

"Star Wars": The Downfall of Goliath?

by
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So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him; there was no sword in the hand of David.

I Samuel 17:50

In the time of King Saul, the Philistines sent a challenge to the Israelites: defeat our champion Goliath, or become our servants. Now Goliath was nine and a half feet tall, and the throw weight of his spear was 600 shekels (over 15 pounds). When they saw him, the Israelites were terrified. But God did not send Saul to the negotiating table to surrender his people into slavery. Instead, He sent David to kill the giant, for the Israelites' cause was just. Despite his fearsome armaments, Goliath was felled by a primitive kinetic energy weapon.

Today's weapons are far more dreadful than those of Goliath. But proponents of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) believe that, like Goliath, they are vulnerable. Missiles have an aluminum skin the thickness of a shirt cardboard. Once on their way, nuclear warheads travel at speeds near 10,000 miles per hour. A collision with any object -- even a piece of gravel -- could destroy them.

The problem is that the gravel has to be in the right place at the right time. Advances in computers and in sensors that detect heat have made it possible to build "smart rocks" that find and intercept their targets. In June 1984, the U.S. Army tested an advanced version of a rock in a sling: the Homing Overlay vehicle. This little rocket managed to set itself on a collision course with a missile fired 4000 miles away. The impact turned the missile into a fine powder. A nuclear warhead could have been transformed into a harmless falling star.

At present, we have no defenses against nuclear weapons, but rely on the policy called Mutual Assured Destruction, or MAD: a strategy that holds the civilian populations of the "superpowers" as hostages.