
Cold War Triumphalism and the Reagan Factor

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Abstract

Three decades after Gorbachev's 1986 Glasnost campaign, the sudden death of the Soviet Union still continues to keep diplomatic historians busy with its momentous implications. The mutually excluding political realms of the Cold War forged a conservative American historical discourse, which perceived the Soviet Union as an evil empire. Existing biases against Moscow continued after the Soviet collapse and were conjured up in a new scholarly genre that might properly be termed as "the Reagan Victory School". The adherents of this school suggest that President Reagan's resolute and unsophisticated yet faithfully pragmatic foreign policy designs – the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in particular – became the major factor behind the Soviet Union's demise and America's "triumph" after the Cold War. Looking at several influential monographs on the subject, this paper seeks to demonstrate the well nuanced yet often mono-causal notions vocalized by American scholars of Cold War triumphalism.

Key Words

Cold War Triumphalism, Reagan Victory School, US-Soviet Confrontation, Demise of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev.

In 1986 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics finally became the toast of American diplomats, who believed that global harmony was a step closer. After four decades of superpower conflict, the new Russia was seen as a long lost friend that reemerged from its ashes, promising to adopt democracy and a liberal market economy. Mikhail Gorbachev's *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* signaled the end of a modern period in history that had been economically and politically exhausting for virtually the whole world. Faced with a serious ideological and military threat after the Second World War, the United States spearheaded the transatlantic community and systematically pursued the common interests of the democratic world against what President Ronald Reagan would later call an "evil empire". During the first 40 years of Cold War bipolarity, American leaders

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had become so familiar with the names and faces of Soviet leaders that these shadowy figures somehow symbolized everything loathsome and hateful in their minds. Thus came into being a popular surge of anti-Sovietism in America that uncannily resembled what Edward Said called, “Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick.”¹

The mutually excluding political realms of the Cold War forged a conservative American historical discourse, which perceived the Soviet Union as an evil empire.

When Gorbachev took office in 1986 and propagated his new thinking (*novoe myshlenie*) campaign, the Transatlantic alliance embraced “the great Other – understood yet not understood.”² The initial euphoria, however, soon faded with the dissemination of armed conflicts in such regions as Yugoslavia and the Southern Caucasus. Russia proved to be ever more lethargic in adopting liberalism and the oligarchs/*nomenklatura* of the young federation found it more lucrative to adopt Yegor Gaidar’s – Boris Yeltsin’s Deputy Prime Minister – shock therapy, which essentially contradicted the principles of market liberalization.³ Suddenly, the adherents of Western optimism and the Third Wave realized that the new

road ahead could actually be even more dubious and unpromising than the past 50 years.

Like all events that have such momentous ramifications, the collapse of the Soviet Union became the center of scholarly controversy. Several new monographs, in their different agendas, provide readers of Cold War history with the essential route map to understand the causal factors behind the collapse not only as a march of abstract social forces and ideologies but as a human event with complicated ramifications. By reexamining the causes and outcomes of 1986-1991, a plethora of recent monographs expose the blueprints of new political factions in American scholarship that emerged after the Soviet Union’s demise. As historian Peter Holquist puts it, “while the Soviet Union may be no more, its past marches on in popular memory and the professional historical literature.”⁴

The number of new publications on the Soviet Union’s death grew exponentially over the following decades, and the most apparent reason for this scholarly enthusiasm seemed to be the opening of the previously closed Soviet archives. The demise of the Soviet Union, thus, furnished historians with new archival references and enabled them to present their arguments with more evidence. Nevertheless, the growing interest vis-à-vis the causes behind the collapse cannot merely be

attributed to the opening of archives. Another, perhaps more relevant reason, was the contemporary incredulity towards the ideological divides intrinsic in the works of Cold War historians.

During the first 40 years of Cold War bipolarity, American leaders had become so familiar with the names and faces of Soviet leaders that these shadowy figures somehow symbolized everything loathsome and hateful in their minds.

The mutually excluding political realms of the Cold War evidently influenced the conservative American historical discourse that perceived the Soviet Union as an evil empire. These biases continued after the collapse and were conjured up in a new scholarly genre what might properly be termed as “the Reagan Victory School”. The adherents of this school suggest that President Reagan’s resolve and unsophisticated yet faithfully pragmatic foreign policy designs – the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in particular – became the major factor behind the Soviet Union’s collapse and America’s “triumph” after the Cold War. Essentially, the divide between the Reagan Victory School and what John Gaddis calls “the many

geopolitical sophisticates on the left” is one of ideology – a struggle between neo-conservatism and liberalism.⁵

Therefore to say that the USSR’s unforeseen implosion between 1986–1991 had been “extensively studied” would do violence to “both the verb and the adverb.”⁶ Existing literature on the subject yields to more questions than answers. First and foremost, what role, if any, did Ronald Reagan play in the collapse of the Soviet Union? As Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry suggest in their *Who Won the Cold War*, “the emerging debate over why the Cold War ended is of more than historical interest: At stake is the vindication and legitimation of an entire world view and foreign policy orientation.”⁷

Jay Winik’s *On the Brink*; Beth A. Fisher’s *The Reagan Reversal*; John Gaddis’s *The Cold War: A New History*; and Jack Matlock’s *How the Cold War Ended* are the four examples used in this paper that demonstrate the well nuanced yet mono-causal notions supported by the Reagan Victory School. These neoconservative scholars hold the view that when Reagan became president in 1981, the USSR was a flourishing superpower that had surpassed the US in the arms race, and that Reagan’s new military buildup duel with the USSR exacerbated the Soviets’ financial vulnerability, consequently leading to its demise. The

latter part of this paper explores four more monographs written by scholars from the liberal opposition: Frances Fitzgerald's *Way Out There in the Blue*; Raymond Garthoff's *The Great Transition*; William Pemberton's *Exit with Honor*; and David Abshire's *Trust is the Coin of the Realm*. In contrast with the Reaganauts, Fitzgerald, Garthoff, Pemberton and Abshire make it clear that Mikhail Gorbachev was the key player during both the Reagan and Bush administrations, and emphasize the reactive role Reagan played while Gorbachev was transforming the Soviets into a more open society.

The Reagan Reversal in US Foreign Policy

Based on several hundred interviews, recently declassified documents and letters of correspondence, Jay Winik's voluminous account on the Reagan years – *On the Brink* – carries the Reagan debate to a new level.⁸ The author sheds light on four defectors from the Democratic Party, who joined Reagan's brain team and laid out the blueprints of Reagan's neo-conservatism: Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams; Assistant Secretary of Defense and arms control negotiator Richard Perle; U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick; and human rights advocate Max Kampelman. Winik gives credit to these four cold

warriors, arguing that they managed to undermine both Nixon's legacy of soft line détente policy at home and the Soviet threat abroad. The author clearly identifies President Reagan as the mastermind of this team. In response to the liberal left's harsh criticism of President Reagan, Winik poses the question: Why did the Soviet Union collapse when it did? Simply put, one major factor comes to the forefront in Winik's account: Reagan's firm stance in the arms control talks with the USSR, and the containment of nuclear missiles in Europe by launching the SDI – more popularly known as the Star Wars.

Winik particularly emphasizes Richard Perle's role in the arms negotiations, and suggests that he deserves much credit with his determination on the implementation of a zero-option strategy against the Soviets. Opposing the accommodationist policies of the Nixon-Ford-Carter administrations toward the Soviet Union, which seemingly took the US to the brink of an uncontrollable arms race, Winik seeks to demonstrate how Perle and his comrades had defended the line until the Soviets yielded and ultimately decided to remove all SS-20 intermediate range nuclear missiles (INF) from Europe. For Winik, Reagan and Perle had decisively "won" the Cold War when they prompted the

SDI against the Soviet Union. “For the prophets of détente and for die-hard doves, the [collapse] had a jarring, even uncomfortable, ring to it. The euphoria of the young people madly chipping away at the Berlin Wall...stood in sharp contrast to those in the West who had for years preached coexistence with the Communist world.”⁹ Winik further suggest that those who were alarmed by Reagan’s tough rhetoric – since they thought it signaled another “menacing round in the escalating arms race” – were almost disappointed to see that “the reverberations of the collapse were without precedent” and that “not even a single shot had been sounded.”¹⁰

Taking a leader-oriented historical approach, Fischer argues that much as Reagan was responsible for the initial anti-Soviet campaign during the early 1980s, he deserved all the credit for masterminding the National Security Planning Group and reversing the evil-empire rhetoric to a non-belligerent, conciliatory tune after 1984.

Suffice it to say, soon after the collapse people from all around the globe heard innumerable shots and

witnessed several tragedies. Overall, Winik’s argumentation is flawed for two reasons. First, it lacks scholarly evidence and highlights those that attribute the end of the Cold War solely to the United States’ actions. Readers will not be able to find the slightest clue about what happened in the Soviet Union during this period. Secondly, although written in a rather convincing prose, the author employs a populist discourse and manifests his political inclinations. While his prose makes the book less valuable for academic circles, Winik probably secures a larger audience of conservatives outside the American academe.

In a similar vein, Beth A. Fischer’s *The Reagan Reversal* seeks to explain the ways in which President Reagan managed to become a major catalyst in ending the Cold War.¹¹ Fisher is particularly interested in the reasons behind President Reagan’s reversal of his assertive stance in early 1984 – 15 months prior to Gorbachev’s administration. The author suggests that “in January of that year President Reagan abandoned his hardline approach to Moscow and began pursuing a more congenial relationship” with the Soviet Union.¹² In her preface, Fisher suggests that she actually started off her project with frequently-cited liberal suppositions in mind – Reagan being merely the spokesperson of his administration. The author tells the

reader that she initially assumed “the president played an inconsequential role” in his foreign policy apparatus, and that it was only when she began to reconsider her assumptions “the answer to [her] puzzle began to unfold; it became increasingly clear that Reagan’s fingerprints were all over them.”¹³

Essentially, Fischer seeks to debunk “the liberal myth” that portrays Ronald Reagan as a reactive actor in coping with the USSR, and challenges the conventional wisdom, which “holds that the Reagan administration did not begin seeking better relations with Moscow until November 1985, when Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev first met during the Geneva summit meeting.”¹⁴ Instead, Fischer suggests, it was in October 1983 when Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam delivered a mesmerizing speech “that epitomized the Reagan administration’s confrontational posture [which] marked the end of Reagan’s hardline period.”¹⁵ Hence, taking a leader-oriented historical approach, Fischer argues that much as Reagan was responsible for the initial anti-Soviet campaign during the early 1980s, he deserved all the credit for masterminding the National Security Planning Group and reversing the evil-empire rhetoric to a non-belligerent, conciliatory tune after 1984. In other words, for Fischer, President Reagan was not a “no hands president, allowing

others to develop and execute his policies.”¹⁶ Instead, the author argues, “Reagan did take control of U.S. foreign policy – but only in those issue areas that especially interested him.”¹⁷

Up until Pope John Paul II’s visit to Poland, and Reagan’s implementation of zero-tolerance policies, détente apologists like the Nixon-Kissinger bloc had turned a blind eye to the ideological, military, and economic conflicts, in which eventually the whole globe was embroiled.

In explaining the Reagan reversal Fischer takes into account three major hypotheses, two of which had been raised earlier: (i) The Grand Old Party (GOP) leaders put some pressure on him before the 1984 elections, asking him to tone down his provocative rhetoric against the Soviet Union; (ii) a relatively moderate faction of the GOP took control of foreign policy; (iii) President Reagan himself decided to take action and readjusted his Soviet policies. Fischer dismisses the first two options and emphasizes the third option as the major cause of reversal. She uses examples from cognitive psychology and public records to support her case.

Consequently, Fischer provides the readers with a more analytical account compared to Jay Winik's monograph, and she does so by remaining aloof to both a populist discourse and a strictly academic jargon. Similar to Winik, however, scholars would find Fischer's argument problematic for two reasons. Firstly, her reliance on public records or cognitive psychology does not disclose a convincing image of the President. Although her hypothesis might seem stronger than Winik's, she too lacks sufficient evidence to give a personal account of the President; how and why Reagan changed his mind about US-Soviet relations in 1983, just before the elections, remains unclear. Secondly, even if one assumes that Reagan indeed reversed his policy on his own, Fischer's account still focuses merely on the actions of the U.S., dismissing the role of domestic problems in Moscow behind the collapse.

Saboteurs of the Cold War Status-quo

Probably the most prominent Moscow insider within the Reagan administration was Jack Matlock, who successfully discredits both Fischer's arguments in his *Reagan and Gorbachev*.¹⁸ Based on his personal encounters with such major players as George Shultz, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Anatoly Chernayev, the four-term

American ambassador to Moscow tries to make a case as to how Gorbachev and not Ronald Reagan transformed the Soviet Union during the 1980s. Contrary to Fischer's claims, Matlock suggests that the Soviet-American rapprochement began at Reykjavik in 1986 – not in 1983 as Fischer argues.

In his succinct account, Matlock spares a substantial space to emphasizing the domestic developments through which Gorbachev managed to take “full command of the Soviet leadership and...come to the conclusion that the Soviet Union required more than arms negotiations to solve its problems.”¹⁹ Despite his seemingly fair treatment of Gorbachev, however, Matlock's exceeding admiration of Reagan and his “firm attitude and bargaining skills” seems to limit his perception of the Soviet collapse to America-centric Cold War lenses. The author asserts that “psychologically and ideologically, the Cold War was over before Reagan moved out of office.”²⁰ It might be fair to suggest that the Soviet collapse and the end of the Cold War are historically two different events. But Matlock's argumentation still proves to be quite problematic since he does not support it with evidence from the Soviet archives. Bearing in mind the fact that when Matlock's book came out in 2005 the Soviet archives were by and large open (disorganized to be sure, but open), one wonders why the

author did not make use of his Russian and provide first-hand sources.

Similar to such Reagan Victory School adherents as Winik and Fischer, Matlock tries to give full credit to Ronald Reagan and dismisses the fact that Gorbachev had been signaling his reform agenda two years before he took office. In other words, the winds of change had already been blowing in Russia as early as 1983, before Deputy Secretary Dam's speech, which Fischer tries to show as the reason behind the Reagan Reversal, or before the Reykjavik summit, as Matlock suggests. Whether or not President Reagan played the leading role in crumbling the Soviet Union into dust, and if he did, how he embarked on this odyssey are questions that deserve a more detailed historical scrutiny; one that can be found in John Lewis Gaddis's *The Cold War: A New History*.²¹

Although most Americans probably see détente as a failed attempt to check the Soviets, it was actually Nixon's pursuit of negotiation rather than confrontation policies that paved the way for a leader like Gorbachev.

Since the publication of *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* in

1972, Gaddis has been considered to be the most controversial yet successful post-revisionist Cold War historian. He has written half a dozen books on this topic since 1972, all of which became academic best-sellers. In 1972, Gaddis challenged both conventional scholars in the discipline, who pinned the blame on Stalin for escalating the tension after the Second World War, as well as the revisionist historians that perceived the United States as the main agitator in the Cold War conflict. Instead, Gaddis argued, it was a series of misunderstandings and foreignness that these two novice world powers suffered after 1945. When the Iron Curtain fell, however, Gaddis reconsidered his earlier remarks in *We Now Know* (1997) and argued that it was indeed Joseph Stalin's personality and leadership that prompted the Cold War in the first place. His latest publication, *The Cold War: A New History* (2007), essentially conjures up – if not reiterates – the arguments he put forward since his last work.

Unlike *We Now Know*, which covered the period from the end of the Second World War until the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Gaddis' new account covers the whole Cold War period in less than 300 pages. While this seems to be another major accomplishment for Gaddis, the book actually has less to offer compared to his earlier works. Leaving aside Gaddis's post-

revisionist and rigidly conservative political stance, *We Now Know* was a more focused account of the origins of the Soviet–American animosity and offered new perspectives on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Nevertheless, Gaddis manages to convey a gripping narrative on “the saboteurs of the Cold War status-quo”, that is Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, Margret Thatcher, and Lech Walesa. For Gaddis, up until Pope John Paul II’s visit to Poland, and Reagan’s implementation of zero-tolerance policies, détente apologists like the Nixon-Kissinger bloc had turned a blind eye to the ideological, military, and economic conflicts, in which eventually the whole globe was embroiled.

Like Jack Matlock, Gaddis suggests that Reagan’s contribution to the Soviet collapse was to embrace Gorbachev and let him further his reforms in Russia. Having read Gaddis’s account, one still wonders though how helpful Reagan had been with his “evil empire” rhetoric. Moreover, Gaddis’ controversial remark about the post-1991 period becomes rather absurd since it is difficult to believe that “the world is a better place for the Cold War having been won by the side that won it.”²² Obviously, neoconservatives – such as Richard Pipes – might think otherwise, and argue that the Cold War, was a “hegemonic struggle that ended without bloodshed when the

party that began it quietly folded its tent and vanished from the historical stage.”²³

Although some of these scholars recognize the fact that the Soviet downfall was partly a result of Mikhail Gorbachev’s new thinking (*novoe myshlenie*) and his pursuit of a romantic dream of socialist reform, they attribute the major role to Ronald Reagan’s attacks on Soviet policy after 1980, when the gap between the Soviet Union and the United States widened. This flamboyantly subjective and ultimately chauvinist perspective on the Reagan phenomenon necessitates an extensive and deeper approach to the study of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Frances Fitzgerald’s *Way out There in the Blue* and Raymond Garthoff’s *The Great Transition* are two successful examples of the popular liberal opposition to the Reaganites. In an attempt to eschew the self-congratulatory idea that unrelenting economic and military pressure of President Ronald Reagan caused the USSR’s demise, these scholars seek to demonstrate how the Soviet Union collapsed from within.

The Collapse from Within

Frances Fitzgerald, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 with her *Fire in the Lake*, makes a persuasive case against the Reagan Victory School. With her

Out There in the Blue, Fitzgerald offers an in-depth analysis on the history of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, which apparently was designed to provide a security umbrella against a possible nuclear attack against the US.²⁴ Popularly known as the Star Wars project, SDI remained a highly controversial matter even after Reagan stepped down. As Fitzgerald suggests: "Between 1983 and the fall of 1999 the U.S. had spent 60 billion USD on anti-missile research, and though technological progress had been made in a number of areas, there was still no capable interceptor on the horizon."²⁵

When Reagan launched his initiative in 1983, the project was immediately called "Star Wars" in the press. As Fitzgerald explains, "the title was a reflection not merely on the improbability of making nuclear missiles impotent and obsolete," but also on Reagan's speech from just two weeks before when he had spoken of the Soviet Union as "the evil empire."²⁶ Historians have long debated over the possible sources of inspiration behind Reagan's imagination. Fitzgerald seems to agree with Michael Rogin - professor of political science at Berkeley - who claimed in the mid-eighties that Reagan was profoundly influenced by the movies he starred in. She suggests that behind Reagan's SDI obsession was the 1940 production *Murder in the Air*, where the president played an

American secret agent trying to save the country from a newly invented super-weapon. As Fitzgerald further asserts, the Americans became so enthralled with the Star Wars that the country kept pouring in billions of dollars despite the abundance of scientific evidence against the feasibility of such a defense system. *Out There in the Blue* makes a convincing case as to *why*.

For Fitzgerald, those who listened to Reagan's "patriotic pieties" believed in the 19th century Protestant beliefs about American exceptionalism and desired to make America invulnerable. Although American exceptionalism had Puritan roots - the perception of the country as a covenanted New Israel - "it was in its complete form a secularized, or, rather, a deicized version of 19th century beliefs about spiritual rebirth, reform and evangelism."²⁷ Since these pieties had been a part of American patriotism, as the author concludes, *Murder in the Air* delivered the message to the public. In reality, however, from Reagan's own team members to senators, people knew what was going on. In one instance "Senator Bennett Johnston went to the floor of the Senate without any preparation - just cold - and asked if anyone believed in an astrodome defense. A dead silence followed."²⁸ Fitzgerald's account is partly a successful survey history of the SDI phenomenon in American history and partly a good psychobiography of Ronald Reagan.

Similar criticisms against the unduly alarmist and antagonist Reagan administration can be found in Raymond Garthoff's *The Great Transition*.²⁹ Garthoff, like Matlock, is a career diplomat who negotiated the SALT I treaty—the episode that initiated a historical period covered in his earlier publication *Détente and Confrontation*. *The Great Transition* covers the Reagan and Bush administrations, and offers a stimulating account of Soviet-American, Transatlantic, and Asian-American relations during the 1980s. He journeys from Reagan's repudiation of détente and avowal of direct confrontation in his first term to the reemergence of a soft-line policy under George Bush the senior.

Garthoff makes it clear that Mikhail Gorbachev was the key player during both the Reagan and Bush administrations. Unlike Matlock, Gaddis, or Fischer, the author emphasizes the reactive role Reagan played while Gorbachev was transforming the Soviets into a more open society. He further asserts that, although most Americans probably see détente as a failed attempt to check the Soviets, it was actually Nixon's pursuit of negotiation rather than confrontation policies that paved the way for a leader like Gorbachev. Hence, Reagan's crusader attitude and belief in dialogue through strength are deeply criticized in Garthoff's account. In many regards,

the author seeks to answer some of the questions he had raised earlier in *Détente and Confrontation*: "Was détente a potential solution to the risks and costs of confrontation, a solution undercut by actions of the Soviet Union, or of the United States, or both? Or did détente exacerbate the problem by providing only a disarming illusion of an alternative?"³⁰ Essentially Garthoff seeks to provide the readers with the roots of American unilateralism that was to come two decades later.

The New Right Movement

The debate between the "Reaganauts" and liberals ultimately boils down to the puzzling nature of the Reagan administration, and to the myths surrounding the character of the president himself. Since Reagan's inauguration in 1981, scholars, journalists, lay observers, as well as those who were personally involved in his administration have been trying to deconstruct this myth surrounding Reagan's persona. They do so by posing a set of similar questions. Was he remote from the particulars of his own administration or did he actually manage to amalgamate the once dichotomized conservative and liberal public factions? Could the revival of Grand Old Party conservative ideas be attributed to the success of his ambitious team of political activists?

Was Reaganomics a myth rather than reality? How did Reagan dodge the Iran-contra affair, when at some point during his second term this scandal seemed to shatter his public image? William Pemberton's *Exit with Honor*, and David Abshire's *Trust is the Coin of the Realm* seek to answer these questions in their different agendas.

The rise of the New Right movement since the late 1970s still seems to be puzzling historians. With the exponential growth in literature on political conservatism in the United States, readers are more likely to be overwhelmed by a multitude of divergent arguments. Conservative ideology had often been portrayed as a shallow combination of rigid dicta following John Stuart Mill's label – the stupid party ideology. There is nonetheless a substantial body of new publications that explains the ways in which conservatism had managed to reformulate its *raison d'être*.³¹ A similar debate revolves around the question vis-à-vis the tradition of conservatism in the United States. While some scholars argue that the Right has no roots in American society, others suggest that “the Right has always been a part of [it].”³² Perhaps the most intriguing episode of this conundrum is the Reagan presidency; a period when image and reality somehow intermingled in Reagan's optimist discourse and conservatism, making

his legacy an appealing myth for many. In James T. Patterson's words, “it was Ronald Reagan's good fortune to ride on a large wave [of political conservatism] that swelled in the late 1970s and that was to leave its considerable traces on American politics for the rest of the century and beyond.”³³

Historians often portray the affair as a tragic interlude caused by meddling intermediaries, holding it as evidence of Reagan's remoteness from the consequences of his own policy actions.

William Pemberton's biography of Ronald Reagan, *Exit with Honor*, is a part of The Right Wing in American History Series published by M.E. Sharpe. In Glen Jeansonne's words (the series editor), Pemberton's work is yet another attempt “to resurrect the Right from the substratum of serious scholarship...and reveal its deep roots.”³⁴ To what extent Pemberton manages to trace these roots or expose the veil that separates Reagan's public and private personas is debatable. Nevertheless, in his succinct account of around 200 pages, Pemberton journeys through Ronald Reagan's life, starting from his childhood in Dixon, Illinois to his early career as a B Grade actor in Hollywood, and moves chronologically

towards his governorship in California and finally to his notable two-term presidency between 1981-1989.

Pemberton spares four chapters on Reagan's early career until the end of his governorship and six chapters on his presidency. While this might seem to be a fair treatment for an introductory level biography, Pemberton relies heavily on secondary sources and fails to give the reader a fresh insight about the blank pages of the "Great Communicator". Pemberton's analysis in the first part does not go beyond a number of repetitive remarks on Reagan's ability "to use his fertile imagination and glib tongue to create word portraits that made partly fictionalized contests come alive for his audience."³⁵ Through revealing the dichotomy between reality (growing up in Great Depression Dixon with an alcoholic father and a religious mother) and Reagan's fictionalized recollections, which resembled rare Huck Finn-Tom Sawyer idylls, Pemberton seeks to explain Reagan's relentless optimism.

Pemberton reiterates the already existing assumption that Reagan's Hollywood experience and ability to fictionalize enabled him to "touch the hearts of listeners who responded to his sunny vision of a way of life that no longer survived and, indeed, probably never existed."³⁶ Pemberton's suggestions bear a strong resemblance to those raised earlier by Lou

Cannon, who was the White House correspondent for *The Washington Post* during the Reagan administration and who covered Reagan extensively in his *The Role of a Lifetime*. Even the title of Pemberton's book – *Exit with Honor* – seems to be inspired by Canon's provocative introduction. In his very first sentence, Canon suggests that "[Reagan] had always prided himself on knowing how to make an exit, and when the end came, on a day of sun and shadows he called bittersweet, Ronald Reagan understood exactly how to leave the stage."³⁷ Likewise, the locus of Pemberton's arguments in the first part could be found in Canon's conclusion, wherein he suggests that "the presidency had turned out to be Reagan's best role... [it] seemed a romantic extension of the world he had known in Dixon and Des Moines."³⁸

Discussing the circumstances under which Reagan's psyche flourished might give the readers a sense of why Reagan often opted to act the part of a "citizen-crusader" or a "cowboy-Cincinnatus" in the latter part of his political career. This correlation alone, however, does not illuminate the ways in which Reagan channeled conservative ideas or perceived the foreign policy decisions during his administration. Pemberton is most likely aware of this flaw; hence in the second part of his book, he seeks to expose a different image of Reagan, one that was

available to the Washington insiders. The author suggests that “Reagan did not contribute to the formulation of postwar conservative thought, but he was a powerful spokesman for those ideas,” and that his populism was simply based on his belief in American exceptionalism; “the idea that he would develop movingly in his verbal portraits of America as God’s shining City on a Hill.”³⁹

Pemberton secures a balanced portrait of Reagan by exposing his public disguise as a self-assured leader. The author emphasizes the fact that although Reagan managed to cushion himself with a strong image, “his grasp of most issues was shaky to nonexistent” and that “he was often almost entirely absent from the nuts-and-bolts work of his administration’s policy formulation.”⁴⁰ Likewise, Pemberton challenges Reagan’s reputation as a “budget slasher” and argues that “The Reagan Revolution... was more a matter of perception than reality.”⁴¹ Through presenting statistics on the macro-economic situation and on the budget deficit stalemate throughout the 1980s, the author convincingly demonstrates that spending actually rose under Reagan, “even for many social welfare programs.”⁴²

In his chapter on the Soviet collapse, Pemberton seeks to challenge the orthodox conviction that Reagan’s SDI

initiative triggered the consequent disintegration of the USSR. Pemberton convincingly argues that most Cold-War Sovietologists – including the prominent hard-liner Richard Pipes – reached problematic conclusions in their works, which colonized the field immediately after the Soviet collapse.⁴³ Pemberton suggests that despite Reagan’s containment policy he was a closet supporter of détente. In other words, for Pemberton, despite Reagan’s evil empire rhetoric and gargantuan defense build-up, “he joined Mikhail Gorbachev to bring the cold war to an end.”⁴⁴ The Reagan Victory School’s confinement to Cold War lenses, as Pemberton further suggests, downplays the importance of domestic factors leading to the demise of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Pemberton poses a significant question: How did Reagan, who “did not have a coherent foreign policy [except for] a few fundamental beliefs, manage to bring Moscow to the bargaining table?”⁴⁵ A significant proof of Reagan’s lack of experience in foreign policy decisions was the Iran-contra affair which almost ruined Reagan’s political career in his second term.

Pemberton deserves much credit for his skillful treatment of the Iran-Contra Scandal. Readers will find a concise account of this scandal, almost every aspect, scrutinized in 25 pages. Those who expect a more

comprehensive narrative would be interested in David Abshire's *Saving the Reagan Presidency: Trust is the Coin of the Realm*. Abshire, the former U.S. ambassador to NATO (1983-1987) and vice-chairman of The Center for Strategic and International Studies, was brought back to Washington D.C. by Reagan as a cabinet-level special counsel to investigate the Iran-contra affair, which haunted Reagan's credibility during his second-term. As the title implies, the book is based on Abshire's personal memoirs and a detailed account of his 86 days long investigation. In Abshire's words, his purpose is to clarify the period when he carried out the formidable task of restoring the "coin of the realm of trust for it to become the basis of Reagan's leadership."⁴⁶

Although the contra part of the affair (American funding of contra-guerrilla forces in Nicaragua) began to unfold as early as 1981, it was not until 1986 that Reagan's trading of arms for hostages (held by Hezbollah mujahedeen) became publicized. It soon became clear that the diversion of funds received from the Iranian arms sales to support the Nicaraguan anti-communist rebels had been authorized by the President; this was an act in violation of the Constitution and constituted "theft of government property - stealing and using funds for unauthorized purposes."⁴⁷ Reagan's disastrous press

statements in response to *Al-Shiraa's* (Lebanese periodical) initial coverage of the story deeply undermined his situation. In Abshire's words, "If Reagan did know (the particulars of the Affair) he could have been guilty of a cover-up and obstruction of justice, and if he were guilty of these, the acts would be grounds for impeachment."⁴⁸

Three decades after Glasnost, a set of questions still remain to be answered: Why did Gorbachev fail to implement the economic reforms in time to prevent a conservative counterrevolution against the reforms?

Hence, the author focuses on a central question; one that was posed earlier by Sen. Howard Baker about President Nixon in the Watergate hearings: "What did the president know and when did he know it?"⁴⁹ The answer to this question is central not only for understanding the mystery behind the scandal but also for getting a better sense of Reagan's touch with reality and the particulars of his government. Abshire provides a convincing answer by exposing both causes and ramifications of the crisis, while keeping his role in saving the presidency as a reappearing theme. Following a brief episode on negotiations, Abshire

defines his conditions to the White House, on which he would accept of the post. After all, as Abshire puts it, he first had to “ensure that [he] had the conditions to be successful and not become some kind of victim like Bud McFarlane.”⁵⁰ Abshire further suggests that although the Reagan administration “did not jump with joy about any outside advisors,” they knew very well that Abshire was their “best ticket to survival.”⁵¹

Historians often portray the affair as a tragic interlude caused by meddling intermediaries, holding it as evidence of Reagan’s remoteness from the consequences of his own policy actions. Although Abshire too seems to refrain from giving a direct answer to the question as to how much Reagan knew, he gives a clear-cut account on how the Reagan administration managed to overcome this scandal. Abshire’s thorough analysis and personal reflections bring important pieces of the Iran-contra puzzle to the surface, and shed light on the entire *dramatis personae*; including chiefs of staff Don Regan, Lt. Col. Oliver North, John Poindexter, Howard Baker, the “covert master strategist” and CIA head Bill Casey, the Iranian arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar as well as Nancy Reagan and the President himself.

Conclusion

The interesting thing about the USSR is that, even months before its demise, it was lethargically stable. The central planning was indeed a total mess, and the party apparatus was much confused by the further exasperation of clashes between the various factions of Soviet public spheres in East Europe. But it was, nevertheless, a stable mess. In Alexei Yurchak’s phraseology, by 1991, a great majority of the people living in the Soviet Empire still thought that “everything was forever until it was no more.”⁵² Why, then, under Gorbachev’s leadership, did the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the vanguard of world socialist revolution, abolish itself with barely a whimper? This has been a quintessential debate since the end of the Cold War.

In response to this debate, Robert Wegs suggests that Gorbachev strongly believed in the free flow of information as “the basis for economic and ultimately the political and military strength of a country.”⁵³ But the differences between the various models of economic modernization eventually led to the Soviet collapse. The readers will find a more detailed account of Sovietonomics in Ota Sik’s *The Economic Impact of Stalinism*. Sik suggests that, “Soviet communism, which claims to be the sole exemplar and champion of a universal socialist

evolution, [had], in fact become the most formidable obstacle to any advance toward a progressive and humane socialism.”⁵⁴ Perhaps more notably, “technological backwardness, the distorted production structure... the wasteful utilization of material inputs and the decelerating growth of labor productivity,” had all remained unsolved, producing a decline in the national growth until the 1980s.⁵⁵

A brief survey of publications presented in this paper suggest that adherents of the Reagan Victory School fall back on such mono-causal notions as American triumphalism. Juxtaposed against these books, both David Abshire’s *Saving the Reagan Presidency* and William Pemberton’s *Exit with Honor* seek to demythologize Reagan’s cult as a Great Communicator. Despite differences in their agendas, both publications give the readers (in and outside the academe) a better picture of Ronald Reagan and his role in the New Right movement. Pemberton and Abshire’s accounts on the ideological framework of neo-conservatism and President Reagan’s legacy are major contributions to the American historical profession. They also stress the need for more substantial research on Russia’s domestic problems, which ultimately paved the way for the Soviet Union’s implosion.

Nevertheless, three decades after *Glasnost*, a set of questions still remain

to be answered: Why did Gorbachev fail to implement the economic reforms in time to prevent a conservative counterrevolution against the reforms? Or, why did he fail to resurrect any remaining belief in true socialism that was left in the Soviet Union at all? The Soviet leadership could have used its immense military and internal-security apparatus to hold power, regardless of the cost. Ultimately, even while it was faltering, why did the USSR not even attempt to stage a cynical foreign war to rally support for the regime?

These questions stress the need for a more substantial body of literature on the Soviet Union’s internal dynamics throughout the 1980s. In the end, this paper supports the greater validity of the argument that stresses the Soviet Union’s internal problems as being behind the collapse of Cold War bipolarity. After all, the privileged party elite (*Nomenklatura*) in Russia and elsewhere in the Union were acutely aware that they could not follow the attempts to reform a system that was intrinsically against reform. To truly understand these questions and the legacy of the Cold War, historians should approach the subject with less fixed ideas about the nature of American triumphalism and the fate of the Soviet Union.

Endnotes

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- 5 John L. Gaddis, "The Unexpected Ronald Reagan", *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- 6 Marshall Poe, *The Russian Movement in World History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, p.76.
- 7 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Who Won the Cold War?", *Foreign Policy*, No. 87 (Summer 1992), p. 123.
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- 12 Ibid., p. xi.
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- 14 Ibid., p. 16.
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- 17 Ibid., p. 103.
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- 27 Ibid., p. 25.
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- 30 Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, Washington D.C., The Brookings Institute, 1985, p. 2.
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- 32 William Pemberton, *Exit with Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1997, p. xi.
- 33 James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush versus Gore*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 130.
- 34 Ibid., p. xi.
- 35 Pemberton, *Exit with Honor*, p. 15.
- 36 Ibid., p. 5.
- 37 Lou Canon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1991, p.15.
- 38 Ibid., p.837.
- 39 Pemberton, *Exit with Honor*, p.49.
- 40 Ibid., pp. 106-109.
- 41 Ibid., p. 105.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., pp. 150-155.
- 44 Ibid., p. 149.
- 45 Ibid., p. 211.

- 46 David M. Abshire, *Saving the Reagan Presidency: Trust is the Coin of the Realm*, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2005, p. 14.
- 47 Ibid., p. 5.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., p. 15.
- 50 Robert McFarlane was the National Security Advisor to President Reagan during the scandal, who later became one of the major scapegoats along with John Poindexter. Ibid, p. 20.
- 51 Ibid, p. 23.
- 52 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.
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