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# Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War

Roger W. Barnett

Frances FitzGerald

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weapons of mass destruction and bioterrorism.

XAVIER MARUYAMA  
Naval Postgraduate School  
Monterey, California



FitzGerald, Frances. *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. 499pp. \$30

In 1984, while the Cold War was raging, then-Senator Gary Hart expressed a sentiment shared by many then and now: "It's unfortunate and tragic. The Reagan Administration has to understand that our relationships with the Soviet Union spring from whether or not we're achieving arms control. If we're not achieving arms control, then it spills over into and colors every other aspect of our relationship." While it purports to be something else, Frances FitzGerald's *Way Out There in the Blue* adopts the same theme. It is virtually impossible to turn to any page in the book and not find a critical discussion of arms control—mostly, of course, regarding the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Folks who work in the U.S. government often say, "We know we don't get it right all of the time, but can we really get it wrong all of the time?" The author, however, can find no redemption for the Reagan years—they got it wrong, at every step, all of the time. Those who toiled in Washington through those years were both wrongheaded and wrong-hearted, according to FitzGerald. As a consequence, as analysis the book is deficient; it qualifies more appropriately as applied ideology. As a wag once put it, "Ideology is a filter through which facts pass for interpretation."

So, the story of *Way Out There in the Blue* is of a simple-minded President

Reagan surrounded and captured by hard-line anticommunists, bent on confrontation with the Soviet Union and heating up the arms race in pursuit of a foolish dream. On essentially every page one feels the author's contempt and disdain, derision and ridicule, for the "star wars" program and for the benighted approach of the two Reagan administrations. This is not a balanced attempt to understand the policy and politics of the Reagan years but a savage skewering.

The book's focus is on politics and arms control, but the author's lack of understanding of strategy deeply undermines her already flawed presentation. Throughout the book FitzGerald ridicules the notion that a defense, any defense, can be perfect. However, strategists recognize that perfection is not at issue. A defense need be only good enough to forestall an attack. If an attacker can be made to believe that his offensive thrust will fail, then the defense will not be challenged. For example, if an attacker has twenty ballistic missile warheads and is faced by a defense with interceptors each of which is judged to be 80 percent effective, he might, if he chooses to disarm himself by firing all of his warheads, expect to have four warheads penetrate the defense. Well, that might be true if the defense shoots only one interceptor at each incoming warhead. On a given day, the defense might opt to use more than one, so its effectiveness might be significantly better than 80 percent. Accordingly, a reasonable strategic assumption of would-be attackers would be that opposing defenses will work, and will work well.

Yet there is another overarching strategic factor at work here. To shoot missiles at the United States is not the same as shooting them at Australia or Belgium; whether or not any missiles get through

the American defenses, one must anticipate a devastating nuclear reply. This strategic fact is bound to affect anyone who is not merely suicidal. Therefore, on the prospect that the defense might work well enough, and given the certainty of a powerful response, a nonsuicidal enemy will have considerable hesitation about attacking. That hesitation is increased—it is in no way decreased—by an in-place ballistic-missile defense. As a consequence, strategically speaking, the issue of “perfect” defense is a phony one. Moreover, the author shows no understanding whatsoever of the power of separate layers of defense. The fact that a three-tiered defense in which each tier has 80 percent effectiveness has an overall system effectiveness in excess of 99 percent goes completely unremarked.

Also, much is made here of the notion that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) sought to make nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete.” This is closely related in the book to the ridiculous notion of “perfect” defenses. In his speech of 23 March 1983, however, President Reagan called upon the scientific community to “give us the means of rendering those nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete.” The strategic argument—that it is when one is convinced that an attack could not succeed that those weapons become “impotent and obsolete”—has totally escaped FitzGerald.

Most serious, however, is the failure of FitzGerald to understand that the Reagan administration set out deliberately to return, after the debacle of the Carter administration, to an active containment of Soviet imperialism and to accelerate the erosion of the Soviet system from within. The SDI was part of this overall strategy, which was set forth in National Security Decision Directive 75, dated 17 January

1983, entitled “U.S. Relations with the USSR.” Although this document—originally classified “Secret Sensitive”—was declassified and released in 1994, the book makes no mention of it. Clearly this information was available to FitzGerald, and one is left to speculate as to reasons for its absence. Perhaps it is because NSDD-75 says clearly that the United States “should continue to resist Soviet efforts to return to a U.S.-Soviet agenda focused primarily on arms control.” That, of course, offends the very essence of *Way Out There in the Blue*.

ROGER W. BARNETT  
Professor Emeritus  
Naval War College



Russian General Staff. *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*. Edited by Lester W. Grau, translated by Michael A. Gress. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2002. 364pp. \$45

This book, edited by Lester Grau of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is the last of a trilogy that covers the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–89. His translator, Michael Gress, served in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Volume 1, *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, was an early translation of original Russian documents prepared by student-officers—who had direct combat experience in Afghanistan—at the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow. It was first published in Russian in 1991, then republished in English in 1996 by the National Defense University. For the second volume, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahedeen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (1996, U.S. Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, Va.), Grau had the valuable assistance of Ali