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Knopf, Jeffrey W.

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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## Did Reagan Win the Cold War?

*Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 8 (August 2004)

by Jeffrey W. Knopf

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### Introduction

America's 40th president, Ronald Wilson Reagan, died on June 5, at the age of 93. In the many commentaries that followed on Reagan's accomplishments and legacy, most gave a prominent place to some variant of the claim that Reagan "won the Cold War." A piece of the Berlin Wall on display at the Reagan Presidential Library symbolizes this historical interpretation.

This summation also implies a view about how Reagan won the Cold War. It suggests Reagan's military buildup and moral frankness enabled the United States and its allies to defeat Soviet communism. The notion that military strength and moral clarity can pressure totalitarian regimes into collapse had become widely embraced as a lesson of the Reagan years even before the president's death. Such putative lessons of past experience are important because they can influence subsequent foreign policy deliberations. This appears to have been the case with some of President George W. Bush's foreign policy actions. President Bush's warning about an "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address, for example, clearly echoed Reagan's 1983 labeling of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire."

Because widely believed lessons of history can affect foreign policy, it is important to assess interpretations of history carefully. If a popular account is inaccurate or incomplete, then applying the supposed lesson of that account could lead to unsound policy. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to summarize and assess the main arguments regarding Reagan's role in bringing about the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The choice of wording to describe these events also has implications. The wording that the West "won" the Cold War accurately conveys the important fact that democracy was preserved while communism was discredited. If the Cold War had become a hot war, however, even if the West had still won it, such a war would have been indescribably destructive. In addition to the democracies being the winners, therefore, the fact the Cold War ended peacefully was also a major accomplishment. The Western democracies really sought two overriding objectives in the Cold War: preserving their freedom and avoiding World War III. The achievement of both objectives is what made the end of the Cold War such a cause for celebration. It is important to assess the Reagan legacy in relation to both these aspects of the end of the Cold War.

Reagan's admirers do not claim that he alone was responsible for winning the Cold War, but they do tend to see his policy of "peace through strength" as the single most critical factor and his

personal leadership as indispensable. Critics of this perspective often argue that Reagan made little difference because communism's internal weaknesses had become so pronounced that the Soviet Union would have collapsed no matter what. In this account, George Kennan's original vision of containment had come true, and Reagan was simply the lucky beneficiary of long-term trends that led the Soviet Union to implode.[1] Some analysts even believe Reagan's hard-line policies were counterproductive because they made it harder for Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to pursue his reform agenda.[2] My own conclusion is that Reagan was neither decisive nor irrelevant. Reagan contributed positively to the end of the Cold War, but his role was just one of several essential factors and his positive contributions were not always the result of taking a hard-line stance.

To support this conclusion, the following analysis proceeds in three steps. First, I summarize the main features of the Reagan approach that have been credited with helping win the Cold War and discuss the degree to which each was likely to have contributed to that result. Second, I evaluate the conventional portrait of Reagan's overall approach in light of relevant findings from scholarly research on interstate interactions in general. Research on bargaining between adversaries suggests that highly coercive approaches, such as that attributed to Reagan, have important limitations. Because of this, I look more closely at how U.S. strategy actually unfolded during the 1980s. As a result of this closer look, third, I identify, in addition to the initial tough approach of the Reagan administration, three other factors also helped bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War. These include popular campaigns against the nuclear arms race and for greater freedom in Eastern Europe, the coming to power of Gorbachev, and the tactical flexibility shown by Reagan and the first President Bush.

The most important conclusion is that the United States did not actually stick to the purely coercive approach that is often associated with the Reagan administration. Instead, U.S. policy incorporated a mixture of firmness and reassurance. This combination of forceful and cooperative elements is what enabled the policy to succeed.

## **Elements of the Reagan Approach**

Those who credit Reagan with defeating the Soviet Union emphasize two basic strands of his leadership: the clarity of Reagan's vision and language, and the pressure applied by his hawkish policies. Starting with the first strand, Reagan's policies appear distinct in part because of how he saw the world. To those who viewed the Cold War as not just a great-power competition but also a war of ideas, a president's ideas are part of the explanation for U.S. success or failure. Reagan's admirers believe he deserves credit for his clarity regarding three issues in particular: the weakness of the Soviet system, the moral failings of communism, and America's own potential.

### **Perceiving Soviet Weakness**

Reagan stands out in part because he believed the Soviet Union could be defeated. For most of the Cold War, Republican and Democratic administrations alike had assumed the Soviet Union would prove durable for the foreseeable future. The bipartisan policy of containment aimed to keep the Soviet Union in check while trying to avoid nuclear war; it did not seek to force the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Ronald Reagan, in contrast, believed that the Soviet economy was so weak that increased pressure could bring the Soviet Union to the brink of failure. He therefore periodically expressed confidence that the forces of democracy "will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history." [3] Since one is more likely to strive to defeat an adversary if one believes that defeating it is feasible, Reagan's belief that communism was ready to crumble contributed to making his approach different from that of other presidents. This is one area in which his personal role stands out.

The underlying weakness of an adversary, however, does not necessarily mean that increased pressure on them will produce the desired results. Short of imposing a military defeat and occupation, it is hard to place another country in a situation where it has no other option except to give up, especially when that country is a great power. Whenever a state's survival is threatened, a state may take extraordinary measures to preserve itself. There is usually more than one option available, so additional information is often needed to explain which option a state adopts in response to external pressure. It cannot be predicted that a hard-line approach will always lead to the collapse or surrender of an adversary.

### **Expressing Strong Moral Judgments**

Political conservatives have tended to applaud the strong moral language Reagan used when discussing America's allies and adversaries. Reagan and the neo-conservative advisors who served in his administration disdained the tendency of Realist theory in international relations to describe all states as essentially alike in the pursuit of power and self-interest. They saw a vast moral difference between liberal democracy and communist dictatorship, and they thought it important that Western leaders should openly express their recognition of the evils perpetrated by communism. President Reagan thus broke with traditional diplomatic practice, which tended to eschew harsh rhetoric, by labeling the Soviet Union an "evil empire."

It is quite difficult to assess the impact of language, but it is hard to imagine that being labeled evil made much difference to Soviet leaders. They tended to think in terms of power politics, so a challenge to their moral legitimacy would have been unlikely to weaken their self-confidence. It is possible, however, that Reagan's denunciations of communism gave encouragement to those citizens in Eastern Europe who were looking for an opportunity to throw off the yoke of communist government. It is unlikely this encouragement was necessary to spur their actions to dismantle communism at the end of the 1980s, but this boost to their morale might have added another increment to their resolve. Even if it did not matter to ending the Cold War, Reagan's clear stand generated goodwill toward the United States among the post-communist Eastern European regimes. As a result, they were more supportive of President George W. Bush's position on Iraq than many Western European governments.

### **Restoring America's Confidence**

During Reagan's presidency, the national mood in the United States changed dramatically. Reagan sought to dissipate the feelings of despondence that had developed by the late 1970s and encourage greater optimism about the country's future. Quite apart from whether this had any impact on the Cold War, Reagan's positive outlook certainly lifted the spirits of many Americans. His contribution to renewing America's self-confidence is one of his most important legacies in the domestic arena.

Some commentators have suggested that Reagan's impact on the national mood constituted a form of "moral rearmament" that increased the public's willingness to stand firm in the fight against communism.<sup>[4]</sup> This is a dubious assertion. Public support for a stronger stance against the Soviet Union increased most dramatically before Reagan's election, and then decreased during his presidency. Starting in 1976, opinion polls found more people supported increasing military spending than favored decreasing it, and by 1980, an absolute majority wanted to increase defense spending. Thus, support for a military buildup actually pre-dated Reagan coming to office. Once he occupied the White House, Reagan's policies and rhetoric divided public opinion and actually led to reduced support for a military buildup. In light of rising budget deficits and repeated revelations of inordinately high prices paid by the Pentagon for commonplace equipment, public opinion turned against the Reagan buildup. From 1983 to the end of Reagan's second term, more people favored cutting defense spending than favored increasing it.<sup>[5]</sup> In addition, the Reagan administration's initial rhetoric and policies regarding nuclear weapons frightened much of the U.S. public and helped spur a sizable grassroots

movement on behalf of a nuclear freeze. Because of this active opposition to his policies, Reagan could not count on conveying to the Soviets that the United States would maintain unrelenting pressure on them over the long haul. Reagan's strong opinions concerning the Soviet Union's internal weakness and America's potential strength are one theme within accounts that credit him with winning the Cold War. These beliefs are given importance because they are seen as a necessary prelude to shifting the country to a more aggressive strategy in dealing with the Soviet Union. The other theme that appears in claims that Reagan won the Cold War concerns the effects of adopting a more competitive strategy. The basic idea is that by competing against the Soviet Union more vigorously in every area possible, the United States put more pressure on the Soviet system than it could withstand. The two key arenas of competition were the Third World and the arms race.

### **The Reagan Doctrine**

The risk of nuclear war made both superpowers careful to avoid direct military clashes. Hence, the later decades of the Cold War were characterized by proxy struggles, in which each side aided clients in various internal and regional conflicts in the developing world. In the late 1970s, the Soviet Union became more assertive in Third World conflicts in the belief that the United States would be reluctant to intervene after its experience in Vietnam. In response, the Reagan administration announced it would confront Marxist forces wherever they were active in the Third World, a policy that became known as the Reagan Doctrine.

These efforts proved most controversial in relation to conflicts in the Central American countries of El Salvador and Nicaragua. Because these countries were so small, neither state's choice about which side to align with in the Cold War would have altered the military balance of power. One could put forward other reasons for not wanting them to be ruled by Socialists, but the outcomes of their civil wars were not going to affect the stability of the Soviet bloc. In addition, the U.S. role in Central America clouded the moral clarity the Reagan administration tried to maintain with respect to the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. At one point, President Reagan called the Nicaraguan Contras "the moral equivalent of our founding fathers." Although the Contras were a coalition, their leaders included former officials of the National Guard that had repressed opposition to the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. Comparing people who had opposed democracy and carried out significant human rights violations to America's founding fathers made Reagan appear morally obtuse rather than clear-sighted.

The one country where applying the Reagan Doctrine had a significant Cold War payoff was Afghanistan. This was the only conflict in which the Soviet Union sent in its own military forces. U.S. aid to the *mujahideen* fighting against the Soviet invasion raised the costs of the Soviet occupation and may have accelerated the Soviet defeat. The Afghan debacle was in turn a catalytic experience that helped hasten the Soviet Union's collapse.

However, two caveats must be added. First, in contrast to the controversies over U.S. involvement in Central America, there was bipartisan support for U.S. assistance to the Afghan resistance. Thus, it is not clear how much difference the Reagan presidency made; a Carter or Mondale administration would probably also have given support to the *mujahideen*, though possibly not as much. Second, we now know that U.S. efforts to mobilize opposition to the Soviet invasion had an enormous downside. The Arabs recruited to join the fight in Afghanistan included individuals like Osama bin Laden who would later organize *al Qaeda*. When the United States washed its hands of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, the Taliban eventually filled the power vacuum and offered a base of operations for *al Qaeda*. The subsequent *al Qaeda* terrorist attacks make it hard to judge whether, on balance, the U.S. assistance to anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan did more good or harm to U.S. national security.

## **Military Buildup**

Most of those who credit Reagan with ending the Cold War see the Reagan-era defense buildup as the single most important factor in bringing about this result. In the eyes of Reagan officials themselves, this had both an economic and a technological dimension. First, Reagan officials believed a rapid increase in U.S. military spending, including significant investments in nuclear weapons modernization, would pose an economic challenge to the Soviet Union. Because the Soviets started with a much smaller GNP, trying to match U.S. spending would create a greater strain on their economy than was the case for the United States. Second, Reagan's 1983 decision to launch the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) played to America's advantage in high technology. Although many experts predicted that SDI would never work, Soviet awareness of America's lead in advanced technology made them insecure about their ability to compete in this area.[6]

The Reagan-era defense buildup did contribute to ending the Cold War, but the causal connection is more indirect than described in the conventional wisdom. In other words, the impact of the Reagan buildup was not primarily a function of the strain it placed on the Soviet economy. The Soviet Union never increased its military spending to match the rate of the Reagan buildup and hence avoided exacerbating the defense burden on the Soviet economy.[7] Instead, the buildup and more assertive U.S. stance in general were most significant for how they affected Soviet thinking. Soviet strategic thought emphasized the concept of a "correlation of forces." This took into account the military balance of power, but instead of viewing it in static terms it emphasized dynamics in an effort to determine which side was favored by existing trends. In addition, the correlation of forces took into account political, economic, and other factors that might reveal the relative dynamism of competing social systems. During the 1970s, Soviet leaders were convinced that the correlation of forces favored socialism, and this made them willing to be more assertive in their foreign policy.[8] The Reagan era provided convincing proof that this rosy view of the correlation of forces was wrong. The various signs of renewed U.S. vigor, by discrediting the view that the correlation of forces favored the Soviet Union, helped open the door to alternative ways of thinking. This became important when Mikhail Gorbachev rose to the top position in the Soviet leadership.

While the military buildup and other signs of toughness in the Reagan years helped create conditions that made a change of direction by the Soviet Union possible, they did not deterministically lead to only one possible end result. History is often contingent, with more than one outcome possible. This was true in U.S.-Soviet relations in the 1980s, as there is reason to believe that the Soviet Union might have responded to the Reagan challenge in a different way.

In international relations, efforts to improve defense often involve a "security dilemma." [9] Increased military strength and a more assertive posture that are intended to bolster deterrence of an adversary can also appear to threaten the adversary's own security. By making the other side feel more insecure, defense buildups have the potential to provoke the other side into a counter-reaction, which can sometimes increase the danger to the first side. In fact, there are signs that the Soviet Union initially reacted to Reagan's defense policies in ways that increased the risks of inadvertent war.

## **The Soviet War Scare**

Soviet sources have reported that in 1981, after Reagan had been in office for several months, the Soviet KGB became convinced that administration statements about seeking the ability "to prevail" in a nuclear war were serious. KGB Director Yuri Andropov, who the following year became Soviet General Secretary, told intelligence officers he believed the Reagan administration was planning a surprise nuclear attack on the Soviet Union; he therefore ordered an intelligence alert to monitor U.S. preparations. In fall 1983, this resulted in a major war scare in the Soviet Union, in which the KGB concluded the United States had placed its nuclear forces on

alert and might be in the final stages of preparations for launching a first strike. If the Soviets had ordered what they believed to be a counter-alert and Western intelligence had detected Soviet preparations without knowing their cause, the two superpowers could have come to the brink of nuclear war. Fortunately, it appears that some KGB officers leaked information about the Soviet war scare to the British and U.S. governments, which then took steps to reassure the Soviet government that the United States was not planning a nuclear attack.<sup>[10]</sup> This incident suggests that Reagan's military buildup and harsh rhetoric had the potential to lead to a catastrophic outcome. Thereafter, things began to turn around, leading to the more favorable result we remember Reagan for today. To get from a nuclear war scare to the peaceful end of the Cold War, however, required both a moderation of the hard-line U.S. approach and a fortuitous development in the Soviet Union.

## **The End of the Cold War in Light of Research on Bargaining Strategies**

There is a tendency to start with what Reagan initially said he set out to do and draw a straight line from these ideas to the subsequent collapse of the Soviet bloc. This leads to a conclusion that hard-line policies and forcefully stated moral judgments pressured the Soviet Union to self-destruct. One way to evaluate this hypothesis is to compare it to general findings from research on states' strategic interactions. Evaluating the Reagan strategy in light of commonly observed patterns in interstate relations is hardly ever done, yet there is a considerable body of relevant research. Findings on the typical effectiveness of the strategies states have historically employed against potential adversaries are the most pertinent. This research suggests that a purely hard-line strategy aimed at forcing the other state out of existence is unlikely to be successful. Perhaps the most relevant research concerns coercive diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy is a strategy that employs threats, especially military threats, to pressure a target state to change its behavior. Research on cases where states have attempted coercive diplomacy finds that the strategy fails much more often than it succeeds.<sup>[11]</sup>

Coercion is especially unlikely to succeed when the other side would threaten its survival by giving in to the demands placed on it. The logic here is similar to situations of deterrence. In contrast to coercive diplomacy, which seeks to stop or change a course of action already underway, deterrence seeks to prevent an action from being initiated by threatening to impose costs on the target state if it takes that action. In many cases, the most powerful threat the deterrer can issue is the threat to eliminate the ruling regime in the other state. For this deterrent threat to work, the target state must have assurance that, as long as it does not take the action being deterred, it will not suffer the threatened punishment.<sup>[12]</sup> If the deterrer announces plans to try to change the regime in the other state whether or not it acts aggressively, then the other side has no incentive to be deterred. Without the assurance that the regime will be permitted to survive if it behaves itself, the target state might as well take a chance on obtaining the benefits of aggression. For the same reason, an expressed intent of forcing the other side's collapse undermines the chances that coercive diplomacy will lead to behavior modification. Without an assurance that a change in behavior will result in the lifting of the coercive pressure, why would any state give in?

In contrast, coercive diplomacy is more likely to succeed when it is accompanied by positive incentives.<sup>[13]</sup> The net benefits of changing its behavior are made greater if, in addition to the lifting of coercive pressure, the target state can also obtain new, positive rewards. This also provides a degree of face saving for the other side, which can claim it accepted a bargain and did not simply cave in to outside pressure. Coercion is most likely to be effective, therefore, if it seeks to change the other side's behavior without seeking to cause the other side's collapse and it includes the promise of positive benefits if the other side becomes more cooperative. This is very different from the portrait that is often painted of the Reagan approach, and it raises doubt about whether his policies would have worked had they been purely coercive and tied to an unwavering objective of destroying the Soviet Union.

Research on crisis bargaining leads to the same conclusion. Several studies have examined the different bargaining strategies states have used across a large number of crises and compared the outcomes. In general, strategies can be characterized as primarily coercive (or "bullying"), primarily conciliatory, or a relatively balanced mix of carrots and sticks. This last approach has been labeled both a "firm but fair" strategy and a "reciprocating" strategy: it seeks to demonstrate firmness while also signaling a willingness to cooperate if the other side behaves cooperatively. Historically, a firm-but-fair strategy has led to successful outcomes much more often than the other two. An overly conciliatory strategy runs the risks usually associated with appeasement by making it appear the other side can get away with pressing harder. An overly coercive strategy, in contrast, tends to convince the other side to dig in its heels and thus is most likely to lead to an escalatory spiral. A strategy that shows a state's resolve to defend itself while also credibly offering to reciprocate cooperation by the other side has the best chance to resolve a crisis peacefully without requiring the state to give up any of its vital interests.[14] Empirical generalizations based on a number of cases and supported by logical reasoning thus imply it is unlikely that the approach often ascribed to Reagan would have produced a peaceful end to the Cold War.

This inference is supported by one other conclusion in the research on strategic interaction. The effectiveness of any strategy is also dependent on internal factors in the target state. The same strategy can produce different results depending on domestic political conditions and the character of the leadership on the other side. In particular, a forceful strategy can discredit hard-liners when they are in power in the other state, but if this emphasis on strength is not adjusted after reformers come to power it can also undermine their attempts at moderation.[15] This again suggests an unchanging coercive approach would have been unlikely to foster Soviet reform. Because the Soviet Union retained sufficient autonomy to choose among different possible responses, if Soviet leaders had truly believed the United States was trying to destroy their regime, they might have chosen to return to greater internal repression in order to extract the resources necessary to respond in kind to the hard-line U.S. posture.

The conclusion that emerges from a wide range of scholarly research on strategic interaction is that U.S. policy would have had the best chance for success if it mixed toughness with accommodative elements, especially if the United States elicited and responded positively to favorable internal developments in the Soviet Union. Ultimately, this is essentially what happened. Although Reagan has received the greatest attention for his efforts to increase the toughness of U.S. policy, it took the addition of three other factors to lead to the end of the Cold War. These other elements in ending the Cold War were grassroots activities in several countries, the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, and the willingness of Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush to depart from the hard-line script.

## **Other Factors in the End of the Cold War**

### **Peace and Human Rights Movements**

Several strands of action at the grassroots level also contributed to the winding down of the Cold War. One strand involved protest on behalf of peace and arms control; the other key strand involved the struggle for greater individual rights in Eastern Europe.[16]

### **Peace Activism**

In response to the development of new nuclear weapon systems by both superpowers and statements by Reagan officials suggesting the United States could achieve the ability to win a nuclear war, massive protest movements arose in both Western Europe and the United States. These movements sought an end to what protesters saw as a dangerous upturn in the nuclear arms race. Reflecting this focus, in the United States the campaign emphasized the call for a bilateral "freeze" in nuclear weapons development.



It may sound strange to give some credit for ending the Cold War to both Reagan and his most vociferous opponents, but there is good reason to do so. The peace movements of the 1980s did not succeed in getting their explicit policy demands adopted; for example, the United States never offered the nuclear freeze proposal to the Soviet Union. However, they did succeed in moderating Western policy. In response to the peace movement's success in appealing to public opinion, the Reagan administration made several tactical adjustments. It ceased all rhetoric suggesting the idea of a winnable nuclear war; instead, President Reagan began speaking regularly about his own concerns regarding the dangers of nuclear weapons. In addition, the United States entered new nuclear arms talks earlier than the Reagan administration had originally intended, and, after talks broke down in fall 1983, the administration worked to ensure talks would resume again as soon as possible.<sup>[17]</sup>

These adjustments changed the face that U.S. policy turned toward the Soviet Union. They helped alleviate the nuclear war fears on the Soviet side discussed above. They also moved the overall U.S. approach closer to a strategy of reciprocity. The U.S. defense buildup continued, suggesting that the United States would still meet any Soviet efforts to expand their influence. But this reciprocity in relation to assertive behavior was now paired with signs of willingness to reciprocate Soviet cooperation as well. Because of the moderating impact of protest against the nuclear arms race, the U.S. bargaining stance came to more closely resemble a "firm-but-fair" strategy than the pure "peace through strength" approach often associated with Reagan. Based on the patterns observed in other historical cases, this should have improved the odds of success.

There are also logical reasons for thinking this shift in a more moderate direction should have helped. If the United States had not credibly signaled that it would agree to equitable arms control deals, reform forces in the Soviet Union would have had to argue their case in the context of a more hostile international environment. It is possible that Soviet leaders would have hesitated to elevate a reformer like Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary if they believed the United States was interested only in forcing the Soviet Union out of business and would not be willing to negotiate any limits on nuclear arms. If Gorbachev had still become the new Soviet leader in 1985, he would have found it harder to gain support in the Politburo for his reform ideas if the Soviet Union confronted what appeared to be an implacably hostile United States. Had Soviet leaders expected the United States would try to exploit any crack in the Soviet façade to engineer the Soviet Union's downfall, they would have had less confidence in the merits of suggesting summit meetings or new arms control proposals, they would have been less likely to make unilateral cuts in conventional forces, and they would have had to consider more carefully the risks before proceeding with domestic opening and economic restructuring.

### **Campaigns for Human Rights**

Another, even more important strand of grassroots activity was centered in Eastern Europe. The Soviet bloc ultimately dissolved because people in Eastern Europe stopped acquiescing in being ruled by Communist regimes. The efforts of groups like Solidarity in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia paved the way for the revolutions of 1989 that swept away the existing Communist rulers across Eastern Europe. The most decisive events in ending the Cold War, including the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, took place on the ground in Eastern Europe. The citizens of these countries who organized and participated in these events have the most obvious, direct links to the crumbling of the Soviet bloc, so their contribution to the end of the Cold War should not be underestimated.

Gorbachev's response to these events was also critically important. In the past, most notably in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet Union had responded to stirrings of independence in its satellites with military intervention. In 1989, Gorbachev made it clear that the Soviet Union would not use its military to assist the Communist governments in these countries in suppressing the opposition movements. This decision had nothing to do, at least directly, with

U.S. strength. Instead, it grew out of changing ideas about how the Soviet Union should seek its place in the world. President Reagan's policies and pronouncements may have contributed indirectly to the evolution in Soviet thinking, but this was not a case of the United States simply imposing its will on Gorbachev, nor was it the case that Gorbachev was persuaded to embrace Reagan's conservative views. In fact, many of the ideas and proposals embraced by Gorbachev had their origins in liberal-leaning Western NGOs and research institutes and were transmitted to the Soviet leader through transnational channels rather than through government-to-government communication.[18]

There were also transnational links between Western European peace and human rights organizations and the opposition movements in Eastern Europe; certain church denominations with congregants in both West and East were also actively involved. These NGOs and church organizations gave various forms of practical help to their Eastern European counterparts. Protest against the nuclear arms race also played a role in Eastern Europe: by describing the nuclear policies of the two superpowers as a threat to Europe, both East and West, the dissident movements were able to gain additional support.[19] Opposition forces in Eastern Europe also got encouragement from President Reagan, including his famous call to Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," and they also benefited from ongoing support from the Polish-born Pope John Paul II. Here again, ironically, the synergistic interaction of conservative and liberal efforts on behalf of human rights probably had greater effectiveness than either strand would have on its own. In sum, grassroots activism in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States in support of arms control and human rights contributed in several ways to the peaceful end of the Cold War.

### **New Soviet Leadership**

While political conservatives have tended to attribute the momentous changes of the 1980s to Ronald Reagan's leadership, many liberals have seen Mikhail Gorbachev as the individual leader who made the greatest difference. Gorbachev should not be seen as a solely decisive factor; for that matter, neither should Reagan nor the grassroots activism discussed in the previous section. However, the outcome of the Cold War cannot be explained without recognizing the impact of leadership change in the Soviet Union.

It is easy to make a *prima facie* case for Gorbachev's importance because he was actually the fourth Soviet leader to serve while Reagan was in power. When Reagan took office, Leonid Brezhnev was at the Soviet helm. Brezhnev died in 1982, and was succeeded by Yuri Andropov and then Konstantin Chernenko before Gorbachev's ascension in 1985.

Each of the four Soviet leaders had to deal with the Reagan administration, but they did not all do so in the same way. If the pressure applied by Reagan's policies was sufficient to force the Soviet Union to abandon the Cold War competition, then one should have seen signs of this under some of the General Secretaries who preceded Gorbachev. In practice, though, it was possible for Soviet leaders to choose different options in response to the Reagan challenge, and Soviet leaders before Gorbachev acted very differently than he did. As noted above, Brezhnev and Andropov perceived the Reagan administration as posing a military threat, and they reacted with harsh rhetoric of their own and also put the Soviet Union on a higher state of alert. Chernenko, already ill when he took over, acted as a caretaker, unwilling to make any major changes. Most Soviet experts believe the Soviet Union could have kept this up for some time; if they had tried to muddle through, making no major changes in their foreign policy or domestic economy and internally repressing dissent, the Soviet Union might have survived for at least a couple more decades.[20] Because the Soviet regime had more than one possible option, the path it took during Reagan's second term cannot be explained without taking into account Gorbachev's personal role.

Gorbachev sought a relaxation of international tensions in the hope this would free up resources for economic reform. For this strategy to make sense, Gorbachev had to believe that a less aggressive Soviet posture would lead to a similar relaxation in the United States, which would make it possible to reduce Soviet military spending.[21] In making this calculation, it helped, as discussed in the previous section, that U.S. policy had already begun to moderate before Gorbachev came to power. Thus, not only did different Soviet leaders respond differently to Reagan, they were to some extent responding to different Reagan policies. The purest version of the hard-line "peace through strength" approach existed when Reagan first took office. It elicited, in tit-for-tat fashion, a largely hard-line response from the Soviets. The more forthcoming Gorbachev approach emerged only after U.S. policy had begun to evolve toward a firm-but-fair approach. If Reagan won the Cold War, he did not do it by sticking rigidly to the original script.

### **The Flexibility of Reagan and Bush**

The final important factor in producing the peaceful end of the Cold War was the willingness of President Reagan and the first President Bush to move away from a purely coercive approach when changes began to occur in the Soviet bloc. Given what Reagan had consistently said about communism during his career and the image of firm determination he projected, it would not have surprised observers if, after Gorbachev came to power, Reagan had insisted that nothing fundamental had changed in the Soviet Union and stated that the dismantling of communism remained his objective. This is not what happened. Instead, as Reagan got to know Gorbachev, especially over a series of summit meetings, Reagan became more open to dealing with the new Soviet leader.

The turning point in U.S.-Soviet relations came after an impromptu summit meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986. The Reykjavik summit itself collapsed because of deep disagreements about the U.S. SDI program. Before the summit collapsed, however, Reagan and Gorbachev had extensive, free-ranging discussions that revealed a common desire to seek the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons. The summit made clear the outlines of possible agreements, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that was concluded the following year.

If Reagan had continued to talk openly about leaving the Soviet Union on the ash heap of history, the Soviet government would have been unlikely to make unilateral cuts in its conventional forces or to negotiate agreements for deep cuts in its nuclear forces out of fear it was disarming itself in the face of an American threat. Gorbachev needed to trust that Reagan would exercise restraint while the Soviet Union struggled with its internal reform process.[22] As Reagan warmed to Gorbachev and their arms control talks, he actually came under criticism from conservative activists who had been among his strongest supporters. Shortly before Reagan signed the INF Treaty, one prominent conservative declared Reagan had turned into a "useful idiot" for the Soviet Union. This shows that true believers in hard-line anti-communism perceived at the time that Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union had changed.[23] Although Reagan did not make a 180-degree turn—he stood firm on SDI and the need for strong verification of any arms control treaty—he did depart from his initial playbook, and this flexibility was important in enabling change in the Soviet Union.

This willingness to pull back from the earlier coercive approach continued to prove important when George H.W. Bush took over the presidency. As the remarkable events in Eastern Europe unfolded during 1989, President Bush could have reacted to the growing cracks in the East European regimes by applying U.S. pressure in hopes of triggering the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Far from seeking to exploit the situation, however, the Bush administration instead took pains to reassure the Soviet government that the United States would not seek to take advantage of the turmoil in the Warsaw Pact countries. By largely staying quiet in public and reassuring Gorbachev about U.S. intentions in private, the Bush administration's deft approach made it possible for Gorbachev to allow the changes underway in Eastern Europe to continue.[24]

With the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the Soviet empire collapsed, but the final stages in this process were only possible because the United States carefully avoided giving any appearance it was trying to force this result. The earlier show of firmness that peaked in the early 1980's helped convince Soviet leaders to re-think their policies, but the changes that finally ended the Cold War could only proceed when the United States made an equally convincing demonstration of its willingness to exercise restraint and cooperate on arms control. Presidents Reagan and Bush recognized the opportunities created by Gorbachev's rise to power and showed the flexibility to move U.S. policy onto a new track. Reagan helped end the Cold War in part by not sticking dogmatically to the hard-line approach so often associated with his presidency.

### **Learning from Sharing Credit**

The Reagan era was a time of significant divisions in public opinion in the United States and Western Europe. Partisan disagreements in the United States are, if anything, even greater today. This partisanship tends to produce either/or debates. Those who regard Reagan as a great hero want to accord to him the lion's share of credit for ending the Cold War. Those on the other side want to discount Reagan's role and give credit instead to Gorbachev, or peace and human rights movements, or long-term trends in the communist bloc that would have caused severe problems for the Soviet government no matter what U.S. policy was.

These claims are not logically incompatible however. Credit for ending the Cold War does not have to be an either/or choice. If one steps back from the heat of partisanship, it is possible to discern a sequence in which different strands of activity combined to produce the peaceful end of the Cold War and dismantling of communism in Europe. When historical events cannot be fully explained in terms of one person or one policy stand, then acknowledging the multiple factors involved helps safeguard against drawing an overly narrow or one-sided lesson from the case. Only by recognizing the need to share the credit for ending the Cold War can we hope to learn valid lessons.

In the eyes of Reagan's staunch admirers, the West won the Cold War through a combination of military buildup, economic pressure, a tough and unyielding bargaining stance, and strongly expressed moral condemnations. These elements of the Reagan approach did contribute to the end of the Cold War. They increased the strain on the Soviet economy and, more importantly, gave Soviet leaders reason to re-think their views on the correlation of forces. If the United States had stuck exclusively to this approach, however, events would probably not have turned out as they did. The widely drawn lesson that military and economic pressure combined with moral frankness can cause totalitarian regimes to collapse is thus inaccurate.

The main changes in the Soviet bloc came about only after U.S. policy combined firmness with moderation. The end of the Cold War thus corroborates the findings of numerous studies on interstate bargaining. In general, the most effective strategies combine sufficient toughness to deter mischief with sufficient restraint to convince the other side that the first side does not seek to dominate it or eliminate it. An effort to signal to the other side that aggressive behavior will be met with a vigorous response is more likely to produce behavior change if it also sends the signal that cooperative behavior will be reciprocated or rewarded.

The initial signs of moderation in U.S. policy resulted from popular opposition to the Reagan administration's nuclear arms policies. By getting the administration to tone down its rhetoric about winning a nuclear war and to commit to arms control talks, grassroots protest helped create an environment in which it was easier for the Soviet Union to try out Gorbachev's reform agenda. Gorbachev's efforts to change Soviet grand strategy then really started the process of ending the Cold War. After that, President Reagan's ability to see that Gorbachev was different and to make tactical adjustments in his approach, rather than stick stubbornly to a purely hard-line strategy, made it possible to change the tenor of U.S.-Soviet relations. The dramatic final steps to end the political division of Europe then came about when the people of Eastern Europe acted to

dismantle communism from below. History is usually written in terms of the world's leaders, and Reagan and Gorbachev deserve much of the credit they have been given. A full understanding of how the Cold War ended, however, shows that history is also made on the ground by many ordinary people whose names never make it into a history book.

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#### **About the Author**

Jeffrey W. Knopf has been a Visiting Associate Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School since Fall 2000. Dr. Knopf was also the Editor of *The Nonproliferation Review* from 1998-2000.