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Introduction by Ronald J. Granieri

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Tragic History with a Happy Ending

Debates over the origins of the Cold War have long been a staple of graduate and undergraduate courses on historiography. Tracing the shifting interpretations of such an important era demonstrates how the writing of history influences and is influenced by the periods in which the history is written. The result has been a familiar tripartite division straight out of Hegel, as Traditionalist certainty inspired Revisionist critique, which in turn spawned a Post-Revisionist effort to harmonize the two that has created new opportunities for creative disagreement in succeeding generations.

The evolution of historical interpretation was also sketched by Herbert Butterfield eight decades ago, when he posited that historical understanding proceeded from a heroic phase that was fixated on the participants and their triumphs, to a Whig phase, in which history was seen as an automatic progress from a benighted past to an enlightened present.¹ Butterfield worried, however, that the Whig phase, which judged historical actors and events on how well they corresponded to the present, was a seductive but imperfect understanding of history. It was seductive because it made the attitudes of the present (and of the particular historian) the measure of all things; it was nonetheless imperfect because it tended to view historical actors according to how well they corresponded to present concerns, singling out winners and losers, and assuming an inevitability of the development of the modern world. Thus Butterfield suggested that greater insight came from a third phase. This he called the 'tragic' perspective, so named not because it was negative, but because it downplayed heroic or progressive narratives in favor of appreciating contingency and complexity, the unexpected and unintended consequences of events. The tragic perspective required distance and time for historians to appreciate and weigh the evidence, but ultimately provided a richer understanding of the past.

It is worthwhile to reflect upon these historiographical trends when considering James Wilson's justly celebrated new book on the negotiations and negotiators who brought about the 'End of the Cold War' in 1989-1991. For just as the origins of that protracted conflict have inspired intense arguments and competing analyses, so too does the story of its end promise to be the source of controversy for new generations of historians. Indeed, we already have seen hints of both heroic and Whiggish history in works that seek to elevate Ronald Reagan or Mikhail Gorbachev into the role of *Weltgeist* on horseback (or, more properly, in a limousine), or which have emphasized the inevitability of Communism's collapse and the West's triumph.² Drawing on a wealth of recently available

¹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

² For example, Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994) and Jack Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2005).

documents and also the intellectual distance of a successor generation of historians, Wilson offers his grateful readers a first taste of Butterfield's tragic perspective on the Cold War's end, and a sense of how that perspective enhances our understanding of those epochal events.

For all the brainpower devoted to mapping out strategies for fighting and winning that conflict, Wilson concludes that it was improvisation and flexibility that won the day, as Reagan, Gorbachev, and George H. W. Bush each modified or even abandoned earlier plans in order to grasp opportunities for peace and international stability. He is aware of how disappointing this can be for those who hunger for more grandiose explanations, but makes a strong case, commenting in his conclusion: "Ascribing important events to wise decisions laid out in a clear set of directives might be more comforting to historians as they seek to find coherence amid change, but such interpretations do not explain the swift and peaceful end to the Cold War" (198). Wilson reminds us of the many contingent factors that went into the developments of 1989-1991. Although so many individuals have since claimed to have seen it all coming, few actually predicted the peaceful breakup of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, or the success of arms control negotiations. Wilson's work reminds us that events continue to have the power to surprise, and that leadership means not only having a plan, but being willing to modify or drop that plan when events make it necessary.

As the following reviews reflect, Wilson has made a significant contribution to our understanding of how the Cold War ended. Tom Nichols speaks for all of them when he calls *The Triumph of Improvisation* "required reading for any serious consideration of the late Cold War period, and no future work on U.S. or Soviet foreign policy will be complete without reference to it." All three reviews praise both the intense research and theoretical sophistication that, as Joshua Shifronson puts it, "combine[s] history and theory in a synthetic way that is both insightful and eminently readable." Wilson's perspective does not efface the importance of individuals such as Reagan and Gorbachev, but rather highlights the significance of their (sometimes surprising) intelligence creativity, offering new insights into their characters and abilities.

This is not to say that Wilson's perspective is faultless, or that his reviewers see nothing worthy of criticizing. His narrative is not completely free of Whiggish efforts to heap praise on 'pragmatists' and cast aspersions on alleged 'hard liners' who stood in the way of progress. Shifronson in particular is skeptical about Wilson's efforts to downplay grand strategic visions, and raises questions about Wilson's assertion of a fundamental change within the Reagan Administration in 1983-1984, when Secretary of State George Shultz allegedly got the upper hand on hard liners such as Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and National Security Adviser William Clark. Shifronson and this author both warn against underestimating the continuity in American policy, since many hardliners, echoing Reagan himself, imagined that the purpose of being hard was to reach the point when one could negotiate from strength. Reaching that point can be seen as much as an accomplishment by the hardliners as their refutation, disagreements within the administration about the timing of negotiations notwithstanding. Nichols also notes the relative (if understandable) lack of appreciation of civil-military tensions within the Soviet

leadership, while Keith Shimko questions whether the book's main strength lies less in a bold new argument than in the marshaling of newly available details. The reviewers also point out the relatively rushed treatment of George Bush's diplomacy, which managed both to wind up the Cold War and organize the Gulf War at the same time, a feat which Nichols calls a "near-miracle." Nevertheless, each of the reviews concludes that *The Triumph of Improvisation* deserves an important place in the literature on the late Cold War, and will help shape future discussions on the era.

Readers of these reviews and Wilson's response can judge for themselves how well each author makes his case, and all readers are encouraged to delve into *The Triumph of Improvisation* on their own. By highlighting the accomplishments of the individuals who brought the Cold War to its surprisingly peaceful conclusion, however, James Wilson has demonstrated how the tragic perspective can help us better appreciate one of contemporary history's happiest endings.

James Graham Wilson received his Ph.D. in diplomatic history from the University of Virginia in 2011 and his B.A. from Vassar College in 2003. He currently works on Soviet and National Security Policy volumes for the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series in the Office of the Historian at the Department of State.

Ronald J. Granieri (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, where he is the Executive Director of the Center for the Study of America and the West, and is also Director of Research and Lecturer in History for the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. Since 2012 he has also worked as a contract historian for the Office of the Secretary of Defense Historical Office, researching and writing a study of the tenure of Caspar Weinberger as Secretary. He is the author of *The Ambivalent Alliance: Konrad Adenauer, the CDU/CSU, and the West, 1949-1966* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2003) as well as a number of articles on European History, European-American Relations, and contemporary politics. His fellowships have included a Research Fellowship and a Federal Chancellor Scholarship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, as well as membership in the American Council on Germany's Young Leader Program.

Tom Nichols is a Professor in the National Security Affairs Department at the U.S. Naval War College, a senior associate of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, and an adjunct at Harvard Extension School. He was personal staff for defense and security affairs in the United States Senate to the late Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania. He holds a Ph.D. from Georgetown University, and the Certificate of the Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union at Columbia University. His most recent book is *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

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Review by Tom Nichols, Naval War College

The history of international relations is usually painted in broad strokes, with the movements of great nations across great expanses of time and space. Whether through the abstractions of realism or the demands, among others, of quantification and comparability, too often the actions of individuals and the role of contingency are washed away, thus draining important historical events of the drama that made them such compelling subjects of study in the first place. James Graham Wilson has done a service to remind us that the study of politics and history is, above all, the study of human beings and their behavior. His book on the final days of the Cold War, *The Triumph of Improvisation*, admonishes us in its very title to remember that people and their decisions matter.

This is not to say that Wilson offers no larger explanation for how the Cold War ended. Rather, he notes that decision-makers – in this case, U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Secretary of State George Shultz, and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev – all entered office with their own doctrines and dogmas, but soon had to improvise and adapt. It is, as Wilson notes at the outset, “a book about structure and agency as well as planning and improvisation.” (8) For Wilson, the key is to understand not only what core beliefs the major players brought to office, but how they had to adapt and alter those beliefs when they had to work with each other, with the international system, and in the face of events and circumstances over which they had little control.

This is decidedly not a ‘Great Man of History’ approach; there are too many players, great and small, in the drama Wilson sets out to explain for any of that. Indeed, what is striking in Wilson’s narrative is the degree to which iconic figures like Reagan and Gorbachev become acutely human, showing the full range of human reaction (including inconsistency) as they struggled to find a way out of the Cold War. In Reagan’s case, as Wilson notes, what emerges is “not the Ronald Reagan the American public thought they knew,” an observation that could be applied to his supporters and detractors in equal measure. (5) Gorbachev, whatever the West thinks of him now, “was no saint,” as Wilson reminds us; this, after all, was the man who escalated the Soviet Union’s “brutal campaign” in Afghanistan. (91) Nor did Gorbachev immediately embrace the idea that Reagan was his new partner in peace. “We are dealing with political scum,” Gorbachev said of the Reagan administration after the 1986 Reykjavik summit. (122)

The portrait of Reagan in this period is especially well drawn. The Reagan of *The Triumph of Improvisation* is neither a dimwit nor a brilliant strategist. Like his eventual interlocutor, Gorbachev, he knew his own goals but sometimes had trouble seeing the inherent conflicts between them. Reagan wanted, above all, both to defeat communism and to keep the nuclear peace, even though he was often flummoxed by the tension between the two efforts. Shortly after the House of Representatives defeated Reagan’s request for one hundred MX ICBMs, for example, the President told his advisor Bud MacFarlane that he was worried about Armageddon. “It’s coming, Bud,” Reagan said. “We’ve got to get off that track.” (67) Confronted by an ossified generation of Soviet leaders, Reagan and his team played a dangerous game, pressing bellicose anticommunist rhetoric and then finding, to

their surprise, that Soviet leaders were terrified that the American leader might really mean war. It was to Reagan's credit that by late 1983 he knew, even ahead of some his advisors, that he had to change course or risk catastrophe.

Here, Wilson adds depth to previous accounts of Reagan's turn away from confrontation, but instead of covering that same ground, Wilson uses new evidence and interviews to show how Reagan's adaptation took place. Especially valuable here is Wilson's attention to staffing, which is how everything in Washington (and all large governments) gets done. His dissection of who wrote which speeches and which memos takes Reagan out of the dunce/genius dichotomy and instead shows an ordinary human being trying to reconcile his own instincts with the competing views of multiple advisors.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Treaty is a good example. It is easy to forget almost thirty years later that even many conservatives opposed the 1987 agreement. [The Conservative pundit George Will, as Wilson notes, even said at the time it represented the loss of the Cold War. (139)] It was only after these battles and in the post Iran-Contra period that the tired, confused Reagan came to the fore, an accurate depiction, in my view, of the exhaustion and drift of Reagan's late second term. (139)

Likewise, Gorbachev is presented neither as a heroic peacemaker nor as a hapless apparatchik. Whatever Gorbachev's actions in Afghanistan, he was determined to avert World War III. Wilson attributes some of this to the memory of World War II, although I am less certain that this explains very much. Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov also knew the pain of the Great Patriotic War, and Brezhnev, at least, was likewise committed to avoiding war with the West. Wilson's better point is that Gorbachev's predecessors did not face the same level of systemic Soviet crisis as he did, and even more important, they lacked Gorbachev's ability to adapt and his willingness to improvise. Previous Soviet leaders were products of the closed Soviet system and men of stolid ideological rigidity, while Gorbachev and his advisors, as Wilson rightly notes, were far more cosmopolitan in their outlook, especially his confidante and chief advisor Aleksandr Yakovlev, who even touted himself as a former New Yorker. (90)

Nonetheless, the account of the Soviet side of the equation in *The Triumph of Improvisation* in this period is, to my mind, somewhat elliptical. This is perhaps out of necessity: there is only so much that can be done in a study that explains the motivations and actions of both Soviet and American leaders. But in some of Wilson's pages, Gorbachev appears too much in control of his own regime, and the activity behind him in Moscow is too muted. Wilson points out, for example, that U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock in 1985 was "impressed" by how fast Gorbachev consolidated control of foreign policy. (93) While Ambassador Matlock may have thought so at the time – and knowing that he had that view is important in itself – the reality in the Kremlin, as we now know, was quite different.

The fact of the matter is that many of Gorbachev's policies were launched not only as initiatives to better East-West relations, but also to outflank his internal opponents, and Gorbachev himself could not foresee where they would take the USSR. As Anthony D'Agostino first noted many years ago, Gorbachev still tells two stories: in Russia, he says

never meant to bring down the USSR, while in the West, he claims he knew what he was doing all along.¹ Mark Kramer's outstanding work on the "blowback" effect of Gorbachev's policies in Eastern Europe would make a good companion reading to Wilson's book, since it adds the kind of detail to the Soviet side that Wilson so deftly gives us on the American side, especially in Kramer's account of how Gorbachev used Soviet policy in Eastern Europe as political leverage against his domestic foes.²

I also think that significant civil-military tensions in the Soviet region receive less attention from Wilson than they deserve. (That observation, of course, may reflect my own research bias.) While he mentions "hardliners" in the military, it seems the book shares Matlock's view that Gorbachev consolidated power faster and more completely than was actually the case. (125) It is not accidental, as the Soviets used to say, that Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev resigned as Chief of the General Staff as Gorbachev was giving his December 1988 speech to the United Nations, something Wilson does not discuss.

Some of this discussion could have been added at the expense of Wilson's occasional digressions (such as his brief discussion of Reagan's former employer, General Electric). (39) And yet, without doubt these details often enrich the narrative so much it would be a shame to have lost them. Who knew, for example, that George H.W. Bush's Chief of Staff James Baker wrote his senior thesis at Princeton on Alexander Kerensky's provisional government? I didn't, and it made me think differently about what Baker might have had in mind in dealing with Gorbachev's regime. (151)

Fortunately, there are many other sound examinations of the Soviet side available in the post-Cold War literature, and thus the relatively greater attention given to the Americans is not a major flaw in the book. This focus on the Americans is especially rewarding in the case of Wilson's discussion of how the elder President Bush and his team managed the soft landing and final dissolution of the Soviet empire, a diplomatic achievement that in some ways dwarfs the accomplishments of Reagan and Gorbachev. A U.S.-Soviet agreement in 1986 to reduce nuclear weapons was a milestone, but a U.S.-Soviet cooperative dissolution of the Soviet bloc without a war was a near-miracle. Managing to do all this while gaining Soviet acquiescence in the attack on Saddam Hussein in 1991, the coda to the Cold War that provides Wilson with the end of his account, was a diplomatic accomplishment almost unimaginable five years earlier. Bush, of course, was negotiating from a stronger position than Reagan, but his firmness with Moscow in private on the necessity of the Gulf War was as unyielding and direct as anything Reagan ever said. (188-190)

The Triumph of Improvisation is one of the best new histories of the end of the Cold War. While it is indispensable reading for specialists, it is written in a fluid, accessible way that will engage students and general readers with a story that moves briskly from the

¹ See Anthony D'Agostino, *Gorbachev's Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 1998).

² See Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Fall 2003.

accession of Ronald Reagan to the close days of the Soviet Union's existence. It will challenge revisionists and triumphalists alike to rethink their views while reminding theorists that no theory, however elegant, can ignore the personalities and decisions of individual human beings. This book is required reading for any serious consideration of the late Cold War period, and no future work on U.S. or Soviet foreign policy will be complete without reference to it.

Review by Joshua Shiffrin, Bush School of Government & Public Service, Texas A&M University

Do great individuals make momentous events, or do momentous events make individuals appear great? When dramatic change occurs in the world politics – war, revolution, rapprochement, and the like – should analysts attribute the shift to individuals and small decisions aggregated over time, to grand strategy, or to structural features of the international system? Above all, how do scholars identify change (or consistency) in world politics, and then infer its causes?

Taking the last twelve years (1979-1991) of the Cold War as its subject, James Graham Wilson's outstanding *The Triumph of Improvisation* speaks to these fundamental issues of history, theory, and statecraft. For Wilson, the end of the Cold War reflects the role of individuals responding to material constraints while still imposing their particular foreign policy preferences upon the world stage. Four individuals are particularly important to the study: U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Each shaped policy by virtue of his particular visions of foreign policy and, beyond that, his ability to mobilize those around him in support of their preferences. Broadly, the three Americans encouraged and sustained a rapprochement in U.S.-Soviet relations that turned the 'Second Cold War' of the early 1980s into a distant memory by the early 1990s. Gorbachev, by leading the USSR into an unprecedented series of domestic reforms and international initiatives, created a demand for American engagement; he then stayed the course amidst mounting domestic turmoil and frequent diplomatic disagreements. Working in tandem, and for entirely different reasons, American and Soviet leaders arrived at a set of formal and informal bargains that ended the Cold War before the USSR's ultimate collapse. With Wilson's volume coming at a time when rocky U.S.-Russian relations dominate the headlines as they have not since the heady days of 1991, the work helps illuminate why the Cold War ended with surprisingly little chaos and violence – as well as why policymakers continue to struggle with Cold War legacies over two decades later.

Driving Wilson's analysis is historical contingency, the notion that "adaptation, improvisation, and engagement by individuals in positions of power ended almost a half century of cold war and the specter of nuclear holocaust" (2). This in itself is provocative, pushing against analyses contending that the Cold War ended due to Gorbachev's reforms, American grand strategy, changes in the distribution of power, and/or pressure by nongovernmental actors.¹ In his telling, the 1980s began with the Soviet Union facing economic and political stagnation even as the United States, under the new Reagan

¹ For representative arguments in these camps, see respectively Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 1st ed (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994); William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994-1995): 91-129; Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2002).

Administration, grappled with economic dislocation at home and worries over American strength abroad. Mutual perceptions of weakness led to symmetric concerns of falling behind the adversary. Against this backdrop, Ronald Reagan's own ambivalence over whether to "undermine the Soviet Union or to engage with its leaders" to put the U.S.-Soviet competition on a sustainable diplomatic footing left American policy in disarray (5): so long as hardliners such as National Security Advisor William Clark and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger dominated the Administration, Reagan's desire to rebuild American strength and outcompete in order to destroy the Soviet Union won out. Hence, the onset of the "Second Cold War" in 1981-1983 as the United States and USSR engaged in mutual recriminations, delegitimation campaigns, and antagonism on a level not seen since the 1950s. With the emergence of Secretary of State George Shultz as a key advisor in 1983-1984, however, Reagan's desire to work with Soviet leaders – particularly in curtailing the nuclear arms race – rose to the fore. Becoming "the critical agent of U.S. foreign policy" for the remainder of the Reagan Administration (5), Shultz leveraged his position to push the United States "to engage the Cold War adversary, establish trust, share ideas, and promote human rights everywhere" (6). In essence, Shultz's vision of what an acceptable U.S.-Soviet relationship entailed reinforced and merged with one of Reagan's own.

American leaders found a willing partner in Mikhail Gorbachev. Coming to power amidst mounting problems (see, for example, 88-92) in the Soviet system, Gorbachev focused on reforming Communism in order to save it. To this end, he proved willing to partner with the United States in order to curtail the East-West competition and find the breathing space (and resources) to revitalize the Soviet system. That Gorbachev and Reagan both "abhorred" nuclear weapons (91) offered a focal point to burgeoning East-West negotiations. The result was a number joint initiatives (e.g., the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, Strategic Arms Reductions talks) and summits (such as Reykjavik) that symbolized warming East-West relations. Thus, by the time George H.W. Bush – the fourth actor in the story – came to office in 1989, U.S.-Soviet relations were, arguably, on sounder footing than ever before. Tapping into this new dynamic, and playing to Gorbachev's growing desperation for international support for his increasingly fraught domestic initiatives, Bush and his advisors pushed resolution (as opposed to Reagan's more general stabilization) of the political, institutional, and conventional military issues underlying the European Cold War. Under Bush's watch – and largely in contravention of Gorbachev's own vision of a post-Cold War Europe– the Eastern Bloc collapsed, Germany was reunified within NATO, and Soviet military power was pushed back to the USSR itself (143-169). However, even these momentous shifts did not cause a return to circa-1982 levels of hostility: with the Soviet Union supporting (or at least not opposing) American efforts to undo the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, "the Cold War was over" by early 1991 (196).

This is an impressive and important work. The last decade has seen a raft of third-generation scholarship on aspects of the Cold War's end drawing on increasingly available archival records in the United States, Russia, and beyond.² Scholars such as Mary Sarotte,

² First-generation work emerged in the form of journalist reports and histories as the Cold War was winding down. Second-generation scholarship developed as policymakers authored memoirs and analysts

Jeffrey Engel, Vladislav Zubok, and Serhii Plokhy have pursued core topics ranging from arms control during the mid-1980s to the events surrounding the miracle year of 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR itself.³ Wilson fits within and moves beyond this corpus, at once drawing from existing research, integrating extant work into a coherent whole, and mobilizing new materials of his own to advance the argument. The outcome is an informed, rigorous, and insightful analysis that stands as the best single-volume work on the Cold War's final years.

More important than the research is Wilson's sense of nuance and his appreciation for the difficulties of effective statecraft. Building from the idea that "improvisation mattered more than any master plan" in the Cold War's final years (197-198), Wilson draws out the fraught policymaking process itself. He aptly and amply shows how, for instance, William Clark's sudden absence in early 1983 from Washington provided Shultz an opening to push engagement; how Jack Matlock's arrival on the National Security Council (NSC) provided Shultz a partner within an otherwise competitive NSC; how Soviet mistakes in the Matthias Rust affair (when a German teenager managed to avoid Soviet air defenses and land in downtown Moscow) helped Gorbachev overcome military opposition to his initiatives; and how Bush's worries of Gorbachev's staying power shaped American strategy in 1989-1990. As such, one comes to appreciate the difficulty of mobilizing unwieldy things like modern states (with their competing power centers, bureaucracies, and contradictory initiatives) in support of a particular ambition. Equally important, the reader is left with a strong sense of the possible roads not taken – the counterfactuals – in the Cold War's ending. One does not have to accept Wilson's thesis that improvisation rather than strategy dominated the period to appreciate that small changes – say, Clark's presence in Washington in January 1983 or the successful shutdown of Rust's plane – would have at least delayed many of the changes in U.S.-Soviet relations. One of the successes of Wilson's work is to make the reader marvel at while understanding the choices made in 1978-1991 on both sides of the Iron Curtain without suggesting teleology. *Triumph* is perhaps the best book on the Cold War's end to walk this fine line.⁴

Finally, no review of Wilson's book is complete without praising its careful engagement with existing arguments – noted above – on the Cold War's end. Given the abundant

gained access to certain critical documents. Third-generation scholarship has emerged in recent years as archives have begun opening and offering a wider and deeper range of primary materials.

³ See, for instance, Mary E. Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jeffrey A. Engel, "Bush, Germany, and the Power of Time: How History Makes History," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 4 (Summer 2013): 1-25; Gregory F. Domber, "Skepticism and Stability: Reevaluating U.S. Policy During Poland's Democratic Transformation in 1989," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 3 (2011): 52-82; Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas S. Blanton, and V. M. Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010); V. M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

⁴ For a similar if significantly lengthier account, see Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994).

literature on the Reagan, Bush, and Gorbachev years, some effort to highlight similarities and differences with extant arguments is to be expected.⁵ Yet, rather than simply dismissing some arguments and buttressing others, Wilson's work strives to integrate these accounts in a way that, on the whole, succeeds. Thus, the study agrees with prior work suggesting that Gorbachev's emergence was the catalyst for the end of the US-Soviet conflict, but argues Gorbachev alone could and did not end the U.S.-Soviet contest; challenges scholarship arguing American grand strategy brought the Soviet Union to the bargaining table, but allows (tacitly) that consistent efforts to move American policy away from intentional antagonism of the USSR was critical; relatedly, critiques the notion that changes in the distribution of power "determined leader's preferences" (2) but accepts that American policy depended on surging American power just as Soviet policy was conditioned by ongoing stagnation and relative decline; and suggests that nongovernmental actors played a major role in helping end the Cold War contest, but suggests that they shaped the operating environment for leaders rather than themselves causing the contest to end. Though readers can debate the veracity of these propositions, the volume offers a cogent account of the period that stands as the closest work yet to a post-revisionist take on the Cold War's denouement. Its attention to prior work makes it an invaluable source for historians and political scientists seeking to adjudicate the perpetual debates over structure and agency.⁶

The careful engagement with prior arguments, however, also highlights the monograph's biggest weaknesses: the suggestion that grand strategy was ephemeral in the Cold War's final years, and that the shift in Soviet-American relations after 1983-1984 was much more than changed atmospherics. Space constraints preclude a full discussion of these issues, but some attention can be given to these points.

The volume clearly sketches its central thesis from the start: as noted, "adaptation, improvisation, and engagement by individuals in positions of power ended almost a half century of cold war and the specter of nuclear holocaust" (2). The conclusion expounds on the same point, namely: "in the last years of the conflict, improvisation mattered more than any master plan. Ascribing important events to wise decisions laid out in a clear set of directives might be more comforting to historians as they seek to find coherence amidst change, but such interpretations do not explain the swift and peaceful end of the Cold War" (197-198). Ultimately, "grand strategies did not shape the end of the Cold War" (198). Insofar as the volume is particularly interested in pushing back on the "Reagan Victory" thesis expounded by analysts such as Norman Bailey and Peter Schweitzer, this thesis

⁵ See notes 2-4.

⁶ For an overview of debate, see Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 107-46.

makes sense: just as American policy followed no pre-set script, so too did changes in the USSR occur independent of the United States.⁷

Wilson's work, however, may also go too far in the opposite direction. By disavowing grand strategy as a way of interpreting the Cold War's end, it may overstate the degree to which Soviet and American policy changed over time. Indeed, there is nothing inherent in the concept of grand strategy that requires a grand strategy be *written down* as Wilson has it. Instead, grand strategy is more often conceptualized as an overall pattern of a state's approach to international politics, the way in which it organizes its economic, military, and political resources to create security for itself at the highest levels.⁸ Grand strategy thus may be written down, but it may also need to be inferred from looking at a state's relations with other actors across time and space.⁹

Though a seemingly small definitional matter, this conceptual distinction holds large implications for Wilson's work and our understanding of the Cold War's end. Freed from focusing on what policies were announced or codified, scholars can focus on the broad patterns emerging in American and Soviet relations over time. Here, one is struck even in the volume's narrative by the striking degree of consistency across time and space. For Gorbachev's Soviet Union, the grand strategy became one of rapprochement and retrenchment: the Soviet Union would consistently engage with the United States, meet American negotiating demands (first on arms control matters, then on the future of Central and Eastern Europe), and reduce the level of Soviet-American antagonism, all while attempting to lock in as much of the military and political status quo as possible while American power grew and Soviet power waned. Debates within the USSR and occasional tensions with the United States did not mar the basic contours of this behavior. Yes, the Soviet leader *could* have "returned to Moscow after Reykjavik in 1986, halted all reforms, and mobilized his countermen to fend off the capitalist world's quest for nuclear inviolability" (203) – but he did not. Rapprochement and retrenchment ruled the roost as Gorbachev pursued the unenviable task of trying to salvage the most he could of the Soviet Union's place in the world in the face of an increasingly powerful capitalist world. The consistency is striking, hinting that grand strategy of the unauthored kind mattered more than the improvisation thesis allows.

Much the same can be said of the United States. By emphasizing a shift in American policy towards the Soviet Union beginning in 1983-1984, Wilson joins other analysts in seeing American policy moving from confrontation and antagonism to engagement and

⁷ See, e.g., Schweitzer, *Victory*; Norman Bailey, *The Strategic Plan That Won the Cold War* (McLean, VA: Potomac Foundation, 1998).

⁸ Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁹ Other analysts employ a similar approach; see most notably Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter, -1997 1996): 5–53.

cooperation (see, for example, the description of Shultz versus the hardliners on 66).¹⁰ One wonders, however, if this putative change in American policy is overdrawn. After all, the objective of Reagan hardliners in 1981-1983 was for American strategy to restore American power, revitalize containment, and eventually 'rollback' Soviet power in Europe and beyond (68). Compare this to Shultz's description of American objectives in his memos and reports to Reagan during Shultz's ascension to influence:

In January 1983 Shultz wrote that "increased Soviet activism since Andropov's rise to power confronts us with a situation requiring strength, imagination and energy. This memo sets forth a strategy for countering the new Soviet activism by using an intensified dialogue with Moscow [. . .] Even if no improvement [in U.S.-Soviet relations] ultimately takes place, the dialogue itself would strengthen our ability to manage the relationship and keep the diplomatic initiative in our hands."¹¹

In March 1983 he offered, "Our minimum objective for US-Soviet relations over the next few years is to make clear that we are determined to resist Soviet efforts to use their growing military power in ways which threaten our security. The Soviets must recognize that [. . .] we also have the will and capacity to correct the imbalances which their military buildup has created [. . .] There may also be a chance to go beyond this minimum objective and make some progress toward a more stable and constructive US-Soviet relationship [. . .] This can only occur if the Soviet leadership concludes that it has no choice but to deal with this Administration on the basis of the comprehensive agenda we have established over the last two years."¹²

In February 1984 he concurred with a report arguing that the United States "should promptly begin to explore the possibility for moving ahead in some important areas [with the USSR], and to test Chernenko's willingness and ability to meet at least some of our legitimate concerns. If we play our cards right, we may well be able to induce Chernenko to pay something in advance for the improvement in relations and summit [sic] which would be very helpful to him personally."¹³

¹⁰ Representative are Beth A Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); Garthoff, *The Great Transition*; Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Did 'Peace Through Strength' End the Cold War? Lessons from INF," *International Security* 16, no. 1 (Summer 1991): 162-88; see also Shultz's own narrative in George Pratt Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993).

¹¹ George Shultz to The President, "US-Soviet relations in 1983," 19 January 1983, William P. Clark Files, Box 8, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (hereafter RRPL),

¹² George Shultz to The President, "USG-Soviet Relations - Where Do We Want to Be and How Do We Get There?" 3 March 1983, William P. Clark Files, Box 8, RRPL.

¹³ "US-Soviet Relations: A Framework for the Future," 24 February 1984, Jack Matlock Files, Box 42, RRPL. Shultz did not author this particular report, but had (per its cover memo) led the group discussion that resulted in the paper and signed off on an earlier version.

And by late 1987, he argued that “Gorbachev comes to Washington to address an agenda you have defined, against a background of American strength and consistency you have created. As such, his visit reflects a qualitative change in the nature of the U.S.-Soviet relationship you inherited in 1981.” Ultimately, “the Washington summit is an opportunity to lock in the remarkable progress we have made since the Geneva summit across your four-part agenda and to set the stage for even more significant gains before your Moscow visit.”¹⁴

Ultimately, just as National Security Decision Directive (NSDD)-75 (the epitome of the hardline position) called for promoting “within the narrow limits available to us, the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system” (68), so too does Wilson describe Shultz (and other moderates such as Jack Matlock) as believing, “that the Soviet Union had the capacity to reform” (63). In short, Shultz and the moderates seem to have embraced the same fundamental objectives as the Reagan hardliners – maximizing gains and influence at the Soviet Union’s expense by applying American power to combat that of the USSR.

This underlying goal matters, because if the objective remained constant, then the degree of change before and after 1983-1984 cannot have been all that great. Instead, what seems to have been at issue are the *means* to that end. Hardliners sought to buttress the American position by isolating and delegitimizing the Soviet Union, while Shultz and other comparative moderates sought to buttress the American position by engaging and seeing what could be wrung from the USSR...still without providing the USSR breathing space. This suggests a difference of degree rather than type. The means chosen to pursue one’s objectives in foreign policy undoubtedly matter; war, for instance, carries different consequences than diplomacy. However, to the extent that the United States’ underlying ambitions remained constant, so too does the United States appear to have consistently pursued a proto-primacist grand strategy and quested for victory (in the form of power maximization) over the USSR. That the Bush Administration later committed the United States to an ongoing management of European security affairs and pursued a Soviet withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe reinforces the point. Even with the Soviet threat in retreat, the United States pressed for greater influence in Europe and relative gains over the Soviet Union, with the tacit objective of rendering the USSR unable to threaten the American position in world affairs and forcing it to accept American dominance in European security and beyond. In the end, it is hard to see what substantive gains (e.g., Soviet military reductions, settlement of regional disputes in ways favorable to U.S. positions) were left on the table by the ‘engaged’ United States under Reagan and Bush that hardliners would have pursued had they run the show. Exploitation and predation should not be understated just because Shultz, Reagan, and Bush ultimately adopted a kinder, gentler approach to power aggrandizement. *Triumph* occasionally hints at the issue (see, for example, its description of Reagan shifting “the goalpost” with the USSR on 129), but does not expound on the point. The result is an underlying tension.

¹⁴ George Shultz to The President, “The Washington Summit,” 1 December 1987, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 4, RRPL.

Significantly, to accept this point is not to argue that American strategy caused the USSR to concede to the United States as the Reagan victory school would propose.¹⁵ It does, however, suggest the need to critically evaluate whether and to what extent American policy underwent a shift after 1983-1984. If engagement, accommodation, and diplomacy mean anything beyond great power competition through means short of war, then it seems to this reviewer that the distinctions between Reagan I, Reagan II, and Bush may be less than initially meet the eye.

None of this, however, detracts from *Triumph's* many triumphs. The book deserves a prominent place on any reading list dealing with the end of the Cold War, and is suitable for scholars and policymakers alike. Other monographs and volumes detail the diplomacy surrounding the Cold War's end. Still others engage in ongoing debates over what led to the Cold War's long-term conclusion. Few, however, combine history and theory in a synthetic way that is both insightful and eminently readable. James Graham Wilson has written a superior book that stands as one of the best single volumes on U.S.-Soviet relations in the Cold War's twilight.

¹⁵ For the Reagan Victory thesis, see Schweizer, *Victory*; Norman Bailey, *The Strategic Plan That Won The Cold War: National Security Decision Directive 75* (McLean, VA: Potomac Foundation, 1998).

Review by Keith L. Shimko, Purdue University

In *The Triumph of Improvisation* James Graham Wilson, draws upon a wide array of secondary and new primary sources to revisit the question of why the Cold War ended when and as it did. Broad in scope, rich in detail, smooth in presentation, and exceedingly fair its judgments and assessments of events and people, it is an impressive work that weaves together the various threads of a complex story, spanning the globe and more than a decade to provide a sweeping yet surprisingly intimate narrative that will be difficult to beat. It is undoubtedly an important contribution to the literature on the Cold War's end. But anyone looking for bombshells or shocking revelations hidden until now in classified diplomatic cables, memos, and personal papers will likely come away disappointed, as will readers hoping for any deep theoretical conclusions about international politics or foreign policy. In this sense the wow factor may be missing, but this is a reflection of sober and balanced scholarship, not a lack of intellectual ambition.

Wilson frames his study in the context of what he sees as the four prevailing narratives of the Cold War's end: "(1) Mikhail Gorbachev was wholly responsible; (2) changes in the distribution of the power in the international system determined leaders' preferences, (3) U.S. policymakers crafted and executed a grand strategy to defeat communism; (4) nongovernmental actors pressured leaders to halt the nuclear arms race and liberate Eastern Europe" (2). While these explanations are not mutually exclusive, most accounts, particularly those that are self-consciously theoretical, tend to stress one over the others. Finding fault with each of these narratives, Wilson argues that new evidence "speaks clearly and consistently: observers misunderstood the end of the Cold War, and historians have mischaracterized it" (2).

What is the nature of this mischaracterization? The main problem, in Wilson's view, is that the dominant explanations are too tidy and fail to capture the messy, uncertain, and contingent aspects of the Cold War's end. Each suffers from a post-hoc imposition of order, purpose, and intent onto events, decisions, and policies more accurately seen as the almost accidental, if highly fortuitous, interaction of personalities and circumstances. This somewhat less dramatic reality has been overwhelmed by a tendency to assume that world-changing events are the result not merely of human action but design. Focusing on the key players in the Cold War's end and the Soviet Union's demise, Wilson reaches a more, for lack of a better word, mundane conclusion: "Reagan, Shultz, Bush and Gorbachev improvised. In the last years of the conflict, improvisation mattered more than any master plan. Ascribing important events to wise decisions laid out in a clear set of directives might be more comforting to historians as they seek to find coherence amidst change, but such interpretations do not explain the swift and peaceful end to the Cold War" (198). None of this is deny anyone credit for making the right decisions at critical junctures where the wrong choices could have led to disaster. Wilson gives credit where it is due. President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, President George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev all come off quite well in his account, but as reasonable decision-makers who managed unforeseen events skillfully, not brilliant grand strategists who orchestrated the end of the Cold War.

Although Wilson views Gorbachev as “the indispensable agent of change” (115), I was most intrigued by his analysis of Reagan, in part because I did some work on Reagan’s beliefs about the Soviet Union many years ago but have not thought about it much since. Wilson offers something of a corrective to the shifting perception of Reagan since he left office in which “as a statesman [he] now commands a presumption of greatness” and some even “regard him as a grand strategist,” (2) a portrait most consistent with the third narrative of the Cold War’s end noted earlier. How common this perception of Reagan’s greatness is among historians I am not so sure, but it is certainly the image of partisans who, in retrospect, think of Reagan as a geopolitical mastermind (despite the criticisms of many conservatives at the time).¹ Wilson’s assessment of Reagan is quite sympathetic and generally favorable, but he is not willing to place him alongside history’s great strategists.

Wilson makes sense of Reagan in terms of a central tension in his thinking about the Soviet Union and international relations that was more generally reflected in his commitment to both a “freedom crusade” seeking the “eradication of communism” and “peace through strength” predicated on restoring American military power as a precondition for engaging the Soviet Union and “reducing arms to foster peaceful coexistence” (15). The contradictions arising from Reagan’s “conflicting impulses” were on full display in his almost shockingly naïve desire to eliminate nuclear weapons, an idealistic objective Wilson characterizes as a “fantasy” (199).² The problem was that negotiating the abolition of nuclear weapons would obviously require meaningful engagement with the Soviets, which in turn would grant the regime some measure of legitimacy. But this recognition of legitimacy was difficult to reconcile with his freedom agenda’s view of any communist regime as morally reprehensible – a source of evil in the modern world. Hence the central dilemma: how could Reagan engage with a regime yet simultaneously denounce it as a morally abhorrent and illegitimate aberration? As a result, Reagan was constantly pulled in different directions by these opposing tendencies.

At the same time, he was also being pulled in different directions by his key advisers, who seemed in their totality an almost perfect reflection of Reagan’s worldview. Wilson excels in detailing the behind-the-scenes infighting as various players and factions tried to exploit particular elements in Reagan’s thinking to draw him in their direction. The hardliners tried to tap into his innate suspicion and reflexive distrust of the Soviet Union while the moderates appealed to his idealism and desire to be seen as a man of peace who reduced/eliminated nuclear weapons. In the end, the moderates, led by Shultz, proved the

¹ Though I would not consider it “partisan” in any dismissive sense, a recent argument along these lines can be seen in Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman and Reagan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), chapter 7. Earlier examples are Paul Kengor, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) and Peter Schweizer, *Reagan’s War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph over Communism* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

² See also Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005).

most adroit in patiently moving the President: “With the aid of the new Soviet specialist on the National Security Council, Jack Matlock, Shultz helped rationalize Reagan’s conflicting impulses toward Moscow in order to engage the Cold War adversary” (63). Thus Wilson deems Shultz “the critical agent of U.S. foreign policy” after his arrival midway through Reagan’s first term (5).

On Shultz’s role and administration infighting more generally, Wilson may present a lot of new detail, but the overall narrative is by no means new or novel. Wilson’s discussion brought to mind one of my favorite exchanges on *Meet the Press* early in Reagan’s second term. In response to Mike Wallace’s observation that “the problem we have had during the whole four and a half years of the Reagan administration is still there...Different officials speak with different voices,” Marvin Kalb noted, “on policy toward the Soviet Union, I think you’re absolutely right. The differences really reflect the roadmap of the president’s own feelings about the Soviet Union, and they are not crystal clear.”³ Of course, there are a variety of ways to characterize Reagan’s intellectual roadmap. I often thought of in terms of a typically American mixture of geopolitical realism and liberal idealism, but Wilson’s juxtaposition of “peace through strength” and a “freedom crusade” probably captures the basic tension better.

One of the obstacles to classifying Reagan as an insightful grand strategist is his relatively limited knowledge of critical issues, a shortcoming his admirers usually gloss over. Reagan was certainly not the ignorant Chauncey Gardiner-like buffoon his critics often alleged (a view, to be truthful, I shared at the time), but he does not emerge here unscathed. Wilson relates how prior to Reagan’s first meeting with Gorbachev in 1985 Matlock compiled a “Soviet 101” crash course “consisting of twenty-one papers, roughly eight to ten pages each, on the country’s history and psychology of its people” (96). This was a revelation for me, one that left me a bit gobsmacked. I had to put the book down for a few moments to absorb the fact that five years into Reagan’s presidency one of the administration’s primary Soviet experts felt that the Commander-in-Chief needed a basic tutorial on the nation’s primary strategic adversary. Imagine a Secretary of the Treasury five years into his/her term than needed a briefing on how the stock market worked. One has to wonder on what basis was Reagan making critical decisions about relations with the Soviet Union if he needed an introductory class in his second term. It is sort of frightening. One can only imagine the howls of derision from our current President’s critics if it was revealed that he needed an “Iran 101” tutorial shortly after his reelection.

The Triumph of Improvisation is also interesting in that it leaves unsolved what I have always considered one of the great mysteries of the Reagan administration – where was George Bush? The Vice President, after all, was a man of some foreign policy experience when he was selected as Reagan’s running mate in 1980, having served as Ambassador to China and Director of the CIA. He went on during his own presidency to manage the end of the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm (as Wilson details). He would seem to have been

³ Keith Shimko, *Images and Arms Control: Perceptions of the Soviet Union in the Reagan Administration* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 101. The date of the show was March 19, 1985.

someone Reagan would naturally have turned to for advice and insight. But this seems not to have been the case. Though Shultz, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Deputy Secretary of State William Clark, National Security Council members Jack Matlock and Richard Pipes and more minor players make frequent appearances in Wilson's account of the Reagan years, Bush is completely absent. In the chapters covering the period from January 1981 to December 1988 – that is, the entire Reagan presidency – Bush is not mentioned a single time. One would never know he was part of the administration. He is a complete nonentity. Bush just appears from out of the blue in 1989 as Reagan's successor. I have always found this utterly puzzling. Did Bush have any ideas about how to deal with the Soviet Union? If so, did he support Shultz's goal of engagement (which would be my guess) or Weinberger's obstructionism? Did he share these views with the President? Was his role so private that little remains in terms of documentation and memos for historians to uncover? Should his absence be interpreted as a lack of involvement, influence, or evidence?

Did I learn a lot from *The Triumph of Improvisation*? Absolutely. Was it a masterful telling of a story with an awful lot of moving parts? No doubt. Will it come to be viewed as one of the definitive accounts of this critical period in American and international history? It certainly deserves to. When asked for good book on how and why the Cold War ended, this will be my new recommendation. Everything in it rang true. But did it fundamentally alter my understanding or perception of the individuals involved in this historic drama or the processes and dynamics by which the Cold War ended with a peaceful whimper rather than a catastrophic bang? I really cannot say that it did, but then I was never enamored of the grand narratives and theoretically driven explanations Wilson counters so well.

Author's Response by James Graham Wilson, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State¹

I thank Tom Nichols, Joshua Shiffrin, and Keith Shimko for their kind words and constructive criticism, James McAllister for organizing this roundtable, and Ronald Granieri for writing the introduction. In *The Triumph of Improvisation*, I set out to explain the end of the Cold War in a 200-page book suitable for undergraduates taking courses in history, political science, and public policy, and for graduate students in search of a monograph to demolish in seminars and dissertations. The basic argument of the book is that adaptation, improvisation, and engagement by individuals in positions of power ended almost a half century of cold war and the specter of a nuclear holocaust. Four of these leaders stand out: General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, and President George H. W. Bush. Amidst ambivalence and uncertainty, Gorbachev, Reagan, Shultz, and Bush – along with a host of other actors – engaged with adversaries and adapted to a rapidly changing international environment that saw the recovery of international capitalism and paralysis within command economics.

Decisions shaped how history unfolded in the 1980s, I argue. Economic recovery after the stagnation of the 1970s resulted from difficult and often unpopular choices. Leaders faced daunting challenges and succeeded when they improvised in response to dramatic and surprising events. The most instructive example of success was the astonishingly quick and almost entirely peaceful response to the protests and demonstrations in East Germany and Eastern Europe – which led to the collapse of communism. Individuals in Moscow and Washington did not catalyze these demonstrations but instead reacted prudently, imaginatively, and courageously to events they did not foresee. No master plan, I contend, explains either the developments in Eastern Europe and East Germany or the response to those developments in the West.

Certainly, strategic thinking played an important role in the story of the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev had a strategy for reforming the Soviet Union: arrest the nuclear arms race so that he could reallocate resources toward domestic goods and services. The Reagan administration employed strategies to reduce nuclear weapons, one of which was to deploy Pershing II and land-based cruise missiles in Western Europe to match Soviet SS-20s in the hope of eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons. Reagan's broader dream of a world without nuclear weapons rested upon building the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and sharing that technology with the Soviets to ensure that both sides adhered to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I). That dream was more fantasy than grand strategy, I contend. Still, the idea of SDI gave Reagan confidence to bargain with the Soviets, and the President's sincerity helped foster trust with Gorbachev (although the Soviet leader did not care for SDI).

¹ Note: The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State or the U.S. Government. All information presented here is based upon publicly available, declassified sources.

Readers looking for a portrayal of Reagan as a grand strategist should pick up a copy of Hal Brands's most recent book.² I think Reagan's pursuit of a world without nuclear weapons took precedence over having a coherent grand strategy for dealing with the Soviets. His declaration in Moscow's Red Square in 1988 that talk of an evil empire was from "another time, another era" significantly reduced the Soviet perception of American threat. (140) These words and his willingness to work with Gorbachev were more consequential than his 'tear down this wall' line in Berlin the previous year.

During the period from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Persian Gulf War, I go on to say in the book, the Bush administration helped construct a new world order not by formulation and execution of a master plan but through improvisation. Bush's critics lamented the absence of a big idea that would replace George Kennan's notion of containment. The President himself joked about lacking 'the vision thing.' In his review, Shimko raises a good point, which is that Bush, who was by Reagan's side for eight years (and very nearly became President in the spring of 1981), enters the narrative of *The Triumph of Improvisation* only in January 1989. Of course, Bush was not at the blockbuster summits in Geneva, Reykjavik, and Moscow, and did not stake out independent positions on the Soviets and arms control. He also tended to hold his cards close to the vest in National Security Council meetings, which were often contentious, knowing that he would meet privately with Reagan before a presidential decision. If I could add several pages to the book in response to Shimko's point, I would devote them to Bush's role as chair of the Special Situations Group (SSG), tasked with crisis management during the Reagan administration. I would explore the extent to which that experience might have shaped his responses to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Persian Gulf War, and the August 1991 attempted coup in Moscow.

In these and other critical moments Bush, along with Shultz, Reagan, and Gorbachev, acted without a script. That does not necessarily downplay the importance of grand strategy, according to Shiffrin, for grand strategy does not necessarily need to be written down. "Freed from focusing on what policies were announced or codified," Shiffrin writes, "scholars can focus on the broad patterns emerging in American and Soviet relations over time." Grand strategy is therefore up to the observers to detect or assess and place within a broader genealogy.

It sounds a bit too neat to me to say that Gorbachev, in adhering to a grand strategy of rapprochement and retrenchment, made repeated concessions to the West as part of a calculated effort to lock in the military and political status quo. Rather, he emerges from my research as someone motivated by ideas that often were slogans: perestroika, glasnost, common European home, and new world order. The pattern on the part of Gorbachev's Soviet Union may have been to accede to Washington's policy preferences, but he did not have a coherent sense of where he was going, and he often was reacting to events outside

² Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014)

his control. Twenty five years ago this fall, border guards opened the Berlin Wall absent explicit orders from Communist leaders in Berlin or Moscow.

Shiffrinson also raises a broader point about continuity versus change in U.S. Cold-War objectives. Indeed, the language he quotes from NSDD-32 and NSDD-75 is consistent with that put forward by previous U.S. presidential administrations. Starting with Kennan's Long Telegram and Mr. X article, the long-term goal of the Truman administration and those that followed was always more than containment: it was victory. The "responsibility of world leadership," read NSC-68, "demands that we make the attempt, and accept the risks inherent in it, to bring about order and justice by means consistent with the principles of freedom and democracy." (198) Both George Shultz and the most hardline Reagan administration official would endorse this prescription for America's role in the world.

The means to achieve this goal of victory differed, however, and strategies of engagement contributed more to the peaceful end of the Cold War than did strategies of containment. Victory short of war was always the U.S. objective during the Cold War. Toward the end of his second term, Reagan saw victory through overcoming the balance of nuclear terror. Shultz hoped that the Soviet Union would become like the People's Republic of China – uninterested in spreading revolution abroad and pursuing economic rationalization at home. "It literally wasn't until Gorbachev was gone and out of power, and you did have a genuine anti-Communist in [power] that the cold war was won," Shultz's rival Caspar Weinberger, later reflected.³ Bush and his top advisors regarded victory as a New World Order that rejected bipolarity but did not necessitate the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"The world before World War I was a very different world than that since," National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft proclaimed shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. "And ever since World War I we have been trying to put back together the pieces of the world which was destroyed by that war." (181) One hundred years after Europe's last summer, scholars are still pondering how individuals in positions of power failed to avoid catastrophe. The story of the last decade of the Cold War is a case study in how they succeeded.

³ Caspar Weinberger Oral History, p. 29, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Ronald Reagan Presidential Oral History Project, November 19, 2002, available at <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/oralhistory/caspar-weinberger> (accessed August 22, 2014).