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William Inboden. *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2022. ISBN: 9781524745899 (hardcover \$35).

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Contents

Introduction by Elizabeth C. Charles and James Graham Wilson, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State	2
Review by Beth A. Fischer, University of Toronto	4
Review by Henry R. Nau, George Washington University	13
Response by William Inboden, University of Florida	19

Introduction by Elizabeth C. Charles and James Graham Wilson, Office of the Historian, U.S.
Department of State¹

William Inboden's *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink* is an ambitious book that covers the entirety of the Reagan administration's foreign policy. Inboden is a distinguished scholar and tireless mentor who served in high-level positions in the Department of State and National Security Council staff, where he observed and participated in the foreign policy process. In researching this book, he read a voluminous number of declassified documents and interviewed many former policymakers. He published it at a moment in which the Cold War no longer feels like history.

In their reviews, political scientists Beth Fischer and Henry Nau—two foremost experts on the Reagan presidency—agree that *The Peacemaker* is an important, well-researched book. Fischer describes it as an “engaging study” that will become “one-stop shopping” for those seeking to understand what President Reagan believed and how his beliefs informed the foreign policy of his administration. Nau declares it to be “a benchmark book.”

Nau lauds Inboden for his extensive archival research, which puts to rest any notion that Reagan was an unserious person. Nor was he simply caught up in historical forces. “Here was the epitome of agency,” Nau writes of Reagan's apparent willingness to lose reelection in 1984 if his policies failed to generate short-term results—“leadership that did not bend to structures but changed them.” The president read, thought, and wrote—some 1 million words over the course of his political career, Nau tallies—and was a devout Christian whose faith shaped his convictions to oppose Communism, uphold the dignity of the individual, and prevent a nuclear war. He concurs with much of Inboden's depiction of the evolution of Reagan's foreign policy.

While praising the scope of Inboden's lens, Fischer finds Inboden's central argument—that Reagan pressed for a “negotiated surrender” of the Soviet Union—to be less than convincing. She agrees that Reagan sought to *negotiate* with Soviet leaders to reduce nuclear arms; however, she goes on to say, a Soviet *surrender* was not his objective. Moreover, Reagan did not compel the Politburo in 1985 to elevate a reformer such as Mikhail Gorbachev to take the helm of the Soviet Union, the destruction of which was not Reagan's objective. In sum, Fischer contends that Inboden overlooks Soviet decisionmaking—before, during, and after the Reagan administration—in the events leading up to the end of the Cold War.

In his reply, Inboden expresses gratitude and humility to the reviews of two scholars whom he respects. He responds to Fischer's critiques while defending and elaborating upon his central argument that Reagan pursued a “negotiated surrender” of the Soviet Union. Inboden concludes with a note of optimism for our

¹ The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the US Department of State or the United States Government.

present era. “When you are looking for someone,” he writes about Reagan in the days before Gorbachev, “you are more apt to recognize him when he arrives.”

Contributors:

William Inboden is Professor and Director of the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida. He previously served at the State Department and on the National Security Council staff.

Elizabeth C. Charles is a Historian in the Office of the Historian in the Foreign Service Institute at the US Department of State. She received her PhD from the George Washington University and is currently working on Soviet and arms control volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series.

James Graham Wilson is a Historian in the Office of the Historian in the Foreign Service Institute at the U.S. Department of State. He received his PhD from the University of Virginia and is currently working on national security policy and arms control volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series.

Beth A. Fischer, PhD, is an Associate Professor (Teaching Stream) at the University of Toronto’s Woodsworth College. She is the author of *The Reagan Reversal* (University of Missouri Press, 1997) and *The Myth of Triumphalism* (University Press of Kentucky, 2020). She is currently researching Soviet and American perceptions of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Henry R. Nau is Professor Emeritus of George Washington University and author, among numerous publications, of *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton University Press, 2013, paperback with new preface 2015); *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2002); *Perspectives on International Relations: Power, Institutions and Ideas* (Sage Publications, 7th edition 2021); and *The Myth of America's Decline* (Oxford University Press, 1990, paperback with new preface 1991). He served twice in government as special assistant to the Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs (1975–1977) and senior staff member of the National Security Council responsible for G-7 Summits and other international economic affairs (1981–1983).

William Inboden's latest book, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink* is an ambitious project. It seeks to explain President Ronald Reagan's beliefs and policies on superpower relations, Western Europe, Central America, Iran, Lebanon, Asia, and more during the eight years of his presidency—a period of momentous global change. It also delves into key figures who sought to influence Reagan, such as former President Richard Nixon, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and members of his own administration.

The volume is an engaging study of Ronald Reagan's views. It depicts a complex, occasionally visionary man who sometimes pursued goals that appeared contradictory and who often confronted hard choices. For this reason it will become “one-stop shopping” for those who are interested in the president's beliefs and how they shaped his approach to foreign policy.

The Peacemaker stands on the shoulders of path-breaking studies that have challenged conventional notions about President Reagan. As Inboden notes, when Reagan was in office he was often caricatured as a “simple-minded warmonger” who was largely detached from policymaking (329). Subsequent studies have demonstrated that he was far more complex. For example, Kiron Skinner, Annelise Anderson and Martin Anderson's book, *In His Own Hand* is a compilation of Reagan's 1970s radio addresses which he wrote himself.¹ The book demonstrated Reagan's detailed policy knowledge on a wide range of foreign policy issues, as well as his strong writing skills. It made clear that Reagan was no foreign policy dilettante.

Paul Lettow's *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* is another path-breaking work.² Focusing explicitly on Reagan's beliefs about US security, it laid bare what had been hiding in plain sight: that the president sought to abolish nuclear weapons. The abolitionist who emerged from Lettow's work sits uncomfortably with popular images of Reagan as a weapons-wielding Cold Warrior. His revelations about Reagan's anti-nuclearism prompted reconsideration of the president's military buildup and his approach to ending the Cold War. Paul Kengor's *God and Ronald Reagan* is another pivotal work about Reagan's beliefs. It was among the first to call attention to Reagan's powerful, yet private religious views and their impact on his policies.³ As such, it shone a light on the president's repeated efforts to promote religious freedom around the world and provided context for his concern about nuclear Armageddon. James Mann's *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan* took an unconventional approach to examining the president's views on superpower relations by focusing on his relationship with former President Richard Nixon as well

¹ Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, *In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan that Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

² Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2006).

³ Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (New York: Regan Books, 2004).

as the influence of Soviet scholar Suzanne Massie.⁴ By doing so he revealed an inquisitive president who often had to fend off conservative critics.

James Graham Wilson's *The Triumph of Improvisation* added further complexity to the story of Reagan and the Cold War.⁵ It stands out for two reasons. First, it is one of the few studies that analyzes both American and Soviet decisionmaking. Understanding the ending of the Cold War requires an examination not only of US policy, but also of Moscow's priorities and choices. Focusing exclusively on US policy tells only half the story and can therefore lead to unsupportable conclusions. Second, Wilson's book revealed the importance of diplomacy and the personal relationships that formed among Reagan, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary of State George P. Shultz, and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze as they worked together to nudge the world beyond Mutually Assured Destruction. The book underscored President Reagan's role as an engaged diplomat.

The Peacemaker weaves this scholarship into a narrative about Reagan's views. Told in a chronological fashion, it begins during Reagan's time as the governor of California, covers his presidential campaigns during the 1970s, and devotes roughly one chapter to each year of his presidency. Inboden chose a chronological format that skips among events, people, and different regions of the world to "capture in part the chaos of policymaking as it felt to Reagan and his team" (7). This helps the reader understand the uncertainty and hard choices the administration confronted. Owing to this format and Inboden's clear, succinct writing, it is a pleasure to read.

The sections of the book that focus on Reagan's views and policies are carefully researched. Inboden draws from President Reagan's letters, his diary entries, government documents, and personal interviews with former members of the administration. Other segments of the book—for example, sections that refer to Soviet policy—do not meet this high standard. Despite the title, *The Peacemaker* is not an explanation of how the Cold War ended or Reagan's role in its denouement. This is because Moscow's perspective has been largely overlooked.

The Peacemaker's central argument is that Reagan pushed the Soviet Union to a "negotiated surrender" (4, 141, 470, 476). Noting that the president sometimes pursued objectives that seemed contradictory, Inboden asks, "How could [Reagan] try to defeat Soviet communism while at the same time cooperating with the Kremlin to end the arms race?" The answer:

By pursuing the Soviet Union's *negotiated surrender*. "Negotiated" because he favored diplomacy over war and wanted to partner with a Soviet leader to negotiate arms reductions and reduced tensions, leading ultimately to eliminating nuclear weapons.

⁴ James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Viking, 2009).

⁵ James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

“Surrender” because he loathed Soviet communism as a reprehensible system, a plague on all whom it ruled, and he sought to render it extinct (4).

The meaning of “negotiated surrender” is murky. Inboden suggests at one point that it was synonymous with “reform,” arguing that a USSR that “believed in God, free markets, and individual liberty and defunded its military and relinquished its empire” would be a Soviet Union “in name only” (470). Yet he also indicates that “surrender” entailed the collapse of the USSR. “Like [President] Franklin Roosevelt, [Reagan] led his nation and its allies in vanquishing a totalitarian empire” (478).

Was it “negotiated?” Absolutely. President Reagan met his Soviet counterpart more frequently than any of his predecessors and repeatedly wrote letters to Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Constantin Chernenko and Gorbachev. The aim of his military buildup, as administration officials frequently explained, was to coax Moscow into arms-reductions talks.⁶ And, with Shultz, he negotiated the first treaty to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons. Reagan’s presidency is a story of diplomatic success.

Was it a “surrender”? No. This is where an otherwise first-rate study of Reagan’s beliefs goes off track. “Surrender” suggests that Moscow was compelled to take actions that it did not want to take, or that were not in its self-interest, or that it would not have taken absent Reagan. None of these conditions held true. Soviet leaders wanted to reform their system even before Reagan took office and would have done so regardless of his policies. In order to understand the impact of Reagan’s policies on the USSR it is necessary to analyze Moscow’s priorities, perceptions, and choices. This requires research about Soviet decision-making in Soviet sources. Although Inboden at times discusses Soviet perspectives with care—the section on Chernobyl (401-403) is an example—the assertions about Soviet decisionmaking are, for the most part, lightly researched, often from US sources.⁷

By largely overlooking Soviet decisionmaking, the book overstates or mis-states the impact of Reagan’s policies on the USSR and his role in ending the Cold War. For example, Inboden repeatedly argues that Reagan’s policies “pressured the Kremlin to produce a reformer” (139, 269, 311, 329, 373). The implication is that Reagan caused Gorbachev to rise to power. This attributes to US presidents a power they did not have: the ability to select or influence who would be chosen as leader of the USSR. Reagan’s preferences were irrelevant to the succession, as is made plain by the fact that two hardliners—Andropov and Chernenko—preceded Gorbachev. More importantly, the book ignores the fact that a reform movement had been growing in the Soviet Union since the 1950s.⁸ By the mid-1970s there was an entire generation of

⁶ Beth Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020), 51-58.

⁷ This is problematic for many reasons, one of which is that US intelligence about Soviet decision making at the time was quite poor, as Inboden acknowledges (360).

⁸ For more on the origins of the Soviet reform movement see Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism*, 80-92. For an interesting account of the bonds that formed among Soviet and American physicists owing to international conferences and the mutual respect they had for each other see the memoir by the first Chief Scientist of Reagan’s SDI

reformers—Mikhail Gorbachev among them—that understood that the Soviet system needed economic, political, and strategic reform.⁹ They did not need Reagan to enlighten them.

Reagan certainly sought democratic reforms in the USSR. But he had the same goals as an entire generation of Soviet reformers who were seeking to improve their country. Reagan did not compel Soviet leaders to reform.¹⁰ He wanted for them what they wanted for themselves: an end to the arms race, an economy geared toward the production of civilian goods rather than defense, better quality of life, and the ability to speak more openly. This is why Gorbachev enjoyed broad political support when he first came to power. Thus it is hard to understand how Soviet reforms, initiated by the Soviets themselves, can be considered “surrender.”

Inboden also erroneously claims that Reagan “lured the Soviet military and economy into an arms race it could not sustain” (470). Gorbachev’s desire to end the arms race is inaccurately portrayed as the Soviet leader having fallen into a “trap that Reagan had set for the Kremlin” (409). The president’s policies had little impact on Soviet sustainability. The arms race certainly weakened the Soviet economy, but it preceded Reagan by decades. More to the point, Soviet officials never sought to match the Jimmy Carter/Reagan military buildup. There was no massive increase in Soviet arsenals during the 1980s. The rate at which the Kremlin procured new weapons peaked in 1975 and remained stable for the ensuing decade. Under Gorbachev there was a brief period in which weapons procurement rates ticked upward, which for the most part reflected an earlier decision to modernize the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system around Moscow. This amounted to increases in defense spending of approximately three percent per year between 1985 and 1987, well below the seven percent per year increases that the Reagan administration enjoyed and not nearly enough to force economic collapse. By 1988 Soviet defense spending dropped to 1980 levels.¹¹

project, Gerold Yonas, *Death Rays and Delusions* (Albuquerque, NM: Peter Publishing, 2017). See also Roald Z. Sagdeev, *The Making of a Soviet Scientist: My Adventures in Nuclear Fusion and Space from Stalin to Star Wars* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994) and Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁹ By this point the debate centered not on whether to reform, but *how*: some Soviets advocated a series of incremental changes, while others believed wholesale fundamental reforms were required.

¹⁰ Jack Matlock remarks, Musgrove Oral History Conference, May 1-3, 1998, in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok, *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe* (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2010), 206.

¹¹ A smaller part of the 1985–1987 increase was owing to the purchase of aircraft and equipment for what was hoped to be the final push to victory in Afghanistan. This offset a decline in the purchase of such weapons between 1975 and 1984. For more on Soviet defense spending and the Soviet response to Reagan’s buildup see Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism*, 102–128. Determining the exact amount that the Soviet Union spent on defense was—and continues to be—exceedingly difficult. The best explanation of the many challenges of such estimates is given in Noel E. Firth and James H. Noren, *Soviet Defense Spending: A History of CIA Estimates, 1950–1990* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), especially 75–80, 100–103, 111. See also Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994), 505–508; and Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces*,

One reason the Soviet military did not match the US buildup is that its weapons procurement had little to do with US policy. Former Soviet military officers have explained that in the USSR weapons production was an employment scheme: the goal was to keep factories open and workers employed.¹² US policy had little impact on this jobs program. Weapons production was also entirely separate from the professional military. The “industrialists,” as they were called, produced weapons and the military was required to accept what was produced. The industrialists “pursued their own interests rather than servicing the military’s needs.... Their efforts...to ensure stable weapons development and production processes appear to have been the primary cause of the USSR’s arms buildup.”¹³ This is why the Soviets had a glut of weapons and redundancies galore: “Uninterrupted production was a value in and of itself—even if what it was producing was obsolete.”¹⁴ This explains why weapons procurement was stable from 1975–1985 despite the Carter/Reagan buildup.

Another reason the Soviets opted not to match the US buildup is that the military reformers had concluded that the arms race was folly and should be abandoned.¹⁵ Moscow’s large arsenal had appeared threatening to the West, prompting the US to build up its own arsenals. This, in turn, had undermined Soviet security. Military reformers argued that the Soviet Union should shift to a doctrine of “sufficient defense,” which would entail reducing its arsenal to its lowest possible level. It would also divest itself of much of its offensive weapons and emphasize defensive capabilities instead.¹⁶ As Colonel Makhmut Gareyev, head of the Military Science Administration of the Soviet General Staff, explained, genuine security “is guaranteed by the lowest possible level of strategic balance, not the highest.”¹⁷

Soviet leaders had also reconsidered the purpose of their nuclear arsenal. Oral testimony and government documents demonstrate that these officials never intended to introduce nuclear weapons into a

240–245. These trends are based on CIA estimates, which are arguably the most accurate. The estimates of Soviet defense spending from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) were based on Moscow’s “official” budget, which was mostly propaganda, as former Soviet officials have acknowledged.

¹² See John Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985 Volume 1: An Analytical Comparison of US-Soviet Assessments during the CW* (unclassified) (BDM Federal, Inc. September 22, 1995). BDM, a contractor for the Pentagon, interviewed 21 former senior Soviet defense officials between December 1990 and 1995 for this study. It was first made public by the National Security Archives on 11 September 2009 and can be found here: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb285/index.htm>. Volume 2 is the transcripts of the interviews.

¹³ Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985 Volume 1*, 67.

¹⁴ Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985 Volume 1*, 61, 13.

¹⁵ On the reform of Soviet military doctrine see Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism*, 102–108.

¹⁶ For example, see Aleksei Arbatov, “Parity and Reasonable Sufficiency,” *International Affairs* 10 (1988): 75–87; Arbatov, “How Much Defense Is Sufficient?” *International Affairs* 4 (1989): 31–44; and Makhmut Gareyev, “The Revised Soviet Military Doctrine,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (December 1988) 44:10, 30–34.

¹⁷ Gareyev, “The Revised Soviet Military Doctrine,” 30–34. By the end of 1985 there was general agreement on the need for sufficient defense and the Warsaw Pact officially adopted the doctrine during its May 1987 meeting in Berlin. See remarks by Vladimir Slipchenko, Brown Oral History Conference on the Ending of the Cold War, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, May 7–10, 1998, transcript 107–108, 171–172, 287–289.

conventional conflict.¹⁸ During the 1960s and 1970s, they stated publicly that the USSR would respond with a massive retaliatory strike should the US launch even one nuclear missile, but Soviet military officials have since disclosed that this was purely propaganda.¹⁹ In fact, they likely would have entered into negotiations. And, if NATO had invaded and had overrun their nuclear sites, the Soviet plan was to destroy their arsenal rather than use it.²⁰

In short, Soviet leaders had determined that nuclear arsenals had no utility other than to deter an American attack—which seemed increasingly improbable. Nuclear weapons were also provocative and expensive to build and maintain. By 1985 there was agreement within the Politburo that nuclear weapons should be eliminated and in February 1986 the USSR formally adopted the doctrine of sufficient defense, paving the way for steep reductions in the Soviet arsenal.²¹ As Gorbachev explained, “It is crystal clear that in the world we live in, the world of nuclear weapons, any attempt to use them would spell suicide. Even if one country engages in a steady arms buildup while the other does nothing, the side that arms itself will all the same gain nothing.... This is why striving for military superiority means chasing one’s own tail.”²² This was not propaganda: this was New Thinking.

In fact, Gorbachev believed that he was personally leading the way toward ending the arms race, coaxing an unwilling adversary. From Moscow’s perspective, Soviet officials made overture after overture—a moratorium on nuclear testing, a moratorium on the deployment of new intermediate-range forces, a call for the global elimination of nuclear weapons, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Europe—hoping to coax Washington into joining them to end the arms race. “Our tactic is to tow our partners behind us,” Gorbachev told UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar in June 1987. He explained, “somebody has to take the initiative of taking the first step—if our partners are not ready to do it, we must do it ourselves.”²³

¹⁸ However, General Adrian A. Danilevich, the Special Adviser on Military Doctrine to the Chief of the General Staff, 1964-1990, has indicated that he believes Khrushchev might have used nuclear weapons. Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985 Volume 2*, 30-31. For more, based on the testimony of Soviet military leaders see Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985 Volume 1*, 22-47.

¹⁹ General Adrian A. Danilevich, the Special Adviser on Military Doctrine to the Chief of the General Staff, 1964-1990, in Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985 Volume 2*, 64. For more, based on the testimony of Soviet military leaders see Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985 Volume 1*, 22-47.

²⁰ For more, based on the testimony of Soviet military leaders see Hines, Mishulovich, and Schulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985 Volume 1*, 22-47.

²¹ Anatoly Chernyaev remarks, Brown Oral History Conference on the Ending of the Cold War, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, May 7-10, 1998, transcript 139.

²² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 219.

²³ Mikhail Gorbachev quoted in Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev’s Gamble* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 175. See also Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 103-104.

Gorbachev was repeatedly frustrated that his initiatives to disarm were not only not reciprocated but dismissed by the Reagan administration as propaganda.

Moscow's reaction to the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is also misrepresented. "Reagan knew his SDI sent tremors through the Kremlin," Inboden claims (298). The president may have believed that the Kremlin was terrified of his project, but this was misguided. The initial concerns of Soviet officials about SDI soon dissipated as they realized it was more of a vision than a plan, the technology was not feasible, Congress was not likely to fund the exorbitant project for long, and in the unlikely event it ever were to be built, it could be easily and cheaply countered.²⁴

Inboden writes that SDI "continued to terrify the Kremlin because Moscow, bedazzled by American technology, believed it could work. A secret GRU assessment concluded that SDI could destroy 90 percent of Soviet strategic missiles" (364).²⁵ This remark lacks crucial context: the Soviets believed that a defensive system that could only intercept 90 percent of incoming nuclear missiles would be fatally flawed and not worth building. Even 1 percent of nuclear missiles reaching their targets would have been devastating.²⁶ Moreover, the claim that Soviet officials were "bedazzled" by the technology is unsupportable. Soviet scientists had deep expertise in the area, having considered building an SDI-like project in 1978. Like their colleagues around the world, they believed the technology was not feasible.²⁷ Alternative approaches were preferable.

²⁴ For more on the Soviet reaction to SDI see Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism*, 108-128; Svetlana Savranskaya, "Soviet Response to the Strategic Defense Initiative," in Luc-Andre Brunet, *NATO and the Strategic Defence Initiative* (London: Routledge, 2023), 35-54; Pavel Podvig, "Did Star Wars Help End the Cold War? Soviet Response to the SDI Program," *Science and Global Security* (2017) 25:1, 3-27 and Peter J. Westwick, "'Space-Strike Weapons' and the Soviet Response to SDI," *Diplomatic History* (2008) 32:5, 955-979.

²⁵ The source for this remark is a CIA document which quotes a report by Soviet military intelligence (GRU). It is likely that the GRU was reporting an *American* assessment that 10 percent of incoming missiles would be able to penetrate SDI. See Vitaly Katayev, "Nuclear and Missile Space Talks," no date, Papers of Vitalii Katayev, (Box 7 Folder 3), Hoover Institution. Katayev was a military scientist and the Deputy head of the Defense Industry Department of the Soviet Central Committee and an important adviser to Gorbachev on military matters.

²⁶ Soviet scientists concluded that a defensive system that was 100 percent reliable was impossible but noted that American studies suggested a system that was 90 percent successful might someday be achievable. When doing their own modeling the Soviets preferred to assume a system that could—theoretically—achieve a 99 percent success rate. See Vitaly Katayev, "Nuclear and Missile Space Talks," no date, Papers of Vitalii Katayev, (Box 7 Folder 3), Hoover Institution.

²⁷ The 1978 Soviet proposal was more comprehensive, however: it included an offensive capability. On allied perceptions of SDI see Luc-Andre Brunet, *NATO and the Strategic Defence Initiative* (London: Routledge, 2023). For the American scientific community's assessment of Reagan's vision see Gerold Yonas, *Death Rays and Delusions* (Albuquerque, N.M.: Peter Publishing, 2017). A physicist, Yonas was the first Chief Scientist of SDI and writes of the mutual respect among American and Soviet scientists working on missile defense.

The problem, however, was that conservative Soviet military leaders used SDI as an excuse to lobby for more funding (just as their American peers did). This frustrated Gorbachev's plans to reduce defense spending. He decided that the most cost-effective approach to removing this irritant was to pressure Reagan to abandon or restrict the program. It was not that Soviet officials were afraid of SDI—in fact many suspected it was simply a propaganda campaign. Rather, they viewed it as an irritating distraction from their main goal: ending the arms race. By 1986 Gorbachev's advisers were urging him to ignore SDI and focus instead on reducing nuclear arsenals. Once he heeded their advice, the path was cleared to conclude the historic Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Inboden's claim that "Gorbachev's obsession with SDI...belies the notion that he and his advisers thought it would never work" (416) lacks an understanding of Soviet perspectives.

A couple of final observations: Inboden writes that there was no "Reagan reversal" in 1984 and that "from the beginning Reagan pursued a dual track of pressure on the Soviets combined with diplomatic outreach" (264). This is correct. When I wrote *The Reagan Reversal* in 1993 with limited access to government documents and oral histories, I sought to understand why the president adopted a more conciliatory public posture beginning in January 1984, before Gorbachev came to power.²⁸ We now know that Reagan had intended to negotiate with the Soviets since the early 1980s but had trouble getting traction on this aspect of his policy owing to administrative in-fighting, weak management, and competing priorities. His hardline posture from 1981–1983 contributed to a worsening in superpower relations and the 1983 war scare, while his diplomatic outreach led, as Secretary Shultz predicted, to a reversal in superpower relations.

Finally, Inboden's extensive research on Reagan's views uncovered an interesting nugget of information that may be easily overlooked: in an oft-told story, Reagan's first national security adviser, Richard "Dick" Allen has recounted that in 1977 Reagan told him that his theory of the Cold War was "we win, they lose" (22). Some have claimed this proves that Reagan's plan was to vanquish the USSR. But it has been hard to know what to make of this anecdote. What did Reagan mean by "win" and "lose?" How does that remark square with his subsequent statements that "there should be no talk of winners and losers" at summit meetings?²⁹ This quip is catchy. Why did not Reagan repeat it to anyone else, or in his speeches, internal conversations, diaries, or memoirs? In his autobiography, he notes that his views about superpower relations changed during his time in office: did he change his mind about the win/lose quip and therefore never repeat it? Inboden's research has uncovered another instance in which Reagan used this phrase. During an April 2017 interview Thomas Reed, a senior NSC official, told Inboden that when he asked the president in 1982 what his end goal was for the Cold War Reagan responded "we win, they lose." This is yet another piece of the puzzle of this complex man.

²⁸ Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

²⁹ President Ronald Reagan, "Gorbachev," dictated memorandum, November 1985. Available at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22396-document-1-gorbachev-memorandum-dictated>.

The Peacemaker is an engaging study of US foreign policy under President Reagan. Although its description of the ending of the Cold War is at times wanting, it is an insightful examination of Reagan's beliefs.

Will Inboden has written a benchmark book on Ronald Reagan. An accomplished historian, Inboden examines the sweep of events that enveloped the 1980s and concludes that “along with [President] Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan was one of the two most consequential presidents of the twentieth century” (3). “Just as Roosevelt rightly is regarded as the architect of American strategy in World War II,” Inboden writes, “Reagan oversaw the American strategy for the successful end of the Cold War.” In a very apt phrase, he argues that “Reagan brought the Soviet Union to the brink of a negotiated surrender” (476).

Inboden captures Reagan’s foreign policy in seven themes: Reagan “put alliances at the center of his strategy,” appealed to history especially World War II and Vietnam to chart America’s conservative future, pursued military power as a diplomatic instrument “to force the Soviets into an arms race that they could neither afford nor win,” viewed the Cold War as a religious war giving priority to religious freedom, acknowledged the tragedy (e.g., the insanity of mutual nuclear retaliation) yet triumph of the human spirit, saw foreign affairs primarily as a conflict of ideas not power, and promoted unabashedly “democratic capitalism” and “the better model of free societies” (7-12).

Inboden scoured the Reagan archives for ten years. He took advantage of all the declassified documents and personal papers that poured out of the archives in the decade after Reagan’s death in 2004. His work stands out, along with the two major two-volume biographies of Reagan.¹ Reagan was often dismissed in the instant history of partisan journalism. He was tagged as an intellectual lightweight, B-actor Hollywood type who depended on his staff, his wife, and good luck to guide his presidency.² That view lingers in some studies but no longer stands the test of scholarship.³ The record portrays a very different Ronald Reagan—a man who read a lot, thought a lot, and ultimately wrote a lot, over 1 million words in his own hand or the equivalent of 5-6 academic books.⁴

¹ Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order 1964-1980* (New York: Forum, an Imprint of Prima Publishing, 2001); and Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009); Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003); and *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 1991, 2000).

² See, for example, Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003); and Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³ Reflecting this lingering view, William Taubman insists that “Shultz’s decisive role belies the proposition that Reagan came to power with a coherent vision of how to handle the Soviet Union and then brilliantly executed it.” See *In the Service of the Nation: The Life and Times of George P. Shultz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), xi.

⁴ For a start on these materials, see *Reagan In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); and *Reagan: A Life In Letters* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

In what follows, I focus on three of Inboden's themes—Reagan's sense of history and his plan to win and end the Cold War, his strategy to build up military arms in order to build them down, and his deep religious convictions that the Cold War, and life itself, was a struggle between good and evil.

Reagan did not succumb to structural forces beyond human control but identified and shaped them, sometimes even created them. For Reagan, history was not inevitable even though a loving God superintended the world. As he believed, human beings had to act as if it all depended on them but then pray as if it all depended on God.

When Reagan came to office, as Inboden writes, America “appeared to the world as a crippled giant, in inexorable decline from economic stagnation, military weakness, political dysfunction, and international ineptitude” (3). When he left office, America was paramount, embarking on 30 years of unparalleled economic growth, wielding a defense budget and weapons arsenal that decisively outmatched those of the Soviet Union, championing open societies against closed ones, religious faith against atheism, and ultimately superintending the greatest expansion of free governments and markets in human history. After 1980, over 60 countries moved toward self-government and some 50 toward freer markets.⁵ Because the information revolution and economic integration required it, maybe all of this would have happened anyway. Yet innovation does not happen on its own. It emerges because leaders create the conditions that foster innovation and growth. Reagan was way ahead of other leaders in creating the incentives to innovate—tax cuts, deregulation, open trade markets and stable money supply.

Reagan skeptics like to attribute the end of the Cold War to structural forces, which they say were emerging already before Reagan.⁶ The communications revolution was drawing countries together. After a dangerous military buildup, Reagan, they claim, eventually “reversed course” in 1984 to embrace arms control and detente.⁷ Inboden flatly rejects this reversal thesis (264). He documents in indisputable fashion that Reagan outlined his plan already in 1962-63 (yes, 1963). In notes drafted for speeches at the time, Reagan wrote:

If we truly believe that our way of life is best aren't the Russians more likely to recognize that fact and modify their stand if we let their economy come unhinged so that the contrast is apparent?... In an all out race our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up

⁵ For an elaboration and update of this argument, see my book, *The Myth of America's Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; and my chapter, “The ‘Great Expansion’: The Economic Legacy of Ronald Reagan,” in Jeffrey L. Chidester and Paul Kengor eds., *Reagan's Legacy in a World Transformed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 24-38.

⁶ For this continuity argument, see Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); and Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁷ For the reversal argument, see the incisive accounts by Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), and *The Myth of Triumphalism: Rethinking President Reagan's Cold War Legacy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2020).

the race as a hopeless cause. Then a noble nation believing in peace extends the hand of friendship and says there is room in the world for both of us (18).

Notice that Reagan writes “all out” race, not just as arms race. He was determined to show Soviet leaders that the free society was a better bet across the entire spectrum of capabilities. The plan therefore underscored Reagan’s economic recovery program, without which the country could not afford an arms race, and the deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe to demonstrate the revitalized political will of the United States and its NATO allies, especially after Vietnam, the Iranian hostage taking, and the failure to deter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the same time, the plan always intended to “extend the hand of friendship” to settle issues in peace.

All of this required time. Reagan had to turn the massive ship of structural forces around. In April 1981, while recovering from the assassination attempt, he wrote to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev that he wanted to start negotiations. But, as Inboden documents, he also punished Moscow severely in December 1981 for its repression in Poland, rejected in summer 1982 an early agreement on intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), the so-called Walk in the Woods proposal, counseled his new Secretary of State George Shultz in fall 1982 not to be “overly anxious” to settle a gas pipeline dispute with allies over Soviet repression in Poland, called the Soviet Empire “evil,” challenged Moscow to a space race, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and refused to go to Moscow against the advice of staff to attend three consecutive funerals of Soviet leaders. He was waiting for his leverage to accumulate—economic recovery, NATO INF deployment, and reelection in 1984. Yes, it was risky. In his 1963 notes, Reagan conceded that “doing these things is no guarantee against war . . . [because] it only takes one nation to make a war.” But “the only sure way to avoid war,” he continued at the time, “is to surrender without fighting.” “Accommodation,” he added, “is based on wishing not thinking, and if the wish doesn’t come true the enemy is far stronger than he was before you started down that road.”⁸

Here was the dual-track strategy of unrelenting pressure and negotiating outreach that Reagan implemented twenty years later as president. (264). As Inboden details, it drove the Soviet Union to a “negotiated surrender” (4, 476). “Negotiated” because Reagan always intended to secure a peaceful outcome; he did not seek an “unconditional” surrender, a military victory, or the humiliation of the Soviet people. And “surrender” because Reagan aimed to win the Cold War for freedom and end Communism, not restore the balance of power or live in peaceful coexistence with communism for the indefinite future.

The “arm to negotiate freedom” strategy was evident early on. Reagan told an aide in 1977 that “we win; they lose.” He told the Council on Foreign Relations in March 1980: “Once we clearly demonstrate to the Soviet leadership that we are determined to compete, arms control negotiations will again have a chance” (38). At an NSC meeting in April 1982, Reagan said: “A vigorous defense buildup will also be a great help at arms control talks. The Soviets do not believe they can keep up with us” (137). He repeated his dual-track

⁸ See, *Reagan in His Own Hand*, 442.

1963 plan almost verbatim to the Pope's representative who visited the White House in December 1981 (115). Reagan promoted and stuck by this strategy during the darkest days of his first term. At Westminster in June 1982, when none of his policies was working, he heralded "the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history." In November 1982, after losing 26 seats in Congress with no signs still of an economic turnaround and protests cascading in Europe to derail the INF deployment, he told his aides the policies would work and if they didn't, he'd be happy to go back to the ranch.⁹ Here was the epitome of agency, leadership that did not bend to structures but changed them.

By 1984, Reagan's policies were working. The economy grew at 7.6 percent that year. The defense budget, though under constant siege in Congress, was expanding. The INF deployment took place in November 1983, the turning point in US-Soviet relations according to Secretary of State George Shultz.¹⁰ SDI had caught the attention of Soviet leaders. Reagan prepared for re-election with no guarantees but a substantial tailwind as the year progressed. Yes, his strategy depended upon two terms which he could not predict. But he did not run to get reelected. He ran to implement a strategy, the first part of which was now in place.

Still, it was lucky for Reagan that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. He needed a negotiating partner. The previous ones kept dying on him, he quipped.¹¹ But Gorbachev was not the white knight who saved the day. As Inboden contends, Reagan may have helped bring Gorbachev to power and the bargaining table. Reagan's Soviet strategy, which he initiated in NSDD-32 in April 1982 and codified in NSDD-75 in January 1983, sought "to promote, within the narrow limits available to us [the United States], the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system." As Inboden writes, it was "designed not only to exploit its [Soviet] weaknesses, but to produce a reformist leader" (139). This was prudent ("within the narrow limits available to us") regime change, and it was totally new. As Inboden explains, "each preceding US president had sought in different ways to contain Soviet expansion from without. None until Reagan had sought to erode the Kremlin from within" (140). When the Communist government in Poland imposed martial law in December 1981, some allies, including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, dismissed the event "as simply an internal situation" (114). Reagan wrote back to the allies that "this may well be a watershed moment in the political history of mankind—a challenge to tyranny from within" (114). For Reagan, as Inboden notes, Poland was "the first major break in the Red dike" (100).

⁹ Reagan delivered the "ranch" remark with a guffaw, signaling his determination to succeed whatever the odds. See my remarks in Gilbert A. Robinson, ed., *Reagan Remembered* (McLean, VA: International Publishers, 2015), 337-341.

¹⁰ George P. Shultz, "A Perspective from Washington," in Kiron K. Skinner, ed., *Turning Points in Ending the Cold War* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2008), xxiv.

¹¹ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 258.

Reagan's role takes nothing away from that of Gorbachev. As Inboden emphasizes, "Gorbachev had a part to play, mostly through what he did *not* do."¹² He did not use force to save the unraveling of the Soviet empire and the Soviet Union itself. Reagan, by contrast, influenced outcomes by what he did do. While Gorbachev failed to reform Communism, Reagan turned around the capitalist US and world economies and sparked a global renaissance of free countries and markets. Reagan's unusual contribution was to link the major instruments of military power and persistent diplomacy to achieve gains for freedom in peace. Oddly, few presidents have done this. They treat power and diplomacy as substitutes rather than complements, pursuing only one at a time given their belief that adversaries will not trust a power during negotiations if that same power is trying to outrace them through military initiatives outside the negotiations. Reagan thought differently. He asked how one can negotiate with an adversary if that adversary is using military force to achieve advantage outside negotiations. Indeed, that adversary may favor negotiations forever if it believes that negotiations keep the other power from confronting its aggression outside negotiations. Leaders must first deter the adversary outside negotiations so that it finally takes seriously the options inside negotiations.¹³

President Jimmy Carter treated diplomacy and power as substitutes. He came into power promoting diplomacy to limit arms, eventually securing agreement with the Soviet Union on SALT II. Until the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in late 1979, he cut defense spending and canceled major defense programs such as the B-1 bomber, neutron bomb and MX. By the end of his first term, Carter had no diplomacy—SALT was never ratified by Congress—and only belated military and economic options, increasing defense spending in his final year on the back of a US economy that was suffering from "malaise" and stagflation. He lacked credibility both at home and abroad. Challenged within his own party, he was eventually defeated.¹⁴ By contrast, Reagan immediately prioritized defense spending and tax cuts, seeking to rebuild the military and economic base of American power. He entered his second term reelected by an unprecedented margin sitting atop a soaring economic recovery, a major defense buildup, SDI, and INF deployment, all of which showcased a powerful America on the world scene. He deployed that leverage in his second term to move the Soviet Union incrementally and peacefully toward freedom.

Reagan and Carter shared something, however, that was equally important—their commitment to freedom, especially religious freedom. Both were devout Christians. This fact is often ridiculed or ignored

¹² Emphasis added. See Inboden's essay, *Reflections on Reagan's Address at the Brandenburg Gate*, Ronald Reagan Institute, 2022. https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/357270/inboden_berlin-wall-address_reagan-institute.pdf.

¹³ Reagan told Walter Cronkite in March 1981 "it is rather foolish to have unilaterally disarmed . . . and then you sit with the fellow who's got all the arms. What do you have to negotiate with?" Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan's Secret War* (New York: Crown Publishers 2009), 34ff. See also my extended discussion and footnotes in *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton University Press, paperback 2015), 190-96.

¹⁴ Carter's approval rating in 1980 was 28 percent compared to Reagan's in 1984 of 53 percent. See Donaghy, *The Second Cold War*, pp 1 and 216.

by scholars. But it is quintessential, and Inboden recognizes this influence in Reagan.¹⁵ “Reagan’s faith,” he writes, “was at once idiosyncratic, elusive, and deeply held.” Nevertheless, it “formed a firm core in his being and defined many of the most consequential elements of his presidency” (10). Once in office, Reagan’s first approach to the Soviet Union was to call upon the Kremlin to release religious dissidents, Pentecostals who had taken refuge in the American Embassy in Moscow fleeing Soviet oppression. He cultivated an unprecedented friendship with Pope John Paul II, sharing not only assassination attempts within two months of one another but also a visceral repudiation of atheistic Communism. And he held the firm personal conviction that God had placed him and every other individual in the world on this earth to do what only they are capable of doing. He referred to this “reality” as a “divine plan” for each individual, and it underlined his Republican Party philosophy that “the [Republican] party must be the party of the individual. It must not sell out the individual to cater to the group.”¹⁶ This commitment underwrote his views on race, abortion, small government, market choice, and, most importantly, the struggle between freedom and authoritarianism in world politics. As he said at William Woods College already in 1952: “America is less of a place than an idea... the idea of the dignity of man, the idea that deep within the heart of each one of us is something so God-like and precious that no individual or group has a right to impose his or its will upon the people.”¹⁷

The divide between individual and group interests today may be wider than ever before. Even Reagan’s own Republican Party is debating the relevance of individualism vs. the common good. Reagan worked out these dilemmas for himself in remarkable, indeed admirable, ways. Just one example is the relationship between church and state. In his State of the Union message in 1984, he said: “I recognize we must be cautious in claiming God is on our side, but I think it’s all right to keep asking if we’re on His side.”¹⁸ In short, individuals can bring their faith into the public square, but they cannot impose it on others. For Reagan, individuals chose and built communities; racial or social groups did not define individuals. Reagan in many ways remains an enigma. But Inboden demonstrates that he was no longer simply following a script. He was writing it, and future scholars would do well to explore the voluminous record now available in the archives to probe the enigma of this twentieth century Republican counterpart to Franklin D. Roosevelt.

¹⁵ As does the historian Paul Kengor, the most eminent scholar of Reagan’s faith. See *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: ReganBooks, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2004); and *A Pope and a President: John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, and the Extraordinary Untold Story of the 20th Century* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2017).

¹⁶ Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC), February 6, 1977. <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/scholarly-initiatives/essay-series-on-presidential-principles-and-beliefs/cpac-speech-february-6-1977/>.

¹⁷ Quoted in Martin and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan’s Secret War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), 248-249.

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan, Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 25, 1984. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-4>.

 Response by William Inboden, University of Florida

I thank Elizabeth C. Charles and James Graham Wilson for their insightful introduction, and also Beth Fischer and Henry Nau for their thoughtful and detailed reviews. In researching and writing my book, I benefited tremendously from their own extensive scholarship on Reagan administration foreign policy, and in Nau's case from his service in the Reagan administration as well, so it is now an honor to have them contribute to this roundtable.¹ It is humbling for any author to have a book read and reviewed with such thought and care.

Their review essays are both helpful overviews of the existing literature on Reagan administration foreign policy as well as careful assessments of my book. In Fischer's case, it is a tribute to her sophistication, integrity, and intellectual openness as a scholar that in the closing section of her essay she revises her "Reagan reversal" argument from an earlier era, and notes that the evidence now shows Reagan pursued a consistent blend of pressure and conciliation towards the USSR throughout the two terms of his presidency. Readers of my book will see that I make a similar argument for the consistency of Reagan's strategy. In Fischer's willingness to amend her previous arguments in light of new evidence, all scholars should find a model to emulate.

In responding I will begin with Nau's review, in part since it is overall more favorable and thus demands less in the way of specific rejoinders. A few points that bear reinforcing in his subtle and gracious essay. First, Nau rightly foregrounds Reagan's strategic concept of the Cold War as most fundamentally a contest of ideas. This may seem self-evident in retrospect but it was an innovation by Reagan at the time. His predecessor presidents had primarily framed the Cold War as a great-power contest that happened to include ideological differences. Reagan reversed this and conceived of the US-Soviet competition primarily as a war of ideas overlayed on a competition between great powers. From this strategic reframing flowed all manner of policy implications for Reagan, such as the primacy he gave to information warfare, human rights, international economic policy, eloquent denunciations of Soviet Communism, and building up the "free world" as a positive alternative to conditions in the Soviet bloc. As I have put it elsewhere, Reagan viewed Soviet communism as an idea to be defeated more than a nation-state to be contained.² Nau has done valuable work in this respect, and he concludes his review with the apt observation that Reagan "was no longer simply following a script. He was writing it, and future scholars would do well to explore the voluminous record now available in the archives to probe the enigma of this twentieth century Republican counterpart to Franklin D. Roosevelt."³

¹ For example, Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) and Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press 2000).

² See for example "UnCommon Knowledge" interview, March 15, 2023, available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/peacemaker-ronald-reagan-cold-war-and-world-brink>.

³ See also Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, 172.

Second, Nau recognizes the primacy that Reagan gave to restoring American strength including economic power and dynamism. Of course this shaped Reagan's domestic efforts to revive the American economy, but it also inspired Reagan's international economic policies, which sought to link American prosperity to the extension of global prosperity. This included his advocacy of free trade and resistance to protectionism, his forging of deeper economic ties with allies, and his support for economic development in the Global South.

Third, Nau contextualizes Reagan's strategy amidst the deeper structural changes that were underway in the international system. Nau accurately observes that several of these structural changes were favorable for the United States, yet others posed headwinds for Reagan. But in the face of the latter, Reagan did not deviate. As Nau writes of Reagan's resolve amidst the domestic and international setbacks of 1982, "here was the epitome of agency, leadership that did not bend to structures but changed them."

Fourth, Nau appreciates the centrality of Reagan's religious faith to his presidency and his Cold War strategy. Reagan's faith inspired his fierce advocacy for Christian and Jewish dissidents behind the Iron Curtain, his efforts to forge a genuine friendship with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and his ultimate vision of a nuclear-free world. In this way also Reagan continued in part in the tradition of his predecessor in the Oval Office, Jimmy Carter, but ultimately forged his own path of faith in the presidency.

Now to turn to Fischer's critiques of my book. I believe her criticisms can be fairly summarized under two broad points: that I give too much credit to Reagan's policies for the peaceful end of the Cold War, and that I pay insufficient heed to Soviet sources and perspectives.

Before addressing those in more detail, I note that her over 3,000-word review that assesses the Cold War's end does not even once mention the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The sudden demise of the Soviet empire less than three years after Reagan left office is a decidedly inconvenient fact for scholars who minimize Reagan's role in the USSR's extinction. Especially since, as I argue and support with extensive evidence, the defeat of Soviet Communism was Reagan's strategic goal all along.

Instead Fischer's review delves into much detail about the efforts of Gorbachev and other Soviet officials (not as many as Fischer contends) to "reform" the Soviet Union. For example, she writes that "Reagan certainly sought democratic reforms in the USSR. But he had the same goals as an entire generation of Soviet reformers who were seeking to improve their country. Reagan did not compel Soviet leaders to reform... Thus it is hard to understand how Soviet reforms, initiated by the Soviets themselves, can be considered 'surrender.'"

It is true that the Soviet officials she cites did try to reform their sclerotic system, though the review also glosses over the many other Soviet officials who resisted these reforms. But regardless, this focus on Soviet reformers misses the point of Reagan's strategic goals—which in the end were *not* "the same goals" as the

Soviet reformers. The Kremlin, including the most pro-reform leaders such as Gorbachev himself, fundamentally sought to preserve Soviet Communism, whereas Reagan wanted to end Soviet Communism.

The difference is profound. The results—the Soviet Union’s collapse despite Gorbachev’s fervent exertions to save it—speak for themselves. Indeed, Fischer’s own recent scholarship recounts how Reagan himself sought the demise of Soviet Communism.⁴ My book details a similar record, of both Reagan and some of his close advisors repeatedly declaring their goal of Soviet Communism’s disintegration. To offer just as a few examples: Reagan in early 1981 said the US should “let [the Soviet system] fail instead of constantly bailing them out,” (59) and that same year dismissed Communism as “some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written” (85); asked in 1982 “Why can’t we just push the Soviets over, backwards?” and collapse their economy (134-35); chaired an NSC meeting in 1982 to codify his national security strategy which NSC senior staff member Tom Reed summarized as “the bottom line is we are helping encourage the dissolution of the Soviet empire” (136); predicted in summer 1982 that Marxism-Leninism would end up “on the ash heap of history” (158); told his staff in 1985 that Soviet Communism “will crumble” from internal citizen pressure and that their desire for religious freedom “is what will bring communism and totalitarianism down...the people will do it themselves. We need to do everything we can to help them accomplish this” (372); and so forth.⁵

Here it helps to step back and consider five simple facts of the big picture, which are summarized from my book: first, every previous Cold War president before Reagan regarded the USSR as a stable nation-state and a permanent reality on the geopolitical landscape (11, 20); second, Reagan rejected this and instead viewed the USSR as fragile and vulnerable (4-5); third, Reagan deliberately devised and implemented a full spectrum of policies to pressure the Soviet Union and exploit those vulnerabilities (4-5); fourth, expert opinion at the time, among both scholars and policy professionals, almost unanimously believed Reagan was wrong (135, 430); and fifth, the Iron Curtain fell less than a year after Reagan left office, and the USSR collapsed less than three years after he left office (476).

These five facts do not by themselves prove a tight causal chain—but they should at least give pause to scholars who downplay Reagan’s policies as having any causal effect on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead these facts should prompt future explorations of what Reagan’s strategy was, what he intended to do, and how he tried to implement that strategy, as I attempt in the book. After all, great powers, let alone empires, almost never suddenly cease to exist. Such an instantaneous collapse is something that has never

⁴ See, for example, Beth Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism: Rethinking President Reagan’s Cold War Legacy* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky 2019), 41-43, which cites multiple quotations from Reagan both prior to and during his presidency urging the end of the Soviet system.

⁵ As my book describes, and as Fischer and other scholars have also pointed out, not all of Reagan’s senior advisors shared his belief in the Soviet system’s vulnerability or his goal to bring it down. But ultimately it is the president’s views that matter most, and as Commander-in-Chief Reagan’s “commander’s intent” was to bring about the demise of the Soviet Union.

before happened in the history of geopolitics without some significant outside forces contributing to, if not outright causing, that demise. In this respect, the suddenness and totality of the Soviet Union's dissolution, absent being engaged in open warfare with any outside great power adversaries, is an "n of 1" as my political science colleagues would say.

Thus my book probes how the various prongs of Reagan's pressure strategy—each of which differed in kind or at least degree from the Cold War policies of every previous American president—all shaped the international environment in which the Soviet Union existed, and influenced the choices that Soviet leaders faced. The prongs included military modernization, forward deployments of strategic weapons, economic warfare, reinvigorated alliances, a rhetorical offensive, human rights pressure, and the Reagan Doctrine of supporting anti-Communist proxy forces. Reagan coupled this pressure with diplomatic outreach, of course, because he knew that the pressure could be destabilizing. He desperately wanted to prevent the Cold War from turning hot, and rather sought a peaceful end to the conflict—as long as that end was on terms favorable to the United States and included the demise of Soviet Communism.

As to Fischer's critique that my book does not extensively treat Soviet perspectives and sources, I did not in fact try to write a book about the international history of the Cold War. In those respects the review reads at times like a critique of a book that I did not write. I did not write an international history of US-Soviet relations and the end of the Cold War. Rather, the book that I wrote is a history of Reagan administration foreign policy in all of its aspects—including the standoff with the Soviet Union, East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, counterterrorism, southern Africa, international trade and finance, global democratizations, the administration's personalities and bureaucratic feuds, and so forth.

Exploring and understanding these other aspects of Reagan's foreign policy helps illumine the international order that he sought to shape—including the global milieu in which the Soviet Union had to operate. Developments such as democratization, the communications revolution, expanded global trade, the rise of Asia, and new technology flows were all encouraged and steered by the Reagan administration. These in turn reshaped the international system that the Kremlin tried but failed to adapt to. These broader shifts mattered because they show not just Reagan's statecraft toward the Soviet Union, but his efforts to shape the broader world in which the Soviet Union existed—and in which the Kremlin was struggling to keep pace.

Because my book is about Reagan's foreign policies, it of course devotes the most attention to the issue that Reagan devoted most of his attention to: the Cold War and US policy towards the Soviet Union. As I describe in the introduction to my book, the peaceful end of the Cold War was a product of three inter-related factors: structural trends in the international system, internal dynamics within the Soviet Union, and Reagan administration policies (6, also 329). Other scholars have given ample treatment to the first two factors in numerous excellent books, such as those by Hal Brands, Odd Arne Westad, Vladislav Zubok,

William Taubman, James Graham Wilson, and Fischer herself.⁶ The aim of my book is to explore and explain the third factor—and contend for its importance alongside the other two.

I do not believe it is somehow incommensurate to write about a president's policies and also analyze the results of those policies. After all, Reagan's global policies included an effort to reshape the international order towards economic and political liberty, and thus the global milieu in which the Soviet Union had to operate. Even more since, there is such a close alignment between Reagan's stated goals and the international events that followed, including the expansion of electoral democracies in Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷

Fischer's review objects to my contention that Reagan's policies had any meaningful effect on the Soviet Union. It rightly highlights my argument that Reagan pursued the Soviet Union's "negotiated surrender" as a core tenet of my book. Fischer praises the "negotiated" part, which aligns with that argument in her own impressive scholarship on Reagan's devotion to diplomacy. (And here we are in substantial agreement, as my book extensively covers Reagan's outreach to Soviet leaders and his commitment to negotiations.)⁸

It is the "surrender" part that Fischer questions. As she puts it, in summarizing her disagreement:

Was it a "surrender"? No. This is where an otherwise first-rate study of Reagan's beliefs goes off track. "Surrender" suggests that Moscow was compelled to take actions that it did not want to take, or that were not in its self-interest, or that it would not have taken absent Reagan. None of these conditions held true.

Yet as my book shows, all of those conditions held true. I will cite four examples (among many others that could be cited). First, Gorbachev only agreed to remove the Soviet SS-20 intermediate range nuclear missiles targeting every NATO capital after Reagan deployed the American Pershing II and Gryphon nuclear cruise missiles in Western Europe to target the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact forces. In a textbook

⁶ Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: US Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2016); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017); James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2014); Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism*.

⁷ Other scholars have similarly undertaken synthetic treatments of a particular American president's foreign policies and paid heed to the international results of those policies. For first-rate examples, see Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2017); Robert Dallek, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press 1995); and Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1993).

⁸ Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism*.

case of coercive diplomacy, Reagan used the American deployments as part of his leverage to bring Gorbachev back to the negotiating table and agree to what became the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty eliminating all intermediate-range nuclear missiles. Gorbachev himself had repeatedly called the American missiles “a pistol pointed at our head” and admitted to the Politburo that the Pershing II and Gryphon deployments played a significant role in his willingness to withdraw and destroy the SS-20s (408, 431).

Second, consider the Soviet invasion and then withdrawal a decade later from Afghanistan. Yes, at the time a few dissenting Soviet officials thought the original invasion was a mistake, and upon taking power in 1985 Gorbachev called Afghanistan “a bleeding wound” that he wanted to staunch (333). Citing individual Soviet officials who objected to the war is like invoking George Ball’s dissent from the American escalation in Vietnam in 1965, or President Lyndon Johnson’s private doubts, as proof that the United States somehow did not want to wage the Vietnam War. American actions on Vietnam, especially the deployment of over 500,000 troops in what became almost eight more years of costly warfare, say otherwise.

Similarly, in Afghanistan, as with all things Soviet, one must look at what the Kremlin did, and not just what some officials said. This includes Gorbachev’s decision to escalate Soviet military involvement in 1986. Gorbachev did so despite (or rather because of) Reagan’s decision the year before to adopt a new strategic goal of forcing the Soviet withdrawal and to dramatically increase the quality and quantity of American weapons provisions to the Afghan resistance fighters (321). The combination of American weapons and the Afghan fighting spirit imposed massive costs on the Soviet occupiers. The main reason that Afghanistan became such a horrible misadventure for the Kremlin, leading to Gorbachev’s 1988 agreement to withdraw in defeat, is that the costs the USSR bore would not have been incurred without the extensive American aid to the Afghan mujahedeen (386, 460).

A third set of actions the Soviets reluctantly took as a direct result of Reagan’s pressure was the release political and religious dissidents. As I describe in my book, Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz made human rights a central pillar of their Soviet policy and regularly pressed the Kremlin to release prisoners of conscience (293). Such appeals irked Gorbachev and other Soviet officials to no end, as they regarded their repression of dissent as an internal matter and found such American appeals intrusive and embarrassing. Reagan’s persistence in this advocacy led directly to the Soviet decisions to release dissidents such as the Siberian Pentecostals, Natan Sharansky, Andrei Sakharov, Irina Ratushinskaya, and many others (384, 410).

Finally, consider the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Despite all of the Soviet voices that Fischer cites supporting reform, virtually none of them sought the actual disintegration of the Soviet Union. From Gorbachev on down, Soviet reformers sought to preserve and strengthen Soviet Communism, not to end it. The death of the Soviet Union thus fails two of the criteria in the quotation from Fischer’s review above, of actions happening that Soviet leaders did not want to take and did not see as in their self-interest. What, then, of the third criteria in Fischer’s review, of something that would not happen absent Reagan? Here I return to the argument in my book: Reagan’s policies had a causal effect on the demise of the Soviet Union.

“Causal” is not “monocausal” of course, and, as I indicated above, I believe it was the product of three interrelated forces, including structural factors in the international system, internal developments in the Soviet Union, and Reagan’s policies. Take away any one of those three, and the Soviet Union would not have collapsed when it did in the way it did (whether it would have eventually collapsed without American pressure is impossible to know. I tend to think it eventually would have, but the survival of other Communist regimes today such as China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba over three decades after the demise of the USSR shows that the resilience and adaptability of Leninist party-controlled states should not be underestimated).

Fischer cites a curated selection of post-mortem interviews with former Soviet officials as evidence of official Kremlin thinking when the Soviets held power. Yet some of these officials retrospectively disavowed official Soviet doctrine. Fischer’s review thus includes some untenable conclusions. For example, she argues that if the United States had launched a nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union, rather than retaliating the Soviets “likely would have entered into negotiations,” a scenario which is highly implausible.

The same holds for the claim in Fischer’s review of a pervasive Soviet commitment to reform. If one only considers the occasional rhetoric of Soviet officials, by this standard, the Soviet system had been engaged in “reform” ever since Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, when his successor, Nikita Khrushchev famously denounced Stalin’s crimes and pledged a new era of openness. Instead, it would be more accurate to describe the Soviet system as a continually fluctuating mixture of reform and repression, divided internally between reformers and hard-liners, yet all built on the edifice of a police state.⁹

Once again, what matters most is what the Kremlin did, not what a few Soviet officials said. By this standard, rather than Fischer’s view of the era from the mid-1970s forward as pure “reform,” during those years Soviet actions included the deployment of SS-20 missiles targeted at NATO capitals, the invasion of Afghanistan and resultant deaths of at least a half million Afghan civilians, the sponsoring of Communist revolutions or insurgencies in Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Grenada, and El Salvador; the support of martial law in Poland; the construction of the largest nuclear arsenal in human history; the violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty; the imprisonment of thousands of peaceful dissidents in the Gulag; and the selection of hard-liners Yuri Andropov and then Konstantin Chernenko as Leonid Brezhnev’s successors. These are not the actions of a “reformist” power seeking to end the Cold War.

Fischer’s assertion that Soviet military spending during the 1980s was restrained is unconvincing. While conceding that the true figures remain impossible to know, she contends that the Soviet military budget only increased by modest amounts of some 3 percent annually in the 1980s. That may or may not be accurate, but even if it is, the context is essential. As I detail in my book, Soviet military spending was

⁹ Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* situates Gorbachev’s life and leadership in the context of these broader reform cycles and movements in Soviet history.

already somewhere between 25-50 percent of the Soviet Union's entire GDP and seems to have been at that level for several years (67-68, and 134-135). Increases or decreases by 3 percent of that enormous baseline were infinitesimal in comparison. By contrast, US defense spending hit just over 6 percent of America's GDP at the height of the Reagan build-up in 1985, and then declined as a percentage of GDP as the American economy grew over the duration of Reagan's second term.¹⁰ In comparative terms, the USSR was spending somewhere between five and ten times as much of its economy on its military as the United States was. It was that Soviet overstretch that Reagan sought to exploit. Fischer's point that Reagan's "policies had little impact on Soviet sustainability" is belied by, among others, Gorbachev himself. To cite one of many examples from my book, Gorbachev bemoaned to his staff in 1986 that unless he could ease the pressure from the Pentagon expansion on the Soviet military budget, "we will be pulled into an arms race beyond our power, and we will lose this race...the pressure on our economy will be inconceivable" (408-409).

Fischer's treatment of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is similarly flawed. She suggests that Soviet leaders' fears of SDI "soon dissipated as they realized it was more of a vision than a plan, the technology was not feasible, Congress was not likely to fund the exorbitant project for long, and in the unlikely event it ever were to be built, it could be easily and cheaply countered." Instead, she asserts that Gorbachev raised merely perfunctory objections to SDI because he wanted to remove it as an excuse his hard-liners were using to push for more Soviet military spending. She further contends that Gorbachev and other senior Soviets "viewed [SDI] as an irritating distraction from their main goal: ending the arms race."

But the historical record shows otherwise. The transcripts of the Reagan-Gorbachev summits, especially in Geneva and Reykjavik, reveal how vehemently, consistently, and obsessively Gorbachev opposed SDI.¹¹ Indeed, the Soviet leader loathed and feared SDI so much that at Reykjavik he rejected Reagan's offer to abolish *all* nuclear weapons just for the sake of preventing the United States from even conducting tests on SDI research. Those are not the actions of a man who believed that SDI would never work, or who made merely perfunctory objections to it to placate his own hard-liners, or who saw it as a mere "distraction" from "ending the arms race."¹²

On Gorbachev's selection as general secretary, one of my book's findings is that Reagan was so eager to find a Soviet leader with whom he could negotiate that his strategy included pressuring the Soviet system to produce a reformist leader. Fischer's review distorts my meaning when stating that my "implication is that Reagan caused Gorbachev to rise to power." Rather, I make clear that Gorbachev's accession was a product of multiple factors and acute timing. I write, "Gorbachev's accession stemmed primarily from larger

¹⁰ Katherine Blakely, "Defense Spending in Historical Context: A New Reagan-esque Buildup?", November 8, 2017, *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*. Available at: <https://csbaonline.org/reports/defense-spending-in-historical-context>.

¹¹ The transcripts of the Reagan-Gorbachev summits in Geneva and Reykjavik can be found in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988*, volume 5, Soviet Union March 1985–October 1986, available here: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo5>.

¹² See also the descriptions of the Geneva and Reykjavik summits in *The Peacemaker*, 372-377, and 410-418.

dynamics within the Soviet system—as well as his vision and shrewd maneuvering.” However, I also cite one of Gorbachev’s closest advisors who claimed Gorbachev’s selection came in part from “internal domestic pressures and Reagan’s rigid position,” leading to Kremlin fears of “falling behind” the United States” (329). In sum, Gorbachev did not arise *ex nihilo*. Rather, as my book describes, the Politburo selected him in a domestic and international environment that was being shaped by many factors, including accelerating pressure from the United States.

Yet of equal importance to my argument is the fact that Reagan had been eagerly waiting for a reformist Soviet leader—and so when Gorbachev took power, Reagan embraced him sooner than most other allied leaders (and most of Reagan’s own cabinet, save Shultz) as a genuine partner for peace. This was the strategic significance of Reagan’s efforts to incentivize the Soviet system to produce a reformist leader. When you are looking for someone, you are more apt to recognize him when he arrives.