

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 447

14 July 2022

Hal Brands. *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today.*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780300250787 (hardcover, \$32.50); 9780300268058 (paperback, \$22.00).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E447>

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Cold War-era scholars endlessly debated whether the United States or the Soviet Union bore primary responsibility for US-Soviet hostility. They made their case arguing that the conflict stemmed mainly from the ideology, political system, or leadership on one side of the conflict; capitalist economic imperatives; great power rivalry and security concerns; or misperception and misjudgment.¹ From their conclusions, we learned whether conflict was avoidable or inevitable—even understandable or shameful. Unsurprisingly, then, why the Cold War ended remains an issue, though admittedly a less contentious one. That the United States ‘won the Cold War’—and, indeed, that President Ronald Reagan brought the Soviet empire down—are accepted by many as conventional wisdom.²

Hal Brands doubles-down on that wisdom in his ambitious, provocative, yet sturdy, new volume. Brands’s main contribution is chronicling the evolution, establishing the basic coherence, and crediting the champions of the ‘winning’ strategy. Toward that end, his book contains revealing chapters on the origins of US containment strategy, the creation of the post-war institutional order, the superpower nuclear arms competition, US competitive challenges in the developing world, US policy toward Eastern Europe, the Cold War’s effects on the US political system, and final chapters on the Cold War’s end. For me, the chapters on the growth of the US intelligence establishment (“Knowing the Enemy”) and the organization of the US national-security establishment (“Organizing for Victory”) are especially illuminating.

Through these diverse chapters, Brands hammers the main point: Despite challenges, detours, and painful setbacks, US policymakers generally ‘got it right.’ The Soviet Union could not hope to compete successfully with the United States over the long term. Soviet resource deficiencies, ideological failings, corruption, and repression made that impossible. Key US policymakers knew this; some US presidents knew it better than others. Together, over successive decades, they crafted policies that played to US strengths and exploited Soviet weaknesses. For Brands, the lessons learned from Cold War experience apply to current US efforts to engage China: “long-term competition is an *ongoing, open-ended contest for influence between great powers*” (7, italics in original). In competition, the challenge is great: “It involves mastering a dynamic

¹ Among the key works of ‘revisionist’ history, challenging the (then) conventional wisdom that the United States reacted appropriately to Soviet provocations, are: Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); Lloyd C. Gardner, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Origins of the Cold War* (Waltham: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970); and William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009). For an arguably more orthodox view, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² That ‘wisdom’ stands as a semi-independent part of a larger body of thinking extolling Reagan’s leadership. For the latter, see, for example, Jeffrey L. Chidester and Paul Kengor, eds., *Reagan’s Legacy in a World Transformed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

interaction while synchronizing initiatives across time, space, and the various dimensions of national power. It requires creating asymmetric advantages and imposing disproportionate costs, rather than simply overwhelming an adversary everywhere” (8).

Thus, the book also makes much of the obstacles that confronted US officials in crafting and implementing policy in the new era. “Containment looks so pristine, so impressive, only in hindsight” when, in fact, “it was pieced together, incrementally and often chaotically” (13, 14). The “drawbacks” were plentiful: “its plodding pace, its dangers and costs, its moral compromises.” Although Brands highlights US efforts to strengthen Europe, to deter and fight Soviet aggression, and promote international institutions to foster cooperation and suppress destructive rivalries, US problems and failures remain central, then, to his assessment: US allies who fretted their location on the frontlines of a US-Soviet military confrontation, US grumblings about “free riding” allies, US strongarm tactics meant to even the slate (42), and inevitable US acceptance of the limited US capability to resolve tensions that were baked into US policies.

Brands’s assessment also spotlights serious US misjudgments and missteps. These include the US belief that the Soviets accepted the principles of Mutual Assured Destruction and shared the view that nuclear weapons serve no useful purpose beyond deterring their own use. They also include US efforts to wedge Eastern Europe countries away from Soviet domination. He writes, “the U.S. record wasn’t bad, all things considered. But it was freighted with failures, frustrations, and unresolved dilemmas” (104). Even then, Brands recognizes the battle for the ‘periphery’ as an exceptional source of US defeat, distress, and disillusionment. In the Third World, the United States competed at a serious disadvantage—no less, on enemy turf—in its broad-based effort to win support and defeat leftist regimes. Most onerously, having confused nationalist with Communist goals, the United States wasted blood, treasure, and global political capital in a futile war in Southeast Asia. In consequence, “overreach in the 1960s produced underreach in the 1970s” (91).

But here, as elsewhere, Brands offers a positive denouement. Even seeming defeats amount to at least minor triumphs, then, with a ‘net assessment’ or long-term view. Take, for instance, the limited US success in battling Soviet control of Eastern Europe. He concludes that “at relatively modest cost, then, U.S. policy [of the Truman administration] weaponized the failings of bloc regimes, intensified strains between Moscow and the satellites, and encouraged the latent dissidence that would periodically flare into something greater” (110). Overall, he concludes: “If we measure U.S. policy not by its near-term failure to roll back the Iron Curtain but by its success in exploiting scarce opportunities and exacerbating long-term frictions, the record looks more credible” (109). Even “eliciting harsher repression could, paradoxically, be a form of success” (110).

A positive spin boosts the strategic payoff in most administrations. Although President Dwight Eisenhower’s strong resistance to China did not appear to weaken its resolve or soften its approach, according to Brands, that was not the intent. Eisenhower’s strategy was meant to punish China severely with the goal—not of luring it away from the Soviet Union but instead of increasing China’s dependence on the Soviet Union. The strategy was not only good politics at home—deflecting allegations of the administration’s ‘softness’ on Communism—it yielded the significant, longer-term benefit of driving a wedge between the two US nemeses: “what America could do was expose deep-seated tensions by pushing China to demand more than Moscow could give” (115).

Whereas Brands thus provides a harsh assessment of détente’s failure to deliver on its promise of US-Soviet cooperation, he accepts, nevertheless, that failure had a big upside. Détente “also delivered sometimes surprising benefits, not least that the travails of détente eventually convinced Americans to recommit to the Cold War”—that is, “the vain search for cooperation can, ironically, remind a country of the importance of effective competition” (150). Likewise, he recognizes the Cold War’s “deplorable effects” on the US home front—“it led to a frenzied search for subversives and egregious violations of civil liberties”—but concludes that “it also revealed a hidden virtue of competition: the opportunity it offers a country to become a better version of itself” (194). US containment strategy, despite its rough history, receives Brands’s biggest nod of approval, again with a longer-term view: US containment policy “often looked to be failing *until it triumphed*” [italics added] (14).

Yet, for all the book's praise for the multi-decade containment strategy, another factor contributes heavily to the final denouement—the presidency, and peculiar talents and capability, of Reagan: “if U.S. strategy had hit its nadir in the late 1960s and 1970s, a decade later it hit its stride” (102). Brands makes much of Reagan's noble aspirations, keen instincts, understanding of history, savvy awareness of the limits to US capability, and willingness then to accept short-term setbacks and compromises awaiting the ripening of facilitative conditions. Reagan would not be caught, for instance, in the Carter-era trap of pushing authoritarian leaders out of power without a suitable replacement. Instead, Reagan would “work with repressive security services to hold the radicals at bay until liberalization with stability could be achieved” and promote “democratic openings in countries where the momentum was already running in that direction” (98). Most importantly, Reagan showed mastery in his Cold War “endgame” (210): He knew when and how to make his move to slay the hobbled behemoth.

“Reagan's understanding of the Soviet Union was surprisingly strong and remarkably idiosyncratic. His gut told him that the Soviet experiment must eventually end, because perpetuating it required suppressing human freedom. His perceptions of Soviet policy and frailty came from many places: amateur Russia experts, quotes (often apocryphal) from Lenin's writings, information from dissidents, anecdotes about everyday life” (170-171).

Despite the ridicule he endured for reliance on “impressionistic sources,” “there was hard analysis behind his views” (171).

Key to the death blow was Reagan's extensive military buildup. It forced an increasingly weakened Soviet Union to accept an arms competition in which it simply could not compete. In Brands's words, “this surprisingly sophisticated strategy succeeded because it put Moscow under pressure on multiple fronts while throwing its longer-term competitiveness in doubt (72). Even if the Soviets had not yet gripped the reality (“Gorbachev's epiphany was still in the future”), “by the mid-1980s, America was decisively winning the military competition” (73).

Brands's discussion of the Cold War endgame is thoughtful and compelling. Reagan must be given his due, and Brands is not alone among respected historians in thinking so.³ Reagan's persistence yet (remarkable) flexibility (in his second term) helped bring an end to the Cold War. But any viable Cold War history—and evaluation of the Reagan legacy—must contend nonetheless with countervailing evidence: Reagan's poor grasp of essential facts (as related, for example, to nuclear weapons);⁴ the negative consequences of US support for Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan;⁵ the administration's failed application of US military power in the Middle East (in Lebanon and Libya);⁶ and the sordid human-rights records in the

³ See also, Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁴ In the words of one incisive account of the administration's arms-control deliberations and debate, “behind the scenes, where decisions were made and policy was set, [Reagan] was to remain a detached, sometimes befuddled character.” “Even though he chaired sixteen National Security Council-level meetings on START, there was ample evidence, during those meetings and on other occasions as well, that he frequently did not understand basic aspects of the nuclear-weapons issue and of policies being promulgated in his name.” Strobe Talbott, *Deadly Gambits: The Reagan Administration and the Stalemate in Nuclear Arms Control* (New York: Vintage, 1985, 209).

⁵ James Lebovic, *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 120-121.

⁶ The Reagan administration chose to make the United States an active combatant in Lebanon when bombarding its coast after introducing US Marines into that country. The administration precipitously withdrew those forces after hundreds of Marines were killed in a 1983-Shiite bomb attack. See Micah Zenko, *When Reagan Cut and Run, Foreign Policy* (Feb. 7, 2014, 10:36 PM) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/07/when-reagan-cut-and-run/>. Moreover, the administration's aerial targeting of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 1986 likely contributed to Libya's placement of a bomb (in Frankfurt, Germany) on the Pan Am jet that exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland killing well-over two hundred people.

1980s of US-supported governments in Central America.⁷ Evaluation also requires that we “reality test” the idea of a US president who stood knowingly above the fray, blithely marching to his own drummer, when unforgiving ideological battles occurred both within and outside his administration.⁸ Within the US government of the 1970s and 1980s, and the broader US policy community, individuals fought over whether nuclear wars would produce winners and losers (and thus whether the Soviets were preparing their forces to emerge victorious from a nuclear war),⁹ whether the high levels of Soviet military spending meant that the Soviets were spending themselves into oblivion or, instead, revealing a commitment and readiness to fight¹⁰—indeed, to engage in a final showdown with the West. Was all of this of no real consequence?

Also, what should we make of Reagan’s own commitment *per se* to the conventional and nuclear buildup. Should we assume that when the Reagan administration offered its own self-serving interpretation of the ABM Treaty, and unleashed resources pursuant to an ambitious, nationwide strategic defense, it did so with a wink?¹¹ That is, was it all an elaborate ruse? After all, a matter of broad agreement within the Reagan administration was the false belief that the Soviets were out for world domination and that Communist governments never concede power, a view most notably expressed by Reagan’s own UN ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick: “there is no instance of a revolutionary ‘socialist’ or Communist society being democratized.”¹² What evidence exists, moreover, that the US military buildup convinced the Soviet leadership to exit the competition?

Maybe the United States just got lucky. Is it not possible that Reagan administration policies would have prolonged the Cold War if not for the rise and intervention of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev? For that matter, could the administration’s policies and behavior not have made conditions considerably worse, a possibility that Brands acknowledges (214), given the administration’s early rhetoric, Soviet fears that the United States was positioning itself for a successful nuclear first strike,¹³ and US plans to hit the Soviet leadership first in the event of a nuclear conflict?¹⁴ Indeed, a viable Cold War history could easily venerate Gorbachev, considering his awesome challenge in bringing dramatic change to the ossified Soviet state, no less in the face of hostile US rhetoric and military preparedness. Brands depicts Gorbachev, however, as more object than subject: “Gorbachev would not have gone as far as he did if Reagan and Bush had not cultivated him,

⁷ On this, see, for example, Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

⁸ See the presentation of the palace intrigue throughout Talbot, *Deadly Gambits*.

⁹ Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, “Victory is Possible,” *Foreign Policy* 39 (1980): 14-27.

¹⁰ For the background to the debate, see Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 113-136. On intelligence in the Reagan administration, see Lebovic, *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 169-175.

¹¹ Lebovic, *Flawed Logics*, 143-148.

¹² Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary* November (1979), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/jeane-kirkpatrick/dictatorships-double-standards/> (Note that *Commentary* bills it as “The Classic Essay that Shaped Reagan’s Foreign Policy.”)

¹³ Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, “The MAD Who Wasn’t There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance,” *Security Studies* 26 (2017): 606-641.

¹⁴ Lebovic, *Flawed Logics*, 150.

supported him, and helped him portray himself as a visionary statesman rather than the desperate chief of a collapsing despotism” (135).

Admittedly, historians will forever debate the question, ‘who won the Cold War?’ apart from grand debates about the role of single individuals in history.¹⁵ But, despite the strong virtues of Brands’s well-written and researched book, we can wonder fairly whether the historical facts, and their assessment, are aligned here with the Cold War’s positive outcome. Because Brands knows how this story ends, he arguably downplays considerable evidence that US strategy was neither as coherent nor successful as he depicts it.¹⁶

To be sure, judgments about the foresight and long-term wisdom of US policy hinge on value-laden, cost-benefit assessments. In my assessment, the Vietnam War would feature more heavily for its direct costs, when Brands addresses the war’s costs primarily in post-war US resolve. Still, if we accept the book’s premise that the Soviet empire contained the seeds of its own destruction, should we not look back at the Cold War with considerable sorrow for the wasted US effort, misguided US determination, and enormous human and material costs meant to defeat a bankrupt system that would inevitably have collapsed under its own weight?

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¹⁵ A google search of the phrase, “who won the Cold War,” generates hundreds of thousands of hits. For an alternative view, see, for example, Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry. “Who Won the Cold War?” *Foreign Policy* 87 (1992): 123-138.

¹⁶ For an excellent, well-documented account of US misfires and misjudgments in key Cold War-era crises, see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). In their view, “the strategies of deterrence and compellence provoked at least as much as they restrained. The buildup of arms and the use of threats had complex but generally harmful consequences for the relationship between the two superpowers. Often, they elicited the kind of behavior they were intended to prevent” (4).