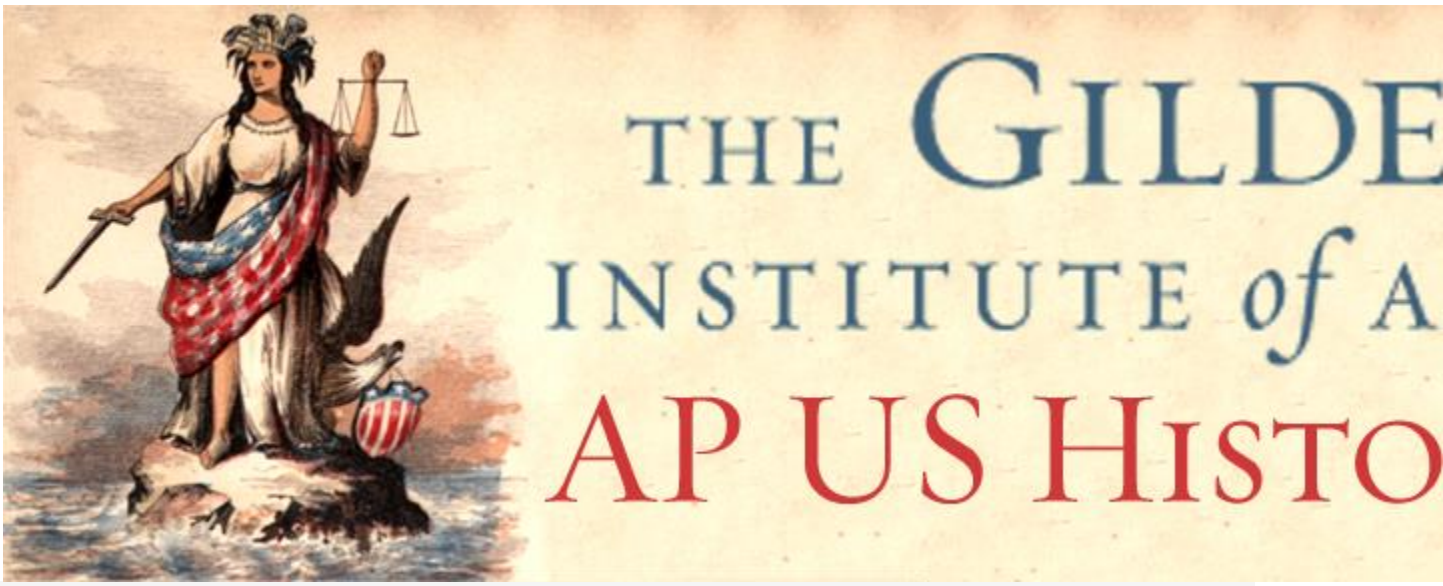




# Ronald Reagan and the End of the Cold War: The Debate Continues


Ronald Reagan at the Berlin Wall, 1987. (Ronald Reagan Library)

For a British professor with more than a passing interest in US foreign policy and the role of the United States in ending the Cold War, it is indeed fascinating to observe how deeply divided opinion still remains over the part played in the making of 1989 by one very special American: President Ronald Reagan. Indeed, in a recent class I taught at my home institution—the London School of Economics—I asked a simple question about which policy-maker at the time was most instrumental

in ending Soviet control in Eastern and Central Europe. Reagan was of course high on my list of possible candidates; and you might say that for a European I made a fairly strong case for him—but to no avail. Amongst a group of 500 very bright first-year students, there seemed to be only one correct answer, and that was not Ronald Reagan but, rather, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. By a considerable margin it was the Russian rather than the American who won the overwhelming majority of votes (over 70 percent of the total).

Yet amongst other students, and no doubt amongst political leaders in other countries, Reagan continues to exercise an enormous fascination—as political leader of the free world at a critical moment in time; as a transformational president; and of course, as the man whose policies, it has been argued, contributed more than anything else to bringing about the demise of Communism. Few American presidents have complete special issues of *USA Today* devoted to their life and times. But in early 2011 Reagan did: forty-eight pages of it from the cover title—"Reagan: An American Icon"—through the back page where we find out that it was no less a corporation than General Electric (a company for which Reagan worked as spokesman between 1954 and 1962) that had in fact sponsored that very important "Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration." Reagan, I suspect, would not have been dismayed. Indeed, according to one account, he later admitted that working for GE was "the second most important eight-year job" he ever had!

Still, for students and teachers of international affairs, the most interesting and difficult question to answer concerns his role in changing the world only a few years after he had assumed the office of president in 1980. Three questions in particular deserve our attention. First, what are the main points in favor of the thesis that Reagan, or at least Reagan's policies, "won" the Cold War? Second, why has there been so much resistance to this thesis—and not only amongst LSE students? And finally, is it possible to arrive (twenty years after the end of the Cold War in 1989 and a century after the birth of Ronald Reagan) at a balanced view of the part he played in undermining the Soviet system?

When Ronald Reagan took over the White House, the end of the Cold War not only seemed a very long way off—nobody in fact thought in such terms at the time—but in many respects it actually looked as if the USSR (and not the West) was winning. The Soviet Union had just invaded Afghanistan. Its supporters in the Third World from Central America to southern Africa seemed to be sweeping all opposition before them. America's European allies were mired down in a politically bruising effort to deploy a new class of missiles at home. And, as many felt at the time, the United States stood on the cusp between one highly debilitating decade (Reagan later called the 1970s a "decade of neglect") and another whose prospects looked anything but bright.

Into this situation strode the ever-optimistic Reagan. The time had come, he announced, to reverse the tide of history. Indeed, instead of retreating (some even believed declining), the United States should challenge its enemies, including the USSR, to a serious contest with nothing less than the world as the

prize. Reagan was always certain that in the end the West would win. He was so certain, in fact, that he even abandoned the niceties of nearly forty years of diplomatic convention that took it for granted that “containment” was America’s preferred strategy toward the Soviet Union and replaced it with an altogether more aggressive policy that did not merely contest the Communist system more forcefully, but called its legitimacy (indeed its very survivability) into question.

Reagan was clear. The USSR, he opined in 1982 before the British Parliament, did not represent the wave of the future. On the contrary, it was, he insisted, condemned like all totalitarian systems to that proverbial “ash can” of history. Reagan even cited Karl Marx in his favor. Marx was right—there was a crisis unfolding—except it was not happening in the capitalist West, according to Reagan, but rather in the communist East. Nor was Reagan content just to point out what was wrong with planning—though he did so in some detail. A few months later he spoke of the USSR in almost religious terms. Its government was not just another system with which the United States was engaged in a competition. It was nothing less (he noted in March 1983) than an “evil empire,” one that the United States not only had a foreign-policy duty to oppose but a moral duty to compete with as well.

And compete the United States did with increasing determination, most immediately with a decisive military build up in what became known as SDI (the Strategic Defence Initiative). The United States, some of Reagan’s supporters loudly proclaimed, would, quite simply, spend the Soviet Union into bankruptcy. It would also make the USSR pay for its aggressive actions undertaken in the 1970s. Hence was born the “Reagan doctrine,” a form of proxy war fought by the United States from Afghanistan to Nicaragua using local forces to increase Soviet problems globally. Finally, the US would seek to squeeze the USSR economically through trade embargoes and investment freezes. And even if this proved problematic (largely because the Soviet economy was not that dependent on the West), there was at least one other metaphorical weapon in the American arsenal: Saudi Arabia, which controlled over 25 percent of the world’s oil supplies, and which was well placed to force down the price of the black stuff upon which the USSR did depend for most of its hard currency.

That Reagan had combined a serious analysis of Soviet systemic weaknesses with a fairly coherent strategy of squeeze and pressure is not, I think, in doubt. Where I think there is some doubt is in making a connection between what he talked about and practiced in his first term in office regarding the superpower relationship and what later unfolded in his second term when one of these two players finally decided to fly the white flag of surrender in Europe. Here we have to exercise some intellectual caution and academic balance.

On one hand, there is very clearly a relationship between US policies under Reagan before late 1988 and what subsequently happened on the Soviet side. It

would be most odd if there was not. On the other hand, it is not at all obvious what that relationship is.

First, we have to determine which Ronald Reagan we are actually talking about: the tough, uncompromising American leader who seemingly denied the very legitimacy of the Soviet Union and opposed it by calling for Mr. Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. Or Reagan the serious negotiator, who met new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on no less than four occasions after 1984. The issue is a critical one in terms of explaining the end of the Cold War. For if, as some believe, it was a policy of strength and contestation that ended the Cold War, then obviously one must conclude that it is the Reagan of the first term who needs to be celebrated. However, if one concludes—as does Reagan's secretary of state, George Schultz, in his memoirs—that it was only the presence of a Soviet leader with whom one could engage after 1985 that made the end of the Cold War possible, then a very different story is bound to be told; not about a Soviet surrender to the imminent might of American power, but about constructive diplomacy, trust, and something that the early Reagan had been deeply suspicious of: namely détente.

This in turn raises the issue of the USSR and the role played by Gorbachev himself. Here most historians would concede that without a reformer taking over in the Kremlin, not only would there have been nobody with whom Reagan could engage, but there would have been no end to the Cold War either. The United States could raise its own military expenditures as high as it liked; it could have lent even more support to so-called "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan, but without a very different kind of Soviet leader responding to some very real Soviet problems it is impossible to envisage 1989 ever happening. The United States might have played its part in weakening the legitimacy of communism and exposing its weaknesses (of which Reagan was more aware than many American experts at the time). However, at the end of the day the corrosive work was not being done from outside the USSR but from within by an economy that could not innovate and an ideology in which fewer and fewer believed.

There is, in addition, another problem with the argument that an assertive Reagan fought the Soviets to a standstill and then wrestled them to the floor until they cried "Uncle," and it is a problem that all teachers of history and world affairs confront on a daily basis in the classroom: complexity. What happens in history—as we all know—can never be explained in single-factor terms; and the end of the Cold War is no exception to this important rule. Indeed, this is why scholars from both sides of the Atlantic are still arguing about it. While some give Reagan his due (though it is never entirely clear which Reagan), they often go on to point out that one also has to take into account several other factors when thinking about 1989, including the central part performed by the ordinary people of Central and Eastern Europe in their own liberation; the important role played by

some European leaders—among whom the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was key when it came to pressing for German unification in October 1989; and finally, the quiet but critical role performed by misperception and misunderstanding. Here, the evidence is now clear. Was Gorbachev prepared to loosen Soviet control over Eastern Europe and let the states there choose their own way (the “Sinatra Doctrine”)? Obviously so. Did he, however, think that this would lead to the rapid and complete collapse of socialism in all its forms? Apparently not. It was one thing seeking a looser, and hopefully less costly, relationship with countries like Poland and Hungary. This did not necessarily mean that Gorbachev actually intended to lose control of the USSR’s “cordon sanitaire” completely. In reality, Gorbachev miscalculated and it was this miscalculation that brought the Cold War to an end.

Finally, how did Reagan himself—and indeed how do most Americans—view the historical figure of Ronald Reagan and what he did in bringing about the end of the Cold War. The simple answer to this is that it all depends on which American you talk to and when! This has certainly been my experience as a teacher. In fact, Americans seem to be even more divided about Reagan than nearly anybody else. There is not very much positive that the broad American left has to say about Reagan, and little indication either that they are prepared to give him any credit for anything. The view on this side of the ideological aisle seems to be that Reagan did more to keep the Cold War going than bringing it to an end. Conservatives and Republicans, you will not be surprised to hear, take a rather different view. Reagan—and here they mean the Reagan of the first term—was absolutely vital in destroying the USSR as result of his policies. George W. Bush even drew significant lessons from what Ronald Reagan had achieved, and sold many of his own policies in the so-called war on terror almost as if they were a re-run of the past. Admittedly in his time, the new enemy was very different from the old one, but the cause was equally just and victory would be achieved by pursuing the same set of uncompromising, morally superior policies against the new totalitarians.

What Reagan himself did say on the end of the Cold War after he left office is revealing. Here, significantly, one finds no sense of the triumphalism that later characterized some more conservative accounts of 1989. Nor, in fact, can we detect much effort on his part to overplay his own role. He accepted that his own policies contributed to the erosion of Soviet power; and that the ideological offensive he unleashed against the USSR in particular (and socialism in general) contributed to changing the terms of the debate about the East-West relationship. But others played their part, too, he insisted: one being Mrs. Thatcher with whom he was so politically close; and the other of course being Mikhail Gorbachev, whose reformist policies he recognized as being genuine when others in his administration were far more sceptical.

Indeed, Reagan even carried on a debate with the skeptics immediately after he left office. He was certainly very critical of his immediate successor. Bush senior may have been the best and only man for the top job. However, he was quite wrong (at first) to treat the Gorbachev reforms with deep suspicion. This not only displayed a distinct lack of vision (unsurprisingly for a president famed for never being possessed of that rather important political commodity), but according to Reagan, it also meant that the West and the United States might lose a golden opportunity. It was time in his view for the United States to be bold and work with the USSR to make the world a safer place; not to hold back for fear of what might lay beyond the Cold War. In this very important sense, Ronald Reagan ultimately demonstrated something that many of his erstwhile critics, and most of his admiring apologists, have never fully comprehended: that whatever role he may or may not have played in bringing about the end of the Cold War—and historians will continue to debate that for many decades to come I suspect—he had what few leaders have ever displayed since: a sense of a different global future in which all might play a constructive role.

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