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**Why Ronald Reagan Didn't Really Win the Cold War**

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On perhaps no part of Ronald Reagan's legacy is there more consensus than the belief that he won the Cold War. The standard narrative asserts that his confrontational approach to Communism, both in word ("evil empire") and deed (record military buildups and the introduction of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a.k.a, "Star Wars"), forced the Soviet Union to cry uncle. This strategy, so the story goes, resulted first in the breakthrough arms reduction treaties between Gorbachev and Reagan in the late 1980s, and then in the collapse of the Soviet system itself.

This reasoning is flawed in fundamental respects. It both greatly overstates the importance of Reagan's "toughness" in bringing the Soviets to their knees and downplays the truly historic departure of new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev from his predecessors. Three key weaknesses in the narrative stand out.

1) One flaw in the consensus story is the claim that Reagan's confrontational first term and large military buildup was important in undermining the Soviet economy. It is true that defense spending comprised an excessively large share of the overall Soviet economy, but this fact well pre-dated the Reagan presidency. In fact, most observers agree that the Soviet economy had begun to stagnate by about 1975, in part dragged down by over-spending in the Soviet military at the expense of consumer needs and other necessary investments. And by the time of Leonid Brezhnev's death in 1982, many in the Soviet leadership knew that their economy was beset by long term problems, including eroding worker discipline, rising alcoholism, wasteful investment and the Soviets' striking failure to integrate computer technology into their production systems. None of these factors owed anything to the Reagan military buildup, which began only a year before Brezhnev's death and several years after Soviet growth rates began to sputter.

2) A second misplaced claim is that Reagan's policies prompted beleaguered Soviet hardliners to promote the reformist Gorbachev as Communist party leader. Gorbachev's rise to power had nothing to do with the Reagan administration's hostility to the Soviets. Brezhnev's two immediate successors, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, each died within fifteen months of attaining power. If not for this relative fluke, there might well have been no progress in easing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during Reagan's second term. Only Gorbachev's premature ascension to power and extraordinary departure from prior Soviet leadership patterns allowed for the stunning breakthroughs of the late 1980s. Furthermore, Gorbachev's ideas, including his belief in the need to fundamentally reform the Soviet economy and to pull the superpowers away from the nuclear brink were not influenced by Reagan's stridency. Instead, it is clear that Gorbachev and his key ideological ally, Alexander Yakovlev, had recognized the fundamental weaknesses in the Soviet system years before Gorbachev came to power (and before Reagan was elected President). European social democratic thought and universal humanism, the latter embodied by dissident nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov, most shaped Gorbachev's "new thinking." Gorbachev's political mentor, the former KGB head Yuri Andropov, who was acutely aware of the bottlenecks, breakdowns and discontent in the Soviet system, also influenced Gorbachev's understanding of the need for significant internal change.

3) A third misconception involves Star Wars itself. It is commonly asserted that once Reagan announced SDI in 1983, the Soviets realized that they could not compete with the Americans in an arms race centered on computer-based technology. True, the Soviet leadership was initially nervous about SDI. However, under Andropov (Brezhnev's immediate successor), Star Wars merely prompted a further chill in US-Soviet relations. Only when Gorbachev came to power did the two sides decisively alter their relationship. This happened first at Reyjkavik in 1986, when Reagan and Gorbachev nearly agreed to scrap their entire nuclear stockpiles. The sticking point, it turns out, was Gorbachev's insistence that Reagan confine Star Wars research to the laboratory. Reagan's refusal to do contributed to the collapse of those negotiations.

In fact, the first major arms reduction agreement between the two sides -- the 1987 treaty eliminating Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) in Europe -- became possible once Gorbachev dropped his objection to Reagan's continued pursuit of SDI. When Gorbachev's key scientific advisor told him that SDI was not viable, Gorbachev saw no point in making it a bone of contention. So, when the Soviets took SDI seriously, as Reagan had hoped, Gorbachev was more resistant to deal-making. Once Gorbachev stopped worrying about SDI, significant arms reduction ensued.

Reagan is rightly credited with having recognized, despite his own prior instincts, that Gorbachev was "someone we can do business with," in the famous words of Margaret Thatcher. However, the policies that have most come to define his leadership, especially in the eyes of worshipful conservatives -- a massive military build up and a determination to pursue SDI -- played no meaningful role in Gorbachev's rise to power or his subsequent push to reform the Soviet system. Furthermore, many of his conservative allies at the time blasted Reagan for selling out America when he signed the INF treaty. In other words, only Reagan's pragmatic repudiation of the conservative anti-Communist dogma of his first term, plus the felicitous rise to power of a real global visionary as Soviet leader, allowed for the breakthroughs that characterized Reagan's final two years in office.

The subsequent Soviet collapse was almost entirely an internal affair. Gorbachev's far-reaching reforms unleashed long-suppressed nationalist currents and other opportunistic political elements. These factors led to chaos and implosion. The end of the Soviet empire does not owe itself to Reagan's tough anti-communism. Rather, it owes itself substantially to Mikhail Gorbachev's arrival on the world scene and Reagan's recognition that he was now sitting across the table from a truly transformative world leader. And it should be clear that, were today's right-wing worshippers of Reagan in charge back then, only stridency and belligerence, not compromise and flexible thinking, likely would have characterized American policy during that critical historical period.

*Jonathan Weiler is author of two books,*[*Human Rights in Russia: A Darker Side of Reform*](https://www.rienner.com/title/Human_Rights_in_Russia_A_Darker_Side_of_Reform)*and, with Marc Hetherington,*[*Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*](http://www.amazon.com/Authoritarianism-Polarization-American-Politics-Hetherington/dp/052171124X/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297086228&sr=8-1-catcorr)*.*