Reagan's Triumph


Two hundred years after the great Terror of the French Revolution, the causes of that cataclysm remain the subject of lively historical debate. Revision piles on revision, and now and then it is still possible to come up with a fresh synthesis or an original treatment of the subject. The tides of Cold War historiography, likely to ebb and flow for centuries, will rival those of the French Revolution because the enduring controversy in each epoch has a common theme: the role of radical ideology in historical affairs.

Like the French Revolution, the Cold War was the subject of fierce historical revisionism even as the epoch was under way. Most revisionism came from liberals and the radical Left, who suggested that the Cold War was our fault, that it was the result of misunderstanding between the West and the Soviet Union, that the Soviets were merely "insecure," and so forth. Revisionism was not limited to the Left; a strand of leftist-revisionism became popular with the libertarian Right, which still argues today that the United States deliberately started the Cold War in order to expand our government into a "garrison state." The Cold War, many critics suggested, would eventually give way to a stable and
harmonious bipolar world as soon as the West got over its "inordinate fear of Communism."

After the Cold War ended in Western victory, the liberal-left revisionists performed a pirouette worthy of Mikhail Baryshnikov. We knew it all along, they said; the inherent instability of the Soviet socio-economic system made it inevitable that it would collapse of its own weight. This from the same people (e.g., Paul Samuelson and J.K. Galbraith) who were singing the praises of the Soviet economy right up to the end. If anything, the new tune goes, Western hostility and warmongering delayed the collapse. A more recondite variation is that all credit belongs to that farsighted statesman Mikhail Gorbachev (who, in truth, was a rather dull-witted fellow). Time magazine, the house organ of what might be called "Talbottism" (after über-sophisticate Strobe Talbott), named Gorbachev not merely "Person of the Year" for 1991, but "Person of the Decade." And don't forget that it was Gorbachev, not Ronald Reagan, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, though given the squallid gallery of recent prizewinners (this year's went to Jimmy Carter), Reagan should probably be glad not to be in their company.

Above all, no credit could be given to Reagan, because acknowledging him would be an implicit reproach of the establishment intelligentsia. It is simply unthinkable that the Hollywood bumpkin Reagan could deal effectively with the Soviet Union if he rejected the ironic ministrations of the Council on Foreign Relations. Admitting that Reagan bested the foreign-policy smart set would have the most searching consequences for those who, as Reagan once put it, "make a fetish of complexity." Reagan proved that the simplicity of Occam's razor is what is most needed in foreign affairs. Historical argument over the Cold War, like argument over the French Revolution or the American Founding, is a proxy for the fight over fundamental political principles, and has relevance for the present moment. September 11 raised the stakes: It's a straight line from the "evil empire" to the "axis of evil."

The latest entries in the battle of the books are Reagan's War by Peter Schweizer, a fellow at the Hoover Institution, and The Fifty-Year Wound by Derek Leebaert, a professor of government at Georgetown University and founding editor of the journal International Affairs. Although very different in style and approach, both come to the same conclusion: Reagan won the Cold War—though not quite, as Margaret Thatcher put it, without firing a shot.

Reagan's War is in its main respects an updated and expanded
version of Schweizer's 1994 book *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. (Many passages, in fact, are virtually identical, though Victory seems to have been more vigorously edited.) Victory was one of the first books (along with Jay Winik's 1996 *On The Brink*) to present a detailed and compelling case that the Soviet Union's demise owed much to the deliberate strategy and actions of the Reagan administration. Even before he became president, Reagan had laid out his philosophy of how the Cold War should end: "We win, they lose." It was tantamount to reviving the notion of "rollback" that had been abandoned practically at the outset of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union acquired its first nuclear weapons.

The Reagan administration set out to bring pressure to bear on the Soviet Union in at least four deliberate ways. First, through economic warfare, the Reagan team sought to dry up the Soviets' flow of hard currency from the West, which not only hurt their struggling economy but also cut into their foreign adventurism. The economic war came in several parts, including delaying the Soviet gas pipeline to western Europe, midwifing a drop in oil prices, and slowing the flow of western high technology to the eastern bloc. Schweizer estimates that Reagan's economic strictures deprived the Soviet Union of at least $15 billion a year in hard currency, at a time when total annual hard currency earnings were only about $32 billion.

Second, Reagan believed that the Soviets would be unable to compete with the U.S. in an arms race, and he was correct, with the strategic defense initiative the crowning piece of his arms offensive. Third, Reagan decided to turn the tables against the Soviet Union by supporting guerilla insurgencies against its client states and even, in a few instances, against the Soviet Union itself. This step raised the cost of the Soviet Empire in terms of money and blood, most notably in Afghanistan.

The biggest difference between *Victory* and *Reagan's War* is that the latter expands the time line of the story, making Reagan the centerpiece of the action, as he deserves to be. (CIA Director Bill Casey was the central hero of *Victory.*) As perceptive observers have come to appreciate, Reagan's experience with Communist agitation in Hollywood in the 1940s (which was not the McCarthyist misadventure that liberals portray) was crucial to his outlook throughout the rest of his career. In this respect Reagan shared the same hard-won perceptions about Communism as British labor leaders such as Ernest Bevin, who observed in the Soviets the same
mendacity that he had seen among the Communist union organizers he struggled against in pre-war Britain. (According to a possibly apocryphal story, when Bevin returned from the Potsdam conference in 1945 and was asked by his Labour Party colleagues what the Soviets were like, he reportedly said, "Why, they're just like the Communists!"

The parallel between Bevin and Reagan in the 1940s provides the ideal portal to a consideration of Derek Leebaert's stunning and original contribution to Cold War history in *The Fifty-Year Wound*. Leebaert has achieved the rare feat of combining an authoritative chronological narrative with acute judgment and interpretation about the principal players and key moments. And Leebaert executes this grand sweep with memorable prose and wit, which sparkle on every page.

*The Fifty-Year Wound* can be considered a revisionist work, though unlike any revisionism seen before. Some of the nouns in the book's title ("wound," "true price") are misleading, and help explain the confused reception of the book among some conservatives. All wars, even victorious ones, have enormous costs, and not merely in treasure, as the greatest writers on war from Thucydides through Churchill have understood. The atmosphere of crisis that accompanied the Cold War contributed to, among other things, the heightened politicization of American society. War necessarily involves lots of waste, and leading the West involved diverting billions of dollars to less productive enterprises at home and to dubious enterprises abroad. We often supported squalid Third World tyrants and kleptocrats in order to ward off Soviet advances on the West's periphery, but much of our money ended up in the thugs' private Swiss accounts. Among the lasting encumbrances of our Cold War intimacy with Europe is that today our freedom of action is constrained, whether with regard to Middle Eastern policy or climate change policy.

Part of the Cold War's ferocity and peril was that as it progressed it became a two-front war. The Cold War abroad was matched by the Cold War at home; the phenomenon of anti-anti-Communism arose among liberals who had soured on the justice of the Free World's cause. While the Cold War was ongoing, conservatives and other Cold Warriors were understandably reluctant to acknowledge the costs of the struggle, because doing so lent aid and comfort to the anti-anti-Communists. And now that the conflict is over, the justifiable sense of triumph among those who stayed the course leads them to be disinclined to dwell on their mistakes.
Leebaert negotiates these treacherous crosscurrents with near-perfect pitch and refreshing honesty. Beyond just the direct aspects of the Cold War such as diplomacy and military power, Leebaert captures the cultural changes the conflict wrought. Yet Leebaert never indulges any of the fantasies of the revisionist Left or libertarian Right. To the contrary, he devastates the cliché that the U.S. embraced the Cold War in order to establish a militaristic national security state or to become a self-conscious imperial power. Above all, he never questions the necessity of the overall conflict, or expresses any doubt that the Soviet Union was the evil empire that Reagan understood it to be. In fact, near the end of the book, Leebaert is indignant that the Soviet Union isn't regarded as just as evil as Nazi Germany. *The Fifty-Year Wound* is patriotic throughout, realistic ("It would have taken an entirely different United States to have accomplished the task without the usual pork barrels, bureaucratic archaism, and vagaries"), and rejoices that our side won.

The Cold War had a beginning, middle, and end, and, like any epic, is best understood by contemplating the character and actions of its leading figures. Leebaert's character sketches are the strongest part of this muscular book. His highest praise is reserved for Eisenhower and Reagan. George Kennan receives the most damning evaluation, and deservedly so. "Kennan's long career," Leebaert writes, "has come to personify many of the more taxing habits of America's international behavior: intensely emotional, backward-looking, dismissive of the details of economics and technology, often racist, and occasionally 'reckless' and riddled with 'impulsiveness.'" (And that's one of the more charitable judgments about Kennan in the book.) John F. Kennedy and his troupe come in for criticism, too, followed only by Nixon. "Like many compulsive womanizers," Leebaert writes of Kennedy, "he suffered from a deficiency of excitement."

Reagan is the hero of the endgame, and here again Leebaert displays a compelling talent for character study. "Unlike Kennedy," he writes, "Reagan's disrespect for conventional wisdom was more than the junior officer's impatience with the brass. Reagan took the long view of almost everything. He was an extremely effective negotiator, which is not the same as being tough. He did not rattle, and his faith in America's strength rested on an utter indifference to social class." About Reagan's success Leebaert correctly notes: "It is beyond the laws of probability to believe that this was all coincidence or a matter of being lucky.... The lack of surface arrogance should not conceal his force of will, nor should his modesty in
details obscure a confidence in his contribution to the heart of things such as only a great man or fools possess. The hypothesis of foolishness becomes weaker by the day."

Leebaert tells much the same story as Schweizer, though with more of the frisson of the clash between Reagan and the liberal establishment. Leebaert also offers new details about how close we came to the brink of war with the Soviet Union in late 1983, and is scathing at the ineptitude and inaccuracy of the CIA's analysis virtually throughout the Cold War.

Because *The Fifty-Year Wound* does not travel down any of the well-trodden paths of Cold War historiography, its idiosyncrasies have annoyed some conservatives while its contempt for the liberal establishment has infuriated the Talbotts of the world. This has made the book something of an orphan, which is unfortunate and unjust. Leebaert has succeeded in the extraordinary feat of conveying the necessarily tragic dimension of the long-term Cold War conflict without becoming maudlin or sentimental, and without suggesting that it was not worthwhile. His rich narrative deserves to take its place among the classics of Cold War historiography.