

# A Roundtable on William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan in the White House and the World*

*Evan D. McCormick, Aaron Donaghy, Andrew Hunt, Gail E.S. Yoshitani, John  
Sbardellati, and William Inboden*

## Roundtable Introduction

*Evan D. McCormick*

William Inboden's *The Peacemaker*, an indispensable treatment of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy vision and sprawling set of affiliated global policies, could not have arrived at a better time. As I noted in the introduction to a previous *Passport* roundtable about the 40<sup>th</sup> president, an increasing number of scholars of the United States and the world—many of them junior scholars—are now focusing on the Reagan years to understand the transition in the U.S. global role that accompanied the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Inboden's book will loom large in these efforts. There is perhaps no better testament to Reagan's present stature than this: the reviewers in this *Passport* roundtable disagree almost exclusively about Inboden's handling of the contradictions that accompany Reagan, rather than about whether Reagan is deserving of such a consequential place in the literature on U.S. foreign relations. Reagan's contradictions are many and, as the lively discussion amongst these reviewers makes clear, essential to grappling with Reagan's complicated legacy.

All reviewers offer high praise for Inboden's undertaking, which achieves the feat of synthesizing Reagan's foreign policies while also presenting a fresh image of a visionary—if at times elusive—strategic thinker. Aaron Donaghy calls it “arguably the most comprehensive archival-based treatment of foreign policymaking during the Reagan era.” The reviewers are equally impressed with the style in which Inboden has pulled off this scholarly task. Donaghy notes that Inboden's work is “deeply researched and written with panache,” while John Sbardatelli, also citing Inboden's “prodigious research,” calls his prose “crisp and engaging.” Gail Yoshitani is especially laudatory, finding Inboden's balance between “insightful analysis” and knack for captivating storytelling an ideal one for educating would-be strategists about the experience of policymaking.

The reviewers are less in step in as they contend with Inboden's central argument: that Ronald Reagan—despite the detractions of contemporary critics and many historians—was indispensable to bringing about the end of the Cold War. This claim requires, first, seeing Reagan as an artful grand strategist responsible for engineering the dual-track strategy of pressure and conciliation that drove the Soviet Union to what Inboden calls “negotiated surrender.” Furthermore, the claim requires reviewers to agree that achieving peace served as Reagan's strategic North star. In other words, Inboden's portrayal of Reagan highlights centrality and consistency—two features that have long

vexed Reagan scholars and propelled debates over his foreign policy presidency.

It is on the first point that the reviewers here are most focused, not least because of a fixation on grand strategy as the primary rubric for presidential foreign policymaking by scholars of U.S. foreign policy. Sbardatelli says that Inboden “convincingly demonstrates that Reagan consistently pursued a mix of confrontational and conciliatory strategies,” yet raises questions about the framework of negotiated surrender that Inboden imposes to make sense of Reagan's often competing influences. “Reagan as a strategist,” Sbardatelli writes, “appears to have been more impulsive, pragmatic, and given to improvisation, rather than guided by a single coherent strategy that neatly tied together all the loose ends of his foreign policy.” Donaghy, who aligns himself with the camp of scholars who believe in a “Reagan reversal,” or shift in the Administration's strategy towards the Soviet Union, comes away unconvinced by Inboden's extensive case for consistency. He acknowledges the persistence of Reagan's guiding principles, but notes that the manifold “divisions, personnel changes, and policy turns” within Reagan's eight years of Soviet policy to note that a claim for grand strategy is “rather problematic.” Donaghy concludes that “it was precisely Reagan's flexibility, pragmatism, and independence of thought that contributed to the development of a more stable U.S.-Soviet relationship in the second half of the 1980s.”

The second component of Inboden's assessment—that Reagan's legacy is one of peacemaking—also comes in for scrutiny by the reviewers. It should be emphasized that each of the reviewers praises Inboden for the care he has taken to avoid a hagiography while writing a book that aims to bolster Reagan's legacy. Rather than idealizing in any capacity, Inboden foregrounds tragedy as a core theme of Reagan's legacy. In so doing, he directly tackles a number of the Administration's most infamous decisions and episodes, such as Reagan's support for authoritarian regimes and the Iran-Contra scandal. Donaghy commends Inboden's analysis as “judicious and even-handed” despite being favorable to Reagan. Similarly, Andrew Hunt writes that, while a decidedly sympathetic account, “Inboden's prose strikes a judicious tone” and says Inboden “does not ever hesitate [to add] layers of complexity to the words and deeds of the Reagan Administration.”

Judicious as Inboden is, the essays in this roundtable collectively highlight the inextricability of moral judgment from scholarly assessment regarding Reagan's role in the end of the Cold War; it has become difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the ethics of Reagan's hegemonic conception of peace—and the many misdeeds and costly choices that it entailed—from attempts at objective historical analysis.

Sbardatelli notes that “Inboden’s brazenly triumphalist interpretation is deftly qualified by frequent concessions of Reagan’s missteps,” though he notes that these concessions “ultimately do little to darken the heroic portrait that the author sketches here.” Yohistani’s reading is more sympathetic, highlighting Inboden’s focus on Reagan’s attempts to reach the Soviet people, as well as its leaders, with a message of personal and religious liberty. Hunt’s review challenges this heroic image most directly, arguing that Inboden’s centering of Reagan obscures other complex reasons for the Cold War’s end, many of which “had less to do with policies crafted in Washington’s hallowed halls of power, and more to do with conditions inside the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.” Hunt focuses specifically on Reagan’s legacy in Central America, where the conception of the region as an ideological battlefield went hand-in-hand with political violence and repression on an unspeakable scale. Although Inboden does not shy from these facts, Hunt laments that “nowhere is there evidence that the troubling moral choices to which Inboden refers kept Reagan or anyone in his administration, or their backers in Congress, awake at night, troubled by the bloodletting they were financing.”

Inboden responds to the reviews in an essay that is typical of the author’s depth and thoughtfulness, taking on three of the themes in the reviews which more or less track with what I have previewed here: the coherence of Reagan’s strategy, his record in Central America, and charges of “triumphalism” in evaluating the end of the Cold War. In this essay, Inboden deepens his case for understanding Reagan as a visionary and deft foreign policy president, advancing a concept of grand strategy that requires adaptation and acknowledges managerial disagreement. On Central America, Inboden responds resolutely, emphasizing both the reality of the Soviet challenge to U.S. interests in the region, and Reagan’s willingness—in the case of El Salvador—to pressure authoritarian allies to respect basic democratic norms. Readers will benefit especially from Inboden’s pages on moral judgments and the end of the Cold War. Inboden objects to triumphalism as an epithet used by those who would minimize the threat posed by Soviet communism relative to U.S. foreign policy. With remarkable candor, Inboden confirms his abhorrence of the USSR’s record and urges other scholars, while making their own moral judgments, to never “exonerate[e], or even overlook[], the failings of the ‘good’ side.”

There is little doubt, in reading the essays assembled here, that Inboden has produced an essential synthesis of the Reagan Administration’s foreign policy. It is also clear, in reading these essays, that a broad consensus among scholars is hardly within reach; their interpretations of Reagan’s centrality to the end of the Cold War, and the costs of the policies that the Administration pursued in bringing about its vision of peace, diverge widely and seem indelibly bound up in an unresolvable question of conscience. Yet this is not a note of despair, but one of optimism. For scholars willing to turn their attention from the project of demystifying Reagan personally, there remain ample studies yet to be written about the policies and programs that Reagan’s strategy countenanced, the perspectives of people across the globe affected by those policies, and the impact of his presidency and memory on the power of the executive branch. In this consummate tome, Inboden has provided a vital reference point for much of that scholarship yet to come.

Note:

1. Evan D. McCormick, Susan Colburn, Augusta Dell’Omo, and Michael De Groot, “Writing About Reagan: Archival Sources and an Elusive President,” *Passport*, January 2022. <<https://shafr.org/system/files/passport-01-2022-writing-about-reagan.pdf>>

## Review of William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink*

Aaron Donaghy

In *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink*, William Inboden has penned a first-rate study of Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy and the events that shaped the end of the Cold War. Deeply researched and written with panache, the book is rich with insights into one of America’s most consequential and enigmatic presidents. Although I do not agree with all of Inboden’s arguments, *The Peacemaker* stands as a formidable work—one with which all scholars of U.S. foreign policy and the Cold War must surely contend.

The Cold War ended in a swift, decisive, and largely peaceful manner. Communism was effectively consigned to the “ash-heap of history,” to echo a Reagan phrase.<sup>1</sup> Yet interpreting this extraordinary historical moment carries risks for scholars. More than three decades after the denouement, there is an increasing tendency to take a deterministic view of events of the late 1980s—to cast the Soviet “capitulation” as the inevitable result of Soviet systemic weakness and stagnation. But as Inboden explains, the likelihood of an imminent Soviet collapse was anything but clear in January 1981, when Reagan assumed the presidency, not least because the United States faced its own considerable challenges, having endured a series of traumas at home and abroad. “The United States appeared to much of the world as a crippled giant, in inexorable decline from economic stagnation, military weakness, political dysfunction, and international ineptitude,” Inboden writes (3).

Indeed, the author notes that no president had completed two full terms in office since Eisenhower two decades earlier. An assassin’s bullet tragically felled John F. Kennedy; the Vietnam War consumed and doomed Lyndon Johnson’s presidency; the Watergate scandal forced the resignation of Richard Nixon in August 1974. Nixon’s successor, Gerald Ford, was defeated by Jimmy Carter, whose final eighteen months in office were overshadowed by the effects of the energy crisis, inflation, and the incarceration of American hostages in Tehran. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, had installed SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe and was embarking on a major military intervention in Afghanistan. Such was the difficult political context in which Reagan entered the White House.

According to Inboden, Reagan pursued a “comprehensive Cold War strategy” (5). At the heart of this was the concept of peace through strength, whereby the acquisition of overwhelming military power would not only deter aggression but serve to buttress Reagan’s hand at the negotiating table, particularly in the area of arms control. “Reagan used this military modernization to force the Soviets into an arms race that they could neither afford nor win, leaving the Kremlin no option but to negotiate from weakness, leading to a negotiated surrender,” Inboden argues (10). Underpinning this strategy lay a number of key principles, to which Reagan remained devoted throughout his presidency: a deeply held faith and a firm belief in religious freedom; an unwavering commitment to ideas and American ideals; and the expansion of human liberty across the globe—political, economic, and religious.

Much of the U.S.-Soviet saga of the 1980s is by now well known, although it remains open to different interpretations. Inboden illuminates Reagan’s efforts to support the anti-Soviet resistance movements in Poland and Afghanistan, for example, as he attempted to maintain the pressure on the Kremlin throughout the 1980s. But this is more than just an East-West story. As the author rightly notes, “the world itself was undergoing other changes during this time that would transcend the Cold War” (5).

The strongest part of Inboden's work lies rather in its global breadth, as the author skilfully ties together the various components of Reagan's vision while masterfully narrating the complexities, tribulations, and bureaucratic infighting that marked policy formulation behind the scenes. In that respect, the book is arguably the most comprehensive archival-based treatment of foreign policymaking during the Reagan era.

There is much to admire here. We learn, for example, of Reagan's evolving views toward the Asia-Pacific region and his administration's efforts to develop a key strategic partnership with two historic adversaries, Japan and China. While Reagan saw East Asia through the lens of the Cold War, he understood the benefits—geopolitical and economic—of closer cooperation with Beijing, and so pursued agreements with China in areas such as intelligence, arms sales, and trade. At the same time, he actively sought to engage Japan in the “global battle of ideas” and strengthen its defense posture in the Northwest Pacific—which duly occurred under the premiership of Yasuhiro Nakasone (75). The maintenance of solid relations with Japan, China, and South Korea—all partnered with the United States—gave Washington the competitive edge over Moscow and served as a deterrent to Soviet expansionism.

Inboden's analysis is generally favorable toward Reagan, yet nonetheless judicious and even-handed. He acknowledges the “carnage and suffering wrought by many authoritarian regimes and insurgencies supported by the Reagan White House in the name of anticommunism.” Such support “besmirch[ed] the administration's record, and must be included in a full moral and strategic accounting” (10–11). While Inboden tempers his criticism of U.S. policy by frequently arguing that there were “no good choices” in the Cold War, he does highlight Reagan's flaws as well as strengths throughout the book. He notes, for example, that the Iran-Contra gambit “revealed [Reagan] at his worst: stubborn, naïve, prone to self-delusion” (380).

On Central America, the author weighs up the “tragic” policy dilemmas which confronted Reagan. “No option was untainted by human suffering,” Inboden writes. “The choices he confronted ranged from bad to awful” (70). Reagan rejected Jimmy Carter's approach toward the region, but he soon realized that “embracing right-wing dictators carried its own political, strategic, and moral costs” (70). His options were poor, but a failure to act would inevitably cede the initiative to the Soviet Union and Cuba.

The Reagan administration surely exaggerated both the extent to which communism was sweeping through the region and the threat it posed to the United States. In a bid to boost public support for U.S. policy, Reagan described the Contras as “freedom fighters” and “the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers,” despite wide reports that they were engaging in terrorist acts, torture, and the murder of civilians.<sup>2</sup> But for all his strident rhetoric, and his belief in arming the Contras, he remained averse to the idea of direct military intervention. The Vietnam War cast a long shadow over American life, and Reagan understood very well that the public had little appetite for further military entanglements.

Indeed, Inboden notes that the real lesson many Americans derived from Vietnam was “not about how best to support anticommunist forces in a civil war, but rather not to get involved in civil wars at all” (215). Only once in Reagan's eight years as president would he deploy American ground troops—a brief, low-risk mission in Grenada in 1983 that met its goals within days. This prudence points

to another key Reagan trait: his pragmatism—a much overlooked characteristic which might have been more fully developed in the book.

“No good choices” is also how Inboden frames U.S. policy options toward Southern Africa, another region torn with civil strife, and one which Reagan (and the Soviets) viewed through the lens of the Cold War. We learn of the Reagan administration's development of a policy of “constructive engagement” toward apartheid South Africa (218). The aim was to protect Pretoria from the threat of communism while simultaneously pressuring Prime Minister P. W. Botha to end the white minority's monopoly on power and oppression of the black population. “Though Reagan detested apartheid,” Inboden writes, “he considered his efforts to end it a lower priority than eradicating communism and restoring peace to the entire region” (323). Here, Reagan's outlook was similar to that of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who believed that applying economic sanctions against South Africa's odious regime would ultimately hurt the poorest people (i.e., black South Africans) the most.

Inboden does not dwell on the *Able Archer* crisis of November 1983. Exactly how grave the “war scare” became is still unknown, because the most relevant top-level Soviet documents remain under strict lock and key in Moscow. What is not in doubt, however, is the horror with which Reagan viewed the Single Integrated Operational Plan (which outlined the U.S. procedures to wage nuclear war) and the subsequent reports of Soviet panic. Reagan's own memoirs, diary, and the detailed report from the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board make this very clear.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the major themes to emerge from the recently declassified archival material held at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley is Reagan's antinuclearism, which arguably ranks alongside his anticommunism and moral idealism as one of his core foreign policy principles.

Recent scholarship on Reagan's foreign policy has tended to fall into one of two broad categories. On the one hand are those historians who argue that Reagan pursued a consistent “grand strategy” throughout his eight years in office that forced the Soviet “negotiated surrender” and the end of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there are those historians who, while noting some continuities, argue that there was a distinct “turn” that began toward the end of Reagan's first term. They draw a sharp contrast between Reagan's early approach to the Soviet Union and the one he pursued from 1984 to 1989.<sup>5</sup> I lean firmly toward the latter view, and for all the book's many strengths, there is nothing presented here that has led me to revise my thinking on this matter.

Inboden claims that “from the beginning Reagan pursued a dual track of pressure on the Soviets combined with diplomatic outreach,” which formed the basis of a “two-pronged strategy” (264). To make his case, he points to Reagan's handwritten letter to Brezhnev and the lifting of the grain embargo. These examples “reveal how from the start Reagan blended confrontation and conciliation toward Moscow” (84).

This argument is unpersuasive. Although Reagan framed the grain embargo decision as a gesture of goodwill in his letter to Brezhnev, it was a decision which stemmed purely from domestic politics and the pressure applied by farm-belt senators. Reagan's handwritten letter to Brezhnev, meanwhile, was accompanied by a formal, confrontational letter. In it the president criticized a string of Soviet policies, questioned Moscow's commitment to peace, and rebuffed Brezhnev's proposal for a personal meeting.<sup>6</sup> As Reagan

While Inboden tempers his criticism of U.S. policy by frequently arguing that there were “no good choices” in the Cold War, he does highlight Reagan's flaws as well as strengths throughout the book. He notes, for example, that the Iran-Contra gambit “revealed [Reagan] at his worst: stubborn, naïve, prone to self-delusion.”

himself explained, the formal message was designed to “put him on notice that we weren’t going to accept any longer the so-called ‘Brezhnev Doctrine.’”<sup>7</sup> Brezhnev’s “icy reply” could not have come as a surprise.

Reagan did on occasion engage in diplomacy with Moscow in 1981–82, but these were isolated examples—not a concerted “dual track strategy.” In any case, the Soviets were not formulating policy based on friendly words in a personal letter; they were taking decisions based on the broad thrust of U.S. policies. And in 1981–82, from a Soviet perspective, these were overwhelmingly confrontational. They included the dismantling of the diplomatic backchannel in Washington with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin; the refusal to send an ambassador to Moscow for nearly a year; the acceleration of a massive new military buildup; the application of wide-ranging economic sanctions against the USSR; persistent hardline anti-Soviet rhetoric; and active support for anticommunist regimes across the globe. Jack Matlock, Reagan’s top NSC adviser on Soviet affairs (and later ambassador in Moscow), recalled with charming understatement that “Reagan was not eager to take up serious negotiation with the Soviet Union the moment he took office.”<sup>8</sup>

There is, to my mind, a clear distinction to be made between the Reagan administration’s approach toward Moscow in 1981–82 and that employed from 1984 through to the end of Reagan’s term in office. Nineteen eighty-three, as I have argued, was a transitional phase—the year in which Reagan decided that it was time to embark on a new course. It was the year in which the internal balance of power swung from the hardline ideologues toward the pragmatic moderates. Reagan was assuredly part of the latter category. He elevated Secretary of State George Shultz to the leadership of the policymaking process; Jack Matlock replaced the hawkish Richard Pipes as chief adviser on Soviet affairs; and Reagan chose Robert McFarlane (not Jeane Kirkpatrick) to succeed William Clark as national security adviser. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger became increasingly marginalized. By late 1983, the attitudes of Reagan’s top foreign policy advisers bore very little resemblance to those who were in place at the start.

In fact, the administration conducted a lengthy foreign policy review in late 1983 and early 1984, overseen by Reagan. The backdrop to that review was the breakdown in U.S.-Soviet relations and the onset of the 1984 presidential election campaign. These events led to a number of important departures and new policy initiatives during Reagan’s fourth year in office.<sup>9</sup> The administration agreed to adopt a different public tone (symbolized by Reagan’s “Ivan and Anya” address) and henceforth avoid questioning the legitimacy of the Soviet system. Reagan called for “a full, credible agenda on arms control,” with “more flexible” positions on START and INF. He directed policymakers to “build a record” of agreements with the Soviets—diplomatic, economic, and military.<sup>10</sup> By mid-1984, Reagan was reversing most of the sanctions that had been imposed by the Carter administration in 1980, negotiating joint agreements in sixteen areas with the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> During August, he again broke with long-standing policy by inviting Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to a personal meeting at the White House.

What is noteworthy is that Reagan made these moves without any corresponding change in Soviet attitudes or actions. Indeed, the Reagan “turn” followed a long period of worsening Soviet behavior: the war in Afghanistan, continued human rights abuses, the attack on the Korean airliner, walkouts from arms control talks, violations of existing arms agreements, and the withdrawal from the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Reagan’s outlook in 1984—which continued throughout his second term—was a conscious departure from the formal strategy statements, which placed the onus on the Soviets to initiate a change

in course and warned against “yielding to pressures to take the first step.”<sup>12</sup> As former State Department official Louis Sell recalled, NSDD-75—the National Security Decision Directive on U.S. Relations with the USSR—was “a dead letter” by 1985. “The United States had moved on in its relationship with the USSR.”<sup>13</sup> Hardliners such as Weinberger and John Lenczowski (NSC director of European and Soviet affairs) protested bitterly about the change in approach.<sup>14</sup> Reagan waved them away.

To be sure, there were some continuities in U.S. policy, and Reagan and others certainly thought in strategic terms. The “strength” component of the “peace through strength” formula never wavered. Some of Reagan’s core arms control positions (such as his stance on INF, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) did not change significantly. He remained firmly committed to his Strategic Defense Initiative, to the U.S. military buildup, to supporting the Solidarity movement in Poland and the Contras in Central America. But the term “grand strategy” usually implies a considerable measure of consistency, coherence, and consensus. The sheer mass of divisions, contradictions, personnel changes, and policy turns within the administration make the claims for a “grand strategy” (3, 65) rather problematic.

That is not in any way to denigrate Reagan’s role. On the contrary, it was precisely Reagan’s flexibility, pragmatism, and independence of thought that led to the development of a more stable U.S.-Soviet relationship in the second half of the 1980s. The president rejected the counsel of powerful voices in his administration, the Republican Party, and the media, who were discomfited by the idea of negotiation with Moscow. Crucially, a new and completely different Soviet leader was by then at the helm.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s political ascension in March 1985 was improbable—occurring only because three successive Soviet leaders died within the space of thirty months. Notwithstanding the Soviet economic stagnation and Reagan’s buildup of U.S. military strength, it is nigh impossible to conceive of any other Politburo member advancing the sort of reforms and concessions that Gorbachev undertook between 1986 and 1989 and the “negotiated surrender” of which Inboden writes. Contingency and human agency were *at least* as important in explaining why the Cold War ended so abruptly in 1989 as any long-term structural force. And in Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the world had two peacemakers who were indispensable to bringing that process about.

Inboden’s work is an enormous contribution to our understanding of Reagan’s vision for the world and U.S. foreign policy during the 1980s. *The Peacemaker* is a lively, insightful, and provocative study of one of the most important international leaders of the twentieth century. Deftly written and well-researched, it is essential reading for scholars of American foreign relations and the late Cold War.

#### Notes:

1. Ronald Reagan, Address to Members of the British Parliament (London, June 8, 1982).
2. Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 1991), 358–65.
3. For Reagan’s own comments and recollections, see Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York, 1990), 585–89; Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries* (New York, 2007), 199. See also “The Soviet ‘War Scare,’” Report by the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, February 15, 1990, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb533-The-Able-Archer-War-Scare-Declassified-PFIAB-Report-Released/2012-0238-MR.pdf>.
4. See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK, 2005), 342–79; William Inboden, “Grand Strategy and Petty Squabbles: The Paradox of the Reagan National Security Council,” in *The Power of the Past: History and*

Statecraft, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri (Washington, DC, 2016), 151–80; Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York, 1994); Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).

5. See, for example, Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (New York, 2021); Melvyn Leffler, "Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 76–89; James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2014); Jeremi Suri, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 60–92; Don Oberdorfer, *From The Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1991* (Baltimore, MD, 1998); Beth Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO, 1997). Hal Brands argues that "beginning in late 1983 and early 1984, Reagan made a significant recalibration of U.S. strategy." See Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY, 2016), 69.

6. Typed (formal) letter from Reagan to Brezhnev, April 24, 1981, NSC Executive Secretariat Head of State Files, Box 38: USSR, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRPL).

7. Reagan, *An American Life*, 273.

8. Jack Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York, 2004), 50.

9. See Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (New York, 2021), chap. 8.

10. Minutes of NSC Meeting, "Nuclear Arms Control Discussions," March 27, 1984. NSC Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, NSC 104–114, Box 11, RRPL.

11. Ronald Reagan, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1984*, "Conference on U.S.-Soviet Exchanges, June 27, 1984" (Washington, DC: GPO, 1986), 916–18.

12. See NSDD-75, "U.S. Relations with the USSR," January 17, 1983.

13. Louis Sell, *From Washington to Moscow: U.S.-Soviet Relations and the Collapse of the USSR* (Durham, NC, 2016), 133–34.

14. See, for example, Memorandum by Weinberger to Reagan, "Arms Control Strategy," March 23, 1984. NSC Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, NSC 104–114, Box 11, RRPL; Matlock to McFarlane, "Proposed Presidential Statement: Building Cooperation Between U.S. and Soviet Peoples," May 29, 1984 (see handwritten note for Lenczowski's views); Lenczowski to McFarlane, "Reactivation of U.S.-USSR Environmental Agreement," May 8, 1984. The Jack Matlock Files, Series I: Chron File, April–May 1984, Box 4, RRPL.

## Review of William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink*

Andrew Hunt

There is much to admire in William Inboden's *The Peacemaker*, an engrossing account, sweeping in scope, of Ronald Reagan's years in the White House, with a focus on his foreign policy. Inboden, an associate professor of public affairs at the University of Texas, has written an expansive history of the national security policies championed by Reagan and his administration during his two terms as president, from 1981 to 1989. His book is rich in detail yet sure to become one of the definitive synthesis histories on the topic.

*The Peacemaker* is a decidedly sympathetic, sometimes even reverent account of the fortieth president. Inboden identifies Reagan in the introduction as "one of the two most consequential presidents of the twentieth century," the other being Franklin D. Roosevelt (3). It is here, early in *The Peacemaker*, that he establishes the central theme running through his book: "Reagan presents a paradox on the use of force. The American president who launched one of the most expansive military build-ups in history, and who used militant rhetoric toward America's adversaries, was in fact extremely reluctant to deploy the military in combat" (9).

From the outset, Inboden's prose strikes a judicious tone, presenting Reagan as a complex man, at times brimming with contradictions. Through much of the book, Reagan is portrayed as an engaged commander-in-chief with an astute mind, more involved in statecraft than many of his critics believed (they claimed at the time that he was mostly asleep at the wheel). He surrounded himself with men of sharp intellect and shrewd instincts. Most of them shared his idealistic worldview and, of equal importance, his overall commitment to restraint on the world stage. An anticommunist ideologue at times, Reagan "also possessed a pragmatic streak," Inboden writes. He was "often willing to compromise on policies and work with those who did not share his political convictions" (43). Little wonder, then, that he was able to gather bipartisan support for many of his foreign policies.

Of course, the timing of Reagan's presidency, so close to the trauma of the Vietnam War, shaped the administration's approach to world affairs. Entering the White House in the aftermath of the tragic debacle in Southeast Asia, Reagan faced constraints on large-scale intervention in conflicts overseas. And yet, in Inboden's book, Reagan is not a man in search of America's next big war. Despite his commitment to militant anticommunism, re-affirmed in countless speeches, he fully understood the folly of war—conventional and nuclear—and assiduously avoided it on a large scale at every turn. Reagan, writes Inboden, "was pragmatic and ecumenical in his national security catechisms" (309). Even during the frigid depths of the revived Cold War of the 1980s, when Reagan was referring to the USSR as the "Evil Empire" and Soviet MiG-23s shot down Korean Airlines flight 007, he was never on the verge of starting World War III. One never gets the feeling in *The Peacemaker* that his finger was anywhere near the button.

Despite his administration's careful handling of world affairs, Inboden takes Reagan to task more than once in *The Peacemaker* for what he sees as the president's occasional missteps. Such is the case with the 1980 speech in which Reagan celebrated the Vietnam War as a "noble cause." It was a potentially divisive declaration, occurring at a time when the pain of the war was still raw and memories of the domestic upheavals it triggered remained potent. Inboden regards Reagan's efforts to rehabilitate the war as amounting to misplaced and poorly timed rhetoric. But in *The Peacemaker*, Reagan is adept at balancing a good many things, including his ideology and his pragmatism. He listened to men like Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz, statesmen who often personified the principles of *realpolitik* and helped to bring him back to the center time and time again.

Outside the Cold War realm, this *realpolitik* strategy came into play during the Iran-Iraq War, which had reached a bloody, protracted deadlock early in the decade. Washington helped prolong the conflict, fearing a decisive victory by either side. It was one of a growing number of regional proxy wars occurring beyond the framework of the superpower rivalry that absorbed the Reagan administration's attention. It was, in short, a sign of things to come after the collapse of the Soviet Union. "The logic of this stalemate strategy dictated helping whichever side was losing," writes Inboden. "Starting in 1982, this meant a tilt toward Iraq" (277).

While *The Peacemaker's* primary focus is on Reagan, it contains a sizable cast of world leaders, journalists, members of Congress, and top figures in the Reagan administration. The men closest to Reagan, particularly George Shultz, loom large throughout the book. One can sense a particularly vital turning point with Reagan's decision to replace Secretary of State Alexander Haig with the less volatile Shultz in the summer of 1982. "It was an inspired choice," writes Inboden. "Shultz was one of the most accomplished men in the annals of American statecraft" (163).

Inboden dispels the notion—widely held amongst pundits and political figures by the mid-1980s—of “a feud between the ‘moderate’ Shultz and the ‘conservative’ Weinberger” (308). He is at his best when he is dismantling these kinds of myths. He muddies the waters in a welcome way when he writes that “by some measures, such as his support for Israel, overall hawkishness, aggressiveness against terrorism, and support for promoting freedom, Shultz was actually more “conservative” than Weinberger” (308). Similarly, it is refreshing to see First Lady Nancy Reagan appearing in most chapters of *The Peacemaker* as an engaged participant in the era’s events, which contradicts the fallacy that she was simply helming “Just Say No” anti-drug campaigns and appearing at White House dinners alongside her husband.

In chronicling the Cold War’s unravelling, Inboden gravitates toward the camp of historians that believes communism’s demise came about in large part because of a grand plan by the Reagan administration to force the Soviets into spending their way into oblivion to keep up with the American arms race. “By outcompeting the Soviets in the military and economic domains,” he writes, “American pressure had contributed to the USSR’s financial exhaustion and ideological bankruptcy” (465).

That explanation certainly has a basis in truth, and it ought to be considered in any account of the Cold War’s end. But its elevation to the central reason for the end of the Cold War has been a deliberate effort, for ideological reasons, by Reagan hagiographers and Cold War triumphalists. Too often, the tight focus on the spending-into-oblivion thesis is emphasized in their narratives, to the exclusion of other causes for the Cold War’s end. These causes had less to do with policies crafted in Washington’s hallowed halls of power, and more to do with conditions inside the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Those who give credit entirely to Reagan either downplay or ignore resistance movements by people living in those nations, the inherent weaknesses of totalitarian regimes that predated the 1980s, and the ascendancy of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at a pivotal moment in Russian history. Other reasons, too many to list here, must be explored to develop a richer, fuller understanding of the Cold War’s complex end.

Unlike many of Reagan’s more hyperpartisan defenders, Inboden is never entirely reductionist in *The Peacemaker*, and he never hesitates to add layers of complexity to the words and deeds of the Reagan administration, and to world events in general. But in the book’s final chapters and the conclusion, the tone of his account moves decisively toward triumphalism. He celebrates Reagan’s achievements, while occasionally noting that sometimes unfortunate compromises were made, and steep prices were paid, for the administration to be able to do the things that it did.

The author’s defense of the Reagan administration’s Cold War worldview is most problematic when he turns his attention to Central America. Despite a handful of brief comments about the brutality of America’s allies there, Inboden treats the region as a Cold War battleground, accepting the fundamental underlying premise offered by the White House in the 1980s to rationalize its support for the ultraviolent, autocratic regime in El Salvador, which routinely used death squads against large segments of its population. Similar justifications could be found in the administration’s support for the Nicaraguan Contras, an army consisting mainly of ex-members of U.S.-backed Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza’s reviled National Guard. The horrific atrocities of the Salvadoran government and the Contras in the 1980s were extensively documented

during Reagan’s presidency, yet they are only briefly alluded to here, and never adequately explored.

Inboden writes that “Communist regimes around the world had chosen Central America as a priority front” (71). His evidence to support that contention is thin. He quotes Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko as saying that “this entire region is today boiling like a cauldron” (71). And he claims that Gromyko’s “Kremlin colleagues salivated at the chance to foment revolution in Central America” (71). To support this claim, he cites page 196 of Hal Brands’s *Latin America’s Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), where Brands briefly mentions increased Soviet and Cuban roles in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas. But this passage can hardly be described as painting a portrait of Gromyko’s “Kremlin colleagues” salivating at the prospect of stirring up revolution in the region.

Still, Inboden attacks the Nicaraguan Sandinista government for its human rights abuses and “brutality” toward “its own people” (325). It is true that the Sandinistas took unfortunate steps at different points to curtail freedom of expression among the regime’s opponents, and they adopted policies that uprooted and harmed Miskito people. Yet there was no evidence in the 1980s—and, indeed, Inboden offers none in his book—of the Sandinistas murdering ordinary Nicaraguans on the scale of the atrocities conducted by the death squads in El Salvador with the backing of the U.S. government, or similar crimes against humanity committed by the Contras.

There is no avoiding the fact that unspeakable atrocities were committed by Washington’s allies in the region, with the support of the Reagan administration (among those allies were Honduras and Guatemala, whose regimes enjoyed extensive support from the U.S. government). The closest Inboden comes to wrestling with this Washington-funded savagery is when he acknowledges some of the more well-known human rights abuses in El Salvador and the difficult decisions faced by the Reagan administration in the formation of its policies toward the tiny war-torn country. “The policy dilemma that confronted Reagan was tragic in the theological sense: No option was untainted by human suffering. The choices he confronted ranged from bad to awful,” writes Inboden (70). But nowhere is there evidence that the troubling moral choices to which Inboden refers kept Reagan or anyone in his administration, or their backers in Congress, awake at night, troubled by the bloodletting they were financing.

This speaks to a deeper issue with Inboden’s book. The author is not an entirely impartial chronicler of the Reagan administration. At its core, *The Peacemaker*—for all its strengths and majestic prose—is ultimately a celebration of Ronald Reagan, his presidency, and his multifaceted legacies. Inboden is making an explicit case for Reagan’s greatness in these pages. The author deserves to be commended for introducing nuance throughout the book. But his verdict is unambiguous. “Time’s passage calibrates history’s scale,” Inboden writes. “Weighed in that balance, the Reagan legacy measures well” (478).

*The Peacemaker* is great man history for our times. Large segments of it are persuasive and gripping, packed with keen insights and impressive research. It deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone seeking to understand this most eventful of eras. Still, there are also moments, particularly late in the book, when it veers perilously close to hagiography.

Unlike many of Reagan’s more hyperpartisan defenders, Inboden is never entirely reductionist in *The Peacemaker*, and he never hesitates to add layers of complexity to the words and deeds of the Reagan administration, and to world events in general.

**Review of William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink***

Gail E. S. Yoshitani

*The views expressed in this paper are my own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, DOD, or the U.S. Government.*

Well known for his revealing quips, President Ronald Reagan “felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”<sup>1</sup> While Reagan cherished local government, in *The Peacemaker*, William Inboden casts him in a new role: that of a visionary strategic practitioner who led a revolution against the Cold War order and proselytized for an international system empowered by “the trinity of religious freedom, political freedom, and economic freedom” (112). In Inboden’s telling, Reagan joins President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as “one of the two most consequential presidents in the twentieth century” (3). He earned that superlative, Inboden says, by overseeing “the American strategy for the successful end of the Cold War” and bringing “the Soviet Union to the brink of a negotiated surrender” (476).

Given his experience as a policymaker at the State Department and on the National Security Council, Inboden is undoubtedly acquainted with life’s untidiness. Thus it seems most appropriate that he should use a chronological narrative to tell Reagan’s story as the “commander in chief, diplomat in chief, and leader of the free world” (54). In his introduction, he shares that he selected this approach “to capture in part the chaos of policymaking as it felt to Reagan and his team” and to give “the reader the vantage point of seeing history as it happened” (7). His fear that “readers may on occasion feel a bit of whiplash as the story moves from event to event and issue to issue” (7) was unjustified. This is a credit to Inboden’s expertise as both an analytical and a descriptive writer.

Readers need not be daunted by the 608-page length of this book, because Inboden is an exceptionally polite host. He moves through the narrative with intention and assists his readers by injecting insightful summary analysis on a consistent schedule, ensuring that they are never asked to carry too heavy an analytical load on the voyage. He also knows when to share a captivating story. I was intrigued by his account of Soviet scientists’ experimentation “with a computer system known as Dead Hand that would automatically launch all of the USSR’s ICBMs upon detecting an American strike—placing the fate of the world in the hands of machines rather than men” (375). Inboden’s rich analysis and descriptive storytelling are founded on both primary source materials (drawn from eleven archives in the United States and the United Kingdom and from twenty-four interviews, all with Americans) and on a comprehensive reading of the field’s secondary literature.

What is most exciting about *The Peacemaker* is its potential to educate American policymakers about how to serve as strategic practitioners within the realm of foreign policy. Inboden was inspired to create what ultimately became the William P. Clements Jr. Center for National Security while on a trip to Camp David. There he observed senior national security leaders for President George W. Bush studying history books. Inboden wanted the center he envisioned to encourage scholars to curate their scholarship to be directly useful for practitioners.<sup>2</sup> It is delightful to see him following his own vision with this book.

In this vein, *The Peacemaker* serves as an excellent illustrative case study for the theoretical conclusions Sir Lawrence Freedman offers in *Strategy: A History*.<sup>3</sup>

Freedman explains that his aim was “to provide an account . . . of the most prominent themes in strategic theory—as they affect war, politics, and business.”<sup>4</sup> He offers strategic practitioners one definitive theme: that strategy is best considered “as a story about power told in the future tense from the perspective of a leading character.”<sup>5</sup> For Freedman, strategy “is the art of creating power,” and there is no better way to create power than by consciously communicating a visionary story, or in his words, “a strategic script” about the future.<sup>6</sup> A strategic script can profoundly influence how an audience anticipates, interprets, and responds to events.<sup>7</sup> A compelling strategic script will grab an audience’s attention by containing “an element of the unusual and unexpected” and will create imperatives and expectations for how other main actors are to act.<sup>8</sup>

Freedman contrasts *strategic plans* with *strategic scripts*, explaining that strategic plans, which focus on channeling one’s means “through a series of [sequential] steps” against a specific outcome, unrealistically imagine “a predictable world.”<sup>9</sup> Strategic scripts, on the other hand, are open-ended and leave room for “adaptability and flexibility” as the strategy becomes “more deliberative.”<sup>10</sup> This is particularly helpful since, as Freedman observes, “much strategy is about getting to the next stage rather than some ultimate destination.”<sup>11</sup> The deliberative portion of one’s strategy ought to “identify moves that will require other players to follow the script out of the logic of the developing situation.”<sup>12</sup> Leaders at future retreats to Camp David who wish to engage in substantive conversation about the theory, art, and practice of foreign policy strategy would be wise to pair Freedman’s final chapter, “Stories and Scripts,” with Inboden’s *The Peacemaker*, which affords readers a superb opportunity to observe Ronald Reagan putting Freedman’s framework of a strategic script and deliberative strategy in action.<sup>13</sup>

In Inboden’s narrative, Reagan is the leading character who possessed both the requisite intuition that the end of the Cold War could be hastened and the strategic script describing how the contemporary global fabric might be peacefully quilted together into a new system. Inboden opens with an elegant summary of the geopolitical landscape as it stood in June of 1982, along with Reagan’s story of the future, as presented in his Westminster speech. He explains that “to those with ears to hear,” Reagan is distilling “what the next six and a half years of his foreign policy will entail” (2).

The Westminster speech represents Reagan’s definitive first move as a strategic practitioner.<sup>14</sup> Inboden explains that “he concluded [the speech] with a prophecy, and a way to hasten it: ‘What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history’” (157–58). Inboden’s subsequent narration details the acuity of the assumptions<sup>15</sup> upon which Reagan’s script rested, as well as the deliberate plans, actions, and imperatives that the script drove, which began sewing the Kremlin into “a negotiated surrender” (4, 43, 141, 470) and stitching together a new order intended to be more supportive of “individual liberty, self-government, and free enterprise” (315).<sup>16</sup>

Inboden introduces the key concept of “negotiated surrender” to help sharpen our understanding of Reagan’s Cold War strategy. He notes the challenge that scholars studying Reagan encounter: “How could he [Reagan] try to defeat Soviet communism while at the same time cooperating with the Kremlin to end the arms race?” (4) and “Did he desire to inflict a crushing defeat on the Soviet Union or to negotiate a peaceful truce?” (42). He explains that “from the beginning,”<sup>17</sup> the deliberative side of Reagan’s strategy involved the pursuit of “a dual track of pressure on the Soviets combined with diplomatic outreach” (264), and he catalogues “eight pillars” upon which Reagan “built his Cold War strategy” (4). Pillars to restore the American

economy and modernize the military served to build a position of strength from which Reagan could negotiate; while pillars to “delegitimize Soviet communism,” support “anticommunist insurgencies,” and “promote human rights and freedom” helped strengthen the remaining decisive pillar to pressure “the Soviet system into producing a reformer with whom Reagan could negotiate.”<sup>18</sup>

As evidenced by the specific surrender terms he sought, Reagan was truly optimistic about what could be achieved with the appropriate pressure and a proper negotiating partner. He wanted the Soviet Union to “lift the Iron Curtain and end Soviet control of its satellite states in Eastern Europe. Quit inflicting communist revolutions on the third world. Stop tyrannizing its own people. Cease threatening the United States with nuclear destruction” (141). Inboden’s negotiated surrender concept is one which strategic practitioners would do well to study, both for how it specifically applied to Reagan’s effort to lead a revolution against the Cold War order and for its usefulness in understanding the strategic art that, as Freedman suggests, involves getting more “than the starting balance of power would suggest” through “bargaining and persuasion as well as threats and pressure.”<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that the surrender Reagan sought did not involve sidelining Soviet leaders or the Soviet people. Rather, Inboden shows how Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz made efforts to involve both as partners in Reagan’s “global strategy,” which “put the expansion of human liberty at the center” (11). Inboden poignantly describes how Reagan “urged Gorbachev and all Soviet citizens to believe in God”; “pushed for the Soviet Union to respect human rights and allow freedom of emigration, religious freedom, freedom of expression”; and “tried to persuade Gorbachev to adopt free markets and let private enterprise and the knowledge economy flourish” (469–70).

Inboden also details Shultz’s advice to Gorbachev and Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze about the impact the information age would have on the global economy (340–41), and he includes Reagan’s speech to students at Moscow State University, in which he described the information revolution and its driver: “The key is freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication” (468). Inboden calls these efforts “a quiet diplomatic revolution,” as Reagan and Shultz “tried to persuade Gorbachev to embrace their views because *they were in his country’s best interests*” (464–65).<sup>20</sup>

Inboden aptly names Reagan and Shultz “apostles of the information age, knowledge economies, open trade, and democracy” (11–12) and writes that they not only encouraged the Soviets, but also disciplined and disciplined allies and authoritarian partners where those “interlocking drivers of prosperity and human flourishing” (12) were concerned. For example, Inboden provides exceptional coverage of the Reagan administration’s efforts to encourage political and economic freedom in Asia, a region they saw as the engine for the new global economy and as ripe for more democracy. He reports on Reagan’s diligent efforts to help Tokyo, a strategic ally and a democracy, replace Beijing as America’s “supreme partner in the region” (76). These efforts involved not only “treating Japan as on par with NATO allies” but also pressuring Tokyo to “further open its economy” (183). Inboden also describes Reagan’s support of democratic transitions away from dictatorial leadership, which spanned from relatively vigorous, as in the case of South Korea’s President Chun Doo-Hwan, to more cautious, as in the case of the Philippines’ President Ferdinand Marcos (341–43, 397–98, 438–42).

Inboden does not shirk from describing Reagan’s blind spots, such as his hesitation “to turn on Marcos” (342), and he selects “tragedy” as one of seven themes that are “essential to understanding Reagan’s foreign policy across

all domains.”<sup>21</sup> When introducing the theme of “tragedy,” he writes that “of perhaps the most infamy, the tragic includes the carnage and suffering wrought by many authoritarian regimes and insurgencies supported by the Reagan White House in the name of anticommunism.... and must be included in a full moral and strategic accounting” (10–11).

Nevertheless, it is evident to me, after reading about Reagan’s foreign policy, that Inboden’s title—*The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink*—is on point. Reagan’s central characteristic, which Inboden exemplifies so well in *The Peacemaker*, was his love of and faith in humanity. Reagan held his audience by audaciously declaring that the two ideologies upon which the Cold War rested—the idea of mutually assured destruction and the Soviet system—were inhumane.<sup>22</sup> He believed that each, in its own way, infringed upon humankind’s right to live peacefully and freely. At its root, Reagan’s strategic script asked the people of the world and their leaders to remember their shared humanity and their essential right to liberty.

#### Notes:

1. Ronald Reagan, The President’s News Conference Online, 12 Aug. 1986, by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/259715>.
2. Alicia Dietrich, “Robert Gates Stresses Study of History at Clements Center Gala,” *Alcalde: The Official Publication of the Texas Exes*, November 25, 2013, Robert Gates Stresses Study of History at Clements Center Gala | The Alcalde ([texasexes.org](http://texasexes.org)).
3. Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford, UK, 2013).
4. Freedman, *Strategy*, xiv.
5. Freedman, *Strategy*, 608.
6. Freedman, *Strategy*, xii, xiv.
7. Freedman, *Strategy*, 622.
8. Freedman, *Strategy*, 621–22.
9. Reviewer’s emphasis. Freedman, *Strategy*, 622.
10. Lawrence Freedman, “Meaning of Strategy, Part I,” *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Nov. 2017), 92. The Meaning of Strategy, Part I: The Origins - Texas National Security Review ([tnsr.org](http://tnsr.org)).
11. Freedman, *Strategy*, 628.
12. Freedman, *Strategy*, 628.
13. Freedman, *Strategy*, “Chapter 38: Stories and Scripts,” 607–29.
14. Freedman explains that “the script must leave considerable room for improvisation. There is only one action that can be anticipated with any degree of certainty, and that is the first move of the central player for whom the strategy has been devised.” Freedman, *Strategy*, 622.
15. This concept regarding assumptions is also from Freedman. He writes that “whether the plot will unfold as intended will then depend on not only the acuity of the starting assumptions but also whether other players follow the script or deviate significantly from it.” Freedman, *Strategy*, 622.
16. Inboden contextualizes these words from Reagan’s second inaugural address: “Reagan proclaimed his hope that his years in office would be remembered as a time ‘when America courageously supported the struggle for individual liberty, self-government, and free enterprise throughout the world and turned the tide of history away from totalitarian darkness and into the warm sunlight of human freedom.’”
17. Inboden directly engages the scholarship contending that Reagan changed his strategy in 1984. “Many scholars and journalists contend that the multiple Cold War crises of 1983 prompted a ‘Reagan reversal.’ In this view, the escalated tensions, nuclear war scares, and collapse in the Geneva talks prompted Reagan to abandon his confrontational policies and instead seek conciliation with the Kremlin for the next five years. He did not. Rather, from the beginning Reagan pursued a dual track of pressure on the Soviets combined with diplomatic outreach. The INF deployment, military expansion, economic warfare, covert support to Solidarity and overt broadcasting, human rights campaign, and support for anticommunist insurgencies all embodied the pressure track. Just as Reagan’s repeated letters to Soviet leaders, offers to negotiate arms reductions, refusal to downgrade relations after crises such as KAL 007, vision of abolishing nuclear weapons, and search for a Soviet reformer all embodied the outreach track. As 1984 unfolded, Reagan did not



reverse his two-pronged strategy. Instead he rebalanced it, with a tilt toward diplomacy" (264).

[18. The other two pillars were "making 'mutual assured destruction' (MAD) obsolete through the Strategic Defense Initiative" and "reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the world—with the ultimate hope of abolishing nuclear weapons entirely" (4).

19. Freedman, *Strategy*, xii.

20. Inboden's emphasis.

21. The seven themes Inboden highlights are Allies and Partners; History; Force and Diplomacy; Religious Faith and Religious Freedom; Tragedy; Battle of Ideas; and Expansion of Liberty (7–12).

22. It is not discussed here, but Inboden provides excellent coverage of Reagan's strategy to make mutual assured destruction (MAD) and nuclear weapons obsolete by providing for a "mutually assured defense" (311) with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) (2, 4, 201–5, 258, 310–11, 354, 374, 404).

## Review of William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan in the White House and the World*

John Sbardellati

With his new book, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on a Brink*, William Inboden makes possibly the most impressive contribution to the "Reagan Victory" school and to the broader scholarly annals of Cold War triumphalism. Perhaps taking his title from Richard Nixon's fervent urging of Reagan to shift to peacemaker mode early in his presidency (119) or from Mikhail Gorbachev's 2004 remembrance of Reagan's timely decision "to be a peacemaker" during his second term (475), Inboden emphasizes the pacific consequences of Reagan's statecraft as the key to his formidable legacy. This does not mean that he downplays Reagan's hawkish side. Rather, he envisions the fortieth president's defense buildup, military modernization, and ideological offensive as prerequisites to his "peace through strength" strategy. Inboden's brazenly triumphalist interpretation is deftly qualified by frequent acknowledgments of Reagan's missteps and weaknesses, though his criticisms of "the Gipper" ultimately do little to darken the heroic portrait that the author sketches here.

The central argument in the book is that Ronald Reagan should be recognized as the chief architect of America's Cold War victory. Throughout these pages Inboden lauds Reagan for his unique foresight. He was steadfast in his belief that Cold War victory could come about without great bloodshed, that the Soviet empire could be toppled without invasion or attack. Reagan's many critics derided such views as unrealistic. "Whether from the Left or the Right," Inboden asserts, such commentators "shared a default commitment to the Cold War status quo of two nuclear-armed blocs and a stagnant number of democracies. Reagan challenged these verities and envisioned a new world beyond the Cold War" (158).

At odds with most expert prognosticators about the strength of the Soviet system, including many within his own administration, Reagan intuited its weakness and fragility, not least because of his view that Soviet atheism could never command the allegiance of a mass population that would always strive for religious liberty. Reagan's eagerness to negotiate with his Soviet counterparts earned him frequent criticism from the Right, who adored him for restoring American power but loathed his openness to diplomacy.

Reagan's unrelenting hatred of nuclear weapons also made for strange bedfellows, placing him in some ways closer to the antinuclear peace activists who despised him than the Cold War hawks who made up his base. Inboden claims that the peace movement of the 1980s simply "did

not realize that the nuclear abolitionist-in-chief resided in the White House. It is just that Reagan detested Soviet communism even more and remained determined to build up America's nuclear arsenal in order to bring down both the Soviet Union and the world's most destructive weapons" (175). His tool for accomplishing this, the much-derided Strategic Defense Initiative, completely "changed the landscape of the Cold War" (205). Meanwhile, Inboden ultimately celebrates his policy of aiding anti-communist uprisings around the world. Despite recognizing the morally suspect compromises made by the Reagan administration as it backed brutal dictators and illiberal insurgencies, he concludes that "the Reagan Doctrine succeeded on its own terms—and did so without risking American troops" (461).

Inboden is certainly not the only historian to take note of both the hawkish and dovish aspects of Reagan's presidency. However, unlike previous historians who tried to reconcile these two sides of Reagan by imposing the narrative framework of a "Reagan reversal" (264),<sup>1</sup> Inboden convincingly demonstrates that Reagan consistently pursued a mix of confrontational and conciliatory strategies. Yet he cannot refrain from imposing his own coherent framework onto Reagan's policies. He labels his construct *negotiated surrender*. Inboden surely recognizes that Reagan's goals of Cold War triumph and of denuclearization were competing impulses; peaceful coexistence could prolong the Cold War, while the pursuit of victory could risk Armageddon. Hence Reagan's strategy to transcend the Cold War by producing the conditions under which his adversaries would negotiate their own surrender.

Inboden paints Reagan as a master strategist who nevertheless relied on his aides, such as National Security Advisor Bill Clark, to flesh out the details. He finds the blueprint for Reagan's master plan articulated most clearly in two National Security Study Directives produced during his first term in office, NSDD-32 and NSDD-75. Together these sought to translate into policy Reagan's long-held and oft-repeated goal for the Cold War: "We win, they lose" (134). Certainly these studies called for increased pressure on Soviet weak spots, whether in Third World battlefields or within the Soviet empire itself. But was the goal to vanquish the USSR or to press it to reform? "Negotiated surrender" suggests a clear blueprint to accomplish both, but Reagan as strategist appears to have been more likely to be impulsive, pragmatic, and given to improvisation, and less likely to be guided by a single coherent strategy that neatly tied together all the loose ends of his foreign policy.

If the Reagan administration did adopt a master strategy to induce the Soviets to negotiate their own surrender, several high-ranking members of the administration appear to have been in the dark about it. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, a key player in Reagan's military buildup, consistently resisted negotiations, and eventually the president had to replace him lest he prove to be too much of an obstacle to Reagan's increasingly fruitful negotiations with Gorbachev. Inboden writes that "few if any of Reagan's diplomatic successes would have been possible absent the formidable military that Weinberger rebuilt and modernized" (454), but apparently "Cap" never understood the purpose of the military buildup that he implemented. Likewise, Reagan's penchant for nuclear abolition frustrated such top officials as National Security Advisor John Poindexter and such key allied leaders as Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl. While Inboden is right to claim that Reagan's steadfast "vision of a nuclear-free world showed the fervor of his convictions" (417), if such an end-goal was a vital element of his strategy of *negotiated surrender*, it seems rather odd that so many top players on his team were not cognizant of this.

Perhaps Inboden would reply to this criticism by pointing to another recurring theme in his book. He states plainly that Reagan "despite his strategic vision was a

dreadful manager” (7). Reagan’s affability meant that he was fond of just about all of his aides. His extreme conflict avoidance made him reluctant to settle their many feuds, which he allowed to fester to the point that they often led to policy confusion, scandal, and disaster. His administration’s internecine warfare reared its head during the Falklands crisis (146–49), in battles over U.S. policy toward China and Taiwan (169–171), and, perhaps most notably, in the aftermath of the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut.

In that dreadful episode Reagan’s managerial skills were so lacking that his top national security officials were confused as to whether Reagan had even ordered a retaliatory strike at the terrorists in Lebanon. National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane believed that Reagan had approved a joint operation with France and that the defense secretary had scuttled the strike. McFarlane would later write, “It was outrageous. Weinberger had directly violated a presidential order” (254). Weinberger, for his part, insisted Reagan had given no such order. As Inboden laments, “when Reagan was unsure about an issue and faced a divided staff, the president sometimes would speak in broad, ambiguous terms that left his team members hearing what they wanted to hear” (255). Indeed, Reagan’s pitiful response to the bombing elicits Inboden’s harshest judgment of his otherwise much-revered leader: “Reagan should have retaliated. His failure to do so damaged American credibility, hurt relations with an important ally, and invited further terrorist attacks” (256).

Of course, the Iran-Contra scandal also exposed Reagan’s weak managerial abilities. Inboden is especially critical of the Iranian side of the scandal: “American weapons sales to Iran did not just reverse American policy. They also broke the law, which required congressional notification and prohibited providing arms to state sponsors of terrorism; incentivized further hostage-taking; destabilized the Persian Gulf; eroded American credibility; and stuck a finger in the eye of allies” (350). On the other hand, Inboden lets the administration off the hook for the Contra side of the scandal. This too was in violation of the law—specifically, the Boland Amendments—but because congressional policy vacillated and, more importantly, because he finds Reagan’s motives in seeking to roll back communism in Latin America “commendable” (423), Inboden downplays the Reagan team’s transgressions in “America’s backyard” (69).

Although Inboden celebrates the Reagan Doctrine, he proves willing to admit it had a dark side. He notes that Reagan deluded himself while supporting the Rios Montt regime in Guatemala (184), that his Indochina policy put him in bed with the dastardly Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (194), and that only “unadulterated realpolitik” explains his support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war (277). While Inboden laments the moral ambiguity of supporting brutal, authoritarian regimes, he likens such actions to the moral compromises the United States made during World War II while it was allied with the Soviet Union. His oft-repeated refrain is that diplomacy oftentimes entails choosing between tragic choices. This is a defensible position, to be sure, but ultimately Inboden deflects criticism of the dark side of the Reagan Doctrine by relying on such justifications and by never quite focusing in on the atrocities abetted by Reagan as he resisted communism around the globe.

Soviet atrocities, on the other hand, come under the microscope. I do not think it is setting up a false equivalency to suggest that Inboden should have subjected American misdeeds to the same detailed scrutiny as Soviet ones. Doing

so may well have strengthened his ultimate judgment that the Soviets were the “chief architects of this despotism” (324) in Cold War hot spots without leaving him quite so open to charges of too readily closing the book on U.S.-supported tyranny. His revulsion toward Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan is palpable and well-justified: “The Red Army used chemical weapons on civilians, incinerated towns and villages with napalm, poisoned water supplies and food stocks, deployed thirty million land mines in the country, and created booby-trapped toys to maim and kill children” (320). By contrast, Reagan’s insistence that the American war in Vietnam “was, in truth, a noble cause” earns only a tepid rebuke, mostly for its tone-deafness to the lingering divisions within American society over the war (46–47) rather than for the role such words played in forestalling the much-needed “American reckoning” (to borrow from the title of Christian Appy’s powerful book) over the atrocities inflicted on the Vietnamese.

The book’s tendency toward imbalanced criticism at times detracts from its otherwise compelling strengths. Consider, for example, Inboden’s handling of Cold War fears. He might have been content to point out that the climate of fear in the 1980s had ratcheted up to such a degree that both sides faced the chilling prospect of nuclear Armageddon. He might—indeed, he should—also have more fully acknowledged the ways in which Reagan’s own rhetoric contributed to

the escalation of these fears. Instead, he labels it “Soviet paranoia” when pointing out that the “Kremlin’s top leadership genuinely believed that Reagan was preparing to launch a surprise nuclear attack on the USSR” (80). On the very next page American officials who harbored such thoughts are not labeled paranoid. In the immediate wake of the assassination attempt on Reagan, Inboden notes that “Allen and Weinberger worried that the Soviets might have assassinated Reagan as a prelude to launching a surprise nuclear attack.” To be fair, Inboden ascribes the fears on both sides to the “unrelenting terror of the Cold War in 1981” (81). And the narrative here makes for engrossing reading. But still, only one side is labeled paranoid.

I think this is largely because Inboden has adopted Reagan’s view of the Cold War as a battle between good and evil. For this reason, Soviet fears are unrealistic, whereas American fears are warranted. Reagan’s exaggerated fears about “Soviet bloc advances” in Central America get little critical scrutiny, even when he fretted, in a private letter to Nixon, that they marked “the beginning of the conflict for communist control of the United States itself” (213). Perhaps Cold War paranoia was a disease that afflicted leaders on both sides.

These criticisms aside, William Inboden’s *The Peacemaker* remains an impressive work. He has done prodigious research in nearly a dozen archives and conducted two dozen interviews with several of the leading figures. His prose is crisp and engaging. Early on he warns the reader of possible “whiplash” that may result from his adamancy in unveiling his narrative in a truly chronological manner. In some of the early chapters I indeed felt the whiplash, but the reader adjusts as the story unfolds, and ultimately Inboden delivers on his goal of relaying what Secretary of State George Shultz labeled the “simultaneity of events” (7). I am also persuaded by Inboden’s assessment that in the final analysis, Reagan, unlike his predecessors, transcended the Cold War. Yet, as Melvyn Leffler stresses in his marvelous work, *For the Soul of Mankind*, Gorbachev did so as well. Indeed, it is almost certain that neither could have done so without the other.

Reagan’s managerial skills were so lacking that his top national security officials were confused as to whether Reagan had even ordered a retaliatory strike at the terrorists in Lebanon. National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane believed that Reagan had approved a joint operation with France and that the defense secretary had scuttled the strike.

Note:

1. Oddly, although Inboden takes his most overt shot against the “reversal” thesis in this passage, he does not cite Beth A. Fischer’s path-breaking *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* here, though he includes the book in the bibliography.

## Author Response

*William Inboden*

I am grateful to each of the reviewers for their thoughtful evaluations. Though their assessments of my book vary, all of them pay the author the supreme compliments of having read it carefully and of understanding the arguments I try to advance. Each of them in their own right has produced noteworthy scholarship on the Reagan administration, so I am especially appreciative that they describe my book as a meaningful contribution to the growing body of Reagan historiography. On the whole, these are fair-minded, judicious reviews, which is a tribute to the authors, and to Andy Johns and Evan McCormick in convening and introducing the roundtable.

I will focus my response on three broad themes that emerge in various ways across these reviews. First, the question of whether Reagan had a coherent strategy towards the Soviet Union. Second, the assessment of Reagan’s Central America policies. Third, the matter of “triumphalism,” and rendering moral judgments about American policy in the Cold War.

On the first question, did Reagan develop a coherent, consistent Cold War grand strategy? In my book I argue that he did. Gail Yoshitani agrees, and her review helpfully draws on Sir Lawrence Freedman’s distinction between “strategic plans” and “strategic scripts” to contend that Reagan’s Soviet strategy embodies the latter. Channeling Freedman, she writes that as leaders seek to shape the future, “a strategic script is open ended and leaves room for ‘adaptability and flexibility’ as the strategy becomes ‘more deliberative.’” In briefest outline, Reagan’s strategy – his strategic script, if you will -- was predicated on a belief that the Soviet system was militarily strong yet otherwise weak and vulnerable. Thus he held that consistently employing a combination of pressure (military, political, ideological, economic) and outreach could reduce the risk of nuclear war while bringing the Soviet Union to what I call a “negotiated surrender.”

Donaghy, drawing in part on his own insightful work on Reagan’s foreign policy, remains skeptical. He places himself among the scholarly camp arguing for a “Reagan reversal” or “Reagan turn” from ostensibly hardline anti-Soviet policies early in the presidency to a more conciliatory approach towards the Kremlin (the specific timeframes and causes of this purported shift vary from scholar to scholar, but most date the change taking place sometime in 1983. Among adherents of this viewpoint, the causes of the alleged reversal are variously attributed to Reagan’s domestic political concerns, or his horror at the nuclear scares of the fall of 1983, or the departure of hardline advisors such as Bill Clark and Richard Pipes). Instead, Donaghy writes, “the sheer mass of divisions, contradictions, personnel changes, and policy turns within the administration make [Inboden’s] claims for a ‘grand strategy’ rather problematic.” Similarly, Sbardellati contends that Reagan “appears to have been more impulsive, pragmatic, and given to improvisation, rather than guided by a single coherent strategy that neatly tied together all the loose ends of his foreign policy.”

Readers of my book can judge these critiques for themselves. I believe it provides extensive evidence that Reagan developed and employed a clear and consistent grand strategy in the Cold War.

What to make, then, of Donaghy and Sbardellati’s skepticism? First, implicit in their claims that Reagan did not have a grand strategy seems to be a belief that strategy must be a rigid template, adamant and unchanging. Yet this is almost never the case with grand strategy, which by its very nature blends clear strategic principles and goals with adaptation and recalibration of means and ends. Virtually every notable figure in the pantheon of grand strategists ancient and modern – Thucydides, Machiavelli, Metternich, Castlereagh, Clausewitz, Bismarck, both Roosevelts, Kennan, Kissinger, et al – included adjustment and flexibility within his broader grand strategic framework.

Reagan even made this explicit in his own strategy. For example, as I describe in the book, his primary strategy document toward the Soviet Union, NSDD-75, spelled out that “ ‘U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union will consist of three elements: external resistance to Soviet imperialism; internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism; and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements.’ The ‘internal pressure’ on the Kremlin included encouraging a reformist leader to emerge by promoting ‘the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system.’”<sup>1</sup> Made explicit in these goals (e.g. “reciprocity,” “process of change”) is Reagan’s intention to respond in kind once the Kremlin demonstrated a commitment to constructive negotiations.

The second point follows from this. During his first three years in office, Reagan intended his buildup of pressure and denunciations of Soviet communism in part to deter Kremlin aggression, in part to weaken the Soviet system, and in part to create the conditions for negotiations and effective diplomacy. His stepped-up outreach to the Soviets beginning in 1984 was thus not a “turn” or a “reversal,” but the next steps in the sequence his strategy had intended all along. As he often said, he always desired to negotiate with the Soviets – he just wanted to do so from a position of strength.

The consistency in Reagan’s strategy also entailed maintaining the pressure on the Kremlin in tandem with his diplomatic outreach. Donaghy’s argument for a Reagan reversal contends that the “broad thrust of Reagan’s policies” in 1981-82 appeared “overwhelmingly confrontational” to the Kremlin, in contrast with Moscow’s favorable view of Reagan’s alleged turn to conciliatory policies from 1984 onwards. Yet as I detail in the book, throughout his second term Reagan kept up and even increased the full spectrum of pressure on the Kremlin. The Soviets certainly perceived it that way. The transcripts of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit meetings in Reagan’s second term are replete with the Soviet leader’s complaints about US policies, including the intermediate range nuclear missile deployments (“like a pistol held to our head” bemoaned Gorbachev), economic pressure to decrease Soviet oil revenues and access to below-market credit rates, increased Reagan Doctrine support for UNITA rebels in Angola and the Afghan resistance, expanded support for Soviet bloc dissidents, denouncing Soviet imperialism and demanding “Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down this Wall,” deploying a new array of advanced weapon systems, and of course the Strategic Defense Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

Reagan described this strategy in an important but little-remembered 1988 speech in Springfield, Massachusetts, just before he traveled to Moscow for his final summit with Gorbachev. Describing the pressure prong of his strategy and his previous criticisms of Soviet communism, Reagan observed

“this candor made clear to the Soviets the resilience and strength of the West; it made them understand the lack of illusions on our part about them or

their system...But in all this we were also doing something practical. We had learned long ago that the Soviets get down to serious negotiations only after they are convinced that their counterparts are determined to stand firm. We knew the least indication of weakened resolve on our part would lead the Soviets to stop the serious bargaining, stall diplomatic progress, and attempt to exploit this perceived weakness.”<sup>3</sup>

Sbardellati further contends that if Reagan indeed had a strategy, “several high-ranking members of the administration appear to have been in the dark about this.” He then cites Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger’s opposition to Reagan’s negotiations with the Soviets, and National Security Advisor John Poindexter’s frustrations at Reagan’s nuclear abolitionism. (To this list of staff dissent from Reagan’s policies could be added many other examples such as UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick’s heartburn over Reagan’s promotion of democracy among military dictatorships, and Shultz and Powell’s resistance to Reagan’s demand that Gorbachev tear down the Berlin Wall).

However, the better explanation is just the opposite. It is not that as Sbardellati says that these advisors “were not cognizant” of Reagan’s strategy – rather, they just disagreed with their president on the points in question. Thus the advisor would argue against the specific policy they objected to (as Poindexter did when he wrote a lengthy memo to Reagan right after the Reykjavik summit remonstrating against nuclear abolition). If they lost those arguments, they would sometimes salute and carry on – and other times they would leak, bicker, try to undermine the policy, and in some cases eventually resign in frustration. That some of Reagan’s advisors resisted some elements of his strategy does not mean that he did not have a strategy.

The second theme concerns Reagan’s Latin America policies, especially Central America. Readers of the book will see that I am quite critical of several aspects of Reagan’s policies in the region, such as his disregard of vicious abuses committed by US-funded military regimes particularly during his first term, and the criminality of his administration’s contra-funding scheme in his second term. Hunt, however, finds this inadequate, and laments that my book is “most problematic” when “Inboden treats the region as a Cold War battleground, accepting the fundamental underlying promise” of the Reagan administration that it was such.

I do indeed. And that is because Moscow and Havana also treated the region as a Cold War battleground. Hunt regrets that I do not include more material on topics such as Soviet efforts in Central America, and levels of domestic repression by the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. That is primarily because my book is about American policy during the 1980s, rather than an international history or a history of conditions within other countries. I make occasional references to Soviet bloc policies and developments only insofar as those help illumine Reagan administration policies.

That said, while Hunt expresses skepticism about Soviet bloc designs in Central America, and suggests an oddly benign view of the Sandinista regime, his critique downplays or even disregards altogether two malignant aspects of Sandinista rule. First, Managua eagerly sought -- and received -- considerable economic and military aid from the Soviet bloc (including Cuba, East Germany, and the Soviet Union itself), and actively positioned itself as a

Soviet client state in the region. Witness Daniel Ortega’s multiple trips to Moscow and other Soviet bloc capitals, and the multiple billions of dollars in economic and military aid that the Kremlin and its satellites enthusiastically lavished on his regime over the course of the decade – sums which vastly exceeded American assistance.<sup>4</sup> And with Moscow’s encouragement the Sandinistas became a key supporter of the communist FMLN rebels seeking to overthrow the Salvadoran government, and also supported communist insurgents in Honduras and Guatemala.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Sandinista repression was much more severe than Hunt’s euphemistic characterization of it as “unfortunate steps...to curtail freedom of expression” and “policies that uprooted and harmed Miskito people.” Managua’s abuses included hundreds of extrajudicial executions, torture and imprisonment of peaceful dissidents, and the massacre of over one hundred indigenous Miskito people and forced displacement of over ten thousand, perhaps even twenty thousand, more.<sup>6</sup> That misrule does not by itself justify support for the contras – but it should be acknowledged in an honest reckoning of the conflict.

As for El Salvador, Hunt laments that “nowhere is there evidence that the troubling moral choices to which Inboden refers kept Reagan or anyone in his administration, or their backers in Congress, awake at night, troubled by the bloodletting they were financing.” My book does not address Reagan administration sleeping habits, but it does present abundant evidence that the Reagan administration worked strenuously to curtail the death squads and other gross abuses by the Salvadoran military junta. Understanding the strategic context is essential. By the end of his first year in office, Reagan adopted a “third-way” policy of supporting democracy in El Salvador. Specifically this meant backing the embattled Jose Napoleon Duarte and his Christian Democrats against both the brutal insurgents of the communist FMLN and the sadistic death-squads of the rightist ARENA party. As Reagan wrote approvingly in his diary after hosting Duarte at the White House following successful nationwide elections, the Salvadoran president is “outspoken against both the extremists on the right & the [communist] Guerillas.”<sup>7</sup>

It is inaccurate to say, as Hunt does, that the death-squads committed atrocities “with the backing of the US government,” as this implies the US encouraged and promoted such barbarity. Rather ARENA and its bloodthirsty proxies waged violence on innocent Salvadoran civilians despite pressure from the Reagan administration (strongly reinforced by Congress) to end the abuses. This included separate visits to the country by Vice President George Bush and CIA Director Bill Casey to deliver firm messages that US assistance would be terminated if the atrocities continued, and extensive efforts, including a CIA covert action, to back the Christian Democrats against ARENA in the Salvadoran elections. ARENA requited these sentiments, denouncing the Reagan administration in obscene terms and attempting to assassinate Reagan’s ambassador to El Salvador.<sup>8</sup> Those are not the actions of a party that enjoyed unblinking support from the Reagan White House.

Now to the final matter of the moral evaluation of the Cold War. This is prompted by Hunt and Sbardellati’s use of the word “triumphalist” and its derivatives. Sbardellati invokes it twice in his introductory paragraph alone (“Cold War triumphalism,” “Inboden’s brazenly triumphalist interpretation”), while Hunt criticizes “Cold War triumphalists” and laments my concluding chapters for moving “decisively toward triumphalism.”

Readers of the book will see that I am quite critical of several aspects of Reagan’s policies in the region, such as his disregard of vicious abuses committed by US-funded military regimes particularly during his first term, and the criminality of his administration’s contra-funding scheme in his second term.

It is an odd word. I have yet to encounter a clear definition of what it actually means. (Almost twenty years ago here in the pages of a previous *Passport* book roundtable, after being accused of “triumphalism,” John Lewis Gaddis raised a similar question, saying “as for ‘triumphalism,’ I’ve never been quite sure what the word means.”)<sup>9</sup> It cannot mean an account of American foreign policy that dispenses with any negative judgments, since as both Sbardellati and Hunt acknowledge, my book includes abundant criticisms of Reagan and his foreign policy on numerous grounds.

Rather, then as now, the term “triumphalism” seems rather casually deployed -- somewhere between a description, a criticism, and a slur -- against any accounts that offer a favorable assessment of the American role in bringing the Cold War to a peaceful and victorious end. There is even an entire book devoted to these themes.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, consider how rarely “triumphalist” gets invoked against favorable scholarly accounts of the Union’s victory over the Confederacy in the Civil War, or the American intervention in World War I’s critical role in the defeat of Germany, or the indispensable American contribution to the Allies winning World War II. It is not that American (or Union in the case of the Civil War) conduct in each of these wars was untainted by serious strategic errors and grave moral abuses; it was. Nor is it that the decisive role that American policy played in these victories is discounted. While there are thoughtful debates over the interplay of structural factors and contributions by other actors in these conflicts, accounts that privilege American actions as determinative rarely get labeled “triumphalist.”

So the question remains -- when it comes to the Cold War, why do many scholars wield “triumphalist” like an epithet? Let me suggest a fresh effort to interrogate the term. As commonly used, “triumphalist” seems to be employed when two conditions obtain: a historian privileges American policy as playing a decisive difference in the Cold War’s peaceful denouement, and renders a moral verdict that the good side prevailed over the bad. Combine those two factors, and critical invocations of “triumphalism” by those who disagree invariably follow.

I suspect that much of how the Reagan record is assessed, or American Cold War policy overall for that matter, depends in not insignificant part on what one makes of communism. To those who regard communism as an imperfect but well-intentioned system to redress political and economic inequities -- and that its Soviet version was an understandable expression of Russian insecurity and posed only a minor threat to the rest of the world -- Reagan’s assertive foreign policy may appear overwrought, jingoistic, even reprehensible. It naturally follows that this camp generally deploys more condemnation of American policies than the policies of communist regimes.

Whereas to those such as me who regard Soviet communism as a depraved, malignant ideology that spawned dictatorships responsible for the deaths of anywhere from 65 to 100 million of their own citizens, Reagan’s anticommunism merits a more sympathetic assessment.<sup>11</sup> I believe those numbers -- necessarily imprecise but no less staggering in their sheer horror and ghastliness -- should anchor any scholarly and moral assessments of the Cold War.

To the inevitable remonstrance that details a litany of American Cold War abuses and misdeeds, I would reply that making such a moral judgment does not mean exonerating, or even overlooking, the failings of the “good” side. It just means rendering a moral assessment of the overall stakes of the conflict and the relative virtues of each camp. One does not need to be an apologist for every American policy to believe that Soviet communism was a

monstrous evil, whose collective oppressions and atrocities far exceeded the depredations committed by the United States during the Cold War. That Reagan determined to reverse the Soviet bloc’s expansion, to work towards the collapse of Soviet communism itself, and to do so while avoiding a direct military confrontation between the US and USSR, let alone a nuclear apocalypse, strikes me as, yes, a triumph -- but not the tut-tutting of “triumphalism.”

Notes:

1. Inboden, *The Peacemaker*, 139-140.
2. Donaghy makes a passing acknowledgement of some of these measures, but contends they paled in comparison with his conciliatory policies from 1984-89.
3. Reagan, Remarks to World Affairs Council of Springfield, Massachusetts, April 21, 1988. Available at: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-world-affairs-council-western-massachusetts-springfield>
4. *The Peacemaker*, 285, 444; Klaus Storkmann, “East German Aid to the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua, 1979-1990,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 2014, pp. 56-76.
5. For more on this, see Robert P. Hager, Jr. and Robert S. Snyder, “The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 17, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp.3-35. Notably, this was not just a policy concern of the Reagan administration. The Sandinista decision to provide substantial arms to the FMLN in 1980 caused the Carter administration to suspend its aid to Managua.
6. Jean-Louis Panné and Andrzej Paczkowski, eds., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 665-675.
7. For a thorough and insightful accounting of this policy, see Evan McCormick, “Freedom Tide? Ideology, Politics, and the Origins of Democracy Promotion in U.S. Central America Policy, 1980-1984,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 16, Number 4, Fall 2014, pp. 60-109. Reagan quote cited in *The Peacemaker*, photo section.
8. *The Peacemaker*, 212-214, 284-285. For a comprehensive and balanced assessment of the Salvadoran civil war and Reagan’s policies, see Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2016).
9. John Lewis Gaddis, “Passport roundtable response,” *Passport*, August 2005. Gaddis continued that “I’m tempted to define it as a term of opprobrium those who’ve lost arguments like to hurl at those who’ve won them -- but that would no doubt also be seen as triumphalist.” I will refrain from speculating along those lines.
10. Ellen Schrecker, ed., *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History After the Fall of Communism* (New York: The New Press 2004).
11. See, for example, Stephen Kotkin, “Communism’s Bloody Century,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2017 C1; Jean-Louis Panné and Andrzej Paczkowski, eds., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2005). The majority of these deaths occurred under Mao Zedong’s despotism in the People’s Republic of China, a regime which would not have taken power absent Soviet support. Most estimates of deaths perpetrated by the Soviet Union are between 20 and 30 million of its own people.