

The Man Who Changed the Game Plan

Richard V. Allen

I AM GOING to talk about how Ronald Reagan and his team—a team widely characterized at the time, both here and abroad, as a group of inexperienced and impractical right-wing ideologues and fanatics—prevailed in the Cold War.¹ In doing so, I shall not be so foolish as to claim for them all the credit for victory. Clearly, much belongs to earlier American statesmen, from Harry Truman on; and one cannot deny a little to Mikhail Gorbachev, however unintended the consequences of his actions. But I shall offer what I believe is a reasoned defense of the proposition that the Reagan presidency can properly claim the lion's share of the credit—and, even more shocking for some, that the key factor in the winning side's team was the president himself.

Some of Reagan's critics still cannot understand how America and the world survived the eight years of his two administrations. After all, how could an aging actor, so untutored in the finer ways of thinking, so divisive and so right-wing in outlook, so unfamiliar with life inside the Beltway, be expected to tiptoe through (and a preference for tiptoeing was the very mark of sophistication for such critics) the nuanced strategic and diplomatic world of the 1980s? How could he run the world with

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his absurd 4x6 cue cards and a TelePrompTer?

Now it is true, President Reagan did initially take us into a confrontation with the Soviet Union. But he did so intentionally, deliberately, and in slow motion. Moving to confront the adversary in this way, Reagan followed a plan that he had thought through over many years. There were, of course, major glitches, detours, and reversals, but he never changed his basic outlook...and he did understand the importance of keeping it simple.

The fact that Reagan was prepared to use confrontation in this way is what has given credence to the view that, far from ending the Cold War, he actually prolonged and deepened it. There is a considerable body of revisionist history on this subject, including the work of our present deputy secretary of state, Mr. Strobe Talbott, the architect of the present administration's policy toward Russia and its former empire. One cannot help feeling that had Mr. Talbott been around in 1946, when Winston Churchill delivered his famous "Iron Curtain" speech at Fulton, he would have enthusiastically joined the many who accused Churchill of being a "warmonger."²

When Churchill made that speech, we

¹This essay is adapted from a talk given at the Metropolitan Club, Washington, DC, on October 3, 1995.

²For a sampling of such accusations, see Spencer Warren, "Churchill's Realism: Reflections on the Fulton Speech", *The National Interest* (Winter 1995/96), pp. 42-4.

were busily demobilizing and withdrawing from Europe while Stalin stayed there, which meant that the United States was put in the position of reacting to Soviet advances in the postwar period, rather than seizing the initiative. It was only slowly and after much provocation—when, one after another, the Eastern European countries were taken over by a combination of highly effective internal subversion and external Soviet military pressure, and the Red Army did not budge from the eastern part of Germany—that the United States decided to react in earnest. When it did so, a long-term strategic plan began to take shape.

Now, on any given day in this club you may see Paul Nitze lunching in this room. The next time you see him, remember that he was the principal drafter of the 1950 document known as NSC-68. Signed by President Truman forty-five years ago, this landmark paper originated the policy of containment of the USSR. *How* we moved to contain the Soviet Union in various ways was a matter for successive presidents to decide, but this doctrine of containment remained essentially in place for the next forty or so years under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

In my view, however, the stage had been set for a deviation from containment and an eventual showdown with the Soviets—the showdown that was to come with Reagan in the 1980s—as long ago as the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. While we breathed a collective sigh of relief in the wake of that crisis, two trends of great importance were set in motion by it. The first was the clear realization on the part of Nikita Khrushchev that, in October 1962, the Soviet Union was decidedly inferior to the United States in terms of military power. He vowed that it would not remain so, and embarked on the largest military buildup in history. We underestimated and misread this trend—badly.

The second trend was that the Chinese moved into an open and bitter dispute with the Soviets. I believe we badly misread the implications of this trend as well, for we concluded that the so-called responsible and sober Soviets were

to be contrasted with the reckless and revolutionary Chinese, who were busy promoting “wars of national liberation” in the Third World and generally undermining U.S. interests. Of course, in reality it was the Soviets who were reckless, embarking upon a huge military buildup and themselves fomenting revolutionary strife in the less-developed world; while the Chinese talked a good game of revolution, but were in reality sober and careful not to extend themselves beyond their borders.

What was to occur later in the Nixon-Ford years is surely the subject of another discussion. Let me simply note that when détente became a policy, rather than merely a descriptive statement and a generalized hope, it amounted to little more—or less—than a reaffirmation of containment. Leading practitioners of détente (and especially Henry Kissinger) seemed to believe that the United States could never entertain a notion of “winning” the Cold War, and should instead seek the best arrangement possible under less than ideal circumstances. In fact, some believed that the Soviets were actually winning and that this necessitated a deal.

In 1976, you will recall, Ronald Reagan’s primary campaign caught fire when he unleashed a powerful assault on the policy of détente, and the battle became so intense that Gerald Ford nearly lost the nomination at the Kansas City convention. So heated did things become that Henry Kissinger almost did not go to the convention, and when he did, it was to be booed by many of the delegates and to be met by a Republican platform that contained a repudiation of “détente” as the centerpiece of U.S. policy toward the USSR. (That platform document never saw the light of day; it was quietly deep-sixed by the Ford administration in its losing re-election campaign.)

Even in 1976, and for as long as I knew him, Ronald Reagan rejected the doctrine of “containment.” This is not to say that he repudiated or demeaned its achievements, but that he believed deeply in its inadequacy if we were ever to be secure in the modern world. He believed in developing momentum through strength, and applying that momentum to the

Cold War equation. He knew that it would entail risk, but in his view a worthwhile and manageable risk, one that stopped short of outright provocation or war in order to achieve victory. He believed that a quantum change in East-West relations was necessary: no more passivity, no more reacting to Soviet initiatives, as we were clearly doing in the Carter years in Central America, Angola, and Afghanistan. He believed, simply, that democracy and freedom, resolutely asserted and eloquently articulated, could ultimately prevail.

Thus Reagan entered office in early 1981 with a clear strategy in mind. And that strategy, developed over the several years preceding his election, was, if we may use classic Soviet terminology, to change “the correlation of forces” in the world.

Reagan’s program for dealing realistically with the Soviet Union was essentially a matter of getting the U.S. economy in shape, forging ahead with a comprehensive domestic program, strengthening America’s defense capabilities through a sustained program of re-armament using modern and advanced technologies, and changing dramatically the way in which the country’s foreign policy was conducted. There were those who said that Reagan “didn’t have a clue” about how to conduct a coherent foreign policy. But he actually had more than a clue; he had a plan, and the resolution to put it into effect.

The major shift in U.S. policy was made formal in late 1982 and early 1983, through the adoption of NSDD-75, still today a secret document. The United States would no longer be content merely to shape and influence Soviet behavior, but would set out to change the Soviet system itself, and literally “roll back” Soviet advances and conquests outside its borders. The objective was to find weak points in the Soviet structure, to aggravate the weaknesses, and to undermine the system. This represented a sea change in U.S. policy.

A defense buildup would take a long time, Reagan knew, and it would be necessary to mobilize broad support for one. This he achieved by mid-year 1981, making choices for weapons and defensive systems and upgrades that sent a strong,

unmistakable signal to adversaries and allies alike. Europe, with the clear exception of Mrs. Thatcher, did not much like what it was hearing; the United States was “rocking the boat”, taking needlessly risky—even reckless—positions. It was “destabilizing” and “confrontational”, “threatening” and “provocative.” Establishment Washington agreed, and when Reagan said that communists would “lie, cheat, and steal” to get what they wanted, it went into a spasm of fright.³ Even some leading members of his own administration were said to be appalled at this bluntness. For their part, the Soviets sat up and took notice, and began to worry.

There is a widespread but inaccurate view that President Reagan was transfixed by weapons, that he sought a military buildup in the belief that these weapons would be deployed and used. That is not so. He was, in fact, fundamentally a disarmament, so much so that by the time he got to the Reykjavik meeting with Gorbachev in the fall of 1986, some thought he nearly went overboard in that direction. He fervently believed that the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, with its acronym “MAD”, for so long the core of our declared nuclear doctrine, was fundamentally flawed and morally bankrupt because it offered the American people as hostages in a constant upward-spiraling arms race.

He believed the proper strategy to be one of clearly gaining the upper hand, and then negotiating from a position of strength—and the last part of that strategy, negotiation, was as important as the first. That the idea of seeking military superiority reduced the arms control community to a state of funk was of little concern to him; he aimed to build up this country’s strength by relying on its economic and technological advantages, and translating those elements into measurable national power—all in order to convince the other side that it was hopelessly expensive, even impossible, to keep abreast. Only when the other side was so convinced, he reckoned, would it agree to come to the table. In other words, he believed that to disarm safely we first had to arm

³For details, see the companion essay by Stephen Knott in this issue.

ourselves, deliberately and persuasively: the same sermon, not so incidentally, that Churchill had preached at Fulton.

Accordingly, by mid-1981, the president decided to move ahead with the deployment of a dazzling array of weapons systems: the B-1 bomber, Stealth technology in several forms, the goal of a 600-ship Navy, dramatic new cruise and intermediate-range missiles, the M-X missile, new Trident submarines, heavy R&D funding, and more. In the first six years of this program, the U.S. procured 3,000 combat aircraft, 3,700 strategic missiles, and 10,000 tanks. In his 1991 book, *The Turn* (Poseidon Press), Don Oberdorfer quotes Rodomir Boigdanov of Moscow's Institute for the Study of the USA & Canada as saying, "You Americans are trying to destroy our economy, to interfere with our trade, to overwhelm and make us inferior in the strategic field." He was a perceptive man.

Reagan approached the Soviets on a dual track when it came time to decide whether to deploy intermediate range and cruise missiles in Europe in mid-1981. After several long, complex, and even heated discussions in the National Security Council, in which he met with resistance from surprising quarters inside his own administration, the president simply signed off on the option he wanted from the beginning, clearly signaling with hints and body language that he wanted a consensus position: The United States would deploy and at the same time negotiate intensely to make that deployment unnecessary.

As he was recuperating from the bullet that nearly took his life on March 30, 1981, President Reagan reached for pen and paper to hand-write a private letter to Leonid Brezhnev. In that and subsequent letters, as well as by his actions, Reagan tried to convey to Brezhnev both his belief that continuing an arms race would be counterproductive, and, that if there had to be one, the United States intended to win it. Brezhnev never understood the level at which Reagan made his appeal, and the responses always came back as Soviet boilerplate and bluster. By then the Soviets were clearly both baffled and alarmed at what they were seeing.

Reagan knew that he would have to squeeze the Soviets slowly and gently, but so they could feel it, as the U.S. programs to re-arm and modernize the military sector gained momentum. He never believed, as did many Western observers—including alleged experts—that the Soviet economy had the capacity to extract from its citizens limitless sacrifice for the sake of maintaining invincible military power. He knew instinctively that a healthy, growing, and productive American economy, with its scientific and technological excellence, would easily outpace the bankrupt "scientific socialist" system of the Soviet Union.

One of his key concerns was to deny the Soviet Union access to advanced technology. The objective would be to shut down, to the extent possible, the flow of scientific and technological data that migrated, legally and illegally, to the Soviet side. Some of it was simply stolen by a massive Soviet effort, and that would be difficult to stem. But much of it was sold openly, and Reagan was determined to put a stop to this, and to persuade the allies to follow suit. Accordingly, Bill Casey, the director of central intelligence, and others engaged in a major effort to close the doors from the United States and to persuade or, if necessary, cajole and pressure, our friends and allies in Europe and Japan to follow suit. It wasn't well received in Europe, as governments there really wanted to continue business as usual with the East, and resented U.S. interference. It wasn't always successful either, but the efforts during the Reagan years were persistent, even dogged, and people like Fred Iklé and Richard Perle at DoD, and Roger Robinson at NSC, worked hard with Casey to impede the eastward flow.

The weakness and inflexibility of the Soviet command economy were key factors in the Reagan strategy. To the extent that U.S. initiatives would place strains on that cumbersome machine, the Reagan administration sought to increase the pressures substantially. So, the screws were tightened, one turn at a time. At the outset of the Reagan administration, the Soviets were enjoying a bonanza through oil and gas sales to the West—for hard currency.

During the 1970s, high oil prices had increased Soviet energy revenues more than tenfold. Western energy dollars were an important consideration in the ability of the Soviets to stay in the race, and so major efforts were undertaken, again principally by Bill Casey, to bring about a significant increase in global oil production in order to drive prices down. The benefit to the United States would be twofold: reducing the cost of energy to itself, while simultaneously undercutting the Soviet revenue stream. Every one-dollar drop in the price of oil meant a hard currency loss of between \$500 million and \$1 billion for the Soviets.

Led by Casey, this effort paid off handsomely as the Saudi government cooperated by increasing oil production from two million barrels to nine million. In short order the price of a barrel of oil fell from thirty to twelve dollars, inflicting a ten billion dollar annual "hit" on the Soviet Union. The machine tools, industrial robots, electronics, and computers that the Soviets needed to fulfill their ambitious Eleventh Five-Year Plan fell well beyond reach, and eventually put pressure on Moscow to plead for a "time out" in the arms race. They simply could not sustain a defense against the genuine and effective economic warfare being waged from Washington. A rapid succession of Soviet leaders—Brezhnev to Andropov to Chernenko to Gorbachev in relatively short order—did not make it easier for the Soviet side to respond effectively. Reagan used to say that he was trying to have a summit meeting with Soviet leaders, but it was hard to do because, as he put it, "they keep dying on me."

The squeeze also included a new emphasis on strategic defense. Consistent with his basic views that defense is inherently superior in moral terms to offense and his abhorrence of "MAD", Reagan had long believed that the United States should not remain defenseless against a missile attack. Accordingly, a preliminary and informal study of the prospects for missile defense was begun in the first year of the administration. By 1983, an embryonic plan was ready and in late March of that year the Strategic Defense Initiative was announced. It soon became known

by the pejorative term "Star Wars" and was roundly ridiculed and denounced both at home and abroad, especially by the Soviets.

Actually, it scared the hell out of the Russians. They were not sure whether they should believe it or whether it was a massive hoax. They rolled out all their propaganda tools to counter it, they blustered and threatened, but to little avail. After having worked for years since the Cuban Missile Crisis to find a breakthrough like this themselves, the Soviets had been outmaneuvered by the Grade B movie actor from California. Their antiquated command economy and pitifully weak technological base, at least fifteen years behind in computer technology, could not hope to sustain an effort against a determined and wealthy Western adversary. The necessary billions of rubles were just not there.

But that was not all. The "squeeze" was also extended to other crucial fronts. The Soviets had an enormous presence and stake in Afghanistan, and the Reagan administration made the decision to engage by providing a reliable supply of money and arms to the Afghan *mujaheddin*. From late 1981 onward, the administration increased its efforts to open the flow of weapons, principally through Pakistan, and to get the Saudis and other friendly Arab states to finance that flow. Training, communications gear, intelligence from overhead satellite reconnaissance, rifles, mines, mortars, and eventually Stinger missiles for use against Soviet HIND helicopters—all of this converted the *mujaheddin* from a ragtag guerrilla outfit to a formidable military force. Heavy casualties—as many as twenty thousand by the spring of 1983—were inflicted on Soviet and Afghan regime troops, and the venture was turned into a Vietnam-like quagmire for the Soviets. The goals of U.S. policy were to inflict maximum casualties, to raise the price of the war—and to demoralize the Soviet high command. Remarkably, the war was also carried directly into Soviet Central Asia, and *mujaheddin*-supported strikes there became a veritable nightmare for Moscow. Late in 1986, after sustaining huge casualties and the loss of support from the Soviet people, Moscow retreated in defeat.

At the same time, in Angola, aid to Jonas Savimbi was escalated, turning a guerrilla war into a full-fledged civil war, engaging the Cuban and other Soviet-sponsored partisans there in a direct confrontation. In Central America the screws had been applied early in the administration, and progress in stopping subversion eventually bore fruit in U.S. policy toward El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Grenada. Fidel Castro got the message and a degree of stability returned gradually to the region. In Poland, Solidarity and the Catholic Church put up a fierce resistance to the Soviet-backed Jaruzelzki regime. In this case, it was not weapons that Washington and Bill Casey supplied, but copy machines, computers, and clandestine radio broadcasting stations. Friends, even neutrals like the Swedes, were enlisted in these efforts, which succeeded brilliantly.

U.S. intelligence capabilities were beefed up, with dramatic increases in both human and technical collection and enhanced delivery of intelligence information to decision makers. Chinese help was sought in Afghanistan, and Chinese missile monitoring sites produced important intelligence information for the United States. A sophisticated campaign of disinformation was begun, especially in the technological field. As Peter Schweizer relates in his outstanding study, *Victory* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), deliberately faulty gas and oil extraction technology, highly inaccurate designs for offshore drilling platforms, and mainframe computer systems designed to generate pure garbage information into the Soviet research and development cycle were passed on to Soviet agents who, to the delight of our intelligence community, even bought some of this bogus data for cash.

The president was known, rightly, as the "Great Communicator", and he used his talents well in the service of his foreign policy strategy. He sought to harness the information services of the United States Information Agency, the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty to spread his message. While difficult to do and even more difficult to evaluate, Reagan's global crusade for democracy—criticized as "hokey" and primitive by many crit-

ics—had some direct appeal for the many nationalities in the Soviet Union. The radios beamed an unending stream of information and encouragement to these peoples, hoping to increase their level of dissatisfaction with the system.

So, it came to pass that the old fellow from California eventually prepared to leave Washington, his term expired. He had come to town with a game plan, simple but understandable. To be sure, it became a complex plan as elements were added to it and improvisations were made. Implementing the plan required a lot of money and a lot of courage, and in some respects it failed—as in the "loony tunes" of the Iran-Contra scandal, a tawdry sideshow to the main attraction of the struggle with the Soviets. But in the end the United States called the Soviet hand, and the Soviets and their satraps folded.

The rest is recent history and there is no need to recite it. The Bush administration was the steward of the final collapse. As such, it managed what was essentially the result of heavy lifting in the preceding decades, and particularly of the two Reagan administrations. It could scarcely believe its good luck, and almost resisted accepting it—by entreating Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia not to act too rashly in slipping the bonds of the Soviet Union; by declaring that the reunification of Germany was not on the agenda for the time being (just eight months before it was a *fait accompli*!); and by suggesting to the Ukrainians that they not bolt from the Soviet Union lest that contribute to instability in Central Europe. But, that said, the Bush administration did in the end complete, professionally and smoothly, what had been set in motion by its predecessors, and that is to its lasting credit.

Nothing I have said is intended to give offense, or to make light of the contributions of those who guided us through more than four decades of Cold War tension and misery. But I was around when Ronald Reagan changed the game plan, and I think he deserves an enormous amount of credit for having made it possible, as well as providing the inspiration, the vision, and the energy to get it done. □