



Reagan's Ray Gun

How the Cold War was won.

BY GARY SCHMITT

Frances Fitzgerald's thesis is not subtle. The title of her book, *Way Out There in the Blue*, is taken from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: "He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine." This account of the birth of the Strategic Defense Initiative and its role in bringing down the Soviet Empire makes Ronald Reagan out to

Way Out There in the Blue
Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War
by Frances Fitzgerald
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be the Willy Loman of the Cold War. He was a salesman-politician without peer, capable of peddling to the nation the Strategic Defense Initiative, a defense program that had more to do with "phantoms and mirages" than actual technology, and purporting to address the Soviet nuclear threat, which was more "hyperbole" than strategic reality.

Moreover, the scam continues today, with conservatives who persist in selling the American public the idea that pressure generated by Reagan's mili-

tary build-up and his decision to proceed with Star Wars forced the Soviets to cry uncle and end the Cold War. These same conservatives continue to push for ballistic missile defenses in spite of the fact that, after tens of billions of dollars spent on research and development, there is "still no capable interceptor on the horizon."

Fitzgerald's portrayal of Ronald Reagan is a familiar liberal caricature: He was a detached and rather insubstantial actor who, even as president, "lived in a world of rhetoric, performance and perceptions." Henry Kissinger notes, "It's very unusual to have a president who is not interested in policy at all." But Fitzgerald also describes Reagan as having a unique capacity for tapping into a strain of American populism which, at its best, helped revive our self-confidence after the disastrous 1970s and which, at its worst, led to policies that promised too much and left all prudence behind. The latter was certainly the case, she argues, when Reagan proposed SDI in 1983.

Here was a program born of political necessity. The Reagan administration had set about putting U.S.-Soviet relations on a different footing. The keys to doing so were rebuilding the military and strengthening the economy, renewing confidence here and abroad, and putting arms control on the back burner until those things had been accomplished. But this strategy was soon put in jeopardy by the unexpected recession, skyrocketing deficits, a nuclear freeze movement at home, mass protests in Western Europe over the deployment of new U.S. missiles, and Catholic bishops challenging the morality of nuclear deterrence itself.

Reagan's "genius" here was not to play the lines given him. Drawing on movie scripts from his past, Fitzgerald suggests, Reagan offered Americans the dream of a defensive system which would provide an invincible shield against missile attacks. With SDI, he radically changed the nature of the nuclear debate and cut the legs out from under the freeze movement.

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Fitzgerald says building such a system was quixotic at best and all the supposed adults in the administration knew as much. Nonetheless, Reagan's senior advisers were willing to support the president for their own reasons.

Secretary of State George Shultz wanted to use the idea of SDI as a bargaining chip to force more concessions from the Soviets in strategic arms talks. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, on the other hand, wanted missile defenses to enhance U.S. strategic power. The result was a country fooled and a program funded by Congress that by all expert accounts, says the author, "did not, and could not for the foreseeable future, exist." Her conclusion: "Star Wars . . . was surely [Reagan's] greatest rhetorical triumph."

Rhetorical success aside, Fitzgerald rejects any notion that the prospect of Star Wars contributed in

any significant way to bringing the Cold War to an end. The world historical figure is Gorbachev, not Reagan. At most, the president saw the premier as a Soviet of a different stripe well before most conservatives did, but his policies had virtually nothing to do with the reforms or policy changes Gorbachev put forward. The "Soviets did not respond to the Reagan administration's military buildup" and "it was Gorbachev's efforts to reverse the decline and to modernize his country that knocked the props out from under the system. The revolution was in essence a series of decisions made by one man."

Fitzgerald's case is argued with consistency and imagination but grounded less in fact than in her prejudices. She sees SDI as a political ploy of unprecedented audacity by the Reagan administration because she is unable to give any credence to the view that

by 1980 the arms control process, combined with Moscow's unrelenting modernization of its nuclear forces, had left us in a strategic box that allowed for no obvious answers. Being a policy wonk would not be sufficient (as Carter's record had made clear) to address the depth of the strategic crisis the West faced. What was needed was precisely the quality Reagan had in spades: a capacity, as Dinesh D'Souza observed, "to see the world differently from the way it is."

Furthermore, SDI was fully consistent with the administration's earliest conceptions of how to meet the Soviet challenge. The 1982 Defense Guidance, for example, outlined a competitive strategy for dealing with Moscow that suggested we develop "weapons that are difficult for the Soviets to counter, impose disproportionate costs, open up new areas of

major military competition and obsolesce previous Soviet investment.”

The goal was to put stress on what some in the White House, including Reagan himself, thought was a Soviet regime that was militarily strong but systemically weak. The evidence suggested Moscow had placed a grand strategic bet in the 1970s of “guns over butter,” hoping to take decisive advantage of America’s global paralysis.

The bet might have paid off, except Reagan’s America refused to roll over and play dead. Fitzgerald is largely right when she says the Soviets did not respond to SDI or the Reagan military buildup by an expansion of their own programs. But that is because by the mid-1980s, the Soviets faced a situation in which they could hardly squeeze more from a sick and technologically backward economy, shackled with a huge defense and imperial burden.

Although it is true that they could have patched things together for a bit longer, much of the Soviet political and military elite were increasingly pessimistic about the prospects for a long-term competition with the West. In short, there is a reason the Communists turned to Gorbachev when they did and, significantly, stayed with him as long as they did. When it comes to understanding the dynamic that led to

the end of the Cold War, Fitzgerald is simply wrong.

Way Out There in the Blue is an exhausting account of absolutely every shortcoming and failure of Ronald Reagan and his national security team. It takes at face value all Russian proposals and accepts without any skepticism the analysis of strategic matters by every liberal commentator, scientist, or Democratic party official. At the same time, it consistently disparages Reagan’s policy proposals as unrealistic, mere public relations, or the product of a dysfunctional cabinet. It concludes with a one-sided sketch of the post-Cold War program to develop missile defenses.

So one-sided is *Way Out There in the Blue* that the initial impulse is to dismiss the book out of hand. But, as with Fitzgerald’s previous volume, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, I suspect everyone but conservatives will tout this admittedly well-written work as the definitive, popularly accessible account of the period.

This is especially true in the absence of any competing accounts which are as comprehensive and not hagiographic. Reagan was no Willy Loman president and he deserves historians who understand his achievement. ♦