

Interpretations of Reagan's Legacy

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Chidester, Jeffrey L., and Paul Kengor, eds. *Reagan's Legacy in a World Transformed*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015. 294 pages. ISBN 978-0-674-42620-7. Hb. \$45.

Even Ronald Reagan's fiercest critics would agree with the statement of Brian Mulroney, former Progressive Conservative prime minister of Canada, that Reagan was a "transformative president" (vii). When "the Great Communicator" left office in 1989, the world was very different from what it had been like when he was inaugurated in 1981, and in many ways, it was better. The threat of nuclear war between the two superpowers was considerably diminished, the Soviet Union was on the verge of economic and political collapse, and the US was about to "win" the Cold War. Not only did the world seem to be a safer, freer, and more prosperous place than when Reagan started his first term, but the global position of the United States was also a lot stronger. The real question is, how much of this can be attributed to the policies instituted by Reagan? Did all these developments happen because of the president, in spite of his actions, or was the role he played mostly irrelevant?

Contributors to the volume include a wide selection of experts, fellow politicians, supporters, as well as opponents and critics of Reagan. The foreword is written by Mulroney, a contemporary, close ally, friend, and admirer of Reagan, with whom they signed the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the predecessor to the North American Free Trade Agreement. The former prime minister describes Reagan as a transformative president, who remained firmly committed to his ideas and ideals, even amidst heavy criticism. Mulroney points out Reagan's role in ending the Cold War and starting down the road that eventually led to NAFTA as two significant foreign policy achievements of the Republican president; both of these issues are discussed in several of the essays in the collection (xii-xv).

The introduction by the editors points out that Reagan has admirers not only in the United States, but all over the world, especially in former socialist countries, where many statues have been erected in memory of the president, who focused on ending the Cold War. An example many Hungarians are familiar with is the memorial on Szabadság tér in Budapest, near the American embassy, which depicts the president walking cheerfully towards the Soviet military memorial obelisk. It is true that the world has changed a

lot since Reagan took his oath of office, and the editors set out to assemble a volume of studies by contributors from various fields and with diverse ideological political backgrounds that examine the impact the president had on this transformation.

The book is divided into five parts, all of which consist of essays that present and analyze a particular aspect of the influence of Reagan on American foreign policy and on the global stage from various perspectives. The thematic units include domestic policy, spreading democracy, defense and anti-terrorism policy, the end of the Cold War, and multilateral institutions. The first part of the volume, "At Home and Abroad: The Global Impact of Reagan's Domestic Policy," includes three essays that discuss the economic policy and philosophy of Reagan and its influence on world economy. The 1980s saw the advance of globalization, and Alfred E. Eckes points out that Reagan was aware of and embraced the forces that induced this phenomenon: free markets and technological development. In stark contrast to the 1970s, a period of high inflation and economic stagnation, the 1980s brought about economic growth. The deregulatory policies of Reagan contributed to the expansion of the world economy and the increase in international trade between 1980 and 2010, described by Henry R. Nau as the "Great Expansion." The financial markets were also deregulated, which attracted foreign investors to the US (for example, Japanese firms). By the end of the Reagan administration, more and more countries started to implement or, at least, became more receptive of free market policies, which advanced economic globalization.

While the market-oriented economic policies of Reagan contributed to economic growth and increased prosperity in general, they are still criticized for having considerable negative consequences as well. Nau points to the growth of debt, as well as increasing budget and trade deficits, as serious shortcomings of Reagan's economic policies. Eckes notes that as a result of the lowered trade barriers and the fact that the government supported Silicon Valley instead of traditional industries, a lot of American manufacturing jobs were outsourced overseas. The recent financial crisis, the "Great Recession," also raised concerns about the correctness of Reagan's economic policies, especially the deregulation of financial markets. Nau calls attention to the policies of Reagan's successors, especially the increasing debt, and warns against a return to the regulatory policies of the 1970s that would result in a slower recovery. Eckes and Nau both agree with the characterization that, as far as world economy is concerned, Reagan was a truly "transformational president" (23), and his policies, although not perfect,

greatly contributed to the economic growth of the “Great Expansion” (34–37). In the third essay, Peter Trubowitz sheds light on some of the reasons why Reagan’s economic policies were different from those of his predecessors. By the 1980s, there was a geographical shift in the Republican electoral base, the power center of the party moved towards the South and the West. Pursuing an active foreign policy, developing the military, and a laissez-faire approach to the economy promoted the interests of the “Sunbelt” over the “Rustbelt.”

Part II, “Trends in Global Democracy: The Reagan Legacy,” starts with an essay by one of the editors of the volume, Jeffrey L. Chidester, who examines the legacy of Reagan in Eastern Europe, where the Reagan presidency brought about a major shift: Reagan was convinced that communism was bound to collapse, and his goal was to hasten this process. Today, he is remembered all over Eastern Europe as having had an important role in the collapse of communism, and he often serves as a reference point for conservatives in Europe as well as the United States. In the second essay, Paul Kengor points out that Reagan is often invoked by American politicians, for instance, George W. Bush, who compared the Middle Eastern interventions to Reagan’s “March of Freedom” in Eastern Europe. Kengor continues to draw parallels between the policies and speeches of the two presidents, concluding that Bush—rightly or wrongly—appears to have followed in Reagan’s footsteps in the invasion of Iraq.

In the first essay of Part III, “A New National Strategy: Reagan’s Defense Policy Revisited,” Kiron K. Skinner discusses the Reagan administration’s attitude towards Islamic terrorism that emerged as a real threat during the period. Such issues as preemptive strike and the criteria for the use of military force in the fight against terrorism—prevalent in contemporary discourse—already arose during the Reagan presidency. The results of the debate were national security memorandums as well as legislation, and the creation of an institutional background for dealing with terrorist threats. There were only minor changes to Reagan’s strategy until the presidency of Bush and Barack Obama, who both adopted a more militaristic approach to dealing with the issue of terrorism. Still, the foundations of contemporary American counter-terrorism strategy were laid during the Reagan administration. In the second paper, Eliot A. Cohen elaborates on two competing doctrines, two approaches to the use of force that were present in the Reagan cabinet. Secretary of State George P. Schultz took a more proactive stand, stressing the importance of striking first, while Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger formed a set of conditions that he

believed had to be met to apply military force, and both approaches remain influential up to our present day.

“The Great Debate: Reagan Negotiating the End of the Cold War” addresses the Soviet-American relationship in the period, particularly the nuclear disarmament negotiations between Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. In the first essay, Kengor discusses the long road to the dramatic reduction of the number of nuclear weapons during the Reagan presidency. While not trivializing the role of Gorbachev, Kengor highlights Reagan’s willingness to always negotiate, even when facing rejection by the Soviet leaders or skepticism from his own people. Reagan believed that he had to show strength and perseverance in order to realize the reduction of nuclear weapons. Beth A. Fischer emphasizes the significance of nuclear weapons and the Strategic Defense Initiative in Reagan’s legacy; however, she simultaneously challenges the common interpretation that the arms race, accelerated by Reagan, caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fischer claims that instead of the effects of the military buildup, it was Reagan’s “revolutionary antinuclearism” that made him a visionary leader (177). Julian E. Zelizer, who is more critical of the Republican president, reveals that domestic policy played an important role in nuclear arms reduction, as in spite of the Republican dominance in the period, liberalism and liberal policies continued to have an impact on the political sphere. There was also a strong pressure from the public against military interventions and a push for “nuclear freeze” that had an effect on Reagan’s foreign policy.

The last part of the volume, “Reagan and Multilateralism: Two Voices,” examines how Reagan worked with or rejected international organizations to attain his foreign policy goals. Reagan has often been criticized for working outside international institutions, yet both Kim R. Homes and Barry E. Carter claim that this is not entirely true. Homes investigates Reagan’s approach towards the United Nations, confirming that the president was indeed skeptical of the UN, yet he used it to realize his own foreign policy goals and called out the organization to live up to its own ideals, promoting human rights, and freedom in particular, all over the World, including communist countries. Homes approves and claims that presidents should neither count exclusively on allies, nor on international organizations; instead, they should use these platforms to challenge countries that undermine global security and liberty. In the final essay, Carter, a former aide of Walter Mondale, Reagan’s presidential opponent in 1984, studies the Republican president’s record with regard to other international institutions. Based on Reagan’s international economic policy, arms control, and the law

of sea negotiations, Carter concludes that instead of being a shortsighted ideologue, Reagan deserves credit for being a practical pragmatist.

Chidester and Kengor have assembled a volume of papers by a wide selection of academics, analysts, and politicians, close allies, as well as former political opponents of the 40th president, discussing various aspects of the foreign impact of Reagan's presidency, from the influence of domestic politics on the world stage to participation in international organizations. While the particular policies and decisions of Reagan have been debated and criticized, there is a far-reaching consensus that, for better or worse, he was indeed a figure who changed the nature of American presidency, as well as the position of the United States on the international stage. This volume will be of interest for students of American politics, especially foreign policy, and American presidency, as well as scholars interested in the Cold War.

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