

**DEFENSE, DECEPTION, AND DEFICITS:  
RONALD REAGAN'S UNNECESSARY MILITARY BUILD-UP**

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RR is totally lost, out of his depth, and uncomfortable. He has not enough knowledge or decisiveness to cut through the contradictory advice that is being offered to him.

--Richard Pipes, at a 1981 National Security Council meeting

Reagan's "Team B" analysis of the Soviet Union overwhelming the United States is recognized by intelligence professionals as a ludicrous fantasy.

—Robert Parry, former Associated Press reporter

The general effect of Cold War extremism was to delay rather than hasten the great change that overtook that country at the end of the 1980s.

—George F. Kennan, author of the "containment" policy to stop Communism

There has been lots of hoopla surrounding the birth centenary of Ronald Reagan. As a former two-term president, it is appropriate that he be duly honored. He was indeed a very effective speaker and he was able to make many Americans feel good about themselves and their country.

One of the goals of good communication, however, is to relay something truthful. Many of the things Reagan said were false, and most everything said about his achievements is untrue or distorted. For instance, the president who did indeed cut taxes—principally for the rich—also raised taxes on the middle class in six of his eight years in office. A bill to protect social security was the largest tax increase in U.S. history.

A president who is praised for being tough turned tail and withdrew from Beirut after 220 Marines were murdered in their sleep. Even though his advisers encouraged him time and time again, Reagan refused to invade Panama, a task that the first President Bush did with relish. To his credit Reagan was squeamish about civilian casualties, and he ordered only two military attacks: the invasion of tiny Grenada and the bombing of Libya.

But why should I criticize him when he is dead and gone? I agree with reason Peter Drier gives for his strong critique: many of America's current problems began during his administration.

- Reagan's firing of federal air traffic controllers encouraged companies—allied with eager union-busing attorneys—to refuse to bargain with duly elected union representatives and to intimidate workers who wanted to organize. A severely weakened labor movement has meant that the real wages of the world's most productive workers have been stagnant for 30 years.
- The easing of regulations on financial institutions led to the savings and loan debacle and a loss of \$88 billion in federal aid that was never repaid. (The Obama administration will end up making money from its successful attempts at saving the financial and car industry.) Unfortunately, the Clinton administration, with eager GOP help of course, made it even easier for America's big banks to lend with abandon and experiment with complex financial instruments that no one understood.
- When Reagan assumed office, the national debt that had accumulated over 200 years was \$1 trillion dollars. When he left office that number had tripled, and \$7.1 trillion of the current \$14 trillion debt was run up during the Reagan and two Bush administrations.
- The GOP mantra of "No New Taxes" has meant that meager investment in infrastructure and human capital will leave the U.S. way behind other countries—China, India, Brazil, even Europe—by the middle of this century. A poll done by the Rockefeller Foundation found that 66 percent of Americans support government infrastructure investment, but an equal number said that they would not pay any new taxes to finance it.
- In addition to Reagan's tax cuts, \$1 trillion in new defense expenditures also added to the national debt without an appreciable increase in our security. (Our military behemoth is now a clumsy Goliath to nimble jihadists.) After the successful negotiations with the Soviets during the Nixon and Carter years, the Reagan administration chose fear and misinformation to prolong the Cold War.

In *There He Goes Again: Ronald Reagan's Reign of Error*, Mark Green and Gail MacColl documents over 300 misstatements and bloopers. I think it is safe to say that the Gipper had a record number of these, as well as a record number of corrections by his aides, frantically trying to cover for their bumbling boss. Here I list the worst of Reagan's falsehoods and distortions with regard to the Cold War.

- Reagan claimed that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said that "the day of the US is past, and today is the day of the Soviet Union." Kissinger denied that he ever made such a statement.

- Trying to make President Ford look weak in the 1976 primaries, Reagan claimed that the Soviet Union was now both qualitatively and quantitatively ahead in terms of military capability. The fact of course is that the U.S. never lost its qualitative advantage.
- Also in 1976 Reagan warned that a report by military experts in the Library of Congress was “terrifying” in its estimate of Soviet advantages. The authors of the report were mystified by this distortion. The report actually concluded that the Soviets had gained a bit but the U.S. was still superior.
- In 1982 Reagan stated that “the Soviets have 945 warheads aimed at targets in Europe, and we have no deterrent whatsoever.” Green and MacColl simply add up all the warheads available for a U.S.-NATO response and the total was a whopping 6,190.

One would think that with their constant correction of Reagan’s errors, his advisers really wanted him to tell the truth. But the analysts who had the facts were suppressed and even threatened with dismissal by those who wanted to push Soviet superiority. Current Defense Secretary Bill Gates was CIA deputy director during those years, and he says that long-time professionals viewed Reagan’s new team as a “hostile takeover” and they reacted with “a mix of resentment and anger, dread, and personal insecurity.”

One of those new men was Paul Wolfowitz, the neo-conservative who helped George Bush deceive the American people about the threat of Saddam Hussein. Wolfowitz convinced Reagan that the old guard was not trustworthy, and that a separate “Team B” was necessary to get the “truth” out about Soviet superiority. Donald Rumsfeld also set up his own intelligence section when those who had the real facts about Iraq failed to get with the program.

Reporter Robert Parry, who unveiled the Iran-Contra scandal for the Associated Press, states: “The CIA’s raw data did not support the right-wing alarmist suspicions as they went with a worst-case scenario of Soviet power and intentions. Team B simply concluded that the absence of evidence about suspected Soviet super-weapons simply meant the Soviets were well-skilled at hiding the weapons.” Today there are still those on the right who say that Saddam Hussein hid his deadly weapons or shipped them to Syria.

Parry concludes that “the CIA’s objectivity on the Soviet Union ended abruptly in 1981, when William Casey became the CIA director,” and in his memoirs George F. Kennan, author of the “containment” policy to stop Communism, writes that “the general effect of Cold War extremism was to delay rather than hasten the great change that overtook that country at the end of the 1980s.”

During the celebration of the Reagan centenary much has been made about Reagan’s great challenge: “Mr. Gorbachov, tear down this wall!” Four days after the Berlin Wall came down, *USA Today* asked a cross-section of Americans whom they

thought was responsible for the collapse of Communism. A surprising 43 percent said Mikhail Gorbachev and only 14 percent chose Ronald Reagan. For Germans who lived through it, the answer was a more decisive 70-2 percent.

No one “won” the Cold War because Gorbachev and Reagan agreed to end it peacefully and diplomatically. Reagan’s advisers were shocked when at the 1986 Reykjavik Summit he proposed the total abolition of nuclear weapons. As Temple University historian Vladislav M. Zubok states: "It was Reagan the peacemaker, not the cold warrior, who made the greatest contribution to history."

Every president from Truman to Reagan should get credit for our firm bipartisan stand against the Soviet Union, even though, tragically, both sides pursued policies that caused millions of unnecessary deaths in the Third World. (Supporting right-wing dictators and their death squads, Reagan did seem to mind the millions of civilian deaths there.) Reagan stood at the end of the slow economic collapse of a failed ideology and had the good luck of dealing with a pragmatic Soviet leader.

Whatever faults President Obama have (and he does have a few), you will never hear him say “I don’t remember,” as Reagan said repeatedly to the Tower Commission investigating the Iran-Contra scandal. If some say that I’m being unkind to a man on the edge of Alzheimer’s, then I say that Reagan should have resigned for that very reason. One doesn’t keep a likable but incompetent man in the world’s most powerful office.

The military misadventures of Reagan and Bush II, based on fear and misinformation, have left at least \$3 trillion for our descendant to pay. (I’m using the average of the estimated cost of the Iraq war.) That is about the same amount that Obama has added, but one third was due to the recession, another third was a stimulus plan that saved 3 million jobs, and the final third was the Bush-Obama plan to save the financial and car industries that saved an additional 1 million jobs. I’m sure that my grandchildren will view that as a good investment.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.