

Book Reviews

Reagan's Secret War

Reviewed by *Major Joe Schrantz**

I want to be remembered as the President of the United States who brought a sense and reality of peace and security. I want to eliminate that awful fear that each of us feels sometimes when we get up in the morning knowing that the world could be destroyed through a nuclear holocaust.¹

I. Introduction

Based primarily on recently declassified top-secret files, *Reagan's Secret War*² details the efforts Ronald Reagan made during his presidency to rid the world of nuclear weapons, increase the level of human rights, and promote democracy abroad. Focusing on Reagan's battle to end the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, authors Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson guide the reader through strategic leadership discussions, National Security Council meetings, public appearances, and the personal thoughts of Reagan.

While revealing the previously unknown story of his efforts to prevent nuclear disaster, the authors capture the leadership traits that helped Reagan change the world. Understanding he had a major role in the world's fate, Reagan bravely cast aside the diminished respect for the presidential office he inherited, a weakened military, cancer, economic turmoil, an assassination attempt, and scandal to successfully bring Soviet leadership to the negotiating table.³

Reagan began formulating his convictions and goals as early as 1952, thirty years before his presidency.⁴ By the time he ascended to the presidency, Reagan firmly grasped that although a "country could reduce or eliminate its nuclear weapons . . . that would not mean its citizens were free. It could still be evil."⁵ With his foundation firmly established, Reagan alone "decided the direction and

strategy of U.S. policy" and "succeeded in getting the Soviets to accept his vision."⁶

This review examines the authors' presentation and analysis of documents relied on in *Reagan's Secret War*. The review then explores the leadership lessons military leaders and their judge advocates may learn from Reagan's life and career.

II. Analysis

The authors had extensive histories with Reagan in their capacities as both authors and members of his administration.⁷ Nevertheless, some of the declassified documents they reviewed during their research revealed a level of involvement and determination on the part of Reagan that even they were unaware of.⁸ Historians previously uncertain about who set policy and made decisions during the Reagan Administration should now be convinced that Reagan was in charge.

The authors present three examples to illustrate Reagan's decisiveness and determination. First, during his initial National Security Council meeting, Reagan bluntly told his advisers, "I will make the decisions."⁹ Second, in response to a reporter's question about how involved his wife Nancy was with policy, and having heard similar critiques before, Reagan replied, "I'm too old and stubborn to put up with that. I make up my mind. I do listen for counsel and advice. I want to get expertise from people that are expert in various fields. But I haven't changed my views since I've been here."¹⁰ Finally, even a Soviet note-taker observed Reagan's energy during his meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev. Expecting to find an elderly man in his mid-70s, the note-taker instead discovered a "lion" that, when challenged, became "crisp" and "engaged."¹¹ The authors use these examples, along with many others, to reveal how Reagan was determined to be the one who "carried out goals he had long held, carefully plotted the strategy that brought about

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¹ DICK WIRTHLIN & WYNTON C. HALL, THE GREATEST COMMUNICATOR: WHAT REAGAN TAUGHT ME ABOUT POLITICS, LEADERSHIP, AND LIFE 113-14 (2004), reprinted in MARTIN ANDERSON & ANNELISE ANDERSON, REAGAN'S SECRET WAR (2009), *infra* note 2, at 10.

² MARTIN ANDERSON & ANNELISE ANDERSON, REAGAN'S SECRET WAR (2009).

³ *Id.* at ix, 23, 24, 43, 203, 213, 233, 317.

⁴ *Id.* at 248.

⁵ *Id.* (alteration in original).

⁶ *Id.* at 201.

⁷ *Id.* at 4.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at 9 (quoting *Minutes of the National Security Council* 3 (Feb. 6, 1981)).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 198 (quoting Interview with Ann Devroy & Johanna Neuman of *USA Today* (Jan. 17, 1985)).

¹¹ *Id.* at 246 (quoting Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* 596, 828 (1999)).

the ends he achieved, and made all the major decisions of his administration.”¹²

The authors’ prior relationship with Reagan might suggest a degree of bias or favoritism toward their subject. As the authors of several past bestselling books about Reagan, it is unlikely they would choose to damage his legacy now with the publication of *Reagan’s Secret War*.¹³ Nevertheless, the verbatim documents speak for themselves. The riveting one-on-one dialogue between Reagan and Gorbachev, the personal thoughts captured in Reagan’s journal, and the content of Reagan’s self-written speeches show a determined leader who personally set the agenda for his administration, often without support, full consultation, or “advice” from his staff members, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, or the Department of Defense.¹⁴ The evidence clearly reveals that Reagan was driving the policy of his administration. Even the harshest Reagan critics would have difficulty arguing that the authors had not presented the evidence fairly.

Reagan’s Secret War maintains the focus on Reagan, rather than his staff, throughout the book. With the exception of his trusted Secretary of State, George Shultz, the authors give very little credit to the rest of Reagan’s “simply spectacular” staff.¹⁵ The majority of the National Security Council meetings mentioned in the book highlight Reagan’s positions, and when mentioned, the staff is generally depicted expressing their reservations to his views.¹⁶

While glossing over the involvement of Reagan’s staff does not detract from the book, the authors’ failure to expand on Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership does. Despite acknowledging his rise to power and political skill, the authors portray Gorbachev as someone bullied into accepting Reagan’s demands by the deteriorating condition of the Soviet economy.¹⁷ While historians generally agree that economic conditions led to the demise of the Soviet Union and undoubtedly put Gorbachev in a complex dilemma, Gorbachev was confronted by a number of other considerations as well. Stating simply that Gorbachev “caved” without examining the leadership challenges and internal governmental pressures he faced leaves the whole story untold.¹⁸

Having risen through the ranks of the Soviet leadership, Gorbachev had only been General Secretary for two years when he announced that the Soviet Union was willing to make concessions.¹⁹ Reagan had been President for seven years.²⁰ One could argue that the challenges and risks Gorbachev endured were far greater than those Reagan had to endure. For example, he inherited the leadership position of an already crumbling Soviet Union. The authors briefly note, “because the Soviet Union was not democratic, effecting such a change in their policies was extremely difficult. Nothing less than a majority vote on the fifteen man politburo—perhaps even in some cases a unanimous vote—could lead to change.”²¹ Ultimately, the Russian with the “iron teeth” was brave enough to use those same teeth to “bite the bullet” and make huge concessions.²² *Reagan’s Secret War* would have benefited from a more in-depth examination of the challenges and considerations Gorbachev faced.

Despite not developing Gorbachev’s personality or challenges more fully, the authors effectively allow the face-off between the two men to build to an exhilarating point.²³ Readers who lived through the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union will likely recall the “more than 150 times” Reagan publicly called for the elimination of nuclear weapons.²⁴ Younger readers, born in the 1970s and 1980s, which includes the majority of current active duty officers in the military, may only recall replayed popular images of Reagan or such frightening nuclear war movies like the 1983 television movie, “The Day After.”²⁵

For readers too young to remember the specifics of how the Cold War ended, *Reagan’s Secret War* might seem anticlimactic after a statistically insignificant number of weapons destroyed because of the treaty ultimately signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in 1988.²⁶ At the beginning of Reagan’s presidency in the early 1980s, “the United States had an estimated stockpile of 23,464 nuclear warheads. The Soviet Union stockpile was considerably larger, with 32,049 warheads.”²⁷ Reagan’s repeated goal was the complete

theyear/archive/stories/1989.html (describing Gorbachev as “the patron of change” who symbolized “[c]hange and hope for a stagnant system, motion, creativity, an amazing equilibrium, a gift for improvising a stylish performance as he hang glides across an abyss”).

¹² *Id.* at 1.

¹³ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 52, 89, 95, 127, 164.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 12 (quoting Godfrey Sperling, “Democrat’s Strauss Impressed by Reagan Performance But . . .,” CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, May 15, 1981 at 10).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 65–71, 85–86, 127, 164.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 339.

¹⁸ See Lance Morrow, *Mikhail Gorbachev: Man of The Decade*, TIME MAG. Jan. 1, 1990, available at <http://www.time.com/subscriber/person of>

¹⁹ ANDERSON & ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 127, 164.

²⁰ *Id.* at 335.

²¹ *Id.* at 200.

²² *Id.* at 205.

²³ *Id.* at 305–09.

²⁴ *Id.* at 94.

²⁵ THE DAY AFTER (ABC Circle Films 1983).

²⁶ ANDERSON & ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 364.

²⁷ *Id.* at 17.

elimination of nuclear weapons.²⁸ Not until the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty deadline in 1991, when only 2,692 of these nuclear weapons had been destroyed, do the authors begin to back away from numeric achievements and instead begin to stress the symbolic importance of the treaty.²⁹

Readers will find it difficult to feel like anyone “won.” The United States and Soviet Union still possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world. However, in reality, the two leaders were moving towards peace. This was the “first real reduction in an arms race that, until then, had seemed unstoppable, inevitable.”³⁰ In addition, the threat of an “all-out nuclear war ebbed away.”³¹ The two leaders had moved the standoff away from an “oncoming Armageddon.”³² The authors succeed in explaining the significance was not in the numbers of weapons reduced, but rather in the knowledge that an agreement was reached, albeit a statistically small one, in the hopes the “sapling” might “one day grow into a mighty tree of peace.”³³

One stylistic critique of the book includes the authors’ inclusion of facsimiles of handwritten journal entries as well as the transcribed text of the same journals. The incorporation of both is redundant and unnecessary. While the use of Reagan’s handwritten notes lends credence to the argument that Reagan actively participated in formulating policy and making the decisions, it is excessive. Similarly, the inclusion of both the typed minutes of National Security Council meetings and the transcribed, verbatim text is unwarranted. The incorporation of additional photos would have been more insightful and interesting. Diagrams and charts of the different types of weapons and their capabilities would also be helpful. Finally, maps detailing nuclear weapons locations throughout the world would have illuminated the exchanges between Reagan and Gorbachev, especially their discussions of weapons locations and their impact on the European nations.

III. Lessons for Military Leaders and Their Judge Advocates

Reagan’s Secret War provides several meaningful lessons for military leaders and their judge advocates.

First, “envision the future” and plan how to get there.³⁴ Reagan dreamed of a world free of nuclear weapons. This dream motivated Reagan and guided his policy. For military leaders, vision is important. Often, military leaders who command units for short periods can find this difficult. Many want to see immediate results, which encourages short-term planning and the search for a “quick fix.” The truly great leaders do what is best for the long term, and judge advocates should remember this when advising commanders of their legal options.

Second, be open and honest. The Iran-Contra scandal and its follow-on investigation illustrate this principle. Despite this unfortunate incident, Reagan led the administration correctly through the controversy and its aftermath. Reagan immediately appointed an investigator and promised the American people he would “get to the bottom of this matter.”³⁵ History has shown this commitment to be the “smartest thing Reagan did” once the scandal struck.³⁶ For the war in Afghanistan, one of the most tragic incidents became worse due to allegations of leadership failures during the investigation process.³⁷

Third, know your history and the history of your enemy. Understanding the history of your adversary can help explain much of what they do. For Reagan, recognizing that guarding “the homeland has always been of paramount importance” to the Russians was critical when formulating his foreign policy.³⁸ For today’s military leader, especially those guiding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, cultural awareness is of equal importance.

Fourth, remember who the decision-maker is. Reagan made it clear to his staff that he was the one who would make the decisions. Give the leader his options, and give the best advice you can. Once the leader makes a decision, if it is legally permissible, implement it to the best of your ability.

Fifth, assemble the right team. Reagan firmly believed in surrounding himself with the best team possible. While some leaders fear being surrounded by brilliant staff officers,

²⁸ *Id.* at 94.

²⁹ *Id.* at 364.

³⁰ *Id.* at 365.

³¹ *Id.* at 369.

³² *Id.* at 59

³³ *Id.* at 364 (quoting *Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty* (Dec. 8, 1987)).

³⁴ JAMES M. KOUZES & BARRY Z. POSNER, *THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE* 103 (2007).

³⁵ ANDERSON & ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 321 (quoting *Address to the Nation on the Investigation of the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy* (Dec. 2, 1986)).

³⁶ *Id.* at 323.

³⁷ See Josh White, *Army Withheld Details About Tillman’s Death*, WASH POST, May 4, 2005, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/03/AR2005050301502.html>.

³⁸ ANDERSON & ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 102 (quoting *Minutes of the National Security Council* (Apr. 16 1982)).

“Reagan thrived on them.”³⁹ For the military leader, assembling a solid team is also important.⁴⁰

Finally, relentlessly communicate.⁴¹ Reagan communicated “more than 150 times—to the necessity of wiping out nuclear weapons, not just to protect the United States but to protect every other country in the world.”⁴² He knew the importance of pressing his message. Similarly, military leaders need to ensure their commands understand their intent and guidance, and should take every opportunity to communicate their message.⁴³

IV. Conclusion

Reagan’s Secret War tells the story of Reagan’s actions to bring about world change. Today’s headlines publicly

challenge the President to repair the economy, clean up the Gulf oil spill, and serve as the Commander in Chief of two small wars. While certainly significant, these challenges pale in comparison to Reagan’s “secret war” to prevent nuclear disaster. This is not to suggest that the economic challenges are not complex, the oil cleanup is not burdensome, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not been without terrible cost. Each present unique challenges.

However, when compared to the nuclear standoff, the prospect of nuclear annihilation, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War, *Reagan’s Secret War* can serve as a reminder that today’s challenges are surmountable. This message, as well as the historical and leadership lessons interspersed throughout the book, makes *Reagan’s Secret War* worth reading.

³⁹ *Id.* at 12.

⁴⁰ See XVIII AIRBORNE CORPS, OFFICE OF THE STAFF JUDGE ADVOCATE, AFTER ACTION REPORT, OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (FEB. 2008–APR. 2009) (11 June 2009) (discussing the importance of assembling the right leadership team).

⁴¹ BE, KNOW, DO (Leader to Leader Inst. ed., 2004)

⁴² ANDERSON & ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 94.

⁴³ See *id.*