

Decisions In the Land of the Pretend: U.S. Foreign Policy In the Reagan Years

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A kind of Brownian movement characterized U. S. foreign policy in the Reagan years. Officials acted randomly on what they believed to be the operant assumptions of “Reaganism,” calculating what Reagan really intended, and cavorted from the Americas to the Mid-East without burdening the President with the liability of decision, or even knowledge. Reagan’s old friend, Attorney General, Edwin Meese, rationalized it all: after all, he said “[t]he president would [have] approve[d]” his staff’s activities, if [the president had been] asked.” Even after the news of the National Security Council staff’s peregrinations in pursuit of arms, hostages, and cash for the contras had been published, the initiative spun on. Later, the president explained, he forgot what U.S. policy had been; or, he never knew; or, he had not understood. As presidential Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan explained, the president had been told so many “cover stories,” it “sort of confused the president’s mind.” Reagan’s detachment became the stuff of legends. Once, as smoke from a fire filled the Oval Office, his alarmed aids located the president alone, behind his desk, waiting. Through tearing eyes, he explained that, yes, he had smelled something; but he had not wanted to disturb anybody. Reagan’s diffident disengagement had a penalty. Policy became a concatenation of fragmentary and inconsistent responses. Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, the self-proclaimed “vicar” of U.S. foreign Policy, complained that the decision-making process was as “. . .mysterious as a ghost ship; you heard the creak of the rigging and the groan of the timbers and even glimpsed the crew on deck. But which one of the crew was at the helm? It was impossible to know for sure.”

“Ad hocism” in this environment was driven to a level of analytic supremacy. Policy seemed subject to only two criteria: would it “fly” on the evening news; and would the president “look all right.” The president had become like a vaudeville hoofer who, each night, would ask the audience “how’m I doing?” And, not sighting the hook, jauntily tapped on. To be sure, national goals still existed, husbanded by the remnant civil service. But serious public discourse was circumvented by the judicious use of blue lights and zingy one-liners. For six years, much of U.S. policy dreamily wandered in the realm of the pretend and the demi-real. Photo opportunities and the easy slogan transcended substance. There was a micronic depth to high-level comprehension. Reagan’s old California friend, Ed Clark, when he directed the NSC, used films and documentaries to brief the president. Serious observers believed that Reagan’s attachment to space defense could be traced to his days in Hollywood and the 1940 role he played in a film called *Murder in the Air*, which depicted Reagan battling enemy agents with beam weapons. The president’s aides were tormented by his ignorance and inattention. “Each time” before press conferences, recalled Larry Speakes, Reagan’s press aide, “it was like re-inventing the wheel.” Matters were never helped by the president’s apparent indifference to current events. As Speakes explained: “he read the comic pages first”; and did not “read the rest of the newspapers with much attention to detail.”

Both Mr. and Mrs. Reagan, according to their old (and apparently larcenous) advisor, Michael Deaver, believed in ghosts. The “first family” resorted to an assortment of astrologers for advice about auspicious dates, including the signing of the INF agreement. Reagan, on a tour in South America, embarrassed his hosts by confusing his Brazilian dinner location with Buenos Aires. The president forgot the names of trusted aides and cabinet officers. One academic trio measuring President Reagan’s “cognitive impairment,” argued that Reagan’s campaign promise, (“if I ever was thought to be senile, I’d submit to test”) ought to have been enforced by Congress. Henry Kissinger’s malicious aside captured the despair of the foreign policy professionals: “when you meet the president, you ask yourself. . .how he could be governor much less president?”

Critics saw Reagan as a kind of Prospero of the American mind. But the great unarticulated secret of Reagan's hold on the collective American psyche was his unfeigned grace. He faced an assassin's bullet and stubborn cancers with good humor, courage, and unabashed optimism. As important, Reagan was courtly and generous to his opponents. Across the horizon from the Metroliner, most Americans expect good manners from each other. In contrast to his predecessors, who had come to resent the Kennedys, Reagan regularly made "Air Force One" available to the Kennedy family. The president even flew the family and friends to the funeral of his old liberal critic, former Senator Jacob Javits. And when there was news of an illness or misfortune, the president would frequently call to offer quiet comfort.

Perhaps the single steadfast belief of the Reagan years was that arms make a difference. Even the usually recondite Alexander Haig was able to give this clear expression: "Strategic nuclear arms do not exist in a world of their own. Nations accumulate military power in order to give themselves freedom of action and deny it to their rivals." An extension of the Reagan team's belief in the utility of armaments was their studied *insouciance* toward nuclear war. At Secretary Haig's confirmation hearing, for instance, the former NATO commander referred to the possibility of a nuclear warning "shot across the bow." And, while Reagan officials cut food stamps, school lunches, and even the Coast Guard by more than 50 percent, sums exceeding 9 billion dollars were spent to design "post nuclear attack scenarios." Deputy Under Secretary of Defense T.K. Jones argued that nuclear angst was really unnecessary. After all, he said, "[i]f there are enough shovels to go around, everybody is going to make it. . . . It's the dirt that does it." With "a little bit of dirt," anybody could survive a nuclear war.

Nuclear assertiveness was believed to be capable of making the Soviets more pliant, while restoring American credibility, and steeling American resolve. Meanwhile, Reagan advisors explained, full tilt nuclear procurements and harsh rhetoric threw the Soviets off balance. Later on, the administration calculated, the Soviets might have to be diplomatically engaged, if for no other reason than the allies as well as the

American people would probably demand it. But, by then, the Soviets might be more willing to yield to a logic of nuclear preponderance. Some Reagan enthusiasts went even further. Richard Pipes, the senior Soviet specialist at the National Security Council, argued that if the Reagan arms build up proved successful then “Soviet leaders would have to choose between peacefully changing their Communist system . . . or going to war.” The Soviet KGB was virtually panicked. Extensive KGB “watches” were established for the warning signs of surprise attack. As 1981 unfolded, Soviet Defense Minister Nickolaly Okargov began to place Soviet forces on a war footing. The Soviets “surged” submarines into Baltic at four times their usual pace. Inexperienced Russian submarine commanders, in their haste to reduce Soviet vulnerability to attack, began colliding with international shipping; and, in Sweden, at least one Soviet sub ran aground.

Reagan policy makers knew that U. S. allies were worried about an exuberant and extensive U.S. “nuclear modernization” program. But, as Richard Burt, the State Department “action officer” in these matters, told Secretary Haig: “It would be ironic if we could not even decide . . . on an explicit, far-reaching, and sound strategic policy because of [allied] concerns.” If the Reagan defense agenda could be driven forward, then the State Department was confident that the U.S. could get through the inevitable rough spots of allied protests and emerge, as Burt argued, with “significant long term leverage, even under a substantial reductions regime.” Hence, in any negotiation with the Soviets, the original Reagan “game plan,” as Burt wrote privately to the secretary, was to forward U.S. arms control proposals that were confessedly, in Haig’s words, “non-starters.”

Former Budget Director David Stockman’s memoir reveals the Reagan “transition” team’s breathless eagerness to fund defense. In the rush, Stockman explained, he made a “calculator error,” underestimating the cost of the Carter defense programs by 56 percent. As a result of this momentary inattention, the U.S. military was overcompensated by one half trillion dollars more than they had expected. Since the Carter force structures basically obtained throughout the Reagan years, there was

substantial mystification about where the money had gone. But the defense budget could not claim sanctuary in perpetuity. The administration knew that one day there would be an audit, and the budgetary piper would have to be paid, but in the “out years,” Reagan hard-line planners were certain, U.S. Intermediate Nuclear Forces deployments would be in place. By then, the president’s Strategic Defense Initiative might be more than a series of complicated computer simulations, mock-ups, and “one-off” demonstrations. Later, U.S. strategic superiority would be palpable. In time, the Navy would have its coveted 600 ships. It would not be that long until the day when the skeleton of war-fighting strategies could be fleshed with “prompt” and “responsive” forces. Then, after an embarrassing eclipse, the sun would again illuminate the American Century.

II

To the Reagan team, President Carter stood for almost everything wrong with U.S. foreign policy. But Carter’s National Security apparatus shared, in private, the Reagan administration’s concerns that the Soviets were not “in compliance” with significant arms control undertakings. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, apparently in the face of Brezhnev’s personal assurance to President Carter that the Soviet military was about to do no such thing, the Carter administration was suffused by a sense that the Soviets were inveterate liars. Carter and his national security bureaucracy, however, submerged most of their concerns about Soviet “compliance” in arms control matters. Not that “compliance” issues were irrelevant to Carter’s national security advisors; but, in private, Carter’s team calculated that questions about Soviet fidelity to international agreements before the election could only further darken an atmosphere already unpropitious for a SALT agreement. Without the SALT II accord, an expensive and dangerous expansion of strategic forces on both sides seemed unavoidable. After SALT II had been brought to the Senate floor, and presumably approved, the pending agenda on Soviet treaty “compliance” could then be addressed.

In the Reagan years, the ubiquity and tone of accusations lent credence to the observation that “something different” was going on in U.S. foreign policy. The out-of-office national security professionals from the Carter years cooperated with the Reaganites in generating this impression. But the truth was that much of the ground had been well spaded by the regnant cold warriors of Carter’s last year in office. But the Reagan foreign policy did distinguish itself by its undeniable knack for placing the Soviets in the worst possible light at almost every turn. For four years, there was an avalanche of accusations alleging Soviet perfidy. Specific, formal charges of bad faith in international agreement were rare. The first was that the Soviets had transferred a substance called “trochothecone mycotoxins” to their Vietnamese ally. The Vietnamese, in turn, the administration argued, used this poisonous excrescence on Laotian and Cambodian civilians. The mycotoxin story, labeled “yellow rain” by suffering villagers, seemed proof of Soviet misdeeds on an epic scale. Deaths were said to number in thousands as a result of proxy biological experimentation on hapless non-combatants. But the evidence for these hair-raising charges rested on a single piece of one leaf “pouched” to Washington from Cambodia in 1981.

The release of the “news” that the Soviets had used bacteriological terror weapons was carefully timed. The idea, Haig wrote the president, was to gain “maximum impact from this issue.” This part of the strategy of accusation was designed by Reagan’s hard-line stalwarts to allow time for the Reagan administration to better position itself in the context of massive European public unrest surrounding the eminent deployment of U.S. intermediate range nuclear missiles. If the Soviets could be revealed as behind truly atrocious crimes on various battlefields, then anti-American and anti-nuclear European public protests might be becalmed. Two years after Haig’s dramatic charge, the international scientific community came to suspect that honey bees, swarming in huge numbers over parts of northern and tropical Asia, had deposited the “yellow rain” on leaves and grass. For five years the scientific evidence mounted: yellow rain was simply bee feces. Nonetheless, the Defense and State Departments doggedly maintained there had been a Russian transfer of

bacteriological weapons to their Asian clients. Only when the U.S. became more serious about arms control negotiations did the issue of mycotoxins meet with embarrassed administration shrugs.

At the end of the summer of 1983, the Soviets were about to be reengaged at the conference table in Geneva. Meanwhile, some Reagan campaign strategists began to plan for a summit meeting before the election. But, on Sept. 1, 1983, a Korean commercial airliner (KAL 007) crossing the Pacific between the Sino-Soviet coastline and Japan, was shot from the sky. All 269 passengers perished, including one U.S. congressman. At the time KAL 007 flew along the tip of the Sakhalin island “exclusion zone,” Secretary of State George Shultz was exploring a new set of overtures to the Soviet Union, including cultural exchanges and consulate openings in Kiev and San Francisco. Days earlier, Soviet General Secretary Andropov had proposed a nuclear test moratorium (a similar kind of initiative had been proposed by the U.S. in the early 1960’s, and had led to the atmospheric test ban treaty, the first real arms control agreement). Using the Point Magu Naval air station tarmac as a platform, White House press spokesman Larry Speaks read a statement drafted by the President himself:

What can we think of a regime that so broadly trumpets its vision of peace and global disarmament and yet so callously and quickly commits *a terrorist act*. . .? What can be said about *Soviet credibility* when they so *flagrantly lie about such a heinous act*? What can be the *scope of mutual disclosures* with a *state whose values permit it to commit such atrocities*? [emphasis supplied]

“Real time” intelligence indicated that the Soviet Air Command had mistaken the Boeing 747 for a military espionage plane. But the way the charges were phrased—that the Soviets were a piratical state, residing in the outlands, beyond civilization—made it seem that almost any agreement was folly, no less one placing limits on America’s

national means of self-defense. To many Reagan administration officials, the KAL 007 disaster was an irresistible opportunity to ferry a reinflated defense budget another furlong. To Vice President George Bush and Secretary of State Shultz, whatever their private beliefs, the KAL 007 incident had the saving grace of providing them a rhetorical hammer with which they could pound out their bonafides as hard-liners. With the regularity of a fine spring rain, there followed an incessant drizzle of accusations about Soviet lapses in observing the SALT accords. Three weeks after the KAL 007 incident, it would have been hard for the Senate to have done anything less than what it did when it passed a bill requiring the president to submit a report on the “record of Soviet compliance and non-compliance with the letter and spirit of all existing arms control agreements.”

The two most serious accusations regarding the “fatally flawed” SALT II agreement were, first, that the Soviets were encrypting or otherwise hiding flight tests of their missiles and warheads. The second charge was that the Russians had built a “battle management radar” ABM radar facility in violation of the 1972 ABM treaty.

For many years, the Soviets apparently tested their missiles “in the clear.” After U.S. electronic satellite surveillance and communications abilities had been passed to the Soviets by two young misfits (*The Falcon and the Snowman*), the Soviets began to encode their missile tests. Rising American concerns over attempts to “blind” U.S. electronic surveillance of Soviet missile tests prompted Soviet Defense Minister Dimitry Ustinov to state: “The information essential to verification will not be encrypted. . .has been reached.” But a puzzling pattern of periodic Soviet encryption ensued. If systematic Soviet test encryption succeeded in making Soviet missile capabilities unfathomable, it would have been alarming. There was always a potential for a Soviet missile “breakout” of the SALT treaty limits, giving the Soviets a technological trump in missile development. But nobody with any authority ever made the claim that Soviet encoding of missile tests had actually “impeded” detection and accurate evaluation of Soviet rocketry. Since Soviet encoding of their missile tests

were episodic and half-hearted, the best guess of the intelligence community was that the practice was related to Soviet bargaining behavior more than it was a means to confound U.S. intelligence or achieving any strategic surprise.

If the Krasnyarsk radars were part of a battle management system, then it was a clear violation of the ABM treaty. Anatoli Dobrynin suggested an official U.S. inspection of the Krasnyarsk facility in 1985. Neither Congress nor the administration took up the Soviet ambassador's suggestion. In September 1987, however, a group of Congressmen and journalists revived the offer. The visitors came to a cavernous, half-finished facility, bereft of equipment. In some sections, work had been halted for years. Whatever had been intended for the Krasnyarsk facility, it had clearly become an enormous white elephant. No matter how frail and flimsy the substance proved to be of allegations of Soviet bad faith, Reagan seemed married to a strategy of accusation, even when it undercut support for agreements that he himself had begun to embrace.

Gradually, arms control had achieved a new legitimacy as defense spending flattened out and then declined. But by making "distrust of the Soviets" part of the cant of East-West relations, serious impediments had been created to the acceptance of documents which the Reagan Administration had arduously endeavored to conclude in the waning months of its tenure. Indeed, in the twilight of Reagan's term, the administration rose again to answer its strange compulsion: the mere existence of the Krasnyarsk radars were, the White House asserted, a "material breach" of the ABM treaty, and the looming structures would have to be dismantled if a START agreement were to eventuate. Meanwhile, the State Department was instructed privately to assure the Soviets that ongoing discussions in Geneva were being conducted in the utmost seriousness, with an eye to concluding a treaty, at least in draft, by the time Reagan departed. Perhaps the Soviets understood the "signaling" from Washington, but the American public had hardly been edified in the process.

Discussions about strategic weapons never seemed to be argued in their own terms. Rather they were more like physicists' abstractions peeling off into even more inaccessible and abstruse worlds of multifaceted symbols. The subsequent "debate" had the formality of Balinese puppet theater, Wayan Kulit, which uses intricately painted puppets to cast shadows on backlit muslin. In the Indonesian countryside, ancient music pops and crackles in the heat, while each side takes vigorous but not very hurtful whacks at the other. For "expert" and "cleared" arms analysts, verification issues had a peculiar formalism: ten parts catharsis to perhaps one part of substance. By any normal measure, the exercise was unreal; since, in the words of Congressman Les Aspin, chairman of the House Committee on Armed Services, the military significance of the purported violations never did amount to more than a "hill of beans."

III

The proximate aim of U. S. foreign policy since World War II has been containment. The ultimate aim, however, was to position the United States for the inevitable day when the Soviets would rejoin the international community. Measured by the standards of the near term, the Reagan policy was a success. The U.S. had advanced its military superiority. Arms control agreements were achieved, and new accords were at hand. But by denying, until late in the day, the possibility that fundamental changes in Soviet behavior were possible, Reagan turned away from a substantial opportunity to prepare the domestic groundwork for a break with the past. Instead, he offered an insistent image: on the one hand, America was depicted as just wriggling free of fetters. On the other, there was the Soviet Union, chiseling at every opportunity. Absent was not only a decent respect for the evidence, but also lacking was a vision of where it all might lead.

In a sense, the Soviets collaborated with the Reagan Administration in giving enormous weight to strategic defense. SDI could, the Soviets feared, involve them in an element of the arms race for which they were ill-suited. At a maximum, SDI was

another part of the evolving stratagems, as a spokesman explained it for the Navy, of “shooting the archer before he releases his arrow.” At a minimum, SDI served to rattle the Soviets; thus, SDI was a successful part of the strategy, labeled privately “exploiting Soviet vulnerabilities.” When one Politburo advisor complained that U.S. military policy was contrived “as if there is no danger of war,” he inadvertently confirmed to the administration that it was doing the right thing, without having to focus a single beam or place even a mirror into orbit. So intense was Soviet concern about SDI, that Reagan, like Harry Truman at Potsdam, may have believed that he had come to possess a “master card” in dealing with the problem of Soviet power.

SDI was important as long as the illusion could be sustained; as long as the U.S. could devote monies to futuristic programs, and as long as the Soviets continued to express real worries that SDI was a meaningful threat. At 48 percent of the FY 1988 Defense Department’s research budget, SDI was also meaningful to a gaggle of weapons laboratories. Serious physicists and engineers, starved for much of the 1970’s, were on a sweet ride, researching lasers, mirror optics, computing puzzles, and imagery techniques. Indeed, researchers at Lawrence Livermore Laboratories reverentially (and, to them, quite aptly) labeled the artifacts of SDI the “Weapons of Life.” But, after five years, and 14 billion dollars of research, few physicists could understand how SDI technologies would interact to shield significant portions of the U.S. population or, for that matter, protect even a few critical military targets.

Finally, in the early fall of 1987, the Soviets began to finesse what only can be described as a baffling hysteria surrounding the American SDI effort. The Soviet press began to stress the American program’s myriad technical difficulties. The Russians also began to claim that they were subjecting their own programs to cost-effective criteria. Maybe the Soviets concluded that a “stand alone” START agreement was possible. Perhaps the Russians had discovered from their own considerable efforts in strategic defense research that there were no practical solutions to the problem of “strategic vulnerability.” Or the Soviets might have done their sums and discovered

that there was not enough money to fund almost any of the Reagan defense targets through the 1990's, much less the measureless expenses associated with a viable SDI program.

In 1986, one senior NSC aid told me, “just about every senior member of the administration” had recommended, at one time or another a “grand compromise,” i.e., using SDI as a bargaining chip. Many administration stalwarts, including Secretary Shultz, were reduced to arguing that SDI's best use was against limited accidental attack in a world that required vastly reduced numbers of ICBM's. Even Richard Perle, a professional antagonist of arms control, once out of office, began to indicate that space defense was “not realistic.” In an era of budgetary stringency, SDI had become less an all-purpose futuristic shillelagh and more the hobby horse of one command within the Air Force. If ignored, most military professionals hoped SDI would quietly slink back to the remote labs from which it had been conjured. What may have never been more than space dust had finally been cleared from the U.S.-Soviet dialogue. The pity was that the folklore of the Cold War—Russians only come to the bargaining table when the United States achieves “positions of strength”—seemed confirmed.

IV

Despite its evident disdain for the substantial baggage that the Carter administration had left at the station of Central American affairs, the Reagan administration nonetheless picked much of it up and energetically charged ahead. During the constitutionally mandated “transition,” between November 1980 and the inauguration, Carter received reports that Cubans were managing the Nicaraguan intelligence service and that Bulgarian, Soviet, and even PLO personnel were assisting the new Nicaraguan regime. The Sandinistas were also reported to be assisting a Marxist insurgency in El Salvador. But U.S. intelligence was confessedly poor. CIA had relied largely on the instruments and informants of the exiled National Guard who had fled, leaving behind long lists of American assets in Nicaragua.

Secretary Haig believed the Sandinistas were a “sideshow.” The U.S., Haig argued, should “go to the source” of revolutionary and terrorist problems in the hemisphere. Cuba was Haig’s target. In this, however, Secretary Haig had virtually no support. The Joint Chiefs argued that a blockade would consume just about all U.S. troops stationed in Europe, most assets of the Sixth Fleet, and perhaps require bringing up the Seventh Fleet. If the island did not soon buckle, the only option might be an invasion. But Cuba had an enormous, combat-hardened army of more than 200,000 men. Even without Soviet support of Cuba and even if U.S. public opinion was behind an assault on the island, an invasion presented endless possibilities for disaster. Haig backed off but argued that the administration needed a “rollback.” President Reagan concurred. He told associates at the time, “I want to win one.”

While confessing the peripheral nature of the Nicaraguan “threat,” Secretary Haig nonetheless suggested an assault on Nicaragua. It would be, he reasoned, a salutary lesson to the Cubans and might well cow the Soviets. But an invasion of Nicaragua proved no more acceptable to military planners than an invasion of Cuba. The JCS believed it would require a substantial portion of at least one fleet and most U.S. ground forces. Two possibilities remained. The first was to make life as difficult as possible for the Sandinistas so that they might “self destruct” from the pressure. The second was to attempt to find a *modus vivendi* with the new regime. The new Reagan assistant secretary for Latin American affairs, Thomas Enders, a veteran foreign service officer, was charged with riding both rails at the same time. Enders, however, was hardly a run-of-the-mill “negotiator.” Much of Enders’ diplomatic perspective was derived from his years as a virtual proconsul in Southeast Asia. A huge man, at more than six feet seven inches, possessing a peremptory personal manner, Enders arrived at the U.S. embassy in Managua and delivered, *ex cathedra*, his explanation of the “two tracks” available to the Nicaraguans:

...[This] country [is] a goddamn flea that could be knocked off by the United States with its hands tied Don't be silly . . . You must commit yourself to limiting your military buildup. . . . [A]nd you have to get out of El Salvador. Ortega said, "No, the Salvadoran revolution is our shield. It makes our revolution safer."

The Sandinista leader, Daniel Ortega, in his early thirties, looked like a small, excessively serious graduate student. He had fought for years in the jungle against enormous odds, losing a brother in the process. He had himself been arrested and tortured by Somoza's Guards. Ortega had probably not met many bigger men, but he had undoubtedly met bigger bullies.

Six weeks into the the Reagan term, on March 9, 1981, the White House transmitted a "finding" to Congress authorizing the funding of "moderate" opponents to the Sandinistas. The finding secured discretionary monies to begin to sweep Soviet influence from Afghanistan, Laos, Cambodia, Grenada, Iran, Libya, and Cuba as well. But the Nicaraguan "activity" had a special emphasis in the CIA. It was the first and, it seemed, the most manageable of a series of covert exertions which became known, five years later, as the "Reagan Doctrine." The Nicaragua undertaking was important in five ways:

a) To the "operations" side of the CIA, the Reagan doctrine was deliverance from a long dark night of falling budgets, bungled operations, massive layoffs, and dispiriting revelations about excesses—ranging from goofy assassination plots to the use of experiments with LSD on mental patients.

b) In terms of the Reagan foreign policy faithful, the Nicaraguan "project" was emblematic of 40 years of struggle. The struggle for Nicaragua was part and parcel of the great strategic equation, even though intrinsically Nicaragua posed little risk. In

language which would have been familiar to John Foster Dulles, Under Secretary of Defense Fred Ikle, argued:

... There is a driving organizing force behind it all: here it stirs up and feeds an insurgency, there it exploits a coup d'etat, here it instigates terrorism to weaken democratic governments, ...diligently, ruthlessly [it] expands its dominance through the world. We in the West ...[have] checkmated ... Soviet expansion. But ...primarily [in] the so-called Third World ... The Cold War [is being] followed by insurgency warfare

c) Army budgets had missed out in Mr. Stockman's initial fit of absent-mindedness. For parts of the Army, the "new" counter-terrorists mission and "low intensity conflict strategies" (more than a bit familiar to graduates of the "insurgency studies" of the 1960's) promised more missions, men, and material for new commands. It was irresistible.

d) The successful demonstration in Nicaragua of American power, it was argued, would help rid the U.S. of its debilitating institutional immobilism and deep-seated public doubts about the future cost of foreign policy activism. If there could be success, or, better, a series of successes, starting in Central America, then, in some of Reagan's favorite language, "America would be back" and "standing tall."

e) Nicaragua, and similar "low intensity" conflicts associated with the Reagan doctrine, would tie down Soviet resources. As Ikle confided to an associate, it was part of the Reagan team's plan: "to spend the Soviets into the ground."

Argentina, with its own agenda in fighting Communists in exile, acted as a "cut out" in disbursing CIA funds to the contras. The Argentines were preferred, at first, since the contras were too disreputable to be seen with American officers. By the fall of 1981,

however, large amounts of direct support were being delivered to the contras. Within two years, the U.S. had put a number of action teams inside Nicaragua itself. Some were American units which organized suppressive fire and provided lift for the contras. Other CIA contract personnel were assembled and trained in Panama. They were infiltrated across Nicaraguan frontiers in order to make it appear that the contras had effective fighting and commando forces. Nicaraguan statistics showed that contras had been responsible for 10,000 casualties in the first 18 months. Several human rights groups began documenting stomach-turning contra atrocities within Nicaragua. CIA Deputy Director Duane (Dewey) Claridge, in 1983, testified that contras had assassinated “heads of cooperatives, nurses, doctors, and judges.” “After all,” Claridge shrugged, “this is war.” But the U.S. armed forces, along with the armed services of virtually all advanced countries exclude civilians as targets of war unless they are armed and pose an immediate threat. Making civilians a target is a prosecutable offense. If ordered to injure a civilian, soldiers are legally enjoined to disobey superior officers. Instructions on who and what are proper targets of force are usually issued as part of field packs. The profession of arms is based on coherence, discipline, and honor. If soldiers behave wantonly, discipline is lost. The regular Army is very much aware of this “lesson” of Vietnam; and, in general, the U.S. armed forces have a proud history of professionalism. Claridge’s flip characterization sullied professional soldiers everywhere.

Few members of Congress wanted to be called lily-livered after the 1980 election. But there were the haunting contradictions with extant legislation and the eerie recrudescence of evils thought to have been put to rest after Watergate. To dignify the contras, the State Department was assigned a “non-traditional,” “white propaganda” operation which worked with the NSC and a group of “psy-war” experts on loan from CIA and the special forces. In January 1983, the CIA actually hired a Miami based public relations firm, with a \$600,000 annual retainer, to project a more “positive image” of the contras. Television ads aimed at supporting the contras were personally reviewed by Elliot Abrams, the assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs. One target was former Maryland Representative Michael Barnes, chairman of the

House Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs. Barnes was running for a normally “safe” Democratic Party seat in the Senate. Using taxpayers’ money funneled from the State Department and NSC, one “private group” launched a campaign of TV invective in order “to destroy Barnes [and] use him as an object lesson to others.”

In 1983, the CIA produced a manual for the contras with instructions on hiring criminals, assassinating miscreant contra personnel (and then blaming the Sandinistas), and “neutralizing Sandinista officials.” Congress bestirred themselves. In January and February 1984, Nicaragua’s harbors were attacked by CIA “contract” personnel. Six ships belonging to U.S. allies were damaged. Finally, Congress was sufficiently vexed to seriously limit contra aid. This was the moment when then CIA Director William Casey decided to further “privatize” the Reagan Doctrine. The Sultan of Brunei was dunned for support. The Taiwanese and the Koreans apparently anted up. South Africa, Taiwan, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras contributed weapons, logistic support, and money to the “Enterprise.” The Saudis contributed. There were also odd reports of Japanese personnel assisting the Miskito Indians. Monies were raised for the contras by briefings held in the White House. In a curious amalgam, part Sothebys, and part roadside tent revival, White House *soirees* were convened, with senior U.S. officials enlisted to “sell” from slick “catalogues” equipment ranging from light attack aircraft to “Blowpipe” surface-to-air missiles. Sometimes President Reagan appeared in order to “pitch” the “freedom fighters” to wealthy donors.

At one point, when Congress was pinching off a great deal of U.S. official and pseudoprivate monies, almost the whole contra resupply operation was run by Israelis. On the return leg of the supply missions, cocaine was ferried to the U.S. market. Just before the Congress was to again debate the contra aid question, Lt. Col. Oliver North released a photo of a Nicaraguan Sandinista drug runner (who happened to be a U.S. informer as well) caught in the act by a hidden camera. The picture lethally compromised a complex DEA “sting” that had promised to bring in the whole of the notorious Columbian Medellin cartel.

In order to help raise funds for the contras and undo Marxists in Angola, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan as well, the World Anti Communist League (WACL) was enlisted, through its head, retired Gen. John Singlaub. WACL's policies were unsavory, at best. In Mexico, WACL's "correspondents" were the Tecos, a neo-Nazi association of anti-Semites. In Honduras, the local WACL correspondent was in intimate association with the death squads. The Guatemalan WACL representative was Mario Sandoval Alacaron, who had been reliably linked with drugs (and organized mayhem, such as kidnapping and bank robbing) in order to finance his party's activities. In El Salvador, the World Anti-Communist League's affiliate was managed through Roberto D'Aubuisson, a man implicated in the murder of the archbishop of San Salvador and the attempted murder of three US ambassadors. The administration's view of the "private" supporters of the contras could not have been clearer. "What's kept the resistance alive," said Assistant Secretary Abrams "has been private contributions. Some very, very, brave people have been willing to actually bring this [war] material into Nicaragua. God bless them." Senator Patrick Leahy characterized this bypassing of legislative constraints as an executive use of a "wink and a nod" to skirt the law. Abrams retorted, "a wink and a nod, hell. We think it's been fine."

All Central America had now been stitched together as a vast intelligence site, training redoubt, and arms depot. Costa Rica had been virtually compelled to give up its nonmilitary tradition and neutral position in Latin America. When an ammunition-laden plane was stuck in the mud at one Costa Rican airfield, the plane had to be towed out with trucks borrowed by the U.S. embassy. Costa Rica's help to the contras could be kept a secret no longer. A barrage of recriminations ensued; and the classic, moderate Costa Rica ruling coalition cracked. The contras in Honduras were supported by a U.S. presence which included one of the largest diplomatic missions in the world. In 1983, the sole DEA office in the country was closed down for over two years, while reports reliably established that Honduran and intelligence units and the contras were profiteering in cocaine.

For most of the Reagan years, there was an exploding market in cocaine transshipped from Central America. By the mid-1980's, a conclusive case was made that the effective ruler of Panama, General Manuel Noriega, had not only been involved in drug trafficking, but had also been involved in arms deals with Cuba. When General Noriega was indicted by a Florida grand jury, the State Department decided to make him an example. At first, the putative "constitutional" president was encouraged to "fire" General Noriega via a prerecorded video. When Noriega outmaneuvered his internal opponents, the U.S. embargoed the export of dollars, Panama's only legal currency. The Panamanian economy virtually imploded; but Noriega hung on. The State Department's Latin American "expert," Elliot Abrams, noted one foreign service officer serving a tour in Panama:

. . . ruined a healthy economy, weakened the pro-American middle class and created the conditions in Panama for growing Communist influence. You've got to give yourself credit. That's a hell of an achievement for diplomacy.

In March 1986, just as Congress was about to debate contra aid again, a high ranking State Department official from Washington shouted over the phone to the U.S. Embassy in Honduras: "You have to tell them to declare there was [a Nicaraguan] incursion." Honduras's president resisted. Finally, Ambassador John Ferch, who had been in bed with the flu, caught up with the Honduran leader who was on his way for a long Easter weekend at the beach. "Mr. President," Ferch advised, "my opinion [is] you don't have any choice" but to come back and request assistance. Thus was ultimately drafted the "Honduran request" to stave off a "Nicaraguan invasion." In the end, Hondurans, perhaps the least nationalistic people in Central America, became resentful. When the U.S. virtually put out a "contract" to retrieve a notorious Honduran drug dealer who had been involved in the torture and murder of a DEA agent in Mexico, the embassy in Tegucigalpa was set alight by an angry mob while the Honduran police and military looked on.

In El Salvador, by the end of the Reagan Administration, three billion dollars had been spent to buttress democratic processes and defeat the Communist rebellion. Yet in 1988 the death squads resurfaced. The Salvadoran economy was a shambles, and GNP actually declined. In less than eight years, the Salvadoran guerillas, although declared by the U.S. embassy in San Salvador to have been reduced to a “nuisance,” tripled the scope of their operations. More than 60,000 noncombatants had been killed or “disappeared.” Great sections of the Salvadoran countryside had been made into “free fire zones,” as the military explained it, to “separate the people from the guerrillas.”

* The contras’ conduct, and the character of contra “military” activities were an enduring problem. At the time of Claridge’s testimony, an American Catholic priest witnessed an attack on his parish in Nicaragua:

“Twenty peasant people were assassinated by the contras, including women and children. Some of them were terribly tortured first. After decapitating one little girl about 14 years old, they put her head on a stake at the side of a trail, to strike terror into people.”

* Title 18, paragraph 960 of the US criminal code prohibits assistance to “armed expeditionaries” “begin[ing] or setting] foot or provide[ing] for or furnish[ing] the money [to] any expedition” with any nation with whom the United States is not at war.

V

Virtually any successful guerrilla campaign, if it is to be successful at all, collects taxes and controls territory. The Huks, the current Filipino rebels, the Viet Cong, the Chinese Communists, Fidel Castro’s small band, the Afghans—every

successful peasant based revolution of recent times has mounted a sustained, popular struggle in the countryside. The Salvadoran and Sandinista revolutionaries moved as a feature of the landscape. But the contras had their heritage as Somoza's Guardsmen, and, they had been trained in an American tradition of meeting fire power with superior fire power. In this, both they and their U.S. trainers knew they would always be outgunned. The U.S. was aware that the contras were not a winning force. Army Gen. Paul F. Gorman, chief of the Southern Command in Panama admitted that "[t]he training of the contras . . . was abysmal. . . . I didn't regard it as a very effective military organization." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Crowe, suggested the absence of contra military success would inevitably drive Americans to "back out from under the commitment." Frank Carlucci, in his incarnation as director of the National Security Council, told associates: "I don't see how the contras can win." Nobody could.

The purpose of the Reagan administration in Central America was perplexing. It had always accepted Mrs. Kirkpatrick's formulation: left-wing "totalitarian regimes" do not, by their nature, give way to democracy—except by being virtually undone. To the administration, their own prescription for a peaceful conclusion to the war—"power sharing"—was an oxymoron. Only two explanations for the stubborn association with evident failure seem plausible. The first was to so bedevil the Nicaraguans that any who contemplated their example would shudder. The second explanation was, simply, that it was a strategy of putting off the inevitable contra collapse until a "different watch." The "disposal" problem, as John Kennedy had referred to the survivors of the Bay of Pigs operation, would come later. There was not much more life that could be breathed into the contras' waning and artificial insurgency. Eventually, the contras would dissolve. Some would chose exile. Some would be reintegrated back into the rural economy of Nicaragua. And some would simply be crushed in battle. Whatever contra remnant bands remained would probably bear their defeat bitterly. Then, the choice for policy makers would be somehow to arrange for safe passage to the U.S. or

to abandon the contras to their fate; a familiar story to those with memories long enough to recall the American postwar association with the Kurds, Meo tribespeople, Vietnamese, or Baltic and Ukrainian separatists.

There was not much more life that could be breathed into the contra operation. Yet, when the president of Costa Rica came to Washington to discuss a settlement of the war, Elliot Abrams announced that he was “intensely displeased” that the Costa Ricans were “lobbying” Congress in favor of the peace plan for which President Arias had just won a Nobel prize. The Arias Peace Plan was “fatally flawed,” the president said. In January 1988, when yet another National Security director, Gen. Colin Powell, toured Central America, his “advise” was that aid to the region would be predicated on support of the contras. But the contras could see the inevitable. Monies from Congress might continue, but only at a much reduced level; and funds would be disbursed not by sympathetic CIA personnel but by the OAS or the Red Cross. Seeing an end to their capacity for finding arms, supplies, and safe haven, the contras began a process of hesitant negotiations with their old foes in Managua.

Our foreign policy in Central America from Panama to Mexico was a tapestry of unrelieved disaster. Nowhere in Central America did people have a better life. In most of the area, after billions of AID funds (most of which were siphoned off to security assistance programs), the leading cause of death was still malnutrition. By the end of the 1980's, the fine sounding phrases surrounding the “Caribbean Basin Initiative” and the Kissinger Commission gathered more of the dust that covers the “good Neighbor Policy” of the 1940's and the Alliance for Progress of the Kennedy years. CIA Director Casey argued that Mexico could be the next Iran. Mexico was besieged by ills. Foundering in a sea of debt, the ruling Mexican party had claimed a mandate only by evident fraud. There were bursting urban sores and an accelerating rhythm of scandal involving corruption, narcotics, repression, and political assassinations. The Reagan administration had invested much hope and rhetoric in a coalition of bankers and investors who were enjoined to support conservative, free enterprise voices in the

area. Jamaica was singled out as manageable. But stubborn problems of high unemployment, crime, and low commodity prices seemed to best the new paint of slick promotions, loan infusions, and White House “photo opportunities.”

* They were called, in Nicaragua, “los Bestias”—the beast, a term they arrogated to themselves with kind of perverse pride.

VI

Policy after policy in the Reagan years seemed as if it were staged by Max Sennett or the Three Stooges. Once, when Secretary Shultz tried to inform himself of the opening gambit in the weird arms-for-hostages escapade, White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan refused to confirm or deny its existence. The secretary of state, at the time, was coordinating an arms embargo of Iran and a condemnation of that nation as the sponsor of state terrorism. But neither Shultz, nor his great bureaucratic adversary, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger was aware that there had been an “intelligence finding” authorizing the diversion of funds to the contras. Nor was Weinberger informed that the Saudis had given more than \$32 million to the contras in what now appears to have been an elaborate *quid pro quo* for the \$8.5 billion sale of “AWAC’s” surveillance aircraft. AWAC’s, the most expensive aircraft ever built, were sold to the Saudis in order to protect them from Iranian attack. But the missiles the U.S. had sent Iran in 1985 gave the Iranians a capability to shoot down the Saudis’ new AWAC’s.

The Reagan administration set up a series of procedures in 1982 that required eight signatures before any intelligence “finding” would have effect. Congress, in turn, was to be notified in a “timely fashion,” as the Hughes-Ryan legislation puts it. Of the prescribed eight signatures, only four were obtained. Weinberger testified he had believed that the Iran arms sales initiative had been “strangled in its cradle.” The defense secretary learned that the Iran arms sale had gone forward only when he read a third country’s intelligence report. The Joint Chiefs were kept in the dark. The

chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the one group in the Reagan years that at least has had a consistent vision of U.S. purposes and capabilities, testified: we “are the ones who are supposed to provide military advice.” He added: “I didn’t appreciate [having] “zero knowledge” about military shipments to Iran.”

The American ambassador in Beirut repeatedly met with NSC figures involved in the arms-for-hostages arrangements and did not report back to Secretary Shultz but rather to Lt. Col. North and Admiral Poindexter. Secretary Shultz, in rising voice, said he was “shocked. . . . There is supposed to be—I say supposed to be—a chain of command. . . .” The CIA was “blacked out” in the sale of weapons to Iran and the transfer of funds to the contras. Those who were informed of the undertaking with Iran seem to have been DCI Casey, Lt. Col. North, two National Security assistants, and, perhaps, the president. Reagan signed at least one finding but claimed he never read it; and, in any case, he “forgot” its substance. Attorney General Edwin Méeese, the nations’ highest law enforcement officer, argued that even if written justification for U.S. arms shipments to Iran could not be found in any document the president had already made a “mental finding.”

Three weeks after an administration official told Congress that the U.S. was pressing its allies to embargo Iran, the seventh shipment of arms—consisting of 500 TOW missiles—arrived in Tehran. Iran’s dissidents and émigrées overseas were encouraged by the CIA to overthrow the Khomeini regime. But the CIA, in order to establish itself with some Iranian “moderates,” passed on reliable information to Iran regarding Soviet penetration of the same Iranian opposition groups, many of whom were, in turn, rounded up and executed on the basis of our intelligence. Iraq, which started the war and indeed initiated most of the first four years of attacks on Persian Gulf shipping, was given targeting information by a U.S. general stationed in Baghdad. When the U.S. sent a flotilla to the Gulf in order to match a Soviet offer of assistance to Kuwait, an Iraqi jet nearly sank the USS *Stark* with a French Exocet missile, killing 37 crewmen. The U.S. responded by sinking Iranian ships and announcing a series of changes in the rules of engagement which gave local commanders the right to sink

virtually anything Iranian if our ships seemed to be menaced. When another *Perry* class frigate was blown up, in April 1988, by an Iranian mine, the U.S. announced new and even more “flexible” rules of engagement. In early July 1988, an Aegis cruiser mistook an Iranian commuter flight for an Iranian F-14 (with no known air-to-surface capability). The plane, Air-Iran 655, on a regularly scheduled flight to Dhubai, was shot from the sky by the USS *Vincennes*. Two hundred ninety passengers died.

Although less than 5 percent of U. S. oil comes from the Gulf, American competitors derive a large percentage of their oil from that region. Hence, the Gulf convoy was said was to protect the oil lines of the West. But the tanker war, before the U.S. convoy had arrived, inhibited less than 1 percent of all tanker traffic; and, with the imminent completion of new pipe lines, most of the region’s oil would not be shipped through the Gulf anyway, but, rather would be piped north or northwest. In any case, the only real air-to-ground threat or missile threat to Gulf oil, and, indeed, most of the damage to shipping before our intention had emanated from Iraq. When asked to explain some of this, one official said, “You’d have had to have been there.”

The decision to go to the Gulf with a reflagging convoy was made in response to Kuwaiti request to the Soviets to escort three of their tankers. It was a classic case of the manipulation of a threat of Communist penetration in order to extract another yard of U.S. assistance of one kind or another. But the “Hollywood reaction,” as a Kuwaiti diplomat sarcastically put it, seemed little appreciated in the region. The Saudis whose oil it was said was the ultimate prize in the Gulf, had, by the time the Gulf convoy appeared in numbers, began to back away from the U.S. Saudi Arabia turned down our request for joint relief efforts to the Afghanis stranded in Pakistan; and they backed out of commitments to the “Reagan Doctrine,” pleading budgetary stringencies. At the same time, however, the Saudis managed to purchase long-range Chinese surface-to-surface missiles, and placed more than \$40 billion in orders for new fighter planes and associated military gear from the British. The Navy was

unenthusiastic about a mission which drained as much as \$2 billion a year from its operations budget. The professional Navy wanted to make a point about naval power and get out. As then Secretary of the Navy James Webb wrote:

Now that we have demonstrated our naval capabilities to Iran, and, at the same time destroyed much of its navy, [we can] declare victory, and reduce our naval structure . . . and then disappear back into the sea.

The downing of Air Iran 655 “was an accident bound to happen,” opined one Pentagon pundit, since, every day, scheduled civil aviation overflew the zone the U.S. had “policed” for 16 months. The “after action” report of the Navy later formally exculpated the *Vincennes*’ crew laying instead what blame could be mustered at the feet of the Iranians themselves for scheduling flights over a combat zone. Admiral Trost, the CNO, claimed the captain of the *Vincennes* “did the right thing.” A few weeks after the Air Iran 655 incident, the Iranians accepted, with UN mediation, the standing Iraqi offer of a cease fire. The Iranians, U.S. officials explained, realized they were isolated when they were unsuccessful in getting an *a priori* condemnation of the U.S. downing of the plane in the UN Security Council.

Perhaps felling civil aircraft is an attention-getter in Tehran. But it is not the same thing as losing more than a half million youngsters to some of the most hideous battlefield conditions since Verdun and Ypres. The administration claimed that the sometimes embargo of war goods to Iran— “Operation Staunch”—dried up Iranian arms. Yet the embargo did not give Iraq its edge in air superiority gained well before the embargo began. Nor did U.S. policy have anything to do with the one war-determining weapon that was used: poison gas. The administration’s claim that it contributed to the impending peace between Iran and Iraq shared the intellectual force of the claim that the cock’s crowing in the morning brings up the sun.

VII

Perhaps the only coherent aspect of Reagan-era foreign policy was its persistent and sometimes zany urge to keep under wraps its back-channel “facts” and to muzzle free inquiry. On the Reagan watch, diaries were pulled from a public library shelf years after they had been referenced in print. The rationale, according to the deputy director of NSA, was that “just because something has been published doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be classified.” A former NATO general could not get a visa because he was on the wrong side of the European nuclear controversy. Newspapers were threatened with a dusty espionage statute for the crime of printing information released by high administration officials and amplified on TV by the president himself. In the summer of 1985, the Defense Department’s director of research said that if university professors wanted to get Pentagon research money, they had better “keep their mouths shut” when and if they had any doubts about the administration’s Strategic Defense Initiative. In 1986, Lawrence Korb, a former assistant secretary for manpower, suggested after he left government, that the Navy might be forced to trim its budget, given a new fiscal reality. Korb wrote his report while he was working for Raytheon, a large defense contractor. When Korb remained in his new civilian position, despite a spate of high Defense Department official calls to oust him, an indignant Pentagon official asked the CEO at Raytheon “when [did] you started kicking the customer around.” Within weeks, Korb was on the job market.

Groups involved in protesting administration policies in Central America had their offices ransacked and burglarized. Maryknoll nuns, members of the United Auto Workers, academics, and Martin Luther King’s old group, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, were put on FBI “watches.” The notebooks and papers of academics returning from Central America were confiscated. One White House inspired, “private” group, called the “American Anti-Terrorism Committee,” used the “excess” profit realized from the bizarre sale of arms to Iran to fund a television campaign that was helpful in defeating a Democratic congressman’s bid for what had been, normally, a “safe” Senate seat. A bogus Roman Catholic priest was paid \$2500

by Lt. Col. North. The phony priest, Thomas Dowling, disputed charges of contra human rights abuses in his subsequent testimony to the Congress. Later, after Dowling was taken in for a photo session with President Reagan, the counterfeit clergyman was commissioned by North to write a pamphlet describing the contras' virtues.

For years, in a fashion which was sadly to encapsulate the decisional style of the Reagan Era from Central America to defense procurement practices, the administration did its best to hear only what it chose to hear. Deputy Director of CIA Thomas Gates told a Senate Committee that the CIA, “[F]rom the director on down, actively shunned information . . . [W]e didn’t want to know. . . . [W]e actively discouraged people from telling us things.” Historians of science remember the collapse of Soviet biology under the long, scandalous Lysenko era (when the party held that the theory of evolution was not science but capitalist propaganda) and the failure of Germany to develop an atomic bomb and instead to cultivate “Aryan” physics. It was an autistic strategy. If it were to take root in the U.S., the government would resemble Tolstoy’s parable of a deaf man sitting by the side of the road with a trumpet to his ear, answering questions nobody asked.

Many of the Reagan appointees viewed public service with the gleaming eye of a Florida swamp developer. A kind of towel-snapping, 19th-hole atmosphere covered a rapacity rivaling any Biblical winged plague. A library shelf of laws had been broken. The National Security Council staff and the CIA used practices harkening back to letters of marque, a power expressly reserved to the Congress in the Constitution. Claims were forwarded that the president and his staff could construct shadowy treasuries designed to support hidden intelligence *apparats* and private wars. The Constitution and the president’s very oath of office were disregarded. Presidential authority had begun to see the sun again in the Reagan years. But, at the end of his time, it had ducked back behind a cloud of disappointment.

Overseas, a sad parade of officials who had been embraced by the Reagan administration were gradually disgraced. Revealed as odious and corrupt, they fled at midnight in search of safe haven. Most importantly, to the chagrin of the remaining right-wing faithful, Reagan literally and figuratively embraced the “evil empire,” arguing that the Soviet Union had become a “normal” society. The Soviet human rights problems, held Reagan, were the culpability of a few bureaucratic die-hards. He now believed “a turning point in the history of East-West relations” had arrived; and he was willing to give Gorbachev “the benefit of the doubt. . . .” In the end, relations had changed, perhaps permanently, for the better. And Reagan, onetime epitome of the Cold War Warrior, managed to say, with a straight face, “I told you so.”

* for the largely nonpartisan Committee on National Security

VIII

F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed that the mark of intelligence is the capacity to hold two contradictory ideas and still retain the ability to act effectively. The Reagan administration, to the degree it was marked by any ideas at all, was caught in its own antinomies. The exuberant champion of conservatism and capitalism, with Doonesbury sardonically looking on, declared victory, and embraced the Soviets. This was accomplished in the face of the other vacuities, inconsistencies, and all too frequent manias of an executive machinery that seemed unable to monitor itself, much less events. The great Reagan departure from the Cold War seemed at odds with its own inclinations and purposes. Yet, if the Reagan administration did not grab destiny by the forelock and wrestle with it systematically, Reagan’s last 18 months were marked by a self-conscious struggle with a stunning transformation in Soviet-American relations. By the last months of the Reagan years, an ocean of obstacles had been traversed. The Reagan administration had meandered like some weary hobo to a place, in Matthew Arnold’s words, “between two worlds, one not yet dead, and the other still unborn.”

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