



Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

By Paul Lettow

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Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) has puzzled scholars and commentators. Some have claimed that it was a purely political maneuver, while others have explained it as a ruse conjured up by presidential advisers to weaken Soviet resolve.

These assumptions, however, fail to acknowledge the depth of Reagan's involvement in nuclear abolition, and how passionately committed Reagan was to the pursuit of this goal. In *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, Paul Lettow renders untenable the persistent belief that Reagan was an ideologically shallow figurehead.

Reagan's wish to ban nuclear armament first came to light in 1945, just months after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. While sidestepping political partisanship, Lettow demonstrates that scholars and historians have largely neglected to assess properly the influence of Reagan's ideal and how it led to one of the most important, if the least understood, of Reagan's accomplishments.

In a narrative that covers the start of Reagan's presidency and the 1986 Reykjavík summit between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, during which SDI was a defining issue, we see SDI for what it was: a full-on assault against nuclear weapons waged as much through policy as through ideology. While cabinet members and advisers—Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger among them—played significant roles, it was Ronald Reagan, himself who presided over every element, large and small, of this paradigm shift in U.S. diplomacy.

Lettow conducted interviews with former Reagan officials—four of his six national security advisers, both of his ambassadors to the USSR, and both of his defense secretaries. He also draws upon the vast body of declassified security documents from the Reagan presidency; much of what he quotes from these documents appears publicly here for the first time.

The result is the first major work to apply such evidence to the study of SDI and superpower diplomacy. In *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear*

Weapons, Paul Lettow does not simply add nuance to the existing record; he revises our very understanding of the Reagan presidency.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The growing body of affirmative revisionist scholarship on Ronald Reagan and his presidency is enhanced by this comprehensively researched, well-crafted monograph. Independent scholar Lettow uses recently declassified archival material to establish Reagan's determination to abolish nuclear weapons as a focal point of his presidency. Reagan believed that the U.S. should use the arms race to bankrupt the Soviet Union, and that the development of an effective defense against ballistic missiles would then render all nuclear weapons negotiable and foster discussion of their abolition; the U.S. would then share the system with the U.S.S.R. and other countries, ensuring the safety of an eventually nuclear-free world. Lettow presents Reagan as a thoughtful leader, who developed his radical challenge to both liberal and conservative conventional wisdom on the Cold War independently. His unwavering belief that missile defense was possible reflected his intellectual conviction that the U.S. could solve the technical challenges involved. Lettow shows Reagan's advisers were on the whole significantly skeptical at the prospect of actually abolishing nuclear weapons. Reagan, meanwhile, successfully negotiated the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces treaty and established the matrix for the START treaty. The U.S. and Russia have made additional drastic cuts in their nuclear arsenals; plans for a ballistic missile defense continue in the U.S.; Reagan's ideas and methods, in short, continue to shape the world.

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From [Booklist](#)

When then-president Ronald Reagan first proposed his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, or "Star Wars" initiative), the Soviets and critics in Europe and America lambasted it; at best it threatened to destabilize the nuclear equilibrium, and at worst it provided the U.S. with a first-strike capability. But it was Reagan, in conjunction with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who succeeded in eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons. Lettow presents a strong case that Reagan's prime motivation in promoting SDI was a long-standing aversion to nuclear weapons and to the MAD^AB (Mutually Assured Destruction) doctrine; which kept the Soviets and the U.S. from pushing the button. Lettow, in tracing Reagan's early life, reminds us that, as a Roosevelt Democrat, Reagan flirted with pacifism and he actively supported international control over nuclear weapons in the aftermath of Hiroshima. Lettow is an unabashed admirer of Reagan, so he may be a bit credulous in accepting assertions by Reagan and his supporters. Still, this is a well-done, informative study, which adds to the still-evolving understanding of Reagan and his presidency. *Jay Freeman*

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Review

"Lettow conveys this extraordinary story crisply and convincingly. . . . A significant addition to our understanding of Reagan and the endgame of the Cold War."

—The Washington Post Book World

"Paul Lettow's sharp and succinct book makes the best case yet for why Ronald Reagan deserves to be remembered as one of the most visionary grand strategists of the twentieth century."

—John Lewis Gaddis

"Paul Lettow is lucid and dispassionate. His willingness to go far back, to the very birth of the nuclear age (which coincided with the very birth of Reagan's anticommunism), and then to trace the story forward as

Reagan's ideology slowly matured, pays triumphant dividends.”

–Edmund Morris

“Provocative, informative . . . Lettow's achievement is to show that both Reagan's detractors and votaries misread him.”

–The New York Times Book Review

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gregory Throop:

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Sharon Hite:

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