Cramer on Miles, 'Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War'

Review published on Thursday, March 3, 2022


Reviewed by Mark Cramer (Air University, Air War College) Published on H-War (March, 2022)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57366

The years 1980 to 1985 marked the Cold War's climactic period because the superpower military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union appeared to reach parity. The superpowers' perception of military parity forced them to look beyond the military balance of power and account for the political, social, and economic accomplishments of their capitalist and communist socioeconomic systems. In the end, the Soviet Union's system proved to be a failure. Today, echoes of that failure persist as the origin of Russian resentment for the US-led world order. In 1980, the balance of world power appeared to favor the Soviet Union, as the Cold War reached another phase of coexistence. However, at the dawn of the next century, the Soviet Union had peacefully disintegrated. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peacefully incorporated many former Warsaw Pact members, while Russia was recovering from a decade of political and economic decline in a world prospering under wide acceptance of capitalism. In the climactic period of the 1980s, the emergence of an American grand strategy shaped the conditions of the twenty-first century.

Simon Miles explains President Ronald Reagan's grand strategy to accelerate the Cold War's end in Engaging the Evil Empire. Miles favorably evaluates how Reagan, between 1980 and 1985, used a disciplined dual-track approach to the Soviet Union, seeking peace through strength while simultaneously pursuing quiet diplomacy to achieve dominance. Beginning with Reagan's election and concluding with the Reagan-Mikhail Gorbachev summit in Geneva, Miles chronicles how each superpower perceived the other and how fluctuating tensions subsided with Gorbachev's liberalization of Soviet thinking, which allowed détente to evolve. Miles provides three conclusions for the Cold War's culmination: first, the balance of power clearly and irreversibly shifted to the US by 1985; second, Reagan's dual-track grand strategy was decisive; and third, the Soviet Union's grand strategy centered on reducing military tension to create space to address its economic, social, and political problems.

In 1980, Reagan rejected détente in favor of confrontation with the Soviet Union through increased defense spending and hard-line policies to shift the balance of power toward the US. However, it is too simple to view Reagan as a hardliner because while pushing defense spending, he was also adamant about eliminating nuclear weapons and, more important, according to Miles, extensively used covert back-channel diplomacy to communicate a desire for a genuine peace that became increasingly more overt, culminating in the 1985 Geneva Summit. Miles begins in 1980, explaining that while both the US and the Soviet Union were suffering economically, they also both understood
that capitalism was in crisis. Moreover, the Soviet Union appeared ascendant because of its third world expansion, nuclear deployments, and the Afghanistan invasion. Within this understanding, Miles claims, Soviet leaders were optimistic as Reagan took office since they were disappointed by Jimmy Carter’s sudden abandonment of arms control negotiations to prop up his reelection campaign and hoped that Reagan would reflect Richard Nixon, a hardliner who desired détente.

Miles describes how the quick succession of the four Soviet premiers between 1981 and 1985 moved the superpower competition to Reagan’s advantage. The Soviet Union’s central problem was a leadership crisis where the aged founding generation still maintained firm control over the nation and tightly managed succession to ensure the Soviet orthodoxy. Following Leonid Brezhnev’s nearly two-decade premiership, the critical figures were Yuri Andropov, the relatively vibrant intellectual with reformist leanings, and Konstantin Chernenko, an experienced politico and protégé of Brezhnev; yet both were in failing health. This sclerotic political leadership mirrored the Soviet economy, which proved inept in meeting basic consumer needs due to ruinous centralized management practices that ignored improving the Soviet Union’s antiquated infrastructure and overlooked advances in consumer technology, resulting in peculiar trade imbalances for such necessary items as grain imports from the West. Despite understanding the serious socioeconomic problems facing the Soviet Union, all four premiers, in some fashion, agreed that military competition with the US was central to forcing arms control agreements that would create space for domestic reform. Therefore, the Soviet Union’s SS-20 deployment into Eastern Europe became the central issue of the Cold War’s climactic period because both sides, confident in their own strategies, increased the preconditions for negotiations into broader topics, including the wider arms race, human rights, and multilateral issues despite a desire just to reduce nuclear tensions in Europe. Miles asserts that Reagan desired arms control but wanted agreements with substantial meaning, such as the ambitious idea of agreeing to abolish nuclear weapons altogether, which departed from the traditionally narrow-focused détente treaties of the past. However, between 1981 and 1985, renewing arms control talks lost momentum because of increased tensions over the KAL 007 shoot-down, disagreement over the proposed INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty, and most notably, an inability for Reagan to form a relationship with the first three premiers, who all died in office.

Miles illustrates how Gorbachev's ascension began the end of the Cold War and the triumph of Reagan's quiet diplomacy track because Gorbachev accepted that to reform the desperate Soviet socioeconomic situation, he needed to negotiate in good faith with Reagan to relieve the burdens of the arms race. Miles shows that back-channel engagements played a key role as Western European leaders assessed Gorbachev's sincerity to negotiate while Reagan focused elsewhere. The subsequent favorable evaluations opened further engagements that curiously involved Secretary of State George Shultz privately explaining modern market capitalism to Gorbachev. The culmination of quiet diplomacy was the Geneva Summit, which rejuvenated arms control. Central to the summit was Reagan's desire for an INF Treaty based on a verifiable reduction of nuclear weapons juxtaposed to Gorbachev wanting guarantees against pursuing SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative), a technologically advanced missile defense program in which the Soviet Union admittedly could not compete. By 1985, acceptance of American economic superiority underscored Reagan's peace through strength track and consequentially shifted the balance of power to the US, allowing Gorbachev to focus domestically to manage the Soviet Union's peaceful decline.

*Engaging the Evil Empire* is a thought-provoking historical analysis of the people and events that
accelerated the Cold War's peaceful conclusion. Miles's work is an efficient case study for any student of grand strategy. His use of archives from multiple European states adds credibility to the importance he places on back-channeling and quiet diplomacy as the profound aspects of Reagan's approach. While Miles credits Reagan's grand strategy as the catalyst for ending the Cold War, he underscores Gorbachev as the actual change agent who admitted the Soviet system's impotence and looked beyond institutional concerns toward the survival of a society.


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.