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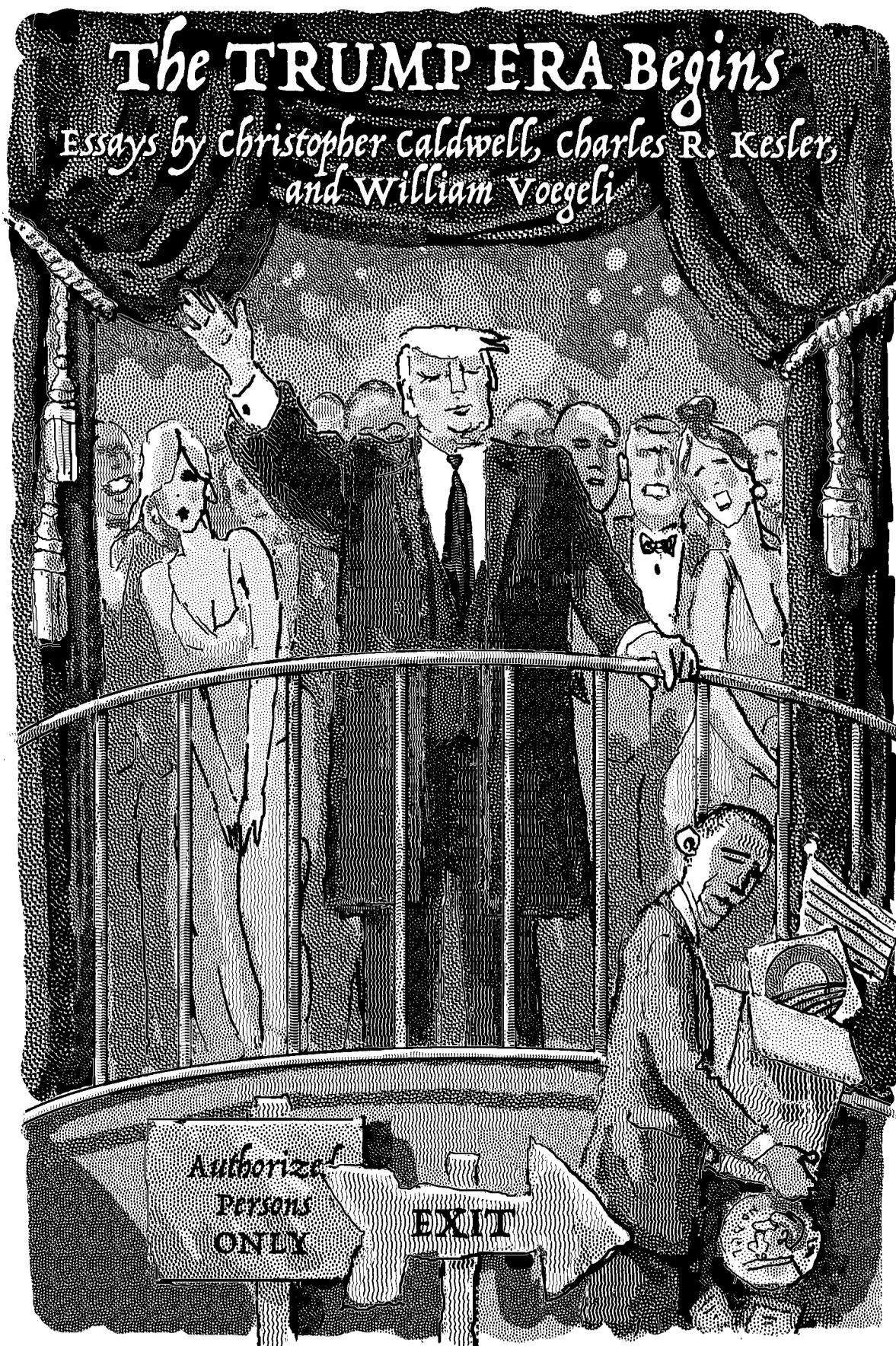
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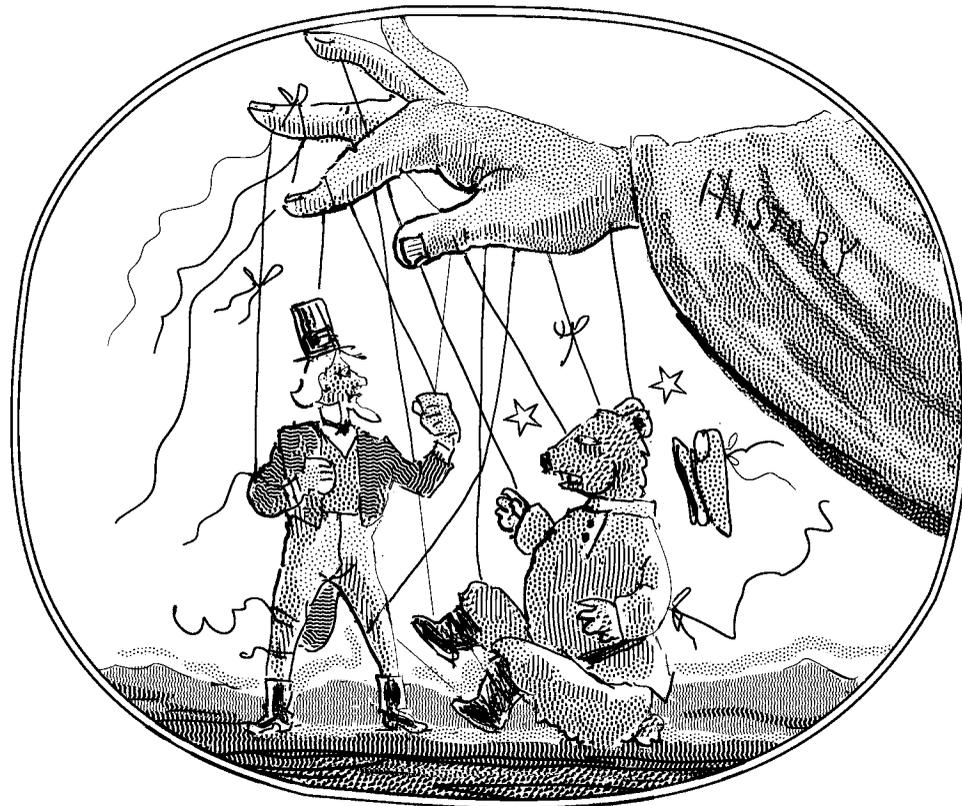
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Book Review by Henry R. Nau

## THE DIFFERENCE REAGAN MADE

*Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, by Hal Brands.  
Cornell University Press, 480 pages, \$29.95



IT IS THE FATE OF REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTS to be judged by liberal historians. Liberals dominate the academy and, not surprisingly, don't rank Republican presidents very high. A 1996 poll conducted by the highly acclaimed liberal historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ranked Ronald Reagan 26th. A 2005 poll that controlled for participants' political bias ranked Reagan sixth.

Liberal bias comes wrapped up, of course, in historical interpretation. Liberal academics, "progressives," believe that history is the march of progress. Those on the "right side of history" will effect and enjoy an ever better future. Liberal professors apply to historical events the language used to describe natural phenomena—tectonic forces, seismic shifts, momentum, path dependence, and the accumulation of events. They like to think that systemic factors, not human agency, drive change. As they see it, the Cold War's conclusion was inevitable, for example, because the Soviet Union had been fading for the preceding two decades. Similarly, the globalization that followed was dictated by the advent of the infor-

mation age, not market-oriented policies that ended the 1970s' stagflation. To be successful, leaders must align with these structural shifts. To resist them is perverse and destructive in the near term, and futile in the long run.

For conservatives, by contrast, history is a struggle, not a structure, a war of conflicting purposes and ideas that shapes world affairs. Nothing is inevitable, events are not necessarily our friends, and flawed human beings with limited knowledge have no choice but to act and take sides. As Ronald Reagan often said, "Freedom is never more than a generation away from extinction." Conservatives believe in the possibility of progress, but as *classical* liberals they affirm the dignity of individuals and distrust *social* liberals' schemes that emphasize determinism and diminish individual freedom. When experts think they know better than the people, conservatives stand athwart history and yell Stop.

Recent books about President Ronald Reagan carry this debate forward. *Reagan: The Life* (2015) by H.W. Brands, made "a case for Reagan's greatness while holding

him at ideological arm's length," according to Christopher Caldwell's review in these pages ("Reckoning with Reagan," Summer 2015). Brands finds Reagan's impact to be substantial, comparing him favorably to Franklin Roosevelt, but cannot bring himself to believe that Reagan's policies had anything to do with the 40th president's success. It was all a matter of events. Reagan, Brands writes, "had no policy agenda beyond basic conservative principles. He expected events to furnish direction. They obliged from the start."

BRANDS'S SON HAL, A HISTORIAN TEACHING at Johns Hopkins University, now embraces this structural assessment even more forcefully. In *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, the younger Brands attributes Reagan's success to structural shifts that had already emerged by the time he took office, paving the way for his program. The Carter Administration anticipated and even initiated these changes. In the realms of human rights, democracy promotion, covert ac-

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tion in Central America, defense spending, and globalization, “Carter took numerous actions that undermined communist authority within the Soviet bloc...[and] began to develop many other initiatives that figured prominently in U.S. policy during the decade to come.” Reagan simply intensified these initiatives, exploiting Soviet weaknesses and American strengths.

Reagan succeeded because his decisions meshed with historical trends. “When structure and strategy aligned,” Hal Brands concludes, “the United States did very well; when they clashed, transformative achievements went wanting.” But then, betraying his bias, Brands also attributes Reagan’s success to luck: “Reagan was, no doubt, very lucky to come along when the Soviet Union was falling into deep systemic crisis.” Liberal historians rarely explain Franklin Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy’s successes in terms of structural forces and luck.

In short, Reagan rode historical waves he did not set in motion. A product of his times who did not stand athwart its trends, he seldom used force and came to realize that his ideology was an obstacle to negotiations with the Soviet Union. What saved his presidency was pragmatism, not doctrine.

CONSERVATIVE HISTORIANS, BY CONTRAST, believe Reagan faced Kremlin leaders who had every reason to think the correlation of forces was shifting in their direction. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union rebounded to achieve strategic parity in the arms race and, through détente, formal recognition of its imperial position in eastern Europe. It projected military power for the first time beyond its territorial boundaries and waged proxy wars against Western forces in Central America, southern Africa, southeast Asia, and eventually southwest Asia (Afghanistan). Most menacingly, it deployed intermediate range nuclear missiles in eastern Europe, a brazen strategy meant to intimidate the western European allies and decouple Europe from the United States.

Reagan also faced a crumbling U.S. and world economy. In the 1970s growth slowed while inflation, oil prices, and trade protectionism all accelerated. In this environment of stagflation, the information revolution was not waiting in the wings to rescue America and the world, it was sidelined indefinitely. Innovation and technological change do not just appear at the right time; they require the right circumstances. Reagan’s policies ignited 30 years of investment and entrepreneurship, spawning a commitment to markets and na-

tional security policies that turbocharged the global economy, ended the Soviet Union, and diffused democracy across Europe and much of the world.

CONSERVATIVE HISTORIANS LIKE STEVEN Hayward in *The Age of Reagan* (2001 and 2009) describe the world Reagan faced in more accurate terms. The recession of 1981-82 was worse than the subsequent 2008-09 financial crisis, involving more unemployment and higher inflation, despite liberal success at labeling the latter crisis the “Great Recession.” And Reagan in 1980 was in a very small minority of those who believed that the Soviet Union was weakening. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., gave the consensus view: “Those...who think the Soviet Union is on the verge of economic and social collapse...are only kidding themselves.”

Reagan was “no lightweight,” according to John Lewis Gaddis, the dean of Cold War historians and more conservative than Schlesinger.

He came into office with a clear set of ideas, developed for the most part on his own, on how to salvage the strategy of containment by returning to the objective [George] Kennan had set for it in 1947: “to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection...and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.” Reagan would do this, not by acknowledging the current Soviet regime’s legitimacy but by challenging it; not by seeking parity in the arms race but by regaining superiority; not by compromising on the issue of human rights but by capitalizing on it as a weapon more powerful than anything that existed in the military arsenals of either side.

President Carter declared that “we are now free of [our] inordinate fear of communism.” President Reagan called the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” Carter called for “a freeze on further modernization and production of weapons.” Reagan initiated a massive arms buildup. Carter said the goal of the Cold War was “reciprocal stability, parity, and security.” Reagan said the goal was “we win; they lose.” Carter touted a massive government-directed energy plan and said “it’s inevitable that there will be a lower standard of living than what everybody had always anticipated.” Reagan embraced “the magic of the marketplace.”

When Paul Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve, raised interest rates in 1980, Carter criticized him openly on the campaign trail. When Volcker raised interest rates to unprecedented heights in 1981, causing the true “Great Recession,” Reagan never complained publicly or even asked Volcker privately to back off his tight money policy. David Stockman, Reagan’s budget director, concluded that there is “little doubt that Volcker’s feat would not have been possible without Ronald Reagan’s unwavering support during the dark days of 1982.”

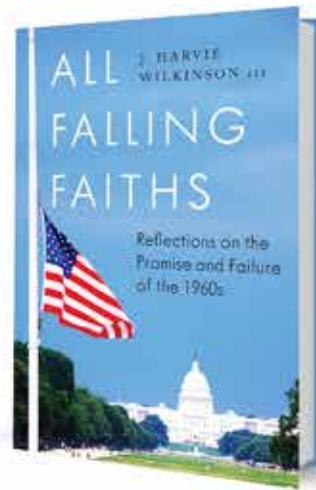
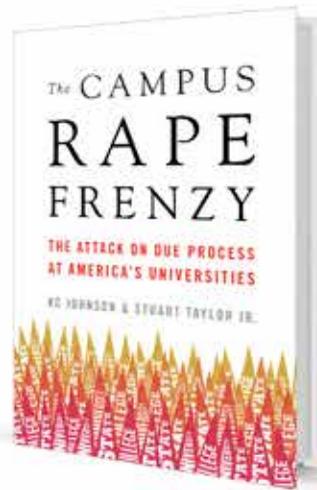
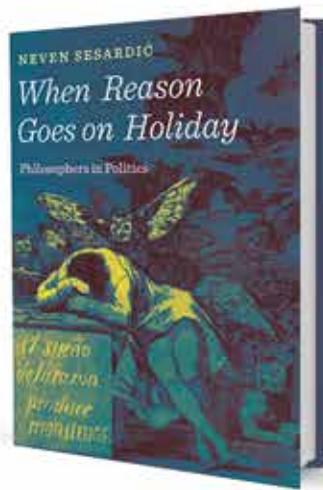
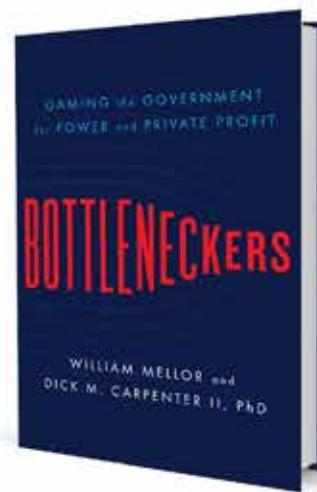
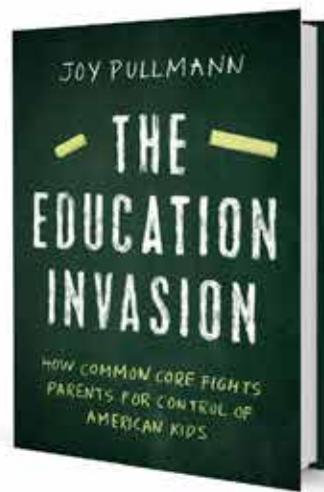
DARK DAYS INDEED—IN NOVEMBER 1982, the economy was stagnant, mass protests in Europe imperiled the deployment of NATO’s Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) deterrent, the Republican Party had just lost 26 seats in the House of Representatives, and by January 1983 Reagan’s popularity had plummeted to 35%. If there was ever a time for Reagan to reverse or recalibrate his strategy, this was it. Yet Reagan never wavered. Asked at that moment by his national security advisor, William Clark, if the NSC staff should think about Plan B, Reagan replied, “No, Bill, my policies are in place, and the economy and Soviets will come around.” Reagan changed history, rather than simply waiting for circumstances to change him.

Carter could never make up his mind between the soft line advocated by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and the hard line of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. He sided with Vance in the first three years but then—after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and Vance resigned over the abortive Iranian hostage rescue attempt—with Brzezinski. Shocked by Soviet behavior, Carter boosted defense expenditures by 4%. If anyone reversed course it was Carter, and the reversal was marginal. Reagan went on to increase defense spending by 40% (using Brands’s own numbers). Was Reagan simply exploiting Carter’s bold initiative?

But Brands likes the structural orientation of Brzezinski, who famously and wrongly predicted in *Between Two Ages* (1970) that the Cold War would end in a convergence between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Communist country would succumb to “the trend toward a more open, humanistic, and less ideological society” and the democratic country would “require more and more planning...blurring distinctions between public and private bodies.” The reasons were structural: “Under the pressures of economics, science, and technology, mankind is moving steadily toward large-scale coopera-

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tion." In fact, of course, the Cold War ended with the abject demise of Communist regimes and the profusion of democratic ones.

Reagan, too, had a divided staff but rather than siding with one or the other and never making up his mind, he synthesized the disparate views into a single strategy that only he embraced in its entirety. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, known for his budget prowess, midwived the massive Reagan defense buildup and Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) but never accepted negotiations with the Soviet Union. Secretary of State George Shultz was shocked when SDI was launched but exploited the leverage it gave the U.S. in negotiations with Russia. Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan championed Reagan's tax and trade reforms but vociferously opposed Paul Volker's anti-inflation policy. CIA Director William Casey fueled the freedom fighters that stymied Soviet aggression in Central America, Africa, and Afghanistan but, like Weinberger, recoiled from negotiations with Moscow. And White House Chief of Staff James Baker helped pass Reagan's economic program despite opposing its tax cuts, which he later helped reverse (to the detriment of Reagan's successor and Baker's patron, George H.W. Bush).

**R**EAGAN SUCCEEDED BECAUSE HE KNEW enough to orchestrate the experts, once quipping that he was getting so involved in the INF issue that he might have to take over the chief negotiator's job. Martin and Annelise Anderson documented Reagan's command of detail in *Reagan's Secret War* (2009), based entirely on the sequencing of Reagan's comments in secret NSC meetings, his daily diary, and numerous speeches and interviews.

Reagan also succeeded by staying the course rather than adjusting his strategy constantly to new exigencies. Hal Brands makes too much of the need to adjust as structural realities manifest themselves. This makes sense only if your purpose is to accommodate rather than change circumstances. If the latter, then sometimes you simply give your policies time to bend events to your will.

This is what Reagan did by waiting to negotiate until his policies changed circumstances. Liberal accounts insist that Reagan reversed course in late 1983 when, realizing that his defense buildup might cause a nuclear war, he embraced negotiations with the Soviet Union. To his credit, Hal Brands rejects this thesis,

popularized by Beth Fischer in *The Reagan Reversal* (1997). But Brands still insists that Reagan learned from earlier efforts and made a "significant recalibration of U.S. strategy."

Reagan did make adjustments, of course, but his intent to negotiate with the Soviet Union clearly was not one of them. He had made that plain in 1963! In "an all-out race our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up," he said at the time. A "noble nation" at that point "extends the hand of friendship and says there is room in the world for both of us." In the 1980 campaign he talked about a defense buildup "pending negotiations," and in office, he signaled his intent to negotiate in an April 1981 letter to Leonid Brezhnev. As Brands recognizes, Reagan's first arms-control proposal, the zero option, was not the all-or-nothing proposition the media described but a serious attempt at compromise over the INF issue.

Negotiations were the objective of Reagan's policies from the start, not a "recalibration." But first he had to revive U.S. and NATO strength. He told Shultz in summer 1982 "not to be overly anxious" to lift the gas pipeline sanctions on the Soviet Union, and rejected a proposal to ban deployment of U.S. Pershing missiles but not dismantle the Soviet SS-20s the Pershings were designed to counter. He had to shift the correlation of forces so that Moscow would negotiate real, verifiable reductions, not just elaborations of the 1970s' Strategic Arms Limitation Talks agreements that had permitted a continuing Soviet buildup.

**B**Y THE END OF 1983 HIS ECONOMIC AND defense programs were paying off. The Pershing missiles were deployed, an event George Shultz records as the turning point of the Cold War; the U.S. economy was roaring back—GDP based on chained 2009 dollars grew by 4.6% in 1983 and 7.3% in 1984; and the Soviet Union was encountering the crushing costs of empire as well as of isolation from a Reagan-inspired global information revolution. Now was the time for negotiations, and Reagan was ready long before Gorbachev arrived. When Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, visited Washington in September 1984, he and Reagan agreed on future summits and the elimination of nuclear weapons. Reagan told the National Security Planning Group that the superpowers "may be coming together more than many people realize."

Reagan's policies shaped two new structural realities, which decisively influenced Soviet behavior: an arms race the Soviet Union could not win and a global economic boom the Soviet Union could not afford to miss. In October 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev told Politburo colleagues: "Our goal is to prevent the next round of the arms race. If we do not accomplish it... [w]e will be pulled into another round of the arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose...[and] the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable." Coming from the intended target, there is no better proof that Reagan's second-term policies did not reverse but required his first-term ones.

Why is all this evidence overlooked by liberal historians? Why do they insist that Reagan was lucky while Carter was prescient and George H.W. Bush prudent? Carter was overwhelmed by details; and if anyone was lucky, it was Bush, who inherited a world that was rapidly democratizing and globalizing as Reagan left office. Yet the liberal establishment, including Barack Obama, prefers the worldview of "realists" like Brzezinski (and Brent Scowcroft, Bush's foreign policy guru) who simply steer the world in the direction it is going anyway.

**Y**ET, IMAGINE IF REAGAN'S GAMBIT HAD failed. Would the Cold War have ended in Jimmy Carter's second term, under a President Walter Mondale, or even during George H.W. Bush's presidency? What about the world economy? Starting from the stagflation of the 1970s, where did the 50 million new jobs in the United States and a new middle class of nearly one billion people in developing countries come from in the 1980s and 1990s? Were the structural forces at work so powerful that these outcomes were inevitable? That's a bit like arguing that slavery would have ended with or without Abraham Lincoln. Of course, as Hal Brands acknowledges, we never know *how much* is strategy and *how much* is structure. But that is the crucial question, and like most liberal historians, he concludes that structure predominates.

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