

Writing About Reagan: Archival Sources and an Elusive President

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Introduction

In recent years, a subset of historians working on American political history has been experimenting with new ways of writing about the presidency. In historiographical terms, this approach has aimed to bring the presidency “back in” after years on the margins of academic scholarship and to integrate high politics with the insights of cultural, social, and economic histories.¹ In analytical terms, this has meant placing the power of the executive branch and the occupant of the United States’ highest office in the broader context of the social and cultural forces that both enable and constrain the power of the presidency.² In both senses, although the approach places presidential power in the frame, that power is, in the parlance of our times, decentered, used to refract or illustrate how it was embedded in and impossible to divorce from a broader political world.

One can think of few presidents for whom the task of “decentering” is more challenging than Ronald Reagan. This may seem counterintuitive. After all, Reagan’s enigmatic qualities, his aloofness and distance, are by now well-established features of his biography, as is how these qualities were manifested in intra-administration squabbles.³ Indeed, at times it could almost seem that Reagan was seeking to decenter himself. Nonetheless, he continues to loom extremely large in the historiography of the long 1980s as an outsized political figure, as an architect of a governing program and global order, and as the symbol for the age of American political experience that he ushered in. For those who see that legacy as deleterious as well as those who see him as a visionary, Reagan stands at the center of explanation.

Today an increasing number of scholars of the United States and the world, many of them junior scholars, are turning their attention to the 1970s and 1980s. They seem less motivated by the desire to engage with the mythos of Reagan than by the urge to recognize the significance of the transitional period constituted by the Carter-to-Reagan years both for American foreign policy and for the changes to the international system that predate the formal end of the Cold War.⁴

This roundtable brings together three such scholars. Their essays are an extension of a panel at the SHAFR 2021 annual conference that focused on the intellectual and methodological challenges of writing about the Reagan years across a broad variety of topics. That panel originally coalesced around the realization that the scholars had something in common: their research was compelling them to grapple not so much with Reagan as with Reagan’s absence.

Each essay combines the analytical with the experiential, allowing the scholars to convey the diverse nature of the considerations that have informed their choices to write

around Reagan and the implications of doing so.

For Susan Colburn, who writes on Reagan’s nuclear policies, transatlantic relations, and the competition with the Soviet Union, assessing Reagan had much to do with the experience of finding the president so elusive in materials at the Reagan Library (an experience shared by all contributors to the roundtable, including this one!). Colburn explains how Reagan’s absence from the documents on the Euromissiles episode mirrored the way he shaped so many of the conversations surrounding the Euromissiles. His ambiguousness led him to be seen alternately as “a driver of policy, a source of consternation, and an avatar of sorts.”

Augusta Dell’Omo also uses the word “avatar” to describe Reagan’s role in mediating among actors in U.S. policy towards South Africa, but she focuses on how his absence was weaponized by international conservative movements. Unlike Reagan’s ambiguousness in transatlantic relations, Reagan’s absence on South Africa was deliberate. After he voiced support for the apartheid government in 1981, his advisors isolated him from the policy of constructive engagement led by Secretary of State George Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker. Crucially, Dell’Omo argues that Reagan’s “absence on constructive engagement—and his continued refusal to come out forcefully against apartheid” opened the door for rightwing supporters of the apartheid state to build a narrative that “what Reagan wanted”—i.e., the truly conservative policy when it came to South Africa—had been wrongly sidelined.

Michael De Groot notes that explaining Reagan’s international economic policies requires “viewing him as one actor among others,” but he adds that this challenge is a feature of all executive-level policy histories. He suggests that the challenge of writing around Reagan may appear exceptional only in the wake of Jimmy Carter, whose detail-oriented approach to the presidency actually invites an understanding of his personal role. Be that as it may, De Groot argues forcefully for paying attention to the relationship between Reagan’s White House and the oft-overlooked Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker. The story, often framed as a triumphant, Reagan-led free market victory, De Groot says, emerges as a narrative of “improvisation and unintended consequences instead of intelligent design. The Federal Reserve compensated for Reagan’s unwillingness to live up to his promise of balancing the budget by exploiting Washington’s structural advantages in a post-Bretton Woods world in which the dollar reigned supreme and capital traveled freely across borders.”

Whatever readers think of the suggestion that Reagan could indeed be submerged within a history of his own presidency, this group of essays provides several extremely compelling models for how scholars of the United States and the world can do such decentering work around the

presidency. For although such an approach seems naturally congenial to American foreign relations, a field that is fundamentally interested in the study of power, the debates over the proper role of the state have been long-running and often totalizing.⁵

The essays provide beautiful examples of how scholars writing about *the* primary elite institution, the presidency, need not necessarily reinforce the centrality of executive power, but can instead use it to illuminate a broad range of social movements, cultural forces, economic structures, and issues of memory. These matters are precisely what historians of international politics during the Reagan years must grapple with—more so than Reagan personally. And these scholars' thoughtful engagement with that elusive figure helps interrogate just these themes. As historians think about addressing another president—the 45th—for whom the task of wrestling with historical causation will occur in the shadow of an all-consuming personal image, the modes of inquiry modeled by these scholars can hardly seem more urgent.

Notes:

1. See Brian Balogh and Bruce J. Schulman, *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency* (Ithaca, NY, 2015), particularly the introduction.

2. See Jeremi Suri, "The New Presidential History," *Reviews in American History* 49, no. 3 (September 2021): 422–28, as well as the book reviewed by Suri, Nathaniel C. Green, *The Man of the People: Political Dissent and the Making of the American Presidency* (Lawrence, KS, 2020). See also Vanessa Walker, *Principles in Power: Latin America and the Politics of U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).

3. For Reagan biographies that highlight elements of his personality in discussing his political significance, see H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, 2016) and Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 1991). For examples of historians grappling with Reagan's place in the course of events, see much of the literature on the end of the Cold War, including James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2014); Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2020); and some of the recent literature on human rights and democracy promotion, including Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK, 2020). See also the comprehensive essay by Melvyn P. Leffler, "Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018).

4. The most striking example of this phenomenon can be found in the essays in Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca, NY, 2021).

5. The most recent iteration of this debate came in response to the argument for focusing on elite institutions made within Frederik Logevall and Daniel Bessner's essay "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 38–55. That debate was taken up in these pages, among other places. See Chester Pach, Cindy Ewing, Kevin Y. Kim, Daniel Bessner & Fredrik Logevall, "A Roundtable on Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, 'Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,'" *Passport*, September 2020. <https://shafr.org/system/files/passport-09-2020-bessner.pdf>.

Nuclear Cowboy, Nuclear Abolitionist: Perceptions, Personal Preferences, and the Policymaking Process in the Reagan Years

Susan Colbourn

Going to the Reagan Library is an experience. Researchers must brave L.A. traffic or, worse still, try to navigate the train-to-bus connections of a place designed for cars. Once in Simi Valley, visitors will find it

hard to ignore the symbolic setting of the library, which is perched atop a hill. From the top, panoramic views feature elephant topiaries and the obligatory segment of the Berlin Wall. Visitors pour off tour buses to have photos snapped with the bronze statue of the president in the courtyard. People get emotional. The first time I visited the library for research, I saw a woman sobbing in the museum at video of Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's eulogy at the fortieth president's funeral in 2004.

Ronald Reagan is inescapable—except, that is, in the archive files. In the reading room at the Reagan Library, it is easy to go days without seeing the president's handwriting. I knew Reagan's management style was more hands-off than that of most presidents, but during my first visit, these absences in the files still surprised me. The fact that I had already been through countless folders at the Carter Library, where the Democratic president's personal annotations abound alongside tiny scrawls of JC on nearly every page of some folders only made Reagan's silence in the margins even more striking.

The absence of personal annotations is only one part of a governing style that can make Reagan difficult for historians to pin down.¹ It was not unusual for him to remain silent in meetings of the National Security Council. Reagan himself described a process in which, amidst heated debate between his advisers, he would keep a "poker face" before going away to make a final decision. "If a horse was nearby, that always helped in my decision-making," Reagan wrote in his memoirs, "but sometimes I might just stand in the shower or think out a problem at my desk or before going to sleep."²

How can we, as historians of U.S. foreign relations, make sense of Ronald Reagan as a policymaker? Where does Reagan the individual fit in the making and implementation of the administration's foreign policy? How did his personal beliefs, his priorities, and his overall worldview shape the policies the administration ended up pursuing? What is left unexplained when we focus too much on the president?

What follows briefly considers these questions from my vantage point as a historian interested in the issues that occupied much of the president's two terms in office: the competition with the Soviet Union, the role of nuclear weapons within that struggle, and the administration's efforts to forge a common policy with its allies within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the history of the Euromissiles, Ronald Reagan occupied any number of roles. He was a driver of policy, a source of consternation, and an avatar of sorts.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to explain the process that led to signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty without putting Reagan and the evolution of his relationship with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev front and center. The road to that December 1987 agreement was shaped by Reagan's personality, outlook, and priorities in critical ways. The near-deal that Reagan and Gorbachev almost struck at Reykjavik, envisioning an agreement to eliminate the two superpowers' nuclear weapons stockpiles by the year 2000, opened the door to an agreement that did away with both sides' intermediate-range forces a year later.

Reagan's willingness to question the orthodoxies of the atomic age ruffled feathers within his cabinet and among his allies. After Reykjavik, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher panicked about what the president had almost done. Horst Teltchik, who served as Helmut Kohl's chief adviser on security policy, confessed to British interlocutors that "perhaps it was just as well that the meeting at Reykjavik had broken up when it did." Had Reagan and Gorbachev seen their deal through, the European allies

would have ended up saddled with a commitment to “the theoretical objectives of a world without nuclear weapons.” Thatcher, who shared none of Reagan’s aversion to marginalia, underlined numerous phrases in the embassy report on Teltschik’s comments, including one noting that the consequences of such a deal “could not be foreseen.”³

These concerns were a far cry from those that had brought protestors into the streets. After his inauguration in January 1981, Reagan’s reputation as a hawkish, anti-Soviet hardliner shaped the grassroots activism of the era in pivotal ways. His bombastic rhetoric and sky-high defense spending encouraged their activism, and, to make their point, many invoked his likeness on placards, banners, and protest flyers.

Many of the protestors who took the streets in the autumn of 1981 in record-breaking rallies and demonstrations across Western Europe credited their presence to the American president.⁴ A few weeks earlier, Reagan had made an offhand comment to a group of reporters about how a tactical nuclear exchange could take place in Europe “without it bringing either one of the major powers to pushing the button.”⁵ Already, prominent peace campaigns like European Nuclear Disarmament had been arguing that NATO’s doctrine suggested a limited nuclear war could be fought in Europe. The president’s remarks left a great many convinced on that front.

Anti-nuclear campaigners on both sides of the Atlantic urged the president to dial down his rhetoric and change course, lest he unleash a nuclear holocaust. But their critiques of Reagan’s policies were not confined to his defense spending or seemingly cavalier attitude toward the use of nuclear weapons. Critics linked NATO’s plans to deploy the Gryphon ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) and Pershing II ballistic missiles to Western Europe to other elements of the Reagan foreign policy that aroused their ire, such as the administration’s obsession with Central America or the general thrust of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The planned introduction of new U.S. missiles in Western Europe was held up as prime evidence of an aggressive and militaristic administration, even though the plans were a holdover from the Carter years.

As opponents rallied against NATO’s deployments, they often turned to images of the president to share their overall message. Placards and posters satirized the president as a gun-slinging, missile-toting nuclear cowboy. Demonstrators donned masks of the president’s face and made papier-mâché statues of Reagan riding a missile à la *Dr. Strangelove*’s Slim Pickens. In a famous riff on a movie poster for “Gone with the Wind,” Reagan held Thatcher in his arms in front of a giant mushroom cloud. “She promised to follow him to the end of the earth,” the poster’s tagline blared. “He promised to organise it!”⁶

Reagan was not, of course, the only politician pilloried by protestors, nor was he the only symbol of the United States employed. Some demonstrators latched onto stereotypes about the American way of life, like a group of West Germans who made an elaborate model of a McDonald’s hamburger covered in little American flags and armed with a fake missile. In case any passerby failed to appreciate the critique, the hamburger was labeled Schießburger.⁷ Others turned to more traditional expressions of opposition. At Rhein-Main Air Base in the Federal Republic of Germany, protestors at one 1982 rally draped an American flag over the perimeter fence and burned it.⁸

How these various facets of the Reagan years fit together is still fiercely contested. There is no shortage of historians who have tried to explain the seeming disconnect between

the bombast and heightened tensions of Reagan’s first term and the dramatic breakthroughs of his second. For some, it is a story of continuity, as the president devised, then implemented, a grand strategy designed for the long haul.⁹ Others see it as a fundamental rupture in the president’s foreign policy, an about-face often called, in a reference to Beth Fischer’s influential work, the “Reagan reversal.”¹⁰ Still more tout the president’s intellectual flexibility and capacity for improvisation.¹¹

Perhaps no subject is more controversial than the president’s attitude toward nuclear weapons. It is a topic I have grappled with at length in my research on the Euromissiles and a source of considerable ambiguity because of the kinds of records that the president did and did not leave behind.

In the autumn of 1981, the Reagan administration tried to craft a negotiating position for the forthcoming talks to limit intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF). While it was doing so, massive rallies grabbed headlines as hundreds of thousands of Western Europeans took to the streets: 250,000 in Bonn, 200,000 in London, 200,000 in Brussels. Against that backdrop, the administration elected to back a dramatic arms control proposal. The United States would offer to cancel its planned deployments of Pershing IIs and GLCMs, provided the Soviet Union removed its own SS-4s, SS-5s, and SS-20s, which were aimed at targets across Western Europe.

The zero option, as the proposal was known, divided Reagan’s cabinet. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger was an enthusiastic supporter, not because he hoped to secure an agreement with the Soviets, but because he assumed it would stiffen the spines of Washington’s waffling allies.¹² Secretary of State Alexander Haig detested the proposal for precisely this reason. It was a transparent public relations ploy and

would easily be spotted as one.¹³

Reagan backed Weinberger. The zero option, he wrote in his later memoir, was “a vivid gesture demonstrating to the Soviets, our allies, the people storming the streets of West Germany, and others that we meant business about wanting to reduce nuclear weapons.”¹⁴

Since November 18, 1981, when Reagan formally unveiled the zero option at the National Press Club, observers have questioned the president’s motives. As Haig predicted, some contemporaries viewed the option as little more than a public relations stunt designed to make sure the deployments went ahead without pursuing any meaningful negotiations that might avert that outcome. Subsequent scholars have expressed similar doubts about the proposal’s sincerity. “The fact is,” as one historian recently put it, “that for the other side of the negotiating table”—the Soviet Union—“the proposal was simply unacceptable, which arguably is enough to establish that it was not intended as a serious diplomatic effort.”¹⁵

Is it enough? How can we know why Reagan backed the zero option and what he hoped to achieve in doing so?

Reagan’s later memoirs suggest a commitment to reducing nuclear weapons, though the framing highlights how difficult it was to parse the various strands that might have shaped the decision, including public opinion, popular anti-nuclear demonstrations, and the administration’s overall strategy to manage relations with the Soviet Union. Could these calculations not coexist, perhaps even align with a broader desire on the part of the president to see these weapons eliminated? The fact that the administration stuck with the zero option long after the missile deployments were under way adds another layer of complexity into the situation.

"Until I got into the arms control business, I did not realize how antinuclear Ronald Reagan was," the president's second director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Kenneth Adelman, later told interviewers. "The fact was that he couldn't stand nuclear weapons; he wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons . . . I'd never met an antinuclear hawk before in my life. It was just part of Reagan's make-up."¹⁶ Aides and allied leaders agreed, regardless of whether they shared the president's point of view.¹⁷

For some, the image of Reagan as a nuclear abolitionist is a hard sell. Given the sheer partisanship surrounding Reagan's legacy and especially his role in bringing about the end of the Cold War, making the case becomes more fraught. Reagan defied neat characterization.¹⁸ And even on the issues that occupied so much of the president's attention, his motivations can be difficult to discern and even more difficult for some constituencies to accept. Reagan might not drive policy anymore, but he certainly remains a source of consternation as well as an avatar of sorts.

Notes:

1. On this phenomenon, see William Inboden, "Grand Strategy and Petty Squabbles: The Paradox and Lessons of the Reagan NSC" in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri (Washington, DC, 2016), 151–80.
2. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), 297.
3. UK Embassy Bonn to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Reykjavik Summit: German Views," 15 Oct. 1986, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), PREM19/1759.
4. Leonard Downie Jr., "Thousands in London Protest Nuclear Arms," *Washington Post*, 25 Oct. 1981.
5. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Working Luncheon with Out-of-Town Editors," 16 Oct. 1981, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan 1981* (Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 1982), 956–57.
6. A copy can be found at the National Portrait Gallery, NPG D43009, available at <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw251471/Gone-with-the-Wind-Ronald-Reagan-Margaret-Thatcher>.
7. Sahn Doherty photograph, "Anti-nuke protesters around giant model of McDonald's," 1 Apr. 1981, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/anti-nuke-protesters-around-giant-model-of-mcdonalds-news-photo/50655833?adppopup=true>.
8. Don Sutherland photograph, "An American flag is burned on the perimeter fence by protesters demonstrating against NATO's decision to deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles in Western Europe," 12 Dec. 1982, <https://nara.getarchive.net/media/an-american-flag-is-burned-on-the-perimeter-fence-by-protesters-demonstrating-001764>.
9. Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).
10. Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO, 1997).
11. James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2014).
12. "Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting," 13 Oct. 1981, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1981–1988*, vol. III, Soviet Union, January 1981–January 1983, ed. James Graham Wilson, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 2010, Doc. 92.
13. National Security Council minutes, 12 Nov. 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Executive Secretariat, National Security Council, Meeting Files, Box 3, "NSC #25" folder.
14. Reagan, *An American Life*, 297.
15. Marilena Gala, "The Euromissile Crisis and the Centrality of the 'Zero Option,'" in *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War*, ed. Leopoldo Nuti et al. (Washington, DC, and Stanford, CA, 2015), 162.
16. Adelman interview, 30 Sept. 2003, Miller Center of Public Affairs, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, 38.
17. See, for example, George Shultz interview, 2013, reprinted in "Remembering George Shultz: an interview with a key figure in ending the Cold War," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, <https://thebulletin.org/2021/02/remembering-george-shultz-an-interview-with-a-key-figure-in-ending-the-cold-war/>; Margaret Thatcher interview, 8 Jan. 1980, Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive, Doc. 109324.

18. On the challenges of making sense of Reagan, see Melvyn P. Leffler, "Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 77–89.

Finding Reagan in "Reagan Foreign Policy": An Examination of Apartheid Policy

Augusta Dell'Omo

There are few figures that loom larger in post-World War II U.S. history than Ronald Reagan. He personified the American conservative movement, and his singular importance to seemingly every faction of the right persisted long after his presidency ended in 1989. He remains an endlessly fascinating subject for historians, with the Reagan Presidential Library listing nearly one hundred and fifty titles on him—likely a conservative estimate. But for all historians write about Reagan, a closer examination of his archival record reveals an elusive figure, leaving many of us studying Reagan's avatar rather than the man himself.

At first glance, it seems a strange statement to make. The policies of the Reagan administration remain some of the most distinct and significant of the Cold War. Domestically, "Reaganomics" policies of tax cuts, greater defense spending, and the elimination of federal regulations profoundly altered the American economy. The militant "War on Drugs" program at home targeted Americans of color and accelerated systems of mass incarceration. Internationally, the Reagan Doctrine sought to rollback communist influence, the blame for which the Reagan administration placed squarely at the feet of outgoing president Jimmy Carter. The 1983 invasion of Grenada, paramilitary involvement in Central America, and the Iran-Contra scandal defined Reagan's later years in office. Finally—and perhaps most crucially for Reagan himself—his close relationship with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev culminated in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which fundamentally changed the trajectory of the Cold War.

Thus, as I began my time at the Reagan Library, I assumed Reagan would occupy a central place in my research. I study the U.S.-South African relationship, specifically examining transatlantic white supremacist organizing in support of the apartheid state in the 1980s and 1990s. The seemingly dramatic shift by the Reagan administration on apartheid policy demanded consideration. The White House's decision to implement constructive engagement, a policy of behind-the-scenes dialogue with Pretoria to encourage racial reform rather than vocally challenge the apartheid government, broke from the strategy of the Carter years.

I started archival work in late July 2019, just after the release of a recorded conversation between Reagan, then governor of California, and President Richard Nixon in which Reagan used racist slurs to describe Africans. Historian Tim Naftali, who fought for the tape's release, characterized the recording as a "stark reminder of the racism that often lay behind the public rhetoric of the American presidents."¹ For me, a scholar examining race and U.S. foreign policy, it seemed to be the moment to focus on Reagan himself.

Almost immediately it became apparent that Reagan was hard to pin down on his administration's South Africa policy. As many scholars have documented, Reagan's own writings are limited. His diaries say little on the matter of South African apartheid. Uneven declassification further hindered my research. Decision-making on South Africa seemed to operate around Reagan, with Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker and the two secretaries of state, Alexander Haig and George Shultz, driving constructive engagement. Reagan often deferred to Haig and Shultz in NSC meetings on South Africa. Indeed,

while the State and Defense Departments often clashed on constructive engagement, a consensus seemed to emerge that Reagan should not take center stage on South Africa.

This decision likely came as a result of Reagan's 1976 statements in the *Manchester* (N.H.) *Union Leader*, in which he praised South Africa's homeland system—territories created to forcibly remove Black South Africans from urban areas. Reagan's election elated white South Africans, with Afrikaner newspapers praising the new American president. With Reagan, South Africans could count on a more approachable, friendly, helpful United States, Afrikaner reporters argued. Showering praise on Reagan's foreign policy team, Afrikaans-language papers *Die Beeld*, *Die Vaderland*, and *Die Transvaler* ran daily reporting on the administration's refusal to accept white downfall.

I realized that Reagan was simultaneously elusive and disengaged on South African apartheid. His racist view of South Africa's violent homelands and his refusal to take apartheid seriously pushed his advisors to remove "Reagan" from a central part in "Reagan's southern Africa policy." Still, while his writings remained sparse, his comments infrequent, and his presence elusive, it is possible to glean insights into Reagan's view of South Africa.

The public perception of Reagan's tilt towards South Africa only increased in the first few months of the new administration. In a televised address on March 4, 1981, Reagan stated that his administration would try to be "helpful" to South Africa as long as Pretoria made a "sincere and honest effort" on apartheid reform.² He questioned whether the United States should "abandon a country that has stood beside us in every war we have fought," to the elation of South Africa Prime Minister P.W. Botha. The decision—pushed by Haig—to invite South African Foreign Minister Roelof F. (Pik) Botha to visit Washington on May 18, 1981, seemed to further tie the United States to South Africa. *South African Digest*, published by the apartheid state's Department of Information, reported favorably on Pik Botha's visit to the United States, declaring that Reagan "stood up" for South Africa.

Pretoria's tying of Reagan to apartheid and the derisive treatment of Reagan's comments by U.S. media alarmed U.S. officials, particularly Counselor to the President Edwin Meese and Chief of Staff James Baker III. While the administration publicly denied any "tilt" towards Pretoria, insisting constructive engagement was a policy for all of southern Africa (not just South Africa), privately, administration members sought to distance Reagan from the issue. After the 1981 backlash to Reagan's South Africa statements, his involvement in constructive engagement became limited, with Shultz and Crocker taking a leading role in publicly defending the policy.

This limited involvement became more pronounced during his second term, after the administration came under fire for its 1985–1986 opposition to economic sanctions, and Shultz's relationship with P.W. Botha rapidly deteriorated. Reagan's only major remarks on South Africa, given before the World Affairs Council and the Foreign Policy Association on July 22, 1986, and almost universally panned in the United States, Europe, and Southern Africa, further incentivized this public retreat.

With Reagan largely isolated from South Africa policy by 1981, studying his role in U.S. policy towards South Africa appeared at first to be impossible. Initially, it left me both frustrated and alarmed at the viability of reshaping the way scholars think about constructive engagement. However, throughout my months of archival work at the Reagan Library, it was precisely Reagan's disengagement on South Africa that became the most important means

of understanding the U.S.–South African relationship. That relationship became a contentious issue within the Republican Party, as "moderate" and "hardline" conservatives split over the question of economic sanctions. Each sought to use Reagan to defend their position, insisting that they represented the "true" Reagan.

The tension within the Republican Party over South Africa came to a head in 1986 amidst congressional efforts to pass sanctions against the apartheid state. Congress had made various attempts at passing economic sanctions as early as the 1970s, but these efforts picked up momentum in the 1980s. Spurred by continued abuses by the South African government and the growing prominence of anti-apartheid figures like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, congressional Democrats and Republicans felt pressure to act. As a result, Democratic senators attempted to pass a version of economic sanctions in 1985, only to have it filibustered by Republicans. This filibuster emerged as a last-ditch effort by conservatives to give the Reagan administration time to let constructive engagement pay dividends.

It was the Reagan administration's belief (indeed, it became one of the few points of agreement between the State Department and the NSC) that not only would constructive engagement encourage reforms by the apartheid state, economic sanctions would antagonize the regime. Furthermore, the administration considered the legislation an infringement on the president's powers, a position accepted by many Republicans in Congress in September 1985.

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The P.W. Botha government's declaration of a National State of Emergency on June 12, 1986—after repealing a previous act in March—infuriated both Democrats and Republicans. The State of Emergency massively expanded the power of South African police, allowing forces to make arrests without warrants, impose curfews, seize property, and ban television and radio coverage of riots, strikes, or police action. In a matter of hours, it led to the arrest of hundreds of anti-apartheid activists, students, clergy, and labor leaders. Within a week, the apartheid government had detained over 3,000 people. The *Los Angeles Times* called the crackdown "unprecedented," and both the Reagan and Thatcher administrations lodged formal protests.³ The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives passed H.R. 4866, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, just six days later, on June 18, 1986.

Congressional frustration over the Reagan administration's apparent refusal to act on South Africa now included vocal Republicans. Jim Leach (R-IA) took the administration to task: "All we ask of this Republican administration is that it advances a foreign policy consistent with the views of the first Republican administration, put the Republican Party on the right side of its heritage, [and] our foreign policy on the right side of history."⁴ Influential members of the Republican Party within Congress, like Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, viewed the question of sanctions "as a litmus test of lawmakers' feelings on civil rights."⁵ As the Reagan administration signaled its commitment to veto sanctions again, Republican lawmakers, led by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Richard Lugar, informed the administration of Republican willingness to override Reagan's veto.

Republican lawmakers tried to avoid blaming Reagan personally, instead taking his administration to task for its "out of step" position on apartheid, all the more glaring in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. This approach—blaming the administration and not Reagan—

proved useful for defenders of the apartheid state.

A significant faction of conservative intellectuals, media, and lobbyists vehemently opposed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act and any prospect of economic sanctions against South Africa. According to these activists, the Reagan administration's policy of constructive engagement worked, pushing the South Africans towards minor racial reforms and regional rapprochement. Instead, the failure belonged to the State Department. Hardline conservative activists accused Shultz and Crocker of betraying the Reagan administration from within. *Human Events* and the *Washington Times* routinely ran stories promoting this narrative, pitting Reagan against an administration that undercut his policies at every turn. The belief in a Reagan Revolution betrayed was not unique to the apartheid issue, as conservative activists routinely accused members of the administration of being insufficiently committed to rightwing policies, particularly anti-communist action abroad.

For the most extreme supporters of white rule, a group I refer to as the pro-apartheid movement, Reagan's absence on constructive engagement policy fueled the narrative of right-wing policy betrayed.⁶ The State Department derailed "Reagan foreign policy," according to supporters of white rule. Pat Buchanan, then director of communications in the Reagan White House, echoed those accusations; he often accused Shultz and Crocker of ignoring Reagan's wishes and not executing "Reagan foreign policy." Afrikaner nationalist organizations and media ran articles lambasting Crocker and Shultz and insisting that Reagan himself wanted to protect and extend white rule throughout southern Africa.

Reagan's absence on constructive engagement and his continued refusal to come out forcefully against apartheid proved useful for white power actors looking for solidarity from the White House. For American conservatives—both for and against the administration's constructive engagement policy—"what Reagan wanted" became a useful organizing tool, as both factions became increasingly dissatisfied with the administration's policies.

Where does that leave Reagan scholars? In my own work, as I moved away from focusing on the hold Reagan seemed to have over the entire conservative movement, a richer underbelly of right-wing struggle became apparent. The idea of Reagan within conservative movements—not just within the United States, but globally—remains an important avenue of exploration for scholars, especially in light of the elusiveness of Reagan himself. Even for those who work on issues where Reagan's views, decision-making, and objectives appear starker, it is critical to consider how the avatar of Reagan looms large throughout the calculations his administrations made.

It also reminds us as scholars of foreign policy to be cautious of the way the role of the president seems to loom over every aspect of the field. While we have rightly noted the concentration of foreign policymaking power within the executive branch, we should be thoughtful in our treatment of American presidents. Accepting the limitations of the presidency and acknowledging the places where presidents ceded ownership of particular policy issues opens up broader and perhaps more complicated questions for scholars of American foreign relations to explore. We should not absolve America's presidents of their policies and decisions. Reagan deserves great scrutiny and criticism for his administration's South Africa policy. But the question of who takes up the mantle of Reagan and why might prove more interesting than the man himself.

Notes:

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Trench Warfare and Global Reaganomics

Michael De Groot

The Reagan years cast a long shadow. Though many Republican candidates seeking public office have tripped over each other in recent years to fall in line with Donald Trump, they traditionally endeavored to align their values with Reagan to sell themselves to their constituents. They drew on Reagan's rhetoric and invoked his policies as proof that deregulation, limiting public spending, and lowering taxes will lead to prosperity.

The neoliberal triumphalist narrative—that the empowerment of the free market led to sustained economic growth in the 1980s after years of onerous government intervention—is a simple and attractive story, but it obscures the international Keynesian reality. The devil is in the details, and as Director of the Office of Management and Budget David Stockman later admitted in his memoirs, whatever success the Reagan administration enjoyed had little to do with the original supply-side ideology.¹

Any effort to explain the links among Reagan's policies, the domestic economic expansion, and the international reverberations of the U.S. economy's recovery raises fundamental questions about structure and agency as well as correlation and causation. The Reagan years oozed contradiction and irony. The president promised to achieve conflicting objectives such as slashing taxes, boosting defense spending, balancing the budget, and reducing inflation. "How this fits together will give them quite some trouble for digestion," West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt remarked shortly after Reagan's election in November 1980.²

A Cassandra of sorts for the vagaries of international economics, Schmidt had reason to be skeptical of Reaganomics. With an undeniable gift for turning a phrase, the Great Communicator denounced big government, yet public spending exploded under his watch, and he added more to the national debt than all presidents in American history combined until that point. He ridiculed deficit spending, but meeting his domestic and foreign policy objectives required the Keynesian stimulus of foreign capital to help finance tax cuts, military spending, and, much to Stockman's dismay, social safety nets. Reagan sought to unleash the power of the free market and promote American businesses, but the trade deficit exploded instead, forcing the administration to coordinate with other industrial democracies in the mid-1980s to arrest the appreciation of the dollar and combat protectionism at home as deindustrialization accelerated.

Reaganomics and its international consequences beckon as a subject that speaks to a variety of contemporary issues, but for the moment, the growing interest in the field exceeds

the means to develop it. Reconstructing policymaking entails tracking the paper trail up the bureaucratic ladder, but the lack of access to archival materials at the National Archives presents a formidable obstacle. After receiving most of what I requested in European archives, I arrived in College Park for the first time during the fall of 2016 with high hopes. I asked the archivist on duty for assistance locating Treasury records on international economic affairs in the 1970s. He chuckled and responded, "Good luck." Most of them remained unprocessed and unavailable, he explained.

If access to the Treasury records of the 1970s remains difficult, it is even tighter for the 1980s, so much so that in many respects I had better luck in Moscow with the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Trade, Gosbank, and Gosplan files. Prospects are better at the Reagan Library, but there too one confronts the same problem. Scholars must privilege what is available, and the field remains trapped in the streetlight effect for the moment, even if the declassification of more documents at the Reagan Library in recent years has allowed the bulb to illuminate a greater area.

Archival limitations notwithstanding, the challenge of situating Reagan within the policymaking process is not qualitatively different than for other presidents. To be sure, as Susan Colbourn and Augusta Dell'Omo point out in their contributions, Reagan does not often make himself known in the archives. He infrequently gave instructions, listened more than spoke during meetings, and left his advisers—as well as future scholars—to read between the lines and speculate about his true intentions.³ Yet the tough task of locating Reagan's agency is endemic to the study of the American presidency because of the government's relatively decentralized structure. "Writing around Reagan" echoes the difficulty of studying Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, who charmed his advisers and left them each believing that their policy preferences comported with the president's wishes.

In fact, if any one president stands out as the "outlier" during the late twentieth century in terms of his legibility in the archives, it is Jimmy Carter.⁴ The detail-oriented Carter had his fingerprints all over his administration, and his handwriting and initials are at the top of many memoranda currently stored at the Carter Library to prove it. In this regard, Carter was the exception rather than the rule.

Putting the issue of Reagan's elusiveness in the archives aside, understanding U.S. international economic affairs in the 1980s requires decentering him and viewing him as one actor among others. The most important figure may not have even been a member of the administration at all. A case can be made that it was the Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker.⁵ While the Fed does not figure prominently in scholarship on U.S. foreign relations, its policies have enormous implications for the global economy and the projection of U.S. power, given the centrality of the dollar in the international monetary system, finance, and international trade.⁶

The antagonism between the administration and the Fed created an unexpected cocktail of policies. While Reagan and his staff entered office confident in their supply-side ideology, their unsuccessful war against the welfare state, rising defense expenditures, tax cuts, and an end to tax bracket creep caused the budget deficit to rise to unforeseen levels. Setbacks deflated the administration's confidence. During his November 1982 visit to Washington, Thatcher's economic adviser Alan Walters reported the feeling of "uncertainty, loss of confidence, confusion

and flux" in the administration. Under Secretary of the Treasury for Monetary Affairs Beryl Sprinkel admitted that he had to reconsider "the need for a considerable and obvious reduction in the budget deficit," and Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan "merely huffed and puffed" in defense of the White House's strategy, "clearly display[ing] some of the pressure he was feeling."⁷

The Fed helped counteract the fiscal failure of Reaganomics. Focusing on contracting the money supply and keeping interest rates high, Volcker prioritized lowering inflation at all costs. The Fed's disciplinary policy sharpened a recession in the early 1980s, which forced many Americans to the unemployment lines and undermined the GOP during the 1982 midterm elections. Reagan officials accused Volcker's harsh monetary medicine of preventing the recovery, while Fed officials justified the tight monetary policy in part by pointing to the need to balance the administration's lack of fiscal discipline and make investment in American debt attractive.⁸ Neither believed that it could yield while the other behaved recklessly.

The "trench warfare" between the two led to an unusual combination of budget deficits, high interest rates, and an appreciating dollar that ironically drove the resurgence of the American economy by the mid-1980s.⁹ Tax cuts and federal spending ultimately stimulated economic activity, and the administration could escape the constraints of fiscal responsibility because high interest rates and the appreciating dollar limited inflation and attracted the foreign capital that helped finance the budget deficits.

Reagan refused to compromise on defense spending to ease pressure on the budget, and a bipartisan congressional coalition voted against making significant cuts to entitlements. "I wanted a balanced budget," Reagan explained in his memoirs. "But I also wanted peace through strength." When asked which he would prioritize, he answered, "I'd have to come down on the side of national defense."¹⁰ And so he did.

Reagan could make that choice because investors viewed U.S. debt as a prudent investment, and Treasury officials campaigned to liberalize foreign capital markets to make more savings available for investment in the United States. The American economy enjoyed non-inflationary economic growth after more than a decade of stagflation, although the expansion did not benefit everybody. America's second wind accelerated deindustrialization, weakened organized labor, and widened inequality.

While the Fed focused its efforts on domestic issues, the impact of the Volcker Shock echoed across the globe.¹¹ High U.S. interest rates redirected capital to the United States, upending global lending patterns and crowding out sovereign lenders in the developing world and the socialist bloc that had relied on easy money during the 1970s to finance their public spending. A sovereign debt crisis erupted in both of those regions, striking a crippling blow to the Third World project and pushing some nations in the Soviet bloc to the brink of bankruptcy.

Gosbank officials believed that the Reagan administration had purposely created a credit "blockade" against the Soviet Union and its allies as part of an imperialist Cold War offensive, but Moscow gave Washington more credit than it deserved.¹² Commercial banks turned away from the socialist states in the early 1980s because they received better returns in the United States—and the industrial democracies more broadly—and they worried about the Soviet bloc's solvency, not because Washington had implemented a successful strategy to squeeze its adversaries financially. U.S. foreign economic

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policy in the 1980s emerges as a story of improvisation and unintended consequences instead of intelligent design. The Fed compensated for Reagan's unwillingness to live up to his promise of balancing the budget by exploiting Washington's structural advantages in a post-Bretton Woods world in which the dollar reigned supreme and capital traveled freely across borders.

Exploring how this constellation of forces impacted such topics as the global economy's trajectory, the arc of American power, and the end of the Cold War will preoccupy scholars for years to come. The stakes for placing Reagan and his supply-side rhetoric within this story are high. In addition to liberating the field from the political partisanship, the new scholarship will demythologize the Reagan expansion and provide lessons for policymakers and elected representatives who reach back to the 1980s for guidance on how to approach contemporary challenges.

Notes:

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3. Melvyn P. Leffler, "Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 79.
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