Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War

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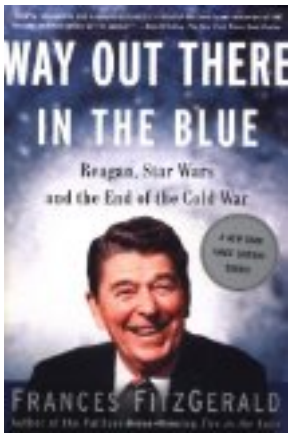

It's not hard to see why building technology to defend against nuclear missiles is tricky. First, there's the obvious difficulty of shooting at a moving target — like a bullet shooting a bullet. Then there's the fact that whatever device is defending you must itself be well defended, or else the enemy can simply take it out. And then there's the nasty fact that with nuclear war, near-perfect defense is necessary — even a single failure can cause enormous damage.

What is hard is explaining why, despite this, so many people took the idea so seriously. That's the question Frances FitzGerald takes up in *Way Out There In The Blue*, in which she uses the "Star Wars" initiative as a prism with which to understand the Reagan administration. Combined with Rick Perlstein's forthcoming *Nixonland*, the books provide allegorical insight into our current government: Bush II has combined the criminality of Nixon with the intellectual emptiness of Reagan.

Ronald Reagan was an actor. Even when off the set, he recited polished lines and played up a well-practiced demeanor. Indeed, he appears to have no inner life whatsoever. No one can be found to whom Ronald Reagan ever "opened up"; even his wife commented that "There's a wall around him … even I feel that barrier." As president, he was given the equivalent of shooting instructions specifying exactly where he was supposed to be every hour of the day and when he attended public events toe marks were chalked on the ground to indicate where he should stand.

Considering the state of the American political system, having an actor for a President is perhaps not the worst idea. But what was problematic was that nobody — including Reagan's closest aides — seemed to realize that that was what they were getting. For months they were continually shocked that Reagan refused to ever make a decision or take an action on any issue whatsoever. Instead, they watched dumbly as he simply listened to what he was told and nodded politely. When two of his subordinates disagreed, he was uncomfortable, but he steadfastly refused to intervene.

The result was that decisions ended up getting made by whoever was around — Nancy Reagan, his wife; Michael Deaver, his aide in charge of public relations; etc. Reagan's top people, such as his cabinet officials, frightened that they were actually making policy without any supervision, kept this fact secret from their staffs and the public until they all published their kiss-and-tell memoirs after Reagan had left office. Even more shocking, Reagan didn't seem to mind when the members of this group changed. One day Reagan's inner circle informed him that they were leaving and bringing the Treasury Secretary in to take their place. Reagan simply thanked them for their service.

There was one thing Reagan did seem to care about (aside from politely answering his fan mail): speeches. Reagan would rewrite his own speeches, removing abstract verbiage and adding homespun stories. And it was out of this concern that he stumbled into launching the Star Wars initiative.

After many years of right-wing propaganda about a "window of vulnerability" in our arms race with the Soviet Union, the Pentagon developed the MX missile series to ensure American superiority. The problem was where to put them. The MX missiles were designed to protect against the Soviets simply destroying all of our missiles, so they could not simply be put out in the open or the Soviets would simply destroy them as well. A variety of Rube Goldberg-like ideas were proposed to solve the problem.

After a thorough investigation, the military concluded the best solution was what came to be called "the racetrack": the missiles would be put on huge underground circular tracks, with little launching stations cut sporadically in the track. There would be several times more launching stations than missiles, so the Soviets would not know which stations to attack. But, to verify compliance with arms treaties, the stations could be opened so that the Soviets could see which ones contained missiles from space.

The problem was that the racetracks would need to be huge and the only practical space for such a thing was in Utah. The Mormon Church was understandably unhappy about having a huge nuclear missile field being built near them and thus the powerful Republicans from that region of the country scuttled the plan.

Other ideas were tried — the racetrack was converted to a straight line system, then to a configuration known as "Dense Pack" in which the missiles were all placed close together, in the hopes that all the missiles coming to attack them would blow each other up and perhaps spare some of our missiles. Another plan,

known as "Big Bird", had the missiles flying overhead on large transport planes, but it was scrapped when technicians raised concerns about the wings falling off. Another proposal involved hiding the missiles as normal luggage on cross-country passenger trains. It got to the point where the best idea was literally known as DUMB — deep underground missile basing — in which the missiles would be loaded on corkscrews which would drill down underground. Finally, they decided just to deploy the missiles in superficially-hardened housing, even though this meant they could be easily destroyed.

At the same time, a mass popular movement for a nuclear freeze was growing, encompassing college students, churches, and many unpoliticized citizens. Reagan's credibility on foreign policy was slipping away while books and movies and massive protests scared citizens into thinking about the unthinkable prospect of a nuclear holocaust. The Democrats were seizing power and mindshare and a nuclear freeze bill passed the House. Clearly something had to be done.

Missile defense seemed like the perfect alternative. It didn't require any diplomatic changes or sacrificing any weapons development — indeed, it allowed for more spending on research. But it allowed Reagan to use the language of the doves — a sincere desire to rid the world of the scourge of nuclear war. So when a Reagan aide proposed the idea (which the aide conceived of as a chip to be bargained away for with the Soviets), Reagan seized upon the idea and worked it into a speech at the next available opportunity.

There was just one problem: nobody had any idea how to make it work. The most prominent right-wing scientist, Edward Teller, was very excited about a new technology in which a high-powered X-ray could be sent along a rod to vaporize small objects. Teller proposed a large satellite with such rods sticking out of it, a device that came to be known as the "space-based sea urchin". What happens when the Soviets target the defense? he was asked. Teller didn't seem to have considered the question but, unfazed, came back the next day suggesting the defense weapons be stored underwater and "pop up" when missiles were overhead.

Such debates disguised the fact that no actual missile defense technology existed or was likely to for a long, long time. Tactics and costs for disintegration rays and sea urchins could be discussed endlessly, but such discussion was irrelevant, as nobody knew how to build the key components. But this fact was carefully kept from politicians and the press who, ignorant of the science, continued to discuss missile defense as if it was a serious proposal. Thus, a majority of Americans were convinced that scientific ingenuity would find a way to protect the country — indeed, they believed it already had.

But the sheen of a someday-to-be-developed missile defense system could not last forever — Reagan needed something more repeatable to boost his flagging poll numbers, especially in the wake of such scandals as Iran-contra. The result was an ongoing series of carefully-spun summits with the Soviets, in which the President claimed to be making good progress on negotiations for arms

reduction. (That negotiated arms reduction could serve as a replacement for a missile defense initiative never seemed to occur to the Reagan administration; it was not exactly a group prone to analytical self-reflection.)

On the Russian side, Mikhail Gorbachev, a brilliant and daring new politician, had come to power. Gorbachev seemed more like an American figure than a Russian one — he spoke plainly, made daring moves toward peace, and played well for the cameras. For much of the following years, Gorbachev had higher poll numbers in the US than Reagan did. Washington was said to have been swept away with "Gorby fever" and "Gorbymania".

Gorbachev unilaterally made a series of striking reforms in both domestic and foreign policy. He offered the US a wide variety of concessions in disarmament talks, insisting only that the US stop the SDI program (the one principle which Reagan refused to concede). Then he begun the process of glasnost, increasing the freedom of the press and allowing a left-wing reform movement to develop. As part of this, he freed dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov, who proceeded to tell the media that SDI was a bluff that the US could never successfully develop. Shortly thereafter, Gorbachev was even willing to budge on that, allowing the US to continue SDI. Meanwhile, he begun the process of perestroika, reforming the Russian political and economic system to increase the scope of democracy.

Meanwhile, Reagan's side continued to bungle or misunderstand all of Gorbachev's moves, using his disarmament proposals for little more than PR victories at home and continuing to insist his reforms were merely cosmetic attempts to prop up the old system. Reagan and Gorbachev continued to hold summits with plentiful photo opportunities, but little in the way of actual agreement was ever reached.

Indeed, Reagan actually made Gorbachev's reforms much more difficult by doing things like giving speeches demanding the General Secretary "tear down this wall". Such speeches only lent credence to the conservatives who charged that Gorbachev was simply doing the West's dirty work from the inside.

Yet despite Reagan's ineptitude, Gorbachev's reforms took hold — perhaps even more strongly than he had intended — and the old Soviet system began to fall apart. Democratic parties were elected, troops were withdrawn, and the wall finally came down.

But Americans were reluctant to believe that the destruction of the Soviet system had come from the reformers within it. Instead, they retrospectively lionized Reagan as the man whose tough talk had made the system come apart.

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