
Book Review

President Reagan Was Fierce Opponent of Mutually Assured Destruction Doctrine

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Ronald Reagan and His Quest To Abolish Nuclear Weapons

by Paul Lettow

New York: Random House, 2005
327 pages, hardbound, \$25.95

At a moment when the credibility of the institution of the U.S. Presidency has plummeted to perhaps an all-time low, as the result of the first four-year term and re-election of George W. Bush, Paul Lettow's new biography of President Ronald Reagan offers an invaluable counterpoint and message of hope. The book focusses almost exclusively on the single great legacy of the Reagan Presidency—his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). But, in painstakingly reviewing the process through which President Reagan launched, and then fought for the implementation of a global defense against nuclear weapons, the young Princeton and Oxford historian has provided a case study in Presidential leadership that is an inspiring lesson for all.

At no time in his Presidency did Ronald Reagan have any support, within the upper echelon of his own Administration, for the SDI, with the sole exception of Judge William Clark, who served as National Security Advisor to the President from 1982-83. Everyone else—from Secretary of State George Shultz; to White House Chief of Staff James Baker III; to Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger; to National Security advisors Robert McFarlane, Adm. John Poindexter, and Frank Carlucci; to Pentagon hawk Richard Perle; and Shultz's arms control advisor Paul Nitze—paid lip service to the President's vision of the SDI, but plotted against it.

Shultz, Nitze, McFarlane, and Baker tried to sell off the SDI as a bargaining chip in arms control negotiations with Moscow. The ostensible pro-SDI hawks, Weinberger, Perle, and Poindexter, all saw the SDI strictly as an enhancement of America's own military capabilities against the Soviet Union, and adamantly opposed Reagan's core concept of SDI as a global shield against nuclear warheads, to be shared with the

Soviet Union, and to lead to the eventual abolition of all nuclear weapons.

Against all of this internal opposition to the SDI, and faced with staunch Soviet rejection of the offer to bring the era of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) to an end, President Reagan held firm. Reagan had a vision of a world freed from the horrors of thermonuclear destruction, and he staked his entire Presidency on launching that process.

Paul Lettow's impeccably documented account of President Reagan's quest conveys all of the complexities of the fights inside Washington, and between Washington and Moscow. It is a must read for any student of contemporary history.

A Missing Element

I had the opportunity to briefly meet with Paul Lettow during a book-signing event in Washington, D.C., in early April. I wanted to size up the author, because of one disturbing missing element from his account, which I knew personally. The missing element was the role played by Lyndon LaRouche and some of his close associates—myself included—in a several-years-long back-channel dialogue with the Soviet government on the subject of ballistic missile defense. The original concept that President Reagan adopted as his Strategic Defense Initiative had been proposed by LaRouche, beginning in 1977, and been a core feature of his 1980 campaign for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination.

During the 1980 primary election campaign in New Hampshire, LaRouche and Reagan had spent several hours together, during one of the big Presidential candidates debates. Reagan had been receiving *Executive Intelligence Review* magazine since 1976, courtesy of John Garabedian, a wealthy California farmer and member of his California gubernatorial team. In the aftermath of their New Hampshire encounter, and Ronald Reagan's November 1980 landslide victory, the President had instructed members of his Administration to consult with LaRouche on a wide range of policy issues.

Thus, when a senior Soviet diplomat at the United Na-



Lyndon LaRouche speaking with President Reagan during a candidates debate in Concord, N.H., during the 1980 Presidential campaign.

tions, Mr. Kudashev, approached an *EIR* correspondent in late 1981, inquiring about Mr. LaRouche's assessment of Ronald Reagan, it was natural for LaRouche to pass the word on to the White House, along with an offer to use the opportunity to establish a back-channel of discussion between Washington and Moscow. LaRouche proposed to launch a dialogue on his own proposals for a joint ballistic missile defense project. The Reagan White House accepted the LaRouche offer, and as the result, throughout 1982 and the first quarter of 1983, LaRouche made frequent trips to Washington, D.C. to meet, privately, with a designated Soviet embassy official, and report all of those contacts directly back to the White House. Richard Morris, the longtime aide to Judge William Clark, who was the Chief of National Security at the National Security Council (NSC), was the White House point of contact for LaRouche on this effort.

LaRouche's private, back-channel discussions were bolstered by his own "public diplomacy." LaRouche wrote extensively about his vision of a ballistic missile defense shield, based on new physical principles, bringing about an end of the era of MAD, and ushering in an epoch of American-Russian cooperation in the frontiers of science and technology. He addressed a series of large diplomatic gatherings in Washington, D.C., and, later, around the world, promoting the SDI concept. On March 24, 1983, the day after President Reagan went on national television to formally announce his Strategic Defense Initiative, Lyndon LaRouche wrote, "True greatness in an American President touched President Ronald Reagan last night; it is a moment of greatness never to be forgotten."

The Soviet response to the Reagan SDI offer was as rapid as it was brutal. They rejected outright Reagan's offer, and devised an agitprop campaign, denouncing SDI as the "militarization of space."

In fact, in February 1983, a month before Reagan's historic televised address, LaRouche's Soviet interlocutor, Shershnev, had returned from a trip to Moscow with a mes-

sage from the government of Premier Yuri Andropov. The message contained three elements:

1. The Soviet government would reject the SDI.
2. Soviet studies of the LaRouche proposal had proven that they were sound and viable. However, under conditions of "crash development," the Soviet economy would be incapable of keeping pace with a so-revived American economy. Therefore, it was principally on economic grounds that Moscow would reject the offer.
3. Paradoxically, because other Moscow channels into the American political establishment had assured the Soviets that President Ronald Reagan would never adopt the LaRouche SDI concept, and Moscow found the overall dialogue with LaRouche to be beneficial, the back-channel talks would continue.

Thus, Moscow had decided *prior* to the Reagan speech of March 23, 1983, that the SDI offer would be rejected, in part because the Andropov government had been convinced that Reagan would never actually make such a generous offer.

Shortly after the SDI speech by the President, Shershnev was again summoned back to Moscow. He returned to Washington, deeply shaken. In a final face-to-face discussion with LaRouche, he privately conceded that his government had made a tragic mistake in rejecting President Reagan's offer. He said that the matter had now been "bounced upstairs," and he was recommending that the dialogue with Mr. LaRouche be turned over to Georgi Arbatov, the head of the U.S.A.-Canada Institute, and Moscow's leading America-watcher. Two weeks later, Shershnev was permanently called back to Moscow, and no such LaRouche-Arbatov meeting ever took place.

On July 24, 1985, Lyndon LaRouche published an assessment of the impact of the Soviet rejection of President Reagan's offer to jointly develop and deploy a strategic defense system to end the era of MAD. The assessment was published in a larger special report by *EIR*, *Global Showdown—The Russian Imperial War Plan for 1988*. LaRouche wrote that if the United States were to "unleash those changes in monetary, economic, and budgetary policies needed for implementation of an SDI 'crash program,'" the Soviet Union would have great difficulties keeping up, given Russia's "peasant problem" and other cultural and ideological barriers to the rapid absorption of scientific and technological breakthroughs into the civilian economy. LaRouche forecast a collapse of the Warsaw Pact system within six years. In a speech in West Berlin in Oct. 1988, LaRouche addressed the prospects of German reunification within a decade.

New Declassified Documentation

Author Paul Lettow based his insightful study of President Reagan on a large number of newly declassified documents, including a string of Reagan-era National Security Decision Directives (NSDD) and CIA National Intelligence Estimates. He supplemented them with interviews and correspondence

with many of the key Administration players in the SDI drama, as well as their memoirs and collected papers.

Through this meticulous cross-gridding of solid source material, Lettow was able to present a lively chronology of the Reagan years, providing a precise, yet intelligible account of the byzantine maneuverings between the State Department, the Pentagon, the NSC. Each faction in the Reagan Administration opposed Reagan's vision, and each tried, in its own way, to coopt and subvert the President's goal.

Yet, every step along the way, President Reagan remained true to his belief: Mutually Assured Destruction was an immoral and unacceptable means of avoiding thermonuclear holocaust. He was truly a "nuclear abolitionist."

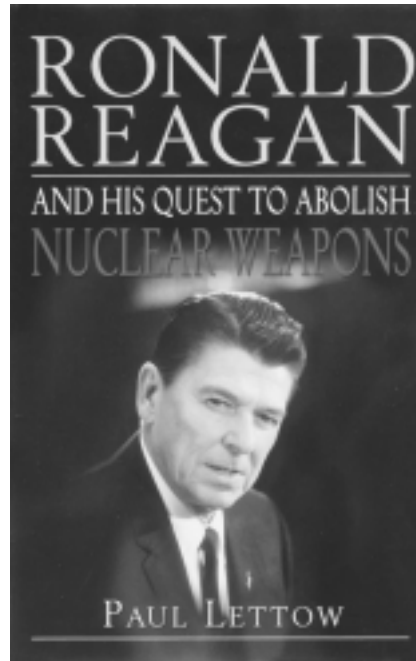
Lettow traced the origins of Reagan's abolitionist beliefs, from his reaction to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to his 1961 visit to the U.S. Air Command Center at Colorado Springs, Colo., to his Nov. 22, 1967 visit to the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory (now the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory). At Colorado Springs, Reagan was horrified to learn that, while the U.S. could track incoming Soviet nuclear missiles 20 minutes before they landed, the U.S. was powerless to do more than warn people in the target zone about their imminent obliteration.

During his 1967 visit to the Lawrence Radiation Lab, the newly elected California Governor Reagan received a two-hour briefing from Dr. Edward Teller and others about missile defense. Lettow quoted Teller on that meeting: "What we told the governor was not simple, but he listened carefully and asked perhaps a dozen salient questions. . . . My impression was that his questions showed very little knowledge of the subject but real interest in the subject. And furthermore, they were perfect questions, they were good questions . . . coming from a man who had not looked into that situation before."

From no later than that 1967 encounter with Dr. Teller, Ronald Reagan was a fierce opponent of Mutually Assured Destruction. As Lettow wrote, "Reagan disliked MAD. He also disliked the technocratic McNamara [then-Defense Secretary Robert Strange McNamara], whom he publicly derided as 'that efficient disaster.' Reagan likened MAD to an Old West standoff, with 'two westerners standing in a saloon aiming their guns to each other's head—permanently.' Deaver, Meese, and Weinberger all recalled that Reagan mistrusted MAD and talked with his aides in Sacramento about his objections to it. According to Weinberger, the idea that one was safe from nuclear attack only if vulnerable to it 'repelled' Reagan. Meese told the author that Reagan felt that MAD was 'politically and diplomatically, militarily, and morally flawed.'"

Debunking the Right-Wing Hoax

One of the most important and refreshing features of Paul Lettow's book is that he thoroughly debunked the right-wing-conjured mythology that Ronald Reagan's SDI was aimed solely at defending the United States against Soviet missile



The book focusses on the single great legacy of the Reagan Presidency, his Strategic Defense Initiative, as a way to eliminate the insanity of the Mutually Assured Destruction doctrine.

attack. To this day, American right-wingers and some liberals bristle at the idea that Ronald Reagan truly intended to collaborate with the Soviet leadership to end the era of MAD, by either jointly developing, or sharing the missile defense technology. The idea that the author of the "Empire of Evil" speech could have passionately sought the elimination of all nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth, provokes the most extreme forms of cognitive dissonance.

Lettow used numerous speeches by President Reagan, NSDDs, and a detailed account, drawn from declassified notes, of Reagan's October 1986 summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachov in Reykjavik, Iceland, to make a slam-dunk case that President Reagan truly was committed to collaboration with Moscow on a global ballistic missile defense shield. He sought the elimination of all ballistic missiles, and all nuclear weapons, and he was convinced that the best way to get there was to devise a global ballistic missile defense shield that would render offensive nuclear weapons obsolete.

From Lettow's account of the Reykjavik negotiations between Reagan and Gorbachov: "Reagan countered that he would agree to share SDI and that the initiative would 'facilitate the elimination of nuclear weapons.' He said that he 'failed to see the magic of the ABM regime,' which enshrined MAD. He emphasized that he wanted 'to eliminate missiles so that our populations could sleep in peace' and that a shared missile defense would 'give the world a means of protection that would put the nuclear genie back in his bottle.' Gorbachov replied firmly that 'no one in the Soviet leadership' nor he personally 'could agree to steps which would undercut' the ABM Treaty."