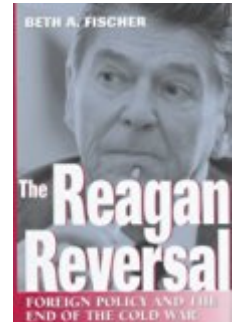


Beth A. Fischer. *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War.*
Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997. ix + 176 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN
978-0-8262-1138-5.



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Published on H-Pol (May, 1998)

On October 3, 1983, Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam delivered a typical hardline speech on superpower relations emphasizing the immediate threat posed by the Soviet Union, the dangers of continued military build up, and the instability created by competition for global spheres of influence. Just ten weeks later, however, on January 16, 1984, Ronald Reagan himself gave a speech which marked a dramatic shift in policy. Instead of speaking of diametrically opposed interests, Reagan spoke of common concerns, the mutual desire for peace and the urgent need to address "dangerous misunderstandings" between Moscow and Washington. Beth A. Fischer, a Political Science professor at the University of Toronto, finds this sudden change in attitude remarkable for two reasons. First the speech, and the permanent shift in policy it introduced, came fifteen months before the ascension to Communist party leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev and two full years before the introduction of glasnost and perestroika, thus challenging the prevailing wisdom that the impetus for rapprochement which set the stage for the end of the Cold war came from the Soviet Union. Second, Fischer sees "Reagan's fin-

gerprints" all over the January speech, which strongly contradicts the widespread image of Reagan as a disengaged, passive president (pp. ix, 3).

In *The Reagan Reversal*, Fischer sets out to closely study the weeks between October 3, 1983, and January 16, 1984, to discover the reasons behind the sudden change of attitude towards the "evil empire." As a political scientist, rather than a political historian, Fischer proceeds very methodically. She divides her book into four separate chapters, each dealing with a different possible explanation for the Reagan shift in policy. The first chapter takes on the conventional view that the Reagan administration did not begin seeking a better relationship with the Soviet Union until November of 1985 when Reagan and Gorbachev met in Geneva. Fischer carefully details the policy stance of the United States between 1981 and 1985, paying particular attention to the issue of "linkage," the coupling of negotiations on arms control and trade, among other things, to Soviet actions abroad. Although noting some softening in 1982 when Reagan opened up the possibility for a new round of Strategic Arms Limitation

(SALT) Talks, Fischer finds American policy to be predominantly hard-line and confrontational until Reagan's shift of line in January of 1984. The remainder of the chapter seeks to demonstrate that the shift of line in 1984 was not temporary or tactical but instead signaled a genuine change in orientation which led directly to the 1985 summit between Reagan and Gorbachev.

Fischer's next chapter explores the possibility that the shift in policy came as response to the need to strengthen Reagan's prospects for re-election. Such a thesis was in fact advanced by *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory who felt that Reagan "was performing a campaign chore" and had to be dragged "kicking and screaming into the East room" (p. 52). Fischer cites a number of proponents of the view that the January 1984 speech was electioneering but finds their reasoning unsatisfactory. Reagan's approval ratings had been going up in the months prior to the speech, large numbers of Americans backed a hard line toward the Soviets, and Reagan was notorious for refusing to give up an idea he believed in just because it was politically dubious. Fischer points to the Iran Contra scandal for proof of the last point. One of her most telling pieces of evidence is that, if the speech was intended for domestic consumption, it was ill timed. Instead of at prime time, the networks broadcast the speech at ten a.m. eastern time, an hour when most Americans were at work or preparing to go there. However, the speech reached Europe at 4 p.m. Bonn time and 6 p.m. Moscow time, perfect for maximum coverage on the evening news (p. 66).

If public opinion can not explain the policy shift perhaps, Fischer asks, it resulted from shifts in Reagan's circle of advisors, in particular the departure of Secretary of State Alexander Haig and National Security Advisor William Clark and their replacement by George Shultz and Robert McFarlane. Both McFarlane and Shultz held much more conciliatory views towards the Soviet Union than Reagan and actively sought to mold foreign policy

to their viewpoints. This thesis fits well with the concept of Reagan as a passive president, essentially reactive and unengaged, but Fischer finds it lacking. After an exhaustive analysis of the foreign policy views of Reagan's inner circle of advisors (each individual is given a separate section of the chapter), she concludes that Shultz and McFarlane were out-numbered by hardliners and in too weak a position to impose their views on a president that Fischer portrays as fully engaged on those issues which held particular importance for him.

Fischer's final chapter deals with Reagan himself exploring the evolution of his ideas regarding communism and the Soviet Union and trying to discover what events and issues influenced his thinking in the crucial weeks leading up to his January 16 speech. This chapter is without question the best one in the book, delving deeply into Reagan's state of mind and revealing a fascinating individual, both in keeping with, and at considerable variance to, traditional stereotypes. For example, despite his implacable opposition to communism, Reagan was deeply distressed by the destructive potential of nuclear weapons and opposed the Pentagon doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) as indeed a form of insanity. However, a more stereotypical Reagan emerges in Fischer's discussion of Reagan's belief that political and natural events in the late 1970s and early 80s were fulfilling Biblical prophecy and bringing history closer and closer to Armageddon, the final battle in which the world would be destroyed by (nuclear) fire (p. 106). Paradoxically, this assurance of the working out of Biblical prophecy made Reagan more sensitive to the need to find ways to avoid war between the superpowers.

Fischer believes that three events between October 1983 and January 1984 convinced Reagan that the Soviet Union (against, to his mind, all common sense) regarded the United States as a threat, that the possibility for accidental nuclear war was chillingly real, and that the conse-

quences of such a war were too grave to risk. The first crucial event was the shooting down of Korean Airlines flight 007 (KAL 007), which Reagan publicly condemned as an act of barbarism. Fischer produces compelling evidence, however, that indicates that, privately, Reagan and his advisors had come to the equally horrifying conclusion that the tragedy was the result of a series of human errors. Highly appropriately for the Reagan myth, the second event was the private screening at Camp David of the controversial television movie "The Day After," which depicts the effects of nuclear war on the residents of Lawrence, Kansas. The film had such an impact on Reagan that seven years later he gave it a prominent place in his memoirs equating it in importance with the downing of KAL 007.

The third event, operation Able Archer 83, took place in November when the United States and its NATO allies conducted the most complex and extensive war games ever staged in Europe. So realistic was Able Archer that the Soviet Union, which Fischer notes had long ago formulated plans for launching a strike at western Europe under the cover of a war game, became convinced that a nuclear first strike was planned, put their own forces on alert status, and flooded their embassies and KGB residencies with urgent requests for information on western intentions. Reagan, as revealed in interviews with top aides and in his own memoirs, was stunned to discover that the Soviets felt threatened by the United States. Fischer believes that this was the last proof needed to convince him that a dramatic change in attitude was necessary, resulting in a new course which he pursued for the remainder of his presidency.

Fischer's book is well worth reading; it is generally engagingly written and its highly theoretical approach makes it suitable for classroom use either as a case study of foreign policy or in a class on methodology. However, her strict adherence to her methodology does have its drawbacks. The book is unnecessarily repetitious, and Fischer

repeats her main thesis in detail no less than four times, and in one place the use of theory detracts from her argument. In the chapter on Reagan, Fischer introduces the psychological theory or "priming" to justify her exploration of the factors affecting Reagan's thinking (pp. 110-12). The theory is overly deterministic and completely unnecessary. Fischer's use of historical sources to reveal Reagan's inner world is quite convincing by itself and requires no theoretical props to hold it up. These reservations aside the book is a welcome addition to the literature on both the Reagan presidency and the end of the Cold war. It presents a picture of a much more activist United States and replaces the image of genial, but doddering, Reagan with that of an extremely idiosyncratic, but, very engaged, chief executive.

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Citation: Vernon L. Pedersen. Review of Fischer, Beth A. *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

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