

James Graham Wilson. *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. xiv + 264 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-5683-1.



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Published on H-War (November, 2015)

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Backroom negotiations, cloak-and-dagger espionage, larger-than-life personalities, and the perpetual sense of nuclear annihilation are some of the most recognizable descriptors of the Cold War. Widely recognized as one of the most dangerous eras in human history, the period that immediately followed the conclusion of World War II up to the beginning of the 1990s was wrought with potential disaster, with no conceivable end in sight. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the conclusion of the Cold War came as a surprise to many. Now, with over twenty years having passed since both the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union came crashing down, many historians have conducted extensive research to find out exactly why the Cold War ended.

Through quality research and comprehensive analysis, historian James Graham Wilson claims in his book, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War*, that it was due to a handful of impactful leaders and their willingness to step away from traditional Cold War tactics that

allowed for the forty-plus-year struggle to come to a close. It is obvious that the author places an extremely high value on the quality of research that is included in the book, as many documents that he uses as references are rarely accessed by the public. This superior research is one of the most defining aspects of the book and is one of the reasons that it should be considered a worthy read by students and historians interested in the Cold War era.

Overall, Wilson's approach to how and why the Cold War came to an end is fairly unimaginative but accurate. His argument about how the major players, such as US Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, and US Secretary of State George Shultz, all had to improvise and think outside of the normal US-Soviet paradigm does not go against the grain of conventional thought on the subject. Of course it took leaders of a different mind-set to shift the landscape and interactions of the Cold War to an area in which change could be made and the conflict ended. However, despite the

relatively weak thesis, the route that Wilson takes to make his point is well written and makes the book worth reading.

Wilson does not delve too much into the how or why the conflict began. He focuses on both major and minor players who entered the stage after the completion of the Carter administration, and pinpoints the key strategic decisions that allowed them to bring about the end of the Cold War. For the most part, he progresses chronologically from the beginning of the Reagan administration to the launching of Operation Desert Storm, the event that he believes signified the completion of the Cold War.

One of the most significant arguments that Wilson makes is that Reagan helped bring about the conclusion of the Cold War due to his willingness to discuss untapped options with the Soviet Union. Wilson writes that Reagan “wanted to achieve a grand bargain on nuclear arms before the end of the presidency” (p. 114). The deal that Reagan pined so hard for near the end of his tenure as commander in chief would have called for complete nuclear abolition from both the United States and the USSR, something that no other administration had ever believed possible, much less tried to achieve. This improvisation was key to ending the Cold War, as it was the opening of this dialogue that allowed for Gorbachev to later push for more radical reforms, reforms that would eventually unravel the Soviet Empire.

Wilson also spends a great deal of time focusing on the significant role that Gorbachev played in bringing about the conclusion of the Cold War. While discussing the role that the Soviet premier played in nuclear abolition, Wilson states that “a different Soviet leader could easily have ... halted all reforms, and mobilized his countrymen to fend off the capitalist world’s quest for nuclear inviolability” (p. 203). However, Gorbachev continued to fight for reforms of all types in a hope to bring about a resurgence for his country, and despite setbacks on all fronts, never ceased to work with

the United States to secure a more peaceful state for the entire planet. Wilson is correct for giving so much credit to Gorbachev for his improvisation and willingness to adapt.

It is in the acknowledgment of the importance of the second-tier contributors that especially allows Wilson’s book to stand out. His thorough research of the numerous secretaries of state, secretaries of defense, national security advisors, and other high-level members in both the American and Soviet governments and their contributions to the end of the Cold War allow Wilson’s work to be solid on the major points. Wilson’s inclusion of such individuals as Caspar Weinberger, George Shultz, and Eduard Shevardnadze, men whose contributions are usually glossed over or attributed to their respective bosses, makes *Triumph of Improvisation* a book that is fair to all members involved in the conclusion of the Cold War.

Overall, *The Triumph of Improvisation* is a solid account of the culmination of the Cold War. While Wilson’s thesis does not move the needle in regard to current thought on the subject, his explanation of how each of the major and minor players influenced the conclusion of the conflict is interesting and well thought out. It is a well-researched and well-written piece that gives a solid account of the decisions and actions that led to the end of the decades-long conflict. Wilson’s emphasis on the contributions of so many players and their willingness to try unconventional means make this book a worthwhile read, as many of these topics have not received the attention that they deserve.

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Citation: Chris Booth. Review of Wilson, James Graham, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2015.

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