

REVIEW ESSAY

WHAT DID THE COLD WAR TEACH US?

James M. Goldgeier

Nichols, Thomas M. *Winning the World: Lessons for America's Future from the Cold War*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. 254pp. \$49.95

In the late 1940s scholars and practitioners reached for the lessons learned from World Wars I and II to combat the growing threat posed by the Soviet Union. The United States established a free trade order to ensure Western prosperity, built peacetime alliances around the world to help contain Soviet power, and went to war to save South Korea and to demonstrate that aggression would not pay.

For four decades Americans experienced a Cold War with the Soviet Union. The two superpowers engaged in a massive arms race and almost

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went to war over Berlin, Cuba, and the Middle East. The United States got bogged down in Vietnam, the Soviets in Afghanistan, and each expended resources in places of dubious strategic value in the Third World. As America faces its new enemy responsible for 9/11, does the Cold War contest offer any lessons for American strategists? Thomas Nichols says that it does.

Nichols stresses that the key feature of the U.S.-Soviet struggle was the difference in ideology and that in a new war with new ideological foes, the United States can learn from the recent past. Just recognizing that the enemy has an ideology is for Nichols no small matter; he spends a good deal of the book deriding liberal academics who in his view failed to understand

the true goals of Soviet communists. One cannot bargain with those who are ideologically opposed to your way of life. Détente was a mistake. What is needed now to combat this new enemy is the kind of pressure used by President Ronald Reagan against the Soviets.

Nichols's viewpoint on ideology is important. The more we learn about Soviet decision making from notes of Politburo sessions, the more we know that those at the top were not just spouting out propaganda but actually believed in what they were saying. Even Stalin, the cynical and brutal master of realpolitik, whom many viewed as merely using ideology instrumentally in his struggle for control, was steeped in Marxism-Leninism and was known to engage in lengthy philosophical discussions. So also was Mikhail Gorbachev, a true believer in a nonviolent form of Marxist-Leninism, whose failure was in not recognizing how bankrupt his ideology was when he tried to destroy the old system with nothing credible to take its place.

The main U.S. foreign policy experiment in engaging this ideological opponent was President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's détente. Nichols argues that avoidance of nuclear war was the chief source of the policy. However, if the United States really wants to draw lessons from this, it should consider Kissinger and Nixon's concern about maintaining America's preeminent position in global affairs. It was not just the avoidance of nuclear war they were seeking, it was the preservation of the U.S. position as the leading world power at a time when America was at war in Vietnam and the Soviets had achieved nuclear parity. Their strategic goal then was to prevent the balance of power from shifting to the Soviet Union—in the parlance of the 2002 White House national security strategy, how to keep the balance of power in favor of freedom. The problem today is that though the United States can maintain its lead over any combination of states in traditional measures of power, how does it maintain its preeminent position in the face of nonstate threats seeking to attack it at its most vulnerable points?

It turns out that even Nichols believes that engagement is not always a bad thing. He does a nice job illustrating how there was not such a huge divide between the end of Jimmy Carter's presidency and the beginning of Reagan's. Carter had already rejected détente—Reagan was just more emphatic about it. Yet Nichols argues that although Reagan put the pressure on, by the end of 1983 even he believed that he had gone too far and was looking to engage.

Perhaps more striking is the author's statement that although Reagan's strategy was appropriate for its time, it was better that President George H. W. Bush was the one to handle the collapse of the Soviet Union and help ease Moscow's decline. The Bush team was clearly successful in managing the end of the Cold War and, in particular, German unification. But would we be praising Bush's

prudence if the Soviet August 1991 coup had succeeded and hard-liners reasserted their control in Moscow?

Surprisingly, given the current world situation, Nichols almost completely ignores the most radical element of Reagan's global vision—the creation of a nuclear-free world. This vision underpinned Reagan's desire for the Strategic Defense Initiative, his willingness to share the technology with the Soviet Union, and his hope to be rid of offensive nuclear weapons. (His advisers thought him naïve.) Such deep cuts in nuclear forces were possible only after the Cold War. No administration since has declared such a commitment that could help in the overall effort to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Finally, what about superpower interests in the periphery? Nichols argues that much of the Third World conflict was unnecessary given the interests of both superpowers. The United States should have felt secure enough to avoid many far-flung conflicts, and the Soviets expended resources that could have been used more productively for their own people. Based on the author's argument on ideology, however, was it really so preposterous for the USSR to seek allies among underdeveloped countries? In the 1970s, both the Soviets and the Americans bought into the notion that the correlation of forces was shifting in favor of the Soviets. However, Europe and Japan were already in the U.S. camp, and after 1972 the United States was engaging China. All major power centers were arrayed against the Soviet Union. What else could Moscow do but court an Ethiopia or an Angola?

Although Nichols argues that many lives and resources were wasted in places of little strategic value, he stresses the importance of the war in Vietnam. "If it was really only one theater of many in a world war, then the question becomes one of whether fighting is better than surrender, what price should be paid to slow the enemy's advance, and perhaps even to avoid having to fight another day in another place." Why would that be true in Vietnam and not in Africa?

Nichols argues that the "Cold War of 1945–1991 was only the first of its kind," because "the war with terrorism, like the war against communism, is a war of ideas against people who will one day seek again to hold us hostage with nuclear weapons." Will America again really face that kind of war with that kind of adversary? Are we in a war of ideas or a war against a network of disaffected people willing to blow themselves up to kill us? Is there truly an alternative vision in how to organize the world, followed by our adversaries in the way Lenin provided? Should we not be more concerned that nonstate actors, who feel no compunction about using weapons of mass destruction against the United States, gain access to the technology they need than fear they will seek to "hold us hostage"?

The study of the Cold War has become increasingly exciting in recent years. Nichols makes some use of new material from places like the Cold War International History Project and the National Security Archive, but he spends so much time expressing his rage at those who did not understand Soviet evil that he misses how much the new materials enable us to explore these themes in even greater detail. We now have access to open archives in places like Central and Eastern Europe, including the former East Berlin. Scholars are exploring in depth from multinational sources the very issues that Nichols raises. Scholars around the world are trying to understand what happened in their own countries. Cold War studies programs and journals have sprouted up on campuses like George Washington University, University of California at Santa Barbara, London School of Economics, Harvard University, and New York University. Young scholars, who do not have the baggage of those who debated each other during the Cold War, are studying and enriching our understanding.

As the United States struggles with adversaries opposed to its way of life, Nichols is right to remind us of what is at stake. Just recall the joy with which Central and Eastern Europeans threw off Soviet rule and took the steps necessary to rejoin the West. We have seen individuals cherish the right to vote in Namibia and Mongolia, and a population in Iran increasingly frustrated with theocratic rule. As did World War II, the Cold War also taught that we should never sell short democratic values.