

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Tragedy of Cold War History*

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It has been well over three decades, now, since William Appleman Williams first called for “a searching review of the way America has defined its own problems and objectives, and its relationship with the rest of the world.” In one of the most influential books ever written about the history of United States foreign relations, Williams rejected the celebratory tone that had characterized the work of an earlier generation of American diplomatic historians, insisting that the record of this nation’s foreign policy had been a “tragedy” because of the gap we had allowed to develop between our aspirations and accomplishments in world affairs. We had preached self-determination but objected when others sought to practice it; we had proclaimed the virtues of economic freedom even as we sought to impose economic control. The result, Williams concluded, was that “America’s humanitarian urge to assist other people is undercut—even subverted—by the way it goes about helping them.”¹

The classical definition of “tragedy” is greatness brought low through some fundamental flaw in one’s own character. When one considers the difficulties the United States created for itself in the world through its own hubris and arrogance during the 1960s and early 1970s, it is hardly surprising that Williams’s tragic view of American diplomatic history seemed, to a great many people at the time, to make sense. To a good many people even today, it still does.

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¹William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, rev. ed. (New York, 1988), 15. The first edition of Williams’s book appeared in 1959. For two excellent assessments of Williams’s influence see Bradford Perkins, “The Tragedy of American Diplomacy: Twenty-Five Years After,” in *Redefining the Past: Essays in Diplomatic History in Honor of William Appleman Williams*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner (Corvallis, OR, 1986), 21–34; and Gary R. Hess, “After the Tumult: The Wisconsin School’s Tribute to William Appleman Williams,” *Diplomatic History* 12 (Fall 1988): 483–99.



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Therein, however, lies a danger. Any view held by a considerable number of people risks becoming an orthodoxy, and the members of our profession are no more exempt than others from that tendency. I only met Bill Williams once, but I gather that he was, if anything, a profoundly unorthodox character.² I suspect that the last thing he would have wanted would be to see his own ideas—or anybody else's, for that matter—become conventional wisdom.³ As he himself put it in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, "history is a way of learning, of getting closer to the truth. It is only by abandoning the clichés that we can even define the tragedy."⁴

What I would like to do here is to question some clichés and then try to redefine a tragedy. For if we mean what we say when we enjoin one another—in a way that has become, in itself, almost an orthodoxy—to transform diplomatic history into a truly international history,⁵ then surely Williams's tragic view of the American experience in world affairs is a good place to start. How well does it hold up when placed within an international context? How does an interpretation that has influenced the writing of so much Cold War history look today, now that the Cold War is over? And how might we apply Williams's habit of asking creatively irritating questions as we seek to understand the post-Cold War world?

The end of the Cold War has obliged most of us, after all, to jettison quite a number of clichés, orthodoxies, and long-cherished pearls of conventional wisdom: in this sense, we are all well on the way to becoming post-Cold War revisionists. It is all the more important, then, that we take another look into what Williams called the "mirror" of history, "in which, if we are honest enough, we can see ourselves as we are as well as the way we would like to be."⁶

II

Let us begin with an issue our students are already beginning to raise with us, which is what the Cold War was all about in the first place. Given what we now know about the internal fragility of the Soviet Union; given what has long been clear about the economic absurdity of Marxism-Leninism; given the persuasive evidence that an international Communist "monolith" never really existed; given all of these things, exactly what was the threat to American interests anyway? Whatever could have justified the massive expenditures on

²See William G. Robbins, "William Appleman Williams: 'Doing History is Best of All. No Regrets,'" in Gardner, ed., *Redefining the Past*, 3–19.

³Gardner makes this point in *ibid.*, vii.

⁴Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 13.

⁵See, for example, Christopher Thome, "After the Europeans: American Designs for the Remaking of Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History* 12 (Spring 1988): 201–8; Michael H. Hunt, "Internationalizing U.S. Diplomatic History: A Practical Agenda," *ibid.* 15 (Winter 1991): 1–11; *idem*, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *ibid.* 16 (Winter 1992): esp. 128–35; as well as essays by Robert J. McMahon, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Akira Iriye in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (New York, 1991).

⁶Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 16.

armaments, the violations of human rights abroad and civil liberties at home, the neglect of domestic priorities, the threats to blow up the world—whatever could have excused all the deplorable things the United States did during the Cold War if no genuine threat ever existed? Does not this record only confirm what Williams suspected: that the American system has a built-in propensity to fight cold wars, and that if the Soviet Union had not provided the necessary adversary, someone else would have?

Few historians would deny, today, that the United States did expect to dominate the international scene after World War II, and that it did so well before the Soviet Union emerged as a clear and present antagonist. Woodrow Wilson years earlier had provided the rationale, with his call for a collective security organization to keep the peace, and for self-determination and open markets as a way of simultaneously removing the causes of war.⁷ It took the fall of France and the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor to bring Wilson's ideas into the policy arena, to be sure, but the country's leadership, if not yet the country as a whole, was thoroughly committed to them long before World War II ended.⁸

This vision of the future assumed a strong military role for the United States:⁹ Americans would hardly have been prepared, even under the best of circumstances, to turn the entire task of peacekeeping over to the United Nations, however enthusiastically they endorsed that organization.¹⁰ And there is no question but that careful calculations of material advantage lay behind all of this. After all, no one had ever combined the fact of self-interest with the appearance of disinterest more skillfully than Woodrow Wilson, and that aspect of his legacy was still very much around as influential Americans, inside and outside the government, set out to design the postwar world.¹¹

But let us be fair to those designers: they also assumed that the Great Powers would act *in concert rather than in competition* with one another. That presupposition had been the basis for Franklin D. Roosevelt's early and somewhat crude concept of the "four policemen," and it carried over into the more sophisticated planning for the United Nations and the organization of the postwar international economy that went on during the last two years of World

⁷The best discussion of this Wilsonian synthesis is still N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York, 1968).

⁸Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York, 1967); John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York, 1972), 1–31; Thomas G. Paterson, *Soviet-American Confrontation: Postwar Reconstruction and the Origins of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1973), 1–29; Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, 1992), 1–24.

⁹Michael S. Sherry, *Preparing for the Next War: American Plans for Postwar Defense, 1941–45* (New Haven, 1977), and *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, 1987), makes this point effectively.

¹⁰See Thomas M. Campbell, *Masquerade Peace: America's UN Policy, 1944–1945* (Tallahassee, 1973), esp. 197–200.

¹¹I have discussed the American habit of linking self-interest with disinterest at greater length in *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (New York, 1992), 9–11.

War II.¹² It is certainly true that the United States expected to lead the new world order; it alone was in a position to set the rules and to provide the resources without which that system could hardly function. But the system was to have been based, we need to remember, upon the principle of what we would today call *common security*. It was to have operated, at least insofar as the Great Powers were concerned, within a framework of consent, not coercion; and most Americans expected, perhaps naively, that this relatively open and relaxed form of hegemony could be made to coincide with their own security interests.¹³

Let us recall, as well, that the United States plan for the postwar world was never fully put into effect. Part of the reason was its failure to take into account the extent of wartime devastation in Europe, and the consequent improbability that a return to open markets alone could solve that problem.¹⁴ But the main difficulty lay more in the realm of geopolitics than economics: it was that Washington's conception of common security ran up against another one, emanating from Moscow, that was of a profoundly different character.

There was nothing relaxed, or open, or "consensual" about Josef Stalin's vision of an acceptable international order; and the more we reconsider Soviet history now that the Soviet Union itself has become history, the harder it becomes to separate any aspect of it from the baleful and lingering influence of this remarkable but sinister figure. One need hardly accept a "great man" theory of history to recognize that in the most authoritarian government the world has ever seen, the authoritarian who ran it did make a difference.¹⁵

Stalin was, above all else, a Great Russian nationalist, a characteristic very much amplified by his non-Russian origins.¹⁶ His ambitions followed those of the old princes of Muscovy, with their determination to "gather in" and to dominate the lands that surrounded them. That Stalin cloaked this goal within an ideology of proletarian internationalism ought not to conceal its real origins and character: Stalin's most influential role models, as his most

¹²The best discussion of Roosevelt's thinking on this matter is Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, 1991), 83–105. But see also G. John Ikenberry, "Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony," *Political Science Quarterly* 104 (Fall 1989): esp. 380–81; and, for a good analysis of the prerequisites for such a concert, Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," *International Security* 16 (Summer 1991): 116–25.

¹³See Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 19; Ikenberry, "Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony," 381–82. This vision of the postwar world, as Arthur Schlesinger has recently reminded us, was not too different from what the "new world order" of the post-Cold War era was supposed to look like. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Franklin D. Roosevelt and U.S. Foreign Policy" (Address delivered at the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Annual Convention, Poughkeepsie, New York, 18 June 1992). See also, on this point, Kimball, *The Juggler*, 105.

¹⁴Ikenberry, "Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony," 384–85; also Henry R. Nau, *The Myth of America's Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (New York, 1990), 87–92. The definitive account, of course, is Michael J. Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952* (New York, 1987).

¹⁵It has long been understood that Hitler's Germany was surprisingly loosely administered. See, on this point, Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York, 1992), 424–29, 434–35.

¹⁶Napoleon and Hitler provide two other striking examples of transplanted nationalism.

perceptive biographer, Robert Tucker, has now made clear, were not Lenin, or even Marx, but Peter the Great and ultimately Ivan the Terrible.¹⁷ His rule replicated the pattern of earlier tsarist autocracies identified by the great pre-revolutionary Russian historian, V. O. Kliuchevskii: “Exhausting the resources of the country, they only bolstered the power of the state without elevating the self-confidence of the people. . . . The state swelled up; the people grew lean.”¹⁸

Now, if the Soviet Union had occupied, let us say, the position of Uruguay in the post-World War II international system, this kind of autocracy certainly would have oppressed those who had to live under it, but it would hardly have caused a Cold War. If the Soviet Union had been the superpower that it actually was, but with a system of checks and balances that could have constrained Stalin’s authoritarian tendencies, a Cold War might have happened, but it would probably not have been as dangerous or as protracted a conflict. If the Soviet Union had been a superpower *and* an authoritarian state, but if someone other than Stalin had been running it—a Bukharin, for example, or perhaps even a Trotsky—then its government could have been in the hands of a Kremlin leader who, although by no means a democrat, would at least have known the outside world,¹⁹ and might have found it easier than Stalin did to deal with on a basis of wary cooperation instead of absolute distrust.

But none of these counterfactuals became fact. Stalin was Stalin, and the people of the Soviet Union, together with the rest of the world, were stuck with him at the end of World War II. That was a tragedy, if not in a classical sense, then in an all too modern one. Let me try to illustrate why with a series of vignettes based on some of the new information we have about the great autocrat’s life:

Stalin, we are told, once kept a parrot in a cage in his Kremlin apartment. The Soviet leader had the habit of pacing up and down in his rooms for long periods of time, smoking his pipe, brooding about God knows what, and occasionally spitting on the floor. One day the parrot, having observed this many times, tried to mimic Stalin’s spitting. Stalin immediately responded by reaching into the cage and crushing the parrot’s head with his pipe, instantly killing it.²⁰

Stalin once was on vacation in the Crimea, and was kept awake during the night by a barking dog. “Shoot it,” he told his guards. “But Josef Vissarionovich,” they reported the next morning, “the dog is a seeing-eye dog, and it belongs to a blind peasant.” “Shoot the dog,” Stalin commanded, “and send the peasant to the Gulag.”²¹

Stalin once had a wife—actually his second wife—who had an independent mind, and who was becoming concerned about the repressiveness

¹⁷Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York, 1990), 17–23, 60–64, 276–82, 482–86. See also Bullock, *Hüler and Stalin*, 632–35.

¹⁸Quoted in Bullock, *Hüler and Stalin*, 633.

¹⁹For Stalin’s provincialism see *ibid.*, 31–32.

²⁰Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, 147.

²¹I was told this tale by Stalin’s wartime interpreter, Valentin Berezhkov.

of his policies. After she argued with him about this one night, either he shot and killed her, or she shot and killed herself.²²

Stalin once had a rival, whose name was Trotsky. Stalin not only outmaneuvered him, exiled him, and eventually had him killed; he also killed everyone he could who had ever been associated with Trotsky or any other potential rival, as well as hundreds of thousands of other people who had never had anything at all to do with Trotsky or with anyone else who could conceivably have challenged Stalin's rule. Some three million Soviet citizens died, it is estimated, as a result of these purges.²³

Stalin once had an idea: that in order to finance the industrialization that Marxist theory said had to take place before there could be a Marxist state, the Soviet government had to ensure a reliable supply of grain for export by forcibly collectivizing agriculture.²⁴ The best estimate is that over fourteen million Soviet citizens died from the famine, exiles, and executions that resulted.²⁵

Stalin once presided over the fighting of a great war, in which at least another twenty-six million Soviet citizens were killed.²⁶ When it was over, he congratulated himself not only on a great victory, but on the impressive territorial gains victory had brought. Wars, he told his foreign minister, V. M. Molotov, were a progressive force in history: "The First World War ripped one country out of the grips of capitalist slavery. The Second created a socialist system. The Third will finish off imperialism forever."²⁷

My purpose, in reciting this litany, is to make the point that the United States and its allies, at the end of World War II, were not dealing with a normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill, statesmanlike head of government. They confronted instead a psychologically disturbed but fully functional and highly intelligent dictator²⁸ who had projected his own personality not only onto those around him but onto an entire nation and had thereby, with catastrophic results, remade it in his image.²⁹ And he had completed that task, I might add, long before the Cold War policies of the United States could possibly have given him an excuse to do so. The twentieth century has been full of tragedies,

²²Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, 215–17. See also Dimitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, ed. and trans. Harold Shukman (New York, 1991), 514.

²³Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York, 1990), 486.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 70–71.

²⁵Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York, 1986), 306.

²⁶Volkogonov, *Stalin*, 505.

²⁷Quoted in Woodford McClellan, "Molotov Remembers," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 1 (Spring 1992): 19. This comment echoes one quoted long ago by Milovan Djilas: "The war shall soon be over. We shall recover in fifteen or twenty years, and then we'll have another go at it." *Conversations with Stalin*, trans. Michael B. Petrovich (New York, 1962), 114–15.

²⁸Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*, 360–62, provides a clear explanation, based on psychiatric literature, of why paranoia need not be functionally disabling. For Stalin's intelligence see Volkogonov, *Stalin*, 225–36.

²⁹Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, esp. 130, 174–81, 425–31, 443–52, 473, is particularly good on the degree to which Stalinist methods extended down through all levels of the Soviet government.

but what Stalin did to the Soviet Union and, let us not forget, to its neighbors as well, must surely rank as among the greatest of them.

III

One might justifiably ask at this point, though: so what? Were not Stalin's sins fully apparent decades ago; and indeed did they not figure prominently in the earliest "orthodox" accounts of Cold War origins? Is not raising this issue now a matter of beating a horse that has not only long been dead, but is mummified, possibly even petrified? There are several reasons why I think this is not the case, why the nature of Stalinism is an issue to which American diplomatic historians will need to return.³⁰

First, archives are important, even if all they do is to confirm old arguments. The new Soviet sources, however, may well do more than that: the evidence we are getting suggests strongly that conditions inside the U.S.S.R., not just under Stalin but also under Lenin and several of Stalin's successors, were worse than most outside experts on that country had ever suspected. Whether one is talking about the death toll from collectivization, or from the purges, or from the war; whether one considers the brutality with which the survivors were treated; whether one evaluates the economic and ecological damage inflicted on the territories in which they lived; whether one looks at what the Soviet system meant for other countries that got sucked into the Soviet sphere of influence—whatever dimensions of Soviet history one looks at, what is emerging from the archives are horror stories more horrifying than most of the images put forward, without the benefit of archives, by the Soviet Union's most strident critics while the Cold War was still going on.³¹ That seems to me, in itself, to be significant.

But there is a second reason why I think a reconsideration of Stalinism is in order, and it has to do with the way American diplomatic historians have for too long thought about the Cold War. Reflecting one of the most curious intellectual habits to grow out of that conflict, we have tended to divide the world, rather like ancient Gaul, into three parts. We have preoccupied ourselves primarily, as one might have expected, with the "first" world, where most of the archives have long been open. We have frequently challenged each other, quite correctly in my view, to extend our horizons to include the "third" world, and to give full attention to the often intrusive impact the United States has had on the regions that made it up. It is very odd, though, that with all of our emphasis on "border crossings" and on the need for a genuinely international perspective, American diplomatic historians have

³⁰Bradford Perkins has pointed out that by the 1970s "[a]lmost no historian any longer wrote on the Cold War with the purpose of holding Joseph Stalin guilty before the bar of history." "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy," 32.

³¹I owe this point to my Ohio University colleague, Steven Miner. See also "Revelations from the Russian Archives," *IREX News in Brief* 3 (July/August 1992): 1, 4, an account of a recent exhibition of Soviet archival documents held at the Library of Congress. The *Bulletin* of the new Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center is an invaluable source of information on Soviet and East European archives.

made so little effort to understand what was really happening in—and what the impact of American policies was on—the “second” world.

This omission resulted in part, of course, from inaccessibility. It was difficult to find out much because governments in the Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe, and other Marxist states kept so much so carefully hidden. Part of the problem also had to do, I suspect, with the lingering effects of McCarthyism on our profession. The ideological excesses of the late 1940s and the early 1950s so traumatized American academics that for decades afterward we avoided looking seriously at the possibility that communism might indeed have influenced the behavior of communist states. Because some charges of Soviet espionage were exaggerated, we assumed too easily that all of them had been, that the spies were simply figments of right-wing imaginations. Because we regarded gestures like Congressional “captive nations” resolutions as a form of pandering to ethnic constituencies, we tended to lose sight of the fact that there really were “captive nations.”³² And perhaps we also worried that if we talked too explicitly about these kinds of things, we would wind up sounding too much like John Foster Dulles, or, for a more recent generation, Ronald Reagan.

There was another problem as well, though, that got in the way of an accurate assessment of what was happening in the “second” world. It had to do with an unfortunate tendency, imported from international relations theory, to lock ourselves into a view of the world that accorded equal legitimacy, and therefore more or less equal respectability, to each of the major states within it, while ignoring the circumstances that had brought them into existence and the means by which they remained in power.³³ Because all nations seek power and influence, or so “realist” theory tells us,³⁴ we fell into the habit of

³²Books such as Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (New York, 1978); Ronald Radosch and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (New York, 1983); and Robert Chadwell Williams, *Klaus Fuchs: Atom Spy* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), have long since made it clear that Soviet espionage was no myth. But it is remarkable that Bennett Kovrig's *Of Walls and Bridges: The United States and Eastern Europe* (New York, 1991) is the only comprehensive history of United States policy toward Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and that apart from Bernard S. Morris, *Communism, Revolution, and American Policy* (Durham, 1987), almost nothing has been done on American attitudes toward communism as an ideology. For a convincing argument emphasizing the importance of ideology in Cold War history see John Mueller, “Quiet Cataclysm: Some Afterthoughts on World War III,” in *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (New York, 1992), 40–41.

³³Hunt, “The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History,” 117–21, makes this point in the course of criticizing what he describes as the “realist” school in the writing of American diplomatic history. But he then goes on to suggest that “progressive” historians, among whom he includes the corporatists, “share an antagonism toward realism” (p. 123). That may be, but this group by no means rejects “realism’s” emphasis on the primacy of *interests*; indeed if anything, the “progressives” have reduced historical explanation to matters of material interest more determinedly than Hunt’s “realists” have, as he subsequently comes close to acknowledging (p. 127). Part of the problem here may be that Hunt has confused the “realism” of international relations theorists like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, which is indeed reductionist in its emphasis on the primacy of states and interests, with a considerably more heterogeneous group of American diplomatic historians.

³⁴Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, 1948), along with its five subsequent editions, is of course the classic text. For a critique of

assuming that they did so for equally valid reasons; that in turn led to a kind of “moral equivalency” doctrine in which the behavior of autocracies was thought to be little different from that of democracies.

This was not, to be sure, a universal tendency. Many members of our profession have long argued that certain “third world” autocracies held power illegitimately, and have vigorously condemned American foreign policy for putting up with them. But not everyone who took this view was willing to grant equal attention to what those few citizens of the “second” world who were free to speak had been telling us all along during the Cold War, which was that communism as it was practiced in the Soviet Union really was, and had always been, at least as illegitimate and repressive a system. Now that they are free to speak—and to act—the people of the former Soviet Union appear to have associated themselves more closely with President Reagan’s famous indictment of that state as an “evil empire”³⁵ than with our own more balanced academic assessments. The archives, as noted earlier, are providing documentary evidence for such an interpretation. And yet, these developments have not yet visibly altered our field’s actual preoccupation with the “first” world, our periodic exhortations to give greater emphasis to the “third” world, and our corresponding neglect of the “second” world, which badly needs the historiographical equivalent of an affirmative action policy.

A truly international approach to diplomatic history, I should think, would be one fully prepared to look into the “mirror” that Williams wrote about to see whether we have given adequate attention to a tragedy that has had the most profound consequences—extending over more than seven decades—for the largest nation on the face of the earth, and for most of the other nations that surrounded it.

IV

What would that mean, though, for the writing of American diplomatic history? The most persistent issue historians of the Cold War’s origins have had to wrestle with is a variation on what we would today call the “Rodney King” question: “Couldn’t we all have gotten along if we had really tried?” We answered that question long ago with respect to another great twentieth-century dictator, Adolf Hitler: few of us have any difficulty whatever with the proposition that Nazi Germany really did represent absolute evil, and that there was never any possibility that, if only we had tried, we could have “gotten along” with so odious a regime.

Nevertheless, many American diplomatic historians have made, and still make, the argument that the United States should have undertaken a greater effort than it did at the beginning of the Cold War to “get along” with the

“realist” theory by one of Hunt’s “realist” historians see John Lewis Gaddis, “International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 17 (Winter 1992/93):5–58.

³⁵Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, Florida, 8 March 1983, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1983* (Washington, 1984), 363–64. It is often forgotten that the larger context of this speech was an attack, based on the theological arguments of C. S. Lewis, on the idea of “moral equivalency.”

Soviet Union.³⁶ We have tended to reject the notion, popular early in the late 1940s and early 1950s, that Stalin was another Hitler, that what we were witnessing in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe was not communism at all, but rather "Red Fascism."³⁷ It is quite true, of course, that the Soviet autocrat did differ from his German counterpart in several important ways, not the least of which was that Stalin was more cautious than Hitler and would back down if confronted with the fact or at least the plausible prospect of resistance.³⁸ Nor did Stalin ever seek the systematic extermination of an entire people: the Holocaust was, and remains, unique.³⁹

But as both Robert Tucker and Alan Bullock have recently made clear,⁴⁰ the similarities between Stalin and Hitler far outweigh the differences. These were both remarkably single-minded men, driven to dominate all those around them. They combined narcissism with paranoia in a way that equipped them superbly for the task of obtaining, and holding onto, power. They persisted even in the most unpromising of circumstances; and although capable of tactical retreats, they were not to be swayed from their ultimate objectives. They were extraordinarily crafty, prepared to take miles when inches were given them. And, most important, they both had visions of security for themselves that meant complete insecurity for everyone else: we have long known that Hitler killed millions in pursuit of his vision, but we now know that Stalin killed many more.⁴¹ It is really quite difficult, after reading careful

³⁶The most recent major study to take this view—even as it acknowledges the repressiveness of Stalin's regime—is Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, esp. 98–99. Leffler subsequently makes the point that "U.S. policymakers, like officials in other times and places, chose to deter and contain rather than reassure the enemy" (p. 121). But that, of course, assumes an "enemy" capable of being reassured. I have seen nothing in the recent biographical studies of Stalin to suggest that he met that standard.

³⁷See Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930's–1950's," *American Historical Review* 75 (April 1970): 1046–64.

³⁸It is difficult to imagine Hitler tolerating the continued independence of Finland in the way Stalin did after the Russo-Finnish War, for example, or agreeing to withdraw from northern Iran as readily as Stalin did after being challenged by the Americans in 1946, or behaving with the same circumspection that Stalin showed after he had authorized the 1948 Berlin blockade and the 1950 North Korean invasion of South Korea. For more on Stalin's cautiousness see Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*, 856–57; also Vojtech Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism, 1941–1945* (New York, 1979), esp. 311.

³⁹Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*, 974. See also Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

⁴⁰This paragraph summarizes several of the major arguments of Tucker's *Stalin in Power* and Bullock's *Hitler and Stalin*. Tucker makes the similarities explicit on pp. 591–92 of his book; Bullock's entire book deals with them, but see especially pp. 347–52 and 726.

⁴¹Charles Maier estimates 20 million state-sanctioned deaths not resulting directly from military operations in the Soviet Union and its occupied territories between 1926 and 1953. His comparable figure for Germany and its occupied territories between 1933 and 1945 is 7.8 million, which includes 4.5 million Jews killed in the Holocaust. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 74–75. Alan Bullock gives the figure of eighteen million "victims of Nazi brutality in the whole of Europe," including between 5.6 and 6.9 million Jews. Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*, 808–9, 989. But Bullock's total presumably includes the direct victims of German military operations; Maier's does not. Robert Conquest's estimate of Soviet citizens who died as a result of collectivization and the purges is 17.5 million. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 306; and idem, *The Great Terror*, 485–86. But his figures do not include, as Maier's do, deaths in Soviet-occupied

studies like those of Tucker, Bullock, and also the Russian historian Dimitri Volkogonov, to see how there could have been any long-term basis for coexistence—for “getting along”—with either of these fundamentally evil dictators. One was dealing here with states that had been reshaped to reflect individuals; but these individuals, in turn, were incapable of functioning within the framework of mutual cooperation, indeed mutual coexistence, that any political system has to have if it is to ensure the survival of all of the parts that make it up.

The tragedy of Cold War history, then, is that although fascism was defeated in World War II, authoritarianism—as it had been nurtured and sustained by Marxism-Leninism—was not. That form of government was at the apex of its influence during the last half of the 1940s, even as the Soviet Union itself lay physically devastated.⁴² material conditions alone do not explain everything that happens in the world.⁴³ As a result, Stalin was able to create or inspire imitators whose influence extended well past his own demise in 1953.

Stalin's clones appeared first in Eastern Europe, where he installed regimes that were so scrupulous in following his example that they conducted their own set of purge trials during the late 1940s, a decade after the “Leader of Progressive Mankind” had shown the way.⁴⁴ His influence was still present in that part of the world four decades later, as the careers of Erich Honecker, Nicolai Ceausescu, and their counterparts abundantly illustrate. Stalin certainly provided a model for the third great autocrat of the twentieth century, Mao Zedong, who it now appears had no interest in any form of cooperation with the United States when he took power in China in 1949.⁴⁵ Despite his differences with Stalin's successors, Mao was still emulating Stalin himself when he launched the ill-conceived “Great Leap Forward” in 1957, a program of crash industrialization that is now believed to have cost the lives of between twenty and forty-six million Chinese, a civilian death toll that may be higher than what Stalin and Hitler together managed to achieve.⁴⁶ And then there were all the little Stalins and Maos who appeared elsewhere in the world during the Cold War: Kim Il-sung, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, Fidel Castro, Haile

territories after 1939. Dimitri Volkogonov places the total for Stalin's victims, excluding all war losses, somewhat higher, at from 19.5 to 22 million. Volkogonov, *Stalin*, 824. A maximum estimate of Hitler's noncombatant victims, then, would fall well short of half the minimum estimate of Stalin's.

⁴²Adam B. Ulam, *The Communists: The Story of Power and Lost Illusions, 1948–1991* (New York, 1992), 1–9, makes this point effectively.

⁴³Consider the circumstances in which the Soviet sphere of influence, and then the Soviet Union itself, collapsed between 1989 and 1991. The military power of the Soviet state had never been greater, but unlike the situation in 1945, its authority—a psychological and not a material condition—was non-existent.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 25–27, 116. The encomium is from Georgii Malenkov's tribute to Stalin on his seventieth birthday in 1949, as quoted in Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*, 958.

⁴⁵See, on this point, Yang Kuisong, “The Soviet Factor and the CCP's Policy toward the United States in the 1940s,” *Chinese Historians* 5 (Spring 1992): 17–34.

⁴⁶Harrison Salisbury, *The New Emperors: China in the Era of Mao and Deng* (Boston, 1992), 166.

Mengistu, Babrak Karmal, and many others, each of whom, like their teachers, promised liberation for their people but delivered repression.

Now, tyrants—even well-intentioned tyrants—are nothing new in history. Certainly the United States associated itself with its own share of repressive dictators throughout the Cold War, and had been doing so long before that conflict began. But there was something special about the Marxist-Leninist authoritarians, and it is going to be important for post-Cold War historians to understand what it was.⁴⁷ They were all, like Hitler, murderous idealists, driven to apply all of the energies they and the countries they ruled could command in an effort to implement a set of concepts that were ill conceived, half-baked, and ultimately unworkable.⁴⁸ They believed that, by sheer force of will, all obstacles could be overcome, and they were willing to pay whatever price was necessary in terms of lives to overcome them.⁴⁹ There was little sense among them of the need to balance ends and means; rather, in such systems, as George Orwell noted long ago, ends justified means, which meant that means corrupted ends.⁵⁰ These were not hard-nosed realists but rather brutal romantics; that does not justify us, though, in romanticizing any of them.

V

But just what was it about the twentieth century that allowed such romantics to gain such power during its first eight decades, and then so abruptly, at the end of the ninth, to lose it? After all, the great authoritarians were not alien visitors: they obviously sprang from circumstances not of their own making, and they rose to preeminence by taking advantage—with astonishing skill and persistence—of the circumstances that surrounded them. History, for a long time, was on their side; and then it ceased to be. We need to understand why.

One way we might find out would be to follow another piece of advice from William Appleman Williams, which is that we rediscover Karl Marx.⁵¹ It was Marx, more than anyone else, who alerted us to the fact that there are

⁴⁷It obviously was *not* Jeane Kirkpatrick's famous 1979 distinction between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" regimes, with its claim that authoritarians, who tended to be on the right, might someday give up power, but that totalitarians, who were Marxist-Leninists, never would. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary* 68 (November 1979): 34–45. After all, most of them just have, and Kirkpatrick has now reconsidered. See her *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State . . . and Other Surprises* (Washington, 1990), esp. 274–75.

⁴⁸"It is a fact of major tragicomical proportions," Jon Elster noted in 1986, commenting on the influence of Friedrich Engels, "that a third of mankind professes these naive, amateurish speculations as its official philosophy." Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (New York, 1986), 11. The origins of this tendency to force unworkable ideas on unwilling people are eloquently discussed in Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1990), 121–52.

⁴⁹See Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin*, 293, 352, 551, 769.

⁵⁰I take this to have been the point of Orwell's providentially unprophetic novel *1984* (New York, 1949).

⁵¹William Appleman Williams, *The Great Evasion: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of Karl Marx and on the Wisdom of Admitting the Heretic into the Dialogue about America's Future* (Chicago, 1964).

long-term, “sub-structural” forces in history, and that they do shape modes of economic production, forms of political organization, and even social consciousness.⁵² To use a metaphor from much more recent discoveries in the geological sciences, Marx exposed the underlying “tectonic” processes that drive history forward, in much the same way that comparable processes push the continents around on the face of the earth.⁵³ These forces by no means determine the actions of individuals, but they do establish the environment within which they function. “Men make their own history,” Marx emphasized in his famous 1852 essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”⁵⁴

We have neglected Marx’s approach to history, I believe, for several reasons. First, we too easily confused Marxism with Marxism-Leninism, which was as thorough a perversion of Marx’s own thinking as one can imagine.⁵⁵ Second, Marx’s incompetence as an economist, which was considerable, obscured his strengths as a historian. Third, Marx himself weakened his historical analysis, though, by falling victim to what we now recognize as the Fukuyama fallacy:⁵⁶ this is the curious tendency of those who think that they have identified the ultimate “engine” of history to assume that history will stop with them. Marx insisted that the progression from feudalism through capitalism to socialism and communism was irreversible, but that it would then for some reason end at that point.

What really appears to have happened is that one set of tectonic forces—industrialization, the emergence of class-consciousness, and the alienation that flowed from it—undermined liberal democratic bourgeois market capitalism late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, thus paving the way for fascism, communism, and the authoritarianism that accompanied them. But during the second half of the twentieth century these tectonic forces evolved into something else—post-industrialization, the emergence of communications consciousness, and the alienation that flowed from it—which then undermined the foundations of authoritarianism and brought us around to our next historically determined phase, which turned out to be liberal, democratic, bourgeois market capitalism all over again. Marx, it seems, had mixed up linear with cyclical processes in history,⁵⁷ and that was a substantial

⁵²For a succinct overview see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago, 1983), 292–95. Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, 103–21, provides a sharp critique.

⁵³I have developed this “tectonic” metaphor more fully in *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, 155–67.

⁵⁴Quoted in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed. (New York, 1978), 595.

⁵⁵See, on this point, Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, 13–14.

⁵⁶Named, of course, for Francis Fukuyama, who inappropriately chose the summer of 1989 to publish a widely read article entitled “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

⁵⁷What happened to Marx might best be described with a fable. Once upon a time there was a historically conscious flea who lived inside a very large hula hoop. This flea believed strongly in historical progress, in marching smartly forward—to the extent that fleas can march—toward

error indeed. But it does not invalidate his larger insight into the existence of tectonic forces and the role they play in human affairs. That insight might well serve as a starting point for a reconsideration, not just of the Cold War, but of the twentieth century as a whole.

The great authoritarians of this century arose, from this perspective, because they turned historical tectonics to their own advantage: they were able to align their own actions with deep sub-structural forces, and thus convey an appearance of inevitability—of having history on their side—in most of what they did. Nothing more quickly demoralizes one's opposition, after all, than the impression that history itself has turned against it.⁵⁸ With the passage of time, though, the historical tectonics shifted, the authoritarians' successors were unable to adapt, and they themselves became demoralized, with the result that their regimes collapsed very much as the dinosaurs did once the environment within which they had flourished no longer existed. One might even conclude from this that the Cold War's outcome was predetermined all along, and that the real tragedy of Cold War history was all the wasted effort the opponents of authoritarianism put into trying to bring about what was going to happen anyway.⁵⁹

It is most unlikely, though, that Marx would have taken this position, because despite all of his emphasis on underlying historical forces, he was no historical determinist.⁶⁰ The authoritarians arose, he might well have argued, because a few key individuals made their own history by exploiting the circumstances that confronted them, circumstances that, at the time, presented them with immense possibilities. It was the *intersection* of action with environment that produced results, not action alone or environment alone. But once one admits that possibility, one also has to allow that the resistance to authoritarianism may have made a difference. It would make no sense to claim that dictators can exploit tectonic forces, but that their opponents can never do so. So let us consider the resistance to authoritarianism, and that gets us back to the actions the United States—and its allies—have taken in the affairs of this century.

If, as seems likely, the twentieth century is remembered as one whose history was very largely shaped by the rise and fall of authoritarian regimes, then historians will have no choice but to debate the role the United States played in resisting them. They may conclude that that role was an active one:

historically determined ends. "Almost there," the flea would say to himself, as he huffed and puffed along the inside of the hula hoop. "Any moment now." But of course the moment never came, and after flea-years of effort, having grown old in the pursuit of the ultimate end, the flea suddenly noticed one day that the landscape around him was beginning to look familiar. "It's *déjà vu* all over again!" the flea gasped, quoting Hegel, at which point he promptly fell over dead not far from the place at which he had begun. The moral of this story is that you can be just as surprised, in life, by facing forward without looking back as you can by facing backward without looking ahead. Or, to put it another way, curved surfaces often appear flat to those with limited horizons.

⁵⁸A point made with great clarity in Arthur Koestler's classic novel about the Moscow purge trials, *Darkness at Noon* (New York, 1940).

⁵⁹I am indebted to Philip Nash for suggesting this point.

⁶⁰Williams, *The Great Evasion*, 27–28, is particularly good on Marx's nondeterministic view of history.

that the Americans themselves harnessed tectonic forces even more successfully than the authoritarians did, and that after a protracted struggle the Wilsonian vision prevailed over those of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and their respective imitators for that reason. Or historians may see the American contribution as a more passive one: that it was one of holding the line, of providing evidence that authoritarianism need not be the only path to the future, until such time as the underlying tectonic forces shifted, thus undermining authoritarianism's foundations and bringing about the events we have recently witnessed. Or historians may take the position that the truth lay somewhere in between.

But whatever the direction these lines of interpretation eventually take, the role of the United States in resisting authoritarianism will be at the center of them. It would seem most appropriate, therefore, for historians of American foreign relations to be at the center of that debate. I see little evidence that that is happening, though, and I wonder if this is not because we have allowed Williams's "tragic" view of American diplomacy to obscure our vision. We have turned a set of criticisms that might have been appropriate for particular policies at a particular time and place into something approaching a universal frame of reference. We have transformed what was, in its day, a profoundly unorthodox criticism of conventional wisdom into an orthodoxy that has now become conventional wisdom. Like most orthodoxies, it does not wear particularly well; it distorts our understanding of our place in the world, and also of ourselves.

How often do we ask the question: "tragedy" as compared to what? Gaps exist, after all, between the aspirations and the accomplishments of all states, just as they do in the lives of all individuals; if they alone are to be our criteria for defining "tragedy," then that is a characteristic inseparable from human existence, which rather weakens its analytical usefulness. If one defines "tragedy" according to the *extent* of the gap between aspirations and accomplishments, it becomes a more fruitful concept. But if one then *compares* gaps in terms of their extent, setting the American "tragedy" against those of other Great Powers in the twentieth century, ours appears more to fade out than to stand out. Perhaps that is why the United States is still the country of choice for those who seek to leave their own countries in the hope of finding better lives. The truly oppressed normally flee *away* from their oppressor, not toward it. If we are to take the voices of the oppressed seriously in doing history, we will need to listen to everything they are telling us, not just those parts of it that fit our preconceptions.

That raises an additional reason, though, for rediscovering Karl Marx. One of his most powerful insights was that even the most successful and beneficial institutions carry within them the seeds of their own destruction. We have seen the authoritarians destroy themselves—with an arguable amount of help from us and from our friends—in a way that might not have surprised Marx and would surely have gratified him, given the extent to which his own philosophy had as its objective the liberation, not the enslavement, of the individual.⁶¹ But the passage of time respects no state and no system, and

⁶¹Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, 25, 35, 43, 48–49.

from a Marxian perspective it is not too difficult to see where the internal contradictions in our own system—the “fault lines” along which tectonic forces intersect, if you will—may lie.

Go back to Woodrow Wilson, whose Fourteen Points speech anticipates, better than any other document I know, what is likely to be the central dilemma of the post-Cold War world. For is not the logic of open markets really economic integration, and is not the logic of self-determination really political fragmentation? And is this not a contradiction of such depth and such significance that Marx himself would have found it memorable? Can we really expect to abandon control of our economic lives—as market theory suggests we must—and at the same time take control of our political lives—as democratic theory suggests we should? Did Marx not teach us that economics and politics cannot be separated when it comes to human lives, however easily we may separate these categories in our minds? The fault line separating the forces of integration and fragmentation, not just in our own society but through much of the rest of the world as well, may turn out to be at least as long, as deep, and as dangerous than the one between democratic and authoritarian government that preoccupied us through so much of the twentieth century.⁶² These considerations too, it seems to me, ought to fall within the scope of a truly international approach to American diplomatic history.

Americans are no more likely to be exempted from tragic processes in history than anyone else is; but American diplomatic historians have treated these processes in a shallow, shortsighted, and curiously antiseptic way. We need to regain a clearer sense of what real tragedy, in this less than perfect world, is all about. That means placing our concept of tragedy within an international context. It means comparing the American “tragedy” with the others that surrounded it. It means using history as a genuine way of learning, not simply as a convenient platform from which we hold forth, either in self-condemnation or self-congratulation. It means, in the most fundamental sense, meeting our obligations as historians, which involve being honest not only about ourselves but about the environment in which we have had to live. And it means according equal respect, as I fear we have not yet done, to *all* of the survivors, and to *all* of the dead.

⁶²For more on these tendencies see Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, 193–216.