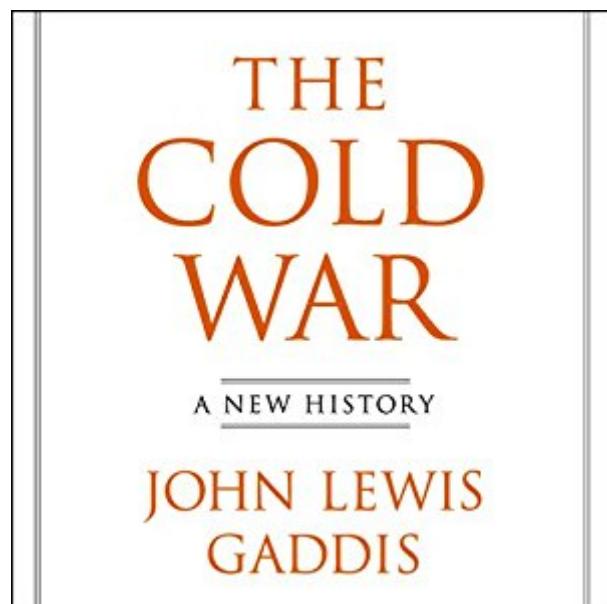


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The Cold War: A New History



Synopsis

The dean of Cold War historians (The New York Times) now presents the definitive account of the global confrontation that dominated the last half of the twentieth century. Drawing on newly opened archives and the reminiscences of the major players, John Lewis Gaddis explains not just what happened but why; from the months in 1945 when the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. went from alliance to antagonism to the barely averted holocaust of the Cuban Missile Crisis to the maneuvers of Nixon and Mao, Reagan and Gorbachev. Brilliant, accessible, almost Shakespearean in its drama, The Cold War stands as a triumphant summation of the era that, more than any other, shaped our own. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book with the expectation that it would provide a comprehensive overview of the events, episodes, personalities, motivations, and results of the Cold War. A reader looking for something similar might be disappointed. This book does not really attempt to be a comprehensive history of the Cold War, but is rather a collection of chapters, each devoted to a particular thematic aspect of the war. It reads as though Gaddis has a particular thesis about the Cold War that he wants to flesh out in each chapter, rather than telling the whole story in an orderly narrative. As examples: there is a chapter about the "logic" of Mutual Assured Destruction, and how mankind's survival depended on two superpowers maneuvering their way through that system's pitfalls. There is another chapter contrasting the Leninist vision of authoritarianism with the Wilsonian vision of self-determination. There is a chapter about how the superpowers' respective allies eventually

refused to do their bidding. There is a chapter about the moral paradoxes at the heart of American Cold War international policy. There is another about the key individual actors who forced the Cold War to a successful resolution. And there is one, sort of a "people power" chapter, about how the Cold War ended (Gaddis argues) largely because the internal contradictions of communism, the gap between its promises and its reality, would no longer be tolerated by its subjects. I found many of these chapters to be thought-provoking, and often found them persuasive. At first, I resisted Gaddis's thesis about the spillover of amorality from the international sphere to the American domestic sphere, and how this precipitated the fall of Richard Nixon. It seemed a weak thesis to me at first, but upon reflection, I agree with Gaddis that there was a fundamental discomfort, a paradox, in how America waged the Cold War. We cozied up to various dictators who violated American values re individual rights, so long as they sided with us in the conflict. And we countenanced actions abroad that we would not have at home. Eventually, Gaddis argues, the roof fell in on those contradictions, when President Nixon started to practice the sort of statecraft domestically that had previously only been tolerated internationally. Gaddis seems to suggest that it was only a matter of time before something like this happened, that this inconsistency was unsustainable. In other places, though, I found Gaddis to be less convincing. Certainly the demonstrations of "people power" that brought down the communist regimes were courageous and consequential. But it is equally true that it could have come out quite differently, if a Stalin had still been in power. Gaddis argues that the people in the communist regimes had finally come to fully appreciate the vast gulf between communism's promises and its reality, and while that is no doubt true, many a similarly-cognizant subject of these regimes was crushed by them in earlier decades. Many other factors coalesced to bring down the governments behind the Iron Curtain, including the steady economic and military pressure brought to bear by a more prosperous west. Perhaps the best chapter in the Gaddis book is the one that is devoted to "actors" -- the singular figures whose insights and vision succeeded in changing the world. Gaddis is clearly an admirer of John Paul II, and he also credits Ronald Reagan with a lofty vision beyond what most other statesmen of his time could see. Reagan, according to Gaddis, was critical to ending the uneasy, dangerous "peace" of Mutual Assured Destruction. Another of Gaddis's finer chapters is one wherein he details the events in Hungary and East Germany that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Gaddis presents more details and insights than I have found in other histories of those wondrous events of 1989. Some of Gaddis's pronouncements struck me as simply curious. He states in one chapter that never so much misery and suffering has been borne from good intentions as under the communist regimes. Whose good intentions, I wondered? Stalin? Lenin? Marx? Mao? It really stretches the definition of "good intentions" to

ascribe such to the architects of 20th century authoritarian communism. By this malleable definition, most any dictator could be said to have "good intentions." Gaddis also provides a much loftier portrait of Woodrow Wilson than I believe most historians would share. Gaddis indicates that Wilson is highly respected today, but I would suggest that at least as many historians regard Wilson as an impractical romantic, in the arena of international relations. I would recommend Gaddis's book as a second or third book on the Cold War, but not the first source. It is not the best source as to the "what," though Gaddis's pronouncements on "why" are often convincing.

Yale history professor John Lewis Gaddis is America's foremost historian of the Cold War. Since the publication of "The United States and the Origins of the Cold War" in 1972, he has written a half dozen more books on the subject, each time finding a new perspective on the superpower standoff that took place between 1946 and 1991. Prior to the 1970's, American historians, for the most part, put the blame of the origins of the Cold War on the Soviet system in general and on Josef Stalin in particular. Gaddis' early work was original insofar as it gave a more balanced perspective on the American/Soviet confrontation. After World War II, both superpowers acted rationally to protect their interests, having sacrificed many lives in hard-fought battles. Each side was protecting a way of life they thought morally superior. In the current work under review, Gaddis' views seem to be evolving. Looking back at the Cold War in light of events since 1991, he concludes that it was primarily the power of ideas that won, since nuclear weapons had made military confrontation unthinkable. The liberal democracies and market economies of the West were better able to provide for their citizens than the command economies of the totalitarian system. The West offered their citizens hope while the Soviets instilled theirs with fear. Gaddis now believes it was the Soviets who were primarily responsible for starting the Cold War. But why did the Cold War last so many years? Why didn't people rise up earlier? One reason, of course, was nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons prolonged the Cold War. The West had few options other than detente and containment. Gaddis has few kind words for the Nixon-Kissinger detente that left hundreds of thousands of disillusioned people behind the Iron Curtain without hope. He recounts in this book how certain key individuals facilitated change. Among these "saboteurs of the status quo" were Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and Lech Walesa. According to Gaddis, when Pope John Paul II went to Poland and kissed the ground, it marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Also, when Ronald Reagan sought to exploit the weaknesses of the Soviet Union by building an antimissile shield that he knew the Soviets couldn't match, he helped bring about the demise of the system. Also, adding to the slipstream of the demise was the unwitting assistance of Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev was

different from previous Soviet leaders - and the world is forever in his debt - in that he realized the arms race could not continue and that the Soviet Union could no longer maintain control over the populations of Eastern Europe. Although Gaddis' work has been used by the Bush Administration as an endorsement of spreading democracy in the Middle East, it should be noted that the saboteurs of the status quo - and Bush sees himself as such - can only facilitate change. The real change, Gaddis argues, must come from the bottom up. Ronald Reagan did not end the Cold War - though he contributed greatly to its conclusion. The Hungarians, the Poles, and the East Germans ended the Cold War as they faced down the repressive Soviet system. This is all very illuminating with our present involvement in the Middle East. This is an excellent, well-written and well-argued one-volume history of the Cold War, written by one of its most diligent historians. I highly recommend this book.

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