TRANSCRIPT
Online Event
“Book Event - The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink”

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FEATURING
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Dr. Tom Karako: All right. Well, good morning, everybody. Thanks for coming out and for watching online. I'm Tom Karako. I'm a senior fellow in the International Security Program here at CSIS. And really appreciate everybody tuning in today for what's going to be a great event.

Our guest this morning is Dr. Will Inboden, executive director and the William Powers, Jr. chair at the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas at Austin, where he's also a professor in the LBJ School. He's also the editor-in-chief of the Texas National Security Review. We've got Will here to CSIS to talk about his new book, entitled "The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the Work on the Brink." Will's, of course, an accomplished historian and a practitioner. He spent time on Capitol Hill, in the State Department and the NSC, and continues to do stuff with the government in several capacities today. And the Clements Center in Austin does some great work, so please check that out as well.

So, welcome back to CSIS. Your book's gotten a lot of attention. It's the first, I think, systematic treatment and comprehensive treatment of Reagan's foreign policy. So I wonder if you might just kick us off. It's a great book. It's a great read. Kick us off with what this book is about, why you decided to write it, and what you thought needed to be said that hadn't been said yet. Over to you.

Dr. William Inboden: Sure. Thank you very much, Tom. And great to be back at CSIS. And of course, a huge fan of you and all your colleagues here doing some phenomenal work. It's really one of the premier foreign and defense policy think tanks in the world. So it's a privilege to be here.

Why did I write this book, and why write it now? A number of reasons. I'll just highlight a couple. First, the timing seemed right. You know, it's now been about a generation, a generation and a half, has passed since the Reagan administration. And so for historians and – you know, speaking here as a historian – that's enough time that we can take a fresh look at the past and treat it more as history, rather than still arguing over current or recent events, right? So we can have a little bit – you know, we know how the story ends, right? We can now evaluate how his policies played out and what the downstream consequences of those were. So it seemed like enough time had passed for a fresh take.

But then also, using the tools of the historian, just very recently in the last five, 10 years, tens of thousands of pages of documents from the Reagan administration have been declassified. So these were previously unavailable to scholars and the interested public. You know, National Security Council meeting minutes, transcripts of Reagan’s meetings with
foreign heads of state. So a lot of the most important records of the internal workings and strategy of the administration were now available. So that’s also why this was a good time to write this book, as opposed to, say, 10-15 years ago when there was less of that.

I think the final one I’ll say, even though I wrote it as a pure history, is I hope it’ll be of interest to policymakers today. There’s no perfect exact historical analogies, but as we’re now in a, you know, great-power contest with a nuclear-armed superpower in Eurasia, particularly the People’s Republic of China, there’s only been one time in America’s history that we were in – previously in a great-power contest with a nuclear-armed superpower on the Eurasian landmass. And that was, of course, the Cold – the original Cold War against the Soviet Union. And so I thought kind of retelling or giving a fresh telling of a really pivotal period in that previous conflict, interesting history in its own right but, I hope, also of interest to policymakers as we’re thinking about the current challenges we face here in the 21st century.

Dr. Karako: Great. Well, we’re going to start walking through lots of questions here. I neglected to say at the outset for those here and online, please do feel free to submit questions. I’ll see them here live on my tablet, and we’ll weave them in as appropriate. So let’s start – let’s start big. Just talking about some of the big and defining features of Reagan’s foreign policy that you really try to highlight.

Dr. Inboden: So, yeah, OK. And on the big picture, with Reagan’s foreign policy, here I will primarily talk about his Cold War strategy. But as Tom mentioned earlier, and it bears repeating, the book aims to be a comprehensive treatment of all of his foreign policies. So a lot on Asia, a lot on the Middle East, counterterrorism, international economics, southern Africa, all the other issues that were crashing in and he and his team were dealing with. But their biggest concern, of course, was the Cold War and the standoff with the Soviet Union.

And so on the main features there of his foreign policy, the first, he saw the Cold War as primarily a battle of ideas that happened to be a great-power competition. And that is something of a reversal from most previous American Cold War presidents, who had seen the Cold War as primarily a great-power competition that happens to have an ideological component. And so for Reagan, putting the battle of ideas at the forefront.

And that meant, in turn, confronting and delegitimizing Soviet Communism as a value system, as an ideology. And then, more positively, promoting the virtues of the free world – free markets,
democratic governance, religious liberty – as a positive alternative to Soviet Communism. And that, in turn, has implications for Reagan’s promotion of democracy and free trade in Asia and Latin America as well.

And so a lot of different strands flow from that. And I know we’ll talk about the particulars there, but that is the big-picture framing that he arrives with and what his, you know, overall Cold War grand strategy, his overall foreign policy framework is going to be.

Dr. Karako: You know, I think one of the innovations I think that you have in the book is to continually refrain. You note that the Reagan administration officials were all decisively shaped by the experience of the Cold War. And you contrast the theme of unconditional surrender with Reagan’s, what you call, negotiated surrender. What do you mean by that?

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. So a couple things went on there. The first is Reagan and his team are very much shaped by history. I mean, every presidency is shaped by history, right, but the two most important, vivid, formative historical episodes for Reagan and his team are World War II and the Vietnam War. And, again, we’ll talk about the implications of those.

And World War II, of course, the American grand strategy, along with, you know, our allies to defeat Nazi Germany and defeat imperial Japan was we demanded their unconditional surrender. You know, these were such vile, depraved regimes that any negotiated settlement that would leave Hitler in power or leave, you know, Tojo and the Japanese War Cabinet in power, with their imperial conquest, was unacceptable. And for World War II, I think that was the right strategy. You know, there’s pros and cons to all this.

So this is where even though Reagan is formed by that experience, the World War II generation, he sees the Cold War differently in a key aspect. He wants to keep the Cold War cold, right? World War II, we can demand unconditional surrender because we were fighting against them, right? Our militaries were – (laughs) – you know, our troops were fighting in Europe. They were fighting in the Pacific theater. And the plan was to eventually, you know, invade and conquer these powers. And so you can demand unconditional surrender.

One of Reagan’s – even though Reagan had a more confrontational posture towards the Soviet Union, and wanted to see the Soviet system collapse, he wanted to keep the Cold War cold. He did not want a nuclear exchange. He did not want nuclear destruction. He didn’t even want a conventional war breaking out in Europe. And so – and so that’s how he
balanced the goal of defeating the Soviet Union with keeping the Cold War from turning into a hot war, is negotiations and diplomacy are a very important part of his strategy.

And so the way other scholars – Professor Mel Leffler of the University of Virginia in particular – have put it, is: Did Reagan want to win the Cold War or to end the Cold War? And we can talk more about what that means. But my answer to that is, yes. He wanted both. And he squares that circle, if you will – we resolves that paradox by pursuing a negotiated surrender of the Soviet Union, where you will be ending the conflict through negotiations, but you'll still be ensuring that they eventually collapse. And that's the – that's the surrender part.

Dr. Karako: Well, let me ask you two things about kind of how – I guess, your methodology as an author. You don't bounce around thematically. You do it as a pure history straight through. And, as a reader, I mean, just the pace of it really carries it along. So that was one choice. Another choice was to make it comprehensive, as opposed to just one particular theme. Talk to me about why you did those things.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. So, no, appreciate you highlighting this, Tom, because it is one of the distinctive features about the book. And readers can decide if it's a good or bad distinctive feature, but it's a really unique one, is writing the book as a narrative where you're – I am trying to take you through events as they are unfolding. And this is where writing the book I was very much shaped by my own experience as a former policymaker, of having worked at the White House in the Bush administration, at the State Department before that.

And having seen firsthand how presidents, secretaries of state, national security advisors, secretaries of defense, they don't have the luxury to only focus on one issue at a time, to only think about one issue. Like, their inboxes are constantly overflowing. They have an unremitting cascade of difficult decisions on dozens of different issues, all at the same time. And their challenge is how do you keep your eye on the bigger picture strategic priorities – for Reagan and the Soviet Union – while still advancing your other priorities, and then managing all the other problems and crises, and doing all that at once.

And I decided that the best way to illustrate that in the Reagan administration is to write this book as a narrative, where you can see every month here's all the different issues that he's dealing with. You know, the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, the invasion of Grenada, and a major crisis with the Soviet Union all pretty much on the same weekend, right? You can't understand any one of those individual
events by itself without understanding the other things that Reagan was dealing with at the same time. So that’s a big part of why I wrote it as a narrative.

The other reason is this: We know now how the story ends, right? We are sitting here in the year 2023, you know, we’re doing this talk. And the world was not destroyed in a nuclear war in 1988. And the Soviet Union did not win the Cold War. It ended up collapsing, right? We know how the story ends. And because we know how the story ends, sometimes an inevitable bias can creep in. We start thinking, well, of course the Soviet Union was going to collapse. Surely we could have seen that they were, you know, a decrepit, bankrupt economy. Of course, the world wouldn’t be destroyed in a nuclear war. That’s insane. Why would we ever do that?

It didn’t look like that at the time. Reagan and his team didn’t know at the time how things were going to end. They hoped it would end in a good way. They were pushing policies that they believed would work. But they didn’t know it. And every day that Reagan would – you know, and his team – would wake up and go into the West Wing and, you know, sit there at their desks, they quite literally didn’t know if this was going to be their last day on planet Earth, right? They did not know if this was going to be the day that he world literally is destroyed.

That’s – I’m only being a tiny bit melodramatic there. That’s what the stakes were. And so I wanted to try to recapture some of that contingency, some of the role of individual leadership and decision making, and trying to shape an uncertain future.

Dr. Karako: I thought that was interesting. It’s not the typical choice. I think it’s more natural, insightful presentation. So, OK, let’s start with the title, “The Peacemaker.” That’s kind of the big theme of the book. Where does that title come from?

Dr. Inboden: So the title comes from a number of sources. I’m often asked if I mean it ironically. Sometimes it’s, are you trolling us, Inboden? We know that Reagan was a warmonger. Why do you call him a peacemaker, right? Principally the title comes from Gorbachev. The peacemaker is a tribute that he pays to Reagan at Reagan’s funeral in June of 2004, when Gorbachev pays a surprise visit to Reagan’s casket lying in state in the Capitol rotunda and says, you know, he was a great leader who chose to become a peacemaker.

It’s also a term that Reagan often wanted to use for himself. You know, his mantra is peace through strength. And we often focus on the
strength part. And that’s right. I mean, you know, the military buildup is very important, his desire to restore American strength is a key part of it. But we shouldn’t overlook the peace part. That was not just a throwaway line for him. He did not want the world to be consume in a nuclear war. He did not want the United States to be embroiled in another, you know, costly war. Especially, I mentioned, Vietnam having been so formative and so recent for his administration.

And so he was very committed. His end goal was peace. He did want to make peace. But he saw the biggest obstacle to world peace not being the American military or American foreign policy, but rather Soviet Communism and its aggression. And so his goal in promoting peace included seeing the dissolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But we should not lose track of that peace part. And this is why he is willing to make, you know, dramatic arms control – you know, arms control agreements with Gorbachev, and slash nuclear arsenals, once he sees us on a path to – a path to peace. So that’s why I chose the title.

Dr. Karako: Well, I like that. I like that you highlighted that – when I was reading I took down in my notes that you used “peace through strength,” but you always – you put the emphasis on the pronunciation on the peace part. I thought that was interesting. I got to tell you, though, I really liked the choice of the title because, you know, Peacemaker was also the Colt .45.

Dr. Inboden: Yes. Yeah.

Dr. Karako: Reagan, the actor in the Western movies kind of thing. And we talked about this before, that Peacemaker was actually Reagan’s choice for the MX missile, which ended up becoming the Peacekeeper.

Dr. Inboden: The Peacekeeper.

Dr. Karako: But nevertheless.

But on that peace theme, talk about the relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev. You spent a good bit of time on this. Difficult, you call them, friends. Describe that.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. Yeah, this is one of the most, I think, remarkable stories in the annals of world history, American diplomacy, how these two leaders of fierce rival nations, you know, both aspiring in different ways to being, you know, the dominant power in the globe, both believing that its value and ideological system should be the wave of the future, both in a lot of ways committed to each other’s destruction – these two leaders end up becoming genuine friends. Don’t put aside their differences, of course,
but becoming genuine friends. And not just in a nostalgic personal affection sort of way, but friends committed to bringing the Cold War to a peaceful end.

So a couple things to highlight on that. The first is I think it’s pretty clear from the recently declassified archives that I mentioned, you know, kind of some new window into the Reagan administration, thinking that from the beginning of his presidency in 1981, part of Reagan’s strategy of pressuring the Soviet Union is not just to weaken it, not just to deter its military, but to pressure it to produce a reformist leader. And that’s, I think, been underappreciated about – as a component of Reagan’s strategy, OK?

Because, again, his form – the form that I use to summarize it is he wants a negotiated surrender. Well, if you’re going to do the negotiations part, you have to have someone to negotiate with. And when Reagan takes office, the Soviet leader is, you know, Leonid Brezhnev, who’s a kind of old-line, you know, communist troglodyte, not terribly interested in negotiations. And so Reagan wants – part of his pressure on the Soviet system is to back it into a corner where the Politburo feels like, all right, we need to pick a more reformist leader who can cut some deals with the Americans, because otherwise we’re feeling backed into a corner. I’m oversimplifying a little bit.

But Gorbachev doesn’t come to power until over four years into Reagan’s presidency, at the start of – near the start of Reagan’s second term. And Reagan embraces Gorbachev quicker than a lot of other foreign policy experts necessarily expect. There was a little more wariness of Gorbachev among some others. Because in some ways Reagan hopes Gorbachev is the reformer he’s been looking for all along. I titled a chapter in my book on this, “Waiting for Gorbachev,” like “Waiting for Godot,” right? Because I think Reagan had been waiting for a Gorbachev-type to come along.

And so when they – then they have this series of four iconic summit meetings – Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, D.C., and then Moscow. And over those – the course of those, and we now have the transcripts so you can literally – it’s almost like you’re there in the room – read verbatim, world-for-word, what Reagan says, with Gorbachev says, back and forth. As they are having big differences over arms control, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and human rights, and all these other issues, you see this real friendship and mutual regard developing. And they both feel the tremendous weight of the responsibility. As Reagan puts it to Gorbachev in their first meeting: You and I together hold the fate the
world in our hands. And let’s not trifle with that. Let’s take that responsibility seriously. So that’s how the friendship develops.

Dr. Karako: So what’s your answer to the question, who did more to end the Cold War, Reagan or Gorbachev?

Dr. Inboden: OK, I’ll give you the simple answer, then I’ll nuance it a little more. If you force me to pick one, I’d say Reagan. And for some of the reasons I laid out there, as far as helping to set some of the conditions in which a Gorbachev will come to power. Again, let me be clear, Gorbachev is largely selected because of internal Soviet dynamics and other developments within the Soviet system and the Politburo. Reagan does not dictate to the Politburo: Thou shall select a Gorbachev. Doesn’t work that way. But because Reagan helped set those conditions, and because Reagan is then willing to embrace and work with Gorbachev, and pursue this very delicate, sophisticated, dual track of pressuring Gorbachev while also doing outreach and diplomacy, I give him a little more credit there.

But the more nuanced answer is they’re both essential. Reagan himself would tell you that he couldn’t have done this without Gorbachev. Gorbachev, who in a lot of ways is a heroic, transformative, you know, iconic, very courageous figure in his own right, would also in a lot of ways tell you he couldn’t have fully done it without Reagan either. I mean, so it’s a good – you know, they need each other.

Dr. Karako: So, as I said, your book really puts the inflection on peace in the peace through strength formulation. Let’s talk about the defense buildup part of this. You call Reagan a paradox on the use of force, and you emphasize that his defense modernization had a diplomatic grand strategy kind of purpose. So talk to me about the defense buildup.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. So there’s a lot there. And this is a theme woven throughout the book, but, again, for any other, you know, scholars out there, I think there is more books to be written on the Reagan defense modernization, dissertations to be written, a lot more good work to be done on this. So I think in some ways I was just scratching the surface. But a few themes to highlight.

First, as I mentioned earlier, Reagan is very shaped, in some ways constrained, by the Vietnam legacy, right? When he takes the oath office in January of 1981, that is eight years almost exactly to the day since the last American combat troop left Vietnam, right? So as I’ve said in other contexts, Vietnam was not history. Vietnam was yesterday, right? It was
a very – in the same way that our nation is still dealing with, wrestling with Iraq and Afghanistan, right? Vietnam was that.

And so – and one of – you know, many takeaways from Vietnam. But one of the big ones for Reagan was just be very careful about deploying large numbers of American combat troops in a difficult – you know, difficult conflict on the other side of the world. It probably won’t end well. And even if he, Reagan, wanted to do it, the American people and Congress would not stand for it.

But he also had seen throughout the 1970s that the Soviet Union had been increasing its military strength, in some ways had eclipsed the United States. And, you know, the Soviets were probably the most powerful military in the world by the early 1980s. You know, different ways to measure this. And the Soviets had advanced tremendously through supporting communist revolutions and new regimes throughout the developing world. You know, we could rattle off a bunch of it, right? But, you know, 10 to 15 new communist regimes come to power.

So for Reagan, his goal is to modernize the American military, build it up from its, you know, Vietnam demoralization, from the pretty crippling budget cuts that Congress had imposed it, and yet to wield it as a diplomatic instrument. That it will strengthen his negotiations with the Soviets, rather than being interested in actually getting into a hot shooting war. So this is why, in his eight years as president, even though he sometimes has, you know, pretty belligerent rhetoric, he only deploys ground troops in combat once. And that’s the Grenada invasion, which is over in pretty much a weekend, right?

Just a quick contrast, Bush 41, George H.W. Bush, his successor, who we usually think of as a little more prudent and cautious, he’s in office half the time – he only has one term, four years – and he deploys American ground troops in combat twice, into much bigger operations. Panama in ’89 and then the Gulf War in ’90-’91. I’m not criticizing him. I think he was a great president. But Reagan is very careful about actually getting the United States into shooting wars. He wants the military to enable him to win without fighting, essentially, right? To strengthen his diplomacy. To deter a Soviet attack, but also to force them to the negotiating table.

Dr. Karako: Talk a little bit, Reagan’s not a unitary actor in the American political system. Talk about some of the things that he had to overcome domestically – for instance, you mentioned Congress – to get that defense buildup. And, frankly, what are some lessons for today as, you
know, one of the big conversations right now in Washington is munitions production. And how do we kind of build a political consensus, if there is an analogy to today? Your thoughts on that.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah, OK, boy, a lot there. And don’t let me turn into professor mode and do a 60-minute mini lecture on this. I’ll try just to highlight a few big themes. The first one is, Reagan has – he inherits a very difficult hand when he comes into office, right? The military is underfunded, weak, demoralized, going through a difficult transition from the draft to the all-volunteer force. Which is the right thing to do, but not an easy transition. We’ve lost our first war in Vietnam. And the nation is divided and somewhat skeptical of his still, right? So even though he defeats the incumbent Jimmy Carter, a lot of the votes for Reagan in 1980 were more votes against Carter. So Reagan still has a – he has a persuasion job to do with the American people.

But he also does inherit a bipartisan consensus in Congress that we need to restore our military strength, right? So eventually he gets more opposition on this, but the first couple years his dramatic increases in the defense budget are passing by overwhelming bipartisan majorities. I mean, everyone agrees that we’re in a bad spot there. And so he has an advantage there. And, you know, while we’re sitting here on stage, of course, former President Carter’s in very bad health. You know, it’s now known that he’s in hospice care.

And I want to go on record right now that Reagan benefits from key decisions that Carter takes in his last year or two in office, including Carter starts what becomes the Reagan defense buildup, right? So Carter increases – gets Congress to increase defense spending by about 10 percent his last year in office. And even though Reagan and Carter had big differences, Reagan himself would say that he inherited a good – a better trajectory there from Carter. And I think that’s an important part of the record.

Dr. Karako: Well, you call Afghanistan Reagan’s signature success. Talk to me about that, and maybe, again, some applications for today.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. And this pivots nicely off of talking about how he’s constrained by Vietnam. So Reagan develops what becomes known as the Reagan doctrine, which is essentially instead of sending American troops into these other wars, let’s support the locals to do their own fighting, if it’s a goal that we support as well. Particularly, let’s support local forces to fight against communist aggression. And so in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan at the end of 1979, and then found themselves in something of a quagmire. And many of the Afghans – you
know, the Afghan fighters known as the mujahadeen, the holy warriors, were fighting courageously against the invading red army.

And so Reagan, again, inheriting a little bit of the initial framework from Carter, primarily through CIA, develops a pretty sophisticated strategy of arming the mujahadeen to impose brutal cost on the Soviet invaders, on the Soviet Army there. And replicates this in a few other ways in Angola, more controversially in Nicaragua, supporting the Contras, even in Cambodia, supporting some of the anti-Soviet forces there.

And so this is another part of the Reagan defense strategy, is using more advanced American weapon systems and supplying them to partners. So when we give the Stinger missiles to the mujahadeen, you know, one Stinger missile costs, I don’t know, $50,000, or something like that, and it can take down a $20 million Soviet attack helicopter, a Hind helicopter. So when I say it’s imposing costs on the Soviets and imposing financial costs on them as well as, of course, the body bags that, you know, Soviet troops are being sent home in.

And so that’s an important part of the overall Reagan strategy. And we see some, you know, similar dynamics right now as we’re all sitting here on the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. And with, you know, NATO and American support for the Ukrainians also fighting against Kremlin invaders.

Dr. Karako: Exactly, to the day. Thanks for bringing that up.

Now, staying on the defense buildup, you call SDI the apotheosis of the Reagan defense buildup. You discuss it in terms of similar things to what you just said there. Cost and position, trying to bankrupt the Soviet Union, but also in terms of the nuclear abolition, which we’ll get to in a minute. But talk to me about SDI, because that is a big theme of the book.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. And this is also a good chance to build a little bit more on what I hadn’t addressed earlier on the defense buildup. You know, I’ve often – hopefully, you have picked up – I often refer to it as the defense modernization. And here’s a very key thing to understand about Reagan’s defense strategy. And this gets directly to SDI. Is it wasn’t just about outbuilding and outspending the Soviets. That was part of it. It was about outsmarting them.

And so – and he inherits some of this framework from the Carter administration, from Andy Marshall in the Office of Net Assessment. But it’s a framework of let’s not just try to outspend the Soviets one-for-one,
for every tank they build we’ll build, you know, one and a half tanks, or what have you. But rather, let’s leverage American technological ingenuity, American innovation, our historic edge in technology to build a next generation of weapons platforms and systems that will overmatch, that will exceed anything the Soviets have in quality, and not worry as much about quantity.

And so I won’t go into all the details here, but you see this across a full range of platforms, right? Our nuclear submarines were much better than Soviet ones. So one American nuclear sub, better than four or five Soviet ones. Our tank-killing platforms – you know, the Apache helicopter, the A-10, you know, much – severe overmatch against the Soviet T-72 tank, no matter how many they had. SDI. This culminates in SDI.

So the Soviets had a vast edge in quality and quantity of ICBMs, right? So their SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missile with, you know, 10 MIRV warheads, they had a vast arsenal there. And that really made us vulnerable. For Reagan, instead of just trying to build the same number of ICBMs, or even more, he thought: What if we can render the Soviet ICBM force obsolete by building a missile shield? So that no matter how many ICBMs the Soviets launch at us, we can shoot them all out of the sky – or shoot them out of the galaxy?

It’s somewhat fantastical. So much so that Teddy Kennedy, the Democratic senator, calls it Star Wars, right? A movie, a fantasy. But Reagan is more realistic about it than commonly appreciated. He knew that it would take 10-20 years to develop, if ever. That this is a big technological reach. But his goal was to at least threaten the Soviets with it, so that they would realize, wow, eventually the Americans will – you know, if there’s even a chance they can build this missile shield, the game is up for us. No matter how many more rubles we spend on our ICBMs, we don’t stand a chance.

And so when you read the transcripts of Reagan’s summit meetings with Gorbachev, Gorbachev is obsessed with SDI. Gorbachev is convinced it’s going to work, and convinced that it will be a game-changer against – for the Soviets. So that’s why he so wants – so desperate to get Reagan to give it up. But finally, it touches on Reagan’s hope of a nuclear-free world. He wants to make nuclear weapons themselves obsolete. And he sees SDI as the ultimate key to that, so.

Dr. Karako: Well, this is probably a good time, then, to move to the nuclear abolition. I know Paul Lettow in 2006 had that book on the “Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.” It was fantastic reading.
Dr. Inboden: Yeah. It was very eye-opening, yeah.

Dr. Karako: Just about how far back it went in Reagan’s, I guess, consciousness. Now, if I’m not mistaken, a young Will Inboden had a poster on his wall in junior high? What was that about?

Dr. Inboden: Yes. Yeah, OK, so my own personal history there. And you can find this in the photo section of the book that we’re talking about here. So the common perception of Reagan in the 1980s, especially among his critics, was that he was a cowboy warmonger who never met a nuclear weapon he didn’t like, who wanted to build – you know, more is better – as many nukes as he could, and threaten to blow up the Soviet Union in a mushroom – you know, series of mushroom clouds. And might actually do it, you know, with his crazy trigger finger.

In fact, Reagan was terrified of nuclear weapons, hated nuclear weapons, and wanted to see all of them abolished from the face of the Earth. And this was a conviction he’d held ever since the dawn of the nuclear era. And I’m glad you mentioned Paul Lettow's book. So Paul shows in his book that Reagan’s first statement against nuclear weapons comes, I think I want to say, in the fall of 1945 just a few weeks after we’d dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And he does an event at the Hollywood Bowl and says: These are terrible weapons and we should get rid of them, right?

And so how do we begin to square these circles? You know, Tom mentioned the poster I had on my wall in junior high and high school in the 1980s. I was more of a young man of the left then. And I was terrified of nuclear war and I thought Reagan was going to blow the world up. So I had an anti-nuclear poster on my wall ridiculing Reagan for this. But what we now know is his ultimately goal was to abolish all these weapons. But the sequencing really matters. And, you know, in a nutshell, his strategy was build-up to build-down.

He wanted – he knew that it would not do much good for the United States to unilaterally disarm, to get rid of all of our nukes, if the Soviets still have theirs. And then if other rogue states, he would often talk about Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi, got nukes as well. And so that’s why in the short term Reagan deployed intermediate-range nuclear missions to Europe, develops and deploys the MX Peacekeeper missile, as we talked about before. Because he wanted to, in a short term, our nuclear arsenal to pressure the Soviets to agree to reduce theirs, and then we would reduce ours as well.
Dr. Karako: So you mentioned the INF – what became the INF Treaty negotiations. Talk a little bit about maybe some of the – first of all, the diplomatic aspects of Reykjavik, Geneva, all these sorts of things, of refusing to give up SDI, refusing to give up the desire for nuclear abolition. I mean, it was a constant battle within the administration and then with the Soviets.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. And this – and this culminates in one of Reagan’s signature achievements, which is the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, that Tom mentioned. Still the only treaty in history to abolish an entire class of nuclear weapons. So why does it matter and how did we get there? So in the late 1970s, one of the several ways the Soviet Union gained an edge in the Cold War was deployed SS-20s. These were intermediate-range nuclear missiles they deployed in the, you know, far western reaches of the Soviet Union. And they were only about an eight to ten minute flight time from all the NATO capitals.

And these were particularly dangerous, destabilizing weapons for a few reasons. So, first, each one had three warheads, right? So the minute it’s launched it can then hit three cities. It’s MIRVed. Second, they’re mobile, all right? So they may be based one place one day but they’re on a truck and they can be moved – you know, moved elsewhere pretty quickly, which makes them much harder to detect and take out preemptively. Third, they were solid fueled. Without going into all the technical aspects, Tom will know this, it meant that they could be launched in a moment’s notice. You don’t need to wait for them to, you know, to hook up the gas tank, for liquid fueled ones, where our spy satellites could detect it sooner.

And so it’s a way of holding hostage all these European capitals, that they could be incinerated within eight minutes, and really undermines American deterrence. Reagan wanted to get rid of those. And he knew that our European allies were also terrified of them and wanted to get rid of them too. And so Reagan purses this dual track strategy of we first will deploy American intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the European capitals – Pershing-2s and ground-launched cruise missiles. So kind of a standard one-for-one deterrence play there. You know, the bad guys have their missiles aimed at us. We’ll put our missiles aimed at them. And Gorbachev called the American missiles a gun pointed at the Kremlin’s head, because by some measurements our Pershing-2s were only about a ten-minute flight time from Moscow.

But then Reagan tells them, well, look, our goal is not to destroy you in a nuclear war. Our goal is to get rid of all these missiles, the zero option. But we don’t just want to reduce them. We want to get rid of all of them. The Soviets initially balk. They don’t – you know, they’ll come back with
a half-baked compromise of, well, they'll cut theirs by a third if we, you know, cut ours by half, or something like that. But Reagan holds fast on that, and eventually Gorbachev agrees, all right, we'll get rid of all those – all those nuclear missiles. And, hence, the INF Treaty.

Dr. Karako: But that took an enormous amount of diplomatic effort with our friends in Europe, with our allies. You know, that wasn't an easy lift. That was – (laughs) –

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. And our Asian allies too. And even though the INF case is primarily understood as a NATO story, a Europe story, and it is primarily that, another theme of the book is Reagan built really close ties with Japan, especially Prime Minister Nakasone. The Soviets have deployed SS-20s in the Soviet far east targeted against Tokyo, and Seoul, and Beijing as well. And so all of our, you know, Asian allies and kind of sometime partners, like the Chinese, were terrified of these too. And again, because they're mobile, they can move them, you know, east to west to target Europe, target Asia, pretty easily.

And so Reagan worked hard to get our allies to agree to let him deploy the American missiles in Western Europe, but also he kept faith with our Asian allies who said: You know, don't cut a deal where they only – the Soviets only remove their missiles from Europe, because they're still pointed at us. That doesn't do us much good. And Reagan even threatened Gorbachev at one point. He said, look, I will put more American nuclear missiles in the Aleutian Islands just, again, what, 100-mile flight time from the Soviet Union too. We'll do in Asia – in the Asia-Pacific what we've done to you in Europe there unless you come back to the table and agree to negotiate. So it involved some very complicated alliance management, and not just with the NATO allies, but also kind of, you know, continent-wide there. And so it's a remarkable diplomatic story.

Dr. Karako: And you spent a lot of time on diplomacy. You highlight George Shultz. Why is that?

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. So I try to make a case, with apologies to many other great American secretaries of state – Henry Kissinger, James Baker – I try to make a case for George Shultz being the greatest American secretary of state since George Marshall, at least, and since, you know, the Truman era. And I think Shultz was an essential partner for Reagan. Reagan had this vision of negotiating with the Soviets, but he needed someone to really help him implement that, who was committed to pressure on the Soviet system but also diplomacy and negotiations.
And Reagan’s first secretary of state was Al Haig. Very talented. Very accomplished. You know, a former four-star general. A former White House chief of staff. Had been the protégé of Henry Kissinger. But Haig just wasn’t the right match. He didn’t play very well with others. He wasn’t aligned with Reagan on Reagan’s overall grand strategy. And so after a year and a half, Reagan dismisses Haig and then hires Shultz as his secretary of state.

And then even though Reagan and Shultz did not have much of a previous relationship – not like, say, George H.W. Bush and his best friend James Baker, you know, who had such an effective partnership because they’d been friends for decades. Reagan and Shultz quickly develop that mind meld, if you will, and realize that they have a shared vision for the Cold War. And Shultz understands that Reagan is the president and Shultz is not. And so even though Shultz is always very free to tell Reagan here’s what I really think, or to disagree with him behind closed doors, Reagan has a very high level of trust that Shultz will not be undermining him, that Shultz will faithfully carry out Reagan’s overall strategy.

And then, in turn, Shultz is also a very good manager. You talk to, you know, career foreign service officers at the State Department who, you know, have decades of experience. And I used to do this when I worked at state, just kind of ask them, hey, who was the best secretary you ever served under? And almost all of them would say Shultz – ones who had been of a certain vintage. And sometimes they’d preface it by saying, you know, I never voted for Reagan but, boy, Shultz was the best. And so Shultz did a great job of ensuring that the State Department was largely aligned with Reagan’s priorities, but Shultz empowered the State Department and yet still kept them channeled in the right direction. And so it’s a – they were very, very effective in tandem.

Dr. Karako: Staying with that, diplomacy and you mentioned the phrase “alliance management.” I was stuck by a couple episodes. You talked about how Reagan was perhaps a little surprised by the Israeli Osirak attack, and you talked about how Thatcher was really surprised by Grenada. But I thought the episode that most – or, the quote that you used here is – in the context of the imposition of martial law in Poland, and Reagan called for complete quarantine. And said, quote, “tell the allies that if they don’t go along with that, we will let them know that we may have to review our alliances.” Lessons for today?

Dr. Inboden: Yeah, boy, a lot there. So, as I try to state really clearly in the introduction, I think Reagan is the modern American president most committed to allies. Our modern alliance system dates to the end of
World War II, right? So that comparison there. So he sees allies as a key source of American strength, an almost unique source of American strength. He’s very devoted to them. And I lay that out really strongly upfront in the book, because the rest of the book is kind of an unrelenting series of frictions and conflicts with the allies, OK? (Laughter.)

But it’s important to understand that those frictions and conflicts take place in this broader context of Reagan being very committed to the allies and really valuing them. So the imperfect analogy I’ve used before is Reagan and the allies is kind of like a bad marriage that is still a marriage, right? A bad marriage that doesn’t end in a divorce. So you’re united in that marriage covenant. You’re not going anywhere. You know, she’s not going anywhere. But you’re fighting all the time. (Laughs.) And yet, it’s in that broader context if you’re still together.

And part of that was at times when it would come to a really critical impasse, Reagan would be willing to say, all right, allies. Here’s where America is going to go. I’ve given you your chances. I’ve heard your concerns. But we’re going to go here, whether you come with us or not. And eventually the allies would come along. That’s the case with the INF Treaty, as we mentioned. It was the case with SDI, with a number of other things. And it even had come up early on when the Polish Communist government had imposed martial law in December of 1981, and Reagan wanted to take a much stronger stance in support of Solidarity. Your colleague, Seth Jones, of course, has written a great book on this here at CSIS. And allies were much more squeamish and didn’t want to do sanctions on the Polish government and on the Soviet system.

So, yeah, there are recurring tensions and conflicts with allies throughout this book on a whole host of issues, the ones you mentioned and others. And yet, at the end of the day, Reagan still sticks with them. They still stick with Reagan. And, as I mentioned earlier, you can’t understand his success without Gorbachev, you also can’t understand his successes without Thatcher, without Nakasone, without Brian Mulroney of Canada, without Helmut Kohl of West Germany, without Francois Mitterrand of France, even too, so.

Dr. Karako: And of course, all – like you said, Japan. And you spent a good bit of time on Reagan’s Asia policy, which is also important for us today. What were some of its main features as well?

Dr. Inboden: Yes. So really important theme in the book, which I think you can’t understand Reagan’s Cold War strategy without this, but also just his
own other set of priorities in Asia. So when Reagan takes office, he inherits a framework for a United States strategic posture in Asia which his three successor-predecessors had all developed. Nixon, Ford, and Carter. So a bipartisan consensus. And that is that the key to America’s strategic posture in Asia is China. And we need to build a partnership with China.

You know, Nixon and Kissinger had first done the iconic opening to China. China had split from the Soviet Union. So China wanted to partner with the United States to counter the Soviets, right? So it made geopolitical sense. China by then had started on some of the economic reform path under Deng Xiaoping. So that’s the framework that Reagan inherits. And part of that framework is essentially let’s marginalize Taiwan. We used to support them. Don’t really care about them anymore. And then Japan was a problem, right?

So Japan, even though formally an American ally, Japan was spending hardly anything on its own defense, its own military, freeriding under the American security umbrella. And Japan was more focused on growing its economy, which seemed to come at the expense of American manufacturing jobs. And so most Americans, policymakers and average Americans, saw Japan as primarily an economic rival. They were an economic rival. They were eating our lunch, particularly with their low-cost exports flooding our markets. They’d closed their economy to any American exports, so they were a trade rival.

Reagan does a strategic reversal of all of that. He doesn’t entirely jettison the U.S. relationship with China, but he does two really important things which still I think are with us today, and still have some takeaways for today. First, he splits the American posture to have Japan – to have our whole posture in Asia go through Japan and not through China. He sees – and he helps transform the U.S.-Japan relationship from primarily economic rivalry to primarily a strategic partnership. Along the way, he persuades Japan to triple its defense budget – triple it in eight years. It’s remarkable. This is where he gets benefits from allies there. And again, your former colleague here, Mike Green, of course, is one of the great authorities on this.

And then with Taiwan, Reagan rebalances things with China-Taiwan. He puts together, you know, complicated, messy negotiations, but he puts the framework that we still have now of a strong American commitment to selling arms to Taiwan and meeting their defense needs. Beijing doesn’t like this at all. Beijing feels like it’s being shunted aside after a decade of love and embrace from the previous three presidents. Reagan tells Beijing: We’re going to come back to you. We’re still going to
partner with you and work with you on a few things. We want to engage with you economically. We want to partner with you to counter the Soviets. But not at the expense of Taiwan.

And so he recalibrates that and puts our relationship with Taiwan, I think, on a more stable footing. Again, which we, I think, can now be grateful for today, especially as you've seen Beijing's again growing threats towards Taiwan.

Dr. Karako: And one of the things, when he went over to China, was he gave that Shanghai speech. Which was pretty forceful. Yes, being nice to China, but also still being forceful on human rights and other things like that. I was also struck, in reading it, that you – and not all historians do this – you put a fair bit of, in the similar way that you have that kind of human perspective to the pace of the narrative – you also put a fair bit of attention on speeches. You talk about Westminster as the most important speech, Evil Empire, SDI, things like that. How important do you think the speeches were to Reagan, to shaping his foreign policy, to what’s been called, you know, the rhetorical presidency?

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. They’re essential. And even people who may not know much at all about Reagan, you know, usually ask, you know, what do you think of when you hear the name Ronald Reagan? Usually they’ll mention a couple lines from his speeches. Evil Empire, tear down this wall, you know, ash heap of history, like that. And I think there’s a good reason for that. And, you know, a few things to emphasize here.

First, Reagan himself took his speeches very seriously. Some of this is going back to his Hollywood days, right? His earlier heyday as an actor, a communicator. Some of it goes back to, you know, throughout the 1970s, he did a week – actually, I think a daily radio program, right? So, you know, most of his career had been spent in communications. But also, because he sees the Cold War as a battle of ideas – going back to – I mentioned this at the beginning – he wants to communicate those ideas.

And so he personally invests a tremendous amount of time and thought into his own speeches. He has a very capable team of speechwriters. You know, of course, the great Peggy Noonan, Tony Dolan, Peter Robinson. But all of them will tell you that when they were crafting initial drafts of speeches, they were really channeling Reagan's own ideas. You know, they're not coming up with these on their own. They've got a template of his ideas. And that he was very personally involved in writing and rewriting the speeches. And so the Westminster one, which I think was his greatest one, he personally, you know, handwrote about 50 percent of the text in that speech.
And there’s a reason why he devotes so much attention to speeches. Is he sees them as his way to make sustained case against – a sustained ideological, intellectual case, against Soviet Communism. You can read his speeches as a sustained, unfolding argument against that system. But also his speeches are his effort to persuade the American people, the allies, the rest of the world, and even, you know, distance behind the Iron Curtain, of the benefits of a free society, of the positive virtues of free and open markets, of democratic self-governance, of religious liberty, of human flourishing in that system.

And he knows that he’s pushing some controversial policies. He’s asking the American people to bear more risks, to bear more costs. And he feels a burden to explain to the American people the journey he’s taking them on, or he wants to take them on, tell them why these policies matter, and invite their support. And so he’s trying to accomplish a lot with these different speeches. And that’s why he invests so much in them.

Dr. Karako: So the speech is part of the battle of ideas. And you emphasize, in a big, thematic way, that Reagan rejected the, you say, power politics détente pure realism kind of thing, and coupled it with that battle of ideas. You talked about Reagan and JFK were the only ones to visit Voice of America, the only presidents, for instance. And yet, today, right now, we got a lot of folks making kind of similar arguments. And if we think about China, we can’t get distracted by the ideological things. We have to focus on hard power only. Reagan had a lot of tension. He was working with sometimes some unsavory characters, and yet he saw value to having the, I guess, ideological as well as the hard power. Talk about that and the lessons for today.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. Yeah. I dodged the lessons for today earlier, so I will – I didn’t mean to overlook that one. So I’ll come back to that one. So, yes, again, you know, Reagan’s overall – his theory of the case on the Cold War, as I said, is this battle of ideas. And so he wants to, you know, put the pressure on the Soviet system as a vile idea to be defeated, rather than seeing the Soviet Union as a rival power to be contained and managed, OK? And so that’s the overarching framework there.

Yes, I do think there is some relevance for our – particularly our competition today for the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party, if you will. It is not perfectly analogous to the Soviet Union, right? And we can do a whole other session on the discontinuities. We’ve got more economic interdependence with China than before. There’s not a comparable Warsaw Pact. The nuclear balance is different. They’re not trying to promote Xi Jinping thought
globally the way the Soviet Union was trying to promote Marxism-Leninism globally, you know.

That said, at the end of the day I do think a lot of what we’re facing with China right now not just that they’re a large economy and large military and we’re a large economy and large military and, you know, IR theory says that when you have two large power blocs like that they’re going to have some – have some frictions. I think, at the end of the day, the core differences are over values, over a different view of the best role of government, over the nature of human society. And so it really is a battle of ideas, then as now.

Reagan did not divorce those ideas from power. You know, that’s why he devoted so much to the military modernization, to restoring American economy. But he wanted – ultimately he saw American power is not – for him, it wasn’t a good in its own right, it’s a good if it is married to a higher purpose, if it’s integrated with these values and with these ideas, and in the service of those values and ideas. And so, again, we are today, rightly, concerned with restoring American power, with restoring our eroding military, you know, edge and balance vis-à-vis China, with our depleted weapon stocks, as we’re, I think, rightly supporting the Ukrainians.

We have all these very legitimate hard power concerns, with our still, you know, less than fully dynamic economy. But at the end of the day, we’re making a – I think an own-goal, a gratuitous unilateral concession if we don’t also think about the edge the United States has in our ideas, in the American idea, in the values of the free world, the values of a free society. That is what makes us more attractive to allies than, say, the Chinese Communist model, if you will. Those are reasons why people are clamoring to get inside the United States in ways that they’re not clamoring to get inside China.

Reagan had this great line in his Westminster address that he would often repeat. And he would say – you know, remind us, you know, the Berlin Wall is not built to keep people out. It’s built to imprison them in, right? You know, refugee and asylum flows were not trying to get into the Iron Curtain. They’re trying to get out of the Iron Curtain. You know, a lot of the Soviet troops stationed there had their guns pointed inward to stop their people from fleeing. Watching how people vote with their feet should tell you something. And let’s – you know, it’s not unilaterally concede that. Let’s not act like that’s not an advantage we have.

Dr. Karako: Well said. Well said. And closely associated with that is how he was kind of using – would bring in Soviet dissidents to the White House, for
instance, and, again, highlighting the captive nations, highlighting the human rights thing. At the same time, you notice a lot of the warts and the apparent contradictions. For instance, you know, at times, supporting military dictatorships who were also anti-communist. So talk a little about that.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. Yeah. Boy, again, a lot there. (Laughter.) So the first principle is Reagan overall sees human rights and democracy as policy priorities, as American advantages, as things that he wants to support and promote, particularly behind the Iron Curtain and within the Soviet system. But this is where, writing as a historian and looking at the context, and also writing as a former policymaker and understanding the hard tradeoffs that you have, even while he has that general principle, remember what the world looked like in 1981.

Just two years earlier, in 1979, a previous, you know, American-supported anti-communist dictator, the shah of Iran, had been overthrown in a popular revolution. Another American-supported anti-communist dictator, Somoza, in Nicaragua had been overthrown in a communist revolution, led by Daniel Ortega, who’s still running things in Nicaragua now. So the Cold War is not so distant as it may think. And it seemed – if you looked at the world, it seemed like outside of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan, there’s really only two models of political organization. There’s communist dictatorship or there’s military dictatorship.

And both of them are bad, but if you’re given a choice – if that’s the only two choices you have – you prefer the military dictatorship as the lesser of the two evils, right, as the least-bad choice. And but you have the risk that if you don’t properly support those military dictatorships, a revolution may occur and then they turn into communist ones, or radical Islamic theocracy in the case of Iran. So it seems those are the only two models, and that’s really unpalatable. So Reagan initially comes into office saying, all right, in those cases we’re going to keep supporting the dictatorships – the military dictatorships, because at least they’re not communist or at least they’re not radical Islamic ones taking 52 of our people hostage.

But over the next two years, his first two years in office, he does come to realize that supporting these military dictators is not cost free, and even brings its own set of risks. I’ll just mention a few of these. First, it’s not cost free in terms of the moral stain, right? At the end of the day, the United States was supporting some dictators who brutalized their own people, who massacred thousands of innocent civilians at times. And
again, you can come up with all the policy rationalizations in the world, but at the end of the day that’s still a really ugly situation.

Reagan also realizes, after the Argentina military dictatorship invades the Falkland Islands in April of ’82, that our dictator friends are prone to getting in stupid wars. And stupid wars against our important ally, the British, right? And then the Argentine people, soon after the Falklands war, kind of have a peaceful revolution and get rid of the dictatorship. And so Reagan also realizes, in a practical case, these dictatorships just aren’t always that reliable. And so this is where by summer of ’82, fall of ’82, he really starts to transition and starts pushing a number of these right-wing military dictatorships on the path to peaceful democratic transitions.

But it’s a hard balance to have, because you don’t want to push them so much that they fall to a communist revolution, which is a real concern looking at recent history. But over time, and this is, again, where I go back to my tribute to George Shultz for his greatness as secretary of state, it turns into a pretty successful track record, right? So with Reagan administration encouragement, Philippines in ’86, South Korea in ’87, Taiwan ’88 and a little bit ’89. Chile, in ’88. All ease out military dictatorships and make peaceful transitions to democracy.

A lot of that is primarily driven by the people of those countries, right? The Filipino people, the South Korean people. Again, you know, Reagan is not dictating this. But American support is key. Sometimes that American supporting being telling the dictator: Hey, we’re not going to support you anymore. Our alliance is not with you, the dictator. It’s with your country and your people and you need to go and let the people have their voice.

Dr. Karako: So in a similar vein, you have – you’ve acknowledged, you know, Iran-Contra is kind of the opposite of the confidence of Reykjavik. Got him into trouble. That kind of thing. There’s a handful of episodes in the book that, you know, really kind of look a little darker, but also kind of these dramatic – whether the assassination attempt on him, I thought you did a nice job of depicting the Ivy League nuclear exercise participation having a big impact on him. And also the torture and execution, ultimately, of William Buckley. Talk maybe some of those episodes in Reagan’s formulation and execution of foreign policy.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. So Regan is in some ways – even though he is committed to ideas, he’s an intuitive learner. He pays attention to personal experiences a lot. These can be very arresting to him. It’s why plights of individual human suffering sometimes grab his attention. And I’ll bring together a couple
threads there. You had asked about Iran-Contra before. And I'll bring this back to the Buckley one too.

A horrible scandal. Reagan bears ultimate responsibility for it. He, again, makes the both foolish and wrong decision to trade American arms for the illusory hopes – trade American arms to Iran, you know, the terrorist state, in the illusory hopes that they will engineer the releases of American hostages. And then he's less – he's responsible, even though he was not knowledgeable, of then diverting those funds to support the Contras in Nicaragua.

But understanding how and why that happens, it’s because Reagan is very personally seized with the plight of these hostages. He's losing sleep over thinking about these hostages. He meets with their families. He sees the grief of the families. And he's become obsessed. He wants to do anything to get them free. And so in that case, his personal empathy or personal connections, if you will, turn into a real liability in leading him into making some, like I said, just terrible and, you know, scandalous policy choices, that almost bring down his presidency.

But in turn, on the intuition, a couple of other key episodes early in his administration is he takes his flight on the doomsday plane. This was, you know, kind of the secure version of Air Force One, designed to stay aloft for a few weeks as the president, the commander in chief's, airborne command post while the rest of the country has been destroyed in a nuclear war. Similarly, when he goes through the Ivy League exercise of simulating a Soviet nuclear attack on the United States and decapitating all of our government here, taking out the Capitol, taking out the White House, and, you know, can we have a few of our folks in bunkers and, you know, secure undisclosed locations?

An important exercise to go through, because you have to plan for the worst, but the series of experiencing these just terrify him about what a nuclear war would actually look like, the realization of what it would really mean for our country, and in turn deepen his resolve to finding ways to reduce and eventually eliminate these weapons, and the threat of the Soviet Union itself, which he sees as the ultimate source of instability. So these are all, in their different ways, episodes of his intuitive learning and experiential learning, which sometimes emboldens him for courageous and visionary policies, and other times leads him into making terrible decisions.

Dr. Karako: Obviously, as we've said before, Reagan is not a unitary actor here. Talk to me about his relations with Congress to, again, shape all these – to
execute. What were some of the challenges there in the executive-congressional relations?

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. Yeah. And Congress is a really important part of the whole story in the 1980s. In a longer version of this book, I did a lot more on Reagan’s relations with Congress. My editor wisely had me slash about 100,000 words from the thing. So wait 20 years for the director’s cut version, if we’re about still then, right? But Reagan’s relationship with Congress is just very complicated. So on the one hand, because he’s a charismatic leader, because he invests a lot in personal diplomacy, because he knows he needs congressional support for his defense budgets, for things like where he’s going to face the MX missiles, for his aid programs to these anti-communist fighters that the Reagan doctrine is trying to support, he invests a tremendous amount of time in relations with Congress.

You know, almost every night he’s hosting members of Congress for cocktail hours at the White House, he’s on the phone with them, he’s giving speeches to them trying to persuade, trying to control. When Congress is resistant, he’ll go over the heads to the American people, you know, given many of his appeals to the American people. Call your member of Congress. We want this or that done, right?

But he also has some key friends and allies in Congress. Paul Laxalt, the Nevada senator. You know, Sam Nunn, of course, a board member here, a hawkish Democrat who’s very supportive of the Reagan defense buildup. Barry Goldwater sometimes. You know, they’ve got a complicated relationship. And then in turn, Congress also plays a key role in some of his biggest scandals and vexations, right? So when Congress bans funding any American dollars going to the Contras, the anti-communist fighters in Nicaragua, you know, the Reagan White House then diverts the funds from the Iran arms sales. So it’s an illegal way of getting around that – getting around that congressional ban.

So he – just as he spends a lot of time in his negotiations, relationships with allied leaders, he spends a lot of that time with Congress too. And it causes him – one back of the thumb measurement is Reagan was a very faithful diarist. You know, he kept a – he wrote diary entries every night. He didn’t expect they’d ever become public, but they’ve since been published. And of course, for this book I read every word of every page of those diaries. And a tremendous amount of his diaries is him venting about Congress. (Laughter.) So almost every day there’s something about this congressman, that congressman, so.
Dr. Karako: I want to come back to the 100,000 words that were cut. But before I get there, I wonder if you might talk – you mentioned, for instance, that you spent a lot of time in the archives working on this stuff. Other historians, other works that really kind of shaped your outlook here that you used? You cite some of them. But also maybe kind of your place, situating this book in contrast with others.

Dr. Inboden: OK. Yeah. So, well, again, every work of scholarship is standing on the shoulders of giants, you know, to borrow the phrase. And I, you know, benefitted tremendously from quite a few other scholars and authors who’ve done a lot of really good work on the Reagan administration, Reagan presidency. Hal Brands has written several books I drew on quite a bit. And he read a good part of the manuscript in draft form too. Steve Hayward wrote a tremendous two-volume “Age of Reagan,” which I, you know, again, read that very deeply, cite quite a bit. Jim Mann wrote a really good book on U.S.-China relations in the 1980s, where he was based there at the time as a media correspondent, newspaper correspondent. And he also wrote a really good book called “The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan” which clued me into some of the Reagan-Nixon relationship. And the Reagan Suzanne Massie one. So those are a few.

Where mine – I guess where I would situation mine is I do argue for the continuity in Reagan’s policies and strategies. A number of other scholars argue for what’s called a Reagan reversal, that his first term he’s a hawkish hardliner, then his second term when Gorbachev comes along he becomes more accommodating and conciliatory. I think that he adopted a much more consistent dual track policy of pressure and diplomacy for all eight years. And you can get more of that in the book. And then mine is somewhat unique in trying to look at all of his foreign policies as more of a – not quite integrated whole, but certainly interacting parts. And so most other authors have looked primarily at his Cold War policies. But so I really want to bring the Asia policies to the forefront, some of the Middle East ones as well, as an important part of the story.

Dr. Karako: Yeah. So back to the archival research for a moment. Lance Kelson sends in a question and asks: What was the most surprising content in the recently declassified material that you went through?

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. Boy, so much I could say there. I’ll just try to give a few highlights. One of them, which I made passing reference to earlier on Asia, and especially Taiwan. So a general impression of Reagan is he’s kind of a big-picture guy, inattentive to details, lets his staff handle that, you know, reads from his cue cards, that kind of stuff. That is not completely
wrong. There is a basis to that. He, himself, would sometimes joke about not having a head for details.

But on issues he cared about, was much more attentive to details. And one really interesting find was, I mentioned earlier his effort to maintain American support for Taiwan. So the summer of 1982, Al Haig, you know, in his final days as secretary of state, Haig had tried to negotiate a big deal with China governing American arms sales to Taiwan, which were essentially throwing Taiwan under the bus. You know, Haig, out of the Kissinger school, wanted to prioritize relations with China. And so Haig and his team at State had put together, I think, about a 25-page, single-spaced, very densely worded draft agreement on – the U.S. would sign with Beijing saying, you know, we won’t sell any more arms to Taiwan after a few years.

Reagan gets that. He reads it word for word, line for line, and he makes very careful line edits, you know, in his own handwriting, on every single page, kind of rewriting major parts of this agreement, making clear that, no, we are going to continue supporting Taiwan. So, again, that was remarkable to see how careful and attentive he was on the detail on an issue like this.

A couple of other finds, again, from kind of recently declassified transcripts of his meeting with other heads of state, was just how strong his Christian faith was. And I’d seen some of this in the diaries as well, but he would often speak personally about it with other leaders as well. He was fascinated by the possibility of growing religious faith and revival behind the Iron Curtain, even where it’s officially atheistic. He would often speak of his own personal faith to other leaders. Even tries to persuade Gorbachev to believe in God at one point. So the religious Reagan comes out in these previously classified records as well.

Dr. Karako: Interesting. Interesting.

All right. So you mentioned the 100,000 words. It’s eight years you’ve got to cover here, plus. I got to say, I got to the end of the book, and it was a long book. But when I got to the end, I couldn’t help but wonder was it long enough? And so of your 100,000 words, you know, what are the things that come to mind when you think about it? Like, oh, I wish I would have had room for this, that, or the other thing.

Dr. Inboden: Yeah. I’ll mention a few things. One is the earlier draft had a lot more material on the 1970s. A little more bit more on Reagan’s background, but also the feuds within the Republican Party, his challenge of Gerald Ford for the 1976 nomination, Reagan’s criticisms of détente. But also
earlier it had a lot more on the 1960s, and Reagan’s really interesting friendship with Dwight Eisenhower, right?

So I only do a paragraph on that in this book as published, but the earlier version had several pages on this, because Eisenhower was, in some ways, one of Reagan’s first foreign policy mentors. Eisenhower encouraged Reagan to run for governor of California, to enter, you know, electoral politics in 1966. Eisenhower in 1968 endorses Reagan for president pretty much, 1968. Even though Eisenhower’s former vice president, Richard Nixon, was already going to be running, right? So Eisenhower actually favored Reagan. And so the Eisenhower-Reagan friendship was a bigger part of it.

Then during the administration there was a little bit more on the defense modernization. There was a lot more on the Middle East policy, a lot more on Asia policy. So I still think some of the main themes are in the final version as published, but there was a lot more detail in the missing 100,000 words – which were – you know, I’ll be in therapy the first of my life for the grief of having to cut those, right?

Dr. Karako: (Laughs.) I understand.

Dr. Inboden: Like amputating your arm.

Dr. Karako: (Laughs.) So just sort of to wrap it up here, you say this – you talk about this explicitly in the introduction. You talk about Reagan as a tragic figure. And I was reading along, you see this kind of poetry and tragedy. You’ve got a bit of a lyrical style, which I think is probably – when you read some of these more rhetorical speeches, for instance, you can’t help but perhaps imbibe that. And there was this story in the – that you relate, where it was 1984, I guess, where Bill Galston was in Mondale’s campaign office. And he’s watching the Pointe du Hoc speech. And there’s some tears coming to the eye. And you quote Bill Galston as saying, quote, “Reagan represents the memory of America at its best.” And that speech, which I got to say is probably my favorite personally.

Dr. Inboden: It was a special one, yeah.

Dr. Karako: But you’re a historian.

Dr. Inboden: You can watch it on YouTube if you haven’t seen it. It’s really something.

Dr. Karako: So you’re a historian. Talk to me about the importance of using memory in history, but also as a statesman. You know, yes, how Reagan did it, but also how it’s important for statesmen today.
Dr. Inboden: Yeah. And so this – I’ll try to get into those threads. So we got tragedy, poetry, memory, all right. So we’ll close on those. So the tragedy part, when I refer to Reagan a couple times as a tragic president, it’s not in that he fails, or anything like this. You know, you’ve heard, this is a very favorable portrayal and all. But that policymaking is often a tragic enterprise, where, as I sometimes put it to my students, rarely is a president faced with I’ve got a good option and a bad option, and I got to pick the good option. It’s usually you’re faced with I got a bad option, and I got a really bad option, and I have a terrible option, and I need to pick the bad option, right? In terms of no matter what choice you make, there will be bad consequences. There will be costs.

And to not make any choice, oh, I just don’t pick any of them, that becomes a choice itself as well, right, where you also will have bad costs, bad consequences. And so looking at a lot of the Reagan administration’s, I think, you know, mistaken policies, or ones that don’t work – and I’m critical of a number of those. You know, the peacekeeping deployment in Beirut is a mess, right? And then 241 Marines lose their life, so it’s a terribly costly mess too. It’s not like there was an easy or a clear path to pick there.

But that, in turn, comes to the poetry part. Reagan is aware. He’s not a utopian. He’s not a perfectionist. He doesn’t think that we can usher in, you know, the kingdom of God here on Earth, or that America is, you know, the final consummation of glory there. But he is enough of an optimistic that even amidst these tragic choices, and the hard circumstances of the world, he still believes in the best ideas of America. He still believes in the best ideas of – the best virtues of humanity. And he wants to call our country back to that. And he wants to appeal that to the rest of the world as well.

And that may sound a little bit hokey, but, you know, some of you may recall the 1970s, others you can read about it in history books or watch it on TV, you know, documentaries. It was a lousy decade. Our country lost faith in ourselves. We were really divided. It seemed that the American model had really, you know, just crumbled and failed. Our economy was a mess. Our political system seemed to be a mess. The presidency itself seemed to be broken.

And so for Reagan, one reason why he would make regular appeals to the founding generation, to, you know, quoting the founding fathers, to the World War II generation, which was also very inspiring to him, is he wanted in his very eloquent way – you know, aided by eloquent speechwriters – to appeal to American history not as a source of
nostalgia, but as a source of inspiration and strength for the present and for the future. And I think it’s a caricature to say oh he’s just being nostalgic. He wanted to turn the clock back to the 1950s. No, no. He wanted to appeal to the best of our country’s past.

And that’s why when he’s there at Pointe du Hoc on June 6th, 1984, the 40th anniversary of the D-Day landings, the liberation of Europe, he’s doing it – it’s a World War II tribute speech, but it’s also a Cold War speech, and it’s a warning about the future too. It’s all that at once. And he’s got these powerful lines about – you know, warning about the return to isolationism, and saying, you know, we are over here to fight because we have learned through two hard wars already in our century that retreating behind our – the security of our own shores is a false security. And we are here with our allies.

And of course, he’s doing this with the Ranger veterans sitting right there in front of him, as you’re sitting in front of us here, paying tribute to them. And so one of the ways it’s such a remarkable speech is that it draws together all those threads of our past, the present, and an appeal for the future. And so much so, since you mentioned Bill Galston, that, you know, a few weeks before this speech the Democrats had nominated Walter Mondale as their nominee for president to challenge Reagan in the fall of 1984 campaign. And they’re very different politically. Reagan, the conservative Republican, Mondale the liberal Democrat.

But Bill Galston, you know, obviously a great thinker and still a tremendous policymaker, was a young staffer on the Mondale campaign. And the Mondale campaign staff with Galston were watching the Reagan speech live on TV at their office in Boston. And they all started crying, they were so overcome with it. And that’s when Galston was going, all right, we can’t beat this guy. Because, you know, even we, on the staff of the campaign trying to defeat him, are so overcoming by him. But that’s kind of Reagan at his best, right, really appealing not just to conservative Republicans, but to unite the whole country.

Well, we’ve covered a lot, Will. This is fantastic. I just want to – one more quick lightning round here is you close the book with Reagan’s final speech. And you started to allude to his kind of warning to the future. Tell us what he warned about in his final speech.

Yeah. So Reagan’s final foreign policy speech in public life, and some of his final words in public life, come in December of 1992. So he’s about four years removed from the presidency. The Soviet Union has collapsed. The Iron Curtain has come down. The Berlin Wall has been torn down. You know, it’s the beginning of the golden era of the
American unilateral – unipolar moment, as Hal Brands has called it. And now ex-President Reagan is invited by the Oxford Union at Oxford University in England to come over and address the Oxford Union.

And he gives this really interesting speech kind of surveying the global landscape. It is not at all a victory dance in the Cold War. I mean, he’s happy that the Cold War is over. He’s happy that freedom seems to have prevailed. But it’s almost more mournful. And he worries about growing isolationism among the American people. He worries about the West becoming complacent and losing confidence. He worries about growing ethnic conflict and genocide in the Balkans – which, you know, just gets worse and worse. And so the speech is almost more of a series of warning and admonitions than it is, like I said, a triumphant victory dance.

And this also is another part where I get the title of the book, because these are – his final words of the speech, which are his final words on foreign policy and public life, is “the work of freedom is never done and the task of the peacemaker is never complete.” So those were his final words to us, and I thought that was a fitting final words for the book too.

Dr. Karako: Well, thank you, Will. This has been a tour du force. And thanks for contributing to the memory with this – with this book. And not just for nostalgia, as you say, but for practical purposes. So really appreciate you coming out.

Dr. Inboden: Well, thank you. And great to be with all of you today. Thanks. (Applause.)

(END)