

Anthony Comegna ([00:25](#)):

Listeners, what presidents have we had over the last, say, 50 years or so since Nixon? There was, let's see, Obama. People seem to be remembering his years as a decidedly mixed term, well, with all the deportations and drone wars and other general policy disasters and all, but at least he was so much classier than Trump and smarter than George W. Bush. We know the problems with Clinton and with H.W. Bush who started this whole forever war thing in the first place. Then jumping back a bit, people like Carter after he was president, well, we kind of liked him then, but as president, we remember him as a sort of feckless and useless leader, kind of like Ford, as a matter of fact. Only Ronald Reagan really retains this demigod-like status reserved for former presidents, and that administration's cloud of mythology really needs to be dispelled. So we take you now of a recording from one of our other programs, an in-house lecture series we call Speak for a Sandwich and historian Marcus Witcher discussing his new book, *Getting Right with Reagan*.

Marcus Witcher ([01:33](#)):

Thanks so much for the opportunity. I'm really, really excited to be here. As I was telling Josh earlier, a lot of the funding for the research for this book came from IHS. I received a fellowship from IHS for, I think, four years while I was in graduate school. I have also received Liberty Fund funding in order to go and do archival research for both this and my future projects which I'm currently working on and writing. So IHS has played a tremendous role in my intellectual developments, played a tremendous role in enabling me to have the resources to actually go to the archives. Simi Valley's a long ways away from the University of Alabama, so to have the resources to go to the archives and actually dig up the research, etc. So I want to give you guys a huge thank you because what you all do really does make a difference in people's lives like me, so thank you so much whether you work in programming or whether you work in resources for academics, it really, really does make a difference.

Marcus Witcher ([02:30](#)):

Today, I'm here to talk about my forthcoming book, *Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism*. The title of the book was actually put forward by a member of my committee. He was like, "There's this book back in the day called *Getting Right with Lincoln* that talked about Lincoln and who he was." He goes, "Your book is about who the true Reagan was, so why not call it *Getting Right with Reagan*?" That's largely what the book attempts to do is it attempts to understand how conservatives viewed Reagan during the 1980s.

Marcus Witcher ([03:05](#)):

Surprisingly, they were actually quite upset and frustrated with the Reagan administration for not getting more done. By the end of Reagan's two terms, people like Richard Viguerie, New Right activists are talking about the failure of the Reagan revolution. There's a real discontent within the conservative ranks when George H.W. Bush becomes president. The belief is is that they had this golden opportunity and they really failed. They really had failed to enact any meaningful change. Now, that was a really pessimistic view. There were some conservatives who obviously were like, "No, we fundamentally changed the tax code." Although they probably didn't give President Carter any credit, "We continued the trend of deregulation, etc." So not everybody was down in the dumps, but I was really surprised as I went back through the archival record to find so many conservatives writing in places like *Conservative Digest*, writing even in places like *National Review*, *Public Interest*, elsewhere. Conservatives from all spectrums, the New Right, the social conservatives, neoconservatives, and your more traditional Buckley types, all of them were upset at one point or another with the Reagan administration.

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Marcus Witcher ([04:12](#)):

So what I'm going to tackle today for you guys, the topic is Reagan, Conservatives, and the End of the Cold War. Maybe the largest myth that's emerged over the course of the last 25 to 30 years, really since 1995, 1996 or so, is this idea that Ronald Reagan won the Cold War by standing, holding fast righteous conservatives principles, not moderating, and because he took this very hard line with the Soviet Union, that's why the Cold War ultimately came to an end. That has become a conservative orthodoxy is that Reagan was successful because he never deviated from his conservatives principles, and if we want to be successful in the future, we need to go back to our principles. Now, I have nothing against being principled, I have nothing against those things, but the reality is is that many, many conservatives during the 1980s were actually quite frustrated, angry at President Reagan's foreign policy specifically in regards to the Soviet Union.

Marcus Witcher ([05:12](#)):

So that's what I'm going to show you today is how conservatives felt during the '80s. Then we'll talk about what they said around the time of the INF Treaty. We'll talk about what led to the end of Cold War. And we'll talk about how Reagan wanted to remember his own foreign policy legacy in regards to the Cold War, and we'll compare that and juxtapose that with what conservatives today think.

Marcus Witcher ([05:35](#)):

You all may have seen T-shirt, What Would Reagan Do? T-shirts, WWRD. Ann Coulter, I think in 2005 or so, they had the WWRD bracelets, a substitute for Christians have What Would Jesus do? She said, "Well, for Republicans, it's what would Reagan do? All the candidates have to ask themselves in 2008 is WWRD: What would Reagan do?" So this mythology is deeply ingrained or was deeply ingrained within the conservative movement and within the Republican ethos. I wonder what they would think if they were to grapple with the ideas in the book.

Marcus Witcher ([06:14](#)):

I really love this quote. I wish that I had come up with it, but Matt Purple, in the *The Churchill We Misremember*, says, quote, "Historical memory is like a great compactor, questioning nuances and flattening wrinkles until a person or event is made a perfect morsel for popular consumption." WWRD: What would Reagan do? By 2005, Reagan had become simplified, flattened, if you will, principled, and all the nuances and all the variances of his administration, some of them great achievements, have been largely, largely forgotten.

Marcus Witcher ([06:49](#)):

So what does the manuscript do? Well, we don't have to go into this at great length. The manuscript tries to detail, as I've already said, a very tense relationship that existed between President Reagan and conservatives. It also tries to do what I think other historians have not done a great job at doing which is describing the plethora of different ideas that exist on the American right. Oftentimes conservatives are lumped into one big group. That's definitely not the case. We, in this room, know that there are a large variety of types of conservatism. It also questions whether or not the Reagan years were actually a triumph for conservatism. Was that the pinnacle of conservatism?

Marcus Witcher ([07:30](#)):

My next book on Clinton actually argues that the '90s were actually the pinnacle of conservatism and that more conservative legislation and achievements were probably achieved during the Clinton

administration, partially because of the work of Gingrich and the Congress, than were actually accomplished during the 1980s. The third thing is is that it examines the interconnectedness of politics, memory, and myth, building among American conservatism is this evolution of Reagan's legacy, etc. So that's what the manuscript does. We don't have to focus on this whole lot. We can come back to this in Q&A if anybody has any questions about evidentiary base. These are some of the archives that I visited, mainly the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, the Hoover Institution archives, etc., the FEE archives.

Marcus Witcher ([08:13](#)):

What do other historians say about the end of the Cold War? There are really four schools of thought. The most popular among historians is that Gorbachev deserves pretty much all the credit, most of the credit for the end of the Cold War. His policies of glasnost and perestroika undermined the Communist Party, and by undermining the Communist Party, it tore apart basically the one thing that was holding this together, the threat of force and coercion by the Communist Party. So that's the predominant school in the Historiography.

Marcus Witcher ([08:44](#)):

There's another school of largely leftist historians who argue that Reagan actually prolonged the Cold War. Because of his militant rhetoric, the Soviets were ready to basically bring about an easing of tensions, but Reagan prolonged it because he made aggressive actions against the Soviets. If only he had been maybe more like Jimmy Carter or something, the Cold War would have ended sooner. Reagan definitely did say some things that extended the Cold War, but I'm going to make an argument that that's not tenable.

Marcus Witcher ([09:14](#)):

There's the Reagan victory school which is the opposite of the last school we just mentioned. There's some very good academics in this school who argue that Ronald Reagan deserves the credit for the end of the Cold War. It was his policies, his economic policies, his ramping up of military spending, SDI, etc., that forced the Soviets to come to the negotiating table because they couldn't afford to keep up with US military spending. Once again, I don't think that school's correct. I think there's some merit to some of the things that school says but not entirely correct.

Marcus Witcher ([09:47](#)):

The fourth school of thought, I think, this is where I fit in, is that Reagan and Gorbachev worked together to set the foundation for the end of the Cold War. This narrative gives credit to people like George H.W. Bush who actually oversaw the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Whereas other schools, George H.W. Bush is seemingly not important at all. Either Reagan was successful in doing it, or Gorbachev had set things in motion to such an extent that it doesn't really matter what the Bush administration did from 1989 to 1992.

Marcus Witcher ([10:23](#)):

Let's go ahead and jump into it. I want to give you just a little bit of backstory. We don't have the time to go into all the different wrinkles, all the different pieces of foreign policy where conservatives were upset with Reagan. But here are just a couple of examples to give you a sense that it wasn't just Cold War issues that they were upset about. They were upset about the sale of advanced airborne warning systems and control systems to Saudi Arabia. The argument was that this undermined Israel's security. Terry Dolan specifically wrote in the press at great lengths about how this was undermining Israel.

Reagan actually had a showdown with the Israeli prime minister where he basically said that the president gets to make foreign policy for the US not foreign leaders. I could just imagine a Democrat saying that today. They'd be torn apart by the Israel lobby, condemned for being anti-Israel. Reagan was attacked on those merits by people like Irving Kristol, Norm Podhoretz, and others.

Marcus Witcher ([11:24](#)):

Taiwan, Reagan accepted China's nine-point plan for Taiwan, which including reduced weapon sales from the US, once again, very much upsetting American conservatives who were dedicated to maintaining Taiwan's independence and security. Conservatives were also very, very hostile to Reagan because of what they perceived as his lack of public response to basically the crack down in Poland in 1981. We now know that... There's a new book that just came out that shows that the CIA was engaged in a lot of covert operations in Poland and helped Solidarity to a large extent. But conservatives at the time didn't know that, and so people like Norm Podhoretz and others, they voiced their concerns and their frustrations with Reagan for not doing more in media.

Marcus Witcher ([12:12](#)):

Conservatives also in 1981, 1982 really wanted a much more aggressive foreign policy towards the Soviets including an embargo on technology and grain shipments to the country. Reagan had sort of mocked Jimmy Carter for his embargo of grain to the Soviet Union, but when he got into power, he was torn about whether he had American business interests versus humanitarian concerns when it came to the Soviets. Oftentimes Reagan fell on the side of American industry and not on the side, at least initially, of what they might call those moral aspects. I'll show you a cartoon here in a little bit where conservatives mock him using cartoons.

Marcus Witcher ([12:56](#)):

This all prompted Norm Podhoretz in 1982 to write an extended column. It's very long. It's a great source. It's like, I don't know, seven or eight pages. It's called *The Neo-Conservative Anguish Over Reagan's Foreign Policy*. In this, he systematically dismantles the idea that Ronald Reagan had had any achievements in the foreign policy arena in his first two years in office. Podhoretz complains that Reagan had been almost completely focused on the economy, which Reagan himself would acknowledge that he had been largely focused on the economy, after all thinking about, if you will, the successes of the tax cuts and whatnot. But Podhoretz insisted that the Reagan administration had not outlined a clear vision for how they wanted to wage the Cold War. The result, according to Podhoretz, "was a vacuum into which have come pouring all the old ideas and policy against which Ronald Reagan himself has stood so many years." Podhoretz continues specifically talking about the Soviet Union to say that Reagan had actually even followed "a strategy of helping the Soviet Union stabilize its empire rather than a strategy aimed at encouraging the break up of that empire from within."

Marcus Witcher ([14:07](#)):

His criticism was so piercing that Reagan actually picked up the telephone and called him, and they had an extended conversation. Podhoretz details this in his memoirs, where they went through it, and Reagan talked to him about his strategy. Podhoretz was like, "No, that still sounds like détente to me." Reagan tried to convince him again, and Podhoretz is like, "Okay, Mr. President. All right, thank you for the phone call." In his memoirs he says, "It was détente." He was following a détente. Maybe a better form of détente than Jimmy Carter had followed but to Podhoretz it was still some measure of détente with the Soviet Union.

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Marcus Witcher ([14:47](#)):

Probably one of the most piercing critiques of Reagan, though, came shortly after that in July of 1982 when *Conservative Digest* published an entire issue, an entire issue dedicated to whether or not Ronald Reagan had deserted conservatives, *Where's the Best of Me?* a play on *Where's the Rest of Me?* from *Bedtime for Bonzo*, I believe, where Reagan's sort of fading out. He starts in very pure, clear colors, principled and then seemingly fades out. *Has Reagan Deserted the Conservatives?* was the title of *Conservative Digest*.

Marcus Witcher ([15:25](#)):

You could say *Conservative Digest* is a publication put together by the New Right. The New Right throughout the 1980s is going to be extraordinarily critical of Reagan because he's not going to do much on school prayer. He's not going to do much on abortion. He's going to appoint pro-life judges. But he's not going to use his political capital on social issues. That's the choice that the administration made. They're going to focus on foreign policy and economic policy. So social conservatives throughout the administration, throughout the years were always mad. So the New Right is always the most vocal critics, so you might just say it's just them. But, no, Richard Viguerie, who's the publisher, reached out to conservatives from all over the spectrum, so we have conservatives from every walk within the conservative movement, neoconservatives, traditional conservatives, Libertarians, and of course New Right critics in this source. I still don't own this. I'm still looking, so if anybody ever finds this on eBay or something, let me know. I'll pay you a finder's fee to purchase it and send it to me. I really want this. I found it in the archives. What can you do?

Marcus Witcher ([16:32](#)):

So what do they say? What are some examples of what they had to say in this 1982 critique? Well, General Daniel Graham, the chairman of the Coalition for Peace through Strength, asserted that, quote, "There's very little difference between Reagan's policy and Carter's policy." This is in regards to foreign policy. Joseph Churba, a former analysis of Reagan's Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, lamented, "We have no strategy for the Soviet threat." Albion Knight, I love this quote, "I'm not disappointed, I'm disgusted," and he gave Reagan a two out of 10 on foreign policy. Midge Decter, who I believe is still at Heritage, although she may be emeritus, said that Reagan was pursuing the same old policy of détente. She concluded that if Reagan were not in office now, he'd be leading the opposition. He'd be leading the opposition to these policies.

Marcus Witcher ([17:26](#)):

They also had in the issue cartoons like the one over here on the right of Reagan talking with Brezhnev. Reagan's basically scolding Brezhnev. It's very poor resolution. I apologize. I didn't realize when I took the photograph in the archives that I would try to use it on a slide. He's basically criticizing Brezhnev. If you look really close, he's finally like, "Well, what did you want to talk about?" Brezhnev's like, "I'd like to purchase some grain." Reagan's like, "How much?" So it's like this idea that Reagan is all talk and no actual substance when it comes to policy. Then when push comes to shove, he's going to basically fall on the side of promoting American economic growth and rehabilitation and recovery rather than the moral high ground, if you will, which would be maybe taking a tougher stance with the Soviets on technology and grain.

Marcus Witcher ([18:20](#)):

I hope at this point you're a little surprised that conservatives were actually frustrated with Reagan on the way he was handling the Cold War. Now, that Conservative Digest issue also had major criticisms of Reagan for increasing taxes in 1982, major criticisms for not getting a balanced budget amendment through Congress, and of course massive criticisms on the social front for not doing more for school prayer and also on the abortion issue. So that volume literally, if you just wanted to take the whole book and the argument distilled into one source, this source has it all. But let's get back on track here.

Marcus Witcher ([18:56](#)):

So the Reagan paradox, when I teach Ronald Reagan to my students, a lot of times I try to get to get across the idea that Reagan was both an adamant anti-communist, which everybody knew at the time. Everyone at the time knew that Ronald Reagan was an anti-communist. From his time in Hollywood dealing with communists in Hollywood to his reading of Whittaker Chambers witness, to being a spokesman of General Electric, Reagan was an adamant anti-communist. He probably had the best anti-communist credentials in the country, which makes it even more astounding at the criticisms that are going to come later on in this lecture.

Marcus Witcher ([19:33](#)):

But the thing that people didn't actually know about Reagan, but they should have because he said it over and over again throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was that Ronald Reagan was a nuclear abolitionist. He believed in the eradication of nuclear weapons. He thought they were dangerous. He didn't think any civilization should have this, and he would love to see the day when they were completely eradicated. The problem is is that Reagan's anti-communist rhetoric was heard, and Reagan's nuclear abolitionist rhetoric often was mentioned and then disappeared. Conservatives whisper about it behind the scenes like, "Did you hear what he said?" "Oh, he doesn't really mean that, right? He doesn't really mean that." So there's this sort of paradox. No one's going to actually remember or give Reagan a whole lot of credit for the nuclear abolitionist part of his thought.

Marcus Witcher ([20:30](#)):

Reagan for the first two years, as I've already shown you, really is focused on the economy. He's focused on economic recovery. That's his primary concern. There are some foreign policy initiatives. But 1983 is the year that Reagan really becomes more assertive, and it's the year that conservatives really, really praise Reagan for what he's doing. I've got a couple of examples up here, the announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative, SDI, in 1983, obviously pleases conservatives. Reagan, though, saw SDI not as a activist measure against the Soviet Union but a defensive measure. That if we had SDI technology, if we had a missile shield where we could shoot down potentially incoming Soviet missiles, it would make nuclear weapons irrelevant, that we wouldn't need to have nuclear weapons. So SDI from Reagan's view was actually part of his strategy to get to a world where we wouldn't have to have nuclear weapons.

Marcus Witcher ([21:26](#)):

The Soviet Union didn't see it that way. The Soviet Union was convinced that Reagan wanted to launch a preemptive strike on the Soviet Union, that he was willing to do that. The KGB put into place Operation RYAN early on in the 1980s right after Reagan comes in to office, which is basically, "If you hear anything about this, be looking because we think it's a possibility. As a matter of fact, we think it's a likelihood that this president is not like Richard Nixon," who would go out and say terrible things about communists and then would work with them, the founder of détente with Kissinger. They said, "He's not like that. He actually means the crazy stuff that he says." So the Soviets are extraordinarily afraid that

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SDI is just part of Reagan's ploy to make it to where the United States could launch a preemptive strike on the Soviet Union, so it's an extraordinarily destabilizing policy at least from the Soviets' point of view and in terms of super power relations.

Marcus Witcher ([22:24](#)):

Reagan also decides to go ahead and keep a promise that he made which was to deploy Pershing missiles to Western Europe in response to the Soviets having SS-20s posted in Eastern Europe. This is something that Carter had agreed to. Reagan came in to office, said, "I will do the same thing." This ultimately in 1983 leads to negotiations breaking down in Geneva over nuclear arms. The Soviets walk away from the table. Reagan and Secretary Shultz say they'll be back, but nonetheless, they walked away.

Marcus Witcher ([22:57](#)):

Reagan also escalates his rhetoric, of course, the Evil Empire speech given at the 41st annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals where Reagan really paints the Cold War in the starkest of terms, the starkest of ideological terms, the battle between good and evil and implores social conservatives to not sit on the fence and to not embrace the nuclear freeze movement but rather to basically recognize this is a conflict between two fundamentally different societies, one espousing Western liberal values, and the other who, of course, oversaw the gulag.

Marcus Witcher ([23:40](#)):

All of this contributes to 1983 being the year of fear, the year of fear. To the Soviets, as I've already said, SDI represents a break. It represents a real danger, the threat of mutually assured destruction, MAD, which had kept the world from potentially using nuclear weapons is now threatened by the idea that the United States might be able to get this technology which would allow a preemptive strike. Also flight KAL007 is shot down from the United States to Korea. It's a Korean airliner. 269 passengers die including 63 Americans. It's shot down by the Soviets. It had strayed into Soviet air space. The Soviets monitored it for two hours, and then shot it down. 269 people are killed. I think what troubled Reagan the most was the fact that they had had two hours to contact the Americans, and the Americans were never contacted. Americans learned about... He learns about it the next day.

Marcus Witcher ([24:46](#)):

Then the third thing that happens in 1983 is that the United States and its NATO allies conduct military exercises known as Able Archer which simulated the use of nuclear weapons and tested for processes. The Soviets pick up on Able Archer when it happens. The KGB, we had a double agent in London at the time, Oleg and I forget his last name, they pick on Operation RYAN, or excuse me, on Able Archer. They know it's happening, but it looks really real. It looks damn real. It was actually designed to have Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan all involved in this sort of war games. That was finally called off because they're like, "Well, maybe the Soviets might interpret that badly." Yeah, they would have. They would have freaked out more so than they already did. If you read his book, Oleg's book, The KGB, he talks about how the Soviets were on Code Red. They were at that level. They believed this was it. We came very close. They were ready to intercept. Ultimately, it passes without anything major happening, but all these things lead to an escalation and tensions in the Cold War between the two super powers.

Marcus Witcher ([26:02](#)):

Why I'm telling you about all these things because I know it sounds really like, "Man, the historian, he really got going, and now he's really deep into the '80s." I'm telling you all these things because all these things contributed to how Ronald Reagan is going to change his policy in 1984. He's going to shift. He's going to realize this. One of the things that conservatives take away from Reagan when they say that Ronald Reagan had these conservative principles, and he already stuck to them, and he never flinched is they rob him of what is probably his greatest strength: his ability to evolve, his ability to take in new data, to process it, and then to address the world as it is not as he would have it be. That's an ability that Lincoln demonstrated during the Civil War as well. I think it's called statesmanship.

Marcus Witcher ([26:50](#)):

Another thing that tremendously affected Reagan, I almost used the word impact, and that would have been a tragedy, but another thing that really affected Reagan negatively or maybe positively is that he watched ABC's *The Day After*. I don't want to pick on people, did you by any chance watch *The Day After* when it came out?

Speaker 3 ([27:10](#)):

[crosstalk 00:27:10].

Marcus Witcher ([27:11](#)):

Sorry, I'm getting myself in trouble. This was a big thing. When ABC's *The Day After* came out, Americans, they went in front of their TVs, families watched. It was pretty graphic and pretty intense as well. Well, ABC actually send President Reagan a copy of the film before it was released so that he could watch it at Camp David, and he did just that. Film had an effect on Reagan that policy briefings never would, and that's partially because of his background in Hollywood. It's the way he processed information. That's not a knock on President Reagan. That's just the way he processed information. So after he watched the film, he recorded in his diary that it had left him greatly depressed and that he was aware of the need for the world to step back from the nuclear precipice. He also shortly after this finally asked to be briefed the nation's nuclear war plan. He had avoided a full, full detailed down briefing. When he gets it, he defines it as the most sobering experience and in his memoirs said, "In several ways the sequence of events described in the briefings paralleled what was shown in the ABC movie."

Marcus Witcher ([28:21](#)):

So the KAL crash where the Soviets didn't reach out to the United States made Reagan think. He asked Secretary Shultz, he asked others, "Why didn't they talk to us? What if this was something bigger? What if it wasn't just 269 people?" Just, right? "What if it wasn't just almost 300 lives that were lost? What if it was a nuclear issue, was a nuclear issue? Well, it could happen. What's going on with the lack of communication between our countries that they can't pick up the phone or they can't go back channel and get in touch with us within two hours?"

Marcus Witcher ([28:50](#)):

Likewise, news come from Britain; news comes from London. They send across Oleg's report. They send it across the Atlantic to the White House, and Reagan gets to read about how the KGB interpreted Able Archer. He's like, "They couldn't possibly actually think that we would preemptively strike them, could they? We're a civilized nation. There's no way we would ever do that. They can't believe that." But they did. And Reagan started to get a sense of the effect that language and words had upon the Soviets and

the KGB. The effect that the things that he said could potentially have upon civilization, the existence of civilization.

Marcus Witcher ([29:35](#)):

So the day after Able Archer ended, Reagan makes his first public appeal for the total elimination of nuclear armaments. He says, quote, "I believe there can be only one policy for preserving our precious civilization in this modern age. A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought. I know I speak for people everywhere when I say our dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the Earth." Then in January he sits down with Secretary of State Shultz, and they draft a new foreign policy.

Marcus Witcher ([30:10](#)):

Now, Reagan had said some of things at times in campaign talks, in speeches, in other things like that, but in January of 1984 they really start to solidify it into a policy, and they decide to shift their public tone. Every once in a while Reagan will deviate from this. If you're thinking about "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," every once in a while Reagan will deviate from this, and he'll be praised by conservatives when he does, but for the most part their goal after January of 1984 is to establish better working relationships with the Soviets marked by better cooperation and understanding. I think it's really important to note that this shift in the Reagan administration took place a full 15 months before Secretary Gorbachev comes in to power. Reagan is ready to begin really working with the Soviets on arm reductions. As he would say, "I was ready. They just kept dying on me." Andropov will die, I believe, in early 1984, and Chernenko will die very quickly after taking office as well. Then we will eventually 15 months later, a little bit later get Gorbachev.

Marcus Witcher ([31:20](#)):

I don't have a whole time to go into these things. I'm going to assume you guys know a little bit about the Geneva Summit and the Reykjavík Summit. But Reagan and Gorbachev at the request of Thatcher, Thatcher actually reaches out to Reagan and says, "This is someone we can work with. This is a new type of Soviet leader." Gorbachev was the only leader of the Soviet Union born after the October Revolution. He represented a new generation, and he does bring new ideas in some ways similar to what Andropov had wanted to do when he took office but was unable to do because of his age and some other constraints.

Marcus Witcher ([31:54](#)):

Gorbachev faces a dire, dire situation within the Soviet Union. Alcoholism is rampant. Financially, there are major problems from the war in Afghanistan. They're overextended. Domestically, they need more consumer goods. It's always a problem. The only way to achieve these things is to try and ratchet down the Cold War conflict. So Gorbachev is pushed to negotiate with Reagan in a sense because he's got some real serious domestic concerns. He's promising reforms, and if he's going to achieve reforms, he's going to have to have a cooling of tensions with the United States.

Marcus Witcher ([32:34](#)):

So Gorbachev and Reagan decide to meet. They first meet at Geneva November 19th and 20th, 1985. Reagan at Geneva talks about he liked to see a future where there are no nuclear weapons. Gorbachev sort of, "Okay, that's nice. That's really idealistic." But they get along really well. They're shuffled in to a separate room as you see here. This photograph is probably staged. But nonetheless, they're sat down.

They have what is described by both of them to a very frank but a very positive conversation in terms of building trust between one another, trust between one another, a belief that they could potentially work together. They start to build this relationship. Reagan always said that the reason why they had nuclear weapons was because they didn't trust one another. That was the major reason. If we could only establish the trust, then maybe we could address the arm issues after that.

Marcus Witcher ([33:31](#)):

So the Geneva Summit breaks up without there being a whole lot done concretely, but they agree to meet again at Reykjavík. Conservatives are losing their minds after Geneva. They're extremely concerned because this doesn't look good. The president was just reelected in 1984, and they had hoped that 1984, a Reagan without the obligation of having to go back before the voters would mean a stronger Reagan, a more aggressive and assertive Reagan, not a Reagan willing to sit down with the Soviets and potentially give away SDI in negotiations, which is their great fear. They're not sure what's going on with Reagan. Why is he negotiating with the man who's the head of the evil empire? This obviously doesn't speak for everyone within the conservative movement, but there were many who had concerns including Jack Kemp, Richard Viguerie, Howard Phillips and others.

Marcus Witcher ([34:26](#)):

They are so concerned that they sit down with President Reagan before the Reykjavík Summit, and they're like, "Listen, you're not going to give away SDI, are you?" Reagan says, "Well, no. I'm not going to compromise away, I'm not going to give away SDI. I might offer it to the Soviets as well," which Reagan will continually do. He'll tell Gorbachev like, "You're concerned about SDI. You don't need to be concerned about SDI. I'll give you the technology for SDI. We can share the technology." Because Reagan's goal is not to launch a preemptive strike. It's to ultimately get rid of the weapons altogether. But Reagan starts that meeting with conservatives by basically telling them that Gorbachev is indeed a different type of Soviet leader. To which some conservatives in the room laugh, sort of an indignant response to Reagan believing that he truly was different than others.

Marcus Witcher ([35:18](#)):

When Reagan goes to Reykjavík October 11th, 12th, 1986, he famously walks away from the table. Gorbachev and Reagan almost came very, very close to making a comprehensive deal on intermediate and ballistic missiles. They almost did it, but at the end of the day Gorbachev once again put out there that Reagan would have to keep SDI in the laboratory for 10 years. That would be condition for the agreement, that he promise that SDI be confined to the laboratory for 10 years, which honestly wasn't that bad of a request. Most people in the Pentagon would have told you if you had asked them that it was probably going to be 10 years before SDI was going to be ready to be out of the laboratory anyways. But Reagan who is really the one, maybe not the only, but the predominant believer in SDI says, "No. There will be no condition like that," and he walks away from the table. You can look at his face. He's extremely pissed at Gorbachev that he threw this condition on him right at the end of the conference.

Marcus Witcher ([36:26](#)):

So conservatives celebrate. They're like, "Yes! No deal was done. We preserved SDI. The evil empire's still the evil empire." But negotiations continue behind the scenes. Their teams continue to negotiate. What that ultimately comes to, the fulfillment of the talks that have taken place at Geneva and at Reykjavík is ultimately, of course, the INF treaty which is signed at the Washington Summit. This is

where we can get back to some of the nice juicy quotes from conservatives being outraged at President Reagan.

Marcus Witcher ([37:02](#)):

William F. Buckley and the editors at the National Review were so upset with the INF Treaty that they dedicated an entire issue of National Review and titled it Reagan's Suicide Pact, Reagan's Suicide Pact. It featured Jack Kemp, Henry Kissinger, and Richard Nixon who wrote their first column together since Watergate. They thought this was so important that they should come together and write a criticism of President Reagan for what he was trying to do. Their criticisms largely took three forms, and this is going to sound very familiar. The treaty was not verifiable. It left the Soviets with significant advantages in conventional weapons, which it did. And they questioned if the treaty was motivated by domestic political concerns.

Marcus Witcher ([37:53](#)):

Does anybody know what domestic political concerns might be at play here? Okay. That's right. Iran–Contra had broken. I think about a year or so before, late 1986, I wasn't [inaudible 00:38:11], anyways. Around that time it had broken. Reagan's under pressure. We have all sorts of investigations into this. Reagan for the first time in his administration, the public doesn't trust him. The public had always trusted Ronald Reagan. Even if everybody else thought he was wrong, he could poll, not that he relied on polls because he didn't, he's not President Clinton, but he could see, "The people are with me. They trust me." But for the first time, people started to believe that maybe Ronald Reagan wasn't telling the truth. Maybe he had lied to the American people, and that really affected him. So it's possible, conservatives said, that maybe Reagan was being influenced by this hit from Iran–Contra.

Marcus Witcher ([38:55](#)):

Well, let's look at what Nixon and Kissinger had to say. They insisted, quote, "That any Western leader who indulges the Soviets' disingenuous fantasies of a nuclear-free world courts unimaginable perils." They said, "Listen, it's natural for every president to want to leave behind this legacy as a peacemaker, but Reagan needed to remember that however he may be held in today's headlines, the judgment of history would severely condemn a false peace." So the criticisms of Reagan in National Review, they're quite strong, and it's really magnified by the fact that Buckley and him had been so close for so long. Like, Buckley literally picks up the phone and calls him and says, "Hey, I'm sending you over an advanced copy of this magazine. Read it and then be in touch with me. I'm sorry, but we're printing this." They have a phone conversation about it where they just basically fundamentally disagree about whether or not the Soviets will actually adhere to the agreement.

Marcus Witcher ([40:01](#)):

My favorite source, my absolute favorite source in the entire book is this one right here. The New Right, led in this instance by Howard Phillips, took out a full-page ad in many, many... I don't know the exact number, but I think it's in the hundreds of conservative papers across the country, and it said this, "Appeasement is as unwise in 1988 as it was in 1938," and they put a picture of Neville Chamberlain up there on the left and right underneath and a picture of Ronald Reagan, and on the right they have a picture of Adolf Hitler and a picture of Mikhail Gorbachev. "Help us defeat the Reagan-Gorbachev INF Treaty." I don't know how much you all hang out with conservatives, but if you get compared to Neville Chamberlain, that is as bad as it gets. It doesn't get any worse than that, being called Chamberlain, being

accused, as Jack Kemp will accuse Ronald Reagan on the next slide, of basically indulging or creating a nuclear Munich with the INF Treaty. So Howard Phillips prints this. It goes out in about 100 or so papers.

Marcus Witcher ([41:17](#)):

So what happened with the INF Treaty? If you know your history, you know the INF Treaty passed. It passed overwhelmingly. Most conservatives in the Senate supported it. But Senate conservatives, they did propose hold-back amendments and modifications in attempt to torpedo the treaty. With the exception of Vice President Bush, who was loyal, every GOP presidential hopeful opposed the INF Treaty. Jack Kemp, in a speech at the Heritage Foundation, labeled it a nuclear Munich and insisted that his Senate colleagues vote against it. Now, I do think to a certain extent there's some strategy going on here by the Senate conservatives. Ultimately, this is probably already going to happen, but they really want to make Reagan aware that future deals will face criticism. He's already given away what amounts to 5% of our nuclear weapons. We need to really hit him as hard as we can so that he recognizes there will be pushback if he wants future deals, so there is some strategy, if you will, going on here.

Marcus Witcher ([42:21](#)):

How did the New Right respond to the INF Treaty? Well, I've already given you Howard Phillips's full-page ad in the Washington Times. How much worse could it get? Well, Howard Phillips once again exclaimed that Ronald Reagan is a very weak man with a strong wife and a strong staff and added that Reagan was a useful idiot for Soviet propaganda. He even then went on NPR and repeated it. When he was pressed, he was like, "No, that's exactly what I meant. He's a useful idiot for Soviet propaganda." Richard Viguerie, another New Right activist, asserted that Reagan is, quote, "Now aligned with his former adversaries, the liberals, the Democrats, the Soviets. We feel alienated, abandoned, and rejected by the president." Viguerie called Reagan an apologist for Mikhail Gorbachev and exclaimed that the INF Treaty represented a splitting of the blanket. Conservatives will file for divorce and never reconcile again. Paul Weyrich, another member of the New Right, labeled Reagan as a weakened president, weakened in spirit as well as clout and not in a position to make judgments about Gorbachev.

Marcus Witcher ([43:31](#)):

So what actually happened? Well, Reagan and Gorbachev do ultimately sign the INF Treaty at the Washington Summit. It's actually probably the biggest achievement of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy career, I would say. It's the monumental achievement, the destruction of 2,692 weapons, 846 American, some 1,846 Soviet weapons. About 5% of their overall arsenals are destroyed. It's his principle foreign policy achievement. He had others. I'm not saying he didn't have other foreign policy achievements, but when you teach this to a survey class, you're hitting this. This is something you're talking about. To get this agreement, though, Reagan had to actually ignore conservatives and not just the far-right folks. No, he had to ignore large swaths of the conservative movement in order to get this agreement. Gorbachev, Shultz, Reagan, all in their memoirs said that the INF Treaty and the relationship that Reagan established with Gorbachev set the foundation for a peaceful end to the Cold War. That this is what set the foundation that President Bush would build off of and that would give Gorbachev the wiggle room back home to make modifications to the Soviet system so that things could ultimately change.

Marcus Witcher ([44:56](#)):

This presentation wouldn't be complete without a disastrously wrong quote from George Will, so we have to include it. Writing in Newsweek near the end of Reagan's second term, Will lamented how widely wrong Reagan was about what was happening in Moscow. "Reagan has accelerated the moral

disarmament of the West," Will said. "Actual disarmament will follow by elevating wishful thinking to the status of political philosophy." The money quote, though, is this. He exclaimed that "December 8th, the day that the INF Treaty was signed, will be remembered as the day that that Cold War was lost." Thank you for that, George Will. A beautiful source if you're me. It's like, "Oh my goodness," the day that the Cold War was lost.

Marcus Witcher ([45:45](#)):

So when the 1988 election comes up, when Reagan's term is ending, conservatives are actually quite reflective about what was accomplished. When they look back, they got tax cuts in 1981. They got tax reform in 1986. There were other achievements along the way. But in terms of fundamentally changing the nation in the same way that FDR changed the nation, which was the goal of the conservative movement, many of them actually feel that they failed, which I sort of led with at the beginning of the talk.

Marcus Witcher ([46:18](#)):

Now the question that I have for you guys is, how did we go from what I've shown you, and there are lots more great examples in the book, which is available for pre-order on Amazon, but how do we go from the stuff that I've shown you, the comments that I've showed you from major conservative leaders who represented, by the way, all of the grassroots organizations, how do we go from that to what we have today? How did that process happen? Well, I don't know if I have time to explain that entire process. Once again, you're going to have to read the book to find out how the conservatives recreate the Reagan legacy. How do they reimagine Reagan or resurrect Reagan to be something different than what he actually was?

Marcus Witcher ([47:04](#)):

But what I want to talk to you about now is Reagan envisioned his own foreign policy legacy. What did he think his own legacy was in regards to the Cold War? Ronald Reagan never claimed to have won the Cold War, never claimed to have won it. Now, maybe he was just being humble. Maybe he was just being humble. That's possible. When he did discuss the fall of the Berlin Wall, which happened, of course, a year or so after he left office, it happened after he left office, Reagan didn't say, "Well, it was my policies. I spent the Soviets into bankruptcy, and that's what caused the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall." No, Reagan said, "It was the brave men and women on both sides of the Iron Curtain who devoted their lives and sometimes sacrificed them so that we might inhabit a world without barriers." It's also a wonderful, wonderful speech, The Brotherhood of Man speech, if you want to talk about Reagan's view on walls and free movements of peoples. Just throwing it out there.

Marcus Witcher ([48:03](#)):

Reagan also in this speech gave credit to Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, and Mikhail Gorbachev for their roles in ending the Cold War. While Reagan was not sure if Gorbachev had listened to him when he called for the Berlin Wall to be torn down, "Neither he nor the rulers of Eastern Europe could ignore the much louder chants of demonstrators in the streets of Leipzig and Dresden. In the churches and schools and the factories, on the farms, a once silent people found their voice and with it a battering ram to knock down walls, real and imagined." Reagan concluded, "It was because of these people, it was because of them that the political map of Europe has been rewritten." It was because of people longing for individual liberty, longing for political freedom, longing for individual rights who came up. It's also because the Soviets miscommunicated, the East German police miscommunicated about whether they

were going to shoot people when they approached the wall, and they decided not to. If they had shot folks, maybe the wall wouldn't have come down, but another matter. Reagan says, "No, it was the people of Eastern Europe who ultimately broke down these barriers and led to a collapse of the Iron Curtain."

Marcus Witcher ([49:19](#)):

One other thing that I do in the book is I look at the Reagan Library and Museum, and I look at the museum exhibits, and I think about how Reagan wanted to remember himself through the exhibits. We know that Reagan actually set down with the curators and created the text himself. A lot of that text comes from his own writings. Now, it's evolved and changed a little bit since Reagan passed away, ever since Reagan left the political scene in 1994, the diagnosis of Alzheimer's. Nonetheless, I use the museum as a means by which to think about how Reagan wanted to remember himself. The foundation, supposedly, tries to carry on that mission today, to push how Reagan wanted to remember his own foreign policy legacy and his legacy writ large.

Marcus Witcher ([50:08](#)):

As you walk through the foreign policy exhibit, you have a room with all these different things that happened in the world. Then there's a doorway, and as you walk through the doorway, this is what you see. Unfortunately, there's a guy in the way, but this is what you see. You see a statute of Gorbachev and Reagan sitting there talking with one another, and all around the room are the summits and the language on those things, the summits, basically says, it was this relationship that they built that set the foundation for the end of the Cold War. That it was through negotiation, engaging your enemies, the people you disagreed with, and trusting but verifying, the famous "Trust but verify" line, that ultimate led to an end to the Cold War. Interestingly, the Iran–Contra exhibit is right here as you're going through this door. I'm not saying this was purposely placed there, but it's placed in such a location that your eye just might catch the screen and the statute instead of looking over here at the Iran–Contra exhibit. Although the exhibit does acknowledge what happened and I think is quite well done.

Marcus Witcher ([51:23](#)):

How did Reagan want to remember his role in the Cold War? Well, he never claimed to have won the Cold War. Indeed, he consistently gave credit to others, especially the people of Eastern Europe and the people in the Soviet Union who demanded that the Cold War status quo had to come to an end and to ultimately rejected communism. I think this doesn't get mentioned enough by non-conservative scholars. Reagan does deserve a ton of credit for believing and acknowledging the bankruptcy of the communism as a system and for inspiring nationalist movements such as Solidarity in Poland, and now we know supporting them with CIA covert assistance, and for his willingness to go against conservatives, against those in own party and to negotiate, to sit down and engage with his enemies.

Marcus Witcher ([52:11](#)):

Over the course of the 1990s, however, many conservatives began to claim, and this really happens after Dole's dismal defeat in 1996, there's a reimagining that happens where conservatives begin to claim that Reagan won the Cold War single-handedly by confronting the evil empire, by sticking to his principles, and demanding that the wall be torn down and that that's what ultimately led to the end of the Cold War.

Anthony Comegna ([52:42](#)):

Ideas in Progress, Episode 21, Getting Right with Reagan with Marcus Witcher

Our most massive of thanks to Professor Witcher for visiting IHS and sharing his work with us. He'll join us again here on this show soon enough, and we'll pick up the story right where he left off. Till then, be sure to subscribe to the show, drop us a rating and review, and I cannot stress enough how helpful those are, and keep the progress coming.