



For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War

Melvyn P. Leffler

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To the amazement of the public, pundits, and even the policymakers themselves, the ideological and political conflict that had endangered the world for half a century came to an end in 1990. How did that happen? What caused the cold war in the first place, and why did it last as long as it did?

The distinguished historian Melvyn P. Leffler homes in on four crucial episodes when American and Soviet leaders considered modulating, avoiding, or ending hostilities and asks why they failed: Stalin and Truman devising new policies after 1945; Malenkov and Eisenhower exploring the chance for peace after Stalin's death in 1953; Kennedy, Khrushchev, and LBJ trying to reduce tensions after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; and Brezhnev and Carter aiming to sustain détente after the Helsinki Conference of 1975. All these leaders glimpsed possibilities for peace, yet they allowed ideologies, political pressures, the expectations of allies and clients, the dynamics of the international system, and their own fearful memories to trap them in a cycle of hostility that seemed to have no end.

Leffler's important book illuminates how Reagan, Bush, and, above all, Gorbachev finally extricated themselves from the policies and mind-sets that had imprisoned their predecessors, and were able to reconfigure Soviet-American relations after decades of confrontation.

For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War Details

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Barry says

The capsule biographies were good, especially the one of Stalin. And I never realized just how scared the Soviets were of Germany. Gorbachev's allowing the reunification seems to have loosened his hold on power.

J.M. Hushour says

Pretty much all Cold War-era politicians, the ones that mattered, Soviet and American, were pieces of shit. This is not in doubt here in this study. Writ large, they were fanatic ideologues, the Americans much more so, it seems, who refused to bend to the other's will for fear that their "way of life" would be threatened. This is a stupid foundation on which to view one's strategic, geopolitical aims, for what is a political ideology, communist or capitalist, but some dumb crap someone else that up that everyone defines their own way anyway?

What really comes out from reading this book, is how much the actual leaders themselves were really, really interested and to varying degrees invested in trying to end the Cold War, even before it began.

Yes, yes, we all know what a dick Stalin was, but it was never so cookie cutter black-and-white as it is often portrayed. From Stalin through Chernenko, the over-riding Soviet strategic aim was to protect the Soviet Union. And meddle in the Third World here and there, for various reasons, sure. The Soviets never, ever, ever received from the US any reassurance over these fears and this was part of the problem. Neither side could countenance the fears of the other and act on it. There was a lot of mutual misunderstanding and over-blown fear-mongering, especially in the US. The Soviets wanted secure borders and an inward focus on their economy. The US wanted to protect the "American way of life" and dominate global resources. This is where we get to the who's-a-bigger-dick bit. And the hero in all this, after we wend our way through Afghanistan and the collapse of the communist regimes of eastern Europe is Gorbachev.

Gorbachev was the one leader on either side who said, "Fuck. It.", screw ideology, screw the military-industrial complex and basically committed political suicide by making concession after concession to the US. Despite Reagan's genial antics, he never really went to great pains to undertake anything proactive towards Gorbachev. Gorby went out on a limb to do what everyone had always talked about: ending the Cold War.

Leffler does a good job of detailing (sometimes over-detailing) the inner machinations of both sides. This is not Red Dawn, people. It was grey as hell. The book could've used a bit more on the proxy conflicts. African decolonization and Afghanistan are mentioned, but issues with China, Japan, the Middle East...much of this is left to the wayside.

Squeemu says

3.5/5

A little too long, but I found the depth fascinating at times. Really helped me understand the mindset of each country during the Cold War, which is something I had been unable to grasp before -- particularly that of the United States.

Caleb says

This book was an interesting commentary on the cold war. It begins at Stalin's takeover of Russia. This leads up to the beginning of the Cold War. This commentary is mainly from an American perspective. Starting with President Truman and Stalin, Then all the way to Reagan and Gorbachev. Although the book mainly focuses on Presidents and the Kremlin (the leaders of soviet Russia), it also has some commentary on Winston Churchill and some Secretary of States. Leffler strikes me as a moderate leaning toward some conservative views and is at some points evident in his writing.

The most interesting part of the book was the part about Eisenhower and Dulles (his secretary of state). In this section, he describes what the real reason for the Cold War was. Eisenhower was really concerned about the threat of nuclear weapons. Eisenhower was also very concerned about the rise of communism around the world. He sent aid against what he thought were communist movements to the Vietminh and also to parts of Africa and South America.

The worst part of the book was during the conclusion. It was well written and informative, but lacked the ability to be as interesting as the rest of the book. I felt that it was a summary of what had happened during the rest of the book but had been summarized to the point that it almost made me feel like I could have written a paragraph to get all the information in the book.

This book was overall well written and very informative. The title drew me in and I am glad that it did. The only word to describe this book in one word is analytical. I think Leffler can see very well the general ideas that both sides of the war was like. I also think that he understood what the sources he used were trying to say.

This is one of the better books I have read recently and I would recommend it to anyone who likes history or likes to learn. While this isn't the best book ever I think that it really deserves four out of five stars.

Todd says

Excellent work that explores the fine line between human agency and contingency as it related to key events throughout the Cold War. This book was well written and focused on the power players, such as Truman and Stalin, and showed how ideology, domestic considerations, and other factors shaped their responses to a rapidly changing post war world.

Mike says

Great overview on the Cold War and the important decisions that occurred during that dangerous 45 year period. The author is very evenhanded in his judgment of the major players during the era. Gorbachev and Reagan both played pivotal roles in ending the Cold War; the author feels Gorby's contributions outweighed Ronnie's in that Gorbachev initiated glasnost and perestroika which inevitably led to the demise of the Soviet Union.

Eileen says

Ideology was at the heart of the Cold War. Though traditional aims of war and diplomacy – such as resources and territory – played their role, ideology informed nearly every word spoken, every decision made. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union sought to expand themselves *per se*; it was authority and influence they wished to spread. Minor conflicts in minor countries became proxy battles between two superpowers trying to staunch the proliferation of rival principles and beliefs. Sabotage, espionage, nuclear blackmail, and dangerous arm races all served the same purpose: contain, intimidate, and quarantine. Of course, the whole thing was in many ways a bad idea, as leaders in both nations recognized. The global standoff drained resources and distracted from domestic issues, while continuous interference in regional clashes brought little reward and could potentially spiral out of control. The truth is, however, that at the end of the day, governments are run by human beings shaped by memories and cultural values. I find myself comparing Melvyn P. Leffler's book *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, The Soviet Union, and the Cold War* with Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* as demonstrating in very different ways the overriding focus of ideology in the Cold War, as well as this focus's inherent hazards and drawbacks.

Read more.

AskHistorians says

A great survey that focuses on several key periods--Truman's presidency, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Reagan and Gorbachev, etc.--rather than the entirety of the Cold War. It's one of the best introductions to the Cold War that opposes John Lewis Gaddis's interpretations. For Leffler, the Cold War was not inevitable, and it was Gorbachev that ended it. Like Gaddis, this book focuses strictly on the relationship between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

Olethros says

-Desde lo generalista, clarificador a grandes rasgos.-

Género. Historia.

Lo que nos cuenta. El libro La guerra después de la guerra (publicación original: *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, 2007), con el subtítulo Estados Unidos, la Unión soviética y la Guerra Fría, es un acercamiento al fenómeno que se conoció como Guerra Fría y que consistió en la manifestación, de distintas maneras, del choque ideológico, político, económico, social y casi militar entre la URSS y los Estados Unidos de América, más sus aliados respectivos, pero especialmente centrado en cinco momentos muy distintos del enfrentamiento.

¿Quiere saber más de este libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

<http://librosdeolethros.blogspot.com/...>

Robert Sparrenberger says

If you wanted to read a solid synopsis of the Cold War with the Leaders of the u s s r and the USA as focal points, this would be your book. It's well written with solid analysis throughout. Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev are featured heavily but deservedly so.

Recommend.

Richard Garcia says

Loved it

Dave says

This is a history of key moments in the Cold War - moments when opportunities presented themselves to reduce tensions or even end the Cold War, but which were missed. He starts with the beginning of the Cold War itself, contending that it might have been avoided if different policies had been employed. Leffler tends to place more of the blame on the United States for missed opportunities - sometimes justifiably so, sometimes not so much in my opinion. Either way, it's still an interesting read.

Craig says

Very readable summary of Cold War that focuses entirely on the leaders of the Soviet Union and United States, arguing that these leaders ideologies were what shaped the conflict and ultimately, due to the efforts of Gorbachev, ended it.

Nothing ground-breaking in the book, perhaps, but still an excellent review of the events between 1945 and 1989.

Jason says

Excellent review of the Cold War, effectively covering all of the major leaders and decisive events. While I love Cold War history, I had never actually read any; this book was a marvelous introduction, and was highly readable. My only complaint is how the late 50's and early 70's are skipped entirely.

Tom Schulte says

A thorough examination of the Cold War from the WW II roots through to the dissolution of the USSR and German reunification under Gorbachev. This is largely told through the series of American presidents on one side and Soviet leaders on the other through summits and other communications and interaction. There are some maps and lots of references and bibliography making this a scholarly work. The one thing that I realized through this is that U.S.-China relations from the 50s on through the Cold War were much about pulling China toward the U.S. and thus away from the Soviet sphere.
