

Avoiding Apocalypse
How Science and Scientists Ended the Cold War
Jeff Colvin

London: Chronos Books [John Hunt publishing], 2023, £17.99 (p/b)

Robin Ramsay

The author is a physicist who has been in or around the U.S. government's nuclear weapons policies for most of his professional life and is no left-leaning peacenik.¹ For him the U.S.'s post-war policy of 'containing' Communism around the world is unproblematic.

As Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has pointed out, though, there would have been no U.S. policy of containment had there not been something that truly needed containing. (p. 76)

' . . . something that truly needed containing'? So that's alright then. On p. 136 he describes the USSR as a militarised society. Couldn't the same be said about the U.S.? Colvin's geo-political innocence (or witting ignorance) makes his book's thesis all the more striking.

The conventional view of the end of the Cold War is that the renewed arms race of the late 1970s onwards led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In that version, to keep up with U.S. military spending, the inefficient Soviet economy had to devote so much of its resources to weaponry that the ensuing neglect of civil society led to the emergence of reformers, notably Gorbachev, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc. Colvin offers a different explanation.

The Russians did not capitulate on arms control because of fear of SDI [the Strategic Defence Initiative²] as the American right continues to maintain. The Soviets agreed to arms control because they were *not* afraid of SDI, and because they saw these arms control agreements in their own best interest. They came to see these agreements, and the

¹ Biographical sketch at <https://www.johnhuntpublishing.com/chronos-books/authors/jeff-colvin>.

² See, for example, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Strategic-Defense-Initiative>. This was popularly known as Star Wars.

necessary winding down of the Cold War, in much the same way that [Soviet nuclear scientist Andrei] Sakharov had seen them. Gorbachev came to accept the concept of *linkage*. His freeing of Sakharov and acceptance of Sakharov's basic theses on linkage was the trigger for all the events that followed. And it was the scientists' boycott, and *its effects on the Soviet Union*, that helped to provide the necessary extra "push" that Gorbachev needed to propel his thinking in the right direction. (pp. 132/3) (second and third emphases added)

'Linkage' is the notion that science can only survive and prosper under freedom and democracy. Colvin actually cites Benjamin Franklin (born 1705).

Franklin understood early on that the advancement of science was integrally linked to a democratic culture that guaranteed freedom of thought, freedom of discussion, and freedom to experiment with unorthodox ideas. (p. 20)

And Colvin asserts:

Thus, contrary to the Soviet government argument that world peace is the only issue that matters, it was the scientists who understood and argued that peace and human rights and democratization – are integrally linked, through the scientific paradigm, and must advance together. (p. 40)

But if this is the case, the absence of democracy in – most obviously – China seems to imply that there should not be any Chinese advances in science.³ And that proposition seems absurd to me.

No matter. Mr Colvin's thesis is that the key event in the move towards cooling the Cold War in the 1980s, was the role of scientists in the West in supporting scientists in the Soviet Union who were being persecuted by the regime there.

It was the imprisonment and exile of the three principal founders of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group – computer scientist Anatoly Shcharansky, physicist Yuri Orlov, and physicist Andrei Sakharov – that prompted the worldwide scientists' boycott of the Soviet Union. (p. 180)

He describes the organisation and history of that support in great detail.

It's a striking thesis; and it is easy to understand why it appeals to a scientist. But he just hasn't provided enough evidence to support it. He does not cite any Soviet/Russian sources confirming that petition-signing in the

³ Nick Must commented there is also the obvious examples of the technological advances under the Nazis – Werner von Braun for example.

West, or academic boycotts in support of persecuted Soviet scientists, impacted the behaviour of the upper reaches of the CPUSSR. It might be true, and Gorbachev may have confirmed all this in his memoir; but I haven't read that. The only citation of that memoir by Colvin is this:

Sakharov's proposal for de-linking SDI and arms control went counter to then-current Soviet policy. Gorbachev, however, listened. He also listened intently to the two American scientists, von Hippel and Stone. He reportedly said later that his discussions with the scientists at the disarmament conference "made a big impression" on him.' (pp. 126/7)

My guess would be that queues for potatoes in the shops in the Soviet Union probably made a bigger impression on Mr Gorbachev.

As well as this 'linkage' thesis, Mr Colvin takes the reader through a detailed account of the various arms control treaties between the Soviet bloc and NATO. But it is the 'linkage' thesis which is at the heart of this book.

Perhaps an even bigger risk for the United States is that it is not at all clear that Americans have learned the right lesson from how the Cold War ended. [. . .] Similarly, the lesson propagated by the American right is that American moral or ideological superiority – what is often framed as "American exceptionalism" – is what won the Cold War, and that this superiority must be maintained with military strength and power
[. . . .]

The fact is that as long as people adhere to these false notions the ideological conflict continues. The Cold War has not yet come to a final conclusion. It will finally end only when we all learn the lesson of linkage that Andrei Sakharov taught. (pp. 185/6 and 197)

I don't think Mr Putin is listening, do you?