Synopsis - Ronald Reagan: Friend or Foe?

Introduction:
The Cold War was a battle between the United States and the Soviet Union. It began at the end of WWII and lasted throughout the end of the twentieth century. Ronald Reagan, the president of the United States when the war ended, has been credited as being “the man who ended the war”.

Question:
Did Ronald Reagan really end the Cold War?

Thesis:
Ronald Reagan did not end the Cold War. Reagan escalated the arms race, took a hostile approach to the Soviet Union, and was not as important as Gorbachev the man.

Argument One:
Instead of trying to end the arms race that defined the Cold War for over forty years, Reagan was an active participant in its extension.

Reagan supporters alike realized that winning the arms race became an obsession of Reagan’s.
- Reagan is quoted as saying “the Soviet Union cannot possibly match us in an arms race.”
- Secretary of defence at the time, Caspar W. Weinberger, stated that “He [Reagan] said this is a Cold War that needs to be won. It was a matter of demonstrating to them [the Soviets] that they couldn’t win a war.”

Military spending for the United States skyrocketed during Reagan’s presidency.
- He spent over one trillion dollars building up the country’s military.
- The defence budget of the United States more than doubled between 1980 and 1985.

Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative was an example of nuclear propagation.
- SDI was intended to defend against nuclear artillery in space and it displayed a message of hostility on the part of the US.

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• USSR has no choice but to respond to this action to defend their country in the result of an arms race.\textsuperscript{7}

**Counter-Argument One:**
In putting a focus on the military and defence initiatives of his country, Ronald Reagan was trying to protect his country from what he thought were imminent threats from the USSR.

- The SDI was to be created for the purpose of defending the United States from intercontinental ballistic missiles.\textsuperscript{8}
- Increased military spending was a necessity in order to maintain the hegemonic status that the United States had over the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{9}

**Argument Two:**
Mr. Reagan had a predetermined dislike for the Soviet Union and thus he was very aggressive towards them during the war.

*Reagan switched from passive leadership to aggressive leadership when he switched his political strategy from détente to brinkmanship.*

- Cold War historian Archie Brown agreed that "sticking to détente would have meant a quicker end to the Cold War. Brinkmanship did nothing but prolong poor relations with the USSR."\textsuperscript{10}
- By traveling away from détente, Reagan sent a message that seeking peace with the USSR was not an option and that the only way to end the war was to push the opposition to the brink.\textsuperscript{11}

Ronald Reagan had a strong dislike for the Soviet Union from the beginning of his presidency.

- On March 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1983 Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as “an evil empire”.\textsuperscript{12}
- He often referred to the ending of the Cold War as an opportunity to “slay the Soviet dragon”.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{6} Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) (United States defense system) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{13} "Concessions to Stay on Table, Gorbachev Says - Blames Reagan for Failure of Talks but Still Offers Hope of Future Nuclear Arms Agreement - Los Angeles Times." *Featured Articles From The Los Angeles Times*. Web. 9 Oct. 2009.
The president took an offensive stand directly against Mikhail Gorbachev in his attempt to get the Berlin Wall torn down.

- Mikhail Gorbachev, the secretary of state for the Soviet Union, had every intention of tearing down the wall as quickly as possible but still had to endure hostile comments from the American president begging him to “tear down this wall!”  

- Even though Reagan was supposedly trying to help the Berlin Wall situation, the wall was still torn down two years after he made his speech at the Brandenburg Gate in 1987.

Counter-Argument Two:
Taking an aggressive approach in dealing with the Soviet Union was Ronald Reagan’s only option if he wanted to affect change in the war.

- Past presidents used détente as their political strategy in the Cold War and they did not end the war.
- The USSR was not innocent during the war and the spread of communism was a serious threat to not only the United States, but also to the rest of the world.

Argument Three:
Ronald Reagan’s efforts to end the war were not nearly as important as those made by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Within his own country, Gorbachev created new reforms to improve the lives of his people.

- Glasnost was a policy that introduced the ideas of freedom of the press and freedom of speech to the people in the USSR.
- Perestroika was an economic reform that called for the “intensification of the Soviet economy and the revival and development of the principles of democratic centralism”.

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Where Reagan took a hostile approach to the war, Gorbachev used a more peaceful method to end the war.

- Soviet armed forces were cut by ten percent under Gorbachev’s rule.\(^\text{20}\)
- 50,000 troops were withdrawn from Eastern Europe in an attempt to make peace not only with the US, but with the entire world as well.\(^\text{21}\)

It was Mikhail Gorbachev who continuously tried to make peace with Reagan and create treaties.

- Gorbachev initiated four separate meetings with Reagan with the purpose of signing a zero-arms agreement.\(^\text{22}\)
- At the Reykjavik, Iceland meeting in 1986, Reagan was the one who refused to sign a treaty with Gorbachev because he did not want to give up his country’s nuclear armaments, including the SDI.\(^\text{23}\)

Counter-Argument Three:
Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had equal parts to play in the signing of the INF treaty that eventually ended the Cold War.

- Reagan took measures to increase his military defence budgets because he could – Gorbachev was suffering with a country that was in an economic downturn and had no power to increase their military even if they so desired.\(^\text{24}\)
- Reagan was a key factor in the signing of the treaties; he was just as important as Gorbachev, if not more so.\(^\text{25}\)

Conclusion:
After nearly forty years of fighting a cold battle that was constantly on the brink of becoming a hot war, the Cold War ended. That being said, through these arguments it can be shown that Ronald Reagan was not really the one who ended the war. Even so, Mikhail Gorbachev said it best when he stated that the end of the Cold War was “a common victory.”\(^\text{26}\)

\(^\text{23}\) Ibid.