

Way Out There in the Blue, by Frances Fitzgerald

reviewed by [Myron A. Marty](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

Readers of this book must keep reminding themselves that, despite the fantasies it describes, it is not science fiction. Its characters are real people contending vigorously over threats they see as real. When the perception of such a threat fades--of war with the Soviet Union, for example--or disappears, like the Soviet Union itself did, another appears. Now we have the China threat and threats posed by "rogue states" (recently renamed "countries of concern"). When a vast, impenetrable, space-based shield designed to thwart enemy attacks proves unfeasible, space warriors invent replacements--something called "Brilliant Pebbles," for example.

In a 1983 speech, Ronald Reagan turned his ideological whims loose in a proposal known as the Strategic Defense Initiative. Had he listened to the voices of moderation in his administration, or even reflected seriously himself about SDI, he might have anticipated that his "way out there in the blue" fantasy would have to negotiate winding roads filled with political, diplomatic, technological and financial landmines here on earth.

Way Out There in the Blue tells an intricate and convoluted story of the consequences of Reagan's Star Wars proposal. Frances Fitzgerald deftly weaves together four principal themes. The first concerns the character of Reagan and the Reagan presidency. In his public appearances, Reagan, the "American Everyman," as Fitzgerald calls him, was the consummate actor. Dutifully following his scripts and playing his roles convincingly, he won accolades as a "great communicator." Behind the scenes, however, he was pliable, disengaged, indecisive and indifferent to details. Although he inspired great loyalty in people like Edward Meese, William Casey and William Clark, he seemed to connect emotionally and substantively only with Nancy Reagan, his chief counselor.

The second theme considers the effects of a largely leaderless presidency on cabinet members and other advisers. Conflict among them was inevitable, and there was plenty of it. The most fascinating portions of the book describe the hostilities between Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar

Weinberger. Although Fitzgerald generally gives the men in her story balanced treatment, particularly Reagan, Weinberger can be portrayed only as a narrow-minded, my-way-or-no-way ideologue. Shultz, on the other hand, comes across as a creative and patient public servant, determined to pursue his goals as long as hope remains that they can be achieved.

Third, Fitzgerald probes the complex diplomatic issues America faced in the later stages of the cold war. For more than three decades the Republican Party had centered its politics on resistance to communism, chiefly the Soviet Union--Reagan's "evil empire." To sustain a spirit of resistance required perpetuating beliefs about real or imagined threats posed by the U.S.S.R. to the worldwide interests of the U.S. Fear of nuclear war was pervasive. Within the party, hardliners resisted every move by those wishing to gain major concessions by granting minor accommodations in dealing with the enemy. The battles between these groups, particularly over arms reduction, produced tales that even such a diligent researcher and gifted storyteller as Fitzgerald must struggle to untangle. Of villains there are many, of heroes few.

The fourth and final theme, important but elusive, concerns the technology of space-based weaponry. If Fitzgerald fails at times to grasp the nuances of SDI's technological prospects and failures, she and readers can take heart: so did Ronald Reagan. (The failure of the "kill vehicle" to shed its booster in the \$100 million experiment this past summer bears witness to the problematic technologies in the Star Wars enterprise.)

Fitzgerald has done little research in primary sources, except for interviews, but to tell the Star Wars story she has mined secondary sources judiciously and effectively. Her book is by no means an easy read, but for anyone wishing to know more about America's legacy from the Reagan years, it is an essential one.