

Bringing Down the Walls:

Reagan and Gorbachev

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Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev share a very special legacy: breaking through the great wall of the Cold War and bringing it down in the end. Reagan and Gorbachev ended the Cold War, and that breakthrough set the stage for the East Germans and Czechs and Hungarians to bring down the Berlin Wall. The formidable Berlin Wall was its most visible symbol—but in fact the Wall divided the entire world, it divided countries and factions within countries producing bloody regional conflicts where the war was fought by proxy. This division of the world preoccupied the best minds and the daily lives of ordinary people. In 1985 nobody envisioned that it would end with arms control agreements and handshakes. Most people feared the tepid conflict would grow hot.

Arguably, the biggest wall of all was the wall of mistrust. It existed inside the leaders' own minds too as well as inside the minds of their peoples. Strong ideological frameworks on both sides made the other look menacing and treacherous, not a good partner for negotiations. That is why for Reagan, the Soviet Union was an “evil empire” and for Gorbachev, the United States was the “war-mongering global imperialist power.” Generations of Soviets and Americans were brought up on this Cold War dogma, which made it very difficult to overcome. Besides, powerful interests in each country were invested

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in perpetuating those perceptions of the other as enemy. Bringing down the seemingly insurmountable ideological walls in the hearts and minds of their own citizens was a Herculean task for the leaders. In addition, ending the Cold War required both leaders to overcome their domestic conservative opposition. Building trust and reaching across the ideological divide was an interactive process that involved deep learning on both sides. It was an enormous success, probably unprecedented in modern history.

The most dangerous wall that they tried to bring down was the wall of nuclear weapons, the wall of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Unfortunately, they came close but could not bring it down. Ironically, the strong belief in nuclear abolitionism, which both leaders shared, and which helped them develop trust, did not succeed to bring about a real policy of nuclear disarmament. Nuclear weapons are still with us, and the United States and Russia still build their nuclear posture on the basis of MAD, thirty years after Reagan and Gorbachev at Reykjavik pronounced this strategy insane and dangerous.

This essay traces the evolution of Reagan and Gorbachev's efforts to end the Cold War and improve relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. It brings in the newest available evidence from Russia and the United States and build on the existing terrific research and memoir literature, of which special mention must be made of Ambassador Jack Matlock's *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold war Ended*.¹

Reagan's Eagerness for Contact and Absence of Response from the Soviet Side, 1982-1984

Ronald Reagan came to power soon after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the relations between the two countries deteriorated to a new low with the U.S.-imposed sanctions and the boycott of the Moscow Olympics. The new president was no dove and believed in peace through strength. Yet, he also believed he had to engage the Soviets in order to avert sliding into a nuclear war. Relations with the Soviet Union were constantly on Reagan's mind, which is reflected in his diary. He brainstormed with Margaret Thatcher for hours "about the Soviets [and] what it would take to get back into some kind of relationship."² He was eagerly looking for a partner with whom he could negotiate. The problem was, as he confided to Nancy at one point, "they keep dying on me."

Reagan started writing personal letters to Soviet leaders beginning in 1982, when he wrote to Brezhnev right after the assassination attempt. In the hand-

written version of the letter, Reagan expressed his desire for a “meaningful and constructive dialog,” while the State Department version accused the Soviets of an “unremitting and comprehensive military buildup” in “search for military superiority.”³ This duality of messages was characteristic of Reagan’s policy toward the Soviets; they found it extremely confusing and usually responded to the most belligerent part of the message. Reagan, in turn, was surprised by the formality and negativity of Soviet leaders’ responses.

Contradictory messages created real problems. Along with a consistent desire to engage in negotiations, there were stunning statements like calling the Soviet Union “evil empire,” and a quip about “start[ing] bombing in five minutes.” In addition to rhetoric, the actual policy of arms buildup was the main signal read in the USSR. While accusing the Soviets of striving for military superiority, in their view, Reagan was the one who was actually actively and successfully pursuing this course. Soviet fears were aggravated even more by the launch of Reagan’s Star War program in March 1983. According to the long-time Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, this dialogue from strength and arms buildup had a significant negative impact by strengthening the hardliners in the Central Committee:

The impact of the American hard line on the internal debates of the Politburo and the attitudes of the Soviet leadership almost always turned out to be just the opposite of the one intended by Washington. Rather than retreating from the awesome military buildup that underwrote Reagan’s belligerent rhetoric, the Soviet leaders began to absorb Reagan’s own distinctive thesis that Soviet-American relations could remain permanently bad as a deliberate choice of policy. Only gradually did both sides begin to realize they were doomed to annihilation unless they found a way out. But it took a great deal of time and effort to turn from confrontation and mutual escalation, probably much more than if this course had never been taken in the first place.⁴

Jack Matlock, who was Reagan’s Soviet expert on the National Security Council, and then U.S. ambassador to Russia during the most crucial period of the transformation of the relationship, shows that actually, Reagan’s belligerent statements were an exception rather than the norm, but that the media in both countries amplified and exaggerated them making them sound like the core of

Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union.⁵ But that approach itself began changing in 1983.

Reagan gradually came to the understanding that the feared Soviet strive for superiority was exaggerated. There was no Soviet buildup. The CIA concluded by September 1983 that contrary to the claims by Secretaries Caspar Weinberger and Alexander Haig and their predecessors, Soviet defense outlays had fallen from the 4 to 5 percent a year real increases of the early 1970s, to an average 2 percent increase, and that "procurement of military hardware—the largest category of defense spending—was almost flat in 1976-1981 ... [and] in both 1982 and 1983."⁶ Reagan's diary shows that he was becoming aware of the dismal state of the Soviet economy, and that they would "scream Uncle" if denied foreign credits.⁷

By the fall of 1983, under the leadership of ailing Andropov, the Soviet leadership was seriously concerned about a possibility of nuclear war. They initiated a top secret intelligence operation [V]RYaN to gather information about NATO's preparations for the first strike and interpreted the fall 1983 NATO exercises "Able Archer" as a possible cover for a first strike.⁸ For Reagan himself, the second part of 1983 was an intense learning period about the Soviets. With the help of his new Secretary of State George Shultz and NSC expert Matlock, Reagan developed a deeper understanding that Soviets had deep fears of U.S. superiority and especially the SDI initiative, which they perceived as starting a new arms race in space. This realization only strengthened his desire to reach out to the Soviets.⁹

This new effort resulted in a major speech on U.S.-Soviet relations, the Ivan and Anya speech, which the president delivered on January 16, 1984. He appealed to the Soviet leadership to "establish a better working relationship with each other, one marked by greater cooperation and understanding." In the speech (drafted by Matlock), he appealed to common Soviet citizens, Ivan and Anya comparing them to common Americans. Reagan wrote later in his memoirs, "I tried to use the old actor's technique of empathy: to imagine the world as seen through another's eyes and try to help my audience see it through my eyes."¹⁰ But the speech was hardly noticed in Moscow. Andropov was dying, soon to be replaced by Chernenko, another invalid with slightly more than a year left to live.

Reagan tried again with the new leader, hoping for a summit. He went out of his way in his letters to Chernenko to recognize Soviet fears of outside aggression and the scale of Soviet losses fighting Hitler. Even more striking,

Reagan's language (drafted by Matlock) acknowledged Soviet fears that ballistic missile defenses might look like "space strike weapons" yet assured the Soviet leader this was absolutely not Reagan's intent, and argued on this account for the elimination of nuclear weapons.¹¹ Notwithstanding Reagan's consistent numerous attempts to engage the Soviets in negotiations or at least get a personal meeting, he never got any positive response. The partner was not there. All that was left to do was to wait for another invitation to a funeral. It came very soon.

Gorbachev: First Impressions

Chernenko died on March 10, 1983. A young and energetic Politburo member Mikhail Gorbachev came to the office with a determination to end the Cold War, withdraw from Afghanistan, reverse arms race so that he could fix the Soviet economy and implement reforms to open the political system without undermining socialism. Reagan was hoping for him as a partner, one may say eagerly awaiting him, especially after Gorbachev's meeting with Thatcher in December 1984. After Gorbachev's visit to Britain and conversations with him, Thatcher was so impressed that she flew to Washington to share impressions with her friend and closest counterpart. In a long conversation, Thatcher described Gorbachev not only as a "man we can do business with," but also as an "unusual Russian.... Much less constrained, more charming" and not defensive about Soviet human rights record.¹² Reagan was ready to act.

Vice-President George Bush and Secretary Shultz flew to Moscow for Chernenko's funeral and a meeting with Gorbachev. Bush brought with him a letter from Reagan inviting Gorbachev to a summit and expressing his hope that a personal meeting would "provide us with a genuine chance to make progress toward our common ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons."¹³ The personal tone of the letter expressing his deepest hope for nuclear abolition touched Gorbachev, who was also looking for a partner on the international stage and how shared the vision of abolishing nuclear weapons. He immediately asked his close ally and future Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev to give him advice on the controversial (for the Soviets) American president.

On March 12 Yakovlev delivered his memorandum on Reagan—a pragmatic, non-ideological analysis of the main issues facing Reagan and his aspirations for U.S.-Soviet relations. Yakovlev points out that after increasing military spending in his first term, Reagan now wanted to turn to high diplomacy; that he wanted to fulfill his dream of becoming a "great peacemaker president." In

a way, Yakovlev's judgment on Reagan was very similar to Thatcher's judgment on Gorbachev: he is a complex person, but we can do business with him, his heart is in the right place.¹⁴

By the end of March, the pen-pal relationship had started successfully. In less than two weeks Reagan received a letter from Gorbachev, agreeing to a summit and eagerly accepting Reagan's invitation to the conversation between the two leaders. In the letter, Gorbachev notes the responsibility of the two superpowers for world peace, and their common interest "not to let things come to the outbreak of nuclear war, which would inevitably have catastrophic consequences for both sides." Underscoring the importance of building trust, the Soviet leader accepts Reagan's invitation in the March 11 letter to visit at the highest level and proposes that such a visit should "not necessarily be concluded by signing some major documents." Rather, "it should be a meeting to search for mutual understanding."¹⁵ The set of letters between Reagan and Gorbachev in 1985, even before they met for the first time in Geneva, addressed all main themes of U.S.-Soviet relationship and represented the first stage of genuine engagement and interaction.

Interactive Learning by Doing: The Letters and the Road to Geneva

Gorbachev believed in personal contact with foreign leaders. He was confident in his power to persuade an opponent in a conversation and after becoming general secretary he was eager to try his persuasion powers on leaders who mattered most for his disarmament program. Gorbachev was right in this respect—his engaging personality and solid grasp of facts brought him quick recognition and respect from foreign leaders. But also, personal meetings and the negotiating experience became for him a real school of international politics, where he learned to trust his partners and test and often change his own views. In the early period of 1985-1987, Ronald Reagan, George Shultz, Margaret Thatcher and to a lesser extent Francois Mitterrand were his main partners and teachers.

In this respect, Reagan was very similar to Gorbachev, who also was an aspiring actor in his youth. He was confident in his ability to persuade an opponent if only he could get a Soviet leader in a room with him one-on-one. But there were people in both countries that were not completely comfortable with the idea of a summit that would not end in signing a major agreement. That was the previous common wisdom regarding summitry. Already in 1983, in his

first personal memo to Reagan, Matlock argued strongly in favor of summits as an opportunity for direct face-to-face communication.¹⁶ Reagan and Gorbachev shared this view. The first summit was scheduled for November 1985 in Geneva.

In the sphere of U.S.-Soviet relations, the first year of perestroika was one of building trust and of intense learning for both leaders. Reagan-Gorbachev letters provide a unique source to trace the learning process that both leaders went through. In their letters they discussed the idea of nuclear abolition, the SDI as a threat (Gorbachev) or as the shortest way to nuclear abolition (Reagan), and the concept of reasonable sufficiency. The letters provided a steady connection for the two leaders even in times of tension like when Major Nicholson was killed in East Germany—after expressing his outrage and grief over the incident in the letter, Reagan returned to his main theme of elimination of nuclear weapons.¹⁷

In his letters, Reagan tried to explain his idea of SDI, especially as he was becoming more aware of Gorbachev's genuine fear of weapons in space. Thus in the letter of April 30, 1985 the president mentioned that he was struck by Gorbachev's characterization of the SDI as having "an offensive purpose for an attack on the Soviet Union." The letter provided a patient and detailed explanation of Reagan's view of SDI as the means of moving toward the total abolition of nuclear weapons.¹⁸ In response, on June 10, the Soviet leader explained his position by pointing out that any development of ABM systems beyond the limits of the ABM treaty of 1972 would lead to a radical destabilization of international situation and the militarization of space. The letter conveyed Gorbachev's genuine fear of SDI leading to deployment of "attack space weapons capable of performing purely offensive missions."¹⁹

Thus by the time Gorbachev and Reagan met in Geneva, they already had a pretty good understanding of each other's priorities and fears. Reagan began to see how for Gorbachev the SDI brought with it nightmares of another Blitzkrieg from the space. Gorbachev, meanwhile, started to understand that Reagan was genuine in his abhorrence of nuclear weapons but also committed to his vision of SDI. Both leaders were visionaries and idealists, both believed that nuclear weapons were evil, and each of them believed in their power to persuade the other.

The Geneva Summit and the Declaration that Nuclear War Cannot be Won and should Never be Fought

Their chance to do so came with the Geneva summit. Gorbachev was hoping to convince Reagan to reaffirm Washington's commitment to the SALT II treaty, which had never been ratified, and to return to the traditional interpretation of the ABM treaty, which in essence would have meant abandoning SDI. Transcripts of the meetings show that Gorbachev repeatedly raised the issue of how the military-industrial complex controlled US policy and profited from the arms race. Reagan consistently tried to dispel that notion, just as George Shultz did during his meeting with Gorbachev in Moscow on November 3, 1985.²⁰

The summit did not produce major agreements or breakthroughs. In essence, the main significance of the Geneva Summit was that it served as a fundamental learning and trust building experience for both sides. Reagan wrote in his letter to Gorbachev, in early December 1985 that he was "struck by [Gorbachev's] conviction that ... [the SDI] is somehow designed to secure a strategic advantage—even to permit a first strike capability." He tried to assuage that concern in the letter.²¹ And for Gorbachev, Reagan's position, combined with his own growing understanding of the argument that the Soviet scientists were making about unfeasibility of missile defenses led to a crucial change in his vision of SDI and Reagan's intentions. At March 24, 1986 Politburo session, Gorbachev said the crucial and unexpected words: "Maybe we should stop being afraid of SDI?"²²

Following up on the understandings achieved in Geneva, and especially under the impression of Reagan's abolitionist views, on January 15, 1986 the Soviet leader unveiled the Program of Liquidation of Nuclear Weapons by the Year 2000. This program, initially developed in the General Staff, and drafted in the final version by Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko and Chief of General Staff Akhromeyev was a serious proposal but was received in the West as mere propaganda.²³ Gorbachev complained about this reaction of the West to the Politburo on March 20, 1986.²⁴

The first meeting with Reagan in Geneva had a big impact on Gorbachev's own perception of threat. He no longer could think that Reagan could push the button. And if not, then rather than putting money into new armaments, the Soviet leader thought the best way for him to increase the international weight of his own country and improve living conditions for his people was to negotiate with the U.S. president to reduce and possibly eliminate nuclear arms.

Although it would be an exaggeration to say that Geneva resulted in perfect trust or resolved all contentious issues in U.S.-Soviet relations, it did remove the urgent sense of threat. Anatoly Chernyaev, soon to become Gorbachev's foreign policy aid and closest supporter, reflected on it in his diary on January 18, 1986: "It seems [Gorbachev] really decided to end the arms race *at all costs*. He is going for that very 'risk,' in which he has boldly recognized the absence of risk, because no one will attack us even if we disarm totally. And in order to revive the country and set it on a steady track, it is necessary to free it from the burden of the arms race, which is depleting more than just the economy."²⁵

Gorbachev, the abolitionist, responded to Reagan, the abolitionist. But the practical negotiating work was not easy because of entrenched interests and dogmas in both countries seeing nuclear weapons as the key security guarantee. Gorbachev was not in a hurry to challenge the military industrial lobby in 1986, but a terrible accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine shook him and strengthened his convictions. Gorbachev understood what consequences even a limited nuclear war in Europe could bring about and that changed his calculations.²⁶ After Chernobyl, Gorbachev felt the new urgency to move on nuclear disarmament, and realized that a new push would have to come from the Soviets. He invited Reagan to meet in Reykjavik.²⁷

Reykjavik: Missed Opportunity and the Lack of Trust

Gorbachev was coming to the Reykjavik summit after the Chernobyl experience as an even more committed abolitionist. In the pre-summit meetings with his advisers and Politburo members he insisted that the Soviets prepare a position with "breakthrough potential," that they had to take U.S. security interests seriously, be flexible and willing to make concessions including on intermediate nuclear forces in Europe for the "ultimate priority"—elimination of nuclear weapons.²⁸ He was even willing to release prominent political prisoners, such as Yuri Orlov and Andrei Sakharov, as long as there was no public linkage to the U.S. demands.²⁹

At the summit, however, the leaders were not able to achieve the breakthrough that each of them truly wanted. The Soviet team brought a proposal structured along the lines of Gorbachev's January 15, 1986 speech and proposed eliminating all nuclear weapons in stages. Reagan and Shultz agreed to the idea of total abolition but insisted that the work on developing and testing the SDI would continue intact. That was the position Gorbachev could not accept.

Reagan kept offering to share SDI with the Soviets, which Gorbachev simply could not believe. During the summit, the leaders discussed different versions of deep cuts in strategic weapons that would precede total elimination, including 50 percent cuts across the board advocated by the Soviets, eliminating all ballistic missiles, and eliminating intermediate-range weapons in Europe. In his memoirs Gorbachev described the discussions in Reykjavik as “Shakespearean passions.” Arguably, no summit meeting between Soviet and American leaders ever rose to such a dramatic level with such terrific missed opportunities. The minutes of the summit give one a visceral sense of hope and loss.

When Reagan offered for the tenth time to share SDI with the Soviet Union, the Soviet leader retorted: “you won’t even share milking machines. For the United States to give the products of high technology would be a second American Revolution, and it would not happen.” When Reagan asked Gorbachev to allow SDI testing, and to “do it as a favor to me so that we can go to the people as peacemakers,” the Soviet leader was completely unprepared for such a highly personal request. Reagan emphasized that the “text [of the draft agreement] contains everything you have asked for.” Reagan asked Gorbachev to agree to SDI testing as a personal favor to him. But the Soviet demurred: “I can do favors for your farmers, but this is no favor, this is a matter of principle.” Shevardnadze was in the room, along with Shultz, and pleaded, “Let me speak very emotionally, because I feel that we have come very close to accomplishing this historic task. And when future generations read the record of our talks, they will not forgive us if we let this opportunity slip by.”³⁰ Yet it slipped.

One answer to the question of why Gorbachev did not take Reagan up on his proposal came from a Soviet negotiator, in the middle of the night at Reykjavik, while staff on both sides were trying to flesh out and test the radical leaps their leaders were taking in the daytime. “Accepting your offer,” the Kremlin’s top American expert, Georgi Arbatov, commented to U.S. adviser Paul Nitze, “would require an exceptional level of trust. We cannot accept your proposals.”³¹ It all came down to the matter of trust. And complete trust was not there yet.

Still, Gorbachev saw Reykjavik not as a failure, but as a breakthrough. He believed that now, after they felt each other out and understood how far each would go in their aspiration to achieve a nuclear-free world, new bold policy initiatives were possible, but that it would require more Soviet concessions. Back in Washington, however, Reagan was faced with an uproar—he did not discuss his willingness to abolish all nuclear weapons with either his cabinet members or with the allied governments. Margaret Thatcher flew to Washing-

ton to express her strong views against abolishing nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, soon after Reagan came back from Reykjavik, the news of the Iran-Contra scandal broke and overwhelmed the administration. It also cost the administration the people who shared Reagan's belief in the possibility of abolition, the key of them was John Poindexter.³² The new people who came to replace them, especially Frank Carlucci as National Security Adviser, thought that elimination of nuclear weapons was an unrealistic and dangerous idea.

The process was very different in the Soviet leadership—the saw the next steps as pushing the United States even harder in the direction of deep reductions and making new concessions. Indeed, at the Politburo meeting on October 30, Gorbachev dropped his insistence on restricting SDI to the labs—“our new positions are the following: testing is allowed in the air, on the ground test sites, but not in space”—thus accepting much of the U.S. position he had just rejected at Reykjavik.³³ But when Shevardnadze took this new departure to Vienna for the November 5 meetings with Shultz, to his bewilderment the Americans declined even to raise the issue, and took back Shultz's starting offer at Reykjavik about banning ballistic missiles.³⁴

The backlash in Washington caused Reagan and Shultz to downplay their own willingness at Reykjavik to abolish nuclear weapons and started a wave of reinterpretations of what exactly happened at Reykjavik. But it was Anatoly Chernyaev who best summed up the most important positive development that happened at the summit: “A spark of understanding was born between them, as if they had winked to each other about the future. And Gorbachev retained a certain sense of trust in this person. After Reykjavik, he never again spoke about Reagan in his inner circle as he had before.”³⁵

To the Washington Summit: Untying the Package and the INF Treaty

In a way, the knowledge that Reagan was serious and committed helped unleash a flood of Soviet arms control initiatives. As early as February 1987, according to senior CIA analyst Douglas MacEachin, the sequence of arms reduction proposals and concessions by the Soviets was nothing short of astounding. The Geneva summit's idea of 50 percent cuts in missiles followed by Reykjavik's discussion of nuclear abolition within 10 years then set the stage for success in abolishing intermediate-range missiles, the so-called “zero-zero option.” MacEachin commented, “Even more damaging to those who thought the answer to zero-zero

was going to be a forever ‘no,’ we also got a ‘yes’ to intrusive on-site inspections. This was a new era.”³⁶

Another major implication of the Reykjavik experience in the early 1987 was a significant change in the perception of SDI on the part of Gorbachev and his close associates. The fear of SDI as a potential first strike weapon from space, which Gorbachev had tried to explain to Reagan over and over at Geneva and Reykjavik, by now had all but disappeared. Part of this change was due to the influence of progressive Soviet scientists, like academicians Velikhov and Sagdeev, who did not believe in the technological feasibility of the SDI concept. Perhaps even more important, the perception of threat from the United States was giving way to the new sense of trust and productive cooperation that emerged from the experience of the two previous summits, and that promised important payoffs in the future.

All these considerations and some knowledge of the U.S. domestic politics helped Gorbachev to untie the package of arms control negotiations and proceed with fast-track negotiations on the INF weapons in Europe and Asia. He also tried to include the shorter-range and tactical weapons in the negotiations but the U.S. side was not prepared to do so. In an unprecedented move, in April 1987 during negotiations with George Shultz in Moscow, Gorbachev agreed to include a shorter-range missile OKA-23, a brand new and highly technological weapon recently deployed in Europe into the INF package. This was done without consulting with any Politburo members or even Soviet military and resulted in considerable resistance in the Defense Ministry. It was a very controversial step basically putting all his bets on the future changes in U.S. negotiating position. Even though he made the decision to include shorter-range weapons in April, Gorbachev announced it to the Politburo only on July 9, after the decision by Kohl that the German Pershing missiles would be eliminated. In his statement Gorbachev presented it as a major step toward “clearing Europe from nuclear weapons” and called for adding a “third zero”—eliminating all tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. The Soviet Union issued a formal announcement of a global double zero platform—going beyond the initial Reagan initiative of 1981. Intermediate-range and shorter range missiles would be eliminated both in Europe and in Asia, therefore, a whole class of nuclear weapons would be destroyed for the first time in nuclear history—under conditions of strictest verification.

The new thinking from Moscow was perhaps most evident when the Soviets proposed—to the shock of the Americans—far more intrusive on-site in-

spections and verification regime than the U.S. military services would agree to. When Marshal Akhromeyev offered during the Washington summit to allow on-site counting of the bombs deployed on each bomber, it was the American negotiator, Paul Nitze, who demurred.³⁷ Similarly, at the Washington summit, when Gorbachev introduced the idea of major conventional cuts along with a mutual ban on chemical weapons combined with ending arms flows into Central America (supposedly a long-time goal of Reagan policy), the U.S. side was not prepared to respond.

In an exchange showing the limits on both sides' thinking during this summit, at one point Shultz reminded Gorbachev that at Reykjavik the U.S. accepted a 10-year non-withdrawal period conditioned on total elimination of ballistic missiles. Reagan interjected that "even elimination of all nuclear weapons was discussed at Reykjavik." Shultz, however, quickly shot down that reflection by stating that "these approaches were no longer a factor in our discussions."³⁸ The joint communiqué issued at the end of the summit did not remove the differences on ABM and missile defense research and testing, so the language was ambivalent, which allowed differences in interpreting the results of the summit at subsequent meetings.

The Washington summit ended with signing the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which for the first time in history eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons. But it was much more than just an arms control summit. On the basis of discussions and understandings reached in Geneva and Reykjavik, Reagan and Gorbachev were able to engage and make progress on many other important issues, contributing to removing many important walls that divided the world, such as human rights and regional conflicts.

The United States had the initiative on human rights—and the Soviets responded defensively. Not in Washington in December 1987. This time, unlike in Geneva, the general secretary was not on the defensive but rather asked Reagan not to make political declarations and allow the Soviets to do their own work "to remove this problem from the agenda," adding that otherwise he would not stand like an accused in front of a prosecutor.³⁹ The Soviet leader also invited Reagan to come to Moscow during the celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Russia and to visit churches of different denominations. Gorbachev stated that human rights was a top concern of his government and repeated the idea of holding a joint human rights seminar in Moscow.⁴⁰

On December 9, and again at the luncheon on December 10, after less than fruitful discussion of the remaining START issues, the leaders addressed

third world conflicts—Afghanistan, the Iran-Iraq war and Central America. On Afghanistan, Gorbachev confirmed his commitment to withdraw, which he had made earlier in his conversation with Shultz, but refused to set a start date. However, he said that “two events should coincide: the onset of withdrawals and the end to [the US] transfer of arms and financing to the opposition.”⁴¹ Moscow would not have a problem with a non-aligned and independent government.

On Nicaragua, the situation was similar. Reagan insisted the joint statement at the end of the summit include a Soviet declaration to stop supplying arms to the Sandinistas. Gorbachev suggested that they should both issue such declarations and the United States should cease supporting the Contras in Central America. He suggested that a joint statement include a pledge by both sides to accept the regional Contadora negotiating process and the Guatemala agreements on reconciliation, and within that context the Soviet Union would be willing to make a pledge no longer to supply weapons to the Sandinistas.⁴² Gorbachev believed that in regional conflicts progress was possible only if both sides limited their support for clients, and not only that—they should use their influence to encourage their clients to find an agreement with their opponents within the framework of national reconciliation. He suggested that the United States and the Soviet Union should cooperate on regional conflicts around the globe, especially in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Central America and Cambodia. This was a complete reversal of Cold War policies—from confrontation in the Third World to trying to solve regional conflicts jointly by putting pressure on warring factions to come to reconciliation and disavow violence. The Great Wall of the Cold War was beginning to crumble across continents.

Moscow, 1988

Reagan declared the end of the Cold War standing in the Kremlin next to Gorbachev, just steps away from the U.S. Marine who carried the nuclear football with codes targeting the exact place where the two leaders were standing—the ground zero.

Both Reagan and Gorbachev were hoping that they would be able to sign the START Treaty while Reagan was still in office. But the Soviets did not fully realize what an impediment to progress the electoral campaign was in the United States. By the late April, it became clear to both sides that the START treaty would not be ready for signature at the summit, and most likely not before the end of the Reagan administration. Although signing START at the Moscow

summit was Shultz's top priority, he found himself bogged down in a struggle for INF ratification in Washington he did not anticipate. In his memoir, Shultz seems to imply that this process and the U.S. Senate debate over INF became the main obstacle to any progress on START. However, as Frances Fitzgerald has shown, the real obstacle was the resistance of the Pentagon, led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Carlucci.⁴³ The irony here is that the Soviet side hoped that by allowing and encouraging so much interaction between U.S. and Soviet military officials, they would enable the generals to transcend traditional barriers and achieve quick progress.

And so the Moscow summit became the summit of human connection, the summit where no major agreements were signed but the leaders engaged in truly amazing dialogue across the entire spectrum of the issues facing both countries. In the first session of the summit Gorbachev walked Reagan back to their first summit, in Geneva, and praised the statement they had made together that nuclear war could not be won and should never be fought. Now he wanted Reagan to join him in a similar statement ruling out the use of force in international disputes. In addition, the two leaders would pledge to respect "non-interference in internal affairs and freedom of socio-political choice" as "mandatory standards of international relations."⁴⁴ Although Reagan liked the idea, the statement met immediate resistance from Carlucci, Shultz and Assistant Secretary of State Rozanne Ridgeway, because to their ears it sounded like the *détente* of the Nixon-Kissinger era against which Reagan had campaigned. The first meeting also included a discussion of human rights (Gorbachev proposed convening a seminar on the subject), emigration and freedom of religion, even the possibility of a joint mission to Mars. Amazingly, not a single word was spoken about the START treaty or arms control in general.

In one sense—overcoming mistrust—the summit was a clear success. For Reagan, it was his turn, like Gorbachev in Washington during the December 1987 summit, to charm the Muscovites and to get his own first-hand impressions of the Russian people. From the first unplanned walk on the Arbat to the last press conference, the summit became a major public relations event, breaking some of the prior ideological stereotypes and promoting Reagan's agenda of human rights.

The highlight of the summit was Reagan's speech to Moscow State University students. For those in attendance, including the author of this chapter, the Cold War ended on May 31, 1988. For us, the graduating class, it was a kind of our commencement address, and we understood that the smiling man who

spoke about things close to our heart, like human rights, would not push the button. It was surreal and illuminating like a dawn of a new era—the leader of our archenemy was human, engaging and enthusiastic about the new partnership with the Soviet Union. Reagan called the experience “an extraordinary day I never thought possible.”⁴⁵

The experience in Moscow deeply affected Reagan at the personal level, and it showed in his final press conference in Moscow, where he spoke about the summit with excitement, as a high achievement and the beginning of a new era. He called Gorbachev his friend and did not harp on any shortcomings or missed opportunities at the summit. Reagan continued to express this feeling of euphoria all the way back to Washington, including in a major speech in the Guildhall in London. When he arrived in Washington he called the summit “momentous” and praised it for producing “real progress on human rights, on regional conflicts, on greater contacts between the people of the Soviet Union and the United States.”⁴⁶ Both sides felt that the war of mistrust had finally been torn down.

The Governor’s Island Summit and Gorbachev’s UN Speech

However, Gorbachev felt that he had to make an extra effort while Reagan was still in the office so that he can hit the ground running with the new President, who, he hoped, would be George Bush, a familiar face. This was a major reason behind Gorbachev’s request to his aids to prepare a speech that would be like “Fulton in reverse” launching major unilateral troop reductions in Europe and essentially publicly abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine. Ultimately, Gorbachev’s speech to the United Nations on December 7 explicitly endorsed the “common interests of mankind” (no longer the class struggle) as the basis for Soviet foreign policy and, significantly for Eastern Europe, declared the “compelling necessity of the principle of freedom of choice” as “a universal principle to which there should be no exceptions.” Most surprising to U.S. and NATO officials were Gorbachev’s announcements of the 500,000 reduction in overall Soviet forces and the withdrawal of thousands of tanks from Europe. A top CIA analyst, testifying in closed session to a U.S. Senate committee at the very moment Gorbachev was speaking at the UN, told the senators he would have been considered “crazy” if he had predicted such cuts beforehand. He insisted he could not even get U.S. policymakers to think about “the prospect of some unilateral cuts of 50 to 60,000.”⁴⁷

Little of this world-shaking impact was evident in the highest-level U.S. government reaction. At the Governor's Island private meeting just an hour later, President Reagan remarked only that "he had had a brief report on it [the address], and it all sounded good to him." President-elect Bush did not even mention the speech in his brief remarks to Gorbachev—no reaction to what Gorbachev had proposed, no questions about the timing of the reductions, no follow-up on the specifics. This did not bode well for hopes of quick progress with the new U.S. administration.

Conclusion

By the time Reagan left the White House, the Cold War was over, U.S. and Soviet teams were negotiating resolution of regional conflicts, the Soviets were in the last stage of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, and the first free elections were scheduled to take place in the Soviet Union in the end of March 1989. Soviet and American citizens as well as political elites no longer saw each other as enemies and the fear of nuclear war practically disappeared from public discourse. Major breakthroughs on every issue of the U.S.-Soviet agenda, including arms control, human rights and regional conflicts was possible in a large part because of the successful, deeply interactive and at times very personal relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev. They shared the main "ultimate" priority of elimination of nuclear weapons and that priority drove their learning and understanding on other issues. However, many missed opportunities did not allow them to tear down that main final wall—that still makes the world a dangerous place to live in. Part of the reason was the entrenched bureaucratic interests and Cold War thinking on both sides. But it was Reagan and Gorbachev who ended the Cold War in 1988 and paved the road for the successes of the Bush administration.

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Notes:

1. Jack F. Matlock, Jr. *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004). Other valuable books that provided rich material and insight for my work and for anybody who studies the end of the Cold War are Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Andrey Grachev, *The Gorbachev Gamble* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); Melvin Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, The Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); and James Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
2. *The Reagan Diaries*, edited by Douglas Brinkley (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), entry for September 29, 1983, 183.
3. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 271-272.
4. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 544.
5. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*.
6. CIA SOVA, USSR: Economic Trends and Policy Developments, Joint Economic Committee Briefing Paper, September 14, 1983, 8-11, 18, presented by Robert Gates, DDI, on September 20.
7. *The Reagan Diaries*.
8. For the best discussion of Soviet war fears, see Nate Jones *The Able Archive 1983 Sourcebook*, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ablearcher/>
9. For the best discussion of Reagan's learning in the fall of 1983 see Beth Fisher, *Reagan's Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).
10. Reagan, *An American Life*, 595.
11. Reagan to Chernenko Letters, March 6, 1984 and April 16, 1984, NSC, Executive Secretariat, Head of State File, Box 39, Reagan Presidential Library. The April 16 letter contains a handwritten "P.S." that reads: "Mr. Chairman, in thinking through this letter, I have reflected at some length on the tragedy & scale of Soviet losses in warfare through the ages. Surely those losses which are beyond description, must affect your thinking today. I want you to know that neither I nor the American people hold any offensive intentions towards you or the Soviet people."
12. Memorandum of Conversation, Reagan and Thatcher, December 22, 1984, *ibid*.
13. Reagan to Gorbachev, March 11, 1985, *ibid*.
14. Alexander Yakovlev's Memorandum on Reagan, March 12, 1985, *ibid*.

15. Gorbachev letter to Reagan, March 24, 1983, *ibid.*
16. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 65.
17. Reagan letter to Gorbachev, April 4, 1985, RRL, NSArchive FOIA.
18. Reagan letter to Gorbachev, April 30, 1985, RRL, NSArchive FOIA.
19. Gorbachev letter to Reagan, June 10, 1985, RRL, NSArchive FOIA.
20. Transcripts of the Geneva Summit, November 19-20, 1985, RRL, NSArchive FOIA, George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 590.
21. Reagan to Gorbachev, November 28, 1985, RRL, NSA FOIA.
22. Politburo Minutes, March 24, 1986, *V Politburo TsK KPSS*, 30.
23. Viktor Starodubov, *Ot Razoruzheniya k Kapitulyatsii* (Moscow: Veche Publishing House, 2007), 261-264.
24. Politburo notes, March 20, 1986, AGF, Fond 2, opis 1, Gorbachev Foundation Archive.
25. Anatoly Sergeevich Chernyaev Diary, Manuscript donated to the National Security Archive.
26. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
27. Gorbachev to Reagan, September 15, 1986, NSC, Executive Secretariat, Head of State File, Reagan Presidential Library.
28. Gorbachev's Instructions to the Reykjavik Preparation Group, October 4, 1986, Fond 2, opis 1, Gorbachev Foundation Archive.
29. Minutes of the Politburo session, September 22, 1986, *V Politburo TsK KPSS*.
30. All quotations are from Memcon, Reagan-Gorbachev Final Meeting, 12 October 1986, 3:25 p.m.–4:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.–6:50 p.m., Document 15 in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., "The Reykjavik File," <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB203/>
31. Russian transcript of Negotiations in the Working Group on Military Issues, headed by Nitze and Akhromeyev, 11-12 October 1986, Document 17 in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., "The Reykjavik File," <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB203/>
32. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 246.
33. Politburo notes, October 30, 1986, Document 23 in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., "The Reykjavik File," <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB203/>
34. Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 292.
35. Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 85.

36. Douglas MacEachin, Musgrove transcript, 75.
37. Record of Conversation Between S.F. Akhromeev and P. Nitze at the U.S. State Department, December 8, 1987, Document 26 in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., "The INF Treaty and the Washington Summit: 20 Years Later," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 238, posted December 10, 2007, at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB238/
38. Transcript of the first meeting, December 8, 1987.
39. First Reagan-Gorbachev conversation, December 8, 1987.
40. Transcript of the first meeting, December 8, 1987.
41. Transcript of Meeting, December 9, 1987, Fond 1, opis 1, Gorbachev Foundation Archive.
42. Memcon, December 10, luncheon meeting, *ibid.*
43. Frances Fitzgerald, *Way out there in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 443.
44. May 29, First One-on-One, Fond 1, opis 1, Gorbachev Foundation Archive.
45. Reagan, *An American Life*, 713.
46. Fitzgerald, *Way out there in the Blue*, 459.
47. Douglas MacEachin Testimony to Congress, Svetlana Savranskaya, ed., *The Last Superpower Summits: Reagan, Gorbachev and Bush* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017).