



RONALD REAGAN AND THE COLD WAR: WHAT MATTERED MOST

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Scholars, like contemporary observers, continue to argue heatedly over the quality of President Ronald Reagan's strategy, diplomacy, and leadership. This paper focuses on a fascinating paradox of his presidency: By seeking to talk to Soviet leaders and end the Cold War, Reagan helped to win it. In that process, his emotional intelligence was more important than his military buildup; his political credibility at home was more important than his ideological offensive abroad; and his empathy, affability, and learning were more important than his suspicions. Ultimately, by striving to end the nuclear arms race and avoid Armageddon, he contributed to the dynamics that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These ironies, rather than detracting from Reagan's significance, should instead put it in proper perspective. He was Gorbachev's minor, yet indispensable partner, setting the framework for the dramatic changes that neither man anticipated happening anytime soon.

Scholars love debating the role of Ronald Reagan in the Cold War. Some say he aimed to *win* the Cold War. Others claim he wanted to *end* the Cold War. Some say he wanted to abolish nuclear weapons and yearned for a more peaceful world; others say he built up American capabilities, prepared to wage nuclear war, and sought to destroy communism and the evil empire that embodied it. Noting these contradictions and Reagan's competing impulses, some writers even claim that he wanted to do all of these things.¹

Figuring out what Ronald Reagan wanted to do, or, more precisely, what things he wanted *most* to do, may be an impossible task. When reading memoirs about Reagan and interviews with his advisers, what impresses and surprises the most is that the "great communicator" was regarded as "impenetrable" by many of those who adored him,

who worked for him, and who labored to impress his legacy on the American psyche.

Nonetheless, the growing documentary record, along with memoirs and oral histories, allows for a more careful assessment of Reagan's personal impact on the endgame of the Cold War. His role was important, albeit not as important as Mikhail Gorbachev's. But his significance stemmed less from the arms buildup and ideological offensive that he launched at the onset of his presidency in 1981 than from his desires to abolish nuclear weapons, tamp down the strategic arms race, and avoid Armageddon. These priorities inspired Reagan to make overtures to Soviet leaders; gain a better understanding of their fears; and, eventually, to engage Gorbachev with conviction, empathy, and geniality. After 1985, many of Reagan's national security advisers, intelligence analysts, and political allies disdained the president's

¹ John Prados, *How the Cold War Ended: Debating and Doing History* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011); Artemy Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle, "Explanations for the End of the Cold War," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Artemy Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle (London: Routledge, 2014). For Reagan's competing impulses, see James G. Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jacob Weisberg, *Ronald Reagan* (New York: Times Books, 2016); for inconsistencies, ambiguities, and change, see Tyler Esno, "Reagan's Economic War on the Soviet Union," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 2 (April 2018): 281–304, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx061>.



nuclear abolitionism, distrusted Gorbachev, and exaggerated the strength and durability of the Soviet regime. Reagan, however, strove to consummate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, push forward on strategic arms reductions, and solidify his relationship with a pliable Soviet leader who was trying to reshape his own country. Reagan's sincerity, goodwill, strong desire for negotiations, and shared commitment to nuclear abolition (however abstract) reassured Gorbachev, helping to sustain a trajectory whose end results the Soviet leader did not foresee or contemplate. Paradoxically, then, Reagan nurtured the dynamics that won the Cold War by focusing on ways to end it.

Ronald Reagan was convivial, upbeat, courteous, respectful, self-confident, and humble. But he was also opaque, remote, distant, and inscrutable. Ronnie was a "loner," Nancy Reagan wrote in her memoir. "There's a wall around him. He lets me come closer than anyone else, but there are times

when even I feel that barrier."² His advisers agreed. Charles Wick, his longtime friend and head of the U.S. Information Agency, acknowledged that "no matter how close anybody was to him . . . there still is a very slight wall that you don't get past."³ "No one was close to Reagan," Ken Adelman told an interviewer. "He laughed, he was a wonderful warm human being, but there was something impenetrable about him. Really, he wouldn't share — some views were out there, but otherwise he just went to a different drummer — a strange person."⁴

Of course, Reagan had a set of strong convictions that he preached for most of his long career as a spokesman for General Electric, as governor of California, as an aspirant for the highest office in the land, and as president. "He wasn't a complicated person," Nancy explained. "He was a private man, but he was not a complicated one."⁵ Everyone thought they knew what Reagan believed: He loved freedom and hated communism. He revered free enterprise and abhorred big government. He wanted

2 Nancy Reagan, with William Novak, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989), 106; also see Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 172–95; Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1999), 61.

3 Charles Z. Wick, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Apr. 24–25, 2003, 42, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/charles-z-wick-oral-history-director-united-states>.

4 Kenneth Adelman, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Sept. 30, 2003, 45, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/kenneth-adelman-oral-history-director-arms-control-and>.

5 Nancy Reagan, *My Turn*, 104.



to cut taxes and catalyze private entrepreneurship. He adored the city on the hill and detested the evil empire.⁶

But things got complicated for his advisers when they learned that he also yearned for peace, detested nuclear weapons, thought mutually assured destruction (MAD) was itself mad, feared that nuclear war would lead to Armageddon, and embraced compromise. When trade-offs were necessary, when priorities needed to be agreed upon, when complicated options needed to be resolved, Reagan was opaque. He “gave no orders, no commands; asked for no information; expressed no urgency,” said David Stockman, his first budget director. Although Stockman became a harsh critic, Reagan’s admirers did not disagree. Martin Anderson, among his most important economic advisers and a longtime friend, wrote: “He made no demands, and gave almost no instructions.” Frank Carlucci, who served on the National Security Council staff in the early years and returned as national security adviser and secretary of defense in the later years of Reagan’s second term, noted that the president often seemed in a “daze”; well, not exactly a “daze,” Carlucci said, but very “preoccupied,” especially during the Iran-Contra controversy. According to Richard Pipes, the renowned Soviet expert, Reagan sometimes seemed “really lost, out of his depth, uncomfortable,” at National Security Council meetings. William Webster, who headed the CIA at the end of Reagan’s presidency, one day approached Colin Powell, then the national security adviser, and confided, “I’m pretty good at reading people, but I like to get a report card. I can’t tell whether I’m really helping him or not because he listens and I don’t get a sense that he disagrees with me or agrees with me or what.” Powell replied, “Listen, I’m with him a dozen times a day and I’m in the same boat. So don’t feel badly about that.”⁷

A Strategy to Win or to End the Cold War?

Nevertheless, a trend has emerged that praises Reagan’s strategy for winning the Cold War. According to its proponents, there is abundant evidence to support this argument, specifically National Security Decision Directives (NSDD) 32 and 75. Those directives, formulated in 1982 and early 1983, outline a strategy: build strength, constrain and contract Soviet expansion, nurture change within the Soviet empire (to the extent possible), and negotiate.⁸ The sophisticated analysts who rely on these directives and who regard Reagan as a grand strategist acknowledge the disarray in the administration; the feuding between the State Department, the Defense Department, and the national security staff; and the bickering inside the White House among James Baker, Michael Deaver, Ed Meese, and (to some extent) Nancy Reagan. Yet they claim — with a good deal of evidence — that when Judge William Clark, Reagan’s close friend, took the role of national security adviser in 1982, he sorted all this out, imposed discipline, and orchestrated a polished and refined strategy that triumphed over the evil empire.⁹ Clark himself, in a lengthy interview at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center in 2003, took pride in forcing the Soviets to reshape their behavior through economic warfare, ideological competition, and military power.¹⁰

These interpretations by sophisticated scholars such as Hal Brands, William Inboden, and John Gaddis appear, at first glance, persuasive.¹¹ But when the evidence is examined closely, there is room for skepticism. In November 1983, after Pipes had left the National Security Council staff, Alexander Haig had left the State Department, and Clark had left the White House, Jack Matlock, Pipes’ successor, began organizing Saturday-

6 A wonderful compendium of Reagan’s beliefs and views can be found in Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan in His Own Hand* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

7 David A. Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics: How the Reagan Revolution Failed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 76; Martin Anderson, *Revolution: The Reagan Legacy* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 289–90; Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 166; Frank Carlucci, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Aug. 28, 2001, 28–30, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/frank-carlucci-oral-history-assistant-president-national>; William H. Webster, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Aug. 21, 2002, 26–27, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/william-h-webster-oral-history-fbi-director-director>.

8 National Security Decision Directive 32, “U.S. National Security Strategy,” May 20, 1982, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-32.pdf>; National Security Decision Directive 75, “U.S. Relations with the USSR,” Jan. 17, 1983, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-75.pdf>.

9 Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 102–19; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 342–79; William Inboden, “Grand Strategy and Petty Squabbles: The Paradox of the Reagan National Security Council,” in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 151–80.

10 William P. Clark, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Aug. 17, 2003, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/william-p-clark-oral-history-assistant-president>.

11 Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*; Inboden, “Grand Strategy and Petty Squabbles.”



morning breakfasts for senior officials to clarify the administration's policy. George Shultz, the new secretary of state, attended, as did Bud McFarlane, the national security adviser, as well as Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Vice President George H. W. Bush. There were sharp differences of opinion, Matlock subsequently wrote,

but nobody [at the breakfast] argued that the United States should try to bring the Soviet Union down. All recognized that the Soviet leaders faced mounting problems, but understood that U.S. attempts to exploit them would strengthen Soviet resistance to change rather than diminish it. President Reagan was in favor of bringing pressure to bear on the Soviet Union, but his objective was to induce the Soviet leaders to negotiate reasonable agreements, not to break up the country.¹²

These senior officials outlined the key goals: reduce the use and threat of force in international disputes, lower armaments, establish minimal levels of trust with the hope of verifying past agreements, and effectuating progress on human rights, confidence-building measures, and bilateral ties.¹³

The policymakers agreed that they should not challenge the legitimacy of the Soviet system, seek military superiority, or force the collapse of the Soviet system, which, according to Matlock, was to be considered "distinct from exerting pressure on Soviets to live up to agreements and abide by civilized standards of behavior."¹⁴

They also agreed that they should pursue a policy of realism, strength, and negotiation. Realism meant "that our competition with the Soviet Union is basic and there is no quick fix." Strength was necessary to deal with the Kremlin effectively, while negotiations aimed to reduce tensions, not to conceal differences.¹⁵

So, what should one conclude? There are Clark and NSDD 75 on the one hand, and Matlock and the Nov. 19 Saturday-morning breakfast memo on the other. Shultz had presented his own memorandum to the president on Soviet-U.S. relations after he replaced Haig as secretary of state, and that memorandum resembled the Saturday breakfast memo.¹⁶ One approach has been interpreted to connote a desire to achieve overwhelming military strength, cripple the Soviet economy, undermine the Soviet empire, and destroy the communist way of life.¹⁷ The other suggested a desire to achieve military parity, negotiate arms reductions, modulate competition in the Third World, avoid Armageddon, and achieve, in the words of Shultz, "a lasting and significant improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations."¹⁸ So what, then, to make of this? Was there a strategy to win the Cold War? Or was there a strategy to end the Cold War?

While pondering these questions, one should consider two of the most famous quotes and stories about Reagan and the Cold War. In 1977, in a private conversation with Richard Allen, the man who would become his first national security adviser, Reagan explained that his approach to the Cold War was simple: "We win, they lose." Allen was stunned by the simplicity and brilliance of this formulation. Others have cited it as the most cogent framework for illuminating the evolution of Reagan's strategy.¹⁹

Thomas Reed, a special assistant to Reagan for national security and a former secretary of the Air Force, narrates the other story. Reed reports that Stuart Spencer, Reagan's political consultant, accompanied the candidate in July 1980 on a flight from Los Angeles to the Republican nominating convention in Detroit. Spencer asked, "Why are you doing this, Ron?" With no hesitation, Reagan answered, "To end the Cold War." I am not sure how, Reagan went on to say, "but there has to be a way." Reagan focused on the weakness of the Soviet system, his fear of nuclear war, and his frustration

12 Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), 75–77.

13 Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*.

14 Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*.

15 Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 76.

16 "Next Steps in US-Soviet Relations," Memorandum from George P. Shultz to President Reagan, Mar. 16, 1983, <http://thereaganfiles.com/19830316-shultz.pdf>; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 269–71.

17 Peter Schweizer, *Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002); Paul Kengor, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (New York: Regan Books, 2006); Francis H. Marlo, *Planning Reagan's War: Conservative Strategists and America's Cold War Victory* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012).

18 Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 266.

19 Richard Allen, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, May 28, 2002, 26–27, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/richard-allen-oral-history-assistant-president-national>; Hal Brands, "The Vision Thing," in *Peril: Facing National Security Challenges*, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 2017, <http://firstyear2017.org/essay/the-vision-thing>.



with détente. Reed then adds, “Reagan was not a hawk. He did not want to ‘beat’ the Soviets. He simply felt that it would be in the best interests of both countries, or at least of their general citizenry, to end this thing.”²⁰

Reed goes on to emphasize that Reagan believed that the way to end the Cold War was by winning it.²¹ But if Reagan’s words to Spencer are parsed

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more carefully, it becomes clear that Reagan was not talking about “beating” the Soviets but, rather, seeking to end the Cold War.

It is easy to conflate “winning the Cold War” and “ending the Cold War.” Yet, when thinking about the strategy and aims of the Reagan administration, consider: What do the two terms mean? Was there, in fact, a strategy to win the Cold War, as many triumphalists claim, or was there instead a strategy to end the Cold War? What would it have taken to win the Cold War rather than end it? Would each involve different approaches, goals, and tactics, or would they overlap? What assumptions would shape the pursuit of one or the other?

In a series of interviews conducted by the Miller Center, leading officials in the Reagan administration were asked whether Reagan had a strategy. Clark said yes. Richard Allen implied that such a strategy existed. Frank Carlucci was not at all certain what Reagan had in mind, but he enormously admired the president’s intuition. Things worked out. Indeed, the results were breathtaking.²² But just because things worked out doesn’t mean there was

a strategy. In fact, George Shultz said that Reagan did not have a strategy to spend the Soviets into the ground. Shultz reiterated the points that he and Matlock had outlined in 1983: realism, strength, negotiation. Weinberger maintained that Reagan’s strategy was simple: negotiate from strength. James Baker pretty much agreed with Weinberger, stressing that the president was a pragmatic

compromiser. Reagan’s aim, said Baker, was “peace through strength,” not the breakup of the Soviet empire, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, or the destruction of communism.²³

Ken Adelman’s interview is one of the most interesting. Adelman, director of the Arms Control

and Disarmament Agency, acknowledged that he personally had never believed that the Cold War would end. Nor did he think that the United States could bankrupt the Kremlin. Reagan’s mastery of nuclear issues was nonexistent, according to Adelman. “He had no knowledge, no feel, and no interest in whether it was missiles, warheads, SEPs [Selective Employment Plan], throw-weights, none of that,” Adelman emphasized. When the president and Mikhail Gorbachev broached an agreement on nuclear abolition in Reykjavik in 1986, Adelman thought that “they were in fairyland.” And when Reagan kept insisting on sharing Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) technology with Soviet leaders, Adelman thought it was “crazy.” Yet the results were spectacular. Adelman’s interview ended with a rapturous homage to Reagan: “I’m so startled by the changes he made, and how that changed our world.” The president was “impenetrable.” One could never grasp “his inner core,” Adelman said. But, Adelman concluded, it is what Reagan accomplished that counts. Everyone can see what he “really, really did,” and that is what matters.²⁴

20 Thomas C. Reed, *At the Abyss: An Insider’s History of the Cold War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 234–35.

21 Reed, *At the Abyss*, 236ff.

22 Clark, Miller Center interview, 14–16, 34; Allen, Miller Center interview, 26, 74–75; Carlucci, Miller Center interview, 28–34, 40–42, 47–48.

23 George P. Shultz, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Dec. 18, 2002, 13, 18–19, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-p-shultz-oral-history-secretary-state>; Caspar Weinberger, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, Nov. 19, 2002, 10–11, 28–31, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/caspar-weinberger-oral-history-secretary-defense>; James A. Baker III, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project interview, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, June 15–16, 2004, 13, 44, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/james-baker-iii-oral-history-white-house-chief-staff>.

24 Adelman, Miller Center interview, 60, 57, 58, 39, 64–66; also see Ken Adelman, *Reagan at Reykjavik: Forty-Eight Hours that Ended the Cold War* (New York: Broadside Books, 2014), 64–66.



Assessing What Mattered

So, what did Reagan actually do, and what precisely mattered? Adelman, Wick, Baker, Weinberger, and Allen, like so many others, assign huge importance to SDI. A few years ago, Paul Wolfowitz contributed an essay to a volume on post-Cold War strategy that began with an anecdote about a young Russian who visited Dick Cheney in 1992, when he was secretary of defense. The man explained how Reagan had won the Cold War, saying that the Russians thought they were invincible until Reagan plowed ahead with the stealth bomber (B-2) and with SDI. At that point, according to the young man, the Russians knew they could not compete unless they changed.²⁵ Supposedly, SDI won the Cold War. Critics of this

to neutralize it.” In 1985, when he assumed power, Gorbachev believed that Reagan’s military buildup was not likely to be sustained. Gorbachev’s closest aide, Anatoly Chernyaev, scorned the argument that Gorbachev was acting as a result of external pressure:

I do not believe that the anti-Communist, anti-Soviet rhetoric and the increase in the armaments and military power of the United States played a serious role in our decision-making . . . I think perhaps they played no role whatsoever.

Anatoly Dobrynin, the longtime Soviet ambassador to the United States who returned to the Kremlin in 1986 to lead the international department of the

Communist Party of the Soviet Union, agreed totally with Chernyaev.

“The Soviet response to Star Wars,” he writes, “caused only an acceptable small rise in defense spending.” The Soviets’ fundamental problems, according to Dobrynin, stemmed from autarchy, low investment, and lack of innovation. Alexander Bessmertnykh, the deputy foreign minister, said that “very soon we realized that” SDI “was impractical

. . . [It] was a fantasy.” The chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff later confided: “I was in contact with our senior military officers and the political leadership. They didn’t care about SDI. Everything was driven by departmental and careerist concerns.”²⁷

Many of the most renowned historians of Soviet leaders and Kremlin decision-making similarly disagree that SDI and the U.S. military buildup were critical factors; these include Mark Kramer, Vlad Zubok, and Archie Brown.²⁸ In his book on the end of the Cold War, Robert Service presents a

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viewpoint, and I am one of them, need to be honest: Many similar quotations from Soviet officials and military people attest to this perspective.²⁶

But again, let’s nurture some skepticism: Just as this essay casts doubt on Reagan’s strategic genius, it also casts doubt on the decisive role that the Strategic Defense Initiative — and, indirectly, the U.S. military buildup — played in bringing about the end of the Cold War. “We were not afraid of SDI,” Gorbachev reflected in 1999, “first of all, because our experts were convinced that this project was unrealizable, and, secondly, we would know how

25 Paul Wolfowitz, “Shaping the Future: Planning at the Pentagon, 1989-1993,” in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 44.

26 See, for example, Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 89–90; Schweizer, *Reagan’s War*; Kengor, *The Crusader*, 300–302.

27 For Gorbachev, see Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev’s Gamble: Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 84; also see Memorandum from A. Yakovlev to Gorbachev, March 12, 1985, in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, *The Last Superpower Summits: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Bush — Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 26–27; for Chernyaev’s comment, see Beth Fischer, “Reagan and the Soviets: Winning the Cold War?” in *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 126; Anatoly Dobrynin, in *Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents* (Random House, 1995), 610–11; for Bessmertnykh, see William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 14; quotation by V. V. Shlykov in Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insider’s History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 57.

28 Private email correspondence, December 2016.



nuanced discussion of SDI. While not discounting its salience, Service stresses that Gorbachev eventually decided to ignore the Strategic Defense Initiative. In his recently published, masterful biography of Gorbachev, William Taubman largely concurs with Service's assessment. In his good book on the arms race, *The Dead Hand*, David Hoffman concludes: "Gorbachev's great contribution was in deciding what not to do. He would not build a Soviet Star Wars. He averted another massive weapons competition." In short, SDI was a secondary factor impelling Gorbachev to take the course that he did.²⁹

What then did Reagan do that made a real difference? Let's first acknowledge some critical facts. Many of the events that defined the end of the Cold War — the eradication of the Berlin Wall, free elections in Poland and Hungary, unification of Germany inside NATO, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union — all came after Reagan left office. They were the result of socioeconomic and political crosscurrents in Eastern Europe; structural problems beleaguering the Soviet economy; nationality conflicts inside the Soviet Union; Gorbachev's policies and predilections; Kremlin internal politics; and diplomatic interactions between Gorbachev and George H. W. Bush, Helmut Kohl, and François Mitterand, among others.³⁰ Ronald Reagan had little to do with these matters.³¹

So, back to the question: What were Reagan's key contributions? Shultz says it was the combination of strength, realism, and negotiation.³² But wouldn't Dean Acheson, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski — to name just a few — have said much the same

about their own approaches: that they combined the pursuit of strength, realism, and negotiation? Adelman says it was the unique combination of seeking arms cuts, building strength, championing SDI, and delegitimizing the Soviet Union.³³ Yet building arms and extolling SDI, as already noted, did not decisively shape Soviet policies. Although U.S. covert actions and ideological offensives put Gorbachev on the defensive, the Soviet leader's relative stature in the world was growing, not declining. Recall that the U.S. arms buildup, the deployment of Pershing IIs and cruise missiles, the genocidal actions of America's authoritarian associates in Central America and South America, and Reagan's reluctance to distance himself from the apartheid regime in South Africa garnered widespread approbation and damaged the image of the United States. Although the new literature persuasively shows that Reagan and his advisers deserve credit for their shift to democracy promotion and support for human rights, one should not forget that when Reagan left office, it was Gorbachev who drew wildly enthusiastic crowds wherever he went abroad — not Reagan, who was tarnished from the Iran-Contra affair.³⁴

The Soviet system lost its legitimacy not because of the U.S. ideological offensive but because of its performance. Even before Gorbachev took office his comrades grasped that their system was faltering and required a radical overhaul. Gorbachev infused conviction, energy, and chaos into efforts to remake and revive socialism. He knew the system was stagnating. Indeed, this was evident around the world, as China embarked on a new trajectory and as country after country moved away from command systems and statist controls.³⁵

29 Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War, 1985–1991* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 192–95, 274–78, 296; William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 263, 295–96; David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 206–25, 243–44, 266; James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009), 345; Luigi Lazzari, "The Strategic Defense Initiative and the End of the Cold War" (master's thesis, Naval Post-Graduate School, 2008), <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/4210>.

30 For brief discussions of many of these matters, see the essays in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3 — Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

31 Of course, Reagan was instrumental in shaping the INF Treaty and in urging Gorbachev to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

32 Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 500, 1136.

33 Adelman, *Reagan at Reykjavik*, 64–66.

34 For new findings on Reagan and democracy promotion and human rights, see, for example, Sarah B. Snyder, "Principles Overwhelming Tanks: Human Rights and the End of the Cold War," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 265–83; Robert Pee, *Democracy Promotion, National Security and Strategy: Foreign Policy Under the Reagan Administration* (London: Routledge, 2015); Evan McCormick, "Breaking with Statism? U.S. Democracy Promotion in Latin America, 1984–1988," *Diplomatic History* (Aug. 30, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx064>; also see Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, *Reagan and Pinochet: The Struggle Over U.S. Policy Toward Chile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 167–271.

35 Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000/01): 5–53, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560516>; Service, *End of the Cold War*; Chris Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 265–335; Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: Bodley Head, 2009); Chen Jian, "China and the Cold War After Mao," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Endings*, 181–200, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521837217.010>.



Reagan deserves credit for understanding these trends and extolling them. Moreover, his advisers merit credit for exploiting these trends in the international economy to America's advantage. In his recent book, Hal Brands brilliantly assesses the ability of Reagan administration officials to capitalize on globalization, technological change, the communications transformation, and the electronics revolution.³⁶ These initiatives reconfigured America's position in the international arena as the Cold War drew to a close, but they did not cause the end of the Cold War. In a recent scholarly account of Gorbachev's economic policies, Chris Miller claims that Gorbachev and his advisers were far more influenced by what was going on economically in Japan and in China than what was happening in the United States.³⁷

Reagan's Contribution: Building Trust

So, back again to the basic query: What were Reagan's unique contributions? Adelman stresses Reagan's desire for real cuts in armaments. Shultz emphasizes negotiation. Baker underscores Reagan's negotiating skills and dwells on his pragmatism.

But these laudatory comments understate Reagan's unique gifts and his contributions to the end of the Cold War. To say that Reagan wanted to talk to Soviet leaders from his first days in office.³⁸ When Vice President Bush attended Konstantin Chernenko's funeral in March 1985, he brought a set of talking points for his first meeting with Gorbachev. He was scripted to say:

I bring with me a message of peace. We know this is a time of difficulty; we would like it to be a time of opportunity. . . . We know that some of the things we do and say sound threatening and hostile to you. The same is true for us.

The two governments needed to transcend that

distrust. "We are ready to embark on that path with you. It is the path of negotiation."³⁹

To say that Reagan wanted to negotiate trivializes his approach. After Bush conversed with Gorbachev at Chernenko's funeral, Secretary of State Shultz turned to the new Soviet leader and said,

President Reagan told me to look you squarely in the eyes and tell you: 'Ronald Reagan believes that this is a very special moment in the history of mankind. You are starting your term as general secretary. Ronald Reagan is starting his second term as president. . . . President Reagan is ready to work with you.'⁴⁰

That determination and anticipation infused Reagan's first meeting with Gorbachev in Geneva in October 1985. Reading the opening pages of his autobiography, one can sense the president's excitement: Having looked forward to this encounter with a Soviet leader for more than five years, his "juices" were flowing. "Lord," he wrote in his diary, "I hope I'm ready."⁴¹

He was ready. He felt that his policies had built up America's military might and strengthened his negotiating position. He thought the Soviet Union was an economic basket case.⁴² But neither U.S. military strength nor Soviet economic weakness explain what ensued. They are part of the puzzle, important parts. Yet they were present at other times during the Cold War, and it had neither ended nor been won.

What was different now? It was not simply Reagan's desire to negotiate. It was his sensibility, empathy, conviction, skill, charm, and self-confidence. Informed of the intricacies of the Single Integrated Operational Plan and the mechanics of decision-making in times of nuclear crisis, Reagan was appalled by the thought that he would have only six minutes to determine whether "to unleash Armageddon!" "How could anyone apply reason" in those circumstances, he mused.⁴³ Perhaps that realization, along with the tutoring he was receiving about Soviet history and culture, explain

36 Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*.

37 Miller, *Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy*.

38 Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 347–65.

39 Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, 364–65.

40 Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 531–32.

41 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 11–14, 634ff.

42 Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 368.

43 Reagan, *An American Life*, 257.



his growing empathy for the adversary.⁴⁴ “Three years had taught me something surprising about the Russians,” he wrote in his diary. “Many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans. Perhaps this shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did.”⁴⁵ He talked to foreign ambassadors about Soviet perceptions and recorded their views in his diary. Learning that the Soviets were insecure and genuinely frightened, he tried to insert this understanding in his handwritten letters to Chernenko before the Soviet leader died.⁴⁶ Reagan told his national security advisers, “We need talks which can eliminate suspicions. I’m willing to admit that the USSR is suspicious of us.”⁴⁷

This empathy subsequently infused his meetings with Gorbachev. Although Reagan wanted armaments to cast shadows and bolster his negotiating posture, he also grasped Soviet perceptions of SDI. “We do not want a first-strike capability,” he told his advisers, “but the Soviets probably will not believe us.” Intuiting that after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl Gorbachev faced growing internal challenges, Reagan prodded his subordinates to reach an agreement that did not “make him [Gorbachev] look like he gave up everything.”⁴⁸ Gorbachev, he stressed, mustn’t be forced “to eat crow”; he must not be embarrassed. “Let there be no talk of winners and losers,” Reagan said. The aim was to establish a process, a series of meetings, “to avoid war in settling our differences in the future.”⁴⁹

The deliberations of the National Security Council after 1985 do not reveal officials designing a strategy to win the Cold War, break up the Soviet Union, or eradicate communism. Instead, they reveal officials who were struggling to shape a negotiating strategy that would effectuate arms reductions. They reveal a president pushing hard

for real arms cuts. They reveal a president who feared nuclear war, believed in SDI, and wanted to share it. They reveal a president who desired to abolish nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ Reagan’s advisers felt that he was living in fantasyland, as Adelman said in his Miller Center interview.⁵¹ Occasionally, they politely interrupted: “Mr. President,” they would say, “there is a great risk in exchanging technical data.” Or, “Mr. President, that would be the most

To say that Reagan wanted to negotiate is far too facile. He fiercely wanted to talk to Soviet leaders from his first days in office.

massive technical transfer the Western world has ever known.” But Reagan was not dissuaded: “There has to be an answer to all these questions because some day people are going to ask why we didn’t do something new about getting rid of nuclear weapons. You know,” he went on, “I’ve been reading my Bible and the description of Armageddon talks about destruction, I believe, of many cities and we need absolutely to avoid that. We have to do something now.”⁵²

Reagan was not very good at getting his advisers to do things they bickered over or did not want to do. But Reagan was good, indeed superb, at dealing with people. He could set you “utterly at ease,” wrote his critic, David Stockman. Devoid of facts and short on knowledge, said Richard Pipes, Reagan nonetheless “had irresistible charm.” “Easy

44 Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 132-34; Robert C. McFarlane and Zophia Smardz, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 308-309; Mann, *Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, 82-110.

45 Brinkley, *Reagan Diaries*, 198-99, 247; Reagan, *An American Life*, 588, 589, 595.

46 Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, 357-61.

47 “Discussion of Geneva Format and SDI,” Dec. 10, 1984, in Jason Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files: Inside the National Security Council*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Seabec Books, 2014), 344.

48 “U.S.-Soviet Relations,” June 6, 1986, in Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files*, 426.

49 “Memorandum Dictated by Reagan: Gorbachev,” November 1985, in Savranskaya and Blanton, *Superpower Summits*, 44.

50 For his fears, see Brinkley, *Reagan Diaries*, 199; Reed, *At the Abyss*, 243-45; Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 102-43; Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: New Press, 2016), 45-47; for his nuclear abolitionism, see especially Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005); Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan’s Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009).

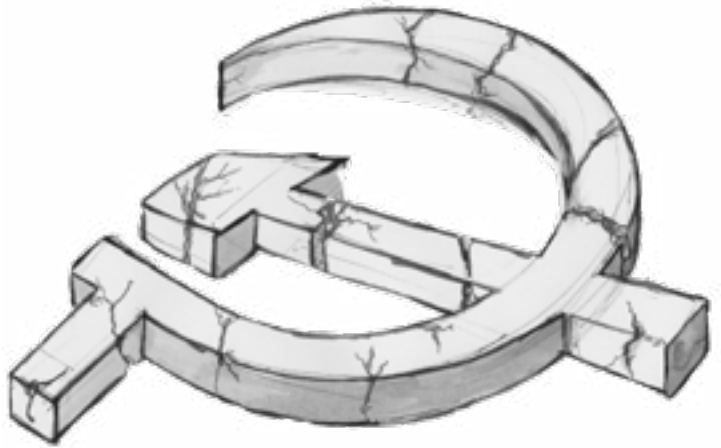
51 Adelman, Miller Center interview, 58.

52 “Review of United States Arms Control Positions,” Sept. 8, 1987, in Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files*, 541, 543; Savranskaya and Blanton, *Superpower Summits*, 454.

to like,” said Shultz; Reagan “was a master of friendly diplomacy.”⁵³

He worked hard at it, prepared for his talks, grasped the rhythm of negotiations, and understood the value of stubborn patience.⁵⁴ Gorbachev sometimes sneered at him during Politburo meetings for his simplistic, narrow-minded, and repetitious talking points. But in their new book, Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton show how deeply affected Gorbachev was by Reagan’s conviction to abolish nuclear weapons at Reykjavik. At the emotional end of their last conversation, Reagan pleaded with Gorbachev to allow SDI testing: “Do it as a favor to me so that we can go to the people as peacemakers.” Gorbachev said no, but was deeply affected. “I believe it was then, at that very moment,” wrote Chernyaev, that Gorbachev “became convinced that it would ‘work out’ between him and Reagan.”⁵⁵

Reagan engaged Gorbachev in a way no American leader had previously engaged a Soviet leader in the history of the Cold War. Of course, he was dealing with a special, new type of Soviet leader. But it was to Reagan’s credit that he realized this. It took intuition and courage. Other than Shultz, hardly any of his advisers felt this way — not Weinberger, Clark, Casey, Carlucci, Baker, Bush, Gates, or outside critics such as Kissinger. Nor is it clear that his Democratic foes would have seized the opportunity as he did. Even had they tried, it is not likely that they could have orchestrated the same type of political support for engagement with the Soviet leader. Reagan’s reputation for ideological purity and toughness — even after the



Iran-Contra scandal — afforded him flexibility that other U.S. politicians did not have. And his Soviet interlocutors knew it. Reagan had the trust of the American people, Gorbachev believed. If the president struck a deal, it would stick.⁵⁶

Reagan provided the incentive for Gorbachev to forge ahead. Gorbachev needed a partner to tamp down the arms race and end the Cold War so that he could revive socialism inside the Soviet Union. Gorbachev wanted to cut military expenditures, accelerate the economy, and improve Soviet living conditions.⁵⁷ Propelled by his ideals and by his recognition of material realities, he gradually made all the key concessions.⁵⁸ Reagan’s stubborn patience incentivized Gorbachev to sign the zero-

53 Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, 74; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 131; Pipes, *Vixi*, 167; also Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 605–12; Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Free Press, 1991), 81–90; Helmut Schmidt, *Men and Powers: A Political Retrospective*, trans. Ruth Hein (New York: Random House, 1989), 241–46.

54 For comments on Reagan’s negotiating skill, see, for example, Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 145; Anderson, *Revolution: The Reagan Legacy*, 285; Michael K. Deaver, *A Different Drummer: My Thirty Years with Ronald Reagan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 71; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 605–12; Baker, Miller Center interview, 41–42; and for Reagan’s own thoughts on negotiations, see, for example, “U.S. Options for Arms Control at the Moscow Summit,” Feb. 9, 1988, Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files*, 574.

55 Savranskaya and Blanton, *Superpower Summits*, 136–37.

56 Mikhail Gorbachev, “A President Who Listened,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/07/opinion/a-president-who-listened.html>; Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 39–40, 41–42; Barbara Farnham, “Reagan and the Gorbachev Revolution: Perceiving the End of Threat,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 116 (Fall 2001): 225–52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/798060>.

57 For Gorbachev, see, for example, Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1995); and especially Mikhail Gorbachev and Zdenek Mlynar, *Conversations with Gorbachev on Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Among the best accounts by scholars, see Taubman, *Gorbachev*; Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Archie Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and, for a much less sympathetic view, see Zubok, *Failed Empire*.

58 For an excellent dialogue about the role of ideas and material realities, see the exchanges between William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks on the one hand and Robert English on the other: Brooks and Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War,” 5–53; Robert D. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence on the Cold War’s End: A Reply to Brooks and Wohlforth,” *International Security* 26, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 70–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092102>; Brooks and Wohlforth, “From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research,” *International Security* 26, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 93–111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092103>.



zero Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and to withdraw from Afghanistan. Reagan's sincerity, affability, and goodwill encouraged Gorbachev to believe that the Soviet Union was not endangered by foreign adversaries but by superior economies.⁵⁹

Reagan embodied a capitalist system that Gorbachev disdained but also democratic and humane values with which he did not disagree. By reconfiguring Soviet foreign policy, championing conventional as well as strategic reductions in arms, and retrenching from regional conflicts, Gorbachev hoped to find the time and space to integrate the Soviet Union into a new world order and a common European home that would comport with Soviet economic needs and security imperatives.

Gorbachev sensed that Reagan was seeking not to win the Cold War but to end it. He recognized that Reagan wanted arms cuts, believed in nuclear abolition, and sincerely championed human rights and religious freedom. He also understood that Reagan and his advisers wanted to exploit Soviet vulnerabilities and weaknesses to enhance America's posture in international affairs. But Gorbachev did not think that these matters endangered Soviet power and security. He also believed that the president's predilections coincided with his own. Gorbachev, said Chernyaev, felt "that Reagan was someone who was concerned about very human things, about the human needs of his people. He felt that Reagan behaved as a very moral person."⁶⁰

Gorbachev was right. Reagan's rhetoric, actions, and behavior during his last years in office reveal what he most wanted to do: establish a process to negotiate arms cuts, reduce tensions, champion human rights, and promote stability and peace. He and his advisers were not discussing ways to win the Cold War or to break up the Soviet Union. At

meetings, they occasionally expressed confidence that they had the Soviets on the run, but far more often they remonstrated about the constraints Congress imposed on defense spending and

Gorbachev sensed that Reagan was seeking not to win the Cold War but to end it.

acknowledged that Soviet economic problems, as bad as they were, were not likely to cause a Soviet collapse or even a rebalancing of military power. Their discussions implied an understanding that, at best, they might reduce tensions; mitigate chances of nuclear conflict; manipulate the Soviets into restructuring their forces; and prompt a contraction of Soviet meddling in Central America, southern Africa, and parts of Asia. Nonetheless, Reagan not only encouraged his advisers to integrate strategic defense and the elimination of ballistic missiles into their overall planning, he also hectored them to move forward to prepare a strategic arms-reduction treaty that he could sign. He still distrusted the Soviets and wanted to negotiate from strength. And he still prodded Gorbachev to advance human rights and religious freedom. But during his last years in office Reagan and his closest advisers rarely discussed victory in the Cold War.⁶¹ Postulating a continuing Cold War, intelligence analysts estimated that Gorbachev wanted "to use economic reconstruction at home as a basis to project Soviet power and influence throughout the world."⁶² Nobody in the U.S. government in January 1989, wrote Robert Gates, then deputy director of the CIA, was predicting

59 See my discussion in Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, 455–61; also see Chernyaev's comments in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989* (Central European University Press), 190, 200; Svetlana Savranskaya, "The Logic of 1989: The Soviet Peaceful Withdrawal from Eastern Europe," 1–47; William D. Jackson, "Soviet Assessments of Ronald Reagan, 1985–1989," *Political Science Quarterly*, 113 (Winter, 1988–1989): 617–45.

60 For Chernyaev's comment, see Wohlforth's *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, 109; also the comments by Bessmertnykh in *Witnesses*, 107–8; Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 405–6, 408–9, 411; Savranskaya and Blanton, *Superpower Summits*, 132–37, 373–80; Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble: Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 224–27; Beth A. Fischer, "Toeing the Hardline? The Reagan Administration and the Ending of the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly*, 112 (Fall 1997): 477–97.

61 The generalizations above are based on my reading of the many National Security Council discussions in 1987 and 1988 in Saltoun-Ebin's *The Reagan Files*, 462–624; on the summitry documents in Savranskaya and Blanton's *Superpower Summits*, 254–478; and on National Security Decision Directive 250, "Post-Reykjavik Follow-Up," Nov. 3, 1986, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-250.pdf>.

62 State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "What Does Gorbachev Want?" Aug. 15, 1987, "End of the Cold War Collection," National Security Archive, George Washington University.



free elections in Eastern Europe, or the unification of Germany inside NATO, or the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁶³

Conclusion: Winning the Cold War by Ending It

Although these conditions that have come to define victory in the Cold War were not expected when he left office, Reagan nonetheless took tremendous pride in what he had accomplished. He sought peace through strength and strove to avoid a nuclear confrontation. He aspired to abolish nuclear weapons and tried to check Soviet expansion while engaging Soviet leaders. He showed empathy, displayed goodwill, and appreciated the changes Gorbachev was making. He hoped to tamp down the Cold War rather than win it. By doing all these things, Reagan reassured Gorbachev that Soviet security would not be endangered as Gorbachev struggled to reshape Soviet political, economic, and social institutions.⁶⁴

In 2001, long after he left power, Gorbachev attended a seminar in London where academics blithely condemned Reagan as a lightweight. The professors had it all wrong, Gorbachev interjected. Reagan was a “man of real insight, sound political judgment, and courage.” Three years later, in June 2004, he attended Reagan’s funeral and showed up at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, where Reagan’s coffin was draped in an American flag. Slowly, he approached the casket, extended his right hand, and gently rubbed it back and forth over the Stars and Stripes. “I gave him a pat,” Gorbachev later commented, a gesture that well symbolized the “personal chemistry” they had forged.⁶⁵

After 1989, when Gorbachev’s initiatives produced havoc within the Soviet Union and led to the disintegration of the Soviet empire, Reagan heralded America’s victory in the Cold War.⁶⁶ But his own contribution was more modest and paradoxical. By seeking to engage the Kremlin and end the Cold War, he helped to win it. Negotiation

was more important than intimidation. Reagan’s emotional intelligence was more important than his military buildup; his political credibility at home more important than his ideological offensive abroad; his empathy, affability, and learning more important than his suspicions. By striving to end the nuclear arms race and avoid Armageddon, he inadvertently set in motion the dynamics that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These ironies should not detract from Reagan’s significance but should put it in proper perspective. He was Gorbachev’s minor, yet indispensable partner, setting the framework for the dramatic changes that neither man anticipated happening anytime soon.

Scholars will debate the end of the Cold War for generations to come. But it would be a mistake to get lost in debates about the primacy of the individual, the national, or the international. There was an interplay of personal agency, domestic economic imperatives, ideological impulses, and evolving geopolitical configurations of power. Gorbachev assumed the reins of power in the Soviet Union, recognizing the economic and technological backwardness of his country, aware of the Soviet Union’s weakening position in the global competition for power, and cognizant of its declining ideological appeal. Seeking to rectify these conditions and believing in communism with a human face, he attempted to revive, reform, and remake socialism at home. To do so, he knew he needed to tamp down the arms race and modulate Cold War rivalries. He succeeded — yet blundered into bankrupting his nation’s economy, disrupting its unity, and contracting its power. His failures at home invite withering criticism, yet his courageous decisions to negotiate arms reductions, withdraw from Afghanistan, resist intervention in Eastern Europe, and accept the reunification of Germany inside NATO make him the principal human agent in a very complicated Cold War endgame.⁶⁷

In this story, it is often difficult to assess accurately the role that Ronald Reagan played. Whereas many observers are inclined to see his

63 Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 449; also see his memorandum (submitted to the president) "Gorbachev's Gameplan: The Long View," Nov. 24, 1987, "End of the Cold War Collection," National Security Archive.

64 Some of Reagan's most sincere convictions, hopes, and aims are expressed in his autobiography, *An American Life*, 266–68; also memorandum dictated by Reagan: "Gorbachev," November 1985, in Savranskaya and Blanton, *Superpower Summits*, 42–44; for the impact on Gorbachev, see Lefler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, 455–61; Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, 190, 200; and Savranskaya, "The Logic of 1989": 1–47; Nicholas J. Wheeler, "Investigating diplomatic transformations," *International Affairs* 89 (March 2013): 104–34, doi.10.1111/1468-2346.12028.

65 The two stories are narrated in Adelman, *Reagan at Reykjavik*, 314, 340; for the "personal chemistry," see Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble*, 227; also see comments by Chernyaev and Shultz in Wohlforth, *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, 109, 16; and Brinkley, *Reagan Diaries*, 613.

66 See, for example, Reagan's Address to the Republican National Convention, Aug. 17, 1992, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/ronald-wilson-reagan/speech-of-the-former-president-at-the-1992-republican-convention.php>.

67 For contrasting yet illuminating assessments, see especially Taubman, *Gorbachev*; Zubok, *Failed Empire*; Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*.



ideological zealotry and military buildup as the catalysts for Gorbachev's decisions,⁶⁸ I argue here that those factors were far less consequential than Reagan's nuclear abolitionism, emotional intelligence, political stature, and negotiating skills. The new evidence and emerging scholarship regarding Reagan's second term and the summitry between 1985 and 1988 suggest that Reagan's engagement, learning, empathy, and geniality — coupled with Gorbachev's growing travails at home — reaped results that neither Reagan nor Gorbachev anticipated. But those results — the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union — can be grasped only in the context of a much larger matrix of evolving conditions within each country, within the globalizing world economy, and within a dynamic international arena. [i](#)

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68 See, for example, Schweizer, *Reagan's War*.