

Ronald Reagan: Foreign Affairs—Miller Center



In his last debate with President Jimmy Carter in 1980, Ronald Reagan asked the American public: "Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that . . . we're as strong as we were four years ago?" Throughout the campaign, Reagan made clear his belief that America's international prestige and power had declined precipitously over, not just the last four years, but the entire preceding decade.

Reagan particularly wanted to redefine national policy toward the Soviet Union. Along with most other national leaders, he had supported the fundamental policy of containing the Soviet Union that President Harry Truman adopted in 1947 and was subsequently followed by all Presidents of both parties. But Reagan believed that the Soviets had taken advantage of *détente*, as practiced by Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. As an example, Reagan contended that the SALT II nuclear treaty, negotiated by Carter but never ratified by the Senate, imposed greater limits on the United States than on the Soviet Union. At the same time, Reagan was convinced that the Soviets were weaker economically than the intelligence community believed. As early as June 18, 1980, Reagan told reporters and editors at *The*

Washington Post, that "it would be of great benefit to the United States if we started a buildup" because the Soviets would be unable to compete and would come to the bargaining table.

In the decades before his presidency, Reagan had read and thought deeply about American foreign policy and brought with him to the White House a number of strong convictions. He regarded Communism as an immoral and destructive ideology and believed that the Soviet Union was bent on world domination. In a famous speech on March 8, 1983, the one in which he referred to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," he also called the Soviets "the focus of evil in the modern world." At the same time, Reagan was deeply worried about the accepted national policy that had prevailed since the Soviets acquired atomic weapons of "mutual assured destruction." This assumed that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would ever attack each other out of mutual fear that both nations would be effectively destroyed in a nuclear exchange. This, said Reagan, was "a truly mad policy." He believed that it was immoral to destroy the civilian population of another country in a retaliatory attack. He also worried that the two sides might blunder into nuclear war—in fact, that almost happened on September 26, 1983, when a defective Soviet satellite system mistakenly reported a supposed U.S. missile attack. Reagan's vision, not well understood when he took office and sometimes misrepresented even today, was of a world free of nuclear weapons and the terror they posed to all mankind.

Reagan's Foreign Policy Team



Reagan believed in cabinet government and assigned a higher role to his secretary of state than to his national security adviser—this made his choice for this position especially critical. His first secretary of state was Alexander Haig, a career military and government man, who had impressed Reagan in a private meeting and also came with the endorsement of former President Nixon. Haig, who called himself the "vicar" of U.S. foreign policy, lasted only eighteen months; he had continual run-ins with the White House staff, which did not consider him a team player, and with Nancy Reagan. Reagan said in his diary that Haig did not want "the President to be involved in setting foreign policy—he regarded it as his turf." Haig was replaced by George Shultz, a Stanford economist who had an even longer background in government. When Shultz took over in June 1982, he proclaimed that he was following Reagan's agenda, not the other way around. Shultz combined bureaucratic skills with diplomatic vision and over time became the most influential member of the cabinet. He gave priority, as did his boss, to U.S.-Soviet relations.

Two other key appointees in the Reagan administration were Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and Director of Central Intelligence William Casey. Weinberger presided over massive increases in the Pentagon's budget that were crucial to Reagan's strategy of dealing with the Soviets. He also boosted the build-up beyond the level Reagan had promised by calculating the spending increases from

President Carter's last budget, which itself included significant arms increases. Weinberger retired in late 1987 after questions arose about whether he had covered up the administration's arms sales to Iran. Ironically, he had been an outspoken internal opponent of the sales. Casey, chief of staff in Reagan's 1980 campaign, was a zealous anti-Communist with an intelligence background dating back to World War II. He died of a brain tumor shortly after leaving office in 1987, at which point he was under investigation for whatever role he may have had in the Iran-Contra affair, a mystery to this day.

The biggest revolving door in the Reagan foreign policy team was at the National Security Council, where six different men served as national security adviser, beginning with Richard Allen and ending with Colin Powell. This turnover in part attests to Reagan's belief that the NSC should be subordinate to the State Department. Nonetheless, national security advisers and their staff played important roles. In the first term, national security adviser Robert (Bud) McFarlane served as midwife of the innovative Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a missile-defense system. In Reagan's second term, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, an NSC staff member, helped lead the administration into the murky depths of the Iran-Contra scandal.

The Reagan Military Buildup

The Reagan defense buildup was predicated on an analysis that the Soviet Union had not abided by the limitations of the SALT II treaty intended to maintain nuclear parity between the superpowers. Instead, Reagan believed, the Soviets had continued its drive to nuclear dominance. Since the Soviets had a huge edge in conventional warfare because of the immense size of the Red Army, Reagan and his team were concerned that they would press their own advantage throughout the world and put pressure on Western Europe to disarm. Reagan believed the buildup would show America's traditional allies that he meant business and stiffen the spines of European anti-Communists, an objective in which he received stalwart support from British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. So the buildup had three objectives: strengthening the military in case of war, persuading European allies that the United States would not abandon them, and encouraging the Soviets to come to the bargaining table. Reagan gave military spending priority over his promise of a balanced budget, telling his advisers, "Defense is not a budget issue. You spend what you need." And spend they did. While the Carter administration and the Democratic Congress greatly increased the defense budget in the late 1970s, Reagan on Weinberger's advice in March 1981 set the price tag at \$220 billion—the largest peacetime military budget in history. Moreover, Reagan's budget planners called for 7-percent increases in defense spending between 1981 and 1985, totaling nearly \$1 trillion. These funds were allocated for a wide array of new weapons systems, research and development, and improvements in combat readiness and troop mobility.

This surge in military spending reaped a number of benefits. First, the military upgraded and modernized its forces and equipment. Second, the money invested in military-related research and development proved a spur to certain segments of the economy, especially the high-tech sector. Finally, the increases in defense spending, coupled with promises that the American military would again be unsurpassed, boosted the confidence of the public. These outlays, however, greatly contributed to the

federal government's ever-larger budget deficits and national debt. The growing defense budget, in concert with Reagan's tax cuts and his reluctance to cut costly domestic entitlement programs, ended any possibility of a balanced budget during the Reagan years.

Confronting the Soviets, 1981-1983

Reagan paired these increases in military spending with more aggressive anti-Soviet rhetoric. He backed away from the language of détente that stressed superpower cooperation and made clear his distrust of the Soviet system and Marxist ideology. At his first press conference, Reagan stated that Soviet leaders reserved "unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" in order to gain an advantage in U.S.-Soviet relations. Later that year, he promised that "the West won't contain Communism, it will transcend Communism." In a speech before the British Parliament in 1982, in a paraphrase of a famous declaration of Karl Marx, Reagan said "the march of freedom and democracy . . . will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history." During Reagan's first years in office, U.S.-Soviet relations were unstable. On the Soviet side, a succession of changes in the nation's geriatric leadership—three different leaders during the first Reagan term—produced a foreign policy that oscillated between militancy and conciliation. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration was dogged by its own internal conflicts. One of these conflicts came to the fore soon after Reagan became President when he reversed Carter's decision to embargo American grain sales to the Soviet Union as punishment for the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Carter's grain embargo was favored by the Pentagon but strongly opposed by the Agriculture Department and many American farmers. Likewise, Reagan delayed repudiating SALT II after he learned that the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that renouncing the treaty before the United States had completed its buildup would be advantageous to the Soviets. Responding to a clamor from Democrats at home and allies abroad, Reagan restarted arms talks with the Soviets in 1982, declaring that his goal was not to limit the arms race—as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks of the 1970s had sought—but to reduce the superpowers' stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Reagan dubbed this new round of negotiations START, for the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks.

Despite these pragmatic moves, Soviet-American relations during the first three years of the Reagan administration were marked by tension and confrontation. The Soviets were rapidly deploying intermediate nuclear missiles, the SS-20, in Eastern Europe. In 1981, in the face of opposition from the Soviets and the anti-nuclear movement, Reagan agreed with European allies to deploy U.S. nuclear missiles in Germany, Britain, and Italy. Although U.S. and Soviet negotiators held arms control talks in Geneva, Switzerland, beginning in 1981, neither side made a realistic effort to resolve the nuclear deployments.

By 1983, superpower relations reached a nadir. In March, Reagan memorably described the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," and—more worrisome to the Soviets—unveiled his plan for a missile-defense system called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which critics derided as "Star Wars," after the name of the popular movie. The SDI project envisioned a shield in outer space to protect the United States from incoming missiles. While the scientific feasibility of a space shield was at best problematic, even a

rudimentary missile defense plan would have forced the Soviets to compete in a range of technologies that was beyond its economic capability. Reagan offered to share the fruits of SDI research with the Soviets, an idea that frightened the U.S. intelligence community, but the Soviets did not take the offer seriously and asserted that Reagan really intended to develop "space weapons." In late 1983, a series of incidents brought American-Soviet relations near the breaking point. On September 1, a Korean Airlines passenger airplane (KAL 007) strayed off course and flew into Soviet territory. The Soviets shot down the jet, killing 269 people. Reagan denounced the act as a crime against humanity but sided with Secretary of State Shultz against Defense Secretary Weinberger in deciding to continue U.S.-Soviet negotiations. "The world will react to this," Reagan told his advisers. "It's important that we not do anything that jeopardizes the long-term relationship with the Soviet Union." With tensions high in November 1983, an American military exercise meant to simulate procedures for a nuclear exchange, code-named "Able Archer," prompted the Soviets to put their military on high alert in expectation of a surprise nuclear attack. Although historians disagree on whether nuclear war was actually imminent, it was without doubt a dangerous time in which miscalculation might have led to accidental nuclear war. Meanwhile, in Europe, the West German Bundestag voted to accept deployment of U.S. Pershing II and cruise intermediate-range missiles to counter the deployment of the Soviet SS-20s. The Soviets promptly walked out of the arms talks in Geneva.

The Reagan Doctrine

Reagan believed that it was necessary for the United States to combat the spread of Soviet-backed Marxist and leftist regimes throughout the globe. He was particularly concerned about Afghanistan, where the brutal Soviet invasion and occupation killed an estimated one million people and made another five million refugees. Central America was also a focus: Reagan continued the Carter administration's support of El Salvador's efforts to wipe out Marxist rebels in a cruel civil war, and he viewed the Marxist government of Nicaragua as a menace to hemispheric stability. Reagan blamed much of the trouble on Cuba, which supported both Nicaraguan government and the Salvadoran rebels. Cuban leader Fidel Castro never missed a chance to tweak the United States; how much material aid he actually provided to his Marxist allies in the Hemisphere remains a matter of historical dispute.

To Reagan, the soldiers and insurgents struggling against Communism on battlefields throughout the world were "freedom fighters," a description he particularly applied to the Contras opposing the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In his February 6, 1985, State of the Union message, Reagan called for support of anti-Communist forces "from Afghanistan to Nicaragua" and proclaimed that "support for freedom fighters is self-defense." Seizing on this passage, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer announced what came to be known as "the Reagan Doctrine." In Krauthammer's words, this was a policy of "democratic militance" that "proclaims overt and unabashed support for anti-Communist revolution." But Reagan pursued this doctrine selectively. Apart from Afghanistan, which was a bipartisan affair, Reagan tried to roll back Communism only in Nicaragua, and to a limited degree in Angola, where Cuban troops were trying to impose Marxist rule. Apart from these examples, Reagan usually followed State Department guidance in dealing with most world trouble spots and continued

policies that were already in place.

Within the United States, most of the controversy about the Reagan Doctrine centered on Nicaragua. Beginning in 1981, and at the behest of Director of Central Intelligence William Casey, Reagan authorized secret aid to the Contras, who grew from a force of a few hundred to an army of 9,000 three years later. Even so, as national security adviser Colin Powell observed, the Contras never amounted to more than a "highland fighting force" capable of putting pressure on the Sandinista government but not of overthrowing it. Reagan was mindful that the United States was resented in much of Latin America because of past military interventions. He often told advisers that the United States was seen as the "colossus of the North" in Mexico and Central America. For this reason, Reagan refused to send U.S. military forces to Panama to oust the corrupt dictator Manuel Noriega. (This would happen under Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush.) The sole U.S. military intervention in the region during the Reagan presidency came in October 1983 in Grenada, where Maurice Bishop, the Marxist leader of this tiny Caribbean nation, was murdered by a renegade faction of his own party. Reagan wanted to intervene because hundreds of Americans, many of them medical students, lived on the island. He was also asked to intervene by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, a group of six former British colonies that felt threatened by the events in Grenada. Reagan welcomed the opportunity to act because he saw Grenada, on which Cuban laborers were building a new airport with a 10,000-foot runway, as a Soviet and Cuban beachhead in the region. The U.S. military forces subdued the small detachment of Cuban forces on the island within a few days, took Bishop's killers into custody, and freed the American medical students with minimal casualties.

Although the American people and Congress supported the Grenada invasion, Democrats led by House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, questioned the wisdom and morality of U.S. involvement in El Salvador, and, especially, Nicaragua. In 1982, Congress passed the Boland Amendment, prohibiting direct Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) efforts to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The amendment, however, imposed no penalties for violation, which encouraged the administration to ignore it. Two years later, revelations that the CIA had aided in the mining of Nicaraguan ports and provided the Contras with an instructional manual that condoned terrorism and assassination caused an uproar on Capitol Hill. The Senate passed a resolution 84-12 condemning the mining. After much debate, Congress prohibited White House-supported funding for the Contras in the fall of 1984.

Involvement in Lebanon

In the summer of 1982, the Reagan administration was drawn into military involvement in Lebanon, a precarious democracy in the Middle East and a cauldron of conflict among competing military and confessional groups, as the various religious and ethnic factions are known. Reagan and his policymakers, including both his secretaries of state, believed that the United States had national security interests in the region to combat the Soviet influence. The United States also had an historic alliance with Israel, supported by every U.S. President since the Jewish state was created in 1948. Reagan himself had been committed to Israel from its inception, which did little to endear him to Arab

nations—or to Israel's chief adversary, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At the same time, Reagan's relations with Israeli leader Menachim Begin were less than harmonious and worsened considerably early in the President's first term when Reagan watched in horror on White House television as Israeli bombers leveled Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon, killing many civilians. Reagan became so angry that on August 12, 1982, he telephoned Begin and told him the bombing had gone too far. "You must stop it," Reagan said. Begin did, but the United States had moved a step closer toward involvement in Lebanon.

Two months earlier, in June 1982, Israel had invaded neighboring Lebanon in the hope of depriving the PLO of a base of operations. The invasion, and particularly the bombing and shelling of Beirut, was globally condemned. Within the Reagan administration, the invasion touched off latent conflicts between the diplomats and the warriors. Secretary of State Haig and Secretary of State Shultz after him believed that the United States should become involved in working out a peace process in Lebanon. Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, influenced by the legacy of Vietnam, were reluctant to put U.S. troops in harm's way. Reagan followed a middle course and in August 1982 sent 800 U.S. Marines to Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force that also included French and Italian contingents. Their mission was to maintain a cease fire during which PLO fighters in Lebanon would be allowed passage to neighboring Syria. Once the PLO had departed, Israel would withdraw from Lebanon.

After the PLO fighters left, Weinberger withdrew the U.S. troops. But with the international force withdrawn, violence broke out again. Lebanese militia with ties to Israel massacred 700 refugees at two camps in mid-September 1982, including at least three dozen women and children. President Reagan, appalled by the massacre, ordered the U.S. forces back ashore.

The Americans found themselves in the midst of a full-fledged civil war, one in which they unwittingly became targets as Israeli troops withdrew. In April 1983, Lebanese terrorists from a group called Hezbollah—which received financial and logistical support from Iran and Syria—detonated a truck bomb in front of the American Embassy in Beirut; seventeen Americans died, including eight employees of the CIA. American forces continued to come under attack sporadically throughout the summer of 1983. In response to the deaths of six soldiers, Reagan ordered U.S. warships to shell the camps of anti-American militias.

The most deadly attack against the United States occurred on October 23, 1983, when terrorists blew up the Marines' barracks at the Beirut airport, killing 241 U.S. servicemen, most of them Marines. More than 100 others were wounded in the attack, many of whom suffered permanent injuries. Reagan subsequently called it, "the saddest day of my presidency...the saddest day of my life." Suspecting that Hezbollah was responsible for the attack, Reagan ordered air strikes against Hezbollah's leadership. The destruction of the Marine barracks forced Reagan to reassess his Lebanon policy. The small remaining U.S. force had no hope of influencing events in Lebanon unless it was substantially reinforced. Against the opposition of the diplomats, Secretary Weinberger and the Joint Chief pushed for

withdrawal of all U.S. military forces. So did White House Chief of Staff James Baker, who feared that Lebanon would become an issue in Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign. In February 1984, the surviving Marines were withdrawn to U.S. vessels waiting offshore. Reagan described the withdrawal as "redeployment," but he would not again send ground troops into Lebanon or any other place in the Middle East.

Middle Eastern Terrorism

Reagan's problems in the Middle East did not end with the withdrawal of U.S. troops, however. Beginning in late 1983, anti-American terrorist groups stepped up their attacks on the United States. In December of that year, a terrorist group bombed the U.S. embassy in Kuwait. One year later, hijackers commandeered a Kuwaiti airliner and killed two American passengers. In June 1985, Hezbollah terrorists hijacked another airliner, forced it to land in Beirut, and killed a U.S. Navy diver who was among the passengers.

Shiite terrorists in 1984 and 1985 took hostage seven Americans living in Lebanon, hoping to force a shift in U.S. policy towards the Middle East, which the terrorists considered anti-Arab and pro-Israel. Reagan desperately wanted to free the hostages, but he and his advisers were publicly adamant that they would not negotiate with terrorists. The longer the hostages remained captive, however, the more Reagan longed for their release. In 1985, terrorists with connections to Libya also began a series of audacious attacks against Americans. Relations between the two countries had deteriorated severely after Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi had threatened Americans in 1981, prompting a military encounter in which U.S. Navy jets downed two Libyan warplanes. The conflict flared anew in 1985 and 1986. The U.S. government suspected but at first could not prove that Libya was behind a series of terrorist attacks that included a cruise-ship hijacking, bombings of airports in Rome and Austria, and the bombing of a disco in West Germany. After U.S. and European intelligence agencies traced the latter attack to Libya, Reagan ordered Operation El Dorado Canyon, in which 200 U.S. aircraft dropped more than sixty tons of bombs on Libyan targets. Thirty-seven people died, but Qaddafi escaped.

The air strike restrained Libya for a time but did not bring an end to the terror. Two days after the bombings, a pro-Libyan Palestinian group in Lebanon killed three hostages (one American and two Britons) in retaliation. In December 1988, terrorists with ties to Libya blew up Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 people.

The Iran-Contra Affair

"Iran-Contra," short-handed in history to a single scandal, actually involved two separate initiatives. The first was the clandestine sale of a small amount of U.S. military equipment—primarily anti-tank missiles—to Iran in contradiction of the Reagan administration's public policy of remaining neutral in the Iran-Iraq War. The Contra part of the affair was the attempt by a small group of National Security Council staff members and former military men to funnel proceeds from the sale of these weapons to the Contra rebels opposing the Nicaraguan government. Reagan said in his diary and later acknowledged to the

American people that he authorized the Iran arms sales, but he insisted he had no knowledge of the diversion of funds to the Contras.

The Iran arms sale, which had the support of the Israeli government, was first proposed to Reagan by his national security adviser Bud McFarlane. Reagan was told that U.S. representatives would be dealing with Iranian moderates rather than that nation's radical Islamic rulers. McFarlane presented the initiative to Reagan as an opportunity to make useful contacts with reformist forces in Iran and also counter Soviet influence in the region. The initiative was also backed by Director of Central Intelligence William Casey, who wanted to free William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut who had been kidnapped on March 6, 1984, by terrorists with links to Iran. Casey feared that Buckley, who later died of medical neglect while in captivity, was being tortured to reveal the names of agents. Reagan was moved by this appeal, and he also wanted to free other Americans held captive by terrorists in Lebanon. Reagan had often said he would not negotiate with terrorists, but insisted after the arms sales became public that he had not done so because he was dealing with middlemen, not the kidnappers themselves.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the second Boland amendment which prohibited third-party and U.S.-government funding of the Contras, Reagan made it clear to his foreign policy team that he wanted to keep the Nicaraguan Contras together "body and soul" so they would continue to be a thorn in the side of the Sandinista government. McFarlane and NSC staff member Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North arranged for donations to the Contras from foreign governments (including Saudi Arabia and South Africa) and private citizens. Between 1984 and 1986, the Saudis alone contributed \$32 million to the Contras in this way.

Reagan formally (and secretly) approved the Iran initiative on December 7, 1985, over the objections of both Secretary of State Shultz and Secretary of Defense Weinberger. The initiative was in fact under way before Reagan acted; in August and September, Israel had sent more than 500 American antitank missiles to Iran, which produced the release of one American hostage.

Throughout 1986, another 1,000 American missiles were sent to Iran via Israel; North and McFarlane, who had resigned as national security adviser in late 1985 and been replaced by his deputy, Admiral John Poindexter, accompanied one of the shipments and met with Iranian officials. As a result of the arms sales, a few more American hostages were released. But since the arms sales had in effect transformed the hostages into valuable currency, others were kidnapped to replace those who had been released. In April 1986, North went to Poindexter with a plan to divert the proceeds from the arms sales—more than \$12 million—to the Nicaraguan Contras. Poindexter approved North's proposal. Poindexter said afterward—in sworn statements to Congress and in court during his criminal trial—that he never informed the President of the diversion.

In November 1986, news of the arms shipments to Iran broke in a Lebanese magazine and quickly became a sensation in the United States. Poindexter and North destroyed a number of documents relating to the initiative, but others were unknowingly preserved on the main frame of an NSC computer

and made available to the Tower Board, a commission Reagan appointed to investigate the affair. Reagan, on the basis of a briefing by Poindexter, made several inaccurate statements about the arms shipments in a November 13 speech to the nation. Polls showed this to be one of the few times that the public did not find Reagan credible. In late November, a Justice Department investigation of the arms deal uncovered North's diversion of proceeds to the Contras. Reagan asked for Poindexter's resignation and fired North, while also telling this decorated soldier that he was a "national hero." A federal court appointed Lawrence E. Walsh, a distinguished Wall Street attorney and former prosecutor, as independent counsel to investigate Iran-Contra. Congress appointed its own joint special committee to investigate and gave North and Poindexter immunity as witnesses despite Walsh's warning that this could have a "destructive impact" on criminal prosecutions. Walsh was prescient: Poindexter was convicted on five felony counts, but an appeals court set aside the convictions because it found that witnesses may have been tainted by their exposure to his immunized testimony before Congress. North was convicted of three felonies; these also were set aside.

For the public, and subsequently for historians, the overriding question was the nature of President Reagan's role. Nancy Reagan believed strongly that Reagan needed to recover his credibility to be effective during the remainder of his presidency, and she brought outsiders into the White House, including the Democratic kingmaker Robert Strauss, in an effort to convince her husband to apologize to the American people for authorizing the arms sales. Eventually, Reagan did. On March 4, 1987, in a speech to the nation, Reagan took "full responsibility for my own actions and for those of my administration." He went on to say, "A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not." Reagan insisted in this speech that he did not know that funds had been diverted to the Contras. Privately, he was incensed that retired Air Force General Richard Secord, one of the masterminds of the diversion scheme, had pocketed some of the money. As a political issue, Iran-Contra dogged Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, as the investigation dragged on for more than six years. Conservatives assailed Walsh for taking so long but when he finally completed his report on August 5, 1993, during the Clinton presidency, he concluded that there was no credible evidence that Reagan knew of the diversion.

Reagan was nevertheless tainted by the scandal. Even if one accepts the validity of Walsh's conclusion—and it is the most authoritative word on the subject—the various inquiries revealed lax management and enormous detachment on Reagan's part and appalling conduct by members of the National Security Council staff. But the public, judging from Reagan's rising poll ratings after his March 4, 1987, speech treated Iran-Contra as a blunder and largely forgave him. This reflected their general trust of Reagan, and their acceptance of his motivations in wanting to free the Americans held hostage in Lebanon. Diplomatically, the Iran initiative embarrassed the United States. Since Secretary of State Shultz had urged allies not to supply the combatants in the Iran-Iraq War with arms, the U.S. shipments of missiles to Iran seemed an act of hypocrisy even though they had no impact on the war's outcome. On the other hand, the discredited Contras did achieve a measure of success, as Reagan hoped: they put pressure

on the Nicaraguan government to hold free elections, in which the Sandinista President was defeated.

Reagan and Gorbachev

Time magazine put Reagan and Soviet leader Yuri Andropov on its year-end cover in 1983, designating them both as "men of the year." The two leaders were shown stern-visaged and back-to-back; the accompanying story raised the spectre of nuclear war. Meanwhile in Moscow, the chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces claimed that the United States "would still like to launch a decapitating first strike." But at this low point of relationships between the nuclear superpowers, diplomats on both sides were planting the seeds of a new relationship that would take root in the contentious ground of the Geneva summit in 1985 and blossom into the arms-control treaties that presaged the end of the Cold War.

Many accounts of this turn in the U.S.-Soviet relationship would assert that Reagan changed his approach to the Soviet Union during his second presidential term. Reagan did not see it that way. He believed his policies were of a piece and was convinced that the U.S. military buildup would inevitably lead to negotiations in which the Soviets would see that nuclear arms reductions were to the mutual benefit of both sides. Reagan acknowledged to his diary that not everyone in his administration shared his optimism. "Some of the NSC staff are hard line and don't think any approach should be made to the Soviets," Reagan said in his diary entry for April 6, 1983. He concluded it by saying that he wanted to show the Soviets "there is a better world if they'll show by deed that they want to get along with the free world." In January 1984, with U.S.-Soviet relations apparently at a toxic stage, Secretary of State Shultz met with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to see if a path could be found to what Shultz called "realistic engagement" between Moscow and Washington.

The main impediment to that reengagement was instability in the Soviet leadership. Andropov, a former head of the KGB, had become the Soviet leader after the death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982. He was potentially a creative leader but suffered from kidney failure during most of his short reign in power. Andropov died on February 9, 1984, and was succeeded by Konstantin Chernenko, who was suffering from pulmonary emphysema and other ailments. Chernenko, who had been Brezhnev's intimate aide, was the last of the reactionary old-guard Soviet leaders. He rarely appeared in public or, as Reagan observed, said anything without a script, but did abandon the confrontational approach of his predecessors to the United States. Chernenko died on March 10, 1985. He was succeeded by Mikhail Gorbachev, a vigorous 54-year-old Andropov protégé with an innovative mind who recognized that the Soviet economy could not survive without serious reforms. He also hoped for better superpower relations. By 1986 and 1987, Gorbachev had determined that a more radical approach was needed in both domestic and foreign affairs. He believed that the restructuring of the Soviet economy ("perestroika") could only occur if accompanied by political liberalization ("glasnost"). Political and economic reforms, in turn, were possible only with better superpower relations. A less antagonistic Soviet-American relationship, Gorbachev believed, would permit a shift of money and resources away from the Soviet military toward the suffering economy.

Reagan sensed that Gorbachev was a different sort of Soviet leader and was encouraged in this direction by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had met with Gorbachev before his ascension to power. At a December 22, 1984, meeting at Camp David, Thatcher told Reagan that Gorbachev was "an unusual Russian" who was open to discussion. Reagan fired off a letter to Gorbachev when he assumed power, asking for a meeting. In November 1985, Reagan and Gorbachev met for the first time in Geneva; they held additional summits in each of the succeeding years of the Reagan presidency. The Geneva meeting, while short on specific agreements, laid the foundation for the other three summits. Reagan and Gorbachev argued freely but also developed the symbiotic relationship that served them in good stead. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) emerged at the Geneva summit as a key sticking point in the U.S.-Soviet relationship but also as leverage for a potential arms agreement.

The other sticking point was Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; Gorbachev gave strong signals at this meeting that he wanted to find a way out. The next summit between Reagan and Gorbachev occurred in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986. During the preceding year, Gorbachev had accelerated his political and economic reforms at home, but U.S.-Soviet arms negotiations remained stalled. Two days of high stakes talks, often unscripted, produced a remarkable opportunity as Reagan and Gorbachev galloped ahead of the talking points provided by their advisers and discussed the elimination of all nuclear weapons. As Alexander Besstmertrnykh, then the Soviet deputy foreign minister, said in an evaluation of this meeting years later: "Gorbachev believed in [doing away with nuclear weapons]. Reagan believed in that. The experts didn't believe but the leaders did." But the Reykjavik summit collapsed when Gorbachev insisted that any American work on SDI be confined to the laboratory. Reagan refused, telling Gorbachev that he "promised the American people" that he would not give up SDI. When Gorbachev persisted in his position, Reagan abruptly ended the meeting.

Because the leaders reached no agreement, Reykjavik was in its immediate aftermath seen as a failure in both the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, it proved a breakthrough. Reagan's stand had made it clear to Gorbachev that the President would never yield on SDI, and Gorbachev had other, more pressing problems. The unpopular war in Afghanistan was a bleeding sore, and the Soviets privately told the United States that they intended to remove their troops from Afghanistan before the end of Reagan's term. Gorbachev declared that the "military doctrine of the Warsaw Pact . . . is subordinated to the task of preventing war, nuclear and conventional." Meanwhile, encouraged by the discussions at Reykjavik, American and Soviet negotiators crafted a treaty that removed intermediate nuclear missiles from Europe, the first pact of the Cold War that actually reduced the number of nuclear weapons rather than merely stabilizing them at a higher level. Gorbachev and Reagan signed the INF Treaty in December 1987 while the Soviet leader made a triumphant visit to Washington, D.C. Reagan's desire to lessen the chances of nuclear war and the revolutionary changes in Soviet policy at home and abroad—which by 1987 were beginning to spin out of Gorbachev's control—had resulted in a landmark treaty that called for the destruction of more than 2,600 Soviet and American nuclear weapons.

Superpower relations continued to improve during Reagan's final year in office. While progress toward a

strategic nuclear weapons treaty was too slow to bear immediate fruit, it was clear by the end of the Reagan presidency that such a treaty was in the offing. (President George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 1991.) In December 1988, at the very end of Reagan's presidency, Gorbachev announced in an address to the United Nations in Washington that he would unilaterally reduce Soviet military forces in Eastern Europe by 500,000 soldiers and 10,000 tanks over the next two years.

The capstone of the Reagan-Gorbachev relationship, however, occurred in June 1988 when Reagan visited the Soviet Union. The symbolism of the trip was powerful and undeniable. Reagan, the most outspoken anti-Communist elected to the American presidency, met Soviet citizens in Red Square and spoke to students at Gorbachev's alma mater. When a reporter reminded him of his 1983 description of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," Reagan replied, "I was talking about another time, another era." By the time Reagan's presidency concluded, the Cold War was not formally over, but its end was in sight. Many people contributed to this achievement, including Secretary of State Shultz and Gorbachev's able foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, but Reagan and Gorbachev deserve the principal credit. In his book, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How The Cold War Ended*, career diplomat Jack F. Matlock, himself a key player in the U.S-Soviet negotiations, wrote that Reagan and Gorbachev were willing to depart from the position papers that had been written for them and make up their own minds on critical issues. "Both were willing to take political risks, and both were skilled in judging the degree of risk in their respective, very different societies," Matlock wrote. "They didn't always get things right, but on the most critical issues, they finally did."

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