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President Reagan's Legacy and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy

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I have been asked to speak about President Ronald Reagan's efforts to eliminate the possibility of nuclear war. That topic is long overdue for serious study.

A substantial amount of primary material is now available to those who wish to study the Reagan presidency. National Security Directives, memos between Reagan and his national security advisers, talking points for meetings, speech drafts, and transcripts of the Reagan–Gorbachev summits, among other documents, have been declassified and released. There is also much to be gained by examining public documents relating to Reagan, including his speeches and writings over the years—especially from before he entered the White House—which scholars have not often explored in detail. This material, together with evidence such as interviews, makes clear that Reagan was not, in Clark Clifford's memorable words, an “amiable dunce.” Nor was he a cipher through which his advisers enacted their own agendas.

Reagan as Strategist

Reagan had a specific and unique strategic vision, and worked assiduously as President to see that vision realized. He was an original and often wildly unorthodox thinker, with little regard for the conventional wisdom of either the left or the right. He thought and read and wrote and spoke about nuclear weapons, and about Cold War policy, long before he ran even for the governorship of California.

Reagan was also a skillful wielder of power. As President he constantly pursued his own goals, whether

Talking Points

- President Ronald Reagan had a specific and unique strategic vision, and worked assiduously as President to see that vision realized.
- Reagan's anti-nuclearism was part and parcel of his larger vision for U.S. Cold War policy, one that he developed years before taking office as President, and one that differed from past U.S. policy.
- Through tactics such as the Strategic Defense Initiative and other efforts to end the Cold War, Reagan's singular anti-nuclear vision had a substantial impact of U.S. policy.
- The United States' current efforts to build a missile defense system derive from Reagan's initiative, although the strategic rationale for it has evolved as the strategic environment has changed.

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his advisers approved or not, and even when they could not see what he was doing. He combined an idealism that bordered on utopianism with mental acuity and hardheadedness. He was much more complex than is generally known, and his personal influence on his administration was direct and extensive. Reagan's ideas served as the foundation for his administration's approach to the Cold War and to nuclear weapons. It is crucial for us to explore not just what Reagan did, but why.

Reagan as Visionary

Reagan, contrary to his image as a champion of the bomb, was a nuclear abolitionist. This is not a mere historical curiosity. Abolishing nuclear weapons was one of Reagan's fundamental goals for his presidency. His desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons underpinned much of what he did as President in terms of his Cold War policy. In many ways it is difficult to understand Reagan's presidency without taking into account his anti-nuclearism. But thus far that aspect of Reagan has been largely overlooked.

Reagan's anti-nuclearism was part and parcel of his larger vision for U.S. Cold War policy, one that he developed years before taking office as President and that differed from past U.S. policy. Reagan believed that the Soviet Union's economy and technological base represented key weaknesses in its Cold War competition with the United States, because of both the intrinsic flaws of the Soviet system and the exorbitant devotion of Soviet resources to the military. He thought that the United States should lead an expansive competition with the Soviets—politically, economically, and militarily—and that the Soviets could be compelled to change not just their behavior but even the nature of their system. He also believed that in the face of such a competition, the Soviets would be forced to negotiate deep cuts in nuclear weapons. Reagan sought not to manage the Cold War, but to prosecute and win it.

Reagan as Nuclear Abolitionist

Reagan was born 95 years ago today in Tampico, a small town in Illinois. He absorbed from his mother's religious faith the belief that God has a plan for everyone; he thought that he had a mission to fulfill in life. During his teenage years, Reagan spent five years as a

lifeguard on the Rock River in Dixon, Illinois. Life-saving left an indelible sense of purpose and satisfaction in the young man. Beginning with his adolescent experience as a lifeguard, Reagan harbored a fundamental impulse to intervene in the course of events in order to rescue others from peril. In time, that impulse would fuse both with his belief that he had a mission to fulfill in life and with his abhorrence of nuclear weapons. From this confluence came Reagan the determined nuclear abolitionist and Reagan the father of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Interestingly, Reagan's awakening interest in becoming an actor coincided with his seeing, and performing in, antiwar plays. While in Hollywood, Reagan was known to read and expound on current events. A liberal in terms of domestic politics, Reagan's views on foreign affairs were largely unformed—although by 1945 there was one aspect of world affairs on which his views had formed instantly and permanently: He loathed nuclear weapons. Immediately after the United States dropped two atomic bombs over Japan in 1945 to end World War II, Reagan became involved in anti-nuclear politics. He was an ardent proponent of the abolition of nuclear weapons and the internationalization of atomic energy. In December 1945, Reagan intended to help lead an anti-nuclear rally in Hollywood. He planned to read an anti-nuclear poem at the rally, but Warner Brothers, the studio to which Reagan was contracted as a film actor, informed him that he could not participate, ostensibly because it would violate his performance contract, but almost certainly because the studio did not want that kind of political attention. So we were denied our first chance to see Reagan's anti-nuclearism in public.

Many views that Reagan held in the mid-1940s changed as he evolved from liberal Democrat to conservative Republican. But he never abandoned his hatred of nuclear weapons and his desire to eliminate them. Reagan's "dream," as he himself described it, was "a world free of nuclear weapons." He pursued that dream as a personal mission.

Reagan as Anti-Communist

Reagan's experiences in Hollywood in the aftermath of World War II catalyzed his anti-Communism. He joined liberal political groups through

which he believed he could help shape domestic and international politics. What he found was that Communists and Communist sympathizers began to exercise increasing control over these groups. He was stung and appalled, and quickly became an anti-Communist.

Reagan served as president of the Screen Actors Guild during the late 1940s and early 1950s. He enjoyed the negotiations involved, and developed considerable self-confidence in his negotiating prowess. From then on, Reagan maintained that negotiations, when skillfully conducted and when backed by sufficient leverage, could produce significant, positive results. It should be noted that Reagan never feared negotiating with the Soviets, as long as he was the one doing the negotiating.

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, Reagan traveled throughout the United States, speaking before countless civic and business associations on behalf of General Electric. Reagan's talks evolved into a single speech, which he wrote on his own and which set forth his political approach. His speech was premised upon the notion that the Soviet Union intended to expand Communism around the world. As a result of that expansionism, the United States found itself in a world struggle in which the Soviet Union sought the destruction of capitalism and freedom. Reagan chafed at the U.S. Cold War policy of containment. He thought it insufficient to protect American security and also immoral, as he believed it relegated individuals behind the Iron Curtain to what he called "slavery." Reagan called for a policy that would roll back Soviet control both from the Soviet sphere of influence and within the Soviet Union itself.

As early as 1963, Reagan criticized what he described as "the liberal establishment of both parties" for asserting that a policy of accommodation was the only way to prevent a nuclear war. Reagan instead focused on what he saw as the economic and technological weakness of the USSR. He argued that the United States should pursue a vigorous competition with the Soviet Union, including an arms race. If it did so, Reagan said, the Soviet Union would realize that it would be able neither to afford economically nor to keep up technologically with the United States. As a result, the Soviets

would be willing to agree to deep reductions in nuclear weapons—ultimately to zero, Reagan intended—but also would be compelled to "modify their stand" in a broader sense. He implied that this would include a realization that the USSR could not win the Cold War, that the Soviets would see aspects of the Western "way of life" as attractive, and that they would begin to change the fundamental nature of their system. (It should be noted, however, that Reagan did not claim that if subjected to an arms race, the Soviet Union would bankrupt itself and fall apart. His own views were much more nuanced.) In Reagan's mind, destroying nuclear weapons and winning the Cold War were closely tied together.

It is essential to understand these views in order to understand Reagan's motives and goals as President. Reagan's arguments that the Soviet economy represented an important area of vulnerability in the Cold War and that the United States could exploit that vulnerability via an arms race and political and economic competition ran contrary to the prevailing wisdom among American politicians and opinion shapers. They appear to have been his own ideas, developed over years of thinking and speaking about U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union before he ever ran for office. Reagan never dropped those ideas. Indeed, he would constantly repeat and refine them in later years, particularly during his presidential campaigns in 1976 and 1980 and throughout his presidency. Those beliefs shaped both his administration's formal written Cold War policy and the implementation of that policy during his time in office.

Reagan as SDI Champion

Reagan was introduced to missile defense technologies and concepts in 1967 during a visit to the Livermore Laboratory in California. He immediately took to the notion of a defense against missiles. In missile defense, Reagan saw a means of using technology to transcend what he viewed as a disjuncture between the destructive potential of nuclear energy and humans' apparent inability to avoid threatening one another with it. He sought to outflank the danger posed by nuclear weapons by drawing upon high technology to produce a

defense against missiles. He made this point explicitly when he announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983.

Revealingly, Reagan did not endorse the missile defense technologies about which he was briefed at Livermore in 1967 because they utilized nuclear warheads to destroy incoming enemy missiles. Reagan disfavored the use of nuclear detonations for any purpose, offensive or defensive.

Throughout his two terms as governor of California, Reagan frequently discussed with his aides, many of whom later joined his presidential administration, his hatred of nuclear weapons, his conviction that they ought to be eliminated, and his desire to seek a missile defense. We also see evidence that during this period Reagan came to believe that the biblical story of Armageddon foretold a nuclear war. He thought both that a nuclear war that would end civilization was imminent and that it could be avoided. Reagan's belief in a future nuclear war as Armageddon further contributed to his nuclear abolitionism, and to his desire to pursue a missile defense system.

Reagan intensely disliked the theory of mutual assured destruction, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was signed in 1972. That the United States should indefinitely base its security from nuclear attack on vulnerability to nuclear attack struck Reagan as morally backward; that it should maintain such a balance of terror with the Soviet Union seemed to him "particularly dangerous."

Reagan also rejected détente. He maintained that the Soviets were using détente as a cover to lull the United States into passivity and self-restraint while they themselves prosecuted the Cold War. He argued that only when the Soviets changed their internal system would the USSR's threat to the United States be neutralized. Reagan continually emphasized his beliefs that if the United States engaged in and led a strenuous military, economic, and political competition with the USSR, it could exacerbate the weaknesses of the Soviet system, particularly its economic and technological base, and help compel the Soviets both to agree to reductions in nuclear arms and perhaps to begin to change their own system toward greater openness.

He made those points publicly time and again as he challenged President Gerald R. Ford for the Republican nomination in 1976 and then as he ran against, and defeated, President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election. Reagan's advisers during these two presidential campaigns have emphasized that those ideas originated with Reagan.

Reagan as Cold War Leader

After an initial period of disorganization, the Reagan Administration, over the course of 1982 and early 1983, established in a series of highly classified national security directives its fundamental Cold War policy, which formally enshrined Reagan's own beliefs and served as the single, unifying framework for the administration's approach throughout the rest of Reagan's presidency. Those directives set out a few basic objectives. The first was to "contain and reverse the expansion of Soviet control and military presence throughout the world." The second was "[t]o foster, if possible in concert with our allies, restraint in Soviet military spending, discourage Soviet adventurism, and weaken the Soviet alliance system by forcing the USSR to bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings, and to encourage long-term liberalizing and nationalist tendencies within the Soviet Union and allied countries." The administration would aim to promote "the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the privileged ruling elite is gradually reduced." The third objective was to negotiate with the Soviets.

The Reagan Administration believed itself to be embarking on a new and ambitious Cold War policy, one guided by the President's own aims and ideas. The policy papers evidenced a special attention to the political, economic, and technological weaknesses of the Soviet Union, and to how the United States could shape the decision-making environment in which Soviet leaders acted. The papers also show that the administration looked to a new, younger generation of Soviet leaders for the kind of interlocutor who might be willing to introduce more flexibility in Soviet policy. While the administration set out the general means by which it would pursue its policy—for example, a vigorous military competition, efforts to destabilize the Sovi-

et economy, covert action, and public diplomacy—it did so more as a means of providing options rather than dictating specific measures, and thus gave itself strategic flexibility in carrying out its policy objectives.

The Reagan Administration also set forth proposals for arms negotiations with the Soviet Union that called for deep reductions in each side's nuclear arsenal. As its plan for intermediate-range nuclear forces, or INF, talks, the administration proposed that if the Soviet Union eliminated its intermediate-range missiles, the United States would not deploy its own missiles, which it had planned to do in Western Europe in 1983. On strategic weapons, Reagan insisted that the name of the talks be changed from SALT, or Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, to START, or Strategic Arms Reduction Talks. He set out a START plan that called for dramatic cuts in strategic weapons, particularly on the Soviet side. Critics within and outside the administration claimed that Reagan's arms proposals were so radical that he must have put them forward because he did not want to negotiate with the Soviets. In fact, they grew out of Reagan's sincere desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

Many of Reagan's advisers who had not previously known him well were astonished and bemused by his anti-nuclearism. Secretary of State George Shultz was the only figure within the Reagan Administration who sympathized with Reagan's nuclear abolitionism. The others thought it unfeasible and unwise.

Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative—his long-term plan to research a defense against ballistic missiles—in March 1983. The evidence shows that SDI was Reagan's idea. It was a "top-down" initiative. Reagan carefully manipulated the bureaucratic system, acquiring support for the general idea of a missile defense effort from elements of the bureaucracy, particularly the National Security Council staff and Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose backing and technological assessment he thought was needed in order to proceed. He excluded from the process other elements of the bureaucracy, such as the State and Defense Departments, whose support he did not think was needed and whom he correctly thought would try to

impede the initiative. Reagan ensured that he would be able to announce the initiative at the time and on the terms of his choosing by having the announcement prepared by a very small group under his supervision and with his own extensive involvement in the drafting of the speech. SDI, as it was announced, corresponded to his own priorities and instincts.

Reagan saw SDI as a means of accomplishing his objective of a nuclear-free world. An effective missile defense, he believed, could render ballistic missiles "impotent and obsolete." In his eyes, such a defense would make not just ballistic missiles but all nuclear weapons negotiable, and would spur talks, first with the Soviet Union and then with the other nuclear powers, that would result in the elimination of all nuclear arms. He thought that the United States could then share a defense system, and that an "internationalized" defense would serve to guarantee security in a nuclear-free world. None of Reagan's advisers adhered to his vision of SDI as the catalyst for and guarantor of a world without nuclear weapons. But from the inception of the initiative through the rest of his presidency, Reagan held unwaveringly to that vision of SDI.

Few of Reagan's advisers knew what to make of SDI. Largely because of the vehement and sustained negative Soviet reaction to the initiative, it soon came to occupy a central role in U.S.–Soviet relations. All of Reagan's principal advisers, and Reagan himself, came to see it as a source of leverage over the Soviets in arms control negotiations. It appeared that Soviet fears of the economic and technological ramifications of SDI led the Soviet Union to engage seriously in arms reduction negotiations in order to constrain the initiative.

Some of Reagan's advisers, especially Shultz and arms control adviser Paul Nitze, who were skeptical regarding the feasibility of SDI, sought to use it as an actual bargaining chip in arms control talks, to be traded away for reductions in Soviet offensive strategic forces. Others, particularly in the Defense Department, resisted any moves to trade away SDI and intended to develop it steadily so that if the initiative proved feasible it could be deployed and improve deterrence. Reagan adhered to pursuing his unique vision of SDI, which constrained what

his advisers could do by way of shaping and using the initiative to achieve their own goals. In serving as an arbiter of the various views within the administration, Reagan adopted those that seemed to him to advance his own objectives and rejected those that did not. Most of Reagan's advisers flatly opposed his nuclear abolitionism and his desire to share a missile defense, and many of them tried to dissuade him or "finesse" his objectives by rendering them unattainable. But Reagan worked steadily to realize his concept. At important junctures, enough of Reagan's advisers supported various elements of it for him to proceed as he wanted; and when they did not, he kept to his view but sought to bring it about at a different time.

Reagan as Diplomat

Before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Reagan and his advisers, in a series of speeches and exchanges with the Soviets, reached out to the USSR in an effort to broaden the dialogue between the two countries. Reagan did not expect to make much progress with the existing Soviet leadership, but thought the United States should lay out for the future a program that extended beyond arms negotiations. The purpose was to help encourage the Soviets to come to the conclusion that making changes within the USSR was in their own best interest.

After Gorbachev took power in March 1985, most in the Reagan Administration did not know what to expect from the new Soviet leader, although a number were cautiously optimistic. Reagan saw it as a particularly promising development. He had always been interested in and attuned to the vulnerabilities of the Soviet Union. In 1985 and 1986 Reagan grew increasingly confident that the Soviet internal system was in terrible shape and that the U.S. arms buildup would soon help compel the Soviets to agree to reduce nuclear weapons and perhaps to begin changing their system. In Gorbachev he saw the potential for the kind of interlocutor who might move in those directions. Reagan was encouraged in that regard by his first meeting with Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985, during which the two men spent a significant amount of time in one-on-one sessions. The issue of SDI dominated the summit. Gorbachev

made clear that blocking SDI was a principal aim of the Soviet Union and that it was the sole condition on which he would agree to arms reductions or even an improvement in relations overall. Underlying Gorbachev's insistence on limiting SDI was a persistent defensiveness concerning the USSR's economic and technological circumstances.

Throughout 1986, Reagan and his advisers paid increasing attention to the economic difficulties of the USSR. Reagan was particularly optimistic that Gorbachev might be compelled to introduce broad changes in Soviet policy and the Soviet regime itself.

Reagan as Negotiator

The outcome of Reagan's meeting with Gorbachev at Reykjavik in October 1986 has long puzzled journalists and scholars. The transcripts from Reykjavik make clear that the course of the meetings was largely shaped by Reagan's nuclear abolitionism and his conviction that that goal was close at hand. At the meeting, Gorbachev set out a number of important concessions that suddenly made the U.S. delegation believe that agreements on deep reductions in strategic and intermediate-range nuclear weapons were possible. After a day and a half of haggling between Reagan and Gorbachev, Reagan proposed that they abolish all nuclear weapons. Gorbachev agreed, and so did Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. They planned to turn over the details of abolition to a team that could prepare a treaty to be signed in Washington. But Gorbachev insisted that SDI must be restricted to the laboratory. Reagan tried to convince Gorbachev of his vision of SDI as the guarantor of a nuclear-free world, but Gorbachev replied that if he agreed to a deal without killing SDI, he "could not go back to Moscow"; he "would be called a dummy and not a leader." Neither would budge, and there the meeting ended.

Reagan was furious that he had come so close to achieving his goal but that Gorbachev had held nuclear abolition hostage to doing away with SDI. Yet Reagan and his advisers believed that Reykjavik had been a success, because Gorbachev had made a number of concessions that they thought would be difficult for him to retract, and because they felt

that Gorbachev, having failed to secure economic relief by curtailing the arms race in offensive and defensive technologies, might look to more systemic changes.

During Reagan's last two years in office, he and Gorbachev deepened their relationship as the number of issues on the U.S.–Soviet agenda broadened and as Gorbachev undertook a series of steps that began to change Soviet foreign and domestic policy. Reagan, more so than most of his advisers, saw those changes as transformational.

He continued to pursue his goal of nuclear abolition. Reagan's dream of a nuclear-free world protected by an internationalized missile defense is, of course, unrealized. Yet he and Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty in 1987, which eliminated an entire category of nuclear weapons for the first time, and he laid the foundation for President George H.W.

Bush to complete the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. The United States and Russia, no longer enemies, have concluded several agreements to make vast cuts in their respective nuclear arsenals. The Soviet Union is no more, the direct threat from Russia to the United States is small, and Russian and U.S. nuclear forces are greatly reduced. Additionally, plans to build an extensive missile defense continue in the United States. The current effort derives from Reagan's initiative, although the strategic rationale for it has evolved as the strategic environment has changed.

Reagan's approach to nuclear weapons was specific and singular, and its impact on U.S. policy was substantial.

— *Paul Lettow is the author of Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (New York: Random House, 2005).*