ANATOLY DOBRYNIN

IN CONFIDENCE

MOSCOW'S AMBASSADOR
TO AMERICA'S SIX
COLD WAR PRESIDENTS
(1962–1986)

RANDOM HOUSE

logue or negotiations with the Soviet Union. He privately discussed the subject of a possible summit. Reagan began to understand the danger of basing foreign policy solely on ideology; he combined militancy with a growing degree of pragmatism toward the Soviet Union, and his main diplomatic principle became negotiation from strength. In September of 1984 Reagan told the UN General Assembly session: "America has restored its might. . . . We are prepared for constructive negotiations with the Soviet Union." After Reagan's reelection and Gorbachev's accession to power, the dialogue about their possible meeting intensified. Yet despite all these contradictions, their face-to-face meeting in Geneva in 1985 was successful enough to give important impetus to a new process of detente, the old process having been destroyed by Carter and then by Reagan himself.

One of the keys to the puzzle of this unique personality was that opponents and experts alike clearly underestimated him. The president proved to be a much deeper person than he first appeared. There is no denying that Reagan had a poor conception of our relations and did not like examining their intricacies, especially those concerning arms negotiations, or that his ideological prejudices sometimes prevented him from realistic assessments and pushed him toward damaging confrontational rhetoric. Yet he struck it lucky, and more often than any other president. His supposedly guileless personality also helped him to get away with many things; he fully deserved the nickname of the "Teflon president" conferred on him by admiring Americans.

Reagan was endowed with natural instinct, flair, and optimism. His imagination supported big ideas like the SDI. He presented his own image skillfully, and it appealed to millions. In no small measure it was rooted in his confident and promising nature, which was not necessarily prompted by wisdom and knowledge but by personal conviction and character. He skillfully manipulated public opinion by means of strong illustrative catchwords which oversimplified complex questions and therefore flew straight over the heads of the professionals into the hearts and minds of the millions, for good or ill. Not infrequently he was accused of trying to apply a primitive approach which made him reluctant to examine questions properly and conscientiously. These accusations were largely justified.

But his overriding strength lay in his ability, whether deliberate or instinctive I was never quite sure, to combine the incompatible in the outward simplicity of his approach and in his conviction that his views were correct, even if they were sometimes erroneous or untenable. The point is, he knew they were nevertheless supported by the population and by his own evident stubborn and even dogged determination to put his ideas into effect.

Consider, for example, his successful defense of the zero option for

medium-range missiles in Europe. When he first made his proposal to wipe all of them out, no one believed the idea would last, not even the Americans. It appeared too biased in America's favor to be acceptable to anyone. But Reagan stuck to his guns against all Soviet attempts to block the deployment of the American missiles by diplomatic negotiation, propaganda pressure on the West European public, and a long and fierce public debate. There is no escaping the fact that under this pressure Moscow gradually revised its views on general strategic parity and its approach to the negotiations on limiting nuclear missiles. In short, the Soviet leadership had to accept the zero option as it applied to its own SS-20s as the most suitable under the circumstances, although at the end of the day it meant that billions of rubles had been wasted because of our own hasty decision to deploy the missiles in the first place.

This example can hardly be described as embodying the general failure of arms control and a triumphant victory for Reagan's rearmament policy. In fact these problems would not have appeared at all, had it not been for Carter's and Reagan's own arms buildup, which pushed the Soviet Union into striving to preserve nuclear parity. This cost both countries enormously in military spending and seriously hampered our search to normalize our relations and the world situation and to reverse the arms race. Yet one of the moments at which strategists in the Soviet Union started to reconsider their positions was when Reagan announced his SDI program in 1983. We realized we were approaching a very dangerous situation in the strategic balance. Perhaps we overestimated the military significance of Star Wars, but its unveiling made us think about the situation once again and thus brought us closer to arms control.

Reagan's perseverance in demanding verification in the process of reducing nuclear arms—*doveryai no proveryai,* trust but verify, an incantation he never tired of repeating in Russian—also contributed to the development of joint control systems which had been a stumbling block for Soviet leaders from Khrushchev to Chernenko.

Consider also the problem of the elimination of strategic missiles. Reagan sometimes shared with the public his dream of a world without them, but no one, not even the closest members of his entourage, took him seriously. His appeals were dismissed as rhetoric, and indeed they were not without propaganda content. But as it later transpired, Reagan really meant it. The whole world had a chance to see this when Reagan, much to his European allies' surprise and dismay, told Gorbachev in Reykjavik that under certain conditions he was ready for both nations to get rid of all their long-range nuclear missiles. It was both his fanatical conviction that the SDI was not a bargaining chip and Gorbachev's intransigence that prevented them from reaching an agreement on major nuclear missile reductions.

Gorbachev at that moment was far more alarmed by Reagan's commitment to SDI than he was encouraged by his unexpected readiness to make sharp reductions in nuclear arsenals. But it was at Reykjavik nevertheless that Gorbachev put away passion and decided that he could and would work with Reagan. He saw in him a person capable of taking great decisions, and Gorbachev himself told me so when we returned to Moscow.

A careful examination of Reagan's political career shows that he was essentially pragmatic and more flexible than his rhetoric would lead anyone to believe. That helps explain the turn in his policy toward the Soviet Union, which both his fondest supporters and most committed opponents believed unthinkable.

I do not think he made serious changes in his general ideological outlook. He evolved by gradually accepting the truth that in the real world of both the Soviet Union and the United States, important changes were taking place, and that one-sided confrontation was against the spirit of the time. Moreover, he realized his unbending opposition would hamper his own plans which, in the final analysis, were aimed at finding a proper place in American history by creating a safer world. And finally, whatever its huge cost, his rearmament program gave him the self-confidence to face the Soviet Union at the negotiating table.

Some Americans, especially those seeking to justify Reagan's enormous arms buildup and tough foreign policy, still maintain that it was the principal cause of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. I cannot agree with that. Reagan's second term coincided with the appearance of a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Without Gorbachev, there is no way that the Cold War would have ended. But if Reagan had also been far-sighted enough to divine the Soviet Union's true motives and agreed to the disarmament treaties that were already on the table, that would have ended the Cold War without the crushing military expenditures he laid on the backs of the American people.

Instead, the four summit meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev became the important milestones as both leaders and their nations gradually changed direction. Both played their part in the turn. Reagan was followed by George Bush, who participated even more vigorously in improving our relations, and it was during that period that the Cold War ended. Our relations were even better at that point than during the first years of detente. The suspicious Soviet leadership became convinced that the road to international security lay through agreements with the United States on drastic reductions of nuclear and conventional weapons. The windows of opportunity for international cooperation were wide open. And then, suddenly, the Soviet Union disintegrated within days in 1991. Was it the result of foreign intervention or influence? Had the evil empire been brought down at last by the policies of the Reagan administration, as its supporters still believe?

Even under the worst possible scenario, which would have been the continuation of the Cold War and the arms race up to the very end of Reagan's presidency, the answer would still be no. Had the implacable pressure of an arms race continued, the Politburo under Gorbachev or anybody else who advocated a tough, militaristic policy would have had no lack of support from the military-industrial complex and more important from the whole country. If it had been necessary, the Soviet people would have fallen in with a massive rearmament program against a restored enemy number one in the United States. If the leaders of the Soviet Union had pictured the American military buildup as a threat to the existence of the nation, the Soviet people would have responded, I have no doubt about it, with patriotic understanding because all Russians bear the memory of the horrors of World War II—or what we call the Great Patriotic War. The Soviet Union was a totalitarian state, and it is unrealistic to believe that any political opposition would have been able to stage, let alone win, a debate over the relative merits of military versus civilian spending, especially against anything seen as a threat to the Motherland. Soviet citizens would have tightened their belts and seen it as part of a war for national survival.

Sadly for the ardent followers of Reagan, the increased Soviet defense spending provoked by Reagan's policies was not the straw that broke the back of the evil empire. We did not bankrupt ourselves in the arms race, as the Caspar Weinbergers of this world would like to believe. The Soviet response to Star Wars caused only an acceptable small rise in defense spending. Throughout the Reagan presidency, the rising Soviet defense effort contributed to our economic decline, but only marginally as it had in previous years. The troubles in our economy were the result of our own internal contradictions of autarky, low investment, and lack of innovation, as even Western economic specialists at the World Bank and elsewhere now believe.

It may sound like a historical paradox, in particular for Reagan's admirers, but if the president had not abandoned his hostile stance toward the Soviet Union for a more constructive one during his second term, Gorbachev would not have been able to launch his reforms and his "new thinking." Quite the contrary, Gorbachev would have been forced to continue the conservative foreign and domestic policies of his predecessors in defense of the nation against America. And who knows how the world then would have developed?

All this does not of course mean that the Cold War and the Reagan presidency had no impact on the Soviet Union, its economy, and its prob-

As a result of his maneuvering, Yakovlev managed to gain control over the ideology, which was ultimately entrusted to him after Gorbachev made him a full-fledged Politburo member and his closest associate. Yakovlev became Gorbachev's evil mastermind in inducing him to destroy the very structures of the party that upheld Gorbachev's power.

Gorbachev himself never remained too close or too long with any of his associates. He could easily abandon a former colleague, leaving him bitter and disappointed. It was not by accident that after his fall, not a single one of the Politburo members later defended the former general secretary and president.

There was no personal friendship among the Soviet leaders, neither did their families maintain close contact. To some extent, this can be explained by the psychological factor of being constantly accompanied and monitored by the KGB. We all met only at official parties devoted to national holidays, or at dinners in honor of high-ranking foreign guests, or at annual dinners given by the Gorbachevs at their summer place near Yalta in the Crimea. All Politburo members and party secretaries who happened to be vacationing at the resort were always invited.

The wooden house where these dinners took place had been built for Stalin on the territory of the summer residence of Czar Aleksandr III. The atmosphere at dinner was quite amicable. The only thing that somewhat spoiled it was the tradition for everyone in turn to pronounce a toast to the general secretary and his spouse. Gorbachev seemed to like it. Gromyko, the eldest among us, would be the first to start the ceremony with a solemn but dull toast.

Gorbachev's major lever of power was his right to nominate top government, party, and military officials at Politburo meetings. This nomination was tantamount to the final appointment, for nobody wanted to contradict him. He tried to place his people everywhere.

Apart from approving the nominations, the Politburo discussed all kinds of questions of foreign and domestic policy, industrial development, and party affairs. Only military issues were not discussed in detail; for these there was a special restricted body, the Supreme Military Council, again headed by Gorbachev. Because of this, not all Politburo members were aware of what was going on in the military field. This perfectly suited the military-industrial complex which covertly exerted its influence on the general secretary. As time went by, however, Gorbachev started to take the top brass in hand in a way that Brezhnev rarely if ever did.

The Summit at Reykjavik

When I was appointed as the head of the Central Committee's International Department I did not have a clear idea about its functions. It had a staff of about two hundred virtually covering the globe. I had thought the department played an active and important role in Soviet foreign policy, but I soon realized it dealt mostly with Communist and other left-wing parties as well as radical international organizations and mass movements, both in the West and in the Third World. All contacts with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe were handled by a separate department of the Secretariat. I was surprised to discover the International Department was really not involved with Soviet foreign policy outside the Third World and would therefore come to prominence only occasionally, in such countries as Angola, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and so on. The department did not concern itself with our relations and negotiations with the United States and Western Europe and was not active in dealing with them. It was also outside the arms control process. I looked up the old charter of the department, which had been approved many years ago, and found it dealt only with similar parties in other countries. Nothing about foreign policy.

There were historical reasons for this. At the start of the Soviet regime Lenin declared there would be two policies—those of the Narkomindel (the Foreign Ministry) and the Comintern (the Communist International)—and when they did not contradict each other, they were to be pursued with equal fervor. But when they were in conflict, the ideological interests of the Comintern were to be subordinated to the normal foreign policy goals of the Soviet state as pursued by the Narkomindel. However, the two lines of policy were always present and often got mixed up in the minds of the Soviet leaders—suffice it to recall the tangle of our relations with Hanoi during the Vietnam War. Some policies were the direct result of ideology, and the propaganda associated with them did not always produce the best image of the intentions of the Soviet Union. Foreigners could easily ascribe to the Masters of Moscow some global conspiracy or sinister expansionist plot.

By inertia the International Department followed the line of the Comintern while the Foreign Ministry handled the foreign policy of the country.

I spoke with Gorbachev about the absurdity of this, and he asked me to draft a new charter reflecting his new policies. In May of 1986 I gave him a detailed memo with a draft charter, which he approved quickly. In addition to its traditional relations with foreign parties of the left, it was charged with maintaining and implementing the party line—that is, Gorbachev's new line—in "cardinal questions of foreign policy and questions of all interna-

tional relations in general." To strengthen the department's new structure, I obtained Gorbachev's permission to transfer several diplomatic heavyweights and specialists from the Foreign Ministry, including Georgi Kornienko, who had been Gromyko's deputy and continued as first deputy to his successor as foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. Kornienko became my first deputy. I was also joined by Vitaly Churkin, an able diplomat who later became deputy foreign minister. We also brought in some experts on arms control negotiations.

This was a good start to move us into foreign policy, and the department began to participate in negotiations with the United States and preparations for the Soviet-American summit meetings. But most important was that this was the period when Gorbachev was beginning to formulate what he called his "new thinking" in foreign policy. On the eve of the Geneva summit of 1985, as I watched him, his mind was still fastened on some of the class mythology and ideology that obscured the world and led him into inconsistencies. But at Geneva he quickly realized the prime importance of constructive relations with the United States, and after Geneva he staked much on a direct dialogue with the Americans at the highest level, aiming first of all at agreements on mutual security and arms control.

In 1986 Gorbachev emphasized the importance of maintaining "the spirit of Geneva" and announced his disarmament program for a "non-nuclear world by the year 2000." He wanted a second meeting with Reagan and was restless and impatient; during the previous year an active personal correspondence of more than twenty-five messages had developed between them. Gorbachev had enjoyed the great publicity he received from the summit. But this time he wanted a meeting with significant results. He mentioned it several times to the Politburo in the first half of 1986, but without going into details of what the agenda might be, although Star Wars was constantly on his mind as a potential obstacle to success.

By the end of February 1986 he confided to some of his assistants: "Maybe it is time to stop being afraid of SDI? The United States is counting on our readiness to build the same kind of costly system, hoping meanwhile that they will win this race using their technological superiority. But our scientists tell me that if we want to destroy or neutralize the American SDI system, we only would have to spend 10 percent of what the Americans plan to spend." He added that the cost of our own SDI system would be more than 500 billion rubles, a huge sum.

But under the influence of our military-industrial complex, Gorbachev gradually began to revert to his insistence on Reagan's withdrawal from SDI as the condition for the success of a new summit on disarmament. He was

persuaded that an SDI system would give the United States a first-strike advantage in nuclear conflicts.

No final decision on the summit had been taken by the Politburo by the time Gorbachev left for his summer vacation in the Crimea. While there he telephoned me—I was on vacation, too—to say that he decided to propose to Reagan that they meet during the autumn at some point between Moscow and Washington, perhaps London or Reykjavik. Their principal subject would be nuclear disarmament. Shevardnadze had already approved the idea, and Gorbachev was asking my opinion before submitting it to the Politburo.

I supported the idea but asked Gorbachev exactly what it was about nuclear disarmament that he wanted to discuss with Reagan. He answered that he intended to propose really deep cuts in strategic arms if the president would abandon SDI. I told him I was not so sure that Reagan would abandon his favorite project, but Gorbachev said he would insist on it. Who knows—he wondered—maybe Reagan would ultimately yield on SDI in exchange for the huge reductions in nuclear weapons he professed to want. If not, Gorbachev still hoped to gain worldwide publicity for his radical ideas on nuclear disarmament.

Gorbachev met Reagan in Reykjavik on October 11–12, 1986, and both came away bitterly disappointed.

The meeting itself was highly dramatic. For the first time in the history of our relations, there appeared the possibility of an agreement on the substantial reduction of strategic nuclear arms. Surprisingly, Reagan agreed to the idea of substantial cuts and even complete elimination after a decade. But he refused to undertake obligations under the antiballistic missile treaty that could have prevented the United States from pursuing the Star Wars project. Gorbachev tried hard to persuade Reagan to moderate his position but without success.

One episode remains pinned in my memory. Gorbachev and Reagan had ended their long and heated negotiations at midnight without agreement and left the conference building together, walking in silence. They stopped to bid each other goodbye as they reached the president's car. I happened to be nearby and served as impromptu interpreter. A short conversation followed in the cold Icelandic night.

Gorbachev, his voice ringing with bitterness he could hardly hide, said: "Mr. President, you have missed the unique chance of going down in history as a great president who paved the way for nuclear disarmament."

Reagan replied gloomily, "That applies to both of us."

On the drive to the airport Reagan was silent for a long time. His chief of staff, Donald Regan rode with him and later told me that the president fi-

nally broke the silence by saying: "Don, together with Gorbachev we were very close to agreement. It's a shame." Then he raised his thumb and index finger half an inch apart: "We were that close." The president was shattered.

At that very moment I was riding with Gorbachev to meet the press in a separate building. He was very angry with Reagan's stubbornness on SDI, which he considered the major reason for the failure of the meeting. Gorbachev was eager to denounce Reagan at his press conference; we who were with him were trying to calm him down. After a ride of ten or fifteen minutes he regained his self-control. He told us that he was going to criticize Reagan strongly, but he would not close the door to future meetings lest the press characterize the meeting as a total failure instead of the first step toward an agreement.

As an eyewitness at Reykjavik, I feel Gorbachev was no less responsible than Reagan for its failure because he held SDI hostage for the success of the meeting. He held good cards with impressive disarmament proposals, and he could have played them far better if he had not been as stubborn on SDI as Reagan. It could have been postponed for further consideration if they had reached agreement on a deep reduction of nuclear weapons, and as a matter of fact Gorbachev followed that bargaining strategy in later negotiations toward the end of the Reagan administration.

At the Politburo meeting to review Reykjavik, Gorbachev was still angry at Reagan but said the meeting with him was worthwhile after all. First, it showed to the world that the Soviet leadership was really prepared for serious discussion of disarmament; second, Reagan unexpectedly demonstrated his readiness to negotiate nuclear arms reduction; third, America's NATO partners in Europe would be critical of Reagan's insistence on continuing SDI at all costs.

Gorbachev was in fact already looking toward his next meeting with Reagan. The old guard in the Politburo and the military-industrial complex covertly opposed his "new thinking" and his plans for accommodation with the United States, but he overcame them by proclaiming his firm intention to carry out his new foreign policy, fully aware that he could count on the party and on the public support he then enjoyed.

Gorbachev in a Hurry

Gorbachev's manner of handling the work of the Politburo was gradually changing. His style became more authoritarian and commanding. The discussion of foreign policy questions by the Politburo had undergone transformations under Gorbachev. Initially the agendas for all the meetings Gorbachev had scheduled with foreign leaders, especially the Americans and

whether in Moscow or abroad, were minutely discussed by the Politburo. Gromyko had usually presented the foreign ministry's discussion papers, drafts of documents to be signed, and other paraphernalia of such international meetings. But when Shevardnadze became foreign minister, fewer papers were presented or discussed. Gorbachev clearly strove to avoid Politburo guidelines and directives and sought a free hand in dealing with foreign heads of state. Ultimately, with Shevardnadze's help, Gorbachev reached his goal. In fact if not in form, he single-handedly devised the foreign policy of the country and implemented it as well.

This could clearly be seen from his personal handling of the strategic arms limitation talks with American Presidents Reagan and then Bush. Gorbachev increasingly improvised and without consulting our experts would agree to sudden compromises which were often regarded by our military as one-sided concessions to the Americans. One example of Gorbachev's style stands out in my memory.

In April of 1987 Secretary Shultz went to Moscow to negotiate with Gorbachev on Euromissiles. The Soviet leadership was prepared to trade off its SS-20 missiles and other weapons for the comparable U.S. missiles that had been deployed in Europe since 1983. The Euromissiles we were discussing had ranges from 500 to 1,500 kilometers. Under the proposed deal both sides would destroy these intermediate-range missiles, but the military insisted on keeping our modern arsenal of more than one hundred SS-23s, with a range of only 400 kilometers. Before Shultz's arrival, Gorbachev had asked Marshal Akhromeyev and me to prepare a negotiating memo with a summary of both sides' positions. Akhromeyev specifically recommended that if Shultz tried to include the SS-23, Gorbachev should refuse because its range was below that covered in the treaty draft.

In our earlier negotiations, the American side attempted but did not press for including the SS-23s, But when Shultz arrived, he was more insistent on scrapping the new missiles. At first Gorbachev ignored this, but toward the end of the meeting, Shultz raised the SS-23 again. He stressed that if Gorbachev would agree to include these missiles, he could say with confidence that we would be very close to a treaty that could soon be signed in Washington at the coming summit meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan in Washington.

After a moment of hesitation, Gorbachev, to the great surprise of Akhromeyev and myself, said to Shultz, "It's a deal." He shook hands with Shultz, and the principals departed.

Akhromeyev was stunned and asked if I knew why Gorbachev had shifted his position at the last moment. I was as mystified as he was. The marshal turned and rushed to the general secretary's office. Half an hour later