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AUTOPSY  
ON  
AN EMPIRE



*The American Ambassador's Account  
of the Collapse of the Soviet Union*



Random House New York

had agreed to such terminology in joint documents over the objection of Soviet specialists like myself. Both Nixon and Kissinger seemed to believe that the words were meaningless and, since the American public was indifferent, they were cheap bones to throw to a dullard like Brezhnev, who might be persuaded to ease our way out of Vietnam if we were nice enough to him. Unfortunately, such terminology was not meaningless to the Soviet leaders, and our acceptance of it was one of the factors (along with a number of more important ones) that persuaded Brezhnev and his cronies that they could inject military force into Third World conflicts with impunity.

Reagan took ideology more seriously than Nixon had and was determined to avoid words that might mean different things to different people. He had been accused by Soviet propagandists of "warmongering" and was eager to put his commitment to peace on the record. But he wanted to make a straightforward, nonideological statement to convey the idea he had already used in some of his speeches: "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

I doubted that the Soviets would accept a simple formulation at Geneva. If they refused it, we were prepared to have no statement at all. However, after initially pressing for the usual "peaceful coexistence," Soviet negotiators consulted Gorbachev and then accepted verbatim Reagan's direct statement that a nuclear war could not be won and must never be fought. This was a major reversal of Soviet policy.

Since the Soviet Union could attack Western Europe with conventional forces, we Americans also insisted that any joint statement exclude a conventional war as well. Traditionally, Soviet representatives had insisted that both countries pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons, but this would have prevented the United States from using nuclear weapons to defend Western Europe from conventional Soviet attack. To our pleasant surprise, Soviet negotiators at Geneva abandoned their previous position and agreed to a statement that it was necessary to prevent "any war between them, whether nuclear or conventional."<sup>20</sup> Thus, after decades of argument, we had spelled out a doctrine acceptable to both sides.

Normally, I am impatient with hairsplitting in declarations and joint statements. Often the issues are trivial, comprehensible only to specialists, and not worth the negotiating effort when the document has no legal force. But this time, the language was important, not so much for what it said (the statement reflected what had long been the actual policy

of both countries) but for the way in which it was said. Gorbachev had demonstrated that he was prepared to deal with the central issue of war and peace without recourse to disingenuous formulas.

The Geneva summit also produced a number of agreements that had been negotiated in advance, including a much-expanded program of exchanges that included many of the ideas Reagan had proposed.

The Carter administration had refused to extend the previous exchange agreement following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Although Soviet troops were still fighting in Afghanistan, we felt that these exchanges were important for the long-term influence they could exert in the Soviet Union. Refusal to support people-to-people contacts simply reinforced the iron curtain, which we should have been puncturing, not strengthening. The best way to get the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, I felt, was to give concrete assistance to the resistance forces there. I was pleased that we were finally able to make a distinction between moves that bring real pressure to bear and those that are self-defeating in the long run.

### Rocky Road to Reykjavik

DESPITE THE IMPROVED tone after the Geneva meeting, 1986 was not an easy year for Gorbachev's foreign policy. When Reagan proposed two subsequent meetings, one in Washington and one in Moscow, Gorbachev accepted with alacrity, but when we tried to schedule the Washington meeting, he equivocated, demanding assurance that a substantial arms control agreement would be signed. Reagan was not opposed to signing an agreement if one could be concluded, but did not want to risk the charge that he had made concessions just for the sake of a meeting. He therefore refused to give advance assurances or to make negotiating concessions opposed by his advisers.

This led Gorbachev to suspect that Reagan was using negotiations as an end in themselves, to lull the American public and U.S. allies without intending to reach an agreement. Nevertheless, Gorbachev began step by step to alter Soviet negotiating positions.

In January 1986, he made a well-publicized proposal to phase out all nuclear weapons by the year 2000 that impressed Reagan favorably. In contrast to most of his advisers, Reagan believed nuclear weapons could and should be abolished, and now, for the first time, a Soviet leader was

making concrete proposals to that end. Nevertheless, many of the details were not acceptable to him, and the way Gorbachev made his proposal (in a letter released to the press as soon as it was delivered) raised suspicions that his intent was propaganda rather than agreement.

In the same letter, Gorbachev followed up on the hint he had dropped in Paris a few months back and abandoned the rigid linkage Gromyko had imposed on the three nuclear arms negotiations: the Soviet Union, he announced, would no longer require agreement in all three before any could be settled. It would now be possible to agree on intermediate-range missiles and on-site inspection even if strategic and defensive weapons remained under negotiation.

In February, Gorbachev addressed a second major foreign policy issue when he called the war in Afghanistan a "running sore." This ended the boast that Soviet troops in Afghanistan were merely doing their "international duty." Henceforth, Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan was to be treated as a problem that needed to be solved. Although it took two more torturous years before Gorbachev made an acceptable proposal and three years before the Soviet troops were actually out, the end was in sight from 1986.

Shevardnadze was also busy changing the Soviet approach to diplomacy. He began to reassign many senior Soviet diplomats in April 1986, and on May 23 he organized a conference of Soviet diplomats and foreign policy professionals to explain "new thinking." Henceforth, Soviet diplomats were expected to discard the old technique of bluster and naysaying and instead cultivate the art of persuasion.

Western diplomats regarded "new thinking," with interest but caution. Most of us wanted something more tangible than words. But then we began to notice that many hard-line Soviet diplomats were being retired to vague consultancies in Moscow, while younger professionals with accomplished linguistic and social skills were moving up with unprecedented speed. Shevardnadze had begun to shape the Soviet diplomatic establishment in his own, rather than Gromyko's, image.

These changes did not immediately close the gap between the Soviet and U.S. positions on arms control, and Washington and Moscow continued throughout the summer of 1986 to dicker over the date of the next summit meeting. Gorbachev refused to come to Washington for a summit unless he could sign an arms control agreement, but the negotiations in Geneva made little progress.

In early fall, Gorbachev proposed in a secret message that a quick

"preparatory" meeting be held in a third country. This was not to take the place of the next full U.S.-Soviet summit, which he agreed should be in Washington, but would be a short working meeting to settle on the agreements to be signed in Washington.

To prove that he was literally willing to meet Reagan halfway, Gorbachev suggested Reykjavik, Iceland, a location four to five hours' flying time for each. He ignored a factor that his predecessors would have considered important: Iceland was not a neutral country, as Switzerland had been, but one of America's NATO allies, and therefore, in a political sense, he would be traveling more than halfway.

Though Reagan wanted a full-scale summit in Washington—he was particularly eager to show Gorbachev the United States—he agreed to a more limited meeting, and the two met in Reykjavik on October 11 and 12, 1986.

Contrary to the public impression that the meeting was improvised, both leaders had prepared their positions carefully, though rapidly and with tight security. Their correspondence and diplomatic contacts had given each a reasonably accurate understanding of what the other sought. For Gorbachev, arms control was the key issue; for Reagan it was important, but only part of his broader agenda.

Since the meeting in Iceland had been planned as a working session and not a full-fledged summit, there were no frills and no social engagements. Reagan and Gorbachev met both days, with breaks for lunch with their own delegations, and two negotiating groups, one on arms reduction and the other on regional and bilateral issues, met through the night.

During a working breakfast on October 11 at the small but comfortable American ambassador's residence, we reviewed the key issues with the president and then held a mock session. I played Gorbachev, speaking in Russian through an interpreter. During a similar exercise just before the Geneva summit, I had accurately guessed Gorbachev's arguments; this time I did not attempt to predict his specific proposals but rather to capture his style of discussion and argumentation.

Subsequently, I took turns with Thomas Simons of the State Department as note taker in the private sessions, was a member of the negotiating team on regional and bilateral issues, and took part in the U.S. team's discussions of arms control issues.

During the morning session the first day, Gorbachev presented a detailed proposal for a comprehensive arms control agreement, which, de-

spite its positive elements, was vague or unacceptable in several respects. Negotiating teams headed by Paul Nitze and Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev worked through the night to clarify the issues. Simultaneously, another group, led by Ambassador Rozanne Ridgway and Alexander Bessmertnykh, dealt with regional conflicts, human rights, and bilateral contacts.

By early Sunday morning, the Soviet approach became clear. Gradually, they were making major concessions on arms control issues but offering very little in other areas.<sup>21</sup> Hope rose that Reagan and Gorbachev could find a common approach for a weapons reduction treaty when they met later that day. Initially, the talks went well, with Gorbachev accepting the U.S. proposals for a 50 percent reduction in heavy Soviet land-based missiles, low numbers for intermediate-range missiles, and extensive on-site inspection. By noon, an agreement on intermediate-range missiles seemed so close that we sent out urgent messages to our ambassadors in Western Europe and Japan to seek out the heads of government to which they were accredited and brief them on the terms. Since it was a Sunday afternoon, that would not be easy in many capitals.

The afternoon session was punctuated by frequent breaks for team consultations and drafting. Both delegations were exhilarated by what promised to be the most comprehensive arms reduction pact in history. It seemed that only two issues of principle remained. First, Gorbachev had proposed to eliminate all nuclear weapons by the year 2000, while Reagan had offered to eliminate all ballistic missiles. Second, Gorbachev was insisting that all research on strategic defense be confined to laboratories, to which Reagan would not agree since he felt that testing outside laboratories would be essential to the program.

To the dismay of his aides, Reagan accepted Gorbachev's proposal for the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons but refused to budge on SDI testing. As a result, the meeting ended with both principals in a glum mood. By evening, the euphoria of midafternoon had turned into resentment. The summit in Washington, which the meeting in Reykjavik had been designed to prepare for, was not scheduled, and this alone would be sufficient cause for the media to label the meeting a failure.

What we all failed to appreciate in the hours just after the meeting ended was that Reagan and Gorbachev had solved more disputed questions

than our leaders had at any previous U.S.-Soviet summit meeting. Our disappointment dominated the initial press briefings<sup>22</sup> and inhibited a clear explanation of what was actually achieved. In fact, the agreements had gone beyond the goals we had set for the meeting, aside from setting a date for Gorbachev to come to Washington. Gorbachev had offered to accept equal and low levels of intermediate-range missiles and to apply the quotas globally. He had also agreed to reduce the heavy intercontinental missiles in the Soviet arsenal by 50 percent, thus conceding a prime U.S. objective. After decades of Soviet resistance, he had espoused the idea of on-site inspection.

Gorbachev had come to Reykjavik with authority to accept the U.S. positions on condition that the agreement preclude sudden deployment of strategic defenses by the United States. Since laboratory work was more important than testing in space at that stage of research in both countries, the United States could have accepted some limitations without crippling the program. But this was not clear to President Reagan, who reacted as if he had been asked to toss his favorite child into an erupting volcano.

The Reykjavik meeting produced breakthroughs that cleared the way for subsequent treaties, and it is just as well that no final agreement was reached at that time. The INF treaty signed the following year was better than what was agreed at Reykjavik, since it eliminated intermediate-range missiles altogether rather than allowing each side to retain a hundred of them. Reagan's consent to a goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons by the year 2000 would have created major problems with Britain and France, which were still determined to maintain independent nuclear forces and which had not been advised that Reagan would make this concession. It was not desirable to signal such a fundamental change in U.S. policy without thorough prior consultation with our allies.

American agreement to a major arms reduction program in the absence of more movement on other issues on the agenda might also have delayed Gorbachev's acceptance of the full agenda. He had come to Reykjavik still believing that he could mend U.S.-Soviet relations by reaching arms control agreements alone. It was only after Reykjavik that he understood that relations could be normalized with the United States only if he dealt with the full agenda of issues, including human rights and raising the iron curtain.

These judgments are possible in retrospect, but at the time they were

not obvious. For several months, a feeling of bitterness and betrayal weighed upon U.S.-Soviet contacts. The leaders had come tantalizingly close to agreement, and each blamed the other for failure. Gorbachev, embarrassed by returning empty-handed despite major concessions, lambasted Reagan to his Politburo colleagues. Military historian and Stalin biographer Dmitri Volkogonov,<sup>23</sup> who reviewed Communist Party archives after the Soviet collapse, told me that Gorbachev's words had been so sharp and insulting that he found it surprising that Gorbachev could face Reagan again.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, as Gorbachev would later remark, he and Reagan were "doomed to cooperate."

### Spies, Diplomats, and a Hostage

THOUGH THE TWO LEADERS dealt with other things at Reykjavik, their meeting took place when the two countries were in the midst of a quarrel over spying.

It started in August, when the FBI arrested a Soviet-citizen employee of the U.N. Secretariat, one Gennady Zakharov, on the charge that he had violated U.S. espionage laws. Unlike diplomats assigned to embassies, employees of the U.N. Secretariat do not enjoy immunity for their unofficial acts and therefore can be prosecuted if they break the law.

Even though Zakharov's arrest was based on solid evidence, the KGB was determined to spring its man. But it faced a problem: there was no American citizen within reach whom they could legitimately arrest for espionage. Therefore, they decided to pick up an innocent American and trump up charges against him. The victim, Nicholas Daniloff, was the Moscow correspondent of *U.S. News and World Report*.

This brazen action transformed a comparatively routine law enforcement action into a major political confrontation. It was not the first time Soviet authorities had tried to force the release of one of their intelligence agents by arresting an American. During the Kennedy administration the KGB had arrested Princeton professor Frederick Barghoorn under such circumstances, but Khrushchev had backed down and ordered his release when Kennedy had protested.

Subsequently, however, when less-prominent Americans had been seized, both the Nixon and Carter administrations had misguidedly negotiated a mutual release. As a result, Americans were put at risk whenever a Soviet citizen without diplomatic immunity was arrested in the United States on charges of espionage.

President Reagan was determined not only to secure Daniloff's release but to put an end to this outrageous practice. To do so, he had to make sure that Daniloff was released quickly without conditions or—failing that—to require the KGB to pay a high price in terms of its own interests.

In direct messages to Gorbachev, Reagan made clear that Daniloff was innocent of the charges brought and insisted that he be released. When Gorbachev equivocated for more than three weeks, Reagan ordered out of the country twenty-five Soviet officials at the United Nations, all of whom we considered likely intelligence agents.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, American officials passed a stern private message to the Soviet government: if it continued to hold Daniloff, further action would follow, and the United States would not tolerate retaliation against the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. We could not allow our embassy to be subjected to reprisals for actions taken in respect to the much larger Soviet installations in the United States. There was no American counterpart in the Soviet Union to the Soviet Mission to the United Nations, and even if there had been one, it would not be proper to expel innocent Americans because of well-founded charges against Soviet intelligence agents in the United States.

Therefore, Soviet representatives were notified that we would insist that our diplomatic establishments be of the same size if there should be any attempt to move against our embassy in Moscow. This would mean a substantial reduction on their part.

Daniloff was allowed to leave the Soviet Union less than two weeks later, by a prior arrangement negotiated by Shultz and Shevardnadze. Zakharov was also permitted to leave the United States after pleading *nolo contendere*, but only on condition that Yuri Orlov, a prominent political prisoner, be released from prison and allowed to come to the United States with his wife.<sup>26</sup> By the end of September, it seemed that the matter was closed.

However, this was not to be. Shortly after the Reykjavik meeting, the Soviets did what we had explicitly warned them not to do: they ordered the departure of five U.S. diplomats in retaliation for the earlier expulsions of Soviets in New York. Two days later, in accord with our earlier warning, the Soviets were notified to remove another 55 "diplomats" (most, if not all, seemed to be intelligence agents) from Washington and San Francisco, and a ceiling of 225 was placed on the Soviet Embassy in Washington and one of 26 on the Soviet Consulate General in San Francisco.