also clear to us as Soviet diplomats during our trips to Moscow. His health declining, he grew less interested in world developments. Gradually he became only indirectly involved in the process of shaping our position at even the most vital talks, including those on strategic arms limitations, although he chaired the meetings that gave the final approval to our positions, if in a rather perfunctory way. Brezhnev was no longer in a position to give any personal impulse to detente, which also contributed to its collapse. Detente, never forget, was in no small measure prompted by the personal ambition and drive of both the Soviet general secretary and his American counterparts. That was one reason personal summit meetings were so important. They were also the last, highest authority to take the most important decisions. Unfortunately, apart from the Nixon period, both capitals underestimated the essential role of these meetings for the open exchange of opinions and mutual assessment of the other's views so they could then be integrated into policy.

The tragic aspect of this was that both Brezhnev and Carter personally favored the principles of detente and slowing the arms race. But things developed in such a way that the Kremlin failed to see in Carter a potential American counterpart who shared that goal. Instead they viewed the administration’s contradictory course in foreign affairs as a plot against Soviet interests. And Carter himself was no great help in the unpredictable and emotional way he conducted foreign policy.

The unreasonable delay in completing the SALT Treaty, which has never been ratified by the American side; the arms race; rivalry over Africa, the Middle East, and Cuba; the public confrontation over human rights; the rapprochement between China and the United States on an anti-Soviet basis—all pushed Soviet-American relations down the scale of American foreign policy priorities while the Carter administration was professing its ideological and political pressure for changes in Soviet foreign and especially domestic policy. It is no surprise that Carter's actions were particularly resented by Moscow while both sides were not trying to understand and accommodate their views on the most controversial issues.

All these factors, combined with the upheavals in the changing world of 1977-79, placed both superpowers in a bitter confrontation. Finally, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan marked the dismantling of the policy of detente, bringing back the cold war.
crowned by the "Star Wars" program, which would have ended the nuclear standoff between the superpowers if it had worked. The Pentagon budget doubled within the first five years of Reagan's presidency, and so did the national debt. All these sacrifices were made for the sake of a strategy of global and regional confrontation with the Soviet Union to repulse communism.

As we in the Soviet Union saw it, Reagan was embarked on a path of breaking the military and strategic parity between the two nations. With characteristically reactive behavior, the Soviet leadership, having spent so much money and effort over the years to attain parity, viewed Reagan with great indignation and suspicion. They regarded his policies as a kind of betrayal of the agreements they had laboriously reached with previous administrations. But Moscow was determined to retain global equilibrium at all costs and to fight Reagan's policy even though they preferred to deal in terms of mutual agreements. They regarded his actions as adventurism.

The outlook was hopelessly gloomy. Tension in international relations grew. Diplomacy became more than ever an exercise in public relations, and the American-Soviet dialogue an exercise in propaganda. I remained the Soviet ambassador during the initial five years of Reagan's presidency before returning home to serve as the secretary of the Communist Party for international relations. Those early Reagan years in Washington were the most difficult and unpleasant I experienced in my long tenure as ambassador. We had practically no room for really constructive diplomatic work. The useful and direct contacts I had long established with the White House were broken.

The principal efforts of the diplomatic services were focused on cushioning the conflicts and preventing the tensions of the revived Cold War from turning into a hot one, but I must say that despite the level of acrimony and rhetorical abuse, I never really felt a sense of dread. Our relations sank to a new low, and the president himself showed signs, however inconsistent, of a desire for agreement with the Soviet Union to reduce the nuclear threat.

I was so depressed that around that time I was thinking of giving up and transferring back to Moscow, but at the same time, Reagan and Brezhnev were exchanging personal letters and trying to reach each other in some inchoate way on a personal level. This was the Reagan paradox.

The hesitant signs of a turn came gradually in the middle of Reagan's first term as president. The first was a characteristically personal gesture by the president when he visited the Soviet Embassy in Washington in November of 1982 to offer condolences for Brezhnev's death. This was followed by the deployment of missiles in Europe over huge popular protests, which strengthened the confidence of both Washington and the Europeans in dealing with Moscow. But there was a hard and bumpy road ahead. There was the president's own behavior, with his vacillations and sporadic anti-Soviet outbreaks in public, and the unsteady situation in the Kremlin caused by frequent changes in its leadership.

From the summer of 1984, the Politburo was increasingly dominated by Mikhail Gorbachev, who often chaired its meetings because of the illness of Chernenko. Without much publicity it took two important decisions, first to renew the disarmament dialogue with the American administration (which was broken off by Andropov later as a protest against Reagan's anti-Soviet behavior), and second to move toward a summit with Reagan. Not that we managed to establish a real dialogue with Washington at once. Moscow still harbored a strong suspicion that the Reagan administration's hesitant turn was prompted exclusively by the forthcoming presidential elections. The administration had no well-developed scheme of promoting relations with the Soviet Union, and strong differences persisted between George Shultz, the taciturn secretary of state, and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who never seemed to tire of leading the Pentagon charge. True, when the large-scale rearmament of the United States had been successfully completed, the president himself showed signs, however inconsistent, of a desire for agreement with the Soviet Union to reduce the nuclear threat.

Reagan had also undergone an evolution as president from opposing contacts with the Soviet Union to using them for domestic political purposes and specific foreign policy goals. He grew increasingly interested in acquiring a favorable political image as a strong president and a peacemaker. More than that, consciously or subconsciously, he began to think about the possibility of some kind of accommodation with Moscow.

After Reagan's reelection in 1984 and Gorbachev's ascension as general secretary in March of 1985, the idea of the first U.S.-Soviet summit in six years began to advance much faster. Gorbachev saw the summit as an important tool for boosting his personal political prestige and normalizing relations with the United States. It would also allow him more room for maneuver in preparing the next Soviet five-year plan, which was to devote fewer resources to the military and develop the civilian economy. Without such a shift, raising living standards would become increasingly difficult.

The first Reagan-Gorbachev summit was held in Geneva on November 19-25, 1985. To the satisfaction of both sides, it turned out that the two were able to talk, and not as irreconcilable antagonists, but as leaders looking for practical solutions. This meeting opened a new epoch, which eventually led to a drastic change in relations between the two countries and elsewhere. My long-cherished hopes for the restoration and development of cooperation...
tion in the spirit of detente appeared to come true. I was personally involved in these dramatic events, and I am going to tell my story of what happened.

A Break with the Past

When he assumed the presidency, Ronald Reagan deliberately and persistently set about breaking with the past. The president and his entourage of radical conservatives lost little time in carrying out the pledges, nay, the threats, they had made during the election campaign. They scrapped detente, directly confronted the Soviet Union by all means possible, and emphasized the strengthening of military force, which meant the redirection of funds to the military budget at the expense of social programs that had built up during the previous half-century.

The hasty military buildup blocked prospects for businesslike negotiations on controlling the arms race. The new leadership dismissed the Soviet-American achievements in arms control as disadvantageous to the United States and turned the whole idea of arms limitation on its head, converting it into additional efforts to build up American military potential and change the strategic balance. Any negotiations with the Soviet Union were to be conducted from a position of strength and conditioned on Moscow's behavior in world affairs. At least that was the practical conclusion of the Soviet leadership after high-level exchanges and my own numerous unsuccessful attempts as ambassador to launch a dialogue with the new secretary of State, Alexander Haig.

In addition to Haig, a military man by formation and demeanor, the top echelon charged with American disarmament policy consisted mostly of those essentially opposed to what they were supposed to be doing. The director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency was Eugene V. Rostow, a hard-liner like his brother, Walt. The ambassador to the arms limitation talks was General Edward Rowny, an opponent of the SALT II treaty and formerly the Pentagon's representative at the Geneva disarmament talks. The assistant secretary of defense for international policy, who served the Pentagon's representative on interagency disarmament and other groups, was Richard Perle, who as Senator Henry Jackson's principal foreign policy aide had accumulated vast experience in blocking agreements with the Soviet Union.

The administration's arms control proposals seemed designed to subvert rather than advance the process. The proposed "zero option" for intermediate-range missiles would have eliminated all of our SS-20 missiles in return for NATO's agreement not to deploy its own, ignoring the point that the Soviet Union would be trading actual missiles for nonexistent ones. The Reagan policy of deep cuts in land-based ballistic missiles under START—the new acronym for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks that replaced SALT to emphasize a shift from limitation to reduction—would have required the Soviet Union to make disproportionate cuts; seven out of every ten of our ICBMs were land-based, as opposed to two out of ten for the United States. Moscow, as well as many in the West, regarded these proposals as an effort to stake out public positions rather than sincere attempts to reduce nuclear arms.

The United States continued its drive to separate the East European countries from the Soviet Union, pursuing its goals in a more straightforward and blatant way, as it did in Poland. American relations with China included military cooperation. American policy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf took a geopolitical view of the region as a link in a broad front of resistance to Soviet influence, and moving toward an active policy from the reactive policy of Carter. The United States displayed no interest in a political settlement of the Afghan conflict, which drew the Soviet Union into a protracted war of attrition. American political and psychological pressure increased on Havana to restrain itself in Latin America and Africa. When Reagan and Haig threatened to "get at the source of instability" in Central America, they meant Cuba. A separate Caribbean command was established for the armed forces, regular military maneuvers were conducted, and counterrevolutionary Cuban groups expanded their activities.

Relations with Moscow rapidly deteriorated. The Soviet leadership had hoped that Reagan would abandon his anti-Soviet attitudes of the election campaign and take a more sober approach when confronted with power, but these hopes proved groundless. The White House sought to damage the Soviet Union at every opportunity and obsessively viewed all international events in terms of confrontation with the Soviet Union, restricting American foreign policy to a gross and even primitive anti-Sovietism. In any case, that was the impression in Moscow.

Of course the administration could not completely ignore the realities of the strategic nuclear balance, nor the apprehensions of its allies and of the American population about the dangerous possibility that the new policy would explode into military confrontation with the Soviet Union. This contributed to a half-hearted and generally unproductive dialogue with the Soviet Union through personal correspondence between Reagan and Brezhnev, occasionally handwritten by the president himself in an attempt to vent his fraternal feelings, which he somehow believed would override and cancel out his aggressive public stand. These were passed through formal diplomatic channels. Unlike the previous administrations, the Reagan team refused any private channel.
Moscow had no illusions about Ronald Reagan. Still, somewhere at the back of the leadership’s collective mind remained a subconscious, weak hope that the tough-talking politician would eventually turn out to be a realist with whom they could establish contact. Their disappointment turned to genuine worry when they realized they had to deal with a dangerous confrontational figure unwilling to reach any agreement whatever with the Soviet Union. At least, that was how it appeared to Moscow during the first years of Reagan’s presidency.

The impact of Reagan’s hard-line policy on the internal debates in the Kremlin and on the evolution of the Soviet leadership was exactly the opposite from the one intended by Washington. It strengthened those in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the security apparatus who had been pressing for a mirror-image of Reagan’s own policy. Ronald Reagan managed to create a solid front of hostility among our leaders. Nobody trusted him. Any of his proposals almost automatically were considered with suspicion. This unique situation in our relations threatened dangerous consequences.

I had known Alexander Haig since his work in the White House under Nixon and did not believe he was the best choice for secretary of state. He was a typical bully, his manner of speaking was confrontational, and his reluctance to seek mutual agreement was well known. He saw everything in black and white and did not admit to anything in between. The categorical nature of his judgment seemed to reflect his military background. He was more used to the atmosphere of confrontation rather than uncertainty, which he connected with the relaxation of tension and vague prospects for protracted negotiations.

The one-man-in-command scheme he tried to introduce with himself as the “vicar” of American foreign policy making led to numerous skirmishes with the president’s close entourage and secretary of defense Weinberger. None of them recognized any right of the new secretary of state to monopolize foreign policy and bit by bit set the president against him. He soon came to be regarded as a controversial figure both inside and outside the administration, although his views did not differ much from those of the president himself.

A problem with the new administration, as I shortly discovered, lay in the fact that another person was also responsible for Soviet affairs, and he was the president’s national security assistant Richard Allen. He chose to avoid contacts with our embassy because he did not want to provoke an open battle with Haig, who insisted that those contacts were his own prerogative. This made little difference in the field of policy, because Allen was unfriendly toward the Soviet Union in any case.

Among Haig’s first appointments were two good career diplomats with experience in Eastern Europe whom I knew quite well. Walter Stoessel, former ambassador to West Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union, whom Haig had befriended during his service in NATO, was to become undersecretary of state for political affairs, the third-ranking position in the State Department. Lawrence Eagleburger, ambassador to Yugoslavia and formerly Henry Kissinger’s assistant, was to be appointed assistant secretary of state for European affairs. Haig decided against having a specialist adviser on Soviet affairs.

My first conversation with Haig took place before he was confirmed by the Senate, at the reception in honor of the new president. We exchanged recollections about our numerous private contacts during his service with Nixon. I pointed out that our relations had seen better times, but Moscow was ready to cooperate. Haig noted that our relations were unfortunately going through a difficult period, and we would have to work hard to solve problems of real importance and dispel strong mutual suspicions about each other’s intentions in various parts of the world—which to him represented one of the main reasons for tension between us. That, he said, could prove a worthy subject for discussion after his confirmation by the Senate.

At the reception, I also had a short conversation with Weinberger, whom I also knew fairly well from the Nixon years when he was secretary of health, education and welfare. Our own public health minister, an academician named Petrovsky, had met Weinberger earlier and was charmed by him; having learned about his appointment as secretary of defense, Petrovsky repeated to everybody in Moscow that there would be “a friend of his” in the Reagan administration. I regarded Weinberger as a balanced man, judging by his past record. But it was not long before we all were strongly disillusioned.

I congratulated Weinberger on his appointment and joked that he had already shown himself as an able diplomat by taking what I described as an “overflexible stand” in public. He opposed the SALT II Treaty and even the ABM agreement while declaring in the next breath that it would take him at least six months before he could speak with sufficient expertise to develop the right approach to arms negotiations with the Soviet Union. The two statements could not possibly go together, so I suggested we meet in private and discuss the subject. I said I was ready to outline the Soviet position and explain the motives behind it.

Weinberger admitted that he was new to such matters and therefore rather ignorant of them, so even an introductory talk with me would be rather immaterial for the present although it would be a different matter later. As for his public statements, in fairness to him he admitted frankly that they were merely repetitions of Reagan’s own. It was to become characteristic of
Weinberger's behavior in the government that he supported all of Reagan's statements on foreign policy without reservation, except that he tended to make them sound even tougher.

The first official exchange between Haig and Gromyko took place in a similar tone. On January 24, Haig wrote—through the American Embassy in Moscow—to warn about Soviet behavior in Poland and Africa and criticize our policy in Afghanistan. But about disarmament, his letter was completely silent. Several days later I delivered Gromyko's cool reply remarking that a number of outstanding questions deserved attention but expressing "regret that, judging by your letter, important questions have escaped the new administration's attention." Haig looked over the letter and said that on reflection, we could "call it quits" with this first exchange.

Then Haig asked me for my personal opinion of the new administration. We happened to be meeting on the very day of Reagan's first press conference, where he had just made the notorious remark that the leaders of the Soviet Union "reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" in order to promote world revolution. I told Haig that, frankly speaking, I failed to see any basic difference from the arrogant moralizing of the departed Carter administration; even though its successors trumpeted the idea of "a new start," they were walking in Carter's footsteps and could end up in the same way.

"You can't compare us with the Carter administration," Haig snapped.

"Unfortunately, such a comparison suggests itself," I insisted. "If the administration is really anxious to improve our relations and not just looking for a pretext for public confrontation, that is not the best way to go about it. This is especially true for today's press conference and Reagan's extremely hostile statement concerning the Soviet Union, which we see as a declaration of war.

That was the end of my first formal meeting with the new secretary of state. In contrast to his predecessors, who preferred to talk with me alone, Haig arranged for our conversation to be attended by two assistant secretaries of state. Although Haig suggested we would be seeing each other at Senator Percy's house for dinner on February 5 and could talk informally then, it was clear that the confidential channel, as it had operated before, had ceased to exist. Instead, our first official encounter, like the first exchange with Gromyko, focused on such disputatious questions as Iran, Afghanistan, and Poland, ignoring areas of potential compromise such as disarmament. That was the course chosen by the new administration, and this first official conversation convinced me that we were in for hard times.

Furthermore, the propaganda aspect of all this was confirmed by the way the exchange became public. Evidently acting on Haig's and perhaps even the president's orders, the White House first leaked the substance of Haig's letter to Gromyko, although diplomatic practice generally prescribes confidentiality in any exchange of letters between foreign ministers. Gromyko angrily replied in the same vein and had his letter released, too. Thus from the very first, the new administration's diplomacy featured recriminations between the two governments conducted in public.

During my first call on Haig there was one incident which received wide publicity as a symbol of the new Administration's uncompromising posture toward the Soviet Union. For almost twelve years, when Kissinger and Vance were the secretaries of state and our confidential channel was in full operation, my visits to them at the State Department were either official, when I came through the main entrance publicly like any other ambassador; or private, when I was driven in through the State Department's basement garage. Each time it was up to the secretary to decide which way I should arrive. That also determined whether he wanted our meeting known to the press or kept private, as often was the case. Before each visit, my aide would call the secretary's personal assistant and be told whether I was to enter through the main lobby or the garage.

My aide made his habitual call to ask which entrance to take for my first call on Haig. The State Department assistant answered, "As usual." My last several visits to the State Department had been through the garage, so my aide and driver decided to do the usual without bothering to inform me of what seemed a routine procedure. When we arrived at the garage, we were directed to the main entrance. Frankly I did not pay much attention to this change, because in the past there had been changes of this kind. I did not ask
Haig about it, nor did he mention it. But next day this “incident” was deliberately leaked to the press and blown up as an inspired gesture that aptly conveyed the change in America’s attitude toward Moscow. When I saw Haig next time and explained to him how all this happened, he apologized for the “misunderstanding,” as he termed it, and said his assistant should have told us beforehand of a new procedure. It was by then clear to me that all this had been a staged political show. It did not increase my confidence in the new secretary of state.

The Politburo discussed the whole situation on February 11 at an angry and emotional meeting, president Reagan was roundly and unanimously denounced because of the tone set at his initial press conference, which was fully reflected in the American media. During my long career as ambassador the collective mood of the Soviet leadership had never been so suddenly and deeply set against an American president. It was a catastrophe in personal relations at the highest level, though Reagan probably had not yet fully realized it.

As we had agreed, I met Haig on February 5 at a dinner given by Senator Percy in his home. It was a cold and windy evening, as if the weather were accommodating the political climate. Our conversation lasted well into the night. Haig remained true to his principles, but he behaved like an old friend. Although more articulate and self-confident than he was under Nixon, he spoke without subtlety. He was evidently anxious to assert himself as the main foreign policy-maker in the administration.

Haig made it absolutely clear in the course of the conversation that Reagan was unconditionally committed to sharp increases in military expenditures “to catch up with the Soviet Union.” I noted that the Carter administration’s final presentation to Congress had held that the United States and the Soviet Union already were at approximate parity in strategic weapons. Haig admitted reluctantly that parity did exist, but in the next breath he said that in the opinion of American military experts, the Soviet arms drive had grown in such scale and momentum that the Soviets were likely to surpass U.S. military potential by the end of Reagan’s presidency unless urgent countermeasures were taken. He cited no data or figures.

Then what about arms talks to allay these fears? Haig made it quite clear that they were not on the administration’s agenda. The priority was to launch a broad rearmament program—“Then we’ll see.”

Haig was also straightforward enough in stating that hostile public statements were an integral part of the Administration’s new approach to Soviet-American relations although “personally I wish the president had found more appropriate words in his press conference. But he did not do that by design. Anyway, what he feels and what he wanted to say were expressed clearly enough: the administration cannot deal with the Soviet Union as if nothing had happened.” What this meant, he explained, was that Reagan would not put up with the Soviet Union’s use of proxies such as Cubans in Africa and Latin America. Reagan was particularly outraged at Cuba’s stirring up civil war in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Haig drew an emphatic parallel between Moscow’s concern about the events in Poland and Washington’s concern about Central America. If Moscow wanted to risk a world crisis by putting down the Solidarity movement in Poland, “I’d like to tell you that, if need be, the United States will be ready to act with determination in our region. Cuba, of all countries, must realize this.”

I asked him straight out if his words meant that the Reagan administration was not interested in any constructive dialogue with us at all. Would it ignore any diplomatic means and pin its hopes solely on the arms race? Could they really believe such a belligerent approach would get anywhere? Haig replied that they did not oppose a dialogue, but ignore any diplomatic means and pin its hopes solely on the arms race? Could they really believe such a belligerent approach would get anywhere? Haig replied that they did not oppose a dialogue, but would take time to prepare. At the same time he linked the possibility of agreements to “the Soviet Union’s general conduct,” of which the administration would remain the judge. I rejected this approach and explained that a history of our relations showed it could not produce anything but permanent confrontation.

Haig’s statements were clearly designed to pressure us. There was not a trace of any search for agreement. The administration still believed that positive changes in our relations, especially in disarmament issues, did not meet its interests. It was unwilling, as Haig put it, to send “false signals” to the American people while they were being asked to make considerable sacrifices for the sake of a sharp increase in military spending.

I decided to explore the situation further with Stoessel, whom I had already invited for dinner at my house. We had been on friendly terms since 1952, when I was counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Washington and he was the chief of the Soviet division in the State Department. Now he was there as undersecretary of state. Our conversation was frank, facilitated by the trust we had built up through years of contacts, talks, and discussions as friends and professionals, even though we were on opposing sides.

Some of his statements were remarkable. According to Stoessel, Reagan had a very special idea of the Soviet Union. He was sincerely convinced that he owed his political power to the American people’s support for his anti-Soviet stand and for his determination to rearm vigorously, which he believed would regain the respect of the world for the United States. All that made it difficult for professionals like himself to take the initiative and make expert recommendations. They were confined to following instructions from
on high. No one in the State Department knew exactly what to do with the SALT II Treaty: whether to work out a completely new agreement, alter the wording, or amend it. So on this or other questions of Soviet-American relations, they were just temporizing.

He felt there would be a pause of at least six to eight months in relations between our governments while Reagan sent his military programs to Congress. We professionals, he said, could use the time to start a dialogue between the two governments little by little, through regular diplomatic channels, with a view to preparing a ministerial meeting in the long term. I agreed with this suggestion. But for the present Reagan’s anti-Soviet rhetoric would carry the day as if he were still campaigning. Only now his subjects would be Cuba, the leftist threat to El Salvador, and the struggle “for a free Poland.”

Brezhnev Tries a Breakthrough and Fails

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union held its Twenty-Sixth Congress in Moscow during the second half of February. Before the Congress the Politburo discussed foreign policy issues, especially our relations with the new administration in Washington. I reported about my first personal contacts with his high representatives. Gromyko made a very critical report. There was in the Politburo no lack of concern, indeed consternation, about the new president and his policies. What were we to do?

It was decided to follow a course for detente in the hope that Reagan little by little would become “more reasonable.” During the party congress the leadership advanced new foreign policy initiatives in the hope of ameliorating the situation and reversing the rising sense of tension. Then, after the Congress, since there was no confidential channel through which to explore these ideas, the Politburo decided to start a personal correspondence with Reagan through Brezhnev.

On March 6 Brezhnev sent an informal letter which was actually an invitation for Reagan to begin a dialogue on a number of concrete suggestions. They started from the confidence-building measures against surprise attack devised at the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Brezhnev proposed extending advance notification of maneuvers and similar measures more deeply into Soviet territory and Western Europe, and then taking in the Far East. He also suggested reopening negotiations on nuclear arms reduction, discussing a Middle East settlement and the Iran-Iraq war, and holding a summit-level session of the UN Security Council. The tone of the letter may be gauged from its opening assumption that “the military-strategic balance objectively serves to preserve world peace,” to its conclusion suggesting that the new administration examine the Soviet ideas and explore them in “various forms of dialogue.” Although some proposals may have been carried too far, and not every suggestion would be acceptable to the American administration, the letter contained enough positive material to feed further dialogue between Moscow and Washington—if Washington wanted it.

The program was also outlined at our party congress and therefore publicized in the West. Reaction in the United States was decidedly mixed. Richard Nixon commented on it favorably when he invited me to lunch in New York, saying Brezhnev was right to refuse to engage in a public wrangle with Reagan. Reagan was in a fighting mood and had been prepared for criticism from Moscow, so he was poised to hit back, and the proposal for a summit was the last thing he expected. Nixon thought the proposal could play a positive role in the long term but he warned us not to push it: “I should venture to give you some personal advice. I don’t recommend that you press Reagan too persistently for a summit in your further dialogue with him, whether public or private. Don’t overdo it!”

Reagan had talked with Nixon on the phone right after Brezhnev’s speech. Much to Nixon’s surprise, one of Reagan’s people had already convinced him that the conciliatory Soviet proposals were the result of the president’s own firm stance. Reagan himself suspected that Brezhnev had proposed a summit meeting because he was far more experienced and would be able to outplay the president, the more so because Reagan still did not know the particulars of many issues. But Nixon tried to convince Reagan on the basis of his own three summits with Brezhnev. But Reagan nevertheless seemed to have been persuaded by his own entourage of the correctness of his policies. Nixon recommended that we continue “reeducating Reagan” but that we make no haste because he was not yet prepared for it.

Several days later I met Weinberger at dinner at Kendall’s house for the businessman’s sixtieth birthday celebration. I asked the secretary of defense what he thought about Brezhnev’s proposals, and he replied that the State Department was examining them. “But,” he added, “frankly and in strict confidence, I don’t anticipate any rapid improvement of our relations under the Reagan administration.”

When asked what made him think so, Weinberger hesitated for a moment and then blurted out: “Moscow believes it can treat Reagan the way it treated Carter. Now, Reagan will prove the opposite.”

I asked him to be more specific about those who suggested that extraordinary idea to Reagan and the reason behind it. Weinberger muddled along trying to explain. He began by repeating the old theory about the Soviet Union testing Reagan the same way it had tested Carter. However, he could not give any definite reply, but proceeded instead to argue that the Soviet
leadership had outsmarted Carter at the summit by making him conclude the SALT II Treaty to its advantage.

Weinberger's further arguments boiled down to a simple statement that if Reagan did agree to hold a summit, he wanted to be sure that Soviet troops would not invade Poland following the summit, which is what happened in Afghanistan only months after Carter met Brezhnev in Vienna. Reagan would not allow himself to become the object of ridicule in the way people had laughed at his predecessor's naivete.

I told Weinberger his reasoning did not hold water. "Let's take the SALT II Treaty, for instance. Neither side outwitted the other. Just tell me what is wrong with it, exactly?"

Weinberger said he had not yet examined it in detail but the administration was reviewing it. I observed that it was odd, to say the least, to declare the treaty inadequate or unsatisfactory before examining it, and then to examine it with only one purpose in mind: to find it unacceptable. I also said that I could assure him that nobody had any intention of invading Poland.

On the whole, the conversation with Weinberger impressed me sadly with his primitive approach to our relations and his incompetence, something characteristic of the whole Reagan administration of that time. The president's image-makers liked him making provocative public statements against the Soviet Union, for example, on Poland. Donald Kendall told me Haig did not think much of this, although the secretary of state still believed the warnings could create the useful impression at home that the administration was able to deter the Soviet Union from doing some things (especially when the Soviet Union had no intention of doing them anyway). Weinberger followed the White House in this rhetoric designed to create a tough presidential aura. Besides, Weinberger himself very much liked being in public eye, and the numerous anti-Soviet statements he made to reporters helped keep him there. They also annoyed Haig, who resented his publicity above his sphere of competence.

My next meeting with Reagan occurred, of all places, at Washington's famous annual Gridiron Dinner, to which I was among the few foreign ambassadors invited. There were as usual about five hundred representatives of American elite from the administration, Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon, business, and the media. At these dinners prominent political figures including the president are the traditional butt of jokes—that is, they are "grilled" on the gridiron. The president spoke, exchanging jocular remarks with the opposition leader and others, and the first lady, Nancy Reagan, made a surprise appearance with a chorus of costumed reporters poking fun at her extensive wardrobe. That was unusual even for an American audience but it helped neutralize the initially critical attitude of the press toward the first lady. There were quite a few parodies and other entertaining performances. It was a curiously and characteristically American political show, something unfamiliar to a foreigner.

I had a short conversation with the president during the intermission. We exchanged greetings, and he expressed the hope that he would be able to have a more detailed conversation with me. He said Nixon had recommended that, too. I replied that I was willing to meet with him at his convenience. He assured me he would do that by all means, but a bit later, so as to make the conversation really productive after examining relations with the Soviet Union. He added jokingly that it would be hard for him to compete on an equal footing with the ambassador who had survived several American presidents and was thoroughly familiar with all the details.

Reagan Writes to Brezhnev from the Hospital

I had Walter Annenberg and his wife Lenore to dinner. They were the closest California friends of the Reagans. He was a former American ambassador to Britain; she was the chief of protocol, an attractive woman who had come under attack in the press for making a curtsy to Queen Elizabeth II at the airport. She was accused of bowing to royalty although the American press and its readers could never get enough news of the visits of foreign monarchs, especially from Great Britain.

Annenberg said he believed that ultimately Reagan would be able to realize, probably even before some of his aides, that he had to adjust his policies toward the Soviet Union. "Reagan is not hopeless in this respect," he claimed. But he added that it would take time, especially after the president's narrow escape from death in an assassination attempt late in March had created a wave of sympathy Reagan had turned into political capital, enabling him to ride high in Washington and the nation. (Brezhnev sent him a personal telegram of sympathy, for which Haig later thanked me.) Thus, Annenberg said in his characteristically formal language, the wound was likely to delay the president's "process of cognition" of the outside world.

More remarkable was the private conversation I had with Senator Paul Laxalt, a close friend and ideological soul mate of the president's who had been governor of the neighboring state of Nevada when Reagan was governor of California. Laxalt warned that we might forget that it was no easy thing to reform Reagan, a seventy-year old man with ingrained suspicions about the Soviet Union. But he said the president's views had been slowly changing, and he was coming to realize that a dialogue with Moscow would
be indispensable; he had even gone as far as to begin writing a personal letter to Brezhnev, something quite uncharacteristic of him. It was not of immense importance in itself and unlikely to impress Moscow greatly, but Laxalt said it was a real psychological stride for Reagan in his understanding of world realities. It should be kept in mind that he was writing the letter with his arm in a sling, not fully recovered, and his aides sought to talk him out of it. “But I supported Reagan,” he said. Laxalt added that the Soviet leaders should not be surprised if they eventually found Reagan a partner ready for agreement.

While convalescing, the president had indeed taken up his pen. On April 25, Haig brought me not one but two letters from Reagan. The first was a formal reply to Brezhnev’s letter of March 6, drafted, as Haig told me, by the State Department. But the other was written in Reagan’s own hand, rather than typed, and was designed, the American president wrote, “to share some ideas with the Soviet president.” Haig had received it from Reagan himself at the same time he was handed the formal reply. He believed that Reagan wanted to avoid the specific problems he had inherited from the previous administration and was trying to examine Soviet-American relations in a broader, philosophical, sense.

The letter was kept top secret by the administration as the president’s intimates regarded it as naive, but it is of special interest because it is one of the few foreign policy documents personally composed by him in the early years of his presidency without the assistance of his aids or formal position papers from the State Department. In later years he would cite this letter as evidence of consistency in promoting favorable relations with the Soviet Union, and an answer to those who accused him of transforming his attitude toward the Soviet Union.

The letter recalled their first meeting when Brezhnev visited Nixon in San Clemente and said that at the time, “Never had peace and goodwill among men seemed closer at hand”—not least when Brezhnev took Reagan’s hand in his and assured him of his dedication to peace. Evoking the hopes of ordinary people for personal autonomy and security, Reagan wondered whether governments had “permitted ideology, political and economic philosophies, and governmental policies to keep us from considering the very real, everyday problems of people.”

As I read the president’s letter I found that it was animated by the classic idea of America’s invariable goodwill in international affairs. He invoked history, particularly the period immediately after World War II when the Soviet Union did not possess the atomic bomb and was completely devastated by the war. The United States then did not take advantage of its superiority, although no one would have been able to prevent it from doing so. But the subsequent policy of the Soviet Union, as the president stated it, looked different. If we could change that, both countries would be able to cooperate.

Brezhnev’s reply was sent a month later. He, too recalled their meeting at Nixon’s Casa Pacifica but also recalled the policy of detente and its companion policy of arms control. “Now, why did the process begin to malfunction, why has it stopped and even reversed?” Brezhnev wrote. Disagreeing with Reagan, he said the Soviet Union had kept its wartime commitments while the United States had achieved what “the American leaders themselves called Pax Americana,” and in recent years relations had grown worse. “But the main message I would like to get across to you is that we are not seeking any standoff, and are making no attempt at your country’s legitimate interests,” Brezhnev wrote. “We are after something else, namely, peace, cooperation, a feeling of mutual trust and goodwill between the Soviet Union and the United States.”

This was one of the key messages at the beginning of their exchange. Haig read the text carefully but declined to comment before the president saw it.

Reagan failed in his attempt to start a personal dialogue with Brezhnev, if that is what he really was trying to accomplish. Perhaps the Soviet leadership underestimated the psychological aspects of Reagan’s behavior: while lying wounded, Reagan for the first time in his life addressed a personal letter to the leader of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party in his own hand. Brezhnev’s letter (dismissed in Reagan’s memoirs as an “icy reply”) was cast in the standard polemical form stressing their differences, without any attempt to emphasize the necessity of developing their personal relations. The tone could not possibly have built a personal bridge. But Reagan’s letter was not much practical help either, although he seemed to be revealing his personal convictions frankly. The main reason that both failed to tune onto the same wavelength for further dialogue was, I believe, that the time was not yet ripe, and Reagan himself wrote the letter on the spur of the moment without really considering how to make concrete changes in his policy toward the Soviet Union. Further letters were again prepared by their diplomatic departments within the expected ideological framework, but the personal correspondence in effect lapsed. The breakthrough launched at the highest level was not accomplished. Moreover, as time passed, the White House would leak to the press biased information from Reagan’s letters, which rendered their confidentiality meaningless.

In an ironic turn during this difficult period, I became dean of the diplomatic corps in Washington, succeeding Guillermo Sevilla-Sacasa, who had been Nicaragua’s ambassador to the United States since 1943—when
Gromyko was our ambassador in Washington. A cheerful man, he was friendly to everybody and was not overburdened with routine business or concern for advancement since he was the son-in-law of the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza, with whom the United States had long had excellent relations because he was essentially Washington’s political creature. Sevilla-Sacasa gladly attended all events at Washington’s embassies demanded by protocol, until the revolution in Nicaragua deprived him of his ambassadorial post. The same revolution, which was of course anathema to the Reagan administration, made me dean of the diplomatic corps, since I was second only to Sevilla-Sacasa in my length of service in Washington.

I was immediately faced with two problems. First, I simply did not have the time to attend the numerous receptions at all of Washington’s embassies, of which there were about 150 at the time. Each staged at least one reception annually to celebrate its national holiday, and there were other occasions demanding the attendance of the dean of the diplomatic corps—plus official ceremonies at the White House when heads of state arrived. That led to the second problem. Some of these countries had unfriendly relations with the Soviet Union or no diplomatic relations at all. That did not formally affect my status as dean of the diplomatic corps, but I sometimes felt out of my element at the ceremonies. Worst of all, President Reagan in his welcoming speeches could almost never forbear from criticizing the Soviet Union, its policies, and its ideology. It became something of a ritual with him. But there was absolutely no point in making the Soviet ambassador listen to it again and again.

The professional diplomats in the State Department were fully aware of the sensitiveness of the situation, so we arranged that every time Washington was visited by heads of states unfriendly to the Soviet Union, or the State Department knew that Reagan would lash out at the Soviet Union in his welcoming speech, the Swedish ambassador, Wilhelm Wachtmeister, who was next to me in seniority, would attend in my place. We cooperated very well in this way.

I still witnessed many interesting events, not least the visit of Pope John Paul II to Washington. The papal nuncio gave a reception for diplomats, and the ambassadors, gathered in the grand hall, were invited one by one to enter a smaller reception room, where they were received by the Pope.

As dean, I was the first to enter. I knew that this Polish Pope understood Russian quite well, so I asked him in English in what language he would prefer to converse. The Pope suggested that he speak Polish and I speak Russian. After a while he asked me rather unexpectedly whether I would mind if he blessed me as the ambassador of a great country, so that he might wish us success in striving for world peace. (He knew that all Soviet ambassadors were supposed to be Communist Party members and therefore officially atheists.) I replied that I would be pleased to receive his blessing, especially in the great cause he mentioned. Thus I believe I am the only Soviet ambassador throughout the history of our diplomatic service to have received a blessing from the Pope.

Moscow’s Annoyance Mounts

It is important to understand the state of mind of the then Soviet leadership. Detente had become an integral part of Soviet policy under Brezhnev and it was personally identified with him. Most Politburo members had arrived at their supreme power during detente. There were no debates in the Soviet Union about the value of detente, either present or future. To Moscow, it not only meant a decrease of tension between two powers but made the Soviet leaders feel that they had achieved the permanent and internationally acknowledged status of a superpower equal to the United States. They wanted this process to be irreversible.

And then, suddenly, the Kremlin leaders were faced with a new American president, Ronald Reagan, who wanted all this swept away. Two features of Reagan’s policy toward the Soviet Union upset them most. One was his apparent determination to regain military superiority; the other, his determination to launch an ideological offensive against the Soviet Union and foment trouble inside the country and among Soviet allies. American public opinion was on the whole willing to give Reagan the benefit of the doubt and even to support him.

Brezhnev and his colleagues found themselves dealing with something truly new, a deeply disturbing figure who tenaciously advanced a course that profoundly offended and alarmed them. Once they reluctantly came to the conclusion that detente could not be recovered as long as Reagan remained in power, the inclination grew inside the Kremlin not to pacify him but to fight back.

When Gromyko and Haig met in New York at the United Nations in September, both sides restated their positions at their two meetings, though they agreed on the idea of negotiating the Euromissile dispute and on holding another meeting in January. Gromyko was hurt and angry that he had not received an invitation to the White House, especially since he carried special instructions from the Politburo to outline our views to the new president in person.

Instead, Reagan’s latest message to Brezhnev, which had been sent on September 22 and restated the White House position on Soviet-American
relations, was made public by the American side as soon as it was sent. By lifting phrases out of context, the White House and American embassies attempted to show that Washington was trying to promote good relations with Moscow, rather than the reverse. Furious, the Politburo publicized Brezhnev's own message, but it was particularly outraged by the Reagan administration's use of high-level correspondence for propaganda.

The Politburo nevertheless decided that Brezhnev should answer Reagan's letter as if no such leaks had taken place, and I handed Brezhnev's response to Haig on October 16. The message welcomed Reagan's ostensible readiness to maintain stable and solid relations with the Soviet Union, but it rebuffed the president's principal accusation that Soviet policies in places like Cuba, Angola, Kampuchea, or elsewhere represented the main obstacle to relations, rather than the reverse. Furious, the Politburo publicized Brezhnev's own message, but it was particularly outraged by the Reagan administration's use of high-level correspondence for propaganda. Linking that to better relations, Brezhnev said, would only produce "deliberate deadlock." He also rejected Reagan's claim the anti-American campaign in the Soviet press was one of the factors poisoning the atmosphere of our relations.

If anyone is entitled to complain about a campaign of rampant hostility, it is the Soviet side. Just look at the incessant campaign over the so-called Soviet threat. Now, what made you, Mr. President, declare in public the other day that the Soviet Union was founding its policy on the belief that it would win a nuclear war? Surely you know, unless somebody deliberately keeps you in the dark, about my statement that a nuclear war would be a catastrophe for the whole of humanity.

Brezhnev's letter tried to salvage the situation by approving the decision of Haig and Gromyko to start negotiations on limiting nuclear weapons in Europe. Haig made no comment, but promised to hand the letter to Reagan, who on October 2 had already announced a new long-term military buildup providing for the biggest increase in powerful strategic weapons ever planned or funded by any American president. It included one hundred B-1G bombers, development of the "invisible" Stealth bomber and larger Trident nuclear submarines and another 100 MX ICBMs, and improved systems of command, control, and communications. Some of these had been discussed under Carter, but it was Reagan who actually ordered them put into production, and with great fanfare. The buildup was part of an important modification of American military and political doctrines to include the possibility of limited nuclear war, endorsed by Reagan himself before the press.

The Soviet leadership felt itself under increasing attack by the administration's campaign, which it tried to justify with the false accusation that the Soviet Union believed a nuclear war could be fought and won. On October 20, the Politburo once again met to discuss how to react to these continued charges of aggressive intent. Furious, the Kremlin decided to publish its position in the form of an answer by Brezhnev to a question by a Pravda correspondent. The Politburo approved the following text:

**Question:** President Reagan said recently that the Soviet Union, judging by its leaders' private conversations, believes a nuclear war to be winnable. What can you say about this statement by the American president?

**Answer:** I leave it to Mr. Reagan's conscience his statement that he allegedly knows what Soviet leaders say in private. . . . As to the point in question, I can say that . . . it is only a suicidal maniac who could begin a nuclear war in the hope of emerging victorious. However great his military power might be, and whatever way of unleashing a nuclear war he might choose, he will not achieve his aims. Retribution will inevitably follow. This is our stand of principle. It would be a good thing if the American president, too, made a clear and unambiguous statement rejecting the very idea of a nuclear attack as criminal.

President Reagan, of course, did no such thing. His bellicose approach caused increasing concern in a number of countries, especially American neighbors. President José Lopez Portillo of Mexico secretly offered to mediate the disputes between Washington and Havana. Reagan turned him down. After several attempts, the Mexicans arranged a secret meeting in Mexico City on November 23 for Haig with Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, a deputy prime minister and a long-time colleague of Castro's. Both sides kept the meeting secret and told neither us nor the Mexicans anything about it. I was kept informed only by the Mexican ambassador to Washington, Hugo Margain. A few days after the meeting Rodriguez informed our ambassador.

The issue of dissidents also continued to irritate our relations. In mid-November Haig told me that Reagan was personally interested in Shcharansky and Sakharov, whose cases if decided positively, he said, might have a constructive effect on our relations. But frankly neither Reagan nor Haig were especially committed to the rights of Soviet dissidents (in contrast to, say, Carter), although they would play that card from time to time for propaganda purposes. The embassy received calls from Carter, Vance, and other public figures inquiring about reports that Sakharov and his wife had been hospitalized. We informed Moscow and were told—"for our own information"—that they were not seriously ill. That was all.

Our embassy nevertheless regularly warned Moscow about the ex-
tremely negative effect the trials of Soviet dissidents were having on American public opinion and on Soviet-American relations, but Moscow ignored it all. Brezhnev’s regime remained convinced that the Western campaign for the dissidents was a matter of ideological warfare aimed at undermining Soviet society. Personal anger against Reagan was an additional factor in their stubbornness.

On December 13 I had Billy Graham to dinner at our embassy. The famous preacher had sought an invitation to an interreligious conference on peace and disarmament in Moscow the following spring, which I helped him to obtain; he delivered a speech that was warmly welcomed. Graham told me he had just spent a night at the White House at the president’s invitation and had a long conversation with Reagan and his wife, whom he had known for about fifteen years. During the conversation, he reminded the president that Nixon had gone down in history for achieving a major breakthrough toward normalizing relations with the Soviet Union and China, and he suggested that Reagan, too, could go down in history as a great president who had carried out a turn toward normalization of Soviet-American relations on an even greater scale. Graham particularly favored an agreement on nuclear disarmament and pointed out that the growing nuclear threat was promoting a surge in religious sentiment in America.

I asked him about Reagan’s reaction. After some reflection, he replied, “I believe the president is on the right track.” It was evident that Reagan had not been too enthusiastic about Graham’s ideas but had not objected to them directly. I asked him who, in his opinion, had the most influence on the president. Without a moment’s hesitation, he said it was Reagan’s wife, Nancy. He characterized her as an intelligent yet rather conservative woman who seemed to be anxious for her husband to make a prominent mark in American history, including Soviet-American relations.

I would have liked that, too, but this was certainly not the figure Reagan had cut during his first year in office.

II. The Reagan Crusade

Impervious to Diplomacy

O matter what diplomatic tack Moscow examined or actually took, the Reagan administration proved impervious to it. We came to realize that in contrast to most presidents who shift from their electoral rhetoric to more centrist, pragmatic positions by the middle of their presidential term, Reagan displayed an active immunity to the traditional forces, both internal and external, that normally produce a classic adjustment. After two years in power Reagan showed no signs of moving beyond the bellicose ideological approach that had characterized his career long before he entered electoral politics and dominated his 1980 campaign. The Soviet Union remained his number one enemy.

Haig and Gromyko met in Geneva on January 26 in the first major diplomatic encounter of 1982. They discussed nuclear arms limitation, the Middle East, South Africa, Angola, and other areas of conflict, but each held to his own views without any real attempt at compromise. The discussion on Poland was especially sharp, with each side demanding that the other stop interfering. There was no progress, but that did not seem to be the object for the Americans. At the end of the meeting Haig declared to the press: “I don’t think the aim of these talks was to improve Soviet-American relations or East-West relations as a whole; on the contrary, they were designed to enable the American side to state its view on a number of pressing problems, first of all, to express concern over the situation in Poland. I think that our talks were more than useful in that sense.”

What that did accomplish was to cause further mutual estrangement between Moscow and Washington, and this intensified when matters turned to arms control. Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Haig justified himself by the events in Poland for failing to resume disarmament talks. Another deadlock.

In Poland, strikes and demonstration by intellectuals and trade unions demanding democratic reforms had been shaking loose the government’s control until martial law was imposed by the president, General Wojciech