Morning in America

secretary of state said to Gorbachev. "You are starting your term as general secretary. Ronald Reagan is starting his second term as president. . . . President Reagan is ready to work with you." He invites you "to visit the United States at the earliest convenient time. . . . If important agreements can be found, the sooner the better."

Gorbachev then said: "this is a unique moment; I am ready to return Soviet-U.S. relations to a normal channel. It is necessary to know each other, to find time to discuss outstanding problems, and to seek ways to bring the two countries closer together."1

For four years President Ronald Reagan had been seeking a negotiating partner in the Kremlin. Few suspected this was the case because his sharp rhetoric, ideological convictions, and defense buildup had made him appear as the coldest of cold warriors. During the 1970s, long before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he had been one of the harshest critics of détente. He had assailed the second strategic arms limitation treaty negotiated by President Carter and denounced Soviet adventurism in the third world. But he was not simply hostile to Soviet conduct. He detested the Soviet system. "When a disease like communism hangs on as it has for half a century or more," he wrote in notes prepared for a radio broadcast in 1975, "it's good now and then, to be reminded of just how vicious it really is. . . . Communism is neither an economic nor a political system—it is a form of insanity—a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature."2

Nor was this rhetoric reserved simply for the campaign trail. In his first press conference as president of the United States, he was asked about the long-range intentions of the Soviet Union. Its goals, he said, were well known: "the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state." And to this end, Reagan went on, "they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat."3 The communists believed in "treachery, deceit, destruction, & bloodshed."4 They denied the existence of God and the sanctity of human life. They vitiated the human spirit. "Let us be aware," Reagan said in one of his most famous speeches as
was no accident that Reagan entitled his autobiography
president, "that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its om-
nipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all
peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world."5

Although Ronald Reagan hated communism, he did not fear it, not nearly as
much as many of his predecessors. He was supremely confident of the su-
periority of American values and of the American way of life. "The West
won't contain communism," he told the graduating students at the University
of Notre Dame on 17 May 1981, "it will transcend communism."6 His adver-
saries in the Kremlin might trumpet its inevitable victory, but Ronald Reagan
saw a different reality. Speaking to the British parliament in June 1982, he re-
phrased Winston Churchill's 1946 iron curtain speech: "From Stettin on the
Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have
had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none—not one
regime—has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets
do not take root."7

The tide of history was moving in a direction that belied the beliefs of
Marxist-Leninists. "Democracy is not a fragile flower," Reagan declared, nor
was capitalism a decaying system. "We are witnessing today," he said in 1982,
"a great revolutionary crisis, a crisis where the demands of the economic or-
der are conflicting directly with those of the political order. But the crisis is
happening not in the free, non-Marxist West, but in the home of Marxism-
Leninism, the Soviet Union. It is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide
of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens."8

There were new dynamics in the international system. The era of decolo-
nization was over, having expired with the breakup of the Portuguese empire
in the 1970s. No longer could the Soviet Union exploit the evils of Western
imperialism or present itself as the embodiment of a successful model of de-
velopment. Revolutionary nationalists were no longer flocking to Moscow to
learn the secrets of economic modernization and technological innovation.
The Soviet economy was sputtering, the Chinese communist economy was
being reimagined, and those of Eastern Europe, deeply indebted to Western
creditors, were floundering. Outraged by the rising cost of meat, Polish
workers went on strike in the summer of 1980 and demanded the right to
form independent trade unions and to express themselves freely. Garnering
widespread support among the Polish people, the Solidarity movement, as it
was called, challenged the Communist Party's monopoly of power and de-
manded that the Polish government comply with the human rights provisions
inscribed in the Helsinki Final Act. Although the movement was suppressed
after the Kremlin threatened to intervene militarily and after the Polish gov-
ernment declared martial law in December 1982, Solidarity's resonance was
considerable. "Around the world, the democratic revolution is gathering new
strength," Reagan declared. Humankind was rejecting "the arbitrary power
of the state." Everywhere, peoples were refusing to "subordinate the rights of
the individual to the superstate"; everywhere, they were recognizing that
"collectivism stifles all the best human impulses." If given the choice, Reagan
predicted, people would always choose democracy over dictatorship. They
would "leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history," as they had left
other tyrannies that had stifled the freedom and muzzled the voice of the
people.9

Reagan's confidence in the superior appeal of Western values meant that
he welcomed peaceful competition with the Kremlin. He was not a warmon-
ger, as so many of his critics claimed, but he believed sincerely in peace
through strength, and even more sincerely in his capacity to deal with the
Kremlin. Reagan's unique contribution to the end of the Cold War was not
his ideological convictions, because they did not depart from those of Tru-
man, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter, nor his conviction that the
United States must negotiate with the Soviet Union from strength, a policy
that Truman and Acheson had made axiomatic during the formative years of
the Cold War and that Eisenhower and Dulles had perpetuated until the era
of détente. What was unique about Reagan was his willingness to reach out
to a leadership he abhorred, men whose values he detested; to appreciate the
concerns of his adversary; and to learn from experience. What was unique
about Reagan was his confidence in himself and his capacity to effectuate
change. "We meant to change a nation," he said, "and instead, we changed a
world."10 Of course, this was made possible by time, circumstance, and the
personal qualities and beliefs of the new man who ruled the Kremlin. But
Reagan had his own gifts: personal charm, a core set of convictions, and opti-
mism about himself and the way of life he represented.

It was no accident that Reagan entitled his autobiography An American
Life. For him, America was a special place, a city on a hill, because it gave all
its citizens "the freedom to reach out and make our dreams come true." In
America, individuals "could determine their own destiny; their ambition and
work determine their fate in life.” Every day was “Morning in America,” Rea­
gen’s campaign theme in 1984, because every day every man and every woman could shape his or her destiny through hard work, self-discipline, entrepreneurship, and personal creativity. Reagan thought his mission in politics was to preserve the America of his imagination, the institutions and values that nurtured individual opportunity and personal freedom. He thought his own life embodied the American odyssey, from rags to riches, from obscurity to eminence. He loved his life story. He loved being presi­dent. His optimism was inbred, but the trajectory of his life proved, at least to himself, that the America of his imagination was the America of lived ex­
perience.11

“He wasn’t a complicated man,” said Nancy Reagan, his second wife, the person who knew him best. “He was a private man, but he was not a compli­cated one.” He was also the most optimistic man she had ever known. “If he worries, you’d never know it. If he’s anxious, he keeps it to himself. De­pressed? He doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”12

The sources of Reagan’s basic disposition are somewhat hard to fathom, but not inexplicable. He grew up in a poor, if not impoverished, family. His father was an unsuccessful shoe salesman, moving frequently from one small Illinois town to another, with a brief stint in Chicago. He was also an alco­holic, periodically going through bouts of inebriation and fighting with Rea­gan’s mother, who preached tolerance.13

As a child, Reagan had a wandering existence until the family settled down in Dixon, Illinois, when he was nine years old. He loved Dixon; it was “heaven”—a small community where people knew and cared for one an­other. Yet Reagan was not popular. “I was a little introverted,” he recalled, “and probably a little slow in making really close friends.”14 Ronnie was “a loner,” Nancy explained in her memoir. “There’s a wall around him. He lets me come closer than anyone else, but there are times when even I feel that barrier.”15

Ronald Reagan’s optimism, serenity, and patience were most clearly shaped by his mother. From his father he learned the “value of hard work and ambition, and maybe a little something about telling a story. From my mother, I learned the value of prayer, how to have dreams and believe I could make them come true.”16 His mother, wrote Nancy Reagan, “was a very relig­ious woman whose faith saw her through bad times. She was also an incred­ible optimist. . . . Ronnie once said, ‘We were poor, but I never knew it.’ ”17

Reagan’s mother told him that “everything in life happened for a purpose. She said all things were part of God’s Plan, even the most dishheartening set­backs, and in the end everything worked out for the best.” She taught her boys not to let bad things get them down. “You stepped away from it, stepped over it, and moved on.”18 Those who knew him well knew that Rea­gan’s faith ran deep. “Ronald Reagan believed that God had a plan for every­thing.”19

Not many boys in Dixon went to college in those days. Reagan’s father could not afford to pay tuition, but Dutch, as Reagan was known in his youth, followed his dream and enrolled in Eureka College, a small liberal arts institution affiliated with the Disciples of Christ, situated not far from his hometown. Reagan was able to secure a football scholarship and a part-time job. He preferred sports and acting to studying economics, his major.20

Reagan graduated in 1932, during the depths of the Great Depression. He struggled to find a job, as did all his contemporaries, and finally landed a position as a radio sports announcer in Des Moines, Iowa. He worked hard at perfecting his rhythm and delivery and enjoyed broadcasting college foot­ball and professional baseball games. When he began to vote, he voted Demo­catic, following his father’s political loyalties. Dutch Reagan “idolized” FDR. He loved the president’s fireside chats. Roosevelt’s “strong, gentle, con­fident voice. . . . reassured us that we could lick any problem.”21

In the mid-1930s, Reagan went to southern California each year to report on the Chicago Cubs during spring training for the baseball season. In 1937, he used the opportunity to schedule a screen test at a Hollywood studio. The studio liked his voice, if not his looks, although he was a strong, tall, hand­some man in splendid physical condition. He got a contract, began an acting career, and repossessed his birth name, Ronald. Within a couple of years, Ronald Reagan was a minor star, making popular movies and earning a very substantial income. He won no Academy Awards, but producers, directors, and actors liked him. He was modest, reliable, and hardworking. He had a great memory and learned his lines quickly. His career was flourishing when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. As a reserve officer, he was quickly as­signed to active duty, but because of his terrible eyesight he was not shipped overseas and spent the war years making training films for the air force.22

After the war, Reagan resumed his film career and became active in the
Screen Actors Guild. These were critical years in his political maturation. He was still “a New Dealer to the core,” and joined a host of political organizations. Although he knew little about communism and almost nothing about the Soviet Union, he quickly became suspicious of communist sympathizers. When a labor dispute erupted in 1946 that threatened to shut down a number of studios, Reagan wanted to have the Screen Actors Guild mediate the tangled conflict, which involved producers as well as unions. “More than anything else, it was the Communists’ attempted takeover of Hollywood . . . that led me to accept the nomination as president of the Screen Actors Guild, and indirectly at least, set me on the road that would lead me into politics.” Although his grasp of these events was less than perfect, they shaped his understanding of the postwar world. “Now I knew from firsthand experience how Communists used lies, deceit, violence, or any other tactic that suited them to advance the cause of Soviet expansionism. I knew from the experience of hand-to-hand combat [in Hollywood] that America faced no more insidious or evil threat than that of Communism.”

In the late 1940s, Reagan’s acting career floundered and his first marriage collapsed. Not long thereafter he met Nancy Davis, and they were married in March 1952. A few months later, he and Nancy took the train to Fulton, Missouri, where an old friend had arranged for Reagan to give the commencement address at tiny William Woods College. Reagan’s speech, entitled “America the Beautiful,” presaged much that he would be saying for the next forty years. He said that America was less a place than an idea. The idea “is nothing less than the inherent love of freedom in each one of us.” America, he told the audience, “was set aside as a promised land.” He exhorted the new graduates to join in the struggle against “totalitarian darkness” and urged them to ensure that “this land of ours is the last best hope of man on earth.”

Soon thereafter, Reagan realized that his acting career was over. He could not get the roles he wanted, and he faced growing financial difficulties. He took a job as host of a new television drama series sponsored by the General Electric Corporation. The program was a great success in the early days of the new medium, and Reagan became a household presence in millions of homes every Sunday evening. He also went around the country delivering speeches for his new corporate employer.

During the 1950s, Reagan’s political beliefs shifted. He became a staunch foe of government regulation and opposed the progressive income tax, which in his view throttled business enterprise and personal initiative. He shifted parties, registered as a Republican, and in 1964 eagerly accepted the co-chairmanship of Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign in California. His speaking was polished and effective. Toward the end of the campaign, some of Goldwater’s leading backers asked Reagan to prepare a half-hour address to be presented on national television the week before the election.

“The Speech,” as it became known, was nothing more than a compilation of the ideas that Reagan had been articulating for a decade. The American people, he warned, faced a stark choice between individual freedom and creeping totalitarianism as embodied in Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs. “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny,” he concluded. “We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.”

Among Republican conservatives, the speech was a smashing success and it transformed Reagan’s life. He was encouraged to run for governor of California, and in November 1966 he defeated the incumbent, Pat Brown. He served two terms in Sacramento and in 1976 challenged President Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination. Although he lost in a very close contest, he spent the next four years delivering speeches and perfecting his messages for a run against Jimmy Carter in 1980.

Reagan was one of the oldest men ever to campaign for the presidency, but his message was one of spiritual renewal. America’s greatest years lay in the future, he said. He assailed Carter’s talk of malaise. The American people were not to blame for the country’s difficulties, for they were optimistic, energetic, innovative, and resilient. The Democrats, not the American people, were the source of the problem. For decades, Democrats had been taxing and spending the American people’s money, triggering huge deficits, causing runaway inflation, and eroding personal incentives to work and invest. The Democrats’ arms negotiations and defense programs had tied America’s hands and eroded American power. “We had to recapture our dreams, our pride in ourselves and our country, and regain that unique sense of destiny and optimism that had always made America different from any other country in the world.” Vote for Reagan and there would be a new “morning in America.”

Reagan won a decisive victory over Carter in November 1980, and the Republicans captured a majority in the Senate for the first time since 1954, al-
though the Democrats still controlled the House of Representatives. In his inaugural address on 20 January 1981, Reagan reemphasized his most fundamental convictions: “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. . . . It is time to reawaken this industrial giant, to get government back within its means, and to lighten our punitive tax burden.” Under his leadership, the United States would recapture its greatness. “We have every right to dream heroic dreams,” he told the American people. Adversaries should take heed: “our reluctance for conflict should not be misjudged as a failure of will. . . . We are a nation under God, and I believe God intended us to be free.”

Reagan’s priorities were clear: to restore the nation’s economic vitality and augment its military strength. His staff worked feverishly to push through Congress his program of tax and spending cuts. The defense budget skyrocketed—12 percent in fiscal year 1981, and 15 percent in 1982. Military officials envisioned spending $2.7 trillion during the 1980s. Increased funds were allocated for training, for preparedness, for command and communications, for the B-1 bomber, for one hundred MX intercontinental ballistic missiles, for fifteen Trident submarines, and for research and development of the B-2 Stealth bomber and the Trident II missile.

Reagan’s most fundamental axiom on national security policy was that the United States must negotiate from strength. The Soviets, he believed, respected “only strength.” The United States had been negotiating with its hands tied behind its back. Greatly distorting what had happened during the 1970s, he claimed that Washington had unilaterally disarmed, providing little incentive for the Kremlin to negotiate in good faith. “[W]e’re going to be far more successful,” Reagan declared, “if [the] adversary knows that the alternative is a buildup.”

Critical to Reagan’s way of thinking was his conviction that the Soviet system was in rotten shape. State Department officials, national security advisers, and intelligence analysts conveyed abundant information about Soviet economic problems, popular malaise, and ethnic discontent. “The Soviet people are no longer confident that their standard of living will continue to improve,” reported the CIA’s directorate of intelligence. “Popular dissatisfaction and cynicism seem to be growing.” Corruption was rampant. Economic productivity was declining. Ethnic discontent was mounting. None of this surprised President Reagan. Among his core beliefs was the inefficiency of a command economy, and its fundamental incapacity to satisfy the aspirations of people who wanted a better way of life. “We could have an unexpected ally,” he said as early as 1977, “if Ivan is becoming discontented enough to start talking back.”

Reagan wanted to squeeze the Soviet Union. The United States would do whatever was necessary to stay ahead of the Kremlin in the arms race, he insisted. “[W]e could oustend them forever.” The men in the Kremlin knew “that if we turned our full industrial might into an arms race, they cannot keep pace with us.”

To negotiate from strength, however, meant a willingness to talk. Reagan grasped this fundamental reality and wanted to engage the Soviets in a dialogue:

I wanted to let them know that we realized the nuclear standoff was futile and dangerous and that we had no designs on their territories. . . . Somewhere in the Kremlin, I thought, there had to be people who realized that the pair of us standing there like two cowboys with guns pointed at each other’s heads posed a lethal risk to the survival of the Communist world as well as the free world. Someone in the Kremlin had to realize that in arming themselves to the teeth, they were aggravating the desperate economic problems in the Soviet Union, which were the greatest evidence of the failure of Communism.

After Reagan was badly wounded in an assassination attempt on 30 March 1981, he lay in bed mulling over these issues. “Perhaps having come so close to death made me feel I should do whatever I could in the years God had given me to reduce the threat of nuclear war; perhaps there was a reason I had been spared.” He told Secretary of State Alexander Haig that he wanted to lift the grain embargo and write a personal letter to Brezhnev. Haig opposed both ideas, which agitated Reagan, who desired to engage with the Soviet leader “as a human being.” In his typically compromising way, the president allowed Haig to write Brezhnev a formal letter that represented the tough-minded attitude of the administration, but Reagan stubbornly went ahead with his own letter, which he wrote in longhand to underscore its authenticity.
They wanted the dignity of having some control over their individual destiny. They wanted to work at the craft or trade of their own choosing and to be fairly rewarded. They wanted to raise their families in peace. . . . Governments exist for their convenience, not the other way around . . . . Is it possible that we have permitted ideology, political and economic philosophies and governmental policies to keep us from considering the very real, everyday problems of peoples?

Reagan concluded by saying he hoped that lifting the grain embargo would catalyze “meaningful and constructive dialogue which will assist us in fulfilling our joint obligation to find lasting peace.”

Nothing came of this letter, partly because Brezhnev replied coolly and was by then physically and mentally incapable of taking any new initiative, partly because Reagan did not know how to move his administration forward. His national security team had been in disarray from the moment he took office, and things got worse before they got better. The president’s style of decision making, his aloofness, his aversion to conflict, his disdain for facts and detail, and his penchant for ideological verbiage contributed greatly to the disorder. Those who knew him best, whether admirers or detractors, agreed on the way he operated. “He made no demands, and gave almost no instructions,” explained Martin Anderson, a longtime admirer and one of Reagan’s most influential economic advisers. “Essentially, he just responded to whatever was brought to his attention and said yes or no, or I’ll think about it.” According to David Stockman, the president’s first budget tsar, Reagan “gave no orders; no commands; asked for no information; expressed no urgency.” At some meetings of the National Security Council, according to Richard Pipes, the Soviet expert who served on the NSC staff, the president seemed “really lost, out of his depth, uncomfortable.” “Unlike some of his predecessors,” wrote Haig, “Reagan made no decisions on the spot, and gave little indication of his own position on the issues.”

His advisers on foreign and defense policy feuded, sometimes for personal reasons, sometimes because of institutional rivalries, and sometimes over policy. Secretary of State Haig, a former general and NATO commander, believed he was entitled to shape policy as he pleased. He was never on intimate terms with the president. Reagan’s closest advisers and friends in the White House—Edwin Meese, Michael Deaver, and James Baker—disliked Haig, and he reciprocated their feelings. Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, an old associate of Reagan’s, also were at odds, the strife being as much departmental rivalry as personal antipathy. Theoretically, the president’s national security adviser, Richard Allen, should have been able to ease these feuds, but he lacked both intellectual stature and a personal tie to the president—indeed, he did not even have direct access to him. Moreover, Allen had staffed the National Security Council with many hard-line anti-
communists who regarded State Department officials with disdain, if not contempt. "The entire first year and a half of the administration passed in an atmosphere of unremitting tension between the NSC and State," wrote Pipes. 40

The feuding bureaucracies took more than a year to produce a strategy statement for the new administration. On 20 May 1982, President Reagan approved it. Times were treacherous, the document stressed:

The growing scarcity of resources, such as oil, increasing terrorism, the dangers of nuclear proliferation, uncertainties in Soviet political succession, reticence on the part of a number of Western countries, and the growing assertiveness of Soviet foreign policy all contribute to the unstable international environment. For these reasons, the decade of the eighties will likely pose the greatest challenge to our survival and well-being since World War II. 41

But there was no reason to despair. The Soviet Union had significant vulnerabilities. "The economies and the social systems of the Soviet Union and of most Soviet allies continue to exhibit serious structural weaknesses. The appeal of communist ideologies appears to be decreasing throughout much of the world, including the Soviet bloc itself." Soviet military difficulties in Afghanistan after their intervention in December 1979 demonstrated the limits of the Kremlin's power-projection capabilities. Unrest in Poland revealed weaknesses in the Warsaw Pact. Inside the Soviet Union, the growth of non-Russian nationalities posed a latent threat to "the dominant Russian population."

The strategy statement also stipulated that the administration's policy should be designed to nurture the economic well-being of the nation, strengthen its industrial and technological base, and promote access to foreign markets and resources. The United States should maintain and strengthen alliances and "wherever possible" encourage and reinforce "freedom, the rule of law, economic development and national independence throughout the world." With regard to the Soviet Union, the United States had to be able to deter attack and prevail in war. The strategy statement explained that the Soviet leaders did not want war but would be inclined to engage in aggressive risk-taking in light of their mounting military capabilities, believing they could intimidate or blackmail the United States. The aim should be to "neutralize" these efforts and "to contain and reverse the expansion of Soviet control and military presence throughout the world, and to increase the costs of Soviet support of proxy, terrorist, and subversive forces." 42

William Clark, an old friend of Reagan's and perhaps his closest confidant other than his wife, claimed that the president focused much attention on this document. 43 On 1 January 1982, the president had made Clark his national security adviser when a minor scandal discredited Allen. Clark was a virulent anticommunist but knew little about international affairs. His task was to improve communication among the departments and with the White House. Like many other Reagan advisers, he believed this goal could be achieved if Haig were removed as secretary of state. In June 1982, Reagan, who loathed controversy among his advisers and hated firing anybody, dismissed Haig and appointed George Shultz as secretary of state. A man of great ability and experience in business, government, and the academy, Shultz had been a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, served as secretary of labor and secretary of the treasury in the Nixon administration, and was currently president of the Bechtel Corporation. 44

But Shultz's arrival did not ease the difficulties besetting the national security process. He immediately sensed that "a cult of secrecy verging on deception had taken root in the White House and NSC staffs." He agreed with all the basic Reagan doctrines. The challenge, in Shultz's view, was "to use freedom and open markets as the organizing principles for economic and political development, and to do so long enough to allow communism's failures to be fully recognized and to play themselves out." But Shultz also believed that the United States should negotiate with the Soviet Union to nurture a more constructive relationship. He knew the president shared this view, but was convinced that Clark, Weinberger, CIA director William Casey, and their staffs were obstructing implementation of the president's wishes. 45

Shultz thought that he alone among Reagan's top advisers actually had experience dealing with the Soviets. As secretary of the treasury, he had conducted extensive trade talks with Nikolai Patolichev, then Soviet minister of foreign trade, a hardened old communist who during World War II had been in charge of tank production. On a trip to Moscow in 1973, Patolichev had
taken Shultz to a Leningrad cemetery where more than a million dead soldiers lay buried. Shultz and Patolicev walked solemnly among the graves as Patolicev vividly described the fighting around Leningrad. The experience left an indelible impression on Shultz:

I had learned something of the human dimension to the Soviet Union. I learned that World War II—the Great Patriotic War against fascism, the Soviets called it—was a matter of deep significance to them. I also learned that the Soviets were tough negotiators but that you could negotiate successfully with them. In my experience, they did their homework and had skill and patience and staying power. I respected them not only as able negotiators but as people who could make a deal and stick to it... Their willingness to engage seriously would depend entirely on how they perceived their interests. Such occasions would come, I felt, when the Soviets concluded that we were not only strong and determined but also willing to make agreements that were mutually advantageous.46

Bill Clark’s NSC staff did not see things in quite this way. Richard Pipes and his colleagues labored during 1982 on a new document more precisely defining American policy toward the Soviet Union. NSDD-75, “U.S. Relations with the USSR,” specified that the Reagan administration would seek to achieve three broad objectives: “to contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism”; to promote, “within the narrow limits available to us, the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system”; and “to engage the Soviet Union in negotiations... consistent with the principle of strict reciprocity and mutual interest.”47 Clark explained to Reagan that what was distinctive about the document was the second goal, “namely encouraging antitotalitarian changes within the USSR.”48 Nothing transformative was expected in the short term. Neither Pipes nor Clark believed this was a strategy to dismantle communism in the Soviet Union. Although their expectations were modest, they were nonetheless significant: “the prospect for major systemic change in the next few years is relatively low, [but] the likelihood of policy shifts is much higher, and some of these could set the scene for broader changes in the system over the long term.”49

What separated Clark and Pipes from Shultz was their relative indifference to the importance of negotiations. When Brezhnev died in November 1982, and Yuri Andropov succeeded him, Shultz warned Reagan that the new Soviet leader would inject more dynamism into Soviet policy. “There is already evidence of greater foreign policy energy and sophistication under Andropov,” Shultz wrote Reagan on 15 January 1983, “and the Soviets will clearly be on the offensive.” The United States needed to react with “strength, imagination, and energy.” It needed to revitalize its economic and military capabilities, promote alliance cohesion, stabilize relations with China, compete briskly in the war of ideas, and mediate regional conflicts in the Middle East, Central America, and elsewhere. But to be successful, Shultz emphasized, America also needed to enter a dialogue with Andropov. The Soviet Union was not about to collapse nor lose its capacity to compete. “While recognizing the adversarial nature of our relationship with Moscow, we must not rule out the possibility that firm U.S. policies could help induce the kind of changes in Soviet behavior that would make an improvement in relations possible.”50

Reagan endorsed Shultz’s policy, but he then proceeded to intensify his rhetorical and programmatic onslaught against the Kremlin. The president was angered by the declaration of martial law in Poland. He assailed the Soviets for aiding Castro, supporting the Sandinistas, indirectly fomenting insurrection in El Salvador, and escalating the fighting in Afghanistan. He denounced them for their arms build-up, religious persecution, restrictions on Jewish emigration, and violations of the Helsinki Agreement on human rights. Reagan’s vitriol reached new heights in a speech he gave to evangelical Christians on 8 March 1983, when he called the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” “Let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in totalitarian darkness,” he said, “pray they will discover the joy of knowing God.” “Religion,” he believed, might “turn out to be the Soviets’ Achilles heel.”51

Shultz shared the president’s disgust with Kremlin policies, but he thought Reagan’s rhetoric was getting out of hand. White House officials had not told him that the president would denounce the Soviet Union as an “evil
empire," and Shultz felt that he was being excluded from the decision-making loop. He met with Reagan at the White House on 10 March determined to present a new approach and to persuade the president, who he believed had become a "prisoner of his own staff," to shift gears. Reagan, however, assured him that he supported Shultz’s ideas, and he encouraged him to go ahead with his efforts to engage the Kremlin in a constructive dialogue.52

Reagan was no one’s prisoner. He possessed his own complex and protean ideas about the nation’s security, however inept he was in thinking them through or finding the means to implement them. On 23 March, with little consultation with either his secretary of defense or his secretary of state, he announced his intention to launch a program “which holds the promise of changing the course of human history.” He wanted to build a shield to protect the United States and its allies from incoming missiles with nuclear warheads, something he had been thinking about for several years. He knew it would take a long time, knew he needed to reassure allies and adversaries alike that this initiative would not endanger their security or contravene previous treaties. But the president firmly believed that relying on the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD) to preserve peace was mad. It was also irresponsible, and a conventional wisdom whose time had passed. Purposefully avoiding discussion with advisers who he knew would oppose it, Reagan announced that he was initiating a “long-term research and development program” designed “to achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles. This could pave the way for arms control measures to eliminate the weapons themselves. We seek neither military superiority nor political advantage. Our only purpose ... is to search for ways to reduce the danger of nuclear war.”53

Reagan did not want his support of “Star Wars,” as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) came to be called, to ratchet up the arms race or intensify Cold War tensions. He insisted that he would be willing to share the anticipated technology—space-based lasers, mirrors, particle beams, and kinetic-energy weapons—with the Soviet leaders so that they, too, could gain reassurance.54 According to Jack Matlock, the experienced foreign service officer who at this time succeeded Pipes as the Soviet expert on the NSC staff, Reagan did not want to torpedo diplomatic negotiations with the Kremlin; he wanted to engage the new Soviet leadership. Matlock later recalled:

Throughout 1982 and 1983, Reagan repeated that he wanted to talk with Soviet leaders. He was ready and willing to attend a summit conference with Andropov, notwithstanding the Soviet leader’s KGB background and aura of toughness. On learning of Brezhnev’s death, Reagan told a press conference: “I want to underscore my intention to continue working to improve our relationship with the Soviet Union.”56 The United States, he insisted, was accruing strength not to wage war, but to negotiate more effectively. We want “to discuss practical steps that could resolve problems.” Talks would improve if the Soviets ended the bloodshed in Afghanistan and permitted reform in Poland, but “we do not insist that the Soviet Union abandon its standing as a superpower or its legitimate national interests.”57

Reagan exchanged letters with Andropov reiterating his desire to preserve the peace and eliminate the nuclear threat. “You and I share an enormous responsibility for the preservation of stability in the world. I believe we can fulfill that responsibility but to do so will require a more active level of exchange than we have heretofore been able to establish. We have much to talk about. . . . Historically, our predecessors have made better progress when communicating has been private and candid. If you wish to engage in such communication you will find me ready. I await your reply.”58

Andropov’s written responses were hopeful, but Soviet actions belied his words.59 On 1 September 1983, Soviet fighter planes shot down a Korean civilian airliner wandering through Soviet airspace, killing 269 people. Reagan was “outraged.” Cutting short his summer vacation in California, he returned to Washington on Labor Day weekend and wrote a speech conveying his “unvarnished” feelings: the downing of the plane “was an act of barbarism, born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and seeks constantly to expand and dominate other nations.”60
Yet Reagan refused to cut off talks with the Soviets. Secretary of Defense Weinberger and others insisted that Shultz cancel a meeting he had scheduled with Foreign Minister Gromyko in Vienna. Weinberger wanted arms-control talks to cease until the world got an honest explanation for the destruction of the airliner. Reagan “brushed aside” this idea. “I could see that [the president] wanted to take a hard position with the Soviets,” Shultz remembered, “but he was not about to break off from important dealings with them.”

While Reagan wanted to keep talking, he did not want to ease pressure on the Kremlin. In the fall of 1983, he did everything he could to get Great Britain, West Germany, and Italy to deploy the new intermediate-range nuclear weapons that had been envisioned since 1979. He rebuffed all talk of freezing the current stock of American and Soviet nuclear weapons, insisting that he wanted reductions, not the status quo (which, in his view, favored the U.S.S.R.). Since the Soviets had rejected his proposal to eliminate all intermediate-range missiles in Europe, the so-called zero-zero option, Reagan insisted on NATO deployment. In mid-November, the first U.S. ground-launched cruise missiles were sent to Britain; a week later the first Pershing II missiles arrived in West Germany.

Reagan also approved Able Archer 83, a military exercise to test command and communications procedures for firing nuclear weapons in wartime—a scenario, said the president, “that could lead to the end of civilization as we know it.” Able Archer was only one of a series of increasingly provocative tests. U.S. aircraft “tested” the Kremlin’s defensive systems, explained one of the CIA’s leading Soviet experts; the U.S. Navy probed its territorial waters; the Pacific Fleet conducted its largest exercise in history around Soviet waters.

On 24 October 1983, without consulting Congress, Reagan deployed U.S. forces to the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada to thwart a takeover by leftists even more radical than the incumbent leader, who had just been murdered. The motive was ostensibly to rescue American students and to respond to the overtures of Grenada’s neighbors, who feared the growth of Castroism. But Reagan’s real intent was to show strength. Two hundred and forty-one Americans had just been killed by a terrorist assault on U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut. Defense officials wanted to pull American forces out of Lebanon, where they were terribly exposed to attacks and where their mission was inchoate, but nobody in the administration wanted to seem weak. In Lebanon, U.S. officials were grappling with civil strife and regional conflict; in the Caribbean, they thought they were dealing with Cuban adventurism. Reagan was determined to overcome the Vietnam syndrome and not allow one inch of additional territory to fall within the Soviet sphere of influence. The United States, he later recalled, “couldn’t remain spooked forever by this [Vietnam] experience to the point where it refused to stand up and defend its legitimate national security interests.”

At the same time, Reagan began to wage proxy wars against the Soviet Union in the third world. He had a rationale. Whereas in the past, the third world had presented endless opportunities for communist advancement, this was no longer the case. The U.S.S.R. was no longer an economic model for developing societies. With the breakup of the last colonial empire in the 1970s, Marxist-Leninist rhetoric no longer resonated in quite the same way. Now, guerrilla forces waged war against Soviet-backed governments, for example, in Nicaragua and Afghanistan, and the United States could support these insurgencies, much as the Soviets had supported revolutionary nationalist movements against colonial or neocolonial regimes. In December 1981, Reagan had signed a presidential directive approving covert aid to a tiny group of counterrevolutionaries (or Contras) in Nicaragua, who were battling to overthrow the radical Sandinista government. At the same time, he began ratcheting up U.S. aid to the Mujahedin and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan who were struggling to unseat the Soviet-imposed government in Kabul and who were bloodying Soviet combat forces in Afghanistan.

Soviet leaders despised Reagan’s rhetoric and feared American initiatives. When Foreign Minister Gromyko summoned Ambassador Hartman for a meeting on 19 October 1983, he was reflective and philosophical yet unusually passionate. The president’s discourse seemed to be exceeding the bounds of propriety, Gromyko insisted. Reagan was attacking the very legitimacy of the Soviet system. Soviet leaders could not grasp the reasons for the president’s inflammatory invective. They did not understand that their evasion of responsibility for the destruction of the civilian airliner had infuriated Americans and discredited the Soviet Union with most of the world. In a speech commemorating the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution on 5 November, Soviet Politburo member Grigory Romanov declared that the global atmosphere had not been so bad since the end of the Great Patriotic War. “Com-
rades, the international situation at present is white hot, thoroughly white hot. 760

Andropov summoned aides to his hospital bed, where he was close to death. "The international situation is very tense," he said, ten times in the air since 1962. "The United States wants to change the existing strategic situation and they want to have the opportunity of striking the first strategic strike." 760 The Soviet Union must prepare itself for every possible contingency in the short run, and boost its economic capabilities in the long run. Believing that domestic proponents of human rights were collaborating with foreign intelligence organizations and scheming to undermine the Soviet regime, the Politburo cracked down more strenuously on dissent and disbanded the Moscow Human Rights Group. 761 The American threat was no illusion, stressed Defense Minister Ustinov. His subordinates were instructed to accelerate the training of troops. 762 When Able Archer got under way in November, KGB officials watched it with trepidation. Some Soviet intelligence analysts believed it portended a real attack. 763

U.S. intelligence analysts tracked Soviet behavior. "What's going on here?" they wondered. "Are these people nuts?" 764 Initially, they could not fathom why the Soviet Union had gone on heightened alert; they could not imagine the level of Soviet fear. But when they grasped that it was real, they reported it to the White House. 765

Reagan wrote in his diary: "I feel the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being in any way soft on them, we ought to tell them no one here has any intention of doing anything like that." He instructed retired general Brent Scowcroft, who was going to Moscow, to convey privately his hopes to improve relations and reduce the level of armaments. 766

Reagan was learning. "Three years had taught me something surprising about the Russians," he recollected later. "Many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans. Perhaps this shouldn't have surprised me, but it did." But as he raised these matters with foreign leaders and his own advisers, his education grew. He met with President Mika Spiljak of Yugoslavia in early 1984, and then jotted in his diary: "I picked his brains about the Soviet Union. He was the ambassador there for a time. He believes that coupled with their expansionist philosophy, they are also insecure and genuinely frightened of us. He also believes that if we

opened them up a bit, their leading citizens would get braver about proposing changes in their system. I'm going to pursue this." And a few weeks later, Reagan talked to West German chancellor Helmut Kohl and on 5 March noted in his diary: "He confirmed my belief that the Soviets are motivated at least in part by insecurity and a suspicion that we and our allies mean them harm." 767

The president still wanted strength, but the purpose of strength was to talk, reduce tensions, promote change in the Soviet Union, discourage Soviet adventurism, and, most of all, avoid nuclear war. On 10 October 1983, he had seen a preview of the ABC movie The Day After, which was going to be televised nationally on 20 November. In the film, Lawrence, Kansas, is wiped out in a nuclear war with Russia. "It is powerfully done and left me greatly depressed," Reagan commented. He was sobered even more a few days later when Secretary Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff briefed him on the American plan for nuclear war, the famous Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), which, for Reagan, seemed to foreshadow "a sequence of events that could lead to the end of civilization as we knew it." He was appalled that there were still men in the Pentagon "who claimed a nuclear war was 'winnable.' I thought they were crazy," and so were their Soviet counterparts. 768

Reagan, meanwhile, had changed his national security adviser again. Shultz and Clark simply could not get along, and Deaver and Nancy Reagan believed that Clark's hard-line attitudes were not only influencing Reagan but eroding his popularity. The president promoted Robert (Bud) McFarlane, a former Marine officer who had been Clark's assistant. McFarlane had worked for Henry Kissinger and served on congressional staff committees before joining Haig's team in the State Department and then moving to the White House in 1982. His attitudes were those of the traditional cold warrior. But he also believed, like Reagan and Shultz, that the United States could bargain with the Soviet Union from strength, and could squeeze it because of its economic vulnerability. McFarlane collaborated with Shultz and Vice President Bush to help Reagan communicate more clearly his desire to negotiate with the Soviets as well as compete with them. Given the popularity of the anti-nuclear movement, whose numbers had multiplied in response to the spiraling arms race and the deployment of new intermediate-range missiles in Europe, Reagan's aides knew that public opinion at home and abroad would welcome a softer message from the White House. 769

On 16 January 1984, Reagan addressed the nation and the world. We live
in a time of challenge and of opportunity, he began. "Neither we nor the Soviet Union can wish away the differences between our two societies and our philosophies." But the "fact that neither of us likes the other system is no reason to refuse to talk. Living in this nuclear age makes it imperative that we do talk." Henceforth he would pursue "a policy of credible deterrence, peaceful competition, and constructive cooperation." He emphasized, "we want more than deterrence. We want genuine cooperation. We seek progress for peace. Cooperation begins with communication."80

Communication, however, was difficult. Andropov died on 9 February and was succeeded by Konstantin Chernenko, one of Brezhnev's closest cronies. Representing the United States at Andropov's funeral, Vice President Bush and Senator Howard Baker met Chernenko. Bush found him "less hard-nosed and abrasive than Andropov." Baker agreed. "General Secretary Chernenko is a man with whom we can deal," he wrote the president. Reagan recorded in his diary: "I have a gut feeling that I'd like to talk to him about our problems man to man."81

Reagan immediately launched into a correspondence with Chernenko, one far more extensive than was known at the time. "I have no higher goal than the establishment of a relationship between our two great nations characterized by constructive cooperation," Reagan wrote on 11 February. He hoped they could make progress in reducing strategic and conventional armaments and in "reducing the dangers of wider confrontation" in regional or local disputes stretching from Afghanistan to southern Africa. "The United States fully intends to defend our interests and those of our allies," he concluded, "but we do not seek to challenge the security of the Soviet Union and its people."82

In subsequent letters, Reagan reiterated many of the same points. We "should look for specific areas in which we can move our relationship in a more positive direction," he wrote, citing various arms control initiatives, regional imbroglios, and bilateral discussions where he thought progress could be made. Vice President Bush told me, Reagan wrote to Chernenko, that it was his hope that history would recall "us as leaders known to be good, wise, and kind. Nothing is more important to me, and we should take steps to bring this about."83 Again, on 16 April, he wrote that he looked forward to a productive working relationship. "As for myself, I am prepared to consider your concerns seriously, even when I have difficulty understanding why they are held." But Reagan was trying to understand better. He added a handwritten postscript to the six-page letter:

In thinking through this letter, I have reflected at some length on the tragedy & scale of Soviet losses in warfare through the ages. Surely those losses which are beyond description, must affect your thinking today. I want you to know that neither I nor the American people hold any offensive intentions toward you or the Soviet people. . . . Our constant & urgent purpose must be . . . a lasting reduction of tensions between us. I pledge to you my profound commitment to that end.84

Shultz and McFarlane kept nudging Reagan forward. They wanted to educate the president. On 28 January, McFarlane had forwarded to Matlock an article by James Billington, the renowned historian of Russia and the Soviet Union. McFarlane asked Matlock to summarize it for the president. "I would like to infuse the president with an historical appreciation of where we stand in relationship and what we can expect in the way of Soviet leadership (goals and strategy)." Even if progress was not likely with Chernenko, McFarlane wanted to "keep alive the hope of an alternative future among the successor generation."85 Over the next couple of years, McFarlane had Matlock write more than two dozen memoranda on Soviet history, strategy, and politics for the president. Reagan read them avidly, commented on them, and circulated them among his advisers. He hated reading dry briefs presented in large loose-leaf notebooks and was renowned for ignoring them, but he was genuinely interested in learning more about his adversary.86

He needed to, because he was bombarded with conflicting views from Weinberger, Casey, and their top aides. According to the secretary of state, Casey and Weinberger "wanted no dealings with the Soviets and were reluctant to make any changes in our negotiating positions once they had been laid down."87 As Reagan began to think about a second term, McFarlane advised him to make some personnel changes. The acrimony was unbearable. Weinberger and Shultz "were like oil and water." The president had to choose one or the other. Reagan did not agree. "They are both my friends. I don't want to fire either one of them," he told McFarlane. "You're going to have to work harder."88
Shultz would not let the matter rest, however. He told the president, “To succeed, we have to have a team: right now there isn’t one. Cap Weinberger, Bill Casey, Jeane Kirkpatrick [ambassador to the United Nations], and I just don’t see things the same way.” Shultz said he was fed up with the leaks, end runs, and delaying tactics. It was impossible to get anything done. “I’m frustrated,” he told Reagan, “and I’m ready to step aside.”89

Reagan would never fire Cap Weinberger, a longtime friend and associate, but he knew he had to make a choice. “Cap was not as interested as George in opening negotiations with the Russians,” Reagan recalled, “and some of his advisors at the Pentagon strongly opposed some of my ideas on arms control that George supported, including my hope for eventually eliminating all nuclear weapons from the world.” Weinberger and his conservative allies in Congress told Reagan that Shultz “had gone soft on the Russians.” Reagan knew this was nonsense, but he also knew that he had to resolve the differences between McFarlane and Shultz on the one hand and Weinberger, Casey, and Ed Meese on the other. The “dispute is so out of hand that George sounds like he wants out. I can’t let that happen,” Reagan wrote in his diary right after his victory in the 1984 presidential election. “Actually, George is carrying out my policy. I’m going to meet with Cap and Bill and lay it out to them. Won’t be fun but has to be done.”90

The exchanges with Chernenko were not leading anywhere, but Reagan’s mind was made up. He had learned a great deal during his first four years as president and believed he could pursue a peace agenda with the Russians when the opportunity presented itself. “Hang tough and stay the course,” he said to himself and his advisers. “America is back,” and the Soviets knew it. Eventually, they would be more forthcoming. 91 Reagan was a patient, stubborn man. He wanted to bargain, but from strength. He seemed very much like Harry Truman when Truman had said that he wanted to cooperate with the Russians, so long as he could get his way 85 percent of the time. 92

Reagan had tremendous faith in his own negotiating skills, disarming friends and foes alike with his relaxed, calm, modest, and self-effacing manner. He was sentimental yet unemotional, a “warmly ruthless man,” wrote Martin Anderson.93 Reagan had the gift “of setting you utterly at ease,” wrote David Stockman. He was a “master of friendly diplomacy,” said Shultz, and “was easy to like.”94 He was often short on facts and devoid of knowledge but, according to Richard Pipes, “had irresistible charm.”95 But he was no pushover. He was calculating, competitive, tough-minded, and disciplined. He instinctively grasped the rhythm of negotiations. His stubborn patience was a powerful weapon, as were his apt use of humor and anecdote, simple language, and strong convictions.96

By 1984, Reagan was eager to apply his negotiating skills to the Russians. “There is renewed optimism throughout the land,” he said in his State of the Union message on 25 January. “America is back, standing tall, looking to the eighties with courage, confidence, and hope.” He had great plans for the new year and for a new presidential term, a term that he was determined to win through a decisive electoral victory. “America has always been greatest when we dared to be great.” He now invited the Soviet people to join him in his dream to make a safer world, “to preserve our civilization in this modern age.” “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” Reagan declared. Speaking to the members of Congress who sat before him, but explicitly directing his remarks across the oceans, he asked the “People of the Soviet Union” to join America in a quest for peace. “If your government wants peace, there will be peace. We can come together in faith and friendship to build a safer and far better world for our children and our children’s children.”97

Reagan’s tough actions and increasingly mellow talk sat well with the American people. His defense buildup, deployment of intermediate-range missiles, intervention in Grenada, and aid to the Mujahedin in Afghanistan were popular, even while his support of the Contras in Nicaragua and his indifference to human rights violations in El Salvador and Guatemala triggered virulent opposition. His wife and some of his political advisers, such as Michael Deaver, nurtured the president’s more conciliatory rhetoric, wanting to dispel the warmongering image the Democrats liked to employ against him. But Reagan did not cater to the polls. He hated arguments based on politics, and he believed he could read the temperature of the American people better than anyone.98

Reagan won a smashing victory in the 1984 elections. His opponent, former vice president Walter Mondale, won only his home state and the District of Columbia. Reagan promised throughout the campaign that “morning in America” meant more of the same: smaller government, less regulation, and more freedom. In his second inaugural address, on 21 January 1985, he proposed an “opportunity society” at home “in which all of us—white and
black, rich and poor, young and old, will go forward together, arm in arm.” He thought a “new beginning” had been achieved during his first administration domestically, and freedom was on the march internationally. He promised an unwavering quest for peace based on strength. Through negotiations with the Kremlin, he was determined to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and seek their “total elimination ... from the face of the earth.” He insisted that his Star Wars “security shield” was an eminently sensible way to proceed. “It wouldn’t kill people; it would destroy weapons. It wouldn’t militarize space; it would help demilitarize the arsenals on earth.”

Chernenko and his aides did not know quite what to make of Reagan’s new public rhetoric. Through most of 1984, Chernenko had sent friendly replies to Reagan. He authorized the renewal of talks that had been suspended when the Pershing IIs had been deployed in West Germany. These discussions bogged down quickly, but Gromyko accepted an invitation to meet with Reagan in the White House at the end of September 1984. As Reagan put it in his diary, the president opened “with my monologue and made the point that perhaps both of us felt the other was a threat.” Both men acknowledged that both sides had mountains of nuclear weapons that were getting higher and more dangerous. “I tried to let him know,” Reagan recalled, “that the Soviet Union had nothing to fear from us.” To Reagan, Gromyko appeared “hard as granite.” To Shultz, he seemed “comfortable with the Cold War.” But Gromyko nonetheless took Nancy Reagan aside at a reception before lunch and whispered playfully, “Does your husband believe in peace?” Nancy replied that he did. “Then whisper ‘peace’ in your husband’s ear every night,” Gromyko said.

Shultz and McFarlane kept nudging Reagan to push forward with his overtures to Chernenko, but on 10 March 1985 Chernenko died. He was the third Soviet leader to pass away on Reagan’s watch. The president had tried to engage each of them but had had little success, partly because of their reluctance, partly because they could not discern the American president’s real intentions when his rhetoric and actions often seemed so threatening.

Yet Reagan’s and Shultz’s hopes for the future were lucidly outlined in the talking points prepared for Vice President Bush when he headed to Moscow to attend Chernenko’s funeral and talk to the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. “I bring with me a message ... of peace,” Bush was scripted to tell Gorbachev. “We know this is a time of difficulty; we would like it to be a time of opportunity.” The Soviet and American systems were different, and the differences would not disappear soon. “Our relationship is bound to be essentially competitive. But it is in the interest of both countries to compete and resolve problems in peaceful ways, and to build a more stable and constructive relationship. We know that some of the things we do and say sound threatening or hostile to you. The same is true for us.” But the point Bush was supposed to stress was that “neither the American government nor the American people has hostile intentions toward you.” They recognized that “you have suffered a great deal, and struggled a great deal, throughout your history.” They recognized that World War II was a great triumph for the Soviet Union and a great tragedy. The triumph opened up possibilities for a more peaceful world; the tragedy was that the opportunities were squandered. Now there was a new chance. “We are ready to embark on that path with you. It is the path of negotiations.” A number of agreements had already been signed, but there could be more. “We think it is a time to be more energetic, to tackle larger issues, to set higher goals. ... [W]e should strive to eliminate nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.” Both nations should aim for a “stable deterrence based on non-nuclear defense. ... [W]e should approach the other issues between us with the same energy and vision. We should seek to rid the world of the threat or use of force in international relations.”

Bush did not actually say these words at the meeting, but wandered instead into a discussion of regional issues and human rights. But then Secretary Shultz looked directly at Gorbachev and conveyed the president’s message: “President Reagan told me to look you squarely in the eyes and tell you: ‘Ronald Reagan believes this is a very special moment in the history of mankind.’ ”

Twilight in Moscow

Mikhail Gorbachev impressed Shultz and Bush. He was lively, energetic, and intelligent. He listened, asked questions, and probed. He liked to talk. He was smart and self-confident. “He has a deep and sharp mind,” Gromyko had said at the Politburo meeting that elected Gorbachev general secretary, and was a man who could “distinguish the primary from the secondary. ... He dissects every issue to see its structure. But he doesn’t leave it at that—he
generalizes and draws broader conclusions. He's a man of principle and conviction... He's straightforward with people... can say things not to your liking but... get along with different people." Shultz saw precisely these traits. "In Gorbachev we have an entirely different kind of leader in the Soviet Union than we have experienced before," he told Bush. Gorbachev was quick, fresh, engaging, and wide-ranging. "I came away genuinely impressed with the quality of thought, the intensity, and the intellectual energy of this new man on the scene," Shultz recalled.

Mikhail Gorbachev was born in the village of Privolnoe in the Stavropol region of southern Russia on 2 March 1931. His grandparents were peasants. His mother's father was an ardent supporter of the Bolshevik revolution, a member of the Communist Party, and an organizer of a collective farm; his father's father, Andrei Gorbachev, wished to farm independently. Andrei and his family suffered terribly during the great famine of 1933, and he was arrested the following year for failing to meet the government's sowing quota. During the 1930s, both grandfathers at different times were declared "enemies of the people" and incarcerated in concentration camps before returning to Stavropol, where they then worked diligently and productively on collective farms. Gorbachev's grandmothers, meanwhile, were deeply religious, as was his own mother. Gorbachev himself was secretly baptized. "Under the icon on a little home-made table stood portraits of Lenin and Stalin," he remembered.

Gorbachev was ten when the Nazis invaded. "Wartime impressions and experiences remain engraved in my mind," he wrote. In August 1941 his father, along with all the other men in the village, was conscripted. "Entire families would accompany their men, profusely shedding tears and voicing parting wishes all the way. We said goodbye at the village center. Women, children, and old men cried their hearts out, the weeping merging into one heart-rending wail of sorrow." Only women and children remained in the village. Mikhail had to take over his father's household chores and cultivate the vegetable patch that provided the family food. "The wartime children skipped from childhood directly to adulthood," he wrote. In late summer 1942, German armies occupied the village. "Rumours of mass executions in the neighboring towns circulated, and of machines that poisoned people with gas." Mikhail and his mother and grandparents feared for their lives. But they were saved when Soviet troops returned in early 1943 and drove the Germans westward. During that year everything in the village had been destroyed—"no machines were left, no cattle, no seeds. We ploughed the land by hitching cows from our individual households. The picture is still fresh in my memory," Gorbachev continued, "the women crying and the sad eyes of the cows." Famine raged. His mother sold his father's clothes and boots for a sack of corn. They planted seed. The rains came. They lived.

In late summer 1944, they received a letter saying Mikhail's father had been killed. But the news was wrong. He had survived. He had fought at Rostov, Kursk, and many other battlefields; in his brigade alone, 440 soldiers were killed, 120 wounded, and 651 missing. But he survived, returning home in mid-1945 after being wounded.

War meant devastation; war meant trauma. Those who were too young to fight were spared some of the worst pain and suffering, but they occasionally caught shocking glimpses of the meaning of war. Roaming the countryside in March 1943, when the snows were beginning to melt, young Mikhail and his friends "stumbled upon the remains of Red Army soldiers." They beheld "unspeakable horror: decaying corpses, partly devoured by animals, skulls in rusted helmets. . . . There they lay, in the thick mud of the trenches and craters, unburied, staring at us out of black, gaping eye-sockets. We came home in a state of shock." Mikhail would never forget. "I was fourteen when the war ended. Our generation is the generation of wartime children. It has burned us, leaving its mark both on our characters and our view of the world."

Life in the postwar Russian countryside was hard. Drought struck. Harvests were poor. Famine wracked the villages in 1946 and 1947. "There was nothing but hard labor and the belief that once reconstruction was complete, we would finally be able to lead a normal life," Gorbachev wrote. "Hope inspired the most laborious, humiliating work."

Gorbachev was ambitious. In school, he compiled an exemplary record. He also joined the Komsomol, the Young Communist League. He was socialized. The school system, he later commented, "played an enormous role in forming our ideas about the world; it sought to convince us by all means at its disposal that we were living in the most just form of society. Thus we developed the outlook... that no alternative was possible."

Of course, he grasped that the realities around him did not correspond to
the theories that were inculcated in him. But the ideals were inspiring. "The impulse provided by the revolution had a powerful effect: freedom, land, . . . human dignity for those who had been humiliated—the belief in all those values was, in spite of everything, something quite positive." He was motivated, moreover, by his father’s becoming a communist at the battlefront. For Gorbachev, as for so many others, “the war was not only a great victory over fascism but proof that our country’s cause was the right one. And by the same token,” he reminisced, “so was the cause of Communism.” After the victory over the Nazis, “there existed a truly positive subjective attitude toward Soviet society on the part of entire generations who connected their dearest hopes and plans in life with the success of that society.”

As a teenager, Gorbachev labored in the fields during the summer with his father, a machinist and tractor driver, whom he greatly admired for his intelligence, industry, courage, and intellectual curiosity. In 1948, working together and with another father-and-son team, they produced a record harvest, five or six times the average. Gorbachev’s father won an Order of Lenin prize and Mikhail the Order of the Red Banner of Labour. The young Gorbachev greatly valued this award, which was instrumental in winning him admission to Moscow State University, an unprecedented opportunity for a peasant lad from the boondocks whose grandfathers had been enemies of the people.

Studying law transformed Gorbachev’s life. Initially, he felt inadequate. His preparatory education had not been on a par with that of the more urbane students from Moscow and Leningrad. But he was hardworking, ambitious, curious, and intellectually gifted. He loved delving into topics he had not previously explored. The curriculum presumed that in order to study law you needed to understand the socioeconomic and political processes that undergirded the law. Gorbachev preferred the courses in history, diplomacy, political economy, and philosophy to the more practical legal courses. Although much brainwashing went on, he was exposed to new ideas, new students, and stimulating faculty. "The lectures revealed a new world, entire strata of human knowledge hitherto unknown to me.”

When, in 1953, Stalin died, it was “a heavy blow that we found hard to endure,” Gorbachev acknowledged many years later. “All night long we were part of the crowd going to his coffin.” But university life changed for the better after the dictator’s death. Lectures became more interesting, seminars livelier. “Doubts were expressed—warily at first, but gradually more outspoken.” Traditional interpretations were challenged. Gorbachev learned “how to think. . . . Before the university I was trapped in my belief system in the sense that I accepted a great deal as given, as assumptions not to be questioned. At the university I began to think and reflect and to look at things differently.”

He met his soul mate, Raisa Titorenko, at the university. An accomplished student of philosophy, she also came from a family that had experienced the purges and terror of the 1930s. With Raisa, Gorbachev found somebody with whom he could discuss his concerns and share his ambitions. They were married in 1953. She did not have his social skills, but she was smart, incisive, and committed to ameliorating the many ills of the Soviet system, including the position of women and the backward conditions of the peasantry, subjects she studied while her husband pursued his career.

After graduating from Moscow State University, Gorbachev returned to Stavropol. For the next two decades, he moved steadily up the ranks, first of the Komsomol and then of the local and regional Communist Party. As he worked on party and agricultural issues and traveled around the region, he learned much about the poverty and backwardness of his country. The infrastructure of Stavropol—health care, education, transport, and water supply—was in miserable shape. “Sewage often poured into the open gutters lining the streets.” He was dismayed by the sterility of thought of local officials. All directives emanated from Moscow. He, like everybody else, “was bound hand and foot by orders from the center.” Gorbachev longed for enlightened leadership from Moscow, but the hopes initially inspired by Khrushchev’s thaw quickly faded. Kosygin’s economic reforms floundered. “All eyes were fixed on the center,” Gorbachev recalled, “and it rejected any kind of innovation, or else it drained the energy and vitality out of any kind of initiative. My first doubts about the effectiveness of the system were born at that time.”

These doubts were reinforced by foreign travel. As he moved up the party ranks, Gorbachev gained the right to travel abroad, for example to the German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria. In 1969, only months after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, he visited Prague and was shocked by the hostility he encountered. In 1971 he went to Italy, in 1972 to Belgium and Holland. Later in the 1970s, he went on trips to Italy and West Germany and
traveled extensively in France. As a provincial official in Stavropol, he knew little about the world, so he relished these trips as opportunities to learn. The trips themselves reflect how highly he was regarded by his superiors, since very few Soviet officials received the right to travel in the West during those years. Gorbachev liked talking to foreigners, exchanging ideas, and making comparisons between his way of life and theirs. He felt pride in the Soviet educational system. He believed his countrymen had better access to medical care and a superior public transport system. But his travels abroad bred doubt:

[M]y previous belief in the superiority of socialist democracy over the bourgeois system was shaken as I observed the functioning of civic society and the different political systems. Finally, the most significant conclusion drawn from the journeys abroad: people lived in better conditions and were better off than in our country. The question haunted me: why was the standard of living in our country lower than in other developed countries? 121

Doubts about the system did not mean rejection of it. Gorbachev was a devoted communist. He saw that Soviet communism functioned badly, but he nonetheless believed deeply in its values and appreciated its achievements. He later reflected:

For many years people experienced an extraordinarily high rate of industrial growth, the tangible and undeniable change from a backward country into an industrialized country. People came from remote villages to work in new factories, which they took pride in as their own accomplishment. . . . The eradication of illiteracy, access to education, and visible improvement in living conditions for the masses after ominous destruction and starvation—all this was not just propaganda, but people’s actual experience.

Inefficiencies proliferated and corruption grew, but basic needs were provided and society was not polarized. At “the lowest levels of the social ladder,” Gorbachev later recalled, “people did not live in such hopeless circumstances that lack of social mobility was transferred from generation to generation, as is typical for those living in poverty in many countries with capitalist economies.” 122

As the party chief in Stavropol, Gorbachev’s aims were to accelerate economic growth and ameliorate living conditions. He was energetic, personable, and adaptable. He tried to appoint young people who were talented and creative. “I considered it my duty to support whatever was new and to encourage the development of a democratic atmosphere in our region.” He struggled to raise agricultural productivity “not by administrative methods” but by encouraging local autonomy and embracing scientific and technological innovation. He tried to spur the independence of local enterprises. 123

His vigor and determination captured the attention of patrons in Moscow. Fedor Kulakov, minister of agriculture; KGB head Andropov; and Mikhail Suslov, the ideology tsar and party secretary, came to know him. They had close ties with the Stavropol region and liked to vacation there at the numerous spas. Gorbachev had worked under Kulakov when the latter was regional first secretary. When Suslov and Andropov visited Stavropol, Gorbachev found ways to meet with them and ingratiate himself. Andropov liked him. In 1970 Gorbachev was designated first secretary of the Stavropol region. The next year, at the age of forty, he became a full member of the Central Committee. When Kulakov died in 1978, Brezhnev brought Gorbachev to Moscow and appointed him party secretary in charge of agriculture. Shortly thereafter, he was asked to join the Politburo, first as a candidate member and then as a full member. In his late forties, he was nearly twenty-five years younger than his average colleague. 124

In Moscow, Gorbachev was eager to bring about change. He met with agricultural economists and other experts, visited various policy institutes, asked questions, listened, and probed. He wanted to decentralize authority, give farmers more responsibility for organizing their work, and pay them according to their productivity. 125 Yet, as long as Brezhnev lived, he was able to accomplish little. By now old and sick, Brezhnev could not organize the work of the government or the party, communicate effectively, or consider new approaches or initiatives. The Politburo, according to Gorbachev, was in “total disarray.” Top party leaders were insulated from the people and isolated from one another. At regular meetings in the early 1980s, they talked little about
their work and rarely explored new ideas. There was a need to reallocate resources away from the defense establishment, but “the problem could not even be analyzed. All statistics concerning the military-industrial complex were top secret, inaccessible even to members of the Politburo.” For leaders with reformist instincts, there was little to do but wait for Brezhnev to die.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev kept developing himself. As a high party official, he now had access to books not previously available to him. He was exposed to new ways of thinking about socialism as he perused articles by Willy Brandt and François Mitterrand. He also initiated contacts with experts on foreign policy and atomic weapons. He met scientists like Yevgeni Velikhov, academicians like Georgi Arbatov, and international relations experts like Anatoli Chernyaev and Georgi Shakhnazarov. On a trip to Canada, he renewed his acquaintance with Alexander Yakovlev, the Soviet ambassador in Ottawa. The two men discovered they were “kindred spirits.” “We spoke completely frankly about everything,” Yakovlev recalled; “the main idea was that society must change, it must be built on different principles.”

When Brezhnev died and Andropov became general secretary, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere. The former KGB chief wanted to invigorate the system and accelerate industrial production. He looked to Gorbachev to help spearhead overall economic reform. And knowing he was ill, he began grooming the younger man as his successor. He assigned Gorbachev the task of preparing the major address commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Lenin’s death and encouraged him to think more broadly about all issues: “act as if you had to shoulder all the responsibility . . . .” said Andropov.

Andropov set a course that greatly appealed to Gorbachev. He “resolutely denounced all the features commonly associated with Brezhnevism, that is, protectionism, in-fighting and intrigues, corruption, moral turpitude, bureaucracy, disorganization and laxity.” He called for the perfection of “developed socialism.” Qualitative changes, he insisted, must occur not only in the productive forces of society but also in the superstructure. He meant that labor productivity must increase and new technologies must be embraced, including computers and robots. Like his predecessors, Andropov stressed that the quality of goods must be enhanced. He reminded his comrades that the “ultimate objective of our efforts in the economic field is to improve the living conditions of the people.” Even while he demanded stricter discipline, he also believed that socialist democracy must be broadened, that the “activities of the party and state bodies [must be brought] closer to the needs and interests of the people.”

Andropov did not hesitate to say that the challenges were daunting. “Frankly speaking we have not yet studied properly the society in which we live and work, and have not yet fully revealed the laws governing its development, particularly economic ones,” he acknowledged in a speech to the party plenum on 15 June 1983. “This is why we have to act at times empirically, so to speak, by the quite irrational trial-and-error method.” Life constantly interjected new problems, and scientific study was required. But science and technology conjured up new challenges and threats, too.

No threat was greater than that of nuclear war. “An unprecedented sharpening of the struggle between the two world social systems has taken place,” said Andropov. “[But] an attempt to solve the historical dispute between the two systems through a military clash could be disastrous to mankind.” Preserving the peace was therefore his main objective. So important was it, he insisted, that one had to “reappraise the principal goals . . . of the entire communist movement.” Fighting “oppression and the exploitation of man by man” had always been an overriding concern, but nowadays communists “must also struggle for the preservation of human civilization, for man’s right to life.” Capitalism was facing ever graver crises, besieged as it was by “internal and interstate antagonisms, upheavals, and conflicts.” But within the capitalist world were factions and movements that realized the necessity of peaceful coexistence. Andropov wanted them to know that he shared their hope for peaceful coexistence, which met “the interests of the peoples on both sides of the social barricades dividing the world.”

Andropov still “believed that the future belongs to socialism. Such is the march of history.” But this did not mean that “we are going to engage in the ‘export of revolution.’ ” Socialism would “ultimately prove its advantages precisely in the conditions of peaceful competition with capitalism. And we by no means advocate competition in the military field, which imperialism is foisting on us.” Although he would never sacrifice the security of the U.S.S.R. or its allies and was prepared to enhance the combat power of the nation’s armed forces, he preferred “to reduce the level of armaments and military
Arms Reductions

At the Central Committee meeting that officially designated him the new general secretary, Gorbachev outlined his vision. Without repudiating the past, he emphasized that the Soviet economy must be rejuvenated and its society revitalized. He wanted to accelerate production, restructure economic management, and promote openness and democracy. "Accelerate" meant to incorporate scientific and technological innovations promptly into Soviet industry, to heighten labor productivity, and to combat alcoholism. Socialist democracy must be nurtured along with more discipline and more order, Gorbachev said. Individual workers had to be reengaged in production, develop a sense of ownership in the process. More self-management demanded more transparency (glasnost). Gorbachev believed that more democracy in the workplace meant more socialism. And more socialism meant more social justice, the feature that distinguished socialism from capitalism and made it more likely to satisfy man's quest for personal fulfillment and creativity.

Turning to foreign affairs, Gorbachev stated unequivocally that the arms race must be curbed. "Never before has such a terrible danger hung over the heads of humanity in our times," he told his comrades. "The only rational way out of the current situation is for the opposing forces to agree to immediately stop the arms race—above all, the nuclear arms race."

The mounting stockpiles of nuclear weapons made no sense to Gorbachev. They did not contribute to national security, and he believed a nuclear war could not be won and must never be waged. "In the atomic-cosmic era," he would say in May 1986, "world war is an absolute evil." Nor did he think that nuclear weapons could be used politically to blackmail or intimidate an adversary in a crisis. Risk-taking of this sort could be suicidal, as war might arise through miscalculation if the adversary did not back down. Nuclear weapons "must stop being used in a political role because it's impossible to achieve our goals using [them]."

The greatest danger to Soviet communism, however, did not arise from external threats. Gorbachev "did not think anyone was going to attack us," said Anatoli Chernyaev, one of the foreign-policy experts who became an aide to the new Soviet leader in February 1986. Soviet military capabilities were sufficiently great "to repulse the desire for aggression." However, Gorbachev did consider the Soviet Union imperiled by internal decay. The arms race had to be tamed and international relations defused because these steps were indispensable for the success of his domestic program. "We understood that if nothing was changed in our foreign policy, we would get nowhere with regard to the internal changes we had in mind," Gorbachev recalled. Chernyaev emphasized that there was an intimate connection "between every important domestic issue and foreign policy."

Gorbachev's thinking adumbrated a radical shift in ideology. Imperialism was still to be worried about; vigilance was necessary. The United States, Gorbachev would say over and over again during his first years in office, was trying to exhaust the Soviet Union, "waiting for us to drown." He would not allow his country to be intimidated by superior American power, and he