CONFRONTING THE EVIL EMPIRE

Before Ronald Reagan became president, he had a long conversation about foreign relations with Richard Allen, who would later become his first national security adviser. “My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic,” Reagan said. “It is this: We win and they lose. What do you think of that?”

The words now sound prophetic, and they form the basis of claims about Reagan’s historical achievement. Yet Soviet communism had begun to rot long before Reagan took office, and resistance within the Soviet bloc was rising steadily in the late 1970s. Three decades earlier, when Reagan was still a left-wing Democrat, Harry Truman initiated policies that, as carried on by administrations of both political parties, contributed mightily to the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire. Reagan’s own foreign policy was not a coherent plan for the downfall of communism but a patchwork of policies in different parts of the globe, sometimes successful, sometimes vacillating, and often disastrous. In retrospect, the chief efforts of the so-called Reagan Doctrine either were irrelevant to winning the cold war or helped set in motion forces that would challenge the United States after Soviet communism collapsed. A novice in foreign affairs when he came to the White House, Reagan headed a divided administration whose foreign policy was long on style and symbolism (and at times on mendacity and deception) but chronically incapable of winning substantial diplomatic victories, especially during his first term.

Reagan the optimist appeared unfazed. During the congressional election campaign, he beseeched the voters to stick with his policies and “stay the course”—a course about which the country’s confidence had been shaken but not destroyed. (Polling data showed that although Republicans were taking the blame for the economic woes, nearly half the country still had a cautious wait-and-see attitude toward Reagan’s larger policies.) Into the new year, Reagan’s rhetoric did not change. In February 1983, he claimed that “all signs we’re now seeing point toward an economic recovery.” On economic policy, Reagan’s chief initial concern, his presidency’s hell of an opening was now over. He betrayed no doubt whatsoever that the show had several more reels to run.

In the elections in November, the Democrats picked up twenty-seven House seats, solidifying their majority. Two months later, Reagan’s job approval rating sank to 35 percent, and less than 20 percent of those polled believed that the economy was improving. That Reagan could win reelection in 1984, let alone climb back onto his heroic pedestal, seemed, suddenly, a highly doubtful proposition.

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Part of Reagan's strength—which, however, also contributed to his worst failures—was his simple and absolute certainty that the West would triumph in the cold war. More important, Reagan eventually adjusted to new political realities and recognized when the cold war was ending, even though foreign policy experts within his administration, and conservative critics outside, refused to believe it. In this, Reagan differed from his fiercely anti-Soviet friends and conservative allies (who for a time denounced him as a turncoat) nearly as much as he differed from the advocates of détente and liberal defenders of permanent peaceful coexistence. Beneath Reagan's harsh rhetoric lay his peculiar imaginings of a world after communism, derived from his uncomplicated, humane conviction that the Soviet Union was a lie, that no lie could live forever, and that Russians and Americans would one day live in peace and friendship. Those imaginings drove the greatest achievements of his presidency.

Yet it took years of covert folly and lawlessness, bogus dogma masquerading as diplomacy, and barbaric bloodletting in the third world—all leading, in Reagan's second term, to a constitutional confrontation that sent his popularity plummeting and might have destroyed his presidency—before Reagan salvaged success from failure. And although Reagan was not the passive cipher some people made him out to be—for ill and for good—that success required fundamental shifts in his own thinking, a drastic rearrangement of his administration in its final year, and the outsize good fortune that came with the advent of the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Reagan's inaugural address made it obvious that domestic matters, especially taxes and the economy, would initially take precedence over foreign policy. The primacy of domestic concerns became even clearer in March, when, over objections from the State Department, the White House heeded agricultural interests and lifted the embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union that Jimmy Carter had imposed in retaliation for the invasion of Afghanistan. In stark contrast to the grain deal, however, Reagan's early speeches, as well as his cabinet appointments, announced a new toughness toward the Soviet Union. Détente, Reagan said nine days after taking office, had been “a one-way street the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims.” Carter and the Democratic Congress had allowed the nation's military defenses to fall into shameful neglect, exposing America to what Reagan called a "window of vulnerability." When, on close examination, the idea of a window of vulnerability turned out to be a sham, administration officials dropped the phrase—but not the broader claim that the United States had permitted its military preparedness to deteriorate in the 1970s. Reagan's chief advisers on foreign policy—Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and William Casey, director of the CIA—were hard-line hawks who shared his desire to establish unquestionable U.S. military superiority, no matter what it cost.

The (now) former Democratic neoconservatives grouped around the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) greatly reinforced that desire. Reagan himself had joined the CPD's executive board in 1979; and after he won in 1980, as many as fifty CPD members took posts in his administration. Convinced that the CIA had badly underestimated the Soviet menace, the neoconservatives had gained considerable influence as early as 1976, while the CPD was still being formed, when President Ford—at the urging of George H. W. Bush, who was then the director of the CIA—mandated the creation of a secret Team B intelligence group to provide alternative reports on national security outside the CIA's established channels. Not surprisingly, the neoconservatives who dominated Team B—including Richard Pipes, a professor at Harvard who would later become a member of CPD—drew a much darker picture of the Soviet Union's superiority over the United States in armaments than the career professionals at the CIA did. Described by one former deputy director of the CIA as "a kangaroo court of outside critics, all picked from one point of view," Team B disbanded in 1977, but some of its findings continued to carry weight in the Carter administration, especially in debates over arms control. After Carter's defeat, the neoconservatives carried their exaggerated worst-case projections back with them into the Reagan White House.

The neoconservatives also pushed for a reversal of what they called the "Vietnam syndrome," which they believed had crippled America's will to use military force against the Soviet Union's proxies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Ending the syndrome, they insisted, required abandoning the squeamishness over human rights that had characterized the Carter administration, and acknowledging frankly that support for authoritarian anticommunist regimes abroad was a necessary check on expansive totalitarianism. A former supporter of "Scoop" Jackson and a prominent member of the CPD, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, gave this blunt formulation a theoretical gloss, borrowing from conservative ideas that dated back to Edmund Burke. Writing in Commentary in 1979, Kirkpatrick argued that "traditional autocracies" (that is, anticommunist regimes), no matter how corrupt, hierarchical, and repressive, were susceptible to democratic reform and therefore
tolerable, whereas "revolutionary autocracies" were utterly closed societies, impervious to change, devoted to controlling every nook and cranny of civic and private life. Impressed by Kirkpatrick's article, Reagan appointed her U.S. ambassador to the United Nations—placing in the UN a figure who held it in contempt for its toleration of "anti-American" resolutions and votes by the General Assembly, and who would apologize for murderous regimes from Argentina to Iraq in pursuit of her neoconservative abstractions.

The accuracy of the conservative and neoconservative reassessments of the Soviet Union's strength and the United States' weakness remains a subject of intense criticism and controversy, but there can be little doubt that they included selective readings of the evidence. The United States had hardly been neglectful of defense in the late 1970s. After bottoming out at mid-decade under Gerald Ford, military spending increased substantially under Jimmy Carter, rising by nearly 12 percent overall between 1977 and 1981. Much of the increased spending went toward improving the nation's nuclear capabilities; it included large outlays for new warheads, new cruise missiles, and development of the nuclear-powered Trident submarine. And contrary to the Reagan administration's claims, military expenditures by the Soviet Union had remained fairly steady since 1975.

Still, the Reagan White House was determined from the start to exempt U.S. defense spending from budgetary constraints, and to remove any doubts about America's global military supremacy. During Reagan's first term, defense outlays climbed from $171 billion to $229 billion, roughly a 34 percent increase when the figures were measured in real 1982 dollars. Reagan resumed development of the B-1 bomber, funded further work on the B-2 Stealth bomber, and spent billions on cruise missiles, the MX missile, and a major expansion of the Navy. The rationale was twofold: enlarging American defense would deter enemies abroad from military adventures such as the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, and would also force the Kremlin to undertake its own arms buildup, which it could not afford. "They cannot vastly increase their military productivity because they've already got their people on a starvation diet," Reagan observed in October 1981. "But now they're going to be faced with [the fact] that we could go forward with an arms race and they can't keep up." The Democrats' fecklessness, supposedly, had permitted the Soviet Union, an economic basket case, to threaten becoming the world's dominant military superpower. Reagan's arms buildup would supposedly ensure that the United States was dominant. The Soviet Union would then have to curtail or cease its cold war adventures.

Having substituted military pressure for diplomacy, the administration coupled the arms expenditures with a new, one-sided approach to arms control negotiations, heavily influenced by a leading neoconservative strategist, Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle. Although uneasy with the SALT II treaty negotiated under Jimmy Carter, Reagan announced late in 1981 that the United States would abide by it—but he then proposed a fresh round of negotiations called the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START). These new talks would begin with a proposal described as the "zero-zero" option, whereby the United States would withhold scheduled missile deployments in Western Europe if the Soviet Union removed its intermediate-range missiles aimed at Europe.

The proposal seemed symmetrical, and the emphasis on arms reduction instead of arms limitation sounded more dramatic. But the plan actually weighed heavily against the Soviet Union, which was being asked to remove the heart of its nuclear defense—land-based missiles that were already in place—in exchange for promises by the United States to abstain from future deployments, and to do so without reference either to sea- and air-based systems (where the U.S. held the great advantage) or to the nuclear capabilities of the British and the French. Rather than a fresh departure, START looked to many Western observers, as well as many of the Soviet leaders, like a disguised attempt to foreclose substantive arms control.

Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, initially brightened by the lifting of the American grain embargo, worsened in 1981-1982 after the Polish government cracked down on Solidarity, the democratic anticommunist trade union movement. Claiming angrily and correctly that Moscow had ordered the repression, Reagan imposed economic sanctions on the Soviet Union, including a ban on its commercial air traffic to and from the United States, and he approved covert support by the CIA to the Polish rebels. The administration then affirmed, in March 1982, a secret document calling for new preparations to prevail over the Soviet Union in either a prolonged conventional war or a nuclear exchange. Formalized in May as National Security Defense Directive 32, the new policy committed the United States to exert what pressure it could to weaken the Soviet Union's economy and to ally itself with dissident forces inside the Soviet bloc. A month later, the administration followed through by blocking the sale of American technology to aid the Soviets in completing a Siberian gas pipeline. During his first major presidential trip abroad, speaking before the British Parliament, Reagan declared that the final conflict had finally come, "a great revolutionary crisis" that would "leave Marxism-
The term "Reagan Doctrine" was coined by the conservative Washington, D.C., columnist Charles Krauthammer in "The Reagan Doctrine," *Time*, April 1, 1985, p. 54. Although never embraced by the White House, it accurately conveyed the thrust of the administration's policy.
The limitations of the Reagan Doctrine emerged earliest and most sharply in the Middle East. Concerned chiefly with forestalling any advance into the region by the Soviet Union, the administration initially stressed reaching what it called "strategic 'consensus'" among Israel and the Arab states. This entailed the expansion of the U.S. military presence in the region and increased sales of arms and other military equipment. But political realities continually undermined the Americans' hopes. Although happy to receive American men and matériel, the Arab governments remained far more concerned about actual deeds by the Israelis and the revolutionary Iranian regime of Ayatollah Khomeini than about countering a conjectured Soviet menace. Iran's success in staving off defeat in its war with Iraq made Tehran appear the chief threat to stability in the Gulf. The shocking assassination of Anwar Sadat by Egyptian jihadists in October 1981 deepened concerns about fundamentalist threats from within; given Sadat's unpopularity (resulting from the Camp David accords and his subsequent suppression of internal dissent), his murder also refocused attention on Israeli-Arab relations, especially with regard to the Palestinian question. And in Israel, the United States' efforts to achieve strategic consensus, capped by the sale of AWACS surveillance aircraft to the Saudi Arabian monarchy, in the aftermath of Sadat's assassination, badly strained the alliance with Washington.

During his first year as president, Reagan put on a show of toughness against the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. Qaddafi, an eccentric autocrat who had taken power after a coup d'état in 1969, preached a blend of pan-Arabism, socialism, and Islam, and had long been a strong supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and other international terrorist groups. At the end of the 1970s, he established a measured alliance with the Soviet Union, which placed him higher on the Reagan administration's hit list. After claiming the Gulf of Sidra as Libyan territory, Qaddafi threatened to attack American naval forces if they performed their usual maneuvers there. Reagan duly ordered the Sixth Fleet into the Gulf, two Libyan fighter jets fired on American F-14s accompanying the fleet; the American fliers summarily destroyed the Libyans. "Let friend and foe alike know that America has the muscle to back up its words," Reagan declared. Yet apart from this passing encounter, during his first term Reagan would undertake no major offensive against Qaddafi.

To contain the Iranians, the Reagan administration implemented the neoconservative policy of supporting the lesser of two evils, who in this instance was the vicious Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein (even though Iraq had long been the strongest ally of the Soviet Union in the Persian Gulf region). Iraq had some initial successes after it invaded Iran in 1980; but the invasion faltered in 1981, and Khomeini's theocracy seemed about to overrun Iraq and seize control of its considerable supplies of oil. To buttress the secularist Iraqis, the U.S. State Department, early in 1982, while formally adhering to a strict neutrality, removed Iraq from its list of outlaw terrorist nations, thereby permitting the Iraqis to trade with American businesses. A year later, with the U.S. government now committed to regarding "any major reversal of Iraq's fortunes as a strategic defeat for the West," Reagan plucked Donald Rumsfeld from the private sector and named him special presidential envoy to the Middle East. Rumsfeld met with Saddam in Tehran, raised the possibility of normalized diplomatic relations, and offered assistance with military intelligence and enormous business credits to Iraq.

Iraq's usefulness as a check on Iran overrode concerns about human rights, including the growing evidence that Saddam, in violation of international law, had used chemical weapons against both the Iranians and his own domestic opponents. When, in 1983, Iran complained to the United Nations about Saddam's deployment of what would later become known as weapons of mass destruction, the Americans called for what Ambassador Kirkpatrick called "restraint" and lobbied successfully to defeat any specific condemnation of Saddam. "Our long-term hope," a former ambassador to Baghdad later explained, "was that Hussein's government would become less repressive and more responsible."

As the United States drew closer to Iraq, American policy in the Middle East began falling apart with regard to Lebanon. Since the mid-1970s, Yasir Arafat's PLO, with support from Syria, had used Lebanon as a base for waging war against fractious Lebanese Christian forces and for staging raids against Israel. In early June 1982, Israeli troops under General Ariel Sharon invaded Lebanon, with the ostensible aim of clearing out the PLO's border camps but with the additional hope of inciting Lebanese Christians to establish a pro-Israel government in Beirut. The Israeli offensive continued into August, capped by an eleven-hour aerial bombardment of West Beirut. Having taken no action for more than two months, and thereby giving the invasion tacit approval, Reagan finally told Prime Minister Menachem Begin to stop the bombing. A cease-fire was soon declared and, following intricate negotiations, the PLO's militants agreed to leave Lebanon...
for several other Arab countries, under the protection of a multinational armed force. But in September, Muslim extremists murdered the Lebanese president-elect, the pro-Israeli Christian leader Bashir Gemayel. Gemayel's supporters in the Christian militia took revenge by invading two camps of Palestinian refugees in Beirut. Then, with the tacit approval of the Israelis, they slaughtered more than 1,000 men, women, and children. Reagan, who had sent 800 Marines as part of the force to oversee the PLO's withdrawal, responded to the atrocities by committing 1,800 Marines to join a new multinational peacekeeping force in a vague, open-ended mission to restore order.

Badly exposed, with no clearly defined political or military objectives, the Americans in Beirut, civilian and military, became targets for Islamic militants. On April 18, 1983, suicide terrorists drove a van of explosives into the American embassy, killing sixty-three people, among them seventeen Americans including the CIA's leading expert on the Mideast. The U.S. forces replied by shelling Muslim militia positions. This reaction deepened the impression among ordinary Arabs that the U.S. forces were acting not as impartial peacekeepers but as allies of the Israelis and Lebanese Christians. American military experts, believing that no vital national interest was at stake, urged withdrawal of the Marines, but Reagan, who saw the Islamic radicals as surrogates for the Soviet Union, refused. Six months later, on October 23, a suicide bomber drove a Mercedes-Benz delivery truck packed with explosives into the U.S. Marines' main barracks at the Beirut airport, destroying the barracks, killing 241 Marines, and injuring sixty others. It was, as it remains, the deadliest single overseas attack on American military forces since the Second World War—and it would lead to one of the most humiliating acts of Reagan's presidency.

The White House's reaction to the bombing was swift and, it seemed, unswerving. Reagan denounced the attack as "despicable" and, backed up by Weinberger, vowed that the American mission in Beirut would continue. Vice President Bush toured the destroyed compound and declared that the administration was "not going to let a bunch of insidious terrorists shape the foreign policy of the United States." Yet apart from some desultory shelling of Muslim militia positions, the United States undertook no military retaliation. Instead, the Marines were moved offshore, out of harm's way. In early February, Reagan ordered the force to begin a withdrawal, and in April the last of the troops departed. By bowing before political and military realities, which had been apparent for months to experts at the Pentagon, the administration had made a mockery of its tough talk about terrorism. What had begun as a policy of strategic consensus had become a strategic nightmare.

Except for the fortuitous unfolding of unrelated events during the weeks surrounding the bombing of the barracks, Reagan might have paid a serious political price for the debacle in Lebanon. But on September 1, military personnel in the Asian part of the Soviet Union mistook a Korean Air Lines passenger jet that had strayed into Soviet airspace for an American reconnaissance plane. When the jet failed to respond to warnings, the Soviets shot it down, killing all 269 persons aboard, including sixty-one Americans. American intelligence reports, later confirmed by a large mass of evidence, showed that the Soviets, their defense systems on a hair trigger, had handled the matter worse than incompetently, but had genuinely mistaken the jet for a spy plane. Reagan, however, denounced the episode as "the Korean Air Lines massacre," a "crime against humanity" that was "born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and seeks constantly to expand and dominate other nations." His retaliatory actions—reaffirming the ban on Aeroflot flights and suspending negotiations on various bilateral agreements—was relatively mild, even wispy, and led some observers on the right to question his will. But the American public, already outraged by the incident, became inflamed when the Kremlin, after putting out false stories that the plane had crashed on its own, accused Reagan of having fallen into a "military psychosis." Americans' anger intensified when Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov of the Soviet army insisted that the Korean flight had actually been a "deliberate, thoroughly planned intelligence operation."

Several weeks later, and just one day before the bombing in Beirut, the cold war reached a crisis on another front. The tiny Caribbean island of Grenada, a former British colony 1,000 miles off the American mainland, had been ruled since 1979 by a Marxist People's Revolutionary Government (PRG), headed by the charismatic chief of the New Jewel movement, Maurice Bishop. To the alarm of Grenada's neighbors, the PRG developed close ties with Cuba, and Fidel Castro sent hundreds of Cuban engineers and construction workers to the island to build a long, modern airstrip suitable for commercial and, potentially, military use. In mid-October 1983, rival elements within the PRG ousted Bishop and his allies, brutally executed them, and installed their own communist government. Six Caribbean heads of government from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (of which the United States was not a member) requested American intervention, and on October 22, Reagan secretly authorized an invasion,
Despite opposition from the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the British government. ("In the middle of a meeting Margaret Thatcher called," Reagan wrote two days later. "She's upset & doesn't think we should do it. I couldn't tell her it had started.") Mishaps plagued the operation, but there was never any doubt about the final outcome. Within a week, American forces overwhelmed the tiny Grenadan military, removed armed Cuban forces dug in at the airstrip, and evacuated several hundred American medical students who had been training in Grenada at St. George's University—the last of which the administration had cited as a major humanitarian reason for the operation.

Reagan immediately sought to entwine the bombing in Beirut and the victory in Grenada and depict them as large and fateful turns in the cold war. After claiming, falsely, that the invasion force in Grenada had turned up huge caches of weapons for supplying communist insurgents, the president described a nightmare vision of the island as a potential major Soviet outpost for exporting terror and tyranny. The American invasion, like the cavalry's arrival at the end of a western movie, had, supposedly, saved the day: "We got there just in time," Reagan told the nation. The president then linked Grenada and Lebanon as places where the Soviet Union had supported violence through its proxy governments and insurgent movements. The claims were unreal; yet the events in Grenada had the double effect of distracting public attention from the catastrophe in Beirut and allowing the president's supporters to claim that the United States had finally won a combat victory against the Soviets and dispelled the ghosts of Vietnam.

Although the invasion of Grenada gave Reagan a clear-cut, albeit easy, military victory, American foreign policy, especially toward the Soviet Union, became increasingly inconsistent and difficult to read after 1982. A shift had been presaged in June 1982, when Reagan replaced his stormy secretary of state, Alexander Haig, with George Shultz. Haig's arrogant penchant for bureaucratic infighting had long alienated him from other administration officials, including the president. After Haig had served uneasily for six months under the newly appointed national security adviser William P. Clark (a longtime conservative ally of Reagan's), Reagan summoned Haig and handed him a note that regrettfully accepted his letter of resignation—a letter that Haig had threatened to tender during earlier contretemps but had never actually written. "The precipitous way in which you're conducting yourself, Mr. President," Haig told Reagan, "means I just can't get up and leave, I will have to make it clear publicly . . . that I no longer support your policies and that is the case." By the time Haig finished with the formalities, Reagan had already announced Shultz's appointment.

Shultz was a former academic economist who had served the Nixon administration in several posts (including secretary of the treasury from 1972 to 1974) before leaving public service to become president and director of the Bechtel Group, a multinational engineering conglomerate based in San Francisco. Known as an unflappable, poker-faced, highly intelligent man, Shultz appealed to Reagan as calm and solid, in marked contrast to the volatile Haig. William Clark, as national security adviser, was impressed by Shultz's evenhanded views about the Middle East and his respect for the Arabs' grievances. But in time, Shultz would also show far more flexibility and pragmatism in dealing with the Soviet Union than Haig did—or than his new colleagues Clark, Weinberger, Kirkpatrick, and Casey would.

In February 1983, Shultz arranged for a secret private meeting in the White House residence between Reagan and the longtime ambassador from the Soviet Union to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin. This was the president's first face-to-face encounter ever with a high-ranking Soviet official. The timing was propitious. Leonid Brezhnev had died the previous November, and his successor as general secretary, the former head of the state police, Yuri Andropov, was eager to recommence serious negotiations for an agreement on arms control. Reagan and Dobrynin talked for two hours about relations between their countries, violations of human rights in the Soviet Union, and the future possibilities for arms reduction. Reagan was, as ever, less stridently ideological in person than he could be in his public speeches; he repeatedly emphasized his desire to be constructive, and he told the ambassador that he wanted Shultz "to be a channel for direct contact with Andropov—no bureaucracy involved." It was a small but important first step away from confrontation. As they left the White House, Dobrynin told Shultz that "this could be an historic moment."

Reagan's thinking about the Soviet Union remained divided—in part deeply skeptical about the communists' motives and devoted to putting the Soviet empire on the road to extinction; in part optimistic about his ability to bargain and persuade, and thus spare the world a nuclear conflagration. Soon after his meeting with Dobrynin, Reagan put his harsher side on display to the entire world. On March 8, in an address in Orlando, Florida, to the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, he blasted the Soviet Union as "the focus of evil in the modern world" and "an evil empire." Two weeks later, he followed up with an extraordinary pro-
posal that the United States abandon its traditional policy of nuclear deter-
rence through mutually assured destruction in favor of building a system of
space lasers and rockets as a shield against any attack by the Soviet Union.
Formally called the president's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the plan
soon won the derisive nickname "Star Wars," after a popular science-fiction
film series depicting a mythic battle between good and evil.

The announcement of SDI came as a complete surprise to Shultz and
Weinberger, as well as to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (who had been consulted
about the idea, but not about when Reagan would publicize it). The plan
blended various aspects of Reagan's thinking.

An often-told tale dates the origins of SDI to 1979, when Reagan,
while touring the facilities of the North American Air Defense Command
(NORAD), was shocked to learn that the United States lacked any de-
fense against even one incoming Soviet missile. Long before then, however,
conservative defense experts, enraged by the restrictions imposed on de-
fense systems by the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty signed in 1972 and
convinced that the Soviet Union had already devised some sort of missile de-

fense system of its own, had been thinking about designing and deploying
a defensive shield in space. The Republican Party platform in 1980 point-
edly rejected the principle of deterrence and called for rapid research and
development of an American antiballistic missile system "such as is already
at hand in the Soviet Union." A group of lobbyists from the new right,
called High Frontier, pressed the idea on the new administration. The
story about Reagan's eye-opening tour of NORAD—a story that reflects
extremely poorly on the would-be president's readiness for the job—may
have been true, but his proposal four years later reflected well-established
conservative opinion.

The SDI also reflected aspects of Reagan's outlook above and beyond im-
plementing conservative ideas. The president appears to have been greatly
aroused by a meeting in November 1982 with the renowned nuclear physi-
cist (and father of the hydrogen bomb) Edward Teller. Teller sketched out
a space station combining X-ray lasers mounted on platforms and nuclear
weapons that could be used solely for the interception and benign destruc-
tion of enemy missiles. The outline appealed to Reagan's dreamy fascination
with technological gimmickry, his cinematic science-fiction imaginings of
immobilizing the enemy and ushering in world peace, and his frustration
at what he saw as one-sided efforts to restrain American military superior-
ity. It also appealed to a side of Reagan at odds with those conservatives, in-
cluding influential elements within his own administration, who believed
that American strategy ought to be directed solely toward winning a nu-
clear war. Reagan's basic hatred of nuclear weaponry had not changed since
his days as a liberal; he believed that no winner could emerge from the ra-
dioactive ashes of a nuclear war. The SDI would mobilize American inge-
nuity and technical prowess to ensure that the ultimate human catastrophe
would never occur.

Most of Reagan's aides involved with foreign policy shrugged off his
fantastic proposition, believing that it would never have much utility except
as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Soviet Union. The technol-
ogy required to develop SDI, let alone to implement it, was utterly conjectural—far more remote in 1983 than the technology that had been avail-
able to develop the atomic bomb during World War II (a crash effort that
Reagan likened to his new proposal). Secretary of State Shultz, however,
was extremely troubled when he received an eyes-only copy of the speech
on SDI two days in advance. To Shultz, the proposal seemed muddled and
incomplete. (How, for example, could an antiballistic missile shield in space
protect Americans from nuclear-equipped bombers or low-flying cruise
missiles?) More important, the speech strongly implied that the United
States was radically altering its basic strategic doctrines— a destabilizing
shift that was bound to confuse, alarm, and enrage the Soviet leaders only
weeks after Reagan had privately and emphatically pledged to Ambassador
Dobrynin his constructive cooperation.

The reaction of the Soviet Union was swift and unequivocal. General
Secretary Andropov, although contending with severe kidney disease, took
only three days to denounce SDI and accuse the Americans of "attempting
to disarm the Soviet Union in the face of the U.S. nuclear threat." If SDI
ever became operational, the Soviet Union would lose the core of its nu-
clear arsenal. The plan did not completely eliminate the possibility that the
United States would threaten the Soviets with a nuclear attack, or perhaps
even launch an attack, secure against massive retaliation. Even if the space
shield was a fantasy, at best many years away from realization, Reagan's
proposal was a clear invitation to a redoubled arms race, which the Soviets
(who had already begun cutting the rate of spending increases for military
procurements) were ill-equipped to undertake.

Reagan, unfazed, continued to pressure the Soviet Union and to combat
Soviet-backed movements around the world. In Western Europe, despite
everseous popular movements (reinforced by an American "No Nukes" move-
ment that favored a freeze on nuclear deployments), Reagan moved ahead
with plans to send Pershing II and Tomahawk cruise missiles—the so-
called Euromissiles—to NATO, in order to offset the Soviet Union's deployment of intermediate-range SS-20 missiles during the 1970s. In Central America, the administration maintained its support for repressive regimes in Guatemala as well as El Salvador, ignoring marauding, right-wing anti-insurgent death squads that had murdered tens of thousands of civilians. The CIA's covert support for the Nicaraguan contras expanded to include gaining the assistance of Panama's new president, Manuel Noriega, in supplying arms and training grounds, despite Noriega's connections to outlaw Colombian cartels that were flooding the United States with illegal drugs. Skeptical critics in Congress pushed back hard. The Senate had already passed, late in 1982 (and compelled Reagan to sign), a resolution, originally sponsored by the respected chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Edward Boland, that outlawed American financial aid for efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas. Yet Reagan repeatedly backed the insurgents. At one point he praised the Nicaraguan contras as "freedom fighters," a term that quickly became the White House's description of choice for every variety of anti-Soviet force. On September 16, the president signed a new secret directive ordering the CIA to aid the contras in ending Nicaraguan support for leftist guerrillas "and to bring the Sandinistas into meaningful negotiations...with their neighbors on peace in the region."

Simultaneously, though, Reagan was working on a very different track. With encouragement from Shultz, as well as from Nancy Reagan and her close friend Michael Deaver, the president continued to give private assurances to the Kremlin that he intended no attack on the Soviet Union and wished to pursue peace. "If each of us determined we would not resort to war as a solution to any problem," the president said in a handwritten, secret letter to Andropov on August 4, "arms reduction would be simply and easily achieved." A turning point in Reagan's thinking came in November 1982, when apprehension in the Soviet Union about a massive war simulation exercise by the United States and NATO (the exercise was called Able Archer) turned into panic among some Soviet military leaders who believed that the Americans were about to launch a first-strike nuclear attack. The Kremlin, leaving nothing to chance, placed some of its nuclear fighters on combat alert. The exercise ended without incident, but Reagan, severely rattled, backed away from his more militant rhetoric. "A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought," he declared; and he expressed a fervent desire that he would live "to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the earth." In his memoirs, Reagan recalled both his shock at discovering that Soviet leaders genuinely feared a first-strike attack by the United States and his new resolve to "get a top Soviet leader in a room alone and try to convince him we had no designs on the Soviet Union and the Russians had nothing to fear from us."

It would take a long time before Reagan's policies caught up with his private words and resolutions. The START talks in Geneva, which had commenced in mid-1982, broke down completely in November when, after diplomatic feints on both sides, NATO began to deploy the Euromissiles. In March 1983, the world discovered the extent of the United States' clandestine support for the Nicaraguan contras after a Soviet tanker struck a mine off the Nicaraguan coast—and the Wall Street Journal revealed that the CIA, contrary to repeated public assurances from its director, Casey, had with Reagan's approval secretly mined Nicaraguan harbors. Outrage was no longer confined to left-wing Sandinista support groups or foreign policy liberals and leftists in Congress, who had opposed Reagan from the start. "I am pissed off," Barry Goldwater wrote to Casey, in a warning that was all the more powerful considering the source. "This is an act violating international law. It is an act of war." In the Republican-dominated Senate, Edward Kennedy led the way to the approval, by an overwhelming margin, of a resolution calling for a ban on U.S. funds to mine Nicaraguan harbors—a first step; Kennedy said, "to halt President Reagan's secret war in Nicaragua." Congress then stiffened its earlier Boland Resolution and cut off any aid whatsoever to the contras.

The controversy over Nicaragua eventually contributed to the near collapse of Reagan's presidency. At the time, however, it was overtaken by a mass patriotic fervor that had been building since the invasion of Grenada. In June, at ceremonies on Omaha Beach marking the fortieth anniversary of D-day, Reagan delivered a widely acclaimed sentimental speech that symbolically linked the victory over the Nazis with the continuing struggle against Soviet communism. Nearly two months later, the Summer Olympics opened in Los Angeles, boycotted by the Soviet Union and most of its Eastern European satellites in retaliation for Jimmy Carter's boycott of the games at Moscow in 1980. American contestants, as might have been expected, won more than their usual share of Olympic medals, to the rau-

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toward the Soviet leadership, Reagan returned to his vision of a world free of nuclear weapons, and urged “a better working relationship” between the superpowers, “marked by better cooperation and understanding.” He concluded with a typically Reaganesque sentimental anecdote, in which two imaginary Russian children meet up with two American children and discover that their similarities and hopes vastly outweigh their differences and fears. “Together,” Reagan declared in a direct appeal to the Kremlin (now paraphrasing John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address), “we can strengthen peace, reduce the level of arms, and know in doing so we have helped fulfill the hopes and dreams of those we represent and, indeed, of peoples everywhere. Let us begin now.”

The wary Soviet leaders denounced the speech publicly as one of Reagan’s “hackneyed ploys” intended to win him public support in preparation for his reelection campaign later that year. Such assessments were normal in the two countries’ exchanges of propaganda. In this instance, the Soviet leaders thoroughly misconstrued Reagan’s popularity, which was not an uncommon occurrence in Soviet-American relations. Immediately after Reagan’s speech, Secretary of State Shultz met for five hours with the Soviet Union’s foreign minister, Andrey Gromyko. Although they achieved nothing of substance, the two diplomats spoke calmly, raised issues concerning arms control and human rights, and agreed that negotiations over reducing conventional East-West forces in Europe, now suspended, would resume. “[T]he ice was cracked,” Shultz later told his aides.

Nine days later, on January 25, Reagan announced that he would run for reelection.

At the nadir of the recession in 1982, when Reagan’s job approval rating plunged to 35 percent and the Republicans fared poorly in the midterm elections, Democratic leaders lulled themselves into thinking that the New Deal’s old-time religion had been vindicated. The hard times, supposedly, had exposed Reaganomics as a return to the disastrous trickle-down Republican policies that the Great Depression had discredited. The election of 1984 loomed as a chance for the Democrats to reassert their old verities and rebuild in new form Franklin D. Roosevelt’s electoral coalition. Happy days would be here again once the electorate realized that Reagan was really, as Tip O’Neill described him, “Herbert Hoover with a smile.”

Reagan’s domestic program ran into additional difficulties in 1983. For decades, hard-line conservatives had been calling for the privatization or outright abolition of Social Security. Yet the bipartisan presidential commission on Social Security, headed by Alan Greenspan, recommended that the system be preserved but strengthened with a number of reforms, including an increase in payroll taxes. Congress duly passed the regressive tax increase, and Reagan approved it, claiming that the adjustments had been planned all along and that they represented no new tax burden at variance with his economic philosophy.

The effects of Reagan’s deregulation policies proved even more costly. Vice President Bush’s Task Force on Regulatory Relief handed down its recommendations in August 1983, foreseeing $150 billion in savings by eliminating what it called unnecessary government interference and red tape—but at the price of either removing or severely modifying hundreds of regulations that protected safe conditions for wage earners and clamped down on threats to public health. Public interest groups and organized labor challenged the administration and won some important victories in the federal courts—including one ruling that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a favorite target of Reagan’s, was legally bound to protect employees from exposure to toxic substances.

Inside the regulatory agencies, meanwhile, indifference among conservative jobholders to their appointed tasks led to neglectful enforcement and, in some cases, blatant corruption. At the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Assistant Secretary Emmanuel S. Savas had emerged as a theorist on reducing big government, with particular expertise in cutting federal aids to the cities. In 1983, however, came revelations that a firm for which Savas had consulted before taking office had received a $500,000 HUD contract under his aegis, even though two other companies had submitted lower bids. It also came to light that Savas had bilked HUD for thousands of dollars in travel costs—while using its workers, at public expense, to help prepare his new manuscript on (of all subjects) privatizing the public sector. Savas resigned in July before he could be removed for abuse of office. His case would prove to be a fairly minor indiscretion in a series of scandals to come at HUD.

Officials charged with protecting the environment also became mired in controversy and scandal. Secretary of the Interior James Watt had been a lightning rod for criticism since the day he took office. He finally stepped over the line in September 1983, when he defiantly replied to critics that one commission he had created included “every kind of mixture you can
have. I have a black, I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent.” Labeled a social troglodyte by the press, Watt resigned. But a more serious affair had broken the previous February, when the budget-cutting chief administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Anne Gorsuch Burford, fired an administrator, Rita Lavelle, a political protégée of Edwin Meese’s, over alleged abuses of the $1.6 billion Superfund set aside by Congress for emergency cleanups of chemical spills and hazardous waste dumps. (Superfund monies were allegedly being steered to Republican officeholders to boost their chances for reelection.) Weeks later, Gorsuch Burford herself, along with twenty of her high-level employees, resigned when Congress cited her for contempt after she refused to hand over Superfund records. (“This whole business has been a lynching by headline hunting Congressmen,” Reagan bitterly remarked.) Lavelle was eventually convicted of lying to Congress, served three months in prison, and paid a $10,000 fine.

Compared with these misdeeds, the various alleged scandals of the Carter administration, notably the trumped-up Bert Lance affair, amounted to nothing. Yet the early exposés involving Reagan’s administration proved negligible when weighed against a spectacular economic recovery that commenced in 1983—beginning the longest continual period of peacetime economic expansion ever recorded to that point in American history. The inflation rate, which had climbed above 11 percent in January 1981, fell to 2 percent; the average unemployment rate declined from 9.6 percent in 1983 to 7.5 percent in 1984; the annual rate of economic growth jumped from 4.5 to 7.2 percent. Reagan’s slogan “Stay the course,” which had once sounded like whistling in the dark, now reverberated like an irresistible political battle cry.

Reagan and his supporters were, of course, quick to credit the tax cuts of 1981 for the turnaround, and for curing the maladies of the Carter years, but they greatly overstated their case. Several factors fed the boom. In part (as David Stockman would later concede), the recovery was a normal phenomenon of the business cycle: the economy was bouncing back from Reagan’s own recession of 1981–1982. Oil prices coincidentally fell by roughly one-third between 1981 and 1983, reducing the inflation rate. The vast increase in federal spending on armaments—what some critics called military Keynesianism—increased aggregate national demand. Above all, in mid-1982, as soon as inflation had begun to recede, Paul Volcker and the Federal Reserve Board slashed interest rates, thereby greatly boosting business activity. Still, it was difficult for the Democrats to argue with the evidence that the economy, overall, had improved markedly under Reagan—as it had not done under Carter and the Democrats.

Reagan’s political fortunes further benefited from the Democrats’ worsening disarray. A crowded field of veteran liberals, including Carter’s vice president Walter Mondale and the diehard George McGovern challenged the president in 1984. Senator John Glenn of Ohio, the astronaut, ran as both a moderate and a national celebrity who could match Reagan’s Hollywood appeal. Senator Ernest “Fritz” Hollings of South Carolina and Ruben Askew, a former governor of Florida, sought to repeat Carter’s success in salvaging the South for the Democrats.

Two other candidates for the presidency—Jesse Jackson and Gary Hart—dramatized the party’s evolution since the heyday of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. Jesse Louis Jackson was the standard-bearer for what had become of the black civil rights movement since the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Born to an unwed mother in South Carolina in 1941, Jackson had risen somewhat testily through the civil rights movement to become one of King’s young lieutenants in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. After King was killed in Memphis, Jackson rushed to the forefront as part of an apostolic succession. Based in Chicago, Jackson headed up a variety of organizations, most notably People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), as vehicles of black economic power and self-improvement. As he raised his national and international profile, though, Jackson also sought to unify the entire spectrum of black opinion, initially by incorporating some of the trappings of black nationalism in his rhetoric, and then (most controversially) by allying himself with Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan’s presence in Jackson’s entourage in 1983 and 1984, as well as Jackson’s own statements about third-world politics, the Middle East, and relations between blacks and Jews, raised clear signals of anti-Semitism inside the Jackson campaign. To Jackson, they marked his abiding hatred of colonial oppression and his determination to become the political tribune for all of black America.

Gary Hart was five years younger than Jackson and came from a very different background—and he represented a very different, more moderate future for the Democrats. He was born in Ottawa, Kansas, and was
originally named Gary Hartpence (he changed his surname in 1961). His up-by-the-bootstraps experiences had carried him from the home of a poor railwayman's family to Bethany Nazarene College in Oklahoma and then to Yale, where he earned degrees in both divinity and law before he relocated to Denver as a private attorney. After comanaging George McGovern's failed presidential campaign in 1972, Hart won two elections to the Senate, where he earned a reputation as one of the most promising leaders in the Watergate generation of Democrats—deeply knowledgable, articulate, and attractive, if sometimes aloof and self-absorbed. In 1984, though little known to the general public, Hart stepped forward as the latest version of the anti-publician—a neoliberal, promising an exciting campaign of new Democratic ideas different from the tired nostrums of New Deal and Great Society liberalism, open to reforming the welfare state and, in international affairs, to questioning the Vietnam-era divisions between hawks and doves.

The nomination was a battle among Democratic splinter groups, the fragments of what had once looked like an impregnable national majority. The favorite of the party establishment was Mondale. After leaving the vice presidency in 1981, Mondale had shown signs of being restless with the traditional liberal orthodoxies on which he had built his political career in Minnesota and in Washington. He publicly sympathized with some of Reagan's cuts in taxes and in spending on failed social programs; he talked about the importance of maximizing economic growth while battling inflation. Yet as the favored candidate, Mondale decided to run a cautious campaign, reaching out to all of the major party constituencies while counting chiefly on the support of his old friends in organized labor. On the campaign trail, he stuck mainly to attacking Reagan, promising new social and jobs programs, and speaking in platitudes about America as "a future each generation must enlarge; a door each generation must open; a promise each generation must keep."

Mondale won by a wide margin in the Iowa caucuses, but Hart stunned the other candidates by finishing second and by then defeating Mondale in the New Hampshire primary by 10 percentage points. (Hart's campaign had been working hard in New Hampshire for five months.) Thereafter, the field was reduced to these two front-runners plus Jesse Jackson, who was intent on establishing an African-American presence (as well as his personal power) in Democratic presidential politics. Jackson would eventually win three southern state primaries and carry half of Mississippi's delegates. But his unguarded, outrageous overheard references to Jews as "Hymies" and to New York City as "Hymietown" all but destroyed his political viability, then and in the future, no matter how much he tried to apologize.

Hart, meanwhile, won in Ohio, California, and several western states. Yet although he was effective at taunting Mondale as "a candidate of the establishment past," Hart could never develop his own promise of "new ideas" into a compelling program. When Mondale (borrowing a slogan from a fast-food chain) asked Hart, "Where's the beef?" during a televised debate in Atlanta, Hart's campaign shriveled.

Mondale's nomination at the Democrats' national convention in San Francisco marked the triumph of stolid, old-style liberalism, its roots in the 1930s, over the "new politics" and the antipolitics of the 1970s as well as the embryonic neoliberalism of the 1980s. Yet Mondale's party was not the same as that of his mentor Hubert Humphrey. In a bow to the changed realities, Mondale made history when, after eliminating three possibilities (two of them male), he named Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate—the first woman ever selected for the national ticket of a major party. Ferraro, a third-term representative from Queens, New York, had a great deal going for her quite apart from the breakthrough her nomination represented: she contributed a tough, white, working-class ethnicity that Mondale hoped would rally the New Deal coalition once more. Unfortunately for the Democrats, Ferraro's husband, John Zaccaro, would not permit public disclosure of his income tax returns, as she had promised he would. His refusal raised doubts about her own truthfulness and competence as well as about her family's possibly shady business connections.

Six weeks later, in Dallas, the Republicans renominated the Reagan-Bush ticket in a cascade of patriotic imagery and speeches. Orators on the podium regaled the delegates with denunciations of the opposition as effete elitists—the "blame America first" party of "San Francisco Democrats," in Jeane Kirkpatrick's undisguised attack on the Democrats' virility. A Republican campaign memo explained, more calmly, how the party should approach the general campaign: "Paint Reagan as the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America. Leave Mondale in a position where an attack on Reagan is tantamount to an attack on America's idealized image of itself." Two television advertisements, written and narrated by Hal Riney, conveyed the mixture of hope and underlying fear that drove the Reagan-Bush campaign. The more famous of the two, called "Prouder, Stronger, Better," showed gauzy images of small-town America awakening to a fresh, dewy dawn, accompanied by a voice-over script in Riney's dulcet tones:
It's morning again in America. Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates and inflation down, more people are buying new homes, and our new families can have confidence in the future. America today is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

The other ad depicted a fearsome brown bear wandering through the woods, as the narrator darkly implied that America would be far less secure against annihilation by the Soviet Union without Ronald Reagan in the White House.

Mondale proposed a combination of increases in taxes and cuts in defense spending to reduce the deficit, while shifting $30 billion in spending out of defense and agriculture to fund new social initiatives on education and the environment. He also lambasted Reagan as a frightening reactionary who had nearly ruined the country. But the strategy was wrongheaded, because voters as yet cared little about the deficit and cared a great deal about new taxes. With his attacks on the sunny optimist Reagan, Mondale came across as a gloomy naysayer instead of the crusader for liberal justice he imagined himself to be. Mondale's only chance of overtaking Reagan came in mid-October. In Louisville, during the first of two scheduled debates, the president, crammed by aides with facts and figures, had appeared distracted, faltering, and confused about his domestic policies. The veteran actor knew it—"I have to say I lost... I guess I just flattened out," he wrote—and his sizable lead in the polls began to shrink. Tellingly, though, the news media's analyses of Reagan's poor performance focused not on the merits of his actual policies but on whether he was too old for the job. Better rested and primed for the second debate on foreign policy two weeks later, Reagan buried the age issue by joking that he would not exploit the youth and inexperience of his opponent. Mondale smiled gamely; and with that, the election was virtually over.

In the final tally, Reagan won 59 percent of the popular vote and carried every state except Mondale's home state, Minnesota (where the Democrats' margin of victory was fewer than 4,000 votes), as well as the District of Columbia. Reagan was now in a position to be the first president since Dwight D. Eisenhower to serve a second full term. Even more impressive, only one presidential candidate since James Monroe—Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936—had won a larger proportion of the electoral vote. Having held their Senate majority and picked up sixteen seats in the House, some Republicans talked enthusiastically of an impending, permanent partisan realignment. What had begun as the Republicans' southern strategy to overturn the New Deal—Great Society coalition now looked like an impregnable national majority.

The Democrats, in shock, tried to blame the avalanche on the Republicans' ability to lure the voters and rob politics of any serious debate by substituting slick, feel-good advertisements. Ironically, in a party that supposedly championed the interests of ordinary Americans, these analyses showed a certain contempt for the intelligence of the average American voter. Without question, Reagan's campaign handled the media skillfully, both in the press and in its own campaign advertising. But Reagan now also had a record as president, which the voters could judge. As the opinion polls showed, he had built a new coalition of educated white middle-class voters (especially younger voters) and blue-collar families who claimed that he had restored national pride. Between Mondale's traditional Democratic ideas and the now tested Reaganism, there was really no contest as far as the great majority of voters were concerned—especially at a time of renewed prosperity and patriotic fervor.

Few Democrats, meanwhile, appeared willing to face some hard facts about their own party. One who did, the liberal lion Edward Kennedy, observed after the election, "There is a difference between being a party that cares about labor and being a labor party... a party that cares about women and being the women's party. And we can and we must be a party that cares about minorities without becoming a minority party. We are citizens first—and constituencies second." Yet even the most astute of the leading liberal Democrats had no concrete program or clear vision for reforming and updating Democratic liberalism to create a unifying party core.

The Republican claims that the landslide heralded a full-scale political realignment were, at the same time, highly debatable. Despite Reagan's lopsided margin, the Democrats would still hold a strong if diminished majority in the new House, and would command a majority of the nation's statehouses. It was not at all clear that the voters had shifted as far to the right ideologically as the presidential election might seem to indicate. Without question, though, Ronald Reagan had earned an enormous personal vindication. And he had won an electoral mandate to pursue, in his pragmatic way, policies that before 1980 had struck conventional pundits as far outside the political mainstream. Despite the administration's numerous setbacks, scandals, and internal contradictions, the age of Reagan had reached a new political peak.