IV. The Thaw

How Reagan’s Belligerence Backfired

The impact of the American hard line on the internal debates of the Politburo and the attitudes of the Soviet leadership almost always turned out to be just the opposite of the one intended by Washington. Rather than retreating from the awesome military buildup that underwrote Reagan’s belligerent rhetoric, the Soviet leaders began to absorb Reagan’s own distinctive thesis that Soviet-American relations could remain permanently bad as a deliberate choice of policy. Only gradually did both sides begin to realize they were doomed to annihilation unless they found a way out. But it took a great deal of time and effort to turn from confrontation and mutual escalation, probably much more than if this course had never been taken in the first place.

It now is clear that the turn began during the presidential election year of 1984. How much the election campaign had to do with it, no one will ever really know. The White House was aware of rising public concern over the threats of war inherent in Ronald Reagan’s policies, and a certain peaceloving phraseology began pushing the warlike rhetoric into the background. Even so, occasional slips of Reagan’s tongue suddenly seemed to reveal the real man: his rearmament program continued, American missiles were deployed in Europe, and the president showed no inclination of abandoning his latest favorite, the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Moscow therefore felt it had to dig in. Shultz and Gromyko were meet in Stockholm on January 18 for another session of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Politburo drafted detailed and essentially uncompromising instructions for its foreign minister; these give a clear idea of the deep suspicions that Reagan’s long campaign had planted at the very center of the Soviet leadership. In his discussions with Shultz, Gromyko was instructed to characterize Reagan’s policies as “permeated by the spirit of militarism and aggression,” to inform Shultz that Moscow would not permit a change in the military balance between the superpowers and to make it clear that the deployment of the Pershing II and cruise missiles had doomed the Geneva talks about them and made strategic arms talks more difficult. He was further instructed to “resolutely condemn” the Reagan administration for stirring up regional conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, including the “gangster attack on Grenada,” and thus undermining “the established structure of relations between states and the whole world order.”

Before leaving for Stockholm, Shultz and I met to discuss terms for resumption of the confidential channel. Moscow was skeptical but was willing to give it a try, and the two foreign ministers planned to talk about details in Stockholm, along with many other questions. I thought to myself that they would have a difficult discussion; God grant it would not turn into an angry quarrel as it did in Madrid. Shultz glumly joked that our relations were in such disrepair that there was plenty of opportunity to improve them with very little effort.

Shultz also showed me an advance draft of a speech Reagan was making on Soviet-American relations on January 16. Shultz had advised Reagan to make it to stress the administration’s determination to continue the dialogue with the Soviet Union after it withdrew from the Euromissile talks. Reagan’s message had a new twist and a new tone: now that the economic and military might of the United States had revived and its alliance with Europe had been consolidated, the administration was prepared to start settling its differences with the Soviet Union, and the year 1984 was proclaimed one of opportunities for peace. Realism, force, and dialogue were his guiding principles, the president declared, with force and dialogue going hand in hand. He spoke in favor of regular summit contacts and concluded that there would be peace if the Soviet government really wanted it. It was—for Reagan—a remarkably conciliatory television address.

At any other time, such a speech by an American president would have been regarded as a tangible step toward improving relations with the Soviet Union. But with all the other negative factors, to say nothing of the imminent presidential election, it was hard to believe in Reagan’s sincerity. The speech did not receive much publicity in the United States and his startling shift in tone was perceived domestically as mere campaigning. In retrospect, it is evident that the speech reflected the beginning of certain evolution in his views on relations with the Soviet Union. In other times, such statements might have been supported by explanations through the confidential channel. But Reagan himself probably was not yet ready to translate his new mood into concrete proposals.

The Shultz-Gromyko meeting in Stockholm did not go all that badly, although it had its tense moments when Gromyko followed his instructions to condemn Washington sharply. Shultz told me later he felt that in spite of
Gromyko's tough line, their personal meeting was much better than the angry one in Madrid. He described it as "ice-breaking," although occasionally they talked at cross-purposes while stating familiar positions. Shultz said, "Gromyko ended by saying that our conversation was indispensable and I fully agree with that."

I found it interesting to watch both ministers in action. Both were strong personalities, with high intelligence and rich experience in life. Both profoundly believed in the superiority of their respective political systems and refused to give up their political principles for the sake of normalizing relations between the two countries. Neither believed our relations could radically improve in the foreseeable future. They were too cautious for that, although both were trying to find their way out of the dangerous impasse which they recognized we had reached. That introduced a certain element of optimism into the otherwise gloomy picture.

All this puts me in mind of some Washington gatherings at the time. One was a grand dinner to mark the seventy-fifth birthday of Dean Rusk attended by all of Rusk's successors, more than two hundred senior officials and American diplomats, and me as the only foreign ambassador. I was pleased to meet again the man with whom I had once enjoyed such close cooperation despite our disagreements in difficult times. At another dinner, the Kennan Institute in Washington commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet-American relations. There was no lack of criticism of Soviet policy, to which I listened patiently. When I got the floor I began by saying, "I did not come here to say we are all right, and you are all wrong."

I really meant that. I had spent many years in the United States and could see fairly clearly the pluses and minuses of both nations and their social systems. I tried to explain to my government the foreign and domestic policies of the United States as I saw them under different administrations, and to do so without much ideology. Of course some of my analyses were wrong, or too emotional. After all, I, too, was strongly influenced by the philosophy of my country and the policies of my government, which I represented abroad to the best of my ability. But I always tried to be objective and was guided by the desire to improve the relations between our two great nations.

Reagan as Peacemonger?

Through the first half of the year, the most intriguing challenge for Washington in general and our embassy in particular was to determine just how serious the president was in reaching out to the Soviet Union—if that was in fact what he was doing—and how long he intended to continue. Would this last beyond the November elections? Observations, interpretations, and advice about the phenomenon were many and varied, and often as not they were colored by the interest of those who made them.

But the fact remained that a thaw of some kind was unmistakable when the monthly meeting of the socialist countries' ambassadors took place at our embassy. The "friends" met regularly, and I always made it a point not to act like the chief of the group or coordinate policy—that was done in Moscow—so that we could freely trade diplomatic information and Washington gossip. At our January 31 meeting, all the ambassadors, except for the Cuban, unanimously noted that the American government had adopted a more conciliatory attitude toward their countries following the start of deployment of American nuclear missiles in Europe. They all felt Reagan sounded less hostile as the election season began.

Jimmy Carter paid me an unexpected visit on January 30 to voice concern at the extent of Reagan's arms buildup. He described Reagan's peace rhetoric as a pure campaign maneuver. The former president was "utterly convinced" that there would not be a single agreement on arms control, especially on nuclear arms, as long as Reagan remained in power. (He proved to be a poor prophet.)

I had a similar conversation with Eagleburger, an old colleague of mine. When asked if we should expect any initiatives from the Reagan administration to improve our relations, Eagleburger voiced frank doubt, saying that Reagan believed his conciliatory tone was enough to placate the voters. Senator Charles Percy, a liberal Illinois Republican, told me that on January 6 Reagan and his aides had met to discuss the "Soviet theme" of the election campaign. They decided that the voters were well aware of the essence of Reagan's anti-Soviet position, so he would do nothing to make voters feel he was a warmonger but also would not raise their hopes of major agreements with the Soviet Union.

Even the Vatican was interested. Father Felix Morlion, who kept in touch with me privately with the Vatican's knowledge, confirmed that Cardinal Casaroli, the Vatican secretary of state, had met with Reagan and got the impression he would restrain his anti-Soviet ardor during the election campaign. This would gratify American priests who were reporting that their congregations had been alarmed by the threat of war during Reagan's three years. But Casaroli also found Reagan holding fast to his hard line, partly in the belief that deployment of American missiles in Europe would induce the Soviet Union to be more flexible.

George Kennan, the distinguished historian and diplomat who designed the Cold War policy of containing the Soviet Union, also believed Reagan had started speaking for electoral purposes because he had to take into account the country's fear of nuclear war. He remarked that Andropov's
warning of the dangers of Reagan's policy had combined in a peculiar way with the wave of films about the horrors of nuclear war, especially The Day After watched by about eighty million people, plus books, articles, and statements by American political and religious figures. All this was producing an uncanny effect, striking fear into the hearts of Americans. With Reagan trying to present himself to the voters as a peace candidate, Kennan advised us to take the president at his word, put him on the defensive and publicly demonstrate our readiness for a mutually advantageous agreement "even under Reagan." Since he was testing the Soviet leadership, we likewise had to put him to test by selecting a few issues where rapid progress was possible and press for action.

Henry Kissinger of course had his opinion, too. He said Reagan and his entourage did not want to exacerbate Soviet-American relations during the election campaign. He reported that the White House and the State Department were discussing various actions to send signals to the Soviet Union, but the whole business was haphazard because there was no one to organize it properly. He stressed that the Reagan administration had no coherent program to deal with the Soviet Union because Reagan had never thought about it seriously, and the State Department was characteristically lacking in initiative and courage to suggest new ideas.

At an official dinner I ran into Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, the speaker of the House and an old acquaintance. As always, he was critical of Reagan but he asked me whether what we heard from the White House should lead him to believe that relations with the Kremlin were really improving. I replied that he shouldn't: Soviet-American relations remained as bad as before. O'Neill said he also thought so, although administration officials tried at the Capitol to create the contrary impression by referring to private contacts with the Soviets. O'Neill said no effort should be spared to prevent "that demagogue Reagan" from being reelected. "If that happens," he continued in a somewhat agitated manner, "Reagan will give vent to his primitive instincts and give us a lot of trouble, probably, put us on the verge of a major armed conflict. He is a dangerous man."

Then in May I got from Eagleburger what I think was the first of several definitive answers to my lingering doubts about the real nature of the White House strategy. He had just left the State Department to work for Kissinger's consulting firm at a salary considerably better than the $65,000 a year he earned in the government, which was insufficient to pay for his children's college educations.

In a sort of debriefing on what he had learned before leaving, he said the White House had already decided that during the election campaign Reagan should exploit to the fullest the Soviet refusal to continue the Geneva arms negotiations. They reasoned this would give credibility to his defense against Democratic attacks that he had failed to reach any major arms agreements with the Soviet Union, unlike his Republican predecessors. All that was supposed to be accompanied by the thesis about Soviet expansionist policy and the Soviet military threat. Almost identical information came to the embassy from other sources and we passed it to Moscow, which failed to develop effective propaganda countermeasures.

Eagleburger also shared with me his impressions of Reagan as a person and as an administrator. The president was still guided by his "inborn instinct" of which he was very proud, although it had not generated a great variety of ideas, and those few it did produce were strongly colored with ideological clichés or plain propaganda. His command of foreign policy was still mediocre after more than three years in office, especially complex nuclear policy problems, and he was just unwilling to go into details. So his aides spared him the trouble of examining lengthy papers, which he simply would not read. Reagan insisted that the only recommendations he would consider approving were those already agreed upon by his advisers. He hated to take decisions that meant choosing between two opposing camps in his administration.

This practice consolidated the role of the Pentagon and Weinberger in foreign policy, particularly in relations with the Soviet Union and China. Taking advantage of Reagan's friendly disposition toward the military, Weinberger could in fact veto any proposals made by the State Department or at least had splendid opportunities to push through his ideas. Schultz had become more active in defending the State Department's point of view before Reagan. But military considerations always weighed heavily in any interagency coordination which the State Department needed "to pass through" before reporting to the president—such questions as disarmament and arms control agreements.

The State Department's diplomacy was severely obstructed by highly formalized procedures imposed by the White House for dealing with the Soviet Union. Instructions were written in such a way as to put tight constraints on what diplomats could say in negotiations or even in the traditionally less structured exchanges of views with Soviet official representatives. Since such instructions arrived only occasionally, American representatives had no backup positions appropriate for sounding out their opposite numbers and continuing an informal dialogue. They had no flexibility and were confined to giving Soviet representatives a strictly approved message, period. This went a long way toward explaining Shultz's noncommittal and guarded
behavior. It also explained why there was virtually no chance of conducting a confidential exchange of views which in the past had assisted diplomats in both capitals to find their way around stalemates.

Eagleburger said Reagan and his entourage would not even hear about using the experience of other administrations with the Soviet Union. So, once the president sensed that his confrontation with Moscow had gone too far, he resorted to improvisations prompted by the narrow circle of his closest aides, who were experts in television image-making but knew little or nothing at all about the workings of the Kremlin and how to conduct a dialogue with it.

Senator Percy told me the White House was busily spreading the word that the president had done his best to improve relations with Moscow but had been blocked by the Kremlin's walkout from the nuclear arms talks. I cited a number of our disarmament proposals and these proved a revelation to Percy, who asked why we did not publicize them. I replied that high-level correspondence was supposed to be confidential. Percy shook his head, saying: "You are just playing into Reagan's hands."

But perhaps the most decisive if not the most rational demonstration of Reagan's character emerged, as it so often does in life, by accident. While testing for the recording of his regular weekly radio address to the nation on August 11, President Reagan joked: "My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." He did not know that his microphone was on.

The Soviet government was not amused by this kind of joke, and issued a strong official statement through Tass. The remark did not exactly go down well in America either. The State Department, hurrying to sweep the whole thing under the rug, accused the Soviet Union of blowing the incident out of proportion to use it for propaganda. Perhaps. But of all the remarks that I have recalled here from my notes of the time in attempting to determine the president's genuine feelings and motives, it is unquestionably the one that's most vivid.

The election of Chernenko at the age of seventy-two, when he was already weakened by emphysema, was not amusing to the Soviet government, which Andropov realized made it impossible for them to delve deeply or at all into the workings of the Kremlin and how to conduct a dialogue with it.

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The first series of exchanges between Chernenko and Reagan reminded me of an elaborate ritual dance in which both sides wrote letters making obeisance to the need for peace and disarmament but did little to advance either. Reagan made an official visit to China in the spring, made there public statements against the Soviet Union, and clearly was looking to China as a counterweight. He declared he would never sign any agreement with the Soviet Union to reduce or eliminate nuclear weapons in Europe unless the United States could ensure they would not be shifted to Asia. The trip in general consolidated the Soviet leadership's suspicions about the general hostility of the administration.

New complications appeared in the old issue of dissidents in the Soviet Union, which our government continued to handle clumsily through a steadfast and mindless policy of reprimands against individual dissidents. First we would allow a case to reach a point where it turned into a public scandal abroad that damaged our relations, and then we would give in. The Kremlin leaders really believed that almost the entire dissident movement had been inspired and developed with the help of Western intelligence services.

Consider the case of Andrei Sakharov and his wife Yelena Bonner. Reagan and Shultz let me know that Sakharov was planning a hunger strike unless she was allowed to go abroad for medical treatment. They wanted us to deal with her request before it became yet another anti-Soviet cause célèbre. On May 19, a Saturday morning while I was at home, I got a call from the president himself from Camp David. He said he wanted to make a personal and confidential request to Chernenko to permit Bonner to leave for medical treatment. Some reports said she was in very poor health, and God forbid that she should die now. If so, Reagan thought, angry American public opinion would drive our very difficult relations to the lowest conceivable level. Reagan remarked that he did not question the high level of Soviet medical science, but “What if she dies in the Soviet Union? There will be no end of trouble. If she is to die, let her die here. At the very least nobody, hopefully will blame me for that.”

Reagan added in a conciliatory tone that, of course, he was not in a position to judge just how critical Bonner’s condition was but he was acting only on unofficial information he had. I promised to relay his request to Moscow promptly. I considered Reagan’s intervention as something of a goodwill gesture.

Within a week I phoned back President Reagan with Moscow’s answer in a message signed by Gromyko. It said that “the lady and her accomplices” were deliberately trying to dramatize the situation to discredit the Soviet Union, and her real state of health was “good enough for her to outlive many of her contemporaries.” This was, he insisted, “evident from the authoritative conclusion drawn by highly qualified medical experts.”

The president calmly noted that he was not interested in worsening our relations just to help Bonner, but he could not stop the hue and cry about her health. He said he feared it would “arise again with the help of Jewish organizations” in the United States which supported her.

Bonner was not allowed to visit the United States until the following year under the regime of Gorbachev. The Politburo discussed her request on August 29, 1985. Viktor Chebrikov, chairman of the KGB, spoke in favor of granting the application but categorically opposed permitting Sakharov to accompany her because of his knowledge of the development of Soviet nuclear weapons in minute detail. If Sakharov got a laboratory abroad, he would be able to go on with military research, Chebrikov said. Then he remarked, “Sakharov’s behavior is shaped by his wife’s influence.” Gorbachev exclaimed: “There, that’s what Zionism is like!” Bonner in fact was only half-Jewish. But because most of the dissidents were Jewish—Sakharov was not—and many Jewish organizations abroad made common cause with them through the Helsinki Watch Committees and other human rights groups, Bonner’s case seemed an extension of Zionist influence in the mind of Gorbachev and much of the Politburo. Yelena Bonner was allowed to leave, but not her husband. Thereafter she made several trips abroad.

Relations continued to drift. In May Moscow refused to attend the Olympics in Los Angeles; they were looking for some way to express their dislike of Reagan and remembered the Carter boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Republicans in the Senate passed a resolution calling for the earliest possible Soviet-American summit, something the average anxious voter could understand, as opposed to the complexities of arms control.

On June 20 Shultz invited me for another conversation. This time it lasted more than three hours and was attended by Assistant Secretary Richard Burt and our embassy counselor Victor Isakov. Shultz said that the president could well understand the disappointment and bitterness on both sides; he wanted to improve relations, but how? A summit meeting with Chernenko could be useful and he did not rule it out, and meanwhile he suggested making an inventory of all our problems.

So Shultz and I went down a long list: nuclear arms control, ratification of past arms agreements, talks on a complete nuclear test ban, banning weapons from outer space, major ABM systems, the Stockholm conference proposals on abjuring force to settle international disputes, limiting naval weapons, banning chemical warfare, improving the hot line. We touched
bBriefly on regional problems such as South Africa, the Middle East, and the Iran-Iraq war; humanitarian questions; and specific bilateral problems. We took stock of all controversial and unsettled questions, but made no attempt even to outline solutions. The discussion undoubtedly proved useful for putting all our affairs in systematic order. But what next?

It turned out to be a surprising invitation from the White House for Gromyko to resume his annual autumn visits to the White House for a conversation with the president. Thomas Simons, chief of the State Department's Soviet Affairs division, delivered the invitation late in August "on the understanding that the conversation should be serious and would not be used for propaganda purposes." He explained to our chargé d'affaires in strict confidence that this curious and unusual passage apparently reflected "present paranoia" among Reagan's entourage, which seriously feared that Moscow might plant some kind of propaganda time-bomb at the meeting that could affect the elections, although the White House was certainly interested in the meeting for its own sake. He added that the government had ordered necessary security measures for the Soviet foreign minister, including an armored car (they knew that Gromyko always paid close attention to his personal safety).

Meanwhile, a new theme began to appear in Reagan's election campaign: that his policy had worked and he now could be more accommodating toward the Soviet Union. By contrast, Soviet leaders continued their public attacks on the American administration, claiming that the danger of war was growing. They would have liked to offer rhetorical assistance to the campaign of the Democratic candidate, Walter Mondale—not because they knew him but because they preferred anybody to Reagan. But Mondale failed to play the question of war and peace to his advantage, and I think that was because he was not sure whether the Soviet factor would turn in his or Reagan's favor by election day. With patriotism and anti-communism deeply rooted in the country, did the American people want their president to stand up to the Soviets in a political, military, and ideological rivalry? Or did they want him to have a summit meeting with the Russians and make some adjustments and concessions for the sake of better relations? Mondale never found a clear answer.

Inside the Politburo, a controversy raged over the best way for us to behave during the final stages of the campaign. Moscow asked my opinion, and I recommended that we keep criticizing Reagan in response to any attacks as a matter of principle, but not to overdo it in practice. Our criticism had to be measured and careful, because American history clearly demonstrated that any foreign interference in elections would most likely backfire. It was also no less important that we reckon on Reagan as the likely winner, and it was simply bad politics to be too brutal toward someone we would probably have to deal with for another four years. The Politburo came to essentially the same conclusion.

But it regarded Gromyko's meeting with Reagan of such importance that it drafted special instructions for him. They stressed the Kremlin's desire for Moscow and Washington above all to discuss mutual security problems and to show their readiness to freeze or reduce nuclear weapons stocks, renounce the production and deployment of destabilizing new weapons, and agree to demilitarize outer space.

The Soviet Union thus had changed its approach from confronting Reagan to starting to try to reach agreements with him. They wanted to take advantage of his more conciliatory attitude during the election campaign in hopes of exploiting it afterward. They were right to move fast because, in retrospect, there was no certainty that this electoral window of opportunity would stay open. Shultz reports in his memoirs that until the very end of 1984 a fierce debate raged around the president on U.S.-Soviet relations. When Reagan decided to receive Gromyko he asked Shultz not to tell anyone beforehand because the people around him would give no peace and insist on him changing his mind.

Gromyko Returns to the White House

The reception accorded Gromyko by the president at the White House on September 26 was, in terms of protocol, more appropriate to a head of government than a foreign minister. The president posed for photographs with him in the Oval Office. There were so many press representatives that they had to be divided into three separate pools, all of them shouting questions at the top of their lungs.

Nancy Reagan appeared during the cocktail party before lunch. Gromyko, after the introductions, proposed a toast to her. He had cranberry juice, her glass was filled with soda water. "We both are certainly fond of drinking," he remarked with his characteristic dry humor.

Gromyko had a short chat with the president's wife. "Is your husband for peace or for war?" he asked. She said that he of course was all for peace. "Are you sure?" Gromyko wondered. She was one hundred percent sure. "Why, then, does not he agree to our proposals?" Gromyko insisted. What proposals? she asked. Someone interrupted the conversation, but right before lunch Gromyko reminded Mrs. Reagan, "So, don't forget to whisper the word 'peace' in the president's ear every night." She said, "Of course I will, and I'll also whisper it in yours, too." I must report that Gromyko got a kick out of this exchange and recounted it to the Politburo with great animation.
The negotiations between Reagan and Gromyko started in the Oval Office. Their conversation lasted for two hours and continued at lunch. The American side was represented by top officials—Bush, Shultz, Weinberger, Treasury Secretary Donald Regan, presidential aides Baker, Meese, Deaver, and Robert McFarlane, the new national security adviser. Gromyko was accompanied by Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko and myself.

Reagan began the meeting with a lengthy speech about America’s hopes for peace and his explanation of why the American people saw the Soviet Union as a threat to those hopes. Reagan explained that he saw the political philosophy of Marxism-Leninism animating a Soviet policy of world revolution, and this provided for the destruction of the capitalist system in the United States and other Western countries. He reasoned that the United States must arm itself or be forced to choose between surrender or death.

Gromyko was at pains to disabuse him. Yes, he said, the objective course of history meant that one form of society would inevitably be replaced by another, and the capitalist system would surely be succeeded by the socialist system, but this was in no way a cause of the arms race. The Soviet leaders do not believe in political or military intimidation, and nobody should accuse us of trying to change America’s social structure by force, he said. “We have no such plans and never have had.”

Reagan suggested talking with Gromyko in private before lunch. Reporting later to us about the brief conversation, Gromyko observed that he did not quite understand what the excitement was all about. The president emphatically told him, as if this was a big secret, that his personal dream was a “world without nuclear arms.” Gromyko answered that nuclear disarmament was “the question of all questions.” Both agreed that the ultimate goal should be the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. And that was about all there was to the private meeting.

I do not rule out that Reagan was personally eager to make the Soviet foreign minister believe that a world without nuclear arms was really his dream. Reagan did refer to it in public time and again, but he realized that there were few people, even in his own entourage, who believed it.

Several presidential aids confirmed to us that Reagan had told them in advance that he wanted a face-to-face conversation alone with Gromyko during the break, but he did not tell them what it would be about and apparently did not fill them in afterward. When Reagan and Gromyko went into the office by themselves, the door was left slightly ajar so the duty officer could peep in case the president summoned him. Having duly exchanged those few words about a nuclear-free world with the Soviet foreign minister, Reagan retired to his personal bathroom, emerged, and then asked Gromyko if he wanted to use it. Gromyko did. The officer did not hear what was said, so the presidential aids were not sure whether the president just forgot his intention of talking with Gromyko in private, changed his mind, or had only intended from the beginning to have a short talk.

On the whole, the exchange proceeded reasonably well and even in a friendly atmosphere, without unnecessary outbreaks of temper both in the presence of other officials and at lunch. But both sides stuck to their guns.

Speaking later on the radio, the president described his conversation with Gromyko as useful, and so it was, but primarily in terms of his campaign for reelection.

Gromyko told the press that his discussion with President Reagan “does not enable us, unfortunately, to conclude that practical positive changes have taken place in the direction of the foreign policy of the American administration.”

The statement served to confirm that the Soviet assessment of the administration remained unchanged. But Gromyko was satisfied with his reception. Before leaving Washington by plane he told me that while he found Reagan incorrigibly dogmatic—this was Gromyko talking, of all people!—he might be more disposed toward agreements following the election, and maybe even before Gromyko’s next meeting with the president the following autumn. Little did Gromyko know that it was his last visit to the White House and that a hitherto obscure member of the Soviet Politburo, Mikhail Gorbachev would after becoming general secretary kick him upstairs to the mostly ceremonial Soviet presidency and replace him with a younger and more flexible politician.

Gromyko’s trip to the United States confronted the Soviet leadership with the cardinal question of how further to develop our relations with Reagan. We had hoped that the popular movement against American missiles in Europe would make the United States and NATO drop the plan. But events had clearly proven us wrong; the missiles were firmly stationed in Europe. It was necessary to search for a compromise by resuming negotiations, and this applied to nuclear weapons in space. Otherwise we would miss the train. Moscow started a painful reassessment of its policy which lasted until mid-November. Then we proposed to Reagan to start a new round of negotiations after the U.S. elections.

As for Ronald Reagan, he felt he had surmounted a hurdle in meeting the formidable Andrei Gromyko. Arthur Hartman, the career diplomat who was the American ambassador to the Soviet Union, told me that immediately after meeting with Gromyko, Reagan had a conversation with his associates, Hartman among them. Reagan looked noticeably relieved; the meeting with Gromyko was over. The president said jokingly that debating Gromyko, a firm opponent of the United States and a convinced defender of the Soviet
position, was much harder than debating Mondale. Hartman got the impression that Reagan was satisfied at having passed the “Gromyko test,” which even enhanced his self-esteem.

Summing it all up, Reagan expressed the view that it would be an illusion to believe that Soviet-American relations could return to the conditions of Franklin Roosevelt’s day; both country’s views on each other’s social system were irreconcilable and formed a part of their continued rivalry. But Reagan formed the impression that the Soviet Union was really keen on agreements to slow the arms race, and the opportunity for that would appear after November.

Hartman said it appeared that, once reelected, Reagan would become more involved in disarmament problems. Until now his formula for the security of the United States had been to introduce new military programs. But now he was increasingly thinking that American security interests would best be met by combining new arms programs with possible arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. Reagan had so far ignored the second half of this policy because he was up to his ears implementing the first half. But there was a chance he would move to the second part, although it would be wrong to cherish any great illusions.

More along these lines came from Vice President Bush just before the election at a quiet dinner at his house. He was confident of victory and brushed aside one of the latest Washington stories, that a couple of years after a victory Reagan might retire voluntarily in favor of Bush. Bush laughed heartily, saying that he would expect an earthquake in Washington before a voluntary retirement by Ronald Reagan, who very much liked being president with all the attributes of power that went with the office. I wanted to know what was behind Reagan’s campaign speeches favoring better relations with the Soviet Union and his references to the possibility of arms agreements. Bush replied that Reagan usually believed sincerely in what he said, but when it came to the specifics of what he had in mind and how he would accomplish then, that was quite another matter. The White House had not yet developed any concrete approach.

A New Atmosphere in Outer (and Inner) Space

The test of the administration’s concrete intentions was played out with Reagan’s favorite project, the Strategic Defense Initiative. This was to be the subject on which the administration would at last start to talk, but only after the election and on terms that proved to be narrowly drawn. In the summer before the elections, Moscow and Washington had already started a long discussion under the heading of the militarization of space. About ten private letters were exchanged on SDI by Reagan and Chernenko, and their tone became quite lively indeed. Jack Matlock, the National Security Council’s Soviet specialist who later became U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, told me that Reagan was carefully examining the pros and cons of negotiations with the Soviet Union. The main obstacle was that he did not want to become a scapegoat if they foundered on the issue of verification.

In due course Star Wars became an issue worldwide and Washington could not resist. The diplomatic struggle was waged on the issue of a precise name for the negotiations, which we proposed calling “negotiations on prevention of the militarization of space.” Washington would not accept the word “prevention.” This was far more than a diplomatic quibble or a semantic debate, since the very word implied that the negotiations could result in banning SDI. Moscow would not agree to withdraw the term, because what would be left might effectively legitimiz the arms race in space by the very process of controlling it.

Early in September the American side declared its readiness to start negotiations in Geneva about “arms control in space.” Simultaneously, it proposed discussing the reduction of nuclear arms along with the possibilities for verification. The first part of the American proposal still implied a possibility of putting weapons in space because the question was practically reduced to the means of control. The second part was designed to overcome the Soviet refusal to negotiate on strategic weapons following the deployment of American Pershings in Europe. Reagan elaborated on it in his speech to the UN General Assembly September 24, which in effect put him publicly in favor of resuming SALT talks that had been broken off by the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, American diplomacy deserves credit for its persistence in trying to reduce the number of strategic nuclear weapons to much lower levels. This was finally accomplished in 1993, but in 1984 the White House needed that proposal to blazon its policy on disarmament and its readiness to resume talks, and they put the ball firmly in the Kremlin’s court. Moscow decided to wait until after the presidential elections, and in mid-November, the Poliburo agreed to new negotiations “on nuclear and space weapons,” the phrase it preferred. The decision was prompted in no small measure by Reagan’s landslide reelection, which awarded a complete mandate to his foreign and domestic policies. The Poliburo instructed Gromyko to try to win a better deal from Shultz on the title.

Inside the administration, there was also a debate over SDI which mirrored the public struggle. The main criticism was that our relations and the strategic balance might be wrecked even before SDI could be developed to shoot incoming missiles out of the sky—the feasibility of which many noted scientists doubted anyway. The internal debate was joined most obviously
and fiercely between Shultz and Weinberger. These former close colleagues in government and in private business disagreed on many things, to the point where, right after Reagan's reelection, Shultz privately demanded that the president choose between him and Weinberger.

Reagan, however, could not make up his mind, saying he needed both of them. Ideologically and personally, he was closer to Weinberger and more often followed his recommendations. But after the election, he wanted to speed up contacts and negotiations with Moscow, especially on nuclear arms control, so Shultz's role became more important to him. Robert McFarlane, the new and more pragmatic national security adviser who had replaced the ideological William Clark, told me privately that Shultz began to study disarmament questions thoroughly after the election; he had understood them only superficially until then. So Shultz started methodically to prepare for negotiations with Gromyko; until then the administration made every attempt to avoid them.

On November 23 the Soviet Union and the United States announced a new set of arms control negotiations linking discussions on START, intermediate-range missiles in Europe, and weapons in space, with a meeting of Gromyko and Shultz in Geneva on January 7–8, 1985. They would set the concrete agenda for future talks.

When we met again, Shultz seemed quite upbeat about the possibilities for negotiation. Change was in the air. He was going to Camp David, where Reagan was to meet Margaret Thatcher. They were looking forward to a report about her recent meeting in London with Gorbachev, a new political figure whom she had anointed on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street as someone with whom she could “do business,” an unprecedented public accolade from her for any Soviet official. The curiosity of these diehard American anti-communists had definitely been aroused. “What on earth did he do to fascinate the Iron Lady?” Shultz wondered out loud, and with a smile.

Perhaps I should have told him. I had first met Gorbachev the previous summer during my visit to Moscow. I did my usual rounds among the Politburo and virtually no one asked me anything beyond the usual: How are things going? But Gorbachev plied me with questions—twenty or thirty of them. He had been reading everything he could find about the United States and there was plenty that he wanted to know.

As I walked from Shultz's office, I ran into Simons, the State Department's Soviet specialist. He warned me that the American position being prepared for the Geneva meeting fell short of the Soviet side's expectations. It emphasized strategic offensive weapons, pushing space to the background. Besides, the State Department was still poorly informed about all of the Pentagon's space programs. In his methodical way, Shultz had asked for a Pentagon briefing on SDI but failed to get it. Simons told me the briefing was conducted by Lieutenant General Leslie Abrahamson, the Star Wars program director. As the briefing proceeded, Shultz realized that the general was speaking in the kind of generalities he might have used if he were giving an interview to a newspaper.

“I want to know the particulars,” Shultz said, asking the general some specific questions. Abrahamson, not in the least embarrassed by the presence of Shultz, asked his assistant if the secretary of state had a security clearance for this top-secret material. Shultz was indignant. This story, true or not, revealed the mood in the State Department that showed that the military in the United States was no more forthcoming than our own generals in giving their secrets even to the ranking diplomats on their own side.

In Moscow, the Politburo devoted a special session to the guidelines for Gromyko in Geneva. He received firm instructions to obtain the clearest possible commitment that the talks would aim at banning space weapons and be linked with the negotiations on nuclear weapons. All this was directed at making it impossible for the Americans to avoid discussing space weapons, since they evidently wanted to talk mainly about reducing strategic nuclear weapons. Gorbachev chaired the Politburo session, which he was increasingly doing because of Chernenko's declining health. While Reagan doggedly stuck to his Strategic Defense Initiative, Gorbachev convinced himself and the rest of the Soviet leadership that it had to be thwarted at all costs. The clash of these two opposing but fixed positions dominated our security negotiations for years to come, and the question was magnified by emotional involvement of the two leaders.

Shultz went to Geneva with different and not very clear-cut instructions. He had received them from Reagan after a dispute with Weinberger, who strongly opposed any talk at all with Gromyko on space weapons. (At that point SDI was the Pentagon's fastest growing program.) Shultz reasoned that without any talk of Star Wars the whole Geneva meeting would be senseless and so informed the president. Reagan resolved the dispute like Solomon. He said it was all right to start discussing the subject with the Soviet Union but Shultz should proceed “without surrendering anything.”

At the meeting in Geneva, Shultz would not commit himself to a clear-cut formula defining the talks in terms of space and Reagan's SDI program, and he also opposed linking the talks on space with nuclear weapons. Thus the discussion with Gromyko proceeded with great difficulty, especially when it came to the wording of a final communiqué. I witnessed the whole process, and I can report that Gromyko displayed enviable perseverance in carrying out his instructions. At last they reached a compromise. The joint
statement said the negotiators would be split into three groups covering "a complex of questions concerning space and nuclear weapons, both strategic and intermediate-range" so as to solve them "in their interrelationship ... to work out effective agreements aimed at preventing an arms race in space and terminating it on earth, at limiting and reducing nuclear arms, and at strengthening strategic stability."

For all its labyrinthine verbiage, this declaration gave a start to new and important negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States on three key groups of nuclear and space weapons—strategic weapons, intermediate-range missiles in Europe, and the weapons of Star Wars. True, the American side tried to amend the wording later to its own advantage. But the negotiations did proceed.

The public atmosphere around our relations also began to clear after the elections. Early in December I hosted Edgar Bronfman, the president of the World Jewish Congress and a prominent businessman, who pointed out that Jews and blacks were the only two ethnic groups to have voted against Reagan. He said he represented moderate sections of the American Jewish community, who tried to take a realistic approach to Soviet-American relations and did not want the Jews to become hostages of a new cold war. Most American Jews realized that in a nuclear age their survival meant first of all prevention of a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States, he said, and that gave them an interest in supporting detente. The leadership of the World Jewish Congress was prepared to oppose the arms race and support detente, better relations with the Soviet Union, and closer ties with its Jewish community. Bronfman also expressed a wish to visit the Soviet Union as a businessman dealing with food, chemical, and oil-extracting industries. We established a good personal relationship, and I helped arrange his trip.

Economic links also began to revive. Dwyane Andreas, cochairman at the Soviet-American Trade and Economic Council, visited me the following week. He told me about his trip to Moscow and a meeting with Gorbachev. He was convinced that the Soviet Union was prepared to develop economic relations with the United States, and he would bring it to the attention of the administration. I would like to do justice to Andreas, a consistent champion of better relations between our countries who commands high respect from political and business leaders. He does his work without much publicity but with great conviction and efficiency. We have long been friends, and our families remain in contact with each other.

Armand Hammer called on me several days later. With characteristic enthusiasm he told me about his reception in the Kremlin and a long conversation with Chernenko. The Reagan administration, he claimed, was interested in his trip, and the president invited Hammer to visit him and tell him about the meeting. Hammer asked me to tell Chernenko that he was trying to obtain a U.S. government license to sell offshore oil drilling equipment that could operate in Arctic conditions but was banned for export to the Soviet Union. He had managed to obtain a special exemption to export coal-carrying equipment, but permission for oil-drilling was harder to get. As was evident from his invitation to see Reagan he was, as always, starting at the top.

What accounted for this new and less confrontational atmosphere? Just before Christmas, I had dinner with McFarlane to discuss the outlook for the coming year, and while I welcomed the change, Moscow still could not be sure it was not just for the elections.

McFarlane gave his assessment: Reagan believed that he had fulfilled the basic task of his presidency, which was to restore the potential of the American armed forces. He was going to continue to support the military, but now he believed it was high time to improve relations with the Soviet Union gradually and reach agreements on reducing nuclear arms. His opinion about communism had not changed, and he firmly believed that free enterprise was the best way to develop a nation's potential, but he would no longer engage in a public debate about it. His priority, McFarlane said, was to lessen the threat of nuclear war and therefore to seek out the possibilities for nuclear agreements with the Soviet Union in 1985.

I looked somewhat skeptical, and McFarlane commented that the president was really undergoing an evolution of his views on the Soviet Union, although the process was not evident to those who did not associate with him daily.