Arms Reductions

At the Central Committee meeting that officially designated him the new general secretary, Gorbachev outlined his vision. Without repudiating the past, he emphasized that the Soviet economy must be rejuvenated and its society revitalized. He wanted to accelerate production, restructure economic management, and promote openness and democracy.137 “Accelerate” meant to incorporate scientific and technological innovations promptly into Soviet industry, to heighten labor productivity, and to combat alcoholism. Socialist democracy must be nurtured along with more discipline and more order, Gorbachev said. Individual workers had to be reengaged in production, develop a sense of ownership in the process. More self-management demanded more transparency (glasnost).138 Gorbachev believed that more democracy in the workplace meant more socialism. And more socialism meant more social justice, the feature that distinguished socialism from capitalism and made it more likely to satisfy man’s quest for personal fulfillment and creativity.139

Turning to foreign affairs, Gorbachev stated unequivocally that the arms race must be curbed. “Never before has such a terrible danger hung over the heads of humanity in our times,” he told his comrades. “The only rational way out of the current situation is for the opposing forces to agree to immediately stop the arms race—above all, the nuclear arms race.”140

The mounting stockpiles of nuclear weapons made no sense to Gorbachev. They did not contribute to national security, and he believed a nuclear war could not be won and must never be waged. “In the atomic-cosmic era,” he would say in May 1986, “world war is an absolute evil.”141 Nor did he think that nuclear weapons could be used politically to blackmail or intimidate an adversary in a crisis. Risk-taking of this sort could be suicidal, as war might arise through miscalculation if the adversary did not back down. Nuclear weapons “must stop being used in a political role because it’s impossible to achieve our goals using [them].”142

The greatest danger to Soviet communism, however, did not arise from external threats. Gorbachev “did not think anyone was going to attack us,” said Anatoli Chernyaev, one of the foreign-policy experts who became an aide to the new Soviet leader in February 1986. Soviet military capabilities were sufficiently great “to repulse the desire for aggression.”143 However, Gorbachev did consider the Soviet Union imperiled by internal decay. The arms race had to be tamed and international relations defused because these steps were indispensable for the success of his domestic program. “[W]e understood that if nothing was changed in our foreign policy, we would get nowhere with regard to the internal changes we had in mind,” Gorbachev recalled. Chernyaev emphasized that there was an intimate connection “between every important domestic issue and foreign policy.”144

Gorbachev’s thinking adumbrated a radical shift in ideology. Imperialism was still to be worried about; vigilance was necessary.145 The United States, Gorbachev would say over and over again during his first years in office, was trying to exhaust the Soviet Union, “waiting for us to drown.”146 He would not allow his country to be intimidated by superior American power, and he...
black, rich and poor, young and old, will go forward together, arm in arm.’” He thought a “new beginning” had been achieved during his first administration domestically, and freedom was on the march internationally. He promised an unwavering quest for peace based on strength. Through negotiations with the Kremlin, he was determined to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and seek their “total elimination . . . from the face of the earth.” He insisted that his Star Wars “security shield” was an eminently sensible way to proceed. “It wouldn’t kill people; it would destroy weapons. It wouldn’t militarize space; it would help demilitarize the arsenals on earth.”

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

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

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

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

Twilight in Moscow

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

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

Gorbachev was ten when the Nazis invaded. “Wartime impressions and experiences remain engraved in my mind,” he wrote. In August 1941 his father, along with all the other men in the village, was conscripted. “Entire families would accompany their men, profusely shedding tears and voicing parting wishes all the way. We said goodbye at the village center. Women, children, and old men cried their hearts out, the weeping merging into one heartrending wail of sorrow.”

Only women and children remained in the village. Mikhail had to take over his father’s household chores and cultivate the vegetable patch that provided the family food. “The wartime children skipped from childhood directly to adulthood,” he wrote. In late summer 1942, German armies occupied the village. “Rumours of mass executions in the neighboring towns circulated, and of machines that poisoned people with gas.” Mikhail and his mother and grandparents feared for their lives. But they were saved when Soviet troops returned in early 1943 and drove the Germans westward. During that year everything in the village had been destroyed—“no machines were left, no cattle, no seeds. We ploughed the land by hitching cows from our individual households. The picture is still fresh in my memory,” Gorbachev continued, “the women crying and the sad eyes of the cows.” Famine raged. His mother sold his father’s clothes and boots for a sack of corn. They planted seed. The rains came. They lived.

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

War meant devastation; war meant trauma. Those who were too young to fight were spared some of the worst pain and suffering, but they occasionally caught shocking glimpses of the meaning of war. Roaming the countryside in March 1943, when the snows were beginning to melt, young Mikhail and his friends “stumbled upon the remains of Red Army soldiers.” They beheld “unspeakable horror: decaying corpses, partly devoured by animals, skulls in rusted helmets. . . . There they lay, in the thick mud of the trenches and craters, unburied, staring at us out of black, gaping eye-sockets. We came home in a state of shock.” Mikhail would never forget.

“I was fourteen when the war ended. Our generation is the generation of wartime children. It has burned us, leaving its mark both on our characters and our view of the world.”

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

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

Of course, he grasped that the realities around him did not correspond to
the theories that were inculcated in him. But the ideals were inspiring. "The impulse provided by the revolution had a powerful effect: freedom, land, . . . human dignity for those who had been humiliated—the belief in all those values was, in spite of everything, something quite positive."114 He was motivated, moreover, by his father's becoming a communist at the battlefront. For Gorbachev, as for so many others, "the war was not only a great victory over fascism but proof that our country's cause was the right one. And by the same token," he reminisced, "so was the cause of Communism." After the victory over the Nazis, "there existed a truly positive subjective attitude toward Soviet society on the part of entire generations who connected their dearest hopes and plans in life with the success of that society."115

As a teenager, Gorbachev labored in the fields during the summer with his father, a machinist and tractor driver, whom he greatly admired for his intelligence, industry, courage, and intellectual curiosity. In 1948, working together and with another father-and-son team, they produced a record harvest, five or six times the average. Gorbachev's father won an Order of Lenin prize and Mikhail the Order of the Red Banner of Labour. The young Gorbachev greatly valued this award, which was instrumental in winning him admission to Moscow State University, an unprecedented opportunity for a peasant lad from the boondocks whose grandfathers had been enemies of the people.116

Studying law transformed Gorbachev's life. Initially, he felt inadequate. His preparatory education had not been on a par with that of the more urbane students from Moscow and Leningrad. But he was hardworking, ambitious, curious, and intellectually gifted. He loved delving into topics he had not previously explored. The curriculum presumed that in order to study law you needed to understand the socioeconomic and political processes that undergirded the law. Gorbachev preferred the courses in history, diplomacy, political economy, and philosophy to the more practical legal courses. Although much brainwashing went on, he was exposed to new ideas, new students, and stimulating faculty. "The lectures revealed a new world, entire strata of human knowledge hitherto unknown to me."117

When, in 1953, Stalin died, it was "a heavy blow that we found hard to endure," Gorbachev acknowledged many years later. "All night long we were part of the crowd going to his coffin." But university life changed for the better after the dictator's death. Lectures became more interesting, seminars livelier. "Doubts were expressed—warily at first, but gradually more outspoken." Traditional interpretations were challenged. Gorbachev learned "how to think. . . . Before the university I was trapped in my belief system in the sense that I accepted a great deal as given, as assumptions not to be questioned. At the university I began to think and reflect and to look at things differently."118

He met his soul mate, Raisa Titorenko, at the university. An accomplished student of philosophy, she also came from a family that had experienced the purges and terror of the 1930s. With Raisa, Gorbachev found somebody with whom he could discuss his concerns and share his ambitions. They were married in 1953. She did not have his social skills, but she was smart, incisive, and committed to ameliorating the many ills of the Soviet system, including the position of women and the backward conditions of the peasantry, subjects she studied while her husband pursued his career.119

After graduating from Moscow State University, Gorbachev returned to Stavropol. For the next two decades, he moved steadily up the ranks, first of the Komsomol and then of the local and regional Communist Party. As he worked on party and agricultural issues and traveled around the region, he learned much about the poverty and backwardness of his country. The infrastructure of Stavropol—health care, education, transport, and water supply—was in miserable shape. "Sewage often poured into the open gutters lining the streets." He was dismayed by the sterility of thought of local officials. All directives emanated from Moscow. He, like everybody else, "was bound hand and foot by orders from the center." Gorbachev longed for enlightened leadership from Moscow, but the hopes initially inspired by Khrushchev's thaw quickly faded. Kosygin's economic reforms floundered. "All eyes were fixed on the center," Gorbachev recalled, "and it rejected any kind of innovation, or else it drained the energy and vitality out of any kind of initiative. My first doubts about the effectiveness of the system were born at that time."120

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, Gorbachev kept developing himself. As a high party official, he now had access to books not previously available to him. He was exposed to new ways of thinking about socialism as he perused articles by Willy Brandt and François Mitterrand. He also initiated contacts with experts on foreign policy and atomic weapons. He met scientists like Yevgeni Velikhov, academicians like Georgi Arbatov, and international relations experts like Anatoli Chernyaev and Georgi Shakhnazarov. On a trip to Canada, he renewed his acquaintance with Alexander Yakovlev, the Soviet ambassador in Ottawa. The two men discovered they were "kindred spirits." "We spoke completely frankly about everything," Yakovlev recalled, "the main idea was that society must change, it must be built on different principles." When Brezhnev died and Andropov became general secretary, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere. The former KGB chief wanted to invigorate the system and accelerate industrial production. He looked to Gorbachev to help spearhead overall economic reform. And knowing he was ill, he began grooming the younger man as his successor. He assigned Gorbachev the task of preparing the major address commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Lenin's death and encouraged him to think more broadly about all issues: "act as if you had to shoulder all the responsibility ... ", said Andropov. Andropov set a course that greatly appealed to Gorbachev. He "resolutely denounced all the features commonly associated with Brezhnevism, that is, protectionism, in-fighting and intrigues, corruption, moral turpitude, bureaucracy, disorganization and laxity." He called for the perfection of "developed socialism." Qualitative changes, he insisted, must occur not only in the productive forces of society but also in the superstructure. He meant that labor productivity must increase and new technologies must be embraced, including computers and robots. Like his predecessors, Andropov stressed that the "ultimate objective of our efforts in the economic field is to improve the living conditions of the people." Even while he demanded stricter discipline, he also believed that socialist democracy must be broadened, that the "activities of the party and state bodies [must be brought] closer to the needs and interests of the people." Andropov did not hesitate to say that the challenges were daunting. "Frankly speaking we have not yet studied properly the society in which we live and work, and have not yet fully revealed the laws governing its development, particularly economic ones," he acknowledged in a speech to the party plenum on 15 June 1983. "This is why we have to act at times empirically, so to speak, by the quite irrational trial-and-error method." Life constantly interjected new problems, and scientific study was required. But science and technology conjured up new challenges and threats, too.

No threat was greater than that of nuclear war. "An unprecedented sharpening of the struggle between the two world social systems has taken place," said Andropov. "[But] an attempt to solve the historical dispute between the two systems through a military clash could be disastrous to mankind." Preserving the peace was therefore his main objective. So important was it, he insisted, that one had to "reappraise the principal goals ... of the entire communist movement." Fighting "oppression and the exploitation of man by man" had always been an overriding concern, but nowadays communists "must also struggle for the preservation of human civilization, for man's right to life." Capitalism was facing ever graver crises, besieged as it was by "internal and interstate antagonisms, upheavals, and conflicts." But within the capitalist world were factions and movements that realized the necessity of peaceful coexistence. Andropov wanted them to know that he shared their hope for peaceful coexistence, which met "the interests of the peoples on both sides of the social barricades dividing the world." Andropov still "believed that the future belongs to socialism. Such is the march of history." But this did not mean that "we are going to engage in the 'export of revolution.' " Socialism would "ultimately prove its advantages precisely in the conditions of peaceful competition with capitalism. And we by no means advocate competition in the military field, which imperialism is foisting on us." Although he would never sacrifice the security of the U.S.S.R. or its allies and was prepared to enhance the combat power of the nation's armed forces, he preferred "to reduce the level of armaments and military
Arms Reductions

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was initially prepared to shift more resources to modernize Soviet defense capabilities. Military preparedness is "for us the sacred of the sacred." But the primary threat emanated from within, from the communist system's failure to fulfill the expectations of the Soviet people, to produce the goods people wanted, and to ensure the way of life they anticipated.

Restructuring was the key to a revival of socialism's appeal. "Contemporary world politics [was] a struggle for the minds and hearts of people," Gorbachev believed. In this contest, socialism offered a glorious vision of social justice and individual fulfillment. But "the international impetus of socialism had lessened." By restoring its dynamism at home, he could increase its attractiveness abroad. When he was elected general secretary, he made it clear that he wanted to focus on domestic issues. On 15 March 1985, he told a conference of party secretaries that the U.S.S.R. "should emphasize domestic issues and solving the economic and social problems of our country's development." In his report to the twenty-seventh Party Congress on 25 February 1986, he would reiterate that the main "international duty" of the party was to ensure the success of the revolution at home.

Gorbachev recognized from the outset, however, that his domestic goals could not be achieved without readjusting Soviet foreign policy. He understood, according to Chernyaev, that "in order to pursue some sort of transformation, to improve Socialism, nothing could be done unless you stop the arms race." The purpose of foreign policy, Gorbachev said a year after taking over leadership, was to "do everything ... to weaken the grip of expenses on defense." He was to be even more explicit at a Politburo meeting in October 1986, when he discussed his strategy for his forthcoming meeting with President Reagan at Reykjavik, Iceland. "Our goal is to prevent the next round of the arms race. If we do not accomplish it, ... [w]e will be pulled into an arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose it, because we are at the limits of our capabilities." Gorbachev's comrades agreed, even most of the military officers, if not the civilian managers in the defense industries.

To defuse international tensions and promote an atmosphere conducive to arms cuts, Gorbachev wanted to transform the image of the Soviet Union. "From the very beginning," Chernyaev stressed, "he ... knew that you could not change society if you did not first change the attitudes of other countries toward the Soviet Union." The "image of our country ... when Gorbachev came to power was actually the worst it [had] ever been in the eyes of international society," said Sergei Tarasenko, another influential foreign-policy adviser. For almost a decade the country had been run by a group of elderly, infirm men who seemed out of touch with contemporary needs at home and abroad. The invasion of Afghanistan, the escalation of the arms race, the declaration of martial law in Poland, the incessant wrangling with China, the destruction of the Korean civilian airliner, and the stagnation of the economy had soiled the Kremlin's reputation and discredited its leaders. "[O]ne of the first concerns of the Gorbachev administration," Tarasenko continued, "was to repair this image so the Soviet Union wouldn't be viewed as the 'evil empire.'"

Gorbachev immediately went to work trying to alter the image of the Soviet Union and to promote better relations with the United States. On 24 March 1985, a few days after speaking forcefully to Vice President Bush and Secretary of State Shultz about the need for a new beginning, he sent his first letter to President Reagan:

> Our countries are different by their social systems, by the ideologies dominant in them. But we believe that this should not be a reason for animosity. Each social system has a right to life, and it should prove its advantages not by force, not by military means, but on the path of peaceful competition with the other system. And all people have the right to go the way they have chosen themselves, without anybody imposing his will on them from outside.

The two countries, Gorbachev continued, had one overriding interest uniting them: "not to let things come to the outbreak of nuclear war which would inevitably have catastrophic consequences for both sides." The leaders needed to stop "whipping up animosity," to assess their differences calmly, and to "create an atmosphere of trust between our two countries." Gorbachev welcomed a personal meeting with the U.S. president. Like Reagan, he believed that "normal relationships" across ideological lines must be built on "a human basis."

Reagan wrote back swiftly and warmly, asking Gorbachev to meet with Congressman Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, Speaker of the House of Represen-
Afghanistan. The relations between our countries are presently in a kind of ice age," but they did not have to remain frozen. "A fatal conflict of interest between our countries is not inevitable." There was "a way out, namely, peaceful coexistence, the recognition that each nation has the right to live as it wishes. There is no other alternative."\textsuperscript{155} To achieve this goal, Gorbachev needed to plow new ideological ground. He was already beginning to embrace "common security," or "equal security," a concept extensively discussed among European socialists and theorists of international relations and a core ingredient of Gorbachev's "new thinking," which moved the Soviet conception of international relations away from class conflict.\textsuperscript{156} Of course, words were cheap, and Gorbachev knew that deeds needed to match his rhetoric. He started to explore ways to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{157} He told the Warsaw Pact allies that he would negotiate to reduce intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe "or, better yet, to reciprocally rid Europe of both intermediate-range and tactical nuclear weapons altogether."\textsuperscript{158} In July 1985 he announced a unilateral moratorium on Soviet nuclear testing and expressed hope that the United States would reciprocate.\textsuperscript{159}

The seriousness of Gorbachev's intentions began to impress foreigners when at the end of June 1985 he dramatically removed Andrei Gromyko as foreign minister, a post he had held for more than twenty years. The able, tough-minded veteran diplomat was, in Gorbachev's view, "rigid," his ideas "locked in concrete."\textsuperscript{160} Gromyko was burdened, as his son later acknowledged, by the memory of Nazi aggression, the "June 22 Syndrome," and by the belief that the Soviet Union was forever encircled and besieged by imperialist enemies.\textsuperscript{161}

In his place, Gorbachev appointed Eduard Shevardnadze, a young Politburo member from Georgia with no foreign-policy experience. Gorbachev knew Shevardnadze well. They were of the same generation, had both endured the hardships of war on the home front, and had moved up the ranks of the party hierarchy simultaneously, Shevardnadze in Georgia and Gorbachev in Stavropol. They had met at meetings and had come to regard one another as kindred spirits. Gorbachev knew that in appointing Shevardnadze he was selecting a foreign minister who would embrace his new thinking.\textsuperscript{162}

World War II had powerfully shaped Shevardnadze's views, though not as permanently as it had those of the generation of 22 June. "The war shaped me as it did millions of my contemporaries," he recalled. "It formed my convictions and purpose in life." His brother died in the first days of the war; his other brother was immediately summoned to the front. "My mother dressed in mourning for all present and future losses." The Nazi attack confirmed that "outsiders wanted to destroy us, to annihilate us physically. My choice [of communism] was determined by the death of friends and relatives, by the grief, suffering, and privations of millions of people." For Shevardnadze, "the war with fascism became a personal battle. . . . The fascists were attacking communism, and communism was my religion."\textsuperscript{163} When appointed foreign minister, he had not grown ashamed of his commitment. "The collectivism that I served with all my might was literally working miracles, transforming barren land, defeating fascism, raising the country from ruins, and therein lay its great authority." But like Gorbachev, Shevardnadze could see the flaws in the system—its lawlessness, its penchant to reduce "a person to a cog who could be crushed with impunity." As party leader in Georgia, Shevardnadze had tried to gain more autonomy, get around the command system, and unleash local initiative, but he was frustrated. "Everything is rotten," he had confided to Gorbachev in late 1984.\textsuperscript{164}

Shevardnadze was flabbergasted by the offer to be foreign minister. He knew little of the world and spoke no foreign language. Georgian was his native tongue, and he spoke Russian with a pronounced accent. But Gorbachev implored him to take the job, for he wanted innovation, courage, and dynamism. He wanted someone, like himself, who could deal with the Americans on a human basis, who could transcend the ideological chasm.\textsuperscript{165}

When Shevardnadze met Secretary of State Shultz in Helsinki at the end of July 1985, he knew little of the details of the arms-control negotiations that had been going on for so many years. He did not hide his ignorance. He told Shultz that he would simply read the talking points that had been prepared for him. His candor and openness impressed Shultz, which was precisely Shevardnadze's intention. His primary goal was to eradicate the "image of the enemy." "We and the Americans were divided by walls built out of the rubble of distrust and stones of ideology," he recalled.\textsuperscript{166}

Shevardnadze's speech in the Finnish capital commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Helsinki Agreement contained the seeds of the new Soviet thinking. The Kremlin, Shevardnadze said, now wanted to defuse interna-
national tension and focus on domestic life. Soviet leaders wanted to accelerate social and economic development, promote citizens’ well-being, and create the conditions for the “harmonious development of the individual.” Soviet foreign policy sprang from these domestic requirements. “In order to carry out its large-scale plans,” Shevardnadze concluded, “the Soviet Union needs a lasting peace in Europe, a lasting peace all over the world.”

Gorbachev communicated the same message. In early October 1985, he told a French television audience that his highest priority was “to develop the economy, social relations, and democracy.” Answering journalists’ questions with vibrant self-confidence, he remarked, “We have different political systems. We have different views of human values. But we also have much in common.” Since “we live in the same house, we need to cooperate.” When asked about whether the Soviet Union had four million political prisoners, he bristled and said it was “absurd” to talk about numbers of this sort. “We know what has to be done in order to open up even more the best aspects of this social system. And at the center of all our aspirations is man and his needs.”

He made the same points when he met with leaders of the Warsaw Pact on 22 October, though in that setting he also denounced what he saw as American attempts to accelerate the arms race. “They are planning to win over socialism through war or military blackmail.” His hostility to SDI was unreserved: “Its militaristic nature is obvious. . . . Its purpose is to secure permanent technological superiority of the West, not only over the socialist community, but over [the US] allies as well.” If necessary, the Kremlin would counter the American initiative and was already pouring more resources into military research and strategic defense. But he preferred not to do so; it was costly. “We need to force imperialism to undertake concrete steps toward disarmament and normalization of the situation in the world.” His aim was to eradicate the Western image of a “Soviet military threat.” But the new tone was distinctive and the larger message clear: the Soviet Union and the United States obviously had substantial differences, as he wrote to Reagan, but must “proceed from the objective fact that we all live on the same planet and must learn to live together.”

Reagan eagerly anticipated his first encounter with the new general secretary, scheduled for mid-November. The president’s “juices were flowing. In a very real sense,” he recalled, “preparations for the summit had begun five years earlier, when we began strengthening our economy, restoring our national will, and rebuilding our defenses. I felt ready.”

He and Shultz knew that Gorbachev wanted to focus on arms reductions and stop the SDI program. Report after report from intelligence analysts in the State Department and CIA stressed that the Soviet Union was “a society in trouble.” Although it was not likely to collapse anytime soon, it could no longer serve as a model for restless peoples and revolutionary nationalists seeking rapid modernization and social transformation. In fact, the Americans believed the Soviet regime would be unable to fulfill its people’s expectations or to muster the resources to meet Gorbachev’s ambitious economic goals.

Knowing all this, Reagan aimed to extract concessions on matters that interested him: the state of human rights inside the U.S.S.R., the war in Afghanistan, and the turmoil in Central America, southern Africa, and other regional hotspots. To him, arms negotiations were linked to these matters. The tension and animosity between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were, in his view, a result not of armaments but of mistrust. If the Soviet Union wanted arms reductions, as did he, they would have to remove the distrust, help settle regional disputes, and allow some of their dissidents to speak more freely and emigrate more easily.

President Reagan was willing to bargain—except on the Strategic Defense Initiative. He wrote in his diary on 11 September 1985: “I won’t trade our SDI off for some Soviet offer of weapon reductions.” He hoped to settle other matters—just not right away. Unlike his secretary of defense, director of central intelligence, and head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, he was eager to talk to Gorbachev. But Shultz advised him to modulate his expectations; Gorbachev was extremely personable and engaging, but he was also tough and intelligent. The most important thing was to establish a personal rapport, to begin a process. Reagan agreed completely. He believed he knew how to negotiate. “You’re unlikely to get all you want; you’ll probably get more of what you want if you don’t issue ultimatums and leave your adversary room to maneuver; you shouldn’t back your adversary into a corner, embarrass him, or humiliate him; and sometimes the easiest way to get things done is for the top people to do them alone and in private.”

Ronald and Nancy Reagan flew to Geneva on 16 November 1985 to meet
Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev. Their excitement was palpable. "As we shook hands, I had to admit... there was something likeable about Gorbachev," the president recalled. "There was warmth in his face and his style." Reagan immediately suggested they chat without advisers, an idea he had been carefully planning. He wanted to establish a sense of intimacy. Together, with only their interpreters, they talked for about an hour.179

"The fate of the world" was in their hands, Reagan began. They could bring peace to the world, if only they could allay the deep suspicions that separated their countries. The president suggested that they focus, first, on building trust; solutions to specific problems would follow if only they could build confidence. Reagan tried to be empathetic, mentioning his understanding of the impact of World War II on the Soviet Union, but he also expressed apprehensions about Soviet efforts to spread Marxism-Leninism by brute force. The U.S.S.R. and the United States, Reagan said, should work together to settle the problems besetting third world countries.180

Gorbachev wanted to build a rapport, too, but he was far more eager than Reagan to reach an agreement on reducing nuclear armaments and preventing an arms race in space. He spoke with warmth and sincerity, and told the president that his intention was to talk quietly and with respect. The Soviet peoples bore no grudges and wished America no harm. He was convinced that they could improve relations but stressed that they had an obligation to solve the overriding question of war and peace. The way to begin was to reduce armaments. Though he shared Reagan's concern about the strife and turmoil in the third world, the Soviet Union was not responsible for the unrest, he argued. Moscow was not "omnipotent." He did not wake each morning thinking about "which country he would now like to arrange a revolution in." Revolutions had their own indigenous causes; the Kremlin supported self-determination, and did not want to impose its way of life on anybody.181

This initial conversation immediately created a bond between the two men. What was obvious was that they both wanted to build a human relationship, to transcend the ideological divide without abandoning their principles. As they joined the larger delegations, they continued to elaborate on many of the key themes they had introduced in this first talk.

Each leader expressed his concerns about the other's expansionist tendencies. Gorbachev, however, picked up on Reagan's initial theme about building trust. But he wanted more than trust: he wanted Reagan to disavow SDI. The Soviets regarded Star Wars as an American effort to gain supremacy, and as an offensive, not defensive, measure. SDI could not effectively shield America against a premeditated Soviet attack involving thousands of missiles; its utility, therefore, must be to thwart Soviet retaliation should the Americans launch a preemptive strike on the Soviet homeland.

Gorbachev said he knew that some Americans relished a chance to demonstrate technological superiority and ratchet up the arms race, thinking it would wear down the Soviet economy. This strategy, he insisted, would not work: if necessary, "we will build up in order to smash your shield." Yet that was not what he wanted to do. He wanted—and he was surprisingly candid in explaining his thinking—to rechannel money from the arms race into the civilian economy. In both their countries, the military was "devouring huge resources."182

Over the next day and a half, Reagan repeatedly accused the Soviets of sponsoring revolution around the world, crushing human rights, and building up a gigantic nuclear arsenal. Gorbachev needed to remove American
another turning point for all mankind—one that would make it possible

But they both recognized that it was being designed for defensive purposes. Why could the Soviets not trust him? "With some emotion," Gorbachev emphasized that verification of space-based technologies would be exceedingly difficult, and he appealed to the president to rethink his attitude. "What was the logic of starting an arms race in a new sphere?"

The discord over SDI meant that there could be no meeting of minds on the limitation of strategic, intermediate-range, or conventional weapons. Nor was there any agreement on regional disputes. Nonetheless, both Reagan and Gorbachev gained confidence in one another and agreed to meet again, first in Washington and then in Moscow. Gorbachev was disappointed that he left Geneva without concrete understandings, but he sensed that Reagan "was a man you 'could do business with.' "\(^{186}\) In turn, Reagan liked Gorbachev. Already at the end of the first day, Nancy Reagan recalled, "I noticed an unmistakable warmth between them."

The warmth was most conspicuous during the evening dinners and toasts, when Gorbachev greatly impressed the president and his wife. He was relaxed, asked questions, and had a good sense of humor. "He could tell jokes about himself and even about his country," Reagan wrote, "and I grew to like him more."\(^{188}\) In one of Gorbachev's warm, evocative toasts, he recalled a biblical story about "a time to throw stones, and . . . a time to gather them; now is the time to gather stones which have been cast in the past." Reagan, in turn, reminded the guests that they were dining on the forty-third anniversary of the Soviet counterattack at the battle of Stalingrad, the turning point in the Great Patriotic War. He hoped, he said, that this meeting might be "yet another turning point for all mankind—one that would make it possible to have a world of peace and freedom."\(^{189}\) At the end of dinner on the second night, when both leaders reflected on their failure to achieve concrete results, they nevertheless voiced optimism. "We will not change our positions, our values, or our thinking," said Gorbachev, "but we expect that with patience and wisdom we will find ways toward solutions." The president agreed. Previous summits had led nowhere, he mused, but "To hell with the past, we'll do it our way and get something done."\(^{190}\)

Gorbachev intrigued the president. "I don't know, Mike," Reagan confided to his former aide, Michael Deaver, when he returned to Washington, "but I honestly think he believes in a higher power."\(^{191}\) To his good friend the actor George Murphy, Reagan summed up his feelings: the meeting "was worthwhile but it would be foolish to believe the leopard will change his spots. [Gorbachev] is a firm believer in their system (so is she [Raisa]), and he believes the propaganda they peddle about us. At the same time, he is practical and knows his economy is a basket case. I think our job is to show him he and they will be better off if we make some practical agreements, without attempting to convert him to our way of thinking."\(^{192}\)

Hoping for quick progress, Reagan sent a long handwritten letter to Gorbachev a week after their meeting. The message was vintage Reagan: glowing with warmth yet tough in substance. "I found our meeting of great value," he wrote. They had spoken frankly, ascertained that "there are many things on which we disagree and disagree

"We should be able to find a way, in practical terms, to relieve the concerns you have expressed." They must instruct their negotiators in Geneva to "face up" to the tough issues and make certain that neither nation achieved a one-sided advantage. Reagan then shifted to regional issues. Once again, seeking to show Gorbachev he had listened, Reagan stressed, "I can
assure you that the United States does not believe that the Soviet Union is the cause of all the world's ills," but it had "exploited and worsened local tensions." It could allay American anxieties and show its true intentions by withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. He concluded with another personal touch, urging Gorbachev to collaborate with him to achieve noble goals that only they could reach. "Both of us have advisors and assistants, but ... the responsibility to preserve peace and increase cooperation is ours. Our people look to us for leadership."193

Gorbachev was eager to provide the leadership, but he wanted Reagan to make the concessions. He was frustrated by the president's intransigence on SDI. "Believe me, Mr. President," Gorbachev replied, also in a handwritten letter, "we have a genuine and truly serious concern about U.S. nuclear systems." And his government also worried about U.S. actions in many third world regions. Both Washington and Moscow offered military assistance to countries around the globe. "Why apply a double standard and assert that Soviet assistance is a source of tension and U.S. assistance is beneficial?" The Soviet Union was assisting legitimate governments that came to it for aid when beleaguered by outside interference. The United States often "incites actions against governments and supports and supplies weapons to groups which are inimical to society and are, in essence, terrorists." He mentioned Washington's actions in Nicaragua and, implicitly, U.S. support of the Mujahedin in Afghanistan. However noble were the president's intentions, he could not ignore U.S. capabilities. But like Reagan, Gorbachev wanted to take the sting out of his letter: Please accept this letter, Gorbachev concluded "as another one of our 'fireside talks.' I would truly like to preserve not only the spirit of our Geneva meetings, but also to go further in developing our dialogue."194

Gorbachev recognized that Reagan was trying to use Soviet weaknesses to wring concessions on SDI, regional struggles, and human rights. Gorbachev wanted to get out of Afghanistan.195 He also was sensitive to Reagan's accusations about the human rights situation in the Soviet Union, and was not averse to easing emigration restrictions.196 But he was most eager to break the impasse over SDI and press forward with arms reductions. This was critical to the success of perestroika, his program to restructure domestic economic and social life, which he was preparing to present at the forthcoming meeting of the twenty-seventh Party Congress in February.

Gorbachev maneuvered deftly to put more of his own people into positions of influence in the International Department of the CPSU and in the foreign ministry. He promoted innovative thinkers like Yakovlev and brought experts like Chernyaev into his office. In these early years of his rule, his control of the party machinery was masterful. His talks with foreign statesmen, his vigor, and his confidence in handling Western journalists added to his stature in the Kremlin. At Politburo meetings, he did most of the talking, and his colleagues deferred to him. Some winced at his long-winded monologues, but most grasped the need to change in order to revitalize the system. They accepted his determination to modulate the arms race and, eventually, shift expenditures away from the military, so long as Soviet security was not jeopardized and its prestige not damaged.197

Gorbachev knew, of course, that he could not disregard the sensibilities of his military advisers and the defense industry managers. He dealt craftily with them, trying to win them over and allowing them to think they were using him. He wanted his generals to devise a viable strategy to solve the problem of intermediate-range missiles in Europe. Marshal Sergei F. Akhromeyev, chief of the General Staff, endorsed a comprehensive program for nuclear disarmament that was generated in the foreign ministry, believing that eventually the program would turn out to be nonnegotiable and that military officers would be able to avoid the cuts they opposed. Gorbachev, however, embraced the idea of this comprehensive package, as it accorded with his predilections and offered a huge opportunity to alter the Soviet image. At a key meeting at the end of 1985, the Politburo approved the new initiative, giving Gorbachev wide room to maneuver. "Once you have a document in your pocket approved by the Politburo about the total destruction, down to zero, of all nuclear armaments, then you are justified in continuing in this policy direction," reflected General Nikolai Detinov, a leading arms-control expert. "It is easier to speak to the military once you have such a document."198

On 15 January 1986, Gorbachev proposed a bold vision to advance the cause of nuclear disarmament, calling upon key statesmen to abolish all weapons of mass destruction by the year 2000. Many of Reagan's advisers felt nothing but contempt for this, and many of Gorbachev's admirers thought he had been hoodwinked by his own armed forces and was offering nothing but platitudes. But Gorbachev took it seriously. "My impression is that he's really
decided to end the arms race no matter what," Chernyaev wrote in his diary. "He is taking this ‘risk’ because, as he understands, it’s no risk at all—because nobody would attack us even if we disarmed completely. And in order to get this country on solid ground, we have to relieve it of the burden of the arms race." 199

Reagan’s advisers told him to dismiss Gorbachev’s initiative. General Edward Rowny, an arms-control expert, told the president not to take Gorbachev’s proposal seriously. The Soviet Union would not change; it would cheat. Rowny shouldn’t worry, the president said reassuringly. “I’m not going soft. . . . But . . . I have a dream of a world without nuclear weapons. I want our children and grandchildren particularly to be free of these terrible weapons.” 200

Gorbachev’s dream coincided with Reagan’s, but both leaders were pragmatists as well as dreamers. Gorbachev’s primary goal was to promote perestroika and accelerate economic growth. At the end of February, he presented his program to the twenty-seventh Party Congress, as always a major event in the Soviet Union. The general secretary outlined his vision in a (tediously) long report that began with a paean to socialism and went on to a discussion of capitalism, its animosity toward socialism, and its inherent contradictions—all traditional pablum. Gorbachev then shifted gears and mused: “Will the ruling elites of the capitalist world” make sober assessments? “Maybe yes and maybe no,” he continued. But “we cannot take no for an answer to the question: Will mankind survive or not? We say: The progress of society, the life of civilization, must and will continue. . . . The course of history, of social progress, requires ever more insistently that there should be constructive and creative interactions between states and peoples.” Such interactions were essential to avoid nuclear catastrophe and tackle other challenges. “The realistic dialectics of present-day development consist in a . . . growing tendency towards interdependence of the countries of the world community. This is precisely the way, through the struggle of opposites . . . [toward an] interdependent and in many ways integral world.” 201

This was a shift in communist thinking—to argue that history would lead to interdependence and peace—but it was a prerequisite to the elaboration of Gorbachev’s program. What is “acceleration”? he asked. “Its essence lies in the new quality of growth: The all-around intensification of production on the basis of scientific and technical progress, a structural reshaping of the economy, and efficient forms of managing, organizing, and stimulating labor.” Administrative changes were imperative; corruption must end. Workers must become engaged in self-management, and their self-discipline and productivity must improve. Enterprises must gain more autonomy. Food shortages must end. Consumer goods must proliferate. People must live better. Social justice must be promoted. Society must change, and socialist democracy must grow “in all its aspects and manifestations.” This was a summary of what Gorbachev called Perestroika—a term that literally means “restructuring” but that he used as a label for his whole economic-social program. 202

The country’s economic and social agenda must shape its international strategy, Gorbachev then emphasized. The goal was straightforward: peaceful coexistence must “become the supreme and universal principle of interstate relations.” The ideological chasm must be crossed, the two systems must coexist and compete peacefully, and “a comprehensive system of international security” must be designed. All societies must have the right to choose their own social systems, and regional disputes must be resolved justly. 203

In Politburo meetings after the Party Congress Gorbachev reiterated these themes. “The idea of acceleration and the idea of preserving peace” must proceed together, he said. They were mutually reinforcing. 204 Thereafter, he and Shevardnadze tried to improve ties with West European governments and transform the image of the Soviet Union. But they never lost sight of the fact that the indispensable partner was the United States. Agreement with Washington was the ultimate prize, the key to reconfiguring international politics, effectuating arms cuts, shifting resources to domestic priorities, and revitalizing socialism within the U.S.S.R. On 3 April, Gorbachev told the Politburo, “Notwithstanding all the ambiguity in our relations with the United States, reality is such that we cannot do anything without them, nor they without us. We live on one planet. And we cannot preserve peace without America.” 205

But Gorbachev was frustrated. The arms-control talks in Geneva had bogged down, and Reagan had shown no inclination to budge on Star Wars. They “are putting pressure on us—to exhaust us,” Gorbachev told the Politburo on 24 March. 206 Nor was he satisfied with the pace of change at home. He went around the country making speeches, trying to generate support for his initiatives, sometimes hectoring, sometimes pleading. Soviet citizens must not tolerate obsolete practices that “are holding back our movement, . . .
blackening and darkening our conditions, our life, our socialist system,” he
told party loyalists in Khabarovskyk. They needed “fewer words, chatter, con­
ceit and empty theorizing, and more down-to-earth concern about real mat­
ters and satisfying the demands and requirements of people.”

Gorbachev was infuriated and embarrassed by the explosion on 26 April
at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine, which killed more than
30 people and required the evacuation of 116,000 local residents. Although
he tried initially to conceal its dimensions, he soon realized he could not. The
fire raged for days, catalyzing fears of a massive nuclear meltdown. Radiation
clouds wafted across Europe carrying more radioactive material than had
been released from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The accident
was a catastrophe, costing billions of rubles, ruining the lives of tens of thou­s­
ands of citizens, and endangering the food chain throughout Central and
Western Europe. Gorbachev was disgusted with the incompetence of his
managers, yet another indication of the rot in the Soviet system, but he was
also angered by the way Westerners used the accident to heap contempt on
the U.S.S.R. and stymie progress on arms talks. Still, the overall lesson was
clear: “it is another sound of the tocsin, another grim warning that the nu­
clear era necessitates a new political thinking and a new policy.” He an­
nounced that he would extend the moratorium on Soviet nuclear tests, and
again asked the United States to reciprocate. Chernobyl had illuminated
“what an abyss will open if nuclear war befalls mankind . . . . The nuclear age
demands a new approach to international relations, the pooling of efforts of
states with different social systems for the sake of putting an end to the disas­
trous arms race.”

In August, Gorbachev vacationed in the Crimea. He was worried and ag­
itated. “[W]hen we spent our vacation together,” Chernyaev reflected, “Gor­
bachev was really concerned . . . . that Perestroika was starting to slow down,
that all his efforts to make the Party pursue Perestroika, to try to awaken so­
ciety, that this was all going to collapse.” He felt he was being tested,
squeezed. The Americans “were using our sincere desire to disarm [as a tool
against us].” When the Politburo met again on 4 September, Gorbachev
poured forth his spleen. The Americans, he said, wanted to exhaust the So­
viet Union, to keep the Kremlin trapped in regional imbroglios, like the one
in Afghanistan. They yearned for superiority and sought to intimidate. Their
aim, he suspected, was to undermine perestroika. They did “not want to let
us increase the dynamism of our system.” They must not be permitted to gain
superiority.

But while he fumed, he did not retreat from his strategy. He was tena­
cious, and he believed that perestroika at home depended on progress
abroad. He decided not to go to Washington, as had been initially planned,
because it might be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Instead, he would ask
Reagan to meet again on neutral ground. On 15 September, he wrote another
letter to Reagan, “We still have not moved one inch closer to an agreement
on arms reductions.” The Kremlin had tried to be accommodating, but
American negotiators were intransigent. Events since their Geneva meeting
“all give rise to grave and disturbing thoughts.” (He was referring to the ar­
est of Soviet spies in the United States and the Soviet imprisonment of
an American journalist, Nicholas Daniloff, for espionage.) The two govern­
ments, Gorbachev said, needed to proceed calmly, temper their rhetoric, and
focus on solutions. Knowing that Reagan would not change his mind on Star
Wars, Gorbachev proposed that they strengthen the anti-ballistic missile
treaty of 1972 in a way that would permit research on SDI but confine it to
the laboratory for fifteen years; if that were acceptable, the Kremlin would be willing to make large reductions in its stockpile of strategic weapons. And he repeated that he would eliminate all Soviet intermediate-range missiles in Europe if the Americans reciprocated. Last, Gorbachev once again challenged Reagan to accept a moratorium on nuclear testing. Negotiations had been floundering for almost a year. “They will lead nowhere unless you and I intervene personally.”

Reagan wanted to move forward, but he demanded that Daniloff first be set free. To Shevardnadze, he denounced the Kremlin’s disregard for individual freedom, and he again chastised the Soviets publicly for their military intervention in Afghanistan, their assistance to leftist factions in local conflicts in southern Africa and Central America, and their callousness about human rights. Reagan’s aim was to sustain the pressure, to make the Kremlin blink first, and to set forth his own prerequisites for any agreement. He believed he was negotiating from strength; they, from weakness.

His advisers were divided. Shultz agreed with Reagan’s impulses and was pleased that the “Soviets were now talking from our script.” But Secretary of Defense Weinberger and his influential assistant secretary for national security policy, Richard Perle, were wary of any attempt to reach agreement. Would the Soviets really change? They doubted it. Were Gorbachev’s reforms significant? Intelligence analysts did not think so. And if, in fact, Gorbachev succeeded at reform, might he make the Soviet Union into a stronger adversary? They worried that the president might be lured into a foolish deal. Reagan hated nuclear weapons and believed that once the world was rid of them, Star Wars might shield America against rogue states cheating on an agreement. Skeptical of his idiosyncratic view yet knowing they had to support him, Weinberger and Perle proposed that Reagan offer Gorbachev a deal that would eliminate all ballistic missiles. (This plan sounded transformative, but Weinberger and Perle knew the Soviets would reject it because it would mean the elimination of a category of weaponry in which they were superior.) By doing so, Reagan could capture the high ground yet kill the negotiating process—precisely what Weinberger and Perle hoped to accomplish.

On 11 and 12 October, Gorbachev and Reagan met for the second time. “At Reykjavik my hopes for a nuclear-free world soared briefly, then fell during one of the longest, most disappointing—and ultimately angriest—days of my presidency,” Reagan wrote.

The two leaders began their talks privately, agreeing that progress had been slower than they had hoped. Reagan expressed disappointment about the Soviet record on human rights. It would be easier to reach an agreement with the Kremlin on matters it deemed important, he said, if American public opinion were not “aroused by things that happen in the countries [like Russia and Poland] where people came from.” But Gorbachev swiftly shifted the conversation to the arms race. “The Soviet side was in favor of proposals which were aimed at total elimination of nuclear arms, and on the way to this goal there should be equality and equal security for the Soviet Union and the United States.” Reagan expressed overall agreement with this goal, provided there was proper verification: “Doveray no proveray (trust but verify),” he said with a smile.

After summoning Shevardnadze and Shultz to join them, Gorbachev presented the concrete Soviet proposals: cutting strategic offensive arms by 50 percent; eliminating all U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe without regard to British and French weapons, a major Soviet concession; and freezing short-range (less than a thousand kilometers) missiles. With regard to SDI, Gorbachev said it could go forward so long as research was confined to laboratories, and so long as both governments agreed not to withdraw from the existing anti-ballistic missile treaty for ten years. In addition, they should ban nuclear testing and agree on verification procedures, including on-site inspections.

Reagan was encouraged by Gorbachev’s proposals, but then dwelled on SDI. He proposed that both sides stay “within the ABM limits, and when the point was reached when testing was required beyond the limits of the ABM treaty, the US would go forward with such testing in the presence of representatives of the other country. . . . If testing showed that such a defense could be practical, then the treaty would call for the US to share this defense system. In return for this there would be a total elimination of strategic missiles.” As they talked more, Reagan clarified that he was stressing cuts in ballistic missile warheads, not all strategic nuclear arms. He also made clear that his intent was for the United States to proceed with SDI testing for the next ten years within the existing ABM treaty, whose meaning was hotly contested and, in the view of U.S. defense officials, did not restrict research to laboratories.

On the morning of the second day, their discussion became testy. To Gorbachev, the Americans did not seem to want to make any concessions. In
Both men left the meeting looking profoundly dismayed. Watching the news on television in Washington, Nancy Reagan saw the expression on her husband’s face and knew “something had gone wrong. He looked angry, very angry. His face was pale and his teeth were clenched.”225 “The stress was incredible,” remembered Chernyaev. Gorbachev seemed very unhappy. Yet, before parting, the two leaders turned to one another and hugged. “They put their hands on each other’s shoulder,” said Chernyaev, and he could see that the bond between the two leaders remained. Reagan went off in his car, but Gorbachev strolled into a conference room two hundred meters away, where reporters from around the world wanted to know what had happened. He declared, “It’s not a failure; it’s a breakthrough.” With these words, Chernyaev explained, “Gorbachev preserved hope, gave hope to all mankind.”226

Reagan and Shultz were distraught. Their assistants, however, saw matters differently. “Why in the world are you calling this a failure?” Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead asked Shultz. The meeting, Whitehead insisted, “was a success.” The Soviets had moved closer to the American position on almost every arms-control issue. Jack Matlock said much the same thing to Reagan’s closest White House aides. His major reservation was Gorbachev’s failure to resolve regional disputes and allay the president’s human rights concerns.227

Gorbachev returned to Moscow and immediately met with the Politburo. He was defiant. “Success was near. Had we adopted the decision to reduce and liquidate nuclear armaments, this would have become a turning point in the evolution of international affairs.” More important, the agreements would have empowered the Soviet Union to move ahead domestically with the new plans to accelerate its social and economic development. Reagan, however, had insisted on SDI, and the Americans believed that “because of [our] internal difficulties we would have to accept their proposals.” “We are dealing with political dregs,” said a frustrated Gorbachev on 1 December. He would not be intimidated. He would remain calm, aware that the Kremlin now had a great opportunity to capitalize politically on Reagan’s Intransigence. It could win a great propaganda victory in Western Europe.228

Meanwhile, Gorbachev would stay the course, even accelerate it. He talked more and more about not only economic modernization but also polit-
ical democratization. The Americans, he confided to Chernyaev, wanted “to see us get stuck, to fall. It is not our foreign policy that interests them, but what would happen with socialism. . . . There is no other option left for our generation but to restructure the country . . . . Our task is to learn how to lead 280 million people to socialism.”

Gorbachev grew increasingly confident that the Americans would have difficulty developing SDI. Even if they succeeded, the Soviets could counter it at much less cost. But Gorbachev was angry at his generals for raising objections to his plans. He told the Politburo that it must not “become like the generals,” who were “trying to scare us,” “hissing among themselves.” They complained about the resources allocated to them, while “25 million [Soviet citizens] live under the minimum which we officially pronounced as poverty level.” In May 1987, when a private German aircraft glided into Soviet airspace and landed in Red Square, Gorbachev was humiliated by the seeming incompetence of his defense establishment to protect the heart of Moscow. He used the ensuing inquiries about the incident as an opportunity to shake up the ranks and promote officers who, he thought, would be more amenable to his way of thinking, his policy and goals.

The security of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev believed, was not at risk. “I’m not going to war,” he told his colleagues. “In this nuclear age,” the “world has become too fragile for war and power politics,” he told a meeting of the Warsaw Pact. He would never initiate war, never contemplate a nuclear first-strike. All that was needed, he declared, was enough weapons to ensure a “reliable guarantee of defense of our country.” There was no need, he insisted to the Politburo, to count “a gun there, and a gun here.” If they did not change their ways, they would have to “stop building socialism.” They must not turn their country into a military camp, nor steal “from our people.” They must not play into the hands of the Americans who wanted to exhaust them in an arms race. They must not be made to seem like fools. His comrades concurred.

After Reykjavik, Gorbachev instructed his defense chiefs to reconfigure Warsaw Pact strategy and focus on defense. He also decided to separate the discussions regarding an agreement on intermediate-range nuclear weapons from the strategic talks involving Star Wars. Defying his military advisers, he was even willing to get rid of the Oka missile, the SS-23, which the Americans were saying had to be included in any intermediate nuclear force (INF) treaty. “We start from the assumption” that as difficult as it is to do business with the United States “we are doomed to do it,” he told the Politburo. “We have no choice. Our main problem is to remove confrontation.” In February 1987, he invited Shultz back to Moscow to resume their talks.

After Reykjavik, however, the Reagan administration was totally absorbed in a scandal consuming the attention of everyone in Washington. The president was accused of clandestinely and illegally selling arms to moderates in Iran in return for the release of hostages in Lebanon, and then using the
funds, again illegally, to support the Contras in Nicaragua (who were still battling to overthrow the Sandinistas). Reagan denied that he had sold arms for hostages, but even Secretary Shultz acknowledged privately that the evidence was irrefutable. Shultz turned in anger on the CIA, the NSC, and the Defense Department, where, he believed, the plans had been hatched and implemented. A "wounded president" made it harder to resume dialogue with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, and Shultz believed that the efforts he was making to reach an agreement on intermediate nuclear forces were being thwarted by Weinberger. Reports, largely exaggerated, that the Soviets had secretly penetrated the U.S. embassy in Moscow created an uproar in Washington and played into Weinberger's hands. "The mood of the town [in March 1987] was boiling hot," Shultz recalled. Yet Reagan, once again, made the decision to move forward. He instructed Shultz to go to Moscow, albeit with circumscribed authority.

On 13 April, Shultz arrived in Moscow carrying a letter to Gorbachev from Reagan. "It has been a long time since you and I last communicated directly," Reagan acknowledged. The president had not abandoned hope that they could "make a difference in the future course of world events." He was "encouraged by the many steps you are taking to modernize your own country and by the improved dialogue on arms reductions." More could be accomplished if the two governments could remove distrust, such as that created by the news of Soviet spying in the U.S. embassy. Reagan encouraged Gorbachev to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan and to curb Soviet support for Moscow's clients in Central America, southern Africa, and southeast Asia.

Shultz was exhilarated by his talks with both government officials and opposition figures in Moscow, where he saw signs of significant change. He was gratified when Gorbachev assured him that reports of Soviet actions in the American embassy had been greatly exaggerated. The secretary of state attended a Passover seder with Jews who had been denied permission to leave the country, and he met with Soviet dissidents. Gorbachev complained about these meetings, but accepted them. He and Shultz heatedly debated human rights in socialist and capitalist countries, and Shultz seized the opportunity to lecture his Soviet host about the benefits of free markets in the information age. Gorbachev's perestroika, Shultz said, would not succeed if restructuring failed to nurture human creativity and individual initiative. Gorbachev was more inclined to think that his domestic agenda required progress on arms cuts, and he again homed in on these issues. He wanted to conclude an agreement eliminating intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe. NATO's Pershing II missiles were "like a pistol to our head," he said, and the Soviet SS-20s "swallowed up" critical resources. When Shultz responded that the United States wanted to destroy all INF weapons, including those deployed in the Asiatic part of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev did not reject the possibility.

Shultz called the president from Moscow. "It's not been peaches and cream," he told Reagan. Gorbachev was tough, but there was no doubt that "the Soviet Union is changing." The strong policies "you've kept in place have made a real difference," Shultz emphasized. He was hoping to pave the way to another summit, and Reagan told him he could speak positively about holding such a meeting in Washington toward the end of the year, during which an INF treaty might be signed.

When the secretary of state returned to Washington, the national security bureaucracy was still in turmoil over the Iran-Contra scandal, and congressional hearings about it were still consuming the attention of the president and most of his top advisers. CIA and Defense Department officials cast doubt on Gorbachev's intentions. Defense-minded Democrats, such as Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, sneered at the deal Shultz was contemplating, and architects of realpolitik, such as Henry Kissinger, claimed that Reagan was undermining NATO cohesion. Robert Gates, deputy director of the CIA, wrote a memo to the president saying that Gorbachev and his fellow reformers were seeking not to ameliorate the lives of Soviet citizens but "to strengthen the USSR at home, to further their own personal power, and to permit the further consolidation and expansion of Soviet power abroad."

Shultz interpreted Gorbachev's motives differently, but he was puzzled on a return trip to Moscow in October when he found Gorbachev testy and argumentative. The Soviet leader intimated that he would not come to Washington simply to sign an INF treaty. He also wanted both sides to cut long-range strategic forces and to agree to prohibit the militarization of space. With this renewed challenge to Reagan's Star Wars initiative, Gorbachev seemed to be imperiling the summit both leaders had claimed they favored.

But Gorbachev quickly changed his mind and sent Shevardnadze back to
Washington with a letter for Reagan that spelled out his thinking. The meeting in Reykjavik, he wrote, had been a “landmark” in the struggle to reduce nuclear armaments, and the opportunity it created must be grasped. Why, then, was Washington hardening its view and upholding positions “which are clearly one-sided?” This made no sense to Gorbachev, who pointed out that he had embraced the U.S. position on most issues: he was willing to ignore the number of British and French nuclear weapons; he agreed to the destruction of all intermediate- and short-range weapons in the Asiatic part of the Soviet Union as well as in Europe, thereby accepting, in effect, the global zero-zero deal Reagan had long said was his ideal accord. “Our position is clear and honest: we call for the total elimination of the entire class of missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers and of all warheads for those missiles. The fate of an agreement on intermediate- and short-range missiles now depends entirely on the U.S. leadership and on your personal willingness, Mr. President, to conclude a deal.”

Shultz thought the letter was promising. The president now had a chance to consummate a historic agreement to eliminate an entire category of armaments. He told Reagan it could be done without compromising the U.S. position on Star Wars and strategic weapons. “I felt that a profound historic shift was under way,” he later recalled. “The Soviet Union was, willingly or unwillingly, consciously or not, turning a corner: they were not just resting for round two of the cold war.” They were bowing to U.S. strength. “[W]e can continue to let [Gorbachev be] the innovator as long as he keeps innovating in our direction,” Shultz told Reagan on 18 November.

Gorbachev came to Washington in mid-December to sign the INF treaty and to expedite progress on a strategic arms agreement between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Exuding confidence and conveying goodwill, he talked of peace and international harmony. Russians and Americans together, he suggested, must envision a brighter future where common sense and mutual understanding supplanted political rivalry and national egotism. The effect of his words was astonishing. “The things he said were almost too good to be true,” said the distinguished American writer Joyce Carol Oates. He preached a “beautiful picture of the world in which we were all brothers,” commented Billy Graham, the renowned evangelist.

In meetings with Reagan and Shultz, Gorbachev was not flustered when they challenged him to settle regional disputes, withdraw from Afghanistan, tear down the Berlin wall, and allow more freedom of expression inside the Soviet Union. The Soviet leader talked with poise and intelligence about all these difficult issues. “Mr. President, you are not a prosecutor and I am not on trial here. Like you, I represent a great country and therefore expect our dialogue to be conducted on a basis of reciprocity and equality.” He insisted that he, too, wanted to reach agreement on all regional issues, especially Afghanistan. He was especially eager to make headway on a strategic arms treaty; an agreement that he hoped he and the president might sign at their next meeting, to be held in Moscow in the late spring. Together, Gorbachev declared, the United States and the Soviet Union must build “a bridge to the future.”

Good feelings infused the concluding sessions of the Washington summit. The warmth that Reagan and Gorbachev felt for one another grew as they took pride in their mutual achievement. The INF treaty, in Reagan’s view, was a “landmark in postwar history,” the first agreement to reduce nuclear weapons.

But the president was not complacent. Though wary of growing criticism among conservatives, he made clear that he wanted progress “on a far broader agenda,” which included not just arms-control issues but also “Soviet expansionism, human rights violations, as well as our own moral opposition to the ideology that justifies such practices.” Between us, there has also been a profound competition of political and economic philosophy, making us the protagonists in a drama with the greatest importance for the future of all mankind,” he said to Gorbachev. But it was time, he emphasized, “to move from confrontation to cooperation. . . . We can coexist as do two wrestlers in a ring if necessary, but we would much prefer to coexist as partners and as friends.”

In order for them to have the friendship that Reagan envisioned, the Soviet Union would need to change still more at home and abroad. At the Brandenburg Gate in June, he had challenged Gorbachev: “If you seek peace, if you seek prosperity, . . . tear down this wall!” However unlikely it might seem, Reagan hoped such changes would occur. The future, he told the American people, “belongs not to repressive or totalitarian ways of life but to the cause of freedom.” This cause still required U.S. strength. Reagan asked Americans to support the administration’s defense programs and foreign policies. More could be accomplished if Congress stopped cutting the mili-
Gorbachev explained to news reporters that the INF treaty was just a beginning. More needed to be done to reduce strategic armaments and conventional forces. The Soviet Union should be prepared for “drastic reductions.” As for Afghanistan, Gorbachev said, “[W]e do not strive for a pro-Soviet regime [there]. But the U.S. side must just as clearly state that it is not striving for a pro-U.S. regime there.” To reach a settlement, more work needed to be done. He would not shirk his duty. The Americans regarded Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan as critical to their future relationship. Perestroika could not succeed without withdrawal.

The Troops Come Out

On 8 February 1988, Gorbachev announced publicly that the Soviet Union would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan over the next year, provided an agreement could be signed. Regional conflicts, he said, “are bleeding wounds capable of causing spots of gangrene on the body of mankind.” More than a hundred thousand Soviet troops were then in Afghanistan. From his first days in office Gorbachev had recognized that the war imposed too heavy a burden on the Soviet Union, required too many sacrifices from his people, blemished the reputation of the U.S.S.R. in the eyes of neutral and non-aligned leaders throughout the third world, and poisoned relations with the West, especially the United States. He had wanted for years to get out of Afghanistan. But this was easier said than done.

On 14 March 1985, just days after he became general secretary, Gorbachev had had his first talk with Babrak Karmal, the communist leader of Afghanistan whom Gorbachev’s predecessors had installed in Kabul. Expressing sympathy with Karmal’s struggle against the counterrevolutionaries, Gorbachev nonetheless made himself clear: “Soviet troops cannot remain in Afghanistan forever.” Karmal explained that the insurgency was being supported by Pakistan and Iran, and was also receiving help from the United States and China, but Gorbachev nonetheless insisted that Karmal must mend relations with his own people, broaden the social-class basis of his government, unite his party, and coopt the insurgency.

Gorbachev and the Politburo were being bombarded with letters from grieving mothers and wives. They wanted to know why their sons and husbands were being sacrificed in Afghanistan. “Why do we need [this war] and when will it end?” they asked. From the outset, the war had not gone as anticipated. Although Brezhnev had expected a quick intervention and rapid withdrawal, the mission of Soviet troops kept expanding, from interdicting the flow of supplies to the insurgents, to protecting the periphery of major cities and bases, and, finally, to engagement in major combat operations. But the insurgency kept growing, catalyzed by widespread hatred of the Soviet occupation, inspired by Islamic religious fervor and ethnic and clan loyalties,
and abetted by the support of Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The fighting inside Afghanistan was fierce, leading to the deaths of almost a million Afghans and causing millions more to flee, especially to Pakistan. By the early 1980s, more than a half-dozen Mujahedin groups were operating out of Pakistan, intriguing against one another as well as battling communist infidels and the Soviet invaders.

The experts to whom Gorbachev turned for advice—Georgi Arbatov, Georgi Shakhnazarov, Anatoli Chemyaev, Karen Brutents, Aleksandr Yakovlev, and Vadim Medvedev—saw nothing to be gained by prolonging the conflict in Afghanistan. It was wasting billions of rubles and costing thousands of Soviet lives. Embroilments in the third world, particularly Afghanistan, drained Soviet resources and distracted the Kremlin from its internal priorities. Since the 1970s, Soviet opportunities to capitalize on revolutionary nationalist processes had withered while the risks and dangers had increased. Soviet troops should withdraw from Afghanistan, they advised.

On 17 October 1985, Gorbachev met again with Karmal to tell him that Soviet troops were going to leave Afghanistan:

[By the summer of 1986 you will have to learn to defend your revolution on your own. For the moment we will assist you, but not with soldiers—only with aviation, artillery and equipment. If you want to survive you must broaden the social base of the regime. Forget about socialism, and share real power with those who enjoy real influence, including the warlords, who are now hostile to you. Restore the status of Islam. Restore popular customs and traditions, seek the support of those who have traditionally enjoyed moral authority, and try to give people a chance to see that they can benefit from the revolution.

Karmal was stunned, Gorbachev told the Politburo. "[W]ithout Karmal we will firmly stay the course that will result in our withdrawal from Afghanistan as quickly as possible."267

When Gorbachev met Reagan in Geneva a month later, the Soviet leader emphasized that he wanted to modulate disputes in the third world. "You could help. The U.S., however, does not help. You say the U.S.S.R. should withdraw its troops [from Afghanistan], but actually you want them there, and the longer the better."268 Gorbachev believed that the United States wanted the Soviet Union to be entrapped in a protracted guerrilla conflict that would drain its resources and morale, much as U.S. vigor and strength had been sapped in Vietnam. Nonetheless, he proposed a package solution "involving a non-aligned Afghanistan, Soviet troop withdrawal, the return of refugees, and international guarantee of no outside interference." Karmal's government would cooperate, but nothing could be accomplished if the Mujahedin and other insurgents continued to fight. Gorbachev assured Reagan that the Soviet Union had "no plan for using Afghanistan to gain access to a warm water port, to extend its influence to the Persian Gulf, or to impinge on U.S. interests in any way."269

The Soviet war in Afghanistan, Reagan retorted, was the Kremlin's fault. The Russians had invaded a neighbor, imposed a communist government, and forced three million refugees to flee. Perhaps the United Nations could help to effectuate a settlement. "Specifically," he mused, "how about bringing about the mutual withdrawal of all outside forces, then forming a coalition of Islamic states to supervise the installation of a government chosen by the people of Afghanistan?"270

This proposal was not serious, and Gorbachev knew it. The U.S. administration was not eager to arrive at a settlement in Afghanistan. Reagan and his aides were happy to see Soviet armies bloodied there. CIA director Casey was a strong proponent of the Afghan insurgency, and he mustered support among key congressmen who championed covert aid to the Mujahedin. He told an assistant in early 1984 that "the Soviet Union is tremendously overstretched and they're vulnerable." If America challenged the Soviets at every turn and ultimately defeated them "in one place," their prestige would be shattered and their empire would start to unravel. As Soviet troops got bogged down in 1983 and 1984, Casey's enthusiasm for the insurgency grew.

"Here is the beauty of the Afghan operation," he told his aides. "Usually it looks like the big bad Americans are beating up on the natives. Afghanistan is just the reverse. The Russians are beating up on the little guys. We don't make it our war. The Mujahedin have all the motivation they need. All we have to do is give them help, only more of it."271 President Reagan agreed. To help the Mujahedin, the CIA collaborated with the monarchy in Saudi Arabia and with the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI; increased its secret funding to $300 million in 1985 and to $470 million in 1986; and provided
Mujahedin soldiers on a destroyed Soviet helicopter in Afghanistan, 1980.

The CIA helped to finance and support the Mujahedin's resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

more advanced weapons, such as Stinger ground-to-air missiles, and sophisticated intelligence support. Casey even wanted to allow the Mujahedin to extend their operations across the Afghan-Soviet border into the Soviet Union itself. Shultz was more restrained, but in February 1985 the secretary of state publicly declared that it would be a “shameful betrayal” to abandon “freedom fighters” in places like Afghanistan.

U.S. actions made it more difficult for Gorbachev to withdraw. “The situation is not simple,” he told the Politburo. “Now we’re in, but how to get out racks one’s brains.” Washington had “set itself the goal of obstructing a settlement in Afghanistan by any means,” he claimed. He wanted to leave without a loss of credibility (much as the Americans had tried to disengage from Vietnam without humiliation). “We could leave quickly, not thinking about anything,” he acknowledged. “But we can’t act that way. India would be concerned, and they would be concerned in Africa. They think this would be a blow to the authority of the Soviet Union. . . . And they tell us that imperialism will go on the offensive if you flee from Afghanistan.”

Nonetheless, Gorbachev was determined to get out. When Babrak Karmal objected and obstructed, the Soviet leader arranged to have him replaced with Muhammad Najibullah, an ambitious, intelligent, and well-educated man from a wealthy Pashtun family. Not yet forty years old, Najibullah had joined the Parcham faction of the Afghan Communist Party in 1965, when he was an eighteen-year-old medical student at Kabul University. For a brief period after the coup in 1978, he had been part of the government’s revolutionary council. He then went into exile and returned when Soviet forces intervened in 1979. Between 1980 and 1986, Najibullah had directed the Afghan state security apparatus and worked closely with Soviet KGB agents in Kabul. When the Kremlin arranged for his elevation to the top party post in May 1986, it hoped for a client more collaborative than Karmal had been.

Speaking to the Politburo on 13 November 1986, Gorbachev poured out his frustration: “Karmal’s policy was simple: sit and rule and leave the fighting to us [the Soviets].” Gorbachev would not tolerate this attitude. “Our strategic goal is to end the war and to withdraw the troops within a year, two years at the most.” He heard no dissent. “We cannot resolve this problem through military means,” said Viktor Chebrikov, head of the KGB. “We need to end this war,” insisted Shevardnadze. “We have lost,” declared Marshal Akhromeyev. “Most Afghans today support the counterrevolutionaries.” Gorbachev concurred. In his view, Afghanistan’s communist clique had to be largely reconstituted. “After all, it is not socialism that we want there” but a peaceful, nonaligned, independent nation that was not ruled by Islamic fundamentalists. To accomplish that end, he was ready to initiate talks with Pakistan.

Throughout 1986 and 1987, Gorbachev struggled to shape a realistic exit strategy. Although several Politburo colleagues and military advisers believed that the war would go on forever if they continued to support Najibullah, Gorbachev did not want “to cut and run,” and he argued that Najibullah should not be abandoned. “We will leave there with bruises no matter what, but we should try to get fewer and make them less painful.” He favored a political settlement. The Americans, he maintained, needed to be brought into the process; they had to become part of the solution. Meanwhile, he wanted to step up Soviet military action in order to gain political leverage in
the negotiating process. Soviet troops, in fact, briefly went on the offensive, aiming to stop the flow of supplies into Afghanistan and to intimidate Pakistan with air and artillery strikes across the border. 277

Gorbachev kept insisting that Najibullah change the policies of the revolution. He must realize that “without Islam there can be no Afghanistan.” Representatives of opposition parties, Gorbachev said, must constitute at least 50 percent of a new government. Najibullah would find it hard to follow this recipe for peace, but he had to learn to govern without Soviet help. “Warn him again,” Gorbachev said to Shevardnadze and other colleagues dealing with Najibullah. “Do as you yourself think and ask us less often.” 278 Shevardnadze went back and forth to Kabul trying to persuade Najibullah to accept Soviet strategy, and then Gorbachev met with him in Moscow on 20 July 1987. “The future of Afghanistan can only be secured through national reconciliation,” Gorbachev stressed. “It is impossible to jump to socialism without a stage of national democratic reforms. We and the Chinese had ‘great leaps.’ We know how they end.” In the circumstances, the Afghan Communist Party must broaden its appeal, embrace pluralism, and form a coalition government with Najibullah at its head. Only with such a strategy, Gorbachev reiterated, could the party survive and compete in the future. 279

When Najibullah returned to Moscow in November for the seventieth anniversary celebration of the Bolshevik revolution, Gorbachev met with him to recapitulate the Kremlin’s current thinking. In order to implement perestroika at home, the Kremlin needed a quiescent international environment. “Our domestic interests are compatible with common human interests. We need a normal international situation.” 280

Najibullah tried to reassure Gorbachev. He was taking steps toward national reconciliation. “In a month we plan to hold a Loya Jirga [grand national council] at which we will adopt a constitution for the country and elect a president,” he told Gorbachev. “Afterwards it is intended to hold elections to a National Council.” Najibullah was seeking the “constructive participation of all political forces and all sectors of the population.” It was essential to respect the peasantry, Gorbachev told him, and he would not survive if he did not placate his foes and win over part of the opposition. If this policy were followed, the Kremlin would support him even while Soviet troops were withdrawn. 281

Gorbachev mentioned to Najibullah that he was trying to secure U.S. cooperation. Shevardnadze had already told Shultz in September that the Soviet Union was going to pull out of Afghanistan, and Kremlin leaders wanted the Americans to dissuade Islamic fundamentalists from seizing power as the Soviets withdrew. 282 Gorbachev admitted that he was not sure if the Americans would do this, but he told Najibullah to form a coalition government regardless of U.S. actions. 283

This reshaping of Soviet policy in Afghanistan had the effect of reconfiguring the zero-sum game of power politics in the third world. Gorbachev knew the international appeal of socialism had waned and “new thinking” at home required the end of old rivalries abroad. 284 In November, Soviet experts on Africa told State Department officials that they wanted to resolve problems in Namibia and Angola, one of the regional disputes that had long preoccupied policymakers in Washington. 285 When Nicaragua’s president, the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, visited Moscow that month, Gorbachev encouraged him to allay American anxieties. “Let’s act as one,” Gorbachev said. “When I meet with Reagan, I’ll tell him that neither do you want to transform Nicaragua into a Soviet base, nor are we intending to create one there.” When Ortega pleaded for more aid, Gorbachev was candid: he could not offer additional loans. The fall in oil prices meant huge cuts in anticipated revenues. “[W]e have much internationalism, but not enough means,” he said. Indeed, even the Soviet Union’s own five-year plan was “under threat.” 286

By the end of 1987 Gorbachev’s focus was on injecting new dynamism into his domestic initiatives. Reform at home, not adventurism abroad, was on his mind. 287 But to make reform work at home, he needed to reassure the United States that the Kremlin was not seeking to take advantage of local strife and regional disputes to expand Soviet influence. When Reagan said in December 1987 that Afghanistan was his number one priority, Gorbachev told him that the Soviet Union wanted to cooperate on all regional issues—in Central America, Kampuchea, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. When Reagan said he had heard enough promises and wanted action, not words, Gorbachev declared that Soviet troops could withdraw within twelve months, even less, if a coalition government were agreed upon and the United States ceased financing the anti-Soviet resistance. “The Soviets were realists,” Gorbachev said. “They did not want to try to make Afghanistan socialist. . . . Moscow had no intention of seeking to leave behind a regime acceptable to
itself alone. It would have no problem with a nonaligned and independent government." Gorbachev suggested a gentleman’s agreement: “the Soviets would talk to Najibullah, and the U.S. to the opposition.”

Yet on 8 February 1988, when Gorbachev announced that Soviet troops would withdraw from Afghanistan, he did this despite many signs that the United States was going to continue its support of the Mujahedin. Gorbachev expressed his disappointment to Shultz in Moscow: “I feel you have maintained a negative attitude,” ignoring “our genuine desire to work with you in solving these problems.” He repeated that Afghanistan was not going to serve as a Soviet springboard toward warm-water ports or the Persian Gulf: “This is nonsense.”

When Shultz showed no inclination to alter the U.S. position, Gorbachev had to reassess the decision to withdraw. He worried that Najibullah’s government might collapse and that Islamic fundamentalists might gain control of Afghanistan as they already had in Iran. And he worried that his nation’s credibility with its friends and clients would be shattered. Their thinking was simple, he said: “you’re abandoning Afghanistan; it means you’re abandoning us.” Nonetheless, he decided to proceed with withdrawal. “It is difficult to overestimate the political significance of solving the Afghanistan problem,” he told the Politburo. “It will confirm our new approach to solving international problems. In this way, we deprive our enemies and opponents of their most powerful argument.”

Najibullah was not happy with the Soviet decision. He was a vulnerable client whose very weakness gave him considerable leverage. Gorbachev wanted the communist government in Kabul not to collapse, but to survive. He wanted it to defeat the die-hard Islamists. He wanted Najibullah to expand his coalition and embrace moderate elements of the resistance, and he wanted a peaceful, non-Islamist neighbor allied with neither the Americans nor the Pakistanis. As the day approached, in mid-April 1988, to sign the agreements committing the Soviets to withdrawal, Gorbachev met with Najibullah in Tashkent. He promised him aid, money, and military advisers. He encouraged him to persevere. But he would not change his mind. Soviet troops must leave.

On 14 April, the Soviet Union, the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan signed the Geneva agreements. The Soviet Union would withdraw its forces, Pakistan would cease interfering, the Afghan government would allow refugees to return to Afghanistan, and Washington, along with Moscow, would guarantee noninterference. Of all the parties to this agreement, only Gorbachev intended to match words with deeds. Pakistan’s president, Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, assured Reagan that Pakistan was not going to stop supplying the Afghan rebels. “We’ll just lie about it. That’s what we’ve been doing for eight years... Muslims have the right to lie in a good cause.” Reagan did not object. Shultz stated publicly, “it is our right to provide military aid to the resistance. We are ready to exercise that right, but we are prepared to meet restraint with restraint.”

The Americans saw an opportunity to capitalize on Soviet weakness. They believed that when the Soviet Union withdrew its forces and stopped aiding Kabul, Najibullah’s government would collapse. Conservative supporters in Congress did not want Reagan to abandon the Mujahedin just because Soviet troops were being driven out of Afghanistan. Najibullah must fall in any case. They did not care that anti-Soviet forces were increasingly dominated by Islamic fundamentalists with wildly different aspirations from their own.

Institutional forces in the U.S. government, especially the CIA and the Defense Department, also had much invested, materially and psychologically, in overthrowing Najibullah’s government. They were not interested in efforts the Afghan communist leader might make to incorporate his erstwhile opponents in a coalition government. As long as Najibullah headed the government, the Soviet Union would have a friend in Kabul, a minion it had installed, a symbol of totalitarianism on the march. Although Reagan and Shultz wanted to reach out to Gorbachev, encourage reforms, and sign agreements, they wanted to do so on their own terms. “We should continue to maintain our strength while seeking agreements that serve our interests,” Shultz told Reagan.

Najibullah understood his predicament. He returned to Moscow and implored Gorbachev not to abandon him. He wanted to achieve “a decisive turning point in the psychological mood of the population... by launching decisive strikes on irreconcilable groups.” To succeed, he needed more aid and some Soviet troops, which he would deploy in the “second and third echelons” to boost his soldiers’ morale. Victory would infuse his supporters with “confidence in their ability to defeat the enemy by themselves.”

Gorbachev was sympathetic, and he knew the Pakistanis were flagrantly breaking their promise not to funnel aid to the Islamic fundamentalists.
A Soviet soldier in Afghanistan leaving for home, 1989. The eventual failure of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was deeply demoralizing.

Gorbachev wanted Najibullah to keep working at national reconciliation. Since the insurgents were badly divided and slaughtering one another as well as attacking the government, he encouraged Najibullah to peel off factions among them who might be enticed into his coalition. And he should tell friends and foes alike that the Soviet Union had no selfish designs on Afghanistan and would respect the traditions and customs of the Afghan people. The Kremlin's goal was simple: "a loyal neighbor at the southern borders of the Soviet Union with whom our country has a long-standing friendship." Gorbachev assured Najibullah that he would not be abandoned. The Kremlin's aid would increase, but Soviet troops must leave. He could not violate his word.298

Gorbachev also wanted Najibullah to grasp what was going on in the Soviet Union. "[W]e are passing through a critical stage in Soviet history. And we can not lose it," he emphasized. The Afghan leader assured Gorbachev that he understood: "We consider the policy of national reconciliation to be part of the policy of perestroika. . . . The ideas of perestroika have international importance and go far beyond national boundaries."299

Yet Najibullah would not stop complicating Gorbachev's domestic agenda. As the date neared for full withdrawal of Soviet troops, scheduled for February 1989, he asked permission to use a Soviet brigade to break the insurgents' blockade of Kandahar. Shevardnadze, who dealt with Najibullah on a continual basis, supported this request, but Gorbachev's closest aides were incredulous. "Is he [Shevardnadze] crazy?" exploded Chernyaev. "Doesn't he understand that Najibullah is setting a trap to prevent us from leaving, to set us against the Americans and the whole world? Or is he [Shevardnadze] such a wimp that he can't turn down a request?" At a Politburo meeting on 24 January, Gorbachev scorned Shevardnadze's position: "From Eduard Shevardnadze here we have heard baby talk and the vain screech of a hawk." Vladimir Kvshchikov, the KGB chief, and Chebrikov, now secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, supported Gorbachev, as did others.300

Shevardnadze had developed a personal attachment to Najibullah, and he believed the Kremlin was betraying a loyal client. The Soviet Union must not abandon its friends, he declared at a Politburo meeting on 2 March, when it was considering another request from Najibullah, this time for air strikes from Soviet territory. "What will they say in the 'Third World'?" Shevardnadze rhetorically asked his colleagues. This time his view elicited support, but Gorbachev interceded. He "was red in the face and angry," Chernyaev recorded in his diary. "I am absolutely against all such air strikes or anything like them," Gorbachev declared. "And while I am general secretary here, I will not let anybody break a promise that we have given before the entire world."301

Gorbachev was not indifferent to Shevardnadze's claim that Soviet credibility was at risk, nor was he callous to Najibullah's predicament. But his overriding concern was revitalizing socialism at home, not spreading it abroad. The greatest threats to Soviet communism were within, not without. At a Politburo session on 23 March, he explained his policy toward Afghanistan: "Our most important goal is to prevent the emergence of a hostile state there. As for the rest of it . . . let it be any type of government—it is none of our business."302

When Najibullah demonstrated unanticipated staying power after Soviet troops withdrew in February 1989, Gorbachev did not abandon him. He believed that the Afghan's efforts during 1989 and 1990 to widen the coalition and coopt former adversaries continued to be the wisest strategy. When they
met for the last time, on 23 August 1990, Gorbachev was tired and worried about the growing instability in his own country. "[T]he load is great," he said to Najibullah. "Possibly in some respects it is now quieter in Afghanistan than here [Moscow]." Perestroika had exposed both new socioeconomic problems and old ethnic conflicts. But Gorbachev was not apologetic. Reliance on leftist radicalism and war communism, he told Najibullah, had "not stood the test of time." To work for the "revolutionary renewal of society within the framework of the socialist choice" was the correct course to follow notwithstanding the turbulence it precipitated.

The Americans, he added, were not being helpful. Officials in Washington, though they recognized the looming threat of Islamic fundamentalism, could not resist the opportunity to topple Najibullah and incite tens of millions of Muslims in the Soviet Union. Americans "were and will remain Americans." Their intention, Gorbachev told Najibullah, was to weaken the Soviet Union. They hoped to "attain much else [by] exploiting our difficulties."303

But he would not turn back.

New Thinking, Old Thinking

Gorbachev would not reverse himself because he was determined to reshape the image of the Soviet Union. "We are proposing and willing to build a new world," he explained to the Politburo at the end of 1988. His aim was to shatter Western assumptions about Soviet aggressiveness. There were dangers in this approach. The Americans, thinking that Soviet leaders were bowing to U.S. power rather than to Moscow's own assessment of the need for change, might try to wring additional concessions, and American adventurism might grow. But the risks appeared acceptable to Gorbachev, given his mounting determination to achieve domestic reform and his evolving perception of threat.304 The Soviet Union, he had said proudly in February 1987, "is a modern state which has immense achievements. . . . But it is a society which has many problems. . . . We are not giving up on socialism; we want to make it better."305

As Gorbachev prepared to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in November 1987, he wrestled with his country's past and tried to envision its future. His assistants prepared a long report that tried to put the tarnished yet, in their view, heroic past of the Soviet Union in historical perspective, and the Politburo discussed the report at a meeting on 15 October 1987. Criticism was muted, except for that emanating from Boris Yeltsin, and Gorbachev thoughtfully defended almost every word of the document.

He wanted to acknowledge but not exaggerate errors in their past. For the last few years he had been struggling, within a Leninist mind-set, to reconcile the market and the state, the individual and the collective, pluralism and planning, communism and democracy. Socialism could not realize its potential without democracy, but democracy remained a unity of rights and responsibilities. This sounded vague, and Gorbachev acknowledged that he was grappling with elusive concepts and an uncertain trajectory. He had not worked out all the answers, but what was indisputable was that World War II had proved the worthiness of their system. However "immense and unpardonable" was Stalin's mass repression and however long it would take to overcome the stagnation that had set in during the late Brezhnev years, Gorbachev emphasized, "We have gone on the correct path—that is the conclusion."306

On 2 November, he delivered an address to the Soviet people and to a