Reagan and the Gorbachev Revolution: Perceiving the End of Threat

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The Reagan administration came into office in 1981 "with the most avowed anticommunist crusading policy in two decades."[1] For President Ronald Reagan, this policy reflected a profound sense of threat that was deeply rooted in his firm convictions about the nature of communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. Yet by the end of his second term, Reagan had substantially revised his view of this threat and accepted the possibility of working with the Soviet Union in the interests of peace. He had been transformed from an "essentialist," who believed that the Soviet Union was governed by an ideology that put no limits on what it could justifiably do to gain its ends of "absolute power and a communist world," to an "interactionist," who saw the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States in terms of mutual misperception. He was hopeful about the possibility of substantial change.[2]

This presents us with a puzzle, because the psychological literature strongly suggests that central beliefs are altered only with great difficulty, if at all.[3] Since

[1] Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994), 1.

[2] Ibid., 767–769. As Thomas Banchoff has observed, no postwar U.S. administration has "altered its view of the threat as significantly as the Reagan administration between 1981 and 1988." Thomas Banchoff, "Official Threat Perceptions in the 1980s: the United States" in Carl-Christoph Schweitzer, ed., *The Changing Analysis of the Soviet Threat* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990), 82.

[3] As Janice Stein has put it, "Cognitive psychologists suggest that stability is the default position and change the *exception.*" (Emphasis in original.) Janice Gross Stein, "Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner," *International Organization* 111 (Spring 1994): 163.

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people tend to interpret new information in the light of what they already believe, they are likely to be slow to change their views, and those most committed to their beliefs will have the most difficulty revising them.[4] This suggests that decision makers may not always be responsive to changes in the nature or level of threat. Yet, as Reagan's behavior demonstrates, they do sometimes overcome their cognitive limitations to make fairly accurate assessments of threat. What enables these decision makers to reevaluate threat successfully while others remain prisoners of their predispositions?

The question is particularly intriguing in view of the numerous criticisms that have been leveled at Reagan's cognitive abilities. According to one observer, for example, he was intellectually shallow and inconsistent, superficially attached to different and not necessarily compatible beliefs.[5] Moreover, David Stockman gives us a picture of the President as both ignorant of the complexities of policy and profoundly muddled,[6] while others note his lack of analytical ability, lack of curiosity, and legendary dislike of detail, which, combined with his ignorance of many issues, put him at the mercy of his advisers.[7] Richard Neustadt has remarked on Reagan's unfortunate habit of "combining ignorance and insistence" (incuriosity about details together with deep commitment to his convictions),[8] which provided fertile soil for such fiascos as the Iran-contra scandal.[9] Clearly, Reagan's success in perceiving and responding to the changes in Soviet policy, especially when many others did not, needs to be explained.

[4] See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 7; Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 113–27; and Deborah Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 32–34.

[5] Keith L. Shimko, *Images and Arms Control: Perceptions of the Soviet Union in the Reagan Administration* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 236–37, 239–41, 246–47.

[6] Richard Neustadt has collected a number of the references that convey Stockman's view. Richard E. Neustadt, "Presidents, Politics, and Analysis" (Brewster C. Denney Lecture Series, Institute of Public Management, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, 13 May 1986), 17. Others who note Reagan's ignorance and lack of curiosity in matters of policy are Shimko, *Images*, 245–46; Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1982), 372–73; Lou Cannon, *President Reagan* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1991), 130; Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Presidential Personality and Performance* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1988), 224; Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 270, 276; Michael Mandelbaum and Strobe Talbott, *Reagan and Gorbachev* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 128–29.

[7] George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 1133; Martin Anderson, *Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988), 289–91; Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 106; Larry Speakes, *Speaking Out* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 67, 304; Cannon, *Reagan*, 375; Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 146, 149; Larry Berman, "Looking Back at the Reagan Presidency" in Larry Berman, ed., *Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 5; Cannon, *President Reagan*, 55, 181–82, 304. Reagan's ignorance of nuclear matters is particularly striking, 291–92, 305.

[8] Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 270, 276, 280; see also Gary Wills, *Reagan's America* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 286, 380.

[9] Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 270–71, 287, 290.

Baseline 1981–1984: Reagan's Initial Perception of the Threat

Showing that President Reagan's understanding of the threat to American security changed in response to the changes in Soviet policy instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev requires establishing a baseline. How did Reagan perceive the threat initially? What were his beliefs about its source and nature, and what evidence did he use to support them?

The Soviet Threat

From the beginning of his presidency and long before, Ronald Reagan believed that the Soviet Union was the prime source of threat to American security, a threat so pervasive and limitless that it was almost existential.[10] For Reagan, the Soviets threatened all the basic values of the United States and were behind "all the unrest that is going on" in the world.[11] Moreover, these beliefs were long-standing and deeply rooted.[12] The only mitigating factor in Reagan's analysis of the Soviet Union was a tendency to distinguish the Soviet people from their leaders,[13] plus an occasional reference to mutual suspicion fueling the arms race and U.S.–Soviet conflict, along with the suggestion that this might be mitigated by increased communication.[14]

Reagan's sense of threat was compounded by fundamental mistrust based on what he saw as the Soviet Union's "record of deceit and its long history of betrayal of international treaties." This he claimed "could be found in the writings of Soviet leaders: It had always been their philosophy that it was moral to lie or cheat for the purpose of advancing Communism. . . . [T]hey had told us, without meaning to, that they couldn't be trusted."[15] Reagan saw the threat posed by the Soviet Union as broad and all-encompassing, political as well as

[10] The term "existential threat" has been used by Daniel Lieberfeld to connote a threat to basic security or national existence. Daniel Lieberfeld, *Talking with the Enemy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); see also Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1900), 265; Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out in the Blue* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 30–31; interview with Walter Cronkite, 3 March 1981, cited in Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

[11] Speech in March 1983, cited in Banchoff. "Official Threat," 87–88; campaign speech, June 1980, cited in Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 12.

[12] See Reagan, *American*, 14; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 12–13; Betty Glad "Black-and-White Thinking: Ronald Reagan's Approach to Foreign Policy," *Political Psychology* 4 (March 1983): 44–46, 67; Fischer, *Reagan*, 81–2; and Shimko, *Images*, 101, 120.

[13] As Shimko points out, however, the Soviet government "was assumed not to reflect the desires of its people." Ibid., 146.

[14] Ibid., 372, 374.

[15] Reagan, *American*, 14, 267. See also Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 159. Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 8; Glad, "Black and White," 45; and Banchoff, "Official Threat," 88. Shimko distinguishes between hardline images which virtually the whole administration held and inherent bad faith enemy images which only some, like Caspar Weinberger and Richard Perle, shared with Reagan. *Images*, 233.

military. "[G]uided by a policy of immoral and unbridled expansionism," and following a pattern set by Lenin,[16] the Soviet Union was advancing "all over the world" with the goal of promoting revolution.[17] It was thus a threat to the security of the free world on all fronts.[18] Not only was it the malign force behind all national liberation movements, it was also the sponsor of international terrorism and a significant threat to human rights.[19]

As evidence of the Soviet threat, Reagan pointed to both intentions and capabilities. His interpretation of Soviet intentions was highly ideological. In January 1981, he told reporters that he did not "'have to think of an answer as to what their intentions are' because all Soviet leaders since the Revolution had 'more than once repeated . . . their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world socialist or Communist state. . . .'"[20] Reagan's view of the capability side of the equation had two aspects: his perception of Soviet strength and his fears about American weakness. His overall assessment of Soviet capabilities was, again, heavily ideological, combining the conviction that the Soviets held a short-run advantage over the United States with a belief in their inevitable failure over the long term owing to their ideological blinders.

Reagan began his presidency convinced that because of a massive offensive military buildup in the 1970s ("the largest and costliest military buildup in the history of man"), the Soviet Union enjoyed "a definite margin of superiority over the United States," with all the ominous consequences this entailed.[21] However, this superiority was not to endure. Not only could the United States correct the imbalance with a military buildup of its own, but also the Soviet system itself was inherently weak. Briefings during the campaign and once in office had convinced Reagan that "the Soviet economy was in even worse shape than I'd realized. I had always believed that, as an economic system, Communism was doomed. . . . Now, the economic statistics and intelligence reports I was getting . . . were revealing tangible evidence that Communism as we knew

[16] Reagan, *American*, 548, 239, 265–68.

[17] Cited in Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 14, 22; Shimko, *Images*, 103–104; Fischer, *Reagan*, 19–20. On the administration's view of the political and military threat, see Banchoff. "Official Threat," 83–87.

[18] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 20; see also Banchoff, "Official Threat," 88.

[19] Reagan, *American*, 238–39; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 19–20, 24, 26.

[20] Cited in ibid., 8. See also Shimko, *Images*, 106, 235; and Reagan's remarks in his press conference in March 1981, cited in Banchoff, "Official Threat," 87. For more on the ideological basis of Reagan's views about Soviet intentions, see Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 33, 98; Edwin Meese, *With Reagan.* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1992), 164, 169; Oberdorfer. *Turn*, 90; and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin's account of Secretary of State George Shultz's description of Reagan as "stubborn and ideologically unprepared for agreements with the Russians." See Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Random House, 1995), 81. See also Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd., 1991), 81.

[21] Reagan, *American*, 294; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 41; see also Fischer, *Reagan*, 20; Shimko, *Image*, 102–103, 108–111; Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 34; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 32; and McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 218.

it was approaching the brink of collapse. . . . The Soviet economy was . . . a basket case, partly because of massive spending on armaments."[22]

In the short run, however, the Soviet Union was exceedingly dangerous—in part because of *American* shortcomings. That is to say, the Soviet threat was magnified by U.S. military weakness and a loss of resolve that could only be cured by an American military buildup.[23] Reagan began such a buildup almost immediately after taking office by requesting a huge increase in the defense budget.[24] As to the loss of American resolve, Reagan believed that in the late 1970s the United States ". . . had begun to abdicate [its] historical role as the spiritual leader of the Free World and its foremost defender of democracy. Some of our resolve was gone, along with a part of our commitment to uphold the values we cherished." In line with their malevolent intentions, the Soviets "had tried to exploit [this weakness] to the fullest."[25]

The Nuclear Threat

As serious as the Soviet threat was, it was far from being the only one. Reagan believed that the mere existence of nuclear weapons put Americans equally at risk. He was dismayed that American defense policy placed "our entire faith in a weapon whose *fundamental target was the civilian population.*" He was appalled by the possible consequences, observing that, "Even if a nuclear war did not mean the extinction of mankind, it would certainly mean the end of civilization as we knew it. . . . [A]s long as nuclear weapons were in existence, there would always be risks they would be used, and once the first nuclear weapon was unleashed, who knew where it would end?"[26]

Reagan had adopted these beliefs well before he became president. [27] They accorded with his religious ideas about the coming of Armageddon, and they were exacerbated by his realization in 1979 after a visit to NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) that no defense against nuclear mis-

[22] Reagan, *American*, 237–38; Meese, *With Reagan*, 164–65, 169. See also Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 11; Shimko, *Images*, 142–44; Fitzgerald, *Way Out*, 175, n. 106.

[23] Reagan, *American*, 294–95. See also, Weinberger on his first meeting with the President-elect, *Fighting*, 34–35; McFarlane, *Special*, 218–19; Shimko, *Images*, 102, 144; Fischer, *Reagan*, 26.

[24] This buildup, according to Garthoff, "had been decided on before obtaining requests from the military services—it was intended to signal the strong resolve of the new administration to build ("rebuild") military strength. . . ." Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 33. As Garthoff also notes, despite the fact that in 1983 the Scowcroft Commission report refuted the idea of a "window of vulnerability" for the United States and the CIA found no spending gap between the United States and the Soviet Union, the military buildup continued. Moreover, at least some members of the administration (Weinberger, Perle) exaggerated the Soviet threat in order to gain support for that buildup, 33, 504.

[25] Reagan, *American*, 266; see also Shimko, *Images*, 103.

[26] Reagan, *American*, 549, 550. (Italics in original.) See also Shultz, *Turmoil*, 246.

[27] See, for example, his speech to the Republican national convention in 1976. Anderson, *Revolution*, 71–72; Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 277.

siles existed.[28] Moreover, his nuclear fears were only reinforced by the briefings he received after he became president.[29]

Reagan's plan for dealing with the nuclear threat was two-pronged. First of all his "dream . . . became a world free of nuclear weapons." However, recognizing that this would not be easily achieved, he also dreamed of creating "a defense against nuclear missiles, so we could change from a policy of assured destruction to one of assured survival."[30] This dream, of course, was transformed into the (in)famous Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a policy to which Reagan clung tenaciously throughout his presidency.[31] Reagan's commitment to both dreams is clearly shown in the discussion below of his negotiations with Gorbachev. However, even before Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, Reagan's apprehension about nuclear weapons was reflected in his attempts in 1983–1984 to negotiate with the Russians.

Pre-Gorbachev Changes in Tone and Policy

Toward the end of President Reagan's first term, a shift occurred in his tone and policies that had little to do with Soviet behavior.[32] This represented a change in emphasis from the Soviet side of Reagan's sense of threat to the nuclear side; it did not, however, signal a substantive change in his core beliefs about the Soviet Union. Early in 1983, Reagan began to show an interest in improving relations with the Soviet Union. In February, despite the anticipated (and later openly expressed) opposition of his National Security staff, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and the head of the CIA, William Casey,[33] Reagan agreed to Secretary of State George Shultz's suggestion that he meet with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. After the meeting, Shultz was sufficiently "impressed and reassured" by Reagan's performance to push ahead with his plan to "design a broader and longer-term approach to U.S.-Soviet relations to put before the president," and to get him "heavily engaged."[34]

[28] Fischer, *Reagan*, 106–108; Anderson, *Revolution*, 80–83; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 25–26, 67; Shultz, *Turmoil*, 261–62. On Reagan's beliefs about Armegeddon, see Edmund Morris, *Dutch* (New York: Random House, 1999), 632–33. Fitzgerald views the NORAD story as a dramatization of Reagan's longstanding horror of nuclear weapons, with Reagan himself at the center of the drama as an "American Everyman." See Fizgerald, *Way Out*, 20–29.

[29] Weinberger, *Fighting*, 341; Reagan, *American*, 550.

[30] Ibid., 550.

[31] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 260–64; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 99. See also Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 463, 466. For Reagan's interest in strategic defense between 1979 and 1983, when he announced his program to the American people, see Anderson, *Revolution*, 75–76, 84–88, 93–97.

[32] As Garthoff points out, in the first eight months of 1983, Soviet leaders sought without success to engage the United States in serious arms control negotiation. *Great Transition*, 111. See also Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan,1984), 131.

[33] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 159, 164–66, 267; Jack F. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire* (New York, Random House, 1995), 77; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 16; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 104.

[34] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 164–65; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 16–17. See also Reagan, *American*, 572. For developments in spring and summer 1983, see Matlock, *Autopsy*, 79. For Reagan's own view of the matter,

The culmination of the president's inclinations and the secretary's efforts was a speech on 16 January 1984 in which Reagan stressed negotiation and dialogue, rather than confrontation, and a common interest in avoiding war and reducing "the level of arms. There is no rational alternative but to steer a course which I would call credible deterrence and peaceful competition."[35] In another major change, Reagan acknowledged for the first time that "most [Third World] conflicts have their origins in local problems" and emphasized the need to "reduce the risk of U.S.–Soviet confrontation in these areas."[36] While these conciliatory gestures were clearly a departure from his previous stance, however the president was far from abandoning the negative themes he had sounded earlier. Throughout 1984 both Reagan and members of his administration continued to refer to the Soviet Union as a threat.[37]

How can we explain this combination of conciliatory gestures and negative rhetoric? Possibly it was simply an expression of what Don Oberdorfer has called the "dichotomous nature of Reagan's views" about the Soviet Union.[38] However, while there is considerable evidence of Reagan's dichotomous thinking, we need to understand why in 1984 he chose increasingly to stress the cooperative side.

Heightened Sense of Nuclear Threat

A number of factors came together for the president in late 1983 that may have triggered this shift in emphasis. To begin with, a series of events occurred highlighting the danger of nuclear weapons.[39] The first of these was the Soviet downing in September 1983 of a Korean airliner that had strayed into Soviet air space

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see Reagan. *American*, 572. For developments in the spring and summer of 1983, see also, Matlock, *Autopsy*, 79.

[35] "Soviet-American Relations," 16 January 1984, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 20 (23 January 1984): 41. For references of this sort to common interests in 1983 and 1985, see Keith L. Shimko, "Reagan on the Soviet Union and the Nature of International Conflict," *Political Psychology* 13 (September 1992): 371–72.

[36] "Soviet-American Relations," 42. For an analysis of this speech, see also Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 142–44; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 545. For an extremely optimistic view of the speech as the "turning point in his administration's approach to the Kremlin," see Fischer, *Reagan*, 3–4, 32–38. Throughout 1984, Reagan returned to many of the ideas expressed in this speech. Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 152, 156, 161. For other conciliatory moves by Reagan and his administration, see Fischer. *Reagan*, 40–45.

[37] See, for example, his 2 June speech in Ireland, cited in Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 153, 154, 157, 160. These negative references culminated in the Republican party's 1984 election platform, adopted by a Reagan-controlled convention, which affirmed that "the Soviet Union's globalist ideology and its leadership obsessed with military power make it a threat to freedom and peace on every continent."

[38] Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: from the Cold War to a New Era, The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1990* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991), 22–23. See also the similar view of Assistant Secretary of European and Canadian Affairs, Rozanne Ridgway in William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 18.

[39] Fischer, *Reagan*, 109.

(KAL 007). While Reagan ultimately came to believe that the shooting down of KAL 007 had been a mistake, he was extremely troubled by it, believing that it "demonstrated how close the world had come to the precipice and how much we needed nuclear arms control. . . ."[40]

Alarming as the thought of an inadvertently triggered nuclear war was, Reagan's distress was compounded by other events that autumn that made him "aware of the need for the world to step back from the nuclear precipice." The first of these was a television movie, "The Day After," which graphically depicted the effects of a nuclear war and left the president "greatly depressed."[41] Following hard on the heels of this distressing cinematic event, Reagan underwent another "most sobering experience"—a briefing from the military on the SIOP (single integrated operational plan) for U.S. strategy to deal with a nuclear attack. He later characterized this briefing as a "scenario for a sequence of events that could lead to the end of civilization as we knew it. In several ways, the sequence of events described in the briefings paralleled those in the ABC movie."[42]

The final episode in this series of nuclear-related incidents was the aftermath of the extensive military exercise carried out by American and NATO forces in November 1983 (Able Archer 83) to test procedures for using nuclear weapons in the event of war. Although the exercise was ultimately scaled down, it remained large enough to alarm the Soviets, causing some to think that the United States was actually preparing a nuclear attack. First dismissed as "Soviet scare tactics," the intelligence reports eventually began to be taken seriously within the administration, especially by the president.[43] For the first time Reagan realized to his great surprise that the Soviet Union might actually feel threatened by the *United States*. Thus, in November 1983, he determined to communicate "outside the normal diplomatic channels" with Yuri Andropov, the Soviet general secretary, confiding in his diary that he felt that "the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being in any way soft on them, we ought to tell them no one here has any intention of doing anything like that."[44]

[40] Reagan, *American*, 584. See also Matlock's view that "there was a serious concern, beginning with President Reagan, about the lack of communication following KAL." Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 76. Note that despite the fact that this incident had brought the nuclear threat to the fore, it also confirmed Reagan's view of the Soviet threat. Reagan, *American*, 585. For a more detailed account of this episode, see Fischer, *Reagan*, 112–114; and Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 118–127, who also discusses Soviet reactions.

[41] Reagan, *American*, 585; also Fischer, *Reagan*, 115–20.

[42] Reagan, *American*, 585–86. Fischer offers a psychological explanation for the impact of these events on Reagan, *Reagan*, 120–22.

[43] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 138–140; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 66–67; and Fischer, *Reagan*, 122–34.

[44] Reagan, *American*, 588–89; Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 324; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 139, 142n; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 67; and Fischer, *Reagan*, 134–38. There is some evidence that Reagan held such beliefs as early as 1982. See Shimko, *Images*, 107; and Shimko, "Reagan," 365, 369–70. Reagan's renewed sense of nuclear threat also heightened his interest in nuclear defense.

Impact of the U.S. Military Buildup

A heightened sense of nuclear danger was not the only factor encouraging Reagan's move toward cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1983 and 1984. Another was his perception that the success of the military buildup he had initiated now allowed him to deal with the Soviets from a position of strength.[45] In that sense, the buildup was at least a permissive, and probably a necessary, condition of his willingness to negotiate.[46] Reagan himself testified to this in his memoirs. While declaring that the Soviets had not changed in their "addiction" to "Lenin's secular religion of expansionism and world domination," he observed that "something *else* had changed: I felt we could now go to the summit, for the first time in years, from a position of strength. . . ."[47] This sense of renewed strength was also reflected in Reagan's speeches on 16 January and at the United Nations on 24 September 1984.[48]

Secretary Shultz and the 1984 Election

From the start, George Shultz believed that while it was necessary to be wary of the Soviet Union, "we should also be ready to deal with the Soviets more constructively if the opportunity arose."[49] Throughout 1983 and 1984 Shultz persisted in his endeavor to get the president involved in such an approach, peppering Reagan with memos on the subject and promoting opportunities for dialogue between the president and, among others, Dobrynin and Andrei Gromyko. Despite the determined opposition of Weinberger, Casey, and most of the National Security Council (NSC) staff, Shultz ultimately prevailed, winning Reagan's support.[50]

We should remember, however, that Reagan, at least, believed the secretary had been effective precisely because his views accorded with the president's own, while those of Shultz's opponents (Weinberger, Casey, and Edwin Meese) did not. As he confided in his diary in November 1984, ". . . [the dispute]

[45] Glad points out that Reagan harbored a long-standing belief that if confronted with strength and aware that they could not win, the Soviets would give up and back down. "Black and White," 64.

[46] According to Robert Jervis, ". . . behavior is influenced by leaders' perceptions and beliefs about their own nations (self-perceptions). A state that sees itself in decline is likely to see others and to behave very differently from one that conceives of itself as continuing to be strong, if not dominant." Robert Jervis, "Perception and Misperception, and the End of the Cold War" in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 228. The putative success of his military buildup also allowed Reagan's personal confidence in his own abilities to come to the fore. Matlock, *Autopsy*, 77; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 22.

[47] Reagan, *American*, 594. (Italics in original.) See also Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 324; and Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 769.

[48] "Soviet American Relations," 41. For the September UN speech, see Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 161. See also, McFarlane, *In Confidence*, 563; and Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 35–36.

[49] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 6.

[50] Ibid., 159–67, 265–70; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 102–10; Reagan, *American*, 605–606; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 77–78; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 34–37; McFarlane, *Sacred*, 295.

is so out of hand George sounds like he wants out. I can't let that happen. Actually George is of course carrying out my policy."[51]

Finally, some, although not Reagan himself, point to the impending 1984 presidential election as a motivating factor in his willingness to negotiate with the Soviets on nuclear arms. According to Oberdorfer, Reagan was told by his pollster, Richard Wirthlin, that his "most serious political vulnerability" was the public's fear that he would bring America into "an unnecessary war."[52] Moreover, Raymond Garthoff contends on the basis of a "well-informed administration source" that as early as the end of 1982 Reagan was thinking about the need to improve relations with the Soviet Union in terms of the coming campaign, and that this continued to play a role in administration planning through the 1984 election.[53] However, while the campaign may have influenced Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union in 1984, it does not seem to have been as important as the other factors, especially given the counter pressures from the right against any such negotiations.

How are we to understand Reagan's rhetorical and policy shifts toward the Soviet Union in 1983 and 1984? Given his persistently negative view of the Soviet Union, it is hard to see it as a serious alteration in his perception of the Soviet threat, especially since the Soviets had not in fact changed their behavior. Rather, it represented a change in emphasis from the Soviet threat to the nuclear threat,[54] triggered by a series of nuclear-related incidents and combined with a more confident self-assessment of U.S. military power, Secretary Shultz's initiatives, and the political needs growing out of the forthcoming election campaign, all of which made him more receptive to negotiating with the Soviets.[55] There was, however, no radical change in Reagan's core beliefs about the nature of the Soviet Union and the threat that it posed to the United States. Further change would, as even Jack Matlock (who was considered a moderate within the administration) believed, have to wait until the Soviet Union itself changed, "If the Soviet Union stayed as it was, we could hope only to manage the mutual hostility, not to harmonize policies."[56] Fortunately, as it turned out, such change was not as distant as most believed at the time.

[51] Reagan, *American*, 606.

[52] Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 52; see also Shultz, *Turmoil*, 270.

[53] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 102, 152; see also Reagan's own allusion to the campaign and foreign policy in *American*, 605.

[54] On the basis of a psychological analysis, Beth Fischer argues that this shift represented a real change in Reagan's perception of threat. *Reagan*, 2–5, 135, 141, 146–56. The evidence presented above shows otherwise. Reagan changed his emphasis and some policies, but his view of the Soviet threat remained the same.

[55] Greenstein also notes this combination in "Ronald Reagan," 215.

[56] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 167; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 23; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 80; Alexander Dallin, "Learning in U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Union in the 1980s" in George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock, *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 415.

GORBACHEV: CHANGE AND RESPONSE

Initial Overtures

The year 1985 began with a continuation of the "unsteady, gradual normalization" of U.S.–Soviet relations of the previous year.[57] When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as general secretary of the Communist party on 11 March 1985, the reaction of the Reagan administration was subdued. Although Secretary Shultz and Vice President George Bush had been favorably impressed by Gorbachev at their first meeting,[58] and although Reagan had proposed a summit meeting and Gorbachev had responded positively, the president retained his long-standing suspicion of anything Soviet.[59] Five weeks after Gorbachev's accession to power, Reagan noted in his diary that "Gorbachev will be as tough as any of their leaders. If he wasn't a confirmed ideologue, he never would have been chosen by the Politiburo." This meant, "We'd have to be as tough as ever in dealing with the Soviets. . . ." Reagan also noted, however, that "we should work hard to establish channels directly between Gorbachev and me through quiet diplomacy." In his public statements, he expressed the hope for "more constructive relations."[60]

The Geneva Summit, 19–21 November 1985

Although he was not often acclaimed for his dedication to the briefing book, Reagan's preparations for the summit were extensive. As National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane saw it, he was "clearly determined to be thoroughly prepared for his first meeting with a Soviet head of state. He worked hard, and by the time he reached Geneva, was thoroughly in command of his brief." Moreover, his efforts were, at least in part, motivated by an extremely successful meeting with the new Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnazde in late September.[61]

These experiences led to a partial change in Reagan's rhetoric. Rather than emphasize Soviet culpability for problems in the relationship, Reagan pointed to "misunderstandings," and in his speech to the nation just prior to the summit he stressed his "mission for peace," the need to reduce "suspicion and mistrust," and his belief that nuclear weapons were the real threat. As Reagan himself

[57] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 197. Nevertheless, Reagan's Inaugural and State of the Union speeches still stressed the Soviet threat and the consequent need for a U.S. buildup and SDI. Ibid., 201–202.

[58] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 532; see also Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 207, n.27; and Thatcher's widely quoted assessment of Gorbachev as a "man we can do business with." *Downing Street*, 463.

[59] See Mandelbaum and Talbott, *Reagan*, 44.

[60] Reagan, *American*, 615; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 208. Nevertheless, he also "resumed crusading rhetoric, charges of Soviet untrustworthiness, and reaffirmations of SDI," 213.

[61] McFarlane, *Sacred*, 308. McFarlane himself remembers working "harder, probably, than I ever had or would again." This included one hundred meetings with Reagan and eleven NSC meetings. Ibid., 312. See also Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 142; and Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 234.

noted, ". . . once we'd agreed to hold a summit, I made a conscious decision to tone down my rhetoric to avoid goading Gorbachev with remarks about the 'evil empire.'"[62]

Ultimately, the Geneva summit yielded a number of benefits for both sides. Reagan and Gorbachev "had come to like and respect each other," and were able to establish the basis for a working relationship.[63] Certainly, this was true of the president: "Reagan came out not convinced by Gobachev's beliefs, but respecting them. And he came out seeing Gorbachev as a person, a fellow politician . . . who had constraints just as he had, and if we could do it, he was willing to try to find a way around [those constraints]. So I think the impact of the personal contact on Reagan was very substantial."[64] Gorbachev had been "humanized" for the president; he "had zeroed in on the character of the human being in the other chair, "admitting that the Soviet leader had deep convictions of his own."[65] What is more, the feeling was mutual.[66] Observers sensed a "personal chemistry" between the two leaders.

As an added benefit, according to Jack Matlock, Reagan came away with a renewed sense of "confidence in his ability to convince," which led "him to take chances because he felt that the Soviet system could change."[67] Thus, while the Geneva summit did not alter Reagan's basic view of the Soviet threat, it did represent a considerable step forward. As Reagan himself said on his return to the United States, he and Gorbachev now "understand each other better. I gained a better perspective; I feel he did too."[68] Moreover, while Gorbachev has often been given much of the credit for the success of the summit,[69] it was Reagan who insisted on arranging more time for the private discussions that went a long way to produce these positive effects.[70]

Reykjavik Summit, 10–12 October 1986

During the first six months of 1986, negotiations for the next summit failed to prosper. Not until June did Reagan respond favorably to Gorbachev's arms

[62] Garthoff, *Great Transformation*, 235–37; "United States-Soviet Summit in Geneva, Address to the Nation," 14 November 1985, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 21 (18 November 1985): 1399; Reagan, *American*, 628.

[63] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 606; remarks of Rozanne Ridgway in Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses*, 18; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 596.

[64] Matlock in Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses*, 22–23.

[65] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 607; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 595; Shultz in Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses*, 16; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 54.

[66] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 607, 606; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 54; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 227; Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Schevardnadze* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 43. See also Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses*, 11.

[67] Ibid., 22; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 239.

[68] Ibid., 247.

[69] Ibid., 239.

[70] Ibid., 236. As Shultz has noted, Reagan and Gorbachev "spent almost five of the fifteen hours of official meetings talking together privately." *Turmoil*, 606.

control initiatives, though even then the president showed no inclination to abandon his dream of strategic defense.[71] Finally, however, in late September an interim meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev was scheduled to prepare for the next summit. It would be held at Reykjavik, Iceland in October.

At that meeting, the greater part of the discussion, to say nothing of all the drama, centered on arms control. Negotiations took place with respect to the entire arsenal of nuclear forces of both the United States and the Soviet Union. More strikingly, the two leaders seriously discussed eliminating all ballistic missiles and actually considered doing away with all strategic nuclear weapons as well. The sticking point was SDI, Gorbachev insisting that it be confined to the laboratory and Reagan refusing to give up testing.[72] Thus, the meeting broke up with both sides registering considerable disappointment; many, including most of the participants, considered Reykjavik a failure.

Given such negative sentiments, it is somewhat surprising that almost all the participants assessed Reykjavik retrospectively as, in Reagan's words, "a major turning point in the quest for a safe and secure world."[73] Shultz was even more enthusiastic, calling its results "sensational," because it introduced the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) treaty and created, "in an immense amount of detail, the basic structure of the START I agreement." In Matlock's view, though the participants failed to appreciate it at the time, "The Reykjavik meeting produced breakthroughs that cleared the way for subsequent treaties. . . ."[74] Moreover, it seems to have marked a turning point in the development of Gorbachev's attitudes that made a number of later agreements possible.[75]

The Washington Summit and the INF Treaty, 7–10 December 1987

These positive retrospective evaluations of the Reykjavik summit notwithstanding, the relationship between United States and the Soviet Union was far from smooth in its aftermath. As Matlock describes it, "For several months, a feeling of bitterness and betrayal weighed upon U.S.–Soviet contacts. The lead-

[71] Ibid., 265–84; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 94.

[72] Ibid., 163; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 95–96; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 285–88; Palaszhenko, *My Years*, 54–57. For Reagan's own account of Reykjavik, see *American*, 675ff; for Gorbachev's, see *Perestroika*, 236–44.

[73] Reagan, *American*, 683.

[74] Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 175, 174; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 96–97. See also Reagan, *American*, 683–84; Palazchenko, *My Years*, 57–58; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 291; Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, 240; Speakes, *Speaking*, 143. For a considerably less rosy assessment, see Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 470–71. Reagan himself thought that "Gorbachev was ready to talk the next time we met in Washington because we had walked out on him at Reykjavik and gone ahead with the SDI program." *American*, 684.

[75] "[I]t was at Reykjavik . . . that Gorbachev put away passion and decided that he could and would work with Reagan. He saw in him a person capable of taking great decisions, and Gorbachev himself told me so when we returned to Moscow." Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 610; see also Matlock, *Autopsy*, 97; and the testimony on this subject of Gorbachev's personal adviser, Anatoly Chernyaev, in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 109.

ers had come tantalizingly close to agreement, and each blamed the other for failure." As Reagan himself pointed out, during the fourteen months after Reykjavik, "progress didn't come easily" although he also recognized that ". . . not all of the obstacles to continuing the momentum started at Geneva originated in Moscow."[76]

In January, the White House issued a strongly anti-Soviet paper titled the "National Security of the United States," which reflected the influence of the hard-liners in the administration. Moreover, the president continued to see the shifts in Soviet foreign and military policy as a consequence of U.S. pressure and renewed military strength.[77] He was cautious about Gorbachev's domestic changes as well, although he claims to have taken note of them,[78] and according to Matlock, while these changes did begin in 1987, Reagan's caution was not entirely misplaced.[79] However, after much negotiation, a date for the Washington summit was set for December 1987.

In contrast to Reykjavik, the Washington summit was generally thought to have represented progress. Unlike previous encounters, this one began on a note of considerable warmth between the two leaders. Moreover, they signed the INF treaty, in which the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to destroy all intermediate and shorter-range land-based missiles and their launchers, and which included "remarkably extensive and intrusive verification inspection and monitoring arrangements." In addition, they discussed human rights, bilateral relations, and regional conflicts; and they agreed to hold another summit in 1988.[80]

Nevertheless, few considered the Washington summit an unqualified success. As Anatoly Chernyaev noted ". . . the INF Treaty was signed in an atmosphere that I would still describe as a rather high level of mutual mistrust." However, he also observed that, "It was right after the INF Treaty . . . that the character of our relations changed. And of course, in changing the character of our relations, the personal rapport between Shultz and Shevardnadze and between Gorbachev and Reagan was of great importance. . . . [I]t was after the INF Treaty that our relationship began to evolve in the framework of trust."[81]

On the American side, the reviews were also mixed. Attributing the signing of the INF Treaty to Reagan's having restored America's military and political strength, Weinberger cautioned that "the restoration of the West's security must not be abandoned to an over-optimistic view of East-West relations."[82] Reagan himself thought that his own policies had ultimately produced the

[76] Matlock, *Autopsy*, 98; Reagan, *American*, 684. For a detailed account of this period, see Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 291–99.

[77] Ibid., 305–306, 308–309, 316.

[78] Reagan, *American*, 686–87; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 315.

[79] Matlock, *Autopsy*, 65–66.

[80] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 325–32.

[81] Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 49; see also Gorbachev's statement to the Politburo, 17 December 1987.

[82] Weinberger, *Fighting*, 332.

treaty, and Shultz, while differing from Weinberger in his sense "that a profound, historic shift was under way," also believed that "there is nothing in the 'new political thinking' that suggests that the end of the adversarial struggle is at hand."[83]

Despite these mixed feelings, however, the relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev was progressing rapidly. Moreover, according to Matlock, "from late 1987 . . . we began to register significant results in all parts of the U.S.–Soviet agenda. The speed of change was dizzying for those of us who had worked for decades on what had for long seemed the intractable problems of dealing with USSR."[84]

The Moscow Summit, 29 May–2 June 1988

The Moscow summit meeting saw the culmination of the rapprochement between Reagan and Gorbachev, as well as a substantive change in Reagan's view of the Soviet Union. Ambassador Matlock had been greatly impressed by the changes in the Communist party program issued in May 1988, and he communicated his excitement to Reagan when he briefed him in Helsinki just prior to the Moscow summit. "I told the president that if they turned out to be real, the Soviet Union could never again be what it had been in the past."[85]

As for the meeting itself, the discussions, although without major breakthroughs, were conducted in a friendly manner.[86] However, the real importance of the summit lay in the impact on Reagan of his visit to Moscow. Impressed by the warmth and friendliness of the Soviet people, he even disavowed his characterization of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire": "I was talking about another time, another era."[87] As Reagan recalled it, "perhaps the deepest impression I had during this experience and other meetings with Soviet citizens was that they were generally indistinguishable from people I had seen all my life on countless streets in America."[88]

This newfound attitude was tested, but not shaken, by Reagan's first-hand observation of the KGB's rough handling of the crowd during his walk on the streets of Moscow.[89] Indeed, the most interesting aspect of this episode is that

[83] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 332, 335; Shultz, *Turmoil*, 1003.

[84] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 332; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 148.

[85] Matlock, *Autopsy*, 121–23.

[86] For the substance of the discussions, see Garthoff, *Great Transformation*, 353–56; and U.S. Congress. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Soviet Diplomacy and Negotiating Behavior—1988–90: Gorbachev-Reagan-Bush Meetings at the Summit* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 71–72.

[87] Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 299, 294–95, Reagan, *American*, 709; Garthoff, *Great Transformation*, 352; Hugh Sidey, "Good Chemistry," *Time*, 13 June 1988, 14.

[88] Reagan, *American*, 709; Sidey, "Good Chemistry," 17.

[89] "I've never seen such brutal manhandling as they did on their own people who were in no way getting out of hand." Reagan, *American*, 709. See also Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 776; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 296–97.

it did not have a more negative impact on Reagan's feelings about the Soviet Union, though it clearly confirmed his long-held beliefs. Nor did it deflect his "conversion to a belief in friendly relations," and his respect and admiration for Gorbachev.

> Looking back now, it's clear that there was a chemistry between Gorbachev and me that produced something very close to a friendship. He was a tough, hard bargainer. He was a Russian patriot who loved his country. . . . I liked Gorbachev even though he was a dedicated Communist. . . . [H]e was different from the Communists who had preceded him to the top of the Kremlin hierarchy. . . . [H]e was the first not to push Soviet expansionism, the first to agree to destroy nuclear weapons, the first to suggest a free market and to support open elections and freedom of expression.[90]

On his way home from Moscow, Reagan gave a speech in London that suggests the extent of his transformation. He not only had kind words for Gorbachev ("a serious man, seeking serious reform"), but he also gave his most optimistic assessment of the future to date: ". . . quite possibly, we're beginning to take down the barriers of the postwar era; quite possibly we are entering a new era in history, a time of lasting change in the Soviet Union. We will have to see."[91]

New York Meeting, 7 December 1988

During the months before the New York summit, relations between the two superpowers were "basically uneventful."[92] Gorbachev continued his efforts to reform the Soviet Union, and on the day of his meeting with Reagan he gave a path-breaking speech at the United Nations in which he publicly announced many of those changes. Many people focused on his most striking pronouncement—he was prepared to cut 500,000 troops from the Soviet armed forces. But Shultz noted, "If you read that speech carefully, you will see that for the first time Gorbachev publicly renounced Marxism-Leninism as an approach to the analysis of international issues and international processess."[93]

The meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan later that day, which also included Vice President Bush, was "ceremonial" rather than substantive. Marking the final official encounter between the two leaders, it was notable for its

[90] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 253; Reagan, *American*, 707. Reagan voiced the same highly positive view of Gorbachev even while he was still in Moscow and not long after his return to Washington, acknowledging that he considered Gorbachev a "real friend." Sidey, "Good Chemistry," 17; *Soviet Diplomacy*, 111. See also Morris, *Dutch*, 647.

[91] "Remarks to Members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, United Kingdom," 3 June 1988, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 24 (June 6, 1988), 735. 91. By contrast, Vice President Bush was cautioning the public several weeks later that "the Cold War is not over." Cited in Banchoff, *Official Threat*, n. 41.

[92] See Garthoff, *Great Transformation*, 368–71.

[93] Wohlforth, ed., *Witnesses*, 91. See also Shultz, *Turmoil*, 365–67.

cordiality.[94] Moreover, shortly after Gorbachev left the United States, Reagan gave a radio address to the nation in which he discussed their meeting in positive terms, noting that "this has been a period of important change inside the Soviet Union," and praising Gorbachev's vision.[95] Secretary Shultz's assessment after his participation in the opening of the UN General Assembly in September was even more enthusiastic: "The world had changed. Margaret Thatcher had it right . . . [when] she said flatly 'We're not in a Cold War now.' Despite this new reality, many in the United States seemed unable or unwilling to grasp this seminal fact. But to me, it was all over but the shouting."[96]

Explaining Reagan's Change in Threat Perception

By 1988, many of the beliefs underlying Ronald Reagan's perception of the Soviet Union as a threat to the United States had been considerably altered, shifting in response to Soviet behavior. Reagan did not change his own ideology, especially his belief in the pernicious nature of communism.[97] However, he did perceive changes in theirs. Not everyone thought that Reagan's new beliefs were well-grounded. One stumbling block was that these changes had occurred in the absence of any shift in Soviet capabilities.[98] This was enough to prevent a realist like Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci from seeing a decline in the Soviet threat,[99] but it had no effect whatever on Ronald Reagan. Although he first attributed the changes instituted by Gorbachev to the pressures of his situation (the American military buildup, SDI, and Soviet economic weakness), ultimately the president was persuaded that real dispositional change had occurred as well.

What are we to make of these changes in Reagan's perception of the Soviet threat? Most versions of rational choice theory hold that "beliefs are formed and updated on the basis of all received information."[100] This, however, is contrary to the model presented in the psychological literature. Just as realists do not expect changes in threat perception without changes in capabilities, cognitive psychologists do not expect such changes to occur readily under any circumstances. Whether the question is viewed in terms of learning theory,[101] be-

[94] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 371.

[95] "Radio Address to the Nation on Soviet-United States Relations," 10 December 1988, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 24 (December 19, 1988), 1613–14.

[96] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 1131.

[97] Fischer, *Reagan*, 148–49.

[98] Jervis, "Perception and Misperception," 226.

[99] "[W]e must be guided by realism, not wishful thinking. The West's security preparations must be based not on Kremlin declarations, but on actual Soviet military capabilities." Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 533.

[100] Dan Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 38.

[101] Ibid., 34; and Dan Reiter, "Learning, Realism, and Alliances," *World Politics* 46 (July 1994): 493–94.

lief change,[102] schema theory,[103] images,[104] or attitude change,[105] revising beliefs is thought to be slow and difficult, even in the face of disconfirming information. Such change is even more unlikely if the beliefs in question have any, let alone all, of the qualities that characterized Reagan's perception of the Soviet Union as a threat: if, for example, they are particularly important to the person who holds them[106] or central to his or her belief system (and beliefs about the adversary are thought to be particularly central);[107] if they are linked to other beliefs,[108] are strongly held or value-laden,[109] held with great confidence[110] or linked to strong emotion;[111] and if the person has made a public commitment to them.[112]

Thus, Reagan's ability to revise his view of the Soviet threat is something of a puzzle. This might not be true for those with less ideological views like Shultz. But, as we have seen, Reagan initially held essentialist views much like those of Weinberger and Perle, who unquestionably continued to cling to them.[113] Moreover, while learning theory suggests that learning is more likely in the face of failure,[114] Reagan appears to have revised his beliefs in the face of success. What allowed him to make such changes when others with similar views did not? The evidence suggests a combination of Reagan's personal qualities and a belief system that was somewhat more complex than has usually been attributed to him.

[102] Philip E. Tetlock, "Social Psychology and World Politics" in D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), 880; and "Theory-Driven Reasoning about Plausible Pasts and Probable Futures in World Politics: Are We Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?" *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (April 1999): 337–38; J. F. Voss, C. R. Wolfe, J. A. Lawrence, and R. A. Engle, "From Representation to Decision: an Analysis of Problem Solving in International Relations" in R. J. Sternberg and P. A. Frensch, eds., *Complex Problem Solving: Principles and Mechanisms* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erbaum, 1991), 131–33; Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in their Minds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 118–23.

[103] Reiter, *Crucible*, 21–24; Stein, "Political Learning," 163–64; Deborah Larson, "The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision–Making," *Political Psychology* 15 (March 1994): 29.

[104] Martha Cottam and Dorcas E. McCoy, "Image Change and Problem Representation after the Cold War" in Donald A. Sylvan and James F. Voss, eds., *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117–18, 123.

[105] Jervis, *Perception*, chap. 7; Jon A. Krosnick, 1988. "Attitude Importance and Attitude Change," *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology* 24 (1998): 240–55.

[106] Ibid., 240–41; Cottam and McCoy, "Image Change," 118.

[107] Vertzberger, *World*, 118–19, 137.

[108] Krosnick, "Attitude Importance," 240.

[109] Cottam and McCoy, "Image Change," 118.

[110] Tetlock, "Social Psychology," 880; Vertzberger, *World*, 120.

[111] Ibid., 120, 137; Cottam and McCoy, "Image Change," 123; Stein, "Political Learning," 169.

[112] Krosnick, "Attitude Importance," 241.

[113] For a comparison of Reagan's image of the Soviet Union with that of his advisers, see Shimko, *Images*, 233–37, 224–25. On Weinberger, see Weinberger, *Fighting*, 37, n.5, 331–32, 347–51; Garthoff, *Great Transformation*, 531–32.

[114] Reiter, *Crucible*, 35, 39 and "Learning," 490; Stein, "Political Learning," 173.

Ideology

Ironically, Reagan's democratic, anti-Soviet ideology, which many considered a fault, may in fact have had the virtue of helping him to perceive change in the Soviet Union. It gave him the sense that the tide of history was moving away from the Soviets and toward democratic freedom. As he said in a 1982 speech in London, "In an ironic sense Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis. . . . But the crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist West, but in the home of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union. It is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens. It is also in deep economic difficulty."[115]

This may have been a simple view of the world, but as Michael Mandelbaum has pointed out, it was not necessarily wrong.[116] It seems to have made Reagan more receptive to change in the Soviet Union than he might otherwise have been.[117] For one thing, it sensitized him to the role of ideology in the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union and perhaps to the significance of ideological change for Soviet foreign policy. For another, it made him more open to the possibility of change altogether. That is to say, Reagan was in some sense primed to accept the reality of change because he already believed it possible, even likely.[118] This, in turn, contributed to his "unquenchable optimism" about the future.[119]

Dual Threats/Dual Goals

Reagan's conviction that the Soviet Union was far from being the only serious threat was as relevant as his ideology in helping him to revise his thinking about the Soviet threat. The notion that nuclear weapons were also a grave danger provided Reagan with more than one goal in the security field, and he was un-

[115] Cited in Banchoff, "Changing," 88. See also Shultz's remarks in an interview with Peter Schweizer: "President Reagan just had an innate sense that the Soviet Union would not, or could not, survive. . . . That feeling was not based on a detailed learned knowledge of the Soviet Union; it was just instinct." *Victory* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994).

[116] Michael Mandelbaum, "The Luck of the President" in William G. Hyland, ed., *The Reagan Foreign Policy* (New York: New American Library, 1987),140–41, 132.

[117] For quite a different view, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. who, writing in 1983, recognizes the ideological basis of Reagan's thought, but has nothing good to say about it and does not foresee a capacity for change. "Foreign Policy and the American Character," *Foreign Affairs* 62 (Fall 1983): 5–7. Gary Wills, too, has scant respect for Reagan's ability to think historically: "He has a skill for striking 'historical' attitudes combined with a striking lack of historical attentiveness." *Reagan's America* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 63, 446–47. For Reagan's lack of historical understanding during the Bitburg controversy, see Cannon, *President Reagan*, 588.

[118] Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 549; Matlock in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 22; Dallin, "Learning," 416. Fischer uses the concept of priming somewhat differently to explain how Reagan's reaction to the events of the fall of 1983 "primed" him to take the nuclear threat more seriously. *Reagan*, 110–12.

[119] Cannon, *President Reagan*, 179; Cannon, *Reagan*, 319, 337, 347–48; U.S. Congress, *Soviet Diplomacy*, 69, 114.

troubled by any sense that his goals were in some way incompatible.[120] Rather, he was able to perceive changes in Soviet behavior that a more consistent person might have dismissed as contradictions.[121]

Some who fail to note the dual nature of Reagan's goals have argued that his inconsistent attitudes toward the Soviet Union were actually due to contradictory beliefs: on the one hand, a "simplistic hardline image of the Soviet Union. . .; and on the other hand, . . . an equally simplistic, even naïve, liberal faith in the existence of an underlying harmony of interests among men and nations."[122] An uncommited thinker, Reagan oscillated between the two views according to changes in the situation and the pressure of his advisers.[123] However, Reagan was not only deeply committed to his basic principles and consistently unwilling to listen to any advice intended to diminish his support for them, but also, rather than vacillate between two sets of incompatible views of the Soviet Union, from at least 1984 he was increasingly concerned about serious threats emanating from both the Soviet Union and nuclear weapons. He may not have been cognitively complex, but he did see the problem of threat as having more than one dimension.

Nor did he waver between contradictory policies directed at these threats. Rather, he felt able to concentrate on the nuclear danger, which included attempting to negotiate with the Soviet Union, only after he had, in his own mind at least, neutralized the Soviet threat by rebuilding America's military strength. Thus, Dobrynin, who was always intrigued by "the paradox of Ronald Reagan," seems closer to the mark in directing us to the "fascinating story of how Reagan's vision of nuclear apocalypse and his deeply rooted but almost hidden conviction that nuclear weapons should ultimately be abolished, would ultimately prove more powerful than his visceral anti-communism."[124]

Strong Principles and Determination

Closely connected to Reagan's belief structure about threat were his firm principles and determination to implement them. There is abundant testimony as

[120] See the remarks of Ambassador Ridgway in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 18. On Reagan's general trait of harboring contradictory convictions and commitments, see Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 277–78. Gary Wills, referring to both conservative and liberal elements in Reagan's political belief system, notes that "All these personae were always present in him, and were not felt to be at odds. Like much of America, he contained contradictions, but never experienced them." *Reagan's America*, 307. See also Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 22; Neustadt, "Presidents," 19.

[121] Fischer explains this in terms of increased cognitive complexity, which allowed him to distinguish the Soviet leaders who shared his "concerns about international security and nuclear war" from communists in general. *Reagan*, 149.

[122] Shimko, "Reagan," 354–57, 359, 374.

[123] John D. Steinbruner, *Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 129–31; Shimko, *Images*, 240–42. For evidence to the contrary, see Cannon, *President Reagan*, 481.

[124] Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 606–608.

to the strength of his "unshakable commitment to a limited number of positions,"[125] including his belief about the dangers of nuclear weapons. Reagan treated these as long-term goals and was not deflected from them by apparent setbacks; nor was he concerned that they violated the "conventional wisdom."[126] Moreover, despite criticism that he was often captive to his advisers, when it came to his principles, Reagan remained in control.[127]

This commitment to principle may have contributed to Reagan's ability to appreciate changes in the Soviet Union in the sense that he perceived and responded to a similar quality in Gorbachev. According to Alexander Bessmertnykh, Reagan and Gorbachev "each had their own ideals which they tried to follow all through their lives. Their ideals were not similar, but the dedication to those ideals was similar. They both believed in something. . . . This is what they sensed in each other and this is why they made good partners."[128]

Openness, Attitude to the Future, and Intuition

Other aspects of Reagan's personal style also contributed to his ability to perceive change. For a "putative ideologue," he was strikingly open-minded.[129] By all accounts, Reagan was a good listener and willing to do considerable amounts of homework when the subject interested him.[130] He could also accept criticism gracefully[131] and was capable of a certain amount of empathy. For example, while initially Reagan seemed to have difficulty understanding why the Soviets should see the United States as threatening in any way,[132] after the nuclear scares of 1983, he became sensitive to that possibility.[133]

[125] Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 157–58, 257; McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 106; Speakes, *Speaking*, 301; Cannon, *Reagan*, 372–73; George and George, *Presidential Personality*, 225; Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 165–57.

[126] Shultz in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 104. See also George and George, *Presidential Personality*, 224. As Secretary Shultz and others have pointed out, this quality had its down side and was regarded as obstinacy by those who wanted Reagan to change his mind. Shultz, *Turmoil*, 145; and remarks in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 104. For a striking example of this stubbornness during the Iran-contra crisis, see Cannon, *President Reagan*, 630.

[127] Fischer, *Reagan*, 155–56; Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 154–55.

[128] All quotations are from Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 107. On the importance of this kind of connection between Reagan and Gorbachev, see Fred Greenstein, "Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the End of the Cold War," 218–19, remarks of Ridgway and Shultz, 115, 104. Both Greenstein and Ridgway include Secretary Shultz as a kindred spirit of the two leaders in this regard.

[129] Greenstein, "Ronald Reagan," 214; see also Matlock's remarks in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 114.

[130] "Ronald Reagan knew what he didn't know, and he was willing to listen." Matlock in ibid., 114. See also McFarlane's testimony about Reagan's preparations for the Geneva summit, above; and Speakes, *Speaking*, 301; Cannon, *Reagan*, 372, and *President Reagan*, 748–49, 763.

[131] Ibid., 140, 372; see also Matlock's comments in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 114.

[132] Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 105, 139; see also, Fischer, *Reagan*, 21. As Stein and others have pointed out, decision makers often have difficulty in empathizing with the other side. "Building," 250–51.

[133] See Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 139; Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 67. Shimko finds evidence of this attitude even earlier in "Reagan," 365, 369–70, and *Images*, 107. See also Reagan, *American*, 595, 588–89.

Closely related to Reagan's openness was his sense of optimism about the future and his willingness to put forward original ideas. Although Reagan was often accused of being doctrinaire, he possessed other qualities, such as a willingness to adopt new ways of thinking that belied that characterization. Some even thought of Reagan as "visionary,"[134] a man whose approach was anything but incremental and who had "a bold approach and a keen intuition, even if he did not understand many of the important details."[135]

Nor was Reagan hidebound. He had a sense of history, yet he was oriented toward the future. Although Reagan's reasoning was clearly less sophisticated and his ability to follow through more limited, Oberdorfer's characterization of Secretary Shultz as one of "the rare policymakers who takes a long view, seeing and thinking in 'time streams' beyond the current day" can in some sense be applied to Reagan as well.[136] Moreover, François Mitterand, at first "taken aback by Reagan's intellectual emptiness," later concluded that ". . . beneath the surface you find somone who isn't stupid, who has great good sense and profoundly good intentions. What he does not perceive with his intelligence, he feels by nature." This view of Reagan as "a man of finer instincts than intelligence" was also shared by those who believed with Dobrynin that he "grasped matters in an instinctive way but not necessarily in a simple one."[137] Nor were Reagan's intuitions about trivial matters. Rather, they concerned issues like the viability of the Soviet Union and dangers of nuclear weapons.[138]

This notion of intuition as a source of insight recalls Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which suggests that people have many different types of ability not covered by the traditional definition of intelligence.[139] Reagan, for example, has been said to possess "emotional intelligence," which guides his intuitions.[140] Thus, his strong emotional reaction to the dangers of

Garthoff, however, criticizes Reagan for his lack of insight into the impact of his harsh words on the Soviet leaders. See *Great Transition*, 105.

[134] Shultz, *Turmoil*, 263; Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 156–57; Cannon, *Reagan*, 372, *President Reagan*, 281, 740.

[135] Soviet journalist, Aleksandr Bovin, cited in Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 438; and Greenstein, "Ronald Reagan," 215.

[136] Oberdorfer, *Turn*, 439.

[137] Morris, *Dutch*, 442, 445, 495; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 494; Wills, *Reagan's America*, 384; Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 309, and "Presidents," 16–23; Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 157; Cannon, *President Reagan*, 133–36, 140. For evidence of Reagan's intuitive approach earlier in his career, see Cannon, *Reagan*, 155. On the possible virtues of simplicity, see Peter Suedfeld, "Are Simple Decision Always Worse?" *Society* 25 (1988): 25–27.

[138] On the former, see Shultz in an interview with Schweizer, *Victory*, xiii; and Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 467. On the latter, see Jervis, "Perception," 227; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Soviet Diplomacy*, 115.

[139] Cannon, *Reagan*, 137–38.

[140] According to Greenstein, emotional intelligence is a person's "ability to manage his emotions and turn them to constructive purposes, rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish his leadership." *Presidential Difference*, 6; as applied to Reagan, see 157; and Greenstein, "Reckoning with Reagan," *Political Science Quarterly* 115 (Spring 2000): 121–22. On the connection between emotion and intuition, see Deborah Larson, "Good Judgment in Foreign Policy" (paper presented at the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, 1996), 5–6.

nuclear weapons led him to press for their reduction when almost everyone else was content to work for limitation. What is more, he sought a defense against them, which had among other things the consequence of making the Soviets more cooperative "by threatening to impose unacceptable costs on the already strained Soviet economy."[141] The same emotion was also partly responsible for his desire to negotiate with the Soviets in the first place, helping him to overcome his equally strong anti-Soviet feelings. Moreover, it seems likely that Reagan's characteristic devotion to his principles and his determination to see them carried out were also fired by emotion.

Reagan has been praised for political intelligence as well. This manifested itself in a number of ways. First of all, it affected the cues he responded to. For example, in assessing the Soviet threat, Reagan looked not so much at capabilities as at intentions. In doing so, he was able to focus on the impact of political changes in the Soviet Union that others assessing only capabilities missed.[142] Second, his political sensitivity made him responsive to Gorbachev's political problems. As Matlock has described it, ". . . [W]here Reagan had a real instinct . . . was as a politician. He understood politicians. We could say about Gorbachev, for example, particularly after he got to know him, 'Hey, Gorbachev's got a problem at home. . . .' He would pay attention to that, he would be willing to take it into account."[143]

Finally, Reagan understood his own political constituency. He was able to use his popularity and conservative credentials to make his moves toward Gorbachev more acceptable to conservatives.[144] Furthermore, he understood the political climate in the United States well enough to be able to parlay the public's nuclear fears into increasing its acceptance of both negotiations and arms control agreements, instinctively trusting that the American people would follow the path that he himself had traveled.

It seems likely that Reagan's openness and intuitive intelligence contributed substantially to his ability to perceive changes in the Soviet threat.[145] Moreover, the same may be said of his capacity to be more flexible and pragmatic than his "rhetoric" would have suggested possible.[146]

[141] Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 154.

[142] See above. This political sensitivity was also seen in President Franklin Roosevelt's diagnosis of the German threat after he had observed Hitler's behavior during the Munich crisis. Barbara R. Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), chap. 5.

[143] Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 114; see also Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 301.

[144] See Shultz's remarks in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 104–105. See also Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 155. On Reagan's ability to handle his right-wing supporters on the domestic front, see Cannon, *Reagan*, 316. On political decision makers' responses to the problem of acceptability, see Farnham, *Roosevelt*, chap. 2.

[145] As Vertzberger has pointed out, the opposite is true for those with closed cognitive systems. *World*, 134.

[146] See Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 610; Anderson, *Revolution*, 284; Speakes, *Speaking*, 301; Cannon, *Reagan*, 186, 309; Mandelbaum, "Luck," 134.

Experiential Learning

While the way Reagan came by his knowledge of the world has often been criticized,[147] in terms of the questions we are addressing here, its effect seems to have been positive. His beliefs flowed "from his life, from personal history rather than study."[148] To make sense of the world, Reagan "crave[d] discourse, not briefing papers." Narrative and experience, rather than analysis and deductive logic were his tools.[149]

The role stories played in Reagan's thinking has often been remarked; he learned by them and told them in order to convey meaning.[150] Some have objected that his "impressionable" belief system resulted in ill-grounded beliefs, easily changed by the next personal experience.[151] It is not, however, universally agreed that the capacity to learn from one's experience is a handicap. Reagan's and Gorbachev's ability to learn from and about one another advanced the dialogue between them and moved the relations between their countries to a new plane, which many had longed for but few had ever expected to see.

Belief in Personal Contact

Of course, none of these positive results could have occurred without personal contact between Reagan and Gorbachev, and Reagan was determined that it should take place as often as possible. To him "personal experience counted for everything, and strong personalities could change the world." As Reagan explained in an interview at the time of the Moscow summit, "Systems may be brutish, bureaucrats may fail. But men can sometimes transcend all that, transcend even the forces of history that seem destined to keep them apart."[152] If, as is widely believed, a person's own experiences facilitate learning,[153] then in this case Reagan's instincts served him well.

[147] Morris, *Dutch*, 414–15; Shimko, *Images,* 120; Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 290–91.

[148] Leslie Gelb, quoted in Shimko, *Images*, 120; see also, Cannon, *President Reagan*, 134.

[149] Cannon, *President Reagan*, 376, 139; George and George, *Presidential Personality*, 224. As Howard Gardner concluded: "Reagan's good with language, but not logically. . . . He makes sense of the world narratively. Scientists can be deductive and understand logic but often can't tell stories. Stories are not necessarily logical." Cannon, *President Reagan*, 138; also noted in Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 157.

[150] Secretary Shultz, at first irritated by Reagan's love of stories, began to see a positive side: "he used a story to impart a larger message—and sometimes that message was simply more important to him than the facts. He was a gifted storyteller, who could use a story effectively to make his point take on a deeper and more vivid meaning or to defuse a tense situation. People, he felt, believe in and act on the stories they hear and tell about the past. Stories create meaning." *Turmoil*, 1133.

[151] Shimko, *Images*, 116, 120.

[152] Mandelbaum and Talbot, *Reagan*, 5; Sidey, "Good Chemistry," 17; Reagan, *American*, 14; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 77; Shultz, *Turmoil*, 145; Carlucci in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 46; Dallin, "Learning," 415. On the positive impact of the two leaders' mutual bluntness, see Shultz, *Turmoil*, 8, 16.

[153] Jervis, *Perception*, 239–49; Reiter, *Crucible*, 34–35, 37, 39.

Moreover, Reagan believed in the efficacy of his own powers of persuasion,[154] and this was linked to his self-confidence—in both the validity of his own convictions and his ability to implement them.[155] If Reagan was able to see change in the Soviet Union, it is at least partly because he firmly believed that he could help make it happen through personal contact and was confident enough to resist the naysayers among his advisers.[156] Ultimately, his faith was justified by the reaction of the one person who really counted. As Gorbachev himself told the Politburo in December 1987:

> In Washington, perhaps for the first time, we understood so clearly how important the human factor is in international politics. . . . For us, Reagan appeared as a representative of and a spokesman for the most conservative part of the most conservative segment of American capitalism and the military-industrial complex. But . . . policy makers . . . also represent purely human qualities, the interests and the aspirations of common people, and that they can be guided by purely normal human feeling and aspirations. . . . This is an important aspect of the new international thinking, and it has now produced results.[157]

Conclusion

Ronald Reagan was able to perceive change in the Soviet Union and revise his perception of the Soviet threat accordingly. Moreover, his interpretation was supported by contemporary observers like Shultz and Matlock, as well as the verdict of later analysts. There is considerable evidence that Reagan's initial beliefs about the threat[158] and the nature and timing of his revision of those beliefs were reasonably sound. That evidence supports both Reagan's caution before late 1987 and his acceptance of the importance of the changes instituted by Gorbachev thereafter.[159]

[154] Cannon, *Reagan*, 745.

[155] On the former, see Shultz in Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 103–105; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 608; Anderson, *Revolution*, 286; George and George, *Presidential Personality,* 224–225. On the latter, see Thatcher, *Downing Street*, 157; Shultz, *Turmoil*, 262–63; Wills, *Reagan's America*, 383, 392; Mandelbaum and Talbott, *Reagan*, 129.

[156] Greenstein, "Reckoning," 121.

[157] Quoted by Chernyaev in Wolhforth, *Witnesses*, 49.

[158] "In reassessing the origins and dynamics of the Cold War from the admittedly one-sided evidence that is currently available, several fundamental conclusions emerge. American officials on occasion did exaggerate the magnitude of the Soviet threat and the malignant intent of Soviet leaders, but . . . it is incorrect to contend that there was no serious threat. A Soviet challenge to a stable world and to U.S. interests in democratic political systems and open economies clearly existed." Samuel F. Wells, Jr., "Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Security During the Cold War" in Hogan, ed., *End*, 64–66; and Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 752–57.

[159] See Matlock, *Autopsy*, 148; Mandebaum and Talbott, *Reagan*, 86–87; William J. Jackson, "Soviet Reassessment of Ronald Reagan, 1985–1988," *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (Winter 1998–99): 629–42; Philip Zelikow and Condolezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 15–16, 19; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 753; Mueller, "Quiet Cataclysm," 41. This view is contrary to Glad's analysis of Reagan as a black and white thinker who might be able to change his perceptions, but only after an inordinate amount of "negative evidence." "Black and White," 72. For evidence of the contrast between Reagan's ability to perceive change in the Soviet

Reagan not only recognized Soviet change; he also, as he himself believed, contributed to it. His ideology led him to promote such policies as the U.S. military buildup, SDI, negotiating with the Soviet Union, and broadening the discussion to include human rights and other issues, in the belief that the Soviets would respond to changes in *American* behavior. Many former Soviet officials now agree that these steps did often contribute to the result Reagan desired. For example, Reagan's conciliatory policies toward the Soviet Union enabled Gorbachev to forge ahead in his domestic and international initiatives. As Dobrynin noted, "If Reagan had stuck to his hard-line policies in 1985 and 1986 . . . Gorbachev would have been accused by the rest of the Politburo of giving everything away to a fellow who does not want to negotiate. We would have been forced to tighten our belts and spend even more on defense."[160] The success of Reagan's moves in turn encouraged him to continue along the path of trying to influence the Soviet Union, convinced that "it could change if subjected to sufficient pressure and his personal negotiating skill."[161]

What does the success of Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union tell us about his abilities as a leader? Since good outcomes can be the result of any number of factors, including luck, it is unwise to infer automatically that they are a consequence of good processes. In addition to the qualities that allowed Reagan to perceive change, therefore, we must briefly explore the other traits that may have contributed to his effectiveness in this case. This is particularly necessary in view of the widespread skepticism cited earlier about his intellectual abilities, and his lack of experience, knowledge, and training in foreign policy. He could also be passive, incurious, uninterested in detail, ignorant of the nuances of policy, and stubborn, all of which contributed to a hands-off management style that left him vulnerable to his advisers. The question is whether other qualities of mind could have compensated in part for these failings.

Earlier we noted Reagan's strong principles and determination to implement them. What also mattered was his ability to do so. Certainly, there is little doubt about his impressive "people skills." These were what gave Reagan confidence in personal contact and made it an effective tool for him. His powers of persuasion have been widely recognized,[162] as have his negotiating skills.[163] Moreover, Reagan's openness to information and his capacity to be a good listener must also be noted. The qualities that helped him to perceive Soviet change often facilitated his efforts to effect change himself.

Union and the inability of the C.I.A. to do so, see Philip Taubman, "How the C.I.A.'s Judgments Were Distorted by Cold War Catechisms," *New York Times*, 18 March 2001.

[160] Cited in Greenstein, "Reckoning," 121; see also Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 609; Jackson, "Soviet Reassessment" Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 47–48, 164–166, 193, 244, 249.

[161] Matlock, *Autopsy*, 77; see also Jervis, "Perception and Misperception," n14.

[162] See, for example, Cannon, *Reagan*, 333, 371; Speakes, *Speaking*, 301; Cannon, *President Reagan*, 122.

[163] See Bessmertnykh in Wolhforth, *Witnesses*, 107; Shultz, *Turmoil*, 145. See also, Anderson, *Revolution*, 241, 284–86; and Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 150–51, 156, and "Ronald Reagan," 122.

While Reagan's skill as the "great communicator" has frequently been acknowledged, his ability as a politician has been less often remarked. As we have seen, he was more flexible, pragmatic, and willing to compromise than his ideological orientation led many to expect. Moreover, he was able to sell his policies to the public and use his popularity to get them through Congress—an ability of which he was fully aware.[164] As Fred Greenstein points out, ". . . Reagan was far more than a political front man. He was a politically skilled chief executive whose talents were insufficiently recognized because he was cut from a different cloth from most of those who rise to the nation's highest office."[165]

A number of other qualities that enabled Reagan to be effective have been noted earlier. His clearly defined goals allowed him to concentrate his energies on what was important to him, and his consistency in pursuing them left his subordinates in no doubt about his priorities.[166] Reagan was confident about his own judgment and for the most part made decisions easily. Moreover, when his goals were at stake, he could often assert himself and resist the temptation to delegate his responsibilities.[167]

When he was not so engaged, however, there could be trouble, as Reagan, encouraged by his dislike of detail and content to focus on the big picture, left to others the task of bringing his ideas to fruition. His management style was distinctly hands off. As a former aide described it, "He made no demands, and gave almost no instructions. . . . Rarely did he ask searching questions and demand to know why someone had or had not done something. He just sat back in a supremely calm, relaxed manner and waited until important things were brought to him." This put Reagan at the mercy of his advisers, with the inevitable result that the system worked well when the his aides were competent and loyal,[168] like Secretary Shultz who "enabled Reagan to implement the unexpectedly visionary aspect of his world view." When they were not such paragons, "disaster [could] strike." At such times, as in the Iran-contra crisis, not even Reagan's "first class temperament" could save him.

What, then does this singular mix of attributes and skills tell us about Reagan's leadership abilities? What was it that allowed him to recognize and promote change in the Soviet Union, yet failed him so badly in the Iran-contra situation? In fact, what stands out is how context dependent Reagan's performance was. When the nature of the problem played to his particular strengths, it could be quite good. But in other situations, these skills could not compensate for Reagan's failings, and some of his strengths became weaknesses.

[164] Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 156; Anderson, *Revolution*, 284; Cannon, *Reagan*, 319 and *President Reagan*, 102, 116.

[165] Greenstein, "Reckoning," 122. This assessment has been echoed by Russians like Bessmertnykh and Evgeniy Primakov ("he is a great political leader"). U.S. Congress, *Soviet Diplomacy*, 116; Wohlforth, *Witnesses*, 108. On Reagan's political skill, see also Neustadt, "Presidents," 17–23.

[166] Greenstein, "Reckoning," 122; and "Ronald Reagan," 215; Neustadt, "Presidents," 17.

[167] Anderson, *Revolution*, 286; Fischer, *Reagan*, 80–81, 155–56.

[168] Anderson, *Revolution*, 289–92; Reagan, *For the Record*, 266–69, 294.

In perceiving and encouraging change in the Soviet Union, Reagan was able to draw on his strengths. In contrast to Iran-contra, what the situation demanded of him was something he could do. When it came to perceiving and encouraging change in the Soviet Union, what was required was openness, insight, persuasion, and negotiation. Unlike the abilities demanded by the Iran-contra situation (guiding and controlling staff and a detailed understanding of policy), these were skills that Reagan possessed, and he exercised them willingly. In this case, persuasion and communication *were* the essential tasks, and Reagan had no need to delegate them.

Long ago, Machiavelli observed that particular combinations of talents may produce success in some situations, but failure in others.[169] Reagan provides a classic example of this, though not all leaders are likely to exhibit such a huge gap between strengths and weaknesses as he did.[170] As Lou Cannon describes it, "The paradox of the Reagan presidency was that it depended entirely on Reagan for its ideological inspiration while he depended upon others for all aspects of governance except his core ideas and his powerful performances. In the many arenas of the office where ideology did not apply or the performances had no bearing, Reagan was at a loss."[171] He could lead the nation and influence his counterparts on the world stage, yet fail spectacularly at keeping his own house in order.*

[169] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 131–32.

[170] Of course, President Jimmy Carter did exhibit such a gap between his analytical ability and his lack of political sensitivity. See Greenstein, *Presidential Difference*, 141–42; Farnham, *Roosevelt*, 240 n 47.

[171] Cited in George and George, *Presidential Personality*, 225.

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