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Did Reagan Make Gorbachev Possible?

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This article examines how Soviet leaders responded to Ronald Reagan during his first presidential administration. It contests the notion that Reagan's tough rhetoric and arms buildup from 1981 to 1984 made Gorbachev possible. It draws on fresh evidence to argue that Reagan's words and deeds had precisely the opposite effect—they emboldened hard-liners within the Kremlin and ultimately postponed "new thinking."

Ronald Reagan's rhetoric and policies toward the Soviet Union in his first administration delayed the reconfiguration of the Soviet outlook toward the Cold War that came to define the Gorbachev era. His words and deeds gave credence to hard-liners within the Kremlin at the expense of voices that would reduce nuclear arsenals and retard the tempo of ideological competition. This process played out in three stages: the cautious optimism with which Soviet leaders and advisors foresaw the prospect of a Reagan presidency in the election year of 1980; the time of frustration from 1981 to 1982; and the period of intense fear from 1983 to 1984.

Recent evidence, drawn from oral history projects, memoir literature, and newly declassified correspondence and minutes of selected Politburo meetings, reveals that Soviet leaders wanted to negotiate with the new American president. This evidence coincides with the release of Reagan's diaries and his correspondence with Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko, in which one finds the fiercely anticommunist American president determined from the very start to negotiate with his adversaries in the hope of transcending the Cold War.

On the American side, political allegiances have both shaped and limited our understanding of this crucial period in time. Especially in the post-9/11 era, Republicans are enamored with what they see as the legacy of Reagan's foreign policy (Arquilla 2006). They contend that Reagan's bold and decisive leadership forced the Soviet Union to its knees and compelled it to negotiate. Some go so far as to say that Reagan's rhetoric and policies hastened the Soviet Union's collapse. Reagan's "talk of democracy and good-

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versus-evil," asserts Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense during George W. Bush's first administration, "[was] widely criticized, even ridiculed, as unsophisticated and destabilizing. But it's now widely understood as having contributed importantly to the greatest victory in world history: the collapse of Soviet communism and the liberation of the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe without a war" (Leffler 2005, 410). Democrats, for their part, tend to avoid having to address the end of the Cold War. If pressed, they shift the conversation to *perestroika* and *glasnost* and to Gorbachev's unilateral reduction of Soviet troop levels, his withdrawal from Afghanistan, and his willingness to allow for the relatively peaceful disintegration of the Eastern bloc.

U.S. and British scholars have tended to reflect this political divide. Aptly titled works such as Paul Kengor's *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (2006), Peter Schweizer's *Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty Year Struggle and Final Triumph over Communism* (2002), and John Lewis Gaddis's recent *Cold War: A New History* (2005) praise Reagan as a visionary who helped foster the peaceful withering away of communism—just as George Kennan had predicted would one day occur. These interpretations mean to counter earlier works such as Raymond Garthoff's *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (1994), which emphasizes the bureaucratic disarray within the Reagan White House as well as the conflicted impulses on the part of Reagan himself, and Edmund Morris's unconventional "official" biography, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (2000), which reduces Reagan to an intellectual blank slate. Thus far, memoirs of policy makers from this Republican administration have—with the exception of excellent contributions by George Shultz (1993) and Jack Matlock (2004)—offered more in the way of political bromides than genuine insights.

By contrast, the literature that has emerged from the former Soviet Union is less ideologically charged. The Soviet Union has collapsed, and communism has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared. Its stewards in the waning days of the Soviet Union therefore have no ideological legatees to protect. Scholars of history and international relations should take these figures seriously. Their testimony, along with the limited amount of material from the time that has been made public, casts doubt on the narrative Reagan once crafted to explain the confrontation that characterized his first administration. "So, once again," he wrote in his memoirs, following the death of General Secretary Chernenko in March 1985, "there was a new man in the Kremlin. 'How am I supposed to get anyplace with the Russians,' I asked Nancy, 'if they keep dying on me?' " (1990, 611). Indeed, leaders and key advisors within the Kremlin wanted to get someplace with the Americans, just as Reagan wanted to get someplace with them, but Reagan's harsh rhetoric and inconsistent policies thwarted their efforts as well as his own.

Cautious Optimism

The narrative of how the Soviets responded to Ronald Reagan begins in the last year of Jimmy Carter's single term. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979, President Carter rang in a cold new year. He withdrew from Senate consideration the SALT II Treaty to curb the arms race; he imposed an embargo on U.S. grain exports

to the Soviet Union; he vowed to boycott the Summer Olympics in Moscow if the Soviets did not withdraw from Afghanistan within a month; and he sent legislation to Capitol Hill outlining the terms of a huge military buildup. By the start of the 1980 presidential campaign, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, which seemed to have improved since the ominous days of the Cuban missile crisis, culminating in the signing of the historic 1975 Helsinki Accords, had reached a new low. From the perspective of both Democrats and Republicans, the Cold War had shifted from détente to outright confrontation.

For their part, Soviet leaders were baffled by the actions of Carter's Democratic administration and, increasingly so, by the ideological contours of American politics. In his 2005 book *The Global Cold War,* Odd Arne Westad emphasizes the role of ideology in the globalization of the Cold War, which reached new heights in the 1970s. "[I]deologies inherent in their politics," he writes, "impelled the United States and the Soviet Union to intervene in the Third World following the collapse of European colonial empires. The United States espoused an ideology of liberty, while the Soviet Union purported to advocate social justice" (2006, 1-7). Despite these lines of distinctions, postwar American politics developed independent of global left and right. Labor unions that stood to gain perhaps the least from unrestrained capitalism provided some of the most strident anticommunist rhetoric. The Democratic Party, which pursued social justice through the framework of the New Deal state, nominated Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy—arguably the two most hawkish Cold War presidents before 1980. Indeed, throughout the 1970s, much of the clamor against détente originated from neoconservative Democrats such as Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, the hard-liner from Washington who spoke out fervently against Soviet treatment of Jewish and Pentecostal dissidents, and whose amendment to the trade bill of 1974 linked internal reforms within the Soviet Union to its broader relationship with the United States.

As the 1980 campaign got under way, Soviets pinned their hopes on the American right. Unlike Democrats, Republican candidates inveighed against the Soviet Union during political campaigns but seemed to moderate their stance once in office. Soviet leaders remembered how Richard Nixon had surprised them by implementing détente after he had made a career of Red-baiting his domestic opponents and vowing to get tough with the Soviet Union. Like that of Nixon, writes longtime Soviet ambassador the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, "Jimmy Carter's presidency [had] also [been] a surprise to Moscow but an unpleasant one. If we had misread him at the beginning, so had the voters of the United States." Carter had entered office vowing to provide more honest and ethical governance, to promote human rights, and to pursue further arms limitations with the Soviet Union. He had cast himself in the American mind as the anti-Nixon firmly committed to relieving the pain of Vietnam and Watergate. He soon became to the Soviets the anti-Nixon who repudiated détente and preached American morals. Brezhnev had taken a personal liking to Carter at Vienna in 1979, placing his arm on the American president's shoulder as he descended the steps from their summit and then embracing him warmly (Leffler 2007, 317), but by the latter's "reelection campaign Moscow so distrusted Carter that it could not bring itself to support him even against Ronald Reagan" (Dobrynin 1995, 455).

Indeed, the Soviet conception of Carter was the complete opposite of how most Americans regarded their president in 1980. While a majority of Americans saw Carter as weak and indecisive, Soviets considered him to be under the spell of his hawkish national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. They found Carter committed to promoting American ideals even at the expense of international stability. They feared that America's first "born-again" president was preparing for war, calling attention to a leaked White House plan for a "new nuclear strategy" in 1980 to survive a massive nuclear exchange and to provide for the recovery of the U.S. economy afterward. "Press reports on these directives, which were never officially made public," Dobrynin writes, "described them as part of the campaign of nuclear deterrence to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that the United States was capable of enduring a protracted nuclear conflict. Special command exercises had been conducted in simulated wartime conditions with President Carter participating" (1995, 456). The Soviet view of Carter was, in short, that he was prepared for a showdown, and that he could not resist the opportunity to exploit Soviet weakness for his own moralistic gains. How else could he have allowed what had seemed to them an act of desperation to restore communist rule in Afghanistan spiral into a new cycle of Cold War tensions?

In contrast, the Soviet view of Ronald Reagan was one partly of resignation. Despite his long pattern of anticommunist statements, the former actor and governor of California, like Nixon, might turn out to be someone with whom Soviets could do business. Alexandr Bessmertnykh, who served as counsel in the Soviet Embassy in the United States and, briefly, as foreign minister during the 1991 coup, recalls that the Soviets had no illusions about Reagan: "We believed we had a pretty good picture of Reagan. . . . He was a conservative, a man who had already put his views forward many decades ago in a very straightforward way." At the same time, Bessmertnykh goes on to say, "the mood in Moscow was 'anyone but Carter,' because Carter was so irritating to us at the end of his presidency that anyone would have been better than Carter. When Reagan won the election, everyone was happy in Moscow" (Wohlforth 1996, 106).

Resignation, yes, but also cautious optimism. Soviet leaders could not envision a sustained American foreign policy that operated outside the framework of détente. As Dobrynin puts it, "the Kremlin found it impossible to believe that Americans would want to turn their backs on détente and return to the suspicions, the warlike behavior, and the huge military spending of the cold war" (1995, 455). Soviet leaders were prepared for a fresh start. Reagan's inauguration offered a chance for both sides to step back from the brink. Reagan found himself in a position similar to that of John F. Kennedy 20 years earlier. Like Reagan, Kennedy had campaigned warning of a strategic imbalance in favor of the Soviet Union. Once in office, Kennedy learned the truth about Soviet weakness from the Corona satellite system, but he proceeded to build up American conventional and strategic arms anyway. Would Reagan do the same? It seemed unlikely to the Soviets.[1] So much had changed since then. The Cuban missile crisis had

1. According to Garthoff (1994, 56), Soviets expected from Reagan tougher terms on SALT II as well as hard bargaining all around, but at least pragmatism and consistency instead of Carter's shifts and moralizing.

accentuated the dangers of nuclear confrontation. The Soviet Union's achievement of rough strategic parity by the start of 1970s seemed to necessitate America's treating it as an equal partner within the international system. And the 1975 Helsinki Accords had finally codified the de facto post–World War II division of Europe.

Yet Reagan defied expectations and, in so doing, missed an opportunity to repair relations between the Soviet Union and the United States and to return to a framework of détente. Instead, he took steps toward exacerbating the confrontation between the two superpowers that had arisen one year earlier. Reagan needed to fulfill his pledge to restore America's strength after a decade of malaise. And he needed to combat the perception that the United States was losing the Cold War. In the first press conference of his presidency, however, Reagan recklessly employed language far harsher than any he had used during the campaign. Asked what he believed were the Soviets' intentions, he responded bluntly,

> I know of no Soviet leader since the revolution, and including the present leadership that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use. Now as long as they do that and as long as they, at the same time, have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards, I think when you do business with them, even at a détente, you keep that in mind. (Reagan 1981a)

This tough rhetoric signaled a pattern for the first few months of Reagan's administration. At his confirmation hearing before the U.S. Senate, incoming Secretary of State Alexander Haig declared the Soviet Union to be the greatest sponsor of terrorism in the world (U.S. Senate 1981, 74-75). The next month, Reagan gave an interview with Walter Cronkite in which he charged that the Soviet goal was "the Marxist philosophy of world revolution and a single, one-world Communist state"; that their ideology was one "without God, without our idea of morality in the religious sense"; and that "their statement about morality is [that] nothing is immoral that furthers their cause, which means they can resort to lying or stealing or cheating or even murder if it furthers their cause, and that is not immoral [to them]" (Reagan 1981b).

The bluster of Reagan and his self-proclaimed "vicar of foreign policy" did not fall on deaf ears in the Kremlin. After an embarrassing incident in which Dobrynin was denied his usual parking privileges at the State Department, Soviet leaders began to sense that Reagan's inauguration would not reverse the slide toward confrontation that had begun under Carter. Dobrynin himself recalls that "[t]he Politburo discussed the whole situation on February 11 at an angry and emotional meeting." On this occasion, he writes, "President Reagan was roundly and unanimously denounced because of the tone set at his initial press conference, which was fully reflected in the American media." As Dobrynin puts it, "[d]uring my long career as ambassador the collective mood of the Soviet leadership had never been so suddenly and deeply set against an American president" (1995, 486).

A Time of Frustration

What followed from the Politburo meeting was two years of increasing frustration with Reagan and his apparent inconsistencies. That spring, Reagan privately called on Leonid Brezhnev to help reduce tensions. Recovering from an assassination attempt in March 1981, Reagan sent a handwritten letter to the Soviet premier that recalled their introduction in California a decade earlier:

> When we met I asked if you were aware that the hopes and aspirations of millions and millions of people throughout the world were dependent on the decisions that would be reached in your meetings [with President Nixon].
>
> You took my hand in both of yours and assured me that you were aware of that and that you were dedicated with all your heart and mind to fulfilling those hopes and dreams. (Reagan 1990, 272)

Reagan beseeched Brezhnev to fulfill his pledge to foster peace, and he promised to eliminate obstacles to common aspirations that Americans and Russians shared:

> It is in this spirit, in the spirit of helping the people of both our nations, that I have lifted the grain embargo. Perhaps this decision will contribute to creating the circumstances which will lead to the meaningful and constructive dialogue which will assist us in fulfilling our joint obligation to find lasting peace. (Reagan 1990, 272)

Brezhnev responded in earnest, pleading with Reagan to restart negotiations. "The main idea," he wrote in May, "that I would like to convey through my letter is that we do not seek confrontations with the USA or infringement upon American legitimate interests. What we seek is different—we wish peace, cooperation, a sense of mutual trust, and benevolence between the Soviet Union and the United States of America." Brezhnev went on to express puzzlement at the disparity between Reagan's words and deeds. On the one hand, he read Reagan's letter as an offer to move beyond the poisonous atmosphere of the end of the Carter presidency. On the other hand, he needed only to read the *New York Times* to realize that Reagan intended to build on Carter's already tremendous military outlays as well as to taken a stiffer line on leftist insurgencies throughout the third world. "Try, Mr. President," Brezhnev implored, "to see what is going on through our eyes. Attempts are being made to revitalize the USA-made military and political alliances, new ones are being added to those which already exist thousands of kilometers away from the USA and aimed against our country, the American military presence abroad in general is being increased and expanded, large areas of the world are being declared spheres of 'vital interests' of the USA" (Brezhnev 1981). Try to understand our position, Brezhnev was saying—that of an empire under duress.

One may be tempted to dismiss Brezhnev's letter as a boilerplate diplomatic response, or as perhaps another ploy to lull an American president into negotiations while the Soviet Union built up its capabilities. It was more than just talk. We know now that Brezhnev had every reason to call for negotiations, given the status of the international system in 1981. The Soviet leader knew that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had been a last resort to shore up a communist neighbor—not, as so many Americans saw it, a

precursor to an invasion of the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf.[2] He foresaw that trouble lay ahead within the Eastern bloc, as support for Solidarity grew in Poland. He was mindful of the fractures that had occurred within the global communist movement over the past 20 years, as China gravitated toward the West and Cuba became an unpredictable, often nettlesome client state. Most importantly, Brezhnev was certain that the Soviet Union possessed nowhere near the strategic capabilities that Reagan insisted they did.[3] Talk of a strategic imbalance during the 1980 campaign had been understandable given the Soviet understanding of the ebb and flow of American politics. But Brezhnev and his advisors did not think that Reagan actually believed what he had said in order to win the presidency.[4]

Brezhnev's bewilderment increased over the course of 1981, as Reagan embarked on perhaps the largest military buildup in American history. His frustration grew as Reagan approved a program calling for defense expenditures that totaled $1.5 trillion over five years and included a host of new weapons systems: 100 MX missiles (later scaled back to 50), each equipped with 10 multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs) with 300 kiloton warheads, or the equivalent of 20 times the impact of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima; the B-1 bomber; the Trident submarine; the neutron bomb; and the F-14 fighter plane. In addition, there were new research projects geared toward acquiring particle beam technology, high-energy lasers and space weapons, as well as wage increases and 75,000 new civilian jobs at the Defense Department, and outlays for two new aircraft carrier groups priced around $18 billion each (Stockman 1986, 281). At the same time as this massive arms buildup, Brezhnev heard Reagan speak passionately about the need to reduce arms, and he received more letters from the American president articulating the same goal. In response to a letter Reagan sent that fall, Brezhnev expressed amazement at Reagan's characterization of the strategic arms balance. "Your message quite correctly points out what danger for mankind is presented by the already existing nuclear weapons stockpiles as well as the need for serious efforts to reduce the armaments," Brezhnev wrote. "However," he went on to say, "it is difficult to match these thoughts with the program of a steep increase in the US strategic forces that you have recently announced.

2. According to Bessmertnykh, Russia's long-held desire for warm water ports (i.e., Indian Ocean or Persian Gulf) was no longer a factor by the second half of the twentieth century. "Maybe someone in the eighteenth century had this notion. But in practical policy there was never a need for that because we already had access to the seas, and the vastness of the Soviet Union is so great that just to get an extra one thousand or ten thousand square kilometers was nothing. So it was never a strategic consideration. I think it was more ideological" (Wohlforth 1996, 130).

3. For a systematic refutation of the overestimation of Soviet capabilities first in the Team B Report and later in National Intelligence Estimates during the Reagan administration, see Garthoff (2001). Writes Garthoff, "*From 1974 through 1986, every year's NIE 11-3/8 overestimated the rate of Soviet strategic force modernization.* The initial deployment of new or modernized systems was overestimated in 10 out of 17 systems (and underestimated in only one). The rate of deployment of modernized systems was also generally overestimated." Garthoff's analysis is based on the declassified 1989 internal CIA study "Intelligence Forecasts of Soviet Intercontinental Attack Forces: An Evaluation of the Record."

4. "I do not know whether the president and his associates really believed what they were saying [when it came to the strategic balance]," Dobrynin writes, "or if it was mostly for public consumption. But Brezhnev and the Politburo firmly believed that the American leadership had fallen into the hands of those who had never liked détente, never accepted parity, and tried to regain superiority, dreaming of the revival of Pax Americana" (1995, 504).

After all, this program in no way leads in the direction of the restraint, which you seem to be advocating" (Brezhnev 1981b).

Reagan's proposal of the "zero option" for Soviet SS-20 missiles targeted on Western Europe did not clarify matters. The essence of the zero option was that the United States would refrain from installing cruise missiles and intermediate range ballistic missiles in Western Europe on the condition that the Soviets unilaterally withdraw SS-20 missiles they had already deployed. This plan paid heed neither to the broader strategic balance that favored the United States nor to America's nuclear-armed allies, who already had nuclear missiles installed in Western Europe. Soviets could not understand how they should take seriously a plan that did not consider strategic the arsenals of Great Britain and France. In a letter sent in December 1981, Brezhnev charged Reagan with engaging in double book-keeping, "whereby in counting the Soviet arms in question their numbers are made to look many times higher, and—conversely—when it comes to the US, such numbers are drastically understated" (Brezhnev 1981c).

Reagan's buildup of long-range nuclear arms earlier that year shaped Brezhnev's perception of Reagan's sincerity when it came to theater nuclear forces that autumn. Brezhnev did not see how the Soviet Union could trust the calculations of the United States, given its earlier rationale for "catching up" with the Soviet Union by building strategic arms. "Moreover," he went on to say, "hundreds of nuclear systems in the possession of Britain and France are totally excluded from the counting, whereas on the Soviet side even those systems are counted which do not belong to the category of medium-range weapons and, indeed, have nothing to do whatsoever with Europe and still less so with the US" (Brezhnev 1981c).

The actions of Reagan and his administration in its first year bred a cynicism on the part of his Soviet audience that fed suspicions about the West. Georgy Arbatov, head of the Soviet Institute on American and Canadian Studies, summed up the likely reaction of Soviet hard-liners. "Since the very first days of the Reagan administration," Arbatov wrote at the time, "its leading spokesmen have missed no chance to make abusive charges against the USSR, like the charge that the Soviet Union supports international terrorism, uses chemical or bacteriological weapons, and so forth. The bully-boy rhetoric was supplemented by corresponding policies—primarily, by whipping up the arms race." How was the old guard within the Kremlin likely to perceive Reagan's actions? "I think that an important motivation of such rhetoric and policy was an intention to provoke the Soviet Union into changing its policies," Arbatov went on to say, "and thus justify a return to cold war" (1983, 17). In short, Reagan's rhetoric and policies had made the prospect of reform and restraint increasingly difficult on the Soviet end.

Yet the Soviet Union did practice remarkable restraint. It did not intervene in Poland in December 1981, as it had done in Budapest in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. As Matthew Ouimet puts it in a recent book on the Brezhnev Doctrine, discussions within the Politburo in late 1981 "offer convincing evidence that Moscow was prepared to allow Polish communism to collapse rather than introduce its own troops into the crisis" (2003, 241). Indeed, the Politburo preferred that the Warsaw government be the one to clamp down on Solidarity. Whether this decision signaled an abandonment of the "Brezhnev Doctrine" is a matter of ongoing historiographical debate (Brown 2007,

271; Kramer 1999; Mastny 1999). The outcome, though, suggests a Soviet Union chastened by recent adventuring abroad, an empire far less expansion oriented than Reagan and the neoconservatives within his administration charged throughout the first term.

What made the Soviet outlook different in 1981? There was partly the expenditure that intervention might entail on top of the Soviet commitment to Afghanistan. By the spring of 1980, the Afghan army that Soviet troops were attempting to shore up, which counted some 145,000 before the intervention, had shrunk to a quarter of its previous size (Garthoff 1994, 1022). The Red Army found itself committing as many as 80,000 troops just to hold major cities and defend the withering Afghan army from the mujahideen (Andrew and Gordievsky 1990, 575). "As feared," Ouimet writes in *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine,* "Soviet forces found themselves at war with the vast majority of the Afghan people in support of an unpopular government" (2003, 95). U.S. support for the mujahideen compounded the costs of Soviet intervention. Even before he authorized the transfer of stinger missiles to the Afghan resistance and codified U.S. strategy in NSDD-166 in 1985, Reagan ramped up Carter's policy of covert aid. Between fiscal years 1981 and 1984, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) budget for Afghanistan swelled from $30 million to $200 million, ratcheting up the costs for a Soviet endeavor that had already been foundering (Coll 2004, 65).

There was also the uncertainty of how the United States might respond to a full-scale Soviet invasion of Poland, given the extent to which Reagan staked U.S. prestige on developments in Eastern Europe. In the winter of 1981, Reagan issued a vague threat to Brezhnev. "Information available to me indicates a growing possibility that the Soviet Union is preparing to intervene military in Poland," he wrote. "I wish to make clear to you the seriousness with which the United States would view such an action, to which we would be compelled to respond. I take this step not to threaten the Soviet Union, but to ensure that there is no possibility of your misunderstanding our position or our intentions."[5] What were these intentions that Reagan implored his Soviet counterpart not to misunderstand? Was the United States prepared to respond to a Soviet invasion of Poland with military force? Economic sanctions seemed the likely response. Yet force was not entirely out of the question. According to long-standing Reagan intimate William Clark, then deputy secretary of state and later national security advisor, "I'm confident that if the Soviets had crossed the line—if it had come to reasonable necessity to use force—[Reagan] was ready to do it. . . . [H]e would not tolerate a repeat of the Hungarian or Czechoslovakian incidents" (Kengor 2006, 96).

Ultimately, General Wojciech Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law preempted a possible Soviet invasion. Reagan, however, saw no daylight between decisions made in Warsaw and in Moscow, and he regarded Jaruzelski as a Soviet officer in a Polish uniform. The specter of a Soviet invasion of Poland had hung over the Reagan White House from the start. "Moscow believes it can treat Reagan the way it treated Carter," Secretary of

5. Reagan to Brezhnev, n.d., box 38, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Head of State File, Ronald Reagan Library. Although it is unclear the exact date this letter was sent, its content and context strongly suggests December 1981.

Defense Caspar Weinberger announced to Dobrynin in their first meeting. "Now, Reagan will prove the opposite." Motivating Weinberger's tough stance was fear that the Soviet Union would invade Poland right after a summit with Reagan, just as he believed it had done in Afghanistan after Brezhnev met with Carter in Vienna (Dobrynin 1995, 490). The imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981, should have marginalized this concern. Yet talk of a summit was not forthcoming, and there was little reciprocity to match Soviet restraint.

Admittedly, no one in Washington could have ruled out the possibility of a Soviet invasion in the near future. Rather than laying the groundwork for a summit, however, Reagan's rhetoric and policies after December seemed to dare the Soviets to intervene. Between the start of 1982 and the spring of 1983, the president approved three important strategy documents, NSDD-32, NSDD-66, and NSDD-75—each of which had challenging the Soviets over Poland very much in mind. The first, National Security Decision Directive 32, signed on May 20, 1982, promulgated several key objectives, including:

> To foster, if possible in concert with our allies, restraint in Soviet military spending, discourage Soviet adventurism, and weaken the Soviet alliance system by forcing the USSR to bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings, and to encourage long-term liberalizing and nationalist tendencies within the Soviet Union and allied countries.

On January 17, 1983, Reagan approved NSDD-75, the goals of which were threefold:

> To contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism by competing effectively on a sustained basis with the Soviet Union in all international arenas—particularly in the overall military balance and geographic regions of priority concern to the United States. This will remain the primary focus of U.S. policy toward the USSR.
>
> To promote, within the narrow limits available to us, the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the privileged ruling elite is gradually reduced. The U.S. recognizes that Soviet aggressiveness has deep roots in the internal system, and that relations with the USSR should therefore take into account whether or not they help to strengthen this system and its capacity to engage in aggression.
>
> To engage the Soviet Union in negotiations to attempt to reach agreements which protect and enhance U.S. interests and which are consistent with the principle of strict reciprocity and mutual interest. This is important when the Soviet Union is in the midst of a process of political succession.

These national security decision directives codified much of what Reagan was saying publicly. Most famously, in a speech to the British Parliament at Westminster, Reagan declared, "Let us now begin a major effort to secure . . . a crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation." Asserting that "the global campaign for democracy [was] now gathering force" and that "the forces of good ultimately rally and triumph over evil," Reagan inverted Leon Trotsky's famous line and called for a "march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people." Stressing the Soviets' economic struggles, Reagan continued to turn communist rhetoric on its head:

> In an ironic sense Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis, a crisis where the demands of the economic order are conflicting directly with those of the political order. But the crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist West, but in the home of Marxist-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. (Reagan 1982, 744-45)

Years of Fear

Reagan's tough rhetoric and policies led to heightened Soviet fears over his intentions in the years 1983-84. They contributed to a missed opportunity for progress upon the ascension of Yuri Andropov. Selected as general secretary in November 1982 following the death of Brezhnev, Andropov appeared willing to take steps to reduce Cold War tensions. He spoke about instituting a nuclear-free zone among the Baltic nations, and he talked about reducing the Soviet SS-20 fleet. He wrote a letter to an American schoolgirl telling her that he, too, feared a nuclear war. He met with former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and seasoned diplomat Averell Harriman to send the message that he was prepared to negotiate with anyone from the West (Steele and Abraham 1984, 180-83).

Andropov was also fearful of Reagan's intentions. While he sought better relations with the West, the new Soviet leader acted in light of his American counterpart's arms buildup and provocative statements about leaving Marxist-Leninism on "the ash-heap of history." Andropov had long been cautious of Reagan. In 1981, as head of the KGB, he had launched Project RYAN, a worldwide effort to determine whether the new American president intended to launch a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union (Andrew 1995, 463). This mind-set accompanied Andropov as he climbed to the top of the Soviet ladder. It hampered his ability to trust Reagan going into 1983, a year that turned out to be one of the most dangerous of the entire Cold War. During this time, "Andropov's deep mistrust of Reagan became entrenched, fortified by emotions—contempt, animosity, and a tinge of fear" (Zubok 2007, 273).

Andropov and his coterie within the Kremlin paid particular attention to two of Reagan's speeches that spring. In the first, Reagan addressed the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, in an attempt to dissuade this influential constituency from lending support to a nuclear freeze. He called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" and urged his audience "to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil" (Reagan 1983a). The Soviets heard this language loud and clear, and within the Soviet leadership, Reagan's speech fit a broader pattern of polarizing rhetoric. Sergei Tarasenko, who worked in the Soviet foreign ministry and would become chief assistant to Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, described its effects at a 1993 oral history conference at Princeton University. "There were always people in the military, the KGB, and the security structures who would use any opportunity to make trouble," Tarasenko recalled, "[and] to heat up the atmosphere. The task of the Foreign Ministry was to balance it, to counter this threat. That was what both the secretary and the

minister were engaged in, trying to put aside this flack, this negative element of the relationship, and trying to get to the core, to the real things, how to solve the problem, how to improve it" (Wohlforth 1996, 20). Reagan's harsh rhetoric, while perhaps not new to the Kremlin's ears, only reinforced the long-held suspicion that the West was engaged in a Manichaean struggle to defeat the Soviet Union.

Just weeks after his "evil empire" speech, Reagan made an announcement that further justified suspicious attitudes within the Soviet security apparatus. On March 23, 1983, the world first learned of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) when Reagan addressed the nation from the Oval Office to rally public support for sustaining a buildup of American arms. Before clearing it with the Departments of State and Defense, he inserted in the final draft the tantalizing proposition, "What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?" (Reagan 1983b). In a matter of seconds, Reagan had overturned the spirit—if not yet the letter—of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that the United States had signed with the Soviet Union in May 1972. He had acted to shore up political support for continuing his massive arms *buildup.*

Despite Reagan's apparent disregard for the ABM Treaty, Andropov attempted to make headway on the issue of theater-ranged nuclear weapons before the deployment of U.S. Pershing II and cruise missiles. He wrote to Reagan that summer, offering to "liquidate in the European part of the USSR those of our medium-ranged missiles which would be subject to reductions. Among them would be a considerable portion of SS-20 missiles as well, namely, that portion of those missiles which would be in excess of the aggregate number of medium-range missiles of Britain and France" (Andropov 1983). This proposal did not make up for the furtiveness with which the Soviets had installed their SS-20 missiles in the late 1970s. It did, however, indicate remarkable flexibility on Andropov's part, given the announcement of SDI earlier that spring. It was hardly a deal, but it did convey willingness to seek a *modus vivendi* based on parity in Europe.

Reagan did not reciprocate Andropov's overture. Indeed, the American president's words and actions throughout the tense fall of 1983 further hindered his Soviet counterpart's ability to offer concessions. In the aftermath of the tragic downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 by a Soviet MIG fighter on September 1, 1983, Reagan expressed outrage in a public statement, calling the incident a "barbaric act," a "terrorist act," and a "heinous act" before asking sarcastically, "What can be the scope of legitimate and mutual discourse with a state whose values permit such atrocities?" (Reagan 1983c, 1223-24). Soviet leaders found Reagan's response ominous. In the transcript of the Politburo meeting on September 2, 1983, at which Konstantin Chernenko substituted for an ailing Andropov, one finds the future general secretary mediating between his foreign minister on one side, and defense minister and KGB head on the other. Admitting from the start that it was a civilian airliner, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko focused on how to manage the political fallout from the incident in the United Nations and around the world. Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov, for his part, defended Soviet actions. "I can assure the Politburo that our airmen acted in full accordance with the

requirements of military duty," he declared, "and everything that is set forth in the memorandum that has been submitted is completely true. Our actions were absolutely correct, since a U.S.-made South Korean plane had penetrated 500 km into our territory" (Wohlforth 1996, 297). KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov, in turn, raised four points to suggest that the United States had carefully orchestrated a mission to test Soviet border defense and that it had been in constant communication with KAL 007 as it "was flying over the Soviet Union's top secret facilities in Kamchatka and Sakhalin" (Wohlforth 1996, 298-99). This assessment was, of course, false. Yet it was not outrageous, given the American military's probing of Soviet airspace throughout the Cold War, as well as the efforts of U.S. Navy secretary John Lehman to demonstrate a "forward strategy" in the Pacific by running aggressive exercises throughout 1983 (Rhodes 2007, 157; see also Benjamin Fischer 1997). Equivocation followed the shoot-down, as the Soviets first denied the incident and then obstructed the investigation. This response further aggrieved the victims in ways ultimately avoidable were it not for the Soviet perception that Reagan was exploiting the tragedy for political ends.

Less than a month after the KAL-007 incident, a NATO nuclear exercise called Able-Archer '83 raised potentially dire suspicions about U.S. intentions. Oleg Gordievsky, a double agent working in the British Embassy, warned his minders in the West that KGB higher-ups believed Able-Archer to be the first stage of an impending attack on the Soviet Union. According to Gordievsky, KGB headquarters had transmitted orders for specialized requests such as counting how many lights were burning in the windows of the State Department and Defense Department (Andrew 1995; Gates 1996). At the 1992 Princeton conference, Tarasenko seconded these fears. "Around this time," he recalled, "[First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi] Kornienko summoned me and showed me a top secret KGB paper. . . . In the paper, the KGB reported that they had information that the United States had prepared everything for a first strike; that they might resort to a surgical strike against command centers in the Soviet Union; and that they had the capability to destroy the system by incapacitating the command center" (Wohlforth 1996, 71).

The reaction to Able-Archer '83 shows the extent to which Soviets feared Reagan's intentions. His installation of Pershing missiles in Western Europe cast doubt on whether the American president was serious about returning to détente. His announcement of SDI raised the question of whether Reagan still believed in the fundamental concepts of deterrence and mutually assured destruction. His frequent allusions to a world without communism led many at home and abroad to ponder just what future Reagan might have in store.

Reagan's own response to the Soviets' reaction was one of disbelief. "Do you suppose they really believe that?" he asked National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, upon reading a report prepared for him by CIA director William Casey. "I don't see how they could believe that—but it's something to think about" (Benjamin Fischer 1997). Several scholars have seized on this reaction as evidence of a fundamental shift in Reagan's thinking about the Soviet Union and the Cold War in light of the crises of autumn 1983 (Beth Fischer 1997; Oberdorfer 1998). Reagan did moderate his tone as his reelection campaign got under way in 1984; yet even if this new tone signaled a shift in policy to

a domestic audience, it would prove effective to with international audience only if Soviet leaders were able to detect it.

Consider Andropov's reaction to Reagan's "Ivan and Anya" speech on January 16, 1984, in which he imagined a Soviet couple warmly meeting a Jim and Sally in a diner and went on to declare, "The fact that neither of us likes the other system is no reason to refuse to talk. Living in this nuclear age makes it imperative that we do talk. . . . As I've said before, my dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the Earth" (Reagan 1984). If this speech intended to signal a shift, the Soviet leadership did not perceive it as such. In a January 24 interview with Reuters, Andropov appeared unmoved by Reagan's new public tenor. "Is it that the American side has realized what it has done and, desiring a dialogue, is prepared to change its negative approach?" he asked, turning the table on the reporter. "No, this has not happened. The president's speech does not contain a single new idea, any new proposals either on the question of limiting nuclear arms in Europe or on other questions" (Andropov 1984a).

Andropov's words echoed what he was writing to Reagan privately. "Let us be frank, Mr. President," he wrote, "there is no way of making things look as if nothing has happened. There has been a disruption of the dialogue on the most important questions, a heavy blow has been dealt to the very process of nuclear arms limitation. The tension has grown dangerously. We know this, and you know this, too." The frustration on Andropov's part was palpable. "The stumbling block has been, so far, in the fact that we, for the time being, hear only calls in favor of a dialogue. If you, however, review the situation of the past years, you can see that with regard to our proposals to discuss important acute problems we either have not received a substantive answer, or the reply has been a negative one" (Andropov 1984b). The announcement of SDI had shaped the Kremlin's reaction to events during the tense fall of 1983, and Reagan's "Ivan and Anya" speech did nothing to change matters. Andropov pleaded with Reagan to calm the rhetoric of the Cold War and to limit underground nuclear weapons tests. He asked, "why not try to look for a mutually acceptable solution to the problem of preventing militarization of outer space, while it is not too late to close this extremely dangerous channel of the arms race? We raise this issue as an urgent one which brooks no delay" (Andropov 1984b).

Andropov was hardly speaking irrationally in the frustration he conveyed in his letter and the skepticism toward Reagan's "new outlook" he evinced in public. "Like Gromyko, but in contrast to the emotional Ustinov," Dobrynin recalls, "Andropov did not favor confrontation with the United States, but he believed Reagan to be a dangerous individual whose actions might trigger a military conflict between us. Hence Andropov's guarded attitude toward Reagan and his determination to maintain the Soviet Union's defense capability" (1995, 513). The former Soviet ambassador goes on to describe a meeting with Andropov in the summer of 1983, in which the Soviet leader asked, "Is he just playing his game and being a hypocrite, or does [Reagan] really realize that for all our ideological disagreements, you just cannot bring about a confrontation in the nuclear age?" Troubled by the status of the Cold War, Andropov concluded, "We should keep on persistently working with Reagan. We should be vigilant, because he is unpredictable. At the same time we ought not to ignore any signs of his readiness to improve our

relations. We should make the confidential channel operate, but we should not press the matter too hard" (Dobrynin 1995, 532).

Cold War apprehensions served to strengthen the old guard when Andropov succumbed to kidney failure in the spring of 1984. The selection of the aged and unimaginative Konstantin Chernenko to be general secretary in February was not a direct result of tensions between the two superpowers; yet the sense that the Soviet Union was under siege by the Western, capitalist world gave credence to the ideological hard-liners. Before his demise, Andropov had had his own successor in mind. Since the latter's promotion to full membership in the Politburo in 1980, Andropov had been the patron of an intelligent and dynamic reformer named Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev had supported Andropov's campaign to reduce corruption and alcoholism and to make communism work more efficiently. This reformist impulse threatened conservatives such as Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov and Premier Nikolay Tikhonov as well as the long-standing foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko. According to Arkady Volsky, an aide to Andropov, this old guard conspired to redact the draft of a speech that an ailing Andropov had prepared in the hospital to be read at a plenum of the Central Committee recommending that Gorbachev preside over the meetings of the Politburo and secretariat (Remnick 1993, 191-92). Ultimately, it was Chernenko, writes Archie Brown, "who was chosen by the old guard precisely because he represented continuity with the past—especially the Brezhnevite past—and he was particularly warmly supported by Gromyko and the hardline Minister of Defence, Ustinov. Both of these political veterans, whose careers as important officials stretched back to Stalin's time, knew that they could continue to run Soviet foreign and defence policy along traditional lines as long as Chernenko was there" (1996, 228).

Gorbachev had not challenged Chernenko formally, seeking instead to bide time after securing a position as senior secretary. He would not have overcome the apprehensions of the old guard. The lack of enthusiasm at the selection of Chernenko, however, was palpable. Anatoly Chernyaev, later a top foreign policy advisor during the Gorbachev era, recalls the mood of the room upon hearing the announcement:

> Tikhonov walked to the podium and began to drone on about "the one who is no longer with us" and about the duty of the Party to continue his initiatives. The tension didn't let up. And finally he said: "The Politburo discussed . . . has entrusted me . . . to advance for consideration by the plenum the candidacy of Comrade Chernenko." After a few long seconds came release—a weak, formal, very brief round of applause. (I remember the ovation, in November 1982, when Chernenko spoke the same words in nominating Andropov). Disappointment filled the room. (2000, 7)

Shortly after his ascension, Chernenko wrote to Reagan about shared interests between the United States and the Soviet Union. "We are convinced that it is impossible to begin to correct the present abnormal and, let's face it, dangerous situation, and to speak seriously of constructive moves," he reasoned, "if there is a continuation of attempts to upset the balance of forces and to gain military advantages to the detriment of the security of the other side, if actions are taken prejudicing the legitimate

interests of the other side" (Chernenko 1984a). In a letter that Chernenko sent to Reagan a month later, he elaborated on what he viewed as the fundamental issues preventing progress between the two nations. "Having initiated the deployment of its missiles in Western Europe," he wrote, "the United States is, thereby, creating an additional strategic threat to the Soviet Union. It is impossible for us to ignore it. This step has become the main obstacle on the path of negotiations, it has undermined in general the process of limiting and reducing nuclear arms" (Chernenko 1984b). Historians may be tempted to dismiss Chernenko's letter as political propaganda. Yet he was conveying to Reagan perfectly rational concerns. How could the Soviet Union overcome a half century of hostility toward the West when the United States would only negotiate from a position of overwhelming strength? How could anyone seek to reform the system without first overcoming hard-liners' suspicions that Reagan's tough talk and arms buildup had helped foment?

Reagan's insistence on going forward with SDI limited Chernenko's options, just as it had done to Andropov. Far from offering invective against Reagan, Chernenko provided a reasoned analysis of the potential implications of SDI, writing that "that the development of large-scale ABM systems would be in direct contradiction with the objectives of strengthening stability—and you in your letter speak in favor of strengthening stability." Again, Chernenko appealed to shared U.S. and Soviet interests. "It is not that the Soviet Union has some sort of a special concern in this regard," he went on to say. "The United States must be concerned about it to an equal degree. After all, the inescapable consequence of the implementation of such plans can be only one thing—an arms race in all directions whose magnitude it is difficult even to imagine today. What is needed is not the negotiations on what such systems might be, but a resolute and unequivocal renunciation of the very idea of creating such systems" (Chernenko 1984b).

Ultimately, SDI proved to be the chief obstacle to meaningful negotiations between the two sides at the time of Chernenko's death in March 1985, and beyond. Soviets feared the potential of SDI more than the actuality of all other U.S. strategic forces. Though Reagan conceived of it as defensive in form, no military planner could deny that an operational system might function as a powerful offensive weapons system to provide the United States first strike capability (Matlock 2004, 122).

One should not overlook the timing of Reagan's announcement of SDI. Reagan shared his vision of SDI with the American public in order to appropriate antinuclear sentiment from a growing freeze movement so that he could continue to build up American arms (see FitzGerald 2000). Reagan was building arms because he was convinced the Soviets had outpaced the United States. "The d—n media has propagandized our people against our defense plans more than the Russians have," the president bemoaned in his diary two weeks before he announced SDI. "We are still dangerously behind the Soviets & getting farther behind" (Reagan 2007, 134-35). If SDI meant waging the Cold War amid the heavens, it was only because the other side had gotten there first. "Had a briefing on the Soviets & Space," Reagan noted that summer. "There is no question but that they are working (twice as hard as us) to come up with a military superiority in outer space" (Reagan 2007, 173).

Conclusion

By the start of the second term, Reagan appeared discouraged by the lack of progress in relations with the Soviet Union. As Chopin's funeral march ushered in yet another transition period in the Kremlin during the spring of 1985, Reagan felt that Soviet leaders were intransigent to the end. Gorbachev was younger, fitter, and more likely to stick around, but Reagan expressed skepticism he would amount to much. "I believe that Gorbachev will be as tough as any of their leaders," he wrote in his diary. "If he wasn't a confirmed ideologue he never would have been chosen by the Polit beaureu [*sic*]" (Reagan 2007, 317). Nothing Reagan read in his CIA briefing leading up to the Geneva Summit that year called this prediction into question.

Reagan's initial assessment of Gorbachev proved to have been mistaken—as he himself would not have denied by the end of his presidency. Yet so, too, was his assessment of his predecessors. Letters by Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko show Soviet leaders who were firmly committed to their ideological underpinnings yet were also ready to negotiate when it came to limiting the buildup of nuclear arms. They were partially infirm, yes, but not intransigent. Reagan's letters, in turn, reveal an American president far more anxious to reach an accord with his Russian counterparts than he let on in public. "You and I share an enormous responsibility for the preservation of stability in the world," Reagan wrote to Andropov in his own hand. "I believe we can fulfill that mandate but to do so will require a more active level of exchange than we have heretofore been able to establish. . . . Historically our predecessors have made better progress when communicating has been private and candid" (Reagan 1983d). Yet Reagan was rarely private and candid when signaling to his Soviet counterparts.

Wherein, then, lies the fault for failing to capitalize on these missed opportunities either to return to détente or to transcend the Cold War? Was one side simply honest, the other dishonest in private and public? Both sides were selective in their handling of the truth. Letters from the Kremlin never acknowledged the slyness with which the Soviets had targeted their SS-20 missiles at the capitals of Western Europe while the Strategic Arms Limitation talks were under way. Likewise, Reagan refused to include the strategic arsenals of Western Europe in his calculations of the strategic balance he insisted favored the East. The leaders of both sides were, at times, deceitful, yet they both sought peace and the survival of their way of life.[6] Ultimately, however, to the detriment of U.S.–Soviet relations in his first term, Reagan proved unwilling to step back from the precipice of confrontation, unable to forge a consensus within his administration over the long-term

6. On the question of honesty, Reagan triumphalists have attempted to have it both ways. To them, Reagan's seemingly sincere overtures for coexistence were merely cover for his "secret plan" to undermine the Soviet system. The sentiments of Soviet leaders, and the press, for their part, turn out, in fact, to have been the judgments of keen political observers. Fearing (rightly) for the survival of the Soviet Union, senior advisors to Andropov conspired with Senator Edward Kennedy to thwart Reagan's reelection bid in 1984, Paul Kengor charges in *The Crusader.* Quoting a "perceptive Communist named Vitaliy Korionov," Kengor contends that *Pravda* got it right: "[T]he present U.S. administration has announced in official documents that its aim is to 'destroy socialism as a sociopolitical system.' U.S. political, economic, and ideological life is increasingly subordinated to that unreal task. . . . The most highly placed U.S. officials, headed by the president, are the spearhead of this spiritual aggression" (Vitaliy Korionov, quoted in Kengor 2006, 203).

purpose of applying economic pressure to the Soviet Union (Dobson 2005), and remarkably insecure over the viability of American power.

What made the difference? Certainly, Gorbachev's dynamic personality—his dazzling of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on his trip to Great Britain in the winter of 1984—more so than any sense of capitulation to Reagan's hard line, secured his formal ascendance in the spring of 1985. Indeed, it took Gorbachev's willingness to restructure the internal workings of the Soviet system to instill in Reagan's mind new ideas about how to deal with the Soviet Union. An integral part of saving communism was, for Gorbachev, reducing the arms race with the West and ratcheting down the Cold War in order to spend money on achieving the promise of communism. Was Reagan's tremendous arms buildup in the first term therefore necessary? Did it justify the war scare that occurred in the fall of 1983? Should it be remembered as prudent policy making on the part of the United States? Historians should ask themselves these questions, and, above all, whether Reagan indeed paved the way for a reformist Soviet leader. Most likely, he delayed both a return to détente and the "new thinking" that infused Gorbachev's efforts to reform the Soviet Union in the second half of the decade.

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