

Chapter 6

Who ended the Cold War— Reagan or Gorbachev?

When Ronald Reagan became president, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* moved the hands of its famous doomsday clock closer to midnight. This ominous shift on the cover of a sober, academic journal reflected the intellectual and liberal hysteria that greeted Reagan's inauguration. Predictions abounded of unnecessary conflicts with the Soviet Union, of violations of the Cold War's painstakingly improvised protocols, and of nuclear war itself. And yet, two months later, while recovering from John Hinckley's bullet, Reagan wrote a surprisingly warm letter to the Soviet premier, Leonid Brezhnev. Using friendly language that the State Department tried rewriting, Reagan sought a human connection with the leader of world Communism, despite decades of demonizing Communist ideology. Reagan believed the Lord spared his life to bring peace to the world. Even more surprising was Reagan's emergence during the second term as an enthusiastic summiteer, meeting the new young Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, DC, and Moscow itself.

The Soviet Union's fall shortly after Ronald Reagan's retirement triggered vigorous debates about Reagan's role in winning the Cold War. When *Time* magazine designated Gorbachev "Man of the Decade" in 1990 for peacefully neutralizing Soviet

Communism, the cover story compared Gorbachev to Freud, Copernicus, Darwin, Magellan, Martin Luther, and the Pope. Ronald Reagan was not mentioned. Two decades later, the American president and the Soviet premier are more frequently linked to explain the Cold War's happy ending. Still, questions remain regarding Reagan's centrality to this process—and how his dueling personae as the affable accommodator and the saber-rattling anti-Communist shaped this momentous shift.

In the 1950s, even as Reagan built his worldview on anti-Communism, his pacifist Church of Christ upbringing still shaped him. Nelle Reagan raised her son to abhor war. In the 1970s, his revulsion for Communism mingled with his disdain for bureaucrats who banked on the mutual threat of massive nuclear annihilation to restrain both the Americans and the Soviets. Reagan rejected this doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) as mad itself.

At the same time, Reagan doubted the Nixon-era détente policy and distrusted the Soviet Communists. Defiance of Soviet policy lay at the heart of Reagan's defense buildup, his Central American policy, even, to an extent, his renewal of American morale. Early in his tenure, mocking claims that his foreign policy was simplistic, the president summarized his message for the Soviets: "Roses are red, violets are blue. Stay out of El Salvador, and Poland too."

Reagan's nationalist revivalism infused his foreign policy. In celebrating America as John Winthrop's "city upon a hill with the eyes of all people upon us," as Alexis de Tocqueville's "land of wonders," Reagan asserted his anti-Communism. Central to the Reagan narrative was the claim that he restored American standing throughout the world, after the humiliations of the Jimmy Carter years—and earlier. Reagan proudly quoted U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick's assessment that "We've taken off our 'Kick Me' sign." Supporters loved his muscular rhetoric

and his refusal to apologize for the Vietnam War or other American actions.

Reagan believed in peace through strength, that a long-term accommodation with the Soviet Union could only come after some short-term intimidation. What struck liberals as contradictory was Reagan's guiding foreign policy assumption: "Our strength is necessary to deter war and to facilitate negotiated solutions. . . . Strength and dialog go hand in hand." Reagan eschewed hard choices. In foreign policy as in domestic policy he believed America could build up the military and count down toward peace, just as he believed America could boost defense while cutting taxes without suffering economically.

In that spirit, Reagan wanted a visionary, aggressive, resourceful, and unapologetic foreign policy. Beyond exorcising the trauma of Vietnam, he wanted to repudiate decades of what he labeled Democratic appeasement. Along with England's Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II, Reagan injected a note of moral clarity into the debate. Communism's evil demanded vigilance. In preparing one defense-related speech, the president scribbled: "what must be recognized is that our security is based on being prepared to meet any contingency." That entailed a conventional and nuclear arms buildup—to achieve peace.

In confronting the Soviets, Reagan acted on the central obsession that propelled his political career. The fight against Communists, their supporters known as fellow-travelers, and cowardly liberals mobilized him in the Hollywood of the 1940s, infused his General Electric speeches in the 1950s, and propelled him toward politics in the 1960s. By the 1970s Reagan insisted that "The ideological struggle dividing the world is between communism and our own belief in freedom to the greatest extent possible consistent with an orderly society." In his radio talks and stump speeches, he defined Communism as "neither an ec[onomic] or a pol[itical] system" but "as a form of insanity—a temporary aberration which

will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature."

Reagan's anti-Communism oriented him. In a telling moment during one of the administration's worst crises, former Senator and actor George Murphy, a comrade in the fight against Communists in Hollywood, compared the critics shrieking about the Iran-Contra scandal to the liberals and fellow travelers who attacked Reagan for fighting Communism. Reagan replied warmly, agreeing that "In our Hollywood adventure with infiltration and subversion you and I picked up a lot of knowledge the pundits and the politicians don't have." No matter what the particular battle, the two old friends were still fighting the same fight.

The Vietnam debacle shattered the broad national Cold War consensus about the need to contain Communism. As America became bogged down in Indochina, as liberals and Democrats soured on an anti-Communist intervention, many seemed to forget anti-Communism's centrality to postwar liberalism. With each passing year, more and more Americans believed that had he lived, the great liberal martyr John F. Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam—even though immediately after his assassination, when the Vietnam War remained popular, most insiders insisted Kennedy wanted to hang tough.

President Jimmy Carter tried repenting for Vietnam and restoring America's foreign policy luster by championing human rights. Yet the Carter administration kept stumbling overseas, with two of the biggest blows being the fall of Nicaragua and Iran to anti-American leaders. Meanwhile, Carter seemed to tolerate Soviet expansionism in Africa, Central America, and the Middle East.

Conservative intellectuals rejected the new trend of apologetic Westerners kowtowing to the Third World. Spicing their moralism

with realpolitik, many distinguished between totalitarian Communists and pro-capitalist, pro-American moderate authoritarians such as the shah of Iran. Looking back, analysts such as Nixon's secretary of defense James Schlesinger would realize ideological considerations led many to overstate American weakness and Soviet military strength. Such widespread insecurity made many Americans doubt disarmament initiatives such as the SALT II Treaty. As a result, Schlesinger and others concluded, "only a president who enjoys a reputation for being strong on defense can be successful in obtaining Senate ratification of an arms control agreement with the Soviet Union."

In his 1980 presidential campaign—and throughout his administration—Reagan would work with renegade anti-Communist Democrats. Reagan's UN ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, may have been the highest ranking of these neoconservatives, who populated the Defense Department, the State Department, and many pro-Reagan think tanks. These neoconservatives supported Reagan's hard line, articulated in his "Reagan Doctrine," which the conservative Heritage Foundation championed. Toughening the postwar policy of "containing" Communism, Reagan sought to roll back Communism in Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Laos, Libya, Nicaragua, and Vietnam—the arenas where Soviets expanded in the 1970s. Heritage also listed Iran, although the problem there was Islamic fundamentalism, not Communism.

Paralleling Carter, Reagan's foreign policy was often personal and moralistic—but the Republican version was more muscular, nationalist, and proactive. As much as he hated nuclear weapons, Reagan felt compelled to place more missiles in Europe. Since 1977 the Soviets had started deploying their powerful SS-20 Saber, a first-strike weapon with three targetable warheads. By 1987, 654 Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) missiles with 509 launchers would be aimed at Europe's major cities. Reagan wanted to respond by deploying 108 Pershing II tactical

missiles and 464 land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles in Europe. In November 1983, the Soviets walked out of arms control talks with the Americans, after the West German Bundestag approved the deployment. Reagan continued seeking opportunities to negotiate while positioning the missiles.

Many European leftists blasted Reagan. Unruffled, Reagan noted the irony. During the 1970s, many Europeans, especially German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, feared Jimmy Carter's America was too pliant. They chided Carter for cancelling the neutron bomb, which killed people but kept property intact. Now that there was a tougher American president, Europeans feared he was too militant.

Ronald Reagan's foreign policy also made many Americans nervous. The Nuclear Freeze Movement thrived by mimicking his tactics, subordinating complicated policy questions to one terrifying image, in this case a mushroom cloud looming over America's heartland. In June 1982, 700,000 people flooded Central Park shouting "No Nukes." *The Day After*, ABC's November 1983 movie dramatizing the effects of a nuclear attack on Lawrence, Kansas, frightened the nation. With an estimated 100 million viewers, it would be the 1980s' ninth most-watched television show, only bested by the final episode of the long-running TV comedy series *M*A*S*H* and various Super Bowls. In co-sponsoring a bipartisan freeze resolution, Senator Edward Kennedy mocked Reagan's "voodoo arms control, which says you must have more in order to have less." In 1982 seventeen Senators and 128 House members supported the freeze; the next year, the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for a freeze.

While critics of Reagan's domestic policy often resurrected the traumas of the Great Depression, critics of Reagan's foreign policy alternated between feeding the fear of Armageddon and resurrecting the ghost of Vietnam. By May 1981, thousands

had massed in the capital for what reporters claimed was the “largest march” at the Pentagon since the Vietnam War. Many feared another Vietnam-like quagmire in Central America. “No draft, no war, U.S. out of El Salvador,” the protesters chanted, infuriated by Reagan’s aggressive anti-Communism and seeming blindness to non-Communist dictators’ moral failings.

Midway through Reagan’s presidency, Nixon’s secretary of defense James Schlesinger would reject the extreme reactions in both Europe and the United States. “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the national mood was one of self-criticism bordering on masochism,” Schlesinger observed. “In the 1980s the national mood has become one of self-congratulation to the point of narcissism.” Schlesinger preferred a less emotional, more realistic and stable stance.

Reagan considered his foreign policy “simple” and “neat.” He wanted to inject moral clarity into the national quest for self-defense. During a March 8, 1983, speech at the National Association of Evangelicals’ conference in Orlando, Florida, Reagan denounced the trends toward self-abasement and moral relativism. He warned the religious broadcasters to beware “the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.” Two weeks later, Reagan sought to transcend the MAD strategy by proposing “defensive technologies,” which “could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies.” Wags branded Reagan’s speech calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” the “Darth Vader” speech. Reagan’s technological solution to the problem, saddled with the bureaucratic moniker of the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, became known as the “Star Wars” defense.

Reagan’s calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire” was a defining moment. Furious liberals called him “primitive,” “embarrassing,” and unduly aggressive. But Reagan’s “Rambo” rhetoric seized most Americans’ imaginations. His muscular foreign policy resonated in Hollywood, where Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger played beefed-up and often renegade sheriffs ensuring justice the world over—thus helping Americans overcome feelings of impotence from the crime wave back home. The “evil empire” language also allied America’s president with two other iconoclastic visionaries of the 1980s, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II. All three saw Soviet Communism’s moral and structural rot long before most of their peers or followers did.

While Reagan’s swagger boosted Americans, it encouraged a cowboy mentality in the White House. The critics’ shrillness and their blindness to the Soviet menace polarized foreign policy discourse. Dismissing critics as “wimps,” many Reagan aides pooh-poohed constitutional niceties to achieve their boss’s objectives. This rogue mentality led them to ignore congressional restrictions on helping the Contras who fought Nicaragua’s populist Marxist, Soviet-backed Sandinistas. Similarly, Reagan staffers, led by the charismatic, manipulative superpatriot Colonel Oliver North, pushed hard to free seven American terrorists kidnapped in Lebanon, just a few years after Iran finally freed its American hostages.

Reagan’s fierce anti-Communism blinded him to the complexities of the Central American situation and confused him regarding Iran’s theocracy, which seemed to him less perverse than godless Communism. The hostages’ families’ heartrending appeals overly personalized the issue for Reagan. Iran-Contra was the sterile product of this crossbreeding as Reagan’s clear, aggressive anti-Communism mixed unhealthily with a sloppy, sentimental approach to Middle East terrorism.

Desperately seeking “a breakthrough” to free the hostages, Reagan approved a series of secret initiatives in 1985 to mollify supposed moderates in Iran. Reagan’s aides shipped arms to Iran via Israel, hoping these weapons could be exchanged for the hostages. Eventually, American operatives supplied Iran with 2,008 TOW antitank missiles and tons of spare parts. The terrorists who received money and direction from Tehran released two hostages—but kidnapped others shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, “Field Marshal North”—as Pentagon critics mockingly referred to Reagan’s aide Oliver North—diverted profits from the Iranian arms sales to fund the Contras. Such machinations broke the Boland Amendment, the law Congress passed limiting aid to the Contras, while violating Reagan’s oft-stated principle not to negotiate with terrorists.

During this same period, Reagan’s iconoclasm, shaped by his idiosyncratic faith in his ideology and in the power of personal chemistry, led him to seek a more personal connection with Soviet leaders. Despite his bravado, Reagan paid attention to public opinion. Accusations that he was warmongering stung. His wife Nancy had decided that he should devote his second term to forging his legacy as a peacemaker. The aging Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev had proved too infirm to respond to Reagan’s overture after the assassination attempt. Even though Reagan was America’s oldest president ever, he watched two more Soviet premiers emerge, languish, and die. Finally, in 1985 a young, dynamic, fifty-four-year-old reformer named Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader.

Reagan defied conventional wisdom by meeting Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985, the first summit in six years. Orchestrating the atmospherics with the care of a Hollywood director, Reagan had a cozy chat with just Gorbachev and two translators by a roaring fireplace in a woody poolhouse next to Lake Geneva. Reagan emerged from his meeting with the



8. President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev meet at their first summit in Geneva, Switzerland, November 19, 1985.

surprise announcement that the two would meet again. Reagan took particular delight in disproving the claim that he could not operate without staffers hovering. He also never felt as powerful or self-satisfied as when he succeeded by deploying his tremendous personal charm.

Reagan was surprisingly pragmatic about the Soviets, to the conservatives’ chagrin. One grassroots conservative activist, Richard Viguerie, called Reagan a Theodore Roosevelt in reverse: Reagan spoke loudly, but only carried “a small twig,” not a big stick. “It would be foolish to believe the leopard will change its spots,” Reagan reassured his worried anti-Communist friends including George Murphy. “I think our job is to show him [Gorbachev] he and they will be better off if we make some practical agreements without attempting to convert him to our way of thinking.”

As the second-term domestic agenda sputtered, as his administration staggered, the unlikely friendship between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev transformed the world. The greatest events of the 1980s—Communism's collapse and the Cold War's end—vindicated Reagan. Even as he slowed considerably and lost power politically, he proved effective diplomatically.

From the conventional perspective, Reagan appeared inconsistent. At the Reykjavik summit in October 1986 he entertained sweeping proposals, telling Gorbachev, "It would be fine with me if we eliminated all nuclear weapons." Yet this summit, hovering on the edge of a revolutionary breakthrough, collapsed over Reagan's stubborn defense of SDI. Democrats mocked Reagan's faith in this "Star Wars" aerial missile defense system as pie-in-the-sky, Hollywood fantasizing. Reagan had starred as Secret Service agent Bass Bancroft, who protected the "Inertia Projector," a futuristic death ray in the 1940 film *Murder in the Air*. But Reagan's faith in the project stemmed from his faith in America, in science, and in alternatives to the conventional MAD approach. Whatever the science, the Soviet leaders were among the few who believed the missile defense would work. They also learned to take Reagan's commitment to the project very seriously.

In Reykjavik, Gorbachev harangued Reagan about how destabilizing SDI would be. Missile defenses rendered existing missiles useless, inviting more of an arms race. "The meeting is over," Reagan announced abruptly before Gorbachev had even finished, "Let's go, George." As Reagan put on his coat, and a shocked Secretary of State George Shultz prepared to follow, the Soviet premier pleaded, "Can't we do something about this?" Reagan replied: "It's too late." Reporters, Democrats, and allies worried about Reagan's bullheadedness, even as the president averted a crisis wherein American allies might have been unnerved by the sweep of his pacifism.

Shortly after this summit failed, a Lebanese newspaper revealed the Reagan administration's involvement in negotiating for hostages via the Iranians, selling arms to the Iranians and then illegally financing the Contras in Latin America with the profits from these questionable Middle East machinations. The timing was particularly shocking because Reagan, after years of posturing, had finally fought terrorism. In October 1985, Palestinian terrorists hijacked the Italian cruise ship the *Achille Lauro* and murdered an elderly, wheelchair-bound Jewish passenger, Leon Klinghoffer, dumping his body into the sea. The hijackers escaped to Egypt. As the terrorists flew to Tunisia for a hero's welcome from Yasir Arafat and their fellow Palestine Liberation Organization terrorists, Reagan authorized four Navy F-14s to intercept the jet. "You can run, but you can't hide," Reagan boasted after the jet's forced landing in Sicily.

Months later, on April 14, 1986, after Libyan operatives bombed a German disco that American soldiers frequented, America bombed Libya. The raid killed 150 Libyans, including the Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's two-year-old adopted daughter. Europeans condemned the attack. Most Americans applauded their president for finally living up to the Rambo Reagan myth—and for protecting America.

The Iran-Contra news in November 1986 undermined Reagan's standing as an honorable man and a tough leader. Reagan lamented that for the first time the American people did not believe him—and for good reason. His explanations were inconsistent. Ultimately, Reagan avoided impeachment by claiming he was out of touch and possibly incompetent rather than responsible and thus guilty.

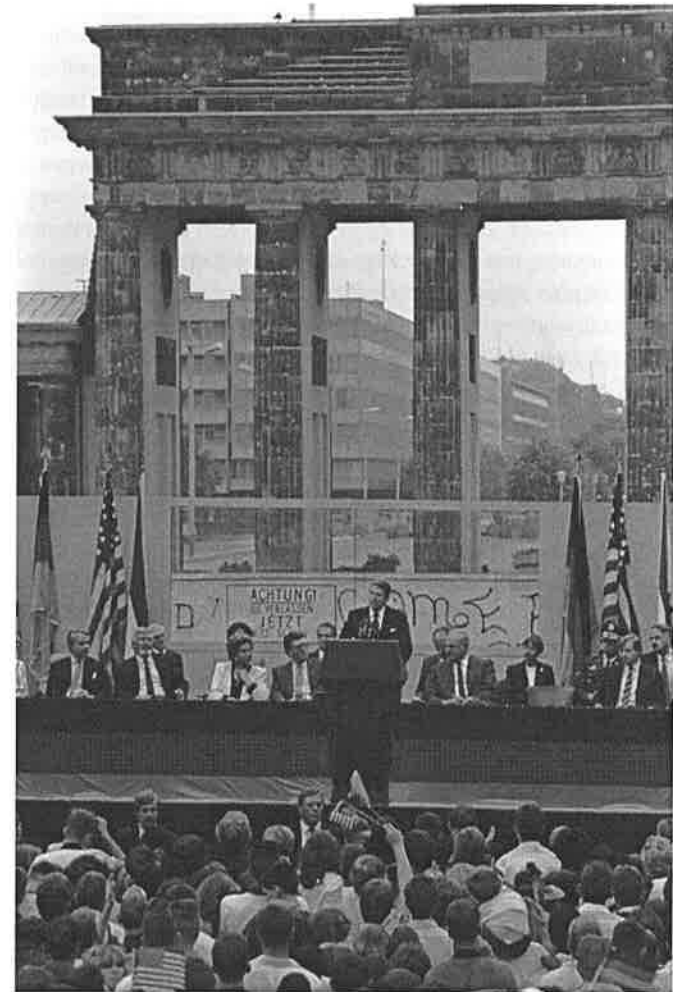
As America's scandal investigating machinery kicked into gear, the Democrats' comeback, seizing back a Senate majority in the November 1986 midterm elections, became more significant. Reagan would try to deflect the congressional investigation with

his own White House investigation. But the Democrats controlled Congress's investigatory mechanisms—and deployed them to full effect. The political psychodrama culminated with Ollie North's self-serving yet strangely effective testimony before the joint congressional committee. North offered a burst of near-pornographic patriotism that distracted Americans from the scandal's sordid details. Still, all the embarrassing revelations of incompetent diplomacy and illegal chicanery could have terminated a less popular president. A leader less resilient might not have been able to continue the delicate dance with the Soviets while mired in the Iran-Contra morass.

Reagan kept to his two-pronged strategy of seeking peace while defending freedom. In June 1987 Reagan thrilled the world at Germany's Brandenburg Gate, where Soviets had divided the Communist East from the democratic West with the infamous Berlin Wall. Acknowledging the Soviet moves toward "reform and openness," Reagan challenged his rivals: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Reagan's plea became a great moment of political theater, casting America as a beacon of freedom—and the power knocking down the Soviet Union, even as it imploded, mostly due to internal decay.

Diplomacy's plodding spadework continued amid the flashy rhetorical fireworks. With the real Berlin Wall still standing, Reagan would host Gorbachev half a year later in Washington. This summit provided another opportunity to tear down more symbolic walls between the two great powers.

The president of the United States kept negotiating with the Soviets throughout his nightmarish autumn of 1987, while helping his wife cope with her own illness and her mother's death. When his mother-in-law died, Reagan flew to Phoenix with Nancy, returned to Washington the same day to meet the Soviet foreign minister, then flew back to Phoenix three days later for the funeral—after finalizing the ground-breaking INF agreement with



9. President Reagan urges Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall" at the Brandenburg Gate, Federal Republic of Germany, June 12, 1987.

the Soviets and scheduling a Washington summit. Despite the president's power, "There was nothing I could do to bring happiness to my wife at a time when she desperately needed it," he mourned.

Reagan hosted the Washington summit in December 1987. "Gorby fever" would end the scandal-ridden year of "Ollie Mania" on a high note. Gorbachev charmed his American hosts in private parties with glamorous celebrities like Henry Kissinger and Yoko Ono, and by spontaneous bursts of handshaking and back-slapping with smitten citizens. At the summit, the two leaders signed the sweeping treaty eliminating their intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles, feeding Americans' euphoria. Delighted with his achievement, Reagan reassured his conservative comrade William Buckley, saying a few weeks later, "I still think that we are on solid ground on the INF Treaty based on our verification provisions and on the fact that Gorby knows what our response to cheating would be—it's spelled Pershing."

Privately during the summit, the two leaders sparred in a friendly fashion, with Gorbachev wincing as Reagan yet again repeated his "favorite" Russian maxim: "*doverey, no proverey*—trust but verify." The trust was a little strained during one afternoon session, when the president responded to Gorbachev's progress report about his reforms with a tired anecdote about competing students moonlighting as cab drivers. The American cabbie said, "I haven't decided yet," when asked about his educational goals, as the Soviet cabbie admitted, "*They* haven't told me yet."

Even Reagan realized he had overstepped. The episode was kept private initially and was not repeated. Thus, Ronald Reagan's nightmarish 1987 ended on a high note. It was hard to believe, but the saber rattler was looking like a peacemaker; with one year to go, Reagan's long-standing Soviet enemy was offering him political, diplomatic, and historical salvation.

Americans were incredulous, unsure whether to believe this change was real. After hobnobbing with Gorby during the Washington summit, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger published a four-thousand-word essay in *Newsweek* warning against being dazzled by the "euphoria." Ignoring the pacifist and radical streaks in Reagan's ideology, Kissinger declared himself shocked that "This most conservative of postwar presidents seemed bent on ending his term by dismantling the concepts and practices that have shaped Western strategy for four decades."

More than a year later, Kissinger's associate Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Adviser in the new George H. W. Bush administration, remained disturbed that the Reagan administration declared the Cold War over so hastily. Influenced by Kissinger, Scowcroft feared "wishful thinking." Scowcroft believed the "old men of the Politburo" hired Gorbachev to "revitalize" Communism, not end it, making "Gorbachev potentially more dangerous than his predecessors, each of whom, through some aggressive move, had saved the West from the dangers of its own wishful thinking about the Soviet Union before it was too late."

Nevertheless, in hindsight, and to the superficial observer of the time, the Soviet implosion—and the resulting love affair with "Gorby"—progressed quite smoothly. When Reagan visited Moscow in late May 1988, the world was treated to what the historian John Lewis Gaddis would call "the unusual sight of a Soviet general secretary and an American president strolling amiably through Red Square, greeting tourists and bouncing babies in front of Lenin's tomb, while their respective military aides—each carrying the codes needed to launch nuclear missiles at each other's territory—stood discreetly in the background." Reagan used the summit to celebrate American values. The president hosted an elaborate formal "freedom" banquet for Soviet dissidents, human rights activists, Jewish "refuseniks" long blocked from moving to Israel, and oppressed

Pentecostals. Reagan also lectured students at Moscow State University about the beauties of liberty as a bust of the Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin loomed in the background.

Five years after America's leading anti-Communist labeled the Soviets the "evil empire," Ronald Reagan was publicly embracing the leader of world Communism. Reagan explained: Gorbachev is "different than any Russian leader I've met before." Cynics noted, "He is the only one Reagan has met." Conservatives feared Reagan had turned soft. Administration officials insisted, "Ronald Reagan hasn't changed, the Soviets have changed."

Six months later, President Reagan and president-elect Bush hosted Gorbachev at Governors Island in New York Harbor for a farewell summit. Addressing the United Nations, Gorbachev admitted that "Today, the preservation of any kind of 'closed' society is impossible." He then unilaterally announced reductions in Soviet forces of a half million soldiers and ten thousand tanks.

Nevertheless, Reagan was surprisingly cautious about the Soviet Union in his farewell address. He seemed to be positioning as much for "plausible deniability" in case relations cooled as for bragging rights in case the Cold War ended. Reagan admitted, "Nothing is less free than pure communism." Still, he justified the "new closeness" because "we're basing our actions not on words but deeds," such as the end to the Soviets' occupation of neighboring Afghanistan. Preempting the historians and critics who would mock his previous record as a skeptic, Reagan contrasted his tough-minded approach, which had yielded results with the détente of the 1970s and which was "based not on actions but promises." Reagan made sure to "wish" President Gorbachev "well" and reiterated his favorite formula yet again: "trust but verify." By contrast, on his last day in office, George H. W. Bush's Inauguration Day, 1989, a more ebullient Reagan boldly declared "the Cold War is over."

President George H. W. Bush changed the dynamic. Reagan balanced his natural tendency toward celebratory bombast with his long-standing hatred of Communism. Bush's WASPish fear of gloating reinforced his instincts toward secrecy and caution. Reagan often spoke in bold colors that sometimes clashed; Bush's overlapping shades of gray often verged on the incoherent. Bush's own secretary of state James Baker would agree that the administration's initial "strategic review" of foreign policy was "neither truly strategic nor a proper review" and resulted in "mush."

Many forces triggered the Soviet Union's collapse as the Cold War ended surprisingly peacefully. Still, Ronald Reagan was not just in the right place at the right time. He was the right man in the right place at the right time. His radical openness to summit-level diplomacy and to eliminating all nuclear weapons, tempered by his insistence on rebuilding America's military and seeking an effective missile defense, worked. Mikhail Gorbachev found a partner, not just an adversary. But Gorbachev also found a rival, not simply a patsy. Reagan knew his conservative allies would trust no agreement with the Soviets, while his liberal critics were tempted to rush into any kind of agreement. By striking the middle path that he did, Reagan accelerated the process, making Mikhail Gorbachev relaxed enough not to mobilize forces or unleash violence to prop up the ailing Soviet regime. As he triumphed, Reagan saw a softer, more reasonable, more human face to the Soviet monolith he had fought so tenaciously for decades.

