Ideas were crucially important in the transformation of the Soviet system and of Soviet foreign policy, but ideas on their own were not enough. Throughout the post-Stalin period there were people in the USSR with radically unorthodox ideas, but until the second half of the 1980s that did not get them very far (unless ‘far’ includes the labour camps of Siberia). In a Communist system, to a much greater extent than under conditions of political pluralism, ideas needed institutional bearers. In this strictly hierarchical society, more power resided in the general secretariaship of the Central Committee than anywhere else. The Cold War ended when it did because of the confluence of events that brought a leader with a mindset different from that of every other member of Brezhnev’s, Andropov’s, and Chernenko’s Politburo to the locus of greatest institutional power within the system. Having reached that position, and drawing upon ideas which were not necessarily novel in a universal sense, but which were path-breakingly new in the Soviet context, Gorbachev was able to inaugurate a conceptual revolution as well as systemic change, both domestically and internationally.

What role did President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush play in ending the Cold War? Three distinct schools of thought have arisen in response to this question. The first school maintains that the United States triumphed in the Cold War by destroying its nemesis, the USSR. These “triumphalists” focus primarily on the Reagan years and contend that the administration brought about the end of the Cold War by hastening (even causing) the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this view, the Reagan administration was keenly aware of the fragile state of the USSR. Thus, it adopted a hardline policy to push its enemy toward collapse. This policy included an unprecedented military buildup, the introduction of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and tough rhetoric. Ultimately, the Reagan administration proved victorious: the Soviets could not keep pace with the administration’s military expenditures, nor could they match US technological advances. Consequently, the Kremlin was forced to surrender. Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, had no option other than to become more conciliatory toward Washington. The ultimate triumph came in 1991, however, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

A second school of thought turns this logic on its head. In this view, the Reagan administration’s hardline policies were an impediment to ending the Cold War. The president’s virulent anti-Communism, his belligerent rhetoric, SDI, and the military buildup combined to make it more difficult for Gorbachev to pursue improved relations with the West. These observers point out that Gorbachev faced a conservative faction within the Politburo...
that saw the United States as an imperialist enemy. These conservatives were wedded to traditional Soviet policy toward the United States and opposed Gorbachev’s “new thinking,” which entailed a more conciliatory posture toward the West, and unilateral gestures intended to end the arms race. These Soviet hardliners believed Washington would perceive Gorbachev’s policies as a sign of weakness and attempt to gain advantage. The more belligerently Reagan acted, the more they were convinced that Gorbachev was on the wrong course. Thus, they pressured him to abandon his reforms. “Reagan’s tough policy ... made ... life for [Soviet] reformers, for all who yearned for democratic changes in their life, much more difficult,” Georgi Arbatov, the director of the Soviet Institute for the Study of the United States and Canada, has explained. “In such tense international situations the conservatives and reactionaries were given predominant influence [in the USSR]. That is why ... Reagan made it practically impossible to start reforms after Brezhnev’s death (Andropov had such plans) and made things more difficult for Gorbachev to cut military expenditures.\(^2\)

From this perspective, then, Reagan’s “get tough” posture had the unintended effect of supporting Soviet leaders who favored a more antagonistic approach toward Washington. If Reagan had not been so belligerent, Gorbachev would have had more domestic support for his foreign-policy reforms, and the Cold War would have ended earlier.

A third school takes a broader approach: in this view, President Reagan and President Bush were both largely irrelevant to the ending of the Cold War. From this perspective, Gorbachev terminated the Cold War practically single-handedly. “In just less than seven years, Mikhail Gorbachev transformed the world,” historian Robert C. Kaiser has written in an example of this view. “He turned his own country upside down ... He tossed away the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe with no more than a fare-thee-weil. He ended the Cold War that had dominated world politics and consumed the wealth of nations for nearly half a century.”\(^3\) Soviet expert Strobe Talbott expressed a similar belief when asked during a talk show why the Cold War ended. “The Soviet Union collapsed,” he exclaimed. “The Cold War ended almost overwhelmingly because of internal contradictions or pressures within the Soviet Union and the Soviet system itself. And even if Jimmy Carter had been reelected and been followed by Walter Mondale, something like what we have now seen probably would have happened.”\(^4\) During the 1992 presidential election William J. Clinton voiced a similar view. Governor Clinton derided President Bush’s claim to have seized the opportunity to end the Cold War, quipping, “That’s like a rooster taking credit for the dawn.”\(^5\)

This view focuses almost exclusively on Gorbachev’s desire to end the arms race in order to divert resources from military expenditures to domestic restructuring. From this perspective, Gorbachev’s desire for domestic reform brought about the end of the Cold War. President Reagan and President Bush just happened to be occupying the White House at the time that the Soviet Union was going through this revolutionary period.

To a certain extent, each of these three perspectives rests upon the assumption that the Reagan administration pursued a hardline policy toward the Soviet Union for the bulk of its two terms in office. For example, the triumphalists assert that it was precisely this confrontational policy that forced the Soviet Union to its knees and brought victory for the West. Those who assert that the Reagan administration was an impediment to improving superpower relations also suggest that Reagan’s hard line made life difficult for Soviet reformers into the late 1980s. Those who think the American presidents were irrelevant to the ending of the Cold War focus primarily upon what was happening within the USSR and, consequently, gloss over the intricacies of US foreign policy. However, the implication is that Washington continued to plod along the same well-worn path of hostility while Gorbachev revolutionized world affairs.

The hardline years

These assumptions about the Reagan administration’s policy are mistaken. President Reagan did indeed have a confrontational policy toward the USSR through 1983, but the following years were characterized by a concerted effort to improve superpower relations.

Between 1981 and 1983, the Reagan administration adopted a hawkish posture toward the Soviet Union. This approach included tough rhetoric, a military buildup, and confrontational policies on arms control and regional conflicts. During these early years, the president repeatedly denounced the Soviet Union. “The West won’t contain communism, it will transcend


\(^4\) S. Talbott, Inside Washington,” as quoted in Schweizer, Victory, xii.

\(^5\) Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1993), 468.
communism," Reagan vowed in 1981. "It will dismiss [communism] as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written."6 Others within the administration echoed these sentiments. "The Soviets [are] not only our rival, but the rival of a humane world order," Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger declared in February 1983. "[N]o one man – indeed no group of men – can affect, except at the very margins, the fundamentally competitive nature of our relationship."7 As Reagan famously declared in 1983, the USSR was the "evil empire."

Reagan charged that the Soviet Union had been engaging in "the greatest military buildup in the history of man" and that it was "plainly ... offensive in nature."8 At the same time, he argued, the United States had allowed its military capabilities to deteriorate. The consequence was that the Soviets had military superiority – a questionable charge that the Kremlin repeatedly rejected. In response, the White House initiated the largest peacetime military buildup in US history, with defense expenditures consuming more than 30 percent of the federal budget between 1981 and 1985. In 1983, President Reagan also introduced SDI. This research program envisioned a space-based system of lasers that would intercept and destroy Soviet nuclear missiles headed toward the United States. President Reagan hoped that it would lead to a defensive system that could protect the American people from a large-scale Soviet nuclear attack. However, while the president viewed SDI as a defensive system, others perceived it to be part of his policy of confrontation. Critics pointed out that SDI had offensive implications: if feasible, it could protect the United States from a retaliatory strike, thus freeing the country to launch a nuclear first strike against the USSR. The Soviets also charged that SDI would precipitate a new arms race in space.

The Reagan administration also appeared uninterested in arms control. It rejected the unratiﬁed Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II), claiming that it bolstered the military imbalance.9 Instead, the White House proposed the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START). The intent was to reduce the overall number of strategic weapons in the superpowers’ arsenals. However, it meant a cap on land-based warheads that would have required the Soviets to destroy more than half of their arsenal, while allowing the United States to increase its numbers. Given the administration’s hawkish rhetoric and military buildup, this proposal was widely viewed as insincere. The Soviets dismissed it as nothing more than a public-relations gimmick.

In addition, in 1981, the Reagan administration announced it would honor the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 1979 decision to deploy US intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Western Europe to counter Soviet SS-20s that were aimed at the region. Reagan's announcement prompted public protests throughout Europe and generated a peace movement. In response to this pressure, the administration put forward the so-called zero option, in which the United States would forego the deployment of its intermediate-range missiles in Western Europe if the Soviets would agree to dismantle their SS-20s. Many observers within the United States and abroad perceived this proposal to be a farce, as it required the Soviets to dismantle existing weapons while requiring virtually nothing of the United States. Some of Reagan's less hawkish advisers even opposed the plan. "The fatal flaw in the Zero Option as a basis for negotiations was that it was not negotiable," Secretary of State Alexander Haig fumed in his memoirs. "It was absurd to expect the Soviets to dismantle an existing force of 1,100 warheads, which they had already put into the field at a cost of billions of rubles in exchange for a promise from the United States not to deploy a missile force that we had not yet begun to build and that had aroused such violent controversy in Western Europe." Haig worried that the proposal was a "frivolous propaganda exercise . . . that would needlessly weaken the President's credibility."10 The Kremlin immediately rejected the zero option, and stormed out of ongoing arms control talks in protest when the US Pershing II missiles began arriving in West Germany in 1983.11

The Reagan administration's approach to regional disputes was also confrontational. The White House wanted to check the influence of the Soviets throughout the globe and to place "maximum pressure" on them throughout the Third World. It desired to ensure that Soviet costs would remain high in these regions, and thus sought to assist those fighting them "to the maximum

10 However, it did ultimately agree to abide by its terms.
11 Alexander Haig, Carpe: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 229. Ultimately, Gorbachev did agree to a version of this plan.
degree possible.” In Afghanistan, the Reagan administration beefed up US support to the mujahedin fighting the Soviets, while demanding that the Soviets withdraw.

By the fall of 1983, superpower relations were more hostile than at any period since the Cuban missile crisis. In September, the Soviets shot down a civilian airliner, KAL 007, killing all 269 people on board, including 61 Americans. The Soviets initially denied that it had happened, but then changed course and insisted that it was not a civilian plane. They refused to take responsibility or express remorse. The president was enraged and asserted that the tragedy was yet another “act of [Soviet] barbarism.” Shortly thereafter, General Secretary Lurij Andropov issued an unusually bitter statement declaring, in effect, that he could no longer do business with the Reagan administration.

Seeking cooperation

Despite this public acrimony, Reagan and several key advisers were, in fact, working behind the scenes on a plan to improve superpower relations. By late November 1983, the president had established an advisory group whose purpose was to chart a course toward “constructive cooperation” with the Kremlin. The president unveiled this new approach on January 16, 1984, with a major speech on superpower relations. The aim of the address was to launch a policy of “realistic reengagement” based on mutual “cooperation and understanding.”

Reagan began the speech by noting that the tense status quo between the superpowers was no longer acceptable. “Our working relationship with the Soviet Union is not what it must be,” he explained. “[W]e want more than deterrence; we seek genuine cooperation; we seek progress for peace.” The tone of the address was reasoned and cooperative. Rather than issuing demands for changes in Soviet behavior and engaging in name-calling, as was customary in the past, Reagan stated that the superpowers “should jointly examine concrete actions that we can both take to reduce US-Soviet confrontation” throughout the world.

Why the shift?

Why this shift in policy? Several factors came into play. On a fundamental level, the change may have been more apparent than real. Reagan had long spoken of his desire to eliminate nuclear weapons, although this idea was rarely taken seriously, even by his own aides. “The concern about nuclear war and the challenge to diminish that war was always foremost in [Reagan’s] mind,” the president’s adviser and long-term friend, Martin Anderson, has explained. “It was not something he talked about a lot in public. But he had strong feelings and strong convictions about what could and should be done.”

13 For example, see National Security Decision Directives 75 (January 1983) and 100 (July 1983).
16 For more, see Beth A. Fischer, Triumph? The Reagan Legacy and American Foreign Policy Today (forthcoming).
In addition, some administration officials maintain that Reagan had always intended to seek cooperation and nuclear disarmament once the United States had regained its strength. By 1984, the United States was in a much stronger position than it had been in years, as the president noted at the outset of his January 16th address. The military buildup was taking hold, US nuclear missiles had been deployed to Europe, the American economy was recovering, and the Western alliance appeared to be unified.

Despite the president's longstanding antipathy to nuclear weapons and his desire for constructive cooperation with the Soviet Union, movement toward this end had been erratic, owing to ideological disputes within the administration, bureaucratic infighting, personnel turnover, and competing priorities. The president's inability to make a decisive commitment to engagement intended to seek cooperation and nuclear disarmament once the United States began to prepare to respond in kind. Reagan had long been concerned about the possibility of an accidental nuclear Armageddon, and the KAL 007 disaster reinforced this fear. 

But other factors played a role. European allies had become anxious about the state of superpower relations and had been quietly appealing for the administration to be "less shrill." Such messages found a receptive audience within some quarters of the administration. The president's domestic advisors, such as Michael Deaver and James Baker, had an eye on the 1984 presidential election and believed a less confrontational approach would score points with voters. Nancy Reagan also urged the president to pursue the path toward peace. Mindful of her husband's legacy, the First Lady encouraged him to leave behind something more enduring than simply a military buildup.

The mounting tension throughout the fall of 1983 was also critical in precipitating the shift. In November, NATO conducted a large-scale military exercise in Europe which simulated a nuclear attack on the USSR. The Soviets appeared to believe that the exercise was the beginning of a real war, and began to prepare to respond in kind. Reagan had long been concerned about the possibility of an accidental nuclear Armageddon, and the KAL 007 tragedy and the war scare surrounding the NATO exercise heightened these anxieties. According to Robert McFarlane, his national security adviser, the president was "genuinely anxious" about the war scare, and it had a "big influence" on his subsequent approach to the Soviets.

The Reagan administration's reorientation was initially discounted or ignored both in the United States and in the USSR. Some derided it as insincere, noting that the White House remained wedded to the controversial SDI as well as its confrontational approach to regional disputes in Central America and Afghanistan. It was also apparent that some members of the administration did not support the new outlook, most notably Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and William Casey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Others considered the new approach to be a cheap ploy to win the upcoming election. In many instances, it simply fell upon deaf ears.

Moreover, the new approach yielded little fruit for several years. The Kremlin was going through a period of unprecedented turmoil with the death of three leaders in less than two and a half years. It simply was not in a position to engage on major policy initiatives, even if it were so inclined, which it was not. Consequently, superpower relations remained icy until the November 1985 Geneva summit. It was only after the 1986 meeting in Reykjavik that relations began to thaw considerably.

In essence, the suggestion that the Reagan administration pursued a hard-line policy toward the Soviet Union throughout its two terms in office is not historically accurate. The White House had jettisoned its confrontational approach by 1984. Between 1984 and 1988, the goal was to improve superpower relations. As McFarlane explained to reporters in a background briefing before Reagan's January 16th speech, "The fundamental purpose of the president's address will be to present in a clear and comprehensive manner his objective, which is to solve problems with the Soviet Union and to improve the state of this crucial relationship." Jack Matlock, the director of Soviet affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, concurs that the aim was to begin to build a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union. Matlock, who wrote the bulk of the January 16th address, has

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18 At times, however, the president rejected the notion that the United States had reached a position of strength. For example, see Reagan's remarks to Gorbachev during the second plenary meeting on November 10, 1985, Geneva, Switzerland, available in Jack F. Matlock papers, Geneva Memcons, Box 92137, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.
19 In his memoirs, Shultz paints a picture of a president who allowed himself to be routinely undermined by the hawks within his own administration.
21 Author interview with Caspar Weinberger, Washington, DC, July 31, 1995. McFarlane offered this view as well.
recollected that the administration thought an improvement in superpower relations might be years in the making:

At the time [January 1984] I said "I don't see any way the present Soviet leadership is going to be able to respond, but we need to be on the record." At least when there are changes [in Soviet leadership] and they are prepared to engage, we should have a policy that is ready and which is directed at not doing them in... Now, did we think they would say, "Hoorah, that's right, we're gonna do it?" Of course not. We were very aware of all of the suspicions and of the real problems. My own estimate at the time was that nothing would happen for a year or even two, but if we could keep steadily reiterating our [new policy] we would eventually engage the Soviets on it.  

The Reagan administration never sought to "vanquish" the Soviet Union, as the triumphalists assert. Reagan officials recall that they recognized Moscow's economic difficulties and sought to place pressure on these weaknesses. However, they reject the notion that the administration was consciously seeking to bankrupt the Soviet Union. "We imposed costs [on the Soviet Union], and put pressure on them through the USIA [US Information Agency] and so forth," McFarlane explained in 1995. "But 80-90 percent of what happened to the USSR was because Marxism was a dumb idea. At most the Reagan administration accelerated its decline by 5-15 years." Matlock agrees that the White House did not aim to vanquish the Soviet Union. "I think we recognized the difficulties with the Soviet economy," Matlock recalled in 1998:

[But] I would say that none of the key players [in foreign policymaking] were operating from the assumption that we were going to do the Soviet Union in, or that the purpose of the pressure was to bring them down... [T]hat's all thinking after the fact. Our goal was always to give the Soviets incentives to engage, we should have a policy that is ready and which is directed at not bringing the Cold War to an end.

Furthermore, the Reagan administration did not pursue SDI for the purpose of bankrupting the Soviet Union, as some have charged. "I was present at many, if not most, of the discussions on [SDI]." Lieutenant General Edward L. Rowny explained in 1998. "As the archives are opened, I would be greatly surprised if you find any serious talk about [spending the Soviets into the ground] at all. I think it did come up once or twice in passing, but by and large, throughout the period, President Reagan's idea was 'Let's defend the people of the United States.'"

Another point is crucial: Reagan's hardline approach of 1981-83 led to a period of nearly unprecedented hostility between the superpowers. There were few, if any, gains from such an approach. Superpower relations began to improve only after the president changed course and Gorbachev introduced important changes to Soviet foreign policy.

It is equally important to note that Reagan began seeking a rapprochement with the USSR before Gorbachev came to power. Thus, Washington was not simply responding to Gorbachev's revolutionary policies. The White House was not simply "along for the ride," as some imply. Reagan and his key advisers actively sought to improve relations even before the Soviet Union began to reform.

Shared dreams in a nuclear world

The three perspectives discussed at the outset not only overstate the antagonistic nature of the Reagan administration's policies, they also overlook the degree to which the Reagan and Bush administrations shared many fundamental goals with Gorbachev and his reformers. While there were important disagreements between the two capitals, Gorbachev and his fellow reformers shared a sense of purpose with the White House on the most fundamental issues. Chief among these shared goals was Reagan's and Gorbachev's desire to eliminate nuclear weapons. It was this common dream that initially led the two men to realize they could work together, thus opening the door to further collaboration.

Both Reagan and Gorbachev rejected the concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD), which contended that there would be stability and peace as long as the two sides had enough nuclear weapons to withstand a nuclear attack and to retaliate in kind. Reagan abhorred this doctrine and considered it immoral: "To rely on the specter of retaliation, on mutual threat... is a sad commentary on the human condition," he lamented in 1983. He repeated these sentiments during his first meeting with Soviet foreign minister Eduard
Shevardnadze in September 1985. "Today it is uncivilized to say we can only maintain peace by threatening innocent people," Reagan reasoned.29

By the time Gorbachev was admitted to the Politburo he, too, had become opposed to the conventional nuclear doctrine. "When I saw the monster that we and the United States had created as a result of the arms race, with all its mistakes and accidents with nuclear weapons and nuclear power, when I saw the terrible amount of force that had been amassed, I finally understood what the consequences, including global winter, would be," Gorbachev has reflected.30

Reagan and Gorbachev both feared the possibility of an accidental nuclear exchange. The president repeatedly spoke to his advisers about his concerns regarding an unintended nuclear Armageddon, and believed that the presence of vast stockpiles of nuclear arms raised the probability of an accident. The KAL 007 tragedy and the war scare of November 1983 played on Reagan's concerns about such an accidental nuclear exchange. As McFarlane has recalled, President Reagan "was genuinely alarmed that the world could get out of control... [H]e genuinely understood that systems can fail, and he saw a responsibility to think beyond established doctrine."31

Gorbachev shared these concerns. "I was quite sure... that the people in the White House were not idiots [and would not intentionally launch a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union]," he has recalled. "More likely, I thought, was that nuclear weapons might be used without the political leadership actually wanting this, or deciding on it, owing to some failure in the command and control systems. They say that if there is a gun, some day it will shoot. That fear motivated me to seek an end to the arms race."32 Soviet concerns about an accidental nuclear exchange grew after the April 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear-power plant.

Consequently, both the president and the general secretary sought to eliminate nuclear weapons. "I believe there can only be one policy for preserving our precious civilization in this modern age: a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought," Reagan declared to the Japanese Diet on November 11, 1983. "I know I speak for people everywhere when I say our dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the earth."33 Gorbachev shared this dream and sought to make it reality. In January 1986, the Soviet leader proposed a plan for abolishing nuclear weapons worldwide by 2000.

Although both leaders had repeatedly called for the elimination of nuclear weapons, it was only during the October 1986 Reykjavik summit meeting that they came to understand the depth of each other's conviction on the matter. To the consternation of most of his advisers, President Reagan revealed at Reykjavik that he was prepared to accept Gorbachev's plan to eliminate all strategic nuclear arms within ten years. Although such an agreement never materialized because of disagreements over SDI, the meeting was crucial in that it proved to Gorbachev that, despite Reagan's sometimes antagonistic rhetoric, the president sincerely sought to eliminate nuclear weapons. "It was a real watershed," Gorbachev has explained.34 Such understanding gave the Soviet leader more confidence to pursue his reforms at home. "After Reykjavik, it was perfectly clear to Gorbachev that there was not going to be a war, and that neither side was going to attack the other," Gorbachev's foreign-affairs adviser, Anatoli Cherniaev, has explained. "He became less concerned about this. I remember multiple discussions of military and budgetary issues, and whenever [the military] mentioned any kind of figures with requests for military spending, Gorbachev always bristled and said, 'Are you planning on going to war? I'm not going to war. So all of your suggestions are unacceptable.'"35

Both the Kremlin and the White House also believed that a genuine improvement in relations would not be possible without a modicum of trust. "The problem of the Cold War was a problem of trust, and of differences in how we understood each other's efforts in the area of security and defense," Cherniaev observed in 1998. "It was this absence of understanding, or incorrect understanding, or lack of desire to understand that was the root of the problem."36 Gorbachev and his colleagues sought to build trust through a series of unilateral arms reductions and moratoria intended to prove that the Soviet Union sincerely sought to end the arms race.

In Reagan's view, the Cold War was built upon a foundation of mistrust. If the mistrust could be resolved, other policy disputes would dissipate as well. This was especially true regarding arms control. "We don't mistrust each other because we're armed," Reagan was fond of saying. "We're armed

31 McFarlane, Brown Conference transcripts, 144.
32 Gorbachev, as quoted in Schell, "The Gift of Time."
34 Gorbachev, as quoted in Schell, "The Gift of Time."
35 Anatoly Cherniaev, Brown Conference transcripts, 44-45.
36 Cherniaev, ibid., 64.
because we mistrust each other." The president was not terribly engaged in the minutiae of the arms-control process — indeed, he found such details boring. But this was because he believed the weapons were a symptom of underlying suspicions, rather than the heart of the problem. If the mistrust between the superpowers could be resolved, the arms race would take care of itself. Consequently, the Reagan administration took a different approach toward building trust than did Gorbachev and his aides: it sought to shift the focus of superpower relations away from arms control and to aim instead to make progress in other areas, such as human rights, regional conflicts, and bilateral relations.  

It was hoped these discussions would improve mutual understanding. McFarlane has explained that, “By broadening the agenda to include not just arms control but other issues we hoped to relieve some of [the Soviet leaders’] fears that we would attack.”

The Reagan administration’s decision to emphasize topics other than arms reductions frustrated Gorbachev and his aides, however. They continued to regard arms control as the defining feature of superpower relations. Moreover, the Soviets were seeking to reduce the financial burden of the arms race and they suspected that the Reagan administration’s focus on other issues was a ploy to slow down — or avoid — such a process.

Gorbachev and Reagan shared another important goal: each believed that superpower dialogue was imperative, owing to the nuclear threat. During his January 1984 address, Reagan stated that he sought a more cooperative superpower relationship and declared that Washington “must and will” enter into talks with the Kremlin. “The fact that neither side likes the other’s system is no reason not to talk,” he reasoned. “Living in the nuclear age makes it imperative that we do talk.” Gorbachev used strikingly similar language during a July 1986 conversation with French president François Mitterrand. “The nuclear era requires new thinking from everybody,” the general secretary explained. “We all depend upon each other. That is why it is very important to understand each other better. In essence, we have no alternative other than to learn to live in the real world.”

Reagan and Bush also shared Gorbachev’s assessment that the Soviet system was in need of reform. Reagan had been calling for market reform and democratization in the USSR since the 1970s. Although Bush and his advisers were initially skeptical about the viability of Gorbachev’s policies,
they repeatedly stressed both in public and in private that they wanted the reforms to succeed. During their December 1989 summit meeting in Malta, President Bush explained to Gorbachev, "You're dealing with an administration that wants to see the success of what you are doing. The world will be a better place if perestroika succeeds." 43

Moreover, both the Bush administration and Gorbachev and his aides sought stable, managed change. Whether by nature or by political philosophy, President Bush disliked the idea of revolution. Instead, the president and his advisers hoped perestroika would lead to a gradual democratization of the Eastern bloc. Gorbachev and his reformers sought the same, in the belief that they could retain greater control over an evolutionary process than a revolutionary one. Both leaders and their aides were therefore unsettled by the rapid pace of change in Eastern Europe, particularly regarding the reunification of Germany.

The Bush administration believed that stable, managed change could occur only if the USSR remained united and Gorbachev's position remained strong. Therefore, Bush and his advisers did not want the Soviet Union to dissolve. In particular, they feared what would happen to the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal should the center collapse.

Accomplishing more by saying less

Not only did the White House share many fundamental goals with Soviet reformers, the US presidents refrained from exploiting the changes taking place in the USSR to the degree they could have. For the most part, they were careful not to exult over a Cold War "victory." For example, while there were important policy differences among Bush's advisers, they all agreed that the White House should not exacerbate Gorbachev's difficult situation. These efforts to avoid embarrassing Gorbachev largely took place behind the scenes. "We can accomplish more by saying less," National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft reasoned. 44 Consequently, Bush and his aides opted for a policy of "prudence." This approach was characterized by deliberately bland statements about the revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. For instance, while preparing for a July 1989 visit to Poland and Hungary, Bush advised his speechwriters, "Whatever this trip is, it's not a victory tour with me running around over there pounding my chest ... I don't want [my speeches] to sound inflammatory or provocative. I don't want what I do to complicate the lives of Gorbachev and the others ... I don't want to put a stick in Gorbachev's eye." During the trip, Bush emphasized his desire for strong superpower relations and advised the reformers in Poland and Hungary that they needed perestroika to be successful in order for their own reforms to proceed. Likewise, as Lithuanians began their drive for independence in December 1989, White House press spokesman Marlin Fitzwater told the media, "We don't want to take any positions that are not helpful to either side." 45 This statement was striking not only for its aloofness, but because of the longstanding American claim that the Baltic countries were not legally a part of the USSR. One could easily imagine an American president seizing upon these uprisings and making them the centerpiece of renewed condemnation of Soviet imperialism.

In the same spirit, in January 1990, the president tried to blunt international criticism of Gorbachev for sending Soviet troops into Azerbaijan to quell anti-Armenian riots there. Bush told Newsweek that it would have been preferable if the troops had not been sent, "but here you have a situation where the Soviet Union is trying to put down ethnic conflict, internal conflict." The president characterized Gorbachev's position as "extraordinarily difficult" and added that the problems "would not be made easier by a lot of pontificating from leaders in other countries." 46 Here again, it is not difficult to imagine a different president loudly condemning the Kremlin for employing troops against its own people.

As the uprisings in the Baltic republics continued throughout 1990 and 1991, the Bush administration came under increasing pressure at home to make a bold statement of support for the people of these regions and to condemn the Soviet threat of the use of force. The administration was in a difficult spot: on the one hand, it sought the democratization of these territories; on the other hand, it preferred managed reform under Gorbachev's leadership. A public declaration of support for the peoples of the Baltic republics might play well among the American public, but it would undermine Gorbachev. Moreover, Bush and his advisers anticipated that public pressure within the United States would prevent them from carrying through with a planned superpower summit in February 1991. However, canceling the summit as punishment for Soviet actions in the Baltic region would undercut Gorbachev. Ultimately, a compromise was found: the two countries issued a joint statement in which the summit was "postponed," ostensibly owing to the Persian Gulf War and

43 Beschloss and Talbott, Highest Levels, 154.

45 Beschloss and Talbott, Highest Levels, 86, 175. 46 Ibid., 176.
obstacles regarding arms control. The uprising in the Baltic area was never mentioned.

As Gorbachev's authority became increasingly tenuous toward the end of 1990, he sought to strengthen his position by adopting more hardline policies and consolidating his power. These moves prompted strong condemnation from Boris Yeltsin, as well as the resignation of Gorbachev's reform-minded foreign minister, Shevardnadze. Both men warned of a coming dictatorship. The Bush administration's response was muted, however. Baker told reporters that the United States would be "foolish" not to take Shevardnadze's warning seriously, but did not elaborate. Bush explained to the press, "Any time you move from a totalitarian, totally controlled state to an open state ... you're bound to have problems ... Far be it from me to to fine-tune the difficulties that they're having there." Once again, it is easy to imagine an alternative response in which Washington seized upon these warnings of dictatorship and reiterated its condemnation of the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union.

Some contend that the Bush administration was far too cautious and could have done more to support reformers in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In particular, they criticize the administration for dragging its feet when it came to office in January 1989, rather than seizing the initiative for change. Indeed, upon taking office the administration engaged in a review of US policy toward the Soviet Union which dragged on for months, placing superpower relations on hold. The outcome of the review was little more than pap and was rejected by Bush and his most senior advisers. Throughout most of 1989, the Bush administration appeared flat-footed, unable to grasp the momentous changes taking place in the Soviet sphere, much less fashion a vision for a post-Cold War world.

The Bush administration was laboring under serious constraints, however, the most important of which was uncertainty. The White House was aware that Gorbachev's position was becoming increasingly precarious. While Bush wanted to encourage reforms through making concessions of his own, he had to consider the growing possibility that Gorbachev would be ousted. In such a case, the reform movement could be jettisoned and the Cold War resumed. Washington needed to ensure that it would not find itself in a vulnerable position should such a scenario come to pass.

The Bush administration was also constrained by economic realities, both at home and within the Soviet Union. Although Gorbachev and his advisers


began increasing pressure for Western financial aid in July 1990, the Soviet economy had yet to be reformed. While Bush wanted to "reward" Gorbachev for his reforms - and to bolster the Soviet leader's position at home - he was painfully aware that any aid would have been largely ineffectual. The administration's ability to provide financial support was further constrained by the budget deficits caused by the Reagan-era military buildup. These budgetary constraints were a source of concern and embarrassment for the president and his advisers.48

In short, the Bush White House had to tread a very fine line: it sought to support and encourage Gorbachev's reform program, yet it also needed to protect US security interests should perestroika be abandoned.

Thorns in superpower relations

Although the Reagan and Bush administrations shared important goals with Soviet reformers and sought to support them, there is no doubt that some of Washington's policies made life very difficult for Soviet reformers. For example, the main thorn in superpower relations between 1983 and 1987 was the Strategic Defense Initiative. If anything was an impediment to improving superpower relations, it was SDI.49 Although the Soviets privately doubted the feasibility of SDI, in public they adamantly opposed the project through October 1986 for a variety of reasons. Gorbachev initially opposed SDI because his primary aim was to end the arms race. It would be more difficult for him to pursue arms reductions if some of his Soviet colleagues believed the United States to be launching a new arms race in space. Additionally, some Soviet military experts were advising that one of the most effective ways to respond to SDI was to overwhelm the system; that is, if SDI could defend against 1,000 missiles, then the Soviets should produce 1,500 missiles. Such advice made it even more difficult to pursue arms reductions.

Despite the Soviets' vociferous and continual objections to SDI, President Reagan would not budge on his pet project. He repeatedly refused Soviet attempts to keep SDI in the laboratory. The president offered to share SDI technology with the Soviets on several occasions, but the Kremlin found these arguments unconvincing and increasingly irritating.

The impasse over SDI ended in late 1986, after Gorbachev decided to shift emphasis away from the program. By this time Soviet studies had concluded

48 See Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 49, 52, 113, 126, 276-77.
49 For more, see Fischer, Triumph? For an alternate view on SDI, see Lettow, Quest.
that SDI simply was not feasible, and some suspected it was a hoax intended to
goad the Soviets into massive military outlays. 39 More importantly, after the
Reykjavik summit, Gorbachev became convinced that the United States posed
no threat to Soviet security. This understanding blunted most of the Soviet
criticisms of SDI. By 1987, the Politburo’s concerns about SDI had dissipated to
the extent that it sought to shift the focus of arms talks away from the defense
project and toward the conclusion of a treaty eliminating intermediate-range
missiles. This shift paved the way for significant progress in arms control, and
Regional disputes were another source of tension. Although Washington
sought to improve bilateral relations with Moscow, it continued a policy
of confrontation in Central America and Afghanistan through the early
1990s. 50 For example, Washington continued to funnel untold amounts of
weapons and approximately $3.2 billion to the mujahedin fighting the
Soviets in Afghanistan. In 1986, it began providing the mujahedin with
shoulder-fired Stinger missiles. 51 These anti-aircraft missiles effectively
ended the Soviets’ dominance of the air, thus turning the tide in the war.
Moreover, the Americans did nothing to help the Soviets extract themselves
from Afghanistan even after Gorbachev made it clear that this was his goal.
In fact, the Reagan administration repeatedly resisted negotiations to end
the conflict. As Gorbachev complained to Shultz in 1987, the Soviet Union
wanted to leave Afghanistan, but the United States kept “putting sticks in
our spokes.” 52

Reagan, Bush, and the Cold War
What role did the Reagan and Bush administrations play in ending the
Cold War? The three perspectives discussed at the outset are all extreme:
Washington did not vanquish the USSR, nor was Washington irrelevant.
These perspectives overstate the degree to which the White House was
antagonistic toward the Kremlin and overlook the degree to which the two

governments possessed shared objectives. As early as January 1984, the
Reagan administration was publicly calling for dialogue, cooperation, and
the elimination of nuclear weapons. This was important because these policies
created an environment that was receptive to the revolutionary changes that
were eventually introduced in Soviet policy.
President Reagan played a critical role in bringing the Cold War to its
conclusion, but not because of his military buildup or confrontational posture,
as triumphalists maintain. Rather, it was Reagan’s desire to eliminate nuclear
weapons that proved pivotal. “Reagan’s anomalous anti-nuclearism provided
the crucial signal to Gorbachev that bold initiatives would be reciprocated
rather than exploited,” Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry have rightly
observed. “Reagan’s anti-nuclearism was more important than his adminis-
tration’s military build up in catalyzing the end of the Cold War.” 53 Former
Soviet officials agree: “[Gorbachev and Reagan] were very idealistic . . .”
Soviet foreign minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh reflected in 1993. “[T]his is
what they immediately sensed in each other and this is why they made great
partners . . . And if it were not for Reagan, I don’t think we would have been
able to reach the agreements in arms control that we later reached: because of
Reagan, because of his idealism, because he really thought that we should do
away with nuclear weapons. Gorbachev believed in that. Reagan believed in
that. The experts didn’t believe, but they did.” 54
While Reagan’s aspiration to eliminate nuclear weapons placed the super-
powers on the path to ending the Cold War, Bush’s desire to support
Gorbachev kept them on the trail. Both President Reagan and President
Bush sought to midwife Soviet reforms, not to stymie them. This support
made it easier for Gorbachev to cope with domestic critics, and to continue his
programs.
How far could Gorbachev have gone with his reforms had the White
House chosen to exploit the changes within the Soviet bloc? If Reagan had
publicly exulted that he had forced the Soviets to their knees through his arms
buildup, would arms-reductions negotiations have proceeded? If the Bush
administration had seized upon the reunification of Germany and its inclusion
in NATO as a great victory for the West and the capitulation of the “evil
empire,” would the reform process have continued? We may never know the

50 The Soviets conducted two studies, both of which concluded SDI was unrealizable:
51 See John H. Coatsworth’s and Amin Saikal’s chapters in this volume.
52 Much of the impetus for this assistance – although not all – came from Congress. See
Odd Arne Westad, “Reagan’s Anti-Revolutionary Offensive in the Third World,” in
Olav Njølstad (ed.), The Last Decade of the Cold War (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 341-61,
and Steve Coll, Ghost Wars: The Secret Wars of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden from
53 Shultz, Tumult and Triumph, 805.

54 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Who Won the Cold War?,” in G. John Ikenberry
(ed.), American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins,
1996), 628.
55 Aleksandr Bessmertnykh’s remarks, in William C. Wohlforth, Witnesses to the End of the
answers to these questions for certain. But evidence suggests that the peaceful resolution of the Cold War depended upon the active collaboration of both Moscow and Washington, indeed of East and West.

Thus, the US presidents played a critical role in bringing about the ending of the Cold War. This role, however, was clearly secondary. Reagan became more conciliatory, but Gorbachev revolutionized his country’s foreign policy. Bush supported Gorbachev, but his propensity for prudence paled in comparison to Gorbachev’s bold initiatives. The changes in Soviet foreign policy were of a much greater magnitude – and more painful – than were the changes in US policy. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, relinquished their grip on Eastern Europe, reached out to a “common home” in Western Europe, and allowed the emancipation of the Soviet republics. Moreover, Kremlin officials made disproportionate concessions in their quest to end the arms race. For example, during the Reykjavik summit, US negotiators were stunned as Gorbachev introduced concession after concession, accepting most of the administration’s earlier “zero-zero” proposal. “We came [to Reykjavik] with nothing to offer and had offered nothing,” US arms negotiator Kenneth Adelman later recalled, “[We] sat there while they unwrapped their gifts.” Such gestures were in striking contrast to the president’s inflexibility on SDI. While President Reagan and President Bush sought to improve superpower relations, they certainly did not meet Gorbachev halfway.


Western Europe and the end of the Cold War, 1979–1989

JOHN W. YOUNG

This chapter argues that Western Europe contributed significantly to the way the Cold War ended. With its large, well-educated population, with its industrial output and technology, and with strategic access to the North Atlantic, the region always remained the greatest potential prize in the global contest between the superpowers. The West European desire to continue détente in the wake of the Afghanistan crisis acted as a brake on US policy during the ‘new’ Cold War and encouraged the improvement in relations afterwards. Perhaps more important, at the same time, West Europeans rescued their economies from the doldrums and continued to build the most successful customs union in the world in the European Community. They also strengthened democracy in Southern Europe, and remained determined, even amid the euphoria of ‘Gorbymania’, to maintain a strong North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), complete with an effective nuclear defence. This combination of strength and a willingness to talk to the other side allowed West European governments to remain popular at home, to maintain security abroad, and to pursue a dynamic policy in the Cold War, one that did much to secure a resolution on Western terms.

If the breakdown of the Soviet system is seen as the result of a long-term failure of Communism in the face of liberal capitalism, then the success of West Europeans in creating a stable, thriving democratic system – mixing economic success with social justice – was an important component of the West’s victory in the Cold War. In a real sense, NATO’s agenda in the Helsinki process was fulfilled. The Soviets may have won recognition of the postwar territorial settlement in 1975, but only at the cost of allowing

1 For a discussion of Afghanistan, see Amin Saikal’s chapter in this volume; for a discussion of the evolution of détente and its breakdown, see especially Jussi Hanhkimäki’s chapter in volume II and Vladislav M. Zubok’s and Olav Njåland’s chapters in this volume.