

# When Reagan and Gorbachev Reached for the Stars

*Don Oberdorfer*

REYKJAVIK IN MY ESTIMATION was *the* summit of the late Cold War era. All other top level Soviet meetings pale in comparison. For a host of reasons, only the Kennedy-Krushchev encounter in Vienna in 1961 can make an equal claim to historical importance. Like Reykjavik, the Vienna meeting also had unintended and unanticipated consequences—but unlike this one, the consequences in Vienna were entirely negative.

At Reykjavik in October 1986, two unconventional national leaders reached for the stars, each in his own way, but fell short at the last moment, leaving an immediate and misleading impression of dramatic failure. Eventually, however, the protagonists and their acolytes—and later, historians of the Cold War—came to realize that the summit at Hofdi House had been a great success, in some respects the greatest success in the decades-long history of arms control.

Unfortunately, I learned about Reykjavik secondhand because I was on leave as a visiting professor at Princeton that fall. It was only the Reagan-Gorbachev summit that I missed as *Washington Post* diplomatic correspondent. Immediately afterward, however, I began reconstructing the summit via in-

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terviews with American participants. I later augmented my knowledge with interviews with Soviet participants and access to the U.S. transcript of the meeting for my book, *The Turn*, later republished and expanded under its previous subtitle, *From the Cold War to a New Era*.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the arms control consequences, it was true at Reykjavik as in all negotiations that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed. In the final moments in Reykjavik, the negotiations fell apart on the issue of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Yet all that had been put on the table by the two leaders and their arms control experts, led by the remarkable Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev on the Soviet side and the remarkable veteran Paul Nitze on the U.S. side, remained as positions that henceforth could not be denied and thus became the core of that which followed.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated for the first time an entire class of nuclear weapons, was a product of the deals that had been offered up at Reykjavik. Moreover, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev agreed in principle that over a five-year period the number of nuclear warheads would be cut by 50 percent, to 6,000 warheads on each side. It took a while and much further negotiation to validate this bargain. But a recent chart in the *Washington Post*, designed to show North Korea's nuclear standing in the international context, illustrated the current reality—5,735 operational nuclear warheads of the United States, just short of 6,000 and 5,800 operational warheads of Russia, the successor to the Soviet Union.

The arms control consequences of the summit were, in the end, historic. Ambassador Avis Bohlen, who has carefully studied arms control in the Cold War, described the principals to

1. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

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me in a recent conversation as “an odd couple on a roller coaster, each having reached the conclusion that the nuclear competition and nuclear weapons as then deployed were truly dangerous to their societies and everyone else.” As Bohlen remarked, that was “a revolutionary idea.”<sup>2</sup>

We know now that Reagan was a nuclear abolitionist. He kept telling us so in speeches to the Japanese Diet and in many other utterances, but we in the press and many in government could not square this conviction with his macho image. We didn’t believe him until the news of the bargaining at Reykjavik leaked out, and we learned with surprise what had happened on Sunday afternoon, October 12, 1986.

The weight of the huge military forces and most of the political and diplomatic establishments on both sides were tugging in the opposite direction, toward more and more devastating weapons, larger and more powerful than ever before. Yet here were two men in a small room in the capital city of Iceland trying to escape the gravitational force and pull their nations back. Former Secretary of State George Shultz, on a recent trip to Reykjavik, revisited Hofdi House, now a museum. He was shocked to realize what a small room and what a tiny table had been the meeting place of Reagan and Gorbachev. From that modest launching pad they had let their hopes and dreams take flight, escaping the power of precedent and the bureaucracies—before Gorbachev brought the collaboration back to Earth with his insistence, which Reagan adamantly rejected, on curbing the SDI.

Here is an excerpt from the American “memorandum of conversation” of the last hours of the summit, as written by Thomas Simons, the U.S. note taker, and as declassified in January 2000:

2. For Bohlen’s study, see Avis Bohlen, “The Rise and Fall of Arms Control,” *Survival* (Autumn 2005).

*The President* . . . asked whether Gorbachev was saying that beginning in the first five-year period and then going on in the second we would be reducing all nuclear weapons—cruise missiles, battlefield weapons, sub-launched and the like. It would be fine with him if we eliminated all nuclear weapons.

*Gorbachev* said, “We can do that. We can eliminate them.”

*The Secretary* [Shultz] said, “Let’s do it.”

. . .

*The President* said that if they could agree to eliminate all nuclear weapons, he thought they could turn it over to their Geneva people with that understanding, for them to draft up that agreement, and Gorbachev could come to the U.S. and sign it.

*Gorbachev* agreed.<sup>5</sup>

The next line, however, contained the deal-breaker: “Gorbachev continued that he now wanted to turn to the ABM Treaty.” He insisted anew that research, development, and testing of antiballistic missile programs be confined to the laboratory. Reagan adamantly refused. After further intense argument on this point, the summit broke up.

In my view, their talk of eliminating their ballistic missiles and their nuclear weapons within ten years was fanciful because the military and military-minded people in both countries—the conventional thinkers at home and the allies on both sides abroad—would have rebelled at the sudden change in direction.

I don’t know what Gorbachev thought, but I can attest that

5. “Memorandum of Conversation, October 12, 1986, 3:25–6 p.m., Hofdi House, Reykjavik,” United States Department of State, Secret/Sensitive (Declassified January 14, 2000).

Reagan did not feel this way. I interviewed him for my book in Los Angeles on March 27, 1990, a little over a year after he retired from the presidency. I asked him what he believed would have happened had he and Gorbachev walked out to the steps of Hofdi House to announce an agreement to eliminate all the ballistic missiles or the nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the world's most militarily powerful nations.

Reagan responded that he had never considered the possibility that his and Gorbachev's handiwork would have been thwarted or rejected. He might have been wrong, he said, but, he told me, with a characteristic shake of his head, "I thought the world would have greeted it with great joy."<sup>4</sup>

There was yet another dimension of interaction at Reykjavik—a human dimension among leaders and diplomats—that I believe was extraordinarily important.

Here is an excerpt of the talk between Reagan and Gorbachev as recorded in the Soviet transcript, but unaccountably absent from the U.S. transcript. It has been validated by Charles Hill, George Shultz's executive assistant and a U.S. note taker in the final afternoon. Hill recalled it vividly when I spoke to him recently. In the course of the bargaining in the decisive final afternoon was the following byplay:

*Reagan.* If we have eliminated all nuclear weapons, why should you be worried by the desire of one of the sides to make itself safe—just in case—from weapons which neither of us has anymore? Someone else could create missiles, and extra guarantees would be appropriate. Your side and our side are completely eliminating our weapons. I can imagine both of us in later years getting together again in Iceland to destroy the last So-

4. Interview with Ronald Reagan, March 27, 1990 (in possession of the author).

viet and American missiles under triumphant circumstances. By then I'll be so old you won't even recognize me. And you will ask in surprise, "Hey, Ron, is that really you? What are you doing here?" And we'll have a big celebration over it.

*Gorbachev.* I don't know whether I'll live till that time.

*Reagan.* Well, I'm certain I will.

*Gorbachev.* Sure you will. You've passed the dangerous age for men, and now it's smooth sailing to be a hundred. But these dangers still lie ahead for me, for a man they come by the age of 60 and besides, I still have to meet with President Reagan, who I can see really hates to give in. President Reagan wants to be the winner. But in this case, on these matters, there can be no one winner—either we both win or we both lose. We're in the same boat.

*Reagan.* I know I won't live to be a hundred if I have to live in fear of these damned missiles.

*Gorbachev.* Well, let's reduce and eliminate them.<sup>5</sup>

Hill also alerted me to a profound change in interpersonal relations that began for him at that meeting. He had had extensive previous experience with communist negotiators. Before Reykjavik, he told me, his Soviet interlocutors had always stuck close to their predetermined line. "You knew you were talking to someone doing something for some reason other than what an individual human being would do on his own hook. And suddenly someone at the top said, 'It's okay to be a human being again.' And their top officials from top to bottom

5. "Transcript of Gorbachev-Reagan Reykjavik Talks: Part 4," *FBIS-USR-93-121*, 20 September 1993. Reagan died at age 93 in June 2004.

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changed. . . . Suddenly the lid was off, and you could be yourself to a certain extent.”

When I confronted members of Gorbachev’s team with Hill’s quote at a Princeton University meeting of former American and Soviet negotiators in 1993, former Ambassador and Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh responded, “For us, of course, there were no instructions to change ourselves into human beings, but there was something that influenced us, and that was Gorbachev himself. . . .

“He was an absolutely new type of top leader. He was absolutely human, accessible—a man who could love, who could curse, who could use good and unprintable language. He was an absolutely normal man, very intellectual at the same time and knowledgeable. In Geneva, in Reykjavik, we [Soviet and U.S. diplomats] were getting more and more open to each other, and this pattern of interrelationship existed for the rest of the presidency. . . . So I would agree that one of the major elements of changing the Cold War was changing ourselves. We were the products of the Cold War, all of us. But we became softened by the new realities.”<sup>6</sup>

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is a tendency to believe that the events at Reykjavik and other late developments in the U.S.-Soviet relationship were much less meaningful than they seemed to be at the time—that the Soviet Union was doomed to go down due to internal contradictions and weaknesses and needed only a nudge to make it happen.

As a historian of the period, I do not believe that is true. Nowhere was it written in the stars that the heavily armed Soviet Union would pass away peacefully and that the atten-

6. William C. Wohlforth, editor, *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 184.

dant Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and Central Asia would pass into history with hardly a shot being fired.

It is a marvel of history that the end of Soviet power came peacefully, bringing about the end of the Cold War. In part, this was due to relationships that were forged at Reykjavik and that survived the seeming failure of that summit meeting and thrived in the months and years that followed. With different decisions and different people, it could all have turned out very differently for the United States and the Soviet Union, indeed, for all humankind.