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## **It's Only Easy in Retrospect: The American Road to INF, 1986–1987**

We should not allow the emerging consensus on the INF Treaty's historical significance to obscure the complexity of its origins. As with so many historical events, things that appear inevitable in retrospect were predicted by few in advance. Both then and now, informed observers have struggled to explain the circuitous, decade-long path that wound from Helmut Schmidt's stern warnings about Soviet missile deployments to NATO's Double-Track Decision, and then, via a deployment that contributed to the collapse of *détente*, to that final Washington signing ceremony. It's a story set to the background music of an increasingly shrill and apocalyptic rhetoric of anti-missile protest marches, which ended at a summit between a reformist Soviet leader and an American President who had once called the Soviet Union "the focus of evil in the modern world."<sup>1</sup>

This fascinating story has only gained in appeal in the last few years. The present essay was originally written for a conference to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Washington Treaty, but now appears in print after a subsequent U. S. President has withdrawn from the agreement in response to alleged Russian violations. It remains to be seen whether any new negotiations will result in a more satisfactory agreement, as negotiators on both sides have suggested. The future remains as hidden from us as it always has been, but, as we experience the politics surrounding the Treaty's death, it is appropriate that we consider the developments and decisions that brought it to life in the first place.

The American road to the INF Treaty was the product of both long- and short-term elements, all of which were important; neither the long-term factors nor the short would have been sufficient on their own. The long-term element was the particular vision of Ronald Reagan, who rose to the leadership of the Republican party as an avatar of hardline anti-Communist conservatism but who also pursued a nuclear abolition agenda that was out of line with that held by many of his supporters. In the short term, the American political developments of 1986 and 1987 that weakened the Reagan Administration, along with the domestic and international pressures that moved Gorbachev to reach a compromise, created an opportunity for the President to close this nuclear deal and end his term of office

1 Ronald Reagan, Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983. Text at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/30883b> (accessed March 14, 2020). See also Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. Ronald Reagan, Washington D. C. 1983, p. 364.

on a historically positive note. This brief essay will attempt to sketch these two sides of the story, to help us understand both how a historical agreement can be the product of such disparate forces, and how similar forces can work against such deals in the future. It aims to contribute to an understanding of the late Cold War era that is post-revisionist (for want of a better term) and which highlights the surprising interplay of long-held beliefs and political opportunities that led to a success many had dreamt of, but few had predicted.

## 1. Ronald Reagan, “Secret Dove?”

Our understanding of the American position on the INF issue has to begin with a recognition that INF was a natural culmination of the Reagan defense buildup. This aspect is underappreciated, even by some of the most recent scholarship, which continues to frame the Reagan Administration’s embrace of disarmament as a “reversal.”<sup>2</sup> Beth Fischer and the scholars who have learned from her path-breaking work are correct in noting the apparent change of course in Reagan’s arms control policy. This, they say, began in late 1983, when Reagan moved away from the position taken during his first term—at that time, stressing the need to close an alleged “window of vulnerability” through substantial increases in the American defense budget—and moved toward an openness to arms control.<sup>3</sup> According to that long dominant narrative, Soviet overreaction to NATO’s Able Archer exercise, which an increasingly nervous Soviet leadership thought was preparation for an actual attack, combined with concerns about the approaching 1984 Presidential elections to make Reagan rethink his rhetorical approach to the Soviets.<sup>4</sup> That rethinking coincided with the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev, who had his own reasons for offering Reagan the opportunity to strike the historic deal in Washington.<sup>5</sup>

That visible break, however, should not obscure the basic continuity in Reagan’s own thinking about nuclear weapons. Even now that Reagan’s historical image has been “rehabilitated” by scholars like Fischer, there is still a tendency amongst commentators to imagine those moves as the product of external forces influencing the President rather than to credit them to his agency. Reagan’s critics were so wedded to his image as a trigger-happy cowboy that, unsurprisingly, his

2 Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, Columbia 1997.

3 Fischer has now significantly revised her original position, see Beth A. Fischer, *Building Up and Seeking Peace: President Reagan’s Cold War Legacy*, in: Jeffrey L. Chidster and Paul Kengor (eds.), *Reagan’s Legacy in a World Transformed*, Cambridge/Mass. 2015, pp. 165–177; as well as her contribution to this volume.

4 Nate Jones (ed.), *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, New York 2016; Marc Ambinder, *The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983*, New York 2018.

5 See the contribution by Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton in this volume.

embrace of arms control caused cognitive dissonance; and this has lasted from his own time to subsequent historical interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Even scholars who consider themselves even-handed with Reagan have struggled to accept the possibility that rearmament and disarmament always went together.

Reagan himself asserted a continuity in his policy vision that neither critics nor admirers have completely understood or consistently applied in their analyses. One-time critics who now have kind words for Reagan tend to shift responsibility for his previous sins onto his more conservative advisors, while praising the sensible moderate advisors who guided him onto wiser paths.<sup>7</sup> Among the latter, they particularly single out Secretary of State George Shultz. But conservative activists, then and now, tend to do the opposite, blaming alleged moderates like Shultz and the Chief of General Staff, James Baker, for betraying the Reagan Revolution, as they criticize some of the Reagan policies. So, in their search for the “Real Reagan,” scholars have often only found the Reagan they wanted to find in the first place. As speechwriter Aram Bakshian noted, when people said “Let Reagan be Reagan,” they usually meant, “Let me be Reagan.”<sup>8</sup>

This is unfortunate, because it not only misses the complexity of Reagan as a character, but also the complexity of his team and the role they played in producing the Washington Treaty. I say this not to claim any of the mystical qualities attributed to Reagan that dot the hagiographic literature on the man,<sup>9</sup> but rather in a plea for scholars to apply the same serious *Verstehen* to the relationship between Reagan’s intentions and results that scholars apply to the protesters who denounced the President’s policies.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not those protesters were correct in their assumptions about the President and in their predictions of imminent nuclear disaster, scholars do understand the value of treating them on their own terms. Like many a peace marcher, however, many Reagan researchers have not fully appreciated that the President was actually serious in his belief that the point of the arms buildup—the buildup he called “peace through strength”—might actually have been to make the U. S. strong enough to negotiate when the time was right; and he certainly assembled a team of advisors who made

6 Laurence I. Barrett, *Gambling with History. Reagan in the White House*, New York 1984 (paperback ed.) is a perfect example of the conventional wisdom during the Reagan Era. Among the well known post-Reagan works, France FitzGerald, *Way out There in the Blue*, New York 2000, also emphasized Reagan’s irresponsible rhetoric on missile defense, treating the INF Treaty as largely Gorbachev’s accomplishment.

7 James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation. Gorbachev’s Adaptability, Reagan’s Engagement and the End of the Cold War*, Ithaca 2014.

8 Interview with Aram Bakshian, in: Miller Center, Ronald Reagan Oral History [MCOH], January 14, 2002, pp. 31, 42, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/aram-bakshian-jr-oral-history-director-speechwriting>.

9 Peter Schweizer, *Victory. The Reagan Administration’s Secret Strategy that Hastened the End of the Cold War*, New York 1994; idem, *Reagan’s War. The Epic Story of his Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph over Communism*, New York 2003.

10 Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke, and Jeremy Varon (eds.), *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s*, New York 2017.

that possible. For all their occasionally intense disagreements on details, those advisors who worked with Reagan the longest, including the pair most often described as polar opposites, Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, did so because they shared an overall strategy for advancing American interests. It was one in which a military buildup and an arms control strategy were intimately bound together.<sup>11</sup>

A central element of that strategy was Reagan's deep aversion to nuclear weapons, which distinguished him from other conservatives, who advocated strength and distrusted arms control.<sup>12</sup> This is what led Reagan to embrace the "zero option," something he advocated for all nuclear weapons and which eventually found expression in the INF Treaty. More conventional arms control experts—of both parties—viewed the zero option as either a dangerous delusion or a clever dodge to avoid negotiations. Whether inside or outside the Reagan Administration, they were generally shocked when Reagan actually followed through on it as a practical policy. Reagan aide Annelise Anderson argues that Shultz and others in the arms control world initially thought Reagan's anti-nuclear positions were "nuts." But the pragmatic Shultz also warned his staff, "You better get used to it because that's what he thinks."<sup>13</sup>

Shultz found a way to channel Reagan's enthusiasm for arms reduction in the direction of opening talks with the Soviets. His success and his positive press image allowed many writers to imagine that he had somehow taken Reagan somewhere the President did not want to go, missing the point that, despite his advocacy of the largest defense buildup in peacetime American history, Reagan's goal was *always* zero. To acknowledge that, however, threatened to confuse those who already thought they had Reagan clearly categorized.

The confusion goes back to Reagan's first embrace of the zero option, in his November 18, 1981 speech to the National Press Club.<sup>14</sup> Reagan gave that speech, shortly before American and Soviet negotiators were getting ready to meet in Geneva as part of the negotiation package of NATO's Double-Track Decision. NBC's Marvin Kalb struggled to make sense of Reagan's musings about a world without nuclear weapons, and asked Secretary Weinberger half-jokingly, "Have you always been secret doves?" Weinberger asserted that he did not "see any change from dove to hawk [...] or anything of that kind at all. I see a perfectly clear evolution of a policy which the President enunciated many times last year

11 Ronald J. Granieri, *Beyond Cap the Foil. Caspar Weinberger and the Reagan Era Defense Buildup*, in: Bradley Coleman and Kyle Longley (eds.), *The Enduring Legacy. Leadership and National Security Affairs during the Reagan Presidency*, Lexington KY 2017, pp. 51–80.

12 Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, New York 2006.

13 Annelise Anderson, MCOH, Interview (December 17, 2002), pp. 56 f., <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/annelise-anderson-oral-history-associate-director-office>.

14 Ronald Reagan, *Remarks to Members of the National Press Club on Arms Reduction and Nuclear Weapons*, November 18, 1981, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111881a>. (accessed March 14, 2020).

[...] to arm and regain the strength of the United States so that we can enter into effective negotiating discussions.”<sup>15</sup>

Getting from that idea to the actual Washington Treaty was, of course, not always so simple. One of the foremost historians of the Cold War, Melvyn Leffler, offers an example of how scholars can gain a better understanding of what was happening in a recent essay in which he emphasized the significance of Reagan’s “desires to abolish nuclear weapons, tamp down the strategic arms race, and avoid Armageddon.” Even though many of his advisors were more suspicious of Soviet intentions and reluctant to pursue radical change, Leffler writes, “Reagan’s sincerity, goodwill, strong desire for negotiations, and shared commitment to nuclear abolition (however abstract) reassured Gorbachev, helping to sustain a trajectory whose end results the Soviet leader did not foresee or contemplate. Paradoxically, then, Reagan nurtured the dynamics that won the Cold War by focusing on ways to end it.”<sup>16</sup>

As much as Reagan disliked nuclear weapons personally, however, his rise to power depended in no small part on the coalescence of a conservative critique of arms control. Both his 1976 and 1980 campaigns built on his suspicion of the arms control process. Along the way, Reagan gathered a diverse collection of arms control critics, giving them coherence and a common home, enabling them to become an authentic conservative counterculture. That counterculture had helped alter the direction of the arms control narrative with the emergence of the Second Cold War after 1979. Historians generally agree that the success of conservative opinion leaders like William F. Buckley Jr. in marginalizing fringe elements and bringing together the main strands of conservatism in the 1960s created a movement with which Ronald Reagan could ride to victory in 1980. But arms control, too, provided a particularly useful issue to attract disparate groups to Reagan’s banner.<sup>17</sup>

Too much work on the historical development of the foreign- and security-policy views of the American Right tends to collapse definitions rather than refine them. Thanks especially to the bruising political debates inspired by the Bush (43rd) Administration’s foreign policy, terms such as “neo-conservative” and “hard-liner” have been tossed around so much that they have lost their specific meanings. Even good books tend to ignore very real differences in detail that separated, and continue to separate, them.<sup>18</sup> While not advocating splitting

15 Weinberger and Kalb on *Meet the Press*, November 22, 1981, in: Public Statements of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger 1981, Vol 5, Washington 1981, p. 3427.

16 Melvyn P. Leffler, Ronald Reagan and the Cold War. What Mattered Most, in: Texas National Security Review, 1/3 (May 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/65636> (accessed July 15, 2018).

17 On the development of the Reagan coalition and the Conservative movement in general, see Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, New York, 2015. See also George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Wilmington DE 2006.

18 Len Colodny and Tom Schachtman, *The Forty Years War. The Rise and Fall of the Neocons, from Nixon to Obama*, New York 2009.

for its own sake, I think it is important that we don't lose all sense of the trees when describing the forest. Understanding differences in origin and goals can help us understand both how political coalitions emerge and also how and why they break up.

A line of simply opposing arms control was neither unique nor a sufficient description of Reagan's positions. A segment of the American policy elite had been arguing in this way throughout the Cold War, but simple rejectionism had been defeated in the 1970s, when the emergence of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process altered the political debate.<sup>19</sup> Conservatives needed to regroup if they hoped to shape any future debate, and this forced them to refine both the nature of their critique and their vision for the future.

The most important distinction between groupings in the Reagan team was that between the anti-nuclear hawks and the hard bargainers. The first group got its name from a term used by one of the men Reagan appointed to direct the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Kenneth Adelman. It was how he described his boss's basic outlook. According to Adelman, Reagan wanted a strong national defense but "couldn't stand nuclear weapons; he wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons."<sup>20</sup> Secretary of Defense Weinberger also admitted in a private conversation that "Ronald Reagan detests [nuclear weapons] more than anyone I've ever dealt with."<sup>21</sup> That attitude was not immediately apparent to all those who supported Reagan nor to those who feared him. Many Reagan supporters, hardened by the arms control debates of the 1970s, assumed that conservatism required an attachment to nuclear weapons and a rejection of all deals. Adelman himself admitted "All of us who were conservative thought that when [Jimmy] Carter said, 'I want to eliminate nuclear weapons,' that was the stupidest thing we'd ever heard. We all made fun of it, and then we have our hero who says things really more extreme than Carter ever does, and he's unstoppable on doing it."<sup>22</sup> As we have pointed out, subsequent literature has emphasized the nuclear abolitionism that ran consistently through Reagan's policies. He opposed conventional arms control because it did not aim at reductions, and believed that an arms buildup was the best way to respond to the Soviet threat until reductions became possible. Reagan's critique of SALT II was twofold. Essentially, he attacked the treaty from both the left and the right. He believed it wrong merely to limit future growth of stockpiles, preferring to negotiate on reducing existing forces.

19 Matthew J. Ambrose, *The Control Agenda. A History of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks*, Ithaca 2017.

20 Kenneth Adelman, MCOH, Interview (September 30, 2003), p. 38, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/kenneth-adelman-oral-history-director-arms-control-and>.

21 Weinberger comment in conversation with Clare Booth Luce, quoted in: William F. Buckley, Jr., *The Reagan I Knew*, New York 2008, p. 190.

22 Adelman, MCOH, Interview (September 30, 2003), p. 38, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/kenneth-adelman-oral-history-director-arms-control-and>.

On the other hand, he was convinced that the Soviets “cheated” or “fudged” on the limitations.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, when in office, he rejected the traditional arms control path and instead embraced the “zero option” idea presented by Weinberger and the Pentagon (an idea they themselves had borrowed from the Europeans). As early as October 1981, Weinberger had argued that the administration “might need to consider a bold plan, sweeping in nature, to capture world opinion,” and advocated zero.<sup>24</sup> He stood by that position even as political pressure built to abandon it, both for larger strategic reasons and for political purposes. As a Defense Department paper argued in 1983, “European opponents of deployments now have a stake in the negotiations because they might lead to a zero outcome; abandon ‘zero’ and their interest will diminish sharply.”<sup>25</sup> The zero option rejected intermediate steps, accepting short- and medium-term increases in arms in return for the long-term vision of abolition. This vision was certainly paradoxical, but that does not necessarily mean it was dishonest, and we cannot understand the Reagan record on arms control without appreciating how sincerely held, yet contradictory, his convictions were.

Reagan’s attitude found its most profound expression in his advocacy of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which in its ideal form was intended to make nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete.”<sup>26</sup> The anti-nuclear hawk vision added an important long-term idealism to what could otherwise sound and look like simple rejectionism. And it had important political consequences, since it made Reagan’s significant and (for many) shocking flirtation with nuclear abolition at Reykjavik possible in October 1986, which ultimately led to the INF Treaty in Washington a year later.

The second group, the hard bargainers, included those security professionals who did not reject arms control per se, but who felt that previous administrations had negotiated bad agreements. Reagan sometimes spoke in this vein, but the more consistent advocates of this position were veterans of the Nixon and Ford Administrations, such as Secretary of State Alexander Haig and National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane. The hard bargainers did not reject the arms control process. They argued, rather, that they could manage that process better than their Democratic predecessors. They claimed to be realists, not idealists, somewhat to the right but clearly within a generalized arms control consensus.

23 Douglas Brinkley (ed.), *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 297, 332 (January 29; June 3 and 4, 1985).

24 Meeting of the National Security Council on October 13, 1981, in: FRUS 1981–1988, Vol. 3 (Soviet Union 1981–1983), ed. by James Graham Wilson, Washington 2016, Doc. 92, pp. 309–315, especially p. 313.

25 Defense Paper, cited in: Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Clark) to President Reagan, January 1983, in: *ibid.*, p. 852; *Reagan Diaries*, p. 125 (January 13, 1983).

26 Reagan’s televised speech, March 23, 1983, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/32383d>.

Haig, for example, prided himself on being tough with the Soviets, famously revoking Ambassador Dobrynin's privileged access to the State Department parking garage once he took over at Foggy Bottom.<sup>27</sup> An important link between Reagan and the security policy establishment, Haig believed that the arms control process should continue. He was therefore appalled by the zero option, arguing that it was a bad idea to take a position that could not, he felt, be the basis for negotiations.<sup>28</sup> Convinced that it was his job to be the voice of reason, speaking for the entire American foreign policy community, Haig never quite grasped the differences between his position and Reagan's. In an NSC meeting on the eve of Reagan's announcement of the zero option, he argued against making zero the official administration line. Seeking a basis for negotiations, he suggested instead that American policy should seek "the lowest possible number" of nuclear weapons. When Reagan and Weinberger pushed back, Haig responded that he agreed zero was the ultimate goal, only to have Weinberger reply: "then we should say so."<sup>29</sup> Reagan concurred.

McFarlane, who took over as National Security Advisor in 1983, after serving as Counselor to Haig in the State Department as well as Deputy National Security Advisor, echoed Haig's sentiment and was often frustrated by Reagan's attitude. For example, after Congress rejected plans for the MX missile, a new ICBM that was originally intended to modernize the American land-based deterrent, McFarlane endorsed using SDI as a possible bargaining chip in getting the Soviets to reduce their own ICBM force. He was genuinely shocked when Reagan made it clear that he did not intend to negotiate SDI away, no matter what the Soviets might be willing to give up in return.<sup>30</sup> These were the positions that Shultz called "nuts."

Reagan was willing to wait a long time for the right deal, and to walk away from half-measures. Thus when the Soviets showed little interest in the zero option, and when the 1983 deployment of the Pershing II and Cruise Missiles led them to break off the Geneva talks, Reagan took a less tragic view than some of his advisors—and certainly less than the Democratic opposition in Congress or the media. "Some on our side want us to come up with an additional proposal" to keep the Soviets from walking away, Reagan confided in his diary. "That is lousy negotiating strategy [...] We can't keep changing our proposals every time they say *nyet*."<sup>31</sup> ACDA director Adelman followed Reagan's position closely. "My objective was to get a good treaty if we could do it, and if we didn't have a treaty at the end of four years, then we didn't. I didn't need a treaty; the United States

27 Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat. Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*, New York 1984, pp.100 f.

28 Ambrose, *Control Agenda*, pp. 183–185.

29 Memorandum for the Record of the National Security Meeting, November 12, 1981, p. 4, in: box 91282, Executive Secretariat, NSC: National Security Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

30 Wilson, *Triumph of Improvisation*, pp. 107 f.

31 Reagan Diaries, p. 186 (October 12, 1983).

didn't need a treaty. Maybe the President's political guys needed a treaty, but if they did, they'd need someone else to get them a treaty."<sup>32</sup>

Variety within the conservative coalition was essential for Reagan's success, but also contributed to the apparent incoherence of the Administration's policies, not to mention the eventual crisis the Republican Party faces today. In arms control the differences were not immediately problematic, as the generalized critique of the Carter Administration's approach worked well in blurring differences among conservatives, and the alternately threatening and sclerotic Soviet leadership of the early 1980s did not offer a terribly appealing negotiating partner for any arms control breakthroughs. But the coalition suffered significant strains during Reagan's second term, as its abolitionist President moved towards negotiations. When the concrete opportunity for talks appeared, once Mikhail Gorbachev had come to power in Moscow in 1985, Reagan moved cautiously but determinedly to seize it. Nevertheless, domestic politics as well as the changing international climate influenced the shape those talks eventually took.

## 2. The Politics of Diplomacy and the Diplomacy of Politics

Even with a clearer understanding of Reagan's motivations, we still need to appreciate the political context that made the Washington Treaty possible. It was a success for Reagan and Gorbachev, but it was not the success that either had initially hoped to reach. The specific form of the agreement reflected the politics of the late Reagan Administration, and although Reagan would defend the agreement by emphasizing its connection to his larger vision, our historical perspective reveals the interplay between long-term strategy and immediate political tactics.

The path to INF wound through two summits and the Administration's near-death experience in the Iran-Contra scandal, all of which, along with the increasing global popularity of Gorbachev's reform agenda, prepared the ground for the Treaty. Despite his career of anti-Communist rhetoric, Reagan had been eager to meet with Soviet leaders ever since he came into office. Even from his hospital bed, as he recovered from a spring 1981 assassination attempt, Reagan composed a long letter to Leonid Brezhnev, concluding with his hope for a "meaningful and constructive dialogue which will assist us in our joint obligation to find lasting peace."<sup>33</sup> Such a meeting did not become a real possibility, however, until Gorbachev's arrival on the scene. Many conservatives—those who had denounced previous Soviet leaders for being Communist true believers—were

32 Adelman MCOH, 36–7. Adelman recounts with some resentment that Colin Powell, at that time one of Reagan's military assistants, joked that Adelman was head of ACDA and opposed arms control. He claims he retorted, "Yes, you were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and you didn't like war."

33 Quoted in Barrett, *Gambling with History*, pp. 31–33. See also Reagan Diaries, pp. 13–15 (April 18, 22, and 23, 1981).

not mollified by Gorbachev's calls for *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. Indeed, they saw him as even more dangerous than his predecessors, as his popularity in the West might undermine Western solidarity. Reagan himself was not unaware of these dangers, but, encouraged by Shultz, he was committed to pursuing dialogue.

The course of true *détente* never did run smooth. After a first meeting in Geneva in 1985, the two sides began a wary dialogue. Significant differences remained on fundamental issues, such as the relationship between strategic and intermediate-range forces and the role of SDI. For all his commitment to nuclear abolition, Reagan's attachment to "Star Wars" threatened the progress of arms control. He may have sincerely believed that SDI could be a force for peace by removing the danger of nuclear attack, but he failed to appreciate what the project must look like from Moscow's perspective. For the Russians, as for Reagan's critics, SDI appeared to be either a colossal boondoggle or a roundabout way of preparing the United States to launch a devastating first strike.<sup>34</sup>

At the Reykjavik summit in October 1986, Gorbachev and Reagan flirted with the idea of massive cuts in their strategic nuclear forces, and the occasion has taken on mythic proportions in the Reagan literature, including a recent memoir by Kenneth Adelman.<sup>35</sup> But it is worth remembering that, at the time, skeptical observers thought Reagan's rash entertainment of the abolition of all nuclear weapons and his ultimate refusal to sacrifice SDI for the purpose at the "slapdash summit" were equally irresponsible stances. They concluded that "the casual way in which Reagan played at gambling away the West's nuclear deterrent is beyond question and without match." For critics writing in the immediate aftermath, the success of Reagan's team in their bid to spin the summit into "Reagan's finest hour" was both inexplicable and infuriating.<sup>36</sup>

Observers back home viewed Reykjavik within the context of a much bigger story arising at the same time: the Iran-Contra scandal.<sup>37</sup> Instead of hailing theoretical developments in arms control, the American press and public saw a President who had become so detached from the details of government, or blinded by his own ideological prejudices, that he had allowed rogue elements of his own government not only to sell arms secretly to enemies of the United States in Teheran, but to use the proceeds from those sales to finance the anti-Communist Contras in Nicaragua—all of which was in direct contravention of Congressional

34 FitzGerald, *Way out There in the Blue*, pp. 248–254; Ralph Dietl, *The strategic defense initiative: Ronald Reagan, NATO Europe, and the nuclear and space talks, 1981–1988*, Lanham/New York/London 2019.

35 Kenneth Adelman, *Reagan at Reykjavik. Forty-Eight Hours that Ended the Cold War*, New York 2014. See also Wilson, *Triumph of Improvisation*, pp. 111–130.

36 Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus, *Landslide. The Unmaking of the President, 1984–1988*, Boston 1988, pp. 282–284. A more even-handed assessment of Reykjavik can be found in Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan. A History, 1974–2008*, New York 2008, especially pp. 254–259.

37 For discussions of Iran-Contra generally, here and below see Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*, pp. 209–244. An indispensable source remains Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *The Iran–Contra Scandal. The Declassified History*. New York 1993.

resolutions and perhaps of the Constitution. From the fall of 1986 through the summer of 1987, President Reagan and his supporters struggled, and largely failed, to explain what had happened in any way that could satisfy the American public. Reagan's own closest advisors Weinberger and Shultz had advised against the Iran deal, but Reagan, moved by the plight of Western hostages in Lebanon, had allowed secret contacts to go forward. Even if he denied knowledge of the financial machinations, the scandal rocked his Administration. National Security Advisor McFarlane had especially encouraged the policy. He had hoped a successful secret opening to Iran would provide a breakthrough in the Middle East—something equivalent to Henry Kissinger's work to open relations with China. Instead, he exposed his President to the same sort of constitutional danger that brought down Kissinger's boss. Televised congressional hearings were just the most obvious connection between this scandal and the Watergate scandal that had driven Richard Nixon from office barely a decade earlier.<sup>38</sup>

Reagan survived the scandal, but his popularity and his reputation suffered a sharp and immediate blow. In early December 1986, for example, he noted with dismay: "71 % of the people like & think I'm a nice fellow. But 60 % don't think I'm telling the truth."<sup>39</sup> Eventually, primary responsibility for both the arms sales and the diversions to the Contras fell on McFarlane (who had resigned his position earlier) and on his successor John Poindexter, but especially on NSC staffer Lt. Col. Oliver North, who had done most of the ground-level work on both the arms sales and the diversion. Each took their turn before the Congressional investigating committee and the television cameras during the summer of 1987, forced to confess their guilt. More importantly for the President, they also absolved Reagan of criminal culpability, claiming that they had acted without his direct knowledge of the details. Reagan's escape, however, came at a steep personal price. Some critics may have believed he was more or less innocent, having already concluded that he was either too old, too incurious, or too incompetent to mastermind a conspiracy against the Constitution. Even his defenders, however, hastened to blame enthusiastic underlings who had acted without the President's notice. Only recently have scholars been able to piece together the degree to which Reagan was not only aware, but also strongly supportive, of many aspects of the scandal.<sup>40</sup>

38 Ibid. For a history of the hearings written by two Senators who participated, see William S. Cohen and George J. Mitchell, *Men of Zeal. A Candid Inside Story of the Iran-Contra Hearings*, New York 1988. See also *The Iran-Contra Affair 20 Years On*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 210, 2006, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/index.htm>.

39 Reagan Diaries, p. 455 (December 1, 1986).

40 Malcolm Byrne, *Iran–Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power*, Lawrence KS 2017. See also *The Iran–Contra Affair 30 Years Later: A Milestone in Post-Truth Politics*, National Security Archive Briefing Book No. 567, edited by Malcolm Byrne, 2016.

By early 1987, a weakened President needed a policy success to restore his standing and get his Administration going again for its final act. At this moment, Gorbachev rode to the rescue. As Sean Wilentz argues, Reagan “found, in his work with Gorbachev, an escape route out of his political morass.” For reasons of his own, Gorbachev offered Reagan “a helping hand to lift him out of the riptide of the Iran–Contra Affair.” Facing criticism at home for failing to deliver the promised international breakthroughs in arms control that would allow further reforms, Gorbachev helped break the Reykjavik deadlock. In February 1987, he offered to decouple the INF issue from broader discussions of SDI and strategic weapons, making a significant INF deal possible. Reagan had also managed to regain some of his ideological élan with a speech made in Berlin that June, in which he called on Gorbachev to “tear down this wall.”<sup>41</sup> The speech, though not as important as some later analysts have tried to claim by linking it to the actual collapse of the Berlin Wall more than two years later, did serve an important purpose. By calling for the elimination of the wall as something that could be accomplished through appeals to Gorbachev, the President declared, at the same time, both his commitment to Cold War ideals and his willingness to negotiate with the Soviet leader.<sup>42</sup>

From that point, things moved quite rapidly. Negotiations for the INF Treaty on the basis of “double zero” progressed to their conclusion, and Gorbachev’s visit to Washington for the signing was a public relations triumph for him.<sup>43</sup> Reagan built on the success of the Treaty in his own visit to Moscow the following May. There, Reagan and Gorbachev walked through Red Square, and Reagan had his chance to greet excited Russians. When asked how he could relate this reception to his previous statements about the “evil empire,” he responded: “I was talking about another time and another era.”<sup>44</sup>

The INF Treaty has emerged as one of Reagan’s signal triumphs, and contributed to the upswing in personal popularity that not only carried him through the rest of his term but also helped guarantee the election of his Vice President, George H.W. Bush, as his successor in November 1988. Even that success, however, had to be filtered through the lens of American politics. Reagan’s critics focused on his previous image as a cold warrior and on his failures in the Iran–Contra scandal; they were slow to accept the INF Treaty as a success. One of the bestselling analyses of Reagan’s presidency, *Landslide* by veteran Washington reporters Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus, which was published during his final year in office, offered a narrative of Reagan’s second term as a series of calamities. Denouncing the Reykjavik meeting as a “slapdash summit,” these authors displayed even less enthusiasm for the INF Treaty, which barely merited a paragraph

41 Reagan’s remarks at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, June 12, 1987; <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/061287d>.

42 Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*, pp. 244, 259–261.

43 Wilson, *Triumph of Improvisation*, pp. 132–137.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

in a 400-page book. Contrasting the Treaty with Reagan's alleged failure to make progress in "other, more critical aspects of arms control" (never specified), Mayer and McManus dismissed the INF Treaty and the follow-up in Moscow as the end of a process in which "a Presidency once known for its ideological fervor now seemed to be devolving into a series of pleasing photo opportunities."<sup>45</sup>

Hard-core Reagan critics who found reasons to dislike him both when he showed too much "ideological fervor" and when he showed too little could never have been satisfied. As the Washington Treaty made the zero option a reality, however, Reagan did not meet serious opposition from the Joint Chiefs, the press, or even the Democratic majorities in Congress. The strongest opposition came from within his conservative camp, opposition from ideological firebrands and hard bargainers who could never believe that zero was realistic, and who distrusted any possible agreement with the Soviets. Echoing the criticisms made by his protégé Haig, Henry Kissinger, for example, lobbied Reagan against pursuing the zero option one last time in May 1987. Reflecting the concerns of many other traditional conservative arms control hard-liners, Kissinger worried not only about the feasibility of reliable inspections to guarantee Soviet compliance but also feared that an effectively denuclearized Central Europe would be at the mercy of Soviet conventional superiority.<sup>46</sup>

Kissinger's doubts were only to be expected, as arms control veterans were never able to make much sense of the zero option. More notable, however, was the reaction of various conservative activists who had been Reagan's most reliable supporters. Many rose up in vociferous opposition to the Treaty. One denounced Reagan as "a useful idiot for Kremlin propaganda," while scholarly conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer accused Reagan of being "dizzy over Gorbachev." The conservative daily *Washington Times* compared Reagan to Neville Chamberlain at Munich, selling out Western interests in the name of an illusory peace.<sup>47</sup> Even William F. Buckley Jr.'s *National Review*, a magazine that had strongly supported Reagan's rise, positioned itself against its once-favorite President. In anticipation of the Treaty being signed that fall, the cover of its May 22, 1987 issue blasted "Reagan's Suicide Pact." It included essays by many conservative luminaries, including one jointly written by Kissinger and Richard Nixon, who were anxious about the strategic folly of pursuing nuclear abolition without conventional force reductions. Buckley himself was so concerned about the

45 Mayer and McManus, *Landslide*, p. 388.

46 Reagan Diaries, pp. 482–483 (March 12 and 13, 1987). Kissinger had raised similar concerns in Moscow. See Record of Conversation of Chief of General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces, Marshal of the Soviet Union S. F. Akhromeev, and H. Brown, C. Vance, H. Kissinger, and D. Jones, February 4, 1987 at the National Security Archive online: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB238/russian/Final1987-02-04Akhromeev-Americans.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2018). For the ratification fight in Congress see also Maynard W. Glitman, *The Last Battle of the Cold War. An Inside Account of Negotiating the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty*, New York/Basingstoke 2006, pp. 223–232.

47 Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*, p. 261.

implications of taking a strong position against Reagan that he sent an advance copy to the President, assuring him of his personal friendship despite this intense disagreement. Therewith, Buckley justified his concerns about concessions to the Soviets and was at pains to argue that opposition to the Treaty extended beyond the “knee-jerk Right” to include Jeane Kirkpatrick and Alexander Haig, among others.<sup>48</sup>

It’s in a crisis that one’s real friends emerge. Reagan discovered the truth of this in the upshot. As conservatives lined up against the Treaty, the alleged “hard-liner” Caspar Weinberger stayed loyal to the President’s vision of nuclear abolition. Although he was openly skeptical about the “new stage” in Soviet-American relations and rejected the universal enthusiasm for Gorbachev which was sweeping Washington after the summit, he embraced the Treaty as “very good” and endorsed its ratification.<sup>49</sup> Press reports tried to link Weinberger’s retirement from the Pentagon in November 1987 to a perceived opposition to the Treaty, leading him to comment that such a view was “ironic, because I had proposed the treaty in the first place.” A long-term advocate of the zero option, Weinberger saw the INF Treaty as proof of how one could negotiate from strength.<sup>50</sup> Reagan made the same arguments in his own friendly response to Buckley.<sup>51</sup>

When the Treaty came up for the vote, the efforts of a few right-wing critics were unable to stop it. The Senate voted 93–5 to ratify the Washington Treaty in May 1988.<sup>52</sup> Reagan’s reputation was on the upswing as well. By the time he left office in January 1989, he was enjoying the highest approval rating of any President at the end of his term since the Second World War: some 71 per cent of those surveyed particularly approving of his handling of foreign policy and relations with the Soviets.<sup>53</sup> It had not been as easy as it might appear in retrospect, but Reagan had not only survived the last crisis of his Presidency, he emerged triumphant. He concluded his televised Farewell Address with the words: “All in all, not bad, not bad at all.”<sup>54</sup>

48 William F. Buckley, Jr. to Reagan, 29 April and 18 October 1987. Summarized in: Kiron Skinner, Martin Anderson, and Annaliese Anderson (eds.), *Reagan. A Life in Letters*, New York 2003, p. 418. Reprinted in: Buckley, *The Reagan I Knew*, pp. 204–207. See also Hedrick Smith, *The Right Against Reagan*, in: *New York Times Magazine*, 17 January 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/17/magazine/the-right-against-reagan.html?pagewanted=1> (accessed November 24, 2017).

49 Maureen Dowd, *Summit’s aftermath*, in: *New York Times*, December 12, 1987. <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/12/us/summit-aftermath-washington-summit-song-is-off-key-for-weinberger.html> (accessed November 24, 2017).

50 Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace. Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon*, New York 1990, pp. 331–352, especially p. 347.

51 Reagan to Buckley, May 5, 1987, in: *Reagan, A Life in Letters*, pp. 418 f.

52 Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*, p. 262.

53 Steven V. Roberts, *Reagan’s Final Rating Is Best Of Any President Since 40’s*, in: *New York Times*, January 18, 1989. <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/18/us/washington-transition-reagan-s-final-1988-best-any-president-since-40-s.html> (accessed November 20, 2018).

54 Ronald Reagan Farewell Address to the American People, January 11, 1989, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/farewell-address-to-the-nation-2/> (accessed November 20, 2018).

### 3. Conclusion: It's Only Easy in Retrospect

The American path to the INF Treaty cannot be understood without appreciating the role of Ronald Reagan and his consistent commitment to the goal of nuclear abolition. That commitment distinguished him from being merely a “hard-liner,” and explains both his resistance to the arms control movements of the 1970s and his ultimate enthusiasm for the zero option that led to the INF Treaty. Over the course of 1987, through a combination of determination and good luck, Reagan managed both to save his Presidency and to accomplish his long-held goal of eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons. Those are significant achievements, but they are not merely the product of a single elderly politician’s will. The political environment has to be considered as well.

Just as a recognition of his accomplishments should encourage former Reagan critics to reconsider their estimations of the man, an understanding of the winding path should temper the enthusiasm of hagiographers. The INF Treaty did not spring fully formed from Reagan’s principles, even if his attachment to those principles shaped the course he chose. Politics determined the limits of the possible. That does not mean the ultimate result was merely the product of chance. It means that only a combination of principles and the political realities of the moment made the INF Treaty. (It would be the same with any treaty.)

The INF Treaty has come to occupy a central place in the current Reagan revisionism, in which scholars are coming to appreciate that the old conservative was actually, in his way, a rebel against a stagnant status quo.<sup>55</sup> That is all to the good, if we want to have the full picture of the man, and makes sense as we try to understand the end of the Cold War in historical perspective. But for such an understanding, we should take care to avoid replacing one set of truisms for another. “Reagan the cowboy” did not simply or suddenly become “Reagan the apostle of peace.” Closer examination shows that he was both of these things, and neither. To appreciate such paradoxes, we need most of all a sense of historical irony. In this case, the most ironic thing is that so many people were surprised by how things turned out, when one of the men at the center had been telling them all along that he wanted to do exactly what he did. Although it’s certainly true that no one at the time would have been able to predict the ultimate result of his Administration’s arms control policies (except perhaps Reagan himself), historians should avoid the Columbus fallacy: just because we stumble across something we did not expect to find does not mean we are discovering something brand new. After all, somebody may already be there.

As we enter an era in which the agreements and alliance structures of the Cold War era face extreme challenges, and transformations in both the principles of American leaders and the realities of international politics have undermined the

55 James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, New York 2009.

INF Treaty itself, we would do well to remember both the accomplishments of a previous generation of statesmen and the fragility of even the most inspired agreement. The nuclear nightmares of the 1980s, thankfully, did not become reality. But avoiding them took wisdom and foresight and luck. Whether we will be as fortunate in the face of a new century's dilemmas is far from certain.