Ron and Mikhail's Excellent Adventure

How Reagan won the Cold War.

*By Fred Kaplan|Posted Wednesday, June 9, 2004, at 7:29 PM ET*

So, did Ronald Reagan bring on the end of the Cold War? Well, yes. Recently declassified documents leave no doubt about the matter. But how did he accomplish it? Through hostile rhetoric and a massive arms buildup, which the Soviets knew they couldn't match, as Reagan's conservative champions contend? Or through a second-term conversion to detente and disarmament, as some liberal historians, including Slate's David Greenberg, argue?

This is an uncomfortable position for an opinion columnist (and occasional Cold War historian) to take, but it turns out that both views have their merits; neither position by itself gets at the truth. Reagan the well-known superhawk and Reagan the lesser-known nuclear abolitionist are both responsible for the end of that era—along with his vital collaborator Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Gorbachev factor—too often overlooked in this week of Reagan-hagiography—was crucial. If Yuri Andropov's kidneys hadn't given out, or if Konstantin Chernenko had lived a few years longer, Reagan's bluster and passion would have come to naught; the Cold War would probably have raged on for years; indeed, Reagan's rhetoric and actions might have aggravated tensions.

Still, at some point, some Kremlin leader would have had to mount a major reassessment of the situation. The Soviet system was dysfunctional; its empire was collapsing; the cupboard was bare. And Reagan's surging military budgets, without question, brought this internal crisis to a head.

Here was Gorbachev speaking at a session of the Politburo in October 1986, days before he traveled to Reykjavik, Iceland to offer Reagan a groundbreaking disarmament plan, including a 50 percent reduction in nuclear arsenals. If he didn't propose these cuts, Gorbachev told his colleagues:

[W]e will be pulled into an arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose it because we are at the limit of our capabilities. … If the new round [of an arms race] begins, the pressures on our economy will be unbelievable.

This was not a sudden development. Three years later, in a November 1989 phone conversation with Egon Krenz, the general secretary of the East German Communist Party, Gorbachev recalled when he first became a member of the Politburo and some of its members wanted to look at the state budget: "But Andropov said, 'Do not get in there, it is not your business.' Now we know why he said so. It was not a budget, but hell knows what." The precise effect of Reagan's "Star Wars" speech—his high-profile and insanely impractical plan to build an antimissile "shield"—is hard to gauge. On the one hand, documents reveal that Gorbachev asked Yevgeny Velikhov, his chief science adviser, to evaluate whether Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, as it was formally called, would pose a threat. Velikhov replied that the project was fanciful and that the Soviets could build countermeasures—or deploy additional offensive missiles to saturate the Star Wars system—much more cheaply than the United States could construct additional defenses. However, at the same time, perhaps succumbing to pressure from his own military-industrial complex, Velikhov advised that it might be a good idea to build more missiles, just in case.

This analysis may have calmed Gorbachev a bit, but not entirely. At a Politburo meeting in March 1986, Gorbachev said, "Maybe we should just stop being afraid of the SDI! Of course, we cannot be indifferent to this dangerous program. But [the Americans] are betting precisely on the fact that the USSR is afraid of the SDI. … That is why they are putting pressure on us—to exhaust us."

If somebody says, "Maybe we should stop being afraid of the bogeyman," it usually means he is afraid of the bogeyman. It's pretty clear that in the spring of 1986 Gorbachev and all those around with him were at least a little afraid of the SDI bogeyman.

The next month, April '86, brought the Chernobyl disaster, which, among other things, made Gorbachev realize that information had to circulate more openly (the beginnings of glasnost) and made him think that the ultimate enemy may be nukes themselves.

He didn't realize it, but Reagan viewed nukes the same way. Samuel Wells, a Cold War historian at the Woodrow Wilson Center, who has examined all the relevant documents, put it this way in a phone conversation: "His staff, for all of the first term and most of the second, kept this out of the press, but Reagan was terribly, deeply opposed to nuclear weapons—he thought they were immoral."

Reagan's vision of SDI—a shield that would render nuclear weapons obsolete—was scientifically preposterous but, by all accounts, genuine. Many of his hawkish aides (most notably the still-active Richard Perle) scoffed at it; they liked SDI because it would scare the Russians and, if it worked, might give us nuclear superiority. But Reagan believed what he said.

At their face-to-face summit of October 1986 in Reykjavik, Reagan went far beyond Gorbachev's proposal of a 50 percent strategic-arms cut. To the alarm of some aides, who were not let in on the discussion, he suggested that the two sides get rid of nuclear weapons altogether and jointly build an SDI system to guard against a nuclear revival. Gorbachev initially dismissed the idea. "I do not take your idea of sharing SDI seriously," the minutes (which were declassified by the Soviets 12 years ago) show him saying. "You don't want to share even petroleum equipment, automatic machine tools, or equipment for dairies, while sharing SDI would be a second American revolution—and revolutions do not occur all that often." Reagan replied, "If I thought that SDI could not be shared, I would have rejected it myself."

The Reykjavik talks finally fizzled. Gorbachev said he'd accept the zero-nukes plan if Reagan pledged not to test nuclear weapons in outer space (a crucial element of SDI). Reagan wouldn't accept that condition.

However, Gorbachev returned to Moscow persuaded that Reagan—who had earlier struck him as a "caveman"—honestly had no intention of launching a first strike against the Soviet Union, and he made this point clear to the Politburo. He could continue with perestroika, which involved not just economic reforms but—as a necessary precondition—massive defense cuts and a transformation of international relations. He needed assurances of external security in order to move forward with this domestic upheaval. Reagan gave him those reassurances. Subsequent conversations between his foreign minister, Edvard Shevardnadze, and Secretary of State George Shultz reinforced his confidence.

In the last couple years of the Reagan administration, Reagan would propose extravagant measures in arms reductions. His hawkish aides would go along with them, thinking the Soviets would reject them (and the United States would win a propaganda victory). Then, to the surprise of everyone (except perhaps Reagan, who meant the proposals without cynicism), Gorbachev would accept them.

In the end, Reagan and Gorbachev needed each other. Gorbachev needed to move swiftly if his reforms were to take hold. Reagan exerted the pressure that forced him to move swiftly and offered the rewards that made his foes and skeptics in the Politburo think the cutbacks might be worth it.

Gorbachev wasn't the only decisive presence. If Reagan hadn't been president—if Jimmy Carter or Walter Mondale had defeated him or if Reagan had died and George H.W. Bush taken his place—Gorbachev almost certainly would not have received the push or reinforcement that he needed. Those other politicians would have been too traditional, too cautious, to push such radical proposals (zero nukes and SDI) or to take Gorbachev's radicalism at face value. (There's no need to speculate on this point. When Bush Sr. succeeded Reagan in 1989, U.S.-Soviet relations took a huge step backward; it took nearly a year for Bush and his advisers to realize that Gorby was for real.)

The end of the Cold War may be the most oddball chapter in the history of the 20th century. How fitting, then, that the two most oddball leaders, Gorbachev and Reagan, made it come to pass.