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From Reykjavik to Fulton: Reagan, Thatcher, and the ending of the Cold War

Abstract

Following the 1986 Reykjavik Summit between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher debated the future of nuclear weapons and the solidarity of the western alliance with the American president. After leaving office, all three leaders, delivered lectures at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, the site of Winston Churchill's famous address that articulated the embryonic Cold War in 1946. This article argues that just as Reagan and Thatcher's Fulton speeches held different emphases on the past and future of international affairs, Reykjavik was a flashpoint in the endgame of the Cold War that reflect different approaches to the challenges of the international system as outlined by Churchill at Westminster College. Thatcher, in the spirit of her predecessors, including Churchill, had to diplomatically manage Anglo-American relations in order to secure her own policy objectives.

Key words: Winston Churchill; Mikhail Gorbachev; Ronald Reagan; Reykjavik; Margaret Thatcher.

Introduction

Winston Churchill's 'Sinews of Peace' speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946 crystallised the Cold War in Europe in the clearest of terms, dramatically describing the iron curtain across continental Europe.¹ In his remarks, Churchill advocated a strong western stance against the Soviet Union and the importance of international relationships and organisations, particularly the role of Anglo-American relations and, more generally, the connection between the English-speaking peoples and the United States. Churchill's message underlined the importance of close transatlantic relationships and institutions as a means to avoid a repetition of policies of appeasement during the 1930s. This message shaped the rhetoric of both Ronald Reagan (U.S. president, 1981-89) and Margaret Thatcher

(British prime minister, 1979-90) towards the Soviet Union during their partnership in power. However, Churchill's approach to Anglo-American relations was also a harbinger for his successors. Whereas Churchill publicly promoted the specialness of Anglo-American relations, in private he would often disagree with the U.S. president, masking this criticism in praise and agreement in other policy areas.² This article will highlight key differences within the feted Reagan-Thatcher 'special relationship' in Anglo-American policies towards the Soviet Union. It will use the 1986 Reykjavik meeting between Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev (General Secretary of the General Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985-91), coupled with the Reagan-Thatcher speeches in Fulton, Missouri. Although Thatcher shared Reagan's broader philosophy, they were prone to differences in specific policies and strategies.³

Both Reagan and Thatcher described their common domestic and international endeavours in Churchillian terms. For instance, when exchanging toasts at a White House dinner on 26 February 1981, they equated their relationship and shared mission to Churchill's ideal for Anglo-American relations.⁴ After leaving office, both undertook pilgrimages to Fulton, speaking at Westminster College about international developments, seeking to follow in Churchill's footsteps. Their Fulton speeches hinted at competing outlooks between the two fabled Cold Warriors. Reagan's Fulton speech on 19 November 1990 focused on his vision for 'The Brotherhood of Man'.⁵ After he briefly discussed international politics during his presidency, Reagan shared an optimistic worldview, praising the heritage of the American people for representing people from across the world and hoping that, in the future, remaining boundaries between people would end.⁶ It was this optimism that underpinned Reagan's nuclear policy. Although the Reagan Doctrine prioritised questions of power and national security, Reagan's foreign policy was far more complex than a right-wing caricature of a simplistic worldview.⁷ Coupled with his belief in American exceptionalism, Reagan advocated a global society based on 'freedom' (in his view), meaning free-markets and democracy.⁸ (Two years later, Gorbachev also visited Westminster College to deliver his own Fulton address. He also called for the global community to be involved in the achievement of progress and peace.⁹)

Reagan's optimism was obvious in his 1982 address at the Palace of Westminster during his visit to Britain. During the speech, the president promised

that ‘Marxism-Leninism’ would ultimately be consigned to ‘the ash-heap of history’.¹⁰ A key component of Reagan’s worldview was that nuclear weapons and a policy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) were abhorrent and should share the same ash-heap as communism. In his memoir, Reagan recalled that he wanted to ‘give the world a greater chance of survival’.¹¹ The result was \$17 billion spent on researching the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI, or, as popularly known, ‘Star Wars’). Reagan wanted the defence shield to protect the United States from Soviet nuclear missiles. Critics argued that it was a new anti-missile system and therefore in breach of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The Soviet Union feared that it undermined deterrence and encouraged an American first strike in a nuclear war.¹² Nonetheless, SDI never materialised – although Reagan’s attachment to the programme proved crucial at Reykjavik.

Compared to Reagan’s address at Westminster College, Thatcher’s Fulton speech on 9 March 1996 was a more substantial and deliberate attempt to influence political debate to the extent that Churchill had been able to do so fifty years earlier.¹³ The former prime minister credited Churchill’s Fulton speech with spurring the West into creating key institutions and policies that ultimately triumphed in the Cold War. Nevertheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union and ending of the Cold War had yielded new threats to the West. It would again fall to the English-speaking peoples and the transatlantic relationship, under the leadership of the United States, to restore Western resolve and institutions to counter new and renewed threats as a means to ensuring continuing prosperity and peace ensure.¹⁴ Thatcher was committed to this ideal throughout her premiership.

The speeches delivered by Reagan and Thatcher in tribute to Churchill alluded to competing visions in the Anglo-American approach to the Soviet Union. Thatcher and Reagan’s election victories in 1979 and 1980 marked the advent of Cold Warriors returning to power after a period of détente. Both leaders criticised the Soviet Union and demanded a renewed effort by the western alliance to combat the Soviet Union’s aggrandising foreign policy. Reagan and Thatcher pursued a policy of ‘peace through strength’ and favoured strong defence and a Grand Strategy that shifted the balance of power in favour of the western alliance. But this is where a subtle difference emerged in Anglo-American relations: Reagan wanted to control the balance of power,

through the creation of SDI and victory in the arms race, as a means to end the Cold War and eliminate the world's nuclear weapons. Thatcher simply wanted a status quo that favoured the West, based on nuclear deterrence rather than costly conventional weapons and a strong western alliance. The advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 offered a means for both Reagan and Thatcher to 'do business' with the 'evil empire'.¹⁵ These competing visions became clear following Reykjavik. Subsequently, just as Reagan and Thatcher sought to echo Churchill's rhetoric and gravitas, their management of Anglo-American relations was Churchillian too.

Preparing for Reykjavik

Reagan and Gorbachev first met at the Geneva Summit in November 1985.¹⁶ The meeting saw robust discussion about mutual trust in American-Soviet relations, human rights and SDI. The most important result of the summit was that a personal relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev began to be established.¹⁷ At Geneva, both sides promised to meet again soon in Washington, D.C. and Moscow. The British government was inevitably keen to maintain close contact with the Reagan administration amid speculation of a meeting between the president and Gorbachev prior to his visit to the United States in 1987. After a meeting with Charles Powell, Thatcher's private secretary and adviser on foreign affairs (1983-90), in July 1986, Charles Price, the U.S. ambassador to the U.K. (1983-89), informed the U.S. State Department that according to Powell, Thatcher 'would "no doubt wish" to visit Washington and see the President in advance' of such a summit in December.¹⁸ Downing Street certainly anticipated a United States-Soviet Union summit, albeit shortly after the congressional elections in November.¹⁹ At the end of September, Powell again confirmed to Price that Thatcher wished to visit Reagan on 14-15 November at Camp David, and proposed that only Powell and Antony Acland, the British ambassador to the U.S. (1986-91), would accompany her.²⁰

Both Gorbachev and Reagan briefed Thatcher on new plans for them to meet at Reykjavik in advance of the scheduled summit in the United States. Gorbachev explained that after Geneva, he believed that 'the whole process of Soviet-American dialogue was in need of a serious impulse'.²¹ He argued that American-Soviet dialogue was 'practically marking time' and, instead, negotiations between the two

countries 'should lead to substantive agreements on the most important directions for lessening the nuclear threat'. Gorbachev hoped that Thatcher would 'facilitate the fruitful course of Soviet/American Summit dialogue'.²² He certainly hoped to take advantage of Thatcher's commitment to Anglo-American relations and utilise her relationship with Reagan to his advantage, although Gorbachev had long convinced the prime minister that he was a man who was willing to do business.²³

Reagan's communication with Thatcher sought to assure the prime minister of his rationale for the meeting and the importance of her counsel. He explained that Gorbachev's argument was that the Reykjavik meeting would not 'take the place of his visit to the United States, but to make concrete preparations for the meetings here'.²⁴ He agreed to the proposal as a means to underline his 'commitment to real progress in U.S.-Soviet relations' and due to the symbolism of Gorbachev's suggestion of 'holding the meeting on the soil of a member of the NATO alliance'. Reagan promised Thatcher: 'As I prepare for this meeting, I shall be seeking your counsel on the substantive issues which may arise'.²⁵ The lionized Reagan-Thatcher partnership was ostensibly working in accordance with Churchill's stated remit: Thatcher replied that the Reykjavik summit was 'a very positive step' and she would share her 'thoughts on the substantive issues'.²⁶ More generally, the Reagan administration offered assurance of Anglo-American collaboration. George Shultz, the U.S. secretary of state (1982-89), wrote to Sir Geoffrey Howe, the British foreign secretary (1983-89), emphasising that Reagan would seek: 'the counsel of your Government on the substantive issues which may arise'.²⁷ This was in the spirit of Churchill's Fulton speech.

Acland's reports to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) suggested that the Reykjavik meeting would not result in any diplomatic and policy surprises for the Thatcher government.²⁸ Reagan's intention to agree a date and agenda for the summit in the United States was again confirmed.²⁹ While preparing for Reykjavik, the Reagan administration continued to receive requests from Downing Street about Thatcher's meeting with Reagan. On 1 October 1986, Peter R. Sommer, a member of the national security staff, briefed John M. Poindexter (the national security adviser, 1985-86), that Thatcher still wanted to meet with Reagan in mid-November after the Reykjavik meeting.³⁰ Typically, the White House hoped to 'avoid disrupting the

President's weekend' and there were 'no compelling reasons to go to Camp David -- other than that is what Mrs. Thatcher hopes to do'.³¹ Nonetheless, Reagan overruled his advisers, as he also wanted to meet Thatcher over the weekend at Camp David.³²

On 1 October 1986, the United Kingdom's Embassy (UKE) in Moscow briefed the FCO that, taking into account his lack of diplomatic victories at the Geneva summit, Gorbachev wanted to use Reykjavik to consider whether the proposed summit in the United States was worth the 'risks'.³³ According to the UKE, the political climate in Moscow meant that while Geneva's 'insubstantial outcome' was 'represented to Soviet opinion as a draw or even a success', Gorbachev recognised that a repeat of this in the United States 'would definitely be seen as a defeat'. Thus, while Gorbachev was determined to meet with Reagan in the United States, it was vital 'for him to secure a cast-iron assurance that ... he will be able to bring back a sufficiently impressive package of agreements ... to disarm his actual or potential critics'.³⁴ The domestic politics of the summit was obviously a consideration for Gorbachev. This was Thatcher's cue to offer Gorbachev encouragement about the Reykjavik meeting and proposed summit in the United States:

I very much welcome the fact that you are coming together to prepare for a Summit, which I hope will be held before the end of this year. I believe that it should be possible to reach agreements then on reductions in arms, as well as to register progress on regional disputes and human rights problems.³⁵

The Reagan administration still did not anticipate that any agreements would be signed at Reykjavik. On 2 October, Shultz wrote to the president that the objective was to 'enhance the chances for a successful summit' in Washington, D.C., although 'the reality is that our work will not be seen as effective without some progress on two big issues: arms control and human rights'.³⁶ Shultz concluded his memorandum with an acknowledgment of Reagan's broader objectives: 'The policies you set in motion six years ago have put us in the strong position we are in today ... We are now entering the crucial phase in the effort to achieve real reductions in nuclear forces -- an historic achievement in itself, and a major step toward your vision of a safer world for the future'.³⁷

Reagan and Thatcher agreed that the Reykjavik meeting was necessary to secure productive talks with Gorbachev in the United States. Nonetheless, not every NATO ally shared Thatcher's apparent confidence in Reagan, fearing that the meeting would undermine the Western alliance. The French government feared that the two Superpowers would make 'deals over the heads of the Europeans' and were 'keen to remain in very close contact' with the British 'over lobbying the Americans' on any potential Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement.³⁸ The State Department continued to assure the British that the Reykjavik meeting 'should give impetus to work in hand, but should not itself involve negotiation on texts'.³⁹ Indeed, the British Embassy briefed the FCO that for Reagan, securing 'agreement on the date and agenda for the real summit remains the test of success at Reykjavik' yet he would 'be reluctant to pay an arms control price to secure it'.⁴⁰ For instance, it was expected that the Soviet Union would demand that the United States should agree to an extension of the ABM Treaty of up to fifteen years, which would mean that the president would need 'to go very much further on SDI constraints than [he] has so far been prepared'.⁴¹

Yet Gorbachev's agenda was clear in his instructions to Anatoly Chernyaev (his foreign policy adviser): 'We must find such an approach that would allow us to pull Reagan into the conversation, so he would agree on directives to the negotiators. It seems we could achieve something, although most likely nothing can really be done with this administration.'⁴² Pierre Elliot Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister (1968-74, 1974-79, 1980-84), had advised Gorbachev that he would 'not be able to come to an agreement with Reagan, who is the product of certain forces, and who has been appointed and sponsored by them'. According to Soviet records, Thatcher would be proven correct in her suspicions of a political trap for the president. Gorbachev explained to Chernyaev:

If we fail, then we can say – look, here's what we were prepared to do! We must place strategic weapons, not nuclear testing, as the top priority of our push-an-breakthrough position. Strategic weapons concern everybody most of all other issues. And we must emphasize that we are proposing the liquidation

of nuclear weapons, which we already discussed with the President in Geneva. The talks must be devoted precisely to this goal.⁴³

Gorbachev clearly identified Reagan's wish to end MAD as a means to separate him from both his allies and the American negotiation process so as to achieve a favourable arms reductions agreement. In the meantime, the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) had 'very little knowledge of how Gorbachev intends to use the meeting'.⁴⁴

As promised, Thatcher wrote to Reagan with her counsel on the eve of his Reykjavik meeting with Gorbachev.⁴⁵ Acknowledging that the United States and Britain 'must not look at relations with the Soviet Union just in terms of arms control', it was 'inevitable that the issues of arms reductions and nuclear tests will take up a great deal of the time at your meeting'. Thatcher was 'puzzled' that Gorbachev was determined to advocate so strongly 'for a comprehensive test ban treaty when he must know that he is not going to achieve it, given your position', but argued that he needed 'to register at least some progress in the area of nuclear testing if he is not to lose face'. Thus, Thatcher hoped that Reagan would continue to argue for 'ratification of the threshold test ban and peaceful nuclear explosions treaties, while being prepared to look at further limits on testing in parallel with cuts in offensive forces'. The prime minister believed that INF was 'the best prospect for agreement on arms reductions'. However, in accordance with British and French concerns, she noted: 'Soviet willingness to eliminate all reference to British and French forces is a great step forward and, of course, a condition for our endorsing any agreement.' Anticipating that SDI and its relationship with the ABM Treaty might prove a source of tension in the talks, Thatcher advised Reagan that he should 'provide the Russians with reassurance that there will be no sudden break-out from the research stage, while preserving your right to conduct research within the ABM Treaty'. Indeed, she suggested that it would be helpful if Reagan 'concentrate[d] on trying to refine your respective understandings on what the ABM Treaty does and does not allow in the way of research'. Thatcher acknowledged that Reagan would raise human rights and regional issues, such as Afghanistan. In a diplomatic flourish, she told the president: 'You have our absolute confidence and trust.'⁴⁶ In his reply, Reagan confirmed that it was his intention to simply 'increase the likelihood that the

coming summit in the United States will be productive' without 'any formal agreements'.⁴⁷ He also emphasised his commitment to 'Western solidarity' as it was 'essential for achieving further progress'.⁴⁸

Meeting at Reykjavik

Reagan and Gorbachev met at Reykjavik on 11-12 October 1986. The Reagan administration opted for Reykjavik rather than London – which was also suggested by Gorbachev – as a means to keep some distance from Thatcher during the negotiations. In short, the Soviet leader stunned the American delegation by offering a fifty percent reduction in nuclear arsenals and a new INF agreement which would have led to some strategic nuclear disarmament, an abandonment of INF in Europe, a test ban treaty, and the offer of on-site verification. It was clear that the Soviet Union recognised that its involvement in an arms race was insurmountable. In return, Reagan, acting on his hopes for a nuclear free world, asked Gorbachev to help him eliminate all nuclear weapons within a ten-year period. SDI was the deal-breaker. Gorbachev was willing to agree to Reagan's offer, but only if he agreed that SDI was permanently consigned to laboratory research. The president refused.⁴⁹

Reagan diarised that his team developed an agreement that would 'eliminate entirely' all nuclear weapons within ten years and that the United States would research and develop SDI in that period, before deploying it and sharing it with the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ He noted that Gorbachev 'wanted language that would have killed SDI'. On his response, Reagan wrote: 'I was mad – he tried to act jovial but I acted mad & it showed. Well the ball is in his court and I'm convinced he'll come around when he sees how the world is reacting.'⁵¹ While travelling back to Moscow, Gorbachev shared his thoughts about the meeting with Chernyaev:

We need not fall into despair; Reykjavik led us to the most important stage of where we stand. Everybody saw that agreement is possible. From Reykjavik, we drew the conclusion that the necessity for dialogue had increased even more. That is why I am even more of an optimist after Reykjavik.⁵²

Regardless of any new optimism, caution and suspicion ensured that there were political consequences. Writing in his memoir, Gorbachev suggested that Reykjavik ‘inspired hopes’ in some political leaders when they could ‘see for themselves who Gorbachev was’, while others, including Thatcher, were ‘worried’.⁵³

During the second day of the Reykjavik meeting, Gorbachev asked Downing Street to accept a visit from Victor Karpov, a senior Soviet diplomat who had served as the leading Soviet negotiator at Geneva, on 14 October 1986.⁵⁴ Powell advised Thatcher to meet with Karpov and direct him towards other government officials and ministers. However, he proposed that the Reagan administration should also be afforded a similar opportunity, given that there were not any similar proposals about American emissaries. Thus, in addition to Shultz’s proposed briefing of NATO Ministers after the meeting, Powell advised the Reagan administration of Karpov’s potential visit ‘in case they want to adjust their plans’.⁵⁵ Powell was keen that government officials, including the FCO, were privy to briefings from the United States in addition to those from the Soviet Union. There would certainly be much to discuss. Subsequently, Powell received a telephone call on 12 October and received an update from the American delegation about ‘the state of play in the Reykjavik meeting’, which was ‘strictly for’ Thatcher’s ‘personal information’.⁵⁶ The prime minister was advised that a ‘tentative deal’ for INF was being discussed. This would result in ‘zero-zero in Europe with 100 medium range weapons in Asia and 100 in the United States’. It would also lead to the freezing of short-range systems and subsequent negotiations about their future. Crucially for Thatcher’s concern for British interests, she was advised: ‘The Soviet Union would not seek any concession for French and British systems: indeed they would be left out of account altogether’. Powell noted that his American contact ‘stressed more than once that this was still all tentative’, although he believed that ‘the Americans fear that there will be some sort of leak and wanted to be sure that we heard first from them of the way negotiations are going’.⁵⁷ The Reykjavik meeting had certainly evolved into more than a preliminary meeting: it was a summit in itself. It was a diplomatic dialogue at the highest level between Reagan and Gorbachev, each seeking results from the discussions.⁵⁸

After Reykjavik

The Reagan administration was determined to shape the post-Reykjavik fallout as favourable towards the president as possible. According to the British delegation at NATO, Shultz briefed his colleagues that ‘the meeting should not be criticised as a failure’ as the United States would build on positive discussions about ‘strategic and intermediate range forces’.⁵⁹ He argued that the United States ‘had made strenuous efforts to meet Gorbachev’s concern on SDI, but could not and would not agree to changes to the ABM Treaty designed to cripple the programme’. Shultz believed that the key achievement of Reykjavik was that the United States government ‘was prepared to face up to the implications of a world without nuclear weapons’. Regardless of ‘concern among the allies about the total elimination of nuclear weapons’, Shultz warned that they should not underestimate Reagan’s ‘own strength of purpose, and his instincts for the future and the concerns of young people’. Nonetheless, Reagan’s optimism was tempered by international politicking. Shultz confirmed that the United States ‘would take no unilateral steps, nor was the elimination of ballistic missiles a practical proposition without the further participation of Britain, France and China’.⁶⁰ Gorbachev was determined to compete for popular opinion. In his press conference in Reykjavik, Gorbachev claimed that ‘the real fight with Reagan’ commenced with his insistence on ‘the right to carry on SDI research outside the laboratory and even in space’.⁶¹ He argued that ‘Only a madman could have accepted such a proposition.’ Thus, Gorbachev believed that ‘an historic opportunity had been missed’ because Reagan ‘was not free to take the decisions which would have made agreement possible’.⁶² This echoed Trudeau’s advice to him before the meeting. In the meantime, the British government was keen for Reagan to take the initiative. Powell advised Thatcher to speak with Reagan on 13 October.⁶³ There was concern that in his presidential television address later that day, Reagan would ‘point himself further into the corner on SDI’ and instead should emphasise ‘the extent of agreement reached on other arms control issues’.⁶⁴ Thatcher followed this advice.

Independently of Powell’s encouragement, Thatcher certainly wished to speak with Reagan as a matter of urgency. Sir Bernard Ingham, Thatcher’s press secretary (1979-90), recalled that the prime minister complained about her ally’s willingness to eliminate nuclear weapons: ‘Does the man not know that you can’t dis-invent

technology?’⁶⁵ He recalled that Thatcher met with Reagan in order, ‘as the Foreign Office put it, to wash his head’.⁶⁶ Poindexter was informed that Thatcher had ‘specific concerns regarding the apparent agreement to eliminate nuclear weapons within a decade’.⁶⁷ The prime minister was incensed. The White House anticipated that she would oppose the proposal as it ‘would make the world safe for Soviet aggression, given the disparities in conventional capabilities’ and thus she was expected to ‘argue that any such agreement must include a commitment to conventional parity as well’. The prime minister continued to lobby for a meeting with Reagan at Camp David, to which Reagan was keen to oblige.⁶⁸

Thatcher spoke with Reagan over the telephone on 13 October.⁶⁹ According to the American record, in her opening remarks, Thatcher praised Reagan for having ‘done wonderfully at Reykjavik’. She wanted to ensure that Reagan made ‘clear publicly that the fault for the stalemate lies with Gorbachev’ as his effort to stop Reagan ‘from going forward with SDI’ was ‘simply unrealistic and harmful’. Before Thatcher was able to explain her concerns, Reagan explained ‘that he was pleased with the opportunity’ to share ‘a personal readout of his meetings with Gorbachev’. Following his talking points, Reagan proceeded to detail the Reykjavik discussion from his perspective. He explained that having ‘reached agreements in a number of areas’, they ‘floundered over Soviet insistence on killing SDI, even though they themselves are deeply engaged in similar research’. By Reagan’s own admission, Reykjavik had evolved into a key summit. The president again sought to criticise Gorbachev: he ‘worships ABM as if it were the Ten Commandments’. Pre-empting her concerns, Reagan explained that ‘British and French systems had not been the roadblock; indeed they had not been under discussion’. After detailing the negotiations further, Reagan clarified that over a ‘ten-year period’, the United States offered to ‘not deploy SDI ... in return for the total elimination of all ballistic missiles’. Reagan claimed that Gorbachev simply did not believe his offer to share SDI with the Soviet Union. According to Reagan, the Soviet demand ‘to renegotiate the ABM treaty to limit SDI research to that which takes place in a laboratory’ was what ended the talks, despite his attempt ‘to use all his persuasive powers’.

Reflecting her concern for solidarity in transatlantic relations, Thatcher suggested that ‘Gorbachev clearly was trying to divide Europe from America’ and

that the meeting ‘looks like a Soviet setup’. In addition, she believed that as Gorbachev ‘had left Geneva with nothing to take home’, it was clear that ‘he was trying to recoup lost ground’. After criticising the Soviet leader, Thatcher turned her disapproval to Reagan. She told the president ‘that the Soviet offer to eliminate all nuclear missiles in return for a 10-year agreement to restrict SDI research to the laboratory is extremely dangerous’. According to Thatcher, nuclear deterrence was crucial to Western defence policy given the Soviet Union’s ‘conventional superiority’. Reagan disagreed that ‘the conventional situation is so imbalanced’. However, even though ‘what the Soviets do not want is a war’, the president contradicted himself by suggesting that the allies ‘would, however, have to increase our conventional efforts’. Thatcher even compared the Reagan-Gorbachev proposal to Labour Party policy: ‘Giving up nuclear weapons is the sort of thing that Neil Kinnock advocates. This would be tantamount to surrender, so we must be very, very careful.’ There were, of course, domestic implications for Thatcher: Kinnock could point to Reagan’s willingness to embrace nuclear disarmament as justification for Labour’s unilateral disarmament policy. Thatcher emphasised that Britain ‘had no intention of giving up its independent nuclear deterrent’, and would adhere to Churchill’s advice that ‘an independent nuclear deterrent was the only way for smaller countries, like Great Britain, to equalize the strength and power of bigger countries’. She explained: ‘Some British missiles would always get through ... the Soviets did not have a free hand regarding the UK’. After again criticising Gorbachev for ‘looking for propaganda gains to separate Europe from the U.S.’, and praising Reagan for ‘a magnificent job’, Thatcher stressed ‘that if we give up all our nuclear weapons the Soviets -- with their conventional superiority -- could just sweep across Europe’.⁷⁰ The British record makes clear that it was Reagan, and not Gorbachev, who was responsible for the nuclear weapons proposal that rattled that prime minister.⁷¹ Reagan told Thatcher that ‘he had put forward a radical proposal under which the United States would guarantee not to deploy a strategic defence system for ten years in return for an undertaking to eliminate all US and Soviet nuclear weapons over that same period’. Thatcher informed Reagan that this ‘would be unsettling to opinion in Europe to speculate on the possibility of getting rid of nuclear weapons within a relatively short time-scale’.⁷² The British record underlines that Reagan was not particularly convinced by Thatcher’s fears. Instead, he recommended that the prime

minister read Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising* (1986) as it offered 'an excellent picture of the Soviet Union's intentions and strategy'.⁷³

Reagan informed the American people about Reykjavik in an address on 13 October. He explained that he could not accept Gorbachev's demands which would have been 'killing SDI' and that he told his counterpart that all their efforts to ultimately eliminate nuclear weapons 'would go down the drain'.⁷⁴ He explained: 'I'm still optimistic that a way will be found. The door is open, and the opportunity to begin eliminating the nuclear threat is within reach'. SDI was the focus of Reagan's account of the meeting: 'SDI is the key to a world without nuclear weapons. The Soviets understand this.'⁷⁵ The British Embassy described it to the FCO as 'a fairly up-beat account of the meeting' and Reagan was 'adamant that he was not prepared to give up SDI'.⁷⁶

After speaking with Reagan about the Reykjavik meeting, Thatcher followed Powell's earlier advice and met with Karpov on 14 October. Thatcher was confrontational with her Soviet guest.⁷⁷ She explained that she was 'disturbed by Soviet tactics at Reykjavik' which made an arms control agreement contingent on Reagan accepting 'Soviet conditions on SDI'. Thatcher claimed that this was a retrograde position, which was previously 'abandoned at the time of the Geneva Summit'. Given that Gorbachev would have known that SDI was non-negotiable for Reagan, Thatcher argued that 'one was bound to question Soviet motives in going to the meeting'. Furthermore, Thatcher warned that if the Soviet Union intended to continue this stance in further discussions about the proposed Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and INF, 'the outlook was sombre indeed' and it 'would bear a heavy responsibility'. As a coda to the record, Powell explained that it reduced 'to order what was an exceptionally lively, indeed excitable, discussion which moved rapidly from one subject to another and back again' although the summary 'eliminates repetition'.⁷⁸ Thatcher's interrogation of Karpov was thorough indeed. Powell shared this record of conversation with Price on 14 October.⁷⁹

Reagan's commitment to eliminating nuclear weapons within a decade was a cause of frustration to his national security team. Poindexter wrote to Reagan on 16 October 1986, explaining why the American government could not commit to this

policy.⁸⁰ He urged Reagan to ‘step back from any discussion of eliminating all nuclear weapons in 10 years, and focus attention on the proposals that you handed over to General Secretary Gorbachev in writing in Iceland which were focused on the elimination of all offensive ballistic missiles in 10 years’. Poindexter’s view was largely in tune with Thatcher’s position, recommending that he ‘make no further public comment endorsing the idea of the total elimination of nuclear weapons in 10 years as something discussed and agreed with the General Secretary’. He was adamant ‘that neither our military experts or our allies would support the idea of moving to the total elimination of all nuclear weapons within 10 years’ but they would ‘likely support a goal of the elimination of all ballistic missiles in that period’. The national security adviser (NSA) further explained that the removal of ballistic weapons would eliminate ‘the nuclear threat posed by such weapons, but the chemical threat as well’. Such action would then ‘enhance our conventional capability by removing the direct threat of rocket attack against our conventional forces’, meaning that ‘the planning of a quick disarming first strike by a conventional aggressor much more difficult’.⁸¹ Thatcher was clearly not alone in her concerns.

Acland reported on other cautious noises emanating from the Reagan administration. He informed the FCO about a lengthy ‘private talk’ with Shultz on 16 October, which should ‘not (not)’ be ‘attributed to him in any subsequent discussion of American views’.⁸² Acland emphasised to Shultz that the Reykjavik discussions had proven to be ‘a somewhat worrying prospect’. Shultz argued that there was ‘a clear distinction’ between the positions advocated by Reagan and Kinnock: the president sought negotiated settlements ‘on a multilateral, balanced and verifiable basis’, while Labour advocated ‘the unilateral abolition of the UK nuclear deterrent and the unilateral withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from the UK’. When pressed that Reagan’s proposal about the removal of all ballistic weapons ‘make it harder’ for the Thatcher government ‘to defend UK Trident’, Shultz assured Acland that such an agreement was ‘a long way down’. Shultz ‘ruminated philosophically about the president’s attitudes’, commenting: ‘He might or he might not be right about SDI ... he was probably right about the mood of younger people, who would be increasingly unwilling to tolerate nuclear weapons’. Nonetheless, Shultz did repeat Reagan’s efforts to reduce fears about Soviet superiority in conventional weapons: NATO was larger than the Warsaw Pact in regards to population and economic strength, and as

such he thought 'that Allied military staffs exaggerated the extent of the Warsaw Pact advantage'. He noted that Reykjavik was 'one of the most remarkable negotiations he had ever participated in'. Given that Gorbachev 'kept putting on the table proposals that coincided with US views' it seemed imperative to keep 'reeling them in as fast as possible'. Gorbachev had sought to transcend the typical negotiation process, having repeatedly claimed to Reagan 'that only the two of them could make progress towards significant arms control agreements' given that 'professional negotiators were too rigid and got bogged down in detail'.⁸³ Gorbachev and Reagan had been determined to achieve an unexpected agreement, while the Reagan administration subsequently sought to temper both the president's enthusiasm and the concerns of their allies.

The national security team remained concerned about Reagan's blanket commitment to eliminating all nuclear weapons within ten years. Prior to Poindexter's meeting with Acland on 28 October, and Thatcher's visit to Camp David, the Reagan administration anticipated British concerns:

In sum, the Prime Minister supports the position we took on INF, 50 percent reduction in ballistic missiles, and the SDI research program. She is concerned about the 10-year timeframe for eliminating ballistic missiles, particularly the impact this would have on the British Trident program. The new UK Trident submarines are currently scheduled to come into service in 1996. She is also deeply concerned about the impact of deep cuts in strategic forces on nuclear deterrence.⁸⁴

Thatcher's concerns were viewed to be 'very similar' to those espoused by Kohl to Reagan, who even noted his own phone conversation with Thatcher when talking to the president. Thus, the White House identified 'a coordinated European approach aimed at underlining those points about which they are uneasy or feel vulnerable'. America's European allies were privately disagreeing with Reagan. For Thatcher she was also 'clearly concerned about the impact of the Reykjavik proposals on domestic politics in Britain'.⁸⁵ At an intimate dinner hosted by the Reagans on 27 October, Acland spoke with Reagan for fifteen minutes about Reykjavik.⁸⁶ Reagan told Acland 'that he understood British and European concerns about the imbalance in non-nuclear forces' and that as 'ballistic missiles moved below the 50 per cent

reduction it would be necessary to ensure that balance was also achieved in chemical weapons and in conventional forces'. Reagan agreed with Acland on the point that 'the nuclear shield (and its ballistic missile component)' was 'essential' to British security, and therefore 'the abandonment of it should be conditional on achieving balance in the other categories of armaments, chemical and particularly conventional'. However, Reagan then advocated 'the Shultz thesis'. He explained that 'the balance of population and economic strength' ensured that NATO countries 'could enhance their conventional effort, and that a clear indication of determination to do so would be a powerful lever in forcing the Soviet Union to negotiate downwards'. Acland reported that this was 'discouraging'. Furthermore, Reagan observed that European allies spent a relatively little on defence. Thus, America's allies could solve this problem with military spending themselves.⁸⁷ The British government remained unsatisfied with Reagan's stance. Acland subsequently met with Poindexter, telling him 'that we saw the establishment of a conventional balance as the key, and that we wished to be fully consulted about new US thinking'.⁸⁸ Acland informed the FCO that this meeting was 'unsatisfactory'; Poindexter was 'evasive, offering counter-arguments which seemed confused, and on occasion contradictory'.⁸⁹ Such analysis is unsurprising given the clear divide between Reagan and key members of his administration on policy during and since Reykjavik.

Anglo-American relations were also strained by British demands prior to Thatcher's visit to Camp David. The national security team explained to Poindexter that 'we have done everything to accommodate the British' but they 'continue to want more, and Powell may call you'.⁹⁰ For instance, the British had 'asked for more time' as they wished 'to start earlier'. The White House 'saw no need' as the administration was 'already offering not only Camp David, but also nearly an hour longer than the time allocated in Washington for official working visits'. Exasperation abounded following a British suggestion to 'forego the cocktails after the *tete-a-tete* [sic.] private meeting before lunch, in favor of a sit down session'. This infuriated Reagan's aides, as 'informal drinks apparently are a mainstay at Camp David'. Thatcher had already secured 'a real working lunch (sit down discussions)' and 'separate meetings with Shultz and Weinberger on Friday'. American patience was dwindling: 'There is also a basic principle: the President is, after all, the host.'⁹¹

Writing in her memoir, Thatcher recalled that on the eve of her visit to the United States, she had ‘never felt more conscious than in the preparation for this visit of how much hung on my relationship with the President’.⁹² On Friday 14 November she ‘practised’ her ‘arguments’ in meetings with Shultz and Casper Weinberger (the U.S. secretary of defence, 1981-87) and again with Vice President George Bush (1981-89) over breakfast the following morning. To Thatcher’s ‘great relief’, it was clear that Reagan ‘quickly understood why I was so deeply concerned about what had happened in Reykjavik’.⁹³ Thatcher recalled that during their meeting and in the subsequent statement, Reagan ‘reaffirmed the United States’ intention to proceed with its strategic modernization programme, including Trident’ and ‘confirmed his full support for the arrangements made to modernize Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent, with Trident’.⁹⁴ In her memoir, Thatcher claimed that she ‘had reason to be well pleased’. Thatcher credited her relationship with Reagan as having ended Gorbachev’s intention to use SDI and Reagan’s vision of a nuclear-free world ‘to advance their strategy of denuclearizing Europe, leaving us vulnerable to military blackmail’. She claimed that it proved her ability to ‘influence ... Reagan on fundamental issues of alliance policy’, and therefore Gorbachev ‘had as much reason to do business with me and I with him’.⁹⁵ Thatcher’s subsequent visit to Moscow in 1987 coincided with Kinnock’s disastrous meeting with Reagan.⁹⁶ Thatcher and Reagan benefitted for each other’s political cover from public diplomacy. Reagan diarised that, after meeting Thatcher’s helicopter ‘in a golf cart’, the two leaders ‘had a good one-on-one re our Iceland meetings & what we are trying to achieve in arms reductions. She had some legitimate concerns. I was able to reassure her’.⁹⁷ The president was grateful for the prime minister’s public support for him later that weekend during a press conference in Washington, D.C.: ‘she ... went out to bat for us. Most helpful’.⁹⁸ The president was clearly relieved to have assured Thatcher, while also grateful for her support for him in the United States. Yet Thatcher alone did not change Reagan’s mind: his own administration was alarmed by his Reykjavik proposal.

Conclusion

Whenever Reagan talked to his staff about eliminating nuclear weapons, Franck Carlucci (NSA, 1986-87) would periodically cite Thatcher’s opposition,

warning the president: ‘No, no. You have to deal with Margaret on that.’⁹⁹ Carlucci recalled that this approach ‘always had the desired effect’.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Reagan’s vision of a world without nuclear weapons was unimaginable to members of his own administration. After leaving office, Reagan reflected on his desire for a world based on a ‘brotherhood of man’, while, in contrast, Thatcher remained motivated after her premiership by promoting the Western Alliance – led by the United States. After Reykjavik, Reagan’s advisers and Thatcher were determined that he would never bargain away the West’s nuclear weapons and abandon deterrence as the central plank of security during the Cold War. Reagan’s willingness to walk away from the potential elimination of nuclear weapons was also motivated by the spectre of his abandonment of SDI. In short, Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’ fantasy trumped even that of a world without nuclear weapons.

Despite their disagreements in power, Thatcher publicly credited Reagan with offering the leadership advocated by Churchill in Fulton in 1946. In her eulogy for Reagan in 2004, she credited Reagan for winning the Cold War.¹⁰¹ However, writing in the *National Review* in 1988, Thatcher tempered her praise for the departing president with a caveat that reflected her own approach to international relations, namely that the West should not downgrade its defences at first sight of more secure relations with the Soviet Union.¹⁰² The Reykjavik summit and its aftermath therefore betrayed a tension at the heart of the Reagan-Thatcher relationship. While both Cold Warriors were willing to work with Gorbachev, Thatcher was unable to imagine a world beyond nuclear weapons and, accordingly, tensions between nation-states. In contrast, Reagan dreamed of a ‘free’ world, governed under the auspices of America’s ‘shining city on a hill’.¹⁰³ Churchill’s Fulton speech outlined the challenges to Anglo-American relations at the beginning of the Cold War. However, Churchill’s private experience of the ‘special’ relationship was also shared by his successors: despite the revolving door of personalities, power and competing priorities and interests governed the substance of Anglo-American relations.

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⁵ Ronald Reagan, 'The Brotherhood of Man,' Westminster College, Fulton MO, 19 November 1990, accessed via <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108357>, 7 January 2016.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Reagan Doctrine was articulated in Reagan's 1985 State of the Union address. The president stated that the United States would 'nourish and defend freedom and democracy' around the world. See: "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," February 6, 1985. *Public Papers*. Reagan Library.

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See also: H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2015), 532. For Reagan's critics, his simplistic policy towards the Soviet Union was summarized by his comment four years before he won the presidency: 'I do have a strategy: We win, they lose!'. See: William E.

Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* (Oxford: Oxford

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⁸ This was evident in, for instance, Reagan's first inaugural address, which was of course focused on the American economy and the role and size of 'government'. In his speech, Reagan argued: 'And as we renew ourselves here in our own land, we will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world. We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom.' See: "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981." *Public Papers*, Reagan Library. <https://www.reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm> (accessed 22 March 2016).

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¹⁵ For Reagan's description of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire', see: "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983." *Public Papers*. Reagan Library. <https://www.reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm> (accessed 26 April 2016). For Reagan and Thatcher discussing Gorbachev for the first time, see: 'Thatcher-Reagan meeting at Camp David (record of conversation),' Saturday 22 December 1984, accessed via <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109185>, 26 April 2016.

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