

# The Reykjavik Summit - The Cold War's Conclusion and the Impact of Power Brokers and the SDI

by

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# **The Reykjavik Summit: The Reagan and Gorbachev Impact**

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## Introduction

For forty-five years the Cold War had dredged on, leaving millions of citizens throughout the United States and the Soviet Union in a constant state of fear. With hundreds of nuclear warheads pointed at each other, the fate of two world powers, and billions of citizens stood in danger, with tensions coming to a head in instances such as the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. While these tensions had been at a continual high throughout the 1960s and 1970s, they began to lessen as General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev took office in the Soviet Union in 1985. As these tensions lessened, an eventual decision was made between US President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev to stage a meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland to discuss the possibility of denuclearization. Reagan went into the Summit with a primary goal of avoiding nuclear war. He saw this summit as an opportunity to showcase the strength of US diplomacy by working through the timid US and USSR relations. Meanwhile, Gorbachev viewed this Summit as way to modernize the Soviet Union. For the first time in decades, the country was placed on a national stage of democracy/diplomacy, and Gorbachev not only saw this as a chance to showcase the Soviet Union as more than a restrictive communist country, but also as an opportunity to help the Soviet Union survive its shrinking strength. This summit left the entire world at a standstill, as the Cold War faced the possibility of an apparent conclusion, as one of the most important geopolitical meetings of the twentieth century was about to take place.

This Reykjavik Summit was planned for the dates of October 11 – 12, of 1986. The location of Reykjavik was chosen as a neutral meeting ground between the two countries, as Iceland had remained neutral throughout much of the Cold War conflict. The timing of the

meeting was also set at an excellent time for Gorbachev and Reagan to meet with one another, as both had openly recently expressed interest in denuclearization and peace talks. Challenges arose almost instantaneously though, as the meeting was scheduled with less than two weeks' notice.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the lead up, and the actual event of the summit, became an extremely important precursor for the end of the Cold War.

The primary sources that define this paper are extremely vast and plentiful and help create a complete picture of the events that occurred leading up to, during, and after the Reykjavik Summit. A majority of the featured primary sources are composed of media interviews conducted with President Reagan. Other examples of primary sources are reflected in pieces such as journals from numerous individuals involved in the events, and multiple national addresses given to the populations of both the United States and Soviet Russia. One of the best strengths held by these primary sources is the fact that there are a large number of primary sources from Soviet Russia, including translated sources into English from Russian. These sources help create a complete picture of the events surrounding the summit, since they include speeches from the leaders meeting in the event, and they also include memoirs and letters from those involved. The one limitation provided by the summit itself, that is reflected in the sources, is that it is an extremely short, two-day event, meaning that many of the sources repeat. While there are still plentiful sources, it often becomes difficult to find new, useful information. There is also an extremely heavy number of secondary sources, with pieces looking deeply into historiography and the impact of items such as the SDI and the Antiballistic Missile Treaty.

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<sup>1</sup> "The 1986 Reykjavik Summit," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, March 16, 2018, , accessed March 12, 2019, <https://adst.org/2016/09/the-cold-war-truly-over-1986-reykjavik-summit/>.

Together, these plentiful primary and secondary sources will combine to help create a complete and thorough picture of the Reykjavik Summit and the subsequent affairs.

The impact that the Reykjavik Summit had on the conclusion of the Cold War, and the concept of denuclearization remains one of heavy debate. Along with this debate, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), more commonly known as the Star Wars program, has become widely regarded as not only the ironic conclusion to the Reykjavik Summit, but also the final piece that drove the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion. The most prominent accomplishment achieved from the Reykjavik Summit was the advancement of the strength of Star Wars, and its assistance in global denuclearization. Before the occurrence of the summit, the only debate over nuclear weapons had involved simply lowering the number of weapons in the world, with plans to reduce nearly the 8,000 worldwide weapons to half in the timespan of five years. Having the opportunity for the two leaders to meet completely revolutionized any previous talks, as conversations of complete denuclearization were discussed. These conversations of denuclearization were drawn by biparty discussion of the immorality of nuclear weapons, as the weapons were unilaterally agreed upon as weapons of mass destruction that were not to be used.<sup>2</sup> The eventual breakdown over the summit drew from the SDI, and Reagan's refusal to remove it from discussions. As the *Economic and Political* article argues, Reagan's insistence on the SDI was both ironic and possibly meaningless. The irony behind the event was that removing nukes, as Gorbachev had proposed, would have had the same effect as building the SDI, as both would have essentially eliminated the threat of nuclear weapons. This point of irony became a smear campaign for Russian media after the event, as they saw denuclearization as an affair that would

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<sup>2</sup> Goodby, James E. "LOOKING BACK: The 1986 Reykjavik Summit." *Arms Control Today* 36, no. 7 (2006): 49-51. <http://www.jstor.org.elib.uah.edu/stable/23627933>.

lead to the same outcome as building the SDI. Along with this, the question is risen about whether or not Reagan even intended to build the SDI, or if it was simply a ploy to bankrupt the Soviets.<sup>3</sup> Together, these pieces examine how the SDI affected the end of the Reykjavik Summit, and the contributions that the Summit had on denuclearization and the conclusion of the war.

This paper will examine the effects of the SDI on the Summit and the effects of denuclearization, and it will also examine the effects that the Summit had on the end of the Cold War. This paper will also aim to examine the effects of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev on the summit, and how each of their individual psyches affected the discussions. Not only will this paper aim to address the actual Summit, it will delve into the lead up of the summit, examining affairs through Roberts Schultz's personal memoirs, along with the effects of the conclusion of the Summit. The conclusion and aftermath of the Reykjavik Summit is nearly as important as the meeting itself, as it led to a subsequent Washington D.C. Summit that produced agreements and treaties that began during discussion at Reykjavik. This paper argues that the beginning of the conclusion of the Cold War started with the discussions held at the Reykjavik Summit, as both the Strategic Defense Initiative and the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, combined to both begin the gradual denouement of the Summit and the Cold War.

### **Reykjavik Precursor**

The briefing for the Summit began instantaneously after the date for the meeting was agreed upon, as hundreds of government officials met to discuss planning. While the

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<sup>3</sup> "Wrecked by Star Wars." *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 42 (1986): 1824.  
<http://www.jstor.org.elib.uah.edu/stable/4376218>.

announcement time for the meeting was less than a week before the actual meeting, the United States government still had created numerous contingency plans for a potential meeting beforehand. These plans held the US position on nearly every conceivable nuclear position, and laid an important framework for summit preparation. Secretary of State George Shultz, who stood closely involved in the meeting preparation, stated that “The summit would not be prenegotiated. But we were prepared.” Both sides intently studied previous documents on the issue, examining treaties and similar agreements that had been made before this event.<sup>4</sup> The uniqueness of the proposed treaties meant that there was no precedence, and the United States would very much be going into this event without knowing fully what to expect from Gorbachev.

Domestically, the United States was undergoing both midterm elections and a budding nuclear movement. These midterm election were going to occur less than a month after Reykjavik, and Reagan saw this meeting as an important benchmark for keeping many Republicans in office. Along with midterm elections, a growing social movement known as the Nuclear Freeze Movement was gaining traction. This movement, founded by Randall Forsberg, became a public response to the slow drift towards nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. This movement quickly gained popularity in the United States, and even became a part of the Democratic Party’s platform. This movement began pushing state and local candidates that supported their platform, and also started pushing legislation that supported nuclear deterrence. While the Reagan Administration attempted to avoid this movement, eventually it was forced to respond, with Reagan’s National Security Advisor stating “We took it as a serious movement that could undermine congressional support for the [nuclear]

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<sup>4</sup> George Shultz, "Cold War: Reykjavik Summit," Margaret Thatcher Foundation, October 12, 1986, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110620>.

modernization program, and potentially...a serious partisan political threat that could affect the election in '84.”<sup>5</sup> While this movement never directly the Reagan Administration’s reelection chances, it stood as an added piece of pressure on the meetings, as mass public outcry pushed for the removal of nuclear arms from the US arsenal.

The standing of the Reykjavik Summit also upped the sense of urgency behind the planning. The Höfði House had been chosen due to its remoteness, and a mass media blackout was put into place to limit the distractions at the event. Both of the leaders were very well aware that the event was going to feature heavy amounts of one on one time, and that both leaders were going to be forced to handle hard hitting questions that would not have any previous script. This sense of urgency upped the importance of the meeting, and also showcases why the meeting was so important.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Summit**

Both sides had spent substantial amounts of time briefing the morning of the event, and through these briefings the United States was able to uncover substantial information about the Soviets that assisted with the meeting. It had become clear to the Reagan Administration, through a Central Intelligence Agency briefing, that the Russian army stood against the meeting, as Gorbachev’s openness to making agreements with the United States worried the military. With this being the case, Gorbachev would only survive the summit if it was viewed as a

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence S. Wittner, "The Nuclear Freeze and Its Impact," The Nuclear Freeze and Its Impact | Arms Control Association, , accessed April 24, 2019, [https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010\\_12/LookingBack](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_12/LookingBack).

<sup>6</sup> George Shultz, “Cold War: Reykjavik Summit” .

perceived success for the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> This placed the Gorbachev Administration into a difficult position, as Gorbachev's goal as Soviet Premier was to modernize the Soviet Union, which would involve Western diplomacy and democratic agreements. Due to this goal, Gorbachev was either forced to go against his preconceived notion that needed to be reached to achieve Soviet survival or continue with his plans and face removal from office upon his return from Iceland. This military disdain against Gorbachev had reached such a crux that there were some premature plans to assassinate the leader, unbeknownst to Gorbachev.<sup>8</sup> Because of this CIA briefing, the Reagan Administration was clearly placed in an advantageous position, allowing them to negotiate more freely heading into day one of the meeting.

The two first began their arrival at the meeting spot of the Höfði house at around 10:30 am, with Reagan's party arriving first. While Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev were the two most prominent figures at the meeting, the other two key figures that sit in on each of the meetings were that of Eduard Shevardnadze and George Shultz. Shevardnadze stood as the Soviet Union's Minister of Foreign Affairs, while George Shultz stood as the United States' Secretary of State during this time. Upon the all arrival of all four figures to the meeting room, subsequent pictures, and greetings took place as a formal precursor to the meeting. While these events were occurring, numerous intelligence agents and strategic analysts continued to define what a successful event would hold for both the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> Eventually

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<sup>7</sup> George Shultz, "Cold War: Reykjavik Summit".

<sup>8</sup> George Shultz, "Cold War: Reykjavik Summit".

<sup>9</sup> George Shultz, "Cold War: Reykjavik Summit".

though both leaders were finally able to sit down and begin the long-awaited discussions that would attempt to proceed one of the world's most potentially dangerous wars to a more non-hostile affair.



(Hofdi House, Reykjavik, Iceland, YoYoGo.com)

When the meeting began, it became ultimately clear that both world leaders were on different pages in what they wanted to accomplish. Gorbachev quickly opened up the meeting wanting to discuss ridding the world of its nuclear weapons, while Ronald Reagan wanted to discuss the Soviet Union's numerous human rights violations. Reagan invited Gorbachev to speak first, who quickly opened on potential Soviet nuclear concessions. Reagan made it extremely clear that for a truly successful meeting to take place, concessions would have to be made on not only nuclear arms, but human rights as well. Reagan also spoke on nuclear arms reductions to Gorbachev, stating "There is a Russian saying: *doveryai no proveryai*, trust but

verify. How will we know that you'll get rid of your missiles as you say you will?"<sup>10</sup> These discussions, set both a proper potential path for agreements to be made, and also illustrated the divide between the two world leaders. While Gorbachev solely wanted to focus on nuclear weapons, Reagan saw much more of an importance on human rights, and the Soviet's numerous violations. While Gorbachev had aimed to modernize the Soviet Union, he was not fully prepared to transfer the Soviet Union over to a modern country when it involved treatment of its citizens. Along with this, much of the industry of the Soviet Union was not prepared for such a transition, as the industry was not capable of sustaining such a change. This disagreement over human rights becomes the first true issue of disagreements between the two leaders, but the disagreements would quickly subside as Reagan accepted that agreements on nuclear weapons were more of a pressing matter.

The discussions over human rights quickly subsided, as conversations quickly transitioned to nuclear affairs. The two leaders first debated over the number of nuclear weapons, as Reagan suggested lowering the number of warheads down to 4,500, as a counteroffer to the Soviets proposed number of 6,400 – 6,800 weapons. Both leaders openly agreed that the end goal was global denuclearization, as the number of nuclear weapons needed to be at zero before both leaders were going to be pleased with the meeting outcomes. Gorbachev quickly wrote up a document titled "Directives for the Foreign Ministers of the USSR and USA Concerning the Drafting of Agreements on Nuclear Disarmament." This document proposed sweeping restrictions on intermediate "strategic and intermediate-range arms, space and defense, and nuclear testing." This proposal also went on to state that global nuclear weapons be cut in half.

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<sup>10</sup> George Shultz, "Cold War: Reykjavik Summit" .

The definition of half became the next point of contention between the leaders, as half can be interpreted based upon types of nuclear weapons, vehicles that carry nuclear weapons, and other similar devices. Gorbachev explained through the presentation of his document that he was giving up a large number of concessions for the United States in order to come to agreement, including complete disregard of British and French weaponry. This stood as a potential major loss for the Soviet Union, as the British and French were both close allies of the United States and were quickly building up their nuclear arsenals. This conglomeration of disagreements and concessions highlight much of the portion of the early meeting, as the disagreements over half continues to showcase the second major divide between the two leaders.<sup>11</sup> These conversations showcase both how important every single discussion was during the event, and how important each leader was during the discussed debates.

As Gorbachev spent an extended period of time presenting his document, Reagan addressed the next point of disagreement between the two leaders: the SDI. This subject of the SDI and the violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty became key points of contention for Gorbachev and Reagan, as Gorbachev requested that the United States “propose a compromise in which we adopt the U.S. approach of a nonwithdrawal commitment and a period of negotiations following it.” Gorbachev’s idea of a compromise involved denuclearization, as long as the United States distanced itself from the SDI. Reagan’s response to Gorbachev’s document and SDI plans, stressed numerous times “that success with SDI would make the elimination of nuclear weapons possible.” Both leaders aimed to remove nuclear weapons altogether, but Reagan obviously leaned more towards holding the SDI as it was a crucial defensive technology,

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<sup>11</sup> George Shultz, “Cold War: Reykjavik Summit” .

and Gorbachev believed that no SDI would simply allow both leaders to lessen their nuclear payloads and come together on a consensus.<sup>12</sup> From this point forward in the meeting, both leaders became fixated on the topic of the SDI and its impact on the meeting and the surrounding affairs. The outcome that the SDI played on the Summit was one of extreme importance, as it completely revolutionized nuclear warfare. While the SDI had just begun to play an impact on the Summit, it had been a well-known worldwide weapon for three years earlier. This defense system would become one of the most important of the twentieth century and would completely change the entire outcome of the Soviet Union.

### **Background of the Strategic Defense Initiative**

The creation of the Strategic Defense Initiative first became known around the globe in 1983, with Ronald Reagan's announcement of the SDI. According to President Reagan, the SDI would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete", which created a problem for Soviet plans for their place as a nuclear power due to threat of nuclear domination.<sup>13</sup> Worldwide reaction to the announcement of the SDI became one of primarily negative feelings, as the Soviet Union and even fellow European allies viewed the announcement with trepidation. While the Soviet response to the incident is more understandable, European feelings showcase a more convoluted look at the United States' weapon announcement. The driving three primary concerns faced by Europeans that became the focal point of controversy involve "the reliability of American leadership, the fate of arms control and East-West relations, and Europe's technological position vis-à-vis America." (1) Because of such concerns, not only was the United

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<sup>12</sup> George Shultz, "Cold War: Reykjavik Summit".

<sup>13</sup> Lambeth, Benjamin, and Kevin Lewis. "The Kremlin and SDI." *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 4 (1988): 755-70. doi:10.2307/20043481.

States forced to create the SDI and navigate the justification of its creation to the Soviet Union, but Reagan was also forced to justify the necessity of its creation to the United States' European allies.<sup>14</sup>



(Ian Williams, Tom Karako, and Wes Rumbaugh, Phase One of the Strategic Defense)

Although the SDI's influence on the conclusion of the Reykjavik Summit became one of substantial impact, initial fear from the Soviets was of urgency, but not full catastrophe. In 1983, General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Yuri Andropov, exhibited much trepidation about the SDI, but also saw the opportunity to capitalize on the first announcement of the plans for the defense system. One of the first major beliefs by Andropov and the USSR was that the United States was simply trying to reassert military dominance over the Soviet Union during the Cold

<sup>14</sup> Lucas, Michael. "SDI and Europe." *World Policy Journal* 3, no. 2 (1986): 219-49. <http://www.jstor.org.elib.uah.edu/stable/40209013>.

War. The Soviet leadership used this belief to attempt to portray American leadership as foolish, as they showcased the American military as trying to find any way to solely “prevail” throughout this cold nuclear war. Along with this reaction, Andropov and the USSR also saw the creation of the SDI by United States forces as an attempt to further their offensive power, instead of simply using the SDI as a defensive weapon as portrayed by Ronald Reagan. They also saw these announcements as a compliment to Soviet forces, as the United States was attempting every possible action to catch up to the massive USSR arsenal.<sup>15</sup> While early sentiments did not showcase immediate urgency behind the announcement, the United States continual desire to build the SDI began to worry the Soviet Union and increase urgency in the administration, especially upon transition from Andropov to Gorbachev as General Secretary.

Gorbachev’s first fears about the SDI as Soviet Secretary General became economic fears, as the USSR began to realize the extreme expenses required to maintain the defense budget to keep up with the United States.<sup>16</sup> Attempting to maintain production of rival defenses to the SDI would force the Soviet Union to completely reallocate large amounts of funds that were not available in the USSR budget . Not only would this spending situation place the country at a disadvantage, but it would force the USSR to sever economic ties or ignore their civilian economy even more than the country already had.<sup>17</sup> These early Gorbachev concerns over spending became an ironic foreshadow for the eventual bankruptcy of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev realized that the country was either going to have to spend aimlessly to keep up with

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<sup>15</sup> Lambeth, Benjamin, and Kevin Lewis. "The Kremlin and SDI." *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 4 (1988): 755-70. doi:10.2307/20043481.

<sup>16</sup> Lambeth, Benjamin, and Kevin Lewis. "The Kremlin and SDI." 760

<sup>17</sup> Lambeth, Benjamin, and Kevin Lewis. "The Kremlin and SDI." 758

the SDI's growth or ignore it and allow the United States to assert complete domination over the Soviet Union, creating a future where the US could launch unrivaled nuclear warheads.

A final major concern of the Soviet Union over the Strategic Defense Initiative involves the global reception of the Soviet Union and their military prowess. Before the announcement of the SDI, the Soviet Union had clearly established themselves as an equal of the United States when comparing nuclear strength, and even a stronger country when examining pure nuclear armaments. Even though both the United States and Soviet Union had more than enough nuclear weapons to destroy the planet multiple times over, it still stood as a key bragging right for the Soviet Union. From the USSR's standpoint, Reagan's promise to make nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete completely destroyed the Soviet Union's mantra as a superpower and made the country's heavy percentage of funds spent on military expenses completely useless.<sup>18</sup>

As Soviet concern over the SDI continually grew, the announcement of the SDI also brought into question the into the question the jurisdiction of many previous international peace treaties, specifically that of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty). The ABM treaty, signed between the United States and Soviet Union on May 22, 1972, placed limitations on nationwide defensive systems against nuclear armaments, and according to the treaty would become a "substantial factor in curbing the race in strategic arms."<sup>19</sup> This treaty, solely created to prevent weapons such as the SDI, banned either country from placing nationwide nuclear defensive systems. When this treaty was passed in the mid-1970s, both the US and USSR saw

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<sup>18</sup> Lambeth, Benjamin, and Kevin Lewis. "The Kremlin and SDI." 759

<sup>19</sup> Daryl Kimball, "The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty at a Glance," The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty at a Glance | Arms Control Association, , accessed April 02, 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/abmtreaty>.

nationwide defensive systems as an opportunity to reach nuclear invulnerability. Due to the lack of defensive weapons, both sides would remain vulnerable to potential nuclear strikes, deterring both the United States and the Soviet Union from launching nuclear attacks.<sup>20</sup> This treaty was created by work between both US President Jimmy Carter and USSR Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev, and was composed when neither sides had any legitimate traction at creating defensive nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union portrayed the SDI as a break of the ABM Treaty, but for the Reagan Administration, unless any international power planned to enforce their treaty breach, it made the most logical sense to create a new defensive staple for the United States.

The Strategic Defense Initiative became an impactful announcement that affected the entire planet. While the Cold War only directly involved the United States and the Soviet Union, discussions over the SDI reinforce the concept that the Cold War was a global war effort. Every decision made by either country included satisfying hundreds of other countries that lacked any nuclear firepower, each of which stood helpless to the potential nuclear fallout. Reagan was forced to negotiate with both European allies, and the Soviet Union in order to maintain SDI construction. While it is important to praise Ronald Reagan's impact on the SDI negotiations at Reykjavik, it is also important to highlight Gorbachev's successes as in dealing with the device. Already entering the meeting from a disadvantageous position, Gorbachev stood his ground as the Soviet Union's leader and managed to maintain the possibility of his two desired goals of complete denuclearization and modernization of the country. This wherewithal sustained by Gorbachev throughout the meeting led to another summit, one that allowed both sides to solidify nuclear agreements. Both Reagan and Gorbachev's impact on the conclusion of the Reykjavik

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<sup>20</sup> Daryl Kimball, "The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty at a Glance,"

Summit were one of great influence, although the SDI continued to drive the remaining portions of the Summit.

### **Reykjavik Summit Conclusion**

From the instant that the SDI became a point of topic in the meeting, the dynamic between the two leaders completely changed. While Gorbachev had been able to negotiate with Reagan about his stance on human rights violations, Reagan was very well aware that he held the upper hand in negotiations on the SDI, as it stood as an item that Gorbachev both wanted to acquire and wanted to eradicate. As the Summit progressed, Gorbachev made his thoughts on the SDI clear, stating that the “pursuit of SDI will necessitate the buildup of strategic arms.” Reagan quickly took offense to this comment, stating “We are accused of wanting a first-strike capability, but we are proposing a treaty that would require the elimination of ballistic missiles before a defense can be deployed; so a first strike would be impossible.” This quip between the two leaders showcases much of the dissenting thought process between Gorbachev and Reagan, as both aimed for a common goal through different means. The meeting neared its conclusion with continued discussions over Gorbachev’s previously mentioned treaty that would allow for the removal of all European nuclear weapons.<sup>21</sup> While much of the staff and even Secretary Shultz pushed for the acceptance of the treaty, Reagan continued to aim for a pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative. Due to the tensions created by the SDI, Reagan even went as far to offer the Soviet Union access to the Strategic Defense Initiative, a move in which Gorbachev doubted. Gorbachev saw this a ploy to get the USSR to sign off on a treaty that wouldn’t be followed through with, as he told Reagan “If you will not share oil-drilling equipment or even

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<sup>21</sup> George Shultz, “Cold War: Reykjavik Summit” .

milk-processing factories, I do not believe that you will share SDI.”<sup>22</sup> These two leaders continued their debate over the SDI for the remainder of the second day, and it became clear that the leaders were going to be unable to come to an agreement on how to reach an agreement for removing nuclear weapons from the globe.

The meeting concluded on the afternoon of Saturday, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1986. Gorbachev and Reagan attempted everything possible to come to an agreement to conclude the conversations, but nothing was ever met. At one point, discussions over the SDI came so close that Reagan screamed at Gorbachev “We are so close!” One closing remark by Gorbachev told Reagan “We won’t be seeing each other again”, which instantly worried many that Soviet – US relations had completely collapsed. While George Shultz states that the quote was referring to the two leaders’ schedules before leaving Reykjavik , it still sent much of the media scrambling over the drastic comments displayed by Gorbachev.<sup>23</sup> Instant worldwide reactions to the Summit viewed the event as an absolute failure. The two leaders had gotten mere moments away from ridding the globe of nuclear weapons, yet the collapse between the two indicated that they were both extremely close, and extremely far, from final agreements.

### **Immediate Summit Aftermath**

After two intense days of summit discussions in Reykjavik, the event ended on the afternoon of Saturday, October 12<sup>th</sup>. Agreements were unable to be reached between the two powers for numerous reasons, but the two driving factors of human rights policies and the Strategic Defense Initiative became the final breaking points between Gorbachev and Reagan.

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<sup>22</sup> George Shultz, “Cold War: Reykjavik Summit” .

<sup>23</sup> George Shultz, “Cold War: Reykjavik Summit”

While the Summit was unable to reach any concessions, it still paved the way for a future DC Summit and began paving the way for talks of the possibility of global nuclear disarmament.

The first driving factor behind the conclusion of the meeting was the aforementioned disagreements on human rights policies. While Reagan had originally understood that reaching an agreement on human rights was less likely than nuclear concessions, Gorbachev's unwillingness to budge on the human rights violations gave Reagan much less of a tendency for leeway to openly budge on agreements on nuclear issues. Mandating nuclear development was much 'easier' in Gorbachev's mind than overhauling the Soviet Union's human right policies, as it would have to be a complete and substantial system overhaul that would involve millions of people.<sup>24</sup> Reagan specifically spoke out against these human rights violations as a clear breach of the Helsinki Accords, an act signed in 1975 which placed international limitations on the Soviet Union's human rights involvement. The human rights violations of the Helsinki Accords thoroughly angered Ronald Reagan, with individuals such as Yuriy Orlov serving as stark reminders of the dangers the USSR still posed. Orlov was a Russian citizen who was arrested and imprisoned for speaking out against the government for violations of these Accords.<sup>25</sup> Although these human rights violations did divide the meeting, these discussions were one in which Reagan was willing to concede on if he could reach correct agreements on other deals.

The true dividing factor between the two leaders became that of the Strategic Defense Initiative. The base message relayed to Mikhail Gorbachev from Ronald Reagan was that the

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<sup>24</sup> ""The Cold War Was Truly Over" - The 1986 Reykjavik Summit," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, March 16, 2018, , accessed March 26, 2019, <https://adst.org/2016/09/the-cold-war-truly-over-1986-reykjavik-summit/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Reagan Address to the Nation on the Summit." Interview by Broadcast Journalists. Making the History of 1989. Accessed February 15, 2019. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/56>.

United States was willing to give up all forms of offensive nuclear weapons in order to focus solely on defensive nuclear weapons. This agreement originally seemed appealing to Gorbachev, but it became ultimately clear that Reagan was still not willing to budge on his plans for the SDI. The SDI simply became too much for Mikhail Gorbachev, as he was unwilling to move on allowing the United States to continue to operate with such a system.<sup>26</sup> One of the largest successes held from the Reykjavik Summit though was the Washington D.C. Summit that was held as a successor to continue discussions held from Reykjavik. While the Reykjavik Summit did an excellent job at laying the groundwork for nuclear discussions, the DC Summit allowed for actual agreements to be made on specific terms.

### **Washington DC Summit**

The Washington Summit held December 7 – 10 of 1987, became a monumental meeting for the future of nuclear warfare and arms control throughout the globe. This meeting produced multiple examples of actual treaties, including the first treaty to reduce global nuclear armaments, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Another document that was composed during this meeting was the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks treaty, another piece that looked to place limits on nuclear weapons. While nuclear discussions were still very much on the table, President Reagan continued to slowly back down from his previous desires of human rights agreements. “So, yes, we will address human rights and regional issues... With time, patience, and will power I believe we will solve these issues.”<sup>27</sup> Reagan’s change of tone on this

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<sup>26</sup> "Reagan Address to the Nation on the Summit." Interview by Broadcast Journalists. Making the History of 1989. Accessed February 15, 2019. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/56>.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the American and Soviet Peoples on the Soviet-United States Summit Meeting" (speech, The White House, Washington D.C., December 8, 1987).

issue becomes one of the largest examples of Gorbachev's ability to leverage the impact of nuclear disarmament to the United States, as Reagan was willing to move on his previous views on the topic in order to reduce nuclear weapons. Regardless of Reagan's choice to move with the human rights agreements, the discussions held in Washington DC still proved extremely influential.

While Ronald Reagan still viewed the DC Summit as a success, even Mikhail Gorbachev addressed the Soviet Union's population with successes of the summit. Gorbachev ironically though cited the humanity of the negotiations, stating that he felt, "maybe for the first time...the importance of the human factor in international politics." Gorbachev not only saw the nuclear agreements as a sign of progress for both the United States and the Soviet Union, but he also saw the way in which he was treated as a sign of advancement for the USSR. Gorbachev explicitly pointed out the "the friendly atmosphere, even enthusiasm to some degree... was a sign of the changes that have begun to transpire in the West, and which meant that the 'enemy image' had begun to erode, and that the myth of the 'Soviet military threat' was undermined...And it was noticed in the entire world."<sup>28</sup> Gorbachev's takeaway from the Washington DC Summit was one that allowed him to attain his original goals aimed for from the Reykjavik Summit. The two major meetings between the leaders had granted both Gorbachev and the USSR relevance on a global scale, placing them at the negotiating table with the United States and other diplomatic world powers. The irony behind this sentiment proves extremely apparent though, as the only reason Gorbachev and the USSR held any modicum of relevance was due to their use of nuclear weapons, and nothing about the country's diplomacy, industry, or development beyond that had

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<sup>28</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, "Gorbachev Address to the USSR on the Washington Summit" (Washington D.C.).

contributed to that placement. Nonetheless, Gorbachev proved correct in his statement, as the United States and President Reagan understood the importance of deterring nuclear war.

The Reykjavik Summit and the Washington DC Summit both stand as interesting comparisons of meetings, but without the Reykjavik Summit and the concessions settled upon at the Hofei House in Reykjavik the discussions in Washington would have been unable to occur. Reykjavik also became an important testing ground for planning treaties in Washington, as points of negotiation were debated upon and removed during the Reykjavik Summit. The most prominent example of this is the aforementioned negotiations over human rights. Reagan quickly became aware that the negotiations on human rights were going to be a difficult debate to work with Gorbachev on, allowing him to table any talks on this issue and focus solely on topics that could be agreed upon. Because of reasons such as these, the Reykjavik Summit helped pave the way for the treaties laid out at the Washington Summit, which continued to help advance USSR-US relations towards the end of the Cold War.

### **Why Does it Matter? The Summit, SDI, and Reagan and Gorbachev**

The Reykjavik Summit is such an important topic of discussion due to the impact it had on the Cold War and the impact it had on nuclear deterrence. While the physical agreements reached at the event were not as important as the agreements reached during the Washington Summit, the Reykjavik Summit allowed for both powers to sit and discuss the potential of ending nuclear war together.

The largest, most important benefit provided from the Reykjavik Summit is the theme of precedence. The precedence set by the Reykjavik Summit is what makes the event so important, and so monumental for global history. Since the creation of nuclear weapons, warnings about the

danger of the use of nuclear weapons had remained prevalent, and the Cold War appeared to bring all of these fears to stark reality. Events such as the aforementioned Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs Invasion brought the world to the grips of dealing with the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, and the discussions at Reykjavik helped curb many of these fears. While the diplomacy provided by the United States was not shocking, the diplomacy shown by Gorbachev and the Soviet Union provided an extremely unique dynamic to negotiations. The precedence created from this event also helped lay the foundation for nuclear treaties at the Washington Summit, and for many subsequent years.

While it is important to examine the importance of the precedence that was set at the Reykjavik Summit, it is key to remember that the driving factors behind the summit were that of Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Strategic Defense Initiative. The impact that Ronald Reagan had on the Summit was clear. Reagan went into the event as the key negotiator, and as the individual that had the most amount of urgency in negotiating. Reagan not only had the opportunity to become a global hero and end the Cold War, but he had the opportunity to cement his legacy as an incredible negotiator. On the opposing side, Mikhail Gorbachev was aiming to modernize the Soviet Union. Through his negotiations with Ronald Reagan, Gorbachev was able to cement himself as both a positive negotiator, and also as someone who was able to withstand Ronald Reagan and the United States strong level of diplomacy. Together, each of these two leader's charisma guided their country through the summit, and it led to the subsequent agreements and treaties that were revealed through Washington.

Finally, the strategic defense initiative becomes the most important instrument of debate for both Gorbachev and Reagan. This device split the debates, and along with human rights

violations, became the primary deal breaker for the Reykjavik Summit. The largest impact that Reagan's insistence on the SDI had on the Soviet Union was in fact not Gorbachev's fear of complete US nuclear invulnerability, but instead it was the extreme amount of funding that the Soviet Union spent on maintaining defenses to follow US defenses. Between the conclusion of the Reykjavik Summit to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country spent millions of dollars attempting to research military equipment to design their own SDI, but the country was simply unable to support it. The USSR rerouted large amounts of funds to upkeep research budgets, and it only further fractured the splitting Soviet system. Along with all of this dynamic, questions arise over the authenticity of the United States' ability to even construct the SDI. As the SDI never became a fully completed project, questions arose in hindsight over whether the United States ever really planned to build the defense system, and if it was simply a ploy to bankrupt the Soviet Union. While this information will never be confirmable, this could be another potential example of Ronald Reagan's strategic outmaneuvering of Gorbachev and the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, the Summit can be viewed as both a success and a failure, as the impact felt by the event played a massive effect on nuclear conversations. The sense of failure behind the meeting was instantaneous, as both Gorbachev and Reagan spoke to their confidants about their closeness to success. Along with this, the aforementioned comments from Gorbachev about Reagan not seeing him again sent the media into a frenzy. Due to the lack of agreements made during Reykjavik, the media also took this as signs of failure, allowing it to negatively reflect upon the advancements the meeting had made during the event. While the instant reaction to the meeting was one of perceived failure, the long-term effects of the meeting illustrated the success

that the event created. Due to the Reykjavik Summit, the Soviet Union and United States were able to lay foundations that provided treaties that helped decrease the number of worldwide nuclear weapons in Washington, along with the cementing of the presence of the SDI in national diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

In hindsight, Reykjavik stands as one of the most interesting events in Cold War history. While it did stand as a successful stepping stone in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, it also stands as the largest 'what-ifs' of worldwide history. The Summit showcased the Soviet Union's diplomacy on an international level, as Gorbachev attempted to reach out and expand the country's impact. Ronald Reagan's impact was also insurmountable on the Summit, as he not only be was forced to coerce numerous European countries to work with the United States on the SDI, but he also was able to stand his ground on the treaties and not give way to Soviet intimidation. The largest piece of impact left behind from the Summit though is the Strategic Defense Initiative. This weapon not only became the breaking point for the Summit, but it also became the economic breaking point for the Soviet Union, as immediate fears of concern over the weapon began even before Gorbachev's Administration. This weapon, although never created, becomes the key reason as to why it is so important to study the Reykjavik Summit. It allowed the United States to set a precedent for nuclear deterrence, but it also became one of the first ever examples of attempted limitations on nuclear weapons. Discussions on nukes had transferred from simply attempting to place a limit on the number of weapons in the world, to discussions of completely removing nukes altogether, which became an incredible stepping stone towards world peace. While the Summit can be seen by many as a failure, the effects of

Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Strategic Defense Initiative played a massive impact on nuclear talks and the eventual conclusion of the Cold War.

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