Chapter One: Swan Song and Surprise

Reagan was ready. His last thanksgiving as president was but days away. After eight years in Washington, there was one final turkey to pardon, one more White House Christmas tree to light, then only a few more weeks in the Oval Office. He looked forward to a long break, long trail rides with his wife, and retirement. The oldest man ever elected president, he’d once been full of energy to match his legendary optimism. Those days seemed gone. He was tired. Never one for details, Reagan seemed to be forgetting more and more during his final years in office, and his beloved California ranch beckoned as never before. “He’s not really working at the job and not in touch with reality,” his chief of staff complained to Secretary of State George Schultz. Other top aides had the same experience: “I can’t tell whether I’m really helping him or not because he listens and I don’t get a sense that he disagrees with me or agrees with me or what,” CIA Director William Webster whispered behind closed doors. “I’m in the same boat,” commiserated Colin Powell, his national security advisor.¹


Reagan was tired but carried few regrets. The economy was rolling. Unemployment was down, and the stock market up. Nearly three-quarters of Americans polled in 1988 considered their personal economic prospects on the rise, the highest rate of his presidency. To his eyes, the country seemed proud again, and the world largely at peace. Even if he’d failed to eradicate nuclear weapons, as he’d long dreamed and nearly achieved during epic negotiations with the Soviets, Reagan had been instrumental in bringing the superpowers closer than ever before. He even forged a personal friendship of sorts with the Soviet Union’s energetic young leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. For over forty years Soviet and American leaders had waged a Cold War between them for global dominance, holding their peoples and the wider world hostage to the nuclear-charged competition between capitalism and communism. Those days appeared over. Never before in the Cold War’s long and dangerous history had the men who ran the White House and the Kremlin seemed as close as they were now.²

Some even argued, first in whispers and then with increasing ferocity, that the Cold War itself might be coming to a close. The threat of nuclear war, which had hung heavily over his head and the world’s for the previous half-century, was if nothing else diminished. Moreover, from Reagan’s perspective, communism itself appeared on its last legs. He’d once predicted as much. Powerful forces called for reform behind the Iron Curtain. In Moscow the talk was of political and economic reform, perestroika and glastnost, restructuring and openness. In hotspots like Poland and Hungary, reformers promising open markets and open elections had not only taken to the streets, they now took part and in some cases even led governments once beholden to communist party doctrine. Democracy appeared in the offing. Even the Kremlin


appeared less menacing. Words like “peace,” “change,” “new thinking,” and “new diplomacy” emanated from Moscow’s top leadership, replacing ominous threats of war and promises of perpetual class conflict. During one of the Cold War’s darkest moments, a Soviet leader had boasted of churning out nuclear missiles like sausages, each one aimed at the West. Communism, he warned, would simply “bury” the capitalist world. The man currently in charge in Moscow now talked instead about building a “common European home” where all could prosper and live in peace. Times had indeed changed over the course of Reagan’s long career. Even if his administration had nearly foundered a few years back over revelation of convoluted arms deals with Iran designed to help anticommunist forces in Central America, a deal Reagan still did not—nor want to—fully comprehend, at least in his mind the United States’ adversaries seemed no closer to gaining a foothold in America’s backyard. Communism appeared on the retreat everywhere else.

Iran-Contra, as the controversial affair came to be known, stained Reagan’s reputation. A political scandal dubbed Watergate had taken down the last elected Republican president. By 1986, pundits and policymakers alike wondered if history might soon repeat. Newspaper headlines seemingly daily blasted new information about the scandal. Nightly news broadcasts, at a time when anchors from the big three networks still dominated the airwaves and defined the national agenda, routinely opened with the latest detail, rumor, and revelation. Televised congressional hearings captured a larger viewing audience than popular daytime soap operas. Clearly, illegalities had taken place. For those who defended the conspirators as patriots acting above the law, and those who saw them as undemocratic criminals deserving prosecution, one question stood above all others: what did Reagan know, and when did he know it?
The official commission charged with investigating the affair ultimately cleared the president of legal liability yet laid ultimate blame at his feet. His “personal management style,” investigators concluded, left too many details to others. In Washington-speak, his White House was out of control, or at least, not under his. As one of his best biographers noted, Reagan’s was the “delegated presidency.” Aides largely provided “a daily schedule that told him what to do. Once he had the schedule he followed it scrupulously. He was never late for an appointment; he never allowed any discussion to run beyond its allotted time; and in the evening he never failed to deal with all the papers he took with him.” Reagan assiduously learned his lines, hit his marks, and always knew when to smile for the camera. He remained the actor he had always been. He led by outlining the broadest of optimistic visions. Underlings interpreted what they thought he meant. No one would ever call him a micromanager. Yet without direct oversight, the Iran-Contra commission concluded, many of his subordinates conducted foreign policy as they desired, with reckless and dangerous results.

By 1987, a daily 7 AM meeting between Powell, Shultz, and Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci decided the day’s national security agenda, largely without input from their commander-in-chief. “We decided that the three of us had to agree on the day’s events, the policy issues,” Carlucci recalled. “If we agreed, that was it. Reagan was past the point where he could intervene in the system. We worked it that way for over a year.” In hindsight, Powell recognized the potential usurpation of constitutional power their morning meetings constituted, and went to great lengths to argue that “I would never, ever, characterize it as me, Frank, and Shultz making
the decisions.” At the same time, however, he euphemistically conceded, “[We] made it easier for him [Reagan].”

The president’s growing inattention did not escape public notice. Despite impressive results, a lead article in Foreign Affairs concluded, “only the most devoted of Reagan supporters would by this time seriously defend the manner in which this president has presided over the formulation and implementation of policy.” Such criticisms stung, especially from the journal of record for the country’s foreign policy elite. Yet they could not overwhelm Reagan’s sense of satisfaction as his presidency came to a close. He felt proud and also vindicated. Voters had just elected his vice president, George Bush, to succeed him in office, the first time any incumbent had pulled off that trick since 1831. So far as Reagan was concerned, the American people had just voted him a third term.

As November crept along and the wind grew colder, Reagan’s daily work-schedule, never rigorous by presidential standards, became even more lax with his successor in place. The world would soon be another president’s problem. Indeed, as the festivities of inauguration day drew to a head the following January, he tried to hand over his nuclear launch codes hours before Bush took the oath of office. His assistants balked. Powell offered a gentle reminder that he remained in command through the official swearing-in, promising that a military aide would accept the nuclear keys at the first possible moment. The awful burden Reagan so hated was his for just a little while longer. For eight years, he’d carried neither keys nor a wallet in his pockets, he later lamented, requiring neither money nor identification as leader of the free world. He toted “only

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3 Ivo Daalder and I. M. Destler, In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisors and the President They Served (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 131, 166. See also Mann, Rebellion of Ronald Reagan, p. 281.
secret codes that were capable of bringing about the annihilation of the world as we knew it.” Reagan sighed in acceptance. He was long used to doing what aides suggested.⁵

Though he was not yet done. Weeks before this moment, as Thanksgiving loomed and the White House buzzed with the fervor of transition, there remained a few final things Reagan wanted to wrap up while he remained in charge. High on his list was giving a proper thank-you to Margaret Thatcher. Britain’s Iron Lady, prime minister since 1979, Thatcher shared much with the American president. Both were deeply conservative. Both favored blanket endorsements of the market, condemnations of centralized government control, and the overriding power of unbridled “freedom.” Both loathed authoritarianism in all its varied forms and were quick to identify totalitarian streaks within political opponents. For eight years, they had weathered international storms together, confiding in each other, offering support and reassurance when times got tough. Of course, the world could look quite different if viewed from the Potomac or the Thames. But when Iran-Contra seemed ready to scuttle his entire presidency in late 1986, with impeachment or resignation not wholly unthinkable, it was Thatcher’s hand-written letter from London that most buoyed his spirits. “The press and media are always so ready to criticize,” she’d written, “but your achievements in restoring America’s pride and confidence and in giving the West the confidence it needs are far too substantial to suffer any lasting damage.” Reagan called the Prime Minister right away to thank her, much to the consternation of Donald Regan, White House chief of staff, who disliked the idea of his boss speaking to anyone without oversight.⁶

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Thatcher played an important role in Reagan’s presidency beyond mere confidant and cheerleader. She was a global figure in her own right, and he listened when she spoke. The annals of the famed Anglo-American “special relationship” are filled with close presidents and prime ministers. When a shocked Franklin Roosevelt stumbled on Winston Churchill in the midst of a wardrobe change, to cite one seemingly apocryphal yet true example, the latter explained, “you see, Mr. President, Britain has nothing to hide from you.” Although invariably clothed when together, Thatcher and Reagan were in many ways even more intimate than their World War II predecessors. More than a mere friendship, they shared a mindset as well. His lofty words seemed to soften her rougher edges. Pundits and the general public often assumed her public speeches voiced the president’s true beliefs.

He trusted her behind closed doors as well, and listened in particular in the mid-1980s when she advised that the new Soviet leader’s fresh ideas stood in stark contrast to the staid and stupefying mold of traditional Kremlin oligarchs. Gorbachev was someone “with whom we could do business.” He appeared to be “an unusual Russian in that he was much less constrained, more charming, open to discussion and debate, and did not stick to prepared notes,” she told the president in 1985 as the two chatted beside a roaring fire at Camp David. Even as she cautioned that “the more charming the adversary, the more dangerous,” she implored Reagan to meet him, to listen to him.7

It took someone he already trusted to penetrate his life-long aversion to communists, for whom he had little patience and typically nothing but contempt. “Communism is neither an economic or political system,” he’d told radio audiences in 1975. “It is a form of insanity . . . contrary to human nature.” Reagan made his political career out of similar rhetoric, having first

7 Memorandum of Conversation between Thatcher and Reagan, December 28, 1984, Margaret Thatcher Archive. See also Thatcher’s BBC interview publicly expressing the same sentiment (a fortnight before her meeting with Reagan), Margaret Thatcher Archive, http://margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=105592.
forayed into politics in order to rid his beloved Hollywood of communist influences. He ultimately rode that crusade to California’s governor’s mansion, then to the White House. Anticommmunism became the bedrock of his entire conservative political philosophy, underlay by the belief that Soviet leaders schemed to conquer the world by force. They would begin by supporting insurrections throughout the third world, he believed, but ultimately overwhelm Western Europe with blunt military force. “I know of no Soviet leader since the revolution, and including the present leadership,” Reagan had declared at his first White House press conference in 1981, “that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world socialist or communist state.” To achieve world domination, he warned, Soviet leaders “have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that.” In his administration, Reagan promised, communists could not, should not, and would not be trusted. Until they rejected their delusional and dangerous ideology the Soviets would find in him an implacable enemy.

Once president, Reagan sought out evidence confirming his long-held belief that Moscow intended to take by force what it failed to conquer with ideas, repeatedly suggesting that the Soviet Union’s military power dwarfed the United States’, and that Washington consequently held the weaker hand in this highest-stakes game. He’d ridden a cresting wave of malaise during the late 1970s to the Oval Office, at once embracing and rebuking the increasingly widespread perception that American power had waned beyond repair by the 1970s. When CIA Director

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8 Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, p. 339; *Public Papers of the President*, Ronald Reagan, The President’s News Conference, January 29, 1981 (hereafter PPP with date and identifying information). Unless otherwise stated, I have employed the on-line version of the papers of the presidents provided by the University of California-Santa Barbara’s American Presidency Project (www.presidency.ucsb.edu).
Stansfield Turner briefed the newly elected Reagan that the best available intelligence suggested no real Soviet strategic advantage after all, in particular due to the technological superiority of America’s nuclear arsenal, the president-elect responded with silence. A career naval officer who took pride in his non-partisan approach, Turner had hoped to retain his job as CIA head even with the change of administration. Confronted by Reagan’s stone-faced response, he realized his “days as a passenger in an official CIA armored limousine were over.” Turner would be replaced, and retired, within weeks. Reagan knew what he believed and wanted like-minded thinkers around him. “The Soviets have spoken as plainly as Hitler in ‘Mein Kampf,’” he warned his National Security Council in 1981. “They have spoken world domination.” For American policymakers of his generation, and of the entire Cold War more broadly, invocation of Hitler demanded a singularly forceful response. Communists could not be appeased, he warned; they would never be satisfied.  

Reagan planned to stop them. Inheriting a renewed arms race begun by his predecessor in response to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he rushed to expand the Pentagon’s power and purse-strings even further. Authorizing the largest military build-up in American peacetime history, military spending more than doubled during his tenure. “The United States will invest as much as is necessary in the arms race until we are in first place,” he declared upon entering the White House. Skyrocketing arms spending coupled with escalating words contributed to the tensest period of Soviet-American relations in a generation. The Cold War was not merely the result of some giant international misunderstanding, Reagan charged in 1983. Neither was it simply traditional great power politics played out on a modern stage. It was 

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instead a “struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.” The Kremlin, he said, was not simply immoral. It ruled an “evil empire.” Its sins required eradication through a “crusade of freedom,” which he would lead, to purge, by fire if need be, the world of communism’s stain. Such religious language was no accident. Reagan considered his cause not only on the right side of history, but righteous as well.10

Critics howled on hearing such inflammatory language, decrying throughout Reagan’s first term the renewed superpower tensions it symbolized. But Reagan embraced both the rhetoric of expunging evil and the mission itself. “I wanted to let [Soviet leader Yuri] Andropov know we recognized the Soviets for what they were,” he explained. His writers coined the term “evil empire,” Reagan later admitted. But the sentiment was his, and he proudly gave the speech, and several more like it, with “with malice aforethought.” It embodied not only his studied view of Soviet communism but more fundamentally his Manichean sense of the world divided into light and dark, right and wrong, good and evil. He thought it obvious which side each superpower represented. “We’re enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it [evil] with all our might,” Reagan sermonized, and so long as Kremlin leaders “preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.” He called Soviet leaders “terrorists” after their air force mistakenly downed a Korean jetliner carrying 269 passengers and crew, including one U.S. congressman. He also frequently deployed the modifier “godless” alongside the term “communists.” He could think of nothing more damning.11

11 For “wanted to let,” and “malice,” see Mann, Rebellion of Ronald Reagan, p. 29. For discussion of Reagan’s rhetoric in a broader Cold War strategic context, see John Lewis Gaddis, The Cold War (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 224. For “godless,” see, for example, PPP, “Remarks at the Centennial Meeting of the Supreme Council of the Kings of Columbus in Hartford, Connecticut,” August 3, 1982. For “declared a crusade,” see Vladislav Zubok, A
Soviet leaders heard Reagan’s harsh words, and more importantly measured the size and scope of his rapid military build-up, and feared the worst. “The beginning of the Reagan presidency calls to mind the fascist seizure of power,” Moscow’s highest-ranking soldier warned, recalling the Nazi invasion and the ensuing Great Patriotic War that saw the deaths of more than twenty million Soviet citizens. They had been caught unawares in 1941. Determined not to make that mistake again, Soviet leaders forty years later put their military on alert and ordered their global intelligence network to ferret out confirmation of Washington’s secret intentions to attack. Confirmation was not hard to find. Superpower tensions and Soviet anxieties, already on the rise, escalated even further two weeks after Reagan’s 1983 “evil empire” speech, when the president announced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), designed to shield the United States and its allies from incoming nuclear attack. Using Reagan’s own words, the Kremlin warned its Warsaw Pact allies that Washington “has declared a ‘crusade’ against socialism as a social system. Those who have now ordered to deploy new nuclear weapons on our threshold link their practical policies to this reckless undertaking.” Soviet fears led to tension within the Politburo, then ultimately jittery fingers on the nation’s nuclear button. In late September 1983, Soviet satellite sensors erupted with warnings of a massive and unexpected American missile launch. Nuclear crews swung into action, warming their missiles, scrambling fighters, and rushing scores of bombers aloft. It seemed Reagan’s military crusade had begun. Fortunately, frazzled Kremlin policymakers realized it was a false-alarm mere moments before ordering a massive strike. Their missiles remained siloed. In calmer times commanders might have assumed faulty equipment when told of a sudden and unexpected full-scale nuclear attack. These were not calm times.

This would not be the world’s only close brush with annihilation during the reinvigorated Cold War of Reagan’s first term. By November of 1983, Soviet nerves proved so frayed that an American-led military exercise in Europe nearly prompted a full-scale nuclear preemptive launch. NATO maneuvers appeared a bit too realistic to Soviet strategists, who heatedly debated firing first before American missiles might land. Cooler heads thankfully prevailed, and the tense peace returned. Previous crises over Berlin or Cuba had unfolded under the white-hot lights of full international scrutiny. In late 1983, the world repeatedly came dangerously close to demise through crises generated wholly by fear. Citizens by and large never learned of this dangerous brush with annihilation. Only the world’s most powerful leaders knew how close to the abyss they had all come.¹²

Reagan’s plans for missile defense, quickly dubbed “Star Wars” by critics and supporters alike, exacerbated Soviet anxieties nearly beyond the tipping point. The Kremlin’s top scientists predicted little chance of such a technologically audacious plan ever working. Most American scientists concurred, though Reagan had not bothered to consult their opinions widely before announcing the initiative. Soviet military strategists, however, took a far more wary view. Trained to consider worst-case scenarios, they warned that the system, if ever operational, would upset the delicate balance of deterrence that had governed the entire nuclear age. Mutually assured destruction had kept tense crises from slipping into hot war for more than a generation. So long as each superpower retained the ability to annihilate the other in any conceivable military scenario, the theory ran, neither would ever dare to attack. Perhaps no longer. When coupled with the short-range missiles Washington hoped to deploy in Europe, placed on what

Kremlin leaders called their “threshold” and thus designed to reduce potential Soviet response time to practically nothing, Reagan’s defensive shield seemed in Soviet calculations to represent the ultimate offensive weapon. It would allow Washington to launch a debilitating surprise attack while parrying any retaliatory strike. “All this confirms our worst fears,” an ailing Andropov lamented from his hospital bed. “The U.S. ruling circles have embarked on a sudden application of a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union.” Andropov had already made international headlines by calling Reagan an insane liar. He’d earlier told the head of East Germany’s security service that “Reagan’s vulgar speeches show the true face of the military industrial complex.” Now he worried that time was running short, for himself and for his country. His farewell address to the Soviet people read more like a warning: Reagan was determined “to ensure a dominating position in the world for the United States of America,” and “if anybody ever had any illusions about the possibility of an evolution to the better in the policy of the present American administration, these illusions are completely dispelled now.” Reagan was in Soviet eyes an inflexible ideologue bent on domination, or in other words, exactly as the president considered them.13

A sad and dangerous situation thereby developed by the mid-1980s, awful in its irony, comical if the stakes were not so terribly all-consuming. American and Soviet leaders both believed their own statements promising peace. Recalling the fervor and destructiveness of their shared Nazi foe, and believing their adversaries driven more by fanaticism than reason, they also believed their current enemy intended to strike. Each side’s ensuing defensive reactions, seemingly reasonable and appropriate in the face of such fervent opposition and prepping for war, appeared menacing in their opponent’s eyes, and thus only further raised tensions. The

dangerous cycle repeated. Again and again, tensions soared and Soviet-American relations crumbled in turn. Frightened by the degree to which Soviet leaders took his rhetoric to heart, and no doubt chastened by how close the superpowers had come to war in their secret crises of 1983, Reagan tried to reach out to his Soviet counterpart, offering conciliatory words written with his own pen. Fearing a trap, the Kremlin brushed aside the overture, which a dying Andropov privately interpreted as “duplicity” designed to “disorient the Soviet leadership” and the Kremlin. “It’s coming, Bud,” Reagan had earlier confessed to Deputy National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane, “this inexorable building of nuclear weapons on our side and the Russians side can only lead to Armageddon.”

Andropov soon died, as quickly did his successor, leaving the relatively youthful (by the standards of Soviet leaders) Gorbachev in charge by 1985. Within a few short years, Reagan reversed a lifetime of distrust and disdain of communism by learning to work with the new Soviet leader, just as Thatcher promised. Their unlikely friendship in time cooled a Cold War that had grown dangerously hot by the mid-1980s, though such a radical shift rattled each man’s political base. “I bet the hardliners in both our countries are bleeding when we shake hands,” Reagan quipped to the Soviet leader in 1985 during their first summit in Geneva. Gorbachev nodded his agreement. He had domestic constituents of his own, many of whom fully imbibed their life-long education in capitalism’s aggressive and unrelenting nature. A mere year later in Reykjavik, the two men nearly concluded an agreement to scrap all nuclear weapons by the twenty-first century.

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Total nuclear abolition proved an unattainable goal—even if its very discussion helped save the administration’s political fortunes by turning the American public’s attention away from Iran-Contra. Gorbachev and Reagan at least made progress. By 1987 the two leaders sat side by side and signed a treaty formally limiting their respective nuclear arsenals. A year later, standing together in the middle of Moscow’s Red Square, taking in a view of the Kremlin in his last year in office that was unthinkable in his first, Reagan publicly recanted his earlier condemnations. His description of the Soviet Union as an evil empire embodied “another time” and “another era.” The following day he again noted times had changed. “I think that a great deal of it is due to the General Secretary, who I have found different from previous Soviet leaders.” Reagan had loathed Andropov, refusing to attend his funeral lest he “honor that prick,” and barely knew his short-term successor, Konstantin Chernenko, who lasted but eleven months in office. “They keep dying on me,” Reagan complained before authorizing Vice President Bush to attend yet another Soviet state funeral in his stead. Gorbachev proved different, and not just because he survived. Soviet-American relations stood on a new ground, Reagan said by the summer of 1988, and “A large part of it is Mr. Gorbachev as leader.”

Historians often debate the relative influence of individuals over history. They ask if individuals alter the course of events, or if true transformation results only from structural forces far beyond the influence of any individual? Histories full of tales of kings, statesmen, and powerful leaders are easy to find. We speak of Alexander’s conquest of the known world as though he acted alone. Bismarck united Germany; Caesar crossed the Rubicon and unified imperial Rome; Hitler plunged the world into darkness. Their explanations of the past as the product of spectacular souls is easy to understand, and often a pleasure to read, this is not the

16 For “prick” and “dying,” see Mann, Rebellion of Ronald Reagan, pp. 151, 223. For “different,” and “large part,” see PPP, “The President’s News Conference Following the Soviet-United States Summit Meeting in Moscow, June 1, 1988.”
only way to view historical events. One can also write history devoid of individuals. The Greek phalanx was unstoppable. Bismarck’s age of industrialization allowed unprecedented centralization of power. Rome owed success to generations of engineers whose roads and bridges long predated Caesar’s arrival. Germans always sought superiority, even before Hitler plunged the world into nightmare, and they always would. Sometimes it is an idea that drives change. How can a single soul measure up in influence to the Enlightenment, the written word, a great scientific achievement like planned agriculture, or a truly transformational notion such as the idea that humans had rights? To paraphrase the great French historian Fernand Braudel, surely among the most influential chronicler of a past devoid of individual action and agency, solitary lives are but the waves and surface movements we see when considering the sea of time; real change, and real power, resides in the currents and tides below.

This book will not answer to this age-old debate pitting biography against structure, but instead argues a compromise position: within tectonic moments of change driven by mass movements and the embrace of epic-changing ideas, individual decisions mattered. The sea of time did not change course as the result of singular souls, but humanity’s heading as it sailed along those waters altered, even if ever so slightly, as a result of decisions made or avoided. Moments and ideas matter. So too do societal forces. The right person at the wrong time in history is unlikely to be noticed. Incompetent leadership can drive even a global hegemon to ruin. At rare but pivotal moments in history, unique individuals make all the difference in the world.

Reagan’s cooperation with Gorbachev was one such moment. The former desired disarmament and relief from his arms scandal. The latter believed his entire society required reformation, and that changes at home demanded decreased superpower tensions to succeed.
Both men wanted—and politically needed—a ratcheting down of the Cold War by the latter half of the 1980s. But so too had numerous leaders before them—to say nothing of millions if not billions more citizens of the world—desired peace and détente as relief from the nuclear age.

What made the late 1980s different from the decades before was the convergence of opportunity and willing leaders. Soviet society was crumbling by this period, though hardliners like Andropov or Chernenko refused to notice or to act. Gorbachev did. Educated beyond communist dogma and doctrine, he had traveled abroad and seen what his country lacked. “We can’t go on living like this,” he confided to his wife the night he assumed power. To his mind, “the system was dying away; its sluggish senile blood no longer contained any vital juices.”

Devoted to securing the socialist utopia promised in his youth, he vowed to reform the Soviet state before it was too late, changing communism in order to save it. As he and Raisa walked in the cool night air the newly installed Soviet leader cleared his head for the political struggle to come, walking and talking outside, it should be noted, and thus beyond any possible eavesdropping of potential political opponents. Gorbachev would in time go even further than ‘merely’ changing his own state, instead skillfully exploiting his nation’s economic crisis in order to reboot an entire international system he believed had gone awry.

An angrier ideologue in the Kremlin might have lashed out in defiance against the disintegration of his state, choosing war rather than change, and national suicide over submission. We will see in the pages that follow plenty of examples of despots who chose repression rather than reform. Chinese leaders, for example, haunted by memories of the previous decade’s violent Cultural Revolution, vowed never to condone anarchy again. They consequently met protestors with tanks. Like-minded zealots occupied influential posts throughout the communist regimes of Eastern Europe as well, vowing even in the face of popular

17 Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, p. 374.
protest and derision to never deviate from their path towards socialism, even to the point of assaulting their own citizenry in defense of the state. “We took power in order to wield it forever,” East Germany’s Erich Hoencker boasted. His words were also a warning to his own people, so too his public embrace of Chinese officials brought to Berlin in order to teach the regime what they had learned about crowd control. Not everyone in charge can see the historical winds sweeping their way; even those who see change coming sometimes prove unwilling to accept uncomfortable and painful change. “History punishes those who act too late,” Gorbachev warned. Many to whom he spoke appeared more willing to die than to change. Tectonic forces brought protestors into Eastern Europe’s streets by 1989, coupling (at the least) the influence of democracy, religious, materialism, and liberty. Whether the soldiers that surrounded them would shoot, or embrace them as brothers, boiled down to individual moments of decision.

Even Gorbachev, this modern-day Prometheus of change, needed a partner. He could not ratchet down Cold War tensions alone. American power appeared on the precipice of domination by the mid-1980s, allowing Reagan room to reform without upsetting, too greatly at least, his ideological base. Reagan also possessed impeccable anticommunist credentials capable of safeguarding his political flanks once he began working with the Soviets. The story of crowds surging throughout the Soviet Bloc and China only to be met by force or acceptance has naturally drawn the bulk of attention by scholars and storytellers fascinated by the waning Cold War, but there is another side to this story. Western leader had decisions to make as well. Reagan agreed to work with Gorbachev. His successor, George Bush, ultimately made Gorbachev more than an ally, but a partner as well. More aggressive American leaders might have seen the appearance of dominant American power as an opportunity to violently push for radical and rapid transformation behind the Iron Curtain and beyond. They might have sought to
catalyze tectonic change already underway. Chaos might well have been the result, destroying not only reformers abroad but also American power and prosperity carefully constructed and preserved since the end of World War II.

Although consistently amazed at Reagan’s disdain for detail and shameless ability to retell the same story—having interrupted one summit meeting by exclaiming in frustration “he’s blathering on again”—Gorbachev appreciated those who shared his willingness to take unprecedented risks for ambitious goals. Reagan “finally convinced himself that he had been right to be believe . . . that you could ‘do business’ with the changing Soviet Union,” Gorbachev wrote in his memoirs, recalling Thatcher’s crucial intervention in Soviet-American relations. “In my view, the 40th President of the United States will go down in history for this rare perception.”

As 1988 drew to a close, the two were set to meet one last time as leaders during the first week of December, following a much-ballyhooed speech by the Soviet leader to the United Nations. Bush would be there too. “This will be our last such meeting,” Reagan explained in his weekly radio address immediately before Gorbachev’s arrival in the United States. “And I must admit that I would not have predicted after first taking office that someday I would be waxing nostalgic about my meetings with Soviet leaders.” From Reagan’s perspective, the meeting would provide one last personal good-bye to the Russian friend he never expected before flying West for good. Gorbachev saw the meeting through a different lens, as an opportunity to gauge and perhaps persuade the new man with whom he would soon have to deal. Reagan had been Gorbachev’s willing partner. He had transcended a lifetime of unyielding anticommunism to work with the Kremlin. But would Bush?18

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Returning to Reagan’s final weeks in the White House, his short trip to see Gorbachev in New York was still two weeks away, and Bush’s inauguration scheduled for soon after that, but his attention on the evening of November 16 was for Thatcher, and for a White House celebration of their special relationship. He’d authorized a massive state dinner, as elaborate as any his staff had yet arranged. She’d been the first foreign guest welcomed to the White House after his inauguration in 1981. It only seemed right she should be honored as the last. A nineteen-gun salute greeted the prime minister, adding sparkle despite the London-like drizzle that chilled the air, as did the Army’s Old Guard in their revolutionary-era garb. It was an ironic choice of uniform given their guest, leader of the country from whom Americans had revolted. They were Reagan’s favorite military outfit, however, and this his last chance to see them in action. No expense was spared. The menu featured lobster, veal, a plethora of wines to accompany every course and toast. Music and an evening of dancing beckoned soon after. Joining the usual cast of Washington’s political and policy elite, actor Tom Selleck swept his mother across the dance floor, adding that extra bit of Hollywood glamour Reagan particularly appreciated. “When you were here 8 years ago,” the president toasted his guest of honor, “I first mentioned that despite all the troubles that beset us, we had every right to have hope in the future, to turn our gaze to the bright sunlit uplands of freedom. I suggested then that the totalitarian impulse had exhausted itself and that collectivism could well be at the terminal stage. Well, we’ve recently seen evidence that all of this may be coming about.”

It was a night for celebration indeed, but also for self-congratulation. Speaking to Thatcher but also to his own political allies and staff, he said “We set out to change a nation,” and “instead, we changed the world.” Needless to say, Thatcher agreed. They began their association, she recalled, back when their nations were gripped by “dark days” of recession.

inflation, and fear of communism worldwide. They stood jointly convinced that “together we could get our countries back on their feet, restore their values, and create a better yet safer world.” Working together, she said while raising her glass, they had done just that.20

Neither Reagan nor Thatcher was truly the center of attention, however. All of Washington eyed George Bush instead. After eight years in Reagan’s shadow, and arguably a lifetime of preparation before that, he’d soon and finally be president in his own right.21 Thatcher met privately with both men in the Oval Office before her official state dinner, giving her the honor once more of being the first foreign leader to confer with the incoming president upon whose shoulders much of the Cold War’s evolving burden would weigh. Reagan confidently told her that “we, together, have been the driving force for change over the last eight years,” but Thatcher knew the opinion that truly mattered belonged to the president-elect. Bush and Thatcher had always enjoyed cordial relations. The gentlemanly Bush was friendly with everyone he met. But she also knew that Reagan’s departure left more than a void within the special relationship between Britain and the United States; it meant as well the introduction of an unknown variable in the world’s most powerful office during a moment of potentially historic international change. The talked, but she remained unsure where the new man stood.22

She left her biggest surprise for the next day. After a working breakfast with Bush and top aides, the prime minister wrapped up two days of meetings and festivities with an afternoon reserved for the press, who were eager for some headline beyond two compatriots sharing a final good-bye and keen in particular to discover if she had learned anything new about the man about to take Reagan’s place. She did not disappoint. Indeed, she spoke with great clarity. The world

20 Ibid.
22 President Reagan Briefing Cards for Margaret Thatcher Visit, November 15, 1988, Margaret Thatcher Archive, accessed October 17, 2011.
had turned a fundamental page, Thatcher reported. The Cold War, the very foundation of international relations that had governed the world system for nearly a half-century, was over. “We are not in a Cold War now,” she said, but instead East and West enjoyed “a new relationship much wider than the Cold War ever was.”

This was no simple statement. The superpower conflict had dominated global politics for more than two generations. It had nearly brought the world to ruin numerous times under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Untold billions had been spent in its cause. Untold millions of lives had been touched, and too frequently lost. It is little exaggeration to state that every international decision since 1946 engaged in some way the bipolar struggle at the world system’s very core. It surely colored the lives of every single person of influence and power by the mid-1980s, many of whom had spent their entire careers in a political universe wholly dominated by the Cold War’s very existence. It was all they really knew, and if Thatcher was to be believed, all they knew for certain was now past.

But then what might take its place? Many policymakers, from both sides of the Iron Curtain, simply could not imagine a world without the international stability (and oddly enough, the mental stability) of the titanic confrontation of capitalism and communism. It gave structure to their politics, their beliefs, and their very lives. Reports of the Cold War’s demise had arisen before, each time proving premature. Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953 gave temporary hope of Soviet-American rapprochement. Conflict instead ensued. Aspiring reform movements in Hungary during the mid-1950s, and then again in Czechoslovakia in 1968, led on each occasion not to change and reduction in bipolar tensions but to violent repression and solidification of strident ideological lines. The Cold War appeared to temporarily wane once again in the 1970s, when Soviet-American détente and Chinese-American rapprochement dominated headlines.

Thanks in no small part to Reagan and like-minded conservatives who considered any reconciliation with communism an outright betrayal and defeat, détente ultimately withered. Superpower tensions returned with a vengeance by the 1980s. The Cold War might ebb and flow, foreign policy theorists concluded, with tensions relaxing and increasing depending on the particular politics or crises of the day, but it was too fixed to ever truly disappear.

By the middle of Reagan’s tenure, it had become fashionable among such theorists to deem the Cold War’s permanence not only fact but its primary virtue as well. As historian John Lewis Gaddis observed in 1986, just as Reagan and Gorbachev prepared for their first fateful summit, when viewed against the long history of repeated conflict and violence that plagued great power relations for centuries before, the Cold War, for all its warts and anxieties, might best be termed “the long peace.” Nuclear parity tamped down great-power adventurism, restraining as well the smaller though no less violent contests and grievances of their allies and client-states. In the nuclear age, neither superpower could hope to destroy its rival and still survive. Thus any world leader who thought it possible for one of the world’s two main ideological systems to finally trump the other was not only wrong but dangerous. “Whatever they might agree on,” former secretary of state and foreign policy elder statesman Henry Kissinger had written immediately following Reagan’s 1984 reelection, “the United States and the Soviet Union will remain superpowers impinging globally on each other. Ideological hostility will continue. Specific, precise arrangements can, indeed must be made. But they are more likely to ameliorate tensions than to end them.” In other words, for all its numerous flaws, the Cold War was here to stay. It was stable; it had defined rules; its leaders knew (the world hoped) its boundaries. For international policymakers like Kissinger, concerned primarily and invariably with the rise and fall of states, scarred by the violence and destruction of World War II, and haunted by the specter
of complete global annihilation after 1945 if the world’s two most powerful states ever truly came to blows, stability was a virtue unto itself. It was surely more important, and ultimately more useful, than Manichean notions of good and evil. Better to accept the safety of stability amidst a nuclear-armed world full of shades of gray, Kissinger frequently preached, than risk the chaos of certitude and change.24

This is one reason why so many professional diplomats and self-styled statesmen recoiled from Reagan’s earlier condemnations of the Soviet Union as an “evil” force in the world—because crusades were risky things. “There’s a school of thought that hardline policies on our part will induce change for the better on their part,” former President Richard Nixon argued in 1982. “Right now we’re frozen into the ice so tightly that we may get to the point where only a bomb can blast us out.” Reagan’s crusading tone, and subsequent belief that the Cold War ice might be melted away, appeared in this vein more than wrong. It was dangerous.25

This is what made Thatcher’s declaration of the Cold War’s demise so startling and newsworthy. She wasn’t merely a pundit, retired practitioner, or ivory-tower professor. She was the leader of a nuclear-armed member of the United Nations Security Council and a lifelong opponent of communism, who had made much of her career by building up and then tweaking the imposing image of a violent Soviet bear. A mere five years after Reagan called the Soviets an “evil empire,” four years after Kissinger pronounced the Cold War permanent, and almost immediately following a series of private sessions with both Reagan and Bush, Thatcher declared this line of thinking outdated. The Reagan who feared Armageddon at the beginning of the decade while simultaneously calling for a crusade against communism, and the Thatcher that encouraged his thinking, were each long gone. She argued it was time instead to agree with the

24 Mann, Rebellion of Ronald Reagan, p. 35.
new Reagan of reconciliation and restraint, who had said in late October 1988 that “right now we have hopes—and for the moment we must remember that they are only hopes—that our children might see 1988 as the turning point in the great twilight struggle known as the Cold War.” It was equally time to agree with Secretary of State Shultz, who more pithily believed that the entire superpower conflict pitting democracy against communism “all over but for the shouting.”

A new wind of change was sweeping the world, Thatcher continued in her epic news conference, transforming Eastern Europe and life behind the Iron Curtain in particular, and by extension the entire panoply of East-West relations. “I expect Mr. Gorbachev to do everything he can to continue his reforms,” she concluded, and the Western powers, London and Washington especially, must be ready to help him whenever need arose, “both verbally and in practice.” Bush, in other words, should continue Reagan’s work—the work he and Thatcher had accomplished together—and embrace change the way Reagan had. Those words still hanging in the air, she left for the airport and home, leaving pundits and policymakers in Washington, London, Moscow, and beyond wondering if she once more gave voice to an American president’s desires.

Bush, however, had different plans.