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## Reagan's Bluffing in the Cold War Game Helped Him End the Soviet Threat

Richard A. Contreras

### Abstract

The Cold War between Russia and the United States neared its end when President Ronald Reagan took office in January of 1981. A worldwide policy of détente had been in effect over the previous decade which allowed the USSR to build up its arsenal of nuclear weapons. Reagan was determined to reverse this course, and by his derailing of détente and style of tough rhetoric, the Soviet government and newly-elected leader Mikhail Gorbachev had no choice but to give into Reagan's capitulations. The U. S. leader's bluff helped him to end the Cold War and nuclear threat— that communist regime would indeed fall and usher in a new wave of democratic governments worldwide.

**Keywords:** *Reagan, Cold War, détente, Gorbachev, communism, Star Wars, SDI, Russia, nuclear weapons*

## Author Interview

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### Which professors (if any) have helped you in your research or creative activity?

Professor Dr. Christine Dias was instrumental in explaining to me and helping me to understand the intricacies of APA style. Before taking her SSCI 306 expository writing course, I had only used MLA.

### What are your research or creative interests?

I enjoy researching in the field of intercultural communication. Specifically, I plan to look into the Latino-Muslim experience.

### What are your plans after earning your degree? What is your ultimate career goal?

This fall, I will begin my graduate degree program at CSUSB's department of Communication Studies. I would like to teach communication courses at the university level.

### Acknowledgements

I dedicate my Bachelor's degree to my father Richard Sr. and grandmother Apolonia who didn't live to see me reach this accomplishment. I hope my endeavors also inspire my two daughters Lilly and Cherie.

The Cold War between the Soviet Republic and the United States had been brewing for nearly four decades when Ronald Reagan, the 40<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S. took office in January 1981. During the late 1960's and 1970's and with the advent of détente as orchestrated by President Richard Nixon, there had been a cooling off of hostilities between the two countries and an increase on diplomatic, economic, and cultural communication and understanding between the two world superpowers. Reagan, however, did not believe in the philosophy of his fellow republican leader. Instead of utilizing Nixon's strategy of discussion and embargoes, the so-called "Great Communicator" believed in turning up the heat and —by utilizing a game-playing strategy— Reagan's bluffing in the Cold War game helped him to stand up to the Soviet challenge.

Mandelbaum and Talbott surveyed the dark clouds on the horizon from the Russians' point of view when Reagan entered the arena:

The fortunes of the Soviet Union had fallen. Reagan's postwar predecessors had all been committed to trying to tame the Russian bear; he was prepared to kick it. This was bad enough for the Soviet leadership. What made matters worse from the Soviet perspective was that Reagan was trying to kick them while they were down (10).

By forming his decisions based on a "new" self-imposed style of détente, the president was able to use rhetoric, scare tactics, war games, and a decisive military and nuclear arsenal buildup to sway the U.S.S.R. into capitulating to eventual U.S. demands; He was able to persuade the Soviet leadership into agreeing to and signing multiple disarmament and reduction treaties. Consequently, in the late 1980's the threat of worldwide nuclear annihilation was virtually frozen. Rapidly propelled by the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989, the Soviet Union regime would crumble in ashes in 1991— and this also took most of Eastern European bloc Communism along with it, but not before tough talk and weighty action behind the bluff message forced the Russians' hands.

President Reagan was helped by

governmental disarray and near collapse of the Soviet political machine early in his first term as U.S. leader. De-facto figureheads had all but given way to an inner working of confusion at the top of Russian leadership. Three successive heads of state — Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko— were sickly and in effect not running the country while in office. This task was in essence, given to a group of others, thus diluting power and the force of the resulting messages sent to the U.S. In a short span during 1983-84, the three Russian premiers died and the Soviets struggled to find a leader that didn't fit with the feeble and decrepit old guard of ruling Russians. Since the old guard subscribed to the newer appeasement strategy of détente, the Soviets felt they had an upper hand in the cold war battle.

Mandelbaum and Talbott noted that the Soviets relished the standing and power that cooperating with détente brought:

The Soviet side was more unified and enthusiastic in its commitment to the principles and practices of détente. It formally recognized their status as the international equal of the United States. It meant that their country was one of only two members of the most exclusive club in the world, the club of superpowers, with all the attendant rights and privileges (24).

The Russian position would eventually change, and it became apparent when a new, fresh, and young leader was chosen. In 1984 Mikhail Gorbachev, a 45-year-old relative unknown to the outside world, suddenly took the perch of the superpower leadership. Notwithstanding, rapidly-changing events as pertaining to the Soviet scheme of things had placed the communistic country in a corner, at least in Reagan's mind.

The opportunistic approach the U.S. president saw stemmed from events that had occurred a few months before Gorbachev's appointment. As one of the men the eventual leader replaced lay dying (Andropov), an ongoing war game was being conducted not too far from the outskirts of Soviet airspace. Russian intelligence collection programs had been alerted for a possible U.S. nuclear attack. In fact, so

palpable was the hypersensitivity to war evident, Soviet fighter jets shot down a Korean airliner in Russian airspace in the summer of 1983. This led to an increased buildup of nuclear war materiel by the Reagan administration as well as the aforementioned mock nuclear exercise.

The Soviet intelligence operative, known as the KGB, had put a program in place to strain out information of an imminent attack. The program, known as RYAN, picked up chatter of missile deployment and aiming of nuclear warheads from nearby NATO-friendly European countries. And even though these war games were just that—games and not operational—the fear it created within the Soviet machine was highly effectual.

One historian (Fisher 30) observed how an all-out war scare took place in Russia as a result of the war game attack: “At various times Russian strategists were acutely fearful. But those fears, although at times extreme, were scarcely insane”.

Seeing the resulting Soviet anxiety, Reagan played another hand. He began one of the most massive buildups of nuclear arsenal in U.S. history. Defense Department spending for developing, planning, and exercising additional troops, along with their equipment and weaponry, totaled approximately \$54 billion in 1984. Research for one of the resulting programs, known as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) ate chunks out of the government budget and sent the U.S. deficit skyrocketing into the trillions.

Reagan, however, knew that at this stage in the game, the spending of an astronomical amount of money and decisive show of force was essential before any diplomatic discussions could begin with the new Soviet leader. Benjamin Taylor in a front-page story reported the president’s own words as the leader reiterated this view: “The negotiations in Geneva won’t really get down to the brass tacks until they see that we are going forward with the scheduled deployment of missiles in Europe” (1).

What was not known to many at the time was that the SDI *did not yet exist and was only in developmental stages*. In fact, it never came into existence. However, at the time, talk of such a system struck fear in the Soviet regime and prompted a forced and rapid response in the psychological game of war.

Ryavek describes the controversial initiative: “The nature of the SDI is a layered defense of radars, sensors, and laser or particle beam weapons in orbit that could sense the launching of missiles early on and destroy some of them before they got into a position. The Soviets are so concerned with it. A purely defensive SDI would be something like a passive force field of science fiction” (122).

The president also knew very well that rhetoric and a war of words would be effective in sending a message to the Soviet leadership. During the war games scare of 1983, a popular movie was screened in the U.S. to a widespread audience. The film *The Day After* showed the devastating and catastrophic effects of a nuclear attack in the United States and Russia if the nations chose to use such an option. The massive loss of life and a portrayal of an end-of-the-world scenario played out before millions in the U.S. household audience. What worked even better, however, is what the spook film did to the Russian leadership: so frightened of the consequences of war, the Soviets did not show the movie to the general populace (Ryavek 105).

Reagan’s second term ushered in the rapid changes of accord between the two nations now that the groundwork of decisiveness, firmness and rhetoric had been laid. The president would meet with Secretary General Gorbachev four specific times in face-to-face meetings to see if an agreement on disarmament could be reached. Two of the meetings were on neutral sites: Geneva, Switzerland in 1985 and Reykjavic, Iceland in 1986; then the two sides met on the others’ home turf: Washington in 1987 and Moscow the following year. These meetings or “summits” would be a key part of the decision points in ending decades of hostility. It was important at first for the two countries to meet neutrally, with many of the other world economic along with the leaders of the other nations—that, including the U.S., comprised the G7 nations, or so-called “Group of Seven”—could put added pressure on Gorbachev to capitulate with U.S. demands.

The two superpower leaders had agreed in principle; hence, two years later a ground-breaking and historic compromise was reached: the December 1987 signing of the INF Treaty at the White House Rose Garden. Reagan, however, had to use additional charm and subtleness to prod the

Communist leader in the right direction—and this was no easy task.

Gorbachev came into power seemingly determined to rule in his own particular style yet constantly battled with the old hard line stance of Marxist-Leninist politics. He was in a conundrum and appeared eager to appease both his constituent communist populace as well as keep a wary eye on the West. One of the first Soviet leaders to encourage *perestroika* and *glasnost* (Russian terms that mean demonstrating an openness to new ways of living), the new Chairman instituted an increasing exchange of ideas, culture, and arts with the West. He encouraged citizens to expand their horizons and was less concerned with the contamination of the average Russian's mind with regards to western propaganda. A new way of living was opening up in the aging Soviet bloc and when the U.S. president spoke the rest of the world, and most importantly, anti-democratic regimes took note.

During the time of tough negotiation, breakthroughs started taking place in the late 80's, and by then the table for hard negotiations had been set. Presidential historian Michael Bechloss recalled a particular time when Gorbachev had been forced into a corner by Reagan during talks at Reykjavik. Reagan had made a proposal and the communist leader made a counter: "This all depends, of course, on you giving up SDI" (41). Reagan flat-out refused, promptly walked out and flew back to the U.S. This hard line made Gorbachev conclude that the Soviet bear could no longer realistically compete with the soaring American eagle. The U.S. and its enigmatic leader were firmly in charge.

What of détente's fate? The Soviets, under the auspices of talking softly and sweetly with Nixon, Ford, and Carter had by Reagan's entrance, built up a cache of nuclear armaments that had put the U.S. in a risky position. In order to quell the growing Communist force, a carefully-balanced fight of tough talk and action was needed.

By the sixth year of Reagan's presidency, Europe and America were at peace. Liberal foreign policy ideology had taken firm root; and the great Communicator had effectually halted the advance of the Soviet machine, even making it reverse its tracking. Reagan led through what many historians refer to as a 'peace through strength' campaign. He was able to awaken the

policy of containment and nuclear deterrence ignored by the fellow leaders of the détente movement (Meyerson 66-67).

On June 12, 1987, the aging president took Gorbachev once more to task by the use of powerful rhetoric. Standing outside the Brandenburg Gate in West Germany, and before an audience of millions, Reagan implored the Soviet leader into a call for decisive action. He asked Gorbachev, that if he was for peace, liberty, and prosperity to come to the gate, open it and to tear down the Berlin Wall—the literal dividing place of western freedom and eastern imprisonment, and long a symbol of Cold War ideology that began in the days of Khrushchev and Kennedy some three decades earlier. What was Gorbachev to do now? All eyes were on him.

In the last year of his lame-duck presidency, Reagan had one more decisive card to play. In May 1988, he and his wife (First Lady Nancy Reagan) took a trip to the Soviet Union. With the INF treaty in place, now it was time for the president to negotiate a lasting peace and see that Gorbachev indeed would tear the wall down. During a speech at Moscow University the commander-in-chief told gathered students and dignitaries that they were participants in a new, exciting era of history. He spoke of the freedoms that most take for granted, and experts have concluded that it was probably the first time most of the students had ever been exposed to the idea of liberty. He implored them to accept the gift of liberty that America was willing to share with the rest of the world. Those students in that university hall, Reagan said, were a "generation living in one of the most exciting, hopeful times in Soviet history. It is a time when the first breath of freedom stirs the air and the heart beats to the accelerated rhythm of hope, when the accumulated spiritual energies of a long silence yearn to break free" (Lefcowitz's "Great Communicator").

In an often-quoted part of the presentation the president referred to a Russian song that poignantly drove his point home. He made reference to the line that asks a simple question: 'Go ask my mother, go ask my wife; then you will have to ask no more, Do the Russians want a war?' His aim was to pull at the heart strings of the new generation of potential Russian leaders. He recalled the days of joint exploration between the two countries and said that it would please him

best if he would be able to see in his lifetime a free Russia engaged in and grappling with the issues of democracy (Lefcowitz's "Great Communicator").

Reagan, who died in 2004, would see the fruits of his labor. After he was termed out of office, he would live to see his predecessor George H.W. Bush sign more treaties and accords with Gorbachev and the later Russian leader Boris Yeltsin. The Berlin Wall indeed did fall in October 1989. The two Germanys —both East and West— united and became one. In 1990, former Warsaw Pact countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania would fight fervently to bury Communism and embrace a more open and democratic way of living. Even in other parts of the globe a dramatic domino-effect of change was taking place. Nelson Mandela, who had been imprisoned for nearly 30 years by the South African apartheid regime, was suddenly freed. Finally, in 1991, the Soviet Union would be no more.

In his presidential papers in May of 1986, Reagan wrote that it was his wish to attain peace, but not at the cost of giving up democracy: "In sum, we will continue to exercise the utmost restraint... in order to foster the necessary atmosphere for significant reductions in the strategic arsenals of both sides. I call on the Soviet Union to seize the opportunity to join us now in establishing an interim framework of truly *mutual* restraint... if the Soviet Union carries out this agreement, we can move now to achieve greater stability and a safer world"(681).

With the rest of the world watching, Gorbachev couldn't call Reagan's bluff. The future of those students in that room, their families —and the rest of the globe, for that matter, rested on Gorbachev and his leadership. The Russians had no choice left but to say yes to the call of liberty, democracy, and capitalistic endeavors; and to seize an opportunity that would put the world on a road to lasting peace— as far as a nuclear holocaust was concerned, at least. Détente had ruled the day for most of the Cold War— a conflict of one-upmanship, war games, espionage, treason, and muted diplomacy.

With the world, led by the two superpowers, locked in a struggle between liberty and freedom; and stunted by oppression and suppression, it took a strong, decisive, confident figure like Reagan to step in and play a style of

hard-ball tactics for the world to stand still and take notice. In Reagan's mind, there were two choices: to fight for world freedom and stay true to the tenets of democracy; or god forbid, head down a road of in his words, an 'Armageddon', and suffer a worldwide destruction by an unforgiving -- and heartless-- nuclear weaponry. He was not going to back down even if it meant world annihilation.

It is safe to say, however, that Reagan, a man both of immense compassion and distancing coldness, indeed most probably had a fear of what would come had his bluff been called. He would often describe America as a 'shining city upon a hill'; and in his mind, he knew if he was to save his precious city from burning down and indeed the world from an earth-wide nuclear meltdown, it was not going to be for a lack of trying. It was his bluffing tactics of steel nerve, uncompromising talk, and a firm resolve that assisted his step forward to meet a foreboding Russian challenge head on and usher in a lasting and meaningful peace for the world.

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