

REAGAN AT REYKJAVIK



FORTY-EIGHT HOURS THAT
ENDED THE COLD WAR

Ken Adelman

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Dedication

*Dedicated to Carol and Will
I can't imagine life without them.*

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Dedication

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Introduction

The Reykjavik summit is something out of an Agatha Christie thriller. Two vivid characters meet over a weekend, on a desolate and windswept island, in a reputedly haunted house with rain lashing against its windowpanes, where they experience the most amazing things. The summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev on October 11 and 12, 1986, was like nothing before or after—with its cliffhanging plot, powerful personalities, and competing interpretations over the past quarter century.

A decade later, Gorbachev felt the drama was something out of the Bard, William Shakespeare, rather than the Dame, Agatha Christie:

Truly Shakespearean passions ran under the thin veneer of polite and diplomatically restrained negotiations behind the windows of a cozy little house standing on the coast of a dark and somberly impetuous ocean. The accompaniment of grim nature is still lingering in my memory.

For those of us in the American delegation, Reykjavik was supposed to be an uneventful weekend, with the real action happening the following year at the real summit in Washington. Instead, in Iceland we rode an emotional roller coaster, full of twists and turns, ups and downs, all weekend long. NPR's Rod MacLeish deemed it among "the most amazing events in diplomatic history," while the ace *Washington Post* diplomatic correspondent turned Cold War historian Don Oberdorfer called it "one of the most controversial—and most bizarre—negotiations by powerful heads of state in modern times." To Gorbachev, it was exhausting with its "wearying and grueling arguments."

Unlike other summits and dramas, Reykjavik's plot unfolded off script. The session itself came as a surprise and ended up delivering surprise after surprise. We didn't know what to expect next or how it all would end—not just over that weekend, but over the months and years that followed.

Besides Reykjavik's gripping plot were its oversize personalities. Reagan and Gorbachev stand among the most intriguing and important characters of the twentieth century. For some ten and a half hours at Reykjavik, they dealt directly with one another—void of staff advice, detailed talking points, or guiding memos—acting more like themselves than at any time in office.

Thanks to the now-declassified American and Soviet notes of their private discussions, we can peep through the keyhole of their small meeting room to see them, hear their back-and-forth repartee, and come to understand their core beliefs, patterns

of thought, and fundamental characters in a way that history rarely offers.

Reykjavik changed each man, changed their relationship and thus that of the superpowers. The day after returning from Iceland, Gorbachev said on nationwide Soviet television that, after Reykjavik, “no one can continue to act as he acted before.” Neither man did, and neither country did.

Beside these two leading characters were two others in key supporting roles. Most constructive and then tragic was the chief of staff of the Soviet military, the five-starred Sergei Akhromeyev. Having been shrouded and operating behind the scenes for decades, he emerged at Reykjavik for a few shining hours to help change the course of history. He could never have imagined that his contribution would end up helping to destroy the country he loved and the life he led.

The other key character in this drama was Hofdi House, the cozy and stunning structure said to be haunted by a people inclined to believe such things. At the time of the summit, more than half of Icelanders believed in elves and leprechauns, including the country’s prime minister. Hofdi House provided a weird yet hospitable site for the world’s two most powerful men to meet.

As if its twisting plot, outsize characters, and unique setting weren’t enough, the Reykjavik summit has been hotly debated and differently interpreted over the years. Immediately afterward, it was universally deemed an abject failure since the two leaders left without a joint statement, clinking of champagne glasses, or promises of future meetings. They left each other glowering and, in Reagan’s case, steaming mad. The White House chief of staff, Donald Regan, asserted that the two would never meet again. The session was nearly universally condemned, even by those as astute in foreign policy as Richard Nixon, who declared, “No summit since Yalta has threatened Western interests so much as the two days at Reykjavik.”

The following year, 1987, Reykjavik received some acclaim when agreements reached over that weekend were signed in the White House as part of a sweeping arms control treaty.

Since then—despite the earth-shattering events of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and end of the Cold War—Reykjavik has mostly been relegated to a footnote in history, something akin to the Glassboro summit of 1967 between U.S. president Lyndon Johnson and Soviet premier Aleksey Kosygin. Specialists have debated the summit’s significance, particularly at four conferences held on its anniversaries, but their debates have largely remained there—among specialists at conferences.

And most of those specialists believe that the momentous events of that era sprang from internal weaknesses in the Soviet economy rather than from any outside events, such as Reykjavik, or outside pressure, such as Reagan’s rhetoric or plans for strategic defense. Indeed, this view has become the conventional wisdom of how and why the Cold War ended.

With the gifts of historical perspective and declassified documents—both of the Reykjavik discussions and of Soviet meetings, before and after the summit—a different interpretation has become possible, and possibly more accurate. I, for one, have come to believe that Reykjavik marked a historical turning point, by leading to:

1. a steady stream of unprecedented arms control agreements;

2. a remarkable decline in the number and danger of U.S./Soviet-Russian nuclear arsenals;
3. an unexpected flowering of the anti-nuclear movement worldwide;
4. and even—the mother of all historical consequences—the end of the Cold War itself.

The case for this interpretation will be laid out in the final chapter, bolstered by such standard methods of substantiation as expert witnesses, evidence, and logic.

One such witness, Mikhail Gorbachev, has been clear over the years. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, at Reagan's side during Reykjavik, had a conversation with the last general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party some years after the summit, and described the scene:

We were sitting around with the interpreter, and I said, "When you entered office and when I entered office, the Cold War was about as cold as it could get, and by the time we left it was all over. What do you think was the turning point?"

He didn't hesitate a second. He said, "Reykjavik."

And I said, "Why?"

"Because," Gorbachev said, "for the first time the two leaders talked directly, over an extended period in a real conversation, about key issues."

This is the story of what happened during that weekend, and what I believe to be its significance—why it deserves to be called the forty-eight hours that ended the Cold War.

Chapter 1

Departures

*Thursday, October 9, 1986
Washington, DC*

Ronald Reagan was beaming as he stood outside the White House on a beautiful Indian summer morning. He embraced his wife Nancy and then turned to acknowledge the greetings of the assorted members of Congress and his cabinet, who had come to wish him well and farewell. Attending a South Lawn departure ceremony was one of the perks of White House employment and the small crowd of staff, interns, supporters, and friends applauded enthusiastically.

The president, on that unseasonably warm October morning, was riding high. His reelection in 1984 had almost been by acclamation: he won forty-nine of the fifty states, most of them by hefty margins. The economy, so dismal when he took office in 1981, had gone through a painful readjustment and emerged stronger, just as he said it would. Reaganomics, as he quipped, was no longer a dirty word. Now, two years into his second term, he was near the height of his impressive popularity and power.

Having started to fix things at home, he was ready to take on the world.

That morning he was headed to Iceland, of all places, to negotiate about nuclear weapons with Mikhail Gorbachev. Negotiating was something Reagan loved to do, something he felt he was good at doing, something he most wanted to do with a Soviet leader.

Before boarding Marine One, the president had a few remarks to offer about the trip. There was a slight disconnect since his delivery was characteristically upbeat while his message was designed to lower expectations.

The upcoming meeting would be a quiet and intimate session, all business and no protocol. Reagan called it “essentially a private meeting between the two of us. We will not have large staffs with us,” nor will they “dash off a few quick agreements, and then give speeches about the spirit of Reykjavik.” That just wasn’t in the cards.

Although it was to be a meeting of the superpower leaders, Reykjavik shouldn’t even be called a summit. After all, summits were staged, theatrical events culminating in the clinking of champagne glasses to celebrate, well, usually little of lasting significance. A real summit fulfilled what Franklin Roosevelt once told Charles de

Gaulle, who needed no guidance on such matters: “In human affairs, the public must be offered a drama.”

But Reykjavik wasn’t going to offer a drama. Rather, the president went on, this meeting would be a mere base camp leading to that “full-scale summit” he was “looking toward” in Washington, DC, the following year.

Just by chance, the president noted, he was leaving for Iceland on Leif Erickson Day—the day named for the mighty Viking explorer who had discovered America nearly a thousand years before. Reagan’s linking that man with that land was a subtle diplomatic reach out to mollify some irritation in Iceland over Erickson’s exact nationality. Days earlier, Iceland’s foreign minister Matthias Mathiesen got cranky and blurted out: “In the U.S., they call him Norse—whatever that means. But he was born and bred in Iceland!”

As the president was speaking, a low-flying plane drowned out his remarks. When this had happened to Lyndon Johnson during some South Lawn ceremony years before, LBJ whispered in an aide’s ear to call the head of the Federal Aviation Agency and have him stop all (expletive deleted) flights from taking off or landing at National Airport—NOW!—and keep them away—FAR AWAY!—until his ceremony ended.

That was Johnson’s way. Reagan handled it his way. He paused dramatically, glanced up smiling, waved his hand gently and said, “Get out of the way!” and then joined the gales of laughter.

The president’s peroration ended on an upbeat. He quoted “a great American who knew the extremes of hope and despair” and who said such immortal words as: “History teaches us to hope.” Reagan then extolled the “nation’s unified support,” and said, “Today we’re making history, and we’re turning the tide of history to peace and freedom and hope.” The man who found hope in history was none other than Robert E. Lee, who was not necessarily “a great American” who shared our “nation’s unified support.”

As another plane approached, Reagan raced through the rest of his prepared remarks. He then wrapped an arm around Nancy’s waist as they strolled across the lawn to the white-topped presidential helicopter. In an elegantly choreographed move, he hugged his wife with one arm, waved to the crowd with the other, bent down to bestow a farewell kiss, and completed the pivot with a crisp salute to the marine saluting him at the helicopter’s steps. Just before he boarded the khaki green chopper, the president turned and waved to his wife. She waved back and he ducked into the cabin.

As the chopper began its slow rise, the president was framed in one of the windows. He waved again to his wife and blew her one last kiss. They would be apart two full days.

THE REYKJAVIK MEETING HAD come suddenly and the first lady had chosen to stay behind. She had several events long scheduled to advance her “Just Say No” anti-drug campaign. Neither she nor Reagan’s staff knew that the Soviet first lady would be accompanying her husband to Reykjavik. Mrs. Reagan would not be pleased when later seeing Raisa Gorbachev careen around Reykjavik with the world press in tow reporting everything she wore and everywhere she went.

Not that the ladies would miss being with each other. The two had not gotten along

in Geneva the year before. Mrs. Gorbachev was political, even ideological to the core—more of a committed Communist, it was said, than her husband. Mrs. Reagan had scant interest in politics and none whatsoever in ideology. She was interested in one thing, “Ronnie.”

After the seventeen-minute hop to Andrews Air Force Base, Marine One set the president down on the tarmac, just steps away from the Air Force One ramp. The big jet’s engines began revving as soon as the door closed behind him. It was wheels up three minutes later.

After being welcomed aboard by the captain, Reagan went into his private cabin and settled in for the long flight. His cabin, directly off the long corridor, had sitting and working areas, a bedroom with the presidential seal sewn into the covers and linens, and a bathroom with toilet and shower.

As was his wont at the outset of any foreign trip, the president reset his watch to local time at his destination. As he twisted the set wheel, 10:30 a.m. became 2:30 p.m. When the plane reached its cruising altitude, an Air Force steward announced lunch would then be served. Reagan was delighted to hear that meatloaf was on the menu. It was his favorite meal aloft, yet one which was served only when Mrs. Reagan was not aboard.

The early meal service was another of his travel preferences. Just as his watch should move to Iceland time, so should his stomach. Now on that time, he was already late for lunch. He paired his meatloaf with water and decaffeinated coffee since he seldom drank alcohol on the plane, except for an occasional glass of wine if Nancy was having one.

AFTER THE MEAL, THE president picked up a black three-ring binder. The title—*The Meetings of President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev, Reykjavik*—was embossed in gold above a presidential seal.

The binder’s eight tabs began with “General Information,” which contained a map with the flight path between Washington and Reykjavik presented in curved red lines drawn between the two cities. Beneath it was the “Statute Miles”—2,880 in either direction—and “Flight Time”—5 hours and 20 minutes outbound riding the headwinds, and 6 hours and 5 minutes back home bucking them. The next tab was “Notes on Gifts and Customs.” Further tabs had papers about the country, converting money, and the names of professionals at the U.S. Embassy—all nine of them. The final tabs on “Soviet Union” and “Security and Arms Control” included his administration’s public positions.

The material was mostly pap. But that was just as well, because Reagan, at best, only skimmed his briefing books. This happened famously in May 1983 when he was hosting a critical session of the economic summit with all eight Western leaders. The picturesque backdrop of Colonial Williamsburg was pure Reagan, as was his performance there.

On the summit’s opening morning, then White House chief of staff James Baker asked the president if he had questions about the material in the briefing book handed him the night before. The president said that, no, he really didn’t. Well, he hadn’t actually opened the briefing book since *The Sound of Music* had been on TV and he simply couldn’t resist watching it again.

The story created rounds of guffaws in Washington. It reinforced the notion of Reagan as—in the memorable sobriquet of the capital’s most esteemed wise man, Clark Clifford—“an amiable dunce.” He wouldn’t even read his briefing book for a top meeting that he was hosting!

Lost among the snickers, however, was how Reagan ended up running the economic summit differently, and better, than had previous hosts. He insisted that the eight leaders of the industrial democracies hold real discussions rather than just regurgitating their staffs’ talking points. Reagan deftly steered the leaders onto topics that went beyond the E-8’s province, yet ones that he considered more critical than those on the official agenda, including NATO unity while the United States deployed intermediate missiles in Europe later that year. Even Reagan’s most scornful colleague, the oft-snickering Canadian prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, publicly called Reagan’s economic summit “an unprecedented success.”

A FOLDER ON THE desk in the president’s cabin provided more sensitive Reykjavik material than the black briefing book. Several classified memos focused on the next forty-eight hours.

A memo from Secretary of State George Shultz, dated October 2, was stamped SECRET/SENSITIVE. Lest there be any doubt, someone had written in longhand “Super Sensitive” on it. In the memo, the secretary urged the president to take “a positive, self-confident, and commanding approach to this meeting”—as if Reagan could take any other—and then advised: “We should not try to separate form from content or appearance from substance. As far as Reykjavik goes, they will be intertwined.” Shultz left it up to Reagan to fathom what this might mean.

While the president should “stress the potential for substantive progress,” he must still be careful not to go “permitting the impression that Reykjavik itself was a Summit.” Shultz ended on an ingratiating note: “The policies you set in motion six years ago have put us in the strong position we are in today.” That solid foundation opened an opportunity to achieve “real reductions in nuclear forces—a historic achievement in itself, and a major step towards your vision of a safer world for the future.”

Reading such supersensitively secret solicitous secretarial boilerplate, Reagan may have considered watching *The Sound of Music* yet again a better use of his time.

As Air Force One continued eastward toward Iceland, the president munched contentedly on fruit and a few jelly beans which the blue-attired Air Force stewards kept in steady supply on his side table.

To break up the trip, he popped into the staff conference area, right behind his cabin, to chat with those gathered there and tell a tale or two. He told about recently reading Tom Clancy’s novel *Red Storm Rising*, with its vivid scenes of Iceland, and about an astronaut who said that the moon had a more hospitable landscape than where he had trained, outside of Reykjavik.

Many of Reagan’s stories harked back to his Hollywood days, but his favorites were about growing up in Dixon, Illinois. He would regale his time as a lifeguard at Lowell Park Beach, where he cut a notch on a log for every life he saved. According to his story, the log ended up having a truly incredible seventy-seven notches.

Throughout the rest of his life, Reagan sought to add to those seventy-seven

notches. He envisioned himself as a lifeguard, though on a far grander scale than at Lowell Park Beach.

RETURNING TO HIS CABIN, he read a second memo in his red folder, one also classified as SECRET/SENSITIVE. Another clear case of classification creep, this memo, from a Soviet expert in the White House, Stephen Sestanovich, was at least clear: “We go into Reykjavik next week with very little knowledge of how Gorbachev intends to use the meeting.” He had recently displayed “coyness” and “may be genuinely undecided, even skeptical which is why you [the president] will have to smoke him out.”

Rather than concentrating on policy, Reagan had mostly prepared for Reykjavik by focusing on psychology. According to Jack Matlock, the top Soviet expert in the White House and the American notetaker the first morning at Reykjavik, the president had concentrated “on the psychology of Soviet leaders—an attempt to understand their mode of thinking and to find actions and arguments that would induce them to change their behavior.”

There had been top-level meetings in the White House and Foggy Bottom to prepare for Reykjavik. Shultz had hosted a few in his wood-paneled, private office on the seventh floor of the State Department. Yet no one had proposed preparing, and then sharing with the Soviets, such basic elements of a professional meeting as an agreed agenda, session times, and attendees on each side.

With midterm elections just three weeks away, the president had been campaigning hard for Republican candidates across the country. In order to refocus his attention on international affairs, he had convened his own meeting on Reykjavik, in the Roosevelt Room, just across the hall from the Oval Office.

The key question at all pre-Reykjavik meetings was the same: “What should we expect from Gorbachev there?” And the experts’ key response was the same: “Not much.”

Connecting scattered intelligence dots outlined the picture of Gorbachev proposing Reykjavik to boost his domestic standing. Facing mounting resistance at home, he needed to show global leadership. This was deftly done by summoning the president of the United States to a windswept island in the middle of nowhere. This assessment was shared by the U.S. and Soviet ambassadors—Arthur Hartman in Moscow and Yuri Dubinin in Washington—during separate meetings in Shultz’s inner office.

Secure in our assessment, we had no problem with the grip-and-grin session we came to expect, if that would indeed help Gorbachev. After all, nobody was better at gripping and grinning than Ronald Reagan.

THE AIR FORCE ONE carrying Reagan to Iceland—Sam 27000—had joined the presidential fleet in 1972. Although it was small compared with the 747 that would replace it, it had a history and a scale that Reagan loved. It was good that he did, since he would log more miles on it (630,000) than any of his predecessors. Fittingly, that plane now resides in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, seeming almost airborne on display in its own pavilion.

Behind the presidential quarters were the staff conference area and a handful of seats for top presidential aides and secretaries. Other sections were designated for lower staff members, a few for the press, and, at the very back, Secret Service agents.

Donald Regan settled into the seat reserved for the White House chief of staff—the first seat in the first section. The son of an Irish Catholic Boston cop, Regan worked his way through Harvard College but dropped out of his freshman year at Harvard Law School to join the U.S. Marines when World War II broke out. He fought in five South Pacific battles, including the vicious ones of Guadalcanal and Okinawa. Anyone who called him “a former marine” would be dressed down and quickly corrected. “I am a marine,” he would counter. And he stayed a marine.

A brisk, focused man, Regan had joined Merrill Lynch as a trainee and ended up as the CEO. He had a temper and colorful vocabulary and was used to being obeyed and getting stuff done.

Regan did a fine job as Reagan’s first secretary of the treasury, managing through Congress the most far-reaching tax reform bill of the preceding quarter century and promoting Reaganomics. He shared the president’s desire to cut taxes and government spending, although both goals were more touted than achieved.

By the end of Reagan’s first term, Regan was becoming restless at Treasury. He had mastered the brief, had performed well, and was thus eager for a new challenge. Luckily, White House chief of staff James Baker was feeling the same way. Baker’s patrician background of hunting parties and private rail cars differed from Regan’s scrappy youth on Boston’s mean streets. Still, they liked one another. Both believed in firm management. Both produced impressive results.

While chatting one time, they realized their respective restlessness and concocted the novel solution of switching jobs. Baker could move to the Treasury and Regan to the White House. They walked right into the Oval Office to propose this unconventional idea. The president readily agreed, seeming indifferent as to who occupied either position.

Thus did Regan become the White House chief of staff at the outset of Reagan’s second term. He fancied himself more as a prime minister than a staff aide, keeping the administration on track and controlling the information flow to and from the Oval Office. As an offshoot of Harry Truman’s sign on his desk “The buck stops here,” Regan had a sign made up saying “The buck doesn’t even pause here.” He was all for efficiency. When issues were posed, decisions were made, fast.

While this new job did challenge him, it did not really suit him. Always assertive, he now became overbearing, if not officious. His salty language did not sit well with members of Congress or cabinet officers. He assembled a cadre of eager-beaver aides—quickly dubbed “the mice”—who seemed more loyal to him than to the president. He assigned himself round-the-clock Secret Service protection—something not even H. R. Haldeman had done at the height of Nixon’s imperial presidency. And Regan entered large ballrooms with a flourish of his own, coming in just before the president but noticeably after the band began playing “Hail to the Chief.”

In a town where status is an obsession and gossip a cottage industry, Regan’s actions and pretensions were well noted. But nothing reached a critical mass until it came to the first lady’s attention, and displeasure.

Before the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit—in Geneva in November 1985—Regan cracked that women cared little about arms control since they didn’t, or couldn’t, understand throw weight. That did not go over well.

During the summit, the official White House photographer snapped a shot of

President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev seated side by side on a red couch craning their necks to look up at Regan, who was standing behind them and seeming to lord over them. When the photo appeared above the fold in the *New York Times* and on front pages around the world, Regan landed on the first lady's watch list.

Despite such faults, Don Regan served Ronald Reagan well at Reykjavik. For starters, he knew his man. The president of the United States was now seventy-five years old and had taken a bullet half an inch from his heart a few years earlier. Knowing that the president adjusted poorly to time changes, Regan built in two days' respite in Iceland. And knowing that he didn't exactly pore over official material, Regan kept the briefing books to a minimum.

Also seated in the Air Force One's front section was Regan's pal and fellow marine, Secretary of State George Shultz. He and his counterpart, Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, were the world's two top diplomats, though neither had done much in diplomacy before. They would be learning their craft together, especially during their thirty-plus meetings with one another. Instead, Shultz's experience lay in Regan's realm of economics and business, but more from the academic side.

On the back of each chair around the conference table in the White House Cabinet Room is a small brass plaque, with the name and title of its occupant. The plaque on Shultz's chair, to the right of the president's, bore four brass plates—"Secretary of Labor, 1969–70," a second "Budget Director, 1970–72," a third "Secretary of the Treasury, 1972–74," and the most recent one "Secretary of State, 1982–." It would be filled in with "89," giving Shultz the longest tenure—six and a half years—of any secretary of state since Dean Rusk.

His first three cabinet posts, all in the Nixon administration, won him acclaim for thoughtfulness, integrity, and tranquility. Even Henry Kissinger—unaccustomed to swooning over others in government posts, especially if they had been *his* posts—succumbed to Shultz. "I met no one in public life for whom I developed greater respect and affection," Kissinger wrote in his memoirs. "Highly analytical, calm and unselfish, Shultz made up in integrity and judgment for his lack of flamboyance. . . . He never sought personal advancement. . . . If I could choose one American to whom I would entrust the nation's fate in a crisis, it would be George Shultz."

It was less Shultz's intellect and experience than his temperament that most appealed to Reagan. After two years of endless *Sturm und Drang* with Al Haig as secretary of state, Reagan canned Haig in June 1982 and installed the Buddha-like Shultz at Foggy Bottom. "As I watched, the President just visibly relaxed with Shultz," longtime Reagan aide Mike Deaver recalled. "He has a marvelous staff style that appeals to Reagan, [who] was very comfortable with Shultz." The men got acquainted in California in the 1970s, when Reagan was governor and Shultz was CEO of the San Francisco-based multinational engineering firm Bechtel. In 1980 president-elect Reagan appointed him head of his economic transition team.

As secretary of state, Shultz was careful and workmanlike, with two real gifts. One was a knack for figuring out what his boss wanted and working hard to get it done. For six-plus years, Shultz kept one thought uppermost: What does Reagan want me to do? It is an admirable trait, one rare among Washington officials, who usually think uppermost on how to get the president to do what *they* want.

Second, Shultz practiced what he often preached, that “politics is the art of inclusion.” Beginning in January 1985, at his crucial Geneva meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to reopen the arms talks, Shultz included representatives of the joint chiefs, the CIA, the U.S. Arms Control Agency, and even the Pentagon to join him. He drew on their varied knowledge and advice and got the oft-warring agencies to work together in a productive manner.

That’s why a number of arms control experts were on their way to Reykjavik. Since the president thought little staff would be needed there, Regan kept scratching names off the manifest. Nonetheless, Shultz managed to wedge in a few arms officials, even though their expertise would probably not be needed.

I WAS DELIGHTED TO be among those on the backup plane, behind Air Force One, and felt lucky to be along. But then again, I had felt lucky about my whole experience in government.

After getting a master’s in foreign service studies from Georgetown University, I had worked on legislation for a fabulous mentor, Hank Lieberman, in the Commerce Department. Then, by happenstance, in 1968 my father ran into fellow lawyer Don Lowitz on LaSalle Street in Chicago, which ended up with my landing a job in the “war on poverty” agency headed by a dashing young ex-congressman from the Thirteenth District of Illinois, Don Rumsfeld, with his even younger assistant from Wyoming, twenty-eight-year-old Dick Cheney.

Two years later, my wife—a career foreign service officer with the foreign aid agency—took me along to Zaire as her “dependent husband.” There she worked while I conducted research for a Georgetown doctorate in political theory, collected African art, and translated for Muhammad Ali during his “Rumble in the Jungle” heavyweight bout.

The year after Ali’s eighth-round knockout of George Foreman, I felt fortunate to be back in the United States with Rumsfeld—this time as assistant to the U.S. secretary of defense. That constituted my deep dive into strategic affairs, armaments, and arms control. It was a golden time, ended by the will of the American people, who tossed out the Ford administration and brought in that of Jimmy Carter in 1977.

Needing something to shove in his pocket in 1978 to read on a long plane ride to Tokyo, Reagan adviser Dick Allen grabbed the latest issue of the tall and narrow journal *Foreign Policy*. On the flight, he was startled to read a conservative piece in that liberal publication—by me. I had by then been publishing articles, some in the *New York Times* and fairly regularly in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Upon his return, Allen invited me to join his newly formed Foreign Policy Advisory Group for candidate Reagan. There, by fate, I got reacquainted with my favorite Georgetown professor, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who asked me to become her deputy at the United Nations after Reagan appointed her to be U.S. ambassador.

For all her hard-line ideology and image, Jeane had a pacifistic streak in her. She chose not to attend National Security Council (NSC) meetings on arms or arms control even though, as a full NSC member, she had a regular seat at the table. Luckily, Jeane asked me to fill that seat, which I did frequently.

Something I said—or, more probably, that I hadn’t said much at all—made someone in the White House think of me when the president needed a new arms

control chief in January 1983. I was in my third year as director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency when flying to Reykjavik.

It was an odd job. While my office was in the State Department, my views inclined closer to those in the Pentagon. Yet I reported to the secretary of state—but also to the president. Secretary Shultz didn't much like having a subordinate sit in White House meetings right beside him, usually disagreeing with him on issues before the president. I can't say I blame him. It must have been especially exasperating since I could muster more information and better arguments than he or anyone else around that table—certainly not because I was any brighter, but simply because I had nothing else to do. Whereas Shultz and everyone else around the cabinet table had dozens of issues thrown at them every day, I focused on arms control all day and all night.

My long good luck streak in government extended to riding on the plane to Reykjavik. After many awkward moments with Shultz over the years, I felt especially grateful for his welcoming me aboard.

ON THE PLANE IN front of ours, on Air Force One, there was a seat in the front section reserved for John Poindexter, the fourth of Reagan's six national security advisers.

A true patriot who had graduated first in his class from Annapolis in 1958 and dedicated his life to service in the United States Navy, the admiral was sadly miscast in this post. While Poindexter mastered nuclear propulsion, he knew and cared little about how to work the Congress and press, or how to build consensus across warring bureaucracies.

For all their power, exalted titles, and real talents, the top trio of Regan, Shultz, and Poindexter—the White House chief of staff, the secretary of state, and the national security adviser—would end up contributing little in Reykjavik. Even Shultz played a small part in that big drama, providing more encouragement than expertise.

This trio of top advisers didn't give a lot of advice. But that was okay, since the president didn't want, or need, a lot of advice at Reykjavik. There, he was pretty much on his own, which suited Ronald Reagan just fine. And, although no one would have imagined it, each of the three would go through professional and personal traumas immediately after Reykjavik.

Friday, October 10, 1986

Vnukovo Airport, Moscow, USSR

A light snow dusted Moscow as the Gorbachev motorcade arrived. In the usual Soviet style, all traffic between the Kremlin and the airport had been cleared, so the armored Zil-115 limo and its surrounding motorcade could travel at breakneck speed down the middle of the highway.

At the airport, the closed-off official area was some distance removed from the commercial terminals. There, the Gorbachevs moved quickly through the geriatric men atop the Kremlin power structure, who had come to bid them farewell.

First was the recently minted chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Andrei Gromyko. As was the Soviet way, the more extensive the title, the less significant the position. It hadn't been easy for Gorbachev to dislodge the wily Gromyko, who had been Soviet foreign minister for a whole generation. The Soviet

Union's face to the world had been a grim one; Gromyko's nickname was "Mr. Nyet." Yet replacing him had been a major milestone in the advent of Gorbachev's new-think on foreign policy.

Viktor Chebrikov stood at Gromyko's side to bid his supposed boss farewell. It was no secret that the chief of the secretive KGB harbored deep suspicions about all the drivel he had been hearing about sweeping reforms. More heartfelt farewells came from Yegor Ligachev, a Gorbachev appointee who had risen to number two on the Kremlin power meter. Behind these four stood lesser members and deputy members of the Communist Party Central Committee.

The Gorbachevs made their way down the line, shaking hands and exchanging the traditional Russian cheek-to-cheek-to-cheek triple kiss. The general secretary was typically dressed in a heavy gray wool coat and his favorite gray fedora. His wife, however, was providing a sneak preview of the fashion show that she had readied for Reykjavik. The Associated Press noted that she was "elegantly attired" in a black coat and matching leather-trimmed hat.

The Gorbachevs' departure, though carefully scripted, was not carefully timed. In fact, it went against their hosts' explicit request. Iceland's ambassador had made strong and repeated pleas for Gorbachev to arrive at any time except between noon and 4:00 p.m. on Friday, October 10. During those four hours—and only those four hours, over the whole year—Iceland's top officials had to attend the annual opening of Iceland's thousand-year-old parliament, the sixty-member Althing.

But despite Gorbachev's burgeoning stab at modernization, the Soviet system was too rigid to bend. The Soviet government informed the Icelandic government that Gorbachev would arrive right during that window, since Politburo invitations to his airport sendoff ceremony had already gone out.

Apprised of this startling news, Iceland's prime minister went public with what, in the delicate nuances of diplospeak, constituted a slap across the face: "It is unfortunate," he said frowning.

AS THE GORBACHEVS CLIMBED the steps to the blue-and-white Aeroflot Ilyushin II-62M aircraft, the rest of his traveling party was already settled aboard.

Despite the American president's assertion that their big staffs would be left home, the general secretary's entourage numbered more than three hundred. A hundred carried diplomatic passports. The others consisted of KGB officers, sundry security officials, staff aides, and journalists.

And in the Soviet system—despite their various ranks, functions, and passports—they all worked for the government. Their journalists were thus both hacks and flacks.

In the middle of the aircraft, astride the Gorbachevs' cabin, sat the key Soviet officials. Foremost was Shevardnadze, whom Gorbachev liked and trusted enough to appoint foreign minister, displacing Gromyko from his three-decade perch.



The fifty-eight-year-old Shevardnadze was an intriguing figure. His background had not been promising, as he had been chief of the secret police in his native Georgia. He rose to Communist Party chief there, occupying that post for some thirteen years.

Despite his pedigree as a local party hack, Shevardnadze had become increasingly convinced that reform was urgently needed and came to consider Gorbachev the man to lead it forth. The two found that they had much in common. Both hailed from peasant stock and had worked the land in their youth. Both were comrades in the Komsomol party youth organizations and then became party chiefs—Shevardnadze in Tbilisi and Gorbachev in nearby Stavropol.

Quietly at first, they increasingly spoke of the need for reform in the 1970s. They took long walks together through the Pitsunda Woods on the Black Sea coast, during which, as Shevardnadze said in his memoirs, “We spoke of the many absurdities of our life, and came to the conclusion that we just couldn’t go on like this.” By 1984, their Pitsunda talks had grown more urgent. “Everything’s rotten. It has to be changed,” they agreed.

Shevardnadze had been seared by his upbringing in Stalin’s native Georgia, and by his wife’s father having been slaughtered during one of Stalin’s serial purges. In 1956 the brutal Soviet putdown of the Hungarian Revolution overshadowed the Soviet police massacre of two dozen peaceful protestors on the streets of Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi. “My generation and I acquired a ‘1956 complex’ for the rest of our lives,” Shevardnadze wrote, “rejecting force as both a method and a principle of politics.”

Four months after Gorbachev became general secretary, he invited Shevardnadze to Moscow to become his foreign minister. The fact that the Georgian party chief lacked any diplomatic experience—he had scarcely ever been out of the country—seemed less important than to have an able and loyal ally in that critical post.

At Reykjavik, and for years after, their relationship remained airtight. Yet it was not always to stay tight. Nor was Shevardnadze always to perform nobly in public life. There would be as many gyrations in his performance over the decades as there would

be in the negotiations over the days in Reykjavik.

A corpulent occupant of another prime seat on the flight was Anatoly Dobrynin, the previous Soviet ambassador to the United States. He squeezed in because even these seats on the Ilyushin II-62Ms were no bigger than economy seats in a Western commercial aircraft.

Ambassador Dobrynin—after so many years, the title became affixed to his name—had served under six Soviet leaders and personally dealt with six American presidents. Trained as an engineer at the Moscow Aviation Institute, he began work in an aircraft plant. Stalin’s solution to the postwar dearth of diplomats—caused primarily by his prewar purges of their ranks—was to recruit engineers instead of intellectuals. Although they were less capable in such a different field, Stalin deemed them more politically reliable, which counted far more.

Dobrynin was among the first so selected. He later recalled that his crash course in diplomacy consisted of language immersion and lessons in etiquette. Because trainees were not allowed to read “bourgeois” newspapers, he picked up English by reading the English-language Communist propaganda rag, *Daily Worker*.

It turned out that “Tolya” Dobrynin was a natural-born diplomat. He arrived in Washington when Harry Truman occupied the White House, became the Soviet embassy’s number two man while Dwight Eisenhower was president, and was given the post of ambassador during the John F. Kennedy presidency. He more than filled that tricky post for another two dozen years, through the first five years of the Reagan administration, becoming dean of the Washington diplomatic corps along the way. During that long run in the spotlight, he traveled throughout the United States, deep-sea fishing regularly in Florida, attending the annual running of the Kentucky Derby, and hobnobbing wherever the rich and powerful capitalists and imperialists of America assembled.

It was during the dicey days of the Cuban missile crisis that Dobrynin’s skills proved most valuable. He negotiated directly with President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. It was Dobrynin who first suggested that the United States remove its outdated missiles from Turkey after the Soviets removed their new missiles from Cuba. This provided a face-saving way out of a fix for his boss, Nikita Khrushchev.

Later Dobrynin became the back-channel contact between his superiors in the Kremlin and Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon in the White House. During the Nixon years, Dobrynin had a direct telephone line to the National Security Council, prompting staffers to become jealous over his having more access to their bosses than they had.

When Gorbachev called Dobrynin home in 1986 to be the powerful head of the international department of the Communist Party Central Committee, Reagan asked, “Is he *really* a Communist?” The answer was decisively yes, even though he did seem too nice and cosmopolitan. As urbane as he was, as much as he enjoyed the cultural and intellectual riches of Western life, he remained a dedicated Communist to the end. He later deemed the dissolution of the Soviet Union an avoidable tragedy caused by the misguided ambitions of incompetent leaders, presumably those along with him on that flight to Reykjavik.

Dobrynin was heading there as an adviser to Gorbachev, much as an NSC staff

member would advise the U.S. president. His real contribution would stem from his intimate understanding of America and virtually all the Americans who counted in government.

Shortly before flying out, he had hosted a lunch for Richard Nixon, who happened to be visiting Moscow then. A dozen years after his 1974 resignation, Nixon had managed to plot, crawl, and will himself into yet another political resurrection. A 1984 cover of *Newsweek* magazine had confirmed—or, as some deemed it, warned—“He’s Back.” In Dobrynin’s Moscow apartment over a long lunch, at least, Nixon was back in the middle of U.S.-Soviet relations.

ALSO ON THE WAY to Reykjavik, along with Shevardnadze and Dobrynin, were three other senior Soviet officials—Sergei Akhromeyev, Alexander Yakovlev, and Anatoly Chernyaev.

Akhromeyev was the least familiar to Americans, even though he was chief of the general staff of the Soviet armed forces and the country’s sole living marshal. Among the combat ribbons bedecking his chest was one certifying him to be a Hero of the Soviet Union.

Even in a country with a bad case of medal inflation, Akhromeyev’s take was impressive—nine Jubilee medals, four Orders of Lenin, a Lenin Prize, the Order of the October Revolution, Order of the Patriotic War, Order of the Red Banner, Order for Service to the Homeland in the Armed Forces of the USSR, plus that Soviet Hero designation, the highest the state could bestow.

Slight tensions had arisen between Akhromeyev and Gorbachev over all the talk of military reform, which invariably meant scrapping costly defense programs. Hence it was not foolish for the *Washington Post*’s lead story that Friday morning of October 10 to place Marshal Akhromeyev “in the second echelon of advisors . . . who apparently will not play a direct role in the talks.” Little did any of us know what lay ahead for that secretive and quiet man.

Yakovlev bore the most inflammatory title, as director of the propaganda department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In life, however, Yakovlev was a credible, noninflammatory man.

He had been chosen early on by Gorbachev in order to strengthen the party’s reform wing. Yakovlev had grasped just how backward his country had become when serving as Soviet ambassador to Canada from 1973 to 1983. During that decade he learned a good deal about America.

“You have to understand what we inherited in 1986,” Yakovlev said at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library during a conference celebrating Reykjavik’s tenth anniversary. “An economy that was heading towards catastrophe, the Cold War, stagnation in the country’s development. We knew it was necessary to implement major change.”

Yakovlev, the author of several scholarly books, came across as more of an intellectual than a propagandist. He was destined to become a critical player in the Kremlin, as Gorbachev began rolling out his reforms and in the troubled years to follow.

Everyone knew that Chernyaev was Gorbachev’s senior aide, although no one knew exactly how he aided him. That would only become clear years later, when the