



President Reagan greets Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev at Hofdi House during the Reykjavik Summit, Iceland (Photo credit: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

Gorbachev's Nuclear Initiative of January 1986 and the Road to Reykjavik

Soviet nuclear abolition proposal in January 1986 welcomed by Reagan, set stage for historic Reykjavik summit and the INF Treaty 30 years ago

Gorbachev believed US dismissed idea as propaganda but declassified documents show major internal debate, consultations with allies, serious presidential support

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Washington, D.C. October 12, 2016 – Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's radical proposal in January 1986 to abolish nuclear weapons by the year 2000 met with derision on the part of

many U.S. officials, who treated it as pure propaganda, but was welcomed by President Reagan, according to declassified documents posted today by the National Security Archive. The records reveal serious internal U.S. debates, consultations with allies, and support by the president that ultimately helped produce the historic Reykjavik summit 30 years ago.

The documents posted today include Gorbachev's abolition letter of January 14, 1986, Top Secret critical responses by the U.S. defense secretary and by the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency ("largely propaganda"), Reagan's formal response over a month later (February 22), the minutes of a Top Secret National Security Planning Group meeting (February 3) that debated how to respond, key highly classified "OWL" and "SAGE" policy options papers produced by U.S. officials behind the scenes, reports back from consultation missions to allies from London to Tokyo, Gorbachev's ultimate invitation letter for the Reykjavik meeting (September 15), and the actual declassified transcripts of the Reykjavik sessions where the two leaders came close to abolishing nuclear weapons.

Transcripts covering all of the bilateral summits from 1985 to 1991 will appear next month in the new book, *The Last Superpower Summits: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Bush: Conversations that Ended the Cold War* (Central European University Press, 2016).

Before the January 14 abolition letter, Reagan and Gorbachev had met at Geneva in November 1985 – the first summit in more than six years of heightened Cold War – where they agreed in an historic joint statement that "nuclear war can not be won and should never be fought." After Geneva, however, U.S.-Soviet momentum on arms control had all but disappeared. The Gorbachev letter and the public statement that immediately followed in January 1986 took the Reagan administration by surprise and generated more than a month of internal debate before Reagan's February response addressed only the first portion of Gorbachev's proposal. The documents posted below show that during this time the U.S. administration was split between those who thought abolition was just another Soviet propaganda move and those who believed it was a serious program that needed a substantive response. The records show conclusively that President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz were in the latter camp.

The history of the Soviet abolition program dates back to the spring of 1985, according to first-hand accounts by the top officials who developed the proposal. Soon after Gorbachev came to power in March of that year, Chief of the General Staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev first spoke to Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko and the head of the Legal and Treaty Department of the General Staff, General Nikolai Chervov, about preparing a detailed program of total elimination of nuclear weapons. Kornienko supported the idea, and Akhromeyev gave orders to selected military experts to study the issues and prepare a draft. Very few people knew about the program until the end of 1985. Soviet arms control expert General Viktor Starodubov mentions that the planners felt the time was right to present it to Gorbachev after his meeting with Reagan in Geneva. [\[1\]](#)



Paul Nitze (Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.)

According to Gorbachev's spokesman and biographer, Andrey Grachev, the drafters of the program envisioned it in terms somewhat similar to those of the U.S. drafters of Reagan's "zero option" INF solution of 1981. They thought that the chances of the U.S. side accepting abolition were close to zero, but that making the proposal would provide both strong negotiating grounds and propaganda points to their own side. According to General Starodubov, quoted in Grachev, Akhromeyev's reasoning was that "if by any chance the Americans accepted the idea, the Soviet side would be able to make full use of its advantage in conventional weapons." Gorbachev, however, saw the program differently—as an opportunity to advance the U.S.-Soviet arms control discussion that had stalled after Geneva with a bold, radical stroke—which he thought would be acceptable to Reagan because of his strongly expressed belief in a nuclear-free world. Also, by accepting the Akhromeyev-Kornienko drafted initiative, Gorbachev, according to Grachev, "trapped" his own military into supporting very deep cuts in armaments across the board.[\[2\]](#)

Gorbachev approved the abolition plan in late December 1985 and after discussion among the top leadership it became the official Soviet program with Gorbachev's public announcement on January 15, 1986.

The program envisioned three stages. First stage: a 50-percent reduction of strategic nuclear weapons (over 5 to 8 years) and an agreement to eliminate all medium-range nuclear weapons in Europe. Second stage: starting in 1990, Britain, France and China would join the process by freezing their arsenals, and all nuclear powers would eliminate their tactical weapons and ban nuclear testing. Third stage: "starting in 1995, liquidation of all still remaining nuclear weapons is completed." (Document 1) Other important elements of the Soviet program were a ban on space weapons, strict adherence to the ABM Treaty, and a nuclear testing ban. Because of the lack of immediate response, Gorbachev always believed that his program was never taken seriously in the West, and had been dismissed as propaganda.

For example, on April 4, 1986, Gorbachev complained to a visiting delegation of U.S. congressmen that "the United States decided to hide behind the opinions of its allies – West European countries and Japan, otherwise, it would be hard for them to justify their negative position ... We are often accused of making propaganda proposals. Well, if it is propaganda, then why not catch Gorbachev at his word, why not test his intentions by accepting our proposal?" (Document 23)

In fact, recently declassified documents show that President Reagan's initial reaction to the proposals, according to his diaries, was positive, not dismissive. He launched a serious and thorough process within the administration to study the feasibility of the Soviet proposal and ways to respond, given his own interest in nuclear abolition. On January 15, after a long meeting with Shultz and national security adviser John Poindexter, he wrote that "we'd be hard put to explain how we could turn it down," and on February 3, after the NSPG meeting devoted to the Soviet proposal, Reagan wrote in his diary: "Some wanted to tag it as publicity stunt. I said no. Lets say we share their overall goals & now want to work out the details. If it is a publicity stunt it will be revealed by them." [3] (In other words, the American president and Soviet leader were thinking along identical lines.) The minutes of the NSPG meeting show a harder Reagan line than he took in his diary, but this was perhaps for the benefit of the half of his audience that opposed any positive response. (Document 10)

According to senior advisor Paul Nitze, Reagan's first reaction to the Gorbachev letter after Nitze and Shultz briefed him was, "Why wait until the year 2000 to eliminate all nuclear weapons?" [4] At the same time, Reagan remarked again and again on the fact that Gorbachev had set an actual date, which made the proposal sound more realistic.



An NSPG meeting in the White House Situation Room, with President Reagan at left, Vice President Bush and Secretary of Defense Weinberger with backs to camera, national security advisor Poindexter speaking at right, May 1986 (Photo credit: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

As noted, there was a considerable difference of opinion within the administration: from Shultz arguing for engaging Gorbachev and his program, to Weinberger claiming that it was just an effort to “divert energy” and to kill SDI. Shultz devotes several pages of his memoir to the internal debates. His account describes Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle as the most hard-line opponent: “Perle declared to the Senior Arms Control Group in mid-January that the president’s dream of a world without nuclear weapons – which Gorbachev had picked up – was a disaster, a total delusion.” According to Shultz, Perle opposed even holding an NSC discussion of how to respond to Gorbachev “because then the president would direct his arms controllers to come up with a program to achieve that result.” [\[5\]](#)

Most eloquently, Shultz quotes his own speech to the State Department’s arms control group on January 17, 1986: “I know that many of you and others around here oppose the objective of eliminating nuclear weapons. You have tried your ideas out in front of the president from the outset, and I have pointed out the dangers, too. The president of the

United States doesn't agree with you, and he has said so on several very public occasions both before and since the last election. He thinks it's a hell of a good idea. And it's a political hot button. We need to work on what a world without nuclear weapons would mean to us and what additional steps would have to accompany such a dramatic change. The president has wanted all along to get rid of nuclear weapons. The British, French, Dutch, Belgians, and all of you in the Washington arms control community are trying to talk him out of it. The idea can potentially be a plus for us: the Soviet Union is a superpower only because it is a nuclear and ballistic missile superpower." [6]



Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev (Photo credit: Yulia Medvedeva.)

Nitze describes the deliberations as follows: "The President and his principal advisers were in disagreement, particularly Shultz and Weinberger, over the response to Gorbachev's January 15 letter. The rest of the bureaucracy, unaware of these high-level discussions, continued the debate on a battle ground already in disarray, which soon degenerated into a free-for-all between the Pentagon and State Department."

In addition to internal deliberations, which produced two NSPG meetings and two National Security Decision Directives, Nitze and Ambassador Ed Rowny were sent to consult with the allies in Europe and in Asia, respectively. Both brought back negative views, arguing that responding favorably to the Soviet program would be too costly in terms of NATO solidarity. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was strongly against any idea that would eliminate the U.S. nuclear umbrella and, in her view, undermine deterrence. Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany was an outlier, supporting "both the goal of total elimination and zero/zero INF in Europe." (Document 14)

In the end, the Reagan administration did not dismiss the abolition proposal as propaganda, but came to the conclusion that they were not ready for a program of such a scope. Reagan's letter to Gorbachev on February 22, 1986, engaged only part of the proposed first

stage of abolition—the elimination of intermediate-range missiles. The response and the sense of lost opportunity on the part of some observers was summed up by U.S. Representative Dante Fascell in his conversation with Gorbachev in April 1986: “the reality is such that the United States is not ready, for some reason—either political or military, I don’t know—they are not capable to make the big leap, which you are calling for, at this time.” (Document 22)



Margaret Thatcher talks with Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, 1987. (Photo credit: Gorbachev Foundation website)

Although the Soviet side was dissatisfied with the U.S. response, the interaction did push both sides to work harder on negotiating positions and think about deep disarmament for the next summit. (Document 25) In fact active Soviet diplomacy and the American effort to use the opportunities offered by Gorbachev resulted in a comprehensive review of the entirety of U.S. arms control policy and long-term nuclear strategy in preparation for the next summit, a process which continued throughout spring and summer 1986 (Documents 26 and 27). Meanwhile, the Reagan administration actively engaged the Soviets in all negotiating formats. As a result, the Soviets accepted the U.S. “zero option” on INF, agreed to radical verification measures, and started internal discussions on dramatic reductions in conventional weapons. Gorbachev’s January 1986 initiative and the U.S. response laid the first paver on the road to the most dramatic summit in U.S.-Soviet history – at Reykjavik in October 1986 – which despite its failure prepared the ground for the INF Treaty signed in 1987.

Gorbachev later described Reykjavik as a summit of “Shakespearean passions,” which are particularly evident in the final session transcript, with the astounding agreement to abolish all nuclear weapons, disagreement over constraining strategic defense research to the labs, repeated offers from Reagan to share SDI with the Soviets – a personal plea from Reagan that Gorbachev rejected (“they will call me a fool in Moscow”) – and two tight-lipped

leaders stalking out of the summit. The dramatic details may be found in Chapter 2 of *The Last Superpower Summits*, and in the authors' package of key declassified documents from both sides, presented to Gorbachev at the 20th anniversary of the summit in 2006. [7]

NOTES

[1] Viktor Starodubov, *Ot razoruzheniya k kapitulyatsii (From Disarmament to Capitulation)*, (Moscow: Veche, 2007), pp. 261-262. See also the joint Akhromeyev-Kornienko memoir, *Glazamy marshala y diplomata* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshinya, 1992), Chapter 3.

[2] Andrey Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 66-69

[3] *The Reagan Diaries, Volume II November 1985-January 1989*, Edited by Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), pp. 562, 568

[4] Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), p. 422

[5] George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), pp. 699-705).

[6] Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 701.

[7] Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, "The Reykjavik File: Previously Secret U.S. and Soviet Documents on the 1986 Reagan-Gorbachev Summit," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 203, posted October 13, 2006,

LINK : <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB203/index.htm>

READ THE DOCUMENTS



Document 01

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev Letter to President Ronald Reagan, January 14, 1986.

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

In this letter to Reagan, Gorbachev shows optimism after their Geneva summit, where both leaders proclaimed their shared dream of a nuclear-free world. Gorbachev explains that despite the many differences between the US and USSR, they must nevertheless cooperate for a safer world for all peoples. To achieve their goal, he presents an unprecedented program to completely eliminate nuclear weapons. In contrast to many previous statements about abolition by the Soviet leadership, this letter lays out a rather specific

three-stage plan. An important element of the Soviet program was a ban on space weapons and strict adherence to the ABM Treaty. Just one day after the letter, without waiting for Reagan's response, Gorbachev announced this program publicly as Soviet official policy.



[Document 02](#)

Arms Control Support Group paper for Senior Arms Control Group, "OWL 20: Responding to Gorbachev's January Proposals," January 25, 1986. [Top Secret/Sensitive/OWL]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The purpose of the paper is to provide information for the Senior Arms Control Group in order for them to choose an appropriate U.S. response to the January 14 Soviet initiative. The paper provides careful analysis of Gorbachev's intentions as well as possible response options, termed Framework Option A, Framework Option B, and Framework Option C, which will have final form as Options 1, 2 and 3 in OWL 21. (OWL was a codeword for the security classification compartment that limited dissemination of option papers prepared for the Senior Arms Control Group [SACG]. By May 1986 OWL was replaced by SAGE.) Option 1 would be to not take any steps in response, basically treating Gorbachev's proposal as old repackaged propaganda. Option 2 would be to provide a general response without detailed multi-years plans and to concentrate on the first phase of Gorbachev's proposal. Option 3 would be to reciprocate with a specific plan, starting with INF and START reductions and to meet Gorbachev's concerns about SDI and ABM while proposing substantive changes to U.S. positions on START, INF and DST. It gives a very detailed overview of every substantive area of the proposal (START, INF, DST, and verification), possible approaches, and projected outcomes. The included intelligence analysis is very cautious in assessing the nature of Gorbachev's proposal. It suggests: "while the initiative contains a mixture of considerable propaganda, Gorbachev's ultimate objectives and expectations are, yet, unclear." The paper recommends a comprehensive review by SACG and a "priority basis" NSC discussion without rejecting the proposal out of hand. In a section titled "Military Implications of Eliminating Nuclear weapons," the paper notes the existing imbalance in conventional weapons in Europe and the allies' dependence on U.S. nuclear deterrence. Included is a table representing alternative options on INF, Defense and Space and Verification.



[Document 03](#)

Department of State, Secretary of State, from George P. Shultz to the President, "Responding to Gorbachev's Arms Control Proposal," January 29, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

In this memo Secretary Shultz lays out his view of Gorbachev's January proposal and suggests response options to the president. He sees the Soviet proposal as "an opportunity to transform Gorbachev's concept" to match Reagan's vision of a nuclear-free world. He argues for the U.S. to respond with its own plan by reconceptualizing Gorbachev's proposal and building on it. Shultz proposes moving forward with Option 3 (OWL 21): constructive moves on INF and START while meeting Gorbachev's concerns on ABM and SDI. This, he thinks, would provide insurance against completely "delegitimizing nuclear weapons" while still "contemplating the elimination of nuclear weapons." He warns against officials who would take Gorbachev's proposal as pure propaganda and calls on the President to seize an opportunity and initiate further negotiations.



Document 04

Department of State, Memorandum from E. L. Rowny to Admiral Poindexter, "Preferred Option for Responding to Gorbachev," January 29, 1986. [Top Secret/OWL]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

In this memorandum Reagan's Special Adviser on Arms Control Rowny is offering his vision of the most suitable response to Gorbachev's January proposal. He supports option 2 and argues that, as opposed to OWL-21 categories description, it does not mean "rejecting Soviet framework." Rather, it would lead to the U.S. agreeing "in principle" on moving towards eliminating nuclear arsenals. He underscores that the U.S. response should not go further than "initial bilateral reductions, as agreed in Geneva." He criticizes Option 3 for giving up "too much for too little" on the U.S. side. He argues against changing the U.S. position on START and renewal of the commitment to the ABM Treaty.



Document 05

United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Office of the Director, Memorandum for the President from Kenneth L. Adelman, "Responding to Gorbachev's January Proposal," January 29, 1986. [Top Secret/Sensitive/OWL]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Adelman's memo opens with a blunt statement that "Gorbachev's plan is largely propaganda, using your vision of a nuclear-free world as bait to stop SDI." He warns that the proposal does not call for any substantial movements, except for the movement on INF.

He analyses three proposed options and suggests choosing a middle ground (Option 2) - to not "stand pat," but to not "make major moves" either; instead, to "pocket" those parts of Gorbachev's proposals that are in line with U.S. goals. Adelman is especially concerned about Option 3, which, he believes, would constrict SDI and "appears to concede the Soviet point that SDI and arms reductions are incompatible."



[Document 06](#)

Department of Defense, Secretary of Defense, Memorandum for the President, "Choosing a Response to the Gorbachev Proposal," January 31, 1986. [Top Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger offers his thoughts on Gorbachev's January proposal and a possible U.S. response. He calls the Soviets' proposal a "largely unhelpful and propagandistic posture struck by Mr. Gorbachev." He argues that Gorbachev's maneuver is aimed at diverting the U.S. from the very promising task of performing SDI research and minimizing the prospect for SDI's success. In Weinberger's view, Gorbachev has just reasserted his "insistence on killing SDI" and proposed "essentially warmed-over Soviet ideas." He supports Option 1 and insists on not making any further steps until the Soviets respond to previous U.S. proposals. Weinberger sees Option 3 as "damaging to U.S. interests in general and SDI in particular" and argues strongly against it.



[Document 07](#)

National Security Council. Option 2 Gameplan, Undated - circa February 1, 1986. [Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This Gameplan assumes that either Option 2 or 3 will be chosen as the basis for the U.S. response and suggests a detailed schedule for elaborating the response, including an NSPG meeting, trips by Ambassadors Nitze and Rowley to consult with the allies, letters to the allies, and a letter of response to Gorbachev over the following two weeks.



[Document 08](#)

The White House, Memorandum from John M. Poindexter to the President, "Background Material for the February 3, NSPG Meeting on Responding to Gorbachev," February 1, 1986. [Top Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

In this memorandum national security adviser John Poindexter summarizes the principals' views in response to Gorbachev's January proposal for the president to prepare for the National Security Planning Group [NSPG] meeting scheduled to discuss the U.S. response. He argues that the "Soviet plan has a large measure of propaganda," but nevertheless warrants serious consideration. He points out that the Office of Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff favor "not altering current US position while discrediting the Soviet plan;" the State Department is more forthcoming in adopting the Soviet approach, while ACDA and nuclear and space talks (NST) negotiators suggest "reframing the issue in US terms and move with substantive change to the US INF position." Poindexter gives his preference for Option 2. The memo includes Annex D - National Security Implications of Eliminating Nuclear Weapons by 1999, emphasizing the U.S. commitment to NATO strategy, which relies on U.S. nuclear weapons and is "absolutely essential to maintaining alliance cohesion;" the annex also points out that elimination of nuclear weapons would require more expensive conventional weapons to "equal the deterrent potential of relatively inexpensive nuclear weapons."



[Document 09](#)

National Security Council. Minutes of National Security Planning Group Meeting. Subject: Arms control-Responding to Gorbachev, February 3, 1986. [Top Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Poindexter opens the meeting by describing Gorbachev's proposals as "subtle and clever" and attempting "to drive wedges between US and Allies." He summarizes response Options 1, 2 and 3 for the discussion. Weinberger speaks first in favor of keeping the U.S.'s November positions and saying that Option 2 offered "major concessions," thus noting his preference for Option 1. ACDA Director Adelman calls Gorbachev's proposal "propaganda" but suggests the U.S. should offer a draft INF Treaty to challenge it. Shultz is arguing for bolder steps to meet Gorbachev halfway, but he steps back from supporting Option 3 as he did in his memo to Poindexter (Document 3). He is still in favor of modifying the U.S. START positions and of continuing with the ABM Treaty "as long as reductions go on." At this meeting, in one form or another, all participants come to support Option 2-"to reframe the Soviet proposal in US terms" and "move in the INF area." Adherence to SDI takes up a major part of the discussion, as Reagan states strongly that "the US does not give up SDI," reminding the principals about the "principle of sharing SDI at the deployment stage."

Treasury Secretary Baker reminds the participants that "the chess game for world opinion was a central element of the present policy debate" and therefore Option 2 would be a better choice.



[Document 10](#)

The White House, National Security Decision Directive Number 210, Ronald Reagan, "Allied Consultations on the US Response to General Secretary Gorbachev's January 14, 1986, Arms Control Proposal," February 4, 1986. [Top Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

In this NSDD, Ronald Reagan lays out his preferences in response to Gorbachev's January proposal along the lines of the above-mentioned Option 2 (OWL 21). He welcomes the Soviet proposals and suggests moving ahead with bilateral 50 percent reductions in strategic nuclear forces as the United States proposed in Geneva while also negotiating an INF agreement. Reagan directs his administration to consult with European and Asian allies on the basis of the positions outlined in the NSDD. During the consultations the focus should be on the U.S. approach to "total elimination of all nuclear weapons" and on "proposed US initiative in the INF area." President Reagan confirms his commitment to authorize the "US delegation to outline a new US initiative in INF area," but he is "not inclined to change his November 1985 positions" on nuclear and space talks.



[Document 11](#)

National Security Council, Action Memorandum from Bill Wright and Bob Linhard to John M. Poindexter, "Letter to Allied Heads of State on Responding to Gorbachev," February 4, 1986. [Top Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This memorandum to Poindexter suggests a presidential letter to the allies in order to "facilitate the discussions with the Ambassadors in capitals." The authors propose that the letter should use "generalized language" to leave more flexibility for presidential envoys to consult with allied leaders.



[Document 12](#)

"Critique of PM Thatcher's 11 Feb Letter," Undated - after February 11, 1986. [Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This undated and unsigned memo seems to reflect views prevalent in the Defense Department that are suspicious of Shultz and Nitze's efforts to engage Gorbachev on Option 3. The document was located in the arms control files of the NSC staff. Heavily redacted, the memo is critical of Thatcher's letter to Reagan of February 11, which calls Gorbachev's proposal "dangerous" and states that a "nuclear-free world favors the East." What worries the author of this memo is that Thatcher offers an "alternative that would extend and strengthen the ABM Treaty regime in return for offensive forces reductions." The memo finds it "worrisome" that Thatcher's position is very close to that advocated by Nitze (and Shultz), where it links ABM extension to reductions because that would threaten SDI. The memo concludes with a remark on the U.S. internal debate: "this fundamental difference in view about the role of SDI is a problem within the Administration also."



[Document 13](#)

National Security Council, John M. Poindexter Memorandum for the President, "Allied Views on a Response to Gorbachev," Reports from Ambassadors Nitze and Rowny, Undated - circa February 17, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The cover note from Poindexter introduces reports from Ambassadors Nitze and Rowny summarizing the results of their consultations with the allies regarding the response to Gorbachev's proposals and the content of letters from allied leaders. Poindexter points out that in view of the allies' positive reaction on INF, the administration was "revisiting the INF approach." Nitze's report, while describing support among the European allies, pointed to some problems, such as the concern about "decoupling" the U.S. from Europe if INF forces were withdrawn, and the disagreement on linking SDI with the objective of a nuclear-free world. The Germans were the only ones who were supportive of "both the goal of total elimination and zero/zero INF in Europe." The Europeans were also concerned about U.S. opposition to a comprehensive test ban and urged the United States to abide by the existing treaties, meaning not breaking out of SALT II and ABM. Most allies saw Gorbachev's proposals as threatening alliance cohesion. Rowny's trip report (curiously, among the "allied consultations" is a visit to communist China) describes doubts about Gorbachev's plan and his willingness to go beyond words and allow verification. The Japanese worry about the continuing presence of Soviet INF forces in Asia if the zero-zero option only covers Europe. The Japanese and Australians raised questions about the U.S. position on testing. The Chinese were friendly and also concerned with Soviet long-range INF (LRINF)

missiles in Asia. Rowny recommends that the U.S. modify its INF proposal slightly restating its commitment to a global zero-zero on LRINF missiles.



[Document 14](#)

OWL 23: Summarizing the INF options and OWL 22: INF Options after Consultations, February 19, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive/OWL]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The cover document represents a new summary of options regarding INF propositions after Allied consultations took place (OWL 23) with detailed presentation of the options and analysis of the pros and cons of each of them (OWL 22). The document refers to NSDD 210 ("Allied Consultations on the US Response to General Secretary Gorbachev's January 14, 1988 Arms Control Proposal") and provides a redrafted portion of the INF paragraph for the document. The new statement underlines the U.S. commitment to eliminate all LRINF missiles (long-range intermediate nuclear forces). The paper outlines five INF options ranging from 80% LRINF elimination in Russia with U.S. matching it in the number of warheads, to the global elimination of this class of missiles.



[Document 15](#)

The White House, National Security Decision Directive Number 214, Ronald Reagan, "U.S. Response to Gorbachev's January Arms Control Proposals," February 21, 1986. [Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

As a result of consultations with allies, the Reagan administration decides to offer its response to Gorbachev's proposal consistent with the one outlined in NSDD 210 (Document 10), with a change in the INF portion of NSDD 210 now offering a global zero-zero option by the end of 1989. The NSDD lays out a detailed plan for INF elimination, which will be superseded by the INF treaty signed with Gorbachev in December 1987 after the Soviets agree to all U.S. demands on INF.



[Document 16](#)

National Security Council John M. Poindexter Memorandum for George P. Shultz, "Transmission of Geneva Material," Draft Letter to Allies and Guidance for NST delegation on Soviet proposal, February 21, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The cover memo from Poindexter forwards a presidential letter to the allies and instruction cables to NST negotiators in Geneva on the U.S. response to the Gorbachev proposal. Reagan's letter praises the allies' support for U.S. negotiating positions and adds individual paragraphs to be included in letters to allied leaders. The letter stresses the need to address not only offensive force reductions but also other allied concerns such as conventional and other force imbalances, regional conflicts, obtaining Soviet commitment to peaceful competition. It also assures the allies that until these conditions are met, nuclear deterrence "must remain fully effective," which effectively moves the goal of nuclear abolition far into the future. Essentially, this limits the response to an INF offer of a zero-zero in Europe and Asia without changing any other positions in nuclear and space negotiations and while keeping SDI intact. The letter also welcomes Gorbachev's position on verification and the need to press him to allow on-site inspections and other stringent measures. The instructions to the delegation in Geneva criticize the Soviet proposals for narrowing the focus of negotiations "to the total elimination of nuclear weapons" without addressing underlying conditions such as conventional imbalances, and for linking the entire plan to "a ban on "space-strike" arms, including termination of the U.S. SDI program." Those positions are unacceptable to the United States, therefore the negotiators are instructed to focus on the mandate agreed to at the last summit-50-percent reductions in strategic arms-and to "reject any idea of negotiations on future steps or phases noting that this would be premature and waste time, at best."



[Document 17](#)

National Security Council, Memorandum for John M. Poindexter from Steven E. Steiner, "Response to Gorbachev -- Public Diplomacy Plan," February 22, 1986. [Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This document includes a cover memo from Steiner to Poindexter, a draft presidential statement and a guidance on public handling of Soviet arms control proposals. The guidance specifically shifts the focus away from the emphasis on total elimination of nuclear weapons to the importance of deep reductions in offensive arms, resolving regional conflicts, improving compliance with agreements, and adherence to international commitments to respect human rights. It instructs members of the administration to emphasize conditions to be achieved before "we can seriously contemplate a nuclear-free world" and to treat Soviet ideas "as response to ours, avoid personalizing them as

"Gorbachev proposals." The guidance outlines problems with Soviet positions that should be pointed out as "unacceptable," such as the "grandiose public concept for eliminating nuclear weapons" while the proposed reductions would "in fact perpetuate Soviet advantages and create dangerous imbalance."



[Document 18](#)

Reagan Letter to Gorbachev, February 22, 1986.

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This lengthy letter (almost eight pages) contains Reagan's formal endorsement of nuclear abolition, in response to Gorbachev's January 15 proposals. The letter suggests a series of specific steps, starting with the 50-percent cut in warheads the two leaders had discussed at Geneva, then getting rid of INF missiles by 1989 (the deal would actually be done in 1987), then bringing in the other nuclear powers after the U.S. and USSR demonstrate their seriousness by going first, while linking the process of nuclear cuts to reductions in conventional forces in Europe, and so forth. Most interesting is Reagan's explicit endorsement of Gorbachev's January proposals as "significant and positive"-at a time when other U.S. officials were dismissing the abolition initiative as propaganda. But here we see Reagan taking the idea very seriously. Yet the delay between the mid-January proposals and this late-February response left the Soviets believing the U.S. was not interested, especially compared to the Indians who immediately embraced the package, while the silence from Washington was deafening.



[Document 19](#)

National Security Council, Memorandum from Bob Linhard and Ron Lehman to John M. Poindexter, "Additional INF Options," February 22, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive with OWL Attachment]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

On the day President Reagan sent his formal response to Gorbachev, the NSC staff are still working up options for the INF negotiations that were the only part of Gorbachev's proposal the Reagan administration intended to engage. The key recommendation here is for the U.S. to insist on its "planned deployment" as the baseline for negotiations, while the Soviet baseline would be its actual "current deployments" - in effect trading a bird in the bush for the bird in the hand.



[Document 20](#)

The White House, National Security Decision Directive Number 214, Ronald Reagan, (Revised Edition), "U.S. Response to Gorbachev's January Arms Control Proposals," February 28, 1986. [Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

The revised first page of NSDD 214 is sent under strict instructions from Poindexter that "no copies are to be made and that a record of authorized personnel who are provided access to the document be maintained by the office of each addressee." The only change in the document is to replace the word "warheads" in the original version with the term "agreed support equipment" in the sentence "As Soviet SS-20 launchers are reduced, the launchers and their associated missiles and warheads would be destroyed." (See the original wording in Document 15)



[Document 21](#)

Gorbachev's Tasking for Assistants on International Issues, March 20, 1986.

Source: The Gorbachev Foundation Archive.

This internal document from the Gorbachev Foundation shows Gorbachev's deep frustration with the U.S. lack of response to his abolition proposal. He feels the U.S. is trying to avoid discussion on big issues-"in response to our proposal on nuclear disarmament they slip us the topic of conventional weapons." But he also adds, probably for the first time in Soviet internal discussions, that "we are prepared to resolve that issue as well." He criticizes the Europeans for their lack of response and for their renewed commitment to the Pershings. He believes that all he sees from both Europe and the United States is "subterfuge, departure from the heart of the matter, attempts to get off by way of half-measures and half-promises."



[Document 22](#)

Record of Conversation between Gorbachev and Members of the U.S. Congress Fancell and Broomfield, April 4, 1986.

Source: The Gorbachev Foundation Archive.

Gorbachev receives U.S. congressmen and gives a feisty performance, partly in reaction to what he sees as a lack of response on the U.S. part to his abolition proposal. The Soviet leader lists the new proposals and initiatives that his government has made in the period since Geneva—extending its nuclear testing moratorium, agreeing to "accept any forms of oversight" in terms of inspections, agreeing not to count the British and French nuclear weapons, and mainly, the bold January 15 initiative. Gorbachev is impatient to move ahead in reversing the arms race, and ready to address all these issues but feels that the momentum achieved in Geneva has been lost. Rep. Dante Fascell agrees with Gorbachev that the best way to test the seriousness of his intentions would be for Washington to respond to his proposals, but he concludes that "the reality is such that the United States is not ready, for some reason—either political or military, I don't know—they are not capable to make the big leap, which you are calling for, at this time." Still, he believes that it would be better for Gorbachev to try to achieve agreements with the present administration and not wait for the next elections, because "Reagan is the most popular president in the history of the United States since Roosevelt."



[Document 23](#)

The White House, Memorandum of Conversation, "The President's Meeting with Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin of the Soviet Union," April 8, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This remarkable conversation represents Dobrynin's farewell visit to the White House after serving as Soviet ambassador to Washington from 1962 to 1986, and before going back to Moscow to head the International Department of the Central Committee. President Reagan expresses his disappointment at "the overall lack of progress in our relations," and provides Dobrynin with a list of seven "optimum goals" including one aimed to dispel the Soviet fear of space-based weapons for a first strike, the core Soviet objection to Reagan's SDI concept. Dobrynin does not seem to hear the offer (nor would Gorbachev at the subsequent Reykjavik summit) and turns the discussion back to the Soviet proposals for a nuclear test ban and for strengthening the ABM Treaty - both of which were non-starters for Reagan. Dobrynin explains that without "a clearcut minimum goal" or agreement beforehand, "our leaders [would be] going blindfolded" into a summit meeting.



[Document 24](#)

National Security Council, Action Memorandum from Jack Matlock to John M. Poindexter, "A Strategy for U.S.-Soviet Relations," May 7, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive/Eyes Only]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This memorandum from the senior Soviet expert on the NSC staff, who would go on to be ambassador to the USSR, begins with a conventional overview of the propaganda battles over a summit date that were upstaged by the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster in April 1986 - "a PR fiasco." Matlock argues for "a combination of private negotiating strategies and a highly public campaign to put the President out with some dramatic proposals" that should "be presented as new, even if they are largely repackaging." But at the end of the memo, Matlock actually puts together what would have been a Reagan match for the Gorbachev January proposals, under a question-marked headline, "A Comprehensive Proposal to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons?" Matlock acknowledges presciently that "it might prove impossible to overcome bureaucratic objections to the individual parts" of the proposal, but lays out a half-dozen advantages, including a "big splash" that would keep "the President out front as the major champion of peace and arms reduction." The files record no evidence that Poindexter ever approved this approach, but Matlock certainly understands what Ronald Reagan wanted.



[Document 25](#)

National Security Council, Memorandum from Michael Donley and Linton Brooks to John M. Poindexter, "Hoffman Memorandum re Long-Term Strategy, Policy, and Programs," June 11, 1986. [Top Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This cover memo summarizes and attaches a 13-page memo written by Fred S. Hoffman, a veteran defense analyst who had led the outside study group of consultants that the Pentagon commissioned to assess the SDI concept in 1983. Here, tasked to look at military aspects of national security policy beyond 1989, Hoffman argues that SDI is "not likely to survive this Administration" unless it emphasizes "some intermediate goal between site defense and full territorial defense" - since success on the latter is "very distant in terms of time." Indeed, 30 years after this memo is written, success is still not in sight. Hoffman also argues for "greater flexibility and military utility" in nuclear force planning, but the NSC staffers who forward his memo conclude that such a "nuclear warfighting reexamination is more than the traffic will bear right now."



[Document 26](#)

National Security Council, Minutes of the National Security Planning Group Meeting, "Subject: US-Soviet Relations," June 12, 1986. [Secret]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Six months after Gorbachev's nuclear abolition proposal, top American officials gather to review the state of relations and arms control positions. These succinct minutes of the NSPG meeting provide short-hand summaries of the positions of the principals, with Secretary Weinberger arguing against "bargaining SDI away," CIA Director Casey warning that "Soviet proposals were clearly aimed at getting SDI," and Joint Chiefs Chairman Wickham chiming in that Soviet timing was meant "to influence Congress on SDI funding" so "new proposals were not necessary." Secretary Shultz disagrees, arguing "we need to be seen as joining the process" and presaging the Reykjavik summit, remarking that the "stage was set for something dramatic." Most interesting are President Reagan's comments and the summary of the president's position attached to the minutes. Reagan says "we do not want a first-strike capability, but the Soviets probably will not believe us." So it is even more important to have observers for all SDI tests and ultimately "[a]gree to share SDI with the world." Gorbachev never would believe Reagan's intention; no doubt several of the participants at this NSPG meeting did not agree with sharing SDI either; but the president insisted. Part of Reagan's willingness, of course, arose from his mistaken belief that the Soviets were at least as far along with ABM research as the U.S. was, likely even ahead. Had Gorbachev seen a copy of these NSPG minutes at the time, Reykjavik might well have turned out differently.



[Document 27](#)

The White House. Draft Memorandum for the President from John M. Poindexter, "Guidance for the Arms Control Support Group," June 21, 1986. [Top Secret/SAGE]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Drafted by three senior National Security Council staff members (Bob Linhard, Jack Matlock, and Sven Kraemer), this memo provides the national security adviser an action item to give to President Reagan, together with a six-page paper that follows up the NSPG conclusion that the U.S. should take a "positive/serious stance" on Soviet proposals. The extensive detail in the proposed "Guidance on the Evolution of the U.S. Arms Control Policy" demonstrates the way in which Gorbachev's abolition proposals at the beginning of 1986 prodded the national security apparatus on both sides to go further than they ever had towards ideas of mutual security. The guidance insists that "the U.S. must develop an initiative which addresses Soviet concerns about SDI providing a U.S. first-strike advantage;" but the most that even this senior group can come up with is a process involving observers and verification at SDI tests. As Gorbachev would comment to Reagan at Reykjavik, how

could he believe the idea of sharing SDI when the U.S. would not even share automated dairy equipment?



[Document 28](#)

Gorbachev Letter to Reagan, September 15, 1986.

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This letter, hand-carried by Foreign Minister Shevardnadze to Washington, was the impetus for the Reykjavik summit meeting, which Gorbachev initially envisioned as "a quick one-on-one meeting, let us say in Iceland or in London," in order to break out of the cycle of spy-versus-spy posturing and inconclusive diplomatic negotiations that followed the 1985 Geneva summit. The American translation includes Reagan's underlinings, notably the sentence accusing the U.S. of deliberately finding a "pretext" to "aggravate" relations, and two sentences about "no start" having been made on implementing the Geneva agreements and the failure to move "an inch closer to an agreement on arms reduction."



[Document 29](#)

The White House. Memorandum of Conversation. "Reagan-Gorbachev meetings in Reykjavik, October, 1986. First meeting," October 11, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This memorandum of conversation captures some of the surprise on the American side from the opening meeting of President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev in Reykjavik. Both parties had been frustrated by the lack of progress since Geneva, "particularly" - as Reagan says here - on "strategic arms reduction." In Gorbachev's initial presentation, the Soviet leader states his intentions for the meeting - "to outline agreements" that the US and USSR can conclude, while Reagan observed that "one of the most difficult subjects is likely to be verification." Gorbachev comments, "We should meet each other halfway and not push the other into a corner." Once Secretary Shultz and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze join the meeting, Gorbachev rolls out his detailed proposals on medium-range missiles, the ABM Treaty, and nuclear testing.



[Document 30](#)

Memorandum of Conversation. "Reagan-Gorbachev meetings in Reykjavik, October, 1986. Second meeting," October 11, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

During the second part of the October 11 meeting, President Reagan describes the U.S. vision of Gorbachev's morning presentation. The American leader underscores the American goal of 50-percent reduction of ballistic missiles and the proposed 4500 limit on warheads (lower than the Soviet suggestion of a 6400-to-6800 warhead limit). Turning to INF, Reagan expresses disappointment with Gorbachev's remarks, pointing to inconsistencies with his previous position as outlined in earlier correspondence. The president welcomes general secretary's remarks on short-range missiles and the two parties discuss possible arrangements for INF missiles in Europe and Asia. Gorbachev keeps coming back to the importance of protecting the ABM Treaty from possible destruction and suggests "an obligation not to withdraw from the treaty for a number of years." Finally, the two leaders agree to hand the discussion over to the experts' groups, who would meet through the night seeking agreement on the ideas Reagan and Gorbachev had outlined during the day. (Marshal Akhromeyev on the Soviet side and senior advisor Nitze on the U.S. side would preside over the arms control experts, while Assistant Secretary of State Rozanne Ridgway would join deputy Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh in presiding over the non-arms control group.) The meeting adjourns at 5:40 p.m.



[Document 31](#)

US Department of State. Memorandum of Conversation. "Reagan-Gorbachev meetings in Reykjavik, October, 1986. Third meeting," October 12, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

On the morning of October 12, Reagan and Gorbachev reconvene to review the progress of the expert groups that met overnight on arms control and non-arms control issues. Both leaders focus on the arms control discussions and express disappointment. While the experts agreed on the proposition of 50-percent cuts under the START agreement, progress on an INF treaty stalled over unresolved difference on the ABM Treaty - seen by the Americans as a stalking horse to limit SDI, and by the Soviets as essential to stability and prevention of first-strike capabilities. Reagan once again voices a suggestion for proportional reductions of INF warheads in Europe and Asia and clarifies that a 100/100 ceiling in Asia would be acceptable for the U.S. Gorbachev complains that Reagan is backing away from his own zero-zero option on INF, and warns against a false impression of the Soviets being more interested in nuclear disarmament than the U.S. Gorbachev refuses Reagan's proposal of an interim INF agreement and the debate goes round and round on

the issue of SDI in the framework of the ABM Treaty. The meeting adjourns for a short break.



[Document 32](#)

US Department of State. Memorandum of Conversation. "Reagan-Gorbachev meetings in Reykjavik, October, 1986. Final meeting," October 16, 1986. [Secret/Sensitive]

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This memorandum of conversation records what Gorbachev later called the "Shakespearean passions" during the final meeting with Reagan at Reykjavik. The two leaders come back from a break to discuss a counterproposal from the Soviet side on the language of arms control, negotiated by Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Secretary Shultz. This version, Gorbachev argues, incorporates both the U.S. and Soviet positions, proposing prohibition of space weapons programs for 10 years, with exceptions for laboratories and research, and simultaneous strengthening of the ABM Treaty. President Reagan notes, "the two sides are very close to agreement." Gorbachev insists on revising the text and putting more pressure on strengthening the ABM treaty. Reagan asks for clarification of the Soviet position regarding types of weapons to be reduced, and suggests getting rid of all nuclear weapons, to which Gorbachev responds, "We can do it." But the final stage of negotiations reaches an impasse on the two sides' visions of SDI, with Gorbachev not believing Reagan's offer to share the technology, and Reagan refusing to confine SDI research to the labs - which he thinks would kill SDI. Despite a personal plea from Reagan, Gorbachev just cannot trust the Americans enough to make a deal. Both parties leave the negotiations without reaching any agreement.

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