A Position of Strength: Arms Dealing as Diplomacy under the Reagan Administration

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A POSITION OF STRENGTH: ARMS DEALING AS DIPLOMACY UNDER THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

by

William D. Watson

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A POSITION OF STRENGTH: ARMS DEALING AS DIPLOMACY UNDER THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

William D. Watson, M.A.
Western Michigan University, 2011

My thesis is an examination of the Cold War during the 1980s, with a focus on arms dealing and diplomacy under President Ronald Reagan from 1981-1989. I chose to write about three specific case studies based on the unique intersections of American diplomatic goals in relation to geography, the sophistication of weapons technology involved, and geopolitical considerations. The purpose of this thesis is to explain why and how the Reagan administration was able to carry out three separate arms deals, and in turn, how those deals fit into the broader, global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. My conclusions are based on primary source research done at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. I argue that the Soviet Union-related policies of the Reagan administration, as first outlined in National Security Decision Directive 75 in January 1983, acted as an accelerant to, not the catalyst of, the rapid and precipitous decline of Soviet power and influence which occurred while Reagan was in office. Understanding why and how the Cold War ended is important not only to historians, but society in general because of the lessons to be learned about conflict and cooperation between major powers.
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William D. Watson
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INTRODUCTION

In July 2010 the controversial website Wikileaks published thousands of classified documents regarding the ongoing war in Afghanistan. Among the papers was a report claiming that the Taliban had used heat-seeking missiles against allied aircraft. How could the Taliban have procured such high-tech weapons in a time of war? Actually, Taliban fighters were using missiles that were acquired during an earlier war. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the United States increasingly sent military support to Afghan resistance fighters known as the Mujahedeen. One type of aid came in the form of an anti-aircraft missile known as the Stinger. Distribution was sloppy during the resistance, and reclamation was even worse in the aftermath of the final Soviet withdrawal in 1989. As a result, after the US military invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, American weapons were used to attack American soldiers. This admittedly brief summary is just one example of how we in the present live among the consequences of our predecessors’ actions. However, to paraphrase George Santayana, we need not repeat the mistakes of the past if we understand their context.

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981 his ideology was no secret. He felt that the Soviet Union was the greatest threat to the American way of life, and accordingly, the United States must negotiate with the Soviets from a position of strength, both economically and militarily. This policy was reflected in the Reagan Doctrine: the belief that it is in the United States’ national interest to support anti-communist activity around the world in order to undermine Soviet geopolitical strategies, thereby improving the American position of strength. Under this policy, outlined specifically in the January 1983 National Security Decision Directive 75, Reagan supported proxy wars around the world, escalated the arms race, and in the process, hastened the end of the Soviet empire. Furthermore, by maintaining an open invitation for diplomatic relations with governments in military conflict with US proxy forces, Reagan’s policies as defined in NSDD 75 necessarily connected foreign policy with arms dealing.
Reagan’s policies also contributed to a weakened bipartisan foreign policy consensus, and intensified market-research politics in America.

Because this thesis is multi-disciplinary, there is a daunting amount of literature that touches on several relevant research topics. Additionally, since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been an important shift in the way Reagan and the Cold War have been written about in general. The fall of communism caused historians to reevaluate previous held dogmas about ideology, hegemony, and globalization. This new research is based on previously unheard of access to former Soviet archives, beginning after 1991. This thesis focuses on major works from noted historians produced within the last ten years.

The Reagan Presidential Library website lists a bibliography of one hundred thirty-three associated books. A cursory search of Amazon.com returns four hundred forty-seven books written about Ronald Reagan since January 2000 alone. The topics range from serious biography and political analysis to memorable quotes and jelly beans.¹

Some of the most interesting starting points of research for this thesis have come from the book *Victory* by Peter Schweizer, a conservative author and former administration lawyer. Although *Victory* is not a history book, (there are virtually no footnotes) it does include several intriguing stories from an insider’s perspective. Chief among them is Schweizer’s explanation of how the Reagan administration hoped to move from a policy of containment to winning the Cold War. Schweizer writes:

¹ One of the most popular books on Ronald Reagan is *Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* by Dinesh D’Souza. D’Souza argues that Reagan was the symbol of the modern conservative movement without ever actively seeking that consideration. Notably missing is from D’Souza’s text is an in-depth discussion of the Iran-Contra Affair or the deficit spending policies of the administration. Instead D’Souza focuses on Reagan’s political and intellectual importance. Another example of the extensive Reagan literature is *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-Up* by Lawrence Walsh. Walsh was the leader of the independent counsel legal team tasked with investigating and prosecuting illegal activities associated with the Iran-Contra Affair. His book is an attempt to describe, sometimes with excruciating detail, the story of his team’s investigation and the deliberate cover-up and obfuscation of evidence by the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations. Published only ten years after the original events, *Firewall* is far from representative of historical consensus on either Iran-Contra or Bush. But it is a highly detailed inside look of how people in power define truth and loyalty, and the lengths to which they will go to protect their interests.
The ‘resource crisis’ that the Soviet leadership faced the 1980s was not caused by American policy; it was inherent in the system. But what is only now emerging is the fact that the United States had a comprehensive policy to exacerbate this crisis. That policy took many forms: hidden diplomacy, covert operations, a technically intense and sustained defense buildup, as well as a series of actions designed to throw sand in the gears of the Soviet economy.²

That meant a shift from containing Soviet strengths to putting pressure on Soviet weaknesses.

The administration felt that there were two interrelated courses of action which could accomplish their goal. First, cut off western technology that was being sold to Soviets, thereby hampering modernization in the USSR and exacerbating an already faltering economy, and second, provoke the Soviets into an accelerated arms race based on technological innovation and deficit spending.

Schweizer’s book is full of statements similar to the one above, but again we run into the problem of sources. Because Victory is so poorly noted, I have taken it as an opportunity to track down the proof behind the words and see if Schweizer has repeated rhetoric or fact.

The key body of literature for this thesis concerns the Cold War. Two recent works emphasize the various approaches to studying the Cold War in the new century.³ The first is by historian Melvyn P. Leffler. His 2007 book, For the Soul of Mankind, is a hybrid of biography and case studies. He asks several questions in this book, including: Why did the Cold War last so

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³ Leffler and John Lewis Gaddis are two of the most prominent Cold War historians to date. Their work is especially important because they both published extensively on both sides of the 1989-91 time period. We are now able to compare how these authors viewed the Cold War from two differently informed times. Leffler’s opus, A Preponderance of Power, was published in 1992, but Soviet archives had yet to be opened. He closes this book with the following lament: “We will need to wait patiently for the opening of Soviet archival materials, and even then the information will be fragmentary and incomplete.” See Melvin Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 517. Leffler’s For the Soul of Mankind is a perfect example of how even the best history is necessarily rewritten as new information comes to light. Gaddis can be cast in a similar light. In his 1987 book The Long Peace, Gaddis wrote that history “has a habit of making bad prophets out of both those who make and those who chronicle it.” See John Lewis Gaddis, The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 244. In his 2005 book The Cold War: A New History, Gaddis wrote, “Humility is in order, therefore, when trying to assess the Cold War’s significance: the recent past is bound to look different when viewed through the binoculars of a distant future.” See John Lewis Gaddis, The Cold War: A New History (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 260. He writes that his new book was meant for a new generation of readers, and that with the opening of archives “we know much more: so much, in fact, that it’s easy to get overwhelmed.” Gaddis, A New History, preface X. Neither Leffler nor Gaddis needed to completely alter their previous approaches; rather they were able to supplement previous research in order to arrive at more complete conclusions regarding the history of the Cold War.
long? Why did both sides not back away from a mutually understood poor situation? And what changed in the mid-1980s that allowed Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan to step back from the brink? Leffler’s ultimate conclusion is that above all other individuals Gorbachev was responsible for the end of the Cold War. Reagan hated communism, but did not fear it, and he believed that the US could win a protracted war of ideology.

Another example of recent Cold War studies is Odd Arne Westad’s 2005 work, *The Global Cold War*. Westad discusses the foundation of ideology and expansion in the US and USSR in relation to Third World policy. The argument that Westad makes is that although both superpowers had hoped to direct Third World policies in a bi-polar worldview, the reality was that they could only influence what was already a force of its own. The people who lived in the Third World nations themselves, of course, had their own agendas outside of those held by the US and USSR. Cooperation with one or the other superpower (and sometimes both) could be a means to their ends, but as the Cold War endured, Third World government policies were not necessarily dictated by Washington or Moscow.

Leffler represents the old guard of Cold War historians who have been reenergized by the sudden access to Eastern European and Soviet archives, coupled with an ever-expanding library of memoirs and journals from former communist politicians and world leaders. Westad represents a generation of historians that treat the Cold War as a global, rather than bipolar, field of study. Westad’s work is at once international and in-depth. His work does not sacrifice quality for breadth of topic. By comparing Cold War studies from the 1980s with contemporary scholarship historians can trace the different approaches that have been used and cross-reference sources to see how some points of view may have changed over time as new information became available.

A juxtaposition of three approaches to one topic, the US-Saudi relationship, highlights the variety of Cold War literature focused more explicitly on the Reagan years. First, a brief return to *Victory*. In discussing Central Intelligence director Bill Casey, Schweizer writes: “To
Casey, the Saudis’ concern about Soviet intentions presented a chance to make Saudi Arabia a powerful ally of the United States. Oil was the mother’s milk of industry, and the West needed stable, secure access to reserves if there was going to be any economic recovery. This approach assumes that the US and Saudi Arabia already agreed on regional security concerns, or at least that both nations feared Soviet aggression. Just how close the two nations were in measuring the possibility of aggression is disputed. Was the US really concerned that the Soviets would attack Saudi Arabia? Or were the arms deals with the Saudi government more about securing low oil prices? Schweizer writes, ‘By raising the issue of oil pricing and the US-Saudi security relationship in the same conversation Casey was in effect saying that the two were related. It was an element of the Reagan strategy.’ “We wanted lower oil prices,” recalls [Secretary of Defense] Weinberger. “That’s one of the reasons we were selling them arms.” The bipolar Cold War approach described by Schweizer is challenged by other authors.

Because the Reagan Doctrine centers on a Cold War approach to diplomacy, removing the Soviets from the US-Saudi relationship is impossible. However, adding other nations, thereby diluting the importance of each state as the number rises, is quite possible. This is exactly what Nicolas Laham does in his book, Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia. Laham writes, “The oilfields of the Persian Gulf were extremely vulnerable to air attack from any one of three major hostile powers either in or near the region – Iraq, Iran, or Soviet military forces in Afghanistan.” This approach keeps the Soviets in play, but regionalizes the issue much more than Schweizer’s approach. Laham discusses at length the objections to the AWACS sale based on the apparent instability of the Middle East in 1981. If another regional war occurred involving Israel, and the US had already supplied the Saudis with high-tech weaponry in return for oil price stability, where would American allegiance stand? Would it be based on regional alliances? Anti-Soviet

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4 Schweizer, Victory, 27.
5 Schweizer, Victory, 31.
policies? Pro-Israel policies? Thankfully this is a counterfactual exercise, but the answers to such questions were extraordinarily important at the time, and could very well give us insight into how security decisions are made today.

The third approach to the US-Saudi relationship within the Cold War-Reagan literature comes from the 2008 publication of *Reagan, Bush, and Gorbachev: Revisiting the End of the Cold War*. Here the authors present an argument that diminishes the fear of Soviet aggression even further. In discussing Secretary of State Alexander Haig, the authors write:

> During April 1981, Haig toured the Middle East […] What he sought above all was agreement that Soviet expansionism comprised the chief threat to the Middle East […] Haig soon discovered that the Arab states regarded the issue of Palestinian autonomy, not Soviet expansionism, the chief danger to regional peace. Egypt made it clear that it had no interest in any anti-Soviet strategy for the Middle East.\(^7\)

This approach gives far greater credence to the concerns that Middle Eastern nations had over the existence of Israel rather than the possibility of further Soviet expansion or aggression. But we are still left with the same question that arises from any of these three approaches: in the event of a crisis, where would US allegiance be? Would the US continue to play all sides? Would such an approach even be feasible?

The final group of scholarship that informs this thesis concerns military history, particularly arms dealing. This subject has been written about steadily over time, yet also shares a similar flash point with Cold War literature: the fall of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Arms dealing studies exploded after the fall of communism, when the arsenals of former Eastern Bloc and Soviet satellites began to unload their stockpiles for cash.

One prominent example of the pre-1991 literature is *The Arms Bazaar* by Anthony Sampson. Because this book was published in 1977, the analysis is almost entirely focused on the military-industrial complex of the superpowers and their allies. Chapters are separated by region and theme, spanning the globe. Sampson writes, “With the end of the railroad boom the

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steelmasters like Krupp, Vickers and Carnegie, who had built up whole cities in Essen, Sheffield
and Pittsburgh, looked elsewhere to fill their order books; and they looked to the industry which
was most profitable and which was also in the vanguard of invention – to arms.⁸ That is to say,
the relationship between government and heavy industry during the Cold War was certainly
nothing new; the morality of profit never changes. Ultimately, Sampson finds, “The extension of
uncontrolled free trade, then and now, puts a premium on arms as the most liberated trade of all;
for it remains the unique characteristic of the arms traffic that it can expand its market rapidly and
almost indefinitely by playing one side against the other.”⁹ That scenario, as described over thirty
years ago, has continued to endure.

One of the books to bridge the thematic gap between the US-Soviet arms race and the
post-1991 armory purges is The International Arms Trade by Rachel Stohl and Suzette Grillot.¹⁰
The authors offer an introductory approach to arms dealing with a focus on what is currently
being done to track and manage the business of violence. One of the most glaring hypocrisies of
regulation comes from the fact that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security
Council (the United States, Russia, China, Great Britain, and France) are also the world’s five
largest arms dealers. The authors write, “Thus, their role in the international arms trade is central
to any larger discussion of the nature and consequences of the conventional arms trade, as well as
efforts to control them.”¹¹

Similar to Sampson, the authors note that one of the important changes in arms trading
over time is who actually makes the weapons. The authors write, “The first major trend in the

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⁹ Sampson, The Arms Bazaar, 329.
¹⁰ The work of Stohl and Grillot is much closer to a work of history than some of the other popular arms
dealing related books that have been published in the last ten years. The arms dealing lit itself is often
conjoined with studies of drug smuggling, organized crime, and even human trafficking. There are also
sub-genres that deal with the way specific weapons have been developed and dealt over time, most notably
the AK-47. Several studies already exist, including Larry Kahaner’s AK-47: The Weapon that Changed the
Face of War and Christopher Carr’s Kalashnikov Culture: Small Arms Proliferation and Irregular
Warfare. These books and their cousins tend to follow the international chronology of small-scale conflicts
and civil wars in which machine guns can win the day.
modern arms trade system was the shift from private to government actors as the dominant players.”

With governments at the crest of the arms trade, foreign policy and commerce were wed in a perfect match of profit seeking and paranoid diplomacy. While the overall value of arms deals pales in comparison to agriculture or oil, for example, the ends that weapons facilitate are far more valuable than the means to procure them. I explore how the Reagan Administration used arms dealing as geopolitical strategy, ensuring their preferred negotiating stance.

The chapters are organized into three case studies, each representing a different level of arms dealing: high-tech nuclear weapons, high-tech non-nuclear weapons, and low-tech conventional weapons. Chapter one discusses the 1981 sale of advanced surveillance aircraft to Saudi Arabia, known as AWACS (Airborne Warning Control System). The US alliance tapestry in the Middle East made such deals controversial at best. But in 1981, several recent events played important roles in policymaking, including the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the American economic hangover from oil crises of the 1970s. In that atmosphere, the Reagan administration argued that protecting Saudi Arabia and the oil they controlled was vital to national security, and therefore dealing sophisticated arms to the Saudis was a necessary step in protecting the American way of life.

Chapter two deals with the basing of American Pershing II nuclear missiles in Western Europe. The delicate balance of deterrence between Moscow and Washington was disrupted in the 1970s when the Soviets deployed a new and highly advanced missile system in Europe, the SS-20. The Reagan administration felt that the imbalance in nuclear forces in Europe constituted a fundamental threat to the relative security of mutually assured destruction between the two nations, and reaffirmed his desire to eliminate all nuclear weapons. As a result, Reagan pursued a highly aggressive policy of confrontation with the Soviets in his first term in order to reset the balance. In his second term, along with the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Reagan then

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12 Stohl, Arms Trade, 16.
negotiated the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty, the first nuclear arms reduction treaty in history.

Chapter three is a look at the complicated nature of Third World intervention, focusing on the Contra War in Nicaragua. When Reagan took office in January, 1981, the Nicaraguan government was run by a group called the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas were a power bloc of Marxist-Leninists who took over the government of Nicaragua after a late-1970s revolution against the ruling dynastic family. For Reagan, acquiescence to another communist nation in the Western Hemisphere was unacceptable, and he blamed Jimmy Carter for ineffectually dealing with Soviet adventurism in the Third World. By supporting anti-Sandinista forces, known to the administration as “contras,” Reagan tried to turn back the clock in Nicaragua to a time more favorable to US interests. In doing so, Reagan had to fight public opinion, Congress, and near-impeachment over the Iran-Contra Affair in order to achieve his policy goals in Central America.

Each case also represents a different approach to achieving diplomatic ends by varying means, but all within the framework of dealing arms for political concessions. In the AWACS case, the administration dealt arms bilaterally to the Saudis in order to solidify the alliance between the two nations. By deploying the Pershing II missiles under NATO guidelines and control, the administration worked within a multilateral framework. In doing so, they strengthened the position of an alliance in which the US maintained the largest plurality of material investment, while wringing concessions from an equally multilateral political opponent, the Warsaw Pact, under direction of the Soviet Union. In Nicaragua, the administration supplied non-governmental groups with weapons and communications equipment in order to destabilize the anti-American government led by the Sandinistas. This effort was meant to force the Sandinistas into allowing open participatory elections, at which point the administration calculated that moderate democratic forces within Nicaragua would prevail, and return to a pro-American government.
In formulating his foreign policy, Reagan borrowed from a myriad of previous precedents and policy doctrines. From Truman’s crusading in Greece to Kennedy’s brinksmanship over Cuba and Nixon’s covert policies in Southeast Asia, Reagan embodied the culmination of American Cold War ideology in the guise of an actor playing a politician. And although Reagan experienced his share of ups-and-downs, for the most part, the American public loved him for his confidence and rhetorical style.
CHAPTER 1

LOUD AND CLEAR: REAGAN, AWACS, AND THE GRAND STRATEGY

“Let us beware that while they (the Soviet Union) preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.” – Ronald Reagan, 1983

In February 1945, Franklin Roosevelt left the Yalta conference of the Big Three and headed back to the United States. Along the way he stopped in Suez, and aboard a US Navy ship, hosted a meeting with King Ibn Saud. During the meeting, Saud waxed kindly about the two men’s leg troubles. Roosevelt thought that Saud was better off since he still had partial use of his legs. The King felt that Roosevelt was better off. Saud’s legs were unreliable, but Roosevelt’s wheelchair could be counted on to take the president anywhere he wanted to go. As a gesture of goodwill to the old King, Roosevelt gave him a spare wheelchair.\(^{13}\) The two leaders, if not nations, were on equal footing, so to speak. Thus began the special relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan offered the reigning Saudi king, Abdul Aziz, a very different material package: the Airborne Warning Control System, or AWACS. Reagan’s offer was tinged with national confidence rather than personal humility, but the two presidential gestures were intended to foster the same result: strengthen ties between the two nations in order to win a war against a common enemy. The central aim of US-Saudi policy is to create regional stability in order to protect the vast oil fields of the peninsula. To paraphrase Lord Palmerston, the US and Saudi Arabia may not be eternal allies, but they do share permanent interests.

1979 was a tough year for the US interests in the Middle East, and even tougher for the people of the region. Early in the year Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi fled Iran. In July the brutal dictator Saddam Hussein took power in Iraq, and shortly thereafter started a war. In November the Iranian revolution turned into a hostage crisis. That same month, the grand

mosque in Mecca was held hostage by Islamic fundamentalists for two weeks. In December the
Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Even peace was contested among non-belligerents regarding
the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. Nothing seemed to be going right, and the
approach to diplomacy were replaced by Ronald Reagan in a landslide vote. It would not take
long for Reagan and his administration of foreign policy realists to seize the initiative in
southwest Asia and utilize arms deals to solidify diplomatic relations with two otherwise
antagonistic nations, Saudi Arabia and Israel. In doing so, the administration negotiated its way
into an enduring security-based position of dominating influence both politically and militarily.

In order to understand Reagan’s AWACS policy, it is important to note that many of
Reagan’s most visible policies were actually inherited from Carter, including arms negotiations
with the Saudis. Reagan’s first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, writes, “The AWACS
controversy, as it came to be called, originated in the Carter Administration. [...] the outgoing
administration intended to sell the Saudis some form of radar surveillance aircraft or ‘airborne
warning and control system’ (AWACS).”14 The negotiations during the Carter administration
were never completed, but according to Haig, the promise between the Washington and Riyadh
was made. In the 1980 presidential campaigned, Reagan accused Carter of being ineffectual in
dealing with communism, especially in the Third World and the Middle East. The fact that no
deal was completed under Carter was the perfect opportunity for Reagan to argue publicly that
after the last four years, American credibility in the region was at stake. The administration
framed the debate within the context of honor and stability.

Historian Douglas Little described the difficulty of securing US interests in the Middle
East as the search for a modern Monroe Doctrine in the region.15 That is, a search for how the US
government can protect vital interests in a specific geographic region. However, his treatment of

the issue does not account for the profound historical differences of the eras. Announced in December 1823, the Monroe Doctrine was the brainchild of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, not President Monroe. The policy of the doctrine was meant to take advantage of the mutual interest which Great Britain and the US shared in keeping other European colonial powers out of the western hemisphere during the early nineteenth century. However, since the US was in no position to enforce the doctrine militarily, the British navy filled that role. In the post-World War II Middle East, the Saudis were playing the role of a weak but rising nation dependent on the US military to enforce regional security. Therefore, Little's comparison between the two eras fails to correctly reposition the US within the original parameters of the issuance of the Monroe Doctrine.

The complicated history of American involvement in the Middle East, especially during the Cold War, led to a tenuous situation as Reagan took office. Haig deftly summed up American interests in the region looking forward from January 1981:

In pursuing the peace process, our goal was to strengthen and complete the Camp David accords, which provided the best hope of preventing the outbreak of another Arab-Israeli war. At the same time, we had to pursue our strategic interests, finding ways to work with each of our friends in the region so that the forces that threatened us all could be contained.¹⁶

Therein lay the problem facing the new administration: how could the United States satisfy all the people all the time? What were American strategic interests? What was the force that "threatened us all?" If consensus on a threat were found, what could the new administration do about it? The answers to these questions were flushed out in the debate (approximately April to October 1981) over whether or not the United States should sell advanced military and surveillance equipment, most notably the AWACS, to Saudi Arabia. In completing the AWACS deal, the Reagan administration was able to create a successful triangular diplomacy which defined "red" Soviet aggression in Afghanistan and the "red" Shia Islamic revolution in Iran as threats to regional stability, and thereby American interests. The US agreed to supply the

weapons needed to contain both threats simultaneously, while encouraging a third-party peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia. It was never necessary that the Saudis and Israelis become allies on their own: they were both allies of the United States and common enemies of the two expansionist “red” ideologies threatening the region.

The Colors of Islam

Green has long been the traditional color of Islam. References to green clothes being worn in paradise can be found in the Qur’an.\(^\text{17}\) The color green is used to decorate mosques, graves, tombs, and other burial markers. In addition, the flags of over a dozen countries with Muslim majorities contain the color green (even more than the crescent symbol), as does the flag of the Arab League and the Islamic Conference.

The association of the color red with Islam is much more contemporary. Historian Vali Nasr traced the origin to a lay intellectual named Ali Shariati, and the mid-twentieth century blending of Marxist and Islamic ideologies. Nasr writes, “Shariati was keenly aware of Shia theology and history, but his worldview was shaped by Marxism and Third Worldism. [...] For Shariati, the challenge was how to translate Marxist ideas into cultural symbols that the Shia masses could relate to – how to make Marx go down easier by giving him a Shia coating, so to speak.”\(^\text{18}\) Red was the color of revolution, secular and non-secular, around the world during Shariati’s lifetime, including Marxist inspired revolts and those more broadly influenced by liberation theology. Shariati therefore chose to label his interpretation of Islam as “Red Shiism.”\(^\text{19}\)

\(^\text{17}\) Qur’an, Surah 76:21.
\(^\text{19}\) Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 129.
The E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System

It is prudent to offer a brief explanation of what the AWACS plane can and cannot do. The plane itself is a modified Boeing 707, labeled by the US Air Force as the E-3 Sentry. It does not carry offensive weapons. According to the official USAF webpage, “The radar and computer subsystems on the E-3 Sentry can gather and present broad and detailed battlefield information. This includes position and tracking information on enemy aircraft and ships, and location and status of friendly aircraft and naval vessels.” In other words, the AWACS is the eyes and ears of modern high-tech warfare in which information rules the day. Washington and Riyadh both recognized the vulnerability of the rich oil fields surrounding the Persian Gulf, and moved to protect them from a surprise attack. The AWACS planes were only meant to be the front line of a broader defense network in the Gulf that covered air, land, and sea. However, the technological capabilities of the AWACS could be applied to a much wider range of uses than national defense, including spying or coordinating offensive attacks. Advanced surveillance equipment from both the US and British had been used by various Middle East countries before 1981, most notably the deployment of AWACS planes by the US to monitor unrest in Yemen during 1978-79. That action was a favor between Washington and Riyadh, but on a small scale and under authority of US forces. At the time of the AWACS debate in Congress, there was no agreement as to who would be in charge of the planes in the air or on the ground. The only agreement was that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented a threat to regional security.

The Soviets

Above all else, the Reagan administration saw the AWACS deal in Cold War terms. The reason was not embodied in the deal itself, but in what the deal represented in the future. The ends which the deal facilitated were far more valuable that the means to procure them.

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Weakening Soviet power and influence was the number one foreign policy goal of the administration, and the best way to do that was to improve its alliance with the Saudis. Because the Soviets and the Iranians both generated huge incomes from their nationalized oil industries, driving down the price of oil was in the best interest of the US both as a stimulant to the US economy, and as form of economic warfare against Moscow and Teheran.

By 1981, the US economy was in a deep recession, in part from the oil shocks of the 1970s, so strengthening ties with the Saudis allowed the US to solve multiple problems at once. First, the US would gain access to cheap oil. The Saudis control the largest oil reserves on the planet. As such, they have the ability to flood oil markets at times of their choosing. What the Saudis lose in price per barrel, they make up in market share. Inexpensive oil drove down the cost of industry in the US, which in turn helped stimulate the economy. Historian Douglas Little explains, “By early 1990 US multinationals were paying just $18.00 per barrel for Middle Eastern crude, a figure that, when discounted for inflation, translated into a price 25 percent lower than the $11.65 that OPEC had imposed during the first oil shock seventeen years earlier.”21 Referring to a meeting between CIA Director William Casey and Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisl, former Reagan administration lawyer Peter Schweizer writes, “By raising the issues of oil pricing and the US-Saudi security relationship in the same conversation, Casey was in effect saying that the two were related. It was an element of the Reagan strategy.”22

The public record supports Schweizer’s position. In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations committee, Secretary Haig said, “many of our security assistance partners enjoy a geographic proximity to the resources our economy demands. [...] As we strengthen these states, we strengthen ourselves.”23 President Reagan spoke even more forcefully, saying, “This sale will significantly improve the capability of Saudi Arabia and the United States to defend the oil fields

21 Little, American Orientalism, 73.
on which the security of the free world depends.” Reagan became famous for his ideological bombast, and the public debate over the AWACS deal gave him the perfect opportunity to use his talents. At a press conference in October 1981, Reagan said, “Saudi Arabia and the OPEC nations there in the East – and Saudi Arabia is the most important – provide the bulk of energy that is needed to turn the wheels of industry in the Western World, there’s no way that we could stand by and see that taken over by anyone that would shut off that oil.” At that time, the “anyone” to which Reagan referred was the Soviets and the Islamists in Iran.

The second Cold War type of consideration attached to the AWACS deal, based on low energy costs, was the increased size of the American tax base. A rejuvenated economy meant a larger tax base, which could then be borrowed against in order to finance deficit spending on an unprecedented military build-up. The new high-tech military could then be used to confront Soviet aggression around the globe, including Afghanistan.

A third Cold War aspect of the deal was the ripple effect of an improved American economy. In time, recovery from the recession strengthened the value of the dollar, which in turn gave the Saudis greater purchasing power with its oil revenues (paid in dollars) thereby completing the circle of dependency. With an increased national income, and a tighter alliance with the US, the Saudis were willing to support American interventions around the globe. The most obvious was in Afghanistan, where the Saudis were all too happy to aid their Sunni Muslim brothers in jihad against the atheistic communists. Here, the Saudis and Iranians shared a common threat, but no direct alliance. Historian Odd Arne Westad explains, “The slogans and the worldview of the Iranian Islamists, purged of its Shia vocabulary, fitted the purpose of the

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25 Reagan, PPP, 873.
26 Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., The Cambridge Economic History of the United States Volume 3: The Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 334. The authors make it clear that the bureaucratic structure (also known as the Iron Triangle or Military-Industrial Complex) was already in place when Reagan took office. What is more important is the sheer size of the bureaucracy during the Reagan administration.
Afghans well: the creation of an Islamic state, the stress on Islamic internationalism, and the condemnation of the godlessness and materialism of the superpowers gave a larger purpose to what might have been an incongruous alliance.”

Riyadh also contributed to a CIA shell corporation, the Human Development Fund, to help the administration pay for the Contra war in Nicaragua.

A final Cold War facet of the AWACS deal was that manipulating world energy markets undercut the potential earnings of both Moscow and Tehran, limiting their ability to grow economically. Arms deals were second only to energy as Soviet exports, but the Soviet Union relied desperately on access to western technology and industrial patents to upgrade its infrastructure. The American position during the summer of 1981 was to constrain Soviet economic leverage over the West, and not allow the transfer of Western technology that increased Soviet war-making capabilities. The US put pressure on its Western European allies to delay a Soviet natural gas pipeline, and moved into the realm of science fiction style sabotage. In June 1982, an American early warning satellite detected an explosion in Siberia, the heart of the Soviet energy economy. A gas line had exploded in such a grand fashion that it was visible from space. The apparent cause of the malfunction was what has become known as a “logic bomb.” In this particular case, agents of the CIA pre-altered software which Soviet agents then stole while operating in Canada. In time, the automation program ran its course, and because of manipulated program script, caused a pressure overload in the pipeline, which burst with great fury.

Schweizer writes:

The ‘resource crisis’ that the Soviet leadership faced in the 1980s was not caused by American policy; it was inherent in the system. But what is only now emerging is the fact that the United States had a comprehensive policy to

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exacerbate this crisis. That policy took many forms: hidden diplomacy, covert operations, a technically intense and sustained defense buildup, as well as a series of actions designed to throw sand in the gears of the Soviet economy.  

The US sought to keep the Soviet energy industry as inefficient as possible and lower income potential by espionage and economic warfare, thereby exacerbating existing problems within the Soviet system.

These four relationships between the Cold War and the AWACS deal constitute a large part of the overall Reagan “Grand Strategy” to move away from détente and containment of the Soviet Union, to an outright effort to “win” the Cold War. The culmination of these and other policies are expressed in National Security Decision Directive 75, “US Relations with the USSR,” issued in January 1983. In part, the Decision reads, “U.S. objectives are: Above all, to ensure that East-West economic relations do not facilitate the Soviet military buildup. This requires prevention of the transfer of technology and equipment that would make a substantial contribution directly or indirectly to Soviet military power.” However, the single greatest threat to a successful completion of the AWACS deal was also one of America’s greatest Cold War allies: Israel. I will discuss Israel’s concerns below, but first a look at the Shia revival and its effect on regional stability in the Middle East.

Red Islam

While the Reagan administration considered the AWACS deal to be first and foremost a Cold War issue, the Israeli and Saudi governments saw the AWACS deal in regional security terms. As noted above, 1979 was a distinctly unsettling time in the Middle East. 1980 brought little relief. Saddam Hussein saw the chaos of the Iranian revolution as an opportunity to expand Iraqi national interests at the expense of his neighbor. Hussein wanted control of the Shatt-al-

31 Schweizer, Victory, xiii.
Arab waterway at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers which formed the border between Iraq and Iran. To secure this position, in September 1980, the Iraqi military invaded Iran. The result was a near-decade long war of bloody attrition (1980-1988) in which the US supplied weapons to both nations. Hussein and his army were not able to capitalize on Iran’s internal chaos, and instead, the Iranians rallied against a common enemy and slowly turned the tide of battle into a stalemate. In the process, the “red” Shia Islamists consolidated power and secured the gains of the revolution within the borders of Iran.

Until 1979, the conservative Sunni Muslim majority in Saudi Arabia had been the most active group within Islamic global community. Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina. Mecca is the home of the Grand Mosque and the Kaaba, and the destination of the Haj, or pilgrimage, one of the five pillars of Islam. When Muslims pray five times a day, they physically look to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi’s brand of conservative “green” Islam was visible throughout the world. The Saudi monarchy funded madrasahs and Islamic missionary work not just in the region, but globally.

For the House of Saud, the competition between Sunni and Shia sects for control of Islam itself was at stake after the revolution. Westad observed, “Khomeini’s return to Teheran and the Islamic Republic he proceeded to set up visualized the existence of an alternative focus of opposition, in which temporal justice derived from the word of God and not exclusively from the decisions of men. Islamism provided an ideology centered on the Third World itself, through which both Western projects of modernization could be condemned.” The Iranian Revolution was a revolt against secular nationalism and modernization. The conservative Saudis were

33 Through the course of the Iran-Contra Affair it became known that the US was supplying Iran with spare parts for the arsenal of American weapons that were co-opted in the 1979 revolution. The US was also supplying Iran with new weapons, including anti-tank weapons. At the same time, through the “Bear Spares” program, the US was supplying Iraq with replacement parts and maintenance gear for the Soviet arms already in its arsenal. The US also supplied Iraq with agricultural credits and satellite reconnaissance photos of Iranian troop movements. For more information see the testimony of former National Security Council member Howard Teicher in United States of America v. Carlos Cardoen, et al, case number 93-241-CR-HIGHSMITH, January 31, 1995, United States District Court – Southern District of Florida.
34 Westad, Global Cold War, 295.
selective in their modernization projects, but like pre-revolutionary Iran, they actively sought to modernize their militaries. When asked about the possibility of revolution in Saudi Arabia, and a subsequent repetition of American material losses in Iran, Reagan was clear: “I have to say that Saudi Arabia, we will not permit to be an Iran.” The Saudis were also concerned about internal security following the Grand Mosque takeover in November 1979, the same month that the revolution in Iran was turning into a hostage crisis. As an example of monarchial fortitude in maintaining internal security, sixty-eight of the Islamic fundamentalist perpetrators of the Grand Mosque take-over were publicly beheaded in various parts of the country.

For the Saudis, conservatism meant stability, something Reagan could appreciate. In an ongoing effort to tie the security of Israel to the stability of the region, Reagan said, “[I]t is essential that we show the Middle East that we are prepared to participate there in trying to bring peace and in aligning ourselves with the moderate Arab states, as well as we have with Israel.” When the Reagan administration officials spoke of supporting moderate states in the region, what they really meant was supporting conservative Sunni majority states which opposed the radical Shia majority state of Iran. Unfortunately for the people of Israel, and for the success of Reagan’s Middle East peace plan, Green Islam, like Red Islam, condemns the existence of the state of Israel. This situation put Iran and Saudi Arabia in an awkward position, creating an exception to the oldest rule of Realpolitik: the enemy of an enemy was not a friend. Because of the opposition between “red” and “green” Islam, the two nations could not coordinate their objections to the state of Israel in any meaningful way.

The success of the Iranian Revolution, however, did far more than secure the sovereignty of an Islamist state. Westad writes:

The Iranian revolution was a watershed for both superpowers in their encounters with the Third World. For the United States it meant that Communism was no longer the only comprehensive, modern ideology that confronted American power. […] For the Soviets, Khomeini’s victory meant that the Marxist theory of

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36 Reagan, *PPP*, 918.
Third World revolutions had encountered significant problems: the left was supposed to supplant ‘clerical reaction’ as the alternative to imperialist exploitation, not the other way around.\(^{37}\)

This framing makes it easy to see that the addition of a revitalized and global-reaching ideological movement in no way replaced either of the existing superpower economic structures. Washington and Moscow shared a common threat to their enlightened modernization projects. And yet, for the Americans and the Soviets, much like Red and Green Islam, the enemy of an enemy was a friend to neither. The American policy stance in September 1981 was based on a fear of anarchy in Iran. Regarding the buffer status once held by Iran between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf, Haig testified, “The danger to Iran’s independence and integrity poses a threat to U.S. security that would make Iran’s own wanton assault on international order pale by comparison.”\(^{38}\) Without knowing whether or not the Iranian Revolution would be secure, the two superpowers reacted to the disruption of the status quo in the Middle East in very different ways. Moscow sent an army, while Washington sent arms.

The geography of the Shia diaspora is key to understanding Saudi and superpower responses to the new Islamist state. In describing the success of the Iranian revolution, Nasr writes, “Khomeini used the emotional power of Shia lore and imagery not only to help him seize control of Iran but to lay claim to Shiism’s very soul. In the process he also made Islamic fundamentalism a political force that would change Muslim politics from Morocco to Malaysia.”\(^{39}\) Shia Muslims are a numerical minority to Sunni Muslims globally. However, Shia are concentrated in key geopolitical areas of the Middle East and Central Asia. The greatest body of Shia are in Iran, but a large number of Shia also live along the Persian Gulf coast from Qatar north through the oil fields of Saudi Arabia, into Kuwait and southern Iraq, then crossing into Iran and the north shore of the Gulf. The diaspora also extends north from Iran into Central Asia along the coast of the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan, and north of India including parts of Pakistan.


\(^{39}\) Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 121.
Afghanistan, and China. There are also small but substantial populations of Shia in the former Soviet states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Moscow feared that Khomeini’s message would spread quickly, undermining Soviet influence in the region. Geography and demography were two of the key factors in the Kremlin’s choice to invade Afghanistan in December 1979. By doing so, the Soviets hoped to check the expansion of the Islamist movement and reassert their own hegemony in Central Asia.

One American response to the Iranian Revolution was to re-examine the “Twin Pillar” policy for stability in the Middle East. Former National Security Council member Howard Teicher explains, “During the administration of President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger devised a security strategy which became known as the ‘Twin Pillars’ policy. This policy relied upon two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to protect important American interests in the Persian Gulf.” The loss of Iran as a regional ally needed to be remedied, and the Reagan administration believed that confirming and strengthening the existing alliance with Saudi Arabia was the first step. Secretary Haig testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Our approach to Saudi Arabia has been shaped by the profound insecurity caused by events of the last 5 years, particularly the fall of the Shah.”

Israel

From its inception as a nation-state, Israel has had to fight for survival. It fought at least one major war with at least one (though often more) Arab state in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. To a large extent, the US has worked to guarantee Israel’s security, most notably during the October War in 1973. After initial military successes by Egypt and Syria in the Sinai and Golan Heights, the US agreed to supply Israel with material support while also working on a cease-fire agreement. The long term result was the Camp David Accords and a “land for peace” deal.

between Israel and Egypt. However, Camp David was not popular with other states in the region, and for a time all but three Arab nations broke diplomatic relations with Egypt.

The Reagan administration considered regional stability as the best defense for Israel. Tel Aviv agreed, but did not share Washington’s view of how to achieve stability. The administration argued that, like Israel, Saudi Arabia must be able to defend itself. Washington preferred a balance of power model in the Middle East, although not necessarily in equal distribution among its allies. Security for Israel meant the ability to defend itself against multiple Arab states at once, regardless of whether or not a potential belligerent was an American ally. Tel Aviv preferred clear military superiority, which would serve as a deterrent to any first strike. The administration was sympathetic to Israel’s position on security, but not at the cost of its own alliances.

Reagan was undeniably consistent in his regional stability message. He was asked time and again about the controversial AWACS sale, and nearly every time he attached the security of Israel to the stability of the region, and the stability of the region to completing a deal with the Saudis. Discussing the proposed deal at a news conference, Reagan said, “It poses no threat to Israel, now or in the future. Indeed, by contributing to the security and stability of the region, it serves Israel’s long-range interests.”42 In an effort to show broad support for the AWACS deal, Reagan invited a distinguished list of former cabinet officials and national security advisors to publicly back the package. In a joint statement, both Henry Kissinger and former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown offered their take on the situation, in the positive. Kissinger said, “I believe the sale is in the national interests of the United States; it is compatible with the security of Israel; it is essential for the peace process in the Middle East; and it is important for the President’s ability to conduct an effective and credible foreign policy.”43

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42 Reagan, *PPP*, 867.
43 Reagan, *PPP*, 889. The statement in support of the AWACS sale reads: “The sale of AWACS and other air defense equipment to Saudi Arabia would make a substantial contribution to the national security of the United States in a vital part of the world. The rejection of this sale would damage the ability of the United
endorsement was a particularly sweet victory for Reagan. Historian Jeremy Suri writes, “His [Kissinger’s] successors, including Ronald Reagan, condemned Kissinger’s emphasis on limits, but they continued to draw on the diplomatic networks and the maneuvers of force that he pioneered.”44 Both Carter and Reagan had been elected in reaction against the détente era of Nixon and Kissinger. Both Carter and Reagan based their politics on ideology over realism. The difference was that while Carter’s ideology was rooted in human rights broadly defined, Reagan’s ideology was built on anti-communism. However, in this case Reagan and Kissinger agreed on a realist vision of the situation in the Middle East based on a balance of power.

For its part, Tel Aviv was unconvinced by the Reagan administration’s framing of the debate. In September 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin traveled to Washington to join the lobbying effort against the AWACS deal in Congress. He was not alone, as Bandar bin Sultan had been sent by the Saudi royal family to Washington as well. Begin argued that Saudi Arabia was an unstable nation with radical elements in key positions, and that adding AWACS to their Saudi Royal Air Force would put Israel at a defensive disadvantage. Begin complained that Saudi Arabia had not accepted the Camp David Accords, which was offered as proof that the Saudis did not favor peace in the region. At one point, the public discourse over the AWACS sale devolved to the point where Reagan felt compelled to assert that, “[W]hile we must always take into account the vital interests of our allies, American security interests must remain our internal responsibility. It is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy.”45

Begin and Bandar were not alone in their efforts. The pro-Israel lobby was working vociferously on behalf of Begin and the Jewish state, and the Saudis hired veteran lobbyist and

States to conduct a credible and effective foreign policy, not only in the Gulf region, but across a broad range of issues.” This statement was endorsed by: Kissinger, Brown, Melvin Laird, Robert McNamara, Elliot Richardson, Donald Rumsfeld, James Schlesinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, McGeorge Bundy, Gordon Gray, Walt Rostow, Brent Scowcroft, General Lyman Lemnitzer, Admiral Thomas Moorer, General Maxwell Taylor, and William P. Rogers.

45 Reagan, *PPP*, 867.
former John F. Kennedy Legislative Affairs assistant Frederick Dutton to parry the aforementioned group. In terms of the American legal process, in order to complete sale, at least one house of Congress was required to approve the deal. The House of Representatives would have no part in backing the arms package. The Senate was malleable, but approval was far from assured.

The Domestic Debate

Michigan Senator and member of the Armed Services Committee, Carl Levin, wrote to National Security Advisor Richard Allen in April 1981, expressing his concerns over the AWACS deal. In part, Levin argued that without details as to who would be in control of both the planes and the information gathered therein, it would be difficult to support any arms package. Senator Levin asked:

Who is going to be in command of the aircraft and will they be Saudi aircraft with Saudi markings? Will the American personnel follow orders issued by the Saudis, or will they follow only those orders issued by an American officer? What command relationship will be established aboard the aircraft between the Saudi and the American officers in charge of the personnel? Will the American officer have the authority to refuse or countermand a request or order by Saudi officers or authorities either in the air or on the ground?46

Two internal White House memos confirm the significance of Senator Levin’s questions. National Security Council member Geoffrey Kemp wrote, “I think it would be unwise for the White House to answer in writing his good questions in too much detail at the moment, since we don’t’ have all the answers at this time!”47 NSC member Bob Kimmitt agreed. In response to Kemp, Kimmitt wrote that the White House, “should send only a general response to Levin” and that “we should also avoid statements that will only serve to encourage another Levin letter.”48

The White House had no tangible answers to Levin’s question at the time, so they chose rhetoric

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and obfuscation. At this early stage of the public debate, a majority of Senators were unwilling to accept the administration’s position.

Led by a conservative senator from Oregon, Bob Packwood, both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate openly challenged the President’s position. In a June 1981 press conference, Senator Roger Jespen complained that before the Iranian Revolution, the Senate Armed Services Committee assured the US Government that while the Shah was in danger, American weaponry was not. Senator Packwood stated that, “Our interest is best served by a permanent peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Saudi Arabia is an impediment to that peace.” He also bemoaned that Saudi Arabia was responsible for raising the price of “our oil.” Senator Henry Jackson argued that allowing Saudis to control the AWACS planes and information was an affront to other American allies. Jackson wondered, “Why apply to the Saudis an authority we don’t give to NATO?” The signers of the Packwood Resolution felt that Israel already had a military that was adequate enough to keep the Soviets out of the region and that the real threat to Saudi Arabia was internal.49

Many people, both in and out of government, expressed fears that Israel’s security would be threatened by arming the Saudis. As a result, both the White House (WH) and State Department (DOS) worked to build support for the deal and assuage fears of worst case scenarios. In one exchange, a DOS official wrote, “Israel already has a highly effective air defense system [...] as well as defensive missile and gun systems. Any attack by Saudi Arabia on Israel would be prohibitively costly.”50 The “prohibitively costly” argument was included as part of a standard response form to Congressmen who were concerned with Israel’s security, including letters to Representative William M. Broadhead of Michigan, and Senator Rudy Boschwitz of Minnesota.51

This indicates that the Reagan administration had substantial confidence in ability of the Israeli military to defend itself as long as the status quo was upheld.

By taking control of the public debate and tying Israeli security to regional stability, Reagan was able to convince the Senate to approve the AWACS deal with a vote of 52-48.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{The Qualitative Edge}

Maintaining the 1981 conditional balance of Middle East militaries meant that if the US dealt AWACS to the Saudis, the Israelis would have to be compensated as well. In order to placate Begin and the Knesset in Tel Aviv, the Reagan administration offered a substantially increased arms package to Israel following the passage of the AWACS deal. A close examination of the evidence indicates that this is likely what both the Israeli and US Governments had been working toward throughout the debate.

Hidden in the public discourse over the AWACS deal is a continuity of language regarding the American-Israeli security alliance. In framing the public debate, the Reagan administration argued: both Israel and Saudi Arabia needed to be able to defend themselves against outside aggression, whether it be communist or fundamentalist, and yet simultaneously not become embroiled in an armed conflict between one another despite the subsequent regional arms buildup. The link between the two nations was an interest in regional stability, and access to the United States arsenal. The answer for how the Saudis could protect themselves was clearly embodied in the AWACS package, but the Israeli situation was more subtle. In an April 1981 correspondence, one DOS official wrote, “since the October 1973 war, a central feature of U.S. policy has been to assure fully that Israel retains qualitative military superiority in the region.”\textsuperscript{53}

In a near echo that sentiment, a WH official wrote in May 1981, “A central feature of US policy since the October 1973 war has been to assure that Israel retains a qualitative military

\begin{flushright}\textsuperscript{52} Nicolas Laham, \textit{Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia: The Reagan Administration and the Balancing of America’s Competing Interests in the Middle East} (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 122. \textsuperscript{53} Letter, Joseph W. Twinam to Leib Orlanski, Undated, WHORM: FO 003-02, Ronald Reagan Library.\end{flushright}
superiority.” The way to ensure such superiority was to promise an increase in arms sales to
Israel in anticipation of successfully completing the AWACS deal with the Saudi government.

According to Secretary Haig, there was some understanding between Washington, Tel
Aviv, and Riyadh from the outset. In his memoirs, Haig recalls the situation as one of bad timing
and press leaks. He wrote that as early as February 1981, Reagan, Begin, and Israeli Foreign
Minister Yitzhak Shamir were in agreement that, “the United States would supply to Israel an
extra squadron of fifteen F-15’s at a cost of $300 million; in return, the Israelis would mute their
opposition to the sale of arms, including an aerial surveillance capability, to the Saudis.”

Shortly thereafter, there was a leak in the Israeli press which exaggerated the capabilities of the
AWACS plane, making the Israeli public very uneasy. While Reagan had just won an election in
three months before, Begin was in the middle of a campaign. Once news of the AWACS deal
went public, both the Begin and Reagan administrations lost control of the debate for a time, only
coming together again in agreement after the deal passed through the US Senate.

This agreement has not gone unnoticed. One historian wrote, “Despite the Begin
government’s vocal protests against the AWACS deal, the Reagan administration never attempted
to use arms transfers to Israel to provide itself with leverage. During months of debate, it did not
raise the prospect of an interruption in American weapons supplies to the Jewish state if the Begin
government continued to object to the sale.” Other historians have noted that “in recognition of
Israel’s strategic importance to the Middle East, the president refused to condemn that country for
its air strikes against Soviet-equipped missile bases in Syria or its preemptive destruction in 1981
of a nuclear energy installation in Iraq.” These observations provide at least some
circumstantial evidence to back up Haig’s claim of equal arms compensation for Israel. In June

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55 Haig, Caveat, 177.
56 David Rodman, *Arms Transfers to Israel: The Strategic Logic Behind American Military Assistance*
(Portland, OR: Sussex, 2007), 90-91.
57 Norman A. Graebner, Richard Dean Burns, and Joseph M. Siracusa, *Reagan, Bush, Gorbachev:
1981, the executive director of the Palestinian Congress of North America wrote to President Reagan concerning the Iraqi nuclear installation attack by Israel. In response, a DOS official defended Israel, writing, “Israel contends that its action against Iraq was a necessary, legitimate act of self-defense because the Iraqi reactor was intended to produce weapons grade material to make atomic bombs. Israel also points out that there is a state of war between the two countries and contends that Iraq had made clear its intention to produce such a weapon for use against Israel.”

This position indicates that public condemnation of Israeli belligerence was merely diplomatic protocol, and that the strategic relationship between the Tel Aviv and Washington remained fully intact.

Both Haig’s and Reagan’s public statements throughout 1981 confirm an underlying agreement regarding the security of Israel. As early as March 1981, Haig told the Senate, “We are determined that Israel retain the military capability to deter threats from hostile forces. Moreover we recognize the importance of Israel to our developing regional strategy.” In September 1981, the Secretary reiterated the point. In discussing the AWACS deal, Haig stated, “Our approach has also been shaped, however, by an appreciation of Israeli concerns over the proposed Saudi package. We are taking steps to alleviate these concerns. We are determined to maintain the qualitative edge that is vital to Israel’s security.” In early October, just weeks before the vote in the Senate, Haig spoke as forcefully as ever, saying, “The United States is fundamentally and unalterably committed to the security of Israel. For our part we are determined to take steps to minimize any adverse impact of the sale and to maintain the qualitative edge upon which Israel depends.” On October 17 Reagan told reporters, “[W]hen Mr. Begin left here after his visit, and I told him what we were going to do, he told me he was

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going to maintain his position but he was not upset at all.\footnote{Reagan, \textit{PPP}, 950.} If true, this statement goes even further toward backing up Haig’s argument that there was already some agreement about compensation from the beginning. In the midst of an election campaign, and with public sentiment in Israel against the AWACS deal, Begin had no choice but to maintain his disapproval of the arms sale to the Saudis. Reagan and his administration, understanding that, continued to tie Israeli security with regional stability, trying to make the best out of a bad political situation. Knowing that an improved arms package for Israel would be the result of a Senate approval of the Saudi AWACS package, both men rode out the debate as professional politicians do. The result was that Reagan’s AWACS deal passed in the Senate and Begin’s Likud party was re-elected to a majority in the Knesset, albeit by one seat over Shimon Peres and the Alignment party.

Some of the strongest evidence in support of the prior-agreement argument comes from a litany of correspondence between WH and DOS officials, and members of Congress. As early as May 1981, WH officials assured, “We are planning to seek Congressional approval to provide Israel with a significant increase in defense credits for 1983 and 1984 to cover the cost of additional defense equipment. Earlier, acquisition of this equipment was deferred due to insufficient funds.”\footnote{Letter, R.V. Secord to Joe Broder, May 15, 1981, WHORM: FO 003-02, Ronald Reagan Library.} This sentiment was expanded and used in response to concerned citizens as well as Congressmen as a standard form content block. The text of the argument reads:

\begin{quote}
We are planning to seek congressional approval to provide Israel with additional military sales credits of $300 million in each of the fiscal years 1983 and 1984. These credits will enable the Israelis to purchase additional air defense aircraft or other equipment they have deferred because of their difficult financial position. These funds would be added to the already substantial military and economic assistance program for Israel, and should total over $2.8 billion in fiscal year 1982. We believe that Israel will be able to maintain its qualitative edge, and will remain capable of defeating any combination of Arab forces. We will also work closely with Israel to counter the Soviet threat.\footnote{Letter, William J. Dyess to William J Lowenberg, June 18, 1981; Letter, Richard Fairbanks to William M Broadhead, June 29, 1981; Letter, Richard Fairbanks to Jennings Randolph, August 4, 1981, WHORM: FO 003-02, Ronald Reagan Library.} 
\end{quote}
Seeking Congressional approval is certainly not the same thing as having approval in hand, but this clearly shows that the administration was deeply committed to supplying Israel with all the weapons necessary to maintain its military advantage in the region, and guarantee its ability to defend itself against multiple hostile nations at once.

The combination of the “prohibitively costly” argument, with the proposed increase in aid to Israel, can be found in two sources, both coming directly from the White House. In a September 1981 talking points memo, the WH position was stated as:

This package will not pose any substantial threat to the security of Israel. Each of the four elements in the Saudi air defense enhancement package has been carefully tailored to ensure that it makes good military sense without providing a capability which exceeds Saudi needs. The limitations of the various elements, including AWACS, and the growing superiority of the Israeli Air Force, will preclude Saudi Arabia from ever posing any credible threat to the security of Israel.65

The second piece of evidence is a form letter sent by Reagan to four Senators just before the October 1981 vote on the AWACS deal. In the letter Reagan wrote:

I am confident that the Saudi AWACS will pose no realistic threat to Israel. I remain fully committed to protecting Israel’s security and to preserving Israel’s ability to defend against any combination of potentially hostile forces in the region. We will continue to make available to Israel the military equipment it requires to defend its land and people, with due consideration to the presence of AWACS in Saudi Arabia.66

These two positions, in combining the “prohibitively costly” argument with the “qualitative edge” argument must be unpacked in two different ways. First, the weapons being delivered to both countries need to be examined in relation to each other. The AWACS plane has no offensive weapons, and therefore relies on fighter planes like the F-15 for protection in the air. Increasing the number of fighter jets in the Israeli Air Force (IAF) meant that in the event of a Saudi-Israeli or Arab-Israeli armed conflict, the IAF would have a sufficient force to counter the airborne protection of Saudi AWACS, and neutralize the threat to Israel by disrupting the flow of

battlefield information to Saudi military commanders. However, should the Saudis face a military threat from Iran or some other belligerent, the Saudi Royal Air Force could be expected to perform admirably thanks to the advanced tracking and communication afforded by the AWACS. Second, the chronology of arms deliveries served to ensure Israel’s qualitative military edge over the relative defensive capability increase of Saudi Arabia upon receiving the AWACS. The increase in arms to Israel took place in 1983 and 1984, while the delivery of AWACS to the Saudis was completed in 1985. In response to a concerned member of Congress, WH official Richard Fairbanks wrote:

Because the AWACS aircraft would not be delivered until 1985-1986, the Saudis do not require fully trained crews immediately. Our plans envision Saudi AWACS flight crews becoming fully trained in a few years through a combination of US military and contractor trainers. In addition, Saudi dependence on US contractors for maintenance for the more complex sub-components of the system will give us additional control over the AWACS aircraft and systems for the life of the system.67

This means that the Reagan administration and the US military saw the AWACS deal as a revenue stream, as well as a geo-strategic move. By withholding certain technologies from the Saudis, the administration set up a perpetual relationship which bound Riyadh to play by Washington’s rules as long as they wanted their new surveillance aircraft to function properly in the long run. The same is true of the increased arms package to Israel. The long term maintenance and spare part sales to purchasing countries are what make arms sales so lucrative in the long term, in addition to the up front cost of purchase. Secretary Haig explains, “After many months of public debate and public diplomacy and private emotionalism, the following was accomplished: Saudi Arabia received nearly everything it had asked for in the way of defense systems and armaments, and so had Israel. No other outcome ever was possible.”68

With support for Israel’s qualitative military edge secured, Reagan and his cabinet were free to pursue their larger geostrategic goals pertaining to the Soviet Union, many of which were

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68 Haig, Caveat, 191.
based on the ability of low energy costs to stimulate the American economy, which in turn funded
the new high-tech arms race. Reagan came into office with a ‘never again’ attitude toward the oil
crises of the 1970s and argued for a reassertion of America’s military might in order to negotiate
with the Soviets only and ever from a position of strength. Reagan also used the Soviet invasion
of Afghanistan as proof of outside threats to the Middle East, which led to an increasingly
antagonistic approach to Moscow and the belief that agents of the USSR were to blame for all the
major disruptions in the world. Further, the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath created a
situation in which Reagan could claim that not only was the Middle East under threat of Soviet
military aggression, but that the stability of the region as a whole was disrupted by the possible
anarchic situation in the early years of the revolution. Instability has been the enemy of the US
since the beginning of the Cold War, and even further as antithesis to the Open Door policy. It
had long been US government policy that political instability allowed for communist subversion,
and after 1979, for Islamic fundamentalism. In order to keep both adversarial ideologies in
check, the administration carried out two comprehensive arms packages for two very unlikely
allies-by-proxy in Israel and Saudi Arabia. Reagan’s triangular diplomacy was successful in the
long term because of the inability of Tehran or Moscow to form alliances of their own to
challenge America’s diplomatic and military dominance in the region.

Over the course of Reagan’s presidency, largely through multi-national organizations
such as NATO and the UN, the US transformed the failed Twin Pillar policy into a four-corner
policy that included Israel in the west along with three conservative Sunni states: Saudi Arabia in
the south, Turkey in the north, and Pakistan in the east. Geography and demography were just as
influential to American policy in the Middle East as they were to the Soviets. The special
relationships which were forged during, and in the aftermath of, World War II were nurtured by
every president from FDR to Reagan and beyond. The mettle of these Israeli-American and
Saudi-American alliances was put to the ultimate test during the 1991 Gulf War. In an American
dominated multilateral action, and in the absence of a strong Soviet response in the last days of
the Cold War, the US was able to protect its vital interests in the Gulf, ensure Saudi security, and keep Israel out of the war, all while rolling back Iraqi gains and restoring stability to the region.
CHAPTER 2

TRUST, BUT VERIFY: REAGAN, GORBACHEV, AND THE INF TREATY

"Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by miscalculation, or accident, or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us."69

- John F. Kennedy, 1961

On December 8, 1987, President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty (INF) which aimed to eliminate short and medium range nuclear weapons from their respective national arsenals. It was a small but significant step in the long process of easing Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, when Reagan first took office in 1981, this outcome was far from inevitable, and by the end of 1983, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were as fragile as they had been since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The potential for brinksmanship endured well into Reagan’s tenure, despite previous efforts at détente by both governments. The great success of Reagan and Gorbachev was their agreement in Geneva, Switzerland in 1985 to put aside all other policy issues and agree that, since it cannot be won, nuclear war must never be fought. This may see to be an obvious conclusion, but to put such an agreement into practice required eliminating the means of deterrence. As such, John F. Kennedy’s warning to the United Nations continues to ring as true today as it did in 1961, or the 1980s for that matter.

This chapter is a discussion of the relationship between the deployment of two types of intermediate (medium) range missile systems in Europe, how leaders on both sides viewed the situation, and how the potential use of such weapons affected superpower relations during the last decade of the Cold War. These events led to the signing of the INF Treaty, which embodies two important concessions by both national governments. First, by eliminating an entire class of

nuclear weapons, and significantly reducing the total number in existence, Reagan and Gorbachev
decreased the likelihood of a nuclear domino effect exchange whereby a tactical or medium-range
attack might lead to full scale retaliation. At its core, the INF Treaty represents an agreement that
the prospect of intercontinental annihilation trumps the reality of regional provocation. There is
no need for short or medium range nuclear weapons when mutually assured destruction (MAD) is
the foundation of a global nuclear peace. Second, in an effort to merge their rhetorical
understanding with the reality of the Cold War, both leaders agreed to a verification schedule
backed up by the potential for unilateral nuclear action if the treaty was violated. In a modern
retelling of the old paradox, to secure lawful enforcement of the INF Treaty which aimed at
preventing war, both nations reserved the right of mutually assured destruction.

The most recent Cold War scholarship tends to portray the positive personal relationship
between Reagan and Gorbachev as key to building trust and understanding between the US and
Soviet governments. Gorbachev is further singled out for his role in the partnership for two
reasons. The first reason is chronological. Gorbachev was the last leader of the Soviet Union,
and his time in office began after Reagan had already been elected for the second time. By this
reasoning, Gorbachev is the difference maker because change happened on his watch. Similar
arguments have been made about Reagan, too. This line of thinking is based on the idea that
Reagan and Gorbachev were simply in office at the culmination of decades’ worth of policies on
both sides, the totality of which initiated a shockingly abrupt end to the Cold War under
Gorbachev, and the break-up of the former Soviet empire less three years after Reagan’s
successor George H. W. Bush took office. 70

70 Historians Melvyn P. Leffler and John Lewis Gaddis discuss the importance of Gorbachev as an
individual within the Soviet system based on his unique combination of intelligence and opportunity.
Leffler and Gaddis each note that Gorbachev’s access to education, and foreign travel in particular, allowed
him to make comparisons between life in the Soviet Union and life abroad. The observations Gorbachev
made when traveling spurred his openness to change in an effort to raise the standard of living within the
Soviet Union. After having seen three consecutive Soviet leaders die in office, Ronald Reagan finally found
an enthusiastic negotiating partner in Gorbachev. Both Leffler and Gaddis argue that the two men truly
liked one another. See: John Lewis Gaddis, The Cold War: A New History (New York: Penguin Press,
The second reason Gorbachev’s contribution is emphasized is more complicated to isolate, but is more or less a result of Gorbachev’s personality, his intellect, and an openness to change. In describing the atmosphere just after the Geneva Summit, preeminent Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis wrote, “Two years earlier [Yuri] Andropov had thought Reagan capable of launching a surprise attack. Now Gorbachev felt confident that the United States would never do this. Reagan’s position had not changed: he had always asked Soviet leaders to ‘trust me.’ After meeting Reagan, Gorbachev began to do so.” By arguing that Reagan “had not changed,” Gaddis implicitly makes the case that Gorbachev was the only one of the two who could break the deadlock of mutual antagonism. On Gorbachev as an individual, Gaddis wrote, “He chose love over fear, violating Machiavelli’s advice for princes and thereby ensuring that he ceased to be one. It made little sense in traditional geopolitical terms. But it did make him the most deserving recipient ever of the Nobel Peace Prize.”

Historian Melvyn P. Leffler also portrays Gorbachev as the central figure, highlighting his intellect and internationalism. During the 1970s Gorbachev worked for the Communist Party on improving the Soviet agricultural infrastructure, which allowed him the rare freedom to travel outside the country, and, in particular, to the West. Gorbachev, Leffler explains, “Liked talking to foreigners, exchanging ideas, and making comparisons between his way of life and theirs. He felt pride in the Soviet educational system. He believed his countrymen had better access to medical care and superior public transport system. But his travels abroad bred doubt.” Leffler describes Gorbachev as “extremely personable and engaging, but he was also tough and intelligent.” His intellect allowed him to “recognize from the outset, that his domestic goals could...
not be achieved without readjusting Soviet foreign policy.”74 In this observation, Leffler and Gaddis are in agreement. Gaddis argues that Gorbachev’s open mindedness freed him to “[sweep] away communism’s emphasis on the class struggle, its insistence on the inevitability of a world proletarian revolution, and hence its claims of historical infallibility.”75 Gorbachev’s charming curiosity did not go unnoticed by Western leaders. After meeting Gorbachev in 1984, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously observed, “This is a man with whom I could do business.”76

Gaddis and Leffler are representative of revisionist Cold War historians who have made the leap to post-revisionism. The opening of eastern European archives, in addition to a running stream of memoirs, and the release of Soviet internal documents for public consumption, has infused a tangible sense of excitement to recent Cold War research. Today’s scholars have much greater access to information than ever before. Combined with a new emphasis on globalization in writing American History, that access has fed a growing number of Cold War reexaminations.

Historian Jeremi Suri has also written about the end of the Cold War. In a 2002 article, Suri explained the end of the Cold War by borrowing a concentric circle analogy from James Joll. In his description, Suri noted that Reagan was, “the man largely responsible for the crisis atmosphere” of 1983, but that after a series of tense events throughout the year, “Reagan made a decisive turn toward improved Soviet-American relations.”77 Like Gaddis and Leffler, however, Suri also holds a special place for Gorbachev, arguing that:

Gorbachev understood that his hopes for improving the Soviet economy and the quality of domestic life in general required a peaceful international context. Continued Cold War competition would perpetuate that social stagnation he wanted to eliminate. Only extensive and unprecedented East-West cooperation could permit the allocation of resources necessary for domestic restructuring (perestroika).78

74 Leffler, For the Soul of Mankind, 381 and 376.
75 Gaddis, The Cold War, 197.
78 Suri, Explaining, 78.
Suri framed the relationship as one between two individuals who want the same thing, but approach it from two different directions. Reagan is the paranoid ideologue always searching for peace through strength, while Gorbachev is the pragmatist, willing to expend political capital in order to bring about change.

What all of these historians have in common is the belief that Reagan and Gorbachev were both men of their time and circumstance. They were both moral and rational, and they sincerely liked one another. The absence of pretension in combination with an open style of dialogue helped foster an honest rapport between the two, which in turn helped thaw Cold War tension from the top down. Their meeting, however, was far from inevitable, and the path leading to the INF signing date in December 1987 was fraught with near misses and real tragedy. From Reagan’s point of view, the Soviet SS-20 deployment during the late 1970s was a clear attempt to tip the balance of power in Europe away from the West. Once in office, he worked to respond multilaterally through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by supporting a plan to match the Soviet nuclear threat.

First Mover Advantage

Proper balance is the key to enduring power relationships. Regarding Europe in the early years of the Cold War, that meant the overwhelming number of conventional Soviet forces was offset by the American “nuclear umbrella” which protected NATO allies. That is, if leaders in the Kremlin decided to take advantage of the situation by advancing militarily against Western Europe, American and NATO leaders could retaliate with nuclear weapons to offset their numerical disadvantage versus the oncoming force. However, this balance was based upon the idea that the Soviet military would be the aggressor. From Moscow’s point of view, NATO leaders’ first strike option was always nuclear, which meant a Soviet conventional force advantage was only as good as an enemy’s reluctance to use nuclear weapons.
As weapons technology improved during the Cold War, this conceptual balance itself was shaken by the introduction of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Since it was no longer necessary to be anywhere near a target in order to hit it, conventional forces were no longer a first-strike option when the expected retaliation is overwhelming missile retaliation. Under the threat of intercontinental MAD, the number of divisions the Soviets had in the European theatre was irrelevant, since ICBMs could be used as the great equalizer of the 20th century. The debate over what constituted “balance” and “security” in Europe, and whether or not the two were linked, was an ongoing one throughout the Cold War. One group of historians put it this way:

Thirty years of successful containment in Europe had never resolved the perennially divisive military dilemmas inherent in the [NATO] alliance. The heavy reliance on nuclear weapons, as the only effective and affordable deterrent and guarantee of peace, placed Europe completely under the decision-making power of the United States. Washington alone would determine how Europe would be defended during any hostilities.79

The limited technology of bomber jets and artillery helped secure the initial NATO view of the balance, but considering the accelerated rate of research and development in the post-World War II world, it could never last.

The steadily increasing total number of nuclear weapons led to another serious Cold War concern: anti-ballistic missile technology (ABM). The desire to possess a reliable ABM system is directly related to the size of an enemy’s nuclear arsenal. If one side believed it could eliminate the other’s ability to counter attack by launching a first strike, then it would be rational to strike first. It is the ability to retaliate which maintains balance. If one nation began developing the ability to defend against a first strike, it would be in the best interest of a belligerent nation to launch an attack before the defense system was operational. Otherwise, once the defender’s shield is in place, they could strike with impunity. This is the logic behind the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 banning such technology, signed by Richard Nixon and

Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev. The ABM treaty represents the spirit of détente, a lessening of tension between the superpowers. The US interpretation of détente was overtly shattered during the Jimmy Carter-Leonid Brezhnev years by Soviet interventionism in the Third World, and by the time Reagan took office in January 1981, there were proxy wars in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Angola.

In Europe during the détente period, Soviet leaders chose to deploy a new kind of missile, the SS-20. Its capabilities were astonishing: the SS-20 had a target range of three thousand miles, carried multiple nuclear warheads, and was capable of being launched from highly mobile platforms. The SS-20 deployment was a strategic move, a threat, that if either the US or any of its NATO allies attacked the Soviet Union or any of its Warsaw Pact allies, massive retaliation could be a reality for any or all of them, some within just a few minutes. In order to make their threat credible, the Soviet government made sure that the deployment was observable. There is no benefit to developing weapons of deterrence if the enemy you hope to deter cannot confirm the danger. The threat was then backed up by a promise that the SS-20s were defensive in nature, but would be launched in retaliation of a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union or any of the Warsaw Pact nations. The promise of retaliation is a promise to do something that a rational or moral leader would not normally do: participate in nuclear war. The promise to use SS-20s was an observable, credible threat to regional security in Europe, and the world.

In deploying the SS-20, the Soviet government shifted the balance. In 1981, former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote:

Experts have been found to doubt the comfort for Europe in each successive American doctrine, whether of massive retaliation, or flexible response, or the seamless NATO Triad. And Soviet threats of all sorts, political and military, conventional and nuclear, actual and hypothetical, have intermittently strained the balance. It endures.  

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By November 1987, Moscow had deployed four-hundred seventy medium range missiles, capable of striking from North Africa to Scandinavia, from either side of the Ural Mountains.  

Independent of the Soviet development of the SS-20, American military contractors designed a nearly equivalent missile system: the Pershing II. The history of the Pershing II research and development dates back to 1974, but the real import of the system was not relevant until 1979 when NATO approved basing of the Pershing IIIs in West Germany in response to the SS-20 threat. However, two years passed before the program entered the production phase. By that time the Soviet military was integrating two new SS-20s per week into their arsenal.

When viewed from the Soviet perspective, the Pershing II system was just as unsettling as the SS-20 system was to NATO allies. The Pershing II is also a ground-mobile, surface to surface, nuclear weapon system, but has a range of only one thousand miles. By deploying the Pershing IIIs in West Germany, the target zone included every Warsaw Pact nation, as well as the highest concentration of Soviet civilians (west of the Urals), and Moscow itself. Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig recalled that Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, “made the expected point that the SS-20s and other Soviet nuclear systems targeted on Europe did not threaten US territory, but the Pershing II would be within range of major Soviet cities.” This situation is similar to putting the American eastern seaboard within range of Soviet nuclear forces which Washington argued was unacceptable during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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82 Alexander Haig, Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy (New York: MacMillan, 1984), 225. Considering this statistic comes from a former US Secretary of State, it should be read with some caution. However, the Memorandum of Understanding which accompanies the INF Treaty confirms that a rate of two deployments per week, starting in the late 1970s, could add up to the total of 470 by November 1987 outlined therein.

83 Haig, Caveat, 231.
Because of the uneven research and development timelines of the two missile systems, the actual deployment of the Pershing II can be viewed, by logic of chronology, as a reaction to the deployment of the SS-20s, but this deployment was not guaranteed. There are, of course, at least two ways to react to any sequential move situation: action or inaction. Since the research and development of the two missile systems was independent, their existence alone cannot be considered as a reaction to the other. In military terms, Washington wanted the option of peaceful destruction of the SS-20s as a military threat. In political terms, by arguing for the elimination of the SS-20s, Washington was asking Moscow to retract its retaliatory promise implicit in the threat, which would return the balance in Europe back to the pre-detente status quo. In order to achieve that end, Washington had the choice to respond to the SS-20 deployment by either basing Pershing IIs in Western Europe (action, or hard line approach), or relying on the existing countermeasures already in place (inaction, soft line approach) and negotiate the elimination of the SS-20s from the existing position. The debate over how to return to the NATO preferred definition of balance in Europe split Reagan’s cabinet.

**Soft Line vs. Hard Line**

The soft line approach to removal of the SS-20 threat was called the Zero Option. The debate over the Zero Option effectively pitted Secretary of State Alexander Haig against Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. In his memoir, Haig wrote that:

> The fatal flaw in the Zero Option as a basis for negotiations was that it was not negotiable. It was absurd to expect the Soviets to dismantle an existing force of 1,100 warheads, which they had already put into the field at the cost of billions of rubles, in exchange for a promise from the United States not to deploy a missile force that we had not yet begun to build and that had aroused such violent controversy in Western Europe. Caspar Weinberger, in his enthusiasm for the Zero Option, could not concede this point.⁸⁴

Haig suggested an aggressive response to the SS-20s as quickly as possible. If the US government were able to counter with deployment of the Pershing II system in a short period of

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⁸⁴ Haig, *Caveat*, 229.
time, then the Soviet government would be forced to react in kind, continuing the cycle of the existing arms race. By emphasizing the financial cost of SS-20 deployment over the danger it represented as a weapon, Haig shows that he was willing to accept the status quo MAD in order to fight the Soviets economically. He felt that Moscow could no longer match the US in financing the Cold War arms race, and this was a clear opportunity to attack the irrationality of their economic system, rather than the rationality of their leaders. Haig felt that the only way the Soviets would not cheat a verification treaty was if the US had a comparable threat to the SS-20 in the field.85

Early in the debate, Weinberger clearly saw the situation differently. Like Haig, he never doubted that the Kremlin would need some sort of incentive to destroy its SS-20s, but Weinberger felt that the mere existence of a comparable missile system would be enough, and that actual deployment would be unnecessary. However, Weinberger’s position was contingent on two points. He writes:

By the first of the two, the Soviets would not only remove the SS-20s, but would actually destroy them. That was important because the SS-20s were mobile. [...] The other essential, I felt, to any treaty on any subject with the Soviet Union, was through on-site verification. [...] Meanwhile, I did not feel we should stop our work on the Pershing IIs or the cruise missiles. I felt that there would be no possibility of the Soviets agreeing to take out their SS-20s, unless, and until, they had the kind of inducement that deployment of the Pershing IIs would bring.86

Weinberger felt that existing systems were enough deterrence in the field, but wanted to prepare for, rather than commit to, future missile deployment. He had faith that submarine-based missiles, F-111 bombers, and Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile systems (ICBMs) would be enough incentive for Moscow to back down from this particular engagement, provided that Washington continued moving forward with the research and development of the Pershing II.87

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85 Haig, Caveat, 229.
87 Weinberger, Fighting, 340.
Haig warned Reagan that the Zero Option, “was a mistake that he would have to modify within the year.”

Weinberger was pleased that Reagan at first favored the Zero Option, but later recalled, “Haig need not have feared, because to the President’s disappointment and mine, the immediate reaction was almost all negative.”

If the Zero Option best represents the soft line approach, then the NATO Dual Track policy best represents the hard line point of view, with a caveat. The Dual Track was an attempt to combine both military (hard line) and political (soft line) policies in a shrewd move. Track one was a direct deployment response to the SS-20. In December 1979, as noted above, NATO leaders approved the basing of Pershing II missiles in West Germany, and ground launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in the Netherlands, Belgium, England, and Italy. In December 1981, the Pershing II program entered the production phase, and by June 1984, deployment of the first Pershing II battalion was complete.

Track two accompanied Track One. Throughout the latter process Western leaders maintained an open position on negotiating the elimination of SS-20s with leaders from the Kremlin. By leaving the Soft Line approach open, both Reagan administration and NATO officials could claim to be advocates of pragmatic arms control at the least, and benevolent arms reduction at the best. If successful, the Two Track policy would achieve the NATO definition of balance either way. From the Soviet point of view, this was an aggressive move which put Moscow at risk of total destruction within ten minutes of a launch.

**The Public Sphere**

The Dual Track policy ostensibly showed that leaders in both Washington and NATO saw no change in the overall precarious nature of Cold War deterrence. The ultimate deterrence was the ability to retaliate against any first strike, whether it occurred in Europe or elsewhere.

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88 Haig, *Caveat*, 229.
However, this position was terrifying to many Europeans, as well as people who held philosophical disagreements with the existence of nuclear weapons altogether. The only way to test if Washington would sacrifice New York for Paris is for Paris to be destroyed first – every time.

Since both Soviet and American governments made threats of full scale retaliation if an ally were attacked, MAD had to be considered a credible threat because of the cost of testing an opponent’s resolve. This line of thinking put an extraordinary amount of pressure on the US government to back up its allies with independent deterrents. If Western Europe was a target, then NATO allies needed to be able to strike back independently of the US, hence the necessity of NATO countries having Pershing II missiles and GLCMs on site. The question of whether or not American leaders were willing to risk New York to defend Paris could be eliminated by giving NATO leaders the ability to retaliate on their own. Failure by NATO to retaliate, or the incapability of retaliation, could still be overridden by the potential of Washington to strike on their behalf with ICBMs. The basing of Pershing II missiles in Western Europe merely reset the regional balance of terror.

Palpable concerns over the use of nuclear weapons drove many people to demonstrate against their very existence. By 1982 people were marching by the thousands in Chicago, and hundreds of thousands in New York. The Catholic Bishops of America spoke out against the arms race as immoral. And by the end of 1982, the anti-nuclear movement was active in forty-three states. Europeans were just as concerned, if not more so, considering first strike possibilities. In just one month, the number of protesters in Bonn, London, and Paris numbered over half a million people.

A visual representation of the nuclear freeze movement was published in newspapers across the US in July 1985. The image shows a small, single missile silhouette representing all

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the bombs dropped in WWII contrasted against 6,667 tiny silhouettes representing the current collective nuclear arsenal of the world. The accompanying text included sobering statistics about the potential destructive power of the US and Soviet arsenals, encouraged people to contact both President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev in support of upcoming summit talks, and asked, “How long can we live with the arms race?”

If Reagan’s hard line approach to the Cold War was terrifying to the people in the freeze movement, it was reassuring to people who believed in his concept of a position of strength. In a letter to the President in 1984, Charls Walker of the private interest group Committee on the Present Danger expressed his support for Reagan and his policies:

As you have long recognized, bad arms control agreements are worse than none at all. Equitable arms control agreements could play a part in insuring U.S. security – but whether the Soviets are prepared to enter into equitable agreements is subject to doubt. Today, with the military balance precariously tipped against us, America’s security is directly dependent on growing strength in our defense forces.

The idea that “bad arms control agreements are worse than none at all” was shared by many, but this concept holds inherent logical fallacies. This idea is a moralistic one, in which the US only participates in the arms race in a reactive way, rather than as the first cause. If there is a legally binding treaty, then both parties must answer to the letter of the law. But in the absence of a treaty, value judgments rule the day, feeding the nuclear hysteria rather than fostering peaceful negotiation.

Many Congressmen, both Republicans and Democrats, recognized this problem, and encouraged Reagan to make the necessary efforts to find common ground with Soviet leaders. Republican Senator Larry Pressler wrote to Reagan, pleading, “we owe it to the world” to negotiate, and that suspended talks “would not be in the interest of any nation.” Shortly

thereafter, a group of Democratic House Representatives encouraged Reagan to be less confrontational, and more diplomatic. They argued that it was, “in the interest of all mankind that serious bilateral negotiations be resumed.”

A group of Republican Senators led by Malcolm Wallop and Jesse Helms co-signed a letter to Reagan regarding the administration’s policy of recognizing the parameters of the unratified SALT II treaty. They asked, “Shall you continue to abide unilaterally by treaties and agreements that the Soviets have violated and that have expired anyhow? Unilateral compliance is unilateral disarmament.” These Senators argued for the negative, and they rejected the tit-for-tat strategy of matching Soviet treaty infractions. Wallop, Helms, and the others agreed, “that option would give the Soviet Union control over what we do and don’t do, and, above all, keep our defense planning within a framework that is fundamentally wrong.”

Reagan, of course, agreed that a world free of nuclear weapons would be a world much improved. Yet the reality was that no one, no matter how much power they wielded, had the ability to simply call for the destruction of a nuclear arsenal. There were too many overlapping interests involved, and always the balance of power to consider.

This point is perhaps best summed up by former diplomat Miles Copeland in his seminal work, *The Game of Nations*. He writes, “when vital national interests are at stake, and when it is a question of seeing them endangered or bowing to some high moral principle, there is no question but that it is the high moral principle which will suffer.” The endangered high moral principle in this case is that the mere existence of nuclear weapons is immoral. The paradox is that if just one belligerent nation possesses nuclear weapons, it is immoral not to possess them for your own nation. This paradox of politics and morals is as old as time. In trying to serve the best interest of a nation in a world in which some other leaders behave immorally, behaving morally may put you at a disadvantage, and therefore threatens the best interest of your nation. Reagan

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confirmed as much in his State of the Union address in 1985, stating, “We cannot play innocents abroad in a world that’s not innocent.”98 When it comes to the nuclear arms race, behaving morally is immoral when you are in a position of power, unless and until another nation has the capability of MAD, at which point morality once again takes over. This kind of theoretical wordplay is difficult to impart to the masses when the consequences of miscalculation could mean the end of civilization as they know it. Fear is much easier to convey than reason. In looking across the oceans at one another, both nations saw danger.

The Mirror Image

The years between Reagan’s first election and the ascendency of Gorbachev to General Secretary were some of the darkest days of the Cold War. The atmosphere led many people to believe that escalation was the only constant, and that the cruel teleological path of a nuclear arms race could only lead on one horrifying conclusion. Reflecting on the tension in early 1980s, Gorbachev wrote, “This was [...] a time when many people in the military and among the political establishment regarded a war involving weapons of mass destruction as conceivable and even acceptable, and were developing various scenarios of nuclear escalation.”99 In his memoirs, Reagan recalled that, “I carried a small plastic-coated card with me, [which] listed the codes I would issue to the Pentagon confirming that it was actually the president of the United States who was ordering the unleashing of our nuclear weapons. The decision to launch the weapons was mine alone to make.”100

Assume for a moment that Reagan’s statement about being solely responsible for ordering a nuclear strike is true, and that everyone from the top down would follow such an order. If the Soviets withdrew their SS-20s without some combination of threat or concession from

Washington, they would appear weak, and lose credibility in their reputation as hardliners. In the absence of economic power, political will backed by military reputation is the strongest feature of any government, and therefore indispensible. Whatever the NATO response would be to the SS-20 deployment, short of nuclear war, Moscow could not blink. To do so would indicate less-than-total faith in the choice to deploy the SS-20s. In the resulting geo-political atmosphere, every situation involving either the US or Soviet Union was highly scrutinized and presented as proof of the others’ aggression or intransigence.

In the collaborative effort *The Sword and the Shield*, historian Christopher Andrew describes the Soviet position early in the Reagan administration. Andrew writes, “In a secret speech to a major KGB conference in May 1981, a visibly ailing Brezhnev denounced Reagan’s policies as a serious threat to world peace.” At the same conference, KGB Director Yuri Andropov announced operation RYAN (*Raketno Yadernoye Napadenie*, “Nuclear Missile Attack”). Andrew continues, “RYAN’s purpose was to collect intelligence on the presumed, but non-existent, plans of the Reagan administration to launch a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union – a delusion which reflected both the KGB’s continuing failure to penetrate the policy-making of the Main Adversary and its recurrent tendency towards conspiracy theory.”

By 1983, Brezhnev had passed away and Andropov was the new General Secretary. Unfortunately, Andropov’s health upon entering office was not much of an improvement over Brezhnev’s later years, and the paranoid view of Washington continued unabated. In describing Andropov and the political climate of 1983, historian Vladislov Zubok writes, “On September 29, *Pravda* published his ‘farewell address’ on Soviet-American relations. Andropov informed the Soviet people that the Reagan administration was set upon a dangerous course ‘to ensure a

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102 Andrew and Mitrokhin, *Sword and the Shield*, 213.
dominating position in the world for the United States of America.’” Previous to his duties as General Secretary, Andropov had been the longest serving head of the KGB, and he was well aware of the American government’s geopolitical strategy and capability. Based on American actions, not words, Andropov made a good point.

For his part, Reagan was all too happy to play the insult game, and consistently derided the Soviet Union in public. In a speech to the British House of Commons, Reagan warned that “the march of freedom and democracy...will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history.” In his first term, Reagan famously labeled the Soviet Union an “evil empire” and warned people not to “remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.” George Kennan, the father of US containment policy called Reagan’s views toward the Soviet Union “intellectual primitivism.”

Reagan also compared Soviet leaders to their most bitter of antagonists, the Nazis. Winning the “Great Patriotic War,” as the Soviets called World War II, was the greatest source of national tragedy and pride. In a March 1981 interview with Walter Cronkite, Reagan said, “I remember when Hitler was arming and had built himself up – no one’s created quite the military power that the Soviet Union has, but comparatively he was in that way.” It was not the only time Reagan associated the Soviets with their World War II adversary. In a speech to Congress, Reagan compared the Soviet communist influences in Central America and the Caribbean with German U-boats operating in the Gulf of Mexico during the early 1940s. In describing the current Soviet leadership as similar to Nazi leadership, Reagan was verbally salting the psychic wounds incurred by millions of civilians. As one historian has noted, “Probably no American

103 Vladislav Zubok, A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 274.
policymaker at any time during the Cold War inspired quite as much fear and loathing in Moscow as Ronald Reagan during his first term as president.\textsuperscript{109}

\textbf{The Year of Living Dangerously}

In January 1983, Reagan made antagonizing the Soviets official policy when he signed National Security Decision Directive 75 (NSDD 75), titled “US Relations with the USSR.” NSDD 75 is the written representation of Reagan’s concept of a position of strength. The policy calls for the US to challenge the Soviet Union militarily, subvert the authority of the Kremlin within the USSR, and at the same time always extend an olive branch to negotiate should the first two points aggravate Soviet leaders to the point of exhaustion on any particular issue.\textsuperscript{110}

The most successful portion of this policy, and also potentially the most dangerous, was its military strategy. In part, NSDD 75 reads:

The US must modernize its military forces – both nuclear and conventional – so that the Soviet leaders perceive that the US is determined never to accept a second place or a deteriorating military posture. Soviet calculations of possible war outcomes under any contingency must always result in outcomes so unfavorable to the USSR that there would be no incentive for Soviet leaders to initiate an attack.\textsuperscript{111}

This line of thinking is contingent upon two very precarious assumptions, the first of which is being able to guess how Soviet leaders “perceive” a situation, and, second, what their “calculations” might be if US policymakers correctly determined the answer to the first assumption. Reagan added to this policy in a statement to Congress in June 1985, when he said it was necessary to, “make it clear to Moscow that violations of arms control obligations entail real costs,” and that the US should continue with strategic modernization programs “as a hedge against the military consequences of [...] Soviet violations of existing arms agreements which the

\textsuperscript{109} Andrew and Mitrokhin, \textit{Sword and the Shield}, 242.


\textsuperscript{111} National Security Decision Directive Number 75.
Soviets fail to correct.\textsuperscript{112} When the two doctrines are combined, the situation reads like this: if Washington guesses wrong on Soviet perceptions of any given situation, and then Moscow reacts in a way that US officials did not anticipate, then US officials reserve the right to respond in a tit-for-tat fashion based on the Soviet reaction, even though it was Washington’s failed model that allowed for the unanticipated reaction. This “miscalculation” portion of Kennedy’s 1961 warning was a real possibility in 1983.

Growing concerns over the arms race combined with a brutal economic recession led to very low public approval numbers for Reagan during this period. After two years in office, the financial slowdown that Reagan had blamed on Carter was still lingering, which led some to question whether or not incurring a large national debt to finance a military modernization project was good policy. According to a Gallup Poll, Reagan began 1983 with a paltry 35% approval rating.\textsuperscript{113} In July 1983, Republican Senator Arlen Specter addressed this concern in a letter to one of Reagan’s national security assistants, William P. Clark. Regarding the prospects of a new arms control summit with the Soviets, Specter wrote:

Even if the summit did not produce an agreement, I do not believe it would ‘dash expectations,’ as some suggest. Rather, a meeting between the two leaders would demonstrate that both nations are serious about arms control. Such a demonstration is crucial, in my opinion, to maintaining public support for our defense build-up, strategic modernization, including the MX missile, and deployment of the Euromissiles.\textsuperscript{114}

By taking this position, Specter was effectively arguing that, in a democracy, informed public opinion is less desirable than manipulated public opinion. Specter felt that a mere façade of good faith negotiations would be enough to drum up public support for the real bargaining target of the administration: a position of strength.

The tension continued to rise into late summer of that year when a Soviet fighter pilot shot down Korean Airline Flight 007 over the Kamchatka peninsula in far eastern Russia. KAL 007 had gone off course and mistakenly entered Russian air space. The fighter pilot did not intend to kill civilians, and in fact thought he was shooting at an American military plane. The US regularly probed Soviet radar defenses, including in the area around Kamchatka where a major Soviet naval base was located. Tragically, after a series of technical and communications problems, in the black of night, the fighter pilot was ordered to shoot down the plane. Only afterwards was the real identity of the craft known. Western journalists and politicians alike criticized the attack as naked aggression, and a representation of the contempt for human life held by leaders in Moscow.\textsuperscript{115}

The timing could not have been worse. The KAL incident occurred in September, followed by weeks of demagoguery in the press. In the midst of all the posturing, both public and private, Reagan approved a ten day NATO military exercise called Able Archer ’83 from November 2 - 11. Author David Hoffman explains:

\textit{The exercise, Able Archer ’83, was designed to practice the procedures for a full-scale simulated release of nuclear weapons in a European conflict. The Soviets had long feared that training exercises could be used as a disguise for a real attack; their own war plans envisioned the same deception.} \textsuperscript{116}

Able Archer was exactly the kind of operation that RYAN was meant to detect and counter, which only heightened tensions between the two nations, as well as the apprehensiveness of European allies on both sides. In carrying out the exercise, NATO forces altered their message formats and moved non-existent forces to high alert status. KGB agents monitoring the communications and the exercise as a whole were shocked, and for a time believed that NATO was on the precipice of a first strike against the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{117} In response, during the exercise,

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  \item [116] Hoffman, \textit{The Dead Hand}, 72-79.
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the Soviet Fourth Air Army was also placed on an increased readiness level, and combat air operations were called off for seven days in anticipation of NATO moves. Reagan was initially scheduled to participate personally, but after word of Soviet and allied apprehension got to the White House, he decided against it.\textsuperscript{118} The successful completion of a mock-nuclear missile attack only reinforced the idea that the scenario was a viable option for policymakers. Both sides believed the other was capable of a first strike.

Despite the mounting fear and polarization caused by the events of 1983, Reagan still clung to the NATO Dual Track policy, which necessitated Pershing II deployment. In response to a letter signed by sixteen Congressmen warning of the "increasingly dangerous" situation, a White House aide wrote on behalf of the Reagan, that the "President believes that making concessions just to get the Soviets back to the negotiations that they themselves broke off would only encourage further intransigence."\textsuperscript{119} Reagan's negotiating policy never changed. It was "no" to any proposal by the Soviet government that was less than the American starting position. Gorbachev, on the other hand, was the first of the two leaders to act on the recognition of both men that the exorbitant amount of time, money, and resources being used for an international arms race could be of far better use within the borders of their own country. Gorbachev believed the benefits to the Soviet Union from ending the arms race would outweigh any security concerns inherent in disarmament. This recognition, and acceptance, is what made Gorbachev so important in the INF Treaty negotiations.

\textbf{Personality Goes a Long Way}

The inability of Washington and Moscow to foster some level of trust between the two governments in the early 1980s is clear. Both nations were scared of what they saw on the other side of the world. The only reason that neither nation acted on their fear is the concept of MAD.

\textsuperscript{118} Hoffman, \textit{The Dead Hand}, 95.
An American economist and professor, Thomas Schelling, articulated this point in his book *The Strategy of Conflict*. Schelling wrote:

There is a difference between a balance of terror in which *either* side can obliterate the other and one in which *both* sides can do it no matter who strikes first. It is not the “balance” – the sheer equality or symmetry in the situation – that constitutes mutual deterrence; it is the *stability* of the balance. The balance is stable only when neither, in striking first, can destroy the other’s ability to strike back.120

The choice by Soviet leaders to deploy SS-20s within range of Western Europe, when taken from the NATO point of view, upset the regional stability of that balance. Open criticism on both sides, coupled with massive intelligence and military exercises like RYAN and Able Archer, only served to exacerbate the imbalance and inflame fear of a nuclear confrontation. Historian Melvyn Leffler explains, “Brezhnev had warned against another escalation of the arms race and even offered to reduce the number of Soviet SS-20s if the West would talk and not act. But NATO leaders moved ahead on 12 December [1979], saying they were willing to talk but would not stop their plans to deploy 464 ground-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles in Western Europe along with 108 Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Brezhnev and his colleagues were dismayed. The Americans were again seeking to negotiate from strength.”121 Under Reagan, official US national security policy outlined in NSDD 75 meant that, in reaction to the SS-20 deployment, the only option for American policymakers was to respond in kind, and move forward with the Pershing II production and deployment.

Even before he took office, this was a point which Gorbachev understood all too well. In his memoirs, Gorbachev wrote:

The decision to deploy SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe had reflected the style of the Soviet leadership at the time, decision-making fraught with grave consequences for the country. I had arrived at the sad conclusion that this step, fateful both for our country and Europe and for the rest of the world, had been taken without the necessary political and strategic analysis of its possible consequences. Whatever the arguments advanced at the time to justify the

deployment of such missiles, the Soviet leadership failed to take into account the probable reaction of the Western countries. I would even go so far as to characterize it as an unforgivable adventure, embarked on by the previous Soviet leadership under pressure from the military-industrial complex. They might have assumed that, while we deployed our missiles, Western counter-measures would be impeded by the peace movement. If so, such a calculation was more than naïve.122

In this single passage, Gorbachev demonstrates how history is never inevitable, but in hindsight, can seem over-determined. Before the NATO Dual Track policy of 1979, before NSDD 75 in 1983, and before Reagan’s statement to Congress in 1985, Gorbachev could see what he felt was inevitable unfolding before his eyes. When Reagan took office, he not only upheld the US agreement with NATO to respond directly to the SS-20 deployment, he encouraged a massive military buildup in order to show the Soviet leaders that he was happy to play the tit-for-tat game. To Reagan’s great credit, by 1985, he was also willing to play tit-for-tat on arms reductions.

In this way, it really did take Gorbachev to break the cycle of counter deployments, war scares, and paranoid living. Both Reagan and Gorbachev recognized the danger of perpetually testing the rationality of their governments in response to crisis. Unfortunately, Gorbachev was not the General Secretary until three consecutive Soviet leaders died while in office. As such, the possibility of continuity in already strained relations was made even more difficult by the reality of human frailty. Between the time Reagan took office in January 1981 to the time Gorbachev took office in March 1985, Brezhnev, Andropov, and Constantine Chernenko all passed away.

The rapid succession of Soviet leaders made it nearly impossible to build any kind of rapport between Reagan and his Kremlin counterparts. The stability of relations between Washington and Moscow was, from a certain point of view, dangerously reliant on the health of two men at any given time. In both political philosophy and physical vitality, Gorbachev represented a clear change within the Kremlin. At fifty-four Gorbachev was easily the youngest member of the Politburo, and when he became General Secretary, Gorbachev was thirteen years

younger than the average age of the voting membership. The INF Treaty more than just a
document: it is the written embodiment of Gorbachev’s policies and personality, based on a life
spent in and out of the Soviet Union.

The INF Treaty

Treaties are contracts between nations, enforceable by war. In the nuclear age, breaking
a treaty could mean disaster for every living thing on Earth. MAD is the foundation of the INF
Treaty, and the foundation of MAD is rationality. Throughout the Cold War both governments
tested the rationality of their policymakers by practicing brinksmanship. The Korean War,
Taiwan Straits Crisis, Cuban Missile Crisis, and even Able Archer were all tests of rationality,
which thankfully both governments continued to pass, at least on a macro level.

Following this analogy, if MAD is the foundation of the INF Treaty, then verification is
the framework. As noted above, both threats and promises are strategic moves in a “game of
nations.” But strategic moves, by definition, must also be decisions that a player, or in this case a
national government, would not normally make. Initiating MAD is not in the best interest of a
rational policymaker, and is therefore a credible threat.

The promise to eliminate nuclear weapons altogether is also something that a rational
policymaker would not normally do, in part, because the United States and Soviet Union were not
the only two nations with nuclear weapons. Although the INF Treaty is bilateral, the parameters
take into consideration the global balance necessary beyond their own national interests. Most
notably at the time, China, India, Pakistan, and Israel also possessed nuclear weapons. It would
not be in the best interest of either the United States or Soviet Union to completely dismantle
their nuclear arsenal in a world where the lack of such weapons would be a geopolitical
disadvantage.

123 Hoffman, The Dead Hand, 187.
The agreement by Reagan and Gorbachev that nuclear war could not be won only reinforced what generations of leaders before them understood. This can be confirmed by analyzing the INF preamble. The treaty reads:

The United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, hereinafter referred to as the Parties, Conscious that nuclear war would have devastating consequences for all mankind, Guided by the objective of strengthening strategic stability, Convinced that the measures set forth in this Treaty will help reduce the risk of outbreak of war and strengthen international peace and security, and Mindful of their obligations under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, have agreed as follows:124

While both Parties agreed that nuclear war would be terrible for all people, they are not negotiating the elimination of all nuclear weapons. They are negotiating a “strategic stability” which will “reduce the risk” of nuclear confrontation. By eliminating short and medium range missiles from their arsenals, both Parties reduced the amount of contingencies available to policymakers who would otherwise consider nuclear war a possibility.

The INF Treaty is also loaded with language that speaks to the paranoid atmosphere that came to a crescendo during Reagan’s first term. Article V, section three reads:

Shorter-range missiles and launchers of such missiles shall not be located at the same elimination facility. Such facilities shall be separated by no less than 1000 kilometers.125

This provision is especially important because of the content found in the Memorandum of Understanding, which accompanies the INF treaty. The Memorandum contains a list of deployment areas and missile operating bases, complete with latitude and longitude locations. The location information makes targeting such facilities a matter of data entry. This information could be utilized to plan a first strike against the other party. If policymakers believed a first strike based on the location information, in combination with the capability of non-theatre weapons to take out ICBM locations, were likely to result in the inability of the enemy to


125 “INF Treaty”, Article V Section 3.
retaliate, then it would be rational to attack. By outlawing the possibility of a confluence of weapons in one theatre, the possibility of achieving a first strike advantage is lost, thereby maintaining balance.

Further proof of distrust is evident in Article XII, which deals with interference and obfuscation. Article XII, Section two reads:

Neither Party shall:
(a) interfere with national technical means of verification of the other Party operating in accordance with paragraph 1 of this Article; or
(b) use concealment measures which impede verification of compliance with the provisions of this Treaty by national technical means of verification carried out in accordance with paragraph 1 of this Article.126

Both Washington and Moscow were clearly concerned that their track records regarding espionage might reveal themselves in manipulating the verification process. If it could be proven that either side chose to act contrary to the provisions of this section, the treaty would be broken, and another escalation of nuclear tension would be likely to occur. Neither party wanted such an outcome, but the only way to enforce such a rule is embodied in the spirit of the treaty to begin with. That is, the point of the treaty is to reduce nuclear tension and the possibility of war, but only if sufficient non-European theatre ICBMs are held in escrow.

The escrow of ICBMs is guaranteed by one simple concept: the elimination of all nuclear weapons in the world does not preclude the ability to re-arm. Because of the risk involved in complete bilateral disarmament, and the cost in time and money to re-arm, it is not rational to eliminate all nuclear weapons from a national arsenal unless and until all nuclear weapons are banned and destroyed under unanimous international verification treaties. It is only rational to hold as many weapons as is absolutely necessary to deter a first strike attempt against a government’s own retaliatory capabilities. This was the goal of both Reagan and Gorbachev.

The verification promises in the INF Treaty, backed up by nuclear capabilities in escrow, ensured

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126 "INF Treaty", Article XII, Section 2.
that the only rational choice for both Reagan and Gorbachev would be to sign the treaty and reap the moral and political benefits.

To further guarantee that the treaty could not be superseded, Article XIV reads: “The Parties shall comply with this Treaty and shall not assume any international obligations or undertakings which would conflict with its provisions.” The INF was given most-favored-treaty status.

Regarding the internal debate between Haig and Weinberger, they both got what they wanted. Haig’s argument that the Soviet government would not negotiate until they faced a credible threat proved to be true. But Weinberger got what he wanted with the promise of verification. The NATO Dual Track policy was vindicated. By deploying the Pershing II missiles to Western Europe, and simultaneously extending the offer of bilateral arms reduction, Reagan gave the Soviets incentive to remove the SS-20s. Agreement on verification did eliminate INF weapons from the European theatre, thereby returning the Cold War to the détente era status quo of proxy wars and interventionism. This allowed Reagan to maintain the policies of NSDD 75 without fear of nuclear confrontation. The strategic modernization process, in combination with the INF Treaty, meant that the US had achieved unquestioned military hegemony in the world, confirming Reagan’s vision of a position of strength.

On December 8, 1987, in the East room of the White House, the INF Treaty was signed. In time, the treaty led to the elimination of 1,846 Soviet SS-20s, and 846 American Pershing IIs. At the signing, Reagan said, “We have listened to the wisdom of an old Russian maxim, doveryai, no proveryai – trust, but verify.”

“You repeat that at every meeting,” Gorbachev replied.

“I like it,” Reagan said, smiling.

127 “INF Treaty”, Article XIV.
128 Hoffman, The Dead Hand, 295.
"The United States is practically sovereign upon this continent, and its fiat is law upon subjects to which it confines its interposition." – Secretary of State Richard Olney, 1895

On December 23, 1972, Nicaraguans felt the ground move beneath their feet. Within one hour, three consecutive earthquakes of 6.2, 5.0 and 5.2 magnitudes rocked the city of Managua, five kilometers below the nation’s capital. International aid poured in from around the world as people sympathized with the difficult task of rebuilding a city destroyed by natural forces. Unfortunately for the people of Managua, and the nation as a whole, much of the relief effort was channeled into the private fortune of Nicaragua’s long-ruling and US-backed dynastic family, the Somozas. The political aftershocks of that misappropriation resulted in a series of violent protests and brutal repressions that ultimately led to the ouster of President Anastasio Somoza-Debayle in 1979, and the rise to power of the communist-inspired Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

On the same day that Managuans experienced the Earth tremble, Hanoi was shaking, too. From December 18 to 30, 1972, US President Richard Nixon was overseeing the bombing of North Vietnam, known as the Christmas Bombings. By this time, public opinion in the US was clearly against military intervention in Vietnam, which led Nixon to approve illegal covert operations in order to hide his administration’s escalation of the war, even as troop levels were steadily decreasing. When the scope of Nixon’s illegal activity was exposed in the Watergate affair, American voters responded by electing the crusading moralist, Jimmy Carter, as president. However, Carter’s human rights based approach to foreign policy was quickly rejected as evidenced by Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980. Reagan’s rise to the presidency signaled a shift away from American non-intervention in the Third World, and solidified the foundation for a new era of overt proxy wars.
Reagan’s victory also brought about a change in overall American foreign policy regarding the Soviet Union. Whereas Carter vacillated between his hard and soft line advisors in an attempt to maintain the façade of détente, Reagan had no such qualms about challenging what he saw as Soviet aggression in the Third World. This policy, known as the Reagan Doctrine, was carried out in Nicaragua by supporting a wide variety of anti-Sandinista forces, known collectively as the Contras. In an address to the nation from the White House on January 16, 1984, Reagan said, “History teaches us that wars begin when governments believe the price of aggression is cheap.” If he is to be taken at his word, then the Contra War suggests that Reagan and his administration believed that the human and material costs of supporting a war against communism in Nicaragua was cheaper than any alternative, diplomatic or otherwise. For the Reagan administration, pursuing the Contra War was cheaper than conceding the failure of previous US policies in Latin America, cheaper than dealing with Congressional limits on executive power in the post-Vietnam political landscape, and cheaper than allowing another inch of soil in the Western Hemisphere to be threatened by communist ideology.

Reagan made an assumed cost-benefit analysis of implementing his Nicaragua policy in relation to the loss of political capital domestically. Negative public opinion regarding the administration’s Nicaraguan policy could be balanced out by positive public opinion on other issues, particularly the economic recovery after 1983. And even though Congress was dominated by Democrats, there was a vocal and supportive minority of Republicans who worked to implement administration policy. Therefore, the administration was able to continue its Nicaragua policy until revelations about illegal aspects came to light during the Iran-Contra Affair. Only then did the administration forced to recognize that further pursuit and defense of the Contra War might cost Reagan the presidency by way of impeachment. This indicates that

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the administration operated under the assumption that the only way to lose the Contra War was to lose the White House.

The transition from Somoza to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was directly tied to the transition from Carter to Reagan in the United States. By the mid 1970s in Nicaragua, the Somoza dynasty controlled fully one third of arable land, major construction projects, the meat and fish industries, national airlines, radio stations, state television (the only channel), and a chain of banks, all of which is estimated to have been worth nearly $1 billion.\textsuperscript{130} In reaction to the blatant co-opting by the Somoza dynasty of developmental and humanitarian aid following the 1972 earthquake, many Nicaraguans began participating in a popular uprising against the Somozas and their military, the National Guard.

The opposition to Somoza was highly diverse, but can be broadly conceived as two main groups, which were divided by class. Nicaragua’s business and middle class was generally moderate, and led by an intellectual newspaper editor, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro. The lower class, which was a much larger plurality of the people, was represented by the FSLN, a nationalist guerilla movement inspired by the Cuban model. The tenuous class alliance was shattered in January 1978 when Chamorro was assassinated in Managua, causing the city to rumble once again.

The Nicaraguan business elite organized strikes, which led to riots, and finally outright military action on the part of the FSLN against the National Guard. Somoza was under attack in his own country, and looked to Washington for help. But thanks to Carter’s human rights-based foreign policy, the moderates also looked to Washington for support. This put the Carter administration in a difficult position. Carter and his advisors were worried that by moving against Somoza, they would hasten the rise to power of the Sandinistas, thereby facilitating communist ideology, and set a damaging precedent concerning Washington’s other strong-man

allies. And yet it was also clear that by continuing to support Somoza, Carter would be contradicting his own foreign policy. While the Carter administration weighed its options, the Sandinistas consolidated their power and the moderates lost not only Chamorro, but the political initiative as well. Ultimately, Carter settled on bribery, and tried to manipulate the flow of US aid money into Managua as a way of gaining concessions from the new Sandinista government on behalf of remaining Nicaraguan capitalist upper and middle classes. This policy had its critics, but it was not a total failure. One historian explained:

Yet in the year and a half after the Sandinista victory, Carter managed to chart out a policy that was both realistic and successful, as far as it went. In November 1980, when he lost the presidency to Ronald Reagan, U.S.-Nicaraguan relations were constructive and the radicalization of the revolution that Carter sought to avert had not happened. Nicaragua had not become another Cuba.

Reagan clearly saw things differently, and upon entering office he set about putting his own foreign policy stamp on the region.

In the transitional period from Somoza-Debayle to a new government, US Ambassador to Nicaragua Lawrence Pezzullo had negotiated an agreement in which Francisco Urcuyo Maliano would become president of Nicaragua under a moderate government. State Department official Paul Bremer wrote to Reagan’s National Security Advisor, William P. Clark, regarding the transition from Somoza-Debayle to a new government. Bremer wrote that Maliano had, “reneged on the agreed upon scenario,” and that, “his action more than any other resulted in the collapse of the National Guard and the demise of the moderates and the total seizure of power by the Sandinistas.” The White House felt as though the US government had been betrayed by Maliano and the Sandinistas. The Contra War was an attempt to punish the betrayal, and in the process, bring stability back to the region in the form of a moderate Nicaraguan government, favorable to the US.

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131 LeoGrande, Backyard, 30-32.
132 LeoGrande, Backyard, 32.
133 Memorandum, Department of State to William P. Clark, January 21, 1982, CO-114, WHORM: Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan Library.
Scholars frequently use the Monroe Doctrine as a way of explaining long-term foundations of US foreign policy in Latin America, and the Contra War is no different. Historian Odd Arne Westad wrote, “As postulated in the Monroe Doctrine and reformulated many time since, most US leaders believed it was part of their country’s mission to lead the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean to democracy and capitalism, while keeping out foreign influences that could ‘seduce’ the southern part of the hemisphere away from the path of ‘Americanization.’” \(^\text{134}\) American leaders recognized the potential wealth that could be extracted from Latin American, if only the newly forming nations would conform to American principals of capitalism.

Over time, the meaning of the Monroe Doctrine has been altered to fit numerous geopolitical agendas, but there are two main themes, which the author of the doctrine, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, meant to set as precedents. These precedents are crucial to understanding the Reagan administration’s broad view of Latin American policy. The first precedent is the concept of non-intervention by European powers in the Western Hemisphere. This includes the “no transfer” policy, which was meant to maintain the existing balance of power in the Americas by removing the ceding of territory for purposes of making alliances or finalizing treaties. The second precedent is the spirit of anti-colonialism, which is a part of the American mission-concept of foreign policy, bringing enlightened government to the less fortunate. In effect, the Monroe Doctrine was a protectionist and missionary based view of foreign policy, in which the US government is understood to be the only appropriate entity to undertake intervention in the Americas.

For Reagan, these two precedents were seen as justification for preventing Soviet clientism in the region, and guaranteeing popular democracy for the people who have been saved from non-US foreign intervention. The Reagan administration feared that because Nicaragua was

the largest and most populous nation in Central America, if the Sandinistas retained power, the surrounding nations would also fall to communist influence, supplied by Moscow, with Cuban mercenaries. In Central America, Reagan saw dominoes.

The Monroe Doctrine is merely a distant cause of the Contra War, a base upon which future American policy was built. Historian William LeoGrande explains:

To justify the subordination of Latin America to the United States, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was resurrected in a new form: it was the natural right of the United States to expand its influence throughout the hemisphere just as it had been its natural right to span the continent. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, articulated in 1904, declared Washington’s right to exercise “an international police power” to maintain order and stability when Latin American governments exhibited “chronic wrong-doing.”

Neither Monroe nor Roosevelt, however, had any concern with communism, they were guarding against imperialism. In the view of Ronald Reagan, communism was the new imperialism. As such, his ideological interpretation of these precedents was colored by the Cold War, the doctrine of containment, and American policy failures in Cuba and Vietnam.

With the Monroe Doctrine and the policies inherent in Dollar Diplomacy firmly established as the distant and intermediate causes of the Contra War, scholars have tried to explain the most immediate causes within the framework of the Cold War, most specifically, Vietnam. The bitter aftertaste that most Americans felt after the Vietnam War affected their views against future intervention. Historian and former US Ambassador to Nicaragua Mauricio Solaun writes, “Vietnam was another watershed. The ‘clientelistic’ war proved too costly. A national mood of pessimism developed against U.S anti-revolutionary interventions abroad. The predicted ‘domino effect’ had not worked to spread Marxist-Leninist regimes beyond Indochina.”

Reagan did not share this view. He was of the group that felt dissent at home had prevented a declaration of war, and the full scale effort needed to win in Vietnam. As governor

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of California, Reagan shut down the state university system in an attempt to limit anti-war
protests, and called Berkeley a “hotbed of communism and homosexuality.”

One of the great challenges for the Reagan administration was to break out of the post-
Vietnam anti-intervention approach to foreign policy under Carter, and reinstate the policy of
containment through confrontation. LeoGrande writes:

A victory in Central America would be Reagan’s first foreign policy success and
its ramifications would be global. By defeating the Soviet challenge in Central
America, the United States would demonstrate to the Kremlin and its Cuban
proxies that the new president would not tolerate Soviet adventurism in the Third
World. And most important, it would demonstrate to the American people that
the United States could project military power into the Third World without
becoming entangled in another Vietnam.

This policy is necessarily contradictory. In proselytizing for democracy, Reagan was a proponent
of popular will. Yet by consciously acting against public opinion in the US by pursing
intervention, he attempted to prove the consensus wrong, rather than validate the responsibility of
elected officials to carry out the will of the people. LeoGrande continues, “The debate over
Central America was, in large measure, an extension of the debate over Vietnam. For the Reagan
wing of the Republican Party, Central America was, first and foremost, an arena of struggle
between Communism and Democracy.” In an effort to gain popular support of intervention,
Reagan tried to sell the Contra War as he saw the rest of the world: black and white, good and
evil.

Nicaraguans were quite aware of the history of American foreign policy in Latin
America. Although direct intervention in Nicaraguan affairs had been limited during and after
World War II, the US government was still seen as an overbearing power with its own interests at
heart. American actions negated the altruistic platitudes of statesmen espousing the moral
ambiguities of the Monroe Doctrine. By the mid-1970s, most Nicaraguans held the US

137 Will Bunch, Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts
138 LeoGrande, Backyard, 81.  
139 LeoGrande, Backyard, 6.
responsible for the decades-long rule and corruption of the Somoza family. The first Somoza in
power, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, only gained his position after twenty years of intermittent US
Marine occupation from 1912 to 1933. Garcia was educated at West Point, and the National
Guard was founded and trained by American officers.\footnote{Solaun, \textit{US Intervention}, 27.}
During the same time period, the
namesake of the Sandinistas, Augusto Cesar Sandino, led a nationalist revolt against US control
from 192 to 1933. When the US Marines left, Garcia used the false pretense of peace talks to lure
Sandino into Managua, and then had him killed. In 1954 the US helped to overthrow the
democratically elected Marxist Jacabo Arbenz in Guatemala. In 1961 the US sponsored a failed
invasion of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs disaster. And in 1965, US troops were sent to the Dominican
Republic to protect American interests and stabilize the government.\footnote{Solaun, \textit{US Intervention}, 17.}
Therefore, any attempt
by Washington to achieve what policy makers believed was stability, was seen by Nicaraguans as
an attempt to subjugate and control them in an insulting and paternalistic fashion. This led to,
among other things, the new revolutionary government slogan, “Yankees, enemy of humanity.”\footnote{Solaun, \textit{US Intervention}, 5.}

By the time Reagan took office, the mood in Nicaragua was anti-American, and the
American people were anti-intervention. Neither of these points mattered to Reagan, since his
overriding ideology was shaped entirely by the Cold War, not public opinion. However, it is
terribly difficult for any president to carry out policy without domestic support, and so the
administration conducted an extensive public diplomacy campaign to sell the merits of supporting
the Contras. Accordingly, the administration’s attempt falls into same pattern that was used to
justify intervention in 1823, 1904, and throughout the Cold War.

\textbf{Why We Fight}

Reagan’s foreign policy was dominated by his view of the Soviet Union. He saw the
Soviets as the number one threat to American hegemony and the greatest challenge to global
liberalism, capitalism, and democracy. Reagan felt that the best way to negotiate with the Soviet Union was from a position of strength, but in order to maintain that position, or at least the image of strength, the policy must be applied universally. The application of this logic can be seen in a series of National Security Decision Directives (NSDD). NSDD 17, signed in January 1982, called for the US to support “those nations which embrace the principles of democracy and freedom for their people in a stable and peaceful environment,” and to “support democratic forces in Nicaragua.” This NSDD fails to mention, however, that the US had the opportunity to carry out such policies under the Somozas, but chose not to enforce them. In 1982, with the revolution over and the Sandinistas in power, Reagan was ready to use American influence to destabilize the existing government in favor of a yet-to-be-determined third option apart from the return of Somoza-Debayle or the continuation of the Sandinista government.

NSDD 17 also includes a directive to, “create a public information task force to inform the public and Congress of the critical situation in the area.” This directive is a clear example of the administration’s attempt to frame the public discussion regarding Nicaragua by controlling the flow of information. There was no need to create a new task force to inform Congress about any of Reagan’s policies. The House and Senate each have their own dedicated committees regarding Foreign Relations, Intelligence, and the Armed Forces. If members of his administration needed to plead their case to Congress in an effort to elicit legislative support for his foreign policy ventures, all they needed to do was work within existing channels of communication.

The public also has an information gathering committee of sorts, the media. This was the real target of NSDD 17. If the administration was able to dominate the media’s narrative through the “public information task force,” then it was confident that public support for the war effort

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144 NSDD 17.
would increase. Greater public support for the president would put pressure on Congress to stay out of foreign policy, which is exactly what Reagan wanted.

In May 1982, the White House issued NSDD 37. The first point of this directive was to confirm the policy outlined in NSDD 17, but with some caveats. NSDD 37 declares, “Our current public affairs and Congressional information programs will be improved. The public affairs effort shall be internationalized, targeting opinion leaders and organizations worldwide.” This is not necessarily a change in policy so much as it is an expansion. By casting a wider net, the administration hoped to gain broader support. Additionally, if the administration were able to secure international support, the US would no longer be acting unilaterally, which would mollify some of Reagan’s critics.

Additionally, NSDD 37 reads, “The Secretaries of State and Defense will review current personnel strengths in the region for adequacy to carry out our policy and forward appropriate recommendations for approval.” Reagan was putting in his own people in order to implement his own policy. This astute political move served two purposes. Number one, Reagan was able to cut Carter out of the Nicaragua discussion. Although aid to Nicaragua was suspended under Carter, he had not done so until January 1981, just before Reagan took office. In order to establish his own hard line credibility, and in an effort to distance himself from Carter administration policies, Reagan authorized the resumption of aid to Nicaragua, only to have it cancelled shortly thereafter. Carter had cut aid to get tough with the Sandinistas, but during the election campaign, Reagan painted Carter as weak and ineffectual in dealing with communism. By cutting off aid in his own right, Reagan could lay claim to being the one who stood up to communism. Number two, Reagan could assert that some good-faith effort was made by his administration to negotiate with the Sandinistas, but that the new government’s obstinacy caused the diplomatic rupture between the two nations.

146 NSDD 37.
The full expression of Reagan’s anti-communism and position of strength policies is contained in NSDD 75, titled “US Relations with the USSR,” released in January 1983. The policy calls for the US to challenge the Soviet Union militarily, subvert the authority of the Kremlin within the USSR, and at the same time always extend an olive branch to negotiate should the first two points aggravate Soviet leaders to the point of exhaustion on any particular issue. Because Reagan viewed the Soviet Union as the cause of unrest around the world, particularly in the Third World, NSDD 75 is also representative of the approach that the administration took towards the Sandinistas.

The most successful portion of this policy was also potentially the most dangerous: military strategy. In part, NSDD 75 reads:

The US must modernize its military forces – both nuclear and conventional – so that the Soviet leaders perceive that the US is determined never to accept a second place or a deteriorating military posture. Soviet calculations of possible war outcomes under any contingency must always result in outcomes so unfavorable to the USSR that there would be no incentive for Soviet leaders to initiate an attack.\(^{147}\)

This line of thinking is contingent upon two very precarious assumptions. Number one, being able to guess how Soviet leaders “perceive” a situation, and number two, what their “calculations” might be if US policymakers correctly determined the answer to the first assumption. When the two assumptions are combined, the situation reads like this: If Washington guesses wrong on Soviet perceptions of any given situation, and then Moscow reacts in a way that US officials did not anticipate, then US officials reserve the right to respond in a tit-for-tat fashion based on the Soviet reaction, even though it was Washington’s failed model that allowed for the unanticipated reaction.

In the case of Nicaragua, the Reagan administration felt that an international communist conspiracy, directed from Moscow, was controlling the Sandinista government in a clientistic way. In response, the administration supported anti-communist groups in the Central America

region in an effort to return to the predictable American allegiance during the Somoza years. But this approach fails to recognize that Nicaraguans hated the Somozas and blamed Washington for keeping the dynasty in power against the will of the people. Additionally, the idea that “stability” is good was antithetical to nationalist movements during the concurrent decolonization and Cold War years. American policymakers feared that nationalist movements would be co-opted by communist movements. As a result, under the Reagan Doctrine, Washington supported anti-communist dictatorships, despite the absence of democratic reform.

Regarding the Third World, NSDD 75 also reads, “The U.S. effort in the Third World must involve an important role for security assistance and foreign military sales, as well as readiness to use U.S. military forces where necessary to protect vital interests and support endangered Allies and friends.” Although Vietnam is never mentioned in NSDD 75, the aforementioned portion is a direct challenge to the mood of anti-interventionism in both the Congress and the American public in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Because this statement appears in an NSDD, Reagan is arguing that in the interest of national security, the US must increase arms sales to allies, and be ready to attack enemies unilaterally. This is exactly how the US got involved in Vietnam in the first place. Anti-communism as a rule had been exposed as flawed policy in Vietnam, but because Reagan was a true believer in escalating American Southeast Asia policy, he saw no problem in applying the logic to Central America.

Just as in Vietnam, and Cuba before that, as the US increased pressure, local nationalists and communists grew more and more determined to resist. In discussing Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, Westad writes, “But to Ortega – as to Castro twenty years earlier – this was much of what his revolution was about: through support for revolutions elsewhere, his country showed not only its internationalist solidarity with others, but – even more importantly – its independence and its sovereignty vis-à-vis the United States.” Regarding the decolonization period, the most effective way to prove the credibility of any given government was to keep the US at arms length. From

148 NSDD 75.
the FSLN point of view, the American-Somoza alliance was colonial in nature, and the Sandinistas were fighting for control of their own national affairs.

A Public Offering

As required by NSDDs 17 and 37, the administration carried out a public diplomacy campaign in an effort to increase support for its Nicaragua policies. In an April 1984 White House talking points memo, the administration explained the legality of the Contra War by citing precedent. Under the heading, “Legality of Defensive Paramilitary Operations,” the argument was made that US law, Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, and the Organization of American States charter, all allow for the right of self-defense. The memo further reads:

Numerous precedents in inter-American relations have permitted paramilitary self-defense against Cuban initiated guerrilla and terrorist warfare. The clear evidence of Nicaraguan initiation of indirect aggression against its neighbors makes the paramilitary activities of friendly states legal.149

This shows that the administration wanted to be seen as reacting to outside interference in Nicaraguan affairs, and that the US was not the instigator of unrest in this case. By doing so, they drew on the precedents set by previous administrations without ever discussing the merits of those actions: the US has intervened in the past, so it must be allowed to do so at times of its choosing in the present and future. Again, this fails to account for the Sandinista perspective that it was the US who began the conflict by supporting the Somoza dynasty, in which case the Sandinistas, among other Nicaraguans, were reacting to American, not Cuban, intervention.

The material support that Washington provided to anti-Sandinista forces was the glue that held the differing groups together. The promise of small arms, communications equipment, and cash from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) served as a very powerful incentive to the various anti-Sandinista forces to cooperate with one another, and to conform to administration goals. On of the most active groups was made up of former National Guardsmen, calling

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themselves the 15th of September Legion. A small group of Nicaraguan moderates called themselves the United Democratic Nicaraguans (UDN). As a condition of receiving aid from the United States, these two groups, among others, were required to work together. The White House had no intention of supplying a stalemate within a stalemate by fostering unrest between anti-Sandinista forces.150

The April 1984 memo also reinforced Reagan’s attempt to distance his administration from Carter’s by noting the brief period of aid to Nicaragua from January to April 1981. While the memo does include a statement of credit to Carter’s policy, the wording of the text is revealing: “President Reagan used a waiver to reestablish economic aid from January 22, 1981 to April 2, 1981 in order to encourage Nicaragua to halt its indirect aggression. The Sandinista government refused; and pursuant to congressional requirement, US economic aid was terminated.”151 Missing from this statement is the fact that Reagan used an “executive” waiver to circumvent the congressional requirement to cut aid to the Sandinistas. Once Reagan’s new precedent was set, the White House claimed to be following congressional policy, in this case foreign policy, and canceled the aid accordingly.

Another April memo, this one from 1985, indicates that one year later, the administration’s public diplomacy campaign was failing. In response, the State Department (DOS) issued a memo titled, “If Congress Deserts The Contras.” Though the administration seems to have seriously supported the conclusions in this document, many of the points read as hyperbole, having taken aim at the insecurities and stereotypes of the American public. This memo is a window into what the administration thought about the intelligence and motivations of the American people, and is representative of market research politics, in which people are sold an issue based on public polling. By tying broader political topics to the Contra War, the administration attempted to form a consensus against the Sandinistas from groups that might not

150 LeoGrande, Backyard, 115.
have otherwise shared a common view on anything. In opening, the memo reads, “Another American ally, armed by the United States and sent into battle, will have been abandoned. Defeat and rout of the Nicaraguan Resistance would likely follow; freedom movements worldwide would be demoralized.”

This indicates that the administration thought the proxy war model of intervention could be vindicated, if only it never stopped. The statement also inherently linked US assistance to freedom movements around the world, as though those movements might not exist, let alone thrive, in the absence of American encouragement. That hubris, when combined with the precedents of the Monroe Doctrine, and a hawkish view concerning American policy failures in Vietnam, allowed for Reagan’s interpretation of Central America as vital to national security, and morally necessary.

The DOS warning continues, “The Monroe Doctrine would be a dead letter – replaced by the Brezhnev Doctrine. The Soviets would have extended their totalitarian system to the mainland of the Americas.” This statement seems to be directed at isolationists. By presenting the Contra War as an attack on American historical precedent, however antiquated that precedent might be when applied during the Cold War, the administration framed the war as an attack on American ideology itself.

The authors of the memo caution, “With ‘wars of national liberation’ spreading, refugees by the millions would begin the long march up the Pan American Highway into the United States.” Although immigration was, and continues to be, a serious issue to many Americans, the idea that millions of people would be capable of walking from Nicaragua across Central America and the full length of Mexico just to hit the Texas border, without any interference along the way, is pure paranoia. While it is not implicitly stated as such, this point might have been a call to Americans who were anti-immigration. By the logic of this memo, in supporting the


153 If Congress Deserts The Contras.

154 If Congress Deserts The Contras.
Contras, would-be immigrants could be confined in their own country. With nativist concerns covered, the DOS memo authors continue:

Managua will become Beirut West – a Mecca for international terrorists. The PLO has already established an embassy the Iranians and Libyans have arrived. Elements of the international terror network – the Red Brigades from Italy, the Montoneros of Argentina, the Baader-Meinhof Gang from West Germany – have been sighted in the Nicaraguan capital.\textsuperscript{155} Here, too, while the authors might truly have believed in the importance of this issue, it can also be seen as a thinly veiled attempt to drum up support from the Jewish community. By invoking images associated with Beirut, Mecca, the PLO, and Euro-Fascism, the administration seemed intent on framing the Contra war as representative of all conflict in the world. The administration’s argument seems to have been that, if only Congress and the American people would more forcefully support the Contras, not only would American interests in the region be well served, but the international communist movement, radical Islam, fascism, and Palestinian nationalism could all be blunted and contained.

The April 1985 DOS memo also includes false binary framing of things that might happen if Congress “deserts” the Contras. The memo reads, “Congress will have left the President this alternative: Accept a metastasizing Communist cancer in Central America – which could produce half a dozen Cubas in Central America within a decade – or send in the Marines.”\textsuperscript{156} This point fails to recognize the dynamism of future events, and makes it seem as though the President would have to make a fight-or-flight decision. In this case, the “flight” imagery is associated with “metastasizing cancer,” and the “fight” alternative is represented by the Marines. Since public opinion on both cancer and military intervention was quite low, the administration hoped to convince people that an ounce of prevention (supporting the Contras) would be worth a pound of cure (avoidance of direct US military action and cutting out communism from Central America).

\textsuperscript{155} If Congress Deserts The Contras.  
\textsuperscript{156} If Congress Deserts The Contras.
One final point worth noting from the April 1985 memo is in direct response to the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. The DOS memo reads, "The United States must not dishonorably abandon men whom we armed, trained and encouraged to go into battle to recapture their homeland from Communist tyranny." This situation is known as a "disposal problem." During the 1950s, the CIA conceived an invasion of Cuba in order to overthrow Fidel Castro, but Eisenhower hesitated to authorize the action because there was no plan as to who would run the subsequent Cuban government, and no guarantee that such a government would be friendly to the US. By the time Kennedy was in office, the CIA had finally formed a plan for post-revolutionary Cuba, and the Cuban exiles that had been trained by the CIA were still around. Kennedy had a difficult choice to make. Eisenhower asked the CIA to meet minimum requirements for invasion, which it failed to complete until the new administration was already in office. As such, in order to avoid invading Cuba, Kennedy would have had to tell the CIA that their years of planning was for naught, and inform the Cuban exiles that they had no home to which they could return.

Kennedy ordered the invasion, and disaster followed. In Nicaragua, Reagan wanted to avoid such a problem. Losing Cuba to the communist orbit was a great embarrassment to policymakers in Washington, and Reagan saw removing the Sandinistas from power in Nicaragua as his chance to exorcise the ghosts of Kennedy’s disposal problem, making Cuba look like the exception rather than the rule when challenging US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

**Domino Theory Version 2.0: Central America**

In order to maintain the argument that supporting the Contras meant fighting communism, the Reagan administration relied on two important realities: 1.) following the anti-Somoza revolution, the Sandinistas broke a 1979 diplomatic agreement, which would have allowed for popular democracy in Nicaragua, by seizing control of the government, and 2.) the new Sandinista government followed Marxist-Leninist ideology, which in and of itself was

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157 If Congress Deserts The Contras.
unacceptable to Reagan. Under the Sandinistas, the new Nicaraguan government suppressed
domestic opposition and initiated an enormous military buildup. Fearing an arms race in Central
America, the administration argued that the Sandinistas were upsetting the balance of power in
the region, which was undermining otherwise-stable American allies in El Salvador, Honduras,
and Costa Rica.

In response to a request by the National Security Council, the Department of Defense
(DOD) issued a memo titled, “Should Nicaragua Be Called a Communist State?” The answer
was: yes. The memo cites numerous pro-Marxist public statements by Sandinista leaders,
including Minister of Defense Humberto Ortega and Minister of the Interior Tomas Borge. In an
August 1981 speech, Ortega is quoted as saying:

> The scientific doctrine which guides our revolution is Marxism-Leninism, the
> analytical instrument of our revolutionary vanguard to understand the historical
> process and to create the revolution; Sandinismo is the concrete expression of the
> historical development of the struggle in Nicaragua. Without Sandinismo we
> cannot be Marxist-Leninist and Sandinismo without Marxism-Leninism cannot
> be revolutionary.\textsuperscript{158}

According to Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Reagan’s Ambassador to the UN, authoritarian governments
could be turned into democracies, but revolutionary governments were repressive and susceptible
to totalitarian takeover, most notably in the form of communism. Therefore, it was necessary to
roll back the gains of the Sandinistas, as quickly as possible, to the moment in 1979 when
Maliano broke the diplomatic agreement with Pezzullo and handed the Nicaraguan government to
the Sandinistas.

If Ortega’s statement is further analyzed, it becomes clear that the Reagan administration
and DOD interpretation of the Sandinistas was too narrow. The pattern of identifying Sandino
with revolution and nationalism was Nicaraguan tradition, dating back to the Depression-Era
guerrilla war led by Sandino against the client government propped up by US Marines. Sandino
had warned, “Do the Latin American governments think perhaps the Yankees would be content

\textsuperscript{158} Memorandum, Office of the Secretary of Defense to Robert M. Kimmitt, Should Nicaragua Be
with the conquest of Nicaragua alone?" 159 In discussing the connection between Sandino and Revolution, Westad writes, "Sandino’s ideas were a form of millenarian socialism,” and that Sandino, “believed strongly in a united Central America, rid of foreign influence, and where the peasants and workers would rule through their organizations.” 160 By associating Sandino with Marxism-Leninism, Ortega expressed a political strategy to garner widespread support among Nicaraguans who found organic nationalism to be a more palatable cause for revolution than communism. In this way, the Reagan administration and DOD were not incorrect, but rather incomplete, in their assessment of the Sandinista government.

The DOD memo authors do make a small concession on this point, but they also question the logic behind the Sandinistas’ less-than-total application of communist ideology. The memo reads:

On the other side of the argument is the fact that the private sector still controls most of the means of production in Nicaragua. This could indicate that the Sandinistas are not, despite their rhetoric, dedicated Marxist-Leninists. It is more likely, however, that they have delayed putting production under state control in the belief that it is more practical to have a visible private sector to encourage economic aid from Western countries. 161

This memo validates LeoGrande’s discussion of this issue, in which he notes, “Even if the Sandinistas seemed responsive to U.S. demands, the Reaganites regarded such moves as merely temporary and tactical – designed to buy time while the Leninists consolidated themselves. Nothing the Sandinistas did could penetrate this seamless web of ideological certainty.” 162 The Sandinistas were in a lose-lose situation as long as Washington supplied the Contras. They had the choice of fighting a prolonged guerrilla war in their own country against a well supplied and diverse group of adversaries, or give up the gains they had won on the battlefield during the revolution against the hated Somoza dynasty. Just ten months before the DOD memo, Secretary of State George P. Shultz testified to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence that,

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159 Westad, *Global Cold War*, 145.
160 Westad, *Global Cold War*, 145.
161 Should Nicaragua Be Called A Communist State?
"If we persevere in all aspects of our policy, solutions can be found short of defeat or escalation."163 From the White House point of view, supplying a proxy war to destabilize the Sandinista government would result in a stalemate in which US aid would outlast FSLN resolve, resulting in a victory for US policy. This was siege warfare politics practiced through mercenary interventionism.

Reagan administration views on Sandinista repression and the arms race can be found in a correspondence between Oregon State Senator Jeannette Hamby and National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane from 1984. In a letter directed to Reagan, Hamby writes that, “as a fellow Republican” she must object to administration policies in Nicaragua. Hamby had visited Nicaragua as part of an Oregon delegation, and in doing so, the observations she made caused her to question the logic of Reagan’s Nicaragua policy. She writes, “I returned home convinced that our current foreign policy toward Nicaragua is forcing this nation to request the necessary aid from Cuba and the Soviet Union.” Hamby encouraged Reagan to “listen to the Contadora Group. They offer our nation a way out of the impasse.”164 A discussion of the Contadora Group follows, but McFarlane’s response is worth investigating first.

Senator Hamby’s letter was just one written articulation regarding some of the common arguments against American intervention in Nicaragua, and so the response from McFarlane is, perhaps, appropriately broad by design. McFarlane begins by restating the previously discussed quote by Humberto Ortega from August 1981. Also included in the response are discussions of Sandinista “internal repression” and the Central American arms race. McFarlane charged that, “Independent political parties have been harassed, denied permission to hold public rallies; their headquarters have been attacked and their leaders beaten.” McFarlane continues, “The respected newspaper, La Prensa, for years the voice of opposition to the Somoza government, has been

163 Testimonial, Statement of Secretary of State George P. Shultz Before The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence In Executive Session, April 20, 1983, folder “Lebanon-Nicaragua,” William P. Clark Files, Ronald Reagan Library.
closed down repeatedly and is heavily censored.” In discussing the native Miskito Indian population of Nicaragua, McFarlane writes, “From the time they came to power, the Sandinistas have engaged in a systematic destruction of the way of life of the Miskito Indians [...] [they] have been moved from their ancestral homes to detention camps.”165 The case of the Miskito Indians is unique among the varying groups which opposed the Sandinistas. Remember that the Somozas accumulated control over one-third of arable land, but the area where the Miskitos live, in the northern highlands and gulf coast of Nicaragua, is some of the most inhospitable terrain in the country. As such, the Somozas had no need to pressure the Miskitos off their land. However, the land redistribution program of the Sandinista government threatened the Miskito population, and so they also joined the anti-Sandinista effort. Claims of Sandinista “repression” were not contested any more than the classification of the new government as being communist. The issue being debated by the Congress and the White House was the extent to which the United States government should get involved in stopping Sandinista human rights violations, and curbing the arms race.

Halting the arms race in Central America was vital to the Reagan administration’s efforts in the region, and an essential feature of the argument for supporting the Contras. If Nicaragua were to be secured as a base for communist agitation on the mainland, the administration feared that armed minority groups would undermine the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, and Costa Rica, in an acrid vindication of the Domino Theory. In response to Senator Hamby, McFarlane warned that the Sandinistas had increased their active duty forces to 40,000 troops, (double the number of National Guard members under Somoza-Debayle), and maintained 50,000 reservists. In terms of weaponry, McFarlane accused the Sandinistas of receiving “sophisticated weapons” from the Soviet Union, including, “T-55 tanks, amphibious ferries, helicopters and transport aircraft.” McFarlane argued that, “This buildup far exceeds Nicaragua’s defense needs,

and the buildup is offensive in nature." McFarlane's value judgment that the Sandinista military buildup was "offensive in nature" follows the logic of the Domino Theory and belief in an international communist solidarity movement.

Despite the warning signs which confirm McFarlane's point of view, the size and speed of the race to arms by the Sandinistas could have had real defensive purposes, too. Note that McFarlane highlights the fact that active duty forces were greater than the National Guard ever was. Consider, however, the Sandinista point of view that the United States backed the National Guard for decades in an effort to suppress domestic opposition to the Somozas. The Sandinistas feared American escalation of the Contra War in order to reverse the gains made by the FSLN during the revolution. As a result, their military buildup can also be seen as defense against a possible large scale US attack. Castro used the same strategy in Cuba after overthrowing Batista, expecting the CIA to repeat the Guatemala operation against Arbenz. Castro was ready, and survived. The Sandinistas were simply trying to do the same.

The Contadora Group

Beginning in January 1983, the foreign ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama formed a group to discuss a joint peace process for Central America. These nations shared an interest in halting the expansion of a regional war, and preventing intensified US military intervention in Latin America as a whole. By forming a group, each nation also hoped to dissipate any negative response from the US in reaction to negotiating with the Sandinistas unilaterally. For its part, the White House was happy to use the Contadora process as an excuse for cutting off bilateral talks with the Sandinistas by arguing that continuing to do so would undermine the multilateral approach by the Contadora group.167

166 McFarlane to Hamby.
167 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, 349-351.
In October 1983, the Sandinistas proposed four draft treaties which covered overlapping concerns in the region. LeoGrande writes:

In the proposed treaty with Washington, Nicaragua agreed to halt all aid to regional insurgents and prohibit the use of its territory for foreign military bases that would endanger the security of the United States. In return Washington would stop aiding the contras, lift economic sanctions against Nicaragua, and cease all military exercises in Nicaragua’s vicinity. Within twenty-four hours, Washington summarily rejected the drafts.\(^{168}\)

Instead of accepting the draft treaty as an attempt at diplomacy, the Reagan administration saw the offer as a sign of weakness, and felt that staying the course would soon lead to a change in the Nicaraguan government.\(^{169}\) The change was not forthcoming, and nearly a year later, the Sandinistas agreed to sign a treaty offered by the Contadora group in September 1984. In doing so, the Sandinistas put the onus on the Reagan administration to prove it really was dedicated to peace by agreeing to sign the treaty as well. The administration rejected the offer, claiming that the security provisions were unbalanced and that there was no verification agreement on enforcement of the treaty. When elections were held in Nicaragua in November 1984, the Reagan administration pressured international election officials to boycott participation, claimed the campaign process had been unfair and marked with violence, and ultimately undermined the credibility of the whole process.\(^{170}\)

In an effort to influence the multilateral peace process, in March 1985, Reagan wrote identical letters to the four Contadora presidents. The letter is representative of the one-sided nature of US efforts in general to end the Contra War. By attempting to steer the Contadora process from the outside, Reagan hoped to influence the outcome of negotiations while claiming that Latin American leaders were taking the initiative on their own. Because the United States had enormous economic leverage over the Contadora participants, Reagan used his position to dictate terms during the negotiation process. After having rejected offers from the Sandinistas in

\(^{168}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 351.
\(^{169}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 351.
\(^{170}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 360-361, 375.
1983 and the Contadora group in 1984, the administration was ready to offer its own plan. Reagan wrote, “I believe that peace will never be achieved in Central America until the armed struggle in Nicaragua is ended through national reconciliation based on truly democratic elections.” Reagan can hardly be blamed for diplomatic relations between the US government and the Somoza dynasty. Unfortunately, previous American support for the Somoza dynasty, which also prevented “truly democratic elections,” was seen as precedent by many people in Nicaragua, not just the Sandinistas. Therefore, Reagan’s call for democracy was understood by many Nicaraguans as an attempt to turn back the clock to a time before the revolution.

Reagan then discusses the most recent negotiation offer, he writes, “The principal leaders of Nicaragua’s democratic opposition groups signed a declaration on March 1, 1985, in which they offered a ceasefire in return for agreement by the Nicaraguan government to a dialogue mediated by the Bishops Conference of the Roman Catholic Church.” This statement includes two problems inherent in dealing with the Sandinistas. First, the idea that Catholic bishops would be fair arbitrators in any peace process was rejected by the Sandinistas because the bishops in Nicaragua had been in collusion with the Somoza dynasty. Second, by agreeing to this offer, the Sandinistas would be setting a precedent of their own by implicitly endorsing the right of loyal opposition within Nicaraguan politics. Combining these two requirements would have left the Sandinistas with less power, at the hands of what they perceived to be corrupt bishops, in a political atmosphere that would allow outside sources to fund opposition within Nicaragua.

Also included in the Contadora letter is a reaffirmation of NSDD 75 and Reagan’s concept of a position of strength. Reagan continues, “My government intends to take action designed to strengthen Nicaragua’s democratic resistance forces while encouraging the Sandinista regime to agree to Church-mediated dialogue.” According to NSDD 75, it was administration

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172 Reagan to Cordova.
173 Reagan to Cordova.
policy to challenge communist governments in the Third World. Yet by offering to negotiate while facilitating hostility, the administration proved its consistency of policy application. This was the approach vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in general, as well as the approach used by NATO in Europe regarding nuclear forces. The White House saw no need to alter course, since doing so would destabilize the foundation of Reagan’s foreign policy.

Reagan’s final point in the Contadora letter is a threat. He writes, “If the Nicaraguan government accepts the offer of dialogue with the opposition, then my government’s assistance will remain limited to humanitarian purposes for a sufficient period to allow a serious dialogue to achieve progress.”\(^{174}\) The alternative, of course, is the continuation of the Contra War. This approach is sheer obstinacy, which offers no concessions to the Sandinistas for all their efforts. The FSLN had fought militarily against the Somozas during the revolution to gain a greater voice in government. After the revolution, right or wrong, the FSLN continued to consolidate power, and continued to fight militarily for its survival. The Sandinistas felt they had made real sacrifices in their rise to power, and had no desire to simply hand over the government to Catholics and capitalists. The Sandinistas rejected Reagan’s proposal. Both the US and Nicaraguan governments accused the other of negotiating in bad faith. The Reagan administration response was to continue the Contadora process, which it could control. The Sandinista response was to try to move negotiations to the UN, where they would have the support of the Soviet Union. Neither plan worked effectively.

**The War at Home**

As the Reagan administration tried to sell the Contra War, Congress tried to bring down the price. One example of the administration’s attempt to sell the war is embodied in an April 1985 memo between two Reagan advisors, Peggy Noonan and Pat Buchanan. Noonan wrote the memo to Buchanan regarding her suggestions for an “Influential Citizens event,” which Noonan

\(^{174}\) Reagan to Cordova.
described as “the bipartisan bignames event,” planned for later that month. Noonan paints a vivid picture of Reagan leading the unnamed group of bipartisan supporters “like a nice big citizen’s army” out to the White House Rose Garden, and with the “most famous faces” in the background, Reagan should make a “short pungent speech about how these fine Democrats and Independents are standing for freedom.” Noonan goes on to suggest, “maybe we could have a Koch, a Kissinger, a Brzezinski all around him nodding in the background.” Noonan is not suggesting that those men will actually be in attendance, but rather the points of view and the political bases which they represent should be seen as supporting Reagan in this effort. She then lays out a plan for manipulating the media in terms of both written and visual content, and closes by writing that the Influential Citizen’s reward should be to “buy them a scotch.”175 This style of information choreography was necessary for the Reagan administration because of the strong effort by Congressional Democrats to limit the power of the executive in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. By framing the Contra War as a bipartisan effort, Noonan, Reagan, and the rest of the administration hoped to gain support for their point of view by making it seem as though there was a bipartisan consensus. For their part, the Congressional Democrats resisted supporting the Contra War through some questionable foreign policy interference, as well as established legislative measures to limit intervention by flexing their power of the purse.

In March 1984, ten Democratic members of the House of Representatives signed a letter addressed to Sandinista leader Commandant Daniel Ortega. In the letter, the Congressmen lament the administration’s policy toward Nicaragua, and pledge, “We have been, and remain, opposed to U.S. support for military action directed against the people or government of Nicaragua.” The Congressmen recognize that, “The Nicaraguan people have not had the opportunity to participate in a genuinely free election for over fifty years.” They also repeat the administration’s refrain about the importance of protecting political pluralism and freedom of

175 Memorandum, Peggy Noonan to Patrick J. Buchanan, April 5, 1985, CO-114, WHORM:Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan Library.
assembly. On the surface, this letter is a soft line approach to ending the Contra War, but in reality, the Congressmen are making the same case as the administration. The Congressmen argue that if the Sandinistas guarantee the security of loyal opposition within Nicaragua, the US will cease in supplying the Contras with war materials.\textsuperscript{176} Both the White House and Congress agreed that in truly democratic Nicaraguan elections, the Sandinistas would be voted out of power, if not immediately, then in short order. By supporting an environment in which the Communist Party has to operate by the same rules as any other political party, most policymakers in Washington believed that the right amount of aid money would eventually tip the voting balance away from the Sandinistas toward more moderate and US-friendly political parties.

Despite the similar goals of both the House Democrats and the Reagan administration, many Republicans saw the “Dear Commandant” letter as an affront to the executive branch’s privilege of exclusive control over foreign policy. Representative Newt Gingrich wrote to Reagan’s Chief of Staff James Baker, complaining that, “While this letter so far has received little press attention, it may prove to be a decisive turning point in the post-Vietnam Congressional involvement in the daily execution of foreign policy.” Gingrich argued that the message of the Ortega correspondence, “clearly violates the Executive Branch’s exclusive prerogative” of negotiating with foreign governments. Gingrich also cited precedent as far back as the Articles of Confederation to support his criticism of the Ortega correspondence, arguing that the Congressmen had stepped “across the boundary from opposition to a policy, to undercutting that policy.”\textsuperscript{177} McFarlane responded to Gingrich on behalf of the administration. In his letter, McFarlane wrote, “I share your view that the American people should be aware that this type of private diplomacy undercuts the President’s efforts.” McFarlane also noted, however, “The President stated that Congress is a significant partner in foreign policymaking, but we must work


as partners.” The Congress controlled monies being used to support the Contra War, and in the years leading up to this particular exchange of letters, the House had been actively pursuing limits on executive power in Nicaragua. McFarlane and the rest of the administration understood that attacking Congressional Democrats in the way Gingrich did would be a far more effective method of undermining Reagan’s foreign policy than working with the Congress, particularly since legislatures had already taken visible steps to limit funding the Contra War.

In December 1982, Congress unanimously passed the first Boland Amendment, named for Missouri Democrat Edward P. Boland. This amendment eventually became the first in a series of Congressional checks on executive power, all of which became public laws, but that was not necessarily the original intent. Journalist Gary Webb explains:

Boland, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, knew full well that the CIA was funding the Contras, and he was not opposed to it. The Intelligence Committee, a body generally protective of the CIA, had been one of the few committees told of the secret Contra project. To quiet other liberals, Boland agreed to an amendment that prohibited the use of taxpayer funds “for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua or provoking a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras.” The House passed it on Christmas Eve 1982 by a vote of 411-0.

Webb’s argument is that the CIA, White House, Defense Department, and the Contras’ Congressional supporters all understood the Boland Amendment to be a play on words and an empty promise. Webb writes, “If the Contras were given money for one purpose and decided to use it another way, well, that wasn’t the CIA’s fault, was it?” By designating that no funds could be used for the purpose of “overthrowing the government,” funds could simply be designated for some other purpose, allowing the Contra War to continue.

In October 1983, a more stringent law was passed by the House, known as the second Boland Amendment. This amendment prohibited covert assistance for military operations in

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Nicaragua and instead authorized overt assistance to neighboring countries.\textsuperscript{181} By passing this legislation, House Democrats were trying to force the administration to limit its war within the public diplomacy campaign limits, which Reagan was framing. The second Boland Amendment was meant to concentrate appropriated funds into an effort to curb the arms trafficking between the Sandinistas and communist movements in Nicaragua’s neighbors. Since protecting allies and checking communist expansion in the region was the administration’s main argument for supporting the Contra War, House Democrats were of the opinion that limiting funds to that purpose would end Executive attempts at widening the conflict.

For a third consecutive year, in October 1984, Congress passed a resolution limiting the scope of funds to be used for the Contra War. House Joint Resolution 648 prohibits the use of funds for use in the Contra War except under certain conditions, and only if an additional joint resolution approved such funds on a case by case basis.\textsuperscript{182} By adopting this strategy, the House Democrats hoped to nickel-and-dime the President into either revealing the scope of the Contra War one action at a time, or to cease covert activity all together.

Finally, in the summer of 1985, the Senate joined the House in limiting Executive war making powers regarding Nicaragua. The Senate severely limited the legality of funding the Contra War by prohibiting funds authorized by the Senate, the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, and the Arms Export Control Act, for providing assistance to any person or group involved in rebellion or insurgency in Nicaragua. The bill further prohibits use of funds sent to allies for the same purposes.\textsuperscript{183}

Members of Congress were not alone in their disapproval of the Contra War. Public opinion in the US was consistently against intervention in Nicaragua, despite administration

\textsuperscript{181} Bill Summary and Status 98\textsuperscript{th} Congress House Resolution 2968, Library of Congress online http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdqquery/z?d098:HR02968:@@@L&summ2=m& (accessed April 27, 2011).
\textsuperscript{182} Bill Summary and Status 98\textsuperscript{th} Congress House Joint Resolution 648, Library of Congress online http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdqquery/z?d098:HJ00648:@@@L&summ2=m& (accessed April 27, 2011).
\textsuperscript{183} Bill Summary and Status 99\textsuperscript{th} Congress S.960, Library of Congress online http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdqquery/z?d099:SN00960:@@@L&summ2=m& (accessed April 27, 2011).
efforts to rally support. Political Scientist Gordon L. Bowen discusses this in an investigation of public opinion regarding US Nicaraguan policy. Bowen writes:

Despite the most popular president in recent decades focusing substantial effort on winning the public over to support the Contras, and despite several episodic “rallies” of heightened support, never did a majority of Americans back the Contras project. Each Reagan-era “rally” certainly had an immediate impact on measurable attitudes toward U.S. Nicaragua policy. However, these changes were transient: in the end, these rallies did little that was durable to alter the general distribution of Americans’ opinions, which fundamentally were to oppose further aid to the Contras.184

Both the American people, and the Congress which represents them, were against Reagan’s Nicaragua policy. Yet even in the face of such popular discontent and legal limitations, the administration continued to pursue the Contra War. That pursuit solidified the link between Vietnam and Nicaragua, and nearly cost Reagan his job as president.

The Iran-Contra Affair

In December 1983, activities in the Middle East became important in relation to the Contras, although it was not apparent at the time. Over the course of fifteen months, eight Americans were taken hostage in Beirut. Mounting pressure on the Reagan administration to secure the release of the American captives, combined with the administration’s policy to never negotiate with terrorists, led to a set of illegal activities including an arms-for-hostages deal with Iran. Upon delivery of arms shipments, it was assumed that the Iranian government would then use its political influence over the hostage takers to secure the release of the Americans. The profits from the arms sales to Iran were to be secretly diverted to support the Contras. The Administration could thereby appear to be in compliance with the Boland Amendments, and continue its Nicaragua policy, as long as the source of the funding remained a secret. That secret also protected Reagan from being accused of negotiating directly with terrorists for the release of American hostages.

Just as the hostage crisis emerged, the administration was forced to deal with the funding problem caused by the Boland Amendments in relation to the Contra War. In March 1984, CIA Director William Casey sent a memo to McFarlane regarding the "Supplemental Assistance to Nicaragua Program." In part, the memo reads:

In view of possible difficulties in obtaining supplemental appropriations to carry out the Nicaraguan covert action project through the remainder of this year, I am in full agreement that you should explore funding alternatives with the Israelis and perhaps others. ... You will recall that the Nicaraguan project runs out of funds in mid-May. Although additional moneys are indeed required to continue the project in the current fiscal year, equipment and materiel made available from other sources might in part substitute for some funding.\[185\]

This is a clear reference to the Boland Amendment regarding covert action funding, and an obvious example of the administration's desire to continue such operations. The alternatives presented in the memo are trafficking captured arms through Israel, and outside assistance from another country. The principles were now in place for what would become the Iran-Contra Affair.

In June 1984, the National Security Planning Group held a meeting on Central America. The meeting was, among other things, called to discuss third party funding of covert activities in Nicaragua. In attendance were President Reagan, Vice President George H. W. Bush, Casey, and others. In the meeting, Secretary of State George P. Shultz shared the feelings of Chief of Staff James Baker, "that if we go out and try to get money from third countries, it is an impeachable offense."\[186\] At the same meeting, with Reagan present, Bush raised the problem of third party *quid pro quos*. Bush asked, "How can anyone object to the U.S. encouraging third parties to provide help to the anti-Sandinistas? The only problem that might come up is if the United States were to promise to give these parties something in return so that some people could interpret this

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\[186\] Minutes, National Security Planning Group Meeting on Central America, June 25, 1984. Kornbluh and Byrne, Iran-Contra Scandal, 77.
as some kind of an exchange." 187 This meeting indicates that Reagan was well informed of what his subordinates were doing. Therefore, by his direct inaction, Reagan was complicit in the activities as well. These interconnected policies continued for two years.

In October 1986, a CIA cargo plane was shot down over southern Nicaragua, killing two American pilots. A third American, Eugene Hasenfus, parachuted out of the plane and was captured by the Sandinista army. Under interrogation, Hasenfus revealed a network of Contra resupply operations and safe houses in El Salvador, and admitted that it was his understanding that the operations were sanctioned by the CIA. 188 Hasenfus was on the cover of every major newspaper in the US, and any credibility that the administration had in denying covert operations in Nicaragua was gone, and the secrecy of administration activity began to deteriorate.

Shortly thereafter, Administration dealings in the Middle East also came to light. In November 1986, a Lebanese newspaper, *Ash-Shiraa*, published an account of a heretofore secret trip by McFarlane to Teheran earlier in 1986, in which McFarlane was helping to facilitate the arms-for-hostages deals. The entire affair was being exposed, and in turn revealed a major contradiction in Reagan’s policy of not negotiating with terrorists, as well as confirming that the administration had been involved in an illegal war in Central America.

On March 4, 1987, Reagan addressed the nation regarding the Affair. In one of his most famous lines, Reagan said, "A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not." 189 That was as close as Reagan came to admitting he had authorized members of his administration to fund an illegal war in Central America by selling arms to governments which associated with terrorists. The Iran-Contra Affair exposed the illegality of the administration’s Nicaragua policy and effectively ended US involvement in the Contra War. For

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188 Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 402-403.
Reagan, the cost of pursing his goals in Central America had finally caught up to the expected benefits.

The suspension of US aid to the Contras did not, however, end the Contra War. The inertia created by US overt and covert support through Honduras and El Salvador assured that, by 1987, the Contras were so well armed and supplied that they were able to challenge the FSLN militarily. In 1988 the fighting ended, and by 1990 presidential elections were held in Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega was defeated by Violeta Chamorro, widow of the slain opposition leader and newspaper editor Pedro Chamorro.

While investigations into Iran-Contra continued into the George H.W. Bush administration, they were thwarted by the outgoing President’s Christmas Eve pardons in 1992. Bush pardoned McFarlane, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Duane Clarridge (CIA), Clair George (CIA), Elliot Abrams (State Department), and Alan Fiers (CIA), saying that “their motivation...was patriotism.”\(^\text{190}\) In response to the pardons, Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel investigating Iran-Contra, released his own statement: “President Bush’s pardon of Caspar Weinberger and other Iran-contra defendants [...] demonstrates that powerful people with powerful allies can commit serious crimes in high office – deliberately abusing the public trust – without consequence.”\(^\text{191}\) In the end, Thomas Clines was the only Iran-Contra participant to serve a prison sentence. He was convicted of falsifying tax records.

From the jungles of Central America, to the deserts of the Middle East, and the highest reaches of Washington politics, the Contra War serves as a clear example of containment gone wrong. While the memory of intervention in Vietnam kept Reagan from gaining public support for the Contras in Nicaragua, it was the memory of Watergate that kept him in office after his cover was blown in Iran. The administration nearly pulled the temple down on their heads, just


\(^{191}\) Lawrence Walsh, Response to Presidential Pardons, December 24, 1992. Kornbluh and Byrne, Iran-Contra Scandal, 377.
as Richard Nixon and his administration had done over Watergate. And yet, when compared to Reagan’s goal of thwarting communist expansion in Central America and his ability to remain in power amid scandal and illegal activity, it turns out that, for Reagan, the Contra War really was cheap, after all.
CONCLUSION

The legacy of the Reagan administration lives on in a variety of ways which continue to effect American foreign policy today. When Reagan left the White House, he left a world in which the largest economic and political tectonic plates were sliding in obvious directions: Capitalism was rising, Communism falling. Whether or not credit should be given to Reagan and his administration alone is up for debate. One view is that it was Reagan’s specific policies which forced change within the Soviet Union, leading to dissolution of the world’s last great multi-ethnic empire. Another view is to point to obvious cracks within the communist structure, and argue that Reagan just happened to be in office during an unstoppable culmination of flawed communist policies. Undoubtedly, the truth is made up of aspects from both viewpoints. The written articulation of Reagan’s overriding Cold War policy, NSDD 75, proves as much. The administration identified what it saw as Soviet weaknesses, and made the conscious choice to pressure Moscow in those areas. However, Reagan and his team would never have been in the position they were in the early 1980s if it had not been for the decades of containment policy carried out by the previous administrations from Truman to Carter.

Reagan’s bipolar view of the world during the Cold War endures in the modern War on Terror. While not strictly a phenomenon developed under Reagan, on some level, the government continues to present international relations as “us vs. them.” In a speech to the British House of Commons, Reagan warned that “the march of freedom and democracy…will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history.” In 1983, Reagan famously labeled the Soviet Union an “evil empire” and warned people not to “remove yourself from the struggle.

between right and wrong and good an evil." In the wake of the Al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush said, "We are a country wakened to danger and called to defend freedom." Bush continued, "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." This overriding necessity to define American strength through confrontation is the most violent aspect of America's missionary style of diplomacy. In that element, throughout his administration, Reagan pursued intervention around the globe on behalf of American interests and ideology. But in the absence of a dominating Soviet challenge in the current political environment, the "us vs. them" model of diplomacy has often been misconstrued as a "United States vs. the World" point of view, in which ultimatums like those of Bush serve to undermine US benevolence, and reinforce paranoid views of American designs on perpetual global dominance.

Reagan's hatred of communism also led him to proselytize the need for proxy wars in a way which left a very distinct impact upon leaving office. During the 1980s, the US supported the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union as a part of the Cold War. In 2001, the United States began participating in a war against Al Qaeda and their Taliban allies within Afghanistan as a part of the War on Terror. That war is still raging ten years later, or nearly thirty years later, depending on how you look at the conflict. Rather than continuing to fight within their own borders, Al Qaeda members based in Afghanistan chose to bring the war in Central Asia to what they perceived to be the cause of the conflict: modernization in the form of globalized capitalism, represented by the World Trade Center and the US Government. Al Qaeda has turned Reagan's interventionist foreign policy against the United States in an effort to curb

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American expansionism in the former Third World in the same way the US had traditionally worked to contain communism: by exploiting superpower weaknesses, not matching strengths.

The Obama administration is now faced with unique decisions of its own. The dynamism of geopolitics in relation to the Arab Spring and the War on Terror has forced the current administration to reexamine traditional American alliances in the Middle East and North Africa. However, in opening up the Arab world to democracy, many suspected enemies of the United States would be allowed participation in governments that had previously suppressed anti-American elements by manipulating elections and violating human rights. Transposing Reagan Doctrine policies onto the Arab Spring situation would have meant supporting former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the monarchy in Bahrain, while attacking the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya. The Obama administration seemingly stood idle as Mubarak was forced from office, and allowed a proxy army of Saudis to maintain control over Bahrain by suppressing calls for political reform, but intervened directly in Libya by supporting the rebels, carrying out air strikes, and maintaining a no-fly zone over Libyan territory. In the Libyan case, the Reagan Doctrine is once again in competition with the anti-interventionists who fear another Vietnam. The Obama administration faces the challenge of walking a fine line between the two schools of thought in formulating an effective policy to protect American interests in the region.

Regarding the specific case studies herein, over twenty years after Reagan left office, the impact of his policies is clearly evident. In Saudi Arabia, the United States continues to enjoy a stronger alliance than with any other Muslim majority state, and the AWACS deal ended up being a precursor to increased American involvement in the Middle East during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the early 1990s. Just as in the 1980s, the enormous size of the oil market in the United States guarantees that one of the Saudis’ best interests is to maintain positive diplomatic relations with the Washington.

Additionally, just as the Saudis were reliable American allies during the Cold War, the Saudis are also a close ally of the United States in the War on Terror. In the 1980s, Reagan argued that the Soviets and Iranians were the biggest threat to security in the Persian Gulf region. While the Soviet threat is long gone, the Iranian government, dominated by Shia clerics, continues to challenge Saudi dominance in the region. As such, the Saudis continue to send oil to the United States, and the US government continues to send weapons to Saudi Arabia.

In Europe, Reagan’s policies have been vindicated most fully. The INF Treaty eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons. Once it became clear that neither Gorbachev nor Reagan had designs on authorizing any form of a nuclear first strike, and that Gorbachev would no longer enforce the Brezhnev Doctrine, the anti-communist movements within the Eastern Bloc flourished. By the end of 1989 the Polish Solidarity movement had triumphed, the Berlin Wall was torn down, and the Domino Theory of communism in Southeast Asia and Central America was proved correct, but in the opposite direction, as one after another, the former Soviet satellites broke away from Moscow and formed new democratic governments. A popular sign during the late 1989 protest movements sums up the transition: “Poland: 10 years, Hungary: 10 Months, Germany: 10 Weeks, Czechoslovakia: 10 Days.” Both East and West Europe have come together under the banner of economic cooperation, first in the Common Market, and now the European Union.

The Reagan administration impact on Central America, Nicaragua in particular, is mixed. Broadly considered, Reagan’s goal of securing the dominance of democracy in the region has borne fruit. Each of the Central American nations is now a democratic republic, and Nicaragua has had regular democratic elections since 1990. Yet some critics have argued that the 1990

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presidential election victory of Violeta Chamorro over the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was a result of Nicaraguan fears of another US escalation of the Contra War if Ortega were to remain in office. Later, the administration of Arnoldo Aleman was charged with corruption, and Aleman was sentenced to twenty years in prison for embezzlement and money laundering. 199

As the years pass and more archival material is made available to historians, the image of just exactly who Reagan was, what his policies meant, and where they came from, will continue to come into focus. Just as perceptions of Dwight Eisenhower changed after the publication of Fred Greenstein’s *The Hidden Hand Presidency*, perhaps the world is simply waiting for the first great Reagan book to facilitate some consensus. In the meantime, we are left to live among the shadows of the Reagan era, darting in and out of the light as world events dictate.

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