

The End of the Cold War: Reagan's Foreign Policy

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In addition to reviving the economy, reducing government regulation, and rolling back the sexual revolution, the New Right sought to increase American influence abroad. Ronald Reagan's foreign policy included this objective. Early in his administration, he referred to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." By the time President Reagan left office in 1989, the Soviet Union was collapsing, but another region—the Middle East—remained a concern for the United States.

This tutorial examines the end of the Cold War in three parts:

1. "Vietnam Syndrome" and the "Evil Empire"

Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981 with the support of a conservative coalition—the **New Right**—which sought to advance America's stature as a world power.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ronald Reagan

Conservative Republican president from 1981 to 1989 whose support of tax cuts, deregulation, reduced spending on social programs, hard-line anti-communism, and conservative social policies earned him the loyalty of the "New Right."



TERM TO KNOW

New Right

A coalition of American conservatives, including business leaders, Southern Whites, intellectuals, and evangelical Christians, who organized in response to socioeconomic changes of the 1960s and 1970s. To President Reagan and the "neoconservatives," the Soviet Union was an important threat. They criticized **President Carter's** handling of the Iran hostage crisis, which continued into early 1981, as well as other situations in which the United States appeared (to them) weak or reluctant to use military force. Reagan and other conservatives referred to this unwillingness to assert American influence abroad as "**Vietnam Syndrome**."



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Jimmy Carter

Democratic president from 1977 to 1981 who attempted to reorient U.S. foreign policy toward promoting universal human rights while drawing a hard line against the Soviet Union and threats to American interests in the Middle East.



TERM TO KNOW

Vietnam Syndrome

Reluctance on the part of American politicians to actively engage U.S. forces in a foreign war for fear of suffering a humiliating defeat.

In contrast to the *détente* policy, President Reagan revived the early Cold War concept of the “iron curtain” when he took office.



TERM TO KNOW

Détente

The relaxation of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s. Reagan’s stark view of the Cold War contributed to renewed tensions and an unprecedented U.S. military buildup. While tax cuts based on **supply-side economics** reduced or eliminated domestic programs, the president and his advisors implemented an aggressive military spending program that led to a revival of the **military-industrial complex**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Supply-Side Economics

Ronald Reagan’s economic policy; suggested that lowering taxes on the upper-income brackets would stimulate investment and economic growth.

Military-Industrial Complex

The matrix of relationships among the federal government, defense industries, and universities, all of which benefited from increased investment in weapons research and other war-related initiatives.

➔ **EXAMPLE** During Reagan’s presidency (1981–1989), military spending totaled nearly \$2 trillion. The money was used to develop the B-1 and B-2 bombers as well as cruise missiles and to expand the U.S. Navy.

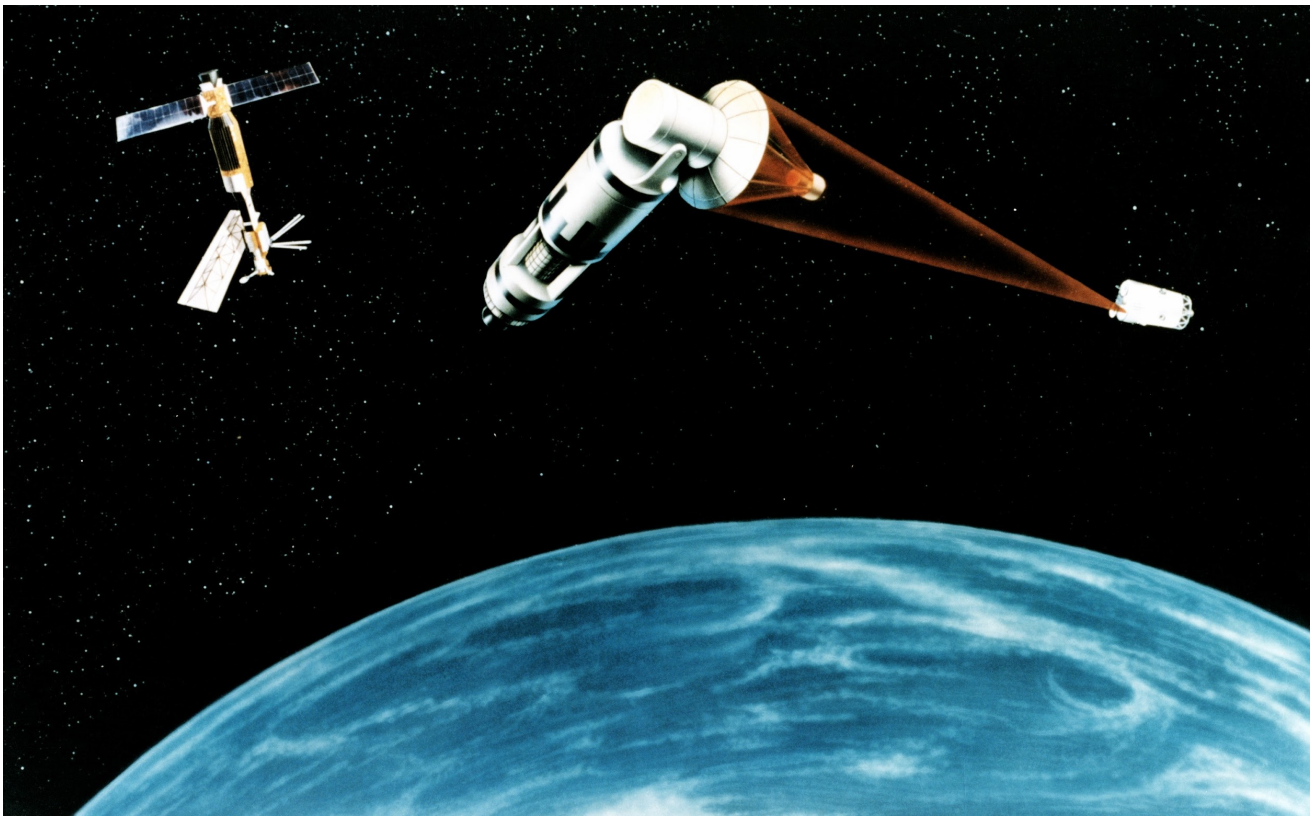
Because the Reagan administration had decreased domestic spending while spending freely on defense, the press called attention to any inefficiency in the military buildup. One of the most notable controversies grew out of coverage of the **Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)**.



TERM TO KNOW

Strategic Defense Initiative

Called for the development of a defensive shield to protect the United States from a Soviet missile strike.



An artist's rendering of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Referred to as “Star Wars” by skeptics, SDI proposed equipping satellites with lasers and constructing other space-based defenses to prevent Soviet missiles from striking the United States.

Scientists argued that much of the technology necessary for SDI to work had not yet been developed. Others claimed that SDI violated treaties with the Soviet Union and worried that the Soviet Union would respond with a similar system. The plan was also very expensive; it was estimated that SDI would cost \$7.5 billion. For all of these reasons, the administration abandoned SDI in the mid-1980s.

Despite the failure of SDI, the resurgence of weapons development and military spending marked a significant transition in the American **containment** policy.



TERM TO KNOW

Containment

The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism abroad during the Cold War. During his first years in office, President Reagan criticized proposals to “freeze” the development of nuclear weapons. As his administration increased defense funding, Reagan pledged to counter any Soviet aggression and exploited weaknesses in the Soviet economy. He described his approach in an address to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983:

President Ronald Reagan, Address to National Association of Evangelicals, 1983

“A freeze would reward the Soviet Union for its enormous and unparalleled military buildup. It would prevent the essential and long overdue modernization of the United States and allied defenses and would leave our aging forces increasingly vulnerable. And an honest freeze would require extensive

prior negotiations on the systems and numbers to be limited and on the measures to ensure effective verification and compliance

. . . let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness—pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they 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.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why did President Reagan oppose a “nuclear freeze,” or a limitation on the development of nuclear weapons?
2. Why did President Reagan refer to the Soviet Union as “the focus of evil in the modern world”?

Throughout his administration, Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” that advanced a set of values that were in opposition to the values held by the United States. These values concerned political and economic philosophies, but also questions of morality. For example, the atheism of the Soviet state (indicated by the phrase “they preach the supremacy of the state”) contrasted with the values of Christian America, leaving Reagan to “pray they [the] will discover the joy of knowing God.” In this speech, Reagan went on to describe the Soviet Union as a nation in which “Morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war.”

Although he did not deny the possibility of eventual coexistence between the two superpowers, he made it clear that *détente* would not occur at the expense of American values. “We will never give away our freedom. We will never abandon our belief in God. And we will never stop searching for a genuine peace,” Reagan said.

2. American Interventions

In addition to an unprecedented military buildup, President Reagan revived American anti-communist intervention abroad.

Reagan enjoyed immediate foreign policy success when, on January 20, 1981 (the day he took office), Iran released the hostages who had been held at the U.S. embassy in Tehran.



American hostages return from Iran in January, 1981.

The hostages had been held for 444 days. They were captured in November 1979 during the Iranian Revolution when an anti-American, Islamic theocratic government led by Ayatollah Khomeini took control of Iran.



DID YOU KNOW

After prolonged negotiations with the Iranians and a failed rescue attempt, it was President Carter's administration that secured the release of the hostages. The terms of the agreement included payment of almost \$8 billion to Iran. As a final blow against Carter, the Iranians did not release the hostages until President Reagan's inauguration day.

The Iranian Revolution and the Iran Hostage Crisis foreshadowed continued violence in the Middle East, as anti-American sentiment in the region grew.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1983, the United States sent marines to Lebanon as part of a multinational force that was deployed to restore order following an Israeli invasion the year before. On October 23, over 200 marines stationed in Beirut, Lebanon's capital, were killed in a bombing carried out by the Iranian-trained Muslim militia, *Hezbollah*. In February 1984, President Reagan announced the withdrawal of troops from Lebanon.



(a)



(b)

The suicide bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut (a) on April 18, 1983, was the first of a number of attacks on U.S. targets in the Middle East. Less than 6 months later, a truck bomb leveled the U.S. Marine barracks at the Beirut airport (b), part of a coordinated attack that killed almost 300 U.S. and French members of the multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon.

As tensions rose in the Middle East, the Reagan administration reasserted American influence in Latin America.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Two days after the bombing in Beirut, President Reagan authorized the invasion of Grenada, a small Caribbean island nation, to end a military coup by pro-communist forces. Communist Cuba had already sent troops and aid workers to the island and was willing to defend the new regime. U.S. special forces swiftly took control of the situation and suppressed the coup within 2 days.

The situation in Nicaragua proved to be more complicated than the coup in Grenada. U.S. involvement in Nicaragua's civil unrest ultimately led to the biggest scandal of Reagan's presidency.

In 1979, while Jimmy Carter was president, the Sandinista revolutionary movement in Nicaragua overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza.



DID YOU KNOW

The United States maintained a military occupation of Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933, when democratic elections were held to establish a national government. The elections resulted in the rise of Anastasio Somoza, the leader of Nicaragua's National Guard. The Somoza family dictatorship ruled Nicaragua until 1979.

President Carter refused to aid the Somoza regime against the Sandinistas, which enabled them to succeed. Ronald Reagan discounted the grievances of the democratically elected Sandinista government against Somoza and believed that their revolution exposed the region to a communist takeover. He authorized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to equip and train anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans known as the *Contras* (*contrarevolucionarios* or "counterrevolutionaries") to oust the new regime.

In 1984, Congress prohibited the president from providing additional support to the *Contras*. It is at this point that the scandal that came to be known as the **Iran-Contra affair** began.



TERM TO KNOW

Iran-Contra Affair

A scandal that occurred during the Reagan administration and involved secret arms sales to Iran and the funneling of money to the Contras in Nicaragua.

A desire to support the Contras among some members of the Reagan administration ultimately led them to Iran. At the time, Iran was fighting a bloody war against Iraq. In addition, Hezbollah had captured several American aid workers in Lebanon. In 1985, Reagan secretly authorized the sale of arms and equipment to Iran in exchange for the release of the hostages in Lebanon.

One year later, the CIA, with the help of National Security Council aide Lieutenant Colonel **Oliver North**, began selling weapons to Iran and used the proceeds to support the Nicaraguan Contras in their war against the Sandinistas. This scheme operated for almost 2 years, in violation of Congress's ban on military aid to the Contras.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Oliver North

National Security Council aide under President Reagan who was tried and convicted for selling weapons to Iran and using the proceeds to illegally support the Nicaraguan Contras in the Iran-Contra scandal.

When the arrangement was exposed in 1987, Congress held hearings and indicted several members of the Reagan administration, including Oliver North. President Reagan, who delegated significant authority to subordinates, denied any knowledge of the affair. As a result, he emerged from the scandal relatively unscathed. Nevertheless, the Iran-Contra affair undermined public confidence in the president and led to criticism that he did not monitor the activities of members of his administration.

3. “Tear Down This Wall!”

The effort to reverse the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, along with the military buildup and reference to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” reinvigorated the Cold War. However, during the mid-1980s, Reagan shifted his position toward the Soviet Union slightly in response to the actions of Premier **Mikhail Gorbachev**, who came to power in 1985.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Mikhail Gorbachev

Leader of the Soviet Union in the 1980s who implemented a series of reforms within the Soviet Union known as *perestroika* (political openness) and *glasnost* (economic restructuring).

Gorbachev sought to reinvigorate the Soviet government and economy. The Soviet Union remained involved in a war in Afghanistan, which it invaded in 1979. That conflict and the escalating arms race with the United States were severely depleting the nation's economic resources. The Soviet Union lagged far behind the United States in the production of consumer goods and increasingly relied on agricultural imports to feed its people.

Beginning in 1985, Gorbachev implemented a series of reforms.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Gorbachev's most notable initiatives were known as *perestroika* (political openness) and *glasnost* (economic restructuring)—attempts to revitalize the Soviet political system and economy.

Despite President Reagan's stated opposition to a “nuclear freeze” earlier in the decade, Gorbachev and Reagan developed a personal rapport and met on several occasions to discuss reductions in arms and military budgets.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1987, both leaders signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, in which the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to destroy their intermediate- and short-range nuclear missiles.



President Ronald Reagan (right) and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev (left) sign the 1987 INF Treaty in the East Room of the White House. The treaty marked the first time that both superpowers agreed to do away with an entire category of nuclear weapons.

The treaty was the result of private negotiations in a formal diplomatic setting. In public, Reagan continued to apply pressure on the Soviet Union, nowhere more notably than at the Berlin Wall in June 1987.



DID YOU KNOW

The Soviet Union built the Berlin Wall in 1961 to stop the flow of migrants from communist East Berlin to democratic West Berlin.



Ronald Reagan spoke in front of the Brandenburg Gate and the Berlin Wall on June 12, 1987.

Reagan made the following remarks while standing before the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin:

President Ronald Reagan, Berlin Wall, 1987

"Some political prisoners have been released. Certain foreign news broadcasts are no longer being jammed. Some economic enterprises have been permitted to operate with greater freedom from state control. Are these the beginnings of profound changes in the Soviet state? Or are they token gestures, intended to raise false hopes in the West, or to strengthen the Soviet system without changing it? . . .

There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Compare President Reagan's speech at the Brandenburg Gate with his 1983 address to the National Association of Evangelicals. In what ways are they similar?
2. Do you think this excerpt provides any evidence that President Reagan had changed his approach to

the Soviet Union? Why or why not?

President Reagan welcomed Gorbachev's attempted reforms of the Soviet Union, which indicates that tension between the two nations may have decreased somewhat. However, his appeal to Gorbachev to "tear down this wall!" reflects Reagan's continued unwillingness to accept peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Acceptance of democracy, liberty, and capitalism by the Soviet Union may have been required to convince him that the Cold War was over.



SUMMARY

Ronald Reagan's foreign policy goals included the reassertion of American influence abroad. He increased military spending and framed the Cold War as a battle between American morality and Soviet totalitarianism. Like his predecessors, however, President Reagan experienced foreign policy setbacks: events in the Middle East and Latin America mired his administration in scandal. By the late 1980s, reforms by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev encouraged Reagan to take a more conciliatory approach toward the Soviet Union in negotiations, even though he continued to apply pressure publicly.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of Strategic Defense Initiative](#) | License: Public Domain
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TERMS TO KNOW

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The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism abroad during the Cold War.

Détente

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Iran-Contra Affair

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New Right

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Strategic Defense Initiative

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Supply-Side Economics

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Vietnam Syndrome

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