

Reykjavik Summit, Iceland | OCTOBER, 9–12, 1986

Background:

Secretary General Gorbachev and President Reagan had met for the first time in Geneva, Switzerland in 1985. After months of postponement, the two leaders met again at a mini-summit in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Gorbachev and Reagan discussed issues of nuclear disarmament, actually agreeing on more than they disagreed. The summit made clear that both leaders were interested in pursuing a plan of disarmament.

Expectations for the summit were high. Different leaders around the world struggled to protect their own interests.

Many Western European allies were shocked to find out that Reagan had actually suggested eliminating intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe. They felt this would leave them vulnerable to attack from Soviet controlled regions in Asia.

At the same time, many Americans and European citizens who were expecting some form of formal agreement or treaty to be signed at the end of the summit were disappointed to find out that the talks had disintegrated over the issue of



the Strategic Defense Initiative – a program being researched by Americans to destroy nuclear weapons in space once they had already been launched.

While the Soviets were already researching a similar program and President Reagan agreed to share all information gathered from American research on SDI, Gorbachev was convinced that President Reagan was planning to create a nuclear war

in space. Gorbachev also felt that the SDI program would violate the previously signed Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. American interpretation of the treaty did not conform to the strict reading of the Russian interpretation.

While the talks also revealed a lack of understanding on the part of the Soviets about American politics and free enterprise in a free society, they ultimately led to a greater understanding between the leader, and a commitment to continue to pursue nuclear arms reductions this led to the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty the following year.



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PRESIDENT
REAGAN
AND THE
COLD WAR



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Quotes:

“Before we can work things out in regard to armaments, we need to try to clarify the causes of mistrust. If we are able to eliminate it, it will be easier to resolve the problem of armaments.” (President Reagan, October, 1986, Reykjavik)

“You know that even in this situation [complete agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union for total nuclear disarmament] we will not be able to guarantee that someone will not begin to make nuclear weapons again at some point.” (President Reagan, October, 1986, Reykjavik)

“As for your arguments about the madman who decides to resort to nuclear weapons, I think we will be able to solve that problem, it is not that serious.” (General Secretary Gorbachev, October, 1986, Reykjavik)

“I am increasingly convinced of something I knew previously only second-hand. The President of the United States does not like to retreat.” (General Secretary Gorbachev, October, 1986, Reykjavik.)

Questions:

- Examine the quotes above. Which one is your favorite? Why?
- Why do you think it was so difficult for the Soviets and the Americans to reach an agreement on nuclear disarmament?
- How do you think the world would look different today if Reagan and Gorbachev had agreed to total nuclear disarmament in 1986? Would that have been a good idea? Why or why not?
- Why do you think President Reagan was so reluctant to abandon his commitment to the SDI program?

Research:

- What was the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty?
- Find a European leader who was disappointed by the results of the Reykjavik Summit. List their name and summarize their reaction.

Activities:

- Imagine you are an advisor preparing President Reagan for his next meeting with Gorbachev. List two questions you think General Secretary Gorbachev might ask him and prepare answers you would suggest the President give to those two questions.
- Create a list of pros and cons from the Reykjavik Summit.
- Write an imaginary dialogue between someone who felt the Reykjavik conference was a success and someone who felt it was a failure.