

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS AND ITS EFFECT ON THE COURSE OF  
*DÉTENTE*

## Abstract

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union began in 1945 with the end of World War II and the start of an international posturing for control of a war-torn Europe. However, the Cold War reached its peak during the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis, occurring on October 15-28, 1962, with the United States and the Soviet Union taking sides against each other in the interest of promoting their own national security. During this period, the Soviet Union attempted to address the issue of its own deficit of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles compared to the United States by placing shorter-range nuclear missiles within Cuba, an allied Communist nation directly off the shores of the United States. This move allowed the Soviet Union to reach many of the United States' largest population centers with nuclear weapons, placing both nations on a more equal footing in terms of security and status. The crisis was resolved through the imposition of a blockade by the United States, but the lasting threat of nuclear destruction remained.

The daunting nature of this Crisis led to a period known as *détente*, which is a period of peace and increased negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union in order to avoid future confrontations. Both nations prospered due to the increased cooperation that came about during this *détente*, though the United States' and the Soviet Union's rapidly changing leadership styles and the diverse personalities of both countries' individual leaders led to fluctuations in the efficiency and extent of the adoption of *détente*. This paper will examine, using the disciplines of History and Political Science, the effects of the Cuban Missile Crisis on the course of *détente* as adopted by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and both nations' leaders' effects on its adoption.

## Research Limitations and Methods

The grand scale of the Cold War, along with the ever-changing leadership of the involved nations, prevents any single examination of the conflict from gathering enough information to create a comprehensive view of the struggle for supremacy that took place. The limitations of this paper in particular are the short period of one semester given to research and compile information, this author's undergraduate status, and the use of the relatively limited literature available in the University of Illinois at Springfield's library.

The research methods used during the course of creating this paper include the examination of UIS' library materials; choosing those sources utilizing the input of government sources or officials directly involved with the course of Cold War foreign policy negotiations on behalf of either the United States or the Soviet Union during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; and comparing these views and intentions in order to create a broad analysis of the course of *détente* during the Cold War.

The examination of *détente* requires the use of the disciplines of History and Political Science. In this paper, an historical analysis of the impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis on future events, such as the beginning of *détente*, will be made along with the use of Political Science to determine the specific effects of the different political administrations of both the United States and the Soviet Union.

## Introduction

By the fall of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union had been locked in an international rivalry for over 17 years. Conflicts such as the separation of Berlin from the United States and its Western allies, the subsequent blockade to force the Soviet Union to restore access in 1948-1949, and the Korean War in 1950-1953 indicated rapidly-increasing tensions between the two superpowers and their respective allies. However, clashes between the United States and the Soviet Union did not reach a boiling point until the early 1960s. The Soviet Union's long-time leader, Joseph Stalin, had died in 1953, and his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, was more unstable than Stalin and was prone to arguments and magnificent fits of temper when dealing with the leaders of the United States. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had largely succeeded in establishing himself as a stern and unyielding leader, which Khrushchev did not desire confronting aggressively on many foreign policy matters. This changed with the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1961. Because Kennedy appeared to be an easy target, being one of the youngest and least-experienced American presidents in history, Khrushchev's political strategy toward the United States, became more aggressive. On October 15, 1962, the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, provoking the United States and sparking a conflict that would come to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The threat of imminent destruction during the Cuban Missile Crisis led both nations' leaders to truly realize the potential for worldwide destruction that resulted from the constant conflict during the Cold War. A period of increased cooperation and reduced tensions known as *détente* began almost immediately after the Cuban Missile Crisis and continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. It is necessary to examine the different political administrations of both the United States and the Soviet Union as well as their

actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis in order to understand the subsequent effect on the evolution of U.S.-Soviet foreign policy.

## Cuban Missile Crisis

Throughout history prior to World War II, an army was required to invade a country on its own soil. With the development of nuclear weapons, the face of warfare changed. It was no longer necessary to raise armies for an invasion or defense of a country; nuclear weapons could kill thousands or millions of people with the touch of a button. This monumental shift in the way wars could be fought also impacted political policies between countries with nuclear weapons, namely the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Cuban Missile Crisis began on October 15 when the United States, during its routine U-2 spy plane investigations of Communist nations, discovered the presence of launching pads for nuclear-equipped ballistic missiles within Cuban borders.<sup>1</sup> Such a discovery was cause for alarm amongst United States officials, since the Soviet Union had made promises in the past that “there is no need to search for launching sites beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union”<sup>2</sup>. President John F. Kennedy immediately began to assemble a group of advisors known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or EXCOMM.<sup>3</sup> These advisors helped to provide Kennedy, who was politically still a very inexperienced president and had recently experienced nationwide embarrassment after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion under his command in 1961, with potential courses of action and information on the ever-changing nature

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<sup>1</sup> Henry M. Pachter, *Collision Course: The Cuban Missile Crisis and Coexistence* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Pachter, *Collision Course*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Hilsman, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Struggle Over Policy* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 68.

of diplomatic negotiations and potential military conflict with the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite his relative inexperience, Kennedy was a focused president that desired to change any misconceptions that American citizens might have had about him, stating that “I am tired of hearing people say, ‘the Chairman of the Soviets did this or did that’; for once I wish to hear that the American President did something”.<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union’s decision to place nuclear missiles so close to the United States is related to Kennedy’s failure to succeed with the Bay of Pigs invasion in the previous year. The United States had made many previous attempts to assassinate Cuban leader Fidel Castro or remove him from power, and the Bay of Pigs invasion was seen by the Soviet Union as the latest in an increasingly desperate series of plots to overthrow Castro.<sup>5</sup> As such, the installation of nuclear missiles and other weapons within Cuban territory was intended to be protection against a full-scale invasion of Cuba by the United States as well as being a way for the Soviet Union to restore some semblance of military balance with the United States after being encircled by NATO nuclear-equipped military bases.<sup>6</sup> However, while the United States had in fact created “military contingency plans . . . in 1961-62 for possible air attack and invasion” in the case of a national emergency, it was decided that these plans were not to be used at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October, 1962, meaning that Cuba’s fears of a full-scale invasion were founded primarily on fear and conjecture.<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of these misunderstandings, the United States and the Soviet Union were at a standstill, with neither nation able to make a decisive action to end the conflict in favor of their

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<sup>4</sup> Pachter, *Collision Course*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1989), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald R. Pope, *Soviet Views on the Cuban Missile Crisis: Myth and Reality in Foreign Policy Analysis* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 169-170.

<sup>7</sup> Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 6.

own national interest. The United States was not able to forcibly remove the missiles from Cuba for fear of causing the Soviet Union to launch the already-operational missiles at various cities in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Soviet Union was surprised by the United States' quick detection of the missile build-up and could not use the missiles to threaten the United States without proving its previous statements that the missiles were unnecessary as offensive instruments false.<sup>9</sup> In this way, both the United States and the Soviet Union were at a standstill, unable to utilize violence as a way of resolving the dangerous situation in Cuba, forcing them to use more diplomatic methods to solve the issue.

This is not to say that destructive options to remove the missiles on the part of the United States were not entertained, however. The United States initially considered several different courses of action at the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis, these being summarized by Robert Kennedy in Naftali and Zelikow's *Presidential Recordings* as:

- An ultimatum to Khrushchev followed by a strike
- A limited strike without prior warning or negotiation, but with notifying key allies
- A political warning followed by a naval blockade and readiness for other actions
- A large-scale strike after some political preparation
- Proceeding directly to an invasion (514)

Important to note is the fact that all but one of these decisions, namely the naval blockade that Kennedy and his advisors in EXCOMM ultimately decided upon, involved violence as a way of forcing the Soviet Union to accede to the United States' demands. This sparse list of choices, with almost no emphasis on the diplomatic side of negotiations with a rivaling nation, along with

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Smith Thompson, *The Missiles of October: The Declassified Story of John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 201.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, *Soviet Views on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 83.

the statements made by Khrushchev, serves to indicate the relatively naïve worldview of both Kennedy and Khrushchev. It also demonstrates their lack of willingness to negotiate with their rivals and a tendency to engage in a dangerous series of escalations, almost to the point of nuclear war, in order to gain an advantage over one's rival. This was a very traditional political stance which made the Cold War, with its modern nuclear weapons, a very dangerous time in history.

Despite an outward stance of determination and firmness, Kennedy and the United States feared the outcome of the Soviet Union's decision to place nuclear missiles in Cuba, believing that the missiles were intended to extract concessions from America and its NATO allies in Berlin, forcing them to remove their troops from Berlin and to allow the Soviet Union to gain ground in consolidating its forces there. The Soviet Union's leader, Nikita Khrushchev, stated that "we will give [President Kennedy] a choice – go to war, or sign a peace treaty [ending occupation rights in Berlin]"<sup>10</sup> The issue of competition over the occupation of Berlin had been a continuous discussion since the end of World War II and had intensified since the Berlin Blockade in 1948-49, with neither the United States nor the Soviet Union willing to back down for fear of losing international prestige. This desire to maintain international prestige was at the heart of the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, and manifested itself most prominently, and most dangerously, during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Once Kennedy and EXCOMM had made the decision to pursue a non-violent blockade of Cuba in the hopes of preventing a nuclear conflict from erupting, a new era in both nations'

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volume Two* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 111.

histories can be identified. The intentions and future goals of both the United States and the Soviet Union had changed from being focused on a reputation-based system, in which both nations' leaders made antagonistic foreign policy decisions in attempts to establish their countries as the most intimidating and thus most likely to gain concessions from their opponents, to a more diplomacy-based system in which both nations' leaders focused on reducing conflict and negotiating more to solve problems. This change in politics is best symbolized by Kennedy's removal of the United States' nuclear missiles from its military base in Turkey, with Kennedy's opinion on their removal being that "If we can do that, we'll find our interests advanced, even though it may be only one more chapter in a rather long story as far as Cuba is concerned".<sup>11</sup>

Previously, these types of concessions were not made in conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union, with Kennedy's decision to make a trade for nuclear missiles with the Soviet Union being a departure from the standard policy of both countries to engage in nuclear brinksmanship. This change is shown in Kennedy's "call for improved relations with the Soviet Union" following the conclusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which he states "above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either humiliating retreat or nuclear war".<sup>12</sup>

### *Beginnings of détente*

Historically, American presidents had strictly hardline military-backed verbal clashes with the Soviet Union. Beginning with Kennedy, however, they began to adopt a more open

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volume Three* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 520.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, *The Missiles of October*, 348.

view towards diplomatic negotiations with the Soviet Union, though a true movement towards a more open system of discussion between the two nations was not truly adopted until Richard Nixon came to power, with Henry Kissinger as an advisor.<sup>13</sup> This movement began on relatively simple terms, with Nixon and Kissinger proposing nothing more than “a narrow, limited accommodation with Moscow” on specific issues such as nuclear disarmament and the situation in Berlin.<sup>14</sup> The desire to begin with these issues stemmed from a strictly American point of view that the Soviet Union was catching up to the United States in the amount of nuclear weapons that could be fielded by each nation, and that this discrepancy would eventually result in the Soviet Union gaining enough power and desire to use the weapons that they would confront the United States, possibly in a violent manner, over any number of previous disagreements. By seeking specific agreements in favor of limiting nuclear weapons, the United States and the Soviet Union could expect to limit future conflicts in both number and effect. It was Nixon and Kissinger’s belief that these specific agreements would result in “a broader, more general improvement” in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, and was a huge departure politically from past U.S. policy.<sup>15</sup>

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under President John F. Kennedy and an important member of EXCOMM during the discussions on the Cuban Missile Crisis, believed that a large benefit of a period of increased cooperation and negotiation for the Soviet Union, specifically the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, or SALT, was that it would reduce the amount of money that the Soviet Union would have to spend on nuclear arms in order to keep up with

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<sup>13</sup> William G. Hyland, *Mortal Rivals: Superpower Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1987), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 20.

the United States during the strategic-arms race.<sup>16</sup> This period of increased cooperation and reduced tensions is known as *détente*, from the French word for “relaxation”. McNamara was of the opinion that, surprisingly, the United States was initially hesitant to commit to any drawn-out negotiations with the Soviet Union relating to *détente* and that the American approach to *détente* “was never very clearly thought through”.<sup>17</sup> This approach originally was only adopted in an attempt to “moderate Soviet behavior in an era when the United States was choosing to decrease the extent of its security commitments abroad”.<sup>18</sup>

The need for these decreased security commitments is related to the issue of increased military parity that plagued the United States during the 1970s after it had enjoyed nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union since the beginning of the Cold War. However, Kissinger argued that “the nuclear age [has] destroyed the traditional measures of power and [has] altered the requirements for maintaining the balance of power”.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, Kissinger is referring to the fact that it does not matter which nation has the greater number of conventional weapons, or even nuclear weapons, once each country has reached the point that it can destroy its rival.<sup>20</sup> In other words, there was little more need to spend money on newer and more destructive nuclear weapons when the destruction of the opposing nation could already be secured several times over. Nixon and Kissinger sought to achieve a series of more peaceful negotiations with the Soviet Union, seen in the 1972 Moscow Summit between the United States and the Soviet Union, wherein economic, military, and international issues were discussed in the hopes of

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<sup>16</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *Out of the Cold: New Thinking for American Foreign and Defense Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 70.

<sup>17</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 21.

achieving a more peaceful relationship between the two nations. The focus of U.S.-Soviet politics was shifting from confrontation to cooperation.

### International Summits between the United States and the Soviet Union

While summits between the United States and the Soviet Union began in 1955 with the Geneva Summit, they often occurred at irregular intervals throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with the first five summits taking place in 1955, 1959, 1960, 1961, and 1967.<sup>21</sup> The 1972 Moscow Summit was the first of a series of four summits between the United States and the Soviet Union that took place from 1972-1974, showing a new appreciation for diplomatic negotiations and the need for cooperation and discussion in order to reach satisfactory conclusions in international matters.<sup>22</sup> During the course of this summit, both countries agreed to focus primarily on the issue of the vast increase in nuclear weapons held within their borders, and to reduce the threat of nuclear war through the adoption of the SALT I treaty.<sup>23</sup> In addition to this reduction of nuclear weapons, the summary of the 1972 Moscow Summit, as noted by Weihmiller in *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, indicates that both nations also agreed to:

[agree] on measures designed to establish more favorable conditions for developing commercial and other economic ties . . .

Continue the negotiations aimed at reaching an agreement on maritime and related matters . . .

[cooperate] . . . in areas such as atomic energy research, space research, health and other fields . . .

[emphasize] the importance of further bilateral cooperation in [outer space] . . .

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<sup>21</sup> Gordon R. Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits: An Account of East-West Diplomacy at the Top, 1955-1985* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), vii.

<sup>22</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, vii.

<sup>23</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 141-144.

[conclude] an agreement on health cooperation . . . [involving] sharing knowledge about . . . common enemies, disease and disability . . . [including] cancer, heart diseases, and the environmental health sciences . . .

Initiate a program of cooperation in the protection and enhancement of man's environment . . .

Note the importance of the Agreement on Exchanges and Cooperation in Scientific, Technical, Educational, Cultural, and Other Fields in 1972-1973. (144-147)

The 1972 Moscow Summit indicates a significant cooling in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, which had been considerably strained in the previous decade, specifically during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. A large portion of this thaw can be attributed to the individual personalities of the American and Soviet leaders that began the process of *détente*, namely Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon on the American side and Nikita Khrushchev post-missile crisis and Leonid Brezhnev during the mid-1960s to early 1970s. President Johnson specifically focused on the increase of *détente* after President Kennedy's unexpected assassination in 1963, stating that "We've got to get into the habit of peaceful cooperation," emphasizing, in McNamara's eyes, the "overriding common interest of [the United States and the Soviet Union] in avoiding war".<sup>24</sup> Henry Kissinger, and Nixon by extension, did not desire that the reduction of nuclear arms should initially play such a dominant role in the discussion of the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, believing that any pressure made by the United States in too overt a manner, especially in such a hazardous area as arms control, may have caused the Soviet Union to close themselves off to any further discussion regarding nuclear disarmament in the future.<sup>25</sup>

With the outcome of diplomatic failure being the potential to cause nuclear war between the two superpowers, American ambassadors such as Kissinger were forced to approach their

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<sup>24</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 36.

Soviet counterparts in a cautious and respectful manner. Barring outright nuclear war, the most pressing issue facing American and Soviet diplomats was the threat of a new arms race with the development of new technology such as the antiballistic missile, or ABM, which targeted and destroyed incoming nuclear warheads, and the multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle, or MIRV, which launched a number of nuclear warheads in an attempt to strike multiple targets at a single time.<sup>26</sup> The ABM threatened to render each nation's conventional nuclear weapons useless by shooting down the missiles before they were able reach their targets while the MIRV threatened to bypass the fledgling ABM systems being researched by the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> The development of these weapons directly contradicted the intentions of the United States in working with the Soviet Union during the SALT I talks and the 1972 Moscow Summit in general.

However, U.S.-Soviet relations had been improving throughout the following year, as shown in the Washington/San Clemente Summit in June 1973. At this summit, both nations "expressed their mutual satisfaction with the fact that the American-Soviet summit meeting in Moscow in May 1972 and the joint decisions taken there resulted in a substantial advance in the strengthening of peaceful relations between the USA and the USSR".<sup>28</sup> The intentions of this new summit were to reassess the progress made in carrying out the agreements of the previous summit and to discuss new methods of reducing the threat of nuclear war.<sup>29</sup> The previous goal was found to have been satisfactorily met, with both nations agreeing that their previous discussions "[represented] a further milestone in the constructive development of their

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<sup>26</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 154.

<sup>29</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 155-156.

relations".<sup>30</sup> Despite the recent construction of an increasing number of MIRVs by both the United States and the Soviet Union in attempts to render their opponents' ABM systems useless, the two countries found that accelerating the creation of these weapons would do nothing but promote the same response from their opponent. To remedy this situation, both nations signed the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems.<sup>31</sup> This treaty was intended to prevent the MIRV arms race from progressing any further by limiting each country to only two ABM sites. With only a small amount of ABMs allowed, and a large amount of territory for each nation to cover, the United States and the Soviet Union could not afford to risk provoking their opponent to build more and more MIRVs in the fear that their own ABM systems could not handle the increased number of warheads. This necessitated a moratorium on MIRV creation in order to prevent the creation of more ABM sites, which would create a never-ending cycle of weapon build-up and deployment.

The year 1974 heralded the decay of *détente* as the pledges previously made by both nations began to be reaffirmed in earnest, though the diplomats behind the summits, especially Kissinger, began to lose hope that their experiment would succeed. Kissinger, under Nixon, began to find that the United States' goals for *détente* "overlapped with those of the Soviet Union only on the issue of SALT".<sup>32</sup> Kissinger later stated about his push for a limit on ABM systems rather than MIRVs that "I would say in retrospect that I wish I had thought through the implications of a MIRVed world more thoughtfully in 1969 and in 1970 than I did".<sup>33</sup> Kissinger was also losing the support of President Nixon as well as the Soviet Union where *détente* was

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<sup>30</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 70.

<sup>33</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 74.

concerned, as Nixon was forced to focus on appeasing the United States public and media over the Watergate scandal.<sup>34</sup> Due to this, the movement towards *détente* was halted as Gerald Ford began to prepare for his term as president after Nixon resigned due to media backlash. Despite all of these issues, the successes of arms reductions and limitations were reaffirmed in another summit between the United States and the Soviet Union at Vladivostok in November 1974.<sup>35</sup> President Ford originally planned for Brezhnev to visit the United States in 1975, though this visit never transpired as the issue of *détente* was pushed to the background and the collapse of U.S.-Soviet relations became evident.

The specific intentions of the Soviet Union throughout this *détente* appear to have been based in an idealistic frame of mind, much as the United States' intentions had been after the terror of the Cuban Missile Crisis, albeit with the opposite view as the United States. McNamara, being intimately involved in the politics of the Cold War, and the proceedings of the Cuban Missile Crisis in particular, believed that the Soviet Union utilized the United States' overeager requests for peace as a way of drawing attention to its involvement in other violent conflicts like the Vietnam War as a form of anti-American propaganda.<sup>36</sup> The Soviet Union also attempted to exploit a potential flaw in the MIRV detection abilities of the United States in the period of 1969-1972 by replacing existing conventional ICBMs with ICBMs equipped with MIRV warheads.<sup>37</sup> The concept behind this was that testing on MIRVs was permanently completed after a small number of tests, thus rendering any attempts to monitor future tests and replacement of ICBMs more difficult to accomplish.<sup>38</sup> As such, the testing of nuclear weapons in 1972 was

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<sup>34</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 167.

<sup>36</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 37-38.

<sup>38</sup> Hyland, *Mortal Rivals*, 38.

not able to be regulated as tightly as expected, and the subsequent arms race led to a temporary resurgence in tensions after the election of the tough and uncompromising Ronald Reagan as president.

### Ronald Reagan, the decline of *détente*, and the end of the Cold War

Ronald Reagan was elected as the United States' president in 1981 under the policy of being tough on the Soviet Union, exemplified in his "Evil Empire" speech in which he "described the conflict with the Soviet Union as an apocalyptic struggle between right and wrong, and good and evil".<sup>39</sup> Ronald Reagan's politics were a striking change from previous leaders' diplomatic styles which caused the Soviet Union to rethink its previous cooperation with the United States.<sup>40</sup> Reagan's focus on combatting the Soviet Union extended even to the point of creating outlandish and unrealistic plans for intimidating the Soviet Union into submission and ending the Cold War. The most famous of these plans was the Strategic Defense Initiative nuclear defense program, popularly known as "Star Wars" or SDI, which relied on space-based laser satellites utilized to shoot down Soviet nuclear missiles and establish the United States as the dominant nuclear power.<sup>41</sup> Reagan's more aggressive policies towards the Soviet Union culminated with his famous speech at Brandenburg Gate, in which he "invited Soviet General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev to come to the site and 'open this gate, Mr. Gorbachev! Tear down this wall [the Berlin Wall]!'".<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Deborah Hart Strober and Geral S. Strober, *Reagan: The Man and his Presidency* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 147.

<sup>40</sup> David D. Newsom, *Private Diplomacy with the Soviet Union* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 93.

<sup>41</sup> Strober and Strober, *Reagan*, 242.

<sup>42</sup> Strober and Strober, *Reagan*, 325.

From a political standpoint, these various outbursts, demands, and programs, especially SDI, were not viewed favorably by many government officials looking to end the Cold War peacefully. McNamara stated in *Out of the Cold* that the issues with SDI were “the fact that it would initiate an arms race in outer space and fuel the competition in strategic arms on earth; and the possibility that it would increase the temptation for preemptive attack in a period of crisis”.<sup>43</sup> The Soviet Union, under the leadership of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, initially increased its opposition to the United States’ methods of attempting to end the Cold War through force and intimidation, increasing their production of nuclear weapons and working to combat the United States’ superiority in ABM systems, especially SDI, under the belief that national defense amounted to “a zero-sum game in which Moscow gained the security lost by others”.<sup>44</sup>

However, when Gorbachev came to power in March of 1985, he responded to Reagan’s straightforward negotiation style by pursuing the policies of *glasnost*, meaning “openness”, and *perestroika*, meaning “restructuring”, as a way of attempting to end the Cold War by focusing on “‘peaceful coexistence’ and mutual interdependence”.<sup>45</sup> This policy of yielding was exactly what Reagan was seeking to accomplish with his forceful demands, and, while breaking with the previous intent of *détente*, used the impact that his demands had on Gorbachev and the Soviet Union to begin a new summit between the United States and the Soviet Union in November of 1985.<sup>46</sup> This summit eventually led to a resurgence in talks focusing on the disarmament of both the United States and the Soviet Union, and showed a willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to reverse its former policies on resuming the arms race.<sup>47</sup> With Gorbachev’s peaceful nature and

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<sup>43</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 166.

<sup>44</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 109.

<sup>45</sup> McNamara, *Out of the Cold*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 199.

<sup>47</sup> Weihmiller, *U.S.-Soviet Summits*, 200-201.

ultimately his willingness to capitulate and symbolically end the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union with the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Cold War ended soon after Reagan's presidency. Reagan's simultaneous willingness to increase political and military pressure on the Soviet Union to force his demands and the ability to oversee the peaceful surrender of the Soviet Union when the time came allowed the United States to end the Cold War, even as it moved away from the ideals of *détente*.

The remarkable and unexpected conclusion to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union led to a new era in world history. No longer burdened by the looming threat of a destructive nuclear war, both the United States and the newly formed Russian Federation were free from the confines of military and political conflict. In accomplishing this feat, the importance of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the increasingly open attitudes of American and Soviet leaders after this encounter cannot be understated. The course of *détente* and peaceful cooperation began, ironically, due to this brush with nuclear war, and established the importance of careful consideration and evaluation before pursuing the buildup of nuclear weapons as a way of establishing political dominance during the Cold War. Only through careful cooperation and collaboration could the destructive tendencies of the United States and the Soviet Union have been controlled, and the Cuban Missile Crisis served, ultimately, to be the road to *détente* and the end of the Cold War.

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## Timeline

**1945** – End of World War II

**1948** – Beginning of Berlin Blockade

**1949** – End of Berlin Blockade

**1950** – Beginning of Korean War

**January 20, 1953** – Election of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President

**March 5, 1953** – Joseph Stalin dies

**1953** – End of Korean War

**February 8, 1955** – Nikita Khrushchev becomes Soviet General Secretary

**January 20, 1961** – Election of John F. Kennedy as President

**17-19 April, 1961** – Bay of Pigs Invasion

**October 15-28, 1962** – Cuban Missile Crisis

**November 22, 1963** – Lyndon B. Johnson becomes President, John F. Kennedy assassinated

**October 14, 1964** – Leonid Brezhnev becomes Soviet General Secretary

**January 20, 1969** – Election of Richard Nixon as President

**May 1972** – Moscow Summit #1

**June 1973** – Washington/San Clemente Summit

**July 1974** – Moscow Summit #2

**August 9, 1974** – Election of Gerald Ford as President

**January 20, 1977** – Election of Jimmy Carter as President

**January 20, 1981** – Election of Ronald Reagan as President

**November 12, 1982** – Yuri Andropov becomes Soviet General Secretary

**February 13, 1984** – Konstantin Chernenko becomes Soviet General Secretary

**March 11, 1985** – Gorbachev becomes Soviet General Secretary

**November 1985** – Geneva Summit

**1989** – Destruction of Berlin Wall

**1991** – Dissolution of Soviet Union

