

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Broadcast Journalists on the Meetings in Iceland With Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev

October 14, 1986

The President. Welcome to the White House. It is a particular pleasure to have you here so soon after returning from a meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev, and that meeting marked new progress in U.S.-Soviet relations. For the first time on the highest level we and the Soviets came close to an agreement on real reductions of both strategic and intermediate-range weapons. For the first time we got Soviet agreement to a worldwide figure of 100 intermediate-range warheads for each side -- a drastic cut. For the first time we began to hammer out details of a 50-percent cut in strategic forces over 5 years. We were just a sentence or two away from agreeing to new talks on nuclear testing. And maybe most important, we were in sight of an historic agreement on completely eliminating the threat of offensive ballistic missiles by 1996.

I can't help remembering being told just a few years ago that radical arms reduction was an impossible dream, but now it's on the agenda for both sides. I think the first thing that's important to do is to put these talks and what occurred into perspective. You'll recall that just over a week ago in talking about going to Iceland I said that we did not seek nor did we expect agreements. We described our trip as a base camp before the summit to be held here in the United States. And if there was a surprise in Reykjavik, it was that we discussed so much and moved so far. No one a week ago would have thought there could have been agreement in so many areas. While we didn't sign a document and there remain significant differences, we must not mistake the absence of a final agreement for the absence of progress. Historic gains were achieved. As you know, after a great deal of discussion, our talks came down to the Strategic Defense Initiative, SDI.

I offered to delay deployment of advanced strategic defense for 10 years while both sides eliminated all ballistic missiles, but General Secretary Gorbachev said that his demand that we give up all but laboratory research on SDI -- in effect kill the program -- was nonnegotiable. Now, the Soviets have made a strategic defense program for years. They've breached the ABM treaty and, as I noted last night, may be preparing to put in place a nationwide ABM system. For us to abandon SDI would leave them with an immediate, permanent advantage, and a dangerous one, and this I would not do.

Abandoning SDI would also leave us without an insurance policy that the Soviets will live up to arms reduction agreements. Strategic defense is the key to making arms reduction work. It protects us against the possibility that at some point, when the elimination of ballistic missiles is not yet complete, that the Soviets may change their minds. I'm confident that the Soviets understand our position. They may try to see if they can make us back off our proposals, and I am convinced that they'll come back to the table and talk.

So, here's how I would sum up my meeting with Mr. Gorbachev in Iceland. We addressed the important areas of human rights, regional conflicts, and our bilateral relationship. And we moved the U.S.-Soviet dialog on arms reduction to a new plane. We laid a strong and promising foundation for our negotiators in Geneva to build on. And I'm disappointed, of course, that Mr. Gorbachev decided to hold all agreements hostage to an agreement on SDI. But during our Geneva summit we agreed to move forward where we had found common ground, especially on a 50-percent reduction in strategic arsenals and an INF agreement. I hope he'll at least remember that commitment in the next few weeks, because for our part, we'll seek right away in Geneva to build on the democratic -- or the dramatic progress that we made in Iceland.

Now, I think you have a few questions.

Q. Mr. President, before going to Reykjavik, you characterized Mr. Gorbachev as one of the more frank Soviet leaders with whom you have had dealings. Do you stand by that characterization, or do you think Mr. Gorbachev has perhaps engaged in a little duplicity in Reykjavik?

The President. Well, I'm not going to use the word "duplicity" there, but I do say, having had an opportunity in these past several years, and before him, to speak to -- while not their outright leaders, their general secretaries, because they kept disappearing -- talked to other Russian leaders. And I think the very nature of the talks that we had in this one and the fact that we were finding ourselves in agreement in the extent to which we would disarm and all -- but, yes, he was more open than I have experienced before. And it wasn't until we then got down to this proposal of theirs with SDI that we ran into a roadblock, and he made it plain then that everything that we'd been talking about was contingent on our agreeing to that one phase. But I'm not saying to you he's an easy mark in any way. He's totally dedicated to their system, and frankly, I think he believes sincerely their propaganda about us: that we're beholden to industrial and military complexes and so forth.

Q. Mr. President, now that you've met that base camp, how important right now is this summit that was originally scheduled for after the election? Is there a chance that there will be a summit, or doesn't it matter?

The President. Well, he brought up the matter of summit and referred to it several times as if he was expecting to be here for the summit. I have to say that our arms negotiators have gone back to Geneva. All of these things have gone with them, and it contains all of the notes and memorandums from all of the meetings as to the extent of the agreement that we had reached with regard to the various types of missiles and so forth. And so I have to believe that as they continue to look at that and see that there was only one major point of disagreement that we had that -- I'm going to continue to be optimistic.

Q. Mr. President, on the subject of the one sticking point that looms so large, if you could just explain to us your reasons for the way you handled it, on one point in particular? When it became apparent that all of the concessions that General Secretary Gorbachev was willing to make in the offensive area were contingent on this demand with regard to SDI, did you feel that you had an option of saying: We'll get back to you. We'll study this. We'll turn it over to our experts. I'll give it some more thought? If you had that option, you clearly didn't take it. You decided to make clear to him, then and there, and subsequently in public, that you were rejecting it. Why was that necessary, particularly given the fact that you told us here only a week or so ago that no great agreements were expected out of this meeting? It's not as though we were all out there waiting for you to come out with either a big agreement or a big disagreement.

The President. No, actually, as a matter of fact, he himself from the very beginning had said that what we were talking about is the necessity for coming to some agreements that would then lead to being able to sign things and finalize things at the forthcoming summit. So, actually, we progressed in those discussions farther than I think either one of us had anticipated we would. And with SDI, I think that is the absolute guarantee. First of all, I'd pledged to the American people that there was no way that I would give away SDI. And looking at their own record -- the ABM treaty -- they're in violation of that now.

Now, the ABM treaty, which he kept referring to as if it was the Holy Grail -- I asked him once what was so great about a treaty that had our governments saying to our people: We won't protect you from a nuclear attack? That's basically what the ABM treaty says.

On the other hand, we know and have evidence that they have been going beyond the restrictions of the ABM treaty with their Krasnoyarsk radar, which shows the possibility of being able to provide radar-directed missiles in a defense not just for one spot -- Moscow -- as the treaty had provided. We never, of course, took advantage of the fact that we could defend one spot. We didn't think that was a very practical idea.

But that they are embarked on a strategic defense initiative of their own. And we feel that, first of all, there are other countries, other individuals, that now that everybody knows how to make a ballistic missile that could be and that are -- well, some have them already, others developing. It's true that we are the two that endanger the world most with the great arsenals that we have. But this would be the guarantee against cheating. You wouldn't have to be suspiciously watching each other to see if they were starting to replace missiles. This would be the guarantee against -- in the future -- a madman coming along. I've likened it -- and I explained it to him in this way -- that right after World War I -- and I reminded him that I was the only one there old enough to remember these times -- the nations got together in Geneva to outlaw poison gas, but we kept our gas masks. And thank heaven we did, because now, years later, poison gas is being more and more recognized as a legitimate weapon.

Q. But are you saying, sir, that he left you no choice but to say yes or no there on the spot and that you had no option to say: Very interesting, we'll study it, we'll get back to you?

The President. There wasn't any need of that. There wasn't any way that I was going to back away from SDI.

Q. Mr. President, are you confident that we are going to have another summit?

The President. I can't say that I'm confident, that I have any practical evidence other than the fact that he several times referred to the forthcoming summit that would take place here in the United States.

Q. What did you say when he said that?

The President. The only mention I made of it at all was at one point I asked him legitimately -- I said, ``Would you like to propose a date -- suggest a date for that forthcoming summit?" And at that time his reason for not doing it, he said, was because, well, until our people have all worked things out and we know about how long it's going to take to make the plans for the summit, why I think we should wait on naming a date. And that was the last time that it was mentioned.

Q. Was that after the deadlock, sir? Was that after the deadlock or before the deadlock?

The President. Oh, that was before the deadlock, yes.

Q. Before?

The President. Yes.

Q. Mr. President, I'm puzzled about something. You two gentlemen talked for nearly 11 hours. Obviously there was harmony, because there were unprecedented agreements between you two. And yet in the final analysis SDI became the major hangup. I get the impression that all along Mr. Gorbachev never indicated to you that this was hanging back there in the dark. And my question is: Was he deceitful?

The President. I'm not going to use that word or say that because where this came up was both of us finally at a point proposed that -- on Saturday night -- that our teams take all of these voluminous notes that had been taken in all of the meetings and discussions with all of the things that had been discussed, and they go to work that night -- and they did, and they worked all night -- in two groups. Well, I mean there were two -- their groups and our groups, but two on each side. One of our groups was dedicated to putting together all the discussion that we'd had on human rights and regional conflicts and so forth. They worked until, as I understand it, about 3:30 in the morning. And the other group was to go through all the things, to come back and find where had we really been in agreement, where there was no problem between us, and where were the sticking points that had not been resolved. And I guess that group worked until about 6 in the morning, didn't they? And then Sunday we went into what was supposed to be a 2-hour meeting and wound up being an all-day meeting.

They put together the things that we had all proposed and that seemed that we could agree on and the places where we were stuck. And that was the first time, really, that it became evident about SDI, because what I had proposed early on was what I talked about here. I told him that what we were proposing with SDI was that once we reached the testing stage we would -- well, before that, that right now we were ready and willing to sign a treaty, a binding treaty, that said when we reached the testing stage that both sides would proceed. Because we told him frankly that we knew they were researching also on defense -- nor was that ever denied. And we said we both will go forward with what we're doing. When we reach the testing stage, if it's us, we'll invite you to participate and see the tests. And if it develops that we have -- or I said if you have perfected a system that can be this kind of defense that we're talking about, then we share, so that there won't be one side having this plus offensive weapons, but that we eliminate the offensive weapons and then we make available to all who feel a need for it or want it, this defensive system, so that safety is guaranteed for the future.

Q. Mr. President, you don't want to use the word "deceit," but I'm still puzzled. It seems to me that you wouldn't have agreed with Mr. Gorbachev as you agreed if you'd known that once you got to the 11th hour he would spring this all on SDI or nothing at all.

The President. Well, I think this came out of the summary, then, that came back from our teams to us, where all of this was put together in kind of an agreement. And they weren't denying SDI openly. What they were doing was framing it in such a way that in a 10-year delay they would literally kill SDI, and there just wouldn't be any.

Q. Mr. President, did you tell Mr. Gorbachev that SDI was, as you described it to us, an insurance policy that they will live up to agreements to reduce weapons? And what did he say to you in response?

The President. I'm trying to remember all the things that were said. It was just that they were adamant, that -- and the use of words, it came down to the use of words. And their words would have made it not just a 10-year delay, but would have meant that we would come to the end of the reducing the weapons and we -- well, SDI would have been killed. And we proposed wording that the research that we were carrying on would be carried on within the provisions of the ABM treaty, and this wasn't good enough for them.

Mr. Buchanan. Thank you very much, Mr. President. Appreciate it.

The President. The boss says I'm through here, but you can take them up with the Secretary of State.

All right, thank you very much.

Note: The President spoke at 1:24 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. Patrick J. Buchanan was Assistant to the President and Director of Communications.