

Chapter 57

Ending the Cold War

Were the effects of President Reagan's foreign policy actions mostly positive or mostly negative?

57.1 Introduction

On June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan stood on a platform in front of the Berlin Wall. Behind him loomed the Brandenburg Gate, a symbol of the divided German capital. The president was visibly angry. He had just been told that police had driven off East Germans who had gathered on the other side of the wall to hear him speak. "General Secretary Gorbachev," he said, knowing that his words would reach the Soviet leader in Moscow. "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!" Reagan continued, his last four words loud and clear, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

It was a ringing challenge from one superpower to the other. The Wall was by far the most well-known symbol of the Cold War. Twelve feet tall and over 100 miles long, it encircled West Berlin. Thousands of well-armed guards, aided by hundreds of tracking dogs, patrolled the wall with orders to shoot anyone who tried to escape to the West. Despite the risks, however, as many as 10,000 East Germans tried to cross the Wall over the years. About half of them succeeded, while the rest were captured or lost their lives. Some died jumping out of windows. Others were shot. Some drowned as they tried to swim across lakes or rivers along the border.

On the night of November 9, 1989, however, a little more than two years after Reagan's speech, the gates of the Berlin Wall finally opened. As the news spread, hundreds of thousands of people rushed to the Wall. Strangers hugged and kissed, while others cheered, danced, and set off fireworks. Then the crowd began to dismantle the Wall by hand. The noise level grew "louder and louder," reported one journalist, "as hundreds of hammers and chisels attack[ed] the wall, taking it down chip by chip." It was a celebration of freedom after decades of anxiety, fear, and oppression. As one young East German put it, "I don't feel like I'm in prison anymore."



In 1987, Reagan gave his famous "tear down this wall" speech in front of West Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. The 200-year-old gate was closed in 1961 when the Berlin Wall was built. Just before he spoke, Reagan learned that a crowd of East Germans gathered on the other side of the Wall to hear his speech had been forcibly removed by East German police.

572 Anticommunism Guides Reagan's Foreign Policy

Reagan had strong views on the dangers of communism. He believed that the Soviet Union posed an ongoing threat to freedom and democracy. In a speech in March 1983, he described the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." Reagan's tough talk pleased conservatives but alarmed other Americans who feared an escalation of Cold War tensions.

An Ardent Cold Warrior Reagan believed that the Soviet Union was bent on world domination and had to be stopped. To counter the Soviet threat and undermine communism, he boosted defense spending. The result was the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history.

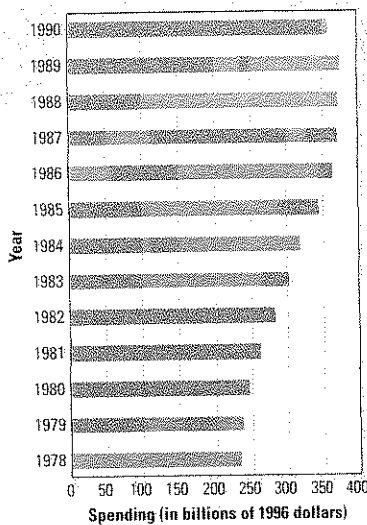
In 1983, Reagan announced plans for a new arms program, the **Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)**. This program would create a "missile shield" designed to protect the United States from nuclear attack. It would include land-based and space-based weapons, which could in theory knock down incoming missiles. Reagan argued that SDI would be a deterrent to war and make nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete."

Critics of the SDI program nicknamed it Star Wars after the popular science fiction movies of the time. They claimed that SDI would provoke a new arms race and undermine arms control agreements. Many scientists expressed doubts that an effective missile shield could ever be built, while members of Congress also voiced concerns about SDI's enormous cost. The program went ahead anyway, though technical problems hampered its development.

To further undermine the Soviets, Reagan called for the United States to openly support anticommunist insurgents and movements around the world. Under this policy, which became known as the **Reagan Doctrine**, the United States provided aid to rebels fighting Soviet-backed governments in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Reagan called these groups "freedom fighters."

Battling Communism in Central America and the Caribbean Central America was one of the first places where the Reagan Doctrine was applied.

**Annual Military Spending,
1978–1990**



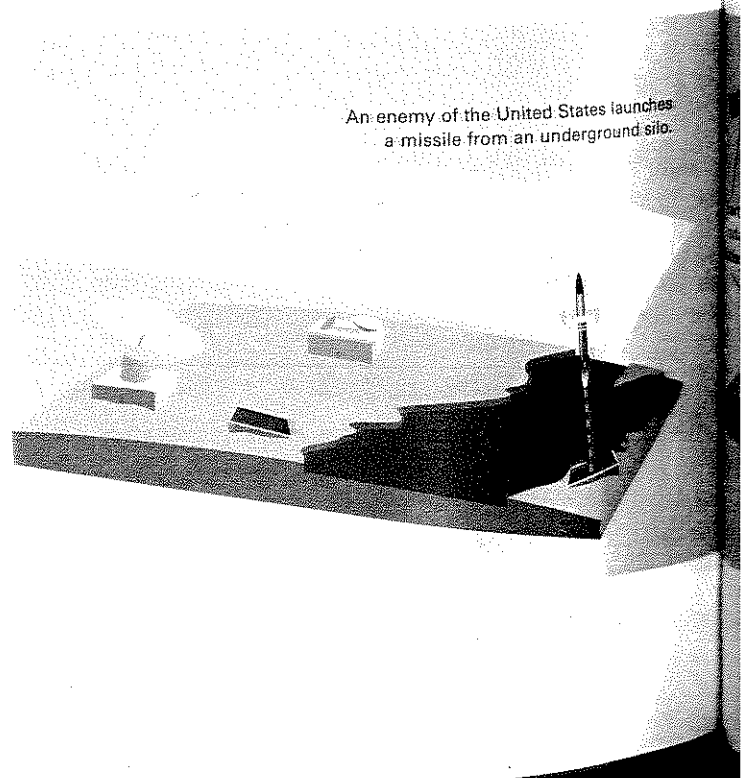
Source: Center for Defense Information.

Defense spending rose considerably over the course of Reagan's two terms in office. This increase was designed to counter the Soviet military threat and undermine the Soviet economy.

How Might an Antimissile Defense System Work?

The purpose of an antimissile defense system is to shoot incoming missiles out of the sky before they can reach their targets. Development of such a system began during the Reagan administration, but lapsed after he left office. In 1999, work was resumed on an antimissile system. Here is how such a missile shield might work.

An enemy of the United States launches a missile from an underground silo.



In Nicaragua, leftist rebels known as **Sandinistas** had overthrown the country's dictator, Anastasio Somoza, in 1979. The Sandinista government then acquired Soviet arms and forged close ties with communist Cuba.

Reagan saw events in Nicaragua, along with a growing insurgency in El Salvador, as evidence of Soviet and Cuban efforts to spread communism in Central America and throughout the Western Hemisphere. In a speech to Congress in 1983, he warned that these events threatened U.S. interests. "The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America," he warned. "If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere."

In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration began funding covert operations to overthrow the Sandinista government. U.S. advisers armed and trained over 10,000 Nicaraguan rebels. This U.S.-backed force, known as the **Contras**, attacked the Sandinistas from bases in neighboring countries.

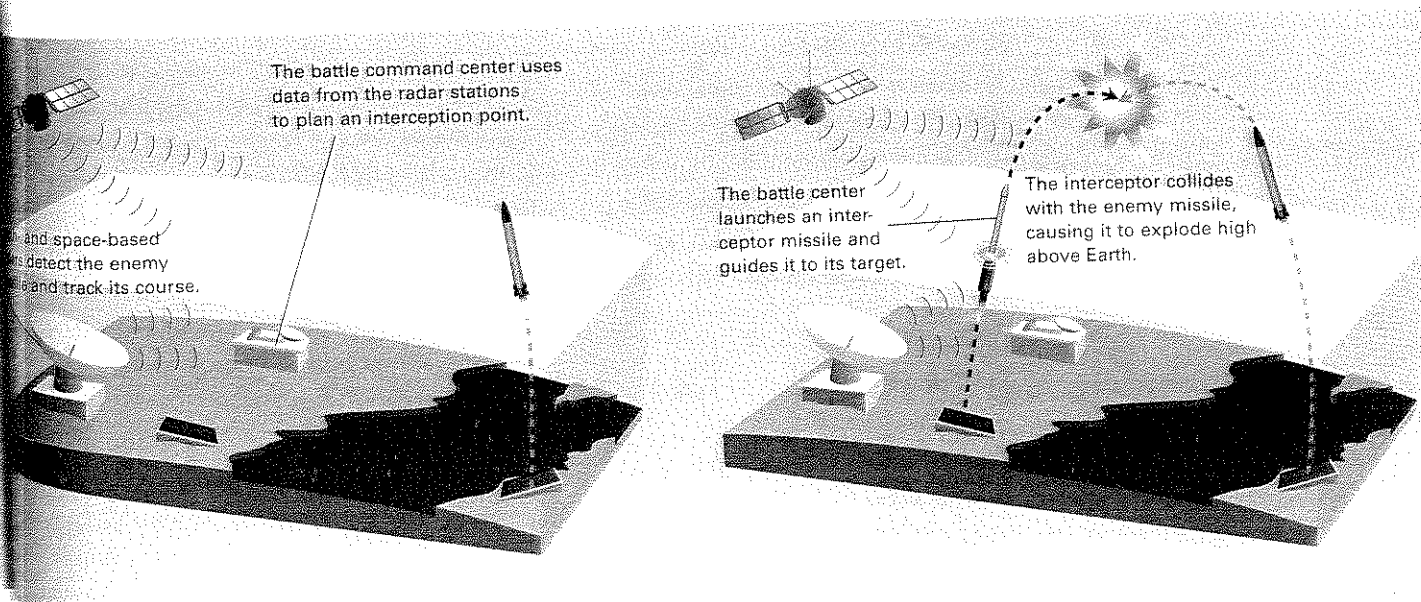
Congress questioned Reagan's policy. In 1984, after lawmakers learned that the CIA had been illegally placing mines in Nicaraguan harbors, they banned further U.S. military aid to the Contras. Covert operations continued, however, and would later embroil the Reagan administration in its most serious scandal.

Meanwhile, the administration was also providing economic and military aid to El Salvador, which was battling its own leftist rebellion. Reagan argued that this aid would counter communist influence and support the country's struggling democratic government. But most U.S. aid went to the Salvadoran military, which compiled a brutal human rights record. The civil war lasted for 12 years and left at least 70,000 Salvadorans dead, before ending in 1992.

The Reagan Doctrine also led the United States to invade the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. In 1983, a military coup brought a communist leader to power in Grenada. He invited Cuban workers to the island and signed military agreements with several communist countries. Alarmed by these events, Reagan sent an invasion force of U.S. Marines to Grenada to oust the regime, expel the Cubans, and install a new government. The people of Grenada and nearby islands supported the U.S. invasion. But many countries around the world condemned the action as unlawful interference in another nation's affairs.



In the 1980s, the United States funded and trained Contra rebels fighting to oust Nicaragua's leftist government. Reagan praised the Contras as "the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers." In 1984, however, Congress voted to end all military aid to the Contras.





In October 1983, a suicide bombing destroyed the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 241 soldiers. The force of the blast knocked the four-story building off its foundation. Several months later, Reagan pulled all U.S. troops out of Lebanon.

Key Events of the Iran-Contra Affair

1984–1985

Several Americans are kidnapped in Lebanon.

1985–1986

In exchange for help in securing the release of the hostages, the Reagan administration sells missiles to Iran.

1986

Reagan administration officials send millions of dollars from the Iran arms deal to Contras in Nicaragua.

57.3 On Shaky Ground in the Middle East

The Reagan administration also got involved in the Middle East. The United States provided aid to Israel along with moderate Arab states in the region, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. In 1975, a civil war broke out in Lebanon when various ethnic and religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, began to struggle for power. This conflict included factions tied to Syria and Iran, as well as elements of the **Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)**, a group fighting for a Palestinian homeland in Israel. In the early 1980s, the United States intervened in this war in an effort to bring peace.

Hopes of Peace in Lebanon Shattered Just before the U.S. entry into Lebanon, the conflict took a turn for the worse. Angry over repeated PLO raids from southern Lebanon, Israel set out to secure its northern border. In June 1982, Israeli troops crossed into Lebanon and destroyed PLO bases. In heavy fighting, they pushed the PLO north to Beirut, Lebanon's capital. Syria condemned the Israeli invasion and sent its own troops to support the PLO.

Reagan feared that Syrian involvement in the conflict might lead to a wider war in the Middle East. Hoping to end the fighting, Reagan sent a diplomat to Beirut to negotiate a settlement. An agreement was reached to create a multinational force consisting of troops from the United States, France, and Italy. These troops would enforce a cease-fire in Lebanon and give the PLO time to withdraw from Beirut. After that, Israel would leave, too.

The United States saw its troops as peacekeepers, but many Muslim groups did not. The U.S. presence in Lebanon angered Islamic radicals and provoked terrorist attacks against U.S. forces. In April 1983, terrorists bombed the U.S. embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people, including 17 Americans.

The following September, Israel began withdrawing its troops from Lebanon. But this did not bring peace. A month later, on October 23, a suicide bombing took place at the marine barracks at Beirut International Airport. The suicide bomber drove a truck filled with explosives into the barracks, killing 241 Americans. At the same time a few miles away, a similar explosion left at least 58 French troops dead. Unwilling to risk more American lives, Reagan withdrew all U.S. troops from Lebanon in February 1984. French and Italian troops left as well. It was a grim setback for U.S. peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East.

Despite the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon, terrorist attacks on Americans continued. In June 1985, Lebanese terrorists hijacked an airliner flying out of Athens, Greece. Most of the 153 passengers on board were Americans. The plane landed in Beirut, where one passenger was killed. Another 39 passengers were held captive in Lebanon for 17 days before they were released. This incident, along with other events in the Middle East, underscored a growing trend in Third World conflicts. Increasingly, insurgent groups with little political power relied on terrorism to advance their goals.

Scandal Rocks the White House: The Iran-Contra Affair A year later, in 1986, Reagan faced the most serious crisis of his presidency, a scandal known as the **Iran-Contra Affair**. In November, a Lebanese magazine reported that the United States had been secretly selling arms to Iran. The public then learned that the

The Iran-Contra Affair: A Crisis for the Reagan Administration

Why was the Iran-Contra Affair damaging to Reagan's presidency?

Broken promise Despite Reagan's vows to "never deal with terrorists," his officials sold weapons to Iranian-backed terrorists.

Illegal funding Ignoring a congressional ban, Reagan officials sent money from arms sales to the Contras in Nicaragua.

Lying to Congress Administration officials tried to cover up illegal activities during congressional investigations.

Abuse of executive power These actions violated the constitutional separation of powers and system of checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches of government.



weapons had been sold to Iran to help gain the release of U.S. hostages held by Iranian-backed terrorists in Lebanon.

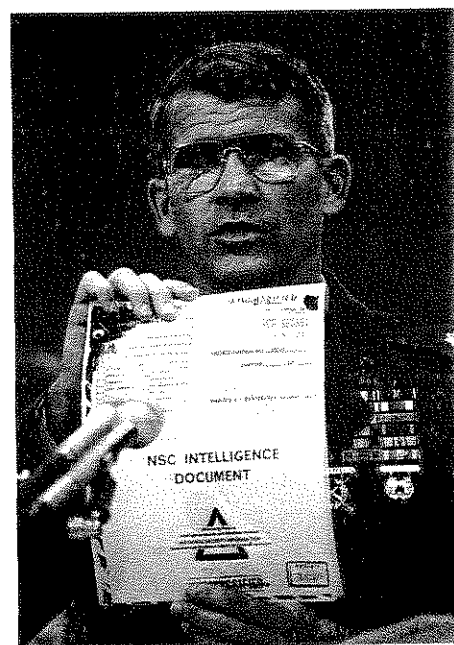
This news shocked Americans. Reagan had repeatedly vowed that he would "never deal with terrorists." Yet his administration had supplied arms to Iran, a country that had once held Americans hostage and that was known to support terrorism. By the time the weapon sales were uncovered, more than 1,500 missiles had been shipped to Iran. The weapons deal had not made Lebanon safer for Americans, though. Three U.S. hostages were freed, only to be replaced by three more. Secretary of State George Schultz called the exchange "a hostage bazaar."

Over the next several months, the scandal widened. Investigations by Congress and a special commission appointed by Reagan discovered that millions of dollars from the Iranian arms sales had been passed along to the Contras in Nicaragua, in violation of U.S. law. Investigators learned that top administration officials had backed this operation and lied to Congress.

The "point man" for the Iran-Contra operation was Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a staff member at the National Security Council. During special hearings in Congress, North told investigators that his superiors at the NSC had approved his actions, even though they violated the 1984 law banning aid to the Contras. He also admitted that he had helped to mislead Congress with statements that were "evasive and wrong." North's boss, Admiral John Poindexter, justified such deceptive practices as necessary to avoid "leaks" of information to the press. Both men were convicted of crimes related to the Iran-Contra Affair, but their convictions were overturned on appeal for technical reasons.

Meanwhile, the Tower Commission, an independent group set up to investigate the Iran-Contra Affair, later found that Reagan "did not seem to be aware" of the illegal operation. But it said that the president's disengagement from White House affairs had made the deception possible. It also found fault with the president for his failure to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed."

Reagan's approval ratings dropped sharply as a result of the Iran-Contra Affair, and some people wondered if his presidency would survive. In the end, however, the scandal didn't "stick" to the president, and his popularity rebounded.



Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North testified before Congress in the Iran-Contra Affair. A decorated Vietnam veteran, North ran the covert operation that funneled millions of dollars to the Contras. North defended his actions and claimed that he was following orders. Some Americans hailed him as a patriot, while others called him a criminal.

57.4 The Cold War Winds Down

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the head of the Soviet Union. At 54, he was the youngest Soviet leader in decades. The son of peasants, Gorbachev had risen rapidly to the top ranks of the Communist Party. Energetic and confident, he took office with bold plans for reform. The changes he made would help bring the Cold War to an end.

A Changing Soviet Union By the time Gorbachev came to power, the Soviet economy was in deep trouble. Production on farms and in factories was in decline. Centralized planning had left local managers little freedom to increase output or improve the quality of goods. Soviet workers also had little incentive to work harder and produce more.

The Soviet Union faced shortages of all kinds. Consumer goods such as shoes, clothing, and soap were in short supply. So were many foods. Families sometimes spent hours in line waiting to buy necessities. When scarce goods did appear in stores, shoppers often bought as much as they could afford. Such hoarding only made shortages worse. Eventually, rationing was imposed on many products. In addition, the country had a severe housing crisis, especially in the cities. Many families had to wait for years to get a tiny, cramped apartment.

Gorbachev knew that the Soviet economy had to change. Soon after taking office, he announced a program of economic reforms called *perestroika*, or restructuring. He closed many unprofitable state-run factories and allowed some private businesses to operate. He also cut the defense budget to make more money available for domestic needs.

Along with economic reforms, Gorbachev announced a policy of *glasnost*, or openness. He called for an honest discussion of the nation's political and social problems. He also allowed the Soviet media greater freedom to criticize the government. Gorbachev hoped that this new climate of openness would help win public support for his reforms. At the same time, however, he made it clear that he did not intend to do away with the communist system.

Negotiating with the "Evil Empire" When Gorbachev took office, the Cold War was intensifying. In the early 1980s, both the Soviet Union and the United States had increased the number of nuclear missiles deployed in Europe. This arms buildup, as well as the Reagan administration's hostile references to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," revived fears of nuclear war.

In the United States and Western Europe, these fears gave rise to the **nuclear freeze movement**. This movement called for a moratorium, or "freeze," on the production, testing, and deployment of nuclear weapons by the superpowers. Freeze advocates held parades and rallies, lobbied Congress, and raised money for antinuclear political candidates. On June 12, 1982, close to a million people turned out for a "No Nuke" rally in New York City. Hundreds of communities supported the movement by declaring themselves nuclear-free zones.

Despite these protests, the likelihood of a thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations seemed slight during Reagan's first term in office. With Gorbachev in power, however, the prospects for ending the Cold War began to improve. Gorbachev knew that continuing the arms race would jeopardize his efforts to bring eco-



As the Soviet economy declined in the 1980s, many Soviet citizens suffered great hardship. Some people migrated to cities looking for work or better living conditions. This migrant is living in a tent city outside the walls of the Kremlin, the center of government in Moscow.

conomic reform. The economy was already weakened further by a lengthy war in Afghanistan, where Soviet forces were fighting a rebellion against a Soviet-backed government. Gorbachev also feared that the development of SDI and other U.S. weapons systems would leave the Soviet Union more vulnerable to attack. As a result, he was prepared to negotiate new arms control agreements with the United States.

Surprising both his supporters and his critics, Reagan agreed to meet with Gorbachev in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1985. It was the first of four summit meetings between the two leaders. Although they made little progress on arms control in Geneva, the men discovered that they liked each other. Reagan later described Gorbachev as having "warmth in his face and his style, not the coldness bordering on hatred I'd seen in most senior Soviet officials."

In 1986, the two leaders met again in Reykjavik, Iceland. They discussed removing missiles from Europe and reducing nuclear stockpiles. The talks stalled, however, when Gorbachev insisted that Reagan cancel the SDI program, a demand that Reagan refused.

Negotiations got back on track the following year when Gorbachev agreed to discuss missile reductions without an end to SDI. At a summit in Washington in December 1987, the two leaders signed the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty**, more commonly called the **INF Treaty**. They agreed to remove and destroy all missiles with a range of between 300 and 3,400 miles. It was the first arms treaty that required both sides to destroy missiles. It also allowed both sides to inspect each other's missile bases to verify that the weapons had been withdrawn and destroyed.

Five months later, the fourth and final summit took place in Moscow. By that time, the two leaders had become friends. In his farewell address to the nation in 1989, Reagan told Americans that the United States had "forged a satisfying new closeness with the Soviet Union." It was a far cry from the anti-Soviet views Reagan had voiced just a few years before.



Reagan and Gorbachev held four summit meetings on arms control, developing a warm friendship in the process. At their final meeting in Moscow, a reporter asked Reagan if he still thought the Soviet Union was an evil empire. "No," he replied, "I was talking about another time, another era."

57.5 The Soviet Union Falls While Communism Struggles On

In August 1991, crowds in Moscow's Lubyanka Square cheered as a huge bronze statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky toppled to the ground. Dzerzhinsky was the founder of the Soviet Union's hated secret police, the KGB. Protesters used giant cranes to pull the statue down as millions of startled Soviet citizens watched on television. This incident became a symbol of the Soviet Union's collapse.

The Breakup of the Soviet Bloc By the late 1980s, the Soviet economy was in tatters and the future of Soviet communism was in doubt. The new openness of glasnost had made more people in the Soviet bloc aware of the success of free-market economies and the failure of central planning. Many demanded greater freedom and independence.

In 1989, Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would no longer interfere in the internal affairs of other communist countries. "Any nation," he said, "has the right to decide its fate by itself." With the threat of a Soviet invasion removed, communism collapsed across Eastern Europe. Most governments fell peacefully, as leaders resigned or agreed to reforms. One exception was Romania, where an angry mob rose up to drive dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife from power. In East Germany, desperate communist officials tried to hold on to power by opening the Berlin Wall and promising other changes. But like other Eastern European nations, East Germany rejected communist rule, and it soon reunited with West Germany.

The Soviet republics broke away as well. By the fall of 1991, the Baltic republics of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania had achieved independence. Ukraine and the other republics soon followed. By the end of the year, all 15 Soviet republics had become separate nation-states. A **nation-state** is an independent country populated mainly by citizens who share a common culture, history, and language.

In July 1991, Eastern European leaders disbanded the Warsaw Pact. A month later, communist hardliners who were angry with Gorbachev for the breakup of the Soviet empire tried to overthrow him. The coup failed, but four months later

Gorbachev resigned as the Soviet leader and declared the Soviet Union officially dissolved. The Cold War was finally over.

Communism Survives in Other Countries

While communism was disappearing in Eastern Europe, communist governments remained in power in Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea, and China. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, most communist countries lost a key sponsor. For decades, Cuba had relied on the Soviet Union for trade and economic aid. Without Soviet help, Cuba faced serious economic problems. Nevertheless, Cuban leader Fidel Castro remained a staunch communist.

In June 1989, Chinese authorities broke up pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. One protester risked his life by standing in front of army tanks as they rolled through the city. His action was a symbolic gesture of defiance against China's communist state.



In the late 1980s, Vietnam's communist government began to carry out reforms. It allowed some private businesses to operate and sought foreign investment to boost its economy. By the 1990s, Vietnam's **mixed economy**—one combining elements of free enterprise and central planning—was growing rapidly, offering more opportunities to the Vietnamese people. Relations with the United States and other Western nations also improved.

Unlike Vietnam, communist North Korea remained isolated. With the fall of the Soviet bloc, North Korea lost a major source of economic support. It turned increasingly to China as an ally and remained a closed, rigidly controlled communist society.

The changes that rocked Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union also touched China. The Chinese were already pursuing economic reforms, but the fall of Soviet communism prompted many Chinese to call for greater political freedom as well. In May 1989, thousands of students joined pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. After several weeks of demonstrations, Chinese leaders finally decided to act. On June 3 and 4, government troops and tanks moved into the square to crush the protest. The protesters were dispersed and an unknown number were killed. By repressing the protest, the Chinese government signaled that it was not ready to accept political change.

Summary

Reagan's foreign policy emphasized anticommunism and support for democracy and freedom. His efforts to undermine Soviet power, along with changes in the Soviet Union itself, helped end the Cold War.

Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) Reagan increased military spending to counter the Soviet threat. One program, the Strategic Defense Initiative, was designed to create a "missile shield" to defend the United States from nuclear attack.

Reagan Doctrine The president backed anticommunist movements around the world as part of the Reagan Doctrine. He gave aid to rebels like the Contras, who were fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

Middle Eastern policy Reagan sent U.S. peacekeeping forces to Lebanon. These troops helped secure the withdrawal of the Palestine Liberation Organization. But terrorist attacks later forced Reagan to pull the soldiers out.

Iran-Contra Affair The Reagan administration faced a scandal over arms sales to Iran and the diversion of funds to the Contras. Several top officials were convicted of illegal actions in the Iran-Contra Affair.

Nuclear freeze movement Rising tensions with the Soviet Union increased fears of nuclear war. The nuclear freeze movement called for an end to the spread of nuclear weapons.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, reducing nuclear missiles in Europe. U.S. pressure, along with economic and political problems at home, eventually caused the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.