

What if Reagan and Gorbachev Had Moved to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons?

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During their summit at Reykjavik in 1986, American president Ronald Reagan, and the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, both expressed a desire to eliminate all nuclear weapons. However, this possibility came off the table as a result of the leaders' disagreement over the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, a program in the United States to develop a comprehensive missile defense system, with Reagan refusing to give up the program and Gorbachev refusing to accept it. This is especially tragic because SDI turned out to be impractical anyway. In this video, we will imagine that back at the summit, Reagan and Gorbachev reached a compromise in which SDI would become a joint American-Soviet project and consider one way history might have unfolded from that point.

At the summit, Reagan had already offered to share the technology with the Soviets once it was developed so they could build their own missile defense system, though Gorbachev did not take this proposal seriously. However, in this alternate timeline, he made the counter-proposal that the two superpowers develop the technology jointly, in a similar spirit to the Apollo-Soyuz mission in 1975, and Reagan accepted, the general plan being to make nuclear weapons ineffective at the same time as getting rid of them.

Overtures were made to the other nuclear powers, and most of their leaders at least agreed to a conference to discuss global disarmament, held in Geneva the following year, with extreme excitement and anticipation among the public at the possibility of finally escaping from the specter of a nuclear holocaust. However, as in our timeline, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, balked at disarmament, asserting the Soviet Union was in a position to dominate Europe with its conventional forces alone. French President François Mitterrand was more receptive to disarmament but also expressed concerns of Soviet domination. China had similar deep concerns relating to its border with the Soviet Union as well as American forces in Asia and the Pacific. Owing to their distrust of each other, both India and Pakistan were unwilling to give up their nuclear weapons. South Africa favored disarmament, but its attendance at the conference was largely considered token as it was already moving toward eliminating its nuclear weapons. Israel, meanwhile, refused to attend at all in line with its policy of neither confirming nor denying the existence of its arsenal.

With global nuclear disarmament essentially off the table, Reagan and Gorbachev moved ahead at least with mutual arms reductions. They held a summit in Washington D.C. in 1988 in which they signed a treaty making much deeper cuts in their nuclear arsenals than the INF Treaty did in our timeline and across multiple classes of sea, air, and land-based weapons. The agreement also included more in-depth mutual inspections, though still well short of total disarmament. Finally, an exchange program for scientists in fields related to SDI, such as aerospace and laser physics, was established as well. In lieu of a completed SDI system, the treaty established jointly operated radar stations around the Arctic. Even though this seems like a better outcome compared to our timeline, in this one, the public would have perceived it as a failure compared to the promise of total disarmament. Instead of being the president credited with ending the Cold War, Reagan was another president who reduced tensions.

The greater arms reduction and lesser need for military spending compared to actual events took pressure off the Soviet economy and bought more time for Gorbachev's liberalizing reforms, Glasnost and Perestroika, and for the situation in the Soviet Union to stabilize. In our timeline, Gorbachev proposed transforming the country into the "Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics," and in this one he actually succeeded. While none of the former Soviet Socialist Republics became independent, the brutal military force used to crush uprisings in the Baltic states created a Tiananmen Square-like moment and damaged Gorbachev's popularity in the West. Also, the August Coup still took place, though it had less support than in our actual timeline owing to better conditions. As a result, Gorbachev was never placed under house arrest, denying Boris Yeltsin the opportunity to supplant him. Ironically, Ronald Reagan helped set in motion a series of events that saved the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Bloc still unraveled during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and Germany still reunified. Eastern Europe was already rising up against the communists, and Gorbachev was already inclined to allow it self-determination. Even though the Soviet Union still suffered most of the loss of prestige and influence Russia did in our timeline, the world continued nominally with two superpowers.

The more dramatic lessening of tensions pushed the dissipating Cold War more into the background during the 1988 presidential election. As for the Republican primaries, George H.W. Bush still won the nomination due to the advantage of being the incumbent vice president. Meanwhile, the shift of the election's issues more to the domestic side brought Michael Dukakis' perceived softness on crime into sharper relief among the Democrats. For the same reason, Al Gore wound up never getting into the controversy around his endorsement by Ed Koch and stance on Israel shortly before he dropped out of the race in our timeline. As a result, he just barely won the Democratic nomination.

During the election, Gore, holding more conservative social views than many Democrats, and never having been tainted by Bill Clinton's scandals, was able to steal the issue of moral values from the Republicans. When foreign policy was discussed, he was also able to turn a form of the "soft on communism" line against them owing to Reagan's joint efforts with the Soviets on SDI. George Bush also did not gain as much prestige from Reagan's legacy as he did in our timeline due to the failure of total disarmament. As a result, Gore won the election to become the 41st president of the United States.

Over the 1990s, the Soviet Union transitioned to a system like China's, keeping a veneer of communism over an actual economy of crony capitalism mixed with state-owned industries, but with some elements of the social democracies of Western Europe mixed in as well. Workers, meanwhile, suffered low wages and poor conditions with very slow improvement. In the United States, "Made in the USSR" came to be derided like "Made in China" is in our timeline.

Al Gore, defeating Bob Dole in 1992, wound up making environmental protection and clean energy a higher priority, improving public health and lessening fossil fuel dependence somewhat. Areas such as solar power and electric cars got pushed ahead faster. Hybrids became commonplace in the mid 1990s, and plug-in electrics were readily available by the end of the decade. This also boosted the development of battery technology. Meanwhile, devices like smartphones became common sooner as well, with computers in general becoming more advanced more quickly. However, the new regulations also accelerated the outsourcing of American manufacturing to the Soviet Union and China. The effect was to hasten what we know as the 2008 economic crisis, which had already been set up by the economic policies of the 1980s, and it wound up taking place 10 years sooner.

Gore's administration was also defined by his overtures for peace in the Middle East, which moved further along owing to his more conciliatory position toward both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Meanwhile in Iraq, Saddam Hussein still invaded Kuwait, since all his motivations for doing so were still in place, and Al Gore, having voted for the Gulf War in our timeline, launched it in this one, ending again with a decisive victory. The issue of Islamism, meanwhile, had already been set in motion by the 1970s, so it didn't go away, though it had less support and financing. As a result, Al-Qaeda was foiled during a clumsier attempt to carry out 9/11.

With Americans considering how close the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and Capitol came to being destroyed, the probable deaths estimated in the tens of thousands, there was still a significant increase in security and surveillance, though not as much as in our timeline without the shock of the actual event, and aside from sporadic and isolated military strikes, the War on Terror never happened either. While Gore's energy policy reduced fossil fuel dependence, it also reduced the incentive to develop the fracking industry, so dependence on foreign oil, and thus a strategic interest in the Middle East, wound up about the same as in our timeline.

The mid 1990s economic crisis created a more favorable position for Ross Perot, with his platform of balancing the budget and tax reform, and he won the 1996 presidential election. As the world economy ultimately came out of recession, the biggest issue for the United States was a new rivalry with the Soviet Union, still led by Gorbachev, as its economy was growing rapidly. This also slowed down the growth of China, which had to compete with the Soviets for investment and markets, and each engaged in a campaign of cyberattacks against the other.

In the U.S., with Perot having proven a third party could win the presidency, the power of the Republicans and Democrats, as well as their corporate backers, was shaken, and upstart third parties and independents began winning elections all over the country. The 2008 and 2012 presidential elections were extremely contentious largely due to misinformation spread on social media. Similarly, in 2016, many sophisticated artificially-generated videos, known as deep fakes, were released of all the candidates to try to discredit them, succeeding to the point that the public didn't really know who said and did what. Approaching 2020, multiple parties held significant numbers of seats in Congress, with none gaining a majority, and while the United States was even more politically divided than it is for us, there was less discontent because people had more ability to meaningfully express their varying positions and affect public policy, which is probably something we should try for here and now.