

The Reykjavik Summit 40 Years Later

What Reagan and Gorbachev Actually Said About Eliminating Nuclear Weapons

Documents Show Quiet American Pressure Worked on Human Rights

U.S. Side Tried to Edit Abolition Out of the Historical Record

Iceland Summit Marked Peak and Downturn of Nuclear Arms Race

Washington, D.C., October 10, 2026 - The Reykjavik summit between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev—seen at the time 40 years ago as a failure—actually marked the historic turning point in the Cold War nuclear arms race, according to declassified documents published today by the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

The documents show that both leaders genuinely intended to eliminate nuclear weapons from the earth (a position that “scandalized” most of Reagan’s advisers and allies) but stumbled at Reykjavik over divergent senses of threat and lack of trust. Yet the breakthroughs they agreed on in Iceland led to the “arms race in reverse” that Gorbachev had proposed in January 1986, the elimination of an entire class of nuclear weapons (the INF Treaty of 1987), and the end of the Cold War.

The previously secret documents published today include both the U.S. and the Soviet transcripts of Reykjavik—what the two leaders actually said to each other—along with both sides’ preparatory materials and expectations, and aftermath assessments.

The documents also demonstrate that the American strategy of quiet pressure on human rights, submitting lists of dissidents and “refuseniks” that had to be addressed by the Soviet side, really worked. Most vividly, that pressure just before Reykjavik led to the release of Soviet dissident physicist Yuri Orlov and to the release of Andrei Sakharov in December after Reykjavik.

Perhaps the most remarkable new evidence shows how the American side tried to “step back” (their mildest formulation) from Reagan’s expressed commitment at Reykjavik to nuclear abolition. The documents show that top national security advisers to Reagan actually intervened to edit the official U.S. transcript of his telephone call with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher after Reykjavik, where Reagan proudly discussed his abolition initiative (to Thatcher’s dismay). The official U.S. record deleted all the abolition commitments, while Thatcher’s own account was “impossible to reconcile” with the U.S. version.

THE NATIONAL SECURITY ARCHIVE is an independent non-governmental research institute and library located at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The Archive collects and publishes declassified documents acquired through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).