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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Feb. 16, 1986

Dear Mr. General Secretary

Your letter of Dec. 24, 1985 was most interesting -
fascinating and I would like to share my reactions
with you. I have of course also received your
letter of Jan. 14, 1986, and will be responding
to it shortly. However, since the substance of the
matter is already in the public domain, I believe
it is well to keep our private communications separate.
Although the issues overlap, I would hope that our
informal exchange can be used to clarify our
attitudes on some of the fundamental questions.

I agree with you that we need to set a
specific agenda for action to bring about a steady and
I would hope - radical improvement in U.S. - Soviet
relations. I suggested two such topics in my
previous letter, and I would hope that we can
identify others as ripe for immediate progress. For
example, some of the obstacles to an agreement on
intermediate-range missiles seem to be falling
away. I would also hope that rapid progress
can be made toward agreement on a verification
regime that will permit a global ban on
chemical weapons.

Regarding arms reduction in general, I agree
with you that we must make decisions not on
the basis of assurances or intentions but with regard
to the capabilities on both sides. Nevertheless,
I do not understand the reasoning behind your
conclusion that only a country preparing a disarming
first strike would be interested in defenses against

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ballistic missiles. If such defenses prove feasible in the future, they could facilitate further reductions of nuclear weapons by creating a feeling of confidence that national security could be preserved without them.

Of course, as I have said before, I recognize that adding defensive systems to an arsenal replete with weapons with a disarming first-strike capability could under some conditions be destabilizing. That is why we are proposing that both sides concentrate first on reducing those weapons which can be used to deliver a disarming first strike. Certainly, if neither of our countries had forces suitable for a first strike, neither need fear that defenses against ballistic missiles would make a first strike strategy possible.

I also do not understand your statement that what you call "space strike weapons" are "all purpose" weapons. As I understand it, the sort of directed-energy and kinetic devices both our countries are investigating in the context of ballistic missile defense are potentially most effective against point targets moving at high velocity in space. They would be ill-suited for mass destruction on earth, and if one were planning to strike earth targets from space, it does not seem rational to resort to such expensive and exotic techniques. Their destructiveness can never approach that of the nuclear weapons in our hands today. Nuclear weapons are the real problem.

Mr. General Secretary, in the spirit of candor which is essential to effective communication, I would add another point. You speak often of "space strike weapons," and your representatives have defined these as weapons which can strike targets in space from earth and its atmosphere, and weapons in space which can strike targets in space or on earth. I must ask, "What country has such weapons?" The answer is, only one: the Soviet Union. Your ABM system deployed around Moscow can

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strike targets beyond the atmosphere and has been tested in that mode. Your co-orbital anti-satellite weapon is designed to destroy satellites. Furthermore, the Soviet Union began research in defense utilizing directed energy before the United States did and seems well along in research (and incidentally - some testing outside laboratories) of lasers and other forms of directed energy.

I do not point this out in reproach or suggest that these activities are in violation of agreements. But if we were to follow your logic to the effect that what you call "space strike weapons" would only be developed by a country planning a first strike, what would we think? We see the Soviet Union devoting enormous resources to defensive systems in an effort which antedates by many years our own effort, and we see a Soviet Union which has built up its counterforce weapons in numbers far greater than our own. If the only reason to develop defensive weapons is to make a disarming first strike possible, then clearly we should be even more concerned than we have been.

We are concerned, and deeply so. But not because you are developing - and unlike us deploying - defensive weaponry. We are concerned over the fact that the Soviet Union for some reason has chosen to deploy a much larger number of weapons suitable for a disarming first strike than has the United States. There may be reasons for this other than actually seeking a first-strike advantage, but we too must look at capabilities rather than intentions. And the fact is that we are certain you have an advantage in this area.

Frankly, you have been misinformed if your specialists say that the missiles on our Trident submarines have a capability to destroy hardened missile silos - a capability your SS-18 definitely has. Current Trident missiles lack the capability for such a role. They could be used only to retaliate. Nor is the Poseidon II, which cannot even reach most Soviet strategic weapons, a potential first-strike weapon. Its short flight time

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is not substantially different from that of the more capable — and much more numerous — Soviet SS20s aimed at our European Allies whom we are pledged to defend and most of whom have no nuclear capability of their own. Our force currently have a very limited capability to strike Soviet sites, and we are improving this capability only because we cannot accept a situation in which the Soviet Union holds such a clear advantage in counterforce weaponry. Even if we are required to complete all planned deployments in the absence of an accord which limits them, they will not match the number of Soviet weapons with a first-strike capability.

Our defense and military specialists disagree regarding the capability of the weapons on the other side, then by all means let us arrange for them to meet and discuss their concerns. A frank discussion of their respective assessments and the reasons for them could perhaps clear up those misunderstandings which are not based on fact.

In any event, we have both agreed to the principle of a 50% reduction of nuclear arms. Implementing that agreement is surely the first task of our negotiators at Geneva. Let me stress once again that we remain willing to reduce those weapons systems which the Soviet Union finds threatening so long as the Soviet Union will reduce those which pose a special threat to the United States and its Allies. Our proposals in November included significant movement on our part in this direction and were a major step to accommodate your concerns. I hope that your negotiators will be empowered to respond to these proposals during the current round and to engage us in identifying which strategic systems are to be included in the 50% reduction.

So far as defensive systems are concerned, I would reiterate what I wrote before: if your concern is that such systems may be used to permit a first-strike strategy, or as a cover for basing weapons of mass destruction in space, then there must be practical ways to prevent such possibilities. Of course I have in mind not general assurances but concrete, verifiable means which both sides can rely on to avoid these

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Continuance, retreat or withdrawal as a part of United States strategy or planning. I honestly believe that we can find a solution to this problem if we approach it in practical fashion rather than debating generalities.

I would like nothing more than to find, by our next meeting an approach acceptable to both of us to solve this problem. But I believe that will require two things: accelerating negotiations to reach agreement on the way to reduce offensive weapons by 50%, and discussion of concrete ways to insure that any future development of defensive systems cannot in use as a cover for a first-strike strategy or for launching weapons of mass destruction in space. Aside from these broader issues, I believe that your recent proposal brings settlement of the problem of intermediate-range missiles closer and that there are improved measures in several areas.

Regarding regional conflicts, I can see that our respective analyses of the causes are incompatible. There seems little point in continuing to debate those matters on which we are bound to disagree. Instead, I would suggest that we simply look at the current situation in pragmatic terms. Such a look would show two very important facts: that the Soviet Union is engaged in a war in another country and the United States is not. And furthermore, this war is unlikely to bring any benefit to the Soviet Union. So why is it continued?

Certainly not because of the United States. Even if we wished we do not have the power to induce thousands of people to take up arms against a well trained foreign army equipped with the most modern weapons. And neither we nor any country other than the Soviet Union has the power to stop that war. For who can tell the people of another country they should not fight for their motherland, for their independence and their national dignity?

I hope, as you say, that there is an open door to a just political settlement. Of course, we support the U.N. process and hope that it will take a practical and realistic turn. However, 1985 was marked by an intensification of conflict. I can only

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hope that this is not what the future holds.

As I have said before, if you really want to withdraw from Afghanistan, you will have my cooperation in every reasonable way. We have no desire or intent to export a Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan to the detriment of Soviet interests. But it is clear that the fighting can be ended only by the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the return of Afghan refugees to their country, and the restoration of a genuinely sovereign, non-aligned state. Such a result would have an immediate positive effect on US-Soviet relations and would help clear the way to progress in many other areas.

The problem of superpower military involvement in local disputes is of course not limited to the Afghan conflict in Afghanistan. And I must say candidly that some recent actions by your government are most discouraging. What are we to make of your sharply increased military support of a local dictator who has declared a war of terrorism against much of the rest of the world, and against the United States in particular? How can one take Soviet declarations of opposition to terrorism seriously when confronted with such actions? And more importantly, are we to conclude that the Soviet Union is so reckless in wishing to extend its influence in the world that it will place its prestige (and even the lives of some of its citizens) at the mercy of a mentally unbalanced local despot?

You have made accusations about U.S. policy which I cannot accept. My purpose here, however, is not to debate, but to search for a way out of the pattern by which one of us becomes militarily involved, directly or indirectly, in local disputes, and thus stimulates the reaction of the other. This transforms what should be of local concern into a U.S.-Soviet confrontation. As I have said, we believe it is the Soviet Union which has acted without restraint in this respect. You say it is the United States.

But agreement as to who is to blame is not necessary to find a solution. The point I would

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major is that we must find a way to terminate the military involvement, direct & indirect, of both our countries in these disputes, and avoid spreading such involvement to new areas. This was the goal of the proposal I made last October. Let us encourage the parties to these conflicts to begin negotiation to find political solutions, while our countries support the process by agreeing to terminate the flow of weapons and war material into the area of conflict.

Mr. General Secretary, there remain many points on which we still disagree, and we will probably never reach agreement on some of them. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the critical problems can be solved if we approach them in the proper manner. I have the feeling that we gradually are finding some additional points on which we can agree, and would hope that, by concentrating on practical solutions, we can gain greater momentum to this process.

But we do need to speed up the negotiation process if this is to occur. Therefore, I hope you will instruct your delegations in Geneva, as I have instructed ours, to roll up their sleeves and get seriously to work.

When you announced to the public the ideas contained in your letter of January 14, I made a statement welcoming them. Our study of that message will shortly be completed and when it is I will be replying specifically to the points you made in it.

Nancy joins me in sending our best regards to you and your wife.

Sincerely

Ronald Reagan

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February 17, 1986

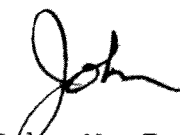
MEMORANDUM FOR THE HONORABLE GEORGE P. SHULTZ
The Secretary of State

THE HONORABLE CASPAR W. WEINBERGER
The Secretary of Defense

THE HONORABLE WILLIAM J. CASEY
Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Presidential Letter to Gorbachev (U)

The President has written the attached letter to General Secretary Gorbachev in reply to his letter of December 24, 1985. The letter with a courtesy translation will be pouched to Moscow this evening. Please limit access to and knowledge of the letter only to those who have a need to know. It is requested that no other copies be made. *tey*


John M. Poindexter

Attachment
Presidential Ltr to Gorbachev

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