



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

A European Perspective on the Reagan Years

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Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 3, America and the World 1987/88 (1987/1988), pp. 478-493

Published by: [Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20043462>

Accessed: 19/04/2011 15:45

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Michael Howard

A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE REAGAN YEARS

American political leaders—or aspirants to political leadership—frequently visit Europe and return to inform their domestic audiences that “the Europeans” hold views that accord remarkably closely with their own. In consequence, they declare, “Europe” would be supportive of their own policies and made deeply anxious by those of their opponents.

This is not surprising. The spectrum of opinion is as wide in Europe as it is in the United States. American visitors would not be human if they did not seek out those who shared their views, and pay more attention to their opinions than to those of the groups with whom they disagreed. The question, how broadly the views of the European elites with whom American politicians communicate are shared by the population as a whole, is one about which even those elites would be rash to offer an opinion. No one—least of all the author of this article—has the right to speak for “Europe” except its elected leaders, and then only on the rare occasions when they can do so with a single voice. American politicians can therefore rest assured that whatever they do, some Europeans will support them and others will be deeply disturbed. The question is how many are there in each group, and how influential are they?

II

It is true that the center of gravity of European political thinking lies somewhere to the left of that in the United States: Jesse Helms probably has as few admirers in Europe as has Tony Benn in America. But even conservative European politicians are more likely to feel at home with Democrats than with Republicans, and the radical socialism, Marxist or *marxissant*, that is an accepted part of European political culture, has never established deep roots across the Atlantic. A right-wing American administration is therefore always likely to have more difficulties with its European allies than a centrist one.

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But the rightward movement that characterized American political life in the first half of the 1980s was paralleled in Europe. Right-wing leaders came to power in Britain, France and West Germany, and their tenure still appears relatively secure. Socialist parties everywhere have declined, those most firmly pledged to unilateral disarmament fastest of all. The style of the Reagan Administration, with its reassertion of American self-confidence, its buildup of American armed forces and its tough confronting of Soviet adventurism, has commanded more sympathy in Western Europe than would have been conceivable twenty years earlier. In spite of this, the year 1987 saw relations between the governments of the United States and its European allies reach a nadir for which it would be difficult to find an equal—the Suez crisis of 1956 excepted—during the whole of the postwar period.

For this one can identify three distinct causes: Reykjavik, the Iran-contra scandal and the budgetary deficit. All can be traced not so much to the policy as to the style of policymaking in the White House, and the personal qualities of the president himself.

The Reykjavik summit meeting of October 11–12, 1986, between President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev succeeded in alienating virtually every sector of European public opinion. The forces of the right were everywhere horrified by the president's declared objective of "eliminating all ballistic missiles from the face of the earth" by 1996 and his aspiration to create "a world without nuclear weapons." The left blamed him for making this aspiration unacceptable to the Soviets by his insistence on retaining his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Moderates in all countries, including most political leaders and government officials, were deeply disturbed by what James Schlesinger has so rightly called the "casual utopianism and indifferent preparation" of the whole exercise.¹

No Europeans—and very few Americans—had been consulted before the Reykjavik meeting. What was assumed to be a preparatory *prise de contact* turned overnight into a serious negotiation over issues vital to the security of the entire West. Soviet proposals, produced without warning at the conference table, were accepted, without any preliminary examination by

¹"Reykjavik and Revelations: A Turn of the Tide?" *Foreign Affairs, America and the World* 1986, p. 430.

Western experts, as a basis for negotiation. The most fundamental rules of diplomacy were ignored. The president's stubbornness over SDI averted catastrophe, but the U.S. government—not for the first time (or the last)—negotiated proposals that would have caused it deep embarrassment had the Soviets accepted them. After the summit the State Department mounted a massive damage-limitation exercise and the British prime minister visited Washington to elicit, on behalf of her European colleagues, a presidential explanation that reconciled his views with official alliance policy. But the sheer unprofessionalism of the whole enterprise shocked European governments deeply and reinforced the opinion, especially common in France, that American leadership was no longer to be trusted. It was no coincidence that during the following spring France and West Germany began to discuss closer military cooperation, or that the government of Margaret Thatcher, pledged to enhancing Britain's independent nuclear capability, was returned to power with a substantial majority. The shadow of Reykjavik lay heavily over alliance relationships throughout 1987; not even the far better managed summit in Washington in December was to remove it.

So, to a lesser extent, did the shadow of SDI. It would be wrong to see all European opinion as hostile to this enterprise. SDI has influential backing, drawing its strength not so much from those who find the argument for the initiative intellectually convincing as from the military-industrial quarters which fear losing the technological benefits that may accrue from its development, and from those supporters of the Atlantic alliance who insist on remaining close to Washington at almost any cost.

The attitude of most European governments was probably shaped by the realization that the president's heart was set on SDI and that there was no point in arguing about it. There was also the realization that the president—or at least his administration—was not immortal; with a new incumbent in the White House, facing ever-greater budgetary pressures and perhaps receiving less optimistic progress reports from his technical advisers, SDI might simply go away.

As a result, European political leaders, although still skeptical of its feasibility and alarmed by its implications for the defense of their continent, have been able to make statements on SDI that, while heavily qualified, are broadly supportive and provide no handle for Soviet propaganda. Perhaps as a result, the

Soviet government has shown decreasing enthusiasm about exploiting allied differences to bring pressure on the Reagan Administration to abandon the program. They, too, may appreciate that in two years' time the situation may be quite substantially different.

The failure of the Reykjavik summit and the easing of alliance disagreements over SDI made it easier to create a common NATO policy on arms control negotiations. This was just as well, since the subsequent rapid introduction of Soviet arms control initiatives and the magnitude of Soviet concessions in this field left the West breathless and might have created—as perhaps they were intended to create—considerable disarray in the alliance. Soviet acceptance of the “zero option” proposal for the simultaneous removal of Soviet SS-20 missiles and the American intermediate-range nuclear forces installed in Europe to match them; their concession that the zero option need not be linked with strategic missile reductions or renunciation of SDI; their accommodating attitude toward their missiles in the Far East; their acceptance of the demand that their shorter-range INFs (SS-12s and SS-23s) should be included in the deal, although they greatly outnumbered the equivalent Western missiles—all this undermined the objections of Western governments to an INF agreement that was anyhow strongly favored by public opinion. European defense experts, especially those in Bonn, did not conceal their fears that the security of Western Europe was being sacrificed to an unholy alliance of their own countries' peace movements and an irresponsible American president concerned only to leave a pleasant image in the history books, and they found support in the valedictory comments of the retiring SACEUR, General Bernard Rogers. But European leaders, who realized that they could not fight both official American policy and their own public opinion polls, accommodated themselves to an agreement with as much grace as they could.

Nor would it be accurate to suggest that even European defense experts were of one mind regarding the undesirability of the INF deal. Typically, those in Paris tended to see it in the gloomiest possible light, as not only bad in itself but a prelude to further disastrous American concessions. Those in London were more relaxed about the INF deal, taking comfort from the “existential deterrence” provided by the fearsome array of nuclear weapons remaining in Western arsenals. The West Germans, for their part, were divided among themselves,

though inclined to give the Americans the benefit of the doubt. The INF controversy indeed provides a typical issue over which Americans of any shade of opinion can find some influential European voices to support them.

Finally, and given greater salience by the conclusion of an INF agreement, there was the question of conventional forces. Increased conventional forces cannot carry out the deterrent function of Pershing 2s and ground-launched cruise missiles by posing a direct threat to Soviet territory, but the imminent disappearance of the missiles certainly focused attention on NATO's conventional shortcomings. Europeans have not been deaf to congressional complaints about more equal "burden sharing." They realize that the combination of the horrendous U.S. budget deficit and a forthcoming presidential election might well result in pressure for a significant drawing down of U.S. forces in Europe.

Further, Reykjavik, as we have seen, made the French take European defense cooperation a great deal more seriously. The fears to which the summit gave rise, combined with apprehension about what was seen as a "soft" West German policy toward the Soviet Union, moved them into closer military contacts with Bonn, and the defunct Western Defense Union was revived as a serious forum for the discussion of European defense cooperation.

As a result there has once again been much well-intentioned discussion of a "European pillar"; so much, indeed, that some Americans have taken alarm. What the West really needs, in their view, is not so much a separate and potentially hostile European pillar as a greater European contribution to an American-dominated alliance. But a greater European contribution can come only from greater integration of the European defense effort—which is bound, if successful, to produce some kind of distinct European defense entity. Indeed the fear of abandonment by the United States, whether at the whim of an irresponsible president or by the votes of an understandably resentful and parsimonious Congress, is a very effective incentive in hastening such integration. Paradoxically, President Reagan may thus have done more for the defense of Western Europe than any of his more alliance-minded predecessors.

But the ability of Europeans to increase their contribution to the common defense is limited, not only by the conflicting service, bureaucratic and industrial interests that make all rationalization (whether of procurement, logistics, equipment

or doctrine) such a desperately slow process, but also by serious economic constraints.

Admittedly, such constraints are usually, at bottom, political. Democratic governments are always unwilling to allocate to defense expenditure resources equally in demand for other goals—investing in wealth creation, maintaining a stable economy, and providing a high standard of living and a welfare system sufficient to ensure social cohesion—unless there is an imminent and universally recognized threat to their security. West European perceptions of Soviet military power and ideological hostility are sufficiently acute to enable their governments to sustain defense expenditure at about the present level, but no amount of propaganda from the Pentagon will persuade European electorates that General Secretary Gorbachev's U.S.S.R. poses such an imminent menace to their independence that they must spend substantially more on their own defense. The American example in any case suggests that greater defense expenditure does not necessarily provide more efficient armed forces, and that large forces of doubtful efficiency are of little value either in enhancing national prestige or implementing the objectives of national policy.

European governments are therefore much more likely to grasp the olive branch of conventional force reductions from among the whole sheaf held out by Mr. Gorbachev, and to thoroughly test his intentions in that direction before they consider further defense expenditure of a kind that would be widely regarded among their electorates as anachronistic and unnecessary. Such increased expenditure, were it to occur, would indeed owe less to fear of the Soviet Union than to the doubts (which the Reagan Administration has unwittingly done so much to kindle) about the ultimate reliability of the United States.

III

These doubts were lavishly nourished by the aftermath of that second major event of the fall of 1986: the revelations of Irangate. Like its Watergate predecessor, the scandal was followed in Europe with a mixture of astonishment, amusement and horror. But its impact abroad was worse even than that of Watergate. Watergate was, after all, a purely domestic issue. Its unsavory revelations about Washington politics were titillating, but most European governments had comparable problems. The mid-1970s was a period when Downing Street was

allegedly being bugged by MI5, Bonn was haunted by spy revelations and both Paris and Rome were dogged by political scandals of all-too-familiar kinds. Above all, Watergate did not affect Washington's conduct of foreign policy, which, in fact, in the hands of Henry Kissinger, commanded more respect abroad in that period than it has ever done since.

But Irangate struck at the very essence of American foreign policy. It was not so much the content of the Iran-contra program that shocked America's friends and allies; rather was the fact that it existed at all, the kind of people responsible for it, and the light it shed on the nature of Mr. Reagan's presidency—these were the aspects that caused such widespread alarm. The revelation that vital issues of foreign policy, some of them of deep concern to America's allies, were being determined by a small group of unqualified and irresponsible officials, without reference not only to Congress, the State Department or the Department of Defense but to the president himself, struck a blow to the credibility of the United States as a reliable partner from which it will take years to recover. Until that credibility has been restored, the United States will be unable to exercise an influence anywhere in the world commensurate with its political aspirations or its military capacity. The president of the United States is sometimes described as the emperor of the West; unfortunately Washington over the past decade has acquired the image, not of a second Rome, but of another Byzantium.

The process of rebuilding credibility is now under way. President Reagan discarded his henchmen with the same casual light-heartedness as he had shown in acquiring them. The massive machinery of congressional and legal investigation was set in motion and is still grinding away. Measures will no doubt be taken to ensure that such an event will not occur again, or at least not in the same way. Everyone has had "no end of a lesson." But two nagging doubts remain.

The first is about the whole system that made Irangate possible: a system that can bring to power a president quite ignorant of the world outside the United States and enable him to delegate immense authority to others yet more ignorant, but which makes him solely responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs. That such power must rest with the executive, and that the president's initiative should not be hampered by constant interventions by or reference to the legislature, is incontestable. Europeans raised no objections to this power

when it was wielded by Roosevelt or Truman. But to control it in such a fashion as to ensure that it is only benignly and responsibly used—and not all Americans regarded either Roosevelt or Truman as benign and responsible—would appear constitutionally impossible (and the American Constitution has recently been celebrated as if it were the greatest achievement of the human race). There will always remain the possibility that, whatever the avowed policy of the U.S. government may be, and however loyally it is being implemented by responsible officials, there will still be a small but powerful cell, working away in the basement of the White House or the offices of the Executive Office Building, with substantial resources at its disposal, doing something entirely different.

The second doubt arises from the fear that, although most Americans were clearly shocked by the unconstitutionality of the methods employed in Irangate, a considerable minority may have applauded the objectives of the conspirators, and that not a few believe that the end justified the means. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North is unlikely to have been the only person to have regarded a scheme that would have simultaneously released American hostages, encouraged the opponents of the ayatollah in Iran and financed the “freedom fighters” in Nicaragua as being “a neat idea.” His very self-confidence must have derived from a conviction that if the president and the American people knew what he was doing they would (apart from the wimps in Congress) have overwhelmingly approved.

Seen from abroad, the appearance of Ollie North before the television cameras was particularly disquieting. History has made Europeans very familiar with handsome, bemedaled young officers who believe they have a higher conception of legality and a greater insight into the national interest than the elected representatives of the people. At best such men split the nation, as they did in France and Spain; at worst, as in Germany, they destroy it. The wave of support for North, and the uneasy shuffling of congressmen publicly trying to distance themselves from his opponents, made many Europeans wonder what kind of America they were really dealing with. In fact, North, like Douglas MacArthur before him, is no more significant politically than was the ineffable General Boulanger in France. But populist militarism is an ugly and dangerous phenomenon wherever it occurs, and America’s allies have every

cause to be grateful that the American Constitution, in spite of its drawbacks, is set in concrete.

Whatever policy the Iringate conspirators may have been implementing, the clandestine nature of their activities would in itself have been a matter of concern to America's allies. But the policy itself was not one likely to command general approval in its approach to the questions of terrorism, or of the Middle East, or of Central America: the three issues that it so "neatly" packaged together.

On the matter of terrorism, or more specifically the ransoming of hostages, the situation was clear. An international agreement had been achieved, with great difficulty, and largely on the insistence of the United States itself, that no ransom money, whatever the circumstances, should be paid to terrorist groups for the release of hostages. It was now revealed that senior American officials were doing precisely that. Whether they were doing so on direct presidential orders is immaterial; they were clearly acting on their perception of presidential wishes, which they regarded as tantamount to orders. European governments were understandably and justifiably outraged. Their confidence in the United States as a reliable partner in dealing with Middle Eastern affairs, which had barely recovered from the precipitate American withdrawal from Lebanon in 1983, was weakened yet further. As a result, American attempts to coordinate common action in the Persian Gulf in 1987 met with little success.

American "leadership" in the Middle East had never commanded much respect among Europeans. This, it must be admitted, was partly due to the not always well-founded belief, on the part of the French and the British in particular, that their long-standing historical involvement in the region gave them an understanding of its problems that it would take the Americans generations to acquire. Nevertheless the deep American attachment to Israel on the one hand and the visceral detestation of Iran on the other has certainly made it extraordinarily difficult for any American administration to take a farsighted view of Western interests in this region and pursue them with any kind of consistency.

It was generally believed in Europe that the positive, if belated, American response to Kuwait's request that Kuwaiti vessels be allowed to sail under the protection of the American flag was due less to any attachment to the principle of freedom of navigation in international waters, or even to an effort to

maintain the free flow of oil to the Western world, than to a desire to exclude Soviet participation from the region and to retaliate for all the humiliations the United States had suffered at Iranian hands over nearly a decade.

European governments on the whole approved of the first two of these motives but were deeply suspicious of the third. Their suspicions were deepened when the Reagan Administration reacted to the Iraqi attack on the U.S.S. *Stark* by rapidly accepting Iraqi apologies and redoubling their denunciations of the Iranian ayatollah. The mood of anger and resentment with which Americans approached the Gulf conflict made it difficult for their government to act the role of dispassionate international policeman to which it laid claim and which the situation obviously required. It was thus not surprising that European governments preferred to act unilaterally to protect their interests in the region and to channel their communal diplomacy through the United Nations. To put it quite bluntly, they did not know what kind of mess the Americans would land them in next.

European opinion was little more supportive of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. There were certainly those who shared the view of the Administration, that this was part of a global struggle against communism that should be given wholehearted support. Others, possibly more numerous and certainly more vociferous, denounced it as typical *yanqui* imperialism. But the left did not make of it a major issue as they had, for example, Chile in the 1970s. Perhaps it was because the issues were too complicated (not that that normally restrains left-wing activists from strident and simplistic propaganda). Perhaps it was because Soviet-backed "peace" organizations had received orders to go easy on the issue. Perhaps it was sheer battle fatigue. But there was a general sense that this was something which the United States must be left to sort out, that Central America lay within a legitimate American sphere of influence in which Europeans had no *locus standi*.

There was however a general sense that the United States was not sorting it out very well. The bad impression created in the international community by the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1984 and the refusal of the United States to accept the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice had never been quite eradicated. It was generally felt in Europe that the United States, in supporting the contras, had a bad case both legally and morally, and President Reagan's improbable de-

scription of them as freedom fighters comparable to the founders of the American republic did not inspire conviction. To those with long memories or some knowledge of early twentieth-century history, American treatment of Nicaragua resembled Austria-Hungary's clumsy bullying of Serbia before 1914—an unhappy analogy.

The policy adopted by the Reagan Administration toward Nicaragua was further seen by many as typical of its approach to the Third World as a whole, and over this notion the disquiet of European elite opinion was very deep indeed. Henry Kissinger has said many wise things, but his suggestion that, whereas the United States is a global power, the states of Europe are only regional powers was certainly not one of them. If true at all, it is so only in the narrowest military sense of capacity for force projection.

In fact European interest in Third World countries, commercial, historical and cultural, has always gone far deeper than that of the United States. British links with the Indian subcontinent, southeast Asia and southern Africa, French links with north and central Africa, traditional Italian involvement throughout the Levant, Spanish cultural connections with Latin America: all reinforced a *tiers-mondisme* strongly influential among European intellectuals, churches and the young, not least in those north European states whose colonial involvement in the area had been minimal. European concern for the welfare of Third World states might be sentimental and even counterproductive, but it is deeply felt and, in consequence, is a political factor that European leaders cannot ignore.

The Reagan Administration's dismissal of the Third World as an irrelevance except as a battleground against the forces of communism, its lack of sympathy for nationalist movements if they betray any tilt toward the Soviet Union, its readiness to exploit local rivalries in pursuit of its global confrontation with Soviet power, above all its lack of empathy with the complex cultures of these regions is, for European observers, a matter of profound concern. Any visitor to Africa or south Asia today must be struck by the contrast between the generosity with which the United States has contributed to the welfare of the new nations in these regions and the visceral anti-Americanism that now seems an intrinsic part of their cultural outlook. It is one of the most saddening phenomena of the contemporary world scene.

This anti-Americanism surfaces most dramatically at the

United Nations and quite properly infuriates all Americans who take an interest in its proceedings. The denunciations of American policy that have become part of the ritual incantations of the General Assembly have effectively destroyed U.S. patience with that acrimonious body. Jeane Kirkpatrick, whatever her shortcomings as a professional diplomat, certainly did a good job in honestly representing the attitude of her government and most of the American public toward the United Nations. There is no reason to expect any state to show courtesy and consideration toward a body—particularly one consisting largely of its pensioners—from which it receives only continual abuse. But that abuse is largely designed for home consumption, and the Third World delegates who engage in it are as faithful in conveying the attitudes of their governments as was Ambassador Kirkpatrick herself.

One does not have to be a European to find this confrontation distressing. Critics of the United Nations maintain that the institution has failed to work, and if one thinks of it as a Western-style parliament aspiring to sovereign powers, that is self-evidently true. But as a *parlement* in the original sense, a forum in which the representatives of all groups can come to air their grievances, it works very well, and those grievances must be listened to, especially by any power that aspires to world leadership. Leaders must embody and articulate the profound aspirations of their followers if they wish to command their implicit trust. That quite clearly is not a role that the United States is today qualified to play within the international community, though fortunately the Soviet Union shows no signs of being able to do so either.

The realization of this has produced a significant shift within the American intellectual community. The Wilsonian assumption that the United States, representing the unspoken longings of all mankind and constituting a model to which all nations aspired, had the duty to assist others to achieve that goal by all means in its power quite clearly no longer fits the facts of the case. All too evidently the United States and its like-minded allies were seen as a beleaguered minority in a world whose cultural values were alien, usually hostile, and showed no signs whatever of changing.

In consequence the view has become increasingly prevalent among “the new right” that the United States should abandon its old liberal sentimentality and instead quite frankly pursue its national interests, use its economic muscle to reward its

friends and punish its enemies, and take little account of “democratic values” on which most Third World states had anyhow turned their backs. The argument is sometimes heard that the United States should “act like a superpower.” When critically examined, this usually meant, not that it should behave with the discretion and sense of collegial responsibility that had, in principle at least, characterized the behavior of Great Powers in the heyday of the Concert of Europe, but rather that it should imitate the Soviet Union in rejecting all the constraints on international behavior that had been so painfully built up within the international community over the last three hundred years.

After the soggy hypocrisy that had attended so much liberal internationalism, this Nietzschean approach had an undeniable appeal to many Americans. But for America’s allies it raised certain problems.

In the first place, those allies found themselves relegated virtually to satellite status, their value judged according to their “loyalty,” and their loyalty assessed by their readiness to accede unquestioningly to American demands. Such an attitude did serious harm to the alliance. The hectoring attitude adopted by certain congressmen and members of the Administration—Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle was a particularly bad offender in this respect—only provoked European resentment and deeply embarrassed all friends of the United States across the Atlantic. It nourished that nationalist resistance to the alliance that has always been dominant in France, is beginning to be a serious problem in West Germany, is palpable even in Prime Minister Thatcher’s Britain, and is making relations immensely difficult with the newest alliance partner, Spain. The web of mutual understanding and cooperation woven and maintained over the past forty years by NATO officials, diplomats, political and military leaders is too dense to be easily disrupted by a few ill-tempered *bêtises*; but subjected to a continuous barrage of such treatment from the hard-nosed realists of the new right, the alliance could rapidly become unworkable.

In the second place, if the United States simply “acts like a superpower,” it will be perceived simply as a superpower—that is, another rogue elephant on the political scene from whose ravages other members of the international community will seek protection, either by some kind of communal non-alignment, or by a policy of maneuver between the two blocs.

That indeed is the policy increasingly advocated by opposition groups within Europe. "Europe," both East and West, they argue, should detach itself from the dominance of its alien masters and constitute itself a stable, nonaligned "zone of peace" between the two nuclear giants. If Western Europe were to detach itself from the United States, so the thesis goes, the Soviet Union would no longer need to maintain its protective *glacis* in Eastern Europe, and the potentially lethal confrontation across the Iron Curtain would come to an end. It is an argument that has as yet made little headway outside the ranks of left-wing activists, but its plausibility is increased by the accommodating and reasonable attitude that Gorbachev's Russia is now beginning to adopt toward European affairs. The simultaneous emergence of a friendly and conciliatory Soviet Union and a cantankerous, bullying United States could make the task of European governments in maintaining domestic consensus—especially in West Germany—very difficult indeed. NATO might then face a really serious danger of being dismantled by an unholy alliance of left and right.

IV

This brings us, finally, to the problem of the American federal budget deficit. Little will be said about it here, since it will no doubt be treated in far more expert fashion on other pages of this journal. But it has always been recognized that the true security of Western Europe rests not on its military defenses but on its economic and social stability. This was the point stressed by Helmut Schmidt in his famous Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture of 1977, one entirely missed by defense specialists who simply focused on—and arguably misinterpreted—the few words Schmidt devoted to the need for balance in intermediate-range nuclear forces. It was the achievement of that stability in the 1950s that banished the postwar fears of economic and social collapse with the resultant triumph of communism, a prospect that even then bulked larger than any purely military threat. It is the success in maintaining that economic and social stability that still keeps moderate right- and left-wing governments in power in Western Europe and has resulted in the disintegration of traditional socialism, to say nothing of the virtual disappearance of Marxism-Leninism. The collapse of that economic stability might not create the chaotic conditions so widely feared in the 1940s, which the Moscow-oriented communists of Western Europe

were then poised to exploit, but it would certainly bring back into power all those political elements most hostile to the alliance. Western democracies vote governments out of power rather than vote their opponents in, and a vote of no confidence in the management of the economy is willy-nilly a vote of no confidence in defense and foreign policy as well. A serious economic recession would test the alliance almost, if not entirely, to the point of destroying it.

That is why America's friends in Europe have watched the mounting U.S. deficit with such anxiety; anxiety not assuaged by the fact that much of that deficit is accounted for by the scale of defense expenditure. There is little comfort in a situation where the economy is in ruins but defenses remain intact, for under such circumstances defenses do not remain intact for very long. A serious recession would do more to "decouple" Western Europe from the United States and move it in the direction of neutralism and nonalignment than the failure of the American government to match any particular weapons system that the Soviet Union may care to deploy against America's allies.

The absence of prudent management that resulted in the United States becoming a debtor nation on a Third World scale, and the inability of the American leadership to tackle the problem when the crisis made further prevarication impossible, did more to destroy European confidence in American leadership even than the Reykjavik summit or the Iran-contra affair. It was sadly typical of Washington's priorities that at the beginning of November, when stock exchange prices had been in free-fall for two weeks and world markets were beginning to panic, President Reagan went on the air, not to tell the Europeans what they were anxious to hear—that he had the economic problem in hand and that drastic action would soon be taken—but to assure them that the withdrawal of cruise missiles and Pershing 2s did not weaken American commitment to European defense. Arguably, this was a matter of concern to that small body of defense specialists who understood the issues, but quite irrelevant to the immediate worries of those far wider circles that make up European public opinion.

Whoever is elected president of the United States in the fall of 1988 will have a lot of hard thinking to do. The first requirement will be to restore order to the management of the economy, which will demand some harsh decisions about defense priorities. These must be taken in the light of a far-

reaching reassessment of relations with the Soviet Union and, in consequence, with Western Europe; an update of NSC-68, a document written at a time of panic nearly forty years ago, will not be good enough. Whatever conclusions such a reassessment may reach, any policy based on them will need to take as much account of economic imperatives as of defense needs. The failure of the Reagan Administration to face this issue, far more than any White House horrors, may ultimately determine its place in the history books. The outcome of such a reassessment might produce some unpleasant surprises for America's European allies. But if it results in firm, rational and realistic policies, carefully thought through and consistently pursued, the United States will be able to count on sufficient support on this side of the Atlantic to preserve the stability on which both our security and our prosperity have depended for the past forty years. It is a great challenge: it remains to be seen whether there is in the United States today any leader great enough to meet it.