

Recollections of Reykjavik, 1986: Ken Adelman

When returning to Reykjavik for the 30th anniversary seminar sponsored by the International Peace Institute, I was reminded how the 1986 Reagan-Gorbachev summit seemed like something out of a mystery thriller: Two vivid characters meet over a weekend, on a desolate and windswept island, in a reputedly haunted house with rain lashing against its windowpanes, where they experience the most amazing things.

That summit was like nothing before or after, with its cliffhanging plot, powerful personalities, and competing interpretations over the past quarter century. Twenty years ago, Mikhail Gorbachev described the drama: “Truly Shakespearean passions ran under the thin veneer of polite and diplomatically restrained negotiations behind the windows of a cozy little house standing on the coast of a dark and somberly impetuous ocean. The accompaniment of grim nature is still lingering in my memory.”

For those of us in the American delegation, Reykjavik was supposed to be an uneventful weekend, with the substantive action happening the following year at “the real summit” to be held in Washington, DC. Instead, in Iceland we rode an emotional rollercoaster, full of twists and turns, ups and downs, all weekend long. *Ace Washington Post* diplomatic correspondent-turned-Cold War historian Don Oberdorfer called it, “one of the most controversial—and most bizarre—negotiations by powerful heads of state in modern times.” To Gorbachev, it was exhausting with its “wearying and grueling arguments.”

Unlike other summits, Reykjavik’s plot unfolded off-script. The session itself came as a surprise and ended up delivering surprise after surprise. We didn’t know what to expect next or how it all would end, not just over that weekend but over the months and years that followed.

Besides Reykjavik’s gripping plot were its oversized personalities. Reagan and Gorbachev stand as among the most intriguing and important characters of the 20th century. For some ten and a half hours at Reykjavik, they dealt directly with one another—void of staff advice, detailed talking points, or guiding memos—acting more like themselves than at any time in office.

Thanks to the now-declassified American and Soviet notes of their private discussions, we can peep through the keyhole of their small meeting room to see them and hear their back-and-forth repartee, and come to understand their core beliefs, patterns of thought, and fundamental characters in a way that history rarely offers.

Reykjavik changed each man, changed their relationship, and thus that of the superpowers. The day after returning from Iceland, Gorbachev said on nationwide Soviet television that,

after Reykjavik, "no one can continue to act as he acted before." Neither man did, and neither country did.

Hosting us most graciously was the Hofdi House, the cozy and stunning structure said to be haunted. It provided a weird yet hospitable site for the world's two most powerful men to meet.

As at our 30th anniversary conference, the Reykjavik summit has been hotly debated and differently interpreted over these three decades. Immediately afterward, it was universally deemed an abject failure since the two leaders left without a joint statement, clinking of champagne glasses, or promises of future meetings. They left each other glowering and, in Reagan's case, steaming mad.

The session was widely condemned, even by those as astute in foreign policy as Richard Nixon, who declared, "No summit since Yalta has threatened Western interests so much as the two days at Reykjavik."

However, as I proposed during our anniversary conference, I believe Reykjavik marked a historical turning point, by leading to:

1. A steady stream of unprecedented arms control agreements, which have reduced the US-Soviet/Russian nuclear arsenals by an astonishing 80% or so;
2. A flowering of the anti-nuclear movement worldwide, after Gorbachev and especially the conservative standard-bearer Reagan both declared, right there in the Hofdi House, their desire to eliminate all nuclear weapons in their arsenals (constituting some 90% of all such weapons in existence); and
3. The soon-to-occur end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

At the opening reception for the anniversary conference, I was honored to speak about what happened there 30 years ago. Following me was George Shultz, Reagan's Secretary of State who participated fully in the summit, who likes to tell a story about the third speaker that night, Gorbachev.

"We were sitting around with the interpreter," Shultz relates, "and I said, 'When you entered office and when I entered office, the Cold War was about as cold as it could get, and by the time we left it was all over. What do you think was the turning point?'"

Gorbachev evidently "didn't hesitate a second. He said, 'Reykjavik. Reykjavik changed everything.'" In that, I believe Gorbachev is right.

Ken Adelman attended the 1986 Reykjavik Summit as Director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.