

Revisiting Reykjavik Revisited

The 25th Anniversary of a Remarkable Meeting

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This year, 2011, marks the 25th anniversary of the astonishing meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986 between Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan. That meeting very nearly led to an agreement to begin the process of eliminating nuclear weapons from the world. Ultimately the two leaders were unable to agree, but both understood their negotiations to have been uniquely fruitful, as indeed they were. “Seen by many as a failure,” Gorbachev wrote later, the Reykjavik Summit “actually gave an impetus to reduction by reaffirming the vision of a world without nuclear weapons and by paving the way toward concrete agreements on intermediate-range nuclear forces and strategic nuclear weapons.” The two-day meeting signalled as well the beginning of the end of the Cold War.

Two decades later in 2006, with little movement toward nuclear elimination in the intervening years, a core group of American statesmen determined to renew and advance the Reykjavik vision. Former Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz, U.S. Ambassador

and arms negotiator Max Kampelman and Stanford University physicist and longstanding government adviser Sidney Drell, discovered a common and urgent concern with renewed nuclear peril. In particular, terrorist attacks by a sub-national group, al Qaeda, had raised the spectre of nuclear terrorism undeterred by the threat of nuclear retaliation. There was uncertainty as well about how long the grand bargain of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty would hold when the nuclear powers continued to shirk their commitment to the non-nuclear powers to move expeditiously toward nuclear disarmament. Shultz, Drell and Kampelman invited other former U.S. government officials to participate in their new initiative, and many responded.

CALLING FOR A NUCLEAR-WEAPON-FREE WORLD

Out of that effort came a conference, held at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California, on the 20th anniversary of the Reykjavik Summit. The findings of that conference were summarized in an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on 4 January 2007, signed

by former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn.

“Nuclear weapons today present tremendous dangers, but also an historic opportunity,” the editorial began. “U.S. leadership will be required to take the world to the next stage—to a solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally as a vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands, and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world.”

In a list of steps that would lay the groundwork for a world free of the nuclear threat, the statesmen also highlighted the importance of U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) by: “Initiating a bipartisan process with the Senate, including understandings to increase confidence and provide for periodic review, to achieve ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, taking advantage of recent technical advances, and working to secure ratification by other key states.”

Other editorials followed, along with concerted efforts by the four signatories to carry the message of urgency to presidents and prime ministers throughout the world. In a joint op-ed published in *The Wall Street Journal* on 15 January 2008, the statesmen renewed their call for a nuclear-weapon-free world by supporting, among other measures, the adoption of a process for bringing the CTBT into effect "... which would strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and aid international monitoring of nuclear activities." Their friends dubbed them "the Four Horsemen," though they rode to oppose the apocalypse, not to deliver it. Their work continues today, with committed support from many national leaders including American President Barack Obama.

MOVING BEYOND THE COLD WAR

As an historian affiliated with Stanford University who has written at length about the development and international politics of nuclear weapons, I had the privilege of attending both the October 2006 conference and a second conference held at Stanford University the following year. It was encouraging to watch and hear a small crowd of statesmen, scientists and specialists debate the deep problem of the continued existence of nuclear weapons in the world—men and women such as former chairman of

the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe, former U.S. Ambassador and arms negotiator Thomas Graham, Jr., historian Don Oberdorfer, physicist Roald Sagdeev, U.S. National Security Council non-proliferation expert Rose Gottemoeller and many others.

I was surprised to hear Henry Kissinger acknowledge, at the end of the second conference, in a tone that seemed more than pro forma, that he had learned a great deal across its two days: so had I. I was not surprised to see that former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle, a prominent neoconservative who had consistently worked to oppose nuclear disarmament, attended the first conference but not the second.

Many of the participants in the two conferences had opposed moving toward eliminating nuclear weapons during their active careers in government. Partly that was because their government service fell within the Cold War years, when both the United States and the Soviet Union believed that their vast nuclear arsenals protected them from nuclear attack. Partly the participants had served at the convenience of presidents who had been committed to maintaining large nuclear arsenals and had properly represented their superiors' views. Partly as well they had understood the darker truth that nuclear weapons had served to embody national prestige and to communicate unmistakable national strength.

BUILDING A SAFER WORLD FOR OUR CHILDREN

I wondered if there were other reasons besides the threat of undeterrable nuclear terrorism that had changed their minds. As the opportunity arose during and after the conferences, I asked some of them. The most common reason, I learned, was that the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union had removed the threat of conflict with what had been a hostile nuclear power. (Many Americans today believe that the United States has already eliminated its nuclear arsenal. That belief is perhaps ill-informed, but it accurately reflects an intuitive sense that the U.S. nuclear arsenal's primary purpose was to deter the U.S.S.R. from nuclear use, and vice versa. Russia clearly does not stand in the same relationship to the United States as the former Soviet Union did.)

Some of those I spoke with mentioned the great expense of maintaining a nuclear arsenal, although the American military has argued that meeting the same objectives with conventional forces will cost more in annual appropriations than the nuclear arsenal does. The argument is questionable, since it's difficult to imagine any military objective for which the United States—or any other major nuclear power—would violate the taboo that has held fast against nuclear use since 1945.

The former French
Consulate, the Höfði
House, site of the
Reykjavik Summit.





President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev in front of the Höfði House, Reykjavik, Iceland, October 1986

Soviet Union on nuclear and space arms in Geneva from 1985 to 1989, coincident with the Reykjavik Summit. Kampelman told me he helped initiate the Reykjavik Revisited project in 2006 because he was worried about the security of the world that his children and grandchildren would inherit. He told me that with tears in his eyes. I took him at his word.

THE 'OUGHT' OF STABILITY AND PEACE

It's one thing to represent a government. It's another to contemplate personally your responsibility for the world you have helped make. Kampelman understood that nuclear disarmament was a difficult challenge, perhaps the most difficult challenge the international community has ever faced. As he said at the opening of the conference at Stanford in 2007, he found inspiration to pursue meeting that challenge in a surprising place. He had taught political science before he entered government. A basic text he had used in his teaching was *An American Dilemma*, the Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal's monumental 1944 report on the state of race relations in the United States. In a word, they were ugly, with apartheid throughout the American South and a continuing plague of lynchings.

Echoing Myrdal, Kampelman spoke of "the power of the 'ought,'" meaning

the power of moral values embodied in the goals nations and communities of nations set for themselves. "Indeed," he said, "we in the U.S. understood the power of the 'ought' at a time when our very existence as a nation was at stake. Our founders established the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution as clear goals for our nation—goals we have continually been working to achieve. And they established these 'oughts' of independence, freedom, and liberty in an atmosphere of slavery, second-class citizenship for women, and property qualifications for voting. . . . The power of the 'ought' is great, warrants respect, and should not be minimized. Today, a central theme of American foreign policy must be to move the 'is' of our present global nuclear peril to a more hopeful 'ought' of stability and peace. We must not minimize the pursuit of the 'ought.' Our role must be to establish a civilized 'ought' for the human race. The abolition of weapons of mass destruction now must be central to that objective."

Idealism is often dismissed as impractical, even weak, as a motive force in international affairs. I found it hopeful that men and women with long experience of government service gave concrete expression to the idealism of "ought." They saw, and see, the elimination of nuclear weapons as a goal worth working toward, to unshackle our descendants from the dangerous follies of the past. Bringing the CTBT into force would be a powerful advance toward that end.

Former U.S. Ambassador and arms negotiator Max Kampelman best articulated the reason I heard most frequently. Born in 1920, Kampelman was 86 at the time of the Reykjavik 20th anniversary. He had been a pacifist during World War II, one of those who volunteered to be experimentally starved at the University of Minnesota in 1945 to assist in research on hunger relief in immediate postwar Europe and to demonstrate his patriotism. In the different context of the Cold War, he had abandoned pacifism to serve as ambassador and head of the United States delegation to the negotiations with the



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

RICHARD RHODES

was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, the first of his four volumes of nuclear history. He is the author or editor of 28 works of fiction, history and letters, an associate of the Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation and, most recently, the author of a play, *Reykjavik*, that recreates the debate between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in Iceland in October 1986.