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MEETING WITH PRESIDENT REAGAN: GORBACHEV

I spent about five hours with Gorbachev last Sunday. He gives the impression of confidence and authority. He is relatively open in manner and intelligent. He is affable and has some charm and humour. He listens carefully to what the other person says. He talks readily and, in contrast to the stultified manner of Soviet leaders, does not just stick to prepared statements. He picks up points made in discussion and responds to them. He was clearly not used to the sort of rigorous questioning which he got from me on things like human rights in the Soviet Union and Soviet payments to our mine-workers' union. But he kept cool and avoided the usual Soviet reaction of reciting lengthy positions of principle. He went to great pains to invoke Chernenko's name frequently in discussion as a source of authority for his remarks. I certainly found him a man one could do business with. I actually rather liked him - there is no doubt that he is completely loyal to the Soviet system but he is prepared to listen and have a genuine dialogue and make up his own mind.

I got the impression that in some ways he was using me as a stalking horse for you. He questioned me very closely on American motives and intentions for the Geneva talks and was clearly interested to obtain a first hand and informed impression of you and your main colleagues and of your policies. At the same time, he was on the look-out for possible divergences of view between us which might be exploited to Soviet advantage. I made it absolutely clear to him that we are loyal members of the Alliance and right behind you.

On the substance of my talks with him - and those which Geoffrey Howe had the following day - the most striking point was the amount of time devoted to the threat of an arms race in outer space. His line was that if you go ahead with the SDI, the Russians would either have to develop their own or, more probably, develop nuclear weapons that would get past your SDI defences. He made much of the role of the ABM treaty as the key-stone to arms control negotiations and said that if events proceeded to the point where the ABM treaty was irrevocably undermined, the prospect of any further agreements thereafter would be minimal.

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He was not very precise on the scope of the negotiations which he expected to emerge from the Geneva meeting, but seemed to expect them to cover space, strategic nuclear weapons and INF. He made much of the difficulties which the Soviet Union had faced in deciding to go to Geneva.

On the other hand, he showed a keen awareness of the penalties of spending yet more resources on defence and agreed with the concept of achieving balanced security at lower levels of weapons. He claimed that the Russians would be ready to come to Geneva with serious new proposals and referred to Chernenko's remark that the Soviet Union would be ready to agree to the most radical measures. He appeared at one point to be saying that the SDI was simply an attempt by the United States to establish a bargaining position and that if that was the case, the Soviets could play the game and bargain as well as anyone. But the over-riding impression left was that the Russians are genuinely fearful of the immense cost of having to keep up with a further American technological advance and are therefore prepared to negotiate seriously on nuclear weapons if they believe that you are politically committed to reductions.

I left him in no doubt that we did not see SDI in the same light as he does: still less did we see it as linked in any way to a US first strike strategy. I stressed your profound sincerity in the search for balanced arms control and a reduction in nuclear weapons. I warned him of trying to drive wedges between the Allies: we were at one on this issue.

These were the main points which arose in his talk with me. He also saw Geoffrey Howe the next day and I understand that Geoffrey will be sending George Shultz a message giving his impressions and details of other steps which they discussed in rather more formal surroundings.