



## **Ronald Reagan, restoring the ‘Margin of Safety’, and the U.S. Navy**

*By: John Lehman*

### **Prelude to the speech**

Before becoming our 40th president, Ronald Reagan had thought long and hard on the deplorable state of the nation’s defenses, including the Navy, and what should be done to mend them. As a movie actor in the 1950s, he had donned a Navy uniform to star with his wife, Nancy Davis, in the Hollywood submarine drama “Hellcats of the Navy.” He honed his thinking about national defense as a candidate for the Republican nomination for president in 1976, consulting with many of the leading conservative national security thinkers of the day, especially Richard V. Allen. In 1977 – having narrowly lost the nomination and with liberal detentist Democrat Jimmy Carter now in the White House, he confided to Allen: “My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic. It is this: We win and they lose. What do you think of that?”

In 1979 Ronald Reagan joined the executive board of the bi-partisan Committee on the Present Danger, where he absorbed the thinking of navalists like Allen, Paul Nitze, Robert Strausz-Hupe, former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Bud Zumwalt, and myself. And in November 1979 he again declared himself a candidate for the Republican nomination for President. Throughout the following year, until Election Day, Reagan and his Republican Party presented his thinking in several speeches and a party platform that laid out his critique of the Carter Administration as well as his plans to fix things.

Meanwhile, the Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jimmy Holloway was testifying before Congress that the US Navy had only a “slim margin of superiority” over the Soviets, but that the balance “will tip” in 5-10 more years if the US Navy didn’t build more ships. Worse, powerful elements within the Defense Department opposed even using the term “maritime superiority” as an American defense goal. Admiral Holloway’s successor, Admiral Tom Hayward, warned that the US Navy had a “margin of superiority” over the Soviets, but that long-term trends did not favor the Navy and “we will lose our margin of superiority” which could “evaporate by the mid-1980s.” By 1980, Admiral Hayward was testifying that “the Navy must continue to have global reach” and “the capability to take the offensive to the Soviets.” He cited the “narrowness of our

margin of superiority today” and noted that -- if building plans on paper were not realized -- “we will be in serious trouble.”

In response, Republican presidential candidate Reagan, competing for his party’s nomination, unequivocally called for US maritime superiority in his March 17, 1980 speech before the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. “We have to maintain a superior Navy,” Reagan declared. “We are a nation with vital interests and commitments overseas, and our Navy must stay ahead of the Soviet build-up. This means commissioning the ships and developing technology which will enable the United States to command the oceans for decades to come.”

At its national convention in Detroit four months later, I was appointed to draft the national security section of the platform. With Reagan as their agreed nominee, the Republican Party excoriated President Carter in its Party Platform for having “cut President Ford’s proposed shipbuilding plan in half.” The platform noted that “He did this while the Soviet Union pursued an aggressive shipbuilding program capable of giving them worldwide naval supremacy in the 1980s unless current trends are reversed immediately.” But the platform also promised that “We will build toward a sustained defense expenditure sufficient to close the gap with the Soviets, and ultimately reach the position of military superiority that the American people demand; and “we will restore our fleet to 600 ships at a rate equal to or exceeding that planned by President Ford.”

### **The “Restoring the Margin of Safety” Speech**

The next month, Republican nominee Ronald Reagan appeared before the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago. This was not a speech focused specifically on the parlous state of the US Navy and the urgent need to rebuild it. It didn’t need to be. Governor Reagan’s call for “maritime superiority” and a “600-ship navy” had already been clearly enunciated in his earlier March speech in Chicago, in the Republican platform in July, and other fora. Party operatives – including Senator John Tower, Bud McFarlane, myself, and others -- were already laying out plans to achieve these goals.

In the “Margin of Safety” speech, Reagan spoke instead in more general – indeed even lofty -- terms: Of our “national defense,” our “margin of safety,” and our need for “strength” and “military superiority.”

Reagan decried a current national defense “which is in shambles.” He commended the Veterans of Foreign Wars for having “consistently urged maintenance of a defense capability that provides a margin of safety for America. Today, that margin is disappearing.” He noted that “I’ve called for whatever it takes to be strong enough that no other nation will dare violate the peace. This is what we mean by superiority. Nothing more, nothing less.” And he asserted that “we’re already in an arms race, but only the Soviets are racing. They are outspending us in the military field by 50 percent and more than double, sometimes triple, on their strategic forces.” He then harkened back to the situation almost two decades previous, “when John F. Kennedy demanded the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba and the tension mounted in 1962, it was Nikita Khrushchev who backed down, and there was no war. It was because our strategic superiority over the Soviets was so decisive, by about a margin of 8 to 1.” “At that time, we led the Soviet

Union in about 40 strategic military categories. Today they lead us in all but 6 or 8 and may well surpass us in those if present trends continue.” “Our credibility in the world slumps further.”

Nominee Reagan continued to invoke our history, reminding his listeners that “World War II came about without provocation. It came because nations were weak, not strong, in the face of aggression.” And then he declared, in ringing tones, “Those same lessons of the past surely apply today. Firmness based on a strong defense capability is not provocative. But weakness can be provocative simply because it is tempting to a nation whose imperialist ambitions are virtually unlimited.”

He went on to note that “We find ourselves increasingly in a position of dangerous isolation. Our allies are losing confidence in us, and our adversaries no longer respect us.”

But, he explained, “Our program to restore the margin of safety must be prudent and measured . . . we must take a stand against terrorism in the world and combat it with firmness., for it is a most cowardly and savage violation of peace. We must regain that margin of safety I spoke of both in conventional arms and the deployment of troops. And we must allow no weakness in our strategic deterrent.”

Regarding arms control negotiations with the Soviets, Reagan was emphatic that “I think continued negotiation with the Soviet Union is essential . . . It is important, also, that the Soviets know we are going about the business of restoring our margin of safety pending an agreement by both sides to limit various kinds of weapons.”

Reagan concluded his speech by reminding his audience that “The Soviets want peace and victory. We must understand this and what it means to us. They seek a superiority in military strength that, in the event of a confrontation, would leave us with an unacceptable choice between submission or conflict. . . Our best hope of persuading them to live in peace is to convince them they cannot win at war.”

### **President Reagan and his Secretary of the Navy**

November 4, 1980 was Election Day. Ronald Reagan won the presidency by a landslide, as the American people repudiated Jimmy Carter and his policies, especially his lack of assertiveness in the face of Soviet aggressions and its military buildup, including at sea. Key to reversing the dangerous decline in U.S. naval power, and widen significantly our margin of safety, was whomever the President-elect would choose as his Secretary of the Navy. My own view was that that person should be me, and I lobbied hard for the job during the transition period.

My supporters including Dick Allen, George Bush, Scoop Jackson and John Tower, believed I was best qualified: My academic degrees all involved national security policy and history, I had been flying off carriers in Navy A-6 Intruder strike jets for years, as a naval reserve bombardier/navigator, including missions over Vietnam. I understood US Navy operations, tactics, and culture. And I shared Ronald Reagan’s views and goals as he had enunciated them in his two speeches in Chicago and the Republican Party Platform.

As a senior civilian member of the Ford administration, I had participated heavily for two years in the crafting of a National Security Decision Memorandum on the Navy shipbuilding program, which provided the rationale for a 600-ship navy. It was the thinking and reading that I did during this study effort that was the real basis for the program I would put together for my tour as Secretary of the Navy. While on the National Security Council staff I had specialized in liaison with the Congress and had become an expert in executive-legislative branch government relationships. Indeed, that had been the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation. Later, as a consultant to Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jimmy Holloway, I had kept abreast of Carter Administration fecklessness regarding contemporary Navy policy, strategy and budgetary issues, and had thought deeply about how to turn our naval policies around.

As things turned out, President Reagan picked me as his Navy Secretary and I was sworn in on February 5, 1981, just a couple of weeks after the Inauguration.

### **Kickoff**

As the President had anticipated, and with his support and blessing, I hit the ground running. From the get-go I worked to achieve his stated goals of maritime superiority and a 600-ship naval battle force. This would require re-shaping the nation's Maritime Strategy, lowering the costs to the taxpayer of buying naval systems, re-achieving a margin of safety, and instilling high morale into the men and women who wore the uniform of the sea services.<sup>1</sup> At my confirmation hearing in February before the Senate Armed Services Committee, I stated that "I think the major need of the Navy today is the establishment by the President and the Congress of a clearly articulated naval strategy, first and foremost." This was very much my first order of business, without which maritime superiority, a margin of safety, and a 600-ship navy would lack purpose and coherence. It remained in the forefront of my thinking for the next two years as the Navy itself worked hard to come up with a compelling statement of naval strategy.

Meanwhile, the President himself enunciated the framework within which I and others in his Administration were now working. A week after his inauguration, at a White House lawn ceremony welcoming back US hostages held in Iran, the President proclaimed; "Let the terrorists beware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution. We hear that we live in an era of limits to our power. Well, let it be understood that there are limits to our patience."

Two days later, at his first press conference, he asserted that "Well, so far detente's been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims. I don't have to think of an answer as to what I think their intentions are; they have repeated it. I know of no leader of the Soviet Union since the revolution, and including the present leadership, that has not more than

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<sup>1</sup> Details on my agenda and record as President Reagan's Secretary of the Navy are in John F. Lehman, Jr., *Command of the Seas: Building the 600 ship Navy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988).

once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use. Now, as long as they do that and as long as they, at the same time, have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards, I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind.”

In March, the Reagan Administration submitted new budget requests to Congress, including increases of 11% and 15% for the Navy Department, proposed reactivation of two battleships, and increased ship construction. It would be the start of the largest peacetime expansion of military spending in our history. National defense spending would go from about 5 percent of GDP to 6 percent, in an expanding economy. And the Reagan buildup, although productive of minor increases of men and women in uniform, was “overwhelmingly oriented toward procurement. From roughly a quarter of the defense budget it went up to a third.”<sup>2</sup>

The goal of the buildup was two-fold: In the short run, to deter and counter Soviet expansionism. And in the long run, to create the conditions for dialogue and arms reductions, enabling the US to bargain from a position of strength, including a 600-ship Navy and a forward maritime strategy.

But the buildup was just beginning. Meanwhile, Chief of Naval operations Admiral Hayward testified that “one cannot, with confidence, state that the United States possesses a margin of superiority.” Noting that he had not supported the lame-duck Carter Administration Fiscal Year -82 defense budget request to the Congress, he announced that the amended Reagan Administration budget had his “strong support.”

Critical to our naval buildup would be the deployment of a new fleet of Aegis cruisers with transformational fleet air defense capabilities. In May 1981 the first such cruiser, USS *Ticonderoga* (CG-47), was christened by the President’s beloved First Lady, Nancy Reagan.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, President Reagan continued to remind the Soviets that he intended to win the Cold War. Later in May, President Reagan spoke at the University of Notre Dame, and declared that “The West will not contain Communism; it will transcend Communism. We will not bother to

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, “Ronald Reagan and American Defense” in Jeffrey L. Chidester and Paul Kengor (eds.), *Reagan’s Legacy in a World Transformed* (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) 124-138.

<sup>3</sup> The ship had been ordered and authorized in FY 1978, laid down in 1980, and launched on April 25, 1981. She would be commissioned in January 1983 and deploy operationally for the first time that fall.

denounce it, we'll dismiss it as a sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.”

With the firm support of the President and Secretary of Defense Weinberger, I too began to make speeches about the need for US maritime superiority and a 600-ship Navy., starting with a lecture at the Naval War College that became a widely-circulated journal article.<sup>4</sup> I also authored op-ed pieces as well as journal articles, and granted numerous press interviews, enunciating the principles of naval strategy that would contribute to expanding our margin of safety.

Over the summer, the President acted, implementing the forward maritime strategy at sea. A US Navy destroyer was sent to sail through a Soviet naval exercise in the North Atlantic, scattering several smaller Soviet warships. Then another US Navy vessel proceeded into the Sea of Okhotsk – international waters but regarded by the Soviets as their own private lake. Against Soviet client and terrorism-sponsor Libya and its own false claims of expansive territorial waters, the President approved a large-scale US exercise in the Gulf of Sidra. When the exercise was briefed to him, the President was asked about Rules of Engagement (ROE): “If we are fired on, what are the orders?” “Anytime we send an American anywhere in the world where he or she can be shot at, they have the right to shoot back,” Reagan replied. Defense Secretary Weinberger asked what the orders would be if the Libyans fired on U.S. Navy aircraft and then returned to Tripoli. “What about hot pursuit? How far can we go?” Reagan pondered the question, but only for a minute. “All the way into the hangar,” he responded.”<sup>5</sup>

In August the United States announced a Mediterranean naval exercise in international waters near Libya, a bellicose Soviet client state and sponsor of terrorism. This triggered aggressive Libyan harassing air operations against US carrier aircraft. Two F-14A Tomcat aircraft from USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) – under the new “hot pursuit all the way into the hangar” ROE -- shot down two Libyan fighters over international waters in the Gulf of Sidra about 60 nautical miles off the Libyan coast, after one had fired a missile at them. Under Carter Administration ROE, the F-14s would not have shot at the Fitters but would have asked for permission from the carrier battle group commander before firing, and then held fire since the enemy had disengaged and was returning to his base. Under Reagan administration ROE, however, they fired.

Word of “President Reagan’s ROE” spread throughout the fleet and gave a big boost to fleet morale. The Sixth Fleet would exercise legally and routinely in the Gulf of Sidra without Libyan opposition until 1984. Libya would not challenge the Sixth Fleet again until 1986. Reagan wrote in his memoirs “I also wanted to send a message to others in the world that there was a new

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<sup>4</sup> John F. Lehman, Jr., “The Rebirth of a U.S. Naval Strategy,” *Strategic Review* 9, no. 3 (1981).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Schweizer, *Reagan’s War: The Epic Story of his Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph over Communism* (Doubleday, 2002), 200.

management team in the White House, and that the United States wasn't going to hesitate any longer to act when its legitimate interests were at stake.”<sup>6</sup>

The day after the incident, the President spoke on a US Navy carrier cruising off the California coast. Said the President: “We responded as we will respond . . . when any of our forces are attacked. They’re going to defend themselves.” “You are ensuring peace just by doing what you’re doing, because any potential enemy has to see the price of aggression is . . . more than he might want to pay, and that’s the greatest service that can be performed.” He noted that he personally had approved the Sixth Fleet maneuvers that presaged the air combat. “The message to the Libyans was brought on by the Libyans. We didn’t go there to shoot down a couple of Libyan planes. They came out and fired on ours when we were holding maneuvers in which everyone was notified.”<sup>7</sup>

President Reagan also addressed the question of why his staff waited six hours before waking him up to notify him of the incident: “There’s a good answer for that,” he responded. “If our planes were shot down, yes, they’d wake me up right away. If the other fellow’s were shot down, why wake me up?”

The fall of 1981 saw a massive series of innovative US Navy and NATO exercises in the North Atlantic, dubbed *Ocean Venture*. While the Carter administration had typically constrained such exercises to waters south of the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap, this set of exercises now ranged far to the north, around Norway’s North Cape and off Soviet territorial waters adjacent to the Kola Peninsula. The message to the Soviets—and our allies – was clear: The US Navy was reclaiming its maritime superiority and traditional margin of safety. Thus began a cycle of annual forward, global at-sea naval exercises in the Northeast Atlantic, northwest Pacific, and Arctic oceans, and the Eastern Mediterranean – usually with allies and other US joint forces. That cycle would not end until the end of the decade, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and the waning of the Soviet military threat in Europe and Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Complementing and supplementing these at-sea exercises were innumerable war games, experiments, conferences, studies, briefings, staff papers, analyses of “real-world” operations and events – a veritable beehive of activity -- all aimed at practicing, demonstrating, and planning innovative new operations and tactics to implement the Reagan Administration’s

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<sup>6</sup> The successful operation was also due in part to the Navy Fighter Weapon School (“TOPGUN”), which had trained Navy fighter pilots well all through the 1970s in aggressive tactics. On the U.S. Navy campaign against Libya, see Joseph T. Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan’s Undeclared War with Qaddafi* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Helen Thomas, “President Reagan said late Thursday that he approved” UPI, Aug 20, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Details are in John Lehman, *Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

Maritime Strategy, and to convince the Soviets that they could not stop us and could not escape defeat if they initiated hostilities.<sup>9</sup>

In October, bent as always on expanding the power, range and lethality of the fleet, the President held a press conference and publicly called for modernization of US strategic forces including Navy submarines and ballistic and cruise missiles. “I have ordered the strengthening and expansion of our sea-based forces.” He said, “We will continue the construction of Trident submarines at a steady rate. We will develop a larger and more accurate sea-based ballistic missile. We will also deploy nuclear cruise missiles in some existing submarines.” This represented a sharp reversal of Carter Administration policies. Following his prepared remarks, the President answered a reporter’s question with “right now, they have a superiority at sea.”

### **Running with the ball**

Meanwhile, we were intensifying our efforts to turn that around. In February 1982, having been in office for a year, I went before the Congress to lay out in some detail the elements of the Reagan Administration 600-ship Navy goal, and its strategic rationale. My clarion call, representing the President and his administration, was clear: “Clear maritime superiority must be reacquired.” Our margin of safety still needed widening.

The President retained his interest in the naval balance. In May he discussed U.S. Navy North Atlantic strategy issues at lunch with Secretary of Defense Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including Chief of Naval Operations ADM Hayward. He wrote afterwards in his diary “Lunched with Joint Chfs. of Staff and Cap W. It was a good meeting with a sound discussion of strategic problems – for example -- the importance of the sea above Norway and what Iceland means in the Navy strategy should there be conflict on the NATO front.”<sup>10</sup> And he continued to assert and decry Soviet military superiority, e.g.: in letters to the columnist Ann Landers and in a public speech (“There’s no question but that they have a superior military force than we do now.”)<sup>11</sup>

June found the President addressing the British Parliament at the Palace of Westminster: “It is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide of history . . . [It is] the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history . . .” Reagan characterized the Cold War as a struggle between freedom and “totalitarian evil.”

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<sup>9</sup> On the development of the Maritime Strategy, see John Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the U.S. Navy’s Maritime Strategy 1977-1986*. Newport Paper Number 19 (Newport RI: Naval War College Press, 2004), and John F. Lehman, “Getting Back on Top: How to Rebuild the Navy,” US Naval Institute *Proceedings* (January 2022), 56-62.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Brinkley, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 85.

<sup>11</sup> James Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev’s Adaptability, Reagan’s Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 66.



The following month, President Reagan announced that the United States would not sign the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III), objecting to provisions regarding deep seabed mineral resources. The United States had no objection, however, to its provisions on navigation and overflight, regarding them as merely codification of existing customary international law, with which its own navigation and overflight practices complied. This included the right of warships to transit the territorial waters of others and international straits while on innocent passage. USN warships at sea would continue to challenge excessive maritime claims of other nations, if they violated customary international law.

In November 1982, the President delivered a speech to the nation on strategic arms reduction and nuclear deterrence: In it he reminded the country that “The world has also witnessed unprecedented growth in the area of Soviet conventional forces. The Soviets far exceed us in the number of tanks, artillery pieces, aircraft, and ships they produce every year. What is more, when I arrived in this office, I learned that in our own forces we had planes that couldn't fly and ships that couldn't leave port mainly for lack of spare parts and crewmembers. The Soviet military buildup must not be ignored. We've recognized the problem and, together with our allies, we've begun to correct the imbalance”

At the end of 1982, President Reagan decided to make a major address at Long Beach on his naval policy, publicly repeating yet again his call for US maritime superiority. The occasion was the re-commissioning of the USS *New Jersey* (BB 62), first of four battleships to be re-commissioned during the decade as part of the 600-ship Navy. This was a major milestone. I was present, but it was the President's show. “Maritime superiority” reiterated the President “for us is a necessity. We must be able in time of emergency to venture in harm's way, controlling air, surface, and subsurface areas to assure access to all the oceans of the world. Failure to do so will leave the credibility of our conventional defense forces in doubt.”

On March 8, 1983, President Reagan delivered his well-known speech to the National Association of Evangelicals: He publicly rejected any moral equivalence between the west and the Soviet Union and lambasted the Soviets as being “the focus of evil in the modern world” and exhibiting the “aggressive impulses of an evil empire.” He wrote later in his memoir “Frankly, I think it worked, even though some people – including Nancy -- tried persuading me to lower the temperature of my rhetoric. I told Nancy I had a reason for saying those things: I wanted the Russians to know I understood their system and what it stood for.”

Even more famous was the President's speech announcing his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) a couple of weeks later. In that speech he repeated his view of deterrence and Soviet military power – a view that also drove his advocacy of a forward naval strategy, maritime superiority and the margin of safety and a 600-ship fleet.: “Deterrence’ means simply this: making sure any adversary who thinks about attacking the United States, or our allies, or our vital interests, concludes that the risks to him outweigh any potential gains. Once he understands that, he won't attack. We maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression.” “Some people may still ask: Would the Soviets ever use their formidable military power? Well, again, can we afford to believe that they won't? . . . The final fact is that the Soviet Union is acquiring what can only be considered an offensive military force . . . their conventional forces are trained

and equipped not so much to defend against an attack as to permit sudden, surprise offensives of their own.”.

I later cited this phraseology in my own address a few months later at Newport, on “The Nine Principles of American Maritime Power for the Future”—later published and widely disseminated as an article in the US Naval Institute *Proceedings*. And Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey, US Army, reinforced the view in his own speech that month to US troops in Hawaii: “I hear a lot of talk in the newspapers which says we don’t have a strategy. Well, I want to tell you that’s a load of baloney. We do have a strategy. It’s a very sensible strategy. Our strategy is one of preventing war by making it self-evident to our enemies that they’re going to get their clocks cleaned if they start one.”<sup>12</sup> (to US troops at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii.

Meanwhile, the 600-ship Navy was becoming a reality. The President, Secretary of Defense Weinberger, and the Congress understood and supported my logic in ordering two new Nimitz-class carriers at the same time, which drove down costs immensely. In August, in a letter to Secretary Weinberger regarding the naming of the carriers USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) and USS *George Washington* (CVN 73), Reagan wrote, “we . . . dedicate ourselves to achieving the requisite naval superiority we need today, by building a fifteen carrier, 600 ship navy.” Three years after announcing those goals in his campaign and two and a half years after charging me with helping him reach them, his guidance was still clear and firm.

But it was now being tempered by the realization that some in the Soviet leadership were fearful of a US and NATO military attack on them. In November 1983 he wrote in his diary: “I feel the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being in any way soft on them we ought to tell them that no one here has any intention of doing anything like that. What the h--l have they got that anyone would want.” Reagan’s strategy against the Soviets was not to attack them militarily, but to strengthen our own depleted forces to deter them, block their attempted advances, and weaken their resolve. And in a meeting with his National Security Council he declared, “The message to the Soviets is that if they want an arms race, the U.S. will not let them get ahead.” “Their choice is to break their backs to keep up, or to agree to reductions.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Hitting our stride**

By the beginning of 1984, the President was becoming confident that his “Peace through Strength” policies – including his drive for a 600-ship Navy and maritime superiority -- were working. In a landmark speech at the University of Texas, he provided this report to the Nation:

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 35-6, 153.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files: The Untold Story of Reagan’s Top-Secret Efforts to Win the Cold War* (United States: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 200.

- “I believe that 1984 finds the United States in the strongest position in years to establish a constructive and realistic working relationship with the Soviet Union. We've come a long way since the decade of the seventies, years when the United States seemed filled with self-doubt and neglected its defenses, while the Soviet Union increased its military might and sought to expand its influence by armed forces and threat.
- Over the last 10 years, the Soviets devoted twice as much of their gross national product to military expenditures as the United States, produced six times as many ICBMs, four times as many tanks, twice as many combat aircraft. And they began deploying the SS - 20 intermediate-range missile at a time when the United States had no comparable weapon.
- History teaches that wars begin when governments believe the price of aggression is cheap. To keep the peace, we and our allies must be strong enough to convince any potential aggressor that war could bring no benefit, only disaster. So, when we neglected our defenses, the risks of serious confrontation grew.
- Three years ago, we embraced a mandate from the American people to change course, and we have. With the support of the American people and the Congress we halted America's decline. Our economy is now amid the best recovery since the sixties. Our defenses are being rebuilt, our alliances are solid, and our commitment to defend our values has never been clearer.
- America's recovery may have taken Soviet leaders by surprise. They may have counted on us to keep weakening ourselves. They've been saying for years that our demise was inevitable. They said it so often they probably started believing it. Well, if so, I think they can see now they were wrong.
- This may be the reason that we've been hearing such strident rhetoric from the Kremlin recently. These harsh words have led some to speak of heightened uncertainty and an increased danger of conflict. This is understandable but profoundly mistaken.
- Look beyond the words, and one fact stands out: America's deterrence is more credible, and it is making the world a safer place -- safer because now there is less danger that the Soviet leadership will underestimate our strength or question our resolve.”

The President later told Republican congressional leaders that he had been careful to criticize the Soviet system but not to challenge it. “If they want to keep their Mickey Mouse system, it’s OK.”

Complementing this milestone, in May of 1984, in accordance with national policy guidance from the President, I approved the publication by the Chief of Naval Operations of a comprehensive and up-to-date classified version of The Maritime Strategy reflecting the important contributions made by the joint operational commanders, the other services, and our naval allies. Under development for two years and updated periodically, it would underpin the Navy’s plans, policies, operations, programs, and budgets for the remainder of the decade.

In September 1984, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, he asserted: “America has repaired its strength. We have invigorated our alliances and friendships. We are ready for constructive negotiations with the Soviet Union.”

## The second term

On November 6, President Reagan was overwhelmingly re-elected by an even more lopsided landslide vote than his victory four years earlier, defeating Jimmy Carter's vice president, long-time carrier skeptic Walter Mondale. The Administration saw this as a strong public endorsement of Reagan administration policies; Reagan and his policies received yet another very clear mandate from the American people.

The Reagan 1984 campaign had repeated the phrase "Peace through strength," which the Republicans had used in the election of 1980 to good effect. It also famously included the phrases "America's back," and "It's morning again in America," going on to stress that "under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?" The campaign also featured the iconic "Bear" ad, which pictured a wandering grizzly bear and made a case for the Administration's military buildup: "There is a bear in the woods. For some people the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who is right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear." (In the final scene, a man appeared, and the bear took a step back, followed by a picture of President Reagan)

In March 1985, author Tom Clancy and I dined at the White House with the President. The Naval Institute Press had published Clancy's first book, *The Hunt for Red October*. A runaway best-seller, the book had heightened awareness by the reading public of Cold War Navy submarine operations at sea, and of the Navy itself. The book was publicly praised by the President, who called it "the perfect yarn" and led a spirited discussion of naval strategy.

On May 21, President Reagan proclaimed the following day as National Maritime Day. While his proclamation was largely concerned with merchant marine policy, the President once again took an opportunity to continue to advocate for a "superior navy" and "the construction of the 600-ship Navy".

On 1 Oct: Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr. succeeded General Vessey as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This was yet another demonstration of the esteem with which Navy leaders – and the Navy -- were often held during the Reagan Administration.

December 1985 demonstrated that we could not afford to rest on our oars, despite the improved diplomatic climate: On December 6 the Soviet Navy launched the first of a new class of multi-mission aircraft carrier, representing a significant addition to the Soviet naval threat to ourselves and our allies.<sup>14</sup> And a week later the Reagan defense buildup slowed significantly, with the

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<sup>14</sup> The 65,000-ton ship was to be named *Riga* (then re-named *Leonid Brezhnev*, then *Tbilisi*, finally *Admiral Kuznetsov*. She did not deploy until the 1990s, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and has had a problematic career in the Russian Navy, with few deployments and numerous materiel issues. But we did not know any of this at the time, and she looked like potential trouble to us.

signing into law of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act. Henceforth, annual US defense (including Navy) budgets would cease to grow in real terms and begin to decline. And at the same time, the Soviets launched a major global diplomatic offensive to constrain US Navy operations through arms control negotiations and agreements, designed to remove the US margin of safety, challenge the hard-won naval superiority we had regained, and strangle the 600-ship Navy program at the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, in January and February 1986, the US Sixth Fleet conducted pre-announced Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPS) north of the Gulf of Sidra near Libya. This kicked off three months of President-approved naval operations against Libyan forces that would culminate in a successful US naval and air raid on Libyan bases in April. In a message to Sixth Fleet personnel, President Reagan told them “You have sent a message to the whole world that the United States has the will and, through you, the ability to defend the free world’s interests.”<sup>15</sup>

In a celebratory mood, the US Navy hosted an International Naval Review in July 1986 in New York harbor. Coinciding with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, it was the 5<sup>th</sup> international naval review in American history. 21 foreign warships from 14 countries joined 12 US Navy warships. President Reagan participated, breaking his flag on the USS *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67). I broke my flag on USS *Iowa* (BB 61). The Beach Boys entertained the President from a sound stage built on the top of *Iowa*’s turret no. 3.

On 2 September 1986, President Reagan signed a new top secret *National Security Decision Document (NSDD 238) “Revised National Security Strategy”* This capstone policy document would remain authoritative until the end of his Administration. It’s many taskings included:

- “To deter military attack by the USSR and its allies against the U.S., its allies, and other important countries across the spectrum of conflict; and to defeat such attack should deterrence fail.”
- “To ensure US access to space and the oceans.”
- “Our grand strategy, global objectives, and the nature of the threat require that we defend our interests as far from North America as possible. In coalition with our allies, we will continue to maintain in peacetime major forward deployments for land, naval and air forces in both Europe and the Pacific, and other deployments in the Western Hemisphere and the Indian Ocean.”
- “We must continue to build and modernize national forces sufficient to retain maritime superiority.
- “United States conventional forces should have the capability to place Soviet interests, including those within the Soviet homeland, at risk. Successful war termination may require seizure of strategically significant territory in order to provide incentives to end hostilities and to create leverage for favorable post-conflict settlement. It may also include conventional attacks on Soviet nuclear capabilities, including Soviet ballistic

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<sup>15</sup> Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, 139. Credit for the successful performance of Navy attack aircraft was due in part to tactics honed at “Strike U,” the newly established advanced training facility that the Navy had created at Fallon Naval Air Station in Nevada.

missile submarines. Such actions would be intended to deny the Soviets the ability to operate from sanctuaries and to deter or control escalation.”

- “We will seek to prosecute the war as far forward and as close as possible to the sources of greatest threat.”
- “The US and its allies must be able to establish and maintain control of Atlantic and other sea-lines of communication and be able to sustain a war at least as long as the Warsaw Pact.”

As the President’s Secretary of the Navy, I knew this guidance was intended to validate our program of maritime superiority, strategic rebirth, a 600-ship Navy, and widening our “margin of safety”.

We took a giant step toward those goals the following month, when USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) was commissioned in Norfolk. Secretary of Defense Weinberger spoke at the ceremony, again publicly and explicitly endorsing The Maritime Strategy. And my wife Barbara, as sponsor, broke a bottle of champagne across her massive bow.

In January 1987, with his top secret *Revised National Security Strategy* in place, the President signed and promulgated the first ever public unclassified *National Security Strategy*. This document broadcast – at length – the by-now 6-year-old Reagan Administration tenets of maritime superiority and a 600-ship Navy, needed to provide us with that “margin of safety” that he had discussed in Chicago in 1980. Here are some key extracts:

- Maritime forces play a unique role in supporting our military strategy. Given the realities of our geostrategic position, fronting on two oceans, maritime superiority is vital to support our alliance relationships and our forward deployed forces.
- Maritime superiority enables us to capitalize on Soviet geographic vulnerabilities and to pose a global threat to the Soviets' interests. It plays a key role in plans for the defense of NATO allies on the European flanks. It also permits the United States to tie down Soviet naval forces in defensive posture protecting Soviet ballistic missile submarines and the seaward approaches to the Soviet homeland, and thereby to minimize the wartime threat to the reinforcement and resupply of Europe by sea.
- “The mobile nature of maritime forces allows them directly to influence land campaigns through the application of sea-based tactical air power; and by the use of amphibious forces to seize strategically important territory, reinforce allies accessible from the sea, or threaten the seaward flanks of enemy ground of particular importance.” given the central position of the Soviet Union in the Eurasian landmass, the fact that
- “Essential to our wartime strategy, maritime superiority plays equally vital roles in peacetime. Mobile maritime forces, easily deployed in time of crisis, are a traditional symbol of our nation's will and capability to defend its vital interests.”
- The trends in the maritime area are generally favorable. We are steadily building back toward our goal of a 600 ship, 15-carrier battle group Navy. With continued strong Congressional support, the programs of this Administration should ensure our essential maritime superiority for the remainder of this century.

So, we did it. Our margin of safety had been widened.

On April 10, 1987, with the President's ringing and detailed endorsement of U.S. maritime superiority, and with a 600-ship 15-carrier battle group Navy in clear sight, I resigned as his Secretary of the Navy. My work here was done. The Navy had 594 ships in commission and 30 under construction. Maritime Superiority had been achieved. The forward Maritime Strategy was being implemented routinely. Costs had been driven down significantly. Congress had just approved a second cost-effective 2-carrier buy. Morale in the Navy and the Marine Corps was high. And our margin of safety had been widened.

My own morale was high too. I remained in the operating Navy as a reserve bombardier-navigator flying in A-6Es and would be promoted to Captain in 1989.

The President remained a strong proponent of maritime superiority and a sufficient margin of safety, with no illusions as to the opponent he was dealing with. A month after I resigned, he reiterated his earlier characterization of the Soviets in a letter to his friend William F. Buckley., the conservative journalist. "I have not changed my belief that we are dealing with an 'evil empire'" he wrote. <sup>16</sup> And a month after that, in a speech near the Berlin Wall at the Brandenburg Gate, he publicly and famously challenged the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, to "open this gate! . . . tear down this wall!"

### **Peace through strength achieved**

At the end of the year, however, the President and General Secretary Gorbachev signed the US-Soviet Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty. This proved to be a major milestone in the President's policy of negotiating from strength. The treaty would result in the destruction of nearly 2700 American and Soviet ground-based intermediate-range missiles but left limiting naval sea-launched cruise missiles for a later day. The Reagan Administration continued to regard such missiles as necessary to maintain U.S. maritime superiority and hence our margin of safety.

The President and General Secretary would meet again in Moscow in the spring of 1988. At this meeting, President Reagan declared a change in his attitude toward the Soviet Union while walking through Red Square and the Kremlin. Asked if he still considered the Soviet Union an "evil empire," he answered, "No." Surprised, reporters asked why. The President then responded, "I was talking about another time, another era." This public statement was interpreted by many as signaling a major – and much less confrontational -- US policy shift vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Actually, it was an expression of triumph. He had achieved the margin of safety he had sought for so long.

Despite the President's change in tone, that summer the Republican National Convention warily adopted a still skeptical party platform supporting Vice President George H.W. Bush, its candidate as President to follow Ronald Reagan. Its positions included:

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *Triumph of Improvisation*, 129

- Soviet conventional superiority remains a serious problem for NATO. Soviet-Warsaw Pact military doctrine continues to be predicated upon the Soviet Union's ability to mount a massive conventional offensive against the NATO allies. The NATO allies must strengthen their conventional forces, modernize their remaining nuclear systems, and promote rationalization, standardization and interoperability.
- The United States has always been a maritime nation. We have rebuilt our Navy to permit continued freedom of the seas. Our focus has correctly been on the fighting ships our Navy would use in the event of a conflict. Our successful peace mission in the Persian Gulf is eloquent testimony to the benefits of a blue water Navy.
- To protect American interests in remote areas of the world, we require a 600-ship navy with 15 aircraft carrier battle groups. This number enables us to operate in areas where we lack the infrastructure of bases we enjoy in Western Europe and the western Pacific. A force of this size will enable us to meet both our security interests and commitments into the 21st century.
- In 1981 . . . we inherited an America in decline, with a crisis of confidence at home and a loss of respect abroad. Reestablishing America's strength, its belief in itself, and its leadership role was the first and most important task facing the Reagan-Bush Administration. We met that task. We repaired our defenses, modernized our strategic nuclear forces, improved our strategy for deterrence with our development of the Strategic Defense Initiative, deployed INF missiles in Europe, and restored pride in our nation's military service.

On November 8, 1988, Vice President George H.W. Bush was elected President by a substantial margin. Public endorsement of Reagan Administration ideas and policies continued.

The following month, President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev met for the last time, on Governor's Island in New York City harbor. President-elect Bush was also present. Navy submarine-launched cruise missile limitations were again a topic of discussion, but no agreement could be reached. With only a month remaining of his terms in office, President Reagan's maintenance of US maritime superiority remained firm. And at the end of the year, he proclaimed the extension of the territorial sea of the US, in accordance with international law, including the Law of the Sea convention, from 3 to 12 nautical miles. Within US territorial waters, he declared, "the ships of all countries enjoy the right of innocent passage, and the ships and aircraft of all countries enjoy the right of transit passage through international straits."

### **His last official words**

On January 11, 1989, President Ronald Reagan gave his Farewell Address to the nation. I had been out of office as his Navy Secretary for almost two years. Ever the navalist, he included in his speech a compelling vignette about a US Navy sailor on USS *Midway* (CV 41) rescuing Vietnamese boat people at sea. And he charged the nation, "We must keep up our guard, but we must also continue to work together to lessen and eliminate tension and



mistrust.” “If and when they don’t (act helpfully), at first pull your punches. If they persist, pull the plug. It’s still trust but verify. It’s still play but cut the cards. It’s still watched closely. And don’t be afraid to see what you see.”

Invoking visionary Puritan forefather John Winthrop’s image of America as the “shining city on the hill,” he described it as “a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity.” “We made the city stronger; we made the city freer, and we left her in good hands. All in all, not bad, not bad at all.”

### **Postscript**

On March 4, 2001, former First Lady Nancy Reagan christened USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN 76). Five years later, my son John would land on her deck as a naval aviator. The President would have been proud: Of his First Lady, of John, and of the margin of safety and maritime superiority that he and his Navy had bequeathed the Nation.