Rearmament, Rhetoric, and Realignment

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Abstract:

While there has been much study done on the hardline anti-communist policies of 1950s McCarthyism, there really is not as much research into the rest of Wisconsin’s Congressional history during the Cold War. This paper seeks to survey and study the responses of Wisconsin’s Senators and Representatives to policies and events in the last decade of the Cold War. In particular, the eight year period of 1980-1988 in which the Reagan administration went head to head with the last few leaders of the Soviet Union, leading up to the collapse of the East Bloc in 1989. Looking at newspapers and speeches of Wisconsin’s delegation in relation to the memoirs and policies of political leaders like Reagan and Gorbachev, the goal will be to determine Wisconsin’s political character at the upper levels. The paper will feature the ideas of Representatives like David Obey, Les Aspin, James Moody, and Clement Zablocki, who all served the state of Wisconsin during this time. While America’s late Cold War foreign policy towards the Soviet Union is often portrayed as a bipartisan issue, looking at Wisconsin’s congressional delegation shows that there was still a large number of differing opinions and ideas. During this era there was clearly two power bases In Washington, the Republicans in the White House, and Democrats in the Capital. Due to this split power base, Wisconsin is a state of particular interest as it was a battleground state for Reagan Republicans, moderate Democrats and liberal Democrats. Battleground states like Wisconsin demonstrate the party divide over foreign policy in this last critical decade of the Cold War.
I. Introduction:

With the Election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Cold War exited détente and entered its final critical phase. While the United States no longer feared Communism to the extent it did during the Red Scare, the threat of an all-out nuclear war remained ever present in the government and public’s mind. The 1980s would see some of the most rapid changes in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. These dramatic shifts included arms races, heated rhetoric and tense debates between the leaders of the two superpowers. During this truculent decade, the United States was led by Ronald Reagan, who few can deny is one of the 20th century’s most notable presidents. But the Reagan administration was only one branch of the United States government. Budgets, treaties, and rhetoric all passed through the halls of Congress and of the states represented, Wisconsin played an important role as a bellwether of partisan politics. Indeed some thirty years after McCarthy shook the fabric of the nation, the representatives of the badger state still had something to say about the foreign policy direction of the United States. This paper describes the policies, speeches, and meetings of the key players of the last decade of the Cold War through the reactions of the Wisconsin congressional delegation. It features speeches and reactions from key Wisconsin Democrats like David Obey, Clement Zablocki, James Moody, Les Aspin, Robert Kastenmeier, and William Proxmire, who were caught between defending their beliefs as liberals, while maintaining their own political goals and presenting credible solutions to the Soviet Union. It also features Republican Bob Kasten who became a soldier in Reagan’s powerful political force, supporting the President, and aiding in collecting support from Congress. While the Late Cold War Era foreign policy is often described as a bipartisan effort, the truth is that while both parties supported the idea of preventing nuclear war and stopping the
Soviet Union from gaining too much power, there was little agreement on the best way to accomplish this. At this point in time, Wisconsin was a battleground state split between Republican and Democratic representatives, making it a superior example of the spectrum of politicians that existed during the Reagan administration. Generally speaking, Wisconsin’s Democrats offered the voice of caution and cooperation as the method of easing tensions along the lines of détente and the policies started during the Carter administration, while Republicans preferred aggressive hard line stances and conveying strength to what they saw as Soviet challenges to American security. Of course there also a minority of dissidents in both parties that would not fall in line with the general trend of the party.
II. Literature Review

There is no doubt that there is a large amount of literature written about American polices and responses during the Cold War. This is especially true about President Ronald Reagan who is seen as a critical American figure at the end of this period. However, there have been fewer studies written about the Congressional responses, and the works that do focus on this branch of government tend to be general and nationally focused rather than centered on a particular state. There are also several biographical works written about some of the longstanding congressional members, but while these are more focused to a smaller level of analysis, they do not completely cover a specific period as well as the national ones. So this paper does not cover information that is completely new, but rather organizes it in a different way that attempts to strike balance between large national studies focused on major leaders and highly focused biographical works, by staying at the state level and connecting it to the national studies.

For general knowledge on the Cold War, two books are particularly useful. The first is *The Cold War: Questions and Analysis in History* by Bradley Lightbody. This book highlights the dramatic changes in US-Soviet relations that occurred during the 1980s, beginning with what he describes as the “worst” US-Soviet relations since the 1950s with the buildup of the US military and intense rhetoric of Reagan. This was followed by a thaw during President Reagan’s second term that resulted in the breakdown in tensions.¹ In addition to this work this paper also used evidence from *Cold War: An International History* which confirms much of the ideas of the

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¹ Bradley Lightbody, *the Cold War: Questions and Analysis in History*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 90.
previous works going so far was to call the first term of Ronald Reagan the “second cold war” highlighting the tensions of the early 1980s.²

One body of research used in this paper are international studies that focus on the Soviet Union’s foreign policy during this time. Looking beyond the United States for information provides this paper was some information that explains some events in the timeline that are a result of independent Soviet policy decisions. As far was general knowledge on the Soviet Union at this time, the book *A Failed Empire: the Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* by Vladislav M. Zubok is a comprehensive history of the Soviet Union with the goal of highlighting the problems that led to its demise. Zubok concludes that the United States had intelligence that suggested the Soviet Union was in trouble economically, but they couldn’t quite grasp the scale of the problems until it was too late. These economic problems did result in the Soviet Union acting differently towards the United States then it would have if things were better for them.³ This resulted in key changes in Soviet policy especially during the second half of the decade where the Soviet Union became more willing to deal with the United States on issues like arms control. As for more personal accounts, this paper made extensive use of Mikhail Gorbachev’s memoirs. Written after his time as leader of the Soviet Union, the memoirs provide insider details into key summits with President Reagan and provided a good emotional account from the Soviet side that confirms much of the theories found in *A Failed Empire*.

There were several books and article used in this paper for information on the President at this time. *The Reagan Reversal: foreign policy and the end of the Cold War* by Beth Fischer

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provides insight into the middle of Reagan’s tenure as president and tries to determine the cause of his dramatic mid-decade policy shift. As the earlier books had stated, there was a massive increase in US-Soviet tensions as result of both the major US military buildup and Reagan’s own remarks. One of Fischer’s most important conclusions is the idea that Reagan was much more personally involved in the creation of foreign policy than most other presidents. This work proves information of a critical time in this era that moment when the Reagan switched gears from an offensive approach to one that was more willing to engage in dialogue with the Soviets." This paper also used the article “How the East was won: Why Ronald Reagan Won the Cold War” by Dinesh D'Souza, who concludes as the title suggests that Reagan’s actions as president directly led to the demise of the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe. An important topic in this article is the discussion of Reagan’s firm stance in Central America which created a massive debate in Congress about the use of foreign aid to fund anti-communist governments. D’Souza believes that these stances pushed the Soviets to the brink and brought them into a position where they were forced to negotiate. Valuable to this paper were also sections taken from Ronald Reagan’s personal account of the events, *The Reagan Diaries* edited by Douglas Brinkley. These were a key part of the paper because much of important summits between Gorbachev and Reagan were done behind closed doors and this collection gives some access to that. As the work of Beth Fischer claims Reagan had a very personal role in his foreign policy, getting his personal thoughts on the summits that effectively ended the Cold War is essential.

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Finally there are several books on congressional actions and conferences that were valuable for this project. While none of them focused on Wisconsin alone, major sections included opinions and voting records of the Wisconsin delegation. The book *President and Congress: Assessing Reagan’s First Year* edited by Norman Ornstein is a collection of essays published in 1982. This book is an effective source because of the detail used in the discussion of topics related to the Reagan administration’s first year in office which extends to discussions of Congress as well. It provides a good starting point for understanding the relationship of Reagan and Congress. One of the essays “Reagan, Congress and Foreign Policy” written by I. M. Destler is most insightful in answering purely foreign policy questions.6 This book paid considerable attention to the question of foreign aid, which became the first major debate of Reagan’s new more aggressive attack on communism. The result of this early skirmish between Reagan and Congress colored the rest of his Presidency culminating in the notorious Iran-Contra scandal. The book, *The House and the End of the Cold War, 1980–1985*, is useful because it was one of the few detailed congressional Cold War studies. In this book Robert David Johnson describes the congressional structure and decision making processes during this era.7 The debate over the MX missile program became a central focus of congressional action during the 1980s because it was a dramatic increase in the US nuclear arsenal that Congress had a direct effect in shaping. Lastly *from Cold Wars to Star Wars: debates over defense and détente* by Louisa S. Hulett provided a very helpful examination of the debate over the creation of new weapon systems like the MX missile program and the SDI or “Star Wars.” What made this book useful was the way Hulett explained the ways in which the weapons fit into the larger military and

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political strategy. It would not be right to say this book takes a congressional perspective; rather, it reflects that priorities and perspectives of the Defense Department.8

Taken together, these sources provide the background essential to understanding and to putting into context the primary sources used to explore the positions of the Wisconsin Congressional Delegation during the last decade of the Cold War.

III. Rearm: Foreign Aid and the MX Missile Debate

It is no secret that the executive branch is often faster at creating new policy than the legislative branch, so it makes sense that the Reagan Administration would make the first moves following the election of 1980. In a sweeping victory, President Reagan captured the American people with his hard economic stance and his strong support for increased military spending. Throughout the campaign, Reagan stressed the view that the United States had fallen behind the Soviet Union during détente and needed to take serious measures to improve and expand the US military. Indeed there was some truth to this argument: during the anti-military sentiment following the Vietnam War updating and advancing the military had been somewhat neglected and military expenditure had dropped some 20% between the fiscal years of 1968-1979.9 The Reagan Administration’s combination of slashing federal domestic programs while attempting to boost military funding provided ample areas for reaction from Congress. There were many areas of debate over how the Reagan administration planned to expand the United States military. One

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of the best representations of these exchanges was the MX missile project, which was started in 1979, but became an issue under Reagan’s leadership. Another important issue that congress and Wisconsin’s delegation had in common was the increase in foreign aid to countries that were determined to be fighting communism. In their responses to these military-focused changes presented in these two case studies, Wisconsin’s congressional delegation provides a good cross section of the general attitudes of Congress. Wisconsin’s Republicans generally maintained a very pro-Reagan stance using the success of the 1980 election to carry them along through Reagan’s first term while Wisconsin’s Democrats became divided over protecting the legacy of President Jimmy Carter and catering to anti-military groups or protecting their own positions that were becoming increasingly threatened by an American public that was enthusiastically embracing president Reagan.

Often over-shadowed by the more futuristic and famous “Star Wars” or Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the MX missile program was one of the first important policies of the Reagan administration that provided significant reaction and debate from Wisconsin’s representatives. The MX missile project was first pitched in the late 1970s and was created as a plan to update and reorganize America’s Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) forces. Updating and in increasing the size of the Americas nuclear and conventional arsenal was a major priority for President Reagan who brought in a new understanding of the Soviet Union not as a geopolitical constant, but as an enemy that needed to be vanquished. In addition to that, a key position of the Reagan campaign was to highlight the “weakness” of the Democrats under Jimmy Carter, which had resulted in a loss of American power overseas and military that had become neglected.10

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The MX was the first step in bringing American military might back up to speed by increasing and improving the nuclear arsenal. At that time, the United States’ nuclear doctrine surrounded the nuclear triad, which combined land-based bombers, short ranged submarine missiles, and long ranged intercontinental ballistic missiles, was to ensure that the United States could always provide a response to any Soviet attack. At the time of Reagan’s inauguration, there was growing concern among the military brass that American missile forces were being neglected and that newer larger Soviet missiles were rendering the missile arm of the nuclear triad ineffective. The concern steamed around the fact that the current arsenal of ICBMs, the old titan and the newer minuteman missiles were housed in large immovable silos that could be destroyed by direct nuclear attack and the missiles contained in these silos were far too slow to reach the USSR before significant damage could be done to the US nuclear arsenal. The original plan proposed by the Reagan administration called for the creation of 200 of the MX missile which were larger, faster, and contained ten warheads with explosive power 17 times greater than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. These missiles would be stored in a series of 4,600 hardened silos spread throughout the American interior and connected by a defended railway network. The idea was that these new missiles would give the United States’ nuclear forces a new offensive ability to hit the Soviet Union faster and harder while constantly moving throughout the country to keep the Soviets guessing at precisely where the missiles were stationed. The other intended effect was to signal to the Soviet Union that the United States was still willing to keep an active hand in building a powerful nuclear force, a high priority for an administration that believed that the United States had fallen behind in the arms race and had grown complacent during détente. If approved in full, the MX project would create a large

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amount of defense related jobs, but would also cost the tax payer a fairly large price tag -- something that the Reagan administration would have a hard time justifying with its stance on fiscal responsibility. Already, these problems started to show themselves and before any proposal hit the congressional floor, the Reagan administration changed the plan from 200 to 100 MX missiles and started to question if the railway system was really worth the cost. The costs combined with the drain of other military projects like the B-1 bomber and SDI made the original MX plan a tough sell that was somewhat easy to oppose, but would turn out to be hard for Democrats to completely defeat.

For Wisconsin’s Republicans like Senator Bob Kasten, then a junior senator, supporting new military expansion and projects like MX was a breeze. The 1980 election had proven that Americans were actually somewhat concerned about the country’s position relative to the Soviet threat and Kasten was unaffected by the main concern keeping some Republicans from supporting MX, which was the loss of productive agricultural land that would be used for silo locations. In fact, throughout the Reagan administration, Kasten would continue to support almost any new military project purposed. This included to MX, but also extended to the B-1 bomber and even a highly unpopular plan to restart production of nerve gas weapons, which was voted down in the house in 1983, with Wisconsin’s delegation voting 7-2. By 1985 one senatorial opponent of Kasten said that he was “is out of touch with the people of Wisconsin on the most important issue of the day: whether we will survive the nuclear arms race or whether it will destroy us all.” Democratic Representative James Moody from Wisconsin also had a

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12 Louisa S. Hulett, From Cold Wars to Star Wars, 103.
diametrically opposed message when he described Kasten in a 1985 news article Moody said
“Bob Kasten is a faithful foot soldier in Reagan’s conservative army.” The relationship
between the Reagan and Kasten reached a very close level which can be seen in the fact that
Kasten is the only Wisconsin representative listed by name in the President’s personal diaries.

Democratic reaction to the MX was mixed with debate mainly existing in the House.
Representatives like David Obey from Wisconsin’s 7th congressional district and James Moody
from Wisconsin’s 5th district were quick to voice their concerns that were not related to costs,
but rather stemmed from Soviet reactions to a new reinvigorated US missile program. In general,
rejection of the build-up in US military stemmed from a difference in perception over the nature
of the Soviet threat that will be touched on in more detail in the rhetoric section. Needless to
say, the result was some fairly active opposition with David Obey, who in 1983 visited the
Soviet Union and concluded that the MX missile program was “a turkey” that would not fulfill
its goals nor justify its costs. Other concerns stemmed from the Soviet reaction to such a large
missile program, fearing that MX would signal the end of détente and the result would be a
massive new arms race. Such opposition had a real lasting effect on the MX missile program as
the plan was quickly amended to reduce the number of missiles and change the nature of their
construction. In fact, if it were not for the efforts of a few moderate Democrats there was a good
the MX project would have ended up either competently gutted or having its funds frozen. In
fact this was the reality several times throughout the deliberation process where the House would
approve funds for the missiles then freeze the funds until certain aspects of the missile program

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were changed.\textsuperscript{19} This coincided well with a new arms control strategy supporting the idea of a nuclear freeze in which no new nuclear weapons would be built by both the Soviet Union and the United States. Hardliner Democrats like David Obey in the House and William Proxmire in the Senate, continually created the support base for these strategies and combined with a few Republicans that had issues with the missiles based on local concerns, the result was a significantly changed plan. Obey and other Wisconsin Democrats feared that increased defense spending would end up hurting budgets for domestic issues like education. In a 1980 speech David Obey explained quite simply that “When it [budget committee] allocates more resources for one category like defense, there is going to be less available for other categories like education.”\textsuperscript{20} Faced with threatening opposition, the Reagan administration took steps to lower costs and fundamentally changed the proposed plan by abandoning construction of the underground railway system in favor of placing the new missiles in previously constructed silos and decommissioning a large number of older Titan missiles to prevent the overall ICBM number from climbing.\textsuperscript{21} Eventually the number of missiles was reduced from 100 to just 50.\textsuperscript{22}

Even with these concessions, the MX missile program needed support from some Democrats to get the program running. Wisconsin’s delegation contain a fair number of representatives who fit this category. The most outspoken of these Democrats was Representative Les Aspin. Les Aspin is an interesting case of switch identity, as he had in the past been strongly opposed to the Vietnam War and any increases in military spending. His

\textsuperscript{21} Cox News Service,” Proxmire concedes Reagan will get his defense request,” \textit{Wisconsin State Journal} (Madison, Wisconsin), April 6, 1983.
\textsuperscript{22} Louisa S. Hulett, \textit{From Cold Wars to Star Wars}, 103.
opinion unexpectedly changed by 1983 when Aspin described the MX missile as “major negotiating tool” saying that the missiles would give the US the capability it needed to push the Soviets into further arms agreements.\(^23\) Over his years in the House, Aspin had become known for his expertise on military matters. Several reasons account for his shift in opinion on the MX. First, Aspin had a genuine interest in improving the United States’ nuclear arsenal as a tool for getting the Soviet Union to play ball with arms control. Besides the MX, Aspin also greatly supported the creation of smaller single warhead “midgetman” missiles that could be placed on mobile launchers and moved onto US highways in the event of a Soviet attack.\(^24\) Aspin had an interesting view on arms control; he disliked how much debate was centered on the best way to pursue arms control and he felt that “we are wasting our time trying to judge them in terms of good and evil, what matters is what works.” To Aspin that meant keeping the United States’ nuclear arsenal at peak operating capacity and keeping the Soviets on their toes while reducing the threat of war, mostly through a method known as “build-down” where a ratio of old missiles would be retired for every new missile created. The MX then was the prefect plan for Aspin’s arms control philosophy because it would allow for the United States to continue to keep up with nuclear arms while at the same time, starting to actually reduce the total number of missiles with build-down.\(^25\) The second reason for Aspin’s approval of MX was purely a political career move; his reputation for being a military expert and his long service on the House armed services committee put Aspin in a good position to become a Secretary of Defense. To achieve this goal, he needed to distance himself from his prior anti-military positions. Finally, there was the


election of 1980 which had been dangerously close for Aspin, so he felt inclined to hop on the
Reagan bandwagon as a way of putting himself in a better electoral situation come the next
election. For all these reasons, Aspin played a critical role in trying to negotiate with
Democrats in favor of both the MX and other military expansion policies. While the MX project
was just one of the items on a very long list of military expansions proposed by Reagan, it
provides a good example of the type of discourse and the kinds of positions that Wisconsin’s
congressional delegation had on military expansion issues.

In terms of expanding US presence against the Soviet Union, the Reagan administration
did not put military expansion as its sole agenda item. There was also a new push for a dramatic
increase and change of United States foreign aid policy that attracted reaction from the
delegation. For years, Democrats in Congress had been the premiere group advocating for
increased foreign aid money. The difference between what they wanted and the direction the
Reagan administration wanted to go depended on the definition of “foreign aid.” Democrats
like David Obey were strong supporters of foreign aid for development based programs, while
most Republicans and Reagan wanted to shift aid in a more military direction to provide anti-
communist fighters and governments the tools they needed to hold off communism and weaken
the Soviet influence bloc. Much of the Administration’s plan was based on assumptions that
were critical to the ideas of containment adopted by President Truman in the late 1940s. This
was also keeping in line with the promises they made during the 1980 election were they
promised to reverse what they called an American “retreat” for fighting communism. While it
might seem out of place today communism more specifically, Soviet communism was view as an

26 Robert David Johnson, the House and the End of the Cold War, 270.
27 F Norman J. Ornstein, President and Congress, 77.
28 Bradley Lightbody, the Cold War: Questions and Analysis in History, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 98.
ever permanent fixture of the world and it was considered far easier to devote resources to keeping states like Afghanistan and Nicaragua from becoming communist then it was to try and free already converted states from Soviet influence. Of course the real challenge for the Reagan administration was getting these military aid programs passed under an election mandate of fiscal responsibility and government cut-backs. As a result, the Reagan Administration was forced to be flexible and work with opponents.

From those serving in the House from Wisconsin at that time, no one was more outspoken on this issue than Democrat David Obey who was a major leader in the lobby for development based foreign aid. He displayed this in 1981 by voting against a bill that would have cut funds to the International Development Agency, an affiliate organization of the World Bank that provided loans to developing nations by some 15%, a compromise from an earlier amendment that cut the fund by almost 40%. At the same time, Obey also opposed a bill that would have provided some $5 million to aid the government of El Salvador in its fight against communism. These stands against any military use of aid were often in vain because the Reagan Administration led an attempt to cause a shift in Republican perception of foreign aid. This, combined with a weak coalition of Democratic leaders who were willing to compromise made all or nothing stands like those taken by Obey unwinnable. From Wisconsin, Representative Clement Zablocki was one of the major Democrats in the coalition that worked with the Reagan administration. Zablocki was excited at the prospect of bringing more

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Republicans on board in support of foreign aid because for years Democrats had been punished for their support of foreign aid by a public that was worried about wasteful spending. Zablocki was also a prominent member of the Polish-American community and unlike Obey was not fazed by bills that increased military support for nations in a battle with communism because there was a strong desire to prevent others from feeling the domination of Soviet control like what had happened to the Polish Solidarity movement.³³ In the Senate, the Reagan administration used Republicans like Bob Kasten as agents to bring in republicans from states that were far less politically diverse than Wisconsin. Cooperation was easier said than done in the House, as proposals for bipartisan foreign aid bills that contain a balanced mix of both development and military based aid continually failed to get enough Republican support, despite the Reagan Administration’s lobbying.³⁴ Zablocki conceded the need for total Republican support, and worked with the Reagan administration to have more liberals onboard in the coalition, but at the cost of reducing the total military aid.³⁵

In the early part of Reagan’s presidency, questions of resource allocation were the first instances where Wisconsin’s congressional delegation came into contact with the new administration. Case studies of the MX missile project and foreign aid appropriations demonstrate that members of the delegation never truly abandoned their party identities even when the issues end up being categorized as “bipartisan.” For issues like foreign aid, bipartisan really did not mean that the parties were aligned in their goals, but rather that there was enough give in and take for enough people from both sides to lessen their traditional party stances in a

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³³ F Norman J. Ornstein, President and Congress 80.
³⁴ F Norman J. Ornstein, President and Congress 81.
³⁵ F Norman J. Ornstein, President and Congress 82.
need to achieve their own party or personal goals as opposed to actually having a legitimate interest in working together.

IV. Rhetoric: the case study of Ronald Reagan versus David Obey

While the initial policies of Reagan’s first term provided ample opportunities to develop relationships with Congress, the rhetoric that inspired the policies is equally important as it often generated its own reactions. The difference between looking at policies as opposed to rhetoric is the fact that policy is often the result of many compromises and differing opinions, while political rhetoric typically reflects a more unitary voice. Politicians can employ similar rhetoric in expressing their goals and ideas, but there is an inherent individuality in it. The rhetoric of Reagan’s first term went in a starkly different direction than that of presidents during the détente period. Much like the policies of increasing the American military and expanding anti-communist operations overseas, Reagan’s rhetoric took the United States back to an anti-communist stance very similar to that of Truman’s during the Red Scare in the 1950s. The aggressive and accusatory nature of Reagan’s words prompted fear and response from Wisconsin Democrats like David Obey, while Republicans like Bob Kasten took advantage of the president’s speaking skills to further their own goals. Through an analysis of a selection of Reagan’s public speaking opportunities and two speeches by Wisconsin Democrat David Obey, the connections between foreign relations with the Soviet Union, partisanship, and Wisconsin congressional politics become much clearer.

36 Bradley Lightbody, the Cold War: Questions and Analysis in History, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 99.
The first instance of President Reagan’s rhetoric comes at the start of his presidency in a 1981 White House press conference. In this press conference, Reagan set the anti-communist, anti-Soviet agenda that characterized the drive to rearm the United States to fight against a determined enemy that was not willing to compromise.\textsuperscript{37} When asked what he thought the intentions of the Soviet Union were Reagan answered:

“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 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.\textsuperscript{38} ”

This was not just public posturing by the President; in his private diaries, President Reagan reveals that he did not trust the Soviet government during the early part of his presidency. On the issue of the grain trades to the Soviet Union, President Reagan wrote on February 4\textsuperscript{th} 1981, “Trade was supposed to make Soviets moderate, instead it has allowed them to build armaments instead of consumer products.\textsuperscript{39}” In the same press conference President Reagan also expressed his unenthusiastic view of current arms control agreements like SALT which he described as allowing “a continued buildup on both sides of strategic nuclear weapons but, in the main thing, authorizes an immediate increase in large numbers of Soviet warheads.\textsuperscript{40}” Reagan used this perception of the Soviet Union as a constantly expanding and untrustworthy enemy to justify his plans to expand the United States military which in his view was underfunded and was outnumbered by Soviet forces in key theaters like Europe.\textsuperscript{41} This was


\textsuperscript{39} Ronald Reagan, and Douglas Brinkley, \textit{The Reagan Diaries}, 2.

\textsuperscript{40} Ronald Reagan, “Presidential Press Conference January 29, 1981.”

\textsuperscript{41} Beth Fischer, \textit{The Reagan reversal 44}. 
combined with a central policy pillar that it should be the Soviets who make the first move in any arms control agreements going forward until the United States’ military was on more equal terms with the Soviet’s conventional forces in Europe.\textsuperscript{42} Common US military doctrine at the time was that the numerical superiority of conventional forces in Europe could always be countered in a worst case scenario by a small deployment of nuclear weapons in a regional strike.\textsuperscript{43}

A year earlier in 1980, Representative David Obey held a very different position on the United States’ and the Soviet Union’s military. By the time Ronald Reagan was in office, David Obey had become the star of Wisconsin’s Democrats. While Clement Zablocki, Les Aspin, James Moody, and William Proxmire led Wisconsin on certain hot issues like military expenditures and the space program, David Obey had more a board liberal approach that was respected by his peers. He also had a strong knowledge of the Soviet Union which he built up by both traveling there as part of a congressional delegation in 1983, and being a major part of a congressional committee created to welcome a Soviet Delegation in 1985.\textsuperscript{44} This popularity and respect could have propelled Obey to a run against Republican Bob Kasten, but in 1983 he decided to retain his important position on the House appropriations committee.\textsuperscript{45} From his powerful committee positions, special Soviet experiences, and respect within the party, David Obey is one of the best gauges of the rhetoric that Wisconsin’s Democrats would support. In a 1980 speech for the Wisconsin ex-POW association in Marshfield Wisconsin, Obey reveals his less aggressive summary of the US-Soviet relationship. He started his speech off by saying that “The United States will have a lot more staying power in the 1980’s than will the Soviet

\textsuperscript{42} Ronald Reagan, and Douglas Brinkley, \textit{The Reagan Diaries}, 290.
\textsuperscript{43} Beth Fischer, \textit{The Reagan reversal} 45.
\textsuperscript{44} Congressional research service, “Briefing documents for member of the US-Soviet delegation 1985,” \textit{David Obey Papers}, Wisconsin State Historical Society.
He went on to state that “No American Foreign Policy Planner in his right mind would want to change places with his Russian counterpart.” Obey added that the Soviet Union was in fact surrounded by countries that supported the United States and were willing to fight communism. In Obey’s view, Soviet expansion efforts were not dangerous assaults on American power abroad, but desperate attempts to escape an unwinnable geopolitical situation. Obey’s remarks were in effect linked to the results of a disastrous presidential election that saw the election of Ronald Reagan. If Obey were to change rhetoric to something more in line with that of President Reagan, the détente efforts of Jimmy Carter would not only be erased and deemed a failure, but he would also handicap public efforts by Democrats to fight Reagan’s defense buildup plans and efforts to retain control over domestic welfare issues.

By 1983 the deep divide between Reagan’s aggressive rhetoric and Obey’s calmer logical logic grew when Reagan gave his own famous “Evil Empire” speech. In the “Evil Empire” speech, Reagan showcases his powers as a public speaker in a speech that is even more powerful in delivery in person than reading the words alone. The key passage comes about two thirds through the speech where Reagan proclaims:

“Some would have us accept them at their word and accommodate ourselves to their aggressive impulses. But if history teaches anything, it teaches that simpleminded appeasement or wishful thinking about our adversaries is folly. It means the betrayal of our past, the squandering of our freedom. So, I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority. You know, I’ve always believed that old Screw tape reserved his best efforts for those of you in the Church. So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely..uh..declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant

misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and
good and evil.48

This speech had a profound impact on both the United States’ public and the Soviet
Union; the former in particular now feared that the military escalation and dramatic rhetoric were
signs that nuclear war was closer than most Americans had previously considered. The
leadership of the Soviet Union were now more fearful of a possible confrontation then they had
been for decades.49 In a 1983 speech David Obey stepped up his rhetoric at the Democratic
National Convention to convince Wisconsinites that the Soviet threat was not as great a threat as
President Reagan’s dramatics would have them believe and that arms control solutions like
Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and nuclear freezes were not yielding to evil, but were
logical steps towards peace. In his convention speech Obey argued:

“Overall we have 9,000 strategic nuclear weapons. They have 7,000, so we don’t have to panic.
We’re going to be around awhile unless nuclear miscalculation blows up half the world. Yes
you had better believe that the Soviets the Soviets would like to and are trying to make mischief
in many places around the world but do we really believe that the Soviet Union is the principle
cause of political instability and revolution around the World?50"

Obey’s speech was an effort to provide a logical alternative to Reagan’s emotional
language. Arguing that the number of nuclear weapons, both superpowers had was relevant
when the world was going to be destroyed in the event of a nuclear war. The language President
Reagan was using was, in Obey’s view, driving the country closer to war and into insanity, with
unnecessary military buildup programs that increased our doomsday arsenal far more that was

48 Ronald Reagan, “Evil Empire Speech March 8, 1983,” Public Papers of the President, Accessed through:
https://www.reaganlibrary.archives.gov
49 Valdislav M. Zubok, A Failed Empire: the Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev, (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 305.
50 David Obey, “Speech at 7th district Democratic Convention 1983,” David Obey Papers, Wisconsin State Historical
Society.
needed. Later in the speech Obey addresses this, concluding that “we must regain our sense of balance and above all, we must resume the push for nuclear arms control.”

During his visit to the Soviet Union, Obey also expressed in a speech he gave there a desire to forge bonds between the United States and the Soviet Union in the midst of growing anger between the two countries:

“As one member of Congress who believes that both our countries have occasion engaged in counterproductive belligerence on both the policy and rhetorical level as one who believes that both of us are at times unnecessarily driven by our own fears and insecurities I hope I have given you a sense of how important it is that we do make progress on these issues.”

Giving this speech in Moscow determined the type of approach Obey took in this speech, but there is a definite continuity between it and his convention speech. That being said, a let cooler heads prevail approach, arguing it was in the best interest of both countries to work together, comprised of the majority Wisconsin Democratic rhetoric during Reagan’s first term.

It would not be completely accurate to say that David Obey’s position represented the entirety of Wisconsin’s congressional delegation, but even when there was a split, many of the suggestions and key talking points worked with one another. There was one stand out from the Democratic Party who continued to support arms increases and harsher rhetoric towards the Soviet Union. That person was Les Aspin, who from his support of both the MX and midgetman missile systems, was still gunning for a higher position either in the armed services committee or as secretary of defense. In a 1985 newspaper article, Aspin confirmed that he did in fact agree with Reagan that the Soviet Union was “an Evil Empire” and was making questionable policy moves that threatened the United States. However, this was not a blind endorsement of the

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rhetoric Reagan presented in his first term and the policy moves that went along with it, because he added the condition that for arms control to be the future of US-Soviet relations, then Reagan would have to give something up rather than wait on the Soviets to extend some gesture or greater compliance.53 What does this say about the overall picture of Wisconsin’s congressional delegation and its responses and changes to President Reagan’s rhetoric? It means that while there may be a difference in the exact wording and the partisan position that Wisconsin’s representatives based on their own political goals, often the end conclusion is the same. While Obey and Aspin had differences regarding the support of the MX missiles and the exact nature of the Soviet Union, in the end by the end of Reagan’s first term as president, the Democrats were trying to get across the message that they were not going to stand for a foreign policy that just waited around for the Soviet Union to make the first move on arms control simply because they were seen by the United States as the more belligerent nation.

By 1984, the success of the Reagan Administration’s attempts to increase America’s defense output and the growing concern from both Democrats and the general public over the threat of nuclear war was starting to change and effect the rhetoric President Reagan was using in his speeches. This process was slow and as this White House speech from January of 1984 illustrates, the rhetoric changed to a sort of a hybrid combination of making sure Americans view the Soviet Union as a hostile force, while at the same time suggesting that there is room for negotiation:

“We've come a long way since the decade of the 70's, 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 ICBM's, 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.  

Earlier in his first term, this would have most likely been the bulk of his statements, but Reagan now suggests there is room for the United States and the Soviet Union to work together. In a later section of the same speech President Reagan said to it is important that we “must and will engage” in talks with the Soviet Union and that there will always be differences between the two countries, but he said that there was “common interest” between the two countries.

When it came to the aggressive rhetoric of Reagan’s first term, there was clear objections to and breaks from that language from the Wisconsin Congressional Delegation that demonstrates there was no monolithic public view expressed by government officials towards the Soviet Union. Even when serving as a representative of the United States in his official visit to Moscow, David Obey felt no need to fall into line and makes statements that were in line with what the President had said; he felt independent enough to make statements that were quite different from that of the executive branch. Even as Reagan changed his tone and started to incorporate more cooperative language, the Wisconsin Democrats continued to fight the narrative of the Soviet Union as an evil force that was winning arms race because doing so would have jeopardized the legacy of President Jimmy Carter and future political goals as a party that was going to take softer would thought-out action towards the Soviets.

V. Realignment: Gorbachev and Reagan’s special relationship

Even with the aggressive rhetoric of President Reagan’s first term, the Cold War would essentially come to an end by the end of the decade. Much of this is the result of a shift in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States that occurred during Reagan’s second term and saw the creation of a new working relationship which was helped greatly by Soviet Union’s new leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Coming to power in 1985, Gorbachev was unlike the general secretaries who had led the Soviet Union earlier in the decade. They in the main had attempted to retain as much of the old Soviet military and foreign policy. Gorbachev, on the other hand, had a greater desire for the creation of new policies and reforms while also having a strong tendency to seek cooperation and compromise.\textsuperscript{56} Through the rest of Reagan’s presidency the two leaders would meet five times to discuss important issues such as nuclear arms control, human rights, and the SDI program. The four most important of those meetings being the summit in Geneva, Switzerland in 1985, the summit in Reykjavik Iceland in 1986, the meeting in Washington D.C. in 1987 and the meeting in Moscow in 1988. From the first of these meetings to the last in 1988, it is clear that Reagan and Gorbachev were able to build a strong working relationship that prior leaders of the Soviet Union and United States simply did not have. While Wisconsin’s congressional delegation had little to no control over these closed summits, they did have power to draw unique conclusions and to weigh in on the respective arms control treaties. Much like the heads of states of both nations, Wisconsin’s representatives came to the same conclusion by 1988, regardless of their starting rhetoric, that the new Soviet leader was someone who could be worked with.

\textsuperscript{56} Valdislav M. Zubok, a Failed Empire 278.
The first meeting between President Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev lasted from November 19th to the 21st and was the least productive of these four meetings, but laid the ground work for increased cooperation. It started off extremely promising as an initial meeting that was supposed to last 15 minutes but which continued for over an hour.57 In his memoirs written after the fact, Gorbachev noted that this first meeting remained very surface level with both leaders retaining to their respective traditional stances. Gorbachev wrote:

“As I reread the minutes, I am amazed at the extremely ideological stands taken by both partners. In retrospect, they read more like the No. 1 Communist and the No. 1 Imperialist trying to out argue each other, rather than a business like talk between the leaders of the two superpowers.”58

Reagan too in his recounting of the meeting felt the first sort of cold war ideological struggle rather than a productive attempt to make headway on any real issues. In his journal he wrote:

“He [Gorbachev] said we had declared zones of special interest around the world but attacked the USSR when they did the same thing. We must recognize the right of people to a revolution. Well finally it was my turn and I took them all the way through the history of Soviet aggression…”59

If the rest of the summit had continued this way there probably would have been little future relations between the two leaders as Gorbachev described Reagan as a political “Dinosaur” stuck in the past.60 Reagan’s appraisal of the Soviet leader wasn’t much better; he said Gorbachev was “really belligerent,” especially in talks about America’s missile defense program SDI which was attempting to use a series of early warning satellites and lasers to destroy incoming ICBMs in space as a defensive measure.61 By the time the summit had come to an end very little had been

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58 Mikhail Gorbachev, Sergeevich Memoirs / Mikhail Gorbachev, First ed, (New York: Doubleday), 1996.
60 Mikhail Gorbachev, Sergeevich Memoirs, 407.
accomplished and the two leaders could barely agree on a joint statement stating their resolve to meet again.

The underwhelming results of this first summit generated very little response from congressional leaders. It appeared that further meetings would be business as usual in that both leaders would continue to shout ideologically charged statements at one another without any substantive policy breakthroughs. This did not anger or engage Congress per say because unproductive ideological battles meant that the status quo was maintained and nothing important had been lost. In reality this was only true for the American side of the issue, as the Soviet leaders in midst of an economic crisis were unhappy at the inability to overcome traditional ideological barriers; they felt more pressure to adopt a new approach in order to relieve the financial strain of the arms race. They quite simply did not have the luxury of holding the status quo like the United States did. Among Wisconsin’s congressional delegation, this feeling was most captured by Les Aspin, who was most active in voicing his opinions about the Gorbachev-Reagan relationship, using his position as a chairman of the armed services committee. In a newspaper interview published on November 22\textsuperscript{nd} of that year, Aspin said that the meeting was “long on style and thin on substance.” He then admitted that this was not necessarily a bad thing when he said “the fact they are talking is good and the fact they are meeting again is good.” It wouldn’t be until the next summit in Reykjavik that the two leaders would create controversy.

The results of the 1986 Reykjavik meeting were probably the most interesting and important of the four meetings described in this paper. Reagan’s continued support of SDI resulted in the failure of the two leaders to come to an agreement that would have resulted in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Valdislav M. Zubok, \textit{a Failed Empire} 285.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Kenosha News Courier, “Congress Praises Summit Beginnings.” \textit{Kenosha News Courier}, (Kenosha: Wisconsin), November 22, 1985.
\end{itemize}
end of nuclear weapons in the next ten years. At the summit, it looked as if the two leaders were going to adopt the same standard stances as had been evident in Geneva, but Gorbachev became adamant that the two leaders seriously discuss arms control. Reagan noted his eagerness and proceeded “it was plain that they wanted to get to arms control, so we did." Of course this was all a part of the strategy the Soviets had composed from the lessons learned in Geneva back in ‘85. In his memoirs Gorbachev reveals that the drive for arms control was in fact a critical part of the overall Soviet strategy and he was willing to make big reductions suggesting a cut back as to as much as 50% of the total nuclear arsenal in every category to break the status quo:

“It was the first time that the Soviet Union had agreed to such a big reduction in its ground-based ICBM force. This was our most powerful strategic weapon and was considered a major threat by our ‘potential enemy’ as we used to call the Americans. But now we would have agreed to this step to unlock the stalemate in the disarmament process by now completely blocked by decades of fruitless talks.”

This took Reagan and his team somewhat by surprise, and the discussion moved very quickly, indeed probably faster than both groups would have preferred. At one point both leaders started to seriously discuss an agreement to completely disarm all their nuclear weapons over a ten year period. There was one catch in the way through, much the same as in Geneva, Gorbachev was not going to agree to such a major cut in nuclear weapons without something being done about SDI. Gorbachev knew Reagan had a personal connection to the project and was willing to let SDI research continue under the stipulation that no research be conducted in space. This was something President Reagan would simply not allow and he admitted this fact in his diaries “He [Gorbachev] wanted language that would have killed SDI. The price was high but I wouldn’t sell and that’s how the day ended.” Gorbachev agreed that SDI was in point that

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prevented agreement at Reykjavik and described it the situation as “Success was a mere step away, but SDI proved an insurmountable stumbling block.” Despite the failure to accomplish anything really meaningful at Reykjavik, the summit was a major turning point in US-Soviet relations. It was now quite clear to the United States that the Russians were seriously ready to discuss arms control and move forward towards easing tensions in a way that was more permanent than détente. In the later meetings at Washington D.C. in 1987 and at Moscow in 1988 both sides came prepared to discuss real solutions to Cold War issues. The result of this was an ever increasing working relationship between Gorbachev and Reagan especially coming from President Reagan. At the 1987 meeting in Washington, he noted that “Our Teams have been meeting literally around the clock and great progress has been made.” And at the end he would describe it as the “best summit we’d ever had with the Soviet Union.” This working relationship reached its peak by the 1988 Moscow meeting. By that time Reagan said “There is no question in my mind but that a certain chemistry does exist between us.” By this time Gorbachev had similar things to say about Reagan. In one instance he recalls two instances of Reagan’s visit to Moscow that display how much better at cooperation the two men were:

“The American President made an unfortunate gesture, knocking over a glass of water and apologized. ‘Never mind, Mr. President,’ I commented jokingly ‘a carless move with a glass of water is no big deal. If it had happened with missiles…., we all laughed at the joke and the tension eased.”

Later Gorbachev recalled an instance from their shared tour of Moscow: “Someone from the crowd asked ‘Mr. President, do you still see the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire’? Ronald

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67 Mikhail Gorbachev, Sergeevich Memoirs, 418.
Reagan’s reply was short: ‘No.' It was now abundantly clear that a major thaw had occurred over the course of the meetings following the summit at Reykjavik.

Wisconsin’s congressional response shared a similar experience and started out extremely upset and aggressive as a result of the “failure” of Reykjavik, but generally warmed up as the President and General Secretary made more agreements and the Soviet Union started to reform itself. The fact that SDI was a major issue preventing agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States was quickly known by the general public and there was major backlash from Wisconsin’s Democrats directed at the President. The fact that the disarmament they had been advocating for years for was put on hold for a military program which was in their view of dubious value was utterly frustrating. In a *Madison Capital Times* article, Les Aspin, a supporter of SDI as a bargaining chip for agreements, said that Reagan had walked away from the “deal of the century…he hangs on the hope of eventually reaching an agreement.” In another interview Aspin said that he thought there was certainly an opportunity to strike a deal with the Soviet Union, but it waste of time to talk about massive sweeping cuts in the nuclear arsenal because those kind of offers just could not be realistic. Aspin was not alone in his view of the President; Senator William Proxmire agreed with Aspin, but was less concerned about the 50% reduction opportunity, but the inability of the President to give up SDI despite its massive costs and the fact that the program actually had not provided any real results. He also said that the complete abolishment of nuclear weapons would most likely make “the world safe for conventional war”

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70 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Sergeievich Memoirs*, 457.


and that such agreements were nothing, but pure “fantasy.” Wisconsin Democrat Robert Kastenmeier went so far as to say that Reagan had “no commitment to arms control arrangement.” Republican Senator Bob Kasten also could not hide his “disappointment” at the results of the summit, but as a strong ally of Reagan since 1980 he tried to remain positive about the situation. He claimed “that what happened in Iceland was only a snapshot in the arms control process.” He also said that he was confident that “the Soviets would be back.”

In a way Kasten was actually fairly accurate; the 1987 meeting in Washington brought forward more agreements with the Soviets which quickly changed the tone of the Reagan-Gorbachev relationship. The fact that this conference resulted in the signing of a major agreement on intermediate missiles in Europe was certainly a boost for the summit that encouraged mainstream support, but still had some doubters. William Proxmire who a year ago had serious concerns about the President’s ability to make a deal with the Soviet Union now described the deal signed by the two leaders as an excellent treaty. Proxmire also received support from Republican Bob Kasten who expressed full support for the President’s actions thus far. Democratic representative Kastenmeier also had a nearly 180 turn of opinion from what he said in 1986 and now in ’87 said “I think the stage is set, and we should see meetings between

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the Soviet Union and the United States next year on long-range reductions of strategic arms.\footnote{Joe Beck, “Treaty Wins Praise, Vote of Proxmire,” Madison Wisconsin State Journal, (Madison: Wisconsin), December 11, 1987.} Not all the members of the delegation had been completely influenced by the optimism of the 1987 Washington meeting. Les Aspin continued to be critical of the President and stressed that the agreement reached in Washington was “a small step in the wrong direction.” Aspin’s main concern was a feeling that arms reductions of that type would leave the United States military open to attack in Europe with no choice but to escalate to strategic weapons.\footnote{Associate Press, “Aspin: We should have used Force in Panama,” Madison Wisconsin State Journal, (Madison: Wisconsin), June 4, 1988.} The optimism surrounding these new agreements and the reforms started by Gorbachev had a profound effect on the delegation to the point that by 1988, the majority of the delegation had a positive view of the Soviet Union and its leader in particular. For the rest of the decade up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the perception of the Soviet Union reached an all-time high, due mainly to the efforts of its leader who came to represent change in the Soviet Union. In a speech at a UW law School in 1988, David Obey expressed confidence in Gorbachev’s leadership and what it meant for the Soviet Union. “The biggest opportunity for the US is presented by the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev is bringing about changes in the Soviet Union…\footnote{David Obey, “Speech at UW Law School 1988,” David Obey Papers, Wisconsin state Historical Society.}”

It is clear from this speech and other statements made by the delegation that there was a significant change in the perception of the Soviet Union and its leader during Reagan’s second term in office. Unlike President Reagan and his staff, the Wisconsin delegation did not have direct access to the relationship between Gorbachev and Reagan and so they had to rely on hard pieces of evidence like arms reduction treaties to confirm the Soviet leader’s intentions. From
their perspective, summits like Geneva and Reykjavik were failures because they did not produce hard signs of cooperation even as the two leaders started to form a working relationship.

VI. Conclusion:

The Cold War was a massive era that directly affected the lives of millions of people around the world and forever changed history. While it is important to study the largest players in the system, it is also important to recognize that the choices these big players made were not created in a vacuum and were often part of a larger system composed of hundreds of people that carry their own unique opinions and solutions. The truth of the matter is that as much as he wanted to, President Reagan couldn’t do whatever he wished for he was beholden to a large Democrat power center in Congress that his Republican supporters could not control. This decade might not have produced a House name or ideology like Joe McCarthy, but nevertheless there were still important figures like David Obey, Clement Zablocki, James Moody, Les Aspin, Robert Kastenmeier, William Proxmire, and Bob Kasten who demonstrate the spectrum of congressional positions during this decade. Wisconsin’s delegation is special because it is one of the few states that had representatives across this spectrum from Democrats and hard stance liberals to supportive Republicans. In the future, case studies of other battleground states could provide additional insights into how the foreign policy of this last dramatic decade of the Cold War was forged.
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