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RONALD REAGAN AND SUMMITS WITH THE SOVIETS

It has become a time-hallowed tradition in the Soviet Union that the incumbent dictator will test each new American President in an ordeal of summitry. This practice was temporarily put on the backburner during the illnesses and deaths of Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko, but Mikhail Gorbachev seems eager to revive it.

The prospect of U.S. Presidents meeting with Soviet bosses does not evoke optimism. Past summits are a dismal record of vain illusions shattered by diplomatic defeats. Our Presidents seem to be no match for the single-minded toughness of Kremlin dictators who know what they want and are uncompromising in seeking their goals.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt told William C. Bullitt in 1943, "I have just a hunch that Stalin doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing from him in return, noblesse oblige, he won't try to annex anything and will work for a world democracy and peace."

So, FDR went to Teheran in 1943 and to Yalta in 1945 and gave Joseph Stalin Poland and Eastern Europe, strategic bases in the Far East, and three votes in the United Nations. Noblesse oblige didn't work; we got nothing in return.

President Harry Truman's attitude toward Stalin was: "I like old Joe. He's a decent fellow." So Truman went to Potsdam, reaffirmed Yalta, and divided up Germany.

President John F. Kennedy traveled to Vienna to meet Nikita Khrushchev in 1961. Khrushchev shouted and threatened to move against West Berlin with conventional forces, and even to use nuclear weapons. Kennedy said it was "a very sober two days."

Khrushchev made his personal estimate of Kennedy's character, and then taunted him in a message sent via the poet Robert Frost, that the Kennedy Administration was "too liberal to fight -- even in defense of U.S. vital interests." Kennedy made no response; so Khrushchev conspired with Castro in 1962 to plot the clandestine deployment of offensive nuclear missiles to Cuba.

Richard Nixon went to Moscow in May 1972 to meet with Leonid Brezhnev and sign the

SALT I Agreements at 11:00 p.m. after a state banquet, free-flowing liquors and numerous toasts, just in time to make the Friday evening national TV newscasts in the United States. Only later did we find out that the fine print pledged us to the mad doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction and an inferiority in ICBMs and missile-launching submarines by a ratio of 3 to 2.

Brezhnev welcomed President Gerald Ford with bear-hugging and vodka at Vladivostok in Siberia in 1974. Then Brezhnev ambushed Ford into agreeing to the essential elements of what later evolved into the SALT II agreement.

Jimmy Carter traveled to Vienna in 1979 and kissed Brezhnev on the occasion of the signing of the SALT II Treaty. It was so disadvantageous to the United States that the Senate never ratified it.

After that sorry series of sellout summits, how can we hope that Ronald Reagan will do any better than his predecessors of both parties? Reagan is an easy-going, non-confrontational personality who appears on the surface to be no match for the hard-driving Communist boss who claws his way to the top of the Kremlin apparatus.

But a recent New York Times analysis piece by Hedrick Smith has convinced me that we have nothing to worry about. Smith and three other reporters sat down face to face with the President in the Oval Office and discussed 27 questions, mostly on foreign policy.

As Smith described this interview, Reagan was "unshakable" on his Strategic Defense Initiative (called Star Wars by the media). Smith reported that SDI was the one issue that "moved him most deeply, the one on which he had the strongest convictions."

The label "Star Wars" was devised by the anti-Reagan media as an epithet of derision. The reporters surely hammered away at the President on this issue, but they were unable to dent the President.

They came away believing that Reagan "intends to press ahead with research on such a system regardless of what happens in the talks on offensive weapons and that, once the defensive technology is developed, he wants to see it deployed." Hedrick said that "the force of his position comes across as much in his body language as in what he says."

So, come along to a summit, Gorbachev. Ronald Reagan will be disarmingly pleasant. He might even say, "Mikhail, there you go again." But Gorbachev will have to conclude, as have many reporters, Congressmen, and staff before him, that it is useless to try to change Ronald Reagan's mind on issues he really cares about -- and SDI is one of those.