

Reagan, Bush, and Gorbachev: Ending the Cold War

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In addressing the topic of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union under Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, I will have relatively little to say about Gorbachev, partly because there are many people here at the Gorbachev Foundation who know a great deal about Gorbachev and partly because my good friend William Taubman is busy finishing his biography of Gorbachev. Also, I have already written a great deal about Gorbachev myself over the past 10-15 years, and so today I will focus on U.S. policy.

My remarks are based on research I have done in recent years at the U.S. presidential libraries (which are administratively under the National Archives and Records Administration but are located at various locations around the country), including the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley and the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, TX. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has declassified many thousands of documents pertaining to the Gorbachev era, and these are available in two separate locations: the agency's extremely useful online reading room of declassified records (www.foia.cia.gov) and the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) collection at the National Archives in College Park, MD. There is some overlap between these two repositories, but not as much as one might hope. Work is under way to merge the two and to have everything available online, but this process is fairly slow because of technical incompatibilities. Finally, I have drawn extensively on the memoirs of all key participants on the U.S. side. These memoirs, and interviews I have conducted, are crucial in "connecting the dots" and giving the policymakers' own perspectives. Memoirs, of course, have to be used with great caution, but they can be an invaluable source.

Let me start by briefly emphasizing the importance of the passage of time. I then want to focus in some detail on allegations that the Reagan administration set out to destroy the Soviet Union. And I then want to return to the question of the Bush administration's policy, which has at times been harshly criticized by Western analysts for having been too passive. My own view is the opposite — I have increasingly come to appreciate the benefits of “doing nothing” when the main alternative is to do something stupid. Policymakers deserve credit, not condemnation, when they do nothing rather than give in to pressure to do something foolish.

The passage of time under Reagan and Bush was crucial. The contrast with 1953 and 1989 brings this out. The major policy adjustments that were needed to overcome the Cold War could not suddenly happen all at once. The sweeping reorientation of East-West relations in the latter half of the 1980s occurred over several years, giving policymakers on both sides sufficient leeway to adapt and to “learn” new ways of interacting. Those interactions reinforced Gorbachev's confidence that the West would not try to exploit his new approach in East-Central Europe. In 1953, by contrast, the window of opportunity for Georgii Malenkov and other Soviet officials before the June 1953 uprising in East Germany was much too compressed to allow for fundamental adjustments and learning on either side. Deep reservoirs of mistrust and suspicion in both Moscow and Washington could not be dissipated overnight, and any headlong attempt to surmount the East-West divide was highly vulnerable to derailment. Except in the immediate aftermath of war, drastic change in international relations is apt to require a prolonged period of gestation.

Yet, in both 1953 and the late 1980s, that is precisely what happened. In 1953 the Cold War divide in Europe, which might have receded if Soviet leaders had stuck with the course they had initiated in June 1953, became far more entrenched after July 1953 when the USSR shifted decisively to a two-state approach vis-à-vis Germany. In the late 1980s, Gorbachev's domestic

reforms not only inspired his steady reorientation of Soviet foreign policy but also spilled over into East-Central Europe, paving the way for the collapse of Communist regimes there. These converging trends gave rise to the dramatic events in the latter half of 1989 that ended the East-West divide in Europe and severely eroded the bipolar configuration of the international system. That is why the passage of time mattered.

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The next part of my presentation today will deal with the question of the Reagan administration's intentions toward the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the United States influenced the Soviet Union in numerous ways, both directly and indirectly, and it is not always easy to tell whether a particular form of influence played a role in the events of 1985-1991. The question that has often (perhaps too often) been of greatest interest to Western (and Russian) analysts and policymakers is whether *deliberate* pressure from the West forced the Soviet Union to carry out sweeping changes and, eventually, to disintegrate. Observers in both Russia and the West have provided radically different answers to this question. In the West, some analysts, including Peter Schweizer in his book *Victory*, have argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the direct result of pressure exerted by the Reagan administration as it pursued a comprehensive strategy to undermine Soviet rule. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Raymond Garthoff's book *The Great Transition*, which argues that Western pressure, far from contributing to the Soviet collapse, actually prolonged both the Cold War and the existence of the Soviet regime.

A similar dichotomy is evident in Russia, where some former hardline officials and military officers, including Vladimir Kryuchkov and Valentin Varennikov (both of whom were centrally involved in the August 1991 coup attempt), insisted that the United States subverted and destroyed the Soviet Union. Kryuchkov and Varennikov accused Gorbachev of treason, and

Kryuchkov repeatedly alleged that one of Gorbachev's top aides, Aleksandr Yakovlev, was secretly working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1980s and early 1990s. By contrast, some other former Soviet officials, notably Gorbachev himself, have strongly denied that Western pressure played any role in Moscow's decisions to seek far-reaching arms control treaties, to curb military spending, and to scale back Soviet foreign policy commitments. When Gorbachev was still in office, he repeatedly condemned "allegations by conservative forces [in the USSR] that perestroika was imposed on us by the West." In the years since 1991, he has continued to argue that Western pressure did not spur his domestic program or his "new thinking" in foreign policy. Gorbachev concurs with Raymond Garthoff's assertion that the Reagan administration's pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) – a program announced with great fanfare in March 1983 to develop technologies for defense against long-range ballistic missiles – merely delayed, rather than expedited, reforms in the Soviet Union.

The juxtaposition of these highly contradictory views is useful in establishing some of the parameters of the debate, but the issue is more complex than this clash of views implies. It is certainly true, as Peter Schweizer indicates, that the Reagan administration made a concerted effort to apply pressure on the Soviet Union, but it is also true that similar efforts were made in earlier decades, notably by the administration of Harry S. Truman. Documents released from the U.S. archives show that the Truman administration pursued an aggressive campaign of rollback vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc – a campaign far more ambitious and more dangerous than the steps taken in the 1980s by the Reagan administration. (Ironically, one of the strongest proponents of an aggressive rollback program was the director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, George F. Kennan, the so-called architect of containment. It turns out that, during the crucial early years of the Cold War, Kennan believed that highly provocative covert warfare against the Soviet Union was essential.)

The earlier rollback policies did not lead to the breakup of the USSR, even though the Soviet state in the aftermath of World War II not only was weaker (because of the extensive damage and loss of life caused by the war) than it was in the mid-1980s, but also was confronted by full-scale armed insurgencies in western Ukraine, the Baltic states, and western Belorussia. The lack of results under previous U.S. administrations should make us wary of assuming that U.S. policy was decisive in the 1980s in undermining the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration's wide-ranging efforts to exert pressure on the Soviet Union were important, but monocausal explanations of the collapse do not take us very far.

Yet, even if the United States did not single-handedly *cause* the Soviet Union to moderate its foreign policy or to dissolve internally, U.S. policy undoubtedly *contributed* to the outcome in numerous ways. Pitfalls arise when assessing one country's influence on another. The difficulty in this particular case is compounded by the inaccessibility of crucial documentation. Although many highly sensitive documents are now available at the Russian State Archive of Recent History and the archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, large gaps in the documentary record remain. Hence, it is not always possible to tell whether (and how) particular forms of Western pressure (or positive inducements) affected Gorbachev's rise to power and his subsequent policies.

The problems in tracing Western influence loom large even with issues that are often assumed to have had a major effect. Despite the sharp increases in U.S. military spending in the early 1980s, U.S. military budgets decreased in real terms from fiscal year (FY) 1985 on, at the very time that Gorbachev became CPSU General Secretary. Moreover, although Gorbachev eventually came to perceive the "burden" of military spending in the USSR as an obstacle to economic reform, it is not clear that he subscribed to that view when he first came to office. After all, Soviet military spending continued to rise until 1990. In any case, it is questionable whether military spending actually posed as much of an obstacle to economic reform as is often assumed.

Because total factor productivity in the Soviet Union was declining in the late 1970s and 1980s, the opportunity costs of high military spending most likely were relatively modest. Reductions in military spending – which did not actually begin until late in the Gorbachev period – might not have gained much in other sectors, especially in the short term.

Even if that is the case, however, the key thing is how Gorbachev himself *perceived* the issue. Whatever his view may have been when he took office, he soon came to believe that reductions in military spending would ease the task of economic reform. But the link between that perception and the earlier rise in U.S. military spending is at best hard to discern.

Another myth that has arisen, a myth that remains widely believed in Russia to this day, is that the Reagan administration secretly conspired with Saudi Arabia in 1981 to flood the market with oil and thereby drive down world oil prices, bringing pressure to bear on Soviet oil exports. The myth holds that Saudi oil output rose sharply in the first half of the 1980s and thus drove down world oil prices to record lows, a direct result of the alleged U.S.-Saudi conspiracy orchestrated by the Reagan administration.

This argument has been put forth in many books that are on sale in leading bookstores like Dom Knigi and Biblio Globus (it is also alleged by Peter Schweizer), but the problem is that it is totally undermined by the actual data. Let me provide full data for Saudi oil output in the 1980s, which come from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the statistical information unit of the U.S. Department of Energy.

Here are the relevant data for the first half of the 1980s: At the end of 1980, just before Reagan took office and when world oil prices were at their peak, Saudi oil output was 9.9 million BBD. In 1981, Reagan's first year, Saudi output dropped slightly to 9.815 million BBD. In 1982, Saudi output declined by 34 percent to 6.483 million BBD. In 1983, Saudi output dropped by another 21.6 percent to 5.086 million BBD. In 1984, Saudi output declined by a further 8.3

percent, to 4.663 million BBD. **And in 1985, Saudi output dropped by a further 27.4 percent, to 3.388 million BBD.** World oil prices declined precipitously every year from 1981 to 1985, but that obviously had **nothing to do with Saudi production levels.**

More important than the aggregate level of U.S. military spending or fictional conspiracies with Saudi Arabia were two specific policies that the United States and its allies pursued in the early 1980s: the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Western Europe, and the provision of covert military aid to anti-Communist guerrillas in Afghanistan. If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had not proceeded on schedule with the INF deployments in 1983, the delay would have damaged the alliance and would have invigorated the hardline forces in the Soviet Union that were seeking to undermine NATO. Similarly, if the United States had not supported the guerrillas in Afghanistan and had permitted Soviet troops to establish outright control over the country (as they nearly did on several occasions in the early and mid-1980s), the traumatic Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan would never have occurred.

The combination of the INF deployments and the support for guerrillas in Afghanistan (a policy begun by the Carter administration and then expanded under the “Reagan doctrine” of support for anti-Marxist insurgencies in Angola and Nicaragua as well as Afghanistan) had important implications for Soviet foreign policy and, indirectly, for Soviet domestic affairs. The success of the U.S. policies dealt a blow to hardline officials in Moscow, including several who were still on the Politburo when Gorbachev became CPSU General Secretary. The inability of the hardliners to produce better results undoubtedly gave the new Soviet leader greater leeway to consider “new thinking” in foreign policy, which began in earnest in 1987 and early 1988.

The subsequent changes in Soviet foreign policy soon led to a far-reaching improvement of relations with the West – an outcome that Gorbachev could claim as a major achievement. Many officials in the two U.S. administrations that dealt with Gorbachev – the first under Ronald Reagan

and the second under George H. W. Bush – initially were skeptical that the new Soviet leader genuinely wanted to reorient Soviet foreign policy. But when Gorbachev began offering dramatic concessions in arms control negotiations and then decided to pull Soviet troops out of Afghanistan and Africa, the ranks of the skeptics diminished. Robert Gates, a high-ranking CIA official under Reagan (and later director of the agency), who was one of the initial skeptics of “new thinking,” recalls in his memoirs that the boldness of Gorbachev’s initiatives in 1987-1988 offered “the final proof that, at least in foreign policy, this was a very different Soviet leader.”

When the Bush administration took office in 1989, senior officials launched a policy review to determine whether the Reagan administration’s basic strategy toward the Soviet Union – a strategy that entailed cooperation with and support for Gorbachev, though with notable caution – should be adjusted. The review dragged on for an inordinately long time, but in the end the existing line of cooperation with Gorbachev was reaffirmed. The fruits of that cooperation were vividly apparent by the end of the year, with the largely peaceful collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. The Cold War was over, and a new era had begun. The fundamental change in U.S.-Soviet relations had three important consequences for internal developments in the Soviet Union.

First, Gorbachev’s personal stake in maintaining the new U.S.-Soviet relationship, and his desire to gain Western financial backing, gave the United States an unusual degree of leverage over many of his decisions, including decisions at home that affected the stability of the USSR. Robert Gates, who moved from the CIA to become deputy national security adviser under President Bush, recalls that “behind the scenes, there was constant pressure on Gorbachev from Bush and [Secretary of State James] Baker to avoid the use of force in the Baltics and elsewhere, to end the use of force and of economic sanctions quickly when Gorbachev resorted to such coercion, and to set in motion a process of negotiation to resolve disputes” with the Baltic

governments. In August 1990, when the U.S. Congress moved to provide ten million dollars of humanitarian aid to the Lithuanian government, high-ranking Soviet officials privately expressed deep irritation, arguing that “this action is obviously intended to bolster the separatist movement in the Lithuanian republic and to encourage analogous processes in other regions of the USSR.” Even so, the U.S. overtures about the Baltic states, according to one of Gorbachev’s top aides, Anatolii Chernyaev, had to be “taken into account” by the Soviet leadership. In the past, U.S. influence on domestic affairs in the Soviet Union was negligible, but by the end of the 1980s Gorbachev’s policies toward human rights activists, dissidents, and peaceful nationalist movements were increasingly constrained by his desire to stay on good terms with the West. Although it is unlikely that Gorbachev’s hopes of attaining further improvements in U.S.-Soviet relations ever had an overriding impact on his actions at home or drastically altered his outlook, they undoubtedly induced a degree of caution about the way he dealt with democratic forces in the USSR.

Second, the changes in Soviet policy toward the United States in the late 1980s may have had internal consequences that Gorbachev did not anticipate. In the famous “long telegram” of February 1946, George Kennan argued that the Soviet regime (then ruled by Stalin) deliberately fostered the impression of a grave external threat to justify the maintenance of tyranny at home:

The Bolsheviks . . . found justification [in Marxism] for their instinctive fear of [the] outside world, for the dictatorship without which they did not know how to rule, for cruelties they did not dare not to inflict, for sacrifices they felt bound to demand. . . . [By] pictur[ing] the outside world as evil, hostile, and menacing, [the Soviet regime] provides justification for that increase of military and police power in [the] Russian state, for [the] isolation of [the] Russian population from the outside world, and for that fluid and constant pressure to extend [the] limits of Russian police power.

Assuming that Kennan was right, Gorbachev’s efforts to deflate the impression of an external threat were bound to have far-reaching implications at home. The Soviet Union’s highly publicized campaign in the late 1980s to “do away with the enemy image” (i.e., to allay fears

abroad that the Soviet Union posed a danger to other countries) necessarily entailed a sharp reduction of the Soviet government's own threat perceptions. As numerous Western observers pointed out at the time, Gorbachev began steadily downplaying the magnitude of external threats to the USSR. This policy was intended mainly to provide a basis for eventual cuts in military spending, but in the process it inadvertently eliminated one of the crucial props of the Soviet regime – the myth of an urgent foreign threat. This is not to say that the end of the Cold War led inevitably to the collapse of the Soviet Union – that outcome was far from inevitable – but it does seem clear that the greatly reduced perception of an external threat made it harder to keep the state from unraveling.

Third, the fundamental improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations vindicated the sentiments of those in the Soviet Union who – either secretly or openly – had become sympathetic to Western democratic values. Over the years, the example provided by the United States and its allies, with their democratic freedoms and prosperity, was a marked contrast to the lack of freedom and low living standards in the Soviet Union. Until the Gorbachev era, very few Soviet citizens could actually travel to the West, but the ones who did get a chance to go there were able to see for themselves that the Soviet media's alarmist depiction of the West was highly distorted. Information that seeped into the Soviet Union via short-wave radio broadcasts and underground publications also provided an alternative viewpoint to the official media. The number of people who actually received this information was relatively small, but they included individuals who came to play key roles under Gorbachev. These were the people who, like Eduard Shevardnadze, concluded that the Soviet Union had to become a “civilized country.” For most of them, there was no sudden epiphany that changed their attitudes toward the West; instead, it was the cumulative realization that democratic values and free markets were a profound source of strength. This point had always been emphasized by leading Soviet dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov, who received

moral support from the West and who overtly espoused Western democratic principles. But in the pre-Gorbachev era the dissidents were officially scorned and persecuted, often by force. Not until the situation turned around in the late 1980s, and Western values suddenly won acceptance in the Soviet Union, did the long struggle of the dissidents finally pay off.

These consequences of the new U.S.-Soviet relationship were bound to have at least some influence on Gorbachev as he tried to figure out how to prevent the Soviet Union from descending into chaos. It is interesting to note, however, that Gorbachev was not the only one who felt constrained during the final year of the Soviet regime. In 1990-1991, and particularly after the reunification of Germany in October 1990, the Bush administration felt a major debt of gratitude to Gorbachev for the momentous changes he had overseen. Bush by then had developed a trusting and friendly relationship with Gorbachev (as had Baker with Shevardnadze), and the last thing Bush wanted to do was to undermine the Soviet leader's position. U.S. officials therefore were generally discreet about their support for democratic and nationalist movements in the Soviet Union. As Gates indicated, most of the pressure occurred behind the scenes. Critics of this approach, in the U.S. media and Congress, argued that the administration was being too timid and was investing too much in Gorbachev, whose hold on power appeared increasingly tenuous. In late July 1991, Bush traveled to Kyiv and gave a speech before the Ukrainian parliament in which he vowed not to "support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism [or] aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred." Although the speech was not aimed specifically at Ukraine, where pro-independence sentiment was increasing rapidly by the summer of 1991, it seemed peculiarly inappropriate. The "chicken Kyiv" speech, as it became known, came to symbolize everything that the critics disliked about the Bush administration's policy toward the Soviet Union.

There is certainly merit in the critics' complaints, but there is also some merit in Gates's

argument that the administration was confronted by an extremely fluid situation in which missteps could have done great harm:

Historians may criticize the Bush administration for not taking a more aggressive stand in support of the independence movements among the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. Certainly, Baltic-Americans were critical at that time. It is useful to remember, however, that during that period the President was faced with the liberation of Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, a revolution in the Soviet Union, and the danger of an explosion there as a result of either economic crisis or centrifugal forces. The challenge was to promote these changes – and to arrange it in the case of Germany – keep them peaceful, and to try to have them carried out in a way that did not guarantee future conflict. We also fought the Persian Gulf War, in which Soviet political help was important. As in Eastern Europe, perhaps George Bush's greatest contribution was in knowing both what to do as these events took place, and what *not* to do.

Coping with the turmoil in the Soviet Union in 1991 would have been a formidable challenge for any U.S. president. Even those who believe that, on balance, the Bush administration was too cautious in its approach can agree that the results provided a degree of vindication for the policy. Bush's firm opposition to the August 1991 coup left no doubt about where the United States stood, and the administration's management of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 – by offering to recognize newly independent states only after they lived up to certain requirements – proved helpful as the leaders of the republics made final preparations for the post-Soviet era. The breakup of the Soviet Union could have ended much worse, and the administration was able to contribute, at least at the margins, to a remarkably peaceful outcome.