When Did the Cold War End?

The partition of Germany cast a shadow over European politics for more than forty years. A divided Germany was the main front of a quiescent but ever dangerous military confrontation, the wall between two ways of life, and a fundamental barrier to political reconciliation in Europe. When this division ended, the terms of German unification were definitive. There was no coming together of the two systems. A free and prosperous Federal Republic of Germany absorbed the constituent parts of the failed German Democratic Republic. Soon after, the Soviet bloc, and indeed the Soviet Union itself, lay in ruins.

Gorbachev's Vision
The great irony is that the Cold War could not have ended without a fundamental change in Soviet policy. Students of this period will long debate why the Soviet Union pursued a new course, as well as the role of the United States and other countries, but none can deny a central place in the story of the Cold War's end to Mikhail Gorbachev and the "new thinkers" who took power in Moscow in 1985.

One is even tempted to see the outcome as somehow inevitable and inexorable—a natural outgrowth of a fundamental change in the way Moscow dealt with the rest of the world. This is typical of what the English historian Herbert Butterfield has called the "whig interpretation of history." What Butterfield meant, writing more than sixty years ago, was that historians all too often array the past before us with almost godlike powers, placing events into an order that seems to march logically from where we were to where we are, interpreting the past through the eyes of the present. "The total result of this method," writes Butterfield, "is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present," preferably demonstrating "an obvious principle of progress."

It is easy to fall into a "whig" interpretation of the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev's "new thinking" was crucial, providing as it did the initial conditions for the events that unfolded and for a while pushing the process along. Yet it is wrong to say, as some have done, that Gorbachev intended to end the division of Europe and succeeded.

Gorbachev did want to "end the Cold War" and create a "common European home." He used those phrases. But he attributed a particular meaning to them. Events did not turn out in accordance with his plans. The "whig" historian, writes Butterfield, "too easily refers changes and achievements to this party or that personage, reading the issue as a purpose that has been attained, when very often it is a purpose that has been marred." So it was with the purpose of Gorbachev's "new thinking." Internal change was Gorbachev's main concern. Changes in foreign policy were intended to help perestroika succeed. Yet in domestic affairs Gorbachev did not really seem to know where he was going. He knew that the status quo was unacceptable. It was characteristic of him to keep trying to move forward, zigging and zagging, compromising at times, always the master of tactics, but unsure about his precise destination.

In foreign policy, though, Gorbachev was thought to be resolute. He seemed to know what he wanted: to end the Cold War, encourage the rise of legitimate reformers in Eastern Europe through a policy of noninterference in their affairs, and reintegrate the Soviet Union into the international system as a trusted partner. In this view he moved smartly forward, pursuing this agenda from 1985 until 1990, when events slipped out of his control.

Gorbachev foresaw the Soviet Union taking its place in a "common European home," in which capitalist, socialist, and communist countries existed on a seamless continuum—not in two hostile camps. The states of Europe would trade and work together despite their different forms of governance. The Soviet Union would be not just tolerated because its military power was feared but accepted as the heir to Russia's historical ties to Europe. Gorbachev believed that reform in Eastern Europe would produce "little Gorbachevs" who would make socialist rule viable just as he was making socialism viable in the USSR. He believed that when the division of Europe was overcome in this way, it would be on the basis of "human values" that the Soviet Union had helped to define. He believed that a pan-European security system would
replace both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. He believed, in short, that Europe, with the Soviet Union as an integral and organic part, would be a new continent—not Western, not Eastern, but a “common home.”

The operational implications of the Gorbachev vision were imprecise, allowing others to fill in the concrete terms. Gorbachev fully intended to maintain, even enhance, the Soviet Union’s status as a superpower. Thus, elements of rivalry and competition with the West existed side by side with the vision of the new Europe. On any given day Gorbachev was driven to devise a new way of overcoming the latest opposition of those on the left or the right who did not share his goals.

This is not to detract from the tremendous importance of the “new thinking” or to underestimate how radical it truly was. People sometimes abandon long-held views and make nonlinear leaps of imagination. Such leaps are especially hard for political leaders, whose beliefs are among the sources of their power, reflected in institutions, the bases of their authority and their legitimacy. Not surprisingly, these leaps rarely take place when things are going well. Rather, they often occur in response to crises, when the old ideas have failed and “everything is rotten.”

Gorbachev’s “new thinking” was a reaction to a system in crisis. The problem was a structural one: the centralized, isolated, and heavily militarized character of the economy, which had its origins in the late 1920s. This system had worked well for industrialization, but the world had passed it by as more decentralized economies, encouraging innovation from below, made rapid technological progress. The Soviet leaders had known for some time that the system was not working and were looking desperately for a way out. Radical new ideas were discussed in academic circles, but they were too unorthodox for the men in power. It is in this sense that Gorbachev is truly a remarkable historical figure. He understood his options differently and somehow saw a link that successive Soviet leaders had failed to see: Soviet domestic problems were inextricably bound up in an international policy guided by definitions of national interest that had changed little since the rule of Josef Stalin.

The Soviet economy was faltering, in part, because it was isolated from the world economy. Gorbachev’s knowledge of the international economy and its key institutions was limited. He sometimes seemed to define participation in the world economy simply as membership in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the Group of Seven leading industrialized countries (G-7). He did not understand the changes that were needed in the Soviet economy or their implications for Soviet society. But he seemed to grasp one key point: the Soviet Union could not end its economic and political isolation without a fundamental shift in the foreign policies that had made it a pariah within the international system.

In days past the Soviet Union had taken pride in being a pariah—neither an accomplice to nor a victim of global capitalism’s exploitation of the world. This is how Soviet leaders understood Marxist-Leninist ideology. And ideology mattered, not as a blueprint for action but in defining the range of the possible. Soviet policy from the time of Josef Stalin had been ideological in precisely this way. It had one central tenet—that the long-term interests of the Soviet Union could not be reconciled with those of an international economic and political order dominated by capitalist democracies. The world had to be divided until the day when socialism would triumph. Marxism was at once both the foundation for the internal organization of the Soviet Union and the basis of its place in the world.

Successive Soviet leaders believed that the West would ultimately try to destroy socialism either by war or, after nuclear weapons seemed to rule this out, by subversion. Stalin structured the Soviet Union as a country that would go it alone until a “ring of socialist brother states” could provide additional resources and security. He made it absolutely clear that the survival and prosperity of the Soviet Union was the first priority for any good communist. The policy demanded self-sufficiency for the economy and provided insulation from an international economic order that the Soviets feared. The system successfully made maximum use of the resources of its multinational empire to support Moscow’s goals and prepare the Soviet state for World War II. But this isolation from the world economy, almost from the Soviet Union’s inception, doomed Moscow to live with its peculiar economic structure.

After the war Stalin’s hopes for “a ring of socialist brother states” were realized. Soviet leaders tried, sometimes imperfectly, to harness Eastern Europe’s economic power toward the goal of building a stronger Soviet Union. This was done principally through the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), an institution created to coordinate the administration of the socialist economies—a mandatory function in a system where trade relations could not be regulated by the market or the value of convertible currencies. So the Soviet leaders continued to build this countersystem, which isolated them further from the economic and political order dominated by the West.

The Western policy of containment deepened Soviet isolation. East-West trade was constrained, and the West formed an organization, COCOM (Coordinating Committee for East-West Trade), to coordinate limits on the export of militarily useful technologies to the Eastern bloc. The COCOM members argued constantly about what exports to control, but the net effect of the system was to help push the Soviet economy further and further away from cutting edge technologies, stunting not only Moscow’s military economy but civilian development as well.
By the 1970s the myth of an “alternative” system was beginning to break down. The Soviet Union was increasingly dependent on imported grain and foreign technology. Some East European states did all that they could to make the boundaries between their own economies and the West more permeable, and occasionally—as with Poland’s membership in the IMF—they succeeded. But the Soviet Union never abandoned hope that its own alliance institutions could be revitalized to meet modern economic challenges. Thus, the Soviets fiddled endlessly with CMEA, trying to rationalize trade among the states without converting Eastern currencies. But CMEA remained a closed system, sustained by the exchange of shoddy products that had little value on the world market.

Tactical adjustments were needed, and in the 1970s détente provided the ideal framework for cooperation with the West. Moscow, at the height of its power, thought that it was strong enough to make that accommodation on equal footing. There was little to fear and much to gain. The Kremlin believed that the “correlation of forces,” a kind of rough measure of the progress of socialism, was moving in the Soviet Union’s favor.

The West read détente as a means by which to ensnare the Soviet Union in a “web of interdependence” that would give Moscow a stake in the international system and regulate Soviet behavior. But Moscow’s stake was very limited. The Soviet leadership wanted to avoid a suicidal war at all costs, acquire economic and technological help from the West, and enjoy the diplomatic and symbolic benefits of superpower status. Moscow was the equal of the United States in military terms. Nuclear equality or parity was the Soviet Union’s best insurance that its “alternative” international system was secure. From this perspective détente was a triumph for the socialist alternative, not an accommodation. Leonid Brezhnev spoke proudly of how the West had come to terms with Soviet power and of Moscow’s ability to defend not just its own interests but those of the entire socialist world.

But it was not long before the West was thoroughly frustrated with the Soviet government’s conduct. Moscow’s active policy in the third world, culminating in the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, led observers to accuse the Soviets of violating the rules of cooperation. Moscow, of course, understood those rules differently. The Carter administration found itself on the defensive as it became apparent that the Soviet Union had undertaken an enormous buildup of its conventional forces. Although debates about the size of the overall military buildup will probably never be resolved—figures range from 12–18 percent to 25–30 percent of some imaginary “real” Soviet gross national product—one expert, David Holloway, perhaps put it best when he told his colleagues, “I am agnostic about how much. Suffice it to say it was a lot.”

In the face of that challenge, the United States turned to a strategy that tried to leverage American technology against Soviet brute strength and numbers: the creation of precision-guided munitions and new weapons systems that depended on sophisticated technology Moscow could not hope to match. At the end of his term President Jimmy Carter requested the sharpest increase in U.S. defense spending since the height of the Vietnam war.

For Ronald Reagan even that was not enough. He believed that the West had been soft on communism and had paid dearly for it as Soviet power and influence spread across the globe. He came to office determined to confront and convert its foe. Reagan’s confrontational style was evident in the way he thought and talked about nuclear weapons. Convinced that the Soviets believed nuclear war to be winnable, he redirected American nuclear strategy toward “warfighting” as the basis of deterrence. In doing so he frightened many Europeans and made many Americans uneasy, particularly when his secretary of state (and former NATO commanding general), Alexander Haig, spoke about a “demonstrated nuclear shot” to convince Moscow of Western resolve should war break out.

That style was evident in arms control, too, which the Reagan administration was certain had codified Western weakness and Soviet strength. Reagan assumed an all-or-nothing negotiating stance, insisting on a “zero option” for U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe. He made clear that the United States would deploy its own nuclear missile forces in five NATO countries if Moscow did not remove every single one of the more than four hundred SS-20 intermediate-range missiles that appeared to pose a distinct new threat to Western Europe. The deployment of the U.S. missiles was to begin in 1983.

The Soviet government used every available political and diplomatic asset to prevent the deployment of the American missiles. Relations with the United States were tense. Popular movements protesting the deployments were given support. The West German election of 1983 became a testing ground for the political strength of the opposing sides. But the United States and its Western allies stood firm and refused to compromise. Helmut Kohl, who backed up the United States, won the 1983 election. The deployment began on schedule in December 1983. Although it was four years before Moscow accepted Reagan’s “zero option,” NATO had taken the Soviet Union’s best shot at derailing Western policy and won. The failure of that confrontational approach had a lasting effect on the Soviets’ thinking about their policy toward Western Europe, discouraging, as Gorbachev later acknowledged, faith in a purely military approach to Soviet security problems.

Reagan’s hard line was evident in other aspects of the policy as well.
Moscow needed to be compelled, Reagan and his advisers believed, to pull back across the globe. The United States supported these policies with large increases in military spending. In 1983 Reagan opened a new high technology front with the decision to pursue the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), promising that space-based defenses could shield the United States from a nuclear attack. Even though most scientists doubted its plausibility as a "defensive shield against nuclear weapons," Soviet leaders—particularly military leaders—took the challenge very seriously indeed. 20

The American emphasis on new military technology went well beyond SDI. Most important, it seemed to threaten the Soviets’ greatest asset, their conventional forces. Already worried about the emphasis on “smart” munitions, Soviet generals argued that the real impact of SDI would be to harness the sophisticated technology of the West, such as lasers, optics, and real-time information processing, to render Moscow’s vast conventional forces obsolete. American high-performance aircraft married to smart weapons and computer-aided guidance became the Soviet General Staff’s worst nightmare. Chief of the General Staff Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov railed against these “reconnaissance strike complexes.” 21

The challenge to Soviet military technology crystallized the key structural problem in the Soviet economy. The problem was not just to build a better tank or an atom bomb. The Soviet Union had been very good at that, using its command economy to direct resources toward feats of engineering and industrial production. This time the Soviet Union faced not just a new military weapon but integrated weapons systems that drew on a variety of technological innovations. 22 Soviet military leaders were the first to realize the significance of this challenge. Ogarkov did not simply call for more money. He wanted the Soviet Union to confront the challenge head-on, pouring massive resources into a race for technological sophistication in weaponry, which the Soviet Union was bound to lose.

The worries of the professional officers had to concern the political leaders of the Soviet Union. Military strength had first claim on the country’s resources and on its finest human and physical assets. It is no accident that military parades became more grandiose as the Soviet Union’s internal decline accelerated. Military power was a source of pride, the country’s best and brightest achievement. But in the last year of his life, Leonid Brezhnev began to send signals that he was not so sure that the Soviet Union could or should try to meet the demands of a new arms race.

As Moscow’s economic, political, and military difficulties mounted against the Western challenge, a succession of geriatric Soviet leaders—Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Konstantin Chernenko—seemed unsure about what to do. They constructed arguments explaining why the West’s assault would have to fail. Some said that the hardening Western policies were evidence of a deepening crisis in capitalism. 23 The Kremlin tried to play the “peace card,” with workout initiatives to demonstrate that the Soviet Union was indeed the guarantor of international stability. But the Soviets clung to their leadership of a socialist alternative and hoped that Reagan and his ilk would just pass from the scene.

One option would have been for the USSR to settle into a grim effort to harness the best that the command economy could produce and confront the West yet again. The economy might have sputtered along as in the past. Or the Soviet government could have declined to participate in a new arms race, holding on to existing gains and simply ignoring the U.S. military buildup. But what the Soviet leaders believed they faced was a deterioration in their position, not a continuation of the status quo.

In fact, the Soviet leadership appears to have rejected both of these options before Gorbachev was chosen to take control of the party, and the country, in March 1985. Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister, had successfully engineered a return to the bargaining table with the resumption of the Strategic Arms Reduction (START) talks in the fall of 1984. With Reagan’s reelection appearing certain and Reagan himself describing hopes for a more conciliatory direction in East-West relations, the Soviets may have thought that détente was back on track.

But Gorbachev decided that such minor adjustments in policy were not enough. Muted calls to change fundamentally the Soviet Union’s relation to the West had filled the halls of Soviet academic institutes and the pages of scholarly journals for years. Now there was a Soviet leader who was prepared to explore the possibilities. Gorbachev had few preconceived notions about foreign policy and had spent almost no time traveling in the West. This son of an agricultural worker from Russia’s Caucasus region was a child during the Second World War, when his home was occupied for four months by German troops during the high tide of German conquest in 1942. But the German occupation of his region was relatively benign. Instead it was the Stalinist deportations following the retreat of the Germans that left searing memories for the young man. Gorbachev’s family had suffered hardship and hunger as a result of Stalin’s collectivization of agriculture, and his paternal grandfather had been sent to Siberia by Stalin’s secret police. 24

Gorbachev’s rise through the party ranks was rapid yet unremarkable. His reputation for unpretentious competence, and a direct no-nonsense style attracted powerful patrons in Moscow, particularly Yuri Andropov. But his biography reads like those of scores of other party apparatchiks of the period. There was little in his background to suggest that this general secretary of
the Communist party would be so unlike his predecessors. It did not take long for his distinctive personality to emerge, however. He had an attractive demeanor, and displayed obvious intelligence and courage. In 1989 he was fifty-eight years old. His alert, flashing, and intense eyes were the physical attribute that stood out most, contrasting as they did with his rather squat stature. He greeted people warmly and always with a broad smile. But Gorbachev could turn steely in direct exchanges, speaking from notes that he himself had prepared by hand. He could make off-the-cuff remarks that took his counterparts by surprise. When president-elect George Bush, in his first meeting with Gorbachev, asked what the Soviet Union would be like in three, four, or five years, Gorbachev responded with a quip: "Even Jesus Christ couldn’t answer that question." Yet he rarely seemed truly candid. Rather, he was self-aware at all times, projecting different sides of his persona—sometimes within a matter of minutes—for a presumably calculated effect.

Unlike his counterparts in Washington and Bonn, Gorbachev did not have a national security staff of his own. A suspicious Josef Stalin had destroyed his personal staff out of fear that they knew too much. That tradition survived him, and general secretaries were, from that time on, dependent for assistance on the secretive party apparatus and, in foreign policy, on the staff of the international department of the party’s Central Committee. When Gorbachev took power it was as the leader of the party, served by party staff. There was no “presidency” or “presidential staff” then; that came later.

Over time Gorbachev began to build a personal staff. But he was difficult to help, according to those who worked for him, given to placing his own phone calls from his dacha and organizing his own calendar. Western officials found the Kremlin apparatus somewhat chaotic, having difficulty even in small matters, such as knowing how to locate Gorbachev for a phone call. Yet Gorbachev began to rely increasingly on a few advisers who worked directly for him. On Europe and Germany his advisers were drawn from a stable of Central Committee and Foreign Ministry experts and a few close aides chosen not only for their substantive specialties but also for their loyalty.

Alexander Yakovlev, a veteran diplomat and party ideologue known for his unconventional thinking, was one such adviser. Yakovlev had been ambassador to Canada when Gorbachev recalled him to Moscow, soon put him in charge of the Central Committee’s international department, and eventually elevated him to membership in the Politburo. Yakovlev had a reputation for harboring anti-American sentiments, but the most important thing about him was his commitment to the “new thinking.” He was, in fact, its intellec-

tual father and a principal architect of this new way of defining Soviet national interests.

Gorbachev’s closest personal aide was Anatoly Chernyayev, a veteran party theorist and top foreign policy adviser who had served as a propagandist in the international department of the party’s Central Committee. Chernyayev, sixty-nine years old in 1989, was rarely far from Gorbachev’s side. He was the note taker at almost all of Gorbachev’s private meetings with foreign leaders and was the man most often designated by Gorbachev as his point of contact for U.S. officials.

Gorbachev depended, too, on Marshal of the Soviet Union Sergei Akhromeyev, a veteran of the siege of Leningrad, chief of the General Staff until 1988, and a respected military professional. Though more conservative than Gorbachev’s “new thinkers,” Akhromeyev was an independent thinker on military matters who at times found himself at odds with Chief of the General Staff Mikhail Moiseyev and Minister of Defense Dmitri Yazov.

But by far the most important man in Gorbachev’s entourage was, like him, an outsider with no foreign policy expertise. Eduard Shevardnadze, the foreign minister, had been too young to serve in World War II, but his elder brother was killed defending Brest-Litovsk in the first days of the German invasion. Shevardnadze reflected later that “the war with fascism became a personal battle for me” and “the victory in that war became the victory of communism.” The war, he wrote, “formed my convictions and purpose in life.” Yet Shevardnadze grew up in Georgia, closer to Iran than to Germany, and never seemed to share the deep anti-German feelings sometimes found among Russians scarred by the war.

Shevardnadze rose through the ranks of the party in Georgia to leadership of the republic. He first met Gorbachev during the 1950s, and the two became friends. Shevardnadze had replaced a notorious party boss in the freewheeling Georgian republic and in the 1970s acquired a reputation for vigilance in stamping out official corruption. In many ways he was much like Gorbachev. When the new general secretary needed to bring fresh air to Soviet foreign policy, he called on Shevardnadze, who described the July 1985 invitation as “the greatest surprise of my life.”

Shevardnadze replaced Andrei Gromyko, a rigid figure of the past who had been involved in Soviet diplomacy since the time of Stalin. Shevardnadze spoke Russian with a Georgian accent and, free from the habits of Soviet-style diplomacy, brought a sharp change in perspective and style. He was admired by younger diplomats for his energy, honesty, and openness. In 1989 a book listing the hundreds of diplomats slaughtered as spies during the great purges
In 1937 was installed in the front hall of the Moscow Foreign Ministry building as a memorial to victims of the terror. That was the kind of ministry Shakhvardnadze tried to run, an institution willing to look history square in the eye, discard the past, and turn to the future with hope and, sometimes, resignation. In that sense he was a true believer in the “new thinking,” if less of a tactician than Gorbachev, habitually candid, even emotional in trying to solve problems.

Shakhvardnadze relied, in turn, on a few close advisers. Sergei Tarasenko, head of the ministry’s General Secretariat, was his constant companion. Although the fifty-two-year-old Tarasenko was a career diplomat with a background as an expert on the Middle East and on the United States, he seemed to hold no views that could be associated with the old regime. His intellectual passion was the politics of the Middle East, where he had served, not of Europe, but he worked on whatever problems concerned Shakhvardnadze.

Tarasenko found himself in frequent tugs-of-war with the experts on Germany. Among them was Yuly Kvitsinsky, ambassador to West Germany in 1989, then appointed during the spring of 1990 as Shakhvardnadze’s deputy handling European issues. A former arms control negotiator best known in the West for his “walk in the woods” with Paul Nitze during the negotiations on nuclear missiles in Europe, Kvitsinsky was competent but inclined to polemics. Though a wide-ranging, often skeptical thinker, Kvitsinsky supported the fundamental postwar Soviet position on the German question.

More conservative was Alexander Bondarenko, chief of the Foreign Ministry’s Third European Department, which included the Federal Republic of Germany. A decorated veteran of World War II, Bondarenko, sixty-seven years old in 1989, embodied the sentiments of an older generation. He had headed the German desk and been a member of the Foreign Ministry’s collegium of senior diplomats for nearly twenty years. Although Bondarenko could not have been further from the “new thinking” on Germany, Shakhvardnadze admired and listened to him.

Outside the Foreign Ministry the main rival source of advice on policy matters was the staff of the international department of the party’s Central Committee. Traditionally the Central Committee staff could be quite influential as the in-house source of advice for the general secretary, the effective head of the government, and also because the party and its organs had long provided ideological and practical guidance for the more traditional institutions of government. The Central Committee staff’s international department also had primacy in dealings with top party officials in the allied countries of Eastern Europe as well as with other foreign communists.

In 1988 Gorbachev completely restructured the Central Committee bureaucracy. Yakovlev, now a member of the Politburo, supervised the international department, headed by Valentin Falin, perhaps the Soviet Union’s leading expert on Germany. Falin had been the Soviet ambassador to West Germany from 1971 to 1978, forming close ties to the then-ruling West German Social Democratic party (in German, SPD). He supported close relations with Germany but understood clearly that Ostpolitik was meant to seal postwar realities in place. Falin in turn was assisted by Nikolai Portugalov, an expert on Germany who was acquainted with Kohl’s top foreign policy adviser, Horst Teltschik.

It did not take Gorbachev and his new team long to launch Soviet foreign policy in a different direction, at first through energy and charm, attributes that their predecessors had certainly lacked. The old themes were still evident, casting the Soviet Union as the defender of world peace. But Gorbachev soon gave new meaning to his rhetoric about the impermissibility of war in the nuclear age. Within two years Gorbachev and his advisers had redefined the operational aspects of Soviet military doctrine. They admitted that the Soviet military offensive presence in Europe was so large that it had become an impediment to good relations. Nuclear weapons had made all war unwinnable. Now it was possible to talk about large reductions in Soviet forces, both conventional and nuclear, reductions that might even be asymmetrical—that is, requiring deeper cuts in Soviet forces than in those of the West. The shift culminated in the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty at the end of 1987, committing both sides to eliminate these weapon systems and requiring the Soviet Union to give up four warheads for each one eliminated by the United States.

Yet the effort to defuse the military confrontation in Europe was just one aspect of Gorbachev’s redefinition of Soviet national interests. It is possible to imagine other Soviet leaders pursuing a radical arms control policy to stabilize the military competition against the Americans. What was truly extraordinary was Gorbachev’s goal of integrating the Soviet Union into a new Europe. This required a fundamental reevaluation of relations with Eastern Europe. Most startling of all, it moved the “new thinkers” to renounce the class basis of international relations which lay at the very heart of Marxist thought.

This turning point in the “new thinking” apparently came during late 1987 and in 1988, before and after a historic conference of the Soviet Communist party in the summer of 1988. At this party conference Gorbachev accelerated the course of domestic renewal, perestroika. Gorbachev’s historic speech to the United Nations General Assembly in December 1988 appears in retrospect
have been the culmination of a reevaluation of Soviet foreign policy and formulation of a new policy for Europe. In his speech Gorbachev announced a unilateral reduction of five hundred thousand in the strength of the Soviet Union’s front-line forces as well as measures to reduce the offensive character of the Soviet military presence in Europe. That was the headline. But there was a more fundamental point: his announcement that other socialist countries—the countries of Eastern Europe—would be permitted to find their own path without interference from the Soviet Union.

These military and political initiatives were linked inextricably in Gorbachev’s mind. His aide Chernenkov has described the preparatory speech in great detail and has lamented the widespread failure—even in the Soviet Union—to appreciate fully its ideological significance. It was not the first time that, from the Soviet point of view, the West had missed the point. The Soviets had tried to get Reagan’s attention at the June 1988 summit in Moscow with a declaration on the mutuality of interests between states in an interdependent world and the principle of noninterference in the affairs of others. It is not hard to see why Reagan’s advisers had viewed the statement as a set of slogans, not unlike those adopted during the period of détente for which Reagan had criticized his predecessors. The Reagan administration was focused on incremental steps to advance its own four-part agenda: human rights, arms control, bilateral relations, and regional security.

Gorbachev, however, was trying to convey a theoretical and philosophical message that, in his world, carried enormous significance. His December 1988 UN speech emphasized what he had been saying for months: Eastern Europe was free to go its own way, leaving no ideological barriers to one demilitarized Europe, tied together by interdependence and common values. When he first took office in 1985 Gorbachev had been cautious, adopting a conservative line with Eastern Europe, and stressing the importance of the world socialist system at party congresses in East Berlin and in Poland. He warned the Poles to be wary of “traps” in their attempts to seek more trade with the West. He derided market-style economic reform. “Some of you,” he said, “look at the market as a lifesaver for your economies. But, comrades, you should not think about lifesavers but about the ship, and the ship is socialism.”

As perestroika progressed in the Soviet Union itself, though, this policy fell out of step with Gorbachev’s domestic course. The Soviet Union began to reevaluate its approach to Eastern Europe. In November 1987, commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, Gorbachev declared that “national and social differences” in the “world of socialism” were “good and useful.” He was ready to count on reformist communist leaders like himself to scuttle the harshest aspects of the Stalinist system without destroying its Leninist foundation.

What was this irreducible “Leninist” foundation? Gorbachev was struggling to decide what was essential to Leninist ideology both at home and abroad. Sensing, perhaps, that perestroika was without firm ideological moorings, he sought to redefine the guiding ideology to keep pace with his vision. He asked working groups—headed by key aides such as Yakovlev and Chernyaev—to examine thoroughly the relationship of Leninism to perestroika in preparation for the party conference. Chernyaev describes Gorbachev in this period (late 1987 and the first half of 1988) reading papers that had been written for Lenin, histories of Marxist thought, and the writings of the “old Bolsheviks,” most of whom had been executed by Stalin.

Apparently Gorbachev took two lessons from his studies. First, there were many roads to socialism, and it was permissible to be guided by the historical conditions encountered in a given place or time. Second, there was nothing in Lenin that prevented one from adapting socialism to radically different circumstances, especially circumstances that Lenin himself had not foreseen. Failing to find specific blessings for his radical course, Gorbachev settled for Lenin’s vague endorsement of the need to be guided by practice.

The foreign policy implications of those findings soon became clear. Gorbachev had said that every socialist country could go its own way and concluded that there was nothing “un-Leninist” about that. If one could simply be guided by practice, it was easy to admit that the world was very different than in Lenin’s day. Thus, Yakovlev and Shevardnadze were able to take dead aim at proletarian internationalism as an outdated basis for foreign policy. They focused on the revolution in technology and communications, the borderless nature of environmental problems, and a host of other reasons why global interdependence was now the dominant factor in international life. Months before the United Nations speech, Yakovlev had declared that “class struggle” had lost its meaning in the international politics of an interdependent world. Shevardnadze elaborated at a “scientific-practical conference” of the Foreign Ministry, saying that class interests had given way to the interests of one interdependent world. These developments led Yegor Ligachev, one of the last old-style theoreticians remaining on the governing Politburo after the 1988 party conference, to appeal for reaffirmation of the fundamental nature of class struggle in Soviet international life.

But Gorbachev and his advisers did not agree. The Soviet Union would be a member of a common European home. As Gorbachev would tell the Council of Europe in July 1989: “It is not enough now simply to state that European states share a common fate and are interdependent . . . The idea of European unity must be collectively rethought, in a process of creative collaboration among all nations—large, medium, and small.”44 Two different social systems would exist side by side in this common home, with the
differences overcome by shared human values. Gorbachev continued to talk
about European socialism and Soviet communism as if they were cousins. 45
There was no reason why class struggle had to shape the international system.

In articulating this vision Gorbachev changed the very foundation of Soviet
foreign policy. Was it possible to think of Marxism as a set of principles for
the internal socioeconomic organization of states and say that this had no
implications for international relations? After all, when asked if he was a
Leninist, Gorbachev always answered yes, forcefully and without hesitation.
He did not accept Western notions of private property, and he once told
George Bush that he simply rejected the idea of people working for other
people as a form of exploitation. But he saw no contradiction between that
Leninist basis for the Soviet state and a set of common international values.
That made him unlike all of his predecessors and unlike Marx himself.

The insistence on common values was absolutely fundamental to the "new
thinking." When Bush met with Gorbachev at Malta toward the end of 1989,
the president asserted that the division of Europe could be overcome only
on the basis of "Western values." Gorbachev took that opportunity to rail
against this formulation, which he had "heard many times." He proceeded
to lecture the American president for almost twenty minutes. "We share the
values of democracy, individual liberty, and freedom," he declared. A beleaguered Bush tried to respond, but then Yakovlev and Shevardnadze joined in
the argument. Rather than argue about the place of ideals such as democracy
and individual liberty in Russian or Soviet history, Secretary of State James
Baker asked if it would be more acceptable just to characterize these ideals
as "democratic values." The Soviets settled down and agreed. 46

By 1989 the Soviets had abandoned the old notion of the "socialist alter-
native." 47 They were ready to be integrated into the international system
rather than isolated from it. They intended to join a transformed Europe on
full and equal terms. What did all this mean for the Cold War? It obviously
meant new chances for easing the U.S.-Soviet military rivalry. It meant that
the Soviet Union no longer felt a special obligation to support fraternal
socialist movements in the third world or to prop up regimes that would at
least ally themselves with the socialist camp. In Europe it meant that Moscow
would want friendlier political and economic relations and arms control talks
to reduce concerns about the armed forces deployed by the opposing alli-
cances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

By 1988 the United States appeared to be defining an end to the Cold War
as the achievement of three general goals:

1. Stabilize and reduce any danger from U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the develop-
ment and deployment of nuclear forces.

2. Defuse and ameliorate any major areas of tension in the U.S.-Soviet
competition for influence or advantage in the third world.

3. Persuade Moscow to move toward respect for the fundamental human
rights of its citizens as a basis for full Soviet participation in the interna-
tional community.

By these standards the results at the end of 1988 seemed impressive. The
Reagan administration and its allies believed that the 1987 signing of the INF
treaty and progress on a START treaty were accomplishing the first goal. They
had finally persuaded Moscow to accept on-site inspection as a basis for
verifying arms control. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and negotiated
settlements in southern Africa were signs that the second goal was moving
toward fulfillment. There had also been substantial though still uneven pro-
gress in the USSR's recognition of human rights. Hence, the most warlike
of cold warriors, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, could declare pub-
licly in November 1988, "We're not in a Cold War now." The American
Secretary of State, George Shultz, also judged in retrospect that at the end of
1988 the Cold War "was all over but the shouting." 48

But what of overcoming the division of Europe? In 1982 President Reagan
had told the British Parliament that his goal was to lead a "crusade for
freedom" that would end only when it left "Marxism-Leninism on the ash
heap of history." 49 Reagan also used the annual occasion of "Captive Nations
Week" to launch rhetorical missiles against communist control and Soviet
influence over the states of Eastern Europe, including the Baltic republics of
the Soviet Union. His vice president, George Bush, appeared particularly
convinced, delivering a provocative 1983 speech that denounced the postwar
division of Europe. 50 Yet with one major exception Reagan's policies did not
act on this rhetoric, though the Soviets worried openly that they might. The
major exception was Poland.

After the Polish military declared martial law in December 1980 and seized
control of the country in order to curb widening unrest led by the Solidarity
movement, Reagan cooperated with an odd assortment of Solidarity's sup-
porters, including the AFL-CIO and the Vatican, in a covert policy to keep
its leader, Lech Walesa, and the independent trade union movement alive.
The policy was a stunning success, and it contributed to Solidarity's reem-

er  gence as a popular force in 1988. But when George Bush sought to travel
to Poland in 1987 to pursue talks about legalizing Solidarity, the State Depart-
ment experts, worried that a Bush trip might stir up controversy, opposed it
until they were overruled at the last minute by Deputy Secretary of State John
Whitehead. 51

In general, though, the Reagan administration avoided direct clashes with
the Soviet government over the political division of Europe. Reagan did give a memorable 1989 speech in Berlin, standing at the Brandenburg Gate and challenging Gorbachev to “open this gate” and “tear down this wall!” It was a speechwriter who had come up with these words, not the foreign policy professionals. The policies for following up these statements were no more than mild efforts to regularize the existing Four Power controls over a divided Berlin. American diplomats did not consider the matter part of the real policy agenda; Shultz does not discuss the issue in his detailed memoirs. As former German chancellor Willy Brandt later wrote, Reagan may have “publicly called on Gorbachev to get rid of the Wall. But in negotiations with the Russians he set other priorities and certainly did not put in question the division of Germany.”52

None of this is meant to suggest that Reagan, Shultz, and Thatcher did not care about the division of Europe and Germany. They did. But the postwar realities seemed fixed, and they sought a renewal of détente—this time a genuine and lasting détente—as the best way to moderate the effects of Europe’s tragic division. They were succeeding, too. Shultz left office in January 1989 worried mainly that his successors in the Bush administration “did not understand or accept that the cold war was over.”53

When the Bush administration came to power, it was cautious about Gorbachev’s motives. U.S. officials saw the old constraints vanishing but wondered whether the positive trends would continue. “Once you say the Cold War is over,” the new national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, later recalled, “you can never take it back. You can only say it once.” Once the words were spoken, it would be hard to hold back massive reductions in defense spending. Scowcroft, like others in the administration, simply did not feel sure enough that the changes in the Soviet Union were irrevocable or had affected Soviet military posture in any fundamental way.54

As a result, the Bush administration started out slowly. The new team wanted to set a new course. Bush’s advisers believed that Reagan had gone too far to discredit reliance on nuclear weapons in Western defense. They set out to rehabilitate nuclear deterrence and refocus policy toward reducing Soviet conventional forces. Without exception, the top officials on the new Bush national security team were veterans of government service, picked more for their personal and professional qualities than for their ideological convictions. If there was a philosophical coloration, it combined a kind of pragmatic internationalism—belief in the essential verities of postwar American policy and institutions—with a suspicion of both the multilateral impulses of the Carter administration and the unilateralism of Ronald Reagan.

George Bush himself was both interested and experienced in foreign policy. Raised in an affluent New England family close to the world of establishment Republican politics, he was strongly influenced by his service in the Pacific theater as a young navy pilot during World War II and by more than a decade as an oil man in the desolate fields of West Texas, a young wife and children in tow. After returning to the political world in the early 1960s, Bush became the consummate insider, eventually capping twenty-five years in and out of public office with eight years of loyal service as Reagan’s vice president. He had served as ambassador to the United Nations, as emissary to China, and as director of the CIA.

As a person Bush was restless but unassuming, at once both relaxed and reserved. He was gracious, an easy man with whom to talk, displaying constant attention to small acts of courtesy. He tended to listen carefully, asking few questions and rarely talking at length, seldom using personal anecdotes as Reagan did. He tended to make his points in a self-deprecating way. After being complimented by a foreign leader, Bush answered, characteristically, by quoting Yogi Berra, who once said he had won a game only because “I didn’t make the wrong mistakes.”55

Yet Bush rarely said anything in private encounters that he did not mean to say. His style with foreign leaders bordered on the indirect, but sooner or later he would make his point. His managerial style was equally disciplined. He would discuss issues individually with top subordinates, clearly conveying the principles he cared about. But he would almost never visibly intervene in subcabinet or even some cabinet-level policy discussions. Instead, he was constantly informed about daily developments, usually through Scowcroft and the deputy national security adviser, Robert Gates. Bush would frequently call them for answers to questions about minor facts, news reports, or events that interested him or, on occasion, personally type out notes to other members of his staff.

Bush gathered around him people who shared his penchant for low-key rhetoric and careful attention to details and consequences of action. He also chose those who could get along and keep their egos in check. That done, he consciously delegated day-to-day foreign policy management to those subordinates—James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, and General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

James Baker, secretary of state, had been one of Bush’s closest friends for more than twenty-five years. Yet Baker carefully separated two George Bushes in his mind, one the longtime friend and the other the person Baker would address even in small meetings as “Mr. President.” Baker, a member of one of Houston’s most prominent families, had been schooled on the East Coast, studying history at Princeton, where he wrote his junior thesis on the Kerensky government of 1917 and his senior thesis on the British Labour party. He then returned home to study and practice law. A Marine Corps veteran.
Baker had first served in the Commerce Department in the 1970s before playing a leading part in managing first Bush’s then Reagan’s presidential campaigns in 1980. A successful White House chief of staff and later secretary of the Treasury in the Reagan administration, Baker was a man whose soft Texas drawl masked his intensity. He was precise in his interactions with foreign leaders, having decided in advance how he wanted each encounter to end.

Baker complemented Bush well, connecting the president’s general convictions to operational concerns. Baker’s objectives could be very ambitious, but they were always tied to a notion of how these goals were to be achieved. These qualities, together with an instinct for getting to the heart of a problem and visualizing what a solution might entail, made him a highly effective secretary of state.

Scowcroft was the first national security adviser to hold the job twice, having served President Gerald Ford in the same role. He had made his way through the ranks of the U.S. Air Force to lieutenant general, serving on the ground after being injured in a crash early in his career. His formative period as a strategist had been on Henry Kissinger’s National Security Council (NSC) staff. Scowcroft was known for his writings on nuclear policy and arms control and had strong views about those issues. He had also served in Yugoslavia as a military attaché and worried often about the danger of conflict in Eastern and Central Europe. But Scowcroft’s most important contribution in 1989 may have been the organization and conduct of the national security decision-making process. Never a competitor for the limelight himself, he was hardworking, discreet, and cautious, insisting that internal squabbles not mar the conduct of American foreign policy. Scowcroft had served most recently as a member of the Tower Commission, investigating the role of the NSC in the Iran-Contra affair. His already strong views that the NSC staff should not become involved in the implementation of U.S. foreign policy was reinforced by close examination of Oliver North’s adventures.

A kind of informal division of labor arose between Scowcroft and Baker. It was Scowcroft’s job to make the government work, using his staff in policy development and engaging Baker, Cheney, and Powell until a coherent and shared policy direction emerged. He also stayed close to the president, constantly checking to make certain that Bush was comfortable with that direction and fully prepared to deal with other heads of state in carrying it out. Bush in turn truly trusted and relied heavily on Scowcroft. Although Scowcroft often met with foreign officials, it was Baker who carried policy into the international arena.

Baker and Scowcroft, in turn, gathered around them a tight circle of subordinates who shared their objectives and suited their personal styles.

When it came to German unification, that circle narrowed even further to just a few key aides. Scowcroft relied heavily on Robert Gates, a career intelligence analyst who had been the deputy director of the CIA in the second Reagan administration. Gates was the perfect alter ego for Scowcroft. He was well organized, determined that the policy-making process run in a highly disciplined manner, and extremely skilled at the day-to-day operations of government. Gates, generally more conservative than others in the administration regarding the Soviet Union, ran the deputies committee of top subcabinet officials so efficiently that full meetings of the National Security Council were rarely needed to clarify issues before they were presented to President Bush.

The most senior among Baker’s aides was Robert Zoellick. Zoellick was the gatekeeper to Baker and was chosen by him to be the top subcabinet official on German unification. Raised in the Midwest, near Chicago, Zoellick had earned joint degrees from Harvard’s Law School and Kennedy School of Government. Brought into the government by Richard Darman, he then impressed Baker, who took Zoellick with him to the Treasury, made him the issues coordinator for Bush’s 1988 campaign, and placed him by his side at the State Department with the formal title of counselor. Zoellick was then thirty-five years old. Dennis Ross, director of policy planning and a specialist on Soviet foreign policy and the Middle East, was Zoellick’s partner in advising Baker. He had served in the Pentagon and in the National Security Council during the Reagan administration, leaving the government at one point to take up an academic post at the University of California at Berkeley. Zoellick and Ross were close companions intellectually and professionally, conceptualizing overall strategies.

Though it was outside Baker’s “inner circle,” the leadership of the State Department’s European bureau played an important part in managing American diplomacy toward Germany. From the summer of 1989 onward, the bureau was headed by Raymond Seitz and his deputy, James Dobbins. Seitz was a diplomat’s diplomat, a man in whom grace and wit were joined to a keen, careful mind. Dobbins had recently been deputy chief of mission in Bonn, knew Germany well, and, though more acerbic than Seitz, had one of the quickest analytical minds in the foreign service.

Bitter rivalries between the State Department and the National Security Council staff had been a standard feature of Washington politics since the 1960s. But Scowcroft and Baker placed a premium on cooperation. Disputes arose but were always quickly contained, and the key aides to Baker forged close working relationships with members of the NSC staff. The most important of these were the ties between Zoellick and Robert Blackwill, a strong-willed strategist appointed as Scowcroft’s senior director for European
and Soviet affairs. Although he was teaching at Harvard’s Kennedy School of
Government at the time he joined the Bush administration, Blackwill had
been a career foreign service officer who had worked for both Henry Kissinger
and Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s national security adviser. He had also
served as ambassador to the Vienna arms control negotiations on conven-
tional forces in Europe. Yet Blackwill’s energetic operating style was far from
typical for a professional diplomat. Blackwill in turn brought Philip Zelikow,
a career diplomat and lawyer who had worked for him in Vienna, to the NSC
to manage European policy. The council’s top Soviet expert, Condoleezza
Rice, was recruited by Scowcroft from Stanford University. She had known
Dennis Ross during his tenure at Berkeley, which made their working rela-
tionship on Soviet affairs an easy one. These three members of the Directorate
for European and Soviet Affairs, led by Blackwill, were Scowcroft’s principal
aides on German unification and European security issues.

Bush Takes the Reins

The new administration emerged from the transition with potentially ambi-
tious objectives but still inchoate policy prescriptions. Within about four
months George Bush became the first Western leader to say plainly that the
Cold War would not be over until the division of Europe had ended and
Europe was “whole and free.” This was a powerful philosophical argument.
It held that the Cold War could end only where it had begun—in Central
and Eastern Europe, and above all Germany. Before taking office Bush had
told his advisers, “We should dream big dreams.” Scowcroft put it clearly:
“We thought we should change our sights from managing the Cold War on
the ground in Europe and stabilizing the situation to look beyond, to reso-
lution of the basic issues.” But how and how fast? These were the questions
for a cautious president and his essentially conservative senior advisers, who
wanted to make the most of this historic chance but to avoid “doing some-
thing stupid.” Baker and his staff wished to pursue opportunities for democracy in Eastern Europe but were concentrating in the first weeks on Nicaragua
and negotiation of a Central American settlement.

A much-publicized series of formal policy reviews was launched to con-
sider the implications of the new political situation for U.S. relations with
the Soviet Union: National Security Review (NSR-3), Eastern Europe (NSR-4),
and Western Europe (NSR-5). As these churned on, both Soviet and West
European leaders joined the American media in a chorus of impatient criti-
cism, public and private.

Yet it was the march of events, not the deliberations of the new admin-
istration, that forced the emergence of a different, albeit somewhat fragmen-
tary approach in the spring of 1989. The Polish communist government,
facing enormous economic difficulties, held “roundtable” talks with represen-
tatives of the still outlawed trade union Solidarity as participants. As the talks
drew to a close, the NSC staff and the State Department combined to
overcome Treasury objections and win President Bush’s agreement to the
promise of economic assistance as a reward for Polish reform. Bush wanted
to be careful not to encourage popular unrest in Eastern Europe that might
prove a negative Soviet reaction; he did not want to repeat the tragedy of
Hungary in 1956, when inflammatory U.S. rhetoric contributed to an uprising
which was then bloodily crushed as the Americans stood by, unable to help.
Now, having waited for the day when Poland lifted the ban against Solidarity’s
revival, Bush spoke out on April 17, 1989, promising that his offer of aid was
only a first step. “Help from the West will come in concert with liberalization,”
he declared. “The West can now be bold in proposing a vision of the European
future.” This policy would later expand and become a coordinated effort
by twenty-four countries (G-24) to send economic assistance to Poland,
Hungary, and, within a few months, the rest of Eastern Europe.

Still, the steady drumbeat of criticism continued, and the president’s im-
patience began to grow. In response the NSC and White House staffs began
to look for ways to demonstrate American leadership. Still lacking, in March
1989, any significant policy initiatives to use in launching such a diplomatic
offensive, the White House had decided to create action-forcing events,
including presidential trips and speeches that would oblige the government
to develop policies. Thus, Scowcroft, Blackwill, and top State Department
officials mapped out a plan for two major European trips by the president in
1989. The first, in the late spring, would be to Western Europe, and would
include a NATO summit to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the alliance and
consider its future. The second, in the summer, would concentrate on
Eastern Europe, and would culminate in the G-7 economic summit, to be
held that year in Paris. The White House also decided to use the president’s
upcoming commencement speeches in May and June to deploy ideas about
the direction of policy.

As plans for the trip and the speeches progressed, the policy review on
Western Europe, NSR-5, also dragged on, producing a paper for interagency
review in March 1989. The paper was prepared by the Policy Coordinating
Committee for Europe, then chaired by the outgoing assistant secretary of
state Rozanne Ridgway. Ridgway, a career diplomat and former ambassador
to East Germany, had served for six years as Shultz’s chief aide, helping him
manage the turn in U.S.-Soviet relations. During this NSR-5 review the first
differences emerged in Washington over policy toward Germany. On the NSC
staff both Blackwill and Zelikow began to argue that U.S. policy had to tackle
the German question anew if the Cold War was to enter a final phase. But
they could not persuade the career staff at the State Department in late
February and early March. Ridgway, for instance, believed that the existing
situation was stable and a source of peace. She understood recent relations
with Germany better than Zelikow did, and judged that renewed debate about
the German question would be both premature and unwise. Robert Zoellick
later recalled that when, in early 1989, he had asked a visiting West German
general about German attitudes toward unification, Ridgway sharply ob-
served that unification was "the subject that all Americans are interested in
and no German cares about." 61

The final version of the NSR-5 policy paper, as prepared by the State
Department, reflected Ridgway's views, which were the dominant opinion
among the European experts at State. In especially strong language for a
bureaucratic document, the paper warned that "the issue of German re-
unification is never far below the surface. However, the Germans themselves
do not wish to increase the salience of this issue at this time. Nor do the
other Europeans. There is no more inflammatory and divisive issue, and it
serves no U.S. interest for us to take the initiative to raise it." 62 This paper
was reviewed at a meeting of the NSC deputies committee, the top level of
subcabinet officials, on March 20. Both the deputy director of the CIA and
the deputy chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged that more attention
be given to U.S. policy on German reunification. But there the issue was left. 53

Neither did the reviews do much to help coalesce the Bush administra-
tion's policy on the Soviet Union. In frustration with the review of policy toward
Moscow, Scowcroft called Blackwill and Rice into his office late one evening
in March. "This is going nowhere," he said. "See if you can write something
that has more bite." Rice and Blackwill then drafted an alternate national
security directive. The paper laid out a case that containment had been a
success but not an end in itself: it was time to move "beyond containment
in the integration of the Soviet Union into the international system." The
paper went on to lay out a series of conditions for the Soviet Union's entry
into the international system.

That document became the centerpiece of the president's first commence-
ment speech of the season, the address at Texas A&M on May 17. The speech
itself was met with a yawn, but "beyond containment" became a catchphrase
to describe the Bush approach toward the Soviet Union. Bush liked the notion
and referred to his policy in that way. Actually, "beyond containment" relied
on the Soviet Union to continue to make concessions at a time when it was
really the United States that was on the defensive. But Moscow rather liked
the idea. By accident, not by design, the speech resonated with a central tenet
of the "new thinking": that an end to the Soviet Union's isolation from the
international system was now possible.

The policy review churned on to a conclusion. Baker's closest advisers,
such as Zoellick and Ross, had paid little attention to the review process,
considering it largely a waste of time. Scowcroft, Gates, and Blackwill knew
that they would not produce the initiatives needed for Bush's trips and
scheduled speeches. By March 1989 Scowcroft was considering a major an-
nouncement. Intent on getting Soviet troops out of Eastern Europe, he
suggested the withdrawal of all U.S. and Soviet troops from Europe. Blackwill
dissuaded him from pursuing the proposal by emphasizing the symbolic
power of the U.S. troop presence in assuring Europeans of the American
commitment to their defense. 64 Scowcroft demurred but continued to cast
about for some idea that would attack the basic Soviet military position in
Central and Eastern Europe.

Scowcroft's old mentor, Henry Kissinger, had proposed an analogous ap-
proach: a U.S.-Soviet dialogue about mutual restraint in Eastern Europe, to
"give the Soviets security guarantees (widely defined) while permitting the
peoples of Eastern Europe to choose their own political future" and "conceive
a drastic reduction of all outside forces in Europe—including those of the
U.S.—that might revolutionize present concepts of security." Such a negoti-
ation needed a confidential envoy, Kissinger had explained. In Moscow to
deliver a courteous letter of greeting from the new president, Kissinger
discussed his ideas with Yakovlev and then with Gorbachev. The Soviets were
receptive. Kissinger then reported back to Bush, Baker, and Scowcroft on
January 28. There is no evidence that Bush liked the idea of such a deal. At
the State Department Ridgway and her deputy, Thomas Simons, told Baker
that Kissinger's idea was dangerous. Baker, heeding Ross's advice, liked the
idea of a discussion with the Soviets about democracy in Eastern Europe but
also thought that Kissinger should not be part of such a dialogue. Neither
Baker's staff nor the NSC staff (possibly excepting Scowcroft) had any symp-
athy with the substance of Kissinger's suggested bargain. Preferring a trade
of Soviet tolerance in Eastern Europe for U.S. willingness not to exploit such
a new environment to threaten Moscow, Baker deliberately quashed Kissin-
ger's initiative in a press interview warning against any "signal that somehow
we are getting together with the Soviet Union and carving up Eastern
Europe." 65

The NSC staff set forth its own policy ideas for Europe and the NATO
summit in a March 1989 memo written by Zelikow and Blackwill, which, on March 20, Scowcroft sent to President Bush. The memo opened by declaring: "Today, the top priority for American foreign policy in Europe should be the fate of the Federal Republic of Germany." Scowcroft advised Bush to "help keep Kohl in power" because his "government is now lagging in the polls behind an opposition that, as currently constituted, has too little regard either for nuclear deterrence or for conventional defense." Scowcroft recommended that the goal of U.S. policy in Europe should be to overcome the division of the continent through acceptance of common democratic values.66 This concept of a "commonwealth of free nations" was offered as an alternative to Gorbachev's call on Europeans to build a "common European home."67

More controversial, though, was the suggestion that followed. Scowcroft's memo stated: "Even if we make strides in overcoming the division of Europe through greater openness and pluralism, we cannot have a vision for Europe's future that does not include an approach to the 'German question.' Here we cannot promise immediate political reunification, but we should offer some promise of change, of movement . . . Although virtually no West German expects German reunification to happen in this century, there is no German of any age who does not dream of it in his soul." The memo went on: "The formal Allied position has long been that we want the German people to regain their unity through self-determination. I think we can, working with Bonn, improve on this formula, make it more pointed, and send a clear signal to the Germans that we are ready to do more if the political climate allows it." Bush was reminded that, "amidst all the enthusiasm about 'glasnost,' it is sobering to remember that, in February 1989, East German border guards again shot down and killed a youth for trying to cross the Wall."68

The proposed rhetoric was not radical. The U.S. government was already formally on record in support of the peaceful and democratic reunification of Germany. But Bush was urged to put this goal back on the active political agenda. The president had thus been thinking about the issue of German reunification when Washington Times editor Arnaud de Borchgrave raised the topic with him in a May interview. Bush declared that he would "love to see" Germany reunified, adding, "Anybody who looks back over his shoulder and then looks at the present and sees a country ripped asunder by division, a people ripped asunder by political division, should say: 'If you can get reunification on a proper basis, fine.'"

Bush describes himself as "less of a Europeanist, not dominated by history." When then-Vice President Bush had visited the German city of Krefeld in June 1983, at the height of the mass demonstrations against INF missile deployment, the new FRG chancellor, Helmut Kohl, had taken time to get to know the American. Bush recalled demonstrators sling rocks at his car without any security counteraction ("Our Secret Service would have shot them!") and sitting in a garage with Kohl waiting for a route to clear. This, he remembered, was a society willing to pay the price for free speech. Though the first to admit he was not clairvoyant and "can't claim to have understood everything that would happen in Europe from Day One," Bush had concluded that Germany was a solid democracy that had done penance for its sins and that "at some point you should let a guy up."69

A few days before the de Borchgrave interview, Blackwill had written another memorandum for Bush on dealing with the West Germans. Blackwill urged again that the United States adopt this issue anew. In the context of renewed nuclear debates in NATO between Washington and Bonn, Blackwill argued that if the Western allies identified their interests more closely with Germany's national aspirations, it would be easier to persuade the German people to reciprocate by continuing to identify their nation's future with the Western alliance. Separately Zoellick was advising a receptive Baker "to get ahead of the curve" on the issue of German unification or Gorbachev "might grab it first" (a mistaken exaggeration of Soviet flexibility on this subject).70

The time for rhetorical flourishes devoid of substantive initiatives had clearly come and gone. Administration officials were increasingly uneasy about the continuing perception of the president as slow to react to the historical moment. Gorbachev, by contrast, seemed to garner headlines daily with some new gesture of openness.

The primary source of tension with West Germany and within the NATO alliance was the dispute over the modernization of short-range nuclear forces (Lance). Rather than confront this problem head-on, the administration decided to move on another front—the conventional military balance in Europe. The United States planned to launch ambitious objectives and a fast timetable for concluding a treaty that would drastically reduce the size of conventional forces in Europe and push for an especially significant reduction of Soviet military power west of the Urals. The Bush administration, particularly Scowcroft and his staff, had concluded that the conventional military balance had not received as much attention as the U.S.-Soviet strategic nuclear balance. They would give conventional arms control in Europe much more attention since they believed that the hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops and thousands of Soviet tanks in Central and Eastern Europe were, more than any other factor, the fundamental source of Europe's insecurity.71

Scowcroft received crucial support for the idea when Baker returned from his first trip to Moscow in May 1989. This was the secretary of state's first major encounter with the Soviet leadership, and he had felt himself to be on
the defense throughout his trip and was annoyed by some of the showier but militarily meaningless arms control gestures coming from Moscow. When he met with Gorbachev, the Soviet leader opened by stressing the reality of perestroika and pushing for greater effort in arms control. There was a pointed discussion of the planned NATO modernization of short-range nuclear forces, but also a preview of a more meaningful upcoming move in the conventional arms control talks.  

Baker came home convinced that Gorbachev might really be serious and sincere. He was also certain that the United States had to take the initiative, had to "define George Bush as the leader of the alliance." Baker met with Bush and Scowcroft on May 17 and joined Scowcroft in rallying support behind a major conventional arms control initiative, prepared during the second half of May. The Pentagon had done some of the analysis to support these plans during the policy reviews, but military leaders were hesitant about going forward with dramatic new conventional arms control ideas, with objections voiced by then-JCS chairman Admiral William Crowe. Bush, however, had made up his mind. "I want this [more radical proposal] done," he said at a meeting of his top advisers. "Don't keep telling me why it can't be done. Tell me how it can be done." The NSC staff prepared the new proposal. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and Scowcroft's deputy Gates traveled secretly to Europe to persuade Margaret Thatcher, French president François Mitterrand, and Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany to support the idea.  

Decisions were also made about the broad rhetorical themes to be developed during the NATO summit and Bush’s related visits to Italy, West Germany, and Great Britain. Bush decided that he would link the end of the Cold War explicitly to an end of the division of Europe, and that he would hint at the implications of overcoming Europe’s division for Germany’s future.  

The NATO summit on May 29–30 turned out to be a major success for the United States, for West Germany, and for Bush personally. The vexing issue of nuclear modernization was adroitly put aside after a negotiation in which Baker and Zoellick both played key roles. Chancellor Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher were quite satisfied with the outcome. Bush’s conventional arms control initiative came as a complete surprise to the gathered journalists and was approved by NATO with enthusiasm. The episode had a dramatic and positive effect on the perception of Bush within Europe and, indeed, on Bush’s confidence in his own handling of foreign affairs. He tended to rely thereafter on the improvised and secretive policymaking processes which had contributed to this success. A bit bemused by the acclaim that greeted the summit outcome, Bush reminded reporters three days later, "I’m the same guy I was four days ago."  

Bush used his postsummit press conference to deploy his new theme for Europe. He told those assembled that “our overall aim is to overcome the division of Europe and to forge a unity based on Western values.” The next day Bush traveled to Germany. He delivered a major address in the Rheingoldhalle in Mainz, the Rheinland-Pfalz capital, where Kohl had risen to national prominence. The West’s goal now, Bush proclaimed, was to “let Europe be whole and free. To the founders of the Alliance, this aspiration was a distant dream, and now it’s the new mission of NATO.” Bush then made explicit his definition of the end of the Cold War: “The Cold War began with the division of Europe. It can only end when Europe is whole. Today it is this very concept of a divided Europe that is under siege.” Alluding to Gorbachev, Bush observed that “there cannot be a common European home until all within it are free to move from room to room.” He called for the Iron Curtain to come down: “Let Berlin be next.”  

Having introduced the volatile language of unity to his German audience, Bush then became more restrained in his speech. “We seek self-determination for all of Germany and all of Eastern Europe,” he declared. More radical phrases referring directly to German unification had appeared in an earlier draft, but Scowcroft had removed them in part because he feared that Bush might be getting ahead of Chancellor Kohl’s own statements about the national question. During Bush’s visit, on a boat trip down the Rhine, Scowcroft raised the unification issue directly with Defense Minister Gerhard Stoltenberg, of Kohl’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party. Stoltenberg was polite. The United States, he said, should keep raising this question in a calm, logical way, setting an agenda for change.  

Bush went on in his Mainz address to propose that the pan-European political organization, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), could do more to promote pluralism and set guidelines for holding free elections in Eastern Europe. The speech welcomed Germans as America’s “partners in leadership.” Bush’s remarks delighted many Germans, who were quick to infer that Bush hoped the seemingly frozen German question would soon begin to thaw. There is no doubt that the president grasped the significance of the new concepts and was not just parroting words drafted by aides. Washington Post reporters talking to Bush on the final stop of his trip in London were struck by his emphasis on the potential for change in Eastern Europe. Although the region was relatively quiet at the moment—a week before the Polish parliamentary election and shortly before other states in the region would experience serious unrest—Bush called Eastern Europe
"the most exciting area for change in the world." According to one journalist, he "came back to [Eastern Europe] time and again in response to questions on other subjects." What did "beyond containment" mean? the reporters asked. Bush answered: "It means a united Europe. It means a Europe without as many artificial boundaries."\(^{80}\)

The events in May 1989 thus set the tone for much closer U.S.-West German cooperation, including between Baker, Genscher, and their staffs.\(^{81}\) That done, American officials could watch the unfolding events assured of a solid foundation for relations with Bonn. Two weeks later they could also watch, without alarm, Gorbachev's triumphal visit to West Germany.

Gorbachev's Turn

Gorbachev arrived in West Germany in June 1989 and received a hero's welcome. Soviet-West German relations had been transformed since the confrontational years of the early and mid-1980s, when Moscow was using all its political strength to stop the deployment of new NATO nuclear missiles into Germany. That battle was over; the INF treaty had been signed. The Soviet government reassessed the situation and began to receive top officials of the Federal Republic of Germany, including President Richard von Weizsäcker in 1987 and Kohl himself in 1988.\(^{82}\)

There is evidence that both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze alluded to the possible unification of Germany before 1989. An outspoken but tolerated expert at one of the Soviet foreign policy institutes, Vyacheslav Dashichev, argued in 1987 that Moscow should be willing to accept a united Germany as part of a more cooperative relationship with the West.\(^{83}\)

But what did these Soviet leaders really have in mind at the time? When FRG president von Weizsäcker repeated his 1985 position that unity of the German nation should be accepted but understood in human terms and not in a territorial sense, Gorbachev replied that he was not inclined to theorize on concepts such as the German nation. The current reality was two German states, but "history would decide what would happen in a hundred years." Von Weizsäcker recalled to Timothy Garton Ash that he interjected, "or perhaps fifty?" and Gorbachev indicated his assent. Chernyayev, who was present, recalled that Gorbachev explained at length the importance of the ties East Germany had developed with other states, "ties that cannot be broken." Gorbachev had also told the West German president that East and West Germany should try to strengthen and deepen the ties between the two states (gosudarstv'). Chernyayev comments that this was all theoretical; Gorbachev just "did not rule out" the possibility of German union.\(^{84}\)

Gorbachev's own published views in his 1987 book Perestroika also suggest that he thought of German unification as a distant theoretical possibility. Referring to the discussion with von Weizsäcker, he writes, it must be said "quite plainly" that statements about the revival of "German unity" are from being 'Realpolitik,' to use the German expression. It has given the FRG nothing in the past forty years." As for Reagan's call to open the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev writes that Reagan and other Western leaders "cannot actually offer anything realistic to the FRG as regards the so-called German issue. For the time being, one should proceed from the existing realities and engage in incendiary speculations."\(^{85}\)

There is clearly no evidence that the Soviet government sought to use its momentum of their new policies to bring the German states together as on Dashihevsky himself says that his views were roundly rejected by the entire Soviet foreign policy establishment. Even this maverick called only for the possibility of confederation or even unification in the very long term, after both German states had withdrawn from their alliances and East-West conflicts had dissolved. One scholar who studied the subject, Michael Sodet, justifiably concludes that "before the dramatic developments of late 1989 was by no means certain that the Gorbachev leadership had come to a specific decision to modify the decades-old Soviet position on either the division of Germany or the division of Berlin. Ambiguities and reservations abounded in public discussions of these issues."\(^{86}\)

During Kohl's visit to Moscow in October 1988 he spoke publicly, as always did, about his hopes for the ultimate unity of the German nation. Gorbachev, Chernyayev, and Valentin Falin conferred about whether Gorbachev should tell Kohl that this sort of talk was unacceptable. Gorbachev even asked Falin to draft talking points that "will not be forgotten." At the meeting, however, Gorbachev did not use this material, because Kohl did not raise the subject of unification.\(^{88}\) Publicly Gorbachev repeated that history had divided Germany and that any attempt to change the situation with "unrealistic policies" would be "unpredictable and even dangerous."\(^{89}\)

West German and Soviet perspectives thus seemed to converge. Gorbachev received his tumultuous, even euphoric, reception in West Germany during June 1989. Gorbachev and Kohl could agree that the history of the German nation might take its course. Gorbachev and Kohl could agree that they did not need to devise common policies that would give history a push. Kohl, for example, told an interviewer years later that he and Gorbachev had a long private conversation overlooking the Rhine. The according to Kohl, Gorbachev asked whether he could rely on West Germany's economic help if he ever urgently needed it. Kohl said yes. This, Kohl remembered, was "the decisive moment" on the road to German unity.
Neither Gorbachev nor Kohl's adviser, Horst Teltchik, remembers such a discussion. There is no evidence that Gorbachev thought he had made any substantive concession on the issue of German unity during his Bonn visit.91 Numerous West German–Soviet joint ventures were announced, and trade between the two states increased rapidly in 1989.92

The Bonn declaration issued by the two heads of government announced that henceforth the Soviet Union would join West Germany in seeking to overcome the division of Europe. They would do this by “working on concepts.” The “concepts” would examine how this goal could be achieved through the “building up of a Europe of peace and cooperation—of a European peace order or of a common European home—in which the USA and Canada also have a place.” There were few specifics. The Soviet government could show tolerance for the existing order by agreeing officially to call the FRG the Federal Republic of Germany rather than the German Federal Republic.93 The declaration mentioned the need to respect, among other human rights, the “right of peoples to self-determination,” but stressed that “continuing differences in values and in political and social orders are no hindrance to future-shaping policy across the system-frontiers (Systemgrenzen).”94 But the postwar realities were just that—realities.

The West Germans did not contest Soviet pronouncements about the real state of the world. In the spring of 1988 leaders of the largest West German political party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), almost amended their formal party platform to set aside, as one of them put it, “the old continuing assumption that the German question [had] to be on the agenda.” Kohl's two top advisers on these issues in the Chancellery, Wolfgang Schäuble and Horst Teltchik, and the minister of intra-German affairs, Dorothee Wilms, had all supported the push for change in the CDU platform.95

In February 1989 the head of the West German Chancellery, Wolfgang Schäuble, talked about the old hopes “that the unity of Germany could be achieved through the reunification of both German states in the not-too-distant future.” But, he said, “we know today that these hopes were illusory.” It was clear by 1961 at the latest that for the time being there was “no way to overcome the German division.” What was left must primarily be the preservation of the “substance of the nation,” the “commonality of the Germans,” which meant keeping open the “communication between the people.” As late as July 1989 Horst Teltchik, Kohl’s foreign policy adviser, repeated the point FrG president von Weizsäcker had made years earlier, namely, that “for us, the German question is not primarily a matter of seeking a territorial solution.”96 West German officials hoped that the GDR might begin a process of internal reform, like that in Poland or Hungary, and believed that such reform might be “easier if the GDR was not challenged by the question of territorial unification.” Once the East Germans had democratic rights, anything might be possible. But the priority was not unification, it was human rights for East Germans.97

The new U.S. ambassador to West Germany, Vernon Walters, a retired army lieutenant general and special envoy to many trouble spots over nearly fifty years of government service, had a deep sense that unification might be coming. But when he confided this view to West German officials in April 1989, he was greeted with polite chuckles.98 In fact, the West German government was not fully prepared to take on Bush’s May hints of support for unification. Teltchik recalled later that the United States “was far ahead of the Germans at this time” on the issue of unification.99 The West Germans, being realistic, felt that they already had what they wanted—excellent relations with the reformist leadership of the Soviet Union and a continued strong allegiance to their Western values and Western allies.

Unhappiness in East Germany

As Gorbachev sought to renew socialism in the Soviet Union, he looked to communist leaders in Eastern Europe to follow his example. He believed that socialism had put down deep roots and could weather the turbulence of reform.100 So it is no surprise that Gorbachev himself had no particular sympathy for Erich Honecker, chairman of the East German Communist party, and his hard-line comrades in the government. As early as 1985, at the funeral of Konstantin Chernyayev, he had told East German party officials that kindergarten was over; no one would lead them by the hand. They were responsible to their own people. The relations between Gorbachev and Honecker went downhill from there. Hannes Adomeit, who studied both published statements and the East German archives, writes, “As time went by, cutting remarks and cryptic allusions became the order of the day; open controversy and argument that might have cleared the air disappeared from the discourse.”101

But Gorbachev did not want to destroy the East German state; he wanted to reform it. Honecker traveled to Moscow two weeks after Gorbachev left Bonn and was personally reassured. Chernyayev confirms that Gorbachev adhered to traditional principles in his June 1989 talks with Honecker.102

But decades of communist rule and indoctrination had engendered widespread hatred for the system throughout Eastern Europe. As the Polish people
were allowed to reenter politics through the April 1989 legalization of Solidarity, it became clear that old-style communism was in real jeopardy in at least some countries, and that Moscow would not intervene to save it. In earlier years mass protests would have been crushed by indigenous security forces, confident that Soviet troops would back them up if needed. Now East European communists were face to face with their own people. Gorbachev and the Soviet government were insisting by the end of 1988 that the "Brezhnev doctrine" was dead. Still, no one could know how Moscow would respond if socialism itself was challenged. After all, it was one thing to talk about different roads to socialism, quite another to confront the prospect that the roads might lead to the end of socialism. That Rubicon was yet to be crossed.

In early 1989 few if any observers thought that this was a problem for the East German state. The German Democratic Republic did not seem to be threatened by serious instability. Indeed, it seemed the most solid of the East European states. It had only once—briefly in 1953—experienced the kind of upheaval that had tormented communist leaders in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. David Childs, one of the leading Western experts on the GDR, in the standard English text on the country, could judge in 1988 that East Germany "is apparently one of the world's most stable regimes."103

Bolstered by relatively greater affluence than his country's Eastern European neighbors enjoyed and a fantastically elaborate system of internal controls, East Germany's longtime leader Erich Honecker seemed secure in his position. His government had long dealt with dissent through a mixture of brutal repression, forced emigration, and the vent of allowing occasional, limited travel to the West for a substantial part of the population. An English observer, Timothy Garton Ash, visited the GDR in July 1989 and noted firsthand the deep pessimism of opposition activists. Officials would say that the situation was "very complicated" and shake their heads but "the State Security Service—the 'Stasi'—still seemed all-powerful, the population at large not prepared to risk its modest prosperity. Above all, the ranks of the opposition had been continuously thinned by emigration to West Germany." A friend complained to Garton Ash that soon "there'll be nobody left in this country but a mass of stupid philistines and a few crazy idealists."104

Western observers had long guessed or sensed that many East Germans probably despised and even hated the regime, but this bitterness had seemed to lapse into passive, cynical resignation. A tiny number of citizens were openly critical of the regime: representatives of the counterculture such as the leaders of peace, feminist, and ecological groups; a few figures in East Germany's literary establishment; and a handful of dissident Marxist intellectuals. These individuals could find some shelter for their activities in Protestant churches, which had secured an uneasy independence from direct state control. Yet these dissenters remained a fringe element in East German society. Demonstrators had been swiftly and severely punished in 1987 and 1988, and again in March 1989 a small demonstration of about sixty churchgoers in Leipzig was suppressed by security forces. The East German security chief, Erich Mielke, having been in the business of arresting or killing opponents of communism for more than half a century, assured his government colleagues that only the presence of Western media had inspired the demonstrators to act.105

If there was a threat to the regime in East Berlin, it appeared to come from reformist elements within the ruling Socialist Unity party (SED). These reformers, such as Dresden party chief Hans Modrow, seemed ready to take cue from Gorbachev and begin their own East German perestroika. But the GDR's rulers held fast through the spring and summer of 1989, determined to isolate themselves from the turmoil gripping the rest of the Soviet bloc. In the inner councils of the East German Politbüro "the issue of Gorbachev was taboo." To outsiders the line, as one member of the Politbüro remarked to reporters, was that just because "your neighbor renewed the wallpaper in his flat, would you feel obliged to do the same?"106

In the winter of 1988–89 the regime tried to quarantine itself against the perestroika virus. The government banned importation of the more heretical Soviet journals. Honecker held a summit with Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania's dictator and a kindred spirit. The Poles were planning genuinely free elections. Hungary was well along the same road. But the East German government had its own election plans. In May the SED followed its usual practice of rigged local elections and announced it had earned the support of 98.8 percent of the electorate. Protests from activists and church poll watchers were ignored.107

The contrast between this behavior and the thawing climate for political reform in Moscow, Warsaw, and Budapest was jarring to many East Germans. It sharpened their sense of injustice enough to widen the usually small circle of popular unrest. But the police made more arrests and increased their harassment of the churches. In June the East German parliament applauded Beijing's bloody crackdown on dissidents in Tiananmen Square, and the Politbüro pointedly criticized Hans Modrow. In August 1989 the well-informed East German security police privately warned party leaders that membership in dissident groups had grown, but the total number of people involved was estimated at only 2,500 in a population of 16 million.108

Even if the East German government seemed invincible, it was not at ease. The theoretical implications of Gorbachev's new policies were profoundly
unsettling. Otto Reinhold, a top social scientist in the East German Communist party, posed the dilemma for his country: "What right to exist would a capitalist GDR have alongside a capitalist Federal Republic? In other words, what justification would there be for two German states once ideology no longer separated them?" But that was hardly Moscow’s worry in the spring of 1989. For the Kremlin the danger seemed to be the recalcitrance of Honecker, and the distance between Moscow and East Berlin was growing. Change had to come to East Germany because the old and sick Honecker was clearly not up to the tasks he faced.

The larger implications of the East German problem were not yet apparent. But what was happening in Eastern Europe and the GDR was only the beginning of a very rocky ride. Soon it would become clear that socialism could be defended only to the extent that capitalism could be attacked. The Cold War was rooted in that conflict, and it in turn sustained the socialist myth at home and abroad. Class struggle was at the root of the myth that, together with Moscow’s coercive power, held the Soviet bloc intact. It was the rationale by which Eastern European leaders oppressed their people, confident that the Soviet army would help if things got out of hand. It was the logic for continued sacrifice of the Soviet people to an economy perpetually on war footing. And it was the glue that held a hundred nationalities together in what, without it, was nothing more than an empire waiting to collapse.

Leaders from Stalin to Chernenko had never dreamed of abandoning the philosophical foundation of the Soviet state and its place in the world in order to accept integration into a Western-dominated international political and economic system. They worked desperately to sustain a “socialist alternative” because to abandon it, they believed, would be suicidal for the Soviet state itself. Until the fall of 1989 Gorbachev had no reason to think that they were right. But he would soon confront the full consequences of his ideas and learn that there was something to his predecessors’ concerns.

Revisiting the German Question

WE ALL TEND TO assume that great changes must have great causes. To think otherwise seems to offend some innate sense of proportion. Writing 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville speculated about the February 1848 overthrow of France’s monarchy, a sudden but relatively peaceful revolution that, like the downfall of communism in East Germany, left the victors “as astonished at their triumph as were the vanquished at their defeat.” His solution was to combine general causes with particular events, writing that the revolution in France, “in common with all other great events of this class, sprang from general causes impregnated, if I am permitted the expression, by accidents.” And although Tocqueville referred to “accidents,” he perceptively observed that these were really “that tangle of secondary causes which we call chance, for want of the knowledge how to unravel it.”

The leaders who now faced the reemergence of the German question had been taken by surprise. Everyone knew that the earlier struggle had ended in stalemate, not agreement. In that sense Germany’s future had never been settled. But not one of the leaders involved had expected to be faced with the problem. They had inherited Four Power “rights and responsibilities” toward Germany that now existed completely outside the context in which they had been won. A stable, democratic, and powerful West German state was an anchor in the Western alliance, not a defeated enemy. For its part the Soviet Union was led by a reformer desperate to rescue his country from internal decay and international isolation, not by a victorious and ruthless dictator determined to consolidate socialist wartime gains.

In 1989 a “tangle of secondary causes” brought these contradictions to the surface. Then the delicate task was to finish the work of 1945 forty-five years later, in the context of all that had happened in between. Unsettled borders,