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What Was the Cold War About?

Evidence from Its Ending

JOHN MUELLER

It is important to ascertain when the Cold War ended because such a determination can help to indicate what the Cold War was all about.

Its demise is commonly associated with the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in late 1989 or with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and of Communism in 1991. However, judging from the public rhetoric and actions of important observers and key international actors at the time, the Cold War essentially ended in the spring of 1989, well before these momentous events took place.

If this proposition is true, it suggests that the Cold War was principally (or even entirely) about an ideological conflict in which the West saw the Soviet Union as committed to a threateningly expansionary ideology. Once this menace seemed to vanish with the advent of the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev (similar processes had taken place earlier in Yugoslavia and China), Western leaders and observers began to indicate that the conflict was over. Thus, the Cold War was essentially about ideas. It was not centrally about power or about the military, nuclear, or economic balance—or the distribution of capabilities—between the East and the West. Nor was it about Communism as a form of government, the need to move the world toward democracy and/or capitalism, or, to a degree, Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. The Cold War was not about these concerns because it came to an end before any of them was really resolved.

Two issues should be clarified before beginning the discussion. I wish to argue that the Cold War essentially ended in early 1989, but I do not wish to suggest that the Cold War was necessarily permanently closed down or that it

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could not have been reinstated after that date. It was certainly possible for Gorbachev later to change course if he had wanted to. Or, more likely, he could have been overthrown and his policy reversed by a group of opposing hard-liners. Indeed, in 1991, there was a coup effort against him by such Communists and, had they been successful, it is possible that they would have reestablished Cold War hostilities. Actually, the coup conspirators, during their fifteen minutes of fame, seemed to indicate that while planning to undo some of Gorbachev's domestic reforms and to adopt a tougher line about the potential breakup of the Soviet Union, they did not intend to amend, alter, or reverse the basic changes Gorbachev had made to the Cold War situation. But, of course, it is possible that they eventually would have done so. Therefore, the "ending" of the Cold War could have proved to be something less than a terminal experience.

However, this concern holds for *any* supposed ending point for the Cold War. Indeed, we are not completely out of the woods yet. The Communist Party remains strong in Russia, and some of its core supporters are quite hard-line. It is conceivable that if those characters managed to get into office in Russia, they might seek to reinstitute the Cold War, albeit with a somewhat smaller geographic base than the Soviet Union enjoyed at its imperial peak. This seems pretty unlikely, but given the tumultuousness of Russian politics, it is surely not impossible. Hence, any proposed ending date for the Cold War is potentially reversible.

In addition, the argument here deals with when the Cold War ended and with what it was about, but not with *why* the Soviet Union changed its ideology. Some analysts, like Robert English, stress intellectual factors and argue that the ideological change was in the works for well over a decade before 1989, while others, like Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, contend that material factors essentially impelled the change.¹ Although I have distinct views on this debate, I am concerned here with the consequences of the ideological shift, not with its causes.

DATING THE ENDING OF THE COLD WAR

Although later events were to prove more striking and dramatic, there is quite a bit of evidence to suggest that by the spring of 1989, many key people in the West had already substantially accepted the proposition that the Cold War was essentially over.

¹ Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Robert D. English, "Power, Ideas, and New Evidence on the Cold War's End," *International Security* 26 (Spring 2002): 70–92; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 25 (Winter 2000/01): 5–53; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research," *International Security* 26 (Spring 2002): 93–111; see also Mark Kramer, "Ideology and the Cold War," *Review of International Studies* 25 (October 1999): 539–576.

Thatcher, Reagan, and the Reagan Administration

Perhaps the earliest proclamation by an important policy maker that the Cold War was over was made by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in an interview published on the front page of the *Washington Post* on 18 November 1988. “We’re not in a Cold War now,” she noted, but in a “new relationship much wider than the Cold War ever was.” At the same time, she was entirely sensitive to the possibility that progress could be reversed, suggesting that the West be prepared to make a reassessment and return to confrontation should Gorbachev be toppled or become stymied.²

Three weeks later, on 8 December 1988, in his last press conference as president, Ronald Reagan was asked a remarkable question by *Washington Post* reporter Lou Cannon: did he think the Soviets might once again become allies with the United States as they had been during World War II. At the time, Reagan was not quite willing to admit the Soviet Union into NATO, perhaps, but he did take the rather startling question quite seriously, and he substantially, if a bit equivocally, suggested that the Cold War was just about over. Moreover, he explained his reasoning:

If it can be definitely established that they no longer are following the expansionary policy that was instituted in the Communist revolution, that their goal must be a one-world Communist state . . . [then] they might want to join the family of nations and join them with the idea of bringing about or establishing peace.³

The reporter’s question and Reagan’s answer were likely influenced by an important speech Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had given at the United Nations the day before. In this speech, he had announced that he planned to reduce Soviet arms unilaterally and, in addition, he made a striking declaration about ideology and its role:

The new phase also requires de-ideologizing relations among states. We are not abandoning our convictions, our philosophy or traditions, nor do we urge anyone to abandon theirs.

But neither do we have any intention to be hemmed in by our values. That would result in intellectual impoverishment, for it would mean rejecting a powerful source of development—the exchange of everything original that each nation has independently created.

In the course of such exchange, let everyone show the advantage of their social system, way of life or values—and not just by words or propaganda, but by real deeds. That would be a fair rivalry of ideologies. But it should not be extended to relations among states.⁴

² Don Oberdorfer, “Thatcher Says Cold War Has Come to an End: Briton Calls for Support of Gorbachev,” *Washington Post*, 18 November 1988.

³ See *New York Times*, 9 December 1988. Reagan had actually strongly signaled this perspective earlier in 1988 on a trip to Moscow. Asked whether he still believed the Soviet Union to be an evil empire, he responded firmly in the negative and explained, “I was talking about another time, another era”; Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era, The United States and the Soviet Union 1983–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 299.

⁴ “In Gorbachev’s Words,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1988.

In many respects, this declaration was the culmination of a development that had begun shortly after Gorbachev came to office in 1985, in which the Soviet Union came to abandon its once-central devotion to the international class struggle.⁵ As part of the process, Gorbachev promised in 1987 to withdraw from Afghanistan, where the country was bogged down in a costly war. Reagan administration officials had at first felt that this was “too good to be true,”⁶ but Gorbachev fulfilled the promise, and the pullout was completed by 15 February 1989. This, of course, was a clear indication that despite the pronouncements of the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968, the Soviet Union was willing not only to cease expansion but also to withdraw, at least from areas where it had become overextended, even though a Communist government would likely be replaced by a non-Communist one in these areas. There were also passages in Gorbachev’s UN speech that could be taken to suggest that the Soviet Union would not use force to maintain its control over the countries of Eastern Europe.⁷

Reagan was not the only member of his administration to be impressed by such words and deeds. His Secretary of State, George Shultz, entitles the final chapter of his memoirs, “Turning Point.” In it, he concludes that “Margaret

⁵ By 1986, Gorbachev had begun forcefully to undercut Communist ideology about the “class struggle” and about the Soviet Union’s “internationalist duty” as the leader of world socialism. Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 158–164, see also 141–142. By mid-1988, the Soviets were admitting the “inadequacy of the thesis that peaceful coexistence is a form of class struggle,” and began to refer to the “world socialist system” or the “socialist community of nations” rather than to the “socialist camp.” David Binder, “Soviet and Allies Shift on Doctrine: Guiding Terminology Changes—‘Class Struggle’ Is Out, ‘Struggle for Peace’ In,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1988. And by October, the Kremlin’s chief ideologist was explicitly rejecting the notion that a world struggle was going on between capitalism and Communism. Bill Keller, “New Soviet Ideologist Rejects Idea Of World Struggle Against West,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1988. There is a very substantial literature on the origins and development of this important ideological change and on Gorbachev’s internal struggles. In addition to the references above and to those in note 1, see, for example, Jack Snyder, “The Gorbachev Revolution: A Waning of Soviet Expansionism?” *International Security* 12 (Winter 1987/88): 93–131; John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), ch. 9; William G. Hyland, *The Cold War Is Over* (New York: Times Books, 1990), ch. 14; Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1994), 255–265, 358–368, 753–757, 769–778; Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), ch. 1; Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); John A. Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 13; Jeremi Suri, “Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4 (Fall 2002): 60–92.

⁶ Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 243.

⁷ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner’s, 1993), 1107; Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*, 16; Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), 154, 192. Additionally, on a trip to Cuba in April 1989, Gorbachev publicly denounced the “export of revolution and counterrevolution” and had begun to cut off aid to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and to other like-minded forces—though not yet to a degree that made the new Bush administration fully comfortable. Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1993), 58–59, 105; George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 135. He also worked to extricate the Soviet Union from Angola and to secure the withdrawal of Communist Vietnam from Cambodia.

Thatcher had it right . . . it was all over but the shouting,” and notes that the “Cold War was over” when he stepped down in January 1989 and that his main apprehension was that the new foreign policy team being assembled by the incoming president, George H.W. Bush, might not understand or accept this fact.⁸ Referring to Gorbachev’s UN appearance, Shultz has said, “If anybody declared the end of the Cold War, he did in that speech.” And Soviet foreign policy spokesman Anatoly Chernyaev called it “a turning point—he publicly renounced Marxism-Leninism.”⁹

The New York Times

Impressed by the developments, the *New York Times* published a series of op-ed pieces under the theme, “Is the Cold War Over?” during the first months of 1989. Then, on Sunday, 2 April 1989, it ran a long editorial summarizing the discussion, under the title, “The Cold War Is Over.”

The editorial actually tended to extrapolate beyond what most of its comparatively tentative commentators had indicated, and it was perhaps intended to be rather provocative. But it was a pronounced declaration by a source with a reputation for sober judgement.

The Washington Post and the Views of Major Foreign Policy Figures

A month later, in early May, the *Washington Post* ran a two-part series on its front page, pointedly entitled, “Beyond the Cold War.” In one of these articles, Don Oberdorfer surveyed various foreign policy figures outside of government and found that “nearly all of them said that the vast changes under way in the world are bringing an end to the post-World War II era.”¹⁰

Thus, former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara noted that “for 40 years U.S. foreign policy and defense programs have been shaped largely by one major force: fear of and opposition to the spread of Soviet-backed communism,” but now, he argued, new organizing principles for governing international life must be found: “We face an opportunity—the greatest in 40 years—to bring an end to the Cold War.” Former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance concluded that “we are entering a new era” in which “we will find ourselves very often on the same side with the Soviet Union,” and William Hyland, editor of *Foreign Affairs*, indicated that “what began in 1943–45 is ending, and something else is taking its place.” Former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger found that “international factors have rarely been so fluid. The one thing that cannot occur is a continuation of the status quo.”

⁸ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1131, 1138; see also Matlock, *Autopsy*, 197.

⁹ Cold War Retrospective, panel discussion, School of International Affairs, Princeton University, 26 February 1993, as recorded by C-SPAN.

¹⁰ Don Oberdorfer, “Eased East–West Tension Offers Chances, Dangers,” *Washington Post*, 7 May 1989; see also Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 346.

According to former National Security Council Director Zbigniew Brzezinski, “We are quite literally in the early phases of what might be called the post-communist era. This is a massive, monumental transformation.” Conflicts in the Third World, he observed, “will be deprived of the extra ideological fuel which often contributed to igniting even greater passions and tensions than the conflicts were capable of generating in themselves.” Brzezinski recalled that Winston Churchill’s famous “Iron Curtain” speech of 1946 had “closed the gap between public consciousness and a reality that already existed” and, in the process, had essentially announced the Cold War. A similar gap-closing declaration, Brzezinski argued, was now needed to inaugurate the new era.

Public Opinion

Actually, the public may not have needed the reminder. It already seems to have been aware that a new era was dawning (or had dawned).

Figure 1 displays the results from a pair of questions that crudely, but clearly, pose the central Cold War question: Was the Soviet Union, after all, actually out to take over the world, or was it mainly just interested in its own security? In the early years of the Cold War, and reaching a high at the time of the Communist Chinese entry into the Korean War at the end of 1950, the public strongly opted for the former interpretation of Soviet behavior. Once Gorbachev had established himself, however, the public reversed itself. Although the amazing changes of 1989 certainly enhanced the benign interpretation of Soviet behavior, it is impressive how positive it already was at the end of 1988.

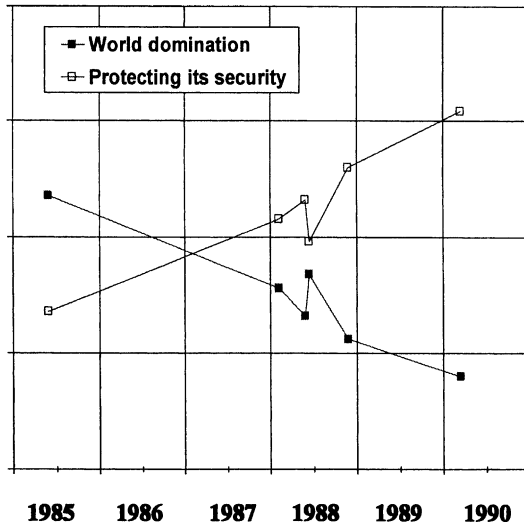
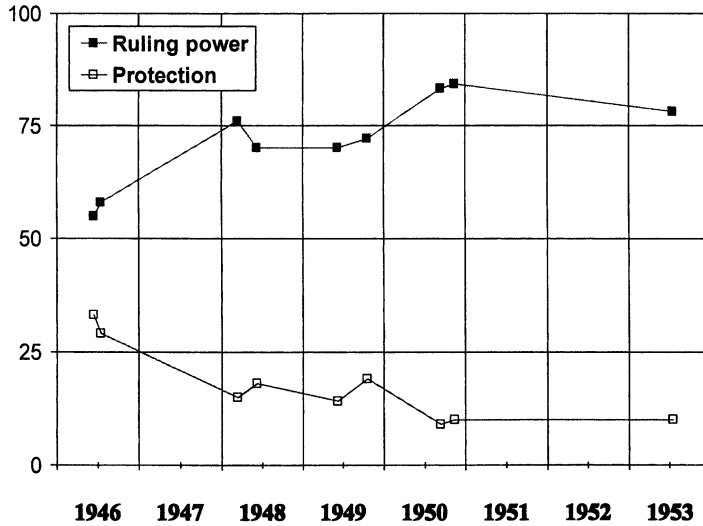
Figure 2 supplies data concerning the degree to which the public found the Soviet Union to be a threat. By the time of Gorbachev’s United Nations speech in December 1988, over half of the public was already willing to find that country to be only a minor threat (44 percent) or no threat at all (10 percent), and by mid-June of 1989, still well before the dramatic fall of the Berlin Wall, these numbers had increased to 45 percent and 14 percent, respectively. For comparison, the figure also includes data from a somewhat similar question concerning the alarming new “threat” to national security perceived at the time to be presented by economically impressive, if demilitarized, Japan. By the spring of 1989, the Japanese threat was seen to be nearly comparable to the one posed by the Soviet Union.

The Wall Street Journal

The *Wall Street Journal* also picked up the message and joined the journalistic chorus. In a 24 May 1989 editorial ebulliently entitled, “Bulletin: We won!” the publication noted that Gorbachev was “repudiating 70 years of his country’s history,” and declared that “containment plus the Reagan doctrine worked. If the Cold War is over, the West has won.”¹¹

¹¹ See also the editorial, “The Empire Pulls Back,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 1989.

FIGURE 1
Public Opinion on Soviet Motives



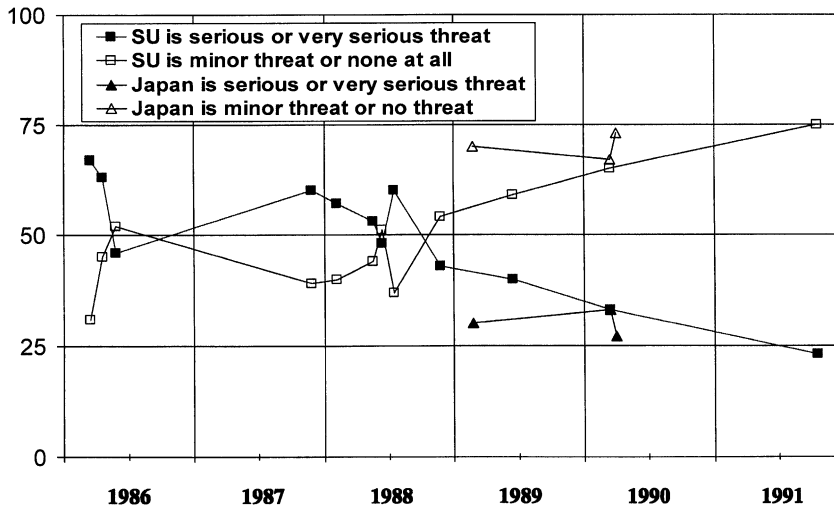
Upper graph: Subjects were asked: "As you hear and read about Russia these days, do you believe Russia is trying to build herself up to be *the* ruling power of the world, or do you think Russia is just building up protection against being attacked in another war?"

Lower graph: Subjects were asked: "Do you believe the Soviet Union is mainly interested in world domination or mainly interested in protecting its own national security?"

The Bush Doctrine

Partly impelled, perhaps, by the series in the *Times* and the *Post*, the new Bush administration engaged in an extensive review of Cold War policy in the spring of 1989. The administration appears to have been groping for the gap-closing phraseology that Brzezinski, the press, and the public were calling for, and Condoleezza Rice, a member of the National Security Council staff, came up with

FIGURE 2
Public Opinion on the Soviet and Japanese Threats



Subjects were asked, "How much of a threat would you say the Soviet Union is to the United States these days: a very serious threat, a serious threat, a minor threat, or not a threat at all?" "Do you feel the national security of the United States is threatened because Japan has become so strong economically? If yes, is the threat to U.S. national security a very serious threat, a serious threat, or only a minor threat?"

the phrase "beyond containment," something, as Oberdorfer notes, that was "almost the reverse of containment" in its "encouragement of Soviet integration into the Western economic and political community."¹² Working with Robert Blackwill, she produced a secret seven-page National Security Directive, NSD-23, which included the key phrasing: "containment was never an end in itself. It was a strategy born of the condition of the postwar world. [But] a new era may now be upon us. We may be able to move beyond containment to a new U.S. policy that actively promotes the integration of the Soviet Union into the international system."¹³

National Security adviser Brent Scowcroft was taken with the phrase and with the policy change. There was even talk of labeling it the "Bush Doctrine," but Scowcroft rejected this idea on the grounds that the press, not presidents themselves, are supposed to confer such labels.¹⁴ There was also consideration of declaring the Cold War over, but the cautious Scowcroft vetoed that phraseology, not because he necessarily thought it invalid, but because of concerns about reversibility: "That's the kind of line that once you've said it, it can never be unsaid."¹⁵ The "beyond containment" idea was presented to Bush and he quickly embraced it.

¹² Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 347.

¹³ Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵ Quoted by Philip Zelikow at the Annual Conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Princeton University, 25 June 1999; see also Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*,

The phrase was first used in a major address at Texas A&M University on 12 May 1989. Bush began this important speech by placing the policy of containment quite clearly in the past tense:

Wise men—Truman and Eisenhower, Vandenberg and Rayburn, Marshall, Acheson, and Kennan—crafted the strategy of containment. They believed that the Soviet Union, denied the easy course of expansion, would turn inward and address the contradictions of its inefficient, repressive, and inhumane system. And they were right—the Soviet Union is now publicly facing this hard reality. Containment worked.

Now, Bush continued, it was time to move on to a bold new policy:

We are approaching the conclusion of an historic postwar struggle between two visions: one of tyranny and conflict and one of democracy and freedom. The review of U.S.–Soviet relations that my administration has just completed outlines a new path toward resolving this struggle. Our goal is bold, more ambitious than any of my predecessors could have thought possible. Our review indicates that 40 years of perseverance have brought us to a precious opportunity, and now it is time to move beyond containment to a new policy for the 1990s—one that recognizes the full scope of change taking place around the world and in the Soviet Union itself.

And, Bush extrapolated, that meant essentially reversing containment:

In sum, the United States now has as its goal much more than simply containing Soviet expansionism. We seek the integration of the Soviet Union into the community of nations. . . . Ultimately, our objective is to welcome the Soviet Union back into the world order.

At the end of the speech, he noted that a Texas A&M graduate had been the first American soldier to shake hands with the Soviets when the forces met at the Elbe River at the conclusion of World War II. Making use of this rhetorical convenience, Bush made a clear comparison between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War: “Once again, we are ready for a hand in return. And once again, it is a time for peace.”¹⁶

This was not simply a momentary reflection, but a major policy declaration, and Bush hammered it home in speeches over the weeks that followed. The next day he went out of his way in two separate speeches to point out that “yesterday I announced a new policy for the 1990s” that “seeks to bring the Soviet Union into the family of nations, a policy, if you will, of reintegration.” On 24 May, he repeated the notion at a major speech at the Coast Guard Academy, again employing the past tense when dealing with containment: “We now have a precious opportunity to move beyond containment. . . . Our goal, integrating the Soviet Union into the community of nations, is every bit as ambitious as

20. On Scowcroft’s continuing “reservations” about Gorbachev even after the spring of 1989, see Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 135.

¹⁶ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1989* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 541, 543.

containment was at its time.”¹⁷ These sentiments were stressed in additional statements over the next several days.¹⁸

Although these pronouncements did not declare the Cold War to be over in so many words — as someone like Shultz might have preferred — they strongly carried this implication in their call not simply to go beyond containment, but effectively to reverse it. Bush and Scowcroft reflect that although they were trying to be appropriately “cautious and prudent” in these speeches, they were consciously “shifting policy” and presenting a “new strategy toward the cockpit of East–West confrontation.”¹⁹

Bush’s important policy shift garnered little notice at the time, perhaps because it was too atmospheric (or too “cautious and prudent”), because Bush was not very good at handling what he called “the vision thing,” because the Texas A&M speech was belabored with a distracting, dead-on-arrival policy proposal that was mostly a warmed-over rephrasing of the “Open Skies” idea from the Eisenhower administration,²⁰ because of Scowcroft’s unwillingness to engage in explicit hype, and because “beyond containment” as a phrase simply doesn’t have the same vivid ring or resonance as “iron curtain.” At any rate, some in the administration were disappointed in their hopes that the press would grasp the importance of the message Bush was trying to deliver and dub it the “Bush Doctrine.”²¹

EARLIER RHETORIC

At various points, there were “thaws” in the Cold War, accompanied by suggestions that things were notably improving. There was, for example, the “Spirit of Geneva” in 1955, following the death of Stalin and the rise of new, more moderate Soviet leadership. Or there was the development of what came to be called “detente” after 1963, as the United States and the USSR mostly put crisis aside as a diplomatic technique and focused on engineering arms control agreements designed to reduce the likelihood of nuclear war between them. Some also saw notable improvement when the Helsinki Agreement was signed in 1975.

However, none of these mellowings inspired the kind of direct and repeated “beyond containment” or “the Cold War is over” rhetoric of early 1989. Nor did they lead to a significant and often unilateral dampening of the arms race

¹⁷ Ibid., 546, 553, 602.

¹⁸ Ibid., 606, 617, 667–668.

¹⁹ Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 55.

²⁰ Although Bush rather liked the Open Skies idea, Scowcroft says he found that it “smacked of gimmickry, and would wrongly give the impression that we did not have the brain power to think of something innovative and had to reach back thirty years for an idea.” Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 54.

²¹ In an effort to jigger things along, Blackwill promised an excellent dinner to anyone in the administration who used the phrase “beyond containment” on television after the Texas A&M speech: Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 70.

of the sort that followed the changes of 1988–1989 (to be discussed more fully below).

One indication of the differences was the conversion of the conservative American commentator, Francis Fukuyama. In the fall of 1987, he published an article suspiciously suggesting that Gorbachev's mellowing could simply be a temporary tactical maneuver akin to some that the Communists had employed in the past.²² By May 1989, however, when his famous article, "The End of History?" went to press for the summer issue of *National Interest*, he was triumphantly proclaiming the irreversible ascendance of liberalism.

IDEOLOGY VERSUS DEEDS

Fukuyama's 1987 analysis also can be used to sort out the role of ideological declaration from other factors—particularly from the effects of deeds or acts of policy such as the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Fukuyama points to the rightward, accommodationist shifts in Soviet policy during the New Economic Policy period of 1921–1928, during the popular front period of 1935–1939, during the wartime alliance period of 1941–1947, and variously during the Khrushchev and immediate post-Khrushchev period of 1954–1972, and he notes that once these tactical actions had served their purposes, policy once again shifted sharply to the left.

Following this approach, it seems clear that many of the policy acts of the Gorbachev era had resonances with earlier periods. In particular, Nikita Khrushchev, like Gorbachev, sought to dampen Cold War tensions that could lead to direct conflict between the Soviet Union and the West, and, due in large part to economic strains, he unilaterally cut back on military expenditures, reduced repressive internal policies, accepted notable arms control arrangements, and established more businesslike economic relations with Western capitalist countries.

However, while it could be held that these changes ended the most directly confrontational period of the Cold War (there were few, if any, direct crises between East and West after the Cuban missile crisis of 1962), Western policy makers and commentators had not prominently and repeatedly declared the Cold War to be over or suggested that the time had now come to move "beyond containment." The difference, it seems to me, was that Khrushchev still retained his ideological commitment. He termed his policy one of "peaceful co-existence," but he precisely defined at the time what he meant by that: "intense economic, political, and ideological struggle between the proletariat and the aggressive forces of imperialism in the world arena." In fact, he ebulliently assured the world that "the victory of socialism on a world scale, inevitable by

²² Francis Fukuyama, "Patterns of Soviet Third World Policy," *Problems of Communism* 36 (September–October 1987): 1–13.

virtue of the laws of history, is no longer far off.”²³ And he continued to keep the faith even after he had been drummed humiliatingly and unceremoniously out of office. In the memoirs secretly dictated during his induced retirement, he declared, “Both history and the future are on the side of the proletariat’s ultimate victory. . . . We Communists must hasten this process. . . . There’s a battle going on in the world to decide who will prevail over whom. . . . To speak of ideological compromise would be to betray our Party’s first principles.”²⁴ And “peaceful coexistence among different systems of government is possible, but peaceful coexistence among different ideologies is not.”²⁵

Like Khrushchev, Gorbachev instituted policy actions that led to accommodation, arms reduction, and a relaxation of tensions. Unlike Khrushchev, however, he was also willing to betray his party’s first principles. And that made all the difference. For example, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan by early 1989 is properly taken as a “costly signal” of Gorbachev’s sincerity.²⁶ But if that is so, it is because the signal was costly ideologically—a tangible admission that Gorbachev had abandoned Communist expansionary ideas.²⁷ That is, had such deeds not been accompanied by indications of an ideological shift, they, like those of Khrushchev, would have been seen to be signaling simply that the Soviet Union was capable of pragmatic retreat from an overextended position—rather like the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 or that of America from Vietnam in the 1970s.

WHAT THE COLD WAR WAS NOT ABOUT

Not everyone considered the Cold War to be over by the spring of 1989.²⁸ But by then, a considerable array of important decision makers, foreign policy experts, opinion leaders, and leading newspapers in the West had strongly suggested, and sometimes explicitly declared, its demise. If the Cold War essen-

²³ G.F. Hudson, Richard Lowenthal, and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds., *The Sino-Soviet Dispute* (New York: Praeger, 1961), 214. Similarly, his successor, Leonid Brezhnev, declared in 1976, “Detente does not in the slightest way abolish, and cannot abolish or change the laws of the class struggle. We do not conceal the fact that we see detente as a way to create more favorable conditions for peaceful socialist and communist construction.” Geir Lundestad, *East, West, North, South*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111.

²⁴ Strobe Talbott, ed., *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1974), 530–531.

²⁵ Edward Crankshaw and Strobe Talbott, eds., *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1970), 512.

²⁶ Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization* 54 (Spring 2000): 346.

²⁷ In his 1987 essay, Fukuyama pointedly suggested that Soviet behavior in Afghanistan would “provide a good test of how far-reaching the changes in Soviet Third World policy are.” Fukuyama, “Patterns of Soviet Third World Policy,” 11.

²⁸ For an assessment of conservative analysts who wanted more evidence and who waited for the Eastern European revolutions of late 1989 to relax, see Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” 349–350.

tially did come to an end in the spring of 1989, this would suggest that it could not have been about a number of issues and themes.

Nuclear Weapons and the Military Balance

If the Cold War was centrally about nuclear weapons, and the “bipolarity” they have been said to produce, it would still be going on: the United States and Russia continue to retain enormous nuclear arsenals. In fact, about the only thing that didn’t change at the Cold War’s end was the size of the nuclear arsenals that the East and West had pointed, or potentially pointed, at one another.

Nor was the Cold War about the military balance or the “distribution of capabilities” more generally.²⁹ Later events, particularly those surrounding Russia’s muddled effort to deal militarily with the secessionist movement in Chechnya in the mid-1990s, have led to the realization that the Soviet “military machine” may well have been much less enormous and, especially, much less capable than anyone really imagined in 1989. At the end of the Cold War, however, Soviet military might and potential still inspired awe. In its 2 April 1989 declaration of the Cold War’s end, the *New York Times* readily acknowledged that “two enormous military machines still face each other around the world.” This view was widely shared. As one of its series essayists, hard-liner Frank Carlucci, stressed, “At present, and in spite of actual and announced reform initiatives, the Soviet Union is in sheer military terms more formidable than ever before. This is a fact that has not changed under the leadership of Mikhail S. Gorbachev, and one that will persist even, for instance, after Gorbachev’s promised reductions in the Soviet military.”³⁰ And even as he announced his “beyond containment” policy, George Bush pointed out that “we must not forget that the Soviet Union has acquired awesome military capabilities. . . . That is a fact of life for me today as President of the United States.”³¹ Yet the *Times* and, it appears, Bush concluded that the Cold War was essentially over, even though the military balance seemed to be as monumental and as potentially dangerous as ever.

The Soviet Union had impressively agreed to the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) treaty in 1987, and in his 8 December 1988 UN speech, Gorbachev announced his unilateral arms cuts. But these measures, as Carlucci noted, still left the country with a massive military force. Although they could

²⁹ See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 98, 170.

³⁰ Frank C. Carlucci, “Is the Cold War Over: No Time to Change U.S. Defense Policy,” *New York Times*, 27 January 1989.

³¹ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Bush*, 541; see also Vasquez, *Power of Power Politics*, 330; Owen Harries, “Is the Cold War Really Over?” *National Review*, 10 November 1989, 45.

be treated as “costly signals” of his sincerity, they could also, by themselves, be dismissed as temporary and readily reversible measures to reduce military costs, with the long-run intention, as the *Economist* magazine put it in 1988, of making the country a “more formidable adversary for the West, not a partner with it.”³²

To be sure, the Soviet Union’s military capabilities were at all times factored into the risk calculation during the Cold War; the threat was particularly alarming because it was linked to an impressive military arsenal. But it was the threat that was principally motivating, not the size of the arsenal. North Korea and Iraq have been seen as threatening and dangerous because they have sometimes acted or talked threateningly, even though their military capabilities pale in comparison with those of, say, unthreatening France or Britain. And of late, the United States has become deeply alarmed about the dangers presented by tiny bands of fanatical and suicidal terrorists, whose ability to kill Americans, even in the most apocalyptic scenarios, is dwarfed by the damage that could have been inflicted upon the United States by the Soviet Union in the 1980s — or for that matter, by Russia today.³³

This suggests that the arms balance was more nearly an indicator of international Cold War tensions than the cause of them. Hans J. Morgenthau once proclaimed that “men do not fight because they have arms”; rather “they have arms because they deem it necessary to fight.”³⁴ It follows, then, that when countries no longer deem it necessary to fight, they will get rid of their arms. And that is exactly what happened as the Cold War came to an end: once the ideological struggle had begun to wane, something resembling a negative arms race evolved because the weapons built to wage it began to seem burdensome and even parodic. Indeed, within days of Gorbachev’s 7 December 1988 speech, press reports observed that there was a “new reluctance to spend for defense.” In a month, reports were noting that Gorbachev’s pronouncements “make it harder for Western governments to justify large sums for military machines. . . .

³² See Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” 345–348, 350. With its later withdrawal from Eastern Europe, the Soviet ability to invade Western Europe was, of course, vastly reduced, but it still retained a huge army and nuclear capacity. The failure of the Soviet economic and administrative system clearly encouraged Gorbachev and others to reexamine their basic ideology. However, as Myron Rush notes, these problems by no means required a doctrinal change: had the Soviet Union done nothing about them, “its survival to the end of the century would have been likely,” and “by cutting defense spending sharply . . . a prudent conservative leader in 1985 could have improved the Soviet economy markedly.” Myron Rush, “Fortune and Fate,” *National Interest* (Spring 1993): 21.

³³ In a parallel to the Cold War discussion, if terrorists led by Osama bin Laden were to credibly give up their anti-American ideological zeal, concerns about them would diminish markedly, even though their physical capacity to commit damaging acts of terror would be unchanged.

³⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 327; see also James Lee Ray and Bruce Russett, “The Future as Arbiter of Theoretical Controversies: Predictions, Explanations and the End of the Cold War,” *British Journal of Political Science* 26 (October 1996): 457.

The Soviet bear seems less threatening to Western publics these days, so that they want to do less on the weapons front. . . . Western perceptions [are] that the Soviet threat is receding and that big armies are expensive and inconvenient—perhaps even irrelevant.” A few months later, as more proposals and counterproposals were spun out by both sides, the *Wall Street Journal* was calling the process a “race to demobilize.”³⁵

The arms buildup, of course, had not been accomplished through written agreement; instead, there had been a sort of free market, in which each side, keeping a wary eye on the other, sought security by purchasing varying amounts of weapons and troops. With the demise of the Cold War, a similar reactive arms policy continued between West and East, except that now it was focused on arms reduction. Jerimi Suri argues that “a race to disarm dominated the end of the Cold War.”³⁶ It seems, rather, that this “race” naturally followed it.

Communism in the Soviet Union

Neither in his 7 December 1988 speech nor in his later pronouncements did Gorbachev indicate that he intended to abandon Communism or Communist Party control in the Soviet Union. Indeed, even after the failed coup attempt against him in 1991 by members of that party, he continued to contend that while some bad elements needed to be removed from the party and while his policy of *glasnost* should be further advanced, he still deeply believed in Communism as a system and felt that it needed to be reformed, not abandoned: he pledged to “work for the renewal of the party.”³⁷

Consequently, if the Cold War essentially ended in the spring of 1989 (or even in late 1991), it could not have been about the fact that the Soviet Union had happened to adopt Communism as its domestic economic and governmental form. As the quintessential Cold Warrior, John Foster Dulles, once put it, “The basic change we need to look forward to isn’t necessarily a change from Communism to another form of government. The question is whether you can have Communism in one country or whether it has to be for the world. If the Soviets had national Communism we could do business with their government.”³⁸ In 1962, President John Kennedy made the same point:

³⁵ Amity Shlaes, “Talk Turns to Triple Zero in West Germany,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 December 1988; Robert Keatley, “Gorbachev Peace Offensive Jars the West,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 January 1989; editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, 31 May 1989; see also R. Jeffrey Smith, “Arms Cuts Gain Favor as Anxieties Ebb,” *Washington Post*, 8 May 1989. On the phenomenon of the negative arms race, see John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), ch. 3.

³⁶ Suri, “Explaining the End of the Cold War,” 84.

³⁷ Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, 437.

³⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford, 1982), 143.

The real problem is the Soviet desire to expand their power and influence. If Mr. Khrushchev would concern himself with the real interests of the people of the Soviet Union—that they have a higher standard of living, to protect his own security—there is no real reason why the United States and the Soviet Union . . . should not be able to live in peace. But it is this constant determination . . . that they will not settle for a peaceful world, but must settle for a Communist world . . . [that] makes the sixties so dangerous.³⁹

In his proclamations, including the 7 December 1988 speech, Gorbachev essentially indicated that he only wanted Communism in his country and was not interested in forcibly exporting it: “In the course of such exchange, let everyone show the advantage of their social system, way of life or values—and not just by words or propaganda, but by real deeds. That would be a fair rivalry of ideologies. But it should not be extended to relations among states.”⁴⁰

When it became clear that Gorbachev meant it, Bush and other Western leaders moved to accommodate. They certainly hoped for further economic and political liberalization in the Soviet Union. But that liberalization, however desirable, does not seem to have been an essential condition for calling an end to the Cold War.

The Need for the World to Be Democratic and/or Capitalist

If the Cold War was not about the fact that certain major countries had domestic processes built around Communism, neither was it about the fact that those countries, and others, were neither democratic nor capitalist. The United States has been a champion of both institutions, of course, and has long tried to promote them and continues to do so. But it has generally been willing to adopt a live-and-let-live policy toward various kinds of dictatorships, whether dominated by Fascist parties (as with Franco’s Spain), by Communist ones (as with today’s China), or by militaristic groups (as in dozens of places in Latin America), as long as those dictatorships do not threaten their neighbors or, particularly, the United States and its core interests.

The Existence of the Soviet Union

Dating the demise of the Cold War to coincide with the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 makes little sense. Not only does that seem far too late, following the reasoning above, but the United States actually made considerable efforts to keep the country from collapsing, fearing the kind of violent chaos that was to erupt in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Most notably, earlier in the year, Bush had gone to Kiev in the Ukraine to give a speech in which he essen-

³⁹ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1963), 551.

⁴⁰ “In Gorbachev’s Words,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1988.

tially urged the various Soviet Republics to work it out and to remain within the country.⁴¹ If there was a Cold War raging at that time, the United States and the Soviet Union were on the same side.

Soviet Control over Eastern Europe

The pronouncements noted above about the end of the Cold War all came while the Soviet Union still controlled Eastern Europe. Although there were signs of liberalization in Hungary and although Poland was going to hold semi-open elections in June 1989, Soviet control of the area seemed quite firm. Indeed, several of the countries—particularly East Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania—were under the domination of Communist hard-liners, who greeted Gorbachev’s reforms with utter dismay and even open contempt.

In its 2 April 1989 declaration of the end of the Cold War, the *New York Times* readily acknowledged this issue, noting that “Europe remains torn in two” and that “No one seems to have a good answer about the division of Europe, always the most dangerous East–West question.” It called for “superpower talks to bring about sovereign nations in Eastern Europe and special arrangements for the two Germanys.”⁴² Indeed, Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice argue that whatever the implications of the “beyond containment” speeches (which they helped write), Bush essentially felt that the Cold War could not be over until Europe was “whole and free,” a phrase he used a few times both before and after the set of “beyond containment” speeches.⁴³

Consideration of this issue is confused somewhat by the incredible speed with which Soviet control over Eastern Europe was terminated. De-Sovietization there substantially took place over a few months at the end of 1989, and the peaceful unification of Germany was accomplished over the following year. But no one had really envisioned the astonishing speed with which these massive changes would come about. The editors of the *Times* almost certainly felt that working out viable arrangements in Europe would take many years of careful diplomacy with a Soviet Union that was now clearly willing to negotiate in good faith on the issue. Once the remarkable revolutions in Eastern Europe began, of course, the possibility of rapid change began to be more accepted. However, even on 12 November 1989—even after the Berlin Wall had crumbled—George Kennan published an article in the *Washington Post* noting, ac-

⁴¹ Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 417–418; Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 515–516; Matlock, *Autopsy*, 565–566.

⁴² On this issue, see also Michael Mandelbaum, “Ending Where It Began,” *New York Times*, 27 February 1989. By mid-1988, some analysts were noting that the Soviet position in burdensome Eastern Europe had become negotiable and might lead to some sort of Finlandization of the Soviet colonies there. Irving Kristol, “The Soviets’ Albatross States,” *Wall Street Journal*, 22 July 1988. See also Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 377–378.

⁴³ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Bush*, 431. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*, 24, 31. Zelikow and Rice date the end of the Cold War with the unification of Germany. *Ibid.*, 3.

curately, that “the changes now sweeping over Central and Eastern Europe are momentous, irreversible, and truly epoch making,” but then going on to argue that the process of designing a new Europe was very complex and profound and would “take years, not months. We will be lucky if the task is substantially accomplished before the end of the century.”⁴⁴ As Zelikow and Rice recall, “For weeks after the Berlin Wall fell on the night of November 9–10, 1989, even those who dared think about [the] unification [of Germany] laid out timetables in years, not months.”⁴⁵

Essentially, these comments suggest that the expectations at the time were that the Soviet Union would retain overall control over Eastern Europe for some considerable period, but would work, over the years, in a businesslike manner to negotiate relative autonomy for individual states and to develop an accommodation on the division of Germany, allowing much-increased contacts and perhaps even a kind of confederation. At the same time, it would presumably continue to dampen East–West military tensions through arms control agreements, in the manner of the important 1987 INF treaty, and it would assist in the rise of Gorbachev-style reformers in places like East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and, insofar as it could, Romania and Albania.

In this process, it was to be expected that the Soviets—or indeed any regime in that geographical location—would proceed with great caution to make sure its security was not compromised. The country had, of course, been invaded twice in the century through Eastern Europe, and Western policy makers were fully sensitive to this understandable security concern. Any armed Soviet suppression of independence movements in Eastern Europe (of the sort Gorbachev-

⁴⁴ George F. Kennan, “This Is No Time for Talk Of German Reunification,” *Washington Post*, 12 November 1989. Similarly, Henry Kissinger anticipated at the time that it would take three or four years even for a de facto unification of Germany to take place. Michael R. Gordon, “Kissinger Expects a United Germany: Declares Changes in the East Set in Motion Forces That Cannot Be Reversed,” *New York Times*, 16 November 1989. In a spring 1989 memo, Scowcroft noted that “virtually no West German expects German unification to happen in this century.” Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*, 28. A personal note may be of interest in this regard. In 1986, I presented a paper at the International Studies Association meetings arguing that because the Cold War was about ideology (a theme continued in the present article) and because Gorbachev was already in the process of dismembering this crucial element, the Cold War might well be in terminal demise—that we might be coming to the end of the world as we knew it (the paper can be found at <http://psweb.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty/jmueller/isa1986.pdf>). In 1985 and 1986, I tried to get the unfashionable argument published, in various versions, in *Foreign Policy*, *National Interest*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New Republic* to no avail. I then gave up and blended the argument into a book that came out in February 1989 (*Retreat from Doomsday*, see especially 211–214). While I think I got the basic mechanism for the demise of the Cold War right, I was as flabbergasted as anybody by the speed with which events in Eastern Europe took place. At the 1986 meeting, someone asked me when I thought the Soviet Union might decide to leave Eastern Europe. The paper suggests that this might happen “eventually” and “in the long term,” and I tried to take refuge behind such crafty vapidity. But he kept badgering me, and I finally blurted out, “Maybe by 1995,” with what I felt was amazing heroism. If I had heard myself saying “1989” I would have had myself committed.

⁴⁵ Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*, 2.

chev had earlier instituted in Lithuania) would likely have been condemned by the West. But even these would probably not have fatally derailed the process or led to major claims that the Cold War was still on—any more than the later Russian wars in Chechnya have. Most likely, of course, was that the Eastern Europeans, as sensitive as anybody to historical realities, would be content to participate in a gradual process of liberation. Indeed, this approach was urged upon them by Thatcher. In her 1988 interview, she anticipated progress toward solving the Eastern European problem, but warned those still behind the Iron Curtain about being too impatient: “They can get their increasing liberty if they handle it well.”⁴⁶ If the Cold War could only end when Europe became “whole and free,” its demise—from the perspective of early 1989—was years, possibly even decades off. The 1989 rhetoric and declarations of Bush and others detailed above suggest, by contrast, that the Cold War could end long before that event took place.

The issue, then, is whether settlement in Eastern Europe was crucial to ending the Cold War or whether it was more nearly the first really important item on the post-Cold War agenda, one that, as it happens, was resolved with astonishing and utterly unexpected speed. The evidence seems to point more toward the latter interpretation. As the American ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, recalls, “There was a change—it was rather gradual, but *very* perceptible after [Gorbachev’s 1988 UN speech] in that it was no longer a zero sum game in terms of Soviet negotiating. We disagreed on a lot of things. But we all agreed the new Europe should be united. . . . And that was not characteristic of Cold War negotiations.”⁴⁷ That is, well before the tumultuous events took place in Eastern Europe, the key leaders in the East and West had reached a crucial agreement: that, in Matlock’s words, “Europe should be united.” The rest was detail—highly significant detail to be sure, but detail nonetheless.

An important element in the institution of the Cold War was doubtless Western reaction to Soviet control over the areas it happened to occupy in Eastern Europe after World War II. But the containment policy, formulated after that accomplished fact, essentially accepted that control and was designed mainly to stop any expansion. Thus, although Soviet domination of Eastern Europe was not acceptable to the West, Cold War policy essentially acknowledged that reality. The Cold War could logically end even while such domination continued, particularly if the former contestants were determined to resolve the issue in an orderly fashion. And it did.

PREVIOUS ENDINGS: YUGOSLAVIA AND CHINA

This argument can, I think, be strengthened by looking at two earlier, if partial, endings in the Cold War.

⁴⁶ Oberdorfer, “Thatcher Says Cold War Has Come to an End.”

⁴⁷ Comment at the Annual Conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Princeton University, 26 June 1999.

Shortly after World War II, the version of Communism in Yugoslavia under Josip Tito was perhaps the most dynamically ideological and confrontational in the world. This condition changed after the Tito–Stalin split of 1948, when Tito and his party were excommunicated from the international Communist movement led by Moscow. In desperation, Yugoslavia largely abandoned its ideologically confrontational approach and sought accommodation with the West. Even though the country was still a Communist dictatorship and was to remain one for decades, the West responded almost immediately, supplying aid year after year, and it was soon declaring that Yugoslavia was “of direct importance to the defense of the North Atlantic area” and that its ability to defend itself “was important to the security of the United States.” For a while Yugoslavia was close to becoming an informal participant in NATO.⁴⁸

Similarly, when China abandoned its commitment to worldwide anticapitalist revolution in the 1970s, it was gradually embraced by the capitalist world and eventually came into something like an alliance with the United States: if the Soviet Union contemplated invading China in the 1960s, it would not have had to wonder much about the possibility that the United States would come to China’s defense; by the 1980s, it would have. As early as 1980, there were official discussions between China and the United States about the possible transfer of American defense technology to China and about “limited strategic cooperation on matters of common concern.”⁴⁹ All this even though the Communist Party remained (and remains) fully in control in China (as well as in colonized contiguous Tibet), even though democracy has never really been allowed to flower there, and even though (although later considerably reformed) the domestic economy remained strongly controlled from the center.⁵⁰

The process was summarized in 1985 by Reagan adviser Richard Pipes: “China has turned inward and ceased being aggressive, and so we are friendly toward China, just as we are toward Yugoslavia. We may deplore their Communist regimes, but these countries are not trying to export their systems and therefore do not represent a threat to our national security.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ John C. Campbell, *Tito’s Separate Road: America and Yugoslavia in World Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 24–27.

⁴⁹ Jonathan D. Pollack, “China and the Global Strategic Balance” in Harry Harding, ed., *China’s Foreign Relations in the 1980s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 159. On the potential for alliance, see also Strobe Talbott, “The Strategic Dimension of the Sino-American Relationship” in Richard H. Solomon, ed., *The China Factor* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 81–113. On China’s abandonment of threatening ideology, see Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, 184–186.

⁵⁰ In his assessment of the end of the Cold War, Andrew Kydd ignores ideological change and seeks to explain the development by stressing instead various tangible signals and reassurances put forward by Gorbachev. But as he notes in passing, China abandoned the Cold War, and was accepted by the West, even without such tangible signals. The experience serves, he suggests, “as a reminder that a transition path from communism exists that does not provide a great deal of reassurance to the outside world.” Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” 350.

⁵¹ *Policy Review* (Winter 1985): 33. An interesting comparison can be made with Cuba. Although there is little concern that that tiny nation can do much to harm the United States, a great deal of hostility toward the regime lingers in part at least because, however materially impotent, it still subscribes to a hostile ideology.

WHAT THE COLD WAR WAS ABOUT

By the spring of 1989, Gorbachev had been able to convince a broad array of important Western leaders and analysts as well as, it seems, the American public that the USSR was giving up on Leninist notions about the international class struggle. It no longer yearned for the demise of capitalism and, certainly, it was no longer interested in using violence in any form to accomplish that goal.⁵² Once the West became convinced that this ideological reversal had taken place, the Cold War came to an end.

As noted, in his last presidential press conference, Reagan was quite clear about what the Cold War was about: “the expansionary policy that was instituted in the Communist revolution, that their goal must be a one-world Communist state.”⁵³ And in his “beyond containment” speeches of 1989, Bush expressed a similar understanding. Containment involved denying the Soviet Union “the easy course of expansion” until it “turned inward” to address its own “contradictions.” Or it required “checking the Soviet Union’s expansionist aims, in the hope that the Soviet system itself would one day be forced to confront its internal contradictions.” This happy consequence, Bush felt, had now come about.⁵⁴

The quintessential and seminal declaration of U.S. policy toward international Communism remains George Kennan’s “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947. Kennan expresses concern about Soviet military strength, but argues that what makes that strength threatening is an ideology that is fundamentally expansionist. In the first paragraphs of the article, he argues that “the outstanding features of Communist thought” are: “the capitalist system of production is a nefarious one which inevitably leads to the exploitation of the working class by the capital-owning class”; “capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction” which must “result inevitably and inescapably in a revolutionary transfer of power to the working class”; countries where revolutions have been successful will “rise against the remaining capitalist world”; capitalism will not “perish without proletarian revolution”; and “a final push” is “needed from a revolutionary proletariat movement in order to tip over the tottering structure.”⁵⁵

There has been considerable debate about the degree to which ideology actually impelled Soviet policy.⁵⁶ However, over the decades, prominent Soviet leaders have repeatedly made statements such as the following:

⁵² An important Soviet official observed in 1987, “Previously we reasoned: the worse for the adversary, the better for us. . . . But today this is no longer true . . . The better things are going in the European world economy, the higher the stability and the better the prospects for our development.” Snyder, “Gorbachev Revolution,” 115. See also Harries, “Is the Cold War Really Over?” 40–42.

⁵³ *New York Times*, 9 December 1988.

⁵⁴ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Bush*, 541, 602.

⁵⁵ X [George F. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25 (July 1947): 566–567.

⁵⁶ For an able analysis and discussion, see Nigel Gould-Davies, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics During the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1 (Winter 1999): 90–109.

The existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with the imperialist states for a long time is unthinkable. One or the other must triumph in the end. And before that end supervenes, a series of frightful collisions between the Soviet Republic and the bourgeois states will be inevitable.⁵⁷ (Lenin)

As soon as we are strong enough to fight the whole of capitalism, we shall at once take it by the neck.⁵⁸ (Lenin)

The goal is to consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat in one country, using it as a base for the overthrow of imperialism in all countries.⁵⁹ (Stalin)

To eliminate the inevitability of war, it is necessary to destroy imperialism.⁶⁰ (Stalin)

All the socialist countries and the international working-class and Communist movement recognize their duty to render the fullest moral and material assistance to the peoples fighting to free themselves from imperialist and colonial tyranny.⁶¹ (Khrushchev)

Of course, there is some possibility that pronouncements like these and slogans like “Workers of the World, Unite!” are simply philosophical boilerplate.⁶² And it could certainly be suggested that Western policy makers often exaggerated the degree to which the Communists had the daring, will, and capacity to carry them out.⁶³ However, after they have been recited millions of times in speeches, books, leaflets, brochures, letterhead, tracts, training manuals, banners, pamphlets, proclamations, announcements, billboards, handbooks, bumper stickers, and T-shirts, one might begin to suspect that the sentiments could just possibly actually reflect true thought processes.

At any rate, because such sentiments are explicitly and lethally threatening, responsible leaders of capitalist countries ought, at least out of simple pru-

⁵⁷ Frederic S. Burin, “The Communist Doctrine of the Inevitability of War,” *American Political Science Review* 57 (June 1963): 337.

⁵⁸ Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Specter of Communism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 17.

⁵⁹ Historicus [George Allen Morgan], “Stalin on Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 27 (January 1949): 198.

⁶⁰ William Taubman, *Stalin’s American Policy* (New York: Norton, 1982), 224. As Taubman points out, Stalin was referring to wars *between* capitalist states, something often neglected when the West examined this statement. Nevertheless, even taking that into account, the declaration clearly remains profoundly threatening to capitalist states. On this issue more generally, see Burin, “Communist Doctrine.”

⁶¹ Hudson et al., *Sino-Soviet Dispute*, 196.

⁶² This is essentially the position taken in the waning months of the Cold War by Gorbachev adviser Giorgi Arbatov, who argued that Gorbachev was in the process of destroying “anti-Soviet stereotypes.” He concluded, “Something very serious is happening: The beginning of the demise of the entire political infrastructure of the Cold War. The Western press is already saying that Gorbachev’s destruction of the stereotype of the ‘enemy’ is his ‘secret weapon.’ The arms race, power politics in the Third World, and military blocs are unthinkable without the ‘Soviet threat.’” “Is America No Longer Exceptional?” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 5 (Summer 1988): 31. For the forceful argument that the sentiments reflected real ideological zeal and importantly affected policy during the Cold War, see Douglas J. Macdonald, “Communist Bloc Expansion in the Early Cold War: Challenging Realism, Refuting Revisionism,” *International Security* 20 (Winter 1995/96): 152–188.

⁶³ See Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994).

dence, to take them seriously. And it seems clear that Western leaders and analysts like Kennan, Churchill, Dulles, Kennedy, Thatcher, Reagan, Shultz, and Bush did so. Moreover, it rather appears that these ideological threats were absolutely crucial to the Cold War. Once Gorbachev was able to convince Western leaders that the Soviet Union no longer subscribed to such notions, the Cold War came to an end, even though other aspects of the international environment remained substantially unchanged.

John Gaddis has observed that “Moscow’s commitment to the overthrow of capitalism throughout the world had been the chief unsettling element in its relations with the West since the Russian revolution.”⁶⁴ The ending of the Cold War suggests that that commitment comes close to being the only cause of the Cold War. As Jack Matlock puts it, “The cold war could not end, truly and definitively, until the Soviet Union abandoned its system’s ideological linchpin, the class struggle concept.”⁶⁵ That is, even if the Soviet Union had retrenched geographically and militarily, it would have continued to be seen as an adversary—although a somewhat less-potent one—if it had continued to embrace its threatening ideology.

The Cold War, in essence, was not about Communism per se, about Soviet control over Eastern Europe, about Communist control in the Soviet Union, or about arms and power balances. It was about something else: the Soviet Union’s attraction to, and support of, an ideology that threatened the West. Once that changed, the Cold War came to an end. Other developments, however important historically, were essentially ancillary. And by the spring of 1989, the necessary and sufficient condition for the ending of the Cold War was in place. Nothing more was required.

⁶⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, “Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?” *Foreign Affairs* 52 (January 1974): 388; see also Garthoff, *Great Transition*, ch. 16.

⁶⁵ Matlock, *Autopsy*, 649.