On April 26, 1986, at 1:30 A.M., a huge explosion destroyed the fourth block of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor. The explosion caused the second-worst manmade nuclear catastrophe, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This sudden disaster in Ukraine created a radically new perspective on security affairs for Gorbachev and the entire Soviet leadership. At first, a majority of the Soviet leadership and the Soviet military-industrial complex instinctively chose to downplay and cover up the incident, in essence bluffing in the face of the whole world, as it had following the KAL-007 tragedy. Just as then, the bluff was called, and the international uproar over the nuclear fallout, resulting from the accident, penetrated through radio broadcasting to Soviet society. Panic spread in waves, and from Ukraine it soon reached Moscow. Soviet authorities, after days of delay, evacuated 100,000 people from the irradiated area. A decade later, it became known that the radiation spread after the Chernobyl accident killed 8,000 men and women. It affected the health and well-being of 435,000 people, and the list is not yet finished. 90

The Chernobyl catastrophe consumed the Politburo's energies for three months. It shattered ossified bureaucratic structures and the old militarized mentality to the core. 91 Gorbachev was humiliated by the international scandal and indignant at the rigidity of bureaucratic structures, and he chose to scapegoat the military-industrial complex. The most secret and impenetrable part of the Soviet system, its nuclear program, became the object of blistering criticism, its heroic and romantic image tarnished beyond repair. Military scientists and the military command were shaken, too. It was the first time that the Soviet armed forces participated in a rescue and decontamination operation on such a large scale. To the head of the General Staff, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, Chernobyl was reminiscent of the Great Patriotic War. But, instead of lessons of vigilance and military buildup, the catastrophe revealed that the military doctrine of "victory" in nuclear war was a hollow hulk. And it dawned on the military command what a disaster it would be to have even limited nuclear warfare in a Europe studded with atomic reactors. Akhromeyev recalled that after Chernobyl "a nuclear danger for our people ceased to be abstraction. It became a palpable reality." 92

Chernobyl's effect on the Soviet political leadership was greater than any other single event since the Cuban missile crisis. "We learned what nuclear war can be," Gorbachev said to the Politburo. Certainly, the catastrophe was much more responsible for the drastic changes in Soviet official mentality than the previous years of American pressure and military buildup. The catastrophe demanded the end of xenophobia and obsessive secrecy and a reappraisal of security policies in the nuclear age. Within a year after this accident, Soviet foreign policy, positions on nuclear arms control, the approach to negotiations with the United States, and military doctrine would drastically change. Chernobyl also forced the Politburo to introduce glasnost, the practice of public discussion of contentious issues that the country had not known since the 1920s. Several weeks after the disaster, Gorbachev said to his colleagues: "Our work is now transparent to the whole people, to the whole world. There are no interests that could force us to hide the truth." 93

Gorbachev suggested to his Politburo colleagues that the Soviet Union should come up with better and bolder disarmament initiatives to stop the arms race. In late May 1986, the general secretary made an unprecedented appearance in the Foreign Ministry and addressed a large group of diplomats. The Reagan administration, Gorbachev told them, was trying to box in the Soviet Union in an exhausting arms race. "Soviet foreign policy," he concluded, "must alleviate the burden of military expenditures, must "do anything in its capabilities to loosen the vise of defense expenditures." Diplomats were told to get rid of the mentality of bureaucrats without individual voice and initiative, the mentality that had prevailed during the tenures of Molotov and Gromyko. Gorbachev criticized the old Soviet diplomacy for "senseless stubbornness." Instead of digging Cold War trenches and waiting for a more conciliatory leadership in Washington, Soviet diplomacy had to engage the Reagan administration, envelop it with peace initiatives, and influence it via its own Western European allies. 94

The first tangible result of the post-Chernobyl foreign policy was a breakthrough on conventional arms control and verification in Stockholm. These talks had lasted for years, as the Soviet side refused to accept on-site inspections proposed by the Americans. The General Staff was horrified at the prospect of NATO inspections, which might reveal the many Potemkin villages in the armed forces. At the Politburo, Akhromeyev challenged the top Soviet negotiator in Stockholm, casting doubt on his "Soviet patriotism." After Chernobyl, however, secrecy no longer won the day. Instead, at Politburo instructions, Akhromeyev himself had to go to Stockholm to announce Soviet acceptance of on-site inspections. The marshal, deeply shaken by Chernobyl, obeyed and after a few weeks the treaty was signed. 95

By that time, the general secretary had undertaken a private study of international relations that included the works of the Palme Commission and Western social democrats on disarmament and "common security." He also read the Russell-Einstein Manifesto of 1955 and the works of the Pugwash Movement of scientists against nuclear war. 96 Armed with new ideas, Gorbachev next appealed to the socialist-leaning U.S. allies, arguing for a new security philosophy. Presi-
dent of France François Mitterrand, Prime Minister of Spain Felipe Gonzalez, and
Prime Minister of Canada Pierre Elliot Trudeau expressed sympathies with the
“new thinking” and were very critical of the U.S. leadership. At a meeting with
the French president in July 1986, the Soviet leader attacked Reagan and “the
forces and groupings that brought him to power” for promoting SDI and failing
to understand the new security needs of humanity. Mitterrand admitted that “the
military-industrial complex might be applying strong pressure on the US admin­
istration.” At the same time, he added, “one should keep in mind that Reagan,
for all the influence of his own milieu, is not without common sense and intuition.”
He appealed to Gorbachev not to view the political situation in the United
States as something set in stone: “The situation may change.” He also catered to
Gorbachev’s genuine security concerns, posing as a middleman between the
Soviet Union and the Americans.

British conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher played the role of an
informal ambassador between Gorbachev and Reagan. There was a remarkable
personal affinity between Thatcher and Gorbachev, despite the ideological chasm
that separated them. From the start, Thatcher fully grasped the double-sided idea
of reform and disarmament promoted by Gorbachev but categorically rejected
the idea of a nuclear-free world as a dangerous romantic utopia. In retrospect,
Thatcher was right, as the process of disarmament followed her vision more
closely. But, as Chernyaev commented, “if Gorbachev had not been so pushy, and
so implacable in his desire to prove to all that nuclear weapons are an absolute
evil and one cannot build world politics on it, then the process [of détente] would
never have begun at all.”

Another informal middleman between the Kremlin and the White House was
retired U.S. president Richard Nixon. Nixon still enjoyed a good standing among
Soviet leaders as the architect of détente in the 1970s. In July 1986, he told
Gorbachev: “You are right—there are people in the [Reagan] administration that
do not want agreements with the Soviet Union. It seems to them that if they can isolate
the Soviet Union diplomatically, apply economic pressure on it, achieve
military superiority then the Soviet order would collapse. Of course, this is not
going to happen. During many years Reagan, as you know, was considered a part
of the grouping that shared these views. However, today he is not one of them. I
learned from conversations with him that the meeting with you had a slow, but
undeniable impact on the evolution of his thoughts.”

These conversations made Gorbachev more impatient to put his “new thinking”
to work. Another impulse came from bad economic and financial news.
Perestroika was not going well; slogans of domestic reforms contrasted sharply
with a sluggish economy and continued social stagnation. One month after the
accident, the cost of Chernobyl had already come to three billion rubles. The
unforeseen expenses affected Politburo discussions of the financial burden that the
continuation of the strategic arms race with the West would entail. Perhaps
for the first time since the debates during the Polish crisis, it became poignantly
clear that the Soviet Union was seriously overcommitted financially. In July 1986,
Gorbachev admitted that the Soviet budget had lost nine billion rubles, due to the
rapid drop in oil prices. The Soviets also expected a trade deficit. And the anti­
sealcohol campaign had reduced state revenues by 15 billion rubles. In domestic
affairs, the general secretary, with the help of Ligachev in the Party Secretariat,
radically repopulated the bureaucratic and party cadres, hoping to rejuvenate the
Soviet party-administrative system. But Gorbachev was not yet ready for drastic
measures, such as fixing prices and fighting hidden inflation. And he did not
know how to transform the socialist economy. He hoped to alleviate the eco­
nomic situation by reducing international tensions, thus obtaining the “peace
dividends”—lower military expenditures and Western credits.

U.S.-Soviet relations were exacerbated by what amounted to a virtual espion­
age war, and this war caused real casualties. In Moscow, the KGB obtained from
the CIA’s Aldrich Ames complete information on American spies in the Soviet
Union. In 1986, with Gorbachev’s consent, they were arrested; some of them
were tried and sentenced to death. At the same time in the United States, long­
time Soviet moles in the FBI and the National Security Agency were found out
and arrested. The nasty warfare continued to escalate in late August, when the
FBI arrested a KGB agent, Gennady Zakharov, working under cover at the UN
Secretariat. In retaliation, the KGB framed and arrested U.S. News and World Re­
port correspondent Nicholas Daniloff. A new wave of anti-Soviet feelings in
the American mass media, vigorously promoted by the Reagan administration,
seemed to return U.S.-Soviet relations to the 1983 low.

Gorbachev was impatient for a dramatic breakthrough. In early September, in
the midst of the Zakharov-Daniloff controversy, he wrote a letter to Reagan,
proposing that, instead of waiting for the next regular summit in Washington,
they have a quick one-on-one meeting, “let us say in Iceland or in London.” In an
attempt to separate Reagan from his right-wing entourage, Gorbachev suggested
“a strictly confidential, private and frank discussion (possibly with only our
foreign ministers present).” The purpose of the meeting would be “to draft
agreements on two or three very specific questions,” to ensure they would be
ready for signing at the next summit.

Later, Margaret Thatcher and Reagan’s advisers claimed that Gorbachev had
lured Reagan into a trap. Indeed, Gorbachev was prepared not only to discuss
“two or three very specific questions” but also to present a revolutionary agree­
ment on nuclear arms reductions. But the Soviet leader was not trying to ambush Reagan. As part of summit preparations, he instructed the General Staff to abandon the offensive strategy of reaching the English Channel in several days and to work out a new military doctrine based on “strategic sufficiency” and defensive posture.104 He also told the military that he would like to accept Reagan’s proposal on elimination of all Soviet and U.S. medium-range missiles in Europe (“zero option”). Finally, he suggested that the Soviet negotiating package include acceptance of 50 percent cuts on the “heavy” ICBMs, the backbone of the Soviet strategic arsenal.105 As a result of all this, the meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, turned out to be the most dramatic diplomatic event in the concluding years of the Cold War.

Soviet proposals were based on the ideas of “strategic sufficiency,” which had long circulated in Moscow’s academic institutes and among arms control negotiators. These ideas held that it was not vital to maintain a numeric parity in strategic armaments. Of course, nobody except Gorbachev dared to propose these ideas openly, fearing cries of treason from the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. Even Gorbachev had to explain his “new thinking” as a pragmatic necessity. He argued at the Politburo in early October 1986 that the USSR could not afford to react to the Reagan challenge in traditional tit-for-tat fashion: “We will be pulled into an arms race that is beyond our capabilities, and we will lose it, because we are at the limit of our capabilities. Moreover, we can expect that Japan and the FRG could very soon add their economic potential to the American one. If the new round begins, the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable.”106

SDI again proved to be a stumbling bloc for Gorbachev’s “new thinking.” British political scientist Archie Brown believes that for Gorbachev at that moment SDI was not so much a security concern as an excuse to argue “for the kind of policy innovation which would break the deadlock and end the vicious spiral of arms race.”107 The evidence speaks to the contrary: Reagan’s program was indeed a real concern for the Soviet leader. He still could not understand if Reagan’s intentions were aggressive or not. As with the Geneva summit, Politburo instructions for the Reykjavik meeting were a compromise between Gorbachev’s new ideological approaches and his traditional security fears. While the military leadership would have done the same, it was Gorbachev who firmly linked any agreement on cuts of strategic armaments to a single condition: Reagan had to bury the idea of SDI and affirm American adherence to the 1972 ABM treaty. Speaking to a small group of “new thinkers” during the preparations for Reykjavik, Gorbachev argued that it was necessary to dislodge Reagan from his position on SDI. “If it fails, then we will be able to say: This is what we were ready for!”108

The Reykjavik summit began with an amiable one-on-one conversation between the two leaders.109 The president began by laying out the U.S. four-point agenda, linking the progress in disarmament to changes in Soviet behavior in the third world and observance of human rights at home. Gorbachev assured Reagan that he would support “ultimate liquidation of nuclear weapons” on the principles of “equal security.” He also said he would go “as far on the matter of verification as would be necessary” to remove U.S. doubts. At the same time, the Soviet leader clearly linked a date for a Washington summit to the reaching of an agreement on arms reductions—an echo of the similar Soviet linkage during the Carter administration.110

What went on between the two leaders seemed almost surreal to other participants, veterans of the decades of standoff. Reagan and Gorbachev seemed to have resolved more disarmament issues than all their predecessors had done. In the view of American experts, Gorbachev made more concessions than they had received from the Soviet Union in twenty-five years. Secretary of State George Schultz reacted to this curtly: “Fine, let him keep making them. His proposals are the result of five years of pressure from us.”111 Other more ideologically driven members of the administration were alarmed. Reagan saw an opportunity to accomplish what he viewed as his mission—to prevent the nuclear Armageddon. Without bothering to consult the Pentagon or American allies, he laid out on the table, first, the idea of complete elimination of nuclear ballistic missiles by the year 1996, and then the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Gorbachev agreed, but insisted on excluding any plans to test components of missile defense in space. Reagan, however, was convinced by his friend Caspar Weinberger that Congress would “kill” SDI if it was limited to laboratories. He asked Gorbachev for “a personal favor” to allow testing in space. A concession on SDI, he told the general secretary, would have a “huge influence on our future relations.” Gorbachev, however, stuck to his guns: complete renunciation of SDI, including the interim period of laboratory testing, or nothing.112 The summit collapsed, and the visibly shaken general secretary and the U.S. president had to face the consequences of their failure at home. As is clear today, ten or more years of laboratory testing would not have “killed” or “created” the antimissile shield, as Reagan and Gorbachev feared. Gorbachev was not ready for elimination of all Soviet nuclear weapons, not to mention Soviet ballistic missiles.113

Gorbachev left for Moscow complaining that the Americans “did not abandon the quest for superiority” and just came to Reykjavik to pocket his concessions—essentially true as far as most of the U.S. delegation was concerned. To the Politburo, Gorbachev said that Reagan “is unable to handle his gang” and “appears to be a liar.”114 Just a few years later, however, the Soviet
leader described the Reykjavik effect as an epiphany, similar to the shock of Chernobyl. It may be that, again, traditional fears battled in the soul of the general secretary with concepts of "new thinking." Inwardly, he was surprised to discover that Reagan's belief in nuclear disarmament seemed to be genuine. Other Soviet participants in the summit felt the same. Anatoly Dobrynin recalled later that "Reagan's vision of nuclear apocalypse and his deeply rooted but almost hidden conviction that nuclear weapons should ultimately be abolished, would prove more powerful than his visceral anti-Communism." The image of Reagan as enemy in the Soviet foreign policy establishment shaped by the earlier confrontation began to change, but this happened slowly, in fits and starts.

"NEW THINKING" AND THE LOOMING CRISIS

The failure of the Reykjavik summit did not diminish Gorbachev's appetite for "new thinking" in global affairs. On the contrary, he soon went to Kyrgyzstan to discuss the nuclear threat and political responses to it on a beautiful mountain lake with the world's intellectual elite: writers, sociologists, economists, ecologists, futurologists. Excited by the quality of the audience, Gorbachev spoke publicly for the first time about the priority of "human interests over class interests." Gorbachev's theoretical innovations evoked puzzlement from Ligachev and party propagandists. "A bomb exploded in the camp of orthodox thinkers!" rejoiced Gorbachev in his memoirs. By spring 1987, Gorbachev's ideological transformation made him feel alienated from his most loyal and effective supporters, Ligachev and Ryzhkov. They could no longer see eye to eye with him ideologically. The post-Reykjavik months highlighted the first stage of disagreement between Gorbachev and his Politburo colleagues, who had viewed his "new thinking" as mere rhetorical cover for a pragmatic policy of temporary retreat and retrenchment of Soviet power. From changing people in key command positions to achieve economic "acceleration," Gorbachev began to shift to changing the guiding ideology of the Soviet Union.

The anti-Soviet "crusaders" in the Reagan administration meanwhile continued to complicate Gorbachev's reformist plans. On December 1, the administration announced that the United States would not observe the limitations on its strategic forces imposed by SALT-2. The provocative behavior of the U.S. leadership, for the second time after the second summit, presented the Politburo with a choice: to give up on Reagan and wait for future opportunities or continue the peace offensive with more vigor and strength. At the Politburo, Gromyko could not help uttering a skeptical remark about Gorbachev's fixation on disarmament: "If we destroy nuclear weapons that we had been building for twenty-five years, what would then happen? Will we depend on good faith of the Americans? Where is a guarantee that they will not surpass us in the space race? No, further concessions will not get us American agreement. The United States will not agree to an equal agreement." In addition to Gromyko, Ligachev and KGB chairman Viktor Chebrikov also voiced concern about the Reagan administration's "crusade" against the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, however, was already determined to pursue his new policies no matter what. He said that playing the tit-for-tat game with the Reagan administration would be "a nice present to these types who disrupt treaties and spit on public opinion. They would say: the Soviets had just waited for such a moment." The Politburo decided to exert pressure on the Reagan administration through moderate members of the U.S. Congress, U.S. allies, and the American public.

Just about this time, the Soviet top brass were told to relinquish their longtime goals of achieving superiority over the enemy and agree to deep unilateral cuts in the Soviet strategic stockpile. Soon after Reykjavik, Sergei Akhromeyev presented the draft of the new military doctrine at the Academy of the General Staff, the elite senior military school. The document stated the impossibility of victory in a future war (since it would be nuclear) and proposed that the Soviet military should no longer strive for parity with the Americans. The document threw the military audience into a state of profound shock. There were muffled cries of treason. These cries reached Gorbachev's ears, and a sharp exchange took place at the meeting on December 1 between Gorbachev and Marshal Akhromeyev, who had just resigned from the General Staff only to be appointed a military assistant to the general secretary.

GORBACHEV: We have not made any real concessions. However, our generals try to scare us, they are afraid to be left with nothing to do. I know there is a lot of hissing in their midst—what kind of leadership is this that is disarming the country?
VITALY VOROTNIKOV (POLITBURO MEMBER): People do think so!
GORBACHEV: Ogarkov is very upset. He demands more and more. At a time when 25 million people here live below the officially proclaimed minimal living standard.
AKHROMEYEV: Generals are good people. Yes, they are good party members. However, if a general believes he cares about the country more than the Politburo does, we should sort it out with him.
GORBACHEV: If we fail to struggle for peace, people will not support us. And if we let down our defense, people will not support us either. They are robust chauvinists.
Gorbachev used his rhetorical skills to overcome the resistance from the military and obtain what he wanted. On New Year’s Eve, acting as commander in chief and head of the Defense Council, he approved the new military doctrine. This was a momentous change—but it also marked the end of the initial enthusiasm that the military had felt about Gorbachev and his reformist course.

Gorbachev’s “new thinking” continued to evolve, even in the absence of any signs of détente with the United States, in marked contrast to Brezhnev’s détente politics. But a surprising consensus, at least in appearance, prevailed in the Politburo. Nobody among the conservatives or the military was willing to challenge the general secretary. Even the General Staff, for all its dismay at the new disarmament proposals and military doctrine, never dared to oppose Gorbachev’s policies at the Politburo. Also, contrary to the impression that Gorbachev’s memoirs may convey, the direction of his evolution was still unclear to conservative modernizers and “new thinkers” in the party, as well as to state elites. The general secretary was bafflingly inconsistent in his rhetoric and, in particular, in his actions. He seemed to thrive on ambiguity and enjoyed the role of moderator, listening with equal attention to the opposite opinions, mediating in discussions, papering over rifts, and nipping confrontation in the bud. The most formidable of the conservative strongholds, the KGB, still believed in early 1987 that Gorbachev was implementing Andropov’s program of controlled conservative modernization and imperial retrenchment. It did not occur to the KGB leadership that Gorbachev intended to dismantle the entire regime of police repression that had survived de-Stalinization and become entrenched during the Brezhnev-Andropov years. Vladimir Kryuchkov, head of the KGB branch for foreign intelligence, recalled that he had never doubted Gorbachev’s devotion to the Soviet system and “socialism” and was horrified later by the extent of his “betrayal.”

Gorbachev was careful not to challenge the basics of official ideology openly. On the contrary, his ideological vigor and frequent public pledges “to live up to the potential of socialism” confused the sophisticated Moscow elites who had long regarded Communist ideology to be a cadaver. His misguided economic gambits and the anti-alcohol campaign indicated to many outside and inside the Soviet Union that he just wanted to give new vigor to the old system. Yakovlev complained privately that the Soviet leader remained a captive of ideological, class-based mythology. “During the first three years of perestroika,” Chernyaev admits, the Soviet leader “thought about improvement of the society in Marxist-Leninist categories. Gorbachev was convinced that had Lenin lived ten years longer, there would have been a fine socialism in the USSR.” The general secretary worshipped the founder of Bolshevism; he kept Lenin’s works on his desk and reread them in the search for clues and inspiration.

Thus the time of open ideological and political divides over Gorbachev’s course still lay ahead. On some foreign policy issues, the dividing line was not so much ideological principles as the strategies of Soviet retrenchment. This revealed itself most strikingly in Politburo discussions of the hopeless situation in Afghanistan. Assisted by CIA funds, the Pakistani regime of General Zia-ul Haq armed and trained Islamic fundamentalists who waged unrelenting war against the Soviet troops and the pro-Soviet Afghan regime. The Soviets could not defeat the unconventional fundamentalist formations operating from Pakistani territory. Gorbachev, along with the rest of the Politburo, was still against the immediate withdrawal of troops. He argued that the Soviets should set up a friendly moderate Islamic regime in Afghanistan and thus avoid a situation in which the United States or the fundamentalist forces would control this country. By 1987, it became clear that this was a chimerical idea, primarily due to the alliance between the United States, Pakistan, and the fundamentalist Muslim forces. Minister of Defense Sergei Sokolov, Marshal Akhromeyev, and the commander of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, General Valentin Varennikov, advocated immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops. Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kornienko supported them. Ironically, even Gromyko, the last living original proponent of the invasion of Afghanistan, stood up for immediate withdrawal.

The two ranking members of the Politburo commission on Afghanistan, Shevardnadze and the KGB’s Kryuchkov, however, insisted on continuing efforts to “save” Afghanistan, fearing a bloodbath in Kabul and damage to Soviet security interests in case of a fundamentalist victory. Back in 1986, the KGB had promoted Najibullah as a better alternative to Babrak Karmal and now stuck with its candidate. At that time, the leading advocate of the “new thinking,” Yakovlev, had also supported the Afghanization of the war. Gorbachev, as the records and memoirs reveal, supported their position and ignored the warnings of Akhromeyev and Kornienko. Later, Gorbachev and Yakovlev both claimed that it was the relentless policy of the United States that prolonged the war in Afghanistan.

Gorbachev’s position on Afghanistan was not an isolated episode. In general, he continued to support and maintain all traditional Soviet clients and friends in the third world, including the anti-Israeli nationalistic Arab regimes, Vietnam, Mengistu Haile Mariam’s regime in Ethiopia, Castro’s Cuba, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The dynamics and motivation behind this costly policy demands explanation. Did Gorbachev want to reform the Soviet Union while sustaining its great power role and alliances around the world? Did he, as well as Shevardnadze, still adhere, through inertia, to the legacy of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm in the third world?

Conservative modernizers in the Politburo, like hard-liners in the Reagan
administration, assumed that it was so. But the general secretary was most likely procrastinating, not quite ready to begin a unilateral dismantling of the Soviet empire. It also appears that the third world issues never really interested Gorbachev, whose “new thinking” ideology made him focus on the integration of the Soviet Union into the “first world”—cooperation with the most advanced capitalist powers. In 1987, Gorbachev was already beginning to articulate his beliefs in the global interdependence between Soviet socialism and democratic capitalism. Just like Khrushchev in 1955–57, the Soviet leader began to combine peace negotiations with de-Stalinization, negotiations with the West and liberalization at home. But Khrushchev had resumed domestic repression after the Hungarian and Polish uprisings. Gorbachev wanted to go further than his reformist predecessor and never turn back. He used the preparations for Reykjavik to demand reassessment of Soviet policies on human rights, immigration, and persecution of domestic political and religious dissidents. After the failure of the Reykjavik summit, Gorbachev argued that it was vital to win back the sympathies of Western European leaders, the educated elite, and the general public. Without pressure from Western Europeans, it would be impossible to bring the Reagan administration around to a more conciliatory position. In particular, Gorbachev suggested at the Politburo that Andrei Sakharov, the most famous dissident in the Soviet Union, should be allowed to return to Moscow from his exile in Nizhny Novgorod. In January 1987, the Soviets stopped jamming the BBC, the Voice of America, and West Germany’s Deutsche Welle.127

By this time, the majority of Soviet officials, even in the KGB, grudgingly recognized that the persecutions of dissidents and religious groups presented a major obstacle for negotiations with the United States. They remembered how upset Reagan had been in 1983 by the Soviet refusal to allow a group of Pentecostal Christians to immigrate to the United States. At the Politburo discussion, KGB chairman Chebrikov proposed freeing one-third of political prisoners and bringing the figure to one-half later. This proposal was of the same nature as Andropov’s plot to use Jews and dissidents as a bargaining chip in the détente negotiations during the 1970s. After 1986, the KGB began to reduce the number of arrests for “political crimes” and intensified instead its so-called prophylactic measures, that is, intimidation and blackmail of Soviet citizens who fell under suspicion.128

A major factor influencing Gorbachev and the Politburo at this time was the ongoing economic slump and the looming deficit. The initial programs for perestroika and improvement of the Soviet economy lay in ruins. Beginning in 1985, the USSR had to spend more hard currency than it was able to earn; this led to the double burden of a trade deficit as well as foreign debt—a dangerous situation that had saddled the economies of Eastern European countries since the 1970s. Also, in the first two months of 1987, industrial production, in disarray from partial decentralization and other misguided experiments, plunged by 6 percent, with heavy and consumer industries suffering most. There was an 80 billion rubles gap between state revenues and expenditures. Gorbachev in his memoirs does not explain why the economic and financial situation had sharply deteriorated since he had come to power.130

Before fall 1986, rank-and-file Politburo members were not informed about the true figures of military expenditures, foreign assistance, and other secret budgetary items. The figures were shocking. In addition to the defense expenses that swallowed up 40 percent of the Soviet budget, the Soviet Union supported Central European allies and other numerous clients abroad. Politburo members learned with amazement that the annual “cost” of Vietnam was 40 billion rubles. Other clients were only marginally less expensive: Cuba cost 25 billion rubles, Syria cost 6 billion, and so on. Since the 1950s, the Soviets had sent to Iraq, Libya, and Syria great amounts of military equipment, including first-line tanks, aircraft, and missiles, but had never received payment for this equipment.131

The Soviet budget felt the burden of 67.7 billion rubles of the defense expenditures (16.4 percent of the budget). But the budget sustained even greater losses from the 1985 decision to invest an additional 200 billion rubles and hard currency into the modernization of the machine-building industries—a necessary investment but one that could not give any return soon. Meanwhile, the revenue from alcohol fell, and the last big source of revenue, the export of oil, continued to diminish, as oil prices plummeted from longtime highs to $12 a barrel in April 1986 and continued to fall. By 1987, the Soviet state had no other means to increase its revenues besides taxes and price increases. On October 30, 1986, Gorbachev said that the financial crisis “has clutched us by the throat.” Yet he refused to balance the budget by raising consumer prices and reducing the state subsidies for food. Six months later, the Politburo learned that without price reform these subsidies alone would reach 100 billion rubles by 1990. Nevertheless, despite numerous discussions, preparations, and drafts, the price reform was never implemented. There were piecemeal measures, but all of them only aggravated the financial malaise. The reasons for Gorbachev’s temporizing are not clear. It is obvious that he and the rest of the Politburo lacked even basic knowledge of macroeconomics. It is also possible that Gorbachev realized that drastic rises in prices would create turmoil in the society and undermine his domestic standing.132

The bleak economic and financial situation made détente and Soviet retrenchment look like an urgent necessity even in the eyes of the Politburo’s conserva-
In February 1987, Gorbachev was about to begin the third round of his peace offensive against Ronald Reagan. In advance of their next summit in Washington, he came up with more asymmetrical cuts in the Soviet military arsenal. During a meeting with Gorbachev late in the month, Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti praised the Soviet leader for “boldly” agreeing to dismantle the intermediate-range missiles directed at Europe. Andreotti then encouraged Gorbachev “to take just another small step” and unilaterally cut Soviet short-range missiles. This “courageous step” in his opinion would undercut U.S. plans to deploy short-range missiles in Western Europe. In their April meeting with George Shultz, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze accepted Reagan’s “zero option” on intermediate ballistic missiles as the Politburo had decided. To everyone’s surprise, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze told Schultz that the Soviet Union also would pledge to cut its new short-range missiles, the SS-23 ("Oka"). This proposal meant that the Soviet Union would dismantle many of its missiles that specifically targeted Western European territories. This was a minor, but highly significant, step past the boundaries of the pro-detente consensus outside the Politburo. The military was aghast. It grumbled about the hasty squandering of Soviet strategic assets. As if to prove this point, Schultz pocketed Soviet concessions and left for home without giving anything back. Akhromeyev, however, was bound by his personal loyalty to Gorbachev. He, along with the rest of the military, chose to blame Shevardnadze for selling out to the Americans.

Soon Gorbachev had a chance to reduce potential military resistance to his policies. In May 1987, Matthias Rust, a young West German pilot, flew a sport plane into the USSR from Finland and landed on Red Square. The bizarre “Rust affair” allowed Gorbachev to remove most of the old top brass, beginning with the minister of defense, Marshal Sergei Sokolov. Rust, after spending several months in the KGB Lubianka prison, quietly obtained amnesty. The Soviet leader handpicked a new minister of defense, Dmitry Yazov, a veteran of World War II and former head of the Far Eastern military district, who had little charisma or authority among the top brass. Gorbachev began to advocate “transparency and candor” on the issue of conventional arms in Europe, admitting a huge Soviet superiority of 27,000 tanks and almost 3.5 million soldiers. Simultaneously, the Soviet military began to implement the new military doctrine. The new doctrine of the Warsaw Pact, a carbon copy of the Soviet one, was adopted in July 1987. William Odom believes that the new policy replaced the old vision of war in Europe. As a consequence, it also shook the ideological and psychological foundations of the Soviet military presence in Central Europe.

Meanwhile, with tacit encouragement from Alexander Yakovlev (who was in charge of media), as well as from Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev, an informal network of the “men and women of the sixties,” “enlightened” apparatchiks and intellectuals, and those who had been devoted to de-Stalinization and democratic change twenty years earlier began to grow and influence the public climate. Since 1986, these people had rapidly come to occupy strategic positions in the state-controlled media. Yakovlev’s protégés would become the editors of some leading periodicals, among them Sergei Zalygin in Novy Mir, Vitaly Korotich in Ogonek, and Yegor Yakovlev in Moscow News. The “new thinkers” began publishing forbidden manuscripts, promoting anti-Stalinist films and novels, and criticizing the Brezhnev era of stagnation.

In the summer of 1987, Gorbachev revealed his intentions to a narrow circle, including Yakovlev and Chernyaev: he wanted to overhaul “the whole system—from economy to mentality.” Chernyaev jubilantly recorded Gorbachev’s words: “I would go far, very far.” By that time, Gorbachev already had nothing to fear from the conservative side, including the Politburo and the party nomenklatura. On the contrary, among the new cohort of party officials, people, among them Boris Yeltsin, head of the Moscow party organization, were beginning to grumble about Gorbachev’s slow pace of domestic reforms. In November 1987, in his speech marking the seventieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Gorbachev for the first time took up Khrushchev’s criticism of Stalin, saying that there were still “blank pages” in Soviet history. It was a turning point in the interaction between foreign policy innovations and domestic developments. From the early phase, with its emphasis on arms control and détente, Gorbachev moved on to the next phase in which he combined his peace offensive with Khrushchev’s unfinished task of de-Stalinization. Chernyaev explains: “To achieve a success in foreign policy, we had to depose myths and dogmas of the confrontational ideology, and this had an impact—through mentality of the general secretary and the reformist mass media—on the entire intellectual environment of the society.”

The rapid ascendency of this highly idealistic and reform-motivated “new thinking” did not end Gorbachev’s baffling inconsistencies. On June 27, 1987, in his conversation with Robert Mugabe, the prime minister of Zimbabwe, Gorbachev described Soviet foreign policy philosophy in the same terms as Khrushchev would have used thirty years earlier. He concluded that “an increasing
pressure has to be brought to bear on [Western countries].” On October 23, 1987, Gorbachev told Shultz that he would not come to Washington for a summit until Reagan renounced the SDI program. Simply signing a treaty on the reduction of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF Treaty) would not be enough to justify the summit. The Soviet leader asked his group of inner advisers, including Shevardnadze, Yakovlev, Akhromeyev, Chernyaev, and deputy foreign minister Alexander Bessmertnykh, for advice. Some of them told him to wait until a new administration was in Washington and ready to deal with the SDI issue. Chernyaev, however, urged Gorbachev not to back out of the summit.141

Gorbachev’s vacillations and his obsession with SDI could only add to the extreme skepticism about Soviet intentions within the Reagan administration and among neoconservatives in Washington. But the phenomenon of “new thinking” was not a public relations trick. Gorbachev moved on to ideas of radically transforming Soviet ideology and the political and economic systems and truly opening the Soviet Union to the world. Being realistic dictated caution, prudence, and a careful strategy, but Gorbachev was impatient. His radical reformism was driven by the deterioration of the Soviet economy and the financial crisis. But even more it was driven by romantic notions about international affairs and by his reformist abilities. Only a few in the Soviet leadership and political classes followed Gorbachev with reformist zeal and enthusiasm. The rest watched with tacit approval as Gorbachev’s new foreign policy elevated Soviet international status to unprecedented heights and achieved substantial results in reducing Cold War tensions.

Soon, however, this approval was replaced by concern and dismay. The conservatives, the modernizers, and the military realized that the Soviet Union could ill afford its commitments in Central Europe, Afghanistan, and all over the world.144 And they advocated cautious retrenchment to postpone the crumbling of the Soviet sphere of influence. In contrast, Gorbachev and the “new thinkers” began to proclaim a policy of noninterference in Central Europe. Soon they would be leaving Soviet allies completely to their own devices. Still, the Politburo majority, the KGB, and the military did not imagine that Gorbachev would be prepared to bring the Cold War to an end, at the cost of destruction of the Soviet external empire in Central Europe and fatal instability in the Soviet Union itself.

In a word, the total dismantling of socialism as a world phenomenon has been proceeding. This is a reunification of mankind on the basis of common sense. And a common fellow from Stavropol [Gorbachev] set this process in motion.
—Chernyaev, in his diary, October 5, 1989

It took three decades to turn the Soviet Union into a superpower, the main challenger of the supremacy of the United States in the world. But it took only three years for the Communist giant to disintegrate. For people who had come of age during the Cold War, the event was sudden and breathtaking. Those inclined to see the Cold War in apocalyptic terms as the struggle between good and evil concluded that it was Ronald Reagan and his administration that overthrew the great Satan of Communism. But most scholars and analysts conclude that the Soviet superpower met its end at the hands of its own leadership under the influence of new ideas, policies, and circumstances.1 Canadian political scientist Jacques Lévesque, who wrote The Enigma of 1989, concluded: “Rarely in history have we witnessed the policy of a great power continue, through so many difficulties and reversals, to be guided by such an idealistic view of the world, based on universal reconciliation, and in which the image of the enemy was constantly blurring, to the point of making it practically disappear.”

It is a perennial human illusion to attribute great events to great causes. During the past century, scholars have tended to attribute transitions from one historical period to another to grand, impersonal forces: shifts in the balance of power, contradictions among states, revolutions, the rise of new ideologies and social movements, and so on. In the current scholarly climate, it has also become fashionable to highlight the micro-levels of history—the role and beliefs of the “common people,” incremental changes in social life, and power as a phenomenon of everyday life. Between these two trends, the view that history is shaped by “great men” seems utterly discredited. Today, many historians are loathe to