he returned and told me a bizarre story. When he asked Gorbachev why he had so suddenly ceded a whole class of missiles and gained nothing in exchange, Gorbachev first said that he had probably made a mistake because he “forgot the warning” in our memo. Akhromeyev then suggested that someone be dispatched quickly to Shultz, who had not yet left Moscow, to correct our position. Gorbachev became very angry and shouted at him: “Do you suggest that we tell the American secretary of state that I, the general secretary, am incompetent in military questions and that after correction from my generals I now am changing my position and going back on my word?”

That was the end of the story; normally Gorbachev had an excellent memory, and things like this did not slip his mind unless there was a reason. Akhromeyev strongly suspected that everything had been staged by Gorbachev because he knew the general staff did not want him to yield on the SS-23s, and the Politburo would support the military. For that reason, he preferred to present his concession to the leadership later as the removal of the final obstacle to the treaty.

Gorbachev was in Washington from December 8 to 10 to sign the treaty on intermediate missiles, and again he yielded a major point without any serious bargaining or consultation. Gorbachev agreed not only to destroy all our SS-20s deployed in Europe, but those in the Asian part of the Soviet Union as well. In Asia the SS-20s were part of our strategic defenses against China as well as the American bases in Japan and the Indian Ocean, so this certainly represented a major concession. Politically the treaty sent an important signal to the world that both superpowers tacitly and at last recognized that the arms race did not strengthen their national security and that controlling their armaments did.

But our military command as well as some members of the political leadership were decidedly unhappy about Gorbachev’s zeal in making deep concessions in order to achieve agreements with Washington. They also saw that Gorbachev was greatly encouraged by Shevardnadze, who was in permanent conflict with the Defense Ministry.

This struggle came to a head in the Politburo between Shevardnadze and the defense minister, Sergei Sokolov. The work of these ministries’ joint committee on Soviet-American disarmament talks was at a dead end: the representatives of the departments followed their ministers’ orders, which could not be harmonized. Shevardnadze constantly complained about the defense ministry to Gorbachev, who repeatedly had to reconcile the two parties.

Then Gorbachev put Lev Zaikov at the head of the joint ministerial committee preparing our positions for the disarmament negotiations. Zaikov, a Politburo member, had long dealt with the arms industry and had good relations with the military but as a party veteran was loyal to the general secretary. Nevertheless, Gorbachev had to talk to him privately and at length to win him over, and Zaikov maintained a reasonable balance between Shevardnadze and Sokolov. The commission began to move forward, but still not as fast as Gorbachev and Shevardnadze desired.

Gorbachev, though impatient, at first was cautious and wanted to avoid a direct clash with the military. Suddenly an extraordinary incident played right into his hands. On May 29, 1987, a small one-engine West German aircraft violated Soviet airspace undetected by the Soviet air defense system, reached Moscow, and made a sensational landing right in Red Square. The plane was flown by a young amateur pilot, Mathias Rust. This event shook the Soviet leadership, which had been convinced it was impossible to penetrate Soviet airspace without being caught. It left the Defense Ministry in complete disarray.

Gorbachev made perfect use of the military’s state of confusion and its badly damaged prestige. On the day after Rust’s landing, which was a Sunday, he called an urgent meeting of the Politburo. Opening the session, Gorbachev strongly condemned “the complete helplessness of the Defense Ministry which still has to explain this extraordinary incident to the party and the people.” He demanded immediate explanations from the ministry officials.

General Ivan Lushev, the deputy defense minister, reported to the Politburo and admitted that the event was, indeed, unheard of. He tried to justify the malfunctions in the air defense system by saying that it had been designed to intercept only modern military aircraft and was unable to detect a small plane flying at 150–170 kilometers an hour and at an altitude of not more than 300 or 400 meters. This did not sound very convincing, and Lushev had to admit that the sole responsibility for what happened lay with the Defense Ministry. Sokolov, the minister, acknowledged that the ministry had not developed any means of intercepting single low-altitude targets. He also admitted that the defense units themselves were not operating in close cooperation.

After a heated debate Gorbachev took the floor. He spoke about the grave situation in the army whose top leaders were “apprehensive of the party’s turn toward perestroika and the new thinking” and urged them to remedy the situation without delay. He urgently demanded stronger leadership at the defense ministry “to increase the military establishment’s sense of political responsibility.” Then turning to the defense minister, he said, “I don’t question your personal integrity, Sergei Leonidovich. But under the present circumstances, if I were you, I would resign at once.”

Sokolov, profoundly shaken, stood to attention and resigned on the spot. Gorbachev did not hesitate to accept the resignation “on behalf of the Politburo” adding that it would be announced as a retirement to ease the sting.
After a fifteen-minute break Gorbachev proposed appointing General Dmitri Yazov, Sokolov's deputy, as defense minister. He had already been summoned by arrangement with Gorbachev. At the time Yazov was in charge of the ministry's Personnel Department, so he was closely connected with the party's Central Committee. Yazov was far more obedient to Gorbachev than Sokolov, and thus Gorbachev accomplished a quiet coup. The new defense minister knew little about disarmament talks, and had nothing to do with them. With Yazov as defense minister, Shevardnadze felt much more at ease during the talks. Opposition by the military became more moderate. Sokolov was followed into retirement by about one hundred generals and colonels, conservative military leaders who also opposed Gorbachev's reforms and his concessions to the Americans. But the military establishment by and large remained discontented with Gorbachev, and this would show time and again.

Having gained control of the military establishment, Gorbachev became more active and confident in dealing with disarmament. He wanted to reach his objectives as soon as possible. He was fascinated by the huge challenge of the task and carried away by the cheering international audience. So he moved forward without seriously contemplating the consequences. Here lay his weakness. He was either unable or in too much of a hurry to think about the prospective turn of events. Very often, he did not have a detailed plan for implementing his designs, only a fascinating outline. At Politburo meetings, when someone expressed cautious concern about his rapid innovations, Gorbachev would cut him off for “contradicting the spirit of the new thinking and perestroika.”

Before going to the UN General Assembly in New York in 1988 Gorbachev urgently pushed through the Politburo a bold unilateral reduction of our armed forces by half a million men. The domestic and foreign political effect of this demobilization was good, and Gorbachev himself was highly praised. But the Soviet government had no plans for reintegrating such a huge number of men into the civilian economy. Then in 1990 Gorbachev signed a treaty between the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries on conventional forces in Europe that demanded further deep reductions in our armed forces. Fine as it was in principle, this policy created a serious domestic crisis with the mass withdrawal of Soviet forces from Germany and Eastern Europe. The country was faced with the difficult problem of where to put the troops, and this tragic task was passed on later to the Russian Federation. Where would they live? What would they do? There was no winter housing for them, nowhere for their families to live but in the most elemental conditions. Gorbachev proved to be a poor organizer; thus the proper and indeed necessary idea of reducing the size of our army and bringing it home has proven a severe and lasting burden for the country because of clumsy planning.

As a result, the Soviet population—faced with drastic changes in Europe but no coherent explanation of them from its own government—was at first puzzled and then angry. Morale declined in the armed forces, and military and civilians alike wondered how the Soviet army, still seen as the European victors of World War II, could be rushed home as if it had simply been thrown out. This is an inglorious heritage of the Gorbachev era.

**Gorbachev, Bush, and Germany**

From 1990, Gorbachev's popularity fell rapidly in the party, in the army, and among ordinary people; it was propelled further downward by the country's economic problems. Abroad, however, his popularity soared. Hadn't he played the leading role in the turn of Soviet foreign policy toward constructive new thinking? Without question. He also deserved credit for a rapid accommodation with the United States and an impressive process of negotiation that radically reduced nuclear and conventional arms.

But looking back, it now is clear that in its execution Gorbachev's diplomacy often failed to win a better deal from the United States and its allies. Ourscrambled on the treaty to limit Euromissiles, Gorbachev also had to agree to a heavier burden of reductions for Soviet forces in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe signed on June 14, 1991 in Vienna. The cost of these reductions was paid in upheavals along Russia's troubled southern borders and in the Caucasus, where the number of Russian troops is limited and all attempts by Moscow to renegotiate this provision of the treaty have been so far in vain.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) signed at the Moscow summit on July 31, 1991, was also a good treaty but once again the military advantage went to Washington. More important, neither side again had to commit itself to observe the agreements limiting antiballistic missiles. At first Gorbachev wanted to declare unilaterally that were the ABM Treaty to be violated, Moscow would feel free to drop its obligations under the START I Treaty, but then he decided not to complicate the signing ceremony and so, even after Ronald Reagan left office, voices are still heard in the United States proposing the revival of his favorite Strategic Defense Initiative.

In exchange for the generous Soviet concessions Gorbachev and his devoted lieutenant Shevardnadze offered the West, they could and should have obtained a more important role for the Soviet Union in European security and a stronger Soviet voice in European affairs. But they did not. Able but inexperienced, impatient to reach agreement, but excessively self-assured and
flattered by the Western media, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were often outwitted and outplayed by their Western partners. On occasion they went farther than necessary in concessions in agreements on arms control, Eastern Europe, German unification, and the Persian Gulf crisis, and they continued doing so right up to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev in addition distorted the mechanisms of Soviet diplomacy by running a kind of personal back channel with high American officials to avoid criticism by his colleagues in the Politburo and our corps of professional diplomats. They were increasingly kept in the dark. (The confidential channel I ran and all the deals struck on behalf of Moscow with Washington, had to pass through the entire Politburo for approval.) From 1989 on, Soviet diplomacy became progressively less effective because of the urgent pressure of Gorbachev's domestic political agenda and his efforts to sustain his weakening reputation at home by what appeared to be successes abroad. The result was a dramatic reduction in our capacity to adapt to the fast-changing international environment, provoked in no small degree by Gorbachev himself.

The role of the International Department of the party also diminished after its brief revival in 1986. It gradually returned to its old role. In 1988 Gorbachev ordered the department to explain the meaning of his reforms to Communist parties and other foreign organizations and movements "because they do not understand them and are confused." But we were confused, too.

No small part in the downgrading of this department was played by Shevardnadze, who wanted to monopolize foreign policy and avoid competition from our department. Thus the department, and I as its head, were no longer actively involved in foreign policy on an everyday basis. From time to time Gorbachev used me as his personal adviser on Soviet-American relations, especially for his remaining meetings with Reagan and then George Bush. He occasionally sent me as his personal representative to discuss matters confidentially with high American officials up to the president, but I was no longer systematically involved in Soviet-American affairs. These and other major issues of foreign policy were handled by virtually only two men: Gorbachev and Shevardnadze.

Gorbachev began to emerge as a virtual monarch bypassing the traditional policy-making institutions and increasingly making important decisions by himself and directing the nation's course abroad with the eager assistance of Shevardnadze. Ironically, by that time Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker also were operating U.S. foreign policy in an intensely personal and informal fashion, interacting freely with foreign leaders face to face or by telephone. Neither the American president nor the Soviet general secretary seemed to feel the need to consult their governments or explain to their people the full direction and import of their policies, which were shaping the future of the world after the Cold War.

At the core of Gorbachev's foreign policy stood the sound priority of values common to all countries—preventing nuclear catastrophe and ending the Cold War. This did not deny the existence of national interests in our diplomacy, and its general restructuring along these lines provided the necessary flexibility and imagination to overcome old dogmas. The majority of the Soviet diplomatic corps welcomed this with enthusiasm.

But soon they became confused and frustrated. Gorbachev frequently frittered away the negotiating potential of the Soviet state. His practical interpretations of what he publicly characterized as "the interests of all mankind," were increasingly transformed into personal decisions that ignored important Soviet interests for the sake of hasty agreements with the West. Few Russians were prepared to forgive him for this, especially as the West certainly did not forget its own interests. On March 13, 1989, shortly after George Bush's assumption of the presidency, the National Security Council adopted a confidential document stating that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union should not be aimed at "assisting" Gorbachev but at dealing with the Soviet Union so "as to push it into the direction desirable for us."

And the Bush administration pushed it quite successfully. Arms control aside, Washington together with Bonn managed to extract important concessions from Gorbachev in the vital areas of German reunification and European security as the two blocs that had divided Europe for forty years but also had provided the foundation for Soviet security, began collapsing along with the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989.

Much earlier in that year our Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively began exploring new ideas to discuss with the West on global and regional security systems. We thought they should exist worldwide within the framework of the United Nations, and in Europe as a regional system within the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation. This was a general goal of Soviet policy, especially in Europe, and Gorbachev was fully behind it. He enthusiastically developed his own image for the idea of regional security—a "common European home" where all the nations of Europe would live together peacefully in condominium apartments, so to speak, with the United States and Canada on the same street if not the same building. Washington did not share his enthusiasm but did not object publicly. It oc-
cupied itself exploring quietly with its allies the possibility of reunifying
Germany.

When Gorbachev met President Bush at Malta on December 2 and 3, 1989, German reunification was not on the agenda. But the idea was on everyone's mind because the Berlin Wall had come down less than a month before and East and West Germans were mingling freely for the first time in half a century. Bush cautiously sounded out Gorbachev on reunification in casual conversation. (This was Bush's favored method of starting a negotiation; he would gently trail an idea past his partner without pressure, sometimes try it again, and wait to see if he got a bite.)

Gorbachev responded in a general way that our policy was founded on our adherence to an all-European process and the evolutionary construction of a "common European home" in which the security interests of all countries should be respected. But he did not specify how it could or should be done, although he had with him a confidential memorandum by our Foreign Ministry outlining a concrete policy: German reunification should be the final product of a gradual transformation of the climate in Europe during which both NATO and the Warsaw Pact would shift their orientation from military to political and be dissolved by mutual agreement. There were no more discussions about German unification in Malta, but it was important for Bush and for the West in general that Gorbachev had not rejected unification as a subject for discussion—as both Washington and Bonn feared we might.

Within a week after Malta Bush sent Gorbachev a personal message again raising the question of the reunification of Germany. The president wrote that it should proceed under a process of self-determination without prejudging how the Germans themselves would decide, and be part of a growing integration of the European community that would be "peaceful, gradual and carried on in the framework of an evolutionary process."

So both sides actually agreed that German unification was part of a general process that would lead to a new form of European security and stability, which for forty years had been guaranteed by the firm structure of two opposing blocs in balance. This position in favor of evolutionary change to a new all-European system was supported by the Politburo and our European and German experts. But then there was a metamorphosis in Gorbachev's behavior. Amid turbulent events at home, he began to handle all the negotiations on Germany virtually by himself or in tandem with Shevardnadze, sweeping aside our professional diplomats and scarcely informing the Politburo, who still favored an evolutionary process. Under Western pressure which came through confidential channels, he began to uncouple German unification from the general problem of European security.

True, during his summit meeting with Bush in Washington on May 31
their own, his confused colleagues—some angry, some merely passive—watched as one by one these countries broke loose from the iron frame of a political and military alliance which, however hated it may have been, had held their ethnic and other self-destructive conflicts in check for two generations. The discussions in the Kremlin were chaotic and dominated by Gorbachev's empty rhetoric. He accused the Communist leaders of Eastern Europe of failing to reform and adapt themselves to "new thinking." Sometimes on the spur of the moment he hurried to visit those leaders and lectured them, but this only expedited the disintegration of the local regimes, especially in the German Democratic Republic.

Gorbachev's Political Bankruptcy

I believe that Gorbachev never foresaw that the whole of Eastern Europe would fly out of the Soviet orbit within months or that the Warsaw Pact would crumble so soon. He became the helpless witness to the consequences of his own policy. Our worried general staff sounded the alarm over this disintegration to the Politburo and to Gorbachev and asked how to deal with the security problems. The Kremlin as a whole was confused; there were no contingency plans for such disintegration. Military intervention was ruled out. Gorbachev desperately repeated his main theme of a joint search with the West for a new security system in a "new Europe." But Gorbachev had thrown away his best card in rushing to agree to German reunification and Warsaw Pact military intervention in Poland because the anti-communist Americans but added that they might have a point, and in any case he thought it would take at least fifteen to twenty years to reorganize the Soviet economy. But this was only an afterthought, because he did not act on it.

Early in 1989, as part of the preparations for his first full summit at Malta, Gorbachev had sent me to Washington with a personal letter to Bush and instructions to discuss summit topics with the new president, whom I had known for twenty years. (Gorbachev had first met Bush in December of 1988 at a lunch organized by Reagan, who was ending two terms in office. Gorbachev hoped to talk with the president-elect, but they only managed to have a short private conversation—I was the interpreter—because Reagan stole the show. They agreed to start an active private communication.) Bush confessed to me that the recent "turbulent events" in the Soviet Union had prompted him to review Soviet history for a greater understanding of the Communist Party's role in the power structure of the nation. The president asked me a "not a very diplomatic, but a very direct question"—would Gorbachev be able to survive these tumultuous times? He wanted Gorbachev as his negotiating partner but was unsure about Gorbachev's political future. Bush inquired about the legal and judicial means, and the political rules and traditions, that could ensure Gorbachev's continued leadership "irrespective of some sudden party decision" of the kind that deposed Khrushchev. He apologized for the intrusive nature of his question and assured me he would not divulge the contents of the conversation to anyone.

I told Bush that he was right about the complexity of the situation; perestroika was creating instability and that made it hard to take a long view. Gorbachev, I said, had just been elected president, and not even the supreme organs of the party now could dismiss him from that post and deprive him of his powers. But the situation was unique and many things were unclear because the party was always the ultimate power in the country. So what would happen now? It looked like Gorbachev would remain Bush's partner in foreign policy at least in the near future, and as such was willing to conclude far-reaching agreements with the United States, especially in disarmament.

Two days later Bush gave me a handwritten letter for Gorbachev stressing the importance of their personal contacts and "the significance of perestroika not only for the Soviet people but for his own children and grandchildren." Bush had evidently decided to count on Gorbachev.
But in fact Gorbachev’s dominance of events was nearing its end. During his first four years in power, he was the unquestionable leader of his country, and until the end of 1989 he retained a degree of control over the forces of change he had so boldly set in motion. But by 1990 the situation in the Soviet Union had deteriorated, and Gorbachev began to feel he was losing ground. He sought desperately to strengthen his position and, although it is not well known, he spared no effort to secure financial and moral support for his reforms from the United States and from the new President Bush personally as one way of supporting his regime and his popularity at home.

On the eve of the Malta meeting in December of 1989 the Kremlin leadership was still not sure whether Bush backed Gorbachev’s reforms. Reflecting these suspicions, Shevardnadze on November 8 sent Gorbachev a strictly confidential personal memo saying that “Bush looked like an indecisive leader” torn by different forces and had not yet decided on his attitude toward the most important issue for the Soviet leadership: its reforms in the Soviet Union. Shevardnadze said Bush evidently would not mind using Moscow’s difficulties with perestroika for his own benefit, so it was of prime importance at Malta for Gorbachev to obtain Bush’s public commitment to the reform program in the interests of both countries. The Politburo considered this a main task for the summit.

Gorbachev left Malta with the impression that he had won Bush’s support for his program and regarded it as the most important result of their meeting. On January 21, 1990, in his report to the Politburo, he welcomed Bush’s “readiness to give us certain practical aid in the sphere of the economy”—this never materialized—as well as “a mutual understanding of the necessity for Soviet-American cooperation as a stabilizing factor in the current and crucial moment of developments in the world.”

In mid-May of 1990, just before Gorbachev’s visit to the United States, Secretary of State Baker visited Moscow. Gorbachev had a long private conversation with him about our domestic problems. Baker sounded very sympathetic. Gorbachev was especially encouraged when Baker told him that the Bush administration was in favor of perestroika because it “fully corresponded with U.S. interests” and that “Washington had changed course in Soviet-American relations from rivalry to dialogue and cooperation.” Gorbachev was easily carried away by such reassurances.

But in fact several days previously, Jack Matlock, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, had briefed the visiting governor of Maryland, William Schaefer, that the Soviet Union was suffering from a declining economy, ethnic tensions, rising crime, and even the threat of a military coup. Although there was hope of a gradual democratization, Matlock reckoned it would take from half to three-quarters of a century to implant itself. So while the United States wanted to support Gorbachev, Matlock frankly said it also was interested in using his visit to Washington to promote American interests by moving a weakened Soviet Union toward accepting political and economic concessions, including the reunification of Germany.

Back home after his trip to Washington, Gorbachev again spoke with satisfaction to his colleagues. He said Bush understood “our domestic difficulties” and gave his private reassurances “that the United States would never pose any danger to the Soviet Union.” Gorbachev stressed that he “did not feel any more danger from Washington” and declared that he had succeeded in using Bush’s and indeed America’s support for perestroika to convince Washington that the changes in the Soviet Union would benefit the United States. On Germany he spoke more vaguely—that despite serious differences over the military and political status of a unified Germany, both sides sought a solution that would be part of an all-European process. But he concealed his desire for a quick agreement with the West to help him out of his domestic difficulties, which made him all too ready to acquiesce to the West’s demands. He accepted them the following month at his meeting with Kohl.

Bush played a particularly soothing and reassuring role, keeping in close touch with Gorbachev and on occasion flattering him quite openly. In the crucial days of July 1990, when Germany’s unity hung in the balance, Bush first spoke by telephone and then sent Gorbachev a personal letter about the Group of Seven summit of the largest Western industrialized nations in London. All the leaders of the seven, he wrote, agreed that the “positive and quick changes” in Europe were mostly the result of “your sagacious foreign policy” and—adding what he knew Gorbachev wanted to hear—that “NATO was ready to cooperate in building with you a new Europe.” Bush said that he as president was also thinking about “the gradual transformation of NATO itself.” All this sounded very encouraging to Gorbachev.

In his lengthy reply on August 6, 1990, Gorbachev expressed “confidence in a close cooperation [with Bush] in solving these historic tasks.” One month later, during their meeting at the Helsinki conference in September 1990, Bush again praised Gorbachev’s foreign policies, to the great pleasure of Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Their glowing conclusion, in a confidential memo, was that Bush and Baker “very definitely staked their firm support on our efforts for cardinal reform of Soviet society in this difficult time.”

* Gorbachev and Yeltsin held President Bush in high esteem. Interestingly enough, in the crucial days of the dismantling of the Soviet Union both of them called Bush as if he were a supreme judge—to give him their own versions of the fateful events.
But those optimistic hopes never materialized. The failure of Gorbachev's political agenda, the increasing crisis in the country, the disarray of foreign and defense policy, were all destroying Soviet potential. At that critical, final moment of the Cold War, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had no coherent, balanced, and firm foreign policy to end it in a fitting and dignified way on the basis of equality. As the Cold War had begun to wind down in the second part of the 1980s, this balance of power with the West was widely recognized and could have created a base upon which to transform international relations into a new and nonconfrontational era. With an inexplicable rush, they actually gave away vital geopolitical and military positions which we had, instead of using them to achieve a new era of stability and equal cooperation.

Gorbachev missed his great opportunity and missed it badly. The magic wand didn't work. His western partners played their own realpolitik. His dream of a new Europe with a new security system encompassing all states, including Russia, did not come true. The problem of European security has remained very much a conundrum after the end of the Cold War. The joint efforts of Europe, Russia, and the United States are needed more than ever.

Gorbachev also played a prominent role in launching the important process of liberalization and democratization in our country, and of the turn toward transforming our centrally planned system into a market economy. But his "new thinking," especially in domestic economic policy, turned out to be significantly less successful than in the international arena. In some ways, it was catastrophic. His thoughts were contradictory. Until his last days in power, his motto was "more socialism, more democracy." He believed strongly in socialism and resisted drastic changes in our economic structure while he had nevertheless become convinced of the need to introduce elements of a market system to raise our standard of living.

His policy was one of the convergence of socialism with capitalism, although he rejected that definition in public, most notably at a meeting in Washington in 1987 with a group of American intellectuals. He never mentioned the word "capitalism" while describing his economic plans, and his successors in the Russian Federation continued avoiding the word. But Gorbachev's fundamental failing was that he did not really understand economic problems and the policies to deal with them. He was always looking for advice, especially from foreigners and academicians, none of whom had ever been practically involved in economic management on a large scale. From 1986 to 1989, when I worked in the Politburo and participated in its deliberations, I never once heard Gorbachev present any broad and detailed plan for reforming the economy—whether one-year, or five-year, or some other kind of plan that had really been thought through. There were always improvisations, sometimes after his trips abroad or his talks with famous economists and prominent Western industrialists. Li Peng, the Chinese prime minister, confessed to our ambassador in Beijing, Oleg Troyanovsky, that Gorbachev changed his views so rapidly that the Chinese could not properly study them.

At the start of the reforms in 1986, Gorbachev explained his economic credo to the Politburo in this way: the Soviet economy certainly needed reforms, and although we did not know precisely how to achieve them, we must begin. He told the Politburo that they must all be guided by the words of Lenin: "The most important thing in any endeavor was to get involved in the fight and in that way learn what to do next." We got into a fight, all right, but for the years afterward even the new leaders of Russia did not know exactly what to do next.

As a domestic reformer, especially of the state and its economic system, Gorbachev showed himself increasingly helpless in the face of practical problems and tried to solve them by taking spontaneous, feverish, rash steps. I cannot help remembering Winston Churchill's words to Nikita Khrushchev when he visited Britain in 1956 and the two met at a Soviet Embassy reception. The great British statesman said: "Mr. Khrushchev, you are launching reforms in your country. That is good, indeed. But I should like to urge you not to be too rash. It is not easy to cross a chasm in two leaps. You can fall in."

A decisive blow to Gorbachev's political power was the disintegration of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and his own failure to create a new structure of power and authority as a successor. The party, with its local branches throughout the country, was the governing backbone from the high leadership in Moscow to the villages and factories. As general secretary of the party, Gorbachev was the country's undisputed ruler, and he therefore continued until 1989 to emphasize the leading role of the party in all things, including his own reforms.

But then his attitude toward the party began to change because, once he had opened the Pandora's box of glasnost and democracy, criticism naturally arose from within the party's own ranks. His own Politburo was not unanimous in support of his reforms, and Gorbachev could not forget that Khrushchev had been summarily dismissed in a party coup. Fearful of losing control in the party and thus of losing supreme power in the country, at the end of 1988 he switched to parliamentary rule via the presidency, a post from which the party could not dismiss him. But these were essentially backroom political maneuvers, and they served only to weaken Gorbachev's position in the country. And in August 1991, when the parliament banned the
Communist Party and threw its support to Yeltsin, Gorbachev was left with no followers.*

In the end Mikhail Gorbachev did not have a clear vision or the concrete national priorities to go with it at home or abroad. I suspect that he will not be entirely comfortable with the suggestion that his endeavor to introduce new thinking unleashed forces that he was unable to control. The political and economic chaos created by Gorbachev's own confusion over how to go about the difficult task of necessary reform, combined with the upheavals of the latter part of 1991, led to his personal political downfall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

If the reforms had been directed skillfully and appropriately, with all positive achievements reasonably preserved and major shortcomings and mistakes of the past eliminated in a carefully planned and evolutionary way, the Soviet Union, renewed, reformed, and oriented toward a new course of development, would not only have mastered its challenges but, I am convinced, also would have ranked high among the democratic countries of the world. I do deeply believe it will achieve that in the future, despite the terrible trials as we find our new way.

Instead of an Epilogue

Now that we have dropped our grand expectations and illusions, Russia has begun to accommodate itself to the complicated experience of dealing with the outside world. We are going through an agonizing period of shaping a new image of Russia and its new domestic and foreign policies. This process depends to a certain degree on whether and how the United States recognizes the proper role of a new Russia in the international community. In the West voices are still heard saying that a strong Russia would be an unpredictable and dangerous adversary. But it would be unrealistic and indeed dangerous to stake the future on driving Russia down or creating frontiers of old or new antagonism in Europe. With its human and intellectual resources, its natural riches, its unique geographic position on two continents, and finally its abiding determination as a nation, Russia will always remain a great country, and it would be a grave error to believe that even the huge difficulties of a transition period had deprived us of our standing in the world. For the United States and indeed the whole world it is better to have a strong and confident friend and partner than an unfriendly country with a huge nuclear arsenal.

It is important to remember that the Soviet totalitarian regime was defeated inside our own country by our own efforts and not by foreign liberators like Nazi Germany or militarist Japan. So there are no victors and no vanquished now.

The Russian and American people can learn from each other. Just as Americans are constantly trying to reform capitalism—Franklin Roosevelt's name is still revered in Russia, and it was he who believed that a market system needed correction by the state from time to time—we Russians are on a difficult and painful road toward modernizing our society and our economy. Russia favors democracy. But just like the market, there are many different understandings of what it really is. Even in America this has always been the case, as Abraham Lincoln said in Baltimore in 1864: "We all speak in favor of democracy, but when we use the word we do not always mean the same thing."

Now Russia is ready for a constructive alliance with the United States, and this is in no way an alliance against anyone else. Our countries share common values and both strive for peace. But the peoples of Russia want to defend their historical and cultural identities and will defend their national interests. Not by force at the expense of other countries, but by the reasonable convergence of interests through traditional political and diplomatic means. This path will not ever be smooth; the United States often experiences difficulty and competition even with its own allies.

But historically, the interests of our two countries have rarely if ever collided. The Cold War was a temporary perversion, based as it was on ideology and not essential national interest, and we must now get rid of the Cold War mentality. Now, for the first time in history, a democratic America meets a democratic Russia. Both countries have much more in common than ever before. We should be candid and not easily discouraged when our views do not coincide. From time to time our interests may even clash. But we should always be able to find a way to disagree without damaging a profoundly important strategic partnership. This is a fundamental lesson I have learned from my own long life of close association and diplomatic experience with the United States. And it is the lesson I have tried to capture in the pages of this book.

* On August 19, 1991, I was working alone in my office in the Foreign Ministry, anxious as an attempted coup d'état was unraveling just a few turbulent blocks away. The phone rang, and I heard a voice that was familiar but at that moment highly incongruous with its Texas accent: "Hello, Anatoly, It's me, Bob Strauss. I just arrived in Moscow [as the new American ambassador] and I can't find any Soviet officials. They've all disappeared. I tried to call the foreign minister [Bessmertnykh] but he's also not in. What shall I do?" I told him to lay low for a few days, during which I promised to organize a meeting, which in fact I arranged the very next day by overcoming the hesitation of my old colleague Bessmertnykh who was staying at home. Strauss was thus officially able to get started in his new job. He soon met President Gorbachev. But the days of the president were already numbered. By the end of the year he was forced to resign.