with the president's personal character, political strength, and desire to eliminate nuclear weapons. Reagan seemed to want to get to know us personally, Shevardnadze recalled. While “adhering to his convictions,” Gorbachev wrote, the president “was not dogmatic.” He wanted to negotiate and cooperate. Most of all, Reagan had the trust of the American people. The Soviet leader knew that if he struck a deal with Reagan, it would stick.414

To his relations with Reagan, America’s most renowned ideologue, Gorbachev could apply his own considerable personal skills. He could try to shatter the image of the evil empire, and to a considerable degree, he did.415 But the substantive outcomes were always on American terms, since Reagan did not compromise much. Yet Gorbachev was not unhappy with the relationship because the summitry had bestowed a more benign image on himself and his country. With time, he hoped, he would gain the opportunity to shift resources, nurture his perestroika, and create a system of democratic socialism worthy of example.

Gorbachev wanted continuity with Reagan’s successor and welcomed Bush’s victory in the 1988 elections. Although he was irritated by Bush’s policy reassessment, the two men subsequently developed a rapport with one another. Bush was not the ideologue that Reagan was, nor did he have the same political base. But Gorbachev liked Bush’s cautious, prudent demeanor. The new president did not rub Gorbachev’s nose in his defeats. He did not talk flamboyantly or arrogantly. “I have conducted myself in ways not to complicate your life,” Bush said to Gorbachev. “That’s why I have not jumped up and down on the Berlin Wall.” “Yes, we have seen that,” retorted Gorbachev, and “appreciate” it.416

The affection that characterized Gorbachev’s relations with Bush and, even more, the warmth that developed between Baker and Shevardnadze were conditioned by the weakness of the Soviets’ position domestically and internationally.417 They were supplicants. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze made most of the concessions. At the outset of the Cold War, Truman had said that there could be cooperation between Moscow and Washington if the United States got its way 85 percent of the time. Now that was happening. Rather than compete for the soul of mankind in a global competition, Gorbachev wanted mostly to rekindle the real promise of communism, now reconceived as democratic socialism, in the Soviet Union. To do so, he needed to end the Cold War.

CONCLUSION

The Cold War was not predetermined. Leaders made choices. During the Second World War, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill were besieged by competing impulses and clashing priorities. They distrusted one another. Yet as allies they labored diligently at wartime conferences to modulate their differences and plan for victory and peace. As the most horrible war in history came to an end, leaders in Washington and Moscow, including the untutored and provincial Truman and the evil and paranoid Stalin, recognized that cooperation was preferable to conflict. So did their successors.

Cooperation might mean collaboration in preserving the peace when the advent of atomic weapons made war even ghastlier than before. It might mean collaboration in punishing and controlling foes whose eventual revival was taken for granted and whose long-term behavior was a frightening imponderable. It might mean collaboration in reconverting wartime economies and reconstructing devastated areas. Moscow might receive reparations from
the western zones of Germany and might get credits from Washington in exchange for its acceptance of a liberal peace based on open markets and self-determination. If conflict could be avoided and an arms race modulated, American and Soviet leaders might be able to focus on their domestic priorities and direct funds to meet the needs of their societies as defined by their respective political cultures. Stalin and Truman; Malenkov and Eisenhower; Kennedy, Johnson, and Krushchev; Brezhnev and Carter; and Reagan, Bush, and Gorbachev never doubted that they represented alternative ways of organizing human society. But the question they faced was whether they could identify and pursue common interests notwithstanding their ideologi­cal differences.

Until the mid- and late 1980s, they were unable to do so. The Cold War emerged and persisted for four decades because these leaders were trapped by their ideas and ideals and beleaguered by the dangers and opportunities that lurked in the international system. Their beliefs heightened their sense of danger and accentuated messianic impulses. Their rhetoric and programs mobilized domestic constituencies and empowered interest groups and bureaucracies that opposed policy changes and made them increasingly difficult. Foreign allies and clients often developed their own stakes in the bipolar system, manipulated the United States and the Soviet Union in behalf of their own interests, and made it harder for the two powers to relax tensions and reconfigure their relationship. Leaders in both countries often glimpsed the mutuality of their interests but became hostages to their ideas and constituents rather than agents of change. It took an exceptional man, Gorbachev, to reconceive the nature of threat and to focus on domestic resurrection rather than external opportunity. It took an exceptional man, Reagan, to muster the inner conviction, personal charm, and domestic political strength to leverage his opponent’s concessions into a framework that preserved and institutionalized his own nation’s global hegemony.

The Cold War lasted as long as it did because of the ways in which American and Soviet ideas intersected with evolving conditions of the international system. U.S. and Soviet leaders thought they represented superior ways of organizing human existence. The men in the Kremlin sincerely believed they were reconfiguring human society and eradicating human exploitation. By eliminating private property and a marketplace economy, they thought they could supplant human greed as the driving force behind human progress. Planning would replace the anarchy of the marketplace. Workers would no longer be at the mercy of their employers, and oppressed peoples would no longer be subject to imperial domination. The Communist Party would serve as the vanguard of the proletariat and the liberator of colonial peoples. The trajectory of history envisioned the end of capitalism, perpetual peace, universal justice, and the emancipation of mankind.

The men in the White House had a different vision of how history should unfold. Their aim was to fashion a world order along the lines of democratic capitalism. They wanted people to be free and markets to be open. Political parties should compete for power in governments that represented their citizenry. Individual rights and private property were the keys to human advancement and personal opportunity. God, they often said, intended people to be free. Certainly, men and women could not worship as they pleased if they were not free.

These contradictory visions of mankind’s future were inseparable from Soviet and American ideas about the past. Historical memories and ideological assumptions shaped perceptions of fear and opportunity. For Soviet leaders, from Stalin to Brezhnev, capitalist countries could neither escape conflict with one another nor resist the temptation to crush an ideological foe. History since 1917, as they understood it, confirmed the implacable hostility of capitalists, the volatility of the international capitalist economy, and the enmity of other powers like Germany and Japan, whose governments were controlled by fascists and militarists. Notwithstanding the immense suffering that Soviet citizens had endured, their utopian experiment had survived and, allegedly, demonstrated its superiority. If the Kremlin remained vigilant, history’s trajectory portended a glorious future for communism.

U.S. officials, no less than their counterparts in Moscow, were inspired by their ideals and shaped by their experience. For Americans, their past confirmed that totalitarian governments, whether fascist, Nazi, or communist, were likely to expand and to crush human freedom—the freedom to speak, to practice religion, to own property, and to trade. Americans had learned from the interwar years that freedom and liberalism could not be safe at home if they were at risk abroad; the United States could not be secure if a totalitarian adversary controlled the human resources, raw materials, industrial infrastructure, and technological know-how of Eurasia and used those assets to challenge the American way of life.
The international environment posed danger and opportunity to leaders in Moscow and Washington. In Europe, the suffering bequeathed by the years of depression, war, and genocide was almost beyond human comprehension. Almost forty million Europeans had perished during the war, but the suffering did not end when the guns fell silent. The anguish, the turmoil, the hunger, the upheaval, were just beginning for millions and millions. As Europeans yearned for a better future, communism and communists competed vigorously for their allegiance, especially in France and Italy. Stalin's reputation was not tarnished by his brutality but exalted by his wartime victories. Europeans wanted change, security, welfare, peace. "They have suffered so much," Dean Acheson acknowledged, "that they will demand that the whole business of state control and state interference shall be pushed further and further." For Stalin, opportunity beckoned in Western Europe; for Truman there was peril—in the prospect not that Soviet armies would march to the Atlantic but that demoralized peoples would choose alternative ways of organizing their societies.

While U.S. officials worried about the configuration of West European politics, Stalin could not relax about his East European periphery. Everywhere his armies went, they marauded. Soviet troops raped and despoiled, intensifying the distrust that traditionally existed between Russia and many, if not all, of its neighbors. Proximity to Soviet behavior usually meant revulsion; lived experience was very different from utopian imagination. In Romania, Hungary, and Poland, communist partisans were few; in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and eastern Germany, they had no chance of triumphing in free elections. Free elections in the lands occupied were not likely to lead to governments friendly to the Soviet Union. These countries had assisted the enemies of the Soviet Union in the past and might do so in the future. Even Soviet minions and clients were susceptible to capitalist blandishments, like the Marshall Plan. Nobody could be trusted in a world beset by capitalist adversaries who neither controlled their own pendant for conflict nor resisted the temptation to surround, squeeze, or maybe even crush Stalin's utopian project to remake mankind. For him, the postwar Soviet occupation of other countries in Eastern and Central Europe offered an opportunity to gain defense in depth, as the Americans liked to call their own security perimeter, which stretched across the oceans and included all of the Western Hemisphere. Security could not be entrusted to others when the future of Germany was so uncertain. And the international configuration of power depended on the future of Germany. On this fact, American and Soviet leaders agreed. They also agreed for many decades that Germans, left to themselves, could not be trusted. From Stalin to Gorbachev, German power was feared; from Truman to Bush, German power had to be harnessed in behalf of the West. Tension in Europe abated when the wall that divided Berlin seemed to resolve the German question and when the sovereignty of two German nations was recognized, one bourgeois and democratic, the other communist; the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 confirmed this understanding. To the extent that it allayed the fears of Brezhnev and his colleagues about German revanchism, the Helsinki Agreement was the high point of détente and, in Soviet eyes, worth the price of agreeing to reconfirm the legitimacy of human rights. Thereafter, Kremlin leaders could focus on negotiating strategic arms agreements and expanding trade with the West. But to their chagrin, Brezhnev's comrades would learn that the security of their way of life was far more endangered by the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act than by the resolution of the German question—a fine illustration of how their vision of the morrow was buried in fears of the past rather than in any understanding of the future.

The same could be said about U.S. officials in the 1970s. After Helsinki and SALT I, their apprehensions did not wane and the Cold War did not end. The growth of Soviet military capabilities and ferment in the third world continued to conjure fears they could not overcome. They were haunted by the threat of Soviet gains in the Horn of Africa, the Persian Gulf, and southwest Asia; an arc of crisis defined that part of the globe, said Zbigniew Brzezinski. If U.S. officials did not calm regional turbulence and thwart Soviet inroads, critical sources of petroleum and other raw materials might fall outside Western control, and the industries of Western Europe and Japan would be at risk. As the great economic advances of the 1950s and 1960s slowed—as cheap oil disappeared, unemployment mounted, and inflation soared—social peace showed signs of unraveling and people wondered, as Time magazine put it, "can capitalism survive?"

The aging men in the Kremlin were heartened. Systemic conditions appeared to be confirming their idea of history's trajectory. Their own society was advancing more slowly than it had in the past, but they could take heart
in the travails of Western capitalism. For a brief while in the 1970s, there were even fleeting hopes for communist gains in Europe as Spain and Portugal threw off their neofascist governments, leftist parties competed vigorously for power, and the souls of Europeans as well as Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans seemed up for contestation once again. Upheavals in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Indochina, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Yemen tantalized the Kremlin. New leaders from these and other nations gentry before their patrons in Moscow, spouted Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, and enticed ever more aid out of aging military leaders and party ideologues who saw a chance for vindication and reincarnation.

The Cold War lasted through the 1960s and 1970s because these revolutionary nationalist upheavals and regional turbulences engendered exaggerated hopes in Moscow and aroused exaggerated fears in Washington. In Moscow, defense managers and party ideologues were eager to exploit new opportunities, and for a few years Kremlin leaders were awash in petrodollars that financed foreign adventure. They sent arms, deployed agents, and empowered surrogates in faraway places like Angola, Ethiopia, and Yemen. In the United States, there was a political groundswell against this perceived Soviet adventurism. Disaffected liberals—soon to become the intellectual forefathers of neoconservatism—joined with traditional conservative groups, ethnic blue-collar workers in the Northeast, defense industrialists and business entrepreneurs in the South and Southwest, and evangelical Christians. These business, ethnic, and religious groups had little in common but their fear of Soviet power, their antipathy to atheistic communism, and a desire to redirect what they regarded as a wrongheaded liberal tendency in American politics. They believed strongly that the United States had to rebuild its military strength. Jesus "was not a sissy," asserted Jerry Falwell, the emerging leader of America's so-called Moral Majority. These business, ethnic, and religious groups had little in common but their fear of Soviet power, their antipathy to atheistic communism, and a desire to redirect what they regarded as a wrongheaded liberal tendency in American politics. They believed strongly that the United States had to rebuild its military strength. Jesus "was not a sissy," asserted Jerry Falwell, the emerging leader of America's so-called Moral Majority.

The hopes and fears of politicians, bureaucrats, defense managers, and ideologues in Moscow and Washington obscured the subterranean crosscurrents in the international system. For while the oil crisis of the 1970s eroded the strength of Western capitalism and brought huge revenues to Moscow, it diverted attention from the profound technological changes imperceptibly transforming capitalism in the United States, Japan, and Western Europe. Electronics, microprocessors, pharmaceuticals, and biotechnology were creating knowledge-based industries and services that would not only rejuvenate economic productivity in the United States but also refashion and refurbish its military capabilities. But for the time being in the 1970s, the United States seemed vulnerable. Its economy was battered by stagflation, its relative military power was diminished, its alliances were shaky, and its position in the third world was more vulnerable than ever before.

Systemic developments seemed to be playing to the advantage of Moscow. "The global swing away from democracy in the 1960s and 1970s was impressive," writes the renowned political scientist Samuel Huntington. Soviet leaders talked with pride about their accomplishments and aspirations. "The world is changing before our very eyes, and changing for the better," Brezhnev declared to the twenty-fifth Congress of the CPSU Central Committee in February 1976. "We have created a new society, a society the like of which mankind has never known before. It is a society with a crisis-free, steadily growing economy . . . [II] is a society governed by the scientific materialist world outlook. It is a society of firm confidence in the future, of radiant communist prospects. Before it lies boundless horizons of further all-around progress." But for Soviet leaders vigilance was forever necessary because capitalists were forever seeking to undo Moscow's mighty achievements and thwart the trajectory of history. The Americans had tried and failed to set back revolutionary forces in Indochina. The imperialists had been dislodged from Iran when the Shah was overthrown, and they were being challenged in Central America by the Sandinistas. But the Americans nonetheless were scheming with the Chinese renegades to encircle the Kremlin, and plotting to insert themselves in Afghanistan where the People's Democratic Revolution of 1978 was devouring itself in incompetence, repression, and corruption. Détente between the superpowers began to founder on these Soviet perceptions of threat. Soviet leaders deployed troops to Afghanistan not because they aimed to seize oil in the Persian Gulf but because they feared the prospect of encirclement. If the communist revolution were reversed in Kabul, where would the forces of reaction stop?
Ideology shaped perceptions—this is one of the great lessons of the Cold War—accentuating fears, highlighting opportunities, and warping rational assessments of interests in Washington and Moscow. And in the early 1980s, the relationship of fear to opportunity evolved. U.S. officials sensed that the Kremlin was growing more vulnerable. The Soviet Union’s economic growth rate was slowing to a trickle. The appeal of the Soviet model of development was waning. The Chinese were abandoning it. Almost everywhere “the vogue of revolution” was disappearing. “There was a sweeping loss of faith throughout Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia in the promise of revolution and in the dominant revolutionary ideology—socialism.” In India, for example, socialism and planning were seen as failures that had created enormous inefficiencies. As the first generation of revolutionary nationalist leaders passed from the scene in Asia and Africa, the “force of anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments” declined. New leaders were willing to open their economies and learn from the West. The colossal failure of governmental human-engineering projects, like Mao Zedong’s attempts to remake China’s economy, society, and culture, made people aware that “certain kinds of states, driven by utopian plans . . . [were] a mortal threat to human well-being.” Among Western intellectuals, the light generated by communist utopianism and the Soviet Union’s heroic defeat of Nazism finally disappeared after fading for almost two decades. Asians and Africans studying in Paris and London in the 1970s and 1980s were receiving different cues and learning vastly different lessons than had the previous generation.

The optimism of official Soviet rhetoric was belied by confidential reports and internal memoranda from Soviet experts and officials, especially during the Polish crisis of 1980-81, when it became clear that the Poles could no longer tolerate their communist government and wanted change, and when the Polish pope, John Paul II, championed human rights and positioned the Church as the guardian of individual freedom and personal conscience. When he visited Poland in June 1979, his trip commanded enormous attention. “Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe,” he exclaimed. The huge crowd in Warsaw’s Victory Square cheered rhythmically, “We want God, we want God.”

The men in the Kremlin did not want God, but they understood the popularity of the Pope and the enthusiasm for Solidarity. Fearing that the movement would “spur workers in the Soviet Union . . . to press for improved living conditions, greater freedom, and an independent trade union of their own,” they knew that Solidarity had to be thwarted. Recognizing that military intervention would be costly and self-defeating, they orchestrated the Polish government’s imposition of martial law, but the communist hold on Poland and Eastern Europe would never be the same.

Soviet leaders now worried less about their security and more about their vision. From Malenkov to Brezhnev, the justification for the existence of the Soviet regime and one-party rule was that the Bolsheviks projected the best and boldest vision for the future. It is customary to trivialize their rhetoric and mock their vision. The Soviet nomenklatura was corrupt, complacent, and self-referential. But Soviet leaders were not cynics; they were “authentic true believers,” writes Martin Malia, the eminent scholar of Soviet politics and ideology. The archival materials recently brought to light underscore the importance of taking their public rhetoric seriously. In speech after speech, whether by Malenkov or Khrushchev, Kosygin or Brezhnev, or even Andropov or Chernenko, Soviet leaders pronounced that they would promote the welfare of Soviet peoples and bring about a more humane society guided by social justice. In November 1961, at the twenty-second Party Congress, they declared improvements in social welfare and increases in distributive equality to be their central policy goals. “As Lenin taught us,” declared Andropov in a typical speech in 1979, “the ultimate goal of socialism is to secure the ‘complete well-being and free all-around development of all members of society.’ ”

Although they stepped back from Khrushchev’s boast that communism would surpass capitalism in a generation, and although they constantly reformulated the stages they were traversing toward communism, Brezhnev and his colleagues always spoke in heroic terms about the need to accelerate economic development, technological innovation, and agricultural output. They were excited by their ability to turn out military hardware to protect “Great October,” and they gloried in statistics showing substantial gains in Soviet coal, steel, and electrical production. But the revolution also was designed to deliver more dill and more potatoes for Soviet consumers, as Khrushchev once put it at a Presidium meeting. In fact, Soviet leaders never ceased talking about their obligation to provide more housing, more food,
better health care, and more education to the Soviet people. And "most people," writes the historian Stephen Kotkin, "simply wanted the Soviet regime to live up to its promises."19

But the regime fell short of its promises. The Soviet economy gained relative to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, advancing from about a quarter to a little more than a third of per capita U.S. production, but by 1980 it was falling behind. In fact, many other nations, including Italy, Spain, Japan, and South Korea, narrowed the gap between their per capita production and the American level better than did the Soviet model.20

More important for Soviet peoples themselves, increases in per capita consumption slowed noticeably in the late 1970s. Growth rates for consumption had peaked in the late 1960s, when advances per year were at a hefty rate of about 5 percent. Although in the mid-1970s most Soviet citizens (about 74 percent) thought life was improving, the government's expenditures on social consumption—education, health care, social security, and housing—were taking a turn for the worse; soon spending on education and health care barely increased to keep up with the times. The food supply was not improving. Soviet consumers ate far more bread and potatoes and much less meat and fish than did Americans, British, Spaniards, Italians, or Japanese. Workers began expressing their discontent. In the last years of Brezhnev's rule, strikes, theoretically forbidden, "became larger and more frequent," particularly at major automotive plants in Gorky, Togliatti, and Cheliabinsk. Many Soviet citizens had once been willing to accept or acquiesce to one-party rule and authoritarian government in return for employment security, health care, educational opportunity, and better and more equal living conditions. But when the regime faltered in carrying out its side of the deal, people's disaffection grew.21

The Kremlin could not compete for the soul of mankind when it could not win the trust of its own citizens—another great lesson of the Cold War.

Gorbachev understood this growing demoralization. He did not want to retract Soviet power, but he believed the first priority was to refashion communism at home so that it could have a demonstrative appeal elsewhere. In order to do this, he needed to shift resources from the military to the civilian sector, which he could not do so long as his own society felt beleaguered by an intractable, formidable foe.22 Changing the zero-sum game of the Cold War was Gorbachev's great challenge and his greatest achievement. He ac-

cepted the argument that the U.S.S.R. must reduce the threat perception of the adversary; to accomplish this he had to make wrenching changes in his own perception of threat.

Basically, Gorbachev came to feel that Soviet security was not threatened by capitalist defenders; it was far more endangered by communist functionaries, economic managers, and demoralized workers than by any external foe. Rigid controls, leveling practices, and alcoholism had sapped individual creativity, eroded productivity, and interfered with the potential of national planning. When he made his decisions to modulate the arms race, he did so because he was scared of his society's growing impoverishment. "We are encircled not by invincible armies but by superior economies," he said.23

While altering his conception of threat and changing his views about the functioning of capitalist systems, Gorbachev never ceased to believe that communism represented something better than capitalism. But capitalists need not be seen as intractable foes. Nor was it necessary to believe that economic conflicts with the United States were more salient than the mutual interests that bound the U.S.S.R. to its antagonist as well as to socialist economies. Common human interests, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze came to feel, transcended class ties.

Gorbachev's achievement was a uniquely personal one, although he was not alone. He was general secretary of a party with a monopoly of power; traditions of deference were ingrained. When he made his fateful decisions to de-ideologize international politics, to let the Berlin wall come down, to agree to the unification of Germany, to withhold force against secessionist republics within the U.S.S.R., and to end regional disputes in southern Africa and Central America, he rarely asked the Politburo for advice or consulted with the Defense Council. He did confer with experts, advisers, and other officials in an ad hoc fashion, but he had no process and no blueprint. He twisted and turned. Rather than implement a policy, he followed a vision that, however blurry at first, became clearer as he trekked forward.

Strong as was his position as general secretary (and then president), Gorbachev was not unassailable. Malenkov and Khrushchev had both been pushed aside. Indeed, Gorbachev perhaps at times exaggerated his vulnerability. From 1985 to 1989, he worked to remove opponents from key positions and to promote people who held a more flexible disposition. But he could never satisfy some of his allies, who tired of what they saw as his am-
bivalence. His vacillation, however, was a reaction to an unpredictable environment where so much was contingent on the responses of friends and foes. As the man most responsible for Soviet affairs, he appreciated the formidable obstacles he faced and understood the daunting nature of the enterprise he was contemplating. His acceptance, however grudging, of a unified Germany within NATO suggests how profound were the changes he was willing to tolerate even when they awakened tortured memories and infuriated political foes. In a functioning democracy, Gorbachev might not have been able to make these changes; in fact, he could do so in Soviet Russia only so long as he functioned as general secretary of the party representing the dictatorship of the proletariat. When he altered the structures of Soviet domestic governance in 1989, he vastly complicated his own efforts to bring about the changes he wanted. But he felt he had no choice, given the ends he pursued.24

Gorbachev would not have persevered with his reforms had he not found sympathetic listeners in Washington. Reagan’s greatness was not his buildup of force but his inspiring of trust. In March 1985, when Gorbachev became general secretary, the rearmament phase had peaked in Washington and Reagan was constrained by new budget deficits, growing antimilitarism in Congress, and mounting skepticism about the practicality of Star Wars. Unlike so many of his predecessors, however, Reagan could persuade the American people and the American Congress to appreciate the changes under way in the Soviet Union. Reagan, thought Gorbachev, would have the strength and might have the will not only to convince his countrymen to accept arms-reduction treaties but also to imagine the possibility of transcending the Cold War. Although Gorbachev frequently ranted to the Politburo about Reagan’s inflexibility, he nevertheless appreciated a partner who could help him to reconfigure the image of the Soviet Union in the West and thereby allow him to concentrate on reforms at home.

The many conversations that Reagan and Shultz had with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze about human rights, religious freedom, and democratic practices had an impact. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze frequently responded favorably to the American requests to intervene in certain cases because they wanted to make headway on issues they deemed more important, such as arms reductions. But they also responded positively because they were embarrassed by the cases, which revealed flaws in a system they continued to regard as superior to capitalism. Dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov upset Gorbachev because he felt they were aberrations and got too much attention. Accusations of mass repression in the Soviet Union incensed him because he considered them untrue, part of a Stalinist past that had been disavowed. When Gorbachev learned from the KGB just how many political prisoners there were (only 250–300), he did not mind jousting with Reagan and Shultz about the virtues of their respective systems.25 Still, in tactful and respectful yet forceful ways, Reagan and Shultz never let Gorbachev forget the gap between the promise and the reality of communism in the Soviet Union.

Reagan’s ideological fervor was very important in bringing about the end of the Cold War because it gave him tremendous confidence about the appeal of his way of life. His predecessors had also believed that democratic capitalism worked well in the United States and represented the best system of political economy, yet they were not sure that others agreed. They worried incessantly about communism and eurocommunism, state planning and nationalized industries, Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and revolutionary nationalist impulses. But by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the world economy was changing and Reagan’s beliefs meshed with evolving international realities. Shultz spoke frequently about the trend toward economic globalization and the pace of technological innovation. Planned economies would never keep abreast of the changes wrought by the information and communications revolutions, he said. Only free men and free women operating in democratic societies and motivated by free markets and personal incentives could harness the new technology and employ it to generate economic growth and material advancement. Command economies and nationalized industry might have generated impressive results when the output of steel and coal were benchmarks of success, but not when electronics, computers, data processing, and biotechnology had redefined the meaning of modernity in production. Command economies and national ownership might have seduced revolutionary nationalists in the third world during the era of decolonization, and communist rhetoric might have appealed to demoralized and hungry Europeans in the wake of depression and war, but the world was changing dramatically. Men and women around the globe were discovering, Reagan declared, that “Democracy, the profoundly good, is also the profoundly productive.”26

Reagan believed that if people had a choice, they would always choose personal freedom, private markets, and entrepreneurial opportunity. In this respect, he expressed what most Americans thought. He was a salesman for
the American way of life, certain that he offered salvation for the souls of mankind everywhere. Consequently, he was afraid neither to compete with nor to talk to his opponents. He knew, moreover, that most Americans were sure he would not betray their interests or their ideals. Reagan could talk to the men from the evil empire with less fear of partisan recriminations and conservative criticism. Unlike Truman, he was not facing a Congress dominated by the virulent anticommunism of an opposition party; unlike Eisenhower, he did not have to deal with an American political culture aroused by McCarthyism; unlike Kennedy and Johnson, he was not haunted by fears that his domestic policies would be undercut by the appearance of weakness in foreign policy; unlike Carter, he did not have to worry that he would be accused of temerity. Reagan could lead the American people to accept the end of the Cold War—on American terms, of course.

Reagan’s legacy is instructive. He believed in strength. Strength tempered the adversary’s ambitions and tamped down its expectations. But the purpose of strength was to negotiate. Even while he denounced the tyrants who ran an evil empire, he reached out to talk to them. In one of his most famous speeches, he asked the American people to imagine what Ivan and Anya would say to Jim and Sally if they should discover one another in a waiting room. “Would they debate the differences between their respective governments?” Or would they talk about their hobbies, their children, and their careers? All people “want to raise their children in a world without fear and without war,” Reagan said. “They want to have some of the good things over and above bare subsistence that make life worth living. They want to work at some craft, trade, or profession that gives them satisfaction and a sense of worth. Their common interests cross all borders.”

Reagan believed that leaders were obliged to work in behalf of these common interests. “The fact that neither of us likes the other system is no reason to refuse to talk,” he said. “Living in this nuclear age makes it imperative that we do talk.” Moreover, as he tried to find opportunities to talk, he discovered that the fears of the adversary were not feigned and that the dreams of the enemy were not dissimilar to some of his own—for example, the abolition of nuclear weapons. With patience and determination, with dignity and grace, Reagan crossed the ideological divide without altering his principles or ideals. “Tell the people of the Soviet Union,” he said to Gorbachev on 2 June 1988, “of the deep feelings of friendship felt by us and by the people of our country toward them.” In his “farewell address” to the American people a few months later, he advised, “We must keep up our guard, but we must also continue to work together to lessen and eliminate tension and mistrust.”

Reagan’s shrewdest insight was his understanding that the Cold War would be won by the system that could respond most effectively to people’s wish for a decent living, a peaceful environment, and an opportunity for free expression, religious piety, and individual advancement. After World War II, it had been far from certain that democratic capitalism would have the capacity to avoid another depression, sustain the peace, and satisfy the yearnings of Asians and Africans for autonomy and self-determination. The Cold War tested the capacity of two alternative systems of governance and political economy to deal with the challenges of a postcolonial and postindustrial age.

The overriding achievement of Cold War America was that its leaders usually remained patient and prudent in dealing with the Soviet Union. Although ideology and historical experience accentuated their sense of threat and tempted them to overreach when danger loomed or opportunity beckoned, they recognized that nuclear weapons made any armed great power conflict irrational. They realized they had to achieve their overriding strategic goal—a favorable correlation of power in Eurasia—without war. They were most successful at this during the early postwar years, when they calculated interests carefully, rebuilt Germany and Japan, helped to reconstruct Western Europe, forged the North Atlantic military alliance, and avoided embroilment in China’s civil war. They did less well in the 1960s and 1970s, when they allowed fears of revolutionary nationalism and regional turbulence to overcome any reasoned assessment of national interest. Forever worried that their adversary would seek to blackmail them in a crisis, exploit opportunities in the third world, and shrink the world capitalist market, they built up and maintained a nuclear arsenal that exceeded U.S. needs, got sucked into conflicts (like the one in Vietnam) that drained U.S. resources, and supported authoritarians (like the Shah in Iran) and insurgents (like the Mujahedin in Afghanistan) who disdained U.S. ideals. These Cold War policies did not cripple America’s ability to compete with a much weaker adversary—in the case of Afghanistan, American policy actually worked to America’s short-
term advantage—but they inflicted misery on millions of people in Asia, Africa, and Central America who were having difficulty enough dealing with the problems of modernization and industrialization.

Like the men in the Kremlin, U.S. leaders recognized that the ultimate proof of the superiority of their system would be measured by its capacity to give security, opportunity, and a high standard of living to its people. Yet, unlike the men in the Kremlin, they had to contend with a well-established democratic culture and a host of democratic political processes. At critical moments during the Cold War, public opinion—real and imagined—and legislative intentions complicated the presidents’ efforts to modulate conflict and reduce tensions. But in the final phase of the Cold War, in the middle and late 1980s, something like the opposite happened: Congress reined in defense and intelligence officials when it thought Reagan was overspending on defense, exaggerating the potential value of Star Wars, overreacting to a perceived communist threat in Central America, and in fact disobeying the law (as in the Iran-Contra scandal). Although Reagan fumed at this, his efforts to reach out to the Kremlin may well have been aided by the legislative constraints: his rearmament programs and interventionist proclivities had in fact been playing into the hands of Gorbachev’s foes and making it harder for Gorbachev to reach his goals.

No one, then, was more responsible for ending the Cold War than the Soviet leader. Reagan was critically important, but Gorbachev was the indispensable agent of change. Without losing his political faith, he transcended the Marxist-Leninist ideological postulates that defined the nature of threat and opportunity in the international system. He used his authority to retract Soviet power in ways that his predecessors had considered unimaginable. He understood how nuclear weapons had transformed the traditional security imperatives of the Soviet Union and how economic shortcomings required the government to reconfigure Soviet priorities. His predecessors had occasionally recognized this, but their unchanged perception of threat and of opportunity, as well as their sense of mission, prevented them from shifting course and sticking to a new direction.

Gorbachev believed that external threats to the Soviet Union were small and external opportunities even smaller. Success, for him, depended on democratizing socialism and making it work more productively for Soviet citizens. He failed miserably in these efforts, but he realized that ensuring the well-being of his people and letting them have a voice in shaping their destiny were more important tasks than pressing the universal claims and millennial aspirations of the Soviet way of life. As a result, he neither sought foreign enemies nor thought they were necessary to preserve totalitarian rule at home. Instead, he needed friendly governments and foreign aid to buttress his attempts at socialist renewal. For him, a geopolitical world with a relaxation of tensions at its core would be the key to a successful reformation of socialism with the well-being of Soviet people as its centerpiece. This nexus brought together geopolitics and ideology in ways that could not have been imagined when the Allies met at the Elbe River in 1945, and when Stalin and Truman first pondered the risks and opportunities of the postwar world.