I. Gorbachev: The First and Last
President of the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union that Gorbachev inherited in 1985 was a global power, perhaps somewhat tarnished in that image, but still strong and united and one of the world’s two superpowers. But in just three years, from 1989 to 1991, the political frontiers of the European continent were effectively rolled eastward from the center of Europe to the Russian borders of 1653, which were those before Russia’s union with the Ukraine. How did all this happen?

The roots of the demise of the Soviet Union must be found mainly at home, in our political struggles, in our incompetent but highly ambitious leaders, and in the unbelievably quick chain of domestic events in which the great majority of the population did not participate and still does not really understand. These dramatic and tragic days in the history of my country await a thorough and impartial study, but I will tell my part of the story as I lived it.

Life as a Secretary

On the first day after I returned to Moscow from the United States in March of 1986 to become secretary of the party’s International Division, I felt as if I were in a very special world. I was visited by a representative of the Ninth KGB Department, which provided members of the Politburo and Party Secretariat not only with security but with all kinds of services. As a secretary of the party, I learned that I was allocated four personal bodyguards, a large ZIL limousine with radio telephone, and a state-owned country house in Sosnovy Bor; it was appropriately called “Sosnovka,” that is, “The Pines.” The house had its own staff: three cooks, four waitresses, two gardeners, and a guard.

I was greatly surprised to learn that this particular house used to belong to the famed Marshal Georgi Zhukov, to whom it was given by Stalin during World War II. After Khrushchev dismissed him from his post of defense minister, the marshal lived there till his death. It was a
spacious two-story building with a large dining room, living room, library, and several bedrooms, and even its own room for screening movies. On the premises there were a tennis court, a sauna, and a greenhouse, as well as a fruit garden. All this was more than sumptuous by Moscow standards.

For their trips around the country and abroad, all of the approximately twenty-five members of the Politburo and the Party Secretariat were free to use a special squadron of airplanes. Each of us had two local and one international “hot lines,” through which we could get in touch with any Soviet official wherever he might be. There was also a special, well-protected telephone network among ourselves.

The weekly Politburo meetings were held regularly on Thursdays, and sometimes Gorbachev called urgent meetings. With rare exceptions, these meetings were attended by all party secretaries, who had a right to take part in a discussion, but not to vote. Not that the Politburo often resorted to voting: when the general secretary sensed impending discord, he would suggest that we “finalize” the issue in question at a later meeting, using this time to pressure dissenting members into accepting his position.

Gorbachev reveled in rhetoric and would speak extensively on nearly every issue. As a result a meeting which had started at 11 A.M. might end at 6 or even 8 P.M. Everyone who had something to say was given the floor. Gorbachev was a dynamic individual and usually dominated the Politburo meetings, the more so as there were few who would seriously want to contradict a general secretary. When he presided, as he did at all Politburo meetings, his mental outlook and his logic were impressive, and he usually succeeded in making the Politburo accept his decisions eventually, although he was not an authoritarian ruler and had to take into account the general mood. Yet, he met with no direct or organized opposition in the Politburo. One person stood out for his independent conduct, Boris Yeltsin, the then secretary of the Moscow party committee. He could stubbornly defend his viewpoint although he usually preferred to keep silent, especially when the issue under discussion was not directly connected with his area of authority. Still, one felt some apprehension by Gorbachev toward Yeltsin, whom the general secretary had previously promoted.

During the regular recess of thirty minutes to an hour, all those present would dine together at a long table in one of the Kremlin halls. One could choose between just two simple menus without any elaborate dishes and without liquors (only tea and coffee were served). The conversation would center on the news and the topics of the day.

No official records of the Politburo meetings were kept, although Gorbachev’s aide would confidentially make some notes. Politburo decisions were issued in the form of official documents and circulated to a restrictive list of officials for implementation and oversight. They were kept in the secretary general’s department filed in a “special folder.”

The agenda was always made up by the general secretary himself. Politburo members had a right to propose additional items and changes but seldom did so. The discussion papers were distributed a day or two before the meeting by the General Department of the Central Committee, the principal executive body under the general secretary.

This General Department had a special place in the Central Committee’s apparatus. It was headed by those closest to the general secretary. For Gorbachev, it was Anatoly Lukyanov and later Valery Boldin. Lukyanov was an intelligent and friendly man, but Boldin was known as a haughty, narrow-minded mandarin, who, to many people’s surprise, exercised some influence on Gorbachev. (Boldin showed his real face when he not only took part in the August putsch of 1991, but came to Foros, the vacation retreat where Gorbachev was confined, at the head of the delegation that brought an ultimatum to his former benefactor.) Boldin had daily access to Gorbachev, commenting on his mail and providing his chief with the latest news and rumors about the nomenklatura, which was our word for the list of those who really ran the country. It was he who recommended the agenda for Politburo meetings, which was then reviewed and approved by Gorbachev.

Formally, Gorbachev had no deputy in the Politburo, yet his de facto number two was Yegor Ligachev, who stayed by Gorbachev until he abandoned him at the end of his rule. Ligachev managed the party’s everyday business and thus assumed substantial nationwide influence. He presided at all Secretariat meetings.

Ligachev was also in charge of ideology, assisted by Aleksandr Yakovlev, another secretary of the party. Ligachev was orthodox, never wavering in his adherence to principles of Marx and Lenin. At the beginning of my work in the Secretariat Gorbachev told me frankly that he valued Ligachev’s talent as a party organizer which relieved him of routine business. But as for ideology and cultural development, Gorbachev said, Ligachev was “not exactly an innovator” because his overall theoretical learning was far from substantial. Yet he was perfectly capable of preserving the ideological purity of the party.

These shortcomings of Ligachev were subsequently used by Aleksandr Yakovlev who won Gorbachev’s confidence and, being an intelligent and well-educated person, established a high intellectual level in his private conversations with the general secretary. This enabled Yakovlev to become Gorbachev’s trusted conversation partner and to infiltrate Ligachev’s ideological domain.
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The Summit at Reykjavik

When I was appointed as the head of the Central Committee's International Department I did not have a clear idea about its functions. It had a staff of about two hundred virtually covering the globe. I had thought the department played an active and important role in Soviet foreign policy, but I soon realized it dealt mostly with Communist and other left-wing parties as well as radical international organizations and mass movements, both in the West and in the Third World. All contacts with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe were handled by a separate department of the Secretariat. I was surprised to discover the International Department was really not involved with Soviet foreign policy outside the Third World and would therefore come to prominence only occasionally, in such countries as Angola, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and so on. The department did not concern itself with our relations and negotiations with the United States and Western Europe and was not active in dealing with them. It was also outside the arms control process. I looked up the old charter of the department, which had been approved many years ago, and found it dealt only with similar parties in other countries. Nothing about foreign policy.

There were historical reasons for this. At the start of the Soviet regime Lenin declared there would be two policies—those of the Narkomindel (the Foreign Ministry) and the Comintern (the Communist International)—and when they did not contradict each other, they were to be pursued with equal fervor. But when they were in conflict, the ideological interests of the Comintern were to be subordinated to the normal foreign policy goals of the Soviet state as pursued by the Narkomindel. However, the two lines of policy were always present and often got mixed up in the minds of the Soviet leaders—suffice it to recall the tangle of our relations with Hanoi during the Vietnam War. Some policies were the direct result of ideology, and the propaganda associated with them did not always produce the best image of the intentions of the Soviet Union. Foreigners could easily ascribe to the Masters of Moscow some global conspiracy or sinister expansionist plot.

By inertia the International Department followed the line of the Comintern while the Foreign Ministry handled the foreign policy of the country.

I spoke with Gorbachev about the absurdity of this, and he asked me to draft a new charter reflecting his new policies. In May of 1986 I gave him a detailed memo with a draft charter, which he approved quickly. In addition to its traditional relations with foreign parties of the left, it was charged with maintaining and implementing the party line—that is, Gorbachev's new line—in "cardinal questions of foreign policy and questions of all interna-
tional relations in general.” To strengthen the department’s new structure, I obtained Gorbachev’s permission to transfer several diplomatic heavyweights and specialists from the Foreign Ministry, including Georgi Kornienko, who had been Gromyko’s deputy and continued as first deputy to his successor as foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. Kornienko became my first deputy. I was also joined by Vitaly Churkin, an able diplomat who later became deputy foreign minister. We also brought in some experts on arms control negotiations.

This was a good start to move us into foreign policy, and the department began to participate in negotiations with the United States and preparations for the Soviet-American summit meetings. But most important was that this was the period when Gorbachev was beginning to formulate what he called his “new thinking” in foreign policy. On the eve of the Geneva summit of 1985, as I watched him, his mind was still fastened on some of the class mythology and ideology that obscured the world and led him into inconsistencies. But at Geneva he quickly realized the prime importance of constructive relations with the United States, and after Geneva he staked much on a direct dialogue with the Americans at the highest level, aiming first of all at agreements on mutual security and arms control.

In 1986 Gorbachev emphasized the importance of maintaining “the spirit of Geneva” and announced his disarmament program for a “non-nuclear world by the year 2000.” He wanted a second meeting with Reagan and was restless and impatient; during the previous year an active personal correspondence of more than twenty-five messages had developed between them. Gorbachev had enjoyed the great publicity he received from the summit. But this time he wanted a meeting with significant results. He mentioned it several times to the Politburo in the first half of 1986, but without going into details of what the agenda might be, although Star Wars was constantly on his mind as a potential obstacle to success.

By the end of February 1986 he confided to some of his assistants: “Maybe it is time to stop being afraid of SDI? The United States is counting on our readiness to build the same kind of costly system, hoping meanwhile that they will win this race using their technological superiority. But our scientists tell me that if we want to destroy or neutralize the American SDI system, we only would have to spend 10 percent of what the Americans plan to spend.” He added that the cost of our own SDI system would be more than 500 billion rubles, a huge sum.

But under the influence of our military-industrial complex, Gorbachev gradually began to revert to his insistence on Reagan’s withdrawal from SDI as the condition for the success of a new summit on disarmament. He was persuaded that an SDI system would give the United States a first-strike advantage in nuclear conflicts.

No final decision on the summit had been taken by the Politburo by the time Gorbachev left for his summer vacation in the Crimea. While there he telephoned me—I was on vacation, too—to say that he decided to propose to Reagan that they meet during the autumn at some point between Moscow and Washington, perhaps London or Reykjavik. Their principal subject would be nuclear disarmament. Shevardnadze had already approved the idea, and Gorbachev was asking my opinion before submitting it to the Politburo.

I supported the idea but asked Gorbachev exactly what it was about nuclear disarmament that he wanted to discuss with Reagan. He answered that he intended to propose really deep cuts in strategic arms if the president would abandon SDI. I told him I was not so sure that Reagan would abandon his favorite project, but Gorbachev said he would insist on it. Who knows—he wondered—maybe Reagan would ultimately yield on SDI in exchange for the huge reductions in nuclear weapons he professed to want. If not, Gorbachev still hoped to gain worldwide publicity for his radical ideas on nuclear disarmament.

Gorbachev met Reagan in Reykjavik on October 11-12, 1986, and both came away bitterly disappointed.

The meeting itself was highly dramatic. For the first time in the history of our relations, there appeared the possibility of an agreement on the substantial reduction of strategic nuclear arms. Surprisingly, Reagan agreed to the idea of substantial cuts and even complete elimination after a decade. But he refused to undertake obligations under the antiballistic missile treaty that could have prevented the United States from pursuing the Star Wars project. Gorbachev tried hard to persuade Reagan to moderate his position but without success.

One episode remains pinned in my memory. Gorbachev and Reagan had ended their long and heated negotiations at midnight without agreement and left the conference building together, walking in silence. They stopped to bid each other goodbye as they reached the president’s car. I happened to be nearby and served as impromptu interpreter. A short conversation followed in the cold Icelandic night.

Gorbachev, his voice ringing with bitterness he could hardly hide, said: “Mr. President, you have missed the unique chance of going down in history as a great president who paved the way for nuclear disarmament.”

Reagan replied gloomily, “That applies to both of us.”

On the drive to the airport Reagan was silent for a long time. His chief of staff, Donald Regan rode with him and later told me that the president fi-
nally broke the silence by saying: "Don, together with Gorbachev we were very close to agreement. It's a shame." Then he raised his thumb and index finger half an inch apart: "We were that close." The president was shattered.

At that very moment I was riding with Gorbachev to meet the press in a separate building. He was very angry with Reagan’s stubbornness on SDI, which he considered the major reason for the failure of the meeting. Gorbachev was eager to denounce Reagan at his press conference; we who were with him were trying to calm him down. After a ride of ten or fifteen minutes he regained his self-control. He told us that he was going to criticize Reagan strongly, but he would not close the door to future meetings lest the press characterize the meeting as a total failure instead of the first step toward an agreement.

As an eyewitness at Reykjavik, I feel Gorbachev was no less responsible than Reagan for its failure because he held SDI hostage for the success of the meeting. He held good cards with impressive disarmament proposals, and he could have played them far better if he had not been as stubborn on SDI as Reagan. It could have been postponed for further consideration if they had reached agreement on a deep reduction of nuclear weapons, and as a matter of fact Gorbachev followed that bargaining strategy in later negotiations toward the end of the Reagan administration.

At the Politburo meeting to review Reykjavik, Gorbachev was still angry at Reagan but said the meeting with him was worthwhile after all. First, it showed to the world that the Soviet leadership was really prepared for serious discussion of disarmament; second, Reagan unexpectedly demonstrated his readiness to negotiate nuclear arms reduction; third, America’s NATO partners in Europe would be critical of Reagan’s insistence on continuing SDI at all costs.

Gorbachev was in fact already looking toward his next meeting with Reagan. The old guard in the Politburo and the military-industrial complex covertly opposed his “new thinking” and his plans for accommodation with the United States, but he overcame them by proclaiming his firm intention to carry out his new foreign policy, fully aware that he could count on the party and on the public support he then enjoyed.

Gorbachev in a Hurry

Gorbachev’s manner of handling the work of the Politburo was gradually changing. His style became more authoritarian and commanding. The discussion of foreign policy questions by the Politburo had undergone transformations under Gorbachev. Initially the agendas for all the meetings Gorbachev had scheduled with foreign leaders, especially the Americans and whether in Moscow or abroad, were minutely discussed by the Politburo. Gromyko had usually presented the foreign ministry’s discussion papers, drafts of documents to be signed, and other paraphernalia of such international meetings. But when Shevardnadze became foreign minister, fewer papers were presented or discussed. Gorbachev clearly strove to avoid Politburo guidelines and directives and sought a free hand in dealing with foreign heads of state. Ultimately, with Shevardnadze’s help, Gorbachev reached his goal. In fact if not in form, he single-handedly devised the foreign policy of the country and implemented it as well.

This could clearly be seen from his personal handling of the strategic arms limitation talks with American Presidents Reagan and then Bush. Gorbachev increasingly improvised and without consulting our experts would agree to sudden compromises which were often regarded by our military as one-sided concessions to the Americans. One example of Gorbachev’s style stands out in my memory.

In April of 1987 Secretary Shultz went to Moscow to negotiate with Gorbachev on Euromissiles. The Soviet leadership was prepared to trade off its SS-20 missiles and other weapons for the comparable U.S. missiles that had been deployed in Europe since 1983. The Euromissiles we were discussing had ranges from 500 to 1,500 kilometers. Under the proposed deal both sides would destroy these intermediate-range missiles, but the military insisted on keeping our modern arsenal of more than one hundred SS-23s, with a range of only 400 kilometers. Before Shultz’s arrival, Gorbachev had asked Marshal Akhromeyev and me to prepare a negotiating memo with a summary of both sides’ positions. Akhromeyev specifically recommended that if Shultz tried to include the SS-23, Gorbachev should refuse because its range was below that covered in the treaty draft.

In our earlier negotiations, the American side attempted but did not press for including the SS-23s. But when Shultz arrived, he was more insistent on scrapping the new missiles. At first Gorbachev ignored this, but toward the end of the meeting, Shultz raised the SS-23 again. He stressed that if Gorbachev would agree to include these missiles, he could say with confidence that we were very close to a treaty that could soon be signed in Washington at the coming summit meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan in Washington.

After a moment of hesitation, Gorbachev, to the great surprise of Akhromeyev and myself, said to Shultz, “It’s a deal.” He shook hands with Shultz, and the principals departed.

Akhromeyev was stunned and asked if I knew why Gorbachev had shifted his position at the last moment. I was as mystified as he was. The marsh turned and rushed to the general secretary’s office. Half an hour later
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 long 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 military 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 air 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 urgedly 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. Outmaneuvered 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 to June 2, 1990, he tried to improvise by coming up with ideas of neutralizing a united Germany or offering it simultaneous membership in both NATO and the Warsaw Pact, while the two blocs would gradually merge their structures. But his hesitations soon ended. As Western countries intensified the pressure for unification and his domestic reforms began stalling, Gorbachev began yielding his position, hoping that the West would continue to cooperate with him nevertheless.

To the surprise of the West, during a blitz meeting with Chancellor Helmut Kohl in July of 1990 at a remote vacation area of the Caucasus far from public attention, Gorbachev removed all his conditions and agreed to Germany’s membership in NATO as a unified nation, even though there was still fairly strong opposition within the Politburo. I was later told by one of President Bush’s assistants that Kohl was, in his own words, stunned by Gorbachev’s sudden agreement. The German chancellor, like the West as a whole, had been prepared for prolonged and difficult discussions with Gorbachev and had come prepared with several fallback positions on different parts of any deal. On the flight home he and his entourage celebrated this historic event, which had been totally unexpected so early in the bargaining. Washington did not conceal its pleasure either. The issue of German unification was of paramount importance to the Americans, and they also had been expecting hard bargaining with Moscow. So I was later told by Bush, Baker, Kissinger, and other prominent Americans.

Thus what was to have been a gradual process of evolution took Gorbachev only half a year. Why was he in such a hurry? He of course correctly understood that the reunification of Germany was historically inevitable. But the process had to be completed in such a way as to ensure the security and stability of the Soviet Union and the whole of Europe. After all, Germany started two world wars. Under pressure at home and abroad, his main aspiration remained a new Europe built on the cooperation between the Soviet Union and the West. After the rapid reunification of Germany, the consequence was a dramatic narrowing of Soviet options and a significant reduction in Moscow’s ability to shape its mode of adjustment to new circumstances.

At the start Gorbachev had the right idea: the unification of Germany should be synchronized with the formation of a new security structure for Europe. But he did not fit for this grand design, especially as the regimes in Eastern Europe began to crack and the region grew increasingly unstable. In fact he did not try to translate this grand strategy into concrete action, and although it may be difficult to believe, did not even discuss this troublesome situation as a whole in the Politburo as change shook the Warsaw Pact countries. He was completely frustrated by events. Lacking any strategy of
marked casually to Gorbachev that some high officials she had recently visited in Washington considered perestroika a misstep that could disrupt the entire economic structure of such a big country, especially if Gorbachev moved too quickly. She counseled caution—even she had run into trouble privatizing British state industries—but she wished him luck. Reporting this to the Politburo, Gorbachev joked about those unnamed “ultraconservative” 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 them 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 abid-

* 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.