The sudden ending of the Cold War, surely the dominant feature of the second half of the twentieth century, continues to be one of the most unexpected and perplexing phenomena of our time. Explanations provided by the winners and losers differ considerably, often contradict each other, and even taken together they produce no answer to the key question: ‘Why did it happen?’

The Cold War came to an end peaceably; but because its happy conclusion was not formalized by any act of capitulation or postwar congress such as the Potsdam Conference of the summer of 1945, there remains a significant diversity of views even with regard to timing. When did it actually happen? There is no agreement even about that. In fact since the very term ‘Cold War’, as Archie Brown justly observes, is a metaphor, there can be no definitive – still less a ‘scientific’ – answer to the question.\(^1\) Anyone can choose his or her own version, selecting a date or event to mark the moment in accordance with his or her understanding of what the metaphor actually meant.

According to prevailing opinion, the Cold War came to an end in 1989, although among the many extraordinary events that took place during that year, different analysts choose different symbols. For some it is quite naturally 9 November, the fall of the Berlin Wall. Others refer to the US-Soviet December summit at Malta, where in their joint press conference on board the Soviet liner *Maxim Gorky*, Bush and Gorbachev announced to the world that the leaders of the two superpowers no longer considered their countries to be adversaries.

Archie Brown, while reminding us that the Cold War was an ideologized struggle – and not only on the Soviet side – also places its formal end in 1989. He writes: ‘The Cold War began with the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe in the form of acquisition of power by Moscow-dominated Communist Parties. It ended when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe became non-Communist and independent.’ Yet he recognizes that from the ideological standpoint, the Cold War was over a year before it ended on the ground, citing two important speeches by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988: one at the 19th Party Conference in the summer of that year and another in December, his ‘anti-Fulton’ address to the United Nations.\(^2\)

Gorbachev’s UN speech is also chosen by Matthew Evangelista, who sees it as a trumpet-call proclaiming the end of some fifty years of East-West strategic confrontation; Anatoli Chernyaev focuses on this moment as well, although for different reasons. For Evangelista this speech, in which Gorbachev announced a substantial unilateral reduction of Soviet troops and conventional arms, ‘marked the end of the Cold War in Europe as it rendered Soviet forces incapable of either a standing-start invasion of the West or a major intervention to maintain control of the “fraternal” allies of Eastern Europe’.\(^3\)

Chernyaev chooses a different argument.\(^4\) For him the most important thing was Gorbachev’s new philosophical approach to the handling of foreign policy, his renunciation of the use of force as a way to solve international problems along with the recognition of people’s sovereign right to choose their own political systems. With this statement the last General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party formally severed his filial ties to his predecessors; it was not just a question of Stalin, the ‘godfather’ of the Yalta accords, or Brezhnev and his ill-fated ‘Doctrine’, but Lenin as well, since for the first time a Soviet leader was ready publicly to admit that he did not necessarily consider communism to be the world’s final destination, in accordance with a scientifically programmed ‘end of history’.
And yet apart from these ‘romantic’ analysts of Gorbachev’s statement of intentions, there were of course also the ‘realists’, like the US Secretary of State, James Baker, who preferred to wait for the promises to be carried into effect. It would not take long before this happened. Already in 1990 the Soviet-American political entente declared at Malta was put to the test by two major challenges: first, the need to handle the delicate issue of a reunited Germany’s future membership of NATO; and, secondly, the question of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 – what would be the Soviet reaction? In both cases Gorbachev did not deviate from his stated principles.

During the US-Soviet summit meeting in Washington in May 1990, he confirmed to George Bush his acceptance of the future German state’s ‘right to choose’ its future alliance, fully aware of the fact that it was going to be NATO. Following the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, Gorbachev did not hesitate to describe it as a brutal violation of international law that could not be justified. According to Baker, the crucial moment came on the day in August 1990 when he and Shevardnadze read their joint communique to the press, condemning the Iraqi incursion and demanding the evacuation of Kuwait: ‘a half-century after it began in mutual suspicion and ideological fervor, the Cold War breathed its last at an airport terminal on the outskirts of Moscow’.

The common position taken by Moscow and Washington in the face of an act of aggression against a sovereign state represented for Baker ‘a historic demonstration of superpower solidarity’; it signalled the encouraging picture of a stable and secure post-Cold War international order. Two days after his mini-summit with Gorbachev in Helsinki, it was this prospect that inspired the US President George Bush in his speech to Congress on 11 September (with hindsight, an ironic date) to promise to Americans and to the whole world a ‘“new world order” based on the rule of law and not on the law of the jungle’.

Bush had reasons to be optimistic at that time, and not only because Gorbachev had just assured him of Soviet support for the American position. There were also other areas of the world where ‘superpower solidarity’ seemed to be extremely productive, facilitating the resolution of chronic conflicts of the Cold War decades. Europe was heading towards the historic Paris summit of the CSCE, which in November would adopt the Charter of Europe that declared an end to the era of division and confrontation. The CFE Treaty signed on 19 November, after years of futile bargaining, announced significant cuts in the manpower and weapons of the Warsaw Pact armies that for so many years had aroused fears in the West of a Soviet blitzkrieg. The Warsaw Pact and NATO, following disarmament, would be non-antagonistic, serving as an infrastructure for a new pan-European security system built on a strengthened and institutionalized CSCE, soon to be transformed from a ‘Conference’ into an ‘Organization’, the OSCE (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).

In Africa, the continent that for many years had served as a battleground for East and West acting through their local clients, new opportunities emerged for the resolution of several long-term regional conflicts, and finally the shameful apartheid system of South Africa came to an end. Following the December 1988 Agreement jointly brokered by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoli Adamishin and his American counterpart, Chester Croker, Cuba agreed to withdraw its troops from Angola. And a year later, in November 1989, South Africa withdrew its troops from Namibia, ending the occupation of seventy-five years and opening the road to Namibian independence. In South Africa itself the newly elected President de Klerk, likened, as already noted, to Gorbachev by his Minister of Foreign Affairs, R.F. Botha, decided to meet the imprisoned Nelson Mandela, who was subsequently released after twenty-seven years of incarceration on 11 February 1990.

Even the most long-standing and seemingly hopeless of the regional conflicts, that of the Middle East, began to show signs of possible positive evolution. True, there had to be a delay until the war in the Gulf was over, but the new level of US-Soviet cooperation achieved during their collective management of the Gulf crisis encouraged the extension of this experience to the search for a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Formally, the Soviets and particularly the Americans preferred to deny any direct relationship between international action to force Saddam to evacuate Kuwait and the
proposal to convene a Middle East peace conference, yet the connection between the two was obvious. Gorbachev started to push Bush in this direction ever since their meeting in Helsinki in September. At first the Americans were reluctant to agree out of fear that the linkage between the two could be interpreted as a reward to the aggressor. Yet at the end of January 1991, when the preparations for the ground offensive against Iraq were in their final stage, James Baker accepted the mention of the project for a Middle East peace after his meeting with the newly appointed Soviet Foreign Minister, Aleksandr Bessmertnykh, to whom he said: 'it is a reward for Gorbachev, not Saddam.'10 (The Conference under the joint chairmanship of Bush and Gorbachev eventually convened in Madrid at the end of October 1991.)

In Latin America, not only did the Soviet Union stop its military aid to the Sandinista government from the spring of 1989, as Gorbachev informed Bush at Malta; now, according to James Baker, the USSR would 'join the United States with strong support for negotiations, searching for a political settlement of civil conflicts' in Nicaragua and El Salvador.11

During these crucial months it was not only the many regional conflicts across the globe, nourished by Cold War confrontation, that suddenly seemed to acquire the possibility of resolution; the general structure of global politics was considerably strengthened, with major institutions regaining the chance to function effectively. Speaking at the opening of a meeting of the UN Security Council on 29 November 1990, convened to discuss sanctions against Saddam Hussein, James Baker had every reason to say: 'With the Cold War behind us, we now have the chance to build the world envisioned by the founders of the United Nations. We have the chance to make the Security Council and this United Nations true instruments for peace and justice across the globe.'12 In fact after Malta the American vision of the emerging ‘new world order’ was not very distant from Gorbachev’s ‘new political thinking’; it was Gorbachev’s belief as well that a new international order should move on from a ‘balance of forces’ to a ‘balance of interests’, and that this would be achieved through the strengthening of international organizations and gradual transfers of national sovereignty to the United Nations.13

It is striking to discover in the memoirs of both leaders, Soviet and American, amazing similarities of tone when referring to this period; with a certain nostalgia they tell the story of the extraordinary political romance between the two superpowers that brought about an end to decades of mutual fear and mistrust. Describing the atmosphere that reigned at Camp David on the day following the Washington summit of May 1990, Baker writes:

The President, Scowcroft, and I spent the . . . day at Camp David, discussing regional issues with Gorbachev, Shevardnadze and Akhromeyev in a very relaxed way and in casual attire . . . . We covered conflicts from Kashmir to Cuba and Ethiopia, to North Korea . . . . the discussion reminded me of some of the talks the President had held with Kohl and Thatcher – thinking out loud, comparing notes and creating stronger personal relationships.14

And now compare to this Anatoli Chernyaev’s notes about the Bush–Gorbachev summit that took place one year later in Novo-Ogarevo (a kind of Soviet Camp David):

Gorbachev and Bush had agreed to spend at least one day outside Moscow in a relaxed atmosphere, outdoors, ‘with their ties off’ discussing anything and everything in an intimate circle. . . . They talked about the Middle East, disarmament, including the chemical and biological aspects, Angola and South Africa, Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe . . . . Gorbachev suggested discussing a new concept of strategic stability on a global scale, because the former foundation – nuclear parity between the two superpowers – was losing its significance . . . . I had the impression that I was present at the culmination of a great effort very much along the lines of ‘new thinking’.15

Gorbachev confirmed Chernyaev’s impression in a conversation with the author: ‘I remember sitting with Bush and Baker discussing the prospects for the solution of other [post-Gulf War] regional conflicts . . . . As we would have done between ourselves.’16

In these converging stories one can sense much more than mere ‘superpower solidarity’, and certainly no inclination to strike a geo-strategic deal in a form of a future condominium across the globe. The new US-Soviet relationship emerging
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from the spirit of confidence enjoyed between the two leaders reflected their concern and feelings of common responsibility for the as yet unknown world that they were about to set free from the weight of their confrontation, a confrontation that had lasted for almost half a century.

Yet less than half a year later, the would-be reliable partner of the US President for the building a ‘new world order’, Mikhail Gorbachev, was compelled to abandon his post; one of the presumed bastions of the future construct – a democratized Soviet Union – fell into ruins. To many in the West it was this break-up of the historic rival of the Western world that signalled the real end of the Cold War. History seemed to have reached a happy ending, this time not in its communist incarnation but as a liberal, democratic triumph. It was assumed that nothing could now inconvenience the sole remaining superpower or disturb its imposition of its own version of law and order on the rest of the globe.

We all now know what happened next. The political universe that emerged after the end of Cold War unfortunately is now referred to as the world ‘post-9/11’. Instead of living in the comfort of Fukayama’s ‘end of history’ we face unprecedented challenges, most, such as international terrorism, on a new and global scale. Certain former problems have returned as well. US–Russia relations, at least in terms of the rhetoric employed by political elites or the tone of the press, can seem reminiscent of the days of the Cold War. A number of strategic issues thought to have been successfully resolved at the time of Reagan–Bush/Gorbachev political collaboration are back on the political agenda, including: conventional and nuclear disarmament, weapons modernization, systems of mutual confidence building, NATO’s expansion to the East, anti-ballistic missile defences, the presence of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, etc. History gives the impression of going round in circles.

It is now obvious that during the years when the Soviet Union was headed by Gorbachev, US–Soviet relations enjoyed much greater predictability and seemed to be heading toward a more promising future, in contrast to the present relations between the Kremlin and the White House. As some Western analysts argue, since ‘the Cold War ended more than two years before the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist’, it was not the formal preservation or the disappearance of the USSR but rather the nature of the Russian state and the chances of its political evolution in the direction of community of values and interests compatible with those of the West that should be regarded as the factor determining the effective end of the Cold War.17 Hence the indissoluble relationship between the unprecedented opening up of Soviet foreign policy in the direction of the West and the internal reform initiated by Gorbachev; while the failure of perestroika, the deviation of Russia’s development from its original objectives during the Yeltsin/Putin years, had an undermining effect. Gorbachev himself believes that the break-up of the Soviet Union deprived the world of an important factor for stability, rendering more hazardous the positive transformation of the international political scene dreamed of by the two superpower leaders at Malta.18

And yet an obvious question arises: how realistic was Gorbachev’s strategy? Could a reformed Soviet Union have been transformed into a solid bastion of a new international order? Was there no contradiction between his project for profound democratic political reform and the wish to preserve the Soviet state that carried the stigmas of the Bolshevik project? Replying to these questions, Gorbachev reminds us of his intention to reform the Union state, turning it into a loose confederative structure. He also cites the convincing figures of the vote of approval for the preservation of the Union in the referendum held in March 1991. He then presents his final argument: the draft of the new Union Treaty, approved by the leaders of nine Soviet republics and supported by the autonomous republics as well, was scheduled to be signed on 20 August 1991. The plotters of the August putsch chose 18 August for their action in order to disrupt the ceremony.

However, these formal arguments do not stand up against the political logic flowing from Gorbachev’s own perestroika policies: the liquidation of monopoly rule by the Communist Party, a key result of his reforms, gave rise to the progressive erosion of the regime and prepared the ground for the collapse of the state, based as it was on ideological dogma and coercion. It was through his practical policies, however, that Gorbachev...
provided a better and more convincing answer to the above embarrassing question: by renouncing the use of force to preserve the Union state, he made it clear that he would not sacrifice the democratic core of his project in order to maintain a rigid shell.

Undoubtedly the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union was directly related to Gorbachev's biography and political career; it must be remembered that this first elected President of the USSR was in that office for only twenty months. And yet in addition to his personal destiny, the verdict of history on him will be determined by the concrete record of his rule and influenced by the judgement of his compatriots as well as by world public opinion. Mixed, if not negative, assessment of the Gorbachev years by many Russians is understandably affected by the contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies of Russia's post-communist reforms and development. Yet the appraisals of Gorbachev's role by some Western historians and analysts present his actions as of almost marginal importance.

Some seem to share John Lewis Gaddis's claim (in his book on the Cold War) that 'Gorbachev was never a leader in the manner of Václav Havel, John Paul II, Deng Xiaoping, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Lech Wałęsa - even Boris Yeltsin. They all had destinations in mind and maps for reaching them. Gorbachev dithered in contradictions without resolving them.' Others argue that the major real incentive for Gorbachev's revolutionary transformation of the Soviet relations with the West was the USSR's 'material decline', which in fact did not really leave any freedom of choice for the Soviet leader. These authors basically reproduce the evaluation of Gorbachev's policy given by Robert Gates at the time he was the Director of the CIA, when he declared that the 'new thinking' had grown 'out of need for breathing space'.

Curiously, while some contemporary Russian historians (Utkin, Narochntskaya, Myalo, Sheviakin) do not hesitate to present the foreign policy of the Gorbachev–Shevardnadze team as the realization of a long-time Western dream of destroying Russia or even of a CIA conspiracy, there are also quite a number of Western analysts who, while recognizing the historic dimension of the change inaugurated by Gorbachev, present the transformation of the international scene as an unexpected byproduct of his utopian reform plans, unforeseen and unwanted by Gorbachev himself, who simply lost control of the forces he had unleashed and behaved like a politician who was both naïve and unprofessional.

It seems to me that the testimony collected in this book produces an adequate counter-weight to most of these assertions and helps better to define the true significance of the 'Gorbachev factor'. And yet the question of Gorbachev's 'naïveté' perhaps requires some additional comment. It was the 'naïve' Stavropolian who for more than six years successfully presided over the extraordinary process of peacefully dismantling the world's most powerful and feared totalitarian regime of the second half of the twentieth century, leading the first successful 'velvet revolution' of the East. 'It was Mikhail Gorbachev not Ronald Reagan or George Bush who ended communist rule in the Soviet Union,' testifies Jack Matlock, one of the most effective US Ambassadors in Moscow and a shrewd observer of Soviet society at a time of unprecedented change. To achieve this, unlike the promoters of democratic transformation in Germany or Japan, the reformist General Secretary could not lean on a military defeat of the ruling caste or major assistance from victorious powers; when he launched the introduction of democratic procedures and institutions and attempted to protect them, he had to mobilize and lead thinly scattered, disorganized democratic forces within Soviet society itself, including within the ruling party.

Despite tremendous political pressure at home that on a number of occasions risked sinking the boat of political reform, it was he who remained uncompromising on the principle of 'freedom of choice' - the sovereign right of people to determine their own political systems and to choose their leaders and strategic alliances; he accepted the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the break-up of, first, the Soviet 'external empire' and later of the Soviet Union itself, sparing the world the nightmare of a continental-size 'Yugoslavia with nukes'. 'The nations of Eastern Europe, in the course of a free expression of the will of the people, chose their own path of development based on their national needs. The system that existed in Eastern and Central Europe was condemned by history, as was the system in our own country,' writes Gorbachev.
It was Gorbachev, whose father had fought the Germans, and who himself survived Nazi occupation in 1942–3, who, on behalf of a whole nation that had suffered so grievously during the last war brought the German Chancellor to his native village to offer historic reconciliation to the German people (as well as the long-awaited reunification), an achievement comparable to the other crucial example of postwar reconciliation between the leaders of France and Germany. The admission of Germany, finally sovereign and reunited, as an equal member of the family of its former victorious adversaries not only marked the end of the Cold War but also brought closure to any remainder of the unhappy legacy of the Second World War.

The 'naive' Gorbachev succeeded where several generations of postwar leaders, both East and West, had failed: he managed to recast the formal ritual of disarmament talks, which up until then with a few exceptions had brought no results. From serving merely as alibi for both sides to continue the arms race, negotiations were transformed into a genuine common endeavour, a search for effective schemes to reduce the most dangerous weapons arsenals along with reliable procedures for mutual inspection. Having chased secrecy from the sensitive sphere of the strategic balance of power, glasnost fatally undermined the possibilities of the military-industrial complexes of both sides to dominate over politics and the politicians.

To break this circle of futile bargaining and reciprocal suspicion, Gorbachev did not hesitate to resort to a risky gamble, making to his partners offers they could not refuse and proposing sensational unilateral concessions and asymmetric arms cuts in order to involve the other side in practical negotiations. Amazingly for the professionals in the trade, eventually the gamble worked far better than containment; within a period of two to five years a number of disarmament treaties were concluded that radically reduced (or even totally eliminated, in the case of intermediate nuclear missiles) not only the nuclear arsenals of both sides but also conventional forces and weapons to an extent unimaginable during the preceding decades of the Cold War. Even certain totally unilateral gestures by Gorbachev paid off in the end, such as sacrificing the shorter range 'Oka' tactical missile, despite the fury of his generals since there was no American equivalent; it was this action that persuaded the US to renounce the modernization of the 'Lance-II' missiles, earmarked to be deployed in West Germany to match the Soviet analogue.

Could these impressive results lead to the conclusion that in order to achieve ephemeral political success, Gorbachev did not hesitate to squander the hard-built military might and authority of the Soviet superpower? This line of argument could be and has been taken only by those who ignore his primary goal: to liberate Soviet society from the devastating burden of the arms race and from the quest for strategic parity, matching not only US capabilities but also those of its allies in NATO, with China included as well. It was a price that the country could no longer afford to pay.

Yet if carefully calculated political gambling was part of Gorbachev's negotiating tactic, it was in the end not tactics that helped him to achieve the desired results but rather a profound shift in the logic that determined relations between all the parties engaged in the Cold War. It is amazing to see the similarity of the arguments that were used by decision-makers in Moscow and Washington when discussing strategy vis-à-vis the adversary. In January 1982, presenting his view about the way to face the challenge posed by the Soviet Union, Reagan cited Winston Churchill, who 'observed that they [the Soviets] respect only strength and resolve in their dealings with other nations'.

In Moscow in those years it was common at Politburo meetings to hear similar reasoning coming from Andropov, Ustinov or Gromyko: 'The Americans understand only strength.' The same argument was repeated by the conservatives (KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov) in 1986, after the failure of Gorbachev's attempt to reach an agreement with Reagan at the Reykjavik summit; they wanted to demonstrate the naivety of any alternative foreign policy based on the vague postulates of the 'new thinking'.

And yet, convinced that it was precisely this logic of mutual mistrust and demonization that had pushed East-West relations into their present impasse, at times bringing the entire world to the verge of catastrophe, Gorbachev continued to insist on the need to replace the logic of confrontation with a strategy of partnership. After initial attempts to persuade the
West of the seriousness of his intentions, he realized that the only way to introduce real change was to set an example. Whereas in the traditional logic of superpower relations, reducing Soviet nuclear forces in the face of the SDI challenge would have been virtually unthinkable, Gorbachev managed to negotiate a strategic arms reduction treaty while essentially evading the Star Wars issue. 'His accomplishment marks a key turning point in the Cold War endgame because it removed SDI as a stumbling block to internal and external demilitarization and achieved the first significant reductions in the arsenals of strategic nuclear weapons of Russia and the US,' writes Matthew Evangelista.28

Naive, idealist or visionary? The distinction between these assessments is often quite thin and any final judgement, almost always elusive for contemporaries, can only be given by history. The opinions of analysts continue to diverge, even with the privilege of hindsight. For Jacques Lévesque, 'seldom in history has the policy of a great power continued to be guided, despite difficulties and reversals, by such an idealistic view of the world, one based on universal reconciliation, one in which the image of the enemy gradually blurs until it virtually disappears as an enemy'.29 Gorbachev 'allowed circumstances – and often the firmer views of more far-sighted contemporaries – to determine his own priorities,' writes Gaddis.30 Vladislav Zubok reproaches the Soviet leader for an excessively 'rosy' view of the brutal reality of the world, leading him to a 'psychological dependence on former enemies and geopolitical rivals'. For that author, the fact that Gorbachev was too 'soft' on his Western partners and too conciliatory, that he neglected to draw certain 'red lines' before making concessions, makes him (at least partly) responsible for the excesses of triumphalism that characterized Western (American) behaviour after the end of the Cold War.31

Even unconditional supporter and loyal aide Anatoli Chernyaev remarks: 'Gorbachev made a few faulty decisions and mistakes in assessing his foreign counterparts, often expressed unwarranted optimism, he exaggerated the effects of personal charm and relied on ungrounded predictions.' He also testifies to the personal style of Gorbachev diplomacy: 'the man hated confrontation, fist banging, he preferred com-
promise and consensus'.32 Gorbachev himself would not hesitate to acknowledge: 'I prefer to trust people.'53 These characterizations illustrate the nature of Gorbachev as a politician as well as a human being.

But it may be precisely his determination to embrace the quest for personal integrity, rather rare for a professional man of power, that made him different from the crowd of 'political animals' that too often surrounded him; it was this quality that made him unexpectedly similar to another powerful state leader, the man whom he was fated to encounter and collaborate with – Ronald Reagan. Meeting Gorbachev before Reykjavik, as noted in Chapter 2, Mitterrand described Reagan in the following manner: 'Reagan is among those leaders who intuitively want to put an end to the existing status quo. In contrast to other American politicians, Reagan is not an automaton. He is a human being.'34

Another testimony to Reagan's character comes from George Shultz, someone who certainly observed him from much closer range than Mitterrand: 'I think that [Reagan's] characteristics were important . . . when Reagan said, “Yeah, I think this man is different,” . . . that was an expression of this internal confidence, as I see it, and willingness to stand against people all around him if he felt this was the right course.'35 Perhaps because the words 'confidence' and 'trust' meant so much to both men, these two very different individuals developed a certain chemistry in their relations and managed to achieve a historic breakthrough in the annals of the postwar world.

Reagan, reflecting on his first meeting with Gorbachev in Geneva on 19 November 1985, wrote in his memoirs: 'Looking back now, it’s clear that there was a chemistry between Gorbachev and me that produced something very close to a friendship.'36 It would seem, after all, that Gorbachev’s reliance on personal diplomacy, his inclination to trust others, was not as naive as some may have thought and could even be said to have paid off.

And so where, then, does the truth actually lie? Was this new political thinking ‘romantic a man cut off from the brutal reality of the world, a compliant follower of partners with a stronger hand? Or was he a visionary who refused to accept
the absurdity of the world that he had inherited? Was he blinded by the original decision to choose partnership with the West and personally in thrall to his Western partners to the point where he could no longer distinguish between the national interests of his own country and those of the major Western powers? Was he absolutely unable to admit the existence of strategic rivals and adversaries? Was it simplistic to believe that by proposing new rules of the game and putting the accent on common interests in the face of common challenges, he would be able to transform enemies into partners? It may be useful as a way of rescuing Gorbachev's reputation as an effective politician to cite the reaction to his initiatives and performance by his more experienced Western partners. Reagan certainly did not view him as a dilettante. The American President did find Gorbachev's obsessive attachment to the idea of a de-nuclearized world seductive (despite warnings from Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and a vigilant Robert Gates against 'naïve(!) support of Gorbachev), to the point that in Reykjavik he almost accepted Gorbachev's proposal for the progressive elimination of superpower nuclear potential; this gave rise to panic on the part of the French and the British.37

Gorbachev's dream of a 'common European home' was initially received sceptically by Mitterrand; but the French President was soon persuaded to share the logic of this project and even suggested a practical way in which it might be realized in the form of a European Confederation.38 The 'prudent' George Bush obviously borrowed some of the ideas for his 'new world order' from Gorbachev's 'new political thinking'; announcing his intention to go 'beyond containment', he gave the green light to his Secretary of State publicly to discuss (in a Berlin speech of 8 December 1989) ideas for a 'new Atlanticism for a new era' along with the possibility of a new common security system including the Soviet Union and extending from Vancouver to Vladivostok.39 Impressed by Gorbachev's position in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait, Bush would not hesitate in his address to the joint session of Congress on 11 September 1990 to speak not only about the building of a new relationship with the Soviet Union but of the 'new partnership'.40

It is true that most of these ideas were born in the climate of euphoria that accompanied unprecedented changes on the international scene at the end of the 1980s; what was taken for granted was the continued existence of the USSR as a key player in world politics, even if in a transformed state. Another explanation is suggested by Jacques Lévesque: 'messianic and ambitious though it may have been, the project [of Gorbachev] was not wholly devoid of realism, and it did embody political aspirations that had currency in both East and West'.41 But previously unimaginable events suddenly took on a momentum of their own. With the progressive and rapid disintegration of their presumed partner in the East and the crumbling of Gorbachev's authority under the multiple blows coming from insurgent Warsaw Pact members along with the rising popularity of Boris Yeltsin, optimism in the West about constructing a new, more rational architecture for the world as a joint venture with Gorbachev quickly evaporated. ‘The stock market is heading south,’ announced Baker in January 1991 to his colleagues in the State Department. ‘We need to sell.’42 ‘Selling’ meant ‘locking in’ the change during the uncertain but already limited time that was left to Gorbachev to stay in power. The Americans were concerned, above all, to get a rapid end to the war in the Gulf and a finalization of the START Treaty, as well as some initial progress in the Middle East. Observing the accelerated weakening of Gorbachev's position at home, his Western partners abandoned the projects of 'castles in the air' promised by his 'new thinking' and soberly returned to 'realpolitik' reflexes in their relations with Moscow. In a certain sense the West was faster and better than the initiator of perestroika at adapting to the winds of change that it had set swirling across the world political scene. Yet it did it mostly by retreating into the habitual past rather than agreeing to answer the challenges of the future, and in this way by its reaction contributed to the reintroduction in international relations of the age-long ploys of the 'win-lose' games between the great powers.

Forgotten were the 'no winners, no losers' slogans that held sway during the Malta summit. Nor was there any more needless bargaining with Gorbachev over the reunited Germany's affiliation with NATO. ('We prevailed and they did not,'
remarked Bush. ‘We can’t let the Soviets snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.’ Gorbachev’s desperate appeals for economic aid to ‘save perestroika’ were met with nothing more than polite if sympathetic words, first at the G7 summit in London and finally at the last official meeting between the US and Soviet Presidents in Madrid in October 1991, after the August putsch. The US administration abandoned its promise to convince Congress to drop the Jackson–Vanick amendment, a remnant of the Brezhnev era that limited US–Soviet trade relations in response to Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration. (At a later stage, under the pretext that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, Bill Clinton repudiated the commitment given by Baker to Gorbachev that NATO would not extend eastward.44)

At the time of discussions with Baker in May 1990 dealing with the question of a reunited Germany’s entry into NATO, Gorbachev opposed the idea using an argument from his domestic political context: ‘It is going to mean the end of perestroika.’ ‘People will say that we are losers,’ added Shevardnadze. In reality it was not the West’s imposition of Germany’s NATO affiliation that sank perestroika but the opposite: the misfortunes of Gorbachev’s ambitious reform plan and the resultant break-up of the world’s last remaining empire doomed the ‘new political thinking’ to failure.

And yet even after the passage of time and the publication of piles of books on perestroika and its author, the final question remains unanswered: how will Mikhail Gorbachev finally go down in history, as a winner or a loser? To say that his balance sheet is mixed would be a too easy answer, in fact an evasion and profoundly unfair.

After his less than seven years in power Gorbachev left behind him a peacefully dismantled totalitarian system in the biggest country of the planet and a different Russia reconciled with the rest of the world. He raised the ‘iron curtain’ that came down after the Second World War and allowed and encouraged the reunification of Germany and Europe after more than forty years of division. He succeeded in initiating, together with his Western partners, a disarmament process which for the first time in postwar history slowed down, even turned back, the arms race. Without any doubt Gorbachev’s policies gave a powerful impetus to globalization. What more impressive appraisal could there be for a statesman who always was obliged to remember that politics is the art of the possible?

On the other hand, Russian public opinion today rates this man (at least for the time being) as one of the least popular national leaders of the twentieth century. Post-Gorbachev Russia is smaller and much less powerful than the Soviet Union before perestroika, and under Gorbachev’s successors the country seems to be heading away from the democratic goals proclaimed by perestroika and glasnost; many observers have represented the current uncertain trend as ‘back to the USSR’.

As for the world today in general, it is light years away from the inspiring vision of ‘new political thinking’. The Cold War has been replaced by a multitude of ‘hot’ conflicts across the globe, and although the threat of annihilation in a nuclear catastrophe has been lifted, the number of victims of terrorist violence, inter-ethnic and religious conflicts and local wars (including those that are waged with the proclaimed objective of countering terrorism, promoting democracy and securing human rights) surpasses the annual rates of the darkest Cold War years.

The promised stability of international relations has yet to arrive and force remains the accepted way of handling conflicts, new and old. The ‘peace dividends’ have never been shifted from the military budgets of the developed countries to development aid or ecological programmes, while the volume of defence spending and international arms trafficking has considerably surpassed Cold War levels. The system of international disarmament treaties that covered the whole spectrum of weaponry is being reconsidered, and some key East–West agreements achieved after years of effort on the basis of hard-reached compromises have been suspended or even annulled.

Contrary to the assurances given to Gorbachev by Western leaders, NATO has expanded to Eastern Europe and has entered the territory of the former Soviet Union, provoking frustration in Russia and giving rise to nationalist, anti-Western currents in Russian public opinion. As for Gorbachev’s project of a ‘common European home’, it is indeed being realized, but without the participation of Russia, while Moscow’s relations with the West are once again, as during the Cold War years,
marked by mutual accusations, propagandistic campaigns and spy scandals.

The new generation of politicians in both East and West, who never lived through the worst experience of the Cold War years, apparently has no hesitation about resorting to the spirit of confrontation and using enemy imagery as an instrument of domestic policy in order to consolidate public opinion behind national leaders. Such a regressive slide towards the atmosphere and reflexes of the past may result in, if not a new version of the Cold War, then at least a very cool peace, quite different from the rosy perspective suggested by "new thinking". This perhaps confirms the fragility of the historic changes which at the end of the last century seemed irreversible.

With such a contradictory balance sheet, should not Gorbachev's historical record in fact be portrayed as a global failure? Would he not himself appear to be a commander who, though he won numerous battles, ultimately lost the main war? And yet the controversy around this figure persists, both in Russia and across the globe, despite the passage of years. Why?

I am convinced that had Gorbachev been an average politician he would have been allowed to live quietly in retirement - after all, how many statesmen have really kept the promises given to their nations or their foreign partners? But Gorbachev's case is different. Because his project aroused so much hope and expectation, because his actions set in motion such important social forces and processes in his own country and the world over, many cannot forgive him for his failure. At times one almost has the impression that he is being judged not as a politician or a normal man but as a new Moses who failed to lead his people to the Promised Land. What adds a degree of complexity is the fact that quite often it is difficult to be clear whether we (Russians and non-Russians alike) are blaming Gorbachev (again with the wisdom of hindsight) for his errors and inconsistencies, or ourselves for not having effectively used the chance that was offered.

But is it really a failure after all? Gorbachev had the courage to push the old world aside and, with it, the old thinking; they were consigned to the past, where they belonged. He possessed the wisdom to welcome and assist the birth of a new reality, however controversial, with all its as yet unknown dilemmas and contradictions. And whenever it came to a conflict between interests (including his own) and principles, he invariably chose principles.

Mikhail Gorbachev was himself very conscious of the enormity of the challenge he had chosen to face. When his aide, Georgi Shakhnazarov, informed him that *Time* magazine had designated him the 'man of the decade', he did not seem to be particularly touched or flattered. 'The scale should be different, Georgi,' he said.

It's not about me, the scale of our design is global. Look, we've turned our country upside down. Europe will never be the way it was. And the world will not return to the past... Once again it's turned out that our new revolution is not only national, Russian, but global. At least we've managed to launch the beginning of world perestroika.

Is this messianic ambition? Megalomania? Hardly, under the circumstances. Perhaps it is just one more 'gamble' on history by a politician who believes to the end that he correctly guessed the sense of history's movement and was on its side.
To Alena, and to my grandson Maxim, with the hope that one day he will read this book and will be struck by the contrast between the world in which he will be living and the absurdity and fears of the one that had been inherited by his grandparents.

GORBACHEV'S GAMBLE
Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War

Andrei Grachev