Chapter Six: Gorbachev at the U.N.

Kremlin insiders publicly hinted a major address was in the making. Gorbachev had big things in mind for his speech at the United Nations. I want a speech capable of keeping perestroika’s international momentum rolling no matter which candidate ultimately won the American election, he explained to Kremlin aides in only days before Americans went to the polls. I want a speech similar in magnitude to Winston Churchill’s famous 1946 “Iron Curtain” address delivered in Fulton, Missouri, though with opposite results. It should be an “anti-Fulton,” Gorbachev said, A “Fulton in reverse.” Many considered Churchill’s provocative remarks the Cold War’s official start. Gorbachev wanted to declare its end. He did not know Thatcher planned to utter just that phrase, “the Cold War is over” during her own visit to the United States scheduled for mid-November. He only knew that he wished to speak to the ages, and more concretely to the leaders and peoples around the world, and in Europe especially, who might wish to join the revolution in international affairs he had in mind.¹

It was time for perestroika to go global. “We should present our worldview philosophy based on the results of the last three years,” Gorbachev told aides. “We should stress the process of demilitarization of our thinking, and the humanization of our thinking.”² He needed a speech so powerful and so profound the Americans would have no choice but to help. To date perestroika and glastnost had focused on domestic affairs, but they had always contained an important international strain. Restructuring and openness included from the start his desire to demonstrate a more peaceful and cooperative Soviet Union. He needed reduced Cold War

¹ Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, “Reagan, Gorbachev, and Bush at Governor’s Island,” National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book #261, esp. Document 3: “Gorbachev’s Conference with Advisers on Drafting the U.N. Speech, October 31, 1988”.
² Ibid.
tensions to justify the reductions in arms expenditures the country desperately needed, for example, and needed as well to demonstrate the sincerity of Soviet reforms before Western governments and businesses would invest in the Soviet Bloc. These international aspects of perestroika, while important, nevertheless grew out of the domestic agenda that was to this point his primary focus.

Now he wanted to do more. He’d explained in bits and pieces the international dimension of his program, and certainly had succeeded in changing the tenor and tone of the Cold War once he found willing partners in Reagan and Thatcher, but as 1988 drew to a close, and as a new American president came to power, Gorbachev concluded the time was right to lay out in sweeping detail the broad sweep of his international vision.

His timing, at the end of 1988 and immediately before inauguration of a new American president, was not accidental. On the contrary American politics weighed heavily on his mind. Watching the campaign intently, influential Kremlin Adviser Georgy Arbatov predicted during the summer of 1988 that Soviet-American relations might take a step back no matter which candidate prevailed. What Reagan had done in partnering with Gorbachev was both unprecedented and extreme, delivering “a blow at the most sensitive spot of the entire ‘cold war’ structure,” including the West’s “starting assumption that Soviet communism was ingrained with hostility and bent on confrontation.” This was a bridge too far for most American policymakers, raised on a steady diet of anti-Soviet fears and anxieties throughout their lives. The “more influential circles” of America’s “political elite” would therefore step back from Reagan’s advances, Arbatov concluded. Transformational leaders, as they believed Reagan (and their own leader) to be, are almost always followed by less radical elements more enamored of the status-quo, Gorbachev’s advisers reasoned. Reform and retrenchment were but swings on a pendulum,
and in Moscow it appeared the pendulum of American politics seemed ready to swing back the other way. As Arbatov ultimate advised Gorbachev, “they [the American ‘political elite’] will try to impose on us a more and more slow tempo in the real development of relations in the name of ‘caution’ and ‘realism.’”

Gorbachev faced similar problems at home. Conservatives in the politburo balked from the start at perestroika’s more radical elements, and powerful elements within the Soviet military and intelligence services in particular recoiled at his more provocative suggestions, his desired cutbacks, and his pace of change. Their position demands sympathy, because Gorbachev proposed far more than mere tweaks at the edges of a faltering system or subtle shifts in long-debated ideological positions. He had attacked dogma and doctrine, cutting the very heart of the socialist vision and thus to the very reason for being of the Soviet Union. “What is this ‘new thinking’” Boris Ponomarev argued amidst a Communist Party meeting in 1986? As head of the party’s International Department, and thus responsible for coordinating the global communist movement, the conservative and influential Ponomarev was well positioned to stymie or at least delay any fundamental restatement of Soviet objectives. “Our thinking is already correct,” he railed, citing party-approved Marxist-Leninism. “Let the Americans change their thinking.”

Gorbachev’s increasingly influential foreign policy aide Anatoly Chernyaev was quick with a retort: “But look at what Gorbachev’s been saying,” with his speeches and briefs. “It’s quite clear that he’s referring to our thinking.” Previous Soviet leaders like Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev had each spoken periodically of coexistence with the West, Chernyaev argued. “Nobody believed them.” But “they [Western leaders] trust Gorbachev because he’s begun to

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3 Ibid.
make our deeds match our words.” Ponomarev could only sputter in exasperation, voicing a concern held by a broad swath of committed Soviet policymakers: that what Gorbachev demanded was not so much a new Soviet state, but rejection of everything their people held dear. “What are you trying to do to our foreign policy?” he railed. If Moscow changed its international reason for being, eliminating communism’s central purpose of transcending capitalism, then what could possibly remain unchanged? Communism and capitalism were dialectically opposed. Marx had said so. Lenin confirmed this point. Successive generations of Soviet citizens imbibed this foundational dogma from their first days in school. To suggest the real possibility of coexistence with the West, as Gorbachev appeared to imply—and then later state directly—would be akin to the Pope, after two millennia of Christianity, denouncing the Trinity. It was like the Dalai Lama discarding reincarnation, or the Ayatollah in Iran conceding perhaps that Mohammed had not ascended to heaven from Mecca.6

Even the most avid reformer found the breadth of Gorbachev’s vision difficult to grasp, because the implication of his argument required a true conversion to his entire way of thinking. Mere bureaucratic changes would not save Soviet communism, he argued. Neither would a new industrial modernization program fix their broken economy. Alleviating the impending collapse of the Soviet system demanded a fully new way of thinking, one in which the state’s central authorities did not have all the answers, and in which human events were not pre-ordained but wholly contingent upon individual acts and decisions. The new way of thinking required acceptance of co-existence with alternative economic and political systems as well, even capitalist ones every Soviet leader since Lenin had preached wanted nothing more than to crush communism at every turn. Debate and argument were required, something the state had not

6 Ibid.
openly allowed in a lifetime. “We have no opposition party,” Gorbachev explained in 1986.

How then can we control ourselves?” Control, progress, and efficiency could only be achieved through “criticism and self-criticism.”

Gorbachev believed in the power of ideas, and recognized at the least the difficulty even loyal followers would encounter when faced with the full impact of his revolution. “We were at Zavidovo [a government retreat] working,” Gorbachev later recalled of time spent with his inner circle in 1986 trying to square their ideological circles. “We really quarreled—for a day and a half we even stopped speaking to each other. What was the argument about? About….the fact that we live in an interdependent, contradictory but ultimately integral world. No, the new thinking wasn’t just some policy shift, it required a major conceptual breakthrough.”

What he really was after was interconnectivity, the notion that East and West were not separate but in fact intertwined, and the more connected the better. Neither side should try to conquer the other. That was old thinking. On the contrary they needed to learn from each other, to work together in peace, to share ideas rather than stifle exchange. Communism was clearly not working on its own. If it was sufficiently integrated with the West, if the Soviet Bloc could trade and exchange all the way from the Atlantic to Vladivostok, the Soviets would not need to conquer the West in order succeed. Soviet planner had long ago discarded any real hope of conquest through force. NATO had too many tanks, planes, and nuclear weapons for such folly. In his vision communism would instead succeed by assimilating western ideas, instilling new values in former adversaries in the process, linking East and West, or to use the word he repeated time and again, “integrating” the world. The West would transform too through communist

7 Treisman, pp. 15-16.
influence, the harsher structures of capitalist society tempered by socialist concern for the common good. Both sides could prosper, he reasoned, from a bit of restructuring and openness, what he termed during his first years in office the “new thinking” his state required, and that his foreign policy would emulate.

East-West integration could only succeed if long-standing fears could be dissolved, however, and if the walls that separated peoples could be dismantled. He preached that “non-violence must become the basis of human co-existence,” yet knew his American critics were right when they charged his reforms showed greater rhetorical flash than substance. His Kremlin had renounced violence, but the Red Army largely remained as before. “The military doctrine we announced differs from what we are actually doing in military building,” he confessed to his closest advisers. But “if we publish how the matters stand, that we spend over twice as much as the US on military needs,” he railed in exasperation to Politburo insiders, “if we let the scope of our expenses be known, all our new thinking and our new foreign policy will go to hell.” After all, “not one country in the world spends as much per capita on weapons as we do, except perhaps the developing nations that are swamping with weapons and getting nothing in return…. ” We should recall he was only in office a touch more than three years by the time Reagan left the scene, and had moved Soviet-American relations more than anyone might have predicted back in 1985. Getting the entire Soviet military-industrial complex to change course proved far more difficult.

To date he had offered glimpses of his philosophy of integration, enough to bring Reagan around and to inspire deep hope throughout Europe and beyond that Cold War antagonisms

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9 Treisman, p. 9.
might be nearly at an end, but as 1989 loomed he considered it time to offer a full depiction of what perestroika might mean for international affairs. It was time to once and for all make the world believe he meant what he said: that his country was ready for a truly radical break with the past. Doing so would convince the new administration to retain Reagan’s warm stance, especially if he simultaneously announced dramatic cuts in military spending, deployments, or both. If the Americans wanted to see more than just words, he would show them action indeed, and any drawdown of troops would help keep Western Europeans enthralled by his promise and by the opportunities they might find for trade and investment behind the Iron Curtain. It would simultaneously reassure those in Eastern Europe, including those hardliners in communist regimes still unsure if reforms were real, that he meant what he said. And of course any help and support he could in turn garner from the outside world would further help him keep his own critics in place. He would announce his new world order where the world came together, in New York, at the United Nations, and start by announcing something big.

This was just as the Americans expected. Reporting to Reagan and Bush in early November of 1988, only a week after the election that ensured Republican continuity in power, Washington’s best Soviet analysts predicted Gorbachev would soon raise his rhetoric to even greater heights in an effort to keep political pressure on the West and the spotlight of global attention squarely on himself. “In the short term,” Washington’s intelligence community concluded in a National Intelligence Estimate designed to give the President a consensus view of complex issues, “we believe the [Warsaw] Pact will pursue a strategy aimed at reducing the West’s perception of the Soviet threat in the expectation that this course will make it difficult for NATO governments to maintain or increase defense spending. The Pact will engage NATO in
the conventional Stability Talks and probably will introduce sweeping proposals for asymmetric reductions.”

Put in clearer terms, American policymakers expected Gorbachev would announce drastic unilateral military cuts. In one fell swoop he would save money, win even greater applause from Western Europeans, further divide Washington from its NATO allies, and yet slyly strengthen the Warsaw Pact. “We judge that the ongoing restructuring of the Soviet ground forces is intended primarily to make units more effective for prolonged conventional combat operations against NATO,” Washington’s intelligence community concluded. Gorbachev might be trimming the Red Army’s fat in order to win favor abroad, but putting bloated Soviet forces on a radical diet would also improve their overall health.

Gorbachev planned exactly what the Americans predicted. Massive unilateral cuts would imprint a Soviet style on global affairs, he explained to his inner circle, and “affirm that the new thinking, our new foreign policy, is fully connected with perestroika.” Withdrawing troops from Eastern Europe in particular “will make a great impression.” Following “the agreement to liquidate middle and short-range missiles, and after [quitting] Afghanistan…the world will see that it’s not empty talk, these are policies. We will advance the entire process.” Gorbachev in short hoped to change the entire Cold War dynamic when he spoke in New York. As Chernyaev had earlier argued, what was required was reformulation less of the “arithmetic” of the Cold war than its “algebra.”

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12 Ibid.
13 For “affirm that the new thinking, see National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book #261, “Gorbachev’s Conference with Advisers on Drafting the U.N. Speech, October 31, 1988”. For “algebra,” see English, p. 217.
To understand his cryptic formulation, the distinction between arithmetic and algebra, is to understand what animated the Kremlin most by the late 1980s. For decades superpower security derived from addition, demanding equivalent force capable of eliminating the other should the Cold War ever turn hot. Perestroika required and proposed more than merely a new equation for security and progress, but a new formula. If force and violence were no longer acceptable options, only cooperation and integration would be left.

In December of 1988, therefore, both sides in this still on-going Cold War struggle for global preeminence precisely judged exactly what the other would offer. Soviet analysts predicted a conservative backlash against Reagan’s foreign policies. They got this in Bush. Their American counterparts meanwhile predicted Gorbachev would employ dramatic gestures to maintain the momentum of his reforms at home, while ensuring that he alone retained the mantle of change within the global system. The Americans held by far the better hand as 1989 dawned; but Gorbachev held the initiative. He had to take it back, former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski urged Bush in a private letter written mid-November. Veteran of a Democratic administration, Brzenski broke with his party by endorsing Bush in the election, and his advice therefore quickly made it to the president-elect’s desk. For years, he explained, “it has been the Soviets under Gorbachev, and not the U.S., who have been setting the pace with dramatic—though obviously self-serving—proposals.” It was therefore important for Bush to break this pattern, “capitalizing on your political triumph” by “impose[ing] a strategic sense of direction on U.S. foreign policy,” thereby reasserting American leadership “from day-one.” One ideal way to recapture the international initiative would be through more one-on-one meetings with Gorbachev, beyond their upcoming meeting. Bold American initiatives delivered in person and at a summit meeting would surely demonstrate to the world Bush’s firm sense of direction.
Leadership of the Western alliance, and of Washington’s Pacific relationships Zbrzinskis stressed as well, demanded he, and not Gorbachev, dictate the pace of change.\(^\text{14}\)

“Not yet” Bush scribbled in the letter’s margin when he came to the suggestion of more one-on-one meetings with the Soviet leader. After all, the Soviet leader was already coming to New York, to meet with Reagan but also with Bush. He would arrive in early December.\(^\text{15}\)

New York welcomed him like a visiting hero. News anchors interrupted daytime soap operas to describe his descent down the jet-way at Kennedy Airport. CBS’ Dan Rather praised Raisa Gorbachev’s “light up the room” smile. His NBC counterpart, Tom Brokaw, complimented the luxurious cut of her fur coat. Tens of thousands of normally staid New Yorkers, self-consciously blasé about celebrities, lined their route in hope of catching a glimpse of the forty-seven-car Soviet motorcade. They chanted “Gorby, Gorby.” Flags bearing the hammer and sickle far outnumbered the stars and stripes. In Times Square the ticker read “Welcome Comrade General Secretary Gorbachev.” Optimism even pervaded Wall Street, home to the capitalist lords of finance Soviet citizens learned to loathe from their earliest days. The markets were up the day Gorbachev visited.\(^\text{16}\)

For those hoping to see history in the making he did not disappoint. “We are witnessing the emergence of a new historic reality,” Gorbachev told the packed United Nations General Assembly. “The history of the past centuries and millennia has been a history of almost ubiquitous wars, and sometimes desperate battles, leading to mutual destruction…. However, parallel with the process of wars, hostility, and alienation of peoples and countries, another

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
process, just as objectively conditioned, was in motion and gaining force: The process of the emergence of a mutually connected and integral world.” Western Europe, through economic and political consolidation set to take new form in 1992 with establishment of the European Community, was even then in the final stages of a unification process dreamed of for centuries, though only begun in earnest in the aftermath of World War II. Proponents promised greater economic efficiency, political harmony, and in the minds of the most optimistic eradication of the root causes of conflict and war.17

Europe stood poised to enter a new age, but what Gorbachev described transcended mere continental affairs. The world demanded a “new world order,” and nations “must learn to shape and direct the process in such a way as to preserve civilization.” The formula of development "at another's expense" is outdated, he argued. “In light of present realities, genuine progress by infringing upon the rights and liberties of man and peoples, or at the expense of nature, is impossible.” East and West, North and South, Developed and not, capitalist and communist, each dialectic divided humanity; each division could be pushed aside through integration.18

Gorbachev offered three tangible steps as proof is his nation’s willingness to lead a global surge of reform. First, he pledged unprecedented support for national self-determination, even within the Soviet Union’s own communist empire. “Freedom of choice is a universal principle to which there should be no exceptions,” he said. Not even for communist states. His second reform flowed from the first. “Force,” he argued, “and the threat of force can no longer be, and should not be instruments of foreign policy.” For the man who led a Soviet state whose long history included numerous violent crackdowns on states and citizens within its empire who dared

18 Ibid.
pursue a different path, sad but instructive events explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters in order to illuminate the mindset of Eastern European leaders, these were grand statements indeed. It was nothing less than public affirmation that he was prepared to let Eastern Europe go its own way, even if the price was erosion of the Soviet empire. “They’re sick of us and we’re sick of them,” he had already privately complained to Chernyaev. “Let’s live in a new way, that’s fine.”

He saved his most dramatic revelation for last. To demonstrate their peaceful intent the Soviets would unilaterally reduce troop levels by a full half-million soldiers by 1991, and furthermore withdraw 50,000 troops and 5,000 tanks from Eastern Europe. Remaining Soviet units in the region would be reorganized on a purely defensive footing, further proving Gorbachev’s desire for “the demilitarization of international relations.” He concluded with a direct appeal to the man he would see later that day. “The future U.S. administration headed by newly elected President George Bush will find in us a partner, ready—without long pauses and backward movements—to continue the dialogue in a spirit of realism, openness, and goodwill, and with a striving for concrete results.” He had started the volley; the ball was in Bush’s court.

Gorbachev finished his speech to silence. Haven spoken for merely an hour—brief remarks by his standard—perhaps the assembled delegates merely expected more. Slowly the magnitude of his words crept over the crowd. Slowly the assembled delegates began applauding.

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19 Ibid. It should be noted that American leaders too inherited a long legacy of violent responses to revolutionaries and reformers in their own country and throughout their sphere of influence. Labor activists of the early 20th century and civil rights workers of the mid-20th knew the violent power the state could impose, as did political leaders throughout Latin America, in Iran, and in Vietnam, whose policies strayed too far from Washington’s ideal. No superpower had fully clean hands by the late 1980s. This was exactly Gorbachev’s point, exactly the zero-sum game of reform, political change, and military response, indeed the entire prior logic of the Cold War he decried and pledged to end.

20 Treisman, 11.
21 Ibid.
Then standing. Then roaring approval. Veteran diplomats could recall no other U.N. speaker so enthusiastically embraced. Newspaper editorialists and pundits were equally enthused. One writer in the *Washington Post* noted Gorbachev had “unfurled a blueprint for saving the planet and democratizing the world. No ‘thousand points of light’, no ‘I’m on your side’, no one-liners, no sound bites. This was cosmic stuff, announcement of a new order, one in which the Soviet Union will march side by side with, although a step ahead of, other nations toward peace and reason on earth.” Editors at the *New York Times* were no less effusive. “Perhaps not since Woodrow Wilson presented his fourteen points in 1918 or since Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill promulgated the Atlantic Charter in 1941 has a world figure demonstrated the vision displayed yesterday at the United Nations.” To one veteran Washington reporter it was “a speech as remarkable as any ever delivered at the United Nations,” while influential Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a longtime Washington insider (and frequent Bush adviser) termed it “the most astounding statement of surrender in the history of ideological struggle.”

Even the American intelligence analysts who had previously predicted dramatic moves were taken aback by the scale of Gorbachev’s proposals. His speech coincidentally overlapped with a closed-door hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee on the future of Soviet reform. Analysts therefore took turns answering questions and jumping into the adjoining room to catch snippets of Gorbachev’s remarks. “In all honesty, had we said a week ago that Gorbachev might come to the UN and offer a unilateral cut of 500,000,” the CIA’s Director of the Office of Soviet Analysis confessed, “we would have been told we were crazy.”

Gorbachev’s ability to shock remained intact. “I don’t believe that you will be able to find

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anywhere, in the government, out of the government, think tank, academic or otherwise, anyone who articulated in 1984 a forecast or an outlook, even as a remote possibility” the transformations unfolding around them. “And had we done so, people would have been calling for my head.”23

Tragically, Gorbachev would not have long to celebrate his rhetorical victory. He left the United Nations to thundering applause, then received devastating news upon entering his limousine for the short drive to lunch with Reagan and Bush. A massive earthquake had struck the Soviet province of Armenia. Information was sketchy at best, yet measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale, it was sure to have caused massive damage and untold casualties. Reports only grew worse as the afternoon progressed, prompting cancellation of the remainder of his trip, including a scheduled visit with Margaret Thatcher, so that he might return to oversee relief efforts.

His presence back home ultimately contributed little more than moral support. Soviet troops arrived quickly on the scene, but brought little with them save military supplies. They were trained to repel a NATO invasion—or an ethnic uprising—but could do little to help the thousands buried beneath the region’s rubble, nor the far more numerous cold and hungry survivors exposed without shelter to the elements. The scale of destruction was immense. Whole city blocks tumbled like dominoes when the ground moved. It was later revealed that steel rods intended as reinforcement for the ubiquitous concrete of Soviet architecture had instead been sold on the black market by local officials. It was, in short, a very Soviet disaster, coupling corruption and bureaucratic indifference, just like Chernobyl. Unlike in 1986, however, this time communist officials did little to hide news of their suffering. Soviet journalists covered the

tragedy and its aftermath as no previous natural disaster in the nation’s history. Foreign reporters too were on the scene, as well as foreign relief agencies. Even Bush’s son and grandson, Jeb and George P., traveled to Armenia as part of the international relief effort. Soviet society had not yet overcome its structural deficiencies, as Gorbachev promised, but at least it was far more open about its trials and suffering.

What was arguably the high-water mark of Gorbachev’s entire career thus intertwined with tragedy and loss, though he refused to forsake his vital meeting with the outgoing and incoming American presidents. He arrived on Governor’s Island to a wall of flashbulbs and a sea of reporters. One member of the press managed to yell above the rest, asking Reagan “has he [Gorbachev] taken a propaganda advantage with his major proposal today?” Gorbachev answered incredulously for the President. “This is not [a] serious” question” he replied with real anger in his voice. “If we score any points, we can do it only together. If we try to score points alone, nothing will happen.” Out of earshot of the press he deadpanned to the two Americans that he “hoped what he said at the UN had not contained surprises.” Ever the gracious host, Reagan ignored the political point, noting while shepherding the group to lunch that Governor’s Island was so-named because it had once belonged to the British, though was now used by the Coast Guard. “Have I ever told you about Lyndon Johnson’s remark concerning the press,” he asked his guest? Continuing without waiting for a response, Reagan explained that Johnson often lamented that “if he ever walked from the White House to the Potomac and walked on top of the water, the press would report that the President could not swim!” The Soviet leader
politely laughed, explaining that in fact yes, the president had told him that story before. More than once. By the close of 1988 Reagan had fully expended his new material.24

Gorbachev really cared only for Bush’s opinion. What was the president-elect’s reaction to the UN speech, one final reporter yelled before the lot was ushered out of the room? “I support what the President says,” Bush answered with a grin. Long used to playing the role of Reagan’s junior partner, he knew his lines well. That’s “one of the best answers of the year,” Gorbachev laughed, this time heartily.25

Their meeting on Governor’s Island gave Bush and Gorbachev opportunity for each man to size up the other, for the first time both as leaders (even if Bush would not formally take command for another six weeks). The president-elect was not there to negotiate, or even to discuss policy. Indeed his administration planned to begin by reviewing the whole of American policy, top to bottom. He “would need a little time to review the issues,” Bush explained to Gorbachev while Reagan watched. There would be no quick initiatives emanating from Washington. “What had been accomplished could not be reversed,” Bush assured him, though every aspect of American strategy would be reassessed anew.26

Gorbachev could barely contain his incredulity upon hearing the news. Reviews naturally took time, and if Bush seriously intended for his new team to reassess the entirety of Washington’s strategy, a strategy moreover that had to date been vital to Gorbachev’s own success, then far more time would be required than the Soviet could stomach. “The name of the

24 For “propaganda advantage,” see Public Papers of the President, “Informal Exchange with Reporters Prior to a Meeting with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev,” December 7, 1988. For Lyndon Johnson reference, see Margaret Thatcher Archives, “New York (Reagan-Gorbachev Meeting (Governor’s Island), From the Reagan Presidential Library, NSC System File Folder 8791367.


26 National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book #261, Introduction. Also, Margaret Thatcher Archives, “New York (Reagan-Gorbachev Meeting (Governor’s Island), From the Reagan Presidential Library, NSC System File Folder 8791367.
game is continuity,” Gorbachev responded hastily, having only that morning warned in his speech against “long pauses and backward movements.” He had no intention of “stalling things,” Bush explained. He merely wanted “to formulate prudent national security policies.”

The conversation grew tense, with Reagan sitting largely mute as the two younger men jostled for power. Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater later reported he’d never seen a President so ignored, treated as merely a piece of furniture. Trying to reset the tone, Reagan asked Gorbachev how his reforms were faring, but Gorbachev only interpreted the question as a challenge. “Have you completed all the reforms you need to complete?” he shot back. The scene threatened to deteriorate. Recognizing he could not rebuff Gorbachev’s questions forever, and tired of playing defense, Bush offered a question of his own. He wanted to know if perestroika and glasnost were for real, though of course that would be have been impudent to ask directly, and unlikely to solicit a satisfactory response in any case. “What assurance can you give me,” he instead posed, “that I can pass onto American businessmen who want to invest in the Soviet Union” that “reforms will succeed?” Gorbachev snapped yet again. “Not even Jesus Christ knows the answer to that question!” the Russian berated, continuing:

“I know what people are telling you now—that you’ve won the election, you’ve got to go slow, you’ve got to be careful, you’ve got to review, that you can’t trust us, that we’re doing all this for show. You’ll see soon enough that I’m not doing this for show, and I’m not doing this to undermine you or surprise you or take advantage of you…. I’m doing this because I need to. I’m doing this because there’s a revolution taking place in my country. I started it. And they all

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27 Ibid.
28 For “have you completed,” see Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, p. 7. For “assurance” and “not even Jesus,” see Norman Graebner et al, America and the Cold War, 1941-1991: A Realist Interpretation (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2010) and Graebner et al, Reagan, Bush, Gorbachev: Revisiting the End of the Cold War (Westport, CT, 2008), p. 115. See also Talbott and Beschloss, pp. 10-11.
applauded me when I started in 1986, and now they don’t like it so much. But it’s going to be a revolution nonetheless….Don’t misread me, Mr. Vice-President.”

The entire day ultimately failed to live up to Gorbachev’s expectations. His speech designed to offer a tectonic shift in international affairs was sadly overshadowed by real shifts in the land back home. He conspired to warm his personal friendship with Bush under Reagan’s approving embrace, yet left Governor’s Island more worried about Bush than before. Moreover his address that morning, designed as well to propel Soviet-American relations forward, prompted the opposite reaction from Bush’s inner circle. Real progress was won through deliberate negotiations rather than at a speaker’s podium, Baker reminded Bush when the two found time to dissect all that had occurred. Soviet troop reductions were of course always welcomed, but in the end would total a mere 50,000 soldiers removed from Eastern Europe, a sum that would do little to change any East-West strategic calculation. Gorbachev wanted an immediate response, perhaps even a move in kind Baker advised, but Bush should “avoid rashness,” in response. In his experience the greatest mistakes a President and administration could make, in particular in their first months in power, were “those of commission, not omission.” Scowcroft seconded the sentiment for prudence. Gorbachev was a “clever bear,” he told Bush, “potentially more dangerous than his predecessors.” The Soviet leader was clearly “attempting to kill us with kindness,” and “my fear was that Gorbachev could talk us into disarming without the Soviet Union having to do anything fundamental to its own military structure, and in a decade or so, we could face a more serious threat than before.”

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Gorbachev’s trip to New York produced precisely the opposite of what he had hoped, confirming Bush’s decision to fully pause Soviet-American relations rather than meet it aggressively at the start of his administration with new plans announced from day one. There would be no early summit, for example, nor any American attempt to compete with the Soviets, in the short-term at least, in the crucial arena of global public opinion. “The Soviets in general and Gorbachev in particular were masters at creating these enervating atmospheres,” Scowcroft later explained. “Gorbachev’s UN speech had established, with a largely rhetorical flourish, a heady atmosphere of optimism.” He was a masterful speaker, with charisma to burn and an increasingly global following. In a battle of words and dramatic gestures, Bush’s inner circle advised, the Americans would lose. Gorbachev would say or do almost anything, Bush concluded. He was many things, but surely not prudent.31

Gorbachev was, however, increasingly frustrated with Bush’s tempered and slow approach, reiterated once more in a personal letter carried to Moscow in early January, only days before the inauguration, by Henry Kissinger. Bush neither liked nor trusted Kissinger. Their mutual antagonism lingered from the early 1970s.32 But Kissinger could gain easy access to Gorbachev, indeed news that he would meet with the Soviet leader during an upcoming trip to Moscow would raise nary an eyebrow, and he could thus deliver a private message without raising alarm. “As I explained” in New York the prior month, Bush wrote, “my new national security team and I will need time to reflect on the range of issues—particularly those relating to arms control—central to our bilateral relationship, and to formulate our own thoughts on how best to move that relationship forward….beyond the details of arms control proposals to the

31 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, p. 46.
issues of the larger political relationship we should want to create.” He was willing to work with Gorbachev, just not yet. “Stable relations can only be built on the basis of the long-term interests of each side,” Kissinger further elaborated to the Soviets, having of course taken the opportunity to read Bush’s private letter before delivering it. Clearly the world was changing and “it is impossible to stop history,” Kissinger said, suggesting perhaps that a deal might be brokered wherein Moscow retained control over Eastern Europe even as the region turned toward democracy. “We should not be trying to reform you,” Kissinger explained, “and you agree to live in conditions of relative and not absolute security.” So long as the Soviets allowed a natural evolution of their empire towards the West, in effect allowed the very East-West integration Gorbachev so frequently advocated, Washington and its allies would in effect guarantee continuation of Eastern Europe as a buffer between Russia and the West. Bush “would be willing to work on ensuring conditions in which a political evolution could be possible but a political explosion would not be allowed,” Kissinger explained. The new president desired stability above all else, was why he would take his time in deciding his next move.33

Gorbachev wanted more. There were “new forces at large in the world,” he replied, “yet despite transformational changes, in his view “the United States and the Soviet Union still had the principal responsibility for preserving the peace.” Both countries should both keep an eye on Germany “and by that I mean both Germanies,” Kissinger reported Gorbachev to have said. “We must not do anything to unsettle Europe into a crisis.” Moreover, Gorbachev continued, at least in Kissinger’s recollection of their conversation, “as far as Eastern Europe his view was as

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33 For Bush letter to Gorbachev, see James A. Baker III Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University, Mohtly Files, Box 108, January 1989, “Copy of POTUS Exchange of Notes w USSR President Gorbachev re: 1/7/89 Meeting between H. Kissinger and Pres. Gorbachev.” Hereafter Baker Papers. For Kissinger’s notes, see Baker Papers, Monthly Series, Box 108, Folder: January 1989, “Notes from Henry Kissinger meeting with Gorbachev, Jan. 17, 1989, 12:00-1:20pm.” For Gorbachev’s formal response, see Baker Papers, Monthly Series, Box 108, Folder: January 1989, “To the Vice President of the United States from M. Gorbachev, 1/18, 1989.”
follows: life brings certain changes which no one can stop and that applied as well to Eastern Europe. Both sides should be careful not to threaten each other’s security. That was the spirit in which he would approach the dialogue.”34

“I lead a strange country,” Gorbachev said as Kissinger was led out the door. “I am trying to take my people in a direction they do not understand and many do not want to go. When I became General Secretary I thought by now Perestroika would be completed. Instead the economic reform has only just begun. But one thing is sure….this country will never be the same again.”35

34 Ibid. For discussion of Kissinger’s visit to Moscow, see Beschloss and Talbot, pp. 12-17; Sarotte, pp. 22-23.