Introduction

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again”

Thomas Paine, 1776

He had never seen anything quite like it. Onlookers screamed and cheered as their armored motorcade hurtled through the streets. They waved flags. They rhythmically chanted his name. The air seemed electric. George Bush had seen crowds like this before. He’d been Vice-President of the United States for almost seven full years. On stage at inaugurations and national political conventions, he’d witnessed military parades and Super Bowl extravaganzas, and had thrown the first pitch at more baseball games than he could remember. He’d been cheered…but never like this.

More importantly, he had never seen Americans so excited for an avowed communist. The masses screamed for Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev, whom Bush escorted from the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., to a meeting with President Ronald Reagan. It was December of 1987, and Gorbachev was arguably the most popular man in the entire world. In little more than two years in office he had transformed not only his country but the prospect for global peace as well. He had clearly changed the tone and tenor of the Cold War, that Soviet-American confrontation that had raged
for more than four decades by the late 1980s, more than once bringing the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation.

He promised change, with programs whose names came to represent an era. *Perestroika*, a general “reconstruction” of Soviet communism in preparation for the 21st century complete with greater political and economic freedom for his people, and *Glastnost*, a new “openness” to a Soviet society long run by secrecy and fear. His words set off a revolution throughout the communist world, catalyzing democratic movements throughout the Soviet empire. His words even prompted long-time hardline anticommunists like Reagan to think him a new kind of leader, and to think of their age with new hope and promise. The world seemed new again. He was in Washington to sign a historic treaty reducing Soviet and American nuclear stockpiles. It was only a year before that he and Reagan had nearly agreed to do away with all nuclear weapons—every single one of them—by the year 2000. That effort failed, but Gorbachev had hope there were more cuts to come. He lived his life on hope, powered by ideas, and had thus far succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Everywhere he went in the world people shouted his name; they cheered his every move; they rode the wave of global reform he started. He was the Prometheus of his age.

This Prometheus was also perpetually behind schedule, and this morning was no different. His aides first asked Bush to wait in an anteroom while their boss finished his meetings with aides. When even those meetings stretched on, they suggested perhaps the vice-president might prefer simply to proceed along without him. Bush refused. Vice-Presidents were rarely made to wait, but more importantly Bush had lobbied for weeks for the chance to be seen side-by-side with this new global rock star, and he was not about to let the chance for that ideal photo-op evaporate merely because he had to cool his heels for a few moments. He wanted
voters to see him with Gorbachev, to see him alongside real power and thus to see him as a
global leader in his own right. So, he waited.

Plus, he had a message to deliver. Election season would soon be heating up, he explained when they were finally alone in the back of the Soviet limousine. Only a translator rode with them. They had met two years before, though only briefly, when Gorbachev had only days before become his nation’s leader, and when Bush had only begun to plan his own run for the White House. That race was about to start. “The campaign would be filled with strong, hardline statements from all kinds of sources about US-Soviet relations,” Bush explained. Gorbachev should not pay too close attention. Recalling one of Mao Tse-tung’s favorite phrases—and one of Bush’s following his time in Beijing—warning against the “empty cannons of rhetoric,” Bush told Gorbachev not to take his campaign statements “too seriously.”¹ He would have to say and do all sorts of things to get elected, he explained. This was how things were done in America.

Gorbachev nodded quietly, but stared off into the crowd whizzing by. He said not a word. Bush wondered if perhaps the translator had delivered the message incorrectly. He wondered if Gorbachev was even listening to him at all. Suddenly the Russian bolted forward. “Stop the car!” Gorbachev ordered his driver. Tires screeched. The limousine’s doors flew open, and Gorbachev verily threw himself into the crowd. Before Bush truly knew what was happening his companion’s entire body was being nearly consumed by the ecstatic mob pressed up against the wooden barriers meant to keep them from overflowing into the street. While Soviet and American security personnel screamed into their handsets and scrambled to catch up, Gorbachev smiled and shook hands like a man who had been kissing babies and wooing voters

his entire life. Bush was at once stunned, impressed, and not to be left behind. In a flash he was at Gorbachev’s side, lest he fail to appear in photos sure to run in the next day’s newspapers.

“Do you do this a lot?” Bush gasped when the two finally tumbled back into the safe confines of their car. Flush with adrenaline, Gorbachev nodded. “Leaders should be the equal to the people,” he said. His flashing gray eyes told Bush that Soviet leaders could be unpredictable as well, not to be underestimated, and not at all unused to dealing with crowds. It was not an auspicious beginning to their relationship, as each man seemed primarily interested in proving their importance to the other. Like new rivals on a schoolyard, they seemed interested most of all in intimidation.

Little did either man know that their relationship would in time help ease the world through one of the twentieth century’s most dangerous and tumultuous periods. Within a year Bush would be his nation’s president-elect. Gorbachev would still be struggling to make his reforms work. Increasingly popular in the West, his own citizens had begun to tire of his incessant calls for change. Everyone knew the Soviet system had to change. Its economy was in ruins. Control over its empire appeared frayed. All of Soviet society threatened to crumble. Gorbachev promised brighter days, but it was hard to eat hope, and hard to accept a tsunami of change when words like ‘markets’ and ‘democracy’ rang contrary to everything Soviet citizens had been taught for a lifetime. His revolution had created a wave of enthusiasm for change throughout the world. It might also prove his downfall if his people became disenchanted, or if the hardliners throughout his own government and military came to conclude they’d had enough.

Bush had problems of his own, Gorbachev chief among them. Western voters loved the new Soviet leader. He was charismatic. He was eloquent. He was a radical reformer brimming with big ideas for how to transform the world. He was, in sum, everything the more staid and
stable Bush was not. What Bush did have on his side was a country more powerful than any the world had ever seen, unmatched in its relative power over its allies and adversaries as any since the heyday of the Roman Empire. Americans possessed the world’s most impressive military and economy, with a powerful and alluring ideological foundation at the base of their international appeal, though their overall power appeared on the decline as Bush assumed office. Words like “freedom,” “democracy,” and “free markets,” all tropes employed by generations of American policymakers as hallmarks of their diplomacy and global vision seemed at long last ready to take hold behind the Iron Curtain. But at his nation’s apparent moment of triumph the American economy seemed on shaky footing, increasingly in debt to its allies, increasingly vulnerable to manufacturing losses. Absent the threat of communist assault, perhaps Washington’s allies might find little reason to heed American leadership at all, or little reason to pay the political and social costs of deference to the American view of the world. Without the Soviets to act as a bogeyman against insubordination, the world might finally realize that American power, though predominant, was not impervious to assault or critique.

This is the story of their partnership, which grew from mutual distrust to mutual need, fostering even a friendship of sorts by the time both left office during the early years of the 1990s. This is also, and more broadly, a story of the Cold War’s end, and of international policymaking at the highest levels of power during one of modern history’s most tumultuous. It is at once a study of diplomacy, a group biography of the men and women who forged American policy during this time, and ultimately it is an international history as well, one that gives if not equal than at least full credence to events and decisions occurring and made far beyond American shores. Political life inside Washington’s beltway may seem like life inside a bubble at times, but American foreign affairs is forever affected by the wider world. Any history of
such a tumultuous period must therefore take into account voices and actors throughout the world if we are to gain a full picture of what happened and why. This book reveals much that was until recently locked away in American archives. So too does it draw upon the wealth of similar research and declassification conducted by scholars and interest-groups throughout the world. Soviet, Chinese, British, French, German, Japanese and even more new sources have been tapped for this book, making it in many ways a product only capable in the 21st century, when the interconnected web of scholars matches the plethora of new documentary resources published en masse and with heretofore unimaginable quantity on the global internet. To have personally culled such sources from the world’s four corners would have taken any one researcher a lifetime of work and a multitude of languages. No time would be left to write-up one’s findings, I suspect!

Today one needs only a computer and interest to tap the kinds of rich veins of available sources necessary to compose a textured international history. Worthy subjects and stories abound beyond the pages of this book, but if readers leave with a sense of the transnational winds of change, optimism, and anxiety that swirled throughout this period, this approach will be a success. My contribution to this global cornucopia of sources has been largely American, culled mainly from the papers and products of the Bush Administration as released by the National Archives and the Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas. For several years, declassification requests submitted under my signature—so archivists told me—exceeded the combined rolls of all such requests submitted at all the nation’s presidential libraries. I never actually stopped to count, instead taking my interlocutors at their word. The point is this: this history of a presidential administration’s diplomacy and of its engagement with Moscow, though invariably focused upon decision-making near and within the Oval Office, is as much a story of
the age as of the White House, as much international history as American diplomatic history, and
as much a tale of powerful men and women the world over forming pivotal decisions as it is a
study of decision-making in the Oval Office.

The Cold War’s end is often told as a story of crowds. Massive throngs of people, from
Beijing to Berlin, demanded change. They largely succeeded behind Europe’s Iron Curtain. The
state held out, violently, in China. This narrative of crowds and their power is instructive, and no
doubt inspirational. It is also incomplete if we are to gain a true sense of what went on, and why,
during the Cold War’s climax. Crowds surged, but leaders decided to fire on their own people or
not. Geopolitical fates rose and fell, but leaders decided to forge ties across old lines of conflict.
Led in particular by the President of the United States and the General Secretary of the Soviet
Union, decision-makers ultimately forged a new geography for Europe out of the bones of World
War II and the decaying flesh of the Cold War. Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, John Major,
Boris Yeltsin, Deng Xiaoping, Francois Mitterand, Brian Mulroney and a host of other global
leaders played a part. So too did the subordinates who advised them, critiqued them, and in
some cases, supplanted them. If one needs a broad takeaway lesson for this work, it is that
leadership matters, more importantly that individual at the helm of great ships of state matter,
particularly in times of crisis. Like all powerful lessons this one appears obvious at first blush.
But too often history has turned a dangerous corner less because leadership was present, but
because it was lacking. “These are the times that try men’s souls,” Thomas Paine wrote in 1776.
Two-plus centuries later trying times would tax men (and women) anew, and it is my opinion
that the times did not find them lacking, even though the wrong move might have brought about
true chaos, violent revolution, war, or worse.
The world they left behind was not perfect. Neither was it designed to be. As Bush baldly stated, the goal was simply to improve upon the past. A world “freer from the threat of terror,” was the goal, “stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace….A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor.” Humanity’s ills would not be solved within a single generation’s lifetime, but civilization could, incrementally and in steps, continue its path toward a better world. Some have critiqued this generation of leaders for failing to seize the opportunity, if it existed, to remake the entire international system under new rules. This view underestimates the dangers of revolution, and the perils of opening Pandora’s box on a global scale. I contend their achievement was merely to survive in order to pass the baton to the next generation. The new world that did arise was full of promise, successfully midwived by leaders whose ill-timed and ill-conceived interventions might have smothered hope in its crib.

George Bush governed during remarkable times. Indeed looking back it is hard to believe so much of consequence could occur in a single four-year presidential term. The Berlin Wall fell. The Cold War ended. The Soviet Union ceased to exist. Germany was reunited. Violence in Tiananmen Square portended a China potentially divided. Europe emerged from its communist night with a surprising lack of violence, save for Romania where crowds chased down despots on the run, and with the larger exception of Yugoslavia where ethnic conflict emerged at a level unseen in Europe since the 1940s. During this same period, American forces removed Manuel Noriega from power in Panama; landed in Somalia in an 11th hour humanitarian effort; and further east still led a massive international coalition against Saddam Hussein’s army. Closer to home, negotiations for the North American Free Trade Association largely concluded, offering a controversial vision of a continent economically joined. So too did
trade negotiations with a rising Japan reach a fever pitch, while on the other side of the globe preliminary talks for NATO expansion began to shape a new and equally contentious vision for Europe.

The entire world changed in four years, all during the presidency of George H.W. Bush. One or perhaps two such events would have been enough to occupy any White House’s attention. That they all occurred during the same four years suggests that Bush’s presidency offered more varied and geographically dispersed problems than faced any American leader save perhaps Franklin Roosevelt at the height of World War II. Moreover, given that Bush governed during the high point of American hegemonic superiority at the Cold War’s end, and if one believes (as I do) that the American empire was the most powerful in world history, then for a brief moment in time this one-term president was the most powerful man in human history. This kind of power can lead to ill, in particular ill-conceived crusades to catalyze change through force, rather than through the normal evolution of time.

Bush’s approach to the world rested on what I term “Hippocratic diplomacy.” Others might have rushed to act in response to the aforementioned changes. Bush typically waited. Revolutions are dangerous things, he and those around him argued, even when conducted for democracy, freedom, and causes they embraced. Regimes rarely cede power easily, and violence can erupt even at the moment of most hopeful optimism. Bush thus tempered all the hopes and fears of his age with caution. It was caution that helped carry the world safely through this tumultuous time. Bush did not end the Cold War. No single person did. But a single leader with the wrong temperament, with more of a hair-trigger for action and less respect for the power of chaos and the promise of steady change, might well have pushed this tumultuous time in dangerous directions. In the final analysis he believed the world heading in the right direction as
he took up residence in the White House. Democracy was on the rise. Markets were opening. Freedom seemed on the march, even behind the despised Iron Curtain. The stream of history, what famed German strategist Otto von Bismarck termed a current of progress and civilization that “flows inexorably along,” moved in an American direction by the close of the 1980s.

Gorbachev liked nautical analogies as well. “One might say I had to assume the role of the captain of a ship, riding out the storm…occasionally turning so sharply that I thought the wheel would be ripped from my hands,” he concluded long after his political career had come to an end. Bush had a different job. His job as captain of the world’s largest vessel, with a rapidly growing flotilla following his course, was avoiding rocky shoals, tacking along with the current to its ultimate destination: the new and better world. This is his story, and the story of the Cold War’s perhaps surprisingly peaceful end.