

The Bush–Gorbachev Years, 1989–91

CIA and the Fall of the Soviet Empire, Part II

Kirsten Lundberg

“
Personnel changes alone made a considerable difference in the way the new government used intelligence analysis. For one thing, Bush himself as a former DCI took an active interest in intelligence, knew the kinds of questions he wanted answered, and had respect for the product.
”

Kirsten Lundberg is a writer of case studies at the Kennedy School of Government.

Copyright 1994 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Editor's Note: This is the concluding installment of the case study written for Professors Ernest May and Philip Zelikow of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government which, in cooperation with CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, develops case studies that aid in illuminating issues related to the use of intelligence by policymakers. The first installment appeared in the spring 1995 edition of Studies in Intelligence.

Many within the intelligence establishment and elsewhere assumed that President Bush would build on the legacy left him by Reagan, particularly in relations with the Soviet Union. They were wrong. Bush decided instead on a pause to re-evaluate the relationship and in particular the reliability of Gorbachev as a negotiating partner. At the same time, he re-energized the way the executive branch used intelligence.

New Chain of Command

Personnel changes alone made a considerable difference in the way the new government used intelligence analysis. For one thing, Bush himself as a former DCI took an active interest in intelligence, knew the kinds of questions he wanted answered, and had respect for the product. Brent Scowcroft, the newly appointed National Security Adviser, chose as his deputy Robert Gates—another intelligence veteran. The Soviet specialist on the NSC staff was Condoleezza Rice, a Russian speaker and

expert on the Soviet general staff who quickly proved herself an informed and skillful intelligence consumer. She, together with Baker deputies Dennis Ross and Robert Zoellick, became the administration's chief counselors on Soviet policy.

As important to the CIA as individual appointments, however, was the reconstitution of the National Security Council itself as a strong policy body with influence in the Oval Office. Traditionally, the NSC served as the CIA's primary client, filtering intelligence analysis for Cabinet members, the vice-president and president. Under Reagan, the institution lacked authority, which Bush restored.

Early on, Bush demonstrated that he expected top-quality intelligence reports. When he ordered up a national security review of the Soviet-US relationship, the State Department chaired the so-called Policy Coordinating Committee steering the interagency effort.

There were two parts to the exercise. The first was an intelligence assessment examining how real were the prospects for change in the USSR; the second part explored the policy implications of that. Within SOVA, NIO Blackwell remembers, there was no real dispute over the analysis in the intelligence piece. But the Office of the Secretary of Defense found unacceptable SOVA's conclusion that real change was possible, arguing instead that Gorbachev's reforms were still reversible. In the end, the SOVA language prevailed.

“

Meanwhile, events in the USSR and Eastern Europe were unfolding so fast it was sometimes difficult indeed to distinguish between what was real and what was not.

”

The Community's debate over details in the report proved irrelevant, for Bush found the overall result unusable. With conclusions "coordinated" as customary down to the lowest common denominator of consensus, with opposing views largely weeded out, the final product was, as Rice termed it, "a bureaucratic document."

It wasn't in any sense of the word presidential. It wasn't in any sense of that word forward-leaning. It wasn't operational. It got the moniker status quo plus.... I think that's the last time we did anything that way.

Bush asked Rice, who had served as executive secretary to the committee, and senior NSC staffer Robert Blackwill to redo it with a more practical policy focus. The resulting 7-page report, given to Bush in the spring of 1989, came in the middle of his "pause" to re-evaluate Washington's policies toward Moscow.

The Pause

Arnold Kanter, a senior NSC staffer for arms control during the Bush period, remembers some of the compelling reasons for stopping to reconsider:

Bush's advisers felt strongly in almost an unselfconscious way that they were a new administration. I think the outside world thought it was kind of the third Reagan term. Bush didn't see it that way at all. He thought it was a new administration.

Gorbachev's record, says Kanter, did not inspire 100 percent confidence:

Very few people who thought seriously about it thought of Gorbachev as a democrat. A brilliant tactician but a poor strategist. An expedient democrat, that is, someone who faced with horrendous economic problems came to the realization that the Soviet Union would not enter the 21st century as a major power on its present course. Coming to be convinced after trying real hard that the Party was part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This is not a guy who has deep principles, abiding commitments, and who was frankly dependable. He had also given evidence of someone who would take advantage of you if he could.

The new philosophy toward US-Soviet relations which Rice and Blackwill articulated for Bush seemed suited to a fresh start: beyond containment. As their document, called NSD-23, said:

Containment was never an end in itself. It was a strategy born of the conditions of the postwar world. A new era may now be upon us. We may be able to move beyond containment to a new US policy that actively

*promotes the integration of the Soviet Union into the international system.*⁴⁷

Rice remembers thinking that the time had come to go beyond the postwar division of Europe:

The idea was that détente had really been about mediated or moderated competition between two systems. What we now had was the collapse of the Soviet social system and the possibility that it could integrate into the international order.

Bush, sticking to his decision to be deliberate in his Soviet policy, signed NSD-23 only on September 22. He used the "beyond containment" phrase, however, in a speech in May. The crux of his message was that the United States did not need to leap at Soviet proposals: if Moscow was serious, the offers would not vanish; if they disappeared, then they were not real.

Meanwhile, events in the USSR and Eastern Europe were unfolding so fast it was sometimes difficult indeed to distinguish between what was real and what was not.

1989—Watershed Year

The year started quietly enough. March 26, however, took its place in Soviet history as the date for the first multi-candidate elections in over 70 years. Around the country, the Communist Party found its monopoly challenged and toppled, as even unopposed Party candidates failed to win votes. The elections also marked the emergence for the first time of a threat to Gorbachev's preeminence

on the Soviet political landscape. In a stunning political comeback, the radical reformer Boris Yeltsin, bounced from the Politburo in 1987 by Gorbachev, won election to parliament as Moscow's at-large candidate.

Milestone events continued to mount. In April, violence broke out in a corner of the Soviet empire. Soviet troops massacred peaceful demonstrators for independence in Tbilisi, the capital of the Georgian republic. In July, coal miners in Siberia went on strike, an historic rebellion by some of the state's most eulogized workers. In August, a top Soviet official publicly denounced the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrip protocols which gave the Baltics into Soviet hands. Immediately after this, Lithuania declared its annexation by the Soviet Union illegal. In retaliation, Moscow hit Lithuania with a trade embargo. But that same month, Gorbachev advised the head of Poland to let Solidarity come to power.

In November, the most startling event in a disturbing year shook the world: the fall of the Berlin Wall. While Gorbachev did not ordain its opening, many felt his lukewarm support of the East German leadership contributed to the courage of those who breached the wall and, within months, brought about the fall of Communist governments across Eastern/Central Europe.

A New Question for Intelligence

The Intelligence Community worked overtime to make sense of it all. The avalanche of change had finally laid to rest the question dividing analysts and policymakers alike. Debate no longer focused on whether

Gorbachev's changes were bona fide. That point was moot, as NIO Bob Blackwell relates:

These are tangible things. The notion that somebody is doing all these things to undermine you and is ready to suck you in somewhere and then lower the hammer on you became a ludicrous proposition. So, thereafter, the proposition shifts to how far is this going to go and how much can he manage the instability? And a lot of our debates were how long can he stay on top of this? Is he still pushing things forward or holding them back?

The year 1989 challenged the Intelligence Community to answer instead the question: can Gorbachev survive his own reform program?

View From the CIA—1989

The CIA's answer, at least in the first half of the year, was a qualified "maybe." In January, an estimate noted ethnic tensions rising to the point where "the stage appears to be set for a protracted struggle in which the risk of miscalculation is considerable." This was followed by an April document, "*Rising Political Instability Under Gorbachev: Understanding the Problem and Prospects for Resolution.*" Calling the Soviet Union "less stable...than at any time since Stalin's great purges in the 1930s," the assessment reported that "[e]ven Gorbachev realizes...that it is far from certain that he will be able to control the process he has set in motion":⁴⁸

His apparent impatience and determination to push reform

simultaneously on many fronts could alienate so many groups that even Gorbachev's political skills will not be able to prevent a coalition from forming against him.

It pointed out the growing threat from nationalism, with fully half of some 1,200 political and economic demonstrations or work actions since January 1987 inspired by nationalist aspirations:

Gorbachev's hope of buying local support with greater autonomy is a dangerous gamble. It is far from clear that Moscow will be able to control this process, and it could unleash centrifugal forces that will pull the Soviet Union apart or create such serious tensions among nationalities that the ensuing social and political chaos will undermine Gorbachev's reforms.

The report called the economic program a near disaster and predicted that the next few years would be "some of the most turbulent in Soviet history." Drawing a comparison with Czechoslovakia in 1968, the paper said a constituency arguing for more radical reforms, led by Yeltsin, might gain control. On the other hand, the analysis also raised more pointedly than before the possibility of a conservative backlash and coup attempt against Gorbachev:

A growing perception within the leadership that reforms are threatening the stability of the regime could lead to a conservative reaction....Should a sharp polarization of the leadership prevent it from acting resolutely to deal with a growing crisis, the

prospects would increase for a conservative coup involving a minority of Politburo members supported by elements of the military and the KGB.

The piece predicted that Gorbachev would be looking for foreign policy successes to bolster his position at home, including arms control agreements which would allow him to reduce military spending.

A month later, the National Intelligence Council sponsored a piece on Gorbachev's chances for survival. The Intelligence Community view was that he would continue in power for at least the next three to four years. But SOVA took a formal dissent from the report, writing that the situation was so volatile and tensions so great within society and within the elite that Gorbachev could not survive unless he turned to the right politically. SOVA gave Gorbachev a blunt 50-50 chance of survival unless he retreated from his reforms.⁴⁹

But even that gloomy view turned more pessimistic by late summer, when SOVA began its annual review of the research program for the year ahead.

SOVA Breaks Away: "Domestic Gambles"

George Kolt had just taken over as director of SOVA from Doug MacEachin. At the annual planning session for next year's research program, some analysts said that, in their opinion, Gorbachev's policies were

not sustainable and were leading the country toward disaster. Says Kolt:

I think that's the turning point at which we really started to see the growing dangers to Gorbachev, and the dangers were from two sides. Number one is that others in the [Communist] Party would see where his policies were leading and would throw him out. . . .

The second process going on is that these critics of Gorbachev in the party were really right, that his policies were not sustainable, that they were leading to the loss of the Party's supremacy which Gorbachev was simultaneously trying to sustain.

The second point was strongly argued in a paper titled "Gorbachev's Domestic Gambles and Instability," prepared by senior analyst Grey Hodnett and published in September 1989. The paper blamed many of the symptoms of crisis on Gorbachev and his inconsistent policies. It argued that *perestroika* was too limited to fulfill expectations, that "direct and violent confrontation" with the Baltic states was nearly inevitable, and that the failure to push through a free market system would produce only economic deterioration, social unrest and perhaps revolution:

Conditions are likely to lead in the foreseeable future to continuing crises and instability on an even larger scale—in the form of mass demonstrations, strikes, violence, and perhaps even the

*localized emergence of parallel centers of power.*⁵⁰

While conceding he had no easy choices, the assessment said Gorbachev was gambling on ill-conceived strategies. Gorbachev's most generous offer to non-Russian nationalists, for example, would not satisfy them, while "allowing these people freedom to protest without being able to redress their basic grievances is a recipe for escalating crises." The regime's recent emergency financial stabilization plan "more likely than not will fail," while Gorbachev's tinkering with Communist Party authority was "undermining its ability to integrate Soviet society before new political institutions are capable of coping," said SOVA.

The paper predicted growing pressure on the regime to crack down, or on Gorbachev to resign. It foresaw the possibility of a "traditionalist restoration" or coup. Even were Gorbachev to remain in power, much would depend on his ability to move to a market economy, without which SOVA warned of a potential breakup of the union, or what an academic article SOVA cited had called "Ottomanization—a slow process of imperial decline with unplanned piecemeal emancipation of constituent entities":

By putting economic reform on hold and pursuing an inadequate financial stabilization program, Gorbachev has brought Soviet internal policy to a fateful crossroads, seriously reducing the chances that his rule—if it survives—will take the path toward long-term stability.

“

It was ironic that, just as SOVA lost hope for Gorbachev, Bush and his senior administration officials took up Gorbachev's cause in earnest.

”

nationalists, as in Tbilisi in April, they would be neither widespread nor lasting.

Thanks to Kolt's efforts, Hodnett's views were included in the NIE as parallel, dissenting text. Secretary of Defense Cheney, for one, found Hodnett persuasive. The lower levels of the State Department also proved a receptive audience. Gates, too, was listening. As a result of the stream of reporting out of SOVA, he set up in September 1989 a top-secret contingency planning group "looking at the possibility of the collapse of the Soviet Union and what we would do."

But, as Kolt remembers it, "the high-level people rejected it." The more optimistic NIE assessment resonated at the White House and the National Security Council. It was ironic that, just as SOVA lost hope for Gorbachev, Bush and his senior administration officials took up Gorbachev's cause in earnest.

The Administration—Learning To Love Gorbachev

By July 1989, Bush had concluded that Gorbachev was a force for stable change and should be supported. Bush decided secretly to invite Gorbachev to an "informal" summit off the coast of Malta in December 1989. Scowcroft advised against it. Gates likewise told Bush to make no moves until the Soviet internal situation grew clearer, that it was too soon to cast his lot with Gorbachev. But Bush had made up his mind. "Look, this guy is *perestroika*," he told Scowcroft.⁵¹

The United States would need skill in reacting to a volatile situation, said the paper. Soviet domestic problems were, however, likely to keep the USSR out of foreign adventures:

Whether or not Gorbachev retains office, the United States for the foreseeable future will confront a Soviet leadership that faces endemic popular unrest. . . . This instability is likely to preoccupy Moscow for some time to come and . . . prevent a return to the arsenal state economy that generated the fundamental military threat to the West in the period since World War II. Moscow's focus on internal order in the USSR is likely to accelerate the decay of Communist systems and the growth of regional instability in Eastern Europe.

Kolt felt the paper deserved strong support, although some CIA analysts forcefully disagreed with the paper's conclusions. The paper's scope note reflected this, saying "the report is a speculative paper drafted by a senior analyst in the Office of Soviet Analysis":

In a period of epochal change in the USSR, anticipating the future is a hazardous undertaking, and the issues dealt with in the report hardly invite unanimity of judgment.

"I decided," declared Kolt, "that I was not going to let this thing be coordinated down to the lowest common denominator":

We were saying no, he cannot muddle through. This situation

is changing so much qualitatively, there is such a dynamic at play, that this is going to lead to major discontinuity. . . . What that paper did is begin to set us aside from the rest of the Community, whose view in effect didn't change through let's say early 1991.

The SOVA paper mentioned in passing "populist figure" Boris Yeltsin. Privately, some analysts within SOVA felt that the growing domestic opposition to Gorbachev would be headed by Boris Yeltsin.

The Prevailing View

The countervailing view on Gorbachev's chances for survival were laid out in an NIE prepared under NIO Bob Blackwell. The paper predicted that, although the economic situation in 1990-91 would be critical, Gorbachev would weather it. While noting that Gorbachev's policies could threaten the system's viability and in any case would produce one of the most tumultuous periods in Soviet history, it went on to say most believe Gorbachev would survive this period of tumult without imposing the kind of repression that would snuff out reform. The estimate predicted that, although harsh measures might be taken against

The administration members who remained skeptical of Gorbachev were, in fact, asked to keep their opinions to themselves. Gates was scheduled to deliver a speech in the fall of 1989 at a conference in Bethesda, Maryland. The State Department vetoed the speech on the grounds that it departed too radically from administration policy. As Secretary of State Baker observed at the time:

*If we keep saying he can't pull it off, it'll begin to sound as though that's what we want.*⁵²

Gates's view had, in fact, changed remarkably little since 1985. NIO Blackwell, who saw drafts of the speech, recalls that it portrayed Gorbachev as "really out more to undermine us than he is to fundamentally change."⁵³ The prohibition on dissenting views did not, apparently, extend to Vice-President Daniel Quayle who, in October, publicly called Gorbachev a "master of public relations" and *perestroika* a "form of Leninism."

As the Malta summit approached, however, the unfolding drama of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe came to dominate world headlines and policy discussions alike. Debate over the future of the USSR and Gorbachev shifted with the latest developments in the rapidly changing East bloc situation. On November 9, the Berlin Wall fell. In response, intelligence officers presented Bush, Baker, and Scowcroft with a wide range of views on Gorbachev. A CIA briefing at Camp David before Malta revealed the growing complexity of Gorbachev's situation. Led by DCI

Judge Webster, George Kolt, Bob Blackwell, and SOVA's Bob Abbott and Fritz Ermarth gave brief presentations on Soviet economics, politics, society, and nationalism. At the briefing, says Ermarth, "the whole range of issues was laid out, including Gorbachev's increasingly troubled future." Asked whether *perestroika* could succeed, Ermarth replied that, first of all, different definitions of *perestroika* abounded:

What one believed about the long term depended in large part on whether you believed something very important but unprovable: that all humans, including Russians, want and are capable of democracy.

But, overall, the Bush White House was sending the message that the President had confidence in his negotiating partner and was prepared to do serious business with him. His confidence seemed justified when, at the Malta meeting on December 2-3, 1989, Gorbachev told Bush that "we don't consider you an enemy anymore." Bush returned the gesture of reconciliation when he pledged to exercise restraint on the issue of Baltic independence if Gorbachev would promise to prevent violence in the region.

Bush emerged from the Malta summit, where gales tested the physical as well as the moral mettle of both presidents, with a four-part Soviet policy agenda: help Gorbachev remain in power; keep him on the path to reform; lock in agreements favorable to the United States; and concede nothing which could be harmful in the long run were Gorbachev forced out of office.⁵⁴

In substance it resembled closely the Reagan agenda, the "pause" notwithstanding. But Bush had a new factor to contend with which had arisen since Reagan left office: Boris Yeltsin.

The Yeltsin Factor

When Grey Hodnett developed his analysis of Gorbachev's decline, he and others at SOVA predicted that the growing domestic opposition to Gorbachev would be headed by Yeltsin. Events seemed to bear them out. On May 29, 1990, Yeltsin was elected leader of the Russian parliament. At the 28th Communist Party Congress in July 1990, Yeltsin quit the Party in a public display of defiance. As far as analysts could observe, Yeltsin had a more legitimate claim to representing democratic forces than did Gorbachev.

The majority of administration officials did not welcome this assessment. While a few, such as Cheney, agreed that Yeltsin represented the best hope for the future, most felt that Yeltsin was unstable, lacking in leadership qualities. There were substantiated reports that he was a heavy drinker. Most important, policymakers did not want to undermine Gorbachev by appearing to accept Yeltsin—who was only a parliamentarian—on equal terms. Thus, when Yeltsin visited Washington in September 1989, he was—despite pleas from Gates and Fritz Ermarth, chairman of the National Intelligence Council—granted an appointment with Scowcroft, not Bush. Instead, Bush "dropped in" on Scowcroft while Yeltsin was there. Yeltsin favorably impressed neither Bush nor Baker.

“

The recent acceleration of political events in the USSR could soon produce major discontinuity in Soviet policy and substantial changes in the top leadership.

”

The issue of what to do about Yeltsin from a policy viewpoint would continue to divide the policymaking and intelligence communities. The issue became even more complicated in early 1990 as German reunification became more certain and Moscow's approval a necessary part of that historic process. Meanwhile, Yeltsin's popularity in the USSR continued to grow, seemingly in inverse proportion to the declining reputation of Gorbachev.

Is Gorbachev Slipping?—1990

According to CIA reports in March, Gorbachev's government was losing control:

It is likely that political instability, social upheaval, and interethnic conflict will persist and could intensify. ... [There is] a general inability to implement its directives in many national republics, a loss of control over society in general, and the precipitous decline of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, secessionist movements in the Baltic Republics and elsewhere, serious interethnic strife, and continued economic deterioration.⁵⁵

The Cheney-Webster Affair

Clearly, not all branches of the US Government shared this view. In an unusual display of publicly aired, differing views, Secretary of Defense Cheney and CIA chief William Webster testified on the same day before different Congressional committees. Webster, in testimony approved in

advance by Secretary of State Baker, told the House Armed Services Committee on March 1 that he found it highly unlikely there would be any revival of the Soviet military threat. In contradiction, Cheney the same day warned the House Foreign Affairs Committee that a turnaround in the Soviet reform process could give rise to a renewed military threat.

Cheney was defending the proposed Bush defense budget of \$306 billion for fiscal 1991. Nonetheless, the conflicting testimony highlighted the ongoing debate within the administration about the durability of Gorbachev's reforms. Webster asserted that even a successor regime to Gorbachev would "probably continue to pursue arms control agreements with the West. It would be unlikely, in addition, to seek a broad reversal of the changes that have occurred in Eastern Europe or to try to revive the Warsaw Pact."⁵⁶ Cheney took an opposite tack, stating that another Soviet leader "could reverse military course decisively." Both men agreed, however, that the long-term outlook for Gorbachev was not secure.

In late May, Gorbachev attended another summit with President Bush, this time in Washington. The Soviet leader clearly welcomed the

adulation of American crowds. But at summit events, policymakers could see for themselves that Gorbachev was losing influence, even over his own military. On at least one occasion, he had to renege on a statement after whispered consultations with aides. A measure of Gorbachev's growing desperation was that he begged Bush to sign a trade agreement not specifically linked to the Soviet embargo against Lithuania.⁵⁷

The news was no better in June when, once again, the CIA raised the possibility of a coup:

The recent acceleration of political events in the USSR could soon produce major discontinuity in Soviet policy and substantial changes in the top leadership. President Gorbachev is losing control over the political process and will be under increasing pressure to make a dramatic move to the left or right to try to regain the political initiative. The period of measured reform, directed by the central authorities in Moscow, is coming to an end.⁵⁸

In July, the Agency reported that "differences in the economic development of the republics are fueling ethnic tensions and strengthening the centrifugal forces that threaten the Soviet Union's continued existence as a multinational state." By September, Central Asia was the focus of concern:

Moscow's challenge in Central Asia is likely to evolve from policing outbreaks of violence to dealing with outright defiance of

*its policies by republican regimes and, in the region's poorest and most Islamic areas, insurrectionist and secessionist movements.*⁵⁹

But, by then, the fall of 1990, Bush needed Gorbachev as much as Gorbachev needed him. Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait on August 2 and the United States embarked on a crusade to muster the support of the world community, through the UN, against Iraqi aggression. No country was more crucial to this multilateral effort than the Soviet Union. The two presidents met in Helsinki in September to discuss their cooperation in the Gulf.

The Helsinki Crossroads

At Helsinki, the two men felt warmly toward one another. Bush had done Gorbachev the favor of signing the trade agreement at their May summit. Gorbachev had made a major concession to Western geopolitical aims when, on July 14, he withdrew Soviet objections to a reunified Germany under NATO. His agreement laid to rest the most enduring symbol of the Cold War: a divided Germany.

The Helsinki meeting clearly had one overriding goal: to get Bush and Gorbachev together in order that they might publicly reaffirm their joint opposition to the Kuwait invasion, and in this it succeeded. The meeting was historic for reversing 45 years of US policy aimed at keeping the Soviets out of the Middle East, seeking instead their active cooperation. The two leaders also devoted several hours to discussing progress

on arms control negotiations, including START and Conventional Forces in Europe.

But lively discussion centered on developments within the Soviet Union. Gorbachev seemed taken with a much-publicized economic reform scheme for the Soviet Union known as the Shatalin plan. The so-called 500-Day Plan by economist Stanislav Shatalin called, among other things, for the sale and privatization of state enterprises, the dismantling of state farms, reductions in government subsidies to a wide array of enterprises, currency reform, and a new banking system. It was an admittedly ambitious effort to jump-start Gorbachev's stalled economic reforms.⁶⁰

But within months, Gorbachev had abandoned the Shatalin plan and taken a sharp political turn to the right. Gorbachev's move dismayed his reform-minded supporters, confirmed those doubters who had always seen in him a Communist in free market clothing, and put his international reputation as a reliable partner at risk.

A Missed Opportunity

Some of the ranking US experts on the Soviet Union saw the Helsinki meeting both at the time and in retrospect as a failed opportunity for Bush to put some very straight talk to Gorbachev. Blunt advice on the need to cooperate with even distasteful political opponents, if acted upon by Gorbachev, might in their opinion have prevented subsequent violence, kept Gorbachev as

president, and fostered a peaceful transition to a confederation. Jack Matlock went to Moscow as US Ambassador in April 1987, attended the Helsinki meeting, and witnessed Gorbachev's subsequent turn to the right:

This was one of Gorbachev's great failures, that he didn't push his reform more rapidly. But we could have pushed him harder in the fall of 1990 to do so, and I think if we had he might have made it. I think we had the chance, and I think Reagan would have done it because Reagan had more confidence in his own ability and was more willing to take chances than Bush. Bush had his emotional attachments, but basically he was very conservative and had more of a caretaker president attitude.

Matlock argues that direct advice was "the only way to have prevented [Gorbachev's] turn to the right":

We would have better served the Union by pressing him to accept the Shatalin plan and by giving him some encouragement that he would find support in the West... Also [we sent a message] by our own actions in being too cautious in dealing with Yeltsin and the other [republican leaders]... I didn't feel I should have to go over and explain to the foreign minister every time we had a high-level appointment with Yeltsin. And the White House seemed to have that attitude.

Eric Edelman, who moved to the Defense Department as liaison for the State Department in April 1990, also calls the summer and fall of 1990 a “tremendous missed opportunity...when Yeltsin and Gorbachev were groping toward a rapprochement and working together on the economic issue”:

But the idea of trying to promote a coalition or a grouping, a union of the reform forces, never was pushed. In part, because everyone's attention got refocused after August 2 on the Gulf. And secondly, because there was very real bias that Gorbachev was our guy... Gorbachev's been a real prince. He's given us everything we've wanted in arms control.

What Edelman considered an overfocus on arms control prevented the US Government in his opinion from understanding that “the political dynamic was such in Russia, moving in such a direction that if the democratic movement succeeded, not only would what we had negotiated be preserved, but that you'd be able to go further.”

George Kolt at the CIA likewise felt that earlier US attention to Yeltsin could have averted later developments:

It was not a question of Gorbachev's policies are going to fail, therefore you should no longer deal with him. You have to deal with existing governments. But I do fault the policy people for ignoring other things that could have been done, such

as dealing with Yeltsin much earlier by giving him much greater recognition, being much more supportive of the democratic movement in Russia. ... We could have facilitated a much smoother evolution in the Soviet Union than what occurred, which would have been not only in Gorbachev's interest, but our interest as well.

But Bush administration defenders object that any attempt to push Gorbachev faster along the path of reform would only have galvanized his rightwing opponents earlier, when they might have been successful. Condi Rice, for example, believes that “had the coup come in January [1991], not August, it would have succeeded.”

Arnold Kanter, the arms control expert at the NSC, also believes that Gorbachev could not have moved any faster:

If he would have moved in the direction of loosening Moscow's control over the various republics, if he would have moved faster or more ostentatiously from strong central control to a looser federation, it seems to me that would have done nothing but reinforce the conviction of the coup plotters that this guy is dangerous. And it would have motivated them to move sooner rather than later.

Gates, then Deputy National Security Adviser, recalls that top US officials, and Bush in particular, may have given Gorbachev advice. In fact,

says Gates, Gorbachev “was encouraged to deal with Yeltsin”:

But you are dealing with human beings. And they hated each other by that time.

In any event, believes Gates, an earlier acceptance of Yeltsin would have changed nothing for US policy:

The real issue was less Yeltsin than the pressure to abandon Gorbachev and swing to Yeltsin. While the Soviet Union still existed, that didn't make any sense at all. You could stop trashing Yeltsin. You could open lines of communication to Yeltsin. But it was Gorbachev making the decisions on START and on all of the issues that we were engaged with the Soviet Union on, about Afghanistan, on Cambodia, on Angola. So the notion that we stuck by Gorbachev too long is just nonsensical and doesn't reflect the reality.

What had become a reality was that SOVA's backing of Yeltsin since the fall of 1989 had been noted at the White House. According to Gates, “A lot of policymakers thought the intelligence folks had an agenda and therefore I think tended sometimes to discount their influence.”

Don't Shoot the Messenger

The strength of administration commitment to Gorbachev was illustrated when DCI William Webster felt compelled to deny that the CIA was in some sense “pushing”

“

**...those within the CIA
advocating greater
openness to Soviet
republican leaders came to
feel that even though this
administration listened to
their assessments, it paid
them no heed.**

”

Yeltsin. “Don’t shoot the messenger,” pleaded Webster. NIC Chairman Ermarth in turn denied accusations that he was a Yeltsin lover. “I’m a Yeltsin watcher,” he replied.⁶¹

Such defense aside, it was true that those within the CIA advocating greater openness to Soviet republican leaders came to feel that even though this administration listened to their assessments, it paid them no heed. As George Kolt puts it:

A lot of our analysis might have been read, but it was completely rejected when you started talking about Gorbachev’s weaknesses, the weaknesses of his policy, the danger of his policy.

Gorbachev Swings Right

By December 1990, Gorbachev gave alarming signs of retreat from his reform program as he strengthened ties to the Communist rightwing. In late November, Gorbachev had proposed a union treaty giving greater autonomy to the republics. But he countermanded that conciliatory gesture when, on December 2, he fired his moderate interior minister and replaced him with a former KGB chief. Gorbachev’s close adviser, Alexander Yakovlev, warned publicly about the re-emergence of reactionary forces.

On December 17, Gorbachev told the assembled parliament that the national crisis was deeper than initially thought, and he asked for

emergency powers to create “strong government, tight discipline and control of the implementation of decisions”:

Then we shall be able to ensure normal food supplies and rein in and stop interethnic strife. If we fail to achieve this, we will inevitably see greater discord, the rampage of dark forces and the breakup of our state.⁶²

The Congress of People’s Deputies gave Gorbachev much of what he asked for despite a plea from Yeltsin, who argued that the nation did not need “Kremlin diktat”:

The way out of the crisis requires honest dialogue, with equal rights between the center and the republics. This does not mean the disintegration of the Union. On the contrary, this is the only way to save it.

Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, tired of blame from the right for “losing” Eastern Europe, added his own warning to the rising chorus. On December 20, he resigned, starting not only the Soviet Union but

the US administration. Shevardnadze warned that “dictatorship is coming”:

No one knows what kind of dictatorship this will be and who will come—what kind of dictator, and what the regime will be like.⁶³

Within weeks, Shevardnadze’s sober prediction seemed on its way to fulfillment. On January 2, crack Black Beret Soviet troops seized buildings in Lithuania and Latvia, two of the rebellious Baltic states. On January 13, Soviet troops killed 15 peaceful demonstrators in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. On January 20, dubbed “Black Sunday,” Black Berets shot their way into the Latvian Interior Ministry, leaving four dead.

In the midst of this, on January 16, 1991, the UN under US leadership launched Desert Storm to retake Kuwait from Saddam Hussein.

Did Gorbachev Know?

The White House debated furiously how to respond to the Soviet developments. When Shevardnadze resigned, Bush had told reporters that:

Any time you move from a totalitarian, totally controlled state to an open state...you’re bound to have problems. ... Far be it from me to try to fine-tune the difficulties that they’re having there.⁶⁴

But the charges against Gorbachev were much more serious in January. Although Gorbachev denied fore-

knowledge of the Baltic attacks, most observers were inclined to discount this disclaimer.⁶⁵ As the State Department desk officer at the time for the Soviet Union, Alexander Vershbow, remembers it, “the Lithuanian crisis sort of jarred everyone”:

In the view of those who saw the devolution process as accelerating, spinning out of control, it was a sign of things to come. But for those who were determined to press ahead with a Gorby-centric approach, it was seen as an aberration that we had to manage and tamp down.

NSC Soviet expert Rice remembers early 1991 as the most alarming period of her tenure at the NSC because Gorbachev had so isolated himself from his reform-minded supporters:

He began to resemble the classic isolated leader surrounding himself with people who had no purpose in mind but to reestablish an authoritarian state. ... The costs of perestroika were suddenly clear. Lithuania was about to declare independence, Ukraine and Russia were talking independence. [Plus] we were occupied in the Gulf. I still to this day think they thought they had us over a barrel. Add all of that up, and I thought that was a point of maximum danger.

Most observers concur that, whether or not Gorbachev gave the direct orders to shoot in the Baltics, “he created the conditions,” as Rice says. But public reaction, both domestic and abroad, unnerved Gorbachev at

that point. The hardliners were “shocked,” she adds, when the United States and European nations threatened to withdraw aid. Even more important, Gorbachev couldn’t go through with it because of his personality:

Confronted with the bloodshed, he couldn’t stomach it and he backed off. In that we were lucky it was him. I think, by the way, that was when the hard right in Russia lost faith in him and decided he was part of the problem.

The Intelligence Report

The CIA took the view that Gorbachev was behind the violence in the Baltics. In a Spot Commentary written for Bush, the Agency assigned Gorbachev responsibility “strategically if not tactically.” On January 24, the *National Intelligence Daily* carried an article titled “Crisis at the Turning Point.” It said that “Gorbachev has started a conflict without a visible program and with scant prospect of long-term success. He will not easily escape the predicament for which he is largely responsible, and he may become its principal casualty.”⁶⁶

Throughout the crisis, Rice for one felt that the Intelligence Community performance was “magnificent.” Much of her time during that period was spent chairing emergency sessions of a small, secret interagency committee working on contingency plans for the Soviet Union.

Using Intelligence—A Policy-maker’s View

Rice’s committee was the one started by Gates in the fall of 1989. The committee was, says Rice, “a very small and secret effort to ask ourselves the radical questions” about the Soviet Union’s future.⁶⁷ Some of the questions the committee examined were: what if Soviet nuclear weapons fell into dangerous hands?; what if the USSR ended violently?; if the US government learned of plans for a coup, would it tell Gorbachev?; what if Soviet troops in Germany refused to go home? Recalls Rice:

These meetings were so secret our secretaries weren’t allowed to put them on our calendars because all we needed was a story that the administration was making contingency plans for the violent breakup of the Soviet Union, and our Soviet policy was dead.

The committee, as well as her expertise, made Rice one of the more aggressive users of intelligence in the Bush administration. She was known within CIA circles for actively seeking out differing opinions directly from analysts. In general, Rice found intelligence analysis most useful in a crisis situation such as the Baltic events:

I think that looking for big strategic answers from the Intelligence Community is actually the wrong use. I think where they’re best is at the tactical level. If you ask me, did I need the Intelligence Community to know that the Soviet Union was collapsing

and that Gorbachev was trying to put a finger in the dike, but that in fact the dike was coming at him and Eastern Europe was exploding? No, I could read that in The New York Times.

She found the “big picture” National Intelligence Estimates too obvious:

They would say, for example, Gorbachev could try and hold on to Eastern Europe, or he could not try and hold on to Eastern Europe. Well, I probably could have figured that out, right? But what they're very good at doing is watching with a real worm's-eye view. They can tell you it looks like the threat to move airborne forces into Lithuania to enforce the draft is credible. And they can marry that up with hard-core military intelligence. ... What you need help with is, 'This is going to happen today.' So we're not caught in the position of announcing a summit tomorrow, and the next day they invade Lithuania. That's where intelligence is helpful.

Verbal Intelligence

Analysts and their customers alike emphasize that in many instances, the most useful intelligence to the policymaker is that conveyed in a briefing. In such a setting, policymakers solicit the well-informed opinions of analysts on issues of pressing concern. The responses, freed from the need to “coordinate” views as in a carefully crafted written estimate, can be frank and enlightening.

Two analysts recall instances when they were asked to brief officials at the White House. “Collectively,” says one “we knew somewhat better than we wrote. ... While our documentary record was careful, our dialogues with top policymakers were far richer.” The other asks rhetorically, “How is intelligence conveyed?” and answers himself: “Much more is conveyed orally. The written product represents 1/10th of the total.”

Andrew Carpendale, an assistant to Secretary of State Baker, concurs that informal networks of communication were very important for intelligence reports:

Because these types of communications...leave little of a paper trail, there is a natural tendency to downplay them, but in my estimation, they were probably more important in shaping the mindset of decisionmakers than the formal communications.

At the State Department, he recalls, analysts would visit every two or three months to meet with top officials. Such meetings, comments Carpendale, allowed analysts to “present a more personal and sophisticated assessment of the evolving situation, as they were not required to vet their views with others [and] allowed us to ask them questions which were more policy relevant and useful than would be the case otherwise.” Officials at State would, in turn, draw on this information when drafting their own analytical memorandums to the Secretary before key meetings with Soviet leaders.

An Analyst Turned Consumer

Robert Gates, knowledgeable about how intelligence analysis is produced, was not so critical of the NIE format. But he had his own problems with the intelligence he was getting at the NSC. Most had to do with the old CIA predicament of seeking a consensus view versus airing differences of opinion. Gates had concluded that seeking a completely unified view was a “serious mistake”:

One of the most difficult problems that I had was that I knew there were bitter differences of view across the board on Soviet policy. And it was very tough to get SOVA to bring that to the surface.

To counteract this, recalls Blackwell, Gates would order up estimates which would try to get at the differences of opinion within the Community, to explore different scenarios. By and large, comments Blackwell, who found the exercise thought-provoking, analysts hated this. It was not “sources and methods.” Gates may have been unaware of analyst resentment at what appeared to them a form of “make-work.” But they did not charge him with telling them what to write. Neither did Gates ever feel during his time at the NSC that CIA intelligence analysis was written to suit a policy agenda:

I was worried about the lack of an expression of differences. I was worried about the lack of greater candor about the reliability of some of the sources. I was worried about the lack of alternative scenarios. I had a lot of

“

If anything, as 1991 unfolded, CIA assessments of Gorbachev's dwindling odds came increasingly into conflict with administration hopes for his survival.

”

worries. Politicization wasn't one of them. I had no concern that somebody at the Agency had an agenda. The process is too uncontrollable for that.

If anything, as 1991 unfolded, CIA assessments of Gorbachev's dwindling odds came increasingly into conflict with administration hopes for his survival. In publishing these views, comments Nick Burns, then deputy to Rice, the CIA exercised its unique responsibility within the policy community:

I think elements of the Agency were kind of fearless. They did not tell policymakers what they wanted to hear. ... You've got to have somebody [in government] who doesn't care what the president thinks of them.

The Soviet Cauldron

SOVA paused in April 1991 to do a comprehensive assessment of the unraveling events in the USSR. In a special 9-page report entitled “*The Soviet Cauldron*” and sent to policymakers on April 25, SOVA warned that “economic crisis, independence aspirations and anti-Communist forces are breaking down the Soviet empire and system of governance.” The estimate characterized the central economy as broken and Gorbachev's credibility as zero. It once again raised the possibility of a coup attempt, but also the chance that such a coup might fail.

The report pointed specifically to burgeoning independence movements in Ukraine, Belorussia, the Baltics, and Georgia. It pointed out that the centrally planned economy had “broken down irretrievably and is being replaced by a mixture of republic and local barter arrangements, some of whose aspects resemble a market, but which do not constitute a coherent system.” New media were springing up daily, moored by the rise of “inchoate” new political parties.

Gorbachev, reported SOVA, had transformed from “ardent reformer to consolidator”:

His attempts to preserve the essence of a center-dominated union, Communist Party rule, and a centrally planned economy without the broad use of force, however, have driven him to tactical expedients that are not solving basic problems and are hindering but not preventing the development of a new system.

SOVA predicted five possible early developments: public riots or strikes; heightened activity by antigovernment forces; the deaths from overwork or assassination of either

Gorbachev or Yeltsin; the rise of strong republican leaders; a reactionary coup in the name of law and order. The report found a coup attempt “the most fateful” possibility, although it discerned signs of preparation for such an event:

Explosive events have become increasingly possible.... The reactionary leaders, with or without Gorbachev, could judge that the last chance to act had come and move under the banner of law and order.... Military MVD and KGB leaders are making preparations for the broad use of force in the political process.

The primary target of coup plotters would be Yeltsin, said SOVA, because he “is the only leader with mass appeal.” But long-term prospects for coup leaders, it opined, “are poor, and even short-term success is far from assured” because of the uncertain loyalty of the armed forces and the likelihood of widespread opposition.

SOVA foresaw a confederal Soviet Union by the end of the 1990s:

With or without Gorbachev, with or without a putsch, the most likely prospect for the end of this decade, if not earlier, is a Soviet Union transformed into some independent states and a confederation of the remaining republics, including Russia.

The report gave scenarios for three possible Soviet Unions in the coming year: a continued political stalemate;

an attempted dictatorship; a breakthrough by the pluralists (republican forces).

Gorbachev's Future

By May, the Agency had become even more forceful, pronouncing Gorbachev's rule over and a major shift of power to the republics already underway. In an analysis dated May 23, the DI said:

*Gorbachev remains an important player on the Soviet political scene, especially in foreign and defense policy, but his domination of it has ended and will not be restored. Whether or not he is still in office a year from now, a major shift of power to the republics will have occurred unless it has been blocked by a traditionalist coup.*⁶⁸

No authority was any longer in a position to cope with nationalist demands and the deteriorating economy. Although the CIA analysis saw a ray of hope in an April agreement between Gorbachev and republican leaders, long-term and lasting compromise seemed unlikely, given Gorbachev's record of fighting to maintain central control:

The reformers' and traditionalists' basic goals for the future of the union are diametrically opposed, so there is little prospect that Gorbachev's so-called centrist course can defuse the crisis. ... No matter what happens, the current political system in the Soviet Union is doomed.

The assessment posited several possible outcomes: republican leaders force out Gorbachev; massive strikes topple the government; a coup by hardliners. The analysis conjectured that the danger to Gorbachev from hardliners was greatest if he were perceived as selling out to the republics:

In short, the Soviet Union is now in a revolutionary situation in the sense that it is in a transition from the old order to an as yet undefined new order. Although the transition might occur peaceably, the current center-dominated political system is doomed. As happened in Eastern Europe over the past two years, the ingredients are now present in the USSR that could lead not only to a rapid change in the regime, but in the political system as well. ... The current political situation is highly volatile and could quickly unravel and throw the country into a succession crisis with little warning. The security services are feeling increasingly desperate and there is a possibility that they could act against Gorbachev at any time.

Also in May, the DI published an assessment of the Soviet economy which sounded many of the same gloomy notes as more political analyses. It made the point once again that Gorbachev had undone the old command system yet hesitated in the difficult process of introducing a market economy, with disastrous results. A smooth evolution toward a federal structure based on a draft union treaty published in March might, said the analysis, "improve economic organization by eliminating much of

the confusion concerning areas of authority."⁶⁹ But the DI still foresaw a minimum drop of 10 percent in 1991 GNP.

"*The Soviet Cauldron*" and subsequent analyses were circulated to all leading members of the government and the relevant Congressional committee members. Within the administration, the CIA warnings were listened to, even believed. But they did not significantly affect US policy in large part, say administration officials, because it was not in the US interest to tilt support away from Gorbachev and toward the republics.

To What Degree Yeltsin?

Once again, the question of Gorbachev's staying power raised the issue of how much official support the United States should offer Yeltsin and his followers. His sway was growing: 100,000 supporters defied a Gorbachev-imposed ban on March 28 to demonstrate in Moscow on Yeltsin's behalf. Disagreement within the administration was leading to mixed policy signals. During the Baltic crisis of January, for example, some voices had argued forcefully for sending Ambassador Matlock to see Yeltsin. Rice and others at the NSC felt that was unwise. As it was, Matlock, who in Moscow did not know of the Washington discussion, visited Yeltsin on his own initiative in the midst of the crisis.

Within the executive branch, one faction strongly favored encouraging greater openness toward Yeltsin. Its members included Cheney, and, to a

lesser degree Baker, Gates, and, Matlock. Yeltsin, says Matlock, "really was the leader of the opposition in the whole country as well as increasingly the leader of Russia." Gorbachev, he says, had become a spoiler:

Certainly from 1989 on, every time they had a deal Gorbachev would walk away from it. [Yeltsin aides] would bring drafts [of agreements] and Gorbachev would sit on them. ... He wasn't dealing in good faith.

On the other side were President Bush and most members of the White House staff who still saw signs that Gorbachev was working toward reform. In March, for example, Gorbachev sponsored a nationwide referendum on whether the country should be reestablished as a federation of republics. A draft union treaty was published. In late April, Gorbachev met with Yeltsin and the leaders of eight other republics in what proved indeed to be the beginning of a political swing back toward the center.

US National Interest

But even without these encouraging political developments, say administration officials, the US national interest continued to lie with supporting Gorbachev. As National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft told his aides in no uncertain terms: "We're not going to do anything that looks like we're casting our lot with Yeltsin against Gorbachev."⁷⁰

The Soviet leader had been cooperative in many areas of US concern, not least arms control, emphasizes Rice. With the START agreement under negotiation in the spring of 1991, says Rice, "I believe we had an obligation to push as much [as possible] through that window before it did collapse."⁷¹

But even had it been clear that Gorbachev was finished and his country ready to implode, adds Rice, the United States should have done nothing to accelerate the process—"The United States of America should not have any fingerprints on it":

If it was going to fall, let it fall of its own weight. Because we weren't prepared to deal with the consequences of a collapse that we helped engineer. We weren't going to go defend Ukraine if Russia decided to take it on.

Rice says she did make successful efforts to organize meetings between Bush and several republican leaders. But President Bush "didn't want to go out and recognize independent states":

He knew there was a possibility the Soviet Union was going to fall apart. ... He could see it happening. But it's one thing for me, out of a government role, or [others] to stand up and say the Soviet Union's going to fall apart, than for the President of the United States to say it. Or someone who works for him. Because actions have consequences. And words have consequences. And [what] if it

happens and it happens violently and some republic bolts prematurely because it thought the United States was going to support it?

NSC arms control expert Kanter adds that stability, after all, was one of the overriding US interests:

If there was an ambivalence in US policy toward Yeltsin before the coup, it was not because of the belief that Gorbachev was in such a solid position but, on the contrary, that things were very volatile and that US interests would be better served by a soft landing than a crash landing when the Soviet Union collapsed. Fomenting the collapse of the internal Soviet empire in the shortest period possible come what may was not our policy objective.

However, the Bush administration, particularly the NSC, did begin to look more favorably on Yeltsin, once Ed Hewett replaced Rice in March 1991. Edelman remembers that:

The first thing he said was, 'This government's got a major Yeltsin problem and we've got to work our way out of it.'

Moreover, in the spring the CIA began to include a situation report (sitrep) on circumstances in the republics in its *National Intelligence Daily* classified report to the President and top officials.⁷² By June, matters had evolved to the extent that Bush received Yeltsin at the White House for what proved to be a 3 1/2-hour conversation.

View From the CIA

The DI submitted its assessment of Yeltsin's political agenda in June 1991, as Bush prepared for the meeting with the Russian leader. The Agency saw in Yeltsin a "coherent Russian democratic alternative to the imperial authoritarianism of the traditionalists."⁷³ Charges Yeltsin was an "unprincipled opportunist" were not, said the DI, "borne out by his actions."

The assessment gave Yeltsin credit for helping to defuse the dangerous situation in January when, among other things, he went to Estonia and signed documents effectively recognizing Baltic independence. As the likely first president of Russia (elections were scheduled for July), the analysis predicted that he would promote "rapid marketization.... He is certain to emphasize that [foreign] aid should be channeled primarily through the republics and to specific projects." Yeltsin would also, it said, continue to work for a reconstituted union of equal republics:

The "order" and stability" projected in President Gorbachev's vision of the union is—in Yeltsin's view—inherently unstable because it denies the striving for national self-determination. True stability now will come only with a genuinely voluntary association of republics.

Yeltsin, in a considerable boost to his own power base, was elected president of Russia on July 12, 1991. On July 16, Secretary Baker in Paris told journalists that the US intended to have

contact with the opposition forces Yeltsin headed:

I think if you take a look at the way we have approached similar situations in the countries of Eastern Europe and in other countries as well, you would see that we have taken care to touch base with the opposition to make sure that we understand where the opposition is coming from, that they understand where we are coming from. I don't think that is inappropriate just because it is the Soviet Union.⁷⁴

But there was no significant shift in US policy. Instead, intelligence and policy efforts focused on preparing Bush and his staff for a late July summit with Gorbachev in Moscow.

The atmosphere was business as usual. Despite the warnings out of the CIA, despite the contingency planning by Rice's group, despite even an early summer dress rehearsal for a coup, there was little sense when the two presidents met in late July that Gorbachev would face the ultimate crisis of his career a little less than three weeks later.

The Coup

The group gathered in Moscow for the summit from July 29 to August 1, 1991, was upbeat. Finally, the United States and the Soviet Union were signing the historic START treaty on reducing nuclear weapons. The two nations also announced plans to co-sponsor a Middle East peace treaty. It was not a crisis atmosphere. Says Kanter:

The world was transformed three weeks later. [But] I certainly didn't have the sense in Moscow that we were on the brink of an historical transformation.

There was, however, a general consensus that events in the Soviet Union were moving so fast nothing could really surprise observers anymore. "By 1990, certainly by 1991," says Kanter, "you could believe anything...you literally couldn't tell if someone was pulling your leg. It could be preposterous and it could also be true."

Everyone knew that Soviet society was in turmoil. Everyone knew that Gorbachev was riding the tide, that he was taking bold actions born of desperation rather than inspiration. Everyone knew how fluid, how volatile things were. And so in that sense no one was shocked that there was a coup three weeks later. ... But the event, when it happened and how it happened, did surprise people. If you will, people were tactically surprised but not strategically surprised.

In the event, coup leaders moved against Gorbachev on the eve of the scheduled signing of a union treaty giving greater autonomy to the republics. Gorbachev was placed under guard in his vacation home on the Black Sea while the hardliners fought it out in Moscow against Yeltsin and his supporters. The coup leaders buckled in a surprisingly short time, revealing the amateur character of their takeover plan. Most were placed under arrest; senior military official Marshal Sergei

“

The coup did not surprise the CIA, although it could not foresee the exact

timing.

”

Akhromeyev committed suicide. Gorbachev returned to Moscow, but he had lost the last shreds of popular respect. In a widely noted omission, he even failed to thank Yeltsin for his part in toppling the putsch.

The Agency Before the Coup

The coup did not surprise the CIA, although it could not foresee the exact timing. SOVA director George Kolt had taken a short leave in early August, during which he had time to think about the Soviet situation away from the pressure of daily events. The United States had already received potent warning, via Ambassador Matlock, of a coup attempt in June. That coup never took place, but plans for it clearly identified those individuals who would be involved in any future takeover attempt.

On Kolt's return to work, he requested SOVA put together an analysis of the prospects for a coup. The outlook, he recalls, was not encouraging. But the paper did not go so far as to say that Gorbachev's downfall would be linked to signing the controversial union treaty, even though one analyst made exactly this connection. Says Kolt:

We could have said very clearly that a catalyst is this union treaty. There was one analyst who said they cannot let this be signed. But this thought was brought to my attention only after the coup. We did not pursue it in the piece. We had a hard enough time internally getting it agreed—not with our leadership; we always argued among ourselves. ... We said the

possibility of a coup was growing. We even said Gorbachev may not go along this time and said it could not succeed in the long run, which was all right. But we couldn't predict it to the exact date.

On Saturday, August 17, however, signs were growing that action against Gorbachev was imminent. Alexander Yakovlev warned against a Stalinist “party and state coup.” *The President's Daily Brief* for that date published SOVA's analysis, which explicitly warned that “the danger is growing that hardliners will precipitate large-scale violence.”

When the coup started on Sunday, August 18, the administration seemed caught unaware, despite the intelligence reports. Most senior-level policymakers were on vacation, including President Bush, who was in Kennebunkport, Maine. But, from the start, there were signs the coup would not stick. The CIA noted virtually no military preparations by coup leaders. Kolt personally called National Security Adviser Scowcroft a few hours after the coup started, said it might not succeed, and implicitly suggested a firm condemnation of the coup leaders.

Bush's first public statement on the issue, given Monday morning, was relatively subdued, saying that, “I've said over and over again that we did not want to see a coup backed by the KGB and the military, and apparently that is what is under way.” But,

he added, “I think it's also important to note that coups can fail.” As Gates puts it, there was little reason initially to hope the coup would fail:

Based on all prior experience in Russian and Soviet history, when you know at the outset that you've got the KGB and the Army and the Party all together in a coup attempt, the chances of it not succeeding based on past history are near zero... [Bush's] first public comments were as much a holding action as anything else, but fairly pessimistic based on the information.

By Monday afternoon, however, intelligence reports indicated the coup was not going well and Bush became far tougher. By evening, and ahead of virtually all Western leaders in condemning the plotters, Bush stated that “We are deeply disturbed by the events of the last hours in the Soviet Union and condemn the unconstitutional resort to force. ... This misguided and illegitimate effort bypasses both Soviet law and the will of the Soviet people.” He expressed support for both Yeltsin and Gorbachev. Gates feels that the contingency planning at the NSC helped the administration cope with the unfolding events:

A lot of thinking had already been done about how we would deal with this problem. And so I think people were a lot better able to cope and move with some facility in a very dangerous and unpredictable time, and I think that the way it was managed sort of underscores that it was done pretty well.

What could not have been predicted, he says, is the degree to which the coup plotters themselves were disorganized:

The key in August was that the leaders were behind the coup, but the institutions that they headed were not, or were divided. But the fundamental thing was that the coup leaders themselves were half-hearted. And nobody could count on that.

Matlock, who had left Moscow for good on August 11, thought that a coup wouldn't occur because its leaders would understand in advance that it would fail. He agrees that the plotters "didn't know, until they confronted [Gorbachev] and he refused, what they were going to do."

On Monday, Bush returned to Washington. He tried several times to telephone Gorbachev but could not get through. Meanwhile, Yeltsin had emerged as the leader of the opposition to the coup, rallying citizens from his stronghold in the "White House" Russian parliament building. On Tuesday, Bush telephoned Yeltsin to offer his support. The coup folded by Wednesday, and Gorbachev returned to Moscow.

In subsequent weeks, Gorbachev's small remaining influence dissipated. One by one, the republics declared their independence from Moscow. One of the most radical republics was Russia. On December 8, Yeltsin and the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus met in Minsk, agreeing to form a Commonwealth of Independent States. On December 25, 1991, Gorbachev resigned and the Soviet Union was dissolved.

NOTES

47. Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott. *At the Highest Levels*; Little, Brown and Co.; Boston, Toronto, London; 1993; p. 69.
47. *Rising Political Instability Under Gorbachev: Understanding the Problem and Prospects for Resolution*. Directorate for Intelligence, CIA; April 1989; p.iii.
49. From a speech by Robert M. Gates, *CIA and the Collapse of the Soviet Union: Hit or Miss?*; Foreign Policy Association, New York; May 20, 1992; p.6.
50. *Gorbachev's Domestic Gambles and Instability in the USSR*. Directorate of Intelligence, CIA; September 1989; p. iii.
51. Beschloss, Talbott; p.94.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
53. At lower levels, too, dissenting views were censored in the interests of presenting a common policy front. Alexander Vershbow, for example, Soviet desk officer in the State Department, was unable to publish in the spring of 1991 an article advocating a slight shift in US policy to support devolution of power to the republics.
54. Beschloss, Talbott. p. 168.
55. From Gates's speech; May 20, 1992; p.7.
56. *The Washington Post*. "Webster Sees No Revival of Soviet Threat; Conflict Continues Between CIA, Defense." March 2, 1990; p. A1.
57. Despite considerable opposition from Congress, Bush agreed. On June 30, Moscow lifted its embargo at Lithuania.
58. From Gates's speech; May 20, 1992. p.7.
59. *Ibid.*, p.8.
60. The Shatalin plan had plenty of critics. CIA economist Jim Noren feels its implementation "would have wrecked the economy to an extent that didn't materialize until 1992."
61. Beschloss, Talbott. p. 168.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
65. Raymond Garthoff takes a more benign view of Gorbachev's role in the Baltic incidents, writing in *The Great Transition* that "Gorbachev had been fed a steady stream of false and misleading information on events and public opinion by his conservative security advisers." p.452
66. Beschloss, Talbott, p.317.
67. Other members of the committee were Dennis Ross from State; Fritz Ermarth from CIA; Eric Edelman from Defense; sometimes Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; and Bob Blackwell from CIA. The group was apparently not so top secret, as many staffers at the different agencies wrote papers for it.
68. *Gorbachev's Future*. Directorate of Intelligence; May 23, 1991; p.1.
69. *Soviet Economic Futures: The Outlook for 1991*. Directorate of Intelligence; CIA; May 1991; p.11.
70. Beschloss, Talbott; p.350.
71. Ermarth words this thinking somewhat differently: "Our diplomatic business with Gorbachev is preeminent; to conduct that business we must assert that he has a bright future; to assert this we must believe it and reject the case that he does not."
72. Garthoff, p.448n.
73. *Yeltsin's Political Objectives*. Directorate of Intelligence, CIA; June 1991; p.iii.
74. *The New York Times*, "Baker Says US Is Ready To Create Links with Soviet Non-Communists"; July 17, 1990.