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U.S. Intelligence Estimates of the Soviet Collapse: Reality and Perception

A common belief is that the United States Intelligence Community (IC) failed to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, many of the U.S. officials who received intelligence about the Soviet Union, its decline in the late 1970s and 1980s, and its final crises in the 1989–1991 period, believe to this day that they were not warned—that they were, in effect, “blindsided.”

This is odd, because the documented record shows that the Intelligence Community performed much better than most people seem to think. Indeed, this record suggests that U.S. intelligence provided about as good a product as one could reasonably expect. It detected the slowdown in the Soviet economy; it noted that the Soviet leadership was running out of options to save the country; it stipulated a set of conditions that might signal the crisis had reached a tipping point; and it notified top U.S. leaders when these conditions were met.

So these facts raise two questions: Why do so many people think the Intelligence Community failed? And why do many of the U.S. officials who were professional consumers of this intelligence still feel that they were not adequately warned? The nature of these questions should be noted before answers can be proffered.

In part, the questions are not about empirical realities, but about perceptions of those realities. To use a photography metaphor, the questions ask not about the “picture” out there, but about the “camera” in human heads. As such, the questions are not asking about the external conditions that produce surprise, but rather, the *collective cognitive architecture* of surprise. Put another way, leaders usually do not “get” blindsided; they bludge themselves by how they perceive intelligence, by the mental hurdles intelligence must surmount before it can change their perceptions, and in the constraints that limit their ability to act on information.

The questions are also about wishful thinking. Deep down, officials seem to want intelligence to make decisions for them, when, in reality, it rarely can.

THE RECORD, ON BACKGROUND

In 1995 Jeffrey T. Richelson brought to my attention several intelligence assessments and National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) that had been declassified and cited in a study that Kirsten Lundberg carried out for the Kennedy School at Harvard.¹ Richelson, a scholar at the National Security Archive, is one of the most frequent users of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and has over the years assembled an extensive database of declassified, leaked, and officially released intelligence products. When Richelson saw the citations in the Kennedy School study, he requested the documents under FOIA.

Richelson realized that these assessments were at odds with the popular conception that the Intelligence Community had failed to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union. The documents, since supplemented by others published by the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence, provide a factual basis for evaluating the IC’s record. Richelson and I agreed to develop our own assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community’s performance, and to consider how the distorted views of its Soviet analyses had developed. We interviewed most of the officials who participated in developing the analysis and several of the key consumers who served in the White House under President George H. W. Bush.²

We concluded that the performance of the U.S. Intelligence Community in anticipating the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union was generally

good and sometimes outstanding. The Intelligence Community faced three basic tasks:

- First, analysts had to detect the overall slowdown of the Soviet economy and assess the underlying political, economic, and demographic factors that would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the Soviets to recover. This long-range analytical task had a time frame of approximately five to ten years, partly because that is the length of time such tidal socioeconomic changes require, and also because that encompasses several U.S. electoral cycles. This long-range warning gives elected officials time to reshape U.S. strategy and the electorate time to absorb and (perhaps) support it.
- Second, the Intelligence Community had to detect shorter-range trends that could plausibly lead to a crisis in Soviet politics and trigger collapse. Analysts had to postulate plausible scenarios and, as the Soviet Union drew closer to a crisis state, compare the probability of one scenario with another. This kind of warning, with a one-to-five-year time frame, permits a President to make significant adjustments during his term. The challenge here was partly one of imagination, and partly one of understanding how to weigh the various political and economic factors that would determine the outcome.
- Third, the IC had to warn U.S. officials when the Soviet collapse was imminent and the final endgame under way. The time frame for this task was a year or less. Analysts had to postulate specific “gates” that developments would need to pass through for the endgame to be triggered and then determine whether those gates had been passed.

Each task required an increasing level of specificity and, by extension, that there were three opportunities in which U.S. intelligence analysts could fail. These levels of warning are also interrelated. If analysts and officials are unaware of strategic changes in their adversary, they are less likely to succeed at tactical warning, and if they have failed the tactical problem, they will more likely be unprepared for the task of immediate warning.

LONG-RANGE WARNING

The challenge of anticipating the Soviet collapse was even greater for U.S. intelligence because the very notion of collapse was inconsistent with the thinking of most Western analysts and scholars. The prevailing view up to the late 1970s was that the Soviet Union would evolve, not collapse. True, some Sovietologists had long believed that a multiethnic, nondemocratic state dependent on a centrally planned economy was inherently unstable. Indeed, that was the assumption upon which containment was based.³ But hardly any of these scholars were willing to hazard a time frame for a Soviet implosion. So their views were more of a theory than an intelligence estimate.

But by the mid-1970s there were growing signs that the Soviet economy and political system had ingrained, systemic problems. In the Intelligence

Community, this economic slowdown was a basic underlying assumption for most intelligence analyses of the Soviet Union from the mid-1970s onward. Up to then, assessments often cited problems in the Soviet economy such as agricultural shortfalls and competition for resources and manufacturing capacity. After this point, the general understanding was that the Soviet Union as a whole was stagnating or declining economically, and that this slowdown would have profound political effects.

The main disagreement within the Intelligence Community was about how severe the effects of economic stagnation might be and how the Soviets would deal with them. The CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) took different approaches to measuring gross domestic product. In addition, while the CIA believed the economic slowdown might hinder the Soviet military buildup, the DIA believed that the continuing evidence of a military buildup illustrated that the Soviets were determined to outpace the United States despite economic constraints.

But hardly anyone in the IC—especially the CIA—argued that the Soviets were in great shape, despite what some critics of the Agency might suggest today. For example, in July 1977, the CIA reported the following:

The Soviet economy faces serious strains in the decade ahead. The simple growth formula upon which the economy has relied for more than a generation—maximum inputs of labor and capital—will no longer yield the sizeable annual growth which has provided resources needed for competing claims. . . . Reduced growth, as is foreshadowed over the next decade, will make pursuit of these objectives much more difficult, and pose hard choices for the leadership, which can have a major impact on Soviet relations with Eastern Europe and the West.⁴

This assessment of a stagnating Soviet economy was, in turn, reflected in U.S. national strategy. Presidential Directive 18, which defined U.S. national strategy in the Carter administration, said that, “though successfully acquiring military power matching the United States, the Soviet Union continues to face major internal economic and national difficulties, and externally it has few genuinely committed allies while lately suffering setbacks in its relations with China, parts of Africa, and India.”⁵

The Reagan administration went a step further by arguing that the United States could take advantage of these weaknesses and, through a planned, integrated strategy, accelerate the metamorphosis of the Communist regime. The resulting policy was a combination of economic pressure (through an arms race and trade sanctions) and political and military pressure (by supporting opponents of the Soviets and their allies in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and especially Afghanistan). According to National Security Decision Directive 32, U.S. goals were to “foster, if possible in concert with our allies, restraint in Soviet military spending,

discourage Soviet adventurism, and weaken the Soviet alliance system by forcing the USSR to bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings, and to encourage long-term liberalizing and nationalist tendencies within the Soviet Union and allied countries.”⁶

In the late 1970s, though, before he became President, not even Ronald Reagan was willing to propose that the Soviet Union was on a course to collapse. In his speeches and essays during this period, Reagan was fully prepared to argue that the Soviet Union was evil, and that its economy was inefficient and unable to sustain itself indefinitely. But he was not ready to say that it was on a course to collapse or that U.S. policy could accelerate this collapse. Reagan did not make those statements until after he entered office, specifically in his June 1982 address to the British Parliament, and his March 1983 speech to the National Association of Evangelicals.⁷

If the documentary record is clear, then why do so many people believe that the Intelligence Community failed to detect the Soviet Union’s social and economic problems in the late 1970s?

One reason may have been that, at the time, the Soviet Union seemed ascendant. It had matched and even surpassed the United States in several measures of military capability, such as numbers of intercontinental ballistic missiles. It had expanded its influence through military cooperation treaties with clients in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The popular media (and the Intelligence Community) duly reported these events, and so the *zeitgeist* was that the Soviets were strong, and the United States was stuck in malaise. Since American officials did not effectively challenge this view in public, Americans logically concluded later that this reflected the intelligence they were reading.

Besides, nothing was inevitable about a Soviet collapse in the late 1970s. At that point, many outcomes were possible. A more ruthless leader might have held the state together for another ten or fifteen years; witness Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus and Kim Jong-Il in North Korea. A more flexible leader might have managed a “soft landing” for the Soviet Communist Party; witness the current situation in China. To provide a more definitive estimate fifteen years before the fact was impossible because the future was not yet certain. It never is.

INTERMEDIATE AND IMMEDIATE WARNING

By the early 1980s, the faltering Soviet economy was a given, the assumed context within which the Intelligence Community viewed Soviet political and military developments. For example, in 1985, as Mikhail Gorbachev took control, the National Intelligence Estimate on the Soviet domestic scene encapsulated the fundamental weaknesses in the Soviet state. It did

not yet say that the conditions for collapse were present, but it explained how such a path was possible:

The growth of the Soviet economy has been systematically decelerating since the 1950s as a consequence of dwindling supplies of new labor, the increasing cost of raw material inputs, and the constraints on factor productivity improvement imposed by the rigidities of the planning and management system. . . .

The USSR is afflicted with a complex of domestic maladies that seriously worsened in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their alleviation is one of the most significant and difficult challenges facing the Gorbachev regime. . . .

Over the next five years, and for the foreseeable future, the troubles of the society will not present a challenge to the system of political control that guarantees Kremlin rule, nor will they threaten the economy with collapse. But, during the rest of the 1980s and well beyond, the domestic affairs of the USSR will be dominated by the efforts of the regime to grapple with these manifold problems. . . .

Gorbachev has achieved an upswing in the mood of the Soviet elite and populace. But the prospects for his strategy over the next five years are mixed at best. . . .⁸

It is noteworthy that the forecasting horizon of the 1985 NIE was five years—normal for an NIE—and that the Soviet collapse occurred just beyond that horizon. But it was still premature in 1985 for a definitive forecast. As the Soviet situation got progressively worse, so did the prognosis by the Intelligence Community. By spring 1989—more than two years before the attempted coup that led to the ultimate collapse of the regime—the IC was telling U.S. leaders that the situation was essentially irretrievable and that a catastrophic end (from the Soviet leadership's point of view) was possible. The 1989 NIE said: "It will be very difficult for [Gorbachev] to achieve his goals. In the extreme, his policies and political power could be undermined and the political stability of the Soviet system could be fundamentally threatened. . . . [A] anxiety, fear, and anger [of the Soviet political elite] could still crystallize in an attempted coup, legal removal of Gorbachev, or even assassination."⁹

In April 1991 the Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA), the office within the Directorate of Intelligence that followed developments in the USSR, told U.S. leaders explicitly that the Soviet Union was in a state of crisis, offered a poor prognosis, and spelled out specific scenarios in which the regime could implode. In a memo titled, "The Soviet Cauldron," SOVA's director wrote,

The economy is in a downward spiral with no end in sight . . . inflation was about 20 percent at the end of last year and will be at least double that this year . . . reliance on a top-down approach to problems,

particularly in regard to republics, has generated a war of laws between various levels of power and created a legal mess to match the economic mess. . . . In this situation of growing chaos, explosive events have become increasingly possible.¹⁰

The memo then went on to describe possible outcomes, which included the assassination of Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin, or a coup by “reactionary leaders who judge that the last chance to act had come”—which is, of course, exactly what later occurred.

Did the Intelligence Community provide immediate warning of the coup that triggered the final events of 1991? George W. H. Bush recalls in his memoirs:

Besides the coup rumors in July, which Gorbachev had dismissed, there had been some recent indication that the hard-liners in Moscow might be up to something. On Saturday morning, August 17, Bob Gates had joined me at breakfast where we went over the Presidential Daily Briefing. In it was a report that the prospective signing of the Union treaty meant that time was running out for the hard-liners and they might feel compelled to act. Bob thought the threat was serious, although we had no specific information on what might happen or when. The next day the plotters struck.¹¹

Robert M. Gates, then deputy national security advisor, and soon to become Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), and currently Secretary of Defense, recalled the same briefing this way:

CIA warned us at the White House that once the signing date [for the Union treaty] was set a deadline of sorts would be established for the conservatives to act. The changes that would follow signature, together with public sentiment, would make action after that date much more difficult. . . . [I]t fell to me on August 17 to hand the President his CIA *President's Daily Brief*, which warned of the strong chance that the conservatives would act within the next few days. It said, “The danger is growing that hardliners will precipitate large-scale violence” and described their efforts to prepare for an attempt to seize power. . . . [Bush] asked me if I thought the situation was serious and if the Agency's warning was valid. I explained the meaning of the August 20 signing ceremony, and said I thought he should take the *PDB* warning quite seriously.¹²

Note how Bush and Gates score this event differently, even though they basically agree on the facts. Gates believes he gave Bush warning because the CIA had previously established the prerequisite conditions for there to be a coup, and he says that the President's daily briefing for 17 August indicated that those conditions were present. Bush wanted to know whether any specific datum indicated what might happen or when, but Gates had no such specific datum.

These two different slants on the same material suggest just how controversial an assessment of whether one was “blindsided” can be, and they also highlight exactly where, if anywhere, the Intelligence Community fell short. To reach this last step in anticipating the Soviet collapse, the CIA would have needed first-hand information from the plotters themselves. Analysis alone can never fill that kind of gap, if only because an analysis is at best a probability assessment necessarily based on inference and deduction. The key datum that was lacking was, as Bush put it, the “specific information on what might happen or when.” This was a very tough piece of information to collect. Even Gorbachev lacked it, obviously.

THE PERSISTENT MYTH—WHY?

All in all, this is a good record. So why has the Intelligence Community’s performance been so underappreciated, and why do officials to this day believe they were poorly served? What collective cognitive architecture explains the gap between the record and the perceptions, then and ever since?

One key reason is that the written record remained classified for several years after the Soviet Union disintegrated. Even when the most important documents, the National Intelligence Estimates, were declassified, they were initially not made widely available. Without being able to point to specific documents that presented the Intelligence Community’s consensus, the idea that the IC was caught flat-footed took root by default.

One example shows how such an information vacuum can be perpetuated into a “truth” with major effects. In 1991, former Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner published an article on the general topic of the future of intelligence. In one passage, Turner cited the apparent failure of the Intelligence Community to anticipate the Soviet collapse:

We should not gloss over the enormity of this failure to forecast the magnitude of the Soviet crisis. We know now that there were many Soviet academics, economists and political thinkers, other than those officially presented to us by the Soviet government, who understood long before 1980 that the Soviet economic system was broken and that it was only a matter of time before someone had to try to repair it, as had Khrushchev. Yet I never heard a suggestion from the CIA, or the intelligence arms of the departments of defense or state, that numerous Soviets recognized a growing, systemic economic problem. . . . Today we hear some revisionist rumblings that the CIA did in fact see the Soviet collapse emerging after all. If some individual CIA analysts were more prescient than the corporate view, their ideas were filtered out in the bureaucratic process; and it is the corporate view that counts because that is what reaches the president and his advisers. On this one, the corporate view missed by a mile. . . . Why were so many of us so insensitive to the inevitable?¹³

This quotation has been repeated many times. It is usually portrayed as a *mea culpa* from a former head of the U.S. Intelligence Community, seemingly acknowledging that the community had failed to anticipate the Soviet collapse. However, it requires some parsing.

When Turner said he “never heard a suggestion” of a systemic weakness of the Soviet system, he was referring to the period he served as DCI, 1977–1981. Also, when he criticized “revisionist rumblings” claiming the CIA did anticipate the collapse, neither the intelligence assessments reporting the Soviet decline in the 1980s nor the policy directives they supported had yet been released.

In reality, both the opinion of “individual CIA analysts,” such as the director of SOVA, and the “corporate view” expressed in NIEs, concluded that the Soviet Union was in decline throughout the 1980s. These views were reaching the President and, as indicated earlier, were incorporated into presidential directives. But this paper trail was not made public until four years after Turner wrote. Indeed, the inherent problems and the decline of the Soviet economy had become the working assumption on which U.S. intelligence was based by the time Turner left office.

Nevertheless, this single quotation by Turner was cited repeatedly and written into the public record. Most notably, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D, NY) referred to it during the confirmation hearing of Robert Gates to be Director of Central Intelligence in 1991; included it in the 1996 report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy, which he chaired; cited it in *Secrecy: The American Experience*, a book he published in 1988; repeated it in an interview on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* in 1998; mentioned it in his farewell speech to the U.S. Senate in 2002; and quoted it in his commencement address at Harvard in 2003. During this entire period, however, one is unable to find a single instance in which Moynihan quotes from an actual intelligence publication, such as those declassified in the early 1990s. Even when Moynihan submitted a bill in 1995 to abolish the CIA, he introduced the bill with a speech on the Senate floor that again claimed the Intelligence Community had failed to anticipate the Soviet collapse—and that again offered as its *only* evidence the aforementioned Turner quotation.¹⁴ Despite its paucity of actual evidence, the impact of Moynihan’s proposal was significant. It was (along with reaction to the Aldrich Ames espionage affair and concerns over the performance of intelligence in the First Gulf War) responsible for the establishment of the Aspin-Brown Commission and the contentious intelligence reforms of 1996.¹⁵

Squaring the documented record with Turner’s comment from 1991 is difficult. Perhaps Turner simply was unaware of the mainstream opinion of the Intelligence Community in the 1980s, after he left office. Even more difficult is the reconciliation of the views of anyone who did have access to

intelligence and still believes that the CIA and other agencies failed to provide warning. But this is precisely what the phenomenon of being blindsided is all about. The perception of being warned becomes separated from the reality of the warning that was provided. The best to be said is that this may be a problem more appropriately examined in the discipline of psychology, rather than in history or political science.

Those who criticize the IC's assessment of the Soviet Union often get caught up in details, faulting it on specific findings that were secondary to the larger picture it was painting. In the early 1980s, the CIA believed the Soviet gross domestic product was growing at about two percent annually. Today we know that its economic growth was essentially nonexistent. But the CIA was *not* trying to make the case that the Soviet Union was growing; as indicated, the two percent growth estimate reflected a conclusion that, after remarkable growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet economy was grinding to a halt. The growth estimates were based on a modeling process that was controversial even at the time, and should not divert attention from the key judgments that summarized the Intelligence Community's bedrock views—that the Soviet Union was in trouble.

WHY DO OFFICIALS FEEL III-SERVED?

One interesting feature about the controversies over the Soviet collapse is that some officials who had read the intelligence and understood full well what it said still believe they were, in some important sense, surprised when the end came. When Gorbachev was toppled, it seemed as though the Bush 41 administration was not prepared to respond. Some critics wondered why Bush had not moved earlier to embrace Yeltsin, who ultimately prevailed. Would better intelligence have made a difference?

The first President Bush described the warning presented to him as too limited for taking action. But his diary entry on 19 August 1991 suggests that more factors were in play than just this intelligence report. Reflecting on the day's events, Bush wrote:

[T]he questions for the most part were okay; [such as] "Why were you surprised?" There will be a lot of talking heads analyzing the policy, but in my view this *totally* vindicates our policy of trying to stay with Gorbachev. If we had pulled the rug out from under Gorbachev and swung toward Yeltsin you'd have seen a military crackdown far in excess of the ugliness that's taking place now. I'm convinced of that. I think what we must do is see that the progress made under Gorbachev is not turned around.¹⁶

In other words, the Bush administration—despite receiving and acknowledging that conditions were ripe for a coup—believed it had no option other than to stick with Gorbachev. This was a judgment based less

on intelligence information or the lack thereof than on the administration's policy objectives. The administration's goals were established by National Security Directive 23, which Bush signed on 22 September 1989:

Our policy is not designed to help a particular leader or set of leaders in the Soviet Union. We seek, instead, fundamental alterations in Soviet military force structure, institutions, and practices which can only be reversed at great cost, economically and politically, to the Soviet Union. If we succeed, the ground for cooperation will widen, while that for conflict narrows. The U.S.–Soviet relationship may still be fundamentally competitive, but it will be less militarized and safer. . . . U.S. policy will encourage fundamental political and economic reform, including freely contested elections, in East-Central Europe, so that states in that region may once again be productive members of a prosperous, peaceful, and democratic Europe, whole and free of fear of Soviet intervention.¹⁷

In short, the Bush administration did *not* intend to destabilize the Soviet Union (though it did envision the breakup of the Warsaw Pact). This is a subtle, but significant, difference from the policy of the Reagan administration, which said that the United States would seek to exploit fissures within the Warsaw Pact and the weakness of the Soviet economy. The Bush administration, in contrast, aimed to use economic pressure as a means to encourage the existing regime to moderate. National Security Directive 23 said:

The purpose of our forces is not to put pressure on a weak Soviet economy or to seek military superiority. Rather, U.S. policy recognizes the need to provide a hedge against uncertain long-term developments in the Soviet Union and to impress upon the Soviet leadership the wisdom of pursuing a responsible course. . . . Where possible, the United States should promote Western values and ideas within the Soviet Union, not in the spirit of provocation or destabilization, but as a means to lay a firm foundation for a cooperative relationship.

Note that the directive says “impress upon the *Soviet* leadership [emphasis added]”—meaning that the U.S. leadership expected the Soviet regime to remain in place as the directive was implemented. The Reagan administration's view was different, as expressed in President Reagan's address to the British Parliament on 8 June 1982:

I have discussed on other occasions . . . the elements of Western policies toward the Soviet Union to safeguard our interests and protect the peace. What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.¹⁸

In other words, the Reagan administration might not have sought the collapse of the Soviet regime, but it envisioned that the regime would fall, and thus would have been less surprised by the collapse. Significantly, the Reagan policy was adopted before Gorbachev rose to power and provided, in the words of Great Britain's then-Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, someone with whom "we can do business." Had there been a third Reagan administration, it might have come to resemble the Bush administration as it adjusted to changes in Soviet realities.

In any event, the Bush policy was predicated on continuing to deal with the Soviet regime. So when the regime collapsed, as Bush recalled, the natural tendency was for observers to ask if the administration had been caught unaware. Apparently it was, but if so, that was not because of an intelligence failure, but rather the result of an intentional policy decision to support Gorbachev to the end.

THE REAL THING

Americans *know* what an actual intelligence failure looks like. Recall, for example, the August 1978 assessment by the CIA that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a pre-revolutionary state," six months before the Shah fell.¹⁹ Or more recently, the October 2002 NIE, which said that, "in the view of most agencies, Baghdad is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program."²⁰ Analysts lose sleep over these kinds of statements because, despite the cliché about coordinated intelligence reflecting the lowest common denominator, a hallmark of American intelligence analysis is the constant pressure to publish clear, definitive statements. So when the analysis is wrong, it is apt to be clearly wrong.

Conversely, when it is correct, it is clearly correct. Only the most convoluted reasoning can turn the summaries and key judgments of the Intelligence Community's analysis of the Soviet Union in the 1980s into a case that the IC "missed" the Soviet collapse.

Holding intelligence organizations accountable for their performance is important. But acknowledging when intelligence is successful is equally important. So, too, is appreciating the differences between an intelligence failure and policy frailties whose sources lie elsewhere. Without an understanding that such things can happen, being blindsided in the future is certain.

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