

Introduction

“The Cold War was a struggle for the very soul of mankind,” former president George Herbert Walker Bush wrote a few years ago. “It was a struggle for a way of life.”¹

A decade ago, when I began work on this book, I would not have thought that I would come to view the Cold War in this manner. Several years previously, in 1989 and 1990, when I was finishing a volume on the Truman administration’s national security policies, I was stunned by contemporary developments. Free governments arose in Eastern Europe. The Berlin Wall came down. Germany was unified. Soviet-American competition in the Third World abated. The Cold War ended.

I had never imagined that these events would occur in my lifetime. Less than a decade before, the Cold War seemed to be entering a deep freeze. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union appeared more ominously hostile than any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Responsible officials talked and wrote about waging and winning nuclear wars. People in Moscow and Washington read stories about surprise attacks. Ideological foes inspired by malicious intentions were alleged to be on the prowl seeking to take advantage of windows of opportunity to gain a preponderance of power. If officials were not vigilant, and the same language was used in Moscow as well as in Washington, the adversary would employ its military power to blackmail the other. Concessions would have domino effects. Allies would lose faith, clients would feel betrayed, the world balance of power would be upset, and vital security interests would be impaired. Leaders

in Moscow and Washington never tired of telling their people that their way of life was at stake. The Cold War, it seemed, would last indefinitely or end in catastrophe.

Most of us were therefore astonished by the turn of events in the late 1980s. Within the half dozen years between 1985 and 1991, the configuration of power in the international system was transformed and an ideological struggle that had engulfed the globe for approximately a half century was ended.

How did this happen? Powerful men, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, seemed to have left a dramatic imprint on the course of history. But if they were able to shape history so decisively, I began to wonder whether other leaders might have done likewise. Why, after all, did the Cold War last as long as it did? Might there have been other moments, other opportunities when the conflict could have been resolved? If men so different ideologically as Reagan and Gorbachev could muster the will and the ability to reconfigure the Soviet-American relationship, might their predecessors have done so? Did they ever think of doing so? If so, why did they fail and why did Reagan and Gorbachev succeed?

Tantalizing documents and memoirs from Moscow, Budapest, Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, and Beijing began to appear. As I read many of the new books and articles based on these archival materials and as I began examining the documents themselves, I was struck with a surprising fact that was often submerged beneath the more dramatic details about espionage, subversion, nuclear blackmail, and proxy wars: leaders in Moscow as well as Washington often realized that their competition was counter-productive. They often grasped the liabilities of the Cold War dynamic. They knew that the global rivalry diverted resources from domestic priorities. They knew that the arms race made little

sense. They realized that the Cold War involved them in civil wars and regional conflicts in Asia and Africa that bore little relation to the vital interests of their own nations. They recognized that local crises in far-away places might engage them in escalatory measures that could spiral out of control and lead to a nuclear exchange.

On the one hand, these new documents suggested that the Cold War leaders were wiser or, at least, more knowledgeable, than I had imagined. They understood the risks they were taking and calculated the tradeoffs they were making. Although this was interesting, it was also troubling. Why did they continue a rivalry that courted disaster for all of humankind? Why did they continue a rivalry that diverted resources from priorities their own people clearly favored? Why were they not content to demonstrate the superiority of their way of life without arms races and proxy wars? If they grasped, even occasionally, that they had much to gain from avoiding a Cold War, or modulating it, or disengaging from it, why did they not do so? And why did things change in the mid-1980s?

Many explanations have been given for the behavior of the two superpowers during the Cold War. Some of them focus on great men, some of whom were outrageously evil, like Joseph Stalin, and some of whom spoke nobly about freedom and diversity, like John F. Kennedy, and all of whom are fascinating to us -- for the power they wielded and for the potential they possessed to do good or bad in the world.

Other explanations of the behavior of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War focus on the configuration of power in the international system. All governments, it is argued, respond to dynamics in the international environment that are beyond their control. They seek to fill power vacuums or, alternatively, strive to survive

in a dangerous world where threats abound and where the naïve are punished if they are lucky and perish if they are not.

But governments do not simply respond to changes in the international environment. Governments are run by men and women with ideas and historical memories. Their beliefs and memories influence their understanding of what is going on in the world and shape the perception of threat and of opportunity. They also inspire dreams and visions about what might be accomplished at home and abroad.

Yet leaders cannot always do what they aspire to do because they are buffeted by domestic interest groups, by public opinion, and by powerful bureaucracies. Democratic statesmen are always sensitive to domestic constituencies and to legislative-executive relationships, and they are sometimes beholden to economic interest groups whose views they may or may not share. Leaders in authoritarian, even totalitarian, countries must also contend with bureaucracies that have divergent aims and concerns. No leader, anywhere, acts in a domestic vacuum in which policy can be made with indifference to internal constituents, bureaucracies, and interest groups.

Leaders also have their constituents abroad, formal allies and sometimes informal clients. These governments have their own interests, which they pursue vigorously, sometimes with cunning and guile and sometimes with a dazzling candor and boldness. These clients and allies are never as weak as they may seem, and great powers aiming for hegemony cannot disregard them.

In seeking to understand why the Cold War lasted as long as it did, I have pondered the role of human agency. I have looked at the realist theories that focus on power and survival and that dwell on the distribution of power in the international

system. I have examined the influence of ideas, ideologies, and historical memories and pondered how officials construct their own realities. I have weighed the impact of domestic opinion, interest groups, and bureaucracies, including the military-industrial complexes. I have tried to analyze the role of allies and clients. My desire was to follow the trail of the evidence, keeping in mind the many persuasive interpretations of great-power behavior during the Cold War. Yes, of course, this is a naïve statement. Its intent is to suggest that I was not consciously wed to a particular theory, and that I had an open mind about the interpretative power of different lines of inquiry. I wanted to think about all of them and weigh them against the evidence.

The documentation intrigued me. The records newly opened in Moscow and other communist countries after 1989 are fascinating, records that most scholars never imagined seeing during the Cold War. Of course, they are incomplete, but they are suggestive. Access to Russian materials has waxed and waned over the last fifteen years. I have relied heavily on documents translated by the Cold War International History Project, the National Security Archive, and the Miller Center of the University of Virginia. For American records, I have spent lots of time at the presidential libraries and the National Archives. Normally, U.S. national security documents less than twenty-five years old would not be available in any significant numbers, but many of the most important ones can now be seen in the collections of the Cold War International History Project and the National Security Archive. They and their institutional affiliates in the United States and around the globe have held “oral history” conferences with leading Cold War decision-makers. For these meetings, they secured the declassification of treasure troves of documents, which I have employed systematically. In the latter parts of

this book, I use these records to examine the erosion of détente in the 1970s and the end of the Cold War in the 1980s. There are fascinating transcripts of the meetings of Leonid Brezhnev with Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and even more illuminating transcripts of the discussions between Gorbachev and Reagan. If I can convey a sense of the richness of these materials, I will have accomplished a good deal.

This book is not, however, a narrative history of the Cold War. Rather, it is an examination of five “moments” in the Cold War, that is, short intervals of time when officials in both Moscow and Washington thought about avoiding or modulating the extreme tension and hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union. By exploring their motives and analyzing why they made the choices they did, I seek to illuminate the underlying dynamics of the Cold War without describing its overall history.

The “moments” I have chosen are for illustrative purposes, but they are also fascinating episodes in the Cold War. All through its history, U.S. and Soviet leaders struggled with cross-cutting pressures. I suggest that the dynamics were similar across time as the ideas of policymakers intersected with the evolving international system. Postwar ferment in Europe, decolonization and revolutionary nationalism in Asia and Africa, and the revival of German (and Japanese) power were systemic conditions that captured the attention and circumscribed the options of policymakers in Moscow and Washington. But the choices they thought they had available were also powerfully influenced by their ideological mindsets and historical memories. Ideas, ideologies, beliefs, and experience shaped their perceptions of threat and of opportunity arising from circumstances often beyond the control of even the most powerful men on earth.

My focus is on leaders, since I am interested in human agency as well as contingency in history. I look at Stalin and Truman; Eisenhower and Malenkov; Khrushchev, Kennedy, and Johnson; Brezhnev and Carter; Gorbachev, Reagan, and Bush at times when they believed they had choices to make. What did they want to do? What were their goals? Their motives? To what extent were they trapped by circumstance, pressured by allies or clients, buffeted by domestic constituencies, or imprisoned by ideas and historical memories? These men grappled with decisions that were of enormous consequence for their own people and for human society worldwide. I want to convey a sense of the pressures they faced, the options they pondered, and the choices they made. Their decisions were often agonizing, far less predetermined than one might think, yet always shaped by a multitude of conflicting pressures and cross-cutting priorities.

These decision-makers could not control the fundamental dynamics. World War II wrought destruction beyond human comprehension, unleashed unexpected political and social developments, bequeathed unanticipated configurations of power in the international arena, and catalyzed an unwanted atomic arms race. For three decades thereafter, peoples in Asia and Africa clamored for their independence and yearned for rapid modernization, embracing revolutionary nationalist discourses that neither their former colonial masters nor Moscow nor Washington could easily control. And once postwar reconstruction began, the questions of German and Japanese revival hovered over the capitals of the world. For decision-makers in Moscow and Washington as well as in all European capitals no question was more important than the future of Germany. Would Germany stay divided? Would Germany be democratic? Would Germany be peaceful?

The meanings attributed to developments in the international arena were influenced by ideological axioms and historical experience. Marxism-Leninism and democratic capitalism shaped the visions of policymakers. Leaders in Moscow and Washington sincerely believed they possessed the formula for the good life, and I have tried to capture the words they used in order to convey the intensity of their convictions. Not only did they believe that their nations embodied a superior way of life, but their beliefs and memories affected their construction of “reality” – their perception of threats and of opportunities in a turbulent world. Leaders had trouble liberating themselves from these ideas and memories even when they saw reason to do so, and they also knew that the shared heritage of national meaning could be used to mobilize their people to incur sacrifices they might otherwise question. In turn, the resonance of these ideals and memories among key constituencies circumscribed the latitude of the decision-makers themselves.

What is fascinating is that public discourse did not depart a great deal from private discussion. In the records we now have of the meetings of the leaders with one another and with their advisers we can see vividly how ideas, memories, and assumptions shaped each player’s interpretations of the adversary’s intentions and influenced their decision-making. We can see how ideas also shaped the definition of national and other interests. But ideas were inseparable from the international environment. The transcripts of the meetings of Reagan and Gorbachev, for example, attest to the power of ideas, and to the fears and hopes they engendered, as the two men grappled with international developments that were seamlessly woven into the fabric of the times.

This book is about men and their ideas and their fears and their hopes. It is about ideology and memory. It is about structure and agency. It seeks to explain why the Cold War lasted as long as it did and why it finally ended.

It argues that the Cold War was a struggle for the soul of humankind. Officials in Washington and Moscow intermittently grasped its consequences, glimpsed the possibilities of *détente*, and yearned for peace, but they could not escape their fears or relinquish their dreams. Around the globe peoples were struggling to define their future and disputing the benefits of alternative ways of life. Nobody can understand the Cold War without recognizing the disillusionment felt by Europeans after decades of war, depression, and genocide. Nobody can understand the Cold War without grasping the aspirations of Asian, African, and Latin American peoples for autonomy, modernization, and material advancement. Nobody can comprehend the Cold War without recognizing the fears that German recovery inspired in European capitals.

With so much turbulence, so much fear, and so much possibility, powerful men were often imprisoned by their ideas and memory, by the pressures of allies and clients, and by the demands of constituents and the impulses of military and civilian bureaucrats rather than inspired by calculations of rational interests. They thought they were struggling for the souls of mankind. Yet in their quest for salvation and vindication, they made decisions that even by their own calculations perpetuated an often self-defeating conflict.

This is a story, then, of lost opportunities, and it shows how opportunities are lost when leaders who wield great power are also engulfed by circumstance and entrapped by ideology and memory. We can empathize with their fears and hopes and we can

condemn their brutality and foolishness. Most of all, we should seek to understand their behavior and appreciate the courage and determination that it took for Gorbachev and Reagan (and Bush) to escape from a dynamic that had imprisoned their predecessors. This book does not seek to explain the collapse of communist rule in Soviet Russia or the disintegration of the Soviet Union. If it provides some insight into the dynamics of the Cold War, its cycles of détente and crises, that will suffice.

¹ George H. W. Bush, "Introduction," At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War, by Thomas C. Reed (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 1.