

A Surprise Peace

I really do inhabit a system in which words are capable of shaking the entire structure of government, where words can prove mightier than ten military divisions.

VÁCLAV HAVEL, speech accepting peace prize, 15 October 1989¹

The major powers avoided catastrophe by scaring themselves into caution. But if, thankfully, wars were unlikely to be fought that left those designing, constructing, and sustaining conventional armed forces with a perplexing task. The word ‘conventional’ suggested some link with the past ‘conventions’ of classical warfare, but it was hard to see their point when there was no obvious route to a decisive battlefield victory against a nuclear-armed opponent. The residual role of conventional force could only be one of reinforcing deterrence, holding a defensive line against an enemy offensive, or ensuring that the enemy’s advance was costly and painful. At best this would allow sufficient time for second thoughts and active negotiations; at worst it would create the powder trail that would take the war to its explosive climax.

During the Cold War it was assumed that the Warsaw Pact had numbers and geography on its side, so that if it chose it could expand into Western Europe without resort to nuclear weapons. The fateful choice would be up to NATO: to surrender or accept nuclear suicide. The Americans, from the other side of the Atlantic, were deeply uncomfortable with the thought that war in Europe could put their homeland so directly at risk. While in

private they doubted whether a president would ever actually take the nuclear initiative, in public they played down their anxieties lest they undermine the credibility of the deterrent. The obvious way out of the dilemma was to improve conventional forces so that at least they had alternative responses to aggression. The Americans worked to separate the nuclear from the conventional, with a firebreak between the two, and to encourage NATO to build up its regular forces. Eventually in 1967 a compromise doctrine of 'flexible response' was adopted, whereby the Europeans recognised the US requirement for an extended conventional stage, so that the first shots across the Iron Curtain would not lead automatically to a nuclear holocaust. In return, the US accepted the need for a clear link between a land war in Europe and its own strategic nuclear arsenal.²

It was impossible to know how well flexible response would work in practice, but the introduction of flexibility into the response meant that it was at least possible that a major war would not turn to nuclear exchanges as automatically as had been supposed. Nightmarish images of a Third World War had dominated the literature. As the risk of a superpower war appeared to subside, the harder it was to conjure up any scenario in which a moderately sane leader would risk a major war let alone authorise nuclear use. That did not prevent occasional war scares. From the mid-1970s hawkish commentators began to conjure up scenarios involving Soviet invasions. In turn this led to fears, captured by well-supported anti-nuclear movements, that an exaggerated response to this alarmism might lead to a nuclear apocalypse.³

IN LATE 1976 GENERAL SIR JOHN HACKETT, A FORMER NATO commander, brought together a group of retired senior colleagues from the British military, bolstered by the deputy editor of *The Economist*, to see whether they could describe how a Third World War might come about.⁴ Their aim, in the tradition of *The Battle of Dorking*, was to use fiction to make a case for greater military preparedness. *The Third World War: A Future History* was a surprising bestseller (over 3 million copies worldwide), read by British prime ministers and American presidents.⁵ Hackett's team stuck to what was already in the public domain about weapons and doctrines, using

maps and illustrations. They envisaged a war starting in 1985, which was quite soon. There were still so many unanticipated events that a new version had to be brought out in 1982, now only looking a couple of years ahead.⁶ One reason for the short timescale, according to Hackett, was that he was not trying to write science fiction, and he did not want to give away any secrets about future weapons.

‘Without much in the way of characters or plot’, Brians observed, ‘the books are almost unreadable; but they provide a fascinating glimpse into the mind of one of the military strategists associated with NATO.’⁷ There had been a forerunner, written in 1977 by Belgian Brigadier General Robert Close. This reflected concerns about the improvements in Soviet conventional capabilities. The most alarming scenario was that the alliance could be caught out by a ‘bolt from the blue’ standing start by the Warsaw Pact, with a minimum of mobilisation, leading to Europe being overrun in a couple of days.⁸ This message was captured in the stark title of Close’s book, *Europe Without Defence?*⁹ Another, potentially rival, book also published in 1978, with a similar title to Hackett’s, had an equally bleak message, this time with the alliance only managing to hold off for four days before the nuclear exchanges began.¹⁰

After thirty years of cold war it was unlikely that the Soviet Union was itching to mount an attack on the West or that Moscow had a convincing plan for a knockout blow. Hackett’s view was that war between the two alliances was more likely to come ‘not by design but by coincidence of miscalculation and mischance’. The danger would come if a number of crises developed together and then some spark turned them into a conflagration, comparable to the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in 1914. If this happened, NATO would be in trouble because its forces had been run down while those of the Warsaw Pact had continued to be built up. NATO could not sustain a high intensity war for long. The scenario envisaged a quick takeover of West Germany. All would not quite be lost because eventually, after a couple of years, the United States would gain command of the sea, sort out the Middle East and then launch a liberating offensive from France. Hackett was told by ‘responsible people’ that, however credible, this prospect was too dismal and harmful to the alliance. Close’s book had undermined morale rather than strengthened resolve. He

accepted the point, acknowledging that ‘a cautionary tale that makes children pee in their beds, instead of frightening them into a sense of doing better, has failed in its object’.¹¹ So Hackett started again, this time assuming that the West did something right and made serious efforts to improve defences, while the Warsaw Pact did little more. Now the war could all be over within a few weeks. Instead of the rush to a cataclysm which had been the hallmark of nuclear age fiction, the book envisaged only tentative nuclear employment, somewhat late in the day. Having a limited nuclear exchange showed that it was still hard to write these weapons completely out of the script, but now also hard to develop a convincing scenario for war when they were present. The purpose of the Soviet Union’s limited strike was to hit Birmingham to get Britain out of the war. This failed when Minsk was hit in retaliation and triggered the break-up of the Soviet Union. Just as Chesney piled up negative assumptions with the result that Britain was narrowly defeated at Dorking, Hackett piled up the positive assumptions so that NATO just won in 1985. The message was that without extra defence spending NATO risked failure. Another message was to keep alliances in good repair.

By contrast to Hackett, with his substantial military experience, Tom Clancy was an insurance agent who wrote in his spare time. This was until he got his breakthrough in 1984 with a thriller, *The Hunt for Red October*. Much of this book’s appeal lay in the technical detail which Clancy had obtained from a voracious reading of naval literature. The story involved the defection of a Typhoon class Soviet submarine, with a Lithuanian captain who loathed the Soviet system. The drama resulted from the efforts of the Soviet fleet to prevent the boat, containing the most advanced sonar technology, falling into American hands.

His next book, *Red Storm Rising*, was more in line with Hackett’s.¹² Like Hackett, Clancy did not go too far into the future and drew on the politics and technology of the time. He had help on the military side from a former naval officer and material in the public domain. The possibility of a new aircraft (which turned out to be the F-117) employing stealth technology so that it would be missed by radar was long discussed in the specialist technical press before its existence was admitted in 1988, two years after Clancy’s book appeared. The plot was complex. It included

Islamic terrorists from Azerbaijan creating an energy crisis by destroying vital Soviet oil facilities, leading to Soviet seizure of Gulf oil fields; a direct Warsaw Pact attack against West Germany, justified after framing West German activists for a deadly attack on a Moscow school; and the NATO air station at Keflavik, Iceland, seized (again using deception) allowing Soviet submarines to get into the Atlantic to disrupt resupply convoys. The fight back involved stealth bombers, cruise missiles, and the Marines retaking Iceland, before Soviet forces ran out of fuel, giving NATO an opportunity to turn things around with a bold move. A split in the Soviet leadership allowed for a swift and negotiated end to the fighting. No nuclear weapons were used and, in the end, no territory changed hands.

President Reagan was a fan of Clancy's. He described *The Hunt for Red October* as a 'perfect yarn'. He was even more enthusiastic about *Red Storm Rising* for it vindicated his own prejudices.¹³ The president suspected the Soviet leadership to be fully capable of the sort of deception Clancy described, which included planning a war while offering the Americans arms reductions. Yet at the same time he was appalled by the prospect of nuclear war. In 1983 he launched what he called a 'strategic defence initiative' to develop layered defences against a Soviet missile attack. Better, he said, to save American lives from a nuclear attack than to avenge them after one.¹⁴ This was why Clancy's other message, that NATO could defend itself without resort to nuclear threats, appealed to him. In 1986 he discussed the book with advisers en route to Reykjavik, Iceland's capital, for a summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. There over two extraordinary days the two men almost agreed on drastic reductions in their nuclear arsenals. Reagan's refusal to concede his strategic defence initiative resulted in failure. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a convinced advocate of nuclear deterrence, was alarmed at how far Reagan had been prepared to go down the non-nuclear route. When they met in October 1986 he urged her to read Clancy's book to calm her fears. A British official recorded: 'It gave an excellent picture of the Soviet Union's intentions and strategy. He had clearly been much impressed by the book.'¹⁵

Both books picked up on the unease surrounding nuclear weapons and

the possibility that a major war could be won without mutual destruction. Hackett relied on a growing defence budget: Clancy saw more clearly how the qualitative edge in conventional forces was shifting to the United States and that this might reduce the need to depend on nuclear threats. Both also were sensitive to the crisis in the Soviet system, although neither anticipated that the system would implode at the end of the decade, let alone that this would be triggered by a loss of legitimacy rather than failure in war. Clancy was still imagining a war between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1991, even after the Warsaw Pact had fallen apart.¹⁶ Hackett assumed, as did almost all commentators at this time, that Moscow would take a hard line against dissidence. Yet it was essential to his plot that the old guard in the Kremlin knew that 'time was running out'. In the event, instead of a war launched to hold the Soviet bloc together, 1985 saw Mikhail Gorbachev become president and the start of a process that would soon lead to the peaceful break-up of the Soviet bloc.

JUST AS THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION WAS A RESPONSE TO the inability of the old regime to cope with war it was not unreasonable to assume that it would take a war to create the crisis that would break the Soviet system. There was always a possibility that a regime that saw a deep threat to its position would take risks that in other circumstances would be rejected as foolhardy. This was why much Cold War diplomacy accepted that it was best not to push the Soviet leadership to a point where it might be provoked into recklessness. It was one thing, however to follow this principle when considering geopolitical spheres of influence but quite another when addressing the ideological contest at the core of the East-West divide. Western countries were not going to stop promoting a liberal political philosophy for fear of upsetting the Soviet leadership. This is why scenarios for war by the 1980s tended to involve a crisis of legitimacy within the Soviet system, probably involving one of the satellite states. This developing instability on the one hand promised a way to bring the Cold War to a satisfactory conclusion but on the other hand might prompt precisely those conditions which might trigger war.

Communist rule depended on the twin assumptions that any challenge would be dealt with ruthlessly and that the West would do nothing about it.

These assumptions had been validated by experience. In 1956 after a rebellion threw out the communists, a new Hungarian government announced its intention to leave the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union sent in tanks to crush the rebellion. Although the uprising was home-grown, it had been actively encouraged by the Voice of America.¹⁷ Yet American military action, warned US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, 'would... precipitate a full-scale world war and probably the result of that would be all these people wiped out.'¹⁸ The brutal logic of a divided Europe was underlined again in 1968. This time the Czech Communist Party moved to liberalise the system, though they were careful not to threaten to leave the Warsaw Pact. It made no difference. On 20 August 1968 the tanks went in again. Following this sad episode, NATO countries concluded that the political divide in Europe was permanent and began to develop policies of détente to manage the relationship between the continent's two halves. The implications of this were spelt out in a document signed by Presidents Richard Nixon of the United States and Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union on the basic principles that could underpin a new superpower relationship: 'Differences in ideology and in the social systems of the USA and USSR are not obstacles to the bilateral development of normal relations based on the principles of sovereignty, equality, non-interference in internal affairs and mutual advantage.'¹⁹

Yet as this statement was made a shift was taking place that encouraged the subversion of the official Marxism-Leninism of the Warsaw Pact. Late in 1972 negotiations began on a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). For three years intense discussions took place (it took four months to agree an agenda) over a declaration that had no legal force. On 1 August 1975 the leaders of thirty-four states (plus the Vatican) met in Helsinki to sign what was described as its Final Act. This involved four 'baskets'. The first covered political and military issues, territorial integrity, the definition of borders, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the implementation of confidence-building measures between opposing militaries. The second focused on economic issues like trade and scientific cooperation. The third basket emphasised human rights, including freedom of emigration and reunification of families divided by international borders, cultural exchanges, and freedom of the press. The fourth and final

basket was about further meetings and implementation.

Most of what Moscow wanted was in the first two baskets. It was the third that proved the most controversial. In one respect it appeared pointless because of deep Soviet opposition to any serious liberalisation. This is why the Nixon Administration was reluctant to expend valuable political capital on 'gestures' that would have no effect. West European governments wanted to keep up the pressure on the issue. The Soviet bloc resisted, pushing instead promises to refrain from the use of force, respect for territorial integrity, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and especially 'non-interference in internal affairs'. In the end, Moscow wanted the first two baskets too much to let their problems with the third be an obstacle. They chose to accept the language with the intention of then ignoring it. This meant signing up to a statement about human rights as 'deriving from the inherent dignity of the human person' and a requirement that they be not only respected but also promoted as a means to achieve peace and friendly relations between states. Moscow just noted that none of this would be binding under international law and there would be no legislative changes in the socialist states.²⁰

US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's views had been shaped by his own experiences of war and disorder, leaving him with little confidence in proposals for pooling sovereignty or sharing values as means of reducing international conflict. His view was that if peace was the ideal then that meant holding in check other ideals, and being prepared for the hard and often bitter grind of compromise and accommodation, requiring patience, discretion, and occasional guile. This was not a foreign policy for which there was a natural constituency in the United States. It offended liberal idealism by its hard-headed, amoral focus on national interests, and perturbed them by bringing results of which they approved, including détente, without a complementary stress on the judicial settlement of disputes or disarmament. It offended conservatives by shrinking away from a key principle that separated the Western bloc from the Eastern. To play down human rights was to allow the Soviets the conceit that one great power was as good as another, deserving of equal respect, despite the fact that the communist system was oppressing whole nations, as well as denying basic political rights.²¹

In a speech on the ‘Moral Foundations of Foreign Policy’ in 1975 Kissinger reminded his audience of the disastrous consequences of a major war and the obligation this created ‘to seek a more productive and stable relationship despite the basic antagonism of our values.’ The US was now in a position common to most other nations in history, unable either to escape from the world or to dominate it. It was not that it was impossible to use influence to promote human rights, but it was best done ‘quietly, keeping in mind the delicacy of the problem and stressing results rather than public confrontation.’²²

By contrast, President Jimmy Carter, who won the 1976 election, made human rights one of the themes of his inaugural address. He denied the tension between the moral and the pragmatic. The United States had a special obligation: ‘to take on those moral duties which, when assumed, seem invariably to be in our own best interests’. He described an ‘absolute’ commitment to human rights, a need to demonstrate to others that ‘our democratic system is worthy of emulation’. This led to a promise for a new foreign policy: ‘We will not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rules and standards here at home, for we know that the trust which our Nation earns is essential to our strength.’ The times were changing:

The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving, and now demanding, their place in the sun—not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights.²³

By this time the 1975 Final Act was already providing dissidents in communist countries with a new tactic. They could assume their governments’ sincerity and then challenge them to uphold the Helsinki provisions and ask Western governments to provide support when they did so. This was the case with the Czechoslovak movement, Charter 77. The Charter was a four-page document with 242 signatures offering to help the government meet its various constitutional and international obligations, drawing particular attention to the Helsinki Final Act.²⁴ The regime sought to discredit the document as ‘anti-state, anti-socialist, and demagogic’. As signatories were denounced and thrown out of their jobs,

international indignation grew. Helsinki now gave Western governments a reason to comment, replacing caution about interference in internal affairs with references to violations of the Final Act. For a while at least, this gave the regime pause, although they could never acknowledge much of a choice between being shown up as hypocrites and allowing a popular movement to develop that could see them overthrown.

One of the most eloquent exponents of this ‘new spirit’ was Václav Havel, a successful playwright, and one of the leaders of the movement behind Charter 77.²⁵ He asked whether human rights could be sacrificed for the sake of peace. His starting point was that life under totalitarianism was a form of death. It was not true, he wrote, that Czechoslovakia was ‘free of warfare and murder’. They had just taken different forms, and had ‘been shifted from the daylight of observable public events, to the twilight of unobservable inner destruction’, presenting as ‘the slow, secretive, bloodless, never quite-absolute, yet horrifyingly ever-present death of non-action, non-story, non-life, and non-time.’ Thus to argue that it would be better to accept communism for the sake of peace, better ‘red than dead’, was only to offer ‘an infallible sign that the speaker has given up his humanity’, by being ready to sacrifice what makes life meaningful and accept impersonal power. He recalled, as an example, ‘West German colleagues and friends’ avoiding him in the early 1970s for fear that contact with someone out of favour with the government ‘would needlessly provoke that government and thereby jeopardize the fragile foundations of nascent détente.’ Havel cited this voluntary renunciation of freedom as an example of how easy it was ‘for a well-meant cause to betray its good intentions’.²⁶

WHEN MIKHAIL GORBACHEV BECAME SOVIET LEADER IN 1985 his aim was not to push human rights but to reform the sclerotic system which he could see to be failing by every measure.²⁷ Unlike those he replaced, his world-view had not been shaped by the war with Germany, and he had not worked closely with the military-industrial complex that dominated the economy. The more he discovered about the baleful, distorting influence of this complex, depriving all other sectors of resources and talent, the more he was convinced that it had to be cut back. If this was to be achieved then

somehow relations with the West had to be calmed and put on to a new and more cooperative path.

From the start Gorbachev was keen to meet with Western leaders and try to chart a new way forward. A succession of summits encouraged commentators to believe that a healthy dialogue was underway and East-West relations should be calmer in the future. Gorbachev's problem was that he was still presiding over a continental empire. This included not only the satellite states of Eastern Europe, each with their own Communist Party, but also those Soviet Socialist Republics who had been acquired by Russia in the past and, in the case of the Baltic States, recently against their will.

For the empire to hold together required local party bosses to follow the path of reform he had set out for the Soviet Union. Yet many were unwilling or unable to follow him. In practice the choice was to accept dependence upon the security apparatus to maintain party control or to allow the empire to fragment. It took until 1989 before this choice became stark. With a number of Warsaw Pact countries already departing from the old ways and showing their independence, Gorbachev could not bring himself to side with the hardliners, especially those in East Germany who were demanding resistance to the West's 'human rights demagogy'. Those reformers who were in power, as in Hungary, were confident that their displays of independence would not result in military action.²⁸

In a landmark speech to the United Nations in December 1988 Gorbachev effectively renounced the use of force and asserted a 'credo' that 'political problems should only be solved by political means'.²⁹ If Gorbachev really thought that the countries that had been coerced into adopting a Stalinist system could move as one along the path of reform he was mistaken. Without force to hold the system in place not only the Warsaw Pact but also the Soviet Union itself fragmented. The system turned out to be rotten. The ideological glue which generations of Soviet leaders had tried to spread so thickly failed to hold.³⁰ Anatoly Dobrynin, Gorbachev's former ambassador to the US, reported that the Soviet leader 'never foresaw that the whole of Eastern Europe would fly out of the Soviet orbit within months or that the Warsaw Pact would crumble so soon. He became the helpless witness to the consequences of his own

policy’.³¹

Why did this rush of developments, viewed with a mixture of astonishment, suspicion, relief, and gratitude, catch the Western intelligence and foreign policy communities so much by surprise? The question was asked with the same intensity as if they had been caught out by a surprise military attack. The same problems of prediction were evident: deciding how to interpret the public pronouncements of the leadership (whose predecessors had been habitually deceptive), picking up real indicators of change amid the noise of conflicting signals, addressing the logic of the situation, and so appreciating the choices to be faced. Not only could there be no certainty about how Gorbachev would actually choose, it was only late in the day that he saw with any clarity the nature of the choice. In reviewing these events it is always important to keep in mind that during that same summer of 1989, as dramatic events were unfolding in Europe, the Chinese Communist Party was facing its own crisis, with mass demonstrations in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square demanding reform. In this case the party leadership decided not to take the risk of liberalising the system and instead clamped down ruthlessly.

Military strength had always been assumed to be the Soviet Union’s greatest asset, available in extremis to get the regime out of trouble. Whatever contrary evidence might be produced, the mindset was one in which the Soviet Union had enormous capabilities and would do whatever was necessary for the sake of its security. It was unimaginable that when the moment came that Moscow would not deploy its armed forces, emphasised by the West for so long, to prevent a catastrophic upheaval that would reduce forever its international standing. There had been decades of talking up Soviet military power. The 1980s had begun with the Reagan Administration issuing a series of alarming and lavishly illustrated publications with projections on how it was going to get even stronger. The 1985 version spoke of an ‘unceasing introduction of new nuclear and conventional Soviet military capabilities’. The secretary of defense’s preface opened with a quote from a NATO document referring to the Warsaw Pact’s emphasis on ‘the element of surprise and the necessity of rapid offensive operations’.³² The September 1990 edition published after the fall of the Berlin Wall acknowledged the changes underway and the

greater openness shown in Moscow when discussing the problems posed by its excessively large military establishment. Yet it still insisted that it would be wrong to conclude, ‘no matter how much we might wish it’, that this was ‘an eviscerated force structure and an evaporating threat’.³³ It was hard to accept that the USSR might one day do what ‘other declining powers have been impelled to do in history: that is, retreat from an empire it could neither afford to support nor hope to control over the longer term’.³⁴

A National Intelligence Estimate of May 1988 noted how Gorbachev’s policies had ‘increased the potential for instability in Eastern Europe,’ but offered comparatively mild scenarios as its outliers, certainly compared with what was to come. Though the estimate noted that Gorbachev faced ‘greater constraints than did his predecessors against intervening militarily in Eastern Europe’, it still assumed that ‘in extremis’ he would ‘intervene to preserve party rule and decisive Soviet influence in the region.’ Even as the real drama was about to begin in 1989 the CIA saw change coming but was still thinking in terms of years rather than weeks. As the instability took hold the intelligence community was still debating how far this might go.³⁵

The problem in part was one of failing to appreciate the deep structural weaknesses of the system, despite evidence of poor economic performance, awful demographic projections, and a progressive loss of legitimacy. The failings were well known, and they had led to a number of predictions that the system could not sustain itself. One of the most famous was dissident Andrei Amalrik’s 1970 pamphlet, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* The date had no significance other than the link with George Orwell. No state that devoted ‘so much of its energies to physically and psychologically controlling millions of its own subjects’, Amalrik argued, could survive indefinitely. Eventually the ‘Soviet Union will have to pay up in full for the territorial annexations of Stalin and for the isolation in which the neo-Stalinists have placed the country.’³⁶ More significantly Ronald Reagan had asserted strongly at the start of his presidency that in the ideological competition with the United States, the Soviet Union was bound to lose.

What we see here is a political structure that no longer corresponds to its economic base, a society where productive forces are hampered by political ones... 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.³⁷

Yet the weight of the Sovietology community, in both academia and government, was much more cautious, convinced that the system was remarkably resilient and also capable of adjusting. Warnings of collapse tended to be dismissed as the wishful thinking of mavericks and right-wingers. Many asserted, almost to the last moment of the regime, that it would endure. Having spent their careers exploring how the system survived decades of tragedy, including revolution, civil war, famine, purges, and invasion, they assumed it could cope with economic trouble. The mainstream view was expressed that ‘short of some unexpected catastrophe, the Soviet economy is unlikely to come close to collapse.... In the end, Gorbachev, like his predecessors, will probably have to settle for an economy that has to rely more on its natural riches than on its creative potential.’³⁸ If anything Gorbachev appeared as the man who would revive the system by reforming it. One problem here was that those economists studying the Soviet economy did not realise just how bad things were, not least because official statistics were largely fictional. The only exception to the sanguine view came from students of the ‘nationalities problem’ in the Soviet Union who recognised that the system was struggling to cope with its internal political tensions.³⁹

The Bush Administration, which took over at the start of 1989, did not share Reagan’s optimism about likely Soviet failure. Their concern was that a reformed Soviet system would simply be a more challenging opponent. This was the view of former President Nixon who when he published a forward look in 1988 saw Gorbachev as changing the Soviet image but not the substance. He considered ‘a more prosperous, productive Soviet Union’ likely to be ‘a more formidable opponent, not less, than it is today.’⁴⁰ National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft worried that the whole Gorbachev phenomenon might lull the West into a false sense of security. If his reforms revitalised the Soviet Union he

would be ‘potentially more dangerous than his predecessors, each of whom, through some aggressive move, had saved the West from the dangers of its own wishful thinking’. Secretary of State James A. Baker III recalled his belief that Gorbachev’s strategy ‘was premised on splitting the alliance and undercutting us in Western Europe.’⁴¹ They soon changed their minds. In December 1989, not long after the Berlin Wall was breached, a summit meeting was conducted between Presidents George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev on a boat moored in choppy waters off Malta. The Cold War began to be spoken of in the past tense. It had lasted, Gorbachev’s spokesman quipped, ‘from Yalta to Malta’.⁴²