

A KINDER AND GENTLER CONTAINMENT

The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the 20th Century

Zbigniew Brzezinski

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Reviewed by Kurt M. Campbell

In academic and political circles, 1988 was the year of unprecedented debate and discussion about the purported decline of American power in the international system. Analysts and political prophets examined the issue in depth, with some passionately arguing that America's current position in the world was stable and secure while others contended that US hegemony was eroding.¹ Considerable attention was devoted to the ascending powers — Japan, West Germany, and Asia's newly-industrialized countries — and their present and future relationship with the United States. In turn, 1989 shaped up as the year for argument and soul-searching about the demise of Communism as an ideological banner and source and inspiration for state power.² Indeed, there is a fundamental historical collision now taking place in which the immovable object of the twentieth century — Communism — is being challenged by the irresistible forces of nationalism and political pluralism.

Ironically, the Soviet Union, once the proud sponsor of national liberation movements in the Third World, is now beset by internal and contiguous national liberation movements aimed at the very destruction of Communism and Soviet power. Although Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has dazzled the international community with his bold and sophisticated diplomacy, there is a growing sense in the West and in Russia that the USSR is practicing the diplomacy of a state in sharp decline.³ Instead of leading a resurgence, ample evidence suggests that Gorbachev is presiding over the demise of Soviet ideological and economic power. There has already been considerable controversy in the international scene about the withering away of Communism. Francis Fukuyama's provocative essay in *The National Interest* entitled "The

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1. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).
2. See Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* No. 16, (Summer 1989): 3-18.
3. See Stephen Sestanovich, "Gorbachev's Foreign Policy: A Diplomacy of Decline," *Problems of Communism* (January-February 1988): 1-15.

End of History" is perhaps the most widely discussed article on the topic. In his bold article, Fukuyama declares that we may be witnessing not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history, "that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of western liberal government, democracy, as the final form of human government." What Fukuyama is saying is that Communism as we have known it in the postwar world is dead.

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progressive decay and the deepening agony, both of
its system and of its dogma" (p. 1).

Other articles also commemorate the end of the Cold War, the "victory" of Western economic models and ideals, and that "peace is breaking out" in many regions of the world. The prophetic are already searching for new strategic paradigms for what lies beyond containment. However, the words "beyond" and "post" in many of the proposed catchy titles for the strategy of America's next global role suggest a transitional era in which few things — from defense budgets and allied commitments to the vital signs of national ideology — are clear.

Amidst the growing collection of works on the status of world Communism comes a most profound and prophetic work by Zbigniew Brzezinski entitled *The Grand Failure* and subtitled *The Birth and Death of Communism in the 20th Century*. Brzezinski has always had a flair for the dramatic, both in his scholarship and in government service, ranging from his searing declaration during the Ethiopian-Somalian war that détente "died on the sands of the Ogaden" to a line in his most recent book that "Communism thus appealed to the simpletons and the sophisticated alike." Brzezinski's book boasts tremendous historical sweep and posits brave predictions. However, some of his early impressions have already fallen to facts. He is most hopeful about China's attempt at economic revitalization, a process he terms "commercial Communism," but his book went to press before the tragic events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Brzezinski declares his colors from the very outset:

This is a book about the terminal crisis of Communism. It describes and analyzes the progressive decay and the deepening agony, both of its system and of its dogma. It concludes that by the next century Communism's irreversible historical decline will have made its practice and its dogma largely irrelevant to the human condition,

prospering only where it abandons its internal substance even if still retaining some of its external labels. Communism will be remembered primarily as the 20th century's most extraordinary political and intellectual aberration (p. 1).

Brzezinski was one of the first to identify some of the problems of economic performance associated with the Communist model. In *Between the Two Ages*, he argued persuasively that as the United States and other Western states plunged into the new technical age, the Soviet Union would lag behind ideologically and remain mired in the smokestack stage of industrial development. The author points out that at the time (almost twenty years ago), the thesis was somewhat controversial, but the tides of time have since borne him out.

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(p. 243).

In both public and private life, Brzezinski has always believed that the Soviet system would ultimately fail, in stark contrast to the beliefs of another prominent scholar, statesman and postwar American foreign policymaker, Henry Kissinger. As late as 1970, in a conversation between then National Security Council Advisor Kissinger and the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, this contrast reveals itself. Zumwalt recounts the conversation in his autobiography, *On Watch*:

K[issinger] does not agree with the President that American people can be turned around. He states strongly that the President misjudges the people. K feels that the U.S. has passed its historical highpoint. He believes U.S. is on a downhill and cannot be roused by political challenge. *He states that his job to persuade the Russians to give us the best deal we can get, recognizing that the historical forces favor them.* He says that he realizes that in the light of history he will be recognized as one of those who negotiated terms favorable to the Soviets, but that the American people have only themselves to blame because they lack the stamina to stay the course against the Russians who are ‘Sparta to our Athens’⁴ (emphasis added).

4. See Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., *On Watch* (New York: New York Times Book Co., 1976), 319-321.

Now, twenty years later, the Soviets appear instead to be playing Athens to our Sparta.

Currently, commentators have adopted a nostalgic, wistful air about the purported passing of the Soviet Union and its associated ideology from the international scene. Fukuyama writes:

. . . the end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself and see in others around me a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed.⁵

This nostalgia appears to beset equally the present generations of American diplomatic practitioners, from the youngest to the most senior statesman. It is there in Paul Nitze's recent memoir *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, Larry Eagleburger's recent comments about the profound uncertainties of this period compared with the well-known political environment of the Cold War, and Fukuyama's poignant description of "almost a sense of loss."

Brzezinski's tone, however, is different; it is tinged almost with a sense of revenge and satisfaction. Summing up, the author describes a potential future for the USSR a hundred years after the founding fathers of Bolshevism shook the world:

In the year 2017, one hundred years after the Bolshevik Revolution, scaffolding is covering the Lenin Mausoleum on the former Red Square, now renamed Freedom Square. The scaffolding is masking the reconstruction of the mausoleum into the entrance to an underground parking garage designed to accommodate the masses of tourists visiting the recently opened permanent exhibit in the Kremlin entitled 'One Hundred Wasted Years — 50 Million Wasted Lives' (p. 243).

Brzezinski's analysis is buttressed with economic data and a variety of social welfare measurements, such as telephones per capita and infant mortality, that document the Soviet decline. He is at his best when describing the early historical development and consolidation of Communism inside the USSR and in examining the history of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. His chapter, "Organic Rejection," traces the roots of rebellion now sprouting across Eastern Europe to the proud, brave men of the Solidarity Union in the early 1980s. Brzezinski argues that the hope of post-Communist economic development, the promise of political pluralism and the indications of the demise of the

5. Fukuyama, 18.

Soviet empire are to be found in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland. His views on Polish society's self-emancipation are perhaps the most insightful and interesting.

Some will criticize Brzezinski's predictions, but he must be given credit for taking firm stands on current trends which are difficult to predict. Why he feels that the Chinese leadership's plans for societal regeneration have more chance of ultimate success than those of Gorbachev and his allies inside the USSR, however, is unclear. Indeed, China's policy of *perestroika* without *glasnost* seems to have led directly to the student rebellion which, in turn, brought on renewed isolation and condemnation by the West.

Overall, Brzezinski's account of the tectonic shifts now underway in the Communist camp is a "must read" for those grappling with America's role and responsibilities in the face of Soviet Communism's apparent demise. Clearly, the book's only real failing is its lack of attention to what Western policy should be towards the USSR as the course of Soviet society is changed by internal economic and political forces and neighboring developments in Eastern Europe. The United States can aggravate these difficulties, or ease them in some instances; the big question is just what the role of the United States should be as these events unfold. Are there policies the West could implement, for instance, which would help subtract or diminish the role of Communist ideology in the Soviet political environment? Brzezinski's analysis stops short of offering recommendations for Western policymakers and observers confronting the confusion in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Some who have gleefully expanded on the question of Soviet decline have assumed that the process will be peaceful, like Great Britain's graceful fall from world power. However, the decline of great powers has been traditionally a dangerous process, and history is replete with examples of declining states initiating preemptive wars or rising states challenging hegemonic leaders. Few have given serious thought to what foreign policy toward a huge state in decline, possessing a large nuclear arsenal, should be.

All important questions about the future world order and likely US strategic response hinge on precisely this point. Raymond Aron observed in 1982 that the most important and neglected question in contemporary international relations scholarship is: "what will the West do when and if the Soviets decline? How we answer that question will perhaps determine whether there will be war or peace in our time."⁶ In 1987 after his first visit to the Soviet Union in over a decade, Kissinger addressed a distinguished gathering in New York on the ambitious agenda of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. After reviewing the results of high-level meetings and intimate discussions in Moscow, Kissinger concluded with some thoughts about what Gorbachev's fledgling attempts at reform might mean for the United States. "The United States essentially faces two stark futures relating to Gorbachev's bold program for domestic revival," Kissinger explained. "The first future to be feared is if

6. Raymond Aron mentioned this to Hedley Bull during a conversation on the future of the international order at a meeting of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, November 1982.

Gorbachev succeeds and the Soviets emerge stronger than before; the second to be regarded with some apprehension envisages Gorbachev's failure and a nuclear-armed domestically-failed state." To this another member of the delegation that travelled to the USSR responded, "While I share your concern for a future world where the Soviets have blasted ahead, I do not share your fears about a future in which the Soviets have buckled. I believe the world with the Soviets in decline is infinitely preferable and indeed safer than the world we live in today."

Many conservatives have favored pushing the Soviets into obscurity by not assisting their plans for reform. Vice President Quayle recently responded to Secretary of State Baker's call for American assistance to the struggling Soviets by saying "let the Soviets reform themselves."⁷ How the Soviets deal with their problems, however, is of great importance to the West. Drawing on Robert Gilpin's thesis on the foreign policy of declining powers⁸, it is vital to take account of potential Soviet responses to their own decline. Departing from Gilpin's work on hegemonic states in transition, I would contend that there are six distinct strategies the USSR might follow in reaction to its perceived slide: (1) improving domestic efficiency; (2) reducing foreign commitments; (3) seeking rapprochement with balancing powers; (4) making concessions; (5) undertaking further external expansion; (6) waging hegemonic war. It is important to note that although each strategy is distinct from the others, several may be followed concurrently, as we are witnessing now in the Soviet Union.

The modern era of rapid economic growth and technological innovation almost insures that the Soviets will continue to fall behind, but will this stagnation and decline be gradual, comparative or absolute? In the pre-modern age, growth and decline often lasted many centuries; the Byzantine and the Chinese empires lasted a millennium, and each was in decline for several hundred years. The contemporary world of heightened economic competition and rapid development, however, necessitates that strategies to reverse the course of decline show near-term results. A comprehensive set of strategies will increase the likelihood of bolstering a faltering position. Currently, Mikhail Gorbachev's determination to revive and revitalize the internal Soviet system involves a variety of techniques and tools. He has determined that the domestic economy needs a serious overhaul and *perestroika*, though severely stressed, is proceeding apace.

In addition, the USSR has begun to cut back on its foreign commitments in the Third World. Unlike Great Britain, which depended on her empire as a source of raw materials and as markets for finished products, the USSR depends on its global empire only as a source of prestige. Brzezinski examines the historical rise and fall of the appeal of Communism in the Third World, both as an ideological banner and organizing structure. He traces the evolution

7. See Paul Bedard, "Quayle: Let the Soviets Reform Themselves," *The Washington Times*, 18 October 1989, 1.

8. See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

of Communism's plight in the developing world, from the revolutionary zeal of the 1960s, to the hopeless, militarized failures of radical regimes in the 1980s. The Soviet Union has been the arsenal of "national liberation," but has remained largely aloof from the more demanding tasks of nation-building in the Third World. Indeed, the USSR has followed a form of reverse imperialism in Eastern Europe and the Third World by sending raw materials abroad in exchange for developed products.

Now the Soviet Union is reassessing such a role. Under Gorbachev the Soviets have quit Afghanistan and openly seek settlements in other strife-torn regions. Although they continue to support beleaguered clients inherited from the past, they remain aloof from new trouble spots such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Israel's occupied territories. They also seek rapprochement with the "balancing powers" in the international system by trying to reach limited accords and by undertaking a range of confidence-building measures with the regions bordering the Warsaw Pact, notably China, Japan and Western Europe. By offering incentives carefully tailored for each of the surrounding states, the USSR has looked to establish better relations with formerly hostile states and to block the formation of a threatening coalition of anti-Soviet nations.

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Attempts at domestic reform, moves to rein in foreign commitments, and efforts to establish rapprochement with balancing powers might simply be viewed as adjustments in course, but major Soviet concessions under duress would represent a fundamental departure. These dramatic gestures belong to a future in which the Soviet leadership has exhausted the relatively painless remedies for Soviet decline and considers bolder, and accordingly more dangerous, steps. Apart from the strategy of addressing or reversing decline is the nature of an international environment that makes accommodation palatable. Great Britain's graceful decline from world power in the decades prior to World War I was made possible by her "special relationship" with the United States, allowing the rewards and responsibilities of world power to shift gradually from Whitehall to Washington. Even today, with Communism's tenets besieged and violated, the Soviet Union still views itself as the only true manifestation of Marxist-Leninist power and the standard by which

to judge any future developments of that power. The Soviet Union has no state to which it can hand off the flickering torch of the revolution, or in Lenin's words, "the spark" of the people's ideology.

National survival and a Marxist prophecy of nearly biblical significance demand that the USSR survive in some form and maintain its power. Yet, what will the Soviet Union do if strategies for reversing its position fail? It is conceivable that a future conservative Soviet leader who comes to power in the wake of Gorbachev's failed experiment may try to bolster the USSR's faltering international position by further expansion. From his early study of Roman grand strategy in its declining years, Edward Luttwak argues in his controversial book, *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union*, that "regime pessimism" about Soviet decline might trigger an expansionist war into adjacent countries.⁹ Since the Soviet Union is currently examining the possibilities and prospects of "sufficient defense" for their conventional forces, this option for now belongs to a distant and unlikely future. On hegemonic war, Gilpin has written "the first and most attractive response to a society's decline" is to launch a preventative war in which the declining power destroys or weakens the rising challenger while the military advantage is still with the declining power. Yet, it is fair to question whether there is really such a thing as meaningful "military advantage" in the nuclear age of mutual assured destruction. Also, the fundamental challenge to the Soviet Union is not emanating from a single state, but from powerful forces that know no national boundaries — dynamic capitalism, political pluralism and unbounded nationalism.

The Soviet response to internal decline ultimately hinges on the internal psychology and the calculus of Soviet decision making. Many Western commentators cite the historical propensity of Soviet leaders, and of Russian leaders before them, to avoid risky foreign initiatives during periods of profound turmoil and change. When saddled with an unsupportive domestic constituency or confronted by an unfavorable international environment, Soviet leaders tend to turn their attentions inward, away from involvement and foreign adventures. This turning away, or *peredysbka*, has meant in the past temporary concentration on domestic matters before re-emerging internationally more powerful than before. Recall Stalin's remarks to Milovan Djilas in the immediate aftermath of the Great Patriotic War: "we shall recover in 15 or 20 years, and then we will have another go at it."¹⁰ It remains too early to tell whether Gorbachev's policies are a Marxist *peredysbka* or the dawn of a new era of post-Communism in Russia and the empire.

Soviet caution has rested on a profound historical optimism, on the assumption that the USSR would triumph in the long run, despite short-term losses or setbacks. If, after failing at internal renovation and reform, a conservative clique in the Kremlin became convinced that Soviet power was fading irreversibly, the USSR might well be tempted to forsake caution and

9. Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

10. Cited in Seweryn Bialer, *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

use its military might in an effort to conquer abroad what it could not create at home. In the final analysis, given the perils of a declining superpower with a vast nuclear arsenal and powerful conventional forces, it is imperative to ask, does the United States have an interest in maintaining at least some semblance of the Soviet state? Some would answer that, rather than arguing for putting the screws to the Soviet Union and driving their economy into the ground, Western *realpolitik* requires that the Soviets survive because the alternatives are worse. In this light, President Bush's policy of seeking to assist Gorbachev's brave new policies should be greeted with applause rather than concern.

Brzezinski has given us a powerful and persuasive explanation for why the Soviet Union as presently configured will soon end up, in Trotsky's words, on the "ash heap of history." He has also provided ample evidence of why we in the West should regard this process with neither satisfaction nor nostalgia, but rather with a sense of caution and curiosity about the challenges of the post-containment world. He is confident that the long twilight struggle to confront and contain Soviet Communism has yielded the internal and international contradictions that are now shaking the very foundations of the USSR and its empire. However, fundamental questions about US doctrine and global strategy, arising from the historic developments now sweeping the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, loom near on the horizon. Although the Western economic and political model has arguably "won" its struggle with centralized state planning and revolutionary Communist ideology, there is an unsettling sense that the political aftershocks from the earthquakes behind the remnants of the Iron Curtain are rattling the United States. Indeed, the very foundations of a half-century of US strategic plans, policies and programs towards the USSR are beginning to sway.