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After The Fall: 1989, Twenty Years On

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Nineteen eighty-nine was a most extraordinary year. There are other years that are imprinted on historic memory, but most of them were occasions for horrible events (1917 or 1939) or disappointing ones (1789 or 1848) or the conclusions of great tragedies (1648 or 1945). The year 1989 was that rare moment when dramatic things happened that were overwhelmingly beneficent. As we watched the world change before our eyes, we learned many things. Looking back today on how the world has evolved in twenty years since that momentous time, we can distill several additional insights.

The economist Robert Heilbroner wrote in 1989: “Less than 75 years after it officially began, the contest between capitalism and socialism is over: capitalism has won.” This outcome reflected a startling reversal because as recently as the decade before, socialism—considering all its diverse forms lumped together—seemed at the apex of its global sweep, apparently confirming Marx’s prophecy that it was not merely desirable but destiny.

Heilbroner’s observation was noteworthy because he himself was not unsympathetic to socialism, and doubly so because he was no Communist. Given the hostile breach between Communism and democratic socialism, why should Heilbroner have conceded that the fall of the Soviet empire was tantamount to the end of socialism? Why did he not accept the claim advanced by some socialists that the end of Communism would only clear the way for a purer form of socialism?

Heilbroner saw how much the allure of socialism rested on the eschatological claims that Marx had made for it. Democratic socialists may have disdained—even detested—the Soviet version, but the fact that systems calling themselves “socialist” had proliferated around the world seemed to confirm the claim that history was marching inexorably away from capitalism toward something newer and presumably better and more efficient. Whether or not Lenin and Stalin interpreted Marx correctly, their enshrinement of him as the patron saint of a mighty empire gave his theories an unsurpassed weight in twentieth-century thought.

Heilbroner also saw that the fall of Communism culminated a trend. With social democratic parties having already forsaken the dream of replacing capitalism and with the developing world having realized that markets rather than state planning offered the surest path from poverty, the Soviet collapse sealed the issue. Socialism was finished.

Has the economic meltdown of 2008–09 reopened the question? Is socialism on the table again? Not at all. It only shows that you can always have too much of a good thing. The fact that free markets are the best mechanism for making economic decisions does not imply that freer is always better. The smooth functioning of the private sector depends on government to maintain a legal framework, to protect the public against unscrupulous behavior, and to provide vital goods that are not profitable for the private sector to furnish. Libertarians who dream of an economy entirely free of government are no less utopian than socialists.

In the realm of politics Mikhail Gorbachev has cut a sad figure these last two decades: first supporting Putin then criticizing him, clinging to vestiges of socialist ideas, and rebuking Washington for necessary exercises of power, all the while unable to raise his own popularity among his countrymen above single digits. Nonetheless, he is arguably the greatest figure of the twentieth century.

The most famous names of the century were mass murderers. Of those who are remembered for the good they did, who was irreplaceable? The Axis would have been defeated without Roosevelt and even without Churchill, although Britain might have fallen first. India would have gained independence without Gandhi. Segregation would have been ended in America without Martin Luther King Jr. But would the Soviet empire have dissolved, the Cold War ended, and Communism been repealed—all these blessings achieved *peacefully*—without Gorbachev?

I don't think so. It has been argued that the Soviet Union collapsed under the dead weight of its absurd economy, but its economy had been absurd for generations and it had not collapsed. Would Soviet inefficiency and low productivity eventually have brought the whole system to its knees? Perhaps, but that might have taken generations more—and in the meantime the state might have been able to replenish itself by means of blackmail and plunder, or it might, in its desperation, have generated a new world war. The dinosaur's brain was dead, but its massive tail still might have lashed destructively.

Yes, goods and construction were shoddy: televisions containing cardboard parts sometimes combusted spontaneously in people's living rooms (except that most Soviet citizens didn't have living rooms). But the weapons worked, and while a tad less advanced than those of America, what the Red Army lacked in quality it made up for in quantity.

The point is underscored by the coda to the famous "Team B" saga of the 1970s—when two groups of analysts were asked by the CIA to produce rival estimates of Soviet military expenditures. That debate is often erroneously remembered as having been about the size of the Soviet military. In truth, Soviet military assets were pretty well known and not in dispute. What was not known, because it couldn't be photographed by satellite or spy plane, was how much it had cost the Kremlin to field those assets. The price tag, it was rightly supposed, would reveal something about Soviet priorities and hence Soviet goals. In essence, while the regular CIA analysts had calculated that the USSR was spending about 6 percent of its GDP on arms and soldiers, a level modestly above that of the U.S., Team B concluded that the costs probably amounted to 12 percent. When the cloak of secrecy was torn from the Soviet state in 1989, we discovered that the true percentage was apparently twice as high as Team B's estimate, which itself was twice as high as that of the CIA's regular analysts. This immense discrepancy was not because the Soviet Union turned out to have more weapons than we had thought, but because it turned out to have less of everything else. As a proportion, one-quarter of its economy was devoted to war.

In other words, despite its economic difficulties, the Kremlin fielded as much military might as it wished, more than any other state then or ever. If this required shortchanging the consumer sector of the economy, so be it. No one dared complain. Further, the rule of the Communist Party was entirely unchallenged, as was Gorbachev's ascendancy within the party, at least until very late in the game. He was the most powerful single individual on earth, and he could have held that power—and all the perks that went with it—until he went to his grave, as had most of his predecessors. Instead he tossed it away.

This is to take nothing away from *Solidarnosc*, Charter 77, Pope John Paul II, Margaret Thatcher, or Ronald Reagan. Each played a heroic part. But Gorbachev could have survived them all.

That this most cynical of political systems could have produced a man of Gorbachev's sensibilities at the top tells us something hopeful about the human spirit. But the story also has its disheartening side. In her famous essay, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," Jeane Kirkpatrick made two essential points about the differences between totalitarian regimes and more prosaic forms of dictatorship. The latter were less likely to disrupt the norms and habits of everyday life, she said, and furthermore they were more susceptible to being overthrown, something that

had never happened to a totalitarian regime short of being defeated in a war.

The collapse of the Soviet empire seemed to disprove the second proposition. But did it really? True, mass action led to the downfall of Communist rule in what was then called Eastern Europe, but these were all colonial regimes that had been imposed by Soviet arms. The revolt against them was not only against Communist rule but perhaps even more so against rule by foreign agents. The two Communist governments that had been brought to power by indigenous revolutionaries rather than by Russian soldiers—those of Yugoslavia and Albania—held onto power for another couple of years. And the Soviet Communists faced little domestic challenge. In other words, Kirkpatrick's melancholy observation that repression works and regimes that do not shrink from ruthlessness are very hard to unseat seems sadly robust.

For forty-odd years the Cold War had dominated global politics, and it was the subject of the most heated debates within American politics. What was the source of the conflict? Did it originate from Soviet belligerence or from mutual distrust? Was America fighting a defensive war or were the two superpowers like “two scorpions in a bottle,” as Paul Warnke, President Carter's chief arms negotiator, put it? And what about the various conflicts in different corners of the developing world? How much were these fueled by Soviet meddling and how much were they rooted in intractable indigenous hostilities?

In 1989 the answers to these questions revealed themselves in crystalline clarity. Virtually the moment Gorbachev ended Soviet global ambitions and hostility to the West, the Cold War ended. The Kremlin was able to call it off because the conflict had all along been its own doing.

With the Cold War over, small hot wars between leftists and rightists in a variety of countries soon were doused. Doves had argued that hawks exaggerated the Soviet hand in these struggles. But in Central America, southern Africa, and elsewhere, the end of Soviet intervention led quickly to compromise settlements. The mutual antagonisms of local actors had been real; without the Soviet Union to envenom the quarrels, they proved amenable to resolution.

But even as we in the West saw the defeat of Communism as a triumph for our ways and values, other observers saw it quite differently. Osama bin Laden and his cohorts and sympathizers believed the Soviet Union had been defeated not by us but by the Muslim believers of Afghanistan and the foreign *ihadists* who had joined their ranks. Far from demonstrating that our civilization represented an end point, it proved its transience. If radical Islam could defeat one superpower, it could defeat the other. If it had outlasted Communism, it would outlast democratic capitalism, too.

A dozen years after 1989—on September 11, 2001, to be exact—this new ideology shattered the peace of the post-history world. It poses a challenge that cannot be dismissed by Francis Fukuyama's observation that no species of nationalism can pose a historic challenge to democratic capitalism because they inherently lack “universal significance.” For one thing, Islamism purports to speak for a populace—the *umma* or world community of believers—larger than that comprised by any mere nation. More important, its aspirations encompass all mankind.

The potency of the challenge that had been posed to democratic capitalism by Communism and socialism was seen by many observers to have originated in the ability of these ideologies to serve as ersatz religions and tap into spiritual longings. How much more formidable, then, might be the challenge presented by an authentic religion of fully mobilized spiritualism that draws on political longings, that is, on the longing for power?

As the events of September 11, 2001, recede in time, we find ourselves uncertain how to gauge the threat posed by Islamism. Since its proponents are poor and weak, it does not seem possible for this ideology to pose a threat to us beyond perpetrating some ghastly incidents. But what if Islamists came to power in, say, Pakistan and Egypt? Might

we then be facing something that would feel very much like a “clash of civilizations”? And might it not seem that “history” had returned in full force?

Fukuyama’s assertion of the universality of democracy, however, stands up well in the twenty years since 1989. Twenty years ago, according to the human rights group Freedom House, only 40 percent of the countries of the world were ruled by legitimately elected governments. Today that figure stands at 62 percent. In short, democracy has gone from being the exception to being the rule. Dramatic as they are, these percentages understate the import of the change, because the total number of states in the world has grown by more than two dozen in the last two decades, and these new states are either in the developing world or were parts of former Communist federations. In other words, none of them would have made the “A-list” of likely democracies as of 1989.

Of course many of the new democratic systems are imperfect, just as are many of the older ones. To take a closer look, we may examine another set of Freedom House data. In addition to counting the number of electoral democracies, Freedom House classifies each country as free, partly free, or not free. To be called “free,” a country must not only have genuine elections but also score well on measures of freedom of expression, rule of law, and other such criteria. Countries ranked as “partly free” may have elected governments but are deficient in other political rights; or they may be ruled by monarchs or even dictators who nonetheless allow a substantial margin of freedom. “Not free” countries are ruled by very repressive autocrats. On this scale, the proportion of free countries has risen since 1989 from 36 percent to 46 percent. At the same time, a more dramatic change has been registered at the opposite end of the scale, where the number of “not free countries” has fallen by half, from 41 percent to 22 percent.

When President George W. Bush spoke in his 2005 inaugural address of eliminating tyranny on earth, he was ridiculed for naiveté. In fact, the number of governments that can be called tyrannies has dropped precipitously and now stands at no more than 42. The number is likely to continue to fall. In sum, world politics these twenty years has been marked by a strong trend toward freedom and away from arbitrary rule.

The picture is not completely rosy. There is powerful evidence that where ruthless rulers are prepared to employ it, repression continues to succeed. In 1989, while freedom fighters against Communism triumphed all over Europe, protesters in China’s Tiananmen Square were brutally repressed. At the time, it seemed that this bloody deed would postpone the inevitable only briefly. As America’s former ambassador to that country, Winston Lord, wrote: “The current discredited regime is clearly a transitional one. . . . [W]e can be confident that, however grim the interlude, a more enlightened leadership will emerge within a few years. . . . It may well turn out that the tragic events in China this year have foreshortened that great nation’s march toward democracy.”

Twenty years later, while China’s standard of living has soared, freedom has advanced scarcely if at all. Nor is China alone. Communist regimes also hang on with apparent ease in Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Although the economic philosophy that constituted the original justification for the Communist Party’s monopoly of power has evaporated, these dictatorships show signs neither of yielding power nor of being challenged from below.

Of the remaining “not free” countries, two-thirds are Muslim-majority countries, meaning that Islam remains a great bastion of unfreedom. If we can find—or, better, if Muslim thinkers can find—a way to transform the political discourse of the Islamic world, then the goal of a world without tyranny will appear within hailing distance.

The ending of the Cold War transformed the global configuration of power and the dynamics of international relations. It had taken the Soviet threat to break the U.S. of its penchant for isolation, and the disappearance of that threat perforce posed the issue of what next for America’s role in the world. Writing at the end of 1989, Jeane Kirkpatrick said: “We will need to learn to be a power, not a superpower. We should prepare psychologically and economically for reversion to the status of a normal nation.”

What that might mean she did not explain. Nothing had been “normal” in the world since 1914. Before that the peace of Europe had been mostly preserved for a hundred years by the Concert of Europe. The closest thing to the Concert to be found in the modern world of nation-states was the United Nations. Many observers speculated that with the Cold War now in the world’s rearview mirror, the UN could at last fulfill the mission for which it was created: sustaining the peace of the world.

That hope even extended to hard-headed realists who made up the administration of President George H. W. Bush. In 1992, buoyed by its success in rallying the Security Council behind the liberation of Kuwait, the Bush administration issued a statement, asserting that the United Nations had “been given a new lease on life, emerging as a central instrument for the . . . preservation of peace.” Bush’s successor, Bill Clinton, sought to elevate the role of the UN so that he could be left free to “focus like a laser” on domestic economic issues.

Yet by the time Clinton took office, the UN was already demonstrating its continued impotence, this time in the face of the challenge of a crumbling Yugoslavia. As war and ethnic cleansing spread across Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the world wrung its hands. Neither America nor Europe did itself proud, but the UN distinguished itself by actually making things worse: responding in knee-jerk fashion with an arms embargo on all parties, which had the perverse effect of leaving the victims naked before their already well-armed persecutors. A year later, as the world’s first unambiguous genocide since the Holocaust unfolded in Rwanda, the UN again acted—or rather, failed to act, shamefully.

By the end of Clinton’s first term, Kofi Annan, who served first as the head of UN peacekeeping and then as secretary general, was complaining aloud that enforcing the peace anywhere was beyond the capacity of the UN. And President Clinton and Madeleine Albright began to speak of the U.S. as the “indispensable nation”—a phrase that sounded offensively boastful to others but only reflected their innocent surprise at this discovery.

Throughout the decades from the late 1940s until the late 1980s, it had widely been recognized that the UN had been paralyzed by the Cold War. But now it developed that the organization was unable to play its intended role even after the Cold War had ended. The flaw in the design went deeper. The experiment of relying on a world body as the guarantor of peace had now gone through three iterations: the League of Nations, the UN during the Cold War, and the UN after the Cold War. Each had proved a failure.

This meant that the burdens of world peace had to fall elsewhere, and the only available alternative was the United States. Neither the Americans nor the rest of the world has rested easy with this situation.

As early as the mid-1990s, well before the controversial war in Iraq, European statesmen were advancing the idea that no use of force was legitimate that lacked the explicit approval of the UN Security Council. They made no bones about explaining that their purpose was to rein in the “hyperpuissant” United States whose power seemed frighteningly unconstrained in a “unipolar” world.

As for the Americans, the platitude “we cannot be the world’s policeman” tripped off the tongues of politicians and editorialists left to right. Accordingly, as Yugoslavia burned, James Baker, secretary of state in the administration of George H. W. Bush, said, “We have no dog in that fight.” Then Clinton ignored Bosnia’s mayhem for nearly three years and Rwanda’s genocide until it was over. In his second term, Clinton pursued a more active foreign policy, leading George W. Bush, as a candidate in 2000, to promise a reduced role abroad for the United States. He might have delivered on this promise, but eight months into his presidency Islamic fanatics flew airplanes into the World Trade Towers, and his world turned upside down.

The legacy of Bush’s response to the events of September 11, 2001, was rejected by the voters in 2008. They chose to replace him with a president who in the campaign and during his first months in office presented himself as the anti-Bush. In place of Bush’s belligerence, President Barack Obama pledged to employ “diplomacy” to lay to rest our

disputes with Iran and Syria, to warm relations with Russia, China, Cuba, Venezuela, and Burma, and even to win over large parts of the Afghan Taliban.

Mr. Obama is likely to have no more success at talking away these conflicts and problems than Clinton had in relying on the UN or than Bush had in presenting America to the world as “a humble nation.” Whatever Bush’s errors and failures, the threats he saw were real. They will not likely yield to painless solutions. Nor will we find much outside help in facing them.

Notwithstanding the world’s unease with American supremacy and Obama’s determination to restore America’s popularity, nothing in the foreseeable future will change this consequence of 1989: the world we live in is unipolar. Perhaps if we look back again in twenty years or forty, we will see that history did indeed end, or begin to end, in 1989. The nations will have grown more uniformly capitalist and democratic, and, because democracies rarely if ever go to war with one another, the world will also have grown more peaceful, indeed harmonious. But that denouement is not yet apparent on the horizon. Until it is, if there is to be a modicum of peace and security, it will rest on the same bulwark that made possible the great advances for peace and freedom that unfolded in 1989, that is to say, on American power and principle.

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