

#229

LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Seweryn Bialer
Director, Research Institute on International Change
Columbia University

Seweryn Bialer is the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of Social Science and International Relations, and Director of the Research Institute on International Change at Columbia University in New York. Dr. Bialer's previous publications include *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, 1980) and *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, International Decline* (Knopf, 1986).

"Lessons from the History of Soviet-American Relations" was delivered at a conference on September 22-23, 1986, at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies.

Copyright January 1989
by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

**The Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies
The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**

The Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies is a division of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Through its program of fellowships, meetings, and publications, the Institute encourages a wide range of scholarship on Russia and the Soviet Union. The Kennan Institute is supported by contributions from foundations, corporations, individuals, and the United States Government.

Kennan Institute Occasional Papers

The Kennan Institute makes Occasional Papers available to all those interested in Russian and Soviet Studies. Occasional Papers are submitted by Kennan Institute scholars and visiting speakers, particularly those who wish to receive timely feedback on their work. Copies of Occasional Papers and a list of papers currently available can be obtained, free of charge, by writing to:

**Occasional Papers
Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies
370 L'Enfant Promenade, SW, Suite 704
Washington, D.C. 20024-2518**

The Kennan Institute is a nonpartisan institution committed to the exploration of a broad range of scholarship. It does not necessarily endorse the ideas presented in its Occasional Papers.

LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS

The goal of learning from the experience of the 40-year Soviet-American conflict is both laudatory and important. The initial assumption, which is not necessarily true, is that the leaders, the élites and the experts of the two superpowers are committed to learning from history. Yet even assuming that such determination exists, "lessons of history" are always full of pitfalls, ambiguities, and limitations.

If the "lessons of history" are to count in the present and future of the Soviet-American conflict, it is necessary that both sides draw similar conclusions from their past encounters. We know well, however, that this is very frequently not the case. Major differences in culture, political interests, and ideological commitments have a potent influence on the evaluations and perceptions of the past by the leaders and experts of the two superpowers.

Moreover, even if one accepts that "right" conclusions can be derived from the past for desirable superpower behavior in the present and future, these lessons may remain inapplicable due to political realities. Both the American and Soviet political systems define the parameters of what is possible in the formulation of domestic and foreign policies, and the risk and price to the system or to the leadership. These parameters are, in the Soviet-American case, highly asymmetrical in practice and poorly understood in theory. Furthermore, "lessons of history" always carry the risk of being irrelevant for the present and for the future because of significantly changed historical circumstances. Finally, such "lessons" may even be harmful and can be described as "overlearning" from history. Analysis of the past can be a poor guide for the present and the future when faced with historical discontinuities.

Dilemmas of the Post-Nuclear Age

Post-World War II Soviet-American relations imposed on the two adversaries a pattern of behavior of which they are not yet fully aware. This pattern, which can be described as a vicious circle, has become especially pronounced in the last 15 years, when both superpowers have conducted their security policies under the mutually recognized conditions of strategic parity. The sources of this pattern can be partly ascribed to the nuclear revolution and partly to the pre-nuclear traditionalism of both superpowers' foreign and security policies. The vicious circle can be envisaged as a set of three dilemmas that the policymakers of both superpowers face.

The first is the deterrence dilemma. The most optimistic statement to emerge from 40 years of Soviet-American conflict is that strategic deterrence works. With the partial exception of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the two superpowers neither contemplated seriously nor were even close to the employment of nuclear weapons on any scale, however virulent their conflict became at times. In this crucial respect, the changing leaders of both superpowers showed themselves to be sane and responsible.

Yet the requirements of effective nuclear deterrence imposed a seemingly logical, yet dangerous, requirement on both superpowers. Strategic deterrence is clearly a psychological concept. Its effectiveness depends, not only on the accumulation of strategic forces sufficient on both sides for Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), but it is also predicated on one's adversary's conviction that, if necessary, these weapons will actually be used in retaliation for a nuclear attack. In the logic of the superpower conflict, such a conviction can be created only by two circumstances: the strategic forces are

large and deployed at a high level of launch readiness, and realistic contingency plans for strategic weapons employment are developed and absorbed throughout the command structure of the armed forces.

Such conditions of deterrence effectiveness create manifold problems. They require high levels of strategic deployment. They seem to require a "surplus" of weapons for a retaliatory blow, and therefore they stimulate an escalation of strategic buildup. By their sheer number and their high state of launch readiness, these weapons increase the chances of an accidental nuclear strike that may evolve into a full-fledged war. Contingency nuclear war planning and insistence on its realistic absorption by the armed forces command structure make each superpower accuse the other of planning a nuclear war, and make both more insecure. This occurs regardless of how hotly and sincerely their political leaders insist on the irrationality of a nuclear war and regardless of their lack of intention to contemplate a nuclear strike against the other. The strategy of deterrence, the most benign role of nuclear weapons, confirms what many strategic thinkers say about the nature of nuclear weapons: there is no such thing as a nuclear strategy that will pass the test of rationality of the pre-nuclear era.

In the 1970s, and continuing today, the "deterrence dilemma" developed a new dimension of a particularly virulent nature -- the theoretical consideration of a first, counterforce strike directed at the destruction of the other side's nuclear weapons and military installations, rather than at population centers and industrial capacities. The logic of the counterforce strike argument is as follows: if one side possesses the capability to destroy the other side's most powerful and accurate strategic systems--land-based ICBMs--the leadership of the superpower whose land-based missiles were destroyed will

face the impossible decision of whether to retaliate against the population and industry centers of the other side, inviting in turn the destruction of its own cities and technological centers. This scenario of the "deterrence dilemma" is purely theoretical, and there is no indication that either of the superpowers contemplates it.¹ However unlikely in real life, the theoretical counterforce capability of a superpower and the possibility, according to the "worst case" scenario, that the adversary may use it under certain conditions, reinforces the vicious circle created by the "deterrence dilemma." It promotes a high level of strategic buildup. It makes the broadening of the spheres and arenas of the strategic arms race, such as developing defensive systems, including space-based weapons, attractive. It increases the probability of adoption of the most dangerous, and most accident-prone, strategic doctrine of launch on warning.

The second, related dilemma that emerged from the superpowers' conflict is the "security dilemma," which was well known before, but was modified by the advent of the nuclear era. In classical terms, the "security dilemma" can be expressed in the following pattern of behavior. The military buildup of one superpower is conducted by its leaders from the point of view of increasing its security as *they* perceive it. Yet the perception of this buildup by the leadership of the other superpower may, and in most cases, does differ in terms of intention and rationale. Almost axiomatically, one's own buildup is defensive in nature, while one's adversary's is offensive. The action-reaction pattern of the superpowers' security policies is neglected by each

¹ Today it is asserted that the Soviet Union alone possesses the potential capability for such a counterforce strike, but with the advent of the Trident II submarine-launched missiles the United States will acquire a similar theoretical capability in the near future.

leadership, while their independent, intrinsic, autonomous sources are stressed. Obviously, the dismissal or neglect of the action-interaction pattern generates a vicious circle -- that is, an arms race that feeds on itself.

The nuclear age infused this classic "security dilemma" with an additional dimension that concerns realistic expectations of the level of national security that each superpower can anticipate under the revolutionary new nuclear circumstances. Due to its history of invasions, extremely costly wars, and defeats, as well as its ideology, the Russian-Soviet concept of "national security" aims at levels of security that can be only described as total and highly incongruent with the realities of the nuclear age. Ironically, because of its different history and ideology, the United States' goals with regard to the desired level of its own "national security" are also incompatible with the realities of the nuclear era. Under conditions of strategic parity, Russia wants to establish its invincibility in place of its past vulnerabilities. The United States wants to re-establish its past actual invincibility. Yet nothing can change the reality that, in the final analysis, the fate of America rests in the hands of the Soviet leadership and the fate of the Soviet Union rests in the hands of the American leadership. Exaggerated expectations about the attainable level of national security feeds the nuclear arms race beyond the levels of sufficient deterrence. In fact, they make any level of deterrence insufficient and unacceptable in the constant search for invincibility by the superpowers.

The third pattern of behavior that emerges from the relations and conflicts between superpowers is the "synchronization dilemma." There were a number of moments in the Soviet-American post-World War II conflict when the

superpowers' priority goals and policies were "in-phase" with each other. The late 1960s and early 1970s represented such a period, with particular regard to arms control. But more often than not, and particularly in the last decade, the two countries were very "out of phase" with each other. One can argue with justification that such a lack of synchronization is perfectly normal due to the fact that, internationally, the United States is basically a status quo power, while the Soviet Union is a revolutionary latecomer that wants to upset the international status quo. Yet the "synchronization dilemma" is most certainly the product, not only of the long-range historical process, but also of the short-range and dangerous policy attitudes of one superpower or another.

The Soviet-American conflict of values, which is expressed in the international arena as a conflict of vital interests, is deep and abiding, whether it is looked upon as an ideological confrontation or as a clash of great power aspirations. But, regardless of its depth and staying power -- or especially because of it -- this conflict requires constant and careful management. The main and imperative purpose of such management is to steer it away from dangerous confrontations that may escalate beyond the control of the superpower leaders and even beyond the nuclear threshold. There can be little doubt -- and this is a most optimistic lesson from the history of the conflict -- that both superpowers recognize the need for mutual management of their conflict, and they have developed in practice a whole set of rules of prudence that influences their international behavior. And yet in arms control, the only area of conflict where their vital interests overlap in a major way, the "synchronization dilemma" is particularly pronounced. When one side is ready for deals and compromises, the other side is not. The direct sources of this

behavior, which undermines the management of their conflict, are rooted in each superpower's short-sighted inability to resist the temptation to exploit short-range advantages over its adversary when the opportunity arises.

In this respect, it is almost certain that Soviet behavior in the 1970s will be looked upon by future historians as a decade of wasted opportunities. There is a danger that, due to the behavior of both superpowers, the 1980s will also loom large as a period of lost chances to diffuse and lower the temperature of the conflict for a long time to come. In the 1970s, the United States was domestically and internationally weakened by a dramatic confluence of circumstances. The disillusionment of the war lost in Vietnam, the Watergate crisis, and the energy shock combined to effect a stagnation of American military expenditures, to create a crisis of executive authority, and to deny America interventionist options in the international arena. Under those circumstances, not only détente but any policy opposing Soviet aggrandizement would not work. The Soviet Union used the opportunities opened by America's weaknesses to continue the buildup of its military power in all dimensions clearly beyond defensive needs, and to engage in a rampage of foreign military adventures and involvements. The seeds for an American rebound and countermeasures were planted, and they bore fruit in the 1980s.

In the 1980s, the "correlation of forces" changed significantly and clearly in Soviet disfavor. Under the pressure of domestic emergency circumstances, an imperial crisis, international overextension, and the emerging ability of a new set of young leaders to review the commitments and policies of their predecessors, the Soviet Union shows signs of being willing to bite the bullet and seriously negotiate a radical, balanced, stable, and verifiable reduction in strategic and theater nuclear weapons. The probability exists

that the United States will not test in earnest this potential opportunity for a historical reversal of the vicious circle of the arms race. In the 1970s, the Soviet Union took advantage of American weaknesses to gain what proved to be illusory and transient gains. In the 1980s, the United States is in danger of repeating the Soviet Union's deeply misguided attitudes.

The three dilemmas of deterrence, security, and synchronization that an analyst may derive from the course of Soviet-American relations and conflict are to a large degree reversible. The attitudes that will reverse them go against the grain of the past experience of superpower behavior, but they are attainable once the leaders of both countries display a willingness to learn. This would require a commitment to mutual security and a long-range vision of one's national interests. The reversal of the vicious circle pattern, created by past Soviet and American policies, that underlay the three dilemmas will not nullify the Soviet-American conflict. It may, however, make the superpowers' behavior more prudent, more realistic with regard to their policy goals, and more suited to reducing the overwhelming danger of an impending nuclear arms race.

The central item in such a reversal will be a radical reduction of the nuclear arsenal to a finite level sufficient for its deterrence function, with a balance in the reduction that will recognize the strategic concerns of each side, a stable deployment and agreements that will build fire-breaks between technological progress and weapons modernization or extension, and a system of verification that will move far beyond the national means of each superpower. It will also require the distillation from the history of Soviet-American relations of lessons that are particularly important for one superpower or another.

Lessons for the Soviet Union

For the Soviet Union, particularly important lessons from past Soviet-American relations concern primarily the linkage between central and peripheral concerns in Soviet foreign policy, the enduring connection between the Soviet Union's imperial behavior and its relations with the West, and the legitimacy and unavoidability of American concerns over patterns of Soviet domestic behavior as they relate to broadly understood human rights. Professor Adam Ulam, one of the most astute students of the history of Soviet-American relations, called his book on Soviet foreign policy *Expansion and Coexistence*. This title reflects very precisely the dual nature and goals of Soviet foreign policies almost from the days of Lenin, but particularly in the post-Stalin era. The term "coexistence" reflects the Soviet determination to avoid wars and confrontations with the major Western powers and China. Incidentally, the Leninist meaning of the term "coexistence" was marginal to Soviet foreign policy, referring to periods of *peredyshka* (breather) in the acute conflict with international capitalism. Today the concept of "coexistence" still retains some of its Leninist connotations, but, under the influence of the nuclear revolution, it has moved far beyond its old restrictive meaning. "Coexistence" denies the inevitability of war between the alliance of capitalist states and the Soviet Union and its clients; it proclaims the necessity for stable relations among nuclear powers; and it stresses the dangers of superpower confrontation.

The term "expansion" refers to the Soviet Union's aspiration to become the central actor in the international arena and to include a growing number of nations and states in its orbit of domination, let alone influence. In the

past, such domination was achieved primarily through the straightforward application of military force or the threat of force, often disguised as revolution.² In Khrushchev's time, the urge to dominate hinged at times on hopes of cashing in on the dissolution of the traditional colonial empires. More recently, it hinged on the supply of Soviet weapons, training, and advice, the use of proxy military forces, and, in a return to a Stalinist pattern, outright invasion. Under both Khrushchev and Brezhnev, the targets of Soviet expansion were Third World countries.

The post-Stalinist formula of Soviet foreign policy and international activity is therefore characterized by the maintenance of peace and stability in Europe and the avoidance of confrontations with the United States ("coexistence") combined with a major effort to dominate selected targets in the Third World by all available means, including military intervention ("expansion"). From the outset, however, and increasingly with the growth of Soviet military reach, tensions existed between the two components of the basic Soviet formula of "expansion and coexistence".

Military and political relations with the United States constitute the central axis of Soviet foreign and security policies. The experience of the late 1970s and early 1980s has shown, however, that stable and beneficial relations on this central axis cannot be reconciled with an aggressive Soviet stance regarding its peripheral foreign policy goal of aggrandizement by military means. The destruction of détente with the United States showed the influence of the inescapable linkage between components of Soviet foreign and

² Examples include the annexation of a part of Poland in 1939, parts of Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Bessarabia in 1940, parts of East Prussia and Japan's northern territories in 1945, and the creation of an East European empire in the 1944-49 period.

security policies on American policies. The necessity of any sort of accommodation with the United States instructs Soviet leaders to be cautious and limited in their pursuit of peripheral expansion. Turmoil in the Third World and the opportunities for Soviet expansion which it creates, however, tempt the Soviet leadership to exploit these opportunities, which may not recur in the future.

We can endlessly reassert the basic desideratum that, in the areas where Soviet-American relations are not a zero-sum game and where the interests of the two sides overlap -- such as in arms control -- a Soviet-American accord should be reached, regardless of conflict and confrontation on other issues. Such assertions aside, however, the realities of the American political system, with its division of powers and the frequent shifting of public opinion, preclude any serious agreement as long as the Soviets follow their own position on issues where compromise agreements are impossible. The realities of American politics cannot be reconciled either with unilateral Soviet military buildups or with major direct or indirect military involvement in areas of Third World conflict. If the new Soviet leadership does not absorb this lesson from past and present experience, the outlook for a major improvement in Soviet-American relations is dim indeed.

The beginning of the acute Soviet-American conflict and the Cold War is particularly associated with three sets of early post-World War II events: the building of a Soviet empire in Eastern Europe through a process of communization and satellitization; the extensive Soviet support for the communist side in the Greek revolution, combined with strong pressures against Turkey; and the attempt to expel Western powers from Berlin in contravention to the Great Powers' agreements, culminating in the lengthy but unsuccessful Berlin

blockade. Of these events, the first was obviously the most important and enduring.

In many of the East European countries, revolutionary situations or at least overwhelming pressures for regime changes developed towards the end and directly after World War II, and as a result of the war. Yet, without direct Soviet intervention, including the actual and large-scale application of military force and secret police activities, and without indirect pressures and threats to use force, one can be fairly certain that the revolutionary situation or regime changes would not have led to a communist victory in any of these countries.³

Soviet participation in the Polish civil war and the promotion of the rigged 1946 referendum and January 1947 elections in Poland, the Soviet-engineered Czechoslovakian coup in 1948, and the establishment and militarization of the German Democratic Republic in 1949 were the main way stations in the relentless process of Soviet empire building in Eastern Europe. The domestic and foreign policies of Eastern Europe were in fact controlled by the Soviet Union and safeguarded by a large-scale Soviet military and secret police presence in most of these countries and by the threat of force.⁴

The communist revolutions in the East European countries were not authentic but were imposed from abroad. The Soviets and the local communist leaders hoped that time, generational changes, economic development, and communist-controlled education would eventually legitimize the new regimes in

³ Yugoslavia is, of course, an exception in this regard and its exceptional circumstances were the decisive factor in its early and successful break with Moscow.

⁴ In 1946, Soviet troops withdrew from Czechoslovakia, but they were reintroduced in 1968 after the abortive Prague Spring.

the eyes of their populations. This hope was not realized. Even where existing East European communist regimes gained some native legitimacy, as in Hungary under Janos Kadar, it had the most shallow and transient basis -- the party-state socioeconomic performance. To acquire legitimacy, the East European regimes must be perceived as being independent from Moscow, but, of course, the Soviet Union will prevent such independence at any cost.

Since Stalin's death, the Soviet Union has moderated the harshness of its rule in East Europe and increased the parameters of permissiveness, yet it shows no signs whatsoever of dissolving its empire or relinquishing its ultimate control over what can or cannot be tolerated in the development of these countries. As a matter of fact, today, with a new and energetic leadership in Moscow, the control and supervision of its empire are being tightened. During the power vacuum in the Kremlin, connected with the lengthy interregnum, native communist leaders in Eastern Europe enjoyed a relatively high level of independence. The beginning of the end of the succession process in Moscow has produced clear signs of attempts to impose on Eastern Europe greater economic demands, stronger support of Soviet foreign policies, and increased domestic adherence to communist orthodoxy.

The continued illegitimacy, or at best fragile tolerance, of the East European regimes by their populations had led to numerous disorders, revolts, movements for reforms unacceptable to the Soviets, and intellectual dissent. The crucial factor in communist success in the 20th century -- the merger of communist ideology with nationalism -- is absent in Eastern Europe, and this puts their long-term stability into question. Throughout the postwar period, Eastern Europe has been, and will remain, the most potentially unstable and unruly region of Europe.

In the past, the United States, let alone Western Europe, did not seriously consider the "rollback" of communism in Eastern Europe, and for all practical purposes, it was largely inactive during the native rebellions and protests against Soviet domination. Afghanistan is the first case in which America supplied large-scale weapons to resistance movements fighting Soviet troops.⁵ Considering the level of Soviet commitment to the preservation of its empire, Western intervention in this region would have clearly been a *casus belli*.

Yet the United States was never reconciled to permanent Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, nor will it be for the foreseeable future. With the Polish events of 1980-81, the postwar history of Soviet-American relations closed a full circle. The Cold War started with the creation of the Soviet empire, and it was resumed in its present incarnation largely because of Soviet inflexibility and determination to preserve the empire. The lesson for the Soviet Union, in this respect derived from both the past and the present, is clear: the Soviet commitment to the preservation of its empire is, and will remain, a persistent cause of Soviet-American tensions. These tensions are chronic and they may be background for some periods, but they flare up to major proportions whenever Soviet domination is challenged by the East European peoples themselves.

One can hardly hope that the unavoidable and deep Soviet-American tensions, let alone the Soviet-Western European tensions, will be sufficient to affect the Soviet Union's commitment to the preservation of its empire. Yet if the new Soviet leadership wants to learn from the history of Soviet-

⁵ There must be people in Moscow who wonder whether the Afghanistan precedent will not at some future time be applied, under the right circumstances, in Eastern Europe.

-American relations, it should be induced to grant a greater degree of autonomy to its satellites and to tolerate much lower barriers to relations between the two parts of divided Europe. It should be clear beyond any shadow of a doubt to the Soviet leadership that its imperial practice over the last 40 years is not consonant with even-tempered overall Soviet-American relations or with the necessity to avoid debilitating, if not dangerous, confrontations.

The evolution of Soviet-American relations in the postwar period became increasingly influenced by a subject of contention that is rather new to international relations and is ill-fitting to traditional diplomacy. This subject, the broadly understood human rights policies of the Soviet government towards its own citizens, was neither a temporary preoccupation of the United States' Soviet policy, nor a propagandistic sideshow to the serious business of the two superpowers' relations. It would be very desirable, indeed, for the Soviet leaders to understand the importance and the legitimacy of this issue, which after all concerns the domestic policies of a sovereign power, as a major lesson derived from its experience of relations with the United States.

World War II began a revolution of rising spiritual aspirations that were incorporated in the United Nations charter and eventually spanned the globe. The impetus of this revolution is still rising, rather than being exhausted. One of its latest manifestations was the Helsinki Accord of 1975, which was ratified by a large number of governments, including the United States and the Soviet Union. This accord in itself legitimizes American concern about the issue of human rights in the Soviet Union. But the main question here involves, not the legitimacy of the issue, but rather the inescapable political realities of the American system of governance, as they have continued to

influence Soviet-American relations and will certainly do so in the future.

The United States is a populist democracy that differs in many respects from the major European liberal democracies. On the international arena, the United States is a great ideological power whose policies are not molded in the image of European *realpolitik*, but are set to promote values that the American public and élites consider to be "inalienable rights" of peoples and "unquestionable truths." Soviet leaders consider the American government's preoccupation with human rights in the Soviet Union to be sheer hypocrisy. The Soviets point out that many authoritarian regimes that violate human rights nevertheless have close relations with the United States, and sometimes even were or are its allies.

There is an element of justice in the Soviet accusation of hypocrisy, especially when American behavior in this respect is defended by the spurious distinction between "totalitarianism" and "authoritarianism."⁶ On the other hand, Americans have nothing to be ashamed of with regard to the presentation and promotion of human rights policies in their own country, especially when one looks at the trend of development in the years of Franklin Roosevelt or in the postwar decades. Moreover, in its relations with friendly foreign countries, the United States not only prefers to deal with democracies and feels uncomfortable with authoritarian regimes, but it actively promotes the process of democratization -- in the Philippines, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Brazil, Argentina, and Guatemala. This is why authoritarian regimes can never feel really secure in their ties with the United States. Because of its domestic system and the role of public opinion, the United States simply was,

⁶ General Pinochet's government in Chile, for example, is clearly more repressive, or even murderous, than General Jaruzelski's government in Poland.

is, and will remain a highly undependable ally to regimes that clearly violate human rights.

Finally, even if one accepts the Soviet accusation of American hypocrisy as partly accurate, this accusation is in fact irrelevant with regard to the major place that the defense of human rights in the Soviet Union occupies, and will continue to occupy, in American foreign policy. Even if the American preoccupation with Soviet violations of human rights may be partly hypocritical, to paraphrase Marx, once an idea takes hold of the masses it becomes a material force. And there can be no doubt that broad strata of the American public wholeheartedly support American policies in defense of human rights, and no American government can escape this pressure, even if it wants to.

The internationalization of the world economy went far beyond the emergence of a world market. For the first time, we can speak about a truly global economy, including to some extent the Soviet Union and its empire, where the domestic economic policies of any government are justifiably an object of scrutiny and pressures from other governments. As the Chernobyl' tragedy has shown, nuclear energy policies and environmental concerns inevitably cross borders, supersede national sovereignty, and are an inescapable preoccupation of the world community. Similarly, the issue of human rights, as spelled out in the Helsinki documents, has also become internationalized and it will remain a serious issue in Soviet-American relations.⁷ Indeed, the post-Stalin decades of Soviet-American relations have clearly demonstrated that human rights issues will remain high on the agenda of America's Soviet policy.

⁷ The question of how human rights issues between the two superpowers can best be handled is, of course, an issue of tactics -- of the proper combination of public and private diplomacy.

These then are the three major issues, or lessons that are particularly pertinent to the Soviet government's attention to lessons from the history of Soviet-American relations: the linkage of arms control to the issue of armed engagement in regional conflicts and civil wars, the issue of Soviet flexibility and permissiveness in its treatment of Eastern Europe, and the issue of Soviet policies with regard to human rights that are universally recognized by civilized nations.

The key question of the radical reversal of the nuclear arms race is indubitably linked with other, nonmilitary issues in Soviet-American relations. On the one hand, serious and far-reaching arms control negotiations and agreements require a modicum of mutual trust, which has been greatly weakened in the last 10 years. On the other hand, improvements in Soviet-American political relations that may produce the necessary degree of mutual trust depend on progress in arms control negotiations. This vicious circle can be broken by changes in public opinion. Poll after poll shows that the overwhelming majority of the American public wants arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, but the same polls show that the same overwhelming majority of the American public deeply fears the Soviet Union and its international adventures and intentions. Some of my Soviet colleagues are baffled by the limited response of the American public to the many serious arms control proposals advanced by their new leader, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. This limited public response is not the product of any executive-media conspiracy. If there is serious progress on the three issues that loom so large in the history of Soviet-American relations, the arms control deadlock can certainly be broken, to mutual satisfaction, under any American president.

Lessons for the United States

There are many lessons derived from the past experience of Soviet-American relations that are particularly pertinent to the formulation of American policies towards the Soviet Union.⁸ Three lessons seem to be especially important: the role of perceptions of the Soviet Union in shaping American foreign policy and American public opinion, the implicit or explicit goals of American policies toward the Soviet Union, and the avoidance of extremes and the need for continuity and persistence in the United States' Soviet policy.

Nuclear weapons have not only placed before our eyes the stark vision of a world-wide holocaust and increased immensely the stakes of the superpower conflict, but they have also, as a result, dramatically raised the need, if not always the willingness, for hostile states to cooperate. Therefore, even as the national leaders of both the Soviet Union and the United States are determined to achieve as many of their international goals as possible, they are also both subject to a strong, self-generated pressure to rationally control their actions and to somehow regulate their competition. Any such cooperation and conflict management requires that the opponents understand each other's moves and motives.

Neither during World War II, when the Soviet Union and the United States

⁸ These lessons are extensively examined in some of the author's previous writings. See Seweryn Bialer, "Lessons of History: Soviet-American Relations in the Postwar Era" in Arnold Horelick (ed.), *US-Soviet Relations, The Next Phase*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 86-110; Seweryn Bialer, "The Psychology of U.S.-Soviet Relations," (Gabriel Silver Memorial Lecture, School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, April 1983); Seweryn Bialer, *The Soviet Paradox* (Alfred A. Knopf Publisher, New York, 1986), chapters 14-16.

were allies, nor during the initial postwar years when the two powers confronted each other in a Cold War, did the United States know much about the Soviet Union. From the point of view of understanding the adversary, American policymakers, the foreign policy élite, the academic community and the political public were unprepared for this conflict. The ensuing 40 years were an intense learning experience about the Soviet Union, the roots and patterns of its international behavior, its domestic situation, and the trends of its internal and international development. One American president who stated that he learned more about the Soviet Union from a single experience -- the invasion of Afghanistan -- than he ever knew before, was rather unique in his susceptibility to sudden revelations. For other policymakers and students of the Soviet Union, the experience of 40 years of Soviet-American relations and conflict was cumulative.

It is not surprising, however, that in the process of learning about the Soviet Union through study and experience, many misperceptions of our adversary developed. These misperceptions deeply affect the nature and evolution of the Soviet-American conflict, and American foreign policies. Their origins and durability can be traced primarily to three sources. The first is false analogies. The second is preconceived pictures of the adversary which lead to misreading or selectivity in the choice of evidence. The third stems from ignoring the realities of international relations that were brought about by the nuclear revolution, which was discussed above.

Misperceptions about the Soviet Union span the whole range of the American political spectrum -- from left to right. Neither the "hawks" nor the "doves," the "confrontationists" nor the "accommodationists," the "squeezers" nor the "dealers," the "ideologues" nor the "pragmatists," are free from

illusions about the Soviet Union, its patterns of behavior, its international goals, and its policies.

Among the misperceptions of the Soviet Union, the historical comparison of the contemporary Soviet state and its policies with Nazi Germany holds pride of place. When comparing Stalinism with Naziism, the question is not whether the Stalinist regime was better or worse than the Nazi regime-- Stalin probably killed more people than Hitler -- but whether, given its worst excesses, it was different. But now, over 30 years after Stalin's death, the comparison has even less validity, either as a description of contemporary Soviet reality, or as a policy guide for American political leaders. It is worth noting here that Zbigniew Brzezinski, the co-author of the pioneering work on the theory of totalitarianism, Stalinism, and Naziism, in one of his articles in the 1970s, "The Soviet Union--From the Future to the Past," explicitly abandoned the concept of totalitarianism as a means of analyzing the developmental tendencies of contemporary Russia.

What should be emphasized here is that the rules of behavior that orient Soviet foreign policy and the role that the Soviets play in the international arena differ from those of the Nazis in their relative pragmatism, gradualism, and caution. The Nazi regime was a racist and extraordinarily uninhibited personal dictatorship with an enormous nationalistic appetite, whereas the Soviet Union today is an oligarchical system which, having acquired military strength too late to participate in the global colonial feast, is still prodded by a sense of an inevitable, although slow, historical process. It flexes its military and political muscles at a time when it has already entered a phase of internal and imperial decline. It bullies the weak and cringes from the strong, and it is most averse to taking risks in situations

where it may lose everything.

The political vocabulary of many American leaders and their mental images of the Soviet Union strikingly reflect the vocabulary and images from the interwar period. "Deals" with the Soviets are said to be impossible or extremely fragile. Soviet signals for mutual agreements are dismissed as pure propaganda. There are implicit suggestions of the inevitability of a military clash between the free world and the "totalitarian" one. Any search for greater stability in the superpower relationship through mutual compromise is deemed an immoral "appeasement" of the forces of evil. One can conclude that many people in charge of American foreign policy have learned too well the lessons of their pre-World War II predecessors.

On the other end of the American political spectrum and among a large part of the American public, we find a different phenomenon. Rather than "overlearning" history, there is simply a lack of attention to the historical experience of our 40 years of conflict with the Soviet Union. How often do we hear from well-intentioned people who are shocked and frightened by the direction in which Soviet-American relations are moving, the question: "Why can we not reach agreement with the Soviets that will avert the danger of nuclear war? After all, they are people just like us, and if only we could explain to them our sincere desire for peace, we would be successful." Of course the Russians are "people like us": they love and hate, feel pain and fear, are loyal or treacherous, ambitious or stolid, amiable or rude, clever or stupid. But Soviet leaders, officials, and experts are not "people like us." In Heideggerian terms, they have a different "clearing" -- a different prism through which they look at the world, a different set and order of priorities that they impose on their social existence, and a different way of

appraising domestic and international issues.

It is not easy, nor is it enough for Americans and Soviets to understand each other. Understanding each other as far as possible does not solve problems, but leads to their reemergence on the rational level. If we want to have successful negotiations with the Soviets on issues in which we are both vitally interested, the first thing to understand is that our counterparts on the other side are individuals who share deep beliefs that do not correspond to ours. However alien, unnatural, illogical, and unacceptable these beliefs may seem to us, let us not forget that this is exactly how our beliefs look to them.

The best way to understand Soviet beliefs is to look at them, not as a doctrine, but as a culture that dominated the socialization and politicization of the Soviet leadership stratum and permeates its thinking and values. Of course, as political scientists, sociologists, or psychologists, we understand that those beliefs have survived primarily because they serve the interests and goals of "official" Russia. But it can also be said that it was exactly these beliefs which shaped "official" interests and goals. Soviet beliefs, however, are not immutable, nor are they closed to change or to the adaptation of ideological "realities" to the realities of the nuclear world. After all, it would not be the first time in history that external, or for that matter internal, stimuli led to a reorientation of Soviet beliefs and actions.⁹ Our willingness to negotiate and to be flexible, combined with our strength, may produce results. Anyway, there are no other realistic alternatives open to us.

⁹ For example, the Soviet switch from revolutionary internationalist priorities to "socialism in one country" in the 1920s, and the movement away from isolationism and autarky in the post-Stalin era.

Another misperception of the Soviet Union that is discernible among segments of the American policymaking community and the political public concerns the process of Soviet foreign policymaking. As in the previous case, unsubstantiated views cover the entire range of American politics from the left to the right.

On the far right, the view is still entertained that Soviet leaders follow a "master plan" for world conquest, and that almost every major step in their foreign policy reflects such a long-range plan and even proceeds according to some secret timetable. But nothing of the sort can be deduced either from the long-range international actions of Soviet leaders or from the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin -- the Soviet Union's holy writ.

Contrary to general beliefs, it would be quite reassuring if the Soviet Union did indeed follow a "master plan" laid out by its ideological founding fathers. Soviet actions and ambitions would then be less dangerous than they are in reality because they would put greater hopes on the "natural" evolution of the non-socialist countries towards communism. In other words, they would trust the "invisible hand" of the historical process, rather than resorting to the "unnatural" employment of the "visible hand" of Soviet power in effecting the communization of the world outside Russia.

A much more plausible view perceives the shaping of Soviet foreign policy by long range strategic plans, which change from one phase of Soviet and international development to another. One can find evidence that Soviet leaders defined long-range strategic foreign policy goals at crucial turning points in their history. I suspect, however, that such strategic planning is now of very limited operational importance.

The view of Soviet leaders and élites on the direction and evolution of

world history is, of course, deterministic, and it does expect the final victory of communism. But the Soviet formulation of short- and middle-range foreign policy is not very different from that of any other nation-state. Soviet foreign policy stresses what is possible and prudent. It is derived from careful evaluation both of the temptations and opportunities which might maximize Soviet influence in the international arena, and of the dangers and obstacles that dictate restraint and caution. I am very far from arguing that Soviet international behavior consists simply of a chain reaction to external stimuli, and I do believe that Soviet leaders display an almost pathological preoccupation with the security of their own system, coupled with a powerful ambition to expand their international influence. Without doubt, they also believe that, in the long run, their actions are on the side that "history" favors. Yet in light of their post-World War II experience, Soviet leaders increasingly recognize that the foibles of history and the dangers of the present make their belief in the final victory of communism an insufficient, or even faulty, compass for the formulation of foreign policy. The Soviet joke that the goal of communism can be compared to a horizon -- the closer you come to it, the further it moves away -- better portrays the Soviet view of the world's future than does the concept of a "master plan" or a long-range strategy, in which many American political leaders and groups believe.

On the other end of the political spectrum, many liberal leaders and groups misperceive Soviet foreign policymaking and the tendencies of Soviet international behavior no less than the American right, although, of course, from an opposite angle. They believe that all or most Soviet foreign policy, particularly Soviet-American relations, can be sufficiently explained by an action-reaction scheme -- a vicious circle where American action generates

Soviet reaction, leading in turn to an American counteraction.

Such a view is doubly satisfying to those who pronounce it. First of all, it carries the comfortable assumption that a change in American foreign policy behavior vis-à-vis the Soviet Union will be reciprocated by the other side. Secondly, it assumes that the Soviet Union's international behavior would be basically identical to the behavior of the industrial democracies, which are committed to the status quo, if only Western, and particularly American, foreign and military policies would leave the Soviet Union the option of cooperation, instead of forcing them into an escalating conflict.

This view is naive and faulty because it neglects the divergence of Soviet and Western interests, values, and stages of development. While the Soviet Union is the most conservative industrial country in the world, domestically speaking, it is not a status quo power on the international level. Even if the Soviet Union were not a communist state, its search for a "place under the sun" commensurate with the late growth of its military status would clash with the interests of the older Western democracies. The growth of the Soviet Union's military status and its great power ambitions, combined with a Marxist-Leninist outlook which adds virulence to its international goals, would make it aggressive, activist, and ambitious in the international arena, regardless of Western policies. This much can be deduced from the events leading to the failure of détente during the 1970s. Western revisionism of the origins and history of the cold war, which assigns equal blame to the two protagonists, or even places the larger blame on the United States, may be correct in certain instances, but it suffers from historical myopia, misreading or neglecting the domestic pressures that determine Soviet behavior.

The Soviet Union's aggressive international tendencies, both directly after the World War II and in the 1970s, were not primarily a result of Western actions and Soviet reaction, although this type of interaction played a significant role. They resulted from an internally generated Soviet drive that is independent of Western behavior. The task for American leaders rests not on its ability to treat the Soviet Union gingerly and bring out the best human traits in Soviet leaders, but on its recognition of the imperative need, in the era of nuclear weapons, to regulate conflict and competition with an *inherently aggressive* Soviet Union.

I have concentrated on a few of the many American misperceptions of the Soviet Union. Not for a moment do I want to suggest, however, that these misperceptions and false analogies are the reason for, or the critical item in, the Soviet-American conflict and its unabating virulence. Even if the superpowers' perceptions of each other were correct, as they often are, the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States would be very sharp and very dangerous under any leadership. I am very much against "psychologizing away" the conflict.

Some misperceptions, however, add virulence to the conflict, oversimplifying the issues and the solutions and making negotiations much more difficult. These misperceptions contribute to a conception of the conflict in strictly zero-sum terms, and they tend to make each superpower more likely to embark on wrong policies -- that is to say, on policies which are based on incorrect assumptions about the other side's response. Other misperceptions distract policymakers from long-range realities of the conflict and create unwarranted illusions about our adversary. In the final analysis, they produce a backlash which makes the conflict more dangerous. Misperceptions

and false analogies account, at least in part, for the stalemate and spirit of confrontation that dominates Soviet-American relations today.

The history of Soviet-American relations shows both the need for each superpower to define realistic goals of its policies towards the other and to recognize the harmful effects of exaggerated expectations of their leverage over each other. Yet the goals of the American policy toward the Soviet Union often carry exaggerated expectations about the systemic changes to be achieved through evolution or revolution in the Soviet Union. The leverage of American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union is limited in its impact on the Soviet domestic system, and policies aimed at Soviet systemic changes often lead to consequences that are the opposite of their intended objectives.

Throughout the post-World War II Soviet-American conflict, but especially in the last 15 years, many American policymakers subscribed to a view of the Soviet Union that was unbalanced, and this often carried over into designing America's Soviet policy. This unbalanced view of the Soviet Union concerned the legitimacy of its political regime, its stability and staying power under harsh conditions, its potential economic strength, and its ability to resist outside pressures. As far as the present is concerned, I have no intention of minimizing the weaknesses and major troubles that the Soviet Union is already facing, and will continue to face throughout the 1980s. It is justifiable to conclude that the Soviet Union is in the throes of a serious systemic crisis.

Yet there is something fundamentally wrong in the evaluation of current and future Soviet weaknesses that emanates from some political leaders and high level officials. In particular, and most importantly, the policy conclusions that these people derive from their evaluation are wrong. Some of them seem to believe that an unmitigated push-and-shove policy may eventually

bring down the edifice of the Soviet government, that a new arms race spiral may eventually bankrupt the Soviet economy, and that the difficult Soviet internal situation will erode the Soviet leaders' will and ability to pursue a security policy that will preserve strategic parity with the United States. If such hopes exist among American policymakers, they are based on an exaggeration of the Soviet Union's troubles in the 1980s, a serious misunderstanding of the character of its new and old leadership, and an underestimation of its determination and its ability to resist outside pressures. These ideas do not reflect insights that can be gained from the experience of past Soviet-American relations.

Despite its verbal belligerence, the American political right, by retaining illusions about how much the Soviet system may change under our pressure during the last two decades of the 20th century, belittles the long-range dangers and challenges that we now, and will, face from the Soviet Union. The root of these views may be the ingrained belief, not only that the American system is better than the Soviet system -- which it is -- but also that the American system is "natural" for mankind, whereas the Soviet Union is "unnatural" and therefore must perish. There are almost no professional students of the Soviet Union who share the view that the Soviet Union is in the throes of a crisis so destructive that, as long as Western policy is "hard," it may lead in the foreseeable future to the Soviet Union's demise or to its leaders' loss of will. The consensus among students of the Soviet Union is clearly that the systemic crisis of the Soviet Union today is one of effectiveness, not of survival. We all hope that the Soviet Union may change from within. But it seems unwise to believe that we can play a major role in this change, and to allow such hopes to influence the direction of American

foreign policy. It is also unwise in the nuclear era to consider unrelenting pressure and a constant "hard" line to be the only way of dealing with the Soviets.

In the 1970s, we shared an exaggerated belief in our ability to modify Soviet international behavior by trying to influence Soviet domestic development. In part, the exaggeration of the first view stems from the fact that the United States entered into détente with the Soviet Union from a position of weakness. The second view was exaggerated partially because, in the special and unfavorable circumstances of the 1970s, we were not able to influence Soviet international and security policies in the direction of moderation in any significant way.

The second view is based on the truism that the foreign policy of any nation-state is deeply rooted in domestic determinants. In this respect, the Soviet Union is not different from other states. The determinants of Soviet international conduct derive from the imperial ambitions of Soviet leaders and élites, their great-power expansionist impulses, and their messianic Marxist-Leninist ideology, which encourages them arrogantly to perceive the international role of Soviet power as the instrument of "historical will." Yet the basic assumptions of this view -- that we are unable to influence directly in any serious way elements of Soviet international behavior, and that the Soviet internal system is malleable to major changes through external pressures-- seem to be grossly overstated.

There are numerous reasons why this strategy is erroneous: the United States has a severely limited ability to effect change in the Soviet domestic system, because of the Soviet economy's ability to "muddle through" great difficulties, and because of the Soviet Union's large unused reserves of

political and social stability. Moreover, political and economic realities in the United States and in other NATO countries make it difficult to build a consensus behind coercive policy options. Furthermore, the extent of Soviet expansionism is determined to a large degree by the temptations and opportunities, as well as the costs and risks, presented by the international system. Manipulation of the costs and risks of expansion is the most promising way to frustrate Soviet ambitions, particularly when the cost-risk manipulation is tied to American short- and long-range efforts to prevent the occurrence of opportunities for Soviet expansion in the Third World as much as possible.

The assumption behind the truism that the roots of Soviet foreign policy are domestic ignores the fact that the Soviet system is capable of producing a very broad range of foreign policies -- from engagement in regional conflict or invasion to strictly ideological or political attempts to gain influence. Focusing on the domestic roots of Soviet foreign policy diverts our attention from other critical problems of the world, including those that provide the Soviets with opportunities for expansion. Moreover, obsession with the Soviet domestic system can blind us to shared interests, such as preventing nuclear proliferation and achieving a radical, balanced, stable and fully verifiable arms control agreement.

American liberals hope to encourage internal change in the Soviet Union through the calibrated use of incentives and deterrence. The American right hopes for internal change in the Soviet Union through the application of increased pressure. Yet the real and realistic challenge to the United States as a superpower is to deal with a Soviet Union whose domestic system will not change seriously. The verdict on whether such a Soviet Union will have to

change some of its foreign policies is not yet in. It will depend very much on what American policy is in the coming decade.

The history of Soviet-American post-World War II relations illuminates the American leadership's singular susceptibility to wide swings in its policies toward the Soviet Union, and its frequent lack of continuity and persistence. At least in a large part, this phenomenon has its source in the nature and role of American public opinion, which, in the eyes of the politician, requires the "overselling" of particular policies -- the exaggeration of their underlying reasons and their desired effects. In fact, what is in doubt is the American leadership's ability to mobilize the American public by measured means, without exaggerated claims and hysteria, for long-term support of the sacrifices that are necessary to conduct an active foreign policy and to check Soviet expansionism.

The attitudes and policies towards the Soviet Union of the first-term Reagan administration were not simply a self-indulgent gut response of representatives of the American right, which was for so long in the wilderness. While there can be no doubt that what President Reagan and his entourage were doing reflected their genuine and bottled-up beliefs about the inadequacy of American policy toward the Soviet Union, their rhetoric, the "tone" of their behavior, and their entire public relations management were calculated to awaken American opinion to the Soviet danger. They were singularly successful in their goal, and, thus, they created irresistible pressures on Congress to provide the necessary -- in President Reagan's view -- funds to confront the Soviet Union with a new military and political reality. It is doubtful whether, without President Reagan's rhetoric and without the sense of danger stemming from the Soviet "conspiracy" conveyed by his ad-

ministration, it would have been possible to increase the military budget significantly when simultaneous cuts were being made in welfare spending and budget deficits were immense.

Of course, President Reagan's achievements with regard to Soviet-American relations in his second term will ultimately demonstrate whether all of the mobilizational efforts of his first-term administration were justified. By now, the American negotiators in Geneva and President Reagan himself as he prepares for the second summit meeting, have almost all the "chips" for which they asked Congress well in their hands. In the light of major Soviet domestic problems and international overextension, General Secretary Gorbachev's arms control proposals seem to be credible, serious, and far-reaching. They reflect a genuine desire for an equitable and radical arms control accommodation with America. They probably do not go far enough to satisfy all the major and legitimate American strategic and European theater concerns, but they are certainly more than adequate as a negotiating position. They constitute an opportunity that should not be lost. The American response and the Soviet willingness to bite the bullet and walk the final steps, will indicate whether the President Reagan's mobilization of America will be regarded by future historians as another cycle in the unending arms race, producing only greater insecurities, or as a major breakthrough in the history of the superpower conflict.

The questions posed earlier about exaggerations and the lack of continuity in American policy towards the Soviet Union, and about the nature and role of American public opinion in the Soviet-American conflict remain open. It is an open question whether, in an atmosphere of normalization of Soviet-American relations, let alone "managed rivalry," the American public and their

representatives will have the staying power to confront Soviet competition. Is it possible to raise military expenditures substantially, if this is necessary, even during a recession, as President Reagan did, without rekindling the Cold War? Is it possible for the American leadership to be interventionist, when competition with the Soviet Union so requires, without nationwide hysteria?

It seems that those in President Reagan's current administration who oppose summit meetings and advise against any American concessions in arms control negotiations have already answered these questions. They do not want summits and serious arms control negotiations, not only because they mistrust the Soviets, but also because they have no trust in the American public or in the Congress that represents it and is sensitive to the moods of its constituency. The evidence distilled from the history of the Soviet-American conflict provides no conclusive proof that they are right or wrong. My instinct tells me, however, that these individuals and the ideological bloc whose views they reflect, extrapolate too much from the exceptional circumstances of the 1970s for the conduct of the Soviet Union, the mood of the American public opinion, and the actions and inactions of Congress. If they are proven to be correct, prospects for the future of Soviet-American relations would be truly frightening. The prospects would, however, be even more dangerous and more frustrating if they are wrong but, nevertheless, they prevail.

Conclusions

I started my discussion of the lessons of history of Soviet-American relations by warning about the difficulties, ambiguities, and pitfalls of such an exercise. Concluding our selective overview of the "lessons," it seems only

proper to return to our initial warnings about differences in perceptions, historical discontinuities, and the political irrelevance of some of these "lessons." Everybody who is engaged in a dialogue with our Soviet counterparts is keenly aware of the extreme differences in our perceptions, even of single events, let alone of lengthy historical processes. It would be naive to expect that a radical change in this respect will occur in the foreseeable future. Yet it is not unrealistic to hope that the dangers, the costs, and the sheer futility of the arms race of the last 15 years may convince the leaders and the élites of both superpowers that their national security, as it is understood in less than perfect terms in the nuclear era, is concomitant only with mutual security -- that is, respect for each others legitimate strategic concerns.

I proposed at the outset that lessons of history may be of questionable importance if the circumstances of the superpower relations change sufficiently to create historical discontinuities. One such discontinuity occurred when strategic parity was reached between the Soviet Union and the United States. Parity cannot, of course, be interpreted by the Soviet Union as providing a license for low-risk, low-cost expansion of Soviet power and domination. It is the legitimate right of the United States to use its resources to increase the risks and costs of such Soviet behavior, and effectively to dissuade the Soviet leadership from engaging in military expansionism with the purpose of domination. Yet strategic parity requires American recognition that the Soviet Union is a superpower, whose efforts to increase its international influence are as legitimate as that of any great power, past or present.

We warned that some of the most obvious, but abstract, lessons of history may be politically irrelevant. They may even be recognized by the leadership

of either superpower as valid, but their applicability is highly improbable because of the realities and requirements of either or both political systems. The separation of nuclear arms control issues from other aspects of Soviet-American relations, as a clear and most important priority, may be desirable. Yet the nature of the American system of populist democracy means that all major outstanding issues in Soviet-American relations are inevitably linked to each other and the Soviets must recognize this inevitable linkage. The need for a balanced, consistent, and continuous policy towards the Soviet Union is clear to many American policymakers, but it is very difficult to attain under conditions of ebb and flow in American politics, with its exaggerated swings of opinions and conflicting particularistic pressures. The Soviet leadership may be aware that détente relations with the United States, or even only with Western Europe, cannot survive the almost regular cycles of upheaval and suppression in the Soviet East European empire. Yet the Soviet Union's commitment to the preservation of imperial conditions in its relations with Eastern Europe remains total because it is predicated, not only on Soviet security concerns, but also on the very legitimacy of the Communist Party's rule within the Soviet Union and on the political fortunes of any set of top Soviet leaders.

The United States' concern with the preservation of human rights inside the Soviet Union is absolutely necessary and may be even fruitful in specific cases or categories. Yet a change in the Soviet understanding of the nature of human rights would require a virtual transformation of the Soviet system, which is now based on the supremacy of the state over civil society.

It should be clear that the assimilation by the two superpowers of the "lessons" derived from the history of their troubled relations can be at best

only gradual, limited, or even marginal. Yet domestic or international politics is all about margins. In the nuclear era, progress on the margins of superpower relations may make all the difference. The alternative of systems convergence is too unrealistic to count on, and the alternative of war is too horrible to contemplate.

