

Trust and Publicity: The Decrease in Soviet-US Tensions During Perestroika and Glasnost

“Because during periods of high tension one match could spark a bonfire.¹” Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev ominously described the potential future of Soviet Union–United States relations had tensions not been lowered as a result of his policies during his presidency from 1985-1991². Gorbachev’s political agenda of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), considered revolutionary at that time, transformed Russian society by allowing for a freer press and less government oversight over the economy; it was also considered a failure by many in terms of actually resolving the political and economic mess in Russia³. However, while perestroika and glasnost couldn’t save the Soviet economy, the policies did result in a transformation of Soviet-US relations.⁴ The period before perestroika and glasnost in the early 1980s was defined by mutual distrust with both countries unwilling to engage in beneficial joint policies.⁵ The perceived lack of religion and morality in the Soviet Union caused US President Ronald Reagan to deliver speeches propagating fear of and anger towards the Soviet Union. Gradually, especially after US politicians like Reagan began to meet and develop personal connections with Gorbachev in meetings like the 1985 Geneva Summit and 1986 Reykjavik Summit, this distrust and misunderstanding was replaced by a drive towards concrete actions like nuclear disarmament. Lacking this personal connection, newspapers could only view

¹“ Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush. White House, Washington D.C.,” National Security Archive, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16135-document-21-record-conversation-between>, 1.

² Harry G. Kyriakodis, “The 1991 Soviet and 1917 Bolshewk Coups Compared: Causes, Consequences and Legality,” *Russian History* 18, no. 1-4 (1991): pp. 317-362, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633191x00137>, 3, 4.

³ John Blaney and Mike Gfoeller, “Lessons from the Failure of Perestroika,” *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): p. 481, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151700>, 495.

⁴ Ibid, 495, 496.

⁵ U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State), accessed April 4, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations>.

the situation from the outside, and therefore continued to promote wariness and concern about the continued support of Communist ideals in the Soviet Union. George H. W. Bush, Reagan's vice president at the beginning of perestroika and glasnost and the president towards the end after 1989 also developed a direct personal connection with Gorbachev, and used the success of concrete actions as a reason to praise Gorbachev, giving him most of the credit for reductions of tensions and framing him as a hero, therefore making the American people aware of Gorbachev's character. Articles detailing the end of the Soviet Union, now had a more positive view as a result of seeing Gorbachev's character through US president's speeches when he stepped down. The personal relationship of trust that developed throughout perestroika and glasnost between US politicians and Gorbachev was largely responsible for thawing the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States and gradually became more exposed in speeches of government representatives. Newspapers, and by extension the American people, having not understood this relationship at first, were still wary of a power-hungry Soviet Union who was doing everything possible to remain Communist, a fear that diminished only after the connection became more public when they began seeing this trust between the leaders.

Religion and morality were the driving factors behind Reagan's disinterest in forming relations with the Soviet Union in 1983-84 because he thought the Soviet Union's lack of morality was at odds with American traditions and nationalism. Being very religious in private life, Reagan supported the introduction of legislation such as the school prayer amendment about which he gave a radio address in 1984.⁶⁷ This legislature directly tied public schools, the institutions which educated most of America, to religion, allowing for organized prayer. In

⁶ Eileen White, "President Reagan Backs Constitutional Change on Prayer in School," Education Week, September 13, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/education/president-reagan-backs-constituional-change-on-prayer-in-school/1982/05>, 1.

⁷ Matlock, Jack F. Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended. New York: Random House, 2005, 100-130.

justifying this, Reagan employed rhetoric praising America’s founders and using quotes from them to argue that as America was built on primarily religious ideals, prayer should be allowed in school.⁸⁹ This policy-making displayed a direct connection between Reagan’s private views on religion and his platform, something that would also appear in speeches on the Soviet Union in a similar time period. In his famously named “Evil Empire” speech, Reagan spoke to the National Association of Evangelicals, a group of people who were key contributors to his successful election in 1980.¹⁰ Reagan again cited important people in America’s history, using a quote by William Penn—”if we will not be governed by God, we must be governed by tyrants”—to make an argument that because Russians were not as religious as the Americans, their government was therefore filled with “tyrants.”¹¹ Reagan continued on this by reaffirming his stance that America will win the Cold War, referring to spirituality as the “source of our strength.” In doing so he also commented on morality, arguing that because Americans have morality and spirituality, that they will “triumph over those who would enslave their fellow man.”¹² While this speech was for a religious group, Reagan’s other speeches, addressing a broader audience, continued to showcase the same rhetoric, such as the support for prayer in public schools. Therefore, the location of the speech was not what made Reagan develop the concept that a lack of religion and morality made the Soviet Union “evil”; this was really his personal view, thus demonstrating that at this point government leaders, and by extension the American people who listened to these leaders, feared the Soviet Union.

⁸ “Radio Address to the Nation on Prayer in Schools.” Ronald Reagan. Accessed April 4, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/radio-address-nation-prayer-schools>, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals.” Teaching American History, July 8, 2022. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/speech-to-the-national-association-of-evangelicals/>, 1.

Appendix A

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Reagan, ‘Evil Empire,’ Speech Text,” Voices of Democracy, July 5, 2016, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/>, 1.

Seeing Gorbachev and the Soviet people's affection for God through Russian Orthodox Christianity and meeting Gorbachev in person in 1985 and 1986 allowed Reagan to overcome his distrust and shift his rhetoric to campaigning for more concrete plans.¹³ Therefore, his position on the Soviets shifted from a mindset based on vague concepts to one on concrete actions like lowering the quantity of nuclear weapons. Reagan and Gorbachev originally had misconceptions about each other, creating an atmosphere of anxiety as each leader waited to see what kind of leader the other would be. Gorbachev thought Reagan was a political "dinosaur" or a conservative and Reagan thought Gorbachev would be the same as other Soviet leaders, and thus lacking the morality and religion that he thought was so important.¹⁴ However, after beginning to meet with an advisor, Suzanne Massie, Reagan's rhetoric changed after realizing the strength of Russian Orthodoxy in Russia and that Gorbachev often mentioned God in his speeches, Reagan's rhetoric changed. Instead of continuing to position himself as a "fire-breathing cold warrior" that he was, Reagan became accommodating, demonstrating his support for Gorbachev and treating him as an equal, and creating for the first time "an atmosphere of trust between a U.S. president and a leader of the Soviet Union." This change was only amplified after the Geneva Summit, where Reagan and Gorbachev met to talk about policy. Reagan was nervous, but saw that Gorbachev was willing to communicate openly, often having jokes in his policy briefs. In a future New Year's message to the Russian people just months after the summit, Reagan reacknowledged the "fresh chapter in relations" and the goal of "reducing suspicions and mistrust between us" for the Geneva meeting. The culmination of the meeting resulted in a shift in rhetoric towards more concrete plans. In the same message, Reagan

¹³ Jason Saltoun-Ebin, "Title," The Reagan - Gorbachev Summits | Title | Jason Saltoun-Ebin, accessed April 4, 2023, <http://www.thereaganfiles.com/the-summits.html>, 1.

¹⁴ Matlock, Jack F. Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended. New York: Random House, 2005, 110-120.

mentioned the reduction of “the massive nuclear arsenals on both sides” and an exchange of “our most accomplished artists and academics” as key talking points during the summit. Instead of blindly framing the Soviet Union as the enemy, Reagan developed the idea of hope and cultural exchange, thus building for a better future, something which was only possible all as a result of the meeting and realization about religion, thus demonstrating the formation of a personal connection.

American newspapers, not having built the same connection with Gorbachev as Reagan, looked at the Soviet Union from a more outside perspective, instead noting the continued support for Communist ideals in the Soviet Union and the idea that the Soviet Union needed reforms to continue being a foe to the United States. The connection between Reagan and Gorbachev was not something that the American people, or the newspaper writers who influenced the mindsets of the American people had, as it was mostly based on a balance of personality that worked well between Reagan and Gorbachev.¹⁵ Instead, the only communication that could be found about this relationship was through speeches and observations, and thus, newspaper accounts of Gorbachev’s initiatives of perestroika and glasnost were passive, simply describing the effects of glasnost and perestroika instead of relating it back to the American people. For example, a New York Times article describes the change in Moscow:

But beneath the capital's seedy, socialist exterior there is an unaccustomed hum of excitement. Passersby pore over posted copies of Moscow News, marveling at articles on (gasp!) official corruption and incompetence. Once banned abstract paintings hang at an outdoor Sunday art fair. In public parks and private living rooms, families plan futures that many believe will be better, richer, freer than ever before.

The article captured the excitement of the Soviet people through a series of scenes that develop the narrative that change is happening.¹⁶ However, the article did not have a real connection to

¹⁵ Matlock, Jack F. *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*. New York: Random House, 2005.

¹⁶ Thomas A. Sancton, “Can Mikhail Gorbachev Bring It off?,” *Time* (Time Inc., July 27, 1987), <https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,965086,00.html>.

the Soviet people or a sense of common identity, instead appearing somewhat patronizing through interjections like “gasp!” when describing how the Soviet people now have access to freedom of press. The connection to world politics comes later:

“For all his innovations, the Soviet leader has hardly, at 56, become a convert to Western-style democracy. He rose to power through the Communist hierarchy and deeply believes in the tenets of Marx and Lenin. His goal is not to scrap that system but to save it from permanent economic decline through a series of bold, pragmatic measures.”

The article noted that Gorbachev is still a threat, mentioning his rise to power in a Communist system and continued adherence to Marxist and Leninist theory, which advocated for continual revolution and pose a direct threat to American capitalism. The Soviet Union, and by extension Gorbachev, also had secondary motives for perestroika. After a rapid increase in the quantity of arms on the part of the Reagan administration in the 1980s, Gorbachev was afraid that the Soviet Union would fall even further behind and lose the military competition that defined the Cold War. The article acknowledged this, noting that the central ideas of the Communist nature of the Soviet Union, like the constant struggle against the United States, were not getting removed, rather, they were trying to be saved. This idea made the American people and newspapers afraid of the Soviet Union.¹⁷ Therefore, newspaper accounts lack the sense of optimism that accompanied speeches by Reagan, not because there wasn't real change, but because they did not have the same trust in or personal connection with Gorbachev, and thus would have to rely on speeches to understand it.

By praising and making him seem like the sole reason for the reduction of tensions in 1991, Bush made the private relationship between his administration and Gorbachev more public after Gorbachev stepped down from his role as the leader of the Soviet Union. Since Bush shared

¹⁷ John Blaney and Mike Gfoeller, “Lessons from the Failure of Perestroika,” *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): p. 481, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151700>, 496-499.

many of Reagan's philosophies and was active in the government at that time, he saw firsthand the change in relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁸ He therefore also saw the development of mutual trust, something which is reflected in his End of the Soviet Union Speech where he praises Gorbachev for stepping down:

I'd like to express, on behalf of the American people, my gratitude to Mikhail Gorbachev for years of sustained commitment to world peace, and for his intellect, vision and courage. I spoke with Mikhail Gorbachev this morning. We reviewed the many accomplishments of the past few years and spoke of hope for the future. Bush directly related Gorbachev to the American people by using his position as president to thank him on behalf of the American people, setting a clear message that Gorbachev should be valued by every American.¹⁹ He continued, describing the personal conversation he had with Gorbachev, bringing the American people into the personal relationship that was propagated by Reagan years earlier. Bush also described a joint desire for hope in the future and the many accomplishments that came out of the concrete changes that Reagan supported after meeting with Gorbachev for the first time. He also juxtaposed Gorbachev with an idealistic standpoint about what the world would look like in the future: "We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities and hope for our children, a world we could not have contemplated a few years ago." Bush brought up the idea that the world as it is now would have been unimaginable, and by juxtaposing it with Gorbachev's accomplishments, gives him the credit for this new world and making the American people aware of the importance of the shared connection between US policymakers.²⁰

¹⁸ Moore, Leah B. "Second Terms, First Impressions: A Comparison of Presidential Inaugural Addresses by Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush." WTAMU Repository Home, December 1, 2015. <https://wtamu-ir.tdl.org/handle/11310/44>, 1.

¹⁹ "Text of Bush's Address to Nation on Gorbachev's Resignation," The New York Times (The New York Times, December 26, 1991), <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/26/world/end-soviet-union-text-bush-s-address-nation-gorbachev-s-resignation.html>, 1.

²⁰ John Blaney and Mike Gfoeller, "Lessons from the Failure of Perestroika," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): p. 481, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151700>, 490.

United States newspaper articles reporting on the end of the Soviet Union responded to the now more exposed trust between leaders with an increase in positivity and hope, thus lowering tensions and thawing the relationship with the Soviet Union. The article viewed glasnost as positive citing it as a way to spotlight the “tenacity of the people” and indicated that Gorbachev was the only one who could “leave with any dignity,” demonstrating that newspapers, and as a result the American people who read those newspapers, believed in Gorbachev’s importance and role.²¹ Newspapers controlled the narrative, being able to publish whatever they wanted; portraying Gorbachev in a good light influenced the American perception.²² The article directly mirrored what was described in Bush’s speech, but also added in praise for the Soviet people, indicating that tensions were truly declining. The lowering tensions can also be seen from polls that demonstrate the previous fear that the Soviet Union was just trying to save itself to continue fighting the United States: only 33 percent of Americans believed that the Soviet Union was a large threat just before the collapse in 1990 as opposed to the almost 60 percent in mid 1988.²³ The article also described how Gorbachev changed the people, and that he was “an instrument of faith,” meaning that finally, after many years of Soviet policies of glasnost and perestroika, the American people finally were less wary as a result of speeches by their politicians.

²¹ Serge Schmemmann, “The Soviet State, Born of a Dream, Dies,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 26, 1991), <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/26/world/end-of-the-soviet-union-the-soviet-state-born-of-a-dream-dies.html>, 1.

²² [Author removed at request of original publisher], “4.4 How Newspapers Control the Public's Access to Information and Impact American Pop Culture,” *Understanding Media and Culture* (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition, 2016. This edition adapted from a work originally produced in 2010 by a publisher who has requested that it not receive attribution., March 22, 2016), <https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/4-4-how-newspapers-control-the-publics-access-to-information-and-impact-american-pop-culture/>, 1.

²³ “The Polls-Poll Trends Changing American Attitudes toward ... - Jstor Home,” accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2749146>, 3.

The United States government noticed and capitalized on the good fortune of having a more progressive leader of the Soviet Union in the persona of Gorbachev and saw the fact that perestroika and glasnost represented a turning point in Soviet policy. By developing an atmosphere of trust, first between US politicians like Reagan, and then between the American people who were convinced as a result of their speeches, a new era in relations between the Soviet Union and the US was created. This change had lasting impacts, resulting in new relationships between the US and former Soviet republics and leading to greater world peace as a whole. It also demonstrated the ability of politicians to sway their voter bases and reinforces the importance of being aware of the effect that rhetoric can have in influencing a population towards propagating hate, something which is especially important considering later conflicts such as the US's involvement in Afghanistan in 2001 .

Appendix A - Ronald Reagan Evil Empire Speech

“So, I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority.... I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and labeling both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil. I ask you to resist the attempts of those who would have you withhold your support for our efforts, this administration’s efforts, to keep America strong and free, while we negotiate real and verifiable reductions in the world’s nuclear arsenals and one day, with God’s help, their total elimination.

While America’s military strength is important, let me add here that I’ve always maintained that the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might. The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith.

Whittaker Chambers, the man whose own religious conversion made him a witness to one of the terrible traumas of our time, the Hiss-Chambers case, wrote that the crisis of the Western world exists to the degree in which the West is indifferent to God, the degree to which it collaborates in communism’s attempt to make man stand alone without God. And then he said, for Marxism-Leninism is actually the second-oldest faith, first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with the words of temptation, “Ye shall be as gods.”

The Western world can answer this challenge, he wrote, “but only provided that its faith in God and the freedom He enjoys is as great as communism’s faith in Man.” I believe we shall rise to

the challenge. I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written. I believe this because the source of our strength in the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual. And because it knows no limitation, it must terrify and ultimately triumph over those who would enslave their fellow man. For in the words of Isaiah: "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary."

Yes, change your world. One of our Founding Fathers, Thomas Paine, said, "We have it within our power to begin the world over again." We can do it, doing together what no one church could do by itself.

God bless you and thank you very much."

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