

**H-Diplo** *Commentary*

**Stephen Cohen, “Did the Cold War Really End?”**

*Remarks delivered at the Cold War Conference at the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow on March 1, 2006.*

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My subject is a paradox: Everyone says - politicians, journalists, and scholars - that the American-Russian Cold War ended 15 or more years ago, but today both the American and Russian press regularly publish reports of what they call “Cold War” policies, behavior, and polemics.

The explanation of this seeming paradox is that the Cold War did not end in 1989-91. Only one of the several chapters in its long history ended, and a new chapter is unfolding today. To understand this reality, we must recall that history.

If “cold war” means serious ideological, political, economic, and even military confrontation, but without shots or bombs, then the American-Russian Cold War began not in the late 1940s, as is usually thought, but during the 16 years following October 1917 when the U.S. government refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new Soviet government.

To answer the question when, or if, it ended, we must remember another historical fact: From the beginning there were always, along with maximalist cold warriors, forces on both sides that wanted to replace some of the conflict in the Cold War with elements of cooperation. Their policy later became known as detente. But it is also important to understand that mainstream advocates of detente never sought to end the Cold War, only to make it less dangerous, because they too believed it was inherent in the different natures of the American and Soviet Russian systems.

Those two historical policies shaped the different chapters of the twentieth-century Cold War.

The first chapter was limited in scope and mainly rhetorical, but its initial years 16 years of U.S. frigid non- recognition and Soviet revolutionary policies generated ideological factors still at work today. Later, it also included the first episode of detente, which began under President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, when Washington finally granted diplomatic recognition to the Soviet government. Nonetheless, the struggle between extreme cold warriors and advocates of detente continued, publicly and behind the scenes, throughout the 1930s and even after the two countries became wartime allies in 1941.

Chapter 2 of the Cold War, along with a renewed struggle between its hardliners and softliners, began to develop after the battle of Stalingrad, when it became clear that the mutual enemy, Nazi Germany, would be defeated. By the late 1940s, proponents of detente both in Washington and Moscow had been crushed and the second chapter of the Cold War was fully under way.

This chapter intensified the ideological conflicts of the first chapter, but it was larger and different in two fundamental ways. American-Soviet conflicts were institutionalized in the

division of Europe and soon spread around the world. And this chapter of Cold War included a dangerous arms race, particularly a nuclear arms race.

The second episode of detente, initiated by Eisenhower and Khrushchev, began badly in the 1950s and was quickly defeated. A full second chapter of detente was thwarted in the 1960s by a series of events--among them, the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy's assassination, Khrushchev's overthrow, and Vietnam-- and got fully under way only in the 1970s, under Nixon and Brezhnev. In the United States, it featured an exceptionally intense public struggle between maximalist cold warriors and detentists, who were largely defeated by the late 1970s. (Having participated on the side of detente, I remember it well.)

The third (and potentially last) chapter of the Cold War unfolded in the second half of the 1980s. The drama of this chapter was the historic opportunity, represented by the new Soviet leader Gorbachev, to end the Cold War altogether. Though not well understood at the time, or perhaps even now, Gorbachev's "New Thinking" in foreign policy was not a program for another detente but for actually abolishing the Cold War. (The basic tenets of the "New Thinking" rejected each of the ideological, political, and military axioms that had sustained the Cold War on both sides since 1917.)

Thus began a fateful struggle in Washington (and Moscow) between policymakers who wanted to embrace the historic opportunity presented by Gorbachev, or what he called an "alternative," and those who did not. All of us know this history.

To his credit (and the dismay of many of his right-wing supporters), President Reagan decided to meet Gorbachev at least part of the way toward abolishing the Cold War. After a "long pause," so did his successor, the first President Bush. As a result, in December 1989, at a summit meeting at Malta, Gorbachev and Bush declared that the Cold War was over. But declarations alone could not end 70 years of conflict and confrontation. Their statements really meant that each would now try to terminate the Cold War.

We do not know what would have happened if Gorbachev and/or Bush had remained in office in the 1990s, but there was already a bad omen. Even when Bush agreed to end the Cold War in 1989-91, many of his top advisers, like many leading members of the American political elite and media, did not believe in or accept this goal. (I witnessed that reality personally, on the eve of Malta, at Camp David where I was invited to debate the issue with the irreconcilable cold warrior Richard Pipes in front of President Bush and his entire foreign policy team. President Bush agreed with me, while a number of his high-level associates clearly did not.)

The proof is that when the Soviet Union ended in December 1991, the U.S. government and media immediately began to present the presumed "end of the Cold War" not as a mutual Soviet-American decision, which it certainly was, but as a great victory for America and defeat for Russia.

That (now conventional) American triumphalist narrative is one major reason why Chapter 4 of the Cold war has been unfolding for more than a decade. It began in the early and mid-1990s -- not a decade later as a result of Putin's policies, as is now alleged in the United States -- when the

Clinton Administration made two ramifying decisions. One was to treat post-Communist Russia as a defeated nation that had to model itself on the American system in order to be a friend and junior partner of the United States. The other was to break the Bush Administration's promise to Soviet Russia in 1990-91 that NATO would not be expanded, in the words of then Secretary of State James Baker, "one inch to the east."

Fifteen years later, we are witnessing growing manifestations of this fourth chapter of the Cold War, even recapitulations of Chapter 2, primarily, I regret to say, on the part of the U.S. government. (The Kremlin's contribution thus far has been largely reactive.) Here are four obvious examples:

1. The establishing of American and NATO military power ever closer to Russia's borders, creating a cordon sanitaire, or reverse iron curtain, and again militarizing relations between the two countries.
2. The tacit U.S. denial that Russia has any legitimate national interests outside its own territory, even in neighboring, ethnically akin countries, or even legitimate full sovereignty in its own internal political and economic affairs.
3. The familiar double standards that condemn Moscow for the same policies pursued by Washington - such as seeking allies as well as military bases in Ukraine and other former Soviet Republics and using its wealth (energy in Russia's case) as foreign aid to friendly governments. (There are many other examples.)
4. And, barely noticed, the development of new nuclear weapons on both sides.

If this new chapter of the Cold War continues to unfold, it may be the most dangerous one ever, for several reasons:

- Its geopolitical focus has moved from Central Europe to the very center of Russia's traditional zone of security, its "near abroad," in a growing and exceedingly provocative military encirclement.

- At the same time, there are dangerously conflicting American and Russian self-perceptions. The United States, now the self-professed "only superpower," has a much more expansive view of its own international entitlements than it did before 1992. (Indeed, Washington's winner-take-all policy toward post-Soviet Russia is significantly more aggressive than was its approach to Communist Russia.) Russia, on the other hand, is much weaker and less secure than it was before 1992, and thus both less stable and less predictable.

- There is an equally grave psychological factor: this chapter of the American-Soviet Cold War is undeclared, unfolding, at least until recently, behind a facade of pseudo-"partnership and friendship," and as a result already teeming with mutual resentments over perceived broken promises and betrayals. (The psychological factor will be even more dangerous if these developments cause Moscow to conclude that the American Cold War was really primarily against Russia, not Communism, as many Russians already believe.)

- Nor are there today any significant detente-like relations between Washington and Moscow. Most alarming, negotiations for reducing nuclear weapons have in effect been terminated by this Bush Administration's unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and by the essentially meaningless nuclear reductions agreement it imposed on Moscow in 2002. And all this, including new buildups on both sides, while Russia's means of fully controlling its existing nuclear devices are less reliable than they were under the Soviet system.

- Finally, hardline Cold War elites have always been much stronger in both capitals than pro-detente forces, and even more so than Cold War abolitionists. That is why the possibility of easing or ending the Cold War has always required a transcendent leader - first, Roosevelt, later Gorbachev. But is such a leader possible today? It is hard to imagine one emerging anytime soon in the United States, where the new Cold War policy toward Russia is developing with full bipartisan support--the Edwards/Kemp "report" issued this month by the "non-partisan" Council on Foreign Relations being a particularly telling and lamentable example-- and, unlike in the past, without any significant elite, media, or popular opposition. As for Russia, it is true that Gorbachev emerged out of the conservative Soviet nomenklatura, to the great surprise of most Western specialists. But Moscow commentators tell us that today's Russian elite is more corruptly self-interested and less visionary than was its Soviet predecessor, certainly than Gorbachev's reform-minded "generation of the 20th Party Congress."

Should I conclude, therefore, with an apology to Mikhail Sergeevich for having challenged, on the eve of his birthday, the claim so often made on his behalf - that he ended the Cold War?

In my view, the tragic reality of that missed opportunity does not diminish Gorbachev's greatness in history. Not even the greatest reform leader - and still less a heretical one, as Gorbachev certainly was - can himself actually transform his own country or the world. He can only give the rest of us an opportunity, which we did not have before, to do so. At home, Gorbachev gave Russia an opportunity to continue an unprecedented evolutionary political and economic reformation, which it did not take. And he gave my country an opportunity to end the almost century-long Cold War, which we did not take.

When historians eventually write the real history of the era of Gorbachev, and its lost alternatives, they therefore will judge the rest of us very harshly - if, that is, there are any survivors to write it.

Or we may hope, in Mikhail Sergeevich's always optimistic spirit, that the alternatives he gave us are not yet irretrievably lost.

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