

General Secretary Gorbachev: A New Beginning or a Return to Socialist Values?

Directions: Read the excerpts, and answer the questions that follow.

Document 1

Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika* (1987)

The policy of restructuring puts everything in its place. We are fully restoring the principle of socialism. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work," and we seek to affirm social justice for all, equal rights for all, one law for all, one kind of discipline for all, and high responsibilities for each. Perestroika raises the level of social responsibility and expectation. . . .

Perestroika means mass initiative. It is the comprehensive development of democracy, socialist self-government, encouragement of initiative and creative endeavor, improved order and discipline, more glasnost, criticism and self-criticism in all spheres of our society. It is utmost respect for the individual and consideration for personal dignity.¹

Document 2

Gorbachev's Speech to the United Nations (1988)

Our country is undergoing a truly revolutionary upsurge. The process of restructuring is gaining pace; we started by elaborating the theoretical concepts of restructuring; we had to assess the nature and scope of the problems, to interpret the lessons of the past, and to express this in the form of political conclusions and programs. This was done. The theoretical work, the re-interpretation of what had happened, the final elaboration, enrichment, and correction of political stances have not ended. They continue. However, it was fundamentally important to start from an overall concept, which is already now being confirmed by the experience of past years, which has turned out to be generally correct and to which there is no alternative.

In order to involve society in implementing the plans for restructuring it had to be made more truly democratic. Under the badge of democratization, restructuring has now encompassed politics, the economy, spiritual life, and ideology. We have unfolded a radical economic reform, we have accumulated experience, and from the new year we are transferring the entire national economy to new forms and work methods. Moreover, this means a profound reorganization of production relations and the realization of the immense potential of socialist property. . . .

Now about the most important topic, without which no problem of the coming century can be resolved: disarmament. . . .

Today I can inform you of the following: The Soviet Union has made a decision on reducing its armed forces. In the next two years, their numerical strength will be reduced by 500,000 persons, and the volume of conventional arms will also be cut considerably. These reductions will be made on a unilateral basis, unconnected with negotiations on the mandate for the Vienna meeting. By agreement with our allies in the Warsaw Pact, we have made the decision to withdraw six tank divisions from the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and to disband them by 1991. Assault landing formations and units, and a number of others, including assault river-crossing forces, with their armaments and combat equipment, will also be withdrawn from the groups of Soviet forces

¹Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 31, 34.

situated in those countries. The Soviet forces situated in those countries will be cut by 50,000 persons, and their arms by 5,000 tanks. All remaining Soviet divisions on the territory of our allies will be reorganized. They will be given a different structure from today's which will become unambiguously defensive, after the removal of a large number of their tanks. . . .

Finally, being on U.S. soil, but also for other, understandable reasons, I cannot but turn to the subject of our relations with this great country. . . . Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States of America span five and a half decades. The world has changed, and so have the nature, role, and place of these relations in world politics. For too long they were built under the banner of confrontation, and sometimes of hostility, either open or concealed. But in the last few years, throughout the world people were able to heave a sigh of relief, thanks to the changes for the better in the substance and atmosphere of the relations between Moscow and Washington.²

1. What does *perestroika* mean in your own words?
2. What does *glasnost* mean in your own words?
3. In what ways are these terms consistent with socialism?
4. In what ways were these ideas a new start for Soviet domestic policy?
5. What did Gorbachev plan to do in terms of foreign policy?
6. In what ways were his plans different from those of his predecessors?

²“Address by Mikhail Gorbachev at the 43rd UN General Assembly Session, December 7, 1988,” *The Cold War Files: Interpreting U. S. History Through Documents*, <<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/coldwarfiles/files/Documents/1988-1107.Gorbachev.pdf>> (11 October 2010).

What Should the United States Now Do?

Directions: Read the following document, and use the questions to prepare for class discussion.

The Governor's Island Summit, December 1988

The last official meeting between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev—after four spectacular summits that commanded worldwide attention at Geneva 1985, Reykjavik 1986, Washington 1987 and Moscow 1988—took place on an island in New York harbor on December 7, 1988 during the Soviet leader's trip to deliver his now-famous United Nations speech announcing unilateral arms cuts and—to many observers—the ideological end of the Cold War.

Adding particular interest to this abbreviated summit was the participation of then-President-elect George H. W. Bush, who was at that moment constructing a national security team of aides who were distinctly more skeptical of Gorbachev's motives than President Reagan or his top officials were. In fact, the transition from the Reagan to the Bush administrations at the end of 1988 and beginning of 1989 might be described as a transition from doves to hawks. (One of the leading hawks was Bush's deputy national security adviser Robert Gates, now serving as Secretary of Defense for President George W. Bush and President-elect Barack Obama.)

According to evidence from the Soviet side—much of it published here for the first time anywhere—Gorbachev explicitly prepared the U.N. speech as a means to speed up arms reductions, engage the new American leader, and end the Cold War. After the successful signing of the INF Treaty at the Washington summit in 1987 eliminated that entire class of nuclear weapons, the Soviet leadership was prepared for a very quick progress on the strategic offensive weapons treaty START. Building on the personal understanding and chemistry between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev, the Soviets were counting on signing the treaty with Reagan, before the U.S. presidential election of 1988.

Having made substantial concessions on verification and shorter-range missiles for the INF Treaty, Gorbachev was signaling Reagan throughout the spring of 1988 trying to push for faster progress on START. But Reagan's conventionally-minded advisers—particularly Frank Carlucci at the Defense Department and Colin Powell at the White House—undercut Secretary of State George Shultz with their go-slow approach, even though Shultz saw the opportunities for radical arms reductions. Opposition from the U.S. Navy over submarine-launched cruise missiles also stalled progress, even though the withdrawal of such missiles was manifestly in the U.S. national security interest. The result was that the Americans were not ready to agree on START in time for the Moscow summit in May–June 1988. Even after the summit, Gorbachev still kept hope alive for signing the treaty; but there was no progress, at least in part because then Vice-President Bush—in the middle of a presidential campaign where securing the conservative base of the Republican Party was key to his strategy—was not eager to move any arms control forward.

During the summer of 1988, gradually, the documents show that the Soviet leadership realized that the treaty would have to wait until the new administration came to power in Washington, and therefore, the most important priority for Soviet foreign policy now was not to lose the momentum and to hit the ground running with the new administration. Georgy Arbatov in his June 1988 memo to Gorbachev emphasized the importance of being prepared for the new administration—*not* slowing down the pace of negotiations, keeping the initiative, and building a base of support in Europe—thus keeping the pressure for comprehensive cuts in conventional arms, including elimination of asymmetries and reductions of Soviet forces by 500,000. However, in the summer of 1988, the Soviet side still saw this plan as part of mutual reductions in Europe.

In the summer of 1988, the groundbreaking Soviet XIX Party Conference discussed the main ideas that later became part of the Gorbachev U.N. address and adopted them as guidelines for Soviet foreign policy. But even that significant ideological shift did not produce any response in the United States preoccupied with the electoral campaign. In the fall of 1988, however, after various Soviet initiatives did *not* result in U.S. engagement, the Soviets felt the need to radicalize their approach if they were to achieve quick progress with the new administration. Former ambassador to Washington and now key Central Committee official Anatoly Dobrynin in his September memorandum to Gorbachev suggested that the General Secretary should meet with the President-elect as early as possible, preferably during his visit to New York for the session of the U.N. General Assembly. Dobrynin suggested that if Gorbachev delivered an address at the U.N., it would be helpful in his relations with the new administration and would have positive impact on the American public opinion.

Late October 1988 brought a major break with past Soviet positions, when Gorbachev decided to offer deep reductions in Soviet forces in Europe as a unilateral initiative, and to deliver a major address at the United Nations. Gorbachev conceptualized this speech as an “anti-Fulton, Fulton in reverse” in its significance—comparing it with the historic Winston Churchill “Iron Curtain” speech of 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, at the beginning of the Cold War. Gorbachev wanted his speech to signify the end of the Cold War, offering deep Soviet reductions in conventional weapons as proof of his policy. These reductions would address the most important Western concern about the threat of war in Europe, where the Soviets enjoyed significant conventional superiority. This move, in Gorbachev’s mind, would build trust and open the way for a very fast progress with the new American administration. His meeting with President-elect Bush and President Reagan would take place immediately after the U.N. speech.

However, the documents show that Gorbachev and his advisers had first to convince their own military of the wisdom of making such unilateral unbalanced reductions, including the problem of what to do with the personnel being withdrawn from Europe. Gorbachev seemed well aware of the potential opposition to his initiative both in the Politburo and in the Armed Forces—a very sensitive issue to handle. The decision making on the U.N. speech involved a very narrow circle of advisers, and the full scope of numbers was never discussed at the Politburo or published, partly because as Gorbachev stated in an unprecedented direct way on November 3, “If we publish how the matters stand, that we spend over twice as much as the U.S. on military needs, if we let the scope of our expenses be known, all our new thinking and our new foreign policy will go to hell. Not one country in the world spends as much per capita on weapons as we do, except perhaps the developing nations that we are swamping with weapons and getting nothing in return.”

Gorbachev's U.N. speech on December 7 explicitly endorsed the "common interests of mankind" (no longer the class struggle) as the basis of Soviet foreign policy and, significantly for Eastern Europe, declared "the compelling necessity of the principle of freedom of choice" as "a universal principle to which there should be no exceptions." Gorbachev particularly surprised CIA and NATO officials with his announcement of unilateral cuts in Soviet forces totaling 500,000 soldiers, and the withdrawal from Eastern Europe of thousands of tanks and tens of thousands of troops.

Reaction in the West ranged from disbelief to astonishment. The *New York Times* editorialized, "Perhaps not since Woodrow Wilson presented his Fourteen Points in 1918 or since Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill promulgated the Atlantic Charter in 1941 has a world figure demonstrated the vision Mikhail Gorbachev displayed yesterday at the United Nations." U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan called this speech "the most astounding statement of surrender in the history of ideological struggle," while retired Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, a former NATO commander and top aide to President Eisenhower, described Gorbachev's announcement of unilateral troop cuts as "the most significant step since NATO was founded."

Little of this world-shaking impact was evident in the highest-level U.S. government reaction. At the Governors Island meeting, for example, President Reagan remarked only that "he had had a brief report on it, and it all sounded good to him"; while Vice-President and President-elect Bush remarked that he "would like to build on what President Reagan had done" but "he would need a little time to review the issues. . . ." Bush described the "theory" behind his "new team" as "to revitalize things by putting in new people."

But the new Bush advisers were more than skeptical of Gorbachev. In subsequent memoirs, national security adviser Brent Scowcroft dismissed the U.N. speech when he described his staunch opposition to any early summit with Gorbachev in 1989: "Unless there were substantive accomplishments, such as in arms control, the Soviets would be able to capitalize on the one outcome left—the good feelings generated by the meeting. They would use the resulting euphoria to undermine Western resolve, and a sense of complacency would encourage some to believe the United States could relax its vigilance. The Soviets in general and Gorbachev in particular were masters at creating these enervating atmospheres. Gorbachev's U.N. speech had established, with a largely rhetorical flourish, a heady atmosphere of optimism. He could exploit an early meeting with a new president as evidence to declare the Cold War over without providing substantive actions from a 'new' Soviet Union. Under the circumstances which prevailed [in 1989], I believed an early summit would only abet the current Soviet propaganda campaign."

Ironies abound in this statement. The Soviet evidence shows that substantive accomplishments in arms control were very much on the table and available at the very beginning of the Bush administration. These included the START agreement for 50% reductions in strategic arms that the Bush administration would not actually sign until 1991, or the withdrawn deployments of tactical nuclear weapons that President Bush did not order until the fall of 1991, to immediate reciprocation by Gorbachev. The U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Jack Matlock, titled his chapter on this initial period of the Bush administration, "Washington Fumbles"; while Gorbachev's advisor Anatoly Chernyaev is even harsher with his chapter title, "The Lost Year."

Chernyaev subsequently wrote: "Much has been written about the impression that Gorbachev made on the world in his U.N. speech. But we also have to consider the impact on him of the world's response to his speech. . . . Having received such broad recognition and support, having been 'certified' a world class leader of great authority, he could be faster and surer in shaking off the fetters of the past in all aspects of foreign policy." Regrettably, exactly those "fetters of the past" continued to restrain the highest levels of the George H. W. Bush administration from meeting Gorbachev half-way, and arguably prevented dramatic reductions in nuclear weapons, fissile materials, and conventional armaments, to the detriment of international security today.¹

1. In 1988 and 1989, how should the United States have changed its policies to meet the needs of the current situation?
2. What issues were of greatest concern?
3. What opportunities existed to end the spiraling arms race?

¹Dr. Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., "Reagan, Gorbachev, and Bush at Governor's Island: Previously Secret Documents from Soviet and U.S. Files on the 1988 Summit in New York, 20 Years Later," *National Security Archive: Electronic Briefing Book No. 261*, 8 December 2008, <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB261/>> (11 October 2010). Internal footnotes omitted.