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MIKHAIL S. GORBACHEV: AN EXCEPTIONAL LEADER

It is a great honor to be asked to comment on an article by Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, a man who is one of my political heroes. I must confess that his leadership was the highlight of my long academic career. After almost two decades of observing Brezhnevism in power, we finally got a chance to find out whether the Soviet system, and its position in the international arena, were fundamentally changeable.

That said, an evaluation of Gorbachev's leadership must be a complex exercise. Calling him a "transformational leader" may capture his aspirations, but could leave the impression that he succeeded in transforming the "old" into something new, coherent and lasting. Calling him an "event-making man" highlights the reality that, absent Gorbachev's exceptional qualities as a leader, no such radical reform would have taken place. Calling him a "hero," in most usages, is a normative claim, invoked by those who applaud his aspirations and share his values.

But even if we put aside the normative question, assigning the label of "hero" can obscure the fact that, in some areas of policy, Gorbachev failed *on his own terms*. For it is undeniable that, in the end, Gorbachev did not welcome or advocate many of the things that came to pass: the dissolution of the Soviet Union into fifteen independent states; the collapse of any politically "leading role" for the CPSU in the new order; the disorderly disintegration, rather than reform, of the command economy ("spontaneous privatization" [i.e., theft] of state assets by the managerial class and organized crime); the overthrow of all the communist states of Eastern Europe; or the reunification of Germany within NATO. And, of course, he did not welcome being forced out of power in December 1991 by Boris Yeltsin.

In the end, Mikhail Sergeyevich did not provide us with conclusive evidence that the "Soviet system" was "reformable." What he *did* demonstrate was that, through exceptionally skilled leadership by a man of democratic orientation, the

ancien regime was capable of being brought down peacefully, and that such a leader could serve as midwife for the birth of a new, more-democratic political order and for an alternative to “anti-imperialist” struggle as the country’s defining mission in world affairs. Mr. Gorbachev’s desacralization of the Soviet political and ideological order, and his midwifery of a new order at home and abroad is, in my eyes, his greatest accomplishment as a leader. His inability to raise the infant into maturity, however, is undeniable and must be his greatest disappointment.

What did Mr. Gorbachev accomplish and how did he manage to accomplish it? Once we list the accomplishments at home and abroad, I am impressed by how much Gorbachev managed to achieve in such a short period of time. The list is breath-taking, both in the scope of changes in both domestic and foreign policy, and in the leadership skills required to secure adoption and implementation of those changes. Most observers of the Brezhnev era grew accustomed to assuming that the power of the sclerotic Party-State — the pervasive and sacralized *nomenklatura* backed by a suffocating KGB and its countrywide corps of informers, domination of resource allocation by the military-industrial complex, and support for tit-for-tat Cold War policies — would preclude what came about under Gorbachev. And most observers would have assumed that a man of Gorbachev’s intellectual flexibility and democratizing ideals could never have made it to the top of the Party-State hierarchy, much less be allowed to promulgate such radical policy changes once he was at the top.

And yet he *did* make it to the top and *did* radicalize policy after going slow during his first year in power: *glasnost*, *perestroika*, *demokratizatsiya*, and “new thinking” in foreign policy became rapidly radicalized during 1986-1990. Gorbachev certainly qualifies as an “event-making man” — a leader without whom policies this radical would not have been adopted. The relentless expansion of civil liberties; the public desacralization of the existing political order, which helped to strip the *nomenklatura* of its sense of impunity; the introduction of competitive elections throughout much of the Party-State; the creation of new arenas for authentic legislative deliberation and decision (the Congress of People’s Deputies,

the Supreme Soviet, among others); opening of the country to Western cultural and economic influences. And *New Thinking* about foreign relations that resulted in: making President Reagan far-reaching offers of verified arms reductions, both nuclear and conventional; announcing a firm date for withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan; withdrawing Soviet support for varieties of Third World, “anti-imperialist” states and movements; and rejecting use of the Soviet military to prevent regime change in Eastern Europe. All these (and more) unfolded in such rapid succession that it was fair for observers to ask: where did this man come from? And how is he getting away with all this?

Part of the answer, I believe, is that, within the confines of the Brezhnevite system, Gorbachev proved to be innovative, bright, energetic, skilled at interpersonal relations, idealistic and — importantly — uncorrupted. This might explain why he came to be viewed by Andropov and others as someone who could introduce *within-system* innovations that might reverse decline and stagnation. But, once in power, Gorbachev went much, much further. His one-time patron, the deceased Yuri Andropov, likely would not have approved.

If we ask how Gorbachev came to assimilate and advocate such radical ideas for change, some of the credit must go to certain liberating strands within the Marxist-Leninist heritage, in which Gorbachev had read (and re-read) extensively. That heritage embraced an optimistic, progressive, teleological view of history, and predicted that some variant of “socialism” would emerge ascendant as the universally acknowledged “good society.” This encouraged him to seek a “middle way” between (what we in the West call) “state socialism” and (what the Soviets called) “monopoly capitalism.” (This progressive and optimistic view of history distinguishes Marxism-Leninism from varieties of nationalism, fascism, and theocracy that are used to justify most authoritarian regimes today.)

Indeed, Eurocommunists justified their radicalism with reference to the Marxist heritage (specifically, the “early Marx”). Gorbachev’s views about a middle way crystallized initially under the influence of these Eurocommunists. His views radicalized further while in power, as he met obstacles; eventually, his

conception of “democratic socialism” became little distinguishable from “social democracy” à la Scandinavia. His advocacy of such convergence between East and West became a foundation for his prediction that, through renewed *détente*, international relations could be demilitarized and result in an enduring *entente*: a “common home from Vancouver to Vladivostok”.

All this constituted a true “revolution from above,” but without the violence that usually attends such revolutions. For Gorbachev, whether for idealistic or practical reasons, rejected the idea of continuing with the routine use of violence at home and relations abroad. Such a posture contributed to both his successes and his failures. Resort to violence against domestic critics would have aborted his *perestroika* programs; resort to violence abroad would have aborted his *détente* with the United States. But such a rejection of organized violence also contributed, under the weight of *perestroika*, to the collapse of the CPSU’s grip on power, the dissolution of the USSR, the collapse of communist states in Eastern Europe, and Moscow’s unwillingness to threaten force to prevent the reunification of Germany within NATO.

On these scores, evaluation of Gorbachev’s leadership includes pluses and minuses. Gorbachev cannot be “credited” for that which he did not wish to happen; but, in retrospect, his rejection of violence made it possible for a huge empire (the USSR and the Warsaw Pact) to collapse peacefully — quite rare, perhaps unprecedented, in history.

How, then, did he get away with such rapid radicalization of domestic and foreign policies? Of course, he began with the advantage of being General Secretary, which allowed him to be, if he wished (and he did so wish) an assertive initiator of policy within the collective leadership. But part of the answer is personal. Gorbachev displayed exceptional skills at presenting and debating his ideas. And he was not timid about purging those who were not persuaded by his arguments. He was also a master at seizing the political initiative. He would argue, both in private and in public, that the costs of continuing in the old way — in both domestic and foreign policy — exceeded the costs and risks associated with his

far-reaching policy proposals. And he was very skilled at immediately “upping the ante” through further radicalization when serendipitous events (Chernobyl; Nina Andreeva, Mathias Rust, to note but a few) validated his predispositions. In all, Gorbachev was an exceptionally skilled political in-fighter, in a context in which most members of the leadership knew that things could not continue in the old way, but were not themselves sure what would “work” to improve the performance of the system.

Of course, these strategies work only as long as political polarization within the elite and the society has not reached a breaking point. Even as he moved the political spectrum in the reformist direction, Gorbachev tried to monopolize the center of the reformist political spectrum. He managed to do this for several years, but, having allowed Boris Yeltsin to get back into politics in 1988, and having created the arenas of public politics that Yeltsin was able to exploit, the level of polarization grew rapidly, both within the establishment and on the streets. This left Gorbachev having to fend off skeptics or opponents from both the “Right” and the “Left.” Yeltsin’s relentlessly radical “outbidding” of Gorbachev helped to accelerate the rate of polarization in society and within the elite.

Gorbachev tried to fight this battle on both fronts. But by August 1991, the coup plotters kidnapped him to prevent what they defined as the intolerable drift toward collapse of the USSR. After defeat of the coup, and Gorbachev’s return to Moscow, Yeltsin attacked him as ineffectual and defined the USSR as unsalvageable. Yeltsin and the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus eventually met to formally dissolve the Union. Gorbachev was left with no country to govern and a formal position in name only.

The odor of failure at that time was so strong that it threatened to diminish an appreciation of Gorbachev’s achievements. Who would have predicted that the *nomenklatura* would bring forth a leader who was willing to put his career and life on the line to so radically reform the system and the Soviet Union’s mission in the world? And who would have predicted that he could wrestle the political leadership into acquiescing? From the standpoint of leadership evaluation, one can

give Gorbachev credit for recognizing that the *ancien regime* was a spent force, and for his exceptional political skills in desacralizing the old order, introducing democratic norms and practices, and ending the Cold War. That the ultimate goal of a consolidated new system was not achieved defines the limits of his success. But that bringing down the old system and the Cold War was done so thoroughly and peaceably — and against such enormous odds — is testament to Gorbachev's place in history. In my eyes, and given my values, it justifies the “Gorbymania” that engulfed me for more than six incredible years.