

THE TURN

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in world politics."—The New York Times Book Review**

FROM THE COLD WAR TO A NEW ERA



Author of TET!

DON OBERDORFER

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR:

TET!



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THE ★ TURN

FROM THE COLD WAR TO A NEW ERA

THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION 1983–1990

DON OBERDORFER



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INTRODUCTION TO THE TOUCHSTONE EDITION

In the years just past, the relations of the two leading global powers changed dramatically in ways that hardly anyone had expected. This is the story of how the leaders of the United States and the former Soviet Union ended the Cold War and proceeded into a new era.

From the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, the hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union was the central factor in international life, threatening mass destruction, dominating global politics and affecting the lives, attitudes and even nightmares of people everywhere. In the early 1980s, the conflict between Washington and Moscow deepened with the advent of a highly ideological U.S. administration. Then, with the arrival of a new Soviet leader who sought to reform a moribund system, spirited and often intense negotiations between the leaders of the two nations began to melt the ice between them, and slowly the antagonism diminished. By the dawning of the 1990s, a web of political and personal connections had been created between the leaders, governments and peoples of the United States and the Soviet Union. Neither country felt threatened by the other.

It was clear when I began work on this book in 1988 and even more so when the book was finished early in 1991 that the immense changes which brought an end to the Cold War would inaugurate a very different phase of East-West relations. At that point, however, the culmination of the great transition was beyond our grasp. Rather than a cooperative relationship between two great powers—along the lines envisioned by Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan and George Bush in their discussions reported here—a more radical shift developed late in 1991, when the Soviet Communist Party was disbanded and the Soviet Union itself was abolished.

Whatever happens next, the story of how the two great enemies worked their way out of hostility to a large measure of reconciliation between 1983 and 1990 will be forever looked upon with fascination as an important turning point of our times. In little more than the blink of an eye in historical terms, the global scene dominated by the two leading powers was transformed in startling fashion and the stage was set for even greater changes.

For those of us who lived through those years, often amazed at each day's headlines, the events took place so rapidly and in such unexpected ways that even now the story is difficult to recall or understand. The great turnabout recorded here is a jumble of images and impressions in our minds: Evil Empire, Star Wars, KAL 007, Geneva, Reykjavik, Malta, the march of Soviet troops out of Afghanistan, the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Berlin Wall. We can recall presidents, general secretaries and some of their leading diplomats who played starring or supporting roles. But how did the change take place? What were the discussions and decisions, the actions and interactions that brought it about? This book is a chronicle of what happened, step by step, as the story unfolded.

As a journalist and student of history, I have long been fascinated with turning points, perhaps because they give meaning and more lasting importance to the rapid flow of daily events. My first book, *Tet!* (Doubleday, 1971), was a history of the turning point of the Vietnam war, the dramatic battle of 1968 that changed the way the United States responded to a drawn-out military conflict in Asia. Similarly, the developments between the United States and the Soviet Union in recent years seemed to me another unmistakable turn of the hinge of history. I researched and wrote *The Turn* believing that the extraordinary shift in U.S.-Soviet relations would be a subject of intense interest and historical importance for a long time, and that I could make a contribution by bringing diverse pieces of the story together in one place in a coherent and comprehensive manner.

Future historians will have the advantage of still secret documents, still unwritten memoirs of key participants and of an Olympian perspective provided by the passage of time. My advantage is in having observed the events as they developed from close range as a diplomatic correspondent who covered nearly all the summit meetings and other high-level exchanges between the two nations. Then, for this book, I was able to interview nearly all the key participants in both capitals about what went on behind the scenes, during a period when events were still fresh in their minds. While underlying trends in the two nations are of basic importance, to a large degree this is a story of remarkable human actors on a mammoth stage and the ways they dealt with and thought about one another. Some of the most important aspects of the story do not appear in the records of the White House, the Kremlin or in any diplomatic archive, for they deal with the participants' personal

impressions and subjective judgments underlying their decisions and actions. Such ideas are rarely expressed in formal meetings.

On the U.S. side, my efforts were aided by longstanding acquaintance with many of the key American participants, who were willing to speak to me for this book candidly and often extensively. I recognize and gratefully acknowledge the help of each of these people, from presidents to Foreign Service officers, in the Acknowledgments. I wish to express my special gratitude to former secretary of state George Shultz, now at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, who took an interest in this project from my first discussion of it with him, and who spent a great deal of time patiently answering my questions in thirteen interviews over a period of sixteen months.

On the Soviet side, my work was greatly enhanced by the policy of *glasnost* which, in the context of improved U.S.-Soviet relations, made possible unprecedented access to policymakers in the USSR, particularly during a six-week visit to Moscow in early 1990, when openness was in full flower. To a greater extent than ever before in connection with events of the immediate past, I was able to obtain from Soviet participants their description of Moscow's decisions and reactions. The interviews with high-ranking officials of the Soviet Foreign Ministry and the Communist Party Politburo and Central Committee, whose assistance is recognized in detail in the Acknowledgments, provide an important dimension that had been largely unavailable earlier.

I have written this book primarily for the use of interested citizens, journalists and students in the United States and abroad. To make this work as useful as possible to scholars and historians as well, I have provided extensive notes at the end of the text identifying the sources I have relied on, especially for information that was not previously or generally available, except for material given to me in confidence.

This account begins with the events of 1983 because it was a critical year for the two governments and the alliances they led. It was "the Year of the Missile," the deadline imposed by NATO for the United States to place new intermediate-range nuclear missiles on the soil of its Western European allies, an endeavor which took place against massive Soviet opposition. The year 1983 is also well remembered for President Reagan's "Evil Empire" and "Star Wars" speeches, and for the Soviet Union's shooting down of an unarmed Korean Air Lines jet. It is less well known as the moment when some things began quietly to change for the better despite the sharply rising tension between Washington and

Moscow. The narrative ends with the events of the Washington summit of mid-1990, the last important meeting of which a detailed account was available to me. Aside from several minor corrections, I have made no changes in the text of the original edition. The story recorded here has not been altered by subsequent events, though its historical meaning may continue to be interpreted anew with new developments for decades to come.

As a practitioner of what might be called “contemporary history,” which seeks to transcend journalism but is written only a few years later, I have been inspired by a quotation from C. V. Wedgwood, a British historian, “History is written backward but lived forward. Those who know the end of the story can never know what it was like at the time.” My effort was to write an early account of one of the great turning points of history, even without knowing the end of the story. What follows is intended to convey what happened, and what it was like at the time.

Don Oberdorfer
January 1992

I. A Candle in the Cold

The snow began falling Thursday night, about an hour after Secretary of State George Shultz arrived home from a twelve-day trip of twenty-one thousand miles to China, Japan and other Asian nations. Late the next morning, federal government workers were dismissed because of the unrelenting heavy snowfall, and Shultz was warned by Metropolitan Police that if he did not leave the State Department soon he would be snowed in for the night. On Saturday, February 12, 1983, Washington awoke to a rare winter scene of sixteen to twenty inches of snow and flurries all around. As skiers frolicked on Washington streets and snow plows struggled to open two lanes for traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan canceled their plans to spend the weekend at Camp David, their Catoctin Mountain retreat, and invited George and O'Bie Shultz to the family quarters of the White House for dinner. On that Saturday night in early 1983, in the wake of one of the most severe blizzards the capital had seen in this century, United States policy toward the Soviet Union began to change.*

The first two years of Reagan's administration had concentrated on the domestic economic shifts that were being called the Reagan revolution and the massive military buildup sponsored by

* A nickname derived from her maiden name, Helena O'Brien.

the President. But starting with the intimate dinner with the Shultzes, Reagan would shift more of his attention to making contact with the Soviet Union in a manner that could ease the tension between Washington and Moscow. Although no one—including Reagan himself—could have predicted it at the time, this would be the start of a change for the better in relations between the two leading nations of the world. In the beginning, the shifting of gears would be almost imperceptible, an unseen quickening of presidential interest in ties with the Soviet Union.

In the initial stage, Reagan's desire to engage the Soviet Union in more productive dialogue would not get very far. His administration was not ready and, equally important, the leadership in the Kremlin was in disarray. Eventually there would be a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who would develop new policies toward the United States and the rest of the world, and after that a successor U.S. president, George Bush, who would take the improved relationship with Moscow into a more openly cooperative phase. In 1989 and 1990 Bush and Gorbachev would work together as the Berlin Wall came down, Germany was reunited and Iraq was forced to end its conquest of Kuwait.

Those dramatic shifts were still unforeseen at dinner in the White House on the snow-covered evening of February 12. Reagan told Shultz that he had been fascinated by the television coverage of the secretary's trip to China, where he had met Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The President, encouraged by his wife, Nancy, wondered if it would be possible to arrange his own journeys to the Soviet Union and China, and how this might be done. Shultz replied that such trips would be "a great idea if it comes about in the right way." He explained that to make such top-level visits meaningful, step-by-step improvements in relations would be needed.

Reagan, reflecting on Shultz's point, said that he recognized it would be difficult to move quickly with either communist nation. The path was somewhat blocked, Reagan said, by his National Security Council staff, then headed by his longtime California associate William Clark, by his Department of Defense, headed by Caspar Weinberger, and by his own lifetime of harsh rhetoric about communists, which included the statement at his first press conference as President that the Soviets "reserve