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DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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Editors
The National Interest
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Dear Editors,

Enclosed is a copy of an article, "Containment and the Decline of the Soviet Empire," which I would like to submit for consideration for publication in THE NATIONAL INTEREST. The copy need not be returned.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

John Mueller
Professor

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**CONTAINMENT AND THE DECLINE OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE:
SOME TENTATIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT**

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We may be coming to the end of the world as we know it. The predominant characteristic of international affairs over the last 40 years has been competition and confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and there is a great deal in the present situation to suggest that this condition could be moving toward terminal improvement: the incentives for the Soviet Union to reduce its commitment to worldwide revolution are considerable, and this could eventually undermine the rationale for the Western policy of containment and bring about a meaningful end to the cold war.

After a period of great expansion over the last decade, the Soviet Union now rides herd over a vastly over-extended, and largely useless, world empire. This, together with such things as massively expensive defense outlays, has caused the USSR to neglect major economic and social problems at home. Mikhail Gorbachev seems fully aware of this neglect and is working to remedy the problem, though few Soviet specialists expect his reforms to be significantly, or at any rate quickly, successful given the entrenchment of the smug, corrupt, self-serving, nepotistic elite that now dominates that theoretically classless society.

But whatever his changes, Gorbachev desperately needs to free up money to spend on such chronic domestic problems as inadequate housing, deteriorating health care, consumer frustration, economic stagnation, ethnic tension, massive alcoholism. The situation is made worse by the considerable decline in the price, and in Soviet production, of its most important export,

oil; and there are also problems with its second most important export, arms, because buyers (particularly in the Middle East) now have less money to spend and because sales competition from France and other countries has increased substantially.

Gorbachev may be hoping to gain some funds by reducing defense expenditures, partly linking this to progress in arms control. This may well prove to be a weak reed, however. Arms control agreements don't have much of a history of reducing overall defense spending, and they tend to take forever to consummate: the non-proliferation treaty of 1968, a very mild measure that was clearly in each sides' best interest, was argued for five years. In fact, given the labor shortage in the USSR, it could be argued that Gorbachev really ought to be emphasizing conventional arms reductions, not nuclear ones. (In some respects Soviet preoccupation with America's "Star Wars" defense may also be a misdirection of effort--competition in this labor-light area is likely to have a favorable impact on Soviet development in that it would dramatically increase skills in computer and laser technology, something the country sorely needs.)

Whatever the progress in arms control, it seems conceivable that Gorbachev may soon be tempted to look to another possibility for freeing up money: the gradual downgrading or outright abandonment of portions of the Soviet overseas empire.

A RAND Corporation study under the direction of economist Charles Wolf has determined that the cost to the Soviet Union of its dependencies around the world has grown enormously over that last 15 years to several percent of the Soviet gross national product. This is probably far higher than empires have traditionally cost the home country (insofar as the United States can be said to have a comparable "empire" its cost is less than half of one percent

of its GNP, calculates Wolf). The new dependencies have provided little in the way of significant gains for Soviet security. Indeed, most of them--Vietnam, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola, South Yemen, and Nicaragua--are, to varying degrees, in political and economic chaos. Meanwhile the old dependencies in East Europe have become a net economic drain on the USSR.

The Soviet Union has been willing, even eager, to take on its overseas burdens because it still clings to its ideological affection for worldwide revolution. Economic crisis, however, may now make it clear to the new, younger Soviet leaders that this romantic affection is far too costly, and thus they may be impelled to reduce their revolutionary commitment to lip-service, and to begin to abandon much of their overseas empire.

This would, of course, take an ideological change within the Soviet Union, and there is no guarantee the Soviets are so tormented by their problems that they will be able to convince themselves to go that far. But other, even more devotedly ideological Communist states have been able to make the change in the past when the pressures were high enough--China in the 1970s, Yugoslavia after 1948. Moreover, the deaths in recent years of such old-line Soviet ideologues as Suslov may make the change easier. And since the change would be merely theological, many in the Soviet elite ought to see it as thing of beauty--a reform that would pump more money into the system without threatening entrenched privilege. Domestically, ideology has long been heavily flavored by a cynical opportunism and, as several analysts have observed, there has been grumbling about the military and economic wisdom of the farflung empire in many Soviet writings in the last few years. For example, one substantial school of thought in the Soviet Union sees Third World nations as often ungrateful and as mercurially independent; it advocates a policy based on cost-benefit analysis as opposed to outdated ideology.

Another school contends that Soviet ventures in the Third World are simply not useful and an actual threat to international equilibrium and peace.

In the 1980s there has been a distinct reduction in the Soviet commitment to Third World revolution. Where the Soviet Union once grandly and enthusiastically pledged economic and military support for "liberation movements" around the world, it now pledges "profound sympathy" instead. ~~And~~

While it continues to be willing to support the radical states it has collected over the years, it urges them to rely mainly on their own efforts and has sought to reduce and to place limits on its financial commitment, ~~and it~~

Meanwhile, ~~from~~ Gorbachev courts major capitalist states like Japan, seeks trade and respectability, and proclaims that the achievement of his domestic goals will require "not only a reliable peace, but also a quiet, normal international situation." Whatever revolution may be, it is never "quiet" or "normal."

The theologians in the Soviet Union seem to be trying to finesse the ideological issue. They are now arguing that for the Soviet Union to be strong and effective internationally, it must first be strong and effective domestically. Of course, this may simply be a tactical consideration, with the Soviets returning to international revolutionary evangelism once they feel more comfortable domestically. But given their costly and often frustrating experiences in the Third World over the last decades, they may instead eventually decide permanently to sit back and let what they view as inevitable historical developments take place unaided and at history's own leisurely pace. Already some Soviet theorists are stressing the "long-term character" of revolutionary developments and are arguing that revolution can best be aided by "the acceleration of socioeconomic development and the perfection of socialism in the Soviet Union."

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movement of the Soviet Union is to be a

Should the Soviets make a real change, the arms race might well continue to percolate along irrelevantly, but the cold war would essentially come to an end. In the past when the perceived threat from international Communism has waned, the US has usually been quick to respond favorably. As Secretary of State George Schultz noted in a 1985 speech, the United States soon became accommodating when China and Yugoslavia quietly abandoned their commitment to worldwide revolution even though their internal systems remained at the time as objectionable as ever. The United States has opposed the Soviets' "evil empire" (and Hitler's too) not because it was evil, but because its imperial designs seemed threatening. There might still be bloody Marxist revolutions around the world, but if they have no threatening external referent, these revolutions have little consequence for American security--even now little concern is shown for the Maoist rebellion in Peru because those rebels do not relate to more significant bastions of international Communism (there is no longer a Maoist motherland).

A sensible place for the Soviets to start would be Africa where their pet Marxist regimes are shaky anyway: with little loss, the USSR could reduce its presence there and induce Fidel Castro to do likewise. A partial abandonment of its very expensive commitment to its scrappy, but problem-plagued, ally in Vietnam doesn't seem out of the question. This move would, in addition, do much to improve Sino-Soviet relations, something that Gorbachev sensibly sees to be of great benefit to the USSR, and this in turn might allow it to reduce the costly burden of war-wariness on the countries' long common frontier.

In the somewhat longer range quite a few improvements are possible. With Cuba out of Africa, normalization of Cuban-American relations (returning to a process that was begun under the Ford administration in the mid-1970s)

seems quite possible and, judging from his recent statements, would be welcomed by Castro. As a result the substantial cost to the Soviet Union--some \$3 billion per year--of its Cuban albatross might be reduced considerably. In an era of better feeling, the US might work with China to help the USSR extricate itself from its enervating and pointless mess in Afghanistan, and perhaps do it before that unfortunate country and culture have been fully destroyed by the war there.

Finally, in the long term and with very substantially reduced tensions, a solution to the Soviet Union's imperial problem in Eastern Europe might become possible--perhaps demilitarization and neutralization of its costly, rebellious, and under-productive dependencies there, and maybe even eventually a similar sort of solution for the problem of the two Germanys.

It would be a different world, but a much better one. There are certainly no guarantees that these events will come about, but if Gorbachev is alert to the cues and the opportunities, the logic of the situation suggests things move in that direction.

The conclusions for American foreign policy that one might draw from this line of thinking are mixed. To a degree one can find support in these notions for the Reagan Doctrine which in some respects might be called "Leninism on its head." Precisely because the Soviet Union is saddled with many problems within its borders as well as within its over-extended empire, it is argued that the United States should seek to exacerbate these troubles through various forms of political and economic warfare and by inflicting defeats on its foreign policy. The hope is that by pushing the Soviets' internal contradictions to the point of major crisis, genuine reform will be forced upon that country's ruling circles.

But this approach is not likely to be very popular within the United States. In the past, major anti-Communist efforts were accepted because they seemed to counter a perceived threat, not because they were seen to be doing good or because they might help manipulate Soviet policy in a favorable direction. Current anti-Communist ventures in distant areas of the globe are likely to inspire significant support only if the risks and costs remain low. Meddling and tinkering in these areas--support to friendly countries here, aid to anti-Communist rebels there--may be accepted. But it seems unlikely that significant intervention will be. Even now the Reagan administration has discovered that getting Congressional and elite support even for rather inexpensive anti-Communist ventures in an area close to home--Central America--is very difficult, and the President has been given to arguing that Communist gains in the area are undesirable in part because they "will send millions of refugees north," hardly the sort of contagion feared by containment theorists.

Some opponents of the Reagan Doctrine are concerned that, because support for major anti-Communist ventures in the post-Vietnam era is so small, the policy unwisely couples ambitious ends with means that will of necessity have to be modest; and in the process this illogical policy poses the danger of creeping Vietnam-style overcommitment that will later be difficult to abandon. This is certainly a danger, though it should be noted that the US has often proved in the past that it could abandon anti-Communist commitments--indeed, wherever the Communists emerged victorious between 1949 and 1975, their rise to power was accompanied by a cancelled or substantially reduced American commitment to the anti-Communist side: China, Indo-China, Cuba, Laos (1961), Angola, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos (1975).

It can also be argued that the Reagan Doctrine could prove counterproductive. The Soviet Union may, as speculated here, soon be forced to make some decisions that are intensely unpleasant for it, and it is not at all clear that it is wise for the United States loudly to seek to heighten the dilemma. The Soviets might well come to resent the shoving and, in irrational consequence, react in the opposite direction.

Most importantly, however, anything the United States does to exacerbate the Soviet dilemma is likely to be small compared to what the Soviets have done and will do to themselves (something that could also be said about American policy toward Iran and Libya.) The Soviets did not need the United States to adopt their economic and bureaucratic system, overbuild in defense, get involved in a war in Afghanistan, or take on their pathetic array of dependencies in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and East Europe. To see the Soviets squirming with their domestic and imperial problems may give a certain comfort to the West, but the West should not take major credit for having created the condition in which the Soviets find themselves. In fact the Soviets are in their current mess in part because the West let containment lapse and stood idly by while the Soviets, in what seems now to have been remarkably like a fit of absent-mindedness, snapped up basket case after basket case in Asia and Africa. It is unlikely that the West will be able to, or will need to, significantly manipulate the situation to its own benefit.

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December 8, 1986

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Dear Professor Mueller,

Thank you for sending us your article "Containment and the Decline of the Soviet Empire." We found it interesting and provocative; the subject, of course, is timely as well.

Unfortunately, it is not quite suited to our current editorial needs. Our Winter 1986 issue, due out in January, contains a lengthy essay on the history and theories of containment; our Fall 1986 number contained reflections by Robert Tucker on a similar topic; and upcoming articles we are already committed to deal with the subject from the Soviet Union's standpoint. Given these circumstances, we are reluctant to return to the topic for a while. Thanks again, though, for keeping us in mind, and please accept my best wishes that you are successful in placing your manuscript in another journal.

Sincerely,



Owen Harries
Editor

OH/ggr