Can the War on Terror Be Won?

How to Fight the Right War

Philip H. Gordon

Less than 12 hours after the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush proclaimed the start of a global war on terror. Ever since, there has been a vigorous debate about how to win it. Bush and his supporters stress the need to go on the offensive against terrorists, deploy U.S. military force, promote democracy in the Middle East, and give the commander in chief expansive wartime powers. His critics either challenge the very notion of a "war on terror" or focus on the need to fight it differently. Most leading Democrats accept the need to use force in some cases but argue that success will come through reestablishing the United States' moral authority and ideological appeal, conducting more and smarter diplomacy, and intensifying cooperation with key allies. They argue that Bush's approach to the war on terror has created more terrorists than it has eliminated—and that it will continue to do so unless the United States radically changes course.

Almost entirely missing from this debate is a concept of what "victory" in the war on terror would actually look like. The traditional notion of winning a war is fairly clear: defeating an enemy on the battlefield and forcing it to accept political terms. But what does victory—or

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defeat—mean in a war on terror? Will this kind of war ever end? How long will it take? Would we see victory coming? Would we recognize it when it came?

It is essential to start thinking seriously about these questions, because it is impossible to win a war without knowing what its goal is. Considering possible outcomes of the war on terror makes clear that it can indeed be won, but only with the recognition that this is a new and different kind of war. Victory will come not when foreign leaders accept certain terms but when political changes erode and ultimately undermine support for the ideology and strategy of those determined to destroy the United States. It will come not when Washington and its allies kill or capture all terrorists or potential terrorists but when the ideology the terrorists espouse is discredited, when their tactics are seen to have failed, and when they come to find more promising paths to the dignity, respect, and opportunities they crave. It will mean not the complete elimination of any possible terrorist threat—pursuing that goal will almost certainly lead to more terrorism, not less—but rather the reduction of the risk of terrorism to such a level that it does not significantly affect average citizens' daily lives, preoccupy their thoughts, or provoke overreaction. At that point, even the terrorists will realize their violence is futile. Keeping this vision of victory in mind will not only avert considerable pain, expense, and trouble; it will also guide leaders toward the policies that will bring such a victory about.

THE LAST WAR

One of the few predictions that can be made about the war on terror with some confidence is that it will end—all wars eventually do. Such an observation might appear flip, but there is a serious point behind it: the factors that drive international politics are so numerous and so fluid that no political system or conflict can last forever. Thus, some wars end quickly (the Anglo-Zanzibar War of 1896 famously lasted for 45 minutes), and others endure (the Hundred Years War lasted for 116 years). Some wars end relatively well (World War II laid the foundation for lasting peace and prosperity), and others lead to further catastrophe (World War I). But they all end, one way or another, and

it behooves those living through them to imagine how their conclusions might be hastened and improved.

Where the war on terror is concerned, some of the most instructive lessons can be drawn from the experience of the Cold War, thus named because, like the war on terror, it was not really a war at all. Although the current challenge is not identical to the Cold War, their similarities—as long-term, multidimensional struggles against insidious and violent ideologies—suggest that there is much to learn from this recent, and successful, experience. Just as the Cold War ended only when one side essentially gave up on a bankrupt ideology, the battle against Islamist terrorism will be won when the ideology that underpins it loses its appeal. The Cold War ended not with U.S. forces occupying the Kremlin but when the occupant of the Kremlin abandoned the fight; the people he governed had stopped believing in the ideology they were supposed to be fighting for.

The Cold War is also an excellent example of a war that ended at a time and in a way that most people living through it failed to foresee—and had even stopped trying to foresee. Whereas for the first decade or so the prospect of victory, defeat, or even nuclear war focused minds on how the Cold War might end, by the mid-1960s almost everyone, leaders and the public alike, had started to lose sight of an end as a possibility. Instead, they grudgingly began to focus on what became known as peaceful coexistence. The policy of détente, initiated in the 1960s and pursued throughout the 1970s, is sometimes retrospectively portrayed as a different strategy for bringing the Cold War to an end. But détente was in reality more a sign of resignation to the Cold War's expected endurance than an alternative way of concluding it. The primary objective was to make the Cold War less dangerous, not to bring it to an end. Ultimately, détente served to soften the image of the West in Soviet eyes, to civilize Soviet leaders through diplomatic interaction, and to lead Moscow into a dialogue about human rights that would end up undermining its legitimacy, all of which did contribute to the end of the Cold War. But this was not the main goal of the strategy.

Détente's critics were also caught by surprise by the end of the Cold War. President Ronald Reagan, it is true, denounced accommodation in the 1970s and 1980s and began to talk about defeating communism

once and for all. But even Reagan's vision for burying communism was only a "plan and hope for the long term," as he told the British parliament in 1982. Reagan himself admitted that when he declared, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" in Berlin in June 1987, he "never dreamed that in less than three years the wall would come down." Reagan and his supporters, moreover, saw the Soviet Union of the late 1970s and early 1980s not as a failing empire in its final stages but as a threatening superpower whose expansion had to be checked.

By the end of the 1980s, when signs of the Soviet Union's internal rot and external softening were finally starting to become apparent, it was those who later claimed to have foreseen the end of the Cold War who most steadfastly refused to accept that it was happening before their eyes. Even as the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began to undertake the reforms that would lead to the end of the confrontation with the United States, Americans and others had become so used to the Cold War that they had trouble recognizing what was happening. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis wrote in a 1987 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, the Cold War had become such a "way of life" for more than two generations "that it simply does not occur to us to think about how it might end or, more to the point, how we would like it to end." Hard-liners such as the Reagan administration defense official Richard Perle were warning that Gorbachev had "imperial ambitions and an abiding attachment to military power," while "realists" such as Brent Scowcroft, President George H. W. Bush's national security adviser, were "suspicious of [Gorbachev's] motives and skeptical about his prospects." As late as April 1989, the Central Intelligence Agency, whose job it was to identify important geopolitical trends, was still predicting that "for the foreseeable future, the USSR will remain the West's principal adversary," a view that was shared by the American public at large. When asked by pollsters in November 1989—just after the Berlin Wall fell—whether they thought the Cold War had ended, only 18 percent of respondents said that it had, while 73 percent said it had not. It was only when the vast majority of Americans had finally given up on ever seeing the end of the Cold War that it actually came to an end.

Is it possible to do any better anticipating how, when, and why the war on terror might end? The war on terror will probably also last for

a considerable amount of time. But assuming that it will not go on forever, what will the end of that war look like when it comes? And what does a realistic assessment of what victory in the war on terror might look like say about the way it should be fought?

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

JUST AS IT was once possible to imagine the Soviet Union winning the Cold War, one possibility to be considered today is the victory of al Qaeda. Those in the United States may not have an agreed theory of victory or a path to get there, but Osama bin Laden and his cohorts certainly do. Bin Laden's goal, as he, his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and others have often articulated, is to drive the United States out of Muslim lands, topple the region's current rulers, and establish Islamic authority under a new caliphate. The path to this goal, they have made clear, is to "provoke and bait" the United States into "bleeding wars" on Muslim lands. Since Americans, the argument goes, do not have the stomach for a long and bloody fight, they will eventually give up and leave the Middle East to its fate. Once the autocratic regimes responsible for the humiliation of the Muslim world have been removed, it will be possible to return it to the idealized state of Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. A caliphate will be established from Morocco to Central Asia, sharia rule will prevail, Israel will be destroyed, oil prices will skyrocket, and the United States will recoil in humiliation and possibly even collapse—just as the Soviet Union did after the mujahideen defeated it in Afghanistan.

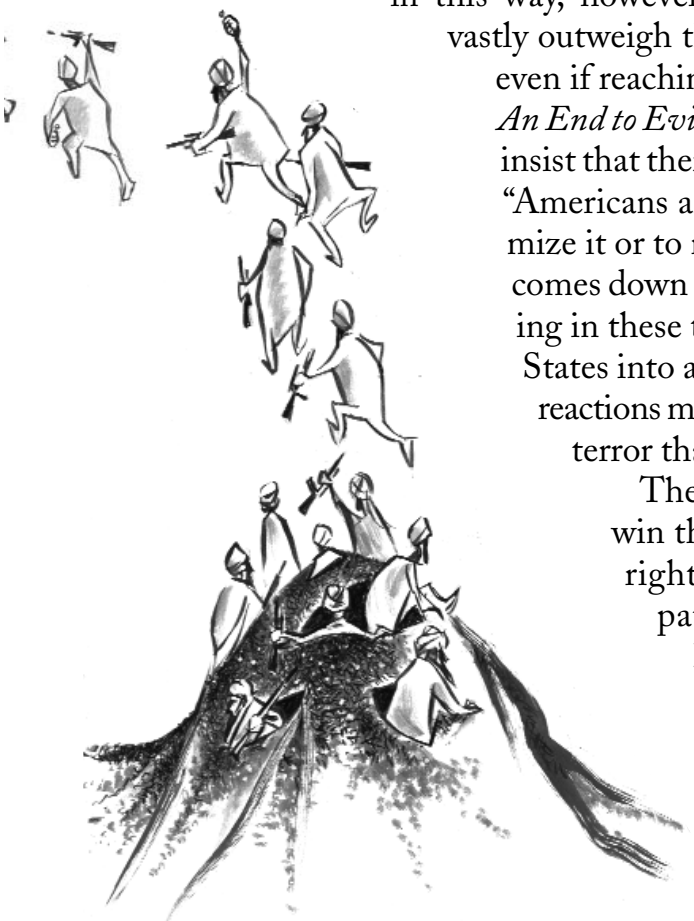
Bin Laden's version of the end of the war on terror is unlikely to be realized. It is based on an exaggeration of his role in bringing down the Soviet Union, a failure to appreciate the long-term strength and adaptability of U.S. society, and an underestimation of Muslim resistance to his extremist views. But if these scenarios are misguided, they are also worth understanding and keeping in mind. If bin Laden's adversaries fail to appreciate his vision of how the war on terror will end, they could end up playing into his hands—by, for example, being drawn into the very battles that bin Laden believes will ruin the United States and inspire Muslim support. This is the error that has led to the United States' unenviable position today in Iraq.

In the long run, the United States and its allies are far more likely to win this war than al Qaeda, not only because liberty is ultimately more appealing than a narrow and extremist interpretation of Islam but also because they learn from mistakes, while al Qaeda's increasingly desperate efforts will alienate even its potential supporters. But victory in the war on terror will not mean the end of terrorism, the end of tyranny, or the end of evil, utopian goals that have all been articulated at one time or another. Terrorism, after all (to say nothing of tyranny and evil), has been around for a long time and will never go away entirely. From the Zealots in the first century AD to the Red Brigades, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army, the Tamil Tigers, and others in more recent times, terrorism has been a tactic used by the weak in an effort to produce political

change. Like violent crime, deadly disease, and other scourges, it can be reduced and contained. But it cannot be totally eliminated.

This is a critical point, because the goal of ending terrorism entirely is not only unrealistic but also counterproductive—just as is the pursuit of other utopian goals. Murder could be vastly reduced or eliminated from the streets of Washington, D.C., if several hundred thousand police officers were deployed and preventive detentions authorized. Traffic deaths could be almost eliminated in the United States by reducing the national speed limit to ten miles per hour. Illegal immigration from Mexico could be stopped by a vast electric fence along the entire border and a mandatory death penalty for undocumented workers. But no sensible person would propose any of these measures, because the consequences of the solutions would be less acceptable than the risks themselves.

Similarly, the risk of terrorism in the United States could be reduced if officials reallocated hundreds of billions of dollars per year in domestic spending to homeland security measures, significantly curtailed civil liberties to ensure that no potential terrorists were on the streets, and invaded and occupied countries that might one day support or sponsor terrorism. Pursuing that goal in this way, however, would have costs that would vastly outweigh the benefits of reaching the goal, even if reaching it were possible. In their book *An End to Evil*, David Frum and Richard Perle insist that there is "no middle ground" and that "Americans are not fighting this evil to minimize it or to manage it." The choice, they say, comes down to "victory or holocaust." Thinking in these terms is likely to lead the United States into a series of wars, abuses, and overreactions more likely to perpetuate the war on terror than to bring it to a successful end. The United States and its allies will win the war only if they fight it in the right way—with the same sort of patience, strength, and resolve that helped win the Cold War and



with policies designed to provide alternative hopes and dreams to potential enemies. The war on terror will end with the collapse of the violent ideology that caused it—when bin Laden's cause comes to be seen by its potential adherents as a failure, when they turn against it and adopt other goals and other means. Communism, too, once seemed vibrant and attractive to millions around the world, but over time it came to be seen as a failure. Just as Lenin's and Stalin's successors in the Kremlin in the mid-1980s finally came to the realization that they would never accomplish their goals if they did not radically change course, it is not too fanciful to imagine the successors of bin Laden and Zawahiri reflecting on their movement's failures and coming to the same conclusion. The ideology will not have been destroyed by U.S. military power, but its adherents will have decided that the path they chose could never lead them where they wanted to go. Like communism today, extremist Islamism in the future will have a few adherents here and there. But as an organized ideology capable of taking over states or inspiring large numbers of people, it will have been effectively dismantled, discredited, and discarded. And like Lenin's, bin Laden's violent ideology will end up on the ash heap of history.

WHAT VICTORY WOULD LOOK LIKE

THE WORLD beyond the war on terror will have several other characteristics. Smaller, uncoordinated organizations capable of carrying out limited attacks might still exist, but the global al Qaeda organization that was able to inflict such destruction on September 11, 2001, will not. Its most important leaders will have been killed or captured, its sanctuaries destroyed, its financial sources blocked, its communications interrupted, and, most important, its supporters persuaded to find other ways to pursue their goals. Terrorism will not be over, but its central sponsor and most dangerous executor will be.

After the war on terror, U.S. society will be better able to deny the remaining terrorists the ability to reach their primary goal: terror. The risk of attack will still exist, but if an attack takes place, it will not lead to a foreign policy revolution, an erosion of respect for human rights or international law, or the restriction of civil liberties. Like in other societies that have faced terrorism (the model being the United

Kingdom in its long struggle against the Irish Republican Army), life will go on and people will go about their daily business without inordinate fear. The terrorists will see that the result of any attack they carry out is not the overreaction they sought to provoke but rather the stoic denial of their ability to elicit a counterproductive response. Put in the hands of the U.S. legal system and locked away for years after due legal process, they will be seen as the heartless criminals they are rather than as the valiant soldiers they seek to be. Over time, the risk of terrorist attacks will diminish even further because they will no longer be serving their intended purpose.

After the war on terror, the nation's priorities will come back into balance. Preventing terrorism will remain an important goal, but it will no longer be the main driver of U.S. foreign policy. It will take its place as just one of several concerns, alongside health care, the environment, education, the economy. Budgets, speeches, elections, and policies will no longer revolve around the war on terror to the exclusion of other critical issues on which the nation's welfare depends.

That world is a long way off. The political and economic stagnation in the Middle East, the war in Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and other conflicts from Kashmir to Chechnya continue to produce the frustration and humiliation that cause terrorism, and with the right conditions, it only takes a small number of extremists to pose a serious threat. But although the end of the war on terror will not come tomorrow, the paths that could lead to it can already be seen. The destruction of the al Qaeda organization, for example, is already under way, and with determination and the right policies, it can be completed. Bin Laden and Zawahiri are now living like fugitives in caves rather than like presidents or military commanders in compounds in Afghanistan. Other al Qaeda leaders have been killed or captured, and the organization's ability to communicate globally and to finance major operations has been significantly reduced. Al Qaeda is trying to reconstitute itself along the Afghan-Pakistani border, but with so much of the world—now including the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan—sharing an interest in suppressing the group,

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it will have great difficulty becoming once again the global terrorist enterprise that was able to take the United States by surprise on 9/11.

There are also signs of a Muslim backlash against al Qaeda's use of wanton violence as a political tool—exactly the sort of development that will be critical in the long-term effort to discredit jihadism. After al Qaeda's suicide attacks at two hotels in Jordan in November 2005—which killed some 60 civilians, including 38 at a wedding party—Jordanians poured out into the streets to protest in record numbers. Subsequent public opinion polls showed that the proportion of Jordanian respondents who believed that violence against civilian targets to defend Islam is never justified jumped from 11 percent to 43 percent, while those expressing a lot of confidence in bin Laden to "do the right thing" plunged from 25 percent to less than one percent. Similar Muslim reactions have followed al Qaeda attacks in Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. In Iraq's Anbar Province, there are also signs that locals are getting fed up with Islamist terrorists and turning against them. Sunni tribes from that region who once battled U.S. troops have now joined forces with the United States to challenge al Qaeda militants. Tribes that once welcomed al Qaeda support in the insurgency against U.S. forces are now battling al Qaeda with thousands of fighters and significant local support.

This is why Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and former CIA case officer who has studied Islamist terrorist movements, argues that support for jihadists will eventually erode just as it did for previous terrorist groups, such as the anarchists of nineteenth-century Europe. In the long term, Sageman argues, "the militants will keep pushing the envelope and committing more atrocities to the point that the dream will no longer be attractive to young people." The terrorism analyst Peter Bergen believes that violence that kills other Muslims will ultimately prove to be al Qaeda's Achilles' heel. Killing Muslims, he argues, is "doubly problematic for Al Qaeda, as the Koran forbids killing both civilians and fellow Muslims." After the 9/11 attacks, wide segments of the Arab public and the Arab media expressed sympathy with the victims, and prominent clerics (including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Islamist firebrand with a wide following on satellite television) issued fatwas condemning the attacks as contrary to Islam and calling for the apprehension and punishment of the perpetrators. That

type of response is what will have to happen if Islamist terrorism is to be discredited and discarded—and it is what will happen when the terrorists overreach and fail.

Fundamentalist Islamism also has poor long-term prospects as a broader political ideology. Indeed, far from representing a political system likely to attract increasing numbers of adherents, fundamentalist Islamism has failed everywhere it has been tried. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, in Iran under the mullahs, in Sudan under the National Islamic Front, different strains of Islamist rule have produced economic failure and public discontent. Indeed, the Taliban and the Iranian clerics are probably responsible for creating two of the most pro-U.S. populations in the greater Middle East. Opinion polls show that there is even less support for the kind of fundamentalist Islamic government proposed by bin Laden. "Many people would like bin Laden … to hurt America," says the political scientist and pollster Shibley Telhami, "but they do not want bin Laden to rule their children." Asked in Telhami's survey what, if any, aspect of al Qaeda they sympathized with, 33 percent of Muslim respondents said none, 33 percent said its confronting the United States, 14 percent said its support for Muslim causes such as the Palestinian movement, 11 percent said its methods of operation, and just 7 percent said its efforts to create an Islamic state. Fundamentalist Islamism has not yet run its course and cannot be expected to in less than a generation. Communism, after all, was a serious competitor to the capitalist West for more than a century and survived in the Soviet Union for more than 70 years, even after its failings became clear to those who once embraced it. In the long run, fundamentalist Islamism is likely to suffer a similarly slow but certain fate.

Finally, there are good reasons to believe that the forces of globalization and communication that have been unleashed by changing technology will eventually produce positive change in the Middle East. This will especially be true if there is successful promotion of economic development in the region, which would produce the middle classes that in other parts of the world have been the drivers of democratization. Even in the absence of rapid economic change, the increasingly open media environment created by the Internet and other communications technologies will prove to be powerful agents

of change. Although only around ten percent of households in the Arab world have access to the Internet, that percentage is growing rapidly, having already risen fivefold since 2000. Even in Saudi Arabia, one of the most closed and conservative societies in the world, there are over 2,000 bloggers.

Cable news stations such as the independent Qatar-based al Jazeera and the Dubai-based al Arabiya reach tens of millions of households throughout the Arab world, often with information or perspectives the repressive governments in the region would rather not be heard. According to the Arab media expert Marc Lynch, "The conventional wisdom that the Arab media simply parrot the official line of the day no longer holds true. Al Jazeera has infuriated virtually every Arab government at one point or another, and its programming allows for criticism, and even mockery. Commentators regularly dismiss the existing Arab regimes as useless, self-interested, weak, compromised, corrupt, and worse." Lynch points out that one al Jazeera talk show addressed the issue "Have the existing Arab regimes become worse than colonialism?" The host, one of the guests, and 76 percent of callers said yes—"marking a degree of frustration and inwardly directed anger that presents an opening for progressive change."

That sort of progressive change is unlikely to take place in the near future, and it is true that the region's autocrats seem ever more determined to prevent it. But even if the priority for Middle Eastern leaders remains what it has been—to keep a grip on power—at some point it will become clear that the only way to hold on to power is to change. The next generation of leaders in Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria might conclude that in the absence of change, their regimes will fall to fundamentalists or their countries will be surpassed by regional rivals. There do not appear to be any Gorbachevs on the horizon at present, but that was also true for the Soviet Union as late as 1984. Gorbachev's two immediate predecessors, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, did not seem to be harbingers of radical change when they passed through the Kremlin, but that is exactly what they were. A new, dynamic, and determined leader of a major Arab country who opens up political space and embraces economic reform can—by

providing prosperity, respect, and opportunity for his or her citizens—strike a greater blow in the fight against terrorism than anything the United States could ever do.

THE RIGHT WAR

THIS SORT of victory in the war on terror may not come for quite a long time. On the calendar of the Cold War, which began in 1947, the sixth anniversary of 9/11 puts us in 1953—decades before its denouement and with plenty of setbacks, tragedies, mistakes, and risks still ahead.

The point of imagining the end of the war on terror is not to suggest that it is imminent but to keep the right goals in mind—so that leaders can adopt the policies most likely to achieve those goals. If they fall prey to the illusion that this is World War III—and that it can be won like a traditional war—they risk perpetuating the conflict. Even if Americans were somehow prepared, as in World War II, to mobilize 16 million troops, reinstate the draft, spend 40 percent of GDP on defense, and invade and occupy several major countries, such an effort would likely end up creating more terrorists and fueling the hatred that sustains them. It would unify the United States' enemies, squander its resources, and undermine the values that are a central tool in the struggle. Certainly, the U.S. experience in Iraq suggests the perils of trying to win the war on terror through the application of brute military force.

If, on the other hand, Americans accept that victory in the war on terror will come only when the ideology they are fighting loses support and when potential adherents see viable alternatives to it, then the United States would have to adopt a very different course. It would not overreact to threats but instead would demonstrate confidence in its values and its society—and the determination to preserve both. It would act decisively to reestablish its moral authority and the appeal of its society, which have been so badly damaged in recent years. It would strengthen its defenses against the terrorist threat while also realizing that a policy designed to prevent any conceivable attack will do more damage than a policy of defiantly refusing to allow terrorists to change its way of life. It would expand its efforts to promote education and political and economic change in the Middle East, which

in the long run will help that region overcome the despair and humiliation that fuel the terrorist threat. It would launch a major program to wean itself from imported oil, freeing it from the dependence that constrains its foreign policy and obliging oil-dependent Arab autocracies to diversify their economies, more evenly distribute their wealth, and create jobs for their citizens. It would seek to end the large U.S. combat presence in Iraq, which has become more of a recruiting device for al Qaeda than a useful tool in the war on terror. It would stop pretending that the conflict between Israel and its neighbors has nothing to do with the problem of terrorism and launch a diplomatic offensive designed to bring an end to a conflict that is a key source of the resentment that motivates many terrorists. It would take seriously the views of its potential allies, recognize their legitimate interests, and seek to win their support and cooperation in confronting the common threat.

If the United States did all that, Americans would have good reason to be confident that in the long run they will prevail. Ultimately, extremist Islamism is not an ideology likely to win enduring support. Terrorism is not a strategy with which Muslims will forever want to be associated, and eventually it will create a backlash within Muslim societies. With time and experience—and if the United States and its allies make the right choices—Muslims themselves will turn against the extremists in their midst. Somewhere in the Muslim world, at some point possibly sooner than many realize, new Lech Walesas, Václav Havels, and Andrei Sakharovs will emerge to reclaim their people's future from those who have hijacked it. They will seek to put their civilization on a path toward restoring the glory of its greatest era—when the Muslim world was a multicultural zone of tolerance and intellectual, artistic, and scientific achievement. The agents of change might come from above, like Gorbachev, who used his position at the top of the Soviet hierarchy to transform the Soviet Union and end the Cold War. Or they might rise up from below, like the protesters in 1989 in Budapest, Gdańsk, and Leipzig, who stood up against tyranny and reclaimed their future. If the United States is strong, smart, and patient, they will come. And they, not the West, will transform their world—and ours.