



# Atlantic Council

NOVEMBER 4, 2009

---

## Zbigniew Brzezinski on the End of the Cold War

BY FREDERICK KEMPE

*Atlantic Council president and CEO Frederick Kempe interviewed Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter and a member of the Atlantic Council [International Advisory Board](#), for [Freedom's Challenge](#), a publication commemorating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.*

### Who and what won the Cold War?

It is an oversimplification to talk of victory, since no war in the real sense was involved. If one chooses to do so, then clearly freedom won. This was the greatest upheaval in favor of freedom, and a predominantly peaceful one, since 1848, so almost 150 years later. And it created an altogether new setting for scores of millions of people, depending on how far you want to count.

Certainly 200 million Central Europeans, or thereabouts, and a significant number of what used to be called “Soviet citizens” suddenly were living in countries of their own national identity, not in all cases democracies, but still more free of foreign domination than before. So freedom certainly won.

### So who should we associate most with that cause?

I think it is fair to say that America led in terms of active support and led the Western alliance in that support. But it is also fair to say that the actual mechanics – the operational mechanics of mentoring this process, keeping it within bounds and making it possible – belong to Bush Sr. and Kohl in the first instance, and much more hesitantly to Thatcher and Mitterrand, who feared German unification. In the background of all of this, patronizing it, blessing it and somewhat inspiring it, was Pope John Paul II.

You were National Security Advisor in 1978. Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope John Paul II the same year. The Soviets, of course, thought you orchestrated this. What was your reaction and role at the time? And what role do you think the naming of a Polish Pope had on the Cold War?

I wish I had orchestrated it. I am certainly delighted that it happened without my orchestration. But it is true that the Politburo was exaggeratedly informed of my role by its intelligence services.

### They believed you did it?

Yes, that is a fact. In fact, they had the whole scenario – namely that I got Cardinal Krol, the Polish-American, to organize the American episcopate. Then on that basis, the American episcopate allegedly conspired with the German episcopates. And the two episcopates then set in motion this election of Wojtyła.

### What was your role?

My role was prayerful. (Laughter.) I think, nonetheless, there is no doubt that the choice of a Polish Pope absolutely transformed the political climate in Poland. All of the East European countries were restless and dissatisfied. But all of them were also intimidated after the Soviets put down the Hungarian revolution and the Czechoslovak Spring. There was fear and intimidation and also penetration of societies by agents, so that one never could quite trust one's neighbors.

The Pope's arrival in Poland showed that everyone was enthusiastic about what he symbolized and was prepared to endorse it openly. And the regime discovered that it was naked, in effect isolated. That transformed the nature of the political context and gave birth shortly thereafter to Solidarity. And what was Solidarity? It was a word that defined the new reality that there is national solidarity against a foreign-imposed regime that is anti-democratic.

And that contagion spread from Poland into the region, particularly Czechoslovakia and Hungary, thereby isolating East Germany. That precipitated the fall of the Wall, a night of particular gratification for me because back in 1963 I wrote a book entitled, *Alternative to Partition*. And the whole thesis of the book was: let us engage in peaceful engagement with Central Europe, but leave East Germany out of it, thereby isolating East Germany by promoting change within the most vulnerable part of the Soviet Bloc. And eventually, it will lead to the collapse of the East German regime and to a new Europe, namely no longer partitioned.

**Does it go too far to say that German unification wouldn't have happened, the Cold War wouldn't have ended, were it not for the Poles?**

Well, there is no doubt that without what happened in Poland, we wouldn't have a situation in which the East German regime was isolated and unable to control its people, who were streaming through Hungary into the West and who were increasingly associating themselves with restlessness that was just immediately to the east of East Germany, namely in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. That is sheer geopolitics.

Eventually, the Soviet Bloc certainly would have collapsed anyway. But when and how and whether so peacefully, we will never know.

**What was the role of Soviet failure in Afghanistan in the 1980s?**

It demonstrated two things: the increasing lack of Soviet self-restraint and, at the same time, the limits of their military capability. They could not achieve what seemed to be initially a very easy and attainable victory.

**What was the U.S.'s role in that Soviet failure?**

Both the Carter and the Reagan administrations pursued exactly the same policy, except that the Reagan administration greatly increased the scale of the external assistance, as we were in office for just one year of the war. Both administrations made certain that this would not be a cost-free victory for the Soviets because it would be very destabilizing for the international system that you can invade and occupy another country, without any negative consequences for oneself.

**As the Carter administration was in its final weeks in the 1980s, was there a danger of Soviet military invasion of Poland to end the Solidarity movement?**

Absolutely. And we had very clear evidence to that effect from our own intelligence, from the deployment of Soviet forces around Poland, from the demands that the Soviets made of the Polish communist government.

That precipitated two developments, which unintentionally reinforced each other. The Polish communist regime, headed by Secretary Kania, strongly objected to Brezhnev about the so-called maneuvers to be held in Poland, saying that this could create a very volatile situation. And Carter, at the same time, sent a message via the hotline to Brezhnev saying that this could have the gravest consequences for the American-Soviet relationship, and while we do not intend ourselves to intervene in Polish affairs, we will take the gravest view of a Soviet intervention.

And that was done by an administration that was already engaged in supporting the resistance in Afghanistan. There is no way that the Soviets could take that lightly. For symbolic purposes, and also to convey a sense of urgency, it was sent by the hotline directly from the White House to the Kremlin.

### **Do you think you averted a Soviet invasion?**

They were going to go in. We now have a lot of documentation regarding the plans and which troops were going to enter from where. I think one or two East German divisions were going to be used. Two or so Czech divisions were going to be used. The rest were going to be Soviet divisions, both from East Germany and from the territory of the then-existing Soviet Union. And the date was even set, which was the first week of December 1980.

Now, what specifically at that given moment made Brezhnev postpone, I do not know. But certainly our actions complicated his sense that he had freedom of action.

Beyond that, the nature of the sanctions adopted against the Soviet Union following the invasion of Afghanistan had to make the Soviets ask themselves, what is it that we might do if they invade Poland? They had to ask themselves that. And there is no doubt that they didn't like the sanctions that we adopted, including one particularly, which was very symbolic but painful: namely depriving them of the opportunity to match Hitler's 1936 Olympics with the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which we boycotted.

They also had to question the wisdom of the use of force with all of its unpredictable consequences one year after using force in Afghanistan without success.

In 1988, you were Co-Chairman of the Bush national security advisory task force. You formally endorsed Bush for president, a break with the Democratic Party. And you also published a book, *Grand Failure*, where you predicted the failure of Gorbachev's reforms. Why, as a Democrat, did you turn to the Republican Party and Bush at this critical time?

Because it was a critical time. There was very little evidence that [Democratic candidate Michael] Dukakis understood the strategic and geopolitical dimensions of the crisis in the Soviet Bloc, whereas Bush had a good grasp of it. And as events subsequently showed, he actually did play it masterfully. I very much doubt Dukakis would have been as skillful.

### **What was the role of individuals versus underlying trends?**

It is almost a basic law that historical spontaneity operates through the movement of social forces and the surfacing of key catalytic individuals. That combination always arises. It is the interaction of these two dynamics that then results in transformation. Who would have thought that a simple and personally poor shipyard worker, Lech Walesa, and a "bohemian" playwright in Prague [Václav Havel] would emerge as the great symbols of an upheaval that destroyed an empire?

Who would have thought that a surprisingly sophisticated, intelligent and flexible son of a peasant in Southern Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev, would then acquire the skill and flexibility to enable him to set in motion belated, and ultimately unsuccessful, reforms in the Soviet Union that contributed to the collapse of the will to resist within the Soviet elite?

### **How would you define Gorbachev's role?**

He was terribly important in legitimizing among the Soviet elite the progressive fragmentation of Soviet authority, historical self-confidence, sense of direction and will to resist, or even to persist.

### **At the time, the common thinking was that the Soviet Union was a permanent fixture of the international scene.**

Well, I never thought that.

### **Did you foresee the collapse?**

No. But ever since I was a graduate student, I was convinced that the Soviet empire was increasingly ahistorical in the sense that it really was an empire involving domination by one national identity over a set of other national identities. That one national identity was stronger and tougher, but not omnipotent. And over time, its will, its cohesion and its intelligence was sapped. And this is why the fall of the Soviet Union was so natural and so relatively bloodless – because it outlived its days.

### **Why did it collapse when it did?**

Well, I can't tell you why precisely it happened then. It could have happened 10 years earlier if circumstances were different. And it could have happened 10 years later if circumstances were different. But it was a conjunction of all of these events that brought it to a head.

### **What did we do wrong after the Cold War's end?**

I don't think we did many things wrong. I am not one of those who believes in psychotherapy as a base for interpreting international affairs. And geopolitical realities and historical forces are far more important than hurt Russian feelings or the feigning of hurt feelings. The Russians resent what happened because what happened deprived them of something very special, namely the last great empire in the world. They would like to have it back to the extent that it is possible.

The fact of the matter is, however, that there really wasn't any choice for the West except to include in Europe and in NATO those who would have liked to have been in it and were forcibly deprived of that opportunity and that right. There was no way of stopping that.

Also, if they had not been included out of some misguided psychotherapeutic theories regarding how to deal with the Russians, then we would have today not just Georgia already hit hard by military force, Ukraine continuously threatened, but we would have Estonia and other Baltic countries being subjected to barrages reminiscent of Hitler's claims that the Sudeten Germans need protection. You would have the Poles beleaguered by the Russians like the Ukrainians or the Georgians already are.

And we would have probably mounting hostility between the East and the West, which fortunately is now significantly reduced and limited to a couple of specific issues, but which at the same time coexist with a lot of contacts, cooperation and joint responses to other problems. While it is not an ideal situation, it is far better than what would prevail if we had simply let Central Europe drift indecisively until such time as Russia was powerful enough to try to restore the status quo ante-1989.

### **How do we deal with Russia now?**

We patiently try to work with the Russians while encouraging their accommodation to their new historical context. That is to say, they have to digest the fact that they, like the British or the French, or even more acutely the Germans or the Japanese, can no longer revert to an imperial past based on force. That reality is gone.

And, incidentally, we are learning that, too. Look at our relatively passive reaction to Soviet planes and tanks for Venezuela, to Nicaragua's recognition of Abkhazia or Ossetia and our growing indifference to communism and Russian ties in Cuba. We are moving beyond our imperial era and I think that is all good. But if the Russians think they are going to gain anything by trying to recreate an empire, they will simply isolate themselves more. They will embroil themselves more. And they will become a massive national failure in a huge and potentially rich space, which is bordered in the West by 550 million West Europeans and Central Europeans, and, in the East, by a billion-and-a-half increasingly successful Chinese. It is a policy of national suicide.

And the last point to be added here: not a single one of the newly independent states wants to be part of Russia again, not a single one. So I think the course for Russia is self-evident. And we ought to facilitate it, but not feed their imperial aspirations. We must be prudently clear-cut as to what our vital interests are regarding, let's say, Ukraine and Georgia. And they are essentially that they remain independent, not necessarily members of NATO, maybe not even ready for quite a while to be members of the European Union. But they must be independent.

### **Is there any lesson from the Cold War for today?**

One lesson is that the fall of the Wall and the events of those years were handled with sophistication by an engaged America working closely with the Germans, the British and the French. We need serious partners. This is why I am such a strong advocate of there being a European voice to which we are prepared to listen. But it is up to the Europeans to shape that voice. At the moment, we don't have that. We have a political vacuum in Europe.

*This piece is selected from [Freedom's Challenge](#), an Atlantic Council publication commemorating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.*

- Frederick Kempe
- 

Copyright © 2019 Atlantic Council.  
All Rights Reserved.