‘His Finest Hour?’ George Bush and the Diplomacy of German Unification

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This article examines the diplomatic record of the Bush administration with particular reference to its role in German unification. Based upon memoir material and new sources made available since 1989, it argues that the administration in general – and George Bush in particular – played an indispensable role during these critical years. First, Bush’s unequivocal support for unification drove the process forward and reinforced Germany’s commitment to NATO. By reassuring countries like France, the US also managed to compel reluctant Europeans to accept unification. Finally, by working closely with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, Washington was also able to persuade the USSR to accept what many had once thought quite unacceptable to the Russians: a united Germany within NATO. Given the part that the President played in all this, the authors suggest that the generally accepted view of Bush as a politician without purpose or plan has to be questioned. The ‘statesman without a vision’ who emerges from this reading of events is seen as having been a more forceful and effective diplomatic leader than some of his critics have been prepared to concede.

In a little known memo written nearly a year before the peacemakers gathered in Paris, the young Walter Lippmann, who was then Secretary of the American Commission of Inquiry of the Peace Conference, reflected upon the past and the role which his President might play in bringing order to a war-torn world and an unbalanced Europe. Like many others at the time, Lippmann was carefully studying what had happened around other peace tables, and he observed, ‘with much perturbation’, that wars could be won on the battlefield but then lost when the politicians sat down to negotiate. It had happened before and there was no reason to think it could not happen again. The implication was clear. Woodrow Wilson had to be careful when he engaged in serious discussion with those worldly-wise Europeans like Clemenceau and Lloyd George. Otherwise, they would pull the wool over his eyes and make him forget that he was there for very different – and more moral – purposes than they. They were proponents of the old diplomacy which had led to the original carnage that had caused ten million deaths and destroyed four great empires: he was the champion of a new diplomacy that would save

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Europe from itself and help build the foundation for a new world order. The future lay in his hands, but unless he learned the lessons from when ‘peace commissioners’ gathered at different times before, then, either through miscalculation or simple ignorance of the facts, he could quite easily fail. ‘It isn’t difficult to win a war’ he concluded, and then go on to ‘lose the peace’.  

Too much has subsequently been written about the Paris peace negotiations to repeat the obvious point here, but few would dispute the claim that what happened in Paris in 1919 made a huge difference to the subsequent history of Europe. This is one of the reasons why the entrails of what occurred have been picked over so meticulously by successive generations of historians, many of whom have been highly critical about the way in which the Treaty (or treaties) were drawn up, and perhaps even more vituperative about the role played by the one man who seemed to promise so much, but in the end appeared to deliver so little: Woodrow Wilson himself. One should be careful not to generalize too much. Wilson, like Versailles, remains a hotly debated topic. Even so, there is little getting away from the fact that as a diplomatic figure he has been subject to more than his fair share of historical abuse; and none were to be more abusive than his European contemporaries. Thus, according to the acidic Keynes, the American leader was not only ‘slow and unadaptable’, but ‘ill-informed as to European conditions’. Harold Nicholson was more scathing still: Wilson, he opined, was spiritually and mentally ‘rigid’. Lloyd George agreed and, while recognizing the American’s many talents, still felt that Wilson lacked ‘human sympathy’ and was a ‘bigoted sectarian’ to boot. In the end, though, it was left to E.H. Carr to deliver the final European verdict on the unfortunate Wilson. The President, he insisted, was not a bad man, neither was he foolish. Rather, his fatal flaw was that he was out of step with his times. A product of the nineteenth century, he attempted, in vain, to impose his own version of liberalism on a Europe which had moved far beyond the point where liberalism in any of its versions could provide an answer to the continent’s several problems. To this extent, his efforts were doomed to fail.

Yet if Wilson as peacemaker is deemed by some to have been less than successful (though he does have more than his fair share of academic devotees), those who followed in his footsteps do appear to have drawn the appropriate lessons. In fact, in much the same way as those in Paris looked back to past peace conferences to help guide
them in their deliberations, they too did policymakers at the end of those two other great wars of the twentieth century. Hence, when influential Americans began to reflect upon the future of the international system towards the end of World War II, they kept looking over their shoulders, all the while hoping they would not repeat the same mistakes. And when a new set of policymakers were confronted with the end of another very different kind of conflict 45 years on, once again they felt compelled to look back to other peace settlements – and not surprisingly were drawn to what they felt was the irresistible conclusion that they had little to learn from 1919. Wilson may have been a genuinely important President, very much within the American political tradition. But his rare combination of declaratory idealism on the one hand, and political vindictiveness on the other (especially towards Germany) did not make him a particularly good diplomatic example to follow.

These various observations about the past, and the lessons which peacemakers claim they have learned from its study, bring us, then, to the central question under examination in this article: the conduct of US diplomacy at the end of the Cold War. Here, we confront both an interesting comparison and a fascinating paradox about how reputations can be made and unmade. Woodrow Wilson, recall, went to Paris with a reputation second to none and expectations running extraordinarily high. George Bush, on the other hand, raised few hopes in the early part of 1989. Indeed, he had done his best during his first few months in office to lower expectations, thus giving the impression that he felt deeply uncomfortable with the situation as it was then unfolding in Eastern Europe. Yet, within a year of the end of the Cold War, it looked as if he had navigated the rapids quite successfully. Admittedly, he faced a less appalling test in Europe than Wilson had. He also had more power to play with and confronted less opposition back home. This much is obvious. However, whereas the more famous and intellectually endowed of the two men is perceived by many of his contemporaries to have failed, the other, less renowned, figure appears to have succeeded rather well. Moreover, he managed to do so, it seems, not because of any grand new ideas, but rather because he got the diplomatic basics right. Most obviously, he did not cry ‘victory’ over a defeated Russian foe when many outside the White House were doing so with great gusto; and, more important still, he understood the central importance of helping facilitate the transition from German division to unification.
This was absolutely vital. Initially, few believed that he would be up to the task. Many more predicted disaster once the Berlin Wall had come down. But, at the end of the day, an effective 'deal' was brokered; and, as we will show, that deal could not and would not have been brokered without the support of the United States and the strenuous diplomatic efforts of its chief executive. As one leading European historian of the Cold War has argued, whatever else might be said about Bush, there is much to suggest that this was his 'finest hour'.

This article retells the story in some detail. Its main purpose, though, is not just to tell a tale which has been told several times before, but to focus on the many complex ways in which the Bush administration not only came to terms with the upheavals caused by the rapid and unplanned retreat of Soviet power from Central Europe, but was then able to intervene in the process and by so doing to direct and shape events. Based on new memoir material (which obviously needs to be treated with the usual caution, though having memoirs from all sides allows for cross-checking and comparison), as well as other important primary sources, the argument advanced here is a simple but important one: that effective diplomacy made a huge difference to the course of European history during a particularly dangerous and challenging period. And while in no way seeking to detract from what one American official has called Bonn's 'masterful role', we show that it was the United States – conscious of both its national interest and its superpower status – which ensured that the process of German unification 'came out right', with all of Europe, including the Soviet Union, 'accepting and supporting' the outcome. Unification might have happened anyway, but the fact that it unfolded in the particularly benign way that it did had a lot to do with the manner in which the Bush administration dealt with this vital issue.

We also address a second question concerning the way in which Bush has hitherto been interpreted by historians. While the literature on the Bush presidency remains scant, much of what has been written has strongly implied that Bush himself tended to respond to international issues rather than address them in a robust fashion. Lacking Reagan's flair and 'galvanizing style and discourse', Bush, it has been suggested, was a president without a view of the world at a time when clear thinking was most in demand. Even some of the adjectives used to describe his world outlook – 'prudent', 'inactive',...
'inert' – all point to someone more inclined to pragmatism than dynamic leadership.\textsuperscript{19} Certainly, Bush was very cautious when he assumed office. There is no doubt either that he displayed less enthusiasm than some thought he should have done about the break-up of both Yugoslavia and the USSR. A realist by inclination, and a team player by training, he was the insider’s insider who rarely thought outside the loop. But, as the record shows, even though he was initially very careful when it came to dealing with Gorbachev (though for reasons which seemed sound enough at the time) ultimately he did take the initiative and establish a relatively clear agenda for Europe in general and Germany in particular. Furthermore, he did so at a time when his own administration was deeply divided over what to do, with some arguing for the status quo and others for change. Tragically for him, of course, he could not then turn foreign policy success into political capital. As has been observed, he ‘proved incapable of using’ his ‘foreign policy skills and successes to hold on to power’.\textsuperscript{20} This much is true. But it says very little about his foreign policy. Indeed, one of the great ironies of modern American politics is that this quintessential foreign policy president, who led the United States through a most turbulent period, was rejected by the electorate not because he was seen as having failed in the area of international relations but rather because he was perceived as taking too much interest in the world outside American borders. In a rapidly changing political landscape, without a clear and present threat to the US interest, in which the American people seemed to be more focused than ever on their own problems, the Bush administration thus found itself in the unenviable position of appearing to be more concerned about the affairs of other people rather than those of its own citizens. This was a deadly combination which spelt disaster for the Bush presidency in 1992.

To make good our claims, we have divided the article into three sections. In the first of these we look at the initial caution displayed by the Bush administration towards the Gorbachev phenomenon. In the second we then examine the way in which it began to take the initiative and tried to set its own European agenda, a move undertaken in the spring of 1989 (and importantly, some time before the Berlin Wall came tumbling down a few months later). Finally, we assess the diplomacy of German unification, focusing in particular on the delicate three-way negotiations between the US, the USSR, and the Kohl government. As we will reveal, throughout these laborious
discussions, the United States played a key role. To this extent, our study also demonstrates a more general point about the part played by great powers in history. It would be naïve, of course, to think that all great powers wield their power wisely or responsibly. Even the United States has not achieved that sort of perfection, in spite of the best efforts of some of its apologists to suggest otherwise. Nonetheless, it wielded its influence to great effect in the unsettling days and months following the quite unexpected collapse of communism in Europe in 1989. Consequently, the transition from one era of stable blocs to which the United States had apparently grown accustomed, to another era for which it had neither planned nor had anticipated, was managed with minimal cost. But it all could have turned out so differently.

The Gorbachev Problem or What is Going on in the USSR?

When George Bush was inaugurated as President of the United States in January 1989 there were clear signs that important changes were afoot in Europe. Gorbachev’s December 1988 speech to the United Nations in particular seemed to some to be the harbinger of important things to come. However, few foresaw, and perhaps even fewer expected to see the deep and profound transformations that were to sweep Europe during the following two years. The Bush administration’s attitude towards the changes under way in superpower relations was one of cautious optimism tempered with scepticism. Whilst most members of the administration saw the changes initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev as significant, many remained deeply uncertain about what they meant and not at all clear as to how to respond to them.21

These concerns and uncertainties stemmed from a number of considerations. In the first place, a number of Bush’s senior advisers expressed considerable doubt as to the benign nature of Gorbachev’s intentions. For instance, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft initially believed that Gorbachev’s goal was not so much to end the Cold War as to seek a period of detente which would allow him to ‘restore dynamism to a socialist political and economic system and revitalize the Soviet Union domestically and internationally to compete with the West’.22 This view was shared by others, including Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates.23 Gates especially had long expressed his
reservations about the meaning of the Gorbachev phenomenon. The USSR was in deep trouble: that much was obvious; and this is why Gorbachev had undertaken the risky strategy of perestroika. However, the United States should not be misled into dropping its guard. Gorbachev offered many opportunities. On the other hand, if his policies succeeded it would make the USSR ‘a more competitive and stronger adversary in the years ahead’. And that would not be good for the US, or the world as a whole. It was essential therefore to keep one’s powder dry.\(^{24}\)

This concern was reinforced by the belief that, whilst Gorbachev had been most forthcoming with warm words and attractive proposals, these had not, as yet, been matched by concrete actions. As Secretary of State James Baker expressed it in January 1989: ‘the talk is different but the force structure and policies that support far-reaching interests and clients have not changed commensurately. Many of those policies and those clients are hostile to American values and threaten our interests and our allies. That’s a reality.’\(^{25}\) This theme of a gap between Gorbachev’s fine words on the one hand, and real measurable changes on the other, was also picked up by other members of the Bush administration. The Director of the CIA, for example, was in little doubt. In spite of apparent changes in the Soviet outlook, the USSR, according to Director Webster, was still showing hostile intent. ‘The Soviet Union is and will continue to be the primary focus of our intelligence’, and remain so, he insisted, because ‘its military efforts, its efforts to increase global influence, and its aggressive intelligence activities are still serious threats to the United States’. Nor should the United States be fooled into believing that Soviet capabilities had changed very much. They had not. If anything, in order to appease his own military, Gorbachev had approved just as many if not more military programmes than his apparently less benign predecessors. So nothing fundamental had changed. Gorbachev may be ‘stirring up a brew’ in the West. However, Americans should not lose sight of the fact that the USSR still remained an active danger to the US international position.\(^{26}\)

These beliefs underpinned a third concern: namely, that Gorbachev’s ‘peace offensive’ was generating an unwarranted euphoria in Western Europe which threatened to undermine the unity of the Western Alliance. In Baker’s view, ‘Gorbachev’s strategy was to weaken Western cohesion through high profile publicly attractive proposals’.\(^{27}\) According to US intelligence assessments of
the time, even Gorbachev’s promise to reduce Soviet troop levels in Europe (as made public at the UN in December 1988) was problematic because they were ‘clearly calculated to put pressure on western governments’ while undermining ‘support in the alliance for modernizing programmes’. This danger was seen as being particularly acute with regard to West Germany, where ‘Gorbymania’ had begun to undercut popular and elite support for nuclear deterrence and particularly for the modernization of NATO’s short-range nuclear forces (SNF). This development generated great concern inside the Bush administration since it represented a real threat to the cohesion and viability of NATO’s nuclear strategy.

Finally, some in the administration argued that even if Gorbachev was sincere in his desire to transform the Soviet Union, he would, in the end, be defeated. Certainly, history was not on his side. On the contrary, a study of the past suggested that those who set out to reform the USSR (and here the example of Khrushchev loomed large) were likely to be overthrown. An analysis of the present led to even more pessimistic conclusions. In reality, the sheer scale of the opposition facing Gorbachev meant he would not be able to carry the day; and no doubt for this reason (there were others) ‘everyone, from Bush on down, was sceptical about Gorbachev’s chances for success in reforming the Soviet system’. Anything was possible, but the most likely scenario – in the official American view – was further chaos inside the USSR and a resulting conservative backlash which would sweep Gorbachev from power. Given this likelihood, it followed that it made little sense to start making concessions to the Russians, and a great deal more to maintain America’s guard against a possible return to the Cold War.

The ‘Vision Thing’

Despite this scepticism regarding Gorbachev’s intentions and the likely success of his reforms, the Bush administration was united in the belief that doing nothing was simply not an option. To fail to respond to Gorbachev’s initiatives would only further surrender the initiative to the Russians and jeopardize the unity of the Western Alliance. The administration thus decided, after some initial hesitation, to develop a strategy based on the idea of ‘testing’ Gorbachev and demanding that he back his words with concrete actions.
In the European context, this strategy comprised two elements. Firstly, there was a perceived need to shore up NATO unity by responding to Gorbachev’s proposals to reduce Soviet armed forces in Eastern Europe by 500,000 and to remove all Soviet short-range nuclear weapons (SNF) in Europe by 1991 – if the US would do likewise.33 These proposals, of course, had been received with great enthusiasm in West Germany in particular and hardened that country’s opposition to the modernization of NATO’s SNF.34 As far as the Bush administration was concerned, however, Gorbachev’s offer contained as many threats as it did promises. NATO’s SNF had always been justified by the need to offset the Warsaw Pact’s massive advantage in conventional forces. A cut of 500,000 Soviet troops therefore would not remove that imbalance and the elimination of both alliances’ SNF would, it was felt, weaken NATO’s position vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact. Gorbachev’s proposals thus looked to Washington to be both self-serving and dangerous.

The SNF issue threatened to become highly divisive and to drive a wedge between Washington and Bonn.35 Recognizing the danger, the Bush administration began to work hard to find a solution to the question and to shore up Alliance unity. This was achieved by the development of a two-pronged strategy revealed at the NATO summit in Brussels at the end of May. With regard to SNF, the administration crafted a proposal that promised negotiations on SNF with the aim of a ‘partial’ rather than a total removal of those weapons. In addition, a final decision on deployment of new NATO SNF would be postponed until 1992 and taken ‘in the light of overall security developments’.36 The proposal thus bridged the gap between those in the Alliance who wished to abandon SNF modernization and those who desired its deployment by putting off the divisive decision.

In addition, and in order to prevent a recurrence of the arguments of 1989 in 1992, the Bush administration also crafted new proposals for the ongoing talks on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). In particular, it proposed that the US and USSR agree to an equal ceiling on troop levels in Central Europe of 275,000 and do so by 1992 or 1993, rather than 1997 as originally planned.37 The skill of this proposal lay in the way, firstly, that it regained the strategic initiative from Gorbachev. By demanding deeper cuts in Soviet forces than those of the US, the administration was seeking, as Bush himself put it, ‘to really put Mr Gorbachev to the test now’. The administration was challenging Gorbachev: ‘How serious are you? Are [sic] you –
really want to reduce the imbalances that exist in all these categories, [of weapons] or do we want rhetoric? This proposal also served to neutralize the SNF question. If the USSR agreed to it there would be no need to deploy new SNF since the crucial conventional imbalance between the two alliances’ forces would have been eliminated. If they rejected it, then the NATO allies would rally behind deployment in the face of Moscow’s intransigence.

The second area in which the administration sought to seize the initiative and ‘test’ Gorbachev was Eastern Europe. Gorbachev had already hinted that the USSR was prepared to acknowledge the right of self-determination for that region in his speech to the UN in December 1988. The National Security Council therefore suggested that the US should begin putting such promises to the test. The appeal of this idea was reinforced by concrete evidence of real reform in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and Hungary. When the Polish government and the opposition Solidarity movement agreed terms for elections in April 1989, Bush seized the opportunity to declare his administration’s ‘vision of the European future’. It was now possible, he declared ‘to dream of the day when East European peoples will be free to choose their system of government and vote for their party of choice. ... If we are wise, united and ready to seize the moment, we will be remembered as the generation that helped all of Europe find its destiny in freedom’.

Thus, the Bush administration was demanding, as proof of Gorbachev’s good faith, the overthrow of the entire postwar European order. Nor were the implications of this demand lost on the Bush team itself. Indeed, in the process of formulating the new policy, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft told Bush that the administration must now give serious thought to German unification as part of its overall objectives; moreover, that it should be supportive of that goal. Accordingly, on 31 May 1989, in the West German city of Mainz, Bush publicly stated that the unification of Germany was now an explicit goal of his administration. Declaring that ‘the Cold War began with the division of Europe. It can only end when Europe is whole’, he went on, ‘we seek self-determination for all of Germany and all of Eastern Europe’. Bush’s readiness to embrace such radical change was strongly informed by his implicit confidence in the stability of West Germany. Unlike many European leaders, Bush was possessed by none of the atavistic fears which characterized their reactions to the idea of German unification. That much was implicit
in his remarks in Mainz, but later in 1989 he spelled it out quite explicitly: ‘I think there’s been a dramatic change in post-World War Two Germany. And so, I don’t fear it [unification] ... I think there is in some quarters a feeling – well, a reunited Germany would be detrimental to the peace of Europe ... and I don’t accept that at all, simply don’t.’” Bush’s actions in the early months of his administration thus belie the portrait drawn by most analysts of a ‘cautious’, ‘conservative’ statesman oriented towards the ‘status quo’. On the contrary, the President who famously had problems with the ‘vision thing’ was outlining a future for a new Europe which was more ambitious than anything his postwar predecessors or, for that matter, his contemporaries – including Gorbachev – had been prepared to contemplate.

**German Unification: American Calculation**

In effect, by the time Bush’s call for the freedom of Eastern Europe became a dramatic reality in the second half of 1989, his administration was already psychologically and politically prepared to address the consequences. But one other crucial individual deserves mention here. As the crisis in East Germany unfolded, Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany began to see emerging before him the opportunity to achieve the ultimate political prize for any West German Chancellor, and decided to seize it with both hands. This meant doing everything possible to encourage the collapse of East Germany. It was not so surprising therefore that when the Berlin Wall did come down, Kohl rushed to Berlin to call for the right to self-determination for ‘all Germans’, and to proclaim that the road ahead would now lead to ‘unity, right and freedom’. He formalized his goal in a speech to the Bundestag on 28 November in which he outlined a ten-point plan for unification.

This open call for unification caused consternation not only in Moscow, which saw the chief prize of its victory in World War Two and the keystone of its Western security system threatened, but in most of the Western European capitals as well, where governments which had always publicly supported unification in the secure knowledge that it was never going to happen, now had to contemplate the uncomfortable prospect of a united Germany. Nor was it Gorbachev alone who was concerned, insisting that German unification was ‘no issue of current policy’.
Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom similarly declared that ‘the question of borders is not on the agenda. They should stay as they are’. 48 Similar worries were also expressed, albeit somewhat less robustly perhaps, by the French, the Italians, and some of the smaller West European powers. 49

The one exception to the general reluctance to contemplate German unification was the government of the United States, and George Bush in particular – possibly the first in his own administration to back unification unequivocally. 50 More generally, and ‘alone among leaders of the Western Alliance and the Soviet Union’ according to his Deputy National Security Advisor, he really did believe that the Germans had changed and was ‘prepared to gamble a very great deal on that faith’. Hence it was no surprise when the day after Kohl announced his plan for unification to the Bundestag, Bush called him personally to express his support. 51

There were a number of reasons for the Bush administration’s swift embrace of Kohl’s plan. The first, quite clearly, was Bush himself, who sensed – correctly as it turned out – that after nearly 40 years West German democracy had become so deeply entrenched that any change in Germany’s international status could do little to upset Germany’s and Germans’ attachment to democratic norms and procedures. Bush also had a good deal of faith in NATO and the European Community. Again he calculated that Germany’s political class had everything to gain, and much to lose, if it abandoned the very institutions which had brought it security and prosperity – and so long as the new Germany remained firmly integrated into both there was nothing to fear. Indeed, given these realities, unification would represent a clear victory for Western policy and would end the division of Europe on Western terms.

There was also a more pragmatic consideration. Despite Bush’s faith in Kohl, there were still nagging fears that, if necessary, Bonn would do a deal with Moscow in order to attain unification and that the price of such a deal might be German neutralism and the consequent collapse of NATO. This fear was exacerbated by the popularity of Mikhail Gorbachev in West Germany in the late 1980s. Within the German government, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher in particular was seen by some in the Bush administration as overly enthusiastic about Gorbachev and his reforms. 52 The emergence of unification as a real possibility made the fear of ‘Genscherism’ much more tangible. The nightmare scenario for the
US was one in which Gorbachev agreed to German unification but only if a united Germany was neutral. In such a situation, faced with the choice of unity or NATO, there was at least a chance that the German people would choose the former over the latter. Moreover, American insistence on a united Germany’s membership of NATO would mean that it, and not the USSR, would be perceived by the German people as the obstacle to unification. The crucial objective of American diplomacy, therefore, was to ensure that Bonn insisted that both unity and NATO membership were non-negotiable. Such an insistence would, in turn, make Moscow’s demands for German neutrality the perceived obstacle to unification.

Thus, when the administration quickly recognized in November 1989 that unification was becoming inevitable, it became vitally important to be on the inside, shaping the policies that would bring unification, rather than on the outside, opposing it. As State Department Counsellor Robert Zoellick observed, ‘our strong support for the process would make it more likely that the German people would voluntarily stay within western structures’. In addition, there was also the question of the impact of German unification on Gorbachev’s domestic position to consider. Once again, being in a position to influence the process was in the United States’ best interests.

The administration’s desire to shape the process of German unification was evident in the speed and nature of its response to events. By mid-November 1989, even before Kohl’s speech to the Bundestag, the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff had come up with an approach to German unification emphasizing four central principles:

1. The United States should support German self-determination without endorsing a specific outcome.
2. Unification must be consistent with German membership of NATO and the European Community.
3. Movement towards unification should be peaceful and gradual.
4. On the question of postwar boundaries, the terms of the Helsinki Final Act should be observed.

Of the four, the second was obviously the Bush administration’s chief concern. By moving this early it clearly hoped to set the terms of the debate.
Besides keeping Germany inside NATO, the other essential role of US diplomacy was to try and persuade both the Soviet Union and the Western Europeans to accept German unification. Because of the unique nature of the US–Soviet relationship and America’s central role in NATO, the United States was in the prime position to perform both tasks. Bush accordingly informed President Gorbachev at the December 1989 Malta summit that he would not seek in any way to exploit the German question and persuaded the NATO summit of the same month to endorse German reunification over British – and in particular Mrs Thatcher’s – opposition.

‘Two plus Four’

The key questions now for American diplomacy were the pace of unification and the nature of the process. In early 1990, even Chancellor Kohl did not envision unification taking place for four or five years. Within weeks, however, both he and Washington had changed their minds. The reason for this was the accelerating decline of East Germany. The East German regime was bankrupt, its government powerless to act, and its people increasingly saw their future in a united Germany. Put crudely, East Germany was falling apart; it was not going to last another four or five years and unification was going to have to come sooner rather than later. In fact, this prospect was far from unattractive to the Bush administration, since it calculated that the longer the process took the greater would be the opportunities for Moscow to find ways to obstruct it. At present Moscow was clearly off-balance and uncertain how to respond to events that threatened to overwhelm it. A rapid unification process might serve to keep things that way and present Moscow with a fait accompli.

But the administration was not of one mind. The National Security Council staff (like the West German government itself) was in favour of unification being negotiated solely between the two Germanies. The NSC staff in particular saw no reason to allow the USSR a role and believed that unification would occur most quickly if left to the Germans alone. Secretary of State James Baker, however, felt that an attempt to exclude the USSR, not to mention the UK and France, was ‘a recipe for a train wreck’ should one of those three attempt to obstruct the process. The State Department, moreover, was looking at the problem in the wider context of
US–Soviet relations and believed that the USSR had to be offered some form of face-saving role, both in order to win its acceptance of unification and to protect Gorbachev against his own domestic hardliners.62

The mechanism the State Department Policy Planning Staff proposed to achieve this task became known as ‘2+4’. Under this process the details of German unification would be decided by the two Germanies plus the four occupying powers (US, USSR, UK, and France). ‘2+4’ would be a mechanism for unification, not a forum for arguing for or against it, and all matters of substance relating to unification would be decided by the two Germanies alone. The only formal role of the four occupying powers would be to surrender their occupation rights. The NSC staff opposed the idea right up until its formal acceptance at the Ottawa summit in February 1990, but Baker and the State Department eventually won the argument.63

The NSC staff were not the only people who had to be persuaded of the virtues of ‘2+4’. Moscow had also to be cajoled into accepting the plan; and the goal of the Bush administration was to give the Russians a role that would prevent their humiliation but which would not allow them to throw a spanner in the proverbial works. The great fear was that, given the crucial importance of East Germany to the USSR, both in strategic terms and as a symbol of the victory over Nazi Germany, its loss could precipitate a hardline backlash against Gorbachev which might even remove him from power. Thus, American thinking on Germany was always ‘cast in terms of how it would affect the continued process of reform throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union’.64 The US therefore sought a means to lessen the pain of the loss of East Germany. ‘2+4’, it was hoped, would serve this purpose. It would give Moscow the dignity of appearing to play a part in the unification process without giving it any real power over the substance of the matter.65

In early February 1990 Baker flew on to Moscow to try and persuade Gorbachev of the virtues of ‘2+4’. As part of his effort to woo Gorbachev, he suggested that a united Germany inside NATO, denuclearized and tied to the US, would pose less of a threat to the Soviet Union than an independent, non-aligned Germany which might feel the need to acquire nuclear weapons. Gorbachev admitted that he had also been toying with some form of six-power structure and agreed that ‘2+4’ was a ‘suitable’ way forward. Even more
significantly, he declared that German unification was ‘nothing terrifying’ and that while he remained opposed to a unified Germany being inside NATO he could see that the continued presence of US troops ‘could have a constructive role’.

Nor was it only Moscow which had to be persuaded of the merits of ‘2+4’. On 31 January 1990 Genscher gave a speech at Tützing in which he spoke out against four-power structures and said that unity should be negotiated by the two Germanies alone. Furthermore, according to Genscher, after unification, NATO (and the Warsaw Pact) would only become ‘elements’ of new Europe-wide security structures and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) would play a strengthened role. Genscher’s remarks, in particular those about future European security structures, were greeted with some anxiety in Washington. The Bush administration was adamantly opposed to any dilution of NATO’s role or any absorption of it into what some saw as the talking-shop of the CSCE. Moreover, with Kohl due to fly to Moscow in a few days, it was imperative that Washington and Bonn were as one on the key questions in order to prevent the Russians exploiting divisions between them.

Genscher’s concerns about four-power interference were easily laid to rest when he met with Baker in Washington on 2 February. Once Baker assured him that ‘2+4’ was designed to prevent four-power obstruction rather than facilitate it, Genscher was amenable to the idea. Following that, Bush wrote to Kohl in order both to express his absolute support for unification and US readiness to resist Moscow’s efforts to obstruct that process in any way. He also used the opportunity to reiterate US preferences concerning the process and above all the imperative need for a united Germany to remain in NATO. Kohl later described this letter as ‘one of the most important documents in the history of US–German relations.’

With the Bush administration’s views on the unification process thus absolutely clear in his mind, Kohl was able to go to Moscow and present Gorbachev with a united US–West German front. With Kohl also pledging significant economic aid for the USSR and accepting that NATO troops would not be deployed on the territory of the former East Germany, Gorbachev said that he was prepared to accept unification as a matter for the German people to decide. The joint Soviet–German communique released after the meeting between the Soviet leader and Chancellor Kohl declared that ‘the Germans
themselves must resolve the question of the unity of the German nation and themselves decide in what kind of state system, in what time frame, at what speed and under what conditions they want to bring about this unity". But, importantly, not in which alliances they would be members.

**Reluctant Russians**

So it seemed clear that by the middle of February 1990 Gorbachev was finally prepared to accept unification (we now know from his own memoirs that at a small meeting with his advisers in January 1990 he had come to the conclusion that unification was almost certainly inevitable). This was then confirmed at the Ottawa conference on ‘Open Skies’ at which Baker was able to secure the agreement of all six relevant parties to the ‘2+4’ process. The announcement of this agreement clearly stated that the two Germanies would discuss all internal aspects of unification while the four powers would discuss only the external aspects. It was also made clear that while the ‘2+4’ could discuss anything, it could only formally negotiate the ending of four-power rights in Berlin. The scope of the talks was therefore tightly circumscribed to curb Russian leverage. More interestingly, the announcement also stated that, on unification, Germany would have full sovereignty and no limitations on its choice of alliance.

The Ottawa announcement thus implied that Moscow was now ready to accept all of the West’s terms for unification, including NATO membership. A month later, however, Gorbachev appeared to reverse course, declaring on 6 March 1990 that ‘we cannot agree to [a united Germany being in NATO]. It is absolutely ruled out’. This shift was confirmed at the first meeting of ‘2+4’ officials on 14 March when the Soviet delegation denounced moves towards rapid unification and demanded a far broader mandate for the ‘2+4’ process than had been announced at Ottawa, including discussion of the question of NATO membership.

This kind of reversal would prove to be characteristic of Moscow’s diplomacy on the question of German unification. There would be a series of false dawns, such as Ottawa, when the USSR would appear to concede to Western demands, only subsequently to retract that concession in their next public announcement. This vacillation was a product of two factors. In the first place, it is clear
that the speed of the unification process took the Soviet leadership utterly by surprise. Baker realized this in his meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in Ottawa, when the latter at one point said ‘we are trying to think things out, to find variants and solutions, I just don’t know’.78

The other reason for the confusion in the Soviet position was domestic politics. Whilst Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze wanted to pursue a policy of interdependence and cooperation with the West, both were aware of the enormous symbolic and strategic importance of East Germany. The division of Germany was the great prize of the Second World War, the tangible reward for the terrible sacrifices of the Soviet people in that conflict and an assurance that the German menace would never arise again. To accept unification – moreover unification within NATO – was bound to be more than many could bear. Shevardnadze indeed told Baker at Ottawa that at the recent Plenum of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Politburo member Yegor Ligachev had talked of ‘a new Munich’, and warned that the conservatives were seeking to use Bush’s support for Gorbachev against the reformers.79

The Bush administration understood this and responded accordingly. The key issue was not just unification: it was German unification inside NATO which was the real problem. The absorption of the keystone of the Warsaw Pact into its main military opponent was a bit much, even for proponents of the ‘new thinking’ to swallow. Given that German membership of NATO was a non-negotiable issue as far as Washington was concerned, the administration was faced with a very clear task, namely to persuade Moscow that German membership of NATO was not a menace to the USSR. The obvious way to do this was to adapt NATO structures and goals in such a way as to make the institution itself appear less of a threat to Soviet security interests.

In early 1990 the Bush administration therefore decided that a major overhaul of NATO strategy was required. In February it put together an interdepartmental group, under the chairmanship of Robert Gates, to analyze the question of NATO’s future role.80 Following this, Bush announced in early May that he would be ‘calling for an early summit of all NATO leaders’ in order to ‘launch a wide-ranging NATO strategy review for the transformed Europe of the 1990s’. The review would focus on four key areas; NATO’s political role in Western Europe; conventional defence; nuclear
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defence; and the future role of the CSCE. In making such a declaration, Bush was taking a significant risk. He was promising to achieve a major reform of NATO before he had consulted his alliance partners as to whether they were prepared to go along with it. He was clearly driven to take this risk by the importance of finding some form of quid pro quo for Russian acceptance of German unification inside NATO.

Another part of this strategy of reassurance was the so-called ‘incentives package’. This stemmed from a list of ‘seven questions’ which Shevardnadze had first raised in a speech to the European Parliament on 19 December 1989. These ‘questions’ included recognition of existing borders; the future status of the German armed forces and other troops stationed on German soil; the place of a united Germany in Europe’s ‘military-political’ structures; and the national security interests of other states. The ‘questions’ effectively constituted a list of concerns which Moscow required to be addressed before German unification could be contemplated. Bush and Kohl consequently agreed to work on a combination of unilateral concessions delivered by Bonn, as well as a number of pledges by NATO that Washington would seek to deliver which would address those concerns. A preliminary version of this package was revealed to the Soviets by Baker when he visited Moscow in mid-May.

The key points were:

1. A united Germany would not develop or possess nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.
2. German borders must be settled on unification.
3. Soviet troops would be allowed to remain in the former East Germany for a number of years.
4. NATO troops would not be deployed on East German territory for a transitional period.
5. There would be a ceiling on the size of the German armed forces as well as on those of other central European countries, to be formalized in a CFE 2 treaty.
6. NATO would review and revise its strategy.
7. NATO would agree to negotiations on SNF.
8. NATO would agree to an upgrading of the role of the CSCE.
9. Development of Soviet–German economic relations and the fulfilment of all GDR economic obligations to the USSR.
The US and West Germany were thus engaged in a policy of 'trying on two levels to bribe the Soviets out of Germany'. The Germans were offering a range of financial and economic sweeteners whilst the US sought to make unification inside NATO more palatable. There was no indication in the Soviet response, however, of any readiness to give ground in return. They said that any ceiling on the armed forces of a united Germany must be fixed by the '2+4' and not wait for a CFE 2 and, crucially, that NATO membership was not an option. Baker returned from this visit convinced that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were under severe pressure not to compromise on this issue.

The first indication of a softening of the Soviet position came at the US–Soviet summit in Washington at the end of May 1990. When the question of German unification was raised for discussion, Bush reiterated the US position: a united Germany must be a member of NATO. He also presented a slightly revised version of the incentives package and told Gorbachev that the US intended to unveil a reformed NATO at a summit now scheduled for early July. In response, Gorbachev suggested that Germany become a member of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Bush then introduced a new argument. He put it to Gorbachev that, under the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, a sovereign state had the right to choose its own alliances. To the surprise of Bush's advisers, and to the visible consternation of Gorbachev's, the latter agreed that that was true. In order to confirm the reality of this shift, the American drafters of the final summit communiqué included a statement to the effect that the Russians now agreed that Germany would be free to choose its own alliance membership. When the Soviet delegation confirmed their acceptance of the draft, Washington at last had a direct acceptance of German unification inside NATO.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Washington Summit was the decisive moment. It would be another month and a half before final agreement was reached, but from this point on it was primarily a question for Bush and the other Western leaders of how to sweeten the pill that Gorbachev had finally, reluctantly, decided to swallow. Gorbachev's shift at the summit was apparently spontaneous and unplanned, but it was entirely in accord with the underlying logic of his position. His whole project of reform at home depended upon ending the Cold War and building a new cooperative relationship with the West. Bush had so shaped the process of German unification
that the potential price of seeking to prevent unification within NATO was the loss of Gorbachev’s entire reform programme. Edward Shevardnadze would later express the starkness of the choice thus: ‘we no longer saw any other possibility, it was a question of either-or; go to war or take part in the world process and have some influence on it’.89

However, while the Soviet reformers had finally accepted German unification within NATO, there were plenty of Russians, many of them within the Soviet hierarchy, who continued to be adamantly opposed. With a Congress of the CPSU (at which he faced a challenge for his reelection to the post of General Secretary) coming up in mid-July, Gorbachev was in no hurry to publicize his concession. Consequently, the next month saw little or no further progress and plenty of indications of the pressure Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were under. On 12 June, Gorbachev told the Supreme Soviet that he would accept a united Germany as a member of NATO providing there was a transitional period during which military forces in the former East Germany retained ‘associate membership’ of the Warsaw Pact.90 And at the 22 June ministerial meeting of the ‘2+4’, the Soviets asserted that the ‘2+4’ settlement should be merely an interim agreement. Four-power rights should remain in place until 1992, when a further convening of the ‘2+4’ would occur to assess German behaviour in the intervening period and to decide whether to relinquish four-power rights. In addition, all the GDR’s international commitments, including its membership of the Warsaw Pact, should be maintained for five years after unification.91 In effect, the Russians were declaring that if they could not halt unification, then they insisted on major constraints on the sovereignty of a united Germany. This was as hardline a stance as they had taken since their initial refusal to contemplate the possibility of unification at all. In private, after the ministerial meeting, James Baker asked Shevardnadze what was going on. The Soviet Foreign Minister admitted that his statement had been dictated by domestic political concerns and manoeuvrings. He told Baker that there was ‘tremendous’ domestic opposition and that if the US wanted unification within NATO then the forthcoming London NATO summit must produce an outcome that allowed Gorbachev to declare that NATO was no longer a threat.92

The forthcoming NATO summit thus became a crucial moment. If Bush could deliver on his promise to initiate a major review of NATO strategy, he would provide Gorbachev with the means to
accept German unification despite the Soviet hardliners. With this in mind, Bush decided to short-circuit the normal NATO decisionmaking process of submitting proposals to the NATO bureaucracy and instead circulated his proposed reforms directly to the NATO heads of government for their approval. Despite considerable disquiet about both method and content, Bush was able to get his way with the forceful backing of the Germans and, with minor modifications, the summit approved the Bush proposals.\textsuperscript{93}

The resulting ‘London Declaration on a Transformed Atlantic Alliance’ outlined a radical overhaul of NATO strategy and structure. NATO would invite the Warsaw Pact governments to establish diplomatic liaison missions at NATO and to work with NATO on matters of common concern. There would be a move away from the strategy of forward defence towards one stressing mobility. There would also be a move towards ‘minimum deterrence’ away from early first use of nuclear weapons, as well as a commitment to future negotiations on SNF and further deep cuts in conventional forces in a CFE 2 negotiation. Finally, there was a pledge to upgrade the role of the CSCE with the creation of a secretariat and parliament and a crisis management centre.\textsuperscript{94} Essentially, the message being sent was that NATO was acknowledging the decline of the Soviet threat and moving away from an aggressive military posture; moreover, the USSR would be assured of a full role in future debates on European security by its membership of the CSCE and through direct contact with NATO.

Immediately the ‘London Declaration’ was published, Gorbachev invited NATO Secretary-General Manfred Worner to Moscow to publicize the good news. According to Gorbachev aide Anatoly Chernayev, ‘domestically the London summit was extremely important’.\textsuperscript{95} Eduard Shevardnadze would later write that ‘without the decisions passed by the NATO council in London, membership of Germany in NATO would have been unacceptable to us’.\textsuperscript{96} When Gorbachev then secured a comfortable reelection to the post of General Secretary of the CPSU, he was finally in a position to lay the matter to rest. The opportunity to do so arrived within days, when Chancellor Kohl arrived in Moscow. Kohl saw three issues as still unresolved; the question of NATO membership, the termination of four-power rights, and the size of the unified Germany’s armed forces. Cautiously optimistic, he nevertheless did not expect the ease with which the deal was done. There were no negotiations as such,
Gorbachev simply announced his acceptance of Western terms. At their meeting on 14 July, Gorbachev said that a unified Germany would be free to choose its alliances and that he was happy for four-power rights to end as soon as agreement was reached in the ‘2+4’. Two days later in the Caucasus an agreement on a troop ceiling of 370,000 at the time of the completion of a CFE treaty was reached.\textsuperscript{97} With no outstanding issues remaining between the positions of the two sides, Kohl was now able to announce to the world that agreement on the terms for German unification had been reached.\textsuperscript{98}

**Conclusion**

The US contribution to German reunification was therefore enormous. As even Genscher later conceded, ‘if America had so much as hesitated, we could have stood on our heads and gotten nowhere’.\textsuperscript{99} And in every key external aspect of the unification process, the role of the Bush administration was crucial. Already committed publicly to German unification before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Bush moved swiftly to reaffirm that commitment, and that decisiveness would prove to be the key to the administration’s eventual success. The unification of Germany was almost inevitable once the East German regime began to collapse, but how that unification came about, and what its consequences would be for those both inside and outside Germany, was far from clear. In recognizing this reality while others were still trying to find ways of averting the inevitable, the Bush administration put itself in a position to dictate the subsequent process.

Even then, it faced a considerable dilemma. Unification of Germany outside NATO was unthinkable both to the administration and to its key West European allies.\textsuperscript{100} Unification inside NATO appeared to be equally intolerable to the Soviet Union. Once again, however, the trick was not so much in achieving the desired objective, which was always the most likely outcome, but achieving it in a fashion that was minimally disruptive of other important relationships and processes. Above all, once Bush had secured Kohl’s commitment to seek unification inside NATO, it was a question of rendering that outcome palatable to the Russians. More precisely, it was a question of finding ways of enabling the reformist Soviet leadership to accept that outcome without fatally undermining their domestic political position at home. ‘2+4’ was a part of this, but it
was the reform of NATO that was vital. Once again the supposedly cautious George Bush led from the front in proposing and forcing through a radical revamp of NATO which altered that organization’s relationship with the USSR from one of confrontation to one containing the seeds of cooperation. The combination of NATO reform and the incentives package devised by the US and the West Germans made it possible for Gorbachev to agree to unification inside NATO without appearing to have conceded everything and gained nothing in return.

In this instance, therefore, the allegedly timid George Bush proved himself a most effective leader. Accepting and increasingly welcoming dramatic shifts in the geopolitical landscape – while others were paralyzed with uncertainty and trepidation – the President and his advisers acted decisively in shaping and directing potentially destabilizing processes. Nor should we think that the outcome was predetermined. What happened in the end did not have to happen; things could have turned out very differently. And one of the main reasons they did not was because of an active American diplomacy. Of course, not all Americans agreed about how to end the Cold War. Some even worried about it ending at all. However, as events unfolded, even the most cautious could see no real alternative other than to get seriously involved in negotiating its conclusion. Indeed, they soon came to recognize that if they did not do so in a positive and constructive manner, then the cause of European order would be severely tested – as many of them recognized it had been after World War I. Which brings us back, full circle, to Wilson in 1919. Naturally, we should beware of making unfair comparisons and drawing false historical analogies. Hence the fact that one American president failed to build a new European order after the end of World War I, and another succeeded 70 years later, should not be put down to diplomacy alone. That would be quite absurd. On the other hand, as we have seen, an active diplomacy conducted by the United States possessing a good deal of power and a clear memory of what not to do (as well as what needed to be done), did make a big difference. No doubt Woodrow Wilson will go down in history as being the more important of the two American leaders. But it remains to be seen who will be remembered as being the more effective negotiator and diplomat.
NOTE

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10. This is discussed in detail in several of the essays in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi (eds.), American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, Impacts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
14. On the sense of crisis following the collapse of the Wall, see the early assessment


17. Ibid., p.90.


20. David, ‘Who was the Real George Bush?’, p.197.

21. For a detailed look at the events of 1989, mainly based on Soviet documents of the time, see the very useful collection, The End of the Cold War, Cold War International History Project, Bulletin, Issue 12/13 (Fall/Winter 2001).


32. ‘The Challenge of Change in US–Soviet Relations’, address by Secretary of State James Baker before the CSIS, 4 May 1989, DOSB July 1989, pp.36–9, for the administration’s first public articulation of this idea.


35. For a detailed examination of Soviet perceptions of the evolving German question in the 1980s, see Hannes Adomeit, Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998).

36. The Alliance’s Comprehensive Concept of Arms Control and Disarmament, 30 May
48. Ibid., p.96.
49. We are grateful to Professor John Baylis for reminding us of this important point.
50. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p.188.
60. Ibid., p.160.
61. Ibid., pp.167–8.
72. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*, p.188.
77. Zelikow and Rice, Germany Unified, p.225.
79. Ibid., pp.208–9.
82. Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, p.231.
83. Hutchings, American Diplomacy, p.106.
85. Gates, From the Shadows, p.492.
91. Zelikow and Rice, Germany Unified, pp.296–7.
95. Zelikow and Rice, Germany Unified, p.332.
99. Pond, Beyond the Wall, p.186.