Two Plus Four

The Lessons of German Unification

Robert B. Zoellick

TEN YEARS ago, on October 3, 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany absorbed the German Democratic Republic, creating a single, united Germany. Less than a year before, the people of East Berlin had breached the Berlin Wall, prompting a flurry of diplomacy. Events moved so quickly that they seemed pre-ordained. But were they?

At the time, I was serving President George Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker, III, as counselor of the Department of State. One of my assignments was to help develop and implement U.S. policy toward German unification. In this article, looking back after a decade, I offer ten observations about American diplomacy during those busy months.

FIRST, the story of German unification underscores the importance of anticipation. Even with the best intelligence, it is difficult to foresee what lies ahead. Nevertheless, officials should seek to identify critical trends so they may then prepare the groundwork to meet various contingencies in a fashion that moves them toward their strategic goals. This precept might seem obvious, but the press of events, a full in-box and a long list of phone calls to return can easily pre-empt long-range thinking and preparatory action. The normal state of affairs is that people turn to immediate and usually easier tasks before facing longer term complex problems.

Consider the world in late 1988, as President-elect Bush was preparing to assume office. Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* had made the Soviet leader a celebrity, even a symbol of hope, around the world. The German public seemed especially charmed by this very new type of Russian leader. Elsewhere in Central Europe, particularly in Poland and Hungary, restive publics were stirring; people were just beginning to test the boundaries of the Soviet empire's new rules. In geopolitical terms, the center of gravity appeared to be shifting to Central and Eastern Europe. Hence, for the United States and the NATO alliance, Germany's posture would be decisive in shaping the future course of events.

Yet there was a tension in the relationship between the United States and Germany, and it was about to burst into the open. President Reagan had successfully pressed the Soviets to scrap their deployment of intermediate-range

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nuclear missiles in Europe. This left principally short-range nuclear missiles in place, situated mostly in Germany, as well as America's ICBMs. In late 1988, NATO was considering a plan to modernize this missile force. But the West Germans were asking why only they and their East German neighbors should have to bear the brunt of nuclear deterrence in Europe. As one West German politician observed dryly, "The shorter the missiles, the deader the Germans."

President Bush was keenly aware of the rapidly changing European scene. He launched a series of initiatives to mold the dynamic environment to America's advantage. At the NATO Summit in May 1989, he advanced a proposal to reduce drastically conventional military forces in Europe. (In doing so, Bush overrode the vigorous resistance of his chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe.)

Bush's dramatic move accomplished a number of aims. It seized on Gorbachev's rhetoric about reducing Soviet ground troops and challenged the Soviet Union to cut their numbers further to achieve equal levels with the West. The proposal also shifted the focus of U.S.-Soviet arms control from its traditional concentration on strategic nuclear limitations to the recently launched negotiations on conventional forces in Europe (the CFE talks). By doing so, the United States was directly targeting the Soviet army of occupation in Central and Eastern Europe. It also pushed the debate on short-range nuclear missiles to the background. Indeed, NATO reached an agreement at its 1989 summit to defer the question of the modernization of such missiles, easing a sharp point of contention between the United States and Germany. Finally, President Bush's NATO initiative demonstrated his determination and ability to lead the alliance at a critical moment.

The President's plan to reshape the political landscape in Europe had other dimensions as well. After the NATO Summit, he visited Mainz, the capital of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's home state, to deliver a speech about the importance of the partnership between Germany and the United States. Recognizing the changing public mood in Germany, including its positive response to Gorbachev, Bush sought both to charm and challenge his German allies. He praised them for their extraordinary political and economic accomplishments over the previous forty years. But he also urged the Germans to accept the responsibility of being a partner with the United States in making all of Europe "whole and free."

President Bush intended to take his message further east. I recall early in 1989 seeing a page of notes that the President had typed personally and given to Secretary Baker. It identified areas of particular interest, including developments in Central and Eastern Europe. He acted on this interest directly in July 1989 with the most powerful weapon in the Western diplomatic arsenal: a visit by the president of the United States to Poland and Hungary. In doing so, President Bush was acknowledging and encouraging the movements for freedom; he was also competing with Gorbachev and signaling to the Soviet leader that he would pay a huge price in terms of Western opinion (which he seemed to cherish) were he to interfere with the march of liberty behind the Iron Curtain.

In sum, by the summer of 1989, the new U.S. administration had discerned major tremors in Germany, Central and Eastern Europe, and the NATO alliance itself. It had repositioned the United States to work closely with its German ally; achieve parity in conventional forces in Europe as a result of large Soviet withdrawals; consign the issue of short-range nuclear missiles to the background; signal a direct interest in political change in Central and Eastern Europe; and lead

NATO by proposing and refining plans to meet the concerns of all its members. Without knowing for sure what Gorbachev might do or how events might unfold, the United States was deployed to manage change.

SECOND, the United States approached German unification with a strategic and historic perspective. Senior American officials viewed the challenges of unification within the context of even larger changes taking place in Europe.

In 1989 and 1990, President Bush, Secretary Baker, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and their colleagues recognized that their decisions would shape Europe for decades to come. It was therefore important to ensure that individual actions meshed with the larger strategic goal of achieving security in western Eurasia. The U.S. aim was to unify Europe in peace and freedom, while seeking to avoid a "Versailles victory" that invited its own destruction.

The United States wanted Germany to be a strong democratic partner in building a new Europe and a new transatlantic relationship. Thus, it would have been a grave mistake to accept, as a price of unity, restrictions on German sovereignty. The United States wanted Germany to evolve over time, within Europe, as a true political, economic and security associate. Any limits imposed from outside would create the potential for future grievances.

For U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, the strategic objective was to limit the rise of future irredentism while building a new political and security structure in Europe based on the North Atlantic alliance. To that end, the United States sought to treat the Soviet Union with respect. America designed a negotiating process that offered the Soviets an opportunity to participate in the development of Europe's new security system, and the United States and Germany tried to address legitimate Soviet concerns. We even helped our Soviet counterparts to develop a public explanation of how the outcome took account of Soviet interests and sensitivities.

I hasten to add, however, that this willingness to work cooperatively with the Soviets did not slip into over-empathizing, short-changing U.S. interests, or creating false expectations. Secretary Baker, who bore the brunt of the advocacy and negotiating duties, was a master at displaying resolve and firmness, while listening carefully to reasoned arguments that he would seek to address—as long as the response did not counter U.S. interests.

For U.S. policy toward Europe as a whole, America's strategic aim was to promote peace and security, as well as a political dynamic of freedom and democracy, by pressing for Germany's unification within the European Community and NATO. To provide an assurance of America's commitment to the security of this new Europe, the United States recommended maintaining American forces on the continent. In December 1989 at the Malta Summit, President Gorbachev told President Bush that he actually wanted the United States to keep its troops in Europe. U.S. forces would only stay there as part of NATO, Bush answered, so a continued U.S. military presence depended on a healthy NATO.[1]

[1]In a similar vein, President Bush told U.S. allies at the 1991 NATO Summit in Rome that U.S. forces would only remain in Europe if they were wanted. The hush in the room that followed his statement made it clear that his point had been understood: America was in Europe as an ally, not as a military hegemon. If new concepts of a European army were premised on America as a competitor rather than as an ally, the United States would accept the point and bring its forces home.

The United States publicly outlined its strategic concept for a unified Germany within a more unified Europe, linked to America. As early as December 1989, Secretary Baker gave a speech in Berlin that described this vision. He previewed the changes the United States would seek in order to shape NATO for the future, develop new ties between the United States and the evolving European Community, and promote the role of the CSCE.[2] In sum, the diplomacy of German unification sought to close out the Cold War in Europe by laying the foundation for a political and security structure for a new Europe.

THIRD, the U.S. strategy toward German unification combined these conceptual and institutional goals with a critical, practical judgment about events on the ground: we believed that the East German public would be a driving force for national unity. We were convinced that the average East German wanted what his or her cousins had in West Germany—and which most East Germans could see on Western TV. This was not the view of the U.S. embassy in East Germany. The U.S. diplomats there were in touch with the dissidents in the church movements and other intellectuals who had challenged the communist regime; these courageous people wanted to find a "third way" between communism and capitalism. But the general public did not.

I recall a visit with Secretary Baker to a Lutheran church in Potsdam in December 1989, not long after the opening of the Berlin Wall. One could not help but be moved by the sincerity and decency of people who had struggled to preserve the church as a sanctuary of conscience against a brutal regime. But when we asked about the preferences of their fellow East Germans, I listened carefully as the ministers and lay leaders sadly recounted that their congregation wanted the prosperity of the West, not a new socialist experiment in the East.

There were two important policy implications that stemmed from this intelligence judgment. First, the Federal Republic of Germany—West Germany—was the legitimate German state in the eyes of Germans, both in the East and West. So unification would be a takeover, not a negotiated merger. Second, events on the ground would create a continuing momentum for unity that the United States and West Germany could use to their advantage. On the other hand, the momentum created a risk as well: a stalled diplomatic process would probably lead to a crisis, because there would be either a massive East German migration to the West or huge, uncontrollable protests against the weakening local authority and the occupying powers.

FOURTH, the U.S. initiative to channel the diplomacy into the "Two-plus-Four" process[3] reflected a larger evaluation of events and thinking about the Soviet Union in late 1989, as well as a decision on how best to deal with President Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had devised the label "New Thinking" to describe their approach to Soviet foreign policy.

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[2]The CSCE, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, was later renamed the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

[3]The "Two-plus-Four" process involved the two Germanies and the Four Powers: the United States, the USSR, Great Britain and France. The United States and West Germany argued for this particular description (as opposed to "Four-plus-Two" or "the Six"), because we wanted to stress that Germany's unification was the key issue, and that the four allied powers would be supporting and adjusting to that unity.

During the course of 1989, Secretary Baker and his team had arrived at two conclusions about this label: that the content behind it was vague or even lacking; and that, with adroit interaction and influence, the United States had a reasonable opportunity of persuading Soviet leaders how best to define that content.[4] In the context of German unification, this strategy required working closely with the Soviets to help provide them with justifications for accepting U.S. and West German preferences.

The United States thus advanced the Two-plus-Four process to draw the Soviets into the diplomatic dynamic, which in turn was propelled by the East German people, who were driving toward *de facto* unity. I recall making this point to an obdurate Soviet official, Ambassador Yuly Kvitsinsky, just after he had angrily rejected efforts by our West German and British colleagues to press for details on the Soviet position on unification. Kvitsinsky bluntly asserted that, "You cannot do this without us; you cannot leave the Soviet Union out", suggesting the USSR would only respond if and when it chose to do so. I replied that he was partially correct: the only one who could leave the Soviet Union out was the USSR itself, because the process was in fact moving forward with or without it. I pointed out that we had offered the Soviets an opportunity to deal with reasonable concerns, but if they would not cooperate we would move on.

Indeed, the diplomacy of the United States and West Germany combined an overture to the Soviets on process along with substance. In May 1990 Secretary Baker and I (and later President Bush) summarized various ideas to meet Soviet concerns through separate presentations of "nine points."[5] Since all these points had been stated before, if in a less organized fashion, the diplomatic purpose was to demonstrate a willingness to be forthcoming. At a more basic level, Dennis Ross[6] and I suspected that the Soviets had not focused on the individual ideas when each had been proposed. We thought that effective packaging might highlight the points and also lend them greater weight. This experience suggests another modest diplomatic lesson: do not assume that the other side has understood your message just because it is out in the public realm. The value of clean, simple and direct communication cannot be overstated.

In recent years, some have argued that U.S. commitments to the Soviets included

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[4]This was controversial at the time. Some preferred to stand back and wait for the inevitable contradictions in Gorbachev's policies to lead to his demise. Others distrusted all Soviets and argued against trying to work with them. Given the fate of Republicans who had been associated with détente, the safest course was to continue to attack the Soviet Union for its all-too-evident failings.

[5]The nine points were: 1) Follow-on CFE negotiations would address the size of conventional forces throughout Europe, including in Central Europe. 2) We would be willing to move up the start of the proposed arms control negotiations on short-range nuclear forces. 3) Germany would reaffirm that it would neither possess nor produce nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. 4) No NATO forces would be stationed on the former territory of the German Democratic Republic during a specified transition period. 5) Germany would work out a transition period for the withdrawal of all Soviet forces from Germany. 6) NATO strategy would be reformulated to take into account the changes that had occurred in Europe. 7) Germany's future borders must be settled. 8) The CSCE should be enhanced. 9) Germany and the USSR would seek to establish satisfactory economic ties, preferably in a way that benefited *perestroika*.

[6]Ross was the director of policy planning at the State Department, a respected adviser to Secretary Baker on the Soviet Union, and my close colleague.

a promise not to enlarge NATO. I adamantly disagree, in part because I recall anticipating the possibility of Poland and others joining NATO and so I wanted to avoid taking any action that would preclude that option. Shevardnadze has stated that the United States did not rule out NATO's enlargement. There was no limitation in the nine points, nor in the Final Settlement agreement. (And, in my experience, Soviet diplomats were quite adept at pinning down in documents explicit issues of concern and were hardly prone to rely on general assumptions.) On the contrary, I viewed the overture at NATO's London Summit to invite East European countries "to establish regular diplomatic liaison with NATO" as the first step down the path to possible membership.[7]

Not all those on the American side agreed with the effort to create the Two-plus-Four process or to present the nine points. Some feared that the process would provide the Soviets a vehicle through which they could be disruptive. After decades of distrust in the Cold War, the impulse not to offer the Soviets any cooperation was understandable. The counterpoint was that with 380,000 troops in Germany and its Four Power legal rights, the Soviet Union already had multiple means to resist the unification of a fully sovereign Germany within NATO. Given these Soviet assets, there were dangers if the United States sought to exclude the Soviets from decisions about unification, ranging from the risk of accidental violence to troublemaking Soviet proposals and even a deadlock leading to crisis. Moreover, once the Soviets accepted the Two-plus-Four process, the proponents of that mechanism expected that the internal German momentum would push the Soviets to resolve their differences with the four Western allies. The Soviets seemed off balance and behind events; we hoped to use this condition to pull them along to our desired outcome.

The positive experience with the Two-plus-Four process may underscore another diplomatic lesson: Do not assume that the other side has fully figured out its position, especially during periods of flux. Fast-moving events can leave governments and individuals uncertain about their objectives and the means to achieve them. In the right circumstances, negotiators can use processes to shape the other side's determination of how to achieve its objectives, and perhaps even help define the objectives themselves.

FIFTH, having created the Two-plus-Four process to help conduct the diplomacy, it was important for the United States, West Germany, Great Britain and France to have an operational concept about how to connect the means with the desired ends. The discipline of linking process with goals and results is vital, because diplomats can easily fall into the trap of treating talks and process as ends in themselves.

In 1990 the United States relied on West Germany to handle the internal aspects of unification, thereby maintaining the momentum on the ground. The Two-plus-Four would resolve the unfinished business of 1945—such as finalizing borders and sovereign rights—while also serving as a loose "steering group" that would orchestrate but not negotiate action

[7]My recollection on possible NATO enlargement is especially sharp because it related to a drafting disagreement on the night before the signing of the Final Settlement in Moscow on September 12, 1990. The open issue was the extent of non-German NATO activities on the former territory of the German Democratic Republic. Without stating my speculation explicitly, I wanted to preserve the possibility of transit by U.S. and other non-German NATO allies across Germany in case Poland were ever to join NATO. This concern was resolved satisfactorily.

on the many other issues that would prepare the external context for German unification. For example, this external environment included the negotiations on lower and balanced conventional forces in Europe, changes in NATO, new activity in the CSCE, and possible economic assistance for the Soviet Union. Each element contributed to a safer and more secure Europe with a united Germany, as well as to the rationale about the consideration of their interests that Soviet officials could use domestically to justify the unification of Germany within NATO. As the various components of the overall arrangement moved toward apparent resolution, the Two-plus-Four group could move into a negotiation of the Final Settlement agreement. It would become the process through which the four World War II victors would relinquish their remaining rights over the two German states.

SIXTH, the U.S. government was aware of the critical need to communicate with the public—especially in Germany and Europe—so as to generate support for its diplomatic strategy. The subtitle of Philip Zelikow's and Condoleezza Rice's 1995 landmark study of German unification, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft*, emphasizes one perspective: how a relatively small number of political leaders and diplomats moved quickly in a series of negotiations to transform a political earthquake into a new political and security order for Europe. The statecraft, however, was responding to and capitalizing on the actions of the German people. American diplomacy had to be attentive to, and work with, this public movement. Moreover, other publics throughout Europe and the Soviet Union were also anxious about the course of events; if their concerns were not addressed, their respective political leaders would create problems in diplomatic drawing rooms.

Both President Bush and Secretary Baker sought, through words and actions, to communicate America's aims to the Europeans. They wanted to show the German public that America stood by Germany at this critical moment. They also wanted to reassure the other peoples of Europe that the new European system would offer security as well as freedom. This was one of the purposes of Secretary Baker's speech in Berlin in December 1989: to relate chaotic events to a larger plan for the future of Germany, Europe and transatlantic relations.

Those American officials with broader political experience recognized that the public announcement in Ottawa of the launch of the Two-plus-Four process in February 1990 would send a powerful signal, in addition to serving as a diplomatic tool. After forty-five years of communism, we appreciated that the East German people might still be skeptical or suspicious about the real likelihood of unification. Given the rapid course of events, even West Germans might wonder if unification were truly possible. Yet because the American and West German diplomatic strategy was based on using the momentum of the German public for unity, we needed to demonstrate clearly that the Four Powers had accepted the idea that unification was on its way.[8] Indeed, the Ottawa announcement had an electric effect on German public opinion. I believe that it helped produce a surprise victory for the Christian Democratic Union in the March 1990 elections in East Germany, because, while Chancellor Kohl had shrewdly positioned the party

[8]In contrast, a photo of the four ambassadors of the victorious World War II powers, without any Germans, after a December 1989 meeting at the old Allied Control Authority building in Berlin, sent precisely the wrong message: that the Four Powers would not let this German movement for freedom and unity get out of control.

for unity, the Social Democratic Party leadership was noncommittal at best.

The U.S. delegation was also keenly sensitive to the public diplomacy dimensions of the ministerial meetings of the Two-plus-Four. Given the German public's sympathy for Gorbachev, we were always concerned that an adroit Soviet move might try to paint the United States as the foe of unification in the minds of the German public. The United States and its allies were insisting on a united Germany's membership within NATO, in accord with our strategy for a secure Europe after unification. If the Soviets had launched a public campaign accepting unification, but not within NATO, we could not have been sure of the German public's response. (An even tougher case would have been if the Soviets had stated that they would accept Germany within NATO, but only along the lines of French alliance membership, without military integration or the presence of American soldiers and bases.) Therefore, Secretary Baker's statements to the ministerial meetings, which we released to the press, always emphasized our core principles of support for Germany's unification in freedom and of not singling out Germany for discriminatory treatment (including limits on its choice of alliances).

In retrospect, this integration of diplomacy and communications strategy may also seem self-evident. But most diplomats are by training and experience apolitical. They usually work with people in power, not those challenging the current order. As such, they focus on communicating to leaders and officials, but not to general publics.

SEVENTH, U.S. officials were extremely fortunate that the American public expressed strong support for German unification. I was exceptionally proud, as an American, to see the public readily support keeping a long-standing promise to the German people. Average Americans instinctively associated with the desire of average Germans to unify in freedom; they fully shared in the excitement of the crowds surging through the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The American tendency to assume that the world thinks as we do can get us into trouble, but, on this occasion, America's fraternity with freedom served it, Germany and NATO very well. The U.S. focus on the future—not an obsession with the past—enabled it to adapt quickly to changed circumstances.

This public support for and trust in Germany had a practical effect on U.S. diplomacy: it afforded us the freedom to be agile. For example, in early 1990 Chancellor Kohl had temporarily deferred Polish demands for Germany to make a firm commitment regarding their border because of domestic political maneuvering. President Bush managed a discreet mediation that reassured Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, without forcing Kohl to back down publicly. One could have imagined groups in the United States demanding a more direct approach if they had viewed the whole process skeptically.

Of course, the mood in many European countries was different. Old fears and animosities surged to the surface and were given voice by political leaders. There were even echoes of these anxieties in "elite" American media circles. If President Bush and Secretary Baker had taken counsel of the warnings and hesitations expressed in establishment editorial opinion, the United States would never have moved boldly to mold events to its design.

EIGHTH, for all the strategy, concepts and planning, the United States was fortunate that its leaders had invested in building good personal ties and trust with their

principal foreign counterparts. Most important, President Bush and Chancellor Kohl respected and relied on one another, and President Gorbachev came to trust President Bush and rely on Chancellor Kohl.

At the time, President Bush was criticized at home for not showing enough emotion, or what was soon to become known as triumphalism. But the memoirs and official documents that have come to light over the past ten years demonstrate that his instinct was the right one. America's ability to use enormous fluidity to its advantage depended on Gorbachev's belief that Bush would not exult over his problems, and that the United States would seek to cooperate as the Soviet Union stumbled under the pressure of shocking change.

Secretary Baker's relationships with the German and Russian foreign ministers, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Eduard Shevardnadze, were also indispensable. Baker and Genscher each recognized in the other a master of power in his own political system. Both had a keen intuition about human nature. And both respected the code that one's word is one's bond.

The partnership with Shevardnadze was even more striking, given his background and the political system he represented. But the Soviet foreign minister was an intelligent, questioning man struggling to come to grips with the recognition that his country's past could not define its future. By revealing information and insights in private sessions with Baker, Shevardnadze earned his trust. Baker responded by offering support where possible.

For example, in advance of the NATO Summit in early July 1990, Baker gave Shevardnadze a general description of some of the initiatives that the United States hoped NATO would adopt. Shevardnadze thanked Baker for both the substance of the proposals and for sharing the confidences. The advance notice was extremely helpful, Shevardnadze went on to say, because it would enable him to pre-empt opponents, like Marshall Akhromeyev, with a positive public statement on the day NATO issued its communiqué. And that is precisely what he did. We had progressed to the point where the American and Soviet foreign ministers could plan secretly how to use tentative NATO language to persuade the Soviet Union to accept a unified Germany within NATO.

At lower levels, private exchanges of information and opinion were even more candid. Frank Elbe, Genscher's chief of staff, formed a partnership and channel of communication with me that proved instrumental time and again. The U.S. participants also had strong bonds with Horst Teltschik, Chancellor Kohl's assistant for foreign policy and security. Because of my close working relationship with Robert Blackwill, the senior director for Europe and the USSR on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, at times it seemed as if the State Department and the NSC had created a connection in order to ensure that the German Chancellery and Foreign Ministry would also be pressed to cooperate.

The most important, and truly courageous, participant in our troika was Sergei Tarasenko, Shevardnadze's assistant in the Foreign Ministry and later the head of his planning staff. Tarasenko formed a warm working relationship with Dennis Ross and me during 1989, and we drew Tarasenko to Elbe's attention. On numerous occasions, Tarasenko would explain the battles taking place in Moscow over various policies, including German unification. When Shevardnadze's public statements diverged from positions he had taken with Baker, Ross or I would point out the risk of breached trust to Tarasenko; Tarasenko then conveyed the messages to Shevardnadze, who would

explain the situation to Baker. Even more important, Tarasenko relayed how U.S. and German positions related to maneuverings within Moscow. Whatever Tarasenko's background earlier in his career, which I can only guess, by the time of our association he was a resolute, reliable and respected person of high principle.

Despite these close ties, the views of key participants at various levels often diverged. We did not mistake reliability, integrity and even friendship for identical interests.[9] On this score, Secretary Baker was the most disciplined of all. He always kept in mind his principal duty and objective, and neither friendship nor personal sympathy would divert him from the job to which he was committed.

U.S. diplomacy also had one other critical advantage: the key individuals worked closely together as a team. Too often, officials are handicapped not just by internal differences, which are to be expected, but by personal rivalries and circuitous maneuvering to advance positions by undermining others. President Bush, Secretary Baker, Secretary Richard Cheney and General Scowcroft set a very different tone. And most of the officials working for them recognized that forthrightness and fairness enabled the administration to share the load more effectively and accomplish much more.

NINTH, timing is vital in diplomacy. In 1989–90, Germany and the United States seized the moment. The East Germans accidentally opened the Brandenburg Gate on the night of November 9–10, 1989. Within ten months, on September 12, 1990, the Four Powers and the two Germanies signed the Final Settlement agreement resolving the key external dimensions of unification. Within another month, on October 3, Germany was united.

During this critical period, Gorbachev's position was weakening. However, he had one more surge of strength at the 28th Congress of the Communist Party in July 1990. On that brief rising tide, Gorbachev agreed with Chancellor Kohl on the principal terms of Germany's unification within NATO. The critical groundwork had been laid by Gorbachev's successful summit meeting with Bush in Washington late in May and then by the forthcoming results of the NATO Summit in early July.

By December 1990, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze had resigned and there were rumors of coups against Gorbachev. By August 1991 the plotters struck, and Gorbachev and the Soviet Union were finished.

Even high-level American attention was in question by the time of the signing of the Final Settlement agreement. In August 1990 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and President Bush and Secretary Baker quickly turned to assembling an international coalition to wage the Gulf War. The deal on Germany's unification was sealed just as the window of opportunity was closing.

TENTH, U.S. and German diplomacy were blessed with good fortune. Although luck may be the residue of design, the U.S. strategy could have been derailed by a host of calamities or new obstacles. An accidental spark could have led to widespread violence. Mistakes and fears could have unraveled into a Soviet use of force, as Shevardnadze reportedly has stated was possible twice in 1989.

After initial misgivings, the NATO allies, especially Great Britain and France, offered solid backing for the German and

[9]Fortunately, American and West German interests usually overlapped, making for an extremely cooperative relationship.

American strategy. Early in the process, during 1989, French President François Mitterrand met with Gorbachev in Kiev to explore how to put the brakes on Germany's unification. The Soviet memorandum of the conversation reveals that Gorbachev was wary of being maneuvered into a negative position and was particularly attentive to the U.S. posture; he felt that a Soviet-French (and even British) blocking combination would not serve his interests if the price were a breach with the United States and West Germany. To ease British and French concerns, President Bush arranged separate private meetings early in 1990 with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Mitterrand. After these sessions, our cooperation at the working level was usually highly effective, supported by high-level aides such as Charles Powell, who worked with Mrs. Thatcher.

The Soviets could have caused many additional difficulties if they had been more obstructionist, though it is not clear that such a strategy would have served long-term Soviet or Russian interests. The Soviets might have accepted unification but made Germany's membership in NATO their point of critical resistance. It is hard to say how the German public would have reacted to this. At one point, the Soviets did propose delinking the internal aspects of unification from the external ones—letting Germany unify without resolving Four Powers rights, the question of membership in NATO, the future of Soviet forces in Germany, and a host of other external topics. This initiative was directed at disconnecting the diplomatic process from the political momentum on the ground, which the U.S. strategy had tapped effectively. Although some Germans might have been tempted, the German political leaders refused this ploy.

Finally, there was the good luck of having the right leadership in the right place at the right time. In his book, *At the Highest Levels*, Strobe Talbott, later appointed deputy secretary of state by President Clinton, revealed a very different sense of American priorities. Talbott saw the events of 1989–90 as follows:

> In their handling of German unification, Bush and Baker were primarily concerned with shoring up their fellow conservative Helmut Kohl and thus staying on the good side of a vital ally. They failed to give full consideration to the potentially disruptive consequences of quick unification—consequences that would become apparent during the two years after 1990.[10]

This passage conveys a fundamentally different foreign policy outlook from that of President Bush and Secretary Baker. First, it traces Gorbachev's downfall to his external policies, not to the political and economic chaos he had unleashed at home. Second, it reveals a willingness to hedge on America's commitment to vital allies, even in a supreme moment of testing, in order to favor other powers. Third, it ignores the strategic connection of German unification to NATO's future, and, through NATO, to America's ongoing political and security presence in Europe. Fourth, it assumes a very different sense of timing about the need to proceed speedily with German unification, both to achieve our ends and to avoid the diplomatic and probably human disasters that would have been triggered by delay and the associated uncertainty. In sum, Talbott's outlook would have made the Soviet Union America's first priority, not Germany and NATO. Moreover, he assumed that U.S. foreign policy could have "saved" Gorbachev, the Soviet

[10]Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993), p. 470.

Union or later Russia from itself. We have had a chance to see the consequences of this outlook for U.S.-Russia relations over the past eight years.

Today, ten years after German unification, there may be one more lesson we can draw: diplomatic events must find their place in a continuing stream of actions, both before and afterwards. It is the course and currents of that stream that will determine the enduring implications of individual episodes. The most successful nations build on their achievements. They extend the logic of their strategies to deal with the next series of events, both anticipated and unexpected. They make new judgments about how to transform seemingly isolated incidents into momentum that will move them closer to long-term objectives. They connect strategies with operational concepts. They pay close attention to building public support for their strategies, and they establish relationships of trust with others around the world. They move with alacrity to seize and shape opportunities, and they try to avoid mistakes. Finally, successful diplomacy capitalizes on good luck, but does not rely on it. □