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Prime Minister

I'm afraid I find it rather disappointing. Homo Oxoniensis at his most judicious & least convincing

CDP 12/5

B.0114

MR POWELL

cc Sir Robin Butler
Sir Percy Cradock

Lecture by Professor Sir Michael Howard

On the eve of imminent departure to take up a new Chair in Military and Naval History at Yale, Professor Sir Michael Howard delivered a lecture on 10 May at Chatham House entitled "1989 - End of a Chapter?" A copy of his text is attached. I believe this may be of interest to the Prime Minister, though she will not share every judgment in it.

2. The main points are as follows:

a. We are witnessing events in the Soviet Union no less fundamental and far-reaching than those which occurred in France in 1789.

b. Gorbachev is the expression rather than the cause of the profound historic forces underlying these changes.

c. There is now real scope for reconsidering a defence policy based upon the kind of worst case analysis that has governed Western strategic policy toward the Soviet Union since the days of Stalin.

d. The Alliance would do well not to force the pace for modernisation of Lance; nor on the other hand to get caught in SNF negotiations, at least before clearing our own minds. The issue is not just this or that weapon system, nor even conventional parity, but the whole structure of allied strategy.

e. A new chapter in German history is about to begin. The Germans are recovering their identity as a central European people. This is not a cause for alarm and does not presage either neutralisation or unification. Differences of emphasis with other allies will occur objectively: they do not reflect simply the blandishments of Soviet propaganda.

f. A revival of Bismarckian Germany is not on the cards. The GDR will continue as a case apart, rather like Prussia before Frederick the Great.

g. In Eastern Europe a kind of 'Finlandisation' will occur, where Eastern European nations regulate their internal economic and political destinies within implicit parameters for defence and foreign policy set by the Soviet Union.

h. The gradual osmosis between East and West Europe does not require reciprocal and negotiated withdrawal of conventional forces, and the key does not lie in formal and technical arms control, which is oversold.

i. The military framework of East/West relations may not change very much before the end of the century. But it will become increasingly inappropriate to the evolving political structure in Europe, which is one where Germany returns to her natural role as link between East and West.

j. If autonomous budgetary or economic difficulties nevertheless make both US and Soviet troop reductions inevitable, we should welcome the change in East/West relations which makes this politically possible, not agonise over the nuances of the remaining military balance.

k. Quiet moderation by President Bush would be welcome. Both in the Soviet Union (economic imperatives) and in the United States (drugs, violence, inner city decay, the emergence of an embittered underclass), domestic preoccupations may loom larger than geo-strategy. But these will be at least as important for world stability in the long run.

l. Soviet power and ambition will continue to trouble us for many years, but are likely to be eclipsed by the turn of the century by societal, north/south and climatic/environment problems.

m. To that extent attitudes and policies born from events half a century ago may need adjusting, and there may be political dividends for those who are the first to recognise this.

P J Weston

12 May 1989

Lecture by Sir M. Howard

Chatham House - 10th May, 1989

1989 - END OF ~~AN ERA?~~ A CHAPTER ?

Historians, curiously enough, do not really like dates, or chapters, or eras. We know that the flux of the past can be no more divided into chunks than can the waves of the oceans. But the oceans have been so divided by geographers, and to make their vast subject manageable, and teachable, historians have to devise 'periods', and find dates from which it seems appropriate to begin them.

Beginning is easier than ending. Spectacular political events, as we know, did occur, in Britain in 1688 and in France in 1789, from which new historical chapters can be dated; but the processes which these events set on foot were not so much tidily ended as overtaken and compounded by other events and other processes, whose dates or origin may be less easily defined. In Europe such a spectacular event occurred in 1945 and most historians are happy to take that as the opening of a new chapter (though some for good reason prefer 1941): the defeat and disintegration of the last European power to aim at continental hegemony, the partition of the Continent between two superpowers as de Tocqueville had foreseen 100 years before, the creation of two antagonistic blocs facing each other across the Iron Curtain. For the past forty years events have been shaped by this solid if uncomfortable framework. But is this chapter now drawing to a close? Has there now occurred an event, or series of events, within the Soviet Union which will change the course of history as profoundly as did events in Britain three hundred and France two hundred or the United States 213 years ago? Will we be able to say, if not as did Goethe after the Battle of Valmy, that we have assisted at the beginning of a new epoch in world history, then at least that a new chapter has begun?

There certainly seems good reason to suppose that we are witnessing events in the Soviet Union no less fundamental and far-reaching than those which occurred in France in 1789; a genuine revolution (as opposed to Lenin's coup d'etat in 1917) in which a new, literate, educated middle-class is breaking the shackles of an incompetent and obscurantist ancien regime and establishing a new order based upon intelligent analysis, reasoned discussion, and goodwill towards mankind. To attribute these events solely to the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev and assume that their continuation depends on his personal skill and survival, as if he were a reincarnation of Peter the Great, is of course totally anachronistic. Who put him in power and what keeps him there? Like all great leaders he is riding a wave set in motion by profound historic forces. Gorbachev did not create that wave. He may fall off and be submerged by it. It may yet break up and be lost in chaotic eddies.

extended range. To make this kind of issue a test of "loyalty" to the Alliance is to misunderstand both the nature and purpose of an alliance which exists to reassure its members – not to dragoon them. This is a matter of political, not military judgement, on which the views of our German allies deserve to be treated with respect; and on which, it must be admitted, they have a more direct interest than we do ourselves. German attempts to dictate what kind of U.S. missiles should be deployed in British territory would not, I think, go down very well with the present management in Downing Street.

But the question of opening 'speedy' negotiations with the Soviet Union on the whole question of short-range nuclear missiles is something quite different, for one very simple reason: the Alliance has not yet worked out its own position on the matter, and until we do there is no point in talking to the Russians about it. It is not enough for us to stall by saying that we can only contemplate abandoning short-range nuclear weapons in the context of substantial Soviet conventional force reductions. Are we really prepared to do so even then? We must be quite clear in our own minds about this if we do not want the Russians to call our bluff as they did over the I.N.F. issue. Nor is there any necessary correlation between the number of such missiles deployed by the Allies and those by the Soviet Union.

These weapons are not targetted on one another. They are not indeed war-fighting weapons at all. The use of a few dozen would reduce Germany, east and west, to a radio-active graveyard within a few hours. If we need them at all we need them, in very small numbers, as a rung in the escalation ladder which constitutes the existing alliance strategy of nuclear deterrence, which is also a strategy to integrate the nuclear capability of the United States into the territorial defence of Europe. To this strategy the size of the Soviet stockpile is irrelevant. There is nothing to negotiate about. So long as we preserve an essential minimal force we can afford a massive reduction in the numbers of our largely unusable tactical nuclear weapons - ADMs and artillery - whether the Russians reciprocate or not. This is a matter of unilateral restructuing, not of painful and long drawn-out negotiation.

As for the size of Soviet conventional forces, what realistic reduction can we anticipate that would be sufficiently reassuring for us to abandon altogether this element in our capacity for flexible response? And what measures of intrusive inspection are we prepared to allow, to convince the Russians that we have abandoned it? These are questions that must be resolved within the Alliance before we go anywhere near a negotiating table, and in standing firm over this issue the British and American governments are only displaying common sense. What is at stake is not one or another weapons-system but the whole structure of Allied strategy.

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The conflict itself marks the end of a chapter in the relationship between West Germany and her allies. It is a relationship established by Konrad Adenauer forty years ago when the Federal Republic cast its lot in with the West, accepting a major but subordinate role in the Atlantic Alliance in return for protection against the threat of Soviet domination and promise of ultimate reunification. The significance of both the threat and the promise have now waned. Long before the advent of Gorbachev, the West German government had established a new and stable relationship with the Soviet Union and its East European neighbours, and opened a careful dialogue with the DDR. The eastward pattern of German trade had begun to re-establish itself; Germans again became conscious of their historic identity as a people in the centre of Europe rather than as the eastward provinces of an Atlantic Empire. For a new generation the security provided by the Alliance began to look very much like an Anglo-American hegemony. The seismic shifts in Eastern Europe can only intensify this trend: negatively, by reducing the fears which drove West Germany into the Alliance in the first place, and positively, by offering opportunities for the kind of peaceful Eastward penetration into lands hungry for German capital and German technology which many Germans have seen as the natural direction of their expansion for the past hundred years. With the melting of the Iron Curtain, a new chapter will begin in German history as well.

This revived emphasis in Germany on a Drang nach Osten is nothing to be alarmed about. It is unlikely to involve either neutralisation or, in any crude sense, reunification. The interests of the Federal German Republic, economic and political as well as military, are now far too firmly entwined with those of her west European neighbours for any such drastic restructuring to be seen as desirable, or indeed possible, by any responsible statesman in Bonn. But it does mean that within the Alliance, and within the Community, the German voice will be speaking - as indeed it is already speaking - with a different timbre from that of its Western neighbours; that the Germans will be viewing their interests from a different perspective; and that if these differences cannot be accommodated, the Alliance is in for a very rough ride indeed. To attribute these growing differences to the diabolical subtlety of Mikhail Gorbachev and assert, as do many American statesmen who should know better, that Gorbachev's whole policy is directed toward separating Germany from her allies, is of course conspiracy-theory run wild. That the internal changes in the Soviet Union and the resultant softening of Soviet policy towards the outside world are producing divisions within the Alliance is all too evident; but to believe that the former are contrived to produce the latter is symptomatic of the kind of paranoia which has all too often fogged the vision of observers in the western world. Gorbachev may be taking such advantage as he can of these developments but he did not create them; and we cannot halt them.

As for German reunification, the recreation of Bismarck's Germany is the last thing we have to fear. However great the desire may be in Western Germany for cultural re-integration, or in Eastern Germany for the consumer-products of the West, there is little likelihood even of a post-Hone~~gg~~cker DDR allowing itself to be absorbed by its dynamic western neighbour. It has acquired an identity and a perverse pride of its own. It may indeed remain the last stubborn outpost of Marx-Leninism, an anachronistic island as the tide of pluralistic capitalism washes past it into Eastern Europe. Its relationship with the Federal Republic is likely to be delicate and subtle, compounded as much of rivalry as of partnerhsip; one which foreigners may find it difficult to understand. The position in Berlin is likely to remain anomalous; whether or not the Wall comes down, the DDR is likely to maintain a well-guarded frontier, as much to keep disruptive elements out as to keep its own disgruntled citizens in. What we are likely to see, in short, is a revival not of Bismarckian Germany but of pre-Frederic~~k~~an Prussia: poor, proud, well-organised, and thoroughly disagreeable; eyeing the culture and prosperity of its neighbours in Bavaria and on the Rhine with a mixture of jealousy and contempt.

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All of which brings me to Eastern Europe; the key to relations between East and West. If the nations of Eastern Europe are 'set free' - that is, allowed to develop pluralistic political systems appropriate to their needs, and to communicate freely with their Western neighbours - we are unlikely to worry too much about internal developments within the Soviet Union. But so long as a Soviet hegemony remains in this region, we are unlikely to be very impressed by any measures of liberalisation that may occur in the Soviet system itself. It seems quite clear that a new chapter is indeed opening for Eastern Europe. Both Poland and Hungary are seeing political changes - changes which it would not be rash to term 'irreversible' - far more fundamental than those which provoked Soviet intervention in the 1950s; and if the regime in Czechoslovakia remains immobile it is through no fault of M. Gorbachev. Moscow seems for the moment content to allow its satellites to solve their own problems in their own way, and to accept that the solution to those problems can only lie in open contact with the West - that only capitalism can succeed where socialism has so evidently failed. The question is, of course, how far can this go?

The term 'Finlandisation' rises unbidden to the lips; a destiny which American prophets of doom once foresaw for Western Europe but which now seems much more appropriate for Eastern. Such a situation would permit the nations of Eastern Europe to regulate their internal economic and political destinies so long as they allowed the Soviet Union, whether explicitly or implicitly to set the parameters of their defence and foreign policies. Henry Kissinger has apparently floated the idea of an explicit agreement between the super powers to that effect; forgetting, I am afraid, how resistant the world is to the best-laid plans jointly made by Moscow and Washington. If such a situation were to develop it could only happen as a natural process, not by Yalta-type agreements. In any case those who refer to Yalta tend to forget that that conference did not create a new order; it did no more than recognise a fait very much accompli.

But the Finnish situation is not truly comparable. Finland enjoys its autonomy partly, if not entirely, as a result of the 'Nordic balance'. To its West there lies neutral Sweden; beyond that, a Norway which plays host to no nuclear weapons. There is thus no danger of Finland becoming a western military springboard. It remains to be seen whether even a liberalised Soviet Union could tolerate any lesser degree of security on her borders further to the south, and withdraw her forces without comparable concessions on our side; and it remains to be seen, also, what concessions the Allies are prepared to make to encourage such a movement.

My own feeling is that neither side would be wise to press for troop withdrawals. The presence of armed forces does not in itself prevent a gradual osmosis between East and West Europe: indeed it provides the kind of security - 'reassurance' both East and West - that makes such osmosis possible. German ostpolitik would be barely thinkable if the Federal Republic were not firmly anchored by the Western alliance. Our object should be not directly any reciprocal withdrawal of forces - because, let there be no illusion, any such withdrawal would have to be reciprocal - but the creation of a relationship which would gradually make the presence of such forces anachronistic and unnecessary. And that kind of relationship, as the experience of the past seventy years has made quite clear, is not best fostered by negotiations for arms reductions and arms control.

As relations improve and reciprocal threat-perceptions diminish, both sides will anyhow find it increasingly difficult, for domestic and economic reasons, to maintain armed forces at their existing levels. At present, arms control negotiations are very largely used as an excuse for retaining weapons, for which we have no possible military need, as 'bargaining chips'. If it were not for the arms-control process we could dispose of the balance of our redundant nuclear warheads in Europe, which still run into thousands, without waiting for 'modernization' of the Lance missiles. Arms control negotiations merely force governments to ransack the first-class brains of their senior civil servants to think of reasons why they should retain weapons in their arsenals, rather than encourage them in their elimination.

I am deeply sceptical of any serious outcome from the new round of talks in Geneva and Vienna. What we need are fewer Genevas and more Locarnos.

The military framework of East-West relations may, therefore, not change very much before the end of the century. But it will become increasingly inappropriate to the political structure of a continent in which the states of Eastern Eruope are in ever closer contact with those of the European community, and Germanyreturns to her natural role as a link rather than a barrier between East and West. This political evolution is being shaped by events east of the Rhine, and neither British, American nor even French political leaders can do very much about it. They watch with consternation as the familiar pattern disintegrates, the traditional formulae no longer work; and they appear sadly unwilling, or at least incapable, of devising new ones.

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Within Western Europe itself, it cannot be said that 1989 marks the end of any particular chapter. But, as we all know, 1992 will make the beginning of a new one. The European Community will enter the twenty-first century as a dynamic economic force in the world, though it still seems uncertain whether Britain will be at the centre of it or remain lagging behind on the periphery. That dynamism, with all its power to attract or penetrate weaker economies, will ever more powerfully affect relations between East and West Europe, and West Europe and the Soviet Union. So far from the discredited geopolitical fantasies of Mackinder and his American disciples being proved valid, with the Heartland of the World Island pressing out to control the rimlands, we are seeing instead the communities of the Rimland increasingly penetrating and transforming the stagnant Heartland. Nor can the European Community be seen in isolation. It is, with the United States and Japan, one of the three foci of an economic system which circles the globe, increasingly integrated by the communications revolution, increasingly lavish in the opportunities it provides for its members, increasingly exploitative of global resources: a thriving transnational community envied and, alas, sometimes detested by the less fortunate peoples of the world whose destinies it is gradually transforming for better or for worse.

It is this global economic community, a community created as much by its rivalries as by its co-operation, that links the United States both to Western Europe and to Japan; positive links far deeper than the negative ones of common fear which initially brought them together.

The association of Europe and the United States depends on cultural and economic forces far more powerful than the military arrangements of the Western Alliance. It is a 'linkage' that does not depend on the deployment of any particular weapons-system. It is because of the very closeness of that association that we Europeans should not be distressed if the United States were to decide sooner or later to reduce the scale of a military commitment determined, under very different circumstances, nearly half a century ago. In the light of U.S. budgetary difficulties we would be wise to regard any such reductions as inevitable - very much as economic difficulties are making Soviet arms reductions inevitable - and welcome the change in East-West relations which has made them politically possible; rather than agonise over the nuances of the military balance that remains. Soviet intentions, it is true, can change faster than capabilities, but a decision to take the huge risks of launching an attack on Western Europe (the benefits of which would hardly be self-evident) would require a transformation of the entire Soviet outlook such as is unlikely to occur overnight.

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As for the United States, it would certainly be welcome if the advent of the Bush regime marked the end of one very unhappy chapter: that alternation of hubris and neurosis which has characterised American policy since the Eisenhower years: the post-Sputnik panic; the misplaced heroics of the Kennedy era; the miserable humiliation of Vietnam (and the two were not unconnected); the confusion and uncertainties of Carter; ? the raucous patriotism of Reagan: alternations as distressing to America's friends as they have been an embarrassment to the multitude of quiet, able men and women in Washington who try to mould a coherent and consistent policy out of it all. Without necessarily subscribing to theories of 'imperial overstretch' the United States has now discovered the limitations on the exercise of power, whether military or economic, in a multipolar and, more important, a multi-cultural world. Under Carter they discovered the limited relevance to the real world of ideological liberalism; under Reagan of ideological conservatism. There is hope that President Bush will settle quietly in the centre and display that rarest of qualities in politicians; the courage to be moderate; to resist the call for dynamic new policies and to refrain from trying to exercise 'leadership' of a kind which is likely to leave him with few followers. He needs instead to show, as M. Gorbachev on an even larger canvas needs to show, the capacity to manage change, as one actor among several in a very complicated world.

Bush may indeed be under constraints of a different kind from his predecessors - constraints of a kind hardly seen since the 1930s. We may be witnessing the end of half a century in which the primary concern of the White House has been the conduct of military and foreign policy: the exercise of power on the world scene. In the same way as domestic catastrophes have forced the Soviet leadership to turn their eyes inward and abandon, however temporarily, their ambitions to shine as a superpower, so developments within the United States are demanding the urgent attention of its rulers, and present a threat far more immediate than any posed from abroad. The syndrome of drugs, violence and inner-city decay, seen at its appalling worst in New York, seems gradually to be blighting the whole of American society. Continuing prosperity has not prevented the emergence of an alienated and embittered under-class, under-educated and unemployable, which takes notice of the rest of American society only to prey upon it. The drug traffic, and the concomitant AIDS epidemic, is the result of this situation and thrives upon it; and one chapter which is, one hopes, finally closed for the United States is that in which officials of the Administration connived at the drug-trafficking of such figures as Noriega in the interests of the fight against Communism. The success with which the United States tackles its social problems - problems which, alas, we also share - is of at least as much importance to world stability as is the credibility of her nuclear deterrent.

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No chapter in history, as I have said, every closes completely: the problems of every era persist, if with diminishing intensity, into the next. The German problem which dominated the first half of the century has not entirely disappeared; nor has the stubborn Anglo-French rivalry which has grumbled on as a kind of cold war for so many centuries. The world as we know it consists of a palimpsest of unsolved problems, and that of the power and ambitions of the Soviet Union will continue to trouble us for many years yet, as that of the power and ambition of revolutionary France continued to trouble Europe for half a century after Waterloo. But it is likely to be eclipsed, in the last decade of this century and for many in the next, by the problems we have created for ourselves by the very success of our thriving economies: problems within our own societies; problems on the troubled interface between the developed and developing worlds, whether in the Middle East or on the Rio Grande, which can feed so dangerously the divisions within our own multi-cultural communities; and above all the problems increasingly arising as we press ever more greedily on the limited resources of our planet.

The prospect before us is not very comforting, but it does at least set in their proper perspective attitudes and policies born out of our responses to events that happened half a century ago. It may be that the Time is not yet Ripe to adjust those policies (a phrase as popular with the later Thatcher administrations as There is No Alternative was with earlier ones). Certainly that was the predictable message coming out of the Ministry of Defence last week. But one would like some encouragement to believe that serious thought is being given to what should be done when the time _is_ ripe. And it is not inconceivable that it might one day soon be a considerable electoral asset to a political party prepared to do so.

Oxford
May 1989

Michael Howard