ASSESSING CHANGE IN THE USSR AND EASTERN EUROPE

by Everett Carll Ladd

Students of American public opinion are often struck—some simply amazed, others delighted—by the range and subtlety of the distinctions the general public makes on complex events and policies. The public may be short on factual information—but it certainly is not uninformed. Polling on the public's views on the sweeping changes that occurred throughout 1989 in the communist systems of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe once again bears this out.

An uninformed populace might be expected to oscillate wildly between two polar views—both simplistic—of the Soviet system and how the US should respond to it: that it's bad and merits only our unremitting hostility; and (when, as now, liberalization takes place) that the problem is being solved and the US should hasten to set down the heavy burden it has borne throughout the Cold War. Polls taken over the past year make clear that these simple extremes are being avoided.

Momentous, satisfying change. One evident component of Americans' response has been a recognition that the changes in the USSR and Eastern Europe are at once unprecedented and of enormous importance, and that they should be welcomed by the United States. For example, 80% of those polled last month by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman described the recent developments as "very significant," and by a 61 to 19% margin they believed that the reforms in Eastern Europe will be permanent.

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As a principal architect of this transformation, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev gets pretty high marks from the US public. Indeed, his approval/disapproval ratio would be the envy of most American politicians. Over the last five years the proportion of the public thinking Gorbachev different from—in the sense of better than—previous Soviet leaders has increased greatly—from 47% in 1985, according to surveys taken by CBS News and the *New York Times*, to 79% this year. Gorbachev didn't make the Gallup poll's list of "most admired men" until December 1987, when he came in eighth, tied with Lee Iacocca, just behind Oliver North and just ahead of Jimmy Carter. By December 1988 he had climbed into second place—getting more "most admired" mentions from the US public than anyone save Ronald Reagan. (The December 1989 rankings had not been released when this was written.)

Hailing recent events and praising Gorbachev's leadership, Americans believe that the time is right to advance formal agreements with the USSR. Even in the bleakest days of the Cold War, the public favored US-Soviet negotiations to find common ground. In the present climate, that longstanding inclination has been enlarged. In November, for example, shortly before the Malta "summit," 72% of those polled by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman opined that "this is a good time for President Bush to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union on a significant reduction in nuclear weapons"; just 18% thought not.

Keeping change in perspective. Several surveys taken over the past year have shown 60 to 70% of Americans saying they have a favorable opinion of Mikhail Gorbachev. The proportion in fact isn't nearly that high—as CBS News and the *New York Times* have demonstrated when they have asked the question the right way: "Is your opinion of Mikhail Gorbachev. . . favorable, not favorable, undecided, or haven't you heard enough about [him] yet to have an opinion?" In the late November poll, 47% were favorable, 7% unfavorable—a good ratio indeed—but 22% were undecided and 24% still hadn't heard enough about the Soviet leader. That 46%, when given a chance, indicated they were still uncertain, even on so well-known a personage, attests to a high degree of public caution.

Other questions pick up this "go slow" mood more forcefully. In 1985 and again this year, for example, the Roper Organization asked a national sample whether they considered a number of countries allies of the US, friends though not allies, more or less neutral, merely unfriendly, or enemies. In mid-decade, just 3% put the USSR in one of the first two categories; by mid-1989, the proportion stood at 16% (most of them calling the Soviet Union an unallied friend of this country). The increase is substantial. Still, after much posi-

tive news on Soviet changes, only a very distinct minority of Americans see the USSR a friend. The same proportion exactly called China a friend—in this poll taken just one month after the Chinese government brutally suppressed its own students in Tiananmen Square.

Keep your powder dry. "Prudent caution" is Americans' predominant response. The public is pleased with the developments taking place in the communist world, but it still is not prepared to endorse a shift in basic US policy toward the Soviet Union—in large part because it doesn't believe the Soviet system has yet changed fundamentally. "In light of recent changes," Yankelovich Clancy Shulman asked in its November poll, "do you think the United States can now trust the Soviets more, or should the United States wait longer to see if these changes stay in place?" Eighty percent thought we should wait and see.

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Some US politicians may be considering ways to spend an anticipated "peace dividend," but the general public thinks this premature. A clear majority would keep defense spending at least at its present levels. The November Yankelovich survey found only 23% of the mind that the US should pull all or most of its troops from Europe, while 28% would withdraw a few troops and the largest group, 42%, would keep forces at their present strength. All recent surveys show large majorities—67% in the November CBS News/*New York Times* poll—believing that the Bush administration has *not* been too slow in responding to changes in Eastern Europe.

One question effectively sums up the public mood at the end of the Eighties—a mood which is hopeful but still skeptical and cautious. "Do you think that the 'Cold War' between democratic nations and communist nations has ended or not?," the November Yankelovich Clancy Shulman survey asked. Only 18% said it was over, 73% that it was not.

Views of Communism. Throughout the last 4 decades, most Americans have had a considered view of communism—that it is a bad system. They haven't changed their minds. When the Soviets shot down the Korean Airlines plane early in this decade, and "Evil Empire" talk was in the air, the proportion condemning communism as "the worst kind of government" was somewhat higher than it is now, according to surveys taken by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center. But throughout the post-war years the overwhelming majority of the US public have judged communism harshly. The fact that the system is now being publicly condemned, in whole or in part, within Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself, is hardly likely to move Americans from the negative assessment they have so long entertained.

BUSH v. QUAYLE

What is your impression of (George Bush/Vice President Dan Quayle)? As of today, is it very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable—or haven't you heard enough about him yet to say?

	Bush April 1981	Quayle April 1989
Very favorable	20%	6%
Somewhat favorable	40	26
Somewhat unfavorable	5	16
Very unfavorable	2	15
Haven't heard enough	33	37

NOTE: Surveys by the *Los Angeles Times*.