

## 4.1.2 GORBACHEV SPEECH

### “THE RIVER OF TIME AND THE IMPERATIVE OF ACTION”

#### 1992 Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev

On May 6, 1992 Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the former Soviet Union (1988-91) spoke at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. The following are excerpts from his “The River of Time and the Imperative of Action” speech:

“Here we stand, before a sculpture in which the sculptor’s imagination and fantasy, with remarkable expressiveness and laconism, convey the drama of the “Cold War,” the irrepressible human striving to penetrate the barriers of alienation and confrontation. It is symbolic that this artist was the granddaughter of Winston Churchill and that this sculpture should be in Fulton.

More than 46 years ago Winston Churchill spoke in Fulton and in my country this speech was interpreted as the formal declaration of the “Cold War.” This was indeed the first time the words, “Iron Curtain,” were pronounced, and the whole Western world was challenged to close ranks against the threat of tyranny in the form of the Soviet Union and Communist expansion. Everything else in this speech, including Churchill’s analysis of the postwar situation in the world, his thoughts about the possibility of preventing a third world war, the prospects for progress, and methods of reconstructing the postwar world, remained unknown to the Soviet people.

Today, in paying tribute to this eminent statesman, we can evaluate more quietly and objectively both the merits of his speech and the limitations of the analysis which it included, his ideas and predictions, and his strategic principles.

Since that time the world in which we live has undergone tremendous changes. Even so, however paradoxical it may sound, there is a certain similarity between the situation then and today. Then, the prewar structure of international relations had virtually collapsed; a new pattern of forces had emerged along with a new set of interests and claims. [...]

So I would like to commence my remarks by noting that the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. missed that chance -- the chance to establish their relationship on a new basis of principle and thereby to initiate a world order different from that which existed before the war. I think it is clear that I am not suggesting that they should have established a sort of condominium over the rest of the world. The opportunity was on a different plane altogether.

If the United States and the Soviet Union had been capable of understanding their responsibility and sensibly correlating their national interests and strivings with the rights and interests of other sta-

tes and peoples, the planet today would be a much more suitable and favorable place for human life I have more than once criticized the foreign policy of the Stalinist leadership in those years. Not only was it incapable of reevaluating the historical logic of the interwar period, taking into account the experience and results of the war, and following a course which corresponded to the changed reality, it committed a major error in equating the victory of democracy over fascism with the victory of socialism and aiming to spread socialism throughout the world.

But the West, and the United States in particular, also committed an error. Its conclusion about the probability of open Soviet military aggression was unrealistic and dangerous. This could never have happened, not only because Stalin, as in 1939-1941, was afraid of war, did not want war, and never would have engaged in a major war. But primarily because the country was exhausted and destroyed; it had lost tens of millions of people, and the public hated war. Having won a victory, the army and the soldiers were dying to get home and get back to a normal life. [...]

So I would be so bold as to affirm that the governing circles of the victorious powers lacked an adequate strategic vision of the possibilities for world development as they emerged after the war -- and, consequently, a true understanding of their own countries’ national interests. Hiding behind slogans of “striving for peace” and defense of their people’s interests on both sides, decisions were taken which split asunder the world which had just succeeded in overcoming fascism because it was united.

And on both sides this was justified ideologically. The conflict was presented as the inevitable opposition between good and evil -- all the evil, of course, being attributed to the opponent. This continued for decades until it became evident that we were approaching the abyss. I am stating this because the world community has paid dearly for the errors committed at this turning-point in world history.

In the major centers of world politics the choice, it would seem, has today been made in favor of peace, cooperation, interaction, and common security. And in pushing forward to a new civilization we should under no circumstances again make the intellectual, and consequently political, error of interpreting victory in the “Cold War” narrowly as a victory for oneself, one’s own way of life, for one’s own values and merits. This was a victory over a scheme for the development of humanity which was becoming slowly congealed and leading us to destruction. It was a shattering of the vicious circle

into which we had driven ourselves. This was altogether a victory for common sense, reason, democracy, and common human values.

Churchill urged us to think “superstrategically,” meaning by this the capacity to rise above the petty problems and particularities of current realities, focusing on the major trends and being guided by them.

What are the characteristics of the world situation today? In thinking over the processes which we ourselves have witnessed, we are forced to conclude that humanity is at a major turning-point. Not only the peoples of the former USSR, but the whole world is living through this watershed situation. This is not just some ordinary stage of development, like many others in world history. This is a turning-point on a historic and worldwide scale and signifies the incipient substitution of one paradigm of civilization by another. [...]

First and foremost, it signifies the possibility of creating a global international security system, thus preventing large-scale military conflicts like the world wars of the 20th century and facilitating a radical reduction in levels of armaments and reducing the burden of military expenditures. This signifies that the attention, and the resources, of the world community can be focused on solving problems in non-military areas: population, environment, food production, energy sources, and the like. This means new opportunities for economic progress, ensuring normal conditions of life for the Earth's growing population and improved living conditions. [...]

The ending of the global confrontation of nuclear superpowers, and of the ideological opposition between the two world systems, has rendered even more visible today's major contradiction – between the rich and poor countries, between “North” and “South”, even though these terms today are merely conventional. [...]

Turning now to the world economy, the increasingly close links between national economies and markets is accompanied by intensified international competition, leading to de facto trade wars and a threatened revival of protectionism. One of the worst of the new dangers is ecological. When Winston Churchill gave his speech here, most people on this planet did not even suspect a mortal threat from that direction. [...] If they do not understand the transitional character of the present international system, with all its inherent contradictions and conflicts, politicians again risk committing errors which would have the most baneful consequences for all. The prospect of catastrophic climatic changes, more frequent droughts, floods, hunger, epidemics, national-ethnic conflicts, and other similar catastrophes compels governments to adopt a world perspective and seek generally applicable solutions. The only alternative would be an intensification of conflicts throughout the world, instability of political systems, civil wars, i.e., ultimately, a threat to world peace. [...]

No, the idea that certain states or groups of states could monopolize the international arena is no longer valid. What is emerging is a more

complex global structure of international relations. An awareness of the need for some kind of global government is gaining ground, one in which all members of the world community would take part. Events should not be allowed to develop spontaneously. There must be an adequate response to global changes and challenges. If we are to eliminate force and prevent conflicts from developing into a worldwide conflagration, we must seek means of collective action by the world community.

There are chances for peace. This is confirmed by what has happened to the political views of the leaders of the Great Powers in the past few years. What is needed are principles and mechanisms for converting possibility into reality. The principles are generally known. I spoke of them in New York at the United Nations General Assembly in the end of 1988.

What has to be done is to create the necessary mechanisms? In my position it is not very appropriate to name them. It is important that they should be authorized by the world community to deal with problems. Without that there is no point in talking about a new era or a new civilization. I will limit myself to designating the lines of activity and the competence of such mechanisms. [...]

Here the decisive role may and must be played by the United Nations. Of course, it must be restructured, together with its component bodies, in order to be capable of confronting the new tasks. These ideas have long been under discussion, and many proposals have been put forward. I myself have no plan of my own for reorganizing the United Nations. I will just address the basic parameters of the changes which are ready for solution.

The United Nations, which emerged from the results and the lessons of the Second World War, is still marked by the period of its creation. This is true both with respect to the makeup of its subsidiary bodies and auxiliary institutions and with respect to its functioning. Nothing, for instance, other than the division into victors and vanquished, explains why such countries as Germany and Japan do not figure among the permanent members of the Security Council. [...]

Of course, the UN's contemporary role, and, first and foremost, an expanded and strengthened Security Council, will require substantial funding. The method adopted for financing at the founding of the United Nations revealed its weaknesses just as soon as, some years later, it became more active and came closer to actually carrying out the tasks assigned by its founders. This method must be supplemented by some mechanism tying the UN to the world economy.

My thoughts may, at first glance, appear somewhat unrealistic. But we will count on the fact that business is becoming more humane, that a powerful process of technical and political internationalization is taking place, and that business is achieving an increasingly organic relationship with contemporary world politics into which the seeds of the “new thinking” have been cast. Today democracy must prove that it can exist not only as the antithesis of totalitarianism

nism. This means that it must move from the national arena to the international.

On today's agenda is not just a union of democratic states, but also a democratically organized world community. Thus, we live today in a watershed era. One epoch has ended, and another is commencing. No one yet knows what it will be like. Having long been orthodox Marxists, we were sure we knew. But life once again has refuted those who claimed to be know-it-alls and messiahs. [...] In concluding I would like to return to my starting-point. From this tribune Churchill appealed to the United Nations to rescue peace and progress, but he appealed primarily to Anglo-Saxon unity as the nucleus to which others could adhere. In the achievement of this goal the decisive role, in his view, was to be played by force, above all, by armed force. He even entitled his speech "The Sinews of Peace." The goal today has not changed: peace and progress for all. But now we have the capacity to approach it without paying the heavy price we have been paying these past 50 years or so, without having to resort to means which put the very goal itself in doubt, which even constitute a threat to civilization. And while continuing to recognize the outstanding role of the United States of America, and today of other rich and highly developed countries, we must not limit our appeal to the elect, but call upon the whole world community.

In a qualitatively new and different world situation the overwhelming majority of the United Nations will, I hope, be capable of organizing themselves and acting in concert on the principles of democracy, equality of rights, balance of interests, common sense, freedom of choice, and willingness to cooperate. Made wise by bitter experience, they will, I think, be capable of dispensing, when necessary, with egoistic considerations in order to arrive at the exalted goal which is man's destiny on earth" (Gorbachev, 1992).

**Source:**

Gorbachev, M. (6 May 1992). *The River of Time and the Imperative*. (Speech presented at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri ) Retrieved from *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, (1992, July/ August), pp. 22-27.

## THE NEW YORK TIMES

*At Site of 'Iron Curtain' Speech***GORBACHEV BURIES THE COLD WAR***By Francis X. Clines**May 07, 1992*

History came full cycle today as Mikhail S. Gorbachev added a post-script of global reconciliation to the "Iron Curtain" speech by Winston Churchill here 46 years ago, but pointedly contended that the United States was the "initiator" of the nuclear arms race.

Speaking at Westminster College, the scene of Churchill's warning in 1946 about Soviet imperialism, the former Soviet leader conceded that the Kremlin made a "major error" in assuming that the defeat of fascism in World War II would produce an inevitable triumph of Communism.

But he argued that the United States and other Western nations erred grievously in failing to realize that Stalin and the Soviet people were too exhausted from the war to indulge in military aggression against the West.

"By including the 'nuclear component' in world politics, and on this basis unleashing a monstrous arms race -- and here the initiator was the United States, the West -- 'defense sufficiency was exceeded,' as the lawyers say," Mr. Gorbachev declared. "This was a fateful error."

Speaking as the last President of the now-defunct Soviet Union and the Kremlin chief who led the world back from nuclear confrontation, Mr. Gorbachev spent much of his speech looking ahead to a better world strengthened through his prescriptions for a stronger United Nations.

But he also presented a blunt critique of some cherished American underpinnings of the cold war and warned against "the intellectual, and consequently political error, of interpreting victory in the cold war narrowly as a victory for oneself." Rather than a lopsided victory, Mr. Gorbachev described the end of the cold war as "a shattering of the vicious circle into which we had driven ourselves." "This was altogether a victory for common sense, reason, democracy, and common human values," he said.

Examining the roots of the cold war, Mr. Gorbachev cited a critical Soviet error in Stalin's inability to grasp postwar politics. But he contended that "the West, and the United States in particular, also committed an error." "Its conclusion about the probability of open Soviet military aggression was unrealistic and dangerous," he said, differing with the basis of the West's collective defensive strategy of the postwar decades.

"This could never have happened, not only because Stalin, as in 1939-41, was afraid of war, did not want war, and never would have

engaged in a major war," he contended. "but primarily because the country was exhausted and destroyed." Visiting, like Churchill, as a politician rebuffed at home yet outspoken in retirement -- the British leader was ousted in the 1945 election by Clement Attlee and the Labor Party -- Mr. Gorbachev spoke to an outdoor gathering and offered a range of proposals for strengthening the United Nations. These included the enlargement of the Security Council and the application of stronger sanctions and military force against wayward members.

But the audience, watching him on a sunny day in a simple American heartland setting, was clearly more interested in his pronouncements on the end of the cold war. In this, Mr. Gorbachev was reflective and recanted a bit on his own views.

"Having long been orthodox Marxists, we were sure we knew," he said. "But life once again refuted those who claimed to be know-it-alls and messiahs." A 'Watershed' Moment.

Mr. Gorbachev's speech was titled "The River of Time and the Imperative of Action," an allusion to his sense that a "watershed" moment had arrived, comparable in its way to the 1946 moment and its need for concerted action. He was repeatedly applauded, particularly in hailing the world's retreat from the abyss, urging global efforts to protect the environment and warning against triumphalist claims of cold war victory.

The Missouri countryside glistened, with a cluster of cold war nuclear-missile silos hundreds of miles to the west all but forgotten. Mr. Gorbachev obviously enjoyed the day, offering Churchill's V-for-victory signal to pleading photographers and giving thanks for a lunch of baked ham and potato salad provided by the administrators of the 140-year-old liberal arts college of 750 undergraduates.

It was the college, which gained international visibility after the famous 1946 speech, that invited him to speak today. Mr. Gorbachev, as in earlier addresses, warned against the excesses of nationalism reawakened at the end of the cold war, as well as against a "monocentric" view of post-cold-war politics. In that view, one dominant nation, the United States, might prevail over a "multipolar" political world.

The former Soviet leader was cheered as he arrived in the sunshine at the speaking platform set before a sculpture by Edwina Sandys, Churchill's granddaughter, celebrating the fall of the Berlin wall.

He came as a pensioned politician looking for a foothold in the West on a fund-raising tour for his new Gorbachev Foundation. He spoke gratis and beamed and touched his chest to demonstrate his gratitude, as a crowd estimated at 10,000 applauded the college's award to him of an honorary doctorate of laws. [...]

The mood in Fulton was serene, in severe contrast to the ominous one conjured up here on March 5, 1946 by Churchill.

"A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory," the British wartime leader said. "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." Today, Mr. Gorbachev stood in the Missouri sunshine to proclaim an end to Churchill's alarm, but also to press for a greatly strengthened United Nations to deal with the complicated post-Soviet world.

In particular, he called for creation of a "special body" to use economic and military means to prevent regional conflicts and for a greatly enlarged Security Council, with nations like India, Japan, Poland, Mexico, Germany, Brazil, Canada, Indonesia and Egypt as members, even if without veto power.

Churchill had declared, "Nobody knows what Soviet Russia and its Communist international organization intends to do in the immediate future, or what are the limits, if any, to their expansive and proselytizing tendencies." Today, Mr. Gorbachev stood at the same lectern as Churchill to symbolize the Soviet Union's peaceful demise and to look no less uncertainly into the future, hoping this time that nations "made wise by bitter experience" might cast aside "egoistic considerations in order to arrive at the exalted goal that is man's destiny on earth." *From the New York Times, May 7, 1992 © 1992 The New York Times. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of this Content without express written permission is prohibited.*

**Source:**

Clines, F. X. (1992, May 7). At Site of 'Iron Curtain' Speech, Gorbachev Buries the Cold War. *The New York Times*.

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