

Senator Bill Bradley's Address to the Third General Chautauqua Conference on U.S.-Soviet Relations

A Speech by Bill Bradley - August 27, 1987

Today, in Chautauqua, this uniquely American community, I'd like to share with the Soviet delegates and all of you my sense of what Americans want from our relationship with the Soviet Union and what I think may be possible.

Like you, I have watched what is happening in the Soviet Union. Like you, I have many questions on the future of U.S.-Soviet relations. I have doubts and concerns, but above all, I have hope. Today, I want to talk about my hopes.

This week Americans and Soviets meet at a threshold of history: at one of those moments when a door long closed may be opening to show us the path to new places, new vistas of hope, and progress for the human race. Dostoyevsky told us that of creation, only man has no formula to tell him how to act, or even what to be. So how we walk through that door – or whether we let it close before us – is our choice, the human choice. And it's not arrogance but reality which tells us that of all those who will determine the course of coming events, our two nations will play the greatest roles: seeming to fulfill de Tocqueville's prophecy that American and Russia were "by some secret design of Providence [each] one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world."

Those in both our countries who see the seeds of a new cold war inherent in our relationship believe the world is too small for two superpowers. I reject the destiny that dooms us to be perpetual enemies. We can create a different future.

Maintaining peace is fundamental. Ever since our scientists solved the nuclear puzzle, Soviet and American arsenals have hung heavy over the future of the world. This knowledge has given our relationship its single categorical imperative – we must never meet in war.

Yet this strong and simple conviction doesn't answer all questions. Avoiding war is not securing peace. Struggle, tension, and conflict between our nations persist. But General Secretary Gorbachev has urged us "not to evade urgent problems". So let's candidly examine what we have in common as well as what divides us – let's begin this process as the first step toward lasting peace.

One thing we share is our love of the land. For both Soviets and American, the land is the wellspring of our greatness. It has steeled our people. Its beauty inspires our songs. Its cruelty is a source of our sorrows.

Early Americans were energized by the vastness of their territory and emboldened to start anew on the frontier. They extended America's boundaries, tamed her wilderness, and cultivated her abundance. They revered the land as the source of their strength and the root of the values. They derived from their experience of the land a sense of independence, tempered by a respect for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These inalienable rights remains at the core of the American character, defining our aspirations for democracy.

Unlike our brief American experience, Russian history goes back a thousand years. A history of triumph and tragedy. Often on an heroic scale. And it is a history always against the huge canvas that is the Russian and Soviet land: a majestic, silent procession of forests and lakes; the vast sweep of the steppes; the strong

currents of mighty rivers; the still somber sands of the arid zones; and the great Siberian wilderness of taiga and tundra.

Our peoples have been challenged and restrained by the land. We have trusted its generosity; and too often taken its replenishment for granted. Now from Chernobyl to Love Canal we see its vulnerability to abuse and we recognize that its potential for giving us rebirth may be slipping away.

Two years ago, I visited the deepest lake in the world, Lake Baikal, in Siberia. I drove there in the afternoon after an exhausting flight from Moscow. When I arrived, the lake was obscured by a dense mist. I could see nothing. My disappointment was as heavy as the fog. Early next evening, after a long visit with your great writer, Valentin Rasputin, I went back. The sky was clear and luminous. The lake stretched before us...deep, still, pure. In Nature's mysterious quietness, I could hear the heartbeat of time. I could sense the life-giving force that flows through all people, Soviet and American, who know the land. I'll never forget it.

But, land is not all that we have in common. We share cultural ties: poetry and music, basketball and hockey, and most of all a love for literature – from Chekhov to Bellow. Back in 1966, as a student traveler, I can remember leaving the Soviet Union by car into Hungary and being detained four hours until the Soviet border guard had his fill of perusing my copy of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

We also share historical ties: we both endured the traumatic experience of revolution and the satisfaction of nation building. And, unusual among world powers, we have never declared war on each other. To the contrary, we were even allies in a war which we won, in large part, because of the heroic struggle of the Soviet people against the invasion of Hitler's armies.

And, finally, we share a yearning for freedom.

Above all else, Americans cherish liberty. We fought a war to claim it from a colonial power. We value not just the freedom of the nation, but the liberty of each individual man and woman. And in America, as de Tocqueville said, "The spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty are in fundamental agreement". The idea of banning any kind of religious worship is alien to us. For Americans, freedom is the essence of man. It cannot be bargained away or yielded for any price.

More than this, we have always believed that individual freedom is a universal aspiration. We borrowed our doctrines from England and Greece and ancient Israel; we were helped in our Revolution by Poles and Germans and French. We have often tried to help others find freedom in their turn.

These sentiments cannot be strange to the people of the Soviet Union. How many times, at the limits of human endurance, did the Russian people themselves, peasants and poets, Cossacks and party members, somehow rise and save their country from the invader? How many times did a Pugachev with his 80 men rise against serfdom or a Pestel, with a few hundred, challenge all the might and cruelty of the czar? Or, in our day, has not the most brilliant example of the inextinguishable thirst for human liberty come from the innermost heart of the Soviet Union – come in the Akhmatovas and Pasternaks, and all those nameless ones who have in their matchless courage braved the winds of Kolyma, circulating handwritten manuscripts in defiance of the censor just as their ancestors evaded the censorship of Czar Nicholas The Flogger.

Yet despite these bonds – of land, wartime alliance, culture and common yearning for freedom – our countries remain far apart. Our institutions and standards of conduct differ profoundly.

For example, Americans are mystified by Soviet denial of many basic freedoms of expression. We don't

understand why Rostropovich couldn't conduct an orchestra or play his cello in his motherland. Why pianist Vladimir Feltsman has to emigrate to perform. Why Baryshnikov felt he had to leave in order for his artistry to grow. Why exile was the price the writer Vassily Kasyanov paid to publish his novels. We are grateful to have these artists among us. But why is the Soviet Union so inhospitable to such talent?

America, as perhaps the world's most open society, is also bewildered and threatened by Soviet preoccupation with secrets. There is no profit for American leaders in dwelling excessively on the sins of the Soviet past, but even General Secretary Gorbachev has said the Soviet people must "know everything and consciously make judgments about everything". Put simply, the Soviet Union itself must come to terms with its history. If the Soviet Union wishes to be trusted by others, it must first show that it believes its own people can be trusted with the truth. More than this, Americans know that we could never deal with our racial problems without squarely acknowledging that slavery was our greatest crime. So the Soviet people will not be free until, as Andrei Sakharov said 20 years ago, the whole nation can examine the historical records and understand for themselves why terrible abuses of power have occurred.

Finally, we Americans are also deeply suspicious of a nation that keeps families divided, that denies loved ones the right even to visit. This may seem minor compared to regional conflicts and nuclear weapons. But to many Americans, permitting Soviet-Western families to unite is a basic requirement for membership in the international community.

Secrecy, repression, and insensitivity do not produce greater understanding between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

So how do we improve relations in the face of all the things that divide us?

First we have to see each other clearly.

American views of the Soviet Union swing between wishful thinking and hostile pessimism. We tend to think that the tensions between us result only from superficial misperceptions. Or, we believe that the Soviet state is our implacable adversary – the incarnation of evil.

These caricatures lead to errors in judgment. The one lulls us into a false sense of security which, after events such as Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan, degenerates into an angry sense of betrayal. The other obscures the significant opportunities that appear from time to time to settle grievances, reduce tensions, and advance mutual interests.

Soviet misperceptions of the United State are at least as great and as dangerous. Soviets discredit our concern for human rights and individual liberties; and see our foreign policy as the captive of rapacious capitalists; they attribute our defense policies to the "military-industrial-complex"; they underestimate the extent to which speech is truly free in a democratic society; and they ignore throughout our history the pride with which we have enfranchised ever larger segments of the American people.

These assessments are sterile, even unreal. If Soviet authorities indulge such illusions, they'll be vulnerable to surprise, disappointment, miscalculation, and bad policies.

And lurking behind our views of the Soviet Union and their views of the U.S. is the ultimate fear. The ultimate fear that the other side will start a war that leads to the use of nuclear weapons. If rationality prevails, it will never happen. To make rationality prevail is a major challenge.

To see each other more clearly also means to admit that neither of us is so devious or so naïve as the other

thinks. And we each have something to learn from the other as well as past mistakes to overcome. But improving understanding, accepting differences, and identifying mutual interests will not happen overnight. Conflict stems from clashes of interest. Minimizing confrontations and the danger of war means resolving conflicts of interest. We should proceed soberly but confidently one step at a time, promising only what we can deliver.

And there is no better time to begin than now. Before Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary, all but the most optimistic Americans would have given low odds to significantly improved relations. We saw a nation, then in the grip of a rigid ideology, sinking under the weight of economic stagnation and official corruption, while engaged in a massive military buildup. It was as if the Soviet generals had been given a blank check to indulge their ambitions and to indenture the economic future of the Soviet Union.

But in 1985, we began to feel the winds of change. General Secretary Gorbachev began to call for “revolutionary change” and “historic restructuring” of the Soviet system. Many Soviet participants at this conference are leading figures in that reform effort. In February of this year, the General Secretary said: “Our international policy is determined more than ever before by our domestic policy, by our interest in concentrating on creative work for the perfection of our country. For that very reason we need a more stable peace, predictability, and a constructive direction of international relations.”

Because of the General Secretary’s words and his actions, Americans have begun to question their old views. Were we wrong? Is Soviet change possible after all? Are such radical new possibilities practical? Should we rethink our policies toward the Soviet Union?

We know our influence over the internal affairs of the Soviet Union is limited. But at the same time, we are all citizens of the same human community, and we Americans believe that stable peace and increasing freedom go hand in hand. So we would share with the Soviet delegates in the candid spirit of Chautauqua the views and the questions on American minds as we watch what is happening in the Soviet Union.

First, some of General Secretary Gorbachev’s proposed reforms promise a more productive society. But they also threaten the Soviet status quo and political establishment. Americans recognize that the Soviets face a strategic choice: either cling to the established ways, with military power and internal repression as the major sources of authority. Or seek through a more open expression a broader mandate to govern and permit the system to evolve. Americans doubt that there is any middle way.

We Americans also wonder how fully the General Secretary and his supporters have foreseen the difficulty of transforming the Soviet state. We watch how far or fast they will proceed and if the Soviet people are with them.

We ask:

Will the Party and State bureaucracy, about which General Secretary Gorbachev has often complained, share more power with the Soviet people?

Will workers have a bigger voice and trade unions a stronger role, even as “restructuring” creates hardships for some workers who lose their jobs?

Will Soviet citizens make their own choices about what to read, see, hear, buy, and sell?

Will freedom to travel no longer be confined to the privileged few?

Will Soviet history, including the record of Stalin's purges, Ukrainian famine, and collectivization, be taught by people concerned with discovering the truth?

Will fewer resources go to a military buildup at home and abroad?

Will the General Secretary's call for "Democratization" bring greater autonomy to minority nationalities who have lived under Russian dominance for decades?

Will the Soviet leadership let the people of Eastern Europe restructure their own systems and their relations with the outside world?

Will Soviet youth be permitted to repudiate the war in Afghanistan with the same decisive vehemence that young Americans rejected Vietnam?

Will all this happen or will only some of it? Or will none of it? How broad a swathe does General Secretary Gorbachev want to cut through Soviet history?

Some Americans say real reform cannot happen in the Soviet Union; that reform will be stalled by the system's inertia or be subverted or even overthrown by the opponents of change. Other Americans worry that if reform succeeds, the Soviet Union will emerge as a stronger and more dangerous adversary, able to make new demands on the West.

"The reformer," said Machiavelli, "has enemies in all those who profit by the older order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order." Even so, most Americans are rooting for the reformers. Most Americans believe that a stable peace requires a more open Soviet society.

And now, as the door long closed may be opening, we Americans must be flexible enough to allow for our own rethinking in order to seize new opportunities for a lasting peace. We know the importance of dialogue and negotiations – to dispel the specter of nuclear catastrophe, to avoid the horror of any war, and to resolve conflicts of interest. If reform continues in the Soviet Union I believe we can cut U.S. and Soviet conventional forces in Central Europe and indeed nuclear weapons, by more than anyone has been prepared even to talk about up to now. It is within our power to create a different future, for as Solzhenitsyn said, "history is us....".

Meetings like this one in Chautauqua, that bring together politics, religion, and art, are important. We need powerful voices that express direct human feelings in ways that politicians hear. We need an American/Soviet competition that celebrates and preserves humanity, not endangers it; one that enables us to solve our nations' domestic problems instead of threatening the world with destruction. We need prophets and dreamers, as well as generals and bureaucrats. In the words of Valentin Rasputin..., we need "to establish a different plan – one measured not just in cubic meters, but in souls".