

Twenty Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall, How We Misremember the Cold War

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November 12, 2009

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Twenty years ago this week, the Berlin Wall was taken down ending the division of that city and, symbolically, Germany and all of Europe. Within two years of that event, the Soviet Union itself dissolved and the Cold War was over. These events were unimaginable even only a few years before they occurred. As late as the mid-1980s, it was assumed by most policy makers on both sides of the Cold War divide that the Cold War was going to go on for a long time, if not forever. While better relationships between the two sides and a softening of the repressive Communist regimes were viewed as achievable, the end of the Cold War itself, was not.

The Cold War was the organizing principle of American foreign policy, and had a strong influence on domestic policy as well, for almost half a century. Today, less than two decades after its end, the Cold War is poorly remembered. The equivalence which some have suggested between the threat of Jihadist terror and that represented by the USSR, and the almost ubiquitous comparisons between Saddam Hussein and Stalin from those trying to drum up support for the Iraq war are just some examples of this. These comparisons are not so much wildly inaccurate, Jihadist terror represents a real threat to the U.S., and Hussein was much worse than your garden variety dictator, but they betray an intellectual laziness and failure to understand the true nature, and, for quite a long time, power of the Soviet regime.

When the war between Russia and Georgia broke out in 2008, there was a lot of speculation in Washington, and elsewhere, about the possibility of a new Cold War. In some quarters of the American foreign policy elite this was met almost with a sense of glee because it was comfortable territory. A *New Yorker* cartoon from that fall captured, and implicitly criticized, this sentiment as it showed a heavily decorated general speaking to room full of government officials compared returning to a Cold War to putting on a “comfortable old shoe.”

The Cold War was many things including, a struggle for the future of the world, a half century flirtation with nuclear annihilation and power politics between superpowers, but it was not a “comfortable old shoe.” However, as the years go by and the U.S. continues to face new and previously unimaginable perils, there is a temptation to see the Cold War as a more comfortable and simple struggle and to view it through a rosy nostalgic tint.

That nostalgia is the byproduct of victory. From the vantage point of 2009, twenty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War looks very different than it did in decade preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall. The victory which in the mid-80s was unimaginable now seems to have been inevitable. History does that as back stories and narratives are created making it seem that the eventual outcome was the only possible one. Victory in the Cold War, however, was not, and was not viewed, as inevitable or obvious at the time.

The two decades since the Cold War have not been easy for the U.S. The “peace dividend” was sapped by conflicts in the Balkans and elsewhere, followed by the struggle against terrorism and the ill-conceived war in Iraq. A new and different set of challenges quickly emerged requiring virtually the entire foreign policy community to change foci and become familiar with new parts of the worlds, types of conflicts and security threats. Concepts like cyber-terrorism, for example, and climate change are important foreign policy issues which did not exist two decades ago.

The two decades since the Cold War have also been a period of extraordinary advances as the U.S. and our allies have helped countries ranging from Croatia to Latvia shake off decades of repressive regimes, move concretely towards democracy and integration into a strong and increasingly peaceful Europe. This work is, of course, not yet complete, much of the former Soviet Union is still characterized by undemocratic regimes, unresolved conflicts and the threat of Russian aggression. Nonetheless, now is a good time to recognize some of these accomplishments and be grateful that the Cold War is firmly in the past.