

**From Division to Integration:**  
**How President George H.W. Bush Reunified**  
**Germany**

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The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union did not occur in the blink of an eye. Rather, a series of tumultuous political and economic events in Eastern Europe, such as the end of communism in Hungary and Poland in 1989, brought about the end of an era and led to a new ordering of international relations. Though the Soviet Union's downfall did not happen overnight, one event which catalyzed its end was German reunification. At the end of World War II, Germany was divided into two separate states, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), in order to prevent the country from ever again causing as much destruction as it had during WWI and WWII. Split into East and West, respectively, the GDR was a communist Soviet satellite state while the FRG was democratic and under the backing of Western powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of Soviet policies by Mikhail Gorbachev evolved into the German Question, which eventually led to the reunification of Germany.

The foreign leaders involved in the German Question included Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, French President Francois Mitterrand, and U.S. President George H.W. Bush. Arguably, President George H.W. Bush successfully navigated the issue of German reunification through diplomatic relations with all the leaders involved. However, most important in the U.S.'s accomplishment was President Bush and his administration's dealing with the Soviet Union and Gorbachev himself. The President's cautious approach towards German reunification, his personal diplomacy through meetings and telephone calls with Gorbachev, his assurances and praises of the Soviet leader, his transparency, and his foreign policy background all factored into his success. Through excellent leadership, pragmatism, and personal touch, President Bush was able to convince Gorbachev to support German reunification; in result, East and West Germany were

merged into one state on October 3, 1990 through Western institutions, most prominently the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Without President Bush's careful approach towards the issue and his mindfulness of the impact it would have on the Soviet Union, Germany might not have been unified at all, and it definitely might not have been a power anchored in NATO.

Perhaps President Bush's cleverest strategy in moving towards German reunification was his understanding of Soviet history, viewpoints, and fears. Although he made it clear that he was in support of German reunification, the President acknowledged the Soviets' concerns of a renewed German threat and declared he "was not pushing for speedy reunification, [but] sought to assure Gorbachev that he appreciated the Soviet leader's precarious standing at home."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, according to a memorandum of the conversation, when the President met with Gorbachev at Malta in December, 1989, he stated that the U.S. would "do nothing to recklessly try to speed up reunification."<sup>2</sup> Thus, while maintaining an immovable stance on German reunification, the President made sure to make assurances to Gorbachev, keeping in mind the Soviet defeat by Nazi Germany in WWII, as well as Gorbachev's domestic predicaments. In addition, Gorbachev had frequently complained to President Bush that Chancellor Kohl was rushing to unify Germany, and in response, Bush made sure to calm the Soviet leader down and assure him that the U.S. would take active steps to prevent a rash and foreboding reunification process from happening.

Aside from providing reassurances, President Bush's personality and his experiences in personal diplomacy also aided him in convincing Gorbachev to get on board with German

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<sup>1</sup> Nagorski, Andrew. "Reagan Brought Down the Berlin Wall, but It Was George H.W. Bush Who Unified Germany: A united Germany might not have emerged at all without the consummate skill that the late president displayed." *Daily Beast*, 02 December 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, George Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev, Brent Scowcroft, Anatoliy Chernyaev, 12/02/89, ID# 04-1944-MR, Subject File, Textual Archives, Memoranda of Meetings and Telephone Conversations (Memcons/Telecons), George Bush Presidential Library.

reunification. For instance, Bush would regularly compliment Gorbachev or praise him on his actions or choices both through his meetings and telephone conversations with him, and occasionally through press and news conferences presented to the American public. During the Malta Summit, for instance, President Bush directly, face-to-face, told Gorbachev that “the most conservative Americans salute how [he] handled [the issue of German reunification].”<sup>3</sup> In another case, President Bush, in a telephone conversation with Gorbachev, applauded him for his efforts to advance perestroika, mentioning that he “watched with awe and respect” the way Gorbachev managed his economic and political reforms.<sup>4</sup> Even in a Joint News Conference with Chancellor Kohl in the U.S. in 1990, President Bush announced to the crowd that both he and Kohl believed that “Chairman Gorbachev [had] shown true statesmanship in respecting the will of the people in Eastern Europe [and] in trying to build new relationships based on cooperation instead of coercion.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only did Bush directly offer Gorbachev praises for his policy efforts at home in the Soviet Union, but he also publicly commended him on his attitude towards Eastern Europe in joint with Chancellor Kohl in a news conference on American soil. This represents a breakthrough for U.S.-Soviet relations and undoubtedly encouraged Gorbachev to continue to improve those relations, as well as align more closely to Western initiatives, such as that of German reunification. Through pointing out and appreciating the efforts that Gorbachev put into implementing more open, democratic, domestic policies and encouraging the freedom of self-

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<sup>3</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, George Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev, Brent Scowcroft, Anatoliy Chernyaev, 12/02/89, ID# 04-1944-MR, Subject File, Textual Archives, Memoranda of Meetings and Telephone Conversations (Memcons/Telecons), George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, George Bush to Mikhail Gorbachev, 07/17/90, ID# 2000-0429-F, Subject File, Textual Archives, Memoranda of Meetings and Telephone Conversations (Memcons/Telecons), George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>5</sup> “Joint News Conference Following Discussions with Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Federal Republic of Germany,” 02/25/90, ID# 1585, Subject File, Textual Archives, Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library.

determination for all of Eastern Europe, Bush was able to build a solid personal relationship between himself and Gorbachev while simultaneously pulling Gorbachev closer to his side on the issue of German reunification. In many telephone conversations between the two leaders about German reunification, it is clear that President Bush succeeded in forming a close friendship with Gorbachev that allowed for effective convincing that German reunification was beneficial for the future of Europe and not dangerous to the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, President Bush uniquely approached the German Question not only through personal diplomacy, but also transparent diplomacy. This especially came into play in Bush's triangular relationship with Chancellor Kohl and Chairman Gorbachev. Although Gorbachev and Kohl also met privately and extensively to negotiate German reunification, President Bush continued to update Gorbachev on his own conversations with Kohl as well. During a telephone conversation with Gorbachev on July 17, 1990, President Bush started by saying: "I just talked to Chancellor Kohl and he is pleased. He thinks the agreements you reached are good not just for Soviet-German relations, but for U.S.-Soviet relations too."<sup>6</sup> In another telephone conversation, the President also expressed his own deliberations with Kohl to Gorbachev, explaining to him openly the items that he and Kohl discussed as well as how they both felt about Gorbachev's position on the future of Germany and Europe.<sup>7</sup> Keeping Gorbachev in the loop about his conversations with other leaders allowed the President to maintain a trusting relationship with the Soviet leader and proved to be an efficacious strategy in convincing

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<sup>6</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, George Bush to Mikhail Gorbachev, 07/17/90, ID# 2000-0429-F, Subject File, Textual Archives, Memoranda of Meetings and Telephone Conversations (Memcons/Telecons), George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>7</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, George Bush to Mikhail Gorbachev, 02/28/90, ID# 2000-0429-F, Subject File, Textual Archives, Memoranda of Meetings and Telephone Conversations (Memcons/Telecons), George Bush Presidential Library.

Gorbachev that U.S. leadership could be relied upon to reach a solution to the German Question that would not be detrimental to the security of Europe or the Soviet Union.

Another significant manner in which President Bush was able to convince Gorbachev that German reunification was necessary and beneficial to the future world order was by proceeding with caution and by circumventing triumphant or gloating public announcements. By doing this instead of “celebrating victory more publicly, [...] the Bush administration avoided embarrassing, threatening or otherwise provoking the Soviets.”<sup>8</sup> This is extremely important because if Bush had publicly declared victory ostentatiously, the outcome of many Eastern European states’ paths towards freedom might have been jeopardized. Additionally, President Bush kept the United States relatively in the background in terms of Eastern European states’ self-determination processes. Rather than trying to negotiate with Gorbachev on the status of these states or the Soviet Union’s position on their increased sovereignty, Bush stayed on the sideline. Fortunately, the Soviet Union did not intervene, but were the Bush administration to involve itself more in Eastern Europe, it could have threatened the possibility of self-determination for those states as well as the potential for Gorbachev to move forward with supporting German reunification.

Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, President Bush did not make any public announcements on the future of Germany, resulting in harsh domestic criticism on his foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Though President Bush had called for self-determination in Germany and Eastern Europe prior to the fall of the wall, he later practiced a strategy of legislative silence in which he did not comment publicly on what policy the U.S. would pursue in regards to German

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<sup>8</sup> Mandelbaum, Michael. “The Bush Foreign Policy.” *Foreign Affairs, Council on Foreign Relations*, 1990/1991.

<sup>9</sup> Harlow, William Forrest. “And the Wall Came Tumbling Down: Bush’s Rhetoric of Silence during German Reunification.” From *Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush* by Martin J. Medhurst, *Project Muse*, 2006.

reunification. The reason for this was two-fold – first, he might have upset European allies that were still reeling from Germany’s past behavior; second, he could have risked his relationship with Gorbachev and endangered the changes that were already occurring in Eastern Europe. Therefore, instead of making clear to the public what his thoughts on German reunification were specifically, President Bush preferred to use his personal diplomacy to meet with Gorbachev privately to discuss. In the end, Bush’s silence through “lack of policy-making speech” proved to be more fruitful, while his rhetoric of positive change, peace, and understanding of Soviet struggles made “sure that Germany was not pulled from the path of democracy.”<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, President Bush was able to convince Gorbachev of the prominence of German reunification by molding it as an opportunity to reshape Europe, with German reunification moving alongside European integration and within Western institutions. In Malta, both Bush and Gorbachev agreed that Germany must be unified “on the basis of [...] democratic values, self-determination, openness and pluralism,” but Gorbachev expressed concern with the possibility of Germany going down its own individual path and rebuilding itself along the same lines it had before.<sup>11</sup> In order to maneuver around Gorbachev’s anxieties, President Bush thus proposed that German reunification occur under Western institutional control, with Germany becoming a full member of NATO, American troops remaining in Europe, and a newly established status for the former territory of the GDR. In a telephone conversation in February, 1990, President Bush reassured Gorbachev that a united Germany would not be a threat to the

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<sup>10</sup> Harlow, William Forrest. “And the Wall Came Tumbling Down: Bush’s Rhetoric of Silence during German Reunification.” From *Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush* by Martin J. Medhurst, *Project Muse*, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Spohr, Kristina. “Germany, America and the shaping of post-Cold War Europe: a story of German international emancipation through political unification, 1989-90. *Cold War History*, Routledge - Taylor & Francis, 2015.

Soviet Union as its reunification through NATO and an integrated European Community would “guard against uncertainty and instability.”<sup>12</sup>

Although President Bush’s Secretary of State, James Baker, had made assurances to Gorbachev that Germany would remain in NATO but that no NATO forces would extend to East Germany, Bush split with him and instead suggested a “special military status for” the GDR. His ultimate end goal, however, was for a unified Germany to be a full-fledged NATO member with Article 5 guarantees and allied forces in the entire region even after Soviet troops departed.<sup>13</sup> In order to placate Gorbachev in regards to these terms, Bush convinced him that NATO would take on a more political role in which the alliance would “ensure the protection and defensibility of all of unified German territory” in order to guard against uncertainties in Germany’s future path.<sup>14</sup> The negotiations concluded with the U.S. being on top, as NATO was able to expand to East Germany as well as leave its doors open to future expansion in Eastern Europe.<sup>15</sup> By orienting German reunification side-by-side with European integration, security, and NATO protection against future potential aggression by Germany, Bush was able to persuade Gorbachev to agree and effectively transformed the post-Cold War era.

Though tangible factors, such as full German membership in NATO, played a large role in President Bush convincing Gorbachev of German reunification, Bush’s leadership style and the context in which he led were also essential. First, it is important to note that the individual and various personalities have a huge impact on the course of international relations. According

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<sup>12</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, George Bush to Mikhail Gorbachev, 02/28/90, ID# 2000-0429-F, Subject File, Textual Archives, Memoranda of Meetings and Telephone Conversations (Memcons/Telecons), George Bush Presidential Library.

<sup>13</sup> Sarotte, Mary Elise. *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Spohr, Kristina. “Germany, America and the shaping of post-Cold War Europe: a story of German international emancipation through political unification, 1989-90. *Cold War History*, Routledge - Taylor & Francis, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Sarotte, Mary Elise. *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2014.



to Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack in *Let Us Now Praise Great Men*, individuals are crucial to the intentions and strategies of a state and can affect not only the actions of their own states but also the reactions of others.<sup>16</sup> This is incredibly relevant to President Bush's leadership style and his experiences negotiating German reunification.

Not only was Bush able to achieve U.S. dominance over the situation through utilizing Western institutions, such as NATO, of which the U.S. is the largest contributor and director, but he was also successful in evading a negative reaction by Gorbachev. Indeed, the President received positive and reinforcing reactions from the Soviet leader due to his ability to understand his counterpart's qualms and reassure him that those concerns would be taken into consideration. Similar to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, also mentioned in *Let Us Now Praise Great Men*, Bush developed budding alliances not solely with other Western leaders, but also with Gorbachev, in order to preserve peace in Europe and build a brighter future based on European integration, security, and freedom. His personal relationship with Gorbachev allowed him to overcome the pushback he experienced by both the American public and Western leaders who were afraid of a unified Germany, as well as to strengthen U.S.-Soviet relations and Soviet-European relations at the time.

In addition to forming a collaborative relationship with Gorbachev, Bush's leadership style was also heavily influenced by his environment and the context in which he was leading. As Byman and Pollack argue, an individual leader can grow more important and powerful when "institutions are in conflict or in times of great change."<sup>17</sup> While many leaders may struggle to determine what course of action to take and when, the processes that sparked the German

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<sup>16</sup> Byman, Daniel L. and Kenneth M. Pollack. *Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In*. Project MUSE, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Byman, Daniel L. and Kenneth M. Pollack. *Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In*. Project MUSE, 2001.

Question occurred quickly and demanded the U.S.'s attention, making it easier for President Bush to direct his focus there and to pursue a strategy in which the U.S. championed self-determination and a new post-Cold War world order without provoking the Soviet Union. A rational leader, President Bush used his foreign policy and diplomatic experience to seize the changes that were taking place in Eastern Europe and form a trusting relationship with Gorbachev that allowed for a relatively smooth German reunification process.<sup>18</sup>

In remaining a pivotal player in the German Question by holding frequent private meetings and telephone conversations with Kohl, Mitterrand, Thatcher, and most importantly, Gorbachev, President Bush dominated his administration's foreign policy. In *The President as World Leader*, Barbara Kellerman and Ryan Barilleaux state that "the leadership provided by the president in foreign affairs is, without any doubt, the pivotal influence in framing foreign policy."<sup>19</sup> This was especially true of President Bush, as he took control of his circumstances by truly understanding them and by interacting with other leaders in a personal, pragmatic, and compassionate manner while Congress and the American public mostly took more of a backseat and watched as events unfolded. Through taking initiative and recognizing the political environment he was engaged in, President Bush became "the sole organ of communication with other nations" and effectively used his previous experiences and his individual personality traits to negotiate with Gorbachev and other foreign leaders on the issue of German reunification.<sup>20</sup>

As for Bush's leadership style among his own administration during the German reunification negotiations, he "relied heavily on a trusted network of aides including James A.

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<sup>18</sup> O'Reilly, Marc J. and Wesley B. Renfro. "Transatlantic Travails: America and Reunited Europe During the Presidencies of George H.W. and George W. Bush." Department of Political Science & Anthropology, Heidelberg College, Department of of Political Science, University of Connecticut, 3 March 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Barilleaux, Ryan, and Barbara Kellerman. *The President as World Leader*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Barilleaux, Ryan, and Barbara Kellerman. *The President as World Leader*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Baker, Brent Scowcroft, Lawrence Eagleburger, Marlin Fitzwater, and others.”<sup>21</sup> His willingness to listen to his key advisors and maintain a smaller decision-making group was beneficial during a period of rapid change. Because of this, Bush was able to receive valuable advice, but still have the freedom to make his own policy-making decisions without wavering between options due to the presence of too many voices. Similar to John F. Kennedy, Bush practiced a collegial leadership style, in which he created a team of staff members and advisers who worked together to identify and analyze policy problems while avoiding infighting or bargaining, such as with a competitive model of leadership.<sup>22</sup>

In his collegial model, Bush made it a point to cultivate professional and personal relationships with his staff. His Deputy Chief of Staff and Transportation Secretary, Andy Card, said of him: “[he] created personal relationships with everyone he could. That personal connection could become a strategic partnership when it needed to be. It was universal but sincere.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than dictate or command his staff members around, Bush made them feel important and valued and took a genuine interest in getting to know them individually and develop friendships with them while letting their voices be heard in deliberations. This relational aspect of his leadership style is one that not only aided him in approaching German reunification with confidence in his decisions, but also in interacting with Gorbachev and understanding the Soviet position.

Overall, it can be argued that President George H.W. Bush was one of the most influential leaders in history due to his key role in convincing Gorbachev to support the German

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<sup>21</sup> O’Reilly, Marc J. and Wesley B. Renfro. “Transatlantic Travails: America and Reunited Europe During the Presidencies of George H.W. and George W. Bush.” Department of Political Science & Anthropology, Heidelberg College, Department of of Political Science, University of Connecticut, 3 March 2007.

<sup>22</sup> George, Alexander. *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*. Boulder, Westview Press, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> Coleman, John. “The Power of Relational Leadership.” *Forbes*, 16 Apr. 2018.

reunification process and in turn reshaping the future of the post-Cold War era. The President upheld American ideals of democracy, freedom, and self-determination while also understanding the Soviet Union's stakes in the matter and successfully bridging any differences through personal diplomacy. His foreign policy background, transparency, open and frequent communication, pragmatism, and understanding of the Soviet Union were imperative for the swift and smooth realization of German reunification, along with his reassurances to Gorbachev that Germany would be under NATO supervision. Bush exhibited true leadership in taking advantage of a period of extreme change and framing the issue of the German Question as one of importance to European security and integration as a whole. Had Bush danced atop the Berlin Wall rather than remain quiet in the public arena, had he approached the Soviet Union aggressively rather than with understanding, had he been sly and discrete about his conversations with other foreign leaders rather than clear and forthcoming, Germany may have turned out to be much different than it is today. The President's rhetoric of silence, his personal conversations with others, his collegial style of leading and interacting with his administration members, and his compassionate personality were integral in his leadership style and strongly influenced the outcome of the German Question and the end of the Cold War. For that, the world should forever be in awe of George H.W. Bush's incredible leadership in foreign affairs.

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