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Cold War collapse calls for rethinking

Hard-line ideology falls
along with communism

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The collapse of communism and the Cold War system in Europe is the most important and hopeful development of modern times. But it is also a complex lesson — for Americans as much as for Europeans — about where the winds of history are blowing.

While it's too soon to grasp fully the events of the past year, the unfolding story suggests at least five basic revisions of our political thinking in the new era:

1. Democracy is indeed a universal human value, as meaningful in Prague or Beijing or Managua as in Peoria. It isn't arrogant to assume that the rest of the world wants what we want in this regard; it's arrogant to assume the contrary. The whole world doesn't need American-style government; but democratic institutions are concomitants of the basic human rights that all people want and deserve.

The pursuit of those values will always vary from one culture to the next. But certain essentials are constant: pluralism; open and frequent elections; and the constitutional quarantine of certain key liberties, such as expression, assembly, privacy and due process, from the caprices of executive power or majority rule.

The democracy movement in China, for example, rearranges our view of that alien land, long regarded with a certain deferential awe based on ignorance and fear. China must now be held to the same human rights standards as Western countries. We can no longer confuse the will of her aging strongmen with the will of her billion people.

2. Like communism itself, the Cold War ideology of anti-communism is defunct, and subtler distinctions are needed.

Totalitarian communism is, in hindsight, a form of tyranny peculiar to our time; it could never have existed in the 19th century and cannot survive the 20th. But the very different ideas behind socialism and Marxism will probably survive the wreckage.

What is ending with perestroika and glasnost is not socialism but its perversion: party rule in the fraudulent name of the working class. Socialist ideals will persist — as they have across Western Europe — based not on state ownership or party rule, but on economic equality in more democratic forms, such as cooperative, worker-owned and local government enterprise.

Marxism will survive, too, not as a statist dogma but mainly in the universities — and in a sense that's where it belongs. Marx never offered an explicit design for government. What he devised was a mode of analysis of capitalism which, for all its limits and flaws, is an enduring contribution to social thought.

3. As East-West conflict eases, North-South tensions will inevitably mount, and the industrialized countries will have to form stable political and economic relations with the less affluent nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Disease, hunger and overpopulation in these developing lands will be the challenges of the new century, as will the fostering of democratic institutions there and in the Islamic world.

Egalitarian socialism may well prevail in the Third World, but if coupled with democracy we needn't fear it. In the struggles of democracy's newest adherents, we may even have something to learn. With new parliaments and constitutions emerging, we might be emboldened to make modest repairs of our own system.

4. Foreign policy "realists" of the Kissinger-Haig-Kirkpatrick school have been utterly upended by events. Their premise that right-wing "authoritarian" states should be cultivated as anti-Communist allies that might eventually go democratic, while Communist states could never be democratized, is now both demonstrably false and obsolete.

Though liberals equally abhorred communism, the stark polarities of the Cold War were tailor-made for the more militant and simplistic arguments of conservative thinkers. That era is now bygone; the collapse of communism is a victory for the very agenda of human rights that Jimmy Carter was scorned by the "realists" for advancing.

5. Down through history, nations have based economic power on military conquest and empire. But the contrasting experiences of the Soviet Union, West Germany and Japan since World War II have shown that might is no longer the key to economic success.

On the contrary: prosperity is now based primarily on human capital, which means skills, education, energy and incentive. And the return on human capital is incomparably higher in open, democratic societies. At last, the argument for a liberal society has become basely pragmatic. That alone explains the astonishing political drama of Communist abdication across Eastern Europe.

The splitting of economic from military power may prove the second great discovery of this century, after the splitting of the atom.

History is not ending, as some have argued; it is resuming. As we grope to understand the new order, it's time for new thinking across the spectrum of American opinion — and at the very top.

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