Historically, the Soviet Union and Russia had been virtually indistinguishable. Now Yeltsin for the first time was drawing a distinction and asserting Russian interests against the Soviet Union.

As in the old czarist empire, Russia and Russians formed the geographical and political heart of the republics and their imposed union. Russia was by far the largest republic in both territory and population—with close to 140 million people, over 80 percent of whom were ethnic Russians. As Gorbachev often pointed out, Russians also formed substantial minorities in some of the other republics. Russia was inextricably associated with the political system of the Soviet Union, as well as the dominance of the Communist Party over the republics and the nationalities they represented. What emerged in the 1920s as the Soviet Union was not only the child of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, but also a powerful echo of the old empire. In the throes of those upheavals, along with the post–World War I settlements, the empire had broken up, some of its nationalities asserting and briefly enjoying independence and sovereignty after centuries of Russian rule, only to be bloodily recaptured by revolutionary Russia in the name of international communism. Lenin and Stalin brutally imposed a union of republics—ostensibly a free association of socialist states each governed by its own one-party system, but all controlled by what was then still called the Russian Communist Party. They began a calculated and systematic campaign to remove or repress nationalism and national cultures—including the Russian—in the hope of establishing a broader, socialist identity.

BRENT SCOWCROFT

In retrospect, when Yeltsin started to reject the authority of the Union and the Party and to reassert Russian political and economic control over the republic's own affairs, he was attacking the very basis of the Soviet state, shaking its political structure to the roots. In withdrawing Russian support, Yeltsin, perhaps at this point unintentionally, may have helped remove the very means by which the other republics were forcefully bound to the Soviet center, emboldening them to pull further away. Without Russia, the ability of the center to enforce its will on the other republics would be cast into doubt—although ultimately much still hung on the loyalty of the military and KGB forces.

Gorbachev may not have recognized the depth of the smoldering resentment of national groups to Soviet authority, or the full threat of the nationalities problem to the survival of the Union. Apparently, he confi-

dently (or naively) believed that they saw their economic and political futures wrapped in the Union and that the republics, and the nationalities they represented, would remain in the voluntary association set up under the new Union Treaty. He seemed convinced (or at least hoped) that, once reforms were introduced, resentment of the center would fade. Instead, nationalists found in Gorbachev's reforms an opportunity to challenge the center. In some ways, the United States may have made the same kind of mistake in reading the situation. For years we had tended to assume the Soviets had had more success in stamping out parochial nationalism than proved to be the case.

Moscow's political, economic, and social problems continued to multiply, and no leader was emerging with answers to any one of them, let alone a coherent program that addressed them all. The Soviet Union was, we thought, in a prerevolutionary condition. I summarized the situation in a March 7 memo to the President:

> There are any number of events, particularly during the next month, that could touch off a conflagration. Coal miners threaten to strike. . . . and the Communist party is preparing to force recalcitrant republics to participate in the all-Union referendum on March 17. The more visible and aggressive posture of the KGB, the police, and the army could spark violence at any time. The already dysfunctional economy is likely to get worse in the next few months and it is not clear how much longer Soviet citizens can muddle through and feed themselves. No one knows for sure where the army stands. . . . The situation in the Soviet Union is so bad that it is hard to believe that explosion can be avoided. . . .

It was the most difficult context in which to steer a steady course in US-Soviet relations. We had to sort out our priorities. We suggested three to the President: nail down what we had accomplished in the last two years; push cautiously ahead on the US-Soviet agenda, recognizing and accepting that progress was likely to be slow; avoid involvement in Soviet domestic political wars. After so much rapid progress, the window of opportunity appeared to be closing. It was time to consolidate our gains.*

*Late in March, Condi Rice left the White House to return to Stanford. Ed Hewett, one of the top-ranked scholars on the Soviet Union, replaced her. I knew Ed from many conferences and joint appearances, and his views were solid and balanced. My only hesitation was that he had always operated in the academic world of total independence. I was unsure of his ability to make the transition to the bureaucratic world of the White House and the give-and-take environment of the interagency process. I needn't have worried. Ed took immediately to his new circumstances, and his superb intellectual qualities were matched by an awesome bureaucratic competence. He was the perfect man for the job during the complicated final travails of the Soviet Union. Tragically, Ed was stricken with cancer, but he continued to work right up to the end, which came in January 1993.