

# Gorbachev's Choice

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Feb 22, 1991

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

**B**y issuing his own cease-fire requirements to Saddam Hussein, President Bush has effectively rendered Mikhail Gorbachev's peace plan -- even today's "revised" version -- dead on arrival. In doing so, he is also sending the Soviet President a very tough message: The United States, which has sacrificed blood and treasure to thwart Iraqi aggression, is committed to achieving its objectives in the Gulf in full. Either the Soviet Union now supports those objectives and gets Iraq to comply with them totally, or faces the possibility of significant strains in relations with the United States.

This presents Gorbachev with a dilemma. The very purpose of his peace efforts has been to try and avoid such a choice between George Bush and Saddam Hussein. His plans have sought to walk a fine line between fidelity to UN resolutions calling for Iraq's withdrawal and avoidance of a humiliating defeat for Saddam and the Iraqi military. His revised plan, even with its efforts to address America's withdrawal requirements, suggests he still believes he can square the circle.

By achieving his first goal -- Iraq's departure from Kuwait -- Gorbachev hoped to avoid any serious rupture in relations with Washington. By achieving the latter goal -- saving face for Saddam -- he hoped to placate the concerns and criticisms of right-wing elements in the Soviet national security establishment. They want Moscow to play a more independent mediating role that would achieve three objectives: save Saddam Hussein's regime and as much of his Soviet-supplied military as possible; increase Soviet prestige, influence, and strategic position in the post-war Middle East; and limit the ability of the United States to successfully apply its military and political power in the region.

President Bush is essentially telling Gorbachev that his goals are mutually exclusive: he cannot both maintain close ties with the United States and at the same time save Saddam's face. Despite Gorbachev's continued efforts, there simply is no middle ground. Further Soviet initiatives will only complicate the picture.

Ultimately, military actions on the ground in Kuwait will force Gorbachev to make a decision. If he supports America's requirements for Iraq's withdrawal, and blames Saddam for failing to avert a ground war, he will be choosing to continue the path of close partnership with George Bush. As was agreed to in the joint U.S.-Soviet statements issued last September in Helsinki and in January in Washington, this would assure Moscow an important role in postwar regional developments.

If, on the other hand, Gorbachev rejects America's requirements, insists on sticking with his own plan, and

condemns the U.S. for starting a ground war when he was offering a political solution in accord with UN resolutions, he will have chosen to act as the Butcher of Baghdad's advocate against George Bush and U.S.-Soviet relations will suffer accordingly.

Given the priority that Gorbachev has placed on improving relations with the United States in recent years, it seems inconceivable that he would now sacrifice that achievement on the altar of Saddam Hussein's survival. If his efforts to revive the Soviet economy and rebuild Soviet society are to have any chances for long-term success, they will require the help and goodwill of the United States.

On the other hand, there is clearly a new constellation of hard-line forces within the Kremlin leadership, many of which have no interest in seeing fundamental reform take place either within the Soviet Union or in Moscow's relations with the United States. These elements were the main instigators of Gorbachev's decision to try and save Saddam in the first place, and they are the ones still pushing him to seek a Soviet-brokered deal, even after President Bush has set out his non-negotiable requirements for ending hostilities. Indeed, they will see these requirements as an American ultimatum that totally disregards Soviet interests and makes a mockery of Gorbachev's peace efforts. The question, then, will be whether Gorbachev still has the will and power to override their pressures to continue to complicate U.S. military and diplomatic efforts.

Gorbachev is now playing for very high stakes. If he opposes the United States, he could be jeopardizing his main foreign policy accomplishment of the last five years and sacrificing his hopes of reforming the Soviet Union. If, on the other hand, he now gives up on his mediating efforts and supports President Bush, he will be further antagonizing Soviet conservatives and providing ammunition to those who believe he should share the same political fate as the last official too closely aligned with the U.S. -- former foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze.

John P. Hannah, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, was the deputy director of research at The Washington Institute until March 1991. He was the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, from September 18-October 12, 1990, and is the author of the 1989 Institute Policy Paper [At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82>). ❖

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