

1991: False Dawn

by George Friedman - January 11, 2022

We do not normally think of 1991 as a defining year. We are aware of particular events that might have changed something, but we rarely think of 1991 as more than that. In fact, it was a year of global and intersecting change. It did not change the human condition, but it changed a great deal about how humans lived and saw the world.

1991 was the year the Soviet Union collapsed and brought the Cold War to an end. The fear of nuclear war, which had haunted the world since the 1950s, subsided, as did the fear of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. The Soviet Union broke into its component parts, which is something that is very real today.

1991 was the year the Maastricht Treaty was signed by 12 European heads of state. With this agreement, they tried to do what Europe had never done: create a single structure abolishing the history of Europe. This drew Europe away from the United States, but as the Soviet Union collapsed so had Europe's urgent need for American power.

1991 was the year an American-led coalition executed Operation Desert Storm, driving Iraq out of Kuwait, weakening Iraq and enabling Iran to regain its balance after a brutal decade of war with Iraq. The most important thing that emerged from this was a powerful Islamist force, a major component of which was al-Qaida. The Islamists saw the American presence in the region as both sacrilege and a threat to regional autonomy. The Middle East was transformed, and with it, on 9/11, the United States.

1991 was the year the Japanese economic miracle ended in a massive financial crisis. Until then, Japan was seen as the economic challenger to the United States, and quite likely the winner in the battle. Japan managed its crisis by spending a decade becoming a normal superpower and avoiding extremes in economics.

1991 was the year China accelerated its economic growth. The first growth period was interrupted by Tiananmen Square and sanctions from the U.S. and Europe. The sanctions were suspended in 1991. Like Japan before it, China surged, replacing Japan as an Asian powerhouse growing dramatically and imprudently.

1991 was the year President George H.W. Bush made a speech proclaiming the New World Order. He delivered the speech in the wake of Desert Storm, and he envisioned it as the model in which a united world would enforce peace and crush its violators. The speech replicated the dream Europe had of abolishing conflict and having a common vision of the future. It replicated a Russian dream of ending the barrier between Russia and the world and joining the family of liberal democracy and wealth. And the dream spoke to Japanese hubris and the world's awe of Japan, reminding them that no one could surpass the United States, for the New World Order speech was about American greatness since it was obvious that only the U.S. could manage a world united in a search for peace and prosperity. Even the response to Tiananmen Square and the ultimate outcome signaled the New World Order.

Bush's speech was sincere in the belief that human history can be managed to global satisfaction, and that it was the mission of America, as the only great power left, to manage this system. There have been moments like this, such as the Treaty of Westphalia or the founding of the United Nations. They all disappointed, as 1991 disappointed. Men love their nation more than the world, because it is theirs and because it puts them above others. It also gives them a chance to define what is to happen. The world is vast, and if it is to be managed, it will be by a hegemon made of inhuman justice, who can measure the needs of China against the needs of Japan and make remarkably wise decisions. Or we can have a committee. The Soviet Union was run by committee after Stalin – and was horrid even while Stalin was there. The United States has many committees, all designed to allow us to pursue blatant self-interest. The center has held for over 200 years. The European Union was designed to be a committee of leaders willing to care more about Europe than about their own countries. The creaking sound we hear is Maastricht tottering. Japan survived its near fall because it was a nation of Japanese, with a common past and common fears. They shared the pain.

Sharing the pain of your countrymen is possible, if not common. Sharing it with strangers is much harder. Desert Storm was the opening not to a new world order but to a new threat to the world: radical Islam, a threat stretching from Xinjiang to lower Manhattan. But of course, those who believe in the truth of their version of Islam do not see themselves as threats but as liberators and teachers. And the Russians and Chinese know that if they don't care for themselves, no one will. The New World Order proved as pitiless as the old.

1991 is not remembered by many as a decisive year. It was not a single event, like 1945, to be viewed as a moment. 1991 was a collection of smaller points that, when taken together, represent a moment when all things dreamt of by the enlightenment might be possible. The moment slipped

away because it was never there. Humans will not overcome their humanity and become angels. The world is returning to what it once was. It is ironic that we soon will see American and Russian officials sit in Geneva to decide the fate of nations. History does not tolerate optimism.

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