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From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research

Stephen G. Brooks
and William C.
Wohlforth

Robert English has provided a strongly written critique of our article “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War.”¹ Unfortunately, his reply may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing a pernicious but popular view among political scientists that qualitative research—especially on single cases—cannot generate progress. Here we have a case of seminal importance that has attracted the sustained attention of dozens of international relations scholars for more than a decade, and yet it appears that scholars are still involved in what looks like an interminable historians’ debate over causes. In this article we show that such a reaction would be utterly unjustified.

We have two basic responses. First, much of English’s critique misses the mark because it is based on a misunderstanding of our research design. Second, his reply is nonetheless a test of our major findings conducted by a skeptical and talented researcher. Our analysis passes this tough test, though English does advance some useful criticisms.

We proceed in four sections. First, we show that major progress has been made in explaining the end of the Cold War and establishing its theoretical implications. The debate now turns mainly on how to assess the causal implications of widely accepted findings, which is why issues of qualitative research design are so important. In the second section, we demonstrate the importance of moving beyond the framework of necessary and sufficient conditions toward a more probabilistic approach. Because it is constrained by the old framework, English’s reply cannot directly engage much of our analysis. Third, we explain how we designed our research on this case to assess endogeneity. A failure to appreciate why and how we tackled this key issue is the source of English’s serious—and wrong—charge that our research was “biased.” The fourth section addresses English’s most central empirical challenge concerning hard-line alternatives to Soviet retrenchment. In this case, as in so many others,

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1. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 5–53. Further references appear parenthetically in the text.

International Security, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Spring 2002), pp. 93–111
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arguments over possible alternatives to the course actually chosen are crucial and so rigor is at a premium.

The issues at stake here concern not just the end of the Cold War or even the study of ideas in international relations, but qualitative research more generally. None of the methodological challenges we highlight has a generally accepted answer in social science.² In our article we sought to apply new thinking to these challenges. English's article shows that we were not entirely successful in articulating our method for accomplishing this goal. This symposium gives us a chance to do so.

Making Progress in Explaining the End of the Cold War

Ten years ago, the conventional wisdom held that Soviet material decline—often measured solely in terms of military capabilities—was small or nonexistent; that this factor consequently had little causal weight in the end of the Cold War; and thus that other variables, particularly ideational ones, carried the day.³ A second wave of empirical scholarship that emerged in the mid-1990s shifted the conventional wisdom. At that time, most scholars agreed that Soviet material decline—measured more accurately in terms of overall capabilities—had actually been quite significant beginning in the early-to-mid 1980s and that it did play a significant causal role.⁴ Still, the standard conclusion was that even though decline did prompt change in Soviet foreign policy, the resulting shift could have just as easily been toward aggression or a new version of muddling through (rather than retrenchment) and that other factors played the key role in resolving this uncertainty.⁵

Though the tone of his article might lead readers to overlook it, English actually concurs with two of our most important findings—each of which differed sharply from the previous conventional wisdom. First, we found that the eco-

2. Helpful discussions of these issues include Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, *Case Studies and Theory Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming).

3. See, for example, Charles Kegley, "The Neoidealist Moment in International Studies? Realist Myths and the New International Realities," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (June 1993), pp. 131–146.

4. See, for example, Coit D. Blacker, *Hostage to Revolution: Gorbachev and Soviet Security Policy, 1985–1991* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993); and William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 91–129.

5. See, for example, Robert Herman, "Identity, Norms, and National Security," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

nomic burden on the Soviet Union was far greater than the second wave of scholarship had realized. Three factors stand out: (1) Soviet decline was more marked, occurred earlier, and generally placed a much greater strain on maintaining the foreign policy status quo than scholars had previously assumed; (2) the costs of Soviet isolation from the globalization of production were growing rapidly; and (3) the Soviet Union “arguably confronted modern history’s worst case of imperial overstretch” (p. 22). English does not challenge this analysis, which comprises 40 percent of our article (pp. 14–27, 34–42), and flatly accepts that the Soviet Union represented “modern history’s most overextended empire.”⁶

The second finding concerns endogeneity, in particular, the role of economic constraints in propelling the translation of new thinkers’ ideas into policy. We found that the Soviet Union’s declining material fortunes was the key factor that made the new thinkers’ ideas saleable to those skeptical of retrenchment. English agrees, noting that Gorbachev found that “stressing economic necessity” was the “best” way to “sell his proposals” to his “main opposition . . . such committed old thinkers as [Yegor] Ligachev” and others in the Politburo.⁷

It is thus clear that empirical research is generating real progress on this case. These two new findings alone have substantially moved the debate forward. English’s response is wholly focused on how to assess empirically the causal effect of the material constraints we examined. The rest of this article is consequently devoted to this issue.

Probability, Not Determinism: Avoiding the “Straw Man Bias”

English’s reply exemplifies a pervasive problem in qualitative research: the lack of a good general language for expressing levels of causality within a case.

6. Robert D. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence on the Cold War’s End: A Reply to Brooks and Wohlforth,” *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Spring 2002), pp. 70–92. English does, however, question the significance of the Soviet Union’s rapid decline, arguing that “most of the leadership” had not cared much about the country’s relative position since “the late 1960s” and was instead “mired in corruption, often oblivious to foreign and even domestic economic trends, and largely content to muddle through indefinitely.” *Ibid.*, p. 72. Doubtless some Soviet officials did not care much about the country’s international position. But our analysis centered on Soviet foreign policy change, and our attention was consequently focused on the country’s foreign policy elite, which analysts agree was keenly focused on the country’s international standing. Moreover, as we show on pp. 21–27 of our article, there are four overlapping reasons why “the Soviet Union’s international position made its grand strategy more sensitive to relative decline than were the strategies of other modern great powers” (p. 21).

7. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence,” p. 81.

The popular language of necessity and sufficiency simply cannot capture the debate among scholars who all agree that such major causal factors as “ideas” and material incentives will always be necessary but insufficient to explain any important outcome. Lacking any better terminology for expressing their claims, however, qualitative researchers often fall prey to what might be called the “straw man bias”: That is, they cast others’ arguments as deterministic in order to highlight the significance of their own otherwise unremarkable finding that a different causal factor is necessary to explain a given event. The result is a literature bedeviled by the imputation to others of obviously untenable claims that some factor wholly determines an outcome, which are then countered by obvious, and therefore banal, counterclaims that some other factor is really necessary for a complete explanation. The costs imposed by this practice become evident when we review English’s specific claims regarding our research.

DEBUNKING A STRAW MAN

Four examples of how English discusses our more detailed analysis serve to make our larger point. First, English stresses that there was no “consensus for strategic retreat” among old thinkers, and they were not all simply “‘free riding’ on initiatives with which they actually agreed.”⁸ We never claimed otherwise. Rather, we found that “a solid consensus emerged in the *political* leadership on the need for downsizing the military and scaling back the costs of empire. . . . Even many elements in the military leadership and the defense-industrial sector agreed on the general need to reduce the imperial burden” (p. 33).⁹

Second, English shows that the new thinkers “held beliefs motivated by ideals,” and their ideas did not spring directly from rising economic constraints.¹⁰ Again, we never suggested otherwise. Instead, we found that “many policy-makers and intellectuals who became idea entrepreneurs did so in part as they learned of the material failings of the Soviet system. And their ideas became saleable to those more skeptical about reform in significant part because they accorded with undeniable material trends” (p. 44).

8. English for some reason repeatedly uses the terms “retreat” or “strategic retreat” instead of “retrenchment” to describe the change in Soviet foreign policy we analyzed. Because we believe that retrenchment—dramatic departure though it was—did not become full-scale “retreat” in most people’s mind until 1989 or later, we studiously avoided this hindsight-laden word.

9. We have added emphasis here to the word “political” because of its great importance in accurately describing our empirical findings, because English obviously misses the significance of this key qualifier, and because he leaves it out when quoting from our article.

10. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence,” p. 88.

Third, English notes that Soviet old thinkers did try to “delay arms control progress” and obstruct “attempts to put Soviet-Western relations on a new footing.”¹¹ We agree. We simply found that “the extraordinary feature of the new evidence concerning Soviet conservatives and hard-liners is not that many of them opposed specific concessions to the West (especially regarding arms control, such as the inclusion of the Oka missile in the INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] talks, counting rules for strategic missiles on bombers, etc.), but how very many of them accepted the basic picture of the crisis facing the country outlined by Gorbachev. . . . Each special interest tried to defend itself while admitting, or acquiescing to, the general need for change. Adding up these particular objections did not by itself amount to a plausible general alternative to retrenchment” (pp. 45–46, 49).

Fourth, English discusses evidence that Gorbachev’s “skill as a political tactician” was helpful in overcoming obstructionism from skeptical officials.¹² We never denied Gorbachev’s political skills, but simply found that highlighting economic constraints was his most effective strategy for convincing those skeptical of foreign policy retrenchment and, in turn, that “the escalating economic costs of maintaining the foreign policy status quo. . . . systematically undercut the ability of Gorbachev’s critics to come up with a compelling general foreign policy alternative” (p. 50).

In each of these instances, English translates our probabilistic finding into an obviously untenable deterministic one. And the same problem applies to our broader analysis. We found that the economic costs of maintaining Moscow’s Cold War foreign policy were rapidly escalating, generating strong and growing incentives to retrench. Throughout his article, English is at pains to show that Gorbachev and company did not always act out of narrow rational calculation but rather deep normative conviction; that they sometimes did not see their policies as a strategic retreat but as a leap forward into a better world. All of this is true, but none of it bears on our findings. Incentives affect behavior by altering the relative costs of various courses of action. Our findings do not presuppose that people respond to incentives with automaton-like efficiency. On the contrary, people have dreams and hopes, they engage in wishful thinking, they seek to defy or deny incentives, they blunder. Could anyone with any knowledge of human affairs think otherwise? Over the longer run, however, changing incentives will tend to push people in certain overall directions.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

In the aggregate, we found that the driving force for embarking on new approaches was less the appeal of a clear forward-looking strategic vision than the need to move away from the costly practices of the past. As William Odom puts it, “The most remarkable thing about the beginnings of Gorbachev’s new military policy [was] the lack of a well-developed analytic basis for it. . . . Its motive, in contrast, was clear. A surprisingly broad consensus existed among most of the Soviet elite that the Soviet economy was in serious trouble and that the burden of military expenditures was much to blame” (p. 115). The same goes for the Soviets’ sporadic efforts to put relations with Eastern Europe on a new footing. The documentary evidence that has come to light strongly endorses Alex Pravda’s initial assessment: “It would be unrealistic to argue that the Gorbachev leadership had any well-defined idea of the relationship they wished to achieve. They were clearer about past features they wanted to avoid and the general direction in which the relationship should evolve.”¹³ What the Soviets wanted was to reduce the escalating economic burden of subsidies and other costs associated with their position in Eastern Europe, but their efforts to do so never added up to a plan for “strategic retreat.” Had the citizens in Eastern Europe not organized to overthrow the existing regimes, the Soviet leadership—Gorbachev included—would have been quite happy to hold on to it. Ultimately, what changed was the Soviet willingness to pay high costs to maintain the status quo.

MOVING BEYOND NECESSITY AND SUFFICIENCY

In the end, much of English’s empirical analysis is effective only at debunking a nonexistent straw man—namely, the argument that economic constraints made retrenchment “unavoidable” and that ideas did “not play a causal role.”¹⁴ Neither in our larger conclusions nor in our evaluation of more discrete patterns of evidence did we advance a deterministic claim. On the contrary, we carefully evaluated a series of probabilistic hypotheses and reached a series of probabilistic findings. Why then does English misinterpret our analysis as being deterministic? We doubt that he deliberately “shifted the goal posts” in his

13. Alex Pravda, “Soviet Policy towards Eastern Europe in Transition,” in Pravda, ed., *The End of Outer Empire: Soviet-East European Relations in Transition, 1985–1990* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 7. Some of this documentary evidence is mentioned in footnote 67 of our article. For more, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Economic Constraints and the End of the Cold War,” in Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming); and Hannes Adomeit, *Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev—An Analysis Based on New Archival Evidence, Memoirs, and Interviews* (Baden Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), chap. 4.

14. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence,” p. 72.

favor to make it easier to critique our argument. Instead, his misinterpretation likely derives from the problem with which we began this section: the terminology of necessary and sufficient conditions. The following quotation is telling: “[This is] not to dismiss the importance of the sources that Brooks and Wohlforth bring to bear or to deny the centrality of material constraints to the way the Cold War ended. Economic decline was clearly a necessary factor in the inception of Soviet reforms, and the authors have given us new insights into how such pressures also played an important facilitating role. But they are still far from establishing material forces as a sufficient condition.”¹⁵

It is easy to understand why English resorts to the terminology of necessary and sufficient conditions. It is a lexicon we all understand. Unfortunately, it is simply incapable of expressing the issues at stake in this case and, indeed, in the larger dialogue concerning the relationship between ideas and material incentives. As we were at pains to stress: “Material incentives are never determinate” and, hence, “the question is clearly no longer whether but rather how and how much ideas matter under different conditions—and how best to model their influence on strategic behavior” (pp. 11, 6).

All qualitative researchers face the challenge of expressing levels of causality. We found that the economic constraints on the Soviet Union were far stronger—and had a greater influence on the turn toward retrenchment—than scholars had realized in the mid-1990s, when the consensus was that material incentives were necessary but insufficient to explain Soviet retrenchment. How should we report this finding? Clearly, material shifts were still necessary and still insufficient, yet more important than understood previously. We struggled with this issue and concluded that the best response was to frame our analysis in probabilistic terms. Thus, we concluded that “given the extent of relative decline, the odds were heavily stacked against those who stood for the status quo” (p. 33) and that “material incentives systematically undermined alternatives to retrenchment” (p. 50). By this we meant that rather than being simply one of many equally probable responses to Soviet material decline, retrenchment was the most likely one. Where we erred, and can accept some of the blame for English misinterpreting our analysis, is that although we carefully expressed our more detailed findings in probabilistic terms, we failed to stress adequately that our overall finding was also probabilistic.

English faced the same challenge of conveying his estimate of causal weight. Stuck in the conceptual framework of necessity and sufficiency, he paid a price: He is not prompted to address the issue of probability, with respect to either

15. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

his own analysis or ours. In the end, English's powerful prose conceals a weak argument: that material incentives are not sufficient to explain the Cold War's end, and thus "new thinking" ideas are necessary to explain it—a finding we never questioned. He states that other Soviet responses to decline were possible. Of course they were, though we concluded they were not likely. How probable does English think these alternatives were? He does not say.

Research Design

Like English, we are totally committed to establishing the empirical details in this case. Yet if we do not get the research design right, evidence alone cannot generate progress.

FACING UP TO ENDOGENEITY

English concludes that our study "is not a close analysis that weighs competing claims and evidence, but rather one that systematically *excludes* evidence of ideas' causal influence."¹⁶ This is wrong. It reflects a profound misunderstanding of our motivation for highlighting the issue of endogeneity and our research design for addressing it.

Endogeneity is clearly one of the most important challenges facing scholars who study the role of ideas, not just in this case but in social science more generally. We focused on this issue not because we believe "that ideas are just hooks, or that all phenomena can be reduced to material underpinnings," but rather because "this key endogeneity issue has been ignored or marginalized in recent empirical work on ideas in international relations" (p. 51). The end of the Cold War is simply a particularly prominent example of this general tendency to give short shrift to endogeneity.

To establish the causal role of ideas, scholars must demonstrate that the intellectual shifts they point to do not have the effects they do because of a changing material environment. Prior to our article, scholars lacked a comprehensive account of how economic constraints influenced Soviet policymakers. As a result, scholars who focused on the role of ideas were simply not in a position to grapple with endogeneity. Our purpose in providing a fuller account of the material pressures facing Soviet policymakers was to make this possible.¹⁷ Some scholars who focus on the role of ideas have recognized this pur-

16. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

17. As we noted, "the objective of a more sophisticated approach to the study of ideas is currently hampered less by the quantity of plausible models than by deficiencies in our understanding of the

pose of our article.¹⁸ English instead misinterprets our effort as being driven by “a framework that too explicitly privileges the material over the ideational.”¹⁹

We see no reason to privilege any causal factor in the abstract. As we stressed, “Ideas and material incentives clearly work together in complex ways, and their interaction varies across cases” (p. 11). The precise nature of this interaction is ultimately an empirical question. Scholars who focus on the role of ideas, English included, are often extremely concerned about where scholars should first direct their attention. But this concern is irrelevant to the literature on the end of Cold War, which has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with establishing the role of ideas.²⁰ English is right; we do not spend much time directly discussing how ideational shifts might have influenced this case. But that is only because scholars’ intensive focus on this question had already provided the baseline for our analysis.

MULTIPLYING OBSERVABLE IMPLICATIONS

A second criticism English directs at our empirical analysis is that it is limited to establishing correlation. This is also wrong. On the contrary, our focus on endogeneity demanded that we test the hypothesis that ideas strongly influenced events independent of material shifts. To accomplish this, we examined as many specific observable implications of this hypothesis as we could. Perhaps because English misinterprets our research design for addressing endogeneity, or because he misreads our analysis as deterministic, he neglects our treatment of these observable implications. They fall into three major categories.

ASSESSMENTS OF MATERIAL CONDITIONS. The conclusion emerging from the ideas literature on this case is that the underlying ideas held by new thinkers caused them to perceive the world very differently from old thinkers. This was a supposition, however, because relatively little data on old thinkers were available until recently. In our analysis, we found that (1) the ways that new thinkers and old thinkers perceived trends in the Soviet economy and the

material incentives facing decisionmakers . . . ideational models are crucially dependent on a careful specification of the material incentives facing Soviet decisionmakers” (p. 6).

18. Nina Tannenwald, for example, notes in a recent paper that “for Brooks and Wohlforth, the proper starting point for assessing the role of ideas is to seek to nail down more tightly how constraining material conditions were. . . . [They] have very productively challenged ideationalists to tighten their arguments.” Tannenwald, “The Role of Ideas and the End of the Cold War: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda on Ideas,” paper presented at The Role of Ideas and the End of the Cold War conference, held at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, June 1–3, 2001.

19. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence,” p. 91.

20. As examples, footnote 2 of our article lists eighteen prominent studies that focus on the role of ideas in this case.

global economy during the 1980s were similar and matched up well with objective indicators; (2) pre-Gorbachev, old-thinking leaders perceived relative decline and the technological lag a few years after these trends accelerated in the late 1970s; and (3) during the 1980s many in the Soviet military concluded that the Soviet Union could not continue to bear the costs of its international position.

Of these observable implications, English appears to question only the last. The evidence he marshals, however, once again only undermines a deterministic claim we did not make: that *all* Soviet military officers concluded that the country could not long bear the costs of its foreign policy. What we actually reported was the striking fact that many of them recollect having reached this assessment. Worthy of note is that the most exhaustively researched analysis of the Soviet military in the Gorbachev era reaches an even stronger conclusion: "In interviews and in their memoirs senior former Soviet military officers uniformly cited the burden of military spending as more than the Soviet economy could bear."²¹

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS AND THE SCOPE OF POLICY CHANGE. The ideas literature on this case suggests that the mounting economic problems facing the Soviet Union had relatively little to do with the rapid escalation in both the scope and depth of foreign policy change. In our analysis we found that (1) many new thinkers and old thinkers cited growing economic constraints when initiating foreign policy changes; (2) growing economic pressures made old thinkers increasingly unable to oppose a major shift in Soviet foreign policy; (3) even for many of the most progressive new thinkers, the process of renouncing old foreign policy stereotypes was difficult and, in turn, the complete abandonment of these stereotypes only occurred in 1988–89; (4) poor Soviet performance relative to the West was a contributing factor to many new thinkers' growing dissatisfaction with Soviet foreign policy; and (5) Gorbachev and large numbers of officials decided to opt for more radical foreign policy retrenchment only after the default- option reforms ("acceleration") had failed to revitalize the Soviet economy.

English's analysis challenges the last two of these observable implications. Regarding new thinkers' intellectual evolution, English again assaults a deterministic claim we never made: namely, that "Western military-economic power" mechanistically drove the intellectual journey of *all* new thinkers.²²

21. William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 225; see also p. 91.

22. English, "Power, Ideas, and New Evidence," p. 79.

What we wrote is that new thinkers' recollections testify to the influence of "either living standards or the military-technological superiority of the West" (p. 44) on their intellectual evolution. In his book, English himself shows how new thinkers "emphasized the gathering 'scientific-technological revolution,' stressed Soviet weakness, and argued for drawing on Western experience to keep pace."²³ So too do the new thinkers whose recollections he cites to support his assertion that "Western military-economic power figure[s] little (if at all)" in many new thinkers' intellectual growth.²⁴ English's critique does nevertheless raise an important point: We should have been clearer that we were much more concerned with how the new thinkers' ideas became saleable to skeptics than with their particular origins.

Regarding the fifth observable implication noted above—the role of decline in the shift to more radical retrenchment—English does not deny that the Soviet Union's most dramatic foreign policy moves were made after 1987. Moreover, he agrees that the "economic downturn in 1988 strengthened arguments for at least some kinds of reductions."²⁵ But he stresses that the shift to radical retrenchment had been Gorbachev's intention all along. We are far less confident than English in analysts' ability to discern Gorbachev's precise expectations and desires at every juncture on the basis of only memoirs and recollections. For this reason, we focused on recently released internal documents in assessing Gorbachev's early policies and the transition to more significant foreign policy change. Moreover, we focused on how other decisionmakers perceived Gorbachev's initial course through 1987 and find striking that many new thinkers *and* old thinkers criticize Gorbachev for initially moving too slowly and hesitantly in reining in imperial expenditures.

IDEAS AND RESPONSES TO MATERIAL DECLINE. A key theme underlying the ideas literature on this case is that because they held different ideas, the new thinkers had dramatically different strategic reactions to observable indications of material change than did old thinkers. In our analysis we found that (1) beginning in the early 1980s, Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and

23. Robert D. English, *The Idea of the West: Gorbachev and Intellectual Origins of New Political Thinking* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 143.

24. Examples of English's sources include Georgy Arbatov, whose *Zatianuvsheesia vyzdorovlenie (1953–1985 gg.) Svidetel'stvo sovremennika* [A prolonged recovery (1953–1985): the testimony of a contemporary] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 1991) details his efforts to direct the leadership's attention to the "scientific technological revolution" in the West; and Aleksandr Yakovlev, whose *Muki prochtenia bytiia: Perestroika—nadezhdy i real'nosti* [The torments of reading existence: Perestroika—hopes and realities] (Moscow: Novosti, 1991) documents his institute's extensive analysis of the Soviet Union's economic and technological decline relative to the West.

25. English, "Power, Ideas, and New Evidence," p. 86.

Konstantin Chernenko each successively labored to constrain Soviet defense spending; (2) decline was already strongly pushing the pre-Gorbachev leadership toward greater restraint in Eastern Europe; (3) not just new thinkers, but also many conservative officials strongly supported greater integration with Western firms to try to reduce the growing technological gap; (4) the economic reform alternatives to Gorbachev's post-acceleration plan—including the one favored by conservatives—were all weighted even more heavily to reducing defense spending; and (5) no evidence of a general alternative to retrenchment has come to light. English questions only the last of these findings. In the next section, we show that this challenge fails.

Concerning our research design, two points emerge. First, we did everything possible to conduct tests that went beyond merely establishing correlation to assess the causal mechanisms in play. Second, we explicitly designed these tests to evaluate the conclusions that emerged from the ideas literature on this case. Our overall finding was that “many of the basic causal mechanisms that are featured in ideational models of this case are to a significant degree endogenous to material changes” (p. 51). Although future research may uncover evidence that calls this conclusion into question, English presents none in his article.

Ideas, Switchmen, and Alternatives

Scholars do not have, and may never devise, ideal procedures for examining the argument that ideas can switch policy onto certain tracks rather than others. Yet for the study of ideas in international relations to progress, the “switchmen” issue must be addressed with rigor.²⁶ A standard way to do so is to look at how people with different ideas responded to material change. That is why we examined new evidence on Soviet hard-liners or old thinkers so carefully, and why English spends so much of his article trying to undermine it.

LOOKING FOR ALTERNATIVES

English agrees that “for all their opposition and delay, most [old thinkers] ultimately acquiesced in Gorbachev's policies.”²⁷ In our article we found that hard-liners acquiesced because they could not come up with a coherent gen-

26. See Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions” (1913), H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

27. English, “Power, Ideas, and New Evidence,” p. 77.

eral alternative strategy to retrenchment and that this outcome, in turn, was intimately related to mounting material constraints. In short, we found the old thinkers' acquiescence to be largely the product of their lack of a good alternative. English, in contrast, sees the old thinkers' acquiescence as being driven by other factors. The key question then becomes: Was there an alternative?

Scholars have looked long and hard for evidence of alternatives to Soviet retrenchment. At the time we wrote our article, none had come to light. If any researcher has the motive and the background to uncover evidence of this kind, it is Robert English. Yet he did not do so. All English is able to offer to support his contention that some hard-liners did, in fact, have an alternative to retrenchment is an excerpt from an interview with Gen. Makhmut Gareev (deputy chief of the General Staff under Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov) that spells out three elements of the "alternative" to retrenchment that he and his boss favored: (1) cut and run from third world dependencies; (2) avoid the costly war in Afghanistan; and (3) cut back on unnecessary military programs by stopping the practice of trying to match the U.S. arsenal weapon for weapon.²⁸ Unmentioned by English are the further reductions that Gareev discusses in the same interview. Gareev reports that he and Ogarkov also concluded that it was necessary to reduce the size of the armed forces; scale back the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe; cut spending on civil defense and strategic defense; halt production of aircraft carriers; and reduce the number of branches of the armed forces from five to three, including abolishing the PVO Strany (Air Defense Forces) as an independent branch.²⁹

Two points need to be made about the "alternative" spelled out by Gareev. First, this was in *Brezhnev's* time. Had such a policy been adopted then, it would have been seen as a major retrenchment. After all, it was substantively much more than Gorbachev accomplished in the 1985–88 period that English views as such a dramatic era of change. In short, the Gareev "alternative" that English cites is actually a hard-liner version of retrenchment in hindsight.

Second, also unmentioned by English is that in the same interview, Gareev goes on to argue that the growing technological gap necessitated a drastic Soviet response: a crash course of investing resources and scientists in the development of military technology on the same scale as the Herculean effort to

28. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

29. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insider's Account* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 62. See also Makhmut Gareev, "Voenno-tekhnicheskaia politika: Retrospektivnyi analiz," *Problemy prognozirovaniia*, No. 3 (March 1996), pp. 163–167.

match U.S. thermonuclear and missile capabilities in the 1950s.³⁰ Any Soviet leader presented with such a proposal would likely have mentioned to Gareev that 80 percent of Soviet expenditures on science already went to military purposes; that increasing the proportion yet further was unlikely to bring about a reversal of the growing military technological gap with the United States; and that it would impose major opportunity costs on the general health of the Soviet economy.³¹ Extremely telling on this score is that in this same interview, Gareev himself admits that many of the reforms that he and Ogarkov favored “were doomed because our proposals were detached from an overall restructuring of our society, our political system, and our economy at large.”³²

EVALUATING EVIDENCE ABOUT POLICY ALTERNATIVES: FOUR GENERAL GUIDELINES
English’s effort to marshal evidence of an alternative aside, he also attempts to challenge our finding in several other ways. These critiques ignore four guidelines that need to be considered, however, when addressing the switchmen issue by examining the nature of opposition and policy alternatives.

First, place the nature of the opposition in context. In examining the opposition to Gorbachev’s foreign policy changes, we kept in mind the vast and well-established literatures in social science that tell us that major policy departures always lead to significant opposition due to factors such as bureaucratic interests and institutional structures. The question is not the existence of opposition but its scope and effectiveness given the magnitude of change and the constituencies that it threatens. Reorienting fundamentally the foreign policy course that the Soviet Union had followed for a generation was obviously a dramatic change. And given that the country’s entire political economy was in critical ways geared toward the production of military power, retrenchment clearly threatened major constituencies. Had experts on Soviet politics and international relations been asked in the early 1990s what evidence of internal opposition to Gorbachev’s foreign policy strategy would come to light, most surely would have expected evidence of a major alternative course “waiting in the wings.”³³ Measured against this expectation, what we find most noteworthy

30. Ellman and Kontorovich, *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, p. 63. Gareev stresses that the technological gap was most pronounced in “reconnaissance technologies, navigation equipment, target identification systems, electronic countermeasures, computers—all the equipment which uses electronics.”

31. The source for the 80 percent estimate is Mikhail S. Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 215.

32. Quoted in Ellman and Kontorovich, *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System*, p. 61.

33. This was indeed the expectation of one of us writing at that time. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” p. 125.

about the evidence that emerged subsequently is the weakness of the opposition it reveals. Contention concerned the terms, rather than the advisability, of retrenchment.

English's reply frequently reflects a preoccupation with the specific details of individual decisions. When the analytical lens is concentrated on such finely grained decisions, differences of opinion are almost always evident. This is frequently the stuff of policymaking, and it is not surprising that participants focus on it when revisiting their roles in larger events. But explaining, for example, why the Soviets agreed to the inclusion of the Oka missile in the INF talks in 1987 is not the same as explaining why they opted for a grand strategy of retrenchment. We found the general pattern emerging from the dozens of critical decisions that add up to the end of the Cold War to be consistent with our analysis. English, by contrast, interprets nearly any disagreement and disgruntlement from old thinkers about particular policy decisions as evidence of "concerted" opposition.³⁴ This is a standard of evidence that makes mountains out of what in a larger context are surprisingly small molehills.

Second, consider the free-rider problem carefully. By free riding we do not mean that old thinkers could let Gorbachev do the tough work of implementing retrenchment policies with which they fully agreed. Rather, it means that most of the old thinkers were not in positions where they were forced to confront the trade-offs implicit in any effort to deal with the Soviet Union's growing problems. They could complain about Gorbachev's course without ultimately having to face the painful choices between guns and butter and between the present and the future. For example, English finds it very significant that Ligachev, in Odom's estimation, "wanted reform but not at the expense of the Soviet Union's international military status."³⁵ Odom is no doubt correct on this score. English does not mention that Odom goes on to quote Ligachev himself that "we faced the task of curtailing military spending . . . the economy could not breath normally with a military budget that comprised 18 percent of the national income."³⁶ In short, Ligachev wanted to slash defense without sacrificing military power. Doubtless Gorbachev would have loved to have accomplished this. Who wouldn't? Those in opposition are free to advance incompatible policy preferences without having to worry about how to resolve them.

34. English, "Power, Ideas, and New Evidence," p. 76.

35. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 92.

36. *Ibid.*

Third, bear in mind that leaders will be prone to select lieutenants who agree with their basic assessments. Of course, these lieutenants may end up supporting new policy departures simply out of careerism. This is the basis upon which English objects to the many statements that we presented in our article from hard-liners that no alternative to retrenchment existed. To make this point, English focuses on Marshal Dmitry Yazov—Gorbachev’s minister of defense who was also a leading participant in the August 1991 anti-Gorbachev coup—who, as we quoted in our article, has stated unequivocally that there was no alternative to retrenchment and that the Soviet Union had to follow such a course (p. 46). English is skeptical of these statements and relies on a biography of Marshal Yazov penned by a like-minded friend and fellow officer, Lt. Gen. Leonid Ivashov, to try to undercut them.³⁷

How can we determine whether a lieutenant’s retrospective claims of support for a new policy shift are the product of careerism, as English claims is the case for Yazov? There are three basic steps to take, none of which English follows in his article: (1) examine evidence about the lieutenants from before they were appointed; (2) after they are appointed, examine what kinds of analyses and research they undertook before key policy shifts are undertaken and implemented; and (3) examine how they convinced others of the advisability of policy shifts. In each of these three dimensions, the evidence on Yazov from the very Ivashov source that English relies upon points to the significance of growing economic constraints. First, Ivashov makes clear that, as we reported in our article, Yazov and many of his fellow officers were initially enthusiastic about Gorbachev. They recognized that “the arms race and the military-strategic parity we had attained was exacting a stiff price” and associated Gorbachev with their “yearning for radical changes.”³⁸ Second, Ivashov notes that after he was appointed minister of defense, Yazov had the Institute of Military History conduct an analysis of all military reforms in Russian and Soviet history dating back to the early sixteenth century. Ivashov reports that Yazov was struck by “the interdependence between the size and structure of the armed forces and the state’s economic potential” and, of all the military reforms over the centuries, he was most compelled by the major troop cuts carried out after the Crimean War by czarist Defense Minister Dmitry Miliutin as part of a strategy for modernizing Russia.³⁹ Third, Ivashov notes that economic constraints were, precisely as we argued, at the center of the arguments that Yazov deployed to

37. Leonid Ivashov, *Marshal Iazov. Rokovoi avgust 91-go: Pravda o “putche”* [Marshal Yazov. That fateful August of 1991: The truth about the putsch] (Vel’sk: Vel’ti, 1993).

38. Ivashov, *Marshal Iazov*, pp. 9–10.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

persuade his military colleagues of the necessity of painful reductions.⁴⁰ In the end, the Yazov case is simply a single instance of the general research finding that we reported: Old thinkers acquiesced in or abetted retrenchment because material conditions undermined any effort to do otherwise.

Fourth, when examining how incentives are likely to affect retrospective claims concerning the existence of policy alternatives, apply those incentives to all individuals, not just a select group. Given his portrayal of hard-liners, the absence of any evidence of an alternative to retrenchment is a challenging puzzle for English. He argues that hard-liners face strong incentives to conceal all such evidence of alternatives. English's reading of incentives is highly questionable, however, and he also does not apply these incentives in a consistent manner.

If anything, it would seem that hard-liners now face strong incentives to show that "I proposed a more sensible course that would have worked, but Gorbachev ignored it." After all, by 1999, when the interviews that we cited were conducted, the political climate in Russia had changed dramatically from the immediate years after the 1991 coup, when the putschists faced trial and jail. Nostalgia for the Soviet Union and regret at the loss of great power status were growing. If an old-thinking veteran had taken active measures to put forward an alternative to retrenchment, why not bring forth evidence to this effect? He would at least be able to demonstrate that he had tried—that he had used his position in the government to fight for the right course.

We found evidence of one old-thinking policy veteran who did take this course: Oleg Baklanov. He, as we noted, went to Gorbachev with a memo arguing that defense was not a major burden on the Soviet economy. Although certainly not a full-fledged alternative to retrenchment, this represented a move in this direction by trying to undercut what was, as English admits, Gorbachev's strongest argument for proceeding with retrenchment. As we noted, Baklanov's initiative went nowhere—it did not provide a focal point for resistance to retrenchment. Why? We argue that it was because Baklanov's argument that defense was not a major economic burden was simply not credible—discussions at this time were carried out on the assumption that the military

40. English quotes at length from Ivashov's description of the military's disgruntlement over Gorbachev's unilateral conventional force reductions, announced in his famous speech to the United Nations General Assembly in December 1988. Missing from the passage that English quotes is this key sentence from Ivashov's text: "At meetings of the [defense ministry's] collegium and other gatherings he [Yazov] forcefully implemented the policy of reducing the military forces, and set forth the reasons—mainly economic—why we needed to go forward with disarmament." *Ibid.*, p. 27.

burden was punishing and had to be addressed.⁴¹ Large numbers of individuals were unlikely to stake their political careers on a patently wrong argument, and hence it is no surprise that there is little documentary evidence of efforts that measured up even to what Baklanov attempted.

English, by contrast, argues that the dearth of Baklanov-type evidence has nothing to do with mounting economic constraints, but instead is due to the fact that all old thinkers not only face strong incentives to conceal all evidence showing the existence of alternatives but also have been completely effective in doing so. If this is the case, then how does English explain Baklanov? English's answer is that "Baklanov has simply been more forthright than the others about his opposition to new thinking."⁴² But this raises a key question: Why does English's reading of current incentives not apply to Baklanov—whose revelations have done nothing to harm his sterling reputation among his comrades as a Soviet patriot? In the end, English is right to raise the issue of incentives but apparently wants to have it both ways: Old thinkers *can*, in fact, be trusted, but only if they provide evidence that matches up with his particular reading of events.

Conclusion

Robert English possesses the talent, knowledge, and incentive to subject our article to extraordinarily thorough scrutiny. Our analysis passes this tough test. English endorses our basic empirical finding concerning the nature and magnitude of Soviet material decline. On the crucial issue of endogeneity, he acknowledges that Soviet economic decline constituted the most powerful argument against opponents of foreign policy retrenchment. English was unable to find any evidence of an alternative to retrenchment and fails to undermine our bottom-line conclusion that changing material incentives made retrenchment the most likely policy response. Ultimately, his critique falls short because it does not come to grips with our probabilistic framework, and so is largely devoted to marshaling evidence against deterministic claims we never made.

Needless to say, some of English's criticisms hit home. Our analysis has the advantage of being simple, easily exportable to other cases, and readily

41. As Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, p. 91, notes, "In the first half of the 1980s a rather wide and informal consensus was taking shape among all sectors of the party that . . . dramatic action, particularly reductions in military spending, was imperative to deal with the impending crises. The officer corps shared this view with party conservatives and reformers alike."

42. English, "Power, Ideas, and New Evidence," p. 109, n. 40.

falsifiable, but English does underscore its inevitable limitations. Obviously, no single factor can adequately explain everything that is interesting about this case. In addition, English rightly criticizes us for implying that our analysis applied equally to the origins of new thinking and its actual translation into policy. We needed to be much clearer that, in raising the issue of endogeneity, our focus was on the latter question. His sharp criticisms also compelled us to clarify the sets of observable implications that we examined to evaluate our causal inferences. Finally, his overall response reflects a misunderstanding of our probabilistic framework for evaluating causal weight that has prompted us to articulate our approach more forthrightly here.

In the end, three things are clear. First, ideas are clearly part of the explanation for the way the Cold War ended. To be sure, the end of the Cold War did not become the most important case study of the role of ideas in international relations because scholars surmised that ideas merely played a role. The event's landmark status in the study of ideas clearly owes something to the supposition that ideas were unusually or extraordinarily important. Our research does reveal that this initial supposition has not been borne out by the latest evidence, which shows that retrenchment can no longer be considered to be simply one of many equally probable responses to material decline.

Second, although the Cold War's end is well documented, much archival evidence is not yet available. As English has argued elsewhere, such documents should not be seen as the final answer—particularly in the Soviet context.⁴³ But they may well provide the wherewithal to render far more confident judgments. And they may well undermine our central findings.

Finally, whether we like it or not, the field of international relations learns about theories from events like the end of the Cold War. One of the main reasons for our rigorous focus on research design and our search for greater precision on expressing causal weight is to ensure that further releases of evidence do generate progress. By so doing, we have translated our basic finding into a series of detailed predictions about patterns of evidence that will emerge.⁴⁴ If, by contrast, we stick with old thinking on qualitative research, then all we will have are ambiguous claims about this or that cause “mattering” or being “necessary.” And then every archive in Russia could be wide open for a decade, and nothing resembling progress would result.

43. Robert D. English, “Sources, Methods, and Competing Perspectives on the End of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 283–294.

44. See William C. Wohlforth, “Reality Check: Revising Theories of International Politics in Response to the End of the Cold War,” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (July 1998), pp. 675–679.