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**Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott. *At the Highest Levels. The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War.* Little, Brown and Company. Boston-Toronto-London, 1993.498 pages. Hard cover. Dust jacket. \$24.95.**

Right on the front fold of the dust jacket we read about the basics of this book: "For the first time, the secret messages and telephone calls between Bush and Gorbachev, Baker and Shevardnadze, and the closed-door meetings at the Kremlin, White House, Pentagon, CIA, and KGB."

The book aims to describe the fateful and important events of three full years: 1989, 1990, and 1991. The authors call these years "three eventful years," and a detailed chronology of the relationships between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. is given on the inside covers, front and back.

The two authors, one of whom is an historian (Beschloss) and one a journalist (Talbott) are also authors, separately, of several books each. They based this book under review here primarily on interviews with the main characters of this unusual world drama, just to mention a few: Bush, Baker, Scowcroft, Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, Besmertnykh, and many other people in the entourage of the two poles: Washington, D.C., and Moscow, including advisors, experts, and even interpreters as well as translators of important messages and documents.

That's why this book is not "history" (or is it?), but it is labeled as the "inside story." It concludes at the end of the year 1991, when the U.S.S.R. expired and, we assume, the Cold War ended.

The main characters, of course, are George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, all the others are only "helpers and advisers." However, after reading the whole book, one might get the impression that, at least at certain moments, the more active manager of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the downgrading of the Soviet Empire, was really not Gorbachev, but his foreign minister Shevardnadze. As we know, Gorbachev is now a private citizen in Moscow, but Eduard Shevardnadze—this is 1993—is the President of independent Georgia. Intentionally or not, subconsciously or not, Shevardnadze seems to have hastened the end of the largest empire in the history of the world, the U.S.S.R.

The Baltics, particularly Lithuania, play an important role in the downfall of the Soviet Empire. It seems that Lithuania's quiet but firm determination to become totally independent was the proverbial "beginning of the end." No matter how Gorbachev and company opposed this Lithuanian determination to become totally independent, no matter how he threatened, the Lithuanians simply refused to listen to him and those of similar ilk. This, of course, presented a very awkward situation for Bush: On the one hand, the U.S. had never recognized the illegal occupation and annexation of the Baltic countries, but on the other hand, Bush tried to be a nice guy to Gorbachev. And that is one of the most intriguing parts of the book: What kind of Bush we see in public, and what kind of president, and man, he is behind closed doors.

Some people are really inclined to think that Bush really waffled on this question, and, furthermore, that his ambiguous position here could have contributed to a certain degree to his losing the presidency in the 1992 election. Who knows?

Since many of us lived through the events described in this book, the first impression is that the book is well written, and all the facts mentioned here appear to be correct. This leads one to believe that the two authors must have been very careful in constructing and carrying out their interviews. At the same time, their style is narrative in its best sense, and the narration is very often illustrated with many direct quotations. Reading these interesting direct quotations, we are inclined to HEAR the characters really speaking as distinct individuals, in their own style, although, of course, they all talk in English, with a very few Russian words thrown in. It is not clear, from the book itself, who were the interpreters and the translators of various direct quotes attributed to Gorbachev and company.

One of the most interesting events, naturally, is the August 1991 coup, or putsch. But here, unfortunately, this book does not give anything new: all of what we read here, I recall vividly, was "in the news," in the press, on television, on the radio. I wonder why the authors—they interviewed Gorbachev himself—did not investigate the rumors that Gorbachev had "allowed," or "permitted," or even had helped to organize the putsch himself in order to find out which side will win: the

reactionaries (Yanaev and Co.), or the reformers (Yeltsin and Co.). Apparently, the authors did not manage, after the coup, to interview the people involved.

There will be, I am sure, hundreds of books written about the three very eventful years (1989,1990,1991), but *At the Highest Levels* will always remain as one of the most intriguing ones. It really reads like a thriller which it surely is.

B.S.V.