

Goodbye, Zbig Guy!

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Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the truly global strategic thinkers of the past half-century, passed away last spring. As President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor from 1977–1981, he reoriented American foreign policy, profoundly affecting the world order.

The call in the fall of 1975 from Professor Brzezinski's secretary was a surprise. As a first-year graduate student at Columbia University, I was taking his large lecture class "The Dynamics of Soviet Politics." Since I had the highest grade on the mid-term exam, I was being offered the position of his research assistant. This was Brzezinski's egalitarian way of selecting his student assistant.

I was honored, and of course accepted. Working for "Zbig" plunged me into an illuminating new world. Through Brzezinski's Research Institute on International Change at Columbia and the Trilateral Commission he organized in 1973, he had gathered a group of experts who were formulating a new direction for American foreign policy. In the fall of 1975 he quietly became the key foreign policy advisor to dark horse Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter. As Zbig's assistant, I was included in the meetings, briefings and travel with this group of policy scholars as they developed the thinking that would later shape President Carter's approach.

In the mid-1970s, through the Cold War "détente," the United States and Soviet Union had stabilized their relations to avoid the kind of crises of the 1950s and 1960s that sometimes led to the brink of nuclear war. To avoid conflict, both sides adopted a hands-off policy. We limited our interference in Soviet internal human rights issues, domination of Eastern Europe and meddling abroad. The USSR accepted the strong NATO military presence in Europe and U.S. economic influence. Through bilateral arms control agreements, nuclear weapons were capped at about 50,000 between the Soviet and Western alliances.

A Polish émigré, Zbig was the son of Polish diplomat Tadeusz Brzeziński, who had been posted in Germany prior to World War II and then in the USSR under Stalin. In his early years, Zbig experienced the rise of the Nazis, then saw Stalin kill millions of his countrymen and crush independent Poland and other Eastern European countries, witnessing the dangers of these totalitarian regimes. He married Emilie Benes, grand-niece of Edvard Benes, Czechoslovakia's last democratic president prior to communist domination. Based on his experiences and analysis of global trends, Brzezinski had arrived at a different approach to foreign policy than the prevailing détente.

In mid-1976, this approach and its influence on Jimmy Carter was not yet recognized. While I was working in Washington that summer, the media and foreign policy establishment were mystified

about Carter's approach to foreign policy. Since Carter had served only as governor of Georgia, there was little on record that hinted of his views. As the Democratic convention neared that August, the consensus was that, if elected, Carter would continue the détente approach of presidents Nixon and Ford.

Having spent the prior months with Zbig and his policy group, I doubted that would be the case. Brzezinski believed the détente policy supported a status quo allowing the Soviet Union to engage in human rights abuses, dominate Eastern Europe, invade neighboring countries like Afghanistan, and build influence and military power in far-flung countries like Angola. It froze the nuclear arms race, but at a dangerously high level. Zbig and his colleagues had developed different ideas, including strengthening U.S. alliances with like-minded democratic societies in Japan and Western Europe, opposing Soviet foreign military adventures and exploring common interests with mainland China.

At the request of *The Washington Post*, I wrote a long article about Zbig's thinking and its influence on candidate Carter, which was published just before the 1976 Democratic convention. I outlined a fundamentally different approach that would likely reorient American foreign policy if Carter were elected. Key ingredients I described were a stronger focus on human rights and an effort to combat Soviet totalitarianism.

The rest, as they say, is history. Carter was elected, and Zbig became the guiding intellect behind his foreign policy. Right after Carter took office in 1977, he presented the Soviets with a proposal for deep cuts in nuclear weapons, while pressing the Soviet Union for improvements in human rights.

Much of what came afterwards—the rise of Gorbachev, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, normalization of U.S. relations with China and reductions of U.S. and Russian arsenals from 50,000 nuclear weapons to about 14,000 today—had roots in Brzezinski's thinking.

An effective American foreign policy strategist must have a sharp analytical mind, accurately gauge global trends, understand U.S. power and resources, enlist other experts and have the political skills to apply his or her knowledge and personal experiences to shape policy. Zbig was such a man, and the redirection of American foreign policy in the mid-1970s is largely his legacy.



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