The Gorbachevs vacationing at Foros, August 1990.
“GORBACHEV IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND,” he said to me, referring to himself, as he often does, in the third person. I had begun working on his biography in 2005, and a year later he asked how it was going. “Slowly,” I apologized. “That’s alright,” he said, “Gorbachev is hard to understand.”

He has a sense of humor. And he was correct. The world is deeply divided when it comes to understanding Gorbachev. Many, especially in the West, regard him as the greatest statesman of the second half of the twentieth century. In Russia, however, he is widely despised by those who blame him for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic crash that accompanied it. Admirers marvel at his vision and his courage. Detractors, including some of his former Kremlin comrades, accuse him of everything from naïveté to treason. The one thing they all agree upon is that he almost single-handedly changed his country and the world.

Before Gorbachev took power in March 1985, the Soviet Union was one of the world’s two superpowers. By 1989 he had transformed the Soviet system. By 1990 he, more than anyone else, had ended the cold war. At the end of 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving him a president without a country.

He did not act alone. The sad state of the Soviet system in 1985 prompted Gorbachev’s Kremlin colleagues to choose him to embark on reforms, although he ended up going much farther than they intended.
He had liberal Russian allies who welcomed his far-reaching reforms and worked to support them, but then chose Boris Yeltsin to lead them to the promised land. He had hard-line Soviet adversaries who resisted him, covertly at first, then openly and all-out. He had personal rivals, especially Yeltsin, whom he tormented and who tormented him in turn, before ultimately administering the coup de grâce to both Gorbachev and the USSR. Western leaders doubted Gorbachev, then embraced him, and finally abandoned him, refusing him the economic assistance he desperately needed. And, perhaps most important, he had to deal with Russia herself, with her traditional authoritarian and anti-Western ways: after rejecting both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, she finally embraced Vladimir Putin.

As Communist party general secretary, Gorbachev had the power to change almost everything. Moreover, he was unique among his peers. Other Soviet citizens, some of them in fairly high places, shared his values, but almost none at the very top. The only three Politburo members who backed him almost to the end, Aleksandr Yakovlev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Vadim Medvedev, were in a position to do so only because Gorbachev appointed them or kept them on. Longtime British Soviet expert Archie Brown has written, “There is absolutely no reason to suppose that any conceivable alternative to Gorbachev in the mid-1980s would have turned Marxism-Leninism on its head and fundamentally changed both his country and the international system in an attempt to reverse a decline which did not pose an immediate threat either to the [Soviet] system or to him.”

The late Russian scholar Dmitry Furman framed Gorbachev’s uniqueness more broadly: he was “the only politician in Russian history who, having full power in his hands, voluntarily opted to limit it and even risk losing it, in the name of principled moral values.” For Gorbachev to have resorted to force and violence to hold on to power would have been “a defeat.” In the light of Gorbachev’s principles, Furman continued, “his final defeat was a victory”—although, one must add, it certainly didn’t feel that way to Gorbachev at the time.

How did Gorbachev become Gorbachev? How did a peasant boy, whose high-flown tribute to Stalin won a high school prize, turn into the Soviet system’s gravedigger? “God alone knows,” lamented Gor-
bachev’s longtime prime minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, who eventually turned against him. One of Gorbachev’s close aides, Andrei Grachev, called him “a genetic error of the system.” Gorbachev described himself as “a product” of that system and its “anti-product.” But how did he turn out to be both?

How did he become Communist party boss despite the most rigorous imaginable arrangement of checks and guarantees designed to guard against someone like him? How, asks Grachev, did “a not entirely normal country end up with a leader with normal moral reflexes and common sense?” An American psychiatrist who profiled foreign leaders for the Central Intelligence Agency remained “mystified” as to how such a “rigid system” could produce such an “innovative and creative” leader.

What changes did Gorbachev seek for his country when he took power in 1985? Did he favor merely moderate economic reforms, as he said at the time, only to be radicalized by their lack of results? Or did he seek from the start to liquidate totalitarianism, concealing his aim because it was anathema to the Politburo members who selected him? What inspired him in the end to try to transform Communism in the USSR? What made him think he could transform a dictatorship into a democracy, a command economy into a market economy, a super-centralized unitary state into a genuine Soviet federation, and a cold war into a new world order based on the renunciation of force—all at the same time, and by what he called “evolutionary” means? What possessed him to think he could overcome Russian political, economic, and social patterns dating back centuries in a few short years: tsarist authoritarianism morphing into Soviet totalitarianism, long stretches of near-slavish obedience to authority punctuated by occasional bursts of bloody rebellion, minimal experience with civic activity, including compromise and consensus, no tradition of democratic self-organization, no real rule of law? As Gorbachev himself would later say of the Russian mind-set that thwarted him: “Our Russian mentality required that the new life be served up on a silver platter immediately, then and there, without reforming society.”

Did Gorbachev have a plan? What was his strategy for transforming his country and the world? He didn’t have either, critics claim. But no one did, admirers reply; no one could have had a blueprint for transforming his country and the world simultaneously.
Whether or not Gorbachev was a master strategist, wasn’t he a brilliant tactician? How else could he have gotten a Politburo majority opposed to his most radical reforms to approve them? Was he nonetheless “insufficiently decisive and consistent,” as one of his closest aides, Georgy Shakhnazarov, said? How could he have been, when the risk he ran for six years was sudden ouster and even imprisonment?

How did Gorbachev react when many of his own Kremlin comrades turned against him and so many of his own appointees mounted a coup against him in August 1991? Or was it he who betrayed them, leading them to believe he aimed to modernize the Soviet system, but then contributing to its destruction?

Was Gorbachev vengeful and unforgiving? Does that help to explain his fateful inability to get along with Boris Yeltsin? But he forgave or forgot some of his closest aides’ sharp criticism of him and kept them by his side at the foundation he established after losing power in 1991. “I can’t bring myself to take vengeance on anyone,” he said late in life. “I can’t not forgive.”

Given all the obstacles to success, wasn’t Gorbachev a utopian idealist? Not at all, he insisted: “I assure you that starry-eyed dreaminess is not characteristic of Gorbachev.” Yet he himself recalled, “The wise Moses was right to make the Jews roam the desert for forty years... to get rid of the legacy of Egyptian slavery.”

As leaders go, especially Soviet leaders, Gorbachev was a remarkably decent man—too decent, many Russians and some Westerners have said, too unwilling to use force when force was needed to save the new democratic Soviet Union he was creating. Why, when his enemies were willing to use force to crush the freedom he had introduced, was he unwilling to use force to save it? Was he intellectually convinced, after all the blood that had flowed in Russia’s history, especially in the wars and purges of the twentieth century, that more must not be shed? Was it an emotional aversion based on personal exposure to the terrible cost of war and violence?

Gorbachev’s decency showed in his family life. His wife, Raisa, was a woman of intellect and good taste (even though Nancy Reagan didn’t think so). Unlike too many politicians, Gorbachev loved and cherished his wife, and, rare for a Soviet boss, he was a committed and involved
father to his daughter, and grandfather to his two granddaughters. What, then, made him feel, after his wife’s agonizing death from leukemia at the age of sixty-seven, that, as he put it, “I am guilty. I am the one who did her in”?14

If Gorbachev was indeed unique, if his actions differed so drastically from what other leaders would have done in his place, then his character is central to explaining his behavior. But his character is hard to define. Was he a great listener, as some say, a basically nonideological man willing to learn from real life? Or was he a man who didn’t know how to stop talking? Gorbachev was extraordinarily self-confident, and self-woundingly narcissistic, according to Aron Belkin, a leading Soviet psychiatrist who didn’t know Gorbachev personally, but whose diagnosis one of Gorbachev’s closest aides, Anatoly Chernyaev, found credible.15 But if narcissism is a spectrum at the “healthiest end” of which are “egotism” and “extreme self-confidence,” is that so unusual among political leaders?16 Whatever term one uses, Gorbachev was extraordinarily sure of himself. But when asked what characteristic he found most off-putting in another person to whom he has just been introduced, Gorbachev answered, “Self-confidence.” And what in general irritated him most in other people? “Haughtiness.”17 Did he feel threatened by other self-assured men? Or did he see himself in others and not like what he saw?

Aleksandr Yakovlev, Gorbachev’s closest collaborator in the Soviet leadership, but somewhat estranged from him in later years, thought Gorbachev found himself hard to understand. Yakovlev felt at times that Gorbachev “was afraid to look into himself, afraid to communicate candidly with himself, afraid to learn something he did not know and did not want to know.” According to Yakovlev, Gorbachev “always needed a response, praise, support, sympathy, and understanding, which served as fuel for his vanity and self-esteem, as well as for his creative acts.”18

If so, how did Gorbachev react when, within sight of the mountain-top, he had to watch so much of his grand vision evaporate around him? Was he in fact a truly great leader? Or was he a tragic hero brought low in part by his own shortcomings, but even more by the unyielding forces he faced?