The heresthetical maneuver that launched Yeltsin to the apex of power in Russia is a classic representation of Riker’s argument. Yeltsin reformulated Russia’s central problem, offered a radically new solution through a unique combination of issues, and engaged in an uncompromising, negative campaign against his political opponents. This allowed Yeltsin to form an unusual coalition of different stripes and ideologies that resulted in his election as Russia’s first president. His rise to power, while certainly facilitated by favorable timing, should also be credited to his own political skill and strategic choices.

In addition to the institutional reforms introduced at the June party conference, the summer of 1988 was marked by two other significant developments in Soviet politics. In August, Gorbachev presented a draft plan for the radical reorganization of the Secretariat, which was to be replaced by six commissions, each dealing with a specific policy area. The Politburo’s adoption of this plan in September was a major political blow for Ligachev, who had used the Secretariat as his principal power base. Once viewed as the second most powerful man in the party, Ligachev now found himself chairman of the CC commission on agriculture, a position with little real influence.¹ His ideological portfolio was transferred to Gorbachev’s ally, Vadim Medvedev, who
belonged to the new group of soft-line reformers. His colleague Alexander Yakovlev assumed responsibility for foreign policy.

According to Anatolii Chernyaev, Gorbachev’s close adviser, the decision to curtail the Secretariat’s power came in response to Ligachev’s public and increasingly critical view of the reform process. Gorbachev’s surprise counteroffensive against the hard-liners also entailed removal of a few conservatives from the party leadership, including Gromyko and Solomentsev from the Politburo, and Demichev and Dolgikh from among the candidate members. By demoting Ligachev, Gorbachev neutralized one of his most prominent conservative challengers, but he also eliminated the traditional target of Yeltsin’s political attacks, thus leaving himself exposed. With the conservatives in the Kremlin weakened, Gorbachev now had to bear sole responsibility for the consequences—and inadequacies—of the reform process.

National revival, combined with increased freedom of association, had led to the emergence that summer of a series of popular front movements in the three Baltic republics. These fronts initially represented themselves as committed supporters of perestroika. However, demonstrations that August made it clear that the groups endorsed reforms far beyond anything envisioned by Gorbachev. In addition to questioning the legality of the incorporation of the Baltic republics into the Soviet Union and insisting on the return of their historical national symbols, the fronts demanded full political and economic sovereignty for their republics as guaranteed by the Soviet constitution.

Gorbachev was not prepared to acknowledge the republics’ right to secede, but he also could not reject outright their claim for sovereignty, which was a central principle of Soviet federalism. Palatable as the idea was to a broad political spectrum, “sovereignty” became an effective slogan for mobilization. Radical nationalists viewed it as the first step toward their long-term goal of independence, while moderate Communists believed that they were returning to fundamental Soviet principles. The call for greater autonomy was therefore compatible with both the goal of preserving the Union and that of dismantling it.

On November 16, 1988, the Estonian Supreme Soviet became the first to declare a republic’s sovereignty and the primacy of republican over central laws. The issue of republican sovereignty suddenly posed a new threat to an already-fragile consensus among the top leadership behind Gorbachev’s reform program. Gorbachev strongly objected to republican bids for legal supremacy over Moscow, warning of ensuing
chaos and a conservative backlash. Acquiescence to the nationalists’ demands would radicalize the reform agenda to such a point that it would become unacceptable to the remaining conservatives. In Gorbachev’s view, national radicals in the republics were playing into the hands of conservatives in Moscow, destabilizing the Soviet Union and making it ungovernable.

In an effort to consolidate his supporters, Gorbachev accused both radicals and conservatives of antiperestroika positions. During a speech in Krasnoyarsk in late September, Gorbachev fumed: “What the champions of extreme views have in common is the fact that both of them confuse people and sow doubts among them regarding the meaning and purpose of perestroika.” Calling these extreme views “scientifically erroneous and politically irresponsible,” he confidently asserted that “we will not let ourselves be diverted from our chosen path.”

But it was during this same visit to Krasnoyarsk that Gorbachev suddenly encountered a reaction different from any he had become accustomed to during his previous travels across the country. City residents, with whom he was meeting, openly expressed scorn and hostility over the lack of basic food items in the shops. Yeltsin’s warnings of popular dissatisfaction with perestroika’s failure to produce material results caught up with Gorbachev on the streets of the Siberian city: “I heard much criticism about the food supply at that time . . . and had plenty to think about on my return from Krasnoyarsk. . . . Why were we spending billions on industry, but only petty sums on the things necessary for a comfortable life?” By the end of 1988, as Yeltsin was preparing to jump into his first election campaign, food rationing was already being introduced in some parts of the country.

Yeltsin had risen to national prominence while governing Moscow, and so the Soviet capital was a natural place from which to revive his flagging career. He registered as a candidate for the congressional seat in Moscow’s first territorial election district. The district spanned the whole city, encompassing more than six million voters.

The campaign got off the ground with the publication of a Yeltsin interview in the holiday issue of the daily Kommomolskaia Pravda, under the title “Let Us Not Forget about a Human.” Conducted by Pavel Voshchanov, Yeltsin’s future press secretary, the interview was
confined to just two topics, the economy and social justice. Yeltsin immediately emphasized the connection between the two: “People were constantly told that in our humane country everything is done exclusively for their benefit. But what did they see in practice? Waiting lines of many years for any kind of housing. Empty counters. Extortion, corruption, and money-grubbing. The self-satisfied flourishing of bureaucracy. It all began to seem deceitful and economically unjustified.”

Responding to Ligachev’s earlier charge of wage-leveling, Yeltsin was emphatic: “I am not in favor of leveling! No way. I am opposed to hierarchical benefits. . . . I think material benefits should be identically accessible to everyone. In other words, a minister’s ruble should be no different than the janitor’s ruble.” Yeltsin also challenged Ligachev’s argument that party apparatchiks were given privileges to compensate for their lower wages: “A system of double privileges emerges in society: on one hand you have higher wages, and on the other you have more goods for those wages.” In his concluding message, Yeltsin reiterated the central theme of his future campaign: “Without a staunch, daily struggle for social justice, we could once again find ourselves hostages to bureaucracy.”

It was a perfect example of Riker’s dominance principle. Yeltsin noticed that his objection to elite perks generated a swell of support among reform-minded party members at the core of Gorbachev’s coalition. The denials of party bosses rang hollow and hypocritical in contrast. Unable to offer a persuasive rejoinder to Yeltsin’s argument, they instead opted for the kind of strategy advocated by Cicero’s brother, and attacked Yeltsin’s personal integrity: Riker’s dispersion principle.

There were two components to Yeltsin’s electoral strategy that attracted soft-line reformers. First, Yeltsin did not try to distance himself from his nomenklatura past. On the contrary, he presented himself as an apparat insider with firsthand knowledge of existing practices. As he wrote in his 1989 memoir: “Even at my level as a candidate member of the Politburo, my domestic staff consisted of three cooks, three waitresses, a housemaid, and a gardener with his own team of under-gardeners. And, surprisingly, all this luxury was incapable of producing either comfort or convenience. What warmth can there be in a marble-lined house?” In contrast to his peers, he claimed to be appalled by existing practices and voluntarily relinquished them.

Yeltsin’s other tactic was to justify his attacks against nomenklatura benefits by citing fundamental principles of Soviet socialism. In his interview with Komsomolskaia Pravda, Yeltsin explained that he was
opposed to privileges because the practice “contradicts the economic law of the socialist society: ‘To each according to his labor.’” In another interview, he bemoaned the failure to achieve the socialist ideal of “bringing everyone to the same level regardless of the office they hold.” He thus emphasized his loyalty to the socialist system, which had not yet been discredited in the eyes of the pro-Gorbachev soft-liners.

Finally, he sought to refute the notion that he was personally opposed to Gorbachev: “I don’t want people to portray me as a rival to Mr. Gorbachev, not under any circumstances. I am not the leader of an opposition party.” On another occasion he reaffirmed: “I am not and do not wish to be an alternative to Gorbachev. Who thinks this, in reality, does not think. I will never be against Gorbachev.” Moreover, he emphasized his agreement with Gorbachev on the strategy of reform and diminished their differences to a matter of “different opinions on tactics in internal politics.” His aide, Mikhail Poltoranin, argued that Yeltsin’s electoral program was strategically “in line with the CPSU platform.”

In the run-up to the election, the leadership made a concerted effort to undermine those elements of Yeltsin’s electoral strategy that made him acceptable to soft-line reformers. First, the Politburo’s spokesman on ideology, Vadim Medvedev, announced that a commission had been established to examine Yeltsin’s party loyalty. The next day, Pravda reported that Yeltsin had been accused of campaign statements “contradictory to the guidelines of the Central Committee and party rules and ethics.” It warned that he faced expulsion from the top policymaking body and ultimately from the party—a signal to soft-liners that his policy proposals contradicted the official party line.

Three days later the Moscow-based daily Moskovskaia Pravda published an article by Vladimir Tikhomirov, a factory worker and Central Committee member. The article dismissed Yeltsin’s image as a selfless fighter, claiming that members of his family continued to use the same privileged health services that Yeltsin so frequently criticized, and that the candidate himself retained a two-story nomenklatura dacha in one of Moscow’s suburbs, as well as a luxury car. Tikhomirov concluded his article with a call to all voters: “So let us not get confused: Comrade Yeltsin is sufficiently active in using those same ‘benefits’ that he is publicly ‘fighting.’”

But the attacks proved counterproductive, burnishing instead Yeltsin’s image as a martyr and mobilizing his supporters. Rallies protesting his treatment in the press were organized in Moscow and at
least four other cities, including Leningrad and Lviv. In the final week before the election, several rallies were held in Moscow to protest the accusations against him. Finally, on the day before the election, Moscow saw the biggest unofficial rally held there since the 1917 Revolution with tens of thousands demonstrating in support of Yeltsin. Yeltsin’s argument that the party apparatus opposed him because it feared losing its privileges convinced Moscow’s proreform voters. Gorbachev’s counteroffensive failed. Yeltsin had found an effective issue on which to build an electoral coalition.

One day before the election, Moskovskaia Pravda published Yeltsin’s message to voters in which he emphasized that the only way out of the crisis was “through a struggle against the party-bureaucratic apparatus, corruption and social injustice.” “Only this,” he wrote, “will be able to achieve a new image of socialism and a new state of Soviet society.” In effect, Yeltsin was proposing an alternative vision of the Soviet future characterized by a more “just” socialism. This vision had mass appeal among those who desired change, and the new large coalition electoral environment was an optimal setting for Yeltsin to capitalize on his vision. In the March 27, 1989, election to the Soviet Congress, Boris Yeltsin carried approximately 90 percent of the vote. Two months after his victory, in an interview with the Spanish newspaper La Vanguardia, he identified the central issue that had secured him such popularity as “the struggle for social justice—something that, certainly, earns people’s respect.”

The tenets of Riker’s theory of campaigning are readily apparent in Yeltsin’s strategy. Yeltsin had found an issue that his opponent could not embrace without alienating core supporters. And he had linked his radical position on nomenklatura privileges to the issue of economic welfare to bring about new policy alternatives. While some soft-liners in Gorbachev’s coalition—those connected to the party apparatus—might have disagreed with the need to abolish privileges, they nonetheless agreed with the complaint that perestroika had not brought economic improvement. Yeltsin was thus able to argue for eliminating privileges as a way to hasten perestroika and improve popular well-being.

Yeltsin’s emphasis on the need for quicker reforms also reflected a broader societal consensus. According to a March 1989 public opinion poll, 70 percent of respondents identified themselves as active advocates of perestroika; another 15 percent claimed to be passively in favor of it, while only 5 percent opposed it. At the same time, 80 percent of
respondents said that perestroika was proceeding too slowly, and 75 percent judged perestroika by the state of the consumer goods market.\textsuperscript{20} In contrast, Gorbachev was still attempting to address each issue separately. On the one hand, he was defending the system of privileges as a reward for the extra work done by the party leadership. On the other hand, he was warning that a radical approach to perestroika would lead to major economic upheavals. As Yeltsin’s antiprivilege drive gained momentum, and then eventually brought him victory, Gorbachev, following the dispersion principle, abandoned attempts to rebut his opponent. A month after the election, Gorbachev gave a speech in which he acknowledged that shortages in housing, food, and basic consumer goods were growing despite perestroika.\textsuperscript{21} The next month, in a speech to the Soviet Congress, he proposed that a review of elite privileges be one of the main functions of the newly formed Supreme Soviet.\textsuperscript{22} Still, it was another year before Gorbachev took practical steps to neutralize Yeltsin’s strategy. In late February 1990 the Soviet government announced that the country’s current and former leaders were no longer entitled to extra privileges.\textsuperscript{23} Party nomenklatura were left without summer homes, special food orders, household workers, or cars. By that time, however, Yeltsin had already begun to wage his second election campaign, using a different set of issues to form an even broader support coalition and further undermine Gorbachev.

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\textbf{Campaign for Russian Sovereignty: 1990–91}

Despite his landslide victory in Moscow, Yeltsin still enjoyed less support, countrywide, than Gorbachev. According to a 1989 All-Union poll, the Soviet leader was named “Man of the Year” by 46 percent of respondents, while Yeltsin was mentioned by only 16 percent.\textsuperscript{24} Yeltsin’s support was concentrated in large cities such as Moscow, Leningrad, and his native Sverdlovsk, in contrast to the traditionally conservative rural areas.

The overwhelming dominance of the conservatives had virtually sidelined Yeltsin and his fellow radicals in the new Soviet legislature. The only way they could increase their influence was by winning additional seats in the republican and city soviets in the March 1990 elections. As Yeltsin later explained: “I was quick to understand that radical changes would not come from the All-Union bodies. . . . I was
Yeltsin had to achieve two complementary goals in order to weaken the Kremlin’s power: transfer decision-making power from the Communist Party apparatus to the elected deputy assemblies and from the center to the republics. He outlined these two goals in May 1989, during his first address to the Soviet Congress: “Power has to be transferred to the hands of the people whose interests are represented by the chief legislative body—the Congress of People’s Deputies. . . . In order to speed up the reform process, we also need to give more political rights, as well as economic and financial self-rule, to every Union republic, give them territorial sovereignty.”

Yeltsin’s call for expanded republican rights resonated in some circles of the Russian intelligentsia. A few Soviet literary figures had been expressing concern about the decay of Russian culture and about growing anti-Russian sentiment in other Soviet republics since at least the 1970s. These anxieties were articulated by the prominent Russian writer Valentin Rasputin in his address at the First USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, in May 1989: “Russophobia had spread into the Baltic countries and Georgia and is penetrating into other republics. Anti-Soviet slogans are being combined with anti-Russian ones. . . . Would it be better perhaps for Russia to leave the Union? This, incidentally, would help us solve many of our own problems, both current and future.”

By mid-1989 the intellectuals’ concerns were being echoed by republican apparatchiks who raised the issue of the Russian Federation’s sovereign rights. In August 1989, Vitaliy Vorotnikov, chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), proposed the use of world prices in trading with other Soviet republics. During his address at the September Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU Vorotnikov also noted that “while other Union republics have become stronger, the underdeveloped economical and political mechanisms of the RSFSR have a negative effect on the country, and primarily for all the Russian people.” In an interview titled “Russia’s Interests,” another apparatchik, Alexander Vlasov, chairman of the RSFSR Council of Ministers, blamed the “undermined power of republican authorities” for Russia’s worsening economic problems. In his view, confusion about the interests of the USSR and RSFSR prevented Russia from quickly resolving its own problems. He was convinced that the role of the center must be sharply reduced . . . and we had to strengthen horizontal ties with greater independence for the republics.”
argued in favor of strengthening republican power structures, and transferring Soviet industrial assets under Russia’s control.

The Kremlin recognized the need to raise the Russian Federation’s status in a new CPSU program called “Party’s National Politics under the Present Conditions”: “Up to now certain managerial functions in the republic were performed by the All-Union bodies. This had a negative effect on the interests of the republic and the Union.” However, the program made only a limited suggestion that the CPSU establish new governing bodies in Russia’s administrative, economic, ideological, cultural, and scientific spheres. Still, it was enough to allow Vlasov to claim in December 1989 that Russia’s sovereignty had been expanded.

But Yeltsin and the other radical reformers did not address the issue of Russian sovereignty. During his first visit to the United States in the fall of 1989, Yeltsin hardly mentioned the topic in any of his public appearances. His omission did not escape the notice of his opponents. In October 1989, the conservative newspaper Sovietskaia Rossiia published an interview with a Soviet deputy who was involved in forming a group to represent Russia. He claimed that the radical reformers in the Interregional Group of Deputies, which Yeltsin cochaired, never seriously discussed Russian problems.

The campaign for the republican legislature seemed to bring about a turnaround in the reformers’ attitudes. On December 28, Soviet news agencies reported that Yeltsin had not only announced his intention to run for a seat in the Russian parliament, but had also expressed his willingness to compete for the parliamentary chairmanship. In his first interview of the 1990 campaign, Yeltsin talked about the need to make Russia an independent republic, to address the needs of ethnic Russians, and to separate Russian authorities from the central government. But aside from his vague promise to press for more radical change, his position was almost indistinguishable from that held by his more conservative opponents. Yeltsin’s platform, published on February 5, contained only a passing appeal to Russian economic sovereignty. He had not yet devised his heresthetic formula for success.

Two main electoral alliances formed in Russia in early 1990. Conservatives established the bloc of socialist-patriotic movements, uniting hard-line Communists and nationalists. Members of this somewhat unlikely coalition shared one important goal: reasserting Russian influence within the USSR, while preserving the latter’s integrity. Nationalism became a popular ideological platform that could help the
Communists retain power and prevent the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Communist nomenklatura became a major political ally in the nationalists’ efforts to reverse democratic and market-oriented reforms, which they condemned as an attempt to westernize and further weaken Russia. For both groups, preservation of the imperial Soviet state was paramount.

Radical reformers, for their part, organized an electoral bloc called Democratic Russia. According to one of its founders, Sergei Stankevich, the group’s name reflected two popular tendencies in the Russian public: “Opinion polls had shown that the most powerful trends in Russian politics were pushing people to the left and to the right: toward democratic populism opposed to the power ‘mafia’ and toward Russian nationalism.” The combination of these two trends, however, precluded the neoimperial approach to relations with non-Russian republics that conservatives were advocating. The reformers felt that the republics should be granted the sovereign rights guaranteed by the Soviet constitution. They would then have to rely on their own economic resources, while Russia would be free to correct the economic distortions accumulated during its history of interrepublic relations. They also advocated limiting the power of the central authorities who, by that time, had been discredited in the eyes of reformers and conservatives alike.

This was a very attractive solution in the eyes of an increasingly disgruntled Russian public. Their non-Russian counterparts saw their economic and cultural degradation as the direct result of Moscow’s exploitative policies. Russians, however, regarded the state of their culture and economy as being at least as pitiful as that of their peers. In their view, Russian decay was the result of sacrifices they had made on behalf of other republics with fewer natural resources and industrial capabilities. Thus, Russians perceived that other republics were living at their expense, not the reverse. This view was reinforced by a large number of articles published by Russian economists in the Moscow press, arguing that the other republics were receiving much more from the federal treasury than they were contributing.

These sentiments were shared by many members of the intelligentsia, and even by Russian party officials. In the words of Valentin Rasputin: “We [Russians] are tired of being scapegoats, of enduring the slurs and the treachery. We are told that this is our cross to bear. But this cross is becoming increasingly unwieldy.” Yuri Prokofiev, first secretary of the Moscow CPSU City Committee, struck a more plaintive
note: “Russia put everything it could into the colonies, if you can call them that, and they are talking about seceding. And Russia is left, if you’ll excuse me, with a bare butt.” The debate over ways to unburden Russia divided radical reformers from conservative nationalists and Communists.

Russian party bosses adopted a more ambiguous rhetoric, alternating between acknowledgments of the drive for republican self-rule and concessions to the demand for preserving Soviet cohesion. At the end of 1989 Vlasov still argued for giving the interests of the Union unequivocal priority over republican needs. Vorotnikov expressed a similar view in which he saw Russia’s role in enhancing the unity of Soviet republics.

In contrast, Yeltsin offered a radically different vision in which power was redistributed from the central authorities to the republics. In practical terms, Yeltsin suggested leaving Gorbachev with a substantially diminished and largely symbolic role of “strategic planning with a minimal apparat.”

This reformulation of Russia’s fundamental problem would form the basis for Yeltsin’s heresthetical future. Earlier political debates had focused on the growing economic crisis and ways to address it. Yeltsin also referred to the economic slump in order to buttress his antiprivileges campaign. This time, however, he argued that Russia’s economic calamities were a by-product of the country’s dysfunctional institutional structure. In an interview by the Soviet weekly Argumenty i Fakty, he pointed to the “superconcentration of power” as the sole reason for the country’s dismal condition.

Yeltsin’s radical approach was best characterized in his interview with British ITV. In that interview, he named the three Baltic states, along with Georgia and Moldova, as the most likely republics to secede. Yeltsin added a caveat: “If Russia is treated the way it is being treated now, it can consider using this right the same way that Lithuania did.”

At the same time, Yeltsin was cautious enough to emphasize that, despite favoring maximum decentralization of power, he still did not advocate dissolution of the Union, saying, “I would only fight for maximum independence.” In fact, he argued that his plan would prevent disintegration since, having strengthened their sovereign rights, republics would no longer want to secede from the Soviet Union. This stance made his position acceptable to those who favored greater Russian sovereignty, but also supported Gorbachev’s attempts to revitalize
the Union as a whole. With the members of Democratic Russia running on his coattails, the Russian parliamentary election became the first true test of Yeltsin’s widespread popularity. The party won nearly half the contested seats, while the conservative Communist-patriotic bloc failed to get even one. Still, Communists who ran independently of the two blocs won the majority of races.

The resounding defeat of the Communist-nationalist electoral alliance cannot be attributed simply to the unpopularity of their non-market, anti-Western, authoritarian vision of Russia. Nor can the strong showing of Democratic Russia be explained solely by the popularity of its progressive ideas. The radical reformers succeeded because they identified an easily understood issue that appealed not only to their core constituency, but also to their ideological opponents. Many rank-and-file Communists with strong nationalist sentiments shared a sense of exhaustion with “imperial philanthropy” and a yearning for “contraction.” For them, re-creating a more centralized empire, as the socialist-patriotic bloc advocated, would require that Russia still bear its costs. By contrast, divesting Russia of responsibility for the other Union republics, leaving them to make their own way in the world, seemed like an effective solution to Russia’s imperial troubles. It also addressed the sentiment of Russians who felt they had been unjustly accused of exploiting the other republics. Even Evgenii Primakov, a career Soviet official and chairman of one of the Union parliament’s chambers, pointed to the ironic unfairness of Russia’s poor condition: “The paradox is that ‘metropolis’ RSFSR, having tremendous resources and potential, is worse off than other republics.”

Following on his electoral gains, Yeltsin decided to seek election as speaker of the parliament, a position that would allow him to directly challenge Gorbachev. Realizing this possibility, Gorbachev made every effort to prevent Yeltsin’s rise. Gorbachev should have been ideologically sympathetic to many of Democratic Russia’s positions. But Yeltsin’s drive for decentralization, combined with personal animosity, instead pushed Gorbachev to tacitly support Yeltsin’s ideological opponents, who advocated a stronger and more cohesive Union and hence a larger role for Gorbachev.

Gorbachev made his first attempts to satisfy the demands of the conservative Russian Communists during the September 1989 CPSU plenum. He promised to establish a Russian bureau in the Communist Party, grant more power to the regional authorities, and change the state structure of the Russian republic. When Democratic Russia was
formed and Yeltsin emerged as a forceful advocate of republican sovereignty, Gorbachev sent another favorable signal to the conservatives by appointing two prominent Russian nationalists to his new 10-member Presidential Council. But Gorbachev’s strongest expression of support for the nationalist-Communist conservatives came during the election of the chairman of Russia’s Supreme Soviet.

In their opening remarks at the May 22, 1990 RSFSR Congress, Yeltsin and Vlasov, the Communist conservatives’ representative, argued in favor of expanded Russian sovereignty. However, while Vlasov spoke mainly about economic sovereignty, Yeltsin emphasized the republic’s expanded political rights and criticized the Union leadership, calling it “the cruel exploiter, the miserly benefactor who does not think about the future.” He pledged to end the injustice in relations between Russia and the central authorities.47

Taking the floor, Gorbachev made his own preferences clear. First, he addressed the Communist conservatives, supporting their goal to strengthen Russia as a socialist republic within the Soviet Union “and promising them to create a Russian Communist party.”48 The focal point of his address, however, was a critique of Yeltsin’s speech, calling it an attempt to distance Russia from socialism, which Yeltsin had allegedly failed to mention in his speech. In his rejection of socialism, Gorbachev argued, Yeltsin “contradicts the general course of perestroika, which is supposed to give socialism a fresh breath.” The Soviet leader leveled his most serious charge when he concluded that Yeltsin’s true goal was not so much the revival of Russian sovereignty as the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus, Gorbachev appealed not just to the nationalists and Communists, but also to soft-line reformers who were not yet prepared to accept the dissolution of the Union. Yeltsin immediately rebuffed the accusation, adopting a conciliatory tone: “I have never advocated Russia’s secession. I am in favor of the independence of republics so that republics are strong and so that with this strength they reinforce our strong Union.”49

Yeltsin was elected chairman of the parliament by a modest margin—535 to 467—after three rounds of voting. He clearly benefited from his opponents’ drab style. But Yeltsin also managed to reassure many undecided deputies that his views were not as radical as Gorbachev had claimed. Repeating the party line that strong republics were needed for the sake of the stronger Union, Yeltsin presented his case for Russian sovereignty as a legitimate expectation, rather than a revolutionary goal. He was also quick to position himself as an independent
candidate not beholden to any particular political group. One deputy reminded Yeltsin that many of his allies were supporting him not because he was the leader of Democratic Russia, but because of his personal qualities. Yeltsin responded by vowing to represent all Russians, and not just a particular political group. He then, quite suddenly, renounced his membership in Democratic Russia, saying he was no longer its hostage.50

Opinion polls revealed that Gorbachev’s drift toward the conservatives was further straining his already-stressed coalition. Meanwhile, Gorbachev’s approval rating had decreased from 52 percent in December 1989 to 39 percent the following May51—this despite the fact that Yeltsin had never directly challenged Gorbachev in his speeches and had even claimed to support his ultimate goals. However, as early as February 1990, Yeltsin called upon Gorbachev to renounce the conservative nomenklatura and side with the people. Nevertheless, the core of Gorbachev’s coalition still held on.

Although the idea of greater sovereignty for Russia and the other republics had become widely popular by early 1990, Russians remained divided over the allocation of power between the Union elite and republican leaders. According to a May 1990 poll conducted in 20 RSFSR regions, 43 percent of respondents said that “Russia should receive political and economic independence (possibly seceding from the Union),” 35 percent believed the “economic and political rights of Russia should be expanded, but the final word should be left to the ‘center,’” and 18 percent felt that the status of the Russian Federation in the Soviet Union “should remain the same way it is now.”52 Even after a parliamentary election held under the “Russia First” slogan, most Russians wanted the Union center to retain its hold on power. Yeltsin’s task was to realign this majority in his favor.

Yeltsin had heretically wed the promise of swift economic reform to his crusade for Russian sovereignty. This strategic choice allowed him to attract to his side even those who were initially reluctant to devolve all power to the republics. His campaign focused on the idea that the center had for decades been draining Russian resources that could have been used to improve the republics’ economies. Downsizing the central apparatus and providing the Russian leadership with the power to control their own resources seemed like a quick and effective way to stop economic deterioration. Yeltsin articulated this approach in his first speech at the Congress of People’s Deputies on May 22, 1990, stressing that it was “not the center but Russia which
must think about which functions to transfer to the center, and which
to keep for itself.”53

On June 12, 1990, the deputies of the Russian parliament over-
whelmingly adopted a Declaration of Sovereignty, with 907 “yeas,” 13
“nays,” and nine abstentions. The declaration asserted primacy of Rus-
sian laws over Soviet ones and “reserved the right to leave the USSR
freely.” Yeltsin was even more specific about the role he envisioned for
the Kremlin in an interview on the prime-time news program Vremia:
“Russia should have both its own borders, its own sovereignty, and its
independence in virtually everything apart from that share which we
leave to the center. Not a large share, as we decided—six Union min-
isters.”54 This could be achieved by controlling the cash flow from
republic to center: “If we do not need some Union program and we are
not interested in it, be it space or any other Union program, we will not
pay for it.”55 He called it “a question of elementary justice,” which
could be restored only if Russia “obtains real statehood.”

Gorbachev clearly underestimated the appeal of Yeltsin’s idea. As
his adviser Vadim Medvedev wrote, the Politburo had viewed the
RSFSR “as an artificial Stalinist creation, so the idea of Russia’s inde-
pendence was treated as absurd.”56 The Soviet leadership downplayed
the significance of the election to the Russian parliament and was ill-
prepared to offer an attractive alternative to Yeltsin in the republican
legislature. Having failed to prevent the declaration of Russian sover-
eignty, Gorbachev now faced a challenge not only to his power, but
also to his legitimacy. As the chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet
Anatoliy Lukianov later wrote, the “declaration of Russian sovereignty
opened the way for a legal battle with the Union center.”57 Realizing
this, Yeltsin used his TV appearance after the sovereignty vote to
directly attack Gorbachev for the first time.

After arguing for several years that his main political opponents
were Ligachev and other Politburo conservatives, Yeltsin suddenly
changed his tune: “Gorbachev was the one who headed the campaign
against me. He used Ligachev in this connection. . . . There were
attempts to prevent my election as chairman of the Supreme Soviet of
Russia and Gorbachev was most active here. . . . He gathered 250 loyal
Communist deputies instructing them ‘to stop Yeltsin with all possible
means.’ What may ‘all means’ be, a shot in the head?”58 Yeltsin empha-
sized his opposition to Gorbachev and the center by publicly resigning
from the Communist Party at the Twenty-eighth CPSU Congress in July
1990, a decision that he described as “a severe blow to Gorbachev.”59
Yeltsin’s campaign for republican rights anticipated Russia’s establishment of its own ties with the other Soviet republics, especially those that supported his cause. Immediately after his election as head of the Russian parliament, Yeltsin declared that, as the titular head of Russia, he did not support the center’s reactionary policies toward the breakaway republics. Distancing himself further from Gorbachev, he argued in favor of “developing direct horizontal ties between republics as sovereign and independent states and signing agreements, conditions for which are not determined by the center.” The first such agreement was signed with Latvia in August 1990: “The agreement will be the basis for our mutual relations,” Yeltsin emphasized, “no matter how Latvia’s relations with the center develop and independently of Latvia’s participation in the Union treaty.” In other words, even if Latvia seceded from the Soviet Union, Russia would still be willing to maintain official ties. Later that year, he spoke even more forthrightly: “Say one, two, or three republics break away. What of it? We will conclude treaties; we will live; we will be friends.”

Yeltsin also used the standoff between the Kremlin and the Baltic republics to criticize the Union center and Gorbachev in particular: “I have a sharply negative attitude toward the economic blockade, as I have already said and written to Gorbachev. With regard to Lithuania, it is a major political mistake.” In response, Gorbachev continued to accuse Yeltsin of plotting the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while also calling for increased independence for autonomous republics within the Russian Federation. Yeltsin responded to Gorbachev’s move by upping the ante. Speaking in the autonomous Bashkir Republic, he magnanimously proposed that Bashkir regional leaders “take as much sovereignty as one can digest.”

Yeltsin continued to sharpen his anticenter rhetoric during an August 1990 trip across the Russian Federation. At a meeting with miners, he indicated that by adopting a declaration of state sovereignty for Russia, “We have repudiated the entire union bureaucracy, the top union leadership, all union ministers except six. We don’t need them and we don’t intend to feed them!” Still, he emphasized that the Russian leadership had not been given enough power over the republic: “Today fifty billion rubles are leaving Russia, and we don’t know where they are going. Today tens of billions in hard currency are leaving Russia, and we don’t know where.” When asked for his opinion about Gorbachev’s attempt to overturn a specific resolution of the Rus-
sian parliament, Yeltsin reacted sharply: “If matters go that far, Gorbachev may be left without Russia.”

After several months in office, Yeltsin realized that Gorbachev had little leverage against an assertive and independent Russia: “You cannot blockade Russia, while it itself could blockade anyone.” On another occasion he noted how dependent the center was on Russia: “It is power over Russia that has always given power to the center itself. If it renounces power in Russia, it renounces everything.” That was precisely why Gorbachev could not outflank Yeltsin’s heresthetical, pro-Russian position.

By September 1990, just two months after the declaration of Russian sovereignty, Yeltsin was already characterizing his relationship with the center by using the vocabulary of war: “A real struggle is going on. The center does not want to let Russia slip out of its clutches—not for anything. . . . There is a fierce struggle for the banks, for foreign currency, for gold, for diamonds, and so on and so forth. . . . We will fight for that declaration to the end.” At the same time, he identified Gorbachev as his main opponent in this struggle, pledging not to make any concessions to the Soviet leader detrimental to Russian interests. A political commentator aptly noted at the time that once Yeltsin had been elected chairman of the parliament and Russia had declared its sovereignty, “All the central Union institutions seemed to be out of a job.”

Yeltsin and Gorbachev’s disagreement was at the time focused on the economic reform program known as “500 Days.” The program offered a road map for the transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Despite the two men’s initial agreement to adopt this program on the Union level, Gorbachev rejected it in October as too radical. This made him even more vulnerable to Yeltsin’s charges of being beholden to the conservative majority in the Soviet government.

Yeltsin presented Gorbachev’s decision as an indication that the center was incapable of managing the economic disaster in the republic. He contrasted the central authorities’ political interests with the basic needs of the Russian people, accusing Gorbachev of sabotaging reforms to discredit the republican authorities. Nor could the Soviet leader follow through on his initial promise for greater decentralization, at the very moment when he was attempting to strengthen his position by creating a Soviet presidency. Gorbachev had hoped that his election to this post by the Congress of People’s Deputies in February
1990 would ensure him greater independence from the party apparatus. Instead, with his reformist allies defecting to Yeltsin, he was becoming increasingly dependent on Politburo conservatives.

The status quo was no longer acceptable to any of Gorbachev’s key support groups. The intelligentsia traditionally favored expanded rights for Russia, and was discouraged by Gorbachev’s flirtation with the Right. The nomenklatura blamed him for decentralization and viewed Russian sovereignty as a means to regain control. Even Yeltsin’s former nemesis, Ligachev, called Russia’s economic and political sovereignty “perfectly legitimate.” Most importantly, the reform-oriented majority among Gorbachev’s backers was disillusioned by the unfulfilled promises of perestroika. Yeltsin’s forceful challenge had gradually but irrevocably eroded Gorbachev’s coalition.

In a last-ditch effort, Gorbachev swung to the right. By the end of 1990 he appointed hard-line conservatives to the top positions in the state apparatus, including the posts of prime minister (Pavlov), defense minister (Yazov), interior minister (Pugo), and KGB head (Kryuchkov). Moreover, conservative apparatchiks were also well positioned in the second tier of power, in the posts of vice president (Yanaev) and first deputy general secretary of the CPSU (Ivashko). With the exception of Ivashko, these men would eventually become the core of the State Emergency Committee (GKTchP) that tried to overthrow Gorbachev in an ill-fated coup attempt in August 1991.

The prevalence of hard-liners in key governmental posts strengthened public perception of Gorbachev as an obstacle to further reform. Yeltsin expressed this feeling in his December 1990 speech at the Fourth USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, declaring an end to the revolution from the top: “The Kremlin ceased to be the initiator of improvements in the country. . . . The processes of renewal, which are blocked on the level of the center, transferred to the republics. There is a real possibility to start radical transformations within the republics.”

By late 1990, the original Gorbachev coalition had completely disintegrated. According to polls conducted by the All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion, his approval rating had dropped from 39 percent in May 1990, when Yeltsin was elected chairman of the Russian parliament, to 21 percent in October 1990, when Gorbachev rejected the “500 Days” plan of economic reforms. Another poll, conducted in October 1990 by Monitoring, the Russian sociological service, showed an even greater popularity gap: 48 percent support for Yeltsin versus 11 percent for Gorbachev. Yeltsin entered 1991 as the most popular
politician in the country, attracting to his side most of Gorbachev’s former supporters.

Working to maintain his newfound momentum, Yeltsin launched his most daring attack against Gorbachev and the central authorities in early 1991, after Soviet troops massacred peaceful demonstrators in Vilnius. Yeltsin characterized the attack as “a major onslaught on democracy,”74 and vowed to interfere in case the conflict escalated.

Yeltsin thus positioned himself not only as a supporter of the republics’ right to self-determination, but also as their protector against a Soviet assault on their sovereignty. In an extraordinary appeal, he urged Russian soldiers in Lithuania to disobey orders if they were asked to fire at civilian demonstrators: “You will not be court-martialed, and you will earn the respect of your people and your country—Russia.”75 Gorbachev, in turn, accused Yeltsin of violating the Soviet constitution and characterized his actions as a provocation.

But the president’s warnings only seemed to stir Yeltsin to bolder provocations. Hardly a month later, in early March, Yeltsin openly condemned the center’s interference in Russia’s own affairs: “An extremely fierce offensive has been in progress for a long time in various forums, including the mass media. No methods are spurned. Persecution, slander, and dirt are again being hurled in ever greater quantities, with every passing day, at us.”76 In a moving speech to the meeting of the people’s deputies from the Democratic Russia bloc on March 9, 1991, he charged that Gorbachev’s actions against him were a threat to democracy.77 Yeltsin portrayed Gorbachev not simply as a less radical reformer, but as an opponent of democratic forces: “He [Gorbachev] is constantly misleading both the people and, especially, democrats and democracy.” In order to save Russia, Yeltsin called for the organization of a powerful party that could unite the disparate democratic forces. The reformist electorate was no longer choosing between a moderate Gorbachev and a radical Yeltsin, but between someone viewed as the main obstacle to change and its only consistent advocate.

Yeltsin continued to reassert the link between Russian sovereignty and economic welfare throughout early 1991. He blamed Russia’s swift economic deterioration on Gorbachev’s indecision, his half-measures, and, most importantly, his profound reluctance to concede full republican sovereignty. In an unprecedented live interview on Soviet television on February 19, 1991, Yeltsin addressed the people of the Russian Federation directly: “Will we live better? Yes, if Russia can live according to its own laws, if the center does not block republican bodies. . . .
We will not be able to live better with the existing center.” He accused Gorbachev of conducting an “antipeople policy” that resulted in price increases, military deployments against the civilian population, inter-ethnic hostilities, economic decline, and a low standard of living. Referring to his fateful 1987 speech to the Politburo, he drew a clear line between himself and his once like-minded boss: “I warned in 1987 that Gorbachev has in his character an aspiration to absolutism of personal power. He has done this already, and has brought the country to dictatorship, eloquently terming this presidential rule. I distance myself from the position and policy of the president, and advocate his immediate resignation.” A week later, more than 400,000 people attended a pro-Yeltsin rally in Moscow, one of the largest unauthorized demonstrations ever held in the Soviet capital.

By the spring of 1991, Yeltsin, campaigning on his outsider agenda, had succeeded in redefining the terms of Soviet political debate. The issue was no longer the Kremlin’s willingness to allow liberalization, but instead the extent to which the Kremlin would remain an actor in Soviet politics. Yeltsin’s unique combination of policies, which Gorbachev was politically constrained from accepting, boxed the once-progressive Soviet leader into a corner, with party conservatives as his only remaining allies. Yeltsin was able to attract the support of two crucial elements of the Gorbachev alliance: the intelligentsia, who were primarily concerned with democratic freedoms; and blue-collar workers in the Russian regions, who were the primary victims of the collapsing Soviet economy. In a poll conducted immediately after Yeltsin’s February interview on Soviet television, 77 percent of blue-collar workers and 78 percent of the intelligentsia expressed their trust in him, while only 22 percent of each group trusted Gorbachev. The same poll showed that 62 percent of workers and 55 percent of the intelligentsia said they would vote for Yeltsin if he ran for the Russian presidency. As one observer of the Soviet political scene wrote: “Who was happy with Gorbachev? Neither Left nor Right; neither workers nor middle class; neither generals nor politically oriented intellectuals. The intellectuals, from economists Shatalin and Yavslinsky to Arbatov, who had served every Kremlin boss, jumped Gorbachev’s ship en masse and swam to Yeltsin’s.”

The writings of Vitaliy Tretiakov, then editor-in-chief of the liberal newspaper Nezavisimaia Gazeta, illustrate the intelligentsia’s drift toward Yeltsin. Tretiakov had been an ardent Gorbachev supporter, but by February 1991 his view of the Soviet leader rang like a political
death sentence: “In the present situation I am more attracted to the political figure of Yeltsin than to Gorbachev. The latter, who from being the people’s favorite has become a reclusive politician almost isolated from the people, is not so much concerned with winning back people’s sympathies as with robbing Yeltsin of them. Yeltsin, by contrast, is seeking more an alliance with the people than Gorbachev’s further isolation.” In contrast, one of Gorbachev’s earlier critics and a member of the conservative Soyuz group in the Soviet parliament, Viktor Alksnis, now endorsed Gorbachev: “The group to which I belong has never demanded President Gorbachev’s resignation. It may sound surprising, but I am a supporter of President Gorbachev.” Yeltsin’s successful erosion of Gorbachev’s support was reflected in a spring 1991 U.S. News and World Report poll: only 14 percent of Soviet voters said that they would vote for Gorbachev in a national election, while 70 percent would vote for Yeltsin. Yeltsin was entering Russia’s first-ever presidential election with his popularity near its peak.

The creation of a Russian presidency had raised the republican leadership to a level equal with that of the Soviet president. In fact, since the Russian president was to be directly elected, his popular legitimacy would likely exceed that of Gorbachev. Gorbachev was voted into the Soviet presidency on March 16, 1990, at the regular session of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, by less than two-thirds of the deputies. In less than a year Yeltsin began pushing for the first direct presidential elections in Russia as early as possible in 1991. Although conservatives in the Russian parliament, lacking a strong leader, initially resisted, they finally agreed to put this issue up for a referendum scheduled for March. After it was approved by almost 70 percent of Russian voters, the election date was set for June 12, 1991.

In the referendum the majority of Russians endorsed the idea of a republican presidency, but they also voted overwhelmingly in favor of Gorbachev’s proposal for a renewed union of sovereign republics. While Yeltsin never opposed the Union, he stressed on a number of occasions that his vision of its future differed substantially from Gorbachev’s: “Gorbachev wants to have a strong center and weak republics. . . . I propose strong republics with a center without a president.” Democratic Russia called on its supporters to “say no to Gorbachev’s model of the Union.” However, fewer than 20 percent of Russians followed this call, while 71.3 percent turned out in favor of Gorbachev’s proposal. Support for the Union was greater in Russia’s autonomous republics and rural areas (82.6 percent) than it was in the
RSFSR overall. Voters there were also more cautious about the idea of introducing a Russian presidency (with 62.2 percent in favor) than was the republic as a whole.\textsuperscript{87} The results exposed the limitations of a purely democratic electoral base and proved that Yeltsin’s popularity was founded on a wide coalition of various social groups. Yet it also showed that, despite strong support for Russian sovereignty, the majority of the republics’ residents—especially ethnic non-Russians—wanted Russia to remain within the Union. In a poll conducted a few weeks before the referendum, 48.4 percent of those who identified themselves as democrats supported the idea of a union of sovereign republics, while another 10.6 percent even endorsed preserving the unified state.\textsuperscript{88} The March referendum results served as a warning to Yeltsin that his radical confrontation with the Union center might backfire. Throughout the following three months of the campaign, Yeltsin presented himself as a politician capable of making compromises with the Union leadership.

In an address to the RSFSR Congress two weeks after the referendum, Yeltsin indicated that he was ready to work with Gorbachev on a union agreement, delineating the rights of the center and the republics, and gave his assurance that all the republics would sign it. The two men were symbolically reconciled at a meeting in Novo-Ogarevo on April 23 when they, along with eight other republican leaders, approved the so-called “9 + 1” agreement on the division of power between the center and the republics. This preliminary accord provided the republics with greater independence, while recognizing Gorbachev as the coordinator among them. In the interim between the signing of this accord and the election, Yeltsin avoided personal criticism of Gorbachev, emphasizing instead their new spirit of cooperation.

Yeltsin’s main rival in the 1991 presidential election was Nikolay Ryzhkov, who headed the Soviet government from 1985 to late 1990. Ryzhkov was hardly a popular figure and was no longer a part of Gorbachev’s close circle, but the Kremlin still favored him in the run-up against Yeltsin. Ryzhkov had been a surprise choice for the Communist apparatus. Widely blamed for the Soviet economic crisis, Ryzhkov ran on a pro-Union platform. While adopting strongly pro-Russian rhetoric, he also appealed to voter concerns about the integrity of the USSR: “I am most resolute in my intention to uphold Russians’ interests. The task is to resurrect Russia, to consolidate compatriots without destroying the Union—unlike some, I believe that the Union must not be destroyed.”\textsuperscript{89} He aggressively criticized Yeltsin’s focus on con-
frontation with the Union center, which Ryzhkov claimed came at the expense of Russia’s well-being: “I personally think that Boris Yeltsin’s position is groundless. I think we should not simply give power to a person who has not made any substantial contribution to the development of Russia or to the strengthening of the Union for that matter.”90

In response, Yeltsin capitalized on his role in the 9 +1 agreement. In a Pravda interview published two days before the election, he explained that his vision of the Union was compatible with that held by Gorbachev and the other republican leaders: “The approach to the new center is defined in the joint statement signed at the first ‘9 + 1’ meeting. And I fully share it. To put it briefly, the center will look the way the constituting union republics want to see it. . . . In a sense we advocate a strong center—but strong only in the sphere of its own competence and prerogatives.”91 As to his one real achievement as chairman of the Russian parliament, Yeltsin was quick to point out that “many citizens of the republic have remembered that their motherland is not only the Soviet Union, but first and foremost Russia.”92

Yeltsin’s awareness of the diversity of his coalition was reflected in his choice of vice presidential running-mate, the Soviet military hero Aleksandr Rutskoi. Since Rutskoi had never been among Yeltsin’s close political allies, his selection came as a surprise to many. Yeltsin himself acknowledged the unlikeliness of the pairing, but credited Rutskoi with the ability to understand the needs of military veterans. He also praised Rutskoi’s creation of the movement known as “Communists for Democracy.”93 In a television interview, Rutskoi in turn emphasized that he would remain a member of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, but that he disagreed with its leadership, especially the hard-line conservative Ivan Polozkov.94 He warned against labeling members of the Communist Party rank and file as criminals since they too supported the idea of a sovereign Russia. Rutskoi then appealed to all who sought the restoration of Russian greatness to vote for Yeltsin. The concerns of rank-and-file Communists about his candidacy were one of Yeltsin’s biggest worries. In a February 1991 poll, only 28 percent of those identifying themselves as Communists had said they would vote for him in the presidential election, while 57 percent said they would not.95

Yeltsin’s willingness to reach an accord with Gorbachev shortly before the election, and to form an alliance with the Communist Rutskoi, reassured those of his supporters who had voted to preserve the Union in the March referendum. It also undermined Ryzhkov, who was
trying to present Yeltsin as the anti-Union candidate. In the end, Yeltsin’s coalition gave him a strong victory in the first round, with 57.4 percent of the total vote.

In his memoirs, written three years later, Yeltsin singled out his support for the “new and incomprehensible idea of the sovereignty of Russia” as a factor that had worked against him in the campaign. He may have been trying to portray himself as more of a maverick than he really was. From his parliamentary campaign in 1990 until his election as the first Russian president, Yeltsin had worked to wed, in voters’ minds, full Russian sovereignty to radical economic transformation. He knew the Soviet president could never fully agree with this platform, thus allowing him to establish an independent power base and divide Gorbachev’s supporters. The collapse of the Soviet economy helped Yeltsin transform this pairing from a radical idea into the only viable path for reform.

By linking the issues of Russian sovereignty and radical economic change, Yeltsin persuaded the Russian electorate that expanded republican rights were the only avenue to economic improvement. But his domestic platform also radically transformed the bipolar international system. As he put it while speaking at the Russian parliament, nine months before the Soviet collapse: “The status of a so-called superpower, which has drained the Russian economy, the stress on military force, and the striving for political domination should remain in the past.” It was a statement that would have been considered treasonous under the Soviets. But in the transformed political environment, Yeltsin was now able to sign the historic accords peacefully dissolving the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin would face many further political battles in the years to come. He would win another presidential campaign, but would lose most of his supporters by the end of his presidency. We will not analyze those years in this book. Our concern has been not Yeltsin as president, but Yeltsin as campaigner. Strategic campaigning, as we have argued, requires an ability to persuade or manipulate voters, rather than to govern. Heresthetical politicians win by formulating radically new policies, which create unusual coalitions. In the end, these policies might not be the most effective ones. But we believe it is vital to study how politicians acquire power, as well as how they exercise it. Heresthetical campaigners like Yeltsin and Reagan make history not by following rules, but by reinventing them.