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A Road to Freedom

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A ROAD TO FREEDOM

I don't write memoirs. Instead, I write books and articles about the many far more interesting subjects in the world. Subjects like law, politics, and science fiction. Most people's lives are boring by comparison, and mine is no exception.

Moreover, social science teaches us that memoirs are notoriously unreliable. Memory is extremely fallible; we forget or distort much of the past. Worse, we tend to interpret events in ways that make us look good, avoiding blame for our errors and taking credit for positive developments we didn't cause.

Despite these problems, and others like them, I still want to tell this story. It isn't important in and of itself, and it's far from representative. Still, the tale of one immigrant's transition from the USSR to America is a microcosm of the larger story of Soviet Jewish emigration. And that story is in turn a small part of the larger story of the millions who came to the New World fleeing poverty and oppression.

I. Leaving the Prison House of Nations

Lenin once described the Russian Empire of the czars as "the prison house of nations." It was an apt metaphor - and an even more appropriate one for the far more oppressive empire he himself created.

Life in Lenin's Shadow

I was born in 1973 in Leningrad – the city named after Lenin because it was the place where he launched his Revolution. I was only five when we left the USSR, too young to

understand much about Lenin or communism. I do remember thinking that it was strange that there were so many statues of such an ugly-looking man in the city.

I was also too young to understand the impact of communist totalitarianism on my life or that of my family. But I recall some of what that life was like. We lived in a small three room apartment – my parents, my grandparents, and I. By Soviet standards, it was a fairly comfortable existence. My parents had both grown up in communal apartments where half a dozen or more families each had just one room to themselves and shared a common kitchen and bathroom.

I can also remember waiting in line for food and other basic consumer goods almost every day. There was constant talk about how various items were “in deficit” – in short supply or not available at all. I didn’t think of the poverty and shortages as in any way unusual. Neither did most of the adults around me. It was just a part of life, much like Leningrad’s famously bad weather. Most of the people we knew were no better off, and many had it worse.

While I have many memories of the material side of Soviet life, I don’t remember much about the spiritual and intellectual oppression. All I recall of it were the ubiquitous posters and slogans praising the regime and promoting its propaganda. In his classic book *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel explained that this constant torrent of indoctrination was intended to convince the people that the regime’s power is unshakeable, that any resistance is futile, and that there is no alternative to its ideology.

Some of the adults in my life probably would have understood Havel’s point. By the mid-1970s, my parents had largely lost faith in the regime and its ideology. My paternal grandfather had hated the communists almost from the time when they first came to power. As far back as the 1960s, he told my father that he should leave the Soviet Union the first chance he got. My great-grandfather on my mother’s side had been arrested by the KGB several times. Other

relatives had served time in Gulags. No one, however, spoke of these things to me. It was considered dangerous to criticize the regime in front of a child. I might unthinkingly repeat it to strangers who in turn might report it to the authorities. Unlike in Stalin's day, such an incident probably wouldn't lead to a Gulag sentence or other really severe punishment. But it could cause trouble nonetheless.

Of course not all of my relatives were closet anti-communists. Some were loyal supporters of the regime and its ideology. Sixty years of indoctrination was not without effect. Others probably simply didn't give the matter much thought either way. They were too busy trying to live their lives. One of my mother's friends developed the interesting theory that the regime deliberately made daily life difficult so that Russians wouldn't have any time or energy to think about the government's oppressive nature.

Choosing Freedom

Why did my parents become disillusioned with communism and the USSR? For many Soviet Jewish emigrants, the crucial factor was anti-Semitism. My parents had indeed experienced this form of prejudice all their lives. All Soviet citizens were required to carry an internal passport that included a line denoting their "nationality." The passport was a requirement for applying to college, getting a job, moving into a new apartment, or almost any important transaction. If the nationality line said "Jew," it was a ticket to discrimination in hiring, college admissions, and elsewhere.

My father had finished first in his class in one of Leningrad's best high schools. But the "Jew" in his passport made it highly unlikely that he could be admitted to any of the top universities. When he and my mother graduated from the second tier school they went to (my

father was again the No. 1 student), they knew that the same passport line would close off many of the best job opportunities. Back in the 1950s, my grandmother had been fired from a research job during Stalin's purge of "rootless cosmopolitans" - a code word for Jews.

There was also plenty of unofficial prejudice. Since childhood, my parents had often heard the term *zhid*: the Russian equivalent of "kike." As a boy, my father had gotten into several fights with Russian kids who called him that. Not all Russians were anti-Semitic. But the prejudice was common enough that it didn't seem unusual. It too was mostly considered just a normal part of life.

In 1978, when I was five years old, my parents and I spent part of the summer in Zaporozhye, a city in Ukraine where we had relatives. One day we went to a nearby beach on the Dneiper River. An adult stranger asked what my name was. I told him that it was Ilya. "What an excellent Russian name," he said.

My mother had recently told me that "Ilya" was a Jewish name from the Bible (it is in fact a Russified version of the biblical "Eliahu"). I started to explain this to the Ukrainian man. My mother overheard this little etymological discourse, and quickly pulled me away. She then instructed me in no uncertain terms that I was not to tell anyone in Ukraine that I was Jewish or had a Jewish name. The Ukrainians, I later learned, were considered to be even more anti-Semitic than the Russians. Ironically, thirty years later I married the granddaughter of a Ukrainian nationalist who had fled to America in 1919.

In the end, however, anti-Semitism was not the only reason for my parents' decision to emigrate, and perhaps not the most important. Their most fundamental concern was the much broader lack of freedom of which anti-Semitism was just one manifestation. They had grown tired of the constant lies and censorship, and the need to carefully watch everything they said.

Furthermore, my father was and is an avid student of foreign languages. He yearned to use his linguistic talents and see the world beyond the USSR – something forbidden to all but a tiny minority of Soviet citizens. For her part, my mother wanted to have her own apartment, a life free of constant control by official bureaucracy, and greater freedom to make her own decisions.

Beginning in the early 1970s, some Soviet Jews had been allowed to leave for the United States and Israel. These pioneers sent back word that life in the West was different, better, and most of all freer. Like many Russians, my parents also secretly listened to Western radio broadcasts from the BBC and Voice of America. Despite strict official censorship, some books and magazines also occasionally made it through the Iron Curtain. For example, my father recalls reading a smuggled copy of *New York Times* reporter Hedrick Smith's classic 1976 book *The Russians*.

In January 2010, my father went to hear a talk by Boris Gulko, a Russian Jewish chess grandmaster who had won the USSR championship in 1977 and later emigrated to the United States, eventually winning the US championship as well. Knowing my interest in chess history, my father asked whether I had any questions I wanted him to pose to Gulko. One of my proposed questions was why Gulko had decided to leave the Soviet Union. My father said that this was a stupid question. The answer was too obvious. Nonetheless, I persisted in urging him to ask it. After all, Gulko had been a privileged member of the Soviet elite who had every reason not to risk those privileges.

Gulko's answer to my question was a telling one. He said that he did not want to be a "slave" anymore. Despite his relatively privileged status, he could no longer tolerate life under the control of a totalitarian state that, among other things, could take away all his privileges at any time.

Like most Soviet Jews, Gulko had experienced plenty of anti-Semitism. But it was not so much the special oppression of the Jews that led him to emigrate, but the generalized oppression he endured along with all the other citizens of Lenin's Workers' Paradise. My parents' motives for leaving were in many ways similar to Gulko's. They too were fleeing communism as much or more so than anti-Semitism. Only their decision was easier than his, since they didn't have as much to lose.

In some ways, anti-Semitism made life even harder for Jews than it was for other Soviet citizens. In one crucial respect, however, Jews and a few other minority groups were a highly privileged class: unlike the rest of the population, they had a chance to emigrate. As a result of Western pressure, the Soviet government began to allow limited Jewish emigration in the early 1970s.

If a Jew applied for permission to emigrate, it was by no means certain that it would be granted. Rejection could mean years of penury and official harassment as a "refusenik." Refuseniks were excluded from most jobs (even many of those otherwise available to Jews) and from many educational opportunities. Still, being Jews meant that we at least had a chance to leave. Most other inmates of Lenin's prisonhouse were not so fortunate.

Despite the risks, my parents chose to exercise the one special privilege granted to Soviet Jews, and applied to emigrate. It was the best decision they ever made, and certainly the best thing that ever happened to me.

II. A Whole New World

My parents and I left the Soviet Union in early 1979. The timing was perfect. Just a few months later, the Soviet government ended nearly all Jewish emigration, and many refuseniks

were left to wither on the vine for eight long years until Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika opened the gates one again.

In 1979, few foresaw the coming fall of the Soviet empire. My parents believed they would probably never see Russia again. Much worse, they thought they might well never see their own parents again either. My grandparents could not hope to emigrate themselves, because both of my grandfathers had worked on jobs that were classified as "secret" under the extremely broad Soviet laws covering such matters. Anyone who had ever held such a job was highly unlikely to get permission to emigrate.

My paternal grandparents eventually came to America in 1987, and my mother's parents two years later. But no one expected any such thing to happen in 1979. My parents and grandparents believed that they were probably parting forever. Their willingness to endure such a separation in order to escape the Soviet Union is yet another measure of how awful life under communism was.

In the 1970s, Jews who left the Soviet Union did so under the legal pretense of "returning" to Israel, their "historic homeland," and "reuniting" with their families there. Since the USSR and Israel had no diplomatic relations, Jewish emigrants first went to Austria and then Italy, from whence some went straight to Israel and others, like my parents, waited to get refugee visas to come to the US. Even before leaving the Soviet Union, my parents had already chosen America over Israel. They believed – correctly – that the US offered greater freedom and opportunity, and had heard good things about it from friends and acquaintances who had come to the US earlier.

The first thing I noticed upon arriving in Austria was the greater material wealth compared to the USSR. I was particularly fascinated by the tiny dashboard TV in the taxi that

took us from the airport in to our run-down hotel. I had never seen such a small TV before, or indeed any kind of TV inside a car. It seemed almost like magic.

I don't remember all that much about the week we spent in Vienna, or the three months that we lived in Ladispoli, Italy, a small town outside of Rome. My father took advantage of the opportunity to work on his Italian. Despite the fact that we had almost no money, he traveled all over Italy, sleeping in buses and train stations. We were supported by modest grants from Jewish charities and by my father's job as a messenger. He was one of the few Russian Jews in Italy who spoke the local language well enough to hold down a job.

We eventually got our American visas, and arrived in the United States on June 6, 1979. It was the 35th anniversary of D-Day, and the day before my sixth birthday. Our refugee visas had been arranged by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which had also arranged a host community for us. Many Russian Jewish immigrants ended up in New York City living among other Russians. But HIAS placed us in the affluent town of Westport, Connecticut, where there were few if any other Russian-speakers.

Assimilation by Immersion

We spent our first two weeks living in the mansion-like home of a Westport HIAS member who was a high-ranking corporate executive. I remember how impressed I was by his multiple huge TVs. Since the day after we arrived was my birthday, our host family generously arranged a small party for me and even got me some gifts. Unfortunately, I was much more taken with their kids' huge collection of Legos than with the toys I was given. I cried and whined incessantly when I was told that I couldn't have them.

My parents adjusted to Westport as fast as Russian immigrants reasonably could. They had been computer programmers in the USSR, and their arrival in the US coincided with the beginning of the high tech boom. Although the computers they had worked on in the Soviet Union were primitive by American standards, employers were still more than happy to hire them. The manager who hired my father told him that his credentials were far superior to those of the various English majors and other “jerks” he had been interviewing lately.

Despite the economic stagnation of the late 70s, finding work turned out to be easy. On the other hand, my parents, like most immigrants, faced many culture shocks. Such basic activities as buying a car, opening a bank account, and shopping in a supermarket were all new and unfamiliar.

For my part, I had to attend summer camp and then school without speaking a word of English. Unlike my parents, I of course had not learned any English back in Leningrad. I wasn't even literate in Russian yet.

There weren't any other Russian kids at the summer camp or at Saugatuck Elementary School. This turned out to be a good thing. Since there was no one to talk to in Russian, I quickly acquired English through immersion. There was no other choice. Small children pick up new languages quickly if immersed in them.

In later years, I couldn't believe that respected educators in California claimed that Hispanic children could only learn English through a laborious process of “bilingual education” in which they would first be taught primarily in Spanish. Whatever validity such theories might have for high school age students, immersion is clearly the best way to teach a new language to younger kids.

The Early Education of an Illiterate Slacker

Learning to speak English turned out to be fairly easy. The rest of my education didn't go nearly as well. I learned virtually nothing in first grade in Westport. In 1980, my father got a job in the Boston area, and we moved to Bedford, Massachusetts. But my performance at Job Lane Elementary School in Bedford was no better than it had been in Westport.

By 1981, I was eight years old, about to enter third grade, and still illiterate in both English and Russian. Here, I ran into one of the worst aspects of American public schools: the lack of effort to ensure that students learn much of anything in elementary school. Westport and Bedford both had fairly strong public school systems. The teachers did notice my failures and made some efforts to intervene, such as a few meetings with my parents. Fundamentally, however, no one at either school was much concerned that they had an eight-year old illiterate on their hands.

Some of this apathy might have been due to my being an immigrant; a non-native English speaker was not expected to learn to read and write as fast as those who were. But most of it was due to the fact that school officials didn't expect *anyone* to learn very much in elementary school. Instead, we constantly repeated much the same material every year, making only glacial progress. Even in fifth grade, we were still memorizing multiplication tables and relearning the most basic facts of American history for the umpteenth time.

My parents did not share the schools' complacency. In Russia, at least in the good schools, students were taught to learn as much material as possible as quickly as possible. Much of this was rote memorization that left little room for creativity or original thought. But it did help students master the basics of math, science, and foreign languages. My parents were frustrated by the school's approach and even more with my own lack of effort.

Instead of working to learn how to read, I spent most of my afternoons after school watching Japanese robot cartoons and reruns of *Wonder Woman*, *Star Trek*, and the original *Battlestar Galactica*. This time wasn't completely wasted; watching these shows helped begin a lifelong interest in science fiction. In 2007, I even wrote an article on the portrayal of federalism and socialism in *Star Trek* that became one of my most widely read works. My mother didn't foresee any such happy result back in 1981. In one conversation that has come down in family lore, she told a longtime friend that if I didn't stop spending all my free time watching TV, I probably wouldn't amount to anything.

I wasn't fully aware of my mother's fears. If I had been, I don't know if I would have done anything differently. My own view was that literacy wasn't worth the trouble. In school, the second grade teacher read books aloud to us in class, which I thought was much preferable to having to read them myself. When I had to do a writing assignment, she helped out – knowing that I couldn't complete the work otherwise. In this way, my life was actually easier than that of the kids who were literate. They had to do their own schoolwork, while I often didn't. Moreover, reading and writing were boring.

At some point in the spring or early summer of 1981, this attitude changed. For some reason, I realized that reading might be interesting after all. Within a few weeks, I learned how to do it, as if by osmosis. Almost immediately, I started to read adult books rather than ones intended for children. My parents remember me reading an English translation of Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs around this time. But the work of Stalin's successor wasn't actually the first book I read. I had previously read several books about World War II whose titles I no longer remember.

A year or two later, my parents hired a tutor who helped me learn how to read in Russian as well. From that point on, I was constantly reading books in both languages. I was a highly introverted child, and I spent far more time with the books than with kids my age. J.R.R. Tolkien, Mark Twain, and Jules Verne seemed more interesting than the denizens of Job Lane Elementary School.

Once I learned how to read and write, my schoolwork also improved. While never spectacular, my grades during my last three years in Bedford were generally good. The slow pace of elementary school education enabled me to handle the work without having to try very hard and without diverting too much time from my real interests: by this point, I had read a substantial proportion of the books on American, European, and military history available at the Bedford Public Library.

The early 1980s saw the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Unemployment was even higher than during the present recession. For us, however, it was a time of great progress. Upon moving to Bedford, my parents bought their first house. It was small and slightly run-down. But it was a major improvement over the small rental unit we lived in Westport, to say nothing of what we had in the USSR. As computer programmers in the midst of a high tech boom, my parents quickly started drawing upper middle class-level salaries.

By comparison with most middle class Americans, we were still relatively poor. Unlike them, my parents had virtually no accumulated wealth. We had arrived in the US with nothing beyond \$400 in cash and a few suitcases of clothes. In order to develop the credit rating needed to take out a home mortgage, my father took out a line of credit at a local drug store.

Once every couple weeks, we went out to dinner at a cheap restaurant such as the Papa Gino's pizzeria. To save money, we brought our own beverages. I noticed, though I didn't much

care, that many of the children in the neighborhood had more toys than I did. It did sometimes bother me, however, that I only had four Star Wars action figures, which were all the rage among little boys back then. Some of the other neighborhood kids had twenty or more.

Much of the money saved on petty luxuries like Star Wars figures was invested in a series of foreign vacations. My father began to realize his dream of seeing the world. We took trips to Israel in 1981, France and Britain in 1982, and Spain in 1984. Seeing the world broadened my horizons. I was impressed by the art, architecture, and history of Israel and Western Europe. At the same time, I couldn't help noticing that most people in even these advanced Western democracies were substantially poorer than those I saw in the United States.

Among other things, seeing Israel dramatically illustrated some of the reasons why my parents had rejected that nation in favor of America. Israel and its people had many virtues. But the country still retained much of the socialist ethos and policies of its founders. Russian Jews who had immigrated there told us that the stultifying Israeli government bureaucracy was in some ways similar to the Soviet one they had left behind.

III. A Different Kind of Revolution

In the fall of 1984, we moved from Bedford to nearby Lexington. This move turned out to be one of the most important of my life, second only to the one from the USSR to America. My parents chose Lexington because it had a very strong public school system, one of the best in Massachusetts.

For most of its history, the town's population was primarily composed of old-line New England WASPs. By the early 1980s, however, it was starting to attract numerous education-

minded upwardly mobile immigrants. Most of them were Asian-Americans, and they came for much the same reasons as my parents.

Of course Lexington was most famous as the site of the first battle of the American Revolution. There was a certain apt symbolism to the move. We had come from Leningrad, the birthplace of a totalitarian revolution that ended up enslaving a fourth of the world's population, and ended up in the cradle of a revolution that promoted freedom.

Valley Forge Years

If Lexington was the birthplace of the American Revolution, my first four years there were a kind of personal, self-inflicted Valley Forge. I didn't make friends easily, and the move cut me off from most of the few I had made in Bedford. I made even fewer friends in Lexington. It wasn't easy to break into the established social networks of kids who had already spent five or six years of school together, and for the most part I didn't really try. The intellectual nature of my interests further distanced me from my peers.

As for the Lexington school system, it was indeed superior to Bedford's. But that superiority was a double-edged sword. It meant that I started out behind most of my classmates. Lazy and unmotivated as I often was, I didn't do nearly enough to catch up. From sixth grade to ninth, I posted a long string of B minuses and Cs, punctuated by the occasional D or F. At William Diamond Middle School, I achieved the dubious distinction of combining the low social status of a nerd with a transcript that looked more like that of a stereotypical dumb jock.

I continued to read widely in literature and history. Sometimes, this outside knowledge enabled me to do well in history and English classes. On the first day of eighth grade American history class, the teacher went around and asked each student to name a president (one that

hadn't been named previously). I was one of the first students asked, so I could have picked an easy one such as Kennedy or Lincoln. Instead, I named Millard Fillmore, the most obscure president I could think of. "That's a big one," said the teacher.

Such triumphs were few and far between, however. By the end of middle school, I had dug an even deeper educational hole than the one I had been in before I learned to read. At this point, I became the fortunate beneficiary of one of the great strengths of the American educational system: second chances.

In many European and Asian countries, poor-performing students get shunted into vocational classes and have little opportunity to get back on a college track. In Lexington, teachers and administrations knew how badly I was doing, and some of them were very concerned. But they kept on letting my parents enroll me in high-level classes anyway. They gave us the option of sending me to vocational school or taking easier courses. But they didn't force it on us.

Neither my parents nor the well-meaning teachers could figure out a way to improve my performance. My parents considered sending me to private school instead of Lexington High School. In the end, however, we chose LHS after all. In part, it was because the school was the reason why we came to Lexington in the first place. But the more important reason was the Lexington High School debate team. Under Coach Les Phillips, Lexington had built one of the top high school debate programs in the nation. My parents reasoned that a kid who liked to argue about politics and history as much as I did would surely thrive in debate, which might in turn jump-start the rest of my education.

In the fall of 1987, I was very happy to see the last of middle school and finally get to Lexington High. I was particularly eager to start debate. The idea that arguing about political

issues – something I did for fun anyway - could actually win you trophies and prestige was too enticing to pass up.

The first few months of high school and especially debate went as well as I hoped. I did indeed take to the activity, which seemed every bit as wonderful as I expected.

That year's national policy debate resolution was on US policy towards Latin America. In each debate round, the "affirmative" team of two debaters proposed a new policy (known as a "case") on an issue related to the resolution. The "negative" side had to prove that the affirmative's proposed policy change should be rejected. My partner Eric and I developed a case arguing that the US should impose sanctions on Chile for its human rights abuses. We soon won a series of trophies at several novice debate tournaments.

The best moment of that year came in December 1987. Late at night, I returned from a tournament in New York City, trophy in tow. I was met by my paternal grandparents who had just arrived from the Soviet Union that same night, having finally gotten permission to emigrate. We had not seen each other for eight long years, not since I was five. Proudly, I handed my grandfather the trophy, and we embraced. It was the most wonderful thing that had happened to me up to that time.

Les Phillips, the debate coach, was a revelation in himself. He was the only teacher I ever had who told the students to call him by his first name. He was also one of the few educators I have seen in a long academic career who could actually motivate students to work much harder than they would otherwise. We wanted to win rounds and tournaments for their own sake. But cliché as it sounds, we also wanted to win for Les. He was an excellent teacher and coach. In part, it was because he was the kind of adult who is more comfortable with smart teenagers than

with people his own age. Thanks to Les and our own competitiveness, we were much better prepared than the novices from most of the other schools.

Lexington debate attracted a motley assortment of kids. Some of them were simply good all-round students for whom debate was just another extracurricular activity to put on their college applications. My partner Eric was one such. There were also many Asian immigrant overachievers. Lexington High was a magnet for ambitious immigrants. The best example in my year was my classmate Anjan, the son of Indian immigrants from Bengal. Anjan posted probably the highest GPA in the history of Lexington High up to that time, and also went on to become one of the top debaters in the country.

At the same time, some of the best debaters were alienated intellectual types who weren't motivated enough to do well in other courses. Several of my debate teammates barely maintained GPAs high enough to graduate – even as they piled up trophies and vanquished opponents from Texas and Florida. Outside of debate, they simply didn't care enough to work hard.

Michael ____ joined the debate team a year after me, and by his junior year he was one of the best high school debaters of his age in the entire country. Unfortunately, Michael failed many of his other courses and developed a serious drug problem. By senior year, he even dropped out of debate. Les intervened and helped Michael graduate, eventually even helping him gain admission to a state university in the Midwest. Today, Michael is the head debate coach at a major university. Some of the other debate misfits didn't turn out so well.

By the middle of my freshman year, I was well on my way to becoming a failed misfit myself. Success in debate did not translate to success in the rest of my academic work. Outside of debate, I was almost as lazy and unmotivated as I had been in middle school. I was getting Cs and Ds in French and Math, among other subjects. Although I got along better with the debaters

than with most of the other students, I was still introverted and mostly friendless. The debate victories helped breed an arrogant streak that didn't exactly increase my popularity.

Still, I was making progress in debate, the one activity that I really cared about. In April, Les was going to announce the members of next year's Varsity Policy Debate Team. Of some forty freshman novices, only about fifteen would be allowed to join the varsity team. I was certain I would be one of them. Eric and I had posted one of the best records of any of the Lexington novice teams, and tournament judges routinely gave me higher speaker scores than my partner, which implied that I was the one more responsible for our success. As I saw it, few people deserved to be varsity debaters as much as I did. Moreover, since my other schoolwork was going badly and I had almost no social life, debate was pretty much all I had. Losing it was unthinkable.

When the fateful day finally arrived, I came to school early and went straight to Room B-333, the debate classroom, where the varsity selections would be posted on the door. To my devastating disappointment, my name wasn't on the list. I was, however, third on the waiting list, a group that existed in case some of those offered varsity slots refused. This was no consolation. I knew that the first or second person on the list often ended up making the team, but rarely if ever the third. I was also angered by the fact that Eric had made the team, and I had not – a decision I thought especially unfair.

It seemed to be the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I was completely crushed. I could hardly bear to watch the lucky winners who soon flocked to the debate room to celebrate their good fortune. One of the girls who made it saw my distress and tried to console me. She came up and hugged me. "Once a debater, always a debater," she said. Truer words had rarely been spoken. But I was in no mood to be comforted.

The next day, I met with Les and demanded an explanation. He said that I had been rejected not because of my performance in competition, but because I wasn't very good at working with others. Being a varsity policy debater required lots of group work on research, and working even more closely with a partner. I had not done very well at either. Eric and I didn't get along, and the rift was mostly due to my obnoxiousness.

These were valid criticisms, ones which Les put in much more tactful terms than I have recounted here. Still, I thought that my strengths in other areas outweighed any such weaknesses. Some of the most successful varsity upperclassmen were even more arrogant and unpopular than I was.

I didn't give up. I set aside my grievances and tried to persuade Les to give me another chance. Eventually, we hammered out a deal. I would stay in debate. But instead of joining the varsity policy team, I would do one-on-one "Lincoln-Douglas" debate, known as LD. Unlike policy, LD didn't require as much group research. Instead of focusing on the details of policy issues, the resolutions LDers argue focus on broad issues in political philosophy. Even more importantly, LD didn't require working with a partner. It would therefore play to my strengths, while avoiding my weaknesses. If I did well in LD during my sophomore year, Les promised to consider putting me on the varsity policy team for my junior year.

I was not happy with this arrangement. The LD team was a new program, and lacked the prestige of the policy team. Still, it was a lot better than nothing, and more than rejected novices usually got. I decided to accept Les' offer.

At the same time, I knew I could no longer put off addressing my other academic problems. The Cs and Ds were piling up at ever-more alarming rates. Unlike in my elementary school years, the school administration paid considerable attention to my woes. They made me

take a battery of psychological tests, which showed several mild learning disabilities, including a minor speech impediment. My real disability, however, was lack of motivation. Even the best teachers couldn't do much to help a student who wasn't doing enough to help himself.

Ambition Counteracts Laziness

In May 1988, I had a crucial meeting with Mr. Robert Miner, one of the high school's best and most experienced guidance counselors. We were there to make a plan to salvage my rapidly disintegrating high school career.

I told Mr. Miner that I wanted to go to a good college and that I knew it wasn't going to happen if things continued as they were. The counselor went through a litany of problems that I could work on. He then noted that math was by far my worst subject; I had just made a C in ninth grade geometry. Mr. Miner pointed out that school rules required only three years of math to graduate. What did I think of the possibility of skipping math in my sophomore year? That would give me a chance to get up to speed in my other subjects, and also rebuild my debate career.

Nothing could be more at odds with the Russian educational mindset than Mr. Miner's proposal. In the Russian view, mathematics is possibly the most important of all subjects, and no serious student could even think of skipping it (even if Russian schools gave students a choice in the matter, which most of course don't).

Still, I could barely contain my enthusiasm. I hated math, and the idea of an entire year free of it seemed almost too good to be true. Moreover, Mr. Miner's analysis was correct. Without math to take up my time and drag down my GPA, I stood a much better chance of

getting back on my academic feet. My parents were more skeptical than I was. But to their everlasting credit, they set aside Russian conventional wisdom and accepted Mr. Miner's plan.

Thanks in part to Les' plan and Mr. Miner's, my sophomore year was the first successful one since I came to Lexington four years before. The most important factor of all was that I finally began to make an effort. I wish I could say that it was because of a love of learning for its own sake. In some ways, I really did love learning. Even during the dark days of middle school, I still devoured all sorts of books on history, politics, and literature. But that had never been enough to motivate me to work hard in any class that didn't interest me.

What ultimately overcame my laziness was not love of knowledge but competitiveness and ambition. I really did want to go to a top college, and I was tired of being totally outclassed by the Anjans of the world. My parents had had enough ambition to cross half the world in search of a better life. The least I could do was have enough to become a good high school student. In *Federalist 51*, James Madison famously wrote that "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." In high school, I learned that ambition can also counteract laziness.

Of course there was no miracle. I still didn't work as hard as I probably should have in the subjects I didn't like. I didn't completely conquer my laziness, but merely contained it. The Cs and Ds in what I considered to be boring subjects turned into Bs. In history and English, my strongest subjects, I climbed my way to the top of the class, or close to it.

LD debate posed challenges of its own. Unlike policy, LD did not have a novice division. So I was almost immediately thrown into competition against experienced juniors and seniors. Still, I mostly held my own and gradually became one of the better LDers on the team. Anjan had also joined the LD team, turning down a varsity policy spot because he thought the time commitment would detract too much from his many other classes and extracurricular activities.

Along with some strong returning upperclassmen, we began to make Lexington LD a force to be reckoned with on the tournament circuit.

From Lenin to Libertarianism

In the long run, the political philosophy I read as part of my preparation for LD tournaments turned out to be an even more important influence than the tournaments themselves. Ever since I learned to read, I had always been interested in politics. But I didn't have a clear political identity. I knew that I was in favor of democracy and against communism and dictatorship. But I wasn't especially clear about my views beyond that.

With the exception of my parents, virtually all the politically aware people I knew in Lexington were liberals or leftists. That was true of Les, nearly all my teachers, and most of my debate teammates. In his classic article "The Intellectuals and Socialism," Nobel Prize-winning economist F.A. Hayek wrote that intellectuals are naturally attracted to leftism because they love reason and tend to believe that a good society must be based on rational central planning. I was precisely the kind of young intellectual that Hayek had in mind. And I might well have gravitated to the political left, just as Hayek would have predicted.

Except for one thing: I was born in the Soviet Union, and I knew that my parents had left the USSR because socialism there had led to mass poverty and oppression. Of course I also knew that American left-liberals were not the same thing as socialists. Still, most of them seemed unwilling to do much to combat the Soviet Union, and some claimed that it wasn't really all that bad. Prominent liberal intellectuals such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Paul Samuelson had written that there were no food shortages in the USSR and that it was a fairly successful

economic system, absurd claims that no one who really knew anything about the Soviet system could possibly believe.

The liberals' failure to fully grasp the evil of the Soviet Union was probably what first alienated me from them, forestalling what would have been a natural affinity. And this issue would not have loomed so large in my mind had my parents and I not fled the USSR ourselves.

If liberalism seemed unappealing, I was even less attracted to social conservatism. I was the son of atheists who had rejected the dominant ideology of the society they grew up in and went to the other side of the world in search of freedom. With a background like that, I wasn't going to accept the conservative exaltation of authority, tradition, and religion. Moreover, the Soviet regime had a social conservative streak of its own, aggressively persecuting homosexuals and suppressing pornography and other sexually explicit speech. 1950s Conservatives who claimed that the spread of homosexuality was some sort of communist plot didn't know what they were talking about. The real communists were just as homophobic as they were. In ninth grade, I had read John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. His emphasis on the need to respect the freedom of people who go against traditional values struck me as simple common sense.

During my time in LD, I began to read more political philosophy. Among the books I read was John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, the most important statement of liberal political theory of the last fifty years. I respected Rawls' brilliance, but his arguments in favor of massive redistribution of wealth didn't persuade me. As a result of reading Rawls, however, I went on to read Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, one of the most important critiques of Rawls.

Nozick was a libertarian – a thinker who argued that government power should be severely limited in both the economic and social realms. Like liberals, he contended that government should not regulate peoples' personal lives. But he also argued that the same logic

applied to our “economic” activities. As he put it, government should not suppress “capitalist acts between consenting adults.” Nozick wasn’t the first libertarian writer I had read. But his compelling arguments and his devastating critique of Rawls was what first led me to become a libertarian myself.

It wasn’t only Nozick that swung me in the libertarian direction. Unlike liberalism, libertarianism was the antithesis of Soviet government bureaucracy and economic central planning. Libertarians clearly understood the evils of the USSR. At the same time, they also rejected the traditionalism, hierarchy, and morals regulation that repelled me from conservatism. I was hooked, and have remained so to the present day. I no longer endorse many of Nozick’s specific arguments. But I still believe that government should let consenting adults do as they wish in both their economic and personal lives.

In telling this tale, I do not mean to suggest that it somehow proves that libertarianism is true. The things that draw people to an ideology often have little to do with its validity. This is the story of how I became a libertarian, not the story of why libertarianism is right. If you want to read about the latter, check out some of my nonautobiographical writings!

I didn’t become a libertarian because I had objectively assessed all its strengths and weaknesses; no fifteen year old could accomplish that feat. Neither could most adults. Rather, I became one in large part because the Soviet experience prevented what would have been a natural attraction to the left. Even more than Robert Nozick, the man who made me the libertarian I am today was Comrade Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

Nozick died in 2002, and I never got the chance to tell him how much his work had influenced me. I did, however, have a memorable encounter with his great rival, John Rawls. In January of our sophomore year, Anjan and I and some other teammates were preparing for a

debate tournament. The resolution we were working for was about government censorship of high school newspapers. Anjan and I thought that something Rawls had written in *Theory of Justice* might be relevant to an argument we were thinking of making.

We knew that Rawls was a professor at Harvard, and that he lived in Lexington. Anjan came up with the radical suggestion that we should call Rawls and ask him what he thought of our idea. He looked up Rawls' name in the local phonebook. Lo and behold, the great philosopher's number was listed right there, next to those of mere mortals.

But who should be the one to call Rawls? No one volunteered for this daunting task. So Anjan nominated me. "You should talk to him," he said, "because you guys have a lot in common." The idea that a world-famous political philosopher would have anything in common with an obscure high school sophomore struck me as ridiculous. Still, a part of me was flattered by Anjan's suggestion that I should be the one to call Rawls. So I let him persuade me.

With trembling fingers, I dialed Rawls' number, half-hoping that he wouldn't be home. It turned out that Rawls *was* home. Somehow, I managed to work up the courage to explain who I was and ask my question. Rawls listened carefully, and then modestly admitted that he simply hadn't thought about that issue before. Still, he stayed on the phone with me and talked about it for more than half an hour.

I didn't get much out of him that would be useful for the tournament. He really *hadn't* thought about our issue before. Nonetheless, I was moved by Rawls' thoughtfulness and even more by his willingness to treat a lowly high school student as an equal and take my questions seriously. He didn't become impatient even when I took issue with one of his points.

I still think that most of Rawls' major ideas were probably wrong, brilliant though they undoubtedly were. But he represented the best of American academia. Long afterwards, I taught

at universities in Europe and Latin America. I saw that many European academics tend to be aloof from their own students, to say nothing of high school students. They place great emphasis on hierarchy and expect a high degree of deference and conformity from those they teach. The Russian academic culture in which my parents were educated was even more authoritarian.

By contrast, Rawls valued ideas more than position. Even though he was the greatest political philosopher of his day, he was willing to debate his work with anyone who took the time to study it and listen.

Many years later, after I became a professor myself, a Canadian high school student sent me an e-mail asking about one of my own books. I had work to do, and didn't really feel like taking the time to write to a high school kid. But then I remembered Rawls' generosity. If he didn't think it was beneath him to answer a high school student's questions, I shouldn't either. I sat down and wrote the student a long and detailed reply.

IV. Of Rising Immigrants and Falling Empires

Debate victories, rising grades, and an encounter with the world's greatest political philosopher made for a successful sophomore year. But my work in Lexington wasn't yet done. I still hadn't done enough to achieve my goal of getting into a good college. Nor had I become one of the top high school debaters in the nation. However frivolous it seems today, this latter goal was probably more important to me at the time than the former.

Like most teenagers, I was more into instant gratification than long-term success. College was an important goal, but it seemed infinitely far away. By contrast, debate was the main focus of my life in the here and now. I loved the political philosophy, and I loved winning even more. At the end of my sophomore year, I decided I would stay in LD debate and not take up Les' offer

to join the varsity policy team. I realized what Les had probably foreseen all along: that I was better suited to LD.

A Debater's Travails

That summer, I spent three weeks at the University of Kentucky debate institute. Some of the best debate coaches in the country taught there, and many of the best LDers were among the students. When I got back to Lexington, I thought I was a better debater than ever before. I was sure that I was ready to kick butt.

To some extent, I was. That year, I won more rounds than before, and defeated many strong opponents. Somehow, however, I still lost too many rounds to weaker adversaries. And I rarely won the highest tournament prizes. At tournament after tournament, the pattern repeated itself.

I couldn't understand why it happened. Part of the problem, I thought, was bad judging. Some of the weaker debate schools brought very bad judges with them who didn't really understand the political philosophy arguments very well. I did fine with the truly "lay" judges – mostly parents of debaters from other schools. They at least were aware of their own ignorance. But I couldn't figure out how to handle the pseudo-expert judges who thought they knew a lot more than they did. I blamed them for my failures.

There was a measure of truth to this argument. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and is a surefire recipe for a bad debate judge. As a law professor, I think the same can be said for real-world judges.

Perhaps the best illustration of this truth was a round I debated at a tournament in Maine in January of my junior year. The tournament was the New England qualifier for the National

Catholic Forensic League national championship. Only the top six debaters from the region would go on to the national tournament. One of the last qualifying spots was decided in a round between Paul F____, a debater from Maine, and me.

The Maine teams were generally weak, and I was confident I could beat Paul. During the round, I saw that most of his arguments were very weak. Moreover, Paul himself was extremely obnoxious, and started making personal attacks against me during the round. Although common in politics, such ad hominem insults are a no-no in the more genteel world of high school debate.

I didn't respond to the personal attacks, except in one way. To show my disdain for my opponent and his pathetic "arguments," I decided not to take any preparation time between his speeches and mine. Under the rules, an LD debater gets three to four minutes of prep time that he can take before any of his allotted speeches in order to plan responses to his opponent's arguments. Usually, I took prep time even when I didn't need it, so as to show respect for the opponent and avoid annoying the judges. In this case, I thought that violating this norm was an appropriately restrained response to Paul's nastiness.

Many of the other debaters at the tournament were watching the round, and just about everyone thought that I had won easily. Everyone but the three judges, all of whom were from Maine themselves. After the round, they took us aside and rebuked both of us, but especially me, for our lack of civility. I said nothing, but was extremely annoyed. Paul's offenses were a lot worse than mine; all I had done was refuse to take prep time, which was clearly permitted under the rules and generally considered only mildly rude.

The three judges all voted for my opponent. He qualified for the CFL championship, and I was left to stew at home. Because Paul bore a passing resemblance to the recently deposed Panamanian dictator, the incident became known as the "Noriega Round." The outcome annoyed

the Massachusetts and New Hampshire coaches so much that the next year they moved the CFL qualifier to a different state, thereby deterring most of the mediocre Maine teams and judges from coming. That year, I qualified for the CFL championship and “Noriega” didn’t.

The Noriega Round notwithstanding, the real root of my failures was less the fault of the judges and more my own. I thought that I should win rounds by making the best possible arguments. Inevitably, I often fell short of this ideal, and got frustrated. When that happened, I started performing worse than before. Often, the end result was defeat at the hands of inferior opponents whom I should have beaten.

What I didn’t realize is that most rounds are won not because the winner makes a brilliant argument, but because the loser makes a mistake that the winner then exploits. I let the best become the enemy of the good. Sadly, I didn’t realize the error of my ways until I graduated high school and started judging at debate tournaments myself. But I belatedly took the lesson to heart. It has applications to many other areas of life too.

Despite these self-inflicted setbacks, my debate career was on the rise. In January of my junior year, I scored my first big success at a tournament in Westchester County, New York. That and a few other victories qualified me for the Tournament of Champions held in Lexington, Kentucky the same weekend as the Kentucky Derby. The TOC was the strongest tournament on the high school debate schedule.

I didn’t win one of the coveted TOC trophies with a miniature statute of a horse on top. But I did put in a strong showing, winning four of seven rounds against formidable competition. To qualify for the elimination rounds and get a horse trophy, I would have had to win five. I wasn’t yet one of the top LDers in the country. But I was getting close.

I eagerly looked forward to the next debate season, my senior year. This time, I thought, everything would really come together. If I did my best, only a few people in the country could beat me, and even they not consistently.

Pride came before the fall. The first half of my senior year season was a complete disaster. I didn't win a single trophy at any of my first five tournaments. To this day, I don't fully understand why it happened. I was certainly good enough to do much better than that. I *had* done much better the year before. Ultimately, the failures were due to some combination of bad luck, bad judging, overconfidence, and the same excessive perfectionism that had dogged me in the past.

The low point of the season was a major December tournament at Hendrick Hudson High School in New York where I went 2-4 (losing four of six rounds). Even in my first year, I had never done that badly. On the long bus ride home, I wanted to cry. I even thought of quitting debate.

In addition to being an extracurricular activity, debate was also a class on my academic schedule. Les Phillips gave us grades for our performances in each tournament. My grade for Hendrick Hudson was a D. I didn't even think of arguing about it. I probably deserved an F.

The Outsider and the Insider

Meanwhile, my teammate Anjan was winning trophy after trophy and rapidly establishing himself as one of the top LD debaters in the nation. Anjan was always the best at everything. He had the highest grades in every class, held leadership positions in numerous extracurricular activities, and was popular to boot. Debate was the one arena where we had been

relatively equal. In practice rounds, I was even usually able to beat him. But now he had left me in the dust there too.

I knew that Anjan deserved all the accolades. His was an immigrant success story much more remarkable than my own. He was also almost the only real friend I had in Lexington. Still, I couldn't help but feel envy.

Anjan and I were among the many first and second generation immigrant kids who gravitated to debate. The year before, Lexington had sent three LDers to the important Bronx High School of Science tournament in New York City: Anjan, a Chinese-American girl, and me. When Les called up the legendary Bronx Science coach Richard Sodikow to register our entry, Mr. Sodikow joked that we should have sent a team with "more American LDers." Les said that Sodikow wasn't one to talk. The Bronx team was even more heavily Asian-American than ours.

In considering our friendly rivalry many years later, it's interesting to see how Anjan and I represented two different models of immigrant success. Anjan was a conscientious worker who succeeded in everything he tried. He exemplified consistent excellence in all that he did.

Anjan also didn't question authority as much as I did, and usually conformed to expectations. By and large, he accepted the political liberalism that pervaded Lexington. Years later, in 2008, he served as an adviser on President Barack Obama's economic transition team.

In his approach to debate, Anjan didn't try to make the perfect argument. Instead, he sought to make points that seemed reasonable and convincing. The key to winning, said Anjan, is to "always sound reasonable." If your argument seems reasonable and your opponent's doesn't, you will usually win. Anjan didn't necessarily want to make an interesting or original argument. He wanted to make one that would be hard for the opponent to rebut without seeming extreme.

Where Anjan was conscientious and consistent, I was erratic and lazy. I focused on the subjects that interested me, and only with great difficulty managed to force myself to get acceptable grades in the others. I had little respect for conventional wisdom, and often challenged it. Unlike Anjan, I was rarely shy about saying exactly what I thought. The contrast between my libertarian radicalism and Anjan's mainstream Massachusetts liberalism was just one manifestation of these differences.

In debate, I was drawn to complex and creative arguments, and I tried to make points no one else would think of. Anjan once said that I was "a great arguer," but not "a great debater." He meant that I was very good at coming up with individual arguments, but not as proficient at figuring how to put them together to maximize the chance of winning the round as a whole. It was a penetrating insight. His own strengths were exactly the opposite.

Anjan was the kind of immigrant who seeks to become the consummate insider, playing by the same rules as the establishment and excelling them at their own game. I had more of an outsider perspective, believing that the rules of the game were often flawed and should be changed for the better. One type isn't necessarily better than the other. A successful society needs both pillars of the establishment and outsider critics.

The contrast shouldn't be overstated. I later learned that Anjan was considerably more rebellious than I thought at the time. I learned from Anjan's approach to debate, and began to curb my excessive creativity. He in turn adopted some of the funkier arguments I had developed – after suitably moderating them. We must have debated dozens of practice rounds against each other. Not to learn from the other's strengths would have been stupid. Even more importantly, we had in common our ambition and competitiveness. Anjan's parents had come to America from even farther away than we had, and they imparted to him the same sort of drive that my

own parents had given to me. That, plus our common love of debate, counted for more than all the differences.

In our senior year, Lexington High School handed out “book awards” donated by various universities. Anjan’s academic record was so far superior to everyone else’s that the committee in charge of deciding who should get which award summoned Anjan and told him he could have whichever one he wanted. “Which one has the biggest plaque?” he asked (it turned out be Princeton). When I heard the story later, I thought that I might have made the same choice.

When a Horse is More than Just a Horse

Despite all the setbacks, I stayed in debate. After three and a half years when it had been the most important activity in my life, I couldn’t just walk away. In the new year, 1991, I did well at several tournaments. They weren’t major successes, but they were an improvement over the disaster of the previous fall.

I had won just enough tournament awards that I could potentially apply to compete in the 1991 Tournament of Champions. I hadn’t done enough to qualify for automatic qualification. But I had the right to submit a “bid” that would then be evaluated by a committee of experts convened by the TOC organizers. I had actually gotten in on a bid the year before. That time, my record was so strong that there was little question that my bid would be accepted.

In 1991, by contrast, I thought that my record was nowhere near good enough for a successful bid. I decided that I wouldn’t apply. Quite simply, I didn’t think I deserved to go. A few days before bids were due, however, Les Phillips called me in and asked why I hadn’t submitted a TOC bid. I told him. Les insisted that I should apply anyway. He said he thought I might get in. I didn’t really believe him, but I submitted the bid anyway. Why not?

I learned later that, of the three experts the tournament organizers asked to evaluate my bid, one voted to accept and another to reject it. The third, for some reason, never sent in his ballot. To break the tie, the organizers decided to call up another coach from the New England region. They chose Tim Averill, the coach of Manchester High School in northeast Massachusetts.

As successful high school debate coaches go, there could not have been a bigger contrast than that between Mr. Averill and Les Phillips. Les was single and in some ways a big kid in a man's body. He got along so well with high school students in part because we and he had so much in common. By contrast, Mr. Averill was a family man with a much more traditional approach to teaching and coaching. Manchester was a tiny public school with only about 35 students in every graduating class, in contrast to Lexington's 350. Despite this extremely limited talent pool, Mr. Averill always managed to field a strong team. Relative to the available talent, he did better than any other coach I knew of.

Because Manchester was our most important in-state rival, Mr. Averill had seen more of my rounds than almost anyone else outside the Lexington program. The organizers therefore called and asked him whether "this kid Ilya" was good enough to go to the TOC. "Not only is he good enough to go," said Mr. Averill, "he's good enough to clear." By that he meant I would finish in the top sixteen after the preliminary rounds, thereby qualifying ("clearing") for the elimination rounds and winning one of the much-coveted horse trophies. Nothing in my dubious record so far that year justified such a prediction. Still, the TOC people were convinced, and my bid was accepted.

When I arrived in Kentucky, I didn't really expect to win. Fortunately, Mr. Averill did not tell me about his prediction until after the tournament. For the first time in my life, I came to

a tournament hoping to do just well enough to avoid embarrassment. To that end, I employed Anjan's preferred strategies as much as my own. Every argument I made was going to sound as reasonable as possible.

By this time, I had finally achieved my other major high school objective: getting into a top college. A combination of improved grades and strong standardized test scores was enough to gain admission to seven schools, including my top two choices: Amherst College and Swarthmore. The academic monkey was finally off my back. And since I no longer believed that I could be one of the top debaters in the nation, I didn't feel much pressure on that score either.

Perhaps it was the lack of pressure that helped me out. Remarkably, I won my first five rounds, beating stronger opponents each time. I narrowly lost the sixth and seventh preliminary rounds. But my opponents were two of the top debaters in the whole country, Ron A___ and Jeff M____. I knew I was doing well because I had been paired against them.

My 5-2 record was just enough to get into the elimination rounds, thereby ensuring that I would bring back one of the horse trophies I had lost hope of ever getting. In fact, I was seeded sixteenth out of sixteen. Ron, the star from an elite private school in Florida who had beaten me in the sixth preliminary round, was seeded first. We would meet in the octofinals, the first elimination round.

Because of a shortage of space, the round was going to be held in the Lexington team's room at the Helmsley Hotel, the site of the final day of the tournament. When we got there, I joked that holding the round in our room gave me a home court advantage. "That will make your defeat even more painful," Ron countered. "We'll see," I said.

I had already debated Ron in the preliminary rounds. Because of this, in the elimination round we were required to switch sides, and I was now on the opposite side of the resolution

from before. Ron, as the “affirmative,” had to prove that members of Congress should follow the national interest when it came into the conflict with their constituents’ interests. My task as negative was to prove the opposite. Having spent a great deal of time debating this resolution, Anjan and I thought that the negative side had the stronger position. Judging by all the porkbarrel spending they vote for, most real-world members of Congress seem to feel the same way.

I had observed Ron’s strengths and weaknesses in the previous round and at earlier tournaments. He liked to focus on just a few key arguments. These were always excellent. But he didn’t manage his time efficiently and sometimes gave short shrift to other key points. I decided that I would deploy some of the same arguments that Ron had used against me when he had been “negative” in our earlier encounter. Ron would surely have answers to those points; in fact they would probably be very good ones. But in putting them out, he would take away time from addressing the negative arguments that I had developed myself, which I judged to be better. By using his own arguments against him, I would create a “time suck” that would divert his time and effort away from the arguments that would really win the round.

There was still the problem of what to do with main affirmative arguments from Ron’s case. I knew I could expect them to be very strong. At the same time, however, I also knew that I could find a lot to say against them. My answers probably wouldn’t be quite as good as the affirmative arguments they would be countering. But because I made more efficient use of my speaking time than Ron did, there would be a lot more of them. Collectively, if not individually, they would be good enough to give Ron some real trouble. Joseph Stalin famously said that quantity has a quality all its own. I thought that this truth applied to debate almost as much as war.

The “time suck” and Stalin strategies worked to perfection. Ron was a far more successful debater than I was, and I don’t know if he really took me seriously. Not until too late did he figure out that the really important negative arguments were the ones I had developed myself, rather than the ones I borrowed from him. He readily crushed his “own” arguments. But I won nearly all the others, and easily took the round as a whole. The judges voted for me unanimously. It wasn’t often that the top seed at the TOC got beaten so badly.

In the quarterfinals, I narrowly lost to a much weaker debater in one of the worst judging decisions I had ever seen. Strangely, I didn’t care too much. Becoming one of the top eight debaters at the Tournament of Champions and winning a horse trophy made up for all that had come before: the failures in earlier tournaments, not making varsity, all the awful grades. No LD debater from Massachusetts had ever gotten further than that at the TOC previously.

As several times before, I was saved by that quintessentially American tradition, the second chance. Lexington High School had given me a second chance to dig myself out of my academic hole. Les Phillips had given me a second chance in debate, and Tim Averill a second chance to redeem the failures of my senior year season.

All the way home from Kentucky, I felt as if I was walking on air. When I got back to Massachusetts, one of the first things I did was visit my grandfather in the hospital – the same one who had been the first to urge my father to leave the USSR twenty-five years earlier. Although he was recovering from triple heart bypass surgery at the age of eighty-four, he held the horse trophy and listened to my account of the tournament with rapt attention.

I don’t know if he saw it that way. But in my mind, the trophy was a small but telling symbol that he had given the right advice. Today, it still sits on the mantle in my old bedroom in Lexington.

The End of the Evil Empire

Whatever my self-centered teenage mind might have thought, my success at the TOC wasn't actually the most important historical event that happened in 1991. That honor goes to the fall of the Evil Empire whose oppression had driven my parents to come to America in the first place.

Unlike my grandfather, Mikhail Gorbachev did not believe that communism was inherently oppressive. He thought that a few reforms could make the system work better and win for it the support of the people. Instead, he found that lifting the threat of brutal coercion created such a tidal wave of popular opposition that his regime was swept away not long after its client states in Eastern Europe. The communists finally reaped the harvest of anger that Lenin and his successors had sown when they slaughtered millions of people and consigned three generations to poverty and oppression.

As the Soviet empire was tottering on the brink of collapse that summer, I was working for Action for Soviet Jewry, a charity that sought to promote human rights in the USSR and enable more Jews to emigrate. By that time, we were spending more effort trying to persuade US officials to let people in than persuading the Soviets to let them out. Still, in a very small way, I got to take part in the final defeat of the malign power that we had once fled.

Before the Soviet Union finally collapsed in December 1991, I had one more small encounter with the legacy of communism. That fall, I enrolled at Amherst College. One of the first courses I took was a seminar on the history of the Cold War taught by Professor William Taubman, a prominent political scientist.

One of the two textbooks Taubman assigned for the course was a work by Nikolai Sivachev and Nikolai Yakovlev, two Soviet historians. Their book was on the syllabus for “balance.” It had been written in the pre-Gorbachev days, and was little more than a compendium of communist propaganda. In fairness to Sivachev and Yakovlev, they probably couldn’t have gotten it published in the USSR – or even kept their academic jobs – if they had written anything else.

I thought that the book’s presence on the syllabus was an outrage. It was one thing to use a textbook with a left-wing perspective. That would have been entirely reasonable. It was quite another to include a crude apologia for totalitarianism written by two of the communist regime’s lackeys. In teaching a seminar on the history of World War II, no serious academic would use a textbook written by a neo-Nazi pseudoscholar. The Soviet regime had killed and oppressed as many people as the Nazi one had, perhaps even more. And the scholarship produced by its official historians was little better than that of their Nazi counterparts had been. In my first paper for the seminar, I made these points and others like them and urged Taubman to drop the book from the syllabus.

This was an obnoxious and possibly stupid thing to do. Who was I to tell the professor how to teach his class? Moreover, I wasn’t as polite in making my case as I should have been. Still, the point I made was largely correct. The book *was* a piece of totalitarian propaganda rather than serious scholarship. And Taubman’s inclusion of it in the syllabus did represent a kind of moral blindness.

Taubman was no communist apologist. To the contrary, he had written many books and articles critical of the regime’s wrongdoing. He was a deservedly acclaimed expert on the subject. Still, like most Americans, he hadn’t completely come to terms with the full magnitude

of communist crimes. We still haven't fully done so to this day. Neither have most Russians. Until we do fully appreciate that evil, there will always be the danger that a new Lenin will arise and establish a new socialist totalitarianism complete with a new version of the Gulag and the KGB. If not in Russia, then somewhere else.

To his great credit, Professor Taubman didn't give me the harsh rebuke that my arrogant pretension probably deserved; he didn't even dock my grade on the paper. Like John Rawls, he cared more about ideas than status. We had an interesting discussion about the textbook, and came away with a better understanding of each other's position than we had before. In later years, Taubman became one of my academic advisors when I was a political science major at Amherst. Like Rawls, he too exemplified the best of American academia.

Many years have passed and my current work has little apparent connection to Russia or communism. I am now a law professor, and my scholarship focuses on constitutional law, property rights, and political knowledge. But surface appearances are deceptive.

My work in constitutional law emphasizes the advantages of federalism and political decentralization, particularly the benefits of "voting with your feet," which allows citizens to move away from regions with bad governments to better ones. Although nominally federal, the USSR was actually the ultimate in political centralization. For most of its people, it also denied the right to emigrate, and often the right to internal movement as well. Federalism and voting with your feet represent the antithesis of a key element of the Soviet system. Indeed, my parents' decision to leave the USSR was itself a paradigmatic example of what I later labeled "foot voting."

In property law, my scholarship focuses on the need to protect private property rights against government power. Here, the connection to the Soviet Union is even more obvious. Socialism is nothing if not the abolition of private property.

My work on political ignorance centers on the fact that democracy gives voters little or no incentive to become well-informed. Because there is so little chance that any one vote will have a decisive impact on an election, the average voter quite rationally devotes little or no effort to learning about the issues and candidates. As a result, most voters are woefully underinformed and often end up supporting flawed policies as a result.

Lenin's 1902 book *What is to Be Done?* zeroed in on much the same problem. In a democratic system, he argued, most workers were too ignorant to achieve more than what he called "trade union consciousness." They would never understand that their real goal should be the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by socialism.

But though Lenin and I both focused on the problem of political ignorance, we came to diametrically opposed conclusions about the way to address it. Lenin's solution was the concentration of power in the hands of a small elite, the "vanguard party." That elite would establish a socialist dictatorship that would serve the interests of the people better than they ever could do for themselves under democracy. Lenin's vision led to the establishment of the Communist Party and to the massive atrocities of the Soviet dictatorship.

By contrast, I have argued that political ignorance is better addressed not by concentrating power but by dispersing it. Instead of making more and more of our decisions through a government controlled by voters who have perverse incentives to remain ignorant, we should transfer more authority to the private sector and civil society. When buying a product or

donating to a charity, people have much better incentives to become informed about the options before them. They know that their decisions are likely to make a real difference.

Life works in strange ways. The oppression of the regime that Lenin established caused my parents to leave Russia and me to become a libertarian. Today, I defend ideas that are nearly the polar opposite of his. Yet without Lenin, I probably would never have come to America or embraced any of those ideas in the first place.