This gigantism had another result which should not be overlooked, for it was one of the main reasons why the Soviet Union ultimately self-destructed. The KGB—like the army, the Communist Party, and the gargantuan military-industrial complex—was siphoning off an enormous percentage of the Soviet Union's financial resources. These authoritarian institutions were draining the country dry: nothing was denied the KGB, the Party, or the defense industry. The average Soviet, meanwhile, was living virtually a Third World existence with appalling food, backward medical care, and laughably shoddy consumer goods. There was indeed some truth to the old joke that the Soviet Union was little more than the Congo with rockets.

These problems weighed on me in Washington, but the truth is I was so busy trying to balance my dual existence as a KGB officer and press *attaché* that I did not have the luxury to dwell on such cosmic matters. As 1968 progressed, especially after the Czech events, our station—and particularly my political intelligence line—got deeply involved in analyzing the presidential race between Republican nominee Richard Nixon and Democrat Hubert Humphrey. In fact, the KGB did more than analyze: We forged a close, back-channel tie with Henry Kissinger that not only changed our view of the race but also opened up a direct line between Brezhnev and Nixon that was to significantly improve U.S.-Soviet relations.

As the election heated up in the fall of 1968, the conventional Soviet view—and the one held by Ambassador Dobrynin—was that a Humphrey victory would be far better for the Soviet Union. Dobrynin believed that Humphrey and the Democrats were more predictable and would guarantee more stable relations between our two countries. The ambassador and many other Soviet officials feared Nixon, viewing him as a staunch anti-Communist. Dobrynin also thought Nixon was unpredictable and something of a scoundrel.

We in the KGB, however, took a different view. We liked Nixon. We knew, of course, that he was unpredictable, but we also thought that—unlike the Democrats—Nixon could take giant steps that could lead to a marked improvement in Soviet-U.S. relations. Early on, we saw that the very fact that Nixon was a conservative and a fervent anti-Communist could work to our advantage: Such a man would have the power to improve relations between our countries, for no one would ever dare accuse Nixon of being soft on Communism.

We also had a little help in our intelligence assessments, thanks to a fascinating relationship that developed between one of our officers and Henry Kissinger.

The KGB officer was named Boris Sedov. Officially, he was in Washington as a reporter for the Novosti Press Agnecy. In fact, he was one of my underlings in the KGB's political intelligence line. In the course of his Novosti work, Sedov had met Kissinger, who was then at Harvard University. They hit it off, and began meeting with each other frequently. We encouraged Sedov to cultivate his relationship with Kissinger, because we knew the German émigré professor was well connected and held widely respected views on foreign affairs. We never had any illusions about trying to recruit Kissinger: he was simply a source of political intelligence.

When Kissinger became a close political adviser to Nixon during the campaign, however, we knew that we had a very important relationship on our hands, one that could go well beyond what Sedov and Kissinger had enjoyed before. In fact, both sides began rather quickly to use this contact as a fruitful back channel between the leadership of our two countries.

For his part, Kissinger—clearly acting on instructions from Nixon and plainly aware that Sedov was more than just an average Soviet reporter—began to convey to us that Nixon was no anti-Communist ogre and that he wanted improved relations with the USSR. Again and again in meetings with Sedov, Kissinger told us not to underestimate Nixon's political abilities, not to overestimate his anti-Communism, and not to take Nixon's hard-line campaign pronouncements at face value. Kissinger told Sedov that Nixon, if elected, would strive for a new era of improved relations between the two superpowers. That message was conveyed to Lubyanka, which passed it on directly to Brezhnev and the Politburo. Later, Nixon—through the Kissinger-Sedov channel—sent an unofficial letter to Brezhnev in which he set out his views on the international situation and said he would do all he could to improve relations between us.

The message was well received in the Kremlin, in large measure because Brezhnev and his Politburo cronies were anxious to begin repairing the damage that had been done after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In reply to Kissinger's overtures, Brezhnev sent back a message, relayed through Sedov, that the Kremlin would welcome the chance to work with Nixon and had no ill feelings toward him.

Dobrynin was apprised in general terms of the content of the confidential communications between Brezhnev and Nixon. He was not thrilled about the back channel, but accepted it because the election campaign was under way and it was still improper for the Soviet Union to open up direct contact with Nixon.

The Republican was overwhelmingly elected the thirty-seventh President of the United States. Even before sending an official message of congratulations, Brezhnev forwarded a confidential congratulatory note to Nixon through Sedov. In it, he expressed the hope that Nixon's election would usher in new changes in the superpower relationship. For more than a month afterward the Soviet regime and the president-elect communicated through the Sedov-Kissinger back channel.

Finally, Dobrynin had had enough. He said it was time to begin all communication through proper, diplomatic channels. Dobrynin sent a cable to Brezhnev, saying in effect that he appreciated the service done by the KGB in establishing communications with Nixon but, considering that the ambassador was alive and well, all contact with the new administration should go through the Foreign Ministry and the embassy in Washington. Brezhnev agreed. Dobrynin himself began to meet with Kissinger, and Sedov was relegated to the background.

That, however, was not the end of Sedov's and the KGB's contributions to the dialogue between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Once Kissinger became national security adviser to Nixon, Sedov began to meet frequently with one of Kissinger's top aides, Richard Allen. I, too, later met Allen at a small party given by Sedov. As with Kissinger, Sedov met regularly with Allen to exchange information. Allen must have been aware that Sedov was from the KGB, but both sides nevertheless found it beneficial to use these informal meetings to probe one another, ask questions, exchange ideas, and float trial balloons. Sedov once considered trying to recruit Allen as an agent, and even went so far as to look into Allen's financial affairs and inquire whether there might be some compromising material that could be used to recruit the National Security Council deputy. But I quickly quashed the idea, saying it was useless—and could jeopardize our improving relations—to go after such a man.

Sedov and Allen's relationship continued until I left Washington in 1970. Allen eventually went on to become national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan.