Professor Wade presents in this essay an imposing agenda of new policy requirements, both for Russia and the former Soviet Republics, and for the West and especially the United States in their relations with the old Soviet realm. Democratization, de-colonization and de-socialization, following the chaotic collapse of Communist rule in Moscow, all pose complex challenges. And there is certainly a shortage of clear and long-range thinking about these problems at the top level of leadership in the United States, such that strategic guidance needs to be generated mainly outside governmental circles.

To this end, there are a number of paradoxical aspects about the Commonwealth of Independent States and especially about Russia (on which I shall concentrate my remarks) that need clarification, perhaps even beyond the points that Professor Wade raises. These include the circumstances of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fragility of constitutional democracy in that region and the meaning of the goal of a market economy as a guide to reform. Further, there is a need to spell out more accurately the nature of the system against which all these changes have been attempted, as well as the actual impact of the changes associated with Boris Yel’tsin’s leadership.

As the centerpiece of my observations I maintain that Yel’tsin’s leadership since the August Putsch of 1991 has not laid down the direct path to the brave new world that almost everyone inside or outside Russia (including myself) hoped for at that time. Rather, the role of the President of Russia has turned out to be profoundly destructive. Yel’tsin, as a long-time European correspondent in Moscow wrote me, “has done more damage in two years than Brezhnev in seventeen.”

The break-up of the Soviet Union at Yel’tsin’s initiative in December 1991 was neither inevitable nor was it all to the good, notwithstanding the forces of nationalism that Gorbachev’s democratic reforms had released (within the ready-made framework of the Communists’ dummy federalism, as Professor Wade aptly notes). Gorbachev had worked out a new Union Treaty with the majority of the republics (including Yel’tsin’s Russia), allowing a loose confederal relationship that actually was the last straw for the conservative Communists and the trigger for the August Putsch. After the putsch Yel’tsin sabotaged Gorbachev’s efforts to
salvage the treaty, in order to liquidate the basis of Gorbachev's job as President of the union government. The real coup was Yel'tsin's personal and arbitrary action at Minsk in December 1991, with the Ukrainians and Belorussians in tow, to proclaim the Union at an end.

What did dissolving the Union accomplish? It abruptly severed the highly integrated and interdependent economic relations among the constituent parts of the Union, immediately accelerating their economic decline. By abolishing common union citizenship, it lit the fuse of many new inter-ethnic conflicts, especially those potentially involving the 25 million Russians resident in other republics (evident already in Moldova, Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia). It did not even promote democratization, but instead threw the process back in most parts of the Union by releasing the local Communists (now in nationalist garb) from the democratic reforms that Gorbachev had been requiring of the Union as a whole. The Bush Administration in the United States was quite correct in supporting maintenance of the Union as long as it could.

As for the Russian Federation itself, where his own power was at stake, Yel'tsin remained an uncompromising centralist, denying any right for the national-minority republics within Russia to secede as the union republics had. And toward those other Soviet areas, once Gorbachev's job as head of the Union had been accomplished, Yel'tsin did not hesitate to adopt Russian hegemonist goals.

What of democracy in Russia itself under Yel'tsin? Yel'tsin did not bring democracy ready-made to Russia after the Putsch, as so much of today's discussion seems to assume. He inherited a profound though still incomplete democratic transformation of Russian government pushed through by Gorbachev, that dismantled the totalitarian system and made it possible for Yel'tsin himself to recover from political disgrace and rise to the presidency of the Russian Republic.

To Yel'tsin's credit, he broke up what still remained of the Communist Party apparatus in 1991. Beyond that, he did nothing to advance the cause of constitutional government, launching instead into a bitter power struggle with the legislative branch. Yel'tsin's aim as it has unfolded since 1991 was not to preserve representative government and the separation of powers, but rather to impose presidential authority over all other government institutions that might challenge his will. The September-October crisis of 1993 and the establishment of a presidential dictatorship (at least for the time being) was the logical outcome, notwithstanding the self-delusion among Western governments and many Russian reformists that Yel'tsin was the embodiment of a democratic future.