President and Mrs. Bush visited Soviet leader and Mrs. Mikhail Gorbachev (Raisa) at their suburban Moscow seasonal retreat, known as a "Dacha." Here, Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Gorbachev visit on the shady grounds of the complex.

Photographing world history
Exhibit captures birth of a new Europe
Photo exhibit chronicles fall of Soviet Empire

By MELANIE PLEND 
Sunday News Correspondent

RIDGE — Marlin Fitzwater had the wire report in his hands. Students were on top of the Berlin Wall with pick axes. No one was stopping them. It was coming down or, at the very least, was going to be damaged. Fitzwater took the historic, ecstatic news to President George H.W. Bush: The cold war was over, America won.

Bush didn't quite jump up and down.

"Behind the scenes, just before we went out (to talk to the press)," Fitzwater, the former press secretary for Reagan and Bush, recalled in a recent interview with The New Hampshire Sunday News, that "(Bush) said to me, 'I'm not going to dance on the wall.' And that set the tone. He knew the fierce pride of Gorbachev. He said, 'We've got to be able to work with them now to rebuild.'"

The long Cold War may have been over, but the real work was just beginning, said Fitzwater. What followed was two years of late-night phone calls, summit talks, and meetings that eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These two years, between the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, and the dissolution of the Soviet Empire on Dec. 24, 1991, have been chronicled through photographs that will be part of an exhibit called "Empires Fall."

The exhibit will open Tuesday at 4:30 p.m. in the Marlin Fitzwater Center for Communication on the Franklin Pierce University Rindge campus. Fitzwater will attend the opening event. He was, after all, present every historic step of the way.

"The real historical significance was when the wall came down," Fitzwater said. "Historically, it was the most dramatic — since World War II — realignment and restructuring of countries."

The work had many sides: reuniting East and West Germany; Poland gaining its independence; Czechoslovakia entering its "Velvet Revolution." Not to mention dealing with the communist Baltic States, Fitzwater said.

Leading the charge were two men who history mandated be sworn enemies, but who instead built a friendship and partnership — Bush and then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

"What initially motivated them was they were two Super Power leaders who were searching for stability in the face of the upheaval and change that followed the U.S.S.R.," Fitzwater said. But over the years the two, quietly, and without a lot of public fanfare, built a friendship. Fitzwater said Gorbachev was both curious and fascinated by American capitalism.

He recalled how Gorbachev responded with wonder at how most Americans could afford houses, how they received bank loans, and other mundane facets of living in the U.S. Likewise, Bush treated his Russian counterpart with great respect, and helped lead the way for the new Russia to be a part of a global decision-making partnership with the other industrialized nations.

"People tend to think that the wall came down and everyone turned around and they all lived happily ever after with their independence," Fitzwater said. "But it was an amazing time of upheaval and change. Ending in the Christmas Eve meeting that dissolved the Soviet Union."

Fitzwater said he recalls watching it happen live on television. Over the course of two hours, each country of the Soviet Union was declared independent.

"At the end of two hours," Fitzwater said, "there was no more U.S.S.R. Gorbachev was essentially a president without a country."

He headed back to the Kremlin where he packed up his office. But before he left, he called his old friend Bush. It was early Christmas morning.

"He said he was calling to say goodbye, that the Soviet Union is no more and to thank him for all the good work they had done together," Fitzwater said. "And President Bush, in turn, told Gorbachev that he would go down in history as one of the most courageous leaders of the time."

The two leaders remained close friends in the years since. Fitzwater has just finished collaborating on a play called "Empires Fall" with Franklin Pierce's Robert Lawson. The play explores the relationship between the two men on a historic and personal level. Fitzwater and Lawson are currently shopping the piece to theaters nationally.

As for politics today, Fitzwater said, it certainly isn't like the old days.

"Politics has changed immensely," he said. "I don't quite know all the reasons. The issues are different. You don't have the kind of huge geopolitical issues like the cold war. Not having a huge super power to fight, today they fight over small things."

He also said today's government is more political than it ever was under Reagan or Bush. He said while it may seem "quaint" now, both Reagan and Bush refused to allow political advisors to come to the table when it was time to make decisions. And Bush specifically told his advisors when it came to decisions, he didn't want to hear about how a decision would affect him politically.

"Today they are more focused on political party than on country," he said. "And that's very disturbing to me. I don't know what to do about it. Only the President can change that."