

Bush wise to do nothing

What, everyone is asking, will George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev talk about this weekend when they meet on the cruisers *Belknap* and *Slava* that are lying to off the coast of Malta?

The nautical get-together is officially described as an informal chitchat from which no major decisions will come. But who can make small talk at at time when the once mighty Soviet empire is collapsing?

Malta makes a nice backdrop for the talks. The Ottoman Empire reached its high-water mark below the thick walls of the capital, Valetta. Sultan Suleiman's failure in 1565 to capture Valetta's forts from the Knights of Malta marked the beginning of the Ottoman Empire's long decline and fall. Exactly a century ago, Ottoman power was collapsing all over East Europe — as is Soviet power today.

With charming irony, Bush will be piped aboard *Slava*, one of the USSR's newest cruisers, whose long-ranged SS-N-12 missiles are designed to sink the U.S. aircraft carriers that dominate the Mediterranean.

A much bigger irony, I suspect, will come when Gorby visits aboard *Belknap*, an anti-aircraft cruiser whose job is to protect U.S. carriers from Soviet air and missile attack. There, in *Belknap's* wardroom, Bush will very likely offer to help Gorbachev keep the Warsaw Pact intact.

Why should the leader of NATO be trying to provide life-support systems for the last-gasping Warsaw Pact? For the very good reason that the pace of events in Eastern Europe has overtaken the notion of "reform" and has become a dangerous whirlwind. Politicians, bureaucrats and soldiers like the status quo.

The great revolution now sweeping Eastern Europe is producing the jitters from Lisbon to Leningrad. Not since 1848 has Europe seen such a storm of passionate rebellion. What will happen if the Poles, East Germans, Czechs or Hungarians say "Russki troops go home"?

As this column has been warning for some time, will the Red Army marshals just sit back and

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watch their East European redoubt turned into a sandlot for playful social democrats?

It's not hard to imagine the old guard in Moscow saying enough of Gorbyism, kicking him out and going back to the good old days of rumbling tanks and goose-stepping soldiers.

To prevent this, the West is now in the odd position of trying to shore up the Warsaw Pact by urging its East European members not to defect. And telling the frisky East Europeans to go very, very slowly lest they anger the Russian bear, which is facing its own grave problems right now: Fuel shortages, power cuts, shortages of toilet paper, matches, potatoes, cigarettes — even paper.

Please stay calm, the West is telling rebellious East Europeans, Gorby has enough headaches with his Azeris, Armenians, Moldavians, Balts, Meshketians and Uzbeks at home. Lenin only knows what new angry ethnics will pop out of the woods next.

Washington's rumor mills are now churning out predictions that the Malta powwow will produce massive U.S. troop cuts in Europe.

This is not a great idea. Even if the Warsaw Pact collapses, its core, the Red Army's 380,000 troops in East Germany, is still a formidable threat. Besides, the Soviets knew they could never fully rely on their East European allies.

If the U.S. pulls a big hunk of its 326,000 European-based troops back across the Atlantic, Western Europe will be left quite vulnerable to attack. Particularly now that NATO defence budgets are being slashed by politicians who are giddy at the thought of diverting money into vote-winning social spending.

When all the revolutionary smoke clears, the Soviets will still end up as the major military power in Europe.

If the Germans go through with gradual reunion — or a rapid *Anschlusse* — they would most likely pull out of NATO, leaving the Soviets even stronger.

Yes, the "evil empire" is tottering, but NATO is also looking more shaky by the day. It's all part of Gorby's favorite tactic — creative chaos.

So what should George Bush do? A friend of mine dined with the president last week and paraphrased to me Bush's view: Everything Gorby is doing is great for the West. We couldn't do better if he worked for the CIA. Anything we do could just gum up the works. Leave great enough alone.

This makes a lot of sense to me. Bush is no goey Jimmy Carter. He's an old Cold Warrior and former CIA-chief. His cautious, low-key response to Gorby's whirlwind is appropriate.

Exciting as it sounds, the time is not yet right for a honeymoon cruise on the Mediterranean. At least not until there is a firm pre-nuptial agreement in place. And no passionate kissing until more Red Army tanks leave East Germany and clank back to Gorky.

Berry's World



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"If we don't get some reforms around here, there could be protest marches."