

Mikhail vs. The Basher

Mikhail Gorbachev didn't just drop in on Ottawa because Canadians are such nice people or because it's the navel of the diplomatic universe, as some giddy local newspapers are suggesting.

The purpose of his stop on the way to Washington was to use all of his charm and the lure of \$500 million in grain purchases to sweet talk Mulroney & Co. into taking the lead in pressing for rapid reductions in NATO forces in Europe. Gorby knows that Canada, NATO's weakest link, is itching for an excuse to pull its troops out of Europe and divert defence spending to daycare and other vote-buying schemes.

While the Great Red Charmer was busy in Ottawa undermining NATO, big trouble was brewing in Moscow. No sooner was Gorbachev airborne than the parliament of the Russian republic — in which 50% of the USSR's people live — elected as president none other than Boris Yeltsin, the enfant terrible of Soviet politics.

Yeltsin, known to one and all as "Boris the Basher" for his hard-hitting attacks on the lifestyles of the communist rich and famous, is Gorbachev's leading critic and chief rival. The two men reportedly despise one another.

Gorbachev had the outspoken Yeltsin fired from his post of Moscow Communist party chief in 1987 and booted out of the Politburo for loudly accusing senior Soviet leaders of corruption and incompetence. Since then, gadfly Yeltsin has kept buzzing around the heads of the angry party brass.

Outside of the Kremlin's walls, Yeltsin is widely adored, even venerated, by the Soviet Union's simpler people. An earthy Siberian who looks more like a woodchopper than a politician, Yeltsin is a highly accomplished populist with a sharp talent for capturing the spirit and feeling of ordinary citizens. He aptly articulates their discontent and fury against the party and its inept fat cats.

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



Critics of Yeltsin, who are numerous among the USSR's educated classes, accuse him of being a vodka-besotted buffoon or, worse, a dangerous demagogue with dictatorial pretensions.

Watching Yeltsin, one must admit that his behavior is often rather bizarre. He frequently appears drunk, like many of his fellow Russians, or at least fuddled. Last year, his party foes launched a nasty rumor campaign against him during his trip to the U.S., accusing him of constant drunkenness and taking payoffs.

Yeltsin denies such charges but has never explained the weird incident last winter when he claimed to have been assaulted, before a bag was put over his head and he was thrown into the semi-frozen Moscow River. Shades of Rasputin, the mad monk who was poisoned, shot and thrown into the frozen Neva.

After intense questioning, Yeltsin changed his story, denying the attack had occurred.

Lately, Yeltsin has been saying he wants to remove the Russian republic from the control of the Kremlin which, he charges, has wrecked the economy. Yeltsin, and some of his radical backers, intend to create their own laws, a separate currency and pretty well go their own way. Considering that this is precisely what the Baltic republics, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan want to do, such a dramatic move could leave Gorbachev and the Kremlin ruling little more than Ukraine, Moldavia and the Muslim republics of Central Asia.

In other words, much of Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union appears to be packing its bags and planning to run away from home, leaving the Kremlin looking rather like the Vatican City.

It's also ominously clear that any move to wrench the vast Russian republic away from Kremlin control would accelerate the breakup of the Soviet Union into separate nations.

This huge, new headache comes hard on the heels of the latest economic crisis. Gorbachev's long-overdue plan to get rid of ruinous food subsidies that are bankrupting the treasury by tripling prices has produced waves of panic buying and hoarding. After first promoting the plan and announcing a referendum to gain public approval, a badly frightened Gorbachev is now backing away from the idea and trying to lay the blame for public panic on his other rival, Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov.

Meanwhile, Boris the Basher is flailing away at Gorbachev, accusing him of incompetence and fiddling while Moscow burns.

The public loves Yeltsin's philippics against the "Kremlin bosses." Unfortunately, Yeltsin has yet to produce any reasonable plan for saving the USSR's collapsing economy. Instead, he offers vague assurances of chicken Kiev in every pot and better times for all.

Don't worry, Ivan, be happy, says beaming Boris.

Berry's World



Jim Berman S.D.
© 1990 by NEA, Inc.

"This is my friend Richard, a 'Twin Peaks'-type oddball character."