

Why the bear is smiling

By offering a deal to remove intermediate range missiles (IRBMs) from Europe, Mikhail Gorbachev has just delivered another sharp karate chop to a staggering Ronald Reagan and contrived to throw NATO into confusion. And all this, ironically, by accepting American proposals made in 1981.

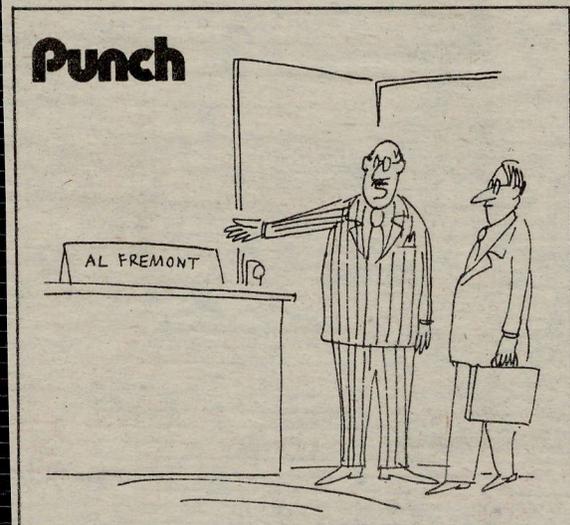
On the surface, Gorbachev's offer to pull all of the Soviet Union's 243-270 highly accurate, mobile SS-20 IRBMs and 112 obsolescent SS-4s out of Europe looks very appealing. In return, Gorbachev wants the U.S. to remove 208 cruise missiles and 108 Pershing IRBMs. Under the Soviet proposal, the U.S. could keep 100 warheads in Alaska and the Soviets 100 in Asia.

Until this week's offer, the Soviets had steadfastly refused to consider the original 1981 American "zero option" proposal. Moscow had always insisted that any deal on IRBMs, in which it has a huge superiority, be linked to long-range systems and a halt in Star Wars deployment.

Washington never expected its zero option plan to be accepted. It was designed to assuage anti-nuclear opinion in Europe, not to be taken seriously.

Now, the embarrassed U.S. is hoist on its own petard and the U.K.'s Margaret Thatcher is also feeling the sharp point of the Soviet diplomatic offensive. Public opinion in Europe, deeply frightened by the prospect of Europe becoming a tactical nuclear battlefield, is reacting with predictable delight to Gorbachev's demarche. This puts Europe's political leaders in a nasty dilemma, as the Soviets clearly foresaw.

In public, the leaders of Europe's welfare democracies pay extravagant lip service to getting rid of nuclear arms. In private, however, their views are quite different. When a somewhat addled Ronald Reagan nearly agreed to scrap European-based IRBMs at Reykjavik, for example, they howled with dismay — behind closed doors. The reason is painfully evident.



"This is your new desk. From now on you'll be known as Al Fremont."

ERIC MARGOLIS



A fat, comfortable Europe cannot hope, even with some 215,000 U.S. troops, to stop a Soviet attack. NATO is seriously outgunned by the Warsaw Pact and increasingly vulnerable now that its former technological superiority has greatly eroded. Europe has the stark choice: Either rely on the threat of using nuclear weapons against any Soviet attack or increase defence spending by 40-50% in order to match Warsaw Pact power.

Look, for a queasy example, at that bulwark of NATO, Canada. Even though Canada can't begin defending its Arctic territory or police its air space and waters, Brian Mulroney has just announced the nation's No. 1 priority is daycare! While not quite so smarmy, the policies of most European democracies reflect the same addiction to vote-getting welfare goodies over the need for much-neglected defence spending.

So the Europeans are stuck. In the U.K., the Labor party, which has been beating the drums for unilateral nuclear disarmament, has now been given a hefty boost by Gorbachev's latest ploy. Thatcher, ever loyal to Washington's policies, is left in an awkward position — just when she is already in serious political trouble over foolishly agreeing to let the U.S. use British bases to bomb Libya.

Chances are thus good that an agreement to scrap Euromissiles may be reached. Gorbachev has neatly boxed his opponents into a diplomatic corner of their own creation. But what about those short-range Soviet missiles, as I wrote two weeks ago, pose a growing threat? Positioned forward, they are as dangerous as the SS-20s. Gorbachev has suggested that once IRBMs are withdrawn, an agreement *could* quickly be reached on short-range systems. Well, maybe. And here's the rub.

What if American IRBMs are pulled out and then agreement is not reached on getting rid of the large numbers of Soviet tactical systems like the SS-21, SS-22 (SS-12) and SS-23? Or the older SS-1c and FROGS? The Soviets are anxious to get rid of the highly accurate Pershings that may threaten Moscow. Once they are gone, NATO has nothing left to trade Moscow for its tactical SS systems. Any failure in later talks on these systems will leave an IRBM-less Europe naked to Soviet nuclear blackmail and, as the French so fear, uncoupled from the U.S. strategic umbrella. Reintroducing U.S. IRBMs into Europe will likely be politically impossible.

Lots to gain here for clever Mikhail Gorbachev and even more to lose for a caught-off-balance NATO. Time to give Ronald Reagan a strong, revivifying dose of smelling SALTS.