

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Reactions to Yeltsin

The last issue of At The Harriman Institute reported on the Columbia University appearance of Soviet deputy Boris Yeltsin. Below are reactions to Yeltsin's comments from scholars affiliated with the Harriman Institute.

Padma Desai (Professor of Economics): I found his observations on the U. S. very superficial. I also thought he was playing up to the gallery. As far as his comments on the Soviet Union, I didn't understand how his suggestions differed radically from Gorbachev's program. All in all, I found him to be a rabble-rouser, to the point of being a demagogue. He may play a useful role, but I'm glad he's not in charge.

Richard Ericson (Professor of Economics): He was a real politician, particularly good at dodging inconvenient questions, a master of the pregnant pause. He was very skilled at playing the audience. He said some interesting things I had already heard. One thing that struck me was his failure to address economic questions. I think he just does not understand economic issues — he avoided the question about what you need to change in the system. He seems to have no concept of trade. In a working market you need to have middlemen. But in the Soviet Union that's still a crime, and Yeltsin would make it even more punishable.

John Hazard (Professor Emeritus of Law): I always wonder about any Soviet who comes here: what is he trying to sell? The impression I had was that some of what Yeltsin did was arranged. It must have been that the big boss gave his blessings. Gorbachev's line is the same as Yeltsin's — that the country is in a crisis. As a personality, Yeltsin is a marvelous goad in the political scene in the Soviet Union, but I would be worried if he were going to become the leader, maybe because he has made his reputation in dissent.... The Italian article about his being drunk [later reprinted in *Pravda*, causing a storm of controversy in Moscow] was totally wrong. I saw him with Mrs. Harriman, and he was totally sober. It sounds like an old charge from

the Stalin era. Somebody conservative was out to get him.... When Yeltsin said the name Ligachev, his face hardened. I got the sense that this is a personal hatred.

Robert Legvold (Director of the Harriman Institute, Professor of Political Science): I would say two things about the presentation — not so much about the substance. On the one hand, Yeltsin, for all his demagogic qualities, came across as more moderate and even reflective than I had expected. Not that he removed the earlier impression — in some respects he reinforced it. On the other hand, I had the impression that he really is a fuzzy thinker, and that he does not have a clear notion of how he would proceed in those areas where he is critical of Gorbachev. Neither on the question of economic reform nor on that of nationalities did he supply very detailed or telling answers.

Gur Ofer (Visiting Senior Fellow from Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Political Science): I found him as I knew him from before, following his speeches: a populist politician, in the sense that he is willing to push reforms — the right kind of reforms, in my view — with the help of some old means. He's ready to push them from above, with a heavy hand. Correspondingly he tried to become popular with American public opinion, but his praise of the American capitalist system went beyond that of an objective observer. Whatever he proposed on economics for the Soviet Union was very general. The one time there was a specific comment, again his tendency was to follow the populist views, with some misunderstanding of economic forces. It was ironic that he was very strongly criticized by a left group here for criticizing socialism in the country where he lives, and for praising capitalism.

Jutta Scherrer (Visiting Professor of History from Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris): I was most of all impressed by his gestures, his theatrical way, his kind of demagogic manner. He's a very skilled speaker. I think, though, that he didn't say anything substantial or anything



that was politically interesting or new, except that the Baltic republics should decide their own fates. I am still amazed — as in the case of Gorbachev — that the Soviet system could produce high party functionaries who address people so freely and who can even grab the attention of a foreign public. His populist manner, which I had the occasion to observe closely in the Soviet Union, came through even to the American public. It was interesting to me that Americans were so friendly and generous towards him.

Marshall Shulman (Professor Emeritus of International Relations): ...I think his major impact in the present political scene in the USSR is as a channel for the expressions of popular resentment against the Party apparatus.

Mark von Hagen (Associate Director of the Harriman Institute, Associate Professor of History): Despite his being a hero of the new period, in a lot of ways he behaves the way I imagine a lot of provincial party bosses have behaved for some time. Moscow friends have described him as a

demagogue, and he certainly answered questions in ways that were designed to please as many people in the audience as possible. Of course, most of the toughest questions he avoided answering or equivocated. Overall, his talk was a bit short on substance.

Richard Wortman (Professor of History): I was impressed by his way of speaking and his good humor and ability to develop a rapport with the crowd. He was very appealing. On the other hand, I was very troubled by the extreme simplicity of his views, especially his lack of a clear approach to the problems of the economy. Basically, he was what I thought he would be, but more so.

Reported by Paul Lerner

Note: For reasons of accessibility, At The Harriman Institute is now using the transliteration system of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

Copies are still available of

Boris Yeltsin at Columbia

A complete transcript of Yeltsin's address and the question and answer session
To receive a copy, send a check for \$3 (made out to Columbia University) and
your mailing address to "Yeltsin Transcript" at the address below

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