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Meeting Gorbachev

Considering the task before him and the problems that he faces as leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev appears patient and relaxed. This was the impression of Robert Legvold after a March meeting with the General Secretary. Professor Legvold, director of the Harriman Institute, participated in a series of meetings in Moscow between senior Soviet leaders and an American delegation of five scholars and five Senators. He related his observations to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute on March 23.

The trip was organized by the Aspen Institute. Generally, the discussions focused on four main areas: conventional arms reductions, strategic arms control, regional instability, and human rights. On the topic of conventional weapons, Legvold found the Soviets to be "quite responsive" to queries from their American counterparts. In one instance, Georgia Senator Sam Nunn proposed that in contrast to strategic arms negotiations, talks on conventional forces should entail exchange of data and an accord on verification *before* concluding an arms reduction agreement. This would be a reversal of the traditional procedure used in strategic weapons talks. Gorbachev and others "indicated a willingness to consider this proposal" in the context of a serious arms control agenda.

Similarly, when discussing the latest round of strategic arms negotiations, "everybody from Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to Gorbachev seemed very interested in reaching an agreement." While they appeared ready to "finesse" as many obstacles as possible in pursuit of a treaty, including the question of the Strategic Defense Initiative, Legvold argues they are far from giving up their opposition to SDI. The Soviets "are prepared to look for ways of getting around this issue" until a new administration takes office in Washington in 1989.

Regional Issues

Throughout the week, the Soviets continually raised regional issues in meetings with the American delegation.

In regard to Nicaragua, Legvold noted that Gorbachev posed a rhetorical question to his audience. "He said, 'You Americans insist on this level of security in your own backyard, in Nicaragua, where everything has to be cleared up before we can move forward in US-Soviet relations. With all the problems that we have around us, what would happen if we asked for that same level of security on our borders?'"

Recent American policy in Afghanistan has particularly angered the Soviet leadership. "It was the one issue that brought Gorbachev out of his chair," Legvold said. Among the Soviets, there is a real sense that the US has been "backsliding" since the agreement reached at last December's Washington Summit. Legvold believes that the Soviets have made a commitment to leave Afghanistan, "but it's been a difficult decision and they're embarrassed by it." They are incensed that the US is now demanding further concessions in the form of a mutual non-aid agreement in which both countries would agree not to provide assistance to any of the warring sides after a Soviet withdrawal. Gorbachev called the Afghanistan issue a "litmus test" for US-Soviet relations which would have implications in other areas.

Human Rights

In conversations with Soviet leaders, including Shevardnadze and Gorbachev, Legvold was "struck by how much their pose has changed" on the issue of human rights. Besides being willing to talk about the issue, Shevardnadze said that he recognized it as a "legitimate matter" in US-Soviet relations. But the Soviets made it clear that this was not "a one-way road" and that they were ready to talk about it "in a balanced fashion," including matters that they would want to raise about human rights violations in the United States and other areas. "Shevardnadze, using an interesting phrase, said that 'we've reached a point in our political culture where we now need to confront human rights issues in a way differently than we have in the past.'"



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Gorbachev Responsive

The meeting with Gorbachev took place at the Kremlin around a "gorgeous white marble table." The Soviet leader seemed "extremely well-prepared." While individually greeting each member of the delegation, he demonstrated that he "knew a little bit about everybody." Throughout the three and one-half hour discussion, Gorbachev seemed "very responsive." Legvold had heard that Gorbachev was "somewhat of a steamroller — that dialogue with him consisted essentially of his talking and the audience listening." But this was not the case; after a short statement, he went around the room, responding to questions from each member of the delegation.

In his opening remarks, Gorbachev praised "the progress that had been achieved in US-Soviet relations and stressed that he was very optimistic" about the future. There was an overall "warm" tone regarding the Reagan administration. There was very little speculation by Gorbachev on what some alternatives to this administration might be. He exhibited little interest in the 1988 American Presidential election. This was in sharp contrast to what Legvold observed in past election years when Soviets were making predictions on their own and were "eager to kibbitz

on the subject with visiting Americans." Legvold attributes this attitude to Gorbachev's intention to "devise a foreign policy that is independent of political trends in the United States. It doesn't matter as much to him whether the next President is Bush or Dukakis."

Of Gorbachev himself, Legvold came out of the meeting with several thoughts. First, he has begun to show the wear and tear of the position. Like American presidents, he is aging in office. The General Secretary keeps a very busy schedule; Legvold estimates that since coming to power three years ago he has seen one hundred eighty foreign delegations. Second, the Soviet leader "seems very much in control, not at all frantic, and at peace talking about any issue, from foreign policy to Armenia." Third, Gorbachev "goes through a prodigious amount of staffing; he seems to spend a great deal of time getting ready for anything that he does."

Finally, the fact that Gorbachev spent a lot of time listening patiently during the meeting implies that "he is beginning to instill a capacity to listen in Soviet bureaucrats — a capacity that they haven't had before when dealing with outsiders."

Reported by Robert Monyak with assistance from Paul Lerner

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