

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Yeltsin Speaks at Columbia

Boris Yeltsin spoke at Columbia University's Low Memorial Library Rotunda on September 11, 1989. His address, sponsored by the Harriman Institute, was entitled "Frontiers of Democracy," and was followed by a spirited question and answer session. He was introduced by Michael Gsovern, President of Columbia University.

Yeltsin, an outspoken supporter of radical reform and a leader of the "Inter-Regional Group" in the Supreme Soviet, announced that he had not prepared a speech and would simply speak his mind and then take questions from the floor. He also registered a complaint that there were no loudspeakers in front of the building, where several hundred people were hoping for a chance to get into the hall, already packed with a thousand people. "But if I were to offer to go out and speak out there, then you wouldn't be very happy," he told the audience.

### "Capitalism is Flourishing"

Yeltsin spoke enthusiastically about his impressions of the United States on his first visit to the country. He described how different America is from what he had been told in the USSR: "I was permeated by my education, in particular my education in the Short Course History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where I was told that capitalism is in the process of rotting away, and if it isn't tomorrow, it will disappear the day after. And I was told that Americans are crude, malicious and badly-intentioned, where New York was described as a pile of gravestones, piled upon one another. Now I've been here two days and the first thing I've seen is that capitalism is flourishing... even some of what in the United States are called slums would pass for decent housing in the Soviet Union. This means that my impressions have been turned around by one hundred and eighty degrees."

Yeltsin said that the Soviet Union is also a great country, "but it has not had much luck with its leadership." He noted that of the five classical components of socialism, the USSR has achieved only one, the nationalization of

property — "and that was done so badly that it's hard to correct it." And even though democratization is now taking place, it is not happening within the Communist Party, "because if they had one hundred and one candidates for one hundred positions, the one that would lose would be my opponent, Mr. Ligachev."

The central theme of Yeltsin's address was to sound an alarm about the Soviet public's increasing impatience with the slow advance of *perestroika*. "Today we have an economic crisis, a financial crisis, the nationality question is in a state of crisis, the standard of living is in a crisis — 48 million people live below the poverty line — the party is in a crisis, society is in a crisis," Yeltsin said. "I think that if there are not some substantial improvements within the next year we will see the beginning of a revolution from below."

Many of Yeltsin's remarks drew applause and laughter from the audience, and he demonstrated the flair of an American politician when, in acknowledgment of the oppressive heat in the Rotunda, he removed his suit jacket and encouraged everyone else to do the same.

### Attacking the Status Quo

Yeltsin spoke for only twenty minutes and then opened the floor for questions — "I beg you, ask away, without notes, anything you want." The first question addressed the nationalities problem. The Soviet deputy drew gasps and applause when he said, "as to whether or not the Baltic republics stay in the USSR or leave it — that's up to them to decide."

The next question was unintelligible because the audience microphone was not working, prompting Yeltsin to comment, "At our Congress the same thing happened. When Sakharov wanted to speak, the microphone automatically turned off." He went on to answer questions about decentralization, the *nomenklatura*, the multi-party system, peace, strikes, and other issues.

When asked what his alternative program is, Yeltsin protested that people should not place him in opposition to



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Gorbachev. He said emphatically, "I support Gorbachev. I totally support his strategy for *perestroika* and for the renovation of Soviet society." He added that their only differences were tactical, because he feels the President is moving on too broad a front, "as if you were trying to carry on a battle with the soldiers spaced two kilometers from one another." He said that *perestroika* should concentrate on three areas — food, consumer goods, and housing — and he called for cutting defense and space programs.

Yeltsin said that he does not rule out the creation of a second party, but that "our society isn't ready for this yet. It has trouble supporting a single party, to tell you the truth." Nonetheless he advocated open discussion in the media of the benefits and drawbacks of a multi-party system. Such discourse is currently prohibited.

Hardly shy with his opinions, Yeltsin blasted Soviet trade unions, calling them "lazy and conservative" and claiming that they do not defend the interests of workers. And he attacked the membership of the Politburo: "We have so many odious and incompetent people in the Politburo — all they do is raise questions and never solve any. They are hanging for dear life onto their positions, and the only way to get rid of them is to get rid of them together with the positions. We have to sort of catapult them out, the way this is done in ejection seats in airplanes. What we need is a person who is willing to push the button."

## Challenging Questions

A few of the questions from the audience were challenging ones from American leftists who implied that Yeltsin was being too enthusiastic about capitalism. When one person asked him whether he supported George Bush or the thousands of American laborers currently on strike, Yeltsin replied, "that's a funny question. That's up to you to decide that — you elected him, after all."

In response to an attack from a self-identified unionist on leadership privileges, he said, "I do not have any privileges at all. I rejected them all voluntarily. Unfortunately, there were no other volunteers after me." He refuses to use special elite hospitals and goes to a local polyclinic, even though, during his last visit, his doctor spent less time caring for him than complaining about the lack of medical resources — such as the need to use one hypodermic needle for the whole clinic.

One curious audience member asked Yeltsin if he still considered himself a communist. He hesitated and sighed, drawing laughter, and then mused, "I don't know what's going to happen to me when I come back from the United States."

*Reported by Paul Lerner*

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### Boris Yeltsin at Columbia

A complete transcript of Yeltsin's address and the question and answer session

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