FROM THE EDITOR

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An Historian's Formulation of Gorbachëv's Real Problems

Certainly most Americans are in a state of near total bewilderment about what is going on in the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachëv. It seems to be totally contradictory, to make no sense at all, that a leading product of the Brezhnev era of dictatorship and stagnation should try to move away from a heritage which would be the envy of most dictators throughout history.

Secretary of Defense Cheney has told us (presumably using information from his intelligence officials) that Gorbachëv has almost no hope of succeeding, whereas President Bush (presumably relying on other sources as well as his political advisers) tells us that this is not so. Bush also has no hesitation about telling the Soviet leader that he'd better get moving, that his progress is too slow.

What is really going on under Gorbachëv, and how did this come to pass? Only if we have some idea of what the reality is will we be able to judge how much hope there is for Gorbachëv's reforms, whether Bush or Cheney is likely to be correct. Much is written these days on Gorbachëv's reforms. This essay will not rehash this material, but rather attempt to see whether a long historical approach might not be helpful in understanding what the real issues of today are.

Both Gorbachëv and his conservative rivals agree at least on two things. First, it would be desirable for the USSR to remain a superpower. Secondly, reforms are needed if the Soviet Union is to remain a superpower. They disagree on the reforms that are needed and how they should be undertaken. Gorbachëv and his camp seem convinced that a modern, innovative, economic man must also be a politically active, thinking, free man. The conservatives doubt that such a nexus is real.

My own sense is that Gorbachëv is correct in his assessment, but that even he underestimates the difficulties he faces because the Soviets have so falsified their own history that they, by their own admission (most publicly, when they cancelled their national examinations in history), have little idea of what is correct and what is not. As will be shown, Gorbachëv's problems today are rooted in ethnic antagonisms and problems, slavery, and autocracy that date from the earliest centuries of Russian history.

Almost all Soviet citizens can perceive that something is wrong with their system. It does not take a well-trained eye to perceive that the shops have become emptier every month to the point that now even the stores that sell for hard currency are almost bare. Pharmacies no longer have basic drugs. The only magazine for auto drivers is being cancelled because of a shortage of paper. Rationing is being introduced for an ever-expanding number of commodities. Inflation is becoming perceptible. Aeroflot reveals that more
planes cannot be put into the air because the USSR, the world's largest producer of petroleum, has a shortage of airplane fuel. Huge deficits surpassing in scale those of the Reagan presidency have been revealed. The foreign trade deficit is larger than anyone had imagined. The Afghan War was lost, and all the lives and treasure expended there were simply wasted. With great regularity the Soviets announce attempts to save money by cutting troops here, by discontinuing support of yet another domestic program there.

More sophisticated Soviet observers perceive even deeper problems. The rate of per capita economic growth has been declining for some time. The return on investment in industry seems to decline almost constantly. Diffusion of new technology is agonizingly slow, primarily because the Soviets do not have Western-type salesmen who tout the latest in hopes of earning a commission. Often a ruble's worth of fertilizer does not produce even an additional ruble's worth of grain, in spite of the highly inflated prices paid for grain. The attempts to introduce personal computers have proved a hopeless fiasco. Only now the Soviets are translating and writing books about early Atari and TRS-80 technology, and computers (and certainly not printers or modems!) of that generation simply do not exist. The Soviet backwardness in the computer sector is almost incredible. Most shocking of all is the return to human capital. The USSR has one of the most highly educated societies on earth, yet its per capita income arouses no envy in many Third World countries. Historically, education produced excellent returns in Russia from at least 1800 until the late 1960s, but since then the economic returns on educational investment have been very low, perhaps even negative. Some Soviet scholars themselves convey the impression that further education is incompatible with the prevailing political, economic, and social regime of their country.

The best statement about the nature of the Soviet predicament is that presented in April 1983 at an Academy of Sciences seminar in Moscow by Tat'iana Zaslavskaya, the famous Novosibirsk economist-sociologist. The 1983 paper earned her a silencing and disgrace during the Chernenko regime, but since Gorbachev came to power, she has been writing furiously and supporting perestroika at every turn. She stated that the root problems of the Soviet system are highly centralized control and command. Thus every farmer is told by a Moscow bureaucrat what to plant, where, and on what day. Every factory director is told by a Moscow bureaucrat where to get his supplies, how much to pay for them, what precisely he should make in what assortment, to whom he should sell his output, and for how much. Every American knows that such total dictatorship will destroy personal initiative. Yet Zaslavskaya shocked her policemen by going even further and stating the obvious: that the Stalinist centralized command system has produced a nation of slaves. She did not use the word "slaves," it is important to stress, but her description of the personality type produced by the Soviet regime will fit any ordinary slave at any place in world history. "A low level of labor and production discipline, an indifferent attitude toward the work