THE LEGACY OF MIKHAIL S. GORBACHEV

It would be extremely premature for anyone yet to write the political epitaph for Mikhail Gorbachev. He remains a very popular and revered international figure, as evidenced in the very positive Western press that he received during his visits to the United States, Germany, Japan and Israel in 1992 and in his hob-nobbing with leaders like ex-President Reagan. Although denying any future political ambitions for himself, the private citizen Gorbachev maintains a high public visibility and profile in Russia through his research foundation in Moscow and through his outspoken criticism in the Russian press of El'tsin and his government.

Despite his current low ranking in Russian public-opinion polls, Gorbachev may still confound his many Russian detractors and critics who have already relegated him to history. Great economic uncertainty, ethnic conflicts and military clashes among themselves threaten all of the nation-states in the Commonwealth throughout the remainder of this century. As a consequence, a future, even figurehead, role for Gorbachev as leader of a reconstituted confederation of the present Commonwealth countries to link their economies, encourage Western investment in a common market and mediate interstate conflicts should not be dismissed out of hand. A youthful 61 years old and in good health in 1992, Gorbachev has time on his side to wait even until the beginning of the next century, and until countries like Ukraine lose their automatic suspicion of him and a confederation as the reimposition of the old Soviet Union or Russian imperialism.

Gorbachev has even been mentioned as a potential candidate for Russian President, especially if Boris El'tsin follows through with his pledge not to seek reelection after his current term expires in 1996. If nothing less, Gorbachev still seems driven by his personal and bitter rivalry with El'tsin that so dominated Soviet politics in 1989-91. That rivalry was only
rekindled by Gorbachev's clearly seething resentment of what he sees as El'tsin's personal betrayal and humiliation of him in December of 1991 — abandoning his commitment to a new union treaty, signing the Commonwealth accord with the leaders of Ukraine and Belorussia, and taking over Gorbachev's former Kremlin offices.

Gorbachev's return to politics would be through a process in which he is freely and competitively chosen by the electorates within these independent countries. This democratic choice by the electorates of independent countries more than anything else epitomizes Gorbachev's political odyssey from the time when he had first been elected leader of an authoritarian political system as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by its Central Committee on 11 March 1985.

As a potential future political leader, however, Gorbachev cannot escape his past. His political reentry cannot but stir all the passions and controversies surrounding his role and impact in bringing about the disintegration of Communism and the Soviet Union in 1985-91. Clouded as it must be by the kaleidoscopic events and changes of such a recent past in the former Soviet Union, the issue of Gorbachev's legacy of 1985-91 for his former country and the world will figure prominently in determining his political future. Even the passage of just seven years allows all of us to appreciate the immensity of those events and changes so closely bound as Gorbachev's unique legacy.

Who would have imagined in March of 1985 within only seven years the collapse of the Soviet Union and the entire European Communist empire with the emergence of independent democracies and the end of the Cold War? Future historians are likely to puzzle at the alarmist views by political pundits and professional national security specialists in the West about the Soviet Union as some kind of behemoth "evil empire" and the trillions of additional dollars appropriated by American administrations in fear of it during the last ten years before the Soviet Union and Communism imploded. These are the same pundits and national security specialists who made their careers by presuming without question that the leadership of the Soviet Union would never voluntarily give up their Communist empire in Eastern Europe or withdraw their troops from that region.