

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Rendering Reagan speechless

This is a case where the adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words," applies—even though, in this case, the picture depicts speechlessness. The photograph accompanying this column appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* Oct. 31. It shows a smug Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze making an unusual, arrogant shrug, while President Reagan stands there, grinning.

The *New York Times* only stated that the photo was taken while Reagan and Shevardnadze announced a Dec. 7 summit in Washington to sign an Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) treaty. Actually, the photographer caught both Reagan and Shevardnadze in a highly revealing moment. They were both looking directly at this reporter at the time.

Right at the end of the joint announcement Oct. 30 in the White House press briefing room, President Reagan indicated that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was now a "bargaining chip."

He was asked by CBS's Bill Plante, "There have been some indications from the administration in recent days that there is some flexibility on the deployment schedule for your Strategic Defense Initiative. Could this come into play in your discussions with Mr. Gorbachov?"

Reagan replied, "These would be one of the things that would be discussed. There are some things that we've agreed to discuss about that."

Plante followed, "So you think it's possible that that could help you get

an agreement on strategic missiles?"

Reagan replied, "Yes."

A moment later, Reagan and Shevardnadze moved off the podium toward the exit. I was directly behind the front row when I let fly my question to the President. He stopped to hear the whole thing.

I asked, "You say we'll be flexible on strategic defense, Mr. President, but the Soviets haven't even admitted yet that they've been working on their own strategic defense for 17 years."

Reagan stared at me, but no words came out of his mouth. He just shrugged and then laughed.

Behind him, Shevardnadze brought laughter from the press corps with an arrogant imitation of Reagan's moment of being caught speechless. That was when the *New York Times* photographer snapped the photo that his editor put on the front page of the next day's paper.

After imitating Reagan's shrug, Shevardnadze then broke out into a big grin, and pointed in derision at the helpless Reagan. This drew even more laughter from the press corps.

To rub a last bit of salt into the wound, Shevardnadze replied to a re-

porter who asked, "Did Gorbachov flip-flop?" by saying, "There was no flip-flop. Everything is going according to plans."

Indeed, from the Soviets' view, everything was going according to plans. Reagan, who only the week before in his nationally televised press conference insisted that the SDI would "never be a bargaining chip" in negotiations with the Soviets, was now saying its deployment schedule would be flexible in negotiations.

Secretary of State George Shultz revealed during his press briefing a few hours later that a mere change in semantics by the Soviets had done the trick. He said that as long as the Soviets spoke in terms of "killing the SDI," the President would never go along. So, Shultz said, the Soviets devised a new terminology. "They now speak of strategic stability, and this we can work with," he said.

He didn't say that the Soviets had changed their objective—to kill the SDI—only their words. Nonetheless, that was good enough for George Shultz, and also, apparently, for the President.

You will hear the Soviets use their new language about the SDI from now on. Instead of a frontal assault, they will go after it in the language of "extending the time period in which withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty is prohibited," and restricting the kind of tests in space that are permitted under the ABM Treaty.

By contrast, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, at the Pentagon press conference after announcing his resignation Nov. 5, said bluntly that the issue of the SDI is simply whether we are serious about deploying it or not. If we are, he said, then we should not allow anything to inhibit the effort to achieve that objective. Anything less reduces SDI to a mere research effort or bargaining chip.

