

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Bush hedged his bets on Gorbachov

The administration's on-again/off-again treatment of Soviet leaders reflects confusion over developments in Moscow.

The behavior of the Bush administration in the days leading up to the meeting of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee in Moscow Sept. 18-20 was in marked contrast to what immediately followed.

It seems that Bush and company were hedging their bets on the chances of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov to survive the Moscow meeting. When it became clear that he remained in control, at least temporarily, the Bush forces wasted no time warming up relations.

The shift could not have been expressed more clearly than by Secretary of State James Baker in two press conferences—one given while the outcome of the Moscow meeting was still in doubt, and the other two days later when it was over—on the eve of his Jackson Hole, Wyoming tête-à-tête with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

On Sept. 19, Baker held a press conference at the State Department where he drew a distinction between the Soviet *perestroika* reform program and Gorbachov himself. He even went so far as to say that "*perestroika* . . . includes the ability of the Soviets to decide on who their leadership shall be."

But then on Sept. 21, Baker held a press conference at the White House where he debunked the idea that "the success of *perestroika*" could be separated from the indispensable role of Gorbachov. "Therefore," Baker said, "as we hope for the success of *perestroika*, so do we hope for the success of Mr. Gorbachov, as well."

The decision by President Bush to

meet with maverick Soviet politician Boris Yeltsin, who at least publicly presents himself as a factional alternative to Gorbachov, was also an indication of the shifting winds in Washington.

During the few days when the President was having a hard time making up his mind whether or not to meet Yeltsin, observers here noted that Bush's decision would be an important signal about how Bush was reading Gorbachov's staying power.

Even if Yeltsin was, in a sense, a "stalking horse" for Gorbachov, by coming to the United States to sing for an economic bailout of his country, reactions to his U.S. tour were read carefully in the Kremlin for what they had to say about U.S. perceptions of the highly unstable internal Soviet situation.

Worried about how Bush's decision to embrace Yeltsin would be read, Gorbachov reacted swiftly, ordering Yeltsin home immediately and announcing that Foreign Minister Shevardnadze would be in Washington within a week to meet with Bush.

Even though the Shevardnadze-Baker meeting in remote Jackson Hole, Wyoming, had been set for a long time, Shevardnadze suddenly wanted to come to Washington to meet with Bush personally before going to Wyoming.

Seeing President Bush before meeting with Baker would upstage Baker and diminish the importance of the Wyoming meeting. But Shevardnadze was willing to risk such a diplomatic offense in order to undo the damage that Gorbachov's circles felt the Yeltsin-Bush meeting had done.

Shevardnadze wanted to be seen around the world, and in the Kremlin, on the White House grounds, and fast.

So, for those who suspected this motive in the sudden change in plans, it was no surprise when 1) the meeting with Bush went more than an hour over its scheduled time, in contrast to the 16 minutes the President granted to Boris Yeltsin; and 2) Shevardnadze gladly allowed himself to be filmed talking at length to reporters in the White House driveway right outside the Oval Office.

The latter was unprecedented. The few reporters who braved the abnormally brutal heat and humidity for over an hour beyond the scheduled end of the meeting that afternoon did so with little real expectation that Shevardnadze would talk to them. In the past, he'd always dive into his limo and pull away, saving his remarks for a carefully orchestrated press conference at the Soviet embassy.

This time, Shevardnadze did not hesitate. He couldn't wait to get in front of all the TV cameras and microphones awaiting him outside the West Wing entrance.

At his press briefing following Shevardnadze's *tour de force* with the media in the driveway, Baker was asked if the subject of Yeltsin had come up in the Bush-Shevardnadze meeting. Baker conceded it had, "in an indirect way."

"Who brought him up?" the reporter asked. "I think the other side did," Baker answered.

But when asked to report on what Shevardnadze said about Yeltsin, Baker decided that he'd already said too much. "I don't think I'm going to say anything more about that," he intoned.

After all, unlike even two days earlier, Gorbachov was clearly the man of the hour again.