

His presidency adrift, Bush embarks on summit at sea

by Nicholas F. Benton

Just as critics of President Bush began taking their gloves off to condemn his lack of leadership, the President announced an unstructured December “non-summit summit” with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov at a White House press conference Oct. 31. The summit, or “meeting,” as Bush officials insist on calling it, is scheduled to occur aboard two ships, one U.S. and one Soviet, off the coast of Malta in the Mediterranean on Dec. 2-3.

The “non-structured” character of the meeting, as described by Bush during his rambling press conference, has experts alarmed. One journalist could not help raising the spectre of the close call at Reykjavik, Iceland in October 1986, when Gorbachov nearly took President Ronald Reagan to the cleaners in a similar “non-summit” called on short notice. Although the U.S. administration denies that there have been any pre-set agenda items, and that “both sides will be free to bring up whatever ideas they want,” there are widespread reports that the Soviets will be coming primarily with economic demands.

Gorbachov will be looking to come out of the December meeting with promises of an economic bailout to salvage his position within the Soviet Union, where he faces the gravest challenge since he took power in March 1985. Despite seeking support within the Supreme Soviet for a ban on strikes during the severe Soviet winter, Gorbachov has already seen some potentially crippling strikes break out. If they spread to the transportation sector, the country will be paralyzed, and the growing legions of Gorbachov enemies will use the occasion to dump him.

Soviet expert Gen. Paul Albert Scherer, the retired head of West German military intelligence who was in D.C. to brief officials for two weeks just before the announcement of the December summit, said that Gorbachov has no more than seven months left. He warned that Gorbachov would be

replaced by a racist, hardline regime that would resort to the “Beijing solution” of brutal internal repression, and renewed military threats to the West. He cautioned the U.S. to take adopt a “wait and see” posture, making no commitments, especially in arms control or economic bailouts, until at least next summer.

U.S. asked to accept crackdown

For his part, Gorbachov has let it be known that he is prepared to adopt “Beijing solutions” of his own against dissenters. As the Soviets announced the Dec. 2-3 meeting in Moscow simultaneously with Bush’s announcement in Washington, senior U.S. administration officials noted that Gorbachov has privately told Bush to expect “some steps to be taken within the Soviet Union that might be inconsistent with democratization.” Gorbachov will repeat this line during the December meeting, according to the administration source quoted in the Nov. 1 *Washington Post*. He will “appeal for U.S. understanding and restraint” as “he may be obliged to take steps that seem inconsistent with his goal of democratizing Soviet society”—namely, a domestic crackdown.

Citing the economic crisis within the Soviet Union as the cause for the unrest requiring the repressive measures, Gorbachov is expected to press Bush for an economic bailout, which would include removal of the U.S. Jackson-Vanik Amendment that prohibits granting the Soviets “Most Favored Nation” trading status with the U.S., and relaxation of the COCOM restrictions on high-technology trade between the West and the East bloc.

Western experts fear that, given what they call Bush’s “almost pathological inability to make command decisions,” displayed over recent months, he might cave in under the pressure of long, arduous, unstructured private talks with

Gorbachov and give the Soviet leader almost everything he wants—much as Reagan did in Reykjavik. Under such circumstances, Gorbachov could also commit Bush to huge reductions in conventional forces in Europe. Helping to convince Bush of the virtues of such a deal will be the impact of the Fiscal Year 1990 budget sequester, which his vacillation permitted to extend more than a month into the new fiscal year, and which could become permanent. The budget sequester could force a U.S. military manpower reduction of as many as 120,000 in 1990, and Bush might look at a new, sweeping conventional forces reduction offer by Gorbachov as an answer to his budget dilemma.

Experts fear, of course, that such a development, combined with anticipated rapid progress toward a strategic nuclear arms (START) accord by early next year, could result in restoring to the Soviets a decisive war-winning military margin over the West, which could be lethal in the hands of either Gorbachov or his successor.

What experts fear most in the context of the superpower relationship is the overall pattern of Bush's behavior since taking office last January. The most common expression circulating in Washington currently is that Bush "still thinks he is the vice president." Namely, he still thinks he is in a job that requires only ceremonial, but not decision-making duties. He has the travel schedule of a vice president, hitting the road almost weekly to stump for a candidate or push some symbolic program, while refusing to make command decisions.

As a result, the nation has ground to a virtual standstill domestically, with the failure to resolve a FY90 budget resulting in the looming threat of a permanent across-the-board "sequester" under the Gramm-Rudman deficit reduction law, and the inability to pass legislation to raise the U.S. debt ceiling to \$3.2 trillion threatening to push the government into formal default. Sale of individual U.S. treasury bonds was already suspended Nov. 1.

By reacting to events rather than taking initiative, as other critics have seen him, Bush is particularly vulnerable to manipulation by Gorbachov. This is particularly true because of Bush's continued insistence that it is his duty "to help *perestroika*" (Gorbachov's military reform program) succeed. In his press conference announcing the Dec. 2-3 meeting, Bush categorically refused to entertain the thought that, even with the threat of unrest and coups in the Soviet Union, the progress toward positive reform would fail to occur.

Bush thinks *perestroika* irreversible

In a tell-tale exchange, this reporter asked Bush: "There's been a lot of talk around town about the survivability of Gorbachov, especially going into the winter months and the prospect of strikes and so forth. When you say you would like to see *perestroika* succeed in the Soviet Union, do you equate that with the success of Gorbachov personally?" Bush replied, "I think it's tied up in that right now, yes."

This reporter followed up: "Do you think if there is anything that you could do to help strengthen his position in the Soviet Union that you would do it?"

Bush answered, "Well, I think we've got to know what 'it' is. But this is the kind of discussion we can have. I say this: I don't think you base the foreign policy of a great power like the United States on one personality."

Later in the press conference Bush repeated, "We are not basing the foreign policy of the U.S. on any individual," adding, "We've got to look at broad changes, we've got to look at commitment from all elements of leadership in the Soviet Union, where they come from—fascinating meeting the other day with Mr. Primakov here—and assess all of this and spell out as clearly as you can what's in the interest of the U.S. and the Alliance.

"And this meeting will help in that regard. But it's not predicated, our whole arms control agenda, on Mr. Gorbachov. Similarly, I don't think they do that on a U.S. President at the time. . . . You hear a lot of cross-currents about how successful *perestroika* is going to be. But one thing you get back from all the Soviet leaders is, look, the clock isn't going to be set back and we—'we'—are going to go forward with *perestroika*. Whether it's Mr. Yeltsin when he was here or Mr. Gorbachov's statements and visits with Shevardnadze, visits with Mr. Primakov; and then others meet with other layers of the Soviet bureaucracy. And you get the distinct feeling that the clock is not going to be set back to square one." Driven by such an obsession that the Soviets cannot fail but to move forward, Bush is prone to look at any evidence to the contrary, such as a brutal internal crackdown, the overthrow of Gorbachov or even the outbreak of civil war within the Soviet Union, through the same rose-colored glasses.

In reality, as General Scherer pointed out during his recent visit to Washington, conditions in the Soviet Union are now so unstable that, in the wake of a coup against Gorbachov, civil war would lead to a disintegration of the country into fractured regions dominated by contending warlords, creating a circumstance in which one such warlord "might actually be willing to push the button" to launch a nuclear strike against the West.

But Bush's "*perestroika* is irreversible" line is new, a departure from statements he made earlier this year when he justified a "go slow" approach to the Soviets. Secretary of State James Baker III has helped shape this new thinking by Bush, reflecting in two major speeches recently—one to the Foreign Policy Association in New York Oct. 16 and another to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco Oct. 23—the concept that "the cold war with the Soviet Union has ended."

But experts with a longer view of history view the Dec. 2-3 summit aboard ships in the Mediterranean as ominous. They recall that the 1807 summit between Napoleon and Czar Alexander I at Tilsit was held aboard a ship. That historic precedent for the summit-at-sea resulted in war.