

The 'doormat' legacy of the Malta summit

by Nicholas F. Benton

It will not take long for history to determine which of the euphemisms coined to describe the Dec. 2-3 Bush-Gorbachov summit held aboard ships in the Marsaxlokk harbor at Malta will best describe the significance of the event.

While it will surely be remembered by all who were there as the "Seasick Summit," the uncommon, near-hurricane-strength winds that were the backdrop for the summit will have a lasting impact primarily as a metaphor for the tempests in the larger political and economic realms of the world, over which neither of the two most powerful mortals on the planet has control.

The uncanny intervention of Nature evoked dozens of images of weather's role in great historical, including biblical, events. The only role in the Bible played by the tiny Mediterranean island of Malta, which retains remnants of civilizations that found safe harbor there dating back to the neolithic age, is ironically associated with a great storm that shipwrecked the Apostle Paul.

The Bush-Gorbachov summit has been dubbed everything from "the Love Boat" (something critics of Bush's eagerness to support Gorbachov's *perestroika* reform policy began calling it when the summit was first announced in October), to the "doormat summit," because of the lengths Bush was willing to abase himself to boost the Soviet leader in his desperate struggle to remain at the helm of his disintegrating empire.

A new Yalta

Both critics and cheerleaders of the Malta summit have also compared it with the Yalta summit at the conclusion of World War II. To its critics, Malta represented the worst sellout by the West to the Soviet empire since Yalta, when Roosevelt and Churchill handed Eastern Europe over to Sta-

lin. To its fans, Malta signaled the end of the era of Yalta, the end of the Cold War and the division between East and West in Europe. In an example of the latter view, columnist Stephen S. Rosenfeld wrote in the Dec. 8 *Washington Post* that the Malta summit was "the most important East-West assembly since the two principal victors of World War II met at Yalta in 1945 to set out a new international order." This is true, Rosenfeld argued, because "With the Malta summit, Mikhail Gorbachov has entirely reversed Stalin's postwar decision to seal the Soviet Union off from Europe and erased Moscow's ambivalence about whether the United States has an abiding trans-Atlantic role. On his part, George Bush has conclusively answered the long pending, suddenly urgent question of whether the United States will stay deeply engaged in Europe as the Cold War winds down."

Events will soon determine whether Rosenfeld's view or, far more likely, an altogether different perception of Malta will survive the test of time.

For example, in the same issue of the *Post*, read the headline, "Soviet Union Raises Readiness of Forces in East Germany." Has the Cold War come to an end? Beyond fine words, there are no actions to justify any such conclusion. On the contrary, if there was any reality associated the Malta summit, it was that Gorbachov refused to repudiate the Soviet Union's right to intervene with force into Eastern Europe, and that he lied about Soviet involvement in ongoing regional conflicts and irregular warfare, such as in El Salvador.

Unresolved: the economic crisis

Added to this was the fact that, despite his willingness to slam his foot on the accelerator for sweeping strategic and conventional arms control agreements, President Bush was simply not able to provide Gorbachov with what he will need

to prevent the continued implosion of the Soviet economy and its associated political disintegration—a process which dramatically heightens the danger of world war.

Not that anything Bush could have done would save Gorbachov or *perestroika* at this stage. Even \$20 billion in hard currency passed under the table aboard the *Maxim Gorky* in a brown paper bag—which Gorbachov wanted, but did not receive—would not prevent the collapse of the Soviet economy at this point. Of course, Bush had nothing like that kind of economic bailout to offer. With the U.S. economy unraveling itself, the lack of U.S. largesse to match its verbal admiration for the reform process in Poland and Hungary, for example, made this point clear last summer.

Instead, Bush offered some minor technical economic concessions, which, matched with his “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” initiatives for major new arms control accords to be completed and signed by the end of 1990, were aimed at little more than buying time for Gorbachov to survive, politically, through the harsh Russian winter.

Will it work? The economic concessions do not put any meat on the table for the starving Russian masses, nor will they any time soon. Granting the Soviets Most Favored Nation trading status by repealing the Jackson-Vanik amendment and negotiating a new trade accord, is not even a new U.S. position. It has always been promised as soon as the Soviets pass specific legislation codifying a liberalized emigration policy.

Offering the Soviets observer status at the international trade talks (GATT) next year is a new U.S. concession, but does not translate into any quick payoffs; nor does the negotiation of a new treaty to provide additional incentives for U.S. private sector investment in the Soviet Union. U.S. business has little enough to invest, and not a lot of interest in high-risk ventures into markets where consumers have almost no buying power.

“Technical” economic aid, in the form of Western expertise on such matters as setting up a stock exchange, developing small business policies, budget and tax management, agricultural and statistical matters, are hardly answers to the urgent demand of the Soviet consumer: “Where’s the beef?”

None of this seems to match the overwhelming historical process which is unfolding. Even in the judgment of such enthusiastic backers of the “new Yalta” arrangement as former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, writing in the winter 1989 issue of *Foreign Affairs* journal, “If forced to choose, [the Soviets] are more likely to opt for all-out repression” in both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself.

On this score, largely overlooked in the joint Bush-Gorbachov press conference held aboard the Soviet luxury cruise liner *Maxim Gorky* at the conclusion of the summit, was Gorbachov’s telling evasion of a question from CBS-TV correspondent Wyatt Andrews about Eastern Europe.

Andrews, who formerly worked in CBS’s Moscow bu-

reau, asked, “President Gorbachov, did you assure President Bush that the changes in Eastern Europe are irreversible and that the Soviet Union has forsaken the right to intervene there militarily?”

Gorbachov replied, “We are part of Eastern Europe, of Europe. We interact with our allies in all areas and our ties are deep.” Continuing to expound on “the course of historic evolution itself” driving the process in Eastern Europe, Gorbachov added a word of caution: “I can only explain my own attitude.”

Asked afterwards what he thought of Gorbachov’s response to his question, Andrews commented, “He completely evaded the issue of military intervention.”

The arms control agenda

While the total of 18 initiatives offered up by Bush at the summit may not have altered the course of history in the East bloc, it has driven confidence in the United States among its NATO and other allies to an all-time low.

Bush threw common sense to the winds with his idiotic assertion that both START (strategic arms) and CFE (conventional forces) treaties would be negotiated, signed, and enacted before the end of 1990. Never before has a Western leader so cavalierly put a time deadline ahead of the actual negotiation of the issues. The same goes for the chemical weapons and nuclear test ban treaties, Bush wants completed by the time of the next summit in six months.

Especially revolting has been the candor with which the Bush administration has admitted that domestic budgetary constraints are playing a major role in decisions on the future of U.S. force posture in Western Europe. Bush has as much as said, “I hope, for the sake of my ‘no new taxes’ pledge, that the Soviets are sincere about their claims of changing their military doctrine away from an offensive posture to defensive sufficiency.” All the talk of the Bush administration as recently as last summer about “no concrete evidence” of a Soviet military policy shift, has conveniently vanished.

The stormy circumstances of the Malta summit underlined the appropriateness of the “doormat” characterization of the summit. Marooned for 14 hours at one point in stormy seas aboard the *U.S.S. Belknap* anchored in Marsaxlokk harbor, Bush and his entourage were forced to battle the savage elements to meet with Gorbachov aboard the securely docked *Gorky* instead. At one point a Soviet spokesman remarked about “the amount of hours Bush is spending on Soviet ‘turf.’ ” As Gorbachov relaxed aboard his luxury liner, Bush and his entourage were splashing back and forth to the fiercely rocking *Belknap*, captives both of the elements and the need to “save face” by spending two seasick nights on board.

One commentator quipped, in observing the parallels between Bush’s performance at Malta and the famous appeasement of Hitler by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain at Munich in 1938, that, given the weather forecast, “At least Chamberlain had sense enough to bring along an umbrella.”