

Gorbachov and Bush reach the nadir of summitry

by William Jones

“Much Ado About Nothing”—this might serve as an appropriate caption for the much-touted Bush-Gorbachov May 31-June 3 summit. The original purpose of the summit was ostensibly to give a boost to the Soviet President’s rapidly deteriorating position at home. As he was preparing to leave Moscow, Gorbachov’s strongest rival, Boris Yeltsin, was elected President of the Russian Republic. One of the first measures which Yeltsin took, while Gorbachov was in Washington, was to meet with Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis. Yeltsin has stated that he will support the independence of Lithuania. At the same time, food is disappearing from the shelves of the Moscow shops.

But even in Washington, things were not exactly going Gorbachov’s way. Already in Canada on a visit with Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney before his arrival in the United States, Gorbachov sent warning signals to the Bush administration that its stand on maintaining a united Germany within NATO would seriously impede any arms agreement. After the Gorbachov warnings, it was leaked from the White House that President Bush would attempt to break the deadlock over the future of Germany by proposing a compromise involving limits on the future size of German armed forces and the promise of West German economic assistance for the Soviet Union—a question, of course, which only the German government itself can really decide.

The selling of a dictator

The Soviet Embassy in Washington did its best to “talk up” the summit, holding five forums during the preceding week, dealing with various aspects of Soviet policy. Gorbachov’s entry to the United States was played up big by the pro-Soviet Washington media. Gorbachov also did his best,

during the course of his visit, to live up to the characteristic “Gorby” public relations gimmicks, like stopping his car in the middle of the street to shake hands with surprised passers-by—to the delight of the mass media who stood prepared with their cameras. This was not, however, the jaunty and buoyant Mikhail Gorbachov of the 1987 Reagan-Gorbachov summit. He looked tired and haggard, undoubtedly reflecting the difficult straits he found himself in at home.

Most of the Gorbymania which characterized the 1987 summit had also waned considerably. Washington during this Gorbachov visit was the scene of continual demonstrations, by the Lithuanians, the Uzbeks, Vietnamese living in America, and Armenian-Americans. Undoubtedly the most colorful of these demonstrations was that of associates of congressional candidate Lyndon LaRouche, who were distributing LaRouche for Justice campaign buttons with a picture of broccoli and the caption “Eat It, George!” which has become something of the LaRouche campaign slogan. A LaRouche supporter wearing a green dress and a dark green chef’s cap, calling herself Miss Broccoli, distributed broccoli to the journalists passing by, many of whom stopped to do interviews with her. Miss Broccoli became a permanent demonstration outside the summit press center at George Washington University during the summit proceedings.

Deadlock on German reunification

The first series of discussions on May 31 were one-on-one meetings between Gorbachov and Bush with only translators and notetakers—much to the surprise of the White House staff, who expected this to be a plenary session, with the whole flurry of advisers assigned to each delegation. The talks dealt with the gamut of questions which they hoped to

cover during the following three days. In the afternoon, they discussed the critical question of Germany. After the first session, Bush tried to appear "upbeat," saying that progress had been made in "narrowing" the differences.

But whatever agreements or promises might have been made behind closed doors, it was obvious that nothing of substance on the issue of Germany would be forthcoming at the summit. It was rumored on the second day of the summit that Gorbachov was putting forward a "new proposal" on the issue of Germany which would bridge the differences between the two superpowers. Rumors were flying that he was proposing something similar to that floated in a letter by Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to the foreign ministries of Europe, where he proposed making the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)—the 35 nations which signed the Helsinki Accords—into a "Concert of Europe," a notion which has been compared to the Congress of Vienna which shaped Europe in the post-Napoleonic era between 1814 and 1848, and was ultimately overthrown by the revolutionary wave sweeping through Europe in 1848.

At a press conference on June 1, White House press spokesman Marlin Fitzwater was asked about an expanded role for CSCE. Fitzwater said that he thought the answer to that was "No." Although the U.S. considers CSCE to be important in the future, he said, it is also concerned about the importance of NATO. Whatever the nature of the Gorbachov proposals, it was obvious that the question of Germany would be subject to much further discussion before agreements could be reached.

The summit was characterized by continual delays and false press reports. On June 1, the day Bush and Gorbachov were to sign all the major agreements, last-minute obstacles came up, possibly due to Soviet stonewalling on key issues, which seriously disrupted the schedule. Already a week before the summit, arms control negotiators were hard at work at the State Department trying to conclude some "framework agreement" on long-range nuclear weapons which could be ready for signing by Bush and Gorbachov.

Since serious difficulties were not resolved, Shevardnadze was sent to the State Department to try to sort things out with Secretary of State James Baker III. Although they were able to do so by early in the evening of June 1, in time to sign a statement outlining what the parties were in agreement on in Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) negotiations, it was obvious that on key issues with regard to long-range nuclear weapons, there was no basis for agreement.

Lunch with the 'intellectuals'

On May 31, the Soviet Embassy arranged a luncheon for Gorbachov, which they billed as a luncheon with American intellectuals. The "intellectuals" included such mental giants such as Henry Kissinger, Jane Fonda, Gregory Peck, Jesse Jackson, and the ethereal pianist Van Cliburn. Gorbachov made a point to praise Kissinger in his luncheon speech for

having "undergone an evolution toward these types of ideas," i.e., collaboration with the Soviets. Gorbachov again and again warned the United States not to "spoil the tremendous potential of the present situation" by returning to "old modes of thinking." "We are one civilization, one world," Gorbachov said, waxing melodramatic, appealing to them to become "seekers and searchers."

The key issue for Gorbachov, however, was a trade agreement. In a series of meetings, Gorbachov sent out an appeal for help on the trade issue. On June 1, Gorbachov met with congressional leaders in an effort to break their opposition to trade agreements and to the granting of Most Favored Nation trading status to the Soviet Union.

At one point Gorbachov became somewhat acrimonious. After hearing their criticism of Soviet policy on Lithuania, he lashed out, "If you love freedom so much, why did you allow your own government to invade Panama?" Majority Leader Sen. George Mitchell (D-Me.) responded lamely that the Panamanian people had already decided that they didn't want General Noriega before U.S. troops were sent. "If there were a referendum in Lithuania today," continued Mitchell, "the overwhelming majority would undoubtedly decide that they want independence." "Fine—let them do it," snapped Gorbachov, "and they will get it—but only if they follow the legal procedures."

Initially, the White House insisted that there would probably be no U.S.-U.S.S.R. commercial agreements because of the problem of Lithuania and the fact that the Soviets had not passed legislation liberalizing their emigration policy—a prerequisite for waiving the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which restricts trade with the Soviet Union.

In spite of the White House hype on that issue, President Bush did in fact announce before the signing of the agreements, that he and Gorbachov would sign a commercial agreement, anticipating the passage of Soviet legislation on emigration. In what was obviously an eleventh-hour marathon, Bush acceded to everything that he felt Gorbachov needed to keep him afloat in the very choppy waters of Kremlin politics. In return, the Soviets agreed to sign a long-term grain agreement, which the Soviets were refusing to sign if the United States did not come up with a more general trade agreement.

The summit occurred in the shadow of Lithuania and in the shadow of the Yeltsin election. Gorbachov's press secretary Arkady Maslennikov, when asked what significance the Yeltsin victory would have on Gorbachov's political future, refused to comment. White House aides were likewise very nervous about Gorbachov's weakened position. "Can Gorbachov deliver?" was the question echoing in everyone's head during this summit meeting. If the next few weeks show that Gorbachov indeed is a "lame duck" in his own country, then the fanfare of the summit pageantry will come back to haunt the President who bent over backwards in a futile attempt to save Gorbachov's falling star.