

Will history charge Al Gore with starting World War III?

by Debra Hanania Freeman

When Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, unquestionably the President's most trusted adviser on Russian affairs, returned from his latest trip to Moscow just a few weeks ago, the report he brought back had a very sobering effect on the President. Talbott reported that there had been a marked worsening in the Russian situation. The financial and economic crisis had deteriorated significantly, reported Talbott. That deterioration, combined with the escalating tension caused by the continuing U.S.-U.K. bombing of Iraq, the threat of military action in the Balkans, and the new NATO doctrine of globalization, had, reported Talbott, strengthened the hand of extremist, anti-American elements and, as such, continues to gnaw away at the stability of Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov's government.

The President's concern was no secret. In response, he placed a high premium on Primakov's scheduled trip to Washington, in effect upgrading the visit, with the President himself intended to play a direct and central role (even though Primakov is not Russia's President, but its Prime Minister). As the situation in the Balkans continued to deteriorate, the importance of the meetings with Primakov increased. President Clinton's policy in the Balkans has always rested on engaging Russia as a key partner in the process. He knew very well that there would be no solution to the Kosova crisis that did not intimately involve Russia. Clinton clearly held out the hope that somehow, in their first face-to-face meeting, he and Primakov could agree on some solution to the strategic dilemma that the Kosova crisis posed.

Then, suddenly, at about 2 p.m. on March 23, just prior to Primakov's scheduled arrival in Washington, at a White

House briefing, it was announced that, following a phone conversation with Vice President Al Gore, Primakov had given the order to the crew of his Ilyushin 62 aircraft to turn around. The trip was cancelled! Primakov was heading home to Moscow. Just hours later, NATO's air bombardment of Serb targets began, and the tenor of statements coming from Russia's leaders carried echos of the Cold War era.

How did this happen? How, in a matter of hours, could the situation have changed so radically? What did Al Gore say in that phone conversation, and who authorized him to say it?

Conflicting accounts

There are conflicting accounts. The written statement issued by the Vice President said, "I informed him [Primakov] that [Serbian leader Slobodan] Milosevic had rejected our efforts . . . and that Milosevic was launching escalated offensive actions against the men, women and children of Kosovo. After discussing the worsening situation in Kosovo, Prime Minister Primakov decided to return to Moscow." Later, Gore said that Primakov had demanded a guarantee that NATO air strikes not commence while he was in Washington, as a necessary precondition for his arrival — a guarantee Gore said he could not give.

White House sources present a slightly different version of the sequence of events. One source expressed some uncertainty as to why Gore had placed the call. Apparently, Primakov had telephoned Gore earlier in the day, from Shannon Island. In that first conversation, Primakov learned that Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's talks with Milosevic had bro-

ken down, and that Holbrooke was on his way to Brussels. As of that conversation, there was no change in Primakov's planned arrival. His plane departed for Washington on schedule. There was no reason why it would not have. By all accounts, both White House and Congressional sources confirm that there would be no air strikes until the President had had the opportunity to talk to Primakov.

When the Vice President placed the second call, President Clinton was apparently "tied up." Earlier meetings with his national security team, and a subsequent series of meetings with Congressional leaders, had already delayed his scheduled address to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Biennial Convention by more than an hour.

Apparently, the Pentagon was advocating pushing up the timetable of possible air strikes. Their arguments ranged from weather forecasts to lunar cycles to reports of worsening atrocities by Milosevic's Serbian forces. It is reported that Vice President Gore "just wanted to keep Primakov informed." However, speaking from Moscow, Primakov reported that he decided to turn his plane around only when the Vice President called to tell him that "an irreversible decision had been made to start the air strikes."

A White House comment

When President Clinton's press secretary, Joe Lockhart, was asked if the President agreed with the "postponement" of the Primakov visit, Lockhart answered simply, "No." But, it was well known that the Russian leader could not and would not agree to be in Washington during NATO bombing of Serbia. Vice President Gore had to know that his call would result in Primakov's turning around.

This is the second time that Al Gore has been instrumental in preventing President Clinton from meeting Primakov. The President was first scheduled to meet the Russian Prime Minister in November 1998, during a crucial meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Malaysia. That meeting was sabotaged when Vice President Gore, and the foreign policy grouping called the Principals Committee, created a crisis around Iraq.

Gore travelled to Malaysia in the President's place, with disastrous results. The President was prevented from meeting Primakov, as well as Chinese President Jiang Zemin, and Gore's outrageous and insulting behavior toward Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, who was hosting the meeting, seriously harmed U.S.-Asia relations. This time, the consequences of Gore's sabotage may carry a much higher price.

The global financial meltdown

In a message to an *EIR* seminar in Washington the day after the dramatic cancellation of the Primakov visit, Lyndon LaRouche stressed that the only way to understand the current

crisis is within the context of the global financial meltdown. The world, LaRouche said, is increasingly being divided between those nations which are for the International Monetary Fund, and those which are against it. And, those which support the IMF will be increasingly distrusted, hated, and attacked by the others. Certainly, it has been the imposition of harsh IMF conditionalities on Russia that has created the powerful backlash against the West. LaRouche emphasized that, unless the current policy direction is shifted drastically, the financial crisis will continue to "nucleate" into a global conflict over IMF policy.

The United States cannot continue to operate with two contradictory policies. President Clinton has repeatedly stated his desire for a collaborative economic partnership with Russia and with China. As recently as March 19, speaking from the West Coast, the President reasserted his view that the United States had to work to help Russia improve the standard of living of its population. He said that that would comprise the substance of his upcoming talks with Prime Minister Primakov. That is, most emphatically, not an outlook shared by Gore. At every point, when a choice must be made as to whether to uphold the interests of people or of financial institutions, the President's inclination is to choose people, while the Vice President's is to choose the financial institutions.

Put Gore in his place

Up to now, the President has failed to discipline Gore, and as such, has caused massive confusion internationally as to just what the policy of his administration is. After the events of March, President Clinton is running out of time. According to the U.S. Constitution, President Clinton cannot fire Al Gore, but he can curb him. LaRouche has advised that the Vice President's duties be restricted to those defined by the Constitution.

However, LaRouche has emphasized, there is no constitutional protection for what is known as the Principals Committee. In order to eliminate any uncertainty as to U.S. policy, that group must be brought under the President's control, or it must be disbanded. Leon Fuerth, Gore's national security aide, has repeatedly expressed views that may reflect the thinking of the Vice President, whom he serves, but which are in sharp contradiction to the views of the President. He should be relieved of his duties.

But, more is required. LaRouche has emphasized that, following recent events, U.S.-Russian relations can only be repaired if the United States were to make a credible offer to Russia to reverse the damage done to Russia by the policies imposed by the IMF. The United States, LaRouche said, must commit to an effort to help Russia rebuild its real economy. That is the only way to overcome the widening gap between the two powers, and to reverse a process that will otherwise lead to war.