

# COPING WITH

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**CAUTION: FALLING EMPIRE AHEAD.**

**BY ADAM GARFINKLE**

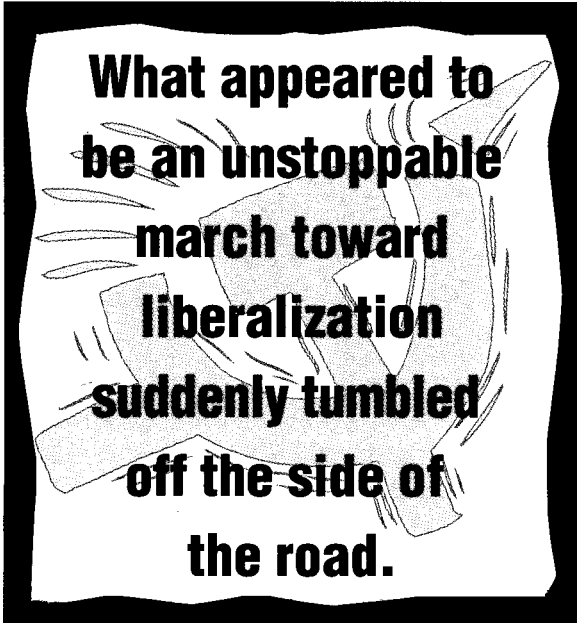


PAMELA HOBBS

**W**hile the Bush administration and the American people agonized over Saddam Hussein and the liberation of Kuwait, something strange was happening in Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union. What had appeared to many in the West to be an unstoppable, irreversible march toward liberalization at home and "new thinking" abroad suddenly tumbled off the side of the road and got stuck in the muck of economic irresolution, the nationalities problem, and general political confusion.

From the hopeful herald of the Shatalin Plan's "500 days to a market economy" early last fall, the Soviets have lurched toward fear of starvation, secession on the empire's periphery, and civil war within its very core. First, Eduard Shevardnadze turned on Mikhail Gorbachev and, in a dramatic huff of resignation rhetoric befitting a scene from the dying Roman Republic, warned the world about the coming Soviet dictatorship. Then Boris Yeltsin called on Gorbachev to resign, his supporters in the streets defying military intimidation and allying themselves with the most explosive (and ironic) new force in Soviet politics: a politicized proletariat epitomized by striking coal miners. And then just as suddenly, Gorbachev and Yeltsin make a deal so surprising and dramatic that both we and the Russians are left dazed and wondering what next.

And what has been the American response to all this? The administration considered food aid. It worried quietly about the implications of Shevardnadze's departure, and then it criticized the Soviet Union for using deadly force against unarmed innocents in Lithuania—and nothing more. Washington lagged behind even the European Community—which temporarily suspended aid—lest it be seen to publicly rebuke Gorbachev. It even "postponed" the scheduled U.S.-Soviet summit lest outright cancellation imply displeasure



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with Moscow. Now, as events accelerate in the Soviet Union, the administration seems unable to say or do anything beyond sending the Secretary of State to Moscow on a side trip from the Middle East.

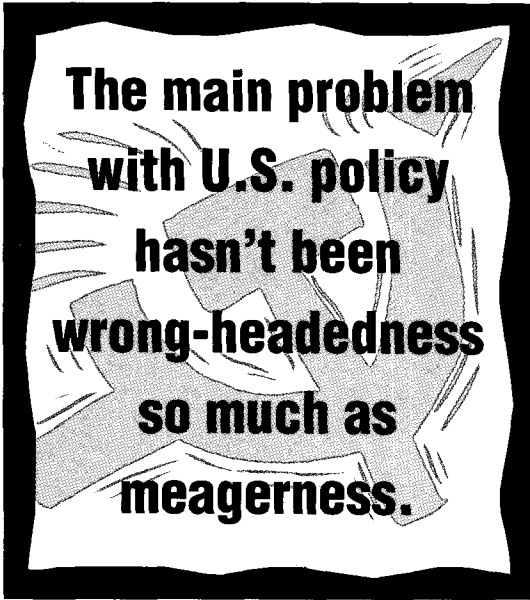
The main problem with U.S. policy over the past several months has not been wrong-headedness so much as meagerness. The administration's seemingly disinterested ad hocery has simply not been a realistically proportioned response to what seemed, in effect, a slow-motion coup d'état in Moscow, followed in late April by Gorbachev's deal with Yeltsin to break free of the would-be coup-makers.

Compare the enormous effort marshaled by the administration to reverse Iraqi aggression against Kuwait with the yawningly detached attitude it displayed toward the hurtling collapse of the Russian Empire. One can only wonder what future historians will make of this juxtaposition, and one is reminded of the witticism that while it may be very artful to repair a watch while falling from an airplane, it just isn't very useful.

**J**ust think what the lead stories would have been during the last eight months had there been no crisis in the Gulf. *Glasnost* Out, Censorship Back In. *Perestroika* and Price Reform Abandoned; Central Economic Control Again Emphasized. Gorbachev Hand-Picks Narcoleptic Reactionary as Vice President. Latvian Thug Boris Pugo Named Soviet Interior Minister. Soviet Government Confiscates 40 Billion Rubles from Citizens; Abolishes 50- and 100-Ruble Notes. Red Army Patrols Streets with Police to Head Off Protest.

Headlines or no, the Soviet Union—and U.S.—Soviet policy with it—is in deep crisis. Surely it must have dawned on the president and his closest aides that the “good guys” with whom we have been dealing are no longer in a position of strength. They have seen the rise of the Soviet military at the expense of the foreign ministry both in the evolution of Soviet policy toward the Persian Gulf and, especially, in unmistakable Soviet backtracking on arms control agreements.

Consider the Soviet attempt to escape the terms of the Conventional Forces in Europe agreement by relabeling three motorized rifle divisions as “naval coastal defense forces.” This ploy, created by the Soviet military and foisted on the



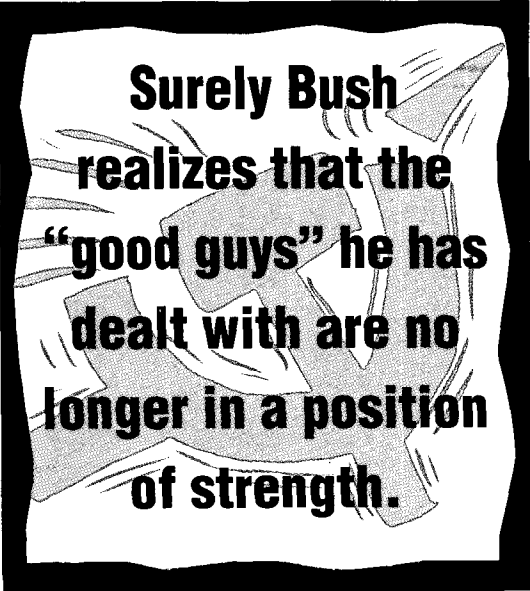
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good reason that it will not move to complete START until the ratification provisions of the CFE accord are implemented—and with no START, no full-scale summit. The Bush administration pleaded with Gorbachev in late March to overrule his military in the interest of U.S.-Soviet amity. Gorbachev seems to have succeeded in moving the Soviet military on the CFE, but how stable the arrangement is, and whether it will spill over to speed the START negotiations, no one can say.

**I**n any case, it's clear that what once looked like Gorbachev's greatest potential value to the future of U.S.-Soviet relations will not be realized. That was his capacity to achieve thoroughgoing internal economic and political reforms capable of transforming the Soviet Union from a totalitarian menace into merely an occasional authoritarian nuisance. Nor is it realistic to expect an orderly devolution of Soviet power in the Baltics and the Caucasus. What has happened is no mere interruption in *perestroika* and “new thinking.” It is the end. There will be no Gorbachevian market reform, and “new thinking” is looking

suspiciously like old thinking in the Middle East, Europe, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Gorbachev has failed, and no amount of temporizing in Washington can change that.

Most administration principals still believe, however, that nothing should be done to hurt Gorbachev despite the attenuation of his power. This is partly from gratitude for the past, and partly from fear of the future. Is this not the man who gave us rollback with a human face in Eastern Europe? Is this not the man who cooperated with the United States as well as anyone might have expected during the Persian Gulf crisis, despite a little mischief toward the end? Would an alternative leadership to the right—or no



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leadership at all—have been better? Certainly not. Will it be as easy to complete pending arms control deals with a leadership even more in thrall to the Soviet army? No. One can understand a preference for the devil we know, at least for a while.

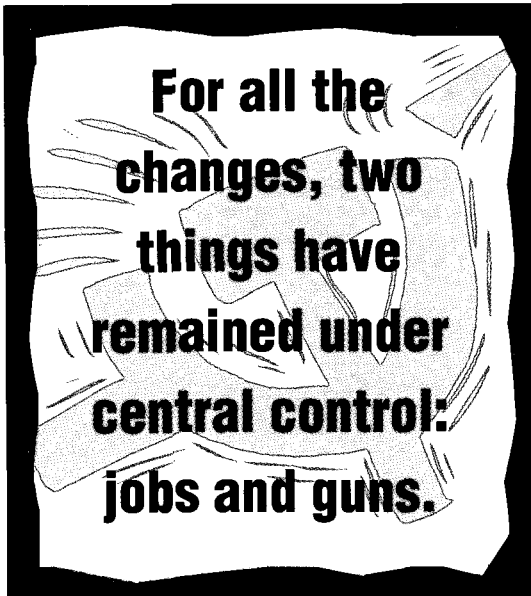
But portentous choices lie just ahead. A brief but very useful period of U.S.-Soviet good feeling is over. What now? One possibility for the Soviet future is a full-fledged return to Brezhnevism and Stalinism led by the army and the conservative wing of the party, and supported by reactionary law-and-order Slavophiles and anti-Semites like those of Pamyat. This would mean continued economic collapse, of course, but such a regime could persist for some time. The Soviet people have more sweat capital left inside them (even if they themselves don't believe it) that could be elicited by coercion and fear. For all the changes of the past six years, two things have remained under effective central government control: jobs and guns.

A second possibility, probably the least likely, is that the Soviet Union will in time—maybe after a failed attempt at Communist restoration—develop an attenuated authoritarian order, if not a liberal democracy, and a more-or-less free-market economy. If so, an orderly devolution of power is yet feasible, and we would see a new Slavic state in diverse if unsteady relations with former imperial subjects, an arrangement achieved generally without violence and disorder.

A third possibility, either after the other two have been tried or sooner, is civil war, social chaos, and the full economic prostration of nearly the entire Soviet Union. Civil war could well be followed by the dissolution of the empire, the eventual consolidation of a Slavic Russian core state, and the creation of a zone of instability from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Okhotsk. The cycles of Russian history suggest that a new time of troubles is upon that unhappy land, and, while nothing is inevitable, to bet against this pattern is almost to bet that winter won't follow fall. This frightening prospect of violence and danger will likely mark the first half of the 21st century.

**N**o American policy can hope to shape Russian history, nor can any other foreign policy. Still, we must do what we can, and many do not yet fully appreciate the scale of the challenge ahead. Given what is likely to happen, future generations will surely marvel at how much time Western diplomats spent on arms control minutiae, and how much importance they attached to one man, when the very edifice of post-World War II international politics was crashing down around them.

American policy, if it is to grasp both the scale of the problem and its relative impotence in managing it, must follow Talleyrand's understanding of diplomacy: the art of foreseeing



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the future and expediting it to one's own benefit. To the extent possible, American diplomacy must direct the upheavals of Russian imperial collapse away from injuring its own interests and, if necessary, toward injuring those of others. A future Russo-Chinese war, for example, is horrible to contemplate for humanity's sake, but it would not be as injurious to U.S. interests as a Russian lurch toward peninsular Europe, the Turkish straits, or the Persian Gulf. So it therefore makes sense to abjure extensive military cooperation with China, but strengthen it over the long term with Turkey, Israel, and Germany.

More than understanding what is likely to come, U.S. statecraft must

have clear policy goals that serve basic American interests. One of those goals is inescapably moral: The continued Russian subjugation of other peoples is unjust and must end. Another goal is geopolitical: We must recognize that whatever government a future Russia may have, America's long-term interests require that this government draw from a smaller rather than a larger territorial and technological resource base.

A diminished Russia will still retain the largest army in Europe and with it, a capacity to wage wars of mass destruction unlike that of any other Eurasian power, but it's foolish for the United States to assist that power, in effect, by allowing greater resources to be brought to its service. Therefore, it makes both moral and practical sense for U.S. foreign policy to encourage the dismantling of the Russian Empire, preferably in the least disruptive manner possible.

U.S. power to influence these events is modest but not insignificant. Any food or technological aid should be given not to the Soviet government but to newly emerging constituent republics, and contacts with these republics must be deepened from the tardy and insubstantial effort the administration has made thus far. To the extent possible, U.S. commerce with the Soviet Union should be targeted to emerging centers of private enterprise; certainly, neither the United States nor any of its allies (notably Germany and Japan) should offer untied credits to the Soviet government. Dealing directly with central Soviet authorities inhibits the growth of market forces. On another level, we will have to counsel U.S. allies near the scene of future peril—Turkey, Japan, and even China come to mind—not to take aggressive advantage of Russian misfortunes, lest their recklessness backfire in their—and our—faces.

The anxieties of ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union are finished. The paroxysms of dealing with the survival of Russia and the emergence of other states from the ashes of empire lie ahead. We are about to be pulled into white water; best to secure the lashings on our raft now. ■

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# YELTSIN'S



## CHESS GAME



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