

# GORBY & I GO FOR A WALK

I had a long strange dream that I walked and talked with Mikhail Gorbachev, who accompanied me on the streets and beaches of Oregon's North Coast while he waited for a plane back to Russia. We were like any two friends, without escort, and although people knew who he was, no one made a big thing of it.

Gorbachev and I — Mikhail and me — just walked around on streets and beaches, being friends and talking about things like friends do.

We walked on beaches that Oregon governors Oswald West and Tom McCall pledged to the people forever. We walked where Robert Kennedy walked near Haystack Rock twenty-two years ago as he campaigned in Oregon for the U.S. Presidency a month before he was assassinated. We walked along Nye Beach in Newport past the old Gilmore Hotel that had been home to American proletariats — the world's only fleabag with a million dollar view, one of its transient residents called the shabby old hotel before it was gentrified into a high-toned literary resort. We wandered through Seaside's arcade and boardwalk (Gorbachev mumbled something about Black Sea tourism), and along the beach at Gearhart, past the skeletal ribs of the Peter Iredale, which he said made him think of old cow bones in western movies.

We also walked along Astoria's dilapidated riverfront. He marveled at the deteriorating cannery buildings. I expected him to comment on the imperative of history in regards to economic ruin. Instead he asked if pollution had killed off the fish and decimated the fishing industry. It was the result of many things, I replied. Mainly a dozen dams upriver, but also overfishing for a century, sedimentation from clearcut logging, pollution from several cities, perhaps even radioactivity from the Hanford nuclear reservation and later from the Trojan power plant near Ranier. He spoke candidly about Chernobyl and the gross environmental devastation in Russia and Eastern Europe during the reigns of his predecessors.

I am not sure how I met Gorbachev. Dreams are not concerned with details, nor is sequence important. The dream started like a movie. We were just walking together in the opening scene, like the beginning of a Laurel and Hardy comedy. (He is a heavyset man about the size of Al Capone.) We had no cops, secret service nor reporters around us. Gorbymania was thankfully absent from our wanderings, although he was recognized everywhere we walked. People were pleasant, even warm toward him. He was as eager to press flesh as an American mayor. He was at home with local people and tolerant of their rustic capitalism. He recognized them as members of a worldwide class of ordinary people, and he thought of himself as their true interpreter (as did his predecessors).

He talked about world peace and the ultimate triumph of democratic socialism. Get real, I said under my breath. I wanted him to explain the collapse of communism and his extravagant schemes to prop it up. His dacha of cards was falling all around him but he seemed relatively unconcerned.

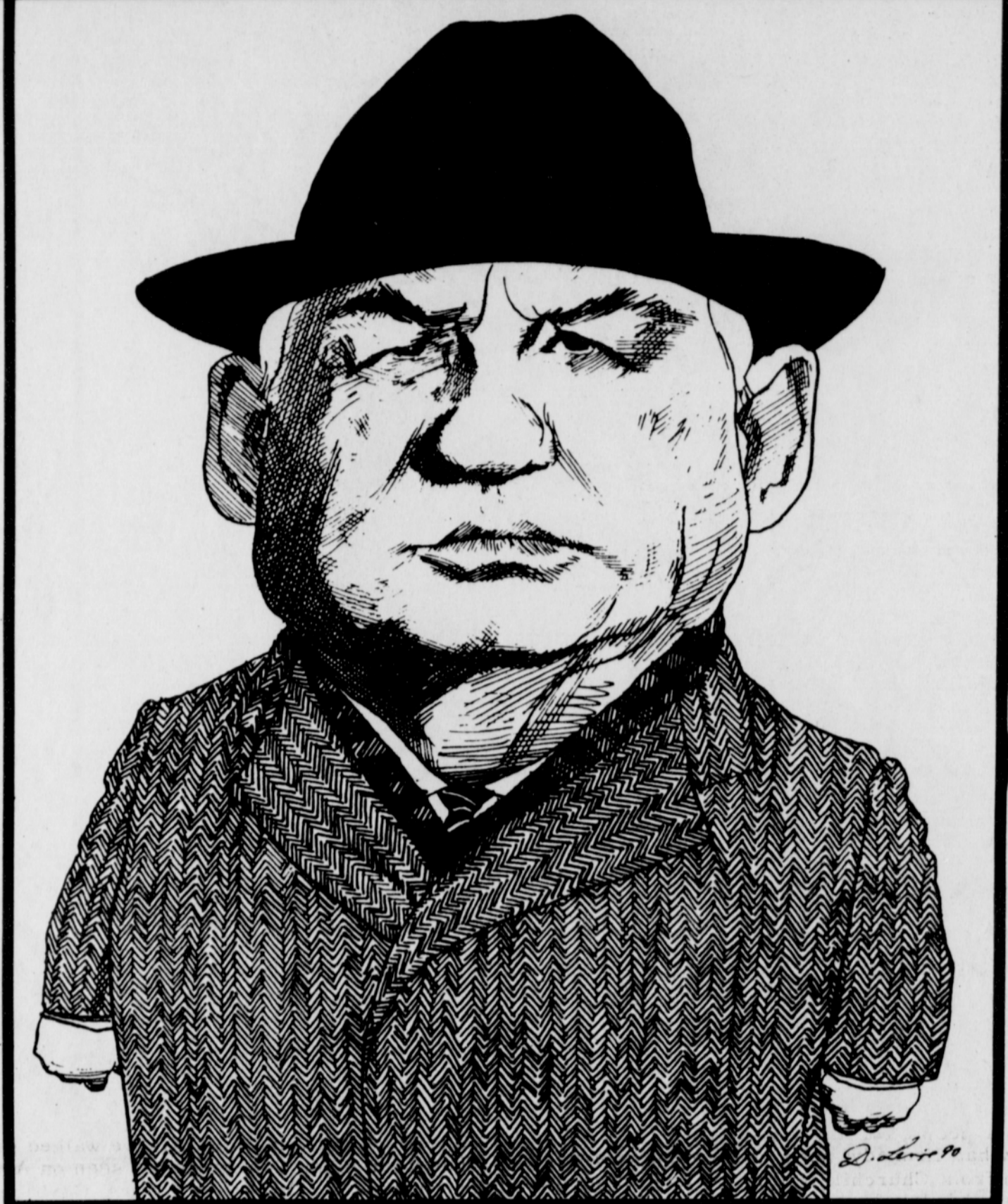
Here he was, the guru of glasnost, the arch-priest of perestroika, making a special visit to our humble practice of seashore capitalism, which he compared to Black Sea tourist resorts. Here was the man who set loose a fantastic variety of forces as he emerged from obscurity to world leadership. This man took great risks. I remember a cartoon of him with President Bush on a large piece of wood descending the breaking side of a huge wave. Gorbachev rides like a surfer, explaining to a terrified Bush, "You just have to pretend you know what you're doing."

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Gorbachev is the most popular public figure in the United States. Time Magazine has made him "Man of the Year" for 1990, and in 1988, not entirely as a joke, people campaigned for "Gorby for President."

I said to him as we walked, "People call you the man of the decade, even of the century."

"You bet I am," he smiled wryly. "Lenin brought the world into the 20th century. Now it is up to me to lead it into the 3rd millennium."

He said this with great charm and self-mockery, which made it difficult to be offended. "Now the Western press loves me," he said. "Even your 'People' magazine. But not so long ago the Western press constantly questioned my sincerity, whether I could be trusted — like I was going to baptise your children, or marry them."

He looked tired. He had extremely serious problems waiting for him at home. The Left and the Right polarize, the Center collapses. He had left Moscow abroil with harsh economic reforms which he ordered into effect just before his summit meeting with President Bush at the White House. Summits no longer seem to be about solving problems but act instead as a vacation from them.

"I have started a class war in Moscow," he said. "This has released many social forces beyond my control. But I am unlike my opponents who wish to reclaim their privileges. The fools do not understand how close to revolution we have been. I understand what must be done."

I asked about the Soviet parliament's desire to arrest anyone who spoke out against the government and against him personally. He countered with a question about the burning flag controversy in the United States, and asked if I thought there was any difference between fools and fanatics in either society.

"You think freedom is easy," he said. "When I took over the politbureau I said we needed a little more citizen input. I had a few reforms I wanted to put across, like easing up on vodka. What I got instead was a series of earthquakes which erupted into volcanoes. Everybody wanted to be free all at once, and everybody wanted somebody else thrown into prison, exiled or booted out of their way. Freedom meant that ancient hatreds exploded into life among the ethnic peoples of the Soviet Union. Everybody had a bear to gore. I must say in truth I never expected to set free so many demons."

He was angry about the Baltics in particular. He carried them like three pernicious spirits. He snorted that they would not survive as independent nations. Yes, we took political control of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia fifty years ago

during Stalin's shameful pact with Hitler, he said. But they had been vital protectorates of Mother Russia since at least the Reformation. The Baltics form Russia's European coastline. They are more important to Russia than they are to themselves, he said, and insisted that a dominion of nations like Britain's commonwealth of former colonies was the answer to Baltic impatience.

"Despite your country's claim of victory in the cold war, it is the Soviet Union which continues to lead in ideological matters," Gorbachev said. "You are mistaken if you think Eastern Europe wishes to embrace your winner-take-all free-market capitalism. Your press and political leaders extol the downfall of communism and the spread of capitalism, but you are in serious error if you believe the people of Eastern Europe wish to give up their social rights and benefits in the name of marketplace democracy."



# NORTH COAST TIMES EAGLE

A JOURNAL OF ART AND OPINION  
PUBLISHED MONTHLY IN ASTORIA,  
OREGON, 955 24TH STREET 97103.  
MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER, EDITOR  
AND PUBLISHER.