

"But they want some form of democracy." "Socialist democracy," he corrected. "But socialist economies are bankrupt. In Moscow people wait for hours in line for groceries and go home with empty sacks." "They have homes at least," he said. "Homeless people crowd your cities. Your middle-class is disappearing. Your industries are shut down. You are the greatest debtor nation, your deficit is more than a trillion dollars and your country is being sold to foreigners." "We are in serious trouble," I admitted. "Marx was at least right about distribution of capital." "You can gloat and boast that you forced us into an insane arms race that made us go broke building weapons, but don't forget we still have those weapons..." He smiled. "In the words of one of my predecessors, we can still bury you."

"I believe the rest of his statement was that you would bury us economically..." He shrugged. "We have the chance to repair a colossal folly perpetrated by both of our countries," he said.

What about the shakeout of Russian society since his ascension to power, I asked. Isn't Bolshevik communism the god that failed? Is Marxism irrelevant?

"Your own Jefferson said the tree of liberty needed occasional waterings of blood to bloom properly," he said. "I continue to believe in Marx and in Lenin," he said with great force. "Marx correctly analyzed the inequality between production and capital. He remodeled the destiny of humanity through a prism of dialectical materialism that is impossible to dispute."

"It is not Marx who is wrong," he said as we stood at the top of the Astoria column and looked out over the spring-fevered river delta. "It is the structure that grew to implement Marxism that has failed. Stalin perverted Marxist-Leninism. I inherit the consequences of Stalinism. The flaw in Marx is the same flaw of every ideology — the unpredictable human beings who rule in the name of ideology. Every structure of civilization is corrupted by time and ambition. Your own is no exception. Your political process elects handpicked pliable men who serve their parties' interests. My system produces handpicked pliable men who also bow to their party's interests."

You are an exception, I said. "Yes," he laughed. "And so was your Roosevelt." He sighed. "I wish I were counterpoised with a President like Franklin Roosevelt. Some of your people tell me it is a shame that Khrushchev had Kennedy, not I. But I think of a telegram from Churchill to Roosevelt in which he expressed delight that they shared the same lifetime."

"Then do you wish you were Stalin," I asked mischievously.

His expression clouded as abruptly as a coastal sky. "Stalin perverted everything Lenin sought to establish," he responded with an edge to his charm. "Stalin betrayed the communist revolution with his shameful pact with Hitler, and he betrayed the Russian people by not foreseeing the Nazi invasion. The great purges that destroyed the flower of communism and the cold war that made our countries enemies for a generation are his responsibility."

Gorbachev shivered. Then he smiled. "But Stalin is dead and Stalinism is dying," he said. "The cold war is over."

We stood near a gathering of picketing and chanting protestors in Astoria who were disturbed that the nuclearized World War II battleship "New Jersey" was in transit up the Columbia River to the Portland Rose Festival. Gorbachev shook his head. A good example of the capitalist mafia of business and war, he said as the huge gray dinosaur slid upriver past Astoria. He compared America's superpower impotence with the disastrously bloated Soviet military monster. The hollow parades of armed might that was stolen from the public welfare were on a par, he said, with this empty gesture of flexing the muscle of a former glory the ancient warship represented.

"War must be abolished," he said sharply. "Nuclear weapons make it too dangerous with no chance for gain. We all face extinction. A nuclear war would have no winner."

I asked if the small group of protestors made him think of the large protests at the Kremlin on May Day this year. "We are learning about protest demonstrations," he smiled. "We are fortunate to have as an example your country's early responses with police and clubs against your civil rights and anti-Viet Nam War movements."

I asked if soldiers or police in the Soviet Union would ever again shoot into crowds of dissenters as was done in China's Tiananmen Square last June.

"No," he said, and said no more for awhile.

We walked along the hillside streets and the waterfront of Astoria, which is one of a few American cities that is a regular port of call for Russian ships, in particular fishing trawlers that share a joint venture with local fishermen. Russians and Americans mingle unconcernedly. Russian crew persons visit homes and schools. Astoria's mayor asks a Russian town to be a sister city. Local perestroika was encouraged when merchants discovered Russian sailors had lots of money to spend. Groups of Russians wandered around downtown as we walked past. They wore clothes in styles not seen on American streets for about thirty years. Gorbachev seemed in appearance more like an officer from one of the trawlers than Mr. Supreme Soviet himself. None of the other Russians paid much attention to him. He shrugged as he

watched his countrymen purchase ghetto-blasters and Walkmen. "Like I say," he muttered. "No ideology can withstand self-interest."

So how about the reunification of Germany? I asked while we stood on the watchtower overlooking the ocean's rough meeting with the Columbia River at the south jetty.

He was quiet for a few minutes. He seemed interested in a large ship that had run aground near the river entrance and was waiting for a change of tide to float off.

He leaned toward me. His round Russian peasant's face was grim. His eyes were bright with angry passion. "We can't forget the war," he said loudly above the wind. "Russia will never forget Hitler. That is the paramount thing you must know about us."

He looked at me with stern patience. "When we severed ourselves from Eastern Europe, it was like pushing down a wall of defense. Now we must depend on the goodwill of our neighbors for safety. Reunifying Germany and insisting that it join NATO as your country is doing is of grave concern to Russia."

His plane was waiting. He had to go. Things between our countries have changed, he said, skipping over his large role in prompting those changes. The United States is no longer regarded as the number one enemy of the workers' state, and the Evil Empire has lost its allure as antichrist to the West.

"We are depriving you of an enemy," Gorbachev said as we said goodbye at Clatsop County Airport. A large Russian jet was ready for takeoff. "Like us, you must now face your own disturbed spirits and try to survive. You can't point to us as the reason for your ideological failures any longer."

He gave me one of those huge bearhugs that Russians do, kissed my cheeks and boarded the plane. He sat at a window near the front. I looked around. No local officials, no press. Gorbachev, the world's hope, was departing the Oregon coast as unnoticed as he seemed to arrive.

I think this was the end of the dream, though I have a last impression of a common countryman's face, splashed on top with a mark of Russia's beloved soil in place of hair, looking at me from a distant airplane window. His final words to me echo in my mind. "We are depriving you of an enemy," he said. We should never have been enemies. I want to ask him why we are. Maybe that's his answer. We are not enemies any longer.

Gorbachev told President Bush that he was coming west after their summit meeting. He wanted to stop in Minnesota and in San Francisco. He would have liked the Oregon coast. I might have walked with him. Mikhail and me.

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