

GORBY & I TALK TRASH

"Why don't you run for President of the United States?" I asked Gorbachev. "You're out of a job and nobody worth a damn seems to want to be President."

He looked at me half mocking, half serious. "You want Yeltsin," he said, and began to walk around the top of the Astoria Column. He stopped at the rail and stared at Saddle Mountain which dominated the narrow river valleys and coastal mountains. To the west a rim of blue fuzz seemed drawn across the horizon.

"You're the most popular man in America," I persisted, though his popularity back home in the former USSR was in twilight. "I wouldn't be surprised if the people waived the native son requirement just for you."

"I have already been President," Gorbachev said, a sudden glint flashing in his eyes. "Now I am not only President, I am also the entire population of the state I rule."

"You worked yourself out of a job," I said. "You opened the way to freedom for millions of people."

Gorbachev seemed pensive as he looked out over the spring fresh hills and valleys shining with rivers and streams that poured like veins into the huge vena cava of the Columbia River. He sighed. "Yes, I did," he said heavily. "And now they think I am no longer useful."

"We could use you here," I said. "This year's crop of Presidential candidates should use as their theme song Stephen Sondheim's 'Send In The Clowns,' and it's embarrassing that they are all that a population of almost 300 million seems able to produce for its highest office."

"The perpetual succession of one idiot for another ruined the Soviet Union," Gorbachev said. "The same process is at work here in your country. The worst sort of politicians rise through the patronage of corrupt and senile plutocrats who have ruined your economy in the same manner as the politbureau ruined Russia's, and they endanger your democracy with paralysis and deceit."

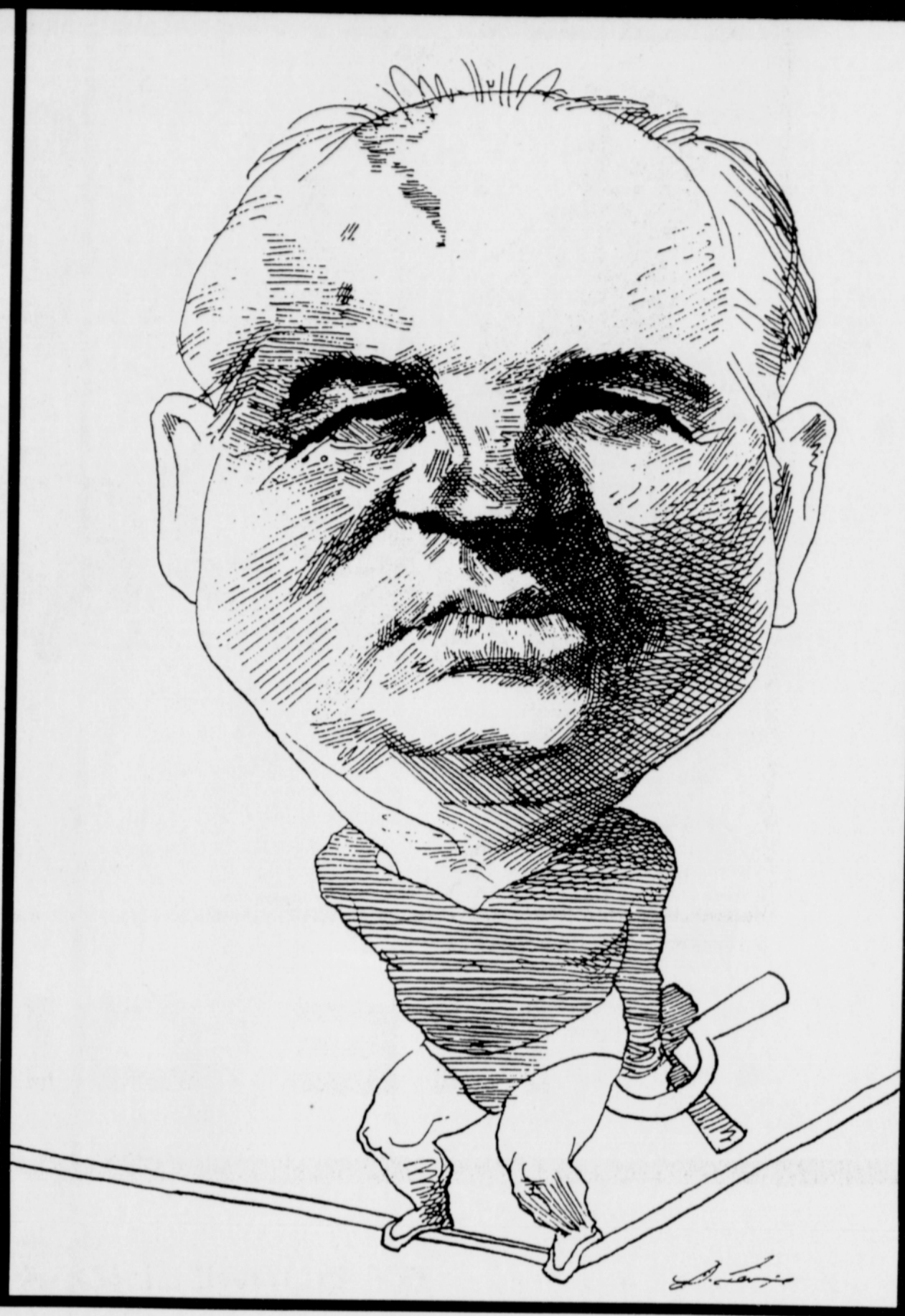
"You mean shit rises to the top," I said.

"The result will be the same for you as it was for us," he said. "You are dangerously close to collapse, though most of you don't realize it yet."

Gorbachev, guru of glasnost and perestroika, the man who ended the cold war and refuses to resign as the last President of the defunct Soviet Union until his term expires, was in the United States for the first time in two years. He was invited to speak at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, where Winston Churchill in 1946 first proclaimed the existence of an "iron curtain" that divided East from West, the communist from the "free" world. Gorbachev told an audience of several thousand who had gathered from everywhere in the United States on May 6 that Churchill's speech was regarded by Russians as the formal declaration of the cold war. He also said, "If the United States and the Soviet Union had been capable of comprehending their responsibility and sensibility correlating their national interests and strivings with the rights and interests of other states and peoples, the planet today would be a much more suitable and favorable place for human life."

Gorbachev and I walked up around the hills of Astoria which were bursting with chlorophyll and pastel colors of blossoms and flowers. He liked the old woodframe houses and particularly praised the churches which he compared with carpenter gothic churches that have almost vanished from Russia because of Bolshevik antipathy toward religion.

"I wanted to bury the cold war in Fulton, where it started," Gorbachev said, patting his large bald forehead with a handkerchief. He sat down



DAVID LEVINE

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

gratefully on the shaded grass of a small park on Franklin Street. "Churchill said that nobody knew what the Soviet Union wanted or how much it was prepared to use its power to expand. He was wrong. World War II exhausted the Soviet Union. But the Kremlin was wrong also. It made the mistake of assuming that the end of fascism made world communism inevitable."

Gorbachev blamed the nuclear arms race on the United States. He had been diplomatic at Fulton. The U.S. had committed "a fateful error," he said, by "including the 'nuclear component' in world politics" which unleashed "a monstrous arms race."

That arms race contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union, but not militarily, Gorbachev insisted. "Your overestimation of our power forced us to attain that power at the expense of the system that generated it," he said.

I expressed amusement at the fact that all that remains of the Soviet empire is its immense misplaced army.

"You laugh too soon," Gorbachev said. "The consequences of diverting your nation's wealth into the arms race has seriously weakened the United States, and as in Russia a great wave of discontent is roaring down on your government."

Such dissatisfaction among Russians dissolved the Soviet Union and deposed Gorbachev. The final collapse of the Communist Party was by an old guard desperate to preserve it. The comic

opera coup last August removed Gorbachev from power and the subsequent rise of the republics eliminated his job. Like Churchill in 1946, Gorbachev was in the U.S. as "a pensioned politician, rebuffed at home, yet outspoken in retirement" (N. Y. Times). At Fulton he warned against the excesses of nationalism that were reawakened at the end of the cold war. "The very fact that the two world blocs are no longer in contention and that the collapse of totalitarian regimes has released centrifugal forces which have been temporarily frozen... has encouraged an exaggerated nationalism, and this has already led to much bloodshed."

We spent an hour in the afternoon flying around the north Oregon coast. A friend took us up in his small airplane. We left from Clatsop County Airport and zoomed above the Astoria hills, which were mosaics of forest and houses tied with ribbons of asphalt. We crossed the wide river and flew over the barbered tops of purple

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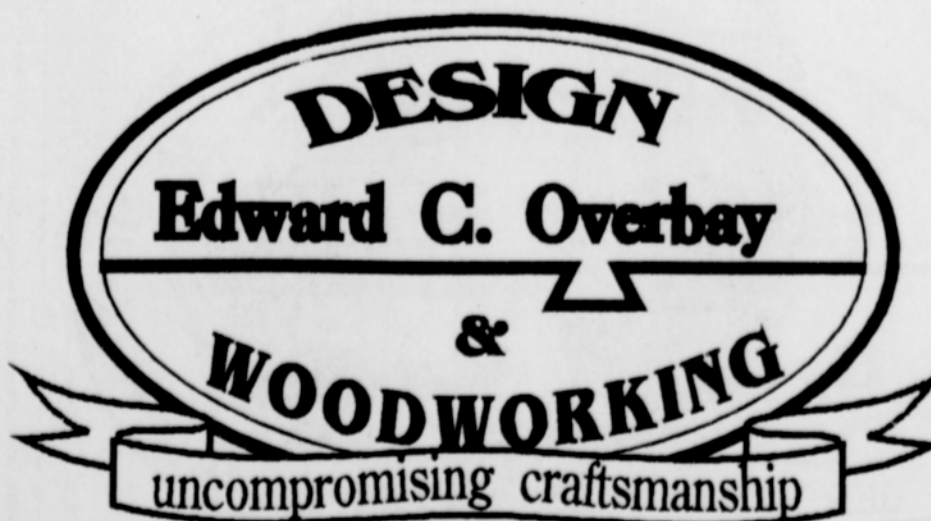
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Volume 1, Issue 1
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A JOURNAL OF ART AND OPINION
PUBLISHED MONTHLY IN ASTORIA,
OREGON, 955 24TH STREET 97103.
MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER, EDITOR
AND PUBLISHER.