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USSR/ANDROPOV

JENNINGS: Good evening. The Soviet president, Yuri Andropov, did not show up today for a very important event. It is the 66th anniversary of the revolution which brought the Communist Party to power in Russia. Mr. Andropov's absence from the celebrations in Moscow raises the most serious questions in months as to who's running things in the Kremlin. We begin with ABC's Bob Zelnick, who was at the big parade in Moscow which Andropov missed.

ZELNICK: Again, Andropov was missing--missing as Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov and Constantin Chernenko led their procession of tired old men to the politburo perch atop Lenin's Tomb. Missing as Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, himself 75, reviewed his troops. Missing as the tanks, armored personnel carriers and missile batteries rumbled through Red Square in a high-speed, high-precision drill--all in a celebration no Soviet leader prior to Andropov had ever missed. How sick is Andropov? The official word is that he has a cold and that his condition is not serious. But he has not been seen in public since this Kremlin session with visiting American senators. Andropov has missed some critical moments. For 28 days, other Soviet leaders were left to explain the shooting down of Korean Airlines' Flight 007. And when Andropov did respond, it was in a Pravda article, not in person. Andropov's latest plans for limiting medium-range nuclear weapons also appeared in Pravda and were read on Soviet television in a question-and-answer format. Soviet leadership is, of course, collective, and there is no way to know the degree of Andropov's personal involvement in the preparation of statements released in his name. Among factions now influencing public policy here, most observers see the Soviet military as the most powerful. Western diplomats suggest the position of the military was decisive in organizing the hard-line response to the Korean Airlines' incident, and in blocking a Geneva negotiating compromise which would have permitted partial deployment of NATO missiles in Europe. The Communist Party here has traditionally been wary of military leaders gaining too much political power, but as Yuri Andropov's absence today suggests, strong civilian leadership is nowhere in sight. Bob Zelnick, ABC News, Moscow.

DUNSMORE: This is Barrie Dunsmore in Washington. Much of what the U.S. knows about Andropov's health comes from analysis of film and tape of his public appearances. In those, he has looked very frail. It's known he suffers from chronic heart and kidney disease. Some believe he also has a nervous disorder. But as there are no reliable independent sources, and as he hasn't been seen for three months, American intelligence doesn't know the current state of Andropov's health. However, top

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American analysts are coming to the conclusion that it doesn't really matter. They think his political health may be nearly terminal. It's noted that today's event is extremely important in signaling who is in charge. As sick as he was, Leonid Brezhnev forced himself to make an appearance last year. He died three days later. In this view, Andropov's absence significantly reduces his influence and power and reinforces the belief that his era is transitional. Most analysts will not hazard a guess as to what is likely to follow Andropov. The succession is seen as a mess. However, given the current sorry state of U.S.-Soviet relations, it's generally agreed among American officials that whoever comes next won't be any worse. Barrie Dunsmore, ABC News, the State Department.