

Commentary by Seweryn Bialer

'A test of Soviet intentions'

The Ruggles Professor of Political Science at Columbia University offers an assessment of possible outcomes of the Nicholas Daniloff affair.



The case of Nick Daniloff has ceased to be just another international incident in the tension-rich Soviet-American relationship. For the White House, it has become a test of Soviet intentions with regard to the Gorbachev-Reagan summit and to the new spirit of resumed Soviet-American communications and negotiations. For the Soviets, it has become a charged issue of internal-leadership politics, involving the highly sensitive theme of Soviet equality with the United States—fears that the American perception of Soviet weaknesses would lead U.S. leaders to believe that the Soviets could be pushed around.

The American decision to agree to the release of the two prisoners—Daniloff and the Soviet physicist and U.N. employe Gennadi Zakharov—into the custody of their respective ambassadors was an act of statesmanship by President Reagan, providing, of course, that any direct exchange of Zakharov for Daniloff remains absolutely unacceptable to the Americans' side.

Some critics see the embassy development as American capitulation to the Soviets by equating the treatment of a Soviet spy and an American journalist. Far from capitulation, it is a useful gesture on the road to a negotiated solution that will leave American principles intact. It will provide Kremlin leader Gorbachev with the time needed to negotiate with his colleagues in the Politburo and to negotiate with the White House some way to salvage as much Soviet face as possible and leave open the road to talks on important world problems.

There are three scenarios in which the Daniloff affair can wind down. The first, which I view as unthinkable, would be Reagan's agreement to swap the spy for the nonspy. The second would be failure of the superpowers to find any mutually acceptable formula to resolve the affair. Such a nonresolution could be quite serious. Retaliatory American acts would be followed by retaliatory Soviet acts. A major weakening or even shattering of newly established lines of communications between the Gorbachev regime and the Reagan administration would ensue. The third would be a Soviet formula for a dignified retreat from the blunder of their own making—a formula that would be acceptable to an American administration eager to have a summit and willing to be flexible without abandoning its principles.

Should events follow the second scenario—the nonresolution—a reconsideration of U.S. assumptions about the extent of Gorbachev's strength would result. If the affair

is not resolved soon—in a week or two—one will have to conclude that General Secretary Gorbachev is not strongly committed to a summit meeting in the near future, particularly since he is dealing with an American administration that wants unequivocally to convene a

summit and probe for Soviet-American agreements. One would also have to conclude that Gorbachev still has a long way to go to really consolidate his power.

The third scenario—a solution at least partly face-saving for the Soviets and flexible to a point on the American side—immediately brings up the tactical question of what kind of formula would be satisfactory. A unilateral Soviet expulsion of Daniloff, without any steps whatsoever on the American side, is possible once the clamor dies down. The Kremlin, without withdrawing its accusations against Daniloff, could present the case as an example of Soviet magnanimity and as a real contribution to the cause of arms control and summitry. A Soviet decision to release him could be reinforced by a formal American declaration that it is against American policy to use journalists as spies.

Another formula might involve a seemingly independent swap of Zakharov for jailed Soviet dissidents. The expulsion of Daniloff would then become a separate and somewhat foggy act, left to the independent interpretations of each of the two governments.

Let us hope that the pattern of Soviet behavior seen in the Chernobyl tragedy, which signaled the new, Gorbachev style, will prevail in the Daniloff case. At the beginning of the nuclear accident, all the hallmarks of the typical Soviet heavy-handedness and security paranoia were displayed. In

time, however, the incident established a record of openness of information inside the Soviet Union unknown before.

Whatever path developments take, one conclusion is inescapable and worrisome: Soviet leaders have shown a lack of understanding of America, its principles and its moving forces. At the beginning, they were prisoners of their disbelief in American idealism and sense of fair play, of their misperception about how much Americans care about the fate of their compatriots. The Soviets believe in the supremacy of the state and "inevitable" historical processes. Individuals for them are dispensable cogs. The case also shows that the Soviets, far from being master propagandists, need to learn the basic lessons of public relations. Inside the Soviet Union, where no competition to state propaganda exists, any lie will do. When pitted against the Western media, however, the Soviets need to learn the ropes of the public-relations game in the international arena.



The Kremlin doesn't understand America, says Bialer