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Michael Ledeen's Grave New World

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"They have a whole society that does not work," Michael Ledeen says. "And those parts of it that do work are all illegal. I frankly do not believe that the Soviet empire could survive, were it not for Western assistance."

He continues. "The economic system is a shambles. And a footnote: One of the curious things about all this great press Gorbachev is getting is that no one bothers to point out that he was minister of agriculture" before his elevation to the supreme position of power in the Soviet Union.

But wait, there's more. Agriculture "is the greatest catastrophe they've ever had. Russia was the world's greatest grain exporter before the Revolution and is today the world's greatest grain importer. That's quite an achievement. And part of it is due to Gorbachev."

Michael Ledeen is unhappy with the Soviet Union, and he's not very happy with the swanky Jean-Pierre restaurant, either. It's lunchtime at Jean-Pierre. Mr. Ledeen, 43 — author, Senior Fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, consultant to the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council, and once special adviser to former Secretary of State

Alexander Haig — has just finished a heated but friendly argument with the maitre d' over the merits of tarragon.

Mock-obstinately, they have agreed to disagree, and as a waiter is bringing Mr. Ledeen his first course — without its usual tarragon-laced dressing — he turns to his favorite — or least favorite, depending on how you look at it — subject, the internal crisis in the Soviet Union.

There was, it seems, a factory in the Soviet city of Cheboksary, where heavy earth movers were built. "They wanted to build these huge earth movers. The first thing to be said is that the current world market

for these things is about 850 units a year. The Soviets wanted to build a factory that would produce 40,000 a year.

"They designed this thing — this huge tractor — and they hired Western companies to design the machines to build it, which they did. And they built a few exemplars.

"So far as I can tell, not one of them has ever worked. The thing is so heavy that nine times out of ten the blade — within about 10 yards of leaving the factory — or the tires collapse, or the shocks go, or the whole thing just caves in.

"It's just a catastrophe. It's like a Walt Disney cartoon where one of these monstrous devices just slowly comes apart, springs popping out.

"That's really the Soviet empire."

But lest those who oppose the Soviet empire think they are about to have an easy time of it, Mr. Ledeen hastens to explain that this is less than half the story.

In the Soviet Union, he says, "You have a combination of structural crisis and great military strength. And that's the most dangerous of all situations.

"If they were militarily weaker, if we still had the kind of strategic superiority we had in the 1960s... we could view this crisis with considerable equanimity.

"No longer so today." Because of their internal failures, he says, "the Kremlin desperately and urgently wants visible signs of victory with regard to the United States."

And to Mr. Ledeen's mind, it is by no means clear that the United States is capable of preventing such victories. "The United States isn't serious about foreign policy. It does not have the people and the traditions in the area of foreign policy to permit us to design and then manage a serious, durable foreign policy.

"American history," he says, "contributes a great deal" to this lack of seriousness. "The fact that we've been isolated for so long, we don't have hostile neighbors on our borders — we've never been compelled to think in realistic terms about foreign policy except when we're attacked."

And since the prospect of a direct military clash between the United States and the Soviet Union is not the most likely threat this nation faces — but rather a gradual, indirect erosion of its strategic position — it's likely that more realistic thinking, in Mr. Ledeen's view, may never be forthcoming.

Thus the title of Mr. Ledeen's new book, "Grave New World: The Superpower Crisis of the 1980s," just published by Oxford University Press. In it, as now over lunch, Mr. Ledeen argues that the current world situation is perilous indeed, for both the United States and the Soviet Union. The ongoing structural crisis in the Soviet Union, combined with the failure of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, has made for a world full of uncertainty and danger.

"The world is becoming more dangerous because neither we nor the Russians know what we're doing," he says. "And therefore, the rest of the world finds us unpredictable."

Of the smaller countries of the world, "The crazy things they would never have undertaken some years ago," when the United States and the Soviet Union were each more in control of their destinies, "suddenly become thinkable. And so they start in on all kinds of crazy adventures and say to themselves, well, if the superpowers don't like it, we'll hear from them and there will be time to change our minds."

The result, he says, is "a kind of Balkanization of the world, where little countries start to drive the big countries. The clearest proof of this is that you now have tiny countries with global foreign policies. You have Cuba, you have Libya, you have Israel — there's a whole series of tiny little countries to which the whole world reacts. Tails wagging dogs."

"Grave New World" is already provoking impassioned reaction, especially from critics on the Left. But even Timothy Garton Ash, the foreign editor of the politically eclectic English weekly, *The Spectator*, was moved, in an otherwise negative review in *The New Republic*, to call the book "a fine introduction to that part of an America ideological shift generally (but unhelpfully) known as neoconservatism."

Mr. Ledeen is indeed possessed of solid neoconservative credentials. He is a frequent contributor to *Commentary* magazine, and once wrote a regular feature on the press for *The American Spectator*. More broadly, the dust jacket of "Grave New World" is sanctioned by former Secretary of State Haig; former U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick; her successor-designate, Vernon A. Wal-

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ters; and columnist George F. Will.

But while the Left's reaction to Mr. Ledeen's argument may have been predictable, the book is also

generating a certain measure of controversy on the Right. One observer says that Mr. Ledeen's analysis has assumed "the U.S. and the Soviet Union could or would or did exercise real control over their spheres of influence." The United States, this observer feels, has in fact never had such control and has never been an imperial power in the sense the Soviet Union has. Moreover, the Soviet Union's "loss of control or power has been much exaggerated."

Another prominent analyst, perhaps anticipating this charge of the "fallacy of equivalence," has said that Mr. Ledeen has been "far more sensitive" to how his thesis plays outside Washington, particularly in European capitals craving a more orderly world. "It's a very acute look at the international system," this observer adds.

Mr. Ledeen himself has had some fairly extensive firsthand experience of Europe. After completing a Ph.D. in modern European history at the University of Wisconsin, he lived in Italy from 1973 to 1977. He taught at the University of Rome and was the Rome correspondent for the *The New Republic*. He returned to become a senior fellow at Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies, and co-editor of *The Washington Quarterly*.

During 1981 and half of 1982, he worked for Mr. Haig, until the time of the latter's resignation as secretary of state. Mr. Ledeen spent most of his time while at the State Department, he says, on "an ongoing mission to the Socialist International," the independent organization of Western socialist parties. The idea was to explore "a whole range of issues having to do with democracy and Soviet power," issues in which even as conservative a government as the Reagan administration might have interests in common with the socialists.

"There was a lot of initial suspicion of this" initiative, he says. Similar efforts under the Carter administration had met with no conspicuous success. "People thought, why do it again when it didn't work with a left-wing government? Why should a conservative government be able to do something that a liberal government couldn't?"

Still, he says from the vantage point of today, "we were quite successful in a number of cases."

Indeed, he says, "I'm tempted to believe that part of the ease right now between the Reagan administration and the socialist governments of Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and the socialist prime minister in Israel," is due "to the fact that [Secretary] Haig was far-sighted enough to realize that we had to be able to work with these people."

After leaving the direct employ of the government, Mr. Ledeen returned to Georgetown's CSIS, and took up con-

sulting duties to the State and Defense Departments and the National Security Council. About much of his consulting work, he is slightly reticent — his activities "deal in part with counterterrorism, and in part with the series of questions I was working on before, Central America, Poland, some West European questions." But, he says, after a pause in the conversation, "there isn't anything particularly sexy about this work. It's analytical."

Among his sexier activities as a consultant was his stint as one of the government's analysts of the tens of thousands of pages of documents captured in Grenada after the U.S. invasion. These documents — copies of internal communications of Maurice Bishop's New Jewel Movement and government — provide, he says, an unprecedented and unique look at how Marxist-Leninists come into and consolidate their power.

This in turn led to another consulting assignment, this time for ABC's weekly television news program "20/20." "We went to Grenada for a week, trying to find out what happened during the four years of communist rule" there.

Mr. Ledeen had become reasonably well-known as a result of his essays and his regular feature in *The American Spectator* and for his sharply critical views of the American media, especially television news.

But his praise of ABC's work on the Grenada program is unqualified: "They did an absolutely super job. I was very impressed with their diligence, their discipline. We never once got to the beach in a whole week on Grenada, which tells you something. It broke my heart," he says mock-wistfully.

Says Martin Clancy, the veteran producer responsible for the segment (tentatively scheduled for broadcast on July 4), "Here's a guy who had sat down and gone through all these documents. He

brought us the concept, the idea" for the program. And Mr. Ledeen was "a joy to work with," Mr. Clancy says. The feeling was mutual. Says Mr. Ledeen, "I was very impressed with him."

Still, though, problems with the media, in his view, do persist. "The most sinister thing about the press is that it has become part of the government." The press offices that reporters maintain in government buildings make for a high degree of access that is in turn exploited by government officials in serious games of politically motivated leak and counterleak.

"There is a tendency here to believe that every morning the world is created anew. It remains to be defined by the major media every morning," he says. "And from my own experience in government, I can tell you that the most important documents on the desks of cabinet secretaries every morning [are not in] the intelligence pouch, but the morning press clips. That is what drives the day's agenda."

It is a significant contributing cause, in Mr. Ledeen's view, to the inability of the government to take foreign-policy making seriously. Another, he urges, is "lack of expertise."

As an example, he cites the failure of American policymakers to understand the revolution in Iran, the forces that toppled the shah and brought the Ayatollah Khomeini and his radical, reactionary brand of Islam to power. "At the time of the Iranian crisis, even at CIA, there was no full-time, experienced Iranian analyst. The man in charge of the original CIA task force to deal with this problem was a Gulf States expert. He was an Arabist. Iran is not an Arab country."

"The station chief in Iran at the time of the crisis was a man who had spent most of his professional career in the Orient." He quickly adds, "This is not to criticize these people. On the contrary, both of those people were and are extraordinarily good — very intelligent, very skilled, very well-trained — in their areas of expertise. Their areas of expertise just didn't happen to be in Iran."

Iran, of course, was the Carter administration's responsibility: What about the Reagan administration? "It's better than Carter, but not nearly good enough. Very often," he says, pointing to a third major factor in the United States' unseriousness, "it comes up with good policies, but too late."

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"Very important questions like timing are hard to raise in this country." As an example, he points to "Haig's enormous frustration," early in the Reagan administration, "with the refusal of the White House to be serious about Central America.

"Now, they had their reasons," mostly the White House's view that the crucial issue for the first year was the economy. "Still in all, the case that Haig made about Central America was that it is urgent — we have got to deal with it *now*, in the first year — because these things can only be done in the first year of a new administration; then the political curtain drops and we're in electoral politics again."

Mr. Ledeen speculates that "if we had done for Central America in the first two years of Reagan what we did in the last two years of Reagan, we would probably have had a solution," by which he means furtherance of "the democratic revolution" in Central America, and the suppression of the totalitarian revolution.

These are some of the things that, in Mr. Ledeen's view, have contributed to the inability of the United States to exploit the difficulties the Soviet Union is having. "All previous totalitarianisms either have continued to survive to the present day, or were blown away in war. We don't

have a model for the breakdown of a totalitarian system."

He sees two different possibilities for potential Western action, direct or indirect. One that "might have an enormous impact internally" on the Soviets would come "if they suffered a clear military defeat someplace," Afghanistan being the most likely, though not the only possible, candidate. A second thing to be borne in mind, he says — thinking, certainly, of such instances of Soviet incompetence as the heavy-earth-mover plant at Cheboksary — is that "the real lever we have against the Soviet empire" comes from the Western superiority in "money and technology" and "know-how."

But, of course, exploiting that — to say nothing of exploring the possibilities of a "clear military defeat" for the Soviets somewhere — requires just such serious policy-making as Mr. Ledeen has found sorely wanting. Is he, then, pessimistic about U.S. prospects?

"Is it pessimism?" replies the trim, bearded man in the gray corduroy jacket that is probably too heavy for the unseasonably warm weather. "Yeah, it's pessimism," he says, lighting a fat Honduran cigar at the table a waiter has just cleared and crumbed. "Anyone who is realistic about the way our policy is being designed and conducted nowadays *has* to be pessimistic."

But perhaps Mr. Ledeen is not quite so pessimistic as he claims. After all, the Soviets are not trying to build 40,000 heavy earth movers for nothing. They mean to use them for no less a project than reversing the flow of a large number of the Soviet Union's Siberian rivers. There is an acute water shortage in the central Soviet Union. By changing the flow of rivers to north-to-south, the Soviets hope to restore the water supply squandered on the now-failing hydroelectric constructions.

But, as Mr. Ledeen puts it, reversing the rivers, "if they achieve it, of course, will be the end of Russia" — ecologically speaking, at least.

A spokesman for the press office in the Soviet Embassy in Washington says that the project, though it "was widely debated" and approved, is now temporarily in abeyance. "Some environmental protection groups said it would cause problems," he says, just as if he were speaking of lobbying efforts of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society.

But, he hastens to add firmly, the project "has not been cancelled."