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Yurchenko: probably a KGB plant

By Dimitri K. Simes

THE KGB is very trusting. Or so we are asked to believe in the case of the mysterious redefection of Vitaly Yurchenko. Less than 48 hours after Colonel Yurchenko entered the Soviet compound in Washington, he was presented to the assembled news media at a KGB press conference in the United States capital. The stakes were high. Yurchenko's performance took place two weeks before the Geneva summit and precisely on the day when Secretary of State George Shultz and national-security adviser Robert McFarlane were negotiating with General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow. Only the Politburo could have approved the defector's press conference in America on a day like that. And the Soviet leadership had to be assured by the KGB that Yurchenko would not embarrass the Kremlin.

But why would the KGB be prepared to provide such assurances unless Yurchenko were a Soviet plant? The Soviet secret police would not be so naive as to accept the tale of Yurchenko's being kidnapped and drugged by the CIA. The boys from Lubyanka would at a minimum have to entertain the possibility that the colonel was a genuine defector who had a change of heart. Of course, the KGB had reason to believe that once inside the Soviet compound, Yurchenko would say whatever was required to win lenient treatment at home.

Still, there could be no complete certainty about his state of mind. It was not just a question of sticking to his story of being an innocent victim of the CIA's monstrous crime. On the eve of the summit it was imperative to have a flawless act, an act that could hardly be expected of a defector who was either a horrible liar or an emotional wreck, or both.

Yet, Yurchenko did not disappoint his Kremlin masters. Under intense questioning, his responses were calibrated and precise. Accusations against his CIA handlers were carefully balanced with suggestions that neither President Reagan nor even CIA Director William Casey was aware of the Yurchenko ordeal. That is despite the fact that the colonel actually had a meeting with Mr. Casey. With patronizing magnanimity Yurchenko explained that he was drugged before the session, that the conversation was quite general, and that it was entirely possible that Casey was kept in the dark about his subordinates' actions against the KGB man.

Such generosity is deadly. On one hand, the CIA, and by implication the administration in general, were portrayed as a bunch of vicious fools. On the other, the Soviets sounded like wounded but sweet people who did not want to be too provocative just before the summit.

Throughout the press conference Yurchenko was professional. He was ill at ease only when he spoke English — hardly surprising for a person whose command of it was less than flawless in front of TV cameras. There was

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no sign of nervousness when he was using his native Russian. Another remarkable feature of the press conference was the sense of authority with which the supposed former traitor handled himself. On three occasions he overruled the Soviet official in charge of the event, Victor Isakov, minister counselor.

But would the KGB use as a plant such a senior and knowledgeable officer — general-designate, as he was described by the CIA? First, a lot of his background was provided by Yurchenko himself and was not independently verified. Second, a colonel who was promised promotion is still a colonel, and there are dozens of generals in the KGB. Not only was Yurchenko not No. 5 in the KGB (as the CIA leaked), he was not even among the first 50. He was a senior operative, not a top spy master. There is something about members of the *nomenklatura* that helps to distinguish them from mere mortals. Yurchenko simply does not look like one of them.

No outsider knows exactly what Yurchenko gave the CIA in terms of information to establish his bona fides.

The agency contends that it was good and useful intelligence. No doubt. The KGB is smart enough not to send a double agent without at least some chicken feed. But was Yurchenko's information unique and truly damaging to Soviet interests? Up to now the colonel was publicly credited with exposing a former CIA officer who was already thrown out of the intelligence community and could not be of further use to Moscow. Incidentally, the officer managed to escape with or without KGB help. Yurchenko also confirmed that a Soviet defector and FBI double agent, Nickolas Shadrin, was indeed killed in Vienna a decade ago. But that was hardly news to those familiar with the Shadrin case. And according to Yurchenko, Shadrin died from an excessive dose of chloroform administered by KGB people who were rushing him for interrogation. Sounds like an unfortunate accident which should not reflect too badly on the KGB.

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Certainly there are many holes in the theory of Yurchenko's being a plant, but still fewer than in any alternative interpretation. If it is difficult to believe that the KGB would be prepared to put a valuable colonel at risk, it is even harder to accept that an experienced KGB operative would impulsively decide to redefect simply because the CIA was not sufficiently sensitive to the needs of his vulnerable Russian soul. As someone who went through two months of CIA debriefing when I myself emigrated to the United States 12 years ago, I can say that the exercise is not universally fun and games. Some frustration on the part of the defector and emigré is understandable. But there is nothing in my experience or in the experience of others I am familiar with that would even remotely explain why a career KGB security man would, after three months with the CIA, opt to escape back to the Soviet Union and risk a firing squad.

Of course, there are still many unknowns about the Yurchenko affair. And it makes sense to avoid definite conclusions on the basis of incomplete evidence. But at this point the hypothesis of Colonel Yurchenko's being deliberately sent to the United States by the KGB to discredit American human rights policy (especially to the Soviet audience), as well as current and potential defectors, appears more plausible than others.

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