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The 'New Generation' Theory—Again

Vice presidents are virtuosos at the art of funeral-attending, and at Brezhnev's funeral George Bush, the former CIA director, had a 40-minute chat with the successor, Andropov, former head of the KGB. They talked, Bush said, "as spook to spook." That was an interesting thought: the CIA director and the head of the Soviet secret-police/psychiatric-hospital/slave-labor empire are in essentially the same craft.

Anyway, Bush brought back a hopeful surmise. Andropov, he said, had spent 15 years reading all Soviet intelligence reports and "anyone who has had access to all the data must objectively know that if a country goes in peace, it has absolutely nothing whatsoever to fear from the U.S.A."

Swimming beneath the surface of that surmise, like a school of sluggish pike in brackish water, are some interesting implications. The Cold War is to a significant extent a misunderstanding to be cured by better "data." Soviet policy is defensive and reactive, driven by neurotic fear of U.S. motives. Therefore, U.S. foreign policy must be psychotherapy to get the Soviet Union thinking "objectively." As Bush's boss says, we must convince the Soviets that we mean them no "harm."

George Orwell said it requires not just intellect but imagination to comprehend Soviet behavior. American leaders are most imaginative when concocting reasons for misapprehending Soviet motives. Comprehension is the enemy of cheerfulness, and cheerfulness is mandatory for leaders of democracy, especially when it is irrational.

American leaders will believe uncountable things to avoid believing the depressing truth, which is:

the Soviet regime is intellectually deranged, morally bankrupt, politically corrupt and economically lunatic, and therefore is utterly dependent for whatever legitimacy it can claim, and whatever élan it can muster, on its role as liberator of everyone from everything but communism.

When Stalin died, Western leaders said, cheerfully: Fundamental change will soon be afoot because Stalin was the last old Bolshevik and, besides, his successor has given a speech praising "peaceful coexistence." Georgi Malenkov did that, in a speech saying war is bad. But he was not really the successor. He succumbed to a Stalinist attack from Khrushchev, who then became an anti-Stalinist regarding everything except government and culture.

Khrushchev, said Westerners cheerfully, is an earthy peasant, in touch with Soviet Everyman. Surely, therefore, he is more interested in raising living standards than in missiles. Two years after

the Cuban missile crisis he was replaced by what Westerners thought was to be a troika—Podgorny, Brezhnev and Kosygin. Kosygin was cheerfully regarded as dominant, and as a worldly moderate, partly because he had an intellectual son-in-law.

The moderation of the new regime did not pan out, as Czechs, Poles, Ethiopians, Afghans, Yemenis, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Nicaraguans, Angolans and others can attest. But when Brezhnev fell, there was Andropov who—be of good cheer—had been reading the data and therefore knew that the United States meant no harm.

Today think tanks are hard at the task of pondering What It All Means—the fact that Gorbachev is the first leader too young to have fought

in the war with and then against the Nazis; the fact that he is a lawyer; the fact that he has failed upward through agriculture. All—all—that is known for sure is that he rocketed to the top of the Soviet elite during the slightly more than a decade (from the invasion of Czechoslovakia to the invasion of Afghanistan) when Soviet behavior was even more brutal than before.

After Stalin, the last Bolshevik, came Khrushchev, the last leader to have profited mightily from Stalin's purges. Then came Brezhnev and Andropov and Chernenko, the last leaders who were—what?—brutalized or sensitized or something by the war. Now comes Gorbachev, and from Western leaders comes the "new generation" theory: Be of good cheer, because the new generation is, well, younger, and, therefore . . . Besides, his wife has a well-turned ankle—a matched set, in fact.

I am not being sexist. I respect her for her mind, but ankles are geopolitical facts. They occasioned favorable comment during a tour of Britain. The tour was like a Broadway show previewing in New Haven to rave reviews. He and she cut graceful figures, she by having one, he by talking of contracts for British industry. He smiled a lot, at least until a member of Parliament, perhaps remembering Lady Astor's question to Stalin (When are you going to stop killing people?) asked about persecutions.

Gorbachev's charm slipped. He said: So's your old man. Actually, he said: What about Ireland and unemployment? This guy is apt to be around for a long time, and it is apt to seem like a long time.