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Nightline

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Review of Soviet Coup Events

TED KOPPEL: The news came suddenly.

NEWSMAN: Mikhail Gorbachev has been removed as President of the Soviet Union.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV [translated]: At about ten minutes to five in the evening, I was told by the chief of the guard that a group of persons had arrived. I told him, "I'm not expecting anyone. I haven't invited anyone."

RAMON CARMEN [translated]: And then a call went out for all women to leave the building and only men stay inside. And then they were giving people weapons and gas masks because they expected the use of tear gas.

MAN [translated]: Today we have plenty of proof that they planned physical elimination of the leadership of the Russian Republic.

KOPPEL: Tonight, some remarkably vivid and moving stories of what went on behind the coup.

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KOPPEL: It happens with even the strongest men and women in the period immediately following the survival of an intense personal crisis. They become acutely conscious of their own mortality. They display a certain vulnerability, which under normal circumstances they wouldn't reveal. That is why Mikhail Gorbachev's news conference here in Moscow today was so remarkable. It's probably safe to say that we will never again see Gorbachev's stripped so emotionally bare.

At the same time, he had a whale of a good yarn to tell, and he was clearly eager to tell it. His story of how he, his family and a loyal band of personal security guards lived through the 72-hour coup will be the spine of this broadcast tonight, fleshed out by the inside stories of some of the others who briefly believed that their careers, and possibly even their lives, were on the brink of ending.

It's been quite a week in the history of the Soviet Union, and it began just as the sun was rising over Moscow this past Mondy. The Soviet news agency Tass announced that a six-month state of emergency had been declared by a new leader who demanded compliance from the Soviet people.

Down in the Crimea, where Mikhail Gorbachev, his wife, his daughter, his son-in-law and granddaughter were vacationing, the nightmare was already well underway. It had begun the previous afternoon.

[President Gorbachev's remarks are translated.]

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: I picked up the telephone in the office that I happened to be in and picked up that receiver, and the phone wasn't working. I picked up another receiver, a third one and a fourth one and a fifth one. None of them were working. They were dead. So I was isolated.

Then I understood that the situation was very serious, that either they will try to blackmail me or there'll be an attempt to arrest me and take me away. Anything could take place at that point.

KOPPEL: In Moscow, the tanks and armored personnel carriers began rolling into the heart of the city around nine o'clock Monday morning. They took up positions around the Russian Parliament.

It has been reported, according to officials of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, that the military phase of the coup had actually been planned to begin the next day, Tuesday. But when the plotters learned that Gorbachev was going to return to Moscow a day earlier than expected, they placed him under house arrest on Sunday.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: I said, "Both you and those who sent you are adventurists and you will ruin yourselves. But the hell with you. Those that's for you to worry about. Only suicidal people could propose that we introduce a totalitarian system, regime at this point in the country."

And the demand was heard that I should resign, render my resignation. I said that "You will not get that from me, neither one nor the other."

KOPPEL: The military operation in Moscow began before it was completely ready. The elite forces which would have been the ones to seize Boris Yeltsin and his advisers at the Russian Federation building didn't get to the city until ten hours after the armor moved in. By then, thousands of Muscovites loyal to Yeltsin had surrounded the building. It was already too late. Although Yeltsin and those with him inside, like Russian television cameraman Ramon Carmen, were still expecting the worst.

CARMEN [translated]: And then a call went out for all women to leave the building and only men stay inside. And then they were giving people weapons and gas masks because they expected the use of tear gas.

KOPPEL: Alexander Yakovlev, an old Gorbachev adviser, gives Boris Yeltsin a lot of credit.

How was Yeltsin?

ALEXANDER YAKOVLEV: You know, it's very, very interesting case, extremely interesting. They demonstrated who is who, who is who, very clearly. And Yeltsin demonstrated courage, decisiveness and confidence. You know, I liked how he behaved himself.

KOPPEL: Can you give me an example?

YAKOVLEV: At the first minute when tanks came to the

building, he left the building...[asides in Russian]...on the tank and began to speak, to make a speech. It was not, it was not very, you know, wise step, because somebody could, you know, shoot him. But probably soldiers and the KGB at that time did not have the order of such a kind. But he did not know about that, but he did it.

KOPPEL: There's a seven-hour time difference between Moscow and Kennebunkport Maine. By Monday morning at President Bush's vacation retreat, the Soviet coup was already well underway, but some of the President's top advisers felt there was a good chance that the coup would fail. Mr. Bush agreed.

PRESIDENT BUSH: It's also important to know that coups can fail. They can take over at first and then they run up against the will of the people.

KOPPEL: In Moscow, members of the Emergency Committee held a press conference. Gorbachev, they insisted, was too ill to govern.

He wasn't sick, but he was completely cut off.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: Complete isolation from the land and sea. Thirty-two persons remained with me, of the guard, and they stayed with me to the end. They decided to make their stand there. They shared all their duties with my family. They were deployed. And they made a decision to stand to the very end.

Seventy-two hours of the isolation. I think all of this

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was done in order to break me psychologically. It's very difficult. I don't need to tell you that. But that's how it went on.

Everything was shut off. But they found some sort of receivers in the service quarters and they jerry-rigged some antennas, those fellows who understand these things, and they started receiving whatever they could on them. They were able to receive BBC. That was the best reception. BBC was the best that we could hear. Radio Liberty and then Voice of America. At any rate, that's what I was told. That was the information I was given.

KOPPEL: When we come back we'll look at the events of Tuesday, when the coup began to crack and the tide began to turn.

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KOPPEL: Tuesday morning. The people of Moscow who manned the barricades around the clock were symbolically important. They were the visible evidence that the Soviet Union's young flame of democracy wasn't going to be extinguished without a struggle. But there were other, even more important activities going on behind the scenes.

One of the leaders of an informal intelligence network, the existence of which is revealed tonight for the first time, was former Gorbachev adviser Alexander Yakovlev, who remained in his office throughout the coup.

YAKOVLEV: Yes, I was here all the time.

KOPPEL: What was happening inside?

YAKOVLEV: Well, you know, it was necessary to know everything what they are going to do. And every minute, every all time, night and day, I used to get the information.

KOPPEL: Also significant, but unknown to the people keeping their vigil on the barricades, was the inactivity of the Soviet military throughout most of the country. U.S. intelligence satellites found little military mobilization. And even Gorbachev, trapped at his vacation retreat in the Crimea, learned that military units were staying away from the coup in droves.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: Seventy-two hours in a very awful tension. And the guards got this idea that we might be taken from the sea. But as it turned out, the sailors let their President know that they can help him out, and the Navy didn't participate in these actions. And not just the Navy, other units didn't participate either.

KOPPEL: By Wednesday it was becoming clear that the coup was crumbling. Even troops that had been guarding the Russian Federation building, with Boris Yeltsin inside, felt that the danger of attack had diminished sufficiently that they could begin pulling out.

At almost precisely the same hour, late Wednesday afternoon, a delegation of coup leaders boarded a plane in Moscow bound for the Crimea, where they sought an audience with Gorbachev.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: When it became clear that Russia's leadership and the republics and people and the Army didn't budget, that they all took up this irreconcilable position, they started looking for a way out in panic. And I was told that a group of plotters had arrived in the Crimea aboard the presidential aircraft in order to talk with the President and bring him back to Moscow.

When they arrived, I said, "Well, put them in the house, put them under guard, and tell them my demands. I will not speak with any of them until official communications are reestablished."

KOPPEL: The coup had been a brief, if terrifying, fiasco.

I asked Alexander Yakovlev what had gone wrong.

Why do you think they lost?

YAKOVLEV: The first, they are fools. Yes.

The second, because they are fools, they did not know the level of the resistance of people. They considered that all people, you know, are unhappy, in a bad mood, against the government, President, and against the situation, and are ready to go, and so on and so on, to fight against that government.

On the contrary. On everything they make very stupid mistake.

The third reason, they thought that the Army, soldiers, officers, would fight against people.

KOPPEL: You think they're all fools. There wasn't a smart man in the group?

YAKOVLEV: No. No.

KOPPEL: If they're such fools, why did your friend Gorbachev hire them all?

YAKOVLEV: It is a problem for thinking for me, too. The same question I would like to ask you. What do you think about this?

KOPPEL: I think he was trying to be all things to all people.

YAKOVLEV: [Laughter]

KOPPEL: You know, one day to the left, one day to the right.

YAKOVLEV: Yeah.

KOPPEL: Maybe he thought he could handle those people well, perhaps because maybe you're right, maybe they are fools.

YAKOVLEV: Maybe you're right. Maybe. The situation was very complicated. He tried to find people who could do something. It is his mistake to take these people.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: This was a lesson for myself. And in particular, I see that the Congress was quite correct when it did not vote for the Vice President on the first round. But I insisted on that and I succeeded in that. That's my error, and not my only one. I see that now.

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I'll tell you just as frankly, because I really have nothing to hide here, I believed especially Yazov and Kryuchkov.

KOPPEL: Yazov, the Defense Minister; Kryuchkov, the man who headed the KGB.

Gorbachev is back at the helm of the Soviet government, but some of the most powerful men in the country who governed at his side only last week are today under arrest.

Nothing is quite the way it was. Reaction in Moscow today? That part of the story when we come back.

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KOPPEL: Thursday morning. A near-perfect sunrise punctuated the end of the coup. Moving out from behind the barricades, where they had established a thin line of armor protecting Boris Yeltsin, tanks garlanded with flowers withdrew, to the appreciative honking of some early-morning motorists.

Almost bloodless, this revolution has not been without its victims, ten death throughout the country. The three shown on Moscow shown on Soviet television today for the first time. And somewhat obliquely today, Mikhail Gorbachev indicated that his wife, Raisa, has not come out of this coup unscathed.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV: Raisa Maximova had a very bad spell. You know, difficult.

KOPPEL: Diane Sawyer got a more explicit version from Russian Prime Minister Silayev, who flew to the Crimea yesterday to bring Gorbachev home

PRIME MINISTER SILAYEV: She had a nervous breakdown and some loss of speech and paralysis of the arm.

KOPPEL: When she returned to Moscow, Raisa seemed to have largely recovered.

For the most part throughout Moscow today, the mood was one of jubilation. The unambiguous man of the hour, hero of the coup, Boris Yeltsin.

In the past, Gorbachev has vacillated between placating the hard-liners and the reformers. The hard-liners these past few days have suffered a crushing setback. Symbolic of that setback, this scene. Late today in front of KGB Headquarters, a statue was torn off its pedestal. Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the first Communist secret police, hung briefly from a crane before being carted off to an uncertain fate.

There are a few empty pedestals in Moscow today. The KGB itself is without a leader. And the man who will appoint the next leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, now carries several fresh obligations. What he does from here on in, the men and women he appoints to fill the high offices that now stand empty, will need the approval, if not the consent, of the reformers led by Boris Yeltsin.

When we come back an artistic footnote from editorial cartoonist Ranone Lurie (?).

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KOPPEL: Earlier in this broadcast you heard an interview that I did today with Alexander Yakovlev. Yakovlev was not only the chief architect of perestroika, he was at one time perhaps Mikhail Gorbachev's closest aide. But if you thought you heard a critical tone in Yakovlev's voice toward Mikhail Gorbachev, his old friend, you are right. Not only have the two men drifted apart, Gorbachev's stature is considerably diminished, even though he is now back in power. Meanwhile, the stature of Boris Yeltsin, the man who only a few months ago was still being depicted as something of a buffoon in the Soviet press, his stature has grown enormously.

Ranone Lurie, our editorial cartoonist, now gives his version and his perception of those events.

[Cartoon of large Yeltsin and small Gorbachev embracing]