

Democracy In The Hands Of The People

By Dmitri N. Shalin

The closest I ever got to a flesh-and-blood politician in the Soviet Union was during the Revolution Day demonstration, when along with fellow citizens pressed into endless columns I filed past local luminaries waving hands atop the makeshift reviewing stand on the Palace Plaza in Leningrad.

It's been years since I emigrated to the United States, but until now my knowledge of grass-root politics in this country had been mostly second-hand. So when a friend offered a ticket to a fund-raiser for Sen. Paul Simon, I decided to go. Not that paying \$100 for the chance to hear a politician had a particular appeal to me. But then for someone who teaches a course on American and Soviet society, I thought, this could be a welcome opportunity to observe American politics in the making.

Fifteen hundred guests packed the student center at Southern Illinois University on that Saturday evening — businessmen, academics, local politicians, civil servants, farmers in working uniforms, campaign officials with red bow-ties and lots of other folks with a stake in Simon's victory. The talk revolved around Simon and his bid for the U.S. presidency.

"He is a long shot, isn't he?" the lady in front of me said to her companion in an apparent reference to the Illinois senator. "How can he lose?" her companion retorted. "If he is lucky, he is president of the United States. If not, he is a U.S. senator with a national following." How true, I told myself. Then I thought about the plight of Sens. Gary Hart and Joseph Biden, and my certainty ebbed.

Moving down a narrow corridor toward the main ballroom, I ran into commotion. By the way people's faces lit up, I knew Simon was nearby. That was my first chance to observe at close range an American politician in action.

A man of average build and unremarkable appearance, (except for the bow tie), Simon was working the crowd with consummate skill. Holding onto your hand with both of his, he would focus just long enough to make you feel special before shifting to someone else. Occasionally, he would pause and strike a conversation. He especially delighted in singling out a person by name, which he would announce loudly for every one to hear. One farmer in overalls attracted his attention. The two chatted for a while, slapping each other on the back. I couldn't tell if they had met before, but this might well have been their first encounter.

How much can one enjoy shaking hands with strangers,

sharing food with casual acquaintances, handling somebody else's babies? I am not sure I could have gone through this ritual once. And yet, there is something humbling about it, and certainly far more democratic than the grandstanding of the now ubiquitous political TV ad. Pressing the flesh is to democracy what waving hands atop Lenin's tomb is to plutocracy. Both are tokens, yet one affirms that ultimate power rests with people, the other that it belongs to their self-appointed representatives.

The "Simon Special," as the event was billed in an oblique reference to Harry Truman's Whistle-Stop Campaign, was moving apace. The main event started amid loud cheers and the deafening sounds of Dixieland. A few things stuck in my memory from this noisy celebration: a 13-year-old girl singing a campaign song she composed for the occasion; the campaign chairman's line, "Remember folks, by helping Simon you help yourself."

All in all, however, the gala's formal part proved to be a disappointment. An endless parade of up- and down-state politicians touting their wares, lavishing praise on each other and swearing allegiance to Simon, the next president of the United States. The Illinois attorney general outdid everyone, his oration rivaling in zeal that of all but a few of Southern Illinois' best known evangelical preachers.

Simon's appearance brought a welcome relief. He spoke with the ease of a politician who needn't worry about impressing the home crowd and who knows how to be forceful without being shrill. In a deep, sonorous voice Simon talked about an America that is a little more humane, a trifle more rational, and in the process managed to convey that most coveted by men and women of his profession: the image of a person who really cares.

The occasion ended, as it began, with a sermon. A preacher called on the audience to pray to God the almighty for Simon's victory. People stood in silence, many with heads bowed in a gesture of reverence.

On the way home I thought about the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. The man sure is a quick study. Look how deftly he mixed with the crowds on the streets of Washington during the U.S.-Soviet summit. He still has a lot to learn about democracy from his counterparts in the West, but pressing the flesh and listening to people is not a bad way to start.

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