

The Limits on Gorbachev's Power

Still, he's too much the party's man to inspire hope

By **Dmitri N. Shalin**

ONCE again, Mikhail Gorbachev has proved himself a master politician. Defying his opponents on the left and the right, he pushed his agenda through at the Congress of People's Deputies and became the first president of the Soviet Union. This time, however, his victory may prove pyrrhic.

The mood in the country has rarely been more dour. Nearly 50 percent of Soviet citizens polled in recent days said they had lost hope in the future. The Soviet leader's personal popularity continues to slip, as more people conclude that the prospects for meaningful reform no longer ride on Gorbachev's political fortunes.

Several recent developments feed this pessimism, none more so than the widening gap between legislative activism and law enforcement. Take this minor yet highly symbolic episode. During the First Congress of People's Deputies, Evgenii Evtushenko proposed to abolish waiting rooms reserved for deputies in Soviet airports and urged that the areas be given to women with children. The motion carried unanimously. However, this didn't prevent home-bound parliamentarians from cashing in on their privilege. Months later, waiting rooms for dignitaries are still a standard feature at Soviet airport terminals.

Many legislative actions have faced a similar plight. The right to lease land is now guaranteed under Soviet law, but few farmers can exercise it. Cooperatives are

legal, yet their members face harassment. Racism is outlawed, but attacks on Jews by anti-Semites go unpunished. People continue to be fired for voicing public criticism, even though stifling dissent is illegal.

In theory, a strong presidency should help close the gap between legislative initiatives and everyday reality. It is unlikely to happen, however, until Gorbachev quits his post as the party head and dismantles the *nomenklatura* class.

There are several million party apparatchiks in the Soviet Union who, using their formidable power, have effectively whittled down the most promising reforms. So far Gorbachev has given few indications that he's ready to take on this mighty strata and surrender his position as

the party's general secretary. "The party is sacred to me," he said recently.

Doubts mount inside the Soviet Union about Gorbachev's ability to inspire and lead. The manner in which he conducted the Congress of People's Deputies has left even sympathetic observers uneasy.

It isn't simply that Gorbachev once again dodged submitting his candidacy to a popular election (though this certainly doesn't strengthen his mandate). Rather, it is the heavy-handed way in which he guided the proceedings, recognizing some deputies, ignoring others, brushing aside criticism, berating his opponents, and scolding alternative programs as "demagoguery." When Sergei Stankevich, a liberal deputy, pointed out that there can be honest differences of opinion, Gorbachev impatiently dismissed his remarks.

The question that Gorbachev's behavior raised is, Is he the right man for the job?

We tend to forget today that Gorbachev came to power as law-and-order man. It took him nearly a year to reveal himself as a born-again reformer, and ever since he has been flip-flopping on policy matters.

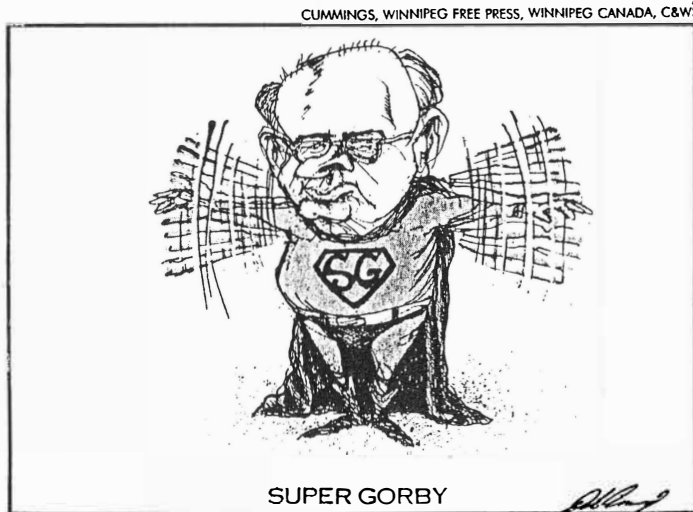
To shore up discipline, he embarked on the draconian anti-drinking campaign, then suddenly called it off. He ridiculed the multiparty system as "rubbish," then

embraced it as inevitable. He vowed to keep the Soviet Union together, then promised a "divorce law" for the republics clamoring for secession. He pledged that the presidential election would be contested, then agreed to run unopposed. Some might see these reversals as the sign of pragmatism. A more apt description, in my view, is opportunism.

Gorbachev is sometimes likened to Moses: He delivered his people from Stalinist captivity, but he might not be the one to see the promised land. According to the Bible, it took the Jewish tribes 40 arduous years to find their way through the desert before they reached the promised land. It might take the Soviet people even longer to climb out of the hole dug by seven decades of communist rule — unless they find moral leadership.

With all due respect to Gorbachev — and I do think that he is a world-historical figure — he seems to lack the qualifications. He is too much of a party man to carry the torch much further. His skills were invaluable for political infighting, outfoxing his conservative opponents, getting the reform process started. But to lead the nation's moral rebirth, a different kind of leader is needed — someone like Vaclav Havel, who can offer a vision, heal moral wounds, and lead by personal example.

I do not doubt that Russia is capable of producing such leaders, though Gorbachev might not be the one.



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