

The sleep is over

Once again, Mikhail Gorbachev is center stage. Today he will speak at the United Nations and then "do lunch" with President Reagan and President-elect George Bush.

As the Soviet Premier continues to exploit his prestige abroad to shore up faltering progress at home, one thought springs to mind: This guy's good.

Everyone knows that Gorbachev loves surprises and the current thinking is that he might very well pull another doozy similar to his "Well, why not get rid of all our missiles?" proposal in Rekyajvik.

U.S. officials spent the entire weekend saying, "We don't think he's going to propose anything. We certainly hope he doesn't, because it wouldn't be in either of our best interests, and if he does say something, well, we just won't say anything back." In other words, Washington and the media are all a-twitter over the possibility that Gorbachev might actually say something.

This is certainly quite a change from just a few years ago. Back then, the heads of state would pound their shoes on the podium during speeches and speak of crushing the capitalist pigs. Soviet spokesmen on television were dull fellows with rambling, incoherent statements that would put Karl Marx to sleep. Democracy could rest easily with Walter Cronkite on our side.

Now, we have the astonishing sight of a smiling, energetic, downright friendly Russian bear who bounds around Washington, stopping his car to chat with citizens and even appearing on Soviet television to field abusive questions from fellow comrades back in the U.S.S.R.

This is a change for the better. Certainly such a wily and charismatic opponent raises the stakes. The opinion of the Western world is no longer ours by default.

In the past, negotiators had to adjust to the slow, grueling process of talks that could drag on for years over minor details. In the future, politicians must learn how to deal with the lightning-swift tactics of a man who knows the art of making proposals that are both clearly to his advantage but damaging for the U.S. to turn down out of hand.

Of course, the challenges are just as great for Gorbachev. Foreign policy is all he has going for himself. Perestroika and glasnost have created interesting problems at home. They are meeting forceful resistance from middle-level bureaucrats and much too much acceptance from the citizens of outlying territories like Armenia.

The small but important increases we see in the Soviet press are encouraging to those of us who work in the media. But the clips shown on network news of hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens massing peaceably to demonstrate against conditions in their territories is a humbling sight and a dramatic example of the obstacles lying in Gorbachev's path.

So we should welcome the media-savvy leader of the U.S.S.R. It's fun to watch him dance circles around the politicians in Washington. And when our two countries can battle it out over the airwaves, they may be less likely to battle it out anywhere else.

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