

SUPERPOWER SUMMITRY AND ITS PERILS

The desire to see Ronald Reagan sit down for a chat with Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko is one of the most admirable American impulses. It reflects a folksy faith that policy can be affected by personality and that U.S.-Soviet tensions are in part a misunderstanding which can be dissolved if the two superpower chieftains powwow and convince each other of their desire for peace. Americans felt reassured, for example, when Franklin Roosevelt warmly spoke of "Uncle Joe" Stalin. And Americans sighed in satisfaction when Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 visited Disneyland and waded through the mud of an Iowa farm.

It is no wonder that U.S. presidents feel almost constant pressure to head towards the summit. Ronald Reagan, however, should not be stampeded up the summit trail. History teaches not only that summits are no sure thing for improving relations, but that they can increase tensions and almost always serve Soviet interests much more than American.

There have been thirteen U.S.-Soviet summits, starting with the 1943 meeting in Teheran of Roosevelt and Britain's Winston Churchill with the Soviet Union's Josef Stalin. Subsequent summits convened:

- February 1945, at Yalta, with Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin;
- July 1945, at Potsdam, with Harry Truman, Britain's leaders and Stalin;
- July 1955, at Geneva, with Dwight Eisenhower, British and French leaders and Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin;
- September 1959, at Washington, with Eisenhower and Khrushchev;
- May 1960, at Paris, with Eisenhower, British and French leaders and Khrushchev;
- June 1961, at Vienna, with John Kennedy and Khrushchev;
- June 1967, at Glassboro (New Jersey), with Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin;
- May 1972, at Moscow, with Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev;
- June 1973, at Washington, with Nixon and Brezhnev;
- June 1974, at Moscow, with Nixon and Brezhnev;
- November 1974, at Vladivostok, with Gerald Ford and Brezhnev;
- June 1979, at Vienna, with James Carter and Brezhnev.

The results of these meetings were spotty. The most successful was Geneva. It was carefully planned to produce an agreement for the occupying powers to withdraw from Austria. The resulting "Spirit of Geneva" became the Cold War's first thaw. Much less successful were Johnson's meeting with Kosygin, Nixon's 1974 trip to Moscow and the Vladivostok

gathering; little was accomplished. Some summits have been disasters. At Yalta, Roosevelt made concessions for which 109 million East Europeans are still paying, while Khrushchev's bullying of Kennedy at Vienna surely emboldened the Soviet leader to erect the Berlin Wall a few months later and to station offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba the following year.

That summitry is perilous has been widely appreciated. Dean Acheson, Truman's Secretary of State, wrote of his "deep dislike and distrust of the 'summit conference.'" He warned that summits "too often [have] been a gamble, the experience nerve-racking and the results unsatisfactory." Kennedy's Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, wrote that "such experience as we have had with summit diplomacy does not encourage the view that it contributes to the advancement of American interests." And Henry Kissinger's memoirs caution that "summit meetings are risky business."

Four decades of summitry teach important lessons:

- 1) Summits asymmetrically affect the U.S. and the USSR. In the wide open American society, extensive media coverage of an approaching summit raises public expectations to towering heights which can plunge to painful disillusion if the expectations are not fulfilled. At the summit, American press coverage places the president in a fishbowl. By contrast, Kremlin control of Soviet media gives it rheostat-like manipulation of Soviet public expectations and knowledge of the summit.
- 2) American leaders are tempted irresistably to exploit a summit for domestic political purposes. This prompts them to exaggerate the summit's importance. Soviet leaders have no need to do so.
- 3) Having raised public expectations, American presidents dare not return from a summit emptyhanded. As a summit's conclusion approaches and success remains beyond reach, a president may be tempted to make reckless concessions. At Moscow in 1972, for example, Nixon was so determined to return home with a SALT I treaty that he negotiated hastily and sloppily, creating the loopholes which Moscow has been exploiting ever since. Writes Kissinger, "Any meeting with the Soviets at the Presidential or Secretary of State level that did not lead to a breakthrough was dismissed by the media as a failure." Soviet leaders, meanwhile, pay no penalty for leaving a summit emptyhanded; no Kremlin boss has ever got into trouble for negotiating too toughly with the U.S.
- 4) Simply going to the summit fosters a mood in the U.S. which makes national security concerns seem less urgent, even though the summit does not slow Soviet military programs.

These lessons cannot be ignored by those who call for a U.S.-Soviet summit. The President is right to be cautious. He is right to insist on careful planning, a detailed agenda and final drafts of those agreements which he will be expected to sign. Only then, history teaches us, should he consent to ascend the summit.

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