

## THE NATURE OF THE SOVIET THREAT AS I PERCEIVE IT AND HOW WE SHOULD DEAL WITH IT

By Ambassador Malcolm Toon

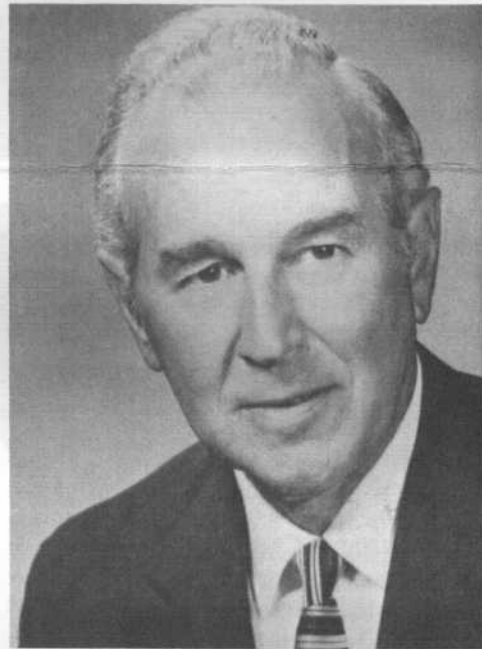
*Malcolm Toon served as U.S. Ambassador to the USSR from December, 1976 to October, 1979. He was awarded the Department of State's Distinguished Honor Award in November, 1979. Prior to serving in Moscow, he was U.S. Ambassador to Israel from June, 1975 to December, 1976; to Yugoslavia from October, 1971 to May, 1975; and to Czechoslovakia from June, 1969 to October, 1971. Previous service included assignments to our Embassies in Warsaw, Budapest, Rome, London, Moscow (twice), and the Department of State as Director of Soviet Affairs in 1965-68 and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs in 1968-69.*

*Ambassador Toon received a B.A. degree from Tufts University and an M.A. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He did graduate work at Middlebury College and Harvard University, and was awarded honorary LL.D. degrees by Tufts University and by Middlebury College.*

*From 1942 to 1946, Ambassador Toon served in the Navy, principally as a PT-boat skipper in the South Pacific. He attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander and was awarded the Bronze Star.*

*Ambassador Toon delivered this presentation on May 17, 1980 at the Hillsdale College Commencement.*

It is an honor and a privilege for me to participate in this graduation ceremony at Hillsdale College. I know it is customary for Commencement speakers to lecture graduates on the problems they will face as they leave the academic and enter the real world and to offer them advice on how they should cope with these problems. I serve notice now that I do not intend today to abide by the norm. I have two principal reasons for this deviation. First, in the many Commencement exercises I have attended, either as a graduate or as a speaker, I have learned that speakers who moralize and preach in most cases are crashing bores and lose their audiences. Second, as a general rule, they know little more about life than those they address and, in any case, they fail to



recognize the elemental truth—that life is a highly individualistic experience and those who face its problems must work out their solutions to those problems in consonance with their own abilities and talents and in response to their own particular circumstances. So, today, I will not preach to you, the graduates of Hillsdale College, and, hopefully, I will not bore you. I intend to speak to you briefly about the parlous and in many respects, the perilous state of the world today and my perception as to how we, as a nation, and you, as graduates, should deal with the threats and the challenges that confront us.

While without question it is the Ayatollah Khomeini and his radical Moslem colleagues who are causing us our most immediate and certainly our most painful problems, there are other extremists whose ideology and behavior pose a much more serious threat to world peace

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

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and stability. I speak, of course, of those who run the Soviet Union—and it is on them and the threat they pose and how we should deal with that threat that I would like to focus my remarks this afternoon.

At the outset, I would like to point out that while I am sometimes called a Soviet expert, I, myself, don't claim that distinction. I feel strongly that the only experts on the Soviet Union are those who sit on the Politburo in Moscow. The rest of us have varying degrees of ignorance—I perhaps less than most because: I speak the language, I have negotiated with the Soviets on a whole

Moreover, the key Soviet decision makers—the 14 men who are now full members of the Politburo—are rarely available to Western Ambassadors in Moscow. Despite persistent efforts, in my almost three years as the American Ambassador, I had substantive conversations with only one full member of the Politburo besides Brezhnev, namely, with Foreign Minister Gromyko. I had thought that access to others who might have a claim to Brezhnev's job would follow my several sessions with their leader—and on access to Brezhnev, I had the best track record of any envoy in town, including those with communist credentials, and in fact, I saw Brezhnev far



range of issues, from a Cultural Exchange Agreement in 1957-8, a Consular Convention in 1964—our first bilateral treaty with the Soviet Union—to the SALT II treaty which we signed last year in Vienna, and I have spent many miserable years living in the benighted capital of the Soviet Union and wrangling with the Soviet bureaucracy over such mundane matters as apartments for the embassy staff, freedom for Pentecostalist squatters, land reduction of the radiation beamed at my office. Certainly this practical exposure to the grim realities of the Soviet system gives me a better feel for the gut element of the Soviet threat we face than those who know the Soviets from textbooks, pugwash conferences and chats with the Arbatovs and the Dobrynins.

Nonetheless, I don't claim to understand the Soviets, and I have long held that the beginning of wisdom in discussing Soviet politics is the humble recognition that we have almost no direct information about what goes on at the top of the Soviet political hierarchy. Meetings of the top leadership bodies—the Politburo and the Secretariat—are held in complete secrecy. There is no informed speculation in the press. Soviet leaders seldom submit themselves to spontaneous press conferences or interviews—Gromyko is about the only one who has deviated from this norm in recent years. Particularly where the leadership is concerned, all Soviet news media—including press, periodicals, radio, television, film—are carefully censored.

more often than any of my immediate predecessors. But, as I was told by Mr. Gromyko—in one of his more profound observations—the Soviet system differs from ours, and Ambassadors must play by the local rules. It is a bit galling, I can assure you, for a person like myself who has dealt with the Soviets for almost thirty years, to be told that their system is not like ours.

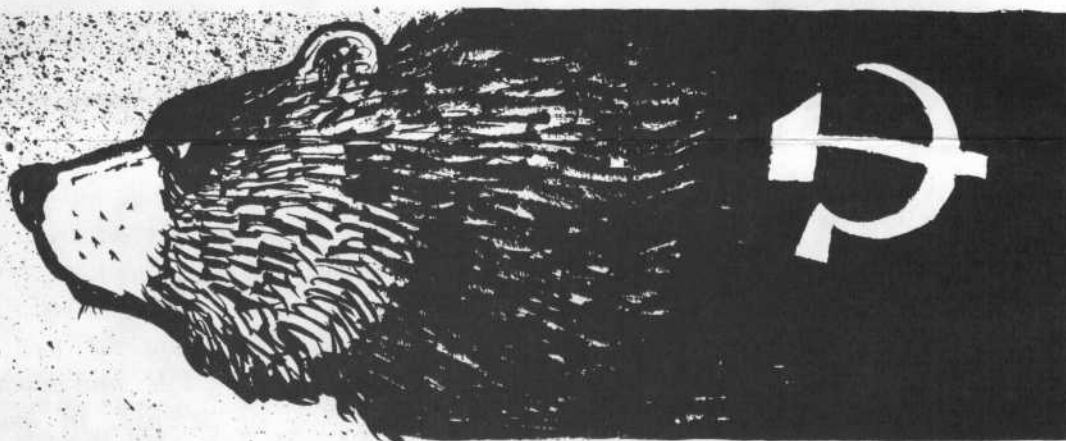
But I suspect there is more than this to Soviet reluctance to arrange access to top party officials. The Soviets are traditionally wary of foreign envoys who speak their language, who are well versed in Soviet objectives and strategy and who are not easily duped by Soviet blandishments. I submit that it ill serves the vital interests of the free world to accommodate the Soviet desire to have in Moscow representatives who lack the skills and the experience to cope with a stacked deck. For that is what the foreigner faces in Moscow. It is very difficult, indeed, for the knowledgeable Westerner in Moscow to fathom Soviet motivations and predict Soviet behavior. It is impossible for the uninitiated to do so.

Thus, you should cast a jaundiced eye on anyone who pretends to offer confident predictions about the future course of Soviet politics. I have been particularly insistent on this point when speaking on university campuses—as I have done frequently in recent months—because our academicians—some of whom now hold high office in Washington—you know who they are, I

needn't name them—have been more often wrong than right in their assessments of Soviet behavior. Today, even those Soviet officials on the inside may not be fully informed about what goes on or what may be in store for them personally. It is worth recalling that when Nikita Khrushchev was suddenly ousted from power in 1964, almost all Western analysts of Soviet politics were caught by surprise—including myself, I was then Counselor of Embassy in Moscow—but I doubt that any of us were more surprised than Khrushchev himself who learned of the downturn in his personal fortunes when vacationing in the Caucasus.

The ideological considerations which underlie their distorted world outlook mean that Soviet regimes cannot accept and will not tolerate ideas of free expression and of free individual choice as we in the West understand them. Soviet regimes thus will try to vindicate their ideology by stifling dissent at home and often by supporting abroad various repressive regimes which proclaim themselves Marxist-Leninist and, like the Soviets themselves, deny individual freedom.

Beyond ideology, geography and historical experience have also shaped the Soviet system and the policies



Nevertheless, as analysts we are not helpless. We have, in fact, made a virtue of necessity, and we make maximum use of the tools at our disposal. The very fact that Soviet news media are carefully controlled means that those in power leave their tracks on what they want us to read and hear. By looking at these tracks, we can find clues about what is going on in the top leadership circles, despite our lack of direct access. And by a close reading of Soviet statements in their own language and to their own people—rather than listening to gossip in the corridors of the United Nations or, worse, to misleading and ambivalent observations by Soviet envoys sensitive and responding to the naivete and wishful thinking of their American interlocuters—we can arrive at a fairly accurate fix on what the Soviet long-range strategy is and how various Soviet tactical moves fit into that strategy.

Let us start with some basic truths. The Soviet system reflects a view of history, a concept of man's relation to the state, a complex of values and principles totally different from our own. Historians can argue whether this amalgam is traditionally Russian or one incorporating basically Soviet ideas imposed from above in 1917. I am inclined to think that Lenin and Stalin took an essentially Western philosophy, Marxism, and shaped it to fit Russian reality so that from Stalin's time until the present there has been no fundamental conflict between Soviet ideology and Russian nationalism.

of its leaders in important ways. Centuries of invasions from both east and west have left their mark on the outlook of the Russian people and of their rulers. Like the Czars before them, the Soviet leadership has invested massive efforts to achieve security on Russia's borders, in part by seeking to push those borders outward—as we saw after World War II and as we have seen more recently in Afghanistan. The cost of this quest for absolute security and for greater political influence by means of military strength has been enormous. It has meant deprivation for the Soviet people, strain and friction in the Soviet Union's relations with its neighbors, and deep concern among those nations like the United States with major responsibilities for world peace and stability. Total security such as the Soviets seek can only mean insecurity for others, and aggressive extension of Soviet influence abroad—particularly in the Third World—must inevitably result in instability and undermining of the peace, at least on a regional basis. And that is precisely the situation today in Southwest Asia.

I recognize that all of this adds up to a fairly grim assessment of how Soviet outlook and behavior may affect not only our relations with the Soviets but, more importantly, the prospects for world peace and stability. It has been argued that this should be seen not as an objective, dispassionate view of the international scene but the mind-set of one who is known as an incorrigible



hard-liner and bitterly anti-Soviet in his approach to world problems.

There is, of course, some truth to these allegations, to this characterization of my attitude. I *am* anti-Soviet in the sense that I believe the Soviets do not wish us well, in the sense that I believe the Soviets would do us in if they thought they could do so with acceptable damage to themselves, and in the sense that I believe they regard detente not as a political mechanism for getting along with the capitalist world but as a device for achieving their basic political goal of reshaping the world in their own image without nuclear war. And I *am* a hard-liner in the sense that I think we should deal with the Soviets as they are—not as we'd like them to be—that is, without any illusions as to what they are up to, what their long-range goals are, and what their real attitude toward the United States is.

I have little patience with those who hold that all we have to do is sit down and reason with the Soviets to achieve our aims—like all who are ideologically motivated, the Soviets are not reasonable people. I believe that on any given issue we should start with the assumption that we and the Soviets are at opposite poles and that they will seek to take advantage of us wherever possible. But at the same time, we should have enough confidence in ourselves to welcome a dialogue with the Soviets and to use our ingenuity to forge solutions which are consistent with our own most essential objectives, and most important, which will not weaken our security or that of our allies. At the same time, solutions to the problems that divide us must be seen by the Soviets as compatible with their own interests—the Soviets will not under any condition agree to arrangements which are to their disadvantage—notwithstanding opinions to the contrary aired last year during the SALT debate by those self-proclaimed Soviet experts who clamored for a better treaty. It is axiomatic that we cannot negotiate a position of superiority over the Soviets—only equality.

Thus, I feel strongly that—despite their ruthless designs on empire, shown most recently in Afghanistan, despite the inhuman treatment of their citizens, particularly those like Dr. Sakharov with the courage to expose the iniquities of the Soviet system at great personal risk to themselves—despite, in a word, brutal Soviet behavior both at home and abroad—despite all this we must deal with the Soviets. We cannot ignore them. We cannot refuse to talk with them—we cannot drive them into brooding isolation—the nuclear world is too dangerous a place for such a negative approach.

But the question is raised—and rightly so—how should we deal with this complex, repressive, dangerously aggressive system without compromising our own principles, without running the risk of losing our shirts and those of our friends and allies?

None of us, of course, even those of us with a degree of expertise on things Soviet, can prescribe a precise, absolutely reliable answer to this fundamental problem

which confronts all of us in the free world. But like most of my colleagues who have dealt with the Soviets—intellectually and in brutal practice—I have, down through the years, fixed on some guidelines, some parameters, some “red lights,” if you will, which might serve in good stead those who henceforth must deal with the Soviet threat. Let me spell them out for you—as I tried to do in official channels during my stewardship in Moscow—not always, I might add, with adequate understanding and certainly not complete acceptance by Washington.

First, as I said at the outset of my remarks, we must start with the basic recognition that the Soviet view of the ideal world order, their view of history, their concept of man's relation to the state, their basic principles and values, remain fundamentally incompatible with our own.

Second, we must understand that in pursuance of their goals the Soviets will continue to seize opportunities in the Third World for extending their influence and their power. They have done this in Africa and most recently in Afghanistan—and they will behave similarly elsewhere in the world if they feel they can do so with impunity. Their conduct abroad in recent years demonstrates clearly that they see no inconsistency between, on the one hand, exploiting targets of opportunity in the Third World in order to hasten achievement of their basic aims and, on the other hand, pursuing a policy of relaxation of tensions in East-West relations. In short, our relationship is and will always be basically an antagonistic one.

Third, we should assume that the Soviets will pay attention not to what we say but to what we do—I believe strongly, for example, that a Carter Doctrine for the Persian Gulf region is no bar to further Soviet adventurism if it is not accompanied by clear evidence of our intentions to bolster our military presence in the area. We need sizeable combat units on the ground—not just in the Middle East but in other areas where our vital interests may be challenged: the need for an appropriate military capability to support and give credibility to our policy statements applies across the board. It is this sort of language and only this sort of language that the Soviets will understand and heed.

Finally, with regard to our negotiating posture and tactics, we should always approach our Soviet adversary without any illusions as to a change in long-range Soviet aims; there has been none nor will there be any until there is a fundamental alteration in Soviet world outlook. This, I am convinced, will happen—but not tomorrow or the day after tomorrow—perhaps fifty years from now when a different generation of Soviet leaders may be more interested in advancing the well-being of their own people than in subjugating others, as is the case today.

We should always have a clear understanding of where our own interests lie—that is, where we must stand firm and where we can compromise. And while I am reluctant to complicate our national life during this

year of difficult presidential choice, I would hope that careful delineation of our vital interests, both geographic and functional, would be the subject of national debate by our candidates.

We should not engage in bluff or idle threats. This never works with the Soviets, as we found out last summer when we foolishly raised a fuss over the issue of the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba without any hope of getting Soviet cooperation in resolving the problem.

We should always have in mind the interests of our allies and the need to avoid even the appearance of neglecting those interests for the sake of an agreement with the Soviets. This, of course, should be reciprocal—that is, our allies should be sensitive to our national interests as well as their own.

We should recognize that we have common interests with neither the Soviets nor the Chinese. Both fear and are avowed enemies of each other; we should bear this in mind and regulate our relations with one so as not to trigger an irrational response by the other.

We should avoid chumminess in our relations with the Soviets for there is no community of interests between us, except possibly a mutual desire to avoid nuclear war. To me, this means on the Washington scene, we should stop treating the Soviet Ambassador as a friend at court and begin treating him for what he is—a convinced and dedicated disciple of a system that is hostile to everything we stand for.

That's the way I view the problem of dealing with the Soviets. Not everyone in Washington agrees with me. In fact, at times when I was abroad I had the impression that my popularity rating in our own capital was only

slightly higher than in Moscow—and there it was less than zero. But this doesn't unduly bother me. I have always felt that I could serve my country best by speaking frankly and openly on the issues. If at times this has ruffled those who are more benign in their attitude toward the Soviet threat, so be it. I think we would be well-advised to recognize, as George Kennan put it years ago, that the Soviet leaders are, by their own choice, the enemies of all that part of the world they do not control. We should understand that Soviet leaders have utter contempt for those who deal with them from weakness and with fatuous goodwill gestures: they respect although they may not like only those who deal with them from strength and a cold calculation of their vital interests. Down through the years, this has been the consistent attitude of us professionals in the Soviet field: it should also be the attitude of our politicians who are now in Washington and those who may succeed to their jobs in the future.

These have been grim words that I have spoken to you today—but the world, today, is a grim place and the problems that confront us are enormous and formidable, not just the political crises we face and with which I am most familiar, but also the staggering array of physical problems which we have just barely begun to face up to—the population explosion, the energy crunch, and the pressing need to cleanse the environment. But the message I have given you today should not be seen as a counsel of despair—it should be viewed as a recipe for realism. I have faith in the future of America because I have faith in you, the youth of America. Good luck and God speed.

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