

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Central America deal—what price?

Baker was so delighted at his pact with the Democrats, that he neglected to mention his tradeoff with the Russians.

Secretary of State James Baker III, when he announced the Bipartisan Accord on Central America at a White House briefing March 24, did not rule out a tradeoff with the Russians, when this reporter asked him about the Soviet role in the area.

Neither did White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, when I asked him the same question about President Bush's letter to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov on the eve of Gorbachov's upcoming trip to Cuba. In the letter, Bush asked Gorbachov to pull back the level of Soviet involvement in the region.

Baker was euphoric about having struck a deal with the Democrats in Congress on a humanitarian aid package for the Contras of \$4.5 million a month through next February. But as one veteran journalist quipped to me, "Why did it take Baker so long to get the Democrats to agree to their own program?" Still, the Baker deal was not cut without some pain. It provoked a rift in the administration when George Bush's pal, White House counsel C. Boyden Gray, publicly attacked the deal as a violation of the separation of powers. Indeed, the deal seemed to give Congress veto power over the Executive Branch's prerogative to make foreign policy.

While some reports speculated about Gray's imminent demise for his insubordination, the *New York Times* was correct when it noted that, in fact, Gray is "an untouchable" in the Bush White House, and that Bush might actually have put him up to taking the swipe at Baker.

However, contrary to the *Times*

account, sources here note that Gray is an "untouchable," not because of his personal relationship with the First Family, so much as his knowledge of "where the monkey sleeps," concerning Bush's role in the Iran-Contra mess. These sources concur that Bush probably endorsed Gray's attack on Baker, because Bush feels that Baker has too big an ego and wants to keep him in his place.

But the Gray-Baker flap was also a smokescreen covering the more important matter: not the White House sellout to Congress, but the U.S. sellout to the Soviets.

When confronted by this reporter, neither Baker nor Fitzwater denied that a tradeoff was involved. Neither would get specific, but all signs point toward a deal to trade Soviet influence in Central America for U.S. influence in Europe. Baker intimated this in his March 28 interview with the *New York Times*, where he said that Henry Kissinger's plan to renegotiate control over Eastern Europe is being taken very seriously by the President. At the March 24 press briefing, broadcast live on Cable News Network, my exchange with Baker went as follows:

Benton: "Mr. Secretary, what evidence do you have that the Soviets intend to diminish their influence in Central America? The State Department has repeatedly said that the amount of Soviet military equipment going into Nicaragua has not changed. Have there been any agreements or tradeoffs negotiated with the Soviets?"

Baker: "There have been discussions with the Soviets and you'll see

references in this agreement to the importance of eliminating Soviet and Cuban influence and assistance to the extent that it is now being provided to Nicaragua. Let me simply say this, and I'm sure that the leadership here [of Congress] would totally agree: Having a policy which represents the policy of the United States, unified and bipartisan, is one of the best things we'll have going for us in our now ongoing dialogue with the Soviets about giving meaning to the New Thinking as far as aid to Nicaragua is concerned."

Benton: "Do you mean by that, that you have already negotiated with the Soviets that we would come up with a plan like this?"

Baker: "No. What I mean is, I have already raised the issue of their assistance to Nicaragua with the Soviets, as I think those who are familiar with my meeting with Shevardnadze in Vienna know."

Later, when the report of Bush's letter to Gorbachov on the eve of the Soviet leader's trip to Cuba came out, I had the following exchange with Fitzwater at the White House daily briefing March 30:

Benton: "Are we offering the Soviets anything in exchange? Are we proposing to them if they cut off aid to Nicaragua, that there's a commensurate response on our part in some way?"

Fitzwater: "Only that we think it would certainly help in improving U.S.-Soviet relations. . . . It will have an impact in terms of overall relations."

When another reporter asked if the United States was offering liberalized trade in exchange, Fitzwater said, "Well, in our growing economic and social relationships with the Soviet Union and in view of *perestroika* and other matters, the interrelationship of all these issues is readily apparent."