

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Gorbachov: 'a drug store cowboy'

A rare White House attack on Soviet lies brings an angry reaction from U.S. Establishment media.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater briefly broke out of the frustrating stranglehold of diplomatic restraint at his daily briefing here May 16, when he lashed out at Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov, accusing him of acting in a "drug store cowboy" fashion for his "very strange pattern of public relations gambits in the last month or two."

The issue was press revelations of Gorbachov's latest act of generosity to the West, the report that he'd promised to stop sending military supplies to Nicaragua.

Essentially, Fitzwater told reporters that there is no evidence that Gorbachov's statement was anything but words, aimed at influencing public opinion in the West. In this regard, he noted, they follow the pattern of recent Soviet pronouncements about unilateral troop and other cuts. In none of these cases, Fitzwater said, has the pronouncement been followed up by demonstrable results.

He said, "In recent days, we've seen any number of arms control proposals which appear to be something they're not. We've heard of Soviet threats to abandon the INF treaty, talk of an SS-23 buildup, and now reports of the Soviet discontinuation of Nicaraguan aid. But we have not seen the results, and we wait for the evidence to come in. At the moment, it appears to be only words, not deeds."

In the latest case, he noted, U.S. "surveillance techniques" had determined that Soviet military supplies were continuing to flow into Nicaragua, adding to that nation's "stock-

piles of military equipment clearly in excess of its legitimate security requirements."

Many members of the White House press corps went berserk over the idea that the White House would dare call Gorbachov a liar. Media coverage all centered on Fitzwater's "drug store cowboy" reference.

By fixating on the phrase in that very lengthy exchange that could be read as provocative, the major media provided an effective smokescreen for what Fitzwater was really saying.

In fact, this reporter found that many citizens, hearing the report of Fitzwater's "drug store cowboy" quip, were not aware that Fitzwater grounded his comment on the fact that U.S. surveillance had demonstrated the Soviet arms shipments had not stopped. That important fact was barely, if at all, mentioned in press accounts.

The *Washington Post* went even further to divert attention from this fact by taking the offensive with an attack on Fitzwater, devoting its May 18 editorial to denouncing the "drug store cowboy" reference in the most vicious terms. "The Fitzwater one-line sneers are about as dumb a response to what the Soviets are doing as you could think of," the editorial railed.

In reality, throughout the White House briefing, Fitzwater was trying to explain why the White House was not responding to the public pronouncements by Gorbachov with unilateral force reduction measures of its own.

At one point, a *Washington Post* reporter spoke up: "Since the election,

Gorbachov gave conventional arms cuts in New York, plutonium factories, his latest offer handed to Baker, now this. And the President's been calling for deeds, not words, but what deeds has George Bush responded with?"

This comment revealed what the Establishment media were really upset about, and had jumped on the "drug store cowboy" comment simply to vent its anger. That is, so far, the United States has not been railroaded by the recent barrage of Gorbachov public relations gambits into making unilateral offers of its own—and for very obvious reasons. Namely, the minute the United States makes a promise to do something, the very nature of its internal political system will tend to ensure that the promise is kept. The Soviets, by contrast, have no such internal mechanism compelling them to keep any promise, whether it be a verbal offer or a formal treaty.

Fitzwater's fuller statement: "I think that's the essence of the PR game that he's playing here, and this is that the United States has been very careful and methodical in its examination of our relationship with the Soviet Union. On the basis of that, we have opened the door to any number of possibilities that could result from an improved relationship. . . ."

"We contrast that, which is an admittedly cautious approach, to the one of throwing out in a kind of a drug store cowboy fashion, one arms control proposal after another—all of which, upon examination, proved to be either very little change from the existing situation, involving promises that have been made in the past involving reductions that are not meaningful in terms of our strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, or reductions that are not meaningful in terms of the NATO relationship to the Warsaw Pact."