

Red brass pampered in U.S. military tour

by Kathleen Klenetsky

A delegation of Soviet political and military officials was given unprecedented access to American military facilities, and received virtually classified briefings on American military plans and weapons systems, during a visit to the United States in mid-February.

The 26-member delegation, representing the Supreme Soviet's Defense and State Security Committee, came to the United States under the auspices of the Congress's House Armed Services Committee.

The latter had undertaken a superficially similar tour of Soviet military installations last year, although one can safely assume that the Americans were shown only what Moscow wanted them to see; whereas the Soviet delegation here has been given the red-carpet treatment, including briefings on matters so sensitive that no ordinary U.S. citizen would ever receive them.

Unlike the American committee, which consists primarily of lawyers, its Soviet equivalent includes individuals who rank among the most important Soviet military figures, like four-star Red Army Gen. Vitaly Shabanov and weapons-designer Vladimir Lapygin—in other words, people who would be able to understand the kinds of briefings the Soviet delegation received.

Secret no more

The Soviet visitors were given access to such crucial strategic sites as Strategic Air Command headquarters in Nebraska; Fort Hood; the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD); the Los Alamos weapons lab; and Cape Canaveral. In addition, they sat in on several formal and informal House Armed Service Committee sessions, including a hearing on the FY1991 Air Force budget, and met with Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

At a Minuteman launch site in South Dakota, the Soviets were given a briefing on missile-launch procedures that touched on technical matters which, as the *Boston Globe* put it, "would not be revealed in an open hearing of a congressional committee."

Among other things, the visitors were shown the sensors used by security police to detect intruders on the base. When one of the delegates, Vladimir Lapygin, chairman of the Soviet Committee on Defense and State Security, said, "I hope that doesn't apply to us," Gen. Robert Marquette, the base's air commander, hastily assured him, "No, you are our friends."

At the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, the Soviets toured the shuttle facilities where the Atlantis was being prepared for a mission to put a surveillance satellite in space—a satellite that reportedly will spy on the Soviet Union.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," said one intelligence analyst. "George Bush is acting pretty stupid when he proclaims the Cold War is dead, and says that the U.S. has to bail out Gorbachov. But when he allows some of Moscow's leading weapons scientists to feast their eyes on some of our most important defense capabilities, then I think he's really gone round the bend. What's Bush up to? Trying to save the Soviets money by giving them secrets they'd otherwise have to pay for?"

But a House Armed Services Committee spokesman defended the level of access given to the Soviet delegation: "This is a brave new world. These are new times. Up until recently, we considered the Soviets our chief adversary; now, it's stated U.S. policy to pursue a degree of openness and transparency that leads to stability."

The Soviet delegation also inspected a B-1 installation, where Lapygin, who designed the Soviet space shuttle, asked extensive questions about the computers used in the guidance system, how the pilots and flight crews are chosen, and what kinds of gyroscopes are used.

At one point, after the Soviets had observed the simulated launch of a Minuteman missile targeted at the Soviet Union, House Armed Services Committee chairman Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wisc.) cheerfully exclaimed: "Can you believe that? Two years ago, this sort of stuff would've been taken out of the public transcript of the committee hearings. It's just staggering what's happening."

Staggering is definitely the word for it. The words "criminal stupidity" would also apply.

The tour ended Feb. 19, with the Soviets returning to Moscow after stopping off in New York City for meetings with their delegation to the United Nations.

But that is not the end of this particularly idiotic episode of glasnost in reverse. According to Aspin aides, the U.S. and Soviet committees are working on a host of joint projects above and beyond existing plans for another trip by the U.S. committee to the Soviet Union sometime in the near future.

Armed Services Committee sources report that future plans include setting up an "information exchange"; issuing joint reports on issues pertaining to the committees' work; and "even reaching some form of collaboration, possibly on the prospect of setting up some sort of mechanism where we could prevent the accidental launch" of a nuclear missile.

The subject of "accidental launch" has been used by the likes of Representative Aspin and his Senate counterpart, Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), as well as National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, to kill off the Strategic Defense Initiative once and for all by limiting it to a defense against the least likely occurrence—an accidental nuclear launch.