

## Will Bush sellout lead to bloodbath in Lithuania?

by William C. Jones

In a slow-motion rerun of the servile kowtowing to the butchers of Tiananmen Square last year, the Bush administration is making special efforts to keep in power Mikhail Gorbachov, Czar of All the Russias. For almost 50 years, the core of U.S. policy toward the Baltic states situated in the northwestern corner of European Russia, has been to regard them as independent nations. Although they were forcibly incorporated into the U.S.S.R. by the Red Army as a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, the legitimacy of this occupation has never been accepted by the United States, a non-recognition reaffirmed by every U.S. government since then. Now in one fell swoop, at the point where these nations for the first time in 50 years have the possibility of throwing off the Russian yoke, President Bush is selling them down the river.

As the Soviet empire begins a slow process of unraveling under the impetus of a grave economic crisis and a major overhaul of the totalitarian political apparatus, the Baltic states maneuvered to regain the freedom so brutally snuffed out in 1939. Counting on the backing of the Western nations, and in particular the United States, the Baltic states have begun edging their way toward independence. Lithuania was leading the way. With the overwhelming victory of the Lithuanian Popular Front (Sajudis) on Feb. 24 and the election of Sajudis chairman Vytautas Landsbergis as President of the republic, Lithuania declared independence on March 11.

On March 21 Gorbachov issued a presidential decree to "safeguard the rights of Soviet citizens," and to "protect the borders" of Lithuania. KGB Border Guards units were deployed for this purpose. It was announced that Moscow would ban the sale of all firearms in Lithuania and gave the Lithuanians seven days to surrender all firearms, including hunting rifles in private possession. Foreign journalists were to leave the country when their visas ran out, or, in some cases, even sooner. A similar deadline was given for all

Lithuanian "deserters" to return to their Russian Army units or else be rounded up by them.

This Soviet reaction led the Supreme Council of Lithuania to issue a warning on March 22 that "another state is preparing to use force against the Republic of Lithuania and its citizens," appealing to the nations of the world to protest against "the possible use of any form of coercion and violence." President Landsbergis also asked world governments to recognize Lithuania.

Yet President Bush continued to punt. At an impromptu press conference on the White House lawn on March 22, Bush referred to "certain realities in life" which had to be recognized, and said that the Lithuanians should talk. When a reporter pointed out that Gorbachov had threatened to confiscate weapons not turned over voluntarily, Bush repeated that the proper response was for the Lithuanians to talk, and praised recent statements by Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, claiming that the Soviets would not use force in the Baltics. As of this writing, Secretary of State James Baker still plans to meet Shevardnadze the first week of April.

A number of congressmen, refusing to take their cue from the White House, put up a show of resistance. An amendment in the Senate raised by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), calling for immediate recognition of Lithuania, was defeated on March 21 in a 59-36 vote. Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.), the point man for the White House on the bill, said that it was through "conversations with Mr. Scowcroft and Secretary Eagleburger" that he realized that there was "a better way to do this" than such an amendment. The same two associates of Henry Kissinger who had toasted the butchers of Tiananmen Square before the blood was dry, were integral in defeating the Helms amendment.

The reaction in the House was a bit more substantial.

In a March 21 letter to President Bush signed by over 100 congressmen, the President was urged to “respond affirmatively” to the request of the Lithuanian parliament for diplomatic recognition. “The dreams and aspirations of Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton of 1776” were also those of the Lithuanian leadership, the letter said. A resolution was introduced in the House by Rep. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) calling on the President to “plan for and take those steps, at the earliest possible time, that would normalize diplomatic relations between the United States and the new government of Lithuania.” Throughout the country, demonstrations were held in support of Lithuanian independence.

### ‘I see the umbrella’

The administration’s failure to recognize the new republic encouraged further aggressive actions by the Soviets. On March 26, Soviet helicopters, with their identification marks painted over, distributed thousands of leaflets over Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The leaflets gloated over the fact that the new government had been given no diplomatic recognition. “Let us ask the new leaders [of Lithuania],” read the leaflet, “where is the world’s recognition of the sovereignty of the republic that has been promised?” The unsigned leaflets in Russian called on the Russian population to gather the next day in a major demonstration in front of the Supreme Council building—a measure which was immediately seen by the government as an attempted provocation. The Bush administration’s lame response met a flurry of criticism in the U.S. media. “Bush and the U.S.-Soviet Love-In” was the title of a *Washington Post* commentary by syndicated columnists Evans and Novak, which quoted a “highly respected administration official who said to them, ‘I would never be quoted on this, but I see the umbrella,’ ” referring to the infamous British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. The Chamberlain image was ever-present.

At 3 a.m. on the morning of March 27, Soviet Army paratroopers forced their way into a psychiatric hospital in Vilnius where the government was giving refuge to Lithuanian defectors from the Red Army, seized the “deserters,” brutally beat them, and carted them away in trucks. A similar action was carried out in the city of Kaunas. The blood-spattered steps of the hospital even made it to the U.S. news programs. There was a general outcry.

In the face of the growing concern of Americans over these events, the administration tried to toughen up its rhetoric, although with no change in its stance. Accusing Moscow of conducting a “pattern of intimidation,” the administration said that the use of force was “bound to backfire.” The Soviets fired back. Soviet spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov commented that it looked like the United States was issuing an “ultimatum.” A phone call to President Bush later in the week from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had spoken with Gorbachov by telephone, convinced Bush that Gorbachov had “misunderstood” the reaction in the West. Bush was

afraid of a “disconnect” with the Russian leader.

President Landsbergis, who blamed Gorbachov personally for “constant demonstrations of armed force” in the republic, chided the United States for “trusting naively” that the Kremlin would not use force in Lithuania. The Soviets defended themselves by arguing that they had the duty to restore law and order, and that even the United States would have the right to search for deserters from its army. The deputy head of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, Chetverikov, justified the Soviet actions on March 27 by citing a comment from Vice President Dan Quayle earlier in the week where he said, “If the Soviet Union is applying disciplinary measures to people in their own military, that’s a different situation” from using force to prevent Lithuanian independence. President Landsbergis asked of the West, “Are they willing once again to sell out Lithuania?”

“We don’t want to inflame the situation,” said White House press spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, when asked on March 28 to comment on the Soviet seizure of the army deserters. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. William Crowe (ret.), both visiting Moscow, sent back warnings that Western criticism of Gorbachov’s handling of Lithuania was undermining perestroika. This led Bush to put the screws on recalcitrant congressmen who were demanding recognition for Lithuania. On March 28, Bush met with four congressmen who had visited Lithuania in February, and stressed that keeping Gorbachov in power was a higher priority than the Lithuanian independence drive. Rep. Bill Sarpalius (D-Tex.), who was at the meeting, commented on Bush’s attitude, “He’s decided to stick with Gorbachov.”

Republican congressmen were easily persuaded to change their tune on behalf of Czar Mikhail’s survival. Rep. Newt Gingrich, (R-Ga.) who prides himself on being a somewhat cocky conservative, was bleating like a lamb after what he billed a “spirited exchange” with Bush. “I went in there more aggressive, more positive than I came out,” said Gingrich. “I wrote him a note and I said I felt I got educated this morning.” Democratic House Leader Thomas Foley was also bleating to the tune of the Republican choir-master, saying that the President “should be given the benefit of the doubt as he deals with this.” Others were not so satisfied. “My patience is wearing thin,” said Sen. Alan Dixon (D-Ill.), one of the senators who opposed the Helms amendment. “If he [Bush] is going to give us the Chinese treatment again, it’s not going to go down well,” said Dixon.

On March 30 the White House announced that the visit of U.S. Army General Vuono, who was scheduled to meet with General Varennikov, the commander of Soviet troops in Lithuania, was canceled. Perhaps the presence of a U.S. military representative in Lithuania at the time of a bloody crackdown would be too much even for President Bush. But if the crackdown does occur, he has no one to blame but himself.