

# The Clinton-Putin Summit: Another Missed Opportunity

by William Jones

The Moscow June 4-5 summit between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Russian President Vladimir Putin raised no great expectations when it was first announced. Consequently, its shortcomings caused little disappointment when it was concluded. Lacking even the camaraderie that existed between President Clinton and former President Boris Yeltsin, which always lent something of a human-interest element to what might otherwise be a lackluster event, the meeting with the new Russian President was a decidedly chilly affair. Between Putin and Clinton there was not the “Bill” and “Boris” of the Yeltsin encounters, only a cordial formality, with each addressing the other as “Mr. President.”

## The Gore Factor

But the emptiness of the summit was not primarily due to a lack of personal chemistry between the two leaders, nor to the lack of significant issues to discuss. The real problem with the Moscow summit was the Clinton Administration’s all-consuming fixation on the political fate of the one player who was not even present—Vice President Al Gore. More than anything, the waning months of the Clinton Presidency have been geared to accomplishing the almost impossible task of getting Al Gore elected President.

During the summit, the Gore campaign was never far from the foreground. Al Gore has served as something of a public figure on Russia policy—a position in which President Clinton placed him in order to “enhance” the Vice President’s foreign policy profile in the Administration. Ironically, Gore’s cozy relationship with Russian bankers’ stooge and former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, in the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, almost led to the political demise of the Vice President himself, as it became known that Chernomyrdin was up to his neck in dirty deals—deals which the Vice President’s office refused to take seriously, despite warnings from the CIA.

The inconclusive status of the issues between the United States and Russia, particularly the unsuccessful attempts by the Clinton team to get Russia to agree to amending the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to allow the United States to build a limited ballistic missile defense system against “rogue states,” obviously necessitates a follow-up,

taking the two countries into the political changeover in Washington in January. This, in turn, helps fuel the Administration’s self-imposed delusion that only a Gore Administration, following in Clinton’s footsteps, could bring such efforts to fruition. In fact, one Russian political analyst, Vsevolod Marinov, interviewed on one of the Sunday morning shows in the United States on June 4, commented rather bluntly, “The political solution is within sight. It would be a President Gore that would have to follow along these lines.” Marinov does not appear to be well informed about the rapid unraveling of the Gore campaign.

Despite Administration efforts to downplay expectations of a breakthrough on arms control issues at the summit, even President Clinton probably felt that he might be able to narrow the distance between the two countries regarding an agreement on amending the ABM Treaty. If so, he was sorely disappointed. President Putin is undoubtedly not so optimistic about the possibilities of a Gore victory, and, even if he were, he would probably not be prepared to sign an agreement with the Clinton Administration that might well be abrogated by the next administration, even one led by Gore. So the Russian President gave Clinton’s overtures the cold shoulder.

## Missile Defense a Bone of Contention

What was signed at the summit on arms control was a rather vague statement of principles by the two leaders, undoubtedly authored by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the point-man on Russia policy for President Clinton, regarding the “road ahead” in the two countries’ discussions on arms control and the ABM Treaty. The document reaffirms the two sides’ commitment to the ABM Treaty “as a cornerstone of strategic stability,” but also promises to continue efforts “to strengthen the ABM Treaty and to enhance its viability and effectiveness in the future.” Something for everybody, but committing no one to anything particular.

Ever since the Clinton Administration indicated that it was considering the development of a limited national missile defense system, in the aftermath of the launching of a long-range Taepodong missile by North Korea in August 1998, Russia and China, fearful that this would lead to the scrapping of the ABM Treaty, and the Europeans, fearful of a U.S.



*President Bill Clinton meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on June 4.*

reversion to an America First orientation, have expressed strong reservations about the American plans.

During his trip to Portugal and Germany, before arriving in Moscow, President Clinton tried to allay European fears by offering to share technology on a missile defense system. In his press conference in Portugal on May 31, he offered to share the technology with all “civilized” nations that are “in harmony with us on a non-proliferation regime,” implying that he would be willing to share such technology, albeit in a more limited way, with Russia.

Spurred on, perhaps, by Clinton’s statements in Portugal, President Putin, in an interview with NBC News’ Tom Brokaw, made the surprising statement that Russia would be interested in cooperating with the United States in a system that would be capable of killing missiles aimed at Russia in their “boost phase,” according to press reports, taking his cue from some suggestions regarding theater missile defense systems which are being propagated by Richard Garwin, neo-conservative Frank Gaffney, and others in the United States.

Putin never made himself more explicit on this matter in his public statements during the summit—and perhaps not privately, either. But Talbott, when asked about the Putin proposals on June 4, responded, “We’re not sure we could develop a system of, say, theater-based boost-phase intercept, in anything like the time frame in which this [North Korean] threat is maturing.” President Clinton, in his press conference with President Putin on June 5, was even more explicit: “I have no objection to working with Russia on a joint missile defense that would intercept a missile directed at Russia or the United States from a hostile power in the Middle East or anywhere else, in the so-called boost phase.

I have no objection to doing that. I think we should work together on it. The problem is, we think it will take 10 years or more to develop; the technology is not yet available.” But on this, as on other questions, the parties agreed to disagree.

### **Early-Warning Center**

What they did agree to was a modest proposal for creating a joint U.S.-Russian early-warning system. This proposal has been in the works since September 1998, when Clinton and Yeltsin agreed on the exchange of early-warning types of data and the potential establishment of a multilateral notification system for the launch of ballistic missiles.

This led to Russian participation in a temporary early-warning center established at the end of 1999 in Colorado Springs, specifically to deal with any problems that might arise in missile computer controls during the Y2K transition. From the U.S. side, there were also concerns about the disintegration of the Soviet early-warning system with the breakup of the Soviet Union, and fear that “blind spots” in the Russian system might lead to a failure to identify an otherwise harmless launch somewhere, and might cause it to be interpreted as an attack. Now, lacking other points of agreement, this was made into a showcase item for the summit and put on the fast track.

The agreement envisions the establishment of an early-warning center in Moscow, manned by both U.S. and Russian specialists, which would observe and report on missile launches anywhere in the world. The system would provide information on the geographic area from which a launch has occurred; the time at which it occurred; the generic type of missile, as closely as can be detected; the azimuth of the launch; the projected area of impact; and the projected time of impact.

In addition, so as not to come up entirely empty on the arms control issue, an agreement was signed regarding the irreversible disposition of 68 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium, and a promise to accelerate work on constructing facilities for conversion of plutonium and its fabrication into fuel.

In another deferential bow to the Gore campaign, the two parties also signed an agreement to fight “global warming.” In his press conference with Putin, Clinton said, “We believe it’s essential to conclude work on the Kyoto Protocol, includ-

ing market mechanisms, to protect the environment, promote clean energy, and reduce costs.

“And on these issues,” Clinton continued, “the President and I are asking the U.S.-Russia binational commission, under the leadership of Vice President Gore and Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, to carry forward the work.” Good-bye, Gore-Chernomyrdin. Hello, Gore-Kasyanov!

### ‘It’s the Economy, Stupid!’

The conference, however, missed an opportunity to deal with the fundamental issue which will determine the fate of Russia in short and long term alike: the industrial revival of the Russian economy. Putin, anxious to come to some agreement with the International Monetary Fund and the Paris Club, gave a thorough run-down of the measures he was submitting to the Duma (parliament), “structural reform” measures penned by his stable of “free market” economists. Clinton’s economic adviser, Gene Sperling, met with Putin’s top economic advisers Andrei Illiaronov and German Gref, in order to encourage them in their attempt to implement the same bankrupt “reform policy” which almost finished off the Russian economy in the first place. “It’s good to talk the talk,” Sperling told reporters on June 4, “but you have to walk the walk.” Sperling’s advice to his Russian counterparts, as they “walk the walk” down the gangplank to the shark-infested waters of “free market reform”: “Stay the course, boys, and everything will be fine!”

It must also have been with some amusement, or perhaps even suppressed anger, that Putin, the former KGB operative and security chief, listened to President Clinton recount how he, too, had had to bite the bullet in his first year in office in 1993, in order to institute “tough reforms” which would change “a negative market perception”—as if there could be any comparison between the situation in the United States in 1993, and Russia’s devastation today! Aside from this facile comparison and facile advice, there was really very little the American President was offering Russia economically, except for promising to send Robert Strauss (a.k.a. the Prince of Thieves), over to Russia with a delegation of capitalists to look at new “investment opportunities.” It was something like Queen Elizabeth sending Sir Francis Drake to help the Spanish Treasury manage its gold surplus.

In a Russian talk show on the Ekho Moskvyy radio program on June 4, President Clinton was asked by the first caller, “Do you think a financial crisis is possible in the United States?” “I think a financial crisis is unlikely in the United States,” the President replied, “as long as we have a good economic program, as long as we keep our budget in surplus, as long as we’re continuing to open our markets and compete with other countries, as long as we’re investing in our people. If we have good policies and we work hard, I think a big financial crisis is unlikely.” With the U.S. stock market about to burst, the President’s response seems to be an extreme case of the condition known as “whistling past the graveyard.”

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## Book Reviews

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### ‘Starr’s Stenographers’ and the Conspiracy To Destroy the President

by Edward Spannaus

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#### **Truth at Any Cost: Ken Starr and the Unmaking of Bill Clinton**

by Susan Schmidt and Michael Weisskopf  
New York: HarperCollins, 2000  
308 pages, hardbound, \$26

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#### **The Hunting of the President: The Ten- Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton**

by Joe Conason and Gene Lyons  
New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000  
373 pages, hardbound, \$25.95

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Media critic Steve Brill, in his famous 1998 “Pressgate” article, described the *Washington Post*’s Susan Schmidt as someone who “does stenography for the prosecutors.” Schmidt was one of the “mainstream press” reporters who was skewered by Brill for uncritically taking dictation from independent counsel Kenneth Starr and his staff, and then reporting the results as if it were objective news.

Although Brill was subject to merciless attacks by the very reporters and news outlets which he was exposing—an irony, because they themselves knew full well the truth of what he was saying, being the very recipients of the leaks from Starr’s office—Brill is now fully vindicated by the new book by Susan Schmidt, *Truth at Any Cost*, co-authored by *Time* magazine writer Michael Weisskopf, also a *Washington Post* reporter for many years.

Not without reason, has Schmidt become known as “Stenographer Sue” among reporters following the Clinton scandals.

Simply put, the Schmidt-Weisskopf book is a shameless public-relations promotion for Kenneth Starr and his staff.