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Gorbachev—Still Our Best Bet

Evans and Novak's column "All Bets on Gorbachev?" [op-ed, Aug. 1] was characteristic of a widespread but dangerous mentality that Mikhail Gorbachev is somehow dispensable and that those who encourage his demise are contributing to the speed of democratization and sovereignty in the U.S.S.R.

Evans and Novak argued that "for Bush to disconnect from Gorbachev would profit . . . Russia, the Ukraine, Byelorussia and other republics." They credited Boris Yeltsin and the Baltic leaders as deserving of "belated" U.S. recognition and as representing a "fascinating variety of political roads [toward] an empire's end."

It is Gorbachev, however, who took the historically unprecedented step of democratizing an empire from the top down. He gave the Soviets their first-ever sovereign and freely elected parliament. The avalanche of criticism and opposition that not unsurprisingly followed would have provoked a reversal from almost any other embarrassed

leader. Gorbachev, instead, used that opposition to further democratize and deepen perestroika.

Gorbachev has not only permitted but has strongly encouraged the republics to demand more autonomy. His advisers established the Commission of the Union Market to create direct links between the republics—such as the ones Evans and Novak credit Yeltsin for proposing.

Further, Yeltsin is not an advocate of autonomy for non-Russian peoples. Like Gorbachev, he advocates democratization, a free market and republican sovereignty. Unlike Gorbachev, he is uncompromisingly against Baltic secession, according to his friend and collaborator Yuri Afanasyev.

It was the largely freely elected Congress of Peoples' Deputies, not Gorbachev, that annulled Lithuania's March 11 independence declaration. It was the legislature that Gorbachev empowered, the Supreme Soviet, that allowed the possibility of secession.

Only through Gorbachev's survival and success are the Baltics likely to gain their independence. Gorbachev's opponents from both left and right have pledged to silence the Baltics' requests, once in power.

Is this the type of opposition the United States enjoys "touching base" with?

The United States must weigh the price of taking democratization in the U.S.S.R. for granted. Labeling Gorbachev an impediment to, rather than the guarantor of, perestroika, as Evans and Novak would have it, would prove correct a State Department official who once lamented, "our inability to align ourselves with democratic sectors has put us on the wrong side of history."

—Fredo Arias-King

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