

THE PROGRESSIVE INTERVIEW

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*by Amitabh Pal*

# Mikhail Gorbachev

I met up with Mikhail Gorbachev in a bar in Wisconsin. As a world figure, Gorbachev has always fascinated me. When he was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 until its demise in 1991, he introduced the ideas of *glasnost* (transparency and openness) and *perestroika* (the restructuring of the Soviet society and economy), concepts that brought about historic changes in his country. The winner of the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize for helping improve East-West relations, he currently heads the Gorbachev Foundation of America and Green Cross International, organizations dedicated to such issues as disarmament, the environment, democracy, and the global economy. He lectures the world over, including at such far-flung places as Appleton, Wisconsin, home of Joe McCarthy

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*Amitabh Pal is Managing Editor of The Progressive.*

and the headquarters of the John Birch Society, though also the location of the liberal Lawrence University.

I had been trying to get an interview with Gorbachev for several months—ever since I learned that he was coming to Appleton on October 1. After calling and e-mailing several places, including Moscow, I finally got in touch with his translator and chief media aide, Pavel Palazchenko, who promised me a few minutes alone with Gorbachev, possibly before his talk.

I spent the whole morning of October 1 in the lobby of the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel in Appleton, waiting for my chance. On entering the hotel, Gorbachev surveyed it with a touch of haughtiness. He looked shorter than he did in his Soviet-era photos, and a bit older.

In the afternoon, I received a call in my room from Palazchenko. He said that Gorbachev was exhausted and wouldn't be able to do the interview before the speech. However, he said, if I waited till the end of the reception, I'd be able to do it then.

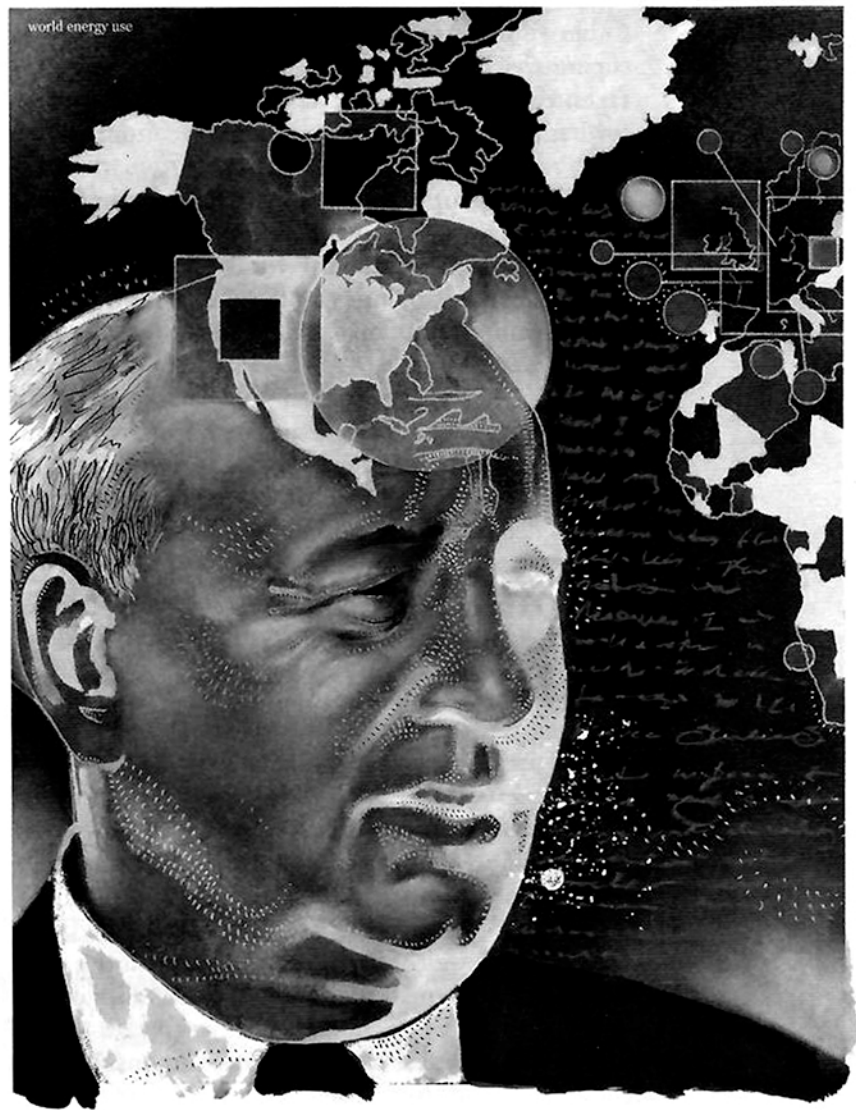
I managed to get a question in at a mini-press conference, where I was positioned next to a senior editor with *The New American*, the publication of the John Birch Society. After sitting through Gorbachev's talk and hanging around afterward, I was chagrined to see Gorbachev and Palazchenko exiting from a side door.

I hurried back to the hotel. Just a few minutes later, Gorbachev and Palazchenko appeared, heading toward the hotel bar. "Mr. Palazchenko, you had promised me some minutes alone with President Gorbachev," I said, as Gorbachev walked along unperturbed. "Why don't you wait outside the bar, and I'll see what I can do," Palazchenko said. Almost an hour later, Palazchenko reappeared. "You're still here?" he said. "Why don't you come on inside?"

As soon as I met him, Gorbachev raised two fingers. I thought he was flashing me the peace sign. "Only two questions," Palazchenko translated. I managed to get in four. A slightly annoyed Gorbachev raised four fingers at the end. When I spilled the remnants of Palazchenko's wine while putting away my tape recorder, Gorbachev remarked to Palazchenko (who duly translated for me) that this was his punishment for bringing me there. Here's what Gorbachev said in Appleton, in response to my questions and others at the press conference and the reception.

**Q** • You recently wrote that the Iraq War was "felonious" and that the United States needed a *perestroika* of its own. Could you elaborate?

**Mikhail Gorbachev:** Not only America but all countries should think together about how the enormous



“Some of our Western partners do not want Russia to fully recover. They would like Russia to be in a subdued state.”

might of the sole remaining superpower should be used. We need a leadership that is based on partnership, a leadership that unites nations and makes it possible to solve the problems of the globe together.

Otherwise, we will have another Gold Rush for a superpower that wants to gain even greater advantages, that wants to gain an absolutely new position for itself. That would lead to a perverse utopia.

**Q: A lot of people in this country think that President Reagan's hardline policies, such as massive military spending and the Strategic Defense Initiative, helped bring the Soviet Union down. What's your response to that?**

Gorbachev: What happened to the Soviet Union happened mainly for domestic reasons. It was a failure of the model based on a command economy and dictatorship. The rejection of freedom and democracy, the decisionmaking monopoly of one party, and

## "I'm still committed to the socialist idea"

the monopoly of one ideology all had a chilling effect on the country. That model turned out to be incapable of making structural changes. It did not open up ways for initiative and was overly centralized.

Of course, we could still have continued the arms race, but the arms race was pointless, and it was another reason we decided to start *perestroika*. It was senseless to continue to accumulate weapons. We had enough weapons to destroy life on Earth 1,000 times, and therefore it was very clear to us that the arms race could spiral out of control. A conflict could have started, as both the Americans and the Soviets realized, not out of a wrong political decision but because of a failure in the command-and-control systems. Sometimes, the decisions have to be taken in minutes, even seconds, and there would be no time to make the right decision. We understood that this could have ended in catastrophe.

So, there were domestic reasons, and there were international reasons. I certainly wouldn't say that we loved the arms race. Trillions of dollars were used to stoke it. For our economy, which was smaller in size than the American economy, it was a burden. But one cannot agree with the statement that the arms race played the key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. When it became clear to us that the one-party model was mistaken, we rejected that model. A new generation of more educated people started to be active. Then society required freedom, society demanded freedom.

**Q: Progress in rounding up the old weapons of**

**mass destruction in the former Soviet Union has been very slow, and the United States has not come through with all the money it said it would provide.**

Gorbachev: The United States found dozens of billions of dollars for military action in Iraq, so it should certainly be able to find a few billions of dollars to get rid of weapons of mass destruction. I'll assume that since the most powerful nation—the United States—has promised to pay for much of this, then its word will be kept. If it isn't, I don't think we can have a true partnership.

It sometimes seems to me that some of our Western partners do not want Russia to fully recover. They would like Russia to be in a subdued state, and they want Russian resources to be used for the benefit of the U.S. economy. Some think that Russia should become a kind of a U.S. province, where it should supply natural resources to the United States and the rest of the world. But these people ignore one very important thing: The Russian people will never agree to this scenario. Russia is ultimately a self-sufficient country. If you want Russia to be a real fully developed partner, then America should invest in Russia and activate Russia as a strong nation.

**Q: America is a society of consumers. What do you think are the implications of this?**

Gorbachev: One of the reasons why this country undertook military action in Iraq was that there are quite a few problems here, and perhaps attention needed to be deflected from those problems. It sometimes seems that the U.S. economy works successfully only if it gets a stimulus from the defense industry. So perhaps in addition to showing the power and the might of the United States internationally, another reason was to help the defense industry and to help the U.S. economy recover.

The model of the consumer society is something that will one day end. My personal view is that too much consumption is wrong. I remember Secretary of State [George] Shultz one day saying that America is an economic model for the world. I replied to him that America represents 5 percent of the world's population and consumes 30 percent of the world's energy. What if everyone in the world lives like Americans? Where do we get the energy for this standard of living?

The problem the world faces today is that only one-third of the world's population lives in decent circumstances, while half the population of the world lives on one or two dollars a day. And even as we have this poverty and backwardness, we are facing a global environmental crisis. We need developmental models that will take into account the specific and unique

position of each country and at the same time will address the environmental crisis.

**Q: You helped draft a document called the Earth Charter, which you describe as a Ten Commandments for the environment. Could you briefly describe the vision embodied in that document?**

**Gorbachev:** We all are concerned about the conflict that we see between man and nature. And nature is sending us signals and messages that we are now beginning to rape the world. The danger is now global. The Earth Charter reminds us that this is a matter for all of us, for this generation and for generations to come. We are currently conducting meetings called Earth Dialogues, and we see that people in different countries understand and appreciate this issue more.

Many people who live in big countries like ours thought that we had resources that would work for us for many, many years, but that was a mistake. Our natural wealth corrupted us. In this country, you were among the first to raise environmental issues. In Russia, despite all of its problems today, people are concerned about the environment, and it's become a central issue on the agenda. The forests of Russia and Brazil are the lungs of the Earth. Lake Baikal in Rus-

sia has 25 percent of the freshwater resources of the world. Sixty-five percent of the Russian ecosystems are in danger. So let's preserve what we have, and let's take good care of nature. We used to have just one criterion and that was profit, and then another criterion was added—social welfare. Now we have to add the third important criterion, and that is nature and the environment.

**Q: In a recent book consisting of your conversations with a Czech friend, you still talk of believing in the socialist idea.**

**Gorbachev:** Yes, I'm still committed to the socialist idea because the socialist idea, correctly understood, includes the principles of freedom and social justice. It also includes the recognition of the value of democracy. When we speak about social justice, it means that freedom should be used not only in the interest of profit but also in the interest of the advancement of the people who create all values. Contemporary social democracy is what I believe is the right concept. I support freedom and I support a free market economy, but it should be a socially oriented market economy. I support globalization, but it should be globalization with a human face. ♦



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