

# Mikhail Gorbachev, GOP poster boy

By Lawrence T. Di Rita

President Clinton's egregious handling of recent events overseas has shown America what it means to have a "domestic policy president" in a world that demands U.S. leadership. The received wisdom is that the administration now "gets it"; there must be more attention paid to foreign affairs. White House spokespersons have even let it be known that self-appointed presidential savior David Gergen will begin to focus on foreign relations. Assuming his previous focus included the president's health care and budget packages, the Democrats are in worse trouble than they think.

The Republican Party could thus be forgiven for having begun fashioning a message for 1994 and 1996 that goes something like this: "We told you they couldn't be trusted with power, particularly military power. We know how to lead. Trust us." If that's the case, though, they have a strange way of going about it. For on Nov. 4, stalwarts from the party of Lincoln and Reagan will gather in Washington to have the party's image burnished at a \$1,000 per plate dinner in honor of — Mikhail Gorbachev, former general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

One year and a day after the American electorate threw them from executive power for having lost touch with the principles that made Ronald Reagan the most successful and popular president in a generation, Republicans will fete Mr. Gorbachev as "one of the most influential people of the twentieth century," as the invitation advises. Organizers have even been cheeky enough to open the invitation with a reference to Time magazine's 1989 selection of Mr. Gorbachev as the "Man of the

Decade." Representatives of the McGovern wing of the Democratic Party could not have crafted a mis-sive that pays better homage to the historical revisionism that has reduced Ronald Reagan to a footnote during the same period.

What can those silly enough to attend this bizarre event expect to hear from Mr. Gorbachev? Will he recount his brutal repression of the

---

*Perhaps he will regale his gracious hosts with a behind-the-scenes look at his decision to use troops to shut down radio and TV stations in independent Lithuania in January 1991.*

---

nationalist uprisings in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and elsewhere that left hundreds dead for having made the mistake of taking his policies of political openness and reform seriously? Perhaps he will regale his gracious hosts with a behind the scenes look at his decision to use troops to shut down radio and TV stations in independent Lithuania in January 1991. Or if it's domestic policy his audience prefers, he can recount his reported offer of assistance to the now-jailed Ruslan Khasbulatov and Alexander Rutskoi in their abortive constitutional coup against President Boris Yeltsin earlier this month.

Mr. Gorbachev's dinner is being organized by a group called the Republican Senatorial Inner Circle. In an interesting irony, the Inner Circle has its headquarters in a Capitol Hill

building named the Ronald Reagan Republican Center. While it's obvious the group is willing to trade on Mr. Reagan's name, though, it doesn't seem to want to be bothered by his legacy.

Ronald Reagan bequeathed a fortune to the Republican Party: the notion that a political party can transcend politics and serve as a store of enduring ideals such as freedom, individual opportunity and responsibility, and prosperity. These ideals were never more well articulated in the history of man than in the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution. But Mr. Reagan's genius was his innate awareness that these "American" ideals are universal. This went well beyond his creation of a new class of voters (Reagan Democrats) in two landslide election victories, though. Speaking over the heads of Soviet leaders like Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and yes, Mikhail Gorbachev, he exposed the universality of his beliefs to people around the world held captive by that evil empire.

President Reagan's immediate successor was able to get an early start on his presidential library because of his failure to defend in all its forms the legacy entrusted to his party. Like the proverbial servant, the Republican Party buried the treasure left to it by allowing Bill Clinton to redefine the Reagan era as one of greed, excess, and indifference.

By embracing Mr. Gorbachev now, it would seem the party has learned nothing from its humiliating defeat just four years after Mr. Reagan left office with approval ratings Mr. Clinton will never see. Despite the high-minded rhetoric found in the invitation to this ill-considered event, most Americans will see it as little more than politics as usual form a party that stands for nothing but its own expedient self-promotion. And as long as that is the party's image, it will continue the remarkable slide towards irrelevance it began last fall.

I recently asked a Russian citizen what he thought of Mr. Gorbachev's possible challenge to Mr. Yeltsin in the next Russian presidential election. He said, "In Russia, no one likes Gorbachev. No one on the left. No one on the right." And then he added: "Give us Reagan. You can have Gorbachev." Evidently, the Republican Party is listening.

---

Lawrence T. Di Rita is Deputy Director of Foreign Policy and Defense Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

10-27-93 W.T.