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Don't judge Gorby harshly

Those with a conspiratorial bent tend to see "linkage" between Soviet repression of freedom and independence in the Baltic states and the war in the Persian Gulf.

As a precedent, they point to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, which coincided with the Suez War which diverted the attention of Britain and America and the West in general.

There is a suggestion Mikhail Gorbachev has used the Gulf crisis to lower the boom on Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, even to the point of shooting down more civilians than the Iraqis were killing American ground troops.

There are also those who feel — perhaps out of betrayed expectations — that we should now cancel trade and aid benefits to the U.S.S.R. and even consider sanctions.

As one who has always been wary of Soviet altruism, and who has scolded and been contemptuous of others who insisted on seeing hope for mankind in the most evil system ever to be inflicted on the human race, I don't think we should judge Gorbachev too harshly.

Despite our support for the goals and aspirations of Baltic peoples, whose independence was raped and confiscated in 1940, we should try to understand Gorby's dilemma.

What we are witnessing in the U.S.S.R. is the extraordinary disintegration of an empire, or a way of life.

No empire willingly sees itself unravel. Few empires crumble peacefully. Even the British Empire was fraught with strife and turmoil when the colonies became independent — and that was one of the more genteel and enlightened dismemberments.

While we should sympathize and support the Baltic states, and Ukraine, Byelorussia, Armenia, even the Russian federation and other republics, as they struggle toward independence, we should be understanding of Gorby's impossible situation. Gorbachev is *not* simply an incipient dictator unwilling to relinquish power. Rather, he is the product of totalitarianism, trying to make his unwieldy, inefficient, oppressive country work better — even if it means loosening the chains and tolerating something resembling free speech, choice, democracy.

He has succeeded, to a degree, in glasnost — especially with the media and critics; in some ways, the U.S.S.R. has been more open and honest about its failings than western democracies, which have perfected the political lie and hypocritical coverup.

But Gorby has failed, utterly, with perestroika — and that is going to destroy him, in the sense that he is doomed to fail, destined to be consumed by the revolution he has unleashed.

But he deserves accolades that have come his way, like the Nobel Peace prize, despite his unleashing the military to gun down Lithuanians and Latvians.

Gorbachev ended the Cold War — which Stalin started and his successors continued. There can be no return to the past. The world is now relatively safe, no matter who replaces Gorbachev.

It is a different world today than it was even a decade ago. In 1981 we couldn't be at war in the Gulf without the fear or threat it might evolve into a global conflict.

There is probably no way to realistically help Gorbachev survive, or achieve his aims. But we can hurt him and the cause of a better and more humane Soviet Union if we get silly and sanctimonious.

Mercifully, the Kremlin has been America's ally in the Gulf war. The biggest problem has been our NATO ally, Germany, which enabled Saddam Hussein to build his chemical weapons potential. (Soviet Scud missiles are irrelevant nuisances.)

Still, there are those who think Gorbachev has been indulging in a massive con game to lull the West into complacency — that his goals are essentially the same as Lenin's, Stalin's, Khrushchev's, Brezhnev's.

That simply makes no sense. You can't give people freedom, simply to oppress them later.

I think Gorbachev is probably doomed. He may go down as a spectacular failure, but whatever happens, what he has achieved can't be undone. The Russian people won't be willing to return to live under the heel of a boot. Nor will Ukrainians. And when you get Russians and Ukrainians pulling in the same direction, they are formidable.

Whatever happens to Gorbachev, he deserves recognition for what he has tried to do, as well as for ending the Cold War, making the world safer and dismantling the "evil empire."