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The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Dec 10, 1991;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1995)

pg. A33

Tensions Between Gorbachev and Republic Leaders Concern U.S.

By David Hoffman and Marc Fisher

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Bush administration officials expressed growing concern late yesterday about new tensions between Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and the powerful leaders of the three republics who on Sunday formed a new commonwealth and declared the old union dead.

U.S. policymakers said they were at first encouraged by the commitment of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia to the principles of peaceful change sought by the West, but became worried after Gorbachev abruptly rejected the pact.

The officials said there appeared to be no rush among other key republic leaders to embrace the new commonwealth, raising questions about whether it would become a unifying force or touch off a new round of conflict. The commonwealth "didn't have any gigantic takers today," one informed policymaker said.

In particular, officials said, they were worried that the creation of the commonwealth could divide Gorbachev and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the key signer of the commonwealth accord. Until recently, U.S. officials had been praising the cooperation displayed by Yeltsin and Gorbachev in the wake of the failed August coup.

The officials also noted that another important republic leader, Nusultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, said he continued to support Gorbachev and Gorbachev's cher-

ished new union treaty, which the three Slavic republics seemingly all but buried with their declaration of a new commonwealth.

The conflicts were apparent in the Soviet Embassy here, where two groups of officials were in touch with the administration, taking contrasting positions on the commonwealth proposals.

One group, working closely with Soviet Ambassador Victor Komplexov and loyal to the central government in Moscow, questioned the legality of the weekend declaration. Another group—headed by Andrei Kolosovsky, the newly arrived representative of the Russian Republic in the embassy—appealed to administration officials to support the commonwealth plan.

There was also confusion at the State Department over fast-breaking events in Moscow because officials could not get a telephone call through to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow because of a mechanical breakdown, sources said.

European leaders—meeting in Maastricht, the Netherlands—reacted cautiously. British Prime Minister John Major and French President Francois Mitterrand broke away from the European summit to meet in their role as leaders of Western Europe's nuclear powers. Mitterrand called for an urgent meeting of all nations with nuclear weapons in Europe: Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The European Community decided to send an envoy to Kiev, the Ukrainian cap-

ital, Thursday to discuss recognition of Ukraine and the status of nuclear weapons in Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia. A British government spokesman said last night that London will send a senior diplomat to Minsk, the Byelorussian capital, as well as to Kiev and Moscow for similar talks.

Secretary of State James A. Baker III is planning a visit to Moscow, Kiev and Minsk starting Sunday. State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler said the United States is concerned that nuclear weapons remain "under safe and secure control." But she said the "United States is not pushing for the transfer of nuclear weapons from non-Russian republics to Russia," as The Washington Post reported Sunday.

Tutwiler said the declaration of the three republics was "encouraging" because it hewed closely to some of the principles for peaceful change that the United States announced in September. They include adherence to international agreements and arms control pacts, protection of the rights of individuals, and respect for international borders.

But Tutwiler stopped short of saying the United States would formally recognize the new commonwealth. She said the administration has not decided whether to send an ambassador or otherwise give formal recognition to the new grouping.

A European diplomat here said allied governments were thinking along similar lines. "All the right noises are being made" about nuclear safety and cooperation, assuming

responsibility for the Soviet debt and respecting previous treaties, the diplomat said of the commonwealth declaration. "The kind of principles the West is talking about have been noticed" by the republics, he added.

A senior U.S. official told reporters, "It is not the U.S. function to prop up the center, but it is our function not to grease the skids" on Gorbachev. "Most of the republics will go independent and we will recognize them," the official added. "There is no debate on that. But we have to make it as clear as we possibly can that we want assurances that the agreements made by the Soviet Union, especially on nuclear weapons, will be kept. That is why we are talking to Ukraine right now and why Baker is making his trip."

The senior official said the commonwealth declaration surprised Gorbachev and the United States. He added that there is still a role for the Soviet president "to play if the republics want any center at all, as they should. But at most it looks like his role will be minimal. There is dislike and even hatred for the man in the republics."

In a Washington speech, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said the seeming demise of the Soviet Union is a development viewed "with a mixture of joy and concern."

Adm. David E. Jeremiah reflected the Pentagon's contradictory views about what he described as "the very brink of dissolution" of the Soviet Union. Although he said

he was happy the United States was victorious in the Cold War, he said "we worry" about the international impact "if the Soviet Union makes a final exit from the stage of history."

In Maastricht, the news of the apparent end of the Soviet Union was received by many European leaders as an anticipated, if nonetheless dangerous event. British Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd said the announcement of the agreement "may have been the final blow" for the Soviet Union. He said the new association made Gorbachev's departure from Soviet power "likely to be true in a real sense."

"The overthrow of Gorbachev has been predicted many times in recent months," said German Foreign Ministry spokesman Hanns Schumacher. "We have already told the three republics that we expect strong controls on their nuclear weapons, and Ukraine has already assured us that it intends to be a nuclear-free state."

Major, asked whether the declaration of the commonwealth increased the chances for a violent demise of the Soviet Union, said, "There's certainly that possibility."

None of the 12 countries at the Maastricht summit was ready to move to immediate recognition of the commonwealth or its three constituent republics.

Fisher reported from Maastricht. Staff writers William Drozdiak in Maastricht and David S. Broder and Don Oberdorfer in Washington contributed to this report.