

CIA Director Warns of Civil Disorder This Winter in Soviet Union

George Lardner Jr Washington Post Staff Writer

The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Dec 11, 1991;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1995)

pg. A31

CIA Director Warns of Civil Disorder This Winter in Soviet Union

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

The former Soviet Union will be torn this winter by "the most significant civil disorder since the Bolsheviks consolidated power" after the 1917 revolution, CIA Director Robert M. Gates warned yesterday.

"The situation is dangerously unstable," Gates told the House Armed Services Committee. "The economy is in a free fall with no prospects for reversal in sight."

Gates said the severe economic conditions in all the republics, "including substantial shortages of food and fuel in some areas," the disintegration of the armed forces and ongoing ethnic conflicts will combine to produce widespread strife.

Making his first congressional appearance since he was sworn in as CIA director last month, Gates said he had "considerable hope and optimism for the long term about Russia and the other republics," but he voiced concern in the short run over the disposition of their 30,000 nuclear weapons.

While the central government retains control of the nuclear arsenal through "an elaborate and effective system operated by the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff," Gates pointed out that "the center is evaporating before our eyes. Those who designed the control system never anticipated this." He described the crumbling empire as a "central Eurasian arsenal that used to be a country."

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin (D-Wis.) said he opened the hearing to review what is happening in the Soviet Union and to begin thinking about the size and shape of next year's U.S. defense budget. He suggested there were two revolutions that have been taking place in the Soviet Union, one that began in 1989 and led to the demise of the Warsaw Pact and a projected 25 percent cut in U.S. military forces over the next five years, and another that started last August with the failed coup by Soviet hard-liners.

"It may be that the second revolution started Aug. 19 and is ending today if [Soviet President Mikhail] Gorbachev leaves office," Aspin said.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union announced Sunday by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia, Gates said he was busy over the weekend keeping his testimony up-to-date with the changes. "What I thought was a bold, forward-leaning statement on Saturday had to be significantly revised by Monday," he said.

The committee met with Gates in closed session after he delivered his prepared remarks. Rep. William L. Dickinson (R-Ala.) told reporters later that Gates said "we'll have to wait a couple of days" to see if the new "Commonwealth of Independent States" proclaimed by the three Slavic republics can work.

Obviously, Gorbachev is losing out, Dickinson said. "Either he can



"The economy is in a free fall with no prospects for reversal in sight."

—CIA Director Robert M. Gates, testifying at House hearing

resign or else he will be a figurehead only because he doesn't have any force behind him," Dickinson said summing up some of Gates's closed-door remarks.

But U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Robert S. Strauss said at a breakfast here that there was "a certain resentment that this [creation of the commonwealth] was done behind [Gorbachev's] back."

"There's no question in my mind that there is less than 100 percent enthusiasm for the new commonwealth," Strauss said at a meeting of the American Committee on U.S.-Soviet Relations. "People are beginning to say, well, no one was consulted, we weren't asked and three people did it."

Gates expressed fear that Rus-

several first-rate demagogues they have. Their demagogues are as good as our demagogues. . . ."

Turning to the Soviet military, Gates said "the threat from Soviet conventional forces is shrinking daily." With the new republic governments seemingly uninterested in more than a bedrock defense capability, he said that the readiness of Soviet general-purpose forces is at its lowest level in decades.

"Training has been disrupted. Food and fuel are scarce. Housing shortages are undermining morale and discipline," Gates said. "Ethnic troubles are growing, and the reliability of the troops is dubious, particularly for internal missions."

Although "a centralized command and control system continues to operate," the CIA director added, "political and economic collapse is beginning to fragment the military into elements loyal to the republics or simply devoted to self-preservation." The biggest danger over the next year or two, he said, may be "conflict in or between various successor republics."

The threat from Soviet strategic nuclear weapons is also diminishing. The CIA has in the past compiled evidence of five new strategic ballistic missiles under development, but Gates said Gorbachev has announced cancellation of two of them. In addition, a Soviet military spokesman said recently that no ballistic missile submarines would be built in the next five years.

"[I]t is increasingly hard to see how Russia or other republics with

strategic nuclear weapons will be able to continue the modernization effort—or even why they would want to given the rapid dissipation of tensions with the West," Gates testified.

Elsewhere in the world, Gates said the biggest danger lies in the accelerating proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. "Over the next decade," he said, "we expect chemical-tipped, mobile short-range missiles to become widespread from North Africa through South Asia."

Soviet agencies involved in special weapons and missile programs could also try to stay in business by turning to the international market, Gates said, while some of the thousands of scientists and engineers emigrating annually from the Soviet Union may find a market for their expertise in Third World countries.

Aside from Soviet and allied forces, however, only China now has the capability to attack U.S. territory, Gates said "the Chinese have deployed a small force of nuclear-tipped ICBMs, some of which are aimed at the United States."

Administration officials said this was nothing new, but Dickinson, the committee's ranking Republican, expressed surprise at the statement. "I didn't know that," he told reporters. "God Almighty, why would they aim nuclear weapons at us when we're trying to pull their ox out of a ditch?"

Staff writer Don Oberdorfer contributed to this report.