

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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[Editor's note: When this article was first published 16 years ago it was preceded by the following paragraph, with a slight modification at the beginning.]

“We take pride in the extensive contacts on which Mark Melcher relies in reaching his pithy Washington insights. But for those who have inquired, no, Mark did not really interview George Bush. Instead, he took a page from the sterling standards of journalistic ethics recently advanced by ABC News in the widely publicized “simulation” of Felix Bloch purportedly handing over a briefcase of secrets to a Soviet spy. Mark’s ongoing interview with the President is also “simulated.”

Last week, we ran the economics section of the “interview.” What follows is the foreign policy discussion between Melcher the interviewer and Melcher the Bush stand-in. Next week, we will run the political portion of the interview.

This note was, of course, for the benefit of what turned out to be a surprising number of readers who were convinced that the prior week’s “interview” had actually occurred. I had thought at the time that no one would fail to recognize the story for what it was— a literary device that helped me explain in an entertaining way what I thought the president really thought about the issues of the day. The nice thing was that no one, to my knowledge, complained.

A CANDID INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE BUSH: PART II

Mark L. Melcher

Me: You've come under intense criticism from Democrats for not helping Gorbachev enough to carry out his reforms.

The President: That's garbage. The Soviets spend billions of dollars annually supplying weapons to Cuba, Central America, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and elsewhere. They haven't reduced their own military spending at all. In fact, they are modernizing their nuclear arsenal at a ferocious pace. And they haven't eased their industrial espionage in the West one bit.

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I have no problem with negotiating all sorts of arms reduction agreements with the Soviets. Heck, I'm all for it. And such agreements would be an enormous help to Gorbachev and to the Soviet Union. They are probably the very best way we can help. But the pressure is on the Soviets, not on us. Unlike the liberals, I am not embarrassed by the fact that we have the advantage this time around. I am very comfortable with the idea of negotiating from a position of strength. Achieving that strength has cost us billions of dollars since 1945. Through enormous determination and sacrifice on our part, we are finally in a position to make some true gains at the bargaining table. I intend to take advantage of our advantage and I think in the long run, the world, and I might add, the Soviet Union, will be better off because of it.

Me: Hobart Rowan, the liberal columnist for the *Washington Post*, says the Russian economy needs an emergency transfusion, that Gorbachev's plea for help is the same one that justifies aid to any third world economy, and he implies that we are missing the boat by not launching some sort of Marshall Plan for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Rowan says that for us to "demand that the transition to free markets be completed before assistance is given is to set up a self-defeating Catch-22."

The President: More garbage. We're not demanding the transition to a free market economy be completed before we help. We would just like to see them do more to help themselves. The same liberals who want us to reduce military spending in order to spend more on domestic programs seem totally unconcerned that the Soviets are not doing it over there to bolster their economy.

Me: Senator Alan Cranston and a group of other Senate liberals want the U.S. to give Poland \$1.2 billion in aid, compared to your proposal for \$150 million. Cranston says if we "fail to respond to the extraordinary opportunities caused by the decaying of the Iron Curtain, it would be a tragedy of epic proportions."

The President: More garbage. The world will, of course, be a better place if the Iron Curtain falls. But, I'm not certain we are in danger of missing any big opportunities by not sending them a lot of money right now. In fact, Cranston wants to finance \$403 million of his proposal by reducing what he calls "surplus" military research and development funds. Why doesn't he just ask Poland to spend \$403 million less on its military? Or ask the Soviets to cut their military R&D by \$403 million and give it to the Poles. Perish the thought, huh?

Me: Mr. President, I'm not suppose to interject my own opinions into this interview, but I have to say here that I am a conservative and I applaud what you just said. I think you are absolutely right. And I'll bet, judging from that relatively hard line you've just articulated about the Soviets, that you are outraged about the situation in China.

The President: Well ... ah ... ah ... no, not really. You see I know those people and I . . . ah . . . I . . . ah . . . well, did you see Henry Kissinger's piece in the *Washington Post* in which he said it's unfair to call Deng a tyrant? Did you see that?

Me: Yes sir.

The President: Well, I think Henry's right. You see, Henry makes a lot of money representing people who would like to make a lot of money over there. So, he knows what he's talking about. And my brother, Prescott, he's got financial dealings in China also. We don't want to be too hasty in condemning those people.

Me: But sir, Deng was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of students. They were just gunned down. Even today they're still shooting them in the back of the head. Aren't you outraged?

The President: Well, of course. Sure. I wouldn't be an American if I weren't. But . . . ah . . . well . . . ah . . . you'll just have to read Henry's piece in the *Post*. He builds an excellent case that it is unfair to call Deng a tyrant. And Henry's got a lot of business dealings over there, you know. So, he knows. Ah . . . why don't you ask another question now?

Me: What if the Soviets start shooting people in Latvia or Estonia or wherever?

The President: Well, if they do that, I don't think they'll make the same PR mistake the Chinese did. I mean, they'll be much more subtle about it. You know, the leaders of those separatist movements might just disappear. That sort of thing. And if there are riots, the Soviet probably won't use tanks, they'll use much more sophisticated crowd control techniques. And, they'll probably make sure the Western press isn't around. No, I'm not too worried about the PR thing with the Soviets.

Me: Sir, I wasn't speaking about the PR problems. I was talking about whether you would be outraged if the Soviets pull there own version of Tiananmen Square and whether this would set back the warmer relationship that has developed between our two nations.

The President: Oh, well. Of course. A Tiananmen Square incident in the Soviet Union would set things back. We had to impose certain sanctions on China, you know, after their little problem. And we'd have to do the same with the Soviets, I'm sure. But, I don't think we'd torpedo the arms talks or anything like that. You have to keep these kind of things in perspective, you know.

Me: Uh huh. Well. Let's move on. When Boris Yeltsin was in town he thought Gorbachev had no more than one year to get things together or he would be out. Could you comment on that?

The President: My gosh, isn't he something. I knew he'd play well here. Gorbachev fired him as Moscow party chief, you know, over a year ago, because Yeltsin gave a speech he didn't like. Gorbachev said the speech was "politically immature, extremely confusing and contradictory." Well you just know anyone who could give a speech like that would do well in Washington.

Me: Ah, sir. Could you comment on Yeltsin's view that Gorbachev has only a year to get things squared away? Or, better yet, what do you think about Gorbachev's future?

The President: Who the hell knows? I don't know and I read the same newspapers you do. I would guess Gorbachev will be around for a while. In fact, I hope he is around for a while. He's a known quantity to us and that's important. But, I'm not sure his tenure is as significant as

everyone thinks it is. The Soviets are in deep, deep doodoo and no matter who is in charge, he will have to deal with that fact.

For some reason, some Democrats seem to think that if we don't keep Gorbachev afloat, we'll be missing a big opportunity. What the hell opportunities are they talking about? They're never specific. They just talk about all these missed opportunities. If Gorbachev doesn't make it, will his successors be less apt to make an arms deal? I don't think so. The Soviets aren't negotiating arms deals because they don't like weapons. They're doing it because they can't afford it any more. Will Gorbachev's successor have more money to spend on arms? I don't think so.

Me: Well sir, some people say the Europeans are way ahead of us in cozying up to the Soviets.

The President: Great! They get to lend them money instead of us. Isn't that a shame? We have our South American debtors. They can have the Soviet Union. Maybe Alan Cranston wants to loan the Soviet's a few bucks of his own.

Me: Where do you think all this is headed then?

The President: Well, again, I don't know and I don't think anyone does. But things are going to get hairy over there. Those people who think the Eastern bloc is filled with lots of really nice people, just like us, who want nothing more than freedom and consumer goods and that we are right around the corner from one big happy world are nuts.

Europe has always been a hot bed of nationalistic tensions. We fought two world wars because of it. Widespread prosperity since World War II has assuaged ethnic tensions in Western Europe. But in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Soviet Union, they are still raw. For decades, they have been kept in check by a heavy hand from Moscow and an extraordinary system of secret police. As Gorbachev dismantles the police state, and begins to grant some autonomy to the regions, I think it is very likely that things could get very sticky. And I guarantee you that no matter what anyone does, the soothing forces of prosperity aren't right around the corner to help ease tensions.

Anti-semitism is on the rise in Poland, in the Baltic states, and in many of the Soviet Republics. Ukrainian nationalism is festering in the Soviet Union, along with Russian nationalism. Armenians are killing Azerbaijanis, Russians are killing Kazakhs and God knows what else is going on in other regions. In Rumania, Ceausescu is waging virtual war against his Hungarian minority. In Yugoslavia, they're are picking on the Rumanians and the Hungarians. They've got places over there that would make Bensonhurst look like a Sunday school picnic. And the doodoo hasn't even begun to hit the fan yet.

Now I'm not saying that any of this will get far enough out of hand to cause economic troubles for the West. But I think the transition from Communism to some form of benign socialism, assuming that is what happens, could be a very messy and long process. And I think its a little like sausage. A whole lot of American liberals aren't going to be so gung ho about it once they see how it is being made. They aren't going to like what they see there anymore than they liked what they saw in China. But it's all part of the process and it is incumbent on us, if we want it to

continue, not to get too involved in the process of change and not get too moralistic when the change occurs.

Me: Some commentators say you have no grand plan for taking advantage of what is happening in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Do you?

The President: Of course, I have a plan. My plan is to get reelected in 1992. And the American public like what I am doing. They don't want us giving a lot of their tax dollars to a bunch of foreigners right now and they don't want us giving away the farm at the negotiating tables.

Me: You said your plan is to get reelected. That means you have decided to run again in 1992?

The President: Are you kidding? Of course I am. This is the greatest job in the world. Barbara and I have never had such a good time.

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