

Greetings, Gorbachev

Prudent Sovietologists tell us not to expect too much from Mikhail Gorbachev. The style may be new and smooth, they say, but the substance of Soviet policy will continue as before. The abiding interests of the Kremlin are unaffected by Gorbachev's charm or his wife's sense of high fashion.

These cautions make sense, but I don't like them. I favor Gorbachev-mania: endless treatments of Mr. and Mrs. G on television and in the Living sections; reams of op-ed pieces on a new era in East-West relations. Lay it on thick, please.

Any approach that gets us to talk about Soviets as human beings (even pop-star-human beings) is preferable to the standard practice of fixating on nuclear weapons — we build, they match; they build, we match — without discussing how or why we might ever want to use them. If this humanization implies style over substance, so be it.

It seems to me that the armed rivalry of the United States and the USSR is, in historical terms, an eerily unsubstantial matter. Surely the stakes are high — human survival — but what are the reasons for the high stakes?

Consider the textbook causes for war. Wars were waged over sovereignty, territory, natural resources, commercial monopolies. But none of these issues apply to the Soviet-American confrontation, at least not to the extent that anyone in Moscow or Washington argues that they merit full-blown hostilities.

Neither country disputes the borders of the other. The United States protests the status quo in Central and Eastern Europe, but ever since 1956 — when the Soviets intervened in Hungary — it has been clear that we won't go to war about it. I have yet to meet anyone who thinks the Soviets will fight in Nicaragua or that Americans will fight in Afghanistan.

Despite the Soviet addiction to imported grain and the American addiction to imported oil, both powers are well-endowed with natural resources and have less cause than 90 percent of other nations to wage war for raw materials. As for commercial rivalry, the

question is moot: the Soviets do not compete with the West in any significant economic sector.

The truth is that America and Russia have never had a good reason to fight a war, and we don't have one now. So why do we stand eye to eye with fingers on the nuclear trigger?

One reason seems to be that each nation believes that its system of economics and governance should enjoy universal application, and so struggles with the other to wield influence around the world.

It would be wrong to underestimate the importance of this ideological struggle, or to belittle those who invest it with high moral purpose. But are nuclear weapons needed or even useful in this contest? They seem to have had little or no bearing on who exerts what influence where.

There may be a more ominous and profound set of reasons for our nuclear nightmare. Both nations seem to be engaged in a struggle not of objective interests but of psychological intangibles: pride and fear. Our two countries crave pre-eminence, and pre-eminence — it is assumed — demands nuclear weapons. The craving and the weapons on one side strike fear in the heart of the other, and fear is a conservative force.

So we dance this deadly dance together: we need each other to ratify our importance and to justify our dread. As New Yorker writer William Pfaff has noted, "The Cold War has cut loose from its tangible origins and has taken on the force of national mission and myth."

So as long as we're dealing with myths and images, bring on more superficial Gorbachev features, please. Let us grasp any opportunity to free ourselves of the lethal dementia that masquerades as sobriety.

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Columnist David B. Wilson is on vacation.