

CHAPTER 13

Congressional Travel to the USSR:
Cold-War Antidote

The author is persuaded by his own visits to Moscow in the 1960s, and by history, that congressional travel to the Soviet Union would slow the arms race and produce much sounder U.S. policy by tranquilizing hawks and sobering up doves. He makes a half dozen abortive efforts to stir such travel, over fifteen years, truly succeeding only when he secures the help of a handful of elite women prepared to wage a door-to-door campaign on Capitol Hill.

Visiting the Soviet Union tranquilized the hawks. They saw, immediately, a totally unexpected third-world poverty and longstanding, deeply felt, Russian fear of war. At the same time, visiting the Soviet Union disabused the doves. Nothing about the undemocratic and totalitarian way in which Russia operated could do anything but stir the apprehensions of dovish visitors.

In 1937 André Gide, the French sympathizer with the Soviet revolution, wrote a disabused report that was a sensation, asserting, "In the USSR, everybody knows beforehand, once and for all, that on any and every subject there can be only one opinion."¹⁸¹ In 1948, a Soviet bureaucrat told John Steinbeck, "We are very tired of people who come here and are violently pro-Russian and who go back to the United States and become violently anti-Russian. We have had considerable experience with that kind."¹⁸²

In 1956, as noted earlier, my father had come back and written something about Russia, in italics, that he knew would startle many of his left-wing readers and, perhaps, jeopardize his publica-

Congressional Travel to the USSR: Cold-War Antidote

tion: “*This is not a healthy society, and it is not run by honest men.*”

In 1970, a liberal journalist couple, Delia and Ferdinand Kuhn, wrote, “Looking back on our journey, we were more troubled by the closed nature of Soviet society than anything else we saw or heard.”¹⁸³ And in 1976, Robert Kaiser of *The Washington Post*, reviewing his three years in Moscow, reported that the Russians were “less formidable than we have imagined, more vulnerable and more nervous.” And he went on to say that our exaggerated fear of Russia and its expenditures was, in part, “a tribute to our own foolishness.”¹⁸⁴

These sorts of reactions were evident to me from my trips to the Soviet Union in the sixties. And later research revealed similar sentiments in the statements of the few American senators who visited the USSR. The conservative John Stennis (D, Mississippi) had gone to Russia in 1958 and reported, “Frankly, I was not prepared for what I saw.” He doubted that “Russia now plans a direct military attack upon us” and talked of its inefficiency.¹⁸⁵ Senator William Roth (R, Delaware) concluded, in 1974, that Communism is a “highly inefficient economic system.”¹⁸⁶ When Senator Sam Nunn (D, Georgia) came back in 1978, he announced, “It is difficult for Americans to grasp the terrifying slaughter and suffering that befell the Soviets during World War II, which left a permanent and indelible scar on the Russian psyche.”¹⁸⁷

From my point of view, the situation was perfect: Congressional travel to the Soviet Union would slow the arms race. “Trust them less and fear them less” became the slogan of the campaign to get congressmen to visit the Soviet Union. It was also pretty obvious that the reverse was true: When Soviet leaders visited the United States, they saw a democratic society that was *not* poised to attack them (leading them to trust us more) while observing wealth beyond anything that they had imagined (leading them to respect and even fear us more).

My campaign began in Moscow when I introduced Senator Mike Gravel (D, Alaska) to some friends in September 1969. At a dinner at the home of Revaz Gamkrelidze, an associate (“corre-

"EVERY MAN SHOULD TRY"

sponding") member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Gravel made a toast to the idea, which he intended to champion, of sponsoring leadership visits. Back in Washington he talked to Soviet ambassador Dobrynin about it and proceeded to introduce a bill on November 7, 1969.¹⁸⁸

Our main point was that visits by nonpolitical citizens could go on forever without making much difference: The percentage of people seeing the other's society would remain minuscule^[189] and the political effect negligible. The problem was that the *leadership* of the two sides had little idea of what the other side's society was like. We needed to stop sending only athletes, doctors, educators, and scientists and begin sending political leaders.

But Gravel's enthusiasm for this idea, which could not be contained, embraced more than just the two houses of the national government: He wanted to subsidize trips for local and state officials as well. He proposed dispatching a thousand political leaders and their spouses for up to two weeks (half would be from Congress, and the other half would be made up of fifty governors, the mayors of the hundred largest U.S. cities, and the majority and minority leaders of the fifty state legislatures). This program, we estimated, would cost only \$5 million—one-half of an intercontinental missile's cost. Gravel also wanted to facilitate trips to the United States for more than a thousand members of the Soviet leadership, with their spouses, under procedures for financing that were to be negotiated.^[190]

On its introduction, Senator Robert Byrd (D, West Virginia) found the idea "intriguing" and Senator Mike Mansfield (D, Montana), the democratic majority leader, used the same word. At a public hearing on February 6, 1970, Averil Harriman and George Kennan, our two most distinguished former ambassadors to the Soviet Union, gave favorable testimony. Of the American public officials polled, 75 percent responded favorably, and only 5 percent were opposed. The Soviet state newspaper *Izvestia* carried an article reporting favorably on the bill.

Congressional Travel to the USSR: Cold-War Antidote

On April 10, 1970, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the bill with only one dissenting vote—the \$5 million was to be spent for the thousand visits over five years. But predictably, the right wing began to attack the bill as “junketing”—although why anyone would want to go to Moscow for its nonexistent nightclubs, sun, and beaches was unclear. In fact, our tabulations showed that six times as many congresspeople were going to Western Europe and five times as many to the Far East. Nobody wanted to go to Moscow.¹⁹¹

Congressional Quarterly was keeping close track of all foreign visits of all members of Congress and wrote a detailed article about them annually. This was, they told me, the issue that invariably attracted the most media attention. Pandering to local cynicism about their representative’s desire to travel, these reports could turn off enough voters to influence elections.

The Gravel bill was brought to the floor on April 20, and Senator Robert Dole (R, Kansas), who was then serving as a kind of informal watchdog for the Nixon administration, championed the opposition, saying, “I do not believe that going to any country as large as Russia or as small as Israel would engage one to learn enough to give us more guidance in voting in Congress.”¹⁹² (Fifteen years later, in a change of heart, Senate Majority Leader Dole was writing President Reagan urging the president to arrange with Gorbachev ways “to institute [parliamentary exchanges] on a more regular basis.”)¹⁹³

It looked like this rallying of conservatives by Dole would defeat the bill, but the majority leader, Mike Mansfield, was found and brought to the floor. He rounded up the supporters, and we won 38 to 23.

The bill was, however, bottled up in the House Committee of International Relations because, we gathered, the White House did not want it. It feared that the legislators might get out in front of the president in the organization of détente and might complicate its efforts. So the State Department announced that if members of

"EVERY MAN SHOULD TRY"

Congress really wanted to go, State would be happy to oblige them if only the bill were killed.¹⁹⁴

In November I wrote Henry Kissinger observing that President Nixon's effort to "turn confrontation into negotiation" had now proceeded apace. Could Nixon now let down the floodgates on such exchanges—perhaps proposing them himself during his upcoming visits to Beijing and Moscow?¹⁹⁵ But in December 1971, with regard to China, Kissinger was still talking of the importance of getting exchange "in other than political fields." And Kissinger's Soviet policy was even more determined to avoid political travel.¹⁹⁶

By 1974 President Nixon had himself been not only to Moscow but also to Beijing. I wrote Kissinger again, asking him to "let my people go." A week later I got my answer on a car radio: Henry Kissinger was saying, "We are all in favor of having scientists, sportsmen, tourists, artists, and other *nonpolitical* persons travel to the Soviet Union." (emphasis added)

In 1977 we decided to analyze the voting records of the senators who had been to the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁷ We concluded that 55 percent of the thirty-three senators who had voted dovishly had visited the Soviet Union. But only 40 percent of the forty-four senators with intermediate voting records had visited there. And of the twenty-three senators who voted hawkishly all of the time, only 22 percent had made the trip. Senator Strom Thurmond (R, South Carolina) told a colleague that of course he could not go there because he was so anticommunist that they would throw him in jail. In an article publicized in *The Washington Post* conveying these statistics, we even played the China card, observing that "at the present rate of travel, it seems likely that within a very few years more senators will have been to [Beijing] than Moscow."¹⁹⁸

In 1982 we geared up the campaign again. To provide the necessary materials, we got the backing of President Ford¹⁹⁹ and twenty former senators, along with some former secretaries of state and defense.^[200] Our research showed that since Russia opened itself up to travel, there had been visits by 284 different senators but only

Congressional Travel to the USSR: Cold-War Antidote

ninety-five senatorial visits. Typically they were going to interparliamentary conferences in Moscow or somewhere in that direction (e.g., New Delhi). If one subtracted presidential aspirants, SALT II treaty investigations, and interparliamentary union visits, there were only about twenty-five senators in the last twenty-five years who had taken the trouble just to go and look around.

On March 27, 1982, we sent a news release on our survey to the AP and UPI wire services. It showed that over 75 percent of the House of Representatives and 60 percent of the Senate had never obtained “first-hand impressions and information” about Russia. The names showed that twenty-two of the thirty-six members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee had not been to the Soviet Union.²⁰¹ And we listed all of the names to draw attention to the situation. We also announced that 70 percent of the Soviet Politburo had never been to the United States.²⁰²

The publication of our release resulted in some forty newspaper editorials in support of congressional travel to the USSR.²⁰³ I also published an article in *The Washington Post* entitled “Let Our Senators Go! (to Russia).”²⁰⁴ Then-congressman Paul Simon (D, Illinois) promptly issued a press release lauding this article and saying he had never before seen a “newspaper or magazine, radio or television station criticize senators or representatives for *not* traveling.”²⁰⁵

In July 1983, a few months later, Senator Dole became a supporter of sorts. He introduced a Senate Resolution (182) stating that it was the sense of the Senate that travel by senators to the Soviet Union “serves the interests of the United States and should be, and is hereby, encouraged.”²⁰⁶ But this was to give senators “protection” from junketing charges; it did not help them finance the trips.

The Women Volunteers Put It Over the Top

In 1984 my wife and I were dining with our friends Townsend Hoopes and his wife, Ann. Ann was the longstanding cochairperson

“EVERY MAN SHOULD TRY”



Ann Hoopes lobbying

of the McLean Foreign Policy Group, an organization of women who met monthly to discuss foreign affairs and to hear distinguished speakers. Motivated, she later told me, by concern about Reagan’s “Star Wars” proposal, she asked me whether there was anything these women could do. I asked her if she could organize a team of women to visit offices of members of Congress who had not been to the Soviet Union to prod them into doing so. She agreed, and we met on July 17 to get it started.

From this chance conversation came the final and by far most successful effort to promote congressional travel to the USSR. We formed the Project for Congressional Travel to the Soviet Union. Beginning in November 1984, a team of about a half dozen female D.C. residents, led by Ann, systematically visited the offices of all 420 congresspeople who had not yet traveled to the Soviet Union.²⁰⁷ At that time, 15 percent of the House members and 50 percent of the senators had made such visits. The women were nervous at first, but their social skills served them well as they learned Lobbying 101: how to go door-to-door in Congress.

On February 28, 1985, the team organized an FAS lunch for



Hoopes’s team in action: From left: Ann Shirk, congressional staffer, Martha Newell, two staffers, Kathy Kenety, Betsy Marshall; other side: Ann Hoopes, Cely Arndt (obscured), staffer

twenty senators. The event’s theme was underscored by Russian dolls and bowls, homemade cookies, and Russian bread and flower arrangements. Marvin Kalb of the State Department was the featured speaker. Majority Leader Dole attended. When senators began telling their favorite trip anecdotes, Senator John Warner (R, Virginia) explained, with some pride, that his toast in Moscow

Congressional Travel to the USSR: Cold-War Antidote

had so angered the admirals who were receiving him that they threw their drinking glasses into the fireplace. (Warner had no idea that this showed enthusiasm, not anger.)

On March 6, the project hosted forty-five members of Congress for the same purpose. William Colby was the featured speaker—as a former director of the CIA, he was perfect for a “know-your-enemy” campaign. No one said even one unkind word about this project, and as an outgrowth of this lunch, Representatives Claudine Schneider (D, Rhode Island) and Morris K. Udall (D, Arizona) introduced a resolution that paralleled the one introduced by Dole in the Senate.²⁰⁸

At about this time, the project decided to write a brochure and to organize a grass-roots campaign; Ann wrote a letter to “The Women of America” with this conclusion: “We are going for the nerve here. A few hundred such visits can change the political and psychological map of the personalities that have the power. Help us nudge the existing system into sanity.”

Our campaign began to show signs of progress. In 1985 there was an upsurge in congressional travel to the Soviet Union, with fifty-five representatives and thirteen senators traveling individually or with committees, as opposed to 1984, when only three senators and three representatives had done so. Both the U.S. embassy in Moscow and the Soviet embassy here reported large increases in applications by members of Congress for travel to the Soviet Union.²⁰⁹ The Soviet embassy told Ann that twenty-six delegations had applied for trips and that enough was enough, “call off your dogs.”²¹⁰

We also now had something that individual citizens could do. A handsome brochure for citizen action—prepared at FAS by our staff associate Ned Hodgeman—was entitled “Raising the Rate of Exchange.” On its cover was our key injunction to citizens: “All you have to do is ask: ‘Congressman, in light of your pronouncements on appropriate U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, may I ask . . . have you ever been there?’”^[211]

The Russians had long wanted, along with many other countries,

"EVERY MAN SHOULD TRY"

bilateral parliamentary exchanges with the United States, no doubt to enhance the international image of their parliament, which, obviously, the United States viewed as a fraudulent rubber-stamp operation. And they no doubt thought, also, that this would be a way of approaching the U.S. government through that "soft underbelly" of our legislature. I was still for such exchanges—any method of fostering Soviet and U.S. leadership visits was okay with me.

Although parliamentary exchanges with any country could take place, U.S. law requires them only with our immediate neighbors, Mexico and Canada. I observed and pressed the idea that the Soviet Union was, also, an immediate neighbor across the Bering Straits. And it seems to me that this notion found its way into a speech by President Reagan.

In April 1985, when I was visiting Moscow as part of the FAS-Soviet Academy traveling "school" on arms control, Evgeny Velikhov arranged for me to meet with Lev R. Tolkunov, the chairman of the Soviet Union's Council of the Union (its House of Representatives). There I pressed for parliamentary travel. (Tolkunov told me that in 1974, Majority Leader Mike Mansfield had explained to Tolkunov that he could not organize a parliamentary exchange group with the Soviets—as we had with the Mexicans and the Canadians—because the United States would then be obliged to organize them with all other countries.)

Tolkunov may have briefed Gorbachev, because when the Soviet leader received Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill the very next week, the issue finally got the spin and prominence we wanted. Gorbachev stated, "We know the role played by Congress in America's political life, and we attach great importance to developing contacts along the parliamentary line as one of the elements of invigorating Soviet-American relations. The time is such now that people, *shaping the policy of the two countries*, should by all means converse with one another."²¹² (emphasis added)

When Gorbachev said he considered parliamentary exchange to be a central method of invigorating U.S.-Soviet relations, I decided

Congressional Travel to the USSR: Cold-War Antidote

to try to create a Soviet analogue of the National Committee for U.S.-China Relations, which had done so much to handle the logistics of Chinese travel. In the summer of 1985, I retained a former undersecretary of state, Benjamin H. Read, who knew, and was respected by, everyone in town. In fifty interviews of relevant Washington policy movers and shakers, Ben found little or no opposition and much enthusiasm. He concluded that moneys secured through legislation and from foundations could set up such a thing.

But at this point we ran into delays and obstacles that obliged us to abandon the project. Soviet fears of incidents, perhaps, or the desire of some Russians, perhaps of Arbatov's Institute, to monopolize the exchanges, may have done us in. Where we wanted an exchange that was as open and frequent as possible, the Soviet side might have wanted it to be controlled and limited. The last straw was an interview I had in the Soviet Foreign Ministry in July 1986 with an official who made it clear that nothing would happen on what we considered to be a worthwhile scale.

In April 1985, en route with Velikhov to a Carter-Ford arms-control meeting, I organized a lunch for Velikhov and Congressman John D. Dingell, the chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. Velikhov, who was the chairman of the Energy Commission of the Soviet Union, promptly invited Dingell's whole committee to come visit the USSR. This was, we thought, our first success in our efforts to link the standing commissions of the Soviet parliament to the committees of the U.S. Congress. However, at the last minute, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger withdrew permission for use of the plane the committee had planned to use.

In February 1987, I was again in Moscow and had the opportunity to talk to Valentin Fallin, the former Soviet ambassador to East Germany. He was then the influential director of the Novosti press agency and a candidate member of the Central Committee. He remembered my interviewing him when he was at *Izvestia*. Prolix and sometimes vague, he nevertheless seemed well meaning. I

"EVERY MAN SHOULD TRY"

asked him to tell Gorbachev that the Soviet leadership would not understand the necessity for his reforms (perestroika) without a trip to the West themselves. Could he, Fallin, poll the Central Committee concerning their visits to the West, or lack of them, and present Gorbachev with the results showing how few officials had had this experience? We gave Fallin our statistics on such Soviet visits by high U.S. officials.

He was cautious, saying, "If people speak on these visits, they will be critical. Your side will forget about internal disagreements if our people come." He added, "According to Gorbachev, our aim is not to quarrel." But on hearing that the leaders could come as "tourists" and not just to discuss policy, if they wanted, he was encouraged. He said he would do the poll and would discuss the matter with a Politburo member.²¹³

In any case, we did not give up on our basic campaign. In June 1987 we were advertising for fifty interested and committed individuals who would lead, on a state level, a national campaign to get senators and congresspeople to travel to the Soviet Union.²¹⁴ By July we had them mailing our booklet (*Raising the Rate of Exchange*) to their members of Congress. In November I could be found testifying on our efforts to the Helsinki Commission, and I tried to get their support at least for an "exchange of parliamentarians" if not for "parliamentary exchange." In other words, we were quite prepared to have reciprocal visits of parliamentarians without formal exchange. The commission had a very good record for having traveled to the Soviet Union, and it knew that such travel would help with human rights.²¹⁵

In the end, of course, although we catalyzed the travel of quite a few delegations, we never got the sort of exchange program we had hoped for. A formalized program of regular Soviet visits here was more than the Soviet Union was ready for. Their parliament was so phony that many of its members—milkmaids and Stakhanovites—were, in the eyes of their government, completely inappropriate for

Congressional Travel to the USSR: Cold-War Antidote

a visit to the United States. So I do not feel that my failures with *that* side were due to ineptitude.

With regard to the American senators and representatives who did travel, it is difficult to gauge how much overall effect these visits had, but it could have been very real in some cases. One dramatic and relevant example of the effect on Americans of exposure to the Soviet Union was revealed in 1997 in the case of General George Lee Butler, who had been in charge of the Strategic Air Command that targeted Russia. Asked to explain his psychological evolution from nuclear warrior to disarmament champion, he mentioned his first visit to the USSR, where he saw “severe economic deprivation. . . . More than that, it was the sense of defeat in the eyes of the people. . . . It all came crashing home to me that I really had been dealing with a caricature all those years.”²¹⁶

Even one senator, speaking privately about a visit, can exercise a powerful influence on the group mind that is the Senate. At one point, through Velikhov, I was able to arrange a visit to the Soviet Union for then-senator William Cohen (R, Maine; now the secretary of defense), who had never been there, and Senator Joseph Biden (D, Delaware), who had.²¹⁷ On his return, Cohen took me aside at a meeting and pulled out a poem that he had written. A quick examination showed that for him one trip was quite enough: His poem reflected the essence of Russia, and I told him so.²¹⁸

