

Soviet totalitarianism is not leadership

The eyes of the West are focused again on the Kremlin. In a bold, aggressive attempt to keep the perestroika ball rolling, Mikhail Gorbachev has made crucial changes at the very top of the Politburo.

Key opponents have been demoted or dismissed, while allies of the Soviet leader have been swept into high office. In striking contrast to the relatively open and dynamic atmosphere of the recent party congress, these latest events were carried out in classic Kremlin fashion: impassive members rubber-stamped Gorbachev's requests with little or no discussion. One man — and one man alone — was clearly in charge.

It is ironic Gorbachev feels that if his plans for increased openness are to succeed, he must consolidate his position as the single most powerful figure in Soviet history since Stalin. Give me complete control, he says, and I will set you free.

Of course, that's not what he says. Most Soviet citizens are not interested in Western-style democracy — they just want to see food on the shelves of local grocery stores. It is we who presuppose that Gorbachev's talk of democratization refers to the liberties and freedoms we take for granted.

Gorbachev merely wants to make totalitarianism a little more productive, to reverse the U.S.S.R.'s decline into a third world economic power. But even this is a daunting task probably doomed to failure.

One could focus on the unprecedented demonstra-

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tions taking place in the Soviet Union or on the rumblings coming everywhere from Poland to Afghanistan.

But more significant is the nature of the current change in Soviet domestic affairs. As before, it is an increase of freedom handed down from above. And those freedoms can be just as easily taken away. It is a dynamism and energy dependent on the individual in power.

Yes, strong leaders can improve the lot of their people under any form of government. But under totalitarianism, their changes too often prove to be ephemeral. The bureaucracy will crush Gorbachev when he stumbles or simply wait him out, just as they have before.

Wish him well, but don't become too enamored of this charismatic man. The appearance of a benevolent dictator does not mean dictatorships are a thing to be admired. The true heroes of the Soviet Union are still individuals like Andre Sakharov — dissidents who decry the very system of government they live under — *not* people who try to make it work a little more efficiently.