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# Solzhenitsyn and the President

The U.S. government may have to expel Alexander Solzhenitsyn from the republic, not only as a hands-across-the-barbed-wire gesture of solidarity with its detente partner, the Soviet government, but also to save the President and his attendants from nervous breakdowns.

This is not the first time Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, has taxed the nerves of the mighty. Last year Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, having decided that he could not conveniently kill Solzhenitsyn and could not endure the sound of his voice, expelled him.

Solzhenitsyn became a nuisance to Gerald Ford when AFL-CIO President George Meany invited Solzhenitsyn to Washington to give a speech in which he reiterated his low opinion of detente, as the U.S. practices it. He believes this policy reduces the United States to craven, degrading reticence about slave labor, concentration camps, and other problems of human rights in the Soviet Union.

Solzhenitsyn is, of course, correct: The U.S. government thinks such reticence is "necessary" lest the Soviet government get angry and refuse to accept U.S. trade subsidies or engage in our memorable grain deals. But mere truthfulness does not redeem politically inconvenient speech, and Solzhenitsyn carries free speech to inconvenient conclusions.

His presence here posed a problem: Should Mr. Ford meet with him? In coping with this problem the President contrived to confirm Solzhenitsyn's point while snubbing him for having made it.

Mr. Ford nervously diagnosed Solzhenitsyn's presence here as a foreign policy problem and summoned advice from the National Security Council, which copes with such threats to the nation's security. He and aides brainstormed about how to justify snubbing the man who, outside U.S. and Soviet government circles, is recognized as one of the moral heroes of the 20th century.

According to reports, several aides, showing a flair for baseness that would have stood them in good stead with the previous administration, questioned Solzhenitsyn's mental stability. The idea of American politicians, rendering negative judgments



By Tom Wilson for The Washington Post

about Solzhenitsyn's mental health has an antic charm, but such judgments were not publicly advanced to justify the snub, perhaps because they would not play in Peoria.

Other aides reportedly noted that during his visit to the United States, Solzhenitsyn is promoting the sale of his books. They said the President should not do anything that might even indirectly help a commercial promotion. The White House is selectively fastidious about such things.

A few days earlier Mr. Ford met with the Cotton Queen. A few days after he summoned photographers to the White House lawn where he kicked a soccer ball with Brazilian star Pele; for the benefit of the American entrepreneurs who are paying Pele \$4.5 million to help promote their soccer franchises.

Press Secretary Ron Nessen, keeper of the presidential image, explained that Mr. Ford could not see Solzhenitsyn because of a "crowded schedule."

Nessen added: "For image reasons the President does like to have some substance in his meetings. It is not clear what he would gain by a meeting with Solzhenitsyn."

Nessen may have a point, but if so it reflects on Mr. Ford's ability to

receive, rather than on Solzhenitsyn's ability to impart, wisdom. The President's image thus clarified, like butter, Nessen refrained from adding the salient point: Brezhnev frowns on Solzhenitsyn, but not on Pele.

Obviously Mr. Ford decided that meeting Solzhenitsyn would be inconsistent with detente. Obviously Solzhenitsyn is correct: Detente, as practiced by the United States, prevents even gestures of support for the cause of human rights in the Soviet Union.

Certainly Solzhenitsyn was not surprised by Mr. Ford's snub. As he said in his Nobel Lecture:

"The spirit of Munich has by no means retreated into the past; it was not a brief episode. I even venture to say that the spirit of Munich is dominant in the 20th century. The intimidated civilized world has found nothing to oppose the onslaught of a suddenly resurgent fang-baring barbarism, except concessions and smiles."

Detente has conferred upon Brezhnev veto power over the appointments calendar of the President of the United States. Perhaps Brezhnev, in the spirit of detente, would refrain from seeing people offensive to the U.S. government's moral sensibilities—if it had any.