

## EYES ON THE PRIZE

*Craig Comstock*

WITH ONE EYE AS GOLDEN AS THE SUN and another as florescent as a full moon, my dog Jen, like a shaman, moves through life as if she inhabits two worlds at once. In my view, the best citizen diplomacy is done in a similar spirit, alert to our utopian vision of amity, yet keeping watch on the ways of the world as it still remains.

The appeal of citizen diplomacy comes, in large part, from our ability to act as if the world we want were already the case. Instead of just talking about cooperation or trying to define the conditions under which it might be possible some day to work together, we simply go ahead and start joint projects as if Americans and Soviets had always been partners.

But to “act as if” requires the discipline of watching with two different eyes, with the vision of what we want and the vision of what we must live with until we actually surpass it. Otherwise, our cultures will remain polarized, in both countries, between cynics who snicker that enemies never change, and dreamers who imagine that, if they see how absurd it is to fight, everybody else will follow suit and dismantle the military.

The relations between our two countries have been so contentious for so long that the recent intimations of normality feel as welcome as rites of spring after an icebound winter. Yet all our joint projects and ventures would together hardly be noticed in the context of a friendly relationship such as the US has with France, say, or Japan, or Sweden. In these cases we take for granted a rich exchange of products, ideas, students, investments, tourists, books and scientific data.

Critics of citizen diplomacy argue that the Soviets have a long history of alternation between simulating elements of liberal democracy in order to appeal to the West, and showing utter contempt for it. According to Edward Jay Epstein in *Deception* (1989), for example, the present period of "glasnost" is not unique, but the sixth in a series since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. In his analysis, the "first *glasnost*" was the New Economic Policy, 1921-29; the second, Stalin's apparently liberal constitution of 1936; the third, our antifascist partnership with "Uncle Joe"; the fourth, destalinization under Khrushchev, 1956-59; and the fifth, the period of detente under Brezhnev, 1970-75. Viewed from the Soviet side, US policy has looked no more stable.

In the current era of *glasnost*, a key element of Soviet policy, according to such spokesmen as Georgi Arbatov, has been to deprive the US of an enemy. In many forums, the USSR has been gazing nobly beyond what is called "the image of the enemy." The West, and most immediately Western Europe, is being invited to act as if its longtime enemy had undergone a mass conversion, or had been wholly misunderstood all along. In this view, joint projects and ventures can be seen as part of this campaign.

To the extent that both sides are actually engaged in a search for a new way of relating, over the long term and not only as a tactical ploy, citizen diplomats are already acting out, and thus establishing some of the models that will make up the new world. But there are other possibilities.

A Soviet with whom I traveled to Dallas and St. Louis, the editor of a well-known journal, had expected to find America filled with misinformation about the USSR. Instead, he told me, it would be more accurate to say there is an almost total vacuum to be filled. The hospitable, well-intentioned Americans he

met knew so little about his country that he did not know where to begin. Even more surprising to him, as a highly educated Russian, was that prior to his two week visit he had really known almost nothing about the feel of life in the US.

Each civilization naturally sees the other in its own terms. That is a very old story. Many Americans assume, because Gorbachev allows some books to be published, releases some dissidents, encourages some editors to criticize corrupt or inept bureaucrats and experiments with “democratization,” that he holds liberal values in a Western sense. Maybe so, but we should do Soviets the honor of trying to understand them in terms of their own complex culture, not of ours.

As we conduct our various joint projects, let us keep one eye on the realities imposed by a very different (albeit rapidly changing) culture and political structure. These realities need to be learned, piece by piece. Without this grounding, the utopian impulse of citizen diplomacy could quickly degenerate into self-deception. With the help of this knowledge, however, citizen diplomacy can continue to do as it has already done, to set an example of peace by acting, in many ways, as if it were possible.

In this spirit, I applaud the diverse, open-hearted and expansive work reflected in this useful guidebook.

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*Comstock's interest in transnational exchanges goes back to 1960 when, as a Harvard undergraduate, he suggested to John F. Kennedy that he propose a Peace Corps. As a board member of the Ark Foundation, Comstock has been involved in supporting some 25 organizations that conduct citizen exchanges between the US and the Soviet Union.*