

SUNDAY FORUM

Students send message of peace

By Walter H. Capps

The season of peace on Earth and good will came early for me this year. The setting was the Asian city of Alma-Ata, deep within the Soviet Union, nearly 2,000 miles from Moscow, and 14 time zones away from Santa Barbara.

I was there, together with fellow Santa Barbarans King Harris and David Cronshaw as members of the American delegation of Vietnam War-related peo-



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ple, to meet with Soviet veterans of the Afghanistan war. Most of those in our group, including Harris, had served in Vietnam. Others of us (psychologists, medical specialists, reporters, writers, peace advocates and educators) had been invited to monitor and interpret the historic exchange, and to facilitate the proceedings.

On the third day of the two-week encounter, we were invited to meet with some university students and faculty for what was billed as "a debate" about similarities and differences between the two wars. The debate never materialized. Instead, we used the time to share impressions about each other's country, our respective roles in the world and why we continue to act toward each other in a confrontational manner.

At the close of this unusually lively session, I was unexpectedly approached by two faculty members and several students with an invitation to return to the campus the next day to deliver a public lecture. In our discussions I had been making references to some current social and cultural trends in our society. They wanted to hear more.

The next day, at the appointed hour, I did what was asked of me. But in closing my address, I spoke more directly and candidly to the students and faculty, believing that I also was representing the people here at home who had encouraged me to travel there.

I reminded the students of the meetings that had taken place between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev. In fact, on that very day, Gorbachev was again in the United States, this time to address the United Nations in New York City. I quoted the line that Reagan had borrowed from Ralph Waldo Emerson, that "there is no history, only biography," when welcoming Gorbachev to Washington just one year ago. Reagan had intended the statement to reinforce the conviction that human beings are responsible for their actions: History cannot be reduced to invisible forces and inevitable tendencies. And, though there was hardly a full discussion of the philosophical basis of this conviction, Gorbachev agreed that when individuals are given the opportunity to work for peace, they must accept this responsibility. I cited this conversation as a noteworthy exchange.

Then I recalled that at the 1987 summit, Reagan assured Gorbachev that our two nations are linked by "something deeper than ideology and politics." He identified this bond as "the deepest hungers of the human heart, hungers shared by all." Quoting President Thomas Jefferson, Reagan observed that all of us are "born to freedom," since "the need for freedom is more basic than the need for food."

On his own occasions, Gorbachev has made a similar observation, attesting that "man does not live by bread alone," to which he frequently adds that "neither does man live by modern material goods." Instead, Gorbachev contends, human life is shaped "by truth, knowledge, justice, freedom and a cultivated humaneness." When talking this way, Gorbachev has insisted that perestroika stands for more than political revolution. Its richer context lies in the moral and spiritual realm. Repeatedly the Soviet leader has pleaded that "without culture, there is no perestroika. I repeated this statement, observing that Gorbachev likes to borrow lines,

too. One of his favorites comes from the writings of Andrej Platonow, the great Russian novelist, who has affirmed that "the life of the spirit is the basis of existence."

From this rich intellectual background, my own plea to those assembled in the crowded lecture hall was that we live and work together in deepest reverence of our common humanity. "We are human beings first," I continued, "and everything else is secondary. We are not Russians and Americans first, but we are human beings."

By now the group was applauding after each line, without waiting for the translation from English to Russian to be completed. "Neither can we create the world from ideology, whether Soviet ideology or American ideology, for ideology, like national identity, is secondary." The applause grew louder. The faces were happy. They were urging me to continue. "We must protect and nurture this fragile planet, in whatever time is still available to us, from the dictates of our common humanity."

For the remainder of the talk, I found my text in the radiance of their faces. "My students would want me to tell you that they are not angry with you," I ventured. "They do not wish to fight with you. They do not regard you as their enemy, and they hope that you will not regard them as your enemy. But they are curious about you, and know you are curious about them." The applause resounded. "They would like to meet you. They would like to talk with you. They are eager to understand you." One of the students shouted "friendship!" Another called "tell them to visit us," to which another countered, "no, better that we should go to California." And laughter pervaded the meeting hall.

I proposed that until we could meet more easily, we should read each other's literature, study each other's history, listen to each other's music and become familiar with each other's art. "Let us share our insights, our knowledge, our hopes," I continued. But before I could get to the end of the concluding line, "let us, you and I, become human beings together," it was as if everyone was talking or shouting at once. Most came forward to thank me for coming, some to shake my hand or touch my sleeve, explaining that they had



Eleanor Mill

never even seen an American before. Several gave me their names and addresses so that students in Santa Barbara could write to them. As I looked into their eyes, I knew for certain that whatever divides us as human beings is far more trustworthy than whatever divides us. I also understood that peace is fostered when love

conquers fear.

Clutching the slips of paper on which the students had written their names, I returned from the Soviet Union, along with Harris and Cronshaw, a few days before Christmas. Now, in the spirit of this season, I believe that I, too, have become a bearer of precious gifts.