IPS features

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A VISIT WITH SECRETARY-GENERAL GORBACHEV

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On Tuesday, November 19, near noon, a group of U.S. citizens assembled at the Soviet Mission in Geneva. Our group consisted of representatives of SANE, the National Nuclear Freeze, and all thirty-four women of Women for a Meaningful Summit. I was a member of this ad hoc coalition of women.

We had been told that we would have five minutes to make our presentation. We were expecting to see Secretary General Gorbachev to present petitions urging: 1) that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. together proclaim verifiable mutual moratoriums on the testing of nuclear warheads on Earth; and 2) that, upon adjournment of the Summit, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. pledge to resume immediately negotiations (with Great Britain) for a comprehensive test ban treaty. The groups had brought petitions signed by one and a half million persons to present to Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev, if possible.

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Of course, the question immediately arises, who were we and why were we there? Both SANE and the National Nuclear Freeze are well-known organizations. Women for a Meaningful Summit is another matter. We represented women of diverse professions and political perspectives. We were a cross-section of the American population. We went to Geneva because we were not seated at the negotiating table. As long as we are not seated around the negotiating table, women will continue to speak out in other ways in order to make our recommendations and express our foreboding concerns and hopes to officialdom.

Women for a Meaningful Summit had requested meetings with both leaders or their designees, as well as with their wives. Gifts had been brought for both Mrs. Gorbachev and Mrs. Reagan. We made repeated efforts to contact officials of our own government through the White House and the National Security Advisor's office. But nothing had materialized. However, in Geneva, our groups finally made appointments.

Earlier on the 19th, representatives of these three U.S. groups had presented some of the petitions, at the American Embassy, to Mr. Charles Thomas, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs. Mr. Thomas had been designated by our government as the representative to receive these petitions. (I was not present at this meeting since the total number of our delegation had been restricted.)

Soon after we assembled in the large lobby of the Soviet Mission, Mr. Gorbachev and his aides arrived. At the outset, Rev. Jessie

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Jackson introduced himself as a representative of SANE, Justine Marriet as the spokesperson for Women for a Meaningful Summit, and Jane Gruenbaum as the spokesperson for the National Nuclear Freeze.

Rev. Jackson relayed to Mr. Gorbachev four points that were of concern to our group: that progress be made on a comprehensive test ban treaty; that the vast resources squandered on nuclear arms be directed to alleviating world-wide poverty; that human rights was a primary concern, with special emphasis on Soviet Jewry; and that we were making a plea for victims of apartheid in South Africa.

Mr. Gorbachev responded through an interpreter. First, he spoke of the vast resources of the two countries and affirmed that he was not unmindful of the arms race. He expressed his interest in moving beyond arms control to disarmament. Rev. Jackson responded by emphasizing to Mr. Gorbachev our concern for Soviet Jewry. In his second exchange, Mr. Gorbachev took note that Rev. Jackson had made the point twice. And he went on to say that the Jews in the Soviet Union were intelligent and resourceful people, and there was no problem.

Justine Marriet was introduced to Mr. Gorbachev. At the outset, she presented a gift for his wife, a beautiful embroidered 24''x12'' segment of The Ribbon, a project founded by Mrs. Marriet, which involved several thousand women from all over the country who created a 15-mile ribbon of individual tapestries and prints that they wound around the Pentagon, Capitol and Washington's monuments last

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August 4, just before the 40th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, as a demonsration of their desire for peace. Then Mrs. Marriet read from the statement of Women for a Meaningful Summit and made reference to the one and a half million signatures on the petitions the three groups had brought to Geneva.

The meeting had gone forty minutes over its alloted time. Throughout, I was within two feet of Mikhail Gorbachev. And what did I observe as the clock ticked away for 45 minutes? I saw in Mr. Gorbachev a man seemingly in no hurry and at ease -- one who gave the appearance of listening and who gave his attention to the event. I further noted that there was one striking similarity in operations between Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Reagan: their advisors are all men.

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Frances "Sissy" Farenthold was the Democratic candidate for Governor of Texas in 1974, a member of the Texas Legislature from 1968-73, and President of Wells College from 1976-1980. She is an attorney in Houston and on the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Policy Studies.

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