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**END OF THE SOVIET UNION; GORBACHEV, LAST SOVIET LEADER, RESIGNS; U.S. RECOGNIZES REPUBLICS' INDEPENDENCE**

By FRANCIS X. CLINES,

**MOSCOW, Dec. 25—** Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the trailblazer of the Soviet Union's retreat from the cold war and the spark for the democratic reforms that ended 70 years of Communist tyranny, told a weary, anxious nation tonight that he was resigning as President and closing out the union.

"I hereby discontinue my activities at the post of President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," declared the 60-year-old politician, the last leader of a totalitarian empire that was undone across the six years and nine months of his stewardship.

Mr. Gorbachev made no attempt in his brief, leanly worded television address to mask his bitter regret and concern at being forced from office by the creation of the new Commonwealth of Independent States, composed of 11 former republics of the collapsed Soviet empire under the informal lead of President Boris N. Yeltsin of Russia. 'A New World'

Within hours of Mr. Gorbachev's resignation, Western and other nations began recognition of Russia and the other former republics.

"We're now living in a new world," Mr. Gorbachev declared in recognizing the rich history of his tenure. "An end has been put to the cold war and to the arms race, as well as to the mad militarization of the country, which has crippled our economy, public attitudes and morals. The threat of nuclear war has been removed." [ A transcript of Mr. Gorbachev's speech and excerpts from interviews with Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Yeltsin are on pages A12 and A13. ]

Mr. Gorbachev's moment of farewell was stark. Kremlin guards were preparing to lower the red union flag for the last time. In minutes, Mr. Gorbachev would sign over the nuclear missile launching codes for safeguarding to Mr. Yeltsin, his rival and successor as the dominant politician of this agonized land. Yeltsin's Assurance on Weapons

Earlier today, Mr. Yeltsin told his Russian Parliament that "there will be only a single nuclear button, and other presidents will not possess it."
But he said that to "push it" requires the approval of himself and the leaders of Ukraine, Byelorussia and Kazakhstan, the four former republics that have strategic nuclear weapons on their soil.

"Of course, we think this button must never be used," Mr. Yeltsin said.

Out in the night beyond the walled fortress as Mr. Gorbachev spoke, a disjointed people, freed from their decades of dictated misery, faced a frightening new course of shedding collectivism for the promises of individual enterprise. It is a course that remains a mystery for most of the commonwealth's 280 million people.

"I am very much concerned as I am leaving this post," the union President told the people. "However, I also have feelings of hope and faith in you, your wisdom and force of spirit. We are the heirs of a great civilization and it now depends on all and everyone whether or not this civilization will make a comeback to a new and decent living." Still Against Commonwealth

In departing, the Soviet leader took comfort in the world's supporting his singular achievements in nuclear disarmament. But even more, he firmly warned his people that they had not yet learned to use their newly won freedom and that it could be put at risk by the commonwealth, which he fought to the last.

"I am concerned about the fact that the people in this country are ceasing to become citizens of a great power and the consequences may be very difficult for all of us to deal with," he declared, implicitly arguing that his union could have remained a superpower despite the cold war's end, which he helped engineer.

"We have paid with all our history and tragic experience for these democratic achievements," Mr. Gorbachev said, assessing centuries of suffering across serfdom and revolution, "and they are not to be abandoned whatever the circumstances, and whatever the pretext. Otherwise, all our hopes for the best will be buried."

Mr. Gorbachev's stringent gaze and strong caution to the now dismembered nation were in contrast to the smiling ease displayed during this transition day by President Yeltsin, chief heir to this land's political and economic chaos. 'They Need Some Belief'

"The people here are weary of pessimism, and the share of pessimism is too much for the people to handle," Mr. Yeltsin declared in an interview with CNN. "Now they need some belief, finally."

Mr. Yeltsin made a point in the interview of sending Christmas wishes to his listeners today as the West celebrated the holiday, although the Russian Orthodox Christmas is not until Jan. 7. Mr. Yeltsin also took care in addressing the outside world to stress that commonwealth leaders had agreed to fulfill the disarmament commitments made by Mr. Gorbachev.

"I don't want the international community to be worried about it," President Yeltsin said, vowing
that there would "not be a single second after Gorbachev makes his resignation" that the missile codes would go astray.

The weapons are only one item in a long list of needed precautions that the commonwealth republics must attend to if they are to establish credibility in a decidedly skeptical world that has watched the Soviet Union reverse its totalitarian course and collapse in a matter of a few years.

Mr. Yeltsin is first among equals in the 11-member commonwealth. This is a very loose political association resorted to by the former Soviet republics because of their disenchantment with the very notion of union and their need, nonetheless, for some common arrangement that might ease the escape from post-Communist destitution.

The commonwealth members are free to decide their individual economic and political plans. But they are pledged to a common military command for joint defense needs and to certain economic denominators as well, including the hope of a resuscitated ruble as their common currency.

Russia has already taken the lead in economics as well as defense, with the giant republic of 149 million people bracing for Mr. Yeltsin's first steps toward free-market reform next week. Sweeping price rises are to be legalized on Jan. 2 as an end comes to much of the consumer-goods subsidies that Communism maintained to make its regime minimally palatable.

Mr. Yeltsin made a point in his CNN interview of expressing some displeasure at the limited amount of aid that has been extended by the outside world.

"There has been a lot of talk, but there has been no specific assistance," he said, offering a small smile. He quickly offered an explanation that with the union collapsing for the last year, willing nations probably found no clear address to which to donate.

"Now everything is clear, and the addressees are known," he said, beaming as if in invitation. "And I think that this humanitarian aid will step up now." A Poke at Baker

He offered the same hint of mischief in dealing with the fact that Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d waited until he headed home from an initial visit before talking quite pessimistically of the commonwealth's chances.

"Mr. Baker, when he and I had a four-and-a-half-hour meeting here in Moscow, Mr. Baker never told me that," Mr. Yeltsin said. "So those who doubt as to the success of the commonwealth should beware and not be so pessimistic," he advised. "We are sick and tired of pessimism."

In leaving, Mr. Gorbachev had no kind words in the televised speech for the commonwealth and never mentioned Mr. Yeltsin.

He reviewed his own campaign to preserve a drastically revised union. It would have accepted the sovereignty the republics gained after the hard-line Communist coup failed in August. This led to the fall of the Communist Party and, tonight, of the union's most prominent defender, Mr.
The flag was lowered from its floodlit perch at 7:32 tonight. A muted moment of awe was shared by the few pedestrians crossing Red Square.

"Why are you laughing at Lenin?" a man, obviously inebriated against the winter cold, suddenly shouted in the square. He reeled near Lenin’s tomb.

The mausoleum was dusky pink against the evergreen trees outside the Kremlin walls. Within, for all the sense of history wheeling in the night sky, the embalmed remains of the Communist patriarch still rested.

The drunk was instantly shushed by a passer-by who cautioned that "foreigners" were watching and he should not embarrass the reborn Russia.

"Foreigners?" laughed another Muscovite. "Who cares? They’re the ones who are feeding us these days."

In the Gorbachev era there were countless moments of floodlit crisis and emergency solutions hurriedly concocted and rammed through in the Kremlin. Previously, Mr. Gorbachev prevailed and often proved brilliant in his improvising. Tonight, though, he was the executive focus for the last time and he seemed brisk and businesslike, a man containing himself against defeat.

In an interview with CNN later, when asked about his plans, he said he would not comment now on the "many proposals and offers" he had received. He said he would "have to recover a little bit, relax, take a rest." 'Respect' From Rival

"Today is a difficult day for Mikhail Gorbachev," President Yeltsin said a few hours before the Soviet President resigned, when the Russian leader was invited to describe Mr. Gorbachev’s main mistakes along the difficult road of reform.

"Because I have a lot of respect for him personally and we are trying to be civilized people and we are trying to make it into a civilized state today, I don’t want to focus on these mistakes," Mr. Yeltsin responded.
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