



Parliament in session: lights burn in the Great Kremlin Palace as the Supreme Soviet meets, without Andropov

SOVIET UNION

Under an Invisible Hand

In absentia, Andropov guides two key Kremlin meetings

The rush-hour traffic on Moscow's broad boulevards was moving at a crawl when the convoys of black ZIL limousines, amber lights gleaming, appeared out of the morning mist. The motorcades whipped by at 70 m.p.h., down empty center lanes marked off for official traffic. The more than 300 members of the Communist Party's Central Committee were on their way to the Kremlin for their annual winter session. All of them but one. There was no hint of the whereabouts of the Soviet Union's head of state, Yuri Andropov, 69, who had not been seen in public since Aug. 18. In his role as Party General Secretary, Andropov normally would run this very important policy meeting. Would he dramatically reappear, thus dispelling the rumors that he was too ill to lead his country effectively?

The first news from the closed-door Central Committee plenum came early in the evening. The official TASS press agency wire fell silent and then, as Western newsmen hovered over their teleprinters, the news agency's English-language service clicked back to life, teasingly printing out a test line again and again: "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs." Then came an equally puzzling message. The Central Committee members had "acquainted themselves" with the text of an Andropov speech, reported the TASS dispatch. But had they heard Andropov speak? When the text of the address finally clattered over the wire, all doubt was removed. "I deeply regret that because of temporary causes, I will not be able to attend the session of the plenum," wrote Andropov. He went on to explain that he had given the party program "much thought and was preparing to speak and outline some of my ideas."

Details of the illness that kept Andropov from delivering his message in person remain as murky as ever. Soviet spokesmen have claimed for weeks that their leader is recuperating from a cold. But Andropov's failure to appear at the all-important Central Committee meeting and, later in the week, at a session of the

Supreme Soviet, the country's parliament, belied any such nonsense. Andropov is suffering from a serious illness and, presumably, is slowly recovering. Says a top-ranking U.S. official: "The truth is that no one really knows what has happened to Andropov." That apparently included Western intelligence services.

If Andropov remained invisible, his hand was very evident in the Kremlin's business last week. With one stroke, he strengthened his position on the ruling Politburo by increasing the number of voting members from eleven to 13, the highest count since October 1982. The two new men, presumed to be Andropov supporters, had been blocked from advancing further in their careers under Leonid Brezhnev. Andropov also promoted an old KGB comrade to candidate membership in the party council and gave greater authority to a like-minded technocrat on the Central Committee Secretariat. Andropov's address to the party plenum conveyed a similar feeling that he was in command. In language not heard since the days of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader railed against "intolerable" waste in the economy and accused factory managers of "marking time." Said a prominent Moscow intellectual: "Andropov came out of the plenum stronger than he went into it. He ran the show. His enemies cannot smell blood."

The push to invigorate the leadership by promoting somewhat younger, discipline-minded technocrats serves the interests of Andropov supporters in the military and security services, even if such key backers as Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, 75, and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, 74, may want to postpone the transfer of power to a younger generation. But Andropov's evident frailty could prevent the kind of firm leadership that would keep his country from drifting aimlessly both at home and abroad. Said a U.S. Kremlin watcher: "You cannot run Russia from your bed, and the Soviet leaders, sooner or later, have got to face that."

For the moment, however, it was busi-

ness as usual in Moscow. To the surprise of Western diplomats, Andropov chose not to intensify the war of words with Washington in his address to the Central Committee. Instead he focused on the problem-ridden Soviet economy. Citing improved industrial production, which grew by 4% last year, compared with 2.8% in 1982, he affirmed that "a change for the better" was under way in the national economy. "The most important thing," wrote Andropov, "is not to lose the tempo and the general positive intent to get things going."

He specifically criticized factory managers who give bonuses to undeserving workers and singled out "managerial links" for their role in creating bottlenecks in the production and distribution of goods. Anyone who does not live up to his contractual obligations, the Soviet leader warned, "must answer to the extent of his guilt." Andropov cited one tractor-manufacturing plant in the Ukraine that revamped its operations according to the "rules of the scientific organization of labor" and found it could dispense with 600 jobs. He called for more such modernization efforts.

Some of his sharpest criticism was re-

Eight key Politburo members: front row from left,

