

International VIEWPOINT

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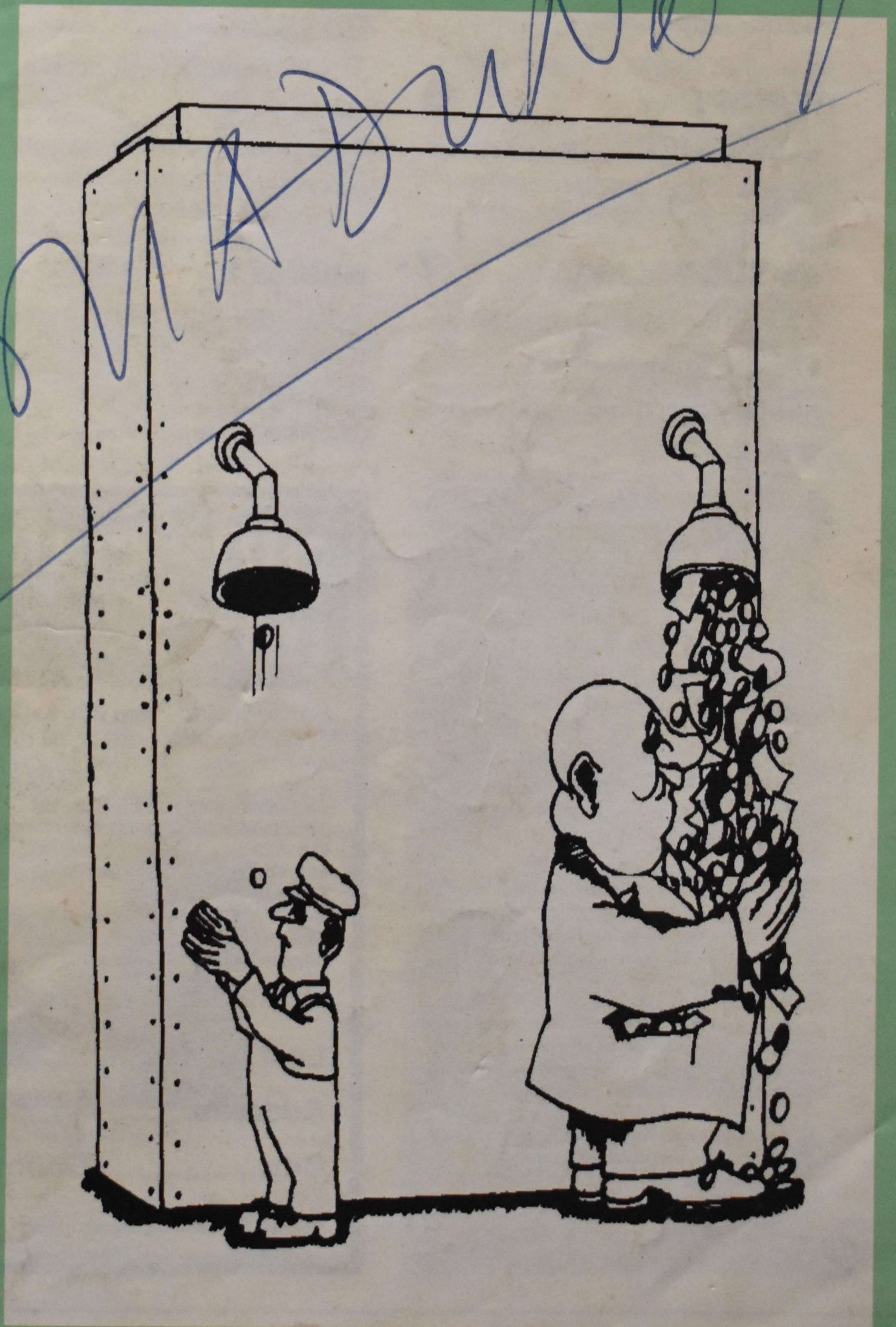
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From Kuwait to Los Angeles

THE most significant result of the American presidential election is not the victory of Bill Clinton — even if he is being promoted as the new Kennedy for the 1990s (and the legend of Kennedy was largely a posthumous creation). It is the shattering defeat of George Bush, who just a year ago, was riding high in the polls.

After his victory in the Gulf War the outgoing president basked in imperial grandeur. The Battle of Kuwait was his Austerlitz, but a year later he met his Waterloo — in Los Angeles.

SALAH JABER

PRESIDENT BUSH inherited the mantle of Ronald Reagan, whose vice-president he had been. When the former actor took the helm of state, the American empire was in profound crisis. Nothing had gone right for the imperial United States; in the wake of the sharp blow to the prestige of the executive dealt by Nixon's Watergate scandals, Jimmy Carter took office on the "Mr. Clean" ticket to inaugurate a presidency that, in 1979, saw both the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the overthrow of the Shah of Iran by Islamic fundamentalists. The same year saw the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan — Moscow's first military adventure outside its accepted sphere of influence since the Second World War.

This was the background when Reagan took control, dressed as an anti-Communist crusader. Drawing on his cinematic experience, he employed powerful Made in Hollywood images: cowboy, western, star wars, Evil Empire. The "Great Communicator" knew how to give his fellow Americans the illusion of restored glory. He had no trouble getting re-elected. His second term came at the same time as the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire, the very objective in whose name he had come to power.

The Reagan years saw a record-breaking military build-up, which had several consequences. The United States fitted itself out with a highly sophisticated array of means of destruction. Its superiority in military technology reached levels never seen before as its great power rival began to falter.

This was itself to some extent one of the consequences of Reaganite militarism: the debacle that Gorbachev presided over in the USSR was hastened by the exhaustion of the bureaucratic economy in the arms race imposed on it. The pursuit by the USSR of military parity with the US meant a much higher burden relative to its own national product than that borne by its rival.

From this point of view Clinton was not wholly right when he compared the triumphalism of the Republican administration over the collapse of the Soviet Union to the pretensions of a cock who

believes daybreak to be the result of its crowing. Reaganite militarism, supported by the interests of the famous "military-industrial complex" was certainly not the ultimate cause of the collapse of the Soviet empire, but it certainly speeded up its coming to fruition.

However, there was a less shiny side to the Reagan medal. Republican prodigality in arms spending did not only stretch



Moscow to breaking point; it was also beyond the means of Washington. The Reagan administration saw the culmination of a mechanism at work since the Vietnam War whereby the US would get its imperialist partners to finance its wars, be they hot or cold.

Taking advantage of their privileged position as the keystone of the world capitalist market, the US ran up a colossal debt which, even in relative terms, would

have sent any other economy to the bottom. The US is the ultimate example of the great debtor without recoverable property who the creditors cannot declare bankrupt because that would be the end of them as well.

Spendthrift on weaponry, but penny pinching cuts on social spending in the name of primitive social Darwinism. "Get rich", cried Reagan to an America already characterized by big inequalities. The result was that the gulf between the two Americas, that of the rich and that of the poor became vaster and more dizzying than ever. Enrichment at the top was less the result of economic growth than of redistribution at the expense of the most disadvantaged and of a policy of easy money for the privileged.

The Reagan legacy

This was the America that Bush inherited and which he was to perpetuate. On the foreign policy front it was easy to flourish the super-sophisticated arsenal built up by Reagan in the face of an increasingly decrepit Soviet Union. Firstly on a small scale, with the invasion of Panama in December 1989 and then on the grand scale against Iraq in January-February 1991 — the biggest US military intervention since Indochina. That year was rounded off by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Paradoxically, the fall of the USSR deprived Reagan's successor of his main argument. A world without the Evil Empire no longer needed "hawks" at the controls in Washington. Furthermore, the Gulf operation disappointed those who had believed in the mystification about the crusade against a new Hitler. Saddam

Hussein is now able to draw consolation — albeit a very meagre one for the suffering Iraqi people — from having survived to see his conqueror's downfall.

In the United States, economic and social issues were again the centre of attention. This time Bush's luck was out. Starting in 1990, recession succeeded the largely artificial growth of the Reagan years. In this context, the consequences

of the latter's anti-social policies have become immediately explosive. And so the victor of Kuwait lost the battle of Los Angeles last April, before losing office in November.

Bush's election defeat sounds the death knell of Reaganism, which represented rightward lurch by an imperialist decline. Our bet is that his successor will have no more success in changing the course of history. ★