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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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July 15th 1992  
Murray Hotel, Rm 210  
Livingston, Montana

EVERYTHING YOU NEVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT AZERBAIJAN: Part Four

Democracy In Unlikely Times And Places  
or: So Long, Azerbaijan

Dear Peter,

Herewith the final installment in the roller-coaster rider's guide to Azerbaijan.

It will be shorter than the others and maybe more focused because the only thing happening since my last installment were the elections of June 7th.

You already know who won, because I sent you an interview with the President-apparent a month ago.

What I will try to give you, though, is minutiae in the way of footnotes to fill the blanks in between. Once more, it will be news stories, filed and unfiled, that will make this piece.

It is not, I think, a bad structure at all--a documentary diary. A little redundant at times, true enough, but tough luck--raw files, lightly dusted, most of which never saw the light of day for the familiar reasons: lack of immediate interest, bad timing, or horrible communications.

As the song sez, it was fun while it lasted.

I am not sure whether I will be able to do it again, and now that it is over, or almost over, I am kind of sad.

I think I just wrote a book.

A very narrow, specialized book to be sure, and not a best seller by any means.

But for those five or ten people who actually give a damn about Azerbaijan I think I have just created a gold mine.

My ego is large enough to think so, anyway.

So, it is with that familiar reluctance author's have about letting go that I complete this opus and turn to a new subject--a new 'Terra I don' Wanna Know Aboutcha,' as it were.

Uzbekistan, a second time around? Kirghizia? Iran?

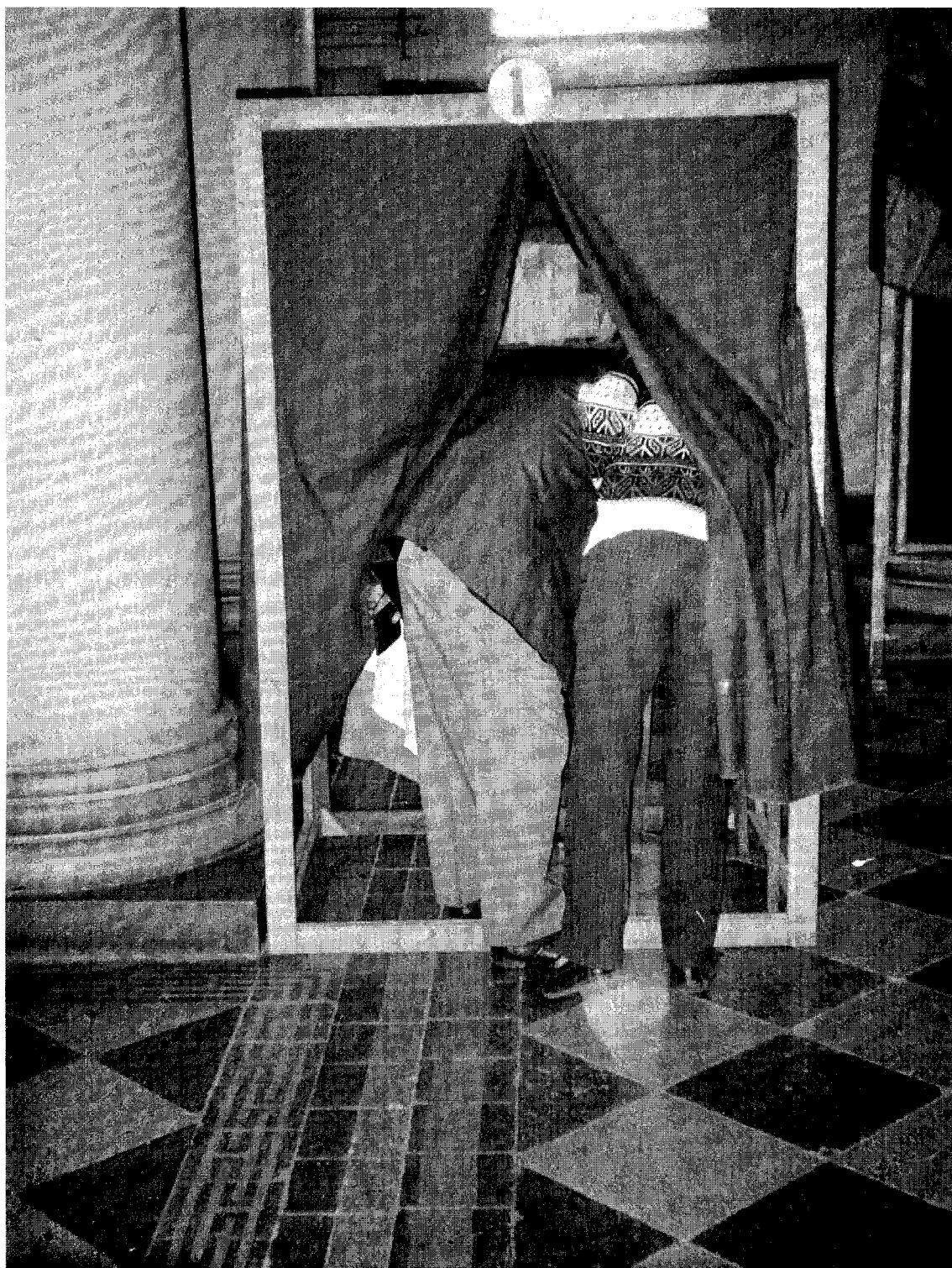
It will come along, whatever it is.

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A Little Friendly Assistance With Someone's Secret Ballot

5.6.92

**In shadow of war, Azerbaijan votes**

Baku--With part of the country occupied by neighboring Armenia, the economy in shambles and tens of thousands of refugees descending on Baku, the people of the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan are to go to the polls on Sunday to chose their first democratically elected leader in more than 70 years.

Officially, there are six candidates, all of whom have been given an hour on national television to explain their positions on Nagorno Karabakh, the economy and future foreign policy. 1)

In effect, however, the chairman of the Popular Front, Mr Abulfaz Elchibey, is the only serious candidate, whose platform

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1) In addition Front Chairman Abulfaz Elchibey, the candidates were: Dr Yagub Mahmedov, the former acting president and chairman of parliament; Tamerlang Garayev (Karayev), Front member and (new) assistant chairman of parliament, Itibar Mahmedov, the head of the National Independence Party/group; and Nizami Suleyanov. Two other men put forward their names out of vanity but are so inconsequential that I will not even name them here for history's sake. Elchibey, obviously, was the candidate of the Popular Front; Karayev, although a member of the Front, maintained that he somehow represented 'Iranian' interests in Azerbaijan--a very strange claim indeed, all things considered. Yagub Mahmedov, amazingly, kept his hat in the ring despite after the May 14/15 Mutalibov restoration debacle. Itibar Mahmedov, meanwhile, withdrew his name in protest twice before doing so officially after a television appearance about a week before the elections. Cf fn 3. Last but hardly least was Nizami Suleymanov, an inventor best known for shamelessly promoting some sort of water filter he had made, claiming that would save lives and make him (and Azerbaijan) rich. The level of 'campaigning' per se was amazingly low. Meetings were disallowed due to security concerns, but each candidate was given an hour on television to present views and field questions on a call-in basis; two days before the elections, all the candidates were invited to a second, live debate-like forum at the television studios. Itibar by this time had officially withdrawn, and Abulfaz declined to attend, holding his own, one-man televised press conference the next day at the Popular Front HQ. This was deeply disturbing to many observers and many Azeris. Karayev, meanwhile, theatrically dropped out of the election during the live debate, and asked his supporters to cast their votes for Elchibey. One smells some horse trading here. The result was that the nation was treated to Suleymanov spouting off about his bag of miracles for three hours, with the occasional interruption or comment by Yagub Mahmedov. It is difficult to say, but Suleymanov may have picked up half of his support as a result of his performance on TV, and another half because of anti-Elchibey reaction due to his no-show. People asked the obvious question: what is he afraid of? When I asked Elchibey why he had not attended, his response was disturbing, if logical: he had no time to waste with Suleymanov, and besides, he was busy at a meeting with the local KGB in order to restructure the organization.

of making a final break from the USSR in any and all forms has become the basic position of all the others.

An almost-messianic looking man who maintains a life-style of a hermit priest, Elchibey has been Azerbaijan's leading dissident since the mid-1970s when he was jailed on charges of pan-Turkism and slandering the Soviet Union. In an interview, he sketched out a thumb-nail portrait his vision of Azerbaijan in the future.

"There are three principles at the base of the ideology of the Popular Front," he said, "These are pluralistic democracy, the rule of law and personal freedom. It is exceedingly difficult to fulfill these ideals in an Asian state like Azerbaijan, especially because there are many other Asian states who do not want to see a democratic, secular Azerbaijan succeed."

Lavishing praise on the United States and Turkey for support and understanding during the crisis days of mid-May, Elchibey reiterated the Front's basic position that Azerbaijan is to become a truly independent state with its own army, currency and central bank; he also expressed hope that mediation by international bodies such as the CSCE, NATO and the United Nations would help achieve a solution to the on-going if undeclared war with neighboring Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, which he identified as the foremost problem facing any government in Azerbaijan. Consistent with Front policy on the territory, Elchibey said that Nagorno Karabakh is an integral and inseparable part of Azerbaijan, where citizens of many different ethnic backgrounds might live in peace while obeying the laws of the land.

In terms of economic policy, Elchibey said that the reason that western investors were reluctant to do business with Azerbaijan was because of the perception of instability in the country, a state of affairs that would end once a new, legitimate regime is in power.

"There is no state economic policy today because there is no state today," he said, "we are emerging from the anarchy of the collapse of the Soviet Union and have to start from scratch."

Elchibey predicts a victory of 'up to' 70 percent of the vote if the elections occur in a calm and peaceful manner.

"There are forces both inside and outside the country that do not wish to see the Popular Front in power and will do their utmost to put the results in question lest the example of a democratic, independent and secular Azerbaijan spread to other totalitarian states in the region," said Elchibey, "We have encouraged international observers and the press to come and see the process for themselves."

But there is no question that the elections are taking place in an atmosphere of distrust, jealousy and suspicion following a mid-May crisis that almost brought Azerbaijan into a state of civil war.

Then, the former communist elite attempted to cancel the elections by mounting a parliamentary-coup aimed at restoring former president Ayaz Mutalibov; the restoration lasted little more than 24 hours before the Front mounted a counter coup and put the elections back on track while quickly taking control of the reigns of government.

Although the press and media have been freer than at any time in Azerbaijan history, political rallies are banned and a soft-sort of martial law prevails as the Front attempts to restore

order in the country by dealing with tens of thousands of Karabakh refugees and disarming independent militia groups. 2)

Last week, Itibar Mahmedov, the candidate of the 'national bourgeoisie,' withdrew from the race and accused the Front on national television of using 'Bolshevik tactics' to seize and maintain power. Mahmedov did not call for a boycott, but his withdrawal is a clear sign to his supporters to stay away. 3)

2) An eerie atmosphere, to be sure: mysterious buses were appearing in areas of conflict around Karabakh and the Armenian frontier (especially Lachin) and offering free service to Baku. Many of these recently arrived refugees were demanding housing temporarily vacated by Russians--even in this correspondent's building--as if a master list for squatters had been published somewhere. On a personal level, I got in a fight with my neighbors who were trying to seal off their hallway, lest the refugees squatting in the courtyard decide to seize a couple of apartments on our floor. I accused the neighbors of trying to privatize the hall-way, and ripped down the metal door they were throwing up. The next day, the refugees attacked--and I mean attacked. I called the cops but there were cops among the squatters, and the only thing that saved the apartment was the appearance of Aliya Hanim (our Russified, tank of an old elite commie landlady) and Fuat, her police captain (KGB? Speznatz?) son who literally threw both indifferent cops and squatters down the two flights of steps. On a macro level, it was clear that there was a dark, manipulative hand at work in bringing the 'refugees' to Baku in order to create anxiety and instability. The quasi-Front government of late May and early June, too, fell into the trap by attempting to ban all non-Bakuites from the capital. Coupled with a rather aggressive if necessary policy of disarming the over-armed population (25,000 fire arms were collected within a week), the new hand of the Front seemed suddenly heavy. Elchibey relieved a certain amount of pressure by correcting the 'refugee law' by excepting all those from Xojali, Shusha and Lachin, who were allowed to come to Baku and who were promised temporary housing. But the question remained: who was providing all the transport for the others, and why? And where were all the weapons from?

3) Itibar, always said to be a favorite of the Turks for reasons I can't quite understand, took his good time about withdrawing. He first announced his dissatisfaction with the Front shortly after he was denied the Prime Ministry, circa May 18th and duly called a press conference to announce that he was 'out', as it were. But he left his name on the ballot until he had his chance on the silver screen some ten days later. Interestingly, and strangely, Itibar has also been a favorite of 'the experts' on Azerbaijan--even those whom I respect--and is usually referred to as a young and dedicated democrat. But watching him in action, the description of 'The Young Napoleon' seems more accurate--he is power hungry. A fuzzy connection to Haydar Aliiev (Itibar had left Azerbaijan on the day of the Mutalibov coup of May 14th, and returned via a rather over-long stay in Nakhjivan) has re-enforced my negative thinking about him. He sure talks a good game, but researchers, beware...

Other remaining official candidates have also taken advantage of the Front's policy of non-censorship of the media to promise the moon if elected. 4)

But Elchibey's main rival would seem to be exhaustion and enervation among the population, who are as tired of thinking about politics as they are about thinking about the string of defeats at the hands of Armenians over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, and many observers wonder whether enough people will vote to for the elections to qualify.

"The first question is whether a quorum can be met," said Eldar Namazov, a social scientist in Baku who has been conducting sample polls, "The second question whether the vote will be so fractured that no-one candidate wins during the first round."

A quorum of the nation's approximate four million potential voters—including the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh—is 50 percent plus one; if not established, the new elections must be re-held after two months. If a quorum is established and no candidate takes more than 50% of the total, a run-off must be held after three weeks.

Namazov pointed out that despite grossly inflated participation figures in elections and referendums held during the time that Azerbaijan was part of the USSR, less than 30% of all potential voters ever cast ballots. The last polls held were in September '91, when Mutalibov ran as the sole candidate for the newly established office of the presidency. Officially, he collected more than 90 percent of the vote, with 70 percent of possible voters allegedly participating.

The Front boycotted those elections and most observers say they were fraudulent.

Another wild card in the up-coming elections, observers note, is a non-candidate, Haydar Aliiev. A KGB general who became the Communist Party boss in Azerbaijan before being elevated to the Politburo by Yuri Andropov in 1982, Aliiev was removed from power by Mikhail Gorbachev but returned to his native Nakhjivan in 1990 as a 'reborn' nationalist. He now lives in a simple house with his sister—in stunning contrast to the life-style of most former CP elite in Baku.

Long time observers of Azerbaijan point out that in addition to his new-found, populist credentials as a Turkic nationalist, Aliiev also commands a great loyalty throughout Azerbaijan because of his reputation as a law and order man, and a leader in the days when the 'shelves were full.'

Earlier, Aliiev had gone on record as calling the Popular Front the 'movement that will achieve true independence for Azerbaijan from Russia.' The Popular Front, however, has been rather more loath to embrace Aliiev, and any move by the old Soviet spy-master to take power would be resisted by the movement.

4) None other than Nizami Suleymanov. No-one took him seriously until the he appeared on television and promised to slice the price of bread and fill the shelves with meat and butter as well as increase salaries by something like 1,000 percent. It all seemed pretty innocent if idiotic until observers started taking sample polls: Taxi drivers, telephone operators and all sorts of other 'little people' were suddenly lining up behind Suleymanov. Later, it became apparent that Suleymanov was acting as a stalking horse for Haydar Aliiev. Cf fn 8.

He has been absolutely silent during the current crisis, which began with the loss of the Azeri town of Xojali inside the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh last February, after which former president Mutalibov was forced to resign, thus triggering the constitution mechanism requiring that new polls be held three months after the presidential office is vacated.

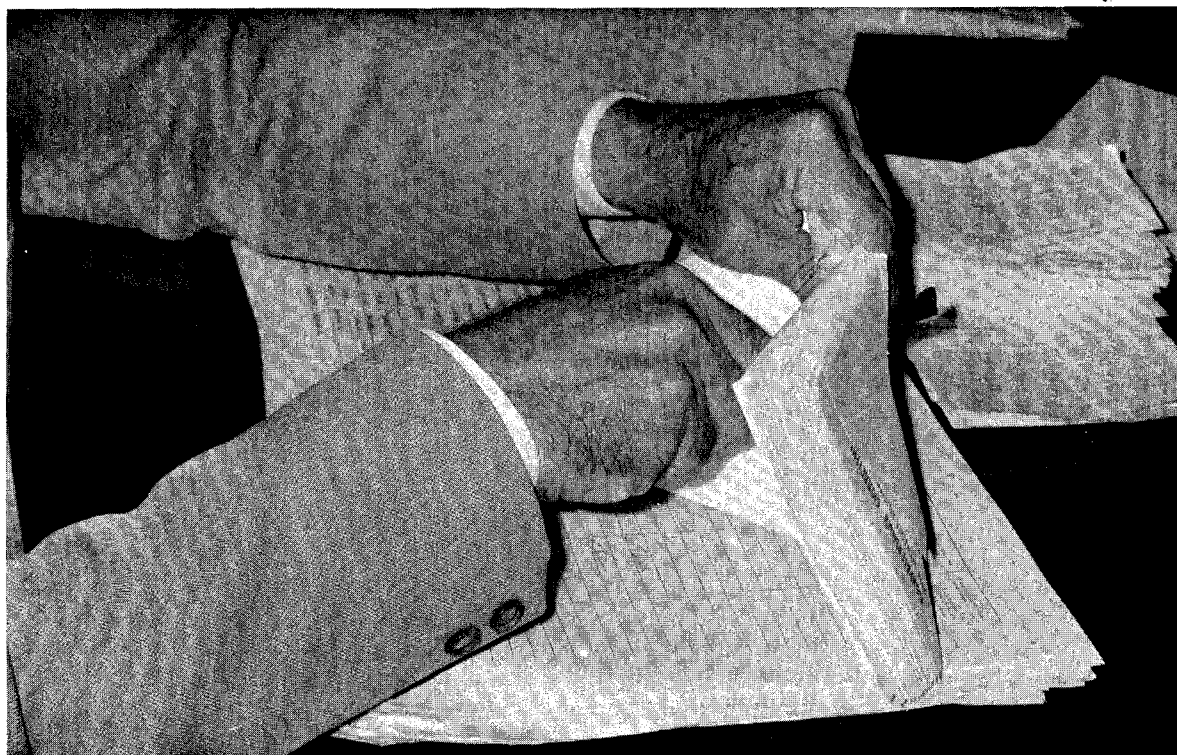
At the time, the Front begged the communist-dominated parliament to postpone the elections, saying it was impossible to hold fair elections while the country was losing the war with Armenia over Karabakh, but the law-makers refused, assuming that acting president and Mutalibov intimate Dr Yagub Mahmedov would win and that Mutalibov might continue as a shadow president.

After agonizing over whether they should boycott the polls, the Front finally decided to show Elchibey as their candidate, who quickly dominated the field of non-entity candidates leading to the last-ditch attempt by the former communist elite to restore Mutalibov and cancel the elections.

Ironically, one likely change an Elchibey presidency will bring to Azerbaijan is the emasculation of the all-powerful presidential apparatus itself, with a re-distribution of power to parliament and the judiciary along the lines of the USA.

"The presidential system in Azerbaijan at present is an invitation to establish dictatorship," the Front chairman said, "And we intend to establish a pluralistic democracy based on the rule of law and personal freedom."

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Counting The Ballots For An Early Return



8.6.92

Despite charges of Fraud, Azerbaijan has new president--apparent

Baku--Preliminary returns from presidential elections in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan on Sunday suggest a victory for the chairman of the nationalist Popular Front, Abulfaz Elchibey, a long time dissident who campaigned on a platform of detaching Azerbaijan from the Commonwealth of Independent States.

With 74 percent of the 3.9 million eligible voters participating in the polls, early returns give Elchibey approximately 60% of the vote.

His main rival, Dr Nizami Suleymanov, got around 30%, and declared the elections rigged. 5)

The remaining ten percent was scattered between three other candidates and invalid ballots. 6)

5) His followers did a pretty good job of announcing that the results were rigged even before the preliminary results were in. At one station I was monitoring for exit polls, two Suleymanov supporters told me that 90% of the voters were casting their ballots for Suleymanov, but that the Front would put on the fix. When I pointed out that according to my exit polls that their man was getting around 30% they gnashed their teeth in disbelief. Later, I was invited in to monitor the vote counting at the same station and was asked my opinion about how the voting had gone, and I referred to the encounter in the context of how important it is to have monitors. We all agreed that at least at that polling station, all had gone well. Amazingly, the next day, the same woman who had asked me about my views in the polling station showed up in Suleymanov's press conference and tried to twist my words, maintaining that I had scientifically established that Suleymanov had received 90% of the vote at her station! Cf fn 8.

6) The most pathetic of whom was Yagub Mahmedov, the former acting president and chairman of parliament and the unofficial candidate of the old Communist Party elite, who collected less than 2% of the popular vote. His very presence in the race invited my 'deep throat' friend Vafa Goulizade to scornfully remark that Mahmedov had proved himself to be a complete fool. 'I can understand a poor man betting all his money in the hope of fantastic gain because if he loses he might lose all but he doesn't lose much, but I can't understand how a rich man like Mahmedov can bet the house.' He was referring to Mahmedov's position as rector of the medical faculty at Baku University, which he used to accrue great wealth by lowering entrance and exit exam standards for a fee. Presumably, he will be eased out of all his old connections by the victorious Front, whereas he might have retained some privilege if he had just bowed out. It was at this point that I understood how 'The Vaf' works--he is the consummate political gambler in Azerbaijan, hedging his bets all along the way. We first met when he was working as an apologist for Mutalibov, but became friends after Mahmedov filled his old boss's shoes. At various times he suggested that he was betting all across the board--even discretely praising Haydar Aliiev at one point, and declaring (former PM) Hasan Hasanov of being 'a patriot' when it appeared that Hasanov was in the ascendent. At one point he even asked me whether I thought he



The head of the election commission, Mr Jafar Veliyev, noting the Azeri constitution specifies that official results must be announced with ten days of an election, declined to release any figures at all until pressured to announce that of 453,738 potential voters from 325 wards in eight districts near Baku, 338,057 voters had cast ballots. According to Veliyev, Elchibey received 55.1 percent and Suleymanov 29 percent of that limited vote. To be valid, a quorum of at least 50% of all registered voters must attend the polls and candidates must receive over 50% of the votes cast to win in the first round. 7)

Exit polls around the country, coupled with the results of individual wards in Baku itself monitored by outside observers, suggest that the sampling provided by the election commission is more or less accurate, making the 54 year old Elchibey the first democratically elected leader of Azerbaijan.

A hermit-like orientalist historian who studied at the Al Azhar university in Cairo, Elchibey has been Azerbaijan's leading dissident since the 1970s, and spent two years at hard labor in a quarry during 1975-76 after being convicted of promoting pan-Turkism in Azerbaijan. His message has remained remarkably consistent through the years--that Azerbaijan needs to remove itself from the USSR in whatever form and establish a pluralistic, secular democracy with a free market economy.

In addition to those ideals, Elchibey's appeal to voters comes from his hard-line position on the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, which he maintains is an integral part of Azerbaijan.

In the week before the voting, Elchibey stressed the need to talk with Armenia about the issue of local autonomy for the Armenians of Karabakh, but that Azerbaijan needed to gear up for a war to retake Karabakh if negotiations fail.

"One must talk, even with one's most bitter enemy," Elchibey said.

But the president-apparent's enormous task of re-organizing oil-rich Azerbaijan as an independent state will no doubt be made more difficult by the attitude of Dr Suleymanov, who charges that the elections were marked by massive fraud. According to Suleymanov, he collected 90 percent of the total vote.

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should form his own political party with PLO money and run for president himself or go to work for the American embassy...at the end of the day, he got in contact with his old school chum Abulfaz Elchibey and was rewarded for his betting on the right horse with a bigger office in the presidential apparatus.

7) The single most distressing aspect of the elections was the presence of this croc-man, who had overseen more rigged elections than anyone living in Azerbaijan. He was perfectly willing to keep silent about preliminary results for the ten days allowed by law until observer Michael Ochs of the CSCE (Helsinki) Commission of the US Congress and myself basically banged fist on table and told him that election results were usually not delayed to such a degree. Within a couple of hours, he staged a mind-numbingly bad press conference in which he announced non-official preliminary results (?) but would not give the actual vote count that his percentages were based on. When I pointed this out he gave me the evil eye and said I asked too many questions. His assistant saw the problem and then gave me the actual number of votes for the various candidates at the 325 wards in question.

"If the people demand that I lead the struggle against the neo-Bolshevik dictatorship that has stolen our victory by armed force and falsification, I am ready to do so," Suleymanov told this correspondent. 8)

Election observers suggest that the remarkably good showing of Suleymanov--a little known academician and inventor before the campaign--was predicated on promising to raise salaries by 100 times, putting Azerbaijan on a dollar-based currency and using Azerbaijan's substantial oil revenues to hire mercenary soldiers to 'clean Karabakh' of Armenians within three months.

His claims of fraud were based on a wad of discarded ballots, several voter registration forms issued to deceased individuals as well as a number of complaint letters from would-be voters who said 'others' had voted in their stead.

8) An amazing and thoroughly disturbing performance. On June 8th, I called up Suleymanov and asked what he thought of the elections. He shouted 'fraud' on the phone and then invited me up to his HQ, where he was about to stage a press conference. I had seen him on television, but when I walked in his room (he embraced me and kissed me twice) I remembered that we had met before and suddenly everything fell into place: Nizami was Haydar's stalking horse. Ten previously, on May 28th, I had flown to Nakhjivan with acting President Isa Gamberov for the opening of the Sadarak Bridge and celebration of Independence Day. As you will recall, Haydar Aliev was playing a hide & seek game, refusing to meet Isa at the airport and at the Nakhjivan parliament. Once a disgusted Isa had gone off to the local PF headquarters, Haydar arrived in glory to meet all the old crocodiles traveling with Isa. And then out of the wood-work appeared all sorts of people I had met in Baku previously--film makers, writers, businessmen, etc, all in Nakhjivan to kiss Haydar's hand. And one of the people I had been introduced to in Haydar's ante-chamber was none other than Nizami Suleymanov. Even more disturbing was the realization that his headquarters were filled with the same film makers, writers and businessmen that I had always associated with Haydar. Bingo. Well, I listened to what Nizami had to say and took a survey of his evidence of massive fraud, focusing on some 90 ballots that had allegedly been removed from the counting at a certain Baku polling station. A friendly monitor had been thoughtful enough to present him with the evidence, he said. But when I cross examined the friendly fellow, he couldn't tell me how he had come into possession of the ballots or even how many potential ballots could have been cast at the station. He didn't even know what station the ballots were from. But it was during the 'press conference' (held in my honor) that Nizami really revealed his game. After stating that he had grossly overestimated the cost of bread and meat and butter in his economic plan, and that although he had meant to keep his Clean-Out-Karabkh plan secret, he now felt obliged to reveal how he was going to get attack helicopters from an unknown benefactor in Moscow via Iran, he announced that as his first act as president, he was inviting Haydar Aliev to join him in Baku. In addition, he had been in contact with Itibar Mahmedov, who was keen to cooperate. Nizami might be a clown and Itibar power-hungry but it was so clear that the Man From Nakhjivan had proven himself to be the biggest crocodile of them all...

International observers and journalists who followed the elections, however, say that while they noted minor irregularities, they discount Suleymanov's allegations. 9)

"We saw a certain amount of confusion," said Michael Ochs, an observer from the CSCE or Helsinki Commission of the United States Senate, "But by and large the elections were conducted in a clean and fair manner. People were surprised and even a little befuddled when I pointed out such fine points as the irregularity of a man voting for wounded relatives."

Indeed, the most familiar violation of standard electoral procedure was husbands attempting to vote for extended families.

If typical of voting procedures in the past, such block voting is technically illegal--although the implementation of banning such practice varied according to different areas of the country. Election officials say that such attempted proxy votes accounted for only a small percentage of registered voters.

"We turned away about 5% or 10% of the potential voters because they came as a block," said the head of polling station Number 7 in the Baku Academy of Science, "We did not accept one vote from anyone's husband or wife for an absent individual."

But this correspondent found plenty of evidence of 'block voting' in the conservative town of Mashtaga outside Baku, where identical signatures signed for multiple votes in many instances. Sixty year old man Muzahir Mehdiyev, for example, collected ballots not only for himself and his immediate family but also for his 56 year old brother Salman for a total of 13 votes.

According to a casual street poll, however, such block voting seemed proportionately divided between supporters of Elchibey and Suleymanov. One individual announced that he, along with all his family, was boycotting the elections because a local poll station worker had refused him his right to vote for all.

"There is a real clash between the spirit and letter of the election law," said Audrey L. Altstadt, a specialist on Azerbaijan from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who was participating as an observer, "preventing heads of traditional families to vote as a block is close to disenfranchisement, because many people simply won't vote any other way."

Election commission officials said on Sunday that save for a few infractions, they were satisfied the voting.

"These are the first free elections we have had in 70 years, and they were not perfect, they have been a wonderful success for us," said Ilhan Husseinli, a jeweler acting as the head of the election board at station Number 35 in Mashtaga, "Now that the people have tasted democracy, they will want more of it."

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9) I cannot stress how good it felt to act as an observer, especially when most of the invited observers didn't show up. It was a pretty hectic day, much of it spent 'busting' polling stations in a 100 mile area around Baku, and I have to say that those working the polls were delighted to see us come in and start checking ballots and registrations and asking hard-ball questions. They were proud of their elections, and I feel deeply honored to have been allowed to participate in the process in my limited way. It was much more important than writing about it.

12.6.92

## Abulfaz Elchibey Interview 10)

Baku, Azerbaijan--The president-elect of the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan says that his country is willing to let Armenia maintain a humanitarian corridor to the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, but that the corridor must be strictly controlled to prevent arms smuggling. He also darkly warned of an Azeri offensive if Armenia did not come to its senses and subscribe to international law.

"There are laws governing the behavior of member states of the United Nations, signatories of the Helsinki final act and other CSCE documents that pertain to the inviolability of territory," Mr Abulfaz Elchibey said in the first interview granted since last Sunday's elections that put him in control of the country, "If the world accepts Armenian aggression in this instance, it should not come as a surprise to anyone if, after five or ten years, we were to devote all our resources to creating a large army that would wipe both Karabakh and Armenian off the map." 11)

Rather than see the conflict expand, Mr Elchibey says that Azerbaijan means to pursue a peaceful resolution of the conflict by diplomatic means and through the isolation of Armenia in international fora. He also ruled out any territorial exchange with Armenia, and categorically repeated that Karabakh remained an integral part of Azerbaijan. 12)

Between 3,000 and 4,000 people--mainly Azeri Turks--have been killed in and around Karabakh since 1988, when the Armenian majority of the enclave announced its intention to secede from Azerbaijan and attach itself to Armenia. The last Azeri was thrown out of the territory in May, after which Armenian

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10) Conducted at 11:30 pm on Wednesday, June 10th in the office of Vafa Goulizade, as a personal favor to me because I was leaving Azerbaijan in two days. The full text is reproduced as a separate newsletter.

11) The 'offensive' appears to have begun two days later, as I was winging my way to Istanbul. CNN and others, quoting Moscow and Yerevan, say the Azeris started it; Turkish Television, reporting out of Baku, said that the Armenians had initiated the new fighting. As might be imagined, this lack of clarity put me in a bit of a bind when I had to defend the interview--because to believe Moscow/Yerevan, it would appear that Abulfaz was either concealing something or outright lying. Subsequently it came out that the renewed fighting was not even in Nagorno Karabakh, but in the Geranboy region to the northeast. Typically, though, Armenians were describing events as 'the biggest Azeri offensive of the war' without bothering to answer the question of what their forces were doing outside of Nagorno Karabakh in the first place. 12) Namely, Karabakh (or parts of it) plus a corridor in exchange for Zangezur (or parts of it) in order to connect 'mainland' Azerbaijan to Nakhjivan. It is of interest to note the Armenian attitude to this idea: 'Sure! Karabakh for Nakhjivan!' The dangerous part of this argument is that there are many 'experts' who describe Nakhjivan as being 'occupied' by Azerbaijan, thus seeming to prepare the groundwork for such an 'exchange.'

militiamen punched through their own corridor linking Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia at Lachin.

Mr Elchibey also called upon international peace monitors to come to the region in order to stop the bloodshed and to allow both sides to slowly adjust to each other, but admitted that it will be very difficult for the two communities to ever live together again in Karabakh after so much blood has been shed.

"Time is needed to eliminate the hatred and distrust between the two people, Mr Elchibey said, "The priority now is to stop the bloodshed. The majority of Armenians want reconciliation and peace--so do the majority of Azeris. We must create the conditions under which Armenians and Azeris can live together, if separately."

Elchibey, the chairman of the Popular Front organization that has been in effective control of the country since May 15th when the Front made a counter-coup against a bid by old communists to seize power, was elected by 59% of the popular vote in the first freely contested presidential elections in Azerbaijan, held last Sunday. He ran on a platform of removing Azerbaijan from the Commonwealth of Independent States--which Azerbaijan never formally joined--and promising to establish a westward looking, pluralistic democracy based on a free market economy.

The leading challenger, Dr Nizami Suleymanov, received 32% of the vote, campaigning on a platform of government largesse and the promise to hire foreign mercenaries to 'cleanse Karabakh of Armenians' within three months. Suleymanov has declared that the elections were rigged and that he is the legitimate new president, having won between 80 and 90 percent of the popular vote.

International observers of the elections say that although there were some irregularities, the elections were fair and smooth and that Suleymanov's contention of massive ballot stuffing is 'insane.'

The official results have been returned from 80 of 88 regional electoral centers in Azerbaijan.

Six in Nagorno Karabakh did not vote, along with two other regions either under attack from or occupied by Armenia.

As such, the 54 year old Elchibey, an orientalist historian and Azerbaijan's leading dissident, will become the first freely elected president of Azerbaijan. Ironically, one of his first tasks will be to emasculate the presidential office itself, which he feels is too powerful and invites dictatorship.

"We have to create a system wherein absolute power does not rest in the presidency," Mr Elchibey said, "The president must be responsible to the parliament and not the other way around."

To prevent the temptation to abuse the office, Mr Elchibey favors a series of checks and balances between the judiciary, the legislature and the executive branches of government, rather along the lines of the separation of powers in the United States.

In terms of foreign policy, Mr Elchibey has consistently stressed that Azerbaijan must become truly independent of the defunct USSR in any form, and that he sees the destiny of the country as being between the East and West.

In addition to Russia, which he blames as being the instigator of the Karabakh dispute to keep both Azerbaijan and Armenia from acquiring meaningful political freedom, he singles out

neighboring Iran as the greatest threat to independent Azerbaijan.

"Iranian media has declared that the Popular Front is an atheist organization and that I am a Zionist agent," Elchibey said, "It is an effort to create antipathy against us because we call for the democratization of southern Azerbaijan. Their response is to provide Armenia--and thus Karabakh--with weapons so that 140,000 Armenians can establish their own state on our territory. At the same time, the 20 million Azeris of Iran are unable to open up their own schools--and Iran still pretends to be an impartial mediator in the Karabakh conflict."

In contrast to Iran, which maintained friendly relations with the regime of deposed president and Communist Party chief Ayaz Mutalibov, Elchibey lavished praise on such countries as Turkey and the United States for maintaining an aloof attitude toward the former communist regime, even after Azerbaijan declared independence last September.

"The US recognized Azerbaijan as a separate, independent state but was slow to establish diplomatic relations with the Mutalibov regime because it was not democratically elected," Elchibey recalled, "This was a great moral boast for us because it meant that the United States was at least taking the principles of the Popular Front into account."

The president apparent also stressed that it was principle that led the Front to condemn Iraq within days of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, as well as the Front's condemnation of the hardliner putsch against former USSR president Mikhail Gorbachev in August last year.

"There were only three institutions or individuals that in the former USSR who came out against the putsch on the first day," Elchibey said, "That was Yeltsin, Landsberger and the Popular Front of Azerbaijan. Everyone else in the USSR kept quiet while waiting to see which way the wind was blowing. We knew perfectly well that there was a danger that the putsch might succeed, but we had to stick to our principles. Our ideas are on the side of freedom, and the coup was a contradiction to that."

Elchibey, who spent 18 months at hard labor in the mid-70s on charges of defaming the Soviet Union and promoting nationalism, says that his guiding principle remains the establishment of a truly independent state of Azerbaijan, with its own army, currency and well defined frontiers in which all citizens are equally protected before the law.

"The idea terrifies the dictatorships in the region," Elchibey said, "And therein lies the danger. If we can have five months of peace, free of the war with Armenian, our economy will start to develop and then you will see the democratic movement begin in both Southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan and Central Asia. It will be impossible to stop this movement."

## POSTSCRIPT

Well, we left Azerbaijan for Istanbul on June 12th, the day before it was officially announced that Elchibey had become the new president of Azerbaijan.

There were already a few changes, and many more in store. Those that I know about that pre-dated the official results were the appointment of Towfig Gasimov as Foreign Minister and Iskender Hamidov as Minister of the Interior, with a promotion to Brigadier General. Then there was another outbreak of fighting in Nagorno Karabakh, but as you have probably gathered, I am reluctant to believe anything that happens there without being on the spot myself. Truly, there is no news about Azerbaijan once one leaves the place aside from news about Nagorno Karabakh, and usually only one side is reported because no-one wants to know about the other.

This was rudely brought home to me once I returned to the United States, and I think it appropriate to end this opus on that note.

After briefing ICWA trustees on my activities over the past year and a half, I was invited to Washington DC to testify before the Helsinki Commission of the U.S. Congress about recent developments in Azerbaijan. I was one speaker; the other was Dr Shireen Hunter, a familiar face on the Islamic-world pundit circuit in DC. 13)

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13) Dr Hunter is a 'Middle East expert' and former Iranian diplomat during the time of the Shah who is regularly trotted out on talk shows ranging from CNN to McNeal-Lehr to give a regional point of view sometimes as a scholar, sometimes as a woman and sometimes as a Muslim. She has recently rediscovered her Azeri heritage because she realized she could get more air time. I don't feel too bad about maligning her because she made an a priori decision that I somehow represent the school of thought that the 'Turkish model' should be promoted in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, although I have never said anything to that effect. But she is against it for reasons she was unable to coherently explain and she also made it abundantly and gratuitously clear that she is against me in a personal and insidious way that is the more surprising because we had never met before. Apparently, she even called up the Helsinki Commission to complain about my being invited to address the hearing because I am 'pro-Turkish,' whatever that means. Anyway, at the outset of the hearing, Shireen announced that Azerbaijan is 'one of those places' where locals only tell foreigners (herself excluded) what they want to hear--IE, that my experience there was of no value. Later, she spoke about locals 'pressing the American button'--IE, that my informants were responding to the fact that I am American, and thus once again only telling me what they think an American wants to hear. There were some other nasty and insidious and totally gratuitous digs that amounted to her calling me an idiot, but I let them pass lest the public former degenerate into a contest of whose expertise was better. I am tempted to include a full transcript of the hearing but will refrain from doing so; verbatim transcripts can be embarrassing, and hers are worse than most and makes for a painful read. My presentation and series of



The audience chamber was packed, and packed with people who had come to get a close look at the devil, me.

I would say 75% of those present were Armenian Americans, and from what I was subsequently told, they knew everything about me from my place of birth to how I like my steaks cooked.

They did have a few detail's wrong, however: apparently, it is widely believed that I am a convert to Islam and that I refer to myself as 'a Turk.' It is also widely believed and publicized among the Armenian American community that I am a 'Turkish agent.' It almost goes without saying that they didn't want to ask me many question about recent developments in Azerbaijan.

They weren't there to listen; they were there to sling shit.

'Slander' is too kind a word.

The hearing ended when a leading figure in the Armenian Assembly of America quoted back a selected paragraph from my ICWA report 'In The Black Garden' in an effort to have me appear to discredit myself as a journalist. Then he informed the faithful that Xojali ('your beloved Xojali") never happened--IE, that I had fabricated the story about the massacre.

He then said that he was 'disgusted' to see me in the room, and stomped out.

The audience broke into cheers and ovation.

Kill the messenger, they seemed to want to say.

The next day I was invited to replace the key-note speaker of a two day symposium on Nagorno Karabakh held by the Carnegie Endowment and the American Institute For Peace attended by delegates from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia 14) to 'discuss' the problem. 15)

I thought the invitation was an honor until I realized why I had been invited to address the august assembly: the honor of picking up the hornet's nest was mine, and my role as key note speaker was to be the first one stung. 16)

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responses was, all things considered, not too bad; but I pity Shireen in editing her own, and I am not willing or allowed to edit hers for her. Interested parties can get the transcript of the two hour hearing of June 22nd 1992 from the Helsinki Commission (CSCE), headed by Senator Denis DeConcini and Representative Steny Hoyer.

14) The 'Russian' component were all Armenians from Moscow, with one exception--Galina Starovoitova, former deputy to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow from Armenia and the most famously (or infamously) pro-Armenian individual in what was the USSR.

15) I was initially slated to be an observer, along with the usual crowd of spobks and dips and lobby people whose lives are spent shuffling from one think-tank picnic to the next. Shireen Hunter made an obligatory appearance, and once again rambled on about the dangers of pan-Turkism and those who promoted that ideology, cloaking a sound-bit presentation as a question before ducking out the door to her next stop of the day. One tired of Shireen Hunter pretty quickly. A more pleasant encounter was with Farzin, my guide to Tehran. I was worried about him because there was no news of him throughout May in Baku, and I thought that he might have been picked up in the reported crack down in Iran after my departure.

16) No sooner had I given my pessimistic tour of the horizon than the Armenian/Russian delegates launched into a major attack on me

Once again, no-one wanted to talk about 'recent developments;' they only wanted to bring the conflict to a different venue.

Happily, maybe, I wasn't the only speaker, and although I don't think it particularly valuable to detail the proceedings, a synopsis might be in order.

The Azeri team was well-meaning and open but almost pathetic in the face of the very well-organized Armenian and 'Russian' assault. 17) While the former stressed how well everyone had once lived together under the old, bad Soviet system, the latter cloaked their arguments in terms that they thought pandered to American sensibilities. They praised Woodrow Wilson and the concept of 'Self Determination,' and repeatedly referred to the Karabakh conflict as a war of liberation very similar to that of 1776 between the Colonies and the Crown. Maybe it should come as no surprise that the Armenia Armenians seemed hard-line but almost reasonable, whereas the diaspora Armenians were the most fanatic. A Dashnaksutun priest was particularly vicious.

All in all, it was the most incredibly depressing two days I have ever spent, watching nominally intelligent people dig a hole for themselves that is only suited for more bodies.

For me, the only beacon of light in the dark picture was the presentation of Max Kempelman, the man who was the chief arms negotiator with the Soviets in Vienna during the 1980s. He actually pin-downed U.S. policy on self-determination, announcing that 'Self Determination is a basic human right but that it does not mean the right of secession through violence.'

I liked that summation, and will use it in the future.

Another interesting presentation was that of the Iranian participant, who almost eloquently detailed Iran's legitimate interest in the conflict and the region. He sold me, anyway.

But the Armenians only wanted to grandstand.

It was history so deep you needed a shovel, and it smelled.

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that focused on the question of how much time I had spent among the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh. Very little, as I will be the first to admit. But I thought the point was for me to give a unique view from Baku. Galina Starovoitova later came up and apologized for being 'so harsh'. I told her, in Russian, that it wasn't important. 'You speak Russian?' she asked with surprise. I replied that it wasn't very good because I usually speak Azeri when in Baku. 'You live in Baku?' she asked, incredulously. Yes, for about a year, I replied. She was stunned. Sadly, her ignorance was typical of the conference, or a least its response to me: no-one was listening to anything I might have to say; they had not even bothered to listen to the fact that I was resident in Azerbaijan. It was like shouting to the deaf.

17) My friend, the one-man foreign policy maker on the run, Araz Azimov, made a good effort to speak English, but came with his hands tied behind his back: Baku had loaded him down with a bunch of bad statistics. He announced, for example, that there were still 80,000 Armenians living in Baku. Afterward, I nailed him down on this and told him to go and correct the record of the proceedings and change the number to 18,000, lest he look like a fool. He was highly appreciative of this, but more so when I took him out to a rhythm and blues bar to relax.

Most discouraging was the Armenians' determination to push the pious fiction that it is only the Karabakh Armenians, seeking self-determination, who are involved in the fighting in Karabakh.

I kept my pen busy but my mouth shut most of the time because of the perception that I somehow represented the Azeri side, but at the end of the second day, during the closing comments, I did note my disappointment that both sides were so absolute in their position.

Then the Armenia Armenians invited me to Armenia, and I accepted.

Then the Helsinki Commission informed me that they had received some 'fan-mail.'

Once more, I was being demonized in the vilest possible manner by the Armenian Assembly of America.

Kill the messenger.

Here are some choice extracts:

'We are deeply disappointed in the Helsinki Commission's decision to give Thomas Goltz a platform from which to distort and defend Azerbaijan's record and policy toward Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia....Goltz is married to a Turkish woman, converted to Islam, often refers to himself as a Turk, and is a personal friend of the new Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey...

...The real travesty...is that Goltz had a blank check in a commission forum to advocate positions which represent the exact opposite of the Commission's purpose. The Commission may as well give someone who supports Saddam Hussein's persecution of Kurds the opportunity to justify Iraq's policy without Commission criticism...Goltz...refused to comment on the pogroms, minimized the relevance of the blockades, condemned the Armenians for saving themselves from starvation by breaking the blockade, denied Azeri attacks on Armenians, recreated Azerbaijani President Elchibey as a democrat in spite of Elchibey's fascist and terrorist connections with marginal ultra-nationalist parties...which even Shireen Hunter acknowledged 18)....

(then, viz the 'offensive:')...The latest Azeri offensive which began on June 9th has created twenty thousand Armenian and Russian refugees and has left approximately one thousand dead Armenians and Russian civilians already...' 19)

The Commission came to my defense in the following manner:

'...we are sorry that the briefing so upset you...but we should state at the outset that we found several of your remarks in the letter quite disturbing...particularly troubling were your remarks about Thomas Goltz. You noted that he is married to a Turkish woman, and described him as 'a convert to Islam' and a

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18) Pretty slick point, making Hunter, 'an Azeri', be more critical of Elchibey than good 'ol me. And true enough. Hunter loaths Elchibey and did use words like 'fascist' to describe him.  
19) Again, I refer you to the transcript of the June 22nd Hearing for my remarks, but would like to add one small comment here: are these people out of their minds or just liars? The putative 'offensive' begins on June 9th? I won't dispute the numbers of refugees and dead because I have no information, but where the hell do the Russians come from?

personal friend of Azerbaijani President Elchibey. For the record, Mr Goltz, an American of German-Irish background, tells us he is a Catholic. He is indeed, married to a Turkish national. But you seem to be implying that anyone with personal or family ties to Muslims, Turks, or by implication, Azeris, is unsuited to testify about Azerbaijan or Nagorno Karabakh for obvious lack of objectivity. By extension, however, the same could be said about Armenians or anyone with personal or family ties to Armenians...we deem any such considerations (demeaning, implicitly racist and explicitly contrary to Helsinki principles and ideals...

....Mr Goltz...did not deny that anti-Armenian pogroms or Azeri attacks on Armenians had taken place; he said that many people in Azerbaijan believe these pogroms to have been inspired or staged by the KGB....he made no statements about which side is 'right' or 'wrong' in the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, whether self-determination should take precedence over territorial integrity or vice-versa, or whether border changes might or might not be a good idea...' 20)

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20) My own (unsent) response is the following, rather less diplomatic epistle:

'You may not like me and you may not like what I have to say but you should at least get a couple of biographical details straight before you slip into slander.

a) I am married to a Turkish national but have had plenty of healthy sex with other nationalities and ethnic groups

b) I have never converted to Islam and my wife would divorce me if I did because she is an atheist

c) Due to assonance, many of my close friends and family do refer to me playfully as 'Tommy the Turk'; one of my five other German-Irish Catholic American-as-apple-pie brothers is referred to as 'Neill the Banana Peel', another as 'Stan the Man', another as 'Vince the Prince'. The other two brothers have names not so easily joined with other words in play, although one of my two sisters, Martha, is usually referred to as 'Mart the Fart.'

d) I have known Elchibey for about a year in friendly if formal context; we are not drinking buddies and I don't think he would accept an invitation to go deer hunting with me in Montana, pheasant jumping in North Dakota or ice fishing in Minnesota. And I am pretty sure I wouldn't want him along even if he were keen. He wouldn't fit in with my 'bacci-spitting, stoggie-sucking, beer and booze swillin' pals out here in God's country.

Which brings up the main point of this epistle.

Where are you from, Krikorian?

I had assumed you were from the United States of America, like me. I have no dual loyalties, only foreign places I go to and report on. And then I come home, here, to Montana.

And I can tell you one thing quite clearly: outside the Beltway, there are a lot of regular folks who are getting pretty tired about getting waltzed over and schmoozed by 'salt pricks'-- people with one foot in one land and the other in another with the third leg dangling in the salty brine.'

Well, after this series of communications and the news that the gentleman who penned the complaint from the AAA had just moved to Yerevan to take up some high-level post, I started wondering how wise it would be for me to go to Armenia.

Character assassination is one thing, but real assassination is something else and getting killed because you are brave only means you are dead.

That may sound paranoid, but I began wondering if a little accident might not be in store if I took the invitation and traveled to Yerevan.

And this leaves me incredibly depressed--the more so given the venue where I am completing this epistle--because if there is a threat out there it is one coming from American Armenians, and not even Armenian Armenians.

Last night, under the full moon, I took a walk down to the Yellowstone River and wondered if I am a marked man.

But hyperbole aside, I have to say that I almosy knew it would be so when I picked up the telephone in Agdam and booked a call to the Washington Post office in Moscow in order to file that horrible story about Xojali on February 27th, 1992.

I knew it.

I had written about Azerbaijan before.

Quite a bit.

More than any reporter before.

But it was that goddamn story that was going to identify me with Azerbaijan, and I knew it when I filed it.

That is where the 'Everything You Never Wanted To Know' business actually began.

Because suddenly, really, I wanted to know everything no-one else wanted to know. Fish-bowl expertise, as it were.

And it sounds like there are some folks out there who think I know too much.

Well, as I said, I am completing this epistle in Montana.

The weather is wonderful, the fish are jumpin' and folks are keen on learning about what I have been up to. A couple of high school pals drove out from North Dakota to see me because I will not be around for my 20th year high school reunion and I showed them some ICWA files and they asked a lot of questions and I tried to answer them. They were interested in what was happening in the world and why they never read about Azerbaijan in the local newspaper.

I also gave a lecture at the university, entitled

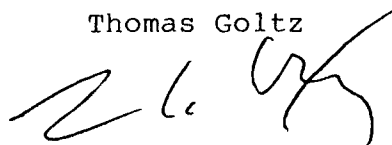
'Terra Incognita or Terra I Don' Wanna Know Aboutcha', and the hall was packed with local folks who did want to know, too.

And now its time to head back out to some place new and start another magnum opus entitled 'Everything You Never Wanted To Know About Uzbekistan,' or something.

There is still a lot of virgin turf to explore, and my batteries are recharged.

Livingston, Montana  
July 15th 1992

Thomas Goltz



Received in Hanover, July 24, 1992