

# The eXile's Taibbi reviews RJ's Ajay Goyal



By **MATT TAIBBI**  
The Russia Journal

Wondering what an article with my byline is doing in this publication? Here's the short version of the story. In the wake of an amusingly unfriendly correspondence I recently had with the publisher of this newspaper, Ajay Goyal, I was invited to submit a "Press Review" column for these pages. I was, he said, to be paid \$50 per column. I agreed. So here it is.

In a correspondence with Goyal there is always a lot of gauntlet-throwing that goes on, on both sides—taunts, thinly-veiled threats, macho challenges, put-downs, exaggerated displays of waggish effrontery, insults and insinuations, false concessions of fictitious defeat, and so on and so on, all the way down to threats without veils at all, and naked provocations. With respect to the latter, one of Goyal's favorite tricks is to offer his despised correspondent a job. He's offered me one several times now.

If I were forced into the role of an impartial observer of his rhetorical method, I would probably have to concede that this is one of Goyal's more successful tactics, the making of a crudely insulting lowball job offer. It's quite funny and he does it with flair, as though it comes naturally to him. Who knows, maybe it does—only his real employees know for sure. In any case, not being the sort of person who likes to back away from an irresponsible provocation, I decided to accept the offer, and up the ante a little bit. The subject of this assigned

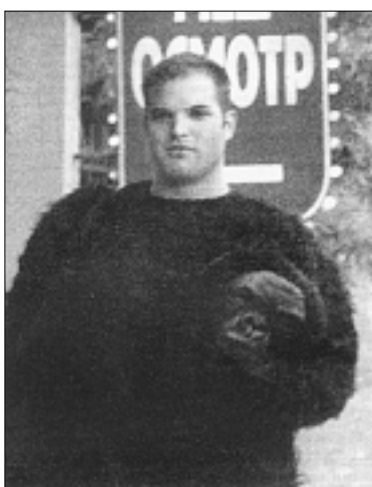
Press Review will therefore be Goyal's own "Intellectual Capital" column. It will be interesting to see if he actually publishes it.

The "Intellectual Capital" column, which once featured a priceless photo of the august entrepreneur-publisher pressing a cell phone to his dark cheek, is a classic example of what happens when the boss takes too many liberties with the company toys. We're all familiar with the cliché of the interfering sports team owner who rings up the coach in the middle of the third quarter to call for his favorite end-around play; the media equivalent is the publisher or owner who gives himself his own talk show or column.

There's no law that says that a businessman can't be a good writer. But he does begin with some disadvantages. Unlike a professional writer, he is not trained to pay close attention to the words he uses, generally being content to get his point across in whatever strikes him at the time as being the easiest possible way. This deficiency may account for some of the more embarrassing aspects of Goyal's most recent column, the May 18 stunner entitled, "Loyalty to colleagues greatest managerial asset: Why Russians value relationships over financial compensation."

I only have 800 words to work with here, so I'll confine myself to a few points about this column, which basically offers Goyal's readers advice on how to improve worker productivity among Russian employees. Here is the most disturbing passage in the piece:

"But how to motivate Russian employees that always seem lost at work, their hearts at home, thinking about their cats and flowers in their 2x2 backyards...? This eternal struggle



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still goes on for the hearts and minds of Russian employees, who seem to be asking themselves all the time: Can I ever get rich working here?"

The term "hearts and minds" has its origins in lingo used by American and British special forces in foreign wars. It was used to describe the

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effort to win over the loyalty of subject populations when force alone was insufficient. The SAS used it to describe the effort to build loyalty among natives in places like Malaysia, while the term "Hearts and Minds" for Americans has become so indelibly associated with Vietnam that it has been used as a title for numerous books and documentaries about the war (see such books as "The American Struggle for Hearts and Minds in Vietnam, by Richard Hunt).

Considering the point of Goyal's column—which aims to educate Western readers on how to get Russian employees to work harder to



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enhance the profitability of their (presumably foreign-owned) companies—this seems to me to be in, to put it mildly, atrocious taste.

Goyal's column is full of contradictions and rhetorical slip-ups that involuntarily reveal his tortured attitudes toward both his readers and his host country. On the one hand, he repeatedly praises Russians for their soulfulness, their "moral wealth" and "integrity", their devotion to friends and family, their warmth. He does so with an excessiveness which is more than a little unnerving, particularly given the title of the column: "Why Russians value relationships over financial compensation."

Students of history will recall that white plantation owners in America used similar tactics to argue against the freeing of the slaves. Time and again, it was argued that blacks—who were so free-spirited and childlike and close to nature, always singing and dancing—would actually be damaged by being released from bondage and forced to take financial responsibility for themselves. Without the master to take care of them, they would lose that childlike quality, etc. Goyal comes dangerously close to saying the same thing in this column, with its refer-

ences to "financial compensation" amounting to a not-so-subtle argument that Russians do not need to be paid as much as regular people.

The impression is reinforced by the (clearly irritated) reference to the alleged Russian habit of leaving their hearts at home, among their "cats and flowers in their 2x2 backyards". They're always singing and dancing when they should be baling hay, those Russians. That one sentence about the 2x2 backyards undermines all the praise in the rest of the piece, and reveals it for what it is, a disingenuous tactic put forward in service of a less generous argument. The contradiction is laid bare most plainly in the following passage:

"Russia was built—and at times saved—by the millions who belong to this pack, not the few who sit in "brainstorming sessions" selling U.S. made cat food. Russians have always aimed for and achieved some higher goal, not a bonus or dividend on five pounds of extra burgers sold."

Goyal writes this in a column which is quite openly aimed at increasing Russian worker productivity. In other words, he tries to appear pro-Russian by praising Russians for not being interested in selling burgers, all the while writing a column which aims to teach Westerners how to motivate Russians... to sell more burgers.

There are many other points to make about this article, particularly with regard to its distracting grammatical problems (the reader of a Goyal article must get used to grappling with such disturbing images as a numerous group of individuals physically sharing one heart, as is implied by the phrase "the problem of getting people to put their heart into their work"), but I don't have space to tackle them here. So I'll just end it as is and leave the rest for another day. I anticipate the inevitable note from the editor handling this submission: "It needs an ending." So it does. It's embarrassing, turning in subpar work. Imagine how Goyal must feel... ■

## Is Russia's latest grand plan a tunnel to the U.S.?

Also, a look at how today's students are taught about the Soviet Union

### MOSCOW MAILBAG



By **JOE ADAMOV**

The writer is host of the Voice of Russia's Moscow Mailbag program.

The Soviet Union may have been a land of fantastically grandiose projects, but some in Russia and abroad still have big ideas for this country, such as a recent proposal to build a tunnel across the Bering Straits. This week, I'll discuss that, as well as answer questions on new Russian architecture, political comedy and healthcare.

**Q: I would like to know more about that railway project to link Russia and the North American continent. Could you say something about that, Joe?**

— *Geoffrey Lund, Preston, Lancashire, U.K.*

**A:** Today, the idea of linking Russia and North America by rail seems to be forgotten. Instead, the very latest plan is a highway tunnel under the Bering Straits that would connect the two. Several investors are interested in financing this project. Essentially, it would be a highway from London to New York, through eight countries. They say it would be as important as the Great Silk Road of ancient times. The tunnel is set to cost about \$40 billion, and would be 100 km. in length.

**Q: Joe, I've a few unrelated questions. The first is about building construction in Russia; has it improved much? Second, is there political comedy in Russia? And lastly, Joe, could you explain how Soviet history is taught in schools today?**

— *Peter Lautzenheiser, Wooster, Ohio, U.S.A.*

**A:** Our buildings have improved a great deal, both internally and externally. Today's architectural design is

pleasant to the eye. Most of the new buildings are built to be sold, unlike those under the old system. Therefore, they must attract a buyer.

Today, apartments have big kitchens, not like the 5 sq. meter kitchen in my condominium, built 35 years ago under Khrushchev. New apartments have spacious entryways and bedrooms with wall cupboards and adjoining bathrooms. Each room has its own exit; they are not interconnected. Outer walls are insulated, and windows consist of three glass panels. Apartments now have thermostats. Ceilings are over 3 meters high, which gives one a feeling of volume.

At last, homes have underground parking lots, and the territory is guarded. How many balconies in Moscow were glassed in, each in a different style? New facades feature a combination of white and red-brown brick and are not just flat panels of concrete or glass, but designed so they'd be pleasant to look at. Homes today are not just places to eat and sleep; comfort and beauty have been built into them.

Regarding Russian political comedy, that very same NTV television channel, which was supposedly deprived of its freedom, still produces its "Kukli" show. All the program's characters are puppets, and one of the main characters is President Vladimir Putin.

Most of the puppets are easily recognizable and the actors behind the scene reproduce voices and manners of speaking with unsettling accuracy. Another serial on Channel 6 called Itogo is what I would term a satire. Our press carries no end of political cartoons. Two vaudeville satirists, Zhvanetski and Zadornov, are very popular.

Finally, on teaching students about the Soviet Union. At one time there was a lack of textbooks on Soviet history. Today, we have 40 textbooks on the subject, but most are not historically accurate and students are unable to draw the correct conclusions. Some history books have even been taken off the school curriculum. I feel there are many people whose hearts are still in the old system.

**Q: How does your health system work? Do you have socialized medicine?**

— *Mark Shaw, Sarasota, Florida, U.S.A.*

**A:** Yes, we have socialized medicine. It was the only kind of healthcare we had under the old system. I've been attached to my clinic for almost 50 years. But changes are taking place. The best doctors have slowly drifted into the private clinics and hospitals because their income there is incomparably greater. Can you blame them?

Yes, the system of free medicine exists and still works, but it is no doubt inferior to the new private establishments. At my state-sponsored medical clinic, I had some new dentures made. They cost me two month's pay.

What don't you see advertised in the magazines today? They'll come to your home to perform an eye operation, and the quality of the work is even guaranteed.

(E-mail the Moscow Mailbag column at editor@russiajournal.com.)