

The Soviets are also engaged in fundamental economic reform. New words are being heard: decentralization; privatization; and the hallmark of capitalism -- profit. It is here where the stakes are highest and where the difficulties are greatest. It goes to the heart of the structure of privilege, corruption and complacency which has characterized the Soviet nightmare. It also demands that choices and opportunities not only be made available, but that they be treated as valuable by the worker.

This call to initiative, this exhortation to work harder and with pride is where Mr. Gorbachev's greatest vulnerability lies. For there is a quid pro quo. Soviet workers want evidence that their new efforts will be rewarded. They have to be enticed. Their attitudes will not change overnight, nor will they change because others want them to. They must be convinced. And the proof so far has been remarkable largely by its absence.

The dilemma is clear: the Soviet economy will not improve until attitudes and behaviour change. But attitudes and behaviour will not change until the economy improves. That is the most urgent test of Mr. Gorbachev's revolution.

There is another basic change, less publicized, but equally important. Mr. Gorbachev wants to reform the legal system. Much of the work is underway, largely quietly and behind closed doors. It is of abiding importance. For it demonstrates that Mr. Gorbachev wants to make his society less arbitrary, less capricious, less cruel. He seeks, in effect, to make it a society of laws, laws which many of us would still find repugnant, but laws nonetheless -- with due process, with rights, with duties and responsibilities. If he fails he will not gain the confidence of his countrymen that the system has changed. And if he does not safeguard the progress he has made through legal guarantees, his own grip on power becomes more tenuous.

And throughout, history is being re-written. Just as the present is precarious and the future uncertain, the Soviet past - once graven in stone - has been shattered. Old idols have been discredited. Joseph Stalin is now seen as being at the root of the Soviet economic failure. Leonid Brezhnev is now judged to have institutionalized stagnation. Unmentionable events are now documented - whether the bloody purges of the pre-War period or the Stalin-Hitler pact to dismember Poland. Criticism is encouraged. They say in Moscow that the most difficult problem today is "predicting the past".