

# Absolutely Yeltsin

BY FRED WEIR

**R**ussian President Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly purged his entire government in late-March, tossing out most of the veteran members of his reform team in a stunning display of his near absolute powers.

Yeltsin sacked the dour but steady prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who ran the country through five crisis-packed years. Another victim was the aggressively ambitious interior minister, Anatoly Kulikov, chief of Russia's police and its most viable military force, the 300,000-strong interior troops. Gone too is Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais, the architect of Russia's deeply corrupt privatization campaign and the most pro-Western politician on Yeltsin's team. Chubais had been considered ripe for sacrifice since last fall, when he was caught accepting a veiled bribe in the form of a \$90,000 advance for a still unwritten chapter in a book about Russian privatization (see "Robbing Russia Blind," January 11).

Many other cabinet ministers were quietly brought back in the days that followed, strengthening the impression that those three were the real targets of Yeltsin's purge. The new acting prime minister, 35-year-old Sergei Kiriyenko, is a liberal ex-banker with barely a year's experience in national politics and no power base of his own.

Having removed the most experienced and able top players, Yeltsin may be setting himself up to run for president again in 2000, even though a third term is forbidden by the constitution he authored. The Constitutional Court—which is widely viewed as a tool of the Kremlin—is considering the argument that Yeltsin's first term doesn't count because he was elected in 1991 in a dif-

ferent country, the Soviet Union, under different laws.

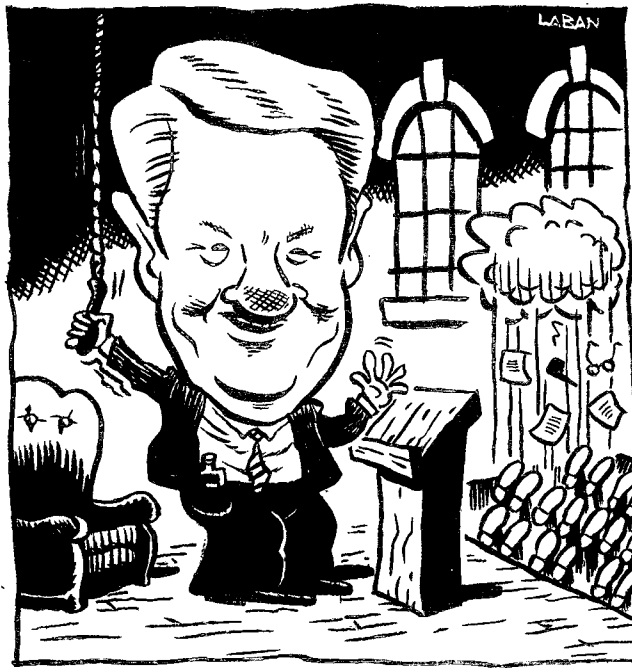
Yeltsin's clean sweep set hearts palpitating in Washington, where—off the record—Clinton administration officials complained about not being consulted in advance. Chernomyrdin's departure is a special headache for U.S. planners. The stolid prime minister had been regarded as a kind of insurance policy against chaos should the ailing

ing to position Chernomyrdin as the logical successor. That's what triggered Yeltsin's wrath."

Yeltsin is notoriously jealous of threats to his authority. When he underwent heart surgery in 1996, for instance, he handed the nuclear suitcase—his badge of office—to Chernomyrdin just moments before going under the knife and snatched it back five minutes after coming out of anesthesia.

Another theory says that Yeltsin replaced his government in hopes of forestalling mass protests over deteriorating economic conditions. Yeltsin himself explained the firings as an effort to "give new impetus to economic reform," but in the next breath insisted that economic policy would not change. "The hallmark of Yeltsin's political style is to meet crisis with theater," says Viktor Levashov, an analyst at the left-wing Institute of Social and Political Research. "He names the guilty officials and ceremoniously fires them. In this way he shows at once that he is completely in charge but totally blameless. It makes a perfect substitute for real activity."

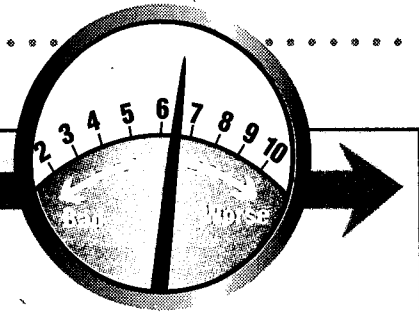
Meanwhile, the Asian financial crisis has sucked foreign money out of Russia's financial system, causing the Moscow stock market to lose half its value in six months and the cost of government debt to double. Plunging oil prices in recent weeks have brought Russia to the brink of bankruptcy—excise taxes on oil exports account for 25 percent of total government revenue. Russia's chronic problem of public sector wage arrears has also reached a dangerous new peak as government funds have dried up. "Political explosions are coming," says Levashov, "and our president, as always, is looking to save himself." ■



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and visibly fading Yeltsin suddenly leave the stage.

During his most recent trip to the United States, Chernomyrdin was treated like a visiting head of state and paired constantly with Vice President Al Gore as "leaders of the future." According to one theory, this is what did Chernomyrdin in. "Chernomyrdin survived all those years by showing almost dog-like loyalty to Yeltsin," says Andrei Piontkowski, director of the independent Center for Strategic Studies. "But lately, because of fears about Yeltsin's health, the Americans and many in the Russian elite have been try-



## The In These Times Index of Indecencies

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### Father Nature

As El Niño battered the West Coast this winter, an elderly Nipomo, Calif., man named Al Niño says he received numerous calls from angry Californians who blamed him for the mess. "It's happened at least a half-dozen times," Niño told the *Los Angeles Times*. "It's always something like, 'Why are you doing this?' And I say, 'Well, I didn't really have nothing else to do. I thought maybe it would be kind of fun.'"

### Death of a Salesman

Charles Cornell was, by all accounts, the very model of a modern British salesman: clever, hard-working and aggressive. Unfortunately, after a recent car accident, his personality changed—for the better. A court in London recently awarded Cornell \$535,000 in damages after hearing testimony that the salesman had become much "nicer to be around" and "too nice" to work effectively, London's *Daily Telegraph* reports. "The accident has taken away the competitive edge," Cornell's counsel told the court. "His relatives find him a more pleasant personality—less aggressive. He now muddles through life. ... Not a good image for a salesman."

### Fired Up

This hurts me more than it hurts you: A recent study of heart-attack victims conducted at 45 hospitals across the United States from 1989 to 1994 explored the

link between work and heart-attack risk. It found that the most stressful events were deadline pressure and firing people. According to Dr. Murray A. Mittleman of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, the risk of a heart attack doubled for managers in the week after they fired someone.

### And the Winner Is ...

After watching *Chicago Hope* star Christine Lahti miss her big moment at this year's Golden Globe Awards because she was in the bathroom, the makers of Kaopectate hit on a novel way to get their product in the spotlight during the Oscars in March, according to a press release. The company sent custom-made "Kaopectate Oscar Relief Baskets" to some of the top nominees—hoping to help them give a "solid performance" during the nerve-wracking event. ■

## the right

# The End of Innocence

BY FREDERICK CLARKSON

Over the past six months, Barnes & Noble has been simultaneously targeted by a Christian Right censorship campaign and vilified as a corporate predator that overruns traditional independent bookstores. As fate would have it, Barnes & Noble's public relations problems have collided at the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

It all started with Operation Rescue head honcho Flip Benham. In addition to their usual intimidation tactics at abortion clinics, Benham and his militant membership have been busy plastering high schools all over the country with posters picturing gory fetuses.

Meanwhile, Operation Rescue has joined with Focus on the Family and the

American Family Association in a direct-action campaign against Barnes & Noble for selling what it calls "child pornography." In particular, these groups object to books by photographers David Hamilton and Jock Sturges.

When Benham was invited to speak at Liberty University last fall, he led a group of Liberty students down to Lynchburg's E.C. Glass High School, where they blocked the doors to the building and were arrested for trespassing. This got Benham six months in jail and irked Falwell by disturbing town-gown relations.

When Benham was thrown in the hoosegow, his colleagues converged on Lynchburg. They discovered that none

other than Barnes & Noble had taken over Liberty's campus bookstore, where—Lo and Behold!—they found a copy of Hamilton's *The Age of Innocence*, a book that got the chain indicted in Alabama and Tennessee for selling child pornography.

Now, Operation Rescue has called for a similar indictment in Lynchburg against the campus bookstore and Falwell. "It is a sad commentary that Dr. Falwell would not condemn child pornographers," says Keith Tucci, the former head of Operation Rescue. "In fact, he invited them onto his Liberty University campus. Yet, he has condemned the Rev. Flip Benham for preaching the gospel at E.C. Glass High School." ■