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The Mouse That Roared

By Richard Lourie

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The pen is mightier than the sword but not than the tank!" quipped a Czech intellectual after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague.

Beijing's reactions to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to human rights activist and writer Liu Xiaobo brought back memories of the bad old days. We heard the same old insults dished out by Chinese Communist Party hacks, and the sudden concoction of the alternative Confucius Prize was so oafishly clumsy and so Brezhnev-like that it made you wonder whether China is anywhere near ready for the 21st century.

Russia, to its disgrace, went along with China's call to boycott the Nobel Prize ceremony on Dec. 10. Too bad because it would have been an ideal moment to show the world that Russia was truly shedding its old skin, at least enough to support dissent in other countries. Moreover, it was an impolitic choice by the Kremlin at a time when Russia is seeking closer ties with the West in terms of investment and alliance. Most of the dozen or so countries that boycotted — Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam — were givens. Russia was not. It had a choice, and it made it.

Since this was mostly a game of symbols, face and prestige, Russia's choice tells us two important things about the state of the struggle for its soul and direction. One, Russia still exhibits no particular respect for the Western sense of rights and values. Second, and more important, Russia has demonstrated that it is every bit as clueless about the currents of 21st-century history as China is.

With all due respect to the brave and talented Liu, the man of the hour in mid-December was Julian Assange, the suave cyber-anarchist straight from Central Casting. He has everything perfect, from the name to the hair. Assange represents the great new paradigm shift, the one that the powers-that-be fear most — the inexorable high-tech-driven decentralization of power that can give the upper hand to individuals and groups over strong states.

China has been savvy to the power of the Internet but overemphasized two aspects at the expense of the third. China saw how the Internet could be used as a weapon against foreign enemies and how it must be controlled at home to prevent the "wrong" information from reaching people. Intelligence company Stratfor says its sources "believe China's government-sponsored hacking capabilities are the best in the world." That, they add, could also be the problem. "Nationalist Chinese hackers, if motivated by the right cause and united through the pervasive Internet, can always turn on the government."

Though Assange has mostly been revealing U.S. secrets, he has other declared aims: "Our primary targets are those highly oppressive regimes in China, Russia and Central Eurasia." The WikiLeaks cables referred to rumors that Putin has funneled about $40 billion abroad — something that analyst Stanislav Belkovsky claimed in a 2007 interview with Die Welt. But what if

WikiLeaks exposed the actual money trail?

Russia already has its own heroic anti-corruption blogger, Alexei Navalny, whose intelligence and charisma make him the only likely rival to Putin and Medvedev now on the horizon. But personalities aren't paramount here. In the past, the opposition had only the power of language and the example of courage. Now it has the mightiest instrument ever devised at their disposal. With their passion and free imagination they will be better at wielding it than the establishment. The pen may not be mightier than the tank, but the mouse most definitely is.

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