

THE POLITICAL GAME

Russian hotel dangles by its merit

By C. Fraser Smith
Staff Writer

The question for today, readers, is whether merit can survive politics.

The idea was this: Aspiring Russian capitalists would move into a brand new hotel with a Russian restaurant to be constructed on the campus of the University of Maryland, College Park.

Arriving in classes of 20 to 30, the Russians would learn about the market economy from professors, bankers, factory managers and others.

All of this was to be paid for by the U.S. and Russian governments and by the state of Maryland.

Then came politics.

President George Bush, the Republican, was endorsed in his race for re-election by William Donald Schaefer, the Democratic governor of Maryland.

Then George Bush lost.

Then the Schaefer administration sent a letter to the White House, outlining favors a departing, though grateful president, might wish to do for his friend in Annapolis. Among these was a request for approval of the exchange program.

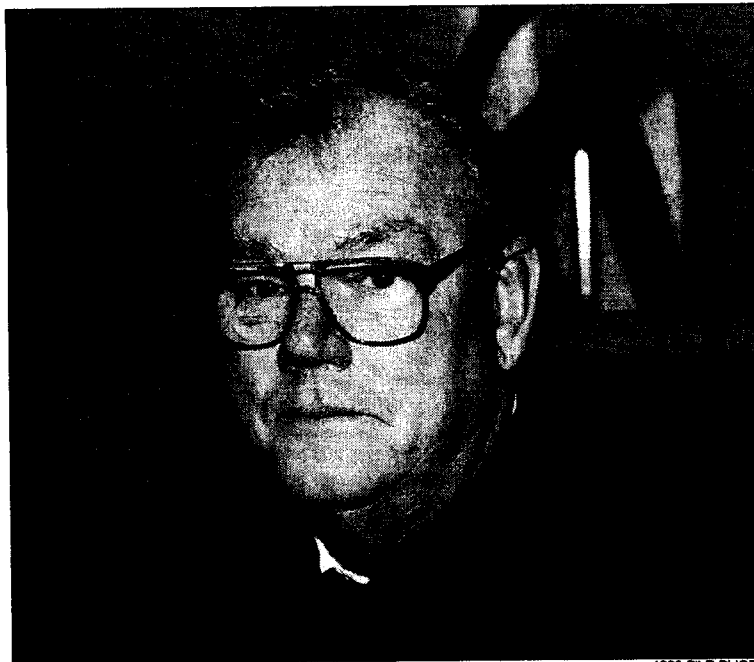
But this did not occur.

Political influence apparently having failed, the project is back where it was before the endorsement.

"This thing was working on its merits," says Mark Wasserman, the secretary of Economic and Employment Development. And on that basis, it may still prevail.

Will the lion roar once more?

When he served in the Maryland Senate, they called him the



1989 FILE PHOTO

Judge John C. Coolahan, a.k.a. the Lion of Halethorpe.

Lion of Halethorpe. And now, after four years on the District Court bench in Catonsville, Judge John C. Coolahan may be gathering himself for one last roar.

"I want to defeat my third incumbent senator," he told an acquaintance.

Or maybe he'll run for Baltimore County executive.

"I can't talk about it," he said in a phone conversation this week. Blissfully married in private, politics and judgeships must be divorced in public.

He says he will retire from the bench in May of 1994. Presumably, he'll make a decision between now and then.

As a senator in the '70s and '80s, Mr. Coolahan served on Budget and Tax, a committee that lis-

tens impatiently to public officials trying to explain their stewardship of the public dollar.

Mr. Coolahan's nickname derived from his shock of blondish hair and his booming voice. He once referred to Mr. Schaefer, then the mayor of Baltimore, as "Willie Don the Con," prompting a mayoral walkout.

But as governor, Mr. Schaefer conferred a judgeship on his tormentor. Some said Mr. Coolahan was lifted to the bench to remove him from the Senate, where he might obstruct a gubernatorial project or two.

Whatever the reason, he says he's enjoyed the work and the respite.

"It's been a good four years to be out of public office," he said this

week, referring to the voters' rising tide of unhappiness with incumbent politicians.

Still, in another year or so, he might be ready for a comeback.

Or maybe not.

"Staying retired is also an option," he said. "I've been working since I was 12."

The unappreciated public vocation

Friends of Republican Anne Arundel County Executive Robert R. Neall have said he's leaning away from running for governor in 1994.

Mr. Neall says he's carefully considering his options.

Support for both positions can be found in a pep talk he gave Sunday during the Howard County Republican Party's Lincoln Day Dinner.

There is much talk about who will run for this or that office, he said, but candidates "are just people, people who are willing to put their lives on hold and offer themselves for public service, an increasingly unappreciated vocation."

Public officials wonder these days if the long hours away from home and the abuse that accompanies public service are worth it.

Mr. Neall, who reportedly did not work the roomful of eager Howard Republicans, continued with his teach-in:

"Democracy," he said, "draws its strength and vitality from the commitment and passion of the people." Candidates "can only be as organized as you are, as energetic as you are, as innovative as you are and as committed as you are."

Some Republicans agreed — but wondered what Mr. Neall's own energy level might be.