



**RED SCARE:**  
Goldblum,  
Schreiber and  
LaPaglia plan  
to go negative

LIEV SCHREIBER—SHOWTIME

T E L E V I S I O N

# Moscow on the Hustings

*Spinning Boris* makes unlikely heroes of the pols who brought American electioneering to Russia

**T**HERE ARE PROBABLY CHARACTERS more difficult to make into movie heroes than political consultants—paparazzi? Jackson siblings?—but none so timely. Every four years, we hear how polls and pandering have cheapened democracy. But if giving the people what they want with scientific precision is not democracy, what is? This is the question raised—and not glibly answered—by the sharp Showtime movie *Spinning Boris* (March 14, 8 p.m. E.T.).

George Gorton (Jeff Goldblum), Dick Dresner (Anthony LaPaglia) and Joe Shumate (Liev Schreiber) have just left the 1996 presidential campaign of Republican California Governor Pete Wilson. Idle and itchy, they get a call seeking help for a presidential candidate in even worse straits: Russian President Boris Yeltsin. A hero for leading his country out of communism in the early '90s, he is now, amid economic ruin and a war in Chechnya, the goat. Polls show him trailing not only his main opponent, communist Gennadi Zyuganov, but also Joseph Stalin, the long-dead Soviet dictator.

Gorton, Dresner and Shumate jump at the offer—for the challenge, the glory and a fat pile of money—but there are catches. The thuggish Yeltsin cronies who hire them insist on total secrecy and keep them virtual prisoners in a hotel. They cannot meet the candidate, who is often ill, drunk or both. Most ominously, the aides press the consultants to let them know if Yeltsin has no chance, so they can

“take steps”—which, we assume, will be more brutal than push polling.

If you care enough about current events to watch this movie, it's no spoiler to say that Gorton et al. ultimately salvage the campaign. (Their secret consultancy was a TIME cover story in 1996.) The drama is in how. Facing a suspended election and crackdown if Yeltsin tanks and possible dictatorship if the communists win, they persuade Yeltsin's daughter Tatiana (Svetlana Efremova) to try a modern campaign: focus groups, photo ops and brutally negative ads. She resists their suggestions as “phony American tricks.” (One of numerous ironies is that many former subjects of the “evil empire” are more idealistic about democracy than the Yanks.) But eventually she accedes even to the brazen request that Yeltsin give a speech sober. “Perhaps we should schedule the speech early in the day,” she offers.

The three Americans are not especially likable—it's hard to tell their principles from mercenariness—but that's the point. The old joke about democracy is that it's the worst system in the world, except for all the other ones. *Spinning's* consultants are the biggest heels in this story, except for their opponents. (Goldblum, who comes off creepy even in movies in which he's the hero, is particularly well cast.) Somehow they make us cheer for them to secure the re-election of the out-of-touch head of a corrupt regime through fearmongering and manipulation—to cheapen democracy in order to save it. —By James Poniewozik