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Soviets Silent on Bugging Case

The Watergate affair illustrates, in Soviet eyes, many of the things the Moscow press has said about American politics — and it has said plenty. Moscow newspapers have described American elections as taking place “in an atmosphere of bribery and corruption, blackmail and violence,” as well as “police terror.”

The Mafia and Tammany Hall have been linked by the Soviet press with the Rockefeller millions and with the military-industrial complex to present to Russian readers a thoroughly corrupt system in which the meanest and most despicable tricks are habitually used to win elections.

But that was before the age of Nixon summitry. The remarkable thing about the Watergate affair itself is that it gets hardly any attention in the Soviet press.

The official Soviet news agency Tass made only one reference to it in the crowded weeks before Mr. Nixon's acknowledgement of White House involvement. Even this was only a passing mention, in a two-paragraph report on the withdrawal of L. Patrick Gray's nomination as FBI Director.

Tass still has not mentioned Mr. Nixon's statement of last Tuesday nor any of the subsequent Watergate developments.

The Soviet press was obviously ordered to say nothing that might disturb Mr. Nixon or the new spirit of concord between Moscow and Washington. But while the Kremlin can censor the press, it could hardly afford to deprive itself of informed comment on the political significance of the affair.

The Soviet ambassador in Washington is sure to have sent home an analysis of the foreign policy implications of the Watergate affair, as every other ambassador in Washington must have done. This is what they are here for.

Embassy analysts in Washington would probably conclude that it may be some time before all White House staff members are cleared of any connection with the Watergate. They would note that this administration has come to rely increasingly on a few key members of the White House staff in getting its policies carried out.

They would argue that men who have been touched by the breath of scandal, even remotely or innocently, will find it difficult to influence Congress or the bureaucracy, both of which have been offering increasing resistance to White House innovations. The economy is in deep trouble. In Vietnam, “peace with honor” appears to be crumbling. And now Watergate.

This analysis would lead foreign observers to conclude that the Nixon administration will be looking for some quick and impressive successes in foreign policy, to be crowned by the visit which Soviet party secretary Leonid Brezhnev is to make to Washington in June. Could this be used to divert public attention from the domestic malaise? Summits make good television. International agreements make a good presidential image. Everybody is in favor of peace.

But at what price? Moscow could reason that Mr. Nixon, in his hour of need, may be more susceptible to pressure on the whole range of issues now under negotiation between the Kremlin and the White House—from the Mideast to strategic arms limitation, from trade to the emigration of Soviet Jews.

The Kremlin hardliners always took a dim view of the concessions Brezhnev made to Nixon to save last year's Moscow summit. In their view, the bombing and mining of North Vietnam on the very eve of the summit was a slap in the face—and they were forced

to turn the other cheek. They would now press Brezhnev to exact his revenge, and to collect a high price for the return visit to Washington—or to call it off.

Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, would certainly assess all the opportunities for diplomatic gain in his dispatch to Moscow about the Watergate affair. But if Dobrynin is really as wise as Henry Kissinger believes, he would also warn his Kremlin masters against pushing Mr. Nixon into a corner.

He would tell them that this administration has still 3½ years to go and that, whatever happens in domestic politics, the President retains considerable powers in the foreign policy field. He would remind the Kremlin that last year Mr. Nixon rescued Brezhnev from a major domestic crisis with a huge shipment of grain, at some political cost to himself. He might point out that the Kremlin now had the opportunity to reciprocate—and to earn much credit for the future—so long as the hardliners did not push for a quick profit.

Since last year's pre-summit dealings, the White House and the Kremlin have been helping each other not only to carry out the grand design for a “generation of peace,” but also to keep their respective enemies at bay. These arrangements were worked out largely between Kissinger and Dobrynin, often in the face of opposition from some of the other forces close to the centers of power in both countries.

The two master diplomats will, no doubt, try to preserve the grand design from too much damage. They deserve to succeed, but the blind forces of politics do not always support deserving causes.