

Watergate Case Bewilders Soviets

By Robert G. Kaiser
Washington Post Staff Writer

At a reception in Moscow, recently, a Soviet journalist who once lived in Washington was explaining the Watergate affair to an American colleague. One thing, the Russian said, was certain—President Nixon would survive Watergate.

The American tried to explain that the situation was complicated—that Mr. Nixon was in serious difficulty. "Well," the Russian conceded, "I'll always remember what Jim Garrison said. He said that they got Kennedy, and if another American president ever tries to turn the United States away from militarism, they'll get him too."

What do Leonid I. Brezhnev and his Soviet colleagues really think about Watergate? The question is unanswerable, but the anecdote about the New Orleans district attorney who failed to prove a conspiracy to kill Kennedy gives a hint of the confusion Watergate has created in Soviet minds.

For a Soviet Communist, Watergate is a bewilderment. Its every element contradicts Marxist-Leninist ideology. The gravity of the affair defies Soviet notions of common sense.

Perhaps most important, the Soviets seem to interpret a threat to President Nixon as a threat to themselves, largely because they have invested so much in their new relationship with Mr. Nixon.

Officially, the Soviets have made no substantive comment on Watergate. Ordinary Soviet citizens—apart from those who listen to foreign radio broadcasts—know virtually nothing about it. Brezhnev has insisted publicly that he will neither exploit nor even mention Watergate in his talks this week with President Nixon.

Unofficially, Soviet journalists in East Europe and elsewhere have suggested that the furor over Watergate is the work of a right-wing conspiracy designed to frustrate Mr. Nixon's detente policy. One journalist in Moscow recently slammed his desk in mock anger and said with a stern expres-

sion and a wink, "You can't do this to our Nixon!"

But what the Soviets really think is a mystery. Much depends on the reportorial skill of Ambassador Anatoliy F. Dobrynin, who is known in Washington as a brilliant diplomat, though no one in Washington reads the messages he dispatches to Moscow.

Dobrynin was away from his post and in Moscow when the crucial decision was made to announce firm dates for this summit meeting. He didn't have an opportunity to report from here on the significance of then-recent events: the dismissal of the Ellsberg prosecution, L. Patrick Gray's assertion that he had warned President Nixon about a Watergate cover-up, the indictments of John N. Mitchell and Maurice H. Stans, and the shakeup of Mr. Nixon's Cabinet.

Despite that coincidence of ominous events during the second week of May, the Soviets agreed on May 12 to announce firm dates for the Brezhnev visit. Some cynics suggested at the time that the Soviet leader knew exactly what he was doing, and would demand appropriate gestures of appreciation from Mr. Nixon in return for his willingness to weather the Watergate tempest.

This argument may tempt the cynics, but it is too simple. It seems much more likely that the Soviets simply don't take the Watergate affair as seriously as many Americans. After all, the kind of behavior for which Mr. Nixon's associates are now under investigation is perfectly normal for the Soviet political police.

The Russians, who are always inclined to believe that other societies are much like their own, probably can't imagine that Watergate-style activities aren't typical here as well.

The Soviets are great admirers of authority. They must find it hard to believe that the President of the United States, after an unprecedented electoral victory, is believed by some to be in danger of losing his authority now.

Brezhnev himself suggested this attitude when he was asked about Watergate on his visit to West Germany last month. "What do you expect," he asked, "an earthquake?" He obviously did not.

The history of the Watergate affair also suggests that the American system of checks and balances has some vitality, a proposition that is ideologically inadmissible in the Soviet Union.

Ideology plays a more important role in determining the Soviet view of the world than many Westerners appreciate.

Events may prove that Soviet skepticism about the importance of Watergate was justified. But if the scandal grew worse and the President's position were threatened, the Russians would be likely to regard that the turn of events as a threat to them. The Soviets—like Americans—assume that they must be an important factor in important events. As they have already revealed, Soviets watching the Watergate affair unfold tend to see a plot against themselves just below the surface.