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The Foreign Reaction to Watergate

The Luftwaffe jet lowered its flaps and prepared for the landing at Dulles Airport. "Denken Sie die Begruesungscomite wird in Handschellen kommen?" joked one of the passengers aboard West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's plane. "Do you think the welcoming committee will come in handcuffs?"

Last Sunday, Watergate seemed almost a laughing matter to many members of the German delegation accompanying Brandt to his two days of talks with President Nixon. Admittedly, the German correspondents in the nation's capital—like other members of the foreign press—had been filing reports of the affair to their newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations back home. Der Spiegel, the

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German newsmagazine, had just done a cover story on "Criminalfall Watergate—The Nixon Scandal." Agence France-Presse was filing up to 3,000 words a day to its 118 clients, and the Japanese Mainichi Press had twice in one week been forced to carry full page stories of Watergate background to satisfy its readers. Tass, of course, didn't say what it was doing, but Reuters' Washington bureau chief John Heffernan had assigned half his 22-person staff to cover breaking developments.

Still, the gravity of the situation seemed not quite clear to the German guests when they arrived.

"I think this is an opportune time to visit President Nixon," said the chancellor in an airport statement. The following day, his pre-planned fishing trip to the Chesapeake Bay probably seemed even more opportune, since Monday's headlines screamed the resignation of Dean, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Kleindienst.

A curious twist, and one that was duly noted by the German press, was that it was the "Berlin Wall" around the President that had fallen. Ehrlichman—which in German means "honest man"—and Haldeman were part of the "German Mafia," which German readers had been told about in reports on the palace guard in more halcyon days. Now the German visitors quickly disassociated themselves from the Germans

in the White House. "These people have German names, but they're not really Germans," several members of the delegation were heard to explain.

Mr. Nixon's speech that night flabbergasted the delegation from West Germany. Even some who had lived for many years in the United States, who knew Mr. Nixon as the "man you didn't buy a used car from," stared in disbelief at the television screen.

Other foreign reporters echoed the German sentiments. An Australian journalist called the speech "mawkish . . . full of contradictions, non sequiturs, loose ends" and found the camera's panning to include the family picture and Lincoln bust in questionable taste. A Japanese correspondent said simply that the President had lost face.

The next morning, during a welcome on the White House lawn, Brandt immediately assured Mr. Nixon that he would not interfere in "your domestic problems." "You will understand,"

Brandt kept his word and carefully avoided making any comments about the President or his aides' involvement in the Watergate scandal. The feeling throughout the German delegation, however, was that Brandt and his reputation as Europe's leading statesman may have been used by the White House. Had the White House had some forewarning of a deep tremor due to shake the government in late April and early May? And had they scheduled Kissinger's Atlantic Charter address, Brandt's visit and the State of the World speech to deflect some of the damage?

On the other hand, some of Brandt's advisers thought the timing may have been in favor of the chancellor and his appeal for U.S. recognition of a more independent, more unified Europe. With domestic policy tumbling around his ears, the President had said he planned to devote his time to foreign affairs—admittedly one of the few areas in which his credibility was not damaged by the Watergate scandal. Mr. Nixon, conjectured some Germans, might be more conciliatory in his time of crisis.

Other Europeans, however, feared that the Watergate scandal could, as The London Observer said, "impair President Nixon's ability to conduct American foreign policy during a period of important and complex negotiations on many fronts . . ." Asked by a newsman if he thought the President would be harmed on the foreign policy

front, Brandt replied curtly: "I don't think so."

The differences in style between the two world leaders could not have been more clearly demonstrated. "Somehow," said a German correspondent, "it's impossible to imagine Brandt in such a situation—or if he were, taking it so lightly." On Tuesday morning, the President had greeted the Germans with friendly smiles and small talk . . . "as if the whole thing didn't affect him at all," said one of Brandt's aides. Such an affair, as foreign journalists were quick to point out, would have brought the government down weeks ago had it occurred in a parliamentary system such as in Japan, Germany, France or Britain.

At the end of the talks, some of the German visitors were still shocked; others thought President Nixon had controlled the crisis, that nothing could happen to him anymore. But one of Washington's most experienced German correspondents was not surprised. "It's the climate in the White House that has produced all this," he commented in retrospect. "It's a certain kind of morality that we Germans are afraid of . . . because it reminds us of something."

Other reactions showed, perhaps, the triumph of the American system, for despite all the muck and cover-up attempts, the United States was also praised abroad. The only positive aspect of the affair, said The London Observer, lies in the fact that "political skulduggery has happened in many countries but in few could it have been exposed as publicly as now in the United States." German correspondent Jan Reifenberg agreed: "The opening of the wound of Watergate," he cabled to The Frankfurter Allgemeine last week, "honors America and it could one day belong to its finest hour."