

A European Hero and Watergate

DUBROVNIK—There is no escaping Watergate anywhere. It penetrates what once was called the Iron Curtain as readily as American jazz; it is ubiquitous.

In Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia, a traveler in the past three weeks found almost every European he met grappling with the enormity of what is happening to Mr. Nixon and his leadership. With few exceptions, they are having a hard time of it.

One reason they find it so difficult is their hero-worship of this President. The admiration for Mr. Nixon is all-encompassing, whether the speaker is a conservative Austrian defense specialist, a shrewd, tough Czech diplomat, a worldly-wise Hungarian editor or a renegade Yugoslav intellectual.

Milovan Djilas, who has become a student of power since his own fall from power in Belgrade, says, "I never liked Nixon much, because he seemed to be too rough a personality. But I am full of admiration for what he has done in the international sphere."

At the opposite end of the Communist spectrum, Jaroslav Zantovsky, the hard-line Czech foreign ministry official, waxes poetic when recounting Mr. Nixon's conversion from the Cold Warrior that Zantovsky came to know during his Washington service in the 1950s. "We say of him," Zantovsky said, "that he stepped over his own shadow to do what he has done."

Beyond the admiration they feel for him, the Eastern Europeans are genuinely puzzled that a man with Mr. Nixon's power—a head of state and head of government, a commander-in-chief whose authority was legitimized only two years ago by overwhelming vote of the people—should be brought down by a handful of unknown reporters and some members of the political opposition.

They cannot understand how this can be happening, or why. At an evening a friend arranged with two dozen of the best journalists in Budapest, the visitor was asked, in every way possible, if the American people did not see the damage they were doing to their country and its world role by their hounding of the President.

The visitor said most Americans knew the cost was indeed great; but that, nurtured in the belief that the rule of law applied to all men, even the President, they literally could not turn back from holding the President to account.

He might have saved his breath, for his words brought bewilderment if not outright rejection. "You speak of morality and the rule of law," said one young Hungarian writer. "But there was no such endless pursuit of wrongdoing when the Kennedys and Martin Luther King were murdered or when the Gulf of Tonkin declaration was shown a fraud. Why only with Mr. Nixon?"

It may be, as a Hungarian critic said to the visitor the next day, that the reason his argument fell on deaf ears was that "there is no idealism left in this part of Europe." Or that may be a convenient rationalization.

However illogical impeachment seems to them, the leaders of Eastern Europe are coming to terms with the reality of Mr. Nixon's altered circumstances.

The morning after that session in Budapest, the government newspaper (to the astonishment of the American embassy) carried an editorial column comparing Mr. Nixon to Onoda, the Japanese soldier who fought in the Philippines for 25 years after everyone else had surrendered. The battle is over, it implied, and everyone but the President has acknowledged it.

After almost two years of telling their people that Watergate was being drummed up by enemies of Mr. Nixon's policy of detente, the leaders of the Soviet bloc countries are preparing a new position, designed to salvage detente from the wreckage of the Nixon administration.

Janos Nagy, the deputy foreign minister of Hungary, told a caller that while he was still suspicious that enemies of detente might try to exploit the Watergate situation to damage that policy, "I am certain, after two years, that the trend has become strong enough to survive the inevitable ups and downs . . . Personalities add or subtract 20 per cent to the execution of policies, but I don't know of any new head of government in the West who would say, 'No, I will not continue this policy.'"

What about Vice President Ford? he was asked.

"It is hard to believe an experienced politician like Mr. Ford would accept the job of Vice President, understanding the principles of the Nixon foreign policy, and then make a right about-face if he came to power. No, Mr. Ford is a man of principle and he would not accept the job if he disagreed with the policy.

"Besides," Mr. Nagy, a former ambassador to Washington, added with a smile, "the American people would not let him forget."

The Hungarians are the realists of the Communist world, but what Nagy is saying — with its implications of accepting the possibility of a change in the American presidency — looks like the beginning of wisdom in Eastern Europe.