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Watergate Image Abroad

By C. L. Sulzberger

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

PARIS—Before 1940 the United States, reckoning "foreigners don't vote," paid relatively little heed to other countries. Nor, until it became a superpower and convinced itself that an "American century" had arrived, did foreign lands pay much attention to the U.S.A.

One result was a heritage of ignorance and even today, after 35 years of direct U.S. involvement abroad, some of that ignorance remains. One can see this in the puzzling failure of foreigners to assess the American sense of political morality as earnestly as Americans do. A glaring case is Watergate.

Maybe because they lack our Puritan ethic, or because they are more cynical in the Old World than the New, there are few places overseas where the affair is taken at nearly the same level of seriousness as in the United States.

Many Americans may think foreigners are fools and should learn better. However, there are enough problems in which foreigners have more tangible interest than they see for themselves in Watergate; so after a brief flurry abroad there now exists a period of journalistic *diminuendo*.

The British, on the brink of economic disaster and possible elections, have little space for President Nixon in their atrophied newspapers. The French, obsessed by political scandals including bugging of a humorous magazine, an event called *Watergaffe*, have small concern for troubles in another version of democracy.

The rest of Europe is worried by the oil emergency, recent outbreaks of terror, slow disintegration of the European Community, or internal problems. For Italy—whose special gift to political theory is the art of governing without a government—Watergate is only a distant snicker.

Even among non-allies there is unconcern. The Russians are playing it *pianissimo*; after all, the embattled President is the man with whom they arranged *détente* from which grain, technology and quiet-on-the-Western-front have stemmed. The Israelis like Mr. Nixon more than they think they like Gerald Ford; and the Arabs appear to think he is the least bad President we've recently had.

And China? When I asked Chou En-lai what he thought of our famous scandal, he replied: "We never use the word scandal in discussing this. Since it is entirely your own internal affair, we have never published anything about it in our press. It doesn't affect the over-all situation.

"We think it perhaps reflects your

political life and social system. . . . You have had such things occur in your society and undoubtedly will again. There are many social aspects interwoven into it and it is better not to discuss this issue. I hope your President will be able to overcome these difficulties."

The extraordinary thing is that just as Mr. Nixon seemed even more closely hemmed in, one could read a front-page column in the leading Paris morning daily by its foreign editor called "The Revival of America," which concluded: "The Pax Americana of Richard Nixon is a fact before which one can only bow."

The same day I received a quote from an American history book, sent by a brilliant Italian friend, discussing the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson. This said: "In these matters General Grant cut a sorry figure.

"He was so eager to aid the impeachment counsel that he even bribed a White House janitor to send him the scraps from the President's wastebasket. He went to the trouble of calling on various Senators at their homes, urging them to vote for conviction. This was, of course, a bare-faced tampering with the jury."

For many foreigners, there is a suspicion that one of America's contemporary problems is not just misuse of the Presidency but its modernization. When one asks: "Has Mr. Nixon the right to tape conversations?" the answer is often, "Why not?"

French political "ins"—as distinguished from the "outs"—see Watergate as another version of their own clash between legislature and executive. The British are mildly surprised that the American public insists on seeing documents involving national security.

"Abroad"—as Secretary Kissinger knows while he rushes around patching it up—is a different world than that at home which still, amid the sordid devices of automatic spookery and instant copying, hopes to recapture the dream of America's Founding Fathers. The world abroad is not biting its nails over United States morality but over if and whether its foreign policy works. So far it does.

Senator Barry Goldwater was incorrectly quoted in Tom Wicker's column of Jan. 15 as having said on "Meet the Press" that Richard Nixon was "probably the best President we've had in this century." A text of Mr. Goldwater's remarks shows that he was actually referring to President Harry S. Truman. The error is regretted.