

# Watergate: The Soviet Cover-Up

MOSCOW — With Vladivostok behind them, Soviet Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev and his Kremlin colleagues have now made the transition to a new American President, without ever telling the Soviet people what really happened to the last man in the White House.

Were an analogous upheaval some-

*Mr. Osnos is the Moscow correspondent of The Post.*

how to take place in the Soviet leadership, the U.S. press would examine its reasons and implications to the last detail. The Kremlin's centrally-directed and tightly-controlled information machinery, however, reports only what suits Soviet purposes. And in the matter of the late events in Washington, the selection has been particularly restricted.

As far as the vast majority of Soviet citizens who get their news solely from the official media are concerned, one day last summer Richard Milhous Nixon stepped down as President of the United States because of something called "Watergate" and because he faced the threat of "impeachment" — terms for which no adequate Russian translation was ever supplied. Nothing was specifically said then — or since — about break-ins or cover-ups.

Shortly after the changeover, some high-level thought was evidently given to publishing a full-fledged account of the Watergate saga. At least one important, although limited-circulation, Soviet journal had such an article in preparation in September. It was never published, and sources at the magazine say it has been permanently shelved.

"To tell the whole story," a thoughtful Moscow editor said the other day, "would have required that the seamy side of Nixon be exposed. For us to say that he was bad would put a shadow on all the agreements and achievements of Soviet-U.S. relations in the past few years. We are not prepared to do that."

Officially then, the Soviets passed up the propaganda chance to show the nature of corruption in the world's most powerful democracy to maintain the consistency of detente.

Critics of the Soviet establishment offer another reason for the silence.

Watergate-style excesses are routine in the Soviet Union, Roy Medvedev, the dissident historian wrote recently. The system here, he argued, can hardly advertise the consequences of a "legitimate investigation of real abuses of power."

At the outset, Watergate was regarded by the Kremlin as a minor nuisance, an internal political dispute with no bearing on long-term policy. When that belief exploded, the growing controversy in the United States was portrayed, on the rare occasions that it was mentioned at all, as an effort by the opponents of detente to topple Nixon.

Then came the climax and some explanation had to be supplied. On a television broadcast a few days after the resignation, Leonid Zamyatin, the director of Tass, the government news agency, delivered himself of the view that Nixon was forced out because of U.S. economic troubles, inter-party rivalries in an election year and the yellow journalism of the American press. His thoroughly misleading statement remains the most detailed ever made here on the subject.

For those few instances in which Watergate comes up these days — as in a recent public lecture on international affairs — the standard line, besides the points listed by Zamyatin, now includes references without explanation to "a scandal." A careful reader of the Soviet press would have noticed a short item in the newspapers in September announcing Mr. Ford's pardon of Nixon, the closest the Soviets have come to indicating that the former President himself had done something wrong.

Currently, Soviet journalists in the know are telling their American friends these days that Mr. Ford and Brezhnev got along famously at the meeting near Vladivostok. "Brezhnev liked Ford's sincerity, openness and informality," said one prominent editor.

None of that, of course, is being communicated to the Soviet people, whose media steer clear of the personal details and judgments so important in the Western press. Instead, the Soviets have been told in long, fulsome repetitive analyses of the "great contribution to the cause of peace" made by this latest summit.

There has not been a word about the role played by Mr. Ford or that other fellow he replaced, whose name doesn't even get mentioned anymore in charting the history of detente.

From the Soviet standpoint one of the advantages of this impersonal approach is that it makes it easier to adjust to changes in foreign leadership. Besides the resignation of Nixon, the Kremlin this year has accommodated the departure of Georges Pompidou in France and Willy Brandt in West Germany with no significant alteration of the party line. So, the reasoning apparently goes, as long as the policy remains the same, what difference should it make to the Soviet people who runs the show in Paris, Bonn or even Washington?