

THE MISCALCULATION

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“Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucurest and Sofia are these famous cities...”

Winston Churchill-Fulton 1946

One of the most secret pages of the history of international relations has been the decision making revealed and explained only partially and with a considerable delay. In the last decades the world has seen the minimalizing of the terms for opening to the public this kind of secrets.

In the present paper I would try to make an interpretation of the US attitude towards the Warsaw pact invasion in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Obviously there are several contradictions in the first statements made by top US officials, the information handed over to the press and the forecast made by experts in East European affairs only days before the tragic events of August 21, 1968. In this order are certain questions about the traditions in American foreign policy, the real impact of the Yalta conference decisions on the latter, about the transitional period of semi-confidence between the Super powers in the late 60's, which inherited the first shifts towards peaceful coexistence in the Khrushchev-Kennedy era.

The administration of Lyndon Baynes Johnson (1964) 1965-1969 dealt with crucial problems for the world's peace-the Dominican crisis in 1964, the war in Vietnam, the Seven days war in the Middle East in 1967 and the Czechoslovak crisis in 1968. Yet it did not come to direct confrontation with the USSR as occurred during the Kennedy administration. Something more - it took steps towards detente, abolishing the MLF and thus making easier the way to the negotiating and signing the Nonproliferation Treaty ¹. The summit meeting of Kossygin and Johnson in Glassboro in June 1967 has been very significant for the the further relations between the powers and the stability in the world. The leaders discussed the global situation marking the first timid steps towards mutual confidence and understanding. The Treaty was signed an July 1, 1968. ². That was precisely the moment when the crisis in Czechoslovakia matured with every day and threatened the status quo in Central Europe. How did America react?

After the Yalta agreements of 1945 the USA hadn't shown great interest in East European affairs. The establishment of firm communist governments even in the contested countries like Czechoslovakia and Poland discouraged further

US initiatives even in the pre-years of the Cold War. The non-commitment attitude was emphasized in 1956 during the revolution and counterrevolution in Hungary. The policy of containment tried to prevent the further spread of "world Communism" but not to establish a different balance of powers in Europe. Certain authors claim that Johnson's foreign policy is a part of the cold war because of the American involvement in Vietnam, thus identifying the cold war with the containment³. In my opinion the European policy is much more significant and in this field the USA had shown a strong willingness for a certain detente, despite the considerable obstacles⁴.

From the beginning of the crisis in Czechoslovakia the US avoided comment. "The administration insistently maintained a hand-off attitude arguing that any gestures of support from Washington would only complicate the Prague regime's status in the Communist camp"⁵. However despite the demonstrated lack of interest⁶ by the Administration a Special Unit was "set up to keep a 24-hour watch on the Czechoslovak situation"⁷. It means that the events in this country were much more important for the US interests. The President's advisers discussed what should be the eventual American position if the Warsaw pact troops rolled into Czechoslovakia. They limited themselves with hopes that this was hardly possible. In fact the USA did not do anything to deter the East bloc from using force. The vague indication of the Czechoslovak government that it should not resist by force ensured the US officials that the situation in Czechoslovakia did not demand any American involvement. A prominent Soviet journalist-Ernest Henry indicated that the American diplomacy had been waiting for the West German aggression in Czechoslovakia to intervene and settle the "limited war"⁸. This propagandist presumption might be transformed in a different point of view. The USA were prepared to intervene promptly if there should be a "limited" Warsaw pact-Czechoslovak war, because that should destabilize the status quo in Central Europe and should make the USSR much more vulnerable identifying the war in Vietnam with the eventual war in Europe. There may be several possible reasons for disbanding the Special Unit a week before the invasion of Czechoslovakia:

1. As Rockingham Gill had indicated "the chances of Soviet Union using armed force to impose its will on its neighbors are considerably less than in 1956..."⁹ especially after the negotiations in Cierna nad Tisou and Bratislava¹⁰. If the Administration really thought in this way it was a "par excellence" miscalculation.

2. It is not excluded that the Administration did not see much harm to the USA if the Warsaw pact did occupy Czechoslovakia and as indicated the Czechoslovak army did not resist.

3. A further possibility, which is less probable and at the moment improvable, is that the confidence between the Super Powers had been such that the Soviet Union informed the USA of the planned invasion (we have seen a similar attitude from the part of the USA in the last years connected with the anti-ter-

rorist Reagan policy) which is denied violently by the US government statements and in the memoirs of the President.

In fact, on August 19 the Soviet Union "had accepted our long-standing proposal to discuss peaceful uses of nuclear power. They suggested that these talks begin in Moscow on October 15..."¹². The White house planned to release this news on the morning of August 21. In his memoirs President Johnson claims that when he heard that the Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin wanted an immediate appointment on the evening of August 20 he asked "Is it Czechoslovakia?"¹³. Although this is only the way he presents the matter, this evidence proves to some extent suggestion #2, backed by the subsequent calm reactions of the US government. What was the immediate reaction?

The American position had been discussed in the NSC, which gathered later in the evening of August 20"... There was nothing we could do immediately about the Czech situation... but... there would be no announcements about my visiting the Soviet Union or technical nuclear talks."¹⁴. It is clear that the main preoccupation of President Johnson and his administration was the improvement of the relations with the Soviet Union at any cost. On the other hand the situation in Vietnam posed serious problems and there were doubts that an anti-Soviet campaign would improve them¹⁵. All the US could do was launch a restricted propaganda campaign against the Soviet Union, and its language seldom passed the admissible limits. In his first statement on August 21 the President spoke of "tragic news", "sad commentary". He expressed opinion that reason will prevail¹⁶. More biting were the statements of Secretary of State Rusk and the Ambassador Ball in the UN Security Council who compared the foreign tyrannies "first of Hitler and than that of the Soviet Union and then the Hungarian events of 1956 with the Czechoslovak crisis. The US called formally on the Warsaw pact to "withdraw their troops from Czechoslovakia"¹⁷. As "The New York Times" indicated the Communist action was deplored yet understood. It was denounced, but not in the ways that would plunge Moscow and Washington into the acrimony of the darkest days of the cold war." The American "indignation" expressed at the UN Security Council was doomed because of the more than probable Soviet veto. Besides the political and military consultations made with the other NATO members the US did not make any other moves.¹⁸

Somewhat more violent was the reaction of the American society. A lot of young people rushed into the center of Manhattan carrying slogans "Hands off Czechoslovakia-hands off Vietnam" thus relating the two interventions. Obviously the emphasis was on the domestic affairs. A large group of more than 400 person was lead by Dr. Benjamin Spock.¹⁹ Practically all the political parties expressed their judgements on the Czechoslovak crisis, the general opinion being strongly opposed to the invasion of the Warsaw pact troops in Czechoslovakia. Only the Communist party general secretary Gus Hall stated that it has been a "defense of socialism against the treat of counterrevolution".

The Soviet bloc involvement in Czechoslovakia influenced the coming elections in fitting more with the republican perception of the Soviet Union as a world power, and thus gaining popularity for Republican candidate Richard Nixon "The hell with the election. We must all stay firm on this"²⁰. An interesting peculiarity is the statement of the Republican Governor of California Ronald Reagan: the Soviet invasion he considered as "a reminder that America must not relax its guard".²¹

As a whole the reaction of the American society was hostile. As it was pointed out by the State Secretary Rusk²² the American Senate was in no mood to accept further agreements with Moscow. On the other hand "it was clear that the leaders in the Republican party wanted to delay approval of the treaty (of Non-proliferation) until after the inauguration so the new administration could at least share credit for this historic move"²³

The immediate impact of the Warsaw pact invasion in Czechoslovakia was considerable. As it has been stated, it reinforced the position of the Republican party and to some extent counter-weighted the resentment of the Americans of the war in Vietnam. But the impact on the bilateral relations with the Soviet Union was far less important. As a matter of fact the Soviets were also reluctant to take serious decisions in arms control when the Johnson's administration was almost past its term²⁴

Thus, one may conclude that the passive attitude of the Johnson's administration, due to a miscalculation or (as proposed) to a precisely calculated risk had positive results clearing the way for mutual Soviet-US understanding. However it had a considerable impact on the Eastern European opinion of the USA, enforcing the already existing perception of America as an friendly but not very helpful overseas power.

1. "AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY-FDR TO REAGAN "DOUGHERTY & PFALTZGRAFF-p.214
2. IBIDEM.
3. IBIDEM-chapter 6 "THE DISSOLUTIONMENT"
4. DEPARTMENT OF STATE BULLETIN, SEPTEMBER 9, 1968, p. 262, "THE NEW YORK TIMES", AUG. 21.
5. IBIDEM, p 1
6. DSB-262 p., JOHNSON LYNDON BAINES "PERSPECTIVES OF THE PRESIDENCY 1963-1969" p. 487
7. IBIDEM & "THE NEW YORK TIMES", AUG. 21 P. 14
8. IBIDEM
9. "EAST EUROPE"-JULY 1968, p 2-6
10. DSB-264 p
11. IBIDEM-264 p, "PERSPECTIVES..."-487 p & DSB-261-273 p
12. "PERSPECTIVES..."-487 p
13. IBIDEM
14. IBIDEM-488 p
- 15 DSB-262 p

16. **IBIDEM-261 p**
17. **IBIDEM 266-268 p**
18. **"POLITIQUE EXTERIEURE-AOUT-OCTOBRE 1968, 278-279 p**
19. **"NEW YORK TIMES"-AUG. 21**
20. **"PERSPECTIVES..." 489 p**
21. **"NEW YORK TIMES"-AUG. 21**
22. **DSB-262 p**
23. **"PERSPECTIVES..."-490**
24. **IBIDEM.**