

Soviet Turns Back Clock

By JAMES RESTON

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia has transformed world and American politics.

It occurred in the middle of the American Presidential election of 1968, as the Soviet invasion of Hungary took place during the Eisenhower-Stevenson Presidential election of 1956. The Soviet Union moved

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on Prague while the United States was preoccupied in Vietnam, as they moved on Buda-

pest in 1956 while the British and French were preoccupied with the invasion of Suez. The latest move by Moscow startled Washington just as officials there were convening on new moves to reach an understanding with the Soviet Union on Vietnam.

Washington was prepared for a dramatic move by the Soviet Union against the new liberal regime in Prague, but not for anything quite so bold as an invasion by the Red Army.

It had been observing closely the increasingly violent attacks on the Czechoslovak Government in the Soviet press, and Under Secretary of State Charles E. Bohlen, former United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union and France, had warned of the possibility of a coup d'état, followed by Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia. But a direct invasion at this time was discounted.

In fact, the Johnson Administration, under attack on its Vietnam policy just before the Democratic Presidential nominating convention next week in Chicago, was discussing new moves to enlist the help of the Soviet Union for a compromise in Vietnam when the Red Army moved.

The first impression of the crisis was that this Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, like the first one at the end of World War II, would increase

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East-West tensions and decrease the chances of a world arms control agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Soviet attack was expected to hurt the peace candidates in the American Presidential election — Senator Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota and Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, who had based their campaigns on the assumption that Moscow had begun to be “reasonable.”

By the same token, the crisis in Eastern Europe was regarded as a boon to the Republican Presidential nominee, Richard M. Nixon, who has maintained a strong anti-Communist position throughout his career.

President Johnson and Vice President Humphrey have been under attack in the Presidential campaign for refusing to make more concessions to the Communists in Vietnam in order to get peace. The Soviet move on Prague has undoubtedly strengthened their position, but not so much as it has helped Mr. Nixon, who has been more anti-Communist than the Democratic party leaders.

The general feeling is that the Soviet Union, worried by the attractions that West Germany's and Western Europe's freedom and economic prosperity would have for Prague, and under attack by Communist China for tolerating “revisionist” tendencies in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the Communist world, decided to move against the liberal and

defiant leaders of the new Czechoslovak Government.

There is a tragic historical parallel in yesterday's events in Eastern Europe. At the end of the last World War, the United States was trying to reach an understanding with the Soviet Union for the reconstruction of the postwar world when Moscow imposed its will on the democratic regime in Prague. Perhaps more than anything else, this started what came to be known as the Cold War.

Similarly, as the Vietnam war seemed to be going into its closing phase, and the United States Government, against substantial political opposition at home, was hoping for a post-Vietnam understanding with the Russians, Moscow has introduced a wholly new problem.

Washington's hope has now been arrested and postponed.

Apparently, the Soviet regime instructed Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin to inform the United States Government of the Soviet movement on Prague, which would indicate that Moscow wanted to forestall any countermove by the United States. But the Soviet invasion will undoubtedly have major repercussions on public opinion in the United States.

What is profoundly disturbing to officials in this country is that the struggle for control of Soviet policy seems for the moment to have been won by the hard-line advocates. The Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 was a spasm of Stalinist aggression, taken at a time when the hard Stalinist line was strong.

But this move on Prague was taken after a long period of de-Stalinization—not by a dictatorial leader but by the new post-Khrushchev “collective leadership.” The struggle between those who wanted to encourage more freedom in Moscow and those who thought freedom was too dangerous—in Prague as well as among the restless youth of the Soviet Union—has now apparently been resolved.

The move toward de-Stalinization, in short, has been reversed for the time being in the Czechoslovakia crisis, and it has been reversed against the advice of most of the international Communist leaders except the Chinese.

In the face of this, the whole argument in the United States about strategy in Vietnam is bound to be affected. Those who regard that conflict as a critical area in the Cold War, who want to use American power to achieve a military “victory,” have undoubtedly been strengthened.

Those who wanted to make concessions for peace in order to get on toward an accommodation with Moscow, arms control, and world reconstruction have undoubtedly been weakened.

It is in this sense that both world and American politics have been transformed. The arguments about the Democratic platform in Chicago now seem irrelevant. Once more in this astonishing year, politics have been overwhelmed and redirected by events.