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Why Koreans Tried to "Fix" U.S. Congress

Custom, geography, politics—James N. Wallace, the magazine's Asia correspondent, looks behind attempts to buy influence on Capitol Hill.

Why would South Korea, a nation that owes its very existence to American support, set out to bribe members of the U.S. Congress?

The answer is at once simple and complex, a combination of Korean tradition and deep-set fears.

Basic to understanding origins of the Koreagate scandal is recognition that this is a land whose capital lies only 30 miles from the cannons of an implacable enemy. There are two things on which virtually every South Korean agrees: Communism must be resisted, and U.S. help is necessary to do it.

Korean anxiety about security—even survival—is the common root that produces bribery abroad and political repression at home. Ironically, all the outside criticism comes at a time when the country's military strength and the government's attitude toward human rights are improving markedly.

Northern threat. Because of governmental pressures both here and in Washington on alleged influence buyer Tongsun Park, current congressional hearings may never reveal the exact sequence of how Koreagate developed. But well-informed Koreans and foreigners in Seoul reconstruct it this way:

Worries that the U.S. would abandon Korea by unilateral decision go back to 1969, when President Nixon withdrew an entire Army division. Concern mounted as American frustration over Vietnam turned into opposition to military involvements anywhere in the world, including Korea.

Here in Seoul, even President Park Chung Hee's strongest critics have no doubts about the threat from North Korea, which frequently sends troops tunneling under and infiltrating through the demilitarized zone divid-

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ing the two nations. Seoul's skyscrapers, symbols of the South's new prosperity, lie almost within range of North Korean artillery and are less than 5 minutes' flying time from Communist air bases.

While many Koreans now are convinced that within three or four years their country can get by without U.S. troops or massive military aid, that wasn't true in the early 1970s when Koreagate was spawned and U.S. aid was rated vital to survival.

The Korean view of the bribery scandal is that Park, an ambitious Korean rice broker in Washington, started distributing money and gifts to congressmen who could help his business interests. Then the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, which doesn't miss much that Koreans do at home or abroad, got involved and broadened the campaign.

A different view. Unlike most lobbying, the Korean goal was to foster support and good will rather than to influence specific votes. This reflected Korean inexperience in lobbying as well as a considerably different view of gifts than Americans have. Koreans, for example, frequently give presents they cannot afford to friends going on trips, or simply to celebrate holidays.

"That does not excuse what happened," says an Asian diplomat in Seoul. "Bribery is bribery. But it helps explain why many people here genuinely do not understand all the fuss in Washington."

To an American-educated Korean professor, the payoffs were "a gross misreading of Congress and how to operate in the Washington atmosphere." He adds, "Very few of our people know how a Midwest congressman gets elected, or what his priorities and principles are."

Koreans, however, do have firsthand knowledge of how the American CIA operates covertly overseas. Their own KCIA was a copy of the U.S. agency; their people were trained by American agents.

The great difference, and one that



Korean President Park

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was a key factor in Korea's congressional blunders: Over the years, the KCIA accrued nearly unbridled power, both in domestic and foreign operations. On occasion, the agency set its own policies independent of other officials at home or diplomats abroad.

"Our KCIA became an empire of its own just like your CIA," one official in Seoul told an American visitor. "The excesses are being corrected, though not in the newspapers." Officials say that some personnel changes and a tighter rein by President Park have reduced the KCIA's independence.

Also apparently corrected by Korea-gate was another flaw in the South Korean government—what observers view as the proclivity of President Park's regime to take action simply for the sake of action. When faced with a problem, such as the threatened loss of American military support, there was a feeling that doing anything—even bribing congressmen—was better than doing nothing.

Recently, say diplomats in Seoul, this compulsion to take precipitate action has given way to a more relaxed view of how to handle Korean-American relations. Tongsun Park's testimony in Washington probably could not have been obtained without U.S. arm-twisting. But President Carter's planned pullout of remaining American ground forces no longer generates panic about Korea's future.

However inept or dishonest Tongsun Park's operations may have been, people here point out that he had no trouble finding congressmen who would accept his hospitality and cash. This disturbs many Koreans, who see their country being punished as a sinner while the American bribe takers suffer few consequences.

Of secondary importance. For most Koreans, the Park scandal is neither as complicated nor as important to their future as the twin issues of human rights and political repression.

This country has a Constitution that includes many progressive European principles. But South Korea is not a Western liberal democracy and probably never will be. Political prisoners, by government count, number slightly more than 100. Western estimates set the figure at 150 to 200.

Park Chung Hee runs an increasingly paternalistic but still authoritarian regime. The right to criticize the government and its officials is limited, but the restrictions are not always enforced. Park shows no signs of relaxing his grip by stepping down from the Presidency in the near future.

Officials justify the limitations on liberty as necessary to protect the coun-



South Koreans today see the need for U.S. troops as slowly lessening.

try from subversion and to guard against an attack by Communist North Korea. They argue that peace and national survival are the most fundamental of all human rights, and that a country whose existence is threatened cannot afford the "luxury" of free-for-all democracy.

What does President Park intend to do with his near monopoly of political power? Are the rights and freedoms of individual Koreans expanding, or are they contracting?

There is considerable evidence that Park's main interest in power is what he can do with it, not what power can do for him. There are no Park statues in city squares. There has never been a hint that the austere ex-soldier has profited personally from the Presidency. Some foreign diplomats are convinced that Park does not even particularly enjoy his position.

Park's most obvious and most successful use of power has been to push economic development by using a combination of private enterprise and strong government guidance. Annual per capita income leaped from \$83 in 1961, the year Park and other generals seized power in a bloodless coup, to

nearly \$750 last year. The new wealth is being shared more widely and evenly than in almost any other Third World nation. There are Korean millionaires, but the government discourages public flaunting of personal wealth. All this fits in neatly with the average Korean's dedication to hard work, material advancement and an innate sense of equality.

"Democratic ideas are very deeply rooted here, but there are differences from the West," asserts a Seoul university professor. "We emphasize an egalitarian tradition. You may make more money than I do, but that doesn't make you any better than I am. Koreans are very stubborn about this. Here, a government that promotes equality can be more truly representative of popular ideas than one that holds elections every year."

Even by Western standards, the human-rights situation in South Korea has improved since 1975 when the Park regime, in a panic because of South Vietnam's collapse, imposed emergency decrees restricting dissent and executed eight alleged Communist subversives.

Relaxed restrictions. Today, student demonstrations are still broken up, though not as brutally as before. A number of political prisoners have been freed, and the most famous one, Kim Dae Jung—who almost defeated Park in the 1971 presidential race—has been moved from jail to a hospital. Korean prisons, like most in Asia, are grim places, but human-rights specialists report that political prisoners are no longer tortured.

Ordinary Koreans can travel freely around the country, change jobs or move without seeking official permits. There is plenty to buy, and purchasing power is expanding rapidly. Some South Koreans argue that even tighter government controls might help in coping with pollution, overcrowding and urban sprawl.

Political argument in Seoul is not free by the standards of Moscow, Idaho. But to a correspondent recently based in Moscow, U.S.S.R., discussion of public issues here is surprisingly open. One Korean teacher, asked if he would prefer talking about the Park regime in a more private place than a hotel bar, responded: "Why?"

Viewed from abroad, Korea may appear to many to be a repressive dictatorship whose agents spent millions of dollars bribing U.S. congressmen. Up close, the perceptions are somewhat different. Korea's reality, like its image, does not depend solely on what one is looking at—but also the point from which one is looking. □