

@CHAPTER = CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Although an extraordinary series of demonstrations brought down the regime of Milos Jakes in November, the human rights situation in Czechoslovakia during most of 1989 was characterized by dozens of political trials, violent dispersals of peaceful demonstrations, and nearly constant harassment of independent activists. The Bush administration, with occasional exceptions, responded to these crackdowns with appropriate protest and concern.

U.S. embassy officials developed ties to the human rights community in Czechoslovakia, especially Charter 77, which kept them informed about human rights violations. An embassy representative, usually the human rights officer, attended most political trials and hearings held during the past year. The embassy presence at trials demonstrated U.S. concern for activists persecuted for the legitimate exercise of their rights, and often had a beneficial effect on the outcome of such trials. In addition, U.S. officials made clear that U.S.-Czechoslovak relations would not improve until Czechoslovak authorities made significant progress on human rights.

For example, the administration protested police violence against demonstrators on November 17, 1989 and later issued statements supportive of Civic Forum, the umbrella group of independent activists formed in November. The administration then cancelled the proposed visit to the United States of Czechoslovak party ideology chief Jan Fojtik, citing the police actions of November 17:

@QUOTENOIND = Now as in the past, only full respect for the human rights of Czechoslovak citizens can provide the basis for stable, long-term good relations between the U.S. and Czechoslovakia.... We are disappointed that the actions of the government of Czechoslovakia have made a mockery of the U.S.-Czechoslovak dialogue begun in a sincere atmosphere in New York. We are even more disappointed that the Czechoslovak government has demonstrated so violently its unwillingness to address its citizens' hopes for democracy.

The U.S. delegations to the Helsinki review conferences in Vienna (January), London (April) and Paris (May-June) -- part of the process known formally as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe -- also deserve credit for raising human rights concerns involving Czechoslovakia. For example, Ambassador Morris Abram, the head of the U.S. delegation to the Paris conference, pointed to continuing Czechoslovak violations and the government's disregard for the Helsinki process:

@QUOTENOIND = Virtually on the eve of this meeting Czechoslovakia released prisoners of conscience Vaclav Havel and Jiri Wolf, yet Havel, as we recall, was arrested for participating in a peaceful demonstration the very week the Vienna meeting ended. Others arrested at that time remain in prison.

During the extraordinary events of November, the administration played a constructive role in urging Czechoslovak authorities to address Civic Forum's demands for democracy in a peaceful manner. After a widely observed general strike on November 27, State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler "encourage[d] further dialogue between the Czechoslovak authorities and Civic Forum...."

At times, however, the administration seemed to let down its vigilance. For some ten years, the Czechoslovak government had requested a high-level meeting with U.S. officials, but the U.S. had been unresponsive, at least in part on human rights grounds. Then, on September 27, 1989, the highest level meeting between the United States and Czechoslovakia in eleven years took place during the United Nations General Assembly session, when Secretary of State James Baker met with Foreign Minister Jaromir Johannes. Although Secretary Baker delivered a strong message that human rights violations are the main stumbling block for improved bilateral relations and also raised some specific cases of

political prisoners, the timing of the meeting seemed ill advised because it took place during a period of crackdown and hard-line retrenchment by Czechoslovak authorities. On August 21, for example, police and militia wielding night sticks attacked a peaceful demonstration of 2,000 to 3,000 people and beat many of them. Some 375 people were arrested, including a number of foreigners. This was followed by a new wave of arrests and political trials of leading human rights and independent activists. Given this context, September was the wrong moment for the Bush administration to switch from shunning to trying to engage the Prague leadership.

Similarly, in November, when the Czechoslovak government announced what appeared to be a liberalized travel policy, the administration went too far in applauding the change. President Bush called the announcement "a very good and encouraging step." But the new visa policy did not merit such unqualified praise because it represented no change whatsoever in the ability of citizens to receive passports, only in the ease with which those already holding passports might receive exit visas for travel to the West. A more tempered response would have focused attention on the obstacles to free travel that remained.

As the new situation unfolds in Eastern Europe and relations between the United States and Czechoslovakia expand, it is hoped that the Bush administration will continue to be a strong proponent of human rights in Czechoslovakia. We caution the administration, however, not to let euphoria over dramatic developments dull its critical faculties. Attention must be paid to half-way measures and any backsliding, and improved relations should depend on concrete progress, institutionalized through legislative enactments, in respect for human rights.