

Koreagate

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"Koreagate" was an American political scandal in 1976 involving South Korean political figures seeking influence from 10 Democratic members of Congress. An immediate goal of the scandal seems to have been reversing President Richard Nixon's decision to withdraw troops from South Korea. It involved the Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) allegedly funneling bribes and favors through Korean businessman Tongsun Park in an attempt to gain favor and influence for South Korean objectives.^{[1][2]}

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Parties involved

Tongsun Park and U.S. Congressman Richard T. Hanna (D-CA) were two of the main actors involved in the Koreagate scandal. Tongsun Park represented the Korean side of the secret agreement, while Richard Hanna was largely responsible for the American side of the deal. According to the agreement, both parties would share the commissions from American rice sales to South Korea and to use them to obtain favorable decisions for Seoul in the United States Congress.^[3] Hanna was also responsible for aiding Chung Il Kwon and Park in finding effective lobbying techniques, which he did by advising the pair to emulate Taiwanese and Israeli models that had succeeded in the past.^[4] Park was also responsible for providing extra financial incentives to Hanna and other members of Congress, a task made easy by large rice sale commissions.^[5] Such financial incentives reportedly ranged from US\$100,000 to \$200,000 at a time per individual. Some 115 members of Congress were supposedly involved. Speculation also focused on the role of Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon, former KCIA Director Kim Hyung Wook, and former South Korean Prime Minister Chung Il Kwon.^{[1][2]}

Objectives

The reasons behind the scandal involved political, social, and financial notions. Korean leaders, including Tongsun Park and President Park were angered with Nixon's decision to withdraw soldiers from South Korea and felt it was urgent to build support for preserving the remaining United States military presence.^[6] The Park government was also concerned with the approval of a substantial package of assistance for South Korea's military modernization programs.^[7] Another reason behind the scandal was to repress or counter increasing criticism of Park's illegitimate policies and human rights violations.^[8] According to many, the deceitfulness of Park's objectives would ultimately lead to his downfall.^[9]

Consequences

The United States Department of State recognized the illegal aspects of Park's action in 1970 and informed the Korean embassy in Washington that such activities were problematic.^[10] Former United States Ambassador to the Republic of Korea William Porter tried to persuade South Korean President Park Chung-hee and Chung Il Kwon that Tongsun Park should have to return to South Korea, but to no avail.^[11] Later, William Porter described the United States response as "greatly pessimistic" because the United States government did not want to denounce South Korea when it was assisting war efforts in Vietnam.^[12] Following the replacement of William Porter by Philip Habib as ambassador to South Korea, punishment for Tongsun Park's unethical activities was increasingly pursued.^[13] Habib attempted to force Park to register as a lobbyist for the South Korean government, but was unsuccessful. In response to his failure, Habib instructed all embassy personnel in South Korea to cut ties with Park and warned several visiting congressmen about his illegal operations, only to be crossed by former Attorney General William Saxbe who warned Park of these actions and his potential prosecution.^[14] Shortly after Porter and Habib's attempts to condemn Tongsun Park's actions, Habib accepted another job opportunity which forced him to work abroad for three years,^[15] which once again left Park's fate uncertain.

Diplomatic relations

After Koreagate was publicized, political relations between the United States and South Korea became shaky at best. Animosity between the United States and South Korea was further aggravated by mutual misperceptions and procedural disagreements.^[16] The United States adopted a legalistic platform and expected South Korea to cooperate with any pending investigations.^[17] On the other hand, South Korean officials believed the story had been exaggerated, spun, or even concocted by American journalists.^[18] Furthermore, South Korea interpreted American action as arising from an anti-Park conspiracy.^[18] Political experts on both sides also suspected that the scandal was being framed in this manner to aid Gerald Ford's election strategy. According to this interpretation, the Ford administration intended to neutralize the Democratic Party's exploitation of Watergate and Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon as issues by linking key Democratic congressmen to the Koreagate operations.^[19]

Results

Despite persistent disagreement about extradition between the United States and South Korea, Tongsun Park ultimately came to the United States in April 1978 to testify publicly in a House hearing.^[20] During the testimony, Park admitted to disbursing cash to thirty members of Congress.^[20] In the end, only ten members of Congress were seriously implicated, of whom most decided to resign, while the statute of limitations expired for three. Park was granted full immunity for his testimony.^[20] Congressional members Edward Roybal (D-CA), Charles H. Wilson (D-CA) and John J. McFall (D-CA) were censured and reprimanded;^[21] Congressman Edward J. Patten (D-NJ) was found not guilty, and Otto Passman (D-LA) was indicted on bribery, conspiracy, illegal gratuities and tax evasion. He was tried in his home district in Monroe, Louisiana and was acquitted.^[20] Richard Hanna was convicted and sentenced to six to thirty months in prison.^[20] Though it was a political scandal at the time, and raised serious questions concerning the loyalty of Members of Congress who would accept bribes from a foreign government, Koreagate had surprisingly few and small long-term consequences, especially when compared to the Watergate scandal.

See also

- Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations (The "Fraser Committee")

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