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GEORGE BUSH AND THE REPUBLICANS

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Dear Peter:

For several weeks before the first anniversary of the Nov. 17 demonstration that started the Velvet Revolution, people debated in the press how the day should be commemorated. The newspapers were full of commentaries and letters to the editor from people chastising the nation for returning to its pre-revolution self -- complacent, indifferent and petty. The writers wondered whether Czechoslovakia has it in itself to be a functioning democracy with a functioning market economy. Some students wrote a proclamation asking people to not celebrate the day, but instead to use it as a time to reflect and remember those who lost their lives or futures during the totalitarian decades. They said Czechoslovakia should not be patting itself on the back. Too much remains undone, unfinished. Another group of students, including some revolution leaders, complained that the revolution was "stolen" from them, that policy is being made by the same type of leaders as before.

But most people were too absorbed by their daily routines of standing in lines at shops and offices and trying to maneuver in this slow-moving society to think about Nov. 17. The general mood was nervousness, uncertainty and grouchiness. People don't know exactly what's coming next year, when economic reform is set to go into full swing, but they know it won't be pleasant. Many complain about the price increases that already have occurred, and they don't understand why there have to be more. They're unhappy about losing the social safety net that ensured them jobs, even if unsatisfying, and retirement income, even if meager.

Of course, some people do understand why prices have to go up.

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They understand that 40 years of Communism devastated the economy. They are willing to make sacrifices because they have the most important thing - freedom. But those people often are drowned out by the complaining masses.

No one I knew was planning to spend Nov. 17 in any special way. Some minor demonstrations were planned, by groups such as anarchists and a right-wing group calling itself the Republican Party.

Luckily, for those hoping for a big event, George Bush chose Nov. 17 as the date he would pay a one-day visit to Prague. Some people were not entirely happy that the visit had to occur on Nov. 17, because it would overshadow the anniversary of the revolution. Nov. 17 also is International Students' Day. In fact, last year's pivotal protest was organized to mark International Students' Day, which commemorates the death of Jan Opletal, a Czech student shot by the Nazis in 1939. On Nov. 16-17, the student protest that had accompanied Opletal's funeral had prompted the Nazis to murder nine student leaders, send more than 1,200 others to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and shut down all the universities in Czechoslovakia. The universities remained closed throughout World War II.

But most people I talked to said Bush's visit would be a good thing. The beleaguered Czechoslovaks need any shot in the arm they can get during this uncertain time, said my next-door neighbor Mrs. Dvořáčková, always a voice of reason. She's a strong, dignified woman in her 70s who prominently displays 8-by-10 glossies of Czechoslovakia's first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and current President Václav Havel in her china cabinet.

Czechoslovakians have always had a love affair with the United States and things American. Sometimes too much so. So I knew they would turn out to see Bush, even if just out of curiosity. This was historic after all - the first-ever visit to this country by a U.S. president.

On the 17th, a typical blustery fall day, I headed out to my tram stop. As a tram pulled up I was pleasantly surprised to see that it was decorated with two small Czechoslovak flags, waving from a little holder on its front end. The flags looked new, their white stripes spotless. The contrast between them and the dirty, dingy red tram was sharp. I realized with a start that I'd become somewhat accustomed to seeing everything covered with a layer of grime. Something clean and new shocked the eyes.

The flags got my hopes up for a few minutes. All right, I said to myself. We are marking this day. (Also, I still feel a small thrill when I see two Czech flags hanging instead of a Czech and a Soviet flag, as was required for such a long time.) My euphoria ended one stop later, when the driver inexplicably announced he was not going on. Despite the route number on the tram, this one was going in a completely different direction. I had to get out

and wait, stranded, for another tram that would take me to the city center. More time wasted on a Saturday when I'd already been to two stores searching for rolls and cheese, my two dietary staples. No cheese. And no rolls in all of Břevnov (the section of Prague I live in), a woman in line at one food store told me. I ran into a neighbor who was making the rounds to find bread - our corner store hadn't received any that morning. All shopping had to be done by 11 a.m., when the food stores closed for the weekend. I'd also tried to return beverage bottles, but the sign on the door of the "Beverages" store said the shop was only open every odd Saturday. How do you know it's an odd Saturday? I asked someone. You have to know which week of the year it is, I was told. This was week 46. An even week. Oh.

I got off the tram on Národní Třída, the wide street that police blocked off last Nov. 17 to trap thousands of student protesters. Hundreds of the students were beaten by the police in riot gear. A simple, black wood and metal memorial has been put up in the covered walkway that was the site of the most brutal violence. It features the date 11.17.89 below a sculpture of a cluster of hands. Some of the hands form peace signs, some are stretched out to show they hold no weapons, just as they were that night.

A run down Národní Třída, which had been badly organized and badly advertised, was just winding up. A handful of sweaty men ran by me in cheap running shoes and well-worn sweat pants. The run was one of the things objected to by a group of student activists from the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague. They wrote a public letter that said, in part, that it is "immoral to celebrate a massacre." They said they don't want to see posters extolling some sort of big November Velvet Revolution, as was done in the past for important Communist Party dates.

"...Don't indulge in euphoria," the letter asks. "Don't talk about taking credit. Instead, think about what we've all let slip by this year, how our interpersonal relationships are marked by indifference. Yes, on November 17th we lost our fear. But why didn't we do it earlier? Why not in October or January 1989, October 1988, why not in January 1977...? Why was it so difficult to resolve to act free?

"Those who see November 17th as a day of victory, a day of celebrations and fanfare, we want to remind: For us it is a day of mourning. Jan Opletal died, Jan Palach died [He set himself on fire in Wenceslaus Square to protest the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia], thousands and millions of people died under the Nazis, under the Communists. By waving your hands you insult their memory. ...

"November 17th is a day of sad resolution, with which students and all decent people waged and still wage the battle against violence and injustice. Wherever in the world that is occurring we should help, and at least in our thoughts, be. Nothing has



*A man enjoys an early afternoon beer in a shop in Wenceslaus Square, which is decorated for the visit of American President George Bush.*

been definitively won, and there's nothing to celebrate as long as violence and injustice triumph and there's even one political prisoner in the world. ..."

The students said they have nothing against Czechoslovak or international athletes. "But we don't like the fact that on Nov. 17 they'll be running on Narodní Třída with a baton, and we won't be their audience."

They said they "deeply respect" Bush. "But we hesitate to welcome him with admission tickets to Wenceslaus Square. Demonstrations were important in November and earlier, when no admission tickets were given out."

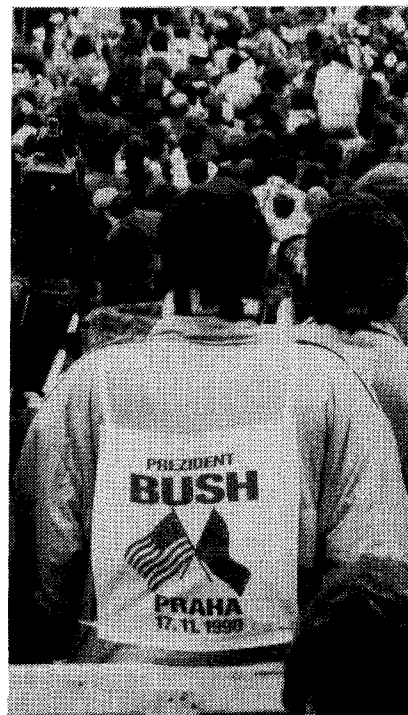
They were referring to the fact that admission to the top half of the square (really a long, wide avenue with a gentle uphill slope) would be by VIP ticket only, for crowd control and security reasons. Bush, who understandably needed tight security because of the Persian Gulf crisis, had asked to make a speech in



*A cheering crowd welcomes Presidents George Bush and Vaclav Havel (above center, in dark overcoats) as they arrive for a wreath laying ceremony in Wenceslaus Square. In the photo on the right, a Czech security helper looks on.*

the square, as well as before Parliament. Both wishes were accommodated.

Some people told me they felt they were to be part of some kind of show (which of course was true). The irony of having to have tickets to go to the square where they had battled for freedom, to see the president of the democratic nation they idolized, was not lost on them. They were not used to crowd control. After all, a half million of them at a time managed just fine during demonstrations last fall, with no one getting hurt. The VIP tickets, about 30,000 of them, were distributed free, at places such as



businesses and Charles University. The ticket holders had to come into the square via one street. A bottleneck was the inevitable result. Unlike at the peaceful, polite mass gatherings of last year, tempers flared and people pushed and shoved. One witness told me he saw two young women faint. This process also was extremely time-consuming. Some people, even though they had come two hours early as requested, did not get into the square in time to hear the start of Bush's address.

While the crowd waited, loudspeakers blared songs featuring pipes and drums and lyrics about Dixie and seeing Mother before going into battle. (One visiting American reporter dubbed them - as he cringed and said he was glad most Czechs couldn't understand the words - "patriotic kitsch.")

The atmosphere was a bit disconcerting. Well-known folk singer Jaroslav Hutka tried to warm up the crowd with inspirational songs that the people knew by heart and had sung with him last November. Not too many joined him on the choruses this time. He remarked that he was sorry they didn't feel like singing, because many tough times lay ahead. ...

The square was decorated with giant American and Czechoslovak flags. Many Czechs apparently had American flags stored at home for years - some had only 48 stars on them. Vendors were doing a brisk business selling caps with a stars-and-stripes design (25 crowns [about 80 cents, or an hour's pay] on one side of the street and 50 on the other - a sign that free enterprise has arrived). Full-color posters of a smiling Bush were taped to nearly every shop window.

Spectators without tickets were confined to the lower half of the square. About 100,000 people showed up in all, including a couple hundred, mostly young "Republicans." Their group - its full name is the Association for the Republic-Czechoslovak Republican Party - unsuccessfully ran for Parliament on an anti-Communist platform in June. Led by the attractive, dark-haired Miroslav Sládek, it claims to have 8,000 members. Sládek is known for making remarks so racist and illogical that he is not taken seriously by most people. Many label him a fascist. His alleged anti-Communist focus loses some steam when one considers he was a government censor - very much part of the "system" - before last November. And his wife is a Communist, but he says that's part of living in a democracy. He spends most of his time criticizing that democracy, its president and Parliament. The posters his supporters held during Bush's speech said things like, "The Velvet Revolution Was a Puppet Show," and "Civic Forum = the Communist Party." The Republicans say the government still is run by the Communists, and they want to clean house.

Sládek, armed with a megaphone and standing on a phone booth, heckled both Bush and Havel when they spoke. He was surrounded by a band of bodyguards, many of them young "skinheads," who - witnesses told me - pushed other spectators off the phone booth to make way for Sládek.



Czechoslovaks are not used to this kind of behavior. The spectators around Sládek were appalled by the heckling. They even made an alley of space and unsuccessfully tried to get him and his followers to leave. People in the upper half of the square were aware of some sort of commotion, but it was not enough to disrupt the proceedings. Havel and Bush, along with their wives, government officials and a slew of security men (sharpshooters also were stationed on surrounding roofs) arrived by a motorcade led by Havel's navy blue BMW. The two men participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at the living memorial to freedom fighting (the display of flowers, photos and candles at the base of the statue of St. Wenceslaus I wrote about and photographed for you in August). Havel, and then Bush, then delivered speeches from a bulletproof booth.

The spectators closest to the presidents held little American and Czech flags, distributed just before the event to ensure a good photo opportunity. Havel's speech didn't prompt much flag-waving, and in fact probably presented some discomfort. As he has always done, he appealed to people's morals and conscience. He chided the nation for not being better during its first year of freedom.

"...We all stand here today somewhat embarrassed," he said. "We know very well how much we have yet to accomplish, and we pose the question of why this collective work is so difficult for us. Is it because we underestimated the legacy of the old regime or overestimated our own capacity? Is it that someone is deliberately delaying and spoiling our collective work, or are we spoiling it ourselves? ..."

He asked why the circumstances surrounding last November's protest and massacre have not been adequately investigated and the guilty punished (The government's probe, its second, continues); why the political atmosphere is poisoned by demagoguery and political, ethnic and racial intolerance; why after the people so humanely overthrew an inhuman regime, the crime rate is growing so much.

He seemed tired. For some reason I felt somewhat embarrassed too. I'm not sure if it was for him, for having to speak this way, for the nation, or because this special man's message from the heart seemed out of place in a slick, American-style media production.

Some Americans living in Prague - naturally more cynical than the Czechoslovaks - had stayed away from the speech, writing it off as a public relations ploy by a politician needing an upbeat event to boost his sagging popularity. And what better place to have it than Czechoslovakia, with its cute revolution and playwright president? But Havel needed this shot in the arm too. He needed Bush's presence to remind people that democracy is what they fought for last year and now must work - and continue fighting - for. He showed them that tiny Czechoslovakia has not been not forgotten by the West. The substance - or lack thereof - of what Bush promised he would do for this country was not as relevant as the fact that he bothered to show up.

Havel finished by saying that he believes that "in each of us, common sense, decency and tolerance will triumph over ambitious rivalry, egoism and intolerance." He received lukewarm applause - the first time I'd heard that happen to him.

Bush delivered a patriotic, positive speech, and the people loved it. He talked about a new "age of humanity" and the need to move from "revolution to renaissance."

"America will not fail you in this decisive moment," he said to thunderous applause. "America will stand with you."

As his finale, Bush rang a replica of the Liberty Bell three times - for courage, freedom, and for the children, he said. A Czech folk group then began singing, "We Shall Overcome," alternating Czech and English verses. Bush climbed onto the music stage with his wife, Barbara, and Václav and Olga Havel to hold hands and sing along. Before he got into his car, he - much to the consternation of his security people - plunged into the crowd to shake hands.

It was a strange scene, mostly, I think, because it seemed to lack spontaneity. Some students who'd been security volunteers at the event told me they felt they'd been props in a theatrical production. For one thing, they were not used to seeing network and cable television crews climbing all over one another. Members of the Czech press were not used to that kind of media presence either. They wrote with distaste after the fact about how the White House Press Corps blew into town and received unlimited access to all events, while Czech reporters and photographers had had to stand in long lines to obtain their share of the limited "pool" passes. Such passes gave them access only to one or two events each. When they did get to an event they were confined to spots far from the action, while members of the foreign press roamed freely.

The Bush visit left other shock waves. A Prague newspaper columnist wrote about how his home phone had stopped working on Nov. 13. He'd received a letter two days later notifying him the line was being used for Bush's visit until the 20th. All other technical possibilities had been exhausted, the letter said. And the Czechoslovak defense minister reportedly nearly canceled an official trip because he was told he could not use the government airport - it too was needed for Bush's visit. ...

After the media left the multi-tiered, wooden platform that had been built for them to allow unobstructed viewing of the presidents, Czech spectators formed a long line and filed up its stairs to take a peek, even though it was dark and there was nothing more to see.

I met up with a Canadian friend and two young people she teaches English - both freshman journalism students at Charles University. We went for a cup of coffee and were about to go home at about 6:30 p.m. when we noticed a crowd of people in a street



leading from the bottom of Wenceslaus Square to Národní Třída. People were shouting, and Sládek was there with his megaphone. We squeezed into the crowd to find out what was happening.

The roughly 200 Republicans had decided to put on an impromptu demonstration down the route of the Nov. 17 protest, past the memorial to the student beatings, and up to the presidential offices at Prague Castle. But about 400 people were trying to stop them from going down Národní Třída. After all, the protesters were carrying signs calling the revolution a lie and the students pawns in a pre-arranged game. They believe the revolution was some kind of conspiracy, with the students deliberately led into a trap. Several such stories and rumors are circulating. None have been legitimized by the government, which has not completed what it says finally is a thorough investigation of the incident. The most controversial rumor involves collaboration between the Charter 77 human rights group (which includes Havel), the secret police, the Soviets and Israeli intelligence in an effort to to replace the hard-line Communist government with one more moderate but still Communist. Such a version was published recently in the sensationalist "Expres," a tabloid daily that hits the streets at noon. People stand in long lines to buy it. Havel said through a spokesman that he was disgusted by the article.

I tried to talk to some of the Republicans in the crowd. Most were unable to express any concrete opinion. They couldn't really tell me why they were supporting Sládek, why Havel was "soft," and why Parliament should be thrown out, as they'd been declaring. Arguments began to break out. Some bystanders began arguing that the Republicans have a right to express their opinion and demonstrate under a democracy. Others replied that this right does not extend to "fascists." Some people told me it's important to have opposition to the "official view." Sládek stood above the crowd while this was going on, wearing a suit and tie, smiling and waving a bouquet of flowers. He got the attention he wanted.

We stood there for about an hour, unable to move. One couple, holding hands, who said they'd just stopped to see what was happening, began discussing the "Expres" article. They said they "partially" believed it. After all, if it wasn't true, how could the author dare to print it? At that point the Republicans pushed forward, carrying us along with them. My feet barely touched the ground. For the first time in my life I felt what it was like to be swept along by a crowd. I lost sight of my friend and one of the students. The other, an 18-year-old named Martin Chlup, hung on to me. We finally broke away and walked ahead of the crowd. People were yelling, "Don't let them down Národní Třída." I kept looking around for police. I didn't see even one officer, which I thought was unbelievable in light of the fact that these people had come from Wenceslaus Square where surely they'd been noticed by police, that this was Nov. 17, and that this was Národní Třída. People told me the police were in a tough position - they didn't want to give Sládek any more ammunition. But I thought



*Children help light candles at a memorial (pictured on the facing page) to students beaten during the Prague demonstration on Nov. 17, 1989, that led to the demise of the Communist government.*

they should at least be standing by. People were pushing and shoving. One man had his eyeglasses shattered, another a bottle broken over his head.

I kept looking for a police officer and even thought of somehow trying to call one (not so easy when most of the public phones don't work). Something ugly was happening, and no one was here to stop it.

At the intersection where Národní Třída begins, the anti-Sládek group quickly put up a metal barricade that had been left over from the race that afternoon. Another standoff. One young man holding the barricade told me he thought the Republicans had "lost their minds." Another, pondering the irony of what was happening, mused, "I don't think we've ever demonstrated against a demonstration before."

After about 10 minutes, the Sládek forces removed one end of the barricade. Accompanied by cries of "Shame" and whistles of disapproval, the group went down a side street, toward the

castle. I found out later that my friend and her student, who was crying because she was so upset by the conflict, went with the protesters to the castle. They passed one police car. The two officers inside did not get out. When the group reached the castle the gates had been locked - at least someone had called up there to warn the guards.

Martin and I stayed on Národní Trída, along with about 50 other people. The people split up into small groups and stood in the street, talking. When people saw I was writing in a notebook, they came up and offered their opinions. They seemed reasonable, decent, united - the kind of people Havel was reaching out to in the afternoon. Most were from Prague, but others were visiting from small towns and villages.

They didn't think Sládek represented any real danger, but "such a demonstration must not be underestimated," said 60-year-old Lubomír Minařík, who works at the nearby Hungarian Culture shop. "It's important to talk about it."

They talked about their personal problems and the country's problems too. They said they thought things would get worse for a while because of the changing economy, but then better.

Two members of Parliament also stopped by, one of them Jiří Dienstbier Jr., the 21-year-old son of Czechoslovakia's foreign minister and one of five university students serving in Parliament. After they got over their surprise at the gathering, they quickly joined the conversation.

Without my asking, the people also wanted to talk about last Nov. 17. Minařík said he'd opened his building to about 30 fleeing students that night, and watched the melee with them from a balcony. "It's hard to talk about it, even a year later," he said with tears in his eyes, his voice breaking. "They were screaming with fear. ... They were like sheep." After the horror ended, cleaning crews came and washed away most of the blood, he said. They also took away the clothing - protesters' clothes that had been strewn all over the street and that Minařík and others had



put into piles.

Shortly after 10 p.m., my hands numb from writing in the cold, I broke away. It was starting to rain. I stopped by the memorial to

the students. Candles extended out a good yard from the wall, rivulets of melting wax forming a multicolored collage. People had brought bouquets of flowers. A child's rendition of an American flag, the stars and stripes scribbled in crayon on its front and the word "Havel" on the back, was stuck into one of the vases.

A solemn, bearded man who appeared to be in his mid-30s was crouched down, relighting candles snuffed out by the strong wind. He stayed that way for a long time, methodically lighting the candles only to watch them go out a second later. He seemed deep in thought as he stared into the flames. He finally stood up, put his hand on his heart and looked up at the hand sculpture, with an expression in his eyes that told me all I needed to know about what he was doing there.

He backed away, into the shadows, and stood there awhile longer, then brushed past me and disappeared into the crowd.

Martin and I walked toward our tram stop. The clusters of people were still where we'd left them, talking, their umbrellas up in what was now a driving rain.

It had been a strange, bittersweet day. Martin's classmate had wound up in tears, while young Martin was full of enthusiasm after listening to the heartfelt discussions on Národní Třída. "I didn't think anything would happen today, but it did," he said. "It hasn't been this nice in a long time."

He said he believed Czechoslovakia will recover from its 40-year malaise. "The key is to overcome the uncertainty, even inside yourself."

We talked about Sládek on the tram. A mild-mannered retired couple who overheard us apologized for interrupting and then politely asked us what had happened. We told them about Sládek's demonstration. "Someone should give him a good punch," the woman said as the couple got off at the next stop.

It was that kind of day.

All the best, and happy holidays!



Dagmar