

U.S. Burned by Peace Feelers

Handling of Hanoi Overture Gives Lift to Opponents of Viet Policy

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Government reaction to revelations last week of Hanoi's negotiation feelers could hardly have been handled in a way to provide more ammunition to opponents of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia.

It was an inept and shabby performance by the Johnson administration and even the reasons for its ineptness and shabbiness remain unexplained—cloaked in the same mystery which shrouded the fact at the time that Hanoi was once willing to meet secretly with the United States to talk peace.

There were valid reasons for this nation to reject those highly tentative offers of more than a year ago. But there has been no ringing national statement to explain these reasons, not was there, until this last week, even official U.S. confirmation that the possibility existed for meeting with North Vietnamese leaders.

News that Hanoi had agreed to a proposal from United Nations Secretary General U Thant to meet with Washington emissaries leaked out as long ago as last February. (The Times reported last Feb. 21 that such approaches had been made.)

No Corroboration

But there was no corro-

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poration until last week, when the same information was attributed to the late Adlai Stevenson, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, in a magazine article by Eric Sevareid.

Perhaps the added authority imparted by the attribution to Adlai Stevenson forced the State Department into a reluctant admission that Thant had submitted proposals. This was coupled with a department explanation that the United States failed to act on Hanoi's agreement to meet secretly in Rangoon, Burma, because the U.S. government did not believe Hanoi sincerely sought peace.

Asked how we knew this, department spokesmen said only that Secretary of State Dean Rusk had "very sensitive antenna."

Aside from this unsatisfying portrayal of Dean Rusk in the posture of a praying mantis testing the next leaf, the State Department declined to say public-

ly what it and all major policy-makers in government knew were the problems of meeting with Hanoi in 1964.

Precarious Hold

These were, first, that the South Vietnam government of Nguyen Khanh was in

such a precarious hold of power that whispers of impending negotiations would have swept not only Khanh but any Saigon government out of power almost instantly.

Virtual anarchy would have followed.

Moreover, the Hanoi agreement was to hold secret talks with only the United States, not with Saigon representatives. No realistic diplomat believes the Communists would have kept the talks secret long from their propagandists inside South Vietnam.

Secondly, the South Vietnamese government's military situation then was not only precarious but well-nigh desperate in the countryside. Massive U.S. ground reinforcements were far in the future. Because the Communists appeared so solidly to be winning—and likely would have won by now without the injection of U.S. forces—the official reading was that Hanoi had only one thing to negotiate about. This was when and how the U.S. presence such as it was, would be withdrawn.

This, the United States has maintained since President John F. Kennedy strengthened the commitment in Southeast Asia, is not negotiable.

No one expects all diplomacy in the nuclear age to be conducted in a fishbowl. But the United States could have confirmed the Hanoi offer when it came and explained to our people clearly why it was unacceptable.

To speak at the time, however, of the Saigon government's weakness would have been to admit the inadmissible—that that government commanded no firm loyalties of the people. To admit this would have strengthened opponents of

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U.S. policy even more in their declarations that the United States was supporting a government which even that nation's people did not support.

True U.S. Policy

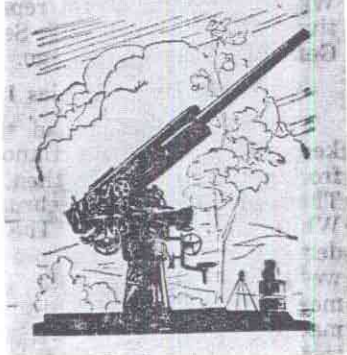
And to speak of the military weaknesses within South Vietnam would have forced a stronger statement of true U.S. policy in Southeast Asia—to halt aggressive expansion by Communist China—at a time when we still described our mission as supporting a friendly government at its own request.

The American public was not yet ready for realization

that we were in a military confrontation with Communist China, albeit one step removed, instead of with simple Asian peasant guerrillas.

This would have been a particularly unpalatable statement for U.S. digestion under the circumstances and in an election year.

So the State Department remained silent until its fingers were caught firmly in the cookie jar last



week. Having been caught at being less than candid, the U.S. government continued its lack of candor.

To opponents of American policy in Southeast Asia, the whole display reinforces their conviction that the United States was never willing to enter into peace negotiations until President Johnson's famous April 7 speech in Baltimore offering "unconditional discussions" on peace.

By then U.S. air raids on North Vietnam had started and American ground troops had started to pour into South Vietnam.

To Dr. Hans Morgenthau, one of the most vocal critics of U.S. policy in Vietnam "what we seek now, neutralization of the whole Indochina peninsula, is what we could have had two years ago, when President De Gaulle proposed it."

Position of Strength

To Morgenthau, a University of Chicago professor, the fact that the United States waited for a position of strength from which to negotiate, "highlights our general situation in that our professions of willingness to negotiate are surrounded by conditions which are implicit but which nevertheless exist."

There are reasons which seem valid for such a U.S. position and there may even be reasons for this government to have handled the case the way it did—including its possible interference with an "unofficial" peace mission behind the Iron Curtain last week by Sen. Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.).

But if there are valid reasons, the U.S. government has not explained them. And it shows no signs of doing so. **END**