

DREW PEARSON

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President Missed Vietnam Peace Possibility by Waiting Too Long

The last words of Adlai Stevenson as quoted by Eric Sevareid in Look magazine have stirred a tempest of discussion as to whether President Johnson was callous toward peace in Southeast Asia; whether he rebuffed peace overtures from U.N. Secretary General U Thant during the fall of 1964.

The facts in the case were rather fully reported in this column and are somewhat different from the version given to Sevareid by Mr. Stevenson.

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However, what neither he nor the State Department nor anyone else knew last year, and what has only leaked out last week, thanks to the Red Chinese, was that one day before Premier Kosygin arrived in Hanoi on the fatal Feb. 7 when the United States started bombing North Vietnam, Kosygin had stopped in Peking to ask the Chinese to use their influence with the North Vietnamese for peace.

Or as the Chinese put it in their latest diatribe against the Russians, Kosygin had "stressed the need to help the United States find a way out of Vietnam."

This was on Feb. 5-6. Next day, as Kosygin was spending the night in Hanoi, the United States answered with a fusillade of bombs, initiating a policy which has played into the Chinese hands.

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This is why the Chinese have been continually accusing the Russians of "faithfully obeying orders of the U.S. imperialists

... officially transmitting to the democratic republic of Vietnam these preposterous demands aimed at forcing the Vietnamese people into unconditional surrender."

This also makes understandable the bitterness of Russian reaction to our bombing policy.

Historians will doubt-

less speculate today on the anniversary of Mr. Kennedy's death and for years to come on how J.F.K. would have played his cards for peace in the crucial year 1964 when, if alive, he would have been running for re-election. Instead Mr. Johnson was running. And about the time of the Atlantic City convention, Mr. Johnson sent a peace feeler to Ho Chi Minh. The response was vague.

"But simultaneously," as reported by this column last spring, "U.N. Secretary General Thant sent a message by way of Moscow to the North Vietnamese. He proposed truce talks on neutral ground, such as his native Burma or Cambodia."

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This was what Adlai Stevenson was doubtless referring to in his talks with Sevareid.

"A favorable response came back from Hanoi in September, again by the Moscow route," this column reported. "This was confirmed by President de Gaulle, who had taken his



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soundings through French instructors still in Hanoi.

But Mr. Johnson in September was in the middle of the election campaign and Barry Goldwater was accusing him of being soft on communism, of pulling his punches in Vietnam by refusing to bomb North Vietnam.

So Mr. Johnson waited. He waited until after elec-

tions, then went down to the LBJ Ranch to rest. He rested too long and he waited too long. Peace and war don't wait for elections or vacations.

During that two months wait, the government of South Vietnam deteriorated. It had so many prime ministers, so much friction between Catholics and Buddhists that the North Vietnamese concluded they could win without talking peace.

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So by the time Mr. Johnson finished campaigning and resting and got back to the pressing problem of peace in January, the North Vietnamese had changed their minds. My information is that this—not Secretary of Defense McNamara's intervention, as reported by Adlai—was what disrupted U Thant's drive for peace.

It was about two weeks after this that the President took the advice of his military men and followed

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the exact policy urged on him by Barry Goldwater during the election campaign. On Feb. 7 he bombed North Vietnam.

Military advisers had argued that this would put him in a position to negotiate from strength. Political advisers say privately that it was the most disastrous decision he has made.

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It has not stopped men and supplies from coming into South Vietnam. They have come in even greater volume. And it has alienated most of our Asiatic friends, especially Japan. Finally, they point out that Hitler's blitz of London only stiffened British resistance and that the American bombs rained on Germany contributed little to Hitler's final defeat.

Massive land armies defeated Hitler, just as heavy American troop concentrations in South Vietnam are beginning to turn the tide there.

EMP