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A Question of Official Credibility

Last week the U.S. government belatedly acknowledged, if only implicitly, two serious incidents involving Communist countries which the U.S. public regrettably learned of first from Communist sources.

The first was the shooting of a Cuban infiltrator by a U.S. guard at Guantanamo naval base, initially reported by Cuban authorities and immediately denied by the Pentagon. Later in the week, however, the Pentagon changed its mind and came forward with an admission that the shooting had in fact taken place.

The second incident was a Red Chinese claim that U.S. planes had shot down a Communist plane over Chinese territory. U.S. authorities in Vietnam, while confirming the air battle, insisted it had taken place over North Vietnam. Then, days later, a State Department spokesman, confronted with "authoritative reports" which tended to back up the main Chinese charge, refused to make any denial. This implied the Chinese claim was true.

As a result of initial U.S. responses in each of these cases, later in effect retracted, the credibility of the American govern-

ment has again been called into question both at home and abroad.

Whether the government set out intentionally to lie about these matters is a question that can't be answered. Intentionally or not, however, the plain fact is that by its confused and distorted handling of these incidents the government has managed to enhance their propaganda value to the Communists, while at the same time casting doubt on its own believability...

No one maintains that it is necessary for our government to be the first to publicize every cold war incident. In fact, many things take place which no one ever hears of because neither side chooses to make issues of them. But there are also incidents which, very often predictably, the Communist side will try to use to maximum political advantage. In such cases the U.S. government should tell its story quickly, accurately, and as fully as possible.

This didn't happen in the Cuban and Chinese incidents. Instead the American people first learned of events involving their nation from Communist sources. And when the American government did speak up, its initial response was what the charitable might call misinformation. Rvd