WASHINGTON

WHO'S CREDIBLE NOW?

BY KENNETH CRAWFORD

Among the many curious happenings of the last few weeks, Ho Chi Minh's gratuitous contribution to the closure of the Johnsonian credibility gap must be rated the most curious. Ho did better for the President by releasing the latest Washington-Hanoi peace correspondence than Mr. Johnson could have done for himself.

Texts put out in Hanoi revealed that the President had again offered to call off the bombing of the north if Ho would reciprocate by stopping the north's infiltration "by land and by sea" of the south. This was essentially the same offer the President had previously made through various indirect channels. The difference was that this time he proposed, in addition to a cessation of bombing, to stop reinforcing U.S. troops already engaged in South Vietnam. Ho's reply was a flat rejection, embellished with ritualistic Communist insults.

Both the President's conciliatory letter and Ho's bellicose reply were matters of secret record at the time when Sen. Robert Kennedy and his friends were saying that Mr. Johnson was passing up offers of peace from Hanoi, relayed through Soviet Premier Kosygin and others. One of Kennedy's associates flatly stated that the President was rejecting these overtures because he wanted military victory, not negotiations short of outright surrender by Ho. This was more tendentious than anything Kennedy himself said but not very much more.

DEVASTATING ANSWER

Now it develops that Mr. Johnson could have documented a devastating answer to the Kennedyites had he chosen to do so. He didn't so choose because he was convinced—still is—that peace negotiations, if they are to succeed, must be conducted away from the goldfish bowl of publicity. This kind of restraint is scarcely to be expected of a politician constantly represented by his critics as one whose primary, if not exclusive, interest is in his own political welfare.

But if members of the Kennedy circle were disconcerted by Ho's revelations they refused to acknowledge it. They insisted that President Johnson's letter to Ho imposed new and harsher conditions for peace talks than ever before suggested. As they saw it, the President this time demanded proof that northern infiltration of the south had been stopped before bombing could be halted, something not required in earlier approaches to Hanoi. The President himself did not deign to answer this interpretation of the record but others in the know called it pettifoggery.

The whole record of approaches to Hanoi, when published, will show, they say, that an end of infiltration has always been this country's asking price for a once-and-for-all end of bombing. The U.S. has suspended bombing several times in the hope of getting negotiations started but never with a promise not to resume raids on the north. It has always been made plain, moreover, that this is a matter subject to bargaining. In his speeches the President also has expressed willingness to enter into "unconditional negotiations": that is, with hostilities on both sides continuing. This may have been a source of confusion.

MISTAKEN ASSUMPTION

The assumption that the Administration is marking up its price for peace is not unnatural, however mistaken. Anyone can see that turmoil in China and reticence in Russia have improved the American position in Vietnam by creating uncertainty in Hanoi about its sources of war supply. Victories in battle, an increase in the Viet Cong desertion rate and the prospect of parliamentary and Presidential elections also have brightened the outlook. Since the President is obviously in a position to toughen his terms, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that he is doing so. Yet there is not the slightest evidence that he is.

This is not the first time Kennedy has been left with his foot in his mouth. He once contended that Hanoi had dropped its demand for "permanent" bombing suspension. Ho has since made it clear that permanent is what he has said and what he means. Kennedy still wants to stop bombing unconditionally to test Kosygin's guess that this would bring Hanoi to the conference table. And what would we lose if Kosygin proved wrong? Aerial pictures of scurrying infiltrators during the Tet bombing pause have answered this question. So have post-Tet mortar attacks by the VC.

than a week later, a third church went up in flames—this one a slave-built white church in a piney grove east of Benton. Though no one could say certainly who burned it, last week the young radicals of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee openly encouraged the obvious guess that the Negroes had invoked the principle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—and had burned a church for a church.

Black Front: The suggestion was a tempting one, for this was the rigidly segregated county where the concept of "black power" was first evolved by SNCC's Stokely Carmichael. First to burn was an abandoned Hayneville church lately occupied by an antipoverty program funded by the U.S., run by Negroes and widely (though mistakenly) regarded by segregationist whites as a mere black-power front. Negroes accordingly assumed that Klannish segs started that fire—as well as another, the very next night, that leveled Macedonia Baptist Church in Fort Deposit just hours after a Negro mass meeting. Egged on by SNCC, some 50 angry local Negroes started forming a "defense committee" to guard the black community against white marauders. Two nights after their first organizational meeting, the white church —Good Hope Presbyterian—burned to the ground.

Who did it? Curiously enough, in so racially strained a climate, whites were by no means unanimous in accusing Negroes. Some, indeed, suspected that the Klan had burned Good Hope for its own cryptic reasons, and one Lowndes elder found a deeper lesson in the fires: "Whoever burned that first church in Hayneville is morally responsible for the other two." Yet SNCC's militants saw a clear deterrent value in suggesting, for the benefit of white terrorists, that Negroes would no longer meet violence with nonviolence. "The mood in that community is we're going [to give] tit for tat," said Rap Brown, a bitter SNCC worker who affects denims, sunglasses, a droopy mustache and a world view that casts the U.S. as "the Fourth Reich." "And we're going to do it on an undiscriminating basis. It's really like a big checker game. They moved. We moved. Now we're waiting to see what their next move will be."

THE ASSASSINATION:

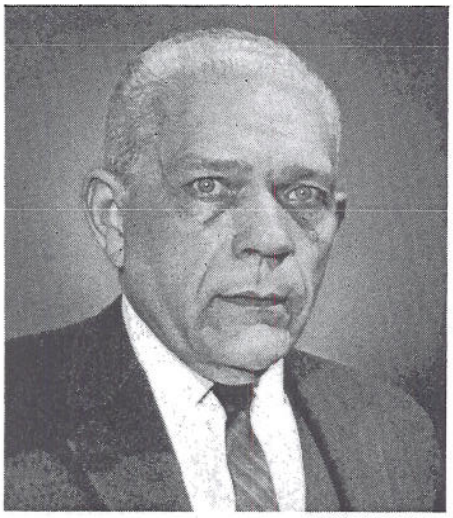
A Charge of Conspiracy

The accused "did willfully and unlawfully conspire with David W. Ferrie . . . Lee Harvey Oswald . . . and others not herein named to murder John F. Kennedy." In stark legalistic terms, a New Orleans grand jury last week thus capped District Attorney Jim Garrison's bizarre investigation: it formally charged New

Orleans socialite Clay L. Shaw, 54, with plotting to assassinate President Kennedy—but not necessarily of complicity in the actual deed at Dallas three and a half years ago.

The indictment followed a three-judge ruling the week before that there was "sufficient evidence" of the possibility that a plot actually lay behind the assassination (NEWSWEEK, March 27). And like the judges' ruling, the indictment was based largely on the testimony of insurance salesman Perry R. Russo; he said he heard Shaw, Ferrie (an ex-airline pilot who died four days after Garrison first linked him to his probe) and Oswald discuss plans to shoot the President.

Unsaid: But the New Orleans grand jury notably did not link the alleged conspiracy directly to the shooting or suggest that anyone other than Oswald actually fired at the President. Nor did it give any clues as to who the "others not herein named" might be. Such details of



Associated Press

Shaw: Indictment in New Orleans

Garrison's self-proclaimed "solution" of the assassination will have to wait for the trial itself, the date of which will depend on prosecution and defense maneuvers.

Meanwhile, one of the dozens of persons questioned in the case—Gordon Novel, 29, former owner of a French Quarter bar who says he knew Shaw and was "indirectly" acquainted with "a David Ferrie"—failed to show up for a scheduled grand jury appearance. He did turn up in Columbus, Ohio, however, long enough to cryptically denounce the New Orleans D.A.'s investigation. "Garrison's political ambition is what this is all about," he said. He did not want to return to New Orleans, he added, without a guarantee of immunity from "harassment." Garrison promptly obtained a warrant for Novel's arrest as a "most important" material witness, and a member of his staff said the district attorney was prepared to file a request for extradition if necessary to get Novel back.