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Those 'Secret' Cables

AS YOU may have noticed over the years, I have devoted almost no space to gossip. This is not because I don't enjoy a titillating morsel as much as the next man; rather it is an outgrowth of my professional training as a constitutional and political historian. I have a passion for probative evidence, that is, for pieces of paper with a date and a signature. For instance, a couple of years or so ago during the famous "Battle of Johnson's Speech" the American public was exposed to an orgy of gossip.

Ex-President Johnson, in an interview with Walter Cronkite, said he had sent a memo to his principal foreign policy advisers asking them for a total review of our options in Vietnam. Townsend Hoopes, a former middle-level official in the Pentagon, wrote an article accusing Johnson of lying, stating flatly that the Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford had never received such a memo.

NOW there was a simple way of discovering whether Johnson or Hoopes was correct. Any "Top Secret" memorandum of this order is delivered personally by an officer courier who does not depart until he has received a signed receipt for the document — a personally signed receipt. The secretary's or administrative assistant's signature won't do. So the question was this: Did Clifford sign a receipt for this particular memo? A check of the President's files indicated that he did. That settled that.

At the moment we are off on another gossip carnival launched when the Democratic Vice Presidential nominee, Sargent Shriver, told the press that in the winter of 1969 President Nixon "blew" a golden opportunity for peace in Vietnam. Shriver, who was then ambassador to France, was not plugged in to the Paris negotiations. They were conducted on a separate diplomatic track. However, he undoubtedly engaged in private conversations with Ambassadors Harriman and Vance.

When pushed for documentation by Secretary of State William Rogers, Shriver took refuge behind this jurisdictional division. He allowed that he had not reported this alleged bungling of the negotiations, but that his views were reflected in the cables sent by Harriman and Vance. Since he remained in Paris for another year as President Nixon's representative, we can assume that the matter did not keep him awake nights.

FOR OPENERS then, Shriver has no document to back his charge. Let us then turn to Ambassadors Harriman and Vance, who rushed to support Shriver's allegation. Recall that, owing to arguments over the shape of the table, agreement on substantive talks was not reached until January 16, 1969 — four days before Mr. Nixon assumed office. Harriman departed shortly thereafter; Vance roughly a month later. At some time between January and March, 1969, then, it is contended that the North Vietnamese signaled their willingness for peace. The alleged signal was that Hanoi withdrew a substantial number of its troops from I Corps.

It is true that Hanoi did pull out some 20-odd regiments, but not in January. This was done in August and September, 1968, and it was then interpreted by Ambassadors Harriman and Vance as a signal that, if we reciprocated, peace might be in the offing. President Johnson was impressed, but skeptical. He insisted on taking out insurance—the "reservations" that Hanoi would not shell the cities, would respect the DMZ, and permit American aerial surveillance. In return he offered a total halt in the bombing of North Vietnam. Hanoi balked at the "reservations," but eventually, at the end of October, informed us through Soviet intermediaries that they would accept the package. The bombing was stopped.

My memory tells me that nothing remarkable occurred in January, 1969, but almost four years have passed since I saw the Harriman-Vance reports. So before we go any further into this hearsay frolic, I would urge President Nixon to declassify the cables from the Paris negotiators. Let's substitute pieces of paper for memories (including mine) —which are frequently and quite unintentionally self-serving.

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William Raspberry is on vacation. His column will resume when he returns.