Banner of Boredom . . .

Dividends in Rusk Dullmanship

By Murrey Marder

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SECRETARY OF STATE Dean Rusk on Monday ran a limp standard of boredom up the flagpole of the State Department in his attempt to squelch Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

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In one sense, Rusk probably did not intend to do that; in another sense that was exactly what he meant.

There is a paradox in the making of American foreign policy that has been only barely discernible in the publicized point-counterpoint exchanges between the Secretary and the author. It could be called the arithmetic of dullness, with its pluses and minuses.

In Rusk's view of his foreign policy objectives, he literally meant what he said when he told newsmen:

"It is the purpose of the Department of State to try to bring about what some people will call a boring situation, that is, a period of peace. I should not object if we got international relations off of the front page for a while. I see no prospect of it."

RUSK'S DESIRE to make international relationships as commonplace and dull as possible is intended to blunt the edges of crisis. The history books of a later era are likely to record that as Rusk's major accomplishment: he has been quite successful at that low-key task, although it bears no doctrinal name or slogan to commend it.

But that desire collides with another American desire: To bring zest, vitality, imaginativeness, drama, inspiration and resourcefulness into the operation of American foreign policy in a period of revolutionary transition in world affairs.

That was what the late President Kennedy tried to inject into diplomacy. He did so to the extent that in death his name remains identified with the hope and vision of progress for many peoples of the world.

President Kennedy's frustrations in stirring up, in the traditional bureaucracy, the excitement, activism, and forward-motion that he wished to generate were what Schlesinger sought to explain. Schlesinger criticized Rusk for being "unembarrassed by banality" and said, "the stereotypes of diplomacy were his native tongue." But Schlesinger also said that Rusk "proved to be the most effective Secretary of State . . . since Cordell Hull."

Many diplomats believe that Schlesinger struck an unscholarly low blow in attributing to a dead President, while Rusk is still in office, an intention to remove him after the 1964 elections. Schlesinger has replied that he should be judged by his full book, when it is published, and not on presently-printed extracts.

BUT APART from the Rusk-Schlesinger dispute, there is a more profound foreign policy issue here, with which the Johnson Administration and succeeding Administrations must grapple. Over simply stated, it is: How can American foreign policy be both dull and vibrant?

If success is achieved in tamping down crises enough to make them "boring," will the emblem of American foreign policy be a supine figure recumbent on a field of grass?

Or, instead of serving as a dreary defender of the status quo, with its officials competing only for categories of mediocrity, will the United States be a forward force in the world?

When the Kennedy Administration came into office, the United States and the Soviet Union were shrieking at each other so loudly that neither could hear what the other was saying. For years a knee-jerk reaction had governed American foreign policy; whatever the Soviet Union was for, the United States was against, and vice versa.

That noise level was suppressed enough so that when a genuine crisis arose, the Cuban missile crisis, the two capitals could signal their intentions well enough to each other to avert a mutually disastrous showdown. The same thing happened in the Berlin crisis. Dulling the edges of crisis paid off.

IT WAS and is Rusk's conviction that it is not his job to be an actor or showman, or a charismatic leader.

While President Kennedy was in office, he performed the other portion of the task. The President preempted more of the news and drama than his associates would then, or now, admit, in carrying the banner of American vitality in international affairs.

Who will fly it now? One Rusk supporter succinctly and defensively replied: "Only a President can succeed a President." But even so, it will serve neither the Nation, nor the morale or effectiveness of its employes, to fly a banner of boredom from the masthead of the State Department.