

Inside Report . . . *Post 4/1/66* By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Harriman's New Mission

QUIET DIPLOMACY, not election-year politics, was the true inspiration behind President Johnson's new and unpublicized "peace desk" on the seventh floor of the State Department.

Although that ageless diplomatic trouble-shooter, Averell Harriman, has been sitting behind his new desk now for six weeks, there has been no formal announcement of his assignment, and there won't be.

In fact, President Johnson regards Harriman's new job of preparing an array of all possible U.S. positions for eventual negotiations with North Vietnam, and of following up every stray clue of a possible change in Hanoi's intransigence, as seriously as he does the war itself.

Proof of this is the fact that the President personally ordered a search two months ago for the right man to man the "peace desk." Mr. Johnson gave that assignment to Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. They divided over three prospects: Ambassador-at-Large Harriman (favored by Rusk), Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, whose diplomatic skill made possible last June's elections in the Dominican Republic (favored by McNamara), and former Ambassador to Russia Llewellyn Thompson, now the State Department's top Soviet expert.

Confronted by these three prospects, the President picked Harriman.

IT WAS Harriman who carried the heaviest load of the abortive peace offensive last January during the bombing pause in Vietnam. Harriman, moreover, has built up a network of contacts throughout the Soviet government, starting with Premier Alexi Kosygin, and is on a first-name basis with many of the neutralist leaders of the Third World.

In addition to the secrecy, another bit of evidence that the peace desk is serious business to President John-



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son is the surprising return to government of former White House aide Chester Cooper. Cooper, a stalwart in McGeorge Bundy's old shop in the basement of the White House, took a sabbatical leave from government to study and write a book. Harriman's call for help reached him in Greece. He would not have returned without a conviction that the President means business, not politics, for Harriman's new assignment.

But with that said, what is the realistic prospect of Harriman's mission? Until next winter at the very earliest, just about zero. The Communist government in North Vietnam is still counting on the supposed anti-war feeling in the United States to undermine President Johnson. By early next year, so the North Vietnamese calculate, far more U.S. troops will be in the field and the casualty rate will be higher.

As top administration policy-makers now see it, however, there is the faint glimmering of a possible change arising from the Communist Party crisis in Red China. The passions unleashed by Mao Tze-tung's Red Guards have undermined Peking-style communism all over the world, thus enhancing the Soviet Union in its fierce ideological struggle with Peking for control of the world Communist movement. This, in turn, will raise Moscow's influence in Hanoi and Moscow is regarded here as a bit less inflexible over the Vietnam war than Peking.

THIS IS precisely the kind of intangible development that Harriman will try

to take advantage of. Mr. Johnson has given him a blank check to take any initiative he wants in his attempt to break down Hanoi's refusal to talk peace. That specifically covers sudden, unannounced trips abroad to get first-hand evidence from visitors to Hanoi. It also gives Harriman access to all U.S. intelligence, to the large society of Communist diplomats in Washington and to policy decisions with the Voice of America.

But beyond this, and probably more important, the Harriman mission is to stake out a whole array of flexible negotiating positions, any one of which can be pulled out of the files when — and if — the rigid, war posture of North Vietnam becomes less intractable.

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