

Department

The Arkansas Traveler

The difference between the letter which Harry Ashmore, with State Department advice, wrote to Hanoi on Feb. 5 and the letter which President Johnson sent on Feb. 8, do not seem to justify the harsh allegation that the Government has been guilty of "a devious course" and of "crude duplicity."

The Presidential letter is more specific than the Ashmore letter but not in basic contradiction with it. And even if a contradiction exists, there seems little reason to suppose this a deliberate sabotage of a possible peace. North Vietnam could have availed itself of the option exercised by President Kennedy in replying to the apparently conflicting Khrushchev letters in the Cuban crisis. The White House in that situation chose to reply to the letter that seemed most hopeful. It seems likely that a government in Hanoi really anxious for peace could have done the same thing.

It is not remarkable that the State Department and the President were pursuing peace through a Moscow channel at the same time that Ashmore was proceeding through his private and informal channel. There does not seem to be anything duplicitous about the failure to abandon all other explorations of peace until the Ashmore lead had been run out. Nor does there seem to be anything duplicitous about failure of the Government to take Ashmore wholly into its confidence as to alternative approaches. Events would seem to afford justification for not doing so. It is not customary or conventional for governments to yield exclusive negotiating rights to private citizens conducting unofficial and informal preliminary exploration of this kind.

Such inquiries as Ashmore and William Baggs made in Hanoi are extremely useful and helpful. While they do not often lead directly to peace or negotiations for peace, they are an alternative means of communication when formal channels of diplomacy are closed. Through such conversations ordinary private citizens often can perform an important and patriotic function. The honest purpose and good motive of these two able journalists entitle them to the praise of their countrymen.

Unfortunately, the Ashmore article in *Center Magazine* is tendentious and querulous and obscures more than it clarifies the efforts of the Arkansas traveler and his companion. Its high tone and imperious posture conveys the somewhat embarrassing impression that the author regards the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions as a sovereign power. The article sounds like a communique from a greater to a lesser, and infinitely more stupid and worse governed, minor state.

The Ashmore article makes it clear that the word he has for the Johnson Administration is the word the Arkansas Traveler had for his critics in the 1850s: "You give me a pain." And that message has some political importance in 1967 but it probably does not much advance the prospects for peace on earth.