

'No Inconsistency'

State Department Denies Scuttling Viet Peace Move

By Chalmers M. Roberts
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The Johnson Administration yesterday characterized as "misleading" the accusation by Harry S. Ashmore that it had scuttled a Vietnam peace overture in which he had played a role.

In fact, Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy told newsmen, Ashmore "yields to a personal feeling" that he was on the "center of the stage," whereas he was involved in only a peripheral part of efforts to talk peace with North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh last January and February.

Ashmore, a former editor who now is executive vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, Calif., had charged that a letter from President Johnson to Ho had "effectively and brutally cancelled" one he had sent to Ho after

Bundy and other officials had aided in drafting it.

Yesterday in Los Angeles Ashmore said he felt the war should be concluded through a "negotiated settlement" rather than by a "military resolution." He said he fears the Administration will take the latter course.

"I'm not one who favors pulling out," he said. "I'm not an all-out pacifist. If President Johnson is a hawk, I guess I'm a dove." His "dovish" position, he added, is intended to be "critical of the policy of the Administration" in bringing an end to the conflict.

To answer the Ashmore charges, made public on Sunday, the State Department put out a seven-page detailed account and Bundy, whose area includes Vietnam, answered newsmen's questions. The White House referred all queries to State.

Here are the key points in the Administration's response:

There was "no inconsistency" between the Johnson and Ashmore letters, as Ashmore contended.

The Ashmore letter, sent on Feb. 5, said that senior officials at State wanted "some recipro-

cal action" in exchange for a halt in the American bombing of North Vietnam. The President's letter, sent on Feb. 8 according to Bundy, offered both to halt the bombing and not to introduce any more American troops into Vietnam "as soon as I am assured that infiltration" from the North has stopped.

The President's letter was sent not on Feb. 2, before the Ashmore letter was composed, as Ashmore had stated, but was "written and delivered"

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phong. Page A12.

on Feb. 8. Ashmore had implied that while some officials were working with him on a "conciliatory" letter to Ho, others, presumably Secretary Dean Rusk, had written a Presidential letter with "the most stringent demands yet made" for reciprocity if the bombing were to be halted.

On March 21 when the Johnson letter was released by State, after it had been broadcast by Hanoi, it bore no date. Some officials at that time said it had been drafted Feb. 2. Others said it was written on Feb. 6 or 7 but that "we had been thinking of a letter for several days." It was handed to a Hanoi representative in Moscow Feb. 8. Bundy said yesterday that if anyone had given Feb. 2 as the date of drafting "we were wrong." But he refused to say whether he and the other officials who had worked with Ashmore and his travelling companion to Hanoi, editor William C. Baggs of the Miami News, then were aware of the Presidential letter.

The Ashmore-Baggs report on their Jan. 12 talk with Ho was not a "significant" factor in the Johnson letter, said Bundy, because at the time, and unknown to Ashmore and Baggs, the United States was passing messages in Moscow directly to the Hanoi representative.

The Ashmore letter to Ho was drafted after he and Baggs had expressed "the strong hope they could be given a message for transmission to Hanoi." Ashmore had said that a "decision" to send the letter was taken at a conference he and Baggs had with Bundy, Under Secretary of State Nicholas deB. Katzen-

bach and others.

Bundy explained that it was decided at State that "it would be useful to send" via Ashmore "a more general message" than those being sent via Moscow. That accounts for the differences on the matter of reciprocity, he said. Bundy denied that the Johnson letter represented any hardening of the previous American position on reciprocity if the bombing were to end. The statement said there was "no change of basic position whatever between Feb. 5 and Feb. 8."

Bundy said that at no time had Ho given a firm statement that he would agree to talks if the bombing were halted. Ashmore had said that Ho had reiterated to the two visitors "his unqualified commitment to enter into negotiations" if the U.S. halted bombing.

But the State Department paper, in part based on the Ashmore-Baggs report of their talk with Ho, said that Ho had insisted on both a bombing halt and a ban on American reinforcements "during the period of the talks." Ho also was reported to have been "adamant against any reciprocal military restraint by North Vietnam." The President's letter asked for such reciprocity but also offered to halt introduction of more troops.

Bundy called "nonsense" Ashmore's contention that

there are "two State Departments," one apparently headed by Rusk and the other more willing to seek negotiations. He also characterized as "cynical" a reporter's suggestion that Ashmore and Baggs had been "fall guys" for State. He said "absolutely no" when he was asked if secrecy had been imposed on the two men in order to keep them from testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in support of the earlier report of the New York Times' Harrison Salisbury on American bomb damage to civilian structures in North Vietnam.

Bundy also implied that Ashmore had had a hand in the disclosure of what some Administration critics have described as another abortive peace effort, that of the Italian mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira, in December, 1965. Hanoi denounced it all as a fraud but after a newsman printed part of the story the State Department released much of the record.

The Department also was nettled by Ashmore's contention that it had attempted to

"discredit" the Pacem in Terris II conference which Ashmore helped organize in Geneva this May. It was noted that American Ambassador to the United Nations Arthur J. Goldberg had been scheduled to address the gathering but was prevented from doing so by the Middle East crisis.

At the Capitol yesterday Sen. Fulbright confirmed Ashmore's account of his (Fulbright's) role, which was chiefly to arrange the State Department meeting.

Ashmore and Baggs were charged with a "shocking display of unmitigated arrogance" by Rep. Samuel S. Stratton (D-N.Y.). Rep. Charles Teague (D-Calif.) in whose district the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions is located, said he agreed.

On the Senate side, minority leader Everett B. Dirksen (R-Ill.) defended the President, Sen. George D. Aiken (R-Vt.) said the Ashmore account seemed to indicate dissention in the executive branch and and Sen. Wayne Morse (D-Ore.) called for Rusk to testify before the Foreign Relations Committee.