

U.S. Policy Shifts Battle W. Germany

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BONN, May 7.—The "credibility gap" which has affected the Johnson Administration's pronouncements on Vietnam appears to have spread to this part of the world.

A few West German officials still profess to know what U.S. policy here is going to be over the next year, but even these officials show no great confidence in their beliefs. Most other officials, politicians and commentators confess a feeling of utter helplessness in attempting to fathom U.S. intentions.

There has been no lack of communication, perhaps the opposite. Bonn has been bombarded daily from Washington by official and semi-official statements, diplomatic notes, private communications and inspired rumors. Cabinet and subcommittee officers, diplomats and parliamentarians have been scurrying back and forth between the two capitals, as well as meeting in London, Paris, Brussels, Strasbourg and a few other points in between.

Officials Uncertain

The trouble has been that a good deal of this talking back and forth has had no

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relation to actions. The Administration has been saying one thing one day, doing something else the next. Or, more precisely, parts of the Administration have been giving promises and reassurances in one direction, while other parts of the Administration have taken action in the opposite direction. Factional alignments have become more "integrated" and "supranational" than the alliance itself, but now officials are not even sure about their own long-time factual allies.

The "credibility gap" goes back a year and a half to the ill-fated multilateral nuclear force (MLF) project, when Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder's supporters here and the famous "theologians" in the State Department convinced each other they had it made—until France, Britain and domestic opinion in both the United States and West Germany persuaded President Johnson to decide otherwise. The same pro and con factions have been intriguing steadily over successor versions of the MLF ever since, but apart from a hard core almost everybody

has wearied of the game by now.

The most serious blow to U.S. credibility, however, has come in the past six months—over the question of American forces stationed in this country. The doubts began when Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara "assured" the NATO Council in Paris last December that there would be no redeployment of "major combat units" from Germany to meet the needs of the Vietnam war. The phrase was suspect from the start, more so when Administration spokesmen declined to say whether a "major combat unit" meant a platoon or a division.

'Numbers Game'

A small-scale "numbers game" soon followed. Overnight, U.S. spokesmen began saying there would be no reduction of the "240,000" troops here, where for months the figure had been "950,000." Transfer of "a handful of specialists" was admitted, but the "handful" appeared to be rather broad, while the "specialists" turned out to include captains of infantry.

Meanwhile, after the Ehrhard-Johnson meetings last Christmas, it was reported that West German defense officials had quietly agreed

that escalation in Vietnam might require the transfer of as many as 70,000 American troops from Germany by the end of 1966 if U.S. reservists were not to be mobilized.

However, this quiet understanding does not appear to have been communicated to diplomats of the two countries, who continued to reassure each other that no big reductions were contemplated. Then came McNamara's disclosure last month that "15,000" more soldiers would be withdrawn—a figure reluctantly amended within a few days to "15,000 net." For it developed that 30,000 men would actually be leaving Germany now, while 15,000 replacements were "assured" by the end of the year.

Humorists on both sides of the Atlantic have had a field day with this performance, which seems to be in for an extended run. The latest statements by Senators Mike Mansfield and Stuart Symington calling for a drastic reduction—from the original six divisions to one or two—will surely be followed by new reassurances that such is not official U.S. policy. It may not be, but doubters will be pardoned.

If this were the only item in the credibility gap, confidence here in the Administration might be restored—for the Bonn government does understand the U.S. predicament in Vietnam and the German public rally does not care much

how many American soldiers are here so long as enough could be here in a pinch.

However, the same disarray and confusion has already been communicated on a wide variety of other issues—ranging from NATO strategy to how to deal with de Gaulle. Wild rumors proliferate in all directions, and most of them seem to have some official source. The impression is strong that either the United States is playing it by ear from day to day, without making up its mind on any of these issues, or else that so many different minds in the Administration have been made up that nobody really knows which one counts.

The only consolation for American observers here is that the Bonn government is just as many-tongued on a host of more manageable issues.