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Today and Tomorrow . . . By Walter Lippmann

Buy Why Avoid the Question?

BEFORE WE RESIGN ourselves to the idea that in Vietnam diplomacy is exhausted, that nothing can be done except by intensifying the fighting, we ought to know why the Administration insists on ignoring the public statements of the Soviet Union. Three times since February 9 we have been told that the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam would "open the way" to a negotiated settlement. We have been told by the Soviet Prime Minister, Kossygin and twice after that by President Podgorny. In these statements from the principal ally of North Vietnam we have been offered openly what the President has repeatedly said is our objective.

WHY THEN do we ignore the Soviet Union? Because, says Secretary Rusk, we know through our private channels of information that Hanoi will not do what the



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Soviet Union says it will do. Is Washington really better informed about Hanoi than is Moscow? What would be the purpose of the Soviet government in making a proposal on which it cannot make good? To deceive the American people? To deceive the rest of the world? Is it possible that the Soviet government would take the risk of practicing a gross and spectacular deception which, if it is a deception, could so easily be exposed by taking Kossygin and Podgorny at their word, suspending the bombing and waiting for them to make good?

EVEN MORE inexplicable than Rusk's refusal to step up to the ball and put it back in the Soviet court, is his strategic speculation as to what might happen if we took up the Soviet offer. He sees a strong buildup of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam while we, having tied our hands with the promise not to bomb, suffer severe losses. This is a nightmare conjured up by the ambiguous word "permanent" which, though used

by some North Vietnamese, has not been used by the Soviet officials. It reduces the whole affair to absurdity to believe that the Soviet government believes that the United States will not fight back if it is attacked, that the United States will disarm itself forever if instead of the way being opened to a peace conference, the way is closed by another Vietnamese offensive.

The stakes are high. There is at stake peace in this cruel war. There is at stake also the good name of the President and of the country. The issue is for the time being quite specific. Nothing is gained and only harm is done by muddying the waters with reports of secret information which contradict the public statements of the Soviet government. The specific issue is: Why has the Administration ignored in March 1967 a proposal which meets exactly what it was demanding in 1966? This is a troublesome and ugly question. And it will not disappear in a cloud of vituperation.

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