

# Secret Peace Feelers

By Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson 4/16/67

THE FULL RECORD of the peace feeler negotiations between Ho Chi Minh, the Russians and the British probably will not be disclosed for ten or 15 years when the State Department publishes its bound volumes of "Diplomatic Correspondence."

However, from highly reliable sources, this column can piece together one small but important segment of the recent talks. They show that:

1. Contrary to Sen. Robert Kennedy's insinuation, President Johnson took the initiative and sincerely tried to achieve a truce.

2. The Russians did their best to help him.

3. Chinese influence with North Vietnam counted more than Russian influence.

4. There probably will never be peace in Vietnam until either the North Vietnamese are completely defeated or the Russians win more influence than the Chinese.

5. The reason President Johnson has been so reluctant to seal Haiphong harbor is that by shutting off Soviet weapons he also would reduce Soviet influence in Hanoi, thus reducing the chances of ending the war.

Meanwhile, North Vietnam has worked out an agreement to take title to Soviet supplies on the Chinese-Russian border. Since the arms technically would belong to North Vietnam, the Chinese reportedly have agreed to permit their shipment across China.

HERE ARE SOME details of the recent highly important chapter in the peace feeler negotiations:

In January, various friendly diplomats in Asia and Europe advised American diplomats that they felt North Vietnam would be amenable to peace talks, and advised that the timing should coincide with the Tet truce period.

Accordingly, the State Department on Jan. 24 began drafting a letter to Ho Chi Minh. The letter was written with great care, and rewrit-

ten several times. It was not actually delivered until Feb. 8 when it was handed to a North Vietnam representative in Moscow by a member of the American Embassy. The text was not given either to the Russians or the British, though both were advised of the move and of the letter's general contents.

The text was withheld because of a possible leak, and because it was known Ho Chi

Minh got irked over negotiations conducted in public.

The Soviet government, at this point, exerted its influence and Premier Kosygin appealed to Ho personally. Kremlin leaders had given the White House their considered advice on how to approach Hanoi and not only urged secrecy but cautioned that we should not be too eager for peace. The North Vietnamese interpret this as a sign of weakness.

Reason for this unusual Soviet-American cooperation, of course, is that both countries have the same long-range policy in Asia; namely, containing China within her present borders.

Apparently, the Johnson letter came in for careful consideration in Hanoi, and there was some evidence that it worried the Chinese. At any rate, American intelligence learned that a North Vietnamese delegation went to Peking early in February to assure the Chinese that they would not be influenced by the Johnson peace feelers. The war, they said, would continue.

The Chinese have been sending North Vietnam much food and a large supply of weapons. Apparently this counted more than Russian arms and influence.

FOR SIX DAYS, President Johnson waited for a reply. Meanwhile, United States observation planes, flying over North Vietnam, took pictures of loaded trucks traveling bumper to bumper across the Demilitarized Zone into South Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff urged him to resume bombing.

Finally, on Feb. 13, it be-

came clear that Ho would turn Johnson's letter down, for he replied negatively to a peace appeal from the Pope. One day later, the President ordered a resumption of bombing.

Ho's negative and rather abrupt reply to the President was actually delivered on March 15, but the President did not make it public, even though it would have answered his critics, including Bobby Kennedy. Publication, he figured, would freeze Ho Chi Minh in his negative position, and he hoped peace feelers could be renewed.

The Chinese, however, were eager to expose the correspondence, probably to embarrass Moscow, which had helped provide the link between LBJ and Ho.

So, on March 21, under

pressure from Peking, Ho released Mr. Johnson's letter. The President was on his way back from Guam when Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach put through a phone call to Air Force One, midway between Hawaii and the California coast. The President's press secretary, George Christian, took the call. The full text of the Hanoi announcement was then transmitted to the President by airborne teletype.

Upon returning to Washington, the President called Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara and other aides into conference. They agreed that Hanoi must have released the letter because of Chinese pressure. However, they decided to keep other correspondence between the President and Ho Chi Minh secret as a basis for future peace probes. Their attitude, however, was pessimistic.

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