

Why the News Is So Confusing

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Government officials are, as they say, redfaced. Some journalistic outsiders are understandably wroth. And, alas, the poor newspaper reader is muddled by it all.

Depending on which paper you read this week — or even which edition of which day — you might be alarmed at the prospect of a Sino-Soviet war. Or you may feel the danger is over-rated.

You could believe, authoritatively, that the Green Berets are innocent and the Central Intelligence Agency guilty in the killing of a suspected Vietnamese agent. Or you could agree with an equally authoritative

and anonymous newly circulated account that says precisely the reverse.

You may see hope, along with State Department spokesmen, in a "significant" drop-off of North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam. Or you may share the more sour view at the Pentagon that things haven't change much.

You may have abandoned all hope for a "peace dividend," along with White House special assistant Daniel P. Moynihan, or you may take the more sanguine view of other officials that new Nixon programs will show-er post-Vietnam benefits on all

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Americans.

When he was campaigning for the presidency last fall, Richard M. Nixon promised to conduct an "open administration." This week it opened up with a vengeance.

The triggering event was a background lunch Monday at which the Green Beret episode and the prospects of a Soviet pre-emptive strike against Communist China were discussed.

IDENTIFICATION

The man who did the backgrounding was identified by the New York Times, the Washington Evening Star and Scripps-Howard as Central Intelligence Agency director Richard M. Helms. None of these news media was represented at the session.

Under the protocol for such sessions, all participants are required to observe the "Lindley Rule."

This is a journalistic convention, named after former Newsweek columnist Ernest K. Lindley, under which the remarks of the briefer are in no way attributed and his identity is in no manner disclosed.

SINO-SOVIET

Following the Monday session stories appeared reflecting the growing alarm in the Nixon Administration over the prospects of war between Russia and China. The stories cited reports reaching Washington that the Russians were sounding out Communist bloc countries and some Western Communist leaders on their reaction to a Soviet attack.

Until that point the past Administration statement on the possibility of a war was made by Secretary of State William C. Rogers on August 20. He told State Department summer interns he regarded it as unlikely.

The State Department was still clinging to that position yesterday. And Rogers was reported to be upset at the newly voiced though clandestine alarm about a Sino-Soviet war danger that was being blared in the headlines.

Yesterday a second story surfaced in various newspapers. It was a new account — also unattributed — of the Green Beret murder in Vietnam.

According to this version the CIA advised officers of the Fifth Special Forces Group at Nha Trang not to kill the suspected double agent, Thai Khac Chuyen. This account also asserted that seven Green Beret officers implicated in the episode lied to their superiors, claiming that the agent disappeared on a mission.

Previous accounts coming from Vietnam, often attributed to "sources close to the Green Berets," accused the CIA of issuing the order to kill the South Vietnamese agent.

If the news reader wasn't reeling with confusion at the rush of contradictory headlines, the infiltration flap was enough to finish him off.

It began with a speech in Madison, Wis., Tuesday night by former Secretary of State Dean Rusk saying there was "an almost total lack" of infiltration from North Vietnam into the south recently and that this was a hopeful omen. (Rusk tried unsuccessfully to put these remarks off-the-record, even though he addressed 800 banking officials).

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REPLY

The next morning the State Department followed up with a statement that North Vietnamese infiltration had decreased by a "significant" level. The Pentagon quickly countered that the decrease was slight, that no significance could be read into it and, furthermore, that the Communists were "substantially" replacing their battle casualties in South Vietnam.

Infiltration figures have always been a source of befuddlement not only to the public, but also to newsmen trained in the statistical artifices of the Pentagon and State Department.

For it is possible that infiltration may have gone, as Rusk indicated, to the zero point at the top of the pipeline in North Vietnam though a substantial number of North Vietnamese may still be pouring out of the bottom, through Laos and Cambodia.

No one made clear — publicly — whether Rusk, the State Department and the Pentagon were talking about the top or bottom of this pipeline. It was almost as though the issue was deliberately fuzzed.

Back in the civilian sector there was similar puzzlement. In the White House summer headquarters at San Clemente on Monday the President's urban affairs adviser, Moynihan, spoke of an era of tight budgets stretching beyond the end of the Vietnam war. By the next day's editions other anonymous White House officials were pooh-poohing the Moynihan claims.

There is only one casualty in this cross-barrage of conflicting claims and numbers. It is the hapless, vexed and bewildered reader.