

U.S. Plans to Thank Nations Whose Aid Was Asked on Pueblo

By PETER GROSE

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 23—The United States prepared messages of appreciation today to foreign governments whose good offices had been requested to help obtain the release of the Pueblo crew from captivity in North Korea.

The Soviet Union is foremost among those governments believed to have urged North Korea to reach a settlement, though the State Department spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, said: "It may never be possible to say what effect they had."

Several of the many proposals for settlement made by the United States during the 11 months of deadlocked negotiations were put to the North Koreans through third countries, rather than in the direct talks at Panmunjom, United States officials said. It was reasoned that the proposals might carry greater weight if they came from a Communist ally of the Pyongyang regime.

As it turned out, that was not the case: the device that finally brought about the release of the 82 surviving crewmen was put to the North Koreans by the United States negotiators only one week ago.

U.W. Denial Assailed

The idea of a diplomatic thank-you note to Communist governments has a certain irony, for their press and radio stations have already started denouncing the diplomatic technique used by the United States yesterday—the signing of a confession of espionage accompanied by a formal statement that the confession was false.

An East German radio broadcast said the settlement showed the "value which the United States imperialists place on international documents which they themselves have signed."

A Hungarian radio commentary, monitored here, called it "the most brazen defense in the history of diplomacy and international politics."

"Does the United States not only violate other countries' territorial waters but also sign false statements?" the Hungarian commentator asked.

The Johnson Administration defended the procedure used, which officials described variously as "a strange one," "unprecedented," and even "kooky—but it worked."

At 11:30 this morning in Pan-

munjom, on the Korean truce line, (9:30 P.M. yesterday Eastern Standard Time) the chief United States negotiator, Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, put his signature to a statement prepared by the Pyongyang Government.

Admission of Espionage

This statement admitted that the Pueblo had intruded into North Korea's territorial waters for purposes of espionage, and accepted as valid the public confessions made by the crewmen during their captivity. On this basis, the Pueblo crew was returned to United States custody at Panmunjom.

Just before signing this admission, General Woodward read a prepared statement in the presence of newsmen from Communist and Western countries. The text had already been cleared with the North Koreans.

General Woodward said that "the document which I am going to sign is at variance with the position" of the United States Government, which remains that "there is no convincing evidence that the ship at any time intruded into the territorial waters claimed by North Korea."

"We could not apologize for actions which we did not believe took place," General Woodward said. "I will sign the document to free the crew and only to free the crew."

Administration officials were angered today at charges that the Government had behaved dishonestly. They argued that there was never any pretense, to the North Koreans or anyone else, that the United States considered the confession true. The signature on the document, they added, was openly described as merely a technical device to win the release of the prisoners.

Spokesmen for the State Department and the Pentagon declined to comment on the remarks made by the Pueblo's skipper, Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, after his liberation. "The story is now with the men," said one official. "We're not going to say anything more for the present."

On Capitol Hill, largely deserted for the Christmas holidays, one Congressman, Representative Bob Wilson, Republican of California, said that the Pueblo incident was by no means completed.

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