

Guy Wright

The Squirming Doves

From the beginning I've said there could be no compromise settlement of the Vietnam war.

It could end only with an undisputed victor standing over his fallen foe.

The Fulbrights and McGoverns and Churches said otherwise.

Early in the game they pictured Ho Chi Minh as a paragon of sweet reasonableness eager to talk things over.

They pictured Lyndon Johnson as an American Machiavelli spurning repeated appeals for peace.

From their perch way out there on the limb the Fulbrights and McGoverns and Churches sang a beguiling chorus of "If Only . . ."

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IF ONLY we would make Uncle Ho a counter-offer to his suggestion that we drop dead . . .

If only we would invite the Viet Cong to take part in elections . . .

If only we would stop the bombing, the enemy would be glad to negotiate.

If only we could ease up on the battlefield, the enemy would stop stalling and negotiate seriously.

At no time did these men advocate running up the white flag. They assured us that wouldn't be necessary.

If only we would make reasonable concessions, the enemy was eager to meet us halfway.

That was the siren song of the doves.

Now the truth is out. Nixon's offer included it all. Ceasefire. Withdrawal. Elections.

Here every "if only" on the list is wrapped in one gift package.

But notice how the doves squirm.

Senator Church says he cannot support the President's offer because it "would require the North to stop fighting and settle for elections in the South . . ."

That, he adds, is something the North will never do.

Some of us have known that all along, Senator. Did you just wise up? Or did you also know it all along and keep mum?

Senator McGovern sees no reason to expect the enemy to accept the offer.

"They want a unilateral deadline (for our withdrawal) and then negotiations."

This is the man who assured us most

eloquently that Hanoi was eager to negotiate if we would just stop the bombing.

We stopped it. The negotiations proved a farce.

This is the man who then told us Hanoi would negotiate seriously if we would relax our pressure on the battlefield.

We have withdrawn thousands of our troops and retired the rest to defensive positions. But Hanoi's delegates still hang tough.

Now this man tells us they won't negotiate until we set a date and swear to get out — at which point there will be very little left to negotiate.

How long has McGovern known the truth? Were his earlier assurances mistakes or misrepresentations?

In either case, does his word have any worth?

"Fair and generous to Western eyes" is how Senator Fulbright assessed the President's offer.

"But what looks generous to us may not look generous to North Vietnam," he added.

From Fulbright that's quite an admission.

He pilloried Lyndon Johnson for not swallowing peace-bait far more nebulous than this offer.

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MORE THAN any other man in America he has spread the myth that Hanoi would welcome honorable compromise.

Now he says the offer is "fair and generous" but we shouldn't expect our enemies to accept it.

He is right. Why should they? They are winning and we are bugging out. They'd be foolish to stop now.

But what of Fulbright's long advocacy of a negotiated settlement? Back in the days when he castigated Johnson for not grasping at imaginary peace feelers did he already know a "fair and generous" offer would be unacceptable to Hanoi?

When he pushed us to the Paris peace table, did he already know a "fair and generous" offer wouldn't satisfy our foes?

When did he first realize all this? Why has he not said so before?

It seems our doves have been caught in a credibility gap.