

Vietnam Issue:

War of Words on War of Bombs

WASHINGTON—In the spring of 1971, as he planned to unveil his projected "journeys for peace" to Peking and Moscow, President Nixon was quoted by his staff as saying at a White House meeting: "Anyone who tries to make a political issue out of Vietnam in 1972 will have the rug

"[In 1969] Nixon had peace handed to him literally in his lap. He blew it."

R. Sargent Shriver



pulled from under him." In an interview last January he said: "The issue of Vietnam will not be an issue in the [Presidential] campaign . . . because we will have brought the American involvement to an end."

Last week, on the eve of the Republican convention in Miami, these confident predictions remained unfulfilled. For despite the détente with Peking, the Moscow summit and the withdrawal of the last of the American ground combat troops from Vietnam, the war was still on, the American involvement was continuing in the form of a stepped-up aerial offensive and a series of charges and countercharges pushed the Vietnam issue to the forefront of the campaign.

President Nixon could still pull off a settlement before Election Day, but time is short; and though the White House sought last week to "pull the rug out" from under the Democratic war critics, the rug seemed stuck.

"We are bombing the hell out of that poor land. We are bombing hospitals. I can't tell you whether it's deliberate. But to the people getting hit, it doesn't make much difference, does it?"

Ramsey Clark



These were the main elements of the debate:

SHRIVER'S RECOLLECTIONS: A little over a week ago Sargent Shriver, the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee, charged that Mr. Nixon had misread or ignored a North Vietnamese pullback in late 1968 and thus "blew" a chance for a compromise settlement in early 1969. Mr. Shriver, who was then Ambassador to France, said he and the two principal American delegates to the 1968 Paris peace talks, Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance, "felt peace was within their grasp." Mr. Vance and Mr. Harriman promptly supported the charge.

In swift rebuttal, Secretary of State

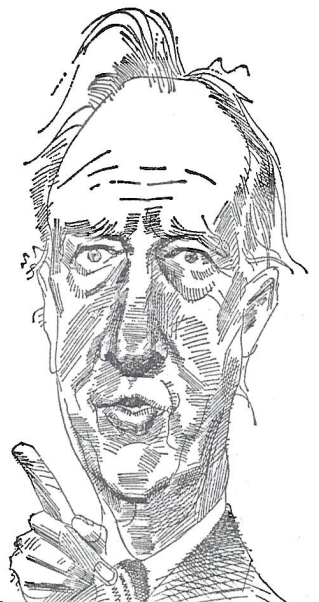
William P. Rogers accused the three Democrats of engaging in rationalization bordering on "political fantasy." Mr. Rogers said a search of the records, including Mr. Shriver's own messages to the State Department in early 1969, when he was still Ambassador to Paris, turned up no evidence of any such opportunity for peace.

CLARK'S THOUGHTS: Winding up an inspection trip to North Vietnam, Ramsey Clark, a former Attorney General under President Johnson, was reported in news dispatches last week-end to have given his conclusions in interviews in Hanoi and over Hanoi radio. Mr. Clark was quoted as (1) declaring that the United States was guilty of "inhuman" behavior in Vietnam, (2) calling for an immediate end to the bombing of the dikes and (3) contending that the American prisoners of war would be returned only if Senator McGovern were elected President. This led to attacks on his judgment, if not his loyalty, by the Administration, which has denied deliberate targeting of the dikes, and by its supporters. John N. Mitchell, Mr. Nixon's former Attorney General, accused Mr. Clark of "broadcasting Communist propaganda from Hanoi."

On returning to the United States last week, Mr. Clark sought to clarify

"To hear the voice of Ramsey Clark, a former member of President Johnson's Cabinet—a former Attorney General of the United States—to hear him on Radio Hanoi was, to me, contemptible."

William P. Rogers



matters. On the bombing damage, he insisted that he had only described what he had seen with his own eyes. On the prisoners, he said he had only meant to make the point that Hanoi would not release the men while the bombing continued. And he emphasized that he had not broadcast over Hanoi radio; taped recordings of his interviews had apparently been broadcast without his knowledge.

Nonetheless, the net effect may have been to diminish his utility to Mr. McGovern. The Democratic candidate, who had been saying that Ramsey Clark was the kind of man he wanted in his Cabinet, began describing him as the kind of man one ought to "consider" for a Cabinet post.

SALINGER'S SALLY: Pierre Salinger, former press secretary to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and now a McGovern aide, disclosed last Wednesday that he had met privately with the North Vietnamese negotiators

"What he [Ramsey Clark] said . . . pales into insignificance compared to the fact that President Nixon is ordering American bombers out to slaughter, kill and destroy all across the face of Indochina."

George McGovern



in Paris on July 15 and Aug. 9 to find out if there was any chance of Hanoi's releasing American prisoners in advance of a peace settlement. He said he had found that Hanoi's position had not changed: A settlement would have to come first.

Ronald Ziegler, the White House press secretary, was quick to spy an opening. Private efforts of this kind, he said in effect, could well "jeopardize" Presidential diplomacy. And Mr. McGovern himself seemed to be caught by surprise. In a display of the kind of managerial uncertainty that has gladdened Republican hearts of late, the Democratic candidate at first denied giving Mr. Salinger any instructions concerning such a meeting, then said in a formal statement that Mr. Salinger had indeed met with the Communists "at my request." He insisted that his emissary had done nothing to damage chances of a settlement.

KISSINGER'S TRAVELS: Henry Kissinger was a very busy man last week. On Tuesday he met with the top North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris—his third such secret trip in a month—and on Wednesday he flew to Saigon for two days of meetings with President Nguyen Van Thieu. The fact that Le Duc Tho, a top North Vietnamese Politburo member, flew back to Hanoi immediately after the Paris meeting fanned speculation that some important breakthrough had been made and that the White House adviser was informing Mr. Thieu about it. From Saigon, New York Times correspondent Sydney H. Schanberg cabled:

"The secrecy blanket thrown over the Kissinger visit has been so tightly woven that newsmen have been unable to find out what his meals consisted of. All we could tell was that he arrived wearing a gray suit, and left

"There is only one way to force the Communists to negotiate seriously . . . We must strike at them continuously, relentlessly, denying them any moment to catch their breath."

President Thieu



Drawings by Robert Pryor

wearing a blue suit and dark (possibly black) tie. His shirts on both occasions were blue. No one here, however, thinks that a peace settlement is likely soon."

In sum, what the Democrats sought to do last week was portray themselves as versatile and generous peacemakers—and Mr. Kissinger's new mission to Paris and Saigon as little more than a preconvention stunt. Mr. Nixon and his spokesmen in the executive branch and Congress, on the other hand, sought to portray the Democrats as undercutting the President's negotiating posture—and to cast doubt on Mr. McGovern's credibility, as well as on his capacity to control his own aides. Yet there was something synthetic about the whole debate.

Whether Mr. Shriver's recollections of a Communist "peace signal" in 1968 are true or revisionist seems secondary, in the view of many observers, to the main point: whether the Communist peace terms in 1969 were terms on which Mr. Nixon was prepared to settle then or might be prepared to settle now.

The President, if he means what he says, is determined to maintain an American role in the war until he can be sure that he will leave behind a non-Communist government in South Vietnam. Such a role is not compatible with the Communists' terms, in 1969 or today. Senator McGovern says it is worth losing the notion of a non-Communist South Vietnam in order to "save America."

The terms of a settlement—Mr. Kissinger apparently hopes the Communists will soften theirs in fear of being confronted with still tougher American terms after a Nixon victory in November—remain the crucial issue. Measured against that, the charges and countercharges of last week seemed to many observers to be the political shadowboxing of an election year, with little certainty as to which side was scoring which points with the electorate.

—ROBERT B. SEMPLE Jr.