

NYTimes

OCT 22 1971

# Us Poor Journalists

By C. L. SULZBERGER

## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

PARIS—One of the most successful tactics employed by the Vietnamese Communist side to confuse U.S. opinion during peace negotiations here is the simple one of saying different things to different Americans and then blandly refusing to see contradiction in such views, much less explain them.

Thus, for example, Communist officials have at various times told U.S. journalists and U.S. politicians that Hanoi did not insist on both U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam and renunciation of support for the Thieu regime before there could be any release of American war prisoners. These two conditions were linked in the Communist seven-point peace program produced last July.

North Vietnamese delegates have occasionally advised newspapermen and other visitors, recently including Senators Bayh and McGovern, that these points were separable. To say that this Hanoi tactic has succeeded in confusing not only American public opinion but the unfortunate newspapermen assigned to report the facts is an understatement. Stenographic transcripts of press briefings stress this bewilderment. For example, from a briefing by U.S. spokesman, Stephen Ledogar:

"Question—Steve, when Senator McGovern briefed the delegation after his various visits this weekend, did the delegation find that the Senator's impressions as he recounted them were consistent with the declarations that the Senator pronounced during his press conference of Sunday morning?"

"The reason I ask is not to call anyone a liar, but we found that we had the impression that some of the Senator's remarks were vague, to put it mildly; he wasn't quite sure of some of the things he was saying. Perhaps he gave you a clearer impression..."

Briefing by Nguyen Thanh Le of Hanoi: "Question [Edith Lenart, Far Eastern Economic Review]—We don't know where we are . . . now I have the impression that we all misunderstood what we were told over the last two or three months, since the presentation of the seven points."

Same briefing: "Question [Jonathan Randal, Washington Post]—You have known me for almost three years; do you understand why we no longer understand anything, do you understand the confusion in our minds?"

Either things are clear or I am a fool, and if I am a fool I am ready to withdraw from active life. . . .

"If you want to say something off the record, go ahead, but for God's sake explain to us whether we are not able to understand anything or whether there has been a change in your delegation policy. Any delegation has the right to change its mind. Sincerely, this is not a game for us, and we are at a total loss."

Spokesman's answer: "We already said that our statements are logical and consistent."

Vietcong briefing by Ly Van Sau: "Question by Randal—The two Senators who were just recently in Paris are against the war, they are serious-minded people who should at least be considered as such, particularly by your side. When they came out of their meeting with you they said things that seemed to point to rather important changes.

"I cannot understand why you do nothing but repeat well-known positions. By repeating those well-known positions, you are—objectively speaking—invalidating everything that the two Senators have stated. Is it your intention to make Senators McGovern and Bayh look ridiculous?"

Scott Sullivan, Baltimore Sun—"As I go over my notes for the last ten minutes . . . there is nothing telling us about the truthfulness of what McGovern told us. We still don't see the light, and we are confused as to whether or not Senator McGovern actually blew out of proportion what he gathered from you."

Randal—"What we are really interested in is whether or not McGovern embroidered the story. After all he is a political leader, he seeks the U.S. Presidency. Did he embroider on the substance of his discussion with you?"

Another Le briefing: [David Cohler, Westinghouse Broadcasting]—"I have been here for eighteen months but there is something that has always seemed strange to me. Since there have never been any restricted meetings, why are you so sure that the U.S. has not changed its policy, that is to say without us poor journalists knowing about it?"

The "poor journalists" receive no flat replies that would spoil the game whose name is confusion.