Pentagon Papers Bare

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Attempts to seek a diplomatic settlement of the Vietnam war during the Johnson administration appear to have been as confused, disorganized and aimless as the pursuit of the war itself.

The secret Pentagon documents made available to The Washington Post plainly suggest that the various efforts undertaken between 1964 and 1968 to open the way for negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam were improvised rather than orchestrated.

The documents also show that, with the notable exception of Henry Kissinger, these efforts were handled largely by an assortment of intermediaries who lacked clear concepts of the issues at stake but, in many cases, were mainly striving to promote their own interests.

Revealed as well in the classified documents is the extent to which the distrust and suspicion of the U.S. and North Vietnamese leaders for each other blocked any plausible approach to serious discussions.

And perhaps most important, the documents disclose, the wide gap in the respective goals of the two sides as they maneuvered to initiate conversations.

President Johnson repeatedly refused to stop the U.S. air attacks against North Vietnam begun in early 1965 unless the Communists reciprocated by withdrawing their forces from the South, or at least by curbing their infiltration of men and supplies. The best the Communists would offer, in contrast, were talks in exchange for a bombing halt.

Haphazard Four-Year Quest

So until U.S. and North Vietnamese representatives finally met in Paris in the spring of 1968, essentially on Communist terms, the four-year quest for a diplomatic breakthrough had very much been a haphazard though strenuous exercise. Or as a former U.S. official who was deeply involved in the exercise now puts it: "We were shooting arrows into the air and hoping to hit targets."

The contacts described in the documents range chronologically from the first mission to Hanoi in June 1964, by J. Blair Seaborn, the Canadian delegate on the tripartite International Control Commission, to an intervention by Italian diplomat Giovanni d'Orlandi in February and March of 1968. Other intermediaries included Rumanians, Poles, Russians, Norwegians, Swedes and two Frenchmen functioning in cooperation with Kissinger, then a Harward professor and now President Nixon's foreign affairs adviser.

American officials who worked with Kissinger in his initial foray into the realm of secret diplomacy gave him high marks. Leslie Gelb and Richard Moorsteen, former Defense Department employees who wrote one of the classified documents, reported that Kissinger "handled the play with consummate skill, clarifying points and making interpretations that could lead to a continuing dialogue." Another former official now says: "Henry displayed zest and talent for those meetings behind the potted palms. He delighted in the code words and Byzantine atmosphere of it all."

But Kissinger's great difficulty as he sought to manage to keep a channel open to the Communists through most 1967 was his inability to speak directly with the chief North Vietnamese representative in Paris, Mai Van Bo, who claimed to lack the authority to see U.S. officials even though he frequently granted interviews to American journalists. Thus Kissinger had to depend on two French go-betweens, Herbert Marcovich and Raymond Aubrac, scientists whose diplomatic experience was limited.

One Reliable Operation

Known under the code-name of "Pennsylvania"—the label was concocted by former State Department official Ben Read—the Kissinger-Marcovich-Aubrac avenue to the Communists is portrayed in the secret documents as having been a relatively reliable operation compared to some of the other efforts. Assessing the other channels, Gelb and Moorsteen wrote:

"The difference in the quality of reporting and intermediation in these tracks is, in retrospect, quite pronounced. Since very few written messages were exchanged, we were continually relying on the ear, predilections and prejudices of the intermediary. Since all the intermediaries, in one way or another, had a definite interest in the success of their role as well as in bringing the opposing sides to the conference table, all transmissions from them have to be viewed with skepticism."

The Rumanians, whose involvement from October 1963 through February 1968, designated by the code-name "Packers," were regarded with particular doubt by the Johnson administration for three principal reasons.

First, according to the analysis of Gelb and Moorsteen, they frankly admitted that "they were only interested in the stopping of the U.S. bombing." Secondly, said the assessment, "the Romanians were very poor reporters" who "did not pick up distinctions such as talks, negotiations, and settlement terms." Finally, the U.S. analysts said, "it is likely that Hanoi did not take the Romanians seriously."

At one point, the document says, the North Vietnamese ambassador in Prague laughed when the Italian diplomat d'Orlandi mentioned to him that "serious exchanges were taking place through the Romanians."

The Swedes were never considered to be important intermediaries either because, according to the evaluation of Gelb and Moorsteen, their "role was very much dominated by their domestic politics." Among other things, America's Vietnam policy was "frequently and vituperatively discussed" in the Swedish Parliament, and the Swedes permittted Bertrand Russell's War Crimes Tribunal to begin its hearings in Stockholm in July 1967.

In May 1967, the Swedes also asserted that they would "take responsibility" for bringing about negotiations, thereby signaling that "they were willing to be a broker as well as a message

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carrier." As a consequence, the Johnson administration lost faith in their credibility.

Despite the acumen of their ambassador in Peking, Ole Algard, the Norwegians were "not treated with great importance by Washington," the documents say. This seems to have been the result of suspicions by both United States and Hanoi toward them because of their neutrality.

Because Norway . . . was not visibly more friendly" to them than to the United States, Gelb and Moorsteen wrote, the North Vietnamese "did not seem really comfortable" in using the Norwegians as a major channel. At the same time, the Johnson administration was apparently squeamish about the degree of antiwar sentiment in domestic Norwegian politics.

Italian Diplomat Respected

The Italian diplomat d'Orlandi was respected by both the United States and North Vietnam. Unlike the other intermediaries, who were primarily seeking a cessation of the U.S. bombing, his approach was "to focus on terms of final settlement," arguing that "only when the future of South Vietnam could be foreseen . . . would the two sides sit down and genuinely and seriously negotiate."

Thus d'Orlandi failed because he was ahead of his time. For only the Communists during that period were willing to discuss the future of Saigon, and their position was centered on the demand that the National Liberation Front be given a political role in a coalition government.

The energies expended in these and other efforts were enormous, and all were futile. Perhaps the most succinct expression of frustration came from the retired Canadian ambassador Chester Ronning, who spent four days in Hanoi in March 1966 unsuccessfully trying to persuade the North Vietnamese leaders to compromise.

Ronning afterwards characterized the results of his visit with an old Chinese aphorism, saying that he had "traveled 10,000 miles to present a feather."

These diplomatic efforts were extremely complicated as well by recurrent communications problems arising from a lack of concise explanations on the part of the two adversaries and their intermediaries.

When he met with former U.S. diplomat Edmund Gullion in Paris in August 1965, for example, Mai Van Bo asserted that there could be no settlement without "recognition" by the United States of Hanoi's four-point peace proposal. But, says the secret document describing the encounter, Bo "did not indicate what 'recognition' meant."

About the same time, the French newspaper Le Monde published an interview with Ho Chi Minh in which the aged North Vietnamese leader appeared to signal a shift in Hanoi's position. The interview touched off speculation in Washington but, commenting on possible interpretations, the secret Pentagon document conceded that "it is not at all clear what Ho meant."

The diplomatic maneuvering also became entangled as a result of leaks to the press by participants in some of the operations. According to the Pentagon documents, the Poles were especially guilty during the "Marigold" episode in 1966 and 1967 of leaking details "in a relatively obvious effort to put pressure" on the United States.

An early account of the episode originated in Ottawa and was attributed to "high Canadian officials" even though Polish diplomats were thought to have been the source. In May 1967, a highly detailed report on the operation was published in Washington by John Hightower of the Associated Press.

Polish Role as Intermediary

In evaluating the Polish role in the "Marigold" episode, the documents hint at possible differences between Adam Rapacki, then Foreign Minister, and Janusz Lewandowski, the Polish representative on the International Control Commission. It says:

"The cable traffic conveys a picture of Lewandowski as more detached than Rapacki, more concerned simply with bringing the contending parties together than with exacting concessions from the United States or throwing the onus for failure upon it."

But underlying all these diplomatic comings and goings was a fundamental difference between the United States and North Vietnam that still exists today. Then, as now, the Communists were determined to push on to victory and, like President Nixon today, Lyndon Johnson was equally determined to prevent their triumph.

As far back as June 1964, North Vietnan's Pham Van Dong made the Communist attitude clear to Blair Seaborn, telling him that "it is impossible, quite impossible . . . for you Westerners to understand the people's will to resist and to continue".

Ho Chi Minh echoed that theme three years later when he told Kissinger's French emissaries that he objected to the phrase "peace in Vietnam" since it "gave the impression of moral equivalence between the United States and North Vietnam." Said Ho: "In fact the United States is the aggressor and must be condemned."

On the other side, President Johnson displayed similar stubbornness. "We intend to convince the Communists that we cannot be defeated by force of arms or by superior power," he said in July 1965. As for a negotiated settlement, he was doubtful. Or as he put it:

"I have searched high and wide, and I am a reasonably good cowboy, and I can't even rope anybody and bring them in who is willing to talk and settle this by negotiation. We send messages through allies—one country, two countries, three countries four or five countries . . . and they sey, we can't even talk to you.

"All our intelligence is unanimous on this point, that they see no need for negotiation. They think they are winning and they have won and why should they sit down and give us something and settle with us."

The talks that began in Paris in May 1968 have still not evolved into real negotiations. The mating dance described in the Pentagon documents, and the maneuvers that have gone on since, may therefore prove that, in the Vietnam conflict, diplomacy is only war by other means.