

Post 6/30/72

Unsuccessful Peace Seeking in the 1960s

By Stephen S. Rosenfeld

In the newly revealed diplomatic volumes of the Pentagon Papers, one part had special interest for me—the part about our Moscow ambassador's efforts to inform his North Vietnamese counterpart officially of the bombing pause which Lyndon Johnson ordered in May 1965 in the hopes of promoting a Vietnam settlement on American terms. I was Moscow correspondent of *The Post* at the time and, like any journalist who's missed a story, I wanted to size the one that got away.

A check of the files revealed that, sure enough, on May 12, 1965, while Foy Kohler was trying in vain to reach the North Vietnamese ambassador, at first directly and then through the Soviet government, we of the Western press corps were out chasing after Luna 5's crash on the moon. We never discovered "Operation Mayflower," then or later on.

Nor did any word leak of the concurrent Vietnam conversations conducted on May 11 and 13 (the bombing pause ran May 12-18) between Pierre Salinger, the former Kennedy aide who was in Moscow ostensibly on private business, and Mikhail Sagatelyan, a Soviet journalist who functions sometimes as a diplomatic front man. These conversations, like the Kohler episode, came to nothing.

For that matter, no hint of "Operation Mayflower" ever emerged from the long

frank talks I had every month or so with Hoang Tinh, the only North Vietnamese "journalist" then in Moscow. We would meet in his apartment, where on the wall hung a photograph of a grinning Ho Chi Minh guest-conducting a symphony orchestra of white-jacketed Vietnamese musicians, and drink sweet rice wine.

This does not mean that the press completely struck out. If you please, we had everything but the facts. A month later, for instance, *The Post* and others, smelling smoke, reported *Pravda's* heated response to Chinese charges that Moscow was "trying to bring about peace negotiations in a painstaking effort to find 'a way out' for the United States aggressors."

In general, comparing the now-disclosed record of Operation Mayflower with press accounts at the time, it seems fair to conclude that the government had its secret channels, for all they turned out to be worth, but at the same time the public had the essentials of the news, these being Washington's devious attempt to open the peace door with a bombing pause and Moscow's pained effort to keep faith with Hanoi, to keep its own lines clear to Washington and to keep Peking off its back, all at the same time. Citations would be gratuitous.

Aside from the details, however, what is most interesting in the Mayflower record is the insights it offers into the method and manner of our ambassador, Foy Kohler. Kohler was always friendly and straight but never particularly communicative with the American correspondents then in Moscow; part of it was his dry style, we figured, part the bugging. Insofar as his personal philosophy was concerned, he was proud to be lumped with the hard line associated with Dean Acheson. Anyway we correspondents never had a good chance to see him or judge him as a diplomat at work. Ony now, in the new materials, is that chance at hand.

Written in cablese, the record shows that, though frustrated by his failure to enlist Soviet cooperation in Mayflower, Kohler had the detachment to realize that his plea had put Moscow on the spot, "given Chicom (Chinese Communist) eagerness to adduce proof of their charges against Soviets and, frankly, given rather strenuous nature of document they were being asked to transmit to DRV (Hanoi)." "Strenuous nature?" The document accused North Vietnam of responsibility for the fighting in the South and threatened a resumption of bombing unless the fighting abate "Significantly."

Kohler had the further detachment not to make his policy recommendation hostage of a bleak analysis of Soviet motive. He said he wasn't sure the Russians wanted to take the heat out of the situation but "we lose nothing assuming Soviets have not completely forgotten lesson Cuba and there is some flexibility in Soviet position which we should seek to exploit." That is: don't back Moscow into a corner.

Specifically, Kohler recommended that the pause message, which was to be resubmitted through the British consul in Hanoi, be revised. "If cast in present form, I think we are simply inviting rebuff, an exercise Hanoi would prove as fruitless as our efforts in Moscow." He suggested smoothing out the abrasive tone and accusatory substance of the message in ways that presumably would have made it easier for Moscow to transmit, and easier for Hanoi to receive and respond to.

However, as the new documents note: "Kohler's recommendation was not accepted, and the message was transmitted to the DRV by the British consul in Hanoi in its original form. As in the Moscow case, the message was shortly thereafter returned to the sender, ostensibly unopened."

What this says to me is that the Johnson administration had available to it good advice from an experienced diplomat in the State Department who not only had a feel for the local situation but knew something about how one nation can best set out to talk to another under difficult circumstances; the Johnson administration ignored this advice. Mr. Johnson turned, later, to a Harvard professor named Henry Kissinger, whose understanding at that time can perhaps best be measured by his confession of bafflement that Hanoi should be reluctant to open negotiations while under the fact or threat of bombardment.

So often the debate over Vietnam is represented as being a struggle between "hawks" and "doves." Ideologically, Kohler, who has since retired from the diplomatic corps, probably was closer to the "hawks." But he was something else: a professional diplomat. In the four diplomatic volumes of the Pentagon Papers, much is made of the missed signals between Lyndon Johnson and North Vietnam. I wonder if the real story of Operation Mayflower wasn't the missed signals between Johnson and the good gray pros like Foy Kohler.