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Fumbled Opportunity

Secretary Rogers, former Ambassador Lodge and the State Department are being disingenuous, to put it mildly, in denying "any" knowledge of the 1969 chance for peace in Vietnam that Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee Sargent Shriver and former Ambassadors Harriman and Vance claim President Nixon "blew." Interpretations of the events of that period may differ, but there can be little dispute on the facts or the Nixon Administration's detailed knowledge of them now and then.

The new Administration's secret National Security Council study memorandum on Vietnam of February, 1969, (NSSM-1), which leaked to the press last spring and has now been published in the Congressional Record, is conclusive on these points. During his first week in office, President Nixon asked eight Government agencies for their interpretation of North Vietnam's withdrawal of large numbers of its troops from South Vietnam—the move the Johnson Administration negotiators in Paris and Defense Secretary Clifford, among others, had interpreted as a "signal" of Hanoi's desire for de-escalation of the war and a negotiated settlement.

Secretary Rogers and the State Department were among those replying that they saw a political purpose related to the Paris negotiations in North Vietnam's troop withdrawals. In response to another NSSM-1 question, they indicated a belief that Hanoi had come to Paris to seek a negotiated settlement—on terms favorable to itself, of course.

Ambassador Harriman briefed President-elect Nixon at the Hotel Pierre in New York in December, 1968, and saw him again at the White House on his return from Paris after the change of Administrations in January, 1969. Ambassador Vance, who stayed on as Paris negotiator for another month, reported to President Nixon on his return. Both negotiators gave their estimate of the situation repeatedly to Secretary Rogers and other high Nixon Administration officials. Notes on these conversations must exist in State Department and White House files.

There is no valid security reason why some of this data should not now be made public, especially after the detailed reports Henry Kissinger has given publicly about his secret 1971 negotiations with North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho. The Harriman-Vance view

is that the tenor and the context of their Paris negotiations made it clear that Hanoi's troop pullbacks were intended to initiate a reduction in the violence of the war, mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces and substantive negotiations for a political settlement. The country has a right to the facts on which to base an independent judgment.

Mr. Shriver's personal role, which the Administration understandably has made the center of its counterattack, was essentially peripheral to the negotiations. As President Johnson's Ambassador to France, who continued for fourteen months under President Nixon, he handled some liaison with French and Soviet diplomats. But, as he has now confirmed, his job did not charge him with reporting to Washington on talks and there is no documentary evidence that he resigned the Ambassadorship out of disagreement with Nixon policy on the peace issue.

The important issue, however, is not Mr. Shriver's role but rather whether the Nixon Administration embarked from the start on a policy that brought stalemate in Paris and the continuation of the war for another four years.

Beginning in the summer of 1968, while Lyndon Johnson was still President, and resuming in early October, the North Vietnamese removed 22 of their 25 regiments from the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. That signaled an intention, at the very least, of abiding by the understanding that large-scale violation of the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam at the 17th Parallel would be suspended once American bombing had halted.

The other key factor, as seen by Ambassadors Harriman and Vance, is that Hanoi agreed after arduous negotiations to seat the Saigon Government at the negotiating table in return for the admission of the Vietcong. Unfortunately, that breakthrough was largely negated first by procedural foot-dragging by President Thieu and then by his refusal to consider either legalization of the Communist party in South Vietnam or a coalition government there, conditions that made a compromise settlement impossible.

The Harriman-Vance view is that the new Administration should have set a negotiated peace as its first goal, but instead emphasized the survival of President Thieu and his Saigon Government. The same factor that made a compromise settlement impossible in 1969 remains the chief stumbling block in 1972.