

Focus of Dispute: Peace Signal in '68 or Politics in '72

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 15—The charge by Sargent Shriver, the Democratic Vice Presidential nominee, that President Nixon "blew" a chance to end the Vietnam war in 1969 has produced a stormy political debate in Washington, but as with many controversies over Vietnam, the historical truth remains murky and subject to many interpretations.

Nixon Administration spokesmen, angered both by Mr. Shriver's criticism and by later comments by W. Averell Harriman and Cyrus R. Vance the Johnson Administration's negotiators in Paris, have ridiculed the charges and denied that any special opportunities were lost in the first days of the Nixon Administration.

Other former officials with no particular stake in the current political campaign have taken no side in the dispute, asserting that neither the Administration nor its critics have a monopoly on the truth.

Focus on Mid-1968

Essentially, the dispute centers on developments in the summer and fall of 1968, the closing months of the Johnson Administration.

Mr. Harriman and Mr. Vance, in a joint statement issued Saturday in defense of Mr. Shriver, said that by the time the Nixon Administration took office, North Vietnam "had signaled its willingness to reduce the level of violence by withdrawing almost 90 per cent of its troops—22 to 25 regiments—from the northern two provinces of South Vietnam, which had been the area of fierce fighting."

They said that the new administration "should have set a negotiated peace as its first goal."

"Instead, it took as its first task the forging of a closer bond with President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam," they said. "This meant nullifying the opportunity for a negotiated solution, since compromise would inevitably eliminate Thieu's power."

Retort by Rogers

On Saturday, the State Department said it "finds no record of any such so-called signal." Secretary of State William P. Rogers said yesterday that if any opportunity was lost, the Johnson Administration was to blame since the withdrawals took place while it was in control.

The State Department said today that it was continuing to consult its files and indicated that further comment might be made later.

The Nixon Administration was aware of the withdrawal of certain North Vietnamese

elements from South Vietnam in 1968. In fact, in a questionnaire sent to all interested agencies at the start of the Administration, Henry A. Kissinger asked "Why did N.V.A. [North Vietnamese Army] units leave South Vietnam last summer and fall?"

The answer to that and other questions were incorporated into the National Security Study Memorandum 1 on Vietnam, which became public earlier this year. The answers indicated that there was continuing debate on the significance of the pullbacks, and that no government agency was as categorical as Mr. Harriman and Mr. Vance that the withdrawals had "signaled" a decision to reduce the level of violence.

Series of Lulls

The reason for the reluctance of the Government planners to attach such significance to the withdrawals was probably the series of lulls in fighting all through 1968, followed by heavy fighting, and then further lulls.

For instance, in February and March, 1968, the lunar New Year offensive took place in which North Vietnamese and Vietcong units succeeded in capturing Hue and causing other serious losses before being driven off by units of the 500,000-man American force and the South Vietnamese Army.

The so-called "second wave" attacks took place in May of that year, about the time that the Paris talks were starting. And the summer of 1968 was marked by a lull until a "third wave" in August. From August until the next February, the level of fighting seemed to ease.

North Vietnamese troops were noted leaving the northern parts of South Vietnam and being deployed either in North Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia.

Because the withdrawal in the fall was linked in time to the agreement in Paris on Nov. 1 for the end of all-American bombing of North Vietnam and the start of "serious" talks, some officials, such as Mr. Harriman, interpreted the pullbacks as a conciliatory "signal." Others disagreed.

The State Department, in its reply to Mr. Kissinger's 1969 questionnaire, linked the withdrawals principally to what it described as Hanoi's desire to get the United States to stop the bombing of North Vietnam. Its reply gave support to Mr. Harriman.

It said that the withdrawals "were in part the result of serious Communist losses" incurred during the (Lunar New Year) and May offensives.

Tactics Called Characteristic

"Indeed, regroupment of forces for resupply and reinforcement followed by relative

lulls in the fighting," it said, "have been characteristic of Communist tactics over the years, even during periods of activity less intense than occurred during the first half of 1968."

"In this instance, however, the Communists withdrew farther and in greater strength and stayed away for a longer period than at any time in the past," it continued. "We believe that Hanoi wanted to make a virtue of necessity, but it took care to make certain that its gesture was substantial enough to be clearly recognized."

"To underline the point further, Communist spokesmen in late June and July suggested that the reduced level of fighting, resulting from the withdrawal of Communist forces, was a 'positive gesture' which should be reciprocated by a bombing halt."

Military Reasons Cited

The embassy in Saigon, then as now headed by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, said that the withdrawals "appear to have been motivated exclusively by military considerations though the enemy did reap certain political benefits from that withdrawal and the concurrent 'lull' in fighting, which were interested by some Americans as a signal justifying a bombing cessation."

It said that the withdrawal was motivated largely by "severe logistic difficulties" in supplying troops in northern parts of South Vietnam.

The embassy said, in possible rebuttal to Mr. Harriman's views at the time, that the enemy "seems to have made no special effort to send us a 'signal.'"

The Defense Department, in its reply, theorized that the enemy in 1968 might have initiated the lulls to take advantage of the unpopularity of the war in the United States to get Washington to negotiate an early reduction of its commitment to South Vietnam.

"In summary, both military and political motives influenced the enemy's decision to withdraw forces from South Vietnam in the summer and fall of 1968," it said. "On the surface, military necessity may appear to be the dominant factor, but in reality, political determination may have been more important."

Mr. Kissinger, in making his own summary of all the replies, said:

"Military pressures and political considerations are viewed as responsible for the withdrawal of some North Vietnamese units into Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries during the summer and fall of 1968."

"Military factors included heavy enemy losses, effective allied tactics, material shortages, and bad weather. Political factors centered on enemy

efforts to make a political virtue out of a military necessity in a talk-fight strategy to influence the Paris negotiations, and the enemy's emphasis on the establishment of 'liberation committees' throughout the South Vietnamese countryside."

Response by Harriman

Mr. Harriman, in a telephone interview today, said that he had never bothered to submit a written report of the views he later expressed publicly because "you don't write the obvious." He said, "Everyone knew about the withdrawals."

Mr. Harriman said that he discussed the matter with officials in Washington in November and December of 1968, but that progress was hampered by Saigon's reluctance to make any deals while the Johnson

Administration was still in office.

He said that some "hard-liners" in the Government disagreed with his interpretation of the pullback, saying it was an indication that the other side "was licking its wounds."

Mr. Harriman said he did not mean to imply in his statements that the withdrawal meant an end to the war was imminent, but only that the other side might be ready to discuss an agreement.

By January, 1969, shortly after Mr. Nixon was inaugurated, newspaper reports from Washington said that North Vietnamese units that had been withdrawn from South Vietnam were on their way back to South Vietnam. And in February, large-scale enemy attacks were again mounted throughout the country.

Thieu Is Blamed

Mr. Harriman, in interviews given over the last three years, has insisted that the Johnson Administration was unable to take advantage of the opportunity posed by the withdrawals because of the refusal of the Thieu Government to join the Paris negotiations. Saigon was notably angered by the American willingness to allow the Vietcong to participate in the Paris talks as an equal of Saigon and to stop the bombing of North Vietnam.

Mr. Thieu delayed joining the talks until the week before Mr. Nixon took office, presumably on the expectation that his Government would receive more sympathetic consideration from the Nixon Administration. And in fact, Mr. Nixon has avoided the kind of public disputes with Saigon that previous administrations have taken part in.

Mr. Harriman, in his statements, has stressed that a solution was not possible until the Saigon Government was broadened to include elements more acceptable to the Communists. He has said publicly that if

Hubert H. Humphrey had defeated Mr. Nixon in the 1968 election, the war would have been brought to an end in 1969 because a Humphrey administration, with Mr. Harriman, Mr. Vance and Clark L. Clifford, the former Defense Secretary, in positions of power, would

have put pressure on Mr. Thieu to make the needed political changes.

The Nixon Administration has made it a cardinal rule that it will not "impose a political settlement on Saigon."

A former intelligence officer in the Johnson Administration said, "We all knew about the troop withdrawals, but there never was a consensus about them." Mr. Harriman, he said, "always took a more upbeat interpretation than others did, and I guess the present flap reflects those differences."



United Press International

W. Averell Harriman, right, chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks in 1968, checking his watch with his associate, Cyrus R. Vance, after a session. Between them is William J. Jorden, spokesman.