

## Demos and the 'Missed Signal'

# White House Rebuttal on

### Washington

The Nixon administration returned yesterday to the attack against charges by Democratic vice presidential candidate Sargent Shriver and others that claimed it "blew" an opportunity in early 1969 to disengage from the Indochina war.

A 13-page document, described as an "evaluation paper" on the dispute, was circulated to news editors over the name of Herbert G. Klein, director of communications for the executive branch. State Department press spokesman Robert J. McCloskey said it is "as honest an accounting . . . as one could produce" without opening the files "totally."

The new summary reiterates, "There was no peace opportunity, real or possible, during the period in question."

This time the administration centered its fire on statements supporting Shriver that were made last Saturday by W. Averell Harriman, chief United States peace negotiator in Paris for the Johnson administration in 1968, and Cyrus R. Vance, then his deputy.

### ESTIMATES

The White House study said claims by Harriman and Vance that in October-November, 1968, the North Vietnamese withdrew 90 per cent of their forces from the "northernmost provinces" of South Vietnam, "and that this represented a peace sig-

nal, are not supported by the facts."

" . . . Our best estimates," the White House summary states, "indicate that the NVA (North Vietnamese army) withdrawal was only about 50 per cent from the northernmost provinces and less than 20 per cent from South Vietnam as a whole."

Harriman countered yesterday that the Nixon administration apparently is misrepresenting what he said in order to challenge it.

What Harriman and Vance actually said last Saturday was: "At that time North Vietnam had signalled its willingness to reduce the level of violence by withdrawing almost 90 per cent of its troops — 22 of 25 regiments — from the northern two provinces which had been the area of fierce fighting."

### PENTAGON

Harriman noted that the Nixon administration challenge yesterday omitted any reference to "two" provinces.

"I know my figures are absolutely right," said Harriman; "they came directly from the Pentagon representative in the State Department." The public record shows that Harriman has used these figures since 1969.

Harriman said the administration's "50 per cent figure" probably is based on statistics "from all five provinces of I Corps — not the two provinces Vance and I were talking about."

The former ambassador said he does not dispute that the Nixon administration in early 1969 and many officials of the Johnson administration in 1968 concluded there was no "signal" that impelled them to take action, as the new study states.

That is precisely the point, Harriman said yesterday, about a disagreement that has become unnecessarily confused in semantics about a "signal."

"This was all a matter of judgment and opinion," said Harriman.

### REDUCTION

There can be no dispute, he said, that "there was a reduction in fighting. We thought it was significant, and that the opportunity should be taken to try to reduce the level of violence. Clark Clifford (then Secretary of Defense) and Vance and I agreed with it — others didn't."

Among those who disagreed, and who are cited in the current White House documentation, was Dean Rusk, then Secretary of State. Rusk said this week, "There were some people on our side who attached some significance to the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese forces across the DMZ (demilitarized zone) back in the late part of 1968, but the North Vietnamese negotiators didn't give any hint that this was a sign or a signal."

The State Department's McCloskey said yesterday that "we found no record citing these (troop) rede-

ployments" as "a signal" warranting action.

### REPLY

Harriman replied, "We wouldn't have telegraphed about some aspect of the order of battle . . . the fact that Washington was considering it was evident from what Clark Clifford said."

"We never had a chance" to press the point in negotiations, said Harriman, for negotiations were blocked after the U.S. halted the bombing of North Vietnam on Nov. 1, 1968. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu refused to send a delegation to Paris until just before the Nixon administration took office.

The White House study, however, repeats the charge made by Secretary of State William P. Rogers earlier this week that Harriman and Vance "had three months to act on the supposed signal before President Nixon took office. If there was any lost opportunity, they missed it."

*Washington Post Service*

# War