



Joseph Kraft

Missed Opportunities

YOU'D NEVER know it from the deadpan, casual tone Lyndon Johnson uses to tell about the episode. But his memoirs contain a major new revelation about Vietnam.

The revelation involves what was probably the most serious of all the missed opportunities to make a political settlement. And it shows beyond much doubt that it was Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford who was truly searching for a way out of the war, not Mr. Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, as the former President claims.

The episode in question occurred in the early days of the Paris peace talks after this country had instituted a

partial halt in the bombing of North Vietnam. Here is what President Johnson says on page 510 of his memoir, "The Vantage Point":

"I received a letter from Soviet Chairman Kosygin on the Vietnam situation. He urged me to halt the remaining bombing of North Vietnam. He and his colleagues thought—and he added that they had 'grounds to do so'—that a complete halt would contribute to a breakthrough and produce 'prospects' for peace. The action, he said, would not damage either our security or our prestige."

ON JUNE 9, President Johnson met with his principal advisers in the White House to discuss the Kosygin message. "Rusk," Mr. Johnson writes, "thought the message lacked clarity and urged that we go back to Kosygin for more specific answers to our questions. Clifford thought we should just 'assume it means what we want it to mean' and proceed on that basis."

As to Mr. Johnson himself, "I still remembered vividly Moscow's assurance late in 1965 that if we stopped bombing the North for 12 to 20 days, 'something good will happen.' On that basis we stopped bombing not for 20 but for 37 days—and nothing happened."

In the response, the Johnson-Rusk view prevailed. The President told Kosygin that "we were prepared to stop the bombing but that we needed assurance, which could be entirely private, that our action would result in de-escalating the war." Washington, in Mr. Johnson's words, "never received an answer . . . from Moscow or from the North Vietnamese."

President Johnson does not print either the text of the Soviet letter or of his reply, so comment cannot be made with full confidence. But other former officials—privy to the Soviet message, to the debate in the White House, and to the American reply—make the following points.

First, the Kosygin letter of June, 1968, was a formal gov-

ernment-to-government communication far more weighty than any previous statements from Moscow on Vietnam. One former official calls it "the kind of communication the head of a superpower makes only in the most serious way."

Second, the American reply asked for pledges from the other side that amounted to giving up the struggle. According to one former official present at the White House meeting, the implication of bad faith was so broad as to make the message "insulting to the Soviet government." Another official speaks of an American "threat" against Russia.

THIRD, Mr. Johnson eventually did stop the bombing, in late October, without any of the formal assurances he demanded in June. He settled for understandings by our side and their side which those closest to the negotiation claim could surely have been achieved on the basis of the Kosygin message early in June.

Fourth, the difference in timing was absolutely essential. For when the agreement finally came, on the eve of the presidential election in this country, it was child's play for the Saigon regime to sabotage it, as it did.

The itch to look for missed opportunities in these circumstances is almost irresistible. Was an agreement on Vietnam a serious possibility? Did the Democrats have to go through the Chicago convention and lose the election? And how about Big Two relations and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia?

But probably all that is justified is a caveat. It is that nobody should place much faith in the selected and self-serving interpretation of events now being put about unless they are accompanied by full publication of the supporting documents. In particular, it would be nice to have the documents that Mr. Johnson, with the reckless abandon so characteristic of the apologists for Vietnam, has now declassified.

Publishers-Hall Syndicate