

Baggs Reveals Hanoi Talks, Ho's Demands

William C. Baggs, editor of the Miami News, visited North Vietnam last winter with Harry S. Ashmore, executive vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Here he tells of a conversation he and Ashmore had with Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam.

By William C. Baggs

MIAMI, Sept. 19 (AP)—Word came in the afternoon that Ho Chi Minh wished to see us.

His office is in the frayed elegance of the palace which once accommodated the governors when France ruled this neighborhood of Southeast Asia.

The old gentleman was certainly prompt. We were ushered into a rather small room, decorated only with a single painting—of a brownish eagle—and we had not seated ourselves when he came in, walking in a mixture of a stride and a bounce.

In English, and with not much accent, Ho said: "Please forget protocol. Please feel at home."

Before arriving in Hanoi, Ashmore and I had picked up conflicting stories about Ho, then approaching 77. One story was that he was feeble. The other story was that he remained active and keen. And the latter story appeared to be the accurate one.

Bombing Talks

After a few minutes of social conversation, Ho Chi

Minh asked if we could talk "among ourselves." It was this suggestion that the talks should be private which could not permit a reporting of the conversation until now. Recent disclosures of the vital parts of the talk have removed the prohibition.

Ashmore and I emphasized to our host that we could talk, but we pointed out that anything he said in the conversation would be reported to our government. We stressed that we did not represent the United States but were pledged to report the conversation in detail to Washington. He nodded.

There was no possibility of peace talks, he said, until the bombing of North Vietnam stopped. And, tapping his fingers together, he said no new American troops should be in-

troduced into Vietnam during any peace talks.

Well then, we asked, could talks begin if the United States stopped the bombing?

He measured the question with much care, and said: "You are a businessman and I am a businessman, and I want to see the goods before the price is established."

During this portion of the conversation, he spoke in English and, through an interpreter, in French and Vietnamese.

Twice more we asked if talks could really begin if the bombing were concluded. And twice he said that talks could begin if the bombing stopped.

Won't Surrender

The Communist leader said that we and all Americans should realize that his country had been at war for 25 years, against the Japanese and the French and the Americans, and they would never surrender their independence after so long a struggle.

Moreover, he continued, coming back to the subject of peace talks, he had no conditions for such talks except an end to the bombing. The meeting could be private or public, he said, and no agenda was necessary.

The word "volunteers" was mentioned. He said that North Vietnam did not need any volunteers from foreign countries at the time. He added that volunteers would be invited into the country if the time arrived when they were needed. He did not refer to the Chinese at any time.

He referred to the bombings all through the conversation. He admitted the bombings hurt North Vietnam but pointed out that the bombings did not unreasonably hamper the military ability of the country.

Now he paused, thought for a moment, and said:

"We would welcome Americans if they came here as technicians to help us. We would welcome Lyndon Johnson as a tourist.

"But now the Americans are coming to kill and get killed. This is a shameful thing."

Dark had crawled over Hanoi when he left the palace. We had talked two hours, and the next evening he sent a minister to see us and make certain we had an accurate record of what he had said.