



Associated Press

HARRY ASHMORE

WILLIAM C. BAGGS

... report on frustrated peace overtures to Hanoi.

Johnson Accused of Duplicity On Peace Overture to Hanoi

By Murrey Marder
Washington Post Staff Writer

A prominent former newspaper editor charged yesterday that the Johnson Administration joined in and then "effectively and brutally canceled" a previously undisclosed peace overture to Hanoi last February.

The disclosure plus accusations of "double-dealing" and an "almost total absence of candor" on the part of President Johnson and the State Department were made by Harry S. Ashmore, executive vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, Calif.

He charged that the Administration, after collaborating in drafting a secret "conciliatory" letter to North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh to exchange a halt in the bombing of North Vietnam for peace talks, deliberately nullified that offer with stiffer de-

mands.

Issue Very Much Alive

The issue is still very much alive in current national and international debate over terms for halting the bombing and initiating negotiations.

Ashmore, formerly the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the Arkansas Gazette of Little Rock, Ark., met with North Vietnamese President Ho in Hanoi last Jan. 12. With Ashmore were William C. Baggs, editor of the Miami (Fla.) News and also a director of the Santa Barbara Center, and Luis Quintanilla, former Mexican Ambassador to the United States.

Their meetings with North Vietnamese leaders were described at the time only as an effort to solicit North Vietnam's attendance at an unofficial peace convocation sponsored by the California-based Center at Geneva, last May.

Ashmore, in a lengthy article written for his organiza-

tion's Center Magazine, said the trip was undertaken with secret recognition by the Administration that it also might "open up a useful channel of communication with the North Vietnamese."

Newsman Departs

At the State Department, he said, "we were asked to keep the trip secret as long as possible . . ." They entered Hanoi on Jan. 6, the day that Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times was departing on the International Control Commission plane that carried them to North Vietnam from Cambodia, and the news of the Ashmore - Baggs - Quintanilla visit became known.

They saw President Ho for about two hours on Jan. 12.

By the time Ashmore and Baggs returned to Los Angeles on Jan. 15, Ashmore wrote, the Salisbury articles about civilian casualties caused by bombing North Vietnam had "created a national furor," with a "concerted effort" in Washington "to discredit Mr. Salisbury . . ." Ashmore said "our reports were a complete vindication of Mr. Salisbury," but he and Baggs avoided any comment about their attempts to open private communications with Hanoi.

"At the State Department's request," said Ashmore, he and Baggs "managed to hide out for three days after our return, and to meet secretly in Washington with the Department's top echelon."

Departmental Briefings

"The briefings (at State) went on intermittently for a day and a half," said Ashmore, and covered the conversation with Ho in great detail.

"We had not brought back any hard proposal from Ho Chi Minh," Ashmore continued, "beyond the reiteration of his unqualified commitment to enter into negotiations if the United States halted the bombing of North Vietnam. This could not on its face be said to meet the stated American requirement of a reciprocal gesture of reduced military action by Hanoi.

"But Mr. Baggs and I," Ashmore said, "could offer our judgment that the tone of the conversation had been deliberately conciliatory and that Ho seemed prepared to consider a specific proposal based on a formula of mutual de-escalation.

"Moreover, no real risk was entailed in finding out whether this was so. Ho had understood that we would report our conversation to the State Department and had made arrangements to have any response sent directly to him."

"Schizoid Quality"

Ashmore and Baggs then left Washington. Ashmore said "our dealings with the Department had begun to take on a pronounced schizoid quality."

Baggs, he said, had done some confidential diplomatic errands for the late President Kennedy in the Caribbean, and "was on fairly intimate terms with a good many" top State Department officials.

Ashmore described himself as "encumbered by identifica-

tion with the eclipsed Adlai Stevenson wing of the Democratic Party and by a long personal association with the Johnson Administration's leading bete noire, (Sen.) J. William Fulbright." Added Ashmore, "Finally, we represented the Center, an unconventional, and therefore automatically suspect, institution."

Ashmore wrote that "we soon began to feel that we were confronted by two distinct State Departments."

"One, which obviously regarded us with profound distrust, apparently was headed by Secretary Rusk," said Ashmore, "who never saw us or otherwise acknowledged our presence.

"The other (State) Department," said Ashmore, "which appeared to be seriously interested in negotiations with Hanoi, included Under Secretary Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Averell Harriman, the elder statesman who speaks with the authority of a personal representative of the President, and Assistant Secretary William Bundy, who is immediately in charge of Southeast Asian Affairs."

Invitations Rejected

At the State Department's request, said Ashmore, he and Baggs rejected invitations to testify before either Senate or

House committees, and to stay out of the news as much as possible during "the next few weeks, while our report presumably bounced back and forth between the two (State) Departments."

Finally, he said, Sen. Fulbright expressed surprise when he asked Baggs if they had reported their conversation with Ho to President Johnson personally, and was told no. Fulbright raised that with the President at a White House function, said Ashmore, "and thereby pinked the nerve that activates the President's consensus reflex."

Ashmore related that the President said he thought it unwise to see Ashmore and Baggs personally and start speculation, but wanted Fulbright "to be absolutely satisfied that we were being taken seriously and treated properly." The President, Ashmore said, suggested that the Senator sit in at the next session at the State Department.

"The President's interven-

tion," Ashmore continued, produced a meeting with the "Department's upper hierarchy (minus Secretary Rusk)," and Fulbright, "plus a silent White House observer as witness."

Ashmore said last night that



NICHOLAS KATZENBACH



WILLIAM P. BUNDY

they met in Under Secretary Katzenbach's office on the morning and afternoon of Feb. 4. The principals there, he said, also included William Bundy and Harriman.

"When Sen. Fulbright had finished" outlining his views, Ashmore wrote, "and the air-conditioning had whisked away the last traces of brimstone, the decision was taken to dispatch a reply to Ho Chi Minh . . ."

In it, Ashmore, it was agreed that Baggs and he "would express the Department's view that it might be possible to

suspend the bombing and initiate negotiations, without specific concessions beyond an agreement that neither side would use the occasion to improve its military position."

"The letter also was suggested that Mr. Baggs and I could return to Hanoi for further informal discussions, or that arrangements could be made to phase us out if it were desired that the matter proceed directly to the official level."

The composition of a page-and-a-half letter, to be sent over Ashmore's signature,

"consumed most of a Saturday afternoon," he said. "It was allowed to simmer overnight, was reconsidered without our presence at an upper-echelon meeting on Sunday afternoon," said Ashmore, and "the final version was delivered in a plain manila envelope to the residence of Sen. Fulbright, where Mr. Baggs and I had gone for luncheon."

"I mailed it myself that afternoon, Feb. 5," said Ashmore, "under the perhaps prophetic postmark of the John Foster Dulles International Airport. By prior arrangement, the letter was to be mailed to Cambodia by regular mail and forwarded from there to Hanoi."

Ashmore said:

"The key passages in our letter (to Ho) read:

"In our several discussions with senior officials of the State Department . . . they emphasized that the U.S. remains prepared for secret discussions at any time, without conditions, and that such discussions might cover the whole range of topics relevant to a peaceful settlement. They reiterated that the Geneva Accords (of 1954 and 1962 on Southeast Asia) might be the framework for a peaceful solution.

"They expressed particular

interest in your suggestion to us that private talks could begin provided the U.S. stopped bombing your country, and ceased introducing additional U.S. troops into Vietnam. They expressed the opinion that some reciprocal restraint to indicate that neither side intended to use the occasion of the talks for military advantage would provide tangible evidence of the good faith of all parties in the prospects for a negotiated settlement . . ."

The key phrase here was the call for "reciprocal restraint," sources on the Ashmore-Baggs side of the issue stressed last night. These sources said it was emphasized in the discussions in the State Department that this terminology would leave open many options, without setting out any specific demand for what would be termed adequate "reciprocal restraint" on either side's military actions.

Said Ashmore:

"This conciliatory feeler was effectively and brutally cancelled before there was any chance to determine what response Hanoi might have made.

Cessation for Holiday

"On Feb. 14, after a temporary cessation of the bombing for the Tet holiday (in Viet-

nam) and an ostentatious two-day extension beyond the originally announced termination, the aerial attack on North Vietnam was resumed and escalated."

But it was not until afterward that Ashmore and Baggs learned, apparently when the rest of the world did, that a presidential letter considerably different than the one they collaborated on, was written even before theirs was, on Feb. 2.

"Later (on March 21, 1967) it was revealed in Hanoi, and confirmed in Washington, that the President, under date of Feb. 2, had already dispatched an offsetting message," said Ashmore, "to Ho Chi Minh over his own signature.

"This was transmitted from Moscow on Feb. 8, the day the bombing was suspended and received in Hanoi on Feb. 10. It was certainly in Ho's hands when ours arrived."

That letter from the President, Ashmore contended, "set forth . . . the most stringent demands yet made for advance assurance that Hanoi would halt infiltration of troops to the South. The uncompromising tone of the presidential message thoroughly disposed of the careful tampering we had undertaken in those long fly-specking sessions" in the State Department.

The key language in the President's message was:

"I am prepared to order a cessation of bombing against your country and the stopping of further augmentation of United States forces in South Vietnam as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Vietnam by land and sea has stopped."

Extending Truce

President Johnson also told Ho that the proposal "would be greatly strengthened if your military authorities and those of the Government of South Vietnam could promptly negotiate an extension of the Tet (lunar New Year holiday) truce," then under way.

Hanoi, however, always had adamantly refused any negotiations with the regime in Saigon.

Ashmore said that "William Bundy and the others who labored over our draft letter had insisted that it would be a mistake to tie any proposal to the Tet bombing pause, since this would be interpreted by Ho as an effort to force his hand without adequate opportunity to consult with his own people and the

NLF" (National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam.)

"Under date of Feb. 14," Ashmore charged, "Mr. Johnson got from Ho Chi Minh the sharp, negative reply he must have expected."

"Ours came a little later," said Ashmore, "the simple, unexceptionable statement that there did not seem to be any point in Messrs. Ashmore and Baggs coming back to Hanoi at that time."

'Necessarily Subjective'

Ashmore said he could only offer a "necessarily subjective" account of "what actually went on in the upper reaches of the Administration" to account for the diverse letters.

"From beginning to end of our dealings with the Department," he charged, "there was an almost total absence of candor on the official side."

" . . . We never got a satisfactory answer," he said, "whether the Administration was really willing to negotiate a compromise settlement in Vietnam or was committed to a military victory."

When Fulbright, at one of the State Department meetings, "bluntly stated his view that the latter was the case," said Ashmore, ". . . the disclaimers consisted of no more than assurance that those he was addressing, at least, were sincerely seeking a settlement."

Ashmore said "the credibility gap . . . may be less a case of deliberate dissembling than of pervasive ignorance of ultimate policy that goes right to the top of the Cabinet." He said:

"A President who insists on keeping his options open as long as possible, and personally revealing his choices, leaves even his own most exalted associates embarrassingly mute in regard to large affairs for which they are nominally responsible."

Chronology of the Ashmore-Baggs Peace

By Chalmers M. Roberts
Washington Post Staff Writer

The record indicates that the Ashmore-Baggs peace effort ran afoul of a change in American policy which occurred at the moment they were involved in Vietnam diplomacy.

This is the record, as far as it is now known, of the pertinent events:

DEC. 4, 1966—Poland reported to the United States that North Vietnam was prepared to send a man to Warsaw to meet an American representative and to do so without demanding as a precondition an end to the American bombing of the North.

American officials subsequently contended that independent checks showed this to be a Polish view, not that of North Vietnam.

Dec. 13-14—American planes raid near Hanoi. Poland later privately blamed the raids for ending chances for a meeting. After the raids Hanoi began to stress the demand that bombing must cease unconditionally before there could be talks.

Dec. 26-Jan. 6, 1967—Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times created a furor with dispatches from Hanoi picturing civilian destruction from the American raids. Officials here said Hanoi had let Salisbury in as part of a campaign to force an end to the bombing. Ashmore and Baggs ar-

rived in Hanoi the day Salisbury left.

Jan. 12—Ashmore and Baggs met Ho Chi Minh who stressed an end to the bombing. Ashmore now writes that "we had not brought back" from this interview "any hard proposal" from Ho "beyond the reiteration of his unqualified commitment to enter into negotiations" if the U.S. halted the bombing.

Ashmore reported to State Department officials that he and Baggs felt that "Ho seemed prepared to consider a specific proposal based on a formula of mutual deescalation" of the fighting.

Early January to early February—The United States secretly sent four memoranda to Hanoi describing, officials say, possible methods of deescalation. These messages, yet to be made public, were handed by an American embassy official in Moscow to a North Vietnamese representative.

Jan. 27—Hanoi's man in Moscow gave a reply to the American official. Later the State Department described the reply as "a diatribe against the United States."

Jan. 28—North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh in an interview with Australian Communist journalist Wilfred Burchett said that "it is only after the unconditional cessation of U.S. bombing and all other acts of war against the DRV (North Vietnam) that

there could be talks between the DRV and the U.S."

Feb. 2—President Johnson prepared a letter to Ho in which he took up the Burchett interview points. Mr. Johnson said he would "order a cessation of bombing" and also halt "further augmentation of U.S. forces in South Vietnam as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Vietnam by land and sea has stopped." These "acts of restraint," he said, "would make possible serious private discussions." This letter, however, was not turned over to Hanoi's man in Moscow until Feb. 8 and the delay has never been explained.

Feb. 4—Ashmore and Baggs met at the State Department with Undersecretary Nicholas deB. Katzenbach and other top officials but not including Secretary Dean Rusk.

A letter from Ashmore to Ho was drafted with Assistant Secretary William P. Bundy, whose area includes Vietnam, as the chief departmental draftsman.

The key sentence in the letter stated that "senior officials" at State "expressed opinion that some reciprocal restraint" was necessary along with a halt to the bombing and an end to the influx of American troops if talks were to take place.

Feb. 5—The draft letter was delivered to Ashmore at Fulbright's house. Ashmore mailed it that afternoon. The

letter did not specify the "reciprocal restraint" although the President's letter of three days earlier had specified an end to North Vietnamese infiltration into the South.

In addition, on the day (Feb. 2) the Administration said the Presidential letter was drafted, Mr. Johnson told a press conference that "just almost any step" would be a suitable response from Hanoi. He also had said that "we would be glad to explore any reciprocal action." Sometime between Feb. 2 and 9 the official American terms were hardened.

Feb. 8—Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, who was in London Feb. 6-13, said at a press conference that the Trinh interview with Burchett "boils down" to saying that if the U.S. unconditionally stopped the bombing, "then it would be possible" to open talks. Kosygin thus publicly changed Trinh's crucial word "could" into "would." He was never contradicted by Hanoi on this. Furthermore, Kosygin passed the word to Washington, which had inquired as to when talks would begin, that they could start in three or four weeks.

Feb. 9—Secretary Rusk, at a press conference which had been announced by the White House, said that "for some time now there has been evident a systematic campaign by the Communist side to bring about an unconditional and perman-

Effort in Vietnam

ent cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam without any corresponding military action on their side, in exchange for the possibility of talks — talks which are thus far formless and without content."

Rusk also distinguished between a "pause in the bombing (here he seemed to indicate he would agree to a pause in exchange for talks) and a "permanent cessation." For the latter to take place, he said, "we must know the military consequences." The U.S., he said, cannot stop the bombing without reciprocity for that would be "closing off one-half of the war while the rest of it goes on full force."

In short, Rusk was surfacing the central point of the President's letter to Ho, the contents of which were not made public until Hanoi broadcast it March 21.

Feb. 10 — Ho said he received the Johnson letter on this day. Ashmore assumes

it arrived before his own letter with the less specific request on the point of reciprocity.

During this period, Feb. 8-14, there was a pause in the bombing over the Tet holiday in Vietnam, including a Presidentialy ordered short extension.

Feb. 13—Ho in a letter to Pope Paul VI assailed the U.S. He coupled an unconditional end to the bombing with the withdrawal of American forces and the recognition of the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong. In Washington this was taken as a reply to the President. Resumption of the bombing was ordered.

Feb. 15—Ho replied to the President in words similar to the Pope. "A little later," writes Ashmore, he and Baggs received a reply to the Ashmore letter saying there did not seem to be any point to their making a second visit to Hanoi.