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When Richard Holbrooke met Nguyen Co Thach in New York in September 1977

On September 22, with world leaders in New York for the annual opening of the United Nations General Assembly, Holbrooke met with a senior Vietnamese official named Nguyen Co Thach. They sat down at Vietnam's new UN mission, a sparsely furnished apartment in a development of brutalist brick towers on the East River called Waterside Plaza. Thach acknowledged that the American objection to aid as a precondition for recognition still stood. "So the ball is in our court," he said in French. They agreed to meet again on September 27 in the same place.

Holbrooke called Oksenberg right away to fill him in on the talks so that Brzezinski couldn't accuse him of operating secretly. Oksenberg let his boss know what Holbrooke was up to. "His adrenaline obviously flowing, Dick Holbrooke called me immediately after his three-hour meeting with the Vietnamese today," he wrote Brzezinski. "I believe the Vietnamese are going to drop their demand for aid, and we are going to be in the unpleasant position of having little bargaining room left. We may find ourselves, by pushing these negotiations forward, normalizing relations with Vietnam before we do so with China and complicating our normalization process with China immeasurably."

Oksenberg reluctantly came to New York for the second round. Holbrooke's deputy, a Vietnam hand named Robert Oakley, was there, and so was Wisner. A year and a half after the failed talks in Paris, Thach was giving every sign of wanting to move ahead, and yet he still didn't drop the demand for aid. After an hour of pointless exchanges, Holbrooke collected his papers and put them in his folder as if to leave. "Let me ask you a very frank question," he said to his counterpart. "When I return to our offices after this meeting and the secretary of state asks me if Vietnam was responsive to our position, what should I say to him?"

Thach didn't answer directly. Instead, he suggested that they break for tea. Tea breaks between the Americans and the Vietnamese always meant that one side was going to say something real. Thach and Holbrooke walked over to the corner of the room and chatted by a table with pots of tea and freshly fried spring rolls. When they sat down again, Thach said, "We will tell you what you want to hear. We can agree that we do not see American aid as a prior condition to normalization. I can verify that."

The stamina of these diplomats! After a bluff that lasted five hours through two meetings, Thach was so eager to get down to business that he suggested writing up an agreement then and there. Holbrooke said that he needed higher approval. In the meantime, each side would set up a working group to scout a future embassy in the other's capital. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam would get the former South Vietnamese embassy in Washington. At the State Department a few old Saigon hands would submit applications for the first assignments in Hanoi.

"Wasn't that amazing?" Holbrooke exclaimed as he and Wisner drove away from Waterside Plaza in a taxi. "We were there all those years ago, and now here we are, this close to normalization!" He squeezed his friend's arm.