

The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

'Marigold: The Lost Chance for Peace in Vietnam,' by James G. Hershberg

Published: February 24

In June 1997, former defense secretary [Robert S. McNamara](#) chaired a remarkable series of meetings in Hanoi with the military commanders and senior foreign policy officials who fought the Vietnam War. Under the guidance of McNamara and Nguyen Co Thach, who had served as Vietnamese foreign minister, the former adversaries from the United States and North Vietnam convened for three days of intensive talks to grapple with a historically consequential and provocative question: Were there missed opportunities for peace in the anguishing conflict that consumed the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and well over 2 million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians?

The McNamara mission to Hanoi, conceived and coordinated by the innovative scholars [James G. Blight](#) and [Janet M. Lang](#), was populated not only by former officials from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations but also by a cadre of historians and political scientists. One invited expert, the talented Cold War historian James G. Hershberg, found in the proceedings multiple avenues of new evidence to explore, including a clue to understanding a widely discussed but poorly documented aspect of the war: the secret diplomatic channel of 1966 between Poland, Italy, the United States and North Vietnam known as "Marigold," which came tantalizingly close to initiating direct negotiations between Washington and Hanoi to end the war.

Hershberg was startled by disclosures from Nguyen Dinh Phuong, a Vietnamese diplomat who described secretly flying from Hanoi to Warsaw to provide guidance for a clandestine meeting with the United States expected to occur on Dec. 6, 1966. While the plan for the meeting had been known for decades, Phuong's participation was nowhere to be found in the documentary record, and his account contradicted the established history of why the United States and North Vietnam failed to consummate that encounter.

"I believed that Phuong was telling the truth," Hershberg recalled, "and that the disparate Marigold evidence . . . when meticulously pieced together, revealed a previously obscured portrait of a diplomatic disaster of grievous proportions." For the historian, a passionate quest commenced: "Trying to reconstruct what happened, I spent more than a decade ransacking archives from Austin to Kew Gardens to Warsaw to Rome to Moscow and beyond and interviewing surviving participants."

The product of Hershberg's inquiry is "[Marigold](#)," a staggering exercise in historical scholarship leveraging both established sources and a huge array of newly surfaced documentary materials and research drawn from 15 countries around the world. With his nearly 900-page cinder block of a book, Hershberg has achieved his presumptive goal of writing the definitive study of a hidden history that had been the subject of intense speculation over the years but never comprehensively told.

At the heart of the book is a protagonist whom the author discernibly identifies with, for all the right reasons. In 1966, Janusz Lewandowski was a 35-year-old Polish diplomat, the only communist ambassador in non-communist Saigon. It was Lewandowski's dream, Hershberg writes, "to alter the course of history"

by brokering a covert negotiation to end the Vietnam War. After discovering in 2003 that Lewandowski was alive and living comfortably in Warsaw, Hershberg jumped on an airplane to conduct the first of myriad extended interviews. Day after day, the historian and the diplomat met in a hotel bar, Hershberg writes, "our table strewn with documents, books, and my tape-recorder, the air smoky from Lewandowski's Polish cigarettes, the two of us transported to wartime Saigon and Hanoi."

On June 2, 1966, Lewandowski met in Hanoi with North Vietnamese Premier [Pham Van Dong](#), who expressed new flexibility about the possibility of negotiations with the United States. Lewandowski reported to Italian Ambassador Giovanni D'Orlandi that Hanoi was prepared to launch talks with Washington in pursuit of a settlement that would require neither the immediate reunification of Vietnam nor its neutralization. American forces, Lewandowski explained, could withdraw from the country in phases and according to a "reasonable calendar." D'Orlandi informed the U.S. ambassador to Saigon, [Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.](#), who promptly cabled Washington. "The proposals attributed to Hanoi, as a package, go far beyond anything we have heard mentioned before," Lodge noted, and "appear so forthcoming as to arouse suspicion concerning the credibility of the Polish intermediary."

Despite his initial doubts, the White House authorized Lodge in the following months to engage in a spirited, secret dialogue with the Italian and Polish diplomats — and by extension North Vietnam — to explore the prospects for peace and a direct negotiation with Hanoi. Hershberg recounts that process in exhaustive, granular and painstaking detail that threatens to overwhelm the reader. But this history is repeatedly enlivened by its central actor, Lewandowski, who drives the fragile diplomatic process forward.

On Nov. 28, 1966, Lewandowski met with Dong for the second time in three days to lay the groundwork for a secret meeting in Warsaw between a North Vietnamese emissary and the U.S. ambassador. When the conversation ended, Dong, close to tears, hugged and kissed Lewandowski. The dynamic Polish diplomat appeared to be nearing a breakthrough.

The American ambassador in Warsaw, John Gronouski, was tapped to represent the United States. Ambassador Do Phat Quang was designated to represent North Vietnam. According to McNamara, Washington was prepared to say to its adversary, in effect: "Give us private assurances of more than talk, and we will immediately cease bombing, after which you will be expected to reciprocate by reducing infiltration and military operations in the south." Hershberg notes that guidance for North Vietnam's negotiator was in fact delivered by the diplomat whose participation had been absent from the documentary record, Nguyen Dinh Phuong, who carried "a document so sensitive that his wife sewed it into his vest, and a senior North Vietnamese official ordered him to destroy it before dying if his plane crashed."

Ironically, and perhaps tragically, despite the months of methodical secret communication, the meeting that was intended to be the catalyst for a negotiated settlement never occurred. While it appears there was simply a lapse in communication among the parties, Hershberg concedes that historians may never uncover the precise explanation for what doomed a potentially transformative meeting between Washington and Hanoi. A week later, President Lyndon Johnson, who Hershberg persuasively demonstrates badly misjudged Hanoi's commitment to talks, ordered punishing airstrikes around the North Vietnamese capital. Marigold swiftly collapsed.

In the years before and after Marigold, other secret channels of communication to launch negotiations were opened between Hanoi and Washington, with code names such as Sunflower and Pennsylvania. But in Hershberg's view, none of these efforts came as close as that of Lewandowski to stimulating a serious negotiation.

And what if that fateful meeting had taken place on Dec. 6, 1966? Hershberg is careful in his analysis of the counterfactual question. Based on evidence in the historical record, he explains that Hanoi would have demanded a complete bombing halt as a precondition for negotiations, a requirement that would have "triggered an intense secret debate among LBJ's top advisers." Hershberg correctly concedes that it was "hardly guaranteed" that Johnson "would have paid Hanoi's price, a bombing halt, just to start direct talks."

Yet Hershberg's ultimate conclusion is infused with the same strain of optimism that seems to have propelled his protagonist, Lewandowski, to try to shape the trajectory of history: "The 'lost chance' for

peace was by no means a sure thing, but it genuinely existed, and if handled better had a reasonable shot at tangible, if now inscrutable, results. Instead it was squandered."

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