Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and we’re starting another session with Ambassador Phong. It is October 1, 9:25 AM, Texas Tech University campus.

Ambassador Phong, let me ask you, we ended up our session yesterday discussing Saigon in the 1960s and talking about Ngo Dinh Diem and his policies and the coup that took him out. Let me go back a little bit and ask you about the Buddhist protests, it reached what was called crisis level in 1963. You were there in Saigon and you witnessed this and you heard about this, can you tell me a little about your impressions of what was going on with the Buddhist protests?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, I think that the general impression of the people in the cities was I doubt very much that the people in the rural areas were very aware of what was going on. It was just political things going on. The Buddhist, so-called revolt at that time was the kind of manifestation of the objection by certain Buddhist groups against the kind of very repressive regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem at that time, so it would be interesting to understand first how was that regime of Ngo Dinh Diem considered oppressive at the beginning of 1960. Then you say why the Buddhists had that kind of manifestation and revolt, why not the Catholic revolt, why not the Hoa Hao revolt or the Cao Dai revolt. First of all, you had the Buddhist so-called revolt because it was more or less generally accepted that the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese population were Buddhist and so the kind of Buddhism which existed and still exists now
in the Far East, as you know the Oriental civilizations of the Far East, did not have any proper religion, it was a kind of Confucianism, it was kind of philosophy, but there was no divinity and they relied on the ying and the yang of Taoism so when Buddhism came from India, then mixed with those traditions and customs of the Confucianist teaching, in a process of osmosis it went into the traditions and customs of those people, so in a way you say why the Buddhists and not another religious group and in fact the Wa How or the Cao Dai religious sects were much more shall we say active in the political spheres than the Buddhists, so suddenly you have the Buddhists. I think first of all, we did not have any political parties proper, there were some traditional Vietnamese political parties, going back to the ruling parties of the Vietnam Working Man, which would be some kind of a Guomindang of Vietnam and then you had later the Dai Viet on those patriotic personalities, instead of being up against French rule but they were no much to Ho Chi Minh and his Communist group. The problem, it had been throughout shall we say three decades of dispute and conflict in Vietnam; you must have some kind of organized mass in the Vietnamese population. So Ho Chi Minh and his group try and were able to have some kind of organized movement against French rule and then later on in their fight for what they claim to be independence and sovereignty for the Vietnamese, so you had the problem of shall we say organize mass groups in Vietnam to become the political force. There was not really any political force deep down in the people. Those early political parties were rather of the intelligentsia, of those who were educated, who were aware of the shall we say the oppression by French rule for young, pelodian rule and some. SO the Buddhists offered a kind of organized mass for the Vietnamese to manifest, so that was why you had that Buddhist revolt and then there was also questions that those Buddhists monks, you say priests, they were not very political, they had never been political before and suddenly now they become a political force to trick against the repressive regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. Many people, when there was not some foreign intervention and participation, encouragement in there and you had a very well known Buddhist monk, Thich It Quen, many people asked the questions whether he was not a CIA agent or not, see now nobody knows really.
RV: I was thinking when you were saying that, that perhaps instead of being a CIA agent, maybe his encouragement came from the North to further disrupt the government.

NXP: From Ngo Dinh Diem, he thought he was from the North, but more and more we in the South because he remained and then he participate in lots of things if he were a Communist agent he was able to camouflage it very well, but to more or less fit with the accusations that it was more of an American spy thing, it cannot be questioned that some of those Buddhist factions received financial aid from the Americans and that can be proof, whether they were really CIA agents or not is something else, but that is not the real matter. The matter is that they took to the streets and manifest and that played into also the hands of people who were against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and it helped the Generals of Saigon and in a way it was also, shall we say useful for the American authorities to put more pressure on Diem for reforms. The man was completely insensible to all those appeals because of various reasons. So, it was clear, even to the American authorities that Ngo Dinh Diem became more and more repressive, why. It wasn’t necessity for Ngo Dinh Diem to be repressive, so there is the question. So the Vietnamese Communists sill accuse him of being repressive because it’s probably the nature of the regime set up by the Americans in order to establish America rule on the Vietnamese people. I don’t think why, Diem should be repressive, if it were not to protect, defend, self-guard a regime which he had got set up to be better than the regime offered to the Vietnamese people by Ho Chi Minh. Then was it possible for Ngo Dinh Diem to use other means, other policies to deal with the disruption, with the sabotage, with the terrorism imposed on the Saigon government at that time. Was it possible for him, would it be possible for him to be more liberal and more shall we say, democratic in inverted commas to win the mind and the heart of the Vietnamese in South Vietnam, rather than have his law of October 1959 to cut the heads off of anybody related, even slightly to anything Communism. It was also an interest to have looked, at that time there were lots of the people in the Saigon intelligentsia, very close to Diem, related to the regime who objected to his repressive methods, that was the caravan crew as we now, that put them Caravel. That is Nguyen Ne Vinh, Tang Tong Dao, and some who were for many times the foreign minister and he was also the representative of Diem as foreign
minister at the Geneva Accords in 1954. These people were very intimately related to Diem and were not blindly behind Diem and objected to those mail cuts and repressive measures against anything against his regime, not only to Communism because that law October 1959, we are in fact, in practice, turned out to be a repressive policy against anything against anything disrupting the regime in South Vietnam, not only Communism and so to be anything anti-the regime would be of course the equivalent to Communism. Then at that moment also you had people like Nguyen Huu Tho and all those who joined the so-called National Liberation from South Vietnam and those people were also very close friends to that caravan crew people, so why you ask yourself that they decided to go into the Marquis, into the jungle to start the resistance movement, so you have there almost the same people and I doubt very much that they were Communists. Some of them were of course, but it must be objectively said that the NLF would not have survived or come into resistance really, in a meaningful manner without the help of Ho Chi Minh and his group in Hanoi. That would be another group, and I doubt very much that the large majority of the people in the countryside in the rural areas and the ordinary Vietnamese in South Vietnam were very much aware of the fight, of the issues and then of the National Liberation Front because no one had organized that population politically and you can always claim they were against the repressive regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, that would be not entirely false, so that was the Ho Chi Minh thing.

RV: Do you think it was possible for Diem to be more quote, unquote democratic in his dealings with any opposition groups?

NXP: That is a very difficult question because it was not a spontaneous reaction or opposition to the Diem regime. It was in my opinion, a very well planned, calculated program set up by Ho Chi Minh and his crew, logistically it must be, you cannot do anything besides that and then there are now here, other difficult questions to answer, which would then bring in the American intervention. The questions you asked me would be the same that I would have put to Washington at that time. Would it be possible to have Diem or anybody else to have other ways to deal with insurgency and the beginning, what was very new which later on would be known as people’s warfare. Then terrorism tactics would be used, under the claim that is they way were can know, press would fight against the powerful and the rich. Terrorism is a form of struggle, as any
other from of struggle, which would be of course against completely western values and
civilization. So there, how did the Americans look at the situation at that time, with
Diem becoming more and more repressive, even cruel, literally and bloody too because
he had to answer bloody methods by bloody methods.

RV: Was he that much under the thumb of Washington, did he have to say okay,
if for example, I would like to deal with this opposition in a different way, would he have
to place a phone call to the ambassador or to Washington DC?

NXP: I wouldn’t say he was under the thumb of the Americans.

RV: At that time.

NXP: I think Diem was the least under the thumb of the Americans if you
compare to other so-called leaders of South Vietnam after him. First, because there was
not much yet, the intervention of the American, so that was not a very heavy restriction
on him. He was not very dependents, although he was vitally dependent on the support
and the beginning of aid that he received from the United States in order to set up that
first republic in South Vietnam. He had to do, his own means, whatever he could in South
Vietnam with the South Vietnamese population at that time and it was only more and
more with the American intervention that he depended more and more on the Americans
and you would say more and more under the thumb of Washington. I think he put up a
fight against Washington until the end.

RV: How much of a role did his brother play in the, you’ve spoken to this, that he
was huge role player?

NXP: Enormous. Enormous, it was the general impression of everybody that in
the day to day management of the regime, it was his brother, Diem was much more in the
principles and the ideals and so on and he tried to project himself as an image of the
nationalist Vietnam but I think he failed completely to touch the majority of the
Vietnamese people by the way that he was and his historical context.

RV: Do you think he was a victim of the historical context, was he a victim of the
circumstance, Diem?

NXP: I think we all are and that he made the best use of it with the best intentions
in the world. He tried to protect conditions and customs of the Vietnamese people, but
from the imperial court as a Mandarin and the United States were also very aware that he
ruled as a Mandarin and that was not the way because the mindset of the people, change at that time already and then he tried to infuse western values to the Vietnamese in South Vietnam and they were completely foreign. So the question that we have to ask here, how the United States saw the problem of Vietnam at that time and why would the Diem regime as it was consider necessary to do what he did. So there you are. I have the impression that the United States in the ‘50s, were already aware of a kind of threat by international Communism and I think that the most critical point was when first Mao Zedong took power in 1949 in China. But you cannot say that Communist China at that time was a threat to United States, it was completely flat, they were only able to chase Jiang Kai-shek to Taiwan, that was all and try to organize themselves. But the most decisive element which came into play at that time was the U.S.S. R. ability to explode the bomb and so your nuclear superiority disappeared more or less, not completely but there was some kind of an equilibrium, so you are not in position to impose much of your will as in the past and that was clear. But I think the awareness of Vietnam, to stave off that threat and it became so obvious with Red China, the People’s Republic of China. I think it went back to the time of even Truman with Dean Acheson. He was very aware of that threat, so it would have been interesting to analyze that threat, was it valid and how was it that it brought the United States into Vietnam eventually. That threat I think was even more concrete with Eisenhower and Foster Dulles. I think Foster Dulles was much more aware of that Communist threat, even more than Dean Acheson, he was very forceful later on.

RV: They saw Eisenhower and Dulles almost look at Communism in religious terms, it was from the devil, they were vehemently anti-Communist and combined in 1949 with the Soviet bomb, quote unquote “losing China,” McCarthyism in the United States, this vehement anti-Communist, it’s almost as the United States did not have a choice, they were setting themselves up to go against Communism anywhere in the world, that’s where our foreign policy was going, do you feel like the United States really took mis-steps there, in anti-Communism?

NXP: Yes, that last bit, yes. I think the awareness of a global threat of Communism was very real at that moment, but I don’t think that the United States thought that Communist armies will rush to American territory and invade the United
States. I don’t think that they thought that way. They thought in another context, that is to say, you may lose your ways of life, that is so-called freedom and democracy in the western sense and that the strength of Communism but when to use it wasn’t the strength of Communism, what kind of else matters. It’s not the military invasion of the United States, it is rather that you are against people becoming Communists, so people becoming Communists you haven’t got conviction in your own position, you cannot deny a guy to become a Communist if he wants to be because of your liberty of political views and expression but you were I think apprehensive that more and more people go the Communist way in their thinking and you would object to that. That is then all the other peoples in the world after the Second World War more and more claim to be Communists as an ideal and I doubt very much that they were very much aware what kind of ideology that was, but I think Communism seemed to catch on as an aspiration to some sort of social justice, more freedom and liberty, less oppression by the rich and the powerful tycoons and things like that, that’s reality. But it’s not an invasion in the sense that we understand, a military invasion of the United States, so was the United States really physically materially threatened by military invasion by Communist people, I don’t think so. But you would not allow the thinking of the Communists to destroy your ways of life and it was also I think the general impression that the Communists would not say no to very violent means of action, that is to say they would resort to any means possible to obtain their political goals, including subversive activities, terrorism and all these things. So it was thought at that time I’m sure at the time of Dean Acheson to Foster Dulles that eventually those so-called Communists would fight you by violence and so you have to put a stop to that. So that is on the one side, the real threat and then on the other side you cannot deny the right of people to claim some kind of political affiliation. That was the thing that the Vietnamese Communists played off, right away there in the 1950s, when they claimed that they should have self-determination after the Geneva Accords in 1956 until the 1960, you can’t deny the right of a guy to self-determination, but then again I would call your attention, what would that mean, concrete terms to the Vietnamese people, sure they want to have independence and sovereignty and the end of colonial rule, but democracy with their mean self-determination would merely mean that just push the people to the polling stations and ask them to put the piece of paper in the ballot box,
what does that mean to the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese at that time or was there any other way to allow the Vietnamese people to express their will? But to go to the polls, that would be a very Western practice.

RV: Do you think the Vietnamese Communists in the north had any better chance than the western Democratic thinkers to persuade the Vietnamese people to rise up and organize themselves and take charge of their country?

NXP: Not in the name of Communism but they can motivate and mobilize those people in the name of independence and sovereignty and so-called nationalism. Some saw I am sure that the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people had only vague ideas about those notions.

RV: One thing the United States was really worried about was what Eisenhower termed publicly in 1954 was the domino theory, that if the United States allowed South Vietnam to become Communist, if Ho Chi Minh ruled Vietnam, then Thailand, Laos, Cambodia would soon fall to the Communists and so forth and it would spread to the west that way, eventually even threatening the Middle East and then vice versa on the other side, if Vietnam fell then the dominos would fall eventually to the east, threatening Japan, threatening the defensive perimeter. Do you think this domino theory was valid, was it reasonable at the time in the 1950s, for the United States to think that countries would fall to Communism if one did?

NXP: That was a very fundamental issue for the United States at that time. People keep on saying whether the domino theory was valid or not, they failed completely to consider that issue in its proper context, to say that you are against the Communization of those Southeast Asian countries, its not completely false. That is to say, if they resort to violence and subversive acts, you are well justified to put an end, or to contain as they said at that time to the Communization of the whole of Indochinese peninsula and the whole of Southeast Asia region. You can find justification to deal with that. On the other hand, you have a contradiction in term too, if that process of Communization sprang from the people of those countries under the principle that they have the right to become Communist or not, provided that they don’t resort to violence and terrorism, subversive acts, then you cannot say you are against that political evolution and so you mix that, you are mixed up there, you should have told the people
very clearly, they have the right to be Communists, but not to resort to violence and subversive action to impose your Communism on the people who may not be very much aware of the political values and issues and principles and so what you have there to preserve is to preserve the ability of those people to have their say for the political future. If you have to come in and you say you are fighting against subversive actions, against aggressive actions, against violence, the people would not understand why they should not be allowed to choose any ideological affiliation that they wish, so that was the confusion and you lose the battle strategically in the political sense with those people, the former colonies. They would not understand, the failure was there, not that the domino theory was not valid in the sense that it may be just a political process and political evolution, not only that area of the world but everywhere else. So, how can you try and show and convince the people that Communism would eventually destroy their freedom and their sense of democracy. So the problem of the domino theory, it was not to say that we were true or not, that would the fall of Vietnam to the hands of Ho Chi Minh would then be the Communization of Laos, Cambodia, then Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, so that was the unsettled point.

RV: Were the intelligentsia, the people in Southeast Asia who were aware of such things, political currents in the world, were they aware of what you just said, were they aware that the United States is saying the domino theory but yet that doesn’t make sense because they’re all about self-determination, yet they’re saying we shouldn’t self-determine into a Communist country? Were they aware of this contradiction that you spoke of?

NXP: They were not aware very much because they were not in position and have the intellectual capability to understand those things. They would take lots of research and study to be aware but Ho Chi Minh was clever not to jump on the opportunity and say here you are, those guys very rich and very powerful, they come here and they claim that they will bring you democracy and freedom but looked what happened in their own country, on the my naked by the tycoon and political freedom wouldn’t mean that how many millions of dollars you have in your pocket to go on the press on TV and you have your electoral campaigns, that’s not the kind of liberty and freedom and democracy that you have here in this poor country of Vietnam, so that was very easy for Ho Chi Minh
and his group to project that image to the very much educated, the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese in Vietnam to say that kind of freedom and democracy, that is a form of neo-imperialism, that is the continuation of another form of colonial rule. Not because Ho Chi Minh was able to at least try very effectively that thing, but because the Vietnamese people didn’t know anything else.

RV: Are you saying that the United States was almost condemned from the very beginning; they have very little change in Vietnam from the very beginning?

NXP: It’s not condemned or anything but you went in with such enormous handicaps and compare that it is here, the political balance of forces, you came in with such great handicaps in spite of all the military might which would not change anything in the fresh I think political setup.

RV: We touched briefly earlier on China and Chinese intentions in Vietnam and one thing that dominated American policy and American thinking was the fear that China would intervene militarily directly in Vietnam at some point if the United States took too many actions militarily. What are your feelings on Chinese intentions toward Vietnam in this time?

NXP: I think again you have to put it in its historical context. When Mao Zedong was able to take power in China in 1949 it was not a military power, it was not much of a threat to the security of the United States. There was some vague idea that they belong to the Communist group and they the allied of the Soviet Union which then began to have a bomb and then of course for Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong would be an ally because they have the same ideology of Communism but to say that the People’s Republic of China was a threat to the United States, I don’t think so. It was considered that they may give a very helping hand to Hanoi and secondly I think the historical context here and you were profoundly affected by it, was the Korean War. How was it possible for China, completely almost destitute was able to fight in the Korean War and al always Mao Zedong would rely on the numbers. He would send his millions of people even with bare hands to there and again, it’s not a matter of military might. They play on the very sensitive nerve that is your civilized Christian values that just kill me, millions of almost destitute without even a rifle and you knew than many of them had wooden rifles in Korea because they didn’t have real rifles. But would your Christian values allow you to
continue and kill and kill and kill. That is also the parallel later on with Hanoi. You
bomb them, bomb them, as I said you bomb them to the Stone Age, they just sit you out,
that’s all. You see, and so was it a real threat and I think that even at the time of
Kennedy, not to mention Johnson and Nixon later, they were very apprehensive about [?]
participation of the Chinese Comm forces, if you escalate too much. But repeatedly you
see, Beijing has made it clear that it would not send ground troops into North Vietnam or
into Vietnam if no foreign troops crossed the border.

RV: Into North Vietnam?

NXP: Into China. It was very clear, but people could not believe the Chinese
entirely and then you had to see the context too. There was a rivalry ideologically
between Mao Zedong and Stalin, not to mention Lenin even before, that they had the
purer Communist thinking and ideology, but then they were two different cases
completely. The Marxist-Leninists doctrine sprang out of industrial background, while
the Chinese were completely agricultural and that’s why Mao tried to infuse his own
personal interpretation of Marxism using the idea of the rural areas with, beseech the
citadels and overcome those things. There was a rivalry and also traditionally Russia has
always been a threat to China and they have to remember that and it was very real, that
confrontation between the Soviet Union and the Chinese and so at one point, the Chinese
have a million troops looking at each other at the borders. Then I think that Ho Chi Minh
did not have any choice really, with the how man years of Chinese domination before
being a Communist or not Communist you have to think that your country may be ruled
again under some from of Chinese influence and so the best thing for him is to reach out
the Soviet Union to placate the Chinese threat because it was a threat, has always been a
threat. When you are such a small guy beside a very big neighbor. So how real was the
conflict between the Soviet Union and China at that time, I think it was not a matter of
territorial ambition, it was much more ideological and political. Mao wouldn’t accept the
kind of interpretation from the Marxist-Leninist doctrine in his political system and the
Soviet Union, I think we must say they had international aspirations, not to send armies
to other countries, but they would like very much that other countries in the world to give
allegiance to the Soviet Union. That was very clear. So, North Vietnam was the
opportunity for the Soviet Union to use a pincer principle on China and then
automatically China had to retaliate. So, they must try to have a hold in Vietnam somehow, if not in the North, maybe in the South and of course you have the problem of Laos and Cambodia. Laos and Cambodia had been put together with Vietnam under the French Indochina, but Laos and Vietnam in the sense that it was used by the Chinese to neutralize as much as possible the pincer part played by North Vietnam with the Soviet Union. That explained also the Khmer Rouge, which wouldn’t have existed without Beijing and without Beijing they disappear very fast. I would say that it was an unavowed policy of Beijing to have the whole of Vietnam, I’m sure, to relieve the pressure of the Soviet Union and that is very logical. Beijing did try with the NLF in South Vietnam because they thought at one time that the NLF could be autonomous, not completely under the Hanoi hold. Of course they didn’t understand very well either, like the Americans what the NLF was. The NLF came into being, maybe spontaneously from a number of people who were against the Diem repressive regime but the NLF would not have survived as many people would claim that the Saigon government would not have survived without American aid, and so NLF would not be anything without Hanoi aid.

RV: But that’s a really controversial theme in American scholarship about the Vietnam War, was what happened in South Vietnam truly an organic insurgency springing from the people of South Vietnam or was it always orchestrated from Hanoi?

NXP: The question there can be answered very easily. Would Hanoi admit a South Vietnam otherwise than a Communist political system and so history has shown that anywhere in the world, it is very hard for a Communist system to permit other political systems to coexist and so why not ask yourself the same question. Would the Soviet Union; would it be possible for Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary to be a kind of a South Vietnam? Subbaron, it’s an aberration, laughs at the question that South Vietnam could exist parallel and not being Communist with North Vietnam. If that happened it would be just a chess mover, temporarily. Because the whole things exists whether that question would be valid or not is in the balance of forces, would South Vietnam one day if it disagrees with North Vietnam be in a position to defend itself? It’s no matter you have true nationalism in South Vietnam or whether you have just camouflaged Communism in South Vietnam, for some time but whether South Vietnam would be in position to defend itself if one day Hanoi said, well I have enough of that,
again this finish. That was the question and so that was also the question of the number of
Communist Vietnamese, would they be in position to put up a fight with the Soviet Union
and the People’s Republic of China behind Hanoi, would they be in position to fight,
hopeless. I have to call in somebody, but then Ho Chi Minh was cleverer than Diem and
all the rest. They didn't call in Soviet troops; they didn't call in Chinese troops and
maintained their political advantage.

RV: That would have been doing the same thing as calling in the Americans.
NXP: Yes.
RV: Do you think the Americans missed an opportunity with the Chinese maybe
to play the Chinese off of Hanoi?
NXP: Well they misread Beijing completely from the beginning, even in Korea
and then would they trust the Chinese in such a thing and then the next step is that when
there was nothing left, would it be better for them to give it to the Chinese. They gave
the Spratley Islands to the Chinese, didn’t do against that, that is to guard Cam Ranh Bay;
eventually they would later become Russian anyway. So you can share like the PRC
share Matsui and Kamoa out offshore Taiwan, the Chinese from the Spratley Islands
could have shared Cam Ranh Bay, twenty thousand rounds a day and no Russian ship
would be able to go in and out, so that’s the thing. Then you will eventually see the
evolution of things more and more indicated, the ambitions of Beijing in Vietnam and
particularly in South Vietnam.

RV: Do you think the Vietnamese people during this very crucial time period in
the late ‘50s, early ‘60s, do you think they knew what they wanted to be, did they realize
the historical context in which they were caught?
NXP: I doubt very much. There have been so long under colonial rule and then
went through the hectic times of the Second World War with the Japanese and then on
the so-called Allied troops coming back. I think the very first and main concern I said
above everything else is to be left alone to begin with and to be left alone is already the
beginning of freedom and democracy, to be left alone. And whoever I think it might be
went against that and claimed ideological motivations and reasons to perpetrate a war
there, in whatever name would go against that feeling of independence, sovereignty,
democracy and freedom of the Vietnamese people. So nobody was really justified can
honestly claim that you were for your ideals and deprived the Vietnamese people of
twenty years of being left alone.

RV: Sir, could you talk a little bit about what happened in August of 1964 in the
aftermath of that in Vietnam, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, or incidents?

NXP: Well, I think first of all again we have to put in its historical context and in
1964 I think the situation was degenerating very fast, that is after they overthrow of
President Diem in ’63 you had a chaotic situation in Saigon. I think that there was a
sincere desire by President Johnson to see democratic from of government in South
Vietnam and in spite of the escalation of the subversive action and beginning of really
almost conventional warfare launched by Hanoi on South Vietnam since 1960, then you
had a succession of all sort of civilian governments in Saigon. At that time the question
was not whether Washington had a choice in that kind of war but to escalate and I am still
convinced that escalation was initiated, started with the action by Hanoi, which they may
claim it is to defend democracy and freedom and self-determination in South Vietnam
against Diem and Diem’s successors and I think it is fair enough to say that the stability
of the Saigon government, of the Saigon political regime in a position to Hanoi was in a
very bad situation, critical and so here is a very interesting question for Washington at
that time, would it let South Vietnam go its own way, what a very disturbing question in
the bag. Would it be taken over, overcome by Ho Chi Minh from North Vietnam, so the
situation there was a dilemma I think for Washington. On one hand it had to contain the
subversive and violent means of action perpetrated by Hanoi and at the same time give
the South Vietnamese an opportunity or a change to have their own say, whether they
would like to continue with the kind of anti-Communism instituted by Ngo Dinh Diem,
they would like to have kind of a compromise with their brother enemies that was the
right of the Vietnamese in South Vietnam. That right was denied to them by both Hanoi
and Washington.

RV: How would they have done, through referendum?

NXP: As usual, that is to say some kind of a coup in Saigon, or the more liberal
faction, maybe the Caravel crew, maybe the NLF if it were really, truly South
Vietnamese. Then to try and have real, genuine representative government and there in
interrupted commerce and function of the capability of the Vietnamese in South Vietnam
to appreciate democracy and freedom in the sense that the west would understand it, why
Ho Chi Minh and his group tried to argue that popular democracy direct from the grass
roots under Communist system would be better for a country coming out of colonial rule
and now how to face what they call the neo-imperialism, so that was too sophisticated for
the Vietnamese in South Vietnam to understand and again I think that they would be
quite happy if it were left alone by everybody to being with.

RV: Are you talking, it was too difficult for the ordinary South Vietnamese
population or the intelligentsia?

NXP: Well, the intelligentsia would be much in better position to appreciate that
and it is also their duty to make the ordinary people understand the issues involved and
they dilemma in which they were and they have to pick a choice. If there is not other
choice than to go to Communist than they had to go Communist, but if they had an
opportunity not to be Communist and have something not Communist than explain to
them why. So the real issue at that time was for President Johnson first of all to placate
the subversive action and the war activities of Hanoi against South Vietnam in the name
of democracy, freedom, Communist way and also under the claim of self-determination
and then it would be an aberration to accept the view of the Hanoi leaders at that time that
they were prepared as they were in the 1940s, in the 1950s, by that time 1964, that they
were prepared to have some kind of compromise of coalition, even almost a neutral South
Vietnam political regime. So why didn't they say that for the whole of Vietnam and then
here you come back to the 1954 Geneva Accords. They were happy to have the partition
of Vietnam at the 17th parallel and they claim that there were two Vietnams in order to
preserve what they claimed to have, the sovereignty, independence of North Vietnam, but
they would not grant that same privilege to the South Vietnamese and they would play
only on your chips, but they wouldn’t put their chips on the table, so if they were sincere
in themselves, to say yes, let’s go name the international control and supervision and
observers and let’s give the whole Vietnamese nation a chance to have a say, not just the
South Vietnamese, so you went into the game with your handicap there. Then even with
the handicap I would the limitation, the restriction and with the apprehension that the
Chinese may move in with their crown troops and then you also have to take into
consideration at that time the nuclear umbrella of the Soviet Union, then President
Johnson must do something and that incident, the Tonkin incident, whether it is true or not is almost immaterial because President Johnson had the need to intervene and make Hanoi understand that I am serious about this business and in the end now turn out that the Hanoi people came from the central government, they never gave the order to attack the destroyer Maddox, it was a local decision, maybe a local decision, doesn’t matter really. But it was a necessity for President Johnson at that time to act, but to act forcefully and also it was a message that he wanted to send to the Soviet Union and to China, I have no mission to take over North Vietnam, so let us have appeasement, containment and coexistence that was the fashion at that time, but I am going to defend South Vietnam. According to domestic political practices in United States, I must act and the Tonkin incident was good enough for President Johnson to act.

RV: By this time you think it was perhaps way too late for any kind of elections of any kind of popular referendum in 1963, 64?

NXP: Because of the political strategy that you limit yourself in there. You were not the one who called the shots, you just respond, the western simply responded to the initiative taken by Hanoi and that’s what the Pentagon generals kept on saying since the ‘50s, the allested ‘50s, that they’ve given it to Diem and at the conditions dictated by that person, you didn’t have initiative, you responded totally. Their purpose was to draw you into it, not to get you out but to draw you more and more for political reasons. It was much more important for them to increase American intervention and the American presence because their toughest job is to convince the Vietnamese people that they were right and they couldn’t do that without the American presence and Ho Chi Minh was very aware of it and the resolution 15, surely very aware of it. The trap that is set for you, is that what they wanted to do, but they wanted to do with you, the Americans.

RV: They were willing to make that sacrifice in people, numbers wise?

NXP: That was a form of fighting, so instead of having B-52s and bombs and things that was the way for them to fight.

RV: And they were willing to make the sacrifice knowing that if the United States came in and established a strong military presence in South Vietnam that eventually there would be fighting and there would be millions killed?
NXP: That is not a strategic aspect in that Vietnam War, as far as Washington was concerned. When Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh and his troops said that they were willing to make all the sacrifices they knew very well that the sacrifices they made were extreme, but the suffering and the pain to them was much less than the pain and the suffering that the American would run into eventually. So, they were flat completely and so whatever you may do to them, they have reached their maximum level of suffering and pain, you cannot do more, but you will feel more and more pain and suffering in the years to come if you continue and I want you to come in more, so that you can suffer more. You would fight out what they would see the realities of things, the political realities, not the military realities.

RV: Why do you think the United States misread that, couldn’t understand that?

NXP: Because you see your military came up with something very new. You asked the military to carry out a war and as Johnson said a war is too serious a thing to leave it entirely in the hands of the military because Sense and Klauswitz taught you centuries ago that war is just a political arm of your political aims. So that was it, you responded in conventional ways to something very new, that is to say casualties that the Hanoi tried to inflict on the American people, not for American government, only American people were not the body counts. You judged it through the body counts but for them it was a sensitive nerve that they can play on the western democracy, on your Christian values and on your civilized ways of life. They would demonstrate that with the enormous might of the United States you would inflict pains and suffering to a tiny nation of people, so that was the object, they would win in the end unless you adapt yourself to their type of fighting, which is now even truer than forty years ago.

RV: If the United States had adapted to that type of fighting from the beginning, do you think there would have been a different outcome?

NXP: Yes, and have the courage also to accept the possible Communization of South Vietnam, if that were the choice of the Vietnamese people. If people always say, you deserve the kind of government you have.

RV: In 1965 at age 29 you became Minister of Labor in the Saigon government, can you discuss how that came about?
NXP: It was very unexpected. I didn’t have anything to do with politics or with the political regime in Saigon, I was completely absorbed with my job in the private sector with the most powerful and biggest oil company in the world because at that time it was Esso. Standard, Houston, used to be Steinbeck, a joint venture between Standard Oil, New Jersey and Mobile but then out of the draw from the hat Vietnam, Cambodia went to Esso. So I still don’t know how and why I was called to that job. The only thing that I could make out that probably the success that I had with the workers union of the petroleum industry in negotiating for two years, latop association, it was the very first time that in South Vietnam you have any dealings directly with the workers union and the workers union at that time were considered heavily infiltrated by Vietcong or anti-government people and I was able to negotiate with them, get agreement with the Petroleum Worker’s Union for the first industry collective agreement of Vietnam and it was used right away as a model for the plantation workers, problem plantation workers and for the banks. Very interesting, I was called to become Labor Minister even at the age of 29 without any knowledge of government affairs or experience of any sort.

RV: You write in your book that you were basically approached and said show up at this meeting or as you wrote in the book or you will have to go into military service?

NXP: Yes, to be drafted because I was at the age to be drafted and I belonged to the group which would have to go to the Pudic reserve officers training academy, but that was the name to differentiate it from the professional soldiers and all the young adults of the drafting age must go through. Thanks to Esso, because we were claimed that we were also involved in the military support activities and my father knew lots of the high ranking officials in the Saigon government I was granted deferment. But then by 1965 after the overthrow of President Diem, the chaotic situation and the military took over power with the Army council at the beginning of ’65 with the bloodless coup to push aside General Ken and then the Army took over from prime minister Phan Huy Quat at that time, still and the American effort to have the civilian government and that was it. I joined the government, which was at that time called the Executive Central Committee of the Army council and General Cy was made the chairman of that Executive Committee and General Thieu was the chairman of the national leadership committee which temporarily replaced the legislative branch be we didn’t have one then. But the President
Johnson was very eager to get democracy on track again and he insisted very much that
very fast we should have a Constitution, a new one and then the general elections and
elect your president, it could be democratic. In a way you can say that I joined the
Ministry of Labor but as a member of the Army Council because that was military rule
completely at that time.

RV: What did you think of this job?

NXP: I didn’t have any idea whatsoever except for the Labor market suppose, and
I was familiar with the workers union and with the officials of the Labor ministry and
since the time of President Diem they have set up a configuration of the workers unions
of Vietnam and that was Mr. Tu Wok Bol, who was the head of it and he worked very
intimately with special advisor, political advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu to control the workers’
movement. The U.S. Embassy led a hand to try and help that the workers’ movement,
basically its a creation in words to the Christian Workers’ Union, the international
federation of Christina Workers’ Unions, IFCTU, so that was the imprint of President
Diem, very Christian which was predominantly Catholic of course. So that was the setup
I had to live with.

RV: What were your major duties?

NXP: Well, the first duty that I was given by the Army Council, that is the
executive committee was to maintain industrial peace and then the second duty would be
somehow to improve the workers’ conditions and the third was some kind of a welfare
policy to help a lot of the workers. It was vague. I was not given any particular job and
General CY who became prime minister did not have any idea how those ministries
operated and he was so busy with his generals and with the war and with the Americans,
that most of the ministries, except the Ministry of Defense of course were left to those so-
called ministers.

RV: So you had relative autonomy?

NXP: Almost completely, there was no restriction, there was no directives there
was nothing at all and for me at the Labor Ministry there was no means at all of action. It
was a tiny ministry, tiny budget.

RV: Were you the youngest minister?
NXP: Yes, the very youngest and that was the first time I think that they had anybody in their twenties to be a Minister and I remember there was some kind of an article somewhere in the national press that at that moment there were only two guys in the world who were in their twenties and were Cabinet ministers, there was me in Vietnam and Woody Freaker in Algeria.

RV: How much did you get paid for this job, do you remember?

NXP: Well, we should have decent pay but in order to project an image of the new government, the Army Council and Prime Minister Cy put out a policy of national austerity, that is we have to be economical and so our ministerial pay was about twenty something thousand dong at that time, it was even less than what I paid my private secretary.

RV: You got paid 200,000 dong a month by Esso and then…., now you go down to 20?

NXP: 23,000 I think if I remembered rightly, but then in order to camouflage that there was also a black fund equivalent to two months salary of the minister that you can draw on as you need, kind of an overdraft as you say but you don’t have to submit receipts so my secretary just used that to buy cigarettes and sandwiches and things like that. It was not even enough for those things. But I suppose that in other ministries they had more means of course, they can manipulate their budget and funds to cover lots of things but the Ministry of Labor was really the poor cousin in the whole lot.

RV: You were in that job for how long?

NXP: About a year.

RV: About a year. What was the most rewarding thing about that position?

NXP: Well, the pretty strong were that they had with me at the Labor Ministry was a general strike all over South Vietnam, that was the very first because Ngo Dinh Diem wouldn’t have allowed any kind of strike because every was behind him and supporting him and his regime. Then the general attitude of everybody that the Vietnamese confederation of workers were just a government instrument and tool, that nobody believed in it, so I was distraught by that because I really respected the workers’ union, the ideal of the workers’ union and many of the employee in Saigon at that time refused to deal with the workers’ union, reluctantly only they did. I came out openly and
said that it’s a plus to have the workers’ organized. I was completely against a closed shop and I discussed for weeks with the workers’ union who wanted to have a closed shop because many of them were in the closed shop, that is to say any employee coming into a company must join the workers’ union, I said no. You have to give them the possibility to be or not to be member of the workers’ union and besides I said that I am against also using company time for the union affairs. You can have that after office work, I can provide you the premises you need but I would not take the company time for union activities, that is your own affair. The workers’ union accepted that position. They try of course to defend the interests but then was fair enough. I said like the other employees you would not have any recognition of the workers’ union at all, I recognize you and I would not be prepared or inclined to have others workers union organized but I recognize your workers’ union in my company, so that was a plus. When I took over the Labor Ministry, I was really unhappy to see the kind of artificial way to deal with the workers’ union because I really believe that it was those union by themselves was also substantial force and even politically in your fight for political aims. Of course in principle the workers’ union should be outside the political thing, but you cannot, because as I said earlier, the absence of any meaningful, effective political parties in South Vietnam or any organized movement in the mass of the people, so you end up first of all with the religious group and the religious group there, you would have the Buddhists to begin with and then you have the Wa How, the Cao Dai, religious sects and the second group that would be of any meaning to have a political impact would be the students, the general federation of the students and so they are also a kind of intelligentsia. Of course you have the workers’ unions as organized mass and I kept on saying to the Generals that in the absence of any meaningful political organizations in South Vietnam you already have two largest political parties in South Vietnam that you mistreated most, they were the most handicapped, that’s the civil servants and the soldiers, they were the two pillars of the regime. They were the worst paid and nobody paid attention to them but they were organized and they stuck together. Until Diem, they missed the point, but Diem did see the point, but then he did it in the wrong way. He organized them under his Catholicism and his own use instead of allowing those troops to express themselves meaningfully and generally to become a force, a political force.
RV: What kind of relationship did you have with General Cy, General Thieu, with the generals?

NXP: That is very funny because General Cy was my prime minister but I can tell you the whole period that I was involved with the Saigon government, he never made a phone call to me. We only met in Cabinet meetings and social events. On the other hand, General Thieu who was out of power, he was the chairman of the leadership committee and he sat at the general headquarters of the ARVN then, he called me very often and exchange views and talk and things like that. Then eventually I moved to other ministry posts, to Cabinet posts, but in 1967 after days of disputes and quarrels, General Cy finally accepted that Thieu be vice president in the ticket with him. I was then given the job to be kind of a national chairman for the election of that ticket, another contradiction in terms. So I put up the mechanical procedures to get those elections through and then after General Thieu became president he called me very often to discuss matters. Of course people thought that I was man of General Cy but I think that General Thieu discovered very soon that I was nobody’s and I always said my mind very straight, disagree or agree I just said it because I didn’t belong to any political parties, I was not interested in any things in particular and that was the general impression even with the so-called political parties in Saigon because together with the Constitution and the general elections, it was also necessary for President Johnson to see very democratic laws and it was a real headache for the Saigon government how to encourage political parties to play their roles in the thing, provided they have allegiance to the Saigon regime. Then they put out the political parties legislation, how you were allowed to set up a political party, how you should all that, and during the government bidding when they passed that law I was always the youngest in the Cabinet and also the very last the people bothered to ask my views and I also gave very short replies. I said that the Vietnamese in South Vietnam never had any knowledge or habit or practice to have political parties, that would be very new to them and now you have hundreds of political parties in Saigon, but if you go to the suburb of Saigon in Fu Lam, that was just outside of Saigon and the people there wouldn’t know any political party or political leaders at all, it was the same to them. So the several political parties didn’t like very much so nobody approached me to join their party or say anything. I was left alone.
RV: Was that your most frustrating thing about the job is that you really didn't have a lot of input? What was the most frustrating thing about that job for you?

NXP: Frustrating?

RV: Frustrating, difficult?

NXP: Well, it's not that I was really frustrated because I didn’t expect much, the things were too big even for the Saigon government to respond to the subversive and war activities launched by the Communists because we know they were launched by the Communists and what I tired to do within the sphere of action from the Labor Ministry was kind of if you say frustrated it was frustration like starving a teacup. So I most encouraged and permitted the general strike to happen to give some meaning and dignity back to the workers’ union and that was what I think was not rewarding for me during my stay at the Labor Ministry. That horrify everybody of course and maybe that was reason on the one hand, I think the U.S. Embassy with John Cunman who was there, as the Labor Attaché eventually understood that, instead of setting up a bogus workers movement for your anti-Communist crusade. One the other hand probably the Saigon politicians would jump on the occasion to say that little guy at the Labor Ministry is doing lots of bad things but I think I demonstrated that I was able to be objective enough not to take sides and that’s probably why I was kicked upstairs to the Prime Minister’s office.

RV: How much interaction did you have with the Americans there at the Ministry of Labor?

NXP: They were good. That was the time that Philip Habib came as the political counselor there and I had a very good labor attaché as my advisor that was John Conden, eventually became U.S. Ambassador but Philip Habib was really good. The man was able to appreciate the problems there. Again he was in a position that he would be able to do so much. I think he was overwhelmed first of all by Maxwell Taylor, who had his own views about the whole thing, and then afterwards you have Cabot Lodge back there once again and we were very particularly with Henry Cabot Lodge. He took me in right away almost as a son because his son, George Lodge, I think was Undersecretary of Labor at that time in the United States and he was very much, he means very much to his son and he would like to have his son visit him in Saigon and so on and through the discussions, I
need to have a visit by a Mr. George Lodge from the Labor Department of the United States to help me at my Labor Ministry, particularly with the statistics I say, because I had to run with the economy minister at that time. He was presenting his economic development program in the Cabinet meeting and when he come to me again at the end to give my views on the economic development, I said there is no economic development in time of war, you can hardly have the means to feed the people and if you don’t have enough rice then the U.S. will give you the rice to feed the people and that’s it. He presented his development in various sectors in the industry, the entire country, I said to him very briefly, how did you do your planning, your economic projection, so he gave am all kinds of statistics, I said I don’t know about your kind of statistics, but I’m sure you need manpower statistics too. I at the Labor Ministry, I don’t have any and if I had any the next day would be completely false because huge bombs would have scattered all my carpenters and masons and mechanics everywhere, that is what I responded to his economic development program for South Vietnam. So I jump on that occasion to say to the Ambassador Lodge that I need to have his son here to give me a hand to understand the situation and he came, George Lodge paid a visit to Saigon to the delight of Ambassador Lodge his father.

RV: Let’s talk about just briefly Maxwell Taylor, what was your relationship with Ambassador Taylor?

NXP: I didn’t have any relationship with him because he was the preceding billiard and he was much more involved with General Ken at that time.

RV: He left in July ’65 and that’s before you.

NXP: Yes, that’s it. That is just a month after I joined the government and Ambassador Lodge came back. But the general impression that we had of Ambassador Maxwell Taylor was he was really a General much more than an ambassador and the Saigon generals really suffered during his stay there because he considered them almost as westfall cannons and he didn’t hide that and it was known in international presence that he scolded them like cannets, publicly.

RV: That did not go over well, I’m sure.

NXP: Well, the Saigon generals I’m sure needed that, the scolding, but you can do it in different ways. He was really frustrated.
RV: How about Henry Cabot Lodge, tell me about him?

NXP: Well, he was a very knowledgeable man but of course fiercely anti-Communist, probably the effect of his stay at the United Nations to be with Stalin and Molotov and all these people. He was a great old man with lots of experience, but again he was very much also under the liens taken by Washington and I think that in Washington people really tried hard, I’m sure that they must have had lots of brainstorming sessions to find out the answers to the problems but I think Ambassador Lodge was sincerely convinced that the Saigon people could have made it if you helped them properly. I think he believed it. There was no reason for him not to believe in it. Probably he hoped very strongly that the Saigon regime after Diem and the chaotic situation of the so-called civilian governments, now the military would give some to create stability and then if you can beef up the social and economic aspects of that situation, he probably sincerely thought that the Saigon regime would have more and more public support. Of course nobody bothered to analyze deeper in details what public support would mean, so that was the flaw.

RV: How much contact did you have with him?

NXP: Oh a lot. We insist very much that he would join me in the social events because after that I went to the Welfare Ministry so in the beginning there was also Mrs. Lodge and I was much closer to Mrs. Lodge because I was invited for dinner and lunch at their private residence very often and they always joined me in those social events when there was something going on. Later on they were again in Paris for the Paris Peace Talks and we were very happy to meet again there. There was also a small incident while I was at the Welfare Ministry there was a very nice young American lady there and we called her Pooh and Mrs. Lodge always called her Pooh so I called her Pooh too and we went on very well in Saigon because I was still a bachelor at that time and whenever there was a possibility to meet and mix with other groups and Pooh was there, we went on very well. Then in ’68 I went to Paris, she also stopped her welfare work in Saigon and moved to Paris and took her a very nice house, just behind my house in Nahe area Mrs. Lodge said Phong, why don’t you marry Pooh and it went on for some time, but we were just good friends and that was it. So probably I missed the opportunity to live in Boston.
RV: Have you had any contact with Pooh since Paris?
NXP: No, so afterwards it was too hectic and she left Paris when I got married in Paris. Okay.
RV: Okay, so we'll end for the day.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. We are continuing the interview session with Ambassador Phong. It is Friday October 4. We are back in the interview room in the Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University. It is approximately 9:30 in the morning. Ambassador Phong we’ve been discussing this crucial time period in not only Vietnamese history but world history and American history and basically the period from 1954 to ’65, ’65 you have the direct escalation of the American conflict with bringing over thousands and thousands of troops in real military commitment, overt military commitment to South Vietnam. Before that happens you go, yourself from a private businessman working for SO to being thrust into government service in 1965 and then in 1966 a year later you are kicked up as you said into the Prime Minister’s officer as a minister. You are right there on the ground, involved in this government, helping make decisions that will shape the future of Vietnam and that’s where I want to start the questioning this morning is how did you feel and what do you think you could do to shape the course of where this conflict was going. There was obviously at this point a conflict, there was the North Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, the Americans were very interested in sustaining South Vietnam as the quote, unquote, “outpost of the free world,” there were millions of dollars in financial aid coming in, military aid coming in and you’re right there at the epicenter. So how do you feel at this point in 1965, ’66 and if we want to go there in just a minute, leading up to that point in Vietnamese history, in
this decade of, maybe this was a giant missed opportunity here for things to maybe shift
or change between ’55 and ’65, what are your feelings on this?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, I think I continued to believe very strongly in the
1950s, especially after the Geneva Accords of 1954 and then coming to 1960, that was
the time I returned from Saigon to England. Well I did not feel any situation of war.
People were able to circulate day and night and then there was not much fighting yet at
the beginning of 1960 although at that particular point in time many things happened but
I think that those things happened even without much awareness on the part of the
Vietnamese, both I’m sure in North Vietnam and in South Vietnam but it was the creation
of the National Liberation Front in a position to what was considered to be a repressive
regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem. In the North I’m sure that Ho Chi Minh and the
government of the DRV did try to explain to the people in North Vietnam that there was
the 1954 Geneva Accords which provided for the partition of the military forces both
sides mainly, on one side French forces, the other side the so-called Vietminh forces at
that time. But in the North they would have understood much better that 1954 Geneva
Accords which provided for eventual general elections under the claim that the
Vietnamese people would then have self-determination and decide what kind of political
regime they would like to have. I’m sure that Ho Chi Minh and his government in North
Vietnam were dead sure to win those general elections so the 1954 Geneva Accords were
not recognized by the United States, but then somehow it was a kind of a contradiction
that for the South Vietnamese who I’m sure did not like to have the country divided, but
then it was a way for them to have the hope that the killing would stop and that the war
would stop, that would be considered as the Second Indochina War against the French.
So, they seemed to claim the fact of, if it’s the jury, the existence of two Vietnams, that is
very interesting. Keep on having that idea of dividing when they get into a dispute or
conflict they always divide and that was the first thing, which was striking to me. When
you have a dispute you divide, I would go rather than when you have a dispute you try to
get together, not divide and that was the challenge that I thought that should have been
taken.

RV: Is that how you feel today or is that how you felt then?
NXP: That is what I felt then in 1960 and '65 and that is what I feel now and it was also what I felt in 1975 too. Then I was with the private sector, working for the oil company, very happy to be young businessman there and suddenly I was thrown into the government. I didn’t expect it, I didn’t think about it and I’m sure that many other politicians in Saigon would have liked to join the government, but I was of course very surprised but also very worried. I was just a guy, 29 years old and to become Labor Minister at 29, no one heard such a thing before. So, what was my understanding or knowledge of the political, military situation, and then the social conditions of the people there. What was the war? I did not have a very clear picture of the escalation of the war between 1960, up to 1965 except that the volume of petroleum products increased madly because of the war activities. As you know, Esso was the large American oil company which was very responsible for supplying not only the civilian needs, but the military needs in petroleum for South Vietnam at that time. So, what was the kind of the war there” I had the very clear feeling that President Ngo Dinh Diem and his family and his government, they were repressive, but repressive in a way that the escalation of the subversive activities of the Hanoi government and it was constituted as an action by the Hanoi government against the Saigon government. It did not come into my mind that the people in South Vietnam, the ordinary people had a any really clear reason why they should try to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem although he became more and more oppressive and bloody repressive in the end, especially by his October 1959 law against Communism, capital punishment for anything remotely related to Communism. So that was the first question, now I would like to find the answer. Was it necessary for Diem to become repressive? I think it was not in his nature to be repressive, bloodily repressive. 

RV: Personally not in his nature?

NXP: No, he was a devout Catholic, a Mandarin, but he was not the kind of ruler who would say that ‘I execute you if you don’t agree with me.’

RV: Was that Nhu; was that his brother kind of implementing that law?

NXP: Yes, that is to say the security network and the system was imposed there with the secret police of his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and everybody knew that. So my question here as a Vietnamese at that time, it was repressive on the part of the government, and how repressive, repressive in what way to the urban population? That
was different from the kind of repression you had in the rural areas. To begin with, with the people in the urban areas, that is the intelligentsia, the workers’ union and people who had more or less a better life in the cities, he was repressive to them in the sense that if they don’t support the Ngo Dinh Diem regime they were the opposition, it was acquainted to Communism. Probably Diem was not stupid to say that anything related to Communism is bad for his regime or that anybody who was not for him would be equal to a Communist but in practical terms Ngo Dinh Diem and especially Ngo Dinh Nhu his brother, were brought to that kind of a position and would they be legitimate to claim its self-defense because people were using assassination, terrorist activities, to overthrow his government and they would have the very legitimate reason to say that the government of Saigon had to provide security for the population. Then you had also other groups, maybe not very well known in the majority of the population in South Vietnam, but they were the traditional nationalist parties, the Dai Viet, the working man parties, they were clearly anti-Communist but they were drawn into the process of becoming more and more anti-Diem too and they were outlawed too. Diem then would find it very difficult to say that a member of the Dai Viet or a member of the working man party would be equal to Communists and would be an ally of Ho Chi Minh. He couldn’t say that but he placed them also in the same group, that is to be anti-Diem is more or less to play into the hands of the Communists therefore you were also as good as a Communist so that was his dilemma.

RV: Do you see that as a really big mistake that he made or do you think that was where he had no choice?

NXP: It was clearly a vitally bad mistake on the part of Diem and probably more Nhu than Diem. Then was it possible for Diem to become what we would consider a liberal, that is to say calling everybody, we have a fight together against the Communists and so were they in Diem and his family in that kind of mental state to be able to really every, that would be the ideal thing for the U.S. government. But then I think we have to put it again in the historical context of the whole world, it’s not only Vietnam at that time, after the Second World War you have the tremendous upsurge of nationalism and you have also some remnants of colonial rule here and there. Then you had also the people who were involved are related somehow to those former colonial rules here and
there and they were what we would call the rightists groups against the leftist groups that
would be associated with the Soviet Union, with the People’s Republic of China and
there goes with Ho Chi Minh and the rest. All right, but then you see it appeared to me
that in those years of the 1950s, the U.S. administration and then from the time of
President Truman and then Eisenhower and then so on with Kennedy and Johnson and
Nixon, you sent up here to be on the right side, not the left side and you seem to have a
policy which was to consolidate the rule of those rightist groups almost everywhere in the
world. Then, although you consider that Ngo Dinh Diem was a good man, he was a
devout Catholic and then he thought good for the Vietnamese people, but more and more
for me who was in France and England for all years, when I was in Saigon from the 1960
to 1963, with the overthrow of President Diem I could not fail to associate President Ngo
Dinh Diem, more or more less a kind of Batista in Cuba or the Trujillo in the Dominican
Republic, that is the connection in which I saw him going. Maybe he was a little better
than the Batistas and the Trujillos, but that's the same part. Too many people even in the
intelligentsia, in the urban areas of South Vietnam, they had that feeling too. In one
sense they have the impression that the Americans supported the rightist groups, why
they had also an acute desire to regain their nationalistic feelings, their independence and
sovereignty from foreign rule, foreign presence. That was a big dilemma and as I said
it’s like jumping out of the window from a building on fire. But you have to make the
decision and I think that most of them in the urban areas they had to go rightist and
sacrifice a little bit of their nationalistic feeling and aspirations. As for the people in the
countryside, I’m sure they were completely in the dark about those political issues.

RV: Did that matter though?

NXP: What mattered to them was to be left alone, plow their little lot of land and
then feed their kids and then was it. They were not very aware of what was Communism
or not Communism or capitalism. I don’t think that people were very much aware or clear
in their minds what were those ideologies. But they were also aware that the United
States was instrumental in the victory against Hitler and against Japan and that the United
States was a very wealthy, very powerful. Then again in the global context at that time,
1950, you had the Soviet bomb, 1949 you had the PRC and then here we have to ask the
question, for those Vietnamese in South Vietnam and in the whole of Vietnam were they
very much aware of that shall we say beginning for what later on you will call the Cold
War, which was a very major confrontation of the Cold War, in the Cold War sense. I
honestly say the Vietnamese were completely in the dark about that kind of conflict
coming up.

RV: Did that matter though, that the Vietnamese people were in the dark and
maybe like some of the American people were in the dark?

NXP: So, how were they made aware that there was a conflict there somehow
between people who claim themselves to be Communist but that also that are fighting for
national sovereignty and independence, so those people in the countryside, they were
much more concerned with their safety and security and then Ho Chi Minh and his group
were very aware and then they would say and so whatever would bring those Vietnamese
in the countryside to see that they were the oppressed, the victims of those colonialists
and now called neo-imperialist forces in the world and they had to regain their national
independence and sovereignty. But then the kind of struggle imposed on them,
subversion, assassination, terrorist, I think that at that time was very much aware of that
new form of struggle, new form of fighting, new form of warfare in fact, which then
eventually be known as people’s warfare. I don’t think that people in South Vietnam
were very much aware of that new notion of warfare but they became part of the notion
of warfare and that notion warfare was not from the people, it was devised, planned,
thought out very systematically by Hanoi, that is by Ho Chi Minh, Giap and the
government there. So now the Vietnamese people would try to seek security and Ngo
Dinh Diem was left with no other choice than try to provide security and who was also in
the long tradition of American values to come to the rescue of people who need that, that
its to provide security and that you would claim in the end as self-defense, again what
you call oppressive acts by North Vietnam against South Vietnam and then we come
back to the two Vietnams principle. I don’t think the people in South Vietnam wanted
very much to have two Vietnams.

RV: How about the people in North Vietnam?

NXP: In North Vietnam, I’m sure that they thought that they should have the
whole of Vietnam to the Vietnamese people and that’s why Ho Chi Minh was really
clever to put out the Vietnamese people is one, the country is one, the people are the
same. Then when they sit down to any kind of negotiating table in the tenacisions they
claim their own sovereignty for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, and
that is the very basic strategic element in the Vietnam country. That is to say you have
never refuted their game, that North Vietnam, as the DRV was a sovereign country, a
sovereign state and a sovereign government, so that was guarded there. So, now from
1960 to 1963 with the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem I think nobody regretted
very much the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime. For President Ngo Dinh
Diem himself there may be some people who say that he was a good person. He tried his
best, but he was surrounded by bad people, cruel people in fact and we wanted a change
and that was the justification for the Saigon generals to do that, without that the Saigon
generals wouldn’t able to do it. Of course to begin with the American wouldn't let the
Saigon generals do it. So, after that it was chaotic with the so-called civilian governments
up and down all the time and in the end who had the bright idea that the military should
take over power with the Army Council. I doubt very much in my mind that even
including President Kennedy and then afterwards President Johnson, they wouldn’t
dream of having a military rule in South Vietnam. It’s detestable to American values.
They were pushed into it, how why? Some claim it’s the CIA, that the CIA thought of it
or not, many people really honestly believed that maybe they did not have the idea to
begin with but they helped.

RV: What do you think, you were in that time?
NXP: Yes, I was there. For a guy of 29 years old it was my belief and state of
mind that whatever may happen in Saigon, that kind of thing couldn’t be done without
Americans. That is the general impression of everybody.

RV: So one idea that’s very popular about this time period from the western point
of view, and also I guess from North Vietnam’s point of view at the time is that the
Saigon government was subject to the whims of the United States government, how much
of that is true, that they were really puppets, that the United States really was calling the
shots at this point after 1963?
NXP: So here I would like to raise two aspects of the question, the first the moral
question. Was it justified for people who disagreed with Ho Chi Minh and his mentors to
be against him and to put up a desperate fight against him with nothing in their hands to
fight against Ho Chi Minh, even the French could not put up with Giap in Dienbienphu, so it was a hopeless fight for those people who disagree. But if we say that they are morally justified and there are legitimate grounds to put up a fight with Ho Chi Minh that is the first thing I say they have. Honestly I believe that you should respect, even if they were the minority, even in there were general elections, 1956, a political system and government under the claim of self-determination should respect those minorities and majority rule, as we understand it nowadays, until we find something better and that’s what I continue to feel at that time and now, that the very essence of democracy is not a matter of having a choice, just a choice, go to the polls, that is the majority rule, waiting for anything better, but for me at that time and even now, democracy means first of all the protection of the minority, of those weak and destitute people to have their say, whether good or bad but they must have their say and you have to respect their say. I think that the Communist system rejects that, even eliminate any kind of disagreement and opposition.

RV: Line in 1959 in Saigon, same thing?
NXP: Oh, repetition, everywhere. So that is the first question. The second question was for the American intervention, from Foster Dulles mainly, then was the United States, first of all morally justified to intervene and I think honestly you have to admit that even now you have to admit the United States had the moral justification to intervene in South Vietnam.

RV: In the interests of protecting those minority groups that wanted to express themselves?
NXP: Yes and not claiming that it is anti-Communism, but is untying Ho Chi Minh and his group to overtake the whole of Vietnam and even to appease, contain the spread of international Communism.

RV: That’s what the United States government told the American people, this is why we’re going, this is why we have advisors there, this is why we have troops there, to contain Communism, to protect South Vietnam.
NXP: Yes, and here again you have to be honest and if we are going to try, not to blame this on anybody but then to find out those justification because I think that those issues are still also very present now. So there, was it a real threat of this threat of
international Communism at that time, first question. The second question, was it a real threat to the security of the American people or was it just a matter of ideology and then you’re kind of a Don Quixote, you go everywhere in the world in the name of democracy and freedom to fight against the enormous upsurge of nationalism everywhere and now also there is another question, honestly you have to answer it. Was there any desire on the part of Stalin and then Mao Zedong to spread Communism all over the world. I said yes, it was a very real thing because that was their ideal. They wanted everybody in the world to become Communism, but then can you object to that kind of a claim, you cannot. You object only when they use violent means to impose that ideology on others.

RV: The United States?

NXP: No, I mean the Soviet Union, the spread of Communism, so as I said, the spread of Communism was not to see armies of Communists marching on the world, but then you cannot deny the people to have the right to become a Communist according to western democracy concepts. But you were justified to take action against any violent means used to impose that kind of Communism on the people who in the large majority of the world were not very much aware what was Communism or not. But then honestly would you say that the Soviet Union and Red China at that time, were not helping the other ex-colonial countries to have uprisings, take over power, that was their method and impose literally and they believed that they had all the right in the world to impose their ideology on others because there was not a better ideology than their own.

RV: Do you think that there is a parallel here with the United States and democracy, that United States was imposing democracy on the world and on people and encouraging uprisings?

NXP: So that is why we come to that question, honestly you have to answer. Would the United States send arms and then as they claimed that CIA agents would go to other countries, provide and arms for the people there to impose pax-Americana.

RV: Like Afghanistan today?

NXP: Or anywhere that you would like to have your regime. I said honestly that the United States as a nation and people, they have no colonial motives to impose anything to anybody but they were really motivated by the desire to bring democratic rule, to bring freedom and liberty to other people, that others would say that is pax-
Americana. But you would say that I just give money, I don’t give arms and I began to
give arms only when the other side began to give arms to the people there, so who started
the whole thing. In the 1950s, I don’t think that the American gave much arms to the
people in Vietnam to fight against Ho Chi Minh. They did give something to the French,
in fact they was to give to the French to get out because they did not understand at all the
conflict there and they were thrust into something that in the end they said okay, you
need money, give you some money and then you do what you can about that in
Indochina, maybe to re-establish some kind of French rule, I don’t know, I’m not
interested. So that was probably Eisenhower who began to say to Paris, if you continue
your colonial war over there, it is very bad. You should go there and brandish the banner
of democracy and freedom. That was a bit difficult for the French to do although
President Eisenhower had all the good motives in the world, but how can you expect a
former colonial power there, organized, to say ‘Now I’m fighting for democracy and
freedom in Vietnam.’ You cannot convince anybody that that is why they had to go
home. So there, was it a real threat to the United States in that period of the 1955 and
even a little bit before that until 1960 that the intervene militarily or that indirectly
through Ngo Dinh Diem they intervene militarily which would give justification to Ho
Chi Minh and his team to claim self-defense and fight for real nationalism as they claim
and try to get rid of what they call the puppet. But puppet there, as you see, I said, the
first part, would it be justified and legitimate to put up the fight against the Vietnamese
Communists and puppet in the sense that you have to salvage some kind of balance of
power. The more the Soviet Union and then the PRC began to send their armaments to
Hanoi, then you reciprocate or was it because you could not cope with subversive
warfare, the beginning of people’s warfare that you introduced a high level of
conventional warfare. In the First World War it was a war between soldiers, you have
with Verdun a million dead so the more people you could throw into the battle then the
more chances you win. The Second World War it was technology, means, planes, tanks,
much more than people why, because you try to avoid having bad casualties so you use
equipment to prevent that and so that was the fight between industrial powers rather than
just people, I would say that. But Ho Chi Minh was very aware of that, he wouldn’t have
tanks and planes to fight against the Americans and so you must give credit to the man,
he devises something which would neutralize only our advantages and bring out his own advantages and he had no other choice than to go what we now know as popular warfare. That is to say complete rejection of civilized values and that is to come to, what has worried me for three decades, that is you come to appoint when even if you are so sure of your ideals, of your objectives, would those ends justify whatever means you can use. The West would not know that, but in the end reasonably to the world Johnson defeated his aims by using those means that he had. That is a bit of a contradiction in the civilized world position. So I am symboret just for the period between ’55 to 1960, what it justified for Ho Chi Minh to fight against what he called the puppet regime in the south and launch his people’s warfare. Was it justified for Diem to introduce very repressive measures which then defeated completely the raison de of his government, that is to bring internationalism, sovereignty and independence and calling in American intervention and was it justified for the United States government there to reciprocate what they would consider an act of aggression by Communist North Vietnam against South Vietnam, militarily and always trying to avoid that I’m in an apolitical dispute with you, it’s not, I’m just helping the little guy, victim of your aggressive acts and responded. Then why did the Americans escalate to that level? It was unbelievable that such a country called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam should have the whole might of this number one superpower in the world to use that kind of armament at that level against such a tiny country. In the end, it didn’t do much good. Was it not the American falling into the political trap set up by Ho Chi Minh because he started really what we now know as people’s warfare.

RV: Do you think the United States, if it had not escalated in 1965 to massive conventional war, that if we had continued, the United States had continued to supply militarily, financially, to whatever regime was in Saigon, and this is a what if question and I don’t know how useful that is?

NXP: It may boil down to the questions that former Secretary of Defense McNamara tried to ask himself probably because it was a matter of conscience to him and I was really profoundly surprised that he would go to Hanoi and try to find out the missed opportunities to have peace between Hanoi and Washington. My complaint here is that the whole process then disregarded completely even a little voice from the anti-
Communist Vietnamese or from the Saigon people. That was the why of the whole war.

But then here we have to ask ourselves whether it is possible for someone like Ho Chi Minh to accept the compromise politically?

RV: Was it possible?

NXP: I said that he did play very well the game of compromise because as soon as he set up his 1945 government in the North he tried to get the other nationalist parties in, but what was his purpose, his purpose when he tried to get them in was the neutralize them and then eventually elimination of those people who were against him. I think that the general impression of people at that time, he might have the right to be the leader of the whole group because there was no one better and if he were the leader he must know what he was doing and if he claimed to be a Communist that might be a good thing to, for there was no one else to say anything contrary and then the second thing was that the nationalist ranks were so divided, could not put up a united front against Ho Chi Minh, each one tried to do whatever he was able to do against Ho Chi Minh. It was hopeless of course and they did not receive any help from anybody. When Ho Chi Minh and his group got there then eventually help from Soviet Union and from the People’s Republic of China and suddenly you have Diem, Diem have the Americans behind him. So the more that Ho Chi Minh tried to what he claim regain the national independence, sovereignty, that’s how the American escalation began. Was it justified, I said it was justified but then you elected the wrong means to fight against and the United States fell completely into the trap. So the missed opportunities for peace here, don’t ask the Hanoi people claim that they were prepared to compromise even to have a coalition government in South Vietnam, nobody believed in that of course and history has shown that it was not possible in 1975 and 1976, then the left was eliminated in the illegal very fast. But at that time he claimed that. I think the only missed opportunities for peace in the early 1960, even before the overthrow of Diem and then right after Diem, instead of the kind of escalation that you saw or with the American intervention and they were also very decent, that escalation by the Americans, that is the good guy trying to help so he has responded gradually and gradually but that was not the way to fight that kind of war. The only missed opportunities you had for the Vietnamese people I would say, was first to surrender to Communist rule and avoid the five million dead and the fifty thousand
American dead that was not necessary and was it worse for the Vietnamese people to
become Communists in the early 1960 or was it really a threat to United States security, I
don’t think so, nobody would think so. The second thing is put up a proper fight against
the adversary, that is to destroy completely North Vietnam in forty-eight hours as
Ambassador Cyrus Vance later has said, ‘don’t make the same mistake again.’ That is
what in labor disputes I have learned, that is you don’t let the dispute rot. Kill it at the
very beginning, either you surrender or you eliminate your opponent, but don’t let it rot
and rot and rot and rot. So the Vietnam War was simply rotting more and more every
day by a sense of decency from the American government.

RV: Are you advocating that the United States should have taken decisive
military action against Hanoi directly in 1965?

NXP: That is what you do usually when you go to war, that is destroy the enemy.

RV: The Johnson Administration was really worried though if they did that, that
the Chinese would intervene, just like in Korea.

NXP: That’s it, if you can believe again the Chinese. They kept on trying to
reassure the United States that they would not have group troops in Vietnam provided
there is no foreign troops invading their borders and then you just look at the kind of
armaments that they send to Ho Chi Minh, they were just individual small armaments,
they never sent big armaments and the crackdown was done by the Soviet Union and so
there I think because it was not made clear what was the final objective of the U.S.
administration because you must admit the Soviet Union, the people’s of Red China and
Hanoi were also justified to think that the Americans would try to dominate North
Vietnam, the extend their influence into North Vietnam.

RV: Sounds like a lot of bad communication.

NXP: Well, I have the impression that because it was the hilleto appeasement, it
was a build of containment and I would like to know the very learned person who
invented the bright idea of a proportionate response, so they were always a proportionate
response. If you escalate a little bit, I will bomb more, things like that. You can call it
proportionate response, but it is also proportionate appeasement.
RV: Did you feel this way in 1965, 66?
NXP: Yes, we could not understand why there was proportionate response. If you slap me in the face, I slap you back in the face, you punch me in the nose, I punch you back in the nose and you hit me under the belt, I hit you under the belt but that was it.
RV: And eventually Hanoi wasn’t able to hit you hard enough, you could hit them harder eventually.
NXP: Well, it depends what was your objective because you can hit them harder physically but they was not hurt physically at all because they couldn’t be hurt physically because they were completely flat you cannot beat a dead horse any more. Then when they hit back it was not physically, they hit you back on other things, you were not defeated in battlefield and that was the same thing because Ho Chi Minh had also a similar experience with the French, that was it. You tried to bring out more things with the meaningful handful. I don’t know, I try and let myself go like that, I don’t know whether it’s good or not, but I was really, I’m still very confused on those things because even now.
RV: One more question before we take a break, do you think there were any other motivations that the United States had for going into South Vietnam besides to protect what they were saying, protecting the small guy, South Vietnam? Do you think there were any other motivations, economic motivations, saving political face in Europe, anything else?
NXP: Well, first of all I do know that they had the legitimate concern of the spread of Communism, especially with the Soviet bomb and with the CIC and so on, but then they could not make the distinction, the right of the person to be a Communist and the right of that Communist to claim that he is legitimately using subversive and terrorist action to impose his ideology and I think that at that time that was very clear to many people, but it was not very clear in the U.S. administration’s policy, so you mix that to give the impression that I do not accept Communism, you have the McCarthy situation. Its not that you were against Communism, you were against the spread of Communism by violent means, that was the precise thing that you should have explained to people but they were not able to explain it. They should have been able to explain it because you have the charter in the United Nations, that is to say for Ho Chi Minh to say to Ho Chi
Minh you have a dispute but in the spread of the United Nations and after the horror of
the Second World War we have all agreed that we would try and resolve our differences
peacefully, not to launch a kind of armed struggle that you are doing and use what you
claim in very proud of saying this is popular warfare, invincible, you cannot defeat
popular warfare.

RV: That brings up a good point, could the United Nations have done anything
more in this crucial time period between 1955 and '65 to stabilize the situation?

NXP: That would come to another question, how good was the United Nations at
that time and how good it has been or it is now. At that time it was considered as a
creature of United Nations because the Soviet Union was not in position to have much
say at the United Nations.

RV: You mean a creature of the United States.

NXP: Sure, many people considered the United Nations a create of United States
until you lost ground with the third world and the manipulations of the Soviet Union and
the PRC and so that’s how you also began funding the thing.

RV: So, the United Nations, despite what happened in Korea?

NXP: And again you see Korea was an illustration that United Nations was a
creature of the United States, so that’s not it. But it’s better than nothing, I must say the
tendency is the United Nations is better than nothing, but you can do better if you are
really honest with yourself.

RV: But how honest can the countries of the world be when they are fighting for
survival, when they are fighting for interests around the world? Is it possible do you think
for countries to honestly say okay, we don’t want the spread of Communism, militarily
but we really don’t want the spread of Communism period because that means to Soviet
cBloc would rule economically more part of the world which would hurt us economically.
Is it possible for the United States to simply let people self-determine themselves and
their governments, whatever it may be and let the United States sit back and just let it
happen?

NXP: That is very clear, but then you see it harrows your bottom about that and
the issues for me are a bit different. The creative spirit of the United Nations in my mind
was the declaration that we will henceforth resolve our conflicts and disputes in peaceful
ways. That is very good. The very big problem of United Nations since its creation is that you have never set, provided the means to effectively resolve conflicts peacefully, that is the failure of United Nations and the same thing with Ho Chi Minh and with Diem and all the rest as well now. The Declaration of the United Nations, as I’ve just said its greatest merit is to call everybody, not to kill one another any more but there must be ways to find a peaceful solution to our conflict. You have to provide the means, effect the means for people in conflict to resolve peacefully, how.

RV: What are those means?

NXP: So, we will come to that later, but coming back to Ho Chi Minh, if he had the great spirit, peaceful spirit, the spirit of the United Nations, he would try, he would take the bother to go and see Diem because he is a creed and to cred brother. It was not possible for Diem to go to him, but it would be as the big brother for him to go and see Diem, you are my little brother, I can crush you but the United States will come and we have a fight with and settle it that way, better try to find something in the spirit of the United Nations, the Vietnamese people to resolve their differences peacefully and that’s why he took in his preamble for the Constitution of Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Declaration of Independence of the United States and I have been telling the young Vietnamese now who try to find a way of reconciliation with the Communist regime and they put up all kinds of traps for the future, because the future of Vietnam. I said all these things are very easy, the division of powers, how to set up legislative, how to go through the polls, how to elect your village priests and your president. But the most, most difficult I haven’t seen anyone or anybody of the people who well intentioned, nobody has written the preamble of that Constitution like the founding fathers did for the United States. That is to say we have always failed to share the ideas, the notion of what we are, what we should be. We have never found really our national identity yet and if you don’t know what you are and what you want to be and what you should be, you cannot write a Constitution, there’s just another piece of paper to organize the government, that’s all. That sense of nationalism should override any ideological disputes. For a thousand years of history, it’s not a fight between the Communists and non-Communists and the country and the people and a national concept of that nation will be there in thousands of years to come, even when Communists and anti-Communists have disappeared. That is
incidental, but now are we able to know also if we take the United Nations as a budding
from of world government or world order and so on, can’t we infuse to the people in the
world who they are and what they want to be. We have failed that too. At least there are
common denominators that you should make clear to the people in the world that what
were are like the American founding fathers, this is what we are. We don’t want colonial
rule, we want to be free, we want democratic, we take in everybody, everybody is the
same, they have all the rights in the world to be exactly the same, let’s get together and
make a nation. We should be able to say something like that to the Vietnamese with their
own traditions and own customs and own values and own culture. You cannot take the
Declaration of Independence and put it in the Vietnamese Constitution.

RV: So why didn’t Ho Chi Minh go to the United Nations, do you think, why
didn’t he take that step?

NXP: Because at that time the United Nation was a creature of United States, he
would go to the plenum of the Soviet Union rather and that’s what he did and became a
member of the COMECON. There was no choice, that’s not a choice. If not he would
say, if you don’t give me that I go to the Americans and tell the Americans if you don’t
give me that, I go to the Soviets, he didn’t have a choice, he just went to the Soviets. I
think if we try to get down to those things maybe we find the answers and help the
youngsters now to make a choice.

RV: That’s why, that’s the most important thing now to you is helping the young
people understand?

NXP: Very much.

RV: Young Vietnamese or young Americans?

NXP: Who else, both American and I just said this morning to the poll of
students, for both American and Vietnamese young people like you, that's why I’m here,
didn’t go back to my village. Yes, sure but then you see we move into the period of “65
to ’75 and only when we clarify a little bit of those issues in the background we can move
meaningfully to the period, ’65 to ’75, why you have things happen in ’65 to ’75.

RV: Do you think that historians have skipped over the, not really?

NXP: Important facts and events and you try to explain why Johnson did that,
why Johnson didn’t that, and all that, but then you see we have to bring in all the
elements involved, what the Vietnamese of all quarters thought, what the Americans of all quarters thought, and then the adversary. What did they think at that time and in the end why it came out that end result in 1975? That was no surprise to me, what happened in 1975 and then I will tell you it did not affect me much when I went into prison. I did not have the guilt complex; I did not consider the victory of those Hanoi people meaningful in any way to the Vietnamese people. They took over power, that’s all. It was not a victory to me, and they didn’t impress and I had the patience to wait thirty years to see that my ideas all seem valid now. You claimed that you were better than us and you have the right to have power more than we do because you know how to bring a brighter future to the Vietnamese people, they did not. Your plan was lies and that is the impression of the large majority of the people now, but they accept their lot, Communist regime or non-Communist regime, even now they don’t care.

RV: They want their bowl of rice, they want their job, they want their family.

NXP: You’re right. But they now realize that whatever the Communists promised since the 1940s until now, just words. It really wasn’t a rich and a powerful country, they keep on saying that for forty years. It is the poorest country now in the world.

RV: Okay, let’s take a break.

RV: This will conclude today’s session of our interview with Ambassador Phong. We’ll resume next week. Thank you sir.