Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and we’re starting another session with Ambassador Phong. It is October 16, 2002; 2:45 PM in the afternoon and we’re again joined by Miss Jenny Board. Ambassador Phong if you would, let’s continue discussing the Paris Peace Conference and let’s look back at 1968 and discuss why the Paris Peace Conference happened, why it happened when it did, how it came about.

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, if you remember President Johnson tried very hard already in the 1965, 1966 and concretely at the Manila Summit Conference in October 1966. There was a clear need or desire by President Johnson to get Hanoi to the negotiating table and trying to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

RV: Why do you think President Johnson was trying to do that so hard, was it because of the presidential election year or do you think that he thought that America simply could not do what it intended to do?

NXP: I think that you must say right at the beginning, it was not intention I’m sure of the U.S. government, whether from President Truman to Eisenhower to President Kennedy and then Johnson to have such a massive intervention with ground troops and then with air support from United States in order to maintain the political regime in South Vietnam. Then we have to go back a little bit here to see how the United States were brought to that point of going into negotiations with Hanoi by the year shall we say, ’66, ’67 or ’68. I think that it would be interesting, try and find out how the whole so-called
Vietnam War developed since the Geneva Accords of 1954 and to read the mind of Ho Chi Minh and his Communist government in Hanoi. The Geneva Accords of 1955 was a big victory for Ho Chi Minh, that was the first time that he had international recognition and he was very keen to maintain and keep what he managed to achieve, that is the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and that would play all the way throughout the Vietnam War until the end. That entity of states, country called North Vietnam, labeled Democratic Republic of Vietnam. How come the United States was not prepared in 1964, 1965, to destroy North Vietnam, launching so that was very crucial for Ho Chi Minh and the Hanoi government to maintain and to preserve that notion of North Vietnam being a sovereign country and thanks to the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China they had the support to do that, and considered it as a sanctuary in the fight for the whole of Vietnam, so sanctuaries in the Vietnam War was not Laos or Cambodia, the biggest sanctuary in the war was North Vietnam. There, if we try and read the minds of Ho Chi Minh from 1955 to 1960, he did not honestly; we must say he did not try very hard to overthrow anything in South Vietnam.

RV: Let’s pause just for a moment.

NXP: So I think that after the Geneva Accords 1955, with the partition of Vietnam, I think Ho Chi Minh was sure he was going to have the whole of Vietnam under Communist rule, under Communist regime, that was the eventual withdrawal of all the French troops and then general elections coming in 1956, there was no competition against Ho Chi Minh at that time, it was just Emperor Bao Dai, the state of Vietnam created within the French union. So South Vietnam came into existence without any government, without any governmental structure, but anything left by the French. It did not have any army, the South Vietnamese Army did not exist at that time, it was just probably the remnants of the Vietnamese presence in the ranks of the French forces which were left. So I think that Ho Chi Minh did not worry much about that kind of South Vietnam and maybe he believed sincerely that South Vietnam wouldn’t be a match to him militarily, it was not a match to Giap for sure. He defeated even the French expeditionary forces. Politically there was a complete void and how are you going to fill that void in 1955 to 6, and in face of that you already have a so-called Democratic Republic of Vietnam in North Vietnam, which was well supported by the Communist
Bloc, so he was very confident that it is a matter so very short time he would take over the whole of Vietnam.

RV: Even in the face of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization?

NXP: Yes, but as you SEATO was just a kind of token military alliance without any striking force whatsoever, if not you have to call on the United States to act, it was not like NATO, SEATO was just an empty shell and the members of SEATO, if you take out the United States wouldn’t mean anything at all. NATO, if you take out the United States would still be able to do something by itself. Then we have to go into those details because they can’t, if not they present picture which may have all the ten toes and ten fingers, but they don’t mean much. It is also in the context of the rise of the Soviet Union as a nuclear power and the creation of the People’s Republic of China, so I think it is valid and justified that the worried apprehension, with the rise of the Communist bloc after the Second World War and then very clearly with President Eisenhower and particularly with a very forceful Secretary of State, Foster Dulles, they were anti-Communist, very clearly and the threat was very clear, very real. There is the spread of Communism, especially in the form of colonies, so that was very clear. Was there any other choice by the United States at that time, except build up the so-called South Vietnam, which just came into being? The United States did try to help the French a little bit, carry on the fight but it was a hopeless fight.

RV: Do you think the Americans realized that the French were fighting a hopeless fight?

NXP: Well I think President Eisenhower was very aware of that because the context was very different and the French carried on with kind of a colonial underdog there and President Eisenhower did say to Paris that you should change your banner, they should go for fight against the spread of Communism and you are fighting for democracy and freedom, but I think that it was an impossible task to give to the French, they did not have the means to do it and they were not in position to do it after a hundred years of being a colonial power in South Vietnam, would be very difficult that I’m a different Frenchie coming back. And the French colonists were still there, exploiting the plantations and having their beehive put out and all kinds of things and taking advantage of the former colony as they used to do. So it was I think a surprise to Ho Chi Minh that
Ngo Dinh Diem managed to create a state with the very little means that he had, although the American came in to give help and if I remember correctly between 1954 or 5, until the early 1960s, by 1963, ’64, the U.S. did put in nearly two billion U.S. dollars, of which most 80% went into beefing up the South Vietnamese so it was the creation of Air MAC and then MACV, so there was no other choice. But you must say that North Vietnam did not really start a war during that period, ’55 to 1960 and they escalated very slowly with rather subversive activities, with what they used to do in the 1940s, that is assassination of the village chiefs, throwing bombs into move houses at market places, to disrupt the civil government in South Vietnam being setting up by Ngo Dinh Diem. Ngo Dinh Diem as I said, projected an image of a Mandarin of the imperial court and at the same time trying to bring in western values and impose really literally Catholicism as a philosophy as shall we say the ideology but there was a clear effort on the part of Ngo Dinh Diem not the be a puppet of the United States because he was an old Mandarin, very conscious of the Vietnamese nation and people and he would not accept I’m sure the ruler of foreign rule. But he was in dilemma because if he did not, he was not prepared except politically, the influence on intervention of the U.S. government he was desperately in need of their aid, in order to survive. He managed to play the tight rope, which didn’t turn out very well for him, because he did not really play the American card completely and then in order to build up that country and government and state which he managed to do with the deposition of Emperor Bao Dai and then the declaration that the first Republic of Vietnam with him as president and here we must be also honest that the referendum and the so-called election to make him president was not in the best democratic tradition but it would be difficult for any one to do an ounce differently because elections in that context wouldn’t need much anyway.

RV: Do you think that in the world context of the 1950s, with the United States’ vehement anti-Communism stance all around the world that the United States got in limited at the beginning with the South Vietnamese government, but simply because the American presidents, Truman and then Eisenhower, mainly Eisenhower had said, South Vietnam will exist, it will be backed by the United States, it will be an outpost of the free world, it will be an anti-Communist, simply because of that comment and that public acknowledgement by the United States government that the United States had just
committed itself to making South Vietnam survive. SO my question is, did it matter in
this context, this is what one school of through of historians think, did it matter in this
context that whatever President Diem wanted or didn't wan, or what the South
Vietnamese government wanted or did not want, the United States was going to be there,
it was going to be very influential regardless sc so its world wide anti-Communist so did
the Saigon government have any choice in the matter of the fact that if the United States
abandons us and we have to deal with Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnam directly and we lose
somehow, that is somehow going to be a black eye on the United States because we had
made this public statement saying we are going to protect South Vietnam, its going to be
an outpost of the free world, do you think the Saigon government had any choice in this
all, in 1955, '56, '57?

NXP: As you have very rightly put the issue in its historical context, the basic
issue here is not Vietnam. The very big issue here is the beginning of the confrontation
between the Communist bloc and the United States. Here I think as an intellectual
exercise, we have to go into the details. The United States were apprehensive of the
spread of Communism, but what kind so a spread of Communism that we were dealing
with, that is to say the Soviet Union did not use the Red Army and try to invade other
countries, they claim that it is the spontaneous decision by the people’s concerned here
and there in the world to choose the Communist ideology and they claim all the rights in
the world to be Communist. What you were against is the use of actual war of violence,
to communize, to impose Communist rule on other peoples and there you find yourself in
a very special and particular case of Vietnam. You did not have yet anywhere else in the
world a war between Communist forces and non-Communist forces, except in Korea
which was another very special case, that was not the strength of Chinese Communism of
the Soviet Communism in Korea, it was something else. So here you are faced with that
and you commit yourself to put the spread of Communism in Vietnam, taking South
Vietnam as your defense line. Also I think it is true to say that at that time, almost
everybody were attracted by the domino theory. They say well if South Vietnam falls and
you have the whole of Southeast Asia, which may well be too, considering that the
people were not very aware of what Communism was, or not Communist was. But Ho
Chi Minh had these feelings to take advantage of that period after the Second World War
and then the Geneva Accords of 1954-55 and then you move now to the point that by 1960 Ngo Dinh Diem was successful to set up a country called the republic of Vietnam with the help of the United States, but then he was in the dilemma too. He did not want American rule on him but needed the means to so his job. At the same time he had to establish a government which would be able to work effectively and provide security, protection, to the people in South Vietnam. The more he became successful, the more effective he was to then set up that governmental structure and beef up his Army thanks to the United States, then how would Ho Chi Minh react to that situation?

RV: Wasn’t he getting help from the PRC, from the Soviet Union in the same kind of way with money and materials?

NXP: Not yet. If you look at the figures of aid provided by Soviet Union and the PRC to Hanoi it went up very slowly and compared to the aid that South Vietnam received from United States, it’s nothing, it’s about one fifth in the aid paid even to Hanoi at that time. But then because they were two different types of activities, that is to say the means used by Ho Chi Minh and the Hanoi government, they did not require enormous amount of money or means like in South Vietnam. They didn’t have an Air Force or Navy or anything of that kind. They were mainly I think up to 1960 rather on subversive activities, much more than conventional warfare and they prepared themselves eventually with the consolidation of the South Vietnamese Army, Giap had to also consolidate the PAVN and he was much more effective to do that, because he already had the past, since 1940s to set up that People’s Army of Vietnam. So what happened then, by 1960, I think that Ho Chi Minh and the Communist government in North Vietnam continued to claim the sanctuary status of North Vietnam, so they were not yet crazy enough to launch an all out conventional attack against South Vietnam that would destroy the status of sanctuary. So they would continue with more subversive activities.

RV: Do you think in 1960 he knew whether or not the United States or I guess South Vietnam, the military of South Vietnam would actually invade North Vietnam, how did he knew it was a sanctuary in 1960?

NXP: I don’t think that he thought that the South Vietnamese Army would be in position to invade North Vietnam, I don’t think so. But if he launch in the conventional
attack, if I were in his shoes at that time, I would expect retaliation by the U.S.
government, with Foster Dulles there for sure.

RV: In the form of what happened in Korea?

NXP: That’s it, so he was very careful not to put himself in that position. So he
continued but then in order to make even surer that he would be safe in North he
launched NLF in South Vietnam to say this is not my business, that’s the trouble of the
South Vietnamese among themselves and he was able to take advantage of it, because
there was a movement by that time against Diem. As I said he was a contradiction
himself, the more effective he became as a government, the more repressive he had to
become and then Ho Chi Minh would help him to become even more and more
repressive and dictatorial by more subversive actions, the escalation of subversive action,
but it was not really conventional by 1960. So they claimed that there was the NLF, it
was probably a spontaneous, I cron that, but there was also other spontaneous movements
against Ngo Dinh Diem at that time, that was not the only one movement and all the
others remained at the Saigon side. Then how come the NLF with Loya Winotar and then
Madame Binh, went to the Hanoi side so the question here is academic, whether the NLF
was really South Vietnamese or was a tool of Hanoi?

RV: This is a huge debate in scholarship about this?

NXP: So, it’s both in my opinion. I lived through that period, I’m sure that they
had real grievances against Ngo Dinh Diem, it was really bloodiest dictatorship and I am
against Ngo Dinh Diem on that point, that he by 1960 with his repressive laws and action,
he pushed the non-Communists nationalists into the hands of the Communists.

RV: Did they think that Ho Chi Minh and the Communists were a better option
than what was happening?

NXP: I don’t think they had a choice because the survival and the effectiveness
of the NLF depended entirely on whether Hanoi would give a hand to a NLF or not.
Now, how was Hanoi then confident that they could use the NLF? Now, after the
reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule in 1976 we discovered that Win Ho Tha
and Madame Binh were members of the Vietnamese Communist party for years, so they
were very confident to have their own people in there to really hold the NLF. But then as
I said, on the practical term, the NLF provided the means to the Hanoi government to act
in South Vietnam and then still preserve their status as sanctuary in North Vietnam, claiming that it was a truly South Vietnamese movement, so it was not entirely false to see that it’s not truly South Vietnamese as I said, but in practical terms the whole survival method of the NLF depended entirely on the help from Hanoi and then can say that during the Paris Peace talks, when they moved to changed NLF into the position of the Republic of South Vietnam with its PRG, provisional government, that was also to play the NLF against the Saigon government, under the entity of a government, so how much was it valid because of the NLF and then the PRG as the counter part of the Saigon government. That is a major element in the Paris Peace Talks.

RV: What is your opinion on that?

NXP: Well, if I were in Hanoi, that would be the thing to do but in practical terms anybody would tell you that the NLF or the PRG didn’t control much the population or the territory in South Vietnam. They had a few areas here and there which could be taken by the ARVN and the American troops any time, anywhere and so these gyro of the lil pots scheme concept, and you don’t say that this is my area, you cannot come in, that is your are, that was not the game to be played by Hanoi and the NLF, it was impossible to say that they have really territory but they claim they have government and structure here and there somehow and they claim to be representative of the South Vietnamese who were against the Saigon government. Here we have to go into the details, so by 1960, President Diem had that dilemma and eventually he became so repressive and to answer your question, I think sometime there was the impression among the officials in Washington DC, at the beginning they thought that Diem was the best that you could find and then when he refused to play exactly the American policy in South Vietnam then they thought that Diem is losing grip of the population and getting out of hand and that led to 1963. So for Ho Chi Minh and the Hanoi government, eventually they found out that they were able to bring down Ngo Dinh Diem through their subversive action. And it was more or less with the blessing of the Americans. I must say that after the Geneva Accords in 1955 there was an acute crisis of leadership among the non-Communist Vietnamese as it had always been. Not that we recognize Ho Chi Minh as a very effective leader of the Vietnamese people but he was the only one who was in position to claim the role of leadership and as we all know he was very clever not to project the image of
Communism throughout the 1940s and ‘50s when he led the fight against the return of
the French forces. And also here I think that the debate is till going on whether Ho Chi
Minh was a nationalist or a Communist. I am very much inclined to say that he was both,
but he was much more Communist than nationalist because he would not have survived
as a nationalist for long if he were not Communist.

RV: He would not have survived what?

NXP: The political game there and the war if he did not have the support of the
Soviet Union, of the PRC, as many nationalist leaders that cracked up during that period
of time with the Dai Viet working, Vietnam working man. So he was able to make use of
all the elements, historical context at that time to continue and claim leadership.

RV: Do you think Ho Chi Minh was more nationalistic that Ngo Dinh Diem?

NXP: The only thing was that Ngo Dinh Diem was not Communist, that’s
something very clear compared to Ho Chi Minh and he failed completely because he did
not respond to the historical context of that time. It would be very hard to say who had
popular support in inverted commas, ‘popular support,’ because overwhelming majority
of the Vietnamese people at that time were not very politically conscious of the issues
involved, but the ordinary people and the peasants in the countryside were very conscious
of the fight against foreign rule, foreign domination, foreign presence, so Ngo Dinh Diem
had a big handicap because he had the Americans by his side. On the face there, you
have Ho Chi Minh without any foreign intervention, foreign presence or anything, so that
is the big handicap of Ngo Dinh Diem.

RV: One really controversial point I’d like to bring up now is the question that a
lot of American scholars have asked, did the United States drive the escalation of the
Vietnam conflict from 1954-55 forward, did the United States drive it, the escalation, or
was that the Communist side, the North Vietnamese side that drove the escalation of the
conflict?

NXP: To answer your question we have to stick to very traditional and
conservative concepts of war peace. Apparently, the American intervention in the
Vietnam War was massive compared to whatever the Soviet Union, the PRC or Hanoi
put into that war, but the escalation was not, the physical escalation, the escalation for the
Vietnamese people was that Ho Chi Minh and his group and it came out very clearly by
the late 1940s to the strictly nationalist parties and people there that we will be overrun
by the Vietnamese Communists because after the so-called period of collision, when Ho
Chi Minh set up the Democratic Republic of Vietnam he had another of provisional
governments which included all the traditional Vietnamese party but it came out very
clearly that he began systematically to eliminate them, physically eliminate them and
those people just withdrew from the collision and began to fight back even before the
French returned but it was a desperate fight, they didn't have anything to fight against
Giap at that time and the Vietminh ranks were there to include also the non-Communist
Vietnamese but those non-Communist Vietnamese in the ranks of the Vietminh were not
conscious, was not aware that they will be taken over very soon by the Vietnamese
Communists, they didn’t see that. The few who saw them then went over and it was a
terrible choice for them to join the French forces and fight back Ho Chi Minh or remain
in the Vietminh ranks and know that eventually they will be overwhelmed by Ho Chi
Minh and the Communist Vietnamese there. That is a very painful decision to make, had
he no conscious, I don’t really know how to make such a decision. Really, if I were there
at that time, that is to accept eventually the Communization of the whole country of
Vietnam, you don’t die because of that, you will be subjected to Communist rule,
eventually we would know what that means, or join the French forces and have a small
chance not to be under Communist rule, so it was an impossible choice. It was an
impossible choice.

RV: In 1960s, when you returned to Saigon from England, would you have come
back to a Communist in 1960 if it would have been?

NXP: I had mentioned to you when I was in England in the 1950s there were
about twenty Vietnamese at that time who were students there and I don’t know how, by
whim of fate and destiny, exactly ten went back to Hanoi and ten went back to Saigon, so
fifty/fifty, so there you are, I went back to Saigon because my father was there, family
was there, but if my father had been more like my uncles in Hanoi I would have gone
back to Hanoi. I wouldn’t know what would have happened.

RV: So it didn’t really matter, the political standing, you just went to where your
family was.
NXP: First of all it was the family, but I’m sure with my upbringing in Europe, in France and England, I would be very quickly put into jail in Hanoi if I start to speak up my mind.

RV: Because you spoke of a professor who dismissed Communism?

NXP: Yes, of course. I’m not really against Communism as an ideology, so intellectually I’m against Communism because I thought that it wouldn’t be a workable system because that was the negation of all the human values and the concept of a human being that we used to in the west, no more private property, no respect for the minority and so on. Did that matter very much to the peasant in the countryside; I don’t think so, so I don’t know. Even now under Communist rule, they continue to live with whatever they have.

RV: Back to that question, did the United States drive the conflict or was it Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnam?

NXP: I think that the type of escalation that Ho Chi Minh took against Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam later was not very visible but it was an escalation from subversive activities, from assassination of the people and the disruption of the peace and ways of life in South Vietnam, eventually he used regular units, forces of the PAVN to intervene into that. So that escalation was not very visible in traditional terminology you would not call that escalation. It was dissent, it was a fight by whatever means you had against what you would call repressive dictatorial political regime in South Vietnam. But for the non-Communist of the anti-Communist Vietnamese, that was escalation, escalation in the fight between them since the late 1940s and Ngo Dinh Diem was not in position to cope with that. The way he ran the country was not to cope with that because he failed completely as a Mandarin to win the support of the people. It was difficult because it’s easy to say that but it would be almost impossible for Diem in his position in that kind of complex to win the support of the people, because first the people was not very much interested in any political stand but they were only interested to be left alone, that nobody would come and disrupt their very miserable life. That was what most of the people were interested in.

RV: So the struggle really was amongst the political elite of the country?

NXP: For the leadership.
RV: It was amongst the political elite.

NXP: Yes, amongst them and also it was the very clear combat for power and to have power to rule. So there the United States found itself in such a context and in order to put an end to what later on would be called aggressive acts by North Vietnam against South Vietnam, it was also to in many respects military aggressive acts against South Vietnam. The United States thought it was very well and justified to act militarily in Vietnam. The what if here, that by the time of President Kennedy rather than President Eisenhower, would President Kennedy go into escalation at the level that later on President Johnson did, or would President Kennedy, who I’m sure had all the courage and profile to deal with that situation, with Cuba, with Berlin, why wouldn't he take the same stand in Vietnam, was it because it was too far away that it would not in the eyes of the American public say a very firm stand in South Vietnam and then I would only truck the North Vietnamese really hard.

RV: Well, with the failure of the Bay of Pigs in 1961 he simply, it was even more imperative to his administration to make a very public firm stance against Communism no matter where, so there you have a commitment to Southeast Asia in that.

NXP: So there it is still not very clear, many people feel that President Kennedy would not go into half a million GIS there, and then spending hundreds of billions of dollars but I think if you provoke him enough, eventually he would go for a very strong stand in Vietnam, President Kennedy. But then fate everywhere, President Diem, President Kennedy and them you must give credit to President Diem, he did try and set up a viable government, create a viable army in South Vietnam to deal with Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi government. He did try and he succeeded because if he didn’t succeed it, Ho Chi Minh didn’t have to really launch any attack against South Vietnam and then bring in the Americans. The Americans of course reacted violently and so it was a little bit disproportionate with republic anyway, they couldn’t understand, so the escalation by the North Vietnamese was much more quiet and subtle than the American intervention but it was an escalation initiated by the North Vietnamese. You may argue that if it were at that level, you should have responded proportionately to the kind of escalation by Ho Chi Minh against South Vietnam, but I don’t believe much in proportionate response.

RV: Do you think the Americans are capable of responding softly and quietly?
NXP: They thought they were doing just that and I’m sure they tried to convince
the Soviet Union and the PRC that they did just that, although it was in a visible manner
out of proportion, but it was in a way proportionate response, which to me is just another
way to put proportional accommodations. You just perpetuated the thing and I think
many of the American generals at that time advocated that you have an all out attack
against North Vietnam, put an end to it.

RV: Let me ask you a question, one of the things that the Eisenhower
administration looked at when considering how to deal with Ho Chi Minh was what
happened in Munich, in Germany, the Munich Conference and this Munich analogy as its
called was well, as the Allies appeased Hitler and said if you don’t do this, then you can
have a portion of Czechoslovakia and that will be it and the appeasement led to World
War II, so they say. The Eisenhower administration looked at Ho Chi Minh and said
well, if we say okay, you can have South Vietnam, we won’t contest you there but you
can’t tough Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma. If they had worked appeasement with Ho
Chi Minh they theorized that it would be a situation just like how they treated Hitler in
Munich in 1938.

NXP: Well, first of all I find it difficult for you to trade Vietnam against Laos and
Cambodia, I trade that any time, that is to keep Vietnam and give them Laos and
Cambodia rather than other way around.

RV: Of course, Ho Chi Minh wanted his Vietnam first. Do you think that was a
viable analogy that the United States government made?

NXP: Here you come into the debate with the Hanoi position because to play the
game right at the beginning, they always claim that they were prepared to compromise,
they were prepared to compromise after the Geneva Accords of 1954, they were prepared
to compromise again in 1960, before the big escalation of the Vietnam War, if only the
United States accepted some kind of coalition in South Vietnam, not for the whole of
Vietnam but in South Vietnam, and even I would say that if I were Ho Chi Minh and if I
really want to play the game with the United States I would even offer to coalition
government as he did in 1945 for the whole of Vietnam. That would really undercut the
U.S. position, but then he was greedy, he just played with other people’s marbles only, so
in the South Vietnam only and they claimed they were prepared to go into a coalition
government in South Vietnam by 1960, even before the Lao sentiment. So they claimed that and because they had the NLF there in 1960 and that they would be prepared and from then they played that game until the end, until the Paris Peace Talks. That was the same format under different colors and shapes, but that was the same thing they continue and then Dr. Kissinger played right into their hands. That is to say there is some kind of political settlement on the basis of self-determination and general elections but in South Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem would claim for the whole of Vietnam, when he refused the general elections with the backing of Foster Dulles, the general elections in ’56, it was because he wanted the general elections for the whole of Vietnam without the Communist government in Hanoi, so he had the better position there.

RV: Could a coalition government have survived in South Vietnam in 1960?

NXP: Well it would have survived as much as the NLF survives in 1975, until 1976.

RV: So the answer is no.

NXP: That’s true. But then the Hanoi people will claim that sure because they want to join us.

RV: What do you think about the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos. This came at a very crucial time and the American escalation or the American involvement in Southeast Asia?

NXP: Well the stakes there were much lower than the conflict in Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh right in the 1940s, or even 1930s I would say, prepare himself for the whole of Indochina, in order to be a viable area for him, that was why with the French notion of Indochina, he started the Communist party of Indochina and he even trained the people to eventually like him the elite in Vietnam, the Lao elite, his Lao people and the Cambodian and he had very good two students, in Lao they had Khe Sanh over Vy Han and in Cambodia, Se Pu San For, who by the whims of history became Khmer Rouge because he didn’t have enough time to run away from the bed when the Khmer Rouge arrived, that’s all. He was most educated and better equipped than the other Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot to deal with international scene, that’s why he became the fever there. But Phe Song Phan was a very good student of Ho Chi Minh and in Khe Sang Han you know very well. So there you were and whatever settlement that you could have with Laos was not
a decisive factor in the conflict because nobody would get guarantee the neutrality of Laos and it would be there at the mercy of Ho Chi Minh.

RV: What about the American point of view, that Laos was vitally important to what was happening in Vietnam, specifically South Vietnam because of the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex?

NXP: Of course, that is again the principle of sanctuaries. As long as you play that game of sanctuaries, especially in subversive warfare you lose for sure.

RV: Was the Kennedy administration mistaken in going after so-called neutrality in Laos?

NXP: On contrary, because at least you have some kind of peace there but they didn’t weigh much into the conflict. It was there because 1962 people we are leaving it alone, but that would be upset any time you did not have any international force to impose that kind of settlement there. The only thing that could upset really Laos would be the PRC.

RV: Right, and that’s something the United States feared, intervention of China.

NXP: Right and I found out that after arriving in Paris that the PRC wanted very much North Vietnam to continue with the war but for other reasons that you think. That is really to get Hanoi out of breath.

RV: Expend their resources enough so they would not ever be a threat?

NXP: Yes, so they did not really push the North Vietnamese into negotiation but even when in ’68 or when the wrong enemies was bright enough to go to the negotiating table with Ambassador Harriman, the Chinese still continued to push Hanoi to go on fiercely in their war activities, get them more meeting.

RV: With the aims of what, the goal being what?

NXP: Weakening North Vietnam?

RV: So they would be a weak North Vietnam, or that they would become another Chinese province?

NXP: To being with because the PRC did not dream right away to overtake North Vietnam and not to upset the Soviet Union but you have to read into the internal problems of the PRC at that time. They were very unstable, Mao and Zhou was dealing with terrible problems, eventually you would see the Cultural Revolution and then if you
bear in mind what happened to Lam Boo, the defense minister, the Soviet Union tried
very hard to take over the PRC too. Lam Boo how was the defense ministers of Mao, he
was the dong feng of Mao, he was clearly the one to succeed Mao above anybody else.
Why did he stage a coup and take over and then have to run away to be shot down in the
north of China trying to reach the Soviet Union for safety. Because he wanted a very
close alliance with the Soviet Union, that is the refusal of Mao and Zhou to go Soviet,
way, there was a very strong movement, especially military in China to go the Soviet way
because that was the best base for them and to consolidate their power. But Mao was
always pushing back the Soviet because they knew and also Zhou knew that the Russians
always been the traditional enemy of the Chinese. Lots of people misread that period and
when you look and read the things about Mao said, what Zhou Enlai said to Phan Mong
Dong and to Ho Chi Minh and all that, they said that at the tip of their tongues, those
Chinese and you must see what they were after and then by 1960 the Chinese saw that
they lost grip on Cambodia and Laos, they put their hopes on the NLF.

RV: Which wasn’t very smart.

NXP: Well, because they were fool too, also probably I was the co-president for
the Friendship Vietnam China in 1965-66 and there were lots of Chinese of Beijing and
Saigon, they also misread the NLF. Wishful thinking that they would be able to take over
even if there was a very strong influence from Hanoi in the NLF ranks but I think the
Beijing people thought they could take over, provide support to the NLF and win them
over to them in the ‘60s. And they tried very hard until the ‘70s, they tried very hard.

RV: Nixon goes to China in ’72 and the United States pulls out of Vietnam in ’73,
do you think there was?

NXP: What happened between that period, after the overthrow of Diem in ’63 and
then you move to ’64, the Tonkin resolution, then ’65 the beginning really of the
escalation by President Johnson to rich, and then the question here is why then in 1966
Hanoi accepted to go to Paris and sit down with the United States, why? What pushed
them to do that, they had refused to do that. After three years of a diplomatic offense by
President Johnson to get them to the negotiating table, so why in 1968. Then of course
after they went there, once they have accepted to go there, only after the Tet Offensive so
it would be interesting to read that Tet Offensive too. Did the Hanoi really hope that they
could take over South Vietnam military with the U.S. troops there, or as many of the
lower ranking and in Hanoi and in the NLF really hoped very strongly, including my
uncles were there on the second and the third level in the hierarchy that the people would
rise up and then even with the American presence the people would rise up and bring
down the Saigon government and have a kind of coalition government with the NLF.

RV: So what role did Tet ’68 play in coming to Paris?
NXP: That is the interesting question, why Hanoi accepted to go there and then
had to launch the Tet Offensive in order to go there. They always do that before they sit
down at the negotiating table, that is to save face, to show their strength politically and
militarily, they did that in ’54 with Dienbienphu, they did that all the time even after ’72
and the Paris Agreement, so that was the principle that they adhered to 100%. In the eyes
of the people they went to the negotiating table in a position of force. The United States
had to sit down and negotiate with them, that is for the ordinary people that was easy to
understand, so that was the idea.

RV: Did Hanoi order the Tet Offensive or was it more indigenous in its origins?
NXP: Yes, it was launched completely by Hanoi?
RV: That’s a controversial point in scholarship. Did the Vietcong launch that
themselves without the permission from Hanoi too early or did Hanoi give the orders.
NXP: We have lots of those tales and then lots of decisions made by Hanoi at the
displeasure of the NLF people and things like that. You can have that, but just for the
bells, it’s just for the fun because the weapons came from North Vietnam. The military
leaders and the commanders were really from North Vietnam and then just a few figures
militarily among the so-called Vietcong ranks but they were not very, very bright, the
military leaders, Madame Binh for example, the military chief of all the forces, General
Gia, so I don’t really believe that the NLF had an army to begin with and then had the
logistics and supplies to establish in order to do that thing. Of course they used lots of
those local Vietcong people but that would not be sufficient to launch an all out attack
against the Saigon army. But I’m sure among the problems that Ho Chi Minh knew very
well that the Tet Offensive wouldn't topple the Saigon government or the Saigon army
with all those American troops present there. So very clearly his objectives were
elsewhere, that’s why he came to the Paris Peace Talks.
RV: How much was he playing on the American public?

NXP: Very much, so if we tried to analyze and with your help maybe we understand better, from ‘60 to ‘63, overthrow of Diem and you must say after the overthrow of Diem it was chaotic. There was a void. Whether you like it or not Diem was some kind of a leader in South Vietnam, not because the people thought of him as a leader but he was able to set up a country and a government and a government structures and build up an army, they had plans from Americans of course but he was able to do that. Who else could have done that? I can’t see anybody because there was nobody in his entourage who was anything near him and there was nobody Ngo Dinh Diem government who of any stature to be a leader and if you consider the one at the top of the NLF, Lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho, he was not a kind of a leader, an intellectual, yes, well known, yes, but he would be a kind of a leader to face Ho Chi Minh, I doubt very much.

RV: Did anybody have a chance against Ho Chi Minh?

NXP: I don’t think so and then afterwards, two years of so-called civilian government to please President Johnson, she had to return to military rule. If you compare what we have the second Republic of Vietnam compared to the first Republic of Vietnam in terms of intellect, philosophy and the policies put out to the people, the period of Minh and Thieu was a complete void compared to Ngo Dinh Diem, although he had his Catholicism but that was something, but with Thieu and all the Saigon generals there was nothing, nothing at all to give to the peasants, except anti-Communism, that’s all.

That was a big void.

RV: They didn’t understand that.

NXP: Of course, as I said to you I asked them what is nationalist because I was brand new to plat of nationalist, they said a nationalist is an anti-Communist. That’s all the answer we have. That was a big void.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing the oral history interview with Ambassador Phong and we are joined by Jenny Board this morning. It is October 23, about 9:12 AM. Sir, I have a couple of questions I would like to follow up on. We have spent a little time in our last session discussing President Diem and his tenure and a couple of clarifying questions. One, discussing the coup that took him out of office. One of the questions that Americans have, and this continues and we’ve talked about this before in this interview, but I think it does need some more fleshing out, is how much involvement the Americans had in the coup, and the specific question is concerning, we know, we have the transcripts of the telephone conversations, we know the so-called official contacts between the American embassy and Prime Minister Diem and what do you know of any records or conversations that the Americans had with the generals who took over, or the people who came into power, do you know of any other conversations that the public is not aware of, or that really hasn’t come to light about that coup?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: It is very difficult now to have a clear picture of what happened, but there were, I’m sure that we can agree clear forces or motivations by various parties at that time, that is by the end of 1962 and the beginning of 1963. I think that Diem performance up to that time became worse and worse and it was the impression of many people that that poor performance resulted from the very hard
measures taken by rather his brother Nhu who was responsible for the security, rather for
the political aspects of the whole conflict. On the one hand Diem and Nhu were not very
able to cope with the increasing subversive actions by the North Vietnamese and the so-
called Vietcong and it was at that time also in 1959, 1960, that you have the beginning of
opposition in South Vietnam to the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, which became more and
more repressive and more and more dictatorial so here we many mention for example in
the Caravel group, wishing too that many prominent South Vietnamese personalities who
were very close to people like Win o Tar and all other who joined then didn’t how and
Diem would wear and no button, who had then they joined NLF and formed NLF with
the help of the Hanoi government. There were others who were in Saigon, who were in
South Vietnam, who were very dissatisfied with the performance of President Diem and
his brother Nhu. Then that should we say dissatisfaction was also very clear to the
Americans who were there and they try very much to bring Diem back to the right track,
if I may say so. But Diem was not very shall we say, sensitive to the recommendations of
the U.S. embassy and of the U.S. advisors and there was a clear conflict between Diem
and the American policies, action there. It came to the point that as always when the
American government was dissatisfied with the local government there, you had that
threat of the reduction of, the cutting of American aid and at that time we must also
remember that with his Machiavellian mind, Ngo Dinh Nhu tried to find other issues, or
solutions to their situation and that was the beginning of his contact through the
diplomats in Saigon, to the international controller’s provision mission of the 1954
Geneva Accords to get contacts with the Hanoi authorities and that became known also
that he tried to compose with no authority and because he was faced with the possibility
that the U.S. may not support him and President Diem any more and than his attempts
also at that time with the French government to get the support or help and aid from the
French and the French were not in position to help much. So that was the situation, there
was very clearly a need to have reforms with the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and it is claimed
now that the CIA was not aware of the preparations of that coup against Diem, that they
say did not know the details of the operations to overthrow Diem, but it cannot be denied
that the CIA Cumming was aware that there was something going on and there was a
coup in preparation, supposedly to be by Big Minh and the Saigon generals, and the
Saigon generals, the prominent ones at that time was Tung Man Do, Tong Tuc Cinh, Leven o Ky, Mai Hut Sun, these were the elder generals compared to example Thieu who was at that time only a Colonel and Cy wasn’t higher than a Colonel, not even Major or something. That was the situation. It cannot be denied that the CIA was aware that there was a coup but we have come to accept now that the CIA was not informed of the details of the coup. General Dong, when I saw him in Paris later, before he died, he claimed that the CIA did not know the details if the coup, but the CIA was very much aware that the coup was there.

RV: How about the American Ambassador, the embassy staff, the diplomats, were they aware that a coup was in the process or was brewing?

NXP: I think compared to the CIA, the embassy officials were even less informed and Ambassador Lodge I think till the end claimed that he was not aware of the details of the coup, but he knew very well that the coup was very prominent and repeatedly he called President Diem and informed of it, that the U.S. embassy may give him a safe exit from Saigon.

RV: Why didn’t he take that?

NXP: Well, I don’t think that it was in the personality of President Diem to leave the country and run away. He was not that kind of person. He would try and find a way out he was sure that in the end it would turn out all right because in the very end he thought that the Saigon generals who were really his products would in the end accept some kind of compromise with him and wouldn’t go as far as to kill him.

RV: So you don’t think he expected to be killed?

NXP: Not at all.

RV: He would have, where do you, if he was going to stay in Vietnam and thought he was not going to be killed, where do you think he saw himself in the future Saigon government?

NXP: I think after his stay in the United States he may have come to convince himself that the U.S. government would never kill him, even in a coup. Secondly, he wouldn't think that the Saigon generals would come to that point and so he was very confident that even in the last minute he would be able to have some compromise with the Saigon generals, although he tried very hard to bring back the Army units which he
thought would remain loyal to him and when he decided to surrender in the Chatelms church in Chinatown, it is in my opinion very clear that he did not think they would kill him, if not he wouldn’t have surrendered, but he did not I think, it did not cross his mind that the Saigon generals were already set to kill his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. And it is more and more the generally accepted version, that Big Minh did give orders to half of the military gentlemen there to kill Nhu, because Nhu was really bad, so Captain Nung got probably the instructions to kill Nhu. And on the way back from Chinatown, the Chatelms church to the headquarters of the ARVN in Tan Son Nhut when the M13 passed by the old big garage, that was the time that Captain Nung opened fire with the submachine gun on Nhu and we are inclined to believe that at that moment, President Diem thought that he could save his brother by trying to protest him and he threw himself over his brother, thinking probably that Captain Nung would not fire on him, but Captain Nung then fired on both. That was how Big Minh then explained to Colonel Hill that it was accidental suicide. That’s the term that Big Minh used.

RV: What do you believe happened in that ADV?

NXP: I think that they had intention to kill Nhu because he was really very cruel man and then accidentally I’m sure, President Diem was killed.

RV: What role did Madame Nhu really play in the government, what kind of influence over her husband and?

NXP: She had enormous influence, first of all because President Diem was a bachelor so she had the role of the First Lady and then she also tried to organize groups and women solidarity movement and then she led all the big programs related to women and children and family life. It was through her that for example, the very strong religious convictions based on Catholicism and Roman Catholics, divorce was forbidden in Vietnam for that long period. So, but then it was also clear in the general public, in the cities and especially Saigon that she was very intelligent, she was always scheming something and of course it was necessary in many instances to go through her to get things done in Saigon, much easier to go through Madame Nhu than to go and see President Diem’s advisor Nhu. Then it was also the traditional eastern way, Oriental way to do things, to talk to the wives rather, get things done.
RV: She was very Catholic; did she not realize that imposing Catholic type laws and rules on a Buddhist population was not going to work?

NXP: There you see we have to go into the details, because when you use the term Buddhist in Vietnam, it’s a very loose term. It’s not, shall we say a very active and concrete from of religion, Buddhism in Vietnam came from China, which received it from India for thousands of years and it was very mingled with Confucianism, that is to say it became part of our traditions and customs. I would say that most Vietnamese are not very conscious of Buddhism as a religion, but it’s a way of life and it is of course religious in the sense that it answers the needs that you have for the spiritual life, but that was probably the reason why Diem, than Madame Nhu were not much concerned about that Buddhist aspect in the Vietnamese society because it was not clearly a religious thing in the minds of the great majority of the Vietnamese people. On the other hand, there was clearly an effort on the part of Diem and Nhu, and Madame Nhu to infuse western thinking and values, as part of an effort to modernize Vietnamese society and to bring progress to the Vietnamese society. So the clash there was not really on Buddhism but it was clearly a clash against the traditions and customs of the Vietnamese people. I think that was the mistake that they made.

RV: You said earlier in our discussions that you did not think that there was a viable replacement for President Nhu, what about people from the Caravel group, was there anybody there who could possibly step in besides the generals to take over the political reins of Saigon?

NXP: Well, first the Caravel group was rather the intelligentsia of the Saigon people and in there to begin with you had Dr. Phan Man Do, Dr. Phan Man Do was the uncle of Madame Nhu, was Dr. Dao who was the younger brother of lawyer Don Man Cu, who was Diem’s ambassador in Washington DC. Dr. Dao was also the foreign minister representing South Vietnam at the 1954 Geneva Accords. There you also had Dr. Nguyen Nhu Vien who was the medical doctor who was director of the Pasteur Institute so a very respectable chap and then you had many other prominent lawyers and university professors and some very respectable people who sent a very long letter to President Diem analyzing all the aspects of his regime, political, economic, social and securities and said that he was ruling, it was catastrophe. Many of them were arrested
right away, the others were so prominent that Diem didn’t arrest and also relatives of the
Ngo Dinh Diem family too. But we have to bring it back into its proper context, Diem
tried to set up a state in South Vietnam after the Geneva Accords, whether you liked it or
not, it’s a kind of an artificial state, although that will become a very sensitive point even
during the Paris Negotiations. There was a point of, a vital point discussed between
Thieu and Kissinger then because they tried to cling to the legitimacy of a South Vietnam
as a state, compared to the North Vietnam, they look at the Republic of Vietnam as a
state too. So, was it very obvious in the large majority of the Vietnamese in South
Vietnam that you should have a country called South Vietnam, you may call it the state
of Vietnam or you may call it republic of Vietnam. I am not convinced that the people in
South Vietnam were very conscious that there was a state called South Vietnam. Most of
those people, the peasants, the countryside, they continue to think Vietnam as one,
whatever you may say. That is also a basic element in the conflict because Ho Chi Minh
never try and push out very hard on that notion of two Vietnams, he rather cling to the
idea that he had a Vietnam in North Vietnam called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam
and that was supposed to be Vietnam. He didn’t say that I am just North Vietnam, he
never said that. He was not stupid to say such a thing.

RV: It was very clever of him to do that way.

NXP: I think that is the very basic thing in the whole Vietnam conflict, in the very
end, whether you were in a position to convince the Vietnamese in South Vietnam that
you were defending the country there, very hard to say, so it was handicapped. So from
the beginning I think Ngo Dinh Diem had that handicap, but there was nothing left except
try to play with the 1954 Geneva Accords and claim, if not the jury, you have the fact of
state of two Vietnams. And then you were on a defensive position again because
according to the 1954 Geneva Accords you must proceed to the general elections and
that’s the position taken by Ho Chi Minh, demanding general elections all the time. You
then had the position of refusing those general elections, that was the American position
to adjust the settle, Foster Dulles. So, to begin with you have to put it back in its proper
context there, so President Diem had a very hard job to create a state, to set up a
government because when the French left and the last units of French forces left 1956, so
at that time he must fill in the void left by the French and he relied on the one had, that
administrative structures and the civil servants, trained, left by the French there and on
the other hand he had to try and take away that French influence, French taste in the
South Vietnamese society and replace it more and more by what people considered the
American system to replace the French system in South Vietnam.

RV: That was a problem right?

NXP: So he didn’t get the win-win situation, but he had the lose-lose situation
because to replace the French by the American image, that was no plus for the
Vietnamese in South Vietnam, but he tried, you see he tried. So that was his problem and
you must give credit to Diem too that he was able through the methods of a Mandarin to
set up an administrative machinery in South Vietnam and he was able to run South
Vietnam in opposition to North Vietnam, One of the great things that he did was the
national school of administration to from those civil servants very much in the French
way but more and more on the American concept and he great help there from the
Michigan State University which literally run his educational policies, MSU, was
everywhere in Saigon in the education field. Also then to continue with the military
academies left by the French but more and more with the American advisors moving in to
train them and sending also lots of officers to the United States for training, so he was
able to set up an army, and a government. The interesting question here had bothered me
forever that did he, President Diem, have any other choice of the chessboard. Ho Chi
Minh saw that very well, that with the help of the Americans you will set up a kind of
state there, a government there, and army there and the only thing for Ho Chi Minh to do
was to begin the escalation in trying to bring down that government and that army, that
state called the Republic of Vietnam. And was it possible for Ngo Dinh Diem to offer any
other alternatives but to respond to that escalation because during ’55 and ’60 the
escalation was mainly subversive actions and we can have the figures there, thousands
and thousands, tens and thousands of the village chiefs of those people from his
administrative structures were literally assassinated and Paris and all kinds of things. So
there was nothing left for Diem to respond to that with more repressive actions against
Communism in his mind.

RV: Right, which in turn hurt him in the long run.
NXP: Because Communism, Ho Chi Minh was very clever to mingle it with nationalism and with the upsurge of nationalistic feelings of the Vietnamese in South Vietnam, so you can’t make the difference any more and the more repressive against Communism the more repressive action you impose on the people themselves. So what was the choice offered to Diem at that time, that is 1960 to 1962, that was very crucial thing for him to do.

RV: Let’s talk about the army that was formed, ARVN and the American advisors. ARVN has been widely criticized for being inept, being cowards, some people have said, for not being able to defend their own country, why such harsh criticism of ARVN, where did it go wrong in your opinion?

NXP: Well, first of all you set up an army to fight the wrong war because Hanoi didn’t launch a conventional war against South Vietnam and you set up a conventional army to deal with it, but that conventional army, Ho Chi Minh knew very well that if you use it, it will be against the people, because not against the regular North Vietnamese divisions, there was none at that time, so they will use that army to provide what I call territorial security, territorial security is not done by the Army, it’s done by the police, which you call the Civil Guards or you call self-defense forces, but you don’t have a million regular army troops to provide territorial security. It’s like now in the cities of New York or Washington you have the army doing the work of the police. So the concession was wrung right at the beginning.

RV: Was that the Americans fault for training. Setting up an army in that way?

NXP: Very clearly, because I think that in the 1950s, after Geneva Accords in the early 1960s I doubt very much that the people in Washington, in the Pentagon and in White House had any idea what kind of war they was dealing with, because at that time I think between 1955 and ’60, even Ho Chi Minh didn’t have any idea of what kind of war he was going to launch against South Vietnam and eventually he divide that kind of from of fighting. So to begin with to say that the ARVN was not apt to fight the Vietnam War at the very beginning the concept was erroneous. The second aspect was that the attitude of the morale of the ARVN troops, what kind of morale can you infuse into those people who were asked to fight a war, expected to fight a war of aggression from North Vietnam and you keep on putting in their heads that they have to fight with the armed aggression
from North Vietnam. But in the end they did not have much opportunity to fight that
armed aggression from North Vietnam through conventional war and there were
eventually, with that kind of logic, you end up with just a few crack units, the Airborne,
the tanks and all these crack units, when there were some kind of conventional warfare.
Here and there in the big battles, they did very well. Those crack units of Saigon, the
ARVN did very well because they were trained to do those things, but to provide
territorial security they failed completely, they can’t do that. Then the million troops that
you have there, many of them were just on paper. We knew that. The young guys were
drafted and then they were put then in the villages, the districts and the hamlets there, so
to provide territorial security and they didn’t do anything at all, many of them just stay at
home and then give their pay to the commanding officers there. So you have figures and
statistics but not really any fighting force and the big battles were done by the crack units
and they did very well and many of the American advisors and the American officers
would testify to that that when they were with those crack units, the ARVN crack units
they did very well and they showed that at the Tet Offensive, they showed that again in
1972 with the Big Spring offensive, they did very well.

RV: How do you think the Americans could convince, or anybody could convince
South Vietnamese individual, or I guess a Vietnamese individual in the south to fight
against as you say his brother-enemy, another Vietnamese person from the northern part
of the country, was that feasible to try to convince them that these other Vietnamese, your
brethren, are your enemy and so you must kill them, you must fight them and this is why
because of democracy and because of freedom and this and defending your country?
When you correctly pointed out that there were very few PAVN incursions into South
Vietnam in a conventional way, how difficult was it to convince them to fight their fellow
Vietnamese?

NXP: To understand that I think it would be better to put the question the other
way around, that is to say why was Ho Chi Minh able to motivate his troops and his
people in North Vietnam to fight the Vietnamese in South Vietnam? He had a big fight in
South Vietnam, I’m sure he was aware that the Vietnamese in South Vietnam were not
motivated in any way to fight the North Vietnamese people too, the Vietnamese in North
Vietnam. So, this becomes the strategic element in the modern type of warfare that was
very political. He chose the position to motivate the people in North Vietnam and also in
South Vietnam to fight against foreign intervention, in that historical context after the
Second World War and he had there I’m sure a win-win situation in both North and
South Vietnam. So it was easier for him compared to Diem.

RV: There was no foreign aggressor for the South to fight against?

NXP: The more foreign intervention you put in, the more handicap you have in
South Vietnam. That was then how he managed to motivate the North Vietnamese to
fight on and on and on and the sacrifices that he put on the North Vietnamese population
was enormous compared to the South Vietnamese. So to answer your question I think
that it was possible for Ho Chi Minh to play on that upsurge of nationalistic feeling and
the fight against foreign presence, foreign rule then for Ngo Dinh Diem to motivate the
Vietnamese in South Vietnam to fight against armed aggression by North Vietnam,
which was in the mind of many people in South Vietnam completely fictitious, so
politically you lose them.

RV: Do you think the ARVN officers, the people who worked directly with the
American advisors were resentful toward the Americans coming in and trying to set up a
new military system and give this so-called advice to them?

NXP: I think first of all it’s only human, that in the human relations you have
frictions like that, especially with the military who were very proud of themselves and the
tradition of, especially the eastern tradition of the warriors and the fighters. Many of
those Saigon generals were French trained and then they were at that time transformed
into American trained in order to continue with the kind of government that President
Diem tried to set up in South Vietnam. So there was a big transition there, from the
French military tradition to the American military tradition and I’m sure you can see
there is a big difference between the two military traditions there. We are talking here
about the professional soldiers, just a very small number and that would come down to,
the most I would say to the level of a Captain or Major, below that they had no notion of
French or American military traditions at all and they were just drafted and they just went
into the army and just sat there. But for the generals your question then would concern
the way of fighting and the kind of army that you tried to set up. With President Diem I
think they continued with the very conventional and traditional concept of an army, very
conventional army. There was the, of course, attempts or efforts to set up units to fight some kind of guerilla warfare, subversive activities, but they did not understand that kind of subversive action taken by the enemies. It was not strictly guerilla warfare, subversive action but it was a very clever mixture of political, of subversive, of traditional, conventional arm, action against the Republic of Vietnam. And when you use those pacification cadres to deal with subversion then the enemy would try to use other types of action against them and they can launch very shall we say conventional attacks against those things. Then when you use conventional units to fight your enemy then they will retreat and use subversive action and you had to go on search and destroy and things like that. And so the conception that they had for the military activities in South Vietnam were really shall we say inept, not appropriate with the type of action taken by the enemy.

RV: How can they get it so wrong, these military officers, American and Vietnamese who were not dumb people, how could they get that so wrong do you think?

NXP: It is not really military; I think it is very much political and psychological because they thought they had all the rights in the world to claim self-defense. I didn’t do anything against you North Vietnam, why do you come to South Vietnam and attack me. I have all the right in the world to be left alone, so that was also I think the general attitude not only of the population who wanted to be left alone before taking sides ideologically, Communist or not Communist, anti-Communist, but to be left alone, so they thought that that point of decency would be strong enough to have the work to support them, that the world would tell on the Americans with all their might would say to Hanoi, leave the poor guy alone, but then of course Ho Chi Minh wouldn’t leave them alone and that was I think the attitude, they couldn’t understand why those people in North Vietnam would use very deadly measures against them and attack them so blatantly. Because in the end, they were not motivated to fight their brother-enemies really, there was no justification for them to do that and they would be prepared to sit down and listen to the North Vietnamese.

RV: Sir, I’m almost out of time here, let me change this disk.

RV: Okay, sir I wanted to talk about the will of the North Vietnamese people. One criticism of the American government has been that the American government simply underestimated the will of the Vietnamese people, specifically the will of the
North Vietnamese people to sustain such long-term difficulty in their life. That the
escalation that Johnson put on the country would finally make them break but he and
others in that government simply underestimated.

NXP: Well, I think from the outside if you look into that period, you would say
that the North Vietnamese had a greater will in the nation in the fight for what they
believed in, compared to the South Vietnamese and particularly the ARVN troops. I don’t
think that it was a matter of will. I would be nearer to the thinking of the Vietnamese that
first of all you must believe in what you do and so the people in North Vietnam were
clearer in their mind, what they were doing, that is to say they were fighting against
foreign intervention, foreign presence, foreign rule and that was also the position they
took in order to motivate the Vietnamese in South Vietnam. So to begin with President
Diem was with a big handicap to begin with politically and psychologically. And then
when you say the will, I would put it in other terms, I don’t think that the Vietnamese
either in North Vietnam or in South Vietnam lacked or did not lack the will but it was
rather an attitude that they had in that conflict. And so they believe in something, and
with that belief, that is to say to fight against foreign intervention, foreign presence,
foreign rule, they did the best that they could with the means and the abilities that they
had and then when they saw the tremendous escalation in the use of the means of war, by
President Johnson in the 1960s, it was not a question I think of the will to go on because
in face of such an escalation, the magnitude, the intensity of that war, it was rather a kind
of resignation rather than will.

RV: Resignation?

NXP: Resignation. That is to say you have done your best in the fight for your
country, for your people and now, it cannot be words, just sit and take the beating and it
came to our awareness that the pain sustained by the Americans in the Vietnam War was
much more than the kind of pain that the Vietnamese had to endure, although the
casualties were a thousand times more, but they were able to sustain the pain, much more
than the Americans. They were less affected by the level of suffering and pain.

RV: Why is that, is that an eastern philosophy?

NXP: Yes, I think it is a very eastern attitude, an eastern philosophy, that is they
have a high degree, or high ability of sustaining pain and sufferings in silence.
RV: What about the notion of defending your country against foreign
intervention, that produces a lot of resignation?

NXP: Yes, but then you see you come to a point when you have nothing else to
do. You did your maximum already, what else can you do in that fight. And that was the
same attitude too for the Vietnamese in South Vietnam. I think they came to that point
that they had the impression that they did the maximum already and that the conflict was
too big for them to understand, to cope with, what could have the ARVN done more,
even with the help of the U.S. government, they came to a point that they couldn’t do
anything more and then the enemy was still there, continued to put up the fight.

RV: What about the Vietcong, first of all were they, in your opinion do you think
that they were indigenous to South Vietnam, or was it a northern-fueled movement?

NXP: Well, here I think we have to be honest with ourselves. There were
opposition to the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and later, probably into the military era, many
people were against those administrations. But that would not say, that would not justify
for you to join the Hanoi government to overthrow your government in South Vietnam,
so that is one point. Were there no other choice for zapa laguerin too? They did not go
to the NLF, so there was a movement of political opposition to the Saigon government
but that does not mean that you join the enemy to overthrow your own government, that
is to say would you play the democratic game of trying to change your from of
government in a peaceful way and not declare war to your government, but many I’m
sure were tempted in South Vietnam to go to war and because there was already a war
going on and it was the justifications were only put forth by Ho Chi Minh and the Hanoi
government that you have to overthrow the government in South Vietnam instead of
playing the democratic rule in South Vietnam. So there you have to make the distinction
there between people who were really dissatisfied with the Saigon government and the
performance of President Diem afterwards with President Minh and Thieu, up to a point
that then they had to join the enemy lines, like the NLF and then you can also say
honestly that the NLF by itself would not survive, not possible, not larger six, nothing at
all and once you have joined the fight that way you have joined the enemy forces and so
no more distinction, it’s academic to see whether after that the NLF is purely South
Vietnamese art, mostly, that’s you join in the two sides of the war. So to say that there
was movement of opposition in South Vietnam among the people in South Vietnam against their own government in South Vietnam, from there to cross the line and say that you have to join the North Vietnamese forces that fight against the government of Saigon and that’s two completely different things.

RV: Would you like to take a short break?

NXP: Yes. Sure.

RV: Sir, we have been talking a little bit about the Vietcong and that brings up the strategic hamlet program that the United States and the South Vietnamese government tried to implement in South Vietnam to control the population, to pacify the population, what can you say about the strategic hamlet program, and it was a disaster in the end?

NXP: To begin with, you see that they base the construction in turns, when you used that we tried to control the population and then to pacify the population. Again I think we run into the problem of how to understand, how to conceive that kind of conflict, which assaulted them after the Second World War for the Vietnamese people. And so with President Diem eventually the overwhelming issue for him and for the American authorities were to provide security to the people in South Vietnam, in face of the subversive actions carried out by North Vietnam against South Vietnam. We saw that Ho Chi Minh and his group started the whole thing on very, shall we say sound basis, that is to say, to fight against foreign rule, presence, intervention and to regain national sovereignty, independence for the Vietnamese people. So, right at the beginning of 1955 when Ngo Dinh Diem started to set up a country called the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam, with its army, its government, its administrative structure, he assumed then the responsibility to provide security for the people in South Vietnam and the purpose of Ho Chi Minh and his crew is to disrupt that kind of government, that kind of administrative structure and also to demonstrate to the Vietnamese people that Ngo Dinh Diem and the American would not be in position to provide them with that security and also did not have the justification to impose such government, or such administrative structures on the people in South Vietnam, so you started with that context and more and more with the disruption subversive actions created by Ho Chi Minh and his group from North Vietnam, the more we saw that very harsh, repressive measures had to be taken by
President Diem to provide that so-called security to the people in South Vietnam. And one of the ways that they thought would be to set up those strategic hamlets, or agroville in South Vietnam. I think the idea came to Nhu rather than to President Diem and probably the idea also came from Sir Robert Thompson, the British because he was much more inclined to listen to the British than the American at that time.

RV: Nhu was.

NXP: Yes, Nhu was. More and more he became very apprehensive of the Americans.

RV: Why so?

NXP: Because they didn’t seem to agree with a number of things that he was doing. So he tried to introduce that idea in a record as security to the people in South Vietnam and he was very impressed as I was able to understand with the kibbutz in Israel, but then the kibbutz in Israel were very different from what Nhu tried to set up in South Vietnam. That is to say, you have people who were willing to fight to defend their ways of life, to defend their properties, their own properties. That is to say you can go in the field and plow and wear the rifle at the same time and defend yourself, that was a very natural, spontaneous reaction for people in Israel to do that because that land was very precious to them, they came back to that promised land and they were highly motivated to do that. It was not really something that the government imposed on the people to do, they did it by themselves. But the kind of security that Nhu tried to bring to the Vietnamese in South Vietnam was completely conditioned by the form of warfare that North Vietnam imposed on South Vietnam. He did not have the initiative, he just responded to the disruption, to the subversive action taken by North Vietnam against South Vietnam in those years of the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, so what did he do. To begin with he didn’t have much means to do that and relied very much upon U.S. aid at that time, which came very little, they were much more interested at that time in Washington to beef up the army and also to help set up the government structures, how to administer and they were not very conscious yet of that kind of fight launched on them by North Vietnam, so they did not go into much economic reforms or measures to help the South Vietnamese, it was left to President Diem to find out. So Nhu was very aware that he had to provide some security to the people in the villages and then also to
demonstrate that his kind of government and ideology, personalism, that they tried to put across to the Vietnamese in South Vietnam would bring more prosperity, better life to the people in the countryside. So here again I think they were completely in the dark about the type of fight, struggle or war against North Vietnam. They tried very hard to help the villagers to get the kind of security in order to work on their land and to have a prosperous life there. So the term that they used at the very beginning, was the prosperous zones, Hu Tu Mac, prosperous zones, that is the whole zones there where you can have your crops and you have your life there, but then as I said they didn’t have the initiative in that kind of conflict with Ho Chi Minh because the other side just tried to disrupt that kind of secured and prosperous life that you hoped to bring to the Vietnamese in the countryside in South Vietnam. So in the end you had what we called the wars of barbed wire and concrete, that is to say in order to provide that kind of so-called security to the villagers, you just put barbed wire around it, or put concrete around it and at one time I think General Westmoreland was very keen on concrete too, that is their fortifications, our post, then you would put your regular soldiers all around in order to provide security and then when it was not very, shall we say tight, then you put the barbed wires, that was the time in the millionaires in barbed wire, barbed wire is everywhere. So what was then the effect on the people, what were then the reaction of the people when you put them behind barbed wires?

RV: Wasn’t that a little like the French outpost system?

NXP: That’s it; exactly the same and you still have those things now as historical sites in South Vietnam. So more and more you put people behind barbed wires, but you cannot just imagine even with the kibbutz in Israel to put barbed wires, you cannot do that, so when you put up the barbed wire, what you try to do is that during the day you may have the ARVN patrolling around there and provide some security to work in the fields but at night it wouldn’t be safe to be outside so let us go all inside the hamlets and put up the barbed wires, so how would you feel if you were the peasants there? You disrupt completely their lives, completely and then what kind of psychological warfare that the other side would use. First of all they would say that the barbed wire is put up there to, shall we say imprison you, which was not very far from the truth, that disrupted your regular, normal life completely. But then because you were told it would be safer to
get inside that barbed wire than to remain outside during the night, there were of course other people who refused to go inside the barbed wires and in that case they have to go elsewhere and then the Vietcong would move in, the North Vietnamese would move in to say well, look at the liberated zones, although there was no liberated zones, but they claimed that you can go to the no pacifying areas, which would be claimed as liberated zones. But then as you see the ARVN could go anywhere and retake those positions, but then you had that notion of the liberated zones, zones which were not under the Saigon government administration. That is another element which came into play with the population. Then for those people who accepted to go inside the barbed wires, eventually they were made to understand that you have joined the Saigon side if you go inside the barbed wires, so you’re subject to the foreign power, traitors to your family and that was then later the justification for the Vietcong and even when the North Vietnamese troops and invaded Hue and Gwan Te in 1972 that they presented a picture of justification to exterminate people who took the side of the Saigon government, hundreds and thousands of people and that was also what I call the dialectics of terror, that is to say to impress all the ordinary people, the population, that you should not be on the side of the Saigon government and in that case they are on the side of the American imperialists. So they have their political stand, they have their psychological motivations, what they play against, what they call at that very start the strategic hamlets and the strategic hamlets had never succeeded in any way because whatever you do it can be disrupted very easily so you tired to provide a kind of security which was no security because with the concrete and with the barbed wires, then the enemy used the rockets, they didn’t have to send in the troops, they did not have to troops in them the strategic hamlets but that it was a rain of terror for the people inside those strategic hamlets to receive rockets at any time. That was really a terrifying thing for the ordinary population to receive Vietcong rockets. That was used not to destroy the strategic hamlets but to impress on the mind of the people that the Saigon government would never be in position to provide with the security that they claimed.

RV: Do you think that instead of the agrovilles and strategic hamlet program that the Saigon government had left the villagers to themselves, let the Vietcong continue with attacks and harassment and terrorist activities, that psychologically the villages
would have come over to the Saigon government side naturally because the government
would say we’re not doing this, this is the Vietcong, this is your enemy doing this?

NXP: The problem which appeared to me at that time even in 1960, I work on in
my mind that because we were so obsessed by the military aspects of the conflict, with
the escalation of the war activities, even in the conventional sense that the Washington
and Saigon were so obsessed with that aspect of the war which was on the high level
through very conventional means and then at the same time you have a very essential
political struggle which had nothing to do with the conventional war, but much more on
the well-being, the normal ways of life, of the people mostly in the countryside, so that
was the dilemma I think of the Ngo Dinh Diem and afterwards. They need not commit
enough means in providing the people with the ways of making a living by themselves,
they tried to choose to almost dispense aid to the people who receive it as charity and that
was the later part of the strategic hamlets, that people were there waiting for government
aid to come to them. They did not have any motivation to defend anything because
nothing belonged to them. So there, to answer your question, I think that you have to
resolve here a fundamental economic problem, not to bring aid to the people as they used
to have, with USAID, but how to provide the people with the means for them to organize
themselves to have the possibility to develop their own activities, so you run into very big
problems and they were aware of those problems. First of all, you have agrarian land
reform. That is to say you must try and make the people feel they own their land, it’s
their own land that they are defending and Diem was very aware of it, Thieu was very
aware of it, USAID was also very aware of it but they didn’t do anything much about
that, that is to say bring back the land to the people. They did have programs but it was
just for show, it did not really get into the people, those agrarian reforms they called land
reform. So that is the first basic element. The second basic element and here I give you an
anecdote, in 1960 when I just returned from England and for some unknown reason I
received a visit from a Lieutenant in the Saigon Army, he said that he came on behalf of
advisor Nhu and advisor Nhu would like me to give talk on the economy because they
learned that I was trained in economics and since I just returned I would have fresh ideas
to give them. I said I have lots of very well known professors in economics like Professor
Hat and Professor Tukt who were the crack economists of Saigon at that time. I was told
that I could choose my subject, the topic I said all right; let me think a few days. Then
the following week I gave my reply, I said I can give a talk on the grocery shop in my
maternal village, Bac Tri, Bac Tri is a very well known village, they are always being the
seat of insurgency against the French. Most of them said that I’m not serious, it was not
serious to take such a topic, I said no, I am very serious and I gave you that example
because I found out in my maternal village, the native village of my mother that grocery
shop which had existed for generations, its just a grocery shop owned by a Chinese
family had been there for six or seven generations together with the family of my mother
there. And day and night its open, I’ve been there and they knew everybody in the
village of course and the guy was always there, very prepared to serve you any time of
day and night, you need a little of lamping oil, he’ll give it to you, you need some salt,
even if you run out of rice to eat he will advance you anything you need, fertilizers. He
didn’t even give them the impression that he put it down on a book or something, but
then when harvest time came he would go to you and you own so many rice, I take then
so much paddy from you.

RV: Paddy, take the land?
NXP: Yes, the crop.
RV: Oh, the crop, okay.
NXP: Yes, and usually he was also very careful not to take more than half of your
crops so he worked in his mind all the things that he advanced to you, so there he gave
you credit, he was the consumption supply point to you, for whatever needs you may
have waiting for your crop. When the crop arrived, he would come there and collect it so
he provide you with transport too and he would bring the crop to the mill and they had
those mills organized and the whole system went back to Chinatown in Saigon and I
found out there were seven channels like that. They siphoned out all the needs for the
farmers and they brought the paddy, mill to the market and they decided the price and
that has existed for a hundred years, even during the French colonial period. So I tried to
demonstrate that it was a multi-purpose, consumption reduction coop, of course
everybody participated, which provided credit, means of production and transportation,
everything and that was done by just that Chinese guy. Then I tried to impress the Saigon
government at that time with Nhu, I said in order to serve the farmers down in that village
they had about twelve government service, Agriculture services, transport services, the 
Farmer’s Bank and each time the farmer would have to go there and fill about a dozen 
forms and wait about a month before they get an answer. Here the Chinese did that 
instantaneously, had to apply van der wick and had been doing that for centuries. And 
you tried to replace that with your government services. You cannot, you have to 
organize the people and bring the kind of same service to them, in order to make them 
feel that they own their land, that they have their won means of production in that they 
can have the security and the stability to carry out the activities down there. So that was 
the kind of topic that I gave them in 1960.

RV: How did they receive that?

NXP: They just listened and that was all and they continues with their 
government services, with the battles that dove the services there, high ranking civil 
servant, big boss down there, so that was it. So that was is, so that was the challenge, that 
you had to go down to them and organize them in that way, bring them what they needed, 
help them in that way in order to fight the kind of insurgency that you have at that time, 
but not by government structure.

RV: Is this kind of what you tried to do when you were Minister of Welfare?

NXP: Yes, very much because then I brought in the people’s organization instead 
of taking, using structure imposed by the Minister of Welfare, right away to begin with, I 
organized the Foreign Welfare Association, which grew to over forty, you know the big 
one, InCare, World Vision, Cavetas and all this, amounts to tens of millions of dollars 
all the time going on. Also I got help from Westmoreland because from the U.S. troops 
they had lots of things to get and then they provide lots of goods and all kinds of things to 
needy. That was charity, but for the people in the countryside, with the complete failure 
of the strategic hamlets and the agrovilles, the only way to be able to organize or provide 
the organizations for them to help themselves there, to organize themselves. That 
wouldn’t have taken much.

RV: So how successful were you at replacing that Chinese grocer?

NXP: Well, they have never been able to replace it because they keep on more 
and more imposing government structures and the less security the more governments 
control they put in.
RV: I want to see if you could on the situation in Laos during this time period, President Kennedy tried to neutralize Laos to make it off limits to all foreign troops which turned out to be?

NXP: Well, right at the beginning you know very well that Ho Chi Minh had a whole concept and vision of Indochina in his fight. First he would claim for the liberation of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, but then he also prepared everything necessary to also impose Communist rule on the whole of Indochina and that has always been the obsession of the American that the Vietnam conflict was also in the context of the whole of Indochina and the main thing was Vietnam of course because Laos, Cambodia, continued to be relatively smaller than Vietnam, or most provinces of Vietnam. So I think that again here, Ho Chi Minh was able to outwit most experts in the military and political aspects of that Vietnam conflict. He was able to maintain Laos in such a situation which would then play a very decisive part in the Vietnam conflict.

RV: SO that the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex and that supply route, how effective was that route in your opinion?

NXP: Oh, it was very effective, it was very hard for them to how that kind of route to bring supplies down little by, unbelievable job there, that is on bicycles and on there back, but they managed to bring down. But it has always been very clear that they can’t bring down up to a certain point and strategically it hasn’t always been since the French period that Ho Chi Minh Trail would be very effective just for the Highlands, that was the main thing. It was not to bring down to Tay Ninh, that is down on the Cambodian border there is too far, so the supplies which came down through there were relatively smaller than the ones that they stored up in the highlands and then eventually the whole thing began in the Highlands and the North Vietnamese regular divisions rather than down.

RV: Do you think it’s a viable strategy, a lot of Americans now today, a lot of American military personnel say that if they were allowed to go in and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, that would have changed the outcome of the conflict, so in the context of our interview, what we’ve been talking about with Ho Chi Minh’s cunning ability to manipulate the situation, manipulate the political situation, psychological situation in the United States and on the ground in Indochina, do you think that was a viable strategy, if
that had have been allowed, like put a division in Laos, an American division and just
stop the trail, what do you think would have happened?

NXP: Well, it was a decisive element in the Vietnam conflict but it was not the
only one. If they did not have that Ho Chi Minh Trail they would have devised other
ways and then you have to go after them in other ways too. SO they used the corridor
they had with the Lao and the Vietnamese border, but if you blocked there, they would
draw another line a bit further in or somewhere else and you would have to after them
again and in the end you saw that they had to go after those sanctuaries but they did not
do it in a sustained way, just to disrupt and the ability to disrupt that supply lines, it’s an
endless job, you cannot disrupt all the time and even McNamara thought that we could
use electronics there to stop them, but how can you stop them electrically or even with
the B-52s because my uncle said that they were many times on the Ho Chi Minh Trail
and they had prepared themselves, they have big holes all along.

RV: This is your uncles from the north said this?

NXP: Yes, from the north and then the only thing that the over bombers, because
you cannot have troops all along nearly two thousand miles of roads up there, you may
use carpet bombing on those trails but carpet bombing would be effective only if they
were not notified in advance and usually they say that fifty minutes would be effective to
neutralize your bombs, only. But as soon as your B-52s took off from Thailand or from
anywhere else those Soviet fishing ships out there informed them right away. Even in
five minutes they were able to jump into their holes, put on the concrete cover and wait
for the bombs to stop and you can throw any amount of bomb on them, that wouldn’t
destruct your trail. You cannot bomb twenty-four hours a day and so it’s hopeless to
neutralize that supply line. If you go into that army instead of cutting the arms and the
legs of the supply line, why don’t you shoot at the brain.

RV: Of course that was off limits, we couldn't shoot at the brain.

NXP: That’s something else.

RV: Speaking of bombing, one of the theories that Americans have looking back
at the war and during the war was that bombing would change the minds of the North
Vietnamese leadership to negotiate an end to the conflict sooner, that strategic bombing
would change the face of the war?
NXP: I don’t know in a western way of thinking, American state of mind but in the Vietnamese I think that very few people would say that that would deter them from anything. I mean you can bomb them to the Stone Age and there would still be there at the Stone Age, that wouldn’t affect them at all, so that’s what happened, they went back to Stone Age and they’re still there. That didn’t change anything.

RV: Is that a matter of, what you said earlier they would wait from the Stone Age?

NXP: Yes, let us just sit them out, its like the bombing and what you can hope and the most you could hope, and Kissinger came to that conclusion that is with the bombing you may achieve some kind of a stalemate, that is to say a waiting period for them again and those people can wait any time you want, they can wait.

RV: You said earlier a stalemate means that the North wins?

NXP: Yes, sure that kind of conflict, if you cannot stop your insurgency then you lose. It’s like the police trying to catch a crazy guy; if you haven’t caught him you lose. The guy doesn’t lose anything.

RV: Well, the 1972 Christmas bombing, that’s always been looked at as changing the negotiations in Paris, what’s your impression of that?

NXP: It didn’t change anything at all because all the basic issues were still there. It changed a few words here and there, that is to say on the part of Hanoi they tried to accommodate Nixon and Kissinger in order to get what they have, basic issues, they still got the basic issues, that is to say the presence of the North Vietnamese troop, a kind of a coalition government in Saigon, that’s it. The end of the American intervention.

RV: Right, that was their goal, to get the Americans out and so the changes that were made after that bombing, do you think that let the Americans think that that bombing had been really the decisive factor in changing the negotiations to get the Americans out faster?

NXP: That would be very simplistic, but it’s easy for the people accept.

RV: But that’s what a lot of scholarship says.

NXP: That is to say the guy who fought you, fought thirty years, you bomb him ten days and then in a couple of weeks he would accept your terms. That is very hard to swallow.
RV: A lot of Americans argue that, they say okay if only we had bombed throughout the war like we did December 1972 we would have won the conflict.

NXP: Oh, sure and then again you see won or win victory would be an inverted commas, what would you mean by that, the guy would sit you out again if he can’t do it right now he would wait for another ten years or a hundred years to do it. Those guys were determined to get what they had in mind.

RV: SO, even in Hanoi is leveled, there’s nothing left, they still sit out, still wait you out?

NXP: Yes, unless you say I come in like Saddam Hussein, you’re an evil guy I had to eliminate you and so then you come in there and then you have a big sweep and you change everything.

RV: In your opinion you think that was the only way the Americans could have really, really won the war?

NXP: The only two ways, either come in and wipe them out or you just out sit them, that’s all. But instead of playing a half measures in the middle then you played with their hands.

RV: Then again if the Americans said okay, we’ll invade North Vietnam with a ground force and with strategic bombing then you worry about the Soviet and Chinese response, so it’s a conundrum that the United States was in, they couldn’t get out.

NXP: Those, what I call the strategic elements which were very political, when you stop the whole conflict and in the Second World War you didn't have that problem, the better equipment you had, you win in all like the First World War, the more men you had, you win. But then Vietnam was probably the very first time in human history that you have the combination of so many elements, conventional warfare, guerilla and political and all kind of things, then the nuclear umbrella and the international situation at that time, you must give credit to Ho Chi Minh, he played very well the cards, very well the cards.

RV: He died in 1969, what effect did that have on the war in your opinion?

NXP: Well, in the last years of his life he was no longer much of an influence because the younger ones were able to take over from him, but he still a symbol and it didn't make much difference at the Paris Talks that he died, although one of the member
of our delegation, Mrs. Bowie who had her cousin Kun Back Kin, just the head of the
NLF delegation sitting across the table and they were first cousins. My cousin too, Lin
Din Tao, was a support men of the NLF was sitting across the table for yeas with me
there and Mrs. Bowie then put on a white tunic in mourning of Ho Chi Minh and she was
a member of Saigon delegation and that upset lots of people in Saigon. But that shows
that not only was he a Communist but the man was also a hero to pass on to the
Vietnamese in general, that he was trying to do something good for the country and the
people too. Maybe he fooled them, but he was able to pass that message.

RV: Was there any memorial service in Paris for Ho Chi Minh?
NXP: On the Communist side, yes, but even still right now the very strong anti-
Communist elements of the people, still right now are ferociously against Ho Chi Minh.
He was committed to his objectives, he did not hesitate to use whatever means necessary
to get his goals and he was prepared to put unbelievable sacrifices on the Vietnamese
people to reach his goal. I don’t know, history will decide whether he had the right to do
it or not.

RV: Have you ever been to Hanoi to view his body?
NXP: No, I was in Hanoi but I didn’t go to the mausoleum.