Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Phong, it is Wednesday November 6, it’s 9:15 in the morning and we’re on the campus of Texas Tech University. Ambassador Phong, let’s go back to the Paris Peace Talks and some of the things that happened there. You arrived in December 1968. First of all, do you think, in 1968, so it’s a pivotal year in the Vietnam War and what was happening in Vietnam and politically back in the United States. President Johnson had called for these peace talks to begin. When you arrived in December, what was the mood in Paris, was it optimistic or was it more neutral, do you think the United States was really ready to settle the war and try to get out somehow, or was it more of a political play?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, the mood or rather the moods of various parties were very different of course but why did we have the Paris Peace Talks to begin with, so it started in March 1968 when at least Hanoi accepted to meet American delegates. And you should remember why March 1968, March 1968 came after the Tet Offensive and it was really the rule of the Communists always before they moved into the negotiating table to have talks. They must have a kind of a show of strength that is mainly for themselves to begin with and to prove to the people that they don’t go into negotiations from a weak point and that was the correct lesson of Dienbienphu in 1954 when the defeated the French and then moved to the Geneva Conference, so that was the same,
exactly the same pattern, so at last they accepted to come to Paris and that was the first
contact really between Hanoi and Washington.

RV: The show of strength was the Tet Offensive?

NXP: The Tet Offensive, we saw it coming very clearly and that was the principle
of Ma Zedong [sounds like da da dot dot], that is fight, fight, talk, talk, and that is the
immutable rule that they always have. So you have those first contacts, they were really
modest at the beginning, a few just ordinary representatives that move eventually to the
deputy level and then eventually with Sun Tre and Ambassador Harriman and so that was
a formal meeting was held openly for people to see. That was very different from the
subsequent, shall we call secret talks between Dr. Kissinger, Sun Tre and then Dr.
Kissinger and Le Duc Tho later. But then what was the mood to begin with of the Saigon
government, so President Thieu of course made it clear that he would not sit down the
NLF, which would mean a recognition of the NLF and the mood of Washington was that
at last President Johnson managed to get the North Vietnamese to sit down and talk. He
tried very hard I would say during three years, he even launched a major diplomatic
offensive to get the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. So for the Saigon
government, they were not prepared to sit down with Madame Binh, with the NLF and
the position of President Thieu at that time was that the U.S. can deal in military matters
with Hanoi but then for the political issues he insists that he can deal with Hanoi himself,
there is no need for the U.S. to move into the internal political problems of the
Vietnamese so that was the position he took. But he knew very well that with the urgent
need for Washington to get the talks going and hopefully to have a kind of an agreement
in order to show that the U.S. government is not thinking of continuing the war, was
prepared to come to an agreement with the adversary. We saw in Saigon very clearly the
need of the U.S. government to have that kind of talks and eventually to have the kind of
agreement which would then put somehow an end to the massive intervention of the U.S.
in Vietnam, so that was the mood. And then I was called at that time by President Thieu
to the palace together with other people and General Tan who was the former CO of the
IV Corps in the Mekong Delta, we were given the job of trying to prepare ourselves for
the so-called Paris Peace Talks. I was given the political issues and General Tan was
going the military issues. Tan was not interested in all. We were given the largest office
in the palace there, which used to be the office of advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu, President Diem’s brother, but Tan usually took a nap here on the sofa and I was there sitting trying to pretend and study the political issues of the Paris Peace Talks. And then the pressure mounted of course from Washington that Saigon should join the talks. It was inescapable that we have to go to Paris eventually but of course President Thieu dragged his feet as much as possible and eventually he chose Ambassador Lam who was at that time the Saigon ambassador in Manila who I met in October 1966 with the Manila Summit Conference but Lam was also a long time friend of my family, of my father. He was much younger than my father but there were in the French civil service together. So that was the mood of the Saigon people. The mood of the U.S. of course when we arrived in Paris we saw very well that Ambassador Harriman and Ambassador Cyrus Vance were very eager to get the talks going and then you have to remember by that time the presidential elections in the United States, so it was pretty, but President Johnson had already announced that he would not run and it was the Vice President Humphrey who was in the race with Richard Nixon. So if you look at the way that President Diem brought the Saigon government into those talks you can see that he was very crafty because to go to the Paris Peace Talks was a bad thing for the military establishment of Saigon, they were not interested in that because for them it was to continue with the fight and even from the political viewpoint there was nothing that you can talk with the NLF or with the Hanoi people. That was the thinking of the Saigon crowd at that time. It was also a good opportunity for President Thieu to play a trick on Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and so he designate General Ky, Vice President Ky to be the kind of special advisor, counterpart of Le Duc Tho from Hanoi for the Saigon delegation. Of course Ky was considered kind of a hawk, not a dove at all to go to a peace talk so that solve everybody as always was really happy to go to Paris of course, gay Paris for a real General Ky, so he brought his wife and all his suite there and the first thing they did was a kind so a fashion show by Madame Ky for Paris Match and they were in the press so that was very good for General. Although General Ky maintained the position, very hard and strong and anti-Communist, that was I would say the Saigon side of the story. But for the American side I think they were very eager to get the talks going and especially before the end of President Johnson’s term, at least to say that, give credit to him to have started those Paris
Peace Talks. So the deadline of January the 20th, 1969 was a great deadline. You have to remember here that in spite of all the things that President Johnson did for the Saigon government, during all those long years since he was in office in 1962, I think President Their, the Saigon government played a trick on President Johnson during that presidential election in 1968.

RV: How so?

NXP: That is the so-called incident with Madame Chenault the wife of former U.S. Air Force General who helped Jiang Kai-shek with the Taiwanese Air Force. I think it is indisputable now, there was some collusion between Madame Chenault and our Ambassador Bu Yim in Washington and by the way that present, he’ll drag his feet, he helped if not directly, very indirectly President Nixon in the election, in those president [mumbling], I think that upset very much President Johnson too, so that is in parenthesis. It was also a very hard problem for President Thieu to accept the presence of the NLF delegation at those Paris Peace Talks, so that’s why you have the problems of the table and so it was a really ludicrous manner. My impression was that Ambassadors Harriman and Vance were not interested in the shape or size of that table and they were very eager to get the talks going and officially open. But Thieu resisted very forcefully, claiming that it would be political recognition of the NLF, so then with the help of the French, the host country and the Soviet we managed to come up with an enormous round table eight meters diameter and then to put two tiny tables at the side, symbolically representing the two sides, which was the position of the Saigon government, that it was meeting between two sides which was really logical in a war but then the two tables was used just by the secretaries and they usually put the recording machines, it was no other use whatsoever, but that saved the appearances. So you have on the one side the NLF and the Hanoi government and on this side the U.S. and the Saigon delegations.

RV: How eager and how genuine was the North Vietnamese desire to enter into the peace talks and to try to have some kind of resolution with the United States?

NXP: I think that they have come to appoint which was a turning point in 1968. First they did not expect such a magnitude of intervention by President Johnson and it was beginning to make it hard for them although I must say they were prepared to endure the beating as long as necessary. But it was also the impression that the Soviet Union and
the People’s Republic of China were also a bit apprehensive that the U.S. would even
escalate higher that war and the Soviet Union and the PRC in my opinion were quite
happy to have it at that level, sufficient enough to help Hanoi and sufficient enough to
wear out the U.S. So there was probably I’m sure, the intention of the Hanoi to somehow
limit the escalation to begin with. The second thing, it was not in their intention to have a
military victory and so the political victory that they tried to achieve at that time was
rather a combination of military, diplomatic and political. The Paris Peace Talks, as the
Geneva Conference was really good international stage for them to carry out their war or
to carry out their struggle and so if we were to be the obsess by the war in Vietnam in the
purely military context that we missed the point completely. And it was the time that
there was also the beginning so descent in the United States, of objection, anti-war
movements and Paris was the ideal place to have that international stage for Hanoi and
the NLF to play. In fact I would say that it was even more effective that waging battles
on the ground in Vietnam. So they started a fight there, a very hard struggle and this was
the reason why they accepted to be there but I don’t think that at that time they have any
desire to give up any of the objectives.

RV: What role did the Chinese play in the early years of the Paris Peace Talks, in
’68, ’69, into 1970?

NXP: Well, the Chinese were interested in the 1960s in Vietnam in the sense that
they thought the Vietnam War was a good thing to begin with for the Vietnamese in order
to regain their independence and sovereignty, the continuation of the fight for
independence after period of colonial rule. They were I think surprised that they
Vietnamese did so well in those mid-60s. They would of course give a helping hand in a
limited way and in certain special ways too. They have always tried to reduce a little bit
of the Soviet influence, regain their own influence with the North Vietnamese but that
was an almost hopeless effort, so they banked much more on what they believed to be a
very autonomous organization called the NLF in South Vietnam. So I think that was the
attitude of the Chinese at that time. But they push a little bit the Vietnamese to fight on,
which would also mean to tire them a little bit more.

RV: Weaken them?

NXP: Weaken them.
RV: Make them more tired. How about the Soviet Union and their attitude toward the Paris Peace Talks, according to what you know, what you experienced?

NXP: Well, overtly they always claim that’s the Hanoi’s business. They would not interfere in it. Of course they play into the theme that the Hanoi people would like to have a settlement of that war with the United States. They only claimed to have a role of a messenger, that is need be then they can pass messages, but it was claimed that they would not have any influence, because that was an internal Vietnamese problem. I think that under the Communist dialectics, knowing their ally very well, the North Vietnamese, politically for them it’s a win-win. They have nothing to lose and so going to the Paris Peace Talks was a good thing for the Soviet Union.

RV: What role did the United Nations play in Paris?

NXP: Very little, although the Secretary General Utan claimed that he managed to get some contact with the North Vietnamese in Rangoon, his own place. President Johnson didn’t believe at all in it and there were other attempts too by Prime Minister Harold Wilson of the United Kingdom and by the Canadians but I think that President Johnson did try very hard by himself and didn’t believe that Ho Chi Minh was interested and probably was only playing games with Mr. Utan, Prime Minister Harold Wilson, Mr. Belson of Canada, so although Secretary General Utan of the United Nations that he tried very hard but President Johnson did not respond, but United Nations didn’t do anything. It was really, I would say odd on the part of the United Nations. It was such a war, it was a major war and the United Nations in the end was invited to witness the signature of the International Act in Vietnam on February the 3rd, 1973, a few days after the signing of Paris Agreement. Secretary General Coel Utan was invited to be there as an observer, that’s all. So that’s an interesting point, why Dr. Kissinger who thought very little of United Nations overall I would say, did not, shall we say did not present the Vietnam War, Paris Agreement, even to the U.S. Congress assent and even less to United Nations. Was that the intention, was it because he did not believe that it was necessary, but then it would be much different to have those Paris Accords formalized by the U.S. Congress or by United Nations in its implementation.

RV: Do you think the United Nations could have played a significant role or do you think that?
NXP: At that time it would be impossible because you have.

RV: It would be impossible or possible?

NXP: Impossible because you have the Soviet Union there and then China.

Eventually with the International Conference on Vietnam with the International Acts signed in principle by the five permanent members of the Security Council, you already had the United States as member in that, but you had the Soviet Union and China in there, so that should mean something, and then those five permanent members of the security council and then you have the four members of the International Commission for Supervisory and Control and that should in a way reflect some kind of United Nations presence. It was not made effective.

RV: Do you think the United Nations could have done anything in Vietnam before 1968?

NXP: If you consider that war in Vietnam and the magnitude that it took, eventually with half a million GIs there, and the bombing, I would put aside the prospects of having negotiated a peaceful solution to that war. What would be left for the United Nations as it was able to do elsewhere, that is to say to separate the fighting troops with a kind of peace keeping presence there, if the belligerents were willing to respect those blue caskets or have enough muscle to come in and enforce peace, which would be even less possible with half a million troops of United States present there. So it was hopeless for United Nations, mainly because one of the main protagonists in there was the United States.

RV: How much effect did the anti-war protests in the United States have upon what was going on in Paris?

NXP: Well, I think the effect would be the United States rather they expected effect was of the U.S. government and U.S. government policies, but it was very clear that the plenary sessions of the Paris Peace Talks were for the Hanoi people and the NLF people was a very good stage and propaganda tool for them to use. But mainly to effect the U.S. government, the American policies.

RV: How much effect did the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969 on the Paris Peace Talks?
NXP: It didn’t have much effect, but I think by the end in ’68 Ho Chi Minh was not in position to say much.

RV: Why so?

NXP: Because he’s getting old and then things were beginning to be very hectic and his group was able to take care of things, very able men like General Giap. Mr. Le Duc Tho, especially Mr. Le Duc Tho and so they were much able to deal with the situation and how to respect, they all of course had President Ho Chi Minh participate as much as he could and use his prestige and reputation, but it did not change anything, his death, it didn’t change anything.

RV: What are your impressions of Le Duong, was he an effective leader, coming in after Ho Chi Minh?

NXP: For the North Vietnamese Communists maybe he was the one and he was a kind of a hawk of course. There were lots of people who were willing to compromise more or less with the American government, but he led the hard liners and he was really pro-Soviet, that was safe for them. In fact he missed the point completely because of his very hard lining, approach to the problems. That’s why many people in North Vietnam that claim that if linebacker two had lasted for another week or ten days even. Then the more moderate leaders in Hanoi would have emerged.

RV: What do you think?

NXP: I believe that. If only we kept on the heat another week.

RV: Did you have any say so in that, were you privately or publicly advocating that the heat continue to be turned up?

NXP: I advocated the heat in another way, that its either you go to war and then put all the sauce in it or you don’t but the worst thing is to have half measures.

RV: How effective did you think the strategic bombing was in affecting the Paris Peace Talks in the mood of the North Vietnamese?

NXP: No way it was mainly for Thieu in Saigon and I think public opinion in United States. It didn’t affect the North Vietnamese much, it didn’t affect the Soviet much in any way, but it gave also the possibility for President Nixon to say here, thanks to that we have the peace agreement to our own advantage. But if you compare the draft
presented to Dr. Kissinger by Le Duc Tho at the beginning of October 1972 with the text signed finally would see very little difference just a few words here and there.

RV: So it was a way for the United States to save face almost with its own public?

NXP: Well, that’s a way to say it but a nicer way would be that that’s the way to do it. I think it was necessary to keep the morale of the RVN and to prompt hill to believe and after the signing of that agreement, the United States would always be behind the Saigon government to defend the Republic of Vietnam in case that the Hanoi people don’t get their words in the Paris Agreement. I think President Nixon believe in that personally, as long as he could remain the President and even Dr. Kissinger and the last straw that he gave Hanoi hang on would say that the stalemate would be maintained there by eventual B-52 bombings of North Vietnam and he even used the expression they can bomb them back the Stone Age.

RV: Do you think that the United States was in a position, like honestly when you’re in Paris and you’re considering okay, the South Vietnamese government might be able to survive with United States airpower engaged, did you honestly think that the United States would be able to say indefinitely in a bombing state to maintain the stalemate?

NXP: I didn’t believe that at all and if you asked the question whether we in Saigon, with the Saigon government we believe at any moment in any way that the Paris Agreements would provide the restoration of peace and the end of the war and no one believed it. I doubt very much that even Dr. Kissinger believed in it.

RV: President Thieu, when you knew in Saigon that the Peace Talks would commence officially, did President Thieu think that was the beginning of the end of South Vietnam?

NXP: Not yet, because at that time all the cards were not laid down but very soon he will find out because the position taken by the Hanoi and of course with NLF with Hanoi was to put an end to the American presence in Vietnam and intervention in Vietnam and the second was the overthrow of the Saigon government. That was a two-way milk a moo and objectives that they tried for years. They continued to try for that and that was the reason why at that time there was a shift in the position by rather Dr. Kissinger, I wouldn't say by the U.S. government but eventually became the position of
the U.S. government. That is to begin with, he did try very hard to separate the military
and political thing, but for the Hanoi people the two things are just one, so he got stuck
with that and eventually he had to give in the kind of strategy and tactic used by Hanoi,
that is to say the military action is consequential to the resolution with your political
problems. In order to move into any kind of solution for the military aspects which
mainly concerned the U.S. was to find an acceptable political formula for Hanoi and the
NLF. And short of overthrowing the whole Saigon government, the Hanoi and NLF did
back down a little bit in appearance by saying that you may have, you can still have, and
that was the big thing, the kind of Saigon government but without Thieu and Ky and
Hung and Kim, that is to say you would chop off the head there. That was the point of
pressure by Kissinger on President Thieu and here is probably one of the most sensitive
point or item of negotiation between Le Duc Tho and Dr. Kissinger and the pressure was
so big at one time, through Ambassador Bunker on President Thieu that he privately only
accepted to resign before the general elections. He claimed that one-month before the
eventual general elections in South Vietnam to resolve the political problem. He did not
take an official position yet, but I think Ambassador Bunker cabled back to Washington
and then Dr. Kissinger jumped on it, Thieu agreed to resign and I think that President
Thieu say it very well, very clearly to President Nixon that he would like to make the
announcement publicly on TV, radio, but together with President Nixon asked with great
effort on his part, its not a matter of personal thing but in order to help with the
negotiations but only by the side of President Nixon that he could say such a thing and
not to demoralize the Saigon troops but then Kissinger jumped on that thing and pass it to
the North Vietnamese right away without telling anybody else and later on he claimed
that he thought that Thieu did say to Ambassador Bunker that he agreed to that thing.
Thieu didn’t even know that the ambassador the point to the North Vietnamese.

RV: Before we get on the subject of discussing Dr. Kissinger in detail, how much
conversation was there between President Thieu and President Nixon, was it daily?
NXP: Almost by the end, almost by the end because time was so short, was so
pressing. I think that President Thieu did put his trust in President Nixon and honestly
he’ll say that President Nixon did try very hard to do whatever he could to save the
Saigon government, to preserve the Saigon government. I think in the end President
Nixon came to the point that it was such an urgent, essential need to have any kind of agreement with the North Vietnamese which made sound acceptable, which may or may not work, that was not the issue but it was necessary for public opinion in United States to come to an agreement, to have an agreement signed. So I think he did very sincerely try, even at the very end when he had to put the ultimate pressure of President Thieu, he I think did believe that it would still save a non-Communist South Vietnam.

RV: Was there any contact with President Thieu, between President Thieu and any Democrats in the United States, Democratic senators?

NXP: Well, to begin with he was not on very good terms with the Democrats and since 1968 onwards I suppose that the best contact that the Saigon government had with the Democrats was me with Ambassador Harriman and Cyrus Vance and that was the reason why after the signing of the Paris Agreement, I was sent to Washington DC to visit the Democrats because there was nobody else willing to do it. At that time, even Senator Fulbright refused to see the Saigon ambassador in Washington DC. Then of course vice president Humphrey didn’t feel very well about the Saigon government and Ambassador Harriman also refused to see the Saigon ambassador. Generally speaking on the democratic side, so I was sent to Washington DC to see Ambassador Harriman and I remember that the Saigon ambassador there at that moment was Mr. Pan Kin Fern, when I said I need to see Ambassador Harriman, eh said you can’t get an appointment with him. And then I said well, that was the embassy secretary there, Mrs. Dong, I said would you just call him and say that Phong would like to pay him a visit. Nobody believed that I could get an appointment with Ambassador Harriman, but then she came back a minute later and said Averill Harriman will see you this afternoon by four o’clock, his rock’s down holden. So that was a big surprise for everybody and it was also a very funny incident. I saw also the chairman of the appropriation committee in the hill. Before I accepted to go to Washington DC and Thieu asked me to go and see the Democrats. I asked him just one sentence, I said if I go, I need a sentence and he said what kind of a sentence would you like. I said if I go there, they will ask me how much and how long. I must be able to answer that. So, I said okay, I go there only if you allow me to say two billions, two years, that’s all I need, fair enough. So he said okay, he gave me the green light and I can say that, so that very morning when I saw the chairman of the
appropriation committee on the Hill, he was very friendly, he saw by seven o’clock in the
morning because he was so busy. So he gave me an hour so we talk all the time of things,
the military situation, and then the political parties in Saigon, so eventually he came to
the question, eh said how much, how long can you hold it. So I replied, two billion, two
years and after that we take care of ourselves. That was 1972. He laughed at me, I was
very upset because he laughed at me and he pulled out the New York Times and showed
me, your foreign minister yesterday evening, declared to the press while attending the
General Assembly as an observer of United Nations that the United States much remain
in Vietnam for at least another ten years. I looked like a stupid ass. So, thank you very
much, I went back to the embassy and sent a cable right to Thieu. I said well, I stop here,
I got back to Paris. So I went to New York and called on Cyrus Vance at his investment
law firm there, we hadn’t seen each other for five years, since he left by the end of, at the
beginning of 1969, Paris. So that was a very funny incident.

RV: Lack of communication within the government?

NXP: No, probably Thieu did not think that whatever I might way, two billion,
two years may transpire into the press but Mr. Nguyen Phu Duc, was at that time Acting
Foreign Minister of Saigon, was in New York and made that declaration.

RV: Now explain how two billion dollars and two years would sustain South
Vietnam without the Americans.

NXP: Because it was so hopeless already and so to begin with its better than
nothing. But then I think that it is fair enough to the American public and that would also
provide shall we say a good stand for the U.S. government, that they have done
everything they could and it is up now to the South Vietnamese to do their part. That
would also help the ARVN Saigon troops to wake up and not to be conditioned as they
have been for twenty years, a big brother would be there. Tell them that big brother
would not be there again and they have to organize themselves and adapt themselves to
the kind of fight. Whatever the Paris Peace Talks did provide a kind of a context that you
can survive, not that the fighting would end, but the fighting wouldn’t be at the
magnitude that you’re used to. It was very clear to many of us at that time that the
ARVN was completely misconceived to fight that kind of war and then struggle. And in
two years we should be able to reorganize ourselves it was also I think more or less
evident that the North Vietnamese, after signing the Paris Agreement they were also out of breath and would not be able to launch anything like the Tet Offensive in ’69 or the Spring Offensive of 1972. In two years, with the very encouraging results recorded by Thieu after the signing of the Paris Agreement, the Saigon government was very strong after the signing of the Paris Agreement, was not weakened at all and in fact Thieu tried to pull the blanket to his side and then plant the flex everywhere and deploy his troops to maintain territorial security. So I was really in an honest way, it would be fair to everybody that you should make the effort in those two years. If you fail then its your own fault, you cannot blame anybody else.

RV: Do you want to take a break?
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I am continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Phong. It is Thursday November 21 at 9:10 AM Central Standard time and we are in the Special Collections Library Interview room once again. Ambassador Phong we talked last time in more detail about the Paris Peace Conference and about what each side was bringing to the conference, what their goals were, their obligations were to their people back home and we talked about the Chinese, the Russians, what role the United Nations might play. Let’s talk about your delegation and once you arrive in Paris what your goal was.

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, officially the Saigon delegation arrived in Paris on the 8th of December, 1969. So that Saigon delegation arrived there after many months of resistance. Reluctantly President Thieu had in the end come to the point that he must have a delegation to Paris but we had our representatives in Paris since March 1968, that was when the U.S. had the first contacts directly with Hanoi. That was the time of Ambassador Harriman and then Cyrus Vance. So when we arrived there, of course was a very big show because the delegation of the NLF also arrived with Madame Binh and Mr. Ta Mu Cy was at that time the head of the Vietcong delegation there and Madame Binh was the deputy leader and of the NLF delegation. So it was of course, a big show, first for the press. There were allowed one thousand reporters and of course everybody I’m sure the general impression was that at last he managed to sit down and begin those so-
called peace talks. So the complexity of the Vietnam War and the Vietnam conflict were
at that time, was reflected not only by the presence of the four delegations, that is the
American, Hanoi, Saigon and the NLF but everybody were very aware that that particular
conflict had also many other players outside. There were of course the Russians, the
Chinese, the PRC, and then the host country, France, that is the former colonial power in
Indochina hosting the conference, but then you also had the six countries which had
troops in Vietnam. Although the Filipino troops were non-combatant troops but there
were besides the American you have the South Koreans, you have the New Zealanders,
the Australians, the Thai. So, it was in that context that we arrive in Paris and the first
concern was the concern of the shall we say the publicity propaganda aspect of it. We,
the Saigon delegation, we were very conscious of that Hanoi and the NLF would use that,
shall we say international platform for propaganda purposes because they were
considered to be very good at those things at that time. It was also one of the main aspect
which influenced the lot on the Vietnamese conflict. So, I think the general impression
was that Saigon was not very eager to join those talks and it turned out also that the
reason why Saigon dragged its feet for so many months, although President Johnson
insisted very much that that conference start earlier, but now that history had also shown
that there was some arrangements between the Saigon people and the staff of candidate
Richard Nixon at the presidential election which then prompted Thieu and the Saigon
government to delay the opening of the Paris Peace Talks.

RV: Was your delegation more optimistic after November of 1968 after the
election?

NXP: I think the delegation was not much involved directly but the mood in
Saigon was clearly much more optimistic with the election of Richard Nixon rather than
the Vice President Humphrey and so that was understandable, which turned out to be
completely the contrary in the end.

RV: What was your knowledge of Henry Kissinger up to this point?

NXP: At that time he did not really appear on the scene yet and we arrived at the
time of Ambassador Harriman and Ambassador Harriman is very well-known diplomatic
politician and he was also well considered by the Hanoi people because at that time the
head of Hanoi delegation, Minister Sum Tri, was also an old acquaintance of Ambassador
Harriman, especially at the 1962 Lao Conference and Agreement. So they already knew the relations there and besides Mr. Sum Tri, there was also Colonel Hau Wen Laut, who turned out to be a diplomat and he participated in all those things since the Geneva Conference of 1954 and so there were kind of a reunion of old friends if we may say so. The Hanoi people clearly had the impression that Ambassador Harriman would be much better as an interlocutor than a Republican representative of the U.S. government, so that was my impression.

RV: So Harriman was respected by all sides, would you agree?
NXP: Yes, I would say so.
RV: When Kissinger came in, did he have the same respect or was he starting really at the beginning of gaining that respect?
NXP: Well, it’s completely different context because when Richard Nixon became president, Henry Cabot Lodge arrived to replace Ambassador Harriman and it was very clear to everybody that Henry Cabot Lodge was much tougher and harder in his position against the Communists than Ambassador Harriman. Although they tried to re-establish the context between the Americans and the North Vietnamese but it was clearly in a different mood. The Hanoi people understood very well that with the election of President Nixon and the position of the U.S. government became much tougher to them.

RV: Which delegation, of all the people represented, all the countries represented, was, do you think was the most genuine and wanting to really find peace and to end the conflict?
NXP: Well, to end the conflict, that was clearly the objective of the American government and we used to tease ourselves that there were four guys at the round table there and it seems only one guy is very eager to have some kind of agreement, the other three had all the time in the world to wait for that. That was very clear, that was very clear. In fact when we came to understand and even before arriving in Paris would we prepare ourselves in Saigon to go there, that is the most dangerous aspect of the whole talks would be how able the Hanoi people would be to accommodate the American position. And it was clear to everybody that the U.S. government wanted an end to the fighting. Also, to end that conflict in such a way that it would not damage the position of
the U.S. government, so that would be understood by the general public as ending the war in honor.

RV: The peace with honor thing.

NXP: Peace of honor. But we also understood very clearly that objectives of the Hanoi government was the end to the American intervention in Vietnam and replacement of the anti-Communist government in Saigon, that was very clear.

RV: You’ve talked a lot about how the North Vietnamese strategy in the war over all was simply to wait out the Americans, do you think they carried that to strategy to Paris, where they would really wait out the Americans again and this is a five year, almost a five year long peace conference. Was there strategy kind of similar, that they would wait until they could get the concessions that they needed?

NXP: In substance they have no change, much in their position. But that is what I would consider as a strategic point, that in the end the words they were prepared to sit out the Americans, because they were in their own house, just sit there. I think that other considerations acme to bring about the contacts between the U.S. and Hanoi at the beginning of 1968 and then the evolution only on the national scene of the relations between the U.S. and the PRC and the Soviet Union made it necessary for Hanoi also to lower a little bit their antes and then still be prepared to wait as long as required but they would try very hard to accommodate the U.S. positions. They knew very well, and here it is a matter of a battle of wits I would say. I would come to the conclusion that at that very particular point in time the U.S. was not able very effectively to grasp, catch the psyche of the Hanoi people but on the contrary I think the North Vietnamese were very able to understand the psychology behind the whole on the political aspects behind the position of the U.S. government.

RV: Why is that, why could the United States not get a hold on this and why could Hanoi get a hold of it, as you said?

NXP: Well, that’s very obvious because the American society is so transparent and the American politics are there for you to understand and they are all between the White House and Capitol Hill and all the parties, Democratic parties and Republican parties, all these things and the press in the United States. While the U.S. were completely in the dark with the North Vietnamese society and I doubt very much that
although they tried very hard but I doubt very much that they managed to understand how
the Politburo in Hanoi worked and then the various factions in there which later I
managed to understand from my own channels, so that is interesting too. Because you
see the U.S. kept there the contents of their contacts with Hanoi very secret, very secret
and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge was I think informed very partly by Henry
Kissinger of what was going on. At the beginning I am sure that the White House let
Henry Cabot Lodge try and establish a dialogue with Hanoi but he was not very open to
have any dialogue with Hanoi and Hanoi didn’t see Henry Cabot Lodge didn’t see an
understanding interlocutor. But then afterwards when Henry Kissinger managed to start
secret talks with Sum Tri and them Le Duc Tho in February 1970, I am sure that Henry
Cabot Lodge was not fully briefed and I’m sure that probably even President Nixon was
very fully briefed and the last to be briefed at the quitting would be President Thieu,
what’s going on between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, it became very evident after a
few months there.

RV: Let me ask you a question quickly, going back to what you said about the
American transparency, do you think and how anyone can really look and just watch,
observe and learn about the United States because of this transparency, do you think that
hinders or helps the United States in its foreign policy?

NXP: Well, in the short term and in the tactical moves, it’s an enormous
handicap, that is to say you have always to explain and expose whatever you’re trying to
do with the enemy because of the kind of democracy that you have but I think that that
witness who would say in the American system in the long run, its quite a strength in the
long run. But then you may find it very annoying that you have to explain to the Hill,
you have to explain to the press and all these things. In fact President Johnson prefer not
to explain anything to anybody, even to his own government on the things that he tried to
do because he thought that he had the abilities to get through those things and then just
present the results, you don’t have to explain those things. So this is a very interesting
thing even for now, just to see how your government operates? So, returning to the Paris
Peace Talks, we the Saigon delegation did not hope very much to achieve anything but
our main concerns from the first of course was to placate the propaganda and activities of
the NLF particularly and of Hanoi.
RV: How could you best do that?

NXP: Well, because first of all the Vietnamese community in Paris were much more Saigon than Hanoi, but you have here the kind of the silent majority, while the minority in favor of the Vietcong of Hanoi, they were very active, like old Communists they were very active and that is the agit prop skills that they have. So we have to be, to be alert, have to placate everything. The second thing that Ambassador Lam and I we tried to establish and we divide out work out also was to get the channels open to the other side. Through the Vietnamese community Lam was very well liked by people he’s a nice man. He was able to establish the overlucit contacts and where I can tell you and this is something that Henry Kissinger did not really think that we would be able to do that. We were able to establish our lines of communication and we followed well what he did with Sum Tri and Le Duc Tho in his secret talks through the few Vietnamese who were in there. Of course they were very careful not to reveal anything which could be damaging to the work that they were doing, but we manage to get the moods to begin with, was it good meeting or bad meeting. Was the issue very tough and how was Special Advisor Le Duc Tho, was he very tough, how did Kissinger react to those things. They were able to give us those things, to feed back those things.

RV: Who was able?

NXP: The Vietnamese on the other side and through our channels, to relatives and your old friends and we were able from mouth to ear to get something of what was going on. I also was assigned rather to the diplomatic community also. I was able to know lots of people, the French and other diplomats in the Paris diplomatic corps and I was assigned to deal with the other kind of complication channels, that is mostly from the embassies and so on, while Ambassador Lam was much more the Vietnamese community and as I said to you I even had a cousin sitting opposite me at the table. We were able through those channels to get some feel of it, at least on the moods of those meetings.

RV: After all you said as you’ve written in your book that these are your brother Vietnamese so you did have, you were able to communicate in that sense.
NXP: Yes. So it was much tougher for me to try and develop those other channels to the other, the parties more or less involved in the Vietnam conflict. During the year 1969 nothing happened actually, there was nothing at all.

RV: Why is that? A lot of Americans want to know, and especially a lot of veterans are puzzled by why it took so long?

NXP: I’m sure that President Nixon didn’t believe very much that he could come to a compromise with the Hanoi people. He devised another way for him to get out of the Vietnam conflict and it was not his intention to get a victory, he would rather to end the conflict in a certain way, unilaterally as much as he could and then if possible some kind of agreement with Hanoi. I think that he fell back into a very simple idea that instead of pouring billions and billions of dollars every year, or tens and twenty billion dollars a year into the Vietnam conflict with half a million troops the Saigon people should be able to defend themselves. So he started that so-called Vietnamization process or at the beginning they called it the de-Americanization process. So he was sure that he could reduce the intensity of that war and I’m sure that he thought that on the bigger scale and context and developing new relations with the PRC and with the Soviet Union, this probably the merit of Henry Kissinger to isolate a little bit the Vietnam conflict or I would say de-internationalize the Vietnam conflict, which would also mean that the Hanoi people would have less money from the Soviet Union and from China in order to have better relations with the United States. So that was the context I think and we had the very clear impression that all costs by anyway, President Nixon would try to de-escalate the war, de-salmatize the war and de-internationalize the war. In other words, you have then the process of making it more local then international.

RV: This brings up a couple really interesting points that you wrote about in your book and I want to ask about that. First the Vietnamization policy, many of the veterans that I’ve talked to, and a lot of other Americans that I’ve talked to, they said they’d had no faith at all in the South Vietnamese military to be able to defend themselves, once the Americans left, none, it was a joke. Do you think the American political leadership realized this? Was this a political play, a way to get the Americans out, by using the Vietnamese that way?
NXP: Well, you can have lots of materials and books by very respectable writers showing you that the South Vietnamese Army was also able in many instances to fight very well, so here you have to make the distinction between those professional soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army, that is the Airborne Rangers, the armored carriers and so on. They were really crack fighters. They are professionals, they are being in war for years, but that I would say would not amount much more than about two hundred thousands troops, so they are very mobile, they are the force of intervention and they can re-capture any location, because the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong forces were never able to hold anything if you intend to re-take it. And then it is not the way that the North Vietnamese troops and the Vietcong troops fought most of the time, when they faced superior forces they just withdraw, so that was the thing. So first you have the distinction, if you say the South Vietnamese Army and so the large majority of the South Vietnamese I would say, shall we say, at least too firm. They were young recruits, they stayed in their locality and they were supposed to take care of territory and security, that is the police force there. Mainly they hardly or seldom get involved in big battles, so they don’t fight. It’s not their job to fight. They just have kind of a police job to do, so that is the first thing. The second things is that you make the distinction between the regular Army and anybody who could fight. We failed completely and especially the U.S. government failed completely right at the beginning to understand the nature of the armed conflict you had in Vietnam and it’s probably the first time in history that the North Vietnamese devise a systematic form or warfare which they call people’s warfare. That is they don’t make any distinction between the regular armies and the ordinary people, the civilians. Women, children, can be fighters too, as well as victims. So there, if you are caught in the stereotypes clichés of an army, of regular army, fighting a war which is a people’s war then you miss the point completely. You miss the point and so at the very beginning, many experts, including a Pentagon experts and brother tonson and so were involved in the Philippines and Malaysia and other kind of so-called guerilla warfare.

RV: Like Edwards Lansdale, people like that.

NXP: Yes, Lansdale. So you should have trained and built, I’m reluctant to use the word army, it’s not an army that we needed there but the capability that the Saigon
government responds to any forms of warfare and mostly what they called guerilla warfare, but even then the term guerilla warfare, that is not really proper a term. It is subversive action, rather than just guerilla warfare.

RV: How about unconventional warfare?

NXP: Yes, unconventional, that comes to the point. So you set up a conventional army to fight an unconventional war. But then you see the notion or the concept of people’s warfare is so fluid, it can take any form, it depends on when, where and what you are dealing with that you devise at that time. The proper way to subvert or to fight, so the South Vietnamese Army was set up rather to impress than to begin with, it became the fourth army in the world. It is probably because we tired to develop a kind of the force of persuasion, which is not effective at all in that kind of conflict. So, it would be necessary to reconsider all those concepts of warfare, when we go into those certain things.

RV: Did you recognize this or did others in the Saigon government recognize this early on and try to change it?

NXP: Well, the very first one who was able to recognize was President Diem. What he started his strategic hamlets and all these things, but he infused in so many inadequate notions into that concept that he missed the point. Can I have five minutes?

RV: Okay, sir if you would continue, we had just finished talking about Vietnamization and the failure of that. You said that President Diem was, he saw the problem early on.

NXP: He saw the problem; yes he saw the problem, that is how to help the Vietnamese in South Vietnam to counter that kind of a subversive action, which was clearly perpetrated by North Vietnam.

RV: Don’t you think the strategic hamlets, this is the reputation, I guess the strategic hamlet system or program had and has now. It was a complete failure and it alienated the people much more so than if it had not been implemented, how do you feel about that?

NXP: But the idea, the very basic idea was a valid idea, that was to say how to enable those peasants in the country side to defend themselves, and what were they against at that time? They were not faced with attacks by military units or by so-called
soldiers, but it was a wise trait, campaign of assassination of the village officials, of
government officials and the purpose of Hanoi at that time is to demonstrate the inability
of Ngo Dinh Diem’s government to secure a normal life to the Vietnamese in South
Vietnam. So that was the thing that was against them. Of course you cannot, after he
took power in 1955-56, he tried to set up a government, an army and then he found
himself with that challenge, that is the disruption of his government, or the authority of
the central government of Saigon. He so very clearly that you cannot combat that kind
of subversion with a regular army and it must be necessary for the people to understand,
be aware of that kind of subversive action perpetrated by the Communists and directed by
North Vietnam. But then he did not have much means to set up those so-called strategic
hamlets and special political advisor, brother Ngo Dinh Nhu took the idea from the
kibbutz in Israel, trying to pass that idea and they only had very small assistance and aid
from the U.S. government, USAID at that time, USOM it was called at that time, USOM
and it was given to them just to organize the committees, things like that, just very little
funds to help really the people in their everyday activities, farming and all these things.
So that was the idea of the strategic hamlets. Besides the failure of President Diem was
that in his eagerness to search for some kind of ideology to counter the socialist or
Communist ideology which was not very clear in the minds of the people at that time but
it was so mingled with the upsurge of nationalism, independent from foreign rule and
things like that. And President Diem asked the advice, his kind of ideology which is
called personalism, and philosophy which he took from the very great [intercom
interrupts], and it is very heavily based on the Catholic philosophy and probably thinking
of that Catholic Jacques Marie Tan, became the French ambassador to the Vatican and it
was completely foreign to the majority of the peasants in South Vietnam. It was so
forcefully Catholic in the eyes of the people. He was unable to counter the propaganda
from the Vietminh side at that time.

RV: So back in Paris, Vietnamization policy, when it was discussed in Paris, was
it discussed seriously? Did people really know that it was on?

NXP: No, because President Nixon began to withdraw the U.S. troops from South
Vietnam without telling much of that thing to President Thieu, it was a common goals. It
reached half a million troops and then they can reduce. Then President Thieu and the
Saigon military establishment thought that well of course they can reduce by ten, twenty
thousand, that wouldn't make much difference anyway and the word Vietnamization
didn’t mean anything to us at all, it doesn’t man anything at all because we were
supposed to kill ourselves anyway. But the thing is how are we organized and prepared
and effective with dealing with whatever form of the struggle that Hanoi would plan to
take against South Vietnam. So there was a clear impression was that everybody,
including Hanoi, tried to find something which would be acceptable to them and to the
United States. We had a very clear impression too that they were not much under the
hold of the Chinese or of the Soviets and they were able to make their own decisions.
Although we had the impression that they could trust or rely on whatever aid they may
need from the Soviet Union and from the People’s Republic of China. To deal with any
type of, or any level of intervention that the U.S. would put in that Vietnamese conflict.
So they were confident that the international Communist community would back them
until the end with whatever action that the U.S. may take. So it was in that kind of
context that Ambassador Lam and I tried to divide our work up there and although I
helped him to open a number of channels with the Vietnamese on the other side and I had
to go back to Vietnam to return the channels in Paris but we were able to have a kind of,
we were able to take the temperature of what was going on between the Americans and
the North Vietnamese, specifically with the Diplomatic Corps in Paris, then my
assignment was correctly facilitated by a very unexpected thing. I was approached by a
Burmese diplomat asking me to join them for drinks but they insisted that I come there on
a very private basis and as an individual, not representing the Saigon delegation or a
member of the Saigon government. So I reported that right away to Thieu and Lam and
I, we asked Thieu’s permission to let me do that. So he said sure, go and have a little talk
with the people and find out things. I attended that little drink about a dozen times, a
kind of tea about four or five in the afternoon. I was told by the Burmese diplomats there
that there are people who would like to meet me as an individual, not as a member of the
Saigon delegation.

RV: Who was at the tea, was it the Burmese delegation?

NXP: Burmese and a few other, the French, there was a French from the Cay Doc
Se and Henry Bolden was his name, he was responsible for Indochina and Vietnam. And
it’s a crowd, a mix of people there, but I said sure. He said well, then you will be then be contacted during the social events here. It was very open. So that was the beginning to the whole thing and then with the numerous cocktail parties and national day of all those embassies, I think 150 of them, I was able to meet quite well, that was during the year 1969 I think that by the second half of 1969. At one of those social events I was taken again by a Burmese guy to a group standing there, it happened it was Ambassador Wen Chang, Chinese embassy and shook hands and then he introduced me to a Chinese standing there, he said that he’s a kind of, what I would understand is a charge against missions, but a member of the Chinese prime ministry who come here often. I’m sure that you two will have things to discuss. He was made to be understood that he would often make trips to Paris. Well, that was my first contact, but I had contacts with other people too, very funny with the Taiwanese, Chinese but from Taiwan. Because in 1966 and ’67 I happened to be the co-chairman of the Vietnam/China friendship association in Saigon with General Wan Man Hong, who was the four-star general of Jiang Kai-shek when they flew from mainland China to Taiwan and also General Olean who was the Taiwanese ambassador, China ambassador in Saigon. But very strange, it’s true that channel of those Taiwanese, they also gave me lots of information from Beijing. They were able to check a number of things too, that is we say to cross-reference with the Chinese on Beijing.

RV: What kind of information would they give you?

NXP: Well, how they felt about the Vietnamese conflict, but they were mostly interested in finding a peaceful way to end the fighting. The position I took during 1969 was that we are very much prepared, willing to come to that kind of a solution provided that their insistence on overthrowing the Saigon government is amended. You recall cannot sit down with someone to negotiate and you ask the person to go have a curie, I said it is the most illogical thing. They accepted that position too, they say sure. But at that time the North Vietnamese saw because of the international context that their position was also weak on that point. They moved then much more to the idea that they don’t want the overthrow of the Saigon government, that is to say the government of the republic of Vietnam, but the tactical move that they infuse at that time, that we understood right away was to empty completely the content of the government of the
republic of Vietnam and replace it by something more acceptable to them although they
don’t insist to take away the label of the Republic of Vietnam right away, but in
substance it’s the same thing. That was a bit the situation in 1969. But by 1970 things
changed, really. For me it was the crucial point and at that point President Thieu then
asked me not to use the red telex to report important messages, designate Lieutenant
Colonel at that time, or our CEO, that is the Central Intelligence Office in Saigon and that
Lieutenant Colonel was a trusted person of President Thieu to establish the direct channel
between me and President Thieu, to report on these things to him. That’s what happened
in 1970.

RV: What came of your contact of the Chinese, through Burma?

NXP: Well in 1970 that chap came occasionally and we met again at those social
events and he then by the beginning of 1970, he just passed me the message that a new
chessboard is in the making. So well I said really, for the better I said. Sure, for the
better, but at that time Hanoi and the NLF continued to ask for the removal of Thieu and
Cy and Kim and Hong and all those people. But we had a very clear impression that they
have something, lots of things and they are clear reading from the Chinese that they
would like to have quite a role in solving the Vietnam conflict and secondly that they are
prepared to maintain the kind of government, they would go for a kind of government in
Saigon, which then would be able to, I would say to survive in that context.

RV: Do you think this was with the vision that a Republic of Vietnam in the
south, that is quote unquote “friendly” with Beijing, or was somehow supported or okay
with Beijing to exist, would that have balances or kind of hemmed in North Vietnam?

NXP: I understood very well. I understood very well that with the lessening of
U.S. participation and support, the French was trying to replace the Americans in South
Vietnam and Indochina and that is something from the west, but from the east it was clear
that there was a necessity to have a presence of a power from the east in the solution of
the South Vietnamese problem. Otherwise put it as the South Vietnamese problem, not
the Vietnam problem, it’s just the South Vietnamese problem. I had the good impression
that Beijing would find a way to have quite a presence in whatever solution that you may
come to in South Vietnam. At that time I was made to understand too that they follow
more or less the French way. There was some kind of understanding between the French
and Chinese and it seems to me that the Cay Doc Se rely also a little bit on Beijing to make its position stronger with Americans or with anybody else and then the Chinese would be also welcome, the participation of the French, together in any kind of solution with South Vietnam.

RV: How did President Thieu feel about this?

NXP: Well, I had a very long meeting with him on that very particular point and it was just also when I was called back to participate in the National Security Counsel meeting and before we moved to that meeting, we had more than an hour discussing again once again, because I passed the message to President Thieu in the late 1970s, when I checked, shall we say the veracity of the messages that was passed to me. First of all, Thieu said that do you know the U.S. would not let me do things like that and second the military as establishment in Saigon, would take it as an excuse to bring him down. I don’t know whether Thieu’s officer was but or not, bought or not, but the wabby gan was the number one man as his confident and then right in the National Security Counsel meeting just afterwards launched a violent attack on me that I am a bit pro-Chinese by saying he never heard me criticize Red China and condemn Red China in the Vietnamese conflict. I’m said that I’m sure there must be minutes of the meeting as a part of my job in Paris, it’s not a propaganda job, you know we have the Ministry of Information to do that. What I tried to do is to present things as they are, they best that I could understand the situation. But it was clear that already in 1970 Thieu knew very well that there’s an option open to him there. He made it clear to me too that it is out of the question.

RV: Because of the American reaction to it?

NXP: Many reasons that I just mentioned to you and that kind of option was open to him. I can say very clearly from 1970 to 1975.

RV: And he never went for it?

NXP: At times I thought that he may say succumb to the temptation but I was not for it.

RV: What did you think of this?

NXP: I did not think that it was a good idea, but it depends. If you had to come to the last resort it may be just a temporary thing that you have to devise. I also have the impression that I’m very honest, that Beijing had lost grip on the NLF completely
because it was also clear to me that the Chinese formed sometime, that is at least since
1960 the creation of the NLF until 1970 for ten years, bet on the NLF, bet on the wrong
horse and they’d realized it. They really thought they could have something of an
autonomous group, which may be more or less friendly and dependent on Hanoi but
which would also allow the Chinese to be present in South Vietnam. That is something
that they tried to do in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge in order to placate the North
Vietnamese.

RV: Do you think you would have been involved in that new government?

NXP: I don’t know whether I was in the new government, but in the very last
minute they made me understood they didn’t care much who was at the head of that
Saigon government, they even implied Bao Dai would be a good one. Of course it didn’t
matter and I think that they were prepared, if only the U.S. could find out a way to
compromise with the Chinese.

RV: Okay, so I would like to ask you about a couple of the major personalities in
person. Tell me about the personality of Le Duc Tho, what did you know about him and
how did he function there in Paris?

NXP: Well, Le Duc Tho was probably the one in the Hanoi Politburo, with the
Vietnamese Communist party who was made fully responsible for South Vietnam. He did
not occupy governmental ministerial positions in the Hanoi government, but he was
responsible for the most sensitive and the most decisive job in the Politburo, that is the
party organization, so he was the one who told the people and the structure and the needs
and actions. I was able to understand at that time that Ho Chi Minh was no longer much
in the driving seat, they still respect him a lot but Le Duns Put and particularly Le Duc
Tho were able to reach a position of power within the party. They were the hard liners,
very clearly, and there were other people in the Politburo were of the less demanding in
trying to find a way out of the conflict. Those who were rather considered soft were
accused of being scared by the escalation of the U.S. There was also the impression that
the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China were no longer as key to push the
Vietnamese further in more escalation with the U.S. there, because of their own interests
and reasons. So the Vietnamese were faced with very difficult options there and I think
they saw it coming very early and probably the one who saw it most was probably Jon
Tin, as we were able to figure out. The guy was able to think out problems more than the others and Jon Tin was much more on the political considerations than the military ones and although there were debates about Hanoi going much more conventional warfare, much more subversive warfare, but that was the real issue because they always adapted themselves and I think this is Giap’s marriage, to adapt themselves and even Nguyen Cy An, he was much more flexible in choosing the ways and means to deal with the U.S. military action in Vietnam. So Turkin would then go for more political indoctrination and to impress the Vietnamese in South Vietnam much more on the political aspects, playing on the upsurge of nationalism of independence from foreign rule and influence.

So I think that advice of Ho Chi Minh to them, which they did not follow completely, but to certain extent helped a lot. That is that they should be less forceful on the propaganda, or shall we say on the indoctrination aspect that Communism is the best in the world, that they are fighting against the American aggression, that is try to avoid shaming the American. In a matter of form, I think that the main objective of the Hanoi Politburo is to lower the determination of the U.S. government, that is the will and determination to fight on and to eliminate as much as possible the American intervention, help, assistance in Vietnam. So that is to remove American presence and intervention in Vietnam. They were probably right in thinking that they would in the end be able to overcome the Saigon government eventually.

RV: So Le Duc Tho, when he came to Paris to negotiate, to talk, he was very serious about finding a way for the Americans to get out of Vietnam?

NXP: Yes, and that is what we please ourselves to say that the position of Hanoi and the NLF together could be shortly stated for the U.S. government and for the Saigon government is “get lost and drop dead.” That is again, “Get lost and drop dead,” and that’s what I said also in Paris, I said the only message that I got up to now is for the U.S. to get lost and for Saigon to drop dead. There’s nothing else for me to add. It was very interesting also that eventually during those social events I was able to talk to Le Duc Tho during that time in a strictly private thing and I was made to understand they considered that I was opening up and it was agreed between us that we are not talking about the official position of Hanoi or Saigon but we are exchanging personal ideas, to find something which could be beneficial to everyone and that’s why I started to move
into aspects of what I call the nationalism, national identity and I insist that on and on it is
rather the economic development of the whole country that we have to think of, whatever
solution you can find.

RV: That brings me to a point in your book, you write about, you had this idea for
South Vietnam, you called it a wild dream that you had to turn South Vietnam into quote
“a haven of free enterprise” quote and you said five years, five billion dollars and that
would solve a lot of the problem, can you explain that?

NXP: Well, that is what I passed over. I say I’m sure that five million dollars
would be a seed to swallow for the U.S. and they would be more than happy to contribute
that to help the Vietnamese people as a whole. It is not only to be fed in South Vietnam
or the Saigon government, but I even mention that President Johnson had the right dream
about de-cropping the Mekong Delta, they were prepared to go and go those things, if
they have no killing and fighting going on and repeatedly the U.S. government has
mentioned that. I’m sure I said that you can convince them. That’s a big concession he
said. We in Saigon, we can convince that they could provide the kind of aid and
assistance, in a certain way that they don’t put a string tied to that. There’s no reason to
go one with the fighting. That was the idea that I passed. At that time I passed it in a
very general broad way, that is I even mentioned is like a free port, like a Shannonin
Island or Amsterdam that anybody can go up and sail and buy and everything. It is open
to everybody. That would be much more beneficial to everybody, that was the initial
idea. They tried to develop that idea, deepen that idea.

RV: Who is they?

NXP: The Chinese and me and I had to play the game evident here you see many
people can help us. I mentioned the French who knew very well Vietnam for a hundred
years and then not only with Vietnam, but Laos and Cambodia because I put in the
context of Laos and Cambodia too because it was only in the problem for South Vietnam,
just a very small, temporary solution, probably to put the head to the killing, but if you
think of the future, it is rather the whole of Indochina that we have to think of. They
asked for more, how can we put into practice and to think that’s thing. I said well, if we
go into the political aspects we will never find a solution. That’s why I propose
something which could be in a more economic and social aspect of it. I tried to impress
them, throw out one idea. I said since 1954 with the Geneva Accord, we keep on
dividing, dividing, can we stop dividing, can we try and bring together. I went on that
direction and eventually we came to a kind of understanding if I may say so. I said well,
let’s start with the DMZ, instead of a line of dividing, because we are just one country,
one people and one nation, let us even widen the DMZ and declare it free port, for both
sides to go in there and do business freely and accept any foreign companies, concerns
and people to come there and see what happens. And if it goes well then we may have a
buffer zone on both sides of that so-called DMZ which would be a free port and then at
that point the Lao can come in and the Cambodian can come in to freely if they want an
access to the city. We can have two buffer zones and the two buffers zones there would
be not as open as the so-called DMZ, but it would be also freer for business concerns to
move into there. But then it would be still under the heavy influence of North Vietnam
and under the heavy influence of South Vietnam and it is here that I said well, anybody
can come there diplomatically and the French and Europeans and the Chinese and the
Japanese and everybody. It would be beginning to come into those buffer zones and see
what will happen. We must eventually try and bring them together. I said it may take
five, ten, twenty years to go through the process but at least we can always begin that
way.

RV: Doesn’t this run against, this is an open capitalist zone, doesn’t that go
against Communist ideology?

NXP: Yes, I said it would be against, but I said well you have Hong Kong, why
don’t we Hanoi, have always that thing. You would see, it is a dollar for you.

RV: And the Chinese they kind of, sort of liked this or?

NXP: They were in the dilemma whether they would be in the upper buffer zone
or in the lower buffer zone.

RV: They wanted to be in the lower?

NXP: Officially they would have to be in the upper buffer zone, but they wanted
very much to be in the lower buffer zone.

RV: Now did you advance this theory independently or did you talk to Thieu
about this?

NXP: Independently but I reported through that Lieutenant Colonel.
RV: Did you tell him beforehand this is what I’m going to propose privately?

Okay. How about the Americans, did you tell the Americans?

NXP: Oh, no. Not at all because it was understood that it would be strictly between us. I did say that I can mention it to Thieu, he said okay.

RV: What came of this, why didn’t this happen?

NXP: Well, because we were overwhelmed by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. They moved much faster. But I had the impression that certain quarters in Hanoi would go along with that, could go along with that here. If *linebacker Two* had lasted for another week I can honestly say that that idea may go through.

RV: But didn’t you say that the bombing did not affect the negotiations?

NXP: For the week, yes. It did not affect anything at all if you compare the drafts drafted by Hanoi, given to Kissinger because he had the ultimate draft and the January agreement in substance was basically the same, tried to save face for him, just a few words here and there.

RV: Then if Linebacker Tow would have been extended for one week, why would that have?

NXP: The *suf-langer* would have emerged in Hanoi.

RV: But did you communicate this to the Americans?

NXP: Oh, no.

RV: Continue the bombing?

NXP: It was a rule that we had not to, if not it would collapse.

RV: Right, right. Did you have any say so at all, the Saigon delegation in how long an American bombing mission would last, even if you could have talked to the Americans?

NXP: Oh, no, not very much. We wouldn’t be able to see that to Nixon.

RV: What strikes me here is that you seem to have been able to talk to a lot of different people, a lot of different sides in Paris.

NXP: Including the Soviets.

RV: Including the Soviets which we haven’t gotten to yet, but you obviously were respected enough by all sides, they had your confidence.
NXP: I guess you know it started probably in Manila, because I was really sincere at the Manila Summit Conference that we should try and find a peaceful solution in the whole conflict. I think President Johnson believed that, probably that he did not have the opportunity to talk to any member of the Saigon government at that time who didn’t say they wanted to destroy Ngo Dinh Diem.

RV: So you’re a respected diplomat, you’re a respected person in Paris.

NXP: Oh, I had a great time in Paris. That’s where I got married too.

RV: Yes, that’s my next thing actually, we need to go back to your personal story, but before, you were thrown into re-education camp in 1975. This person who tried hard to.

NXP: I was probably the most high-ranking Saigon official to be in jail.

RV: Why were you put in jail, was the hard lien in Hanoi?

NXP: They put everybody in jail.

RV: Well, I know that, but you seemed to be somebody who was in the middle, who was trying to really work a deal, which you spoke your mind which might have been offensive to some people, but you’re blunt and yet I take it the hard lien in Hanoi just called the shots.

NXP: That’s probably the reason why. At the signing of the International Act of Vietnam with Co Wan Die and all the other powers there, the beginning of a sort of March I think of the 1973, right as soon as the Conference was an international conference, Vietnam was closed, Nguyen Co Ty walked through the whole meeting hall and shook hands with me and it was a surprise to me and to everybody and I stood up hands with him, two brother enemies. Later when I got out of prison he was then the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and member of the Politburo, he passed the word that he would welcome a visit if I come and see him in Hanoi, so I went. And he was very correct.

RV: This is after prison?

NXP: After prison, still again, on a very personal basis and what touched me most is that the Prime Minister, he also walked me to the front door to see me off and stand there and I locked in the car and went away.
RV: Why couldn’t he, he’s in Hanoi and you’re what, thirty-five miles outside in prison, why couldn’t he?

NXP: They wouldn’t do that, they would never do that.

RV: Why not?

NXP: Never do that, even for your own father, they wouldn't do that.

RV: Would that have cost him his job?

NXP: It’s not to be done, that’s all. That probably would cost his job but its not to be done. You have to put aside any personal feeling and so that was the treatment for everybody because in principle when I was made the Minister of State in charge of negotiations head of the state of litigation at the two-party conference that Minister of State has the rank of the deputy Prime Minister, so probably I was the, but I was a very at least for a guy.

RV: Yes, that’s part my point.

NXP: I was mean.

RV: So before we end for today, tell me about Elizabeth.

NXP: I met her again after a very long time. Her story.

RV: In Paris, you met her?

NXP: Yes, in Paris. Her story was also exceptional. Her father was a very big landowner in North Vietnam and her family was a very well known big family but in fact he is a southerner and he comes also from the Bac Tri province as my parents. And he went up north and had his career there and became a very big landowner and a very rich man. In fact, I went back to Hanoi to visit the house, their home, which is not the British embassy. Beautiful, in Little Getz Street.

RV: I know, I saw it, remember.

NXP: Yes, that’s it. That’s Elizabeth’s house. And of course in 1954 he was arrested in Hanoi, being a big landowner and he was put in prison. Eventually he died and Elizabeth and her family, they evacuated down south in 1955 after the Geneva Accord. Eventually they end up in Paris and I met here there in 1968 when I went there.

RV: First time?

NXP: Oh, no I knew her in Vietnam.

RV: You knew her previous.
NXP: And medicine girl, for one hundred percent she’s five foot eight, so I try and get her for the craft mall. In Washington DC they have a show, last time I was there, I asked them to make their copies. She was a very well known model fashioned for Bomar Ampston and one of the top models at that time, beautiful girl.

RV: You said in your book that she had very light skin, is that correct?

NXP: Oh, yes very light.

RV: So she didn’t look?

NXP: Vietnamese much.

RV: Really Vietnamese, now play a role.

NXP: She looks Asian but not very much Vietnamese and fluent in French. She had French nationality since birth because her father was a nationalized French, being in so rich in Hanoi. So we eventually got married, 1971. That is because.

RV: How olds were you?

NXP: ’71, I was what time.

RV: I don’t know, let me check my records.

NXP: Thirty-five.

RV: Thirty-six to ’71. Thirty-one; thirty-five years old.

NXP: Yes.

RV: And how old was she?

NXP: She’s just one year older, younger I mean. So, it was a tremendous wedding. Even though because it was in London, took a special plane and came just for one hour and gave us magnificent gift, a solid gold box, antique or something like that. But she had quite an ordeal from the experience in 1955 and ’56 in North Vietnam. She was great help of course for my diplomatic activities, since she was always very busy with the association with the women of the diplomatic corps. They were always doing something, sometime.

RV: What would she do for you?

NXP: Oh, she joined the other spouses of the ambassadors and the other diplomats there to visit social institutions, to do thing while we work and things and welfare work all the time. I think they just given the need to chat, that’s all. Then she
insisted on accompanying me when I went back to Saigon five days before the fall and
she was kept there for three years in Saigon.

RV: Why did she insist on going back?

NXP: Well, she wouldn’t let me go back there alone because that’s the end. She
would like to be with me and near my parents, very old parents there, so that’s also the
opportunity for her to know my parents and stay with them for three years there after the
fall of Saigon. But she was taken through interrogations almost every day after I went to
prison and then they insisted that she’s not the real wife, that she was a substitute because
she didn’t look Vietnamese much.

RV: She didn't look like what, a substitute?

NXP: A substitute. They have, they’re all these CIA guys who planted her in,
claimed to be my wife to be back there before the fall of Saigon.

RV: Because she didn't look Vietnamese.

NXP: She didn't look Vietnamese; she looked very western, light skinned, so she
was accused of being a CIA agent, brought there after the fall of Saigon. And only three
years of French intervention that she was allowed to be repatriated to France.

RV: Did she have any contact with the American government, or any contact
with?

NXP: No, not at all.

RV: Nothing?

NXP: Nothing at all.

RV: So she had to stay three years in Saigon and then she left?

NXP: Yes, she was repatriated by the French government there and then back in
Paris she was granted a government apartment, two bedroom, by the Paris town of, under
the misalicut, Paris. That was, at the time the Mayor was Jacques Shiraq who gave her
the little apartment there in Paris and they also found her a job with the post office,
telecommunication ministry, French ministry in the social services department or
something and since 1978, 79 she has been a government employee and took care of
herself that way. That’s it.

RV: What happened when you got out of prison?
NXP: Well, that’s very funny too because after I got out of prison I tried to find work, so I got the ditching job and then not even a year later I was called by the police to the headquarters in Saigon. I was received by a Major General; police Major General who was responsible for immigration. And they said, “Phong the government and the Party permits you to go to France.” I said “thank you very much, I didn’t apply for it because I had my old parents there to take care of.” They said okay, there your passport. So I went to Air France, see what I could get an air ticket back to Paris; I didn’t have a dime on me at that time. The parents were completely flat too. But I had the old ticket that I went back five days before the fall of Saigon, first class.

RV: It was first class, round trip?

NXP: Yes, round trip.

RV: So you could use the second part of the round trip?

NXP: Yes, after what, six years, yes. Then the chap there, his name was Le Jing and then there was a Vietnamese who was also the second in command at the Air France counter said we can do this. So they fly back to Paris.

RV: Did they know who you were?

NXP: Oh, sure known that before. I’ve known those people and ’75 and then Paris fly back, sure. He gave me that thing, first class, any time so I was put on the manifest and I went to the airport that day, but I did say to my parents that I go just for a few weeks to settle things in Paris and also the opportunity for me to get out of Vietnam at that time. That was my big peachy, ’81 and yes, that was the beginning off 1981. And so I went to the airport, I pass immigration, my passport, I passed at customs and then I went into the waiting room, waiting till boarding time. Then after awhile I saw a group coming in suit and tie and in uniforms and the guy came, saluted everything. Said “Mr. Phong.”

RV: Saluted you.

NXP: Yes. “We are very sorry but we have to postpone you weren’t use, to postpone your flight.” I said, “any reason.” He said “we just received orders from Hanoi to postpone your flight so you cannot board.” I said, “okay, you tell me to go, I’ll go. You tell me to stay, I’ll stay,” that’s what I said. So the next day I went to the police headquarters again and the Major General expressed his regret and he said that he didn’t
know the reason why. Great joy from my mother, at the great joy of mother. She was
really sad, but I said I promise I’ll come back in a few weeks. She didn’t believe me.
But anyway, it was what happened to me and they kept me there for another eight years
before they let me get out again. Called me, I did not fly, called me now, the government
part agreeable to go to Paris to solve your family problems there. But then you see
eventually I gathered information all these eight years, sat there again. It happened that
Francois Newlong, who was the correspondent for the Le Fig a Hole, daily newspapers at
the headquarters, he was stationed in Bangkok, after the fall of Saigon he went to
Bangkok and he happened to see my name on the list of passengers of Air France, first
class, so a very long time friend to, Francois Newlong, an Italian, has a Japanese wife and
he put it on the wire, Phong, the foreign minister of Chong associations leave on the
flight Air France whatever, there must be something going on. And that went on AFB, I
think, the Azouns France Press, its like Reuters or Associated Press the French group.
And the few friends in Paris heard about the news and about fifty of them got together
and went to the airport to welcome me with banners “Political prisoner at least freed to
go” and things like that. I found out later that Myron Bo became the Hanoi ambassador
in Paris, right before I went to, cabled back to Hanoi that that’s the thing.

RV: So that was the reason?
NXP: That was the apparent reason why they would not allow that manifestation
at the Charles de Gaulle airport.

RV: Too much bad press for Hanoi?
NXP: But then you see during a Tet celebration at home among the relatives side
there was a Colonel of the security who was there in the family and I don’t know why. I
think about three or four years later, must be about mid-1980s we were there for my
parents and he was an old man. In his conversation with very old father he said, “Well,
you know Phong could have gone back to Paris, two years ago. That’s they have allowed
him to, but it seems there are people that want to keep him here.” My father said “How
come, who would like to keep him here?” “We even don’t know that,” he said. But he
said that one of the meetings of the big shots in Hanoi when he was sitting behind there
as an aide, at one time, Secretary General Ho D Carte Le Juong injected in during a
discussion of something that as in the case of Phong, we have no need to keep him
here, but we are asked to keep him here. That was the number one guy in Hanoi.
RV: Yes, who’s asking him to keep you there.
NXP: There you are, you see, so that security Colonel, a relative of mine said he
was very curious who asked the Vietnamese Communist party to keep Phong here. I
don’t know whether its true or not but eventually I said well who would have any reason
to keep me here. He said that he tired to find out and the best that he was able to do is
that it was the Soviets.
RV: The Soviets?
NXP: [Laughing] yes.
RV: What in the world for?
NXP: I don’t know. He said probably to exchange for something.
RV: Because what?
NXP: To exchange me for something.
RV: Interesting. So what happened to Elizabeth?
NXP: Oh, yes then in Paris she made a life for herself.
RV: Is she remarried?
NXP: It’s a rather sad thing. She has not remarried but it was a very sad thing. I
arrived in Paris in December of 1988. Very unexpectedly I was given the passport to go.
So I was able to go again with the Air France ticket.
RV: Same one?
NXP: Yes, but I asked them not to make first class, so I traveled economy, not to
attract attention of the people. And it was a very big surprise to her too because to make
it short at this time, I do not abort the whole thing again, I did not inform anybody. So I
arrived very early at the Charles de Gaulle airport, like five or six in the morning and
there was a very old lady with a board there with my name on it waiting at the gate. It
seemed like that’s very odd because I didn’t inform anybody at all and an old French
woman standing there with my name written on a piece of cardboard and I went to there,
and said “I am Phong.” She said, “I am from the high commissioner, the UN high
commissioner of refugees so would you apply for refugee status. We would take you to
the center.” I said “Not at all. I travel with a passport. I return here because I have a
family here.” And so I said okay, she said, “They should have told me because I had to wake up very early and find a car to come here to welcome you.” I said, “No, thank you very much,” and that’s it. I had the second passport to travel, after the fall of Saigon. Most of the people who went on the other program of the high commission of refugees, the UNHCR, they were given the kind of lisse passe, just a sheet of paper with your name for the ground for me, and just to get out of the airport and you go anywhere you want and then the U.S. or the French would to their countries. But I was given the passport with the number 002 so I try and find who had the 001 and I was told that it was General Big Minh who got 001, who was allowed to go to France with his daughter, so I got the second passport given to any Vietnamese citizen to travel abroad, not as a refugee. So I presented myself to the French government because I was married in France, 1971, so I had all the papers there. So that's how I landed in Paris in December 1988 and then I found out that I had to present myself to the First Court of Justice of Paris Tribunal to sign the papers because Elizabeth divorced me in April.

RV: Of 1988?

NXP: ’88 in abstentia. In abstentia, I was not there, but the judge, a woman.

RV: Just a few months before.

NXP: Yes, she didn’t know and the judge also was very good, ordered Elizabeth to pay me 300 francs a month.

RV: She’s paying you alimony.

NXP: Due alimony because I was in jail and stuck in Saigon, so she asked me to keep it quiet like that, so I said okay.

RV: You went to see her obviously.

NXP: Yes, and after four months I went back to Saigon. But also Phillip Habib got news that I was there, able to get out and he flew into Paris to see me. I drove to Charles de Gaulle airport to pick him up, took him to Fukets on the Chon ca Leise for breakfast, it was very early in the morning and then I took him back to the airport to catch his plane. He was at that time I think kind of a presidential special envoy for the U.S., I think in the de Leese or south of Paris. That was last time I saw him, soon he died after this. That was, so I returned to Saigon and eventually buried my father, so, that’s fate and destiny.
RV: Why don’t you say we stop for today.

NXP: But then, yeah sure, I was in no position to support anybody, so except for my parents. That I could do with fifty dollars a month in Saigon, but not in Paris.

RV: But Phong you could have gotten a job in Paris, easily.

NXP: Oh yeah, sure. But you know Phillip Habib when he came to Paris he offered to take me to the U.S., get me a job and U.S. citizenship. I said “You have already done a lot.” Because together with Cyrus Vance, Phillip Habib and Cyrus intervened for me at the UN, through the UN channels and it went to Hanoi for my release in 1980 during 1979.

RV: And that’s what got you out?

NXP: Yes, no not really. But at that time you just got to understand, Raymond Bar, who was the president and Raymond Bar, the prime minister also personally intervened, directly with Hanoi. So I told Philip Habib that don’t do that, I can through the French way is much safer for me to go the French way then to go the American way, because after your intervention I was conned by the security people and during a week made to write an essay about patriotism.

RV: In France?

NXP: No.

RV: When you got back to Saigon.

NXP: In Saigon, not back in Saigon but when they intervened for me in 1979. I was still in – so these are the little stories.

RV: Yes, very interesting.

NXP: The call it off?

RV: Yes, thank you sir.