Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I am continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Phong and it is now December 5, 2002. It is a little after ten AM in the morning and we are still on the campus of Texas Tech in the interview room. Ambassador Phong, we left off, we talked about a little bit of stuff in your personal life, but we also talked about Paris, I would like to ask you a little bit more about the Paris Peace Conference. What was your impression then, and now of Henry Kissinger?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, I think that my impression of Henry Kissinger would be the same as most people. The man is extremely able and has exceptional intellect and I was very impressed by his rationality, realism, historical outlook, but he was a very, very pragmatic man. That is to say he tried very hard to find a solution to a problem form the practical aspect that accommodate everybody. I think that he was very successful in finding ways to accommodate everybody but we must honestly say that the foremost concern of Henry Kissinger in the ‘60s and ‘70s was to resolve American problems; the American intervention in Vietnam. He must first of all stop the casualties, second is the incense spending over there. I would say then third concern would be the prisoners of war and probably somehow find a way to save the Saigon government and at the same time secure a certain sense of honor for the U.S. to get out of the Vietnam War. In the end I think he was very able to achieve that with the Paris Agreement. I would not say that he had great merits to have that Paris Agreement because the first merit would fall to
the Hanoi people. The whole Paris Agreement was drafted by Hanoi. Henry Kissinger
didn’t draft anything and try to change a little bit here, a little bit there, particularly after
his meetings with President Thieu in October 1972 and I so I must say very honestly that
Linebacker Two, the Christmas bombing of Hanoi didn’t change very much in substance
with react to the draft submitted to Henry Kissinger by Le Duc Tho. It was a very
pleasant surprise, I’m sure for Henry Kissinger to receive that draft by early October
1972. He didn’t even read, and if they had to go through the drafting process that would
take at least another couple of years before they come to any draft at all and the drafting
committee at that time was rather the task of Milt Salvo, who was the U.S. ambassador to
Laos and Auf Wun Gu Ty, who was the Deputy Foreign Minister and they were given the
task of drafting various articles of the Paris Agreement. As I may have mentioned to you
before, the only sole and unique time that the Saigon delegation had anything to do with
that Paris Agreement was in the very last moments. It was by mid-January 1973, just a
few days before the Paris Agreement was initialed by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho
and then signed officially on the 27th of January 1973. We were then, Ambassador
Lamm and I, asked to meet with the U.S. delegation and Henry Kissinger gave us the task
of drafting Article 8C and Article 15 and that was the only time that we had any
participation in the wording of that agreement, in addition to the sixty-nine requests by
President Thieu to change a number of words in that draft which Henry Kissinger
explained to us, that there were first a matter of terminology, vocabulary,
misunderstanding in the translation and things like that. But then for President Thieu they
were also matter of substance. In the end Linebacker Two didn’t change much in
substance of the main issues of the conflict but at least we had Articles 8C and 15 drafted
completely by us, which were accepted without any change whatsoever.

RV: Did you help write those?
NXP: I wrote them myself, by myself completely.
RV: Why do you think the United States undertook Linebacker Two, if it didn’t
change much at all?
NXP: Well, I think that we have to go back into the context in time. At that
moment it was vitally essential for President Nixon to obtain any kind of agreement and
it was made very clearly to President Thieu that the U.S. would go ahead with any kind
of agreement which they already considered acceptable. So that first draft we called the  
October Draft, October 1972 Draft, it was agreed in principle between the U.S., between  
Washington and Hanoi, initialing, initialed by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in Hanoi on  
October the 24th. That was his schedule: go to Saigon and then to Hanoi and then back to  
Washington and then organize the formal signing and they were prepared to accept that  
October Draft. That’s why the Hanoi government exposed publicly, completely, that  
October Draft when they learned that Saigon refused to go along with it. Here, it may be  
of interest for people to know how that did not happen. When Kissinger went to Saigon  
those four or five days, he met with complete rejection by the Saigon government of that  
draft. Henry Kissinger already gave to President Thieu the English version of that draft,  
not the Vietnamese and then when President Thieu to have Vietnamese then Dr.  
Kissinger eventually gave the Vietnamese version, which then was even worse in terms  
of substance compared to the English version. The next day President Thieu refused to  
see Kissinger again and he had to work with Foreign Minister Lamm and Special  
Assistant, and Na. That was the big problem, but that night the information came out that  
those secret meetings in which Fao Su Man, who as you know is considered the civil spy  
now for the Communist side in all these years, he got wind of the thing and cabled Hanoi,  
informed Prime Minister Dong about the thing, they called in news media and publicized  
and released the whole thing to put Kissinger and the U.S. on the spot because they have  
already agreed to sign on October the 24th, that draft. So Henry Kissinger had to go  
directly back to Washington DC instead of Hanoi and it was quite understandable for  
President Nixon then to launch Linebacker Two, for all kinds of reasons.

RV: You were in Paris during the bombing or were you in Saigon?

NXP: I was in Paris because I was called and informed, don’t deny nothing, if I  
remember correctly, that the French Consulate General in Hanoi was killed by the first  
wave of bombing. It hit the French embassy and so I was in Paris.

RV: What was the mood in Paris amongst the participants at the conference when  
the bombing was taking place?

NXP: Well, we saw so many things already so that was not anything really  
outstanding or exceptional, but it was in the ways there are things that might happen and  
we took it that way and we thought really that it would help. One way or another, get the
degree and it would be in the, shall we say, best tradition for the Communist side as well as the American side, whatever you may accept, just before that you must show that you accept it in the position of force, not in position of weakness. It was quite understandable for us, those kinds of action. But there was a clear comprehension or understanding that we get the agreement, that you have to have the agreement, by the end of that year with the American presidential election, one way or another. That was also when I was called back right away to Saigon, meeting with Thieu and with the National Security Council our position there. I tried to present to them was there was no possible choice for Saigon to join the U.S. in signing the Agreement.

RV: What was the number one issue in Saigon with the draft and then with the final agreement, what was the number one problem if you could look back and say this is what Thieu hated the most about the agreement?

NXP: Well, I think we have to go back in time and consider whole thing in its context. After the victory of President Nixon in 1968 we understood that the U.S. must find a way to get itself out of the Vietnam conflict and then you started the so-called Vietnamization process. I had the clear impression that President Thieu, or the Saigon government did not fully realize what was happening with that Vietnamization process.

RV: Did you?

NXP: It was something of a common goal of the U.S. troops so we’ll have a million U.S. troops. President Nixon can withdraw ten thousand, twenty thousand, did not really worry President Thieu and the Saigon government. It was done, even many of those withdrawals, which the Communists called drop-by-drop withdrawal, it was done even without advance notice to the Saigon government. But I think the Saigon people were still confident that the U.S. government would not abandon them one way or another and they were very sure that they would continue to prevail.

RV: What did you think?

NXP: Well, I also had the same feeling that the U.S. had to de-escalate the intervention in Vietnam but they would try very hard to save the Saigon government. So that was the big question mark and that was why I was in the position in 1968, 1967, and then particularly in 1970, to follow the evolution of those political aspects, particularly when I had the opportunity to discuss with the Chinese and also even before going to
Paris, in 1968, by the end of ’68, in Vietnam through the news and contacts with my relatives on the other side. I must also at least say that at that time it was out of the question that the Saigon government would be overthrown, that some form of government in Saigon would prevail. Then there was the need of course to find a formula by which the U.S. could de-escalate its intervention and at the same time permit the Saigon government to survive, so that was a very difficult question and so in that weighing in time, you have that problem, that is to say on the one side Hanoi demand the elimination, complete elimination of the anti-Communist Saigon government. On the other hand I tried to explain during those contacts that you are complete illogical with yourself accepting to sit down at the negotiating table and demanding that your delocutor drop dead, so that was irrefutable. I saw a change in them in attitude on the other side, not because they willingly accepted that point but in the context in time, by 1969, then particularly by 1970 you had the beginning of the new chess board, the negotiation, and I think that Beijing has one of most caring, so it some too and they were a little bit colder in their backing of Hanoi’s position asking for elimination of the Saigon government, right at the conference there. Some form of Saigon government should be maintained, but then the Hanoi people continue to insist that the so-called warmongering Saigon leaders should be eliminated although they no longer demanded the elimination of the Saigon regime. Then they will try to empty as much as possible that Saigon regime and then replace it by their own people so that was very clear to us. There was opposition which was more defendable on their part then the position asking for the overthrow of the elimination of the Saigon government. So, that was how things that were late and progressed, particularly in 1970 and I reported that to Thieu right away. There’s a beginning of a shift there. I think that you must give credit to the Hanoi people at that time and Ho Chi Minh was still alive, that they have to be much more reasonable in their demands. I must mention here also, through the relatives in Vietnam I also got message that they had the meeting with Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, those who came form the south in the 1940s to join the Vietminh ranks and they were told, as reported to me, by Ho Chi Minh that one day if they return to the South, they should try to maintain the economy, economically and socially of the Vietnamese in the South because Ho Chi Minh recognized that there were lots of assets accumulated there. The dynamic on kippie
neuro qualities of the Vietnamese in the South should be an asset for the development of
the home country, which then when I went to Paris, 1969, then practically in 1970 when
trying to defend the interests of the Vietnamese in the South I did put out that idea very
forcefully, that is to say when Vietnam to insist them. You must, if it were possible at
that time for Ho Chi Minh and those guys in Hanoi to pursue that line. I’m sure that
some kind of accommodation could be found by everybody but I think that was the idea
on which, it was an idea which was not shared much by the other people in Hanoi,
particularly Le Duc Tho or Le Dung or the others but those relatives continued to
maintain that they were instructed to as early as 1968.

RV: Do you want to comment any more on your contacts with the Chinese?

NXP: Yes, and then you know as I said by 1970 each time that I saw those, that
person, he tried to imply that there are changes coming, then in entering 1971, you had
big changes with the success of Henry Kissinger establish contacts with Sung Tri and Le
Duc Tho and begin the secret talks and then for month, before too long, the trip to China
and to Moscow. So that was the crucial time, there was big change at that time although
it did not appear much but there was very substantial move on the part of Ho puppets.
That was why I think we had also operation Dowe Canyon, that is Lam Son 719, I think
President Nixon very honestly tried to demonstrate that his Vietnamization policy was a
big success. Only yesterday I talked to General Wayan, who remember very all, I say
well our chairmen of joint chief-of-staff, General Cao Von Din, just after the Operation
Lam Son 719 was sent to have a rest of a couple weeks in Paris with me and told me at
that time that he didn’t know very much about that operation, even as chairmen of joint
chief-of-staff of the ARVN and the whole operation was put in the hands of General
Want Sun Lan and General Wayan and I yesterday said that well, General Wan Sun Lan,
the commander of I Corps was not the brightest of the Saigon generals, everybody knew
that. All the tactical, operational planning and moves were very badly conceived and
organized and it was a big fiasco. At that time already I told Nguyen Cao Din that as far
as the negotiations were concerned, Lam Son 719 was very decisive because it brought
completely the back of ARVN and it could kill much weaker positions and that was how
he was made eventually to accept a number of concessions that they wouldn’t have done
otherwise. It was also at that time that the Ambassador Bunker pressure him so much
with the Kissinger behind that Thieu should try and find ways to accommodate demands of Hanoi. That’s the reason why Thieu, who was a very careful man, came to say to Ambassador Bunker, almost off the record that he would be willing to resign before having a kind of political solution in Saigon, in South Vietnam. But then Dr. Kissinger jump on that right away, did not even inform anybody and passed the message to Le Duc Tho that Thieu has got into quite a difficult position there. He was willing to make the proper declaration which would be very bad for the ARVN and for the RVN, but he would be able to present it in such a way and at that time he was willing to make the declaration, first to step down which would be a personal sacrifice on his part, but would enhance his even political stand, but he would not do that by himself, giving the impression that he was doing it under pressure. He thought that he would do it together with President Nixon as close cooperation between the allies to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and that saying such a think with President Nixon by his side was no problem. Dr. Kissinger played it another way.

RV: It seems that the Saigon government was trying, and you can comment on this directly, was trying to survive obviously, but in the face of an ally who was working to obtain peace with honor and get out, working with an ally that is conducting secret negotiations and bypassing protocol, at the same time dealing with the PRC and their influence on Hanoi that as you say there were changes happening in Beijing and their influence with Hanoi was changing as well. It almost seems like a completely no-win situation for the government you represented. You accept some concessions and some things you get changed but in the end the Americans leave and Saigon is left to stand on its own and you’re dealing with these people that you’ve been negotiating with for three, four years, five years, and it seems like everything was disingenuous, that Saigon was fighting against this huge brick wall, would you agree with that assessment?

NXP: Well, you can put it that way, but I think there’s another way to put it. That is to say there’s nothing really to agree or disagree between the Vietnamese.

RV: Because the negotiations and the North Vietnamese?

NXP: Yes, and the North Vietnamese. Then if you put your foot down by the end of the day I think that there was not really a big war or a big dispute between Vietnamese at all. IT would be very difficult to think that without the Americans in Vietnam, how
would the Saigon government survive. When we come to that point in time in 1970, ’71, I think that it was the general feeling by even the big powers, the Soviet Union, the PRC and the United States, that everybody had enough of the Vietnam War; we are not going to find a solution, but at least let’s bring it to a lower level. I think that was accepted by everybody, that you have to de-escalate, in the interests of everybody, except Hanoi of course. But Hanoi had no other choice and that’s why at that time in Hanoi you had press articles from the Nem Diem newspaper of the Vietnam Communist Party and the Nguyen Dong Din Yen, the Army newspaper that they were betrayed by the Soviet Union and by the PRC, things like that. So it was necessary for Hanoi to come up with something and they started with a win-win situation to begin with. That is to say they just asked for the U.S. to withdraw and the U.S. would be too happy to withdraw. The problem is for the Saigon government to survive and then the technical issue, whether the Saigon government survive or not is none of your business. It is a matter between the Vietnamese, let them decide and to that we cannot say anything. What we can say is that you launch an armed aggression by North Vietnam against South Vietnam, that doesn’t ring the bell at all, that didn’t ring the bell at all in the Vietnamese people after that, North Vietnam addressing South Vietnam, it didn’t ring the bell for anybody. Maybe between the national law and things like that, you can claim that they sent an aggression from North Vietnam to South Vietnam and you always take the position that you have two Vietnams, while Ho Chi Minh took the position only one Vietnam, so to being with you have no field to play with, if you are left alone with the North Vietnamese. The second thing is in my opinion after thirty years, it was I think psychological, I think that many of those people in Saigon, they were willing to put up a fight against Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnam Communist Party as long as the U.S., the Americans were there by their side. That is they had a valid reason to fight for freedom and democracy and be an outpost of the free world but without the Americans they have no reason to be an outpost of the free world and it came back to the problem of having a fight between brothers. That was very difficult to explain to your family and your compatriot, that you have a fight between brothers and that was the I think the decisive element, factor in that Vietnam conflict. That is as soon as the U.S. government made it clear that it did not
have any more to do there, the people in Saigon lost interest in the fight and the fight
against Communism without the Americans didn’t make sense to them.
RV: But that’s not what they said publicly.
NXP: Oh, yes true now, for the Saigon government but for the ordinary people in
the street is something completely different.
RV: But again we’ve talked about this before, how relevant were the people on
the street?
NXP: They were as relevant as the feeling to have the end of the conflict. They
were not much interested with the side of the Communists or the anti-Communists but the
thing is as long as it was possible to find a way out and put a stop to the killing they
would go along with it. I think that was also in the end the kind of thinking that President
Thieu had. If there were a slight possibility for the U.S. to continue its intervention in
that Vietnam conflict he would try very hard to continue with the ARVN and with the
Saigon government, but the only think left to President Thieu was just a promise by
President Nixon and by Dr. Kissinger that should the Hanoi break the terms of the Paris
Agreement the U.S. would intervene, but then at that time only from the air and come to
what we now know to be the stalemate option of Henry Kissinger and then the Saigon
government would continue to linger on like that with that umbrella from the B-52.
RV: But the American public and the American government weren’t willing to
provide that umbrella for ten more years or fifteen more years or as long as it would take
to protect Saigon, that’s the perception anyway.
NXP: And we say that President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger were also honest in
thinking that the U.S. government could do that. But of course the U.S. government
couldn’t do that because of Watergate and other things but there was also another respect
of that problem. That is the willingness of the U.S. government to really say that Saigon
government, that is in its characteristics of anti-Communist and to change it something to
a non-Communist government instead of anti-Communist. I don’t think that President
Nixon was very attracted by that way, but probably Dr. Kissinger would say that it’s fair
enough that the Saigon government should be non-Communist instead of anti-
Communist. What really worried me and many people at that time was why did not
President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger submit the Paris Agreement to Congress, that’s one
thing and then take a firm commitment to uphold that if the terms of Paris Agreement wouldn’t be honored by the Hanoi government. In that aspect we also wondered about was the super international community was not in the deal at all, although we had the international acts, the international conference with the presence of Secretary General Co Wan Don of the United Nations who was just there as an observer, didn’t even have the right to say anything. The Paris Agreement was not officially presented to the International Security Council to the United Nations; nobody had any obligation to do anything. So, why?

RV: What do you think, was the United States disingenuous in that sense?

NXP: Did President Nixon have the time to do all these things he really wanted to or was he overcome by all the events, but I’m sure that Dr. Kissinger must have told him those aspects and didn’t do anything about it. Probably that was also his belief that the agreement would not be respected at all and he did not believe that the Hanoi government would give up the fight to dominate the rest of the south of Vietnam, the rest of the country. Then I had, it was not with great joy that Saigon signed the Paris Agreement and I think in the end President Thieu put his trust in the word of President Nixon, that was all. It was nothing else. It was very sad.

RV: I was going to ask you, what was the mood that day when it was signed?

NXP: To begin with President Thieu played down completely in Saigon, it was no big deal and you remember it was a very big festivity in Hanoi and the only thing that interested them was Article One, that the full amount of rice of the Vietnamese people and that was the most important clause or article of the whole agreement for the Hanoi government. All the other things are just blah, blah, blah.

RV: You said it was with sadness that Saigon’s side signed it?

NXP: Yes, reluctantly. I think that I really had the impression that Saigon was almost forced to sign it, but that was the best deal you could have. There was nothing else you could do.

RV: What did you do, did you stay in Paris for a while or did you go back to Saigon?

NXP: Well, I was back in Saigon the day they signed officially the thing but I went back to Paris to participate in the international conference and then right after this
we had to prepare ourselves for the second phase of the Paris talks according to the terms of the Paris Agreement, that is to start the conference between the two South Vietnamese parties result in the political problems that I think we started in April or something to try and arrange the, make the arrangements with the French government. Then eventually they decided that they offered kind of a small castle, chateau, Lasse St. Cleu, I think it was built by King Louis something for his mistress, Madame Capoom Padul, we stayed there. We started the lessons and took it through.

RV: What was your role in those negotiations?

NXP: Well, I maintained the continuity with the other one and they tried to put it at the level of the Deputy Prime Minister who had Dr. Nguyen Nu Vinh, came to be the head of the delegation and on the other side we had Nguyen Van Hu was supposed to be the counterpart in the provisional government of the Republic of South Vietnam, of Madame Binh. Dr. Vinh last about a month went home and passed the buck to me for the rest of the period until the end, that was April 1975 when all the talk was suspended there because there was nothing much to say.

RV: What was there to say, how could this?

NXP: Well, we tried to carry out the provisions of the Paris Agreement, that is to say how to get international recognition and council which at the beginning in the original draft there was two words in Vietnamese labeled as the government structure to supersede the Saigon government to organize elections. Then when President Thieu saw the Vietnamese version he insists that it should be a kind of an administrative auger, not a kind of coalition government, but in substance it was intended to be a kind of coalition government, although Dr. Kissinger, yes while I only overheard that it was not a coalition government, but it was just a game of words. In fact, the Paris Agreement in substance didn’t pay attention and did not do much in our concern over the survival of the Saigon government was a way to accommodate everybody and its up to those people in Saigon to survive by themselves.

RV: Do you think the United States achieved peace with honor?

NXP: The question would be better put; did the American people feel dishonored after the Paris Agreement? Some of them did, but I think we must give credit to Dr. Kissinger. The large majority of the American people felt relief for them the Paris
Agreement was a way out. The Paris Agreement by itself was not dishonorable, that is honor was maintained. [?? King of your teeth] but it was maintained but I think that his honor came with the fall of Saigon, rather he was a very bad as the French say the last fifty minutes that we had to go through, that was bad.

RV: Why did you return?
NXP: Well, I returned because there was nothing left to do to begin with and then my own parents were there. I felt that I had to be by their side and also fell I must say this, it sounds a bit corny, but I felt responsible for the tragedy and I wouldn’t be able to just sit in Paris and watch, it was not possible, so I couldn’t bring myself to.

RV: Was it a difficult decision?
NXP: No, it was not really a difficult decision.
RV: Did it surprise your colleagues?
NXP: Yes, it surprised a lot and as I said even a few days ago to Debbie Canvason because he rushed to my office and said Phong, don’t go back. The whole things collapsing and he even offered, he said his feelings for the bad situation. I never regretted it, not at all.

RV: You don’t regret even though you spent five years in prison in North Vietnam?
NXP: When you think in terms of loss, hardship it wouldn’t make much difference whether you’re locked up in a prison or you stay outside because the people outside also have very hard time, very, very hard time in many ways. For example when we were in the Ha Te prison, we observed very well that in many things we were much more privileged than the villagers outside, we had our toothpaste, our soap, we had our ration of sugar, things like that that the villages didn’t have at all. We were given fifteen kilos of cereal, it was supposed to be rice or flour of some sort, wheat and the ordinary people outside the village only had nine kilos because we were supposed to do hard work, we were drunk at fifteen kilos, which we never had in full because it got lost in the way and arrive at the kitchens of – end up with about ten kilos, but even was better than the ordinary people in the village and shouldn’t complain.
RV: Did you have any hope for South Vietnam when you began the negotiations with North Vietnamese and carried through, stopping and starting, and then when you finally returned to Saigon, how much hope did you have for?

NXP: I had great hope by 1970, 1971 because I thought that through the private channels that I was able to have and was given to me, I didn’t really seek those channels but they were offered and I came up with a number of suggestions which were received quite, I’d say with understanding, that would be the word that I would use. From the robbing that I had from other quarters they would go along with the kind of suggestions I had. I tried to take the position and attitude that we should not quarrel about our political aspects. We will never get out of that kind of quarrel, but we should try to show and to deal with problems about the everyday life of the people, that is the economic and social aspects problem. I said these aspects will resolve the political problems in the long run but I don’t think you can improve the people both in the north and the south to Vietnam by political formulas. That is to me something very artificial, but to create or generate conditions and abilities for the people themselves to show that they can do it by themselves, that was why I think I maintained that position until the end. It was not dismissed even after the death of Ho Chi Minh; nobody said they were not acceptable ideas or suggestions. We were taken over by what Le Duc Tho managed to make Dr. Kissinger do.

RV: What are the suggestions that you had, that were understandably received as you said?

NXP: There is the economic, allow the people both north and south to try and get together and go into business.

RV: Two Vietnams or one Vietnam?

NXP: That was the thing which was difficult but I must tell you honestly from the depths of my soul that in the last analysis, if it were necessary and provided that accept the economy formula that I suggested, I would accept a federation even under the Hanoi government, but of course there would be some autonomy in the south in order to make the economy solution prevail but I have thought a lot about it and I said that even if we agreed to a kind of a federation and be a little bit less than the Hanoi government, it wouldn’t kill you and besides they are just words. The thing was much more difficult is
to have the commitment backing from Europeans to make the South prevail. I was more
than convinced at that time, that in that kind of completion we in the South would win
because they were really flat economically and they didn’t have any experience in those
things. We could have overcome them economically, make them accept our ways of life,
little by little but we would succeed to make them accept our way of life. That’s what I
said to Madame Binh once, officially at the conference there.

RV: Officially, what did she say?

NXP: Officially, I just said, what your objective, probably you would get it from
the minutes if you had the Paris Peace Talks and have a look at them. At one time during
the discussion part after reading the separate speeches I said to Madame Binh once, I said
what you are trying to do, you are depriving the Vietnamese people of the opportunities
to improve economically because the Communist regimes have never succeeded
economically anywhere. I also mentioned if I remember correctly that if they managed to
achieve the objective they would create a dis-equilibrium in the area and here I must
mention also that during the years of 1970 and ’71, I had a big quarrel with the French at
the foreign ministry because at that time I tried to make them explain to me what General
DeGaulle meant by neutralizing the whole area, that is Indochina Peninsula, an area of
neutrality and that went parallel to the kind of neutrality, but I said my neutrality, if I may
say so is a bit more dynamic because its mainly economic while their neutrality was
based more political and military aspects. I said well both North and South Vietnam had
different military alliance, how could they be neutral and they have to go back I think to
General DeGaulle to clarify what they meant by neutrality and I had weeks of discussions
with the French. That was a time when Mister DeBray was the Foreign Minister of
France at that time. I had dealings with Ari Bole who was responsible for Indochina area
and then with Framon Maurice who was the Director of the KDC for the whole Asia-
Pacific region and they were also very vague in their idea of neutrality too since you have
the Soviet Union in the north and the Americans in the south, what kind of neutrality do
you have and only answer that they gave me in the end because I want to try and match it
with my ideas there. They said well, not the neutrality in the regime, political regime, but
neutrality in your action, that is splitting hair. That’s what I said to them, splitting hair,
how can you be neutral in your action and not in substance in the kind of political regime
you have. But that was the main idea in 1970, ’71, that we could have come to some kind of understanding and that would also mean that the U.S. military intervention would cease completely, but then it would be replaced by the U.S. and other western countries, capitalist countries to move in on the economy.

RV: Take the guns out, ass the butter, more butter.

NXP: That’s it.

RV: What was Madame Binh’s reaction when you said this?

NXP: She said that I was saying nonsense, that’s the term she used in Vietnamese.

RV: What did you say?

NXP: We all laughed because she did not find anything better than to say, that was the habit of Madame Binh when she was short of a response she would say you are saying nonsense. The only thing is the national independence and sovereignty and U.S. aggression and things like that. That is nonsense.

RV: Did you find her more robotic and lacking intellectually?

NXP: Completely and she hadn’t had any imagination at all?

RV: Who at the conference demonstrated the most intellectual acuity?

NXP: Sung Tre. He was kind of quiet too. He was a writer. He tried to show some kind of intellectual capability while Le Duc Tho said very little, never said anything publicly or officially of course. That was it. All right.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone; I’m continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Phong. It is January 10, 2003 at 9:45 AM and we are in Lubbock, Texas again at the Special Collections Library interview room. Ambassador Phong we left off last time discussing the very end of the Paris Agreements, you’re subsequent meetings with your Vietnamese counterparts and then returning to Saigon. I’d like to ask you a few questions about what happened in 1975, personally with your family. How much contact did you have while you were in Paris and then leading up to the end, ’73, ’74, ’75, how much contact did you have with your uncles in Hanoi and with the people in the north, your family members?

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, the, shall we say information that were sent to me through those channels form the relatives on the other side, they came very regularly but being in Paris after the signing of the Paris Agreement, the communication were much freer of course than before the signing of the Paris Agreement. Then with the worsening of the situation in Vietnam, in South Vietnam itself, and then in the United States with the Watergate scandal it was very clear that the situation deteriorated very fast. So by the beginning of 1975 and with the way that President Thieu dealt with the situation which then made it even worse, that is from the attacks by the Communist troops in Phuoc Long province and then what happened in the highlands, in Pleiku, Kontum and then in the central Vietnam, moving down through Saigon so it was very clear that the whole thing
was collapsing very fast. Besides the information that we got from the Vietnamese, we
also got lots of intelligence information also from the French who were very willing to
share those things. We tried very hard of course and I went to Washington DC by the
end of ’73 as you know, get some support from the Democrats and then I did a tour in the
Middle East to get support form the Arab friends that I had there, but it was very clear by
the beginning of 1975 the whole thing was collapsing very fast because of all kinds of
reasons. By mid-April 19795 I also went to Rome because I had a number of meetings
with officials in Vatican in order to try and understand better the contacts that they had
with the MLF, Madame Binh’s group because the priests in Saigon were also very active
pushing for Big Minh to take over and it was the stand of the Vatican to move into some
kind of coalition that even at the time of President Johnson there were attempts to get the
NLF and Saigon somehow.

RV: With whom did you meet with at the Vatican City?

NXP: That was the, what they call the General of the Jesuits and then he brought
along who was an Irish, and I knew him a long time and he gathered a number of people
who were involved with the Vietnam issue. So, well I did not find much from them, just
the desire to have some kind of compromise and conciliation. So that was very clear that
by mid-April on the one hand you had very hard pressure, including the United States and
also persuasion from the French government for Thieu to pass over to General Big Minh.
The other aspect that I was very concerned with was the position of the line of action
taken by Thieu, that is to say his refusal to put up a fight and the French military experts
said it is catastrophic if you don’t put that it will or mean that it will snowball down very
fast to Saigon. It was also very clear that President Ford would not give the slightest
indication that the U.S. will stand by the Saigon government. So, that was the green light
although we knew that Dr. Kissinger tried but they were very feeble efforts to get the
international community together, he is suggest to have some influence in Geneva,
anywhere else, in order to get the Hanoi government to somehow stick to the terms of the
Paris Agreement, to have a cease fire and to go into a coalition government provided
Thieu would resign so Ambassador Martin in Saigon pressed very hard for Thieu to pass
over the baton to Big Minh, but of course Thieu waited and waited for an American
intervention militarily, massive in order to put a check to the advance of the North
Vietnamese troops, which he permitted to happen, that is to say he didn’t put up any resistance whatsoever, claiming that he was regrouping his troops in order to defend the lower part of South Vietnam. That was not much of an argument. I had to go on the French TV and radio to explain that regroupment for Thieu’s troops.

RV: Was that difficult for you to do?
NXP: It was really difficult.
RV: Because you didn’t believe that it was a factor.
NXP: Nobody believed in it. The French intelligence forces also then by I would say by the 20th of April, they were the informers that according to their assessment you would have at least fifteen divisions around Saigon in a very short time. From my channels I was made to understand that the attack against Saigon would happen around the 25th or 26th of April, that was just a few days after my return back to Saigon.

RV: If you know, what were the French channels, how did they get their intelligence?
NXP: Well, I have a number of former French superior officers, even at the General ranks but many of them were just Colonels who followed very closely with the intelligence they receive and they share with us those intelligence probably in view of putting more pressure on the Saigon government to compromise with the NLF, that was their attention. At one time one of them even told me that the way that the Communist troops would attack Saigon was massive shelling of the city before they move in and they said that its not impossible that they have probably about twenty thousand rounds of heavy artillery on Saigon per day, that is form the sources that I have collected, those shells were already gathered all around Saigon. The main headquarters to direct that heavy shelling is around the Hoo Chi area. That is what I was made to understand that the attack would be done on the 26th and I returned on the 24th, 25th, that is just one day before but it was also made to understand that President Ford and Dr. Kissinger managed to persuade Brezhnev to intervene with the Hanoi people to give the Americans four days to get out because it was claimed that it would be very embarrassing for Hanoi to have a number of American prisoners. So it was accepted by the Hanoi people that sufficient time would be given for them to get out before the Hanoi troops moved into Saigon.

Then when I left Paris there was also the understanding that the Americans could not get
out completely within those four days and the French were trying to convince the Hanoi
people to give an additional four days too for the U.S. to move out, so that is to say that
would be for the 4th or 5th of May. But when I left Paris the last information I got was
that Hanoi was not willing to give another additional four days, so that is what happened
when I came back to Saigon and from the airport went to sea President Huong, who took
over from President Thieu on the 21st.

RV: Was the French intelligence your main source of intelligence?

NXP: Yes, very much.

RV: Did you have any other sources that you can speak of?

NXP: The Vietnamese community there and many of them of course had relations
with my uncles in Hanoi and also from Saigon as you know those relatives very often
visited my parents. These were information of a general nature which also helped me to
sense the mood of the other side.

RV: How many times did you actually get to meet with your relatives from the
other side during the war, when you came back to the country?

NXP: While I was in Saigon but while I was in Paris then I got those news sent to
me. It was also known that from Saigon President Thieu and Mister Ganna, through their
channels also managed to get information about the meetings between Dr. Kissinger and
Mr. Le Duc Tho although at that time Ambassador Bunker, who didn’t know at the very
beginning that there were those contacts, private contacts between Dr. Kissinger and the
North Vietnamese but of course later on Ambassador Bunker was informed by Dr.
Kissinger of those secret talks. But in Saigon they were also able to get information
through their own channels, with many sorts of, many possibilities and means, but we in
Paris, Ambassador Lamm and I, we also got our channels and we also sent back those
information to Saigon to President Thieu and as you know at one time Ambassador
Lamm concentrated his efforts on the Vietnamese community in Paris and I, thanks to the
possibilities given to me by the Burmese diplomats in Paris I was also able to establish a
kind of my network with a number of other governments who were not very sympathetic
to the Saigon government or to the American intervention in Vietnam. But that was the
possibility given to me and I reported to Thieu right away that those channels were
offered, I did not pursue but it was made very clearly to me that I would do it on a strictly
personal basis, not as a representative of the Saigon government, to try to find out whether there were ways to come to some settlement or compromise and that started already in 1970 and very much in ’71 and ’72 and so we were able to try and put the pieces of the puzzle a little bit together and after it was agreed with President Thieu I had to play the role of providing at least that kind of option to him in the last resort and it was made clear to me by President Thieu through the channels I had with him and that channel was indicated by President Thieu himself to join common friend who was in the CIO in Saigon, that Cemblon Intelligence Office, a Colonel, intelligence colonel who was the trusted name and channel of President Thieu with me in Paris. He’s still there; I tried to go home with me. But that was the situation and by April 20, 21 with the last pressure from Ambassador Martin President Thieu eventually gave up because he, I think at that time considered it useless to wait for a massive military intervention by the United States and he thought only form the air, but even then that could be a kind of a signal, meaningful signal by the United States that it would not let the ARVN collapse under the snowballing events of the North Vietnamese troops with their Russian tanks. But then it was also made clear to me that President Thieu also tried to maintain those channels in the last options and I had always insisted that should he think that that kind of option should be opened till the end, indications on the part of the Saigon government should also be given that I would be in the position to fully deal and discuss with that kind of channel and that was a very reason why even through his resignation he asked Tran Van Huong to maintain me in the last government of Saigon in the position of Minister of State in charge of negotiations and head of the delegation in Paris in order to talk with the relatively necessary authority if we were to keep that channel open.

RV: How effective were those channels? I mean with the advancing troops coming in was diplomacy really a realist option at this point?

NXP: Well, there nothing left but then you see many other governments were also anxious and eager to move in, simply was very clear that the U.S. would not return, wouldn’t do anything to save the RVN except pushing it even more to a compromise and a coalition with the NLF through Big Minh, that’s what they all believed, Thieu, many of us in the Saigon government didn’t believe for one minute that you could have any kind of compromise with the NLF. To us the NLF was just Hanoi, there was no NLF.
RV: Right, did you tell them this?
NXP: Oh, yes.
RV: And their reaction was, what was their reaction to that, you’re saying no, the
NLF is Hanoi and there really is no coalition to be had with the NLF, what was their
reaction to that, the other countries?
NXP: In the country?
RV: The other countries that you were in contact with and the people you were in
contact with?
NXP: Well, they really believed that Hanoi would agree to a temporary formula
while waiting for the complete takeover by the Vietnam Communist Party. The French
particularly, thought that it would be possible to have that temporary solution, they
wouldn’t see.
RV: You mention that there were other countries that wanted to step in and fill the
vacuum that the United States had left?
NXP: Yes.
RV: Which countries were these?
NXP: Well, I think it would not be very proper to, I’m not at the liberty to name
them but I can say that it was understood that the French would take the lead to move in
but there were other countries willing to join the French government to do that. Even
those countries were very eager to act very fast and many of those countries, even in the
very last minute while I returned already in Saigon contacted our embassies abroad,
particularly our embassy in London to ask for immediate action before its too late.
RV: And they refused?
NXP: No, because there was no response. I think it was necessary to have some
more time.
RV: Are you talking about military intervention or?
NXP: All kinds.
RV: All kinds?
NXP: Yes. If it were desperate, then military action would be necessary as a way
to freeze things for a very short time to bring them up to something more lasting.
RV: I suppose the intervention of other countries would make Hanoi pause and
say wait a minute, the situation has drastically changed now, there are other countries
involved, willing to change the situation.

NXP: It was clear at that time. I think the guy or the government who had the real
say about it was the U.S.S. R and I had the impression at that time that the U.S.
government, Washington, put also lots of hope and trust in the Soviet that they could try
and find a way somehow to get that coalition in South Vietnam, that was the
understanding. I’m sure that the people in the Kremlin at that time would take the usual
position, that is to say in a way to give the impression to you Americans that the Soviet
also sharing the views of Washington to a certain extent but it is up to the people to
decide their fate. I’m sure that the people in the Kremlin thought very clearly that the
Hanoi people were in position to take over the whole of South Vietnam by force, very
easily because Thieu indicated very clearly since the very beginning of 1975 that he
would not put up a fight between those two enemies. The other people or other
governments may not like to have a takeover of Hanoi and would desperately try in the
last minute to have some kind of a temporary even solution to South Vietnam while
waiting for better days. There were also people who would not like to have the extension
of Soviet influence even to the south of Vietnam, that was very clear. And to Thieu right
at the signing of the Paris Agreement, he was convinced rightly or wrongly, he was
convinced that it was a sellout completely by the Americans to the Soviet. That is to say,
in his mind he thought that Kissinger who played there in China and the Soviet, then in
the joc political game would give the whole of Vietnam to the Soviet.

RV: You mention Thieu not putting up much of a fight in that last month or so.
Could you equate that, his attitude and basically saying we’re not going to put up a fight,
you said this was made clear between these two armies, was that the responsibility for the
ARVN collapsing so quickly?

NXP: That was very clear. There was no reason why Thieu could not have re-
taken the lost post in on Phuoc Long. There were small battles when Schlesinger, the
Defense Secretary said they were just small battles and the Communist troops had done
that for years. They just took positions and then the crack units of the ARVN would
come back to retake those positions but this time they were really surprised, Thieu did not
order to retake those positions at all. There was very feeble little skirmishes and then
when the North Vietnamese, tested, mainly to test the U.S., whether the U.S. would move
back or not, they have always traditionally test in the highlands, since the French colonial
time, so they tested them there and then Thieu instead of putting up a fight asked General
Phu even to withdraw down to the center of Vietnam along the coastline and that
withdrawal was chaotic, real fiasco, on Route Nine. Then when the North Vietnamese
regular troops started the arracks against the DMZ and the I Corps region with General
Trun instead of reinforcing the units of General Trun there Thieu even took out, emptied
the man, so Trun was faced with a ration of one to three regular divisions so it was a
fiasco too. He had to run away really.

RV: Was Thieu hoping for a diplomatic solution here?
NXP: That is to say he again, rightly or wrongly, thought that by that process he
would be able to convince Washington that the situation is dramatic now. You have to
do something if you are true to words that you are going to defend and guarantee the
security of the RVN as President Nixon said in his letter but then it was very clear to
Thieu and it was bad pocket bluff. It was a bad pocket bluff I’m sure because it was not
really, I don’t think that Thieu really thought that the U.S. would come back and put up a
fight with the RVN. He just wanted to have some kind of a meaningful indication, a sign
from Washington that is not going to give up Saigon that easy. That is to say you have to
compose with the Saigon government and then Big Minh will permit you to have a kind
of coalition and it was understood by everybody, Beijing and Moscow, but you cannot
overrun them like that. So that was the understanding, the basis on which things went.
So Thieu accepted to give up on the end on the 21st of April because it was very clear that
even a meaningful small sign or signal by Washington was not even possible.

RV: Was he surprised at that?
NXP: I don’t think it is a matter of surprise but it is, you know the wearing out of
hope till the very last minute, the man hoped in the very last minute and it was clear that
it was no longer possible.

RV: How did you feel about all that, how was it affecting you?
NXP: Well, I was first very worried about my old parents. That was the first
concern that I had and so whatever, I wanted to be by their side. The second thing was
that maybe I could be help to the Saigon people whether it was Huong or Big Minh, didn’t even matter at all because the other side did not worry very much who would be in the Saigon and the worse there the better. They even mentioned to me sometime before that even Bao Dai would be very good candidate to head the Saigon government in the coalition with them.

RV: What about you?

NXP: Oh, no I was too young to begin with. I played rather the role of trying to find out areas of possible understanding and agreement rather than to play any role. It was clear that they would like to have my contributions. It was nothing necessary for me to play any political role, but I did not say that I would refuse if it was necessary.

RV: But you knew through your contacts that they wanted you to be a part of whatever, that Hanoi wanted you to be part of whatever solution was going to happen?

NXP: And there was even a meeting after my return to Saigon and I saw President Huong, there was a meeting called by General Dong, Tran Von Dong, by Mr. Nguyen Sun Wan, Jack Owen and these were the only two who were really to say Saigon people with me in the meeting and all the others were Vietcong.

RV: Where did the meeting take place?

NXP: Right beside the Independence Palace, about one minute walk. It was in a house provided by General Tu Minh Dong and he really believed he could play a role and with Jack Owen he could have dialogue with the other side much better than Big Minh. But the NLF they played on the people wrong and it was just some window dressing waiting for the North Vietnamese troops to come.

RV: Did those Vietcong leaders; did they think they would have a place in the future government?

NXP: Oh, yes very much.

RV: But that was not the case.

NXP: Definitely alive, not in Saigon and then later on after my return after re-education and prison I regularly met with them and they were of course very disillusioned very quick afterwards.

RV: Your parents, you mentioned this was your primary reason of returning, to make sure they were okay and when you were in Saigon you wanted to make sure that
they were okay and taken care off. Weren’t they going to be protected because you had relatives of the family in the north? Did you feel like they would be more protected than the average citizen?

NXP: Oh yes, I’m sure that not great harm would come to them because they had never done anything politically, they were just very simple and ordinary people but I was worried rather for the stray bullets, what we all expected really was the battle of Saigon and arriving from the airport, direct to Independence Palace, as you know the first person that I bumped into was Ambassador Martin and we sat there in the living room talking for some time. He just came out of a meeting with President Huong and so we begin to talk about the military situation which was catastrophic of course and I was very concerned about that certain battle of Saigon and I told Ambassador Martin what I knew from various sources, I believe the French intelligence sources that the battle of Saigon was very imminent and the kind if capabilities that the Communist troops had at that time to launch an attack against Saigon and he agreed with me quickly. I had the impression too that the U.S. intelligence at that time was not very effective, [laughs], was not very effective. They were unable to follow the situation in the Highlands then in central Vietnam, they were completely lost. There was, it was through a very well calculated counter-espionage action by the Communist side to mislead the Americans in Saigon.

RV: Why were the Americans so inept at intelligence at this point do you think?

NXP: I had the impression they were disorganized by March, April they were disorganized, not because of their bad management but they were disorganized because the network on which they depended began to crumble and people began to have certain thoughts by March and beginning of April 1975.

RV: I’m assuming President Thieu felt readily abandoned by not just the United States but by these other countries when you tried to contact them and contacts were put out and there was no answer as you said.

NXP: The impression I had, President Thieu put all his hope in the United States. He did not believe in anybody else because he did not think that anybody else would help South Vietnam the way he thought should be helped, that is to maintain some sort of an anti-Communist political regime there. So, whatever other options were possible at that time besides the support and the help, assistance from the United States, he did not pay
much attention. He thought that instead of selling the whole of South Vietnam to the
Soviets, there was only the other possibility is to give it to the Chinese and in the end I
think he thought that the option for the Chinese would be even worse than not having the
Americans there because for a thousand years the Vietnamese always had that dynamic
and tried to get away from the Chinese influence and it was also the choice of Ho Chi
Minh to go Soviet in order to placate the Chinese. That was also the choice even to
Thieu.

RV: You were back in Saigon for just a few days before the collapse. Can you
describe the atmosphere around the presidential palace and inside the presidential palace
at that time?

NXP: Well, the first impression at the airport was that people were trying to get
out, thousands and thousands and then arriving at the palace I saw that it was the
beginning of let go of most of the people in the governments were gone and I had the
impression that old Huong was left almost by himself there. Then I ran into General Cao
Vun Vinh was the Chairman of Joint Chief of Staff and also General Tran Von Dong who
would the same government as Defense Minister but I didn’t get many encouragement
from those two. It was very eminent that President Huong had to transfer his so-called
presidential palace to Big Minh and that was the thing. President Thieu refused to do that
because he didn’t believe in Big Minh and second he was claiming it would be
unconstitutional for him to do that. The only thing to do is to resign in favor of his Vice
President, old Huong was already seventy-two at that time and not in very good shape,
bad health and almost couldn’t read anything any more with his bad eyesight and of
course he was made to understand by the U.S. ambassador and also very much by the
French ambassador Mr. Marion, that he should as soon as possible pass his powers to Big
Minh and he also claimed that it would be very unconstitutional to do that but the only
thing is for him to surrender his powers to the National Assembly and the Senate, jointly
and it is up to them to designate someone. He tried to maintain very activation things at
that time, that is to say to remain president because he claimed to be the elected president
of the RVN and he was prepared to issue a degree to say that Big Minh would have total
power, authority as Prime Minister to act in the name of the president, but of course Big
Minh refused that then and NLF also passed the message, that’s not what we want and it
was the collapse of the legitimacy of the constitutional government of the Republic of Vietnam that they were after. That also explained why Big Minh had to remove the emblem of the RVN and replace it by the lotus flower which was no emblem at all of a country and that was it.

RV: What was your impression of Big Minh?

NXP: Of Big Minh, he didn't impress me in anyway because the man was completely I would say almost apolitical too. He was not able to think anything political and he was just a figurehead used by all kinds of people. He was considered to be more or less the hero to have overthrown President Diem. That was all. He did not manifest any political capabilities or any kind of thinking that would mean anything but he was the point of rally for the opposition.

RV: What were your interactions with him in his last few days?

NXP: I had interactions rather with the lawyer Nguyễn Văn Wen who was the Vice President of President Nguyễn Văn Minh of Big Minh and Lawyer Nguyễn Văn Wen was at one time President of the Saigon Senate, very highly respected lawyer and a friend of our family, I don’t know, of my parent for fifty years like Huong, but he was really a sound Catholic, very religious man, Lawyer Văn, very religious, very close ties with the Vatican too. I saw him after my return from prison in 1980. They were spared awful re-education, Big Minh and Huong and Lawyer Văn and he was made responsible by Big Minh for the negotiations so I was fat what he said Lawyer Văn, his counterpart in the transitional government and I sat down with him of course and discussed with him and he also expressed the necessity for me to join him in the next few days to deal with the other side, of course he hardly had forty-eight hours to do that but I was at his disposal.

RV: So you had very little direct contact with Big Minh?

NXP: Yes, with Lawyer Văn.

RV: Just through him.

NXP: Yes, because Big Minh was no use to talk to him and the Prime Minister of Big Minh at that time was Mr. Vũ Ưu Máu who was at one time the Foreign Minister of President Diem and he was in the position, very Buddhist, in the position to Thieu and he was made them prime minister by Big Minh in the Big Minh government with Lawyer
Wen as vice president responsible for negotiations. That was the setup so I said to Lawyer Wen that I was at his disposal. I did not even have time to report to him on the various channels open but I thought that if it were possible to stop, to have a kind of cease-fire, stand still while we talk with Big Minh with power than I would present to Lawyer Wen the various possibilities of other channels open to Saigon at that time.

RV: So you never talked to him about that?
NXP: No, because after that the North Vietnamese troops arrived.
RV: Right, so you had no time to do that.
NXP: Not at all.
RV: How much role did the Vatican play in all this?
NXP: Well, even since 1966, ’67 there was already a chief in the position of the Vatican towards a coalition government, so they thought that was the only way and they were somehow convinced by the NLF people because the Catholics in Saigon had lots of contacts with the many leading political figures in South Vietnam and particularly Lawyer Nguyen Von Wen who was the president of the Saigon Senate, stout Catholic, very kind and very respected man. And I think through people like Lawyer Wen that the Vatican tried to show its position there, that it would grow, and in fact the Vatican’s position was the American position, leading eventually some kind of compromise and that was it. The French really believed that they could play a role in it too.
RV: How much reality was the notion of neutrality, if there was a cease-fire or there was some kind of pause and a coalition government set up? This had been mentioned in context of the whole thing?
NXP: That started of course really in 1964, ’65 with General DeGaulle’s visit to Phnom Penh when he declared neutrality for the whole zone of Indochina, Indochina to be a zone of neutrality and he was thinking very much at that time of the formula used to resolve the conflict in Laos in ’62, again thanks to Ambassador Harriman.
RV: Which failed, this neutrality in Laos.
NXP: Yes. In fact it was my duty given to me in 1969, 1970 particularly in Paris to try and understand what the French meant by neutrality so I talked to Mr. Fromon Maurice who was at that time responsible for Vietnam, being the director of the Asian Pacific at the KDC, the French Foreign Ministry and then I also had discussions with the
foreign minister at that time. Mr. Michelle Dubreay and of course they were not in
position to explain to me what General DeGaulle meant by neutrality for the whole of
Indochina because I told them that North and South Vietnam had military alliances in the
position and it would be very difficult to ask North Vietnam to be neutral. It would be
easier to ask South Vietnam to be neutral, but North Vietnam to be neutral would be very
difficult since they have a socialist regime so in the end I was made to understand by our
French friends there that what General DeGaulle meant by neutrality for the whole of
Indochina was the neutrality of attitude and in action by the belligerents but they of
course had their own political regimes and their whole military alliances so I said that it’s
very difficult to understand and the term I used rather splitting hairs in four as the French
say.

RV: That would have meant the whole dream of Ho Chi Minh to unite Vietnam,
the notion of a Communist Vietnam, that would have tossed that out the window, this
idea of neutrality so that was probably very unacceptable.

NXP: Yes, and that is something that we have to really reconsider when we try to
understand the Vietnamese conflict, you know the notion of two Vietnam, who was it just
one Vietnam because the Geneva Accords divided the country at the seventeenth parallel,
being just a temporary line of demarcation to recruit the forces and not politically to
divide your country and so from this strategy viewpoint it was not very logical to claim
that there were de jure two Vietnam, and in fact that was the position of the U.S.
government because the new land never recognized the Geneva Accords and so how then
afterwards with Ngo Dinh Diem then the U.S. took the position that there were two legal
entities, de jure Vietnam, that was very difficult to help the Vietnamese in South Vietnam
to understand.

RV: A de facto division, temporarily, would have been more acceptable, more
realistic to a history of Vietnam, or the backing away of forces?

NXP: Yes, and then the claim by the Saigon government, supported by the U.S.
government, that you should maintain that division was not easily understood by the
ordinary people, especially the peasants in the countryside in South Vietnam. So it was
difficult to persuade or convince the Vietnamese in South Vietnam that you should
maintain two different Vietnams. The kind of nationalism that President Diem started to
infuse into the Vietnamese in South Vietnam was a kind of nationalism in order to fight another kind of nationalism in the north of Vietnam, that could not stand, that could not stand at all.

RV: Do you think it was foolish to almost play against Vietnamese history that two Vietnams was completely historically unrealistic for the Vietnamese people since Vietnam had expanded from the north down to the south centuries and centuries ago, it had always been one country.

NXP: Yes, has always been one country and even President Diem could not particularly reject it. One the one hand he wanted to have the commission for something called the Republic of Vietnam in South Vietnam, but on the other hand he could not refute the idea that Vietnam is one, Vietnamese people is one and that was the formula used by Ho Chi Minh right in the beginning, Vietnam is one and the Vietnamese people is one. So, but to claim a future reunification of Vietnam was in fact kind of lip service, the declarations by the Saigon government from 1955 to 1975 so that did not catch on with the Vietnamese people because in the end the position taken by the U.S. government was for two Vietnams, so that was the difficulty in order to get the South Vietnamese to oppose North Vietnam.

RV: What about North Vietnam one state, South Vietnam one state in one country, but different states and then have a coalition government, is this more practical, this idea?

NXP: Well, it was suggested even at the time of President Diem so by October 1963 when the U.S. was very dissatisfied with his performance and it was revealed that his brother, political advisor Ngo Dinh Nhu approached and sent messages to Ho Chi Minh to have some kind of understanding with Ho Chi Minh, that was the Marigold project, I think went through, if I remember correctly, it went through the Italian Ambassador and through the ICCI members, that is to say President Diem and Mr. Nhu sold the U.S. would jettison them. They were prepared to join Ho Chi Minh in the kind of federation provided Ho Chi Minh accept them in autonomy in South Vietnam.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone; I’m continuing my oral history interview with Ambassador Phong. It’s Monday, January 13, 2003. Sir, we were talking about the last days of the Saigon government in 1975 in April. I wonder if you could just walk us through, you’ve returned and you had five days before the fall of the country, if you could just walk us through those five days, kind of what you did each day and your feeling about what was happening.

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, I can begin with the, from the moment I landed in Saigon returning from Paris and then I went directly to Independence Palace because President Huong was expecting me there.

RV: Did they have a car waiting for you?

NXP: Yes, with bodyguards and everything and each time I returned to Saigon it was the same protocol.

RV: Was Tan Son Nhut, was it very busy?

NXP: Oh, yes you have a big crowd there, a very long lien curling outside the airport along the roadside, I would say thousands of people waiting to get into the airport and get on the planes because the planes were taking off to take people out, thousands of people. Then of course those who had the papers and the seats on the planes, but many of them tried to get on the planes at that time. So, I was taken to Independence Palace, it was about fifteen minutes drive from the airport.
RV: Fifteen or fifty?

NXP: Fifteen. It was very quiet and that was about five, six PM. When I arrived there, the very first person I met while on my way into President Huong’s office was the U.S. ambassador Craig Martin, who was getting out of President Huong’s office and so we went into the little room there, kind of a waiting room there, we sat down and we talked and of course I just saw him a few weeks before when he returned, he had returned to Washington DC, try and plead for Saigon again and on his way back to Saigon eh went through Paris and then I saw him there just a few weeks before. Of course we knew at that time that the situation was deteriorating very fast, then during that discussion I tried to impress that as far as able to figure it out the military situation was catastrophic and what worried me very much was to avoid what I called the battle of Saigon, the so-called blood bath which would entail from that battle. Ambassador Martin was completely in agreement with me that the situation became completely hopeless and the best thing he tried to impress me was for President Huong to turn over his presidential palace to Big Minh and from the conversation that I could not understanding confirm, the general impression that we all had that probably Big Minh could find a kind of solution with the other side, other side meaning the NLF. So it was on that note Ambassador Martin tried to explain to me that there was some, shall we say possibility if Big Minh were in charge and so after that he left and then I met with our two generals, Trun Min Dong and Cao Von Tin. Dong was with me in the same government at that time as the Defense Minister and General Tin our chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff. My conversation with them of course did not give me any hope whatsoever that on the military side that we could try and hold on. So it was with that kind of understanding and impression after landing in Saigon that I went to see President Huong. How can I summarize the hour of discussion I had with President Huong. First of all he wanted to know whether there were any possibility to avoid having to deal directly with the Communists. He tried to find out whether diplomatically or whether the U.S. would have a way to put a stop to the advancing of North Vietnamese troops and their tanks which were on the outskirts of Saigon at that time and how would the French feel because he was under very big pressure from the French ambassador, Mr. Marion who then together with Ambassador Martin tried to convince President Huong to turn over his power to Big Minh. As far I
was able to figure out things I tried to explain to President Huong that there was no possibility whatsoever except the alternative advanced by the French and the American ambassadors, that is for him to resign and hand over his presidential palace to Big Minh. So we wasted about half an hour by President Huong explaining to me that it would be completely unconstitutional for him to transfer his power to Big Minh, who has no legal claim on being president of the Republic of Vietnam in anyway. He said to me that he had offered to General Big Minh the possibility to be prime minister but with the total power, complete power that he will surrender all of his powers to Big Minh but only as a prime minister. I said that Big Minh would not accept that and nobody would deal with Big Minh in such a case.

RV: How well did you know Big Minh?

NXP: Not very well but I had good relations with his group. I met him several times but I did not shall we say work with him or discuss anything important with him.

RV: Did you find him an intelligent man who could make good decisions in power?

NXP: Nonplussed, completely, he was completely unable to understand any political issues whatsoever, he was a good guy, that’s all. He was the most senior soldier or officer of the ARVN and more or less admired by the younger generations and also for the overthrow of Diem in 1963. I don’t think that anybody in Saigon thought that he would be of any help whatsoever to find a political solution. He was in fact a figurehead for a group in opposition to General Thieu and the establishment there at that time. That started with General Nguyen Can who took over for Big Minh and sent him to exile and Big Minh stayed in Bangkok for many years before returning to Vietnam.

RV: Where was President Thieu now?

NXP: President Thieu passed away, year 2001, I think in September in Boston.

RV: Where was he in 1975, when this was happening, had he left the country?

NXP: Not yet, he left the country only, that very evening I think, on the 25th. Yes, he left on the 25th, but when I return home by about eight o’clock, I think or seven o’clock, I got a phone call from him. I didn’t know that he was leaving. He just called and said well, you know, he implied that he was going to leave the country but he didn’t say when and where and how. He also mentioned a few names, people, he said that if I
had the opportunity to help them get out of Saigon, I said sure, if they want to, I would
like to find out, help them to get out. I told him also that I was not going out, I just
returned.

RV: Did he try to talk you out of that?

NXP: No, not at all. He knew me well enough not to say that. So I went in to see
President Huong and there was nothing that I could tell him to let him understand that
one, there’s no other thing forthcoming to save the government of Saigon and second, the
only alternative left to him was just to hand over his power to Big Minh so that was, to
put it in brief, that was the discussion I had with President Huong. Of course he had to,
he insisted that he had to respect the constitutional procedure so even if it were shall we
say unconstitutional for him to hand over power to Big Minh he could not do it directly
form him to Big Minh, but he had to surrender his powers to the Congress, the legislation
assembly, to the both houses to ten decide to give it to Big Minh, which strictly speaking
was not constitutional but you can always claim that Congress can do it. Nothing in the
Constitution allowed Congress to do that, so that was it. So I then went home to my
parents.

RV: How did you sleep that night?

NXP: Oh, we didn’t sleep very much because my father liked to talk a lot and
hadn’t seen me for years so we talked a lot, very long in the night. He was always happy
to have me home.

RV: Did your mother cook for you?

NXP: Oh, yes we had a big dinner. So that was the situation and then of course
afterwards President Huong managed to agree with the National Assembly and the Senate
to carry out the procedure and hand over power to Big Minh which was done at the
ceremony in the afternoon Monday the 28th of April and I attended that transfer
ceremony. Of course I think almost all the members of the Saigon government at that
time already fled and if I remember correctly there was only General To Man Dong who
was the Defense Minister who was there still, I was there. There was also a number of
others, but they were already on the Vietcong side, it turned out to be afterwards.

RV: Turned out to be on the Vietcong side.
NXP: Yes, for example you have, what’s his name, anyway a number of the
government of Saigon, members of the government of Saigon, they were already on the
side of the Vietcong at that time. But when Big Minh took over on Monday, the
afternoon of Monday, of course I had discussions with the so-called vice president
Lawyer Wen, who was the vice president of Big Minh and he was made responsible for
negotiations with the other side and at that time Big Minh had challenged to the Vietcong
delegation in Tan Son Nhut and tried to get in touch with them through Lawyer Tag Noc
Wen who was my predecessor at the Welfare Ministry, I replaced him as Minister of
Welfare, but he went to Vietcong too. He was in contact with the Vietcong delegation,
but of course it was just a game by the Vietcong delegation gave the impression that they
maintain a kind of a channel for Big Minh, but even his, Big Minh’s representatives
Lawyer Wen and others were not able to do anything with the Vietcong delegation in the
Tan Son Nhut airport when they were there.

RV: Did you have any official position in this new government?

NXP: No, I was just having contacts with, discussions with Lawyer Wen but I
attended the meeting. It must be just before the power transfer, so that must be Sunday, I
would say Sunday we had a meeting and it was held at the house just outside the
Independence Palace that was General who was at that time with me in the government
as defense minister, it was Mr. Wen Su Wan, Dr. Wan, Jack Owen as known to his
American friends, former deputy prime minister at the time of Nguyen Can and there
were a number of others who turned out to be all Vietcong afterwards. But there was,
that meeting exchange of ideas. What would happen after President Huong turned over
power to Big Minh and what would happen after with Big Minh. After the transfer of
power with President Huong to Big Minh, the first thing that Big Minh’s group did was
to demand the complete and immediate departure of all American personnel of the U.S.
embassy and in particular of the Defense Attaché office. It was repeated almost
continuously on the national radio and TV, which indicated that the other side made that
sine qua non condition for Big Minh to do anything with them because he could not have
any meetings with them, but if he could not get all the Americans out he would not have
any chance to meet anybody on the Vietcong side.

RV: So that was a condition set.
NXP: That was the condition.
RV: Were these meetings on Sunday and the ones afterward, what was the mood, was it cordial?
NXP: Oh, yes very cordial.
RV: Very formal?
NXP: Very formal, very cordial. And what was in my mind at that time, the only thing left for me was to have any hope on the military side because in my mind at that time, although Thieu permitted the collapse of the ARVN forces from central Vietnam down to Saigon but to me at that time the ARVN was completely intact from the south of Saigon with the IV Corps command completely intact with the Air Force of the IV Corps intact in Ta Noc, hundreds of planes and then you have at least, I would say two hundred thousand troops intact in IV Corps. So there was no reason why we could not make even the last stand in order to talk, just to talk, but it seemed that with the transfer ceremony of President Huong I very soon realized that there was no more battle to fight and that was the general impression in the ARVN generals that I saw like Cao Vaon Vinh or Con van Dom or others, that is, it was not for a fight but it was to accept the course proposed by the American ambassador and the French ambassador, that is let Big Minh have a try with the other side for some kind of an accommodation.
RV: Did you think that was at all possible?
NXP: I didn’t believe in it at all and it was in my mind just a matter of Minh taking over militarily and with the obsession of and the dreadful blood bath predicted with the battle of Saigon.
RV: Why not use the IV Corps troops?
NXP: Because there was completely disruption and absence of the line of command. Headquarters at Tan Son Nhut didn’t function any more and even if the IV Corps commander wanted to do something he expected the general headquarters to direct him, lead him and with Big Minh, General Vinh Lop was made the head of the army to replace General Cao Van Diem and even twenty-four hours after Minh named as replacement of General Cao Von Diem, General Vinh Lop went to Vung Tao and fled away, so there was complete void in the headquarters of the ARVN in Tan Son Nhut and the sad thing, that is the commanding general of the IV Corps in Can Tho, I think was
General Huong, he decide in the end to put on his gala uniform and committed suicide instead of putting up a fight. Even in the whole of the delta area there were no North Vietnamese troops and most of the so-called troops who went into those Army headquarters and took over those barracks were just mainly youngsters, almost Annam. came there and took over power from those Generals and colonels. So that was why I was convinced and still hold that Thieu’s resignation was the message to his troops, to the ARVN troops that there’s no fight any more and you had to follow the U.S. suggestion that we have to find a way out without fighting.

RV: Personally, why do you think Thieu resigned?

NXP: Well, I think he resigned in the end because it came to a point and under very strong pressure form Ambassador Martin on the 20th of April, that was shall we say the date limit I think for the U.S., they thought that after that would be too late to find any peaceful solution and Thieu waited I think until then. He waited since the beginning of the year for any sign of intervention by the U.S. militarily to put a check to the advance to the North Vietnamese but then I think it came to the point that he realized I think by April the 20th and 21st when he resigned that President Ford was very different form President Johnson and Nixon.

RV: In what way?

NXP: Well, that is to say that he would not take very harsh measures or action and he was no longer in position to do it too.

RV: Did you ever have any contact with President Ford?

NXP: Not at all. So, there was the situation and I think generally speaking, the general public was not very aware of the situation, talking to the people in Saigon, even in the government circles I found out that they were not very well informed of how things were happening. I had much better information from Paris on Saigon then the people in Saigon themselves.

RV: Wasn’t the information on the radio?

NXP: Well, the radio didn’t say much.

RV: To a point, yes.

NXP: Didn’t say much and the U.S. embassy didn’t provide any information and I think that by that time the intelligence network, even of the CIA was falling down very
fast and there was some, I’m sure, lots of, disinformation channeled to those people, they were not very much informed and the few information they had were not accurate at all.

RV: This is the common people of Saigon?

NXP: No, even in the government circles.

RV: Did you get the feeling that on the streets the people were aware that the situation was imminent and that Saigon and the government was going to fall?

NXP: That would be a very interesting thing to study, the attitude and the thinking and how people behave in those last days of Saigon. Of course I can only describe the feelings I found in my family. They were of course very afraid with the advance of the Communist troops at the gates of Saigon but I think in my family they thought that the ARVN would be in position to put up a defense of Saigon while waiting for something else to happen, Big Minh to find a peaceful solution, but to have been indoctrinated for years that the ARVN with one million troops and with all the sophisticated weapons from the U.S. and two thousand planes of the Vietnamese Air Force, you can defend Saigon somehow. So, they were not too, too worried, I was much more militarily speaking compared to the people in my family, my parents, they were completely untouched by those things, they were not interested.

RV: Really, what kind of conversations did you have with them about what was going on?

NXP: They talked about very personal things, how are you, how you feel and things like that and they ask about family things, but with my parents we never discussed political subjects or anything, never.

RV: How did they feel about you being in the government and having such an important position all those years?

NXP: Oh, to them it was not a big deal, it was not a big deal. To be in the government or to remain with SO would be the same thing for me, that is to say they wanted me to have a good life and something of that, generally speaking, their son to be happy. They were never impressed by being a member of the government or anything of that kind.

RV: Did they realize the danger that you were in personally?
NXP: They were afraid, apprehensive of what would happen if the Communists took over but I think that somehow they were not really, shall we say horrified, afraid really by the so-called blood bath. I still now, I have the impression that my parents were never convinced that there would be a blood bath, probably because that between Vietnamese you don’t do things like that. It would be beyond their imagination that between Vietnamese you could go and strike one another in that way, it was unconceivable for them.

RV: Did they not keep up with what was happening with the war, say the atrocities in Hue?

NXP: Yes, in the ‘40s. Yes, in the ‘40s there were atrocities there, but to them it was isolated cases in certain hamlets or villages here and there, but it was not the national thing, it was not a national calamity that you had big movement of liquidation. It was a serious liquidation but I think to them it was not something extremely widespread.

RV: Had they heard about what happened in Hue in 1968?

NXP: Yes, but you know you had so much propaganda stuff from the Saigon government and what happened in Hue was something like quite common from the Vietnam, thousands and thousands of cases of assassination reported over the time.

RV: So after the transfer of power ceremony what did you do?

NXP: I stayed home I had a few meetings with the Lawyer Wen but of course I didn’t say much to him or anything. I said I would be prepared to help him to find a solution and then I reported to him what was the Lesson Sau Quo Conference between the two South Vietnamese parties after the Paris Agreement, we had that which didn’t move anywhere of course again Thieu’s reluctance completely to share power in anyway, but we tried to implement the Paris Agreement by discussing those political articles in the Paris Agreement and it was of course the most complete thing was the National Repatriation Council and it was understood that it would be divided equally in three groups, one for the NLF, one from the Saigon government and one so-called groups towards neutral and we spent weeks and months to discuss how we are going to name those people and various formulas were put out, whether we just name our own people in the Council and then half of the third fourths they name and half of the third part we name that both sides dress up a common lease and then we pick up form the common
lease and things like that. We had endless discussions about it, even before discussing
what would be the responsibilities and priorities of that council, what would that council
do, we sat even for how to name that council to begin with and could not even agree on
that one. But I think that neither side was really interested in reaching an agreement
because we didn’t believe in it at all.
RV: So, this is Sunday the 26th, Monday the 27th.
NXP: Monday, 28th.
RV: Monday, the 28th, 29th and 30th.
NXP: That is for forty-eight hours Big Minh just kept on asking the U.S. to
withdraw completely because it was necessary for the Hanoi government to have all the
Americans out.
RV: And what did you do in this forty-eight hours, you met with?
NXP: I found also a few meetings and seeing a few people who came to see me, I
stayed home.
RV: Awaiting your fate?
NXP: Yes, but then after the transfer ceremony on Monday evening then there
was a very important shelling of Saigon and most of the shelling was on Tan Son Nhut,
on the ARVN headquarters, even by the late morning of Monday the airport was
condemned with the first shelling, the runway couldn’t be used any more and that was the
time that Ambassador Martin had to move to the helicopter evacuation from downtown
and I had a phone call with Ambassador Martin on Tuesday, I think about noontime or
something. I called Eva Kim, his secretary that we have known forever, Eva Kim
eventually I think went to work at the United Nations but I had the phone call discussion
with Ambassador Martin on Tuesday, that is about ten, fifteen hours before the very end
when he left and he insisted that he try and find ways to take me out of Saigon. I didn’t
ask him but I very much try and ask him whether there is a possibility how to stop the
North Vietnamese troops at the gate of Saigon, pending any possibility by Big Minh to
find an accommodation with the Vietcong, with the North Vietnamese. Then in the
middle of our conversation I heard the voice of Dr. Kissinger on a loudspeaker from the
other end of the phone then Ambassador Martin says he’s sorry, that he will call me back
right away. He never called.
RV: He never called back, that’s the last?
NXP: No, he was too busy afterwards with the very last.
RV: Was that the last time you talked with him?
NXP: Yes, last time talked. Then many of the remaining government members of Saigon tried to get out and went to the U.S. embassy of course. I heard about it. One of them was General Tho Man Dong and many of them had to climb the fences in order to get it.

RV: I’m curious, with your offer to be able to leave, did you reconsider at all?
NXP: I didn’t think of leaving at all because my parents did not have any idea, any intention to leave it all. It was out of the question for them to leave their home. I think that I came to their thinking, that is to say well, whatever happens, we will stay. Of course we have a very large family.

RV: How far away was your family home from the U.S. embassy, this is, your family is near, in the downtown?
NXP: Yes, in the terminal at least, we’d been there for fifty years and if you drive by car it would be about ten minutes.

RV: Now, on the 30th did you hear the commotion on the streets and what was happening while you were at home?
NXP: Yes, because we knew that North Vietnamese troops and tanks came in very early. But there was no fighting in the street at all. Very soon they found out that they North Vietnamese troops that had the tanks there found out that there was no resistance whatsoever form the ARVN. There was no Army of the ARVN in Saigon. Most of them I think have took off from their uniform and stay home or went home, but there was no fighting at all, except for a few little skirmishes in various places but not in downtown. I didn’t hear anything.

RV: When did you first hear about the Independence Palace gates being, taking of the palace by the troops?
NXP: Right away because people didn’t, in our house, they went in and out of the house freely, they separate, and many of them came back, and a succession of them came back and let us know they have moved in, they have taken position at the crossroads and things like that. There was nothing really to upset the life in the streets. OUR neighbors
were there and it was almost normal because we did not have the tanks in our district, our area, they were downtown rather, but then we saw in the streets, the cars and jeeps with the flats of the Vietcong and then with people on those rushing back and forth in the street like this but in our street there was nothing. They didn’t stop there because there was nothing, there was no police station, there was no Army base, anything near there so it was almost normal. Then I think by noon, a little bit after lunch, one probably, now whether we used to have early lunch, I think that day we didn’t have early lunch and then I sneak out of the house and walk.

RV: You snick out of the house?

NXP: Yes, and then I went downtown and it was a very funny thing. I walked and then eventually I went to Independence Palace and then I saw the North Vietnamese troops and the tanks there, so the people were still very careful. They did not rush out when come the arriving troops, they were curious to see how those troops would behave, all the propaganda they had from Saigon I think it was understandable. But then I found out with thanks there near the Independence Palace and I need not get too near Independence Palace but nearer to the Cathedral. I was standing there in the post office and the tanks were there and then I discovered those North Vietnamese troops, they were just kids, youngsters, rather skinny, that impressed me, they were all very skinny, pale, tired. They were standing there looking around, no troops to fight.

RV: Did you talk with any of them?

NXP: No, I didn’t talk to them but I just look at them very near, so they also look at me but that’s it. And eventually I went to the post office and called home and said I’m all right, don’t worry and I’ll be home very soon and there was not much disruption. The phone worked normally, electricity, water, nothing except for the presence of those troops and then those so-called Vietcong rushing around, what we call later on the 25th, our Vietcong. Everybody became Vietcong after that. Then on my way back it was really funny because my car from my home to Independence Palace would take about ten minutes, but walking it would be more than half an hour and then I tried to get a cyclo, but there was no cyclo and there was a three-wheeler, you know the kind of that cart that they put motion guys on, with the guy at the back pedaling and then I saw a guy there in his shorts only, almost his panties and so it turned out that the he had the uniform, a
Saigon uniform, but he took it off and he was in his panties pedaling that three wheeled cart, so I waved him, can you give me a ride. He was very happy to give me a ride but didn’t say a word, nothing, so I jumped on the front, I sat down there with my legs hanging out because I asked him whether he was going the direction of my home. He nodded and I just got on and continued to pedal very hard. He was in a hurry and then he was very skinny too and then he went out of breath and he could hardly pedal because the cart was heavy so I said well he can hardly move anymore, we were halfway home. So I said okay, you sit, I pedal, so we changed places, then I pedaled the thing home. Then I gave it back the cart to him, went into the house.

RV: So you became a cyclo driver there just for a little bit.
NXP: Yes, I became a cyclo driver on that very historical day.

RV: That’s interesting. So when you got back home, did you tell your parents what you had seen?
NXP: Yes, I told them what I saw and said well, there’s not much disruption. I didn’t seem any fighting, the kind of troops I saw and the tanks there, the fifty-four Soviet tanks there and that was it. I think that was also the general impression of everybody that they just wait and see. Of course the new administration authorities tried to organize festivities and some but it took seven days to organize those things but most people were careful to stay home and wait to see how they would be treated. It became more and more astonishing to me that nothing really drastic happened.

RV: Were you expecting something drastic to happen?
NXP: Yes, for troops to call, round up people and jail them or I don’t know.
RV: Did you expect them to come to your home and get you?
NXP: Yes, I expected them to come and meet for me because in the area, in the prison, people knew very well our house that I was there and nothing happened. We were able to go to the market the next day and then to separate, nobody came to ask for me at all and then the relatives arrived very soon, the next two or three days. My uncles returned from Hanoi, arrived, came, with big festivities.

RV: You all welcomed them?
NXP: Yes, they were very happy to see us too and they never had big meals before for years. And we all enjoy and of course we, my father was responsible for the
ancestors’ altar, that is for everybody in the family so those uncles and all those relatives came back, they had to go pay their respects to their ancestors in the so-called ancestor’s home. That was our duty, my father’s duty to keep the altar of the ancestors, so we had those festivities in the spirit of ancestors, nothing to do with the liberation of the country. So that was the spirit and then the following days I went with those uncles to various government headquarters, because they didn’t know where was where, what. So first of all I took them to the foreign affairs, it was just in the front on Independence Palace. It was completely deserted of course so we had a tour in there, said this used to be the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Saigon that was it. Then I showed them the Ministry of Welfare, Ministry of Labor, various places where I was then. They were also impressed by the life in Saigon. I also took them to the restaurants, so they discovered the capitalist ways of life.

RV: What did you talk about with them, did you ask?
NXP: We talked mainly about the family and they did not say anything about the defeat of the Saigon government or the defeat of the Americans but with my parents the general mood was that well, at least the end of the war, that was the general feeling.

RV: And the family was back together.
NXP: And the family was back again. We also had been the impression that life would be very hard, it would be very hard, but we were back again, we were all together again and we’d make the best out of it.

RV: Had you save some money for this situation?
NXP: Personally I didn’t have any money when I was in Paris for all these years with the Paris Peace Talks, that’s to say about seven years I was there. I had just a per diem allowance of fifty dollars a day. I was not a civil servant, I was not an Army officer, all of them in the Saigon government administration were either a civil servant or an army officer. It was security and solid. I was what was called a notable. That is to say I participated supposedly from the political reasons.

RV: So you weren’t drawing a salary?
NXP: I didn’t have any salary whatsoever while I was with the Saigon government for ten continuous years.

RV: Why?
NXP: Because I was not a civil servant or any Army officer.
RV: But you were doing such important work for the government, I think that they would try to pay you?
NXP: But it was a political assignment, that’s all.
RV: Almost like a volunteer political assignment.
NXP: Yes, that’s it. Probably they follow the American practice, a symbolic dollar a year or something, but anyway that was it and fifty dollars a day per diem and then the relatives found out that very soon because there were spies that I didn’t possess anything, no house, no car, no salary, nothing at all.
RV: Were they surprised?
NXP: They were very surprised.
RV: They expected you to be rich?
NXP: Yes, they expected to be rich and that I should have bank accounts and I didn’t even have a bank account, with fifty dollars a day you don’t have a bank account.
RV: While we’ve been talking your mood has been pretty jovial, you’ve had a good attitude about the fall of your country, can I ask why you feel that way now and were you sad then or were you more accepting then?
NXP: I was of course very sad by the fall of Saigon because I was always convinced that Communist rule would be catastrophic for the country, not only was I not convinced that their system would work but in practice was a Stalinian kind of rule in the Soviet Union and then with Mao in China economic success was not something very familiar with the Communist rulers so I was distraught in that sense, but on the other hand there was the end of the killing, of the war, so maybe this was just fate and I was really surprised by the lack of reprisal or harsh measures after the North Vietnamese troops took over. In fact I had the impression that the North Vietnamese officials were much more shall we say lenient to the Saigon officials and administration people than the Vietcong, I think the Vietcong probably had more reasons to be harder on those Saigon people than the Hanoi people. Of course life continued to be almost normal but we were all very curious what would happen because I suppose that it took time for them to organize themselves and eventually you have the decree, the requirements that all the former Saigon people had to undergo re-education.
RV: Did you expect this?

NXP: Then, there was of course discussions about avoiding re-education although it was only supposedly for thirty days but it was discussed in the family with my brother and with my sister whether I should go or whether I should not go and in the end-- my parents did not participate in those discussions at all – but in the end I informed my parents that I decided to pick up the request to undergo the thirty day re-education as decreed by the new authorities. My parents just accepted that. The uncles were there too. They said “sure, you just go to re-education, it’s nothing. It’s nothing much.”

RV: Did they know differently?

NXP: They really also believed it was for thirty days, everybody believed it.

RV: Was there really an alternative to not go?

NXP: Well, you can flee. Those people continued to try and get out of the country and it was impossible in the Delta area because there was nothing there yet and people you can take a boat to get out, even from Saigon there were people who try after the 30th of April to get on boats and get out because they were not really organized to do anything, cannot govern yet. So there was nothing, it was all right for I would say at least a couple of weeks, nothing, completely. There was no administration whatsoever.

RV: And you stayed at home?

NXP: I stayed at home and then I went around town with my uncles, we went around town and things like that. It was not much of a disruption.

RV: Why don’t we take a break with this?