INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: BUI DIEM

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador Bui Diem's office, Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Ambassador, could we begin, if you would, by telling us from what vantage point you observed the events of the 1950s, when President Ngo Dinh Diem came to power and consolidated his position in Saigon? First of all, if I may ask a relatively personal question, what was your political orientation in the 1950s? Were you a member of a party?

D: Well, I have to start in the period of 1953 because 1953 was the period during which Mr. Diem prepared of his coming back to the country. I was at that time special assistant to Dr. [Phan Huy] Quat, who was minister of defense in the government of Prince Buu Loc, the last government before the government of Mr. Diem. So in 1953 we went to Paris to negotiate with the French government about the implementation of the accords that we call [the] Elysée Accords, the accords which stipulated the implementations of the independence for Vietnam by then. The French were fighting against the Communists at Dien Bien Phu, but in the same time, they were negotiating with us about the Elysée Accords.

So we went to Paris to negotiate with the French, and it was very difficult negotiations because the French did not want even at this late hour to accept it, the notion of independence of Vietnam, and they wanted to keep something back, and it was really difficult negotiations with the French by then. And the negotiations dragged along to 1954, and in Vietnam--it was the end of 1953, and it was the beginning of the formation of the Vietnamese National Army by then, a long plan agreed upon with the French general, General [Henri] Navarre. We were into negotiations with the French people, but the war in North Vietnam was in full swing, and the battle of Dien Bien Phu began by then. You know that after that, in July 1954, we had in the Geneva Conference, the partition of the country into two parts. The military agreement [was] to the effect that the French would be regrouped southward, and the North Vietnamese would be regrouped northward.

But I was then in France, and it was the problem of having another government replacing the government of Prince Buu Loc, and it was a question by then, who would be the new government, and the name of Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem began to appear then. My relations with the Bao Dai group were--my personal relations, because I knew the Emperor before. My uncle was, of course, the emperor before, and he knew me well as a member of the Dai Viet Party by then. So we talked a lot about the preparation of the new government, and he mentioned to me the name of Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem as one of the candidates to be premier, and he mentioned, too, the name of my boss, Dr. Quat, as another candidate for the post of premier by then. And I had a friend at this time who was very close to the Ngo Dinh Diem group, and my friend was Dr. Tran Van Don, who became later foreign minister in the first government of Mr. Diem. So we stayed in

France during the whole month of June or July, and the negotiations with the Communists were in Geneva, but I was in the southern part of France in Cannes. And my friend introduced me then to Mr. Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen, who became later on ambassador to London, and we discussed a lot about the premiership by then. It was understood by all the people at that time that I served as a representative of Dr. Quat, and Luyen served as a representative of Mr. Diem. And both of us tried to influence Bao Dai to appoint his own candidate for it. We didn't talk much about the Quat candidacy by then because it seemed to me that for some sort of reason Bao Dai was more inclined to appoint Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem than Dr. Quat, who was already, by then, minister of defense in the Buu Loc cabinet.

So I discussed with Mr. Luyen--the brother of the President--about Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, about the possibility of a premiership to Mr. Diem. And I was told about the whole clan: Mr. Diem; his brother, named Luyen; the other brother Nhu; the other brother, the bishop of Vinh Long, you see.

G: [Ngo Dinh] Thuc?

D: Thuc. I was told about the clan, but I had never contacted them before. It was the first time I had contact with a member of the clan.

G: I see.

D: And he was supposed to be one of the moderates among the clan, you see, and we talked about the problem of all the old Nationalists in Vietnam and the necessity of getting a government of national unity in Vietnam after 1954, after Dien Bien Phu, and after the Geneva agreement. After long days of talks there, Mr. Luyen agreed to that but with a lot of reluctance, a lot of reluctance in the sense that he characterized to me the other

politicians in Vietnam. He used a French word. He said that "All of them are intellectual *aliénois* [?]." It was a very derogatory term, you see, pointing out that the intellectuals who are simply in their ivory towers know nothing about the outside world, you see. But somehow, Luyen agreed with me at that time, with my friend Dr. Do serving as intermediary, that it should be a government of national union in South Vietnam after the Geneva Agreement and under the leadership of Mr. Diem.

After that, Mr. Diem was appointed the prime minister by Mr. Bao Dai, and I flew back to Vietnam. Mr. Diem got back to Vietnam before me. He was just installed as prime minister then, and I came home a few days after, carrying in my pocket a letter from Ngo Dinh Luyen to his brother, Mr. Diem. I [went] to the palace in Saigon to see Mr. Diem, and I brought to him the letter from his brother, Mr. Luyen. I spent plenty of time with him telling him I was in conversations with his brother for quite a long time already, even before he formed his government. Well, I tried to help him a lot in the sense that, if it can be done, we will try to rely on nationalist groups under his banner. He said, "That is all right, but let me think it over." Immediately after that he posted a letter to his older brother, Mr. Nhu, who was present at the meeting, but somehow I never heard from him any more. I was told later on that Mr. Nhu didn't agree with Mr. Luyen about this formula of getting all the nationalist people around Mr. Diem. So it was an indication for me that it was a very strict policy, centered around his family, that Mr. Diem would have as a policy by then. But that is all right because--well, we didn't consider it. I talked to other people in Saigon about this kind of rebirth that we got from Mr. Diem, but we always hoped that somehow he would succeed in stabilizing the situation because the situation then was a very, very messy one, you see. The French

were still there; the Americans were not in. By the way, [Edward] Lansdale was still there. He started already to be around Diem at that time, you see. And General [J.] Lawton Collins was then later, too.

Lansdale and Collins worked very hard toward this policy of bringing in more people to help Mr. Diem. I personally witnessed many attempts from Lansdale and Collins to try to influence Mr. Diem about bringing Dr. Quat, my boss, into the government as minister of defense, or as a vice-prime minister or something of the sort. But again, they failed in it, and we became very much convinced later on that it was a very, very personal policy for Mr. Diem and that it was difficult for the other national groups in Vietnam by then to come and work in cooperation with Mr. Diem. So we stayed outside.

Contrary to expectations, Mr. Diem did succeed in crushing the sects by then--the Binh Xuyen and the other group--and for a time he did quite a good job. And beginning by 1955, 1956, he reestablished the central authority of the government throughout the country, with the help of the Americans by then, because the Americans brought along with the first economic aid to South Vietnam, [which] helped the Vietnamese government to resettle the refugees coming from North Vietnam and the first economic development in South Vietnam. And so my impression, if I can recall it, is that in spite of our disappointment in the sense that we could not collaborate with Mr. Diem, we were very much impressed by the progress made by Mr. Diem in consolidating the authority of the government in his hands and in having control of the situation by then.

G: How long did the situation remain satisfactory, or were you satisfied with the progress?

D: Well, it lasted for at least three or four years, but the resentments came around the last part of the 1950s, if I remember well, around the year of 1960, because there was a coup against Mr. Diem in 1961 already. So if I remember well the situation, I would say that the resentments against Mr. Diem's government began by the end of the 1950s already, yes. And the resentments came mainly from his policy of relying entirely on his family; first his brother, Mr. Nhu, who served as close adviser to him inside the government in the Presidential Palace because Mr. Nhu has an office over there. He relied on his brother, the Bishop of Vinh Long, Bishop Thuc. He relied on his other brother in Central Vietnam, Mr. [Ngo Dinh] Can, and Mrs. Nhu, the first lady, because Mr. Diem was single, and Mrs. Nhu served with us somewhat as a first lady, and so, rightly or wrongly, the people in the outside world had by then the impression that the whole Diem family was ruling the country. He was ruling the country by himself and through his brother and sister-in-law, and that is what the people didn't like. And I think that the resentments against him and his regime start from then, around the year of 1960.

G: Were you in active opposition at any time during this period?

D: Well, I was active in the opposition, but there was not much that the opposition could do at this time. You remember that during the time there was a group of intellectuals; they called them the Caravelle Group. I belonged to the group because all of my friends were in there, Dr. Do, Dr. Quat. I was not arrested after the other people had been arrested, but there was not much we could do by then in terms of opposition. Some statements and some meetings, but apart from that, there was nothing we could do at that time.

G: Was the Can Lao Party Mr. Nhu's organization, his brainchild?

D: Oh, yes. Mr. Nhu was the founding member of the Can Lao Party even before Mr. Diem came back to Saigon to serve as prime minister, because Mr. Nhu was an intellectual and very active in politics by then, and he had his own paper and his own group among the Catholics by then. The whole group of Catholics had been supporting Mr. Diem long before Mr. Diem came back to the country. And I for one, in 1950, was very close to the group because I came out from the Catholic zone of Phat Diem, and even by then--yes, I remember it was in 1949 and 1950, they were very active organizing the partisan groups supporting Mr. Diem by then. They were very active among the Catholics in North Vietnam, in Central Vietnam, and in South Vietnam, too. And so Mr. Nhu was the [inaudible] of the group. He had his own philosophy based on some vague notions taken from the French--by that time, he was in the French university in France, you see. And he founded the Can Lao Party after Mr. Diem came back to power to serve as a conduit for the policy of the government by then. And the Can Lao Party monopolized, in their hands, all the important posts in the government. You had to be in the Can Lao Party to have some access to the government, and if you were not in the Can Lao Party it was very difficult to serve in the government. It was a kind of--well, along the line of the communist style in the sense that the Communists have their own party, the Communist Party, and the government in South Vietnam had its own party, the Can Lao Party, and everything was in the hands of the Can Lao Party.

G: I've heard that Mr. Nhu was fascinated with the communist methods of organization and of--

D: Well, he was very much convinced that in view of beating the Communists that we had to be well organized, and he thought that with his philosophy, and with a very strict organization, he could beat the Communists.

G: They had the same, virtually the same, cell organization?

D: Yes, cell organization, and very strong, united party, the way the Communists' party was and still is around the world.

G: What were you doing for a living about this time? Clearly, you could not make it in the government.

D: Oh, yes. I was by then professor of mathematics, as I have mentioned to you, because I was teaching in a private school in Saigon. But the private school in Saigon at this time was a kind of refuge for the opposition party because the teachers that I knew by then all opposed Mr. Diem. A close friend of mine was later kidnapped by the police of Mr. Diem, and he literally disappeared. Quan Toh is the name of the man, and he used to be in my home, and he taught literature at the school over there, the [inaudible] School, and I taught mathematics. One day when I came to school, I learned that Quan Toh, who was supposed to teach that day, was not present, and inquired about it, and nobody knew about him. A few days later, we learned that he disappeared completely, and from then on, nobody heard about him any more. And people later on told me that Quan Toh was kidnapped by secret police for Mr. Diem. And I don't know if it was under the order of Mr. Nhu or Mr. Diem or not, but somehow, the man disappeared.

G: Was that common? Were there very many people who disappeared at this stage?

D: Well, I don't know if it was common or not, but I know for sure that there are many cases similar to that one, you see. Quan Toh by then opposed strongly the policy of Mr. Diem

and for some sort of reason--many of us opposed Mr. Diem. I opposed Mr. Diem's policy, too, and everyone knew about it, but somehow I was tolerated, but perhaps my friend, Quan Toh, was more active, and he would involve himself in many plots. I don't know, but somehow he was kidnapped and then disappeared.

G: That is enough to make you worry about your future a little bit, I suppose.

D: Oh yes, well, but then there was nothing we could do about Diem, and we went on. I for one tried to be careful not to become too obvious in the opposition against the government by then.

G: Did President Diem oppress the other nationalist parties, the Dai Viet?

D: Oh yes, for sure. He had a very, very special concept about how to rule the country. He felt that he was qualified to rule the country. He trusted only his brothers and sisters, his family, and he had little confidence in other people. The whole family had literally an attitude of contempt *vis-à-vis* other people, and so it was very difficult for anyone to approach Mr. Diem, and the members of the other political parties had no chance at all at that time to work for the government.

G: Were there lots of political prisoners?

D: True, we had political prisoners, but nobody knows exactly the number of the political prisoners. I know for sure that many of my friends were in jail for that, but as far as numbers are concerned, we do not have really any idea about the exact numbers of political prisoners.

G: Let me ask you a question which I have gotten two answers for; I don't know which is correct. President Diem had a program to eliminate the Communist Party, I believe, in South Vietnam. One version is that this was highly successful. The other version is that

his methods only encouraged people to join with the Communists in opposing him. Which is correct, or are they both correct?

D: Well, I happen to have a completely different view about how to fight communism, and so I disagree completely with Mr. Diem's methods of fighting communism. I think that if we want to fight communism, we have to offer to those we try to convince that we have something different from the Communists, something positive, which is completely different from what the Communists offer. So, if we try to imitate the Communists in eliminating them and in adopting exactly the methods used by the Communists we become as ruthless as they are, and, consequently, we do not project the kind of attraction, of sympathy, that we should. And so, just by the fact that Mr. Diem concentrated in his own hands and in the hands of his family the powers for ruling the country, he excluded the other people already. He pushed them against the wall. Many of my friends happened to be strongly nationalist, and it was very difficult for us to side with the Communists, but many of those people, who were excluded from the ranks of the government, were not so much determined, the way we were, against Communists, and they were very much tempted to side with the other side.

And so I think that if there was something wrong in the policy of Mr. Diem by then, it was wrong in the sense that his policy was too tight a policy, and the circle of his friends were [inaudible] limited to those who were around his family or those who were close to him. He didn't have enough understanding and compassion to be able to bring along with him those people who were against the Communists but who, at the same time, expected from him more compassion and more understanding. That is what I consider something wrong with the policy of Mr. Diem, but I have to concede right away

that he projected some image of a well respected central government by then and, as such, he did contribute to something in the history of Vietnam at that time.

G: You mentioned that as early as 1961 there was an attempted coup. I think this was the paratroop [inaudible].

D: Yes, General Thieu, the group of, by then, and Colonel Vuong Van Dong, the whole group who organized the coup of 1961.

G: To your knowledge, did the Americans know about this coup beforehand?

D: I didn't know about it. We knew at that time that something was going on among the Vietnamese political groups. We knew that something was going on, but we didn't know exactly what was going on, and our relations with the Americans were very, very occasional by this time, so I don't know exactly if the Americans were aware of it or not.

G: Did you have good contacts with American journalists during these years?

D: Oh, yes, I had good contacts with American journalists by then. I remember that it was at that time that I began to know some of the very well-known journalists later on: Neil Sheehan from the *New York Times*, who was by then chief of the Associated Press in Saigon, and many of the very famous journalists who became well-known after the coup of Mr. Diem, [David] Halberstam, and so forth.

G: Did you know Keyes Beech?

D: Oh, yes.

G: He has been around a long time, I guess. Did the CIA make attempts to maintain liaison with the dissident groups in Saigon?

D: Yes, I think that they did have contacts with the outside world, but occasional contacts, but, as always, they--and I think that it is one of the characteristics of American policy,

and I used to call it the "legalist version," you see--well, they stick to the legal government that was present at the time, you see, and so the kind of contacts with the outside world was simply contacts, you see, from monitoring the opposition.

G: I am wondering if you knew George Carver at that time.

D: No, I did not know George Carver at that time, but I remember that there was a group of young officers from [the] CIA, who went around and who got in touch with a lot of political dissidents in Saigon but simply for exchanging ideas and so forth.

G: I've always wondered. It puts the Americans in a peculiar position; if they know of a coup beforehand, then what is their legal duty regarding the legal government?

D: Oh, well. We come to the full problem later on with the coup in 1963 because they knew very well that the coup was in preparation, and the attitude by then was clearly against Mr. Diem. In 1963, at least later on.

G: Did you know the men who put on the coup of 1963, Tran Van Don, Big [Duong Van] Minh, and so on?

D: Oh, yes. I knew them very well. I knew Don very well because his brother-in-law, General Le Van Kim--Don's sister was married to Kim--and Kim was a close friend of mine because we served together twice, as assistants for Dr. Quat, Minister of Defense. By the time when Quat was minister of defense in 1953--in 1951 first and later on in 1953--Kim was there helping Quat, and I was there helping Quat, too. So I knew Kim very well, and just by the fact that I knew Kim well, I knew Don well, too. They belonged to the first group of Vietnamese officers; they belonged to the French Army first. Now after the beginning of the formation of the Vietnamese Army, they became Vietnamese officers by then, but they belonged to the French Army before. And Kim

and Don belonged to this first group of Vietnamese officers at the beginning of the formation of the Vietnamese army in the 1950s.

G: Did you know that there was going to be a coup? Were you informed?

D: Oh, yes. Politically speaking, I was along with them in spite of the fact that, militarily speaking, I knew nothing about the preparations for it. But somehow, secretly, we communicated, and personally I knew that the coup was coming, and I served as somewhat of an intermediary between the military group and the outside politicians.

G: I see.

D: But due to the fact that everything was in the hands of the military group, as far as preparations were concerned, as far as plans for the coup, we knew nothing about it, but we knew that there was one coming.

G: Was there discussion of what the government would look like after the coup?

D: That is one part of the problem about which I put down in writing here in my book, and I said, the preparations were mainly military for achieving the coup, but very little attention was paid to the political preparations of the coup, and so consequently after the coup succeeded, there was a period of confusion about what to do in the political field. It was one of the reasons why the counter-coup came three months later after November 1963, because the counter-coup with [Nguyen] Khanh came in January 1964, just three months--yes, November, December, January--just three months. And so it was one of the aspects of the problem about which I am not happy about the coup, because Don and Big Minh were by then the leaders of the coup, and my friend, General Kim, was among the group. But in the same time, Kim did not have the full authority to prepare the political implementation, the political part of the coup. And it was a period of confusion, a lack of

leadership among them, which later on became a kind of motive for Khanh to set up his counter-coup in January 1964.

I had a very long conversation with Kim the other day when I was in Paris about this part of the problem, and I wrote in my book that your generals got together just for applauding the coup, but they did not have any idea about how to rebuild society. The group was more a military group than a politically motivated group like the one in Egypt with [President Mohammed] Naguib and [Gamal Abdel] Nasser later on, because it was said that those military people behind Nasser at that time had very precise ideas about how to lead the country and what kind of social reforms the country was needing by then. And I said in my book that due to the fact that the military group in Vietnam got together just for plotting the coup, they were not united anymore [inaudible] after the coup succeeded. And I used a Vietnamese saying characterizing them, "They are in the same beds, but they have different dreams." There is a Vietnamese saying to this effect, [speaks Vietnamese]. It means that, well, [that] you are in the same beds, but you have different dreams. And so many of these people in the military group, they have different ideas about how to do things and they have their personal missions, and Big Minh was not the leader: too lazy, lack of vision and so forth. And for some sort of shyness--well, it is very difficult to characterize it--but some sort of distant attitude *vis-à-vis* the Americans, and [Henry Cabot] Lodge was very unhappy about it. Lodge was very unhappy about it. He tried to--I said in my book that the relations were very, very difficult between the Big Minh group and the United States Embassy by then, and again I said in my book that it was the fault of the Americans as well as the fault of the Big Minh group. [It was] the fault of the Americans in the sense that the Americans were too

happy to have the coup succeed in 1963, November, and after that, well, they let the Vietnamese do anything they wanted. And so the Americans had practically no idea about what it would lead to.

But Kim, in my last conversation in Paris, just a month ago, told me that they tried very much to have close contacts with the Americans, but for some sort of reason, Big Minh was aloof, and so Lodge was very, very unhappy about it. Lodge talked to Don many times about the need for the two sides to get together, to map out common planning and so forth, but Big Minh was very, very, very reluctant to join the group, and he delegated the powers to Don. And the line of authority inside the military group was rather confused. The titular head was Big Minh, but as with many things brought to his attention, he delayed the decisions or he didn't want to take the responsibility for it, and so the government was in a sort of disarray during this period of time, for three months, and Khanh by then took advantage of this situation. He plotted along with some other ambitious generals, and it was the coup of January 1964.

And here it is very interesting because there are many versions to this coup of 1964, what we call the counter-coup. This man, Jasper Wilson, was the adviser to Khanh, and when Khanh came back to Saigon, Wilson was with him, and the whereabouts of Khanh were well known to the Americans, very well known to the Americans. So the Vietnamese generals, particularly Kim and Don, thought that the Americans knew about the counter-coup but didn't try to prevent it, simply by the fact that General [Paul D.] Harkins, who was then still commander of the American forces, had a grudge against Don and Kim before because Don and Kim did not inform Harkins about the coming of the November coup, and from then on, Harkins had hard feelings

about it, and he tolerated the coup from Khanh. There was another version to the fact that Lodge knew about the counter-coup. He was informed about it, but he dismissed it as rumors, and he didn't pay much attention. He had to face a situation of *fait accompli* after the coup, and he justified his attitude in a cable back to the States saying that somehow the leadership from Big Minh was too [inaudible], and there are so many rumors about Kim and Don being nationalists that the coup was done, but we accept it.

G: The Americans liked Khanh after they got to know him.

D: Well, many American advisers knew Khanh before, but I don't think that Lodge knew him before, and so I would say that it is a kind of half *fait accompli*, half tolerance from Harkins, and half ignorance on the part of the Americans, and the Americans had to accept it. The Vietnamese, as you know, have a conspiratorial mind, and they thought that the Americans were behind every move. I happen to think that the Americans knew a lot but not the whole thing, and sometimes the Americans have been compelled to catch up with many situations, and we call the situation a *fait accompli*. But it was somehow a kind of very murky situation by then, and the final effect of this counter-coup was a disaster for South Vietnam and, from my personal point of view, was one of the causes which led to the American involvement later because after the coup of Nguyen Khanh in January 1964, for the whole period of 1964, there was, practically speaking, no government at all. Coups and counter-coups, governments and change of governments, and all of the farce continued for the whole year of 1964, and when this farce continued in Saigon, the situation in the countryside deteriorated up to the point that, in 1965, the American administration had to come to the conclusion that, "We have to save the

Vietnamese in spite of the Vietnamese," and that was one of the main causes of the huge involvement in 1965, the commitment of the group troops in July 1965.

So coming back to the coup of Mr. Diem--and we have a lot of things to say about the coup of Mr. Diem--but immediately after the coup of Mr. Diem, there was a sort of neglected attitude on the part of the Americans. The Americans were so much involved in the coup of Mr. Diem--all of us know about it right now--that it was incredible for the Americans not to get involved after the coup of Mr. Diem as if, after the coup of Mr. Diem, the Americans said that, "Woof! That is all right now. Everything is all right now," you see, after the coup of Mr. Diem. They knew practically nothing about what Big Minh was planning to do. They didn't even try to influence Big Minh in spite of the tremendous bargaining power they had in their hands after the coup. The communications, for some sort of reason--perhaps the fault of the Vietnamese, perhaps the fault of the Americans--were sketchy among Americans and Vietnamese, and the coup of 1964 happened. [It] was the whole period of upheaval for the whole year of 1964, and we come to 1965, and by then the Americans in Washington took the decision, "We have to save the Vietnamese in spite of themselves." And there was the commitments of large troops in 1965, beginning by the landing of the marines in March and culminating with the commitment of a large number of ground troops in July 1965.

G: When did you come into government?

D: I came into government at the beginning of 1965 with Dr. Quat again, as prime minister, at the end of this roller-coaster period of 1964.

G: What was your position under Dr. Quat?

D: I was a minister, a member of the cabinet. They call it minister of the prime minister's office. It means, well, a kind of chief of staff for Quat with rank of a cabinet minister by then.

G: I see. Did you have liaison with the Americans at some level?

D: Oh, yes, by that time, it was fully in liaison with the American Embassy by then. General Taylor, with Westmoreland just coming in to replace Harkins and with the deputy ambassador, [U.] Alexis Johnson, so the whole burden of relations with the American Embassy in Saigon fell on my shoulders.

G: When did you--you'll forgive me for taking an aside--but when did you start to study English?

D: Oh, well, I don't know. I started learning English in 1952 when I was in France.

G: [inaudible]

D: My wife was in a sanatorium in the southern part of France, you see, not too far from Geneva, and we ran into a couple, and the man had his wife in the sanatorium, too. He was a professor of English at the University of [inaudible] in Switzerland, and so I began to learn English from then on. Of course, at high school I learned English, but it was just a kind of rudimentary English.

G: Who was your counterpart in the United States Embassy? Who did you usually work with?

D: Well, it was most of the time with Ambassador Johnson, the deputy ambassador, Alex Johnson. And General Taylor himself. Yes. And I remember there was a man who served as a representative from the embassy, by then, but for important conversations it

was always with Ambassador Johnson and Ambassador Taylor. The man was Chet Burden, it seems to me. I remember the name.

G: What resource--or what was the name?

D: Chet Burden. He served as liaison between the United States Embassy and the Vietnamese government, setting up meetings and conferences, but for discussions on important matters, we have always Ambassadors Johnson and Ambassador Taylor.

G: I see.

D: Yes. And yes, there was the political counselor, by then, Mansfield.

G: Oh yes, yes.

D: Mansfield. I remember that I was called to draft a *communiqué* about the landings of the marines in March 1965, and I drafted a *communiqué* with Mansfield by then.

G: Was Philip Habib still there?

D: No, Philip Habib came later on, you see, with [Nguyen Cao] Ky, at the end of 1965. Philip Habib came later on at the end of 1965 when Mansfield left by then, and Habib came to replace him, Mansfield.

G: How did you come to be named ambassador to the United States?

D: Well, I said in my book that "Man proposes, but God disposes," you see. I was serving with a different title in the Ky government, after the Quat [government]. The Quat government served for only four months, and after that it was the Ky government. I didn't expect to stay in the Ky government because I did not know Ky by then, but somehow, Ky asked Quat to talk to me. Politically speaking, I should not [have] stayed because I know that I was the minister and the prime minister was Quat, so politically speaking, I could not stay. But somehow they convinced Quat that I had to stay to help

Ky for a little while, and so I stayed with Ky, knowing very little about the military by then. But, little by little, I tried to convince them about the necessities of having a constitutional government and they accepted the idea, and little by little, I stayed over. So I stayed with Ky for more than a year, beginning June 1965, to December 1966, going through the Honolulu Conference in February 1966, and going through the Manila Conference in October 1966. And around the end of 1966, somehow I made the decision not to stay in the government, first, because I was subjected then to a campaign of criticism from a lot of generals. They thought that, first of all, I am a northerner, and they thought that I was the man behind Ky for a lot of things--because I am the right-hand man behind Ky, and I was instrumental in the reorganization of the system, which could jeopardize their interests, especially in the removal of the corps commanders, the military corps commanders. So they didn't like it, and I was subjected to a lot of criticism, and I was fed up with that, and at the same time, after the Manila Conference, I got sick. I got a bout of flu, very serious flu, and so I said to Ky, "Well, the more I stay in the government, the more you would be exposed to criticism in the sense that there are too many northerners in the government, and so probably it is better for me to get outside, and from the outside, I think I can be more helpful to you than in staying inside the government." It was after the Manila Conference in October 1966.

Ky did not reply to my request at all. He said that he needed time to think it over. I stuck to my decision, and I repeated my request a week later around November 1966, but by then Ky said, "No. It is impossible that we let you go free like that. We need a man in Washington right now because next year will be a very important year in the U.S., and the situation in South Vietnam is quite stabilized, and so I don't expect too many

troubles here. But I see the situation developing in the United States, and we need our man over there."

I made a counter-proposal to Ky by then. I said, "Well, if you want to send me abroad, well, I have a choice. I would like to go to Japan." Somehow I had a weakness for the Japanese by then and, in fact, right now I have received here a lot of cables from Tokyo congratulating me for being appointed ambassador to Tokyo. Somehow, the leaks came out, and they knew about it, and they sent cables to me, congratulating me, but it was too early for congratulation. He said that, "No, it is impossible. We made our decision already. You have to go to Washington." But, by then, I ran into some sort of difficulties.

I have a friend in Washington, Vu Van Thai, who was by then ambassador in Washington. He was a friend of mine, and I had a lot of respect for him, and to a large degree I was instrumental in convincing him to leave the United Nations to become ambassador. So I said to Ky, "It is impossible. I could not do that to a friend of mine." Ky said that, "No. We have made our decision already, and if it is necessary, I am going to make some arrangements for Vu Van Thai, but we have to send you to Washington." So I made the arrangements for Thai to the effect that he would appointed minister of economy in Saigon. We called Thai back to Saigon, but he refused to be a minister of economy by then. But again the military government stuck to their decision, said, "No, we want to send you to Washington." So I had to make all the arrangements with Thai to the effect that he would be appointed ambassador to Argentina and to Brazil, you see, staying in Washington but covering Argentina and Brazil. And only after that, I accepted

to come to Washington and, by then, it was December 1966. I came here and presented my letter of credentials to President Johnson on January 16, 1967.

G: What were your impressions of President Johnson?

D: I liked him as a man. During my years in Washington, 1967 and 1968, I witnessed a lot of difficult situations in which he tried to do his best from his own opinions. Perhaps his best did not fit with the situation by then, but he was very much anxious to solve the problem of Vietnam. He did not succeed, but not by lack of sincerity from his part, by lack of force from his part. Perhaps he was too much half-way between everything. Perhaps his policy was too much a policy of consensus by then, getting all the points of view of his advisers and devising some sort of middle way between the conflicting advice from his advisers. But as a man, as a president who tried hard in the problem of Vietnam, we have to concede that he tried hard. He didn't succeed, but not for lack of force from his part.

Comparing his administration with the administration which followed him, the Nixon Administration, for instance, I think that apart from considerations of policy of the U.S. *vis-à-vis* the world, he had a lot of compassion for the Vietnamese, and the notion of geopolitical considerations. Cold War calculation was not as obvious as during the Nixon Administration, for instance. You remember that even by the time when the U.S. was in the midst of the war in 1965 and 1966, partly, perhaps, for tactical reasons--but I think that partly because he was sincere in it, too--he talked a lot about the nation-building effort, the kind of help that the U.S. was trying to provide for the villages in terms of schools, in terms of hospitals, in terms of fertilizers for the peasants, and so forth. So one can say that he did that because the opposition in the United States by then

said that he was a warmonger, and he had to focus his attention on the other aspects of the war. Perhaps part of it was true, but we have to concede that the other part of it in him was sincere, too, in the sense that he had his own Great Society in the U.S. He had a lot of social ideas about it, you see, and rightly or wrongly, he brought these ideas to Vietnam. And perhaps inside himself, he believed sincerely that in helping Vietnam in fighting against communism, in helping Vietnam to build up a new society in Vietnam, he was doing exactly the same thing that he was doing in the U.S. So in that sense, I think that I have more sympathy for President Johnson than with the other people who followed him later, because later on it was a matter of policy, it was a matter of geopolitical considerations, and how does the U. S. get out, and so forth, see.

G: That is a very apt comparison, I think. I think I have used all of my time.

D: Thank you.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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