Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history interview with Ambassador Bui Diem on the 29th of October, 1999 at 1:40 p.m. in the Southwest Collections Building on Texas Tech University campus. Ambassador Diem, I just had a few questions with regard to your book, *In the Jaws of History*, and in reviewing and reading it a couple of questions have come to mind especially with regard to President Ngo Dinh Diem. And in the chapter where you cover the Japanese occupation during World War II and Vietnam, and you mention that Ngo Dinh Diem, and I guess his brother Nhu (Ngo Dinh Nhu) had allied themselves with the Japanese, and you allude to the fact that perhaps this was Diem looking to the future, that this was one way to become Prime Minister or President of South Vietnam. I was wondering if you could explain in a little bit more detail the effects that that had on the political situation in South Vietnam when President Diem came back in 1954…when…especially when it became evident that the Japanese were not very friendly, were not…this was not going to be a good ally to the Vietnamese, and did that have an impact on the way the South Vietnamese people received him?

Bui Diem: Well, to try to answer your question, I would say that I come back to an earlier period of the history of Vietnam, I mean the period during which we were still under the domination of the French. I am talking of the period of ah, between 1930 to 1945. During this period of time, as you have noted already, many Vietnamese patriots tried to have contact with the outside world, in view of securing their help, and securing their help for getting back the independence for the country. They went to China, they went to France, and they went to Japan. Many of the nationalists from Vietnam went to Japan, and among them of course we have those
people who were predecessors of Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, and it was known at that time that there was a Prince of Vietnam, called Prince Cuong De, C-U-O-N-G D-E. Prince Cuong De was the one who went to Japan, and at least according to what people in Vietnam knew by then. Prince Cuong De along with all the nationalists try to ask the Japanese to help Vietnam for attaining the independence. There is during this period of time, a lot of people: nationalist parties, communist parties, all of that, have their focus on the independence of the country. I would like to mention right away that here there is a difference between the nationalist party and the communist party. The communist party said, by then, that they want the independence of the country. But beyond the independence of the country, even then, they talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat, the class struggle, and they expressed openly their views about how to reform the society along Marxist-Leninist Theory. At the same time the nationalist party, the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang party, the Vietnam Duy Dan party, and all the nationalist parties because they are a lot, a lot of nationalist parties with small differences in terms of philosophy between them. But the main thing I would like to say, to mention here is their main focus was on the independence of Vietnam, and there is a lot of views about how they would construct the society after getting the independence of Vietnam, and you’ll see that there is a big difference over there. I come to the other point, for saying that it is not true, at least according to the communist propaganda, that they were the only one to fight for the independence of the country. During this period of time all the Vietnamese, whether they are nationalist, or whether they are communist, all of us we voted for the independence of the country. And the nationalist parties suffer as much as the communist party in terms of people in jail, people executed, or, well, expatriated to some far away land. Kings of Vietnam were sent abroad. So the two points by which I try to draw the attention of the historian is that the communist party expressed clearly their preferences in terms of how to build the Vietnamese society of the future. The nationalist parties voted for the independence of the country, but well, for a lack of focus, they did not mention this part of their program. Consequently, if we talk about the whole period of 1930 to 1945, before the revolutions organized by the communists in August 1945, we have to say that all Vietnamese, whether they are nationalists or communists, we fought for the independence of the country. Now coming back to your question, I would say that among the many groups of Vietnamese who went abroad, whether to France or to some other countries, there was a group who went to Japan, and the leader of these groups was Prince Cuong De. And Mr. Diem was
supposed to belong to this group of people who follow Prince Cuong De. At that time in Vietnam we had a lot of rumors about, well, Mr. Diem is from the group of Prince Cuong De, and that it explains the reason why later on there was a lot of questions about why the Japanese did not push up his candidacy to become Prime Minister in 1945, and instead of doing that they tried to push the candidacy of my uncle, Prince Cuong De. I think that there are a lot of…a lot of mystery about the attitude of the Japanese by then. And…myself, I try to have some clarification about it, but I couldn’t get all the clarification that I wanted. In 19….1991 I came to Paris and I had a very long conversation with the former Emperor, Emperor Bao Dai. And I ask him about this period of time. I got along quite well with the former emperor and later on, later on quite frequently I got along with him and we had a lot of conversation about our past. And he said to me, and he was confirmed later, in a book of my Uncle Prince Cuong De, that evidently in 1945 after the defeat of the Japanese in August 1945, Emperor Bao Dai tried to contact Mr. Diem. But for some reason, some reason that we didn’t know about, the Japanese military people elude the question. They said to Emperor Bao Dai, “Well, we tried to contact him but we don’t know where he is right now,” but in fact but Mr. Diem was in contact with the Japanese every day! Every day! The Japanese brought back my uncle, Tran Trong Kim from Singapore. My uncle was this scholar, he was not a politician. He did not have any political mission out. The Japanese military authorities invited my Uncle Prince Cuong De to their headquarters in Saigon after they brought him back from Singapore. They invite him to their headquarters and they told him that, well, Emperor Bao Dai invite him to go to Hue. But after the conversation with the military authorities, my uncle came out of the room and run into Mr. Diem! Run into Mr. Diem! And, incredibly Mr. Diem asked my uncle, “What is going on? What is going on?” Well, my uncle was very, very amazed to hear that because he thought that Mr. Diem was in close touch with the Japanese, he should know more than my uncle about what was going on! So it means that the Japanese kept Mr. Diem in the dark, [?]. Later on, my uncle went to Hue to get along with Emperor Bao Dai there. The first question that my uncle asked Emperor Bao Dai was, “Why didn’t you ask Mr. Diem to phone the government?” Because he’s a well-known politician, and he has many contacts outside the country. Emperor Bao Dai said that, “Well, I did ask the Japanese to contact Mr. Diem but somehow they say that they could not contact him, time is running out and I had to ask you to phone the government!” So that is exactly the situation. Emperor Bao Dai confirms it, and my uncle confirm it, and you know the book that he
wrote about it, this period of time. Now…back to your overall questions about the Japanese. I
would say that nobody really understood them, the real intentions of the Japanese. Publicly, they
talk about the cold posterity, yeah, they talking about it. But their way of operating is
somewhat…mysterious. I have by then a number of contacts with the Japanese when I want to
steal them, and they gave me the impression that they had definite ideas about what could be the
future of Vietnam. But they didn’t say in more precise terms of what it could be. They simply
said to me that, “Well, we are all Asian,” you see, “and we are together, we are going to help
you…” and so on. But in terms of precise conditions under which Vietnam could emerge after
the defeat of the allied powers into something…is a mystery that I couldn’t understand by then.
So I was somewhat on the defensive, somewhat, in terms of going full blast with the Japanese,
and in fact my uncle later on told me that, “Well, you have to be careful,” you see, because we
didn’t know really what are their intentions.

SM: Well you mention in your book that the… I guess it’s Yamaguchi? Is that right…
BD: Yeah, Yamaguchi.
SM: …he ah…and when he first showed up to your, I guess it was your uncle’s house,
that it was very difficult to tell what his intentions were and there was I guess some speculation,
he was perhaps was even Kempetai?
BD: Not really Kempetai, but what they called it, a…a [?] group, they call it Black
Dragon.
SM: Oh these are…ok.
BD: Black Dragon.
SM: …they called it, the Japanese called it...
BD: The Japanese called it, they called it Black Dragon. Yeah. But ah, he never
admitted to…yeah…
SM: Well the other thing that you mentioned in your book in terms of your interacting
with, your interaction with Yamaguchi, is you do mention that when the Japanese started to take
action and there was violence, that you distanced…you tried to distance yourself…
BD: Yeah…because of the feeling I have by then that I just described to you.
SM: Yes sir. So I was wondering if, if your concern was based upon the fact that a lot of
Vietnamese people might not…appreciate someone, a Vietnamese whom had a strong alliance
with the Japanese? Given the strength of President Diem’s contact and alliance with the
Japanese, did that have a negative impact at all on the Vietnamese perception of him when he returned in ’54, or…

BD: No, because that well…we need by that time outside help, and even with the reservations we had about the Japanese, if really the Japanese came to help, it would be welcome. But by major, the Vietnamese at that time were cautious in their contacts with the outside world. And I did mention later on that, well, they have a more favorable impression of the Americans than with the other ones. Now, talking about the French, the French want to come back and to keep Vietnam as a colony. The Chinese…we suffer a lot from the Chinese during our history. And the presence of the very undisciplined troops of [?] on the territory of North Vietnam didn’t give us a good impression of the Chinese. The English, they…went along with the French because they have the British Empire and the France they have the French Empire. And they tend to view the French in a more favorable way than the Americans. The Japanese? We saw them during the period between ’41 and ’45; they are very brutal. The Kempetai was very efficient. So this all in all lasted with the Americans. The Americans were known to favor democracy, the Americans were known to be anti-colonialists. And President Roosevelt was known to be in favor of a trusteeship for Vietnam, the UN trusteeship; UN trusteeship means that, well, Vietnam would be under the control of the UN for a period of time, they called it UN trusteeship, and after that Vietnam would become independent. No wonder this time were more in better light than the Americans, and so, well, it was quite obvious, quite natural that we look upon the American as natural allies of the Vietnamese people. There is no mystery about it, there is nothing fancy about it, it is quite natural. Yeah.

SM: So what did you think, then, of Ho Chi Minh’s actions, immediately after World War II; especially when he…although obviously being a communist in terms of his political philosophy…his, my understanding is he actually had worked with a number of American OSS operatives…

BD: Yes, with…

SM: …and of course when he wrote the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence and made that announcement…it’s a mirror of the American Declaration…

BD: The Declaration of Independence, yes…

SM: So did the Vietnamese people in the South, did they agree with that particular philosophy, and…
BD: Well they agreed entirely with him, except for the fact that, well, later on…we discovered that Ho Chi Minh and his group did it just out of…of desire and to have an appearance of nationalists covering their, their….intention of becoming a communist later. Now the question comes up quite often about whether Ho Chi Minh is a nationalist or a communist you see. I do not deny that Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist. But…his love of communism preceded his nationalism to the extent that later on his nationalism simply served as a vehicle for him to attain the stage of his ambition. It means that well, to convert Vietnam into a real communistic country….so the question of, the question about whether Viet…Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist or a communist, well from my point of view it is irrelevant in the senses that well, the development of the situation in Vietnam long after their coming to power clearly demonstrated whether Ho Chi Minh was a communist first or a nationalist first. As a nationalist myself…when the war broke out…again the French in 1946…I was torn by a kind of dilemma…I was a nationalist so I had to fight for the independence for the country, there is no doubt about it you see. But in the same time deep in myself, deep in myself because I know them the way they operated….in the relations, down at the level of the relation with Vietnam. Deep in myself I felt that, well, one of these days. Along with all the nationalist I’m going to be squeezed out because clearly they became even by then, they became even by then to influence the communism of the level of the relations you see. And it is quite a dilemma for all the nationalists. To fight against the French, we have to do it. But we knew that, well, we couldn’t stay everlastingly with the communists because, well, one of these days, as soon as they have your opportunity, they are going to try to exterminate you. It was clear from all of us, and so it was quite a difficult…a difficult situation. We were torn in our confines by this kind of dilemma.

SM: How much do you think though that…was Ho Chi Minh, than perhaps some of the other communist leadership…how much were they pushed toward communism? And I ask this in the context of…in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese delegation try to get in touch with President Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles Treaty Meetings to talk about independence for various colonies, and Vietnamese independence, and he was snubbed. That was of course by the supposed democracies; United States, Great Britain, France, and so Ho Chi Minh’s options and the Vietnamese nationalists or the people who
were Vietnamese trying to get freedom for Vietnam, their options became very limited as a result of that; they were pushed aside. Who else could they turn to but the Soviet Union?

BD: To a certain degree it was right, because that…you remember that after the second World War, the main focus of the U.S. policy was to reconstruct a job. And even by then there was the beginning of the Cold War already. And consequently…the Americans were not that much interested in helping Ho Chi Minh and the group. Obviously, perhaps out of necessity, Ho Chi Minh [...] tried to conduct the American [...] Because they need the help from the outside world for counter-balancing the French, counter-balancing the Chinese. But I look back at the records of the state department by then, and I have discovered that, well, there is not a single interest on the side of the Americans. I remember there is some kind of memorandum from Burns. The Americans, after an initial interest, [...] to help Ho Chi Minh [...] during the [...] period. But immediately after that the Americans seemed to withdraw from the game. And it became very obvious later, and I did mention it in one of my writings in the book. During...the period of the Bao Dai regime in Saigon...and almost around the end of the first Indochina war around 1953 and something like that...the French still drag their feet and did not give us the full independence that we want. And Bao Dai by then organized a kind of gathering of all the political groups and spiritual families of Vietnam...my uncle was the chairman of this conference. And we expressed our wishes to be independent. But the French were listed there, they said to us, “Well okay, you can have independence, but it would be within the French union.” In very vague terms. What does it mean French union? Nobody understands what is a French union. But this conventions of all the Vietnamese and national group stated clearly in their resolution that they want full independence; they don’t want anything whatsoever about the French union. It was brutal, against the French. The resolutions were prepared, and the draft of the resolution was really for...voted the next day. And, we were then contacted by the Americans. A friend of mine, Mr. H[...], said to me that, “Well I understand that you are close to Mr. Prince Cuong De which is men of these conventions, and over there you are almost ready to work on a resolution about the French union.” And so just among France, and I would say that, “Well, it looks as if it is too radical, the resolution you see.” And, “Do you want to see the U.S. Ambassador?” And...I got back to my friends and I ask them whether or not I should see the U.S. Ambassador. And they say that’s okay, well I haven’t seen the U.S. Ambassador to...and we would perhaps have a better understanding of the American position. And the next day I had
an appointment with Ambassador Donald Heath you see. He was a very diplomatic…a very, very skillful diplomat; he explained to me that the U.S. is fully in favor of the independence of Vietnam. But let’s say that the resolution is too strong. And asked him, “Why do you think that it is too strong? Want our independence and the French union is something that we do not understand. What kind of ties they are going to have on us with the French union?” And Ambassador Heath told me that, well, he understood all these things, but, “Well…you have to understand that in Europe we have to be very, very flexible with the French because there is a problem of…European defense community, and that it is better not to shock the French with all these kind of strong resolution. Anyway you are having independence, and how about having a more diplomatic resolution for independence?” you see. So I understand now, and I think that by then I began to understand that there are many facets to American foreign policy and American diplomacy. It is a kind of global interest. The Vietnamese had by then a halt in the independence of the country, but the Americans have other consideration. They have, well, in mind, the reconception of their offer. They have to keep the French within the European community defense organization, something like that. So I’m talking about this because I come back to your questions about the first period of contacts between Ho Chi Minh, [?], and the Americans by then. To say that…soul circumstances, perhaps independent of their will, most Americans view the group communists, did not get closer by then. Nobody knows…what could be the future if the two sides got closer than they were by then; nobody knows because it is a kind of iffy question right now. But the fact is that Ho Chi Minh and [?] were left alone to deal with the French and the Chinese. When the communists were left alone to deal with the French and the Chinese, the French were already in the south part of Vietnam by then with the help of the English generosity and the French to have sudden troops in…down in South Vietnam. So the communist group, by then, have to face the Chinese and the French. They have to make a choice. The Chinese with their presence, help the nationalist party of Vietnam book them down [?] the group. The communist knew too that the French want to return to North Vietnam and that they were, at this point, negotiating with the Chinese about the extra-territorial rights with Tchang Kai Shek and so forth. The Chinese government still under [?] by then, didn’t have much sympathy for the plight of the Vietnamese. They accepted the problem, though, from the French, to the effect that they would get back all the things that they lost before in China and some other places, and in the same time let the French have the rights to come back to North
Vietnam. The communist group, they ponder the situation. They jumped on the opportunity to get rid of the Chinese first. And they began to negotiated with the French [?]. Later on there was a lot of, a lot of jokes about Ho Chi Minh, when people ask him why did he accept the French to come back to North Vietnam and he said that, “Well, to smell the crap the Chinese from the French for a few years is better than to smell the other thing for a hundred years more before,” you see. (ha ha ha). I think that to a certain extent he was right. In terms of strategy he was right. But anyway, he accept the French and sign an agreement with [Sainteny] to the effect that Vietnam become not yet an independent country…but it stated within the French union. Even by then they talk about French union, but nobody knows exactly…because when they talk about French union they say that it would be negotiated later. But they mention the term of French union, the state…the state of Vietnam within the French union. The French would have the authority to stay in Vietnam for five years…during such a period of time the final status of Vietnam would be negotiated between France and Vietnam. And besides, when the Chinese left North Vietnam already, and when the French began to come to North Vietnam we began a period of negotiation between the Ho Chi Minh regime and France, and you know the result. First of all, there was a conference in Dalat and the French, well, really did behave badly because during the conference they tried to resuscitate a kind of irrational government in South Vietnam just to keep South Vietnam apart from North Vietnam. After the failure of the conference in Dalat, they had another conference in France. The conference, it was in France because Ho Chi Minh thought that by then the communist party in France was strong and that he could rely on the French communist party to help him. But to no avail, because at, well, at the end of a long period they signed what they call a modus vivendi and later on broken between the two parties and we have there first what we called the Indochina War.

SM: This discussion about whether or not Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist first or a communist first is an interesting one in the context of the Vietnam War as part of the Cold War. And, when you became politically involved in Vietnam, in Vietnamese politics and as a student, as a young man leading up to what became the American war in Vietnam, how much, how well was it understood that, from the American standpoint what was happening in Vietnam was a part of this bigger picture, this bigger global cold war, was that well understood by Vietnamese generally or Vietnamese politicians?
BD: I would say that...the Vietnamese fought the [?] the South. Became an interaction in the American...mostly beginning after the Geneva Agreement in 1954. You remember that...the Americans reluctantly accepted to participate in the Geneva Agreement in 1954. And all in all the Secretary of State did not even want to participate personally during the period of the Geneva Conference and he asked his deputy general Bedel Smith to be his representative over there. For the Americans by then it was already the Cold War. And the intention of Secretary of State Foster Dulles was to keep - as strong as possible - the power of Vietnam away from communist control, and in view of doing that, after the Geneva Agreement in 1954 he began right away to organize the SEATO Group, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization Group. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia did not belong to the SEATO Group, but the SEATO Group serves as umbrella for covering the three countries; South Vietnam, and Laos, and Cambodia. And it is mainly this period of time that the Vietnamese became so interested in the Americans,. They knew that the Americans helped the French during the first Indochina War. Now the Geneva Agreement stipulated clearly that the French have to be withdrawn from Vietnam. Again the problem is how the Vietnamese can rely on another country and the Americans come right away at...on the spot. The Vietnamese look upon the Americans as the ones who initiated the Marshall plan in Europe. After one who helped the Greek to fight against communism over there, after one who fought against communism, the communist troops in Korea...so almost everywhere the Americans appeared to be the defense of freedom and democracy. Later on, you have...to be in the eyes of the Vietnamese when the words of John F. Kennedy would sit in the world speech...we bury the boat, and all this problem is to help those people who fight for freedom. And even before that, with John Foster Dulles, the kind of statement from John Foster Dulles were moralistic in tone, anti-communistic and [?], so it is quite natural for the Vietnamese and accessories over in the south to go have some possibility in looking to the outside world instead of being closer like the ones in North Vietnam. When the South Vietnamese look at the world, they see the American...in the way that I just described to you . And so they can see that the American...the kind of natural alliance for them, to help them get the kind of freedom and the kind of beginning of democracy that they are by then.

SM: Was there any concern early on that...one of the important Cold War policy statements of course occurs in the 1950’s...late 1940’s, early 1950’s; the evolution of the
American containment doc, and basically that the United States would just try to put a ring around the…

BD: Yes.

SM: …Soviet Union, keep communist countries enclosed and then hopefully, eventually, the road there…

BD: Oh yes, because there…if we talking about the peasant down in the Delta, perhaps these people don’t understand really what does it mean, Cold War? But for the political classes in Vietnam, they understood very well that North Vietnam belonged to the group of communist, well, it was after Geneva Agreement already 1954 so the regime in Beijing was quite well established already, and there was regimes in Moscow. And it was clearly on the other side of the fence, North Vietnam. And on this side of the fence, well, we have the Americans. And so the Cold War concept was readily accepted by the political classes of South Vietnam immediately after 1954.

SM: Well…what happened to the Vietnamese nationalist sentiment that existed prior to the French-Indochina War and then the partition of Vietnam, North and South? Just as there was a desire in North Vietnam to reunify the country, was there…about the same…

BD: You touch upon a very important point which from my own point of view is a very important point of the origin of the war later on. The North Vietnamese, in going to Geneva, has the idea that they have victory in their hands after beating the French at Dien Bien Phu. They were later disappointed by the attitude of the Russians and the Chinese. The Russians and the Chinese had their own consideration in mind than the one of the North Vietnamese, exactly the way the American and the French, they have all the consideration in mind of the Vietnamese in the South. But somehow the end result was, to the disappointment of the communist in North Vietnam, the partition of the country into two parts, north of the 17th parallel and south of the 17th parallel you see. It is along the line of North Korea, South Korea, East Germany, West Germany. Okay, but the North Vietnamese communist, they were disappointed by this kind of end result of the Geneva Agreement. U.S. was very militant, very….very…determined to go ahead with their dream. Their dream by then was more than South Vietnam. Their dream by then was to control completely the Indochina peninsula. Because well, in the early thirties, 1931, they didn’t have the Vietnamese communist party, but they have the Indochina communist party. So their mission was a very very determined mission. To reunify the country was a very
legitimate aspiration. Now, the reason that they are apart. In South Vietnam…it was a different thinking, different…different disposition. Before the Geneva Agreement, they had to struggle hard to have the independence of the country, recognized by the French later on and by the United States, by Great Britain, and by what we call the Western World. But it was a recognition in paper more than in fact. After the Geneva Agreement, they have an important meeting to have it in facts. Well, we have the southern part of the country, we can organize the country the way we want it, and we are recognized by the Western World. What could be a bad possibility? So we concentrated our forces, we knew that one of these days we have to reunify the country, but the attitude was more passive than active, while the North Vietnamese were very active. The South Vietnamese were passive; we accept that willingly the South would fall because we cannot organize the country, later on perhaps and in the future through peaceful means the country could be reunited. But we’re not in a rush to ask for reunification of the country just for the sake of it and having war; we didn’t want a war! But the North Vietnamese were different in terms of mentality. They want to reunify the country at any cost and to organize a war against the south. So on one side it was a very active, active policy pushing toward reunification even if it would be at the cost of a war, and [?] a war. But the South Vietnamese were different. We’re not asking you, we’re very happy to have South Vietnam. We’ll wait for a time when perhaps reunification will come so much easier. And that is one very important part of the origins of the war. Very, very important part of the origin. And so, later on the development of the war with the American’s coming in, and with the kind of limitations that the American’s imposed on the war, no invasion of North Vietnam, no trespassing along the borders to Laos and Cambodia and so forth. It was strictly the defensive portion, for the other side it was different. For them it was a full scale war, going to Cambodia, going to Laos, if necessary and getting back to the [?] if we have to do it but returning to Vietnam later. It’s a kind of very, very active policy that they pursued. While on our side, including with the Americans, the mentality of the South Vietnamese, the kind of restraints that the American policy on their intervention in South Vietnam made it that we were more on the defensive than the North Vietnamese. It’s a very important point to characterize the war, at least from my own point of view.

SM: Now…does that, do you think that that was a strength then for the North? You mentioned before that one of the differences between the communists and the nationalists was that the communists were, even during the earlier struggles, were more active, more organized…
BD: More organized…

SM: …and the nationalist sat back a lot more, and do you think that that contributed to their abilities to get people mobilized, to organize for the war and eventually to…

BD: I think that we have recognized that it is a kind of weakness of the nationalist party. If we talk in terms of political structure, they were better organized than we were. No doubt about it. With the French…and we have to remember that the political classes of Vietnam went to French universities a lot. And to that extent they were individualistic like the French. The North Vietnamese communists were under strict control from the communistic party; very, very strict control. And consequently there was not much opening for them to have all the ideas and the ideas provoked by the party by the Marxist-Leninist group over there. But in South Vietnam it was quite different. We were not yet a democracy in the real terms of the word, but to a certain degree we had more freedom than those people in the north. And that is the reason why you have, in South Vietnam, a proliferation of political parties. And after years of Mr. Diem’s regime the system of government by then was…a paternalistic traditionalist regime because Mr. Diem himself is such a person. And consequently in spite of the fact that there are many political groups, only the government of groups of Mr. Diem prosper. In terms of difference between the North and the South, you have this kind of situation and even later…during…what we called the second republic of South Vietnam as a regime started by the military people by General Thieu and General Ky, there was a…there was always a kind of blackened proposition to the government, whether they were under the official form of political parties recognized by the government, or whether they were in terms of an informal political groups talking among themselves about how to rebel against the government and so forth, and we have at the same time the Buddhist groups and all these kinds of…gathering of people. And if we talking in terms of difference between the North and the South, it is like that. The South, well later on…if we look at the writings of the liberal press, South Vietnam was by then the corrupted regime with dictatorship regimes and so forth. Not was the American help anyway. Far from my mind is the idea of defending those people who are corrupted. But I say that the degree of corruptions, and the degree of cohesion imposed by the government upon the political groups; if we compare it with what was going on in North Vietnam, there is no reason at all. I would say that in South Vietnam we didn’t find a paradise, but it was not hell either. And so well, it is a kind of…it is a kind of…how we look at the problem you see. If we listen to the
liberal press you see, we have a Con Son Island and hundreds of thousands of prisoners in jail and so forth. Well that is not true at all I am not defending at all because I was a liberal element in the Vietnamese government and laughed at all these kinds of things you see. But then well…if we look at the situation right now for any sense you see, well, there is no reason whatsoever in terms of corruptions, in terms of cohersions, in terms of control and so forth you see. That is a kind of difference between the two sides like that you see. We need some, some perspective in looking back at the situation then and so forth. I have a hard time in talking to the liberals in Washington, in spite of the fact that I have many close friends among the news media. But then the anti-war movement for incentive in the United States during…in the late 60’s and the beginning of the 70’s from my own point of view was somewhat natural developing from the American society itself. In 1968 in France, Germany, students everywhere rebelled against the government. In 1968. And so the kind of rebellion that we have on the campus this year is not a unique phenomenon at all. It is a kind of refractions of the development of the western societies up to the point that I have a friend that worked a job with me. The friend with the job said to me that, “Well, if we didn’t have the war in Vietnam we have to invent it.” (ha ha ha). Well of course it was an exaggeration, but anyway you see…right now.

SM: So the rebellion in the south, as it emerged it more as just a natural reflection of just normal political discourse, or…

BD: Yes, a kind of natural political discourse if you see and given time, and given…the kind of normal development, if South Vietnam was left alone, I would say that…the process to democracy could take place. I’m quite, quite optimistic about it you see, because…I talked to the students in Saigon in the 70’s for instance, I talked to the labor unions and so forth. They rebel against the government of course. But if we argue by reasonable language with them, they understand the necessity of compromise in politics. But it requires of course time and condition for that. But South Vietnam did not have time at all to do this kind of…to go through the normal process, and they had to confront the realities of the war, the economy…the difficult economy conditions occasioned by the war. The urgent task of facing the infiltration from the north at the same time, so all these difficult problems combined together made it very, very difficult for South Vietnam, not only to develop its own system, but even to survive.

SM: Now how much did those difficulties contribute to the inability of Americans once the United States became more heavily involved in Vietnam to really understand or comprehend
what was going on. And when…the Americans that you had contact with as a…as a diplomat, do you think they really understood the complexities of the issues that were involved in Vietnam, or…

BD: For years already I come to the conclusion that…one of the tragedy of the war was the lack of comprehension of the nature of the war, of the mentality of the people; a lack of comprehension on both sides. On the side of the American establishment, on the side of the American military men, on the side of the American news media. And on the side that it is a lack of comprehension about American politics, about American political process from the South Vietnamese. It is a lack of understanding which compounds the problem. By the time, ’65 when we have a half a million men of U.S. service men in South Vietnam, I can bet…wish you that not many Americans understand the mentality of the South Vietnamese. And it is exactly the same situation as far as the South Vietnamese are concerned with reason, the American political process, the American policies and politics. I was a man in the middle, to the exposure…due to the exposure. To the [?] in Washington as well as in Saigon. Perhaps, perhaps I understand a little bit better than all the people the kind of complexities of the war. The kind of difficulties that the Americans have to face in waging war as well as the kind of difficulties of the South Vietnamese have to face in dealing with the Americans and with the war. Roughly speaking, I would say that…with their mentality, the Americans were, by nature, very impatient. They came to South Vietnam…with good intentions. Even if I am undecided I have to give them the benefit of the doubt. They came to South Vietnam with good intentions, and…with the kind of idea that better than anybody else, they can fix up things quickly. They have the tendency to push aside the South Vietnamese and say, “Let us do it.” We are too slow at doing this kind, “Let us do it,” you see. And we do it. We do it quickly. And as soon as we finish, we give it back to you. Unfortunately, the situation didn’t belong that way. You have a strategy which gave you decide your opportunity to withdraw to the sanctuaries of the border. Search and destroy won victories, but temporary victories. You decide. They understood it, you drag along, when they have been confronted with superior force, they withdraw. And after withdrawing, they come back again. Harassing you here and there. You cannot finish a task up to the point of public opinion in this country, what mattered as a free country, a democratic country. You cannot ignore the public opinion, and by then it turns around, and you quit. Nobody’s on the American side on the Vietnamese side. Equally by their nature, they are passive. They are confident in the
Americans. They committed the mistake of putting everything in the hands of the Americans. What a big mistake. The gravest mistake of the war, which cost them their freedom as a country. But, they couldn’t believe that the Americans could not wait. They couldn’t believe that the Americans could withdraw from the war after investing so much in the war. And so at the last minute, well, we put too much faith in America. But the Americans, through our own way of our viewing, have to withdraw. And what…that is exactly what the South Vietnamese did not expect of them. It is somewhat cruel, but this kind of cruel situation, this kind of tragedy…did happen. Because the Americans did not understand the Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese did not understand the Americans. They did not have a clear assessment of the intentions of their partners. They didn’t have a clear assessment of the abilities of their opponents. Five or six years was too short a period of time for the two people to understand each other, and the public opinion gets…impatient very quickly. And with the public opinion turning against the war, there is no way for any American not [?] to continue. The only problem left is how to withdraw from it, another important part of the problem, another important point of the problem. I say it is important because…the U.S. is a big power, the soul big power right now. Whether you want it, or you didn’t want it, you are the leader of the country. You intervene or you don’t intervene it. Or you stay silent. The people [?] you were attitude through their own eyes. And that is the reason why, well, you had to take it into consideration. Very difficult, but you have to do it because you are the big power, the soul big power.

SM: As the soul big power, what lessons do you think we should take from Vietnam?

BD: Well…there are many, many lessons of course. But depending on whether you are on the American side, or you are on the Vietnamese side sometimes they are different lessons. I cannot talk about the American side. But, if I have the opportunity to talk about the Vietnamese side, I would say that before relying on a relying country, you have to understand fully their system, their policy, their politics, and…their mentality, their behavior. Because you cannot blindly put all the stakes in the hands of the ally country who can, depending on the circumstances, have all the interest than you all need to risk. Let us take the example of Israel, for example. I would say that the people of Israel, the leaders of Israel, when they think in terms of having to rely on the American protection in the middle east, for instance, I think that they have to think along these terms too. Okay, so let’s say that we put up for another time.
SM: Oh are you finished? Okay. This ends the first interview with Ambassador Diem.

Go Ahead. Stop.