

Nguyen Cao Ky: 'What South Vietnam needs is a man like Ho'

An edited version of the tenth programme in the series, 'Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam' (Radio 3).

MICHAEL CHARLTON: *To Marxist theoreticians, the communist victory in Vietnam was the victory of class struggle and a vindication of its precepts. The final triumph over the nationalists in the South and the Saigon government was held to be the historically inevitable triumph over a Westernised bourgeoisie—which, perhaps too conveniently, ignores the fact that the communist leadership itself came largely from the same class, being the sons and daughters of that bourgeoisie, the 'Frenchified élite' in Vietnam.*

When the Americans took the decision, in 1963, to overthrow President Diem, they transferred that support to the generals of the armed forces. Out of this new meritocracy of the army which they wanted to create, they believed would also come a more vigorous political leadership to achieve the goal of an independent, non-communist state of South Vietnam.

Nguyen Cao Ky was one of the younger officers, born in the North, and one of the million Vietnamese who came south in the exodus of 1954. Ky was a pilot who became chief of the air force. He became prime minister in 1965. He seemed, at the time, to symbolise that more aggressive will to withstand the communists which the Americans were anxious to cultivate and promote. Later, when Ky's personal rivalry with General Thieu—another member of the governing high army council—threatened more political instability, he stood down from an attempt to become president of South Vietnam under the new constitution. General Thieu became president and Ky his vice-president. Stepping down to accept the lesser post of vice-president was, according to Lyndon Johnson, an act for which Ky received insufficient credit.

Today, Ky lives in a relatively modest house, in a straggling suburb of Los Angeles. He keeps a liquor store, and is the acknowledged leader of a large community of 40,000 or so Vietnamese.

Nguyen Cao Ky, were you, at first, sympathetic to the objectives of the Vietminh?

NGUYEN CAO KY: At one time, all the Vietnamese nationalists were fighting against the French and the Japanese, so we were united. We didn't know anything about communism.

'Ho Chi Minh' was a name completely unknown to you in Vietnam?

Yes. Only after the defeat of the Japanese in World War Two did Ho Chi Minh become a national hero. But after that, when the communist party, with Ho Chi Minh at the head, started the destruction of other nationalist parties, and they

organised the country under communism, the things they did to us made all the Vietnamese see more clearly what communism is. They really pushed people against other people: the father against the son and the daughters against mothers, at the so-called public trials. When you see your own son denounce his father, that is something we Vietnamese could not accept in 1,000 years—that kind of philosophy.

By 1954, the KuoMintang and the nationalists had been defeated in China, the communists were on the frontier with Vietnam, and the colonial power had been

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defeated at Dien Bien Phu. What did you, as a young Vietnamese nationalist, believe it was possible to do?

I think we knew that acceptance by the communists, at the Geneva Conference, of the division of the country was just temporary, and that they would come to the South some day. So, at that time, we were busy building a new strength in South Vietnam, because I had the firm belief that the majority of the Vietnamese were against the communist way of life.

How important did the episode of Diem's overthrow and assassination seem to you?

It was very important, because it was a big turn of history, whether the overthrow of Mr Diem was wrong or right. Right after that, you saw a big, big enthusiastic atmosphere among the population. Big Minh was treated as a big hero. But what was wrong was, they eliminated Diem and replaced him by a bunch of generals who were more dumb than Mr Diem himself. At least Mr Diem had some ideal to serve, but the group of general officers who replaced him had no ideal at all. I think they were not capable of carrying out the so-called revolution.

What impact did the fact that the Americans had promoted Diem's overthrow have on the future of relations between the Americans and you in the military, their allies?

Since the Americans helped that group of generals to come to power, I think that the Vietnamese generals felt that they owed something to America. And, because they had always looked at Mr Diem with big fear and respect, and now they saw the Americans could do that to Mr Diem, there was no way that they would go against the rule of the Americans, because

they, too, would be eliminated right away.

After the assassination of Diem came a dreadful period in the war for the South Vietnamese — successive governments, within the space of a very few months, and then your own coup . . .

I never staged my own coup.

I didn't mean you personally, but the military takeover from civilian government.

No, on the contrary, I was against a coup. Any time I was involved, I was on the side of people who were against the coup. I am always against the internal fight among the military to have power. When I took over the civilian government, there was no coup. At that time, Mr Suu was chief-of-state and Mr Quat was prime minister: I never asked them to step down and hand the power to me. Mr Suu and Mr Quat belonged to different political parties, so there was a conflict. Mr Quat proposed the law in some project, and Mr Suu refused to sign. So, that night, Quat called the military council to his office, and he said: 'I cannot govern, I resign and I hand the power to the military.' That is all.

Can you tell us about when Ambassador Taylor attacked you younger military leaders?

It was after the military had taken some measures against the so-called National High Council. It was a figurehead body, with Big Minh and the other old politicians. They were sitting at the palace and talking about politics—they talked, never acted—and the military council decided to get rid of them. General Maxwell Taylor was ambassador. He had just come back from a trip to Washington, where he had told the American president: 'We have stability, we have the garrison, we have the government, we have the military; everything is fine.' When he came back from Washington, he invited us to his home for a dinner—myself, General Khanh and a few other members of the military council—and he told us that that is what he had said to Washington, and he did not want to see any trouble, any coup happen. Two days after that, in fact, Khanh took the decision to get rid of all the High National Council.

That morning, we met together at the headquarters of the general staff, and Maxwell Taylor called Khanh. I don't know what they talked about on the phone, but after that, Khanh told us that Taylor wanted to meet with a few of us down at the American embassy. Khanh said: 'You go, Ky.' So I went down with Mr Thieu.

When we entered Maxwell Taylor's office, he looked pale, very, very angry. He really gave us a lecture, like an old general officer teaching the young officers. He asked why we had done it. I said: 'Mr Ambassador, we did it because we think it is good for Vietnam.' He said something about his dinner. Maybe I misunderstood it, but what I understood at that time was he told us that: 'I invited you for dinner. I told you what we wanted, and you did something different. I think I wasted my dinner.' I said: 'Listen, you didn't waste your dinner, because I can tell you, Mr Ambassador, that I never had such a good piece of steak. I really appreciated your dinner.' After that, I left.

When we came back to the headquarters

of the general of staff and I reported the conversation to the armed forces council, they all were very angry, and they wanted to call a press conference right away. But the Americans heard about that, so they sent someone asking us not to act that way. I remember this man. He said: 'We will not worry about Mr Taylor as ambassador, but we spent years and years to make him a military hero. So please don't destroy it.' I think the guy was very smart, because when he made such an appeal to us we agreed right away.

But there was a specific reason, wasn't there, for Taylor's displeasure with you? It came at a moment when the Americans were about to undertake the bombing of North Vietnam, for the first time, to achieve two things: to make a more stable government in Saigon possible, and to encourage a more cohesive resistance in the South. And, of course, they wanted to signal their readiness to take reprisals against North Vietnam for its continuing attacks. Were you completely unaware that this bombing campaign was about to be undertaken? Were you not consulted or informed about it? Or did you take your action knowing that it was coming?

I was commanding officer of the air force only, so, on all the political decisions between Americans and Vietnamese, I was not consulted. I doubt that even the Vietnamese government at that time was consulted by the Americans. With my experience later on, I think all the important military or political decisions were made in Washington, and they let us have, maybe, 24 hours' warning.

Did you try to protest about the lack of consultation on policy?

After I became premier, I had many meetings with American officials, including President Johnson, and, on each occasion, I told him what I thought was the right way to deal with the war, the communists and the South Vietnamese people. Most of the time, they just smiled very politely, but they never did the things that I asked.

Were the difficulties of relations with the Americans cultural, for the most part?

Yes. I remember, the first time I met with the Ambassador Cabot Lodge, when he asked me: 'What is your government's programme?' I said: 'social revolution'. He said to me: 'I don't think it is good to mention the words "social" and "revolution" to the Americans. They are reluctant about revolution; about "social" because it sounds like communism.' I said: 'Now look, there is a big difference between communism and socialism. And why not "revolution"? Isn't that what we need here in South Vietnam?' That was, in my opinion, the basic difference between Americans and the Vietnamese. I saw the need for a complete change in South Vietnam, but the Americans didn't see it, or they saw it a different way.

Later on, I realised the difference was really big. For example, when we talked about the way to stop the expansion of communism. One American official told me: 'If we give the South Vietnamese a bigger house, more material, more facilities—a really high standard of living—they will not listen to the communist propaganda.'



Ky: 'saw the need for a complete change'

I told them: 'No, it is not true. The Vietnamese have very little need for material; but for spiritual things. A Vietnamese can be a happy man even if he is poor.' Second, I told them what South Vietnam needs is a man like Ho Chi Minh, a true leader, not an American man. But that they never understood.

Perhaps the essential difficulty that the South Vietnamese faced in world opinion was the belief that the US was acting in support of an essentially corrupt power?

It was true; and it was true when the propaganda of communists condemned us as not nationalists but as puppets and lackeys of America. The way that the

Vietnamisation was implemented was the wrong way. When they handed the fighting responsibility to the Vietnamese, they handed over to the people that they felt comfortable with. One Vietnamese general officer was well-known among the Vietnamese as the most corrupted and incapable officer. Every American who came to me said: 'He is a real tiger.' That is the reason why, at the end, within 30 days, the whole army of one million men collapsed: not because the poor soldiers were less courageous than the North Vietnamese, but because all the commanding officers at that time were cowards and corrupted.

You yourself have been tainted by the charge of corruption. How do you answer that?

The only thing that I can say is that I am very proud of myself—and that, maybe, now I regret not having been corrupted.

The suspicions—or open charges—were that you did have some interest in the opium crops in Laos.

I knew that there was a lot of traffic in drugs. I think every type of people was involved in it in Vietnam during the war: the soldiers, the air force, the marines, the navy, the government. I knew that, in some

cases, the Vietnamese air force was involved in it. When they flew to Laos and Cambodia for a military operation, when the plane came back, the crew brought some opium. I knew about those cases, but it doesn't mean that I was involved in it.

How is it you were unable to stop it?

That was impossible. Not only because it was in a war, but also because I was the only one trying to clean the house. I could have done it, but it would have taken me five or seven years.

As a Northerner, you had many difficulties as a political figure with the population of the South, who don't like people from Tonkin. How big a factor was that in preventing a cohesive approach to putting an end to sectarian squabbles in the South?

That kind of a feeling I think existed only in the minds of a group of the Southerners, but not among the population. I knew for sure that I was more popular among the Southern population than among the Northerners, because I felt closer. Most of the Southerners living in the Mekong Delta were peasants, and they liked a cock fight, they liked a drink—and I liked the same thing. I was very popular. So you should make a distinction between the politicians and the people in the South.

Secondly, I think the press, and in particular the American press, really blew it up out of dimension.

What was your attitude to the Americans when Vietnamisation had collapsed? You were not being re-supplied to the extent that you were supposed to be under the Paris Agreement—Congress had cut off aid.

I tried to tell Mr Thieu, and I still believe, that with the massive aid from America we had had years before, with what we still had on hand, we could have saved the works. That does not mean that I believed, as I had done years before, that we could go ahead to the North and overthrow the communists. But we could have stopped their advance. With more stability, more strength within South Vietnam, we could have stopped them militarily, and from there we could have talked with them about a new political settlement—even accept a coalition government with the Liberation Front, or have an open election with them participating.

What was the inducement to enter a coalition with the communists at such a late stage?

We are realistic men. When you see that you cannot save the home, well, at least save the furniture.

In what frame of mind did you go to Paris for the negotiations? What was your own strategy on behalf of South Vietnam and how did it fit with what you assumed the Americans had in mind?

We went knowing that we had not only to fight with the communists, our enemy, but also to fight with our friends, the American delegation. I think that is why Mr Thieu sent me to Paris, because then I was the man to say, 'No' to the Americans and to the communists—and then Mr Thieu would have said, 'Yes', particularly dealing with the chief of the American delegation, Mr Averell Harriman. He was old and very tough. He always looked down and considered you as one of

his grandsons. Many members of the Vietnamese delegation had trouble communicating with him, and I had heard about that before I went to Paris. Mr Harriman and the secretary of state, Mr Vance, came to see me. I told them: 'Let me know clearly, right now, whether you are going to sit down at the conference table as allies, as friends of Vietnam, or as friends of the communist side; because everything I have heard about the preliminary talks and preparation for the negotiation indicates you are on the side of the communists, trying to make us give them concessions.'

Did you feel inferior talking to them?

I am not tall. I am not big, but I fly high. I never have any inferiority complex. I was young, yes, but I think I knew the Viet-

namese better than any old American politicians—the war was a Vietnamese war.

How important does the Vietnam conflict appear to you to be, in retrospect, set in the context of the world today?

Even today, many American people want to forget about it; the war still has a big effect on them. It was a big wound. I think the Vietnam war will serve as a good lesson for the non-communist countries in the world—when a thing happened in Angola, immediately people talked about Vietnam. What happened in Vietnam—what *will* happen to Angola. You will see, maybe on a small scale, a different Vietnam war happen in other parts of the world. I hope that the Americans and all the non-communists really learned a lesson.