

**Oral History Interview of
Tibor Nagy**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
April 6, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

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This oral history interview features United States ambassador Tibor Nagy. Nagy discusses the Soviet Union and the spread of American culture. Nagy also talks about the unique role that art plays in foreign relations.

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Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
First tour	6	00:03:00
The unraveling of the Soviet Union, power of American culture	8	00:11:55
Middle East	11	00:20:07
The role of art	16	00:31:20

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Great. Nothing too onerous in that?

Tibor Nagy (TN):

Oh no.

AW:

Okay let me sign them both, and I'll leave a copy for you.

TN:

And Jane sends her best.

AW:

Well that's my first question. Do you think that she will be willing to do an interview too?

TN:

Absolutely.

AW:

I'd love to, the more I've read, and then the more we talked, the more I thought she is really important—of course, as all of us know about our wives.

TN:

Absolutely. And also, she attended Texas Tech, she didn't get her degree from here—well she got her master's form here after we came back—but she started here, we met here, then she finished at Georgetown, and then when we came back here, for me to work here, she went ahead and completed her master's.

AW:

Well great, please—you might just ask her to call or email me so I have a contact and can set it up at whatever the best time is for her, but I really think it would be valuable to have her input on this. I asked you, when we finished the other day, if you had anything else, and so I'll start with that, but I do have one—it's not a question, it's more of a topic—that came from, sort of percolated through, and I wasn't quite sure how to phrase it, so I phrased it three different ways.

TN:

Okay now that's good, but I thought about it and I think that between what I did with the state department and the chat we had, I think we pretty well covered everything that I could think of.

AW:

Well, then here is the thing that really stuck with me, about both our talk and then reading your interview with the state department, and I think I'm particularly sensitive to this because of the twelve years I spent in police work where I faced a similar philosophical circumstance, and so I phrased it in three different ways—ideology vs. practicality, the ought to be vs. how it is, and the personal vs. the larger interest—and what I read and heard is that you, and we talked a little bit about this on Tuesday, but that you've managed to navigate all those years with a clear understanding of the difference between the two, and still able to do it. I just wanted to see if there was anything more to be said about that?

TN:

Well yeah, a couple of things. My first tour out to Lusaka Zambia, I was very, very naïve about how things were in the world. I hadn't even heard about Lusaka until Jane and I lived in Washington, and we went to church and she was Sunday school teacher for the Zambian ambassador's kids. So when our first assignment sheet showed up after I joined the foreign service, we laughed about it—I mean our class—because we hadn't heard of most of the places that showed up on the assignments list [laughter], didn't even know they existed. One very naïve member of the class had actually gone out and bought a bunch of wool suits because he thought that he was going to be going to Geneva or London or something like that [laughter], so hello, no, you're looking at tropical Africa or somewhere else. But when I went to Zambia, I really—I was still looking at the world as a reflection of United States and how things should work in relation to how they work in America because Hungary was quite a bit different, but not different like Africa, and it took me I think most of that tour to kind of do a major paradigm shift because I did stupid stuff like our embassy vehicle would get into an accident so I would get the police report from the Zambians, and instead of realizing what a huge favor they were doing me, I would go through and correct the grammar and the spelling on the stupid police report [laughter], which of course did not endear us to the Zambian police kind of thing. So I learned then that the world is—you really have to start over each time you arrive at a new place, and deal with the reality that is there. And then a place like Togo, where you have a president who is very, very authoritarian, and treats human rights as a PR issue, not as a real issue, and doesn't mind pulling peoples' fingernails out. But you have to deal with him, because he's the president, and our country at that time was engaged in an existential competition with the Soviet Union, and he was our guy, and as a result our foreign policy was extremely hypocritical. We would support people who committed human rights violations just as grotesque as what the other side was, and we would condemn and criticize their guys, but we would give our guys a free pass. Unfortunately when the Soviet Union came crashing down, a lot of these African dictators—who were our guys, our dictators—all of a sudden we started seeing the human rights violations they were committing because we no longer needed them. So it was a precarious threading the needle for those of us, especially when Jimmy Carter was president, because for him human rights was a paramount overriding issue, and he was willing to criticize everybody equally, and a lot of

people in the state department considered him excessively naïve, and then of course his presidency was a disaster because of the Iranian hostage situation. And then Reagan came in and Reagan was a lot more nuanced in who he considered the good guys and the bad guys, even if they both had bloody hands considering how they dealt with their own populations, and I had a number of fairly intense debates with colleagues over this because I also had kind of a human rights bent, and I would say to people, “For that poor person who was tortured to death by the police, it doesn’t matter if the police are pro-west or pro-east, the end result for that poor person is the same thing.” But the choices you had then, you were either going to represent your country, or pick an alternative, and I thought I could do a lot of good in Africa despite pursuing policies which, in many cases, were very hypocritical.

AW:

Is it possible in the real world to have a foreign policy that is not, at some level, hypocritical?

TN:

No, no, not if you’re a major global power. If you’re Switzerland or Norway you can, and I used to give those people hell, because they would be very, very criticizing and demeaning of the United States and I would tell them, “Gee, you know—” that the Swedes especially, I loved doing the—because the Swedes were very bitter and criticizing us over Vietnam—and I said, “Gee weren’t you the people that traded with Nazi Germany during World War II and maintained your sanctimonious neutrality?” If you’re Norwegian it’s very easy to be pure snow, but when you’re the United States with interests everywhere, it’s a lot different and a lot more difficult, nay impossible. Also, the Western Europeans I would give them hell, kind of like Donald Trump is doing now, saying, “It’s all well and good for you to have your phenomenal socialized medicine for your homogenous population, but at the end of the day, we’re the ones protecting you from Soviet domination. So until you’re willing to shed your blood—

AW:

Or pay your part of the tab.

TN:

Or pay your part of the tab, don’t talk to me about these issues, and they would get—they would huff and puff and be very upset.

AW:

Is there some relationship—I mean because it’s interesting to think about the reversal of roles with say Carter and Reagan in particular. You know, Reagan is portrayed, especially by his supporters, as being an ideologue. He’s for this, he’s for that. Yet Carter may have been the greater ideologue [laughter]—

TN:

Oh absolutely, Carter was the ideologue. Reagan's ideology was America First—you know without saying it—and that's the one thing Reagan looked at in every situation is where do the US interests lie? Whether he did, or his very clever advisors, you know, that's uncertain. Kissinger and Nixon on the other hand, that was an odd pair, but Kissinger was brilliant in looking at situations and saying, "Okay. What are the US interests and what are possibilities for the US?" Like opening China, looking at the Vietnam end game scenario, given political realities in the United States and Nixon's downward spiral because of Watergate. And just like the brilliant Austro-Hungarian foreign minister Metternich in the 1800s who was playing a weak hand, Kissinger played his cards brilliantly. But yeah, Carter was much more the ideologue, whereas Reagan was not. I thought Reagan did foreign policy brilliantly—and he made stupid mistakes like the Iran-Contra deal and things like that—but at the end of the day, I'm convinced in my bones that Reagan had a large part to play in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

AW:

Yeah, that and—

TN:

Well Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Lech Wałęsa, and Pope John Paul II.

AW:

Well, that's interesting that you would include the pope in that—

TN:

Yeah, because of his moral driving force in confronting communism

AW:

And particularly in Europe—

TN:

Yeah and starting with his home country in Poland where it started unraveling one in Poland, and then two when the Hungarians decided to let the East Germans who came to Hungary through the out. I mean those were two huge issues. That was kind of taking the cards out from the bottom of the house of cards.

AW:

Well, thinking of the unravelling of the Soviet Union and the talk we had—the unsettling talk we had Tuesday on Korea, and what is a little unsettling to me about the current administration is budget regards, and all that is to say it strikes me also, that no nation that puts the military first

can sustain that inevitably, for forever. At some point things begin to unravel within the country itself—was that a part of the Soviet Union's demise?

TN:

Well, I think it was part of it because I think on the one hand, they were over feeding the military, but on the other hand, they were underfeeding their economy.

AW:

Because they were a top down economy—

TN:

Yeah and their consumerism, and they just made the huge mistake of trying to have a planned economy—planned socialist economy. I mean I remember my brother visited me here, and often people who come from outside can make the most brilliant observations, and after about a day here, he said, “you know, fundamental difference between the socialist system and the capitalist system,” he said that, “in the socialist system it's very difficult to be a consumer, and in the capitalist system it is very difficult to be a supplier.” [Laughter] He was just staggered when we walked into the grocery store and he saw the 200 different kinds of cereal. And that cut to the chase, the socialist system was just unsustainable, and people just didn't realize it. That's why the collapse happened so fast.

AW:

Related to all these things we've just been talking about, the other question I think about is if we think about practicality versus the ideology, and we're playing in foreign policy and foreign service, we're advancing the interests of our side versus their side, and I don't mean the side of Togo, but the side of the Soviet Union or China or whoever else is our wrestling partner. How, in all that, does the notion of—as you so succinctly put it with the traffic accident report—the imposition of our values and our ways of working on the people in between, is that a separate issue, is that all tied into the practicality?

TN:

Pitching America's values overseas has always been a dual effort because we do it through the U.S. government. In areas like human rights, and women's rights, you know, whatever we consider to be of paramount importance at that day whether its freedom or religion, or now it's no discrimination based on sexual identity, things like that. With the last administration that was quite a heavy priority. So we do that through the organs of our federal government, but at the same time, you have this tidal wave of American culture washing over the rest of the world, which has nothing to do with what the government promotes, but it's all promoted through the entertainment industry and the consumer products. So in that regard we have huge advantages because the Chinese would very much like to promote Chinese culture, and they're doing it

through these Confucius institutes, but they don't have the parallel force that we do. They have a little bit of that with some of their Kung Fu movies and Chinese fashions and things like that, but not nearly to the extent that American culture rules the world. People call it Western culture, but the truth is that it's really American culture with the other countries kind of putting their own spin on it. Because you know, you have Europop now, and this huge music festival which I think is happening soon in the Ukraine, but Europop is just a version of what we came up with.

AW:

Reggae is just American popular rock-and-roll, but on the three and four beats instead of the one and two [laughter].

TN:

Yeah, and Afropop, and all those kinds of things. That gives us such a tremendous, tremendous advantage.

AW:

Well, and that brings up something also connected with this, I was listening this morning on the news—on NPR news—and they were talking with a talking head, a PhD, who is a foreign policy student, and one of the interesting points he made, which was not a think I had thought of, was that one of the problems we have in our relationship with China is that they would like to lead, or be a world leader, but they're not ready for it. And I had never thought of it in that way, I think of them as the size of their economy, as the number of people, and the fact that they're trying in some way or another to adapt or adopt certain parts of capitalism, but his point was they just don't get it yet, and if we cede some authority to them it will be bad for everybody, including them. Is that connected to this thing that you just mentioned, which is you have a government position, but then you have this huge social and cultural and economic thing that operates on its own?

TN:

Yeah, but more than that, we are a hybrid culture. We have people from every nation in the world here, so the culture we push out there, other countries can kind of pick and choose from this massive amount of—quote-on-quote—American culture. Whereas the Chinese are much more homogenous, and their culture does not translate as easy as ours. And also at heart they're not in the business of making the world more Chinese because their inherent philosophy is that China is the middle kingdom—it's the center of the universe—you can only be Chinese if you're born into it, whereas we don't have that outlook at all.

AW:

No, we take in—

TN:
Yeah.

AW:
—anybody and everybody [laughter].

TN:
You know, so, in that regard, the Chinese have an inherent disadvantage along with the lines that they're not a mature power, even though they're thousands of years old. They've been a regional power, but then they had that lost century when they were bullied by everybody, which is going to create scars for them for the time being. Whereas we've never ever been bullied by anybody. You know, we've had our small losses like Vietnam, but we have not had that national humiliation.

AW:
No, and our losses have been self-inflicted

TN:
Yeah, because we won Vietnam militarily, but then we lost it politically, and it's the same thing, you know, we kicked Saddam Hussein's butt in three weeks and then we're still losing the peace.

AW:
That—and this is a completely different thing, but the way you phrased it about the Chinese, and you described it something about the comment about the problem with Russians is that they're not communists—

TN:
They're Russians.

AW:
They're Russians, yeah [laughter], so that's kind of the similar thing to the Chinese, right? Does that pertain also to the Middle East—to the Iranians, and the Iraqis, and the Syrians—?

TN:
Well the Middle East is somewhat different because in the Middle East you've had the civilizations, and you've had people who never have identified themselves as Arab the way we identify them, there's the great line in Lawrence of Arabia where he's trying to promote Arab unity, but the guys are saying, "What is this? I've never heard of a tribe called The Arabs. I know **Bennasini, Helmad A- this [20:34]**. I know those tribes, but I've never heard of Arab." After World War I, the idiot Brits and the French created these artificial countries—which to a certain

extent, were similar to what they did in Africa—and these countries lasted for a while, but they cannot sustain themselves as countries because they never were, and that's why you have this huge conflagration going on in the Middle East now, and when it all is said and done I think the map is going to be totally different. On the other hand, you have a country like Turkey and Iran, which are inherently stable because their geography dictates that there is always a civilization there. You know the civilization names may have changed from the Sasanian Empire to the Persian to the Meads and on, but it was always that geographical unit.

AW:

Yeah, that great song from the twenties, it's Istanbul, not Constantinople, you know, reflecting the continuity—well Philip Sheridan, the general in the Red River Wars, said famously, “If the Indians ever understood Red versus White, we'd never defeat them.”

TN:

[Laughter] That's a true statement—

AW:

And I always think about that when I'm reading news about the Middle East, you know the tribal side is—I mean we have our own tribes, but our tribes are usually the neighborhood bar or the—

TN:

Yeah exactly, exactly, or the Pittsburgh Steelers—

AW:

[Laughter] or the sports team that we support. Well, that's really interesting, and that comes up to my actual really last question which is how in this world of the practical versus the ideological, or that tension, that balance—maybe that's a better way to put it—

TN:

Well there's both—but its tension and balance.

AW:

Well, of course there's no balance without tension involved. So I'm listening to the ongoing debate, you know politically now, but it's echoed or reinforced by the talking heads—the experts—either people like you who've had experience, or people who have been scholars of it, and I wonder where that leaves the scholarship, and thinking about what interesting things you do over here, I think of this as, most of the events I've been to here at the cultural center, are of the sort that I would call broadening. You know, you have Ethiopian coffee, and it's good, and all those kinds of thing, and that's a trivial example—well maybe not so trivial, it's pretty good coffee—

TN:

Yeah it is; it's wonderful.

AW:

But I think you get my drift. How do we, in this country, and is there a scholarship that we're just not hearing about, that allows us to put these things into a perspective where we can make a clear case because, you know, in my heart I want to support Jimmy Carter, but my head says, "Well wait a minute," and in my heart I don't like Donald Trump, but my head says, "Well who knows." How do you—and to me that's where we turn to scholarship—

TN:

The problem with that, with scholarship, is that there has to be a fundamental force in the scholarship, and that tends to be judging the actions of a person, or an army, or a government, or a congress against the scale of American interests, but there is such disagreement over America's interests.

AW:

And do they reflect a lot of the personal interest of the scholar?

TN:

Yeah, yeah exactly—the bias of the scholar—so I don't think you're going to have real scholarship which approaches some semblance of neutrality until it's done historically.

AW:

Mm-hmm, retrospectively—

TN:

Yeah, as opposed to as political science, but I think it's going to have to be done historically because, you know, you have some fairly brilliant people out there now. Thomas Friedman I think the world of, but again his perspective is very biased. Fareed Zakaria, another person I have huge respect for, but they are personally pushing a globalist agenda. They're brilliant, but they're pushing a globalist agenda, whereas on the other side you might have somebody—I can't name anybody—who might be a lot more nationalistic or isolationist.

AW:

Yeah, I can't, not on the scholarship side nothing pops to mind, but on the journalism side you can certainly—

TN:

Oh George Will is, you know one of my favorites, and—

AW:

Mine is David Brooks—

TN:

Oh yeah David Brooks, another one. But you know his history, again, is very non-objective [laughter] because—but he admits it—

AW:

It's also domestic pretty much for him—

TN:

Yeah, David Brooks is great the way he sees the world, so I think it's going to really come down to history because I remember at the height of the Cold War, there was a new scholarship, which was very revisionist because traditional U.S. scholarship was basically along the lines of the good versus the bad—the west versus the Soviet Union—and then there was this new group of scholars who were very revisionist in saying, “Okay but if you look at this from the viewpoint of the Soviet Union, it looks totally different.” And now we're just now getting to the point, I think, where we can accurately reflect on Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Gorbachev, and then the immediate post-soviet decade when the United States was supreme and on.

AW:

Yeah, and it also seems like one of the problems on the scholarship side, is that it's not necessarily inclusive. In other words, we don't read Soviet scholars talking about the Soviet perspective. Or at least I don't see, as a layperson, where do I go to find that? You know it's not readily—I can find Thomas Friedman anyplace, but I can't find necessarily whoever it would be on the Soviet side—

TN:

Yeah and then there's so much noise because when Ambassador Neumann was here last week or the week before, one of the points he made was that there is about 300 think tanks in Washington, and he said, “You know our value added in Washington is minimal, but when we bring a group here, we can contribute quite a lot.” And these people, of course, they're just ginning out the articles and the analyses, and they show up on CNN and their legions, but at the end of the day, if you try to get—you know synthesize it down to the fundamental points, there are just a couple—

AW:

Yeah and it's—and this term is overused—but it's the balkanization of ideas, and we've had the same thing happen in popular music with the web, which many of us heralded as a great thing to eliminate those bad evil middle men, but it turns out the evil middle men had a real role in

reducing the amount of stuff so that you could—as consumers and those who are doing the experiencing—you had a common cultural language. In the fifties it didn't matter whether you didn't like country, or didn't like rock-and-roll, or didn't like jazz, you still—because of the opportunities—you were exposed to all of them, and you could then make a choice. But in today's world, you can so narrowly focus your likes and dislikes, including on the ideology. My poor wife is always watching a particular channel and railing about the other people, and I say—and you know it doesn't work to point out—Well you're doing the same thing, but just on your side [laughter]. Which doesn't go down well—

TN:

Well, you know this fight over the Supreme Court justices is, just to me, it so typifies our times because it's a pox on both their houses because they're both hypocrites, and they're both wrong, and they both share the blame—

AW:

And one was wrong last year, and the other ones wrong—

TN:

Yeah in 2013 or whatever—

AW:

Well Merrick.

TN:

Biden changed the rules and—

AW:

Right and then Merrick a guy who looks, to me, very much like Gorsuch, and I also think back to—I think wasn't it Earl Warren who when he was appointed was considered to be a conservative—

TN:

Yeah, and then he—

AW:

So you just don't know.

TN:

If Trump had a sense of humor his next Supreme Court justice nominee should be, you know, Merrick [laughter]. Let's see what the Democrats would do with that one.

AW:

Exactly. Nobody has a sense of humor in Washington. Which, one of the great things about visiting with you is that I start off with two questions and then I have fifteen, but one of the things that I'm a champion of is the importance of art—not just as something we consume but as something that shapes us—when we're talking about the difficulty of objectifying scholarship, I think about things like Ethiopian coffee, and you know any kind of food, but I also think about music where two people with completely different backgrounds who cannot speak one another's language and have no experience in the other's culture, musicians can sit down together and they each walk away with something that they didn't have to start with, and I think that's just a sort of a—as Blake said, “the universe in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour”—it's that little thing that shows you the big picture. Is there a role for art in these interchanges around the world?

TN:

Oh absolutely because one of the programs that embassies have is the cultural programming—

AW:

My friend Bob Livingston just has been doing that with the state department for years, he just got back from Pakistan, and they were going to go to Afghanistan, but the trip got cancelled for—

TN:

Yeah for understandable—well the two that really come to mind—well there was three, one was negative—but two positive. When I was in the Seychelles, we had a country and western singer come who filled up the stadium—

AW:

Really, who was that?

TN:

Oh I can't remember—this was like 1982, '81?—phenomenal guy, he filled up the stadium and of course they had—and all of a sudden country music became popular in the Seychelles just because of that visit. And then the other one was Queen Ida and her Zydeco Band, came to Telomae [32:18.3], filled up the 4,000 seat—you know Palace of the People or whatever—and oh my gosh, the Togolese had never heard Zydeco—I hadn't heard Zydeco music—and oh wow people loved that. The negative one was a very arrogant artist, Taj Mahal, came too—we had him in Lusaka, Zambia and the again in Nigeria—and the people were okay with it, but you know, just the absolute arrogance of the artist was not helpful.

AW:

Yeah and that translated to the audience—

TN:

Because they kept the audience waiting—although in Africa people are used to waiting—but it just—it was not the best of America.

AW:

Yeah, and I didn't know about that one, and I haven't generally known about—I guess because they don't get reported as often—the negatives, but—

TN:

Yeah, we're not going to report on the negative because that was just something we had to deal with as an embassy. But, you know, they wanted air conditioned rooms, well, there were no air conditioned rooms at the time—that kind of stuff—where they were expecting the same level of support [as] if they were going to visit Cleveland. Whereas these other—the country music guy was phenomenal and Queen Ida was too.

AW:

Well, very interesting, that of course is my bias—the arts side—but I do really see a value in it because one of the things that just drives me nuts is to hear someone talk about, particularly if it comes from Africa, or South America, or some place in the Middle East—not so much in the Middle East you don't hear it—but these other places you hear people talking about primitive art or primitive music, and if you play music, you know that there is no such thing, you know its music, and you'll find that what you think is—or what is reported as primitive—is too hard for you [laughter]. It's too difficult for you—

TN:

Yeah and some of these African instruments are just phenomenal.

AW:

Yeah!

TN:

Yeah, just absolutely phenomenal!

AW:

Yeah well the percussion tradition in Africa is do far ahead of us.

TN:

Yeah when you hear them all with twenty different drums—

AW:

Yeah and twenty different rhythms.

TN:

And the scales the Ethiopians play—somewhere between Indian, and Arabic, and Egyptian—

AW:

David Amram, from New York, who wrote the theme to the—I think he may have written, it wasn't *Manchurian*—maybe he didn't write the score for *Manchurian Candidate*—but he wrote the famous song “Windmills In My Mind” which was a big hit in the sixties, he's part of the beat generation, an interesting guy. He traveled to—and I cannot remember which country in Africa, but it was in the seventies, and he went with a jazz musician, Dizzy Gillespie, and they went on this—and Amram released a story that they went, and they got to Africa, and their program was to be the same at every place they stopped which was the concert would begin with a local—

TN:

Mhmm, that's how we do it.

AW:

Yeah—music. And then Dizzy and his band were going to set in, and then they were going to play their own show. And Amram talks about, you know, here's Dizzy Gillespie who, if you had a dictionary with pictures, the word “cool” would have Dizzy Gillespie right by it [laughter]. And so the African group starts and they're playing all these wild subdivisions, and it was time for the band to kick in, and they were all watching Dizzy, and it was past time, and then it was further past time, and finally Dizzy turns to David Amram and says “Dave, where's one?” He didn't know where to come in because he was a guy that was such a master of jazz in our country who was a complete neophyte there, and to me that's just such a beautiful example of how that goes.

TN:

Well, that wonderful West African musical instrument—string instrument—the kora, that was developed in Guinea and we had very famous people coming, who would go out in the middle of nowhere, and spend a week in a village just, you know, playing with local folks.

AW:

Bob Livingston's son, Tucker, has moved to India. He is married to an Indian woman and they

have a child, and he's there to study the veena because you know, it takes a lifetime to study and you just don't do it somewhere else. Well, that's terrific—and we could talk about this all morning—but those were the things I wanted to—

TN:

Super. No, I really appreciate the time, you know, to go through this, and I'll talk to Jane and I'll get her to get in touch with you, and then you guys can sit down—

AW:

And then, whatever the future holds for you, I would like for us to talk a little more about this—the role of art—and how you might, whether you are interested in doing, having any active participation in it or not, at least provide some insights, some advice, some guidance. We're looking in fact—the announcement will come at the end of the month—but we're under Mike Galyean, and we're going to start with an official non-vertical, but horizontal, initiative on creative process with the idea of not trying to impose process on people, but to get people together that share their process, which is kind of something I think about what your work has been. It's not as much imposition as how you work across the boundaries, and the literal borders, and the figurative borders as well. So but I think art plays a role in all that—

TN:

Sure it does—absolutely.

AW:

So anyway—cogitate on that.

TN:

All right I will.

AW:

Then make some sense on—

TN:

Super! Well thanks so much!

AW:

Thanks again, this was fun!

TN:

This has been great!

AW:

And I'll stop it now.

End of Recording

