

How (Not) to Become a U.S. Ambassador

posted by [Greg Rushford](#)
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There are two paths that aspiring American ambassadors traditionally take to persuade the president of the United States to nominate them for that honor. First, there is the classic, merit-based path where senior U.S. foreign service officers with distinguished diplomatic backgrounds are quietly-and-carefully vetted in the higher echelons of the State Department. Those who survive the scrutiny by their peers have their names forwarded to the White House to get the formal — usually routine — presidential approval. The second route, the political one, is (sometimes scandalously) reserved for famous personalities, presidential cronies, and major contributors of campaign cash who buy their ambassadorships. But now comes the U.S. consul general in Ho Chi Minh City, a Vietnamese-American foreign service officer named An Le, with a novel third way: an oh-so-Asian way.

Le wants to become the next U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. Toward that end, the consul general has been working behind the scenes since at least last July with a network of Vietnamese-American allies, some of whom have political and business connections in both Washington and Hanoi. Although Le has urged his supporters to try to drum up congressional support, the main target of the lobbying campaign is the man who would make the nomination: President Barack Obama.

Toward that end, Le and his allies have demonstrated a certain Asian-style chutzpah. One of Le's key supporters in the Vietnamese-American community is David Duong, an Obama contributor from the San Francisco Bay area. Duong has given more than \$150,000 to Obama and the Democratic Party since 2008, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. According to e-mails exchanged between Le and Duong that this reporter has seen, Duong related that he had approached Obama directly to press Le's ambassadorial qualifications at a Democratic Party fundraising event held in California earlier this month.

Obama was in northern California raising money on April 3 and 4, the White House has reported. Businessman Duong informed Le in one e-mail that he had presented the president a letter, along with a list of people who have lent their names in support of Le's candidacy, at one fundraiser held on the evening of April 3.

The list of Le's supporters— reprinted in the public interest at the bottom of this article — has more than 70 names on it. The first name stands out: former Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, who is now mayor of Chicago. On April 4, Duong informed Le in an e-mail that he had pressed Obama a second time. "I had brunch with president and 27 other people this morning and did talk about you and letter delivered to him last night."

Duong indicated to the consul general that he had received a friendly response from Obama: "We need to work and have a couple congress members and or us senators to recommend you. This will assure you will be in."

The e-mails reveal that as he has sought to advance what Le has repeatedly referred to as his "candidacy," the consul general has not been merely a passive observer. Le has participated in drafting and editing various letters of support and introduction. Before California business Duong presented the letter to Obama on April 3, Le advised his ally to correct a typo. Upon being informed by Duong that the letter had been delivered to Obama, Le expressed his gratitude in another e-mail. Writing on his iPad, the consul general related how "I appreciate" the efforts of such good "friends in advancing my candidacy."

Duong and Le did not respond to several e-mails asking for comment. Nor was an effort to obtain comment from the White House successful. A call to Emanuel's press office prompted a suggestion that this reporter request a response from the mayor in an e-mail — which was then not answered.

Duong, who came to America penniless after the communists won the Vietnam War, is the classic American immigrant success story: an entrepreneur whose waste-management company, California Waste Solutions, now has multi-million dollar contracts with government entities in both the United States and in Vietnam (the latter through a subsidiary corporation in Vietnam that has developed a \$400 million solid waste landfill in Ho Chi Minh City, according to the corporation's website and Vietnamese press clips.)

Apart from his business activities, Duong was appointed in 2010 by Obama to serve on the Vietnam Education Foundation, which receives U.S. government funding to give scholarships to provide higher education to Vietnamese students. The Vietnamese-American entrepreneur had been recommended to the White House by Rep. Barbara Lee, a California Democrat and another recipient of Duong's political contributions. Duong has praised the "full support" that he has received for his charitable work from the higher levels of the Vietnamese government, including Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

Duong is not the only Vietnamese exile in Le's network of supporters who has cultivated ties with the current Vietnamese government that he fled from as a child. Another key supporter appears to be Bui Duy Tam, a medical doctor who has helped introduce the consul general to Vietnamese-American friends in northern California.

Dr. Tam is another immigrant's success story. An octogenarian, he is well-known in the Vietnamese-American community for his charitable medical works in his homeland, including a campaign to help Vietnam fight liver disease. Deputy Prime Minister Tuong Vinh Trong visited Dr. Tam at the doctor's home in San Francisco in 2010. "The Deputy PM highlighted the great contributions made by Mr. Tam to the Vietnamese community in the US and to the homeland," reported Hanoi's official Voice of Vietnam, which broadcasts in Vietnamese and 11 other languages. "Mr. Tam said he was deeply moved."

On July 28, 2012, Consul General Le sent Dr. Tam a private e-mail sent on a personal Hotmail account (presumably to avoid federal restrictions like those in the Hatch Act that bar government employees using official U.S. government computers and time to engage in political activities). "Thank you for your generous draft letter of introduction,"

the consul general told the doctor. "Please allow me a few days to review and prepare a re-draft letter, as this is a very sensitive matter," Le cautioned.

A few weeks after their exchange of e-mails, Le spent time in California on leave. Much of the official downtime in the state was to be spent advancing the consul general's "candidacy as the next ambassador to Vietnam," as he put it in one e-mail.

The disclosure of that candidacy is likely to be controversial in the Vietnamese-American community. Many Vietnamese-Americans who fled from communist rule have come to accept the normalization of diplomatic and commercial ties with Hanoi. But while there are naturally differing views on politics, there remain bright red lines for Vietnamese exiles who will always love their homeland, while also having become patriotic American citizens. One of those bright lines — perhaps the clearest — involves the fact that it remains a crime for Vietnamese citizens to assemble peacefully to advocate the democratic right to vote. Vietnamese citizens have been jailed for expressing such beliefs.

I asked Dr. Tam and David Duong if they believed that advocating democracy should be legally barred in their home country. Neither man responded. The fact that such prominent exiles are willing to avert their eyes and keep their mouths shut on core human-rights issues — perhaps because to do otherwise could be inconvenient for maintaining their current dealings with the Vietnamese communist-run government — will be considered offensive by many. And back in the homeland, one can imagine the reaction when this news is brought to the attention of Vietnamese citizens who are presently languishing in prison because they have been brave enough to advocate the right to vote.

The only member of Le's network of supporters who responded to a request to comment for this article was Truong Ngoc Phuong, who is the executive director of the Harrisburg, Pa.-based International Service Center. The center was established in 1976 to assist Vietnamese refugees who fled from the communist takeover in the preceding year. It now helps others in need as well, including victims of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in Louisiana.

Truong declined to be interviewed on his work with Le regarding the hoped-for ambassadorship (and also further declined to express an opinion on the current Vietnamese government's anti-democracy laws). Still, the Pennsylvania social worker was willing to explain his support for Le's candidacy in general terms.

"We are only a small group of community and business representatives who happened to be aware of the wonderful deeds Mr. An Le was able to accomplish as the consul General in Ho Chi Minh City for the past three years," Truong told me in an e-mail. "Out of admiration for Mr. An Le, and out of respect for the current U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, David Shear, we decided to organized a discreet campaign to mobilize additional support for Mr. An Le's candidacy." (The consul general was copied on the e-mail.)

In another communication that Truong has sent to potential supporters of the consul general, he reasons that Le is the Vietnamese equivalent to Gary Locke, who is now U.S.

ambassador to China. Locke is a former governor of Washington state and a former U.S. commerce secretary. "The appointment of Gary Locke as U.S. Ambassador to China provides a precedent worth replicating," Truong writes. "Ambassador Locke's exemplary service owes much to his identity as a Chinese-American. His qualifications have enabled him to find areas of productive alignment between the two cultures and countries."

It is highly unusual — perhaps unprecedented — for an active member of the U.S. foreign service to run what is essentially a clandestine political pressure campaign aimed securing a White House nomination for an ambassadorship to an important country.

A quick look at the background on what ambassador wannabes usually do illustrates just how unusual.

The first two paths to an ambassadorship are the usual ones. The current U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, David Shear, comes from the elite ranks of the U.S. foreign service. Shear earned a masters degree from the prestigious John Hopkins School of Advanced International Service, is fluent in Japanese and Chinese, and was a deputy assistant secretary of state for Asia before he was vetted by the State Department and tapped for Hanoi in 2011. That traditional route accounts for about two-thirds of all U.S. ambassadorships. Previous U.S. ambassadors to Vietnam have all come from the elite ranks: foreign service officers with broad national-security experience such as Michael Michalak, Michael Marine and Raymond Burghardt.

The first U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Douglas "Pete" Peterson, who served from 1997 – 2001, was a political appointment. But Peterson was considered an excellent choice. He was a respected former member of the U.S. congress and a former prisoner of war during the Vietnam war.

As for the political path in general, think of Caroline Kennedy, who is reported soon to replace U.S. ambassador to Japan John Roos, a Silicon Valley lawyer who earned his diplomatic stripes by "bundling" more than \$500,000 for the Obama 2008 presidential race. Did Roos buy his ambassadorship? Of course. But thanks to the U.S. system of campaign financing, the bribery laws never come into play as long as there are winks-and-nods when the deal goes down, and not quid pro quos — which there "never" are.

To be sure, thoughtful circles in the U.S. foreign policy establishment rightly cringe at such political appointments. After all, ambassadorships — or any government positions — should never be for sale. Perhaps the surprising thing is that the system often produces good results, as some of the presidential cronies turn out to be skilled diplomats who represent their country admirably. Pamela Harriman, who was dispatched to Paris by Bill Clinton, comes immediately to mind. So does former child movie star Shirley Temple Black, who served admirably as U.S. ambassador to both Ghana and Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and '80s. And when the politically connected ambassador happens to be a little light, every U.S. embassy seems to have a top-notch deputy chief of mission to ensure that important American diplomatic interests do not suffer. Like career ambassadors, DCMs come from the elite ranks of the foreign service and can be counted upon to manage the real diplomatic affairs.

Le doesn't come from such elite ranks. He is a former civilian in the U.S. Navy who, after 15 years of service, joined the foreign service in 1991. Le's official State Department resume that is posted on the consulate's website says, confusingly, that he was "born and raised" in Vietnam, which is subsequently contradicted with the assertion that he is "a native of Virginia." A search of the available public record suggests that Le was indeed born somewhere in Vietnam, although exactly when and where, and when he left his homeland, remains unclear.

Le earned a masters degree from George Washington University in engineering administration in 1978, according to his resume. Le has been a senior member of the U.S. foreign service since 2001. But his State Department service seems to have been focused on the managerial side of diplomacy, involving issues such as buildings and administration, not deep involvement in national-security affairs.

An was the honored recipient in 2006 of the State Department's top management award, the Luther I. Replogle Award for Management Improvement. However praiseworthy that award — and it is indeed a significant honor — such accomplishments suggest that his lack of experience in high-level diplomacy might not even qualify him to become a deputy chief of mission in the U.S. embassy in Hanoi, much less an ambassador.

Le's immediate predecessor as consul general in Ho Chi Minh City, Kenneth Fairfax, is now the U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan. But Fairfax has been one of the stars of the foreign service, whose previous service in sensitive positions included a high-level stint on the National Security Council staff, where he dealt with nuclear weapons issues. These days, diplomats based in the U.S. embassy in Hanoi handle sensitive matters of diplomacy, while the consulate in Ho Chi Minh City headed by An Le tends to be seen as a visa-processing center.

An educated guess would be that Consul General Le will not get the ambassadorship that he is seeking. Imagine the reaction from the U.S. foreign service if Le were to succeed in getting the White House nomination by making a political end run around the normal State Department vetting process, including a direct approach to the president — and at a fundraising event.

Note to readers: Below is the list of "Friends & Supporters of Consul General An T. Le in Ho Chi Minh City" that was apparently presented by California businessman David Duong to President Obama at a Democratic Party fundraiser during the president's April 3-4, 2013 appearances in the San Francisco Bay area. The letter that the consul general approved, according to his e-mail correspondence that this reporter has seen, is unedited. (The reference to (F) after the names of some of the endorsers — such as former U.S. Ambassador to France Craig Stapleton, himself a former political appointee — apparently refers to the "former" position. Le served in the U.S. embassy in Paris during Stapleton's tenure.)

LIST OF ENDORSERS OF MR. AN LE'S CANDIDACY

Title	First Name	Last N.	Position	Business/Organization	City	St.	Zip
T.H.	Rahm	Emanuel	Mayor	City of Chicago	Chicago	IL	60602
Mr.	David	Duong	President	California Waste Solutions	Oakland	CA	94607
Mr.	Pedro (Sonny)	Ada	President	Ada's Trust and Investment, Inc.	Hagatna	GU	96932
Mrs.	Jennifer M.A.	Ada	Ambass-at-Large	Governor of Guam's Trade Mission to VN	Hagatna	GU	96932
Mrs.	Stephanie	Au	Behavioral Cons.	Spencer, Shenk, Capers & Associates	Irvine	CA	92618
Mr.	Charles R.	Bailey	Representative (F)	Ford Foundation/Vietnam	Chestnut Ridge	NY	10977
Mr.	Mark	Baldyga	President/Owner	Baldyga Group, LLC	Tumon	GU	96913
Mr.	David C.	Ball	Owner	DesignBalls Studio	Grapevine	TX	76051
Mr.	Greg J.	Baroni	President/CEO	Attain, LLC	Vienna	VA	22182
Mr.	Elvin Y.	Chiang	Senior Advisor	Ernst & Young, LLP	Tamuning	GU	96913
Dr.	Hung Manh	Chu	Professor/Dean	West Chester University	West Chester	PA	19382
Ms.	Sandy	Dang	Principal	11plus Philanthropic Consulting, LLC	Washington	DC	20015
Mr.	Huy	Do	Chair/President	Strategic Alliance VN Ventures Internl.	Brisbane	CA	94005
Mr.	Duc	Do	Editor	Thoi Luan Newspaper	Westminster	CA	92684
Mr.	Thien-Chuong	Duong, Esq	Patent Attorney	AD Intellectual Property Consulting	Palo Alto	CA	94306
Dr.	Huan	Giap, M.D	Director	Scripps Proton Therapy Center	San Diego	CA	92121
Mrs.	Lourdes Leon	Guerrero	President/CEO	Bank of Guam	Hagatna	GU	96910
Mr.	Loc	Hoang	IT Director	University of Maryland	College Park	MD	20742
Mrs.	Diane	Hsiung	Prog. Associate	American University	Washington	DC	20016
Ms.	Kim-Yen	Huynh	Founder/President	Asian-American Business Women Assn.	Huntington Beach	CA	92647
Dr.	Johannes	Kratz	Physician	Massachusetts General Hospital	Boston	MA	02115
Mr.	Larry Trung	La	President	Meiwah Group	Washington	DC	20036
Mrs.	Jennifer L.	Lawless	Professor	American University	Washington	DC	20008
Dr.	Tommy	Le, PE	Vice Chair	County Board of Electrical Examiners	Silver Spring	MD	20906
Mr.	Anh-Tuan, P.E	Le	Managing Cons.	Green Orange	Fountain Valley	CA	92708
Mr.	Marc	Levin	Managing Partner	Levin Capital Management	Chicago	IL	60611
Mr.	David	Lublin	Professor	American University	Washington	DC	20016
Dr.	David	Mai, M.D	President	MediZen Advanced Imaging, Inc.	Fountain Valley	CA	92708
Mr.	Nolan	Metzger	Financ. Advisor	Oppenheimer	Houston	TX	77022
T.H.	Constance A.	Morella	Congressman (F)	U.S. House of Representatives	Bethesda	MD	20817
Mr.	Steve A.	Nagel	Council Member	City of Fountain Valley	Fountain Valley	CA	92708
Dr.	Chau Thanh	Nguyen	M.D.	Private Practice	San Jose	CA	95116
Ms.	Diem H.	Nguyen	Mrktg Executive	Caesars Entertainment	Las Vegas	NE	89109

	Helen			Corporation			
Dr.	Chau	Nguyen	Physician	Chau Nguyen Osthreopathic Center	Westminster	CA	92683
Ms.	GINNA Claire	Nguyen	Design./Professor	GINNA Claire Studio & Pasadena College	Pasadena	CA	91105
Mr.	John Wynn	Nguyen	President	Imperial Investment & Development Inc.	Milpitas	CA	95035
Dr.	Duc Tien	Nguyen	Vice-President	International Liver Foundation for Vietnam	West Covina	CA	91790
Dr.	Thuan Hoa	Nguyen	Physician	Kaiser Permanente	Silver Spring	MD	20902
Ms.	Hoa	Nguyen	Tec. Bus.Analyst	METRO/Public Transportation	Houston	TX	77002
Dr.	Ai	Nguyen	Owner	Pain Clinic of Westminster	Santa Ana	CA	92706
Ms.	Ai Van	Nguyen	Singer	Performing Artist	Cupertino	CA	95014
Mr.	Chris	Nguyen	Co-Chair	Stanford U. Vietnamese Student Assn.	Arcadia	CA	91007
Mr.	Dzung Ky	Nguyen	Professor	Stanford University	Stanford	CA	94305
Ms.	Anna	Nguyen	Chief Fin.Officer	Strategic Intl. Medical Business Alliance	Rancho St. Fe	CA	92067
Dr.	Thu-Huong	Nguyen-Vo	Professor	University of California at Los Angeles	Los Angeles	CA	90095
Mr.	Dean	Nguyen	President	USA Home Realty	Falls Church	VA	22042
Dr.	Ngai	Nguyen	Medical Doctor	Viet Heritage Foundation	San Jose	CA	95112
Ms.	Hong Thuy	Nguyen	Author/Board	Vietnam Literary & Artistic Association	Annandale	VA	22003
Dr.	Quan H.	Nguyen	President (F)	Vietnamese Physicians Assn. of South CA	Fountain Valley	CA	92708
Mrs.	Kim D.	Nguyen	Vice-President	Wells Fargo Bank	San Francisco	CA	94105
Mr.	David	O'Brien	Vice President	University of Guam	Mangilao	GU	96923
Ms.	Allyson	Perleoni	Grad. Assistant	Women & Politics Institute	Washington	DC	20008
Dr.	Christina	Pham	Clinical Fellow	Harvard Medical School, Cambridge H.A	Cambridge	MA	02139
Ms.	Geneva	Pham	Manager	Management Sciences for Health	Washington	DC	20036
Mr.	Son Michael	Pham	Principal	U.S – Asia Gateway	Bellevue	WA	98009
Mr.	Trong	Pham	President	Washington Vietnamese-American C of C	Seattle	WA	98111
Mrs.	Susan W.	Preator	Exec. Chairman	Imagine Learning, Inc.	Provo	UT	84604
Mrs.	Thanh-Lo	Sananikone	ManagingDirector	TAF International, Inc.	Honolulu	HI	96816
T.H.	Craig	Stapleton	Ambassador (F)	Stapleton Management	Greenwich	CT	06830
Mr.	Steve	Stewart	Chairman	Gulf Winds International	Houston	TX	77061
Ms.	Cheryl	Sturm	Vice President	R. Crusoe & Son	Chicago	IL	60661
Mr.	Steven	Taylor	Asso.Professor	American University	Washington	DC	20910
Dr.	Michelle	Thai	Medical Doctor	St. Jude Medical Center	Westminster	CA	92683
Ms.	Diem Lan	Ton Nu	Senior Vice Pres	Children's Hospital, Los Angeles	Los Angeles	CA	91007
Mr.	Brian	Ton, Esq.	President	Satori Law Group, Inc.	Fountain Valley	CA	92708
Mr.	Nhan	Tran	Managing Partner	Advent Pacific Technologies, LLC.	Tamuning	GU	96913
Dr.	Thanh Nga	Tran	Physician	Massachusetts General	Boston	MA	02114

				Hospital			
Ms.	Jenny	Truong	President/CEO	Apollo Manufacturing Services	San Diego	CA	92121
Dr.	Joseph M.	Vo, PsyD	President	International Epic Solutions, Inc.	Riverside	CA	92506
Mr.	Loc Van	Vu	Exec. Director	Immigrant Resettlement & Cultural Center	San Jose	CA	95112
Mrs.	Rosine T.	Vu	Branch Chief (F)	National Security Agency	Silver Spring	MD	20902
Ms.	Linda	Vuong	Attorney	International Service Center	Denver	CO	80219
Ms.	Quyen	Vuong	Exec. Director	International Children Assistance Network	Milpitas	CA	95035
Ms.	Diep	Vuong	President	Pacific Links Foundation	Santa Clara	CA	95054
Mrs.	Margaret A.	Weekes	Associate Dean	School of Public Affairs (American Univ.)	Washington	DC	20016
Ms.	Jackie Bong	Wright	President/CEO	Vietnamese-American Voters Association	Dulles	VA	20189
Mr.	Antoine	Yoshinaka	Assis.Professor	American University	Washington	DC	20016
Mrs.	Gamze	Zeytinci	Dean	School of Arts&Sciences (American U.)	Rockville	MD	20852