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CONFIDENT OF FUTURE: Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker during interview in Saigon

Bunker Assays Vietnam Years

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 9 — Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker has just completed his fourth year in America's most crucial diplomatic post, conscious of past mistakes here, proud of the progress, confident of the future but aware of the dangers that lie ahead.

He celebrates his 77th birthday tomorrow, feeling physically fit but clearly ready to move to other duties. He does not, as he says, "choose to run for another four-year term," and the expectation is that he

will be leaving shortly after the South Vietnamese presidential elections in October.

A slim man who looks taller than his 6 feet 2 inches because of his erect bearing, Mr. Bunker has served here longer than any of his predecessors, presiding as the supreme American influence here as American troops poured in and now, as they pull out. He was behind the policy of expansion of President Johnson, who sent him here, and he is a staunch supporter of the withdrawal policy of President Nixon, who won't let him go.

Sitting in an easy chair in

his office, amid the pictures and mementos recalling a diplomatic career that began 20 years ago, after 25 years as a sugar-industry executive, Mr. Bunker marked the start of his final months in office with a rare and wide-ranging interview.

He foresaw the need for American advisers in Vietnam for several years more and for American air power for at least two or three more years. He said that American troop strength, now about 280,000, should drop to about 100,000 by

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next May 1. President Nixon has announced that the troop level would decline to 184,000 by Dec. 1.

"I thought from the beginning that if we stayed with it, it would come out all right," Mr. Bunker said. "My only doubts are whether we are going to stay with it, not because of the situation here, but because of the situation at home. I've never had any doubt that if we have the determination, the patience and the will, we would achieve reasonable success here."

On the political side, Mr. Bunker said that he thought constitutional government in South Vietnam had worked "remarkably well." On the military side, he said that there had been "very great progress."

Past Errors Acknowledged

But Mr. Bunker also acknowledged some past errors that helped feed the antiwar feeling and that in turn raised his own doubts about the determination of the United States to stay the course in Vietnam.

"I think we talked too much in the early days," he said. "I think that many of our mistakes were compounded by overoptimism as to how the situation was developing and how it could develop. My theory has been that the facts speak for themselves."

Because of the resentment at home over the war, Mr. Bunker emerged over his four years here as two men. One is the Bunker seen by the war's critics at home, a villain who has been responsible for the mistakes and miscalculations of American policy, who has resisted dramatic changes to bring about political accommodation and who has been overly protective of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

The other Bunker is the one seen in Saigon, a charming host, a courtly and skilled diplomat, an efficient administrator, and an envoy who aides say is more responsive to, than responsible for Washington policy, of which he undoubtedly approves. Barely does one hear a critical personal remark against Mr. Bunker here, even from those outside the embassy who disagree with him and think the American involvement has been a disaster.

A Key Man for Nixon

"He's one of the three or four men President Nixon listens to when he's got an important decision to make about this country," one embassy official said. "But he is way out here and obviously those closer to the White House probably have a better chance of being heard."

Another embassy aide said: "Bunker is probably important in shaping policy, if not in making it."

Mr. Bunker has held his public words to a minimum, reflecting the caution and tact that endear an envoy in a sensitive post to his colleagues in Washington. A few wrong words from Mr. Bunker could not only stir the critics at home but also upset the close relationship he has developed with the Saigon Government.

In his interview, Mr. Bunker said that he was frankly worried about the economic future of South Vietnam, that "difficult economic problems" lie ahead because of the departure of American troops and that "economic assistance on a major scale" would be necessary from the United States for a considerable period of time.

Concern About Economy

"I think that the economy will be a greater concern than the military situation," he continued. "The Vietnamese have confidence now in their ability to handle the military situation."

Mr. Bunker, who as chief of the United States mission here outranks Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the military com-

mander, also made the following points:

"Among the mistakes of the past were the lack of official understanding of the type of war being fought here, a late realization that the United States could not finish the job alone and had to train the South Vietnamese to take over, and the tendency to oversell progress here.

"We really didn't understand the kind of war we were engaged in," he said. "So it was difficult, it took time to learn and therefore people became impatient with the war. Then, at the same time, other problems arose at home—problems of the cities, racial problems, pollution, all of these crowded in and demanded attention. So the feeling developed, understandably, that domestic problems should have priority."

Chances for a political settlement may improve after the South Vietnamese presidential elections because Hanoi may decide to negotiate seriously when it sees a regime that "will be in power here for the next four years." Hanoi may also wait to see the outcome of the American elections next year, he said, but he did not rule out the possibility of an eventual outcome here of no settlement, no peace and no war.

While the recent allied thrust into Laos "had some effect," it was still too early to judge how much it succeeded in curbing Hanoi's efforts to supply the Indochina war. The operation showed that the South Vietnamese needed to develop better coordination in command.

President Thieu is a man of "considerable intellectual ability" who has grown in his job. But the United States will take no sides in the forthcoming political campaign here, although "we hope to see fair, honest elections." It would again be a "good idea" if observers, from other countries, including the United States, came for the elections.

Despite the view of many war critics at home that President Thieu stands in the way of a settlement, it is not up to the United States to see that he is removed. The South Vietnamese "have a constitutional system."

Relations With Thieu

The relationship of Mr. Bunker to President Thieu, who rose to power during the Bunker years, has often been a subject of controversy among critics of the war. Some of the ambassador's associates say that he represents "a father figure" to President Thieu and that Mr. Bunker tries to "persuade rather than push" him.

According to an aide of President Thieu, "Thieu and Bunker are open and frank with each other and like each other, but when Thieu says he doesn't like something and wants Bunker to ask Nixon about it, Bunker just sits there and nods and we never quite know what he's thinking. He never tips his hand."

As Mr. Bunker noted in the interview, American leverage on the Saigon Government is not what it was when half a million American troops were in the country. But Mr. Bunker said it would remain considerable because of the economic aid that Saigon will need.

The two men meet frequently, sometimes two or three times a week, depending upon the burning issues. They discuss, often with General Abrams on hand, the specific areas from which American troops would withdraw, the question of financial support, and last week, American proposals for an intensified

campaign by the South Vietnamese to curb the alarming flow of drugs to American servicemen.

Outside the top levels of the Saigon Government, Mr. Bunker, as might be expected, has kept his contacts with the Vietnamese to a minimum. For example, he has never had more than a social conversation with Gen. Duong Van Minh, who is likely to be President Thieu's challenger in the election.

Accordingly, Mr. Bunker seems a distant, forbidding figure to the South Vietnamese who have had no contact with him. The local press has nicknamed him Ong Gia Tu Lanh or "Mr. Refrigerator." Sometimes the papers call him "the governor" of South Vietnam.

For the Ambassador to avoid showing partiality in the elections will take all the diplomatic skill he demonstrated as a trouble-shooter in the 1965 Dominican crisis, where he supervised the transition to constitutional government, and earlier assignments in which he mediated the disputes between Indonesia and the Netherlands over Dutch New Guinea and between Egypt and Syria over Yemen.

Virtually every ambassadorial act—a visit to the palace, a trip to a ceremony with the President—will be seen by opponents of the Government as new gestures of American approval of Mr. Thieu.

Close Tie With Abrams

Apart from the close relationship with President Thieu, Mr. Bunker has developed an effective and friendly partnership with General Abrams, the "political general" who understands that military actions of this war must often be governed by political considerations. When General Abrams succeeded the outspoken Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Mr. Bunker advised him against doing "so much talking about developments here and just see how it worked."

"I keep him thoroughly in touch with political developments and he keeps me thoroughly briefed on the military situation," Mr. Bunker explained.

Inside the embassy itself, Mr. Bunker has earned the respect and admiration of his staff, although some of the younger members sometimes complain that their views are not listened to in the higher councils and that, despite public caution about events at the top, they are expected to accentuate the positive in their reports.

Mr. Bunker and his wife, Carol C. Laise, who is Ambassador to Nepal, own a farm in Vermont. He said he would like to go back there for a while when this assignment ends, but indicated he would not object to returning to his old job as a trouble-shooter with ambassadorial rank—"it gives you a little more freedom."

Asked what his advice would be to his successor, Mr. Bunker replied: "Stand fast. And let the facts speak for themselves."