

Bunker, Personification of U.S. Role,

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 11—Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who has presided for six contentious years as the paramount American authority in South Vietnam and has become the last major symbol of United States involvement here, left Saigon today.

He departed feeling satisfied that he had helped build a strong, stable South Vietnamese regime, preserve American credibility and end United States military intervention under honorable circumstances.

When the tall, white-haired former sugar-industry executive arrived in late April, 1967, American troops were still pouring into South Vietnam, the Government was chosen by coups rather than elections and Saigon controlled little of its countryside. Even Mr. Bunker's gleaming, fortresslike embassy came under attack during the Communists' 1968 Tet offensive and security guards had to order a special armored blanket in which to wrap him.

"People have forgotten what chaos there was when Bunker arrived," one of his aides said. "Bunker's years were the years when the Saigon Government was built."

Erosion of Liberties

But Mr. Bunker's years also saw a steady erosion of civil liberties and constitutional procedures as President Nguyen Van Thieu became increasingly powerful. Dissident politicians were jailed, newspapers were closed and opposition political parties were ruled illegal by presidential decree.

The Ambassador's Vietnamese critics—who seldom had the chance to meet him, for he is aloof—and some younger members of his mission believe that his unswerving support of Mr. Thieu may have been partly responsible for the decline in democracy.



United Press International

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker saying good-by yesterday to Charles S. Whitehouse, left, Deputy U.S. Ambassador, before boarding plane in Saigon for Nepal.

Leaves Vietnam

"Bunker made Thieu, and he must take the blame for what Thieu has done to his opponents," said Ly Quy Chung, a member of the National Assembly and a supporter of Gen. Duong Van Minh, a leading opponent of Mr. Thieu. "Bunker's mistake was to put all his trust in one man instead of in democracy."

Ambassador Bunker, who also celebrated his 79th birthday today, said recently that he had no idea he would be here so long.

"The tunnel was longer and the light was dimmer and farther away than any of us realized at the time," he remarked, sitting stiffly in an easy chair in his office. He was wearing one of his impeccably tailored light-colored tropical suits.

Changed Little Over Years

The Ambassador's aides and other senior American officials who have known him over a period of years say he changed remarkably little during his tenure in the most critical American diplomatic post. As for outsiders, members of the press corps and Vietnamese politicians, he grew increasingly remote from them, particularly since President Thieu's unopposed re-election in 1971 and the secret peace negotiations last fall.

His close associates say he retains his aplomb and tact and has been as energetic and hard-working as ever, taking time off only for an occasional game of golf or tennis on Sundays.

In some ways Mr. Bunker emerged as two men. Publicly, he presented a stern, forbidding visage — some Vietnamese called him "Mr. Refrigerator" — but in private he was known as a charming host who enjoyed passing an evening recounting jokes and limericks, which he carefully recorded.

In contrast to his image in the United States, where critics of the war have cast him as a villain, implacably presiding over the American establishment in Vietnam, United States officials here regard him with affection and almost awe.

"He has such presence that there was never any doubt about who was in charge," said a long-time associate. "Westmoreland, Abrams and Weyand all deferred to him in meetings."

"I know this sounds ridiculous," another diplomat remarked, "but Mr. Bunker has no faults. He might not get around in public, but he reads voraciously. And he has total recall. If you told him one thing this month and another thing next month, he'd tear you to pieces."

Mr. Bunker's signal contribution, some experienced Vietnamese and Americans say, was to shift the basic thrust of the war effort from what Americans could do to what the Vietnamese could and must do for themselves.

"Bunker was appalled to discover so many Americans running around telling him what great things they had done," recalled a subordinate who has been in Saigon since the Ambassador arrived. "He wanted to know what the Vietnamese were doing."

Under Mr. Bunker's guidance the Vietnamization program and the withdrawal of more than 500,000 American troops began.

Under his constant probing, associates say, the pacification program was finally undertaken, spreading the Saigon Government's control into the countryside in the wake of the Tet offensive. The Regional Forces and Popular Forces—local militia—were armed, trained and increased in size, and the Popular Self-Defense Forces—the unpaid village militia—was established. Land reform was made a reality, at least in some

areas, and local elections were held for the first time in years.

Combined with the Communists' loss of tens of thousands of their best village cadres in the Tet offensive, the pacification countryside, and many roads that had been closed as long as most Americans could remember were suddenly safe.

But the pacification program, which was run by the American military command and the apparatus known as CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural Development Support), also generated some major controversies. Its Phoenix program, designed to eliminate local Communist agents by arresting or assassinating them, led to the killing of more than 20,000, but it was eventually abandoned by the Americans as a failure.

While Ambassador Bunker never took a public position on the Phoenix program, informed officials say that he supported it at least in the beginning as one of the more effective ways of increasing the Saigon Government's power.

It was also Mr. Bunker's constant support that helped transform Mr. Thieu from a struggling general, second in power to Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, then Premier and later Vice President, into a strong and unchallenged President. Every ambassadorial visit to Mr. Thieu, every appearance with him at a public ceremony, was seen by the ever-watchful Vietnamese as a sign of American backing.

Role in 1971 Election

"At first maybe Bunker's praise and support for Thieu were good public relations, an effort to create some stability after all those coups," a close associate of the Ambassador suggested, "but Bunker came to genuinely admire and respect Thieu, and felt he had grown in office."

The admiration was reciprocal. On Wednesday Mr. Thieu gave Mr. Bunker Saigon's highest decoration, the National Order, First Class, and played host at a farewell party.

Because of the envoy's obvious power and influence, and his support for Mr. Thieu, Mr. Bunker came to be known to many Vietnamese politicians as "the Governor."

His most blatant intervention in politics, in Vietnamese eyes, was his ill-fated attempt to keep General Minh and Mr. Ky in the race against Mr. Thieu in 1971.

"I remember one morning when Ambassador Bunker came around to try to persuade General Ky to run for President," one of Mr. Ky's campaign managers recalled, "General Ky's candidacy has already been ruled illegal, but Ambassador Bunker said he could fix that. An hour later the Supreme Court ruled that Ky could run after all."

"It was scandalous, Bunker's interference," the aide added.

In the upshot both General Minh and Mr. Ky dropped out, and Mr. Thieu, running unopposed, won 94.3 per cent of the vote.

Mr. Bunker himself acknowledges that it was his biggest disappointment. Some associates believe that the President's manipulation of the election persuaded the Ambassador to abandon his plan to return home after it.

Refusal to Act Criticized

There were also times when, to the disappointment and shame of some members of the mission, he ruled out any use of American power to try to alter President Thieu's autocratic behavior. This attitude was especially criticized in the case of Tran Ngoc Chau, an Assembly member, architect of the pacification program and respected friend of many American officials, who was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for "treasonable" activities.

It was widely believed that Mr. Chau, who was sent to prison despite his legislative immunity and despite a Supreme Court order overturning his conviction, had been arrested more for his outspoken opposition to Mr. Thieu than for his technical crime—having had contact with his brother, a North Vietnamese spy.

Mr. Bunker rejects the criticism that he was unfairly

protective of Mr. Thieu weakening the opposition and lessening its chances to emerge as a potent political force.

"I haven't been partial," the Ambassador said. "It's my obligation program helped transform the pattern of control in the government to deal with the Government to which I'm accredited." he added, giving his solution to one of main problems American diplomats have faced in recent years—whether to deal with unpopular governments or their possibly more democratic oppositions.

Gain for Opposition Seen

"The opposition has been weak because of its own inability to get together and agree on common policies and leaders," the Ambassador remarked.

He said he believed that the new law on political parties—which sets such stiff requirements that only two groups in addition to Mr. Thieu's New Democracy party exist legally—would tend to strengthen the opposition by bringing it together. Almost all politicians insist that the law, in the form of a presidential emergency decree last December, was designed simply to wipe out the opposition.

"I have always said that countries like Vietnam, and the countries in South America, should not be expected to model themselves on us and our democratic form of government," Mr. Bunker explained. "We have a democratic tradition dating back hundreds of years, and they have a hierarchical tradition. They should choose their own kind of government."

Aside from the 1971 election fiasco and some continuing corruption, Mr. Bunker pronounced himself generally satisfied that his goals had been met: to make credible the American commitment in Vietnam, to help the South Vietnamese build a strong economy, to help them choose their own form of government, to insure a just and honorable peace.

"There is an opportunity now to achieve peace, and the framework for it," he insisted. Asked whether three months of the cease-fire, with all the violations, had not shaken his confidence in the Paris accords, he answered: "Imperfect as the situation is today, it is far better than it was before the Paris agreement was signed."

He said he still hoped that the threat of American air power and pressures from the Russians and the Chinese

would deter any ~~new~~ Vietnamese offensive.

Few of the officers in his embassy are that optimistic.

Mr. Bunker flew out of Saigon in an Air Force transport with his wife, Carol C. Laise. They were bound for Katmandu, where she is ending a tour as United States Ambassador to Nepal. Then the Ambassador plans to spend as much time as possible on his 600-acre farm in Putney, Vt.

He will still be available for assignment elsewhere, as a special ambassador at large, but after a 20-year diplomatic career that has included helping resolve the 1965 crisis in the Dominican Republic and the dispute between Indonesia and the Dutch over West Irian and ambassadorships in Argentina, Italy and India, Mr. Bunker says he is interested in his farm's maple syrup and dairy cows.

His successor, Graham A. Martin, former Ambassador to Italy, has not yet been confirmed by the Senate, but few Vietnamese expect him to be as influential as Mr. Refrigerator, who served in Saigon longer than any of his predecessors.

"There will not be another Mr. Bunker," an opposition politician said, and he shook his head.