'This Symbol of Immense American Power in Vietnam'

By Gloria Emerson

I have been thinking about these men in the last few weeks, remembering some of their faces and their voices, when it would be nicer to forget. I wonder if their dreams are dark and ugly things, if any of them trembled and turned away from the television films of Vietnamese refugees weeping, pleading, talking to themselves.

Did they see the woman hitting her head as she cried out for a dead child, or the man with one leg who moved so slowly down a road, with the leash on his small dog tied to a crutch? I wonder what they think, or if they shudder, seeing the pictures of the disgraced Army of South Vietnam, those ruined men who shouted out "Run, quick, run for your lives."

Only a few years ago, the Americans in this imperial photograph, this symbol of immense American power in Vietnam over Vietnamese, could not see very much at all. The victims of the war seemed invisible to them, the human wreckage from all their plans and proposals. Perhaps they still believe there is something to be won, that more guns, more money, more pressure would do it.

No one will remind them, of course, of the lies they wanted us to believe for so long. None of them will suffer for the roles they played in Vietnam. The victims in Indochina were always people whose faces and names meant nothing to us.

In this photograph by Richard Avedon taken in Saigon in 1971, we see the faces of the important men. They all had the same purpose: to make the South Vietnamese fight harder, to persuade Americans the war could be won and to protect and strengthen the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu. It did not matter that Mr. Thieu was a Vietnamese who fought on the wrong side in his country's war for independence, that corrupt elections kept him in power, that he was never a man who cared much for his own people, not even those who had done what he wanted. He did not even seem to like them very much if they were poor or frightened or sad.

Once in City Hall at Saigon, a Vietnamese war veteran on crutches tried politely to pass a letter to President Thieu which begged for help in a very respectful manner. But the letter was never read.

The man, wounded in action, could not feel or use his legs. He was most anxious to receive disability payments which had not come for several years. But the bodyguards circling Mr. Thieu did not want him to get close. They shoved him away. He fell and lay, ashamed, on the floor, unable to move or rise without help. President Thieu did not look at the man on the floor; he moved away to closely inspect some pink legs, then some glass eyes.

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker looked as he always looked, a man unmoved by life itself. The exhibit was one of prosthetic devices manufactured in South Vietnam. It was intended to show the Government's great progress and how nicely it would go when their soldiers lost bits of their bodies or faces. But the soldiers knew better.

These were the Americans keeping the myths about the war fresh and alive for us. It was all going well, they said. Vietnamization was working, the pacification programs were making progress, at last ARVN was "motivated" and looked tough. None of it was true. It was a country of deep, festering disorders that could not be ignored or concealed any more than the gangrenous wounds of a soldier.

What did we give to these people? We gave them the lives of our own young, for 56,555 Americans died there, and an inflation that crippled and frightened them. We trained and equipped most lavishly an army that lost with the French, that nearly collapsed in 1964 and is wrecked forever now. We kicked them into battle and wanted most desperately for them to win. But our army of Vietnamese were never as good, as inventive, as strong, as unswerving, as the Vietnamese who fought us. Were there men in this picture who knew why? Who knew which Vietnamese would never win. Everyone else did.

It was a huge army whose soldiers longed to go home, who knew they were not cared for, or loved, by their own. Early in 1971 South Vietnamese units, considered the best, were sent into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to prove we had made them winners. But it was a rout, a pitiful thing to see, that army on the run, each man only thinking of himself.

I am looking once more at the face of the Ambassador, who for so many years was the symbol of our insistence that the Vietnamese do what we wanted. I remember how buoyed he was, back in Saigon, after attending his fifty-fifth class reunion at Yale.

He said the class of 1916 was behind the war. What the class of 1916 felt did not matter much to the G.I.'s; some were so young I thought they were still growing. They needed bigger boots. Ambassador Bunker organized The Yale Club of Saigon. In December 1971, thirty-three Yalies, as he liked to call them, met in his villa one night. They sang verses of The Whiffenpoof Song and Bright College Years. It was an evening he so enjoyed. This is what I remember when I think of him.

Gloria Emerson was a reporter in Vietnam and is writing a book on the effects of the war on Americans.

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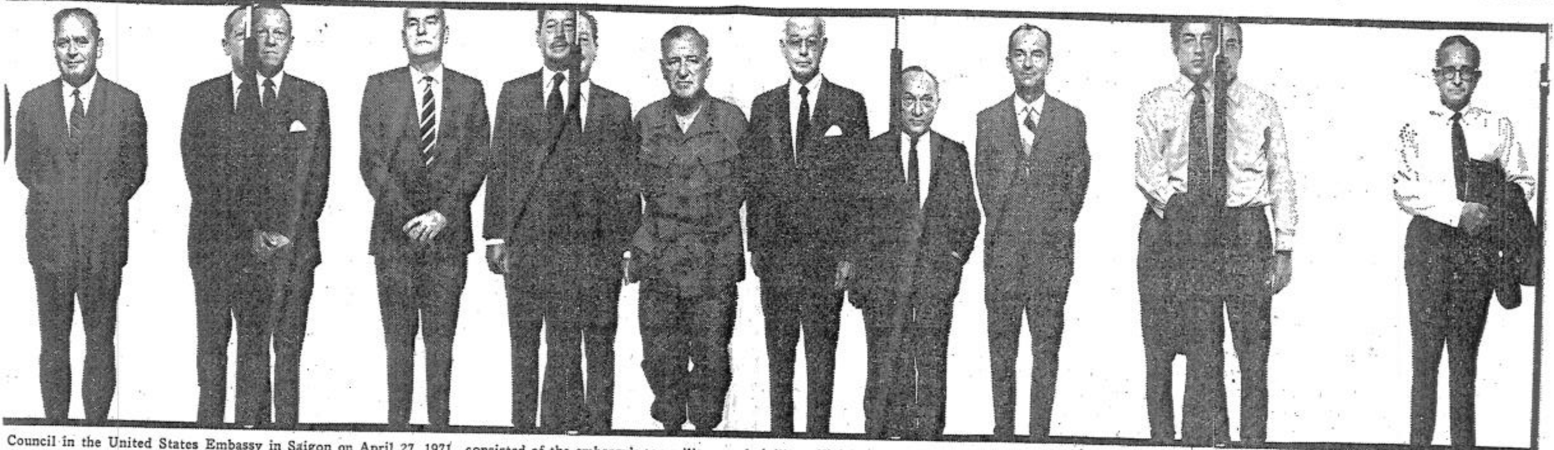
lission Council, Saigon, April 27, 1971

By Richard Avedon



Council in the United States Embassy in Saigon on April 27, 1971, consisted of the embassy's top military and civilian officials. They were, from left:

mission coordinator; Ernest J. Colantonio, counselor of embassy for administrative affairs; Edward J. Nickel, minister counselor for public affairs, and director, joint United States public affairs office; John E. McGowan, minister counselor for press affairs, and special assistant to the Ambassador for press affairs;
assistant chief of staff, Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS); Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and Commanding General, United States Army, Vietnam; Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker; Deputy Ambassador Samuel D. Berger; John R.
also director, United States Agency for International Development, Vietnam; Charles A. Cooper, minister counselor for economic affairs; Laurin B. Askew, counselor of embassy for political affairs.