

Bunker-State Department Split On Chau Reported by Columnist

Serious differences existed between Ellsworth Bunker, the United States Ambassador to South Vietnam and the State Department over the handling of the case of Tran Ngoc Chau, the opposition deputy sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, according to the Newsday columnist Flora Lewis.

In her syndicated column yesterday, Miss Lewis wrote that Ambassador Bunker had proposed making a public statement that no American ambassador had ever been involved in Mr. Chau's eight meetings with his brother, Tran Ngoc Hien, a North Vietnamese intelligence officer, although Ambassador Bunker knew this to be untrue.

But, according to Miss Lewis, the State Department ordered Ambassador Bunker not to make such a statement because it conflicted with secret testimony given by John Vann, chief of United States pacification efforts in the Mekong Delta, at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month.

"That was a diplomatic way of saying the department knew Bunker's proposed comment was untrue and was aware that Bunker also knew it was untrue," Miss Lewis wrote.

Ambassador Bunker was

himself present at a meeting in September, 1967, when Mr. Chau briefed high American officials on his knowledge of enemy plans for the forthcoming Tet offensive. Miss Lewis wrote that Mr. Chau had learned of these plans from the meeting with his brother.

Although Mr. Chu did not have precise information on the timing and place of the impending attacks, Miss Lewis reported, some top American officers believe that his advice was instrumental in preventing Gen. William C. Westmoreland, then United States commander in Vietnam, from transferring more troops to outlying regions and exposing Saigon to disaster. The offensive began at the end of January, 1968.

Miss Lewis wrote that Ambassador Bunker, in suggesting that contacts with Mr. Chau be denied, was acting to protect President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam.

"Bunker, 75, is a traditional type of New England Yankee with a record of high personal integrity," she wrote. "However, it was he who picked Thieu as America's favorite candidate for the presidency and, in effect, created the Thieu government. He is deeply committed to its maintenance in power."