

REVIEW ESSAY

Pike, Douglas, ed. *The Bunker Papers: Reports to the President from Vietnam, 1967-1973*. 3 volumes. Indochina Research Monograph 5. Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1990.

Clarke, Jeffrey J. *The United States Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*. Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1988.

Andradé, Dale. *Ashes to Ashes: the Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1990.

By March 1967, when he was chosen by President Lyndon Johnson to be the next United States Ambassador to Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker was seventy-two years old and had already completed two successful careers. For twenty-four years (1927-51) he had been a director, rising to chairmanship of the board, of the National Sugar Refining Company. In 1951 his appointment as American ambassador to Argentina had launched him on a diplomatic career, which included periods as ambassador to Italy and India, and later the role of mediator in the West Irian dispute between the Netherlands and Indonesia. As United States representative to the Organisation of American States (1964-66) he had played an important part in resolving the crisis in the Dominican Republic. It would have marked an honorable end to that career if he had then been allowed to retire to Vermont to write his memoirs. Instead, not long after his second marriage in January 1967, he found himself summoned to the White House and offered the post in South Vietnam which he was to hold for five years, from April 1967 to May 1973.

That appointment can now be seen as itself a significant turning-point in the evolution of President Johnson's handling of the war in Vietnam. Bunker's predecessor in Saigon was Henry Cabot Lodge, whose second term as ambassador (July 1965 to April 1967) had coincided with the large-scale build-up of American troops in South Vietnam and escalation of the air war against the North. In January or February 1967 it was apparently proposed that Lodge should be succeeded by General William Westmoreland, who would thus have become both ambassador and military commander, and would have been able to ensure proper coordination between the war effort and the civilian programs. The logic of that course would probably have been further escalation; but Johnson decided against it. By selecting Bunker for the post he was signalling a decision to place greater emphasis on the political aspects of the conflict and the objective of "nation-building." Success in that sphere was seen as a necessary first step towards eventual withdrawal — to which the United States had in effect committed itself at the Manila Conference of October 1966. The same trend was implicit in Robert McNamara's decision in November 1966 to place a definite ceiling of 470,000 men on

further troops deployments. In parallel with the Bunker appointment the president approved that of General Creighton Abrams as deputy commander under Westmoreland with specific responsibility for developing the South Vietnamese armed forces; and he appointed Robert Komer to be deputy commander for "pacification" programs, also under Westmoreland. Another newcomer, Eugene Locke, was to be responsible for running the large US Mission in Saigon, leaving Bunker free to play an essentially diplomatic role. What these changes amounted to, therefore, was a fresh start in Vietnam, which was unveiled at the Guam Conference of March 1967, when Johnson presented his new team to the South Vietnamese leaders, Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu.

Bunker's pivotal role in Saigon during the next few years is reflected in a long series of telegrams that he sent directly to the president in Washington, reporting from week to week (later, from month to month) on the various aspects of the developing situation as he saw it. It is these "back-channel" messages which Dr. Douglas Pike's Indochina Series Project at Berkeley has now made available to scholars in published form, and they represent an extremely valuable addition to the literature on the Vietnam War. They constitute only a small fraction of the vast record of communications from the Saigon Embassy to the State Department during the years from 1967-73. Only when that record has been declassified will it be possible for historians to attempt a definitive assessment of Bunker's achievements as ambassador. Nevertheless, they provide important insight into his approach and experiences during a critical phase of the war. As a historical source, moreover, they have the advantage that — unlike memoirs recollected in the tranquillity of hindsight — they were written from week to week or month to month, and give us his reactions to the changing situation while events were still going on.

The sequence is not, unfortunately, completely continuous from 1967 to 1973. For the period after the middle of June 1971 we have only two telegrams: one in January 1972, covering the preceding six months; and a parting shot message in May 1973. Of the other 95 telegrams (one unnumbered) the first seventy or so relate to the eighteen months from May 1967 to October 1968. For that period they are genuinely weekly reports, apart from interruptions occasioned by Bunker's return to Washington for consultations in November 1967 and his attendance at the Honolulu Conference of July 1968. After October 1968 the messages become in effect monthly reports; sometimes the interval is even longer. We nevertheless find valuable information for the events of 1969 in the eight messages sent during President Richard Nixon's first year in office; there are also useful sequences for the period from March to September 1970, and for the spring and early summer of 1971. From December 1969, the messages are addressed also to the chief American negotiator at the Paris Conference on Vietnam.

Perhaps because their content was not classified above the levels of "secret" or "confidential," the telegrams have not been heavily "sanitized" before their release. Here and there we find the excision of the name of an intelligence source, or of a Vietnamese personality on whom adverse com-

ments are being made. A few slightly longer deletions seem to have been made for "national security" reasons, or to avoid offending United States allies such as South Korea. But these omissions do not interfere with our understanding of the main body of the text. There are, however, a number of points at which the ambassador takes for granted rather more detailed knowledge of the latest news reports from Vietnam than the present-day reader is likely to possess. It is unfortunate that Dr. Pike lacked the resources to supply a set of explanatory footnotes to fill in these gaps. (In the absence of such assistance, readers may find it useful to have handy one of the standard news digests of the period: *Facts on File*, or *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*.) In general, however, it is an advantage that the reports were written for presidents who were not themselves experts on Vietnam: they probably take for granted far less than would be the case in the day-to-day cable traffic with the State Department. Certainly, the non-specialist reader should not be deterred from approaching what, for the most part, constitutes a very lucid sequence of reporting and analysis of events and trends as they appeared to a very able and experienced "insider."

Although the military aspects of the conflict are covered in passing, together with various statistical measures of the "progress" of the war, Bunker's own central concern was with the various programs that constituted "nation-building" and above all, during 1967-68, with the establishment of a government in Saigon that was recognizably legitimate and administratively effective. The military considerations most relevant to the task concerned the evolution of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Like General Westmoreland, he was anxious to correct the false impression being given by the Western press that all Vietnamese were hopelessly incompetent and unwilling to fight. He recognized the need to do something about corruption; but the Americans were also taking steps to improve and develop the military capabilities of ARVN. That effort emerges as one of the essential themes of the telegrams.

Especially important during Bunker's first year in Saigon was the conduct of his personal relations with the South Vietnamese generals. He needed all the tact at his command to try to influence their thinking, at a time when the country had to move from rule by a military directorate towards a constitutional presidency, without becoming deeply involved in personal rivalries between them. His reports allow us to follow in some detail the evolving conflict between the two principal figures, Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu: the former still prime minister of the Directorate until the end of October 1967; the latter, at that stage, chairman of the Directorate and commander of the armed forces. Bunker analyzes from day to day the jockeying that eventually allowed Thieu to emerge as the main presidential candidate, with Ky as his running mate. He then gives us a ringside view of the elections of 3 September, and the aftermath of continued dispute over the appointment of a prime minister under the new system.

The rivalry between them continued into 1968, when the crisis following the Tet Offensive gave Ky an opportunity to reassert his influence (to-

gether with his ally, the able but notorious police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan). One has the impression that Ky was rather better than Thieu at handling the uncertainties of a crisis. But in the end it was Thieu who emerged as the more "stable" leader capable of the patient calculation and organization required in building up a whole new structure of constitutional government; of ensuring adequate political support in all quarters, and piloting legislation through the National Assembly that was also feeling its way toward a new kind of political responsibility.

Bunker's cables during 1968 indicate growing satisfaction with Thieu's performance as he transformed his role from that of first general among equals in a military junta, to that of an elected constitutional leader exercising power through correct legal and administrative forms. The relationship between the two men, from its uncertain beginnings in spring 1967 to the mood of confidence they both exuded by 1970-71, emerges as a theme worthy of more careful study than it has received hitherto.

Perhaps the principal value of the *Bunker Papers* is that they oblige us to take the Republic of Vietnam seriously as a developing country of 17 million people, whose fate was still very much in the balance during these years. But two major questions arise from the sequences as a whole. First, the reader is bound to ask whether Bunker's optimism about the progress and prospects of the Republic of Vietnam during these years was really justified. Second, it has to be considered whether that progress was, by 1971, genuinely independent of the American military and civilian presence; and how great their role had been during the period since 1967.

On the former issue, Bunker's weekly reports during 1967-68 — and even more, his monthly messages during 1970-71 — provide sufficient hard evidence of progress to give the lie to those commentators whose minds were already made up in the opposite direction by the end of 1967, and who saw only the futility of all further American involvement in Vietnam. The latter view is presented, for example, by Neil Sheehan in his study of John Paul Vann,¹ a work that does serious violence to Vann's own career by devoting hardly any space to his actual achievements — and optimism — during the years 1968-71. It is also the interpretation that *seems* to arise from a reading of the *Pentagon Papers*, whose release in 1971 greatly influenced many writings on the war, but whose actual contents related almost entirely to the period before the Tet Offensive of 1968. Among the most important of Bunker's telegrams are those which describe, week by week, how the Saigon regime recovered from that offensive and succeeded in coping with the equally serious threat of the "second offensive" in May-June that year. His account suggests an element of surprise on the part of the Americans themselves at the relative effectiveness of the Vietnamese response to the situation, and the speed with which it was possible to reverse the worst consequences of the crisis, even in the countryside. It was then that the foundations were laid for the more successful implementation of the various programs that had been worked out by Locke, Komer and Abrams during the previous eight or nine months. Bunker remained optimistic in mid-1971. The real question that

arises from his reports is whether the progress made by then was truly sufficient to allow an independent South Vietnam to survive *after* that time. Regarding our second question, it certainly has to be recognized that the relationship between the United States Mission in Saigon and the Vietnamese government (GVN) was probably much more integrated than appears on the surface of Bunker's reports. Formally, his role was that of US ambassador to an independent country; in practice it is impossible to forget that the survival of the Republic of Vietnam since 1963 had depended on a vast financial investment as well as on the deployment of immense military manpower and firepower in a war whose strategy was decided by the American generals. If Bunker's task was to deliver political stability as a basis for handing over more of the fighting to the ARVN, and establishing a more independent Vietnamese economy, those ends could not be achieved merely through conventional diplomacy of the kind normal between sovereign states. The ambivalence of the relationship between embassy and government is only occasionally hinted at in the telegrams; but behind the formalities stood a whole framework of American agency planning which it was the task of Bunker, Komer and Abrams to bring to bear on GVN "decision-making." On 26 July 1967 for example, there is a reference to the "Blueprint" that Locke and his staff were then engaged in drawing up, and which was to be the basis of "recommendations" to the new government after the elections. We know from other sources that it was in fact completed about a month later and taken to Washington for extensive review at the highest levels. A purely American operation, completed and thoroughly digested before the 3 September elections had even taken place. A later telegram tells us that in a meeting on 5 December that year the GVN presented "its" program on pacification, "which Bob Komer tells me is practically the same as ours." It might not be entirely unreasonable to compare Bunker's role with that of a British colonial governor and his staff in the final stages of "decolonization" and political tutelage.

One test of the reality (or otherwise) of South Vietnam's independence arose with regard to negotiations to end the war. Bunker reports a number of GVN statements during 1967-68 that indicate clearly the Vietnamese view that any formal negotiations should take place between the governments in Hanoi and Saigon, on equal terms. That was the logic implicit in the Geneva Agreement of 1954, insofar as it was still relevant: neither Ho Chi Minh or Ngo Dinh Diem could claim full legitimacy under that accord until after the completion of nationwide elections, which in the event had never been held. By the late 1960s, however, the Americans were seeking their own talks with Hanoi; and when those talks actually began, in May 1968, the Saigon politicians began to view the implications with alarm. They were particularly anxious to avoid any recognition of the National Liberation Front, which would imply a competition for legitimacy between "two parties" in South Vietnam. In the end, that was precisely the formula the Americans were willing to accept and there was little the Vietnamese could do to resist.

Indeed, the chronology of the Bunker telegrams may reflect an element of *realpolitik* in United States policy that is not evident from their

content. The fact that the telegrams ceased to be genuinely “weekly” after October 1968 (though the label was not dropped until July 1969) may mean that President Johnson’s personal interest in the internal affairs of South Vietnam slackened once he had decided to end all bombing north of the 17th parallel. That decision seemed to open the way to a diplomatic solution, in which international bargaining rather than “nation-building” would occupy centre stage, and there is nothing to suggest that Washington intended to allow its own approach to negotiations to be actively shaped by Vietnamese views. In the event no “solution” emerged.

White House interest in Saigon affairs no doubt resumed under President Nixon. During the next two years and more the Thieu regime finally seemed to be taking firm root; and by then the Vietnamese leader probably was taking decisions more independently, in keeping with the spirit of the “Guam Doctrine” of July 1969. The regular Bunker messages finally ended in early June 1971, when Nixon and Henry Kissinger likewise appear to have decided on a serious diplomatic effort to end the war on whatever terms could be obtained. It is with reference to *that* decision, rather than the events of 1967-68, that historians must consider whether the Thieu regime was capable (by 1971) of surviving on its own. The *Bunker Papers* themselves leave that question open.

Two other books published in recent years have a bearing on these questions and can usefully be read in conjunction with the Bunker sequence. Dale Andradé’s *Ashes to Ashes* is a detailed examination of the PHOENIX program launched in 1967-68 to attack the political “infrastructure” of the “Viet Cong” (the “VCT”). Jeffrey Clarke’s *The Final Years* is one of the volumes of the US Army’s official history of the Vietnam War, covering in detail the continuing role of the “advisory” program after 1965 and the effort to improve the RVN armed forces in the years of “Vietnamization.” Both works are based principally on the military archives accumulated by the Center of Military History and the Military History Institute — only some of which are as yet declassified for independent researchers.

Andradé’s main purpose is to test two long-held beliefs about the PHOENIX program: one, that it was nothing more than a covert assassination outfit controlled by the CIA; the other that it was, in any event, completely ineffective against the rural Communist movement whose triumph was inevitable. By looking at the internal documentary record of the program he has no difficulty in disposing of the first assertion. The CIA certainly had an important role in the program at the province level, but it owed a great deal also to the contribution of Special Forces advisers and to US Navy SEALs. As for assassinations, there certainly were numerous operations in which VCI members were killed rather than taken prisoner. But the essence of the program was a pattern of arrest, interrogation, detention, and trial by special courts. The problems that arose were to a large extent those which bedeviled the whole Vietnamese administrative and legal system: problems of the chain of command, efficient implementation of rules, and discipline over local officials. The system of courts and detention centres, and the effort to combine

hard intelligence with police operations at grass roots level — all these things were brought into existence, and for much of the time they probably worked roughly as they were intended to do.

On the second count, Andradé is able to point to the testimony of the Communists themselves, given in interviews with Western visitors after the war, that PHOENIX did indeed damage their political infrastructure and made it more and more difficult for them to operate in the southern countryside during 1968-71. So long as the Americans were in charge, at least, the program was effective. Yet in the end, as the title of the book indicates, PHOENIX rose from the "Ashes of Tet" merely to return to the ashes of inefficiency after 1971. Andradé admits some difficulty in getting a clear picture of what actually happened to the program after it was taken over by the Vietnamese in 1972-3; but he detects a serious decline even before it was abandoned under the terms of the Paris Agreement. He suggests that this was a sphere in which "Vietnamization" did not work very well. But he leaves open the question whether the decline of the program was due to its inherent unsuitability to the Vietnamese social and political context without the presence of the Americans, or was the victim of an over-rapid American withdrawal. Perhaps, in the final analysis, we should look not only to the history of the program itself but also at what was happening in the larger perspective: the return to "big unit war" and the question of ARVN's military effectiveness after 1971.

That is ground covered with great skill and perceptiveness by Jeffrey Clarke, whose book is precisely what the reader of the *Bunker Papers* most needs in order to gain a clearer picture of the relationship between the political and military sides of "nation-building." There has been a tendency among writers about the war to equate "nation-building" entirely with political and economic programs and with "pacification." It can be traced back to the thinking of some of the Pentagon civilians whose views are so well represented in the *Pentagon Papers'* account of the war during 1965-67. In a sense they were reacting against the opposite tendency, of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military commanders in the field, to make the "big unit" battlefield appear all-important. But in doing so they contributed to a sense of dichotomy between the two different kinds of operations, allowing the issue of conventional military assistance to the armed forces of the RVN to fall between two stools. In the end (by spring 1967) the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) went along with the dichotomy in its own planning: it accepted not only that a civilian, Robert Komer, should be responsible to a general for command of the "other war," but also that the main contribution of ARVN should be in the field of "pacification support" — leaving the big battles to the Americans themselves with their massive technological firepower.

Clarke recognizes all too clearly the implications of that decision, not only for the period of escalation (1965-67) but also for subsequent developments. The most important sections of his book are those dealing with the measures taken to strengthen and expand ARVN from the spring of 1968 onwards. In the first instance the American objective was to increase the

effectiveness of Vietnamese forces in performing their assigned role of pacification support. From 1969, with the decision to begin withdrawing United States divisions, the "Vietnamization" of the war began to require the transfer of other combat responsibilities (and support activities) from American to Vietnamese units. But the question was how far, and how fast, that process could go: was it feasible, at any stage, for ARVN to take on the *whole* of the task which the Americans had been performing since mid-1965? Clarke argues that it was not possible, and that during 1969 General Abrams and his staff clearly recognized as much. He places special emphasis on their response to Kissinger's National Security Study Memorandum No 1, (NSSM-1) in January that year, which assessed the future capabilities of ARVN: the Vietnamese *would* be able to deal with a continuing threat from purely Southern-based Communist forces (the Viet Cong), but *not* with the continued presence of North Vietnamese regular divisions (the PAVN).

That was presumably the basis of President Nixon's demand, in all his major Vietnam pronouncements from May 1969 to October 1970, that a complete withdrawal of United States troops from South Vietnam must be accompanied by the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese regular forces. Until the spring of 1971, Nixon was willing to negotiate *only* on that basis. His public statements remained ambiguous even after that point. But Kissinger's memoirs² reveal that on 31 May 1971 he conveyed secretly to Hanoi's representative in Paris a seven-point proposal that accepted a ceasefire-in-place and allowed the question of North Vietnamese troop withdrawals to remain a matter for later discussion among the Vietnamese themselves. That position seems to have been worked out in Washington in April 1971. It coincided with growing Congressional pressure for total withdrawal, in return merely for the release of American prisoners of war by Hanoi; but also with important developments toward détente both between the United States and the Soviet Union, and between the United States and Beijing. (On 14 April Zhou Enlai played host to a visiting American ping-pong team.) There was some basis for hoping that a negotiated settlement in Vietnam might at last be possible — but one designed to satisfy American rather than South Vietnamese national interests.

These diplomatic moves coincided also with a decision (already announced by Nixon on 7 April 1971) to withdraw another 100,000 American troops between May and November that year — taking the residual total down to 184,000 men. This was probably the stage at which the withdrawal plan began to leave the Vietnamese vulnerable to a new offensive by North Vietnamese troops. Yet Kissinger also tells us that his staff were already predicting the possibility of just such an offensive in March 1972. It would have made sense at that point for the Americans to conduct a revised assessment of ARVN capabilities and needs, based on a set of assumptions different from those assumed at the time of NSSM-1. Clarke observes that no such reassessment or revision of assumptions occurred. On the contrary, in April-May 1971 Abrams firmly rejected a request by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff for a new program of ARVN expansion and the provision of more powerful

weapons. The decision to compromise on the question of a North Vietnamese withdrawal, *without* a corresponding decision on more ambitious Vietnamization programs, may represent one of the key turning points in the latest stage of the war: the real beginning of the so-called "decent interval."

Clarke's evidence therefore seems to suggest that Bunker's optimism was not justified in the end: that the political and economic achievements that gave so much ground for confidence in the Thieu regime by 1971 could only be protected if the pace of American withdrawal and Vietnamization was slow enough to allow no break in the capacity to defeat action by North Vietnamese regulars. Only in those circumstances might Hanoi have abandoned its ambitions for good. This conclusion, however, leaves intact Bunker's faith in the achievements themselves, and in the *possibility* of eventual success. Taken together the three books reviewed here would seem to disprove once and for all the contention that the Vietnam War was *inherently* unwinnable, for reasons which ought to have been apparent to everyone as early as 1967-68.

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Endnotes

1. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).
2. Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), chapter 23.