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How We (Almost) Won in Vietnam: Ellsworth Bunker's Reports to the President

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The Vietnam War has been over for nearly two decades now, but memories of the war continue to play an important role in debates over American foreign policy. Images of the United States caught in a seemingly inescapable Asian quagmire constituted the backdrop against which debates during the 1980s over American policy toward El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Lebanon were played out. Memories of how tough and determined an opponent the North Vietnamese proved to be were the inspiration for many of the arguments used by opponents of offensive military operations against Iraqi forces in Kuwait. Accounts of the American role in the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are thus important both for what they reveal about a contentious period in American history and for their effect on current policy debates.

Accounts of the American role in Indochina were at first the work mostly of journalists assigned to cover the war and memoirists who had participated in the decisions by which the United States became more deeply involved. Almost without exception these authors had an axe of some sort to grind. Journalists who published book-length accounts of the war sought to demonstrate how the reality they had observed firsthand diverged from official reports of progress.¹ Memoirists sought vindication, either by arguing that they had done their best in an impossible situation² or by revealing that their own misgivings had been confirmed by subsequent events.³

With the passage of time and the subsiding of passions, accounts of the American role in the Indochina wars became more detached and analytical. The publication of the Pentagon Papers⁴ in 1971 was but the first ripple in what proved to be a tidal wave of archival materials that poured out during the 1970s

and the 1980s.⁵ The opening of the archives permitted scholars to reexamine controversial aspects of the war in almost microscopic detail.⁶ One result of this reexamination was to reveal that events and issues that had once been portrayed starkly in black and white were actually cloaked in many shades of gray. The more we learned about the war and the American role in it, the more inappropriate the certainties that characterized the positions of supporters and opponents during the 1960s came to appear. Responsibility and hence blame no longer seemed so easy to allocate. We know far more about this war than we once did, but we are just beginning to understand how the United States became involved and why our involvement dragged on for so long.

In recent years, the literature on the Vietnam War has become so voluminous that one might be inclined to question whether there is anything interesting that remains to be learned about it. The recent publication of three volumes of messages to the President by the American Ambassador with the longest continuous tenure in Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker, suggests that it is premature to conclude that we know all there is to know about the war.⁷ The publication of Bunker's papers comes at a propitious moment for students of the role of force in American foreign policy. Operation Desert Storm has been followed by an orgy of self-congratulation, not unlike that which followed John Kennedy's triumph during the Cuban missile crisis. The belief that surely the impoverished North Vietnamese would prove a less formidable foe than the Soviets was an important factor behind the willingness of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations to plunge more deeply into the quagmire that Vietnam became during the mid-1960s.⁸ Before memories of the impressive performance of American arms in the war against Iraq harden into a belief that other opponents will fold as easily as the Iraqis, we would be well-advised to ponder again how an experienced diplomat like Bunker could be so consistently wrong in his predictions of ultimate victory.

Ellsworth Bunker was the American Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam for six years, from 1967 to 1973. As explained by Douglas Pike in his introduction to Bunker's papers, Bunker stipulated as one of his conditions for accepting the post that he have direct access to the President.⁹ This access

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took the form of weekly and later monthly back-channel cables from Bunker to the President. Such messages bypassed the standard distribution system within the US government in order to assure a direct link to the White House. Ninety-six such messages—the first dated 3 May 1967 and the last 5 May 1973—were sent from Bunker to the President in this fashion.

Bunker arrived in Saigon on 25 April 1967. He was then 73 years old and already in possession of “perhaps the most enviable and least assailable reputation in the American government” as a result of earlier successes in helping restore a democratic regime in the Dominican Republic and mediating a territorial dispute between the Netherlands and Indonesia over Dutch New Guinea.¹⁰ The scope of American involvement in Vietnamese affairs and Bunker’s stature within his own government meant that he

quickly became more than an ambassador. As Chief of the US Mission he was advisor to the Government of Vietnam and in effect proconsul to the US military. He dispensed billions of dollars of American economic aid money. He was responsible not only for diplomatic activity but also that of the intelligence community, the pacification sector, psychological-warfare work, and even military affairs outside actual fighting on the battlefield.¹¹

In retrospect Bunker appears to have had enormous latitude to influence policy toward the war because of the esteem with which he was held at the State Department, within the upper echelons of the military establishment, and at the White House. What use did he make of this enviable position?

There are obvious pitfalls in any attempt to generalize about nearly 900 pages of primary source material spanning six years of perhaps the most contentious war in American history, but several themes stand out in Bunker’s reports from Saigon. The first is his relentlessly optimistic appraisal of the results of his stewardship. A prominent portion of virtually every message is devoted to describing some aspect of the war that is going better. Throughout these cables Bunker repeatedly informs his audience in Washington that the efficiency of American operations is improving, that the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese armed forces is increasing, that the pacification program is making accelerating progress, and that Vietnamization is proceeding according to plan. Even when he notes problems and disturbing developments, he is always careful to point out how they can and will be overcome.

A second noteworthy aspect of Bunker’s messages is the manner in which he appears to have tailored them to respond to the hopes and fears felt most intensely by the Presidents to whom he reported. Bunker’s tenure in Saigon spanned two administrations, and there are subtle but interesting differences in the tone of his messages depending on whether the addressee is Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon. Johnson was haunted by the question of whether the very substantial investment in money and manpower made

during 1965 and 1966 had resulted in progress commensurate with the costs borne by the United States, and Bunker appears to have made it his mission to reassure the President that his hopes in this regard were not misguided. Bunker's messages to Johnson are filled with statistical and anecdotal evidence intended to reassure the latter that we were on the right track and that if we could stay the course success would be ours in the end. The messages to Nixon, in contrast, while also long on claims of progress, are filled with flattering assurances that "your policies" are producing the desired results and that "your speech" touched just the right note, as if Bunker felt compelled to demonstrate that an ambassador appointed by a Democratic President could be a loyal member of a Republican administration.¹²

There is also an interesting difference between the tone of Bunker's messages to President Johnson prior to and after the latter's withdrawal from the presidential race on 31 March 1968. Johnson hungered for progress in the war for many reasons, but by 1967 one of the more important of these was his awareness that his Administration, his policies, and ultimately his place in history were hostage to deadlines that were beyond his control—initially the presidential primaries and then the end of his presidency in January 1969. That Bunker understood Johnson's hunger for immediate results is suggested by the remarkably short-term perspective taken in many of his reports during



DOD Still Media Records Center

US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker (partly obscured by rifle) surveys the aftermath of the Viet Cong attack on the US Embassy in Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Nineteen Viet Cong insurgents had penetrated the Embassy compound.

1967. Changes that occur from one month to the next (or even from week to week) are hailed as important new trends.¹³ “An unusual spurt of activity” in the pacification program in two provinces is cited as a “clue to larger developments.”¹⁴ An effective performance by one or a few South Vietnamese units is cited as an indicator of the growing strength and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese armed forces.¹⁵ A reduction in the backlog of ships waiting to unload at the port of Saigon or a decline in the Saigon retail price index are cited as evidence that the economic situation is improving.¹⁶

After the shock of Tet and Johnson’s subsequent withdrawal from the presidential race, his need for reassurance that his policies were fundamentally correct was if anything even greater. Johnson was intensely concerned about how the war would affect his place in history, and his longing for vindication knew few bounds. Bunker’s messages toward the end of 1968 go to considerable lengths to reassure the lame-duck President that the struggle has not been in vain. “The tide of history is moving with us and not against us” (30 October 1968).¹⁷ “The government and people of South Viet-Nam continue to make steady, indeed accelerating, progress in many ways” (19 December 1968).¹⁸ “I am convinced that if we continue patient and confident in our own strength, we will get *next year* the kind of peace we have sought through so many grim trials” (19 December 1968).¹⁹ “The enemy must be aware of the fact that any real military success is no longer possible” (16 January 1969).²⁰

A third noteworthy aspect of Bunker’s messages to the President is the casual manner in which he dealt with complex issues. Bunker’s reports are carefully organized, lucidly written, and packed with interesting information, but they are not particularly thoughtful documents. A good example is his discussion of the role played by two elements of the South Vietnamese armed forces in the effort to pacify the countryside—the Regional Forces (RF) and the Popular Forces (PF). In his message of 21 December 1970, Bunker endorsed the expanded role given the RF and the PF in the pacification program:

Pacification has continued to move forward. Effort was stepped up, especially in September and October. The territorial RF and PF were ordered out on operations, especially at night. They were replaced in guard duty on bridges, village offices and other installations by the People’s Self-Defense Force.²¹

It is one thing, however, to order units accustomed to a static defense role to leave guard duty and undertake field operations; it is another thing entirely to ensure that their activities produce meaningful results. In an earlier message, Bunker himself noted that Regional Force unit operations in August 1968 had increased by 8000 over July, but contacts with the enemy had increased by only 300. Popular Force unit operations had increased by 7600, but contacts with the enemy by only 330.²² Put differently, only about four percent of the additional RF and PF operations resulted in contact with the enemy. It is

difficult to win a war if 96 percent of the operations launched by one side fail to even make contact with the enemy.

Bunker's penchant for confusing activity with progress is also apparent in his discussion of the role of the People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF), which was supposed to replace the RF and PF units removed from guard duty so that they could engage the enemy in the field. Bunker notes in his message of 9 December 1969 that "People's Self-Defense Forces made a significant contribution to territorial security. The 1969 goal of two million organized members was met . . . by mid-September and grew to more than three million by the end of November." It strains credulity to suggest that more than a million people could be added to an "organized" self-defense force in less than two months and even more so to suggest that a force put together in this fashion could make a significant contribution to pacifying the countryside. In this respect, Bunker himself noted that the majority of the PSDF consisted of "support" forces, made up of men over 50, women, and children aged 12-18, who at the end of November 1969 totaled 1,750,000. "However," he continued, "there are now more than 1,316,000 men and women in the 'combat' PSDF. Trained members increased to 1,800,000, almost 600,000 more than in October." Is it possible that an experienced diplomat like Bunker would believe that 600,000 men and women could be "trained" in local self-defense in the span of one month? By his own admission, only 92,000 weapons had been distributed to the PSDF as of November 1969, and all PSDF combat group leaders were supposed to be enrolled in a training course during December 1969 that would last all of four days.²³ The usefulness of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of ill-trained civilians was tacitly admitted by Bunker himself in his message of 19 June 1970, in which he noted that "in the Delta, 33 outposts fell to enemy action in April and May [1970], in most cases because the occupants were asleep."²⁴

Still a third example of Bunker's casual approach to complex issues is his use of data on enemy killed in action to add credence to his arguments that "[the enemy] is losing valuable ground" and "is certainly in a weaker posture today than he was six months ago."²⁵ Casualty statistics sent to the White House by Bunker claimed that during 1968 alone the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong lost 182,740 killed in action, plus 13,000 members of the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI) eliminated and 16,000 defectors.²⁶ No killed in action figure is supplied by Bunker for 1969, but figures presented at various points in his reports suggest enemy losses of approximately 200,000 killed in action, 16,000 VCI eliminated, and 45,000 defectors.²⁷ For 1970, enemy losses came to 103,648 killed in action, 22,357 VCI eliminated, and 32,661 defectors.²⁸

Bunker notes at several points that the KIA figures "do not, of course, reflect the total dimensions of enemy losses," since they do not include those who died of wounds, died of disease or in Laos, or were killed by American air

strikes.²⁹ Neither do the figures reported by Bunker include enemy soldiers who were merely wounded in action. During Bunker's tenure as Ambassador, the US military command used as a general rule of thumb a ratio of 3.5 enemy soldiers wounded in action for every one killed in action.³⁰ Applying this rule of thumb to Bunker's KIA figures would result in total enemy casualties during 1968, 1969, and 1970 on the order of 2.3 million, not counting those who died of disease, or in Laos, or by air strikes. If the figures sent by Bunker to Washington are correct, there should have been no enemy soldiers left to oppose the Saigon government by the end of 1970. Therein lies perhaps the central mystery suggested by Bunker's reporting on the war: why should a distinguished ambassador insist on direct access to the White House and then use that access to send back data that led to conclusions that were patently absurd?

In this regard it is useful to ponder the overall picture of the war suggested by Bunker's reports during 1971 and 1972. Data cited by Bunker from the Hamlet Evaluation Survey suggested that as of January 1971, 95.1 percent of the rural population of South Vietnam lived in relatively secure hamlets, 84.6 percent lived in hamlets with a high degree of government control, and only 0.2 percent of the population (a total of 37,800 people) lived in hamlets controlled by the Viet Cong.³¹ Viet Cong recruitment within South Vietnam had declined from 7000 per month at the beginning of 1969 to 2400 per month by October 1970.³² Of the 700,000 North Vietnamese soldiers infiltrated into South Vietnam during the preceding six years, only about 100,000 had survived.³³ "Communist political influence and control in the South," Bunker wrote in his message of 30 January 1971, "is far weaker now than it was six years ago, while their military strength . . . is continuously declining in relation to ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] strength."³⁴ The South Vietnamese armed forces had more than a million men under arms, and ARVN units were achieving kill ratios of 6:1 or even 10:1 in engagements with enemy forces.³⁵ A visitor from another planet who read only this account of the Vietnam War would be astonished to discover that two years after Bunker departed Saigon the North Vietnamese flag was flying there.

There is, however, a broader issue raised by Bunker's reporting that transcends the use and abuse of statistics. In retrospect, a strong case can be made that the very qualities that made Bunker appear the right man for the Embassy in Saigon—the reassuring tone of his gracefully written prose, his ability to work harmoniously with the many and varied elements of the US presence in Vietnam, and his resilient optimism in the face of adversity—were the very qualities that limited his understanding of the war and his effectiveness as head of the US Mission.

Consider first the reassuring quality of Bunker's reporting from Saigon. Bunker's messages to the White House are notable for the absence of any

questioning, much less criticism, of the strategy that guided the war effort, the policies through which that strategy was implemented, and the organizations and individuals responsible for translating policy directives into action. Instead their purpose was to reassure Presidents Johnson and Nixon that we were on the right path, that our strategy and supporting policies were sound, and that everyone on the American side was doing a magnificent job. This kind of reassurance may have been emotionally gratifying for Bunker's readers, but was the nation he represented well-served by an Ambassador who functioned as a cheerleader for whatever policies the White House chose to follow?³⁶

One reason why Bunker never wavered in his belief that we were on the right course was his uncritical acceptance of the anecdotal and statistical evidence of progress provided to him by other members of the Mission Council. Ambassadors are supposed to work harmoniously with the various elements of the mission they head, and Bunker's receptivity to any and all evidence of progress undoubtedly contributed to smooth working relationships with the high-ranking military officers and civilian officials who were his nominal subordinates. Good public policy, however, is rarely the product of a harmony of views among those charged with formulating it. Americans as a people have a curiously bifurcated view of the role of competition in producing desirable political and economic outcomes. Entrepreneurs are expected to sink or swim depending on how brightly the competitive fires burn within them; scientists are expected to compete for the right to publish in scholarly journals by submitting to anonymous peer review; candidates for elective office are expected to criticize the views and activities of those they hope to supplant. Civil servants, in contrast, are expected to be part of a smoothly functioning team that speaks with one voice and pulls together to achieve a common goal.

It is interesting to speculate what the content of Bunker's messages might have been had he encouraged an adversarial relationship between those within the US Mission who believed that the war effort was progressing and those who believed that progress was an illusion and that stalemate was the most likely outcome.³⁷ Adversary relationships of this sort are never comfortable for the individuals charged with casting aspersions on the work of their colleagues. If, however, Bunker had insisted that the various indicators of progress that were being assembled within the US Mission be subjected to rigorous scrutiny before being sent to the President, the result might well have been more balanced reporting on his part, a more skeptical view of our strategy and supporting policies, and ultimately recognition that the war was unwinnable at a price acceptable to Congress and the American people.

Bunker, however, believed in teamwork rather than competition. He accepted without question the idea that progress was being made, and he appears to have found it inconceivable that impressive advantages in airpower, firepower, and strategic mobility would fail to produce the hoped-for

results. He persevered for six years in what was surely one of the most demanding jobs ever created, and therein lies the root of his failure in Saigon.

Persistence combined with unbridled optimism is often the well-spring of overachievement, but in Bunker's case there is a darker side to his determination to portray the war effort in the best possible light. In the course of his tenure in Saigon, an American withdrawal from Vietnam became inevitable because of the costs the war had imposed on American society. Withdrawal would lessen the burden on the United States, but it also meant the abandonment of millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians who, whether from conviction or by necessity, had linked their personal fates to the success of the American war effort. Government officials, soldiers, employees of the US government, merchants, shopkeepers, members of certain religious groups, and their family members and dependents had all come to accept and depend on the promise uttered so often by so many American officials that the United States would not allow the forcible imposition of communist rule in Southeast Asia. The ultimate victory by the communists meant a harsh personal fate for many of these people, as well as for the hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled the rural areas for the cities to avoid coming under communist control. An American withdrawal was inevitable, but it was also a betrayal of all those who fought for or depended on the side supported by the United States.³⁸ The great tragedy of American diplomacy was that it allowed a situation to develop whereby betrayal became unavoidable. Bunker's persistent optimism prolonged rather than shortened American involvement in the war and in that sense contributed to the magnitude of the tragedy.

The appearance of Bunker's papers is thus a timely reminder that a successful foreign policy requires a sense of limitations as well as possibilities. Bunker's graceful prose, dignified appearance, and calm demeanor helped mask those limitations for six long years. The swelling of national pride in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm suggests that a sense of the limits of American power may once again be receding from public view, as evinced by the increasing frequency of casual references to unipolarity and America-as-sole-superpower. Limitations are difficult to accept in the aftermath of a victorious war, but they are essential if triumph is not to become the precursor to tragedy.

NOTES

1. For example, Henry Brandon, *Anatomy of Error* (Boston: Gambit, 1969); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire In The Lake* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Joseph Goulden, *Truth Is the First Casualty* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1972); Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Avon, 1971); Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

2. For example, Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Popular Library, 1971); William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976); Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: Norton, 1972); Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979); Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979).

3. For example, Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, rev. ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1972); Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York: David McKay, 1969); James Thomson, "How Could Vietnam Happen?" *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1968, pp. 47-53.

4. Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by The New York Times* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971); *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-making on Vietnam: The Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington: GPO, 1971). See also H. Bradford Westerfield, "What Use Are Three Versions of the Pentagon Papers?" *American Political Science Review*, 69 (June 1975), 685-96; Leslie H. Gelb, "The Pentagon Papers and the Vantage Point," *Foreign Policy*, No. 6 (Spring 1972), 25-41; Richard Ullman, "The Pentagon's History as 'History,'" and Anthony Lake and Roger Morris, "The Human Reality of Realpolitik," both in *Foreign Policy*, No. 4 (Fall 1971), 150-62.

5. For example, the Declassified Documents Reference System, published by Carrollton Press. See also George C. Herring, ed., *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1983).

6. For example, Robert Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975); Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972); Herbert Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977); Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings, 1979); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War In Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1982); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Patrick Hatcher, *The Suicide of an Elite: American Internationalists and Vietnam* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990).

7. Douglas Pike, ed., *The Bunker Papers: Reports to the President From Vietnam, 1967-1973* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1990), 3 vols.

8. This theme is developed more fully by Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*.

9. Pike, p. xii.

10. *Ibid.*, p. xiii; Halberstam, p. 78A. See also the description of Bunker in Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), p. 47.

11. Pike, p. xiii.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 663, 690, 700, 724, 735, 753, 824, 829, 851.

13. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 28, 104-05, 126.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 104-05.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36, 37-38, 46, 71, 88, 116.

16. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 27, 50, 58, 127.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 621.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 629.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 635 (emphasis added).

20. *Ibid.*, p. 638.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 803.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 609.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 741.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 778.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 672, 697.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 647-49.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 697, 705, 742.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 811, 813.

29. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 653, 664.

30. Halberstam, p. 794.

31. Pike, p. 813. See also Bruce Palmer's comment: "Ambassador Bunker insists to this day that this essential and integral part of the war [pacification] had been won in 1971" (*The 25-Year War*, p. 116).

32. Pike, p. 814.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 817.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 821, 835-36, 843.

36. Note in this regard Bunker's enthusiastic support for the incursion into Cambodia in his message of 16 June 1970 (*ibid.*, p. 773), even though on 24 April he had warned against any steps that would compromise the neutrality of the Lon Nol government (*ibid.*, p. 765).

37. On this point, see Halberstam, p. 786.

38. This theme is developed with great skill by Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983).