

# Reporter in Saigon Being Briefed

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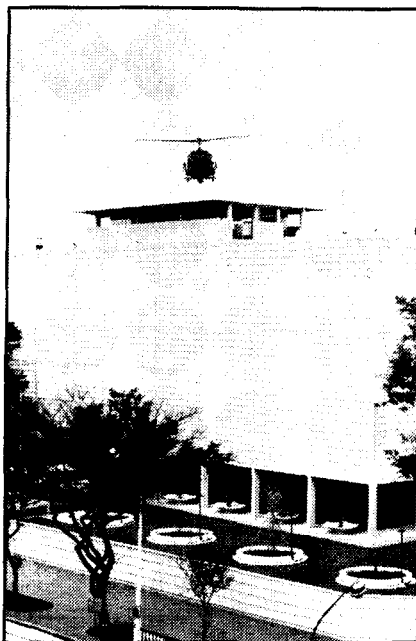
**“Who can still defend the U.S. role in Vietnam—after the Pentagon Papers or Watergate? At the Embassy they can, and do.”**

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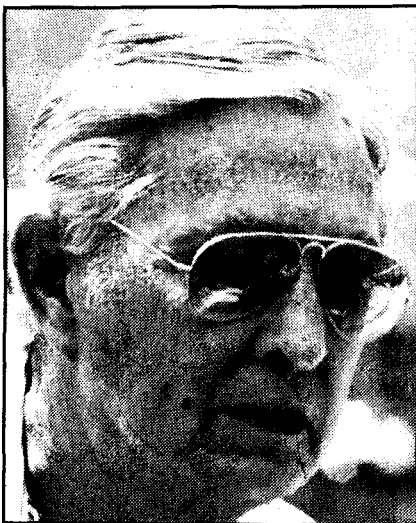
Correspondents call it “the Bunker.” It’s probably the most important building in Saigon, the place where the big decisions are made. After two weeks in North Vietnam and one of the zones under the control of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, I am standing in the well-guarded lobby of the American Embassy. For the first time since arriving in Indochina, I feel like I’m in enemy territory.

I’m here to be briefed—although if they knew where I’d been they would want to reverse the roles. Availing myself of a service regularly extended to correspondents abroad, I’m about to expose myself to a series of encounters with some of the analysts and “experts” who serve U.S. policy objectives in this part of the world. I’m here to see how they work as well as what they have to say.

These briefings are arranged on request for “background” only, a part of the government’s effort to win the hearts and minds of America’s people through its press. They are a device which allows supposedly knowledgeable officials to impart information without being held accountable for what they say. The ethics of the journalistic establishment require that you play by the rules—rules which disguise deception and so often perpetuate fraud. As a partial compromise for the sake of those reporters who will have to deal with these people in the future, I will paraphrase and quote without direct attribution. The names



U.S. State Department



John Spragens, Jr./Indochina Resource Center

are not important anyway.

The Embassy was built as a fortress. Surrounded by a concrete wall with two prison-like guard towers, it was designed to stop rockets. A private guard service watches over the front gate which is off limits to just about everyone. Taxis have to discharge passengers up the block. Armed marines patrol its small lobby, which displays prominently tributes to the bravery of those marines who lost their lives defending the place. That was on January 31, 1968, when “the Viet Cong” sent some sappers inside to invite the Ambassador to the Tet Offensive. Next to the plaques honoring the dead is a glass trophy case in which Marine Company E shows off the trophies it has received in inter-service sports competition. It is the only personal touch in the whole place.

A reported 126 State Department officials keep themselves busy in this six-story building. There is also an undisclosed number of CIA operatives attached to such nondescript organizations as OSA—the Office of Special Assistant to the Ambassador. All the people who work here also apparently prefer the American life-style to the Vietnamese reality outside their doors. They tend to live together in well-secured buildings or compounds, looked after by their servants, insulated from the desperation in the streets. The Embassy complex itself has its own swimming pool and snack bar. The food is cheap and only American money is accepted.

*U.S. Embassy, Saigon*

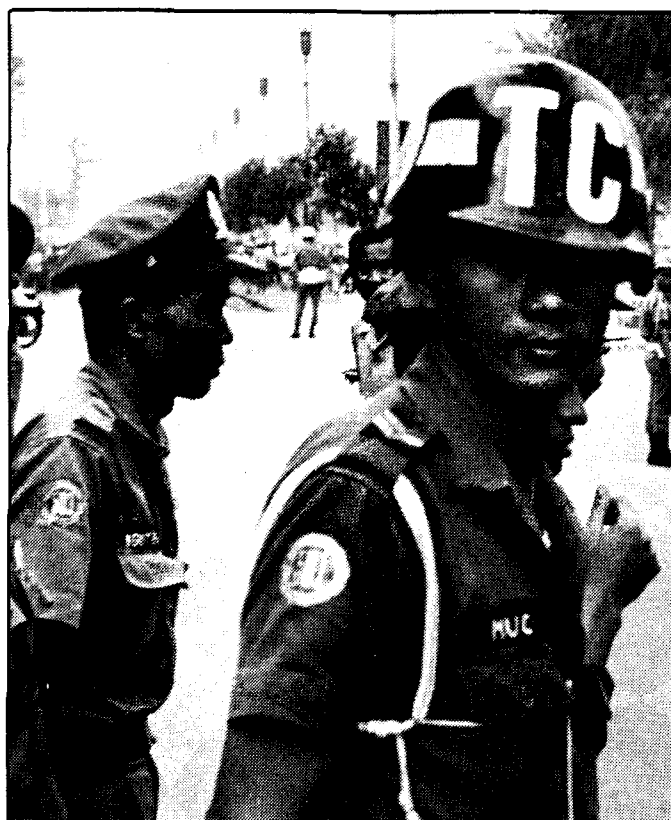
*Graham A. Martin, Ambassador to Vietnam*

by Danny Schechter

The Saigon Embassy is being run these days as a "tight ship" by Ambassador Graham Martin, a hardline anti-communist by anyone's standards. He is a veteran diplomat, a seasoned interventionist who used to manage the U.S. military-political apparatus in Thailand. Martin's vociferous defense of Thieu's regime has turned him into something approaching a one-man lobby for more aid to South Vietnam. He has frequently locked horns with the Peace Movement. On one occasion he told a prominent clergyman that he had blood on his hands because of his failure to condemn an alleged atrocity by the other side. He's categorically denied the existence of thousands of political prisoners, dismisses well-documented charges of torture, and praises the military stockade that is Saigon as a "free and open society." He is said to run the Embassy in a totally authoritarian manner and has forbidden his underlings any contact with the press unless it has been cleared. He openly refuses to meet with journalists he considers critical or negative toward "his" policies.

As a result, most of the resident reporters in Saigon feel frozen out by the Embassy. They dismissed my chances of actually getting in to see the Ambassador, something I had been able to do in Laos. "What's the point?" one correspondent asked me. "He won't say anything. Even if he does, you probably won't be able to quote him, he'll probably be lying and you won't be able to check out what he has to say anyway." Compelling logic. Nevertheless, seeing those people has more than curiosity value. Maybe I could glean some factual tid-bits about the covert maneuvers for which this Embassy is internationally infamous.

I was as interested in the psychology of these people as anything they had to say. Who can still defend the U.S. role here—after the Pentagon Papers, after Watergate, after the American people themselves became disgusted with the war and the policies which spawned it? They can, and do—as professionals, trained in the specialized discipline of diplomatic apologetics. Ideologically, they are well-indoctrinated, although when they talk to you they avoid rhetoric and tend to assume an agonized pose, to pretend at "objectivity." After all,



Saigon Police



Paul Quinn/Indochina Peace Campaign

they reason, it is we who are acting out a responsible world role; it is we who defend the values of the free world against the dogma and violence of the communists. "They want to have this whole place," one of them tells me. "They are absolutely determined." He was speaking of "them"—the North Vietnamese.

They study "them" here, from Saigon. Their radios are monitored and a CIA offshoot called the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) translates and distributes everything broadcast over Radio Hanoi or the clandestine Liberation Radio in the South. An Indochina Peace Campaign delegation learned in Saigon that its visit to the PRG zone in Quangtri had been announced—word of it is now on the desks of a half dozen spooks, news agencies, and computer banks. Undoubtedly, it is friendly embassies in Hanoi which send down North Vietnam's newspapers, theoretical journals, and weekly reports on the price of bananas in the marketplace—an item that diplomats watch as an indicator of economic problems. These texts are studied, analyzed, and selectively used for intelligence and propaganda. Finally, documents are captured, or more

usually "reconstructed," from the bits and pieces of information squeezed out of prisoners by the torture that is called "interrogation."

The people here in the Embassy are not torturers. They don't hear the hiss of the electrodes which make possible the casual use of the phrase: "Information made available to the Embassy indicates ..." Made available how? But never mind. I am lectured about the evils of the "journalism of involvement," the kind of subjective reporting which certain newspapermen engage in these days. People like David Shipler of the *New York Times*, whose vivid series on the treatment of prisoners occasioned, I'm told, an apoplectic reaction by the Ambassador, official denials by the Saigon police, and letters of outraged innocence from the State Department. A foreign service officer, the Ambassador has written, avoids "subjective emotional involvement."

#### [HANOI WATCHERS]

My first stop is the office of a man who calls himself a "Hanoi-watcher." There are maps on the wall, maps of Vietnam. A finger points to the no longer secret





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*ired nuns after anti-government demonstration, Saigon*

offices of the COSVN, the so-called Central Office for South Vietnam. That, I'm told, is VC Headquarters, their Pentagon. It was to have been wiped out during the Cambodian invasion of 1970, but our troops never found it. I'm told they've decentralized their operation now and keep it mobile. Today, two separate briefings locate COSVN in two different places.

The man talking to me "just fell into his job," seems a bit bored by it now. He is earnest and authoritative, summarizing his perception of the North Vietnamese position, stressing their determination to "liberate" the South. The "so-called PRG," as the Provisional Revolutionary Government is called in these parts, is an extension of Hanoi, and the room is papered with diagrams to "prove" it. And then he pauses to add, "That's true, but it may not be relevant." He has plenty of facts to "prove" his case but this is a friendly chat, not an argument. Supposedly he has the information and I'm here to get what I can of it.

This "Hanoi-watcher" really doesn't tell me much, but his assessment is interesting: The PRG is not about to launch a new offensive although they "sure as hell" have the

capability. (They don't have to. As far as the North is concerned things are going the way they want. The military pressure - at approximate 1971 levels - is keeping the ARVN on the defensive, causing heavy casualties. Aid cut-backs are making things tougher for Saigon as well. PRG pressure discourages more foreign investment, keeps things unstable, contributes to the economic crisis squeezing the South. They are also encouraged by the opposition movements, although they miscalculate their strength.) I ask him if he agrees with my assessment, if he thinks things are going the PRG's way. To my surprise, the analyst in him says yes, although he's not to be quoted. I ask the expert jokingly if he thinks his research would enable him to be a good adviser for the other side or prompt him to convert, as Daniel Ellsberg did. "No" is his expected reply, although he won't deny a certain admiration for these people; they have "accomplished quite a bit."

On to the specialist on the domestic political scene. We have our coffee in the Embassy bar. Looking out on the pool, we talk about the people who that very moment in late October were taking to the streets to challenge the

regime. No one in the Embassy takes them very seriously. What do these people want anyway? They have no real program. There's nothing Thieu can do to satisfy them without committing political suicide. To one embassyite, they're a bunch of prima donnas. To another, a growing but still ineffectual lot. To a third, an indication that democracy lives, however imperfectly. "They wouldn't be allowed in a real police state, like Haiti or North Vietnam." Why then are there so many police in the streets, why the heavy intimidation? To protect property, of course, to prevent violence. "If these things grow," one press flack tells me, "there's a point where anarchy is approached and authority has to step in--as we saw in Washington during those riots in the Negro section. Now I'm not saying we've reached that point here..."

It turns out that this Embassy is literally overflowing with Germans just like the Nixon White House in its heyday. According to a knowledgeable Embassy watcher, "There are at least 15 old Germany hands or people of German extraction in important posts. They meet together and keep alive the spirit of the cold war. They even stage cultural events like a German beer festival called 'Oktoberfest.' This year they sent out invitations to it on Embassy stationery. It was written in German... I'm not saying these people are Nazis; they're more like the crew that put West Germany together after the war. They accept the idea of a country being divided permanently as quite natural. They want to apply it here. They are every bit as fanatical as they imagine their opponents to be."

Saigon's CIA Station Chief Thomas Polgar is a Hungarian who used to have the same job in Bonn. Graham Martin's first major assignment was as an administrator for the Marshall Plan which rebuilt Europe after World War II. It also opened the European economy to U.S. corporate penetration and had among its political objectives the suppression of communist worker movements in France and Italy.

Vietnam may be the last frontier for these ideologues of anti-communism. They are mesmerized by the Red Menace, a posture which seems out of step in this age of détente and improved relations with the Chi-

nese. While their experts concede that the government in Hanoi enjoys the support of its people, their propagandists reduce the enemy to barbarians bent on conquest. "Who is it that puts bayonets in the stomachs of children?" a propaganda slogan asks the citizens of Saigon. The answer: The Viet Cong, of course. Until recently American advisers played important roles in this propaganda effort. It is this type of imagery, in subtler form, that the Embassy continues to peddle.

#### [MEETING THE PRESS]

Feeding the press corps with negative information about the enemy is not difficult. It is certainly easier than doing a public relations job for the Thieu government. Most of the effort these days seems to consist of denying that things are as bad as they seem to be. Ron Ziegler would be right at home. For example, an Embassy official commenting on the institutionalized corruption that everyone knows is pervasive in the Thieu regime: "Sure, there's corruption, but this is Asia." On Thieu's announcement that he has purged his 14-member Cabinet of ten members in an attempt to appease the anti-corruption movement: "Well, we've had cabinet shuffles before. At least give him credit for being responsive and taking action." And so it goes. The reporter is advised to be positive, to avoid the temptation of overplaying the mushrooming protests. "Jesus," he is told, "one paper is playing these demonstrations as the biggest thing since the invention of sliced bread." All the Embassy wants, to hear them tell it, is objective reporting.

To insure it, the Embassy maintains its links with what remains of the American press corps. Favors are extended and favors are returned. There are occasional leaks to selected friends, special interviews, exclusives. The Embassy monitors the press "product," influences it when it can, counters it when it must. Its accomplices are the lazy reporters who prefer to rewrite official press releases to launching their own investigations. Its agents are those wire services that continue to function as virtual extensions of the government's information network. Its unwitting accessories are those report-

ers who basically share the values and outlook of those in power. Even the best of our newspapers fall into this category. The emphasis on hard news plays up the "facts," dubious as they may be, but offers no independent interpretation or historical context. The moment the reporter rejects the view that Vietnam is a nation in revolution, or that the ongoing war has an overriding political meaning, reportage inevitably assumes a conservative and distorted direction.

Reporters with another point of view are either denied access to Saigon (several were barred, others expelled in the last year) or find it impossible to gain access to official sources. Those that do manage to get around the obstacles face the prospect of government attempts to discredit them.

That is what happened to me after my return from Vietnam. My visit to the Embassy was made possible because I was carrying credentials from the *Boston Globe*, one of the country's leading liberal and long-time anti-war dailies. The *Globe* had advanced me some money for the trip to Vietnam, and I visited the Embassy to get the American point of view. When the Embassy officials learned that I had first been to North Vietnam, and wasn't a run-of-the-mill reporter, they were incensed. The State Department protested officially to the *Globe*, while in Saigon the Embassy inspired the next *Globe* reporter on the scene to attack me personally.

On December 17, the *Globe's* op-ed page featured a column from its Asia correspondent Mathew Storin. Dated Saigon, it asked: "Why does Hanoi merit support from Americans now?" It attacked an October 30 broadcast by Radio Hanoi on which I appeared—a transcript of which could only have been provided by the Embassy. The column blasted me as a contributor "to the Hanoi government's propaganda machine" and echoed the Embassy line that it is the North Vietnamese who are responsible for fomenting the continuing war. People like me are called "simplistic" because we fail to insist that the communists massacre people and commit atrocities. As evidence, he repeats as fact the Saigon government charge that the "Viet-Cong" sent a mortar round into a school house in the town of Cai Lay in

March 1974, murdering 23 innocent school children.

Curiously, this same incident was invoked, in almost identical terms, in a publicized letter from Ambassador Graham Martin to an anti-war clergyman implying that the blood of those children was on his hands. Several Congressmen later rebuked the Ambassador for using such offensive tactics. It was subsequently revealed that the facts of the matter itself are cloudy. There have been reports that Saigon forces accidentally destroyed the school house and then sought to turn the incident to propaganda advantage. But since Saigon never permitted an outside investigation, we will never come closer to the full truth.

But for the *Globe* reporter, as for so many of his predecessors, this controversy doesn't exist. There's only the Saigon and the U.S. government version. A day later, this same correspondent published a feature on the school house incident, once again treating it as a proven PRG atrocity. I have no doubt that the reporter's visit to the school was arranged with the help of the American Embassy and that the Embassy's press counsellor encouraged him to attack me by name.

This is a dirty business, a logical extension of a dirty war. Happily, it may be ending sooner rather than later. The defensiveness of the hacks in the Embassy betrays a fatigue, a sense of the hopelessness of their own situation. There is none of the "turning the corner" optimism which used to flow from these same official sources years ago. Today they are a discouraged lot, bitter about the continuing opposition to the war and U.S. policies. What a contrast between them and their counterparts in Hanoi or the PRG. The revolutionary Vietnamese are optimistic and committed to a positive vision of the future. The official Americans have nothing to write home about, and know it. They want to keep the rest of us enmeshed in their own web of self deception. After meeting them—and their adversaries—I know it won't work.

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*Danny Schechter is News Director at WBCN-FM in Boston. Research for this article was partially funded by a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism.*

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# Tax Time: Soaking the Poor

**“Government is therefore engaged in creating poverty, and in taking back by taxation what has not been taken by inflation.”**

Now is the time when, through their taxes, people pay for past military adventures which have eaten up the substance of the nation, and for preparation for future wars which will gobble up whatever remains. This time most of the people have little or nothing with which to pay. But pay they must, and whatever is left over will be swallowed by inflation. What has been engorged by America's military madness is the whole of the social trust funds: the weekly contributions made by workers and their employers for unemployment compensation, medical assistance, social security pensions, and all the anti-poverty devices built laboriously since 1932.

Nothing is left but debts by Government, which it intends to meet by printing money to bring its accounts into bookkeeping balance, and which will progressively depreciate to destitution the standard of living of those already in poverty or on its fringes. Government is engaged in the creation of poverty, its extension over larger and larger segments of the population, and in taking back by taxation what has not been taken by inflation.

The political consequence, of course, is a quarrel between the Administration and the Congress. In appearance, the quarrel appears to be

over how much tax relief to grant the people. In reality, the tax relief proposals—and their apportioning among income groupings—are so diminutive as to be meaningless except for a very few. Nevertheless, there are germs of principle involved in this dispute.

The Democratic Congress is accused by the President of doing nothing, of developing no plans and evolving no programs to relieve the poverty which has suddenly overtaken the nation. And the President is right. The Congress is doing precisely nothing.

In turn, the Congress accuses the President, in his energy and tax programs, of conspiring to deepen the new poverty and—by preferential tax alleviation—further to enrich the wealthy. And the Congress is right. It is exactly this that the Ford-Rockefeller Administration is trying to bring about.

There *are* issues of principle in the two approaches. The Joint Committee of the Congress wants to do *something* (though that something is vanishingly small) for the 25 percent of the populace suddenly shaken out of their middle-class status, by returning to them a miniscule part of their loss in real income that has been caused by unemployment and inflation. The Administration wants, by reducing consumption by the poor and transmitting

the balance to the wealthy, to restore some part of the saving capacity of the wealthier groupings, lost through inflation and high interest rates, in order that bank deposits can again be built up, the lending capacity of the banks restored, and capitalist industry consequently revitalized.

In fact, all that Congress wants is to return \$8 billion of tax payments as rebates and tax relief on 1974 incomes—a mere 4.75 percent of total personal tax and penalty payments by individuals annualized over the first nine months of 1974. The Administration wants to return half again as much, \$12 billion, but has a very different idea as to the distribution of the rebates, with none of it to go to those in deepest poverty.

Congress would give 56.5 percent of its miniscule tax relief to those whose incomes did not exceed \$10,000 per year; one third to those in the \$10,000-\$20,000 income bracket; about 10 percent to those in income brackets above \$20,000. Ford-Rockefeller, on the other hand, would give only 15 percent of the aggregate tax rebate to those with incomes below \$10,000; 41.5 percent to those in the \$10,000-\$20,000 income bracket; 43.5 percent to those with incomes above \$20,000 per year.

The differences between the two