

Synopsis of *An American Diplomat: How it Happened*  
Ralph Milton Buck

Come with a young foreign service officer as we embark on an odyssey of adventure and even danger. It starts in 1967 at a Department of State office called the Vietnam Working Group, where we are shown intelligence reports about an anticipated Viet Cong offensive (later called the Tet Offensive).

Soon after language training we are in a military outpost in the delta of South Vietnam. Our province is an oasis of calm in the midst of war. A Buddhist sect has killed or expelled all Communist cadre from the province. We are riding on a motorbike behind a Filipino from an organization called the International Rice Research Institute carrying a slide projector. He is spreading the word about “miracle rice” and giving out seed and instructions to farmers. The province, once one of the poorest, soon is exporting rice. It eventually becomes the largest rice exporting province in the world.

We go on to help implement an audacious village development program under the Direction of John Paul Vann. We discuss the program with Bill Colby, later Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and with a prominent American political scientist. With American help, the province builds 500 classrooms in three years and increases school enrollment by 300 percent.

But the province blocks an important infiltration route from Cambodia and we are invaded by a Viet Cong battalion reinforced by NVA troops. After one week, South Vietnamese forces score a total victory without any U.S. Army troops. There is one American casualty, a young second lieutenant, who was a close friend.

The action shifts to Canada, where the Quebec Liberation Front has kidnapped and killed the Labor Minister of the Quebec Government. We watch Prime Minister Trudeau invoke War Measures. He arrests 497 people and holds them until the Quebec Liberation Front is weakened or destroyed. We run into President Nixon there, who is walking around outside by himself all alone with no Secret Service anywhere. It is 5:00 am and he is getting a little exercise. A Canadian TV personality tells us all about her date with Henry Kissinger.

Returning to Washington as an analyst with the State Department’s Intelligence Bureau, we monitor implementation of the Paris Peace Agreement negotiated by Henry Kissinger, including the deployment of North Vietnamese armored divisions and the weakening of South Vietnamese forces. We lead the State Department’s contribution to a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) requested by the White House. Dr. Kissinger finds out and orders a complete reversal of position. Our office nevertheless accurately forecasts the time and place of the NVA offensive of 1975 and its outcome.

When Saigon falls in 1975, our province is the last to surrender. An ARVN officer assumes command of the Hoa Hao army, refuses evacuation to the USA, and continues to resist. He is arrested and sentenced to prison.

The next hotspot is the little island nation of Grenada in the Caribbean. The Organization of American States (OAS) is holding its General Assembly of 1977 there and we are the political officer in the U.S. delegation. We cable the State Department that Prime Minister Gairy is bragging publicly about murdering his political opponents (at a meeting devoted to human rights). Gairy loses support and in 1979 is overthrown by a leftist/Communist group backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba. President Reagan orders a military operation in 1983 to remove this pro-Cuban Government.

It is 1978. We hear an American professor speak knowingly about Ayatollah Khomeini's plan to return to Iran and overthrow the Shah. Iranian students in the USA are organizing a campaign against the Shah. Upon arrival in Tehran as an Embassy economic officer, we tell the Chief of the Political Section about this but he says not to worry, the Shah has it all under control. Soon we are in the middle of the very first anti-Shah mass demonstration, in the city of Isfahan. We run along with the mob for a while. We observe and report the increasing violence of the anti-Shah movement and how the country is being paralyzed by constant demonstrations and strikes. Our Ambassador reports the Shah is committed to liberalizing the political scene but that he also vows to suppress "senseless violence".

The Shah is forced to flee in January 1979. On February 14, the Embassy is attacked by an extremist Marxist group supported and trained by the Soviet Union. They are not "students". After an hour of gunfire into the Embassy, the Ambassador orders Marine Guards to surrender. The attackers loot the Embassy, force personnel to open the safes, and take away classified documents. Everyone in the Embassy is lined up face against the wall, expecting to be shot. They are saved when more moderate leaders of the government intervene.

On that very same day, the U.S. Ambassador to nearby Afghanistan is abducted by "terrorists" and murdered in an alleged botched rescue attempt. But American personnel on the scene report his murder was actually ordered by Soviet "advisers".

A few months later, in November 1979, another group takes over our Embassy in Tehran and takes everyone hostage. One of the objectives of the hostage-taking is to force the moderate Bazargan/Yazdi Government to resign. Only a short time later, the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan and kills the Prime Minister. The Russians are afraid the new governments of both Iran and Afghanistan will warm up to the United States. They are determined to remove the U.S. presence and influence, including intelligence assets directed at the Soviet Union.

The action swiftly moves to Saudi Arabia. A few weeks after the November taking of hostages in Iran, the holiest shrine of Islam in the world, the Mosque in Mecca, is attacked and occupied by a radical group. Someone plants false information in the press that the United States is behind the attack and Ayatollah Khomeini goes on radio to accuse the United States publicly. A mob attacks the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan and burns it down. Four US personnel or local employees are killed.

The Saudis are extremely reluctant to give out information. They execute some of those captured and we witness one of the public executions in Riyadh's main square. The Saudi King is forced to make concessions to the Islamic conservatives which have future effects, including playing into the hands of Osama bin Laden and his supporters.

The events in Iran have precipitated a global oil crisis. First priority now is shoring up the U.S. economy. To promote US exports, we organize and promote two major exhibitions that sell hundreds of millions of dollars of US products.

After Saudi Arabia we join a group that goes into Communist China in 1980, where we observe the first steps toward opening to the West and the re-invigoration of private enterprise. They are starting in rural areas, giving priority to agricultural output.

The next stop is Panama where we help implement the Panama Canal treaties signed by President Carter and Panamanian dictator Torrijos. We watch with trepidation the rise of Manuel Noriega after Torrijos is killed in an airplane crash. A CIA delegation from Washington warns the Embassy about supporting or cooperating with Noriega. The 1984 election is won by Arnulfo Arias, longtime nemesis of Panama's National Guard/Defense Forces.

The Embassy has monitored every polling place but it backs down and does not challenge Noriega when he stops the vote count. The Ambassador is acting on instructions from Washington. Soon it becomes clear this was a huge mistake.

After Panama we arrive in Bolivia as head of the Economic and Commercial sections. A new government is struggling with hyperinflation running at 24,000 percent. We meet repeatedly with the planning minister (who later becomes President) and the finance minister, who ask that we keep Washington informed about their radical stabilization program. A top economist from Harvard University is helping. We provide encouragement and they succeed in stopping the inflation by implementing a program that is nothing short of amazing. There are almost constant demonstrations. Striking miners throw dynamite at the Embassy.

We then turn our attention to the fact that most of the world's cocaine or coca paste used to make cocaine is coming out of Bolivia. We visit the coca fields and the processing labs and write reports about the economics of the coca/cocaine industry, including the prospects for "alternative development".

Brazil also is in the midst of economic crisis, with inflation at 1,600 percent. The new democratically elected President, Fernando Collor de Mello, imposes a dramatic program which causes further turmoil. Nevertheless, Brazil muddles through with indexation of wages and clever financial manipulation. The U.S. Consulate General in Sao Paulo reports what is happening and helps Washington press Brazil to lower trade restrictions on U.S. computer technology.

The Gulf War starts. We are asked to contact a former Brazilian Air Force General who heads a company helping Saddam Hussain to obtain advanced missile technology.

A while later, Joining the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs as chief of the South American Division, we supervise efforts to reduce coca production and pursue alternatives. We visit communities in coca-producing areas to determine the prospects for alternative development.

The Peruvian Air Force agrees to shut down the “air bridge” that transports coca paste and cocaine to Colombia. The U.S. provides the aircraft, radar tracking, and forward air control from a remote base. Tragically, an American missionary and her daughter are killed when her aircraft is intercepted and fired upon.

During a meeting with our Assistant Secretary, the Colombian Defense Minister agrees to begin spraying coca fields in Colombia. We inspect the operation and take a ride on a crop duster aircraft on a spraying run. We also go on helicopter raids spraying opium poppy in the mountains and overfly narco-controlled communities in Colombia.

We visit Peruvian Marines at their remote jungle base where they brief us on how they are destroying violent left-wing group “Sendero Luminoso”. With U.S. help, the Colombian armed forces are destroying the FARC, the “Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”.

Joining the staff of the Ways and Means Committee of the U.S. Congress, we write sections of bills and help secure passage of important legislation, including:

- The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
- The Customs Modernization Act of 1993 which sets rules that are copied worldwide for electronic customs clearance
- Implementing legislation to establish the World Trade Organization and enact into law results of Multilateral Trade Negotiations,
- Updating the Export Administration Act, and
- Expedited customs clearance for the Olympics and Soccer World Cup events in the US.

You will learn how laws are actually drafted and passed, how trade negotiations are done, who has the most influence, and who are the best-informed people on Capitol hill. You will also find out how and why U.S. tariffs were lowered to zero on hundreds of products.

In 1996 we return to Vietnam as Chief of the Political and Economic Sections of the newly opened U.S. Embassy to push forward normalization of relations.

Human rights issues and individual cases of imprisoned dissidents are taken up with some success. We meet with former Hoa Hao leaders who were only recently released from prison. We help other dissidents to gain release.

Aided by U.S. business groups, U.S. universities, and members of Congress, the U.S. Embassy helps the Vietnamese Government transition to a market economy. Our office assists and backs up the U.S. Trade Representative in negotiating the most comprehensive trade agreement in U.S. history. You will read a blow-by-blow account of what happened.

The Embassy launches a program to promote and explain the trade agreement and the benefits of trade through visits to provinces and public speaking by the Ambassador and others.

The results are nothing short of spectacular -- Vietnam becomes the fastest growing economy in the world. We told them this would happen.

On behalf of the Export-Import Bank we visit Venezuela in 2000, where President Chavez is virtually dismantling the state-owned oil company. Venezuela's oil production drops dramatically. We lower Venezuela's credit rating. Next, in 2005 we observe the continuing mess in Afghanistan while attempting to improve the administration of justice and prison conditions there. Later, we are in Ukraine and the country of Georgia, where we inspect security of the border with Russia.

In the meantime, we are in London when the attacks of September 11, 2001 take place. We attend a special ceremony in Manchester, Britain's second largest city. The huge cathedral is packed to capacity and as we enter, the organ is roaring and everyone is singing the "Star Spangled Banner" as loud as they can. The Mayor of Manchester asks us to go home and tell the American people that Britain "has our backs" and will "fight for the USA."

Conclusion: None of the above is fiction. It is a first-hand account of what happened, as seen from "ground zero" by one who was there. As one reviewer noted: "Mr. Buck was on the point of the spear in some the hottest most important foreign affairs venues of the last quarter of the twentieth century."

The United States took on a challenge that had never been faced or attempted by any other nation in world history. Mistakes were made (and the mistakes are discussed under the headings "lessons learned") but we basically succeeded. We helped other nations to develop their economies and reduce poverty, while encouraging free political systems. The next chapter has not been written. It remains to be seen if we can pull off another success to confront the many challenges now developing, which will determine the future of world civilization.