

Kenton Clymer. *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 424 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5448-6.



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When assassins fired machine guns into a cabinet meeting in Rangoon in June 1947, with the country set for formal independence six months later, most of the Americans who had been thick on the ground in Burma fighting the Japanese War (1942-45) had already slipped away.[1] Film director John Ford, State Department politician Dean Rusk, businessman and politician Robert McNamara, and General Joseph Stillwell had all left their roles in the Burma-India war theater and returned to the United States. Although there were oilmen, missionaries, and pilots left, the US embassy opened its doors upon the dawn of this new country with a rather reduced American presence.

But in a short time, the embassy in an old bank building on Merchant Street near the river found itself facing two serious conflicts—one very specific and public, the other one vague and secret. Kenton Clymer illuminates both conflicts. The vague one concerned soldiers from China who had been in Burma during the war: US diplomats had to respond to the 1950 arrival inside

eastern Burma of four thousand Chinese soldiers who were or aspired to be nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) fighters. The Communists' success in China and the mass exodus of Chiang Kai Shek's government and supporters to Taiwan in 1949 also led to the quiet movement of KMT troops over the Yunnan frontier into the Shan States, under the leadership of seasoned General Li Mi (himself born in a village on the Yunnan-Burma frontier). The Central Intelligence Agency supported these Chinese troops due to their potential to re-invade Yunnan, but those working for the State Department in the embassy rightly feared that their presence inside Burma would provoke an attack from the Peoples' Liberation Army, which had just completed successful operations against US troops in North Korea. However, the embassy was under official instruction to support the Rangoon government in its contests with frontier peoples, including in the eastern Shan States where these KMT soldiers were staying near Kentung. Clymer shows that the Burmese government knew all about the KMT presence and movement,

and demanded answers and action from the embassy, which the embassy tried hard to avoid.

The second, more specific conflict, also unfolding in 1950, concerned a fourth-generation American Baptist missionary named Gordon Seagrave. Born in Rangoon, he was an energetic man who had rebuilt a hospital in northern Burma in 1922, gained a reputation for advanced medical work and training during the Japanese War, and remained in 1945 to work with the frontier people around Namhkam on the Burma-Yunnan border. However, during the extraordinary fight and flight of the combined anti-Rangoon Karen-Kachin rebel movement, a contingent led by a recent Kachin Levies guerilla-commander, Naw Seng, suddenly showed up in 1949 at the hospital needing attention, soon followed by pursuing government troops. What happened next became the subject of a Rangoon trial for Seagrave in 1950, specifying that he had treasonously assisted these rebels to fight against the new Burma state. Rangoon now had more reason to be suspicious about Americans, Baptists, and missionaries as well as the Kachin and Karen (the latter implicated in the 1947 assassination of Aung San). Naw Seng and his guerillas had just successfully fought against the Burma Army but were escaping to China through the town of Namhkam, which they temporarily “held.” Clymer carefully explains why the Burma government decided to bring the charge of treason against Seagrave, why the trials and appeals proceeded (despite popular protests in the United States), and why Burma’s Supreme Court eventually dismissed the charge.

As Clymer skilfully explains on other issues, the delicate relationship was, as in the 1950 KMT-troops affair, complicated with internal American disagreements in which one unit concealed its plans from another. Part of the US government wanted the troops withdrawn from Burma to Taipei immediately; the other side was content to leave them in Burma, supply them covertly with arms and equipment, and dissemble while mak-

ing official protests. With the passage of time these Yunnan men, who had no relation with Taiwan, became an essential part of the international heroin trade from the Golden Triangle, so much of which was destined for the streets of American cities or American troops in Vietnam. This “affair” lasted many years, involving generations of officials. It was translated year after year into other idioms and other contexts of the delicate relationship.

By 1961, American analysts were reasoning that US aid to Myanmar had to be approved so as not to allow Chinese assistance to overshadow American interests, and for years aid planners frequently justified US assistance in these comparative terms. In “the thaw” period, to use Clymer’s image for the beginning twenty-first century, US leaders were constantly advised by Burma analysts and campaign activists that they should not come to the bargaining table too early, but must not come later than others. One result was that the embassy itself was pulled in two or three directions at once.

Clymer has trolled deeply in the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, among the old monsoon-scented boxes from the Rangoon/Yangon embassy, among former presidents’ papers, and in archives in Australia and Britain. His footnotes alone are a gold mine for scholars. He must have chosen many boxes to search, and he must have been selective in the sources he included, but I can see little ground for a protest that *x* is missing or that *y* should have been treated.[2] He also held background conversations with important informants. It is important to recall how troubled and static the American-Myanmar relationship has been at times since 1948, restricted by the scarcity of Americans who had knowledge of and interest in the country, and restricted by the stone wall built up by various military governments. Clymer pays appropriate scholarly tribute to the research and ideas of others.[3] This important book provides

an excellent account of this delicate relationship, using both confidential sources (including in the Myanmar National Archives) and Clymer's on-the-ground sensitivity.

The levels of official US nonmilitary assistance were modest in comparison with neighboring Pakistan-Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam, and India, but projects in Myanmar were nevertheless socially important. What were the inevitable requests for official US assistance, beside arms and ammunition? A proper Mandalay-Rangoon highway had been talked about since the 1950s, was planned and started, but suspended by Burma in 1964, thus ending the plan to train Burmese highway engineers (although it all restarted fifty years later). Helicopters and other aircraft were constantly requested, and aid officials continued to agree to supply helicopters under pressure from US narcotics enforcement agencies: however, in 1971 all fourteen of the American H-43 Huskie helicopters transferred to Burma three years earlier were deemed un-airworthy and grounded for lack of spare parts (p. 238). These helicopters had two uses, one for poppy suppression by spraying and the other for insurgency suppression by shooting, although because the poppies were grown by communities in the anti-Rangoon frontier areas, the two uses went hand-in-hand.

There were no US megaprojects (like dams for hydro-electricity or airports), there was little use of American food aid, and although American oil and gas companies were exploring in Burmese waters, they too needed permits and contracts, which were strongly criticized at home. So the official and commercial US presence was never big, but some mid-level program officers within the embassy showed ingenuity and courage in reaching out, during the sanctions, to invite young Myanmar citizens to the American Cultural Center in Yangon where classes in language studies opened a unique space for new ideas, new music and images, and new relationships. Still, it was

opium, heroin, and the drug trade which often dominated the official discourse.

The organization of Clymer's book would enable both specialists and amateurs to track a particular interest, such as opponents sent to prison, or missionaries with no future, or Americans in difficulty (e.g., Louis Walinsky [1964], Baird Helfrich [1965], or John Yettaw, who swam across Inya Lake [2009]). These internal disagreements about Myanmar involved the State Department, the Defense Department, the CIA, the White House, individuals and committees in Congress, and business lobbies like petroleum producers. Clymer reports for them all, showing how they could scarcely reconcile their interests "rationally." But they muddled through, and a specialist could use the book to track those disagreements. As a foreign historian, I say it is a tribute to the "free play" of American political culture that such disagreements were, in the recent past at least, preserved and transferred faithfully (mostly) to the archives.

American interests interacted strongly around some key polarities: human rights were often eclipsed before the late 1970s by the need to cooperate with Burma for narcotics control; the valued anticommunist attitudes of the Burmese leader Ne Win were eventually eclipsed by the official US need to criticize the military dictatorship; the minimal US-Myanmar trade provided little leverage with other moving parts of US economy and policy, including the behavior of oil companies in the country. At times American expert-advisors enjoyed prominence, such as economists of Robert Nathan Associates in the 1950s, and then later also experienced rejection--see US military trainers in 1960s.

Clymer's book, which is necessarily about unofficial and official American relations with one man, could be paired with the monumental new work by Robert Taylor, *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (2015). One could track the efforts of Ne Win's opponents in both books. However,

Clymer remains balanced throughout, noting that while the embassy had to entertain the general's opponents and their conspiratorial plans, it nevertheless did little to further them. One can track the top man's opponents through Clymer's narrative, people like U Nu, Bo Setkya, Brigadier Aung Gyi, and General Khin Nyunt. The book presents evidence that there was little appetite in Washington for regime change, even in earlier days when the United States had massive troop concentrations close by in Indo-China. Even in the 1990s, when there was a popular constituency for tough intervention among many Americans (in part due to the powerful effect of Suu Kyi's house arrest), the approach was to "stay the course" and continue to build up sanctions: here Clymer plausibly suggests that "the internet, more than any other single factor, produced the sanctions" (p. 286). From that time onward, of course, much of Clymer's book is necessarily again about US relations with one man, but we know there is no monumental book about General Than Shwe, not yet. Clymer provides an excellent account of how sanctions were constructed in Congress and monitored. This vexed situation produced passionate disagreement in America--there were good reasons for having nothing to do with Myanmar, but equally good reasons to remain in close contact and to be ready to promote change. Concerning *The Lady*, Clymer points out that at least three very influential women followed Suu Kyi's case closely and kept a candle burning brightly--Madeleine Albright, Laura Bush, and Hillary Clinton. The paradox was and is that a country with so little other than potential (Myanmar) was able to remain so uncooperative with and at times resistant to the expectations of a country (United States) with so many powerful instruments of inducement and coercion--and for so remarkably long.

Although histories of bilateral relations abound, there are few broad studies (in English) that involve Burma/Myanmar. There is an impressive study by David Steinberg and Hongwei Fan ti-

tled *Modern China-Myanmar Relations* (2013), based largely on Chinese sources. D. M. Seekins's book, *Burma and Japan since 1940*, was published in 2007 and, though valuable, is a little out of date given the huge scale of that present relationship. A former ambassador to Yangon, Rajiv Bhatia wrote *India-Myanmar Relations* (2015). There appears to be no book with a historic sweep comparable to Clymer's, not about Germany-Myanmar, Thailand-Myanmar, France-Myanmar, Russia-Myanmar, Israel-Myanmar, Australia-Myanmar, nor even Britain-Myanmar relations (in that latter case though, much research has been concentrated in the period ending about 1950).

Clymer's fine book is not simply an archive-in-our-hands. It offers evidence and insight into one of the world's incongruous relationships. As the radius of the new Myanmar's influence grows and its peoples search for a more inclusive economy and more just society, Clymer's work will be the basis of a renewed understanding of this delicate relationship, enabling others to build upon it.

Notes

[1]. In this review I follow Clymer's example: when discussing events before 1989 I shall use the old names Burma and Rangoon, and after 1989 I use Myanmar and Yangon, new names adopted officially by the United Nations.

[2]. Where all the documents went we cannot be sure: I recall buying hot peanuts in a paper cone at the river dock near the US embassy in 1999, when strong paper was hard to obtain. When the peanuts were finished I glanced at the carefully cut piece of paper, and on it was printed "US Embassy Rangoon--Confidential--Rice Production Forecast 1999."

[3]. Clymer frequently refers to the famous *Far Eastern Economic Review*, unknown to readers after 2009 but crucial to all of us who went before. Important information about Myanmar was and is found (in archive form) there, and this book poignantly reminds us how lucky we were to have it. I remember carrying copies of it into

Yangon with the cover cut off, in the 1970s and 1980s. However, a foolish decision by its owners, the Dow Jones Corporation, brought the *Review* to an untimely end in 2009.

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