

# How America's James Bond Talked JFK Into Vietnam

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**BOOKMARK**

BY JOHN M. NEWMAN

*By withholding or altering military intelligence, the author contends, senior Pentagon advisers talked President John F. Kennedy into escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam. An excerpt from "JFK and Vietnam."*

"This is the worst one we've got, isn't it?" President John F. Kennedy said, as he looked up at Walt W. Rostow with a worried expression on his face. "You know, Eisenhower never mentioned it. He talked at length about Laos, but never uttered the word Vietnam."

It was only six days after the inauguration, and Kennedy had just finished reading a report on Vietnam. Rostow, his specialist on Southeast Asia in the National Security Council, had given it to Kennedy and insisted he read every word. Rostow described it as "an extremely vivid and well-written account of a place that was

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going to hell in a hack." In between the report's well-crafted lines, however, was an ulterior motive: Its author, Edward Lansdale, wanted to be the ambassador to South Vietnam.

Lansdale, then an Air Force general working in the Office of Special Operations for the secretary of defense, had a long history of experience in covert operations and was a recognized expert on Vietnam, having contributed in a major way to the birth and subsequent development of South Vietnam. In the process, he became a close personal friend of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

■ **BOOK REVIEW:** "JFK and Vietnam," by John M. Newman, is reviewed on Page 1 of the Book Review section.

In the Eisenhower period, Lansdale had worked in the Saigon military mission, but he had powerful allies in the CIA, and his professional patron was the agency's director, Allen Dulles.

In January, 1961, Lansdale returned from a fact-finding trip to Vietnam, where the communists, who had launched a serious guerrilla campaign two years earlier, had made impressive gains. His report said the Viet Cong goal was to take over South Vietnam in 1961, and that they were much closer to accomplishing this objective

than he had realized from the reports he had read in Washington. Lansdale had a solution for the dire problem: the United States needed to show strong support for Diem and make changes in U.S. personnel, including the replacement of Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow. Durbrow, he said, was not considered a friend by the Vietnamese.

Two days after Kennedy read the Lansdale report, the general was invited to attend a meeting in the President's office. The meeting, called to discuss Cuba, was expanded to include Vietnam, due to the President's "keen interest" in the Lansdale report. Kennedy, motioning to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, complimented Lansdale on his report, then asked him, "Has the secretary here mentioned that I wanted you to be ambassador to Vietnam?" Lansdale replied that it would be an honor.

The meeting's poorly focused and superficial discussion of the government's "counterinsurgency plan," especially its linkage of U.S. aid to political reforms, would return to haunt U.S. Vietnam policy. For no one told Kennedy of the poisonous waters that spawned this linkage: that Durbrow, objecting to the U.S. government's proposed enlargement of the South Vietnamese army, came up with the idea of reforms as a quid pro quo compromise. Furthermore, no one questioned how Diem might react to them. Yet the counterinsurgency plan assumed that Diem's ability to resist the communist threat depended, in large part, on their success. Nor did anyone tell Kennedy these reforms were, in fact, anathema to Diem, and that Durbrow (who knew this) anticipated that Diem might have to be forced to implement them.

Considering his close relationship with  
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Diem, Lansdale might have mentioned Diem's distaste for Durbrow's prescription for democracy in South Vietnam. Instead, Lansdale's focus was self-serving and his comments designed to persuade Kennedy to appoint him the new ambassador. Kennedy was thus not given, and he failed to demand, an explanation of why U.S. aid was to be inextricably linked to reforms; nor did he ask how important these reforms were to the overall success of the program, and what alternatives should be considered if Diem refused to carry them out.

Such a discussion would have revealed deep divisions in his Administration on fundamental issues in Vietnam policy. These divisions remained concealed; a few days later, Kennedy took his first step toward a deeper U.S. commitment to Vietnam. Alarmed by Lansdale's Vietnam trip report, Kennedy impulsively grasped for the first solutions within reach: Lansdale and the counterinsurgency plan. Ironically, Lansdale would facilitate Diem's

effort to undermine the reforms mandated by the plan and, as a result, U.S. policy would become bogged down for the next three months.

Kennedy had been immediately attracted to Lansdale, perhaps because both men had similar qualities: energy, fresh ideas, directness and self-confidence in the face of adversity. Far from being put off by the dark side of America's most celebrated covert operator, the President was fascinated by Lansdale's James Bond mystique. The one thing Kennedy made up his mind to do right away was to remove Durbrow and replace him with Lansdale. That hasty, pivotal decision to admit Lansdale into the inner circle of power was a choice that Kennedy alone made. The President had bit hard and took the bait—hook, line and sinker. □

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