
**IN THE MIDST OF WARS:
An American's Mission
to Southeast Asia**

by Edward Geary Lansdale

Harper & Row, 386 pp., \$12.50

Reviewed by Jonathan Mirsky

■ With the exception of the Pentagon Papers, Edward Geary Lansdale's memoir could have been the most valuable eyewitness account of the internationalizing of the Indochinese war. Lansdale, a "legendary figure" even in his own book, furnished the model for the Ugly American who, from 1950 through 1953, "helped" Magsaysay put down the Huk revolution in the Philippines. He then proceeded to Vietnam

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where, between 1954 and 1956, he stuck close to Ngo Dinh Diem during Diem's first shaky years when Washington couldn't make up its mind whom to tap as the American alternative to Ho Chi Minh. Lansdale's support insured Diem as the final choice for Our Man in Saigon. While the book's time span is, therefore, relatively brief, the period it covers in the Philippines and Vietnam is genuinely important.

There is only one difficulty with *In the Midst of Wars*: from the cover to the final page it is permeated with lies. That Harper & Row finds it possible to foist such a package of untruths on the public—and for \$12.50!—several months after the emergence of the Pentagon Papers, and years after the publication of other authoritative studies, exhibits contempt for a public trying to understand the realities of our engagement in Vietnam.

The lie on the jacket describes Lansdale merely as an OSS veteran who spent the years after World War II as a "career officer in the U.S. Air Force." In the text Lansdale never offers any explicit evidence to the contrary. Indeed, on page 378—the last of the text—he states that at the very time Diem was being murdered in Saigon, "I had been retired from the Air Force."

For all I know Lansdale drew his pay from the Air Force and, as the photographs in his book attest, he certainly wore its uniform. This is irrelevant. Lansdale was for years a senior operative of the Central Intelligence Agency; on page 244 of the Department of Defense edition of the Pentagon Papers, Lansdale, two other men, and Allen Dulles are identified as representing the CIA at a meeting of the President's Special Committee on Indochina held on January 29, 1954.

Why is this important? Because if there is one word Lansdale uses repeatedly it is "help"—and he uses it personally, simulating a Lone Ranger-like urge to offer *spontaneous* assistance. Thus, the first day he ever saw Diem, ". . . the thought occurred to me that perhaps he needed help. . . . I voiced this to Ambassador Heath. . . . Heath told me to go ahead." The informal atmosphere continues when Lansdale, upon actually meeting Diem, immortalizes him as "the alert and eldest of the seven dwarfs deciding what to do about Snow White."

Further desires to serve inform Lansdale's concern for the "masses of people living in North Vietnam who would want to . . . move out before the communists took over." These unfortunates, too, required "help." Splitting his "small team" of Americans in two, Lansdale saw to it that "One half, under Major Conein, engaged in refugee work in the North."

"Major" Lucien Conein, who was to

play the major role the CIA had in the murder of Diem in 1963, is identified in the secret CIA report included by the *Times* and *Beacon* editions of the Pentagon Papers (see *SR*, Jan. 1, 1972) as an agent "assigned to MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] for cover purposes." The secret report refers to Conein's refugee "help" as one of his "cover duties." His real job: "responsibility for developing a paramilitary organization in the North, to be in position when the Vietminh took over . . . the group was to be trained and supported by the U.S. as patriotic Vietnamese." Conein's "helpful" teams also attempted to sabotage Hanoi's largest printing establishment and wreck the local bus company. At the beginning of 1955, still in Hanoi, the CIA's Conein infiltrated more agents into the North. They "became normal citizens, carrying out everyday civil pursuits, on the surface." Aggression from the North, anyone?

Lansdale expresses particular pleasure with the refugee movement to the South. These people "ought to be provided with a way of making a fresh start in the free South. . . . [Vietnam] was going to need the vigorous participation of every citizen to make a success of the noncommunist part of the new nation before the proposed plebiscite was held in 1956." Lansdale modestly claims that he "passed along" ideas on how to wage psychological warfare to "some nationalists." The Pentagon Papers, however, reveal that the CIA "engineered a black psywar strike in Hanoi: leaflets signed by the Vietminh instructing Tonkinese on how to behave for the Vietminh takeover of the Hanoi region in early October [1954] including items about property, money reform, and a three-day holiday of workers upon takeover. The day following the distribution of these leaflets, refugee registration tripled."

The refugees—Catholics, many of whom had collaborated with the French—were settled in the South, in communities that, according to Lansdale, were designed to "sandwich" Northerners and Southerners "in a cultural melting pot that hopefully would give each equal opportunity."

Robert Scigliano, who at this time was advising the CIA-infiltrated Michigan State University team on how to "help" Diem, saw more than a melting pot:

Northerners, practically all of whom are refugees, [have] preempted many of the choice posts in the Diem government. . . . [The] Diem regime has assumed the aspect of a carpet bag government in its disproportion of Northerners and Centralists . . . and in its Catholicism. . . . The Southern people do not seem to share the

anticommunist vehemence of their Northern and Central compatriots, by whom they are sometimes referred to as unreliable in the communist struggle. . . . [While] priests in the refugee villages hold no formal government posts they are generally the real rulers of their villages and serve as contacts with district and provincial officials.

Graham Greene, a devout Catholic, observed in 1955 after a visit to Vietnam, "It is Catholicism which has helped to ruin the government of Mr. Diem, for his genuine piety has been exploited by his American advisers until the Church is in danger of sharing the unpopularity of the United States."

Wherever one turns in Lansdale the accounts are likely to be lies. He reports how Filipinos, old comrades from the anti-Huk wars, decided to "help" the struggling Free South. The spontaneity of this pan-Asian gesture warms the heart—until one learns from Lansdale's own secret report to President Kennedy that here, too, the CIA had stage-managed the whole business. The Eastern Construction Company turns out to be a CIA-controlled "mechanism to permit the deployment of Filipino personnel in other Asian countries for unconventional operations. . . . Philippine Armed Forces and other governmental personnel were 'sheep-dipped' and sent abroad."

Elsewhere Lansdale makes much of Diem's success against the various sects, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen. (At every step Diem was advised by Lansdale who, at one pathetic moment, even holds the weeping Chief of State in his arms.) Everything depends on timing, daring, and honesty in the face of venality. Therefore Lansdale ridicules a Frenchman who dares accuse him of bribing the sects. Actually, in the literature on this subject, the only argument about bribes has been about their magnitude. Bernard Fall estimated that American bagmen disbursed more than \$12-million. John Osborne, in *Life*, May 13, 1957, also put the amount in the millions, while Joseph Alsop, in the *New York Herald Tribune* of April 1, 1955, cautiously guessed in the hundreds of thousands.

Although at the end of *In the Midst of Wars* Lansdale says that he regrets Diem's "brutal murder," he makes no mention of the CIA's central role in the affair. And he immediately lies again by claiming: "I had been shunted from Washington work on Vietnamese problems in 1961 and had been busy with other duties." Unfortunately for Lansdale and Harper & Row, the Pentagon Papers reveal him, in 1961, as very busy indeed with precisely such problems—briefing his superiors on CIA activities in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The CIA being the kind of or-

ganization it is, perhaps there was for Lansdale no "need to know" that his old subordinate, now "Colonel" Conein—at the behest of Lodge, Bundy, Rusk, and John Kennedy—had been instrumental in the coup that brought Diem to a bloody end in the back of a truck.

But why should Lansdale have the last word? The Defense Department's analysts knew that Diem's shortcomings were more profound than the kind of stubbornness which made him so exasperatingly lovable to Major General Lansdale.

As far as most Cochinchinese peasants were concerned, Diem was linked to Bao Dai, and to the corrupt, French-dominated government he headed. Studies of peasant attitudes conducted in recent years have demonstrated that, for many, the struggle which began in 1945 against colonialism continued uninterrupted throughout Diem's regime: in 1954, the foes of nationalists were transformed from France and Bao Dai, to Diem and the U.S.—My-Diem, American-Diem, became the universal term of Vietcong opprobrium—but the issues at stake never changed.

Jonathan Mirsky is director of the East Asia Center at Dartmouth College.