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On Duty, "Dirty Tricks" and Democracy

A profile of Maj. Gen. Edwin Lansdale, the original "Ugly American"

By Stanley Karnow

As he walks his poodle along the shaded street near his split-level Alexandria home, Maj. Gen. Edward Geary Lansdale resembles any number of retired officers pasturing in the Washington suburbs. He is still lean and erect despite his 64 years, and, like so many military pensioners, he finds life somewhat tame after his adventurous career.

But in contrast to the superannuated colonels who reconstruct battles at the dinner table, Lansdale's experiences were of a high order. For he was in times past a dynamic, influential and often controversial figure who single-handedly managed foreign governments and whose behind-the-scenes counsel helped to shape U.S. policy and practice at critical junctures in recent history.

In the Philippines during the early 1950s, for example, Lansdale virtually directed the campaign against the Communist-led Hukbs in his capacity as special adviser to Ramon Magsaysay, then that country's defense secretary. In Saigon not long after, he effectively kept South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in office by conspiring to crush his domestic foes while persuading Washington to support him. Later, as the Vietnam war escalated, Lansdale was instrumental in convincing President Eisenhower and Kennedy that the United States and its Vietnamese clients could defeat the Vietcong by relying on counterinsurgency techniques. Some of these techniques, as disclosed in the secret Pentagon Papers, have revealed him to be considerably less savory than the public image of him as an idealist.

Little of the exotic drama that characterized Lansdale's career is apparent in his present manner. He is a gray, unassuming man whose subdued style borders on self-effacement. Some of his friends

suggest that he has lost much of his verve since his wife's death last spring, and he himself concedes that her passing has left him lonely and dispirited. Except for occasional evenings with old cronies, many of them Asia veterans like himself, he leads a rather secluded existence.

Other friends point out that he is weary after years of battling bureaucrats who oppose his unconventional ideas, and Lansdale himself substantiates that view with bitter humor when he says that "the knives going in don't seem to hurt anymore." Yet, as he speaks, it is clear that he still burns with a hard flame that is nearly religious in fervor. His religion, he explains, is not formal. It is his faith that the United States could have successfully played world policeman by propagating its political philosophy.

At the core of Lansdale's doctrine is the conviction that Communist guerrillas can be defeated in brushfire wars by "winning the hearts and minds" of people. In Vietnam, according to this thesis, the United States should have exported American democratic principles along with guns, money, machinery and food. "We couldn't afford to be just against the Communists," Lansdale has written. "We had to be for something."

Lansdale's proposals often provoked the fury of Establishment strategists, some powerful enough to block his advancement. He has also been derided as a dreamer whose perception of reality was, at best, blurred. At the same time, though, he inspired a coterie of disciples who regarded him as nearly infallible. The debate over him polarized several years ago in two celebrated novels that, whatever the validity of their arguments, at least endowed him with a measure of literary immortality. William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick portrayed him in *The Ugly American* as Col. Edwin Barnum Hillendale, whose sweet harmonica purportedly stimulated rural Filipinos to oppose Communism. Graham Greene, on the other hand, depicted him in *The Quiet American* as Alden Pyle, the naive

U.S. official who believed that he could mobilize Vietnamese peasants to resist the Communists by instilling them with the precepts of Town Hall democracy.

Although the old soldier has faded away, the debate lingers on. Just as Lederer and Burdick approvingly quote their hero as saying that "if you use the right key, you can maneuver any person or nation any way you want," so Lansdale's disciples still contend that the United States could have attained its objectives in Vietnam by developing psychological warfare methods more efficacious than those employed by the Communists. This view, which became popular during the Kennedy Administration, is best articulated in the articles of Lansdale's close friend, Robert Shaplen, the *New Yorker* correspondent in Saigon, who has long asserted that the United States and its South Vietnamese proteges could have beat the Communists by preempting the revolution. And just as Graham Greene indirectly reproved Lansdale by declaring that Vietnamese "don't want our white skins around telling them what they want," so his present-day critics claim that he never actually understood Asians. Frances FitzGerald, author of the current bestseller on Vietnam, *Fire in the Lake*, describes Lansdale as a man of "artless sincerity . . . who never thought in terms of systems or larger social forces" at work in contemporary Asia. He was, in Miss FitzGerald's analysis, an enthusiast rather than a theorist "who believed that Communism in Asia would crumble before men of goodwill with some concern for 'the little guy' and the proper counterinsurgency skills."

I spent a recent morning chatting with Lansdale. We sipped coffee and chain-smoked in his study, a large room cluttered with books on Asian affairs, its walls adorned with photographs of him in the Philippines, Vietnam and other faraway places. One of the photographs featured Lansdale and a Vietnamese who once held a high rank in Saigon and now runs a restaurant in Paris, and it

occurred to me as I scanned the picture how many careers had been ruined by the war. But as Lansdale discussed the war, talking softly and modestly, his attitudes eluded sharp definition. Indeed, it seemed to me, his views might fit almost anywhere in the spectrum of opinion on Vietnam. His denunciations of the U.S. bombings of North Vietnam would please radicals, and his expressions of hatred for the Communists would delight conservatives. I had no quarrel with his forecast that "after a horrible casualty list and destruction, we'll end up with the compromise solution we could have had ten years ago." The compromise in Saigon, he predicted, would take the form of a coalition government whose Vietcong members would eventually gain the upper hand and turn the country into a Communist state. But as we discussed what-might-have-been, I doubted the plausibility of his belief that the outcome could have been different. "We should have constructed a political base for South Vietnam," he said, emphasizing as he has consistently over the years, that "we could have helped the Vietnamese to find something worth defending, something that gave meaning to their struggle."

It is no coincidence that Lansdale often sounds like a missionary. He began his professional life as a San Francisco advertising man determined to convert the local citizenry into buying such merchandise as Nescafe and Italian Swiss Colony wine. Born and raised in Detroit, where his father had been an automobile company executive, he had migrated to the West Coast to attend the University of California at Los Angeles, and there he remained. When World War II broke out, Lansdale was commissioned as an officer in the Office of Strategic Services, a precursor of the Central Intelligence Agency. But, oddly enough in the light of his later career, he was not sent overseas to handle the kind of daring jobs assigned to OSS operatives.

Instead, he sat out most of the war in California performing benign tasks like gathering maps

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and coordinating intelligence. Only after the fighting had ended was he transferred to the Philippines, the archipelago that had once been America's proud Pacific possession. There, in the years that followed, he would make his name almost a household word.

Rather than return to the advertising business when peace came, Lansdale chose to join the newly-created U.S. Air Force as a captain. He also elected to stay in the Philippines as an intelligence officer. During that period, the Communist-led Huk insurgency was beginning, and Lansdale was designated to report to the U.S. government on rebel activities. He traveled through the *barrios* of central Luzon, where the Huks were particularly strong, talking with peasants and trying to dissuade them from supporting the insurgents. He also listened to their problems, learning from the experience that bureaucratic corruption, rural tenancy and other social injustices provided fertile ground for the Communists. This ingrained in him the conviction, which he still holds, that Communism must be fought mainly as a political virus.

His early years among the amiable Filipinos left him as well with the conviction that personal ties with people were primordial. "My work had taken me among thousands of Filipinos," he later wrote. "I cared about them as individuals and they responded with friendship. It was that natural and that simple."

Out of that initial brush with the Philippines, Lansdale slowly evolved what would eventually become his lifetime theme—the need for psychological warfare as the antidote to Communist revolution. He studied Mao Tse-tung's theories and, back in Washington in 1950, he lectured at the Pentagon on unconventional methods of waging war. Soon afterward, he was given the chance to put his principles into practice. He was ordered to go back to the Philippines as a member of the U.S. Military Advisory Group detailed to help the Philippine government to cope with its growing Huk insurgency. Lansdale recalls that he was immersed in remodeling his Washington house when his orders arrived. He dropped everything and departed, feeling, as he puts it now, that it was like "playing hooky to go to war."

Back in the Philippines, Lansdale was struck by the fact that American and Philippine officials who briefed him on the extent of the Huk rebellion barely mentioned its political and social un-

derpinnings but focused almost exclusively on the military situation. Still using the imagery of an advertising man two decades afterward, Lansdale would remember that they were like storekeepers "counting the goods on shelves instead of pondering ways to get the customers coming in again."

What the crisis required, in his estimation, was a supersalesman. He found him in the Philippine defense secretary, Ramon Magsaysay. An energetic, disorganized iconoclast who spent more time charging around the country than at his desk, Magsaysay was a character in need of an author. Lansdale was ready to write his script.

Calling him by his nickname, "Monching," Lansdale invited Magsaysay to share his house inside the American military compound. They would talk late into the night, with Magsaysay airing his views in haphazard fashion so that Lansdale could, as he recalls, "sort them out" in order to select or discard courses of action. According to Lansdale, they also revealed their "innermost thoughts" to each other in their quest to bring "peace and justice to the Philippine people." They agreed on the necessity to reform the corrupt, lethargic Philippine army, and they worked on plans for social reform. Lansdale persuaded Magsaysay as well to create a psychological warfare division innocuously named the Civil Affairs Office, and he introduced an assortment of gimmicks designed to discourage the Huks.

One psywar operation played on the superstitious dread in the Philippine countryside of the *asuang*, a mythical vampire. A psywar squad entered an area, and planted rumors that an *asuang* lived on a hill where the Communists were based. Two nights later, after giving the rumors time to circulate among Huk sympathizers, the psywar squad laid an ambush for the rebels. When a Huk patrol passed, the ambushers silently snatched the last man, punctured his neck vampire-fashion with two holes, hung his body until the blood drained out, and put the corpse back on the trail. As superstitious as any other Filipinos, the insurgents fled from the region.

With Lansdale's help, Magsaysay also promoted land reform programs that, although short-lived, appealed to peasants and prompted many of them to deny support for the Huks. The Huks themselves, meanwhile, were suffering from inept leadership. They split into factions and, be-



trayed by one of their chiefs, allowed part of their Politburo to be captured. By 1952, their movement had largely evaporated. A year later, Magsaysay was elected president of the Philippines—again with Lansdale's assistance.

In the semi-fictional account by Lederer and Burdick, Lansdale alias Hillendale drove around the Philippine boondocks on a red motorcycle, playing his harmonica and exhorting the citizens to vote for Magsaysay. In his own memoirs, Lansdale says only that he concentrated on writing a plan to safeguard the "integrity" of the elections and, before the balloting itself, advised civic groups on how to get out the vote. Although Lansdale denies it, some sources claim that he also served as a funnel for U.S. money passed on to Magsaysay. Whatever the truth, his role in the election was important. After Magsaysay's victory, the Indian ambassador in Manila suggested that he change his name to "Lanslide." Characteristically, Lansdale cherishes the inscription on a gift given him by Philippine friends. It reads: "To the salesman extraordinary of democracy."

Following Magsaysay's installation in office, Lansdale's job in the Philippines was done, and he was ready for a new assignment. No less a figure than Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told him personally that his job in Vietnam would be to assist the Vietnamese in "counterguerrilla training."

But by the time Lansdale arrived in Saigon in the spring of 1954, the situation had changed. The Communist Vietminh had defeated the French, and the Geneva Conference was about to partition the country. Lansdale consequently inherited two somewhat different tasks—one covert and the other simply shady. The covert job was to head a team known as the Saigon Military Mission, which specialized in what secret agents call "dirty tricks." The less secret assignment was to advise Ngo Dinh Diem, who had just arrived in Saigon from retirement in a New Jersey seminary, as chief of the wobbly South Vietnamese government.

American military activities in Vietnam were restricted under the terms of the Geneva Agreement. Lansdale's Saigon Military Mission was therefore illegal and, for that reason, clandestine. Lansdale himself posed as Assistant Air Attache at the U.S. Embassy, communicating with Washington through the CIA. His staff in-

cluded Lucien Conein, a tough former soldier in the French Foreign Legion who had parachuted into Vietnam as an OSS operative during World War II. He was also assisted by the U.S. Information Agency director. And, in addition to other military subordinates disguised as civilians, he was helped by two groups of Filipinos subsidized by CIA funds. One, called "Operation Brotherhood," comprised doctors and nurses. The other, known as Freedom Company, was composed of Filipinos who had fought against the Huks and could counsel anti-Communist Vietnamese in their struggle. The activities of Lansdale's team were kept secret until their disclosure in the Pentagon Papers two years ago.

Functioning under Conein's command, several members of the Mission were sent into North Vietnam before the Communist takeover to handle an assortment of undercover jobs. They spread rumors calculated to trigger resentment against the Communists and, among other things, they paralyzed transportation in Hanoi by contaminating the local bus company's oil supply.

According to informed sources, they were also instrumental in encouraging thousands of Catholic Vietnamese to flee from the North into South Vietnam. One former U.S. official who has served in Vietnam has indignantly described this operation as "immoral" because, he contends, it brought into the South nearly a million Northern refugees who were to become the fiercest advocates of the war that later expanded. Lansdale, in contrast, believes that the refugees were saved from Communism—and that the operation was therefore justified.

In further violation of the Geneva Agreements, the Lansdale team smuggled weapons into Vietnam for use by paramilitary groups, some of which were delegated to stay in the North to harass the Communists. In January 1955, according to a classified report among the Pentagon Papers, Lansdale agents hid two and a half tons of carbines, pistols, ammunition and radios along the Red River in the northern region of Tonkin for use by Hao guerrillas who were staged in the Philippines and sent ashore from U.S. Navy vessels near Haiphong. Many of the ships employed to carry refugees south carried illegal weapons on their trips north. Reflecting on its operation after the Communists officially installed their regime in Hanoi in May 1955, the Lansdale team re-

ported that "it had taken a tremendous amount of hard work to beat the Geneva deadline, to locate, select, exfiltrate, train, infiltrate, equip the men . . . and have them in place, ready for action required against the enemy." It would have been a hard task to complete openly, the report added, but "this had to be kept secret from the Vietminh, the International Commission with its suspicious French and Poles and Indians, and even friendly Vietnamese." The fate of the guerrillas infiltrated into the North has never been publicly disclosed. In all probability they were captured by the Communists.

In Saigon, meanwhile, Lansdale undertook to prop up Ngo Dinh Diem, who was then under fire from diverse local sects, the Communists, remnant French and some members of the American Mission. Diem was a strange, ascetic bachelor who either irritated or captivated people. Lansdale, though he could manage him as he had Magsaysay, and he started out on the job the day Diem arrived in Saigon. Observing that Diem had whizzed from the airport to his palace behind a motorcycle escort, Lansdale immediately sent him a memo pointing out that he should have driven slowly or even walked in order to "provide a focus for the affection that the people so obviously had been waiting to bestow on him." Diem was impressed with the advice and, even though they had to speak through an interpreter, Lansdale collects that "our association gradually developed into a friendship of considerable depth, trust and candor." Lansdale was soon spending nearly all his time in the palace, counseling Diem on the smallest details.

Lansdale's intimacy with Diem troubled Gen. J. Lawton "Lightning Joe" Collins, who had arrived in Saigon as U.S. ambassador in November 1954. Collins made it clear from the beginning that he would be the boss. But Lansdale made it equally clear that he considered Collins uninformed, and they immediately collided at the first meeting of the American mission. As Lansdale tells the story, he spoke up at the meeting to offer a couple of recommendations, whereupon Collins cut him short. Lansdale writes:

Collins told me firmly that I was out of order, that he was the personal representative of the President of the United States, that as representative he had set the priorities, and that there was

no need whatsoever to discuss them. Did I understand? I stood up and said, "Yes sir, I understand. I guess there's nobody here as personal representative of the people of the United States. The American people would want us to discuss these priorities. So, I hereby appoint myself as their representative — and we're walking out on you." I walked out of the meeting.

In any other episode of this kind, the junior officer would have been on the next airplane home to await reassignment to Greenland. But not Lansdale.

He went to Collins' home while the ambassador was having his postprandial siesta, pulled up a chair next to the bed, and talked steadily about the vital problem of saving Vietnam from the Communists. Significantly, Collins chided him for describing Vietnam as "vital," explaining that such other problems as the nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union were far more important. Later discussions convinced Lansdale, as he puts it now, that he and Collins lived in "two wholly separate worlds." Looking back, it may be that Collins' view was more realistic. For Lansdale could have been suffering from what Gen. George C. Marshall once diagnosed as "localitis."

The major threat to Diem at that time came from assorted factions seeking to grab his power. These factions included the Binh Xuyen, which controlled prostitution and narcotics in Saigon, and religious groups like the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. Each had a private army. Collins advised Diem to compromise, but Lansdale urged him to fight. Lansdale's counsel won out. Diem fought and defeated his foes—and the covert Saigon Military Mission commanded by Lansdale helped in his effort.

Earlier, the Lansdale Mission had cleverly saved Diem from being ousted by Gen. Nguyen Van Hinh, the flamboyant chief of the Vietnamese armed forces. For motives that are still fuzzy, Hinh had disclosed to Lansdale the exact date of his planned move to overthrow Diem. Acting quickly, Lansdale arranged for Hinh's staff to be invited to Manila on what was depicted in advance as a gay tour of the Philippine capital's notorious nightclubs. Lansdale kept the would-be dissidents in Manila for a week, thereby depriving Hinh of his principal adjutants for the coup. Hinh has since

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become a senior officer in the French military establishment, and Lansdale still wonders whether his project to topple Diem was serious.

Until the fall of 1955, Diem was theoretically prime minister to the dissolute Emperor Bao Dai. But on October 6, Diem announced a referendum to choose between himself and Bao Dai as chief of state. Ever the psywar expert, Lansdale advised Diem to take out some "subliminal insurance" by having the ballots colored in ways that would influence the vote. Diem's ballots were printed in cheerful red, the color Asians interpret to mean good luck, while Bao Dai's ballots were a bilious shade of green, which signifies a cuckold to Vietnamese. The color insurance was reinforced by a substantial amount of military muscle, and Diem ended up with 98 per cent of the votes. Lansdale's assignment was finished, as it had been with Magsaysay's election, and he returned to a desk job in Washington.

The Pentagon job, which consisted of supervising the collection of intelligence for the Defense Department, was only a

sideline for Lansdale: His real interest was still counterinsurgency, and, like an evangelist, he wandered around Washington trying to convert the brass to his views. Few listened. "Those were the days of massive retaliation and the nuclear menace," Lansdale recalls, "and here I was talking about nickel and dime stuff."

But toward the close of the Eisenhower administration, in late 1960, Lansdale went back to Vietnam on a temporary mission that would afterward prove fateful for the United States. Now a brigadier general, he was assigned to sum up the Vietnam situation at the end of Ike's tenure. Anyone else would have produced a routine report. Lansdale, however, displayed his characteristic earnestness. He toured the Vietnamese countryside by helicopter, paying surprise visits to remote areas, and he spent a good deal of time catching up on political developments in Saigon. He was alarmed by what he saw.

Diem, who had just survived an abortive coup d'etat staged by some of his best officers, was almost completely isolated from his people. Distrustful of nearly everyone, especially since the attempted coup against him, he had grown increasingly reliant for

advice on his brother Nhu, an egotistical pseudo-intellectual. Diem was hardly on speaking terms with the U.S. ambassador, Elbridge Durbrow, and Durbrow barely spoke to the chief of the U.S. military advisory group, Gen. "Hanging Sam" Williams, who had earned his nickname as commandant of the Nuremberg jail in which the Nazi war criminals were executed.

Returning to Washington two days before President Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961, Lansdale delivered a long and gloomy report on Vietnam. Despite his friendship for Diem, he candidly criticized the Vietnamese leader, arguing prophetically that his Saigon government would tumble unless its base could be "broadened" to include anti-Communist nationalists. Lansdale also derided the U.S. mission in Saigon, contending among other things that its civilian diplomats were unequipped to deal with the problem, and that its military men, concentrated in the capital, knew little about the countryside. Under this setup, he warned, the growing Vietcong force could not be stopped.

His prescription was typically Lansdale. Other U.S. officials, like Maxwell Taylor, would propose

more weapons and money. But Lansdale recommended that the U.S. team be staffed with "a hard core of experienced Americans who know and really like Asians, dedicated people who are willing to risk their lives for the ideals of freedom, and who will try to influence and guide the Vietnamese toward U.S. policy objectives with the warm friendship and affection which our close alliance deserves." In other words, as David Halberstam would later note, Lansdale was recommending Lansdale.

The Lansdale report somehow reached Walt Rostow, one of Kennedy's aides, and he urged the President to read it. Kennedy reluctantly complied. When he had finished, he said to Rostow: "Walt, this is going to be the worst one yet."

Soon afterward, a call from the White House awakened Lansdale on a Sunday morning. It was a hasty summons to a special breakfast session with the President. Lansdale rushed over, and, as he entered the room, Kennedy welcomed him, pointing to Secretary of State Dean Rusk and saying: "Has the Secretary here mentioned that I wanted you to be ambassador to Vietnam?"

Lansdale's astonishment at the

moment was later compounded by the fact that he never heard another word on the matter. Some sources say that his appointment was blocked by Rusk, others by the Pentagon. But he was asked to produce another report for Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy's military adviser. In it he reiterated in detail proposals for a larger counterinsurgency force not only for Vietnam but for Thailand and Laos as well. He also recommended that greater use be made of his CIA-financed Philippine cohorts and of Civil Air Transport, a Taiwan-based commercial airline owned by the CIA, whose aircraft were used for covert operations.

Lansdale's ideas impressed Kennedy, who rapidly began sponsoring the Green Berets and other Special Forces units to cope with revolutionary warfare. But Lansdale scarcely profited from the new fad. On the contrary, he was shunted aside by the many bureaucrats he had ruffled, and even his travel was restricted.

The State Department prevented him from accepting an invitation to study the Israeli army's counterinsurgency program, and he was barred from inspecting French efforts in Algeria. He was permitted to go to Latin America, but only on condition that he

spend no more than five days in any one country. When I asked him why the President did not override these limitations, Lansdale replied sourly: "Kennedy went along with the bureaucrats."

But Latin America did offer him some scope, however narrow. Lansdale repeatedly visited there, usually as the guest of local governments, to consult on insurgency problems. In Bolivia, for example, he taught the army to build schools in villages and transport fresh water to rural areas in order to win "hearts and minds." His reputation apparently spread, for he was dining one evening in an officers' club in Caracas when four Venezuelan student terrorists tossed a grenade into the building. Lansdale was unharmed, but his pride was wounded not long afterward when, traveling elsewhere in Latin America, he received word that he was about to be retired from the Air Force. The "bureaucrats" finally got him, he says: "They figured I was having too much fun."

As one of his friends recalls, Lansdale was "the most miserable man in town" following his retirement in late 1963. The best he

could do was work for Food for Peace, where he lobbied to have surplus U.S. grain sent abroad distributed selectively to foreign political parties, trade unions and other groups sympathetic to American policy. He was still waging psywar, even from a distance. He remembers sitting up late one night with Sen. George McGovern, who had headed Food for Peace under the Kennedy administration, arguing that U.S. wheat ought to be deployed strategically. "We're too concerned with men's bellies and not enough with their minds," he told McGovern. "We're do-gooders in giving away food, but we don't know how to strengthen our political principles."

Finally, after two sedentary years, Lansdale was offered a fresh chance to perform in Asia. President Johnson had appointed Henry Cabot Lodge to a new tour as ambassador in Saigon. Advised by a former CIA man on his staff, Vice President Humphrey urged Lodge to take Lansdale along. There was also some suggestion at the time that the late Senator Tom Dodd, who blamed Lodge for the assassination of Diem, threatened to block his confirmation by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee unless Lansdale

could join the team. Thus Lansdale was named Lodge's special assistant and, from all accounts, he was overjoyed.

But in the middle of 1965, as the huge U.S. military machine was beginning to roll into Vietnam, Lansdale and the band of counterinsurgent specialists he had recruited somehow seemed anachronistic. One former U.S. official who attended a Washington meeting with them recalls that "they looked like the Lavender Hill mob, sent over from Central Casting." Moreover, the official recalls, they were involved in contriving somewhat "silly" schemes, such as revising Vietnamese folk songs to contain secret messages or devising methods by which peasants could alert friendly troops to the presence of Vietcong in their villages. One notion was to have peasants hang their laundry in a certain way to signal the enemy presence.

The Lansdale group, about a dozen men, comprised the kind of "dedicated" Americans he had urged Kennedy to enlist. It included Lucien Conein, who had commanded the saboteurs in North Vietnam in 1954, and Hank Miller, a veteran propagandist for the U.S. cause in Asia. And

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among its other members was Daniel Ellsberg, the studious young man who would afterward purloin the Pentagon Papers.

Ellsberg was then a counterinsurgency buff, and although Lansdale deplores his later theft of secret documents, he now remembers him with affection for his "brash candor" and his "facility for absorbing things." Ellsberg is reluctant to talk about Lansdale these days but he concedes that he still likes him too. The two met accidentally last spring at the funeral of a mutual friend.

Back in Saigon in the mid-1960s, Lansdale tried to serve as a channel to the Vietnamese political and military figures who were hesitant to speak frankly to U.S. officials. By design, he turned his villa into a sort of clubroom that would attract casual visits by Vietnamese, and to a certain extent he was successful. A frequent guest was Nguyen Cao Ky, then prime minister. Another was Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang, who headed the Vietnamese pacification program and who, on one occasion, consulted Lansdale on his marital problems. But if these and other

Vietnamese officials genuinely admired Lansdale, they also perceived that he had been overtaken by events. The war had gone beyond the guerrilla stage, and was now a confrontation between two large organizations, one Communist and the other American. The "dedicated people who know and like Asians," as Lansdale had portrayed his ideal aides, were out of fashion. The Vietnamese knew this all too well. "Mr. Lansdale is a wonderful man," one Saigon official told me in 1966, "but when our ministry needs money we see your AID people."

So the Lansdale group was reduced to playing a minor role. Among its projects, for example, was a proposal to have the South Vietnamese government issue a postage stamp displaying the flags of the different nations contributing to the war effort. Its members also deliberated on whether the Saigon regime could decently refer to the "fatherland," a term frequently employed by the Communists. Lansdale himself was credited with having persuaded the South Vietnamese leaders to refer to their objective as a "social revolution" in order to counter the Communists. And, of course, there were the folk songs that, it was believed, would

sway the peasants into supporting the Saigon government. One of Lansdale's major Vietnamese recruits was a celebrated guitarist.

Looking back on his second Vietnam tour, Lansdale now believes that he could have helped significantly. He was constantly in contact with the Vietnamese, he claims, and he might have in time assisted them to reconstruct their country's political structure. He blames the U.S. juggernaut for "stifling Vietnamese initiative" by taking over the management of the war. He also attributes his own lack of accomplishment to the American diplomatic and military bureaucracy that pervaded Saigon and the South Vietnamese hinterlands. His prime enemy in the bureaucracy, Lansdale says, was Philip Habib, then Lodge's deputy and now American ambassador to South Korea. Habib, who sought to keep the U.S. link to the Vietnamese government, effectively undermined Lansdale's role as a channel. "He was against everything I was for, and for everything I was against," Lansdale now recalls bitterly.

Since his departure from Vietnam four years ago, Lansdale has mostly rusticated. He occasionally lectures and writes articles, and he recently published an auto-

biography. He also sends letters to newspapers that show that he can still be provocative. In a letter to *The Washington Post* in May 1971, for example, he repeated his lifelong thesis that the United States had a responsibility to aid the South Vietnamese in an election they were then preparing. The *Post* responded with an editorial sarcastically calling his "faith in the efficacy and wisdom of American manipulation of South Vietnamese politics . . . interesting, not to say touching". The exchange, as it turned out, was academic, since Thieu afterward ran as the only candidate and, of course, won all the votes.

Yet Lansdale stubbornly refuses to abandon his original concept for Vietnam. It could have all been different, he insists, had the United States at the outset of its involvement avoided a big buildup and instead focused on constructing a viable political foundation for the South Vietnamese while helping them to infuse a meaning into their struggle. The newspaper headlines are proclaiming another kind of outcome to the conflict, however. And Ed Lansdale is far from Vietnam as, walking his dog along the shaded Alexandria street, he contemplates his lost crusade. ■