

## Reflecting on History

# “A Road Not Taken”: But a Road to Where?

Thomas L. Ahern

---

The impulse to draw lessons from history reflects the more general human urge to use the past as a guide to predicting and influencing the future. But the exercise succeeds in helping to deal with that future only if it correctly identifies causes and effects and avoids abusing history with faulty analogies, counter-factual assumptions, and reliance on preconceived explanations.

The current renewal of the debate over the outcome of the Vietnam War is a case in point. Nearly everyone agrees that it has, or ought to have, powerful lessons to teach about the handling of 21st century challenges in the less-developed world. But people draw different, even contradictory, conclusions about what those lessons are, and the student who really wants to learn them has to try to sort out the competing interpretations.

A new biography of legendary operative Edward Lansdale offers a convenient example for the examination of both the Lansdale record and its treatment in the current wave of revisionist thinking about Vietnam. In *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*, Max Boot has produced a readable if over-long account of a unique career; no more chronologies of the life will be required. Boot avoids the hagiographical approach that mars other work on Lansdale's career as he describes what he sees as his subject's personal and professional shortcomings. But he does not question Lansdale's influence on two major figures in the Cold War in Southeast Asia, Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam.<sup>a</sup>

The basic difficulty facing Boot arises from two premises implicit in his title, that 1) *The Road Not Taken* was indeed a potential path to victory in Vietnam and by extension in other Third World insurgencies, and 2) the US failed to take it. Although both can be found in current revisionist literature and have their advocates among CIA

---

a. Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (Liveright, 2018).

veterans, neither of them is supported by the historical facts.

To begin with, the road was indeed taken in Vietnam, but it led nowhere. Beginning in June 1954, Lansdale built on his experience in the Philippines as he enjoyed two-and-a-half years of the most extraordinary autonomy and policy-level support of perhaps any field case officer in the CIA's history. He was responsible, not to the chief of Saigon Station, nor to the area division chief in Washington, but directly to DCI Allen Dulles and his brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. He exploited this status, in the first weeks of his tour, to enlist the ambassador and other senior US Mission officers to gain access to Diem and to win control of the US Mission's rural operations. Having done this, he consolidated his position with Diem by making known to him that he had the ear of senior officials in Washington.<sup>b</sup>

Despite his perennial emphasis on the need for personal knowledge of people and their circumstances, Lansdale needed only a month in Saigon before informing DCI Dulles that his goal was nothing less than to build South Vietnam into a “political base” in Indochina which, if successful, would “give CIA control [of the] government and change [the] whole atmosphere.” On 12 July, five days after his introduction to Diem, he offered the prime minister a program that included “emergency adoption” of the Philippine Constitution, electing an “interim advisory congress,” absorbing the sect armies into the national forces, and launching a variety of organizational reforms that would introduce representative democracy.<sup>c</sup>

---

b. CIA accounts of Lansdale's work are contained in the reviewer's *The CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63* (This originally classified work and the reviewer's other histories of the period can be found under “Vietnam Histories” in the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room in [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov).) and in *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

c. *House of Ngo*, 27–28.

---

The views, opinions, and findings of the authors expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.

---

None of these proposals involved prior consultation with Diem, but those calling for US material support were immediately accepted. With Lansdale demonstrating US support for Diem by acting as his emissary to the sect generals, the campaign to neutralize the armed opposition to the new regime succeeded brilliantly. By mid-1955, both the religious sects and the Binh Xuyen criminal syndicate had become null factors in the political and security context, and Lansdale was firmly, if uncomfortably, ensconced as the American official closest to a reclusive head of state.

A year-and-a-half after that, however, achievement of Lansdale's ambition to create a functioning democracy was more distant than ever. The civilian civic action entity established at his urging soon foundered, and when Lansdale left, at the end of 1956, Diem was irrevocably committed to an autocratic style of governance. By that point, the adoption of US-style political institutions—or even concern for the consent of the governed—had become a dead issue. There had also been no more talk about a US-controlled government in Saigon.<sup>a</sup>

One of the curious features of Boot's book is its acknowledgments of Diem's rejection of so much of Lansdale's advice while it continues to insist that Lansdale exercised major influence on his client. It is clear that Lansdale exerted his real clout not in Saigon but in Washington, where he was almost certainly the greatest single influence on the Dulles brothers and President Eisenhower when they reversed their approval of Ambassador Collins's urging to abandon Diem in the spring of 1955.<sup>b</sup>

It is true that much of the CIA reporting on the sect crisis was acquired by officers of the regular station. Paul Harwood, especially, as chief of its covert action branch, had developed a close and productive relationship with Diem's brother and confidant Ngo Dinh Nhu. Allen Dulles, however, treated it all as emanating from Lansdale, whom he had personally selected for the Saigon assignment, and whom he regarded as the agency's preeminent authority on Vietnam. Wittingly or otherwise, Lansdale lent that authority not only to his own reporting but to that of the regular station.<sup>c</sup>

---

a. *House of Ngo*, 28–29.

b. *Vietnam Declassified*, 16–17.

c. *House of Ngo*, 82–83.

The relationship with Diem was different. Not even Lansdale himself claimed significant influence; indeed, it took him less than a year to conclude that he had signed up for a mission impossible. Just weeks after victory over the sects and Eisenhower's renewed commitment to Diem, Lansdale wrote to General Leland Hobbes, former chief of the Saigon Military Assistance Advisory Group, asking for help in arranging a transfer back to Manila. John Foster Dulles and President Eisenhower agreed, but a Lansdale visit to Manila to “test Filipino reactions” generated intense opposition from the US ambassador as well as from Filipino politicians and newspapers sensitive to the return of a reputed kingmaker. There is no evidence that Magsaysay expressed interest in Lansdale's return, or indeed that they even met. Lansdale stayed in Saigon.<sup>d</sup>

Against this background, it seems naïve of Boot to accept Lansdale's later assertion that only Washington's refusal in 1956 to pressure Diem into adopting his governmental reforms persuaded him that it was time to leave. Boot also takes at face value the statement, in what appears to be a Lansdale oral history interview, that in late 1956 Lansdale “left a very popular Vietnamese leader running things, a man who was being very responsive to the needs of the people.” But even by Boot's reckoning, Diem's “diffident and autocratic traits [had by that point] disfigured [his] rule.” The contradiction goes unacknowledged, as neither Lansdale nor his biographer seems to see the inconsistency between Lansdale's formula of inspiration and gentle persuasion and the more coercive approach he now wanted Washington to take.<sup>e</sup>



The second of Boot's premises asserts that the United States abdicated at least a chance to save Vietnam from communism when it failed to adopt Lansdale's program. “How different history might have been if Lansdale or a Lansdale-like figure had remained close enough to Diem to maintain a benign influence to offset the paranoid counsel of his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who would push the regime into a fatal and far from inevitable confrontation

---

d. *House of Ngo*, 89; Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 179.

e. Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (Harper and Row, 1972), 342–45; *The Road Not Taken*, 296–98. (Future references to *The Road Not Taken* will appear as page numbers in parentheses in the text.)

with the Kennedy administration.” Well, yes, everything is possible, but in order to be useful, such a proposition has to offer some reason to think that history *would* in fact have been different. (297)

Boot, however, offers nothing to support this surmise, resorting instead to a favored device of Diem apologists, blaming brother Nhu for Diem’s failures and suggesting that Lansdale might have offset this malign influence. Like other critics, he offers no evidence for the allegation about Nhu, but if any US official had first-hand familiarity with the two brothers’ relationship, it was probably Paul Harwood, whose experience contradicts the Boot thesis: he was chronically frustrated by Nhu’s reluctance to make decisions without first consulting Diem. (297)<sup>a</sup>

Nevertheless, it is conceivable that a continued Lansdale presence would have made a difference. But even with the advantage of hindsight, Boot makes no effort to establish any likelihood that more emphasis on tutoring Diem would actually have helped consolidate the government’s legitimacy and weaken the insurgency. Doing so in any persuasive way would have required a comparative analysis of the contending Vietnamese parties, not only in terms of military strength, but of political and social influence with the peasantry. It would have had to deal also with factors such as access to external support and the Saigon government’s competence and energy. Beyond acknowledging that North Vietnam was a very tough adversary, Boot addresses none of these aspects. (Neither, by the way, did the agency attempt any comprehensive study, during the war, of what the communist Vietnamese usefully termed the “correlation of forces.” The emphasis was always on interpreting current events and short-range trends.)

Instead of venturing a structural analysis, Boot invokes the judgment of William Colby that Diem’s overthrow was “the worst mistake of the Vietnam War.” But Colby, unfortunately, had accepted the widespread American belief of the time that a government’s anti-communism sufficed to assure its legitimacy, a simplistic stance that even Boot avoids: “The generals who succeeded Diem were just as authoritarian, unpopular, and aloof—and considerably more illegitimate, ineffective, and corrupt.” The implication is that Diem deserved continued support, not because he was succeeding, but because what fol-

lowed was even worse; we have here a textbook example of history read backward.<sup>b</sup> (xxxvii, xxxix)

Boot asserts that a collision of the Diem regime with the Kennedy administration was not inevitable, but it is hard to imagine how Lansdale’s continued presence could have helped avoid confrontation. By mid-1963, the regime had lost control of both its urban and rural constituencies, and Diem remained obdurate about placating either; there is no reason, given his rejection of Lansdale’s political program in the mid-1950s, to think he would have been more amenable to it in 1963.<sup>c</sup>

In the summer of that year, Diem moved to tighten his control of the countryside. Saying nothing to Lansdale, with whom he still corresponded, he dissolved the traditional elected village councils, replacing them with officials appointed by Saigon. In his memoir, Lansdale professes to be mystified by his exclusion, though it must have been obvious to him that Diem had made up his mind and simply didn’t want to argue the point. Then, in August, Diem published Government of Vietnam (GVN) Ordinance 47, prescribing death for “*any* deed performed in or for *any* organization designated as Communist.” This decree coincided with the decline of the civic action program on which Lansdale had placed such high hopes. From that point, Diem’s relationship with the administration deteriorated until the US-sanctioned military coup on 1 November 1963.<sup>d</sup>

A number of other features of Boot’s opus offer warnings, usually unintentional, to readers looking for insights into Ed Lansdale’s influence on the events of his day and on posterity’s understanding of insurgency and counterinsurgency. One is the author’s effort to establish Lansdale’s influence on Magsaysay and Diem with anecdotes that actually document only their patron’s ability to obtain US support for them. In the Philippine election of 1953, for example, the immensely enterprising Lansdale arranged for coordinated campaign efforts with the papal nuncio, the local Catholic hierarchy, the League of Women Voters,

b. It is strange that Boot implicitly accuses Diem’s rule of being illegitimate and corrupt. This both undermines the case for staying the course with Diem and suggests that he was personally corrupt, a proposition that to the best of the reviewer’s knowledge is unsupported by evidence.

c. *House of Ngo*, chapter 12.

d. *Vietnam Declassified*, 27 (emphasis added); *Midst of Wars*, 356.

a. *House of Ngo*, 13.

Jaycees and Rotarians. He also promoted favorable press coverage in the US, knowing that American attitudes toward Magsaysay could have genuine impact on the Philippine electorate. But Magsaysay didn't have to be educated or persuaded to accept the desirability of such activities, and Lansdale could function as something like a chief of operations for an executive whose purposes he fully shared. (159–63)

Things were very different in Saigon, where Allen Dulles's injunction to Lansdale to "find another Magsaysay" had been preempted by the appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister of South Vietnam. There, Lansdale found almost no sympathy for his self-assigned quest to replace French colonial administration with American-style democracy as imported through the Philippines. Boot acknowledges this, but insists that the potential of Lansdale's quasi-missionary approach merited keeping him there to continue trying to convert Diem.



Unexamined premises, both explicit and implicit, make their first appearance in Boot's prologue. One of them, regarding Diem's strategic hamlet program, implies that a "tried and true pacification tactic" used by the British in South Africa and Malaya, if adequately supported by the United States, would or at least might have defeated the insurgency (as in so many other passages, Boot here avoids a categorical judgment; "tried and true" conveys his endorsement of the strategy without explicitly committing him to a position on the prospects of Diem's strategic hamlets). In fact, the two British efforts were entirely coercive—prison camps, in effect, not protected communities—and in Malaya were aimed at the isolated ethnic Chinese minority. In Vietnam, by contrast, the strategic hamlets were at least nominally designed to give the peasants the security they were assumed to desire. There is nothing here, or anywhere else in the book, about either the Viet Cong's gradual preemption of political energy in the countryside after 1941 or the decay of Saigon's authority provoked, in large part, by Diem's Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign, launched in 1955. (xxxviii)

This gap allows the author (and other Diem apologists) to accept the "communist infiltration" mantra—the myth, really—that Viet Cong influence was always imposed from outside, as if by a foreign invader, on a victimized rural population. Boot takes at face value Lansdale's later

confident description of the Viet Minh and the communist leadership of the National Liberation Front as seeking to "impose alien ways on subjects [whom they controlled] by *force majeure*." Following Lansdale, he ignores the interlocking anti-colonial, nationalist, and xenophobic dimensions of the insurgency, and thus avoids consideration of the obstacles to the success of any US-sponsored regime.<sup>a</sup>

Boot does his readers the service of citing contemporary reservations about Lansdale's approach to counterinsurgency. He quotes the judgment of Henry Kissinger, in Saigon in late 1965 as a visiting consultant to Ambassador Lodge, that Lansdale and his team ". . . too often take the attitude that they will settle the pacification program single-handedly, that Lansdale alone has the magic recipe and that the major contribution of other members of the mission should be to get out of the way." Kissinger also pointed out the differences between the Philippine insurgency and the one in Vietnam: In the former, "There was no foreign base for the guerrillas. The indigenous government was much stronger. There was a tradition of working with the Americans. The situation in Vietnam is much more complex, much less susceptible to bravura, individual efforts." Kissinger's comparison of the two insurgencies is especially cogent, but about this implied challenge to his thesis Boot has nothing to say. (485)

Given the failure of all US efforts—certainly not just Lansdale's—to create a South Vietnamese government capable of defending itself against absorption by the communists, the plausibility of Boot's thesis rests on the shaky notion that things "might have taken a very different course" had Lansdale's "counsel . . . been followed." The context makes it clear that it was American policymakers, not Ngo Dinh Diem, Boot sees as having rejected that counsel. But it was Diem who rebuffed Lansdale's repeated urging to adopt as a model the concepts and values—as interpreted by Lansdale—of America's founders. In fact, it was simply impossible to impose on Diem a worldview he found repugnant if not incomprehensible,

---

a. *In the Midst of Wars*, 164. The best description of the Viet Cong's political base in the countryside is Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972). Also instructive in this regard is the Rand Corporation series, published in the 1960s, based on interviews with Vietnamese refugees, ralliers, and villagers (<https://www.rand.org/R10024.html>).

and that judgment is not just retrospective, though certainly easier to make with knowledge of the outcome. (xxxix)

Like other Vietnam revisionists, Boot leaves out of consideration a key question, namely, the ability of the South Vietnamese military to prevail over an adversary whose forces included both the indigenous Viet Cong and the People's Army of Vietnam. Despite the crushing losses inflicted on the communists during and after the 1968 Tet offensive, MACV commander Gen. Creighton Abrams predicted that even after the modernization of government forces, scheduled for completion in 1972, Saigon would be able to contain indigenous VC forces only with US materiel and advisory support. And no matter how successful ARVN modernization might prove to be, it would never remove the requirement for US forces to help hold off the North Vietnamese. GVN forces were "simply . . . not capable of attaining the level of self-sufficiency and overwhelming force superiority that would be required to counter combined Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnamese Army main force offensives."<sup>a</sup>



The Philippine episode preceded Lansdale's arrival in Vietnam, and despite its unquestionably greater success, Boot rightly treats it as essentially a prelude to Lansdale's deployment to Saigon. The insurgencies in both countries—the Philippines in the late 1940s and early 1950s and from 1954 to 1975 in Vietnam—represented real threats to US interests in Southeast Asia, but the much more protracted struggle in Vietnam, drawing a huge US investment in men and money, was of incalculably greater consequence. Producing a solution in the Philippines, moreover, was much less challenging in alliance with a defense secretary, later president, who knew he needed help and, like many Filipinos, was favorably disposed toward the United States. And Lansdale certainly did make the most of the opportunity offered by his introduction to Magsaysay in 1950, as he applied a fertile operational imagination to challenges in both the political and the counterinsurgency arenas and to soliciting support from public and private sources in the United States.

a. Jeffrey Clarke: *Advice and Support: The Final Years 1965–1973* (Center of Military History, 1988), 345.

Fertile the imagination may have been, but it was sometimes almost antic, as displayed most conspicuously when Lansdale headed the Kennedy administration's campaign, Operation MONGOOSE, to remove Fidel Castro in the early 1960s. In that exercise, Lansdale came up with ploys—one was a biological warfare scheme to sicken but not kill workers in the Cuban sugar fields—that seem almost a parody of the macho, damn-the-torpedoes culture encountered by a newly-minted case officer in the East Asia (then Far East) Division of the late 1950s (384–88).<sup>b</sup>

In another key respect, Lansdale exemplified the anti-intellectual aura that dominated an operational directorate in which covert action was king. Despite his apparently deserved reputation as a gifted amateur anthropologist, and granting that he saw the inequities in Philippine economic and social institutions, he never troubled to analyze the insurgency or use it to develop a counterinsurgency theory. The intuition that worked in the Philippines—that resolving peasant grievances through a pliable leader would defang the insurgency—did not, to his dismay, succeed in Vietnam. There, it encountered in the Viet Cong an adversary with a political ideology and program which could exploit the nationalistic aura conferred by a dozen years of fighting, first against the Japanese and then the French. Neither Diem nor, probably, any other anti-communist leader, could compete.

Despite its limited achievements, Lansdale's dream of exporting American political practices and institutions to client nations survives, for it seems to appeal to a hardy, interventionist strain of American exceptionalism. A more recent example dates to 2003, when US authorities charting a course for Iraq decided to turn it into "the first Arab democracy." Just as Lansdale had done, this model called for an Iraqi polity that embraced American values and guidance. Also like Lansdale, its creators saw no conceptual barrier to the application of a touch of *Realpolitik* when circumstances required. Where in 1956 a frustrated

b. Two other features of the DDP/DO culture exemplified and amplified in Lansdale's career were the twin obsessions with "rapport" in the acquisition and handling of agents—little about community of interests, exploitation of weaknesses, or other such material factors—and with an "aggressive" style as the hallmark of an effective case officer. Lansdale often seemed to see empathy (if only with foreigners) as an end in itself; as for an aggressive style, it would be hard to surpass his manipulation of the US Mission in Saigon during 1954–55.

Lansdale urged Washington to force his reform proposals on Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States chose in Iraq to invalidate the results of the 2010 parliamentary elections in which the party of longtime Western ally Ayad Alawi won a plurality. The United States, still a player in Iraqi domestic affairs, saw an advantage in retaining then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a militant Shi'ite politician, and refused

to endorse the bid Alawi had won to form the new government.<sup>a</sup>

This combination of idealism and conventional power politics—the bestowal of democracy conditioned on the client's willingness to accept Washington's leadership—characterized Lansdale's approach in Southeast Asia and seems to be a feature of the interventionist mindset currently

---

a. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/02/22magazine/the-sunshine-warrior>; <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/obama-iraq-116708>

associated with neo-conservatism. There is always, it seems, a road to take, and if we don't find it it's our own fault: "One of the great failures of post-9/11 American foreign policy was the inability to deal adequately with Hamid Karzai [in Afghanistan] and Nuri al-Maliki." Here, Boot assumes a convergence of basic interests and a compatibility of worldviews which, it turned out, did not exist in either case, just as they were absent in that of Ngo Dinh Diem. Sometimes there really just isn't any way to get there. (xlvi)



---

**Thomas Ahern** is a retired CIA operations officer who has pursued a second career as a contract historian with the CIA History Staff. He has written four book-length classified (and since declassified or partially declassified) histories of the war in Southeast Asia.