



The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam

Max Boot

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The scope of *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* is broader than the title suggests, mainly because of the larger-than-life subject of this very readable biography. A former advertising man, Army officer, operative with the Office of Strategic Services, CIA station chief, and finally an Air Force General, Lansdale played important if unheralded roles in America's involvement in the Philippines and Vietnam. Max Boot, a well-known Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that Lansdale's ideas on how to conduct a counterinsurgency enjoyed temporary success but eventually went unheeded as America chose the wrong road in Vietnam. Boot traces Lansdale's life to analyze the American counterinsurgency experience as seen through the eyes of perhaps one of its most misunderstood practitioners.

Boot succinctly covers Lansdale's early years, from his college days at UCLA, through his work in the California advertising industry (where he first practiced strategies for influencing people's opinions), to his time in Manila advising the Philippine government and helping Ramon Magsaysay get elected president. Lansdale's experience repressing the Huk rebellion in the Philippines was a pivotal one for him. Boot ties all this background together, noting that given Lansdale's work as an adman, it's no surprise that in Manila he embraced psychological warfare "a discipline that had grown concurrently with the advertising industry."¹ It was in the Philippines that Lansdale further developed his ideas on fighting a "political war" and earned his reputation as a "kingmaker."

It was this reputation that caught the eye of CIA Director Allen Dulles, who after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu called upon Lansdale to go to Vietnam and repeat the success he had in Manila. This brought Lansdale to perhaps the most unique role he would ever fill, that of Chief of the Saigon Military Mission (SMM). Serving in that position from 1954 to 1955, SMM was a CIA station established to run the military side of its counterinsurgency operations, or "pacification" as it was then called. Boot explains that it "was natural in this era for the CIA to take the lead in filling the political vacuum—a mission that in another period would have gone to the State Department or the armed forces. There was already a CIA station in Saigon, of course, but the Dulles brothers wanted a political warfare expert on the spot."² Boot makes the significance of this role clear, for as SMM chief "Lansdale became the regular CIA liaison to Diem, which, given the power that the CIA then wielded in American foreign policy, made him in effect the chief American interlocutor with the leader of South Vietnam."³

One of the strengths of this book is that Boot's research draws on many excellent sources, including personal interviews, private letters, official histories (such as declassified CIA histories by Thomas Ahern), and other declassified material analyzed here for the first time.⁴ Boot's account

of the SMM, for example, benefits from his use of documents “the full text of which was not declassified until 2014.”⁵ If the book has any weakness, it would be a tendency to somewhat oversell Lansdale’s importance. Boot insists that “it is no exaggeration to suggest that the whole conflict, the worst military defeat in American history, might have taken a very different course...if the counsel of this CIA operative and Air Force officer had been followed.”⁶ Despite all the evidence presented, it’s not entirely persuasive that the fate of Vietnam rested so heavily on Lansdale’s shoulders. Boot does quote more tempered analysis from other authors, such as Ahern’s history, which notes that Lansdale’s departure from Vietnam “marked the end of an era,” taking with him whatever modest capacity the United States had to persuade Diem of the need to win the consent of the governed.⁷

Lansdale never committed to paper the whole of his views on counterinsurgency, but Boot concludes his book by distilling for us some lessons as Lansdale might have written them. He lists these simply as three “L”s; Learn, Like, and Listen.⁸ “Learn” tops Boot’s list, and familiarizing oneself with the country one is posted to, and genuinely liking the people there, was obviously important to Lansdale. Boot is not without his criticism of Lansdale, and throughout the book it is evident that Lansdale undermined his own effectiveness through his unconcealed impatience with bureaucracy and tendency to rub colleagues the wrong way. Boot points out that Lansdale was renowned for his capacity to listen patiently to his host nation interlocutors, but ironically never seemed to grasp that he needed to listen and win over his own countrymen as well.

Lansdale may never have committed his counterinsurgency ideas to paper in a comprehensive study, but in the end his legacy lies in the example he set. Lansdale and his mastery of acquiring detailed local knowledge “should serve as a model for other soldiers, intelligence officers, journalists, aid officials, and diplomats who are dispatched to foreign lands.”⁹ Max Boot’s biography is a good place for an interagency audience to study that model, and draw their own conclusions. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 Max Boot. *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation), 2018. 126-127.

2 Ibid. pg. 194.

3 Ibid. pg. 210.

4 For a brief but balanced discussion of the “two CIA voices in Saigon,” see Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky), 2010, 9-14.

5 Boot pg. XLVIII.

6 Ibid. pg. XXXIX.

7 Ibid. pg. 298.

8 Ibid. pg. 604.

9 Ibid. pg. L.