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One of the Ugliest Ugly Americans

Lansdale goes to his Maker with the betrayal of Vietnam on his soul
by Hilaire du Berrier

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The death of Major General Edward G. Lansdale, "adviser on Vietnam strategy," in his McLean, Virginia, home at the age of 79, was a front-page story in the ***New York Times*** of February 24, 1987. On into two columns of page 25 it went. But it is not surprising that the newspaper whose top editors boasted to Monsieur Jacques Soustelle, "We're going to pull America out of Vietnam and let them [Hanoi] have it," should go to such lengths to glamorize Ed Lansdale. For, if making defeat an objective, and attaining it, is victory, no one did more than Ed Lansdale to make the ***New York Times*** victorious.

Hard words, some might say, for a man who is dead, but the parents and loved ones of those who died in Vietnam deserve the truth.

The Selling of Lansdale

The basis of the "coca-cola" campaign to sell Edward Lansdale as a national hero was a series of stories on his actions in the Philippines in the late 40s, where he had worked with President Ramón Magsaysay. Americans were told that Lansdale had made Magsaysay President and thereby earned the name of Colonel Landslide.

Magsaysay must have loved being told that he could not have been elected without the help of a foreign meddler. Later, a naval officer named William J. Lederer, who complained that he was discriminated against because he was a New Dealer, wrote a book with Eugene Burdick and called it ***The Ugly American***. That it became a best-seller was no attestation to the intelligence of the American public.

As literature it was trash, but it assured Americans that our simple and unattractive home products, once they go abroad, can solve all problems where foreigners had failed. It further appealed to the little man by glorifying the no-snob attitude of Colonel Hillingdale, who, in uniform and with all his ribbons, would ride his motorcycle into a Philippine village and show the people that he was one of them by bumming the price of a meal.

Colonel Hillingdale, of course, was Colonel Edward Lansdale, bringing himself down to common level by calling himself the ragtime kid. Now anyone who thinks that in face-conscious Asia a man — in uniform and wearing a colonel's eagles — wins the hearts of people or inspires respect for his country by bumming a meal from a bunch of mouth-breathing natives should be chained up or kept at home. As for his deserving any laurels for giving the Filipinos their president, the opinion of

the Spanish embassy was that Magsaysay died just in time to save both his reputation and Lansdale's.

New Worlds to Conquer

Looking for new worlds to conquer, "the ragtime kid" next tried to get into Indo-China to show the French how to fight the Communist army that the OSS had trained and armed after V-J Day. General de Lattre de Tassigny would not let him in, and this Lansdale never forgave. When he did get there, if the Vietnamese refused to accept the man Lansdale was cramming down their throats, it was because "the French were striving by fair means and by sly means to maintain a remnant of influence and profit in the land they had exploited for seven decades," according to ***Time*** of April 4, 1955. This was Lansdale's theme.

Eventually ***Time*** lost its enthusiasm for Ngo dinh Diem after the anniversary of his execution became the country's national holiday, but someone always managed to keep the magazine behind Lansdale. "Working under cover, Lansdale was credited with almost single-handedly maneuvering the late President to the pinnacle of power," was the way ***Time*** put it on August 30, 1965.

Lansdale's opportunity to do this came about because those who imposed a no-win strategy on the army and a sell-out philosophy on the government first worked to get America involved in Southeast Asia.

Joseph Alsop wrote in his column of July 13, 1971: "It is quite possible that there would have been no war at all if it had not been for the [***New York***] ***Times*** and the present Senate Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield, of Montana."

Justice Douglas invited Mansfield to a luncheon in 1953 to meet his "find," a man named Ngo dinh Diem, and Mansfield took him up. He was proud to be known as Diem's godfather. The following year Vietnam was granted independence and divided at the 17th parallel until a plebiscite in 1956 would decide whether His Majesty Bao Dai or the Communists would take over the united country. In the meantime the Emperor was about to appoint a Prime Minister to rule over the South when Diem showed him a letter from Mike Mansfield telling him that America would save Vietnam if he were chosen for the post.

This left the Emperor little choice. On June 15, 1954, he gave Diem the appointment he wanted and a check to pay for demonstrators to meet him at the airport. Lifting his face as he dropped to one knee, Diem swore, "If Your Majesty ever has cause to be dissatisfied with my handling of our country's affairs, you have but to speak the word and I will step down." The propaganda machinery of government agencies and an habitually negative press were about to catapult Edward Lansdale into preeminence.

America was being run by two brothers. Decisions were made by John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State. His brother, Allen, used the CIA to implement them, not to get information on which sound decisions could be based. Under these conditions Colonel Edward Lansdale arrived in Saigon on June 1, 1954, as personal representative of CIA chief Allen Dulles, not to see if the Vietnamese

would accept the man Mike Mansfield and John Foster Dulles were sending them but to cram him down their throats. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote: “Nothing happened in Saigon that Ed didn’t have a hand in or know about.” There were minor ripples at first, but Joseph Alsop assured his readers: “Edward Lansdale meanwhile correctly reported to CIA that only President Diem could prevent a communist take-over in South Vietnam.”

A Chronology of Betrayal

Lansdale stood in the crowd, writing in his notebook on July 7, 1954, as Diem left the airport in a closed car at 60 miles an hour, leaving his paid demonstrators behind him in the sun.

Early the next morning, Lansdale was at the palace to tell Diem he must go through the city slowly, in an open car. When opposition manifested itself, Lansdale reported it was only the thwarted and jealous French trying to make trouble, and the popularity contest started. To take the heat off Diem and his family, Lansdale began cranking out leaflets telling the population to spit on the French.

The most dangerous threat was the army, under Chief of Staff General Nguyen Van Hinh, who had won every medal France could give him in World War II. While a palace guard of Nung mercenaries was being recruited, Lansdale spread word through the ranks that they would get no pay if they followed Hinh’s orders. Then, to get rid of the general himself, as Robert Shaplen tells the story in ***The Lost Crusade***, Lansdale got his friend, Magsaysay, “to spirit most of Hinh’s top officers off to Manila in response to what he told them was a special invitation.”

Hinh had never contemplated a coup d’état, but with his loyal officers lured to Manila he was eased out of command and the demoralization of the Vietnamese Army began. Evans and Novak were right: “[N]othing happened in Saigon that Ed did not have a hand in.”

The Charms of Madame Nhu

To have some hold on the leaderless army, Madame Nhu, the Prime Minister’s sister-in-law (now owning one of the most luxurious penthouses in Paris) turned her charms on a young officer with boy-scout mentality and made him a general. Little could she guess that nine years later he would cast the deciding vote on the execution of her husband.

In his next moves Lansdale seemed to forget that Vietnam’s big problem was the Communists, who were getting ready for the fight to come. The Cao Dai religious sect with some three and a half million supporters controlled a Communist-free area that ran from 15 miles northwest of Saigon to the Cambodian border, and they wanted nothing to do with Lansdale or his man. The Hoa Hao sect, with a ferociously anti-Communist army and two million devotees, kept the Communists out of Cantho and the great rice markets of the Mekong river.

Most important of all, Saigon and the network of roads leading into the capital were protected by one of the greatest natural leaders Southeast Asia ever produced. The vast swamps fanning out in the Mekong delta had been the kingdom of Bai Vien, known as the pirate. The Japanese were powerless against him during the occupation. After the Communists killed 250 men who fought a rear-guard action on the night of May 19, 1948 to permit him to escape, Bai Vien told the French

commander, “Give me the arms and I will take care of the Communists.” Few men have been more viciously smeared by the American press and CIA than Bai Vien, who was known as a man who never broke his word. Raymond Cartier, the political writer, put it, “He cleared Saigon of communist hit teams and spies like a rat-terrier killing rats.”

So efficacious was Bai Vien in fighting the Vietminh in their own way that his Majesty Bao Dai made him a general, whereupon he returned to his family name of Le Van Vien and from that day was never known to commit an illegal act. (The story of his life, ***Bay Vien, Le Maitre de Cholon***, by Pierre Darcourt, should be translated into English, for he was Vietnam’s Rambo and every Vietnam veteran should read it.)

Paving the Way for Communism

These three forces — the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and the private army of General Le Van Vien — which would have assured the security of the three most important areas of Vietnam without costing the life of an American soldier, were destroyed, not by Ho Chi Minh but by Edward Lansdale.

Using American funds, Lansdale bought the defection of the Cao Dai general, Nguyen Thanh Phuong, for $2.6 million. (Ngo dinh Nhu then arrested Phuong and pocketed the money.) The Mekong and its rice markets were thrown open to the Reds when Lansdale paid the Hoa Hao general $2 million to turn the job over to the Americans. Only Le Van Vien, the incorruptible, remained loyal to his Emperor, so Lansdale decided to kill him.

On Saturday, April 30, 1955, Lansdale rented a plane with French markings and hired the pilot to fly Dixie Reece, listed in the American embassy as an embassy photographer, over Le Van Vien’s command post as a spotter. The plane made three passes, with mortar fire becoming more deadly each time. On its fourth pass Reece dropped a fire bomb and Le Van Vien’s gunners shot down the plane. An embarrassed American embassy made no protests.

When Ambassador Lawton Collins had seen enough, he flew to Washington to advise President Eisenhower to wash his hands of the liability America was supporting in Saigon. Joseph Alsop wrote: “John Foster Dulles had to choose between dropping Diem or continuing to back him. There is no doubt that a major feature of his decision was the row Mansfield and the ***Times*** would surely have made if Collins had not been over-ruled.” Thus, 11 and a half years were lost; the Emperor, who would have prevented the senseless coups d’état, was deposed; when the sell-out came, Mansfield got out from under and Lansdale went back to Saigon in 1965 to help Henry Cabot Lodge destroy another government that wanted to win.

While Lawton Collins was in Washington, Lansdale and the family in which he had a vested interest were desperate. Madame Nhu dropped the young general and turned her attentions to the embassy’s chargé d’affaires; once she had won him over, he and Lansdale cut the ground from under the ambassador’s feet. Thus it happened that our ambassador was replaced for being right. And while he was out of the country, Lansdale and the head of the American Military Aid Advisory Group (MAAG) talked their man into turning Saigon into a battlefield and destroying the police and private army of Le Van Vien.

Mike Mansfield brushed the episode off in ***Harper's*** Magazine of January 1956 with the words: "All Diem lost was the prop of several thousand armed mercenaries in conflict with the communists." Mercenaries? Protecting their own country? That is why American boys had to take on the job. Lansdale had cleared the field.

The Removal of Bao Dai

With all opposition crushed, Lansdale next rigged a plebiscite in which the people were to choose between their Emperor and his man. No niceties about nominations and opposition candidates here. The handling of the operation was masterful. First David Schoenbrun, CBS' bureau chief in Paris, wrote a hatchet job on the Emperor in ***Collier's*** of September 30, 1955. "Diem must not only remove Bao Dai but must do it in such a way that he no longer has any usefulness as a symbol of Vietnamese unity," he said.

This prepared America for the farce of a plebiscite and gave Lansdale something to reproduce in Vietnam, as proof that America wanted their traditional Emperor out. Aid money might even seep down to those who did. as they were told. Lansdale left nothing to chance, and on October 3, 1955 Vietnam lost her catalyst, the throne.

Those who took an honest interest in Vietnamese affairs had to wait 13 years to learn how CBS' Paris bureau chief happened to play such an important role in destroying the one man who was above party, regional, religious and tribal differences in Vietnam. The year before Ho Chi Minh died, he gave Dave Schoenbrun and his wife a free trip to Hanoi, and in the book he wrote in 1968 Dave boasted that he had been Ho Chi Minh's friend since 1946. By the time the book praising Ho Chi Minh appeared, Schoenbrun was on the American campus circuit, telling students to demonstrate, resist the draft and refuse to fight. In sum, pleading for his friend.

With the Emperor gone and Vietnam being hailed as "America's showcase for democracy," Lansdale returned to the Pentagon in 1956, leaving a Vietnamese intelligence service behind him, run by Colonel Albert Pham Ngoc Thao, who was also administrator of American aid. Throughout the French war in Indochina, Thao had been Ho Chi Minh's intelligence chief in Cochin China; but Thao so enjoyed the confidence of Ed Lansdale, Joe Alsop, ***Time*** magazine and the entire American press and CIA that anyone who wrote against him — or Vu Van Thai, his dispenser of American aid for public works — was in for CIA and State Department harassment. After his death, Pham Ngoc Thao's remains were transferred to "the heroes' cemetery" by the Hanoi government. Thao's coworker, Vu Van Thai, developed a close friendship with a man named Daniel Ellsberg, when Lansdale took Ellsberg out to Saigon with him in August 1965 on a "fact-finding" trip.

It was bad enough that Thao should turn out to have been Hanoi's top spy all the time Lansdale was strengthening his position; but that their other friend, Vu Van Thai, was left uninvestigated long enough to help Ellsberg photocopy the stolen Pentagon Papers in September 1969 and send a set to Hanoi and to the Soviet embassy in Washington is inexcusable. What a basket of snakes the ***Washington Post*** could have dug into had their investigative reporting not been so selective!

A Saigon editor, Ton That Thien, wrote in the London ***Economist*** of October 2, 1965 that the reason General Edward Lansdale had been sent back to Saigon as an assistant to Ambassador

Henry Cabot Lodge was to remove President Nguyen Cao Ky and put a civilian leader in his place. Nguyen Cao Ky was an air marshal, bent on carrying the war to the north and winning it. Lansdale succeeded in getting him out.

The Aftermath of Lansdale

It was about that time that His Majesty Bao Dai told me in Paris, “If your government had given me a thousandth of the sum it spent to depose me, I could have won that war.” Colonel Nicholas Thorne, the U.S. Marine Corps language specialist and authority on the central region of Annam, readily admitted that as late as 1959 the Emperor’s statement was true.

It is doubtful that many of the two and a half million boat people who had the good fortune to survive, or the Cambodians who escaped Pol Pot’s massacre, read the obituaries that appeared on Major-General Edward Lansdale. If they did, they were not likely to mourn his passing.