



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Lost Opportunities in Vietnam

April 10, 2018

The contributors review Max Boot's *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*.

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1. Max Boot's Revisionist Look at Vietnam

Mark Atwood Lawrence

Could the United States have won in Vietnam if only Americans had made different decisions about how to fight the war there? For the most part, academic historians have said no. The South Vietnamese state was so flawed and the reservoir of Soviet and Chinese support for the communist war effort so vast, runs the argument, that Washington had no meaningful chance of victory, no matter how adroitly it used its vast power.¹

However, a small handful of historians has long begged to differ. These “revisionists” argue that the United States could have achieved its goal — a secure, anti-communist South Vietnam capable of enduring into the indefinite future — if only it had chosen its methods more wisely. To be sure, proponents of this outlook vary widely in their assessments of precisely what went wrong and what could have been done better. Some focus on military decisions, others on the political or diplomatic realms. But the basic point is the same: American leaders stole defeat from the jaws of victory through bad choices.

The “lost-victory” argument first took root in the wartime years, when Lyndon Johnson’s critics excoriated him for failing to wage the war with sufficient boldness. It gained new traction in the 1970s, when Henry Kissinger and his supporters assailed Congress for reneging on U.S. obligations to defend South Vietnam following the 1973 ceasefire,

¹ For an overview of such arguments, see Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2009).

sabotaging a peace deal that would otherwise have established a secure nation.² Such views gained additional legitimacy a few years later when revisionism jumped from the realm of naked partisanship into the world of history writing. In *America in Vietnam*, the first comprehensive revisionist account of the war, political scientist Guenter Lewy contended that the war was winnable if the United States had only prioritized counterinsurgency operations. Lewy also blamed antiwar activists for creating the myth that the United States was inevitably doomed by the complexities of Vietnamese politics.³ Retired Army Col. Harry G. Summers Jr. followed in 1982 with *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, which took revisionism in a different direction by criticizing civilian leaders for doing too little to mobilize the American public and the U.S. military for failing to use its overwhelming conventional superiority to block the infiltration of supplies and troops from North to South Vietnam.⁴

But the real heyday of Vietnam revisionism has been the last couple of decades, when a new group of authors has drawn on mountains of newly available source material to make the case in unprecedented detail. First came Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, which argues that U.S. forces fought effectively in the years after the Tet Offensive and commanded the battlefield to an extent unrecognized by the politicians who pulled the plug on the American military effort.⁵ A few years later, Mark Moyar published *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, which delves into the years before the arrival of

² An old but fascinating account of these charges is Jeffrey P. Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 433-458.

³ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁴ Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1982).

⁵ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1999).

U.S. combat forces. During that time, argues Moyer, American advisers working alongside South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem made steady progress toward bolstering a viable state. But craven political leaders, abetted by self-serving journalists, torpedoed the whole enterprise by conspiring in Diem's overthrow, an event that exacerbated South Vietnam's problems and opened the way to disaster.⁶

Now comes Max Boot's *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*, an engaging book that, like Moyer's study, focuses on lost opportunities in the years before the major escalation of U.S. forces. But Boot makes the case in a fresh and distinctive way — through a biography of Edward G. Lansdale, one of the most fascinating and complex figures in the pantheon of American Cold Warriors.

Boot makes no effort to disguise his admiration for Lansdale. The Air-Force-officer-turned-CIA-operative possessed, in Boot's view, a unique blend of creativity, cultural sensitivity, charisma, and doggedness that made him an exceptionally effective practitioner — indeed, a “maestro” — of counter-insurgency warfare and nation-building in far-off lands. The book focuses first on Lansdale's work in the Philippines, where he played a key role in defeating the communist Huk insurgency and in rallying Filipinos behind the pro-Western liberal Ramon Magsaysay in the 1953 presidential election.

Boot then shifts to Vietnam, where Lansdale attempted to work similar magic in the mid-1950s. This mission started off well enough: Lansdale helped Diem survive innumerable threats to his rule and then lay the foundations of a secure Vietnamese state by winning over his population and suppressing communist opponents. But all this promise

⁶ Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

evaporated when U.S. leaders abandoned Diem and scrapped Lansdale's counterinsurgency methods in favor of a conventional war that, in Boot's view, had no chance of succeeding. Boot writes,

The course that the United States was now embarked on was not just a mistake; it was a catastrophe that would profoundly alter American foreign policy for decades to come, and it might conceivably have been avoided if only Washington policymakers had listened to the advice of a renowned counterinsurgency strategist who had been present at the creation of the state of South Vietnam.

Nor does Boot hold anything back in offering Lansdale up as a model for the 21st century. Over the years, other revisionists — mostly, like Boot, hawkish foreign policy pundits with positions at think tanks rather than academic institutions — have aimed to influence ongoing policy debates by encouraging confidence about the efficacy of U.S. power when properly applied. But Boot, who has championed counterinsurgency tactics in earlier books, takes this presentist agenda to a whole new level.⁷ In Lansdale's story, Boot contends, lie valuable lessons about how to fight insurgencies and how to shape the behavior of unreliable allies. "His practices could be emulated by contemporary advisers in countries ranging from Mali to Mexico," the book insists.

In the reviews that follow, four eminent scholars sink their teeth into Boot's core claims about Lansdale's accomplishments and his relevance for our own times. Each raises serious questions about Boot's analysis, as one might expect at a time when, despite the

⁷ Especially Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

resurgence of revisionism in some quarters, most academic specialists remain skeptical at best. But these reviews offer far more than mere reassertion of long-standing conventional wisdom. Each delves into a different aspect of the book and raises important questions relevant not just to Boot's study but to the larger proposition that the United States possesses the power and know-how to shape foreign societies through Lansdalean arts of persuasion.

The first review comes from Gregory A. Daddis of Chapman University and author, most recently, of *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (2017), which rebuts revisionist claims about the war in the early 1970s. Daddis criticizes Boot on various fronts but attaches particular importance to Boot's thin attention to Vietnamese perspectives. The book, complains Daddis, takes an "American-centric" approach that unpersuasively casts Lansdale in the role of "enlightened imperialist" while depicting Diem as a passive and needy recipient of American advice. Daddis also contends that Boot fails to reckon with new evidence of Hanoi's determination starting in the early 1960s to mount a major war in the South, making Lansdale's insistence on counterinsurgency methods hopelessly ill-suited to the basic military situation.

The second reviewer is Walter C. Ladwig III of the Department of War Studies at King's College London and author of *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relations in Counterinsurgency* (2017). While most reviewers of Boot's book have understandably focused on the sections dealing with Vietnam, Ladwig offers fresh analysis by focusing on the parts concerning Lansdale's time in the Philippines. Central to Boot's argument is Lansdale's alleged ability to promote constructive change in the Philippines through personal charm and gentle persuasion — a combination of traits that Boot suggests could also have worked in Vietnam if given a chance. Ladwig questions this whole chain of

thinking by suggesting that, in fact, the United States got its way in the Philippines as much through coercion as through Lansdale's friendly partnership with Magsaysay.

Heather M. Stur of the University of Southern Mississippi and author of *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (2011) provides the third review. Stur zeroes in on Boot's extensive analysis of Lansdale's relationships with the two women in his life, his wife Helen and his mistress (and eventually second wife), a Filipina known as Pat Kelly. Boot attaches huge importance to this triangle, partly because he is the first author to use Lansdale's extensive correspondence with both women but also because Lansdale's conflicted affections map so neatly onto his role as intermediary between America and Asia. But Stur takes Boot to task for failing to give the women authentic agency and especially for buying into orientalist clichés about the mysterious sexual allure of Asia. Like Daddis, Stur wonders whether Lansdale was, on the whole, more an old-fashioned imperialist than the tolerant, enlightened man whom Boot describes.

Finally, Jon Askonas, a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, echoes Daddis by criticizing Boot for ignoring the perspectives of the Vietnamese and other peoples on the receiving end of Lansdale's counterinsurgency projects. But he also goes in a different direction by questioning whether Lansdale was, at the end of the day, more a shrewd student of social dynamics or a delusional oddball whose skills have been wildly exaggerated by Boot and other admirers. Fortunately, Askonas concludes, Boot's biography is so expansive and detailed that attentive readers can reach behind Boot's enthusiastic spin on his subject and find evidence of the less attractive possibility.

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2. Vietnam and the White Man's Burden

Gregory A. Daddis

“He was there creating Vietnam in 1954.”

So proclaimed journalist Max Boot during an interview moderated by a fawning Gen. (ret.) David Petraeus at the New York Historical Society in January 2018. The topic of the evening's discussion was Boot's latest book, *The Road Not Taken*, a biographical tome on former U.S. Air Force officer and CIA operative Edward Lansdale.⁸

Petraeus found Boot's biography on Lansdale “wonderful” because it “offers lessons for the present day.” “You should know,” responded Boot. “You literally wrote the manual on counterinsurgency.”

The former four-star general's adulation should not come as a surprise. Much of the 2007 surge in Iraq, overseen by Petraeus himself, was predicated on assumptions similar to those that Lansdale held about local peoples immersed in a civil war. Internal political dissension wracked both the Iraqis and South Vietnamese. Both societies were engaged in internecine war. Both apparently required outside guidance from enlightened Americans to put their countries on a path toward democracy.

⁸ Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018). Max Boot, interview by David H. Petraeus, New York Historical Society, New York, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?438632-1/max-boot-discusses-the-road-taken>.

One might even ask if Petraeus, reading *The Road Not Taken*, saw himself as part of a counterinsurgency lineage that ran from T.E. Lawrence through Lansdale to the general himself.

Given Boot and Petraeus's obvious desire to fashion Edward Lansdale into a usable figure for today's conflicts, it seems worthwhile to question a major argument in *The Road Not Taken*. How responsible was Lansdale for the creation of South Vietnam?

For Boot, the answer is clear. Lansdale was already his "country's most successful political warrior" of the entire Cold War era.⁹ He "masterminded the election of Ramon Magsaysay" in the Philippines, according to Boot in his New York interview. The American was a decisive factor in prevailing over the 1955 sect crisis that threatened South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem's political future. Lansdale traveled extensively, taught "psywar" techniques to Vietnamese soldiers, wrote a counterinsurgency strategy, and "took on the herculean challenge of trying to consolidate Diem's power."¹⁰

Moreover, Boot argues, Lansdale was "right to doubt Diem's political acumen."¹¹ Thus, throughout *The Road Not Taken*, Lansdale is portrayed as an enlightened imperialist who uses his charm and empathy to befriend local leaders and then gently guide them, as would a tolerant parent, through the tribulations of political adolescence.

This American-centric view of the Cold War surely is not without precedent. Many U.S. policymakers came out of World War II with a deep-seated faith in their ability to

⁹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 311.

¹⁰ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 234.

¹¹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 209.

transform societies abroad and inoculate them from the contamination of communist influence. Modernization theorist Walt Rostow argued in *The Stages of Economic Growth*, that “traditional” societies too could mature into modern nations if only they followed the developmental model of the United States.¹² It is no surprise that the American experience served as the model for such philosophers.

Yet what if we take Boot’s claims about Lansdale and shift the lens of analysis to the Vietnamese themselves? How did local leaders view this supposedly modern-day Lawrence of Arabia?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these local leaders did not revere Lansdale in the same way Boot does. The endnotes of *The Road Not Taken* contain few, if any, materials from Vietnamese sources. Readers rarely hear local voices in this story except for those filtered through Americans. Like Lansdale, Boot has no fluency in the Vietnamese language (nor did Lansdale even speak French which makes one question how much insight he truly could have gained during his two-year stint in Vietnam from 1954 to 1956).

A new generation of scholars on Vietnam, however, are far better equipped than Boot to judge Lansdale’s accomplishments, and they are less reverential of the American. Edward Miller, for instance, finds Diem and his inner circle crafting their own strategy for political consolidation in South Vietnam. To Miller, Diem was careful to accept any U.S. advice and support “only on his own terms, in ways that furthered his designs.”¹³

¹² W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

¹³ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 86. Similarly, Jessica M. Chapman argues that a closer reading of Vietnamese sources “suggests that politico-religious leaders acted more rationally than Lansdale

Boot certainly acknowledges that Lansdale’s advice was “eclipsed by the influence of Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and his sister-in-law.”¹⁴ But here the storyline remains firmly embedded in an American-centric worldview because Lansdale functions as a convenient North Star. “If only” Diem had been wiser, more compliant, less obdurate. If only he had listened to the wise American, things might have turned out differently.

This counterfactual approach reaches its crescendo as the Lyndon B. Johnson administration decided to Americanize the war in mid-1965. If only Lansdale had been able to prevail over the bureaucracy and convince Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara to embrace a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy — so admired by Petraeus — then the American war might have evolved along a different path. Yet, as Boot tells us, “McNamara had little time for Lansdale.”¹⁵

By considering the Vietnamese perspective, such “if only” arguments ultimately fall flat. While Boot correctly argues that Diem’s coup and assassination in November 1963 proved a major turning point in U.S. decision-making on Vietnam, he errs in assuming that Lansdale’s advice continued to make sense in 1964 and 1965.

In short, Boot views the war in Vietnam as static. It was not.

presumed.” In Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 77.

¹⁴ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 281.

¹⁵ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 367.

After Diem's overthrow, the Hanoi Politburo, now under the influence of General Secretary Le Duan, decided upon a strategy aiming for a "decisive military victory." Scholarship based on Vietnamese rather than only American sources offers important perspective. Lien-Hang Nguyen's excellent work on Hanoi's wartime decision-making clearly demonstrates that Le Duan had committed in late 1964, if not earlier, to achieving a military victory in South Vietnam. In early 1965, for instance, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) doubled its ranks for what Politburo leaders feared was an upcoming battle with American troops.¹⁶

Lansdale may not have wanted to fight a conventional war, but Le Duan certainly did. One wonders how Lansdale's prescriptions on counterinsurgency were at all relevant to the threat of North Vietnamese regiments infiltrating down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam.

Boot never says, instead placing blame on McNamara and the U.S. military commander in Vietnam, William C. Westmoreland, for committing to an ill-advised strategy of attrition. The "if only" counterfactuals stack higher and higher.

Returning to Boot's endnotes, such flawed argumentation begins to make sense. Boot has marshaled no primary sources from the military command — no command policies, no private messages from Westmoreland to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, no after-action reports from U.S. combat units in the field. Instead, old clichés are recycled in mechanical

¹⁶ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 76.

fashion. Thus, in Boot's storyline, Westmoreland had turned the entire South Vietnamese countryside into one ruinous "free fire zone" where "victory was a high body-count."¹⁷

In reality, U.S. military strategy proved far more comprehensive than Boot allows. Even before the introduction of American combat troops, Westmoreland was laying out a concept of operations that noted the dual threat to the South Vietnamese countryside — from "large well-organized and -equipped forces including those that may come from outside their country" and from "the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer."¹⁸

Moreover, allied pacification plans from 1964 onward consistently stressed the importance of securing the population and the importance of the political contest for the people's loyalty.¹⁹ To Petraeus, though, Boot offered a different, more spiteful account: Westmoreland thought "Lansdale was an idiot." Yet, quite simply, there is not a shred of evidence in the historical record to support this bogus assertion.

This is not meant to defend Westmoreland. Clearly, U.S. military strategy in Vietnam failed to achieve its aim of promoting a stable, independent, non-communist South Vietnam. Rather, a deeper analysis of the American war in Vietnam illustrates far more nuance than depicted in *The Road Not Taken*.

¹⁷ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 475.

¹⁸ COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, "Concept of Operations—Force Requirements and Deployments, SVN," June 13, 1965, in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam* [Senator Gravel ed., 5 vols.] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-1972), IV: 606.

¹⁹ The best one-volume account of allied pacification plans remains Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995).

But for his “if only” history to persuade, Boot requires convenient bogeymen. If only the U.S. governmental bureaucracy had listened to Lansdale. If only McNamara and Westmoreland were as discerning as Lansdale. If only the South Vietnamese had been more compliant apprentices.

This last point seems most central — and most pernicious — in Boot’s admiration of Edward Lansdale. At its core, *The Road Not Taken* is a story of an enlightened imperialist. A white Westerner swoops in with only his wit and personal magnetism to captivate the local leaders and offer them a path toward modernity. That the traditional society never realizes its full potential has less to do with the imperialist himself than with those too feeble of mind to accept his advice and munificence.

Like ancient lore passed down in an oral tradition from generation to generation, this revisionist recasting of history as a white man’s burden surely holds allure for those like Boot who aspire to a new global American empire.²⁰ Such narratives reinforce the nationalistic sense of self in the minds of many Americans like him. They bolster claims to American exceptionalism.

But these fanciful tales also nudge the reader away from deeper questions that surely would be more profitable when studying the American experience during the Cold War era. Was it wise for the United States to intervene in a civil war over Vietnamese identity? Could a white foreigner with no language skills truly understand the local political

²⁰ Max Boot, “The Case for American Empire,” *The Weekly Standard*, Oct. 15, 2001, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-case-for-american-empire/article/1626>.

community, which he aspired to mentor? Why, throughout the war in Southeast Asia, did far too many Americans see themselves as superior to the Vietnamese, both north and south? And how did this experience illustrate the limits of American power abroad?

To engage in such a retrospective, to tackle these deeper questions, undoubtedly is an uncomfortable exercise. But history should be more than a “dose of patriotic therapy.”²¹ Counterfactual storytelling based on “if only” narratives may satisfy emotionally, but they hardly impart a history that embraces complexity.

Max Boot wants his reader to believe that if only Edward Lansdale had prevailed, history might have unfolded in dramatically different ways. Yet widening the historical scope to include more than just American voices, to evaluate why historical actors made the decisions they did rather than what they *should have* done, reveals a different, perhaps less satisfying, conclusion.

Lansdale’s was a road not taken because it was a road not feasible.

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²¹ Edward T. Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, eds. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 62.

3. Friendly Persuasion Is Not Enough: The Limits of the Lansdale Approach

Walter C. Ladwig III

Providing aid and advice to local governments' counterinsurgency campaigns, rather than directly intervening with American forces, has recently been identified as a more cost-effective way to counter irregular threats to U.S. interests.²² The challenge that such undertakings have repeatedly faced in the past is that partner governments often have their own interests and priorities which can diverge significantly from those of Washington.²³ Consequently, a host of observers have pointed out that while the United States has provided its partners with extensive assistance to combat insurgents and terrorist groups, an inability to convince them to adopt its counterinsurgency prescriptions or address what Washington sees as the political and economic "root causes" of a conflict has repeatedly emerged as a major impediment to success.²⁴ In the

²² Spc. Noelle Wiehe, "1st SFAB combat advisor teams train for upcoming Afghanistan deployment," U.S. Army, Jan. 16, 2018,

https://www.army.mil/article/199082/1st_sfab_combat_advisor_teams_train_for_upcoming_afghanistan_deployment.

²³ Stephen Biddle et al., "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1-2 (2018): 89-142; Walter C. Ladwig, III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency: U.S. Involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979-92," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 99-146.

²⁴ Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977); D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Benjamin Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1991).

absence of sufficient influence to convince a local government to address these shortcomings, critics suggest that significant American aid and support can actually reduce its incentives to address domestic discontent or govern inclusively, which can render a supported regime less stable than it would have been without U.S. assistance.²⁵

Based on his study of the life and career of Edward Lansdale, Max Boot has suggested that future advisors can find a template for influencing local governments in Lansdale's "art of friendly persuasion."²⁶ One of the Cold War's most colorful characters, Lansdale's career spanned Madison Avenue, the U.S. Air Force, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Lansdale rose to prominence as the advisor, confidant, and friend of Philippine Secretary of National Defense Ramon Magsaysay during the Hukbalahap Rebellion (1946 to 1954).

Under Lansdale's mentorship, Magsaysay professionalized and depoliticized the Philippine armed forces, which enhanced their effectiveness in the field, while also working to ensure that free and fair elections in the country were not thwarted by vested political interests.²⁷ In 1949 the Hukbalahap guerrillas possessed some 12,000 men under arms and more than 100,000 active sympathizers.²⁸ By 1954, however, facing defeat on the battlefield and seeing an opportunity to achieve social change via the ballot box, the Huks

²⁵ William E. Odom, *On Internal War: American and Soviet Approaches to Third World Clients and Insurgents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

²⁶ Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018); Max Boot, "Win The War on Terror with Lansdale's Cold- War Era 'Friendly Persuasion,'" *USA Today*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/01/09/avoid-vietnam-fiascos-win-terror-war-learn-lansdale-friendly-persuasion-max-boot-column/1013646001/>.

²⁷ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 122-124, 138.

²⁸ Charles T.R. Bohannon, "Antiguerrilla Operations," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 341, no. 1 (May 1962), 21.

were willing to give up their armed struggle. The tools Lansdale employed to influence and mentor Magsaysay were patience, understanding, and above all friendly persuasion to build trust with his counterpart. The CIA operative would later seek to employ the same means to shape the behavior of another U.S. partner in Southeast Asia, the leader of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem.²⁹

In calling attention to the importance of advisory efforts, Boot does a real service. Unfortunately, a narrow focus on Lansdale himself and an over-reliance on the man's own account of events in the Philippines leads to mistaken conclusions about cause and effect. A broader reading of U.S. involvement in the Huk Rebellion raises questions about the degree to which American influence stemmed from friendly persuasion and the utility of that technique to, in Boot's words, "influence allies to take difficult but necessary steps such as fighting corruption without risking a blowup or backlash."³⁰

Pressure Not Persuasion in the Huk Rebellion

There is no question that Lansdale and Magsaysay formed a highly effective partnership that helped transform the Philippine government's counterinsurgency strategy. Yet, at the end of the day, as secretary of national defense, Magsaysay was but one part of the administration. As my own study of U.S. patron-client relations in counterinsurgency demonstrates, their relationship was embedded in a far more coercive American influence strategy that pressured, rather than persuaded, the Philippine government to reform.³¹

²⁹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 211.

³⁰ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 602.

³¹ Walter C. Ladwig, III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Despite the communist links of the Hukbalahap insurgents who were attempting to overthrow the government of President Elpidio Quirino, the American view was that the roots of the insurgency were socio-economic rather than strictly political. Guerrilla fighters primarily took up arms in response to abuses by the security forces, electoral fraud, and a lack of access to sufficient agricultural land.³² Consequently, in countering the insurgency, as the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff assessed, “military measures ... can only be a temporary expedient. Remedial political and economic measures must be adopted by the Philippine Government in order to eliminate the basic causes of discontent among the Philippine people.”³³ Unfortunately, Quirino was disinclined to undertake these redistributive reforms because the base of his ruling Liberal Party benefitted from the existing political and economic status quo.

The Philippine government did eventually take steps to address some of the rural discontent driving support for the insurgency. They introduced a minimum wage for agricultural workers and significantly revised the government’s tax policy that enhanced revenue in an equitable fashion to pay for the war and enhanced social spending. These reforms, which had been opposed by the Philippine government, did not come about via friendly persuasion, but by attaching tough conditions to American aid. In the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, American assistance was “firmly conditioned on satisfactory performance by the Philippine Government,” rendering it “as a lever to obtain

³² Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 164.

³³ “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Johnson), Sept. 6, 1950,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI, Doc. 837*,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950vo6/d837>.

such performance.”³⁴ This lever worked. As a contemporaneous scholar of Philippine politics, David Wurfel, wrote,

Few would have dared predict six months earlier that the Philippine Congress could pass in short order two laws, such as the minimum wage and the increased corporate income tax . . . In sum, the leverage of proffered foreign aid had produced the legislative authorization for social change probably not possible otherwise.³⁵

A similar approach was taken in the military realm. At the start of the conflict, counterinsurgency operations were the responsibility of the Philippine Constabulary, a national paramilitary police force whose corrupt and abusive ways created more insurgents than they captured.³⁶ Under the authority of the secretary of the interior, the constabulary often functioned as hired thugs for the country’s large landlords who employed them to terrorize agricultural workers. Recognizing the role of the constabulary in stimulating support for the insurgency, the commander of the U.S. Joint Military Assistance Group urged Quirino to depoliticize the force by putting them under the control of the Department of National Defense and assigning the Philippine army primary responsibility for combatting the insurgents. The Philippine president resisted because such reforms would constrain the Liberal Party’s ability to use the constabulary to suppress their political opponents—which is precisely what the American advisors

³⁴ Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 107.

³⁵ David Wurfel, “Foreign Aid and Social Reform in Political Development: A Philippine Case Study,” *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 2 (June 1959): 466.

³⁶ Walter C. Ladwig III, “When Police are the Problem: The Philippine Constabulary and the Hukbalahap Rebellion,” in *Policing Insurgencies: Cops as Counterinsurgents*, ed. C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24-25.

intended. The United States eventually succeeded in forcing the Philippine government to restructure its armed forces, subordinate the constabulary to the less politicized Department of National Defense, and give the army the lead in counterinsurgency operations, but once again it was tough conditions on U.S. military aid—even in the face of a growing insurgent threat—not friendly persuasion that achieved the result.

Magsaysay's own rise to power from congressman to secretary of national defense was due, in part, to American coercion. This is not to say that Magsaysay was an American creation by any means—he possessed his own political base and the patronage of leading Filipino politicians—but his candidacy received a boost from U.S. pressure. The details remain somewhat murky since the American officials involved actively attempted to downplay their role to avoid undercutting Magsaysay's credibility.³⁷ Douglas MacDonald recounts a claim that “President Truman sent a telegram directly to Quirino telling him to appoint Magsaysay as Secretary of Defense or risk losing U.S. military aid.”³⁸ Boot's version of events echoes Cecil Currey in crediting Assistant Secretary of State Livingston Merchant with delivering the same message, while the State Department's Director of the Office of Philippine Affairs, John Melby maintains that he was the one to instruct Quirino that future U.S. military aid was linked to Magsaysay's appointment.³⁹ When the Philippine president shrugged and replied, “You know, you're asking me to commit political suicide,” Melby allegedly responded, “Yes, I know that, but unless you do it

³⁷ Myron M. Cowen, Letter to Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, Feb. 18, 1952, Box 6, *Myron M. Cowen Papers*, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, <http://www.walterladwig.com/Articles/MagPressure.pdf>

³⁸ Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 326.

³⁹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 113; Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 84.

there's no more American military aid forthcoming.”⁴⁰ In the face of this threat, Quirino acquiesced. Common to all of these accounts is an American threat to cut off military aid to a partner government that was on the back foot in its battle against an insurgency. This was persuasion, but it certainly wasn't friendly.

Once in office, the effect of Magsaysay's military reforms was bolstered by American pressure being wielded on his behalf. Magsaysay managed to engender dramatic improvements in the army's rank-and-file as well as the junior officer corps. However, the effectiveness of the military was hampered by the fact that it was still led by the architects of the Philippine government's initial abusive and ineffective response to the Huk insurgency, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mariano Castañeda, and the constabulary commander, Brigadier Alberto Ramos. Castañeda was a corrupt yet affable figure who refused to cooperate with Magsaysay's reform efforts and was not seen by senior Philippine leaders to be sufficiently competent for command of the military.⁴¹ Ramos was even worse: A known Japanese collaborator, the U.S. embassy in Manila judged that “beyond protecting perpetrators of abuses,” the brigadier had “done nothing but draw his breath and his salary.”⁴²

Although replacing the duo might have enhanced military effectiveness, the two men had played a key role in delivering the fraudulent 1949 election to the Liberal Party. Moreover, after several recent coup attempts in the region, Quirino was particularly fearful about the

⁴⁰ Oral History Interview with John F. Melby, Truman Library & Museum, Nov. 21, 1986, 239,

<https://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/melby3.htm> - 239.

⁴¹ The Chargé in the Philippines (Chapin) to the Secretary of State, Jan. 5, 1951, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific, Vol. VI, Part 2,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951vo6p2/d3>.

⁴² Chargé in the Philippines to the Secretary of State.

loyalty of his armed forces and favored reliability over capability. Magsaysay's predecessor as Secretary of National Defense had resigned when Quirino refused to fire Castañeda and Ramos for mismanaging the anti-Huk campaign. Magsaysay ended up issuing a similar ultimatum to Quirino, however, this time around the threat was bolstered by the American decision to condition \$10 million in military aid on the immediate retirement of the pair.⁴³ Under duress, Quirino complied.

As Magsaysay turned his attention to ensuring free and fair elections in the country, he alienated his former patrons in the ruling Liberal Party who stood to lose from legitimate polls. These senior politicians worked to constrain his authority, undo his reforms, and remove him from office. However, it was implicit and explicit threats to cut American military aid, not friendly persuasion, that shielded Magsaysay and his reform efforts from domestic political enemies.⁴⁴ Whether in the economic, the military, or the political realm, pressure not persuasion was the main source of American influence over the Philippine government. Such was the judgement of the American ambassador in Manila, Myron Cowen, who advised Washington that although the United States successfully shaped the Philippine government's policies in a number of areas, we "must recognize that without exception, [these reforms] were made possible only by continuously applied pressure."⁴⁵

When the Americans did not deploy pressure via conditions on aid to support Magsaysay, he was far less effective. Having won the presidency in a landslide in the 1953 election at the head of a broad coalition, it was expected that Magsaysay would continue his reforming ways from the highest office in the land.⁴⁶ With the Huk rebellion defeated,

⁴³ Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos*, 152.

⁴⁴ Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 133.

⁴⁵ Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos*, 155.

⁴⁶ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 162-163.

however, the United States was far less concerned about redistributive reforms in the Philippines and no longer intervened on the new President's behalf. Consequently, Magsaysay's various attempts at socio-economic reforms foundered at the hands of vested interests. By this time, however, Lansdale was no longer involved in events on a day-to-day basis, having been dispatched to South Vietnam by CIA director Allen Dulles. The lesson Lansdale drew from his narrow perspective in the Philippines was that a combination of patience, shared hardship, and an exhibition of sincere empathy could foster the personal chemistry necessary to influence an embattled American partner. He presumed that the trust and confidence inspired by a sympathetic advisor could lead a previously reactionary or repressive government to willingly rein in abuses by the security forces, combat corruption, implement civic-action programs (health, education, public welfare, etc.), and undertake other reforms that would rally the population to the government's side. Consequently, Lansdale would prove to be just the first of many American officials in Saigon who would search in vain for a "Vietnamese Magsaysay" to save the country.⁴⁷

Modern Magsaysays?

The purpose of recounting these events is not to quibble over the historiography of U.S.-Philippine relations, but to ask: What this can tell us that is relevant for today?

⁴⁷ For mention of the repeated attempts to replicate the Philippines template in Vietnam, see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 126; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 240; Nick Cullather, *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippines Relations, 1942-1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 98.

Friendly persuasion was an effective influence tool in Lansdale's relationship with Magsaysay in no small part because the latter's interests and aims were *already* closely aligned with those of the U.S. Magsaysay had fought with an American affiliated guerrilla unit during World War II, he shared many of his American partners' assessments of the problems facing the Philippines, and as a congressman, he cooperated closely with the U.S. military assistance group.⁴⁸ In short, as Douglas MacDonald writes, "...Magsaysay was an American liberal reformer's dream come true. A dynamic, charismatic, honest and compassionate leader dedicated to democratic values is a rare commodity in any country, not just in the Third World."⁴⁹

In contrast, more coercive strategies were necessary to influence Quirino because his interests and those of the U.S. diverged in key respects. The Philippine and American governments agreed that preventing the Huks from seizing power was important, but the way they wanted to go about it was quite different. For Quirino, maintaining his office was a competing priority and both rival political elites and the nation's armed forces were potential threats to his power. Consequently, the types of reforms and policy changes the United States was pushing in the Philippines—redistributive economic reforms, ending patronage politics in the military, and holding clean elections—were resisted because, irrespective of their utility as counterinsurgency measures, they directly challenged the interests of his key supporters and therefore his hold on power.

If you are lucky enough to have an authentic domestic reformer with no internal opposition as your partner, friendly persuasion may be an effective influence tool. It is unlikely to be sufficient, however, to convince a less enlightened leader to risk reforms

⁴⁸ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 110-112.

⁴⁹ Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos*, 183.

that they believe could lead to their overthrow or worse. This raises a key question: In the future is the United States more likely to work with regimes whose interests are closely aligned or those who diverge significantly? To put it differently, are Magsaysays more common or Quirinos?

Sadly, recent academic research on the subject suggests that the latter is far more common.⁵⁰

Advising a government in counterinsurgency or counterterrorism suffers from a phenomenon that economists call adverse selection.⁵¹ This is a situation where, due to the specifics of a transaction, the only actors who wish to participate are “bad” ones.

Adverse selection often occurs in insurance markets, like automobile insurance, where the people who most want collision insurance are those who drive a lot or otherwise self-assess that they are more likely to have accidents. If there wasn't a law requiring people to have insurance, the people seeking coverage would not be a representative sample of all drivers, but only the riskiest ones.

There is a parallel phenomenon with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.⁵²

Since effective, legitimate governments rarely lose control of substantial portions of their country to terrorists or insurgents, the only regimes needing external assistance to combat domestic political opponents are almost by definition flawed in some key

⁵⁰ Biddle et al., “Small Footprint, Small Payoff,” 98-101; Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 22-51.

⁵¹ Carmen M. Alston, “Adverse Selection,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/adverse-selection>.

⁵² Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 28.

respects—be they weak, incompetent, fraudulent, abusive, or all of the above. In turn, the same governmental shortcomings that facilitate the emergence of an insurgency also undercut the effectiveness of the counterinsurgent response.⁵³

Even if they have the capacity to do so, local governments are rarely eager to address such problems as their core supporters frequently benefit from the country's political and economic status quo. It is perhaps unsurprising that after a year serving as the senior U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese I Corps, Col. Bryce Denno cogently observed in his 1963 end-of-tour report that:

It would be a miraculous coincidence if a host nation in a war of counterinsurgency were to share identical objectives with the U.S. or arrive at identical solutions to problems that arise. Hence, it behooves the U.S. to seek ways in which it can influence the host nation to act in a manner compatible with U.S. interests in a war which we are financing to a large extent and otherwise supporting.⁵⁴

Consequently, Denno advised his superiors:

The development of techniques and means to increase U.S. leverage in Vietnam is the single most important problem facing us there and it will be

⁵³ Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 79-115.

⁵⁴ Bryce Denno, "Senior Officer Debriefing Reports: Vietnam War, 1962-1972," July 19, 1963, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA, <http://www.walterladwig.com/Articles/DennoAA.pdf>.

a fundamental problem in any future counterinsurgency effort in which we become involved.⁵⁵

No matter how much aid you give a country or how many advisers you send, if you cannot prevent the local government from employing these resources to pursue its own agenda, or from prioritizing political reliability in the armed forces over military effectiveness, the assistance effort will come to naught.

One does not have to revisit the unhappy American experience in Vietnam to understand the limits of friendly persuasion in such circumstances, but merely look at the recent U.S. experience in Iraq.⁵⁶

The Bush administration expected that their partner, Iraqi Prime Minister Nori al-Maliki, would embrace its strategy of overcoming the insurgency by bringing Kurds and Sunnis into the political process alongside the Shia majority. Instead, Maliki prioritized bolstering his position among radical Shia political groups, turned a blind eye to violence against Sunnis, and favored sectarian loyalists rather than professional officers in the Iraqi Security Forces.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Denno, "Debriefing Reports."

⁵⁶ For studies of U.S.-Vietnamese relations, particularly in the context of security force assistance, see Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1983); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 67-107.

⁵⁷ Bernard Trainor and Michael Gordon, *The End Game: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 290-292.

The Bush administration never tried to compel Maliki to change his ways, even though his actions were undermining American efforts in Iraq.⁵⁸

Instead, the Iraqi leader was provided with unconditioned aid and support to persuade him to make better choices. President Bush personally sought to mentor Maliki and in his own words provided him with unstinting “advice and understanding” in the belief that “Once I had earned his trust I would be in a better position to help him make the tough decisions.”⁵⁹ Bush specifically notes that he “was careful not to bully him or appear heavy-handed.”⁶⁰

This approach failed to restrain Maliki’s sectarian agenda, which prevented the military gains from the 2007 surge from being translated into positive political outcomes and arguably laid the foundation for the rise of the Islamic State.⁶¹

Toward the Future

With large-scale U.S. military interventions seemingly at an end, it appears that advisory missions will be a key component of U.S. efforts in the so-called War on Terror. In a coda to his phenomenally researched and detailed account of Edward Lansdale’s career, (“Lansdalism in the Twenty-First Century”), Boot suggests that the quixotic CIA officer

⁵⁸ Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 36.

⁵⁹ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, (New York: Random House, 2010), 362.

⁶⁰ Bush, *Decision Points*.

⁶¹ Peter Beinart, “The Surge Fallacy,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-surge-fallacy/399344/>.

can provide a useful role model for future American advisors, both civilian and military.⁶² Lansdale's advocacy of patience, understanding, cultural awareness and local solutions for local problems are all to be commended. It is similarly difficult to disagree with Lansdale's focus on the political dimensions of civil war, or as Boot writes, the belief "that there was more to defeating insurgencies than killing insurgents." Unfortunately, Lansdale's partnership with Ramon Magsaysay does not provide a template for addressing what Boot describes as "the key American shortcoming" in Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam: "the inability to constructively guide the leaders of allied states in the direction desired by Washington."⁶³ The emergence of a popular, capable, indigenous reformer in Magsaysay was a unique circumstance that is unlikely to be replicated in other settings. Moreover, whether Lansdale realized it or not, American influence over the Philippine government was primarily the result of pressure and tough conditions on aid, which strengthened Magsaysay's hand vis-à-vis reactionaries opposed to his reforms. Lansdale's life story makes an entertaining read and his model of friendly persuasion is a wonderful ideal, but the strategy is unlikely to be sufficient in practice.

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⁶² Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 599.

⁶³ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 602.

4. The Woman Question in Max Boot's Tale of Edward Lansdale

Heather Marie Stur

During a party at Edward Lansdale's Saigon villa in 1956, Lansdale performed a traditional Philippine dance called *tinikling*, and it was not awkward. A photograph of the moment shows Lansdale in a white tunic and cropped pants, smiling joyfully as he taught the dance to a friend. He was not an embarrassed white man clumsily attempting a native dance in a cringeworthy demonstration of good will. It was Lansdale at his most comfortable: as the life of a multicultural party where a Philippine dance broke the ice between his American and Vietnamese friends. The snapshot depicted Lansdalian diplomacy in action, in which cultural exchange on the ground with ordinary people was an essential tactic in nation-building strategy.

Max Boot's engaging biography is one of only a few works that examines Lansdale, whose belief in cultural sensitivity and commitment to individual liberty continues to inform American counterinsurgency theory. In the early 1950s, Lansdale's successful training of Ramon Magsaysay to assume the presidency of an independent Philippines and neutralize the Hukbalahap rebellion became the model U.S. policymakers would attempt to replicate in South Vietnam. While working in Vietnam, Lansdale got closer than any other American to Ngo Dinh Diem, the man meant to be a Vietnamese Magsaysay. Things didn't work out in Vietnam quite the way they did in the Philippines, though. Diem alienated the Buddhist opposition and was never popular with the masses. After Diem was assassinated, Washington replaced Lansdale and his CIA team with combat troops. Yet Lansdale's influence remained in the "hearts and minds" approach to pacification that Gen. Creighton Abrams advocated. Lansdale himself spent the better part of two decades in Southeast Asia, save a brief detour to the Caribbean to try and topple Fidel Castro's government in Cuba. From the Office of Strategic Services to the CIA, from the

Philippines to Vietnam, from the United States to Asia, Lansdale traversed the transpacific world in a life's work that bridged *Tales from the South Pacific* and *The Ugly American*.

In his career, Lansdale embodied the “ugly American”—a misunderstood moniker that refers not to an American tourist behaving badly but to a diplomat willing to roll up his sleeves and get down at the village level for a drink, a meal, a walk, and a conversation to learn about local customs, values, and needs. It is one of two sides of Lansdale that Boot's portrait reveals. In that form, Lansdale was a maverick who possessed an innate curiosity about humanity in all its diversity.⁶⁴ Boot makes a compelling claim that racism did not appear to have tainted Lansdale's view of Asia at a time when U.S. policymakers referred to Filipinos and Vietnamese as “little brown brothers.” It was a key example of the chasm between Lansdale and the risk-averse policy establishment, a rift made all the wider by Lansdale's unwillingness to accept received wisdom about nation-building. The tragedy that emerges from Boot's telling of the Vietnam War story resulted from Washington's impatience with what Lansdale understood to be the slow processes of cultivating political stability, fostering economic development, and establishing a national identity.

As unconventional as Lansdale was in his career, he was an everyman in his personal life, and this is where Boot's book contributes something new. Other scholars, notably Edward Miller, Mark Moyar, and Lewis Sorley, have written about the possibilities for Vietnam had Americans made different choices regarding Diem and the war.⁶⁵ While

⁶⁴ Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018), 15.

⁶⁵ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York:

Boot's focus on Lansdale is unique, the broader theme of "what might have been" is established in the historiography. What we know much less about is the impact of U.S. foreign relations on the lives and marriages of deployed personnel, their families, and local populations from the 1940s onward as part of U.S. military and diplomatic expansion. (In the afterword, Boot speculates that Lansdale might have had a Vietnamese mistress, in addition to his long-time Filipina paramour.) In Boot's narrative, Lansdale's love life was not the sideshow but the main event. It shaped him, his work, and, by extension, U.S. intervention in Asia. From the collections of personal letters Boot accessed, he pieces together a picture of an international post-World War II generation in which foreign relations shaped and were influenced by the women in the lives of American men overseas.

Helen Lansdale represents the diplomatic and military wives whose husbands were stationed at U.S. embassies and military bases all over the world. Pat Kelly, a Manila newspaper staffer who volunteered to be Lansdale's guide through rural Luzon, symbolizes the local women who caught the attention of American men abroad. Kelly, whose given name was Patrocinio Yapcinco, was from Tarlac Province, a Huk stronghold in central Luzon. Her husband, James Kelly, an Irish-Filipino orphan, died of tuberculosis in 1944, and Pat got a job to support herself and her baby daughter, Patricia. Pat eventually went to work for the United States, and she was assigned to work as Lansdale's guide and interpreter. Sometimes the intersections of the personal and the political determined the course of international relations. Had Pat and Ed not met, Ramon Magsaysay might not have ascended to the presidency of the Philippines, providing the United States with its model for South Vietnam and sealing the fate of Ngo Dinh Diem.

Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Lansdale might not have requested to return to the Philippines. Perhaps without realizing it, Boot validates the “cultural turn” in diplomatic and military history. Gender and sex influence the behavior of diplomats, military officers, and intelligence agents in ways that end up charting or shifting the courses of foreign relations and war. Boot is very clear about the importance of Lansdale’s wives (he married Kelly after Helen died in the 1970s), noting their roles in “some of his most consequential decisions, such as his return to the Philippines for a second, history-altering tour in 1950.”⁶⁶ He claims to be the first writer to have read Lansdale’s letters from both wives, which “provide the most intimate and complete account that will ever be available of Lansdale’s thinking — and they reveal the hitherto unrevealed importance of his love affair with Pat to the narrative of his life.”⁶⁷

Boot’s portrayal of the women in Lansdale’s life is provocative because, according to a recent piece he wrote for *Foreign Policy*, 2017 was the year Boot “got woke” to his white male privilege.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, neither Boot’s new consciousness nor the weight he places on Lansdale’s relationships with his wives inspired him to flesh out the Lansdale love triangle. His depiction of Helen Lansdale is one-dimensional, and his discussions of Pat Kelly are, at times, tied to old tropes about the exotic Orient and its alluring women. In Boot’s version of Lansdale’s romantic drama, Pat Kelly was beguiling while Helen Lansdale was prematurely gray. Pat teased and flirted while Helen was quiet. Pat was exciting while Helen was boring. It is as though Boot is trying to excuse Lansdale’s dalliances by making Helen the problem, implying that someone so dull couldn’t possibly satisfy an adventurous man of the world like Lansdale, and, let’s face it, men must be satisfied. That is their privilege. All of this may have been true, but Boot’s flat sketch of

⁶⁶ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, XLVII.

⁶⁷ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*.

⁶⁸ Max Boot, “2017 Was the Year I Learned About My White Privilege,” *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 27, 2017,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/27/2017-was-the-year-i-learned-about-my-white-privilege/>.

Helen leaves out the broader contexts that help explain her behaviors and motives. She was a complex human being just as her husband was. Social and cultural expectations likely limited her options and influenced her personal decisions as much as Lansdale did. Mr. and Mrs. Lansdale weren't making love on a beach in California because he was overseas, and she was back home playing both mother and father to two sons. Boot remarks that Helen Lansdale refused to ask for a divorce when she learned of her husband's affair, but a truly "woke" character study of the first Mrs. Lansdale would include a discussion of the limited financial and legal options she would have faced as a divorcee, not to mention the emotional and psychological effects on her and her sons. There was more at stake than Lansdale's belief in his ability to win hearts and minds in Asia, his desire for adventure, or his longing for Pat Kelly. Lansdale himself understood this, which is why he didn't simply quit his American family when Helen wouldn't seek a divorce.

Meanwhile, Kelly is important to the story not because she was a bewitching Filipina, but because she helped Lansdale break into rural Philippine society where he learned the most about the Huk insurgency. Kelly was a high school classmate of Luis Taruc, the Huks' military leader, in Tarlac City in central Luzon, and she was able to get Lansdale remarkably close to the rebels. To his credit, Boot writes Kelly with much more empathy and depth than what he offers Helen. He acknowledges Kelly's strategic importance, asserting that "it was her role as an invaluable intermediary and interpreter, not only of language but also of customs and mindsets, that would account for so much of his success with the Filipino people."⁶⁹ Kelly played a vital role in one of America's most successful nation-building efforts and had a long history of working for the United States,

⁶⁹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 73.

including years with the U.S. War Damage Commission and the U.S. Information Agency at the U.S. embassy in Manila.

As Boot explains, Kelly was fairly unconventional in Philippine society as a working woman who became the head of her family after her husband and her father both died in the 1940s. Boot brings Kelly to life and illustrates her importance to the mission primarily through Lansdale's letters and the author's interviews with those who knew Kelly. From a methodology perspective, Boot's book is a good example of how personal papers and oral histories can offer important details on military missions, policymaking, and other "official" business. Despite Kelly's important role in U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in the Philippines, it would not be surprising if her voice is absent from the archival record. Her race and her gender would have ensured that her American male colleagues would not have written her recommendations into an official report, and if they did, they likely would not have credited her. It is not clear whether Boot looked for Kelly in the records of the War Damage Commission or the U.S. Information Agency where she had worked, but were Kelly still alive, it would be fascinating to talk with her and learn her opinions of U.S.-Philippine relations, her country's history and future, and her married lover. That Boot made the effort to craft a fairly vibrant portrait of Pat Kelly leaves readers wondering why he did not do Helen the same courtesy even though Lansdale's relationship with her is also important to his life story. Having spent most of her adult life as a housewife, Helen likely would not appear in archival documents, but published sources on American women in the Cold War era would have provided some context for understanding the women of Helen's generation. This type of background information might have helped Boot speculate about why Helen behaved and responded to her husband in the ways that she did.

While Boot develops Kelly as an agent of her own history, he comes close to orientalism when describing the “mysterious East” as he sets the scene for the moment Lansdale and Kelly met. He writes, “As long as Western men have been journeying to the Orient (a term that once encompassed all of Asia and North Africa), they have, inevitably, fallen in love with the women they found there.”⁷⁰ Does Boot believe that, or is he referring to what men of a different era thought? He continues by describing the “Age of Discovery” as “an age of sexual discovery, with all kinds of tropes and innuendos that are now considered racist.”⁷¹ But it’s not just that standards for polite conversation have changed. Europeans’ “erotic fascination” with the Far East was part of a broader imperial culture that used race, gender, and sexuality to justify Europe’s subjugation of its African and Asian colonies and establish power dynamics between Europeans and people of color. Boot does not discuss this context except to mention Edward Said’s orientalism, the theory that 19th-century Europeans crafted an exotic, romanticized image of the Middle East that rationalized Europe’s exploitation of colonized subjects. Boot concedes that “[t]here is an element of truth in the charge” but then counters with: “... the exploitation was not entirely one-sided—many poor Asian women saw relationships with Westerners as an opportunity for economic betterment”.⁷² Poor Asian women exploited Western men? In colonialism? An author who claims to understand his white male privilege and “the reality of discrimination, harassment, even violence that people of color and women continue to experience” wrote this?⁷³ By accusing impoverished Asian women of manipulating Western men for a chance at a more financially secure future, Boot demonstrates a surprising obliviousness to the power dynamics that would have prevented such reverse exploitation. Boot lets quotes such as the *Times*’ Richard Bernstein’s comment about “an

⁷⁰ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 67.

⁷¹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*.

⁷² Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 68.

⁷³ Boot, “White Privilege.”

Eastern erotic culture that had always been more frank and less morally fastidious about sexual needs than the Western Christian erotic culture” hang without analysis.⁷⁴ Failing to delve into meaning and context, Boot misses an opportunity to challenge an outdated Western image of Asia by describing the prudish nature of Diem-era Vietnamese society. It’s important context for the time period in which Lansdale was stationed in Vietnam. Concerned citizens worried about the corrupting effects of American men and Western culture on Vietnamese women and traditional values. As J. William Fulbright noted, the Americans, not the Vietnamese, were responsible for turning Saigon into a brothel.⁷⁵

Boot’s link between Sir Richard Burton’s orientalism and Lansdale’s Southeast Asia is Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. The 1904 opera tells a tragic love story of an American naval officer and a Japanese teenaged girl who bears his son and then commits suicide when her lover returns to Japan with his American wife. Speculating that “[n]o doubt there were many such heartbreaks — and even some suicides — that resulted from liaisons between Western men and Asian women,” Boot then brings readers to the love story of Edward Lansdale and Pat Kelly.⁷⁶ Boot’s description of Helen Lansdale as “an old-fashioned, self-conscious ‘lady’ who had gone to a finishing school and behaved according to the prim standards of the early twentieth-century provincial American upper class” sets her up as the inhibited wife who drove her husband into the arms of a “livelier” Asian woman.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Boot, “White Privilege,” 67.

⁷⁵ Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58.

⁷⁶ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 69.

⁷⁷ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*.

What does it all mean for our understanding of Lansdale and U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia? Was Lansdale a Western explorer who “inevitably” fell in love with an Asian woman? Does Boot believe Lansdale was the Cold War-era descendant of a 400-year-old lineage of white men drawn to the “alluring Orient?” If so, can we extrapolate that the orientalist framework that Europeans used to justify imperialism also informed U.S. intervention in Asia in the twentieth century?⁷⁸ Does Boot believe that the United States acts in the world just like its imperial European forefathers? Where does Pat Kelly fit into this framework? Does Boot see her independence and political acumen as an anomaly, or as a real-life example that complicates the romanticized image of Asian women? Absent a discussion of the colonial context in which Europeans developed the idea of the exotic Orient and the ways in which similar racial constructs have shaped U.S. foreign relations, it is unclear why Boot introduced Lansdale’s relationship with Kelly in this framework.

Lansdale is actually an interesting character through which to explore these issues. Boot describes his long fascination with Asia, from his wearing of a sarong while in college to his interest in Filipino folk music, none of which indicates racism or anything else insidious. Lansdale’s willingness to meet Filipinos and Vietnamese on their terms and to go into villages to assess the attitudes of local people suggests a genuine desire to assist in these nations’ political development. Based on the evidence Boot offers, Lansdale did not appear to see himself as a man on a civilizing mission to uplift the darker races. Boot

⁷⁸ Key works that explore orientalism in a U.S. context include: Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

could have used Lansdale and Kelly to challenge the mysterious Asia construct rather than presenting it as the natural explanation for their relationship. Lansdale, the ugly American, believed that native people had important things to tell him about their country's future. Kelly was an employee of the U.S. government, not a dragon lady or a sexually exotic object. In his letters, Lansdale wrote that he was drawn to Kelly's mind as much as her body, and if that was true, then he deserves more credit than Boot gives him when he places him in the same category as earlier European colonizers.

Boot's tendency to provide lengthy quotes — usually from love letters between Lansdale and Kelly — without analysis or broader context is a flaw that runs throughout the book. Perhaps Boot believes discussions of the cultural constructs that influenced Lansdale's relationships with his women belong in dense academic tomes and might bore a popular audience. But analysis need not be laden with tedious jargon, and the American public gets the complicated issues regarding gender, sex, women, and the patriarchy. The #metoo movement has proven that. Analysis can also prevent readers from mistaking the writer for being uninformed or, worse, an apologist for the orientalism of Victorian imperialists. This should be especially important to an author who has announced that his consciousness is raised, and that he now understands that the oppressive forces of racism and sexism are real.

Sometime in the mid-1950s, Helen Lansdale stood beside her husband as he received a medal from Vice President Richard Nixon. While Edward Lansdale lived an adventure-filled career in the Pacific world, taking a mistress as he attempted to save the free world, his wife remained stateside doing the heavy and largely unnoticed work of maintaining a façade of normalcy even as it threatened to collapse. In her role on the home front, Mrs. Lansdale was not unlike all the other military and diplomatic wives who spent the Cold War years as single parents, filling their days with children's activities, trips to the

grocery store, and luncheons, but wondering in the lonely hours where their husbands were, who they were with, and why ordinary family life wasn't enough for them. We know the story of Edward Lansdale the CIA agent, and what might have been in Vietnam, but Max Boot lets us in on a more universal tale. Edward and Helen Lansdale got married. They tried to play husband and wife and parents like they thought they were supposed to. The exigencies of U.S. national security gave Mr. Lansdale an honorable escape from the monotony of family life, while respectability required Mrs. Lansdale to quietly stand by her man. According to the conventions of the time, it would not have been appropriate for her to travel through a Southeast Asian jungle by jeep. But Americans did not hold Filipinas to the same standards. It was perfectly fine for them to drive into a war zone if they were from the same town as the leader of the local insurgency and spoke both English and Tagalog. And so Pat Kelly became part of Ed Lansdale's fantasy, but even if his first wife had agreed to a divorce, it would have been difficult for Lansdale to make her part of his life back home. Boot points out that when Pat and Ed first met in the late 1940s, the United States was not kind to Asians, as anti-Asian immigration laws and Japanese internment illustrated. Americans likely would not have seen Pat Kelly, employee of the U.S. War Damage Commission and crucial operative in the counterinsurgency mission in the Philippines. They would have only seen her race.

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5. Everything but Politics: America's Counterinsurgency Blindspot

Jon Askonas

Max Boot has left no stone unturned in his extensive biography of Edward Lansdale, debonair ad man-turned-counterinsurgent. Boot's tome contains, among other things, informed speculation on Lansdale's sex life, psychoanalysis of Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg's piano-playing, asides on Graham Greene's novels, and short biographies of almost every character in the extensive cast of would-be American counterinsurgents, Filipino and Vietnamese politicians, and various world historical figures. This makes what was left out of *The Road Not Taken* all the more revealing. Boot's mission is to make the case for "Lansdalism," a variant of counter-insurgency characterized by winning "hearts and minds" through civic action (honest elections, government reforms, political persuasion) to legitimize governments and put pressure on insurgents.⁷⁹ According to Boot, Lansdale's approach would have been far less costly than the massive armed military intervention in Vietnam, and might have actually worked.

Boot believes Lansdalism provides a template and inspiration for future U.S. counterinsurgency efforts. But to support this argument, Boot selectively emphasizes details from Lansdale's life that result in an oversimplified telling of the story: In Vietnam, Lansdale is foiled by bureaucratic insouciance, corrupt Vietnamese leaders, stubborn American politicians, and soldiers dedicated to "conventional warfare." Boot's oversimplification highlights this otherwise excellent biography's most notable flaw. In making his case, Boot fails to contend with the ultimate sources of both Lansdale's

⁷⁹ Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018), 601-602.

successes in the Philippines and his failures in Vietnam — the political desires of insurgents and of the people in the nations where Lansdale worked. Never is the possibility considered that people simply might not be buying what Lansdale — and Boot — are selling.

Because Boot is a powerful storyteller, this failure isn't immediately obvious. In both the Philippines and Vietnam, we are introduced to the players on both sides of the conflicts, and their relationships with each other are given dramatic life. But Boot's political analysis never gets past this superficial layer. Why, exactly, are the Huks of the Philippines up in arms? Boot gives us little insight, except for a few slogans and a single oblique reference to a land-owning elite.⁸⁰ We learn nothing of the centuries of exploitation under the Spanish, nor that the postwar regime Constabulary destroyed more peasant villages than the Japanese did in their attempt to suppress the government.⁸¹ Besides an innate charisma and popular touch, we never learn why Filipino politician Ramon Magsaysay might have had broad political appeal. This is not to suggest that the programs Lansdale embarked upon with Magsaysay (reforming the Army, improving elections, and resettling former insurgents with land, among others) were not valuable. However, throughout the book, one gets the sense that native populations, whether in the Philippines and Vietnam or in Iraq and Afghanistan, are primarily acted upon. If the wise Lansdalian counterinsurgent follows the right recipe, the native population cannot help but come around to the American position. There is no sense that they could legitimately choose otherwise.

⁸⁰ Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 76.

⁸¹ Andrew Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 2006), 58.

This political blindspot is particularly egregious in Boot's treatment of Vietnam. He had time enough in his book for a short examination of Allen Dulles' womanizing and spent pages on Hubert Humphrey's relationship with LBJ. But he left no room for an analysis of Vietnam's colonial history, nor for a discussion of why the South Vietnamese regime could be so easily associated with the imperialists, what the average rural resident might want, or why Ho Chi Minh remained such a popular figure. Not a jot is spent exploring the relative effectiveness of Southern and Northern propaganda or comparing relations between rural and urban residents or the rich and the poor. Choices that were in fact highly political and intentional are subsumed under the categories of excess violence due to notions of "conventional war," "corruption" among military and civilian officials, and interpersonal feuds among both American and South Vietnamese leaders. Boot (following the work of Mark Moyar) identifies the 1963 overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem as a critical inflection point in the course of the war,⁸² but says little about the political tensions his regime was causing, focusing instead on the dissatisfaction of the generals and the impatience of the American diplomatic and press corps.⁸³ He adopts Lansdale's conviction that in Vietnam, "what was missing was a high-level American official who could influence allies to take difficult but necessary steps such as fighting corruption without risking a blowup or backlash."⁸⁴ Boot thinks the same is true for both Iraq and Afghanistan. But client leaders are usually acutely aware of their interests, needs, and political pressures. They do not need a "stiff talking to" from some Yankee, but rather a reconfiguration of the incentives they face, which may be quite deep-seated.⁸⁵ Lansdale's laser-sharp focus

⁸² Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xiv-xv.

⁸³ Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 405.

⁸⁴ Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 602.

⁸⁵ Walter Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017).

on the importance of building South Vietnamese state legitimacy was unique and laudable, but American leaders from JFK to Richard Nixon understood more or less the same thing. The problem for all of these American decision-makers (including Lansdale) was figuring out how to support the South Vietnamese without corrupting or distorting the regime, all the while attempting to keep both the Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnamese infiltrators at bay.

Boot's tendency to oversimplify is present throughout the book, especially regarding the complicated story of the American war effort in Vietnam. Boot tells us that Lansdale was *avant garde* in reading Mao in the 1950s. He wasn't. Due to America's involvements in Asia, military leaders were already reading and discussing the writings of Mao and Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap.⁸⁶ Boot argues that the conventionally minded soldiers (symbolized by Robert McNamara and Gen. William Westmoreland) ignored the human and political element. Yet the bibliography indicates Boot never consulted the actual records of MACV (the American military command in Vietnam) or its predecessor, which tell a much different story. Boot relies on Lewis Sorley's narrative of the war (blaming Westmoreland for America's heavy-handed strategy and praising Gen. Creighton Abrams for his belated attempt to turn things around), and ignores Gregory Daddis' authoritative and detailed historical work rebutting most of Sorley's claims.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Jon Askonas, "A Vicious Entanglement, Part IV: If Only the North Vietnamese Had Read Galula," Oct. 6, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/a-vicious-entanglement-part-iv-if-only-the-north-vietnamese-had-read-galula/>.

⁸⁷ Daddis has written a trilogy of books dismantling the notion that a simple focus on "the conventional war" or on the use of force is to blame for America's loss in Vietnam: *No Sure Victory* (2011), *Westmoreland's War* (2015), and *Withdrawal* (2017), all Oxford University Press.

If these flaws don't ultimately undermine the book, it's in part because Boot is a faithful interpreter of Lansdale himself. It would be hard to claim that Boot is projecting his ideas about counterinsurgency onto Lansdale. If anything, Boot is usually (though not always) circumspect about Lansdale's zanier ideas, self-serving misconceptions, and occasional fables. In Boot's book, one can find evidence to support both Lansdale the genius and Lansdale the crank. Though he wants us to see Lansdale through the eyes of his admirers, as an honest, savvy, warm counterinsurgency guru, Boot is honest in admitting that criticisms about Lansdale have merit as well. Thus, Boot conveys Daniel Ellsberg's loving assessment of Lansdale as a "very shrewd, smart guy", but also tells us that most of Lansdale's bureaucratic rivals viewed him as "nutty, lightweight, stupid."⁸⁸ The book contains ample evidence supporting both the case for Lansdale's shrewdness and for his nuttiness. Lansdale's naïveté about the political roots of insurgencies is emblematic of his place riding the line between idealism and delusion. To his dying day, he affirmed the universal appeal of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.⁸⁹ If only, he thought, Vietnam's leaders were good enough, honest enough, and liberty-loving enough, Vietnam's people would be sure to follow. It's hard to reconcile Lansdale's enthusiastic tinkering in other peoples' governments with those ideals.

Boot concludes the book by arguing that, in lieu of extensive intervention or aid, America could parachute "skilled political operatives" like Lansdale into dusty countries the world over to "subtly influence the course of an important, if obscure, conflict." One cannot help but admire Boot's wistful romance and self-delusion, reminiscent of Lansdalian plots to destabilize Castro with fireworks or win the Vietnam War with an accommodating soothsayer. Without a generous dose of realism and humility about the ultimate political

⁸⁸ Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 470.

⁸⁹ Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 529.

forces driving an insurgency, Lansdalism risks turning into a kind of fantasy about plucky Americans manipulating local leaders with a wink and winsome smile (all for their own good, of course). Rather than his approach to counterinsurgency, Lansdale's true enduring legacy may be his guileless optimism wedded to an unfalsifiable belief in the universal appeal of American political ideals.

It is to Boot's great credit that he has included enough unvarnished historical material that different interpretations of Lansdale's life are available within the book itself. Outside of the sections on U.S. military operations in Vietnam, the biography gives a credibly balanced and detailed overview of the man's complex life and times — not an easy feat. Boot is right that we have a lot to learn from Lansdale. Guided as he was by intuition, there is no doubt that Lansdale in practice was superior to Lansdale in theory. And no one can argue that in America's counterinsurgencies we have spent too much time listening to “the natives,” lavished too many resources attempting to force actual reform, or hewed too closely to our traditional democratic and constitutional principles. It's similarly hard to argue with Lansdale's and Boot's belief that the civic action approach to counterinsurgency is far less costly than any of the strategies the United States employed in Vietnam and Iraq. Despite the book's shortcomings, in giving this extraordinary and inspirational American figure his due, Boot has done us all a service.

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