Vietnam Revisionism and the Ugly American

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

Conventional wisdom holds that the Vietnam War ranks high among the most contentious subjects in all of American history—and with good reason. A half century after the war’s bloodiest years, it continues to inspire impassioned debate on any number of issues. Yet on a few points, surprisingly broad consensus prevails among serious students of the war. Above all, most academic historians agree that South Vietnam was riddled with such monumental political problems that Washington had virtually no chance of achieving its goals no matter how it used its vast power. The U.S. military effort was, in short, doomed to fail by an incompetent South Vietnamese regime congenitally incapable of winning the support of its own people.

A few authors, however, disagree. Over the years, an assortment of historians, memoirists, and military analysts have argued that the United States squandered a meaningful chance for victory in Vietnam by making bad choices. Far from a fading vestige of wartime complaints about weak-willed civilians forcing the military to fight with one hand tied behind its back, this “revisionist” school of thought has gained momentum in the last two decades with publication of its most authoritative texts, Lewis Sorley’s “A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam” (1999) and Mark Moyar’s “Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965” (2006).

Now comes Max Boot’s “The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam,” a formidable, if ultimately unconvincing, addition to the revisionist literature on the war. Like most Vietnam contrarians, Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, has a clear policy agenda. By showing what went wrong in America’s biggest foreign-policy disaster, he aims to help the United States avoid the same mistakes in the future and thus reinvigorate the nation’s willingness to use power abroad. Such unashamed presentism may immediately raise red flags for many readers, but it should not. Consistently engaging and provocative, the book deserves the careful attention of anyone seriously interested in the Vietnam War or ongoing efforts to draw lessons from
America’s failure in Southeast Asia.

Boot locates the key U.S. failures in the 1950s and early 1960s, when, he contends, Washington squandered a real chance to create an effective South Vietnamese regime that could have stood on its own. It’s a compelling proposition: A different set of policies long before the Vietnam became a major geopolitical preoccupation could have headed off all the horrors that ensued after 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson concluded that he could prevent the collapse of South Vietnam only through the introduction of American combat forces. Most compelling of all, though, is Boot’s method for delivering this argument: a richly detailed biography of the Edward Lansdale, the Air Force officer and intelligence operative famous for his innovative approaches to counterinsurgency and nation-building in the early years of the Cold War in Asia.

Boot insists that his goal is to provide a “dispassionate” account of Lansdale’s life and times, yet the author’s adoration of his subject is clear from the start. Lansdale emerges not just as an unusually insightful policymaker but also as an exceptionally admirable person in numerous ways. Even decades of infidelity to his wife—a piece of Lansdale’s story that Boot tells in detail for the first time—seem to count in Lansdale’s favor by showing his willingness to defy convention and live authentically. In the opening chapters, we learn that the young Lansdale possessed an winning blend of friendliness, sincerity, pluck, and dedication to the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. Moreover, writes Boot, Lansdale’s childhood in laid-back Los Angeles, combined with the Christian Science beliefs that he inherited from his parents, imbued in Lansdale a cheerful, informal demeanor and instinctive tolerance for religious and racial differences—qualities rare among Americans of his generation.

These traits helped Lansdale find opportunities in the rapidly expanding national-security bureaucracy during and after World War II. More consequentially, Boot argues, they assured Lansdale’s success when he became a senior U.S. adviser to the Philippine government from 1950 to 1953 and then to the South Vietnamese government from 1954 to 1957. Boot is hardly the first to cast Lansdale in the role of humble iconoclast with a knack for connecting with the simple folk of Asia. Authors Eugene Burdick and William Lederer made a thinly fictionalized version of this down-to-earth Lansdale the hero of their 1958 bestseller “The Ugly American.” Boot performs the reverse feat, giving Burdick and Lederer’s “Colonel Hillandale” real flesh and bones.

Warmest praise for Lansdale comes in the section on the Philippines, where, Boot contends, Lansdale played a pivotal role in defeating the communist Hukbalahap rebellion and solidifying the nation’s pro-Western orientation. Unusually sensitive to the underlying social grievances that fueled the insurgency, Lansdale coached Filipino leaders away from the heavy use of force—the “blunderbuss approach,” Boot calls it (79)—in favor of the subtler arts of psychological warfare and civic action programs designed to bring tangible benefits to ordinary people. Lansdale’s success also owed much, in Boot’s view, to his friendship with Ramon Magsaysay, the defense minister who rode Lansdalean ideas to victory in the Philippines’ 1953 presidential election. All in all, Boot credits Lansdale with orchestrating “one of the classic counterinsurgency campaigns of the postwar world,” securing his renown as “a maestro of counterguerrilla warfare and a virtuoso of nation building” (168).

Lansdale carried those credentials with him to Vietnam, where he took charge of U.S. efforts to bolster the wobbly government of Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem following the country’s division at the seventeenth parallel. Boot recounts the array of problems that Diem confronted: weak government institutions, a factionalized population, and powerful rivals for leadership. Few Americans gave Diem much chance of consolidating his
control, much less turning South Vietnam into a competent nation. Yet Diem managed to accomplish both by the end of 1956—achievements that Boot attributes largely to Lansdale’s genius for counterinsurgency and nation-building. Boot lauds Lansdale for bolstering the Saigon government through shrewd psychological-warfare techniques but praises him most for forming a respectful partnership with Diem, who, like Magsaysay, trusted his American adviser and made huge strides under his tutelage.

These achievements did not endure, however. After Lansdale was transferred back to the United States, Diem faced a rapidly growing communist-led insurgency in the countryside and mounting challenges to his leadership. In response, Diem clamped down on dissenters and increasingly relied on his authoritarian brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Amid accelerating crisis, Diem’s enemies within the South Vietnamese army, backed by key U.S. officials, overthrew the government and installed a military junta in hopes that new leaders could turn the situation around. But South Vietnam’s political and military fortunes only worsened, while Lansdale, marginalized by an obtuse bureaucracy and military commanders dedicated to conventional warfare, struggled in vain to steer U.S. policy back toward his ideas.

In this chain of events, Boot suggests, lies the fundamental tragedy of the American experience in Vietnam. He argues that Lansdale’s successes from 1954 to 1957 provided a roadmap for success in Vietnam that other Americans and South Vietnamese could have followed. Instead, Lansdale’s ideas became the “road not taken”—a set of ideas mostly ignored if not actually denigrated by the unimaginative U.S. leaders who made policy toward Vietnam during the pivotal late 1950s and early 1960s. “How different history might have been,” muses Boot, if “Lansdale or a Lansdale-like figure” had exercised “benign influence” over the South Vietnamese leader and steered him as Lansdale had once done (297). To be sure, Boot carefully avoids any definitive statement that Lansdale’s ideas, if properly followed, would have brought success and headed off a major war. “Historical counterfactuals—‘could have been’ and ‘might have been’—must always remain a matter of speculation,” Boot concedes (572). Yet the thrust of the book is unmistakable: If only the United States had stuck with the ideas that undergirded Lansdale’s behavior during his brief stint in South Vietnam in the mid-1950s, happier results for South Vietnam and the United States would have ensued.

There’s a sound point in all of this that historians of the war have perhaps underappreciated: U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders had meaningful choices in the 1950s and 1960s and could have set events on a different track by choosing differently. Above all, Boot argues convincingly that Diem’s crackdowns on his political opponents significantly damaged the government’s standing in the eyes of its own people and fueled the insurgency that metastasized thereafter. Boot is also persuasive in contending that the coup against Diem turned out to be a major error that opened the way to further destabilization of South Vietnam and ultimately the major war that started in 1965. The scale and destructiveness of that war surely undermined U.S. prospects in Vietnam by wrecking havoc on the countryside and saddling South Vietnam with an overbearing American military occupation. No doubt Boot is correct as well in suggesting that sticking with Lansdale’s preferences for counterinsurgency and nation-building methods would, in the worst case, have brought failure at far lower costs than did the major war that consumed millions of lives.

But to recognize the validity of these points is not to accept Boot’s core contention—that Lansdale’s ideas comprise a genuine “road not taken” that might have led to a stable, secure South Vietnam if it had been followed. For one thing, it’s by no means clear that Lansdale’s success in the Philippines indicated any particular genius...
for counterinsurgency or nation-building transferable to other places and times. As Boot acknowledges, the insurgent challenge in the Philippines was different from the problems that would later confront the United States in Vietnam, not to mention Afghanistan or Iraq. Filipino elites mostly spoke English and operated within an American cultural idiom, making it easier for a U.S. adviser to exert influence. Meanwhile, the military problems were relatively straightforward since the Huk insurgents, isolated within the Philippine archipelago, could not easily draw on support from abroad as insurgents in other areas were often able to do.

Additionally, Lansdale’s successes in helping Diem consolidate his power between 1954 and 1956 do not necessarily mean that he had found the key to Vietnamese hearts and minds. Immediately after the partition of Vietnam in 1954, after all, Diem mostly faced the challenge of defeating rival political bosses and the armed movements that they led. Lansdale surely deserves credit for helping Diem subdue these adversaries and consolidating power. But this achievement said little about Diem’s legitimacy in the Vietnamese countryside, where a different kind of challenge—a communist insurgency supported by the Hanoi government—would grow in later years. Boot seems to believe that Diem actually made some progress in winning over the rural population and bolstering his leadership in the eyes of the nation. But he offers precious little evidence to support this point or, indeed, any close analysis of the attitudes or experiences of ordinary Vietnamese.

This shortcoming feeds into the biggest problem of all with “The Road Not Taken”: the pervasive assumption of Vietnamese submissiveness to the ideas that Lansdale espoused so energetically. Boot credits Diem with firm principles but also paints him as a passive leader endlessly open to persuasion and prone to bad decisions when Lansdale’s was not close to hand. Such a characterization comes perilously close to a tired imperialist fantasy that enlightened Westerners could—indeed, must—steer benighted foreigners to act on their own best interests. But the more immediate problem is that penetrating new studies rooted in Vietnamese sources have repeatedly described Ngo Dinh Diem as a defiant leader with distinct and deeply held views about the future course of his country that often clashed with American preferences. Diem may have liked Lansdale, admitted him to the Ngo family circle, and even requested his assistance on many occasions. But those facts do not mean Diem was prepared to subordinate himself to Lansdale. Above all, Diem, who was well aware of his narrow base of political support, likely had little interest in Lansdale’s enthusiasm for democratization or egalitarian reforms in the Vietnamese countryside.

These problems do not entirely invalidate Boot’s efforts to tease out larger implications of Lansdale’s life story for U.S. policymaking in the 21st century. It’s hard to quibble, for instance, with Boot’s reasonable suggestion that the United States would do well to rediscover Lansdale’s preference for relatively subtle forms of power to shape events overseas rather than resorting to large-scale military operations. Boot also seems sensible in urging that American officials work to understand the foreign cultures with which they engage. He is less convincing, however, in suggesting that foreign problems—whether in the Philippines, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere—always have American solutions, as long as latter-day Lansdales are on hand to craft and sell those solutions in the proper way. A practical concern is how to find or create such paragons of cultural sensitivity and civic virtue. A weightier question is why we should be so confident that American preferences, no matter how elegantly packaged, would persuade a world with ample reason for skepticism—far more so now, in fact, than in the 1950s.

On balance, then, Boot’s book, like the best
revisionist writing on the war, performs as useful service by unearthing new stories, posing provocative questions, and challenging interpretive complacency that sometimes afflicts scholarship on the U.S. experience in Vietnam. Boot helps illuminate the ebb and flow of policy ideas and the distinct possibility that things could have gone better for the United States if Americans had made different decisions at various points. The book does not, however, demolish the old idea that Americans, no matter how much aid and expertise they pumped into the country, faced long odds of achieving their goals at any reasonable cost. The possibility of better decisions does not, after all, mean that it lays within American power to shape the overall outcome. It may be that only the Vietnamese themselves were capable of doing that.

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