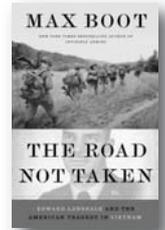


BOOK REVIEW:



by Max Boot

Head of Zeus: London; 2018; 768 pp.; ISBN 9781788542678 (hardcover); RRP \$59.99

The Road Not Taken is a biography of the adventurous life of CIA operative Edward Lansdale. It challenges our understanding of the Vietnam War – particularly the reasons why United States policy evolved as it did during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Lansdale was an eccentric, rebellious and charismatic officer who was able to bond with foreign leaders. He believed that the art of war was to attract the support of the uncommitted. His technique was to get to know the indigenous people and to treat them as equals. He believed that the key to Washington policy questions emanate upward from the foreign terrain itself.

Boot demonstrates how Lansdale pioneered a 'hearts and minds' strategy, first in the Philippines, then in South Vietnam. It was a visionary strategy that was ultimately crushed by America's giant military bureaucracy, steered by elitist generals and diplomats who favoured troop build-ups and napalm bombs over winning the trust and allegiance of the people.

Lansdale had served with the Office of Strategic Services in World War II. In the early 1950s, he was instrumental in defeating a communist insurgency in the Philippines, known as the Huk Rebellion, by employing a counterinsurgency approach – winning 'hearts and minds'. In June 1954, Lansdale initiated the first United States undercover operation in the nascent nation of South Vietnam and remained an important voice in policy circles until the early 1960s as the debate raged over how to best counter North Vietnam and the Vietcong.

Lansdale strongly opposed bringing large numbers of American combat troops into South Vietnam. He also argued that President Diem, for all his faults, represented the best available option for a non-communist government in Saigon. Nevertheless, Diem was deposed and murdered in November 1963. After this came political infighting, more coups, and the collapse of the strategic-hamlet programme – a strategy that had made some headway towards reducing communist infiltration into protected communities. The situation then went from bad to worse, with a massive American troop escalation, growing body counts, and a terror-stricken population. The war continued in this way until 1968, when General Creighton Abrams turned the strategy in a direction vaguely akin to Lansdale's intentions.

The most iconic moment of Boot's biography comes in 1961, when Lansdale, just back from Vietnam, briefs the new defence secretary, Robert McNamara. Lansdale "unceremoniously dumped his cargo of dirty weapons caked with mud and blood, on the secretary's immaculate desk". He told McNamara that these very weapons had been used "just a little bit ago before I got them". Lansdale

then talked about how and why an enemy with tattered pyjamas and sandals was "licking" South Vietnamese soldiers who had been generously supplied with equipment by the United States. "Always keep in mind," Lansdale told McNamara, that the struggle was not about weapons and the material things of life, but about "ideas and ideals", which the communists had in abundance. McNamara listened stone-faced, uncomprehending. After all, Lansdale's ideas could not be reduced to the logic of mathematics by which McNamara lived and breathed.

Lansdale was also alienated by President Johnson's military commander, General William Westmoreland, another hero of World War II, who oversaw the build-up of conventional American forces in Vietnam. In the mid-1960s, Lansdale wrote in a letter: "Are paddy farmers in a combat zone to be shot just because they inadvertently are standing in the way of Vietcong targets, or are they to be protected and helped?" Westmoreland would choose the former option.

The Road Not Taken is a detailed, warts-and-all examination of Lansdale's complex professional and personal lives. Through dozens of interviews and access to never before-seen documents – including long-hidden love letters – Boot traces the bold rise and the crashing fall of the 'T. E. Lawrence of Asia', from the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 to the humiliating American evacuation in 1975.

Lansdale, though, had ended his involvement with Vietnam in 1968. In Boot's judgement, the American war there "would have been more humane and less costly" if McNamara, Westmoreland and other American officials had taken Lansdale's advice. South Vietnam might still have fallen to the communists, but far fewer than 58,000 Americans would have died there.

Boot is presently the Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow in National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. He is a published military historian and foreign-policy analyst who has been called one of the "world's leading authorities on armed conflict" by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The book includes 54 photographs, three maps, end notes, a selected bibliography and an extensive index.

The Road Not Taken is a superbly researched history of the American war in South Vietnam with fascinating military detail and a firm grasp of both American and Vietnamese politics. Boot shows that the tragic outcome was by no means the inevitable result of forces beyond the control of the American political and military leaders. The book is essential reading for students of foreign policy and military strategy.

Marcus Fielding