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'Edward Lansdale's Cold War,' by Jonathan Nashel

The Ugly American

Review by JAMES GIBNEY

A SPECTER is haunting Iraq, the specter of Edward Lansdale. Most American troops now battling Iraqi insurgents are too young to know Lansdale's name. But during the cold war he was the Zelig of Washington's global counterinsurgency effort, squelching a rebellion in the Philippines, plotting the overthrow of Fidel Castro in Cuba and blocking a potential Communist takeover of Vietnam in the first days of America's involvement. As Jonathan Nashel, a professor of history at Indiana University, South Bend, plausibly asserts in his useful if workmanlike "Edward Lansdale's Cold War," Lansdale's exploits made him one of the few Central Intelligence Agency operatives known to Americans before Congress investigated the agency in the mid-1970's.

A journalism dropout from U.C.L.A. and a former adman with clients like Levi Strauss and Wells Fargo Bank, Lansdale joined the Army after Pearl Harbor. He was recruited into military intelligence by Wild Bill Donovan, the founder of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the C.I.A. In 1950, Lansdale was sent to the Philippines to quell a growing Communist insurgency. There, he orchestrated what one journalist later called "a brilliantly led counterrevolution," routing the rebels with sound military strategy, good governance and some flaky "psywar" gimmicks that played on villagers' fears of ghosts and vampires. Over the next three years, Lansdale helped to sell his friend Ramon Magsaysay, the defense secretary, to the Filipinos as their next president (even composing one of the campaign songs, "The Magsaysay March") and tried to influence Washington by persuading American journalists to write pieces like "Ramon Magsaysay: Our Best Friend in Asia."

"Do what you did in the Philippines," Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Lansdale before sending him to Vietnam in 1954. "Lansdale went on to play an immense role in creating and

maintaining the new regime headed by Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam," Nashel writes. In 1956, Lansdale returned to the Pentagon, where he helped develop the counterinsurgency tactics used by the Green Berets and other special forces. [John Kennedy](#) thought of Lansdale as America's James Bond, and in the early 60's Robert Kennedy put him in charge of Operation Mongoose, a fantastical \$50 million plan to topple Castro that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later characterized as "insane." (Lansdale's scheme to have submarines fire star shells over Havana on All Souls' Day as an omen of Castro's fall was derided by one wag as "elimination by illumination.") Lansdale remained involved with Vietnam, but after the death of Diem in a Washington-backed coup in 1963 and the introduction of American ground forces, he became what one Johnson administration aide called "a public nuisance . . . waiting around in an alcoholic haze for the Second Coming of Magsaysay."

Nashel is interested not so much in recounting Lansdale's life and career as in writing what he calls a "cultural mythography," exploring Lansdale's connection to American cold-war culture. Much of Lansdale's legend draws on the widespread belief that he was the inspiration for the main character in two books featuring an American fighting Communism in Southeast Asia - [Graham Greene's](#) "Quiet American" (1955) and William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's "Ugly American" (1958). Both were defining literary works of the cold war. But Greene vehemently denied any link with Lansdale; his Alden Pyle, he said, was based on another, lesser-known American operative. That didn't stop Lansdale from using the book (which he disparaged as anti-American) to his advantage. [Nashel shows how Lansdale collaborated with the Hollywood screenwriter Joseph Mankiewicz to turn the movie version of "The Quiet American" into what Greene called a pro-American "travesty," with the World War II hero Audie Murphy playing the role of Pyle.](#)

[But very little distance separated Lansdale from the fictional "Colonel Edwin Hillandale" of "The Ugly American." The novel was a warning that the United States was losing the cold war because of its ethnocentrism and arrogance. It suggested that only culturally savvy Americans like Hillandale, who were willing to take the time](#)

to understand the locals and get their hands dirty in the field (hence the "ugly" in the title), were going to be able to turn the tide.

In truth, as Nashel convincingly demonstrates, the folksy, harmonica-playing Lansdale may have been able to befriend Filipinos and Vietnamese, but he remained blind to the profound cultural differences that separated them from Americans. To Lansdale, the American revolutionaries at Concord and Valley Forge would have recognized the Vietnamese as "kindred souls." But his injunctions to Ngo Dinh Diem to imitate [George Washington](#) by becoming the father of his country were so maddening that one day Diem shouted at him, "Stop calling me papa!" As Nashel puts it, Lansdale "combined a nearly anthropological interest in the indigenous traditions and concerns of Southeast Asians with a passionate and fatal assumption that those traditions could only be leading in the direction of an American-style democracy."

Lansdale flickered on in the public consciousness after Vietnam, providing counsel to Oliver North in his effort to aid the contras in Nicaragua and conspiratorial fodder for the filmmaker Oliver Stone in his movie "JFK." But however well documented, Nashel's effort to portray Lansdale as purely a creature of the cold war seems misleading, if not mistaken. [Some two decades after Lansdale's death in 1987, the flawed assumptions that guided his thinking still thrive. Just ask the American pundits and policy makers fond of calling people like the former Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi the "George Washington of Iraq."](#)

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