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## The 1955 South Vietnam referendum

**Lansdale:**

[sync]...and became, what, Deputy Chief of Staff or something?

**Karnow:**

[sync]Yeah, now the time, you know, supporting Diem. For example, in the referendum between Diem and Bao Dai, remember the story about the different colored ballots? Was that your idea?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Yeah, well I don't want to get into that.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Yeah, but listen. We've got to do the record. Ah, I just wanted to...okay, let's ah, I mean, let's be candid about it. I mean, you've talked about this publicly anyway.

**Lansdale:**

[sync]...I think they were burned up in the first attack on the palace by those that overthrew him, and I have a hunch that the Vietnamese army scrambled out of there so fast they left those things behind. There might be copies around here, I don't know.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Okay...rolling?

[sync]In those days in Saigon, you used various psywar techniques in support of Diem, the kind of stuff that would, these days might be called dirty tricks. Could you describe some of them, particularly let's say in the referendum between Diem and Bao Dai and if you possibly could recall the date of that?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The psywar, psychological operations that I got into in Vietnam initially were with the Vietnamese army who had a psychological operations division in their army who had very scant equipment and who were hesitant about undertaking operations against the then Viet Minh, the communist groups, simply because of the lack of equipment. And most of my original advice to them was how to wage it without much equipment and word of mouth, rumor campaigns and so forth, which they later undertook up in North Vietnam along the defense of the Red River Delta.

[sync]And where they did have use of loud speakers that would carry at least a couple of miles, better than any equipment I'd seen before which was French equipment, how to use that. So it was a word of mouth type of a thing. Later on the referendum you're speaking of, between Diem and Bao Dai as the leadership was tied in with another piece of advice that I was giving Diem was to make it an honest election, to get a true result in the thing, that the people themselves had been honest, felt we had been honest and they would accept the end results without anything further being done on it.

[sync]Some of the people around Diem wanted to stuff the ballot boxes and do some things and I felt very strongly against that and was advising strongly against that and they said, "well, how can you influence?" I said, "well, if you want to do something, you're going to run the pictures of both men and the balloting will be...you put the picture, the piece of paper with the picture on it in the ballot box."

[sync]This was because many of the voters were illiterate and needed symbols to vote with. And they said, "if you're that much afraid of the thing, and I'm sorry to hear that you're afraid of the results because my own talking around with people show that you're going to win

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overwhelmingly. You don't need to cheat but if you want to prejudice the thing, print the picture of Bao Dai in a color that will be unfavorable so that people will feel like throwing it away and putting the picture of Diem in the ballot box."

[sync]And the color green has got a bad connotation among the people traditionally so Bao Dai's picture on this ballot was printed in green. And people threw that away and when they went in to vote and used Diem's picture. But I think he would have won anyhow.

**Karnow:**

[sync]What color was Diem's picture?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]His was black. Initially it was going to be red which is a happy color in Vietnam but then they figured the Communists used red symbols and they didn't want him to have any look of a communist about him. People were really against the Communists and not for Diem as much as for anybody at the time which showed them an alternative to going communist.

**Karnow:**

[sync]When did the referendum take place?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]That was in 1955, about April...no, it was after April-May...the fighting in Saigon took place in April-May. The referendum took place about a month later so my recollection is it took place in June or possibly early July [sic]. None of it worked.

**Karnow:**

[sync]When did the referendum take place?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The referendum for a people's choice between Bao Dai and Diem took place about July, June or July of 1955. [sic]

**Karnow:**

[sync]Do you remember what the results were?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The results were about 99% for Diem and about truly about 90% for Diem...I think there was a little bit of influence of the voters on that but I think that Diem's true vote would be about 90% for him.

**Karnow:**

[sync]So you're...are you satisfied that it was an honest election?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]I think it was honest enough in its overall decision by the people. I think it reflected the popular will.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Now, one of your...

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Incidentally, I've become an expert on dirty elections by trying to guard against them and its one of the reasons I've always worried that we would attempt in any international problem to resolve them by a popular plebiscite. Because I don't think that the nice people from the west and our politicians from good cultural background know enough of the dirty tricks that would be played by the other side to be able to guard against it.

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## The fugitives of North Vietnam

### **Karnow:**

[sync]Now, one of your major efforts at this time was the operation to encourage Vietnamese in the North to come down to the South. How many came down? What kind of psy war techniques were used there?

### **Lansdale:**

[sync]Well, the big movement of refugees from North Vietnam to South Vietnam started in late 1954 and reached its climax in early 1955. The decision that people had to make is quite similar to the decisions that they are making today even as we're talking here about getting out of the country and going someplace else. They had to give up a family home and leave the family holdings and ancient cultural background, even have a religious meaning to them. It's very deeply held by the people and go to a strange new place and start all over again.

[sync]And this was extremely hard for the people up in north Vietnam to do. At the time they needed several types of reassurance and their attention called the thing in a period of great crisis and emotional upset to them. So that the efforts of the propaganda were informative and also sort of urging them, nudging them real hard to come to a decision quickly because there'd be a period when free movement wouldn't be permitted.

[sync]So that the nudging on the thing, the part of psychological operations that were disguised as a communist order to their cadre inside of the big cities and main populated areas to undertake things that...or were later done by them. In other words there was a wrong timing for the communists...

### **Karnow:**

[sync]Excuse me a second. I think we're getting...there's an airplane overhead, and we're going to...

[sync]Let me repose the question. When we talk about the encouragement and psywar techniques, could you be a little more specific? I know you've written this, you've talked about it. Such things as, remember the Virgin Mary is going south...

### **Lansdale:**

[sync]Well, the propaganda, the psychological operations to really to encourage people up in North Vietnam to come to a final decision and move south, give up their homes, their backgrounds, their ancestral, ancestral shrines and their religious, spiritual beliefs of the people ran a very wide gamut of things and were devised in large part by Vietnamese who were up in the Hanoi area and at a time of great demoralization wanted to do something to express their feelings.

[sync]There were a number of things that happened. One of the means was orders out to people in the name of the communist party - which were fake orders - to have inventories made of the goods that they were holding to account for all their funds that they had and South Vietnamese piasters that would be exchanged for North Vietnamese dong or a different currency or the rate of exchange.

[sync]All of these were reminders of what was about to happen which were such that the communist cadre who were secretly operating inside of Hanoi at the time thought that they were real orders coming out from the...from their own headquarters out in the countryside and helped distribute these orders to the people.

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[sync]And the people outside got messages into their headquarters inside Hanoi to cease and desist doing such a thing and the people inside Hanoi, the communist cadre there, thought that this was a French operation and got messages, two of them allegedly from their own headquarters and didn't believe them. But this and the religious group of Catholics were talking about the Virgin Mary going south. Tremendous emotion about this.

**Karnow:**

[sync]How was this business, this line of the Virgin Mary going south...how was that broadcast? How was that, how did you...

**Lansdale:**

[sync]This was all word of mouth or some of it was by leaflet. There were a number of leaflets produced up in North Vietnam by Vietnamese groups. The Catholics had two bishops with them who were...and they had their own militia. They had their own armed forces and were giving direct orders and information to their people who were moving up out of their area in the countryside up into ports of embarkation in the north.

[sync]Some people were very reluctant about leaving home. Their families had been there for many, many generations so that the orders to these people and pleadings with them starting turning in to sharper and sharper form to get them to move and to have them obey their original impulse to leave which many of the people had already, but to overcome their reluctance in their time of great demoralization of the people.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Were you advising anybody of these psy war techniques?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Usually I was advising the Vietnamese who undertook these and many of the Vietnamese were extremely belligerent about what they wanted to do and I was trying to get them to be a little more rational and a little less destructive about what they were doing and still be effective.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Do you remember, do you recall any particular device that you invented that you thought was good?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Well, I recall one example. The Vietnamese are quite superstitious as a people and believe in soothsayers and...

[sync] (Interruption)

**Karnow:**

[sync]We got the, we got the wind! Is that the Concorde? The Concorde come over here?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Ah, I haven't heard it before. I don't think so. I think this is out of NASA.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Oh. (Cough) Okay?

**Karnow:**

[sync]I'm just going to go back on that one. Could you recall one particular device that you...

**Lansdale:**

[sync]One example of what was done in that period was that to play on the superstitions of the Vietnamese by...and their place in their society that soothsayers have by putting out a, sort of an

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almanac prediction, a publication of predictions for the near future of what was going to happen up in North Vietnam.

[sync]A number of the soothsayers themselves who were fortune tellers contributed to in their writings was actually put on sale up in Hanoi, Hai Phong area and made a lot of money. But it was done by a group that was a non profit group who really didn't know quite what to do with the money when it became a sort of a best seller.

[sync]But the fortune telling in this almanac was very accurate in that it was realistic and it told what was going to happen in the following months, which were based on the communist organizational practices already and which happened. And then went on and got quite fanciful in predicting a future which didn't quite turn out that way. If it had, why, Vietnam would not be communist today.

**Karnow:**

[sync]What, can you remember specifically the sort of things that were predicted?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Remembering details that far back...that was 34 years ago. About 20...I can't remember.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Let me ask you to make some sort of a judgment here, an opinion. Roughly a million people moved south, is that correct?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]That's correct.

**Karnow:**

[sync]A large number were Catholics and that created a strong anti-communist block in South Vietnam. Looking back, do you think it was useful really to have encouraged that because it really sort of made conciliation between North and South difficult in the future. Or would it have been...in other words, do you think in retrospect that we created a very hard core anti-communist group in the South that was going to make negotiations very difficult in the future.

**Lansdale:**

[sync]In looking at the refugee movement flow from north to south with close to a million Vietnamese, it's hard to make judgments of whether this should have happened or shouldn't have happened or whether the US should have helped or shouldn't have helped in the problem. The point is, we as a people our instincts are humanitarian and I don't think that the United States with means to do things could have as a people, as a nation stood by and watched a lot of people trying to get south with no means to go south.

[sync]And I think that there would have been about as many people going south by themselves and under their own determination as almost the total number of them. They would have been streaming out for years just as we've seen the people of...gambling with their lives on leaving Vietnam today. But in political terms, the movement took place at a time when there was still an agreement that had been reached at Geneva between the powers in which there was hopes for a plebiscite to let people decide what their country was to be afterwards.

[sync]So part of the political problem with it was to have enough people in the side where would be a freedom of expression by a vote, some freedom of a ballot box as against a predictably closed system up in the north end of the communists...enough so that the free choice of the people could be properly and truly expressed. So all of the people who were coming south were essentially to be voters, voting their own desires in a plebiscite that was looked upon as coming



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up in the future. The fact that it was later cancelled doesn't negate what the thinking was at the time about that.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Who was really in charge of the actual movement? I mean, this was...we were using American ships and American aircraft and so forth. Who was in charge from the American point of view of the movement?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The movement was managed...

**Voice:**

[sync]We don't need the question...

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The movement of refugees was governed by an executive who was Vietnamese, appointed by Diem and had an organization that was Vietnamese in its manning. There were separate problems in that that required technicians of a very high order. Diem had been quite mindful of the Palestinian refugees and the fact that there was still refugee camps in the Middle East with people stuck in the camps and not able to take up productive, meaningful lives where they were, and he was determined that he didn't want big camps in the South where people who were farmers not being able to farm or a fisherman not being able to fish and so on.

[sync]So there had to be all sorts of technical help on the movement that went beyond the usual one. Part of this was on transportation from the north to the south. Both the Americans and the French used their own transport both by air and by sea to get people out by ground over the highways, get them down to ports of embarkation and they would have liaison officers with the Vietnamese agency and would advise them. We would have have to do this next, we're getting so many people in this camp we've got to move them out and will you please come up with some orders and some way of getting them out onto ships or whatever.

[sync]And then getting them from the port of debarkation in the South out to temporary camps and then very quickly out into new communities. And in this a lot of Americans pitched in. We had to use the Americans that were on the scene which included our military. General Bill Rawson for example was in charge of the initial reception of refugees in the camps in the South and aboard ships and aircraft and into temporary shelter and then seeing that they would get on.

[sync]But he followed directions from and worked under the directions of a Vietnamese executive. And he's still mad at me, incidentally, for one night when he was out at midnight when a ship came in and people streaming off the ship were handing him their little children to hold while they picked up baggage and then take the children back. He said most of them had to go to the bathroom and they were wetting all over his uniform. And he wondered why an American army officer of high rank and dignity should be subjected to such a thing. But like all of us in the military, we have a tremendous fondness for children and helpless people who need protection and this more than made up for his discomfort.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Do you recall that there was somebody who really claimed to play a major role in this was Tom Dooley?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Tom Dooley was a somewhat controversial figure in Vietnam. He was in the Navy at the time, the US Navy, and was brought in by part of the US Navy task force to help with the port of

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embarkation up in Hai Phong, up in the Hanoi, and set up medical teams to work down on the docks and live with these people as they were getting crowded on these Navy transports to go south. Whatever else one might say of Tom Dooley, the look on his face as he was treating helpless people...

[sync] (Interruption)

**Karnow:**

[sync]Just start at that stage. Bad luck. Sorry about the planes.

**Voice:**

[sync]They say they have to have their own planes.

**Karnow:**

[sync]No, it's not that. I think that that's a really important part of it.

[sync] (Cross talk)

**Karnow:**

[sync]Okay? What was Tom Dooley's role?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Tom Dooley became quite a controversial figure in the American community in Vietnam but Tom initially was in the Navy and came in with the US Navy task force that was bringing people from North Vietnam to the South and set up a medical team on the docks in Hai Phong and worked day and night with the people trying to look after their medical needs as they were getting aboard the transports.

[sync]These were people that had just been pulled out of home and been on the road for days of walking and had been on the road for days of walking and had to bring their sick and their ill and those needing some first aid attention right along with them. But the controversy was that some of the Americans out there thought that Dooley was a very conceited person which he had some conceit to him...but anybody that ever went down and watched the look on Dooley's face as he treated those people, the look of compassion, of deep sympathy, wouldn't feel that way about him. Whatever else one might say was that he exuded a genuine love for the needs of these people and a great affection for the people that were his patients even temporarily. The same thing happened later when he went to Laos.

## American support and resistance in the North

**Karnow:**

[sync]One of the operations of the Saigon military mission - and this of course has been made public - was to send teams into the north to sabotage the transportation facilities and other things as the communists were coming in to take over. Could you describe some of these operations in detail?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]No.

**Karnow:**

[sync]It's in the Pentagon Papers.

**Lansdale:**

[sync]I don't give a damn where it is. It's not my doing. The charges have been made that I undertook or gave orders to or saw some things done in the way of sabotage up in North Vietnam

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at this time when there was a tremendous refugee movement going on. All I'd like to say about that is that this took place at a time of tremendous demoralization among the people in North Vietnam when they were having their whole lives torn asunder for them, that a number of these people wanted to hit back at an enemy in any way that they could, that an unrecorded bit of the history of the times is that a communist who were leaving South Vietnam at this same moment were performing bits of militant struggle, as they called it, in terms of murders and kidnapping, of hiding arms and ammunition in great supplies back in the South so that there was an under the surface very vicious struggle going on in all of this period, and that the people up in the north that wanted to hit back wanted to reciprocate in kind and have it be restrained from committing murders, if you will, and violent actions and have this turned over into less, ah, less militant types of action but still were satisfactory.

[sync]Now one of the things that was done, the transportation was hurt up in the north. The people, the communist side was going to take over all the transportation. Now one of the needs that they would have would be to get out into the highways and byways outside the urban areas and interdict the movement of refugees. Which took place. Anything that would hamper their ability to do this to my mind was morally okay.

[sync]And I did give a go ahead to undertake that thing. But they weren't against individuals, they weren't against people. They were really a very small facet of many other things that were happening and I feel myself that they were a very mild undertakings. The major problems were much more serious than that, demanded most of my attention and took place down in South Vietnam.

[sync]Because down in South Vietnam at this very same moment, the administrative structure had turned into a vacuum in the South. The central government, the provincial government and the district government had been run by the French. The French were pulling out. The Vietnamese were trying to take over and many of them were untrained in the thing, in being executives and administering a government.

[sync]The communications in the South were very bad and there had to be a tremendous emergency effort made to train and place civil servants into places throughout the country. To get them into areas where they were physically unsafe and try to protect them. And do so in a space of time that had immediate needs, enough to be successfully done inside of six months or so.

[sync]Now you don't train people and place them in places and get something running that fast, so it was a real emergency situation. And people up in the north would ask for help and make quick visits up there and to see how things were going along, and as they were clamoring for something, all I could do would be to suggest they do the least violent thing when they had violence in their minds and hearts.

**Karnow:**

[sync]What was the overall or longer-term effectiveness of having some stay behind teams in the north? How did that work?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]Well, they became teams through it, passing along information about what was happening and one of the very first acts of course of those new rulers up in the north was to unearth these people and to eliminate them. Which was done. To the best of my knowledge, the people that I



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helped put in the north are still alive or if not they're very old people in the scheme of things, but they kept alive and weren't discovered by the other side.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Was the, was there...could you look back and say that this was an effective operation?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]As an information gathering thing, it was peripherally helpful. I think there were other means of gathering information that were better than that and...that told us more.

## Conclusion to Lansdale's first service in Vietnam

**Karnow:**

[sync]Was there any notion at the time that there might be some kind of an uprising in the north against the communists?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The prospect of an uprising in the North, of a popular nature, were very slim. We knew that people were unhappy about what was going on in the north and after all, that had been the site of the battleground for many years so that people had seen what had happened and there was a secret government of the communists in much of the area and many times groups of people would try and leave there and be stopped at the road and couldn't get south and were being fired upon by troops and police to keep them in place.

[sync]But the actions of the new leaders was such that there was always an outside chance that large enough sections...segments of the population would get unhappy enough to want to do something. And this happened several times up in the north but the troops and the police who both performed much of the similar duties up there were separate from the public and the population in that they had better food, better rations, better clothing to wear and were better looked after socially by the government than were the people so they remained loyal and were more loyal often to the government than they were to their own family.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Why did you leave Vietnam in '56?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]I left Vietnam in 1956 because I felt that my work largely had been done. That there was a great deal of stability in South Vietnam. There were Vietnamese running their own affairs and coming to their own decisions and able to cope with their problems and that the Americans who were there were in a position to do their help and there were Americans training the Vietnamese armed forces. There were Americans that had established a very successful training institution of civil servants and the whole situation had a feel to me that it had a chance of a go unless some terrible mistakes were made. And I wasn't needed.

**Karnow:**

[sync]You had, you had written that one of the things that was important was to turn this into a pro-people fight instead of an anti-communist fight. Do you think at that stage it had been turned in that direction?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The...at that time in Vietnam there as a chance that that people were going to participate enough in political decisions in their country that the people in the government would consider

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themselves as one in some harmony with each other on the decisions. The communist political moves were always to separate the people from the government and to get their viewpoints to contest with each other to a point where it would be popular to carry out an armed fight against the government and to get support of the people.

[sync]I felt that when I left at the end of 1956 that the government and the people were on the way towards achieving enough unity and feeling between themselves so that the communist would have their political rationale and manipulation blunted and if this kept developing...I didn't feel that it had quite reached it yet but it was well on the way to becoming real.

**Karnow:**

[sync]Looking back, do you think you should have stayed?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]I've often asked myself whether I should have stayed or not and first of all, I lost a lot of sleep while I was there. I was very tired and I think even if I'd wanted to stay, I'd have gone off someplace and slept for a month or something.

[sync]On advice up at the top counsels, I think that there were some jealousies and some rivalries that arose after I left that I have been able to get people talking with each other, working with each other that I personally regretted that I wasn't there to smooth out some things that were clashes of personality, clashes of backgrounds being different, clashes based on regionalism and so on that I used to be able to get them talking with each other.

**Karnow:**

[sync]What do you...

**Lansdale:**

[sync]And this reached up into the very top ranks of government there, between the president and the vice president.

**Karnow:**

[sync]The, tell me...would you repeat that and say the South Vietnamese?

**Lansdale:**

[sync]The clashes and rivalries went up in between the president and the vice president of Vietnam, both of them friends of mine, both of them old friends of each other and all it took was someone from the outside like myself to remind them of their close ties and so forth in the past, to get them talking to each other. After I left they...

**Karnow:**

[sync]Stop, we've got the dog going, because there's somebody at the door.

[sync] End Part Three