



MEMORANDUM

TO: Ambassador Leonard Unger

FROM: Rufus Phillips

DATE: 10 November 1966

SUBJECT: Comments on Ed Lansdale's Paper of 3 October 1966,
entitled "Future Plans".

1. You asked me for my comments on Ed Lansdale's paper. The subject is of such critical importance to the entire American effort in Vietnam that I thought it worthwhile to try to put down my thoughts in writing.
2. First and foremost, I endorse everything the paper has to say. Not because Ed wrote it but because it is the clearest expression I have yet seen of how we must operate and what we must do in Vietnam if we are to succeed. There is little I can add to it, except to state unequivocally that we have not utilized to date, the political approach Ed envisages. Despite the lip-service continuously paid to its importance, the political aspect of the war in Vietnam remains the most neglected, while at the same time the most important, of all aspects. We still do not have a political plan for Vietnam, nor do the Vietnamese; and there is no meaningful political consensus among either the Americans or the Vietnamese. Thus, we cannot expect a Vietnam in revolutionary ferment to follow an orderly course of political evolution and development, when the principal actors on our side in this drama do not have a reasonably clear idea of where they are going, nor general agreement on how to get there.
3. With the recent Constituent Assembly elections, an opportunity now exists for the Vietnamese to construct a common national cause, to reconcile antagonisms within their society and to achieve a political consensus. In my considered opinion, they cannot do it alone. The question is not one of do we help, but how do we help.

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4. The Vietnamese want us to help; but they want understanding help given in acceptable ways. Much of the political advice now being given through traditional U. S. Institutions in Vietnam is for the most part not helpful enough to the Vietnamese. Too often this advice does not reflect a sufficiently detailed knowledge of the particular situation and factors involved to be applicable or useful. This is understandable and not anyone's particular fault. The institutions involved are not organized for this purpose, the requirements of their parent agencies in Washington are not primarily targeted at this task, nor for the most part are their personnel oriented toward or especially experienced in the activist political advisory and organization work which is needed. Vietnamese leaders know this and will state what is lacking if specifically asked; but they are not going to volunteer information about American shortcomings on something so intimately connected with their own national pride and sovereignty.

5. It seems to me that Ed's paper sets forth a clear-cut proposition which should be squarely answered. Either give the political ball entirely to the traditional U. S. Institutions; or give Ed a political charter. He does not have one now; and he cannot effectively help the Vietnamese put together a political plan and construct the political base they need to win without such a charter. I know from first-hand experience how limited, in fact, his room for operation is. To give Ed a real charter does not, of course, guarantee political success in Vietnam. However, in my opinion, not to do so will practically ensure political failure.

6. I would like to outline briefly what I think is likely to happen unless he is given a political charter. This is an admittedly gloomy view; but I can only rely on what my experience tells me. First, we Americans will have only a minimal influence over Vietnamese political events. We will not be able to prevent the GVN from sliding into a political crisis

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resulting primarily from regional frictions between Ky and his group of supporters (mainly northerners) on the one hand, and the southerners on the other. Despite the corruption of Generals Co and Quang, the southerners will rally behind them if Ky tries to force them out in a pure power play. Thieu will keep a foot in both camps, but as soon as Ky begins to go down, he will try to step forth as the leader. This dissension will disrupt the work of the Constituent Assembly and probably prevent the formation within it of any meaningful coalitions along non-regional lines. The beginning of a political consensus arising out of the elections will thus be largely dissipated. Pacification will fail to make progress, except possibly in statistics. The Vietnamese Army will go through the motions of committing troops to pacification but will not reform the Corps structure (synonymous with corruption and partisan politics), thus failing to reorient the Army or sufficiently improve morale and discipline for it to properly support pacification. The existing demoralization of the Army will be accelerated by the power struggle within the GVN.

Finally, the GVN will become increasingly paralyzed, the Assembly will be fractionalized and too full of antagonisms and discord to provide stability or come up with an acceptable constitution without a prolonged struggle, a leadership shuffle within the GVN will occur, the U. S. will have to start all over again with an essentially new government which will not represent any greater consensus than previous ones, and one more segment of Vietnamese leadership will have been put on the shelf. Whichever clique of generals comes out on top, it will be at the expense of national unity. Pacification will have to begin again under new leadership but still facing the same impediments of corruption and low morale. Eventually by 1968, a constitution may be approved and elections held but the lack of a national, non-communist reconciliation and consensus will expose the new Assembly and Executive to a continuation of extra-legal power struggles. By this time, we may well be faced with having to fight the war and perform pacification ourselves; or conduct dishonorable negotiations.

The scenario may vary but the end result will be the same: no political progress; therefore, no progress in winning the war.

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7. In conclusion, I consider the right kind of U. S. political input in Vietnam more important than hundreds of thousands of U. S. troops. To get the right input we need effective political action by Americans helping Vietnamese. All my experience in Vietnam tells me that this cannot be effectively done through existing, high level positions or U. S. Institutions and agencies, for reasons truly beyond the power of any Ambassador or even the U. S. Government to change. Therefore, we need a non-institutional, non-bureaucratic approach to this task. It must be led by somebody who has the trust and confidence of the Vietnamese, who understands them and who is sufficiently attuned to their problems to give them useful political advice. Leaving personalities aside, filling this role is critical to U. S. success. Surely, a few administrative and bureaucratic interests and prerogatives can be temporarily given up, and some institutionalized rules can be modified, to give the U. S. at least a chance of truly winning the war by helping the Vietnamese win their own people.