

Zorthian Interview ICF

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Z: Yes, I knew Ed and worked with him. Ed Lansdale was recruited, employed by, I guess the Pentagon recruited him, maybe even McNamara, but approved by Cabot Lodge in time for Cabot Lodge's second tour out there. I remember meeting Ed Lansdale because one of the people Ed in turn had recruited for his team was a fellow named Hank Miller, who was an associate of mine from USIA days, and Hank was supposed to be Lansdale's psychological operations man. Hank and Ed and I had lunch at the Hay Adams Hotel, in the course of a trip I made back here for consultation.

His recruitment, his assignment, his role was initially conceived, again, for a counterinsurgency situation. By the time Ed got out there with his team, some of whom were first-rate people, the situation had passed Ed by. The role he was designed to play really in my mind at least--I guess Ed would dispute this--was almost superfluous. We had made the decision to be there in force, and in force of all kinds, overwhelming force. And the thought of this little team of ten or twelve people, no matter how good they were--and in some cases at least there were questions about their competence for their role. But the thought of their being able to do the insurgency job, advise the Vietnamese in the way Ed had advised them back in the fifties was just outmoded, outdated. Every organization, AID, we, MACV, had structure after structure, platoons of advisers to the Vietnamese. Ed unfortunately, and his team I think, was the proverbial fifth wheel at that point, and his role within the mission became that eventually.

Now, he did fill a role. He was sort of ombudsman for a while to certain groups of Vietnamese. He ran that big sort of hostel he had as a house, and a lot of Vietnamese would stand there and moan about Westmoreland or Lodge or some commander or something. And you know, he had this mystique of [Ramon] Magsaysay and the early Diem period, of being a legendary guerrilla insurgency expert with a great feel for the people. So Vietnamese and some Americans who thought in those terms as against the reality that was facing them, which was conventional military units and a full scale war, would turn to Ed and get rid of their frustrations on him, brief him, talk to him, hopefully get through him to the Ambassador.

I hate to say this because I regard Ed as a perfectly sincere, decent guy who in the right situation was undoubtedly competent. But I just think he contributed very little to Vietnam in the years he was there because, as I say, the role that he could have played and what he could have contributed was no longer needed. The situation had long since passed.

G: Yes. Wasn't Daniel Ellsberg one of his boys?

Z: Dan Ellsberg was one of his people. Christ, he had that fellow Choate who later got into the sugar-coated cereal issue. He had Mike Deutsch, he had Hank Miller, he had--as I go along I'll think of more names. But he had a collection, some of whom came from his early Diem days. He had an ex-Philippine brigadier general who came from his Philippine days. He had people like Hank Miller who had been in Laos and so on.

G: Was Rufus Phillips with him?

Z: Rufus Phillips, who later ran for office here, Rufus was there. Quite a collection, and as I say, in their own place probably pretty competent, unorthodox, maverick, certainly not bureaucratic. I would hate to have been their supervisor.

G: They broke crockery, did they, when they--?

Z: Well, they broke crockery, but by the time they got around to it, it was such a small thing. In the mission prior to the entry of the conventional military units it might have been a bigger factor. By the time they got to breaking crockery around they were just an annoyance, sort of a side show, not a mainstream. . . . See, CORDS took over. Bill Porter took over that job. What the hell was Ed supposed to be doing there? He and Bill didn't communicate too damn well. Sure they went through the motions, but. . . . And Ed wrote a book about this which I've never read but I'm told is very bitter.

G: Lansdale did?

Z: Yes.

G: Well, I know he wrote a book about the early days.

Z: No, this was a subsequent one. I'm not sure it ever got published.

G: Well, I looked for it.

Z: Well, he's down the road here, down in Mount Vernon.

G: Yes, he's in McLean.

Z: Ask him about his book. I haven't seen it, so I don't--

G: I haven't either.

Z: I'm quoting secondhand.

G: Okay. 1964 was an election year.

terms of the mission council, is the intensity of the experience, the pressures that were on, the constant spinning, spinning of wheels, sometimes with movement. But LBJ, as I say, his overwhelming personality, his style of doing things, I don't think has ever been really evaluated, his impact on Vietnam has never been properly evaluated. The intensity and the pressures, and the nature of those pressures on the mission council, and through the members of it on the agencies working out there I think has not been really probed enough, has certainly not [been] appreciated enough.

G: That's a very good point.

Z: That and this whole thing of the constant choice of the lesser of two evils is something I think that tends to be forgotten.

G: Has anybody ever captured LBJ?

Z: I don't know. I did not read Doris Kearns' book [Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream]. I guess that's one that tried most of all. So I really don't know. No one has captured him in anything I've read.

G: How about Merle Miller? Have you read Merle Miller's book [Lyndon]?

Z: No, that's a more recent one. Both books I've gotten and I've put aside like so many other things. But the man, for better and worse, in many ways was a giant, both physically and sort of in personality terms. In other ways he was his own worst enemy. But the man was a presence you never got away from, even if you were ten thousand miles away.

G: I think that's a good place to end it.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV

PREPARED REMARKS BY BARRY ZORTHIAN
FOR SESSION V
"VIETNAM RECONSIDERED: LESSONS FROM A WAR"

Our meetings this week continue a process that one sometimes feels began even before Ho Chi Minh returned to that troubled land in the forties: an examination, a searching, a conference on Vietnam, its problems and its lessons. How often have we looked at this land in these almost forty years and how often have we been frustrated in finding answers. The only hope I see in our sessions this week lies in increased perspective, in the "re" in "reconsidered", in the calibre and the knowledge of the participants. Before myths become history, let us hope that we can shed more light than heat this time at least.

Except for a brief visit in the fifties, I went to Vietnam almost exactly nineteen years ago - very junior by some standards, a real old-timer by others. Mine were what I call the Middle Years - the period between the Diem government overthrow and the build-up of American forces to a figure over one half-million in mid-1968. I might note parenthetically that the press corps in Saigon grew proportionately almost as much during the same years. I speak with intimate knowledge only of these years. For the others, my experience is that of an interested and involved observer but not of a first-hand participant. The distinction is important. Vietnam was many things in many periods. There are few generalities that apply to the whole period of American involvement and few lessons that are valid for the whole spectrum of our participation and experience.

This particular panel has been given the task of evaluating the quality of reporting - a judgment that must be just as complicated and inconclusive as the attempt to evaluate all the other major aspects of this most complicated and controversial of our nation's experiences in this country. One is tempted to respond to the question of whether the reporting in Vietnam was good, bad or in-between with the flip answer "all of the above." Such a response is probably closer to the truth than any flat, conclusive judgment.