

Excerpted from the R. Gilpatric Oral History with Ted Gittinger

RG: No, no, I think at that juncture we were all pretty agnostic because during the briefings that the President got during the transition between the Eisenhower Administration and his administration, Vietnam was never brought up as a major topic. Berlin and Laos were the principal foreign policy problems.

G: Edward Lansdale, a figure of some repute, was in your office at this time, was he not?

RG: Yes, I inherited him from Jim Douglas, my predecessor as the deputy secretary of defense. From the beginning I found him a very useful, knowledgeable assistant. He was a soldier of fortune type. He was not trusted by the professional foreign service officers because he had been in the Philippines and also in South Vietnam before. He tended to operate sort of out of channels, and they didn't think he was their man. Therefore they weren't keen about having him have too much authority, but he was useful to me, to McNamara and later on of course Robert Kennedy picked him to head up the whole Mongoose Operation. My experience with him was that he was useful, you didn't have to accept all his judgments or ideas, but I was I think instrumental in getting him his generalship. I recommended him. He was a colonel when I came in, but I recommended him for a promotion to Brigadier General.

G: Was any of this tied to the fact that he seems to have had pretty direct ties at one time to the Dulles brothers?

RG: That didn't come up that I can recall. There was simply this feeling that he was a solo performer, an operator who didn't go along with the usual channels and guidelines in the foreign service field. But later on of course it is well known Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge pretty much insisted that Lansdale be set out to be his aide, or one of his aides, when Lodge became ambassador of South Vietnam.

G: Why didn't that happen earlier? Didn't Diem ask for him earlier?

RG: Well, the State Department resisted his going back to Vietnam as long as they could, but when Lodge came in and he made it a condition they had no choice. In the meantime, Lansdale was working for me and of course he was one of my principal assistants during that period I headed up the task force from March until May. And then he continued to act as my adviser on a number of things. For example, I was the Defense Department representation on the 54-12 group that oversaw intelligence operations, and I consulted him in that regard. And he also when I was on the counterinsurgency group that the Attorney General set up, I used him there. I used him right along until he went to Vietnam in 1963 with Ambassador Lodge.

G: What was there to the rumor that he at one time was being considered to be the ambassador to Vietnam?

RG:I never heard that. If it was a consideration, the word didn't reach me, and, as I say, I think it was just simply and solely Lodge's insistence on having him that got him out there. And then when he came back, he--or maybe it was before, I've forgotten the sequence of events--but he spent a lot of time on that Mongoose project destabilizing Castro, with Robert Kennedy.