

# STAN KAR NOW

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freedom or whatever, and more flexible government than--and of course each one of those guys was a politician or a candidate for some public job himself. Of course later when some of them got into office they didn't really do very well themselves.

At any rate, maybe at a risk of repeating myself, it was very interesting. I liked that kind of--that atmosphere; I liked that Asian atmosphere. You spend your time talking to lots and lots and lots of people and accumulating a tremendous amount of material, a lot of it contradictory, a lot of it phony. There was never a lack of information in Vietnam. The main question was how you interpreted what you had and how you separated the fact from the fancy, if there was any fact. And as I said, the important thing from a political point of view was and is, and it's true I think in other parts of Asia, [it's] not what was true that was important; it was what people thought was true that was important. Because if rumors swirled around and people believed them, that had just as much political impact as if the stories were actually credible.

G: Do you know Ed Lansdale?

K: Yes. Ed Lansdale was a master at promoting rumors, because he understood this. My own opinion of Lansdale [is] he was in many ways very naive, because he thought that was the whole game, when in fact that was only a little part of it.

G: Did you see him when he went out there, I guess it was in early 1961?

K: Let's see, I must have seen him. I saw him later when he came back in 1965, when he set up a mission there. And I've seen him around here.

G: Yes, he lives in McLean.

K: Yes, we interviewed him. I spent a lot of time with him over the years. G: The reason I ask you that is because that is almost a direct quote of something that he said.

K: Really?

G: He said there are no secrets in Asia, only the need to determine which story is true.

K: Since he put out a lot of phony stories, he--

(Laughter)

The important thing was to know what impact--listen, I may be getting ahead, getting too much--

G: There's nothing sacrosanct about this list of questions.

K: Yes, yes--no, no, that's fine. The next few I guess are not too hard to deal with.

I wrote the book as a companion to the television series because, while I thought that television had its limitations--I'm a writer, I'm not a film maker, but as we began to get going in the television series, which took us a long, long time to do, I began to realize at the very beginning that while you could do tremendous things on a screen, and also you can convey a lot of drama on a screen that you cannot convey in a book, there's a lot of analysis and complexity that you can't get on a screen. The television is a medium of impressions, of drama, but it's not a medium of information. It's very hard to deal with very complicated situations on television. So it seemed to me that it was necessary to do a book as a companion, and the book is not merely a replica of the television series; it's not the script, it's a completely separate book. The television thing was a group project; the book is my own. But they seemed like natural companions to one another. And I suppose if I were doing the book again, the main thing I would do is get a word processor so I could do it faster.

(Laughter)

I think it came out pretty well.

G: Let me ask you a question about the TV program. How much of the film that was taken was not used, that was useable but had to be cut for reasons of economy and so on?

K: Generally, by just a rule of thumb you're operating on about a ratio of about one to ten, or one to fifteen. For every foot of film that you use, you throw away nine or fourteen feet. In some cases, we had to dispense with interviews because they didn't work out well. We

could have an interview that I could use in the book but just didn't work out on the film. Sometimes it just didn't lend itself to the making of the film. Sometimes the interviews, especially with older people, didn't turn out to be terribly intelligible. We spent a lot of time interviewing Averell Harriman, for example, and it really wasn't terribly good. Some of Lansdale was good; some of it wasn't. Durbrow, for example, I don't think we used any of Durbrow. But we did a lot of interviews that we ended up--

G: Let me ask you about a couple of those. Robinson Risner, for example, the POW.

K: Yes, I didn't do that one, someone else did it, but yes, I know about it. I thought it was a good interview.

G: He's in Austin.

K: Yes.

G: Lou Conein. Did you do that one?

K: I did that, yes. Conein's a friend of mine, a good friend.

G: Is he?

K: Yes. Have you talked to him?

G: Yes. Let me ask you a question. He told me that he had told the true story of the Diem coup twice, first to you and next to me.

K: Let me just say about Conein that--I mean, maybe you don't want this; this is just sort of mechanical.

Many years ago I thought that Conein would make an interesting book. He's got an incredible career behind him. So I spent about seventy hours interviewing him. This was all before this Vietnam thing. We had known each other in Vietnam for a long time. And I did a tremendous amount of research on that, not only interviewing him, but then I had to cross-check a lot of what he told me, and a lot of what he says is very exaggerated and a lot of it is not even true at all. I sometimes wonder whether he has told some of these

stories so many times that he thinks they're true. But anyway, so I had to go and interview all sorts of people who knew him, his ex-wives among them [Hmong women?], and so forth. And in the end I never did it; I didn't do a book out of it. But I had a lot of material and so I used a lot of it in my book. I like Conein; we get along very well and I think he's a very funny guy.

The coup story: he gave me a lot of the coup story; there's a lot of other stuff on the coup, particularly a long account I think that appeared as a series in a Vietnamese newspaper that was pretty much inspired by Tran Van Don, the general who was the liaison guy with Conein. That was translated into English by an American by the name of Nach, Jim Nach, who is now serving in Manila. I got a copy of it and then I asked Conein to annotate it for me, to tell me what he thought about it, and he did, which was quite useful. I may be a little pissed off that he made a lot of copies and started handing [them] around to people, because I thought I had an inside track on that story. But at any rate, he was very, very useful. That's jumping ahead to this question, about--he was a big source for me on the coup, even when it was happening. But I'll come back to that later. I spent a lot of time on that story.

G:Okay. What's been the general reaction to the book?

K:It's been really amazing. I mean, it's just something I was unprepared for. When we started thinking about doing a television series, which was in the summer of 1977, [when] the idea was first floated to me. I thought it was a good idea because I was interested in the story, but when the executive producer, Richard Ellison, and I started thinking about that, nobody seemed to be interested in the subject. And we had great trouble getting money for our series, because of this lack of interest and because I guess in the eyes of a lot of corporations that normally give money for public television, it was also a controversial subject that they didn't want to touch. But then it came out. It's gotten the highest ratings

had a limited amount of film, but I spent a lot of time with him, taping him on a tape recorder. And if you wanted, you could actually do a whole story of the communist side of the war just in terms of his own experience. He was very interesting.

G:Do you want to go back to the Diem coup? I think that's where--

K:Yes; now, let's see, "What were the best sources of the story on the Diem coup?" Well--

(Interruption)

Let me just go back a moment in the story of the coup. A very key guy in South Vietnam throughout the Diem period was Diem's secret police chief. He was a man called Tran Kim Tuyen. And he was a very odd little guy; he was tiny, he was less than five feet high, and he spoke in a very squeaky voice. My understanding was that he was both the chief of some kind of a secret police organization that wasn't actually police, but a secret internal intelligence organization, and also an external intelligence organization keeping track very much of Vietnamese living abroad. And both these operations had been set up with the help of the CIA.

Early in 1961, not long after the first abortive coup against Diem, the paratroopers' coup of November 1960, I was introduced to him by one of his people, one of the guys that worked for him, a guy I mentioned earlier, Dong Duc Khoi. It was a little bit surprising to me that he decided to surface at that time. To my knowledge, as I said earlier, there weren't many reporters in Saigon and, secondly, I guess for one reason or another, he picked me to meet. But anyway, he was at that stage beginning to get concerned about the future of the Diem government. He was beginning to get worried that the Diem regime, partly because of Diem himself but also very much because of Diem's brother Nhu and Madame Nhu, was going to alienate a large part of the population and, as a result, play into the hands of the communists. Tuyen, who was a Catholic from the North who had come down in 1954--his name was Tony. We called him Tony; he had a

Christian name. [He] was very perceptive and a guy who was beginning to get very concerned that unless the government straightened out, the communists would take over and of course he would be very much--he would be particularly vulnerable. His CIA guy, by the way, the guy who was his chief CIA adviser, was a guy called Phil Potter, who is now dead. [He] retired from the CIA, went back to Vietnam to try to make money there, and I don't know what happened to him. I knew Potter because Potter was a friend of my wife's from the time that she was in Vietnam. So I can remember quite vividly that he came to lunch with me and began to sort of let on that he was not happy with the way things were going. Then I used to see him quite a bit. By the time we got to the middle of 1963 he was one of the various groups that were starting to plot against the Diem regime. And the important thing to remember is that there wasn't one group at the beginning. My colleague, [Robert] Shaplen, who has written some stuff about the coup, claims that this guy Tuyen was the key guy in the whole thing. That's nonsense. He was just one of the people. Thao was another one. And I've described in my book the various different currents that were operating. So I mention him only in one respect because he was one of the guys.

But I'll just continue, because there was an interesting little story; I'll just play out this story. By now, by about I would say about September of 1963, the regime, especially Nhu, realized that Tuyen, who had been working for him, had turned against him, which was of course par for the course in Vietnam where everybody was double-crossing everybody else anyway, and they decided to get him out of the country.

So they appointed him to be South Vietnamese consul in Cairo, but he never went there. He left the country, went to Bangkok, and then from Bangkok he flew to Hong Kong. And he called me up when he got to Hong Kong and said, "Here I am in Hong Kong." He was really lost in a place like Hong Kong. He didn't speak any English and he didn't

speak any Chinese. He moved into a little hotel and just used to sit around all day reading books or something like that.

There were a lot of Chinese who used to come to see him because they were related to Chinese living in Saigon, and I guess there were a lot of pay-offs his organization got from the Chinese and so forth. At any rate, so he then was kind of in this exile in Hong Kong. I was shuttling back and forth to Saigon, so he started asking me to take letters and things back to Saigon, which was useful for me. I didn't want to get involved in the thing, but at the same time if I carried some letters somewhere I knew I was dealing with one of his confederates, which was useful for me and it helped me to meet a lot of these guys.

So as I say, that was one, and just to finish the story, when the coup took place on November 1, I wasn't in Saigon at that very moment; I was in Hong Kong, but I managed to--and he knew it was going on because he sat in his hotel room listening to the radio. So I took him back--I decided to go back to Saigon, I mean I decided to rush down there as quickly as I could, and I took him along with me. He decided that since he'd been in the plot, now it had been successful and he was going to go back. So we flew back together, in sort of a complicated way. We had to take a long way around because the airport was closed. Anyway, when we got back there and we landed, and he went back to his house to see his wife who was still there, and he hadn't seen her in a couple of months. I came around the next day to see him and I was sitting in his living room with him with a--I had taken another colleague along, Takashi Oka, who is a *Christian Science Monitor* guy in Peking now. We were sitting there talking with him, and some South Vietnamese army officer came in and said something to him in Vietnamese which I did not understand. And he said, "General So-and-so wants to see me, so let's resume this talk tomorrow," or tonight or something. And off he went. They took him to jail.

(Laughter)

I guess things had changed so rapidly that he was a target of somebody. And he was in and out of jail, but he survived it somehow and he was out again, but with no job in the government. Nobody trusted him. I talked to him on the phone not long ago; he's living in Cambridge, England, running a boarding house for Vietnamese students. And I think his wife was dying the last time I talked to him. At any rate, he's just one figure, but he was kind of useful and it led me to a lot of other things.

Of course Conein was useful, but then Conein was not divulging a lot of the things that were going on, nor was Lodge. Actually, at the time that the conspiracy was going on, we were only getting little hints of it. Thao again was another good source at that time, and again a case where--at that stage I had known him a couple of years, and he had his own coup group, too. In fact, he had his coup group; Tuyen had his, they blended, and then they joined some general and that general joined other generals. It was like a lot of little streams feeding into a river. And I saw a good deal of him. The big problem I had was I was then working for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and I couldn't--I was also working for the *London Observer*, so that gave me a sort of weekly outlet, but the *Saturday Evening Post* wanted long pieces. And one of the things I had to do was to put together the whole story of the coup just after it happened. So that's what I did. When I went back there [I] started going around seeing as many people as I could, to piece it together, which wasn't easy to do. I think, looking back on it, it pretty well stood up. Then one of the things I was able to do was when I got all my notes together--which were a massive number of notes, given to volubility of the Vietnamese. I mean, everybody talks a blue streak. And I really had to go around and see commanders of different military units and try to figure out who was doing what at each time. And I ended up with a massive amount of information which had to be boiled down to about five or six thousand words. But when

I had all my notes, I had a friend in the CIA, so I sat down with him and I tried to check them against what they knew about this thing. So they made some corrections, although I don't think that they knew a lot, because the only guy in the station who was then operating on the thing was Conein, and the others were frozen out of it.

G:Who was chief of station then?

K:It had varied. A guy called [John] Richardson had been there and they removed him. I'm not sure who was then the chief of station.

G:Was it David Smith?

K:Could have been. But I mean whoever he was, the only Americans who were really involved were Lodge and Conein, to my knowledge. Oh, there was one other guy. They had a couple of other guys at the early stage, but the real liaison, to my knowledge, with the generals themselves, with Tran Van Don, was Conein. That was the only channel, and as far as I know Conein reported directly to Lodge. There may have been some clerks or something that sent messages back, but I don't know how much the rest of the CIA people knew about it. Lodge incidentally, I want to say, to the extent that he was telling anybody anything was also very open with the press. I mean, when Lodge arrived, politician that he was, it changed the whole complexion of the relations between the embassy and the news media. The first thing he did when he got off the airplane was to have a press conference at the airport, and from then on he was very accessible. Never had any problems.

G:Would you say he courted the press?

K:Yes, of course, yes. Again, being a politician, he realized that he could get his messages back to Washington much more quickly and get them back to the United States much more quickly by talking to newsmen. And while you weren't getting from him in those days any--he wasn't giving people day-by-day reports on the conspiracy, even to the extent that

he knew it, because there was a lot that wasn't known even to him. The inner workings of all the Vietnamese factions were beyond him or anybody else. But what he was very good at was conveying his attitudes, and it was very clear from the moment he got in there that he was determined to see this coup take place. I don't think he anticipated that Diem would be killed, but he--and of course there was a lot of duplicity in his position, too. I think he tried to minimize the role that he himself played in the coup. I mean, he kept saying it's basically there, but we now find the confidential cables which made it clear that he was the one, he felt that he was the one, who planted the seed. And I'm convinced now that of course it would never have taken place if he had tried to discourage the generals involved. They wanted to be absolutely sure that they were going to get American support afterwards, and I think that if they hadn't, if there had been any reluctance to give them that guarantee, I think they would have been much more cautious about doing it.

G:How did you react personally to the news of the coup? Did you think this was a step in the right direction?

K:Yes.

G:Not necessarily the assassinations, but the coup itself.

K:Yes. No, the assassinations were a bit of a shock. I mean, no one expected that. But then again, you get back to what was the prevailing mood, I think, in the American press, and I don't think mine was much different, which was that the feeling was--I did a piece for the *Saturday Evening Post*, I think it was about the fall of 1963, and the headline, which I didn't write, but the title of the piece was, "We Can't Win the War with Diem." And that was generally, I think, the prevailing view of the news media, that our presence, our commitment to Vietnam was valid but that we had this client government there that just was incapable of dealing with the situation and you had to remove it, and if we couldn't