

RECORDED HELMS
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Interview by G. Finger
Helms -- II -- 8

G: Well, I'd propounded that thesis because it has been put forth by some highly placed people.

H: There is truth in it. If it had been allowed to run that course, it probably never would have escalated to the next level above.

G: Of course we don't know whether the communists would have escalated it or not.

H: That's the point.

G: Good.

In 1961 General Lansdale I think went on special mission--

H: Before you get to that, I'd like to say that--you have a question here whether there were disputes concerning what the CIA should or should not be doing in regard to activities in Vietnam and Laos. Back in the late fifties and early sixties on up through the Johnson Administration the arguments about how the CIA should be deployed in Southeast Asia were nonexistent. Everybody was anxious for them to do everything they possibly could. So that controversy arose much later.

G: Okay.

Were you familiar with the Lansdale report of 1961?

H: Yes, sure, because Lansdale, after his time in the Philippines, during which as you recall, he helped get President Magsaysay elected, he then went on to Saigon in the middle fifties. While he was there he obtained a fair reputation for himself as a fellow who knew how to operate and was good at teaming up with the

Vietnamese and staying behind the scenes, had been advising them on political warfare and covert action and things of this kind. So when he went back again, was sent back again and wrote this report in 1961, obviously it attracted a good deal of attention. Also, the Kennedy brothers thought Lansdale was a pretty unusual fellow in that he understood these things a lot better than most people and that one should depend on Lansdale as the man who was a good initiator of proper work with locals and how to influence them and how to affect them and so forth. Lansdale's program, as I recall it now, his recommendation was for what later turned out to be known variously but I guess the most familiar term is pacification. I believe that when he made that report, that was about the time that Dan Ellsberg was involved in these matters in Vietnam. But in any event, it was widely read in government, let's put it that way.

G: You don't have to answer this if you don't like, and I'll understand why you wouldn't, but Lansdale was a rather legendary figure I think in the press and popularly, although I think Graham Greene didn't think as much of him as a good many other people and saw him as rather a sinister figure than otherwise. But within the CIA, was his reputation equally illustrious?

H: He was well regarded in the CIA, but one must realize that those who were working side by side with him and examining exactly what was going on did not think that he was the hot ticket that a lot of other people did. Lansdale was a very good promoter,

and he was a very good promoter of Lansdale. One can't blame a person for being that. I'm not being critical, I'm just stating a fact. But those who worked side by side with him didn't believe that he was the miracle worker that other people made him out to be.

G: The clay feet became more visible the closer you got with him.

H: And later on, you know, he became very much involved in the Cuban operations of the Kennedy Administration, Operation Mongoose and various others that have become well known now, and obviously he did not shine up his reputation in those activities.

G: I believe he has since recorded that he was very much opposed to the Bay of Pigs operation. Do you have any knowledge of that?

H: I have no knowledge of that one way or the other.

G: Now later in 1961 there was another famous mission to Vietnam, the Maxwell Taylor-Walt Rostow mission. Did CIA have any input into that?

H: I think that CIA had an input into everything to the extent that people obviously went around and talked to the CIA officers. They did not have an official input as papers written in headquarters and added to these reports, but obviously people were talked to, and in the Taylor-Rostow mission to which you refer here, I have no doubt that they did talk with the people that were in Vietnam for the CIA at that time. I never actually saw this report as best I can recollect, I think I was briefed on it orally. It obviously had an influence on President Kennedy, there wasn't any doubt about that.