

Boot, Max. 2018, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (pp. 254-276). Liveright. Kindle Edition

16. The Viper's Nest

There was a sudden madness that nearly tore Vietnam apart at the seams.

—EDWARD LANSDALE

“ONE man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Never has this hoary adage been more applicable than in the case of Trinh Minh Th   (pronounced *tay*), a warlord who was **reviled by the French as a mass murderer and revered by many Vietnamese as a hero**. Both sides could agree on one thing: he would play **a paramount role in determining whether the Ngo Dinh Diem regime would live or die**. In fact, the chief challenge to Diem’s rule in 1954–55 did not come from Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh at that point was too focused on consolidating his own authority in North Vietnam to actively challenge Diem’s nation-building aspirations. The primary obstacles were the three sects—the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and the Binh Xuyen—which fielded their own armies. And no sect general was more prominent or mercurial than Trinh Minh Th  .

Trinh Minh Th   would become notorious in the English-speaking world following the publication in late 1955 of Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*. The novel features a series of terrorist explosions in Saigon that are blamed on Th   and indirectly on Alden Pyle, a na  ve young CIA officer who is revealed to be helping him. In January 1952, there was, in fact, a series of bombings in Saigon. Th  , who hated the Communists and the colonialists with equal fervor, was responsible, but at that stage he did not have American support; the United States was still backing the French war effort. Norman Sherry, Greene’s biographer, quotes an unnamed CIA officer: “To my knowledge no single agency official was—at that time—in contact with Colonel Th  . And I would know.” Yet the French blamed the Americans for assisting in the killing of their countrymen, and it was from them that Greene picked up the story. The French already hated Th   for dispatching a grenade thrower who in 1951 had assassinated the French commander in Cochin China. Thus it is not surprising that when Lansdale became involved with Th  , French hostility toward him became venomous.

In real life rather than fiction, Lansdale’s relationship with Trinh Minh Th   began in September 1954, more than two and a half years after the Saigon terrorist bombings. At a time when Lansdale already was preoccupied heading off coups, undermining North Vietnam and moving refugees from the North, **Diem asked him to take on another task: to persuade Th   to integrate his men into the national army**. Unknown to Lansdale, Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Nhu

was carrying on his own negotiations to achieve the same result. But Lansdale, as the representative of the United States, had prestige and resources that Nhu could not match.

Thế was only thirty-two years old but already, in Lansdale's words, a "legendary rebel guerrilla chief"³ who had been described by one correspondent as "the most charming cut-throat [he] had met."⁴ Originally trained along with other Cao Dai militiamen by the Japanese during World War II, Thế had at first fought alongside the Vietminh before turning, along with the rest of the Cao Dai, against Ho Chi Minh. With French help, the Cao Dai formed a militia to protect themselves against Communist encroachments. Thế became its chief of staff. In 1951, however, he broke off from the mainstream Cao Dai and began to fight both the Vietminh and the French in the hope of creating an independent, non-Communist state. By 1954, he was in command of twenty-five hundred battle-hardened fighters operating out of Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin) Mountain, an extinct volcano more than three thousand feet high located sixty miles northeast of Saigon.

Ed Lansdale and Joe Redick set off in a car with several other teammates to find this mysterious warlord on September 15, 1954, wearing casual clothes as though out for a picnic, with guns carefully tucked away. They cruised down the highway past "lonely watch-towers and little roadside forts siting in the rice paddies" and then rattled along a "rutted dirt road" until they were surprised by a group of guerrillas who emerged silently from the jungle. In the lead, Lansdale noted, was a youth "no more than five feet tall and maybe weighing ninety pounds dripping wet. . . . Wearing a faded khaki shirt and trousers, tennis shoes on his feet, weaponless, hatless, he looked as if he might be a guide sent to take me to his leader." Lansdale was astonished to learn that "*this wiry youngster was the villainous guerrilla hated by the French!*"

Lansdale and Redick hid their car in the jungle and hiked with Thế up the mountain. Eventually they reached a small shelter in the jungle that served as Thế's headquarters. Their conversation required two translators—one of Thế's aides translated from Vietnamese into French and Redick from French into English—supplemented by facial expressions and gestures. But then, Lansdale had found in the Philippines that even a complete absence of any common tongue did not impede his efforts to communicate with Negrito tribesmen. Lansdale found himself liking Thế "instinctively," and Thế, in turn, took a liking to Lansdale. Lansdale stressed that Americans were dedicated to principles of liberty. "That's what we fight for!" Thế replied. Lansdale urged him to join the South Vietnamese army. Thế said that this would be a good idea in principle, but there were too many "bad elements" in the army—too many "French officers" such as General Nguyen Van Hinh. He did promise to take care of Diem in case he was overthrown by Hinh and in principle confirmed his support for the Diem government. He also promised to release three French prisoners he was holding.

The rest of the visit was spent with Thế taking Lansdale around to see his guerrillas—"platoon after platoon of barefooted men dressed in the *calicot noir* pajamas of the southern farmers." Thế's men were so impoverished that every time Lansdale went from one platoon to another a runner went ahead of him carrying to the next platoon commander the only "French officer's shoulder insignia" in the entire camp. But their weapons were immaculately clean, and more munitions were being manufactured in makeshift jungle workshops run by anti-Communist Chinese expatriates. "Outside of the Foreign Legion troops, for whom I have real respect as fighting men, I feel that these troops are the toughest in the country," Lansdale wrote.

A few weeks later, Lansdale received word that Trinh Minh Th   was going to see him at his house in Saigon. When Lansdale stepped outside, he found cars full of French troops who had heard that Th   was coming and were ready to shoot the guerrilla chief on the spot. Suddenly a small sedan turned the corner and began heading toward Lansdale’s bungalow. All eyes examined the car’s occupants, the tension mounting with every yard that it advanced. “The driver was a small man, wearing nondescript khakis, an old hat pulled down over his eyes,” Lansdale noted. “The passenger on the back seat was a fat and prosperous-looking Vietnamese, dressed in a white sharkskin suit, fanning himself with a panama hat.” As the driver sprang out to open the back door, Lansdale saw that it was none other than Trinh Minh Th  . Lansdale escorted the fat passenger, who turned out to be Th  ’s interpreter, into the house, while loudly telling the “chauffeur” to go around to the kitchen “where there would be refreshment for him.” Th   had come seeking Lansdale’s help to arrange a truce between his own forces and those of the Hoa Hao general Ba Cut. Lansdale had to explain that he had no influence with Ba Cut. So the fighting resumed. Th   badly wounded Ba Cut; his life was saved only because the French evacuated him to a hospital.

A few months later, after more behind-the-scenes negotiations involving Ngo Dinh Nhu as well as Lansdale, the renegade warlord finally agreed to join the national army. On February 13, 1955, Th   and his twenty-five hundred men marched through Saigon toward a reviewing stand where the prime minister and other notables were gathered. The troops wore their black pajamas, faded to a “rusty gray.” The outer ranks wore sneakers, the inner ranks no shoes at all. “The absence of heavy boots made the march seem almost ghostly,” Lansdale wrote, although their weapons remained in excellent shape, clean and ready to be used. A French officer sneered, “Look at what Lansdale calls soldiers!” Lansdale turned around and shot back, in a retort that won him no French friends, “Hold it! You French types were never able to beat them!”

Lansdale was feeling triumphal that day as Th  ’s men gave him “big grins” and “extra salutes.” Th  ’s decision to join forces with Diem was the first “public moment of real fun” he had had since Ramon Magsaysay’s presidential inauguration fourteen months earlier.

*

NUMEROUS OBSERVERS would claim that Lansdale had bribed Th   and other warlords to join Diem’s side. Lansdale always denied it, even if he did occasionally slip up and refer to “payoffs” himself. “I know of no bribery of the sect leadership by Ngo Dinh Diem, by France, or by the U.S.,” he said. Lansdale insisted that “the most I ever ‘paid’ him was a cup of coffee or a meal when he visited me,” and that Th   more than repaid the favor by giving him a pair of mongooses, which his poodle, Pierre, forced to live under the refrigerator, where they took “turns hissing and growling at him.” Instead of bribing Th  , Lansdale claimed to have enticed him with a vision of “something he had wanted all his life, a free united country.”

The controversy over Lansdale’s relations with the sect leaders was not dissimilar to that involving T. E. Lawrence, a figure to whom Lansdale was now being compared. (The French had taken to calling him “Lawrence of Asia,” which in their minds was hardly a compliment, given how Lawrence had schemed to stymie their colonial designs in the Middle East.) Lawrence had been accused of buying the loyalty of Arab tribal leaders, but a British officer who worked alongside him said, “Lawrence could certainly not have done what he did without the gold, but no one else could have done it with ten times the amount.” In truth, Lawrence was so successful because he had “established himself by sheer force of personality” among the Bedouin tribes. In

Lansdale's case, his offers of friendship and his appeals to the patriotism of men such as Th  were not insignificant; previously Th  had refused to take money from the French. But, contrary to Lansdale's denials, his idealistic appeals were combined with more tangible inducements to "rally" to Diem.

The entire dispute over whether Lansdale "bribed" Th  and other sect chieftains seems to be more semantic than anything else because Lansdale, at least in private, did not deny providing funds. His own CIA report was to say, "At Ambassador Heath's request, the U.S. secretly furnished Diem with funds for Th , through the SMM [Saigon Military Mission]." Whether this constituted pay, as Lansdale preferred to describe it, or bribes, the word generally used by others (including his CIA colleagues), is a matter of taste. Published estimates of the total spent by the CIA to win over the sect leaders are in the range of twelve million dollars, equal to a whopping hundred million dollars in today's currency. The CIA's in-house history says there is "no basis" for this immense figure, an assertion echoed by Lansdale without, however, providing an alternative accounting.

Lansdale was willing to spend money not only to win over the sect leaders but even to kill them if necessary. In a section of the Saigon Military Mission report not declassified until 2014, he admitted furnishing two million piastres (\$57,000) in a "large suitcase" to Diem to pay a former Vietminh activist who had vowed "to get rid of" Ba Cut "through Vietminh who are close to this Hoa Hao rebel." The scheme never came to anything, and Diem, "somewhat embarrassed," returned the money, but Lansdale's willingness to back the operation exposed a ruthless streak that would surface once again a few years later when he was asked by the Kennedy administration to "get rid of" Fidel Castro.

Lansdale was enough of a realist to provide the necessary cash to achieve his objectives, even if it required a murder for hire, but he was so eager to protect his image as an idealist that he was deeply reluctant to admit what he was up to, not least to himself. He was not as naive and unworldly as he pretended to be, even if he had a powerful ability, which might be traced back to his upbringing in Christian Science, to repress unseemly aspects of reality that he preferred not to acknowledge.

*

WHATEVER THE exact amount, the CIA payoffs to the sects were insufficient to avert an uprising against Ngo Dinh Diem. The prime minister had alienated the Binh Xuyen, whom he considered to be "gangsters of the worst sort," by revoking their license in January 1955 to operate the Grand Monde casino, a major source of revenue. He also threatened to end Binh Xuyen control of the Saigon-Cholon police. The Binh Xuyen leader Bay Vien responded on March 3, 1955, by forming a United Front of Nationalist Forces with the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao to oppose Diem. But while the sects were united in their opposition to Diem, they had no consensus candidate to replace him. If he had been overthrown, the most likely consequence would have been unstable rule by an ever-shifting junta lacking popular legitimacy—what, in fact, transpired when Diem was finally assassinated in 1963. Little wonder that a local newspaper referred to the political situation as *un panier de crabes* (literally a "basket of crabs," but really meaning "a nest of vipers"), a description that Lansdale heartily endorsed. As he later wrote, Vietnam was in the grip of a "sudden madness" that nearly tore the country "apart at the seams."

Much to Lansdale's dismay, Trinh Minh Th  and another sect general he had wooed, Nguyen Thanh Phuong, were part of the United Front. Lansdale took it upon himself to try to bring them back to Diem's side. Since Phuong's chief complaint was that Diem had not fully delivered on his American-financed promise to pay him and his men six million piastres (\$171,400) a month, Lansdale's arguments were undoubtedly buttressed by further offers of aid along with his trademark empathy and understanding. Having finally succeeded in once again winning over the two Cao Dai leaders in an all-night parley, Lansdale drove them over to the American ambassador's residence on the morning of March 22 for what he assumed would be "just a brief and friendly call." He was surprised to see that J. Lawton Collins had assembled a phalanx of aides armed with notepads, and even more surprised that instead of welcoming the two wayward warlords back into the fold, Collins began castigating them for their disloyalty. Lansdale cut off Joe Redick before he could translate Collins's words and abruptly ushered the Vietnamese out the door on the pretext of feeding them breakfast.

In a subsequent cable to the State Department, the ambassador petulantly complained that talking with Th  and Phuong "was like trying to reason with two stubborn four-year-old children": "They were either lying very ineptly or they were alarmingly stupid considering the influence and power they wield. In most instances their accusations were without foundation and their arguments without logic. Trying to determine from them exactly what they wanted was completely futile." In reality, both Th  and Phuong were savvy survivors who were maneuvering for maximum advantage in a Byzantine world of Vietnamese politics that Collins did not understand. The ambassador's *cri de coeur*, full of stereotyped insults, was typical of the condescending mindset that had afflicted many American representatives in their dealings with Asians in the past and would do so again in the future as a colonial imbroglio escalated into a larger war. Much of Lansdale's effectiveness derived from the fact that he did not share Collins's prejudices: he knew that the Vietnamese leaders, however duplicitous, were rational and that it was imperative to win them over rather than dismiss them with befuddlement and belittlement.

That Lansdale was able to win back these two Cao Dai warlords was a considerable coup for Diem, but the prime minister still faced a formidable array of foes. By Lansdale's estimate, the Binh Xuyen had as many as 10,000 troops, the Cao Dai 30,000, the Hoa Hao 50,000. (Other estimates were considerably lower.) The sects' military might became clear when Binh Xuyen troopers in green berets set up checkpoints and sandbagged positions across Saigon. They soon had control of all food supplies moving into the city and had placed mortars within range of the presidential palace. They even had gunboats on the Saigon River.

Diem had 151,000 troops of his own, but only 10,000 of them were deployed around the capital, and he could not be sure of their loyalty. Before fleeing to Paris at the end of November 1954, the mutinous General Nguyen Van Hinh had handed over command to General Nguyen Van Vy, another pro-French Bao Dai loyalist. Bao Dai, the chief of state who was widely seen as a French puppet, was collaborating with the sect leaders.

Lansdale found Diem in his office on Monday, March 29, 1955, poring over large-scale maps of the metropolitan area, pointing out locations where Binh Xuyen mortars had been spotted. There were disquieting reports that the Binh Xuyen had acquired heavy 81-mm mortars that could rip apart the Norodom Palace as if it were a Lego set. Yet Lansdale saw no sign of panic in either Diem or the army troops fortifying the palace grounds. A few days earlier, Lansdale had worried about Diem's passivity—his tendency to cry on Lansdale's shoulder rather than to take

charge.²⁹ But the crisis brought out the best in the prime minister. “I was struck by his calm,” Lansdale wrote. “This was a man in control of himself.”

*

ON THE night of March 29–30, only a few hours after visiting Diem, Lansdale was awakened at his spacious new home at 65 Rue Duy Tan, eight blocks from the presidential palace, by the sounds of explosions and the “stutter of machine guns and the popping of rifles.” His poodle, Pierre, took refuge in a narrow space under the bed, leaving only “two big eyes” visible. Joe Redick telephoned Diem to see whether he was all right. An aide reported that the premier was checking the troops on the front lawn while still in his pajamas and slippers. There had been shelling of the palace but no ground assault. The infantry combat, which Lansdale could hear in the distance, was going on in Cholon, where the Vietnamese National Army was driving back Binh Xuyen assaults. Lansdale called Ambassador Collins to share this information and, at Collins’s request, set out for his residence to help manage this crisis.

Driving through the streets of Saigon in the predawn darkness, Lansdale saw that “each tree trunk, shrub, alley and fence” sheltered troops whose “weapons and eyes” followed his car as he drove past. At one intersection, he came upon a column of Vietnamese army troops blocked by French tanks. (The French still had thirty thousand troops in and around Saigon.) The Vietnamese commander was loudly remonstrating with the French officers to let his men through, but to no avail. “I could only conclude,” Lansdale wrote, “that the French military wanted the Binh Xuyen to win, inflicting defeat not only on the national army but on Diem and his government.”

Collins told Lansdale that, in order to stop the shedding of innocent blood, he had agreed to a French proposal for a cease-fire. Lansdale argued that a “cease-fire now merely put off the day of reckoning for which each side would prepare more thoroughly.” But once again the CIA operative and the four-star ambassador were talking past each other. Lansdale had little choice but to trudge home in the early morning hours as the cease-fire was taking effect. He found both government and gangster forces in combat positions on his block, watching each other warily in the evanescent early-morning darkness. As soon as Lansdale opened the door, Pierre bolted into the street. While Lansdale frantically tried to catch his dog, he heard “subdued laughter” from the soldiers on both sides crouched around the house.

*

FOLLOWING THIS brief outbreak of fighting in late March 1955, an uneasy peace descended on Saigon. Jeeploads of men raced through the streets of Cholon firing submachine guns. “Both sides want to show me pictures,” Lansdale wrote, “of their lads who’ve been fished out of the river with their throats cut.”

The French hand in the unrest was obvious to Howard Simpson, an American information officer who drove past roadblocks manned by gangsters to visit the Binh Xuyen headquarters in Cholon; he was particularly struck by one “long-haired officer” in a red sport shirt and camouflage pants, his “gold-capped teeth” clamped around an “ivory cigarette holder,” a cocked revolver in his hand and a holstered automatic on his hip. As Simpson sat talking with his Binh Xuyen interlocutors, he noticed French army motorcycle dispatch riders roaring in and out. A French captain in his shirtsleeves wandered out of the radio room before quickly scuttling away

when he saw Simpson. “The French are running the goddamn show,” Simpson muttered, a conclusion shared by Lansdale but denied by Lightning Joe Collins.

Rather than blame the French and the sects for fomenting instability, Collins had joined the French in concluding that Diem was the culprit. The ambassador had never much cared for the prime minister; he viewed Diem as a “small, shy, diffident man with almost no personal magnetism,” hobbled by an “inherent distaste for decisive action.” Lansdale thought Collins talked to Diem as if he were a “country squire looking down his aristocratic nose at a bumpkin, and a non-too-clean bumpkin at that.” Ironically, now that Diem was moving against the sects, Collins was not crediting him for taking “decisive action” but rather blaming him for “operating practically a one-man government.” On March 31, the day after the inconclusive skirmishes in Saigon, Collins cabled the State Department, “I seriously doubt this can last long.” He argued that “it is, therefore, essential to consider possible alternatives to present situation,” proceeding to list several political figures who could replace Diem.

John Foster Dulles told his brother, Allen, that “it looks like the rug is coming out from under” Diem.³⁹ On April 11, 1955, the secretary of state sent Collins a momentous cable, revised personally by President Eisenhower. “In light of your reiterated conviction that Diem cannot gain adequate Vietnam support to establish an effective government and that other men are available whose designation as Premier would improve the existing status,” it said, “you are authorized to acquiesce in the plans for Diem’s replacement.” Dulles then summoned Collins to Washington to work out “a program for replacing Diem.” Given the CIA’s recent record of toppling Mohammad Mossadeq in Iran in 1953 and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, that was no idle threat: this was one administration that did not hesitate to remove foreign leaders if it felt that doing so was in America’s interest.

Before Collins departed, on April 20, 1955, Lansdale asked him what he should say if Diem wanted to know whether U.S. support for him was wavering. Lightning Joe disingenuously replied that Lansdale might “hear all sorts of rumors of other things, even stories that the U.S. wouldn’t support Diem.” But Lansdale was to “disregard such tales” in the assurance “that the U.S. would continue to support Diem.” And then Collins flew off to conclude the process of dumping Diem.

*

IN WASHINGTON, Collins persuaded the president and secretary of state to go along with a scheme to kick Diem upstairs into a largely ceremonial office of president while delegating real authority to a new premier. At 6:10–6:11 p.m. on Wednesday, April 27, 1955 (7:10–7:11 a.m., April 28, in Saigon), Dulles sent out cables to the U.S. embassies in Saigon and Paris announcing the new policy, yet less than six hours later, he sent out another cable retracting his earlier decision and warning the embassies to “take no action whatsoever . . . until further instruction.”

What happened during those six critical hours to make Dulles change his mind? Edward Lansdale had learned what was in the offing and had acted to stop it. At 8:48 a.m., Wednesday, Saigon time (7:48 p.m., Tuesday, in Washington), Lansdale sent a telegram to CIA headquarters arguing “that the Diem government represented a better chance for success than any non-Vietminh government it would be possible to form in South Vietnam. Failure to support Diem would cause great damage to American prestige and would doom any successor government to Diem’s to failure. The only winners would be the Viet Minh.” Lansdale’s messages prompted the “stay order” from Dulles, along with a request for Lansdale to provide a full report that could be

discussed at a National Security Council meeting on the morning of Wednesday, April 28, Washington time. With this insubordinate intervention, Lansdale had won Diem a stay of execution—much to Collins’s consternation.

*

WHILE POLICYMAKERS in Washington were going to bed on the evening of April 27, events in Saigon were moving at tsunami speed. In his memoir, Lansdale recounted getting a phone call from Diem at his Cholon office at noon on Wednesday, April 28, asking him to come to the Norodom Palace. He and Joe Redick set out immediately in Lansdale’s new car, a big, black Citroën sedan that had been smuggled out of Haiphong by Lou Conein. As they were approaching Place Khai-Dinh, they saw bicyclists falling in the street while cars were stopping and their occupants were sprawling on the pavement. At first it looked like a “massive slapstick scene,” but then they heard the sound of machine-gun fire, which had previously been muffled by surrounding buildings. A number of the bicyclists had just been killed. Lansdale and Redick stopped their own car and joined the others lying flat on the pavement. A few minutes later the firing died away, and they resumed their journey. The war between the government and the Binh Xuyen, which had started and stopped a month before, had just resumed.

Lansdale and Redick found Diem on the porch of the palace. According to Lansdale’s memoir, Diem had heard that “Ambassador Collins had obtained President Eisenhower’s approval for a change of U.S. policy toward Vietnam.” Diem wanted to know whether it was true that he was being “dumped.” Lansdale supposedly responded that he didn’t believe this report and asked Diem where he got his information. This account makes no sense, given that just a few hours earlier Lansdale had been sending cables to stop Diem from being dumped. He was dissembling when he claimed in his memoir, “None of these high-level deliberations in Washington were known to me in Saigon at the time,” probably to protect his CIA sources, possibly even Allen Dulles himself. As for how Diem found out about the decisions being made in Washington, that information was either shared by Lansdale himself or by the prime minister’s American friend Wesley Fishel, who was back in the United States.

Just as Lansdale and Redick were returning from the Norodom Palace at 1:30 p.m., they heard a “series of loud explosions from the direction of the palace.” Binh Xuyen mortars had opened up on the prime minister’s residence.

Who fired the first shots? The French blamed Diem, and the most careful reconstruction of events, by the historian David L. Anderson, supports that conclusion. On April 26, 1955, Diem had resumed his efforts to replace the Binh Xuyen–appointed chief of police with his own man, knowing that the Binh Xuyen would resist by force. Not waiting for the gangsters to strike, Vietnamese army troops had gone by truck to Cholon on April 28 and gotten into a firefight with the Binh Xuyen. The mortar attack on the presidential palace was a response. The French were convinced that this armed confrontation was all Lansdale’s fault for encouraging Diem to “take armed action.” In reality, having told Diem how close he was to losing U.S. support, Lansdale did not need to do much to spur him into action. Diem must have realized that he had nothing to lose by launching an attack against the Binh Xuyen. If the offensive succeeded, Diem would give the Eisenhower administration no choice but to support him. And if it failed, he would lose power and possibly his life. But he would lose power anyway if he did nothing and waited for Washington to oust him. The time for action was all the more propitious given that Collins was in transit from Washington and therefore unable to intervene, as he had done a month earlier.

*

LANSDALE TAPPED into his wide network of friends to keep track of the fighting. Early on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 28, for example, shortly after his return from the palace, Lansdale received a call from the Time-Life correspondent John Mecklin. He and a photographer were in a police station where a company of Vietnamese National Army troops was being besieged by a Binh Xuyen battalion. Mecklin was worried that they would all be killed. But then the army troops counterattacked and put the Binh Xuyen to flight. The gangsters were running away as fast as they could, shedding their uniforms as they ran. “Who said these army guys wouldn’t fight!” Mecklin shouted before hanging up.

Lansdale set out for the embassy to share his information. He was astonished to discover that the diplomats “were debating which adjectives to use to describe the low morale of the Vietnamese Army troops who now had to stand up to the high-spirited Binh Xuyen.” They were getting their reports from the French, and they did not believe Lansdale’s more optimistic assessment. Lansdale seethed about desk-bound diplomats—“the precious lads who sit in offices or make the cocktail circuit and know the surface of a country so brilliantly.” But he knew that if the president accepted the State Department’s gloomy estimate, Diem was done.

Urban warfare has always been a grim, confused, ugly business. From the fighting in Jerusalem in AD 70 between Jews and Romans to the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, close-quarters combat in cities has always led to extensive casualties and property damage. The Battle of Saigon in the spring of 1955 would be no different. As Lansdale drove around on Wednesday afternoon, he could see “dense clouds of smoke” darkening the skies above Cholon. A large section of the city was on fire, with both sides blaming the other for starting it. Because fire trucks could not get through the front lines, at least a hundred people died in the blaze and many more were injured or rendered homeless. In front of his team’s “pool house” on Rue Taberd, Lansdale found “burned-out and shell-shattered vehicles,” which gave “the street outside a junkyard look.” Even the hard-bitten Lou Conein had been shaken when he saw a mortar shell fall right on a Renault taxicab, killing a family inside, including three children.

Given that the “pool house” was packed with explosives due to be shipped to agents in the North, a hit from a mortar shell would have been a catastrophe, setting off secondary explosions that would have killed everyone inside. The possibility of the house being taken in a Binh Xuyen ground assault could not be dismissed either. Some of the team members asked for permission to abandon the building. Lansdale refused. He thought the house was defensible, with walls thick enough to withstand an 81-mm mortar round. Inside, Lansdale noted approvingly, “all files were fixed for instant destruction, automatic weapons and hand grenades distributed to all personnel.”

Once Lansdale had determined that all his men were safe, or at least as safe as they could be under the circumstances, he returned to his own house and sat down at a typewriter to produce the report for the NSC meeting that John Foster Dulles had requested. Rufus Phillips marveled at how Lansdale was able to bang out a single-spaced, twenty-page cable in a single sitting “without pause and without changing a single word.” (Another team member noted that Lansdale was “one of the best typists in Saigon.”) Lansdale’s cable gave a firsthand account of what he had seen, namely, that the army was winning, and concluded with a warning that “no nationalist aspirant for power in Vietnam had as much to offer as Diem and no pro-French leader could succeed against the Viet Minh.” This report reached Washington at 7:44 a.m. on Wednesday, just

in time for the NSC meeting. It was nighttime in Saigon, and Lansdale was so exhausted that he went to bed, not knowing whether he had saved Ngo Dinh Diem or not.

At the NSC meeting in the Cabinet Room, Lightning Joe Collins reiterated his conviction that “Diem’s number was up.” For the first time, however, President Eisenhower was beginning to question the judgment of his “personal representative.” He “commented that it was an absolute sine qua non of success that the Vietnamese National Army destroy the power of the Binh Xuyen.” When the meeting broke up, the participants had tacitly moved away from Collins’s plan to get rid of Diem. Lansdale had succeeded in buying Diem yet another reprieve. Now much would turn on how the fighting went. As John Foster Dulles told his fellow NSC members, “The developments of last night could either lead to Diem’s utter overthrow, or his emergence from the disorder as a major hero. Accordingly we are pausing to await the results.”

*

THE NEXT morning, Thursday, April 29, Lansdale got an angry reception from French officers at TRIM headquarters. One of them was holding a Vietnamese girl who had suffered a shrapnel wound. “Look what Lansdale has done,” he declared dramatically. “He makes war on children!” Unfazed, Lansdale handed the girl to another American officer and left for MAAG headquarters with Rufus Phillips and Colonel Le Van Kim. They were in town to request additional support for the pacification campaign in central Vietnam, Operation Breaking Chains, which had started a week earlier. Thus Lansdale had to simultaneously manage both pacification in the countryside and an urban battle in Saigon—challenges that dwarfed anything he had experienced in the Philippines. He wrote to Pat Kelly, “While it has been an extremely trying time, I’ve got about a thousand tigers by the tail and I’m afraid to let go of any single one of them right now or there will be a big snarling mass of tigers gobbling me up—which I understand a number of people would enjoy but am still doubtful that I would.”

The carnage of conflict was apparent everywhere. The road through Cholon, Rufus Phillips noted, “was littered with burned out buildings and cars,” as well as a few corpses.⁶² Just as they were sitting down with Iron Mike O’Daniel in his office, a battle broke out around the MAAG building. The officers had trouble making themselves heard “over the din of machine gun fire and exploding grenades.” When Lansdale excused himself for a bathroom break, he could see through a window above the urinal Binh Xuyen troops on a nearby rooftop firing at army forces. By the time they walked out of their conference with O’Daniel, however, the Binh Xuyen were gone, their green berets strewn on the sidewalk. This was another sign that low morale was more of a problem for the gangsters than for their government adversaries.

The situation was fraught with peril. Back home on Rue Duy Tan, Lansdale got an unexpected visitor: his old acquaintance Jean Leroy, the half-French, half-Vietnamese Catholic warlord who was now allied with the Binh Xuyen. He arrived with a heavily armed squad of troops to escort Lansdale to “meet” the Binh Xuyen leader, Bay Vien. As the Binh Xuyen were broadcasting grisly threats to disembowel him, Lansdale declined the invitation. Lansdale’s Filipino bodyguard, Proc Mojica, was asleep after having stayed up on guard duty the entire night, so Lansdale’s hand was edging toward a hand grenade he had hidden nearby. The situation was saved only by the unexpected arrival of Charles “Bo” Bohannon and another Saigon Military Mission officer. Bohannon, visiting from Manila, teased Lansdale about all the troops lounging in front of the house, saying he didn’t really need that many bodyguards. Ed introduced Jean Leroy and told Bo that he was just leaving. Seeing that they could not take Lansdale without a

fight, Leroy and his gunmen roared off. “You couldn’t have picked a better time to come,” a grateful Ed told Bo.

No venue was immune to the disfiguring toll of war. Late that afternoon, Diem summoned Lansdale to the Norodom Palace. He found “shell holes and martial litter in the gardens, walks, and driveways and great gouges cut in the palace walls. Windows were shuttered, sandbagged defense positions could be seen throughout the palace grounds, and heavily armed troops were very much in evidence.” Diem was showing the strain of the crisis as much as his residence was. He had gone without sleep the night before, and now his body slumped, there were “strain lines” around his eyes and mouth, and his speech was slower than normal. The prime minister was cheered by the progress his troops were making against the Binh Xuyen, but he was upset about a telegram he had just received from Bao Dai. After accusing Diem of plunging the Vietnamese people into “the horrors of a fratricidal conflict,” Bao Dai demanded that Diem leave for France immediately and turn over the government to General Nguyen Van Vy, the pro-French army commander.

Diem asked Lansdale what he should do, although in truth there was not much doubt that he was going to ignore this appeal from a man that most patriotic Vietnamese viewed as a French puppet; his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had already said as much to his own CIA contact, Paul Harwood. Diem was more interested in hearing from Lansdale what stance the U.S. government would take. A professional diplomat would have cabled back to Washington for instructions. But like Wild Bill Donovan and other OSS veterans, Lansdale did not believe in awaiting orders from headquarters. He told Diem that Washington would “accept a legal action” to remove him as prime minister, but the telegram from Bao Dai was not a “legal proceeding.” Then Lansdale told Diem to do as his conscience dictated, knowing that there was no way Diem was going to leave the country.

That night, back at home, Lansdale had one more meeting. His friend Trinh Minh Thế stopped by to say that he had slipped into town with thirteen hundred of his guerrillas to support the army in its assault on the Binh Xuyen. Thế was, in fact, emerging as one of Diem’s staunchest defenders.

The following day, Friday, April 30, American diplomats and reporters witnessed an extraordinary scene at the presidential palace. General Nguyen Van Vy, the army commander, was standing in the center of the room holding in his hands a statement repudiating Bao Dai and supporting Diem. In front of him was a microphone and a tape recorder. Next to him was Trinh Minh Thế. Vy was perspiring profusely and his hands were trembling. He was stalling for time, refusing to read the statement. Finally Thế lost his temper, whipped out a Colt .45 pistol, and put the muzzle to Vy’s temple. Time seemed to stand still as everyone waited for the hammer to drop. Ashen and sweating, Vy finally read the statement. Thế demanded that he speak up. Only when he was done did Thế put the automatic away. With Vy’s coerced blessing, the Vietnamese army was now free to press its assault on the Binh Xuyen.

The heavy fighting continued into the new month. Lansdale saw Thế for the last time three days later, on Monday, May 3. Blood dripping from a flesh wound on his hand, Thế arrived at 5 p.m. to tell Lansdale that his troops were pinned down at the Tan Thuan bridge by Binh Xuyen gunboats. His men were taking heavy casualties and could not cross the bridge, because they had no artillery with which to fight back. As soon as he heard this, Lansdale sped over to the Norodom Palace. He found Diem in a conference with several officers. They were jubilant

because the army had put the Binh Xuyen to flight. Lansdale was furious that they were celebrating while Trinh Minh Thế's men were getting slaughtered. He demanded they do something to help the diminutive guerrilla—an indication of how freely he was willing to involve himself in what other American officials would have viewed as internal Vietnamese affairs. Shamefaced, Diem told a colonel to get some artillery over to Thế.

The officers then left while Diem, as was his wont, delivered a two-hour exposition to Lansdale on Vietnamese politics. He included some derisory comments about Thế, who “he pointed out was only a peasant and presumably not as worthy as present company,” Lansdale recalled. Ed was “pretty sharp” in his retort. Their colloquy was interrupted at 8 p.m. by Ngo Dinh Nhu, who walked in to announce that Trinh Minh Thế had just been killed. Both Diem and Lansdale were shocked and grief-stricken. Diem asked Lansdale “to forgive what he had just said” and began crying. Lansdale held him in his arms as great sobs racked his body—the only time Lansdale ever saw him cry.

Thế had been shot in the back of the head. The culprit could have been French, Binh Xuyen, one of Thế's own men, or even an agent sent by Ngo Dinh Nhu to eliminate a potential challenger to his brother. The mystery would never be solved. Lansdale grieved over the loss, describing Thế in a letter as “a little guy who was becoming a very close friend.” As if sensing a shift following Thế's death, Lansdale's poodle, Pierre, chased away the two mongooses that Thế had given his master.

Thế was far from the only casualty; the Battle of Saigon left five hundred dead and two thousand wounded. In the process, however, the sect forces had been routed. Bay Vien and his remaining followers fled Saigon to seek refuge in the swamps and canals where they had gotten their start decades earlier. Before long, Bay Vien would retire to Paris. The Cao Dai pope fled to Cambodia. Most of the Hoa Hao leaders were either captured or surrendered. One of the last holdouts was Ba Cut, the Hoa Hao general whom Lansdale and Diem had once plotted to kill. He was finally arrested in the spring of 1956 and, despite Lansdale's entreaties for mercy, executed by guillotine a few months later.

The American information officer Howard Simpson joined Vietnamese troops to search Bay Vien's deserted and once luxurious villa, now a wreck wreathed in the smell of putrefaction. Opium-packaging equipment and Binh Xuyen identity cards were strewn on the floors. The stench came from the “rotting, fly-covered” carcasses of Bay Vien's exotic zoo animals. “His tiger looks like an outsize deflated child's toy; and the python, its coils ripped and torn by shrapnel, resembles a thick, discarded electrical conduit,” Simpson noted. “In one cage a black monkey, stiff with rigor mortis, lies on its back, its two long arms extended.”

*

DIEM HAD won a resounding victory—not only in the noisome and cacophonous streets of Saigon but also in the hushed corridors of power in Washington. On May 1, 1955, John Foster Dulles sent a telegram to the U.S. embassy in Saigon saying that it was impossible to stop supporting Diem at a time when, “rightly or wrongly,” he was “becoming [a] symbol of Vietnamese nationalism struggling against French colonialism and corrupt backward elements.” The U.S. government would continue “supporting Diem Government to maintain its authority and to restore law and order.”

By the time Lightning Joe Collins arrived back in Saigon the next day, he was confronted, much to his frustration, with a *fait accompli*. The ambassador was left to reflect that when “word of Diem’s bold action and the army’s initial success reached Washington, whatever influence I might have had . . . was quickly dissipated.” Collins was summarily informed that he would be replaced by a new ambassador, the career diplomat G. Frederick Reinhardt, who arrived in Saigon on May 10. He would take a more conciliatory stance toward Diem, as advocated by Lansdale.

Collins had defeated Japanese and German armies, but in South Vietnam he had been bested by a former advertising man with a colonel’s wings on his collar. Privately smarting at what he viewed as Lansdale’s insubordination (he later griped that it was a “big mistake” to have “two people supposedly representing the United States government” in Saigon), Collins planted his tongue firmly in his cheek when he thanked Lansdale in a farewell letter for his “splendid help during the past six months.” Also leaving was Emmett McCarthy, the chief of the regular CIA station in Saigon who was constantly at odds with Lansdale.

Amid all these departures, the French, Lansdale noted, “were asking me pointedly when in hell I was leaving.” He jested that he “was being traded for two French generals and a second baseman,” but the joke fell flat, and not only because the Europeans were unfamiliar with America’s national pastime; “these local French are now so sour on life that they just glared at me.” While the French sulked, Lansdale and his team exulted. For one bright, shining moment in the glorious spring of 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem and Edward G. Lansdale—the premier and his premier supporter—reigned supreme in Saigon.

*

LANSDALE DID not, of course, single-handedly determine the outcome of the 1955 sects crisis, any more than he had done with the 1953 Philippine presidential election. Diem, like Ramon Magsaysay, was ultimately master of his own fate. Bernard Fall was right to call Diem’s handling of the Battle of Saigon his “finest hour.” But it was Lansdale’s finest hour, too. His wooing of sect leaders such as Trinh Minh Thé had swung the balance of power in Diem’s favor and given Diem the confidence to fight and defeat the Binh Xuyen. Most importantly, he had persuaded the Eisenhower administration to reverse its decision to topple Diem. The CIA’s official history, which is generally hostile to Lansdale because he was so often at odds with career CIA officers, nevertheless concludes that he was “the largest single influence on deliberations in Washington at the most critical point of Diem’s tenure before 1963.” The history goes on to assert that the CIA’s role in helping Diem to consolidate power was the biggest achievement of its entire involvement in Vietnam, which was to last twenty more years.

Lansdale’s pro-Diem cables would not prove as important as George F. Kennan’s Long Telegram, sent from Moscow in 1946, which laid out the policy of containment. But they surely rank among the more influential diplomatic dispatches of the postwar period. And just as Kennan’s telegram was influential because it gave expression to an already existing disposition to oppose Soviet expansionism, so too Lansdale’s cables were influential because they also crystalized an already existing policy, albeit one that was in momentary danger of being abandoned—a policy of backing Diem as an anti-Communist bulwark in Southeast Asia. It became known as “sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem,” and its author was the buoyant chief of the Saigon Military Mission. William Conrad Gibbons, a leading historian of the American war

effort, was later to say, “If it hadn’t been for Lansdale, Diem would have been out in April of 1955. . . . He was the mastermind of the whole thing.”

Eight years later, a different set of policymakers in Washington would decide to topple Diem, with calamitous consequences. That mistake was narrowly avoided in the spring of 1955 largely because of Lansdale’s intervention. Some might argue, given the problems subsequently encountered by Diem, that it might have been better to remove him early on, but the coup plotters in 1955 were as unlikely as the ones in 1963 to form a government that could have been successful in mobilizing popular support. Indeed, the 1955 plotters would have been even harder put to assert any legitimacy because of their French colonial connections. By saving Diem from his enemies in Saigon and Washington, Lansdale had made a powerful and on balance positive impact on the course of Vietnamese history. Although he did not know it at the time, he had reached the apogee of his power and influence.