

AN HONORABLE & PRACTICAL SOLUTION TO THE VIETNAM DILEMMA



by Martin Cohen

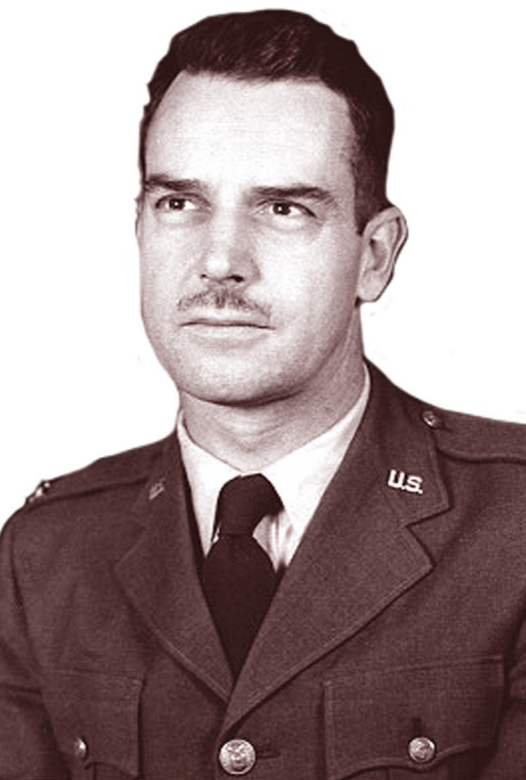
■ Originally, Lyndon B. Johnson said that he would not be the first American President to lose a war, and then later he stated he would settle for an honorable truce in Vietnam. When the nation lost patience with President Johnson's efforts, he announced in a historical speech that he would retire.

Richard M. Nixon is presently trying to make good on his campaign promise to end the war through negotiations with the North Vietnamese, along with gradual troop withdrawal. Many of his critics, both Congressmen and private citizens, oppose the President's scheme and call for an immediate withdrawal of all American troops.

Never in the history of the United States has there been so much confusion among Americans about our goals and purposes abroad, and never has there been so much frustration among our leaders about a dilemma that affects the nation's commitment and pride.

In the suburbs of Washington, D.C., there lives a man — Edward G. Lansdale, major general, United States Air Force, Retired—who believes that the United States can come up with an honorable and successful answer to our costly involvement in South Vietnam.

General Lansdale, one of the world's experts on counterinsurgency, has been engaged in top-level operations in the Asian part of the world since World War II. Insofar as the public is concerned,



he is faceless, and *The New York Times* has called him a “mystery man.” Many Americans unwittingly read about General Lansdale under a fictitious name in the best-selling novel *The Ugly American*; General Lansdale was the prototype for “the good guy,” the humane American.

The General has better credentials for discussing Vietnam than any senator and many of the men in high places in our government. He was not only a key adviser to Premiers Ngo Din Diem and Nguyen Cao Ky, but also worked closely with the common people.

In the following interview, General Lansdale speaks as a man who has great affection for the Vietnamese and deep concern for their future.

PAGEANT: There are many questions to be asked, General. However, can we start with the most topical issue, the withdrawal of American combat troops? If we were to pull out all of our combat forces as quickly as possible, would South Vietnam have a chance of surviving?

GENERAL LANSDALE: An abrupt withdrawal would be catastrophic for the South. The Communists would simply overrun the South.

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PAGEANT: But many Americans hold that the South Vietnamese won't fight for themselves, and that we are making most of the sacrifices in the war.

GENERAL LANSDALE: I cannot agree that we have been making all or most of the sacrifices. Our losses can't begin to compare with the suffering of the people of South Vietnam. Their sacrifices have been enormous.

Americans have given top priority to the waging of war, when the real top priority is, and always has been, the protection of the people. That's what it is all about: winning the loyalty of the people. The goal, the issue, the name of the game, is people, and the Communists know this. Oddly enough, all of the U.S. Presidents since the Communists started trying to work their will on South Vietnam by coercion and force, have been for the objective of safeguarding the Vietnamese people's fundamental liberty. So we must believe, as we have asked the Vietnamese to do, that there are underlying principles for our being there.

On the other hand, I believe that the solution to the war has to be a Vietnamese one. It is their future that is at stake.

PAGEANT: If the South isn't able to defend itself right now, isn't it because of their faults or weaknesses rather than ours?

GENERAL LANSDALE: I think it is our fault the South can't take over immediately. We have been in the driver's seat. Our advisors have been advisors in name only. Actually, we have been running the show at almost every level of the military and civil government. This has been our mistake. We have taken away their initiative.

Now we have to change our operation, give the South a chance to get behind the wheel and really use the controls for defending themselves. What I am saying is that we should jointly arrive at a workable timetable that would set the goal of when South Vietnam could be defended effectively by the Vietnamese, with the complete withdrawal of American combat forces.

PAGEANT: Isn't it likely that if

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we announce such a plan, the South may feel abandoned and fall apart?

GENERAL LANSDALE: I'm sure that at first some will feel they are being abandoned and possibly be frantic. But I believe that most people in South Vietnam would welcome the opportunity to use their own initiative to create their own future, something they can be proud of. These same Vietnamese, in the recent past, have given staunch evidence of their ability to work together toward national goals.

PAGEANT: It would seem that President Nixon has no option but to withdraw American forces before the next Presidential election if he is to keep the confidence of American voters. This means two years, or, at the most, two and a half. Can we withdraw within that time honorably and with a sense of accomplishment?

GENERAL LANSDALE: Yes. The time is sufficient if we recognize the qualitative deficiency rather than concentrate so on the question of quantity. Almost all Americans, whether they articulate it or not, believe in the principles defined in the Declaration of Independence, further defined in the Preamble to the Constitution, and then very specifically laid down in the Bill of Rights. Now, all of this may sound like a tired Fourth of July speech to us, but these ideals are the roots that have made us what we are—rich and strong. Our material aid to South Vietnam is part of the fruit we now are harvesting. What the Vietnamese and others need from us are the seeds from which to grow similar roots. Not whole trees for transplant. Not fruit alone.

PAGEANT: When you said before that some Americans in Vietnam do not live by their principles, what were you thinking of?

GENERAL LANSDALE: We have thousands of Americans at every administrative level in Vietnam. Some of them condone corruption, turn their heads the other way. Or, they ignore inhuman actions. Their usual excuse is, "This is war. This is what happens in war." If Americans are to keep American

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precepts alive, they must believe in ideals and express them as a standard of human behavior abroad as well as at home.

PAGEANT: Some observers hold that the Vietnamese have no concept of democracy.

GENERAL LANSDALE: That's not true. When I first went to Vietnam in the early '50s, I found a great deal of liberty in Vietnam. People in the villages—and there are over 2500 villages in the South—have had centuries of experience in village government.

PAGEANT: Are you saying that the Vietnamese would accept our democratic ideals?

GENERAL LANSDALE: The Vietnamese have very high ideals of their own that are comparable to ours, in Confucian terms.

PAGEANT: On the other hand, are you saying that Americans in Vietnam usually take an indifferent attitude toward corruption?

GENERAL LANSDALE: No. However, there is corruption, and corruption is a most demoralizing factor to the Vietnamese. I am not putting down any of our top American leaders. Their attention is drawn away from such questions and devoted to dealing with billions of dollars' worth of supplies, in making progress in the war. The true solution to corruption is not the negative one of punishment, but the creation of a moral climate that makes luxury detestable in wartime.

PAGEANT: What does not make sense is that you should have to give the Vietnamese a lesson in ethics.

GENERAL LANSDALE: Whenever and wherever you have war and political instability, you are going to have some corruption. However, the people of Vietnam—and I assure you of this—feel as much revulsion, when they hear of corruption among their officials, as Americans do.

PAGEANT: You talk about the people and the common man, but how can they have much to say when their leaders appear to be strong-arm military types?

GENERAL LANSDALE: Most of the South's leaders knew only the colonial type of rule from the French occupation. Such rule is simply governing, telling people what to do, from a position of power. Now they are in the process of learning a different way of rul-

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ing, of recognizing that sovereign power lies in the people. This is a long process, and we should facilitate this learning.

When Nguyen Cao Ky was Prime Minister, he had only known war and the military life, since he was a little boy. He was used to giving commands and being obeyed. Yet, he is the one, helped by his fellow generals who had similar backgrounds, who brought about the big change from autocratic rule to the rebirth of representative constitutional government in Vietnam.

PAGEANT: And yet, Ky has said recently that he would overthrow the government again if a coalition cabinet were to include Communists.

GENERAL LANSDALE: Don't you think some American leaders would take a strong position if our President said he would accept Communists in the Cabinet? Has any coalition that included Communist members really worked out for the cause of free men ever, anyplace in the world? The elected representatives of the people, in the Vietnamese National Assembly, have strongly opposed the arrogant concept of having a coalition government that includes the Communists.

PAGEANT: You have said that we can still rectify our mistakes in Vietnam. How would you go about this?

GENERAL LANSDALE: I have said that we must live up to our democratic ideals, but we should also make available to the Vietnamese the practical knowledge of how the democratic processes work. You have a problem as simple as a Vietnamese politician who wants to organize a political party, a base for his ideas and campaign, and doesn't really know how to go about it. When U.S. politicians visited Vietnam, I would ask them to sit down with Vietnamese politicians and explain the nitty-gritty of politics. Many were reluctant to do this, but some understood what I was driving at—among them, the then Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey, and Richard Nixon before the last election.

Also, the Vietnamese need our

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goodwill and help in strengthening their juridical processes. One American idea which was adopted by the Vietnamese was the concept of a circuit judge who goes from town to town so that people can have a fair hearing. This is only a small start in meeting the great challenge of helping the Vietnamese to establish their own "rule of law."

PAGEANT: From what you have said, it is clear that you have great affection for the Vietnamese, but do you have any proof that the importing of democratic ideals is not a kind of pie-in-the-sky idea?

GENERAL LANSDALE: Maybe this is the answer you are looking for: As I noted before, there are about 2500 villages in the South. By the time I left Vietnam in 1968, there had been free elections in 1000 villages. Today, this has been increased to about 90 per cent of all villages. In each of these villages, people elect executive councils that have primary say in their own affairs.

The people are just beginning to make themselves felt and they have a long road ahead to build a cohesiveness all the way to the top. There are labor leaders and lower-house delegates who are very much aware of their constituencies' needs and act on them.

PAGEANT: Do you have any hope for the war ending soon?

GENERAL LANSDALE: I think that it depends upon our attitude toward the problem. The Communists cannot quit, due to their ideological commitment. This is not subject to negotiation or conventional military pressure. The Communists, who started this and whom we are only wanting to stop what they have started, will quit when conditions in South Vietnam are such that they can no longer survive there. The sooner we start helping the Vietnamese put real strength into these conditions, the sooner the end will come honorably.

PAGEANT: Is there the possibility that the Vietnamese dilemma, if handled with intelligence and imagination, could be turned into a great success?

GENERAL LANSDALE: I think so.

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But we cannot have the attitude that we are withdrawing because we are tired of the war. As we turn the initiative over to the Vietnamese, we must also assure them that we are democratic comrades, just as the leaders in the North know that they have the support and total commitment of Russia and Communist China.

The great lesson that we need to draw from Vietnam is that the principles of man's liberty, the ones that made us strong, still have power today. Let us start heeding that lesson even now, when it is so very, very late and after so much tragedy. If we do, it will give purpose, meaning, to the sacrifices made by many young Americans, Vietnamese, and others. Can we, honestly, do less than that and still keep our own liberty strong at home? ■ ■

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