

Book Reviews

*Why Vietnam Matters:
An Eyewitness Account of
Lessons Not Learned*

By Rufus Phillips
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REVIEWED BY R. SCOTT MOORE

The Vietnam War, long viewed as an example of a U.S. military and political failure best to be forgotten, has reemerged as a hot topic of historical revision. With counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, analysts and pundits are drawing parallels between American mistakes today and those of 40 years ago. Unfortunately, too many merely offer polemics over reasoned analyses, either restating long-held assumptions about Vietnam formulated in the immediate aftermath of the war and unquestioned since or providing shallow summaries of the war intended to prove preconceived points. The Vietnam War, according to much of the literature, remains a fiasco directed by arrogant politicians and inept commanders and fought by luckless troops who stumbled about the countryside blind to the realities they faced. Yet the Vietnam War—as with all wars, to include today’s—proved to be a far more complex conflict than some would have us believe. If there were those whose

hubris failed us, there were also dedicated military and civilians who fought mightily to achieve success. The inept served side by side with the skilled. While blame for ultimate failure can be fairly apportioned, in the end the United States eventually succumbed as much to the conditions and, with due credit not often granted by historians, the competent and well-led enemy it faced as to its own incompetence. Whether or not the Vietnam War could have been won (assuming winning is ever the objective of counterinsurgencies) remains a question that cannot be reduced to simple formulas or indictments of individuals or institutions. Instead, understanding the complexities of counterinsurgency, both then and now, demands a far more nuanced examination of the challenges inherent in these types of conflicts.

It is an understanding of these nuances that makes *Why Vietnam Matters*, by Rufus Phillips, such an engaging and informative read. A personal memoir by a self-professed idealist and somewhat accidental Army, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and then Foreign Service officer, Phillips’s story is one of discovery and intuitive adaptation to the challenges of complex operations, as well as of opportunities lost. It is also an informed narrative of innovative attempts at building grassroots capacities during the first decade of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. During that critical period, the author labored to solve the root maladies fueling the conflict, both at the local level and as an advisor to both Vietnamese and American senior leaders. His book presents a candid, often impassioned, eyewitness account of the increasing violence that swept the country after French withdrawal in the mid-1950s and the subsequent American intervention.

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He chronicles his frustration as he watched the United States seek a military solution to what was a largely political problem. If the Vietnam War remains half a century removed from the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, its track as recounted by Phillips possesses an eerily prescient contemporary relevance.

The book begins with the early experiences of the author in Vietnam in the mid-1950s. A bored law student at Yale, Phillips jumped at the enticements of adventure and elitism offered by CIA recruiters. In the shadowy civil-military world that characterized the agency at the time, he arrived in Vietnam ostensibly assigned to the U.S. military advisory group formed in the wake of France's defeat and withdrawal. He was assigned to a small band of independently operating iconoclasts whose mission remains, to this day, clouded in secrecy, but that, at its roots, involved restoring Vietnamese governance and control in the countryside. They were led by the now famous (or infamous, depending on one's historical sense) Edward Lansdale. An outspoken Air Force colonel and CIA official, Lansdale had already established his reputation as a highly controversial expert in counterinsurgency. As the personal advisor to Philippine minister of defense, and later president, Ramon Magsaysay during the Huk Rebellion a few years before, he overturned the policies of the American military advisory effort by dealing directly with Magsaysay (much to the chagrin of his nominal military commander in the U.S. advisory mission) to transform the Philippine army. Eschewing conventional military wisdom focused on combat operations against insurgents, Lansdale instead pushed for an army designed not only to provide security to the population, but also to address the political and economic ills underpinning the

insurgency. Rather than conducting ineffective combat sweeps that inevitably disrupted and sometimes terrorized the rural population, Lansdale convinced Magsaysay to retool the army so it could not only establish security but, far more important, also serve as the initial face of governmental legitimacy by providing essential services, rebuilding shattered infrastructure, and restoring local faith in the government. Once feared and distrusted by villagers, the army soon garnered respect and admiration, in the process isolating the Huk guerrillas and making them highly vulnerable to the special units hunting them. Within a few years, the insurgency withered and died.

Phillips came to unabashedly admire Lansdale, who sought to implement a similar philosophy to rebuild the Vietnamese army. Initially frustrated by his quixotic commander's apparent randomness and often perceived inaction, the author soon came to understand Lansdale's gift for building personal relationships, gaining an understanding of problems in Vietnamese (rather than American) terms, and only then moving forward with his ideas. Sent to meet and observe the Vietnamese, Phillips and others on Lansdale's team cultivated the same qualities. Gaining the trust of Vietnamese leaders, not surprisingly along with the animosity of much of the U.S. military advisory mission, they proceeded to remold the Vietnamese army, whose units were demoralized by the French retreat. At a time when the French were leaving behind a fractured state and the political and security vacuum was being filled by well-organized and armed Viet Minh cadres, Phillips found himself retraining and then accompanying Vietnamese units as they reoccupied parts of the Mekong Delta and then the Central Highlands. Establishing the authority of the newly independent Saigon

regime, rebuilding infrastructure, providing food and medical care in villages, conducting what today would be called information operations not only through the media but also using such culturally specific tools as highly entertaining plays and musical concerts, and addressing civil as well as military problems, the army units proved to be remarkably popular. If perhaps not capable of fighting a well-equipped enemy in stand-up battle, it showed itself to be a highly effective political force, one able to neutralize Viet Minh encroachments and restore government authority.

In describing these innovative approaches, the author also details the bureaucratic infighting and competing priorities among American agencies operating in Vietnam, perhaps not surprisingly for those who have dealt with interagency planning and operations today. His ire becomes evident as he recounts policymakers in Washington and Saigon stubbornly issuing guidance that had little relevance to the countryside, supporting corrupt leaders, placing American interests in Saigon over democratization and development, and failing to integrate operations by the many U.S. agencies in the country. Notably, the author also cites the patriotism and integrity of Ngo Dinh Diem, president of Vietnam and eventual victim of assassination who, Phillips asserts, alienated American leaders largely due to his staunch nationalism and unwillingness to compromise Vietnamese sovereignty for U.S. purposes. It was, according to the author, this nationalism that Lansdale and his team understood, and that also caused them to butt against policies and priorities of the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), responsible for all aid and assistance. While USOM concentrated on ensuring American influence in the capital, Phillips worked to rebuild government

authority in the countryside in the face of a growing communist insurgency from the north. His comments on the dichotomies make telling and uncomfortable reading for observers of American counterinsurgency efforts over the past several years. They recount a theme that seems not to have altered in the decades since. In the author's words, "Everything was centralized, from the top down. Not only did they appear incapable of understanding the bottom up idea of village development but they seemed to perceive it as a threat to their own programs." When he departed Southeast Asia in late 1959, Phillips admits to being demoralized by the American effort and fearful of the consequences. He responded by leaving government service.

After a 2-year hiatus in the business world, the author returned to Vietnam in 1962, and much of the rest of the narrative recounts his deep involvement in the Rural Affairs and Strategic Hamlet Programs while working for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). His details of village problems, misguided programs and metrics, and lack of accountability have been documented by many historians and observers of the period. His is a tale of growing frustration carried over from his earlier experiences, with particular wrath directed at American leaders who failed to understand the Vietnamese context of the growing war, and the increasing militarization of the American effort leading to inevitable disaster. He bitterly recounts the coup and subsequent assassination of Diem, a series of events he sees as the direct result of duplicity and wrongheadedness. Even more bitterly, he describes the marginalization and eventual discarding in 1967 of Lansdale, his mentor, as the large-scale deployment of U.S. military forces changed the character of the war.

Lansdale's demise, Phillips asserts, is the result of the clear failure of American leaders to comprehend the causes of the conflict. Indeed, much of the second half of the book is an indictment of that failure. His memories spare no one. USAID officials are castigated for their unwillingness to venture beyond Saigon, which directly led to the policy drift experienced by the Rural Affairs Program, then headed by Phillips. Particular venom is directed at James Killen, sent to Saigon in 1964 to direct the USAID mission. Killen's penchant for bookkeeping and his unwillingness or inability to see beyond Saigon led him to downgrade the role of Rural Affairs, cancel many of its grassroots programs (he cites Killen as characterizing well-digging projects in villages as a "boondoggle"), and systematically remove many of those involved in the program—some of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, had been nurtured by Lansdale, who was also increasingly being marginalized, even though he was nominally an advisor to the Ambassador. By 1966, Lansdale's relationship with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., had become so strained that the once-hailed expert of counterinsurgency had little influence on decisionmaking. Instead of relying on long-term patience and cumulative effects to help the Saigon government regain control of the countryside, U.S. leaders in Vietnam, pushed by Washington, demanded instant results. The United States needed to win a war, the Vietnamese to build a country. The two could not be reconciled.

Why Vietnam Matters is a story of competing approaches to counterinsurgency and nation-building, one top-down and the other bottom-up, and the inability to link the two. It is also one of divergent strategic and operational goals between a country engulfed in its own internal war and another seeking to achieve global objectives by rapidly winning that war. Yet the book suffers from what may be a fatal flaw: it lacks context. The personal experiences and frustrations of the author that give the book its authenticity and its urgency to today also make it suspect. An avid admirer of Lansdale, and obviously bitter at the controversial figure's demise, Phillips views all events through a one-sided lens. His memories may be accurate depictions of what he experienced, but they are hardly balanced. His staunch defense of Diem, for example, dismisses contemporary and historical charges of ineptness and corruption as American excuses for duplicity. He fails to delve into many of the decisions and policies made early in the war, and thus his complaints appear somewhat shallow. The reader is not given the opportunity to decide for himself. Nonetheless, Phillips's memories of those struggles in the countryside and among key decisionmakers, as a participant and an observer, are both interesting and instructive. One cannot help but draw analogies to the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, his discussion of Lansdale's innovative approaches, especially retraining indigenous security forces for a larger purpose and his focus on local political and economic development, is instructive and relevant to today. His evident frustration with the political infighting between agencies, inability of American leaders to understand the root causes of the conflict at the local level, and incessant demands for progress from officials far removed from the scene leads the reader to reflect on just how little we have progressed in the past four decades when it comes to these types of wars. These insights, if for no other reason than they will cause the reader to stop and reflect, make the book a worthwhile read. One would do well, however, to have a working knowledge of the history of the era beforehand. **PRISM**