



**JHU/APL Rethinking Seminar Series**  
***Rethinking Future Environments  
and Strategic Challenges***



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**Mr. Max Boot**

**The Council on Foreign Relations**

***The Road Not Taken - Edward Lansdale & the American Tragedy in Vietnam -  
Lessons for Today's and Tomorrow's Conflicts***

**Notes:**

1. Below are informal notes of the speaker's remarks as taken by a JHU/APL staff member.
2. Links to the video, audio, and presentation files from the Seminar can be found on the Video Archives page of [www.jhuapl.edu/rethinking](http://www.jhuapl.edu/rethinking). Files from all other previous events are also available on the site, and recent years' videos may be found on the [JHU/APL YouTube Playlist](#).

**Introduction**

Mr. Boot explained that his topic for the Seminar was based on his recently published book, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*. He explained that Edward Lansdale was one of the most unusual US generals who was once a legend but has more recently been unfairly forgotten. Lansdale was also said to be the model for both *The Ugly American* and *The Quiet American* characters. However, Boot wanted to go beyond these stereotypes with an in-depth look at Lansdale's record. Boot also noted that Lansdale appeared at the center of some Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories that formed the basis of an Oliver Stone movie. Boot has had an unusual opportunity to delve into historical research to tell more of the real Edward Lansdale story.

**Edward Lansdale – Background**

- His upbringing was much more modest than most of those involved in setting up post-WWII US foreign policy – not Ivy League, not aristocratic, not Wall Street
  - His father was an automotive executive for companies that did not always succeed leading to great swings in the family's fortunes
  - Born in Detroit in 1908, he spent some time in New York but primarily grew up with a more informal, very laid-back California lifestyle that pre-dates that of Silicon Valley
- Not a great student, Lansdale was devoted to studying the Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution – the foundation of his own philosophy on American power
  - He did not show any of the prejudices rampant during his youth, which in California especially against Asians
  - Because he was raised as a Christian Scientist, he may have always felt like an outsider himself and always worked well with those of other backgrounds, especially Asians
- He attended UCLA but didn't quite finish
- He then moved to New York with plans to be a writer or cartoonist in the 1930s
  - He then went into advertising and was quite successful in 1930s San Francisco

When WWII broke out he was already over the maximum age for joining the military, so he joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the first civilian intelligence agency, remaining stateside to gather information from interviews with travelers

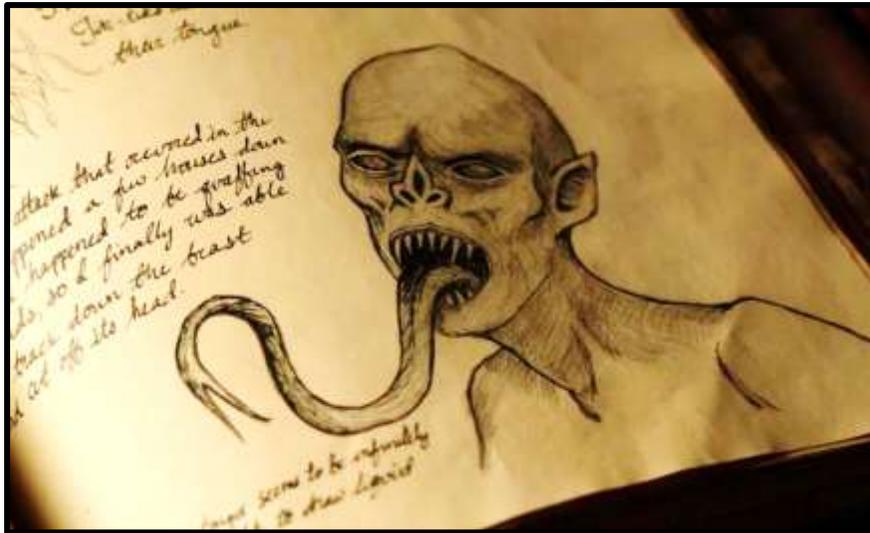
- His skill in collecting information came from being an excellent listener – a skill set that was instrumental in his future successes

- By late 1945 he was in the Army, (eventually switching to the Air Force) and went overseas

### **Lansdale in the Philippines**

- Sent to do ethnographic studies around the newly liberated Philippine islands where he learned about the background of the growing Huk rebellion
  - He also learned about much more including the folklore, music, food, etc. of the area
- Pat Kelly, a Philippine war widow, acted as his guide and colleague
  - Very unusual for the time, she was a single mother and career woman, who worked eventually as a journalist and for the US Information Agency
  - She had good contacts with the Huk leaders and could take Lansdale to meet them to investigate what was behind the insurgency
  - Their travels around the Philippines were something of an adventure, which turned into a romance
- Boot had the unique opportunity to read the letters that Lansdale had exchanged both with Pat Kelly and with his American wife, Helen, whom he had married in the 1930s
  - In the letters Lansdale shared a great deal of his thinking of both personal and professional issues
  - Pat Kelly was important to Lansdale professionally since she was his cultural as well as geographic tour guide around the Philippines
  - In 1947-48 his wife, Helen, and their two sons moved to Manila forcing Lansdale to juggle the two relationships
    - While Helen wouldn't give him a divorce, he was usually deployed elsewhere
- 1945-1948 was the period of Lansdale's greatest triumphs in the Philippines and when legends developed around him
- In 1950, problems began to develop for the US: the Korean War, unrest in the Philippines, the Soviets got the atomic bomb, China fell to the Communists
- These were all seen as a *Red Tide* sweeping across Asia
  - The leader of the Huks, Luis Taruc, appeared to be the latest Communist insurgent to seize power in Asia
  - At the time because of Korea the US didn't have the troops available to send to help in the Philippines even though the Joint Chiefs had developed plans for an invasion there
    - Instead, the super-secret Office of Policy Coordination, which became part of CIA, sent Lansdale and a handful of helpers
    - Using an informal *coffee klatch* method of management, he brought together journalists, anthropologists and Filipinos to share ideas for fighting the Huks
  - Lansdale's most important ally was Ramon Magsaysay, a young Filipino senator who had recently been appointed minister of defense
    - He was a former guerilla fighter against the Japanese, an energetic reformer, and not corrupt
    - He wanted to go after the Huk problem but didn't know how
    - Lansdale did
    - Lansdale became his most trusted advisor as they travelled around together, becoming fast friends
  - Together Lansdale and Magsaysay developed the concepts for what would be called population-centric counterinsurgency
  - These were new concepts at that time
    - Included such ideas as telling the Philippine army to stop bombing innocent villages since such attacks usually develop more enemies
    - Concepts were based on American ideals, i.e., the army should act as brothers to the people, winning their confidence and trust

- Lansdale also used his understanding of both advertising and local folklore (such as a common belief in vampires) to devise what would now be called psyops or dirty tricks
  - Example: A Filipino military unit was told to put puncture marks in the neck of dead Huks so other Huks would believe supernatural forces were against them



An example of Lansdale’s mixing of advertising, folklore, and the military version of advertising – psyops

- The essence of Lansdale’s approach was political despite tricks that also built up his reputation
  - Lansdale understood that the Huks’ appeal was based on distrust of the political system
  - The people did not trust elections since ballot boxes were always stuffed by an oligarchy that did not want to see change in the Philippines
    - The Huks could easily win people over with the motto *Bullets, Not Ballots*
    - Those wanting reform of the landowners’ power could only take up arms
  - Lansdale’s method to give people confidence in their ballots involved getting local civic organizations to safeguard the ballot boxes and stop voter fraud
- Ultimate coup: Lansdale acted as the de facto campaign manager for Ramon Magsaysay when he ran for and won the presidency of the Philippines in 1953
  - A recently declassified memo from 1953 from Lansdale to his boss, CIA Director Allen Dulles, details how he won the presidential election
    - This memo would be an excellent how-to guide for winning a presidential election in a developing world
    - Lansdale even helped write the campaign jingle and the campaign slogan “Magsaysay is my guy”
  - When Magsaysay won in a landslide election that was shown to be free and fair, it ended the need for the Huk rebellion as the Huks lost the incentive to fight
    - Suddenly, the peasants had confidence in their political process
- Bottom line: *Landslide Lansdale* became a hero in US secret intelligence and strategy circles since he found the way for the side the US favored to win without sending in US troops

### Lansdale in Vietnam

- In 1954 after the French lost the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and left Vietnam, the country was divided into the North controlled by the Communists and the South controlled by non-communists
  - Problem: The Vietnamese had not had their own government before and it was not clear how S. Vietnam could become a viable state

- Solution: Send in Lansdale to do in S. Vietnam what he had done in the Philippines
  - He largely did
  - Again, he needed to find a protégé and choose a new prime minister of S. Vietnam
    - He chose Ngô Đình Diệm a scholarly minister under the French who turned against the government but was also anti-Communist
  - Lansdale tried to develop the same sort of relationship he had with Magsaysay in the Philippines, but this time there was a language barrier that he did not experience in the Philippines
- Lansdale had to use interpreters but still built up a good relationship because he would listen rather than lecture
  - Diệm was notorious for his long monologues that drove other Americans crazy
  - At the end of these monologues, Lansdale would say how fascinating the talk was and then restate it in ways to present his own ideas as if they were Diệm's
    - It was a very effective method of operating
  - Lansdale was against lecturing (the way most Americans tend to do) to develop world leaders
- Lansdale's methods involved building a friendship, listening, and subtly influencing others' thoughts, which allowed him to implement his brainstorm
  - Example: Operation Passage to Freedom moved about 900,000 refugees (many Catholic) from North to South Vietnam to build up the South's strength
    - This required assistance from the US Navy, the CIA and others
    - Lansdale also hired a soothsayer to predict bad fortune for the North and good fortune for the South
- Lansdale didn't have the time to develop the background knowledge he needed to repeat his Philippines success
- Lansdale's boss, GEN *Lightning Joe* Collins, had a conventional military mindset and Lansdale's thinking and methods did not fit into Collins views so they clashed immediately
  - Lansdale believed Collins understood how to fight a conventional war on battlefields, but not a peoples' war fought in jungles
  - Lansdale wanted to expand the South Vietnamese army so it could take over the countryside, and take in assorted militias
  - Collins didn't agree and dressed down Lansdale saying he represented the President of the U.S.
  - Lansdale assured him that he represented the people of the United States and he was sure that they would agree with him
  - COL Lansdale could go against the General because he was a veteran maverick, who hated bureaucracy and hierarchy
  - Lansdale also had the support of the Dulles brothers (Allen Dulles, the CIA director and John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State) to go over Collins' head.
  - As an example, in the Battle of Saigon of 1955
    - Insurgents were in the streets and Diệm wanted to take them down
    - Collins wanted to ditch support for Diệm, but Lansdale wanted to support Diệm
    - Lansdale and Diệm prevailed
    - Bottom line: By the end of 1956, it looked like another Cold War success story for Lansdale and Lansdale's legend grew

### **Lansdale and Cuba**

- By the 1960s Lansdale was considered a world-famous secret agent and appeared to be the model for the central character in both *The Ugly American* and *The Quiet American* novels

- Both John and Robert Kennedy saw Lansdale as an American James Bond or the T.E. Lawrence of Asia
- Lansdale's fame aroused jealousies in the bureaucracy and set up unattainable expectations about what he could do
- The Kennedys saw Lansdale as the solution to their biggest problem – Castro
  - Because of the humiliation of the Bay of Pigs episode they wanted Castro out any way that could be done and they had also lost faith in the CIA
  - They turned to Lansdale who was then stationed at the Pentagon as the director of Special Operations
- At the end of 1961 Lansdale was put in charge of Project Mongoose, an interagency effort to eliminate Castro
  - Many advisors believed that the only way to overthrow Castro was with an invasion, but the Kennedys wanted to avoid that – again because of the Bay of Pigs
  - Lansdale was expected to find some magical, covert way to get rid of Castro without sending in troops and do so before the 1962 mid-term elections
- The efforts that Lansdale made to develop an anti-Castro movement were not that effective and Castro remained
- Lansdale's project did develop a great deal of intelligence that ultimately helped to identify the Soviet missile installations that caused the Cuban Missile Crisis in the fall of 1962
- Project Mongoose was then disbanded and Lansdale was left defenseless in front of his bureaucratic enemies since he had lost the support of the Kennedys
  - Lansdale's chief enemy was his boss, SECDEF McNamara who was basically a numbers guy who thought computers and logic could take care of war and peace
    - Lansdale was skeptical of McNamara and the Wiz Kids
    - McNamara considered Lansdale an idiot because Lansdale wasn't a numbers guy
    - Early on, Lansdale enraged McNamara by dumping a pile of the dirty, primitive weapons being used in Vietnam on McNamara's pristine desk
    - He wanted to show that the Communists were winning primarily because of their ideas and not their weapons and that the US needed more powerful ideas to win
      - This would be a normal idea now but was radical thinking then especially with a SECDEF that wanted to win wars using equations
  - Bottom line: Lansdale (by then a 2-star general) was driven into retirement just as things were becoming very bad in Vietnam
- As political protests grew in Vietnam, Kennedy believed that the way to defeat the Communists was to overthrow S. Vietnamese President Diệm
  - Lansdale warned against that and offered to go back and use his methods and knowledge of Diệm and the situation to put Diệm on a more conciliatory path
    - He explained that he knew the other generals and they would be more corrupt, and less effective than Diệm so the US should not support the coup
  - The coup went ahead and Diệm and his brother were killed
    - More coups and chaos ensued and N. Vietnam stepped up infiltrations as S. Vietnam's government fell apart
- By 1965, President Johnson believed the only way to save S. Vietnam was to send in US troops – the last thing Lansdale wanted
  - He recommended a low level advisory presence to build up a legitimate government for the country so that it could defend itself without putting US forces on the front lines
  - Lansdale went back to Vietnam as a civilian advisor to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who had overseen the coup that killed Diệm- a good friend of Lansdale's
    - Like others in the Administration, Lodge had confidence and arrogance but very little understanding of Vietnam

- Lansdale no longer had as much high-level backing in Washington, so he could not as easily go over the ambassador's head
- Lansdale did try to identify a new incorruptible leader and supported South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky
- But, Ky lost a power struggle to other generals meaning Lansdale lost, too
- General Westmoreland believed that he could kill the Viet Cong faster than they could be replaced, while Lansdale believed the US had to help the South to govern its way to victory
  - The South Vietnamese government had to show that it could protect its citizens from Northern invaders
- Lansdale believed that the Tet Offensive demonstrated that there was no light at the end of the tunnel despite what the Administration said
- This left Lansdale dejected and he left Vietnam in 1968

### **Conclusion**

- If the US government had listened to Lansdale, it still may have lost Vietnam to the remarkably formidable North, but at a much lower cost in US lives and treasure
- Lansdale's Achilles' heel was that he was not very good at influencing his own leaders even if he was good at influencing foreign leaders
  - By making war on the US bureaucracy, he turned it into his enemy, undercutting his own attempts at influencing US decision-makers

### **Epilogue**

- Lansdale died in 1987
- He married Pat Kelly in 1973 after his first wife, Helen, died in 1972
- Lansdale's story resonates today as the US struggles against Islamist insurgents in similar ways it struggled against Communist insurgents
  - The US is not going to win today's counterinsurgency by sending hundreds of thousands combat troops to occupy the greater Middle East
    - We tried that and it didn't work
    - Instead we need American advisors to work with indigenous allies to defeat our common enemies
- When thinking of advisors, we must think of Lansdale, the most effective American advisor, in the same class as T.E. Lawrence
  - Lansdale wasn't perfect; he regretted his lack of language ability
  - He was very effective at using empathy as a tool of national security policy
  - Advisors don't have to be perfect, but they do have to have a good understanding of local languages and culture
- Bottom line: Lansdale's life needs to be told as a story with good and bad lessons for today's global war on terror

### **QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION**

#### **Re: What Does Defeat of Islamist Insurgents Look Like Now?**

- The US has killed hundreds of thousands of Islamist fighters since 9/11, but there are many more now than there were originally
  - Obviously, the US has not learned Lansdale's lessons that just eliminating individual insurgents won't kill an insurgency
  - We may achieve tactical victories but it is hard to achieve long-lasting strategical effects
- Ultimately, the solution will be political

- There are more problems now because the countries where the US is operating are a mess and their governments are not addressing the needs of their populations
- Despite American preference for its technological and military capabilities, it must also get the right indigenous politicians in place to win the wars
- We must take Lansdale's lesson on the importance of finding the right local politicians by:
  - Finding ways to cultivate a new generation of Ed Lansdales, who will be capable of going out to find and cultivate the right people

Teaching local leaders how to govern effectively and win the support of their people, rather than only teaching local armies how to shoot and drop bombs

### **Re: Development of Lansdale-style Small Advisory Teams**

- The US Army is doing some of this already with Security Force Assistance Brigades – the first specialized advisory units
  - But they can't be effective unless a lot of their ranks include non-military experts
  - Many US forces found they had to do the non-military tasks such as governance at the local levels in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they have done so without training
  - They often carried out these tasks quite well because they were resourceful
- It would be better to prepare forces for such tasks ahead of time
  - We must include the right people such as those like Lansdale, who wasn't a typical military officer
  - The US needs more people who are trained and adept at psychological operations and political warfare as Lansdale was to fill this gap in US government capabilities
- We need political advisors as well as military advisors
  - Some of this was being done by CIA in the past but not now
  - The State Department does only a very small amount with a few contractors and foreign service officers but it ought to be emphasized as a specialty
- Bottom line: The US needs to train and resource a new generation of Ed Lansdales

### **Re: Governance and the Message**

- Good governance and the message should reinforce each other when done correctly
- Governments must care for their people as well as telling them that they are doing so
  - People need to know that they will get better deals from the government than from insurgents
  - Governments must deliver and not just provide messages
- The message must synch up with actions to be believable as Lansdale did both in the Philippines and in mid-1950s S. Vietnam
  - Failed in Cuba where Lansdale had lots of messages but they were not synched up with any actions that would lead to Castro's overthrow
- Bottom line: Need both good governance and good messages to be effective

### **Re: Lansdale's Later Opinions on Vietnam**

- After he retired, Lansdale tried to explain himself through many interviews and articles and came across as neither Hawk nor Dove
  - Unlike the Doves, he didn't want to abandon S. Vietnam
  - Unlike the Hawks, he didn't want to use lots of troops
  - However, he maintained his belief in the overall mission
- One of his protégés was a young Daniel Ellsberg of Pentagon Paper fame
  - It is ironic that Lansdale who supported the war effort was a mentor to Ellsberg, the anti-war icon

- Lansdale was not happy that the Papers were leaked since they exposed some of his 1950s secret operations, leaving some of his allies vulnerable to retribution
- However, Lansdale and Ellsberg maintained a close relationship
- Lansdale was troubled by what happened to both US Vietnam veterans and the S. Vietnamese refugees and he tried to help both groups
  - Must remember that besides the over 58,000 US deaths, there were millions of Vietnamese killed

#### **Re: Lansdale's Impact in Vietnam and USAID Tasks**

- More of Lansdale's concepts were employed after General Westmoreland left but it was too late since the support of the American people for the war had been lost
- USAID did have much greater capacity in the 1960s than it has today
- USAID should beef up and do more with nation or state building today in countries of critical strategic importance rather than its amorphous development for the sake of development
  - Boot wrote a point paper on this but the concept has gotten little traction
  - The basic concept is to address conflicts using Lansdale-style missions

#### **Re: Corruption Problems**

- Corruption is often a bigger problem than battlefield issues in insurgency conflicts
- Lansdale wrote about situations he faced that were very similar to those the US faces in Iraq and Afghanistan today
- Lansdale wanted to push the military out of civilian governments but too many military leaders profited from the arrangement
  - In Vietnam he did find an incorruptible general he hoped would clean up the army but the general fell out of favor with the military junta and was retired
  - At the time, Lansdale no longer had support from the US government whose leaders only wanted to drop bombs
    - But that didn't win the war partially because of the rampant favoritism, sectarianism, and corruption in the S. Vietnamese military

#### **Re: Why Isn't Lansdale Better Known Today?**

- The better-known General Stillwell, who got unfairly favorable press, had little love for Lansdale and had a very different and unpleasant relationship with Chiang Kai-shek, whom he advised
  - "Vinegar Joe" had a personality that was good for combat but not as an advisor
  - Lansdale was always laid back and should be a role model for future advisors who need to be able to influence foreign leaders
- Lansdale did write a memoir but it was limited by how little he was willing to tell about his operations, many of which had already been exposed by the Pentagon Papers
  - It was more interesting for what wasn't in it, and he left many gaps
  - He didn't try to lay out his precepts or explain how he operated in the way that T.E. Lawrence described his exploits and laid out his rules for advisors
- Even though Lansdale's principles are included in the Army's Counterinsurgency Field Guide, there is no mention of him even though General Petraeus was familiar with him
- Boot hoped that his book to revive the story of Lansdale and provide inspiration and a role model for future US advisors
  - He also wanted to offer a cautionary tale on the problems Lansdale had with his lack of language ability and his counterproductive wars on the bureaucracy

### **Re: US Support of Corrupt Governments**

- The US does not need to support every government that is “on our side” because some may be victimizing their people
  - Making them more *effective* may backfire and make things worse for the people and driving the people toward the insurgents
- Lansdale’s approach calls for identifying incorrupt leaders and empowering them in their reform efforts, but it is not always easy to find the right person
  - Lansdale found such a leader in the Philippines but did not have as good luck in Vietnam
  - He did identify the best available leaders, but they were not good enough

### **Re: Lessons Learned in the Philippines**

- The one good governance leader Lansdale found, Magsaysay, was lost too early in a plane crash
  - Had he lived, he might have made more of a difference in the stability of the government, instead, a group of crooks took over
  - They were followed by the martial law and the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos who was then followed mostly by coups and more bad governments
- The US has done the best it could since 9/11 trying to oppose Islamist insurgent groups there
  - The US has had a Joint Special Operations Task Force in Mindanao for years that has done some good work with the Philippines army
  - But that could only go so far given the overall political climate that is now centered around Duterte acting like a dictator much like Marcos did
- Lansdale understood that acquiring absolute power leads to corruption
- Everything goes back to politics if a country winds up with brutal leaders
  - The US might not be able to do much in the Philippines until Duterte leaves
  - The US should be trying to figure out how to develop a new generation of leaders who will be more responsive to the needs of the people
- Sometimes the US will have to work with less savory governments, but must remember that their abuses will probably make any efforts against insurgents less successful
- Bottom line: Corruption remains the #1 enemy for the Philippines

### **Re: Politicization of the CIA**

- There is little evidence that the CIA has been politicized
- The CIA is usually eager to do what a president wants done, but it is sometimes hard to know what this President wants done
- CIA Director Pompeo was originally welcomed by the workforce there
  - However, he is now thought to be too political, and there are some visible concerns that the political leadership is trying to politicize the Agency
- There is no evidence that the CIA or any other agency is trying to subvert the will of the President
- There does seem to be a battle within the Administration between the professional national security people and the more isolationist members of the Administration
  - The security professionals (McMasters, Mattis) want to maintain the traditional American internationalist foreign policy vs. isolationist/protectionist instincts of the President
- Bottom line: This constant tension has created a lot of uncertainty about what US foreign policy is going to be
  - Given the differences between the President’s tweets and the National Security Strategy, there is confusion at the State Department, CIA, and elsewhere in the US as well as overseas

### Re: McArthur and Lansdale

- General McArthur put Lansdale in his position in the Philippines (1945-1948)
  - Even though McArthur was in charge of the Japan at the time, he was worried about conditions in the Philippines, where he had spent much of his life
  - McArthur was afraid that problems there between the GIs and the locals would embarrass him when he tried to run for president
  - When asked who understood the Philippines, many people there said that Lansdale did and he became the public/civil affairs officer for the Philippines Command
- Lansdale was only a major while the other section chiefs were at least one-star generals, so he said he would quit unless the Commander agreed to back him up in disputes with them
  - An unusually risky move by a major, but he was successful
  - Being put in that position by General McArthur gave him a great deal of leverage over his bosses
- Lansdale did well because he curbed the bad behaviors of the troops and was more responsive to the Filipino media becoming a celebrity as he managed to improve relations
- While his job title changed over time his work continued to be a vague mission to continue improving relations, spreading American ideals, and promoting development

### Re: Alternatives for Vietnam

- There probably would have been no way to build an accommodation between North and South Vietnam
  - There was supposed to be a reunification referendum in 1956 but conditions were not right
  - Ho Chi Minh would have won anyway because he was popular and had control of the North, which was much larger than the South
  - Had the election been held, it could have provided an easy exit strategy for the US and the result would have the same as 20 years later but without all the deaths
- At the same time, the US was most concerned about Vietnam not falling to the Communists leading to others in the region doing so, i.e., the *Domino Theory*
- Some believe the US could have moved Ho away from Communism eventually because he was a Vietnamese nationalist and even used words from the Declaration of Independence
  - However, Ho may have used those words to stop the US from interfering with the French efforts to take back Indochina
  - Also, Ho appeared to be a committed Communist having been a Comintern operative and living in Moscow in the 1930s
- There was a tendency in the 1960s especially among the anti-war movement to see Ho as the sole legitimate leader in Vietnam but there were others who were nationalist and non-Communists who did not see it that way
  - Those writing today would call the Vietnam war a civil war
    - Both sides had claims to legitimacy as nationalists
    - Both sides worked with outside sponsors
- Perhaps there could have been a division like that in Korea with a non-Communist S. Vietnam becoming an Asian powerhouse and a democracy like S. Korea has become
  - That may be happening anyway
  - Instead there were several decades of detour and a lot of needless loss of life