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## May 17, 1984 Interview with Edward Lansdale - Part 3

Cecil B. Currey

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**Tape Three, Side Six, 17 May 1984. Currey interview with Major General Edward Geary Lansdale, at his home in McLean, Virginia.**

L: . . . South Carolina. They never seemed to get above a 1000 feet maybe. They served coffee at every bump in the air. [illegible noises to indicate his confusion at having to hold coffee during air turbulence.]

C: Waitresses or whatever, stewardesses, can be so surly.

L: Oh yeah. [illegible] Who knows?

C: I was always fond of Delta but I don't seem to get on <sup>Delta</sup> ~~there~~ flights anymore. Maybe they've . . . have they gone out of business?

L: I don't think so; I think they're still there. I used to go down there to Fort Walton Beach, the Air Force. I love that part of Florida just right <sup>in</sup> there, I don't like it further west on the Panhandle, but Ft Walton Beach has sort of hicks from Alabama, farmers . . .

C: They call it the Redneck Riviera.

L: That's what it is. It's sort of old-fashioned Florida. <sup>It got to me.</sup> That's disarming . . . and rather charming <sup>to me.</sup> The troops <sup>around</sup> ~~are out on~~ the air bases there get a real good living and they all have boats and they live on a little inlet in the gulf and <sup>can</sup> sail around and play and not make much in the way of pay and live real handsomely.

C: Well, it's a dirty job but somebody <sup>has</sup> ~~had~~ to do it.

L: Yeah. [laughter]. Right.

C: You left Vietnam for the first time in '60 . . . what?

L: I left Vietnam in '56.

C: '56. Then you . . .

L: Yeah. Yeah.

C: Then you went back to work with Nguyen Cao Ky. Is that correct?

L: Nooo. That was the end of my first tour in Vietnam in '56. I went back on several visits there to look over the problems, including one White House sponsored investigation.. On military assistance

programs. Came back <sup>my</sup> the second time, I was out of the service already, <sup>already - it was</sup> I had retired in '65. That's when Ky <sup>was</sup> ~~was~~ prime minister in '65. Thieu was chief of state and Ky was prime minister. Cabot Lodge had asked me to go out as his assistant, which I did. He gave me the rank of minister in the foreign service. It put me in the foreign service reserve as an <sup>FSR-1(B)</sup> SR-1, that's the first, #1 rank. And then as a minister. They ~~XXXXXX~~ want/<sup>ed</sup> me to become an ambassador and take over one of the pacification posts but they were running pacification in such a way that I didn't want any part of it, I didn't believe in it, so I didn't do ~~it~~ that.

C: On your first tour in Vietnam in the '50s, what sort of relationship did you have with the CIA?

L: Uh, I shouldn't go into that at all. I'll say this, tho. I've had very close relationships with them. They've helped me tremendously. I give my word on certain things that I'd never discuss them. I never have. CIA has said some things from time to time, but I haven't. Some of their personnel have served with me out there. The last time I was in Vietnam, about half my people were from the CIA that I picked out to help me. I had some army and USIA and State Department people <sup>with me.</sup> I've always had very, very cordial <sup>working</sup> relationships working with them. On some of the things that I wanted to do, they've quietly gone in and funded them in a very idealistic manner, very unselfish on their part, helping like Operation Brotherhood in the Philippines which was sponsored by the International JayCeers. I'm sure some of the funding <sup>came in,</sup> was helped or generated by CIA whether by them directly or by other sponsors they pushed into helping <sup>me</sup> ~~me~~ <sup>the JC's on that.</sup> That was a <sup>very</sup> ~~very~~ humanitarian type of project and did a tremendous amount of good out there. And helped our side tremendously. They did the same thing in the Philippines with some of the things we were doing. They let me know

at the time that they were doing that to help the efforts we'd gotten started ~~xxx~~ in. They thought very highly of some of the projects I was pushing people into and were trying to make them work. <sup>become realistic.</sup> But I was always a regular officer in the air force out there and that never changed. I remember the air attache in Saigon one time got up on his high horse and <sup>he</sup> thought he outranked me. He was amazed and shocked to find out that I outranked him and that I was a regular officer. I'd gone in, let them put me in as ~~an~~ an assistant air attache and ~~they~~ wouldn't even give me a chair to sit on, ~~let~~ alone a desk or anything in his office. I had to operate out of my hat, so to speak. Very <sup>shabby</sup> ~~savvy~~ treatment by some of these people. But I didn't care as long as I could <sup>sort of</sup> get in the good fight. And the United States was ~~n't~~ then equipped to combat the communist type of warfare.

We aren't today! The military services aren't ready for it mentally at all in any of their training. They don't understand what they're up against. They think they're in another kind of war, and they aren't. If you know how to fight and you get into a fight like that, all you want is a place <sup>where you can</sup> to swing hard at the enemy and hope to connect once in awhile and knock them out of position and go ahead a little.

All ~~I~~ was doing <sup>I</sup> was trying to get through this clutter of US officialdom <sup>over into a</sup> ~~to get to~~ a point where I could get some blows into the fight. It was very different from World War II or Korea. Things <sup>that</sup> counted with the enemy and would lead him to make his moves were things that the US never recognized as having happened. <sup>It's</sup> Amazing. I would see them and understand them and start getting excited. Everybody would wonder why I was excited. And it's still that way! It worries me that the country that I love doesn't understand <sup>when</sup> ~~how~~ it's getting hurt. <sup>or</sup> ~~We're~~ getting ready for a showdown that it thinks it knows

how to meet, but <sup>they</sup> ~~it~~ don't understand the rules of the game.

C: Is there anyone within the active list today that is carrying on in your tradition?

L: I don't know. I hope there is. I'm sure there must be some people that are . . . if there <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ a guy . . . one of the elements is <sup>an</sup> appreciation of psychological operations and a very big one, <sup>and then</sup> linking in political actions to that and sending off from that <sup>comes</sup> some military <sup>actions (?)</sup> and economic axioms. But I haven't seen such a person, maybe going down and talking about El Salvador <sup>with</sup> ~~to~~ people in the Pentagon, maybe I'll bump into some <sup>then</sup>. I hope so.

C: Take along some water so you can baptize him.

L: Oh, I'll just go up and tell him I'll support him the whole way, which I will. That might kill him off, I don't know. I got to watch it a little bit. It's strange. Now CIA doesn't know how to fight either. There used to be some wonderful Americans in there. They'd backstop these plays just out of big hearts. It felt good and it was the American way to go <sup>sort of, you know.</sup> I used to . . . I remember once I was invited up to Harvard to talk to the Nieman fellows who were up there to give an informal lecture to them one evening. It was a gathering of the current Nieman fellows and some of the graduate Nieman fellows, former ones. There were about 30 of them up there. I said, Everybody says I did clandestine things. But they were actions taken that essentially followed the American principles. The principles . . . I think the essence of the American way of doing things is the promise in the Declaration of Independence about the status of an individual. And then the 1st 10 amendments. And I said . . . show how to implement that. The essence is there; it's not the whole thing. <sup>what</sup> I was always <sup>so was to</sup> trying to behave within the promise and the fulfillment of that promise in the 1st 10 amendments, something that <sup>would</sup> fit within that, so that at any point when any body started yelling on that, we'd just

let the American people know and they'd support it. It's well within what we all share and believe. That's very strong, and the people where I was out in Asia felt that was the American way of doing things and they'd go along with it, to save themselves, <sup>wanted that,</sup> ~~from want of that.~~

<sup>That's a</sup> very understandable thing by people, not our form of government but our essential, basic beliefs~~s~~, our ideals that mankind <sup>shares</sup> ~~cherishes~~ with us. When you get that as the basis for your actions in warfare, why you get an awful lot of allies and brothers with you, in the fight. The enemy acts differently toward you. He really does. I used to respect the enemy and I think they used to respect me. I think it scared them a lot of times. In Vietnam, the last time I went out, a retired major general in the air force, was a foreign service officer. A diplomat and an assistant to the ambassador. So all the Vietnamese, including the enemy <sup>up</sup> ~~XXXXXX~~ in Hanoi, said I was secretly the head of CIA. Immediately. And I was! To them! And the CIA came up and complained to me. They said, a lot of the people <sup>around</sup> ~~up~~ here think we're the head of the CIA wearing the black hats and doing all the wrong things and you're the head of the CIA wearing the white hats and doing all the right things." I said, "Just wear a white hat from now on and do the right things. They'll start changing their minds about you. I tell them I'm not the head, but nobody believes it anymore, so why tell them? I think the enemy was afraid . . . <sup>they'd</sup> announce on the radio that they were going to come and kill me. I used to hold a party and put loudspeakers out in the street inviting them to come on in and try. "Take your try. Tonight's the night." Have music and everything at the house, but they wouldn't . . . I think they were afraid the CIA ~~was~~ wouldn't . . . by millions of people <sup>secretly</sup> ~~all~~ over the country would rise up <sup>in arms</sup> and smite them, if they tried that. That was a good and psychological defense.

C: Well, without breaking your promises or being specific, is there anything more you can tell me about it? your relationships with the CIA? I'll even turn my recorder off.

L: [laughs] <sup>No.</sup> Some of the people in the CIA were very jealous. One guy wrote a book--Smith--that said that the way I was behaving <sup>and the way I'd behave</sup> was a scandal and all the real professionals in the CIA were infuriated. They might have been. I don't know. I know that the station chief in Saigon tried to treat me like dirt when I went there in '54.

C: That's strange.

L: Oh, very much so. He [chuckles] This is off the record. I went in to see him and I didn't like his mannerisms at all, his attitude, and there was a . . . talking down his nose to me, "This stupid goddamned amateur, get out of our way and let us pros really move the pieces around on this <sup>chess</sup> board here." I had wanted to look up certain things that I suspected he was doing. So I asked him, he had a lot of cablegrams and mail on his desk. I said, will you give me some information about . . . and I looked over at his filing system and I saw where the H's for the Hoa Hoa were over so his back would be fully turned to me for a time and I asked him some questions about the Hoa Hoa, <sup>that were</sup> technical and detailed. He got up and looked [the answers up]. So I read all the mail on his desk and I had to pick it up and leaf through it. He didn't ever catch me. He still lectured about <sup>what an amateur I was.</sup> ~~amateurs.~~ I found out that he was doing things that were duplicitous inside the US government, things he should have been ashamed of. <sup>50</sup> LaTER, We got to a point where he was doing things that really angered me, holding up the teamwork of the US. I invited him over to my house to meet me and made sure it was an empty house, my people who lived with me and my staff <sup>were all gone,</sup> the servants were out. And I told him that. This house is empty. You're younger than I am, you're

heavier, you got the reach on me, you're in better condition than I am. But you dirty son of a bitch, I'm gonna practically . . . I want to clobber you. <sup>I said</sup> This is what you did. And I told him some of the things that I'd just found out. What he was doing was going against the <sup>best</sup> ~~best~~ interests of the country, not in a sense of treason, but in the sense of harmonious teamwork. <sup>that we were doing.</sup> He was carping at some of the officials that we had to work with. We really had to work in harmony with each other. I said, somebody's got to beat you up and I'm ~~here~~ <sup>hereby appoint myself</sup> ~~by appointment~~ to do it. He wouldn't fight with me and <sup>he turned and</sup> ~~finally~~ <sup>finally</sup> ~~turned~~ and ran out of the house. He outweighed me by 15-20 pounds and he was in good condition, physically. I wrote a letter to Washington and I said, fire that son of a bitch, get him out of here. Well, they withdrew him from there. It was just once in a while I'd run across people like that. He was apparently a friend <sup>of</sup> ~~of~~ this guy ~~XXXXX~~ Smith who wrote a book later and said <sup>I'd done</sup> ~~terrible things~~ <sup>to him;</sup> ~~about~~ how I threw my weight around in Saigon. For example, I analysed what the Geneva accords meant, when I saw them. I got the things and read the agreements, and was starting to think of them in terms, first of all, of what the politburo had in mind to agree to this, what the french were doing you could understand, what the Americans and British were pushing for in there you could understand, but what the politburo had in mind to permit ~~certain~~ things to be signed off and how they'd interpret the words, I saw we were running out of time pretty much to get anything done to remedy the situation so I was trying to get as much done on our side as possible. I don't think any of the other Americans felt that time pressure that I felt. I remember going down and talking to the our commanding general, was . . .

C: Iron Mike O'Daniel?



L: Iron Mike O'Daniel. Iron Mike was a wonderful person but he didn't quite feel the pressure. He wanted to get going and get things done. The ambassador was a very good guy, we were great <sup>Friends</sup> things. He wanted to do the right things, but he didn't feel the same pressure. I said, There isn't time, you know. We got to get this <sup>done before</sup> ~~type of~~ . . . such and such a date, and so forth. So they were thinking of . . . I brought <sup>it</sup> up at a country team meeting. I said, we gotta do something to get at least 2 million people down out of the north, under this Geneva accords <sup>arrangement</sup> ~~agreement~~. They were talking about a few thousand coming down. The ambassador was worrying; he'd talked to the Red Cross, maybe getting some bandages and a few other <sup>some</sup> help for a 100 or so. I said, No. Let's ask CINCPAC to send the fleet and pick them up <sup>there,</sup> bring them down and let's go up to the North and help these people get out of there. So I wrote a message ~~xx~~ <sup>that</sup> /the ambassador signed off on and asked the fleet...CINCPAC, to send the fleet, which they did. Incidentally, I put my tongue in my cheek ~~xx~~ afterwards and sent a "well done" to the US navy for their refugee lift. You do that if you're around boasting that you've done it which I've never done. You can do stuff like that and get away with almost anything so long as its <sup>for</sup> the right thing and you do it for the right reasons, ~~xx~~ <sup>which I was trying to do.</sup> I went down . . . I said, the Vietnamese down . . . President Diem doesn't understand the urgency. I got the ambassador to come along with me. I said, what we've got to have here is an agency to handle all the refugees which I don't want it to be like what happen3d in Israel, put up in camps and living in camps forever, afterwards, and in other countries. We've got to get people back into useful occupations real fast here and not live in tents the rest of their lives. We've got to ~~get~~ a director of this whole thing that we Americans can live with. I talked Iron Mike ODaniel into letting me have some of

MAAG troops to work on refugee affairs, for which some of them never forgave me (chuckle). Including a guy who's retired in Florida now, <sup>full</sup> old general, retired, (chuckle) was telling me how he was standing there in the rain, getting the refugees off a boat and into an overnight camp and they handed him the babies, two of them, and they were all wet and wetting all over his uniform. He says "Goddam Lansdale got me into this. Ed, if you'd been there, I'd have shot you on the spot." I said, "you learned about peoples' warfare doing that. Good." So the ambassador and I went in to see Diem, and I had ~~xxxx~~ some very capable Vietnamese that I knew were very loyal to Diem and the administration in the South, out in the halls of the presidential palace, was <sup>where</sup> ~~what~~ it was, and telling them, when the plebiscite came up between north and south, we had ~~to~~ to have more people on our side to <sup>vote</sup> ~~vote~~ our way, and we'd try to patrol the polling places and make sure we got an honest count and we didn't have communists cheating there. It would give us a chance for the future. I said, we need at least 2 million down. We never got that. We got a million. And the ambassador was interpreting for me in French. He looked at me--it was Don Heath--and he says, Ed, I'm the ambassador here. I shouldn't be interpreting for a colonel in the air force on the subject of refugees; it's very embarrassing for the U.S. And I said, Diem understandxs English enough, don't you? And I said to him, The ambassador's a friend and I'm a friend and we're trying to help you. You're a vietnamese and we're trying to help you. ~~§~~ Yeah, said Diem, I understand. I know what you're doing. I said, so forget being embarrassed I said, have a special commissioner for refugees. He said, I don't know who could run such a thing. How about so-and-so, I said. There're out in the hall right now. Why don't you call them in? So he called them in and said something; I

couldnt tell what he did. He bawled them out in Vietnamese. There're close friends but I've never found out what he said, but they turned and looked at me, they were highly embarrassed, they said, we're sorry, we can't do it, we can't do it, and went out. I don't know what he told them, not to push themselves with foreigners. But he made them assistant commissioners, he picked the commissioner <sup>himself.</sup> ~~of the thing.~~ But we got that done. You only get that when the events of the moment are there, becomes, <sup>Foresee</sup> when you see whats happening and can tell what's happening in a struggle like that, and get the forces on our side galvanized into an action. It doesn't matter who you are if you got a voice and don't let the little formalities of life stop you at all. You go ahead and act as the situation demands <sup>somebody act</sup> and that's why you can get into the positions that you do. Diem understood that and so did the ambassador. The ambassador attended a lecture I gave up in New York years afterwards at the Council on Foreign Relations. I was talking out there and he came up to me after and said, Oh thank god! I thot you were going to say, All of you in this room, go out to Vietnam with me and I'd have found myself saying, Yeah, I'll go out with you. God. You get us aroused on foreign subjects. You see something urgent where we look at it and think, well, we'll have to go after this next year.

Well, next year's going to be very different. You show ~~xx~~ where decisions'll be made before then. This is just interpreting history that's occuring to us every day. So when you act on that, you don't, the normal customary roles for people don't apply <sup>and any</sup> more and you can do it. It's like the little dutch boy that stuck his thumb in the dike. If you're there and see something you suddenly become something more than a little boy, you've got your thumb in the

right place and everybody will acknowledge that that was the thing to do.

C: Were you responsible during that exodus from north Vietnam for the slogan: 'the virgin Mary is moving south.?'

N: No. no. I had some psychological ~~xxxxx~~ operatiios teams. I'd taught the vietnamese army how to take some psychological actions. It was the only thing the French would initially let me do <sup>with</sup> for the vietnamese army. They had a G-5 for psychological warfare in the Vietnamese army, and the French had--French officers--was the G-1, G-2, G-3, and G-4 of the Vietnamese army; but the vietnamese --I think it was a major--was the G-5 over in a separate building. I went over and they said, Al~~s~~right, you can play around. And they . <sup>the</sup> French psychOlogical warfare man was a colonel, reserve colonel, who taught Shakespeare at the Sorbonne. He was mentally old age, past his prime, and didn't think fast at all, ~~xx~~ knew nothing about psych~~o~~logical operations. He had some wonderful equipment and the only one in the ~~entire-operatio~~ whole French forces that I'd found in '53 that knew what he was doing was a very young lieutenant colonel under the combat lines up in Hanoi, in the command up there, very good, who'd gone to school in Hanoi and knew Giap and other , knew them personally and wanted to beat them <sup>personally.</sup> Talking with him, he just sparked with ideas and threw them back and we had a great time together in coming up with operations. He went and mounted them. I worked with the G-5 section and they had troops up in Hanoi and up in the northern area, Haiphong. He carried out a number of psychological operations. I think ~~x~~ they pulled this particular slogan themselves.

I taught them how to spread rumors in marketplaces. To spread them in several places to get people talking, compare storées, and

build a new thing <sup>up</sup> ~~out of them~~. I suggested they could do <sup>it</sup> about  
chinese troop operations in there. To let them think the Viet Minh  
in those days, the communist forces, had made a deal in letting the  
chinese armys down into past the border, raping women, misbehaving,  
stealing things. I got a query from Washington: Would I please  
find out if there was any truth to the fact that two chinese regular  
divisions were in north vietnam? I went out and started checking <sup>up</sup> in  
Hanoi and Haiphong in '54 and **Jesus**, it turns out that these teams  
were telling that story; I'd gotten up myself to about a platoon--  
a small group in there--just enuf to frighten people. I said,  
I want them moving out of th<sup>is</sup> area of communist control and that's  
~~xxx~~ one way to start getting people moving and worrying that  
the chinese were coming along with the communists. I had to wire  
back to Washington and say It's not a true story, but something I  
started. I'm sorry. Mea culpa. I also had vietnamese civilians  
who were nationalists who were very patriotic, wanted to help do  
things, get into psychological operations on their own. We ran two  
operations up in ~~the~~ north that were so close to what the communists  
would do ~~that~~ the communists inside the town went ahead and followed  
the orders that I gave them thru these vietnamese and the communist  
headquarters outside Hanoi told them to cease and desist, that the  
French or somebody must have done this <sup>other,</sup> and the communists inside  
town thot those radio messages, the French must have broken the  
code, and were sending them these messages, see, and kept on doing  
it. We distributed pamphlets, among others, and I was doing it to  
try to <sup>show</sup> tell the people up there what was going to happen. I had  
shopkeepers making inventory of what they had, to give to the local  
party, and the local party inside the town was ins<sup>is</sup>ting on it  
themselves, for confiscation when the troops came in <sup>the communists came in.</sup> That got an

awful lot of people suddenly realizing that We ought to get the hell out of here. Which was the main thing I was trying to do. Say, "Reality is about coming here, and this is the way it looks." But in distributing leaflets up there, it was a civilian operation and the only guy caught was ~~x~~ the one who was a friend who was helping, *was* the chief of police up in Hanoi, a vietnamese. His friends were out distributing these leaflets, and if any of them were arrested, he was to get them out of jail right away. He thot they were having too much fun, they were telling where they were going distributing, so he got in and did it, and the French came along and the French gendarmerie <sup>*caught him and*</sup> put him in jail. They came and told me, Gee, our friend, the chief of police was arrested. I had to go to Diem and get him sprung out of jail. And Diem said, Gee, the guy's a traitor. I said, No, he's trying to help you and help the country. He's really on our side. And Diem couldn't understand that at all. That was too much duplicity for him. I said, No. He said, Did you pay him? I said, No, I don't ~~gt~~ even know the guy. I said, I know these people, friends of mine, were doing it. I talked to them about things ~~to~~ to do and they <sup>*run*</sup> out and do them. So I said, Let these people help the country if they will. <sup>*He said,*</sup> ~~xxxxxxx~~ You got a lot of people supporting it that come in and ask me what to do and I tell them. And they shouldn't go to jail for doing that.

C: On another topic, ~~sg~~general, you mentioned that you're familiar with Stanley Karnow's new book on vietnam.

L: I ~~me~~ know about it. I have not read it.

C: Well, hardly anybody has read it. It's a big book!

L: Well, he sold many, many copies.

C: What do you think of Karnow?

L: Uh, let me tell you what I suspect his book is that he produced. I think it is, it's a . . . an outline history of the communist disinformation campaign that they ran throughout the vietnam war out of Hanoi. All of it's in there which is derogatory to the United States and to the government of Saigon and uh, the misdeeds and so forth, and they're elaborating on them, and uh, I . . . I have a gut feeling that he listens too hard to the arguments of the other side and is too kindly disposed to the arguments <sup>that</sup> they put forth. He came in and interviewed me for the PBS series.

C: <sup>Yes</sup> Yes, I saw you on it.

L: Well, it was a full day interview<sup>3</sup> here.

C: Gee, you were on the screen for only 30 seconds.

L: Yeah. Many hours that they . . . I'm sure my answers didn't fit in with their outlook on the thing, I could tell. In the afternoon when I started getting tremendously sharply sick to the stomach, and I think it was just being on guard all the time, of seeing what my answers would be with what would be on the screen and back of my head; saying The Americans behaved very well, and so on, and they 're showing them beating up kids or old ladies or something, or napalm, kids screaming, and everything while I said that. The dirty lie sort of a thing. I . . . my feeling was not to trust anything, so I was trying to put all my answers in terms that would belie pictures, too, counteract them, and I don't think that was the sort of stuff that they wanted to show. Yeah. I know they wrote me, the producers did, and asked if I would help, they'd run out of money and they were going to try to raise many millions more to finish their series, which they did 2-3 years later, and maybe they used up all their film shooting me, who knows? But they brought

a whole crew into <sup>this</sup> ~~the~~ house, big crew. And I wrote them a letter,  
from the questions ac-----

END OF TAPE

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