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14. The Chopstick Torture

WHILE Ngo Dinh Diem was still settling into the neoclassical Gia Long Palace, international negotiators half a world away were continuing their efforts to resolve the future of his country. The talks took place in the severe-looking Palais des Nations in Geneva, originally constructed in the 1930s to house the ill-fated League of Nations. Ariana Park, the parcel of land on which it stood, had been donated to the city in 1890 by a prominent Swiss publisher who had demanded, as a condition of his bequest, that peacocks be allowed to freely wander its beautifully manicured grounds. As brightly feathered birds strutted and preened across the lawn, inside the Palais foreign ministers in dark suits strutted and preened before an international audience.

The talks had taken on added urgency with the ascension in Paris of the liberal lawyer and politician Pierre Mendès-France. Taking office as prime minister on June 18, 1954, he dramatically pledged to give up power if the Indochina conflict was not settled by the end of the day on July 20, and in fact the final issues were resolved that very day. The French and Vietminh representatives agreed to partition Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, keeping Hue and Da Nang out of Communist hands, much to Ho Chi Minh's consternation. Nationwide elections were to be held no later than July 1956 to decide on a government for the whole country. For the next three hundred days, the population could move freely between North and South, with French forces pledged to leave the North and Vietminh forces the South. Cambodia and Laos would become independent states with non-Communist governments.

Although the Geneva Conference was supposed to create two temporary "withdrawal zones," it actually birthed two new nations: North Vietnam, with thirteen million people, and South Vietnam, with twelve million. In the process, it created a monumental challenge for both Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem—first to consolidate their authority and eventually to reunify the country. Ho Chi Minh, as the leader of a large, victorious army and a powerful political party, had a substantial head start. Diem, by contrast, commanded little beyond the walls of his own palace. The Vietnamese National Army was ineffectual and of dubious loyalty. Much of the countryside was dominated either by the Vietminh or by sect armies. "We didn't think it would last," a twenty-four-year-old aide to Diem recalled, "but we were young and idealistic."

Lansdale was one of the few people who thought "there was still a fighting chance." In top-secret cables to his superiors, he urged that "in order to construct a Free Vietnam which can be an effective bulwark against further Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, the United States must accept a dominant and direct role in aiding the country."³ It was a role that he was more than happy to take on himself. Pondering the implications of the Geneva Accords, Lansdale concluded "that a number of us in Vietnam had been sentenced to hard labor for the next two years."

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TO ASSIST him in “saving the world,” as he sardonically and habitually put it, Ed Lansdale asked for assistance from his CIA superiors. He would soon assemble a twelve-man team, eventually growing to twenty, that would be a cross between the Dirty Dozen and the Keystone Kops. Their highly classified mission: “to undertake paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political-psychological warfare.”

The first and most colorful arrival was **Major Lucien “Lou” Conein**, a “stocky” French-born CIA officer with a “leathery face,” “bushy eyebrows,” and limpid blue eyes who had already developed a reputation as a “wild man.” Given Conein’s boozy proclivity for mythologizing his own life, Great Gatsby style, it was difficult to know where reality ended and the legend began. A superb storyteller, especially if fueled by pear brandy, Conein himself cautioned, “Don’t believe anything I tell you; I’m an expert liar.”

Some facts, however, appear indisputable. **Conein was born in Paris in 1919.** When he was five, his father died in a car accident and his penniless mother put him on a ship by himself to the United States, with a tag around his neck attesting to his identity and destination. He was to be raised by his aunt, a French war bride from World War I who had settled in Kansas City. With times hard during the Great Depression, Conein left high school in 1936 to work as a printer and typesetter while also serving in the Kansas National Guard. Once World War II broke out, he traveled back to France to join the regular French army—**not the Foreign Legion, as he later boasted.** After the fall of France in 1940, he returned to the United States, where he joined the U.S. Army and the OSS.

On August 15, 1944, Conein arrived back in southwestern France as the leader of a Jedburgh team to aid the Allied landing in southern France. “Naturally strong, in excellent shape, and recklessly brave,” a journalist friend later wrote, “he liked blowing up things and was good at it.” **Among the contacts he made were members of the Corsican Brotherhood crime syndicate, which operated an international narcotics network out of Marseille.** The gangsters called him Luigi, giving rise to an enduring nickname.

In July 1945, with the war in Europe over, Conein infiltrated Indochina to attack Japanese forces at the head of an OSS squad. He entered Hanoi on August 22, 1945, and met his future foes, Ho Chi Minh, a “fascinating man,” and **Vo Nguyen Giap, a “brilliant sonofabitch.”** “**Now Ho, the second time I met him,**” Conein said, “**if he’d asked me to join the Party, I would have signed.**” His only complaint about Ho and Giap: “I was going to die of thirst. Goddamn bastards gave me tea! . . . And I wanted beer!”

Immediately after the war, Conein was dispatched to Germany to run agents behind the Iron Curtain for the OSS’s successor organizations. It was during this period that he lost two fingers on his right hand—and not because of some daring commando exploit, as commonly assumed. Conein had been driving with a girlfriend, reportedly “his best friend’s wife,” when their car broke down. He opened the hood to figure out the problem. She started the car prematurely, and the motor sliced off two fingers.

As if plucked from the pages of a novel, Lou Conein was an irrepressible character with a fondness for dark deeds and practical jokes. **He had a violent temper, a drinking habit, and an eye for the ladies.** In Vietnam, where he arrived for the second time at the age of thirty-six in 1954, he would meet and marry **his third wife, an exotic young woman of French-Vietnamese ancestry.**

He was lauded by his colleagues for his loyalty and professionalism, his charm and his direct manner of speaking.

Luigi and Lansdale hit it off, in their own manner. As Conein later said, “Lansdale was a very strange air force colonel, and I was a very strange infantry parachute major.” One fellow team member recalled that Conein opened most of their meetings with “ ‘Godammit, Colonel,’ then saying, in effect, ‘You don’t know shit from shinola about what is going on.’ This was usually followed by an equally blustery rejoinder from Lansdale about Conein failing to keep him adequately informed. Then they would get down to business.” Bluster aside, each man respected and valued the other—Conein for Lansdale’s skills at political and psychological warfare, Lansdale for Conein’s commando and agent-running skills. But Ed was under no illusions about his friend Lou. **He referred to him privately as “the Thug.”**

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THE GENEVA ACCORDS forbade the dispatch of additional foreign military personnel to Vietnam after August 11, 1954. To beat that deadline, CIA headquarters, flush from its recent successes in Iran, the Philippines, and, most recently, Guatemala (where the leftist president Jacobo Arbenz had been overthrown in June), hastily searched for reinforcements besides Conein who could be sent to abet Lansdale. **He had asked for experts in “psywar” and “civic action.”** Instead, he got “an ideal crew for guerrilla combat, for blowing up things, for jumps behind enemy lines,” selected presumably by “personnel officers in Washington who must have had a Korean-style conflict in mind” and who were ignorant “of a Communist ‘people’s war’ such as the Vietminh waged.” This was a sign of the rampant confusion in Washington, which was to hinder American operations in Vietnam in the years ahead, about how to counter guerrilla warfare, an activity as dissimilar from conducting guerrilla warfare as police work is from robbery. Yet by pure serendipity some of Lansdale’s new recruits turned out to be superbly fitted for the task at hand.

Typical of these new arrivals was **Rufus Phillips III**, a strapping, clean-cut twenty-four-year-old Virginian who had played football at Yale. Bored with law school at the University of Virginia, he decided to drop out and serve his country, exchanging his college tweeds for army fatigues. He was trained as a paratrooper officer by the Army and then was sent by the CIA to South Korea. He was not there long before he was dispatched “on a priority basis” to Saigon, apparently because he spoke some French. “Blinking into the blazing heat of the early afternoon,” he stepped off an Air Force C-47 at Tan Son Nhut Airport on August 8, 1954, looking the very embodiment of youthful American vigor and innocence, his uncreased face free of any suggestion of deceit or guile. From there he went to his quarters at the Hotel Majestic on the Saigon waterfront: five stories, yellow stucco, ceiling fans in the lobby, “excruciatingly slow iron-cage elevators,” rooms with no air-conditioning but plenty of geckos.

Phillips and nine other recent arrivals spent a week or two hanging around the Majestic until Lansdale came to meet them in a bedroom that had been swept for “bugs”—microphones, not actual insects, which remained plentiful. Lansdale, Phillips saw, “was forty-six years old, of medium height and build, and was dressed in khaki shorts, knee socks, and a short-sleeved uniform shirt with an air force officer’s hat worn at a slightly rakish angle. I noticed crew-cut hair, a high forehead, penetrating eyes, a throat with a prominent, slightly swollen Adam’s apple, and a brush mustache. He seemed very military yet accessible at the same time.” “After shaking hands with each of us,” Phillips recalled, Lansdale began speaking “quietly in his throaty voice”:

He couldn't tell us what we would be doing yet. He had no office and was operating out of a small house. Soon he would interview us individually to begin making assignments. . . . Our job was to save South Vietnam, but he couldn't tell us exactly how we were going to do that. The present situation was very confused. We had to be patient. With these cryptic statements he gave us a half smile and was gone. I didn't know what to make of him or our situation, and neither did anyone else. I had expected a clear-cut mission; it was a disappointing start. "Save South Vietnam"—how in the world were we going to do that?

Eventually the members of what would become known as the **Saigon Military Mission** would make their way, one by one, to receive their instructions at Lansdale's Rue Miche bungalow. There they would find not only Lansdale but his new housemate, Naval Reserve Lieutenant Joseph P. Redick, who would become his executive assistant and de facto chief of staff. Thirty-eight years old, Joe Redick had a PhD in French literature and linguistics and had served during World War II as a Japanese-language linguist in the Navy. No longer captivated by Molière and Flaubert, he had joined the CIA after the war. He took over translating for Lansdale and dealing with various administrative matters. "A brown-haired man of medium height and build," Redick "had the manner of a schoolmaster, precise and punctilious," a journalist wrote. ut while "soft-spoken" and "professorial," he was also, Lansdale noted, "the deadliest shot on the team."

Gradually, in their conversations with Lansdale, the team members began to find a purpose. They would be given assignments and sent to live in various apartments and houses around the capital. Phillips was told to help the G-5 psychological warfare department of the Vietnamese National Army. He objected that he didn't know anything about psychological warfare, so Lansdale gave him a book on the subject and a vague edict "to make friends, see what they were doing, and figure out how to help." Lansdale seldom gave instructions more exact than that; a believer in professional as well as societal freedom, he allowed individual team members free rein to exercise their initiative, and he ran the entire team on an egalitarian basis rare in the military. **Phillips saluted Lansdale once in his entire life—when he first showed up at Rue Miche and announced that he was reporting for duty.**

The members of Lansdale's team were ostensibly working for the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), and they often wore military uniforms, albeit French uniforms with shorts and knee-length stockings, because those were more comfortable than the heavier American uniforms in this tropical climate. But there was no real mystery about what they were up to—Lansdale was widely rumored to be, as the New York Times put it a few years later, "the chief United States intelligence agent in Saigon." "There are so many secret agents now checking up on me," Lansdale wrote, "that I'm sure real estate values are going up in this neighborhood, as they all try to move in for observation of the front door from across the street and next door. Others are all sorts of people driving cars, motorcycles, bicycles, etc., who dawdle around in front. Think I'll put in parking meters and collect from them."

The situation was no better at a large house with a pool on Rue Taberd where several of his subordinates lived, a few blocks from the Beaux-Arts Norodom Palace, which Diem would take as his residence. "The telephone line was tapped by so many different outfits," Marine Captain Richard W. Smith recalled, "that when you tried to make a call you would hear clicks as everybody picked up and the quality of the transmission went down. More than once I would shout, 'Get the hell off the line. Let me make the call and I will call again and brief you on what was said.' Sometimes they would actually get off the line!" As in the Philippines, Lansdale

preferred to hide in plain sight, disdaining the usual conventions of the spy business. His paradoxical modus operandi, he later explained, was “acting covertly in a semi-open manner.”

Tall by Vietnamese standards, with a clipped mustache and a military-style haircut, Lansdale cut a distinctive figure tooling around town in his dinky Citroën 2CV, often accompanied by yet another new teammate—a black dog that he had been given by his friend George Hellyer of the U.S. Information Service. Named Pierre, the prickly mutt was “part Kerry blue terrier, part French poodle, and some other unknown breed.” Hellyer had to get rid of him because he was biting the servants, but he got along well with Lansdale. Ed wrote to Pat Kelly, “The dog has been in love with me ever since we first met (I think he’s slightly queer, the way he gives me hugs and wants to crawl into bed with me). Anyhow he sleeps at the foot of my bed and bites anyone coming close . . . which not only gives me security, but also keeps my virginity intact, dammit.”

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LANSDALE’S FIRST priority was to make preparations for the evacuation of anyone who wanted to leave North Vietnam, which under the Geneva Accords had to be completed by October 10, 1954. The French were expecting no more than 30,000 people, but by early August 1954 some 120,000 refugees had already streamed into Hanoi and Haiphong, and a seemingly endless flow of refugees kept arriving every day. The populations of entire Catholic villages in the North were leaving en masse, dragging all their belongings with them. The French did not have the resources to transport more than a small fraction, and the American ambassador in Saigon, Donald Heath, was, in the words of a subordinate, “cool to the prospect of saddling the already shaky Diem regime with the logistic and political problems inherent in a major influx from the North.”

Lansdale argued that by encouraging migration, the United States could undermine the Vietminh by showing how unpopular their rule was while bolstering South Vietnam with anti-Communist newcomers. On August 5, 1954, at his urging, Heath telegraphed Washington, “It is our considered judgment here that this vitally important mass movement of non-Communist population from North Vietnam will be a failure with political and psychological repercussions that may well be disastrous unless US steps boldly and strongly forward and deals with problem.” Lansdale later said he had written the telegram himself, using “‘hard sell’ tactics to put it over,” while also sending his own personal appeal to Allen Dulles.

Thus was born what became known as Operation Passage to Freedom. The U.S. Navy assembled a flotilla of vessels to ferry refugees south. Lansdale persuaded the French, using American funds, to hire Civil Air Transport to evacuate refugees by air. (CAT was a CIA-run airline that in 1959 would be renamed Air America.) Lansdale was “very mindful of the Palestinian refugees, and how badly that had been handled,” with the Palestinians settling after the birth of Israel in squalid refugee camps in neighboring Arab states, where they became ripe for radicalization. Therefore, he insisted, the newcomers should be integrated into South Vietnamese society rather than sent to refugee camps.

The first U.S. Navy ship transporting refugees left Haiphong, a gritty industrial center and railroad hub as well as an important port, on August 17, 1954. Howard Simpson, an American embassy information officer, traveled to Hanoi to accompany one such shipload south. The journey began, he wrote, when “trucks arrived in a din of squeaking brakes, banking tailgates,

and authoritative shouting” to discharge eighteen hundred refugees at Haiphong harbor. “Old men and women, their high cheekbones straining at wrinkled flesh, had to be lifted out of the truck by the more able. Bare-bottomed children tottered around the base of the truck, grasping their parents, who were loaded down with household effects, sleeping mats, and fire-blackened pots.” Once onboard, they were deloused and “served generous portions of rice from huge stainless-steel vats.” Families camped out on the open decks. Children, wearing sailor hats and baseball caps, were given chewing gum and Hershey bars by American sailors. Navy doctors treated tuberculosis and malnutrition. At night a screen was rigged up and “the mesmerized refugees watched the glittering productions of Hollywood, murmuring, clucking their tongues and laughing at the international language of slapstick.”

When the refugee ship steamed into Saigon three days later, it was met by a delegation of American embassy and military wives in dresses, hats, and gloves. As if greeting new neighbors next door, they handed out welcome gifts to each family—“several bananas and a large, cellophane-wrapped block of American cheese.” The Vietnamese politely took what they were offered, but within twenty-four hours the complaints started coming back—the “American soap . . . didn’t produce suds or clean properly.” “When the refugees finally discovered they were dealing with cheese,” Simpson wrote, “they sold it to middlemen, who in turn sold it to Saigon’s street merchants, who sold it back to Americans at an inflated price. For months, toasted cheese hors d’oeuvres were a feature at official American receptions in Saigon.”

Though the undertaking had its comical, clash-of-culture aspects, Operation Passage to Freedom was an undoubted success. Some nine hundred thousand refugees moved south, roughly two-thirds of them Catholics, while only thirty thousand people—mostly Vietminh cadres—went north. “By 1956,” notes one historian, “the Diocese of Saigon had more Catholics than Paris or Rome.”³⁹ Not only did these Catholics enlarge Ngo Dinh Diem’s political base, but their departure from the Communist-dominated North was a propaganda windfall for the “Free World.”

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NUMEROUS WESTERN publications exuberantly covered the exodus from the North. Most influential of all was a best-selling memoir, *Deliver Us from Evil*, written by a young U.S. Navy doctor named Thomas Dooley who had provided medical care for northerners. He recounted not only the altruism of American sailors taking care of woebegone refugees but also the supposedly fiendish “Oriental tortures” being perpetuated behind the “Bamboo Curtain” that were causing so many people to flee. One of his most lurid anecdotes concerned the fate suffered by students who had attended a Catholic class: Vietminh soldiers jammed wooden chopsticks into their ears, piercing their eardrums, to ensure they could never hear any religious teaching again. “The shrieking of the children could be heard all over the village,” Dooley wrote.

First appearing in April 1956 in Reader’s Digest, at the time the world’s best-selling magazine with twenty million subscribers, and then published as a book in its own right, *Deliver Us from Evil* became the very first best seller to come out of Vietnam. It influenced how a whole generation of Americans thought about the country. By 1960, the book’s young, handsome, Catholic author had become one of the ten most-admired people in the United States—right up there with Albert Schweitzer and Winston Churchill. Many called him Dr. America, as if he were a superhero like Captain America.

But there was more to the story than most readers realized. In the first place, Dr. Dooley was not the paragon of Catholic rectitude that he was made out to be. He was a homosexual who was forced to resign from the Navy for his sexual behavior in 1956. Given that homosexuality was still a crime under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Dooley might have been court-martialed had he not been so useful in publicizing the Navy's success in Operation Passage to Freedom. According to many of those who worked with him, Dooley was also a consummate "bullshit artist" who exaggerated his own role in helping Vietnamese refugees and simply made up many of the atrocity stories about the Vietminh. His book was written with the help of Captain William Lederer, a Navy public affairs officer and a friend of Lansdale's, yet even Lederer was to say, "The atrocities he described . . . either never took place or were committed by the French."

Did Dooley concoct these horrors from whole cloth, or was he merely passing along rumors that he had heard? Some light is shed on this question by the embassy information officer Howard Simpson. He recalled having an argument in 1954 with none other than Edward Lansdale "over a propaganda story" he had heard while visiting the North "about village children whose eardrums had been ruptured by the insertion of chopsticks during a Vietminh torture session." Simpson was as anti-Communist as the next American, but he had been in Vietnam since 1952 and "there was something about the account that didn't ring true. I had seen and heard enough of torture by both sides during my time in the field. Chopsticks had never featured as a preferred instrument. There were many more direct, simple, and horrifying methods." When questioned, however, "Lansdale only flashed his all-knowing smile and changed the subject."

The implication is that Lansdale and his team spread the chopstick story and that it was then picked up by Dooley. This is plausible, even probable, because Lansdale was using every psywar technique in his repertoire to encourage emigration to the South and many of them were even more fanciful and lurid than the chopstick torture.

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ONE "BLACK psywar strike in Hanoi" of which Lansdale was particularly proud involved leaflets purportedly "signed by the Vietminh instructing Tonkinese [northern Vietnamese] on how to behave for the Vietminh takeover of the Hanoi region"—including instructions to make an inventory of their personal property so that the Vietminh would know how much to confiscate. Lansdale bragged that "the day following the distribution of these leaflets, refugee registration tripled. Two days later Vietminh currency was worth half the value prior to the leaflets." In a midcentury forerunner of "fake news," another handbill showed a picture of Hanoi with three circles of nuclear annihilation superimposed on it, implying that it was about to be atomic-bombed by the United States. Other fliers claimed "Christ Has Gone to the South" and "The Virgin Mary Has Departed from the North."

When Polish and Russian ships arrived in the South to transport Vietminh sympathizers to the North, a pamphlet, attributed to a nonexistent Vietminh Resistance Committee, reassured "the Vietminh they would be kept safe below decks from imperialist air and submarine attacks, and requested that warm clothing be brought." This was accompanied by a "rumor campaign that the Vietminh were being sent into China as railroad laborers." Because this propaganda painted such a "scary picture" of life in the North, Lansdale claimed, "there was a really significant refusal to go North"—not on the part of hardened Vietminh operatives, many of whom were

ordered to remain behind in any case, but, rather, among the impressionable teenagers whom Hanoi hoped to lure north for insurgent training and subsequent infiltration back into the South.

To bolster morale in the South, Lansdale's team had a Vietnamese agent, a refugee journalist from the North, prepare a series of "Thomas Paine type" essays "on Vietnamese patriotism" that appeared in a newspaper owned by a Vietnamese woman who was "the mistress of an anti-American French civilian." "Despite anti-American remarks by her boy friend," Lansdale wrote, "we had helped her keep her paper from being closed by the government . . . and she found it profitable to heed our advice on the editorial content of her paper." The Saigon Military Mission even hired a soothsayer to produce an almanac that predicted good fortune for the South and calamitous tidings for the North. So popular did this eight-page publication become that the CIA made a profit on it that was used to fund refugee resettlement.

Many of these propaganda products were distributed in the South by Vietnamese soldiers in plain clothes; others were infiltrated into the North and distributed by North Vietnamese agents. One of these local agents, who happened to be the chief of police in Hanoi, was arrested by French police after an early-morning car chase through the city; the phony "Vietminh" posters that he was distributing were so convincing that he was held as a suspected Vietminh operative. Lansdale had to ask Diem, who thought the police chief was a "traitor," to intercede with the French to get him released.

The French were not the only ones fooled by Lansdale's black propaganda. In the summer of 1954, Lansdale received orders from CIA headquarters in Washington to investigate intelligence "that three Chinese Communist divisions had crossed the border into North Vietnam." He found that the reports originated with a rumor campaign that had been started by the South Vietnamese army's G-5, at his suggestion, to create the impression that the Vietminh were tools of Chinese imperialists. "Officials in Washington let it be known subsequently," Lansdale said, "that they did not appreciate the joke."

Lansdale was later to deny that his propaganda efforts were responsible for the exodus of refugees from North to South Vietnam. "People don't leave ancestral homes that they care a lot about without a very good reason, particularly in Asia," he said. "So it took tremendous personal fear to get them to leave, and when a million of them did it, it wasn't just words and propaganda making them do it." But Lansdale's propaganda unquestionably did help—as did his efforts to facilitate their movement. Bernard Fall, a leading authority on Vietnam, would write, "Although there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese would have fled Communist domination in any case, the mass flight was admittedly the result of an extremely intensive, well-conducted, and, in terms of its objective, very successful American psychological warfare operation."

Lansdale followed up this initial success by publicizing the fact that Vietnamese were voting with their feet against Communism, a "propaganda job" assisted by other CIA stations around the Far East. There is no evidence that Tom Dooley ever became a CIA "asset," but even if he was not on the payroll, Lansdale helped to spread his story far and wide. This included persuading Diem to award a medal to Dooley along with other Americans who participated in the sealift. Lansdale typed up the proclamation himself. Unfortunately, "Dr. America" did not have long to enjoy his fame; he was to die of cancer in 1961, at age thirty-four.

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THERE WAS yet another aspect of the exodus story, of which few were aware until the publication of the Pentagon Papers seventeen years later (leaked, ironically, by a Lansdale protégé): Lansdale had used Operation Passage to Freedom as a cover to infiltrate his own covert-warfare team, led by Lou Conein, into the North. While this paramilitary operation was arguably a violation of the Geneva Accords, as critics later charged, it was the mirror image, on a much smaller scale, of what the Vietminh were doing in leaving an estimated ten thousand cadres in the South.

As the deadline approached for the French pullout on October 10, 1954, Hanoi became, in the words of the U.S. consul general, “a city of ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ as old guard takes leave and new teams arrive to continue the show.” Houses and offices were stripped of furniture and boarded up. The French even took with them the radium from the X-ray machines in the city’s hospitals. Conein and his operatives exploited the chaos to move into the abandoned residence of the French governor-general. They hot-wired half a dozen large Citroëns, left by their owners on the streets, and transported them back to Saigon by ship. The cars subsequently were adorned with yellow diplomatic license plates and used by the Saigon Military Mission; one of them replaced the dinky 2CV as Lansdale’s personal vehicle.

Conein’s attempts at sabotage were less successful. One of his Vietnamese agents tried to destroy the largest and most modern printing presses in the North, Lansdale reported, but “Vietminh security agents already had moved into the plant and frustrated the attempt.” Taking matters into their own hands, Conein and Marine Captain Arthur “Nick” Arundel, a wealthy, “intense,” and very youthful-looking graduate of Harvard, sneaked explosives disguised as lumps of coal into the Hanoi railroad yard and broke into the bus depot to contaminate its oil supply—actions that critics would later denounce, during the heyday of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the early 1970s, as “little more than terrorist acts.” If he noticed such criticisms, Conein did not care. But he did become indignant when David Halberstam wrote in *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) that the “Lansdale group” had put “sugar in the gas tanks of Vietminh trucks.” “Sugar?” Conein fumed. “That was a high-school trick, something a goddamn amateur might do, not a professional.” A professional like him used corrosive acid. The fumes from the acid canister nearly made Conein and Arundel pass out. Dizzy and weak-kneed, they had to mask their faces with handkerchiefs to finish the job.

With a typical commando’s love for blowing things up, Conein hoped to do more damage by igniting the giant oil tanks in Haiphong belonging to Standard Oil and Shell. But he was ordered to stand down by the embassy in Saigon. Lansdale explained that this was due to “U.S. adherence to the Geneva Agreement.” But it was just as likely that the U.S. government did not want to harm two giant Western oil companies and feared that if too much damage was traceable to the CIA, the Vietminh could retaliate against the U.S. consulate in Haiphong, which would remain open until that city was handed over in May 1955.

In addition to sabotaging the North, Conein established two “stay behind” networks. Nearly forty agents were recruited from two of the most prominent anti-Communist political parties—the Dai Viet and the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD). Both groups were transported separately in the summer of 1954 to a secret CIA training facility on the island of Saipan, where they received instruction in espionage along with “weapons, demolitions, and sabotage.” In March 1955, twelve agents from the Dai Viet were brought back to Haiphong from Saipan.

Conein briefed them, gave them forged papers with their cover identities (most were pretending to be fishermen), and sent them to various locations around the North. The following month, it was the turn of the VNQDD group. As more agents were recruited and trained, Conein continued to infiltrate them into the North as late as 1956, employing either motorized junks or parachute jumps from Civil Air Transport (CAT) aircraft.

To supply these agents, the Lansdale team used CAT flights and Navy ships to bring in tons of supplies: radios, explosives, guns, ammunition, gold. A lot of the matériel was hidden in building basements covered with concrete to create a phony foundation. Some, almost sit-com style, was buried in coffins during phony funeral proceedings. The VNQDD group alone received fourteen radios, three hundred carbines, fifty pistols, a hundred thousand rounds of ammunition, and three hundred pounds of explosives. This may have seemed a considerable armory, but it was only a pittance compared with what Lansdale described as the “huge quantities of weapons, ammunition, mines, grenades, and other materiel . . . being buried secretly by the Vietminh [in South Vietnam] before they withdrew.”

Dick Smith, who served as logistician for the Saigon Military Mission, recalled that at the “pool house” in Saigon, team members assembled crates of equipment and used a blowtorch to remove the MAAG insignia from the boxes. Then he would fly to the North with the crates. A DC-9 aircraft would swoop down to land on a remote jungle airstrip and Smith would hop out, meet a local Vietnamese contact with a truck, hand over his cargo, and take off again. Such missions were particularly incongruous because the CAT pilots, in keeping with their cover story of working for a commercial airline, wore the same kind of uniforms that Pan Am pilots might be expected to wear on a route from Los Angeles to New York. But instead of informing him to keep his seat in the full upright position for takeoff, CAT’s pilots would ask Smith, “If we have to land in Indian country, which of these boxes should we get rid of before landing?”

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LOU CONEIN had accomplished his mission, but his resistance networks failed to accomplish much. The efficient North Vietnamese security service penetrated the Dai Viet network and ran some of its personnel as double agents before arresting all of them in 1958. The next year they were given a show trial in Hanoi, at which the regime displayed some of the spy gear supplied by the Lansdale team—in the words of the historians Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andrade, “silenced submachine guns, explosives, small spring-loaded pistols hidden inside toothpaste tubes, and radio sets.” Working in an atmosphere of haste and improvisation, Smith and other team members had not been as thorough as they should have been in “sanitizing” the equipment: while the weapons were untraceable, “the radios were clearly marked with U.S. Army Signal Corps plates.” Most of these agents received long prison sentences; their leader was executed by firing squad. The VNQDD network lasted longer. Ten of its agents were uncovered in 1964 and put on trial the following year; two were executed and the rest sent to prison. Eleven other agents remained operational until 1974—that is, almost until the end of the South Vietnamese state and nearly twenty years after beginning their assignments. But they did not carry out any substantial sabotage operations, and Donald Gregg, who served as CIA desk officer for Vietnam from 1962 to 1964, does not recall any important intelligence produced by Lansdale’s agents or any others in the North.

Left unanswered is the question of how these networks were ultimately exposed. The North Vietnamese claimed to have run across them by accident—for example, a lump of explosive

“coal” was discovered in Hanoi during a police crackdown on black-market coal sales and traced back to its source. This may well have been true, or it could have been a cover story put out by a savvy intelligence service to protect its true source of information inside the South Vietnamese government.

One of the most successful North Vietnamese deep-cover agents in South Vietnam was, in fact, close to Lansdale and his team. Pham Xuan An became a well-known correspondent in Saigon, working for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Reuters, and Time magazine. He befriended prominent American correspondents such as David Halberstam and Morley Safer, all the while secretly sending intelligence reports to Hanoi. After the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, he was revealed to be a general in the North Vietnamese army. An had gotten his start as a Vietminh agent in 1954 while working for his cousin, Captain Pham Xuan Giai, in the South Vietnamese army’s psychological warfare directorate, G-5, at a time when it was closely cooperating with the Saigon Military Mission. An said that his training in psychological operations came from Lansdale himself. Lansdale joked with him, because An seemed so artless, “An, you would make a terrible spy.” Lansdale even arranged for the Asia Foundation, a CIA front group, to send An to college in California. An so admired the American operative—“Lansdale was excellent, really excellent,” he later said—that he went so far as to imitate his mentor’s habit of going everywhere with a dog, in his case a German shepherd. He was also close to Lou Conein (a “very good friend”) and Rufus Phillips (a “close friend”).

Given An’s proximity to the Saigon Military Mission, it is possible he played a role in exposing its operations in the North even if Lansdale did not intend to share any secrets with him. If An was not the culprit, there were plenty of other possible suspects; the South Vietnamese government was full of Communist moles. Ultimately, the failure of Lansdale’s sabotage and intelligence operations in North Vietnam—which stood in marked contrast to his success at resettling refugees in the South—was hardly surprising. The same fate befell other CIA operations in the early Cold War years to infiltrate agents into Communist countries. All ended, without exception, in tragedy, with agents swiftly captured and either imprisoned or killed. One of Rufus Phillips’s Yale fraternity brothers, John “Jack” Downey, was shot down on such a mission over Chinese airspace in 1952; he would spend the next twenty years in a Chinese prison. Communist police states were simply too effective at internal surveillance and Western intelligence services were too riddled with Communist spies for such missions to have much chance of success. This was a bitter lesson that Lansdale would learn anew when he was tasked nearly a decade later with penetrating Fidel Castro’s Cuba.