



DANIEL MORGAN GRADUATE SCHOOL
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presents

“*Uphill Battle: Reflections on Viet Nam
Counterinsurgency*”

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I want to talk about some things that might be useful to bear in mind with respect to your career as senior national security officials with supervisory responsibilities. Before that, I do want to touch on my Vietnam experience and throw out some important points that I think are still not fully understood or appreciated.

One of them being is that there was nothing wrong either legally or morally with our attempt to help people in the Southern part of that country establish an independent and political entity. There was nothing in terms of an international agreement, nor by anyone else’s moral compass that made that inadvisable to do. Having done it, having made a commitment, I think there were some flaws. One was that we rarely and ineffectively understood that we were not fighting against North Vietnam.

We were not fighting against the Communist Party of North Vietnam. We were fighting the Communist Party of Viet Nam, which was a national party and not a regional party. Some of its members, the Prime Minister of the northern entity, Pham Van Dong of Quang Ngai Province; Le Duan, from Quang Tri Province. Tran Van Tra, who I think was the most capable of the Communist generals and who would later fall into political disfavor because he was a Southerner: all from the South. So, we confuse our own minds over what the enemy was, and this was not operationally perceived until Bob Komer and Bill Colby built on the efforts first initiated in Quang Nam Province by a fellow named Bob Wall who put together the first effective district intelligence center. We began to think in terms of, rather than grinding down battalions, we tried to grind out the party. The key to grinding down the party was to identify who the party members were in any particular area.

Now, the Phoenix Program (in Vietnamese: Phung-Hoang) never by itself, eliminated very many individuals. The record keeping, the index of party members was extremely important because if a local force, people’s self-defense, or popular force platoon was able to bushwhack a party and then you did identification of those that had been killed, you could kind of scratch the list, and then you could factor

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what the longevity might be for party membership in a particular district. There was a lot to be learned from that.

So, mistakes were made. Although we think of it as an insurgency war or counterinsurgency, it was soon eclipsed by regiments, battalions, and divisions on both sides. My sense of it is that the entity that we had fathered and mothered in the South was so close to collapse in 1964. The Party in Hanoi decided that they would send a force, fairly modest relative to what came later, of a few to several regiments. One, to preclude the possibility of any romantic separatists in the South who might take seriously the thought that there really was a Southern liberation front and therefore, it might be the basis for a federation, somehow, of Southern socialists and an assemblage of Northern Communist Party members. Having regiments in the South would be weight against that possibility. The second probability that I thought applied, was that when the collapse came and battlefield victory was secured, the People's Army of Vietnam wanted some of the glory; credit in future history books. So, they sent regiments south and then later, we sent brigades; marine landing teams, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, followed by divisions. Beneath this surface strata of our Divisions on their Divisions, you still had the issue of national Communist Party membership, Party commitment, some Southern commitment to the Party, and that is what made Phoenix so critical.

I think in the beginning we tried to get by cheaply. I believe that we had better weaponry that could have been provided, but we did not. We didn't provide nearly the amount of attention and resources that could've been provided to strategic hamlets to make them model hamlet developments. When I first looked at a handful of strategic hamlets in 1962 and 1963, with barely knowing anything about what was around me, it was obvious from what I was told and observed that there was no effective communication between a hamlet and a District Headquarters. There was probably going to be inadequate, delayed, late response time, if any response time at all; that the defenders were inadequately prepared, inadequately trained, and poorly armed. Everybody who looked at this knew so, and yet we did not have it in ourselves to make the degree of resource commitment that would have altered the situation, I think, favorably.

Were strategic hamlets overextended? Yes, they were, but you could have made corrections. Was President Diem making mistakes after the Buddhist Crisis in 1963? Yes, he was, but in the city of Da Nang just south of Hue he had appointed a Buddhist taken from Kien Hoa Province to be the Mayor of that city and he succeeded by working with Buddhist and Catholics to preclude the kind of insurrection and brutal crackdown that you saw in Hue. I think that whatever the mistakes were, up to that point, they could have been corrected. That's not to say that we didn't put any resources into Vietnam. We did. I remember when I was issued one folding stock M1 carbine, and I said what I would really like to have is an M2 carbine which had a selector switch for automatic fire and I was told "we don't issue those because if you are captured, it would be an advanced weapon lost." Well, I would be less likely to be captured if I had the M2.

Now, again Rufus (an audience member who served in South Vietnam) can speak to this better than I am able, but in '64 -- as we reached a kind of crisis, post-President Diem's murder government turmoil, hardly knowing who it was you were going to be dealing with the following month because there were so many replacements and transitions and newly appointed people, that the chain of command, more so than in the past -- under President Diem -- but obviously by that point, having become a chain of corruption as much as a chain of command because (South Vietnamese) Division Commanders required a certain beneficial kick-back from Province Chiefs within that area -- and Province Chiefs did the same to the District Chiefs. And of course, if you were in a relatively, let's say prosperous province like Vinh Long, the cost would be accordingly higher. If you were in Chau Doc, with smuggler routes to and from Cambodia including a variety of food stuffs and pharmacy items being sent to Cambodia, probably to the

Communists, and livestock coming into Vietnam, all to the benefit of middle men, then the price to be a District Chief there would be higher.

Later in 1966, in Binh Dinh province, where you had payments to farming families who had lost their land due to the construction of Phu Cat Airbase; the Deputy Province Chief—who was removed because he protested about corruption—said that if you accepted all those names on the list of people who were entitled to compensation for land confiscated, you would have to conclude that the district of Phu Cat was the most heavily populated district in Vietnam. So, those all were problems.

But again, I always felt that the solution was to find a path to victory and then correct the civil malfeasance. But that path to victory was going to require our country to do a couple of things. One was to stop thinking we could get by in Vietnam, or maybe in any situation like that, even a contemporary one, on the cheap, economically. It just isn't going to happen. It's going to cost lives and in order to develop a meaningful end and to preclude a greater loss of life than you might have anticipated, you're going to have to apply resources.

The second problem, I think, was to identify what it was that the opposition most needed, and then deny them exactly that. I mean it is, I would say, a fundamental Clausewitzian analytical problem. And what the Communist Party most needed, other than their ability to develop a kind of fictive revolutionary enthusiasm in the South and maintain what they already had in the North, what they most needed was the ability to resupply and replace with human bodies, those we had killed or disabled in the South. And their route for doing so ran through Laos, referred to usually as the Ho Chi Minh trail; but by the time I had looked at it, in person on one occasion, it wasn't a trail at all. I mean it was a – the portion I stood on – pretty damn good rural road. It was graded, it was hard packed, it wasn't asphalt but it was a really good road; and the section I was standing on at that point was only one of many. It was not a trail. There were roads plural! It was kind of like a spider's web that ran south. What we could and should have done we had the punch to do, not as early as 1965, because the whole basket of fruit was on the verge of being tipped over then – was to have put forces where they could stabilize what was surviving. But what we could have done, surely in the summer of 1967, was to occupy a line across southern Laos, from Lao Bao near Khe Sanh on the Vietnam border, to Savannakhet on the Mekong.

The thinking in Washington, I found out when I spoke with Army Secretary Stan Resor, was that that that issue was addressed, he told me, elsewhere in the city. He was World War II infantryman, a Silver Star winner and he knew exactly what I was talking about, and I'm sure that I was only one in a long parade of people who had been there to talk to him about that proposal. We should have done that strategic stroke. I know that we had signed, in 1962, a Geneva Agreement for Laos that was brokered with the Soviet Union, and to some degree with China, and there would have been outrage, tumultuous temper tantrums from Sweden and lots of other countries. To which we should have replied—out of consideration for our own soldiers well-being, and that of the people of South Vietnam—“replace us.” Organize a United Nations force, not simply an observer element, but a United Nations force. Replace us on this line, and we'll leave.

Well we didn't do that, and the consequence of it was that Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, I think at the time National Security Advisor, not yet Secretary, Henry Kissinger, a man for whom I have no fond feelings, was nonetheless dealing with a weak hand, because he – I mean I think that what he agreed to was scandalous, but he was dealing with a hand that had been passed to him in which we had already, for a period of several years, acquiesced to the other side, maintaining that road (the Ho Chi Minh Trail)—which was almost a highway system. The consequences of it were awful, made worse by the agreement that Kissinger accepted, which allowed for the other side to maintain about

120,000 troops in the South. Within the Agreement, it just wasn't something that was kind of shrugged off and left to the imagination; it was actually stated that North Vietnam could maintain forces in South Vietnam, and that they could resupply and could replace soldiers, on a one-for-one basis. But you know, and I mean, that was the fictive aspect of it. It was never going to be one-for-one. Once they got to the point where it would be of greater advantage to them, then the communists would get like—something like six-to-one for every one loss. So, you know, that was an error that loomed enormous.

And the lesson of it is always, insistently, think carefully before you engage in war. But if you do engage in war, be pretty clear of what it is you're going to have to do to prevail. At that point we weren't talking about tipping over the Communist Party Headquarters in Hanoi. We were talking about preserving the right of people in the South to preserve an independent political entity. I know that there are many people – perhaps in this room – who feel that the burden of failure has to be borne by Congress and the Democratic majority that betrayed the wondrous agreement brought by Kissinger, betrayed by not continuing to provide money at the level that had previously been promised. Okay, I think that was disgraceful. I live in a community of Vietnamese in California, and I'm constantly reminded by Vietnamese friends how disgraceful that was – and I share their sense of outrage. But it really went beyond Congress. I didn't see anybody in the Administration who felt so keenly that they went before Congress and said, "This a shame; this a disgrace, and I'm resigning. If you pursue this course, I'm resigning." No, Secretary—about-to-be-Secretary Kissinger was pleased to pocket his Nobel Peace Prize. It was issued both to him and Le Duc Tho the negotiator for the Communist Party. Le Duc Tho declined the honor because he knew it really wasn't a peace agreement after all. And when your honor is placed in shadow by the conduct of a communist – you know – that's a significant measure of the outrage we should feel, I think.

What was required, and it would have taken even more, would have been a prolonged, consistent level of support that would have had the patience to have gotten through, maybe, another 20 years. South Korea was a mess in 1954 and 1955 while we maintained forces there. We reduced the level but we maintained forces there, and we stuck with it. What we needed to get through, in terms of a provisional 20 years, was a kind of decaying of fervor within the Communist Party that was headquartered in the North. Inevitably, that significant element like Le Duan and Pham Van Dong and Ton Duc Thang they were going to become old men, like I am now – faster than I did because they were already older than I was at that point. And they would have died and – given the demographics – then, inevitably, they would have been replaced more significantly by members of the Party who were born and brought up in the North, and who wanted to preserve – to the best that they could – the advantages that the Party could bring to the North.

We would have needed – I think – a span of about 20 years, to get into the next generation, and past this sense that there was a spiritual obligation in terms of Vietnamese history, to unify the country.

So those are representative of my thoughts on Vietnam. I closed my book by saying that "As I walked away from the Operations Center at the Department of State, back to my own humble little office, I felt that my life would never be the same, and that I would never feel the same sense of meaningful commitment that I felt for several years when I was a young man in Vietnam. It didn't mean that they were the only meaningful years of my life, because subsequently I married; I had children. Having children is pretty damn meaningful. But I would never again in any other country – and I had some other interesting assignments around the world – I would never again feel that sense of commitment. That I would put myself on the line and be prepared to die – if that was going to be part of the package, if necessary, grimly. I would always have with me two or three Special Forces or other good people who

felt the same, and we were all in it together. And I – I didn't feel that same sense of intense commitment, thereafter.

Now I want to close – before we get to any expression of disagreement or – as when I had a supervisory position, before I retired, I used to tell people in my office, “If you disagree with anything that I'm about to do or that I've just talked to you about then tell me.” And it would surprise me when sometimes they did. But – you know – go ahead. Anyway, for people here in this room, you are thinking in terms of working at the middle and higher supervisory level of national security. I mentioned that if I were going down to the Fort Bragg neighborhood, if I was speaking to people who were just coming out of the Q Course, what I would say would be something different. Speaking with you in this room, I would say that – as a consequence of the experience I had dealing with supervisors: Consider the consequences of actions versus inaction. Brainstorm unanticipated consequences.

My illustrative examples would be Korea 1950 and Iran 1953. Korea was a good one. Given the context of the existence of a pretty strong Japanese Communist Party in 1950, Soviet machinations, we simply could not have allowed Korea to be unified by a communist party and geographically pointed like a dagger toward Japan; so we intervened. I think it would have been smarter if we had gone north of the 38th Parallel and halted somewhere above Pyong Yang, where the waist pinches in, and set a defensible line and allowed the existence of a kind of rump state north of that line between the line and Yalu River. But we went, as Cornelius Ryan would have said, “a bridge too far.” But there was nothing wrong with what we attempted by the initial decision for intervention.

Then you think of Iran, 1953. Advocates promoted the bright idea of removing the elected socialist Prime Minister, who was saying that he was going to nationalize the oil companies, with benefits to foreign oil companies accordingly reduced. Consequently a choice for intervention was made to bring from Paris the Shah, young Shah, and install him, remove the Prime Minister, prop-up the Shah with training programs for his secret police and urban police, and consequently eliminate political opposition to royal rule. So finally, the only national opposition, by default, became clerical. What would we give now to have that elected socialist in Tehran? Somebody – you know – with whom we might reasonably negotiate.

Okay, my second point: be wary of group think. Cliques who come into the discussion with a clique agenda are not unknown in this city. An obvious example of that phenomenon is what I call second Iraq. No need to say more about that.

Reach deep to get real knowledge, and then make a plan. Rufus Phillips is here today, and I think—I don't know if he would agree with the terminology—I think willy-nilly that he was brought into a meeting at the White House by Rutherford Poats, I think it was, when there was a discussion in the White House, including President Kennedy, about what was going on in Viet Nam. The focus was a trip report by a State Department officer and General Krulak, and there was some difference between their two points of view. General Krulak commented that things were going pretty well in the Mekong Delta area, and security was okay, at which point Rufus spoke up and said, “Sir that's wrong.” Okay, that was great, really terrific. But the follow-on should have been easy to say for me being a non-entity, even today, the follow-on should have been President Kennedy saying to someone on his staff, “I want to sit down with that guy, after this meeting. I want to know everything about him; who the hell he is, that he thinks he can tell the General that he is wrong. And I want to know the basis of him having that opinion.”

Well, it could have happened but it didn't happen. Dicky Meadows, if you go to Fort Bragg you'll see a kind of statue there, I think it's kind of between Smoke Bomb Hill and 18th Airborne Headquarters, it's an infantryman statue, kind of a “follow me” statue – and it's modeled on Dicky Meadows who lied about

his age to get into the Korean War, and then was one of the original Delta and SOG guys. And when in 1964 there was some debate about whether or not the people coming down south from the north were fillers – you know cadre replacements – or whether they were uniformed NVA, Dicky Meadows went into the bushes along one of those trails with, I think, a PX Camera, and took pictures of People’s Army of Vietnam elements in uniform coming down. And he presented those pictures to General Westmoreland and there wasn’t much disagreement later about whether or not there were regulars coming south or not. And Dicky Meadows got promoted and he became an officer. So, reaching deep to get those opinions are critical, I think. And then, as I say, when you’re committed, being a little repetitious here, don’t just act with limited resources. Find out what you really need, add about 20 percent, and then go to it. To me, as I worked in 1964 to organize politically motivated mobile commando units, and having worked with some USAID people in the field, it then became inexplicable to me, and remains so today, as to why the USAID Director, being the mission director for all of USAID including rural programs, decided that USAID was going to withdraw from provincial field support activity. You had maybe a four-horse country team, and all of a sudden one of the horses decided they were going to drop out – or go dead in terms of what was required. I still don’t understand why he did that, I don’t understand how he got away with it; but he had good people within USAID – at that time – and it happened. He made a decision and it was about two years, I think, before they got USAID rural affairs back on track.

Put the best people you can into the field; whether or not you like them, or find them terribly agreeable. I think General Lansdale is an example of the best that we had, certainly in the Philippines and in the Vietnam context. And the reason I say that is I saw him operate. I didn’t work for him, but he included me in some of his meetings and I saw that he had an amazing capacity to sit down with people and listen to them. Lansdale was a really tough guy, so the Uncle Ed persona he would adopt was a little misleading, but terribly effective. He would listen to others and then he would fasten on one or two ideas, meld them with his own thinking, and then feed those points back as if they were heart-felt to the person conversing with him. And – in terms of getting commitment within the advisory situation – this was terribly effective.

I think that rather than General Lansdale being withdrawn, and given other responsibilities, he should have become the American ambassador there. I mean, never mind that he was kind of the unique fixture; it was a unique situation, and we needed a unique ambassador and he could have been that. It wasn’t done.

General Abrams, I think, was a good guy. Solid guy. Committed, good with troops. But he was placed in Vietnam at a time when resources were declining, alarmingly. You know – again – had we maintained, as we did in Korea, let’s say a fire brigade force of a US division – like the CAV, with a lot of integral air assets, circumstances could’ve been different. But, and then when I read the presidential tapes, the Nixon tapes, and hear him and Kissinger talking about General Abrams, and complaining about him and saying he ought to be removed and he ought to be this and then the other, and that he’s drinking too much. I think to myself, boy, those miserable bastards. There they were, way back in their own rear area, not only second-guessing the man’s decisions, but sniping at him in terms of personality. Utterly disgraceful.

Okay, I have only a couple more points. One is that you must do your best to keep a tight leash on political appointees. My observation is that, political appointees – I think even more than we others – I mean everyone is careerist to some extent; did I ever decline a promotion? No I didn’t. So, there is that, but, I think because political appointees do not have a career perspective of 30-35 years, so – they tend to be in a hurry to – as we sometimes said – make money, or make your mark, within a short period of time so that in the next administration they might receive another appointment, possibly at a higher grade.

And a couple of examples of that point are: that in 1995 when I was in China, we had this ongoing problem of some of our radio broadcast frequencies being jammed. So, the ambassador put me in charge of finding a negotiated resolution of that issue, and I found my Chinese counterpart who was a Ministry of National Security person, seconded into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and we had coffee a few times and agreed that when we sat down and discussed this issue, mechanically, we would not consider it a problem of jamming, we would consider it a problem of entangled radio frequencies, and how we might separate them, technically. So, we actually got to the point where – looking at the various frequencies (there were several of them) – he and I, with his team and my team, we agreed that there were four frequencies that we could disentangle. And they were committed to that.

Meanwhile, I was sending classified messages back to Washington. “Do not refer to this as a victory in terms of human rights.” And “don’t, in any way, suggest this is a caving of a Chinese position.” This is a mechanical, technical problem that we have arrived at the beginning of a resolution for both countries. Well, the night before I was supposed to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to initial the agreement with the Deputy Minister, the Voice of America – headed then by a guy named Geoffrey Cowan – broadcast a screed claiming exactly what it was that I hoped would not be said. That the Chinese had caved to the administration’s push on human rights, and therefore they were going to cease jamming radio frequencies.

So, the next morning I go over to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not having listened to VOA that night. And I’m informed that the Deputy Minister is not there, he will not be coming; the agreement is null and void. So, we lost some headway there.

A couple of years later, in this city, there was another political appointee in USIA, who wrangled – I would say behind my back because I was the China officer for USIA – an invitation to go to China by means of inviting some people from the Embassy of China to lunch. And over the course of the meal the Chinese said, “You know, it would be wonderful if you could visit our country someday.” So, he comes back saying he’s got an invitation to go to China. So, I went to the USIA director here, and I said – “This guy is the bull in a China shop. And that’s my China shop. And he’s going to go in there and he’s going to make all kinds of problems.” Well, the USIA Director replied, “we’ll talk to him before he goes.” So, we take him in – the three of us together– we have a briefing session. It was just before President Clinton was going to make his visit. He was told: “Do not in any way represent yourself as an advance person for the Presidential visit. Do not make program suggestions.” Do not do this, do not do that. So, what did he do? He gets right off the airplane and starts advertising himself as an advance person for the Presidential visit. And he goes to the Chinese and he says is, “What we need is for you to set up a Fulbright Committee and chair it, and then you let us know which people you want to send to the United States for academic training.”

During the four years, I had been in China that was not going to happen. And during the time I was responsible for some China issues back here that was not going to happen. We were going to control who came to the US for Fulbright Scholarship. So, he did all of those things, and it just took an awful long while to get it neutralized.

Alright, this is the last thought for today, you’ll be happy to learn. It should be so basic but I just have to say it, avoid the politically expedient. You know the art of getting through life is making political choices within and out of family and occupation. I think of some examples. The decision to gut the Viet Nam period anti-war movement, which was really an anti “me in the war” or an anti “my brother” or “my fiancée” or anti “my someone that I love in the war” movement. But to gut the anti-war movement by ending the draft – I think that of all of the things that might be cited as problematic on the part of

President Nixon or Secretary Kissinger, this is the – and there are many, I think – but this is the one that really hurts me the most, because it changed 200 years of American history. A change from a citizen-based army in a time of need, to a centurion army, and the consequence of that, I think still extends socially throughout our whole country. People will say -- because they learned it in their encounter-groups, “Thank you for your service,” really meaning “Thank God my son doesn’t have to serve,” or my brother or my sister’s boyfriend.

We are now analogous to the municipal sanitation services, in that: the guy who picks up your trash once or twice a week performs a vital service; if he doesn’t do it, you’re going to be highly irritated. But you do not know who he is. Maybe you give him twenty bucks at Christmas, but you don’t know anything about him. You don’t know anything about his family, his desires, his expectations, and his hopes. And for too many Americans, I’d say the vast majority of Americans, that is the case when it comes to our military. They appreciate the service in large part because they will not have to serve. We really lost something with that politically expedient choice and expedient decisions sometimes are just awfully, awfully hard to get turned around. I don’t know if it can be rectified or not, but I hope so.

