Friendly Persuasion is Not Enough: The Limits of the Lansdale Approach

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Providing aid and advice to local governments' counterinsurgency campaigns, rather than directly intervening with American forces, has recently been identified as a more cost-effective way to counter irregular threats to U.S. interests.¹ The challenge that such undertakings have repeatedly faced in the past is that partner governments often have their own interests and priorities which can diverge significantly from those of Washington.² Consequently, a host of observers have pointed out that while the United States has provided its partners with extensive assistance to combat insurgents and terrorist groups, an inability to convince them to adopt its counterinsurgency prescriptions or address what Washington sees as the political and economic "root causes" of a conflict has repeatedly emerged as a major impediment to success.³ In the absence of sufficient influence to convince a local government to address these shortcomings, critics suggest that significant American aid and support can actually reduce its incentives to address domestic discontent or govern inclusively, which can render a supported regime less stable than it would have been without U.S. assistance.⁴

Based on his study of the life and career of Edward Lansdale, Max Boot has suggested that future advisors can find a template for influencing local governments in Lansdale's "art of friendly persuasion."⁵ One of the Cold War's most colorful characters, Lansdale's career spanned Madison Avenue, the U.S. Air Force, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Lansdale rose to prominence as the advisor, confidant, and friend of Philippine Secretary of National Defense Ramon Magsaysay during the Hukbalahap Rebellion (1946 to 1954).

Under Lansdale's mentorship, Magsaysay professionalized and depoliticized the Philippine armed forces, which enhanced their effectiveness in the field, while also

¹ Spc. Noelle Wiehe, "1st SFAB combat advisor teams train for upcoming Afghanistan deployment," U.S. Army, Jan. 16, 2018: https://www.army.mil/article/199082/1st_sfab_combat_advisor_teams_train_for_upcoming_afghanist_an_deployment

² Stephen Biddle et al., "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1-2 (2018): 89-142; Walter C. Ladwig, III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency: U.S. Involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979-92," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 99-146.

³ Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977); D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Benjamin Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1991).

⁴ William E. Odom, *On Internal War: American and Soviet Approaches to Third World Clinets and Insurgents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁵ Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018); Max Boot, "Win The War on Terror with Lansdale's Cold- War Era 'Friendly Persuasion,'" *USA Today*, Jan. 9, 2018: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/01/09/avoid-vietnam-fiascos-win-terror-war-learn-lansdale-friendly-persuasion-max-boot-column/1013646001/>

working to ensure that free and fair elections in the country were not thwarted by vested political interests.⁶ In 1949 the Hukbalahap guerrillas possessed some 12,000 men under arms and more than 100,000 active sympathizers.⁷ By 1954, however, facing defeat on the battlefield and seeing an opportunity to achieve social change via the ballot box, the Huks were willing to give up their armed struggle. The tools Lansdale employed to influence and mentor Magsaysay were patience, understanding, and above all friendly persuasion to build trust with his counterpart. The CIA operative would later seek to employ the same means to shape the behavior of another U.S. partner in Southeast Asia, the leader of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem.⁸

In calling attention to the importance of advisory efforts, Boot does a real service. Unfortunately, a narrow focus on Lansdale himself and an over-reliance on the man's own account of events in the Philippines leads to mistaken conclusions about cause and effect. A broader reading of U.S. involvement in the Huk Rebellion raises questions about the degree to which American influence stemmed from friendly persuasion and the utility of that technique to, in Boot's words, "influence allies to take difficult but necessary steps such as fighting corruption without risking a blowup or backlash."⁹

Pressure Not Persuasion in the Huk Rebellion

There is no question that Lansdale and Magsaysay formed a highly effective partnership that helped transform the Philippine government's counterinsurgency strategy. Yet, at the end of the day, as secretary of national defense, Magsaysay was but one part of the administration. As my own study of U.S. patron-client relations in counterinsurgency demonstrates, their relationship was embedded in a far more coercive American influence strategy that pressured, rather than persuaded, the Philippine government to reform.¹⁰

Despite the communist links of the Hukbalahap insurgents who were attempting to overthrow the government of President Elpidio Quirino, the American view was that the roots of the insurgency were socio-economic rather than strictly political. Guerrilla fighters primarily took up arms in response to abuses by the security forces, electoral fraud, and a lack of access to sufficient agricultural land.¹¹

⁶ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 122-124, 138.

⁷ Charles T.R. Bohannon, "Antiguerrilla Operations," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 341, no. 1 (May 1962), 21.

⁸ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 211.

⁹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 602.

¹⁰ Walter C. Ladwig, III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 164.

Consequently, in countering the insurgency, as the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff assessed, “military measures ... can only be a temporary expedient. Remedial political and economic measures must be adopted by the Philippine Government in order to eliminate the basic causes of discontent among the Philippine people.”¹² Unfortunately, Quirino was disinclined to undertake these redistributive reforms because the base of his ruling Liberal Party benefitted from the existing political and economic status quo.

The Philippine government did eventually take steps to address some of the rural discontent driving support for the insurgency. They introduced a minimum wage for agricultural workers and significantly revised the government’s tax policy that enhanced revenue in an equitable fashion to pay for the war and enhanced social spending. These reforms, which had been opposed by the Philippine government, did not come about via friendly persuasion, but by attaching tough conditions to American aid. In the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, American assistance was “firmly conditioned on satisfactory performance by the Philippine Government,” rendering it “as a lever to obtain such performance.”¹³ This lever worked. As a contemporaneous scholar of Philippine politics, David Wurfel, wrote,

Few would have dared predict six months earlier that the Philippine Congress could pass in short order two laws, such as the minimum wage and the increased corporate income tax . . . In sum, the leverage of proffered foreign aid had produced the legislative authorization for social change probably not possible otherwise.¹⁴

A similar approach was taken in the military realm. At the start of the conflict, counterinsurgency operations were the responsibility of the Philippine Constabulary, a national paramilitary police force whose corrupt and abusive ways created more insurgents than they captured.¹⁵ Under the authority of the secretary of the interior, the constabulary often functioned as hired thugs for the country’s large landlords who employed them to terrorize agricultural workers. Recognizing the role of the constabulary in stimulating support for the insurgency, the commander of the U.S. Joint Military Assistance Group urged Quirino to depoliticize the force by putting them under the control of the Department of National Defense and assigning the Philippine army primary responsibility for

¹² “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Johnson), Sep. 6, 1950,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI, Doc. 837*: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d837>

¹³ Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 107.

¹⁴ David Wurfel, “Foreign Aid and Social Reform in Political Development: A Philippine Case Study,” *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 2 (June 1959): 466.

¹⁵ Walter C. Ladwig III, “When Police are the Problem: The Philippine Constabulary and the Hukbalahap Rebellion,” in *Policing Insurgencies: Cops as Counterinsurgents*, ed. C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24-25.

combatting the insurgents. The Philippine president resisted because such reforms would constrain the Liberal Party's ability to use the constabulary to suppress their political opponents—which is precisely what the American advisors intended. The United States eventually succeeded in forcing the Philippine government to restructure its armed forces, subordinate the constabulary to the less politicized Department of National Defense, and give the army the lead in counterinsurgency operations, but once again it was tough conditions on U.S. military aid—even in the face of a growing insurgent threat—not friendly persuasion that achieved the result.

Magsaysay's own rise to power from congressman to secretary of national defense was due, in part, to American coercion. This is not to say that Magsaysay was an American creation by any means—he possessed his own political base and the patronage of leading Filipino politicians—but his candidacy received a boost from U.S. pressure. The details remain somewhat murky since the American officials involved actively attempted to downplay their role to avoid undercutting Magsaysay's credibility.¹⁶ Douglas MacDonald recounts a claim that "President Truman sent a telegram directly to Quirino telling him to appoint Magsaysay as Secretary of Defense or risk losing U.S. military aid."¹⁷ Boot's version of events echoes Cecil Currey in crediting Assistant Secretary of State Livingston Merchant with delivering the same message, while the State Department's Director of the Office of Philippine Affairs, John Melby maintains that he was the one to instruct Quirino that future U.S. military aid was linked to Magsaysay's appointment.¹⁸ When the Philippine president shrugged and replied, "You know, you're asking me to commit political suicide," Melby allegedly responded, "Yes, I know that, but unless you do it there's no more American military aid forthcoming."¹⁹ In the face of this threat, Quirino acquiesced. Common to all of these accounts is an American threat to cut off military aid to a partner government that was on the back foot in its battle against an insurgency. This was persuasion, but it certainly wasn't friendly.

Once in office, the effect of Magsaysay's military reforms was bolstered by American pressure being wielded on his behalf. Magsaysay managed to engender dramatic improvements in the army's rank-and-file as well as the junior officer corps.

¹⁶ Myron M. Cowen, Letter to Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, Feb. 18, 1952, Box 6, *Myron M. Cowen Papers*, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library: <http://www.walterladwig.com/Articles/MagPressure.pdf>

¹⁷ Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 326.

¹⁸ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 113; Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 84.

¹⁹ Oral History Interview with John F. Melby, Truman Library & Museum, Nov. 21, 1986, 239: <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/melby3.htm#239>

However, the effectiveness of the military was hampered by the fact that it was still led by the architects of the Philippine government's initial abusive and ineffective response to the Huk insurgency, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mariano Castañeda, and the constabulary commander, Brigadier Alberto Ramos. Castañeda was a corrupt yet affable figure who refused to cooperate with Magsaysay's reform efforts and was not seen by senior Philippine leaders to be sufficiently competent for command of the military.²⁰ Ramos was even worse: A known Japanese collaborator, the U.S. embassy in Manila judged that "beyond protecting perpetrators of abuses," the brigadier had "done nothing but draw his breath and his salary."²¹

Although replacing the duo might have enhanced military effectiveness, the two men had played a key role in delivering the fraudulent 1949 election to the Liberal Party. Moreover, after several recent coup attempts in the region, Quirino was particularly fearful about the loyalty of his armed forces and favored reliability over capability. Magsaysay's predecessor as Secretary of National Defense had resigned when Quirino refused to fire Castañeda and Ramos for mismanaging the anti-Huk campaign. Magsaysay ended up issuing a similar ultimatum to Quirino, however, this time around the threat was bolstered by the American decision to condition \$10 million in military aid on the immediate retirement of the pair.²² Under duress, Quirino complied.

As Magsaysay turned his attention to ensuring free and fair elections in the country, he alienated his former patrons in the ruling Liberal Party who stood to lose from legitimate polls. These senior politicians worked to constrain his authority, undo his reforms, and remove him from office. However, it was implicit and explicit threats to cut American military aid, not friendly persuasion, that shielded Magsaysay and his reform efforts from domestic political enemies.²³ Whether in the economic, the military, or the political realm, pressure not persuasion was the main source of American influence over the Philippine government. Such was the judgement of the American ambassador in Manila, Myron Cowen, who advised Washington that although the United States successfully shaped the Philippine government's policies in a number of areas, we "must recognize that without exception, [these reforms] were made possible only by continuously applied pressure."²⁴

²⁰ The Chargé in the Philippines (Chapin) to the Secretary of State, Jan. 5, 1951, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific, Vol. VI, Part 2: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p2/d3>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos*, 152.

²³ Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 133.

²⁴ Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos*, 155.

When the Americans did not deploy pressure via conditions on aid to support Magsaysay he was far less effective. Having won the presidency in a landslide in the 1953 election at the head of a broad coalition, it was expected that Magsaysay would continue his reforming ways from the highest office in the land.²⁵ With the Huk rebellion defeated, however, the United States was far less concerned about redistributive reforms in the Philippines and no longer intervened on the new President's behalf. Consequently, Magsaysay's various attempts at socio-economic reforms foundered at the hands of vested interests. By this time, however, Lansdale was no longer involved in events on a day-to-day basis, having been dispatched to South Vietnam by CIA director Allen Dulles. The lesson Lansdale drew from his narrow perspective in the Philippines was that a combination of patience, shared hardship, and an exhibition of sincere empathy could foster the personal chemistry necessary to influence an embattled American partner. He presumed that the trust and confidence inspired by a sympathetic advisor could lead a previously reactionary or repressive government to willingly rein in abuses by the security forces, combat corruption, implement civic-action programs (health, education, public welfare, etc.), and undertake other reforms that would rally the population to the government's side. Consequently, Lansdale would prove to be just the first of many American officials in Saigon who would search in vain for a "Vietnamese Magsaysay" to save the country.²⁶

Modern Magsaysays?

The purpose of recounting these events is not to quibble over the historiography of U.S.-Philippine relations, but to ask: What this can tell us that is relevant for today?

Friendly persuasion was an effective influence tool in Lansdale's relationship with Magsaysay in no small part because the latter's interests and aims were *already* closely aligned with those of the U.S. Magsaysay had fought with an American affiliated guerrilla unit during World War II, he shared many of his American partners' assessments of the problems facing the Philippines, and as a congressman, he cooperated closely with the U.S. military assistance group.²⁷ In short, as Douglas MacDonald writes, "...Magsaysay was an American liberal reformer's dream come true. A dynamic, charismatic, honest and compassionate

²⁵ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 162-163.

²⁶ For mention of the repeated attempts to replicate the Philippines template in Vietnam, see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 126; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 240; Nick Cullather, *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippines Relations, 1942-1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 98.

²⁷ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 110-112.

leader dedicated to democratic values is a rare commodity in any country, not just in the Third World.”²⁸

In contrast, more coercive strategies were necessary to influence Quirino because his interests and those of the U.S. diverged in key respects. The Philippine and American governments agreed that preventing the Huks from seizing power was important, but the way they wanted to go about it was quite different. For Quirino, maintaining his office was a competing priority and both rival political elites and the nation’s armed forces were potential threats to his power. Consequently, the types of reforms and policy changes the United States was pushing in the Philippines—redistributive economic reforms, ending patronage politics in the military, and holding clean elections—were resisted because, irrespective of their utility as counterinsurgency measures, they directly challenged the interests of his key supporters and therefore his hold on power.

If you are lucky enough to have an authentic domestic reformer with no internal opposition as your partner, friendly persuasion may be an effective influence tool. It is unlikely to be sufficient, however, to convince a less enlightened leader to risk reforms that they believe could lead to their overthrow or worse. This raises a key question: In the future is the United States more likely to work with regimes whose interests are closely aligned or those who diverge significantly? To put it differently, are Magsaysays more common or Quirinos?

Sadly, recent academic research on the subject suggests that the latter is far more common.²⁹

Advising a government in counterinsurgency or counterterrorism suffers from a phenomenon that economists call adverse selection.³⁰ This is a situation where, due to the specifics of a transaction, the only actors who wish to participate are “bad” ones.

Adverse selection often occurs in insurance markets, like automobile insurance, where the people who most want collision insurance are those who drive a lot or otherwise self-assess that they are more likely to have accidents. If there wasn’t a law requiring people to have insurance, the people seeking coverage would not be a representative sample of all drivers, but only the riskiest ones.

There is a parallel phenomenon with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.³¹

²⁸ Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos*, 183.

²⁹ Biddle et al., “Small Footprint, Small Payoff,” 98-101; Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 22-51.

³⁰ Carmen M. Alston, “Adverse Selection,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*:
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/adverse-selection>

³¹ Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 28.

Since effective, legitimate governments rarely lose control of substantial portions of their country to terrorists or insurgents, the only regimes needing external assistance to combat domestic political opponents are almost by definition flawed in some key respects—be they weak, incompetent, fraudulent, abusive, or all of the above. In turn, the same governmental shortcomings that facilitate the emergence of an insurgency also undercut the effectiveness of the counterinsurgent response.³²

Even if they have the capacity to do so, local governments are rarely eager to address such problems as their core supporters frequently benefit from the country's political and economic status quo. It is perhaps unsurprising that after a year serving as the senior U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese I Corps, Col. Bryce Denno cogently observed in his 1963 end-of-tour report that:

It would be a miraculous coincidence if a host nation in a war of counterinsurgency were to share identical objectives with the U.S. or arrive at identical solutions to problems that arise. Hence, it behooves the U.S. to seek ways in which it can influence the host nation to act in a manner compatible with U.S. interests in a war which we are financing to a large extent and otherwise supporting.³³

Consequently, Denno advised his superiors:

The development of techniques and means to increase U.S. leverage in Vietnam is the single most important problem facing us there and it will be a fundamental problem in any future counterinsurgency effort in which we become involved.³⁴

No matter how much aid you give a country or how many advisers you send, if you cannot prevent the local government from employing these resources to pursue its own agenda, or from prioritizing political reliability in the armed forces over military effectiveness, the assistance effort will come to naught.

One does not have to revisit the unhappy American experience in Vietnam to understand the limits of friendly persuasion in such circumstances, but merely look at the recent U.S. experience in Iraq.³⁵

³² Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 79-115.

³³ Bryce Denno, Senior Officer Debriefing Reports: Vietnam War, 1962–1972, July 19, 1963, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA: <http://www.walterladwig.com/Articles/DennoAA.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ For studies of U.S.-Vietnamese relations, particularly in the context of security force assistance, see Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1983); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile*

The Bush administration expected that their partner, Iraqi Prime Minister Nori al-Maliki, would embrace its strategy of overcoming the insurgency by bringing Kurds and Sunnis into the political process alongside the Shia majority. Instead, Maliki prioritized bolstering his position among radical Shia political groups, turned a blind eye to violence against Sunnis, and favored sectarian loyalists rather than professional officers in the Iraqi Security Forces.³⁶

The Bush administration never tried to compel Maliki to change his ways even though his actions were undermining American efforts in Iraq.³⁷

Instead, the Iraqi leader was provided with unconditioned aid and support to persuade him to make better choices. President Bush personally sought to mentor Maliki and in his own words provided him with unstinting “advice and understanding” in the belief that “Once I had earned his trust I would be in a better position to help him make the tough decisions.”³⁸ Bush specifically notes that he “was careful not to bully him or appear heavy-handed.”³⁹

This approach failed to restrain Maliki’s sectarian agenda, which prevented the military gains from the 2007 surge from being translated into positive political outcomes and arguably laid the foundation for the rise of the Islamic State.⁴⁰

Toward the Future

With large-scale U.S. military interventions seemingly at an end, it appears that advisory missions will be a key component of U.S. efforts in the so-called War on Terror. In a coda to his phenomenally researched and detailed account of Edward Lansdale’s career, (“Lansdalism in the Twenty-First Century”), Boot suggests that the quixotic CIA officer can provide a useful role model for future American advisors, both civilian and military.⁴¹ Lansdale’s advocacy of patience, understanding, cultural awareness and local solutions for local problems are all to be commended. It is similarly difficult to disagree with Lansdale’s focus on the political dimensions of civil war, or as Boot writes, the belief “that there was more to defeating insurgencies than killing insurgents.” Unfortunately, Lansdale’s partnership with Ramon Magsaysay does not provide a template for addressing

States: Challenges for the United States (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 67-107.

³⁶ Bernard Trainor and Michael Gordon, *The End Game: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 290-292.

³⁷ Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 36.

³⁸ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Random House, 2010), 362.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Peter Beinart, “The Surge Fallacy,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-surge-fallacy/399344/>

⁴¹ Boot, *The Road Not Taken*, 599.

what Boot describes as “the key American shortcoming” in Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam: “the inability to constructively guide the leaders of allied states in the direction desired by Washington.”⁴² The emergence of a popular, capable, indigenous reformer in Magsaysay was a unique circumstance that is unlikely to be replicated in other settings. Moreover, whether Lansdale realized it or not, American influence over the Philippine government was primarily the result of pressure and tough conditions on aid, which strengthened Magsaysay’s hand vis-à-vis reactionaries opposed to his reforms. Lansdale’s life story makes an entertaining read and his model of friendly persuasion is a wonderful ideal, but the strategy is unlikely to be sufficient in practice.

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⁴²Ibid, 602.