The American Who Predicted Tet

By Max Boot

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The Tet offensive, which began 50 years ago today and is remembered as the turning point of the Vietnam War, caught Americans by surprise. One of the few who saw what was coming was Edward Lansdale, the legendary covert operative and retired Air Force general who had helped to create the state of South Vietnam after the French withdrew. He had returned to Saigon in 1965 as an official at the American Embassy, trying to use his close ties to the South Vietnamese to salvage something from a failing war effort.

At a time when many American leaders were cautiously optimistic about the war, at least in public, Lansdale was sending up warning flares. At the end of October 1967, he wrote to Ellsworth Bunker, the ambassador to Saigon, “I believe that Hanoi is gambling on the climax of the war coming in 1968.” He anticipated that North Vietnam’s leaders would try to repeat their success against the French: “Hanoi policymakers and historians saw the defeat of the French forces as having reached its decisive point through the antiwar sentiment in Metropolitan France rather than on the field of battle in Vietnam; Dien Bien Phu was fought by the Viet Minh mostly to shape public opinion in Paris, a bit of drama rather than sound military strategy. It worked.” Now, he warned, Hanoi was going to implement a similar plan to “bleed the Americans” and “get the American public to force U.S. withdrawal,” because “they believe the American public is vulnerable to psychological manipulation in 1968.”

It was an uncannily accurate prediction, but like much of what Lansdale had to say, it went unheeded by the powers that be. He had warned in 1963 that it was a mistake to overthrow his friend and protégé, President Ngo Dinh Diem. He was ignored, and after Diem’s death in a military coup, South Vietnam went into free fall, leading Lyndon Johnson to send American troops into combat to avert a Communist victory. Then Lansdale had warned that there was no way out of the quagmire through military action alone; the United States, he said, had to nurture a legitimate government in Saigon that could win the support of the people. He had been ignored again as America opened a Pandora’s box of free-fire zones and search-and-destroy missions. Gen. William Westmoreland was convinced he could kill the Vietcong faster than they could be replaced.

The Tet offensive, which unfolded over Jan. 30 and 31, 1968, exposed Westmoreland’s blithe assurances, as late as the fall of 1967, that he saw a “light at the end of the tunnel” as little more than wishful thinking. Eighty thousand Vietcong troops attacked 36 of 44 provincial capitals, 64 of 242 district capitals, five of six autonomous cities and numerous hamlets and villages. A battle for control of Hue, the old imperial capital, raged for more than a month. Even the perimeter of the embassy in Saigon was penetrated by a Vietcong sapper squad.

Lansdale visited the embassy shortly after the Vietcong attackers had been killed or captured. He drove down deserted streets, passing bullet-riddled cars — “one of them, a sedan with doors ajar, had a body sprawling from the seat onto the pavement,” he noted. “An American in civilian clothes, dead.” At the embassy itself, he found that “broken glass and bits of masonry crunched underfoot. Along with holes in the new embassy building and wall from VC rockets and a satchel charge,” the cars outside “had smashed windows, flat tires and bullet holes.”

As the fighting continued, Lansdale’s villa at 194 Cong Ly Street took on, in his words, a “gypsy air.” Most of the Vietnamese household staff were not around because of the Tet holiday, so Lansdale and his two American aides had to scrounge for food and cook for themselves. One of his men liberated a supply of bread from the Brinks Hotel, which was being used as American bachelor officers’ quarters. Lansdale and his men visited their Vietnamese friends, trapped in their houses, to bring them the contraband bread.

Ambassador Bunker, nicknamed Old Man Refrigerator by the Vietnamese for his cool demeanor, came to Lansdale’s house with his security detail to spend a night after his own residence was deemed insecure. Lansdale noted that the ambassador, after taking a nap, “became acquainted with our F.O.V. cognac from Hong Kong for the first time.” Lansdale also took in some Vietnamese refugees rendered homeless by the fighting — a former cook and her young daughter and niece. To celebrate Lansdale’s 60th birthday on Feb. 6, friends and family sent food as gifts, ranging from a salami to San Miguel beer. “So,” Lansdale wrote, “some of the meetings at Cong Ly lacked the usual Vietnamese spirit of grand tragedy, looking more like old-fashioned picnics.”

In the end, the Tet offensive did not succeed in igniting a general uprising, as Communist leaders had hoped. Official American statistics showed 58,373 enemy dead between Jan. 29 and March 1, 1968, compared with 3,895 American combat deaths, 4,954 South Vietnamese troops and 14,300 South Vietnamese civilians. American generals claimed this was a decisive defeat for the Vietcong. Lansdale, naturally, saw things differently.

He conceded that the enemy “has been crushed militarily,” but he warned on March 27, 1968, that the offensive had the potential to achieve Hanoi’s objectives: It could strike “fear into the hearts of the urban population by demonstrating the inability of the government to provide adequate security,” and it could increase “pressure on the U.S. at home and abroad to withdraw, by seeking to demonstrate the hopelessness of victory and the immorality of our cause (for example, the image of U.S. firepower destroying friendly Vietnamese cities).” “The emotional factor in the Viet-Nam war has grown to immense size since the shock of the Tet offensive,” Lansdale warned. In the coming months, “it promises to become the real pivot factor.”

Once again, Lansdale perceived more than most of his rivals in Saigon and back in Washington, who wrote him off as a dreamer and a has-been. The shock of Tet persuaded President Johnson to refuse Westmoreland’s pleas for 200,000 more troops and to bring Westmoreland home to become Army chief of staff. Then, in a dramatic TV address on March 31, Johnson announced that instead of seeking re-election, he would apply all his energy toward bringing the war to an end.

The American quest for victory in Vietnam was over; the only question now was the pace of disengagement. But there was still plenty of fighting to come — more Americans would die after Tet than before — and Lansdale witnessed his share of it during the final months of his deployment.

On May 4, 1968, the Vietcong struck again across the South in what came to be known as Mini-Tet. “As during the Tet attacks,” Lansdale wrote, “all the flowering trees and shrubs are still in bloom. Somehow, their beauty just makes the rest of it more ugly than ever.” This attack, too, was repelled with heavy losses. But Lansdale was appalled by the level of destruction inflicted by the American counteroffensive.

His aide, Charlie Sweet, visited a working-class section of Saigon known as District Eight and was startled by “the deep anger against all Americans” because of the heavy firepower that American forces were employing against the 200 or so Vietcong guerrillas who had infiltrated their neighborhood. “Two hundred houses were being destroyed for every Vietcong killed,” one man complained. The fighting in District Eight would destroy more than 5,000 buildings, kill more than 200 civilians, wound 2,000 more and create 40,000 refugees. “I hope we never use these tactics in riots in the U.S.,” Lansdale wrote, “or we will lose all of our cities.”

Sweet’s memo about District Eight “resonated,” Defense Secretary Clark Clifford later wrote, and it led Westmoreland’s successor, Gen. Creighton Abrams, to curtail the use of air and artillery strikes. This was part of Abrams’s attempt to wage what one historian has called a “better war,” but it was too late: The American public had already turned against the war.

By mid-June 1968, when Lansdale was due to leave Vietnam for the last time, Saigon remained a city under siege. He noted: “Masses of barbed wire, now rusting under the rains that had come with May, clogged streets here and there about the town. Trash and garbage were being heaped on the pavements, as public services slowed.” Vietcong rockets were crashing into the capital, killing and wounding hundreds. “The blind caprice of enemy gunners,” he added, “made each inhabitant feel that he might be the next target.”

As he departed from Tan Son Nhut Airport on June 16, 1968, Lansdale tried to put on a brave face, but he knew that the war was being lost. Years later, he expressed “a deep-seated feeling of grief over my failure to accomplish enough in my 1965-1968 service in Vietnam to have helped the people there prevent the tragedy which eventually overcame them.”

Lansdale lived until 1987, and he would believe to his dying day that if only his advice — to focus more on politics and less on firepower — had been followed, America might have avoided a quagmire. There is no way to know whether he was right, and certainly North Vietnam would have been a formidable foe under any circumstances, with greater will to win than the United States. But it’s hard to imagine that the path America did take — a defeat involving 58,000 dead Americans and millions of dead Vietnamese — was a superior alternative.

*Max Boot is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. This article is adapted from his new book, “The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam.”*