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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon in the Foreign Policy program and I have the privilege of being up here today with two of my good friends who have written remarkable new books about Afghanistan, Max Boot and Steve Young -- excuse me, about Vietnam. (Laughter) That's the Freudian slip. It tells you where --

MR. BOOT: It might be two other good friends.

MR. O'HANLON: Yeah, two other good friends, right. But I got the names right of these two. This is Steve Young, not the quarterback, and this his Max Boot, yes, the Council on Foreign Relations scholar. And Max and I --

MR. BOOT: Also not the quarterback.

MR. O'HANLON: Also not the quarterback. Well, maybe --

MR. BOOT: That was the high school team, right?

MR. O'HANLON: Or the Redskins because we haven't finished that conversation yet as to this team's future. I luckily had some of their material to read over the weekend rather than abusing myself with watching that football game, but we are here to be treated today to some very important new histories about Vietnam. And we will get into, potentially, Afghanistan later with your help if you wish. But that's not where we're going to start. We're going to start by burrowing in a bit on Vietnam and the books these two gentleman have written.

Of course, Vietnam is still an important part of our country and not just its history, but its contemporary outlook on life. As the Faulkner said, the past is never forgotten. It's not even past. And I think that's certainly true with Vietnam today. A lot of you, a lot of us, have been influenced by Vietnam directly and personally, but also it clearly influences our national politics and our ways of thinking about war and social

cohesion and a lot of the issues that are back on the agenda today. But, again, we're not going to start there.

We're going to start by talking about the specific books and histories they've each written, which take angles on Vietnam, but speak more generally to that war. Max wrote a book called "The Road Not Taken," and it's about a man named Edward Lansdale, who many of you are familiar with and who Max is going to talk more about in just a moment, who had some ideas on Vietnam that clearly were not ultimately at the core of American policy. And a big question is, how much difference would it have made if they had been more heeded?

And that's certainly going to be the theme we continue on with Steve Young as he talks about his book on the CORDS program. And by the way, the CORDS program is interesting enough and important enough that some people, including Steve, think the war could have gone much differently if we had full-heartedly and more early on endorsed it. But it's also a little bit opaque enough and forgotten enough that many websites can't even agree on what the initials stand for. I think everybody says "Civil Operations," but after that the consensus seems to diverge as to whether this was revolutionary development or rural support or a little of both. The first one sounds a little leftie, but it may have been the accurate name, at least for a time. Steve can explain all of that to us shortly. But this was an idea to try to really work on both local security and good governance at the local level, the kind of theme that we've continually been debating and discussing in regard to Iraq and Afghanistan in this century.

So our format today, we'll ultimately get to you and we'll want to involve you and your questions in roughly the second half of the 90 minutes. At the beginning, what I'm going to do in just a moment here is ask first Steve and then Max just to mention a little bit more about the specific scope of their book, very briefly, so you can begin to

see how we're envisioning the flow of the conversation. And then I want to take 10 or 12 minutes with each of them just to ask them to explain some of the big ideas in their book, the main flow of their argument, the main flow of their history, with a couple of follow-up questions from me.

And I'll begin with Max because Edward Lansdale sort of comes first in the Vietnam history. He had been involved in Vietnam in the early to mid-1960s especially, and Max will say more about that in a second. The CORDS debate may have had some roots in earlier periods in the Vietnam campaign, such as it was, but it really became a big idea and official program more towards the latter part of the '60s and into the '70s. And I think it's fair to say, although Steve can quickly correct me here in a second when I give him the podium, that there is a serious argument as to whether if we had gotten to CORDS sooner, as someone like an Edward Lansdale's outlook might have advised, whether we could have done much better in Vietnam.

So that's the question before the jury and also whether there are any lessons for today in our current counterinsurgency and stabilization missions in the United States at the moment. But that's my once-over. Let me ask both Steve and Max now to situate in their own words their book in this broader debate. And then we'll go into the actual meat of the discussion.

Oh, one more word. Steve has a distinguished career in philanthropy, in corporate good governance, in social responsibility, a considerable background with Harvard University, both its College and Law School, and then later as an assistant dean. A lot of ongoing activities in the great state of Minnesota, as well. And so we're very glad to welcome him back to Brookings.

Max went to Berkeley for college, then studied history at Yale in graduate school, and as you know, is the author of previous award-winning books on

counterinsurgency, on revolutions in military affairs, and related matters. And just one of the most distinguished authors and national security scholars of his day.

So without further ado, Steve, please tell us a little more about your book.

MR. YOUNG: Thank you, Michael. So there's a long story behind this book, which I will avoid talking to you, but it began when Pastor Ellsworth Bunker, who was our ambassador in Saigon from '67 to '73, asked me to help me write memoirs. So I worked with Ellsworth and he passed away. The memoirs did not get published. I had a lot of stuff from his files, from the interviews, from reading all the secret cables. A lot of it was about the pacification, working with the Vietnamese on the political side. I'd also served in CORDS myself and so I tried to pull together a story about CORDS, which nobody was interested in, frankly.

So the years went on and Iraq happened and Afghanistan happened. And I had a friend a couple of years ago who said, Steve, the people have to know about CORDS and its successes. That would be one of my points. But I said I tried, nobody's interested.

He said, well, you've got to make it academic. You've got to have a theory because people don't want to rethink Vietnam very much. This is all before the Ken Burns program.

So he said, well, why don't you do something with hard and soft powers. I said okay.

So then I tried to think about how does CORDS, counterinsurgency, if you will -- because there are a lot of harmonies between this and Ed Lansdale, so I want to reference Ed Lansdale approach with hard and soft power? So my first response was, yes, it's soft power. Then the more I thought about it, I said, no, no. In fact, the more I

thought about it after that, and I know Joe Nye, soft power is, I will be very frank, ladies and gentlemen, on many points, it's a stupid idea. But we have dichotomized our thinking about power and foreign affairs into two incompatible alternatives.

I'll go into this later, there's the continuum, I argue, it comes from Clausewitz, most of what goes on is in the middle. Neither hard power nor sort power is relevant. Something else is relevant in the continuation of the spectrum from, if you will, from peace to thermonuclear war. CORDS is in the middle.

So I tried to articular a theory and I put a clumsy name on it called associative power. Because the genius of CORDS, and this goes back to Lansdale in '54 and '55, is you work with other people. If you want to be successful, it's not unilateral. So CORDS ultimately is combining efforts, U.S., South Vietnamese, U.S. military and civilian, South Vietnamese military and civilian. It's all about putting together a complex joint venture. So that's my point number one.

My point number two is that basically defeated the Viet Cong and we won the war in South Vietnam by 1972.

MR. O'HANLON: So you can see this is going to be provocative. Thank you. That was excellent for situating the topic within the broader subject.

Max, we could ask you to do the same. And then I'll launch in with a little more extensive discussion of your book.

MR. BOOT: Well, my book is a biography of Ed Lansdale, but really seeks to tell the story of our involvement in Vietnam through the life of Ed Lansdale, who was this once legendary covert operative said to be the model for *The Ugly American* as well as for *The Quiet American*. And he was somebody who had a career in the Air Force, ultimately retired as an Air Force two-star, but his most illustrious years were spent on assignment to the CIA. In the early 1950s, he masterminded the defeat of the

Huk rebellion, the Communist insurgency in the Philippines. And his reward for that was to get a one-way ticket to Saigon in the summer of 1954, where he helped to create this new state of South Vietnam and became very close to Ngo Dinh Diem, the first leader of South Vietnam.

He subsequently left Vietnam and became engaged in other pursuits in this town, including running something called Operation Mongoose in 1962 to overthrown Castro. But he kept close tabs on what was happening in Vietnam and he was very dismayed by the course of events, in particular by the rift by the Kennedy administration and Diem. And he watched helplessly from the sidelines as the Kennedy administration did exactly what he told them not to do, which was to overthrown Diem, which he warned would be a disaster because it would undermine whatever tenuous stability South Vietnam had achieved in the early ’60s. His advice was disregarded. He was forcibly retired by Robert McNamara with whom he clashed incessantly.

And then he went back for another tour of duty in Vietnam from ’65 to ’68, working first for Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and then for Ellsworth Bunker. And again, his advice was largely ignored because his advice was really to focus on creating a viable political entity in South Vietnam, one that could win the battle for hearts and minds, that could compete with the Viet Cong and the attempt to govern the South Vietnamese countryside.

And of course, the main thrust of U.S. policy was simply to bomb North Vietnam and the Viet Cong into oblivion because General William Westmoreland thought that he could defeat the enemy by killing a lot of them. And Lansdale argued consistently that was not going to work. In fact, it was going to backfire. He was really a pioneer of what we would today call population-centric counterinsurgency, the idea that to be successful the troops have to win the confidence and support of the people. And you

don't win the confidence and support of the people by destroying their villages and killing them, and a lot of that went on in Vietnam obviously under both the French and our war.

And so argued against all that and he was largely disregarded. And he retired in the middle of 1968 after the Tet Offensive, disillusioned and dejected because he had seen his advice consistently ignored by the powers that be.

And so the reason my book is called *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* is because I suggest that there was another road that Ed Lansdale had argued for. And we could have if not necessarily won the war, at least things would have gone at lower cost both to ourselves and to the Vietnamese if we had followed the approach the Lansdale advocated.

MR. O'HANLON: Outstanding. Let me ask a little more about that approach. And I guess I will at least mention in passing already Iraq and Afghanistan. You and I have had the privilege of seeing some amazing Americans in action in the wars of this century where when I reflect on the comparisons of Iraq and Afghanistan to Vietnam, I don't get the sense that Vietnam was all that well poised to win. And I'm going to have a similar kind of question for you, Steve, a little later.

And so you can try to do a combined effort, security and good governance and economic development, but in these societies where institutions and individuals are weak or corrupt, where there is an outside power with sanctuary and support from abroad, it seems like it's a daunting proposition. So I just wanted to ask which of the tenets of Lansdale's do you think were sort of well enough and sophisticated enough in their development that they really could have made a meaningful difference? Is it primarily just taking away the bad stuff we did or do you really have a sense that Lansdale had a complex, integrated concept in mind that itself was refined enough that it really could have worked?

You see what I'm getting at. In other words, the barrages with artillery, with napalm, the harm done by those seems so great that maybe simply avoiding that would have been the benefit of listening to Lansdale. Or do you think that he had really worked through a combined concept that sort of added up to something particularly synergistic?

MR. BOOT: Well, I think a lot of what Lansdale was preaching, again, is what is known today as population-centric counterinsurgency. I mean, he really invented the modern day counterinsurgency in the late '50s, early '60s, helped to get the Army Special Forces their counterinsurgency mission. Back then it was called counter guerilla warfare. Eventually it became known as counterinsurgency. But the basic insight of that is to position the Army on the side of the people to avoid heavy firepower, but also to focus on governance. And that's something that we still have a lot of trouble with today.

I think, you know, Mike, you and I were both in Iraq during the surge and I think part of what made the surge in Iraq successful in 2007, 2008, was basically the application of Lansdale-ism to Iraq, although it certainly wasn't viewed that way. But, you know, the counterinsurgency manual tried to distill the lessons of past counterinsurgency, and Lansdale wasn't cited, but certainly others who had very similar viewpoints were.

And so I think that was what enabled at least some of the temporary success, but it wasn't more lasting, in part because I think that even now we neglect the basic emphasis that Lansdale put on building governmental institutions and working closely with local political leaders. And I think one of the big mistakes that we made in both Afghanistan and Iraq was becoming so at odds with our local allies, with Maliki and with Hamid Karzai. And in some ways this paralleled our falling out with Ngo Dinh Diem which had such catastrophic consequences in Vietnam and led to the Americanization of the war.

And I think part of Lansdale's genius is that he was, along with T.E. Lawrence, one of the most illustrious advisors of the 20th century. And he was somebody in the Philippines, he became as close as brothers with Ramon Magsaysay, who was the defense minister and whom he elevated essentially to the presidency in the Philippines. And he, again, became very close with Diem in a way that no other American was as close with him. And he really established a rapport and he was able to get them to do what he wanted not by hectoring them, not by lecturing them, not by giving non-negotiable demands, which tends to be the American way of dealing with weak local allies, but he would befriend them.

He would listen to them and he would sit there for hours. And in the case of Diem, this was quite an ordeal because anybody who dealt with him could tell you that he would go on for hours and most Americans were ready to strangle themselves listening to the minutiae of South Vietnamese politics. But Lansdale had this infinite patience and he would gladly listen to what Diem had to say no matter how longwinded he was and then eventually he would kind of lean into him and say so if I understand you, what you're saying is X, Y, and Z. And then he would subtly rephrase what he had just heard and gently steer this foreign leader along the path he wanted to go, not by telling him, goddammit, this is the way we're going to do it. We're Americans and we know better. But by saying you have the wisdom, I'm just helping to draw the wisdom out of you. It's a very different approach, much more effective, and it's something we failed to do with leaders like Karzai and Maliki, and I think it's something that we still struggle with today.

But that's, you know, along with limiting the firepower, it's kind of a general different approach to counterinsurgency and it's worlds removed from the drone strikes, its military operations. Because Lansdale was really focused on the political

element of warfare. And, you know, we all know that Clausewitz talked about the primacy of politics in warfare. But all of our military folks learn that in school, but we don't actually practice it on the battlefield. And we tend to give pride of place to combat arms and we neglect the political dimension, which is why it's so hard to win lasting victories in places like Afghanistan and Iraq or today in Syria.

MR. O'HANLON: So thank you. And I'm just going to keep at it with a couple more questions for you and then move on to Steve. And I realize we're just sort of getting little snapshots of your argument and your history, so I apologize if this is imperfect way to do it. And we encourage everyone, of course, to read the book and buy the book.

But I wanted to ask you a little bit more about Diem and Lansdale. And you alluded to Maliki and Karzai. You could argue that with Maliki and Karzai we stuck with them and with Diem we didn't. And in all three cases we got bad outcomes; or at least in Iraq and Afghanistan for the amount of effort we put in, the results are pretty mediocre. And if those two hadn't been ultimately displaced, we were perhaps headed for an unfortunate outcome. One could argue that.

So I guess I want to probe a little more on the Diem question. I don't know the history of that individual very well, but what I do know isn't that impressive. And you didn't say anything just now that made me feel more impressed by Diem. And I wonder how well we could have done with a guy who was widely seen as corrupt, as divisive I think between Catholics and Buddhists, as insufficiently attuned to where his people were at that moment in their history. Is this really a guy that even if we had displayed the infinite patience of Job or Lansdale that we could have brought to run his country well enough to defeat the insurgency that was being presented and supported from abroad by some pretty powerful actors?

MR. BOOT: Well, I mean, what you're articulating is basically the critique that took root in the Kennedy administration in 1963 and that lead to Diem's overthrow. And it's a critique which is still widely held today, including if you watched episode 2 of the Ken Burns documentary series. A lot of criticisms in there of Diem. I wouldn't say so much for corruption because I don't think even his worse critics accused him of being corrupt, but certainly he was accused of being autocratic, aloof, this Catholic Mandarin out of touch with his people, a dictator. And a lot of those criticisms had some validity.

But here's the thing. Everybody in 1963 was so focused no how terrible Diem supposedly was and certainly Halberstam and Sheehan and the press corps was howling for him. And ultimately the Kennedy administration concluded that we could not be successful in the Vietnam conflict with Diem. But guess what. We saw what happened when he was actually overthrown and the situation spiraled out of control because it turns out in retrospect that Diem was actually holding South Vietnam together more or less. And as soon as he was overthrown you had one illegitimate ruler after another, one military coup after another. And the security situation disintegrated, leaving Johnson with no choice he thought but to send American troops if he was to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam.

And I think from Lansdale's perspective what he would have said is that Diem was underrated, that he was actually an honest guy. He had credibility because he was both anti-Communist and anti-French. That he was really the most credible nationalist leader that South Vietnam could have had. But he had a lot of issues and, of course, chief among them was his conspiratorial brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who pushed him to create a more Fascist type state in South Vietnam after Lansdale left at the end of 1956.

But what Lansdale consistently argued was instead of raging against Diem and giving the military the approval to overthrow him, what we need to do is we need to influence him for the better. And Lansdale, when he had been in South Vietnam, had actually managed to influence Diem for the better. But after he left, we wound up with this adversarial posture with Diem where we weren't influencing, just like we wound up with an adversarial posture with Karzai and Maliki. And it wound up being incredibly counterproductive.

MR. O'HANLON: So two more questions, one on military reform and the performance of South Korean military forces and then one on --

MR. BOOT: South Vietnamese.

MR. O'HANLON: South Vietnamese, thank you. Yeah, I'm getting ahead of myself. One I'm thinking about on the military reform piece, but one I'm thinking about local governance and what the Lansdale view of the world might have meant for South Vietnamese local governance and how you would have actually implemented this concept of population-centric security within Vietnam given its various fissures and social challenges. So that's the second question.

The first one, you mentioned Neil Sheehan, "A Bright Shining Lie," perhaps one of the best Vietnam books. And he did something similar in his book to what you've done I think in yours: to find one very interesting, important American who spanned much of the effort. And, of course, that was John Paul Vann, if I'm getting that name right after my previous missteps.

But I remember very vividly from the "Bright Shining Lie" book a battle I think of Ap Bac in 1964, where South Vietnamese forces performed abysmally and was --

MR. BOOT: '63.

MR. O'HANLON: '63? And so the performance was so poor that I have

to ask, you know, that's just one snapshot. And this is a provocation, obviously. I'm not trying to counter you. I'm just trying to set up a point of view and see how you would respond. Even if we had continued to massage Diem and get him to make a few okay decisions at the level of national governance, weren't the South Vietnamese force so unmotivated and incompetent, frankly, that they were up against a better foe? And the timeline on which the Lansdale effort would have had to occur would have been so belated compared to the kind of time we really had available to us, that we would have been in a bad place regardless?

MR. BOOT: I think that's a -- I don't think that's a fully argument, I guess I would say. Because there was certainly no question that the ARVN, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, had their weaknesses and they were up against a superb foe in the North Vietnamese military machine and the Viet Cong. Some of the best soldiers in the world, no question about it. But, in fact, and we can see this more clearly with the advantage of historical hindsight, despite the occasional reverses that they suffered and the battle of Ap Bac, which was one where John Paul Vann was the advisor to I think it was the ARVN 7th Division. And he castigated them in the press and gave the ARVN a bad name because of that.

I think that was, in that period, in the '62/'63, area when Diem was still in power, was a little bit of an aberration. Because, in fact, at that point the ARVN was on the offensive and the Viet Cong were actually on the defensive and they were being driven back not only by the ARVN, which had new American military equipment, American advisors, and was actually on the go, but also by the Strategic Hamlets Program, which was kind of a classic counterinsurgency initiative to try to secure the rural population from the Viet Cong. And again, that had some problems and it was overhyped by the Diem regime and it expanded too rapidly and so forth. But generally, it was

actually making headway.

And if you actually read the official history put forward by the North Vietnamese military and the North Vietnamese government they will concede that they were suffering some serious defeats in the ’62/’63 period. And they only really regained the initiative as soon as Diem was overthrown because at that point the Strategic Hamlets were abandoned, chaos gripped South Vietnam. All the province and district chiefs were replaced. You had one military regime after another, so you lost any kind of cohesiveness or stability and that’s what really enabled this massive North Vietnamese invasion to occur, which led to Johnson’s fateful decision to send American combat troops in 1965, which Ed Lansdale opposed.

So I hope that people will read my book with an open mind because I think I try to provide a more balanced picture of Diem and I don’t neglect his dark side or his weaknesses, and there were many, but I don’t think that he was quite as bad a guy as has often been portrayed and not as bad as the Kennedy administration through he was. Because, in fact, as we know, things got a lot worse once he was gone.

MR. O'HANLON: And then finally, thank you. I appreciate very much the clarification on the key themes of your book and how they push back against some widely held views, including perhaps by me. But on the issue of the Strategic Hamlets and the potential for local political governance to improve, what’s your feel about -- I mean, I think it’s implied in your slightly more optimistic sense of how things could have gone, but how would the fissures in society, you know, the agrarian versus rural, landholder versus non-landholder, Catholic versus Buddhist, how could these have been reconciled in a strategy for good governance locally? Would you have had to go for those towns and villages that were primarily less divide? Start with those and have the ink spots grow to the more complex areas of social descent and divisiveness? What was

the potential really to bring this society together and unify it hamlet by hamlet?

MR. BOOT: Well, that was actually a lot of what Lansdale was advocating was starting with local areas that were more resistant to Communism, where you had villages that were Catholic or belonged to one of the religious sects, the Cao Dai or the Hoa Hao, who were ideologically resistant to this atheist ideology and kind of expand outward. But he also believed it was incredibly important to have local governance in the villages.

And one of the things that he thought Diem really made a big mistake on, which he did after Lansdale left Vietnam, was to end the local election of village chiefs and then start appointing them basically from Saigon, like the district and provincial leaders. And what that meant in practice was that if villagers were not happy with their local chief, there was no way to vote him out of office. The only way to get rid of him was to dime he out to the Viet Cong and have the Viet Cong kill him, and that happened quite a bit. And the Viet Cong would tend to kill either the most corrupt and unpopular village chiefs or the most effective ones who were the best at resisting the Communist offensive.

But Lansdale thought this was just a fatal miscalculation on Diem's part. And he probably would have been able to dissuade Diem from doing it if he had been around, but because he thought it was important for villagers to have confidence in their officials and be able to replace them through lawful elected means. And, you know, Lansdale basically -- I mean, he was certainly well aware of the fissures in South Vietnamese society, some of which you have mentioned. But, I mean, he consistently argued that whether it was Diem or his successors, that they had to reach out to their political opponents to try to have a more inclusive regime that would represent all aspects of society and that would not rule in dictatorial or heavy-handed fashion.

And he has some success in achieving that kind of outcome in the mid-

’50s, when he had the full support of the Eisenhower administration and the Dulles brothers in particular behind him. But in subsequent years, he lost that support. And Johnson and Westmoreland and the folks who were running the war in the mid-’60s just couldn’t have cared less. They were happy to back a military regime and to go out and kill VC, and they kind of ignored Lansdale’s efforts to increase governmental legitimacy by holding legitimate and fair elections. I mean, he actually managed to hold legislative elections in 1966 that were pretty fair, but he had very little support from anybody.

And there’s a scene in my book where Richard Nixon, who was at that point out of office, but knew Lansdale from having served as vice president, came to Vietnam and visited with Lansdale and his team. And he said, you know, hey, Ed, so what are you guys up to these days? And Lansdale said, well, you know, Mr. Vice President, we’re trying to hold these legitimate and fair elections for the legislature in Saigon. And Nixon kind of looked blankly and his reply was, well, of course, I’m all in favor of free and fair elections as long as the right candidate wins. (Laughter)

And that wasn’t at all the Lansdale philosophy. His idea was you’ve really got to have real free and fair elections where whoever is the most popular candidate wins. But Johnson and Nixon and all these other U.S. leaders, their view was basically, well, we’ve spent years fixing elections on the United States, so why shouldn’t we fix the election in South Vietnam?

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. Thank you very much. Excellent overview. Got me very intrigued and it’s just two weeks till Christmas, so I’ll be doing some shopping in the kind of quantities that I hadn’t necessarily anticipated because I think I’m going to send this book around to a few places.

Steve, over to you. There’s a lot on the table already. And you may want to comment already on some of what you’ve heard, but specifically, I also hope that

you'll tell us a little more about the key precepts of CORDS. And the one question I would put before you is, when I heard you talk about that continuum and you said that CORDS was neither hard power nor sort power, I actually thought it was both hard power and soft power. So maybe you can explain or help me understand my confusion.

But, you know, if you can lay out just a few more of the big ideas in the CORDS program and anything you want to do by way of reacting to Max, as well.

MR. YOUNG: Okay. First point, reacting to what you guys have been saying. I will put before the group a proposition that CORDS addressed and largely solved all those issues, but sub rosa. One of my stories is, I can't remember some of the details, I think it was '71. There were provincial elections. Parker, you may remember, provincial elections. And I'm sorry, folks, it was either Peter Osnos or Peter Jay from the *Washington Post*. I was working in Saigon at the time. I got to know him. The big thing about is democracy in Vietnam? I said, hey, there are these provincial council elections and there's real competition going on down there. You ought to come with me.

I think it was Peter Jay, so we went down to Vinh Long where I used to work. We went to a couple of district and there's these heated elections going on. The Vietnamese do not get along with each other very well as a general principle. So there are a bunch of candidates and he goes back to Saigon. He says, Steve, I've got to thank you. It's amazing.

He wrote up something like, I don't know, 30, 38 paragraphs on these elections. The story gets published in the Washington Post. And it was either, and I can't remember, ladies and gentlemen, it was either 8 paragraphs on page 11 or 11 paragraphs on page 8. Right? (Laughter) In other words, a major, major accomplishment in terms of what we Americans were trying to do in Vietnam ignored. Right?

So the fact that I could say CORDS addressed all these things and some of you may be looking at me saying, you know, what's Steve smoking, I can understand. Let me do two things.

First, getting back to Mike's point about the continuum in the center. I would argue, and this is a debate I think we Americans and you here in Washington, you have to have, both soft power and hard power are fundamentally unilateral. And I submit that if you listen to what Max was saying about Lansdale, because my dad had the same experience with Diem in the '50s, if you can sit there as an American and listen to somebody like that, you're not being unilateral. You'd doing something else. You're building a relationship. You're building trust. You're doing something.

So soft power unilateralism, quoting Joe Nye, Joe Biden just had a piece the other month, soft power is they do what we want because they love our values. Just like those Iraqis in 2003, right? Once we got rid of Saddam they were all going to welcome Western democracy and American values and things like this. And I believe George W. Bush, our then President, later complained that nobody told him that there were Sunnis and Shia. (Laughter)

So soft power is they're going to do stuff for us. Karzai's going to get along with us. Maliki's going to do what we want because our values, right? That's very unilateral, I submit. We lecture.

The other thing with hard power is it's expressly unilateral. This is what Clausewitz writes about. Right? I break your will through the use of violence. Now, what's in the middle? When I'm not there to impose unilaterally, I've got to work out a deal.

A quick jaunt to history. Washington, George Washington, won the battle of Yorktown. Is that historically accurate? That he alone and the American forces

won the battle of Yorktown? Some of you may remember that Benjamin Franklin had negotiated a treaty of alliance with the king of France. And at the time of the battle of Yorktown, what was out in the Chesapeake Bay? De Grasse's fleet preventing the British from resupplying and supporting Cornwallis' troops. Without that French fleet the British would have resupplied Cornwallis, Cornwallis would have won the battle and there would be no United States of America.

We only survived, we only won at Yorktown because there was an alliance. We were working with other people; they were helping us. First point.

Second point, let me try to be very fast on what happened to create CORDS and why was it created. Because I think it indirectly addresses the failures of these two extremes and something in the middle.

Some of you may recall that in the fall of 1966, we Americans in Washington and President Johnson in particular was faced with two competing philosophies about what to do in Vietnam. There was the approach of Robert McNamara and the military, which was hard power roughly speaking. There was the approach of the anti-war movement and the doves and George Ball and others, which was to negotiate, which was in effect a soft power approach. We have to negotiate and get out of the war.

In October 1966, some of you may remember, McNamara submitted to Johnson what is fairly well known, and the text is in at least the Gravel edition of The Pentagon Papers, his memorandum, which basically said I have come to the conclusion that nothing we are doing will defend South Vietnam. We cannot convince the North Vietnamese to give up and I don't know what to do. I'm overstating the case, right.

The memo is elegant. It is professorial. It is emotionally neutral. It is well-written, it is well crafted. The prose is excellent. But the bottom line is -- so put yourself in the shoes of LBJ in October 1966 with congressional elections coming up in

like two weeks. And we're not talking about any secretary of defense, ladies and gentlemen. We're talking about Robert McNamara, iconic figure and a very, very close confidant of Bobby Kennedy, who's telling Bobby everything he's also telling LBJ.

And he's basically going to his president, who's got -- listening to McNamara and the military. He's got 175,000 (inaudible) Americans in combat in South Vietnam and more on the way. He hasn't given the military all they wanted, but he's basically done the non-Lansdale approach, just I support what Max was saying. Now his secretary of defense comes in and says, oh, sorry, Mr. President, you can't win doing what I told you to do and I don't have any ideas.

Ending up my book a friend of mine suggested I go back to the LBJ Library in Austin, and go through files of Komer. And I also said, oh, Walt Rostow, whom some of you may remember. Because Rostow was the advisor for national security at that time. He'd taken over from McGeorge Bundy.

So I go through Rostow's files and Komer's files. Sitting in a folder in Rostow's files, which I don't think anybody had seen, is a piece of paper with handwritten notes by Rostow of a luncheon meeting with LBJ on (inaudible) November 13th. I think I reference it in the book, 1966. And the note says: Put together a small group, you, Robert Komer, Chair Katzenbach, Cy Vance, and get a smart general and rethink Vietnam.

Now, I've never seen any other reference. I've seen nothing else that that group was actually formed and met. But by the end of November, within two or three weeks, Robert Komer on the White House staff comes up with a strategy for Vietnam which is new and comprehensive and it's in the middle. It's not more hard power and it's not sort power. It's basically working with the South Vietnamese at the village level, it's a Lansdale kind of strategy, and mobilizing more and more South Vietnamese assets, i.e.,

the ARVN; i.e., the economic wealth of South Vietnam. Got to get the economy going. And implicitly in Komer's recommendation in late '66, phasing out and withdrawing American forces.

This gets accepted by Johnson. In March, he puts it into operation by sending out Ellsworth Bunker to be ambassador, Robert Komer to set up the CORDS organization, and Creighton Abrams to be a deputy to Westmoreland to focus in on the ARVN and building up the capability of the ARVN. And those three people work on that for the next three or four years. And basically, as I said earlier, and I will defend it in the Q&A, the Viet Cong, the southern sympathizers of Hanoi, were defeated. And in '72, the ARVN held off a main force invasion of Hanoi's divisions with the help of American airpower. But American bombing in An Loc, Kon Tum, and Quang Tri would not have won the day if the ARVN had broke. And at least the Ken Burns film admitted that, that the ARVN stood their ground. And it was the ARVN under General Truong who recaptured Quang Tri.

So what was CORDS? I mean, next question. The book, I try to go through sort of year by year, step by step. How did this work? Who did what? What was the theory? And the basic theory, the operational theory, there were two phases, I argue.

The first phase was sort of the Komer phase, which was called revolutionary development, which was basically central government cadres coming down to villages to motivate the people. The second phase, which I give all credit to William Colby, who in my experience, and I worked for him, the guy was a genius. He was just a remarkable man. It was local elections and organizing the people in their local communities, which, Michael, gets to your point.

If you're in a Hoa Hao village, the Hoa Hao elect their own village council. Right? If you're in a Hoa Hao Catholic village, depending on where the election

goes, you have a village council of 10 people, you're going to get 6 Hoa Hao and 4 Catholics. And guess what generally happens among human beings in those kinds of situations? You kind of work out a compromise. Right? The Hoa Hao don't sort of step on all the Catholics. The Catholics get along a little bit, but then they ask for a few things. And in the ebb and flow of democratic politics you trade off and you build a community process, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So let me stop there.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic.

MR. BOOT: If I could just add one thing to what Steve just said.

MR. O'HANLON: Please.

MR. BOOT: Because I obviously agree with what Steve is saying, but I think the tragedy of Vietnam is that we tried this other approach, the firepower-intensive Westmoreland and Johnson approach really from '65 to '68 with two years of complete chaos before that between '63 and '65. And so by the time the alternative CORDS approach started to have some success after the failure of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, the patience of the American public was exhausted and nobody at that time was interested in a fair assessment of what was going on in Vietnam. They just wanted to get the hell out. And essentially, that unsuccessful approach that Johnson and Westmoreland pursued, which killed so many Americans and so many Vietnamese and also killed American popular support for the war, so that by the time we started to get things more right, it was too late. Because even Nixon and Kissinger were intent on just pulling everybody out as quickly as possible.

MR. O'HANLON: So a question for you, Steve, to follow up. You mentioned McGeorge Bundy, who I think left in 1966. And I think he left largely in frustration at how the war was going. He doesn't seem to have had, despite his great

gifts, doesn’t seem to have had the intuitive realization that there was an alternative, right? Because he was a smart guy and a pretty historically minded guy. And if he had thought it was worth fighting for, that there was something else to do that was doable, presumably he might have stayed on. I’m just asking this as a provocation.

So why do you think McGeorge Bundy didn’t grasp the potential here out of a Lansdale model, out of in some ways what seems like common sense? Try to scale back the firepower, focus more on local governance. Why were we so devoid of ideas in that crucial period of time that, as Max has just said, may have been when we really squandered the opportunity politically?

MR. YOUNG: This may be unfair and it involves my institution and my class and my background of Harvard. McGeorge Bundy, I mean, David Halberstam got something I think very correct in his book, “The Best and the Brightest.” And may I also submit, ladies and gentlemen, that that’s what happened in our presidential election of 2016. The best and the brightest were rejected by the deplorables. And Halberstam was on to something.

McNamara was cold, focused on numbers. He was more an MIT numbers guy, right? McGeorge Bundy was old-line New England, Harvard. I think he was dealing with the fact that he didn’t have a Ph.D., if I recall.

MR. O'HANLON: I think you’re right.

MR. YOUNG: But McGeorge Bundy had everything figured out. There’s a story -- a story -- I think it’s in Halberstam, but I’ve heard it from others, too, of Lyndon Johnson right after the Inauguration. He’s at the first cabinet meeting of the Kennedy cabinet and he goes back up to the Hill and he goes with his mentor, Sam Rayburn. And he says something like, I’m sorry for the language, it’s something like, Sam, I’m fucked. I mean, look at these people. I mean, MIT Ph.D., Harvard this, Harvard that. And he goes

through all these credentials of all the people in Kennedy's cabinet whom I think to those of us who were around at the time were saying, my god, these are demigods. What was the other story about how a meeting of the -- Max, the most brilliant meeting in the White House was the Kennedy cabinet since Thomas Jefferson dined alone? (Laughter)

So anyway, Johnson is crying to Sam Rayburn at this. He's outclassed. He's this crude, vulgar Texan. And Sam Rayburn said something like, shit, Lyndon, I just wish one of those people had ever been elected sheriff. (Laughter)

And McGeorge Bundy, there's something in there. You don't sympathize with other people. You rationalize everything. You impose conceptual boxes on other cultures, on other people. And you have -- and this is what I think you see in retrospect if you read the memos of these people, you have this remarkable ability to rationalize. In other words, you know what outcome you kind of want the President to get to, right? So you rationalize the date, the this, the that, and if I read the memo, I come down and I say, right, Option No. 1 is -- you know, so there is a danger in being too smart.

MR. O'HANLON: It's the last question for you, Steve, and then we'll --

MR. BOOT: Can I just jump with one fast anecdote --

MR. O'HANLON: Yeah, absolutely.

MR. BOOT: -- that supports the point that Steve is making about the arrogance of the best and the brightest? This was a meeting that occurred in '62 when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called Ed Lansdale, who at that point was essentially what we would now call the assistant secretary of defense for special operations. Called him into his office and said he had this graph paper there and he had a pencil and he said, you know, Ed, I'm working on arithmetizing the Vietnam War, getting everything into the computer here. And I have a list of factors and I want you to help me with getting the numbers right.

And Lansdale stood there and listened to him for a little bit and said, well, Mr. Secretary, you know, I'm happy to be helpful, but you need to remember the most important factor of all, which is the X factor. And McNamara immediately writes "X factor" on his graph paper. (Laughter) And he says, okay, great, tell me how to calculate that. And Lansdale says, well, unfortunately, Mr. Secretary, I don't know how to calculate it because the X factor is the most important thing of all, but you can't get it down to numbers. It's the feelings of the people, who the people actually want to be governed by. And that is going to resist any attempt to reduce the are down to an arithmetic calculation.

And so, of course, McNamara being McNamara, instead of listening to Lansdale and taking this in, concluded that Lansdale was an idiotic who was too stupid to understand this new technology and basically shunted him off from having any more influence on the course of Vietnam policy.

MR. O'HANLON: If we had done it right, how long would it have taken?

MR. YOUNG: Three years. Well, we did it in three years with CORDS, you know.

That's a little bit flip because one of the things -- a couple other things I put in the book, there are two other things. I have a chapter on Bunker as the ambassador, and I call it something like "Setting the Context." You've got to set the context. And that goes to you point, Michael, the capacity, the ability of your ally. If you don't set the context, if you don't have the right leadership, the right -- I mean, there's a whole bunch of things, the economy, then your CORDS effort ain't going to work. So I'm being flip, but if you set the context, three years.

Going back to another of your points, in '64, this goes to -- there was a Vietnamese government in '64 which -- and these were my friends. So Robert

McNamara, Cabot Lodge, Harkins, Westy, they had no clue. This was a government of (inaudible), who had a coalition approach to fighting the Communists, coalition for villages on up. That same party, that same philosophy shows up again under Thieu after the Tet Offensive and is the Vietnamese partner to Colby and the CORDS organization. It was there in ’64 and we pushed it aside.

MR. O'HANLON: But if we did it for three years, you said we succeeded in ’72 in helping the South Vietnamese repel one particular invasion. So what did we get wrong? It obviously would have been better to start sooner, but what did we get wrong that meant that ultimately the war was lost if we did what you said for the length of time you espoused, got to an okay place in ’72? Was it just too abrupt of a departure or what?

MR. YOUNG: No, there was something else and it’s something I came across when I was working with Ellsworth. And I don’t want to talk about it too much because I’m trying to write a book about it. But from my point of view the Vietnam War was lost on May 31, 1971, in Paris. And if you want more background, please contact Henry Kissinger. (Laughter) I mean, there’s a big, big story there.

MR. BOOT: That’s a cryptic reference basically to the fact that the Paris Peace Accords negotiated by Henry Kissinger obviously under Nixon were ultimately lopsided and that we removed all of our troops from South Vietnam. But North Vietnam was allowed to keep more than 200,000 of its own troops in South Vietnam, and that was ultimately the lopsided bargain that doomed the state of South Vietnam.

But I think, you know, going back to what Steve was saying, the success in repelling the Easter Offensive in 1972, and we had only about 5,000 advisors in South Vietnam, but they were able to call on massive airpower. I think if we had kept that kind of commitment indefinitely up to the present day, it’s possible or even likely that South Vietnam would have survived.

MR. YOUNG: If I could follow-up on that. This is very important and none of this is covered, I think, in the Ken Burns documentary, which is sort of going to be the collective wisdom of our people about this.

So first of all, Henry shows up in Saigon with the peace agreement in September ’72. And he presents it to Thieu in an English version. He didn’t even have a Vietnamese draft. And Thieu suddenly realizes, and there’s a much longer story here, too, but Thieu suddenly realizes that his fundamental condition, that the North Vietnamese regular army, the PAVN, leave South Vietnam has been ignored. The PAVN are going to stay in South Vietnam and he refuses to sign.

It’s coming up on the ’68 election, right? You know, he’s got his American patron and he refuses to sign. The consequence was Bunker has to negotiate. Private letters from Nixon to Thieu promising B-52s if the PAVN ever goes on the offensive inside South Vietnam.

In the United States we had a little affair called Watergate. President Nixon resigned. If you read Van Tien Dung’s book, (speaking in Vietnamese 55:18), *Great Spring Victory*, it says Le Duan, after the resignation, Le Duan calls together the politburo and says let’s test them. So they use the PAVN troops to go after a remote, godforsaken, provincial capital, Phuc Long. Right? And they surround Phuc Long and they take Phuc Long. Gerald Ford is President. The B-52s are not sent.

Oh, by the way, the politburo is meeting 24/7 in Hanoi with a landline going down to their commander at Phuc Long. The commander reports back to the politburo we have taken it, no B-52s, we’ve got the province. And Le Duan said that’s it, the Americans are not coming back. Release the troops.

So this just goes to Max’s point that if we had remained a credible ally in ’75, not clear that Hanoi could have conquered the South.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, thank you. I've monopolized enough. I think a lot of you are going to want to get in on this. And so please, just wait for a microphone, identify yourself. And if you want to direct the question to one or the other, that's great. Please, right here, beginning in the fourth row.

MR. HIRSCHHORN: Yeah, Eric Hirschhorn. I feel as though I'm listening to a discussion of how the deck chairs should have been arranged on the *Titanic*. And my question is whether this was ever a good place to take a stand or whether it was quicksand from the get-go?

MR. YOUNG: If I could speak to that historically with a little personal thing. But another factor, again strategic, I don't know how many of you know or remember Norm Hannah. Norm Hannah wrote a book, I can't remember of it. Norm Hannah was Paul Mill for CINCPAC in the '50s and in the '60s. Anyway, Norm was State Department, I think.

Norm's argument was the place to take a stand was Laos, in the mountains of Laos, to prevent the North Vietnamese from infiltrating. And apparently the only piece of advice that President Eisenhower gave to incoming President Kennedy when the two men met before they went up to the Inauguration was that. He says the most dangerous thing you have to face is Laos.

Halberstam talks about this; I think some others. There was a compromise -- oh, because of the Bay of Pigs. And the military, our military, refused to go into Laos because there are no logistic bases, there's no support how to do it. So Kennedy has to compromise in Laos. He then concludes that for whatever reason the line you have to defend is South Vietnam, which has a long border. That's one factor.

The second factor, was there anything there? Was there any there there in two grounds? And these are the two arguments I think I remember as a college kid

fueling the anti-war movement.

One was these people don't deserve our help. There's nothing there. There's no there there. They're a bunch of crooks, they're a bunch of this, they're a bunch of that. Who knows what? They don't get their act together.

The second thing was they can't perform. They're impractical, unworthy allies because they cannot deliver one of those two things. The original premise of the American commitment to South Vietnam, which was the October 23rd letter of Eisenhower to Diem, which -- and this is the reveal -- was written by my father, who was head of Southeast Asian affairs for the State Department at the time. And it very expressly references, and this point has been overlooked by everybody, it expressly references nationalism among the Vietnamese as a motivating force.

And I remember Dad, he was a new frontiersman. He was ambassador to Thailand. We were in Thailand and everyone -- I was a kid in high school and I didn't get it, you know. But my dad's sense of going back to Washington, meeting with McNamara, and coming back, this was his team. Rusk, they never got this point about nationalism. I mean, my dad and Ed Lansdale worked very closely together. They never got to the point that if you're going to have the Vietnamese become worthy and stand up and be effective, you have got to appeal to their nationalism. To this day we do not have in English a book which will tell you about Vietnamese nationalism. I tried to put two chapters in my book.

And this is sort of -- you know, I apologize for being pretentious, but I bring these along. This is the political theory of Yongdap Shindong. It is the (inaudible) theory. It was a theory written by Professor (inaudible) who became a friend of mine. And here is on the Vietnamese side the justification for the CORDS program and village decentralization. It's in Vietnamese. Vietnamese nationalism goes back centuries.

MR. O'HANLON: So let me put the same question --

MR. YOUNG: We never studied it.

MR. O'HANLON: I'll put the same question now to Max. And frankly, when you combine the odds of success, even for a better designed approach, with the relative strategic importance of Vietnam, was this war worth fighting?

MR. BOOT: Well, I think the question is, was South Vietnam worth supporting? And I think you can certainly see why in the 1950s we decided to support South Vietnam as an anti-Communist bulwark for the same reason that we supported South Korea, which was just as much of an artificial state and was, in many ways, even more illiberal in 1950s than South Vietnam was.

But, you know, Ed Lansdale's philosophy was that South Vietnam had to basically stand or fall based on its own efforts, that we should not be fighting the war for them, that they needed to fight the war for themselves. And we needed to give them assistance. We needed to help them build up a viable political entity, but we should not be sending American troops that do the fighting. And I think that's a philosophy that in hindsight looks pretty good because whether we would have won or lost the South Vietnamese war, it wouldn't have resulted in -- even if we had lost, it wouldn't have resulted in the deaths of 58,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese in this firepower-intensive struggle.

We got the worst of all worlds that we disregarded the Lansdale-Ken Young approach, Steve's father, to try to build up a viable political entity in South Vietnam. And we thought we could just short-circuit that process through massive use of firepower.

And I got some chills just yesterday when I saw a story in the *New York Times* about how we are using B-52s to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan. We have tried

using B-52s to fight guerillas before. It has not worked well. It will not work well in the future.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, we'll take two in this round. We'll start with Gary and then we'll go to the third row here. We'll take them both together before we go to you guys.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks very much for this conversation. I'm Garrett Mitchell. I write The Mitchell Report. And I want to -- I think this speaks -- I'm going to direct this to Max, but not because I'm not interested in the point of everybody up there. And that is, you know, it seems to me the two questions that people wrestle are, should we have ever been there? And could we have won?

And the question that I'm -- as I sit and listen to his conversation this afternoon the question that I get more and more intrigued with was what difference, leaving aside the death of people who -- I'm leaving aside that part of it, in political terms what difference would it have made to us and to the Vietnamese if we had won that war? What would the world -- how would the world have been different if America had won the Vietnam War? That's really the question that I'm intrigued with.

MR. O'HANLON: Great. We'll take one more before we go to the response.

MS. BACHRACH: Eleanor Bachrach. I have a micro and macro side of the question. The micro being, Mr. Boot, you say that we should have supported Diem more, but, at the same time, you point to how he was asserting more and things were already falling apart under him, partly or maybe largely because of his brother and his dragon lady wife. But I'm not convinced, of course, they couldn't have foreseen.

But the larger question is, was the original sin our intervening to prevent the elections in the 1950s over uniting Vietnam because it was anti-democratic? And it

seems to me that when I was studying Southeast Asia in college there was a lot about it being a nationalist movement more than communist.

MR. O'HANLON: So we'll start with Max Boot and then if Steve wants to comment.

MR. BOOT: Okay, there are a lot of questions out there. You're referring to the reunification elections that were agreed to in the 1954 Geneva Accords. But remember, the United States and South Vietnam were not actually parties to the Geneva Accords, and so we were not bound to implement them. And the notion that there could have been free and fair elections across Vietnam is just an illusion. Because by 1956, North Vietnam was a Communist dictatorship. Ho Chi Minh was not going to allow a free and fair vote. And we didn't want a free and fair vote either because North Vietnam was bigger than South Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh also had great standing as a nationalist leader having defeated the French than the guy we were supporting, Ngo Dinh Diem.

So, yeah, undoubtedly, you know, we would have lost and Vietnam would have been reunified under Ho Chi Ming. But that was why President Eisenhower didn't want to have that election. But I don't think that it was, therefore, necessarily illegitimate to back the state of South Vietnam any more than it was illegitimate to back the state of South Korea, which, remember, under Syngman Rhee during the Korean War was not a democracy. And actually Ed Lansdale was working on trying to develop more of a democratic polity in South Vietnam.

And the point on Diem was that, yes, there was a crisis going on in 1963, but the view of a lot of smart people, including Lansdale and Rostow and others, was that we should not necessarily get rid of Diem because that would make the situation worse. What we needed to do was to guide Diem along a more consensual approach and less

confrontational. Because his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was pushing the confrontational approach, but we didn't have anybody on the American side who had his confidence to try to move him along in a more conciliatory fashion, which is why Lansdale kept trying to get out to Vietnam and he kept being stymied by his bureaucratic enemies.

I mean, one of the turning points I mention in the book happened in 1961, when Lansdale became very close to JFK and JFK listened to him on counterinsurgency. He introduced him to the problem of Vietnam. And he talked about making Lansdale the ambassador to Vietnam or possibly making Steve's father Ken Young the ambassador and having Lansdale go out as his political advisor. And in hindsight, a lot of people, including Rostow and a lot of others, think that history might have taken a different turn if that had happened because they could have exercised a positive influence over Diem and avoided this terrible confrontation that we had in 1963.

Now, your question, remind me again quickly.

MR. O'HANLON: How much difference would it make if we had done a successful job?

MR. BOOT: Oh, if we had won the war, right. Got it, got it. If we had won it. Well, I think it certainly would have made a big difference to millions of people who might now be alive. Leaving aside just the -- no, no, no, let me finish. Leaving aside the victims of the American -- of the war on both sides, Vietnamese and Americans, what I'm thinking of specifically are all the people who died in 1975 after the fall of South Vietnam and then the fall of Cambodia, of course. Because Cambodia probably would not have fallen to the Communists if South Vietnam had not fallen.

And, of course, we know the killing fields in Cambodia, something like 2 million people killed. We know hundreds of thousands of boat people killed fleeing Southeast Asia. Just a humanitarian nightmare.

And beyond that, I think, you know, obviously the loss of the Vietnam War affected American confidence. It led to major strategic setbacks elsewhere around the world. It was, as we all remember those of us who are old enough, and I barely was old enough at the time, but, you know, the crisis of confidence that the country suffered.

And also, I think, remember also what it meant for Vietnam. Because eventually, in more recent years, Vietnam has followed the kind of reformist market, Leninist path of China, and so it's becoming a more prosperous and bustling place. But anybody who visits Vietnam today sees very quickly that southern Vietnam, you know, Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon, remains a much more vibrant and economically bustling place than Hanoi is.

And so it's not hard to see what might have been because, remember, like in the case of Korea, in 1960, North Korea was richer than South Korea. North Korea was more developed. It had all the industry. Today, of course, South Korea's like the 11th richest country in the world and North Korea's one of the poorest. And again, Vietnam is a very poor place, but I would submit to you that if South Vietnam had gone a different way, if it had gone the way of South Korea or Taiwan and had remained non-Communist and an American ally, it could today be another Asian tiger like Taiwan and like South Korea.

And eventually it's getting there anyway. Okay? You can say it's getting there anyway. It's becoming an ally of America anyway. And that's true, but I think we've basically lost a few decades of development along the way.

MR. O'HANLON: Steve, you want to comment on any of that?

MR. YOUNG: On your question first, two things come to mind. One, the consequence for we Americans, which gets more complicated because we got into it, but if we had won, we would not be such a divided society today. We would not have had

the sense of whatever we want to call it and from wherever you all are in the political spectrum, but that sense of American exceptionalism, that sense of American idealism, the sense of patriotism, the sense of being proud, that would be very strong and we would have a center to our politics.

The rot and corruption which is facing us today started with a sense of something has gone wrong. Our government lied to us, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I think we can all relive those years.

Secondly, and this is yet to happen, but I predict that the Chinese are going to buy Vietnam. All right, just cash. They've already bought half the politburo I'm told by cash. They have stolen -- the islands that they're militarizing in the South China Sea are Vietnamese. They stole them from the Vietnamese. If China militarizes the South China Sea you could argue -- have you all thought about the ship traffic that goes through the South China Sea every day? If you want to destroy Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea and Southeast Asia, what do you do? You close the South China Sea, which the Chinese can do right now today because they've got the anti-ship missiles and they've got the land-based bases. They just shoot the ships.

Now, that provokes World War III, but what the heck? I mean, they can win it, right? I'm being flip, but that's a real consequence. If they dominate Vietnam, they get the South China Sea. If Vietnam were split and the southern part of Vietnam was strong economically, militarily, and a democratic society, China would have a much more difficult time. I don't think they could get the South China Sea. So that's one.

Going back to your points, the original sin, another point that I think is out there, you can find it, Khrushchev would not pressure Ho Chi Minh to have a fair election in 1956 because Khrushchev didn't want the elections because of the precedent for the Koreas and the Germanys. The Russians did not want any talk of elections to unify

Germany or unify Korea, so he had to stop it in South Vietnam. That's sort of another fact on this.

Second, you mentioned this great gorilla in the room which is sort of Ho and the Viet Minh as nationalists; a very, very common feeling. I think it's a myth because you have to look at the murders in 1945 and 1946. Because Ho and Viet Minh murdered the leading nationalists, like the guy who came up with -- you know, (inaudible) was a young man. He put together the (inaudible) Party in 1939. He's hauled and murdered in 1946. Right?

Huynh Phu So, who at age 19 in 1939 has a transcendental experience. He sets up the Hoa Hao religion. He's got hundreds of thousands of followers. He's murdered in 1947, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Ho Chi Minh and his people brought the French back to Central and North Vietnam in March of 1946. They brought them back. And then you had for about six months the Communists and the French cooperating in eliminating nationalist leadership. When the nationalist leadership has been eliminated by the fall, guess what. These two parties turn against each other.

Ho and his people go to the Vietnamese people and say, oh, my god, those nasty French want to come back and reestablish colonialism. Join us and we'll fight the French. The French then say, oh, my god, Ho Chi Minh, he's not really a nationalist. We've just discovered he's a communist. Catholics and wealthy people of Vietnam rally to tricolor, we will protect you.

And this is where the Graham Greene image of the third force comes up. Right? Most Vietnamese sort of say now what do we do? We have no leaders. We've got the Communists on one side, the colonialists on the other. What are we going to do?

In 1954, two people arrive to try to deal with the third force. One is Ed

Lansdale, the American, who's got this down. I mean, just read *The Quiet American*. Graham Greene is almost apoplectic in putting down these Americans for trying to work with the nationalists. And then the other guy is Ngo Ding Diem.

So this story about nationalism has never really been covered. And there's not one word, I think, about the genuine Vietnamese nationalists in the Ken Burns series.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, so let's go to another round. I think this time I'm going to take four in the hope that there'll be sort of two for each our guys up here. So we'll go with Sandy and then we'll one, two, three, four. So row 1, 2, 3, and 4. And then we'll have time for another round, don't worry.

MR. APGAR: Sandy Apgar, CSIS. We appear to have a national security advisor and team today who reflects the best and brightest criteria of the Halberstam era and your own descriptions. Do they in your view represent an understanding of the lessons we're here to discuss? In what way do they? In what way don't they?

MR. O'HANLON: And here, please.

MR. BAER: Gordon Baer, Army and State Department, retired. It seems to me that American policy in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan has followed essentially the same trajectory: engage, escalate, and abandon. It took us three years or so to learn how to do counterinsurgency, which we did successfully after 1968 and then threw it away.

In Iraq, Petraeus rewrote the book on counterinsurgency. He had done his dissertation on Vietnam. He had some help from other people, mainly Army officers as opposed to State Department or academic types. We abandoned Iraq in 2011. The Obama administration wanted to abandon Afghanistan in 2016, but, fortunately, turned

that one around. I'd appreciate your comment on that.

One final footnote. As Mr. Boot pointed out, the bloodbath in Southeast Asia after 1975 was ignored or minimized in the Ken Burns documentary.

MR. O'HANLON: And Father, right behind you.

MR. HURLEY: John Hurley, was a CORDS rep and CORDS SCAG, that's another initial, S-C-A-G. This was a Saigon Civil Assistance Group, so my address was CORDS SCAG and that hasn't changed, but it was coming apart (inaudible). But at the time I was there after the Tet Offensive and we were involved to a large extent in helping to rebuild areas that had been smashed up during the Tet Offensive.

I was in an outlying area beyond Chu Lang, District 7, and that was made up of, on the one hand, about half of them were Catholic refugees from the North and principal individuals, and with each (inaudible) with each group was the local priest. And the other half were the Buddhist contingent and the principal individual there would have been a Buddhist monk. I certainly agree with your comment that they worked together because there was a sense of concern about the Communists, about the Viet Cong. And they had experienced what could be done.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. We've got a final question in this round in the fourth row. You're in the fourth row and then we'll -- no, and then we'll start in the sixth row next with the next round.

MR. ROSENBLATT: Lionel Rosenblatt. I'm a CORDS graduate, as well. Working with South Vietnamese in the field, the corrosiveness of the corruption really was one of our chief obstacles. The local leadership, military and civilian, were quite aware that their superiors had bought their positions and that indeed, the American presidents has fueled the price of a province chief's job or the price of the corps commander's job. So we had good people to work with at the relatively junior levels, but

no way for them to succeed unless we targeted corruption as a problem and used our leverage to deal with it. We didn't use that leverage and I think we need to recognize that.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

MR. BOOT: Yeah, I think that -- can I just jump in?

MR. O'HANLON: Please. I was going to actually make sure that you -- well, you do the questions on the 21st century because those were the first two and I was going to start with Steve to handle the last question. Just trying to make sure we get through, but you can still comment on it when the floor is yours. How about that?

MR. BOOT: Sure.

MR. O'HANLON: I just want to keep the pace going because I have time for a couple more rounds here. So, Steve, that last question to you, please.

MR. YOUNG: Well, first of all, if I may, ladies and gentlemen, I would like Lionel Rosenblatt and Parker Borg to stand up. Parker, please. Okay. Ladies and gentlemen, I want to introduce to you two American heroes because these two guys in March 1975 started a refugee movement when Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford didn't want to do it. And because of them 150,000 South Vietnamese allies of ours were saved. And you guys need to be applauded. (Applause)

On corruption, Lionel is, as usual, prescient, insightful, and very hard-minded. A major problem which I don't think the South Vietnamese elite ever really dealt with, not for the lack of trying by a lot of Americans and not for a lack of trying by a number of Vietnamese. I've been thinking about this for years. There's a cultural dynamic and it's part of -- and we see this throughout transitioning societies partially, which is patron-client politics. I mean, Afghanistan, all these issues you guys experienced in there, right? Iraq, corruption in Iraq, corruption in Afghanistan.

If I'm going to get ahead I need Lionel and I need Parker as part of my team, I've got to take care of them. And I have to take care of them in material ways: money, foreign bank accounts, houses, stuff for the wife, whatever it is. I've got to have a source of funds. But I'm not alone. All of you, if we're all in this system, you're all parts of patron-client relationships. And patron-client relationships are nourished by wealth. Boss Tweed in New York, Daley in Chicago, I mean, it's -- and this is a political structure. And Max, I'd appreciate your thinking on this. This is a political structure that is very advantageous to idealistic, motivated insurgents, right, whether they're the Taliban or ISIS in Iraq or certain aspects of the Communists in Vietnam. And to me this is the Achilles' heel of the strategy that I recommend of associative power.

If our basic approach is associative power with a group of people in another country and they're running traditional patron-client systems, and we go in there and we lecture them on honesty, integrity, live on your salary -- I mean, I remember a lieutenant in Thai Binh Province. The lieutenant was getting, whatever it was, 2,000 piasters a month, the RD lieutenant. He's got a wife, he's got two kids. I think one bag of rice was 500 piasters. His monthly salary buys him four bags of rice. I mean, the guy can't make it, right? So the wife is out working.

But, I mean, I think you've hit on a structural problem that I don't think that we as a foreign policy elite have really looked at with any great sophistication.

MR. O'HANLON: So let's go to Max for that and then the other questions on 21st century applications and issues.

MR. BOOT: Yeah, I mean, I fully agree that corruption is kind of a sleeper issue that we don't pay enough attention to. And it was striking to me the parallels between the challenges we face today and what the challenges that Lansdale was involved in in '65 to '68 because he was -- as an advisor to the U.S. ambassadors,

he kept beating the drums about corruption, that we had to reduce the massive corruption, which, again, as the questioner suggested, was being fueled by our own cash. Exactly the same as it's happened in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

And he wanted to push reformers within the ARVN military structure. He wanted to take away the ability of the military junta to appoint the provincial and district chiefs because he didn't want them to use those patronage posts where people just bought their jobs and then recovered the cost through corruption. And he just had no support in the Johnson administration because, again, nobody really cared about that kind of stuff. All they wanted to do was go out and kill VC. And this is the same exact problem we've had in Afghanistan and Iraq because if you're cracking down on corruption, you have to have some very difficult conversations and confront your own military allies who are in the middle of that corruption. And it's much easier just to avoid that altogether and just turn a blind eye.

I mean, it's ironic because you'd asked about the current national security leadership. It's funny because I was part of a small advisory team for General Petraeus in Afghanistan when he came in as the commander in 2010, and what our assessment was, was that corruption was the number one issue driving the Taliban. And so we had to do something to address it. And what General Petraeus did was actually he appointed something called Task Force Shafafiyat to address corruption led by this promising young Army general named H.R. McMaster. But, of course, he only had limited success because it's a very difficult, intractable problem, and much of the rest of the U.S. Government just wants to keep relationships as they are and not to cause confrontation and upheaval with our allies.

I mean, the question was in terms of what lessons have they learned today? Very interesting question because, as I'm sure many of you know, H.R. gained

prominence for his best-selling Ph.D. dissertation called *Dereliction of Duty* in which he very harshly blasted the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the '60s for not being more confrontational with President Johnson. You know, I have mixed feelings about that thesis because I'm not sure the Joint Chiefs of Staff knew what they were doing either because they were actually in favor of a more conventional brute force military approach. I don't know if that would have been successful either, but, I mean, it certainly, as many people have remarked, it'll be interesting to see what H.R.'s views are on the proper role of military officers in government now that he is himself at the center of power in this administration.

But, yeah, I mean, to the other point that was made about how we were repeating in Iraq and Afghanistan some of the same mistakes. And I think there is an element of truth to that. It's not only our short attention span and our tendency to think we're just going to whip the bad guys and leave, but also our inattention to issues of corruption, as we were discussing, and political governance. And we don't see those as being really the center of gravity for the conflict, which they really are at the end of the day. We're not going to win just by killing insurgents, but there's a tendency to even now, although we don't necessarily use the same brute force methods as in Vietnam, you know, we don't have free fire zones, we don't have nightly harassment and interdiction fire where we're just randomly firing artillery, but we're much more precise today.

But there's a tendency today to think that with our drone strikes and our precision-guided munitions that we can just kill individuals basically by leadership targeting to defeat the insurgency. And that has not worked because you've seen what happened since 2001. I mean, we've killed tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Islamist warriors all over the world, and there are probably more Islamist terrorists today than there were in 2001. Those groups remain stronger. Even though some have been defeated, others have arisen.

And so I think the lesson we need to learn from Vietnam is it's all about governance. And until you get the governance right, you're not going to win lasting victories, whether it's in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, name a country. And of course, it's very, very hard to get governance right and that's why we tend to avoid it.

And, you know, nation-building is a third rail in Washington. One of the few things that Trump and Obama agreed on is that they both hate nation-building. But at the end of the day, you're not going to win unless you do nation-building. That's how we won the war in Germany, Japan, and South Korea. We did it through nation-building. And if we avoid doing nation-building today, we're not going to win.

MR. O'HANLON: So let's go to one last round because we only have five minutes to go and you can get whatever final comment you've got in in that. So let's see, I've got this woman here in the purple and then we'll work our way over, maybe we'll even get the -- Tim, I'm going to plead for your -- we'll discuss later. Get these two guys who have had their hands up for a while. So we'll go 1, 2, 3, 4, and then wrap up.

DR. POPLIN: I'm Dr. Caroline Poplin. I graduated from college in 1969, so this was my war. I was married to an anti-war activist who was Harvard '67, Marty Slate. You haven't talked about the anti-war movement. And a lot of the feeling in the anti-war movement was that people hated us because of the corruption that we lost the hearts and minds.

If there had not been anti-war movement, would we still be there today, afraid that as soon as we left, the government would collapse?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And then here, the gentleman in the blue tie, and then we'll come over there.

MR. ROPER: Dan Roper from the Association of the United States Army. I'd like you both to elaborate a little bit, if you would, on the binary nature of the

discussion, whether it was hard power and soft power, which you called it associated power or smart power, that is now what Nye is calling it, to the problems we've had Iraq and Afghanistan with big debates on is it enemy-centric counterinsurgency or is it population-centric counterinsurgency? And is there -- if we got too binary in the national security decision-making process where, again, it's not an either/or when you're talking about a wicked complex problem like either Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam.

MR. O'HANLON: And the last two over here on the this side. Yes, these two gentlemen.

MR. RAPPAPORT: Stanley Rappaport. Simple question. With regard to governance, don't you think we should recognize Eisenhower as not getting us into the war because he realized that the war in Vietnam and supporting Dien Bien Phu was not going to work? And I'd like to ask about Kennedy. Do you think the issue of governance and the role of the Catholic Church with Diem played a role in his choice to get into the war?

MR. O'HANLON: And then finally, right behind you and then we'll wrap up.

MR. GOLASH: Mike Golash. My question has to do with one of my themes involved in the anti-war movement and the period. There seems there was a lot of belief that the American Army, the soldiers did not want to fight that war. And one of the reasons for the agreement to withdraw American troops and end our participation in the war was the lack of morale in the American Army to continue the struggle.

MR. O'HANLON: So, Steve, you want to take a couple of those questions and then any final thoughts, and then the same for Max.

MR. YOUNG: Let me just try to shoot sort of bullet responses. On your question about the National Security Council, so I have a friend and I'm trying to promote

the book and the theory and everything like this on the supposition that it might be helpful. So I had breakfast on my last trip to Washington and said, Steve, it's really interesting and I'll try to set up a meeting for you, but don't talk about Vietnam. And I realized he was kind of crushed. I mean, how do you explain something to this staff if you don't go into history, if you don't learn from history, et cetera, et cetera?

Anti-war movement, long, complicated thing. My sense is if you go to Vietnam today and you have a private conversation with almost any Vietnamese, oh, including Communists, right, USA number one. Where do they want to send their kids? Where are they sending their money? Our reputation among the Vietnamese because we went there and we sacrificed and we did not ask for one ounce of gold and we did not ask for one acre of land and, frankly, they don't understand us, I mean, back then and now. They just think you Americans. I mean, everybody else history, you go there, you grab stuff, you know. But you people came, you lost 58,000 of your people, you tried to help us, you screwed up, but, dammit, you're nice people. Naïve maybe.

The other thing about the anti-war movement in terms of soft power, which I like to -- as to why did Hanoi win, Hanoi had soft power in the United States and we had zero soft power in Hanoi. The soft power in Hanoi in the United States was the anti-war movement. And, I mean, there's a long conversation on that, but okay.

The link between declining morale in U.S. forces and withdrawal, my sense at the time was it was reversed. The real morale problems started after Nixon announced Vietnamization, which was taken by the military as a rejection of the hard power strategy. It was not seen as a sophisticated policy that it was, that Nixon saw. And, therefore, my sense is you're a draftee, you're in Vietnam in '69, '70, or '71, and you want to be last guy killed? Because withdrawal in the hard power context is failure.

So I think it was the other way around. The hard power and soft power

are too binary. I think my point is we are much too binary. And I even in the book I criticize Petraeus and Coyne, frankly. Basically I'm saying I think -- and McChrystal's plan for Afghanistan. They get 80 percent population-centric, but they don't get the heart. They don't get the genius of Bill Colby, which is the people do it for themselves.

The real trick is the people are the frontline troops. Everybody else is reserve: your main forces, your drones, your (inaudible), your school buildings, your governance. Because if the people don't stand up and "fight" and often the fight in a critical situation, and my sense from afar is this is very true in Muslim societies, it's the mothers. It's the mothers who go to their sons and say don't you join the Taliban. How do you motivate the mothers and this and that?

I mean, this is all people's -- I would say not population-centric, Max. I think we ought to say people-centric and get out with the people. Because if you do that, then things sort of solve themselves.

And I really love your expression "wicked problems." That's a technical term I picked up from academics in the Humphrey School. A wicked problem is what we had in Vietnam, it's Iraq, Afghanistan, it's Syria. No easy answers. And it takes a certain suppleness and sophistication of mind to see the different pieces you have to put together. That's another thing, by the way, we haven't had time to talk about, but with CORDS and these other things you've got to have five or six things mutually interrelated happening all simultaneously.

One of the other things I see in retrospect is we Americans tend to think in linear terms, particularly our military. Step one and then step two and then step three and then step four. So you're debating about step number one and somebody says, yeah, you can't do number one because number four isn't in place. And then somebody else says, yeah, but you can't do number four until you get number one. And you debate

and you all end up going to number one, which is usually going out and try to kill somebody.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Okay, let's go to Max. And thank you very much for those eloquent comments.

Max, to wrap up the whole day, over to you.

MR. BOOT: Well, let me just pick up on one question about President Eisenhower and, you know, was he determined to keep us out of the war. I mean, there is some truth to that. In the spring of 1954, as Dien Bien Phu was on the verge of falling, there were a lot of generals in the Pentagon and certainly at the urging of the French who were trying to develop military options for us to save Dien Bien Phu. And Eisenhower was actually somewhat open to it, but he wanted the allies to come on board. The Buddhists didn't and congressional support was not there, and so at the end of the day, Eisenhower decided no, we were not going to save the French bacon in part because, as Lansdale and others were arguing, France could never succeed because they were essentially fighting for the colonialist regime and the Vietnamese wanted independence.

But, you know, after the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the negotiations in Geneva which split the country in half, again, Eisenhower was not going to send large numbers of American troops to defend South Vietnam. What he did was he essentially sent Ed Lansdale and basically a dozen aides through Allen Dulles and the CIA director and his brother, John Foster Dulles, as Secretary of State. And basically Lansdale did what he had done in the Philippines, where in a similar situation in 1950 he had been dispatched with a handful of aides to try to rescue a country that was in danger of falling to Communist insurgents. And in both cases, he built up a local leader, Magsaysay in the Philippines, Diem in South Vietnam. He instituted what we today call population-centric counterinsurgency, telling the Army to stop abusing the people and to become brothers

with the people.

And by the way, the way that population-centric counterinsurgency really works is that it isolates the guerillas and then you can target the guerillas very accurately because the people rat them out. But you first have to win the confidence of the people to tell you who are the insurgents in their midst. And that's something that Lansdale pioneered in both the Philippines and in Vietnam. And he had the full support of President Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers because, you know, Eisenhower did not want massive American military commitments. He favored covert action, he favored low-level types of interventions. And that was actually fairly successful, not everywhere, but in general it was.

And I would submit to you that today as we think about a model for American policy going forward that's not a bad model to think about. Because it avoids kind of the disasters of sending hundreds of thousands of troops into a war that nobody wants in a place like Iraq. But, at the same time, we can't simply write off all these countries either because we know they're breeding terrorism, they're creating threats that we need to be worried about. We can't have another Islamic State on the ground in a place like Iraq and Syria.

And, you know, we are to some extent doing this and we've done it successfully in recent years in places like El Salvador and Colombia and elsewhere where we've used essentially relatively small-scale advisory missions and providing aid to the local governments and building up local leaders, like President Uribe in Colombia, to defeat the insurgents and take the lead on their own with American help. That's kind of the Lansdale model. That's what Ed Lansdale was arguing for in Vietnam. You can argue about whether we ever had a chance to do that in Vietnam, but we certainly lost that chance after we colluded in the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in November of 1963.

But in the future, you know, I would say let's avoid that mistake and let's think about how we can apply that Lansdale model low-level engagement to deal with all the national security threats that we face all over the world.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. Well, let me first thank all of you because there's a lot of expertise in this room and a lot of great service. And I know we all welcomed your comments and questions. And please join me in thanking these two guys. (Applause)

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