

Meeting Lt. Col. David Galula - April 1962

Rufus Phillips

In April 1962, I participated in a RAND Symposium on Counterinsurgency held in Washington, D.C. along with my old boss from the 1954–56 days in South Vietnam, General Edward G. Lansdale, and a number of others. Lansdale had been the key advisor to Ramon Magsaysay in the successful campaign against the communist Huks in the Philippines and then in the successful birth of the Republic of South Vietnam in 1954–56. I had worked under him advising the Vietnamese Army in its occupation and pacification of large areas in South Vietnam previously controlled by the communist controlled Vietminh (predecessors to the Vietcong), and I had moved on to Laos to try to help that government counter Pathet Lao subversion in the villages through civic action.

I did not participate in the first few symposium sessions, but heard from Lansdale that there was a very unusual French officer named David Galula present, who had a lot of good ideas that sounded very much like our own. As I got involved in discussions with Col. Galula, I discovered he wasn't anything like the vast majority of the French officers I had tried to work with as part of a joint American-French military advisory mission (called TRIM) in the 1954–55 days in Vietnam. Most had a colonial attitude toward the Vietnamese and saw them as lesser beings. Col. Galula, however, was different. He didn't maintain an attitude of superiority. Rather, his mission involved trying to help the local Algerian population as their friend, and he imbued his troops with that attitude.

During one symposium session, I spoke about the importance of troops and civilians engaged in pacification having the right attitudes to “convince the people that you are doing something *with* them as well as *for* them.” Col Galula then underscored my statement by saying that in reviewing the contrasting attitudes and methods of his own unit in Algeria he thought they confirmed all that Col White (a British advisor in Malaya) and I had been saying. Col Galula went on to describe how he had taken over a battalion which, during the height of FLN terrorism, had become “afraid and furious, [reacting] “angrily and violently,” and had therefore been moved to another area of operations “for disciplinary reasons.” It was at this point that Col. Galula assumed command and “undertook the slow but ultimately successful task of indoctrination by which to convince the men that they had to avoid whatever would antagonize the civilian population. In the end, some of those who had once resented the label of ‘*pacificateurs*’ came to feel superior towards the ‘warriors’ with their useless methods.”

Throughout the sessions, Col. Galula described winning over the population by a participatory approach, helping local leaders emerge through democratic means. It was a revelation to those of us who spoke from the Philippine and early Vietnam experience,

where we believed in the same approach. (Unbeknownst to me at the time, only a few months later, I would find myself back in South Vietnam, developing that same bottom-up participatory approach, decentralizing advice and assistance down to the provinces and villages in support of the Vietnamese government's Strategic Hamlet program.)

My closing memory of Col. Galula is tied to a later informal discussion during which he acknowledged the importance of a political cause in motivating the national government from the top down to meet popular aspirations; that insurgencies cannot be won on the local level alone. He understood that only a country's people and government could ultimately win such a contest and he recognized the difficulties inherent in an advisory role of promoting the emergence of national as well as local leadership.

Like General Lansdale, Col. Galula was *sui generis*. What was amazing about the entire counterinsurgency symposium was the similarity of basic concepts of successful practice expressed by the participants. One of them, Frank Kitson, who eventually became the Chief of UK Land Forces, put it this way:

“Although we came from such widely divergent backgrounds, it was as if we had all been brought up together from youth. We all spoke the same language. Probably all of us had worked out theories of counterinsurgency procedures at one time or another, which we thought were unique and original. But when we came to air them, all our ideas were essentially the same. We had another thing in common. Although we had no difficulty in making our views understood to each other, we had mostly been unable to get our responsive armies to hoist in the message.”

Not long afterward, when I directly dealt with a formidable insurgency in Vietnam, I was able to put into practice many of the principles and ideas I had learned under Lansdale, which were reinforced by the Symposium. Unfortunately, most of our senior leadership in Vietnam during my active days, 1962–63 and 1965–68, were wedded to very different and more conventional concepts of warfare coming out of World War II and Korea. Even more unfortunate, these concepts prevailed during the massive intervention of our own troops until General Abrams took over from General Westmoreland in 1968. By that time, though, the support of the American people had been lost.

Notes: Quotes are taken from the record of the 1962 RAND Counterinsurgency Symposium republished by RAND in 2006.

Rufus Phillips, author of the new book [Why Vietnam Matters](#) (Naval Institute Press), became a member of the Saigon Military Mission in 1954 and the following year served as the sole adviser to two Vietnamese army pacification operations, earning the CIA's Intelligence Medal of Merit for his work. He later worked as a CIA civilian case officer in Vietnam and Laos, then joined the U.S. Agency for International Development's Saigon Mission to lead its counterinsurgency efforts. In 1964 he became a consultant for USAID and the State Department and served as an adviser to Vice President Hubert Humphrey. He lives in Arlington, VA.

SWJ Editors Endnote: From [U.S. Naval Institute Press](#):

"Phillips's short chapter on lessons the U.S. should have learned from the Vietnam War should be mandatory reading in Washington, D.C."

--Publisher's Weekly

"An extraordinary memoir and history that sheds fresh light on the American experience in Vietnam. A combination of personal experience and incisive analysis, *Why Vietnam Matters* illuminates the ideological, political, psychological, and human dimensions of the Vietnam War. Phillips makes an important contribution not only to understanding the Vietnam War, but also to understanding the complex conflicts in which the United States is engaged today."

--H. R. McMaster, PhD, Colonel, U.S. Army, and author of *Dereliction of Duty*

"*Why Vietnam Matters* is in itself a lesson of what not to do today in Iraq, Afghanistan, and wars not yet imagined... If you want to know why Vietnam matters, read this brilliant memoir and find out why those who refuse to learn the lessons of history are doomed to make the same mistakes, with much the same results, endlessly."

--Joseph L. Galloway, syndicated columnist and co-author of *We Are Soldiers Still*

"Phillips takes the reader into new firsthand accounts of his interactions with the legendary Edward Lansdale, President John F. Kennedy, South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem, the spy Pham Xuan An, and a veritable roll call of a generation's so-called best and brightest. *Why Vietnam Matters* may be the year's most important new book on the war because it adds to rather than repeats the historical ledger."

--Larry Berman, professor of political science, University of California at Davis, and author of *Perfect Spy*

"This book is not just another Vietnam memoir. It is the personal history of a remarkable American who served in Vietnam from the early days of U.S. involvement. Rufus Phillips was one of the rare few who moved with ease between the Vietnamese countryside and the corridors of power in Saigon and Washington and who acquired a true appreciation of South Vietnam's social and political complexity. Many of the Americans and Vietnamese who appear in this book are familiar, but the stories that Phillips tells about them are full of new revelations and insights."

--Edward Miller, assistant professor of history, Dartmouth College

"Rufus Phillips is widely known and admired as an iconic figure in the early days of pacification in Vietnam. Now, at long last, he has given us an authoritative, insightful, modest, and intensely interesting account of what was accomplished, and a saddening perspective on what might have been. In the flood of books on every aspect of the Vietnam War, this is one that will endure as among the most valuable, accurate, and important."

--Lewis Sorley, author of *A Better War*

In *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam described Rufus Phillips as a man one could trust telling President Kennedy during the Vietnam War about the failures of the Strategic Hamlet Program in the Delta, "in itself a remarkable moment in the American bureaucracy, a moment of intellectual honesty." With that same honesty, Phillips gives an extraordinary inside history of the most critical years of American involvement in Vietnam, from 1954 to 1968, and explains why it still matters. Describing what went right and then wrong, he argues that the United States missed an opportunity to help the South Vietnamese develop a political cause as compelling as that of the Communists by following a "big war" strategy based on World War II perceptions. This led American policy makers to mistaken assumptions that they could win the war themselves and give the country back to the Vietnamese. Documenting the story from his own private files as well as from the historical record, the former CIA officer paints striking portraits of such key figures as John F. Kennedy, Maxwell Taylor, Robert McNamara, Henry Cabot Lodge, Hubert Humphrey, and Ngo Dinh Diem, among others with whom he dealt.

Phillips details how the legendary Edward G. Lansdale helped the South Vietnamese gain and consolidate their independence between 1954 and 1956, and how this later changed to a reliance on American conventional warfare with its highly destructive firepower. He reasons that our failure to understand the Communists, our South Vietnamese allies, or even ourselves took us down the wrong road. In summing up U.S. errors in Vietnam, Phillips draws parallels with the American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan and suggests changes in the U.S. approach. Known for his intellectual integrity and firsthand, long-term knowledge of what went on in Vietnam, the author offers lessons for today in this trenchant account.

--U.S. Naval Institute

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