



Edward Lansdale's Cold War (Culture, Politics, and the Cold War)

Jonathan Nashel

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The man widely believed to have been the model for Alden Pyle in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Edward G. Lansdale (1908–1987) was a Cold War celebrity. A former advertising executive turned undercover CIA agent, he was credited during the 1950s with almost single-handedly preventing a communist takeover of the Philippines and with helping to install Ngo Dinh Diem as president of the American-backed government of South Vietnam. Adding to his notoriety, during the Kennedy administration Lansdale was put in charge of Operation Mongoose, the covert plot to overthrow the government of Cuba's Fidel Castro by assassination or other means.

In this book, Jonathan Nashel reexamines Lansdale's role as an agent of American Cold War foreign policy and takes into account both his actual activities and the myths that grew to surround him. In contrast to previous portraits, which tend to depict Lansdale either as the incarnation of U.S. imperialist ambitions or as a farsighted patriot dedicated to the spread of democracy abroad, Nashel offers a more complex and nuanced interpretation. At times we see Lansdale as the arrogant "ugly American," full of confidence that he has every right to make the world in his own image and utterly blind to his own cultural condescension. This is the Lansdale who would use any conceivable gimmick to serve U.S. aims, from rigging elections to sugaring communist gas tanks. Elsewhere, however, he seems genuinely respectful of the cultures he encounters, open to differences and new possibilities, and willing to tailor American interests to Third World needs.

Rather than attempting to reconcile these apparently contradictory images of Lansdale, Nashel explores the ways in which they reflected a broader tension within the culture of Cold War America. The result is less a conventional biography than an analysis of the world in which Lansdale operated and the particular historical forces that shaped him—from the imperatives of anticommunist ideology and the assumptions of modernization theory to the techniques of advertising and the insights of anthropology.

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