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Interview with Dan Ellsberg

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Notes made on a telephone conversation with Daniel Ellsberg, 23 September 1985.

His telephone number is [REDACTED], and his address is:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [REDACTED].

He suggested I contact Frank Scotton, USIA and Everett Baumgardner, USAID.

He suggested some sources he thought I might not have heard of:

Larteguy, **Yellow Fever**. There are two parts to this; the fall of Hanoi and the Rise of Saigon. EGL is in second part.

two authors who wrote **Secret Lives of T. E. Lawrence**, which is based on his declassified files. Way Lawrence looked at himself is reminiscent of way EGL did also.

also suggested I might contact Karnow, who made extensive tapes on Conein before CIA prevailed on him not to write a book about him.

Ellsberg said other CIA operatives greatly admired EGL. He was always willing to appear naive, obtuse, even a yokel in order to get the job done. There was an extreme contrast between the way he appeared when talking with an 'outsider' and a team member. He was shrewd, complex, tactical in his thinking with the team. To an outsider, he was simple minded--even to the point of being 'simplistic' in the clinical sense--and romanticist. All this was a cover, used to help him get around people and drive for his goal. To disarm them.

Ellsberg heard that Graham Greene portrayed EGL as Alden Pyle in **Quiet American** because EGL beat him out with a woman.

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E: ...always appealed to the higher instincts which was definitely true. He did do well. Simply didn't mention another aspect which was that a lot of money changed hands.

C: Uhn hunh.

E: Well, anyway that has some bearing on your own interview with him, in a sense that I have seen him so often with interviewers or with people outside sort of "blunder on", about Vietnamese folk songs...

C: Oh, yes. I am bored to death with tales of Vietnamese folk songs and tales of ...

E: Exactly. Well, that's what he liked to talk about. In a way, it's kind of filibustering to keep from having to talk about anything government.

C: Well, I had visited with that man off and on for about a year...

E: Who?

C: Lansdale. And he hadn't really told me anything and I said, hey, I have got a book contract, I've spent all this time with you; I said, you haven't told me anything...some interesting tales and we were riding in his car at the time. And he kind of glanced over sidelong at me and said, you know, you are right. He said, maybe I ought to come clean with you. I said, that would be wonderful. And he said, but I have never told anybody these things; not even either of my wives. And I was ^{not} ready, and he poured forth some of the organizational material that I very much needed to know, but we were ten miles from his house and my tape recorder was there in his house.

E: Oh, swell.

C: Yeah.

(Laughter)

E: How is your memory?

C: Pretty good, except you know there is no way I can replicate the tonality of his voice and everything; nuances that he was suggesting.

E: And he never did this again?

C: No.

E: Oh, shit. That is too...that's horrible. I wish you hadn't told me that.

C: Well, it's a terrible story, Mr. Ellsberg.

E: Yeah. Well, here's the other book I was going to mention. It's a book with very interesting angles on Lansdale. And...I think the man never met him, but I wouldn't ...I don't know whether the facts are all right about

E: the period I didn't know about. It's by Richard Drennen (sp?), called "Facing West" (?)

C: Oh, I have that.

E: Have you read that?

C: Yes.

E: What did you think of it?

C: Well, ..

E: I have only glanced through it, but it looked extremely interesting.

C: I made the mistake of reading the first half of it, and the first half, of course, he's talking about the experiences of American racism with American Indians. And while I don't really disagree with a lot of the conclusions that he draws, he is a fanatic. And his language sounds like Jerry Falwell talking about South Africa or the Communist menace. The language turns me off so badly that his ideas become obfuscated.

E: Uhn, hunh.

C: Then when I get to what he said about Lansdale, he knows the man. He comes up with some very strange connections that he mentally leaps to. And yet, having said those negative things, some of his suppositions about why Lansdale was sent, who sent him, their motivations, are probably going to end up in my biography.

E: Well, I was just mentioning it, but I haven't... I have just glanced through it and it looked like interesting...

C: Uhn hunh.

E: I'll tell you one other though that I feel... now this is one you never think of but I think it could be very useful to you.

C: Ok.

E: There's a book called "The Secret Lives of T. E. Lawrence!"

C: Don't know it.

E: Ok, it's basically based on, despite the rather lurid title, it's actually based on the declassified files of Lawrence, including his actual Cables Home, which I think took 50 years or something to be declassified. In the late '60's they finally became available. And here's what's interesting. Well, I have it here somewhere. By that title you can find it. It is by, I believe two authors. "The Secret Lives of T. E. Lawrence". It's a quite scholarly work. There's obviously a superficial connection between the two, because it was often suggested that Lansdale aspired to be the Lawrence of Vietnam.

C: Uhn hunh.

E: And I would say that's pretty accurate.

C: I didn't really know he aspired to be. I made the connection myself in my own mind.

E: Oh, I think various people...it always comes up. Even Conein was put in that connection, or once in awhile, young Frank Scott^W was mentioned...

C: Uhn hunh.

E: ...early in his career. /Lansdale was the obvious choice for it.
But

The point I want to make is that as I read that book after I knew Lansdale, it seemed to be not only uncannily ~~like~~ similar to Lansdale, in...respects, as intelligence (?) officer (?) but think it reveals to be about Lansdale as well as about Lawrence, it seemed to me. When I knew the two, the fit was very close. And here's the correspondence, I would suggest you look at that book, which I really urge you to do.

C: I will.

E: First...well, first, the relation to their respective countries and to their mother countries, their respective countries of operation are

E: Indochina and the Philippines...

C: Uhn hunh.

E: And in the case of Lawrence, the official policy of the British was to leave large parts of that area, particularly Syria and Lebanon, mainly under the control of the French. And that was part of the official agreement which at that time, / Lawrence didn't agree with it. And Lawrence, you know, is usually known, including from "Pillars of Wisdom", as someone who believed entirely in Arabic nationalism.

C: Right.

E: And it's part of his great romantic in that respect and having been identified with the Arabic...

C: Uhn hunh.

E: You notice, by the way, he put a lot of emphasis on wearing native garb.

C: Uhn hunh. Yes, he did.

E: Lansdale, didn't exactly do, but he was a big one for/wearing ^{his cadre} ~~fox~~ ~~his~~ black pajamas.

C: I didn't realize he ever did that.

E: He didn't do it personally, he didn't wear them himself, it was his Revolutionary Development Team. Apparel similar to farmers. He believed in cultural assimilation, but here's the real point. When one reads Lawrence's actual cables home in this book, you see quite a contrast from the "Seven Pillars of Wisdom", whereas in these things he is totally identified with Arab Nationalism, in his cables he is quite cynical and critical of them, very patronizing of them. But the objectives he describes is that of ^{endorsing} embracing the weak and very fragmented nationalism which would be essentially under

E: British influence as a way of furthering British influence over ~~the~~ French hegemony.

~~area~~. So his position of opposing either Turkish or French colonization, that is direct administration, was really in the interest of ~~what could be called~~ ~~furthering-what-might~~ informal role by the ~~be-called~~ a more ~~formal~~ British influence, which on the other hand was thought of as largely advantageous for the Arabs because the British administration, British law, was very good for everybody, which the British thought in general.

C: Of course that typifies Lansdale's views about America.

E: Yes, of course. The French see the mission civilatrise of bringing French culture and French language and history to the world. The British see themselves as conferring the gift of administration and law and order. Lansdale I think was pretty much an imperialist in the mold of the British, except in his case it wasn't so much law and order and administration as it was democracy. So he did think these things were in the interest of the people he was working with, the Filipinos, the Vietnamese. But at the same time he believed it was very much in their interest to be within the sphere of American influence. In this respect he was fighting in the 1950's American policy, that is policy of government, which was to concede basic hegemony in the area to, guess who, the French. Lansdale in that case agreed with some other Americans who thought that that was bad, that it should be American influence. And that, our interest, was to be served not by direct American intervention as in the case of the French, but rather by fostering a ^{kind of} nationalism and a relative independence, which however would need American aid and American influence but would be independent. So it was a way of extending and insuring a sphere of American influence for the good of America but also for the good of the people and of course against Communism, which he despised. And so the parallel I am seeing is not an identity with Lawrence but the parallel I am seeing is really quite (illegible).

C: You spoke earlier about cynicism, and it may be...

E: Whereas Lawrence is really surprisingly patronizing and cynical toward to
Arabs idealization of
compared to the ~~way-he-sees-them~~ in "Pillars of Wisdom"

C: That's what I wanted to comment on to you, Mr. Ellsberg.

E: I don't want to be cited on that. I was aware when I said it to you
that...

E: You found that in him?

C: I went through all his personal papers and I was surprised at how
many CIA and State had cobbled back. They had just left "out" cards in the
files. But a couple of times I found Lansdale saying, you know how he always
spoke so highly in public of Ramon Magsaysay. To Bo Bohannan he says at one
point we could have done the same thing with a trained ape. And on another
occasion when he is being transferred from one job to another, he spoke of
having to put on his blue costume, not a uniform, but a costume.

E: Well, he never claims to have done much in the Air Force.

C: Not really. And, of course, he didn't. He was always on detached
service.

E: I'll tell you one thing when it comes to his keeping secrets. I
spent an awful lot of time with him in very drunken evenings at that house
for which I have forgotten the address...

C: 194 Cong Ly Street.

E: Until late in the morning, you know, 3 o'clock in the morning, 4
o'clock in the morning, with long, long tales of derring do in Vietnam and
even the Philippines. And the word Cuba was never, ever mentioned. I learned
he had been head of the Cuban Task Force and Operation Mongoose from the Church
report. And that for the first time that gave me a new insight into the meaning
of the word secrecy. I would not have thought he could have kept, I thought
I knew that man well enough, that he could not have kept that from me.

E: But no question, he not only kept it from me and Lou Conein and every member of his team, nobody ever mentioned that.

And so the question of the assassination plot against Castro and nothing anything like that, that was a real eyeopener to me to realize that I had known nothing about that, and since I had joined him immediately after that in '64, or '65...and he left there in '63, so in between I think he had done Food for Peace.

C: I don't think his heart was ever in it, but yes, that's what he did for a year.

For instance,

E: I did not know that he had any connection with Bobby Kennedy, but he worked for Bobby Kennedy. So that gives you some clue into the level of secrecy, or the effectiveness of the secrecy, but we have a good deal to talk about. I recommend this book on Lawrence to explain the mind of an intelligence operative, because there really is a great parallel between the two. I don't mean, by the way, to suggest a personal parallel. Lawrence was a clinical masochist, which I have no reason to believe Lansdale was.

C: It has never been apparent to me at any rate.

E: No, no.

My book might be worth looking at----

(MATERIAL ABOUT ELLSBURG'S BOOK OMITTED)

E: (He starts to talk about Bohannon. Currey says he has been dead for 3 years).

E: He was an interesting guy; he was also kind of a bitter and twisted person. He was fired by Lansdale while I was on the team.. I don't really recall the details. It was a very bitter thing. No one had been closer to him. And when I joined the team he acted like he was sort of really running it. But the whole thing has gotten vague in my memory. ~~But it's coming back to me... I remember when I was coming out~~

E: Namely that he came out...that when I actually met with the team in Washington he was definitely a part of it, a key part of it, you know, and very authoritative. He had an air of great authority. My memory is that he came out and was with us for the first month or two and then Lansdale sent him back. And I did not know/what all this was about and it was a sore point, when we tried to talk about, and it was very rupturing psychologically. I really don't remember it well enough. Maybe I will if ..

E: If I were you at this point, when you see Lansdale next, say to him: why don't you level with me.

See, Bohannan was at odds with most of the people on the team at that point. I think the key point is beginning to come back to me.

Bohannan made a bid that undercut Lansdale in some way, so he would be regarded as the head of the team. I think it was something like this: Bohannan would have a direct relation to the head of the CTA mission, the chief of the mission there. And it was regarded as a betrayal by Ed. And he threw Bohannan out. Bohannan was drinking a lot then. That was it.

C: I think Lansdale was doing a lot of drinking himself.

E: Both of them did, drank a lot.

C: Dorothy Bohannan told me how Bo was really the brains behind the outfit.

E: Well, that was Bo's attitude.

C: That's what he was telling her.

E: There could have some truth to that; I don't really know. You see I saw him only at this early stage which was the last stage of Bohannan's relation to Lansdale. So a couple of times Bohannan got missions out to Vietnam and would come to visit but the relations were very strained.

E: But the big break, the big rupture was about a month after he got there.

What I knew about it I learned primarily from Napoleon Valèriano somebody who was one of my close friends. And I was very much of an outsider on this team was Sam Karrick. MATERIAL ABOUT SAM KARRICK, JOE REDICK AND JOE BAKER OMITTED

ASK JOE BAKER ABOUT THE BOHANNAN THING ASK LOU CONEIN

E: I can speak (about Lansdale), from the point of view of what I was doing. And so it's a question of not _____. And so, I'm critical of him of course now in the same way that I'm critical of our whole effort there. And at the same time I know what you mean. I have a very respectful and loving attitude toward Lansdale still. And I say that of not too many people. Oh, there are others actually that I would say that of. Ed had quite a fatherly relation toward me at that time. And at the same time he inspired quite a lot of other people. Most of the members of the team seemed to see him as kind of a father image even though they were the same age, like Lou.

C: Quite a number of the people in the Philippines with whom I talked. Really referred to and think of him as a saint.

E: That is definitely a widespread attitude. But I am prepared to be more realistic than I would be about my own father, if you put it that way. MATERIAL OMITTED

I think Bohannan in a lot of ways was very racist. That was my impression of him at the time. By the way, Bohannan was a kind of imperialist in an old-fashioned straight-forward mold, unreconstructed. I think he was quite racist, and I have no doubts he was ^{anti-}anti-Semitic too.

MATERIAL OMITTED

E: Habib was stupid about Viet nam but in that he was by no means alone. Ignorance of Vietnam was really phenomenal. He was head of the political section but he had a tin ear for anything Vietnamese.

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E: And I'm no expert on Vietnam, God knows, at all, but the Vietnamese he dealt with he just drove out of their minds. I am sure there are parts of the world he does know. He had no experience in the far east. I'm not speaking of the far east. It is not my judgment of him; this judgment comes from people who know him. Certainly you ought to talk to him about Lansdale.

And it was also true, by the way, he was fighting Lansdale in bureaucratic terms; basically he won. He was totally boxed in and felt himself to be. I didn't get any impression that Lansdale was an effective bureaucratic insider at infighting.

C: OMITTED

E: I think I could see for instance traces of his old abilities in him, his ability to deal with Vietnamese.

MATERIAL OMITTED

One quality he had that was almost magical which is often described as though it were magical was his rapport with foreigners whose languages, of course, he did not speak. I saw enough of him in the two years I was there to see what the magic was. And relative to other Americans, it was almost magical. It was very simply, that ~~xxxxx~~ he did not show contempt for them. He had respect for them, but not He acted respectfully, not in a deferential way. Human respect, decent respectable people. He would listen to them.

I liked Porter very much. I think he was an intelligent, decent guy, but he hated the Vietnamese. He just couldn't stand them. And in this he was like Habib. They both liked the middle east.

MATERIAL OMITTED

But ^{he} the loved the middle east. He was bitterly disappointed to be sent to Korea. He hated orientals; he despised them; he had contempt for them; he just couldn't stand them. He didn't make any effort to hide that.

MATERIAL OMITTED

E: But it was true of Habib and most other Americans, patronizing, condescending toward people. The Vietnamese being subordinate and having to depend upon the Americans were very successful in holding in their anger,

MATERIAL OMITTED

E: But the point is that Lansdale, whatever he might say sometimes in private and then he could be critical and cynical for some of these people, but he could not show that or evidence that in dealing with these people. They really did feel that they were being heard respectfully and reasonably, and that's all it took. He didn't have to speak their language, he didn't even speak French. And yet he did establish a rapport with them that amounted to reverence. It came natural. All he had to do was listen to them.

MATERIAL OMITTED

E: I remember, and this is a particularly personal comment on Ky by Lansdale. I remember once after a meeting with Ky and Lansdale came very depressed and drinking his cabinet a bunch of people a lot and saying, and at that time that was a very significant statement, it was in the fall of '65. we had just arrived, a couple of months after we arrived and said, I don't believe this is a government that can win the hearts and minds of the people.

MATERIAL OMITTED

TAPE ENDS