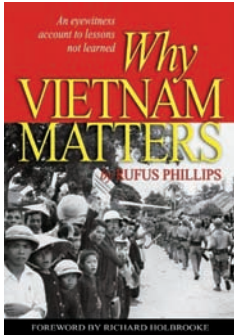


WHY VIETNAM MATTERS: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF LESSONS NOT LEARNED

RUFUS, Phillips. Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008, hardcover, 384 pages, \$45.71, ISBN-13: 978-1591146742

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The title of this book is misleading. At first glance, one would expect a polemic about the importance of Vietnam to the Cold War. Only the use of the descriptor “eyewitness” suggests its true nature; its author, Rufus Phillips, was present in South Vietnam for a number of years and in a privileged position to observe and participate in the tumultuous business of diplomacy and development in the Republic of Vietnam (a.k.a. South Vietnam). The book is a collection of the author’s memoirs from his times spent in South Vietnam.

Phillips divided the book into four parts. The first three correspond to his tours in South Vietnam. What was striking was that in each tour, a different government agency was responsible for the activity of advising the South Vietnamese on how to deal with the problem of national development. In his first tour, Phillips was a U.S. Army infantry Second Lieutenant seconded to the CIA. The next two tours saw him as a consultant for and then a member of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The interesting part of all this was that his tasks differed only slightly from tour to tour.

Part one of the book focused on his time with the Saigon Military Mission from 1954 to 1956. This part of the book described a terra incognita for most American authors on the Vietnam War. The Saigon Military Mission was a separate entity from the Military Advisory Assistance Group Vietnam (MAAG Vietnam), the American mission that funnelled equipment to the French; its purpose was to replicate the Philippines’ successful counter-insurgency. While the Republic of Vietnam had come into existence because of the international treaty signed in 1954 in Geneva, itself a result of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, this did not mean that the South Vietnamese had a monopoly on violence. Other armed groups existed and the central government needed to exert greater control. The CIA sent the American advisor with Philippines experience—an air force colonel named Edward G. Lansdale. The name may be familiar to some readers, as he is often portrayed in a negative light for his support for the Vietnamese prime minister of the era, Ngo Dinh Diem. Lansdale’s advice and techniques were instrumental in Diem’s consolidation of power in the 1950s. Phillips portrayed him in a surprisingly sympathetic light and pointed out that much of Lansdale’s plans and schemes were attempts to increase the government’s utility in South Vietnamese eyes. He described a series of operations in the countryside designed to provide basic services to the people in order to counter Viet Minh propaganda or boost electoral results. Phillips left South Vietnam in 1956 to serve as a CIA Officer in Laos.

After his stint with the CIA and a brief foray into the private sector, Phillips became a consultant for USAID and returned to Vietnam in 1962. This time, it was to make recommendations for a counter-insurgency strategy; in this case, it was how to use developmental projects to increase popular support for the South Vietnamese government in the face of a growing Communist insurgency supported by North Vietnam. This was also the era where the South Vietnamese government tried to build strategic hamlets to replicate the British success in Malaya. It failed as the Malayan solution relied upon conditions that did not exist in South Vietnam. Shortly after his return, Phillips recalled the Buddhist crisis and its destabilizing effects on the Diem government and the Kennedy Administration. This culminated in the overthrow and execution of Ngo Dinh Diem. This instability ultimately played into the Communist’s hands.

The third part of the book described the events from 1964 to 1968 in both Washington and Saigon. This part of the book provided a different perspective on the early years of the war. Instead of discussing the slow drift from an attempt to coerce the North Vietnamese

into ending the insurgency to the land-based attempts to defeat it, the book discussed the bureaucratic infighting and attempts by all parties to control the activities of the others in order to suit their needs. This suggests that despite all the good intentions of all parties, this may be one of the realities of interagency and/or combined operations.

There was a fourth part to the book in which Phillips commented on the nature of the more recent attempts at counter-insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this, he summarized what he believed were the “lessons not learned.” This included:

- Interagency teams (i.e. the Ambassador and staff, the military commander and staff, and the head of the development mission) need to be capable of resolving difficulties quickly and locally. Anything else might lead to an extension of bureaucratic battles into the theatre of operations.
- Countering an insurgency is a lengthy process based more upon gaining and maintaining popular support through sound political advice (a function he attributed to the State Department), and teaching others how to provide useful services to their populations, than it is about eliminating insurgents.
- Development is a tool of foreign policy and needs to remain subordinate to foreign policy goals.

Such points may be of interest to those with experience or an interest in interagency operations (a.k.a. the 3D Approach). Some may find themselves agreeing with Phillips’ arguments, while others might take exception to them. The comments, however, leave one with the impression that Phillips believes that such problems spring from organizational narcissism and a general ignorance of the needs and wishes of local populations. His beliefs, borne of the Vietnam experience, lend credence to his arguments about other conflicts, but it is best left to others to judge whether such “lessons not learned” reflect problems common to all counter-insurgency efforts.

Endnote

1. For details, see Peter Busch, “Killing the ‘Vietcong’: The British Advisory Mission and the Strategic Hamlet Programme,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 2002): 135-162.
