

How the U.S. Navy Sold the Vietnam War

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Dr. Tom Dooley, whose best-selling book “Deliver Us From Evil” helped create a favorable climate of opinion for U.S. intervention in South Vietnam, has long been linked to legendary CIA officer Edward G. Lansdale and his black operations in Vietnam between 1954 and 1955. But the real story about Dooley’s influential book, which has finally emerged from more recent scholarly research, is that it was engineered by an official of the U.S. Navy’s Pacific Command, Capt. William Lederer.

Lederer is best known as the co-author, with Eugene Burdick, of the 1958 novel “The Ugly American,” which was turned into a [1963 movie](#) starring Marlon Brando. Far more important, however, is the fact that from 1951 through 1957 Capt. Lederer was on the staff of the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC), Adm. Felix Stump.

The Pacific Command was intensely interested in Dooley, because the U.S. Navy had the greatest stake of all the military services in the outcome of the conflict between the communists and U.S.-backed anti-communist regimes in Vietnam and China during the mid-1950s. And the Pacific Command was directly involved in the military planning for war in both cases.

Adm. Arthur Radford, the former CINCPAC and then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, led the senior officials pressing President Dwight D. Eisenhower to approve a massive U.S. airstrike against the [Viet Minh](#) at Dien Bien Phu in April 1954. And between 1954 and 1955, Adm. Stump called for increasing the size of the Nationalist Chinese raids on the Chinese mainland from offshore islands. He also pushed for a U.S. attack on the mainland, including the use of nuclear weapons, if necessary, to defend those same offshore islands.

Capt. Lederer met Dooley in Haiphong, Vietnam, in 1954 after the Navy launched “[Operation Passage to Freedom](#)” to help transport more than 300,000 Vietnamese civilians, soldiers and members of the French Army from the French-controlled North to Saigon. A CIA psychological warfare team led by Lansdale had slipped into Hanoi and Haiphong to sabotage the Ho Chi Minh government takeover and to spread propaganda to provoke fear among Catholics and other residents.

The key tactic of the Lansdale team was to print a series of “black propaganda” leaflets—designed to appear as though they came from the Viet Minh—to frighten residents of the North into leaving for South Vietnam. The most dramatic such deception involved spreading the rumor that the U.S. military was going to bomb Hanoi, a story that was further promoted by leaflets showing concentric circles of destruction of the city by an atomic bomb.

Lt. Tom Dooley, a young Irish Catholic Navy doctor, was “loaned” by the U.S. Navy to

Lansdale for the operation, although Dooley apparently thought the team's function was to gather intelligence. Dooley's job was ostensibly to manage medical supplies needed for the movement of North Vietnamese to the South, but in fact Dooley functioned as the team's propagandist, briefing visiting news media and sending out reports through Catholic media in the United States that supported the CIA's anti-Viet Minh mission.

Lederer quickly recognized Dooley as a potentially valuable propaganda asset because of his connection with Vietnamese Catholics and his penchant for telling tales of Viet Minh atrocities. It was Lederer who suggested that Dooley write a book about his experiences with North Vietnamese refugees who wanted to move to the South. The Navy gave him a leave of absence to write it, and Lederer became Dooley's handler for the project. Dooley was a charismatic public speaker but needed Lederer's help with writing. Lederer also introduced Dooley to Reader's Digest—by far the most popular magazine in America, with 20 million readers. Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh Burke officially embraced the book and even wrote the introduction to it.

Reader's Digest published a highly condensed 27-page version of the book in its April 1956 edition, and Farrar, Straus and Cudahy immediately published the full-length version. It became a runaway bestseller, going through twelve printings.

The constantly reiterated theme of Dooley's book "Deliver Us From Evil" was that the Ho Chi Minh government was determined to suppress the Catholic faith in Vietnam and used torture and other atrocities to terrorize Catholics into submission. That was a grotesque distortion of actual Viet Minh policy. The Ho Chi Minh government had worked hard from the beginning of the war to ensure that there was no interference with Catholics' exercise of their faith, even establishing severe legal penalties on any infringement of that freedom.

But Dooley's book was full of lurid descriptions of North Vietnamese Communist atrocities against Catholics that Dooley claimed to have known about from treating the victims. It told of the Viet Minh having partially torn off the ears of several teenagers with pliers and left them dangling—supposedly as punishment for their having listened to the Lord's Prayer.

And he described the Viet Minh taking seven youths out of their classroom and forcing wooden chopsticks through their eardrums. The children, he wrote, had been accused of "treason" for having attended a religious class at night. As for the teacher, Dooley claimed the Viet Minh had used pliers to pull out his tongue, as punishment for having taught the religious class.

But it was widely recognized within the U.S. government that these stories were false. Six U.S. Information Agency officials who had been in North Vietnam during that period, as well as former Navy corpsmen who had worked in the Haiphong camp with Dooley, all said they had never heard of any such events. And in 1992 Lederer himself, who had made 25 fact-finding trips to Vietnam since 1951, [told an interviewer](#), "[T]hose things never happened. ... I traveled all over the country and never saw anything like them."

Many years later, in an [interview with scholar Edward Palm](#), Lederer disclaimed any significant influence on the content or tone of Dooley's book, even though Dooley had credited Lederer with helping put the book in final form. Lederer also told Palm he didn't remember any such stories appearing in the first draft of the book he read.

But Palm, who obtained the first draft of the manuscript from Dooley's papers, confirmed to

this writer that the first draft *did* contain those stories of atrocities. And Palm's monograph [documented](#) the fact that the last draft chapter was dated the end of July 1955 and that communications from both men at the time indicated that Lederer had met repeatedly with Dooley during June and July to help him finish the draft.

Palm also [quoted from Dooley's first draft](#) to show that it concluded with a call for Americans to be ready for a U.S. war against communism. If negotiations with the Soviet Union failed to bring "lasting peace," Dooley's draft warned, "Communism will have to be fought with arms ... it must be annihilated...." Dooley concluded, "[T]here can be no concessions, no compromise and no coexistence."

Palm pointed out that the published version of the book dropped that rabidly warlike rhetoric and instead introduced a new character named "Ensign Potts" to represent the view that America must be ready to fight a war to destroy communism. The role of the "Potts" character was to be converted to Dooley's argument that service to the ordinary Vietnamese would be the most effective way to prevail in the Cold War—after Dooley's tearful recounting of the story of the Viet Minh puncturing the Catholic youths' ears with chopsticks, reduced "Potts" to tears as well.

Lederer and Burdick popularized the idea that personal kindness to the people of Southeast Asia from America could help defeat Communism in "The Ugly American" and that same idea infused Lederer's own March 1955 Reader's Digest article on the interactions between U.S. sailors and Vietnamese aboard a U.S. Navy ship. Lederer told Palm in a 1996 interview that he had suggested that Dooley model his book on that article.

Palm wrote that he didn't believe Lederer's personal preference was to promote a U.S. war in Vietnam. But Lederer had obviously approved Dooley's portrayal of the Vietnamese Communists as an alien horde terrorizing the Catholics. Catholics were the fastest-growing religious denomination in America from 1940 to 1960, during which time their numbers doubled, and Dooley's message was an obvious way of mobilizing American Catholics to support Adm. Stump and the Navy's agenda for Vietnam.

Marine Lt. Col. William Corson, who was detailed to the CIA during much of his career and knew Dooley during the writing of his book, told fellow former Marine Edward Palm in a 1997 telephone interview, "Dooley was programmed toward a particular end." He did not say specifically what that end was, but he appeared to mean building popular support for U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

While on a nationwide book tour, Dooley was one of the featured speakers at the first conference of The American Friends of Vietnam—later known as the "Vietnam Lobby"—in Washington, D.C., on June 1, 1956. The meeting was held at a crucial moment in U.S. Vietnam policy. Eisenhower was still supporting the election for a government throughout Vietnam as called for by the 1954 Geneva Agreement, with strict conditions for a free vote. Meanwhile, hardliners in the administration were pushing for opposing that election outright on the ground that Ho Chi Minh would certainly win it, regardless of conditions.

Dooley's contribution was to describe "Communism" as an "evil, driving, malicious ogre" and recount the "hideous atrocities that we witnessed in our camps every single day." And he retold the story of the Viet Minh punishing the schoolchildren by puncturing their eardrums.

A few weeks after the meeting, Eisenhower reversed his previous position of supporting the all-Vietnamese Vietnamese, opening the path to deeper U.S. political and military intervention in Vietnam.

Dooley had just learned that his secret life as a gay man in the Navy had been discovered by Naval intelligence, and he was forced to quietly resign. At Lansdale's suggestion, Leo Cherne of the International Rescue Committee helped Dooley establish a primitive medical clinic near the Chinese border in northern Laos. But Dooley had to agree to cooperate with CIA in Laos by allowing it to [smuggle arms into the site](#) of the clinic to eventually be distributed to local anti-Communist militiamen.

The Dooley Clinic in Laos helped make him a hugely popular celebrity, with two more best-selling books, feature stories in popular magazines and network television appearances. By the time Dooley died of cancer in 1961, a Gallup Poll found that Americans viewed him as the third most admired person in the world, after Eisenhower and the pope. But his role in the larger tragedy of U.S. war in Indochina was to serve as the instrument of a highly successful campaign by the U.S. Navy to create the first false propaganda narrative of the conflict—one that has endured for most of Dooley's fans for decades.

But Dooley's popularity and saintly image increased the power of his tales of Viet Minh atrocities against Catholics that represented the first major false U.S. propaganda narrative of the Vietnam conflict—one that helped build public support for the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam that began under President John F Kennedy in 1962.

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