

An Appreciation of Rufus Phillips III and *Stabilizing Fragile States*

by Roger Myerson, May 2022<sup>1</sup>

<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/phillips2022.pdf>

As an academic, I have considered the problems of state-building and stabilization assistance only from a theoretical perspective, unlike the distinguished practitioners and policy-makers in this panel. I had the privilege of meeting and talking with Rufus Phillips only in the last few years of his life. Before I read his two books, I had studied many others' approaches to the problems of stabilization assistance, but to me these all seemed to be missing something essential, and so I gradually developed different theoretical ideas about how international assistance should be applied when the goal is to support political stabilization in a failed or fragile state. When I studied Rufus Phillips's work, however, I discovered that these theoretical ideas fit almost exactly with what Rufus Phillips did in 1962 when he organized the Office of Rural Affairs for USAID in South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

Phillips first arrived in Vietnam in 1954 to work with the legendary Edward Lansdale. Lansdale made significant contributions to political stabilization in Philippines and Vietnam by developing personal relationships with high government officials and then using these relationships to encourage policies for effective democratic government. Studying Lansdale's career, however, one might get the impression that the most important work in stabilization assistance could be done by foreign service officers stationed in the capital city, as if democratic state-building were just about helping national leaders to develop policies and institutions that can win people's loyalty. Indeed, when Rufus Phillips returned to Vietnam in 1962, the USAID mission there had 110 employees but only three Americans permanently stationed outside Saigon. But then, as the director of the new Office of Rural Affairs, Phillips organized a nationwide network of local field officers, each of whom had responsibility for working with local Vietnamese officials to distribute American assistance in one of the country's provinces.

In 1962, Phillips's approach to counterinsurgency was characterized by decentralized political engagement. Studying his approach, we can learn how to avoid the common problem of foreign support promoting excessive centralization in the recipient government, which has been

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for an online seminar of the United States Institute of Peace on 10 May 2022 to celebrate the legacy of Rufus Phillips III and the publication of his new book *Stabilizing Fragile States* by University of Kansas Press. See <<https://www.usip.org/events/stabilizing-fragile-states-legacy-rufus-phillips-iii>>

<sup>2</sup> See also Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters* (Naval Institute Press, 2008).

an issue in many stabilization-assistance missions. Foreign interveners have often forgotten that autonomous local governments play an important role in most successful democratic states.

For example, Phillips quotes the Vietnamese nationalist Dan Van Sung, who observed that the U.S. had "reduced its anti-Communist efforts in Vietnam to the maintenance of an administrative machine and of an army" and then urged that the way out should have been "by going deeper into local revolutionary problems... infusing them with the revolutionary spirit of 1776." When Americans read this today, however, many might not truly remember what was the revolutionary spirit of 1776. It was certainly not about the right of Americans to elect a national President, which did not happen until many years later. Before independence was declared in July 1776, the primary concern of American patriots was to maintain an appropriate distribution of power between America's locally elected provincial assemblies and the sovereign government of their King. The fundamental error in America's recent state-building efforts has been, not an over-estimation of how much people elsewhere might be like Americans in appreciating democracy, but an under-estimation of how much people elsewhere may be like Americans in wanting their local governments to be locally accountable, not just appointed by national leaders.

In a weak or failed state, people are generally unable to rely on a national government, and they so must get basic protection and other essential public services from groups with local leadership. The positions of these local leaders could be threatened by the establishment of an effective state under new national leadership, and many people may trust their familiar local institutions more than they trust new and unproven national leaders. So we should always expect local politics to be of the essence in the problems of stabilization, as the new government needs to earn the trust of people who may have relied on different forms of local leadership in different parts of the country. Certainly the successful establishment of America's national government was characterized by long and intense negotiations about the appropriate distribution of powers between local and national authorities.

Foreigners who send assistance to support a new state can exacerbate these problems if they just try to strengthen the central government without any understanding of local political concerns. The strategic direction of an effective stabilization-assistance mission must be informed by a detailed understanding of local political concerns in every part of the country, not just the views of those who would lead the national government. For such decentralized political engagement, an effective mission for democratic stabilization assistance needs a team of field officers who can monitor and respond to local political issues in every part of the country.

Rufus Phillips and Bert Fraleigh created such a team in 1962. The provincial field officers of the Rural Affairs Office worked with centrally appointed provincial chiefs to support the formation of locally elected councils for communities throughout the country. This introduction of these locally accountable local authorities (the Strategic Hamlet Program) helped to spread resistance against the Communist insurgency.

Lansdale and Phillips emphasized that victory against an invasion or insurgency depends on providing a motivation for many thousands of ordinary people to fight for the defense of their nation. Lansdale called this the "X factor" and saw democracy as a way to provide it, but we should note that institutions of local democracy can be particularly effective for providing such motivation.

People can be motivated to fight by an expectation that military service to the state could earn them greater respect and higher status in their community, but such an expectation is plausible only if people see some connection between service to the state and leadership in their community. A national centralization of power can leave many communities where even local leaders feel alienated from a state that has no use for them. But a devolution of substantial powers to democratic local governments ensures that trusted local leaders everywhere can have a stake of power in the state, and community leaders who are so invested in the state can encourage local volunteers with promises of respect and honor for those who fight for it.

Thus, Phillips's Rural Affairs team was engaged with the core task of counterinsurgency in South Vietnam: encouraging the state to reach out and earn people's loyalty in communities throughout the nation. As director of this program, Rufus Phillips also worked regularly with many high South Vietnamese officials, even as his field officers who were monitoring people's concerns in every province of the country. So his position gave him the broad understanding of local and national political concerns that was essential for directing a successful stabilization mission, if American policy-makers would have relied on him for strategic guidance.

Unfortunately, they did not. Phillips and his field officers understood how military operations could affect the political problems of stabilization, but the US government did not consider his civilian agency to be qualified for raising questions about military tactics. When Phillips returned to Washington in the summer of 1963, he was warned not to speak without permission in high-level meetings on policies about which he was the best-informed person in the room. Then, after his family's needs called him away from Vietnam, the Rural Affairs Office was fundamentally reorganized so that different US assistance programs would not have to take

direction from a provincial field officer who understood the local political issues. When top American policy-makers would not take guidance from a team with decentralized political engagement in South Vietnam, a massive intervention could not save the country.

We should not be surprised that a well-organized stabilization-assistance team would elicit such an adverse response from other bureaucratic elements of America's federal government. US federal agencies are generally organized according to the fundamental principle that the tax-payers' money should be used only with regular controls to ensure accountability to the American people through their elected political representatives. But the ultimate goal of a stabilization assistance intervention is to support the development of a foreign government that is accountable to its own people, not to Americans. Appropriate responses to political conditions in a remote province of a foreign country may seem obscure and unverifiable to bureaucrats in Washington DC.

Thus, a stabilization-assistance team that operates with decentralized political engagement in the target country may need exemptions from many controls that are standard in other federal agencies. Furthermore, the head of such a stabilization-assistance team needs a recognized status that is high enough to command the attention of top policy-makers when they are making fundamental strategic decisions about a foreign intervention. These are basic reasons why foreign stabilization assistance needs to be managed by a dedicated agency that has authority both to direct aid in remote communities and to advise top policy-makers in international missions where the goal is to support political development.<sup>3</sup>

Rufus Phillips understood all this when he was in Vietnam in the 1960s, and in later years he saw that America's refusal to prepare for subsequent stabilization missions led to costly failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, with this great final treatise, Phillips warns us that recriminations over recent failures should not prevent America from learning these conflicts' lessons and preparing better to meet the challenges of future stabilization missions, which are bound to occur again someday. In this new book, he offers detailed suggestions about how this should be done, to which I would only add that there is no better model for a stabilization-assistance team than the Office of Rural Affairs as Rufus Phillips organized it in 1962. This time we should heed his advice.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Roger Myerson, "Decentralized Stabilization Assistance" (2022)  
<<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/decentstabil.pdf>>