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TWO QUIET AMERICANS: TURNING BRITISH LITERATURE INTO AMERICAN PROPAGANDA

MARIAM DARCE FRENIER

On February 18, 1982, history, film, and literature met and merged in Ronald Reagan's description of the American decision to enter the Vietnam War. Echoing the platitudes of the fictional Alden Pyle, he stated:

If I recall correctly, when France gave up Indochina as a colony, the leading nations of the world met in Geneva with regard to helping those colonies become independent nations. ...North and South Vietnam had been, previous to colonization, two separate countries.... And openly, our country sent military advisors there to help.... And they were doing this, if I recall correctly, also in civilian clothes, no weapons, until they began being blown up where they lived and walking down the streets by people riding by on bicycles and throwing pipe bombs at them¹.

As Garry Wills, Lou Cannon, and many others have pointed out, Ronald Reagan cannot always distinguish between movies and reality. In this case, Reagan's analysis seems to be shaped by too many late-night viewings of *The Quiet American*. Reagan's (probably unconscious) revision of history is a product of the same American tendency to reinterpret unpleasant realities as Joseph Mankiewicz's movie (sub)version of Greene's novel. In this article I will demonstrate the way in which Mankiewicz's reinterpretation of Greene mirrors American Cold War misinterpretations of the Vietnam conflict and of the French experience in Indochina.

Greene went to Vietnam during the early 1950s. *The Quiet American* was constructed from his experiences there as a newspaper correspondent. A converted Catholic², his sympathies were with the political Left; he admired Fidel Castro and was once heard to say that, if forced to choose, he would prefer to live in the USSR than the US³. His novel examines American naiveté in Vietnam in the early 1950s. Thomas Fowler, the novel's narrator, is a British journalist familiar with

Saigon and the Vietnamese — obviously a proxy for the author. Originally published in 1956 and still in print, many critics now consider this the best novel about Vietnam in English.

As the novel begins, Fowler and Phuong (Phoenix) have lived together for two years when the quiet American, Alden Pyle, stumbles into their lives⁴. The novel's Pyle is a well-intentioned promoter of a "Third Force" — Vietnamese who are neither communist nor collaborators. Fresh from the US, Pyle "knows" what the Vietnamese want and how to help them to accomplish their goals. Fowler tries to explain the realities of Vietnamese politics to Pyle, but Pyle cannot listen.

Nor can he listen when Fowler tries to explain the basis of Phuong's attraction to Pyle. Phuong has no understanding or interest in the romantic love which Pyle professes; instead, she is won over by Pyle's promises to take her to the United States and marry her.

In the course of his work, Pyle causes a massacre. Hopelessly immersed in American mythology, Pyle can only do harm, and Fowler decides to cooperate with the Viet Minh who wish to assassinate him. The French Inspector, Vigot, who investigates Pyle's murder decidedly concurs in Fowler's judgement of the political situation in Vietnam and of the quiet American. Pyle dead, Phuong gravitates back to Fowler.

The movie tells a different story. As in the novel, Fowler narrates. However, the movie's quiet American wins the romantic love of Phuong, is innocent of the murder of women and children, and represents wisdom while Fowler is the true innocent. In his naiveté, the movie's Fowler is duped by the Chinese Communists into cooperating in their assassination of Pyle. Vigot seconds Pyle's analysis of Fowler. Phuong, in disgust at Fowler, and grieving for Pyle, returns to her life as a dance hall girl — rejecting Fowler's offer of marriage.

Joseph Mankiewicz wrote and directed the movie version of *The Quiet American*, which first appeared in American movie theaters in 1959⁵. A Cold War liberal, Mankiewicz was accused of being a "fellow-traveller" by powerful director Cecil B. DeMille during the turbulent McCarthy Era. Though he retained his position as President of the Screen Director's Guild, he may have felt his reputation was stained by DeMille's accusations. His version of *The Quiet American* may have been created, in part, to drown out any whispers that he was soft on Communism.

Though Robert Lantz claimed that Mankiewicz "boasted of his projected transformation" of the novel, Mankiewicz denied this in 1978⁶. He describes the film, instead, as "the very bad film I made during a very unhappy time in my life..."⁷ But neither does Mankiewicz have praise for the novel, calling it "a terribly distorted kind of cheap

melodrama in which the American was the most idiotic kind of villain”⁸.

A critical and commercial failure, the movie failed to make the list of Annual Top Moneymaking Films for 1958 or 1959, falling far short of *The Bridge on the River Kwaj* (estimated box office receipts \$18 million) and *Auntie Mame* (\$8.8 million). *The Quiet American* did not even gross as much as \$1 million⁹.

When the movie was reviewed in 1958, many critics thought Mankiewicz changed the ending to avoid the anger of American exhibitors and the movie’s financing distributor, United Artists. But it is disturbing that Geist and other critics did not note changes more insidious than Mankiewicz’s gross manipulation of the ending. Greene himself wrote to protest those changes in a letter to the *Times* of London, published on January 29, 1957:

(S)uch changes ... will make only the more obvious the discrepancy between what the (US) State Department would like the world to believe and what in fact happened in Viet Nam.

Speculations on the reasons for the differences between novel and movie include the strong possibility that Joseph L. Mankiewicz and his company — along with too many other Americans in the 1950s — held so tightly to American mythology that they couldn’t tolerate Greene’s presentation. American mythology dictated that Americans cleaned up after decadent Europeans, and had a mission to bring God/Democracy/American values to other parts of the world. Though Mankiewicz was critical of the “white hat/black hat” polarization in the Hollywood Western and gangster movie¹⁰, he was seemingly oblivious to his own decision to use that same device. Thus, in Mankiewicz’s *Quiet American*, the American became a hero, the British journalist became a sleazy patsy for the Commies, and the wishes of the Vietnamese became invisible and irrelevant.

To illustrate specific ways in which the movie inverts the novel, I will examine several key passages and scenes, and discuss their presentation in both contexts. As in most artistic works, the opening has a special significance, setting the tone of what is to come, and creating audience/reader expectations.

The novel begins at midnight in Fowler’s room; it is the night of Alden Pyle’s assassination. Six months have passed since he met Fowler and Phuong, and “weeks ago (it was) the Chinese New Year”. Vigot is present, and the novel’s first conversation between the French Inspector and Fowler not only establishes that both were aware of Pyle’s covert military activities, but that both disapproved of them. “To speak

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plainly, " Vigot states about Pyle's murder, "I am not altogether sorry. He was doing a lot of harm". Pyle's misapprehension of Vietnamese politics is early established by these two experts, who acknowledge the importance and existence of the Viet Minh.

The United Artist movie opens with an orientalized title. Audie Murphy (Pyle) receives top billing, followed by Michael Redgrave (Fowler), Claude Dauphin (Vigot), and Georgia Moll (Phuong). Orientalized music plays as the titles are superimposed on a series of Asian faces, and then the movie breaks directly into a Chinese New Year celebration which features a paper dragon. Subtitles follow:

Frame 1:

SAIGON
At the time of
CHINESE NEW YEAR
1959

Frame 2:

There was an Emperor who
ruled by permission of France
to whom it belonged

Frame 3:

and 300 miles to the north of
Saigon, both the Emperor and the
French were fighting a war against
a Communist army

Frame 4:

But, at war or in peace, CHINESE
NEW YEAR was a time to forgive
one's enemies, square accounts
with one's God and creditors —

Frame 5:

and to rejoice in a world that
for two days, might be considered
a happy one.

At the end of the credits the movie cuts to an Asian man who finds Pyle's body. He is joined at the scene by a group of Asian women.

In this way, although the "it" in Frame 2 is Vietnam, Vietnam itself goes unspecified. Furthermore, the date is given as 1952: Greene closes his novel with the notation "March 1952 — June 1955." These changes distance the movie's Pyle from Colonel Edward G. Landsdale and the events of 1954, and make Vietnam a stand-in for any "it" that is "fighting a war against a Communist army". Then, the subtitles estab-

lish the importance of the Chinese in Saigon and begin to connect them with Chinese Communism. These political shifts transform Greene's novel.

In the novel, the most politically significant scene is set in a South Vietnamese watch-tower well outside Saigon. Pyle and Fowler end up there because their cars have been sabotaged — perhaps by the Cao Dai, a cult which once backed Pyle's for the leader of the Third Force, General Thè. They share the tower with two Vietnamese sentries.

Fowler: You and your like are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren't interested.

Pyle: They don't want Communism.

Fowler: They want rice... They don't want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. They don't want our white skins around telling them what they want.

Pyle: If Indochina goes...

Fowler: I know that record. Siam goes.

Pyle: They'll be forced to believe what they are told, they won't be allowed to think for themselves.

Fowler: Thought's a luxury. Do you think the peasant sits and thinks of God and Democracy when he gets inside his mud hut at night?

Pyle grounds his arguments in the theories of York Harding, an American scholar. But Fowler calls Harding merely "a superior sort of journalist... He gets hold of an idea and then alters every situation to fit the idea. Pyle came out here full of York Harding's idea". In the watch-tower, Pyle again refers to Harding.

Pyle: You shouldn't be against York, you should be against the French. Their colonialism.

Fowler: Isms and oracles. Give me facts.

Fowler tries to explain the Vietnamese peasants to Pyle:

The only man to treat him as a man is the (Communist) political commissar. He'll sit in his hut and ask his name and listen to his complaints; he'll give up an hour a day to teaching him — it doesn't matter what, he's being treated like a man, like someone of value. Don't go on in the East with that parrot cry about a threat to the individual soul. Here you'd find yourself on the wrong side — it's they who stand for the individual and we just stand for Private 23987, unit in the global strategy.

Finally, Greene points up the nature of the Viet Minh and Pyle's distrust

of his South Vietnamese allies. Fowler leaves the watch-tower to fetch blankets from his car, and finds the atmosphere different in the hut when he returns:

Pyle: I don't trust (the sentry guards) with the gun if (the enemies) are coming....

Fowler: They are supposed to be on our side.

Pyle: I thought you didn't have a side.

Fowler: Touché, I wish the Viets knew it.

In the movie's watch-tower scene the conversation is very different. Pyle says of the two guards, "They're just kids." He wonders how to pass the time.

Fowler: Why not give them lectures on "national democracy."

Pyle: You don't believe in it at all do you? There are two different beliefs here, both confined to this hut at this minute.

Pyle offers a cigarette to Fowler, who suggests he give some to the guards in order to stay friendly with them.

Pyle: I wouldn't have thought you'd suggest economic aid to buy friends.

Fowler: They're scared.... They just want enough rice.... They don't want our white skins around telling them what they want.

Pyle: You're telling them what they don't want.... (T)he skins in Russia are still white too.

Fowler: I don't take sides.... This sudden importance of the individual and his freedom, why have we just discovered it? Fifty years ago nobody would have spoken of it.

Pyle: I'm from a country that's been in existence less than 200 years in a very old world.... (S)uddenly the world waits angrily for us to find the answers it hasn't been able to find in 50 centuries.

Mankiewicz uses the watch-tower scene to establish Pyle's concern for his allies, America's special mission, and to confirm the audience's belief in monolithic communism. He ties the Vietnamese Communist struggle to the Soviet Union (never mentioned in the novel), and makes no reference to Vietnamese peasants or Viet Minh commissars.

Pyle's theories are put into practice, in both the novel and the movie, in the bicycle-bomb incident and in the bombing of a civilian

crowd in Saigon. In the movie, the bicycle-bomb incident occurs after a Chinese, Mr. Heng, shows plastic ("Diolactin") and a mysterious mold to Fowler. Heng then suggests that perhaps Fowler will be "near the flower stalls on the Boulevard Chamet at precisely half-past one this afternoon". Near the flower stalls at the appointed time, Fowler sees vehicles racing to a fountain, sirens screeching; officials jump from their cars, pick up nearby bicycles, and hurl them into the fountain. Heng appears and begins to talk to Fowler. The bicycles explode. With Heng's help, Fowler makes the connection between the bicycle-bombs, Diolactin, the mold, and Alden Pyle. While the novel is subtler — for example, Heng does not set Fowler up so explicitly — the bicycle-bomb incident has similar consequences.

But novel and movie lead the audience in different directions. This is brought out most clearly in the scene where explosions kill Vietnamese women and children congregating in a busy Saigon square. In the novel, after the explosions, Fowler and Pyle meet in the square.

Pyle said, "It's awful." He looked at the wet on his shoes and said in a sick voice, "What's that?"

"Blood," I said....

He was seeing a real war for the first time....

He said weakly, "There was to have been a parade."...

"But the parade was cancelled yesterday, Pyle."

"I didn't know.... They should have called it off."

He looked white and beaten and ready to faint.

Greene's Pyle blanches at the realities of war, or dirty tricks, and acknowledges his faulty intelligence gathering.

The movie scene is full of burning cars, a woman screaming, and a woman being carried off on a stretcher. Pyle arrives standing on the dashboard of a vehicle; men are inside and he seems to be directing them to bring him to the massacre scene. Subsequently, he points out to Fowler that a French Military parade had been scheduled, then cancelled, and that there had been rumors about a demonstration and bicycle bombs. Fowler exclaims, "Your bicycle-bombs!" and suggests that Pyle's Third Force hope, General Thè has done the bombing. Pyle denies any part in the demonstration and snaps: "Why don't you just shut up and help somebody."

The movie's Pyle becomes the helper rather than the menace. Furthermore, a take-charge Pyle is established as being in full control of intelligence gathering and as being innocent of any part in the massacre. These shifts are part of a greater revision — Pyle's naiveté

replaced by Fowler's.

Early in the novel, the innocence of Pyle is established as a cause of concern to Fowler. After Pyle's death, the American Economic Attaché first tells Fowler that Pyle had "special duties" and then wonders why he was killed. Fowler responds:

They killed him because he was too innocent to live.... He had no more of a notion than any of you what the whole affair's about, and you gave him money and York Harding's books on the East and said, "Go ahead. Win the East for Democracy." He never saw anything he hadn't heard in a lecture hall and his writers and his lecturers made a fool of him. When he saw a dead body he couldn't even see the wounds.

In the novel, Pyle's second-hand ideas are re-emphasized, and his foolish innocence is under-scored.

In contrast, the movie portrays Fowler as the true innocent and infers that Pyle's idea of "national democracy" is the solution for South Vietnam. York Harding is never mentioned in the movie. The movie's last scene between Fowler and Pyle demonstrates this subversion clearly.

Fowler: What do you hear from General Thè?

Pyle: I haven't seen him lately.

Fowler: I supposed he would have come to Saigon to see how his bomb worked.

Pyle: What makes you so sure it was his bomb? I don't think so....

Fowler: Believe me, national democracy is something that comes out of a book.... Thè's not the leader for your Third Force.

Pyle: It's not my Third Force.

Fowler: Your country mustn't trust men like Thè....

Pyle: You're talking cloak and dagger nonsense.... It's quite true that I've been in touch with General Thè.... After I was graduated from college, I took some post-graduate work at Princeton.... While I was there I met a very prominent Vietnamese living in exile in New Jersey.

Fowler: Who was he?

Pyle: You know, or should know, as well as I. Because if all goes well, if Vietnam becomes an independent republic, this man'll be its leader.

Fowler: And this future leader sent you to General Thè?

Pyle: What makes you believe any sane government or sane man would send me on a mission like that?

Fowler: Then, who did send you to General Thè?

Pyle: I did.

The movie conversation ends with Pyle denouncing Fowler: "I think you believe whatever you need to believe emotionally.... My government has nothing to do with this ... it was my own idea." Pyle continues:

You've got a great talent for words ... you depend on them as if saying a thing is an effective way to make it true.... What are you afraid of anyway? Like an adolescent boy who keeps on using dirty words all the time because he doesn't want anyone to think he doesn't know what it's all about. You're going to hate this, but I think you're one of the most truly innocent men I'll ever know.

Three important subversions exist in the scene described above. The most important is the reversal of Pyle's and Fowler's roles. In the novel, it is Pyle's words that are dangerous — innocent, idealistic, and deadly — but it is Fowler's words that are condemned in the movie. The second subversion is a removal of Pyle from the intellectual environment of Harvard (and York Harding) to the Princeton, New Jersey area, so that his connection with Diem (an "authentic" and validating connection) can be established. The third subversion is that Mankiewicz absolves the US government of even the remotest complicity in the massacre of innocent civilians.

Mankiewicz uses several devices to accomplish the demolition of Fowler's credibility and character. He reverses the positions of innocence and wisdom which Greene had established between Fowler and Pyle, he realigns the sympathies of the French Inspector, Vigot, and he manipulates the relationship between Pyle and Phuong.

Where the novel's Vigot is sympathetic to Fowler, the movie's Vigot is contemptuous of him. In a scene set in the French inspector's office, Mankiewicz's Vigot and Fowler discuss Pyle's murder.

Fowler: He was killed by an idea as much as anything else.... All his life they saturated him with this idea; from books and slogans, church pulpits, lecture platforms.

Vigot: An idea so repugnant that he was killed for it?

The movie has already established that words, especially when uttered by Fowler, can be bad, but now it is clear that ideas are good and worth dying for. In this scene, idealism joins with anti-intellectualism, tapping into an old American disjunction between knowledge and ideals. The conversation continues, and it becomes clear that Fowler has been fooled into thinking that Pyle was dealing in explosives by the

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Communists. Vigot's contempt knows no bounds.

Vigot: Do you ask ... about guilt (for the massacre)? Do you ask how about the guilt you decided upon before the crime was committed? And for which the sentence has already been carried out? ... It was the idea that had to be murdered.... You know, it is a mistake to say that Communism is appealing to the mentally advanced. I think it is only true when the mentally advanced are also emotionally retarded.
Fowler: I'm not a Communist, Vigot.

Vigot: But someone was required to help assassinate the idea, someone gifted in the war of words ... to plead the righteousness.... But yet someone so emotionally involved that he would not permit even his training as a professional reporter ... to reject such an obviously idiotic story.

Fowler: All right, *mea culpa*.

Vigot: You were terrified of losing your girl to a younger man.... You've simply been used that you could be so childishly manipulated.... They have made a bloody fool of you.

In the novel, Fowler is driven to take sides when he realizes that Pyle's blind innocence has already brought about the death of civilians and will likely bring about more such deaths. Greene's depiction of the last exchange between Pyle and Fowler points out the correctness of Fowler's interpretation.

Pyle: I saw Thè this afternoon.... I dealt with him very severely.... In the long run he is the only hope we have. ... The massacre was a terrible shock today, Thomas, but in a week, you'll see, we'll have forgotten it. We are looking after the relatives too.

Fowler: We?

Pyle: We've wired to Washington.

At this point, Fowler goes to the window to give a pre-arranged signal to Heng's associates. Still staring out the window, Fowler reads out of a book to Pyle:

I drive through the streets and I care not a damn,
The people they stare, and they ask who I am;
And if I should chance to run over a cad,
I can pay for the damage if ever so bad.
So pleasant it is to have money, heigh ho!
So pleasant it is to have money.

By having Fowler quote from Arthur Hugh Clough's "Dipsychus" (the

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"twin-souled") Greene comments on America's moneyed insensitivity, and acknowledges that Pyle may indeed represent the flip-side of Fowler.

The scene in the movie goes in a very different direction. Directly after Pyle's statement that "My government has nothing to do with this ... it was my own idea," he says, "I'm being sent home next week. Phuong's going with me. We're going to be married at home.

Immediately Fowler, in voice-over narration, notes: "For the first time he spoke of Phuong, of taking her away with him, of leaving me behind alone." That is the moment that Fowler chooses to go to the window to betray Pyle, and then to quote Shakespeare's *Othello*, rather than the more political Clough:

Though I purchase am vicious In my guess, —
As, I confess, it is my nature's plague
To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy
Shapes faults that are not, —

Mankiewicz's Fowler thus betrays Pyle out of sexual jealousy. And it is this jealousy which disgusts Vigot and highlights the movie's focus on romantic love.

Greene's Phuong is incapable of romantic love: "It isn't in the Vietnamese nature," Fowler explains to Pyle. But the movie up-ends Phuong's response to the Pyle of the novel, and implies that romantic love is indeed universal. The movie's last scene between Fowler and Phuong takes place in the dance hall where they first met. Fowler reads her a telegram from his British wife: she is granting him a divorce so that he can marry Phuong. Phuong walks away from Fowler, but pleading, he follows after her. She turns to him and echoes his last statement.

Phuong: What "we" have always wanted is in your hands?
What is that?

Fowler: To be together as we were, to have again what we had.

Phuong: What were "we" and what did we have? There was a man who gave to me something ... of himself. I've known a man who loved me, he said.... Have you ever loved me? Have you ever even lied to me that you loved me?

Fowler: What will become of you here in a place like this with... with people like these?

Phuong: Since when does the future concern you?...

Fowler: Now, it concerns me now.

Phuong: Now is too late for you.

This argument takes place in the middle of the same Chinese New Year celebration which marked the beginning of the movie. The emphasis on Chinese culture is significant because it underlines the way in which Mankiewicz simplifies and reduces Vietnamese culture. To Mankiewicz, all Asian cultures are one — there is no need to distinguish among them. Thus, Greene's considered observations on Phuong's Vietnamese conception of love and marriage are easily replaced by standard 1950s American concepts (the "right" concepts), in the same way that "good" Vietnamese, like General Thè and Diem, can accept American concepts of national democracy. "Bad" Vietnamese (like the Viet Minh) are equated with the Chinese Communists. The inference here is that traditional American values are good, and that traditional Asian values are corrupt.

Fowler's last words in both novel and movie are the same: "(H)ow I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry". But they imply something completely different in the film and in the novel.

In a 1969 interview, Greene said of his novels: "Even the early thrillers were political: *The Confidential Agent* deals with the Spanish Civil War. *The Quiet American* and *The Comediens* are political novels"¹¹ Nevertheless, *The Quiet American* was written by a devout Catholic, who framed those last words carefully to represent an atheist's longing for God.

One gets so tired of people saying that my novels are about the opposition of Good and Evil. They are not about Good and Evil, but about human beings. After Hitler and Vietnam, one would have thought good and evil in people was more understandable¹².

1950s America was incapable of getting the point, and it seems that this incomprehension has carried over into the 1980s. Reagan's February 1982 speech is only an extension of the logic which governed Mankiewicz's revision of Greene's *The Quiet American*.

Life imitates art in amazing ways. Thomas Morgan tells the story of a conversation which took place between him and Audie Murphy, the real-life World War 2 hero who starred in Mankiewicz's *Quiet American* years before. Morgan and Murphy got into a discussion about the antiwar protesters who demonstrated against American involvement in the war in Vietnam.

"Gee," (Murphy) said, "I'd hate their guts if they had any."

"I think we should get out of Vietnam," I said.

"No, you can't leave Vietnam unless you win the war."

"I don't think the Vietnamese want us over there."

"Listen, when you feel you are morally right, you just have to act and let people catch up later. That's the way it is in war... It'll take one million troops! But I say — we go in, we do the job. Then we get out! There's no other way"¹³.

¹ Gettleman, Marvin E., Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, H. Bruce Franklin, eds. *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove Press) 1985: xiii.

² During his college years "out of impishness," Greene had joined the Communist Party. He remained a member for six weeks. In 1926, at the age of 22, he converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism.

³ *Current Biography* (1969): 180-182.

⁴ The character of Alden Pyle was obviously modeled on the American CIA officer, Colonel Edward G. Lansdale. In 1954 Lansdale worked with the CIA to establish Ngo Dinh Diem's power base; he used various methods to accomplish his ends, including "dirty tricks". He is also known to have bribed several of the leaders of the Cao Dal and Hoa Hao to rally to Diem, paying them with CIA funds. (Karnow, Stanley, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking) 1983: 222.)

⁵ The movie was a box-office flop, but is still frequently shown on American television.

⁶ Geis: 267-269.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 268.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 269.

⁹ Steinberg, Cobbett. *Reel Facts: Movie Book of Records* (New York: Vintage) 1982: 22.

¹⁰ Geist: 196.

¹¹ Phillips, Gene D. "Graham Greene: On the Screen," *Catholic World* 209 (August 1969): 218-221.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Morgan, Thomas B. "The War Hero," *Esquire* 100 (December 1983): 597-604.