REFLECTIONS

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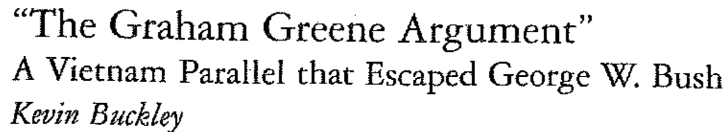

"The Graham Greene Argument"

A Vietnam Parallel that Escaped George W. Bush

Kevin Buckley

In a speech this August to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, President George W. Bush boasted of success in Iraq and invoked memories of Vietnam to attack his critics and justify his decisions. He recalled that the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina led fatefully to the horrors of the re-education camps, the fleeing boat people, and the Cambodian genocide. But most curious was his reference to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American,* which seemed to miss the point of the 1955 novel and what it uncannily foretold.

The reference resonated with me not only because I wrote about Vietnam for *Newsweek,* but also because I virtually relived some of the episodes that Greene described and encountered the inheritors of the characters he conjured. Mr. Bush, one may venture, spoke more truly than he or his writers might have suspected.

But first, I suggest reading carefully the "Graham Greene Argument" as put forward in the official White House transcript:

> Finally, there's Vietnam. This is a complex and painful subject for many Americans. The tragedy of Vietnam is too large to be contained in one speech. So I'm going to limit myself to one argument that has particular significance today. Then as now, people argued the real problem was America's presence and that if we would just withdraw, the killing would end.
>
> The argument that America's presence in Indochina was dangerous had a long pedigree. In 1955, long before the United States had entered the war, Graham Greene wrote a novel called *The Quiet American.* It was set in Saigon, and the main character was a young government agent named Alden Pyle. He was a symbol of American purpose and patriotism—and dangerous naïveté. Another character describes Alden this way: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused."
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> After American entered the Vietnam War, the Graham Greene argument gathered some steam. As a matter of fact, many argued that if we pulled out there would be no consequences for the Vietnamese people.

For the record, the United States entered the war in Vietnam before 1955, and not afterward, as Bush asserted. Indeed, by the early 1950s, the time in which *The Quiet American* is set, the United States was already underwriting close to 80 percent of the French cost of the war. The *New York Times* correspondent Neil Sheehan described the enormity of that often forgotten conflict in *A Bright and Shining Lie* (1988): "A quarter of a million to a million Indochinese civilians perished during [France's] nine years; 200,000 to 300,000 Viet Minh died in the fighting, taking 95,000 French

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colonial troops—Vietnamese, French, Algerians, Moroccans, Senegalese, Germans, and other Foreign Legionaries from sundry Eastern European lands, Cambodians and Laotians—with them.... American statesmen did not recognize their responsibility. Their ability to blame whatever went wrong on the French left them unfeeling of the moral burden they carried."

In *The Quiet American*, just as it was in the non-fiction world of the time, it was clear that the French were losing the war to maintain colonial control. It was also clear that various other trespassers, to say nothing of governments, had other futures in mind for Vietnam. Enter Alden Pyle. Bush refers to him as just plain "Alden," and seems to regard the assessment of Pyle that he quotes—"I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused"—as a compliment.

Those words were spoken by Thomas Fowler, the narrator-hero, who in essential respects was the moral opposite of Alden Pyle. Yet Fowler is probably the best spokesman for "the Graham Greene Argument," whatever it is exactly that Bush means by the term.

After the president's speech, I reread *The Quiet American* for the first time in many years. I recommend the experience. Whatever his reason for referring to Alden Pyle in support for his course in Iraq, his choice of a literary hero provides a revealing if inadvertent window into the president's character.

Alden Pyle, In Full

In the novel, Alden Pyle is a newcomer to the U.S. legation, attached to the economic aid mission, with, as a colleague says, "special duties." He soon collides with Thomas Fowler, a British newspaper correspondent with a taste for opium, and a ruined marriage back home. Pyle tries to appropriate Phuong, Fowler's Vietnamese girlfriend, and the two fight over her and clash in their political views.

Greene visited Indochina often during the French war and the political climate of the time is part of the story's texture. This was just a few years after Mao Zedong consolidated control of China. Pyle is depicted as a fervent believer in a "Third Force," a dreamy political ideology that he hopes will defeat both the French and the Communist Viet Minh. He and General The, the commander of a "Third Force" militia, whom Pyle covertly finances, hatch a plot to advance the prospects of the Third Force involving the use of concealed explosives. Their intended target is a military parade, but thanks to Pyle's incompetence, the blast kills hundreds of innocent civilians in downtown Saigon. Fowler realizes that Pyle is the culprit, and Pyle himself ends up dead not long afterwards. Did Fowler share culpability for Pyle's death? Read the book.

The Quiet American proved sadly prophetic. Pyle's ideological descendants abounded in Vietnam when I reported on the war for *Newsweek* from 1968 to 1972. And there are obvious parallels between Alden Pyle and George W. Bush.

Much like Bush's debt to various neoconservative mentors, Pyle owed much to York Harding, an important, off-stage character in the story. Harding is an intellectual journalist who has recently published a book titled *The Advance of Red China*. ("It's a very profound book," Pyle tells Fowler.) For Pyle, Harding has the answer to what ails Vietnam, but Fowler has a distinctly different view that illuminates "the Graham Greene Argument."

As Fowler sees it, Harding is "a superior sort of journalist—they call them diplomatic correspondents. 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. Harding had been here once for a week on his way from Bangkok to Tokyo. Pyle made the mistake of putting his idea into practice. Harding wrote about a Third Force. Pyle formed one—a shoddy little bandit with two thousand men and a couple of tame tigers. He got mixed up."

Fowler tries to warn Pyle about the hazards he faces, and tells the young American, "We are the old colonial peoples, Pyle, but we've learnt a bit of reality, we've learned not to play with matches. This Third Force—it comes out of a book, that's all. General The's only a bandit with a few thousand men; he's not national democracy."

After Pyle's death, Fowler says "Perhaps I should have seen that fanatic gleam, the quick response to a phrase, the magic sound of figures: Fifth column, Third Force, Seventh Day. I might have saved all of us a lot of trouble, even Pyle, if I had realized the direction of that indefatigable young brain." Fowler tells a U.S. Legation official: "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. A Red menace, a soldier of democracy...he was determined—I learnt that very soon—to do good, not to any individual person but to a country, a continent, a world. Well, he was in his element now with the whole universe to improve."

The Graham Greene Argument evidently constitutes the opposite of what might be called the "Alden Pyle Argument."

Shades of Greene in Saigon

Reading *The Quiet American* in Saigon, in the spring of 1968, in the aftermath of the Tet offensive, was for me, revelatory. Thirteen years after its publication, its prophecies of violence had been grotesquely fulfilled. The Tet attacks eroded General William Westmoreland's credibility and mocked his constant assurances of progress. They also made it clear that, short of a massive escalation, with no guarantee of success, there was not to be a military solution to the problems in Vietnam. Or so it seemed.

Parts of Saigon were then exactly as Greene had described them. I often heard arguments about where his apartment had been, and discovered that canny Saigon real estate brokers charged a bit more for places if they could convince newcomers that Graham Greene had once slept there.

Did Greene have a model for Alden Pyle? It was a staple of Saigon conversation for someone to assert that some diplomat or another was really the model. In the more rational conversations, it was generally felt that Greene did not copy anyone, but created Alden Pyle, and all the characters in the book, from his experience in their world.

Nevertheless, it had already become a legend that the model for Alden Pyle was Edward G. Lansdale, the California advertising executive who became the legendary patron saint of "win-their-hearts-and-minds" warfare. He was in Saigon in 1968, and was still revered as the man who crushed a Communist rebellion in the Philippines in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and who pulled off a "miracle," (the ubiquitous press cliché) in Saigon between 1954 and 1956, when it appeared that Ho Chi Minh was about to gain control of all of Vietnam. Saying that Lansdale inspired Alden Pyle, however, is to reverse the relationship. It's much more plausible, I think, to view the fictional Pyle as a blueprint, or a prophecy, of Lansdale.

Lansdale arrived in Saigon on June 1, 1954. That night, the Viet Minh blew up a French ammunition dump at Tan Son Nhut airport, to celebrate their May 7 victory over French-commanded forces at Dien Bien Phu, on May 7. As the detonations shook Saigon, it certainly appeared that Ho Chi Minh had won the war. The famous "Domino Theory" was about to be tested. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles were alarmed. So was Lansdale. They all would have taken Pyle's side, when he says to Fowler "If Indo-China goes...."

But Fowler interrupts: "I know the record. Siam goes. Malaya goes. Indonesia

goes. What does 'go' mean?" He mockingly elaborates, "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?"

For his part, Lansdale believed in the idea of town hall democracy. In her landmark analysis, *Fire in the Lake* (1972), Frances FitzGerald writes of Lansdale, "With all his expertise in black propaganda and every other form of unconventional warfare, Lansdale had an artless sincerity. He had faith in his own good motives.... He was...a man who believed that Communism in Asia would crumble before men of goodwill with some concern for 'the little guy' and the proper counterinsurgency skills." Lansdale himself put it this way: "The Communists strive to split the people away from the government and gain control over a decisive number of the population. The sure defense against this strategy is to have the citizenry and the government so closely bound together that they are unsplittable."

Lansdale took his theories to Saigon in ways that *The Quiet American* predicted; his authority was based on a simple directive from John Foster Dulles: "Do what you did in the Philippines." His arrival coincided with the fateful 1954 Geneva Conference, whose tone was defined when Dulles refused to shake hands with China's foreign minister, Chou En Lai. The conventional belief was that once Ho Chi Minh had consolidated his control of the northern portions of the country, he would readily extend his control to the south. But the conference turned out to be a setback for Ho, and good news for Lansdale. It created a "provisional military demarcation line" at the seventeenth parallel, and the French agreed to supervise an election in July 1956 in which Vietnamese voters could determine their status. Eisenhower himself acknowledged that Ho was likely to obtain at least 80 percent of the vote.

Lansdale set about derailing the Geneva formula by reshaping Vietnam below the seventeenth parallel as a permanent new country, not a transitional entity that would vanish with the 1956 nationwide election. In effect, Geneva gave Lansdale an opportunity to create a whole new domino from the chaos in the south, and "stand it up," to borrow a twenty-first century idiom.

This strategy required a staunch anti-Communist who was also free from pro-French taint. The choice fell on Ngo Dinh Diem who, as Neal Sheehan writes, was "more mandarin than the mandarins of old had ever been."

The New Domino

In the summer of 1954, Lansdale masterminded Operation Exodus, which moved nearly a million Vietnamese from the north to the south. They were mostly Catholics, or others closely identified with the French. In the spring of 1955, with Lansdale's coaching, Diem crushed the sects and private militias that had been fighting the Viet Minh under French sponsorship. In July 1955, Diem officially repudiated the promised elections, and in 1956 gave the domino a name—the Republic of Vietnam.

Writing in *The New Republic* (May 16, 1955), Graham Greene described Diem: "Separated from the people by cardinals and police cars with wailing sirens and foreign advisers droning of global strategy...sitting with his blank brown gaze, incorruptible, obstinate, ill-advised, going to his weekly confession, bolstered up by his belief that God is always on the Catholic side, waiting for a miracle." As Lansdale guided and supported Diem, different dreams danced in each man's head. For Lansdale, it was the spirit of 1776. Diem's visions reached farther back, to the tenth century, when there was a short-lived, Ngo dynasty. He hoped to restore it.

Diem played well in Washington and in the U.S. press. *The Saturday Evening Post* called the new republic "the Bright Spot in Asia," explaining, "Two years ago at Geneva, South Vietnam was virtually sold

down the river to the Communists. Today, the spunky little Asian country is back on its own feet, thanks to a 'mandarin in a sharkskin suit who's upsetting the Red timetable.'"

Lansdale went home in 1956 and Diem continued a reign of corruption and oppression that turned the Viet Minh into the Viet Cong. Nevertheless, he remained popular in Washington circles. In 1961, Vice President Lyndon Johnson called him "the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia." "Sink or Swim With Ngo Dinh Diem" remained U.S. policy into the 1960s, even as reporters such as Homer Bigart, Neil Sheehan, and David Halberstam began to document the extent of his regime's failures. In 1963, with the Viet Cong ascendant and with Diem's sister-in-law, the notorious Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, uttering tasteless remarks about Buddhist monks "barbecuing" themselves, the Kennedy administration connived in a coup, and Vietnam's putative Churchill was killed.

In 1965, Lansdale returned to Vietnam, where he remained until his retirement in 1968. In government circles, especially in Vietnam, he was still regarded as a genius, a master of secret warfare and counter-insurgency. No one talked about Diem anymore. In 1965 and thereafter, Lansdale's job was to help reform the unsteady Vietnamese government and also devise a nationwide "pacification" program intended to win hearts and minds. General William Westmoreland's firepower and the diplomacy of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., and his successor, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, were to carry out the plan.

Lansdale assembled a talented team of believers (including a subsequent apostate, Daniel Ellsberg), who thought that the war could be won, if only it was fought the smart way. They did bring some insights and were helpful in solving a variety of specific problems, but lacked bureaucratic clout and were on the margins of the war. More and more troops poured in, on both sides, and President Johnson boasted about hanging a coonskin on the wall.

Lansdale's advertising agency experience was evident once again, along with continuing echoes of Alden Pyle's playbook. One team member, for example, composed folk songs in the Vietnamese style that were sarcastic and satirical about the Viet Cong. He wanted to train guitar-playing, anti-Viet Cong troubadours to travel the country and draw crowds with their music. The folk-singers would focus on markets, bus stations, and street corners, and sway popular opinion against the Viet Cong. Another plan was to issue a stamp with the flags of the Saigon government and the "Free World Forces" (Thailand, Korea, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand) that also had troops in Vietnam.

An acolyte told me that Lansdale had conducted a sort of tutorial in counter-insurgency warfare. Suppose, Lansdale said to my friend and a few others, you find a rice cache in enemy territory. What do you do with it? Lansdale asked. Burn it? That was the consensus, in order to deny the food to the enemy. Perhaps, said Lansdale, but what he did with great effect in quelling insurgents in the Philippines, he continued, was to lace the rice with finely ground bite-size shards of glass and let the enemy eat the rice. That same evening, Lansdale recalled that when he was a boy he was the first in his neighborhood to think of putting rocks inside snowballs. Someone else on the team was managing a project in which he bribed fashionable Saigon astrologers and fortune tellers to tell their powerful clients whatever it was that was deemed useful for the counter-insurgency campaign of the moment.

Alden Pyle, Updated

I became friendly with a member of Lansdale's team—let's call him Chuck—whose political certainties and messianic inclinations reminded me of Alden Pyle, with an updated and modified style. Chuck was just as secretive, and loved intrigue, but he was

more curious, and knew the Saigon scene and personalities as Pyle never did. I can't remember what brought Chuck to Vietnam, right after college, but I think he worked for community development aid organizations for several years before joining Lansdale's team.

Along the way he learned excellent Vietnamese, and made many friends among students and other young people who wanted the United States out of Vietnam, but hoped to avoid communism. Unlike Pyle, Chuck kept learning. But, like Pyle, he sometimes seemed to lack a sense of proportion, if not reality, especially when his zeal about his own updated version of a Third Force came to the fore.

When it was urgent (in Chuck's view) to talk, he preferred meeting in the middle of the night, at Lansdale team headquarters in the villa on Cong Ly. My phone at the Continental Hotel would ring, and Chuck would say "20 minutes." Right on time, a sedan would pull up in front of the hotel, a rear door would open, I would hop in, and say hello to Chuck and his heavily armed, silent Nung driver. The car was always fiercely air-conditioned and choking with cigarette smoke, with automatic weapons on the seat and floor. We passed through the Saigon streets, empty except for MP jeeps, the license plates on the sedan proclaiming exemption from the curfew. Safely back at the team headquarters villa, we could discuss the passing scene without fear of eavesdropping, which Chuck feared in restaurants and the world at large.

Like Pyle (and so many other people in Vietnam) Chuck knew how to win the war. His magic bullet could be found in an effort he masterminded in a sprawling stretch of Saigon called District 8. "District 8" was shorthand in the spring of 1968 for an extraordinary victory in the hearts-and-minds war. With the buildup of the war, thousands of refugees from bombed out villages in the countryside had streamed into the already crowded district, living in makeshift shacks, with no services, plenty of chaos, and no hope.

With Chuck's encouragement and tutelage, and his access to funds in Lansdale's budget, the place was transformed. Vietnamese community leaders—generally young men and women who were anti-Communist and who also opposed the massive violence that had come to characterize the American war—built schools, nurseries, and row after row of small, neat houses. They developed small boat-building businesses and a co-op slaughterhouse. Working together, the Vietnamese organizers, the refugees, Chuck, and some other Americans created a new and thriving community.

American officials called District 8 "nation-building in action," and made it a must-see for visiting dignitaries. The embassy made a film about what community development techniques and U.S.-Vietnamese cooperation could accomplish. District 8 was a model for what could be done anywhere in Vietnam. Chuck was proud of the place and so were his young Vietnamese friends whom I met. In the post-Tet period, District 8 took on even more luster. It had survived with relatively little damage. If U.S. troops withdrew, but massive American financial and advisory aid continued, District 8 could be the nucleus for a post-war...Third Force: not Communist, and not shielded by U.S. firepower.

Like Pyle, Chuck disapproved of the behavior of some Americans. For Pyle, it was their fondness for "The House of Five Hundred Girls," a raucous brothel. For Chuck, it was politically uncouth behavior. Once, a group of Foreign Service officers newly arrived in Saigon went to dinner at a French-Corsican restaurant, with Vietnamese waiters in red sashes. The newcomers had all studied Vietnamese back in Washington and now insisted on asking menu questions and ordering their meals entirely in Vietnamese, even though the waiters all spoke at least menu English, and probably French. It was a slow process, and the new arrivals became

even more exasperated when the waiters delivered a variety of not easily identified dishes. The freshly minted Vietnamese-speaking diplomats complained, in Vietnamese and English, that they did not get what they had ordered. "Oh, but you did," the waiters said. Chuck cringed at such boorishness (and secretly applauded the waiters).

The Future of District 8

In the wake of the Tet offensive, there were more shocks. On March 31, 1968, President Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection. He promised a bombing halt and talked of negotiations. In America, on April 4, the Rev. Martin Luther King was murdered in Memphis, precipitating riots in major cities.

And, on Sunday morning, May 5, the Viet Cong struck Saigon again in the "mini-Tet" offensive. Fighting spread towards District 8, near the Y Bridge, an approach to downtown Saigon. South Vietnamese Rangers teamed with Saigon police and armored units of the U.S. Ninth Infantry Division to block the Viet Cong advance. U.S. helicopter gun-ships and Phantom jets bearing napalm assaulted District 8 for five days. One could watch the air strikes from the roof of a nearby building, as many reporters did.

When possible, District 8 residents fled. I can still see the bloody sandals many left behind on the Y Bridge as they ran for safety. By the time District 8 was "secure," close to 8,000 houses had been destroyed, and at least 100 civilians were killed. Close to 40,000 people, or a quarter of the district's 161,000 residents were left homeless.

Chuck and I walked through the wreckage. It was the bitterness of the survivors that most distressed him. Previously, the district's inhabitants had blamed the Viet Cong for whatever destruction they endured. This time they blamed U.S. air strikes and tanks. Poking around a ruined school, with its smashed typewriters and lab equipment, we heard about GIs on tanks who had heard gunfire and assumed they were targets. The gunfire was in fact a salute at a policeman's funeral nearly a mile away. But the Vietnamese survivors told us that U.S. forces opened fire and killed 13 civilians.

"Shattered Symbol" was the headline on my story about District 8 in *Newsweek*. The story irritated Westmoreland and, at an embassy meeting, he glared angrily at Lansdale. For his part, Lansdale warned that what happened to District 8 was no way to win a war. Chuck said that Lansdale had won a bureaucratic point. There would be a new set of rules regarding air strikes in densely populated urban areas. Henceforth, permission from the highest levels would be required. So, Chuck told me, the *Newsweek* story might actually save lives down the road. We all had to keep trying.

Wandering Into a Novel

Shortly afterwards, Chuck helped me on a reporting trip in Tay Ninh, where I felt I had wandered into a sort of "Twilight Zone" version of *The Quiet American*, and where I learned more about the spiritual descendants of Alden Pyle. Tay Ninh was, and is, the center of Cao Daiism, an exotic combination of occult practices and séances, with elements of Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and Confucianism. Its pantheon of saints includes Winston Churchill, Victor Hugo, Sun Yat-sen, and Joan of Arc—and the cathedral is famous for its huge "Eye of God."

Tay Ninh, some 65 miles northwest of Saigon, is also synonymous with Nui Ba Den, or Black Virgin Mountain, a brooding hill outside of town. In the early 1950s, when Pyle and Fowler were there, and when the Cao Dai (then numbering close to 2 million people, with an army of nearly 20,000) were the regional overlords, it was Pyle's friend General The, the leader of the Third Force, who owned the mountain. "Under the bleak vertical sunlight I saw

Pyle; he was trying in vain to make his Buick start," Fowler said. They left the Buick in Tay Ninh and set off for Saigon in Fowler's car.

In June 1968, U.S. Special Forces occupied the top of the mountain, and the Viet Cong inhabited the sides. I hitched a ride from the airport into town, vividly aware that Greene—and Pyle and Fowler—had all traveled the same road. In that mood, in the back of a fast-moving open truck and with no way to stop, I thought I saw Pyle's Buick! Pyle's Buick? It was certainly an early 1950s Buick, and it was up on blocks, down an alley. It was red.

The temple was exactly as Greene had described it: "Saint Victor Hugo, Christ and Buddha looking down from the roof of the Cathedral on a Walt Disney fantasia of the East, dragons and snakes in Technicolor." In the novel, Fowler has a conversation with the Cao Dai pope's deputy; I hoped for something of the same. Cao Dai notables were reluctant to talk to reporters, but I had a secret weapon. Thanks to Chuck, I was carrying invitations for the two Cao Dai "popes"—(as I understood the somewhat ambiguous situation)—to Lansdale's farewell party in Saigon, some two weeks away.

I found someone in the temple who seemed helpful, explained my errand, and promptly got an audience with two elderly men in white robes. I made it clear that I had no official association with Lansdale. I'm sure they thought I was lying. They were suspicious and cagey.

To be sure, mentioning Lansdale could be awkward. In the early 1950s, when Pyle and Fowler were there, the Cao Dai, like the other sects, were fighting the Viet Minh successfully on behalf of the French, in return for arms for their private army, and various subsidies. But all that changed between 1954 and 1956, when Diem and Lansdale made destroying their power one of his first orders of business. The pope of the time had to seek refuge in Cambodia. Lansdale was applying his theory of the Philippines, and there could be no potential challenges to Diem's authority. As Neil Sheehan has written, "it would never have occurred to Lansdale that Diem was beginning his rule by eliminating the most effective opponents of the Communists in the South."

No doubt, I thought, Lansdale had tried to patch things up with the Cao Dai when he returned in 1965, but, maybe not. Or maybe he thought he had. In general, the Cao Dai tried to stay out of the way and survive in the violent years that had followed.

I told the Cao Dai that I was trying to write a "situationer" about Tay Ninh province. I asked a few questions, and got nowhere, especially when I attempted to ascertain if both men were popes, or was there just one pope? And what were their exact titles? They were tight-lipped. Fowler's description of his interview with the pope's deputy was still fresh in my mind. "I didn't expect to get anything out of him and I was right; it was a convention on both sides...."

I asked a few more questions and then one of the Vietnamese spoke very clearly. "In the Caodaist faith," he said, "all truths are reconciled and truth is love." It was a moment of intense pleasure, especially after glimpsing the old Buick. His words were the very same words the pope's deputy had spoken to Fowler.

The Cao Dai did not offer me lodging, and I bunked with a few U.S. advisers, who were happy to share what they had been seeing in Tay Ninh. One was an air force colonel in civilian clothes who was smart, friendly, and well informed. He said he was involved in various "psywar" operations; if we were playing charades, you would have shouted "spook" as soon as he appeared. But he was good company, optimistic, and eager to say that he saw plenty of progress.

Another was a Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) advisor, a less polished fellow than the colonel. He commanded Vietnamese and Khmer mercenaries on raids

against villages that were home to the "Viet Cong infrastructure," and specialized in kidnappings and close-up, send-a-message assassinations, usually at night. He laughed often, at odd moments in the conversation, and did not seem to particularly like the colonel. He too saw plenty of progress. Both men worked under the umbrella of the pacification program—Lansdale's invention—the war for Vietnamese hearts and minds.

I told them about my Cao Dai audience, and the wonderfully eerie intimations of Graham Greene's presence. Neither had read *The Quiet American*, and I promised to send the colonel a copy, saying I thought the book was prophetic. At one point in our conversations, a B-52 hit a target in the jungle towards Cambodia, and we felt its rippling rumble. It prompted the colonel to say he was one of the air force officers who early on saw the usefulness, "the applicability," of the huge eight-engine bombers, even in a guerrilla war. He said he and his colleagues had, in effect, brought the B-52s to Vietnam. Whatever happened in Tay Ninh, he had made that contribution to the war.

Later that day, while checking my notes and listening to music on the armed forces broadcast, an announcer broke in to say that Robert F. Kennedy had died from his wounds. I shouted the news to the colonel, who was stricken. He admired Bobby Kennedy, as so many people in Vietnam then did. Then he said, "There's too much violence on American television." "Roger that," was all I could think to add.

The Illusory Parallel

Given the vehemence of White House denials of any resemblance between Vietnam and Iraq, Bush's linking of the two conflicts in his August speech was as notable as his admiration for Alden Pyle. In *Fiasco*, a 2006 book about the Iraq war, for example, Thomas E. Ricks recounts a 2003 meeting between Gary Anderson, a retired Marine Corps colonel and L. Paul Bremer, Bush's proconsul in Baghdad. Anderson, like others, detected the beginnings of the insurgency, but official doctrine at that time was that there was no insurgency. Anderson had gone to Baghdad, at the direction of Paul Wolfowitz, to brief Bremer about the danger and recommended that Bremer strangle the insurgency while it was still in its infancy. He mentioned that Bremer might consider replicating the village militia programs that, he claimed, had worked in Vietnam: "'Vietnam?' Bremer exploded. '*Vietnam*! I don't want to talk about Vietnam. This is not Vietnam. This is Iraq.'"

In President Bush's telling, everything was fine in Vietnam until the U.S. withdrew. Most of his references in the August speech concerned events that took place when the war was over. He seemed oblivious to everything that happened before "withdrawal," as if the bungling that characterized the management of the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1975 had no connection to its sequel.

He warned of similarly dreadful consequences in Iraq if his critics were to have their way. He made no mention of the calamities his Iraq policy has already caused, notably a mushrooming refugee crisis, a specter of the future. I thought Alden Pyle would have approved of the speech—avoiding accountability for consequences was also his style.

Bush claimed his policies were producing progress. "Our troops are seeing this progress that is being made on the ground. And as they take the initiative from the enemy, they have a question: Will their elected leaders in Washington pull the rug out from under them just as they're gaining momentum and changing the dynamic on the ground in Iraq? Here my answer is clear: We'll support our troops, we'll support our commanders, and we will give them everything they need to succeed." (Applause).

I felt another ghost drift from the pages of *The Quiet American*. It was the ghost of "who lost China?" the slogan used to discredit State Department officials and others

who dared acknowledge the reality that Mao Zedong had triumphed in China.

Whatever happens after he leaves office, Bush is likely to assume no responsibility for Iraq's future. Just as the long Vietnam war had no connection with the boat people, re-education camps, and killing fields he cited, what the Bush administration has done in Iraq is "progress" that will be ruined by someone pulling the rug out from under the troops.

The Innocence of Ignorance

I combed through *The Quiet American* again, and Pyle's personality became more and more detailed. Fowler observes, "[Pyle] was as incapable of imagining pain or danger to himself as he was incapable of conceiving the pain he might cause others.... Yet he was sincere in his way: it was coincidence that the sacrifices were all paid by others...."

The most dramatic encounter between Pyle and Fowler takes place at the scene of the bomb explosion which Pyle has abetted. Fowler says: "A woman sat on the ground with what was left of her baby in her lap; with a kind of modesty she had covered it with her straw peasant hat. She was still and silent, and what struck me most in the square was the silence.... The legless torso at the edge of the garden still twitched, like a chicken which has lost its head.... 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. 'Haven't you ever seen it before?'... He was seeing a real war for the first time.... 'You've got the Third Force and National Democracy all over your right shoe.'" Fowler then says of Pyle: "He looked white and beaten and ready to faint, and I thought, 'What's the good? He'll always be innocent, you can't blame the innocent, they are always guiltless. All you can do is control them, or eliminate them. Innocence is a kind of insanity.... He was impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance.'"

Later, Pyle composes himself, and, referring to the civilians killed by his blundering, he tells Fowler "They were only war casualties. It was a pity, but you can't always hit your target. Anyway they died in the right cause.... In a way you could say they died for democracy."

CASUALTIES

Then I had a final, mitigating thought about Alden Pyle. You can say this for him: at least *he* went to Vietnam. ●

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