

Twenty
Greene
Malaya & Vietnam, 1950–1955

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THERE IS A REMARKABLE PASSAGE early in *The Quiet American* in which Fowler gives Alden Pyle, a callow American ostensibly working for the Economic Aid Mission in Saigon but really an operative of the CIA, the lowdown on the war. It's a spiel Fowler has delivered before and he feels like "a record always turned on for the benefit of newcomers." Fowler, though, knows that what he tells Pyle is just "arid bones of background," and that the American would need experience to flesh it out:

He would have to learn for himself the real background that held you as a smell does: the gold of the rice fields under a flat late sun: the fishers' fragile cranes hovering over the fields like mosquitoes: the cups of tea on an old abbot's platform, with his bed and his commercial calendars, his buckets and broken cups and the junk of a lifetime washed up around his chair: the mollusc hats of the girls repairing the road where a mine had burst: the gold and the young green and the bright dresses of the south, and in the north the deep browns and the black clothes and the circle of enemy mountains and the drone of planes.

The understated lyricism of the passage captures something of Fowler's—and Greene's—infatuation with the country, with its light and color, but in each clause the aesthetic is entwined with menace: the sun is setting, the mosquitoes hover, the cups are broken, the mine has burst, and the planes drone overhead. Vietnam provoked in Greene a genuine response even as he embraced the more sordid clichés of Orientalist fantasy in the brothels and opium dens of Cholon. But that genuine response was conditioned by the "exhilaration that a measure of danger brings to the visitor with a return ticket." He loved the cafes on the Rue Catinat because of the grenade netting, not despite it.

Greene arrived in Saigon for the first time on January 25, 1951. The previous month Jean de Lattre de Tassigny had been appointed Commander in Chief of the French Expeditionary Corps and High Commissioner for Indochina. It was an appointment that changed the course of the war. De Lattre was vain, bad-tempered, and a bully, yet he was a brilliant military leader who had served with distinction in both world wars. The novelist was impressed by the general—"a terrific soldier"—and when Greene arrived, De Lattre hosted him as an honored guest in Hanoi, where he presented him with "a shoulder flash of the First French Army, which he commanded at the fall of Strasbourg."

The French and their Vietnamese allies desperately needed a charismatic leader to inspire their deflated troops. The enemy had just such a figure in Ho Chi Minh, who commanded profound

loyalty from his followers. In 1941, Ho had formed the Viet Minh, a united front among nationalist independence movements. His credentials as leader were impeccable: he had campaigned for Vietnamese independence since before the Great War and spent thirty years abroad seeking to organize a political movement strong enough to force out the colonial French. While living in Paris in 1921, he had mixed in left-wing circles and became a communist. He traveled to the Soviet Union, where he got frostbite while waiting in line to pay his respect to Lenin's corpse. Having spent much of the 1930s eluding the French security services, he finally returned to Vietnam during the Second World War. Ho fought alongside the OSS against the Japanese believing that, with Roosevelt's stated commitment to postwar decolonization, the Americans would support Vietnamese independence, and he was dismayed when they failed to oppose the return of the French to Saigon after the Japanese were defeated. From Hanoi in the north, Ho declared Vietnamese independence, and the Indochina War began.

Unlike in Malaya, where there were deep divisions between the largely ethnic Chinese insurgents and the larger Malay population, the Vietnamese Communists offered a unifying nationalist narrative, their position strengthening by the day. The triumph of Mao's Communists in the Chinese Civil War meant Ho's forces could be supplied by their ally across the northern border. Their superior motivation and tactics resulted in a series of victories over the French Expeditionary Corps in the north of the country, with the French forced back to the Red River Delta, where they held on precariously to Hanoi. The war was unpopular in France, but withdrawal was not considered an option, so the decision was made to change strategy via the establishment of a Vietnamese army, an increased reliance on American materiel, and the appointment of De Lattre.

The urgent priority for De Lattre was to prevent the fall of Hanoi. Led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the forces of the Viet Minh staged a full-blooded assault on the Red River Delta in January 1951, just before Greene arrived in the country. The key battle was fought at Vinh Yen, northwest of Hanoi. De Lattre took personal command of the battle, flying into Vinh Yen on his spotter plane, and, drawing on all the resources he could muster, pulled off a renowned if bloody victory. What proved decisive was his deployment of the heaviest aerial bombardment of the whole war and, specifically, the use of American-supplied napalm. Some 6,000 Viet Minh troops were killed and 8,000 wounded. Giap attacked again, in March, on the coast and was again repelled by the French using napalm. A third assault came from the south, in the area around Phat Diem, in May, and this time Giap gambled too recklessly, with a further 9,000 Viet Minh killed and 1,000 captured. These losses, combined with the psychological damage inflicted by the horrific new weapon that dropped fire from the sky, forced Giap to return to guerrilla tactics.

Even before the victory at Vinh Yen, De Lattre knew that if the French were to avoid defeat, let alone win the war, they would need more help from the United States. To make the war more palatable to the Americans, the French framed it as a war of Cold War containment. De Lattre told one American journalist, Robert Shaplen, that he was there to save Vietnam "from Peking and Moscow" and warned that Tonkin (the colonial name for the Red River Delta region) was the "keystone of the defense of Southeast Asia." "If Tonkin falls," he said, "Siam falls with Burma, and Malaya is dangerously compromised. Without Tonkin the rest of Indochina is soon lost."²² This domino theory proved persuasive in Washington, not for the last time.

GREENE ARRIVED IN PHAT DIEM on a landing craft early on a December morning, having used the cover of night to creep up the river from Nam Dinh. The enemy had the town surrounded so instead of docking at the naval station, the craft pulled in by the marketplace, which was on fire. Disembarking, Greene was shocked by the destruction of a town he had visited on his first trip to Vietnam ten months earlier. He had been particularly attracted to Phat Diem because it was a staunchly Catholic enclave, run by Bishop Le Huu Tu, who commanded a two-thousand-strong private army. It even had its own cathedral. Back in January, Greene had persuaded himself that these men were all the more powerful for being soldiers of faith and that he “would have felt more confidence fighting in their ranks than in the ranks of the 1,000,000 armed Malay police.” On hearing reports of how valiantly the Catholic militia had fought in repelling the assault on Phat Diem in the spring, Greene had felt vindicated and told his brother he was dismayed not to have been there to see it. He had not anticipated, on his eventual return, to find the town in ruins. A regrouped Viet Minh was back on the front foot. They had infiltrated Phat Diem on the day of a religious festival, rising up in the night, striking at key targets, and wresting control of the city. The following day French forces had swept in to try to retake the city, dropping parachutists and managing to push the Viet Minh some six hundred yards out of the town.

De Lattre had helped Greene get into Phat Diem back in January, but now the general was ill disposed toward the bishop and his forces. While their anti-Communism was beyond doubt, they were also ardently nationalistic and considered the French colonial interlopers. De Lattre believed the bishop had deliberately withheld information from him about Viet Minh troop movements that had resulted in a number of ambushes and defeats for his men. In one of these attacks his son, Bernard, who was leading a platoon of Vietnamese troops, was killed.

When Greene had returned to the country in October he found the increasingly paranoid De Lattre far less welcoming. The Sûreté Fédérales, the French colonial police, had warned De Lattre that Greene was working for British intelligence, in league with Arthur Trevor-Wilson, the British consul in Saigon. It was an assumption with some grounding. The pair had been colleagues in Kim Philby’s Section V of MI6 during the war, and Trevor-Wilson continued to work for the service under diplomatic cover. And as both Englishmen were Catholics and had traveled to Phat Diem together back in January, De Lattre suspected they were intriguing with the bishop. As a result he had Trevor-Wilson kicked out of the country and got the police to follow Greene. In later years, Greene would make a joke out of it—imagine tailing a middle-aged novelist?—but it is most likely that he was still providing MI6 with information, even if only in an informal arrangement. De Lattre might have been wrong about the details, but he was right to regard Greene with suspicion.

Greene immediately went looking for frontline action in Phat Diem. He picked his way through the rubble-strewn streets (which reminded him of the London Blitz) and persuaded a group of French parachutists making their way to a village on the outskirts, in which the enemy were supposedly gathering for an attack, to take him on patrol. They snaked warily along in single file until they came to a canal that could be crossed only one at a time via a plank. Greene was initially confused as to why the soldiers were avoiding looking at the canal in front of them. He later shared his realization with Fowler in *The Quiet American*:

The canal was full of bodies: I am reminded now of an Irish stew containing too much meat. The bodies overlapped: one head, seal-grey, and anonymous as a convict with a

shaven scalp, stuck up out of the water like a buoy. There was no blood: I suppose it had flowed away a long time ago. I have no idea how many there were[.]

The plank at the crossing was too flimsy to take their weight, but a soldier found a punt and they were able to push their way through the bodies to the other side. They found the farm buildings where the enemy were supposed to be hiding abandoned, but then Greene heard two shots from the front of the patrol. In the novel, Fowler presumes they have been ambushed: "I awaited, with exhilaration, the permanent thing." But the shots had come from the French and no fire was returned. A mother and her child had broken cover and run, only to be gunned down:

They were very clearly dead: a small neat clot of blood on the woman's forehead, and the child might have been sleeping. He was about six years old and he lay like an embryo in the womb with his little bony knees drawn up. "Mal chance" the lieutenant said. He bent down and turned the child over. He was wearing a holy medal round his neck, and I said to myself, "The juju doesn't work." There was a gnawed piece of loaf under his body. I thought, "I hate war."

Fowler is not Greene, of course. For one thing, Greene did believe in the "juju" while Fowler is an atheist. But Greene did share with his creation a need to bear witness. As he did with the stabbed and beaten corpse of the Malayan policeman, or with those bodies floating in the canal, Greene forced his attention, and, later, that of his reader, onto the violence done to the body by these wars. To many of his readers, the conflicts of the Cold War were fought between unfamiliar belligerents at a great distance. It was too easy for their complicity in that violence to be understood only in the abstract.

The Quiet American, though, shows that one did not have to be on the other side of the world to fail to understand the suffering being created by these proxy wars. Pyle, the American agent, cannot see the literal consequences of violence even when they are right before his eyes; he does not see mutilated bodies, only intellectual abstractions and political puzzle pieces. He does not believe the French can preside over a unified Vietnam, because they are tainted by their colonial past while the nationalism espoused by the Communists is, he thinks, just a front for the influence of the Soviet Union and China. He argues that only a Third Force can save Vietnam and is secretly charged with finding the right candidate to lead such a force and then to supply them with what weapons they need.

This was no fictionalized premise; Greene knew that the concept of a Third Force was one circulating among American officials at the time. The French, this argument went, were only interested in perpetuating their own influence, which was why they propped up a weak and unpopular leader like Emperor Bao Dai. Without a strong nationalist leader in the south to rival Ho's popularity in the north, it was argued, there was no way to win the war. When visiting Ben Tre, southwest of Saigon, Greene stayed with one such American official, Leo Hochstetter, public affairs director of the Economic Aid Mission and a champion of the Third Force theory. It was, to Greene's mind, a strategy naive in conception and dangerous in execution, for there were bandits and mercenaries only too happy to tell the Americans what they wanted to hear in order to part them from their guns and money. A Third Force solution was a fantasy, not least because of its remote chances of gaining popular support, especially if it was obvious that it was backed by another Western power. In fact, to Greene's mind, by arming factions, whose motives they did not understand, the Americans actually threatened to complicate the conflict further and put

more innocent Vietnamese in the firing line. And perhaps what angered Greene the most was that Americans like Pyle had convinced themselves they were doing noble work.

AT 11 A.M. ON JANUARY 9, 1952, two car bombs exploded within moments of one another in the center of Saigon, one outside the City Hall, the other on the Place de Théâtre. The immediate aftermath of the latter explosion was captured in a photograph published in Life magazine. In the picture, the figure with his back to the viewer appears seated, propping himself up on his right arm; it is only on closer inspection that you see the pool of blood around him and realize his legs have been blown out from beneath him by the explosion. Cars, burning and smoking, clutter the foreground, while the tree-lined boulevard stretches into the background. It was an iconic image of the war: revolutionary violence framed by the colonial project that provoked it. Or so it seemed. Early reports claimed this attack was a brutal escalation in Viet Minh terror tactics, but it was soon claimed by General Thé, the leader of an independent band of fighters who opposed both the French occupiers and the Viet Minh. The previous June, Thé and 2,500 followers, who were part of the Caodaist religious sect, seized weapons and disappeared over the border into Cambodia, from where they launched their attacks (Caodaism was a monotheistic religion established in Vietnam in the 1920s that quickly attracted large numbers of believers).

Greene saw the photo and made these attacks the fulcrum of the novel he was writing. In *The Quiet American*, the fictional Pyle identifies the real-life Thé as the leader of a Third Force that could reclaim the nationalist agenda from Ho Chi Minh. As the novel unfolds, the reader discovers clues to Pyle's clandestine activities: when a diplomatic bag addressed to Pyle is accidentally opened it is found to contain plastic for explosives; in Thé's Cao Dao stronghold, Pyle becomes evasive when Fowler surprises him deep in discussion with an agent of the general. On the day of the explosion, Pyle warns his lover Phuong to avoid the square at a specific time. (Pyle thinks the plan is to kill French officers, whom he considers expendable, but the result is the horrific death of innocent Vietnamese civilians.)

Greene's belief that the Americans were culpable for the car bombs verged on conspiracy theory. He believed Americans had been warned to avoid the area of the explosion (in the novel Fowler overhears embassy workers saying they have been told to do just that). He heard one story of an American consul being arrested with explosives on the road to Thé's hideout and another of two American women found dead on a plantation in the Tay Ninh region, whose presence there was never explained. He was even suspicious of the photograph in Life magazine, suggesting that only somebody who had been tipped off could have been on the scene and able to capture the immediate aftermath of the blast.

There were a number of holes in Greene's theory. The photographer, for example, was no agency plant but simply an enterprising Vietnamese freelancer. Furthermore, what would be the point in trying to blame Ho Chi Minh for the attacks and squeeze propaganda value out of such a graphic and disturbing image if Thé was only too willing to publicly claim the attack as his own? It seemed insufficient evidence of an American conspiracy. Perhaps Greene knew information he could not disclose. British intelligence certainly believed there to be secret American support for Thé, and the French security services were apparently wary of attacking the rebel bandit because of his involvement with American elements. There is, though, no hard evidence of American complicity with Thé at this time.

WHEN GREENE LEFT VIETNAM IN MARCH 1952, the French were becoming increasingly dependent on American support. De Lattre had returned to Paris at the beginning of the year, dying shortly thereafter of cancer. Giap kept up the pressure with his guerrilla attacks, and by the end of the year the United States bore a third of the cost of the war. By early 1954, the Americans were responsible for up to 80 percent of the cost. Even with some five hundred thousand troops under French command, there seemed little hope of making any tangible gains; the best the French could hope for was to perpetuate an expensive stalemate. The war was becoming more and more unpopular in France, and the idea of a negotiated settlement, as had ended the Korean War, held wide appeal.

A bullish Dwight Eisenhower exhorted the French to keep fighting and even pondered direct intervention, but with the military still exhausted from the Korean War, there was little appetite for sending American troops into another Asian theater. The Chinese, with 250,000 troops stationed on its border with Vietnam as a precautionary measure, were also eager to avoid being sucked into another costly war, as they had been in Korea, and the Soviet Union was in the process of seeking more constructive relations with the West. Talks were scheduled in Geneva for May.

In an attempt to secure a stronger negotiating position, the French and the Viet Minh sought a convincing victory in the field. In the northwest, near the border with Laos, French forces sought to lure Giap into a large-scale confrontation at Dien Bien Phu. The French thought they had the superior firepower but Giap outwitted them, using a huge labor force of 250,000 to drag heavy artillery into the surrounding mountains. Using these powerful guns, the Viet Minh destroyed the French airstrip, denying them the ability to resupply. With the eyes of the world on them, the French struggled to withstand the siege. After fifty-five days of bombardment and a final massed assault, they surrendered. The French were left to negotiate a settlement with a weaker hand.

The Geneva Accords divided Vietnam in two along the Seventeenth Parallel, with the promise of elections that would unify the country in 1956. The hard-liners in the Viet Minh wanted greater concessions, but China warned their allies of the possibility of American intervention if they pushed harder. Ho Chi Minh was persuaded to play the long game; he would doubtless win any nationwide election if it were held. Realizing this, the Americans refused to sign the agreement, fearing that it simply delayed the fall of the country to Communism. Setting out to bolster South Vietnam, they finally found their Third Force leader in Ngo Dinh Diem, who, despite French concerns, was appointed prime minister by Emperor Bao Dai in June 1954. Diem was fervently opposed to Communism and colonialism, and despite his authoritarian methods and unabashed nepotism, the Americans helped him take control of the country. In 1955, he got rid of Bao Dai by transforming South Vietnam into a republic with himself as president. Diem brought the bandits, rebels, and religious sects into line, reorganized the army, and defeated the criminal gang that controlled Saigon (although this was far from the end of corruption in the city). When the French failed to convince the Americans to get rid of Diem, they withdrew their forces.

The French had lost their colonial war, but the American war on Communism in Vietnam was only just beginning. Having attained power, Diem had no intention of jeopardizing it by agreeing to the elections supposedly mandated by the Geneva Accords. Nor did his backers seem interested in acquiescence. Greene finished writing *The Quiet American* in June 1955 and it was published in the United States the following March. The publication of a novel that depicted American intervention in Vietnam as dangerously myopic at the very moment when the United States was becoming more heavily involved in the country was met with inevitable hostility.

Newsweek launched a preemptive strike in January, accusing Greene of being anti-American and motivated in his vendetta against the United States by his being denied a visa under the McCarran Act (for his brief membership in the Communist Party). *Newsweek* later followed up this review with an article about how *The Quiet American* had received glowing reviews in the Soviet Union, perhaps failing to grasp that their own hostility to the novel was a motivating factor in its popularity in official Communist circles. Offense was not taken exclusively by McCarthyites and hard-line anti-Communists. In *The New Yorker*, A. J. Liebling wrote a review that began bitchily dismissive and ended by lashing out at “Mr. Greene’s nasty little plastic bomb” of a book. “There is a difference, after all,” Liebling wrote, “between calling your over-successful off-shoot a silly ass and accusing him of murder.”

Greene might have been guilty of a certain amount of conspiratorial thinking, but American policy soon made his ideas flesh. A real-life Pyle emerged as a key player in Vietnam at the same time as the novel was published: Edward Lansdale, a former OSS officer, waged a large-scale secret campaign against North Vietnam and did as much as anyone to take the United States into war. Even before Diem was established as a leader sympathetic to U.S. interests, the CIA set up a special unit, the Saigon Military Mission, which was separate to their Saigon station, and was run by Lansdale. In direct violation of the Geneva Accords, the Mission sent secret squads into North Vietnam to conduct sabotage, to circulate propaganda, and to contaminate fuel supplies (many of these fighters were captured, some even defected). When Diem came to power, Lansdale was one of his closest advisors. So similar was Lansdale to Pyle that it was frequently assumed that Greene must have based his character on him. Like Pyle, Lansdale was a staunch believer in American exceptionalism and was willing to use clandestine methods to achieve his aims. Like Pyle, he even had a pet dog that followed him everywhere. Perhaps most uncanny was the fact that Lansdale at one stage even sought to cultivate General Thé as part of his plan to build a Third Force in Indochina.

As American involvement increased year by year, so the reputation of Greene’s novel grew. It was not just that it had so accurately diagnosed the problems the French faced in Indochina, but it was eerily prescient in the way it predicted United States involvement. To a generation of American reporters, following Fowler’s beat a decade later, the book was an essential item in their luggage. As David Halberstam later remembered, the correspondents sent out to cover the Vietnam War had whole chunks of *The Quiet American* committed to memory. “It was our Bible,” he said.