

The Quiet American: A haunting portrait of US-backed terror in 1950s Vietnam

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The Quiet American, directed by Phillip Noyce and currently screening in the US and Britain, is a thoughtful and haunting depiction of the bloody role played by US intelligence agents and their local operatives in the dying years of French colonial rule in Vietnam. Adapted from Graham Greene's celebrated 1955 novel, it is a timely reminder of how US-sponsored terrorism prepared the ground for America's military intervention in Vietnam.

Set in Saigon in 1952, as the Vietnamese national liberation forces are delivering major blows against the French colonial rulers, the movie unfolds within the framework of a complex love story and murder mystery. It opens with the discovery of a young US aid worker's body in the river. The American, Alden Pyle (Brendan Fraser), has been murdered. French colonial police contact Thomas Fowler (Michael Caine), a British correspondent for the *London Times*, to identify the body. Fowler is a hard-bitten, world-weary journalist and an opium addict who was a friend and later rival of Pyle.

The story moves into an extended flashback as Fowler recounts his first contact with Pyle several months earlier and the personal and political events that brought them together and transformed them into enemies.

The fresh-faced Pyle, who has just arrived in Saigon, befriends Fowler, asking the knowledgeable but cynical journalist for advice and information about the country. Fowler explains that he has "no opinion" on the unfolding war against French rule but is a passive observer. Pyle claims that America is not a colonial power, like the French and the British, but that it wants to bring democracy to Vietnam.

Soon after, Fowler introduces Pyle to Phuong (Do Thi Hai Yen), his Vietnamese live-in mistress. Pyle is mesmerised by the beautiful young girl. Meanwhile, Fowler receives a telegram from the *Times*, instructing him to return to London. Not wanting to leave Phuong or return to his failed marriage in Britain, he decides to travel north to the war zone and start filing stories to extend his stay in Vietnam.

Travelling with the French forces to Phat Diem, Fowler happens upon Pyle in this dangerous territory. Their strange encounter is forgotten after they discover a bloody massacre of local villagers. The French commander and Pyle claim the communist-led Vietminh (forerunners of the Viet Cong) must have committed the atrocity, but Fowler is unconvinced.

Later that night, Pyle confesses that he has fallen in love with Phuong and that he travelled north to tell Fowler face-to-face that he plans to ask her to marry him on his return to Saigon. Phuong rejects Pyle's proposal, but over the next weeks, under pressure from her ambitious sister who regards the American as a better catch, decides to

move in with Pyle.

The embittered journalist, who somehow hopes to stave off old age via his relationship with Phuong, begins to discover more about Pyle and other shadowy figures involved in the aid program. The young American is a member of the newly established Central Intelligence Agency, which is providing political and economic aid to General Thé, a local warlord, and other right-wing elements. This "Third Force", which is fighting the French and the Vietminh, is being cultivated by the US to take control of Vietnam and bolster US interests in Indo-China.

Fowler, who realises that he can no longer remain indifferent to these machinations, discovers that chemicals supplied through the US medical aid program can be used for explosives—a suspicion tragically confirmed when two car bombs are detonated in the middle of Saigon. The terrorist attack, which kills scores of innocent people and is witnessed by Fowler, is falsely attributed to the communists. Fowler—having been told by Hinh (Tzi Ma), his personal assistant and a communist sympathiser that "sooner or later one has to take sides if one is to remain human"—decides to confront Pyle.

Pyle attempts to justify the terror attack by declaring that the French are incapable of defeating the communists and in war "you have to use whatever tools you can". The blast, he continues, will generate US Congressional support in Vietnam for the "war against communism". Horrified by this response, Fowler decides to assist those plotting Pyle's death.

The Quiet American ends with the journalist renewing his relationship with Phuong. A series of *Times* reports written by Fowler are superimposed on the screen, tracing the final French defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the US military buildup to full-scale war under President John F. Kennedy in the mid-1960s.

Noyce's film has much to recommend it. The cast is strong with intelligent performances by Caine and Fraser. While Caine, now 69 years old, occasionally strains to bridge the five-decade age gap with Do Thi Hai Yen, this is not a serious problem. In fact Caine, who seems to have been born to play the jaded, slightly melancholic *Times* correspondent, puts in one of the best performances of his long career.

Nineteen-year-old Do Thi Hai Yen is excellent as Phuong, as are the rest of the Vietnamese actors. Phuong is clearly a symbol for the colonial exploitation of Vietnam. Her languid explanation to Pyle about the fate of Vietnamese girls—promised marriage by foreigners but left stranded, unable to either regain their place at home or to begin a new life in another country—is particularly moving.

Thankfully, Noyce seems to have held his cinematographer, the often-pretentious Christopher Doyle, in check. The resultant images are restrained but strikingly effective. They beautifully complement a

superb soundtrack.

The Quiet American is not a groundbreaking work, but Noyce's measured approach and his fidelity to the spirit of Greene's extraordinarily prescient story, give the movie an emotional and political power that will resonate with thoughtful audiences. Importantly, *The Quiet American* will encourage a new generation to reexamine the history of US intervention in Indo-China and begin to draw connections between the CIA-backed terrorists in Vietnam and the secret operations conducted by US forces and their allies over the past 40 years in Latin America, the Middle East and elsewhere.

As the Saigon bomb blast echoes through the cinema and Pyle explains that a "third force" is needed to "save Vietnam", one is reminded that it was not so long ago that the Reagan administration provided technical and financial support to figures such as Osama bin Laden, hailing them as "freedom fighters" in the war against the USSR in Afghanistan.

Political censorship and US spying on Greene

While *The Quiet American* is currently screening in Britain and has had a limited release in New York and Los Angeles to qualify for Academy Award nominations, the film would still be "in the vaults" if principal producer Miramax had had its way. Completed more than a year ago in mid-2001, Miramax executives decided to shelve the movie following the September 11 terrorist attack on the US.

Seizing on negative "audience test" responses after the World Trade Center attack, Miramax co-chairman Harvey Weinstein declared that Noyce's film could not be released because staff and friends had said it was "unpatriotic" and that "America has to be cohesive and band together". Noyce was told privately that his film was "as good as dead" and would never get a release.

After several months and some behind-the-scenes agitation by Caine and Noyce, with support from a few US film critics who demanded it be released, Miramax agreed to screen the movie at the Toronto Film Festival. Only after it was critically acclaimed at the festival did the US producer finally agree to give the film a limited US release.

While Noyce and Caine were eventually able to break through this outrageous act of political censorship, the difficulties they encountered is similar to the response to Greene's book when it was first released in the 1950s.

At that time Greene was denounced as "anti-American" by many leading US critics who deliberately distorted or ignored the story's unambiguous condemnation of US covert operations in Vietnam. A *New York Times* review in 1956 suggested it was full of "custom-made characters" and regretted the absence of an "experienced and intelligent anti-Communist" in the story.

Two years later, Joseph L. Mankiewicz directed a Hollywood movie of the book starring Michael Redgrave and former US war hero Audie Murphy. Mankiewicz twisted the story to present Pyle as an innocent but courageous fighter for democracy and dedicated his film to the US-backed South Vietnamese puppet regime of Ngo Dinh Diem.

Mankiewicz consulted the infamous US military counter-insurgency expert Edward G. Lansdale on the script and told the press that "anti-Americanism" and "Communist footsie-ism" was "loose in the world". Lansdale, who helped establish "third force" proxies in the Philippines and Vietnam in the 1940s and 50s and was a senior US advisor to Diem, was one of the models for Pyle in Greene's book.

Greene condemned Mankiewicz's movie as a "propaganda film for America" and defended his book, explaining that rather than his characters being contrived or "custom-made" there was "more direct rapportage in *The Quiet American* than in any other novel" he had

written. He described Mankiewicz's distortions as "treachery" and commented that the film appeared to have been "deliberately made to attack the book and the author".

One of Britain's most popular 20th century writers—a novelist, short-story writer, playwright, film critic and journalist—Greene continued to expose and condemn the involvement of the US in Vietnam during the 50s and 60s. He also supported various anti-imperialist movements, regularly denounced US-backed death squads in Latin America, and maintained friendly relations with a number of Latin American leaders, including Cuban President Fidel Castro, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, Chile's Salvador Allende and the Panamanian military populist General Omar Torrijos.

In a November 1964 letter to the London *Daily Telegraph* commenting on the torture of Viet-Cong prisoners by South Vietnamese troops, Greene wrote:

"The strange new feature about the photographs of torture appearing in the British and American Press, is that they have been taken with the approval of the torturers and are published over captions that contain no hint of condemnation. They might have come out of a book on insect life. 'The white ant takes certain measures against the red after a successful foray.'

"But these, after all, are not ants but men. The long, slow slide into barbarism of the western world seems to have quickened. For these photographs are of torturers belonging to an army which could not exist without American aid and counsel. Does this mean that the American authorities sanction torture as a means of interrogation?"

US intelligence regarded Greene as "dangerous". He was defined as a "communist sympathiser" and for a time barred entry to the US, despite the fact that he vetoed publication of his novels and short stories in the Soviet Union for many years in protest over the Stalinist political repression in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

According to documents obtained last week by Britain's *Guardian* newspaper under Freedom of Information, Greene was under constant surveillance by US intelligence agencies from the 1950s until his death in 1991. US officials, according to the newspaper, "went to extraordinary lengths" to spy on Greene, reading his mail when he was temporarily refused entry to the US, and gathering reports by US diplomats and other shadowy figures on his travels, particularly in Latin America, and international public appearances.

While Phillip Noyce and Michael Caine probably did not anticipate the opposition from Miramax, it is important that they campaigned for the release of *The Quiet American*. Hopefully their efforts and the movie itself will encourage filmmakers and writers to dramatise other stories the political establishment does not want told. This would be a fitting tribute to the spirit of Greene's book and his often-neglected comment that "the writer ought to be a bit of grit in the state machine".



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