

“All Propagated with the Best Intentions”: Greene, the U.S. and Indochina 1951-55

Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American* was written between 1952 and 1955.<sup>1</sup> He tells us this himself. Most of the action takes place in 1951, however, ending in early February 1952. Yet the years 1952-55 are also important for the novel. There are a number of anachronisms or, more precisely, prolepses in it, and these are indicative: the novel was obviously written with the degree of hindsight that only the years 1952-55 could have made possible. Whatever else it may be, then, *The Quiet American* is to some extent an anatomy of the political condition of Indochina, and even the geopolitical situation, in 1951. As such, it is composed with an exact knowledge of the direction that events would subsequently take in the next three years. We get the full measure of Greene’s novel only if we recognize that 1951 marked the beginning of a historical sequence that reached a significant point in 1954-55, and that the spectre of later events hangs over the novel’s account of earlier ones.

I have two themes, expressed in two nonce-terms: firstly, *The Quiet American* presents itself as an ‘epochal novel’; that is, Greene means it to announce the inception of a new historical epoch. So much is clear from his choice of epigraph from the first canto of *Don Juan*:

This is the patent age of new inventions,  
For killing bodies and for saving souls,  
All propagated with the best intentions.<sup>2</sup>

Important as questions of character, psychology, sexuality, responsibility, choice, religion and conscience may at some level be, *The Quiet American* is very aware of their precise implication in a determining historical, cultural and geopolitical moment. The corollary of this is a text in which novelistic realism is inseparable from a strain of political allegory.

My second theme is what I’m bold enough to call the ‘blank space’ of some of the best cold war narrative. This, I think, was a sober, mature and sophisticated political and aesthetic legacy, one which the present culture seems bent on disregarding, to its cost. At the climax of Le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, for example, it becomes clear that the West has preserved the monstrous, anti-Semitic, fascistic East German agent Mundt at the expense of the relatively decent and honourable East German Jew Fiedler: ‘Fiedler lost and Mundt won’, says Leamas. ‘London won—that’s the point. It was a foul, foul operation. But it’s paid off, and that’s the only rule’.<sup>3</sup> The ‘blank space’ appears at a moment that could be variously described as one in which means call ends into absolute and universal question, ideological opposites reverse into one another or implode, cold war politics reveals itself in the form of the Moebius strip, complicity and taint spread everywhere, all the insistences of justification or rectitude categorically break down. Le Carré, of course, repeatedly produced the blank space, as did other writers and film-makers in the Cold War period. In *The Quiet American*, Greene does it too. This early version of the blank space, however, is very unusual, specific and *sui generis*. It is certainly not Le Carré’s version.

The ‘epochal novel’, then, and the ‘blank space’ of cold war narrative: *The Quiet American* seems to me precisely to seize the historical turning-point or geopolitical moment at which the world order of the old empires definitively cedes to that of what the novel itself refers to as American ‘global strategy’ (*QA*, p. 97). French historian Jacques Dalloz sees this moment as beginning in January-February 1950. It is the moment, he asserts, at which the logic of the Indo-China war [became] that of the cold war.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Greene grasps the onset of the cold war in a specific geopolitical sphere, South-East Asia. The basic facts support this view. Mao Tse-Tung proclaimed the People’s Republic of China in 1949. On 16 January 1950, China recognized Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh as the legitimate government of Indo-China. On 30 January, the Soviet Union followed suit. On 7 February, The US and Britain responded by formally recognizing the French-appointed leader, the emperor Bao Dai. The cold war logic that would lead to the partition of Vietnam began here. China quickly began to send supplies

<sup>1</sup> Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), hereafter cited in the text as *QA*; p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> *Don Juan*, Canto I, CXXXII, 1049-51.

<sup>3</sup> John Le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (London: Pan, 1964), p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> Dalloz, Jacques, *The War in Indo-China 1945-54*, tr. Josephine Bacon (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. 129.

and instructors to the Viet Minh. After the start of the Korean War, in June 1950, the process accelerated. By 1951, Chinese troops were massing on the border of Tonkin. That, in 1951, Greene's quiet American Pyle should have just read a book called *The Advance of Red China* is no accident. Nor are his references to 'the problem of China' (*QA*, p. 18). Nor is the British narrator Fowler's view that whether the French effort holds up in Tonkin or not depends upon whether the Chinese come to the aid of the Vietminh.

Between January 1950 and when Greene began *The Quiet American*, US policy in Indochina went through a transformation. Since 1945, the US had been unenthusiastic for when not actually hostile to the French cause. In 1945, the OSS, forerunner of the CIA,<sup>5</sup> had actually thought of Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist leader and had supported him in his struggle against the Japanese. The French protested. The US subsequently withdrew from Indochina, and made no significant return until 1949. After all, the French war was a war of colonial reconquest. For the US as for the Soviets, the old colonial empires belonged to the past and should be liquidated as rapidly as possible. The US even threatened France with sanctions if it sent American-supplied aircraft to Indochina.

All this changed after the declaration of the People's Republic of China in October, 1949. Indochina abruptly became a key battleground in the struggle with what the US took to be the Communist drive for world domination. The Americans began to fear that the French might abandon Indochina. The threat of withdrawal was a card the French themselves occasionally played, to some effect. By December 1949, the US *Evening Star* was warning that 'the surrender of French Indo-China to the Reds seems likely if the United States does not move into action'.<sup>6</sup> The idea that the South East Asian states would topple in sequence if Indochina fell to Communism rapidly gained ground. This would later become famous as what Eisenhower first called it in 1953, the domino theory. At one point in *The Quiet American*, Pyle begins dutifully to rehearse the domino theory for Fowler's benefit. Fowler, who like Greene in 1951, has already had first-hand experience of counter-insurgency activities in Malaya, cuts in impatiently: 'I know the record' (*QA*, p. 95). The point would seem to be that, by mid- to late 1951, the domino theory has already become a standard mantra.

Certainly, throughout 1950, the US government increasingly felt that, as in Korea, so too in Indochina, it must vigorously oppose the spread of Communism. It massively upped its aid package to the French. The US Economic Aid Mission, of which Greene makes a good deal in the novel, arrived as early as February 1950. As Greene and the French themselves very quickly saw, the Mission was Janus-faced from the start; that is, it had more or less clandestine objectives that were quite different from its publicly acknowledged purposes. At all events, in return for American assistance, the French declared their support for US policy in Korea. They also appointed de Lattre as commander-in-chief of French forces in Indochina. De Lattre is best known as the man who almost turned things round for the French and might even have given them victory, had he not died too early. But he was also important because he was specifically concerned to build bridges between the French government and Truman. With de Lattre, for the first time, we hear a *French* rhetoric asserting that the French are conducting the war on behalf of the Free World, and not just for French ends. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this moment. It is the moment when a universalism in decline, that of the one and indivisible Republic, cedes to a universalism in the ascendant, that of the globalization of American democracy. It is by no means coincidental that the film whose story Fowler's lover Phuong recounts to him at the end of the novel sees the French Revolution debased to a theme for trashy romance.

Conciliatory to the US though de Lattre sounded, nonetheless, tensions were rife. The French wanted to run the show but couldn't bankroll it, and even looked as though they might lose the war. The US was frequently impatient with what it took to be French ineptitude and French persistence in a stuffy and obsolete colonial mindset. None the less, as Eisenhower was to put matters a little later, America was also 'bitterly opposed to ever getting involved in a hot war in that region'.<sup>7</sup> The result was that the French fought the hot war, the Americans the cold. The tensions surface throughout Greene's novel in sporadic backbiting, particularly in the scene of the press conference, where the Americans relentlessly bait the French for their incompetence. The Americans are scornful of what they see as a 'damned colonial war' (*QA*, p. 36). The French see the Americans as fighting a war by proxy and

<sup>5</sup> The shift from the first to the second appears to be taking place more or less during the time at which *The Quiet American* is set. See p. 173, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China*, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a War: Indochina, 1954* (New York and London: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), p. 54.

keeping their hands invidiously clean. Greene was well aware of the difference de Lattre was making in 1951. De Lattre strove to give his forces a more international flavour. Somewhat unconvincingly, he did this by bringing in other colonials like the Senegalese and the Moroccans, both of whom get mentioned in *The Quiet American*.<sup>8</sup> French characters retort to the American accusation of colonialism precisely with the de Lattre doctrine: 'I'm not fighting a colonial war', as Greene's Captain Trouin says. 'We're fighting all of your wars, but you leave us the guilt' (*QA*, p. 151). The US did indeed leave the French to keep on getting their hands dirty: this is part of the point to Pyle's peculiar innocence. The French colonel reminds his American interviewers, with 'amazed bitterness' (*QA*, p. 65), that he has only one helicopter for the whole war, and that the US will not send even a second-hand one. The pointed reference to the 'new American planes [bombers]' (*QA*, p. 11, 19, 181), at both the beginning and end of the novel is both historically significant and ironic. Since the purpose of the planes is not military assistance, they represent a kind of uninvolved involvement, even in a sense, an immaterialization of involvement.

This briefly sketches in the context in which Greene's encounter with an incipient Cold War politics unfolds. *The Quiet American* is about a 'patent age of new inventions': clearly, in the first instance, the invention Greene was no doubt thinking of was the A-bomb, which, by 1955, when he finished his novel, the US had successively threatened to drop on Pyong Yang, Hanoi and China. But beyond that, it seems to me that *The Quiet American* also indexes the invention of, firstly, a rhetoric, secondly, a set of practices, and, thirdly, a structure of both relation and non-relation between the two. That structure involves what I have just called the immaterialization of involvement. In philosophical terms, it involves a peculiarly weird version of idealism, idealism Strangelove-style. This, I think, is chiefly how *The Quiet American* apprehends the new epoch and the Cold War.

Greene's first intuition of the new epoch started with a voice. That much is clear from Sherry's biography. The idea for *The Quiet American* came to him from a presumably rather unquiet American who, like Pyle, was attached to the Economic Aid Mission and who 'lectured me all the long drive back to Saigon on the necessity of finding a "third force in Vietnam"'.<sup>9</sup> Quiet though he may be, Pyle is also remarkable for his voice. 'I heard him talking' is a recurrent phrase in the novel.<sup>10</sup> There are clearly echoes in both the anecdote and the novel of Conrad's Kurtz — remember just how crucial it is to *Heart of Darkness* that, in Marlow's phrase, 'the man presented himself as a voice'.<sup>11</sup> Greene means us to be aware of both the parallel and the contrast between Pyle and Kurtz. Interestingly, Greene added that his companion on the drive brought him close as he had never been before to the American dream.

If so, he clearly had his own distinctive idea of what that dream involved. I would suggest that what Greene heard as the American dream was in fact the expression of a will to abstraction. In geopolitical terms, he heard the shift away from Roosevelt's emphasis on America's global role combined with a respect for local specificity, with national rights to self-determination, to a conception of self-determination as itself determined by a set of *a priori*, global, abstract imperatives. These unexamined, formal imperatives echo throughout his novel as what are by now wearily familiar terms, freedom and democracy above all. The important point is that for Pyle as much as for Dulles, abstract forms must prevail over and even erase all possibility of any local specification or inflection of their meaning. Dulles announced that the US must promote the cause of freedom in South East Asia, whilst equally asserting that 'the solidarity of the free world' must 'transcend all national interests'.<sup>12</sup> Robert Blum, who was head of the Economic Aid Mission in Saigon precisely in 1951, and whom Greene knew, argued that the nationalist movements in South East Asia expressed 'the awakening self-consciousness of ... peoples... trying to break loose from domination by the Western world'.<sup>13</sup> They

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance *QA*, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Sherry, p. 417.

<sup>10</sup> See *QA*, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. with an introd. and notes Robert Hampson, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene, Vol. II: 1939-1955* (London: Jonathan Cape. 1994) p. 422.

would accomplish this break with the West precisely by identifying with America. The irony could hardly have been more piquant. That Blum should have apparently been unaware of it may seem to indicate precisely how the new reflex of abstraction kicks in. It is worth adding, incidentally, that one enthusiastic convert to the new abstraction was a young John F Kennedy, who visited Saigon in 1951 and went back to preach the Mission's forward-looking gospel in the US.

Greene understands the new abstraction exactly. 'He gets hold of an idea', says Fowler of Pyle, 'and then alters every situation to fit the idea' (*QA*, p. 167-68). One thing about Pyle that Fowler everywhere insists on is that he knows nothing about Indochina and is protected by his very pieties from learning anything. The habit of abstraction is also what connects Pyle's pieties with the practices to which they should seem in principle opposed. Greene makes this evident above all in the degree of Pyle's shock when he sees the result of his covert activities. As Fowler puts it, Pyle ends up with national democracy and the third force, i.e. the blood of innocent women and children, spattered over his right shoe.

Norman Sherry maintains that Greene made up his CIA dirty tricks allegations, that there was 'no need for him to opt for a conspiratorial view of the world'.<sup>14</sup> Alas, Sherry should have read some secret documents, as Greene himself did when he was learning about counter-insurgency in Malaya before he went to Saigon. By 1951, CIA eminence grise Edward Lansdale — of whom more in a moment — had already organized covert activities against the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, which was rapidly becoming the nerve-centre of CIA operations in South East Asia. Hence the book on *The War in the Philippines* on Pyle's shelves. The CIA were also engaged in covert activities against the Chinese along the Burmese border. In Viet Minh-controlled Indochina, they were sponsoring the Kuomintang-inspired, ultra-right wing, extreme nationalist Dai Viet, whose cells in the police and administration had begun a reign of terror.

National Security Directive 5412 defined and specified the range and nature of CIA covert operations. The crucial point was that, if they were uncovered, the US government must be able 'plausibly to disclaim any responsibility for them'.<sup>15</sup> Again, the will to abstraction exactly required an uninvolved involvement. NSC 5412 did not in fact come into force until 15 March, 1954. But it explicitly states that it is an extension of NSC directives 10/2 and 10/5, which were produced under the Truman administration. The main difference was that, notionally at least, NSC 10/2 and 10/5 insisted that covert activities be carried out under an Operations Coordinating Board. In NSC 5412, that insistence has disappeared. It is clear that the CIA were close to getting the *carte blanche*, the freedom of operation that they wanted by or during 1951. If Sherry and not Greene is right, and the CIA were not involved in Saigon-based covert activities in 1951, the strong possibility of their soon becoming involved must certainly have been in the air.

Indeed, if Alfred McCoy's researches from the seventies onwards are anything to go by, the CIA may already have been hoping to muscle in on French control of the Indochina drug trade, which the French maintained through their own equivalent of the CIA, the *Service de Documentation Extérieure et du Contre-Espionage*.<sup>16</sup> The allusion in *The Quiet American* to the French drug campaign in Laos, which can certainly not have been a war of prevention, and the coded reference to the US threat to French business interests in Indochina, suggest that Greene suspected that drug profits were at stake.<sup>17</sup> Greene may or may not have adapted the facts of the bomb attacks: we shan't know. Lansdale told Joseph Mankiewicz around 1957 that no more 'than one or two Vietnamese now alive know the real truth of the matter, and they certainly aren't going to tell anyone'.<sup>18</sup> We do know that, as Greene himself admitted, he altered the order of the bombings, placing the more after the less serious one. At

<sup>14</sup> Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, Vol. II, pp. 433.

<sup>15</sup> NSC 5412, 'National Security Directive on Covert Operations', <http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/USO/appC.html>

<sup>16</sup> See Paul DeRienzo, 'Interview with Alfred McCoy', 9 November 1991, <http://pdr.autono.net/mccoy.html>

<sup>17</sup> See *QA*, p. 124, 157.

<sup>18</sup> See Franklin, H. Bruce, 'By the Bombs' Early light: Or, *The Quiet American's* War on Terror', *The Nation*, 3 February 2003; <http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/m-fem/2003m03/msg00005.html>

all events, the point is really this: more important than any question of strict documentary accuracy is the fact that Greene so clearly recognized the geopolitical temper of the times, and the direction in which US policy and CIA practice were cumulatively and inexorably heading.

If he knew this in 1951, it must have seemed altogether more obvious as he wrote the novel. After 1951, The Economic Aid Mission grew swiftly and hugely. By 1953, the US was paying 78% of the cost of the war. By the time of the meeting of the Five Power Staff Agency in 1953, the US was formally assuming responsibility for opposing Chinese Communism in South East Asia. In June 1954, soon-to-be South Vietnamese premier Ngo Dinh Diem returned to Indochina from the States. To the US, by then, he represented the institutionalization of Pyle's 'third force'. Fittingly enough, Lansdale and the CIA promptly brought one element of the third force out of the jungle to join forces with Diem, in the shape of the self-appointed General Trinh Minh Thé. It is of course Thé's bomb attacks that, in *The Quiet American*, Greene has Pyle involved in. They form the climax of the novel. In November 1954, Washington announced complete support for Diem. From 1 January 1955, it stopped channelling aid through the French, and supplied it directly to Diem. In February 1955, Lansdale saw to it that Thé's 'army', a.k.a. his gang of brigands, were duly incorporated into Diem's national army. By 1956, the US was solely responsible for agrarian reform, economic aid and the training of the South Vietnamese troops, police and administration. By May 1957, Diem could claim that 'the frontier of the United States extends to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel'.<sup>19</sup>

Lansdale's own progress matched that of the US. Lansdale arrived in Saigon in 1954, which is when Greene met him. He was soon setting up the Saigon Military Mission specifically to engage in dirty tricks. He went on to become one of Diem's principal advisers. *The Quiet American* registers the accelerating pace of the process requiring the progressively deeper involvement of the US and Lansdale together. At the same time, in Pyle's rhetoric, his covert activities and the bridge that spans the gulf between them, Greene lays bare the structure of assumption from which that process was inseparable.

What is remarkable is that he clearly does so out of a sense of the sheer necessity of doing it. For he has nothing to put in the place of Pyle's good intentions. The political analysis of the situation with which the novel provides us is impressively acute and sophisticated. In a sense, the novel itself directs us towards a mode of political thought, a hermeneutics of suspicion. Equally, the events it describes substantially bear out the conclusions to which its political analysis points. But that analysis is conducted by Fowler. Fowler may be almost painfully clear-eyed and unrelentingly astute. There is nonetheless little doubt as to what we must think of him. 'What a shit he is!', Evelyn Waugh declared, to Greene.<sup>20</sup> Fowler is crucially dishonest with both his lover and his friend and betrays the American who saved his life into the hands of the men who will murder him. That the French refer to him throughout as 'Monsieur Fowlair' seems fitting enough.<sup>21</sup>

But to think here in terms of the classic English formula according to which private moral conduct necessarily turns out to be the Achilles' heel of the properly critical intelligence, of the liberal, radical or left intellectual, is I think to glide smoothly over Greene's cunning. For it is only on the surface that Fowler's personal morality seems separable from a political position. On the allegorical level, it actually reflects or represents one. Throughout the novel, Fowler's refrain is 'I'm not involved'.<sup>22</sup> Obviously enough, his lack of commitment is an important theme. The key moment for this theme, however, comes when Viet Minh sympathizer Heng tells Fowler that 'you are English. You are neutral. You have been fair to all of us' (*QA*, p. 129). Here Fowler's detachment is clearly identified as more than merely personal. It is precisely this moment that allows us to see what is truly at stake in his Laodicean self-distancing.

For British policy in Indochina in the early to mid-fifties might indeed have been plausibly described as ostensibly neutral or (the historians' more frequent term), a policy of 'non-commitment'. It might also have been described as shabby and duplicitous. Heng's memory may in fact relate to an earlier period. In October 1945, the British had quite literally played a neutral role in Indochina. Along with their colonial Indian allies, they had actually gone into Saigon to separate the already warring French and Viet Minh. They even liberated their Japanese enemies of a few weeks earlier from their

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China*, p. 198.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Sherry, p. 386.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. *QA*, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance *QA*, p. 28.

PoW camps, so that the more experienced ex-enemy soldiers could help them keep the peace. By 1950, however, according to the excellent Raffi Gregorian, the British had two policy objectives in South East Asia. The first was to supply logistical assistance and training in what it saw as buffer states — Burma, Siam, Indochina — in order to protect British interests in the one that really counted, Malaya. The second objective was to get the US to commit itself to the actual defence of the buffer states themselves.<sup>23</sup>

As mean-minded Fowler gains his secret, treacherous victory over Pyle, so, by 1954, Britain had accomplished both its policy objectives in Indochina. It had accomplished them precisely with the most minimal commitment of its own, other than the occasional appearance of a Cabinet Minister in Saigon (as referred to in *The Quiet American*).<sup>24</sup> To a Vietnamese Communist like Heng, ignorant of Britain's own covert activities in Malaya (to which *The Quiet American* again refers), British policy might indeed have seemed neutral. When, in 1950, the French issued appeals and warnings about the Communist threat, unlike the Americans, the British remained obstinately deaf. According to Gregorian, at least, they effectively admitted to themselves that, even in the event of a Chinese invasion of Indochina, they would do little or nothing.<sup>25</sup> This, of course, was hardly a matter of principled reservations about a colonial war. The trouble was that, though Attlee spent a good deal of time cosying up to Truman, in reality, he had only very limited room for manoeuvre. *The Quiet American* everywhere reminds us that Pyle has money and Fowler does not: that is why Pyle can buy up Fowler's Annamite mistress. Like Fowler, Attlee had scant funds. The British government simply had no money to spend on Indochina. As things stood, obnoxious Labour left-wingers like Bevan and Wilson were already denouncing Attlee for currying favour with the US and spending money on arms not the NHS.

Nothing much changed with the return of Churchill. Indeed, it was Churchill and Eden who most angered the US in 1954 by refusing to back Operation Vulture, the planned US bombing of Dien Bien Phu which might conceivably have set France on the path to the all-out victory it never won. Britain, then, looked marginal to the Indochinese sphere. British policy in South East Asia was paltry, handdog and even cynical. It was also determined by economic necessity. In Fowler, Greene reproduced this policy as a set of personal attitudes. Whatever the cleverness of the analysis to which it leads, in *The Quiet American*, British detachment provides no alternative or counter-balance to the uninvolved involvement of the US. It is precisely in the implosion of the difference seemingly represented in Pyle and Fowler that Greene's unique version of the blank space of Cold War narrative appears.

It appears, in part, because Greene maintains a faint trace of another critical perspective. One of the oddest and most unsatisfactory things about *The Quiet American* might seem to be the Sartrean twist that Greene gives to his theme of commitment. Is it not inherently implausible that French soldiers and policemen in Indochina in 1951 should be pleading the faintly philosophical cause of *engagement*, as Greene makes them do?<sup>26</sup> Surely this is callow academicism or trendy term-dropping, or both? I wonder. Even as the US had begun to increase its support for the French, the French Communists and left increasingly opposed what they called the 'dirty war' (as is noted in *The Quiet American*).<sup>27</sup> In the words of *L'Humanité*, they were quick to allege that 'Washington is dictating French policy in Vietnam'.<sup>28</sup> The Communists accused the French in Indochina themselves of covert activities and even atrocities. They stirred up opposition to the war. This opposition gathered momentum, and spread to Germany and Italy. In 1950, it crystallized around the famous case of Henri Martin.

Martin was a young former resistance fighter who had gone from the Resistance to the French army in Indochina. On returning to France, however, he had got involved in anti-military propaganda and even subversive work. In 1950, he was convicted of trying to sabotage a French warship in Toulon

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<sup>23</sup> Raffi Gregorian, *The British Army, The Gurkhas and Cold War Strategy in The Far East 1947-1954* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 203.

<sup>24</sup> See *QA*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> See Gregorian, *The British Army*, p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> See for example *QA*, p. 151. For the French word, see for instance p. 96, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> See *QA*, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China*, p. 120.

harbour. He promptly became a *cause célèbre* with the French left in general and the PCF in particular. The 'Free Henri Martin' campaign produced posters, songs and cartoons. Picasso even painted Martin's portrait. The play about the trial, *Drame à Toulon*, was staged everywhere in France. Above all, Martin became the subject of a book, *L'Affaire Henri Martin*, credited to Sartre but only partly by him, in which Sartre promotes Martin as a model of political *engagement*.<sup>29</sup> Greene and the real-life equivalents of his characters can hardly have been ignorant of the Martin case. Nor could they have been unaware of what luminaries like Sartre and Picasso were making of it. *L'Humanité*, for example, was readily available in Saigon, and the latest developments in the Martin affair were splashed all over its pages in 1950 and 1951. The term *engagement* threads its way through the novel as the trace of a European, Communist critique of the British narrator's dismal little insistence on the primacy or sole reality of the private world and private life. It is important to specify the fact that the critique appears only as a trace: *The Quiet American* hardly 'takes the Communist side'. Nonetheless: from Blum to Lansdale, the Americans in Saigon took Greene to be a Communist fellow-traveller. This Greene is the one who is responsible for the critique of Fowler. In *The Quiet American*, it is the trace of radical critique that, like the incredulity and sheer decency of Leamas's lover Liz in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, allows us to get the full measure of the blank space the novel otherwise occupies.

What in the end does Greene discern as the logic that binds Pyle's rhetoric and his dirty tricks together? There is another 'epochal novel' that seems to me to have been very influential on *The Quiet American*. If Greene's accounts of the drive back to Saigon and of Pyle's voice seem to owe a debt to Conrad's Kurtz, they also call to mind that masterly, even prescient analysis of modern political language which we can appreciate so much more precisely now that it can be sprung loose from the totalitarian theme, Orwell's account of Newspeak in 1984. Greene was very impressed by 1984 ('except the sex part', he wrote. 'That's ham').<sup>30</sup> Pyle's rhetoric is a Greenian Newspeak. Even more important, however, the logic I have just specified is Greene's version of Orwell's doublethink. Orwell writes of doublethink with a subtlety remote from the cliché it has since become. This is important: the banalization of the idea of doublethink has made it difficult if not impossible for us to see how far Orwell might have been aware of and concerned to specify a distinctively and disquietingly new, modern phenomenon that was by no means simply a fleeting offspin of totalitarianism.

In fact, doublethink is very close to what I have called the will to abstraction or idealism Strangelove-style, to the reflex whereby Pyle fits the fact, however recalcitrant, to the idea. Doublethink provides a structure of 'beliefs, habits, tastes, emotions, mental attitudes' that functions to balk, deflect or supplant perception.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it must be capable of supplanting all alternative truth-claims, not least because it has the force of the collective behind it. Orwell's Winston must learn the truth of 'collective solipsism', even when it decrees that the law of gravity is nonsense.<sup>32</sup> What is most crucial, however, is the extraordinary, devious twist whereby disingenuousness spontaneously reverses into its opposite. Deception knows itself as honesty from the start, inhumanity gives itself out as principle and decency, pure cynicism as sweetness and light...one could multiply the Orwellian paradoxes almost indefinitely. As I pointed out earlier in the case of Robert Blum, they are inversions of irony, irony without the acumen or perhaps the conviction of a transcendental principle of reason that defines it as such. Orwell was meditating on the winding ways by which the inconceivable becomes conceivable, the unacceptable, acceptable. To his robustly secular, sceptical intelligence, it seemed clear that there was nothing either in nature (including any supposed 'human nature'), or in culture, nothing given us by either religion or ethics that could necessarily prevent the inconceivable from taking place. In *The Quiet American*, Greene offers us an admonitory fable on the process involved.

Here I want to go back to Lansdale. As I've said, Lansdale did not arrive in Saigon until 1954, nor did Greene meet him before 1954. That does not mean that he could not have contributed quite substantially to the novel. Indeed, *The Quiet American* might be thought of as in one sense about the Lansdale principle in the conduct of modern politics. Nonetheless, Sherry is right: Lansdale could not have been the model for Pyle. This is evident above all, though, from his memoirs. These swing

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<sup>29</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, et al., *L'Affaire Henri Martin*, commentaire de Jean-Paul Sartre, texts de Hervé Bazin, Marc Beigbeder et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, Vol. II, p. 312.

<sup>31</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 172.

negligently between Pyle's pieties and the most breathtaking moral indifference. Even Sherry, who is inclined to 'find the good' in Thé, conveys the impression that he was what the French thought him, a monster and 'a murderous reptile'.<sup>33</sup> Lansdale simply remarks that 'I found myself liking him instinctively'.<sup>34</sup> Lansdale was only too well aware of Thé's reputation. His brazenness, here, is very obviously self-conscious; but it's also indicative. Lansdale is jovially but bleakly, brutally, chillingly shrewd. Pyle is decidedly not. Lansdale is not an instance of doublethink. In the end, for all the dutiful homage paid in his memoirs to freedom and democracy, like Orwell's O'Brien, Lansdale knows the real name of the game, and knows very well what he and the US are up to. Pyle does not; or rather, to adapt Orwell's phrase, 'by the exercise of *doublethink*, he...satisfies himself' that the idea 'is not violated' by reality.<sup>35</sup>

'This is the patent age of new inventions': it's often said, rightly, that *The Quiet American* is about the dangers of innocence, but as though innocence had no history or historicity. In fact, the novel seems to me to be about the invention of a particular, dangerous, new, modern form of innocence which is as crucial now as it was then, however mutated its more recent forms. In 1954 and for a long time afterwards, it looked specifically American. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has looked much less so. In fact, it seems ever more like a vast collective mindset that is everywhere protected by the effective closure of the world investing in it. It may be that modern innocence began with American involvement in Indochina, with NSC 5412 as its founding document. Like Greene, Orwell also understood the invention of innocence. In 1984, the *Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* states that, above all, the practitioner of doublethink must feel no guilt. The modern conviction of innocence is both baseless and an imperative. Yet it is indeed a dangerous conviction, not least, because, founded on doublethink, by a logic both implacable and practically unthinkable, it provokes the very menace which unfailingly returns to haunt it.

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<sup>33</sup> Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, Vol. II, p. 423.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Geary Lansdale, *In The Midst of War: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 190.

<sup>35</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 171

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