Review: BEST INTENTIONS: An Appreciation of Graham Greene
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BEST INTENTIONS

An Appreciation of Graham Greene

Andrew J. Bacevich


In Washington, where the honorific “historic” ornaments every speech, appointment, conclave, and legislative initiative however trivial, those who earn their living purporting to explain “what it all means” have a limitless supply of material. Small wonder that the senatorial defection of an unprincipled hack from one party to the other qualifies as Big News, while the nomination of an associate justice to a seat on the Supreme Court becomes equivalent in significance to the Normandy invasion.

To suggest that this rampant narcissism induces a distorted, not to say warped, view of reality is to understate the case. Rebutting this presumption of Washington’s supreme importance requires a constant effort. Students of U.S. foreign policy might feel some obligation to sample the cascade of pretentiously titled tomes produced by movers and shakers situated In the Stream of History or At the Center of the Storm who claim to have engineered or participated in or at least witnessed events of enduring significance.

Yet a steady diet of such excretions results in the need to cleanse the palate and flush the mind of accumulated toxins. To assist in that effort, Americans are fortunate in being able to draw on a rich homegrown tradition of observers who have devoted themselves to puncturing Washington’s conceit and delighting in its folly, a tradition running from Mark Twain all the way down to Garry Trudeau and Jon Stewart.

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For a less comic approach that stands beyond the confines of the American tradition, there is Graham Greene’s prophetic novel *The Quiet American*. Appearing in 1955, Greene’s fictional narrative became within a decade must-reading for those seeking to understand how the United States blundered so badly in Vietnam. For those today seeking to understand how the United States blundered so badly in Iraq and Afghanistan, *The Quiet American* remains an essential text.

Greene has little interest in Washington or in those who genuflect before the White House as the cathedral of supreme power. To locate the nub of the matter he looks elsewhere, to the grimy world where functionaries labor to translate Washington’s high-sounding clichés into actual policy, with the consequences borne by ordinary people who never fly on Air Force One or appear on the Sunday morning talk shows.

In this case, the setting is Saigon, near the end of the first Indochina War. French efforts to suppress the Viet Minh insurgency and retain their empire in the Far East are failing. The United States, although nominally supporting France, is actually positioning itself to supplant its ally as the region’s dominant outside power. Within a decade, of course, this effort will yield a second Indochina War and ultimately a second Western defeat.

Greene’s protagonist is Thomas Fowler, a God-haunted, burned-out British journalist, who in late middle age has fled to the East in the wake of a failed love affair that had wrecked his marriage. From Saigon, he half-heartedly covers the war, mostly by passing along press releases issued by French military spokesmen. Steadfastly refusing to take sides, he stands apart and simply reports.

In Saigon, he has taken up with the beautiful and much younger Phuong. Whether Fowler loves Phuong—whether he is capable of love—is difficult to say. Yet he needs Phuong desperately, for sex and companionship, to prepare his opium pipes each evening, above all as someone whose presence keeps at bay Fowler’s fear of facing alone the terrors of old age. In return Phuong wants only one thing: a guarantee of security, which implies marriage. Yet this Fowler cannot deliver: he remains formally wed and his wife, back in England, is a Catholic whose conscience will not permit her to dissolve their union.

Into this relationship comes Alden Pyle, a young American newly assigned as an economic attaché with the U.S. mission. Pyle is polite, modest, and boyish. “With his gangly legs and his crew-cut and his wide campus gaze,” Greene writes, “he seemed incapable of harm.”

Yet appearance and manner are deceiving. Pyle’s nominal assignment is a tissue-thin cover; he is actually a CIA agent (although the agency is never identified as such). To stem the Communist tide threatening to inundate Southeast Asia, the agency wants to conjure up an indigenous democratic alternative to French colonialism. Pyle’s job is to devise this Third Way.
As he undertakes this task, Pyle draws inspiration from a journalist named York Harding, a sort of proto-Thomas Friedman who parachutes into various trouble spots and then in best-selling books serves up glib recipes for advancing the cause of liberty. In Pyle’s estimation, the challenge he faces does not appear all that difficult. York Harding provides the answer: “you only had to find a leader and keep him safe from the old colonial powers.”

“Impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance,” Pyle embodies all that Fowler (and Greene) can’t stand about Americans: too much money, too much confidence, and too little self-awareness. Cruising the streets of Saigon in oversized Buicks, air conditioning everything in sight (to Fowler’s dismay, even the U.S. legation’s lavatories), passing out cigarettes as if they exist in infinite supply, and quoting York Harding, zealots like Pyle proceed on the assumption that American know-how backed by American values can make short work of even the most perplexing difficulties. Born and raised a Unitarian, Pyle takes God’s existence as a given, his faith reinforcing his conviction that America’s purposes necessarily reflect God’s will.

As eager and as earnest as he is naive, Pyle first cultivates Fowler as a source of information, but soon falls in love with Phuong. Professing his intention to do the right thing by everyone, Pyle promises Phuong that which Fowler cannot: he will make her his bride, taking her back home to New England to live happily ever after. When Phuong accepts, Pyle compensates Fowler with apologies and assurances of his own everlasting friendship and respect.

When not conspiring to steal Fowler’s girl, Pyle is conspiring to devise the Third Way, his efforts to find the right leader centering on a shadowy figure known as General Thé. As with the U.S. officials who in our own day fell under the spell of Ahmed Chalabi, Pyle has persuaded himself that General Thé’s aims and America’s aims align neatly. As was the case with Chalabi, this turns out to be a massive misjudgment.

Positioning General Thé as the anointed successor to the French requires first demonstrating the powerlessness of the colonial regime. This effort finds expression in a campaign of terror orchestrated by Thé, using plastic explosives covertly provided by Pyle, but to be blamed on the Communists. Pyle purports to believe that the campaign will concentrate on military
targets. In fact, Thé organizes a savage attack on civilians in the center of Saigon, which Fowler and Pyle witness.

Momentarily taken aback by the bloody consequences of his handiwork—his shoes are spattered with human remains—Pyle quickly recovers and assures Fowler that the victims of the bombing had “died for democracy.” Their deaths were a “pity,” he tells Fowler, “but you can’t always hit your target. Anyway they died in the right cause.” Pyle’s own sense of righteousness survives the incident intact. He knows he meant well. That knowledge obviates any need to take responsibility or to make amends. In his own mind, he remains blameless.

Fowler’s own determination to avoid taking sides does not survive this episode. In his innocence, Pyle has become like “a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm,” even as he contaminates everything he touches. The ease with which Pyle rationalizes and then dismisses the results of his own recklessness persuades Fowler that detachment has become untenable. So the observer becomes a participant.

To prevent the American from committing further mayhem, Fowler initiates his own conspiracy, arranging for Pyle’s assassination by the Viet Minh—an outcome by no means disagreeable to the French. Once Pyle has been dispatched, Phuong returns to Fowler’s bed, this time to stay—in an unexpected act of generosity, Fowler’s wife has decided after all to grant him a divorce. So the novel ends with a tormented Fowler reflecting that even though (or perhaps because) Pyle’s death had put his own life right, “I wished there existed someone to whom I could say I was sorry.”

In the twentieth-century English-speaking world, Greene ranks alongside Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Evelyn Waugh among the small number of writers addressing explicitly Catholic themes who might qualify for the accolade “great.” Yet Greene’s relationship with Catholicism—with God, for that matter—was profoundly ambivalent and riddled with contradictions. He cheated on his wife, cheated constantly on his several mistresses, and during his restless travels frequented prostitutes. Fealty and self-denial did not figure in his makeup. He was not a nice human being. Yet Greene’s intimate familiarity with sin combined with considerable gifts as a writer to produce works of profound insight.

*The Quiet American,* deriving its energy from Greene’s scabrous anti-Americanism, offers one example. The novel stands in relation to Cold War America as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* stands in relation to the antebellum South: it expresses its author’s ill-disguised loathing for the subject he depicts. Yet one need not share Greene’s animus toward the United States to appreciate his achievement. Indeed, Americans above all should be grateful to Greene since they—should they choose
to do so—can benefit most directly from that achievement.

Is Pyle as naive as he appears? Are his professions of high ideals real or contrived? Does he take seriously the verities offered by York Harding in books like *The Challenge to Democracy* and *The Role of the West*? Or does he merely appropriate them to lend a veneer of respectability to a ruthless enterprise? When Pyle prattles on about freedom and democracy, does he mean what he says? Or is it just so much cant? Although Greene poses these questions—which by implication apply not only to Pyle but to the nation and the cause that Pyle serves—he refrains from offering explicit answers.

Indeed, Greene suggests that the answers may not really matter. “Innocence,” he writes, “is a kind of insanity.” When it comes to the exercise of power, the idealist intent on doing God’s work is likely to wreak as much havoc as the cynic who rejects God’s very existence. Those who credit themselves with acting at the behest of the purest motives are hardly less likely to perpetrate evil than those who dismiss ideals as sheer poppycock.

Only those who recognize the omnipresence of sin—recognizing first of all that they themselves number among the sinful—can possibly anticipate the moral snares inherent in the exercise of power. Righteousness induces blindness. The acknowledgment of guilt enables the blind to see. To press the point further, the statesman who assumes that “we” are good while “they” are evil—think George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11—will almost necessarily misinterpret the problem at hand and underestimate the complexity and costs entailed in trying to solve it. In this sense, an awareness of one’s own failings and foibles not only contributes to moral clarity but can help guard against strategic folly.

Whether feigned or real, therefore, innocence poses a problem. Good intentions informed by the simplistic belief that the world can be fixed and things set right only succeed in killing people.

Back in Washington, those who dream up such policies somehow manage to evade accountability. Discredited policy-makers depart with clear consciences, en route to a visiting chair at Georgetown or a cushy billet in some think tank. There is no blood on their hands, the dirty work having been contracted out to soldiers, whose compensation, writes Greene, “includes the guilt of murder in the pay-envelope” and who upon returning home from battle may find their sense of personal culpability more difficult to shake.

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America means well: on this point the vast majority of Americans will permit no dissent. We differ from all other great powers in history. Our leaders differ as well. To those who formulate U.S. policy, ideals really do matter. As President Obama insisted in his Cairo speech, anyone depicting the United States as a "self-interested empire" is way off base.

When U.S. policy goes awry, therefore, the culprit might be bad luck, bad planning, or bad tactics, but American motives lie beyond reproach. Thus, the reassuring take on the Iraq War, now emerging as the conventional wisdom, is that—however mismanaged the war may have been early on—the "surge" engineered by General David Petraeus has redeemed the enterprise: a conclusion doubly welcome in that it obviates any need to revisit questions about the war's purpose and justification, while meshing nicely with the Obama administration's inclination simply to have done with Iraq and move on.

The implications of trivializing Iraq are already evident in the debate regarding "Af-Pak": the overriding concern becomes one of finding the general best able to apply to Obama's war the "lessons" taken from Bush's war. That such an approach should find favor in Washington would not have surprised Graham Greene. Those who conceived the Iraq War, the cheerleaders who promoted it from the sidelines, and critics of that war who have now succeeded to positions of power share a common interest in wiping the slate clean, refurbishing the claim that the United States meant well because the United States always means well. No doubt mistakes were made. Yet America's benign intentions expiate sins committed along the way—or allow those in authority to assign responsibility for any sins to soldiers who in doing Washington's bidding became sources of embarrassment.

Vietnam once laid waste to Washington's claim of innocence, until Ronald Reagan helped restore that claim. Every indication suggests that American innocence will survive Iraq as well, this time with Barack Obama as chief enabler helping to sanitize or erase all that we do not wish to remember. A people famous for their self-professed religiosity won't even bother to look for someone to whom they can express contrition.