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The Quiet American



Synopsis

Against the intrigue and violence of Vietnam during the French war with the Vietminh, Alden Pyle, an idealistic young American, is sent to promote democracy, as his friend, Fowler, a cynical foreign correspondent, looks on. Fowler's mistress, a beautiful native girl creates a catalyst for jealousy and competition between the men and a cultural clash resulting in bloodshed and deep misgivings. Written in 1955 prior to the Vietnam conflict, *The Quiet American* foreshadows the events leading up to the Vietnam conflict. Questions surrounding the moral ambiguity of the involvement of the United States in foreign countries are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I can honestly say that I've spent more time thinking about the events of Graham Greene's *THE QUIET AMERICAN* than of any other book I've read in months. In short, this is the story of America's involvement in Vietnam, full stop. Astounding is the fact that this was written between 1952 and 1955, yet can serve as a metaphor for almost two further decades of US involvement in that region. This is no simple tale, although it can be read as one. It works on many different levels. In its simplest form, this is a story about two foreigners in Indo-China: a middle-aged British reporter, and a young idealistic American. They involve themselves in two main plots: one concerning the French Army's battle with the Vietminh, and the second, concerning the two men's relationship with a native woman and the subsequent fight for her affections. On this level, *THE QUIET AMERICAN* works as an effective thriller. Who is the mysterious "third force" that Pyle, the American, is aiding? Why is he even there, and why is he providing aid to this group? Will Fowler, the British journalist,

abandon his policy of neutrality and enter into the conflict? Who will end up with the girl at the end? But there are all sorts of other subtexts and subtleties going on here. Pyle isn't just "the quiet American"; he is America -- at least as far as the US's involvement in Vietnam is concerned. And the difference in age between Pyle and Fowler is no random chance. Fowler is the older man; his country has already had its expansionist, colonial period. Fowler already knows what it's like to get one's fingers burnt interfering in other people's conflicts. But Pyle won't be told. He's the young inexperienced man who has to find out for himself -- to the detriment of everyone.

Only the great Graham Greene could have written a story that is as wry and understated as it is prophetic. "The Quiet American" captures several different attitudes during Vietnam's transition from French colonial occupation to American "involvement". In this novel the French do what they do best, namely they undertake a hopeless struggle and experience painful defeat. The Americans enter the scene with grandiose plans, tons of money, and utterly no sense of reality. The Vietnamese are, of course, hard-edged and practical, while the lone Englishman-God bless him-is the epitome of dying yet dignified colonialism. For those of you who haven't read the book, it's both an odd love story and a metaphor for American involvement in Vietnam. The hero, Fowler, is a washed up, middle aged, English war correspondent, content with his opium pipe and his Vietnamese mistress, Phuong. His world is gradually disrupted by the arrival of an American covert operative named Pyle who is both a zealous ideologue and a naïf optimist. Things get complicated when Pyle steals Phuong away from Fowler, yet attempts to remain friends with him. The normally indifferent Fowler soon becomes morally repulsed by Pyle's seemingly well intended terrorist activities, and gradually becomes politically involved. By the time Fowler helps to engineer Pyle's murder it is unclear even to him whether he is doing so to help the Vietnamese people or to win Phuong back. "The Quiet American" explores several different concepts. Like many of Greene's novels and short stories it examines the peculiar morality of love. Fowler and Phuong form a strange symbiosis. Fowler is estranged from his English wife, and is old enough to be Phuong's father.

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