

Intelligence in Public Media

The Quiet Americans – Four CIA Spies at the Dawn of the Cold War – Tragedy in Three Acts

Scott Anderson (Doubleday 2020), 562, 24 unnumbered pages of plates/illustrations.

Reviews by Leslie C. and Peter Sichel

Origin stories have become a familiar trope in mass entertainment, and movie studios have reaped enormous profits from exploring the legends of comic book superheroes. In these narratives we learn how the hero became the hero, how the villain became the villain, and in the process, the foundational mythology becomes canonical. The CIA has not escaped this interest in origins, and the agency's founding amidst America's debut as a reluctant global superpower heightens the fascination. Like the pop culture origin stories, the CIA's has its heroes and villains, but the canon is more fluid and changes with time and fashion.

In *The Quiet Americans*, Scott Anderson endeavors to revise the canon and redefine familiar roles. He is not the first to tread this ground. The book, which uses group biography as an organizing principle to examine the early days of America's premier intelligence service, is reminiscent of Evan Thomas's *The Very Best Men* (Simon & Schuster, 1995) and Burton Hersh's *The Old Boys* (*Charles Scribner's Sons*, 1992), and Anderson acknowledges he stands on their shoulders.

One distinction between Anderson and his antecedents lies in his protagonists. Hersh did not limit himself to a handful. His research encompassed a larger group he characterized as "The American Elite." Thomas chose four: Frank Wisner, Richard Bissell, Tracy Barnes, and Desmond FitzGerald, all of whom loom large in US clandestine history and who comfortably fit the "Oh So Social" stereotype of the CIA's founding generation. Anderson took a different path, with Wisner, Edward Lansdale, and two lesser-known figures, Peter Sichel and Michael Burke. Wisner notwithstanding, this group cannot be so readily characterized. Lansdale was a Midwestern advertising executive; Sichel a German-Jewish refugee from a family of wine merchants; and Burke a college football star and sometime Hollywood screenwriter.

The Quiet Americans is revisionist. The morally compromised spymaster is a standard device in fiction and nonfiction alike, including this book's namesake, Graham

Greene's 1955 novel, *The Quiet American*. Anderson, however, provides his subjects with a degree of nuance rarely seen in that caricature. Anderson is revisionist also in his assessment of the wider enterprise and of the men at the top setting the policies. In his account, Wisner, Lansdale, Sichel, and Burke are sympathetic figures in contrast to George Kennan, J. Edgar Hoover, the Dulles brothers, and Dwight Eisenhower, whose character and actions Anderson calls into question.

Against the familiar backdrop of a prostrate Europe and a crumbling wartime alliance succumbing to mistrust, Anderson's editorial choices are notable. Because Germany formed the cradle of the intelligence struggle of the Cold War, beginning the narrative there, in the closing days of World War II, was wise. What the OSS and its successors did there became, in microcosm, the tragedy at the heart of this book. Anderson was wise also in identifying 1956 as an endpoint, rather than continuing the story into the 1960s, as Hersh and Thomas did. The Hungarian uprising and the Suez Crisis, together with the slide of South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem toward his fate, illustrate the author's contention that over those dozen years the United States squandered the promise that animated Anderson's heroes, becoming in the eyes of most of the world just another imperial power. Less wise were lengthy discourses on Cold War events. While these form the book's context, most are familiar enough to need no recapitulation.

The chosen four transcend their treatment in standard accounts, most of which struggle to balance between two clichés: one, that the Americans were outclassed amateurs in what former MI6 officer Malcolm Muggeridge called "our frowsty old intelligence brothel"; and two, the CIA was a malevolent appendage of a nascent national security state, its rogue operatives hubristically rampaging across the seams between US and Soviet spheres of influence. Anderson is more imaginative, and too careful to fall into that trap. His characters are more realized, more human.

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Anderson describes the suave and charismatic former All-American Burke, who specialized in running Albanian emigres into Albania to roll back Stalin's empire, as "James Bond before James Bond existed." (34) If this is hyperbolic, Burke was not the only model. Lansdale, " . . . a kind of anthropologist in the field of human conflict" (81) whose work against a Filipino insurgency made him the confidante of two Southeast Asian heads of state, and "the thinly disguised protagonist of one best-selling book, *The Ugly American*, and quite possibly of a second, *The Quiet American*" (79) was another. Wisner, who rose to be Allen Dulles's deputy, was a far-beyond-driven pragmatist who believed in the need to *do something* in the face of Soviet provocations. Hersh regarded him as a zealot; Thomas Powers, as a crusader; a distinction with little difference. More grounded was Sichel, who rose from OSS Berlin Base's paymaster to head of operations for Eastern Europe, and, who as the only one of the four still living whom Anderson interviewed at length, serves as the book's moral conscience.

The notion of moral conscience is important, given Anderson's view that his story is classically tragic. Burke and Sichel left the agency early, burned out by the burden of repeatedly sending assets across the Iron Curtain to die. Wisner bore a similar load, compounded by America's failure to stand alongside the Hungarians in 1956 after it had encouraged their revolt. The weight of it drove him to despair, madness, and ultimately, suicide. When Lansdale finally retired, he had become a cautionary tale, the eponymous quiet American, if not a punch line, given his role in covert action against Castro's Cuba, which was uncharacteristic of anything he had done in Southeast Asia.

If this theme is familiar, Anderson's sympathy for these men is less so. However motivated they were, they are not one-dimensional caricatures. We learn, for example, that in the Philippines Lansdale grasped the complexity of insurgency and the importance of addressing the grievances of "the other side," and that in Vietnam he was the only US official in either Saigon or Washington who believed the 1956 reunification elections should have been held. We find that Sichel, and all of Berlin Base's leadership, rejected on practical grounds inheriting the Nazi Gehlen Organization from Army counterintelligence and that early covert action efforts were more sophisticated than the "sophomoric propaganda" they later became because CIA understood the need "to appeal to and co-opt the moderate left." (176) Anderson points out that Wisner regarded McCarthyism and Hoover's concomitant "Lavender Scare" purge of

homosexuals from the intelligence services—which ended the career of his aide de camp, Carmel Offie—were a national embarrassment.

Why does the chosen four's story turn tragic, their carefully calibrated efforts sacrificed on the altar of unimaginative policies? The author places responsibility at the feet of their superiors, including:

- George Kennan, the subject of a prize-winning biography by John Lewis Gaddis, the dean of Cold War historians, was a "two-faced weasel" who disingenuously guarded his reputation when critics drew a straight line from his Containment Doctrine to 58,000 American dead in Vietnam, (155) among countless other casualties of Cold War proxy fights. Anderson further regards Kennan as a "grand master of forgetfulness" for disavowing knowledge of working with former Nazis against the Soviets in post-war Germany. (197)
- Allen Dulles, the legendary "Great White Case Officer," was marked by "glibness and superficiality," and Anderson quotes Peter Grose, who wrote that Dulles "learned to deal comfortably in perfectly bad faith." Wisner's actions, by contrast, "were dictated by a sense of honor and fairness" and who, despite his reputation as a hardened Cold Warrior, was reluctant to approve many of the covert actions that Dulles urged upon him, (258, 311), including the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh. The subsequent coup in Guatemala only deepened Third World disaffection with the United States.
- John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower's secretary of state, seems to have earned his portrayal as a dour Presbyterian scold. During his tenure, the Cold War descended to new depths. Anderson tantalizes the reader with the notion that a rapprochement with Stalin's successors was possible after the tyrant's death, but the opportunity was lost, because, "in brief, John Foster Dulles happened." (316)
- Much of this occurred on Eisenhower's watch. Views of Ike have evolved, from a grandfatherly figure who oversaw a dull decade of conformity, to the "hidden hand" president who masterfully manipulated events from behind the curtain. Not for Anderson, who, noting the president's failure to defend his mentor George Marshall from McCarthy's attacks, wrote, "for all his carefully honed image of humility and integrity, [Eisenhower] was an intensely ambitious creature, one willing to compro-

mise on the most basic precepts of personal honor if it might play to his political advantage.” (331)

In *The Quiet Americans*, Anderson has produced an engaging account of four very different men who served the same cause, and whose service foundered on the sclerotic assumptions and ill-advised actions of their superiors. This is the tragedy of the title; this, and Anderson’s lament at the loss of America’s moral advantage for minimal Cold War gains. He concludes that the United States, for all its pretensions, was helpless in Hungary in 1956—though he acknowledges that Moscow took advantage of the Suez Crisis—a distraction for which Washington bore no responsibility. Perhaps worse, the United States backed itself into a corner that made low-end, low-risk engagements through covert action and proxy wars more tempting. Here lies one more fascinating theme of the book: the tension between the collection and analysis of intelligence that rests at the core of the CIA’s mission and the conduct of covert action—the impulse to act—that more than one critic has suggested underpins much of the CIA’s legacy.



Peter Sichel on *The Quiet Americans*

Though many books were written almost immediately after World War II about that war, it took almost 50 years for serious scholars to write well-researched books on German successes and failures, Allied successes and failures, and the horrors visited on Soviet Russia and its prime responsibility for the defeat of Nazi Germany. The best books, German, English, and Russian, have largely appeared in the last few years. It took that long to try to describe that “recent” history without giving in to the justifiable, moral outrage the subject elicited.

The same can be said about books on wartime and post-war clandestine political action and intelligence operations. Though a goodly number of books by retired intelligence officers and other authors have appeared almost from the end of WWII, they either dealt with highly sensational subjects—such as the Cambridge Russian spy

ring, with emphasis on Philby, Burgess and MacLean—or with failures of CIA—such as Tim Weiner’s *Legacy of Ashes*, which did not address successes or deal with the complexities involved in actions demanded by the executive branch of the government.

Spying and covert political actions are just a small element in the larger and more complex canvas of international relations and activity and the risk that the actions will lead to unintended consequences is high. A classic example was Britain’s view of Iran and London’s fear of being cut off from a landline to India and losing a cheap and secure supply of oil, which caused them, with US aid, to depose a democratically elected head of state in Iran. That ultimately contributed to a worse outcome in 1979, the institution of a regime led by religious zealots.^a

These complexities were recognized by Richard Bissell, the brilliant and unqualified head of the CIA clandestine services, who did not consult his deputy Richard Helms prior to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. In his memoir he wrote:

Many, probably most, successes were successes only in the short run. Arbenz, for instance, was overthrown, but the long-term problems of Guatemala were not solved. Elections were won in several countries, but political parties and political systems were not permanently rejuvenated. Most covert action operations (like military operations) are directed at short-term objectives. Their success or failure must be judged by the degree to which these objectives are achieved. Their effectiveness must be measured by the degree to which achievement of the short term objectives will contribute to the national interest. It can be argued that, although few uncompromised operations actually failed, the successful achievement of their short term results made only limited contributions to the national interest. Covert political action is therefore usually an expedient and its long term value, like that of all expedients, can be questioned.^b

What most books on intelligence and covert political action lack, is a description of all the elements that contribute to the decision of ordering political action. The public has been under the false impression that it is the

a. See Brent Geary’s review of *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Forty-Year Rivalry that Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East* on page 53.

b. Richard Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (Yale University Press, 1996), 220.

CIA that makes that decision, whereas both a large part of the collection of intelligence and all political action is undertaken if the executive branch of the government so orders. Whereas that decision might well result from deliberations of the National Security Council, it at times was ordered by the president based on the prejudice of members of his cabinet. A good example was John Foster Dulles' irrational attitude to communism or Robert Kennedy's hatred of Castro.

As a result of all these complexities, it is hard to write a book that describes not only specific operations but also how and why decisions are made and who made them. Often the operatives of the CIA are asked to act, when their own judgment does not agree with the policy of the executive charged with making the decisions. A good example is Roger Goiran, the CIA station chief in Iran at the time of Mossadegh's removal, who considered the action wrong, recognizing the danger of an Iranian drift to authoritarian rule.

Scott Anderson in his *The Quiet Americans* has anchored his story by describing four CIA officers and their involvement in various Cold War operations, both gathering intelligence and running political action operation.

He puts their action into the larger canvas of the political decisionmakers, the preconception of some of the key governmental players, and the common sense that at times was more important than intelligence provided by émigré groups. A misconception like "domino theory," so often mentioned by Eisenhower, is a good example of the degree of misjudgment of a president who made the final decision of most, if not all, political action operations, even if he denied it. By anchoring his story on four operatives, three of whom were involved in specific operations and a fourth, the chief of clandestine services during these formative years, Anderson is able to write the history of that time and the weighty decisions made by the presidents on advice of their cabinets and the National Security Council. Historical and cultural background were rarely taken into account and often economic interests of US companies were partially the motivator of actions, particularly in the Western Hemisphere.

Scott Anderson tells a good tale about many lessons never learned: that pride often is stronger than reason, and that sometimes it may make more sense to leave things as they are, instead of interfering in a process that otherwise might in the long run lead to an outcome favorable to the interests of the United States.



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