

Running head: THE QUIET AMERICAN

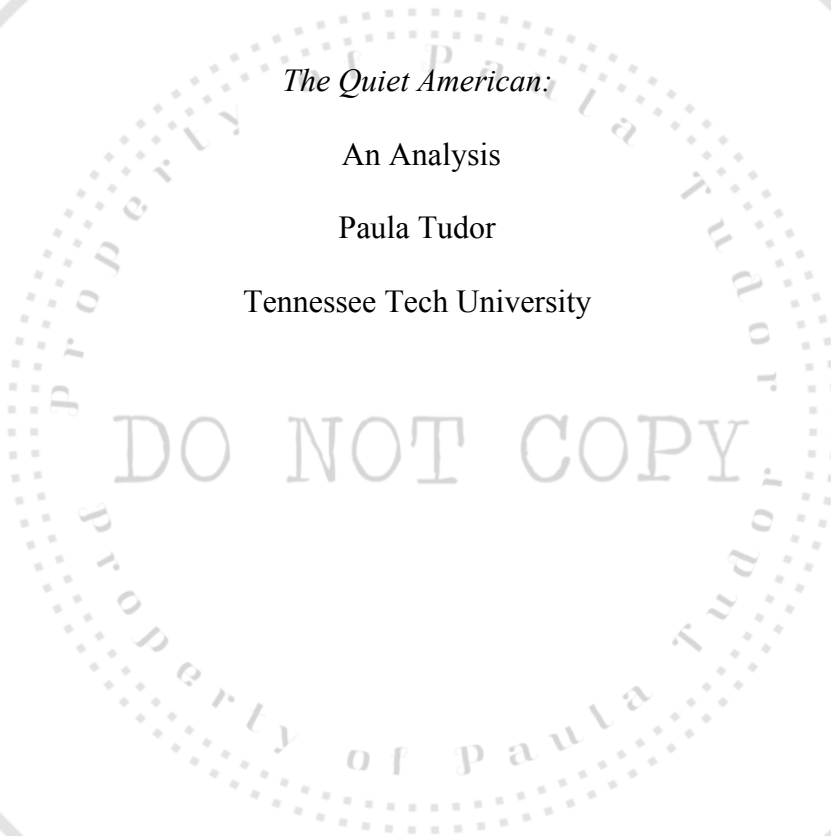
The Quiet American;

An Analysis

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As a rule, foreign correspondents often find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, facing unfamiliar situations, with only their skills and past experiences to rely on. Like most journalists, much of their work is based on gut feelings, instinct, and observations, but because they are so often immersed in cultures far different from their own, utilizing these tools is not always easy. This is certainly true of Michael Caine's character as British war correspondent Thomas Fowler in the film *The Quiet American*. Determined to stay a detached reporter observing the conflict between France and the Communists in Southeast Asia, Fowler soon finds it increasingly difficult to stay uninvolved. His fateful meeting with Alden Pyle and looming U.S. involvement in the war, make this a near impossible task, as he finds himself in one compromising situation after another (Horberg, Ahrenberg, & Noyce, 2002).

Fowler is first introduced to Pyle in Saigon, outside the Hotel Continental, and observes him reading a book called The Danger to Democracy. Pyle tells him that he is there working with the Economic Aid Mission as an eye specialist. Seeming every bit the idealist, Pyle converses with Fowler on his theories about the war and asks him a multitude of questions pertaining to Vietnam. It is clear from their first meeting that the two bonded. Only later is it revealed what this bond would ultimately cost them (Horberg et al., 2002).

Having formulated an apparent kinship, Pyle and Fowler meet again where Pyle is introduced to Fowler's young Vietnamese girlfriend, Phuong. Immediately intrigued by Phuong, this meeting would later spark a love triangle when it is revealed that Fowler is already married. In this same meeting, Fowler is introduced to Joe Tunney, a man from the American legation, who he already knows and distrusts. Fowler, who has been in Vietnam for two years, is ordered to return to London. Hoping to extend his stay, he decides to travel to Phat Diem in North

Vietnam after his assistant, Hinh, tells him that the Communists may be planning another attack there. Unbeknownst to Fowler, this decision marks the beginning of the end in his efforts to stay uninvolved. Upon reaching Phat Diem, Fowler is met by Pyle who is supposedly there to check on a location for his medical team. Along with French soldiers, they immediately encounter an area where a large group of villagers have been murdered. Fowler is automatically inclined to reject the idea that the Communists are responsible because he does not believe they would have anything to gain from this attack. This observation foreshadows Fowler's shift from detached reporter to would-be detective, as he slowly begins to realize that the situation in Vietnam is not what it appears to be (Horberg et al., 2002).

Faced with the likelihood of another attack, Fowler soon finds himself having to become more than just an observer of the war when he and Pyle are instructed to seek shelter in a bunker, and shoot themselves should they be confronted with the possibility of being captured. As the threat of attack transpires into reality, Pyle continues to share his theories on the war based on the book he has been reading about implementing a third force in Vietnam. Likewise, Fowler shares with Pyle his theory about what he perceives to be the real reason behind his unexpected trip to North Vietnam. Fowler tells him that he believes he has been sent there to gather information for Joe Tunney, an allegation that goes unaddressed by Pyle, who insists he came there to talk to Fowler about Phuong and the fact that he has fallen in love with her. It is unclear at this point in the film if Pyle is being honest or this is some sort of cover (Horberg et al., 2002).

The morning following the attack in Phat Diem, Fowler returns to Saigon, where he and Hinh witness a political rally for the formulation of a new party, led by General Thé, who has alienated both the French and the Communists. Almost by chance, Fowler notices both Pyle and

Tunney are in attendance looking rather pleased by this event. Filing this bit of information away, Fowler prepares to meet with Pyle and Phuong to discuss Pyle's declaration of love. This triangle continues to be a running theme throughout the film, one that periodically takes Fowler's attention away from his duties as a reporter. This particular meeting, however, is of little consequence because Phuong rejects Pyle, who, as a result, becomes less communicative with Fowler (Horberg et al., 2002).

Because of covering the carnage in Phat Diem, Fowler is granted an extension on his stay in Vietnam. He decides to use General Thé as the subject of his next story and tries to interview him, but when he arrives to meet with him he is denied access. Pyle, however, who is there with his medical team manages to negotiate an interview for Fowler, who angers General Thé when he asks too many questions. One question in particular proves to be too much when Fowler brings up the general's severed ties with both the French army and the Communists, and suggests his involvement in the massacre at Phat Diem. Furthermore he suggests that he and his army are being given supplies by an anonymous party. Following these accusations the general leaves the interview abruptly, thereby ending the line of questioning. After the interview Fowler notices Joe Tunney, who had apparently been listening to the interview around the corner. This immediately raises Fowler's suspicions because Pyle had just informed him that Tunney had been involved in foreign aid programs with ties to General Thé. Temporarily abandoning his policy of detachment, Fowler warns Pyle about Tunney's behavior, and Pyle asks Fowler for a ride back to Saigon. At this point in the film it is obvious that Fowler has stumbled onto an important story, but his friendship with Pyle keeps him from readily noticing every angle.

Throughout the film this friendship continues to compromise his objectivity, as he becomes increasingly involved in almost every situation he observes (Horberg et al., 2002).

As the two ride back to Saigon, Fowler's car runs out of gas and they have to seek shelter in a watch tower, which is already occupied by two armed Vietnamese soldiers. This does not present a problem until gunfire erupts near the tower and Fowler finds himself relying on Pyle to avoid capture. Pyle steals a gun from one of the soldiers, which enables him and Fowler to escape, but Fowler gets injured in the process and has to wait in hiding for Pyle to return with help. This scene shows how trusting Fowler is of Pyle, particularly when he gives him permission to go after Phuong in the event of his death. The situation with Phuong is never far from Fowler's mind no matter what situation he finds himself in, and it often seems that the ongoing conflict in Vietnam is secondary to his relationship. At times Phuong even seems to be the primary factor for Fowler to continue writing about the situation in Vietnam, as it allows him to stay there with her (Horberg et al., 2002).

Following up on his suspicions about Tunney, Fowler returns to Saigon and asks Hinh for information on him, and inquires about the possibility that Tunney is the anonymous supplier to General Thé and his army. Meanwhile, Fowler receives a letter from his wife refusing to divorce him, but he hides the letter from Phuong and tells her that she has agreed to a divorce. She soon finds out the truth, which gives Pyle another opportunity to win her affections. Once again, this seems to cause Fowler to become distracted and temporarily lose sight of the real reason he is in Saigon. Nevertheless, it does not take him long to continue investigating the connection between Tunney and the general and their joint motivations in Vietnam. When Hinh tells him that some unidentified shipments have been passing through the area without being inspected, Fowler

decides to look into the matter. He only has time to notice a few details about the shipments in question before being forced out of the warehouse where they are being held, but these details ultimately prove to be the key to breaking his story. The shipments are labeled 'Joe Tunney,' along with the mysterious word 'diolacton.' Pyle informs him that diolacton is a plastic that is made from milk and used for the manufacture of eyewear. At this point in the film, Phuong has already left Fowler for Pyle, which somehow allows him to refocus his attention on Vietnam and his articles (Horberg et al., 2002).

With renewed focus, Fowler overhears two women talking near his table outside the Hotel Continental. In the course of their conversation the women mention Tunney and remark about his instructions to leave at a particular time. As they leave their table, there is an explosion, from an apparent car bomb. Amidst the chaos, Fowler witnesses Pyle wiping blood off of his leg and speaking fluent Vietnamese. This is a crucial point in the film because Pyle made it clear early on that he spoke very little Vietnamese. This fact immediately makes Fowler turn his suspicions toward Pyle, perhaps for the first time throughout the entire film. He instinctively researches casein plastics, perhaps realizing there may be a connection between the explosion and the mysterious diolacton. It does not take him long to find that casein plastics are indeed milk-based and are referred to as diolacton, which is used to make explosives. Based on this information Fowler deduces that the United States are likely furnishing General Thé's army with supplies to aid in the formation of a third force in Vietnam, something that Pyle had been advocating. Then Hinh informs him that he believes Pyle is a CIA agent and tells him he has Communist contacts that want to ask Pyle a few questions. He instructs Fowler to ask him to dinner so that he will come alone, but it is clear that Fowler still feels a certain loyalty to Pyle

and is apprehensive about negotiating this interrogation. Hinh tells him that he will have someone stand outside his apartment window and instructs him to open a book in front of the window if he decides to invite Pyle to dinner. Still unsure, Fowler decides to invite Pyle to his apartment to see if he can explain the explosion outside the hotel. This meeting makes any chance for detachment an impossibility, as Fowler becomes a part of his own story (Horberg et al., 2002).

Inside Fowler's apartment Pyle makes him question everything that has happened throughout their entire relationship. Pyle tells Fowler that he thought his life was in danger following the interview with General Thé, which is why he wanted to ride back to Saigon with him. He also tells him that the United States has been using the general to launch attacks so they can pin it on Communism and gain congressional support for U. S. involvement in the war. And even though he assures him that the situation with Phuong was real and not a cover, Fowler still feels betrayed and ultimately decides to set him up for the interrogation with the Communists. Up until this point in the film, Fowler has been able to convince himself that he could stay neutral. He believed he could carry on some sort of friendship with Pyle, while being able to remain objective enough to write about the war. This meeting changed all of that and Fowler is forced to decide how much he is willing for his friendship with Pyle to cost him (Horberg et al., 2002).

At the restaurant Fowler sees Pyle in the distance, walking with his dog. Pyle appears to sense that someone is following him, but he does not have time to react before being dragged off by four armed men. They take him to a remote location where he immediately tries to escape. Meanwhile, Fowler appears to have second thoughts about setting Pyle up and leaves his table to

search for him. Pyle is eventually able to break free from his captors, but as he is running he turns a corner and finds Hinh standing there with a knife, who stabs him then gives orders for the other men to dump his body in the river. Fowler is later questioned as a possible accomplice in the murder after it is discovered that he lied about Pyle being at his apartment that day and requested a table for one at the restaurant where he was supposed to meet Pyle. Fowler is eliminated as a suspect as quickly as if Pyle had never existed, allowing Fowler to turn his attention toward winning back Phuong. Fowler tells her that he has decided to stay with her in Vietnam indefinitely, and as the film ends Fowler's articles are seen depicting the increased involvement of the United States in the war. It is also clear that he feels somewhat remorseful about what he allowed to happen to Pyle, as is evident by his apology to Phuong for his demise. Perhaps this remorse is the real reason behind his willingness to stay in Vietnam. It is possible he realizes that he has become far too involved in the culture and the war to ever return home (Horberg et al., 2002).

When this film begins, Fowler's only intentions are to report the news as is, without ever formulating an opinion or becoming involved in the Southeast Asian conflict in any way. Despite his best efforts he is unable to maintain this neutrality, particularly after he meets Pyle and their lives become intertwined. Virtually every situation he finds himself in is somehow linked to Pyle, and by extension his friendship with him. Fowler soon finds it impossible to maintain his role as a war correspondent, as he is forced to make decisions he would likely have never been faced with otherwise. With every impossible decision Fowler encounters, he becomes less a detached reporter until it is difficult to discern between his stories and his life in Vietnam (Horberg et al., 2002).

References

Horberg, W., & Ahrenberg, S. (Producers), & Noyce, P. (Director). (2002). *The Quiet American* [Motion picture]. United States: Miramax Films.

