

# The Ideal Approach to Idealism

By Teresa Xu

As the Cold War progressed, the focus of American foreign policy expanded to include Southeast Asia – as did the scope of foreign policy failures (Hunt 11). These failures intensified fears that the Soviet Union was winning the Cold War and inspired literature criticizing American foreign policy in Asia. Two such literary works are *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene and *The Ugly American* by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick. Both explore American identity in the Cold War, the former by criticizing the motivations and actions of one American, the latter by juxtaposing the beliefs and actions of various Americans to recommend an approach to Cold War success. Both suggest that being American means idealizing freedom, but how Americans pursue these ideals – a forceful approach versus a cooperative one – diverges because the assumptions that underlie this idealism are different. While Greene suggests that Americans are guided by a notion of superiority, Lederer and Burdick imply that Americans can be respectful and perceive others as equals.

In both novels, Americans believe that freedom constitutes an ideal life. In *The Quiet American*, Pyle values freedom of thought, fearing that under communism, the Vietnamese would not “be allowed to think for themselves” (Greene 87). Likewise, in *The Ugly American*, Father Finian

---

[SCAFFOLD: A SHOWCASE OF VANDERBILT FIRST-YEAR WRITING](#) | Vol. 2 | Spring 2020

*Scaffold* is a digital collection of first-year writing curated by the [Vanderbilt Writing Studio](#). By pairing each piece in the collection with a recorded reflection from the author, *Scaffold* aims to highlight the developing writing processes and learning experiences so central to the growth of undergraduate writers. We hope it acts as a future learning resource for students and instructors alike. Visit [Scaffold's website](#) to listen to the authors reflect and learn more about our review process.

*The copyright to this work rests with the author. Proper attribution required. Vanderbilt retains a non-exclusive right to distribute the work as part of this collection.*

values freedom of religion, believing that “the important thing...is a country where any man may worship and live as he wishes” (Lederer and Burdick 55). In these instances, Pyle and Finian oppose communism specifically because they believe it forbids freedom of thought and religion, indicating not only that they value freedom but also that this belief is so strong, it informs their other opinions and actions. Although freedom of thought and religion are slightly different – religion refers to only a specific kind of thought and lifestyle – they both fall under the umbrella concept of freedom, and freedom of religion necessitates freedom of thought. Therefore, Greene, Lederer, and Burdick similarly suggest that idealizing freedom is central to American identity in the Cold War.

Both books further imply that Americans value freedom in not only an abstract but also a material sense – an ideal life includes a particular capitalistic lifestyle, encompassing efficiency and other virtues of modernization. Pyle’s vision of a “decent life” (Greene 124) includes “a car for [oneself] and the newest television set” (Greene 124), indicating a preference for technological advancement. Similarly, in *The Ugly American*, Homer “says that in America one of the best things that can happen to engineers...is to be allowed to sell what they make” (Lederer and Burdick 229), signifying a desire for a free market. These instances speak to the American value of freedom: having a car for oneself suggests autonomy, being allowed to sell what one makes suggests choice, and both imply ownership. Although the novels criticize American materialism rather than supporting it, with Fowler mocking Pyle’s ideal lifestyle (Greene 124) and Magsaysay criticizing Americans’ “big cars” (Lederer and Burdick 108), they still suggest that valuing material freedom and comforts is part of American identity, and even American materialism stems from a desire for freedom. Therefore, both novels imply that rather than

valuing freedom in only an abstract, political sense, the American definition of freedom has material manifestations. Americans have a specific modern, capitalistic lifestyle in mind when envisioning the ideal life.

However, in the novels, Americans undertake different approaches in pursuit of their ideals. Pyle imposes his ideals by force, while characters in *The Ugly American* lead by example with a cooperative approach. Pyle's desire to bring freedom to Vietnam manifests itself in a determination to defeat the communists and forge a 'Third Force' – neither communist nor colonial – at all costs, as he believes both communism and colonialism contradict his ideals. Determining that Vietnam's 'Third Force' should be General Thé's Caodaists, he supports the group's terrorist endeavors by setting off a bomb (Greene 154). Rather than allowing the Vietnamese to choose between communism, colonialism, and a supposed 'Third Force', Pyle makes the decision for them. Therefore, his approach to idealism is forceful and violent.

In contrast, attempts to bring freedom to Asia in *The Ugly American* are peaceful, cooperative, and pedagogic. Finian believes the defeat of Burma's Communist Party is necessary for freedom of worship, but he pursues this abstract freedom using words, not force. He discusses strategy with Burmans who already share his Catholic faith and American ideals, so the locals are not forced into compliance, and although Finian leads their strategy discussion, he never offers his own suggestions (Lederer and Burdick 53). Furthermore, their chosen strategy of publishing and disseminating a newspaper to the rest of the Anthkata province, which exposes the weaknesses of communist ideology, is nonviolent.

Attempts to spread capitalistic material freedom in *The Ugly American* are similarly cooperative and nonviolent. Homer cooperates with Sarkhanese locals to help them live more

efficiently via technological advancement. Although Homer proposes the idea of a bicycle-powered water pump, he develops the product with Jeepo, a Sarkhanese mechanic, and allows Jeepo the final say in its design (Lederer and Burdick 216). The Martins lead by example, promoting their efficient lifestyle by simply living it – they would show curious onlookers their “small home canning outfit” (Lederer and Burdick 150), and if Burmans wished to adopt the system, the Martins would teach them. In these instances, the locals are able to choose whether or not to adopt American ideals. Even when Americans in *The Ugly American* do attempt to impose their ideals instead of cooperating with locals, “telling the [locals]...what kind of equipment they ought to spend their money on” and bringing offensive “brochures [and] movies” (Lederer and Burdick 149), the Americans’ approaches are nonviolent in nature. Therefore, although Americans in both novels actively spread their ideals, Greene suggests that they do so by force, not example, whereas Lederer and Burdick suggest the opposite.

The stark contrast in how Americans approach idealism stems from differences in the assumptions guiding the characters’ actions. Despite sharing a vision of what constitutes an ideal life, they hold different beliefs about the status and role of Americans. Greene suggests that in response to the new environment of Asia, Americans cling to a notion of superiority and display arrogance and disrespect towards Asians, whereas Lederer and Burdick suggest that Americans can be “friendly, unassuming, and interested in the world” (Lederer and Burdick 145), perceiving Asians as equals and being receptive to different ideas.

Pyle believes that only American ideals are correct and only Americans can pursue them successfully – “England and France...couldn’t expect to win the confidence of the

Asiatics...America came in now" (Greene 115). In this instance, Pyle implies that America can bring freedom even when its allies cannot, indicating an underlying assumption of American superiority. This perceived superiority leads Pyle to patronize the Vietnamese as "childlike" (Greene 168), unable to realize the ideal path for their country and instead dependent on American guidance. Due to this dismissal of Vietnamese autonomy and ability, Pyle makes no attempt to learn their language or understand their true situation. Instead, he projects his ideals onto them, assuming that "they don't want communism" (Greene 86). Guided by these assumptions of American superiority and Vietnamese inferiority, Pyle uses violence to force his ideals onto the Vietnamese. However, by undermining Vietnamese autonomy, Pyle contradicts the very ideal of freedom that he pursues.

Conversely, Lederer and Burdick suggest that in the new cultural context of the Cold War, Americans are able to open their minds to Asian language and culture and accept the people as equals. Although some Americans in *The Ugly American* share Pyle's assumptions of superiority, the authors use these characters as counterexamples to suggest that Americans can move beyond arrogance and disrespect and instead embrace equality and respect. For instance, Joe Bing asserts that "it's better to make the Asians learn English" (Lederer and Burdick 81), indicating a belief in the superiority of America's language and echoing Pyle's belief that the Vietnamese have nothing to offer and everything to learn. In contrast to Joe and Pyle, Bob Maile believes he is "getting more than...giving" (Lederer and Burdick 72) from Setkyans. Joe and Bob contrast sharply in both the beliefs they hold and the outcomes they bring – Joe fails to spread American ideals, making the Setkyans "embarrassed" and deterring them from attending American parties (Lederer and Burdick 69), whereas

Bob succeeds, teaching the Setkyans how to “take candid pictures” (Lederer and Burdick 72) and becoming the most respected, “best known American” in Setkya (Lederer and Burdick 73). As such, Bob’s open-mindedness, humility, and propensity to kindness are emphasized as qualities that constitute American identity, while Joe’s arrogance and failure reinforce Bob’s humility and success.

Lederer and Burdick further imply that with Bob’s qualities, Americans can make the effort to learn local languages and understand their cultures and true situations. The characters who do not make this effort demonstrate that a lack of cultural and linguistic understanding leads Americans to incorrectly assume, like Pyle, that American ideals are ideal everywhere: “usually the first thing a...USIS official does is...start making big plans for [Burma] – without knowing anything about it” (Lederer and Burdick 71). In doing so, they fail to raise American prestige or earn Asian sympathy – locals scorn and avoid them, citing their forceful behavior as “a pain in the neck” (Lederer and Burdick 71). The opposite occurs for Homer, who learns Sarkhan’s language (Lederer and Burdick 219). Rather than making arrogant, ignorant presumptions, Homer believes locals themselves should decide what works best for them, and he accepts that this may not align with American assumptions. Accordingly, Homer scraps his original pump design because Jeepo notes that “it will not be...sensible...for [Sarkhan]” (Lederer and Burdick 222). By respecting the locals’ authority and autonomy, Homer successfully brings material freedom – modern efficiency – to Sarkhan, as the bicycle-powered water pump he and Jeepo invent allows locals to collect water more effectively without incurring additional costs (Lederer and Burdick 225). Again, the contrast in belief and outcome between characters in *The Ugly American* who do not learn local languages or respect local

autonomy, and those who do, serves to accentuate the authors' suggestion that American identity can constitute respect and understanding, with the failure of the former reinforcing the success of the latter.

Ultimately, guided by such assumptions of Asian equality and American fallibility, some Americans in *The Ugly American* successfully adopt a nonviolent, cooperative, and pedagogic approach to spread their ideals to Asia – and unlike Pyle's case, this approach aligns with freedom. Therefore, the novels' different approaches to idealism indicate differences in the assumptions guiding characters' actions. Both novels base American identity in the Cold War on how Americans respond to a new cultural context. However, while Greene suggests that Americans cling to notions of superiority, resulting in disrespect towards Asians and forceful actions, Lederer and Burdick suggest that Americans can embrace concepts of equality, leading to respect towards locals and cooperative actions.

Therefore, the novels' representations of American identity in the Cold War are similar because both suggest that being American means sharing an ideal of freedom, but while Greene implies that this idealism takes on a violent, forceful approach, Lederer and Burdick imply that its approach is cooperative and pedagogic. These contrasting approaches are informed by different assumptions about America's status in the world – to what extent Americans are superior to and should respect Asians. Yet despite this divergence in their depictions of American identity in the Cold War, the novels converge in their implications for American foreign policy. Although Greene suggests that idealism cannot bring Cold War success, whereas Lederer and Burdick suggest that idealism will work if Americans lose their ignorance, disrespect, and apathy, the authors agree that failure to understand the Asian

situation—languages, cultures, and true desires—will result in continued failure of American foreign policy, and idealism will not revive it. To win hearts and minds, Americans must open their hearts and minds.

## WORKS CITED

Greene, Graham. *The Quiet American*. Penguin Books, 2004.

Lederer, William J., and Eugene Burdick. *The Ugly American*.  
Norton, 1965.