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Art imitates life: Edward G. Landsdale and the fiction of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the adaptation of an historical person, the Air-Force officer and CIA operative named Edward G. Landsdale, as a model for fictional characters in three novels – English, American, and French – dealing with the early years of the American involvement in Vietnam. Landsdale's political career and the historical background of his contribution to the creation of the anti-Communist state of South Vietnam is outlined, followed by an examination of his fictionalization in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955), Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer's *The Ugly American* (1958), and Jean Lartéguy's *Yellow Fever* (Eng. Transl. 1965). It is seen that Greene's model is disputed, while all three novels actually underestimate Landsdale's historical importance.

Key words: Graham Greene, Edward Landsdale, historical fictionalization.

RESUMO. A arte imita a vida: Edward G. Landsdale e a ficção da guerra de Vietnã. Neste artigo, examina-se a adaptação de uma pessoa histórica, o oficial da Força Aérea e agente da CIA Edward G. Landsdale, como modelo para personagens ficcionais em três romances – um inglês, um americano e um francês – que abordam os primeiros anos do envolvimento americano no Vietnã. É delineada sua carreira política, bem como os antecedentes históricos de sua contribuição para a criação do Estado anticomunista do Vietnã do Sul. Em seguida, faz-se um estudo de sua ficcionalização em *The Quiet American*, de Graham Greene (1955), *The Ugly American* (1958), de Eugene Burdick e William J. Lederer, e *Yellow Fever*, de Jean Lartéguy (Tradução inglesa de 1965). Observa-se que o modelo de Greene é questionado, enquanto todos os três romances, na verdade, subestimam a importância histórica de Landsdale.

Palavras-chave: Graham Greene, Edward Landsdale, ficcionalização histórica.

Introduction

Edward Landsdale and the history of Vietnam

Edward G. Landsdale was one of those men of action, usually described as 'flamboyant', who seem as fantastic as any fictional character – an example of the type novelist Philip Roth once complained about: a character thrown up every day by the American newspapers that would be the envy of any novelist. Roth's question 'Can anybody have imagined him if he did not really exist?' referred to Richard Nixon but is even more pertinent to Landsdale, who seems to have inspired several fictional character in the early narrative literature of the Vietnam War, but was in fact far more influential in supporting the American effort in Vietnam than any of his fictional counterparts turned out to be.

After the Second World War, when the French colonial army was allowed by the Allies to regain control of Hanoi, the Communist Viet Minh forces faded back into their bases in the countryside to fight an eight-year-long guerrilla war of resistance to

French control, which was eventually successful at the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954). Meanwhile, as a result of its effort to halt Communist advances in Southeast Asia, the US recognized the French puppet emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai (February 1950), and thus became an adversary of the Viet Minh leader, Ho Chi Minh. The political choice to support anti-Communist foreign leaders, however weak or corrupt, sadly reflected an ideological project in which anti-Communism was equated with patriotic Americanism, fulfilled at home by Senator McCarthy's attacks against individuals and institutions, even the American government itself.

The imbalance of power in Indochina was evident by 1954, by which time the Viet Minh were in military and political control of most of Vietnam, while in the chaotic situation following the defeat of the French and the migration southward of Catholics and non-Communists after the division of the country, the southern leader Ngo Dinh Diem barely controlled the city of Saigon (YOUNG,

1991). American leaders thought that an expert in handling Communist Asian revolutionaries might be useful to the beleaguered Diem. The chosen expert turned out to be Landsdale, a Lieutenant Colonel (eventually, Major General) in the US Air Force, who was on loan to the CIA as an operative in Vietnam since the early Fifties. Landsdale was both instrumental in convincing President Eisenhower that the US should support South Vietnam against a Communist take-over and indispensable in maintaining Ngo Dinh Diem in power. With American support, Premier and Defense Minister Diem deposed Bao Dai but adopted his imperial flag.

Arriving in Vietnam on June 1, 1954, a day that the Viet Minh celebrated their victory over the French by blowing up an ammunition dump, and (as Landsdale himself noted) “rocking Saigon throughout the night” (GETTLEMAN et al., 1995, p. 83). Landsdale commanded the top-secret Saigon Military Mission in that year, which was intended to harass Hanoi’s government. He tried to install resistance teams in the north to delay the consolidation of that part of the country, an effort that was largely unsuccessful, while he backed the Catholic Diem’s repressive non-Communist regime in the south. By the time of the Geneva deadline prohibiting the introduction of additional military personnel into either side of the country, Landsdale’s teams were already active in ‘paramilitary operations’ and ‘psychological warfare’, i.e. perpetrating acts of sabotage and spreading misinformation in both north and south. The sabotage activities included destroying government printing presses and pouring contaminants into bus motors to undermine the transportation system. Misinformation included the distribution of leaflets about harsh government measures in the north, and a successful rumor campaign that the US would support a new war employing atomic weapons – a rumor that greatly added to the flow of refugees to the south, many of whom, already encouraged by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and organized by Landsdale’s teams, were transported in US Navy ships in an ‘exodus’ of one million Catholics (SHEEHAN et al., 1971). A fictionalized version of the exodus may be found in a fascinating but relatively unknown novel called *The Journey of Tao Kim Nam* (BOSSE, 1959).

Landsdale was a former advertising executive who had served in the OSS (predecessor of the CIA) during the Second World War and later went to the Philippines as counsel to Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay, whom he aided in a successful counter-revolutionary repression of the Communist Huk insurgency movement and later helped to become

president. Besides his skills in unconventional warfare, Landsdale was evidently a man who could gain the friendship and confidence of Asian leaders. It was his intention to make Diem a progressive, non-Communist national hero on the model of Magsaysay and turn the Vietnam of the Sixties into another Philippines of the Fifties, and he was sent to Vietnam by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to carry out that mission (GETTLEMAN et al., 1995). The difficulty with this plan was that the Americanized Philippines, a former US colony that had granted long leases to US military bases in exchange for independence in 1946, was a very different country from Vietnam, which throughout its history had resisted all foreign presence (SHEEHAN, 1989). Similarly, the deeply suspicious, autocratic, and unpopular Diem was a very different man from the honest, charismatic Magsaysay.

Landsdale, nevertheless, was a tireless defender of what he hoped would be a popular ‘Third Force’ government in South Vietnam, neither colonialist nor Communist. He became Diem’s best American friend (he actually lived in the presidential palace), mentor, and champion, indispensable for keeping the regime in power, although he was ultimately unsuccessful in persuading the arrogant Diem to personify the Third Force ideal. In November 1954, Landsdale ‘single-handedly’ stopped a *coup d’état* of Bao Dai’s officers (HERRING, 1986) and the following year he ‘masterminded’ the campaign that subdued the military arms of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects (SHEEHAN, 1989).

By April 1955, however, Dulles was ready to dump Diem, as the French also wanted, but Landsdale lied to Diem about Dulles’s intention to replace him, believing that with his help Diem could do the job of running the country and opposing the Communists. The French, who still had 75,000 troops in South Vietnam, did not intervene for fear of upsetting the US, but they supported the sects clandestinely in order to oppose Diem, a situation that is fictionalized in Jean Lartéguy’s novel *Yellow Fever* (LARTÉGUY, 1965). To make his protégé, Diem, appear more convincingly a leader, Landsdale persuaded him to counter-attack the Binh Xuyen, not a religious sect but a powerful criminal organization that also had a private army. With Landsdale’s auxiliary force to help him, Diem’s troops defeated the Binh Xuyen on the streets of Saigon in April 1955, Dulles thereupon countermanded his earlier order and the cable urging Diem’s removal was burned (FITZGERALD, 1970). Thanks to Landsdale, the

US was now solidly behind Diem as the South Vietnamese leader. Landsdale 'sealed the commitment' by rigging the plebiscite that deposed Bao Dai and declared Diem President of the Republic of Vietnam (SHEEHAN, 1989; SCHULZINGER, 1997). Had Dulles followed Ambassador Lawton Collins's advice to get rid of Diem, the subsequent history of Vietnam, and that of the United States, might have been very different. The French would have sooner or later given up Vietnam to the Communists without the losses of the ill-advised American intervention (SHEEHAN, 1989).

Landsdale was also adept at courting American leaders. He was a favorite of President Kennedy, who received him at the White House only a few days after the inauguration. Advisor Walt W. Rostow gave Landsdale's report on the current situation in Vietnam to the president, which he read 'with horrified fascination'. The report predicted a Vietcong offensive before the end of the year that could, in Landsdale's view, be checked by a vigorous American effort. Kennedy urged McGeorge Bundy of the National Security Council to get the story of Landsdale's anti-Communist exploits in the Philippines published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, presumably to publicize him as a heroic figure in the struggle against Communist tyranny (SCHULZINGER, 1997; HERRING, 1986). As Fitzgerald puts it, Landsdale had

[...] faith in his own good motives [...] a man who believed that Communism in Asia would crumble before men of goodwill with some concern for 'the little guy' and the proper counterinsurgency skills (FITZGERALD, 1970, p. 78).

After the humiliation at Cuba's Bay of Pigs, Kennedy put Landsdale in charge of another secret operation, code-named Mongoose, to eliminate Fidel Castro – yet another failure.

In October 1961, Kennedy sent Landsdale along on General Maxwell Taylor's mission to Vietnam to evaluate what American forces there could accomplish. This crucial mission of Kennedy's pro-war supporters resulted in the so-called Taylor Report, which would eventually be adopted as policy. It advised an increase in the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and the introduction of an American military task force (SCHULZINGER, 1997). Landsdale was therefore directly influential in bringing about the American War in Vietnam, both in his advisory capacity to the American leadership and through his influence on Diem in Vietnam. As Sheehan has succinctly put it, "South Vietnam, it can be truly said, was the creation of Edward Landsdale" (SHEEHAN, 1989, p. 138).

Landsdale as Graham Greene's Alden Pyle

When the first important novel in English about Vietnam was written, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (GREENE, 1955), the United States had not yet arrived there in force, although at one point the protagonist watches American equipment being unloaded on the Saigon docks. The novel's is set in Saigon in the final years of French colonial rule in Indochina (1951-1952). Most critics have assumed that Landsdale was the model for Greene's title character, but, it must be admitted, the novel offers a fictional portrayal of a less flamboyant early American adventurer, Alden Pyle, who does not resemble Landsdale in many ways. If the title of Charles Currey's biography *Edward Landsdale: The Unquiet American* (CURREY, 1988), for example, pays homage to Greene's character, it also suggests that the man was quite unlike the fictional character. The entry on Green's novel in the *Vietnam Encyclopedia* claims that Pyle is a "composite" figure, blending Landsdale with Leo Hochstetter, a member of the American legation in Saigon (TUCKER, 2000), while Judith Adamson, in her critical study of Greene, argues that the real-life model for Pyle was an American attached to an economic aid mission (perhaps Hochstetter, although he is not explicitly named), who once shared a room with Greene and lectured him on the necessity of creating a 'Third Force' in Vietnam that he thought might be led by the self-styled General Thé, "as happens in the novel" (GREENE, 1988 apud PRATT, 1996, p. 481). Greene himself commented on this encounter in his memoir *Ways of Escape* (1980); he assumed that the man in question worked for the CIA but noted that his "companion bore no resemblance at all to Pyle, the quiet American of my story – he was a man of more intelligence and less innocence" (GREENE, 1980 apud PRATT, 1996, p. 321).

The long-running controversy over a positive identification of Landsdale as Pyle is perhaps best illustrated by John Clark Pratt, who, in an early commentary on Vietnam War fiction, wrote that Landsdale was "unmistakably modelled on Landsdale", who was also the model for "a major character" in at least two other novels (PRATT, 1987, p. 126). In a footnote, Pratt added that "Landsdale believes he was the model", perhaps because in 1983, he told Pratt (who was also a Lieutenant-Colonel in the US Air-Force) that he thought he was the model, noting that both he and Pyle had dogs. In his Introduction to the Viking Critical Edition of Greene's novel (1996), however, Pratt points out that the historical context of the novel, the years 1951-1952, predates Landsdale's

actual arrival in Vietnam: one month (incognito) in June 1953, and then the two years that he headed the SMM in 1954-56 (PRATT, 1996).

Greene, for his part, always denied that he knew Landsdale personally, commenting in an interview for the *British Sunday Telegraph* (in 1975) that he had never had the misfortune to meet him. Of course, Greene would not have to have actually met Landsdale in order to use him as a fictional model, only to have heard about him, but it is not altogether certain that the two men – despite Greene's denial – did not meet. Pratt cites a letter from Landsdale (apparently addressed to him) in which he mentions that the French hated the Cao Daist General Thé (who goes by his real name in the novel), for having had the popular French General Chanson killed: "I was his [Thé's] American friend and the French used to mock me about him *in the presence of Greene*" (PRATT, 1996, p. xv, emphasis added). In an interview with his biographer Currey, Landsdale mentions at least one episode when this happened, recalling that a group of French officers, with Greene among them, booed him at the Continental Hotel. And yet, as Pratt notes, even this evidence is suspect, because Landsdale did not actually meet Thé until 1954, by which time Greene had left Vietnam and was already at work on the novel (PRATT, 1996).

If the Landsdale-Pyle mystery will never be completely solved, it is likely that its origins have arisen from the legendary character of Landsdale's

[...] exploits in the Philippines and Vietnam after World War II [which] have provided not only historians but also journalists, novelists and filmmakers with material for their countless stories and myths (NASHEL, 1994 apud PRATT, 1996, p. 313).

That is to say, Landsdale's exploits, not the man himself, may have served as any number of fictional models. Pratt neatly sums up both the inconclusiveness of the evidence and its ultimate insignificance when he comments that "given the outcome of the American presence in Vietnam, perhaps Landsdale *should* have been the model after all" (PRATT, 1996, p. xv, his emphasis) – a recognition of Landsdale's mythical, even metonymical presence in Vietnam for the Americans who came later. Decades after its publication, *The Quiet American* has continued to amaze readers with its prophetic vision of the disruptive American presence in Vietnam, which would only gradually be recorded in fiction and non-fiction by American writers. Critics have accordingly celebrated the novel's "prescience" as well as its artistry (MILLER, 1990, p. 106).

In Greene's novel, the (supposed) Landsdale

character is one Alden Pyle, an earnest young man from Boston, who claims to be working for a medical mission in Saigon, which is only a cover for his covert operations for the CIA. The title of the novel, therefore, in one sense refers to Pyle's need for secrecy. He also pretends to speak neither French nor Vietnamese, but, as it turns out, speaks fluent Vietnamese. Although quiet in the sense of being shy and reserved, as contrasted with the loud and vulgar members of the US press corps, Pyle is very talkative with the protagonist, Thomas Fowler, a jaded English journalist, especially when expounding his political theories. Both men also compete for the love of the beautiful Vietnamese woman, Phuong, Fowler's mistress. Pyle wants to extract her from his friend's influence, marry her and take her to the US.

Beyond the love triangle, I would interpret the conflict between these three characters as representative of the geopolitical situation, a "metonym", as Miller (1990, p. 109) puts it "for a larger struggle". Phuong represents Vietnam, more cunning than supposed, between the competitive western powers, with Fowler as the representative of European colonialism (he is sympathetic to the French throughout) using Vietnam for his own benefit (Phuong gives him sex and opium) but loath to give up possession, while Pyle, representing the US, wants to save her from colonialism and take possession himself. Pyle is inspired in this imperialist project by the works of an intellectual, York Harding, who champions a 'Third Force' or national party that is neither colonialist nor Communist and that will be willing to fight the Vietminh to ensure an American-style democracy in a united Vietnam. Harding may be based on a professor of political science at Michigan State, Wesley Fischel, a friend of Diem and Landsdale, who proposed such a plan to combat Communism in Vietnam. Harding and his young disciple Pyle, now in the field in Southeast Asia to implement the master's theories, base their plans of action on the Domino Theory – the belief that the fall of Indochina to Communism would bring about the immediate collapse of other neighboring nations, a theory that was in fact the basis of American policy. Where Harding and Pyle, and by implication, the American leadership went wrong is in their assumption that they would succeed where the French failed.

Pyle means to implement his plan through the use of General Thé (a historical figure), who was the former Chief of Staff for the Cao Dai religious sect and the leader of their small army. In a terrorist

bombing of the crowded center of Saigon, where over fifty people, including a number of women and children, are killed, the novel again shows its prescience in these times of cruel acts of terrorism. This particular act of provocation was planned by Pyle and blamed on the Communists in order to discredit them. At this point, Fowler, leaves off his neutral stance toward the conflict and makes the decision to help assassinate his friend, Pyle, who, for his part, is not even repentant of the bombing and still believes General Thé can be of use in his nation-building project. Historically, the American leadership depended on Diem to hold off the Communists even knowing that his regime was brutally repressive.

In his introduction to the 1973 edition, Greene rebutted accusations that American responsibility for the terrorist bombing had never been proved. He evidently intended that his novel expose the dangers of so-called 'American innocence', although that phrase has surely been overused in critical and cultural discourse. American policy in Vietnam, after all, was not the result of ignorance or innocence, as even Greene seemed to think, but was based on a series of decisions and deliberate actions intended to establish an American-run regime in a divided southeast Asian country. It was, as Neilson (1998, p. 87-88) puts it, "a logical and necessary means of maintaining capitalist hegemony", as Landsdale himself surely knew.

Landsdale as Antidote to the Ugly American

A character of another American novel has a greater claim to be based on Edward Landsdale although the novel as a work of literature is forgettable: William J. Lederer's and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American* (1958), a bestseller adapted for the cinema, which is actually a polemic barely disguised as fiction. The two authors were, in fact, real-life counterparts of Greene's fictitious York Harding, typical anti-Communist, liberal Sixties' intellectuals: Lederer was a consultant to the commander of the Navy's Pacific Fleet and Burdick was an academic specialist in Southeast Asia at the University of California, Berkeley (SCHULZINGER, 1997). It has been since observed that the novel accurately reflects Cold War thinking of the time. The Cold Warrior Jack Kennedy, while still a senator but with his eye on the White House, distributed copies of the novel to other senators.

As an example of how fact often copies fiction, *The Ugly American*, whose title obviously plays on Greene's, was extremely influential in shaping actual political policy. Schulzinger (1997) even compares

the novel's influence on the Vietnam War to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) on the American Civil War. Like Stowe, whose novel helped spread anti-slavery sentiment throughout the country, Lederer and Burdick's work is meant to spread anti-Communist sentiment. Like Stowe's work as well, it is a polemic against a godless enemy.

The novel itself is episodic, consisting of a series of fictional portraits of Americans in 'Sarkhan' (Vietnam). The so-called 'Ugly Americans' are those unprepared for their mission abroad, unlike the true adversaries, the Soviet Union, whose representatives are shown to be doing everything right. The isolationism, monolingualism, and general political ignorance of the countries they work in are the reasons for these foreign service professionals to be losing the Cold War, as shown by a number of negative examples. On the other hand, there are counter-examples of dedicated Americans who are doing the right thing, according to the authors: men and women who manage to be both idealistic and pragmatic, sincere in their efforts to help Asians (the book is extremely condescending in its cultural attitudes) and in the course of their work incidentally improving the image of the US in foreign lands. There seems to be no awareness on the part of the authors that anti-Americanism might have an actual basis in political and economic oppression.

The Landsdale character is called 'Hillandale' in the novel and is one of the well-intentioned Americans determined to do good in Asia, in this case, the Philippines. The authors also seem unaware that Colonel Hillandale is a caricature of Colonel Landsdale. He is, for example, called the 'six-foot Swami from Savannah' and goes in for occult sciences (palmistry and astrology). He also studies the Tagalog language at the university and is popular with both common people and politicians, including Ramon Magsaysay, but the state personnel and embassy officials (i.e. the 'ugly' Americans) think, with some justification, that he is a lunatic. To ensure support for Magsaysay in the upcoming presidential election, Hillandale goes alone by motorcycle to a province where "the Communist propagandists had done too good a job" (BURDICK; LEDERER, 1958, p. 93), plays favorite Filipino tunes on his harmonica, and talks genially to the potentially hostile crowd and manages to convince it to turn out for a 95% victory in the province for Magsaysay and his pro-American platform.

In the second episode in which Hillandale is involved, he is equally imaginative but less successful. On loan from the Filipinos to Sarkhan, he is invited to the Philippine Ambassador's dinner party in 'Haidho', the Sarkhanese capital, where he

is asked by the ambassador to entertain the guests by reading their palms while the chef makes his final preparations. The American embassy's *chargé d'affaires*, is contemptuous and sarcastic about 'vaudeville [i.e. parlor] tricks' at a diplomatic reception, but Hillandale shuts him up by revealing some embarrassing things about his past. The Prime Minister, impressed by this exhibition, asks to have his own palm read in private, which is to be done a day or two after the proper protocol has been observed. The embassy official, who is responsible for this contact, simply ignores it and thereby both insults the Filipinos and causes Hillandale to lose an opportunity to tell the King that the 'stars' have advised troops be sent on maneuvers to the northern border, where Chinese Communist troops have massed (Hillandale is also an astrologer, with a degree from 'Chungking School of Occult Sciences'). The opportunity for American influence has thus been lost, for one of the 'ugly Americans' has undone the efforts of someone who understands the 'Asian mind' enough to use astrology for his purposes.

As Landsdale's pupil and admirer, John Vann, once said, in another example of unconscious condescension: "Landsdale understood that Asians were people, that you could discern their desires and play upon those desires to your advantage" (SHEEHAN, 1989, p. 42). Interestingly enough, Landsdale did make opportunistic use of astrology in his misinformation campaign in North Vietnam. One of his clandestine tactics for harassing the Hanoi government and encouraging emigration to the South was bribing astrologers to make the desired predictions. In the words of the *Pentagon Papers*:

In the South, the team hired Vietnamese astrologers – in whose art many Asians place great trust – to compile almanacs bearing dire predictions for the Vietminh and good omens for the new Government of Premier Diem (SHEEHAN et al., 1971, p. 17).

Landsdale as *bête noir*

In the last fictional work to be discussed, a French novel about the early phase of the war, Jean Lartéguy's *La Mal Jaune* (1962) – published in English as *Yellow Fever* (1965) – Colonel Landsdale becomes the sinister Colonel Teryman (Fr. *terre* = land). This long, complex novel focuses on both military and political action and frequently evokes an air of nostalgia for the old colony, with the author in several passages lamenting the passing of an era. For his part, Graham Greene admitted that he shared this nostalgia "with so many retired *colons* and officers of the French Foreign Legion whose eyes

light up at the mention of Saigon and Hanoi" (GREENE apud PRATT, 1996, p. 480). One character, the French journalist Rovignon, joins in a patriotic tirade directed at his American and British colleagues, in which the loss of another foreign colony is equated with the historical decadence of France: "We had such a nostalgic memory of being a great nation" (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 141).

As if the reaction of the French characters to the loss of Vietnam prefigures the American loss twenty years later, an American journalist's reply to Rovignon becomes prophetic when he claims that his own country will be more successful than France in Vietnam. "We'll reinforce South Vietnam and, since you've gone bankrupt, we'll take your place" (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 141). The author broods on the end of an era but also fondly recalls the cultural interrelationships of colonial rule, what he calls the "communion between a yellow race, a white army and a handful of officials, adventurers and revolutionaries" (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 189), while omitting any mention of its long history of French colonial regime's social and economic exploitation of the native population. The nostalgia may also explain why the author is less than enthusiastic about those people, the Viet Minh, who are to replace his compatriots in North Vietnam. With nostalgia for French colonialism taking the place of a more critical representation of the period, it is not surprising that the Americans should appear in this novel as the barbarous usurpers in the second part of the novel, which is set in Saigon, where the Landsdale character, Teryman appears, and the chaos of assassinations, riots, shifting alliances, intrigues and betrayals contrasts with the orderly rituals of the new regime in Hanoi.

The nominal leader of South Vietnam, the Emperor Bao Dai, rarely visits his own country, preferring to lead the life of a playboy in Cannes, financed mainly by Lê Dao (historically, Le Van Vieu), the leader of the Binh Xuyen, an organization said to have begun as a group of pirates who looted junks and were willing to work for anyone, whether Japanese or Viet Minh (Le Van Vieu was in fact a gangster whom Bao Dai granted the gambling concession and actually made a 'general' in charge of the local security forces). The conflicts depicted in the second part reflect both the global conflict (France vs. US) and the local one (Diem's government vs. the Binh Xuyen and the two militarized religious sects). The sects are backed by the French, while the government, which has tolerated them as a bulwark against the Viet Minh guerrillas, is politically supported and bankrolled by

the Americans and said to be headed by President Dinh-Tu (i.e. President Ngo Dinh Diem), “a misfit who should have been a priest” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 189), The French at this point in time (in 1955) want to avoid further military involvement but are also anxious to maintain political influence while retaining their economic interests (SULLIVAN, 1978). It is frankly admitted that the conflict is really about the survival of French capitalism and is being protracted by the French to gain more time, as a French leader explains it, “to enable the big French business concerns to withdraw to Africa or Metropolitan France” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 223). For their part, the Americans, want a strong leader like Dinh to halt Communist incursions. The global and the local struggle are therefore interrelated.

President Dinh’s American advisor Teryman is portrayed as a sly political manipulator, “a masterly stage manager”, and an uncouth, anti-French “new Lawrence of Arabia” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 199). He pressures the president to attack the Binh Xuyen in order to gain some international respect, but Dinh wavers, hesitant to make a commitment. Teryman thinks that what the country really needs is a dictator, someone like the ruthless sect leader whom Teryman is keeping in reserve as a stick, in case Dinh tries to make a deal with the French, the carrot being a large amount of American aid.

The Binh Xuyen and the sects all seem to be awaiting a former French army major named Résengier to tell them what to do. Résengier (who *Art Imitates Life* may be based on an unidentified historical figure) is portrayed as a legendary figure who once belonged to virgin territories a tightly-knit group of die-hard French paratroopers evidently admired by the author: “the conquerors of and the fighters for lost causes” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 257), who become the liaison bureau with the militarized religious sects. Résengier needs the sects to force Dinh out of power, but he realizes the difficulty of fighting against Teryman’s promise of American money. The day he arrives the government troops begin firing on the Binh Xuyen (the battle of April 27, 1955, which in the novel begins two days early), and he immediately rushes out to try to stop it. The tide of the street battle sways back and forth, resulting in a general conflagration for the poorer outlying sectors of the city with their thatch and bamboo huts. The French authorities are confident of victory and are mainly concerned with keeping the battle out of the European quarter in the center of Saigon.

Teryman, worried that the president will give up and negotiate, decides to play his ‘last card’, the ruthless sect leader Trinh-Sat. The two of them

burst in upon the Dinh brothers to announce that Trinh-Sat is withdrawing from the Sects’ United Front, thus isolating the Binh Xuyen and giving the government forces an advantage. Teryman intends to manipulate Trinh-Sat by appealing to his dreams of power: Trinh-Sat will, he promises, be “the first to raise the standard of revolt against the French colonialists and their hired killers” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 256). President Dinh, who has been summoned to Cannes by Bao Dai and is afraid to make a move, is silently overruled by his brother (unnamed, but evidently the regime’s *éminence grise*, Ngo Dinh Nhu). The brothers decide that, even though they are worried about Trinh-Sat’s dangerous pretensions, the American colonel Teryman is backing him and they will therefore just have to renege on their promise to the French and continue the attack. General Delmond (i.e. General Collins, US Ambassador), gives Teryman another week to ‘make the situation clear’ or he will send him home (actually, Landsdale’s mandate was independent of the American embassy).

Teryman and Trinh-Sat surprise President Dinh with a bogus ‘popular committee’ that demands more power for the people, a rather distorted reflection of the American pressure exerted on Diem to make his administration more democratic. The Communists, however, have infiltrated the committee, and Teryman realizes, too late, that he has been tricked. He abandons ‘the Trinh-Sat game’ without warning Trinh-Sat that he will be assassinated, an act that is brought off by a clever ruse and blamed on the Binh Xuyen. With both the Binh Xuyen and the sects neutralized, a devious but efficient Communist agent, Houang, becomes in charge of civilian and military security and Teryman’s influence is at an end, leaving way for the US government’s abandonment of the South Vietnamese president and his eventual assassination with the cooperation of the CIA.

The hero of the novel is Résengier, the French Anti-Landsdale, who is clearly qualified to do “battle with the American Colonel Teryman” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 224). As one character observes, both men have old-fashioned, flamboyant and unorthodox styles of action. “Do they believe in what they’re doing”, he reflects,

[...] or else are they merely technicians trained in a king-making school who are practicing the tricks they’ve been taught without really understanding them? (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 270).

Well-matched adversaries, they both lose to historical circumstances, but while Teryman is seen as a cold, manipulative agent in the limited

possibilities of palatial politics, Résingier is fully humanized by action and emotion. Huang, not a sentimental character, for example, says that the Frenchman “had certain qualities that Teryman will never have; he understood us and I think he was even fond of us” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 309), by which the author seems to mean that the Americans will never understand the Vietnamese as well as their former colonizers.

Yellow Fever is filled with intriguing characters and historically related incident, but it is not without its weaknesses as an imaginative narrative. In addition to the discrepancy between the two parts of the novel – the second part in fact might better have been turned into a sequel, forming a southern version of the events following the Communist victory in the north – the narrative technique is often clumsy. For example, characters tend to reveal their thoughts by thinking ‘aloud’: “I’m going to dismantle my past piece by piece”, Lê says (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 309), and then goes on to do so, a technique more suitable to the stage. Although the French viewpoint on Vietnam is of interest to the Anglophone reader, the novel retains, as emphasized above, a certain colonialist, pseudo-native moral authority that he is not willing to extend to the next group of foreign intruders, as, for example, when a Viet Minh leader is made to say that it would be simple to fight the Americans or any other country, because “it would merely be war”, while against the French it would be “civil war” (LARTÉGUY, 1965, p. 309). This misplaced notion of brotherhood is not borne out by the historical realities of the French colonialist regime.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been seen that the fictional characters Hillendale in *The Ugly American* and Teryman in *Yellow Fever* are undisguised portraits of Lt. Colonel Edward Landsdale in his role as advisor to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. Although it is not surprising that Lartéguy’s novel celebrating the final days of French colonialism in Indochina demonize Landsdale, while Burdick and Lederer’s denunciation of the lack of animus in the American crusade against Communism in Southeast Asia portrays him in a positive light, neither novel gives its historical model its due. Landsdale’s role in the early years of the war was far more important than that any of his fictional counterparts – including Greene’s Alden Pyle, who, it has been argued, may or may not have been directly inspired by Landsdale. Greene’s *The Quiet American*, in any case, is the most critical of the American anti-Communist project in Asia and remains one of the most important novels of the Vietnam War.

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