FALL-WINTER 2020 COLLECTION
roche bobois PARIS

SHARE

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

'The Quiet Americans' Review: Inventing the CIA

Was the legendary spy service a vital weapon against the Soviets? Or a tangle of competing ideas?

Berliners watch the arrival of relief planes during the blockade of Berlin, 1948.
PHOTO: SPAARNESTAD PHOTO/BRIDGEMAN IMAGE

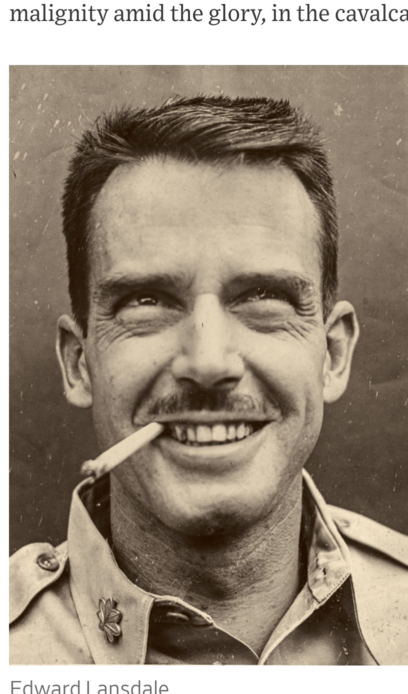
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
CMO TODAY
Get the facts on shifting marketing trends.
Sponsored by Deloitte.
SIGN UP

By Edward Kosner
Sept. 18, 2020 10:43 am ET

SAVE | PRINT | TEXT | 2

Were America's unsung Cold War spies and their masters adroit covert heroes protecting the nation and the free world from the encroaching evil of Stalin and his successors? Or were they the cloaked vanguard of an incipient American deep state that led the country into the disastrous Vietnam War and other misadventures under the false flag of anticommunism? Or both?

It's increasingly fashionable these days to cast a fresh—and often jaundiced—eye on what had seemed relatively settled questions of American history since the start of World War II. Revisionist historians and journalists see more misguided hubris than honor, more malignity amid the glory, in the cavalcade of American dominance.



Edward Lansdale
PHOTO: EDWARD GEARY LANSDALE PAPERS, HOOVER INSTITUTION ARCHIVES

THE QUIET AMERICANS
By Scott Anderson
Doubleday, 562 pages, $30

The latest to turn over the rocks is Scott Anderson, the novelist and author, among other works, of the acclaimed military history "Lawrence in Arabia." In his skillful and fascinating "The Quiet Americans," his intense focus is on the period between 1944—the beginning of the end of the hot war—and 1956, a pivotal moment in the Cold War. Mr. Anderson ingeniously tells his story through the entwined sagas of four of the secret service's most adept and intrepid operatives—Frank Wisner, Peter Sichel, Michael Burke and Edward Lansdale—and balances these four flawed heroes with three establishment figures: John Foster Dulles, Ike's ultra-hardline secretary of state; John's brother Allen, conveniently the chief of the Central Intelligence Agency; and J. Edgar Hoover, the rivalrous head of the FBI, ever on the hunt for communist or gay security risks.

Mr. Anderson's subtitle, "Four CIA Spies at the Dawn of the Cold War—a Tragedy in Three Acts," is a spoiler for his point of view, which he makes explicit in an odd preface that recounts his boyhood in Asia as the son of an American agricultural-development specialist. A gut anticommunist, the elder Anderson was disillusioned by America's behavior in Vietnam. The author—who shares his father's abhorrence of communism—then describes his own crisis of conscience when, as a young journalist in El Salvador during the country's civil war in the early 1980s, he witnessed the work of the right-wing death squads supported by the U.S.

Reading "The Quiet Americans" often feels like listening to an old military or journalistic pal sharing war stories over drinks. But the book's tone tilts toward moral fervor in its later chapters when Mr. Anderson excoriates some of the Cold War strategies and tactics of the Washington officials who gave his spooks their marching orders.

The CIA has its roots in William "Wild Bill" Donovan's blandly named Office of Strategic Services. The successor CIA's clandestine branch was designed to be so autonomous that the visible government could deny responsibility for its triumphs and, especially, its fiascoes. Mr. Anderson plays out that secret drama along with a deft narrative of the early Cold War—the Berlin blockade, Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of his crimes, the Korean War, the Hungarian Revolution and the introduction of American "advisers" to Vietnam.

The author's protagonists are straight from Central Casting for a World War II movie. There's Wisner, the courtly but driven Southerner; Mr. Sichel, the Jewish refugee from Hitler fighting the murderer of his people; Burke, the big, handsome Irishman with charm to spare; and Lansdale, the roguish former ad man with a pencil mustache and a big idea. All of them came out of the OSS after the war and found themselves risking their lives and their sanity running Cold War operations without a playbook.

Wisner, whose family had made a fortune in Mississippi lumber, rose to be a deputy director of the CIA. He might have been the chief had Hoover not schemed against him over a wartime affair with a Romanian princess, perhaps descended from Vlad the Impaler, who may have dabbled in spying for the other side. Wisner gave himself the code name "Typhoid," but he was better known as "the Wiz" of operations. He sneaked dissident Slavs into Soviet satellite states to spy and stir up trouble, formed cultural-front organizations among anticommunist exiles, and beamed radio broadcasts and dropped propaganda leaflets from balloons behind the Iron Curtain. A workaholic, he obsessed over everything. After years of trying to foment rebellion in communist Eastern Europe, he was distraught when Eisenhower refused to intervene on the side of the Hungarian freedom fighters. He had two nervous breakdowns and killed himself, at the age of 56, using his son's shotgun.

Sichel, whose refugee family had been prosperous German-Jewish wine merchants, had a flair for finance and the good life. He was celebrated as a paymaster in the wartime OSS for working the Algiers currency black markets and for commandeering an exquisite 1937 Cord 812 automobile while on assignment in St. Tropez. After the war, he established the first CIA foothold in Berlin and was deeply involved in sending agents into the Russian sphere, among them former Nazis and Ukrainians who had done some of the Nazis' dirty work against the Russians. Few of the infiltrators succeeded, and eventually Sichel realized that the Russians used the operations to their own advantage. He survived a bogus accusation that he was a KGB double agent and spent the final years of his CIA career as station chief in Hong Kong. When a newly promoted CIA official tried to sell him on an ambitious new scheme to send operatives into China, Sichel realized he'd played that game before—and left for a long and happy life running the family business.

Burke and Lansdale were the swashbucklers. A college football star, Burke spent time as a Hollywood script writer before landing with the OSS in Europe, where he palled around with Ernest Hemingway. Later, he ran a long and fraught operation aptly called "Fiend" that resulted in many Albanian partisans being killed. As CIA chief in Berlin, he conducted airdrops in Poland and elsewhere only to learn later that his operatives had long since been wiped out and replaced by hoax signals from the enemy. When John Foster Dulles asked him to stir up trouble in East Germany in an assignment Burke knew would doom the agitators, he could see his time with the CIA coming to an end. Back in New York, he ran the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus and the New York Yankees, among other sports teams, then slipped off to Ireland to write his memoirs.

Lansdale had the most tangible success. He conceived a strategy to ward off communist advances in Asia by winning "hearts and minds." This involved curtailing political corruption, ordering land reform and putting government troops to work building schools, clinics and irrigation projects for the people. Lansdale put his theory into practice in the Philippines, which was under attack by left-wing Huk guerrillas. He identified a legislator named Ramon Magsaysay as a potential savior, engineered his election as president, then served as his éminence grise. Lansdale played rough. Once, when Magsaysay resisted his advice on a speech, Lansdale slugged him. Dispatched to Vietnam after the French were driven out, Lansdale tried the same approach with the South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem, but the U.S. abandoned Diem over Lansdale's objections. The rest is grim history.

The fulcrum of Mr. Anderson's book is the ascension of John Foster Dulles, who was adamant that, especially after the invasion of South Korea, there could be no accommodation with communism. Dulles rebuffed feelers from the Soviets, who professed to want better relations after Stalin's death, and ordered up intensified action in other parts of the world where he feared communism might get a foothold.

Wisner and other top CIA officials now found themselves running operations to topple elected leaders suspected—wrongly, in many cases—of being Judas goats for the communists. A plot conducted by Teddy Roosevelt's grandson, Kermit Jr., overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh, the prime minister of Iran, in 1953 and reinstalled the ill-fated young shah, Reza Pahlavi. A year later, the CIA ousted Jacobo Árbenz, the president of Guatemala. These interventions foreshadowed the misbegotten 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and the farcical poison plots against Fidel Castro. In 1973, Salvador Allende, the leftist president of Chile, killed himself in the midst of a successful CIA-backed coup.

By Mr. Anderson's tally, during Eisenhower's two terms the U.S. intervened not only in Iran and Guatemala, but also in British Guiana, Egypt, Congo, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Laos and Indonesia.

Operations and propaganda intensified to encourage rebellion in Soviet Eastern Europe. Astonishingly, the CIA was surprised when the Hungarian Revolution erupted in Budapest in October 1956. The Hungarian rebels shocked the Russians and, within a few days, Moscow was on the brink of withdrawing. After years of CIA encouragement, the Hungarians were certain America would sweep in to seal their liberation. Traveling in Europe, Wisner begged his superiors to act. But Ike blinked, and Khrushchev sent 60,000 troops and battalions of tanks to crush the revolt.

The outcome, Mr. Anderson writes, was "not the collapse of the Soviet Union or the breaking away of those satellite nations in its thrall. Rather it was to be the fall of the United States' moral standing in the world, the extinguishing of whatever claim to a higher degree of honor or altruism it still enjoyed. It was to be the final laying bare of the myth of America as the herald of freedom."

Still, for all Mr. Anderson's righteous indignation, his "Quiet Americans" and their successors won the Cold War after all.

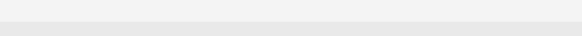
—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me," of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

SHOW CONVERSATION (2)

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS
1. Russia Under Pressure to Investigate Navalny Poisoning
2. Residents Return to Ruins After Fires Tear Through Southern Oregon
3. The Risks of Rushing a Coronavirus Vaccine
4. Anthony Fauci on What It Will Take to Put Covid-19 Behind Us
5. What Does a Second Coronavirus Lockdown Look Like? Ask Israel

WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE
How to Get Your Finances in Order Before Returning to Work
Your emergency fund, health accounts and coverage, estate planning and budgeting should all be considered.
READ

JOIN THE CONVERSATION
U.S. to Rein In TikTok, WeChat on Sunday
Saudi Royal Family Divides Over Potential Embrace of Israel
Forget the Stock Market. The Rare-Plant Market Has Gone Bonkers.
Portland Police Worry About More Unrest as Stress Grows and Resources Shrink
The Incredible Shrinking GM: Mary Barra Bets That Smaller Is Better
Some Investors Tried to Win by Losing Less. They Lost Anyway.
Lawmakers Close In on Spending Deal to Avert Shutdown
Can an Employer Require You to Get a Covid-19 Vaccine?
How to Exhaust a Tour de France Racer: Ask Him to Take a Walk
Why Did Covid Overwhelm Hospitals? A Yearslong Drive for Efficiency



Copyright ©2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.