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**Daniel Immerwahr. "The Ugly American: Peeling the Onion of an Iconic Cold War Text."**

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Daniel Immerwahr has written a brief, entertaining, and revealing piece that uses William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American*<sup>1</sup> as both a lens through which to view, and an artifact to study, a particular slice of Cold War America: the U.S. effort to combat Communism in Southeast Asia at the high point of decolonization. Likening the novel to an onion, Immerwahr peels away the layers to understand what the book consciously and unconsciously has to say about American "designs" on the region in the late 1950s "and the secret means used to pursue them" (9). Central to his analysis are the three of the novel's protagonists—Homer Atkins, Father John X. Finian, and Colonel Edwin Hillandale—and their real-life counterparts: community development expert Albert Mayer; doctor and international volunteer Tom Dooley; and CIA operative Colonel Edward Lansdale. Through a critical reading of the exploits of these characters and their human sources of inspiration, Immerwahr is able to reveal some of Lederer and Burdick's narrow assumptions about the failure of American efforts to stamp out Communism in the region as well as the broader, more explanatory, "omissions" regarding the reality of American foreign policy that Lederer and Burdick's assumptions cover up (13).

According to Immerwahr, the book's "main heroes" offered a simple and straightforward panacea for America's woes in Southeast Asia through their earnest and unprejudiced efforts to help uplift the local inhabitants at the grassroots (9). Their noble efforts, however, were ultimately undermined by the know-nothing bureaucrats from the State Department who were more concerned with the high life of the "affluent foreign capitals" than the hardships at the village level, paving the way for the continued success of Communist revolutionaries in the region (8). Yet, Immerwahr contends, *The Ugly American*'s fictional assessment obscures the reality that Washington's difficulties in the Global South were a product of a variety of complex factors including the political economy of the region, the legacy of imperialism, and the shady

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958).

relationship of American policy to both the imperial project and the consequences of its dissolution—to which each of Lederer and Burdick’s “real-life models” were complicit to varying degrees (11).

None of the substantive themes addressed by the piece—the Cold War, decolonization, and nation-building—are new to Immerwahr. Immerwahr has engaged with the topics of development and empire in his two previous works: *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* and *How to Hide and Empire: A History of the Greater United States*.<sup>2</sup> He handles them, once again, with a deft touch here, offering another excellent example of scholarship on the U.S. in the world. By focusing his analysis on a less-traditional historical source, like *The Ugly American*, and decoding it as both a prism and artifact for academic inquiry, Immerwahr reveals a great deal about not only how Americans, particularly non-state actors like Lederer and Burdick, conceived of their nation’s global role, but also how this was perceived by the people of Southeast Asia themselves.

This exposes a good deal about the United States as a global actor. First, there is the belief that there is something extraordinary about the American character that makes it uniquely disposed to successfully contend with any of the world’s myriad problems. As Immerwahr demonstrates, Lederer and Burdick essentially argue that the right kind of Americans—those who are non-judgemental, self-effacing and genuine—can, through the sheer force of their will, virtue and ingenuity, ameliorate the complex systemic problems of the Global South that seemingly made that region susceptible to Communist influence. Second, this oversimplification of the potential solutions to the challenges of development in Southeast Asia is a product of the blinders that the authors of *The Ugly American* and their adherents have developed toward the potential damage that can occur through American efforts to interfere in, and manipulate, the evolutionary processes of those societies in the name of confronting Communism. Third, the consequent impairment of the socioeconomic advance of the peoples of the Global South by these efforts, such as supporting reactionary and despotic anti-Communist regimes, is, most likely, what actually registers in the minds of the more vulnerable members of those societies when they think of the United States in the world.

Hovering over Immerwahr’s analysis of the text is the spectre of American Exceptionalism. According to Lederer and Burdick, if all American diplomats and aid workers in Southeast Asia behaved like the three seemingly straightforward, well-meaning and convivial “exemplars” in their book, the basic democratic ethos of the American people that these characters conveyed through their selfless actions should have been enough to convince the people of the Global South to turn their back on Communist revolutionaries (9). Unfortunately, Immerwahr does not engage with this exceptionalist view as much as I wish he had. The article closes with a paragraph that discusses the enduring power of the book, particularly among Immerwahr’s students who have been assigned the novel in his course on American foreign policy. Referring to the book as “entrancing” and its basic argument as “persistently seductive” (18), he opens the door to further inquiry into its allure, particularly as a “product of the Cold War” (9). However, he does not explicitly take this argument up any further. Given the author’s cogent commentary on the book and its backstory, the insightful accounts of the individuals who inspired its creation, and the critical deconstruction of the message Lederer and Burdick are attempting to convey, I would have liked to have read more of his arguments on this particular aspect of the American character and how it informed the writing of the book. To me, this lies at

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Immerwahr, *How to Hide and Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

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the very core of the onion that is *The Ugly American*. Nevertheless, this does not detract from Immerwahr's article, which is a fine piece of scholarship that reveals a good deal about a once-celebrated work of historical fiction and what it has to say about Cold War America.

**Geoffrey C. Stewart** is an adjunct professor of history at the University of Western Ontario. His research explores the United States in the world, particularly at the intersection of decolonization with the Cold War. He teaches courses on the history of international relations, the Global Cold War and the Vietnam War. He has previously contributed reviews to H-Diplo, *Cold War Studies* and the *Journal of Asian Studies*; published in the *Journal of Vietnamese History*; and published *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955-1963* with Cambridge University Press in 2017.

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