

OUT OF VIETNAM

Our vision of the past, especially concerning the way wars are fought and their outcomes, has always been represented and affected by novels. For Vietnam this is certainly the case. Perhaps novels about Vietnam present Americans with a darker vision of the nation's role in world history, which competes with embedded assumptions dating back to the American Revolution. But more than contending with American exceptionalism, these novels continue to shape attitudes like the debate over "leaving" Afghanistan, America's "new" longest war. In a major speech, then-President George W. Bush complained that the most famous Vietnam novel, *The Quiet American* (1954) by British author Graham Greene, actually undermined American will to see the Iraq invasion through to a successful ending.

The Quiet American appeared just at the outset of American involvement in Vietnam at the height of Cold War fears about Communist advances in the wake of the Chinese Revolution and decolonization in Southeast Asia. It presented a naive American intelligence agent's disastrous attempt to find a nationalist alternative to a Communist victory in the last years of French rule. We will discuss Graham Greene's novel, along with another British novelist's take on the same basic story, Creina Mansfield's *The Quiet Soldier: Phuong's Story*. Mansfield posits that Phuong - the mistress of Greene's jaded British correspondent and symbol of the Americans' "mission" - was actually a Vietcong operative. I hope to have Mansfield join in the discussion of her book.

We will begin with Anthony Grey's *Saigon*, an epic story some compare to *War and Peace*, which traces the history of America's fateful encounter with Vietnam: in a love story and through the intertwining histories of a prominent American political family and a Vietnamese family divided by loyalties during the Vietnamese struggle, 1925-1975. It is a very long book, written with verve and page-turning excitement.

Through these and three other works of fiction, we trace the outlines of the war and its enduring repercussions on civilian and military participants and the societies in which they live.

LEADER: Lloyd Gardner taught American foreign policy at Rutgers University for 49 years.

THURSDAYS: 10:00 a.m. to noon, 8 weeks beginning September 30 through November 18

MAXIMUM: 40