

# The Ugly American



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EUGENE BURDICK AND WILLIAM J. LEDERER

Eugene Burdick was born in Iowa, though his family moved to Los Angeles when he was a young boy. Burdick studied at Stanford University and completed his graduate studies at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Between Stanford and Oxford, Burdick served in the United States Navy during World War II. After his own studies, Burdick worked for the University of California as a political scientist. Burdick made a name for himself as a writer with his award-winning short story, "Rest Camp on Maui" in 1947. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Burdick became a respected political author, penning seven major works, including *The Ugly American* in 1958. However, during this time he also struggled with diabetes and frequent heart trouble. He died of a heart attack in 1965, the same year that he published his second novel with William Lederer, *Sarkhan*. William Lederer was born in New York City. As a teenager, he dropped out of high school to enlist in the United States Navy, and within six years became a junior officer on a gunboat, the U.S.S. *Tutuila*. Lederer served as a naval officer in Asia and Europe during World War II. Afterward, he spent several years working as a public information officer at the Pentagon. Beginning in 1950, Lederer wrote and contributed to numerous literary and non-fiction works, writing about everything from politics to skiing to marriage to American intelligence programs. However, his greatest success came from his collaboration with Eugene Burdick on *The Ugly American* in 1958, in which both authors reflected their own experiences with American Foreign Service members who, in their mind, catastrophically failed in Southeast Asia. Lederer died in 2009, more than 40 years after Burdick's untimely death.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Ugly American* is set during the Cold War, when tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union ballooned into a world-wide ideological conflict between Western capitalism and Eastern communism. After World War II, the ideological battle between the capitalists and communists rose to global prominence. The major powers tried to spread their ideology and exert their influence by winning the support of smaller countries, marking the rise of international aid and foreign policy. As the U.S. and Soviet Union embarked on a thermonuclear arms race, they each also tried to gain influence and leverage in other countries by distributing aid, investing in their economies, and spreading their own propaganda. As a

result, developing nations like Burma and Vietnam were flooded with foreign workers employed by their respective governments, each trying to persuade local governments and populations that their own countries have everyone's best interests in mind. Although the U.S. was the first nation to develop nuclear weapons, by the mid-1950s the Soviet Union had caught up militarily by developing their hydrogen bomb, and in 1957 launched Sputnik, the first human satellite, prompting American fears that they were falling behind their competitors. Only a few years before, France, Vietnam's long-hated colonizers, left Southeast Asia, creating a financial and military vacuum that the U.S. rushed to fill, setting the stage for the brutal Vietnam War between American capitalists and Vietnamese and Chinese communists.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many regard *The Ugly American* as one of the most iconic American political novels of the 20th century, commenting on the Cold War tensions between the capitalist and communist nations. In 1965, William Lederer and Eugene Burdick co-authored their follow-up novel to *The Ugly American*, *Sarkhan* (later retitled *The Deceptive American*), which takes a further dive into American foreign policy in Southeast Asia, but focuses on the catastrophic errors made by America's intelligence community and the very few individuals who truly understand what they are doing. Although Burdick suffered an early death, Lederer continued writing political novels for several decades, including his successful collaboration with Harvey Wheeler, *Fail-Safe*, a novel about a nuclear near-miss that reflects the apocalyptic feeling of the 1960s in light of the Cuban Missile Crisis and possibility of nuclear war. Lederer's political novels, including *The Ugly American*, focus primarily on the Cold War and the events that led up to the Vietnam War. British author Graham Greene's novel [The Quiet American](#) continues this commentary by telling the story of Thomas Fowler, a journalist in Vietnam during the years immediately preceding the Vietnam War, and questions America's involvement in Southeast Asia from a non-American author's perspective. Greene's novel is particularly notable because, although published in 1955, it accurately predicts America's total failure in the Vietnam War 2 years later. Additionally, Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* tells the true story of John Paul Vann, an American officer who served as an adviser to the Saigon regime during the Vietnam War and became increasingly critical of America's foreign policy and military decisions, much like Burdick and Lederer were.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Ugly American*
- **When Written:** 1957
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1958
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Political Novel
- **Setting:** Southeast Asia, including the fictional nation of Sarkhan
- **Climax:** Senator Brown says that all of Ambassador MacWhite's criticisms of the American Foreign Service are false, and MacWhite resigns.
- **Antagonist:** Communism, American Bureaucracy
- **Point of View:** Third Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Nonfiction.** *The Ugly American* was originally proposed as a nonfiction work, until editors decided that it would work better as a series of vignettes to present the author's arguments.

**Peace Corps.** John F. Kennedy thought that *The Ugly American* was such an important read that he sent copies to everyone in Congress in 1959. When he became president a year later, Kennedy launched the Peace Corps, a new arm of the Foreign Service that embodies the grassroots development ethic demonstrated in *The Ugly American*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In the early 1950s, Louis Sears becomes the American Ambassador to the (fictional) Southeast Asian country, Sarkhan. Despite being the top American diplomat in the country, Sears does not speak Sarkhanese, does not understand the history or the culture, and spends most of his time complaining that the local newspapers criticize him. At the same time, Luis Krupitzyn, a Russian diplomat in Sarkhan, is an expert in Sarkhanese language and culture, lives quietly, and works effectively to sway the Sarkhanese population toward Communism. Krupitzyn thinks that Sears is a valuable asset to the Russian cause, since he makes Americans look stupid and prevents them from getting any real work done. He advises his contacts in the local newspapers to run flattering articles about Louis Sears, which they obligingly do.

A Catholic priest named Father Finian travels to Burma on an evangelistic mission to reach the local Burmese people. Finian is an expert on Communism, having read most of its significant literature, and considers it a uniquely evil threat that the Church must actively combat. When Finian arrives in Burma, he spends his first months learning the language and adapting his body to the local food, even though it makes him terribly sick for weeks. Finian then finds eight Burmese men, a few of

whom are Catholics, but all of whom are fiercely anti-Communist, and tells them that though he organized their meeting, he will follow the will of the group. The men discuss the growing threat of Communism, particularly because the Communists do not let the Burmese people worship freely. The nine men do not care whether everyone in their area is Christian or Buddhist, but only that they are able to live free. The men begin a quiet campaign against Communism, anonymously publishing actual articles by Communist leaders that criticize peasants and demonstrate that Communism will not truly benefit poor people but only gather power for itself. Through their efforts, the nine friends destroy Communism's influence in their entire province.

On an American press tour, a Burmese journalist named Ruth Jyoti criticizes an American diplomat, Joe Bing, whom all Americans love for his boisterous and extravagant personality, but whom Asians find extremely boorish and insensitive. Jyoti thinks Bing is typical of most American diplomats. Elsewhere, a bored young woman named Marie MacIntosh listens to Joe Bing talk about how great working abroad for the Foreign Service is. She takes a job in Sarkhan and lives a far more luxurious life in Sarkhan than she could ever afford in America. In Sarkhan, Louis Sears receives word that he is being sent back to America to become a federal judge, and that he will be replaced by Gilbert MacWhite.

MacWhite spends his first six months as Ambassador to Sarkhan laying a careful plan to rid the country of Communists. He believes his plan is foolproof until he discovers that his Chinese servants are Communist spies who've revealed his plan to their superiors, and his months of planning are already ruined. MacWhite decides he needs to learn more about Asian politics and psychology, so he takes a long leave of absence to travel Southeast Asia and meet other Foreign Service workers.

In Vietnam, an American, Major "Tex" Wolchek, joins the French Major Monet and his Foreign Legionnaires, fighting against the Communists in Vietnam. Although Monet and his men are excellent fighters, they lose every battle and cannot understand why. MacWhite joins them as an observer, and he and Tex slowly convince Monet that the Communists fight by entirely different rules than the French do. To defeat their enemy, they need to understand Communist ideology and tactics by reading a book by Communist leader Mao Tse-tung. Monet is hesitant to go against French military tradition, but he eventually agrees to adopt Communist guerilla warfare tactics, and they enjoy their first victory in months. However, when Tex, Monet, and MacWhite present their epiphany to French and American military leaders, they are promptly ignored.

Tom Knox, an American chicken farmer, spends two years traveling Cambodia, visiting villages, and teaching local people how to raise healthier chickens. At a conference with other Foreign Service workers, Tom presents a simple and cost-effective plan to strengthen Cambodia's chicken stock by

introducing a few American breeds into the local poultry population, strengthening their chicken stock and multiplying the country's egg output. Although Tom's plan is practical, his superiors refuse to back it since it does not sound grand, impressive, or immediately beneficial. Tom is so furious that he resigns and intends to return to Washington, D.C., to "raise hell" until the American government funds his plan. However, the French diplomats send Tom on a long and luxurious trip through Asia and Europe, treating him like an esteemed guest. After months of luxury and travel, Tom cannot remember why he was so angry or passionate about Cambodian villagers and their chickens.

The American, Colonel Hillandale, visits Sarkhan, taking time away from his normal work in the Philippines. Hillandale is an astrology enthusiast and recognizes that it is a very important practice in Sarkhanese culture. At a dinner with Sarkhanese heads of state, Hillandale reads the Prime Minister's palm and advises him on political matters. The prime minister asks Hillandale to read the King's palm, which would provide an excellent diplomatic opportunity for America. However, the American diplomat George Swift thinks astrology is stupid and fails to follow protocol when arranging the King's palm reading, which deeply offends the Sarkhanese and destroys Hillandale's opportunity.

In Hong Kong, Solomon Asch leads a conference on nuclear armament, where the American delegation tries to convince India, Thailand, and Burma to store nuclear weapons in their countries. Asch leads the American delegates with strict discipline and masterful planning, but the negotiations fall apart when one of his delegates starts a nightly affair with a local woman, costing him sleep and crippling his negotiating performance.

American engineer Homer Atkins and his wife, Emma, move to a poor rural village in Sarkhan. The villagers struggle to irrigate their crops, since they live on high hillsides and must haul water up the hill from a creek far below. Homer designs a bicycle-powered water pump that can be made entirely from locally sourced pieces. He presents it to the village headman, who introduces Homer to their local mechanic, Jeepo. Jeepo and Homer go into business together as equal partners, teaching other villagers to design and manufacture their sustainable and practical water pump, creating a new local industry. At the same time, Emma realizes that all of the elderly people's backs are bent from sweeping with short-handled broom. Since good wood is not readily available, Emma finds a long and firm reed that can be cut to make a long broom handle, and demonstrates to the elderly people how, when using a long-handled broom, they can sweep with their backs straight and save themselves from a painful hunch.

Senator Jonathan Brown travels from America to Vietnam to determine whether the Foreign Service's progress justifies their massive budget. Brown arrives intending to get the real

facts and conduct a thorough investigation, but his ailing health and the diplomats' efforts to conceal their own incompetence prevent Brown from seeing the truth of the matter. When he gets back to America, Brown testifies before the Senate that the Americans are doing a tremendous job abroad. When a written testimony from MacWhite argues that the Foreign Service is wasteful and ineffective, Brown calls MacWhite a liar.

After his travels in Southeast Asia, MacWhite writes the Secretary of State to argue that America could beat the Communists if it employed capable and dedicated Foreign Service workers rather than the selfish and unprofessional people who currently staff it. He writes a long list of recommended requirements for new recruits that would ensure their professionalism. However, the Secretary of State thinks MacWhite's recommendations are terribly impractical and requests his resignation as Ambassador to Sarkhan, replacing him with Joe Bing.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Gilbert MacWhite** – Gilbert MacWhite is Louis Sears's successor as American Ambassador to Sarkhan. Unlike Sears, MacWhite is sharp, disciplined, and dedicated to his work, especially as it pertains to combating Communism in Sarkhan. However, when MacWhite realizes that he has Communist spies serving in his own home and loses six months of careful planning, MacWhite realizes that he does not understand Southeast Asian politics or psychology well enough to do his job effectively. MacWhite spends several months touring Vietnam and Burma. He spends weeks with Major "Tex" Wolchek and Major Monet as they realize that they cannot fight the Communists without reading Communist literature and understanding their philosophy so they can turn their own tactics against them. MacWhite eventually invites Homer Atkins to Sarkhan and removes several diplomats he finds ineffective, including George Swift. He writes out a long list of criticisms and recommendations for how America can fix its reputation, arguing that the key to winning against the Russian Communists is simply to act morally, professionally, and effectively in Asia, which most Americans do not do. His criticisms of the American Foreign Service and disruptive actions lead the secretary of state to reprimand him for rocking the boat and ultimately force him to resign as Ambassador to Sarkhan.

**Homer Atkins** – Homer Atkins is an American engineer and inventor and the titular "ugly American" (since he is modest, unassuming, and works with his own hands). Atkins initially goes to Vietnam to consult for the government on where to build dams and military roads. However, he quickly realizes Vietnamese villagers don't need massive roads, they need basic,

practical solutions for growing more food and alleviating hunger. When the American and Vietnamese government won't listen to his argument, Gilbert MacWhite invites Atkins to come to Sarkhan and work there instead. Atkins and his wife Emma move into a small Sarkhanese village, learn the language and adopt local customs. He partners with a local mechanic named Jeepo to develop a bicycle-powered water pump, which will help villagers draw water out of the river and up the hillsides to properly irrigate their ailing crops. Throughout the process of developing his water pump and launching his business with Jeepo, Homer is careful to only use resources that are locally available and to let Jeepo guide the development of the pump, since as a Sarkhanese man, Jeepo best understands the local needs. Homer Atkins thus models the most effective, ethical, and sustainable approach to grassroots development, creating practical, tangible change in the lives of the Sarkhanese villagers.

**Louis Sears** – Louis Sears is the first American Ambassador to Sarkhan in the story. Sears is a lifelong politician who becomes an ambassador after he loses his fourth political election. Although Sears works in the Foreign Service, he has no interest in Sarkhan or its people, and he simply holds the post until a position as a federal judge opens for him in America. He rarely does anything productive as an ambassador, but spends his time complaining that the Sarkhanese newspapers publish political cartoons that make him look bad. The Russian diplomat Louis Krupitzyn believes that Sears, in his stupidity and ineffectiveness, is a valuable asset to Russian influence in Sarkhan, and so he makes clandestine efforts to keep Sears in office. Sears eventually leaves his post, claiming that Sarkhan is more loyal to America than it has ever been, even though the opposite is true. Sears typifies the worst form of American diplomat.

**James "Tex" Wolchek** – Tex Wolchek is an American officer and decorated veteran of World War II and the Korean War. Tex travels to Vietnam to observe Major Monet and his Foreign Legionnaires in their fight against the Communists, and ultimately decides to fight alongside them. However, Tex, Monet, and the Legionnaires lose every single battle, despite being skilled soldiers. After weeks of steady defeat and losing many men, Tex realizes that the Communists are fighting by nontraditional rules. He remembers a book he read on warfare tactics by Mao Tse-tung, and thinks that perhaps they should reassess the way that they fight the Communists and adopt Mao's guerilla strategies. Although Monet is reticent to change his philosophy of warfare, Tex and MacWhite (there as an observer) eventually convince Monet to adopt the Communists' guerilla warfare tactics. When they do, Tex and Monet and their men have their first real victory in months. However, when Tex, Monet, and MacWhite present their epiphany to French and American generals, the generals completely dismiss the idea of learning Communist ideology

and methods, assuming that their own Western tactics are automatically superior. Tex and Monet respond by getting drunk in a bar.

**Thomas Knox** – Thomas Knox is a chicken farmer from Iowa who spends several years in Cambodia trying to increase Cambodia's egg output. Tom is outgoing, humble, and loves Cambodian food. He travels from village to village befriending the people and tending to their sick chickens, and giving advice on farming as he goes. The villagers unanimously love Tom. For two years, Tom tries to get the American government to fund a small project of importing American chickens to breed into the Cambodian poultry population to strengthen their stock. Tom believes that, through an inexpensive program, he can multiply Cambodia's egg production within a few years, which would help to fight malnutrition across the country. However, Tom's superiors ignore his plan because it does not seem grandiose enough and would take several years to execute. Tom becomes so furious that he resigns, resolved to go to Washington D.C and "raise hell" until he can find support for his plan. However, to prevent Tom from causing trouble, the French diplomats send him on a long, luxurious, expenses-paid tour through Asia and Europe, treating him as an honored guest. After months of traveling and being treated like royalty, Tom forgets what he was angry about in the first place and retires quietly to Iowa, pushing any memories of Cambodian villages out of his mind.

**Monet** – Major Monet is a French officer leading his Foreign Legionnaires against the Communists in Vietnam. Monet comes from a legendary military family and is a decorated commander, yet he consistently loses every battle he fights in Vietnam. With frustration, Monet cannot understand why the Communists keep beating them, despite having far less weapons and equipment. When Tex Wolchek suggests that to fight Communists, they need to think and fight like Communists, Monet is reticent to abandon centuries of French military history. However, Tex and MacWhite eventually convince him that Communist literature, especially Mao's writings on warfare, may hold useful and innovative ideas. When Monet finally puts Communist military tactics into practice, he and his Legionnaires have their first real victory in months. However, when Monet and Tex try to convince their military commanders that they need to rethink their military strategy and learn from the Communists, their superiors viciously dismiss them.

**John Colvin** – John Colvin is an American O.S.S. agent and a powdered milk businessman. As a special agent, Colvin helps rid Sarkhan of their Japanese oppressors. He befriends a Sarkhanese man named Deong and makes him his combat partner, and develops a deep love for Sarkhanese people and culture. Colvin returns to America, but when he hears that Sarkhan is leaning toward Communism, he goes back to Sarkhan with a plan to import cattle and create a dairy industry, bolstering the local economy and strengthening the people

against Communism. However, within weeks, Deong reappears and announces that he is a Communist, and he must stop Colvin. Deong frames Colvin for attempted rape and local women nearly beat him to death. Colvin is flown back to America to recover, though he eventually returns and successfully puts his dairy plan into action.

**Louis Krupitzyn** – Louis Krupitzyn is a Russian diplomat in Sarkhan and secret antagonist to Louis Sears. Krupitzyn demonstrates the total superiority of Russian diplomats over American diplomats in the story. Where Sears is unqualified and incompetent, Krupitzyn and his wife are well-trained, and they are experts in Sarkhanese language, culture, and customs. He lives in a modest home and operates largely unseen. Krupitzyn believes Sears is a valuable asset to the Russians because of his incompetence and encourages Communist newspapers to run flattering articles and cartoons about Sears, so that the American government will think he is doing good work and keep him in office.

**Father Finian** – Father Finian is a Catholic priest who fights Communist ideology in Burma. Finian is an expert on Communist thought and believes that it bears many similarities to religious zealotry. He moves to rural Burma and spends five weeks learning the language, culture, and adapting his body to the food, even though it makes him terribly ill. Finian then finds eight Burmese men who are firm anti-Communists and suggests that they collaborate to fight the ideology spreading through Burmese villages. Rather than lead, Finian allows the Burmese men to lead and follows whatever decisions they make, which is unusual behavior compared to most white men. Together, Finian and his friends run a successful clandestine campaign against Communism by distributing Communist articles and speeches that reveal that the ideology does not care about peasants and farmers, but only about gathering power for itself. Through Finian and his friends' work, their entire region turns against Communism. Father Finian demonstrates how committed individuals can effectively fight Communism on a local level.

**Edwin B. Hillandale** – Colonel Hillandale, also known as the Rag-time Kid, is an American who spends several years in the Philippines and falls in love with their food, culture, language, and people. Hillandale is friendly to all and enjoys dancing and playing music, and he soon becomes the most beloved foreigner in the Philippines. The politician Ramon Magsaysay adopts him as his unofficial advisor, and when Magsaysay runs for president, Hillandale helps him win over a province by befriending their people and proving that not all American Capitalists are rich or snobbish. When MacWhite brings Hillandale to Sarkhan, Hillandale realizes how important astrology is to Sarkhanese culture. He happens to have a strong interest in astrology and even studied it at a college in the Philippines. At a formal dinner with Sarkhanese dignitaries, Hillandale reads palms, which thrills the Sarkhanese. After

reading the palm of the Prime Minister and advising him on a military situation, the Prime Minister requests that Hillandale read the King's palm as well, which would be a major diplomatic opportunity and give the Americans greater leverage. However, Swift, the American protocol officer, spoils the opportunity by refusing to follow Sarkhanese protocol, deeply offending the dignitaries. Hillandale is so furious with Swift that he punches him in the eye.

**George Swift** – George Swift is an American protocol officer in Sarkhan. George Swift does not understand how culturally important astrology is to the Sarkhanese. When Colonel Hillandale reads palms during a formal dinner with Sarkhanese heads of state, Swift mocks the performance as a “vaudeville stunt.” Because of his ignorance and irritation at Hillandale, Swift neglects to arrange an opportunity for Hillandale to read the Sarkhanese King's palm, not realizing that it would be a major diplomatic opportunity for America. Swift's neglect deeply offends the Sarkhanese and infuriates both Hillandale and MacWhite, and MacWhite requests that he be removed from his post.

**Prince Ngong** – Prince Ngong is a Sarkhanese intellectual and protocol minister, making him one of the few named Sarkhanese officials in the story. Prince Ngong states that Sarkhan wants independence and to not be controlled by America or the Soviet Union. However, because of Sarkhan's dependence on American aid, Prince Ngong must appease Louis Sears's ego and ask the local newspapers to run flattering articles about him, even though all of the Sarkhanese believe Sears is “more stupid than most.”

**Deong** – Deong is a Sarkhanese villager who befriends John Colvin after saving his life from Japanese soldiers. Deong spends months fighting the Japanese with Colvin and even sabotages a Japanese platoon, allowing American marines to liberate Sarkhan from Japan. However, while Colvin is in America, Deong sees that Communism is overtaking Sarkhan. When Colvin returns to start a dairy industry, Deong tries to kill him, stating that Colvin's plan is good, but he cannot let the Sarkhanese people believe that America is their economic savior. Deong ultimately frames Colvin as a rapist and disappears.

**Ruth Jyoti** – Ruth Jyoti is a Burmese reporter who writes about Father Finian. The American government invites Jyoti to visit America and see how their press operates. During her stay, Jyoti speaks with Joseph Rivers about how ineffective most American diplomats are in Asia—especially Joe Bing, whom Asians find loud, boorish, and offensive in the way that he only pays attention to white people or wealthy upper-class Asians.

**Solomon Asch** – Solomon Asch is an American diplomat who leads a negotiation to convince India, Thailand, and Burma to allow America to store nuclear weapons in their countries. Asch is disciplined and professional and demands that his delegates follow suit. Asch tells Captain Boning that the

negotiations will hinge on his technical knowledge of American weapons, and that Boning must be sharp and alert at all times. However, Boning fails to remain disciplined and alert, and Asch's negotiations fail because of Boning's lack of discipline.

**Boning** – Captain Boning is a navy captain who serves on Asch's delegation. Asch warns Boning that the negotiations will depend on Boning's weapons knowledge, and Boning must remain sharp and alert at all times. However, Boning has an affair with a local Chinese woman during the delegations and spends each night with her, rather than sleeping or preparing. As a result, Boning falls asleep during negotiations or answers vaguely, offending the Indians so much that the negotiations fail.

**Emma Atkins** – After leaving Vietnam, Emma and her husband, Homer, move to Sarkhan and settle in a poor village called Chang 'Dong. Emma supports Homer while he works on his water pump, but she also undertakes a development project of her own. Emma realizes that all of the elderly villagers' backs are bent from sweeping the village with short-handled brooms. To fix this, Emma finds a naturally growing reed that can function as a long broom handle and demonstrates to the villagers that using it, they can sweep while keeping their backs straight.

**Jeepo** – Jeepo is a Sarkhanese villager who helps Atkins design his water pump and becomes his business partner when they go into production. Jeepo is a sharp mechanic who gives invaluable insight into how to make the pump accessible to average Sarkhanese villagers, and he speaks to Atkins as his equal. When they finish their design of the pump and begin manufacturing it, Jeepo decides that they will not patent their design but allow anyone to build it and sell it themselves.

**Senator Jonathan Brown** – Jonathan Brown is an American senator who travels to Vietnam to decide whether he should reduce the Americans' operating budget. Although Brown arrives with a stern attitude and is intent on getting the facts, his ailing health quickly slows him down and exhausts him. Ambassador Gray and his staff lie to Brown and make him believe that they are working hard and making progress against the Communists, when they actually are not. Brown returns to America convinced that the Americans in Vietnam are doing good work. When, on the Senate floor, a fellow Senator reads MacWhite's criticisms of the Foreign Service in Vietnam, Senator Brown charges that MacWhite is a liar.

**U Maung Swe** – U Maung Swe is a Burmese journalist who speaks at a formal dinner in honor of Ambassador MacWhite. U Maung Swe explains why American diplomats are ineffective throughout Southeast Asia and how their garish behavior comes across to Asian people. U Maung Swe tells MacWhite about the Martins, an American couple who move into a little Burmese village, learn the language, and teach their neighbors how to can and preserve vegetables, initiating a small canning industry in the area. U Maung Swe thinks that all American

Foreign Service members should be like the Martins.

**Arthur Alexander Gray** – Alex Gray is the American Ambassador to Vietnam. When Gray hears that Senator Brown is coming to inspect them, he calls his staff together and tells them to make Brown think they are doing a better job than they truly are. Gray and his staff are ultimately successful, since Brown leaves convinced that the Americans in Vietnam are working hard to combat Communism.

**Dr. Hans Barre** – Dr. Barre is a translator working for the Americans in Vietnam. During Brown's visit, Gray tells Barre to filter whatever the Vietnamese civilians tell him as he translates. Barre does so, hiding the fact that the Vietnamese civilians hate the French as much as the Communists, and that the French are not training Vietnamese soldiers.

**Joe Bing** – Joe Bing is a member of the foreign service, a loud, boisterous, quintessential American. Although most Americans love Joe Bing, Jyoti remarks that most Asians find him overly loud and culturally insensitive. He does not try to learn any local languages, he throws wild and disruptive parties, and he belittles non-white non-Americans. Bing serves as a public information officer in several countries before ultimately succeeding Gilbert MacWhite as Ambassador to Sarkhan.

**Bob Maile** – Bob Maile is an American diplomat in Burma whom Ruth Jyoti speaks very highly of. Unlike most Americans in the story, Maile is studious, humble, and quiet. He and his wife learn Burmese immediately, put their children in a local school, and live in a modest house in the city without servants. Jyoti believes that if all Americans were as good as Maile, Communism would not last in Southeast Asia.

**Marie MacIntosh** – Marie is a 28-year-old American woman who is bored with her "drab" life. Marie takes a job in the Foreign Service and moves to Sarkhan. She writes to her former roommates about how luxurious her new life is abroad, with servants, a lavish house, and endless parties. Marie's lifestyle demonstrates the superficial appeal of working in the American Foreign Service.

**Li Pang** – Li Pang is a Chinese representative for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. Li and MacWhite are old friends. MacWhite invites Li to visit him and help him with his plan to rid Sarkhan of Communist operators. However, Li realizes that MacWhite's Chinese servants, Roger and Donald, can understand English and are secretly Communist spies, meaning that MacWhite's entire plan is compromised.

**Jim Davis** – Jim Davis is a black American soldier who fights for Major Monet as a Foreign Legionnaire. Davis is an excellent scout and the only Legionnaire whom the Vietnamese scouts trust. However, on a patrol, Communists capture Davis and tear out one of his eyes as a warning to the other French fighters.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Ramon Magsaysay** – Ramon Magsaysay is a Filipino politician and Minister of Defense. Colonel Hillandale befriends Magsaysay and becomes his unofficial advisor. When Magsaysay, who is sympathetic to America, campaigns for the presidency, Hillandale helps him win support in a region with entrenched Communists by befriendng the local people.

**Joseph Rivers** – Joseph Rivers is an American official who gives Ruth Jyoti a tour of San Francisco. When Rivers hears Jyoti criticize Joe Bing—whom all Americans love—he thinks that she is terribly offensive, and that any person who doesn't love Joe Bing must not love America itself.

**Hamilton Upton** – Hamilton Upton is an austere and professional man who works with Joe Bing to recruit new people to the Foreign Service. Upton states that although everyone would rather stay with their family and work in America, they have a duty as citizens to fight Communism's "world-wide conspiracy."

**Donald** – Donald is MacWhite's Chinese servant. Although Donald claims to not understand English, he secretly does and operates as a Communist spy.

**Roger** – Roger is MacWhite's Chinese servant. Although Roger claims to not understand English, he secretly does and operates as a Communist spy.

**The Martins** – The Martins are an American couple who move into a Burmese village, learn the language, and teach their neighbors how to can and preserve vegetables, initiating a small canning industry in the area.

**Don Philippe** – Don Philippe is the Philippine Ambassador to Sarkhan and an old friend of Colonel Hillandale. During a formal dinner, Don Philippe asks Hillandale to read the Sarkhanese dignitaries' palms to stall them for 30 minutes while his cook goes to find a missing ingredient.

**Prince Moyang** – Prince Moyang is a Sarkhanese protocol officer, who George Swift offends when he does not follow protocol to arrange the King's palm reading.

**Ernest Cravath** – Cravath is an American officer in Vietnam, who convinces Senator Brown that they are effectively fighting the Communist soldiers, even though they are actually losing.

**Mao Tse-tung** – Mao Tse-tung is the leader of the Chinese Communists and a prominent intellectual in the Communist movement. Mao and his soldiers defeat Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Chinese nationalists, and take control of China.

**Margaret Johnson** – Margaret works as a secretary for Louis Sears. Margaret takes her job seriously and maintains relationships with Sarkhanese newspaper editors, which Sears dislikes her for.

**U Tien** – U Tien is a Burmese Catholic and the first man that Father Finian enlists to fight Communism. U Tien helps Finian find dependable local anti-Communist men to ally with.

**Vladimir Vinich** – Vladimir Vinich is a Russian operative sent to combat Father Finian's effective campaign against Communism. However, Toki secretly records a conversation where Vinich admits that the Communists will not actually help the Burmese people and broadcasts it on the local radio, defeating Vinich's efforts.

**Toki** – Toki is one of the Burmese men who helps Father Finian fight Communism in the rural villages. Toki infiltrates the local Communist Party, records Vinich admitting that the Communists do not actually intend to help Burmese peasants, and broadcasts the recording on the local radio, thus defeating Vinich.

**Dexter Peterson** – Dexter Peterson is a member of the State Department in Washington, D.C., and Louis Sears's superior.

## TERMS

**Sarkhan / Sarkhanese** – Sarkhan is a fictional nation of 20 million people in Southeast Asia, which represents the archetypal developing nation in that region of the world. Sarkhan is occupied by Japan during World War II until the Americans liberate it. However, as Sarkhan struggles economically in the 1940s and early 1950s, the country begins to lean toward Communism.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### THE FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE

In 1958, political scientist Eugene Burdick and naval officer William Lederer published *The Ugly American*, a series of interconnected vignettes that together offer a scathing critique of America's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. The political novel centers around American presence in the fictional Asian nation of Sarkhan, though it also features stories set in Vietnam, Burma, and Cambodia. Although the stories are fictional, they reflect actual historical events, and several characters have specific real-life counterparts. Altogether, the stories expose and explain the failure of America's Foreign Service and diplomatic efforts. Through its many vignettes, *The Ugly American* argues that the American Foreign Service fails because it employs arrogant and ignorant people, favors impressive-sounding projects over effective solutions, and fails to support innovative and

committed thinkers.

The American government staffs its Foreign Service with career politicians and well-educated figures, but they are self-centered, pompous, and ignorant, demonstrating that people with impressive credentials are not necessarily well-qualified for work abroad. The novel opens with “the Honorable Louis Sears, American Ambassador to Sarkhan.” Sears is a career politician (meaning he spends his entire career in political or government roles) whose political party assigns him to work in Sarkhan until a post opens up for him as a judge in America. Sears cannot speak the language and knows nothing about foreign policy or Sarkhanese culture, suggesting that he has no interest in actually helping Sarkhan or even advancing an American agenda there. Rather, Sears spends the majority of his time in his mansion, which is staffed with servants, complaining that the local Sarkhanese newspapers make him look bad. As a result, Prince Ngong, a Sarkhanese official, regards Sears as “more stupid than most.” This suggests that many of America’s Foreign Ambassadors are unqualified and poor representatives of the United States—by Prince Ngong’s assessment, they’re *all* stupid, but Sears is even “more stupid.” Another American in the Foreign Service, Joe Bing, is beloved by his American contemporaries for being loud, befriending important people, and throwing wild parties. However, Burmese reporter Ruth Jyoti notes that Joe Bing seems outrageous and boorish to Asian sensibilities. She states, “Generally Americans in Asia are not effective [...] They feel that if the nice rich respectable people like them, they are doing a good job,” suggesting that such people put all their energy into being well-liked, rather than doing their jobs well. Both Joe Bing and Louis Sears embody the elite, well-educated career politician who is nevertheless arrogant and inept and poorly represents the United States, implying that the Foreign Service is rife with such people.

Although the American government invests money into developing countries, *The Ugly American* points out that it prioritizes projects that merely sound impressive over ones that will actually help people in practical, tangible ways. Although Cambodia, Burma, Vietnam, and Sarkhan are all rural, agricultural countries, the American government only wants to undertake large-scale projects like building massive dams and military roads. Though they sound impressive, such projects do little to support the agrarian peasants. Homer Atkins, an American engineer, goes to Vietnam to consult for the American government on building roads. However, after traveling through the rural countryside, Atkins declares, “You don’t need dams and roads [...] You ever hear of a food shortage being solved by someone building a military highway designed to carry tanks and trucks?” With this, Homer Atkins suggests that America’s resources should go towards supporting the Vietnamese people in ways that make practical sense for their lifestyle and landscape—the American government’s plan to

slap their own grandiose solutions on the country is not only ineffective but laughable.

However, when presented with practical and efficient solutions, the American government often demurs. Tom Knox, an American chicken farmer, develops a cost-effective plan to introduce several American breeds into Cambodia’s chicken population, strengthening their weak chicken stock and raising the country’s egg production by 200 percent. For two years, Knox petitions his superiors to fund his plan, but they think it will take too long and does not sound impressive enough. They tell him, “What our two governments want is something big, that really helps people right away”—ignoring the fact that dams and roads take a long time to build, and still wouldn’t help anyone when they are finished—implying that the American Foreign Service will not even back effective and affordable initiatives that its own people develop.

However, more than just refusing to support effective projects, the American government opposes people who want to reform the Foreign Service and make it more effective. When Tom Knox’s superiors won’t support his chicken plan, he angrily resolves to go to Washington, D.C., and make a scene so that the government will see the need for more effective Foreign Service workers. To prevent Knox from causing trouble for them in D.C., his superiors and their French partners send him on a luxurious trip through Asia and Europe. By the time Knox reaches the U.S., he forgets what he was angry about and contentedly retires. Knox’s superiors basically buy him off to reduce trouble for themselves, suggesting that they not only inhibit effective and intelligent people, but even actively undermine them. Louis Sears’s replacement, Gilbert MacWhite, is intelligent and forthright. As an ambassador, MacWhite travels around Southeast Asia and recognizes the weakness of the entire American Foreign Service. He draws up a list of new requirements for Foreign Service workers, stating that they must be fluent in the local language, study local history and culture, and so on. However, the American Secretary of State calls MacWhite’s ideas “highly impractical” and forces him to resign. The American government’s removal of MacWhite suggests that it is unwilling to reform its Foreign Service into a capable system, preferring instead to keep career politicians in comfortable, though ineffective, positions.



## COMMUNISM VS. CAPITALISM

Set in the mid-20th century, *The Ugly American* is framed by the Cold War-era tension between Eastern Communism and Western Capitalism.

American and Russian diplomats compete with each other in every Southeast Asian country to sway the regional governments toward their own ideology, with Communism maintaining a significant lead. The American Foreign Service’s failure to represent America well also reflects their failure to make Capitalism seem like a better ideology than Communism.



Building on their own experience working with the foreign service, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer use their political novel to propose that America and its Capitalist allies cannot defeat Communism through major military or propaganda victories, but by understanding their opponents and truly helping the Southeast Asians they want to convert.

The American Capitalists are outwitted and outfought by Chinese and Russian Communists at every turn, suggesting that America cannot merely overpower its Communist opponents and thus win control of Southeast Asia. Ambassador Louis Sears organizes millions of pounds of rice to be shipped to Sarkhan to help alleviate food shortage—and to establish the United States as a compassionate benefactor. However, the Russian diplomats, all fluent in Sarkhanese, briefly intercept the shipment. On each sack of rice, they write in Sarkhanese that the food is a gift from the Russian government in the name of Communism. When the Americans deliver the rice, they don't understand what the Sarkhanese text on each sack says, but only see a sea of smiling Sarkhanese peasants. The Sarkhanese peasants don't speak English, and so only understand that white people are handing out bags of food, purportedly as a gift from the Russian government. Because of the Americans' inability to read Sarkhanese, what should be positive propaganda for American Capitalism instead becomes propaganda for Russian Communism, demonstrating that the Communists are much cleverer and better-equipped than the Capitalists for operating in a country like Sarkhan. The Americans cannot simply buy the Sarkhanese people's goodwill. In Vietnam, the American Major "Tex" Wolchek and the French Major Monet work together to lead a battalion of Foreign Legionnaires fighting Communists soldiers. Despite both Tex and Monet being excellent commanders leading skilled fighters with superior weapons, the Communists fight with such unusual tactics in the Vietnamese jungles and villages that the Foreign Legionnaires suffer defeat after defeat. This is particularly frustrating for Major Monet, as his long military career and centuries of French military knowledge suddenly prove worthless, suggesting that the Capitalist powers cannot beat the Communists through conventional methods, whether military or financial.

A small number of Americans begin to understand their Communist adversaries' methods once they start to read Communist literature, suggesting that Americans must truly understand their enemy's ideology in order to counteract it. After suffering catastrophic defeats and losing many soldiers, Tex remembers that he once read a book by the famous Chinese Communist, Mao Tse-tung, outlining a new theory of guerilla combat which operates under completely different rules than traditional European warfare. Although Monet is reticent to let go of his traditional French manner of fighting, when they start to read Mao's war tactics once again, they suddenly understand why they've lost every battle thus far: the

Communists ignore traditional military wisdom and approach battle in an entirely different way, which is better-suited to Vietnam's difficult terrain. When Tex and Monet use the same guerilla tactics against the Communist fighters, they achieve their first victory in months, suggesting that the only way to effectively fight against Communism is to understand how the Communists think, even using their own tactics against them. Gilbert MacWhite, Sears's predecessor as the Ambassador to Sarkhan, takes inspiration from Tex and Monet's new victories. He starts reading Communist literature for himself to understand the ideology spreads and takes root in poor communities. Through his reading, MacWhite becomes so convinced that understanding Communist ideology is essential to fighting its spread across Southeast Asia that he argues any new Foreign Service worker must be well-versed in Mao, Lenin, Marx, and Engel's writings (all leading Communists thinkers) before they ever set foot in the country.

Ambassador MacWhite argues that ultimately, the greatest way for America to fight Communism in Southeast Asia is simply to act morally, professionally, and benefit the lives of everyday people. MacWhite states that the Russians efficiently and swiftly spread Communism by being effective diplomats. Pointing to the American and French diplomats' reputation for partying, boorish behavior, lavish lifestyles, and general ineffectiveness, he notes that every Russian foreign service worker is fluent in the local language, lives quietly and modestly, and goes to great lengths to understand the needs of local people and meet them as best they can, thus making Communism seem appealing and responsible. MacWhite declares, "the Russians will win the world by their successes in a multitude of tiny battles. Many of these will be fought around conference tables, in the rice fields of Asia, at village meetings, in schools; but mainly they will take place in the minds of men." MacWhite thus argues that each country's perception of American ambassadors is critically important, and that every single foreign diplomat should be modest, productive, and well-versed to live in and understand their respective cultures. MacWhite praises people like Homer Atkins and his wife Emma as model evangelists for Western Capitalism. Homer and Emma move into a small village in Vietnam, learn the language, and partner with local tradesmen to develop simple innovations which can be made, marketed, and sold by local people. Their humility and tangible benefits to the village make Homer and Emma into cherished and respected figures in the region, even though they are foreigners, developing Vietnamese appreciation and goodwill towards America, and thus toward Capitalism. MacWhite (and the authors) argues that every American Foreign Service worker can do the most to combat Communism by following Homer and Emma's lead—living humble and productive lives, offering America's insight and technical knowledge for the benefit of everyday people.



## GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT

Despite its numerous examples of the American Foreign Service's failures, *The Ugly American* also provides models for how Americans Foreign

Service workers can succeed. After the engineer Homer Atkins and his wife Emma realize that Vietnam does not need massive roads and dams—as the American government asked him to build—they move to Sarkhan to figure out how to help the people who need it most. In doing so, Homer and Emma model how to live alongside people in poverty, build relationships with them, and create practical, sustainable change. Through Homer and Emma, the book emphasizes how grassroots development—meaning development that's focused around individual communities and local projects—is often far more impactful and welcomed than impressive large-scale development.

Homer and Emma move into a rural village and live exactly as the Sarkhanese peasants do. Living amidst the community allows them to understand the daily lives and needs of the people they want to help. Homer and Emma move into a small, earthen-floored hut and adopt the villagers' lifestyle. They learn the language so that they can communicate with their neighbors. This helps Homer and Emma integrate themselves into village life and helps the Sarkhanese to understand that they are different from most foreigners, who live in luxurious homes in the city. When Homer introduces himself to the village headman, the Sarkhanese leader is touched that Homer speaks to him in his own language and hears him out, which is a clear example of how living amidst a community and adopting its language and lifestyle helps build trust with the local people.

Homer and Emma's daily proximity to other villagers also helps them to recognize legitimate needs that they can address to improve the villagers' quality of life. Homer observes that the villagers, living on hillside paddies, struggle to produce food because they must haul water up the hillside from the river, which is slow and exhausting work. Similarly, Emma realizes that all the elderly people in the village have painfully bent backs due to spending their days sweeping the village with short-handled brooms made of palm fronds, which require them to constantly bend over to reach the ground. These observations inspire Homer to design a bicycle-powered water pump and Emma to design a long-handled broom as practical solutions to the villagers' everyday problems. It is living amidst the community—not functioning as some far-off benefactors—that allows Homer and Emma to affect change.

Besides simply living among the villagers, Homer and Emma also set an example for positive grassroots development by treating the villagers as equals, which in turn encourages the villagers to make their own contributions to new developments. When Homer wants to prototype his water pump, he explains his idea to the village headman. The headman introduces him to a strong-willed and capable Sarkhanese mechanic named

Jeepo, who makes several improvements to Homer's design, specifically to make it more affordable and practical for farming. Homer and Jeepo become equal business partners and launch their new endeavor together, and Homer benefits from Jeepo's mechanical skill and insight. The villagers enjoy seeing a white man and a Sarkhanese man working as equal partners, especially when Jeepo and Homer erupt in shouting matches over new changes to their designs. They've never seen a Sarkhanese person fully express themselves toward a white person without fear of recompense. Thus, not only do both parties benefit from an equal relationship, but long-standing tensions between groups—such as between white foreigners and local villagers—can begin to heal through equal collaboration.

Like Homer, Emma is careful to maintain an equal relationship with the elderly people as she tries to introduce her long-handled broom. When the elderly Sarkhanese tell her that their bent backs are simply due to old age, she does not argue with them but respects their view. Instead, Emma sweeps her own hut with her long-handled broom each day, demonstrating that she is able to stand straight and preserve her back. Rather than just telling the elderly people what she thinks they ought to do, Emma leaves the choice up to them. When they do adopt Emma's long-handled broom, they do so of their own free will. By showing rather than telling, a foreign developer can help local people maintain their own agency, treating them as equals rather than as subordinates and encouraging them to make their own contributions to each development as well.

When designing their new developments, Homer and Emma ensure that all the required pieces will be easily available to villagers so that the villagers can recreate such developments themselves, demonstrating the need for sustainability in any new development. Although Homer could import the pieces to build new water pumps, he understands that it would keep the villagers dependent on foreigners, leaving them no better off. Together, Homer and Jeepo modify their water pump design until every piece can be salvaged from old jeeps and bicycles, which are plentiful. They hire several villagers, teach them how to build the pumps, and then send them out to sell the pumps and show the design to other villages. They choose not to patent their design so that any village can manufacture the pumps for themselves, making the advantages of the water pump accessible to the greatest number of people. Similarly, although Emma could purchase broom handles from the U.S. and import them, she recognizes that that would be an unsustainable development. Instead, she hunts around until she finds naturally growing long, firm reeds that can be transplanted and grown in the village and then harvested to work as suitable broom handles, creating an endless supply of new handles. Homer and Emma's focus on sustainability demonstrates how sustainable grassroots development can have benefits that endure far longer than the developers

themselves, thus creating lasting and tangible change in a community. In this way, grassroots developments can be carried on by the local people and grow far beyond their initial target.



### SELF-INTERESTED PHILANTHROPY

Both the French and the Americans claim to maintain their presence in Southeast Asia to help those countries develop, posturing themselves as humanitarians offering aid to poorer people. However, America and France both blatantly use their positions in such countries to line their own pockets and advance their own interests, even when it hurts those countries' growth and independence. Although the French and the Americans claim to help nations like Sarkhan and Vietnam develop, they constantly try to leverage developments in Southeast Asia to benefit themselves at the cost of others, suggesting that the America and France's supposed philanthropy (charitable aid) masks their own self-interest.

Sarkhan and the other Southeast Asian nations desire their own independence and development, which makes them wary of accepting aid from larger, more powerful countries, indicating that they recognize other countries' total self-interest. During Ambassador Louis Sears's tenure in Sarkhan, a local newspaper publishes a comic of him leading a Sarkhanese man on a leash toward a Coca-Cola sign, indicating that many Sarkhanese people suspect America is not in their country to help them, but to make them buy American products and enrich American companies. Prince Ngong, a Sarkhanese official, tells his advisers that he is wary of accepting too much help from either America or the Soviet Union, since he knows they are both trying to leverage aid to gain control in Asia and further their own Capitalist and Communist ideologies. Prince Ngong states that what he truly desires is "Sarkhan's independence and development," suggesting that nations like Sarkhan do not want to be beholden to any foreign powers, but as free and autonomous as America, France, or the Soviet Union.

However, despite Sarkhan's hopes for independence, America and France constantly undermine sustainable development initiatives to enrich themselves, confirming that their efforts are more self-interested than philanthropic. The engineer and grassroots developer Homer Atkins observes that any time the French try to offer a new innovation to a country like Vietnam, they immediately place restrictive patents on it so that French companies can collect royalties. This makes any new product or technology too expensive for most of the local population to use. This practice confirms that despite their claims of wanting to help countries like Vietnam, the French care more about enriching themselves than helping Southeast Asians. Worse yet, when Homer Atkins observes that many Vietnamese villages sit on rich mineral deposits and could be trained to make their own bricks, a French officer severely chastises him.

He explains that a French company has the monopoly on all brick manufacturing in Vietnam—"If everyone started forming brick and quarry companies, it would ruin [France and Vietnam's] relationship." Although the idea could save money and help the Vietnamese become financially independent, France only cares about guarding its own wealth and profit-making.

Although the French exhibit the most egregiously self-interested behavior, America also exploits the countries it claims to help. In Sarkhan, the American government owns several thousand acres of flat, undeveloped land. They lease it to the Sarkhanese government to use as a training ground for their air force, and the Sarkhanese government spends several years and millions of dollars developing the land and building on it. When the property value of the entire area rises due to the Sarkhanese government's investment and development, the American government slyly evicts them so that they can sell the now-valuable land to American real estate agents and subdividers. As a result, the Sarkhanese government loses years of work and millions of dollars of investment, while the Americans make a fortune without investing any of their own money. The American government thus proves itself to be as exploitative and underhanded as the French, pursuing its own wealth, even while hurting the already struggling Sarkhanese.

France and America's exploitative actions actively impede the Southeast Asian countries' development rather than encourage it, implying that such countries may have been better off without such foreign interference. Ironically, such financial corruption and domination inhibit competitive free markets and growth, making France and America, who preach the values of Capitalism and democracy, more domineering and controlling than even the Communists. Their blatant self-interest inhibits the growth of developing countries, suggesting that they are more colonial than philanthropic—they are more interested in subjugating and profiting off of those countries than helping them move toward independence.



### RACISM AND CULTURAL INSENSITIVITY

Despite living and working in another country, most members of the American Foreign Service hold racist views and lack awareness of the cultures they live amongst. Rather than embodying a progressive and democratic society, America's representatives showcase the worst aspects of American superiority and ignorance of other cultures. Naturally, such attitudes disrupt productive and healthy cooperation between American diplomats and their Southeast Asian counterparts. *The Ugly American* depicts the American Foreign Service as rife with racial prejudice and cultural insensitivity and demonstrates how such ignorance sours diplomatic relations between America and its hopeful allies.

More often than not, the American Foreign Service workers

(and their European allies) exhibit racial prejudice against the Asians they are supposedly fostering relationships with. Ambassador Louis Sears, the head of the American diplomats in Sarkhan, exhibits clear racial prejudice against all non-white people. When he is initially assigned to work in Asia, he tells his superiors, “I’m not prejudiced, but I just don’t work well with blacks.” While serving as Ambassador, he privately thinks of the Sarkhanese as “strange little monkeys,” demonstrating that even the leaders of America’s effort to build relationships with other nations dehumanizes them through their own racial prejudice. When the famed Foreign Service worker Joe Bing advertises employment in the Foreign Service to a group of American recruits, he says, “You’ll have to work among foreigners, but we don’t expect you to love ‘em just because you work among ‘em [...] you’ll be living with a gang of clean-cut Americans.” Bing’s assurance implies that he thinks living with non-Americans would be naturally distasteful, suggesting that not only does racial prejudice exist in the American Foreign Service, but the government practically expects it.

French and English diplomats exhibit a similar racial prejudice against non-white people. In a conference discussing nuclear armament with representatives from India, the American delegate Solomon Asch realizes that the English and French only want to talk down to the Indian representatives. Privately, an English delegate tells him, “[Indians are] not used to talking about such intricate problems as armament” and advises offering simple, minimal solutions, suggesting that he believes Indians are not intelligent enough to understand complex issues. Such frank racism suggests that prejudice is widespread not only among the Americans, but among all the developed Western powers.

In addition, many members of the American Foreign Service make no effort to understand the cultures of the people they’re working with. Joe Bing often offends his Southeast Asian counterparts through his ignorance of their customs and culture. He serves only liquor at his social functions, even though Muslims and Buddhists can only drink milk, fruit juice, or water, effectively banning their participation. Moreover, Bing refuses to learn the local language and make no effort to understand the cultures he works amongst, but instead believes “it’s better to make the Asians learn English.” The fact that other Americans highly regard Bing in spite of his cultural insensitivity suggests that such ignorance is widespread throughout the American Foreign Service, not regarded as a serious problem. In Sarkhan, astrology is taken very seriously and occupies an important role in the culture. The American Colonel Hillandale recognizes its significance and studies astrology himself so that he can use his knowledge to ingratiate himself to Sarkhanese dignitaries. However, George Swift, the American protocol officer, completely disregards astrology as “fake[,] a vaudeville stunt.” Swift denigrates a major aspect of Sarkhanese culture based on his own opinion of it, failing to

even see its diplomatic value. Swift’s total rejection of an important cultural institution suggests that his own American cultural ideals make him completely dismissive of other cultures.

The Americans and Europeans’ racism and cultural insensitivity disrupt their diplomatic relationships with Asian countries, underscoring that such prejudices are not harmless, but have real detrimental effects on international diplomacy. The Sarkhanese people regard Ambassador Sears as an ineffective, offensive joke, and despise him as much as Sears despises them. Similarly, Burmese reporter Ruth Jyoti notes that although Americans love Joe Bing, most Southeast Asians find his insensitivity to their cultures offensive. Both men, as public figures, tarnish the reputation of all Americans across Southeast Asia. Similarly, Asch warns the English and French that if they talk down to the Indian representatives, negotiations will grind to a halt. He says, “unless you feel they’re equals and act on that feeling, they’ll never respond. [...] Make someone feel inferior in a negotiating situation, and he’ll be the toughest guy around the table.” Asch’s prediction proves true, as the Indian representatives perceive that they’re being condescended to and refuse to cooperate, since the Western countries will not treat them as equals. Also, Swift’s disregard for astrology loses the Americans a major opportunity to strengthen their relationship with the Sarkhanese government and grow their influence. Although Hillandale agrees to privately read the Sarkhanese King’s palm—which is a great honor—Swift fails to do his duty and formally arrange the meeting, because he thinks astrology is stupid and finds Hillandale’s interest in it irritating. Swift’s superior, Ambassador Gilbert MacWhite severely reprimands Swift for his failure, counseling, “Your business is not to judge whether or not things [like astrology] are fakes, but who believes them and why and what it means,” suggesting that cultural sensitivity and understanding is essential to working in another culture, since it helps one to understand why other people act and believe the way they do. Such cultural insensitivity is thus the worst trait that a foreign diplomat could possibly possess. Among the many faults of the American Foreign Service, *The Ugly American* suggests that America’s diplomatic efforts are severely impeded by simple racial prejudice and Americans’ inability to take other cultures seriously.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## UGLINESS

Homer Atkins’s ugliness, which makes him the “ugly American” of the novel’s title, symbolizes his

practicality, humility, and excellent work ethic. Atkins attends a meeting in Vietnam with a number of French, American, and Vietnamese officials, all of whom are clean-cut and expensively dressed. Atkins, by contrast, is stocky, wears wrinkled khaki clothing with no tie, and his hands are scarred and blackened from years of manual labor and machine oil. Although Atkins feels out of place in such a setting, he is proud of his ugliness, particularly of his strong and ugly hands, since he's made three million dollars with those hands and knows that he could make more. Atkins's ugliness thus sets him apart from the other Foreign Service workers by signifying that he works with his hands and spends his time outside in the rural parts of Vietnam rather than in luxurious, clean mansions.

In the book, ugliness does not only apply to Atkins. When Atkins meets the Sarkhanese mechanic Jeepo, Atkins immediately likes him because he can see that Jeepo is as ugly as himself—Jeepo, too, is independent and practical and works with his hands to solve problems. This extension of ugliness to other characters and the novel's title, *The Ugly American*, suggests that such "ugly" people—that is, people who aren't afraid to dig in and get real work done and don't care if they or their jobs look impressive on the outside—are precisely the type of people who should make up the Foreign Service, since they will be humble and work hard to solve real problems with real solutions.

election, the Democratic National Committee offers Sears a post as Ambassador to Sarkhan, which he accepts rather than take a menial clerk position. Sears's comment about black people demonstrates that he is racially prejudiced, and his ignorance about Sarkhan indicates that he has never had any interest in Southeast Asia. That such a racist, ignorant individual should become the chief American diplomat in another country, responsible for guiding America's relationship with that country, is disturbing. Sears's appointment to his post suggests that the American government is not recruiting high-quality, dedicated officials to the Foreign Service, but failed politicians and people who are out of options. The book highlights that with such worthless, uncommitted people running the Foreign Service, it seems highly unlikely that America could maintain any sort of productive foreign policy or keep up a strong reputation abroad.

“Look, John, I told you milk is part of history. If you get this crazy milk and cattle scheme of yours going, it could in time change the economic balance in Sarkhan.”

“What's wrong with that? That's what I want to do.”

“Nothing. It's a good idea. Out in the bush we've talked it over a lot. But you're the wrong person to be permitted to do it. If it succeeded, the Sarkhanese would believe that America was their savior.”

**Related Characters:** John Colvin, Deong (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 14

### Explanation and Analysis

When Colvin returns to Sarkhan to launch a dairy industry and strengthen their economy, Deong shows up to stop him—and even kill him if necessary. Since John left Sarkhan, Deong has become a Communist. Deong's statement that an American should not be the one to save Sarkhan not only reflects his Communist politics, but also a real fear of aggrandizing Western powers like France and America any more than they already have been. Deong's fear appears to indicate that he is worried that Sarkhan will accept a colonial-style relationship with America much like Vietnam has with France: if the Sarkhanese people view America as “their savior,” they will accept increasing levels of American control in their country, and Sarkhan will never be free. Such fears seem well-founded, considering Europe and America's



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *The Ugly American* published in 2019.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

“Where the hell is Sarkhan?”



“It's a small country out toward Burma and Thailand.”

“Now, you know I'm not prejudiced, but I just don't work well with blacks.”

“They're not black, they're brown. Well, if you don't want it, we can fix you up as a legal assistant to...”

“I'll take it.”

**Related Characters:** Louis Sears (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

After Louis Sears, an American senator, loses his fourth

history of colonizing other countries. Such histories and fears demonstrate the complexity of foreign policy and international relationships, where good people like Colvin must not only face economic and cultural challenges, but also be aware of how their actions and their nationalities fit into the historical narrative.

“I think that the *Eastern Star* has, perhaps, become somewhat critical of our foreign policy. In particular, it is reluctant to have us grant air bases in this country in exchange for foreign aid. But as a representative of a democratic country, you can surely understand our reluctance to interfere with a free press.”

**Related Characters:** Prince Ngong (speaker), Louis Sears

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

After Ambassador Louis Sears sees a Sarkhanese political cartoon mocking him, he presses Sarkhanese official Prince Ngong to put a stop to such criticisms—or else Sears will complain to the American government. Sears disregards Sarkhan’s democratic freedoms for the sake of protecting his own ego. This is grimly ironic, since Sears is the representative of a democratic country, trying to convince Sarkhan to maintain its democracy rather than submit to Communism. His willingness to threaten Sarkhan and coerce it into repressing its own press suggests that Sears has no interest in Sarkhan’s wellbeing whatsoever, and certainly not in preserving its freedoms. Rather, Sears’s primary concern as an ambassador is to be well liked, meaning that he barely functions in his position. Unfortunately, Sears is depicted as a common type of diplomat in the American Foreign Service, supporting the book’s argument that many of America’s representatives abroad have no interest in truly helping the countries they are in. Rather, they use their diplomatic authority to serve their own self-interests.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

“The American Ambassador [Sears] is a jewel. He keeps his people tied up with meetings, social events, and greeting and briefing the scores of senators, congressmen, generals, admirals, under-secretaries of State and Defense, and so on, who come pouring through here to ‘look for themselves.’ He forbids his people to ‘go into the hills,’ and still annoys the people of Sarkhan with his bad manners.”

**Related Characters:** Louis Krupitzyn (speaker), Louis Sears

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 29



### Explanation and Analysis

Louis Krupitzyn, a Russian diplomat in Sarkhan, writes to his superiors that Sears is a great asset because he disrupts American operations and makes the entire nation look bad. Louis Krupitzyn is a foil for Louis Sears, embodying the effective Communist to contrast against Sears as the bumbling Capitalist. Krupitzyn’s letter not only asserts that Sears is a gift to the Russian diplomats, but also suggests that foolish, incompetent, and offensive Americans fail to represent Capitalism well and thus actually advance the cause of the Communists. By forbidding his staff from traveling into the rural parts of Sarkhan, where the poor villagers live, Sears leaves a wide open territory for the Communists to occupy and influence unchallenged. Additionally, the more that Sears demonstrates his racial prejudice and cultural insensitivity, the more that the Russians appear well mannered, sensitive, and professional. In this scenario, people like Sears do catastrophic damage to America’s reputation and push Sarkhan further toward Communism. Arguably, it would be better if Americans like Sears were not in Sarkhan at all, since at least then they would not be having such a negative impact.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

“It is not for me to say [...] It is for all of us. It is your country, your souls, your lives. I will do what we agree upon.” [...] This was, [Finian] was sure, the first time that these men had ever been told by a white man that a big and important decision was entirely their own... and would be followed by the white man.

**Related Characters:** Father Finian (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

In Burma, the American Catholic priest, Father Finian, meets with a group of Burmese anti-Communists to develop a plan to fight Communism. However, Finian only organizes the group, and insists that they lead themselves. Finian's decision not to lead establishes the equality between himself, a white American, and his friends, native Burmese men. His sense that the Burmese men have never been treated equally by a white man before suggests that they are used to the white foreigners who enter their country and insist on being in command and telling the local people what they must do. His statement that they are discussing the fate of "your country, your souls, your lives" rightly recognizes that the decisions they will make primarily effect the Burmese men, since they are all conspiring to save their homeland from Communism. Since Finian has the least stake in their success or failure—America is safe, and he will always have a home to return to—it seems only reasonable that he not make the decisions. Finian possesses a humility thus far rarely seen among Americans and demonstrates that establishing equality is the first step in effective grassroots organizing. However, this requires that the foreigner give up control and accept that their project's success or failure is out of their hands.

“Vinich had made elaborate plans before he smuggled himself into Anthkata. He had developed a thorough plan for the extermination of the *Communist Farmer*. And he took steps to assure that his presence in Anthkata would not be known. He had discovered long ago that natives should do their own political work... foreigners should come in only as a last resort, and then always as quietly as possible.”

**Related Characters:** Father Finian (speaker), Vladimir Vinich

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

Father Finian recounts in his journal how the Russian operative, Vladimir Vinich, arrives in Burma to stop Finian and his friends' effective campaign against Communism. Vinich's belief, that local people should do their own work as much as possible and that foreigners should only intervene when absolutely necessary, informs the Russian approach

to diplomacy as well, which the novel constantly argues is far more effective. Vinich's philosophy suggests that diplomats should be subtle and discreet and allow local people to lead initiatives, manage projects, and make decisions as often as possible. This approach allows the local people to have the most say in issues that effect their own country, echoing Father Finian's insistence on equality and his belief that the Burmese people should be the ones to make any decisions. Unfortunately, this philosophy is precisely the opposite of how most of the French and American diplomats behave, since in practice they tend to be domineering, loud, and abrasive, and consider non-white people too unintelligent to handle anything remotely complex. This Russian style of diplomacy and operation, which they use to advance Communism, also becomes the ideal for how the Western Capitalists should operate as well.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

“But you have to know Joe Bing. He's six feet tall, fat, wears Tattersall checked vests. Lots of charm. [...] I can remember him sitting in the café at he Hotel Montaigne. Nodded to everyone who went by...”

“Nodded to everyone who was European, Caucasian, western-educated, and decently dressed,” Miss Jyoti said coldly. “I know the bastard now. He drives a big red convertible that he slews around corners and over sidewalks. And he's got exactly the kind of loud and silly laugh that every Asian is embarrassed to hear.”

**Related Characters:** Ruth Jyoti, Joseph Rivers (speaker), Joe Bing

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

While Burmese reporter, Ruth Jyoti, visits America on a press tour, her State Department guide, Joseph Rivers, speaks fondly of Joe Bing, currently stationed in Burma. Rivers' and Jyoti's perceptions of Joe Bing sharply contrast with each other, demonstrating how the same personality can appear vastly different to different cultural backgrounds. Jyoti's hatred for Joe Bing is particularly notable since Bing is depicted as the quintessential American: loud, eccentric, gregarious. This extends Jyoti's resentment from Joe Bing to all Americans who embody those same boisterous traits. Her charge that Bing has “the kind of loud and silly laugh that every Asian is embarrassed

to hear” suggests that overbearing American personalities are not simply obnoxious, but even offensive to Asian people’s sense of proper behavior. However, Bing is highly regarded among his American colleagues for those same characteristics that Jyoti despises, suggesting that most Americans do not understand how boorish and offensive their own behavior may appear to people from other cultures.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☞☞ The American editor said, “Mr. Ambassador, there’s a story making the rounds that the United States is about to evict the [Sarkhanese] Air Force from land lent to them by the United States. This would mean that all their millions of dollars of building would have to go. The property is supposed to be turned over to American real estate salesmen to sell as subdivisions.

**Related Characters:** Louis Sears

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

When an American newspaper editor in Sarkhan confronts Louis Sears over rumors that the American government is about to undercut the Sarkhanese Air Force, Sears uncomfortably states that he has “no comment to make.” This vignette not only demonstrates Sears’s inability to handle any situation at all, but more importantly demonstrates the self-interested angle of America’s foreign aid. Although America claims to be charitably helping countries like Sarkhan develop, their actions undercut Sarkhan’s investments and hurt its government, all so that America can make more profit, which it arguably needs far less than Sarkhan needs to protect its own investments. Such corruption calls America’s basic morality into question. Although the American diplomats fight against Eastern Communism and claim that it is an evil and exploitative ideology, their Western Capitalism hardly appears any better. Worse yet, every selfish and profit-driven action that America makes—much like this one—reinforces the Communists’ narrative that the Western Capitalists are soulless, money-grubbing people. Such behavior seems indefensible and counter-productive to helping developing countries grow and stemming the spread of Communism across Asia.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☞☞ [MacWhite] recognized that he did not know enough about the Asian personality and the way it played politics. There was a strain of coldness, an element of finality, about the whole thing he had never encountered before. Politics in Asia were played for total stakes. He also recognized that he could learn from the experience of others.

**Related Characters:** Roger, Donald, Gilbert MacWhite

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

After MacWhite, the new Ambassador to Sarkhan, finds out that his Chinese servants are actually Communist spies and have revealed his entire plan to fight Communism, he takes several days to reassess his position. MacWhite’s painful realization suggests that, although he was a successful politician and diplomat elsewhere, he cannot assume that diplomacy and politics in Asia will work like they do in America or European countries. Despite MacWhite being a committed professional who studies the language and culture, his basic assumptions about other people simply do not hold up in Southeast Asia. MacWhite’s realization that the Communists in Asia play by different rules echo his later realization that they also fight by different rules. More importantly, however, MacWhite’s realization implies that the vast majority of American diplomats are utterly unequipped to operate in Southeast Asia, since they do not understand the political or psychological landscape they live in. If MacWhite, who makes great efforts to study and understand and do his job well, does not understand how to operate effectively in Southeast Asia and combat Communist politics and methods, then the average American diplomat—as they currently are, with little qualification or cultural awareness—does not possibly stand a chance of being an effective Foreign Service worker.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞☞ “It doesn’t have a thing to do with the quality of the French fighting, or with your Legionnaires [...] It’s just that the Communists are fighting by a different rule book. And, like a damn fool, it’s taken me almost a month to remember that I once read it. When I was in Korea, I picked up a book by Mao Tse-tung. Now, Monet, don’t kid yourself about this. Mao is one hell of a bright guy. I hate what he stands for, but he does have a kind of genius.”



**Related Characters:** James “Tex” Wolchek (speaker), Gilbert MacWhite, Mao Tse-tung, Monet

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

Tex, an American officer, joins Monet, a French officer, to try and help him figure out why the French soldiers keep losing their battles with the Communists in Vietnam, despite having better soldiers and superior weapons. This vignette solidifies the novel’s argument that the Western Capitalists can only effectively fight Communism if they study Communist philosophy and understand Communistic tactics. Tex’s statement that Mao (a famous Chinese Communist leader) has an unusual sort of genius echoes MacWhite’s realization that politics in Asia operate completely differently from how they do in Europe and America. The fact that Mao’s strategies consistently outwit traditional French military wisdom suggests not only that Mao is brilliant, but that his Chinese cultural perspective lends him a mode of thinking that is completely counter-intuitive to how the French and Americans think. This establishes yet another massive challenge for Westerners operating in Asia, since the Westerners arrive with their own cultural assumptions and manners of thought which not only are completely different from Mao’s thinking, but also seem to be largely ineffective in Asian politics and war, as demonstrated by Monet’s consistent military failures.



## Chapter 13 Quotes

“In this section of the Shan States, everyone is pro-American because of the Martins. They came to Burma to help us, not to improve their own standard of living.

You don’t need publicity if the results of what you are doing are visible and valuable to the people. The steam from a good pot of soup is its best advertisement.

You asked me what I would do if I were the President of the United States. This is what I would do: I would send more people like the Martins to Burma. That’s all you’d need. You could forget about the hordes of executives, PX’s, commissaries, and service forces which are now needed to support the Americans abroad.”

**Related Characters:** U Maung Swe (speaker), The Martins

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 135

### Explanation and Analysis

At a dinner with American officials and press workers, Burmese journalist U Maung Swe outlines what he would do to reform the American Foreign Service. U Maung Swe thinks everyone should emulate the Martins, an American couple who did nothing more than move to rural Burma and teach villagers how to can and preserve vegetables. U Maung Swe’s advice suggests that all of the billions of dollars poured into the American Foreign Service are unnecessary, since the only effective Americans are those who live humbly and provide practical help to poor people, which requires almost no money.

U Maung Swe’s vision of what he would do as President seems to have had a direct impact on actual American history. After *The Ugly American* was published in 1958, Senator John F. Kennedy thought it was such an important book that he gifted a copy to all of his colleagues in the Senate. In 1960, when Senator Kennedy ran for President, he proposed creating the Peace Corps, a league of American Foreign Service workers who emulate the Martins, moving into poor, rural communities overseas to provide practical help wherever they can. President John F. Kennedy officially launched the Peace Corps in 1961, seemingly as a result of *The Ugly American* and the proposal that characters like U Maung Swe make for a more effective Foreign Service to represent American values.

“I believe firmly that the Americans could drive the Communists out of Asia in a few years if you really tried and were willing to live life on our level. And if you had a definite policy. But most important—act like Americans. We love Americans—the kind we meet in America.”

**Related Characters:** U Maung Swe (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

U Maung Swe, a Burmese journalist, explains how the Americans he meets abroad behave far worse than the Americans he has met in America, who are humble, generous, and eager to solve problems. He believes that if Americans could learn to act like they do in their own country while visiting other people’s countries, they would be a far more effective force. U Maung Swe’s statement

suggests that Americans must learn to live their lives on other people's terms; they must adopt the average lifestyles and living standards of the countries they work in, rather than demanding mansions and servants. More importantly, however, U Maung Swe's statement narrows the criticism of the entire novel. *The Ugly American* paints a rather grim picture of Americans, more often than not depicting them as greedy, insensitive, and boorish. However, U Maung Swe's criticism specifies that the largely critical novel is primarily aimed at Americans in the Foreign Service, who take their physical difference from American shores as an excuse to live large and rowdy and offensive. Notably, none of the novel's chapters are set on American soil, and very few even make reference to it. *The Ugly American's* harsh depiction of Americans thus demonstrates how repugnant American behavior abroad can give one the impression that all Americans act so foully, even when that is clearly not the case.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ To [Tom's] astonishment Cambodia seemed a long, long time away, and glazed over with wonderful memories. These were not so much memories of the village life, as of the generous and courteous attentions he had been given by so many Cambodians on his trip home. The anger, which in Cambodia had seemed so sure and honest a weapon, in his suite on the *Liberté* seemed somehow almost ridiculous.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Knox

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

When the American Thomas (Tom) Knox, a chicken expert, threatens to "raise hell" in Washington, D.C., until his superiors in Cambodia back his chicken plan, the French diplomats send Tom on a long, luxurious, expenses-paid tour through Asia and Europe to assuage his anger. Although Tom starts out as a good man who passionately cares about the Cambodian people, the French effectively buy Tom off (as the chapter title suggests) to stop him from making too much trouble for them or their American colleagues. Tom's corruption suggests that even the best-intentioned people can be seduced by pleasure and luxury until they forget their righteous impulses and desire to help impoverished people. Additionally, the French's plan to buy Tom's silence cynically suggests that the French and American diplomats not only impede effective grassroots development, but even

actively undermine people like Tom Knox who are ready and willing to carry it out themselves. This implies that the American Foreign Service and its French allies not only do not benefit the countries they work in, but even actively hinder their economic development and national health.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ "When I was asked to read palms at the Philippine Ambassador's dinner, it was a God-given opportunity. All of the Sarkhanese brass except the King were present. And then that knucklehead of an assistant of yours [Swift], instead of helping me, started laughing at me and trying to make a fool out of me. If he had an ounce of brains, he would have noticed how serious the Sarkhanese were. And if those fools in the State Department had briefed him properly, he would have known all about palmistry and astrology before he came here."

**Related Characters:** Edwin B. Hillandale (speaker), Gilbert MacWhite, George Swift

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 167



### Explanation and Analysis

When Colonel Hillandale, an American astrology enthusiast, gets the chance to read the Sarkhanese heads of state's palms, George Swift, an American diplomat, mocks the practice as a "vaudeville stunt." Swift's criticism of astrology, an important practice to the Sarkhanese, demonstrates that he judges Sarkhanese culture based on his own American values. Rather than try to see the world as the Sarkhanese see it, Swift rests on his American presumptions and insultingly dismisses it. Swift's cultural insensitivity ultimately ruins any diplomatic opportunity that Hillandale's palmistry creates, demonstrating the catastrophic impact that ill-equipped American diplomats can have. Swift's conduct and failure thus negatively argues that American diplomats must not only be well-trained, but culturally sensitive and open to non-American, non-traditional ideas, since the cultural values between America and Eastern countries can be vastly different.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ “And don’t kid yourself, gentleman; unless you *feel* they’re equals and act on that feeling, they’ll never respond. I’ve seen it happen too many times. Make someone feel inferior in a negotiating situation, and he’ll be the toughest guy around the table. Gentlemen, that is where I stand, and that is the way I will run my delegation.

**Related Characters:** Solomon Asch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 182



### Explanation and Analysis


While leading a conference between Western and Eastern countries on nuclear armament, Asch warns the English and French delegates that if they talk down to the Asian nations as they tend to, any negotiations will fall apart. Asch’s warning directly confronts the racial prejudice that most American and French diplomats in the novel harbor against non-white people. His insistence that the English and French delegates must “feel” that the other representatives are equal suggests that relationships between Western and Eastern countries will never strengthen until Western diplomats not only treat all people equally, but completely abandon their racist belief in their own superiority. This further suggests that anyone who harbors ideas of racial superiority or looks down on citizens of less-developed nations has no business working in international affairs. Their prejudice, by Asch’s reckoning, will unavoidably taint their conduct and the way that they treat other representatives to the point that it might be better that such prejudiced people are not involved in foreign affairs at all.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ [Atkins’s] hands were laced with big, liverish freckles. His fingernails were black with grease. His fingers bore the tiny nicks and scars of a lifetime of practical engineering. The palms of his hands were calloused. Homer Atkins was worth three million dollars, every dime of which he had earned by his own efforts; but he was most proud and confident of his ugly strong hands. Atkins knew he could always make a living with them.

**Related Characters:** Homer Atkins

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 191


### Explanation and Analysis

In Vietnam, Homer Atkins, an American engineer, sits in a room filled with expensively dressed, clean-cut diplomats and officials as they argue about what sort of development the country truly needs. Atkins is the titular ugly American. Although the term “ugly American” has become, in modern times, associated with abrasive behavior of Americans abroad, Atkins’s ugliness is actually to his credit. His ugliness, compared to the preened diplomats and officials, symbolizes his practicality and willingness to work hard and work with his hands. Where most American diplomats don’t like to exert themselves and do not spend time in the rural countryside, which could benefit from foreign aid the most, Atkins’s “ugly strong hands” and dirty fingernails imply that he spends time outside, in the dirt, with common people. Additionally, Atkins’s ugliness symbolically reflects that he is a self-made man. All of the money and respect that he has, he earned himself. This, too, contrasts with most American diplomats who earn their positions either through nepotism, connections, or because there were no qualified candidates for such roles. Ugliness thus symbolizes the character traits most effective for Foreign Service workers to have: practicality, humility, and integrity.

☞ “You don’t need dams and roads [...] Maybe later, but right now you need to concentrate on first things—largely things that your own people can manufacture and use. I don’t know much about farming or city planning or that kind of thing; but I can tell you that your people need other things besides military roads. You ever hear of a food shortage being solved by people building a military highway designed to carry tanks and trucks?”

**Related Characters:** Homer Atkins (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 192

### Explanation and Analysis

Although the American and Vietnamese governments hired Atkins to tell them where to build dams and roads, after

traveling the rural countryside, Atkins believes they need to alleviate hunger, not prioritize massive, but useless, installations. The officials' prioritizing roads and dams demonstrates how much of America's foreign aid is focused on projects that sound impressive and cost billions of dollars, but provide no actual benefit to average people. Thus, not only is the Foreign Service ineffective, but it focuses entirely on the wrong problems to begin with. Atkins's practicality reflects his symbolic ugliness: he believes that the solutions to Vietnam's primary problems are simple and unimpressive compared to dams and roads, just as his appearance is simple and unimpressive compared to that of the officials he confronts. Nevertheless, Atkins and his recommendations are far more useful and effective for improving the lives of Vietnamese citizens.

Mr. Atkins, [...] you may not know it, but a French firm has a concession to handle the production of building materials in this country. If everyone started forming brick and quarry companies, it would ruin our relationship.

**Related Characters:** Homer Atkins

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 194

### Explanation and Analysis

When Atkins suggests to a panel of Vietnamese, French, and American officials that many Vietnamese villages sit on rich mineral deposits and could be trained to manufacture bricks, a French diplomat angrily insists that a French company already has the monopoly on building materials in Vietnam. The French diplomat's angry retort frankly demonstrates that France is more interested in their own profits than they are in helping Vietnam develop economically. His insistence that disrupting France's monopoly would "ruin" France and Vietnam's relationship implies that France will only pretend to help Vietnam so long as they are able to dominate sectors of Vietnam's economy and extort it for their own gains. Ironically, France is one of the Western nations representing Capitalism and opposing the spread of Communism. However, their monopolistic quashing of free markets and Vietnamese enterprise appears anti-democratic and anti-Capitalistic. Rather than support healthy competition, the French want to exert dominating control, just like they claim the Communists do. At least for France, any claims they make about fighting for Capitalism and democracy thus seem like a ruse, concealing their colonialist intentions to exploit


Vietnam.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

“Why don't you just send off to the States for a lot of hand pumps like they use on those little cars the men run up and down the railroads?” [Emma] asked one day.

“Now, look, dammit, I've explained to you before,” Atkins said. It's got to be something they use out here. It's no good if I go spending a hundred thousand dollars bringing in something. It has to be something right here, something the natives understand.”

**Related Characters:** Homer Atkins, Emma Atkins (speaker), Father Finian

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 200

### Explanation and Analysis

While Atkins sets about designing a new water pump that the Sarkhanese villagers can use to draw water up the hillsides and to their crops, he makes sure to only design it using components that are locally available and reasonably cheap. He does this because he knows that the local people must feel a sense of ownership over the pumps, or the pumps will never become a part of daily life and make a difference. This insistence echoes Father Finian's insistence that his Burmese collaborators make their own decisions themselves, since he knows that they must feel a sense of ownership in order to truly commit themselves to what they are doing. Atkins models effective grassroots development by keeping his invention sustainable and ensuring that local people will be able to recreate it themselves in the future, without depending on outside help or imported goods. In this way, Atkins's water pumps can go from being a white foreigner's device to something that the local Sarkhanese make, manufacture, and own themselves.

[Atkins and Jeepo's] arguments, for some reason, caused the Sarkhanese workmen a great deal of pleasure, and it was not until several months had passed that Atkins realized why—they were the only times that the Sarkhanese had ever seen one of their own kind arguing fairly and honestly, with a chance of success, against a white man.

**Related Characters:** Jeepo, Homer Atkins

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 211



### Explanation and Analysis

Atkins and Jeepo launch their joint business designing and manufacturing water pumps, hiring 12 Sarkhanese men to work for them and often erupting in arguments between them over new design tweaks. Atkins and Jeepo's arguments testify to the total equality of their relationship; both men have equal weight in the business and thus have an equal chance of winning their argument if their rationale is better. The Sarkhanese workers' enjoyment of seeing such equality reflects their pointedly unequal experiences with white people up until this point, implying that every other interaction they have seen between a white person and Sarkhanese person has been tainted by condescension and the white person's sense of superiority. Homer and Jeepo's relationship is not only economically productive, but also begins to heal some of the social rift between Sarkhanese people and white foreigners, since it proves that Sarkhanese people and white Americans can work side by side as equals. This ultimately suggests that grassroots development not only helps people with new devices or practical solutions, but also helps by slowly repairing broken relationships and former prejudices between groups.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ “Can you imagine, Dr. Barre, the injury that might be done to American foreign policy if the Senator were to take seriously some of the nonsense uttered to him by a native?”

**Related Characters:** Arthur Alexander Gray (speaker), Senator Jonathan Brown, Dr. Hans Barre

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 230

### Explanation and Analysis

When Gray, American Ambassador to Vietnam, prepares his staff for an oversight visit by Senator Brown, he instructs his translator, Dr. Barre, to filter whatever any Vietnamese locals try to tell Brown and make it seem more positive. Gray's instructions to Dr. Barre imply that many Foreign Service workers willfully deceive their superiors to make it appear that they are doing more effective work than they actually are. Moreover, Gray's statement about the local people's "nonsense" reflects a deeply prejudiced view of the

local Vietnamese people, whom Gray and his staff are ostensibly there to help. Gray's racist disregard of anything that the Vietnamese people might try to tell Brown not only suggests that he knows it wouldn't be positive—thus condemning Gray and his staff's performance—but also suggests that Gray does not think the Vietnamese are smart enough to know what they need in terms of foreign aid or development. If Gray does not trust the Vietnamese people's account of what they need from the American foreign service, one must wonder who he looks to to give him this information.

☞ “Senator, [the Vietnamese woman] says it's safer in the city. She says that the French will take care of her while the Communists would probably slaughter her. She says she would rather leave the Delta forever than live there under Communism,” Dr. Barre said.

What the woman had actually said was that the French and the Communists were both dogs. The Communists had cruelly slaughtered her eldest son six months before. The French, just as cruelly, had burned down her hut to open a firing lane through her village.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Hans Barre (speaker), Senator Jonathan Brown

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 242

### Explanation and Analysis



During his inspection of the American Foreign Service in Vietnam, Senator Brown sees a stream of Vietnamese refugees fleeing from the countryside into Hanoi, the capital city. Brown tells Barre to ask one of the woman why she is going to Hanoi. Barre flatly lies about what the woman told him to make Brown approve of their work there, again demonstrating that many American diplomats blatantly lie to their superiors to avoid proper oversight. More significantly, the Vietnamese woman's statement reveals what she truly feels about the French, who the Americans work closely alongside in Vietnam. The woman's testimony about French cruelty and insistence that they are just as bad as the Communists not only nullifies any claims about the Western Capitalists' moral superiority over the Eastern Communists, it also sets the stage for the oncoming Vietnam War. Set in the early 1950s, *The Ugly American* predates the Vietnam War (which started in 1955) by only a few short years. The Vietnamese populations' justified hatred for the French and their colonialist ways explains

why, when the fighting began, the North Vietnamese and many South Vietnamese people chose to side with the Communists and fight against the Western Capitalists, who oppressed them for decades.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ “The Russians will win the world by their successes in a multitude of tiny battles. Many of these will be fought around conference tables in the rice fields of Asia, at village meetings, in schools; but mainly they will take place in the minds of men. Only occasionally will the battles be violent; but the sum of these tiny battles will decide whether our way of life is to perish or exists.”

**Related Characters:** Gilbert MacWhite (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 249



### Explanation and Analysis

After spending months traveling around Southeast Asia and observing America’s various Foreign Service programs, MacWhite writes a letter to the Secretary of State expressing his belief that Russian Communism is overtaking the world through its superior diplomacy. MacWhite delivers the novel’s final concluding argument: American foreign policy is catastrophically failing on nearly every level, and this is allowing Communism to defeat Capitalism without even fighting. Although, in a different era, America’s foreign policy failures could be seen as inept and regrettable, but ultimately of little consequence, in the Cold War era, America’s diplomatic failures are set against the Russians’ diplomatic effectiveness. This raises the stakes of American performance and argues that reforming and rectifying the American Foreign Service should be a top priority, as critical and time-sensitive as keeping up with the Soviet Union in the arms race or protecting America’s borders. American failure abroad does not just mean a tarnished reputation, but also poses an existential threat to

democratic Capitalism and a free way of living.

☝ The little things we do must be moral acts and they must be done in the real interest of the peoples whose friendship we need—not just in the interest of propaganda. [...] To the extent that our foreign policy is humane and reasonable, it will be successful. To the extent that it is imperialistic and grandiose, it will fail.

**Related Characters:** Gilbert MacWhite (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 250

### Explanation and Analysis

MacWhite argues, as several character have before, that small, effective, grassroots development projects are far more valuable and more successful than any of the impressive-sounding initiatives ever were, since they did little to actually help people. MacWhite’s argument for how the American Foreign Service should be run is effectively an inversion of the current system, which favors large projects that the American government believes will bolster their reputation. Critically, MacWhite’s vision for American foreign aid explicitly targets the poor and needy people abroad, who would be most vulnerable to Communism’s influence. While most Capitalist American diplomats spend all their time trying to win the approval of their host country’s leaders and governments, the Communists spread their ideology in the poor and rural countryside, promising to take care of them as the rich and power-hungry Capitalists obviously have not. Without saying so explicitly, MacWhite’s vision for the Foreign Service effectively parallels the Communist strategy, focusing on the poorest people who need the most help. That same poor majority can ultimately sway their government toward Capitalism or toward Communism either through political voting or guerilla fighting.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1: LUCKY, LUCKY LOU #1

Louis Sears, American Ambassador to Sarkhan, looks angrily at the *Sarkhan Eastern Star*, the most popular newspaper in Haidho, capital city of Sarkhan. He looks out his window at the American embassy and the American trucks carrying American weapons through the streets. He sees Sarkhanese people going about their day and thinks of them as “strange little monkeys.” Sears looks back at the newspaper and thinks it’s a “red paper.” The paper published a political cartoon of a fat man that looks suspiciously like him, leading a Sarkhanese man on a leash toward a Coca-Cola sign. Nobody in the Embassy can read Sarkhanese, but he’s sure the cartoon is about him: the fat man in the cartoon is named “Lucky.”

Lucky Louis earned his nickname during his 18 years of being a “popular and successful senator,” since he always seems to win his elections by luck: his first opponent drops dead, his second opponent’s wife is suddenly embroiled in scandal, and so on. When he loses his fourth election, Sears knows that “his party owed him something,” so rather than be distressed, he simply asks the [Democratic] National Committee to give him a tenured job as a federal judge. The National Committee tells him that such a position won’t be open for two years, but they can make him an ambassador in Sarkhan, a small country near Thailand, until then.

Although Sears says he doesn’t like working with black people, the National Committee promises him a decent salary, an “entertainment allowance” almost as large as his salary, and a free mansion to live in. He accepts. Sears likes his post in Sarkhan at first, and the mansion is by far the most luxurious place he and his wife have ever lived. However, the papers soon start printing mocking cartoons of him, poking fun at his weight. Sears never minded when white people made jokes, but Sears think that it seems “a bit uppity and quite another thing for natives to joke about his physique.”

Margaret Johnson, the Embassy’s press attaché, enters Sears’s office and tells him that a mob beat up John Colvin and threw him on the Embassy steps, claiming he’d molested a young girl. Sears is irritated by the distraction but minimizes the sexual crime. He then tells Margaret that first he needs to see Prince Ngong about the cartoon, then he’ll see Colvin in the hospital.

*This introduction establishes several of the major themes at once: the heavy presence of American vehicles and technology suggests that the story will focus on America’s relationship with less-developed nations; Sears’s suspicion that the newspaper only insults him because it is a “red paper” indicates that Communism is considered a real threat; his reference to the Sarkhanese as “strange little monkeys” suggests that Sears harbors racial prejudice; and the American diplomats’ inability to understand Sarkhanese suggests they are ill-equipped for their position and insensitive to the surrounding culture.*



*Although the Ambassador to Sarkhan is an important position, Sears receives it as a holding position until he can take a more lucrative job. This implies that the head of American diplomacy in Sarkhan does not actually have any interest in other cultures, foreign policy, or anything related to the job at hand. From the authors’ perspective, this implies that many of the people holding Foreign Service positions are not committed to achieving anything, just furthering their own careers.*



*The luxurious mansion and massive “entertainment allowance” suggests that Foreign Service workers are able to lead far more luxurious overseas than they can back home. This raises the possibility that some diplomats are drawn to the work by the allure of mansions and parties and servants rather than out of an honest desire to protect American interests or help other people around the world. Again, Sears exhibits blatant racism, which is a thread that runs throughout the entire book.*



*Sears’s disregard for alleged sexual abuse of a minor suggests that he is a man without principle. His decision to prioritize complaining about political cartoons about himself over handling a serious diplomatic issue suggests that Sears’s ego is far more important to him than fulfilling his role.*



Colvin wakes in a hospital room, covered in bandages and filled with painkillers. He thinks about how strange the events that just happened were. Deong, a man he'd considered a friend, had just stuck a gun in his back. Colvin thinks back to meeting Deong in 1943, when Deong saved his life: Colvin parachutes into Sarkhan as an O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services) agent with three other men, but the others are quickly killed by Japanese patrols. Colvin evades the Japanese soldiers for two weeks, but just barely. When Colvin is running from Japanese soldiers whom he knows will catch him, he runs into Deong, a villager sitting atop a water buffalo. In Sarkhanese, Colvin explains that he is an American agent and he needs help.

Deong agrees to help and hides Colvin underwater beneath a rock in a shallow ditch. The Japanese soldiers arrive minutes later, cannot find Colvin, and eventually leave. After they are safe, Deong pulls Colvin out of the watery ditch, grinning at him. For the next eight months, Colvin and Deong roam Sarkhan together, blowing up bridges and sabotaging Japanese military patrols. Colvin grows to admire Deong and all Sarkhanese people very deeply. The Sarkhanese are generous toward him and protect him, sometimes even dying to do so, and they only request that he discuss philosophy with them in return.

Shortly before America liberates Sarkhan from the Japanese, Colvin teaches Deong how to poison people with ipecac. When the American marines are about to land on the shore and make their assault, Deong convinces Sarkhanese cooks to poison the Japanese soldier's food with ipecac, which doesn't kill them but makes them incredibly ill. The American soldiers land and easily take Sarkhan, since the Japanese are too sick to fight. Three weeks later, Colvin retires from the O.S.S. and returns to Wisconsin to run his family's powdered milk business. In 1952, newspapers report that Sarkhan is leaning toward Communism. The news shocks Colvin, and he writes letters to his congressman explaining Sarkhanese culture and advising how America could handle the situation. However, nothing changes.

Colvin grows impatient and feels that the United States is mismanaging the situation in Sarkhan. He forms a plan to return to Sarkhan, introduce its population to milk (starting with powder but changing to fresh later on), and import a new breed of short-legged cattle that could thrive on Sarkhan's steep hillsides, thus stimulating the economy with new beef and dairy industries. When Colvin gets to Sarkhan, he cannot find Deong, so he sets up a milk distribution center on his own just outside of Haidho. The American Embassy tells Colvin that his project is foolish, but his first two weeks of operation are successful. Then Deong suddenly appears, pointing a gun at him, carrying a bag of ipecac.

*John Colvin's brief story fills in some of Sarkhan's (fictional) history. Colvin fights Japanese patrols as an American special forces fighter, indicating that Japan occupied Sarkhan during World War II, just as it did to China and Vietnam. This depicts Sarkhan as an archetypal Southeast Asian country, representative of the developing countries in that region such as Vietnam, Burma, and China.*



*Deong, a Sarkhanese man, saves the American soldier's life, demonstrating that Sarkhanese-American relations can be mutually beneficial. Their close cooperation foreshadows the cooperation required for grassroots development, as later demonstrated by Homer and Emma Atkins. The Sarkhanese people's interest in philosophy suggests that they are a reflective, thoughtful culture.*



*Notably, America is only able to liberate Sarkhan with the help of the Sarkhanese people. This foreshadows the novel's depiction of sustainable grassroots development, which requires that the foreigners offering aid collaborate with the local people to find effective solutions and help them to build a better future for themselves. The American government's dismissal of Colvin's letters hints at how ineffective and unwilling to change it is.*



*Although it is thwarted, Colvin's plan represents an intelligent and sustainable solution to a regional problem. Rather than simply pouring extra money into an ailing economy, Colvin finds a way to create practical new industries that offer concrete benefits of beef and dairy to local people. Notably, the American Embassy refuses to back such a reasonable initiative, suggesting that the American Foreign Service in Sarkhan is impractical and ineffective.*





Deong tells Colvin to put the ipecac into his milk mixing machine, but Colvin refuses. When Colvin tells Deong he's not involved in politics anymore, Deong tells him that "powdered milk and cattle are part of politics, and therefore part of history." Deong tells Colvin that his milk scheme could change Sarkhan's economy, and though it's a good plan, Colvin shouldn't be the person to do it. It would appear to other Sarkhanese people that "America was their savior." Colvin realizes that Deong is a Communist, and Deong tells him he has no choice—the Communists are clearly going to win; the Americans do nothing but lose and waste time now.

Colvin knocks the gun out of Deong's hand, but not before Deong shoots him in the arm. They struggle on the floor together. When Deong sees a passing group of Sarkhanese women, he shouts that Colvin was trying to lace his milk with "cocol," a local drug rumored to make young girls lose their virtue and have sex with bad men. The women jump on Colvin and viciously attack him. As he fades from consciousness, Colvin feels his dream for Sarkhan slip away from him. Hours later, the Sarkhanese strip him naked and leave him on the Embassy steps, declaring him an "American rapist."

Prince Ngong, a Sarkhanese intellectual and protocol officer, meets with Louis Sears. Sears complains about the political cartoons, threatening to tell Washington, D.C., about them. Prince Ngong tries to appease Sears, but also mentions that as a democratic country, Sarkhan's government tries not to impede on a free press. However, that afternoon, Prince Ngong meets with his advisors and states that although they want to be independent, not beholden to either America or the Soviet Union, they are in a position where they must bargain with richer nations. Sears is "more stupid than most" but can also be vicious in defending himself. After much deliberation, the Sarkhanese officials begrudgingly decide that they will persuade the *Sarkhan Eastern Star* to run a flattering article and cartoon about Sears.

Sears visits Colvin in the hospital. Half an hour before, the local newspaper's publisher called him and told him about a flattering article they would print on him, so Sears is satisfied. Sears finds Colvin in a hospital bed, jokes with him, and reminds him to be careful about such "freewheeling" since it makes America look bad. When Sears tells Colvin that he'll arrange a flight home to America for him, Colvin tells him that he "won't go."

*Deong's recognition that something as mundane as powdered milk will change the course of history suggests that economics and politics are inextricably linked. His sense that the Americans will lose Sarkhan to the Communists again suggest the failure of American foreign policy, and his fear that Colvin's milk plan would make America seem a hero to the Sarkhanese demonstrates the complexity of navigating economics, politics, and social climate in another country.*



*Deong incites the women to violence by claiming that Colvin was trying to lace milk with "cocol." Although untrue, the women still attack Colvin and nearly kill him, demonstrating that perception is at least as important as reality, especially when one is working in a foreign country. Deong's clever, but ruthless, accusation foreshadows the manner in which the Communists will use perception and propaganda to outwit the Americans.*



*Sears's complaints and threat that he'll fib to Washington, D.C., carry the implication that Prince Ngong must suppress the free press in order to suit Sears's ego. This is particularly dark, since it reveals that Sears, an American diplomat, has no real interest in protecting democratic freedoms in Sarkhan. Prince Ngong's statement to his advisors suggests that although Sarkhan wants to be free and independent, they are trapped in a dependent position, meaning they must sacrifice their own democratic freedoms to appease American egos.*



*Sears gets his wish for flattering press, quashing the democratic concept of free press in the process. This again suggests that he values his own ego more than protecting Sarkhan's freedoms. His charge that Colvin's "freewheeling" makes America look bad is particularly ironic, since Sears's egoism and incompetence obviously damages America's reputation far more.*



## CHAPTER 2: LUCKY, LUCKY LOU #2

Louis Krupitzyn is born in Russian in 1917. As a child, he sees his parents, wealthy farmers, shot to death by Russian soldiers. Rather than anger, he only feels fear and resolves to become powerful. He lives in a state orphanage and learns to hate the type of people that his parents were. In 1934, Krupitzyn writes a nationally recognized essay on Soviet politics, and in 1935, he begins his diplomatic career. He works and studies in New York, Prague, and Peking, and even serves on Mao Tse-tung's staff as an observer. He marries a woman in the foreign service, and together they work in Moscow and study Southeast Asia.

Krupitzyn and his wife receive assignment to work as ambassadors in Sarkhan and bring it into the "Communist orbit." To prepare, they study Sarkhanese language and culture for two years. Krupitzyn learns that the ideal Sarkhanese man is "slender, graceful, and soft spoken," so he loses 40 pounds and takes ballet lessons to mold himself to this ideal. They arrive in Sarkhan one week after Louis Sears accepts his own position in Sarkhan. Krupitzyn introduces himself to Sarkhanese officials in their own language, then meets with the "Grand Leader of all the Buddhists in Sarkhan" and discusses philosophy with him in Sarkhanese for many hours.

Later that year, a typhoon strikes Sarkhan and wipes out much of the year's crop, causing a famine. One of Krupitzyn's informants, a translator in the American Embassy, tells him that Americans are shipping millions of pounds of rice to Sarkhan to ease the food shortage. Krupitzyn announces in Sarkhanese that the Russians will soon bring rice to help the struggling people. When the American shipment arrives, Krupitzyn's agents write on each rice sack (in Sarkhanese) that the rice is a gift from Russia. When the Americans distribute the rice, they cannot read the Sarkhanese writing and do not realize that it appears that the rice is from Russia. The Americans realize what happened a week later, and Sears, embarrassed, vows to retaliate. However, the Sarkhanese still believe the Russian Communists are their "friend and provider."

A month later, Krupitzyn sends his report to Russia, asserting that Ambassador Sears, in all his stupidity, is their greatest asset, since he keeps the other Americans busy with social functions, posturing, and tours, and doesn't let his staff travel to rural areas. However, Krupitzyn thinks that the negative Sarkhanese press about Sears might convince the American government to replace him. To that end, he intends to convince local newspapers to start praising him, ensuring that the Americans keep Sears where he is. Krupitzyn also makes note of concerning rumors about a Catholic priest named Father Finian operating in Burma.

*Louis Krupitzyn is a foil to Louis Sears, demonstrating the superiority of Russian diplomats. Krupitzyn's serious demeanor and hard work contrast with Sears's own behavior, demonstrating how a professional diplomat should act. However, Krupitzyn's hatred of his own land-owning parents and proximity to Mao—a famous Communist leader—suggests that he is a devoted Communist, intent on spreading the ideology around the world.*



*Again, both Krupitzyn and his wife spend years studying Sarkhanese language and culture, demonstrating their professionalism and contrasting with Sears's complete lack of preparation. Krupitzyn even shapes his body to easily integrate into Sarkhanese life, suggesting that he believes the best way to be an effective diplomat is to stand out as little as possible, again contrasting with Sears, who lives in his luxurious mansion.*



*Krupitzyn and his agents are able to infiltrate the American Embassy and outwit American diplomats simply by knowing the local language. This suggests that, for the Americans, not knowing the local language is a massive disadvantage and prevents them from being competent foreign diplomats. Additionally, Krupitzyn's use of spies and deception with the rice begins to indicate that the Communists operate in a completely different manner than the Americans, utilizing sly techniques and trickery to guide the public's perception into believing that the Communists are Sarkhan's saviors.*



*Krupitzyn's plan to keep Sears in power and capitalize on his incompetence demonstrates that the Communists operate by different rules than the American Capitalists. His appreciation that Sears wastes time on parties and social functions suggests that such things are precisely what American diplomats should not spend their time on. Krupitzyn actively shapes the Americans' perception of reality so that they will believe Sears is a popular figure and keep him in power.*



## CHAPTER 3: NINE FRIENDS

In 1952, Father Finian receives an assignment to move from his home in New England to Burma, where he will oversee the Catholic mission. Father Finian is a large and able man and a respected scholar, especially on Communism. He eagerly anticipates his role in Burma. Father Finian meets a Communist once while serving as a navy chaplain during World War II—a young American marine spitefully tells Finian that he is a Communist and that there is no God watching over them, they must take care of themselves. Despite the young man's anger, Finian thinks he looked "older, wiser, infinitely tougher than any man," and Finian realizes no logic could possibly change the young Communist's mind.

After the incident, Finian starts reading Communist literature and listening to Communist speeches. He realizes that Communism, though secular, works exactly like religion and inspires the same blind devotion, even justifying violence like a religious crusade. In spite of all of his reading, Finian always thinks that Communism is evil, the "face of the devil," and must be fought. During his long journey to Burma, Finian spends all his time studying Burmese culture and anthropology and forming his "plan of attack."

Finian arrives in Burma and meets with the Archbishop in a town called Mokthu. The Archbishop warns him that the Communists have attacked or destroyed all of their churches in the rural areas, but Finian resolves that he will spend three months alone in the hills despite the danger. The next day he drives into the countryside, resolved to find one Burmese Catholic, learn the language, and adapt himself to the food, even though it will likely require enduring several weeks of dysentery until his body adjusts.

Five weeks later, Finian understands the language. Though dysentery leaves him feverish and 40 pounds lighter, he can now digest the food and begin to recover. He finds a dependable Burmese Catholic named U Tien, as well as a handful of good non-Catholic, but anti-Communist men. Finian spends several weeks privately testing U Tien's resolve as a Catholic and an anti-Communist. When he is satisfied, U Tien introduces Finian to the other men and they begin their work. Eight Burmese men, including U Tien, gather before Father Finian as the priest leans against a tree to support his weakened body.

*Father Finian's story explores the characteristics of Communist ideology, establishing it as a true threat to free and democratic life while also proposing a method for combating it. Finian's sense that no words or logic could change the young Communist's mind suggests that people become zealots for their ideology. This implies that Communism cannot be fought through simple reason or argument, and an alternative course of action will need to be taken.*



*Like Krupitzyn, Finian demonstrates his professionalism and responsibility by committing himself to learn as much about his target country as possible. Finian's belief that Communism functions like a religion suggests that it is more than a mere economic system, and so it poses a far more tangible threat than other political movements.*



*Finian voluntarily suffers, facing both risk and illness to adapt himself to Burma and do the work at hand. This contrasts him from most American diplomats in the book and demonstrates that he is wholly committed to helping the Burmese people. Finian's plan to integrate himself into the culture and society demonstrates effective grassroots practices.*



*Once again, Finian's suffering demonstrates his commitment to his goal of helping the Burmese people. His decision to work alongside Burmese people rather than other Americans suggests that the most effective way for someone to work in another culture is to ally themselves with local people, rather than depend on a contingent of foreigners.*



Father Finian tells the men that although the Catholic Church does not normally involve itself in politics, Communism is unique. They must fight it together, but Father Finian will not lead them. They will decide what to do as a group, and Finian will follow their will. As he explains this, he notices that the Burmese men stand taller and stronger, and thinks that it might be the first time a white man has asked them to make their own decisions. The Burmese men discuss together and decide that their goal is not for all people to be Catholics but simply for all people to worship freely, which they cannot do under Communism. Father Finian agrees that this is a good goal.

Finian asks the other men why Communism has taken hold in Burma. The men discuss the question animatedly. One man, Toki, seems filled with a restless energy. They determine that Communism spreads in Burma because the people think that the Communists will take care of them. More importantly, the Burmese people believe the Communists will fight the white Westerners who have exploited them in the past. Even so, the Finian's Burmese friends believe Communism is evil and will only seek its own power. Finian thanks the men for coming and states that tomorrow, if they wish, they will start reading Communist literature to truly understand Communism's ideas and methods.

Father Finian and his friends meet for the next several days, compiling everything they know about Communism in Burma. Together, they realize that the Communists wield power in every village, have informants in every Western organization, are militaristic in some areas and subtle in others. They continue meeting for weeks, debating about how to best combat Communism, which denies people the freedom to live and believe as they choose. They decide that they must persuade the Burmese people gently, without force, using language that is easy to understand.

The nine men begin publishing and anonymously distributing a small paper called the *Communist Farmer*, in which they print actual articles by Mao, Lenin, Stalin, and Marx raging against the stupidity of peasants and justifying the slaughter of farmers, or else report news about the Soviet Union's agricultural struggles. The local Communist Party quickly realizes what the magazine is doing, but they struggle to combat it, since all of the articles are actual words by leading Communist thinkers. The more the Communists try to suppress the paper, the more the Burmese people prize them. The Burmese begin to see the Communists as "buffoons."

*Finian actively decides that although he organized their group, he will not lead it, since he is not Burmese. The Burmese men's positive reaction to this decision suggests that making their own decisions gives them confidence and a greater overall sense of agency. However, Finian's sense that no white man has ever deferred to them speaks to one of the book's overarching messages, which is that white people do not often treat non-white people from other nations as their equals.*



*The Burmese men's recognition that Communism seems the best way to fight white people suggests that Western colonialism and exploitation builds a festering resentment toward all white people. Compared to exploitative white Capitalists, an ideology that promises to protect the poor and fight the evil white Westerners must seem compelling to poor Burmese people. This ultimately suggests that Capitalism's abuses set the stage for the rise of Communism.*



*The nine friends' discussion on Communism's local influence suggests that it succeeds because it is adaptive. The Communists employ force or mercy, espionage or propaganda as each situation calls for. Finian and his friends' decision to persuade gently and subtly suggests that they intend to fight Communism by changing hearts and minds, which will hopefully be more effective than fighting with violence or force.*



*Mao, Lenin, Stalin, and Marx are all key Communist intellectuals who shaped the ideology. The nine friends' strategy cleverly exposes the underbelly of Communism, which goes against the grain of the grand promises it makes to poor peasants. Likewise, by publishing news about the Soviet Union's own struggles, the nine friends demonstrate that Communism does not necessarily bring prosperity, since the Soviet Union is thoroughly Communist itself.*



The local Communists grow so desperate that they bring in a Russian strategist named Vladimir Vinich to regain control of their region. Vinich recognizes that the best practice is to keep foreigners as invisible as possible, so he operates his plans through the Burmese Communist Party. However, Toki infiltrates the Communist Party and makes a secret recording of Vinich criticizing the Burmese people and admitting that Russia will not actually send tractors or food to Burma, and that they intend to let many people starve. For weeks, the *Communist Farmer* advertises that an important Communist message will be broadcast on the radio at 2 p.m. on June 10. With the entire region listening in, they broadcast Vinich's damning recorded conversation.

*Vinich's belief that foreign diplomats should remain unseen and discrete again contrasts with the American diplomats who are loud and presumptuous. Vinich's damning words indicate that the Communists are more interested in gathering power for themselves than for actually helping poor Burmese people, revealing Communism's true intentions. Thus, Finian and his friends' method of fighting Communism suggests that simply exposing its true intentions is a powerful and valuable tactic.*



The following day, the nine friends meet together again. Toki seems at peace. He announces confidently that they must execute the same plan all over Burma, and even in neighboring Sarkhan. Toki gives Father Finian a look of "friendship and equality" and Finian feels happy. He makes plans to go to Sarkhan, and writes in his journal that "when Americans do what is right and necessary, they are also doing what is effective."

*Toki's look of "friendship and equality" suggests that, by following the lead of the Burmese men rather than taking the lead himself, Finian treats the Burmese as his equals. This contrasts the Burmese's former interactions with white people, where white people acted domineering and exploited the Burmese for their own gain.*



## CHAPTER 4: EVERYBODY LOVES JOE BING

In 1952, after publishing a series of articles on Father Finian's work, Burmese reporter Ruth Jyoti accepts an invitation to spend three months in America and learn about American press. Her first stop is in Hawaii, where she notes that the Immigration and Customs officers are "cold almost to the point of insult," and the waiting room is drab. She notes that every town and village in China has a guest house, always the best accommodation that the place can offer, which makes for "very effective propaganda."

*Jyoti's observations on American Immigration and Customs workers suggests that American indifference toward foreigners damages its international reputation. This contrasts with China's efforts to always make foreign visitors feel valued and honored, which ultimately endears people to China, rather than the United States.*



In San Francisco, Jyoti meets Joseph Rivers, a member of the State Department. Rivers asks Jyoti if she knows Joe Bing, who works in Setkya, where she publishes her paper. At first she doesn't recall him, but Rivers tells her that Bing is a large, loud, eccentric American whom everyone loves. Jyoti does remember him, but observes that Bing seems exceptionally boorish to Asian sensibilities. He throws big parties but only serves liquor, so Muslims and Buddhists cannot attend since there is nothing for them to drink and still observe their religions. Rivers is disturbed that Jyoti could criticize Joe Bing, and thinks that any friend of America must automatically love "Old Joe." Jyoti mentions that Father Finian mentioned Joe Bing once too; when he asked Bing for commissary pens to give as gifts to his anti-Communist friends, Bing refused.

*As a Southeast Asian woman, Jyoti's perception of Joe Bing sharply contrasts with River's perception of him as a fellow American man. This contrast suggests that behavior that may seem appropriate in one culture may be entirely inappropriate in another culture. As such, American diplomats cannot simply assume that their behavior in another culture is adequate, since it seems appropriate by American standards. Bing's cultural insensitivity excludes Muslims and Buddhists from his social events, demonstrating how such insensitivity be deeply offensive.*



At a press dinner two days later, the Americans ask Jyoti to speak about American diplomats working in Asia. She frankly tells them that most Americans in Asia are completely ineffective. They spend their time trying to earn the goodwill of the wealthiest English-speaking Asians who do not represent the majority lower-class population.

However, Jyoti states that an American named Bob Maile is extraordinarily effective. Maile lives quietly in Burma and spent his first six months there learning the language and befriending Burmese reporters and photographers, teaching them trade skills in return for language tutoring. He and his wife, Dorothy, put their kids in an Asian school, even though it is not as nice as the schools in America. He lives and works humbly. Even so, word spreads that Bob Maile is an excellent man, the “best known American” in Burma. Jyoti thinks that if all Americans were like him, “the Communists wouldn’t last long in Asia.”

*Jyoti’s claim recalls Sears’s behavior, where he spends more energy worrying about his ego and perception than about acting professionally or accomplishing anything as an American ambassador.*



*As with Krupitzyn and Finian, Bob Maile’s decision to learn the local language demonstrates his professionalism and commitment to building relationships with Burmese people. He and his wife’s decision to live simply and educate their children like any other Burmese family would indicates that they see themselves as equal to, rather than superior to, their Burmese neighbors. Jyoti’s final statement suggests that good, humble people like Bob Maile could go far in raising America’s reputation and combating Communist influence over Asia.*



## CHAPTER 5: CONFIDENTIAL AND PERSONAL

Louis Sears writes a letter to his superior, the American State Department’s Dexter Peterson, assuring him that in spite of the negative press, Sears has everything under control. He complains about John Colvin and Father Finian, newly arrived from Burma, and hopes that he will not cause trouble. Sears also asks for a replacement for Margaret Johnson, since she agrees too much with the “native press” and keeps bringing reporters in to speak to him. He asks if Joe Bing can replace her instead, since he seems sharp. Sears also wants a few pretty secretaries sent over to help with “morale” and be a “good advertisement for America.”

*Sears actively complains about Americans who do effective work while lauding his own incompetence. This suggests that high-ranking members of the Foreign Service not only inhibit dedicated and humble workers but actively undermine them. Sears’s desire to have Joe Bing and several pretty secretaries suggests that he believes showing off wealthy, gregarious, or attractive Americans raises America’s international reputation, when in fact it does the opposite.*



## CHAPTER 6: EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ABROAD

The American government advertises jobs for young people working abroad in the Foreign Service. At a university in Washington, veteran Foreign Service workers Hamilton Upton and Joe Bing hold a seminar about working overseas. A young woman named Marie MacIntosh listens in the audience. Upton speaks studiously and professionally about helping America combat the “world-wide conspiracy” of Communism. Upton then introduces Bing as a skilled public information officer and “expert at meeting natives face to face as equals.”

*Upton’s claim that Bing is an expert at meeting local people “as equals” is ironic, since Jyoti’s testimony implies that Bing sees himself as a superior American and above such people. The pairing of Upton, who seems professional and dedicated, with Bing, who is boorish and loud, reflects how the Foreign Service carries a façade of professionalism, even while its members act egoistic and crude.*



Joe Bing jovially speaks about the social aspects of working abroad. He tells the potential recruits that even though they work with foreigners, they don't have to like them and will spend most of their time with other Americans; housing is free and luxurious, they can find any American goods they want in the commissary, and they don't need to learn the local language since "it's better to make the Asians learn English." After the seminar, 67 people apply, Marie MacIntosh among them. A wealthy engineer named Homer Atkins also applies, mentioning an interest in Sarkhan. Other than him, every other applicant would make more money working for the government than they do in their civilian occupations, causing Joe Bing to wonder if they are hiring "slobs."

*Joe Bing's comments about Americans not liking foreigners suggests that not only is racism present in the American Foreign Service, it is expected. The luxurious homes and parties that Bing advertises, and the fact that most applicants would make more money abroad than at home, suggests that most people are drawn to the Foreign Service by desire for high living and good pay rather than a sincere desire to help people in other countries or to represent America well.*



## CHAPTER 7: THE GIRL WHO GOT RECRUITED

Marie MacIntosh is 28 years old, "drab," single, and secretly miserable in her life. She lives in a tiny apartment with three other girls and has a "responsible" but dull job. However, the Foreign Service hires her and sends her to Sarkhan. After living there for a month, she sends her former roommates a letter gushing about her luxurious house and new job, which comes with servants, good pay, cheap liquor, and fancy parties. She even gets a salary bonus because America defines Sarkhan as a "hardship post."

*Marie's character exists solely to demonstrate how someone can be lured to the Foreign Service by luxury and high living, rather than by any desire to make a positive impact abroad. Notably, Marie herself is not criticized. Instead, the authors simply demonstrate how the current system draws unqualified workers who are not dedicated to any cause and are instead motivated by self-interest.*



## CHAPTER 8: THE AMBASSADOR AND THE WORKING PRESS

Fifty years before Louis Sears is Ambassador, the American government buys thousands of acres of unused land in Sarkhan. The soil is hard and bare and remains unused until 1947, when the American government lends it to the Sarkhanese air force as a training area. The Sarkhanese government spends several years and millions of dollars improving the land, which raises its property value and causes suburbs to appear around it until it is the most valuable real estate in the country. During Sears's tenure as ambassador, an anti-American newspaper claims that the Americans are going to evict the Sarkhanese air force off of the land and sell it to real estate agents, thus ruining Sarkhan's investment.

*Although the Americans claim to be helping Sarkhan develop as a country and rise economically, such rumors suggest that the American government actively undermines the Sarkhanese government whenever they can make a profit. Broadly, this suggests that American philanthropy (charitable aid) is self-interested. Although America claims to want to help others, such actions reveal that it is primarily interested in benefitting itself, even if that means exploiting other countries in the process.*



The American Embassy does nothing to combat these rumors, so an American editor who runs an English newspaper resolves to handle the rumor himself. He gathers the Sarkhanese editors of several local newspapers and goes to Ambassador Sears's office so Sears can tell them the rumors are untrue. However, when they confront Sears, he sits uncomfortably and says he has "no comment." After the Sarkhanese editors leave, stunned, the American editor screams at Sears that he practically confirmed the rumor to be true. Sears says he doesn't know whether it's true or not, and he hasn't bothered to check.

*Sears's refusal to deny the rumor suggests that it is true. Even if it isn't, Sears's incompetence and failure to confirm or deny the rumor makes it appear true to the Sarkhanese press. This demonstrates how diplomatic incompetence and unpreparedness can damage other nations' perception of America's behavior, undermining its international reputation and making it seem untrustworthy.*



Dexter Peterson sends a cable to Louis Sears to inform him that a position as a federal judge waits for him in America, and he will be replaced by a man named Gilbert MacWhite. Sears throws a massive party. He then refuses to offer any aid to Father Finian, advises the State Department not to allow John Colvin to return to Sarkhan, and writes a long letter listing his own accomplishments and claiming that Sarkhan is more loyal to America now than it has ever been.

*Once again, Sears praises his own incompetence and undermines Finian and Colvin, both of whom are intelligent, effective, and committed American workers. This suggests that in its current state, the American Foreign Service is not only unproductive but counterproductive to producing real and impactful change.*



## CHAPTER 9: EVERYONE HAS EARS

In 1954, “the Honorable Gilbert MacWhite” becomes the new Ambassador to Sarkhan. MacWhite is fit, disciplined, and efficient, having already served the State Department in several foreign countries. He looks forward to his service in Sarkhan, knowing that its people are restless and that Communism has a strong hold in the country. He expects the Communists will try to stage a coup before long. However, MacWhite has spent months preparing. He is well-versed in Communist literature and thought, he speaks Sarkhanese fluently, and he studied everything he could find on their culture and history.

*MacWhite is the opposite of Louis Sears, demonstrating discipline and professionalism. However, MacWhite’s character arc demonstrates how even a dedicated professional can fail diplomatically, as well as how they can learn from their mistakes. Although the novel is composed of interlinking vignettes, MacWhite appears in more vignettes than any other character, making him the primary protagonist that connects them all together.*



For his first six months in Sarkhan, MacWhite makes his plans to fight Communism in the privacy of his own home in an effort to ensure security. One afternoon, he invites Li Pang, a Chinese representative for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, to visit him at his home. Li is MacWhite’s personal friend and they share a deep bond. MacWhite anticipates that Li will help him enlist the Chinese citizens in Sarkhan in their struggle against Communism. As MacWhite waits for Li to arrive, he hears Donald and Roger, his elderly Chinese butlers, moving about in the room. They speak no English, but they’ve been dedicated servants to the American Embassy since 1939, and MacWhite deeply admires them.

*Chiang Kai-shek is the leader of the Chinese Nationalists, who oppose Mao and the Communists’ spread across China. MacWhite’s coordination with Li suggests that he finds international allies to help him fight against Communism. Such behavior and relationship-building again contrasts MacWhite with Sears, who kept to himself and spurned relationships with non-Americans, demonstrating that MacWhite is a diligent and capable Ambassador.*



Li arrives. He and MacWhite catch up while Donald serves them martinis. MacWhite brings up the point of the engagement: he wants Li to tell him which Chinese-Sarkhanese leaders are secretly Communists, since MacWhite has an “absolutely flawless plan” for removing them. Li’s demeanor shifts and he stares hard at Donald and Roger, but MacWhite thinks that Li dislikes his request for information. Li looks furious but speaks very softly so no one else can hear. He tells MacWhite that he is a “great fool” for speaking of strategy with servants present. MacWhite is “shaken” and claims that neither Donald nor Roger can speak any English. He even had them vetted before he took them on.

*Li’s automatic suspicion that Donald and Roger are spies indicates that he understands Communist political tactics far better than MacWhite does. His charge that MacWhite is a “great fool” for discussing tactics in front of servants suggests that Li sees it as a catastrophic lapse of judgment. However, Donald and Roger have served American ambassadors for two decades, meaning they are entrenched and long-trusted employees.*





Li repeats that MacWhite has been incredibly foolish, which offends MacWhite's tactical mind. He is certain that Donald and Roger cannot speak English; plus, he considers them his friends. Li asks MacWhite who the perfect person to spy on the American Embassy would be, and MacWhite admits it would be a person in a menial position, like a valet. He begins to doubt his trust in his servants for the first time, and he realizes that every single menial position in the American Embassy is staffed by Asian non-Americans.

Li shouts an order to Donald in Chinese and the old man approaches. Li accuses him of stealing and being a Communist and strikes him hard across the face. MacWhite is stunned. He thinks the interaction looks less like an interrogation than than "the deliberate destruction of a person." After several minutes of grilling and deceiving Donald, Li tricks him into admitting that he understands English. Donald looks humiliated and stricken, and Li orders him not to leave the household. MacWhite realizes that all of his carefully laid plans are ruined. He has made a catastrophic mistake; some element of ego caused him to trust too much in his own judgment. Li apologizes for what he has done and the pain he causes MacWhite, but states that it was necessary.

MacWhite spends two days analyzing what went wrong and decides that he does not understand the "Asian personality" well enough. Politics in Asia work completely differently than American politics. He requests that the State Department allow him leave to travel around Southeast Asia and learn more about the psychology and methods of its people. George Swift will serve as Ambassador in his stead.

The State Department grants MacWhite's request, so he travels to the Philippines to meet Ramon Magsaysay, the Filipino Minister of Defense overseeing the military campaign against Communists in the Philippines. Magsaysay says that most Americans naturally make excellent ambassadors: they are generous and eager to help. However, when Americans travel abroad, they change. They feel the pressure to live the lifestyle of nice cars and parties, and they become "second-raters." For an example of a good "unaffected American," Magsaysay advises MacWhite to meet Colonel Hillandale, "the Rag-Time Kid," fighting in the Philippines. He recommends MacWhite go see the fighting in Vietnam as well, since warfare, economics, and diplomacy are all intricately linked together.

*MacWhite's realization that menial workers make the perfect spies and that there are hundreds of non-American menial workers in the Embassy implies that the Embassy is extraordinarily vulnerable. This suggests that the Americans' arrogance and unwillingness to do menial labor themselves puts them at far greater risk of espionage and infiltration.*



*Li's shockingly aggressive behavior reveals that Donald is a spy, which is similarly shocking to MacWhite. MacWhite's discomfort during the entire episode suggests that he is not familiar with other cultures handle confrontations or politics. Although MacWhite is dedicated, professional, and careful, his ego causes him to make a critical error. This suggests that even excellent diplomats fail when they do not understand the culture, methods, or psychology of the people that they work with or conspire against.*



*MacWhite's realization that politics in Asia work fundamentally differently than politics in Europe and America alludes to the fact that the Communists play by entirely different rules, and cannot be fought against unless one learns their ideology and methods.*



*Magsaysay's belief that Americans are excellent at home and wretched abroad is significant, since it confirms that the political novel is not criticizing America itself, just American conduct in the midst of other places and cultures. His praise of Hillandale as a "unaffected American" suggests that the ideal American Foreign Service worker is someone with rigid integrity, who lives the same abroad as they would in their own country and is not lured to carelessness by luxury and parties and servants.*



## CHAPTER 10: THE RAGTIME KID

Colonel Edwin Hillandale likes dancing, drinking, playing jazz music (earning him his nickname) and “any kind of people.” In 1952, Hillandale goes to Manila to serve as a liaison officer, and he instantly falls in love with the Philippines. He learns the language, studies the culture, and celebrates with its people, soon earning a reputation as one of the Philippines’ most beloved foreigners. By 1953, Hillandale becomes Magsaysay’s “unofficial advisor” and helps Magsaysay when he runs for president.

Hillandale travels to a province of firmly entrenched Communists who oppose Magsaysay as a politician, since he sides with the Americans. The villagers are skeptical of Hillandale, but he charms them with his music, easy demeanor, command of their language, and humility. He asks for a meal and explains that he himself is nearly as poor as they are, since everything in America costs so much that he can only live in a tiny house. The Filipino people warm to Hillandale and come to believe that Americans are not all “rich and bloated snobs” as the Communists claim, since an American colonel is humble and sincere. That year, 95 percent of the province votes for Magsaysay.

*As an American, Hillandale earns the respect of the Filipino people by embracing their culture, rather than seeing it as inferior to American culture. Hillandale becomes so popular that he serves as an advisor to a prominent Filipino politician, suggesting that friendliness and openness are powerful tools for American diplomats.*



*Hillandale counters the Communist perception of Americans by simply being friendly, humble, and treating the local people as equal to himself. This again suggests that friendliness and humility are powerful tools for diplomats, since they can heal people’s poor perception of American culture, and thus their opinion of Western Capitalism as well.*



## CHAPTER 11: THE IRON OF WAR

Major James “Tex” Wolchek, a decorated American veteran of World War II and the Korean War, reports to the Frenchman, Major Monet. Tex has bits of metal from two different wars lodged in his body. During World War II, he is shot in the leg while parachuting into Normandy. When he lands, he crawls for three miles and manages to single-handedly capture a tired German platoon. The second injury occurs in Korea, when he leads a platoon on a reckless charge against a Chinese base, killing two colonels and a general in the process. During the charge, Tex catches grenade shrapnel in his back, is captured by Chinese soldiers, and escapes. Though the fighting continues in Korea, Tex’s commander sends him to Vietnam.

Monet admits that Tex’s attachment to his unit as a foreign observer is unfortunate—Monet’s men are about to parachute into fierce fighting in Dien Bien Phu. Tex elects to go with them, since he has more paratrooper experience than any of Monet’s men, though it violates Tex’s superior’s orders. They spend the day together, and Tex learns that Monet belongs to one of France’s most esteemed military families. The next day, Tex meets Monet’s Foreign Legionnaires, one of whom is a black American named Jim Davis. After Tex and Monet make their inspections, Monet tells Tex that Davis is one of his best men, and the only Foreign Legionnaire that the Vietnamese scouts trust.

*Tex’s war record depicts him as a classic American hero and an excellent fighter. Since Tex will eventually argue for abandoning Western notions of warfare to adopt a Communist-style of fighting, his position as the ideal American soldier establishes him as someone who has proven the effectiveness of Western strategies in the past. This makes his proposal to abandon Western ideas of warfare more poignant.*



*Tex’s willingness to fight alongside Monet in opposition to military orders suggests that, though an excellent soldier, he is also unconventional and likes to make his own judgments—he cares more about being effective than about following orders or protocol. Monet’s impressive military lineage depicts him as an ideal warrior, like Tex, well-versed in the Western philosophy of warfare. The Vietnamese scouts only trust Davis, a black man, implying that they do not trust white people.*



The next morning, the Foreign Legionnaires prepare to make their jump into Dien Bien Phu. However, Monet receives word that the station has already fallen; the French have lost the battle. Monet announces the loss to his men. At the same time, Gilbert MacWhite arrives as a foreign observer and asks Monet why the French lost. To help Monet save face in front of his men, Tex takes MacWhite aside and explains that the French don't know why they're losing. The Communists are fighting an unconventional war and the French army doesn't know how to adjust.

Monet announces that the Communists will keep pressing toward Hanoi, and MacWhite decides he will stay with the Legionnaires to see the fighting for himself, since he fears this same fight may come to Sarkhan next. Over the next several weeks, Monet leads the Foreign Legionnaires into dozens of well-executed deployments, all of which end in defeat. The Communists only fight at night, and somehow they always know where the Legionnaires will be or manage to place soldiers behind French defensive lines. Hanoi fills with refugees, and everyone senses that the city will soon be lost.

After three weeks of devastating losses, Monet, Tex, and MacWhite spend an afternoon drinking together. Tex cautiously raises an idea he's been formulating for some time. He suggests to Monet that the reason they keep losing isn't due to the quality of their soldiers or strategies, but because the Communists fight by entirely different rules. He remembers a book that Mao Tse-tung wrote on warfare, and suggests they look to his ideas to understand why the Communists keep winning. MacWhite agrees with the idea, but Monet thinks that Mao could not possibly add anything to the philosophy of war; French writers have already said all there is to say on the subject.

Tex says he'll list off some of Mao's ideas and Monet can at least tell him if they have any precedent in French military history. They spend the next eight hours discussing Mao's tactics on warfare, such as using villagers as double agents in advance of any skirmish. MacWhite and Tex think Monet is ready to admit that they should try Mao's tactics, but Monet hesitates, continually falling back on French tradition. At last, Monet says he's heard enough—they don't have time to change their entire military strategy.

*Despite better technology and better funding, the French are outmatched by Communist fighters. This suggests that the Communists fight in a manner that takes advantage of Vietnam's unique environment and allows them to challenge a more powerful opponent. This alludes to the fact that Western Capitalists cannot defeat the Communists through conventional means, militarily, politically, or financially.*



*Again, though Monet's tactics should be successful, he and his skilled fighters are consistently beaten, indicating that the Communists are fighting in an unconventional, though more effective, way. The Communists' method of only fighting at night suggests that they use deception and subterfuge, much like the Russian diplomats use subterfuge and espionage to combat Western Capitalism.*



*Monet's reticence to consider Communist military tactics, even though Tex and MacWhite think they may be valuable, suggests that ego and adherence to Western tradition can keep people from considering alternative theories of war or politics. Monet's feeling that French writers have already had the last word on warfare belies his sense of cultural superiority, believing that Eastern countries could not add anything worthwhile to the conversation.*



*Again, Monet's resistance to change suggests that ego and belief in one's cultural superiority can make it difficult for one to defy tradition and explore new ideas. Notably, Mao's military tactics rely on espionage and deception in the same way that Communist politics rely on spies, propaganda campaigns, and deception (such as in the rice incident during Sears's tenure).*



A runner arrives and announces that the Communists are beginning their assault on Hanoi. The next three weeks are hellish. Both Tex and Monet are injured and they lose the majority of their Legionnaires. Monet finally decides they will change tactics when Davis and a Vietnamese scout return from a patrol. They were captured by Communists and released to serve as a warning. However, they tore one of Davis's eyes out and cut the scout's vocal cords out through his neck. Monet decides that in their next battle, they will fight like Mao.

*The Communists grotesquely maim their prisoners, again demonstrating that they operate by different rules than their Western opponents (who do not mutilate their enemies). The Communists' brutal methods confirm that the Western nations cannot defeat them through traditional strategies, which assume that their opponents will act with a certain amount of decorum and honor.*



## CHAPTER 12: THE LESSONS OF WAR

Tex briefly returns to Hanoi to find a copy of Mao's book on war. When he returns to Monet and MacWhite, they read it aloud together for hours. Both MacWhite and Tex know that it pains Monet, since he is losing a long-held way of life. However, Monet agrees that the tactics makes sense. The three men discuss the ideas until dawn to determine which they can use to fight the Communists. They decide to use Mao's idea of retreating over rough terrain to exhaust one's enemy as they pursue, and his concept of maintaining central command posts during guerilla warfare. Monet recognizes that both are solid strategies, though the French never used them before.

*Monet's pain at considering Communist strategies demonstrates that letting go of one's long-held ideals and presumptions is a difficult task, and may even cause a person to feel that they are losing a part of their history. However, Monet's recognition that Mao's strategies contain several novel concepts confirms that one must learn from their opponents, since their opponents will have totally different ideals and cultural perspectives.*



The three men examine a map of the village they'll next fight in and locate a cluster of bamboo trees, which they expect the Communists will use as their guerilla command post. Tex sets up a truck bed mounted with 20 rocket launchers that will create a single, simultaneous barrage into an area 100 yards across. After a few days of preparation, the Legionnaires make their way to the village, feeling optimistic for the first time in weeks. At night, they bait the Communists into attacking a small contingent of soldiers, which prompts their commanders to head for the command post in the bamboo grove. As the Communists move, the rocket truck blows up the bamboo grove while trucks with mounted heavy machine guns surprise the Communist foot soldiers and shoot them down. With their enemy defeated, the Legionnaires return to Hanoi.

*Tex and Monet's victory through unconventional, Communist-inspired strategies firmly argues that the West can only fight Communism when it understands Communist methods and utilizes them themselves. Although Monet and Tex's victory is strictly military, this concept arguably applies to diplomacy and politics as well. This is especially true since the Russian diplomats consistently outmaneuver the American diplomats, winning consecutive propaganda victories for Communism.*



Tex, Monet, and MacWhite present their success and new theory on warfare to French and American generals, but the leaders refuse to hear them out. Tex asks if any of them has ever bothered to read Mao's writings, but a French general angrily tells him that the nation that produced Napoleon has no need for "a primitive Chinese" man's military strategies. An American general is furious. MacWhite angrily tells the generals they refuse to learn, and Monet tells them that Mao's tactics provided the only real French victory Monet has seen in Vietnam. The three men angrily leave, go to a bar, and drink in silence.

*The French and American leadership's unwillingness to consider Chinese tactics again suggests that their sense of cultural superiority blinds them. The French general's charge that they don't need the words of a "primitive Chinese" man reiterates the particularly racist motivation of their unwillingness. They instinctively consider Eastern ideas to be inferior to their Western minds, and thus will never be able to fight Communism on its own terms.*



Shortly after, France surrenders Hanoi to the Communists. Tex, MacWhite, and Monet watch the procession of French soldiers with fancy uniforms and advanced weapons slowly file out of the city. The procession of Communists soldiers enters afterward, and though the vanguard soldiers have nice uniforms and weapons, the foot soldiers are all shoddy peasants, some without shoes, some even without rifles. Monet is stunned that the French lost to this army.

*The contrast between the French and Communist soldiers reinforces the unlikelihood of France's defeat and confirms that they were not beaten by superior soldiers or weapons, but by the Communists' superior tactics. This underscores the need for the Western Capitalists to understand Communist ideology for themselves so they can understand how it spreads and succeeds.*



## CHAPTER 13: WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE PRESIDENT?

At a dinner party honoring Ambassador MacWhite, famous Burmese journalist U Maung Swe answers questions about why America so quickly lost its “prestige” in Southeast Asia. He states that although he generally dislikes Russians and appreciates Americans, the Russians he meets serving abroad are excellent people, while the Americans abroad are loud, boorish, and ill-mannered. All the American economists that come to Burma insist on living better than the Burmese leaders, with servants and luxurious houses, which offends regular Burmese people. Additionally, they never actually help or bring economic change. When the Americans promised a brand new dredge to help make rivers usable for transportation, they instead delivered a decades-old, rusted dredge that did not even function.

*U Maung Swe echoes Magsaysay's claim that Americans are good people in their own country, but act terribly abroad. This narrows the novel's criticism from Americans in general to specifically the Americans working in the Foreign Service. U Maung Swe's anecdote about the the old dredge suggests that Americans offer countries like Burma second-rate help and technology. This again suggests that the Americans tend to think of themselves as superior to people from other nations, since they give others what they would not accept themselves.*



U Maung Swe explains that Burma eventually rejected all American aid because its people grew tired of the Americans' “superior airs” and habit of leveraging aid to bully Burma. However, U Maung Swe says that American technical assistance would be welcome if they would go about it the way the Ford Foundation did in Indonesia. He recounts that the Ford Foundation brings a group of Indonesians to America and lets them decide what they want to learn about, whatever they think would be most useful in their country. When the Indonesians decide they want a garage to train mechanics, the Ford Foundation builds one in Indonesia and supplies American mechanics to train Indonesians. Once the Indonesians can operate on their own, the Americans go home.

*Again, U Maung Swe suggests that Americans' self-superiority is deeply offensive to the local people, whether the Americans realize it or not. The Ford Foundation models effective and sustainable development by allowing the Burmese to choose what developments they want for themselves (rather than the Americans patronizingly telling them what is best), showing them how to do it, and then leaving them alone to carry their new developments on themselves, thus leaving them independent and self-determining.*



U Maung Swe recalls an American couple, the Martins, who speak Burmese and move into a small village. The other villagers notice that the Martins' garden is massive and that they can their extra vegetables, preserving them. The Martins teach the villagers how to can food and distribute healthy seeds, and the village sets up a small canning industry as a result. U Maung Swe states that the Martins came to Burma to help people, not to increase their own standard of living. He says that if he were the President of the United States, he would get rid of the embassies and commissaries and make the entire Foreign Service into people like the Martins.

*The Martins join Father Finian and John Colvin in representing grassroots development, which the novel argues is far more practical and welcomed by the local people. U Maung Swe's statement that if he were President, he would make the entire Foreign Service into people like the Martins suggests that quiet, humble, productive Americans can do far more to elevate America's international reputation than massive embassies or charismatic diplomats can.*



U Maung Swe explains that the Russians are superior diplomats because they live quietly and humbly, speak Burmese, are well-educated on local history and culture, and employ only Russian servants. Although Russian economic aid is not any better than American, the Russians promise aid for simple things that common people understand, thus making it better propaganda. The Russians enthusiastically participate in Burma's cultural events and celebrations, while the Americans never bother, and they spend time in the rural regions. U Maung Swe estimates that 90 percent of Russian diplomats act like "dedicated professionals," while he can only recall four Americans out of hundreds who acted professionally.

*Along with being more professional and better-educated diplomats, the Russians understand how to shape the local population's perception to their own advantage, demonstrating how critical perception is to foreign diplomacy. Additionally, the Russians celebrate alongside the Burmese and participate in their culture, suggesting that effective diplomats cannot simply exist in another country, but must take on its cultural traditions, its beliefs, and embrace its people.*



After the dinner party, MacWhite walks with U Maung Swe and asks for his advice on how to lead the Americans in Sarkhan. U Maung Swe tells him about John Colvin, whom the Communists framed with false rape allegations. He admires Colvin's ideas and recommends that MacWhite try to bring him to Sarkhan to work for him.

*U Maung Swe's admiration for John Colvin suggests that, if given the chance, Colvin could have become a successful grassroots developer, benefited the local people, and strengthened the relationship between America and Sarkhan.*



## CHAPTER 14: HOW TO BUY AN AMERICAN JUNIOR GRADE

Thomas Knox fights in World War II, then operates Knox Farm in Iowa until 1952. In 1953, Knox accepts an invitation to consult for the American Foreign Service in Cambodia. After a year in Cambodia, Tom is the best-known American in the country. He roams the countryside in his jeep, speaking a mix of broken Cambodian, English, and French, and helps villages in anyway he can, especially by tending to their weak chickens. Tom is friendly, generous—he spends his entire salary in Cambodia—and loves Cambodian food, endearing him to the rural people.

*Like Hillandale, Tom wins the respect of the local people by being friendly, humble, and doing his best to live as they live, eat as they eat, speak as they speak. This again suggests that American Foreign Service workers can build positive relationships with local people if they are willing to abandon their own sense of self-superiority and share in the local life and culture. Simple human connection can be a powerful diplomatic tool.*



Tom advises the villagers on where to find calcium deposits in the hills and how to mix it into their chicken feed. He gives medicine to diseased chickens, earning himself a reputation as a poultry healer. He also possesses an extraordinary knowledge of anything related to farming, and shares that knowledge with every Cambodian that he can. One evening, a village headman asks Tom why he spends his time helping Cambodians rather than making his money in America. Knox can't quite explain that he's always been drawn to the exotic mystery of Asia and the Far East. Even so, Tom tells the man that he loves Cambodia, and the headman tells Tom that his village loves him in return.

*Tom builds powerful relationships with Cambodian villages by simply offering his expertise and doing what good he can. Although Tom is not building massive new installations, his simple acts of goodwill improve America's reputation in Cambodia. Like Finian and the Martins and John Colvin, Tom models effective grassroots development and demonstrates how to build positive relationships with local people.*



Two weeks later, Tom attends an American Aid conference in Phnom Penh. He listens attentively while other workers propose massive roads and multi-million dollar projects. When it comes to his turn, he simply proposes that they import a few thousand American chickens to breed into Cambodia's poultry stock and strengthen it, which would result in a higher egg output and an important protein boost for the villagers. The chairman of the meeting shuts Tom down, remarking that Tom brought this same plan last year, but the government wants big plans that will immediately help people. Tom is furious. He thinks his plan could increase the country's egg production by 200 percent, which would be a far greater benefit than any new road.

Tom asks a Cambodian governor what he thinks. The Cambodian agrees that egg production is important, but the American chairman badgers the Cambodian until he admits that they also need mechanized farms. Tom feels that he is failing the villagers, which he thinks of as his "constituents," and he makes his final statement: either the Americans back his egg plan, or he will resign, return to Washington, and "raise hell" until he gets the support he needs. The chairman accepts Tom's immediate resignation and Tom leaves.

The day before Tom flies back to America, a high-ranking French diplomat asks Tom if he would allow them to take him on an expenses-paid tour of Asia on his way home. Tom suspects the diplomat has ulterior motives, but accepts, enticed by the chance to see foreign lands and exotic sights.

Tom flies to Jakarta, Indonesia aboard a luxurious French plane, and the French Embassy takes him on a cultural tour filled with dancing girls and excellent food, treating Tom as an esteemed guest. He feels his anger start to ebb away. The French take him from Jakarta to New Delhi, India, where he again goes on wonderful tours and eats excellent food. From there, Tom flies to Nice, France. In the plane bound for France, Tom attempts to write up his thoughts from Cambodia and his criticisms of the Foreign Service, but just can't summon the same passion as he had before.

*Tom's superiors' refusal to back his small project suggests that the American Foreign Service overlooks cost-effective and practical ideas in favor of development projects that sound impressive, but may not actually be useful—they want positive propaganda more than they want to actually help Cambodians. Tom's belief that he can improve Cambodian nutrition with a few thousand chickens suggests that many solutions to common problems are not even expensive or difficult to execute, they simply require patience and follow-through.*



*The American chairman badgers the Cambodian governor into agreeing with him, suggesting that the Americans don't actually care what Cambodians want; the Americans only want to build projects they think are important. Tom's feeling that the villagers are his "constituents" suggests that he feels a personal stake in their wellbeing.*



*Although Tom is thus far depicted as a noble worker who cares about the Cambodian people, the French diplomat's ability to sway him suggests that even good-hearted people can be corrupted by luxury and excitement.*



*The French diplomats effectively buy Tom off, curtailing his anger and passion to create change by treating him to luxury and exotic sights. This darkly suggests that not only do the French and American diplomats not undertake effective development projects, they actively undermine good people like Tom who want to create real change. This suggests that such diplomats are not only unproductive but counterproductive to helping local people.*



Tom stays a week in Nice in a beautiful French hotel, then another several days in Paris in a Cambodian hotel. The hotel owners imply to him that such distinguished guests as himself are “above paying hotel bills.” The Cambodian arranges a luxury suite for Tom on a ship sailing for New York. On the ship, Tom again tries to write out his anger, but now cannot summon any of it. Even the memories of the villages seem distant, replaced by his memories of the lovely journey home. Eight months later, in his Iowa farm, Tom thinks such anger came from someone else entirely, and seems childish in retrospect.

In Sarkhan, an American chicken expert also tries to convince MacWhite that Sarkhan needs healthier chickens. The man explains that with better egg production, they could save millions of dollars a year on food imports. MacWhite’s advisors confirm that the man’s math is correct. MacWhite writes to the American Aid Mission in Cambodia, but the chairman writes back telling MacWhite to drop it. They had an egg expert of their own, but he “just didn’t work out” and went home. MacWhite drops the idea, which is his “second major mistake.”

*Tom’s nobility and desire to help Cambodian villagers completely collapses, suggesting that even the best grassroots developers can be seduced by luxurious living. Tom’s months of travel effectively pushes the Cambodian villagers and their poverty out of his mind, which suggests that many Foreign Service workers simply neglect to recognize the needs of local people, becoming consumed instead by parties, socializing, and their own comfort.*



*Although MacWhite genuinely wants to do what is best for Sarkhan, he follows the advice of people with lesser intentions and thus fails the Sarkhanese people anyway. MacWhite and Tom’s personal failures suggest that even well-intentioned people can fail to be effective diplomats or create real change in the countries they work in. Their mistakes thus serve as a warning not to be seduced by luxury or heed the advice of the wrong people.*



## CHAPTER 15: THE SIX-FOOT SWAMI FROM SAVANNAH

Colonel Hillandale walks the streets of Haidho, where MacWhite has borrowed him for two months from Manila—though MacWhite himself is still in Vietnam. Hillandale notices that there are a lot of pawn shops and thinks he sees people selling opium, meaning that the city is suffering economically. He also notices a lot of astrologers, and notes that some practitioners’ signs indicate that they have Ph.D.’s in the practice. This excites Hillandale, since he himself is an astrology enthusiast and even studied it in the Philippines.

Hillandale returns to the American Embassy and starts reading biographies of Sarkhanese politicians. A protocol officer informs Hillandale that he has a formal dinner to attend tomorrow night with the new Filipino Ambassador—an old friend of Hillandale’s, Don Philippe—and several American and Sarkhanese dignitaries. Hillandale asks the officer for a guest list.

At the dinner, Hillandale and the other guests enjoy an hour of hors d’oeuvres before Don Philippe pulls him aside. His chef is missing an ingredient and Don Philippe asks if Hillandale can buy him 30 minutes with his palm reading trick. Hillandale agrees, so Don Philippe tells his other guests that Hillandale is a distinguished palm reader and testifies to his abilities. The Sarkhanese Prime Minister and his advisors clearly appreciate the skill. George Swift laughs and whispers to his wife that it’s a “vaudeville” stunt. He volunteers to have his palm read first.

*Hillandale observes crime and drug-dealing and sees it as a sign that the Sarkhanese are suffering, rather than taking it as evidence that they are morally inferior to Americans. Hillandale thus demonstrates his own goodwill toward the Sarkhanese people, since he does not jump to negative (and racist) conclusions as many of his negative peers do.*



*Hillandale’s commitment to understand Sarkhanese history and politics, even though he will only be there a short time, demonstrates that he is far more professional and committed than most other American diplomats and takes his role as an American representative seriously.*



*George Swift’s mockery of Hillandale’s palm reading suggests that he judges Sarkhanese culture and its emphasis on astrology, rather than simply observing it, as Hillandale does. However, the Sarkhanese Prime Minister’s appreciation for Hillandale’s palm reading suggests that Swift makes a grave error in dismissing and mocking it, since it is obviously important to his diplomatic counterparts.*





Hillandale gazes at Swift's palm and starts telling him specific details from throughout Swift's life. Swift is visibly shocked. Hillandale finishes Swift's palm reading, including the fact that he beats his wife, stating that he chooses not to read his future as well. The Sarkhanese Prime Minister asks to go next, but would prefer to have his palm read in private. Don Philippe shows Hillandale and the Prime Minister to his study. The two men emerge, arms linked together, half an hour later. The Prime Minister appears "awe[d]" by Hillandale. After that, the chef serves an excellent dinner, and Don Philippe makes a mental note to repay Hillandale someday.

When MacWhite returns to Haidho three days later, George Swift meets him. Swift has a black eye, which Hillandale gave him, and he angrily announces that he's written a letter of reprimand for Hillandale. MacWhite meets with Hillandale, and Hillandale explains that astrology is extremely important to the Sarkhanese, and no officials make major decisions without consulting an astrologist first. However, during the dinner, rather than understand what an opportunity reading the Prime Minister's palm is, Swift angrily tries to mock Hillandale for it—Hillandale researched everyone at the dinner beforehand and told Swift things about himself that were humiliating, but true.

When Hillandale reads the Sarkhanese Prime Minister's palm, he tells the man very specific things about his life—that Hillandale learned through prior investigation—which convinces the man that Hillandale possesses a true astrological gift. When Hillandale tells the Prime Minister that the Minister currently has two friends struggling for power beneath him, the Prime Minister asks Hillandale which of the two men he should have killed. Hillandale doesn't know what MacWhite would desire, so he tells the Prime Minister not to kill either of them yet. As Hillandale relays the story to MacWhite, MacWhite realizes that Hillandale manipulated national events.

After dinner, the Sarkhanese Prime Minister asks Hillandale if he'll read the King's palm and "cast his horoscope." Hillandale recognizes that he could use the meeting to sway Sarkhan's military strategy to appear pro-American and anti-Communist, which would win America a "great propaganda victory." However, according to tradition, the engagement must be arranged by the American protocol officer, George Swift, and the Sarkhanese protocol officer, Prince Moyang. George Swift must initiate the meeting tomorrow morning. Swift promises to do so, and Hillandale retires for the night, planning how he will execute the King's palm reading.

*The Sarkhanese Prime Minister's obvious respect for Hillandale's palm reading ability demonstrates that Hillandale's astrological knowledge gives him a diplomatic advantage with the Sarkhanese. This suggests that, far from the "vaudeville" act that Swift considers astrology to be, such cultural knowledge can be an important and useful tool for any diplomat.*



*Even though Hillandale admits that his palm reading is a stunt, enabled by his thorough investigations of everyone he works with, Hillandale still recognizes astrology as an important piece of Sarkhanese culture and makes no judgment of it. Swift's disregard for astrology and anger at Hillandale for embarrassing him suggests that, like Sears, Swift puts his own ego ahead of his diplomatic duties, making him a poor representative of the United States.*



*Hillandale's palm reading not only pleases the Sarkhanese Prime Minister, but gives Hillandale an opportunity to advise the Prime Minister on significant national events. This demonstrates that Hillandale's cultural awareness not only makes him more endearing to the Sarkhanese dignitaries, but provides him with unique diplomatic advantages. Despite Swift's dismissal of astrology, this suggests that such cultural sensitivity is paramount for effective diplomats.*



*Again, despite Swift's dismissal of something like astrology, which does not suit his Western mindset, Hillandale's respect for Eastern cultural practices grants him an unprecedented diplomatic opportunity. Hillandale's use of astrology to affect Sarkhanese military maneuvers and provide an American "propaganda victory" demonstrates the complexities of diplomatic work and suggests that nothing in a culture should be overlooked or ruled out based on cultural or racial prejudice.*



Swift fails to initiate the meeting the following morning, choosing instead to go liquor shopping at the commissary all morning. Too late, he tells his secretary to call Prince Moyang. She does, deeply offending the Sarkhanese by breaking protocol, and the opportunity is lost. Hillandale confronts Swift later that day but Swift blows him off, not realizing the great error he's made. Hillandale punches him in the eye.

When Hillandale finishes his story and leaves, MacWhite calls George Swift in. He chastises Swift for his stupidity and tells him it's not his job to judge the Sarkhanese's beliefs, only to understand them. Swift is shocked that he is being punished rather than Hillandale. MacWhite tells Swift that he is transferring him out of Sarkhan.

## CHAPTER 16: CAPTAIN BONING, USN

In Hong Kong, Solomon Asch leads the American delegation in discussing nuclear armament with delegates from Thailand, Burma, and India, England, and France. He thinks most of the other Americans won't be useful to him, except perhaps for MacWhite and the short Navy officer, Captain Boning. In a meeting beforehand, Asch briefs his subordinates on what he expects: everyone will practice strict discipline, never challenge him in front of other delegates, and avoid all cocktail parties and most other social engagements, since they will need all energy and focus at the negotiating table. Some of the diplomats are visibly disappointed. MacWhite and Boning are the only diplomats who seem to approve of Asch's strictness. As everyone leaves, Asch tells Boning that as their only person with technical knowledge of nuclear weapons, he plays a critical role. Boning must answer any questions quickly and directly.

The delegates spend the first day of the conference deciding where the next meeting will be held. Asch wants it held in India, since the Indians are most hesitant about accepting nuclear weapons in their country. The debate lasts for six hours without moving, until Asch privately tells the Indian delegates that the America will secretly cover all costs of the next meeting if they will agree to host it in India. The Indian delegates agree, and the matter is swiftly settled.

*Swift's indifference to Sarkhanese culture and protocol suggests that something an American may regard as a minor issue may actually be incredibly significant—or offensive—to people of another culture. Swift belittles Sarkhanese culture, treating it as inferior to his own, demonstrating how such racial and cultural prejudice can destroy diplomatic efforts.*



*MacWhite's rebuke of Swift parallels Hillandale's own practice of observing and understanding a culture without judging it based on his own American cultural background.*



*Asch and Boning's story demonstrates the delicacy of international negotiations and how easily they can fall apart, even over small indiscretions. Asch's assumption that most of his diplomats are worthless suggests that, after years of service, Asch expects very little of his fellow Americans. The American diplomats' annoyance that Asch demands strict discipline and no socializing suggests that most diplomats habitually behave in the opposite way. Asch specifically singling out Boning suggests that Boning is the pivotal character whose behavior will guide the vignette.*



*Asch's secret deal with the Indian delegates allows them to have the honor of hosting their next meeting without having to front the cost, since America will secretly pay for it. Asch's maneuvering with the Indian delegates demonstrates that he is a shrewd negotiator, willing to sacrifice or accept financial burdens in order to achieve a greater goal.*



The next day, negotiations begin over which countries will accept nuclear weapons from America. Asch directs all political questions to MacWhite and all technical questions to Boning, and both perform well, answering “without any air of condescension.” This irritates the English and French delegates, since they do not like speaking frankly about military issues with Asian people, preferring to condescend to them instead. When the English and French privately confront Asch on the matter, he tells them that their attitudes have spoiled international relations for several generations. Unless they treat the other delegates as equals, no one will want to cooperate and negotiations will never be successful.

The first week of negotiations go well, but the second week starts to bog down. Asch notes that Boning is slower than he was the first week. He often nods off after lunch, which offends the Asian delegates, and pauses a moment before answering questions, giving them the impression he is withholding information. Asch privately confronts Boning about his poor performance and asks if he’s “living it up at night.” Boning insists that he’s not, though, in fact, he is.

One of the American diplomats had earlier introduced Boning to a Chinese doctor named Ruby Tsung, who was secretly trained in a school outside Moscow. Tsung starts showing Boning around Hong Kong in the evenings, which later turns into dinners, and develops into nightly affairs. Rather than sleeping or reviewing his notes, Boning spends most of each night with his mistress.

Three weeks into the conference, negotiations are reaching their “climax.” Asch makes his final pitch, asking the Asian delegates to allow America to store nuclear bombs in their countries. When an Indian delegate asks a question about safety features, Boning is dozing and does not hear it. Asch wakes him, restating the question, but Boning cannot think clearly and hesitates. When a delegate asks a follow-up question, Boning hesitates again and states that the answer is classified information. An Indian colonel declares that such conferences always end this way, with America talking down to other countries and refusing to share information. The Indians become hardened against the prospect of cooperating with America, and the negotiations fall apart.

*The English and French delegates’ tendency to talk down to the Asian nations suggests that their own racial prejudice and colonial history negatively impact their performance as negotiators. Asch’s warning that they must treat others as equals or else negotiations will fail implies that treating non-white people as equals is not only morally right, but politically pragmatic, as it makes all parties more open to negotiation and cooperation. This warning pertains not only to negotiations, but all interactions where American and European diplomats may be tempted to look down on other nations.*



*The negotiations begin to derail simply because Boning struggles to stay awake and hesitates when answering, neither of which appear to be major indiscretions. This demonstrates how careful diplomats must be during international negotiations, and how their success or failure can pivot on the smallest interactions and details.*



*Tsung’s training in a Moscow school implies that she is a Communist agent. Regardless, Boning’s lack of sleep each night causes his performance to falter at the negotiating table, demonstrating how even one’s private indiscretions can affect international affairs.*



*The Indian delegates’ anger at being condescended to suggests that even perceived racial prejudice can derail international relationships. Again, Boning’s personal irresponsibility affects his professional performance, which loses America a major strategic and diplomatic opportunity. Boning’s error stresses that American diplomats must be professional and responsible at all times. However, even the most professional diplomat, like Solomon Asch, may be undermined by the negligence of his coworkers.*



## CHAPTER 17: THE UGLY AMERICAN

In Vietnam, American engineer Homer Atkins sits in a room full of stuffy-looking, expensively dressed diplomats. Atkins is, by contrast, **ugly** and gnarled, and he enjoys that about himself, particularly his “ugly, strong hands,” which made him his personal fortune of three million dollars. Atkins tells the men in the room, again, that they don’t need roads and dams, they need practical solutions for alleviating hunger, things that Vietnamese people can make and use themselves. When a Vietnamese official says they want dams and roads instead, Atkins asks if any of the diplomats have actually been out to the rural countryside and visited the villages. They obviously haven’t.

An American diplomat tries to end the meeting, but MacWhite, observing the meeting, speaks from the back of the room and says that he wants to hear the rest of what Atkins has to say. Atkins explains that their first step should be to identify needed resources that the Vietnamese can manufacture on their own. He points out that many villages sit on mineral deposits, and the villagers could easily be taught to manufacture their own bricks and building materials. A French diplomat angrily cuts in, exclaiming that a French company already makes all of Vietnam’s bricks, and creating competition for that business would “ruin” France and Vietnam’s relationship.

Atkins continues to outline his view of Vietnam’s true needs: a canning industry, small roads to give villagers access to the best soil. The other diplomats are furious that an engineer is advising on agriculture. Atkins points at the Frenchman and states that the French are so ignorant that they didn’t even know that Ho Chi Minh and his Communists built a road through the jungle all the way across Vietnam to ferry supplies. The French start shouting that it’s impossible to build a road through jungle. The meeting dissolves into chaos, and Atkins leaves.

As Atkins walks away from the meeting, MacWhite catches up with him and offers to buy him a drink. In a café, Atkins tells MacWhite about the Communists’ road, and that the Vietnamese never told the French because “even the anti-Communists hate the French.” MacWhite asks if Atkins would be willing to move to Sarkhan to put his plan into action. The hillside villages are struggling to get adequate water to irrigate their crops, and they could use Atkins’ expertise.

*The chapter title confirms that Homer Atkins as the titular “ugly American.” However, Atkins’s symbolic ugliness is not a condemnation, but rather an expression of his humble and practical nature. Homer is ugly because he works with his hands—he gets dirty and solves problems for himself. Atkins’s symbolic ugliness contrasts against the preened and expensively dressed officials around him, who never work with their hands and thus do not understand the practical problems of their own countries.*



*The French diplomat’s insistence that they cannot challenge the French monopoly on brick manufacturing suggests that France cares more about its own enrichment than it does about helping Vietnamese people. In other words, France prioritizes its own profits over Vietnam’s self-sufficiency and economic growth, suggesting that France is only philanthropic when it serves its own self-interest.*



*Although Atkins’s development suggestions seem highly practical, the other diplomats are angry that an engineer dares to make economic or agricultural recommendations. Their anger suggests that such diplomats care more about protocol and their own egos than about actually helping Vietnamese villagers or coming up with practical, innovative solutions to common problems.*



*Atkins refers to the Ho Chi Minh trail, an actual road that the Communists used to ferry supplies across the country during the Vietnam War. The French’s ignorance of its existence not only implies that they underestimate Vietnamese ingenuity, but also reflects how much the Vietnamese people hate the French (who colonized and occupied Vietnam for decades).*



Atkins starts making a sketch of some new device, and requests that, if he develops a solution, he'll be allowed to share it freely with all the Sarkhanese people; the French always patent any new devices so they can collect royalties, and the villagers can thus never afford them. MacWhite assures him they will offer their knowledge for free. Atkins is obviously interested, and he loses himself in his sketch. MacWhite leaves him with a note stating that he will make arrangements for Atkins to move to Sarkhan as soon as possible.

*Atkins's charge that the French always patent their new developments to earn royalties off of villagers again suggests that the French care more for profit than they do for actually helping Vietnamese villagers prosper. MacWhite's promise that they can freely distribute Atkins's design indicates that they will take a far more democratic approach, prioritizing actual development over profit.*



## CHAPTER 18: THE UGLY AMERICAN AND THE UGLY SARKHANESE

Homer Atkins and his wife, Emma, move to Sarkhan two weeks later, settling into a small cottage in Haidho with dirt floors and a charcoal fireplace. Emma learns Sarkhanese and befriends the neighbors while Homer works on his design for a "man-powered water pump." Currently, Sarkhanese villagers must haul water from rivers by pail, all the way up the terraced hillsides to their rice paddies. The process is exhausting and time-consuming with very limited returns, but the Sarkhanese have always carried water this way. Homer realizes that the only way to get the Sarkhanese to change is to show them a more efficient, readily available alternative.

*Homer and Emma model ideal grassroots development, demonstrating how American Foreign Service workers can have a truly positive impact in other countries and bolster America's international reputation. Rather than building costly dams or roads, Homer focuses on an everyday problem that can be met with a practical solution, thus providing a much more tangible benefit to Sarkhanese villagers than a military road ever could.*



Although Emma suggests he could simply import the pieces he needs, Homer only wants to design his pump out of readily available parts that villagers can obtain themselves. He uses bamboo for piping and sources most of the components from old jeeps, which litter the countryside. Emma suggests that he use a bicycle mechanism to supply power, since many people in Sarkhan ride bikes. Homer excitedly realizes Emma is right. He works on his design late into the night, drinking beer and chattering excitedly to his wife. Emma looks proudly at him, utterly happy, since he is happy.

*Homer's insistence on building his pump out of locally available pieces makes his task more difficult but ultimately ensures that other villagers will be able to build their own pumps with materials they can acquire themselves. This demonstrates the importance of designing sustainability into any new development, so that the recipients are not dependent on foreign imports. Homer and Emma's happiness suggests that helping other can bring satisfaction and joy, even though they don't live in a luxurious mansion with servants.*



Two days later, Homer finishes his design. Emma advises that he must let the Sarkhanese use his water pump in their own way, otherwise they won't take ownership of the idea. She counsels him on how to bring his idea to the villagers. The next day, according to Emma's plan, Homer Atkins drives his jeep into a small, destitute village called Chang 'Dong and asks to speak with the headman. Atkins explains his water pump design to the old man in Sarkhanese, and though he struggles with the language, the headman is touched by the effort.

*Emma wisely observes that the Sarkhanese villagers must use the pump as they see fit before they will truly adopt the idea and make it a part of their lives. This suggests that if a foreign developer simply brings in a new idea and tries to force it on the local people, it will not take root, since the local people will not see it as theirs, but only as something a foreigner thrust upon them.*



Atkins explains that he is an American inventor and asks the headman who the best mechanic in the village is. Atkins wants to employ him and pay him a good wage, and if the mechanic can help with his water pump design, Atkins will make him an equal business partner. After negotiating an initial wage, the headman leaves and brings back a short, stocky Sarkhanese man named Jeepo (because he fixes jeeps). Jeepo is “ugly,” and Atkins immediately likes him. Jeepo explains the depth of his mechanical experience, which is considerable, but he also admits that he does not understand all machines.

Atkins watches as Jeepo assembles the first pump that afternoon, with the village elders watching on. They connect 25 feet of bamboo pipe together and feed it down a hill and into the river at the bottom. Bicycle pedals connect to a series of pistons that will draw the water up the pipe and into the paddy next to them. Jeepo climbs on and begins pedaling, and water draws up the pipe and gushes into the paddy. The village elders are thrilled, but Atkins can see that Jeepo is not satisfied. Jeepo states that it is a “very clever machine,” but not practical for use in Sarkhan. Most families only have the money to afford one bicycle, which they need for transportation and thus cannot take their bicycle apart to build a water pump.

Atkins briefly feels angry, but he then grins and asks Jeepo what he would do to make the water pump viable for Sarkhanese villagers. Jeepo spends a long time staring at the bicycle, thinking. He and Atkins discuss ideas until dusk when Jeepo figures out a solution: rather than generating energy by turning pedals that are built into the machine, they will generate energy by turning a small treadmill, which the family bicycle can be temporarily mounted on and used to generate energy. Each family can thus power their water pump and keep their needed bicycle intact.

Atkins tells the village elders that Jeepo has made a great contribution to the project and proposes that he and Jeepo become equal business partners. Two of the elders doubts that any white man will work as hard as Jeepo, but Jeepo tells them that Atkins is obviously different than most white men. Jeepo declares he will become Atkins’s business partner, and that they will not patent their invention, so any Sarkhanese person can learn how to build their water pump and distribute it themselves. The headman draws up a legal contract for them. Jeepo and Atkins set immediately to work. They rent an old warehouse and hire 12 workers, buy used tools and supplies, and form The Jeepo-Atkins Company, Limited.

*Jeepo shares Atkins’s symbolic ugliness, which according to the logic of the book signifies that he is practical, unassuming, and works with his hands. Jeepo’s admission that he understands most machines, but not all of them, suggests that he is honest and frank and does not oversell his abilities.*



*Jeepo’s practical insight into the water pump’s flaws demonstrates how important having a local partner is. As a member of the village, Jeepo understands the villagers’ practical limitations and needs far better than Atkins ever could, which thus allows them to design a pump that is optimally suited to helping the villagers. Jeepo’s practicality contrasts with the village elders’ initial excitement, depicting him as a pragmatic and symbolically ugly individual.*



*Jeepo comes up with a more practical solution than Atkins does, again demonstrating the value of developing alongside local people who are intimately aware of the problem at hand and what solutions would actually be viable. Moreover, Jeepo proves himself to be as effective a designer as Atkins—if not an even better one—implying that just because someone comes from a developing country does not make them any less adept or efficient than a Westerner from a developed country.*



*Jeepo’s recognition that Atkins is not like most white men suggests that honest, humble American developers can start to mend some of the damage done by white people who historically exploited people in developing nations. Jeepo and Atkins’s decision to not patent their invention but make it available to anyone who can build it contradicts the French attitude toward new inventions, demonstrating that Atkins and Jeepo care more about helping the villagers than about profiting themselves.*



As they develop their water pump further, Jeepo and Atkins often erupt into shouting matches. The other Sarkhanese people enjoy watching them bicker, since they've never seen a Sarkhanese person fully express themselves against a white person without fearing retribution and with the chance of changing his mind. Emma moves all of their belongings from Haidho into Chang 'Dong and sets up their new home there, and starts cooking meals for all of the company's workers. At one point, an advisor from the American Embassy arrives and asks Atkins to give up his work. He thinks that letting Sarkhanese people see a white person work with his hands "lower[s] the reputation of all white men." Plus, the French never even "allowed natives to handle machinery." Atkins promptly sends the man away.

After six weeks, the company has built 23 pumps. Jeepo and Atkins explain to their workers that now they must set out and sell their machines to nearby villages, and each man will earn a commission on whatever he sells. The workers set off with their demonstration pumps. No one returns for four days, and Jeepo and Atkins grow nervous. On the fifth day, their first salesman returns, having already sold his two pumps and taken orders for eight more. The village celebrates, and Jeepo and Atkins return to work early the next morning.

## CHAPTER 19: THE BENT BACKS OF CHANG 'DONG

After two weeks in Chang 'Dong, Emma notices that all of the elderly villagers have painfully bent backs. She asks some of the old people what causes this, but they insist it's just a natural part of old age. Emma is unconvinced but lets the question go. However, after monsoon season, all of the old people spend their days sweeping the village with short-handled palm fronds, which requires them to stoop over to reach the ground. When Emma surmises that short-handled brooms cause their bent backs, one of the old people tells her all brooms have short handles, and good wood is too precious to use for longer handles anyway.

That evening, Emma brings the problem up with Homer and resolves to figure out a new broom handle that will spare the elderly people's backs. She knows she can't simply import handles, since "only things that people did for themselves would really change their behavior." She searches for a suitable substitute for months until she finds a variety of long and firm reed that grows in the hills. Emma tells Homer to dig up several of the reeds by the roots, and she transplants them next to her home in the village.

*Like Father Finian's relationship with his Burmese friends, Atkins's and Jeepo's relationship is marked by equality. The villagers' enjoyment of watching Jeepo argue with Atkins, knowing that Jeepo may change Atkins's mind, suggests that equal relationships such as this one help mend the historical hostility and division between nations and people groups. Despite all their good progress, the American advisor's belief that Atkins lowers the reputation of all white people by working with his hands suggests that many white people still think of themselves as racially superior to the Sarkhanese.*



*Jeepo and Atkins not only create income for themselves, but also create opportunities for their employees to earn additional income through commissions. This demonstrates the way that effective grassroots development can not only lead to new innovations, but to new local industries as well, encouraging commerce and trade in underdeveloped areas.*



*Emma's observation that the old people are painfully bent over only occurs after she moves into the village, demonstrating how the proximity of living amidst a community allows one to recognize the local, everyday problems facing it. However, the old villagers' insistence that bent backs are just a sign of old age, rather than a consequence of short brooms, suggests that people see many preventable problems as a fact of life, especially without an external perspective to reveal otherwise.*



*Emma could simply import broom handles and solve Chang 'Dong's problem in the short term, even though it would be unsustainable. The fact that it takes her months to find a sustainable solution suggests that proper grassroots development is often slow and requires great patience to do properly but pays off in a way that quick fixes do not.*



Later, while several neighbors are visiting, Emma cuts one of the reeds, ties it to a palm frond like a long handle, and silently begins sweeping her hut. The villagers realize that she is able to keep her back straight while sweeping, which none of them have ever seen before. When one of the villagers asks Emma where she found such reeds, she tells him that he may take one of her reeds or go find his own up in the hills. Later that day, she sees several elderly villagers taking a water buffalo to go find some long reeds of their own.

Homer and Emma eventually move to another village and then back to Pittsburgh years later. Four years after finding a way to make long-handled brooms, Emma receives a letter from the villagers in Chang 'Dong, expressing their thanks and declaring that there are far fewer bent backs in Chang 'Dong than ever before. The villagers set up a small shrine in Emma's honor.

*Importantly, Emma chooses to show the villagers her innovation by adopting it herself rather than tell them what they should do. In this way, Emma allows the villagers to preserve their own sense of agency and choose whether they want to adopt the new broom themselves after seeing the benefit it provides to her. This method nods to her earlier advice to Homer that the villagers must take ownership of an idea themselves and use it in their own way, or else it will not last.*



*Homer and Emma's move suggests that they continue their grassroots development elsewhere once Chang 'Dong is operating on its own. The villagers' letter announces that the fewer elderly people suffer bent backs, suggesting that even seemingly small innovations such as Emma's can have a significant impact over time.*



## CHAPTER 20: SENATOR, SIR...

Senator Jonathan Brown starts his career as a very corrupt politician. When he first runs for office, he strolls into the office of the largest private power company and tells them that if they get him elected, he will award them the contract for all of the region's power needs. They get him elected and pay him \$150,000. However, as he grows older, Brown starts to feel a sense of pride in the workings of the Senate and his corruption slips away. He even passes a bill against the same power company that sponsored him. In 1942, Brown becomes a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and starts carefully studying American work abroad.

Brown becomes the committee chairman and plans a tour of East Asia to see how America's Foreign Service projects are operating. Seeing the long itinerary, his wife reminds him to be careful of his "heart condition and arthritic legs," both of which he conceals from the public. Brown tells his staff that they are not to party or socialize during this trip, though he brings his own personal case of whiskey. He intends to determine whether the foreign diplomats are using the several billion dollars of American money well.

*Senator Brown's vignette demonstrates how Foreign Service workers can hide their own incompetence and lack of real progress from oversight committees. Brown's political career moves from corruption to respectability, subverting the typical movement of politicians from clean-cut to corrupt. This establishes him as an upstanding, responsible, and severe figure who will ensure that the American Foreign Service is doing its job.*



*Brown hides his health issues, suggesting that he wants to project a strong public image. His demand for strict discipline echoes Solomon Asch, who nonetheless failed in spite of it. This foreshadows Brown's own failure in his mission to accurately investigate the Foreign Service projects and determine whether their massive budgets are justified.*





Arthur Alexander Gray, Ambassador to Vietnam, receives a cable from a friend in Washington warning him of Brown's visit. The friend tells him that Brown has a reputation for extracting information from low-ranking staff and using that information to slash their budgets when he believes they're overspending. Gray calls a meeting with his staff to plan for Brown's visit. They plan to print new brochures about agricultural challenges and plan an exhaustive itinerary that will take Brown past every American agricultural station in the rural countryside, though they are fully aware that these do not reflect the "typical countryside."

Gray decides that all his employees must work late each night while Brown is there and should ride bikes instead of driving their personal vehicles. He warns their military attaché, Major Cravath, to be careful when talking to Brown about their military endeavors. Gray warns their only Vietnamese speaker, Dr. Hans Barre, not to let Brown speak to any of the local Vietnamese people so that he doesn't "take seriously some of the nonsense uttered to him by the natives." If Brown insists on speaking to a Vietnamese person, Barre should change their words while he translates.

Brown and his wife arrive in Vietnam and meet up with Gray, Cravath, and Barre. Brown states that he wants to see if Gray and his people have been using their budgets well. Gray's staff shows Brown a 90-minute informational film, and when Brown asks how much the film cost, an information officer insists he made it on his own time. The next day, Brown accompanies Major Cravath out to several military sites, which involves a lot of walking. Cravath can see that Brown's legs hurt, but he keeps a quick pace throughout the day. They pass a Vietnamese man training with a rifle. Brown tells Barre to ask the man how often he's fired that rifle. The Vietnamese man tells Barre he's a cook, and they only handed him the rifle this morning, but Barre tells Brown that the man has trained with it for several weeks and wants to fight the Communists.

By mid-afternoon, Brown decides he's had enough for the day and asks a driver to take him back to his hotel. On the way, Brown interrogates the driver and learns that he has a wife and family with him in Vietnam, their own home staffed with servants, and a personal car shipped to Vietnam at the government's expense. On the way, they pass Tex and Monet, in uniform, getting drunk in an outdoor bar. Brown gets out of the car and angrily confronts Tex for being drunk in uniform, but Tex just threatens him. Brown leaves and tells Gray about the two officers. Gray promises they'll be punished.

*Gray's plan to show Brown agricultural stations which are not actually representative of the "typical countryside" suggests that they mean to actively deceive Brown. This darkly suggests that American Foreign Service workers are not only ignorant and incompetent, but even corrupt as they purposefully dodge congressional supervision.*



*Gray's strict instructions to his staff are meant to give Brown the impression that they work hard, even if they do not. Gray's purposeful shaping of perception echoes the Communists' practice of shaping public perception, suggesting that Gray sees Brown as a sort of enemy. His insistence that Brown not be allowed to speak to the locals, who speak "nonsense," indicates that he is racist toward the very people he's supposed to be helping and supporting.*



*Cravath's refusal to slow down even when he can see that Brown is in pain suggests that he intentionally wears the old senator out, presumably hoping to exhaust him and make him less observant or engaged. Likewise, Barre blatantly lies while translating the Vietnamese man's words. Both of these instances suggest that Gray and his American staff are willing to actively sabotage an American senator's oversight tour, which points to the book's overarching message that the American government is beset by infighting, bureaucracy, and mistrust.*



*The driver's admission that he has a wife, children, large home with servants, and personal car suggests that for every Foreign Service worker, the government may be supporting lavish lifestyles for five or more people when accounting for spouses and children. This implies that the American government spends an astronomical amount on its Foreign Service workers, placing few restrictions on what they can and cannot have.*



From then on, Brown seems “much more amiable.” He conducts all his inspections from inside a car. He visits a bunker where French soldiers are holding their defensive line against the Communists. The French commanders paper over their own humiliating losses and assure Brown they are doing a fine job, though they could use better radio equipment and supplies. That evening, Brown and his wife have an elaborate French dinner with one of the French officials and drink lots of whiskey. The official starts showing Brown photographs of gross atrocities and tortures committed by the Communists. The photos disturb Brown, but he starts to respect the French more and more, even when the official asks for better equipment and weapons.

The next day, Brown flies just outside of Hanoi to see the fighting. French officers continue to tell him small lies about their fight against the Communists. Brown asks to see a prison stockade, but between a heavy lunch and a long, hard hike through deep mud, he cannot finish the journey. A stream of Vietnamese refugees walk past Brown into Hanoi. Brown points out an old woman and asks Barre to ask her why she is going into the city. The woman tells Barre that the French and the Communists are both terrible: the Communists killed her sons and the French burned down her home and then didn't even try to defend her village. She is going to Hanoi to find food and shelter. However, Barre tells Brown that the woman said that the good French will take care of her in Hanoi, and the Communists oppressed her.

Brown goes back to Hanoi and enjoys another large banquet in his honor. He speaks to French officers, officials, and journalists throughout the next day and during several inspections. Everyone he talks to speaks frankly and says the same things. Brown leaves a week later and returns to the United States. On the plane, he briefly realizes that he only spoke to two Vietnamese locals and three soldiers below the rank of general, two of whom were drunk. Brown pushes the thought out of his mind and falls asleep.

On the Senate floor in America, Brown debates Senator Corona about the massive budget given to the French fighters and American Foreign Service in Vietnam. Corona quotes a letter from Ambassador MacWhite, detailing endless corruption and waste. Senator Brown rises and says that everything MacWhite said was a lie. He knows this, because he saw the work in Vietnam himself

*Brown's new “amiab[ility]” presumably stems from the fact that he has seen the wastefulness and lack of discipline he was looking for. However, the photos of Communist atrocities disturb Brown and grow his respect for the French, suggesting that compared to such atrocities, some budgetary wastefulness suddenly seems less significant.*



*Once again, Barre's twisting of the Vietnamese woman's testimony demonstrates that Foreign Service workers intentionally deceive their superiors in order to hide their own failures. The Vietnamese woman's actual testimony suggests that, despite the Westerners claiming Communism is the greatest threat to Southeast Asian prosperity, the French inflict plenty of suffering on their own. This delegitimizes any claim that the French—and the Americans, as their allies—might make to being morally superior to the Communists.*



*A combination of health issues, overconsumption, and oversight effectively eliminates all of the conviction Brown had to find the truth out for himself and decide whether the Americans in Vietnam deserve their massive budget. The fact that he only spoke to two common people implies that he could not possibly have an accurate understanding of what average Vietnamese people feel about the French or Americans' presence.*



*Although Brown's failures seem insubstantial compared to characters like Louis Sears or George Swift, his leverage as a Senator amplifies his failure to see the truth in Vietnam. Not only does he not have an accurate understanding himself, but his power as a Senator allows him to nullify MacWhite's much more accurate testimony.*



## CHAPTER 21: THE SUM OF TINY THINGS

Ambassador MacWhite expects the reprimanding letter from the Secretary of State long before it arrives. When Brown attacked his testimony in the Senate, numerous journalists contacted MacWhite in Haidho for comment. MacWhite reads the Secretary of State's letter, which states that the government is very displeased with his criticisms of the Foreign Service, which they find immodest, "even if true." The Secretary does not want MacWhite to resign, but wants "assurance that [his] future behavior will conform" to expectations.

MacWhite decides to try one last time to make positive changes, and if he cannot, he will resign. He replies to the Secretary of State's letter with an outline of his belief that the Russian Communists are winning in Southeast Asia, and around the world, because their workers are diligent, modest, and humble. In MacWhite's mind, Russia will conquer the world without ever firing a shot as long as Americans continue to behave reprehensibly abroad. He believes the United States will only maintain its influence if Americans learn to act morally and professionally in every aspect of their lives. MacWhite estimates states he has only seen a small handful of Americans actually do so.

MacWhite recommends several new requirements for Foreign Service workers to adhere to that will help America rebuild its international reputation: they cannot live more luxuriously abroad than they would at home, they must be fluent in the local language, they must study Communist literature, and so on. MacWhite thinks that life abroad should be challenging, not luxurious, so as only to attract "superior people" looking for a challenge. If the government cannot find such people and send them abroad, he believes Russia will win control of Asia.

As MacWhite waits for the Secretary's response, he visits Tex Wolchek's training camp, where he trains Sarkhanese guerilla fighters. He sees Chang 'Dong's new industrial businesses, Father Finian's school for young Sarkhanese students, and the short-legged cattle that introduced beef and milk into the country. The Secretary of State sends a cable announcing that MacWhite will be removed from his position and replaced by Joe Bing.

*The Secretary of State places greater importance on the fact that MacWhite acted immodestly than on argument that the American Foreign Service is a catastrophic failure. This suggests that the Secretary of State is more concerned with bureaucracy and politics than with strengthening America's foreign policy and international reputation.*



*Where the Secretary of State minimizes diplomatic failings, implying that they are less important than ensuring that MacWhite "conform[s]" to expectations, MacWhite's argument that the Russians will win through superior diplomacy raises the stakes of every American diplomatic failure. If MacWhite is correct, bumbling officials and cultural gaffes are not trivial failures but significant threats to national security and the non-Communist, democratic way of life.*



*MacWhite's recommendations are designed to make any position with the Foreign Service challenging, something that people work hard and train for rather than accept as a luxury position. In this sense, MacWhite's vision for the Foreign Service would much more closely resemble the Russian Foreign Service as Louis Krupitzyn experiences, which requires years of hard training and dedication.*



*MacWhite's removal from his post suggests that in its current form, the American Foreign Service does not want effective, dedicated workers, but only people who will abide by the status quo. That MacWhite is replaced with Joe Bing, the quintessential boorish American, suggests that the authors do not expect anything to seriously change, although a few grassroots developers may quietly and privately have a positive impact.*





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