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The Quiet American

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THE QUIET AMERICAN was the hero of Graham Greene's novel about the first Vietnam War, the one fought by the French.

He was a young and naïve American, a professor's son, who had enjoyed a good education at Harvard, an idealist with all the best intentions. When he was sent to Vietnam, he wanted to help the natives to overcome the two evils as he saw them: French colonialism and Communism. Knowing absolutely nothing about the country in which he was acting, he caused a disaster. The book ends with a massacre, the outcome of his misguided efforts. He illustrated the old saying: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."



Since this book was written, 54 years have passed, but it seems that the Quiet American has not changed a bit. He is still an idealist (at least, in his own view of himself), still wants to bring redemption to foreign and far-away peoples about whom he knows nothing, still causes terrible disasters: in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now, it seems, in Yemen.

THE IRAQI example is the simplest one.

The American soldiers were sent there to overthrow the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein. There were, of course, also some less altruistic objectives, such as taking control of the Iraqi oil resources and stationing an American garrison in the heart of the Middle Eastern oil region. But for the American public, the adventure was presented as an idealistic enterprise to topple a bloody dictator, who was menacing the world with nuclear bombs.

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That was six years ago, and the war is still going on. Barack Obama, who opposed the war right from the start, promised to lead the Americans out of there. In the meantime, in spite of all the talking, no end is in sight.

Why? Because the real decision-makers in Washington had no idea of the country which they wanted to liberate and help to live happily ever after.

Iraq was from the beginning an artificial state. The British masters glued together several Ottoman provinces to suit their own colonial interests. They crowned a Sunni Arab as king over the Kurds, who are not Arab, and the Shiites, who are not Sunni. Only a succession of dictators, each of them more brutal than his predecessor, prevented the state from falling apart.

The Washington planners were not interested in the history, demography or geography of the country which they entered with brutal force. The way it looked to them, it was quite simple: One had to topple the tyrant, establish democratic institutions on the American model, conduct free elections, and everything else would fall into place by itself.

Contrary to their expectations, they were not received with flowers. Neither did they discover Saddam's terrible atom bomb. Like the proverbial elephant in the porcelain shop, they shattered everything, destroyed the country and got bogged in a swamp.

After years of bloody military operations that led nowhere, they found a temporary remedy. To hell with idealism, to hell with the lofty aims, to hell with all military doctrines – they're now simply buying off the tribal chiefs, who constitute the reality of Iraq.

The Quiet American has no idea how to get out. He knows that if he does, the country may well disintegrate in mutual bloodletting.

TWO YEARS before entering the Iraqi swamp, the Americans invaded the Afghan quagmire.

Why? Because an organization called al-Qaeda ("the basis") had claimed responsibility for the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. Al-Qaeda's chiefs were in Afghanistan, their training camps were there. To the Americans, everything was clear – there was no need for second thoughts (neither, for that matter, for first thoughts.)

If they had had any knowledge of the country they were about to invade, they might have, perhaps, hesitated. Afghanistan has always been a graveyard for invaders. Mighty empires had escaped from there with their tails between their legs. Unlike flat Iraq, Afghanistan is a country of mountains, a paradise for guerrillas. It is the home of several different peoples and uncounted tribes, each one fiercely jealous of its independence.

The Washington planners were not really interested. For them, it seems, all countries are the same, and so are all societies. In Afghanistan, too, American-style democracy must be established, free and fair elections must be held, and hoppla – everything else will sort itself out.

The elephant entered the shop without knocking and achieved a resounding victory. The Air Force pounded, the army conquered without problems, al-Qaeda disappeared like a ghost, the Taliban ("religious pupils") ran away. Women could again appear in the streets without covering their hair, girls could attend schools, the opium fields flourished again, and so did Washington's protégés in Kabul.

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However - the war goes on, year after year, the number of American dead is rising inexorably. What for? Nobody knows. It seems as if the war has acquired a life of its own, without aim, without reason.

An American could well ask himself: What the hell are we doing there?

THE IMMEDIATE aim, the expulsion of al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, has ostensibly been achieved. Al-Qaeda is not there – if it ever really was there.

I wrote once that al-Qaeda is an America invention and that Osama Bin-Laden has been sent by Hollywood's Central Casting to play the role. He is simply too good to be true.

That was, of course, a bit of an exaggeration. But not altogether. The US is always in need of a world-wide enemy. In the past it was International Communism, whose agents were lurking behind every tree and under every floor tile. But, alas, the Soviet Union and its minions had collapsed, there was an urgent need for an enemy to fill the void. This was found in the shape of the world-wide jihad of al-Qaeda. The crushing of "World Terrorism" became the overriding American aim.

That aim is nonsense. Terrorism is nothing but an instrument of war. It is used by organizations that are vastly different from each other, which are fighting in vastly different countries for vastly different objectives. A war on "International Terror" is like a war on "International Artillery" or "International Navy".

A world-embracing movement led by Osama Bin-Laden just does not exist. Thanks to the Americans, al-Qaeda has become a prestige brand in the guerrilla market, much like McDonald's and Armani in the world of fast food and fashion. Every militant Islamist organization can appropriate the name for itself, even without a franchise from Bin-Laden.

American client regimes, who used to brand all their local enemies as "communist" in order to procure the help of their patrons, now brand them as "al-Qaeda terrorists".

Nobody knows where Bin-Laden is – if he is at all – and there is no proof of his being in Afghanistan. Some believe that he is in neighboring Pakistan. And even if he were hiding in Afghanistan – what justification is there for conducting a war and killing thousands of people in order to hunt down one person?

Some say: OK, so there is no Bin-Laden. But the Taliban have to be prevented from coming back.

Why, for god's sake? What business is it of the US who rules Afghanistan? One can loathe religious fanatics in general and the Taliban in particular – but is this a reason for an endless war?

If the Afghans themselves prefer the Taliban to the opium dealers who are in power in Kabul, it is their business. It seems that they do, judging by the fact that the Taliban are again in control of most of the country. That is no good reason for a Vietnam-style war.

But how do you get out? Obama does not know. During the election campaign he promised, with a candidate's foolhardiness, to enlarge the war there, as a compensation for leaving Iraq. Now he is stuck in both places – and in the near future, it seems, he will be stuck in a third war, too.

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DURING THE last few days, the name of Yemen has been cropping up more and more often. Yemen – a second Afghanistan, a third Vietnam.

The elephant is raring to enter another shop. And this time, too, it doesn't care about the porcelain.

I know very little about Yemen, but enough to understand that only a madman would want to be sucked in there. It is another artificial state, composed of two different parts – the country of Sanaa in the North and the (former British) South. Most of the country is mountainous terrain, ruled by bellicose tribes guarding their independence. Like Afghanistan, it is an ideal region for guerrilla warfare.

There, too, is an organization that has adopted the grandiose name of “Al-Qaeda of the Arab Peninsula” (after the Yemenite militants united with their Saudi brothers). But its chiefs are interested in world revolution much less than in the intrigues and battles of the tribes among themselves and against the “central” government, a reality with a history of thousands of years. Only a complete fool would lay his head on this bed.

The name Yemen means “country on the right”. (If one looks towards Mecca from the West, Yemen is on the right side and Syria on the left.) The right side also connotes happiness, and the name of Yemen is connected to al-Yamana, an Arabic word for being happy. The Romans called it Arabia Felix (“Happy Arabia”) because it was rich through trading in spices.

(By the way, Obama may be interested to hear that another leader of a superpower, Caesar Augustus, once tried to invade Yemen and was trounced.)

If the Quiet American, in his usual mixture of idealism and ignorance, decides to bring democracy and all the other goodies there, that will be the end of this happiness. The Americans will sink into another quagmire, tens of thousands of people will be killed, and it will all end in disaster.

IT MAY well be that the problem is rooted – inter alia – in the architecture of Washington DC.

This city is full of huge buildings populated with the ministries and other offices of the only superpower in the world. The people working there feel the tremendous might of their empire. They look upon the tribal chiefs of Afghanistan and Yemen as a rhinoceros looks down at the ants that rush around between its feet. The Rhino walks over them without noticing. But the ants survive.

Altogether, the Quiet American resembles Mephistopheles in Goethe's Faust, who defines himself as the force that “always wants the bad and always creates the good”. Only the other way round.

Post-scriptum :

Illustration de Barthélémy Schwartz.