

The Ugly American, Fail-Safe, and the Cold War

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The Cold War was a period that affected multiple generations of people worldwide. It served as a filter that influenced our experiences and perceptions of the world around us for decades. Popular culture has played a huge role in our beliefs about the consequences of the Cold War and our anticipation of what the future could bring. In this essay I will try to demonstrate how two novels co-written by Eugene Burdick, and his political involvements during that period, can serve as a touchstone that exemplifies many of our anxieties, hopes, and fears during this tumultuous time in modern history.

The Ugly American

I think that it's safe to say that each one of us has heard the term, or maybe even said it ourselves, about the behavior of an "Ugly American". This isn't about looks or appearances but typically it's when one of our countrymen or women does something that we feel is rude, or at least very inappropriate, and that we perceive reflects badly on us as a national group. Usually it occurs when we are in another country and someone is talking too loud in a restaurant, or arguing with a clerk in a store, or perhaps complaining that something isn't as quite as good (or is much worse) than it is in America.

That phrase—if it didn't originate in —was certainly brought into popular culture in a book published in 1958 by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, entitled *The Ugly American*. The novel takes place in a fictional Southeast Asian country, Sarkhan. The title has multiple meanings throughout the book. On the surface, it refers to the physical appearance and lack of refinement of Homer Smith, an American agricultural advisor in Sarkhan, who actually is a hero of the story. In fact, in the book, Homer Smith is the extreme opposite of any derogatory use of

the term. His behavior toward the locals is what the authors believe Americans should aspire to when they are in another country.

However, the other meaning of the book title applies to the foreign-service officers that are working in Sarkhan, in terms of both their insularity and ignorance about the culture of the native people, and their self-serving activities to advance their own careers. In contrast to what these authors see as American bungling of interactions in their host country, *The Ugly American* describes the skill and thoroughness of the Russian representatives in Sarkhan. They are fluent in the language, don't live ostentatiously, and through exchange programs they educate thousands of Southeast Asians, making them both convincing and expert propagandists for the Russians.

The Ugly American sold 5 million copies. Then-Senator John F. Kennedy sent a copy to every US senator and took out a full-page ad about it in the New York Times because he felt that the message of this book was so important. Then-President Dwight Eisenhower initially praised the book. However, he later changed his mind, calling it a "sickening insult to the US Foreign Service." At the same time, Senator William Fulbright denounced the book in the U.S. Senate.

The *Ugly American* went through several fundamentally different iterations on its journey to publication. It began as a non-fiction project, was rewritten as a series of short stories, and finally emerged as a novel. Critics generally welcomed the book. For example, Orville Prescott in the New York Times wrote: "*The Ugly American* is neither subtle as art nor altogether convincing as fiction...But as fictional reporting it is excellent—blunt, forceful, completely persuasive." Robert Trumbell in the New York Times commented that: "To make effective use of the truth, unbelievable truth, without ruining careers and possibly inviting monumental libel actions, Burdick and Lederer wrote this devastating indictment of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia as fiction." However, in both the *Forward* and in a *Factual Epilogue* to the book, the authors point out that everything described in the novel really happened. Burdick and Lederer followed this book with the novel *Sarkhan* in 1965, which was described by one critic as an even more engrossing story than *The Ugly American*.

The Cold War

The Ugly American was certainly a product of the Cold War, when the sphere of influence of the two dominant powers was used to court, or even to coerce, countries and regimes to join one or the other international camps. Most of us would consider that the period referred to as the Cold War roughly extends from the end of World War II until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. In

conversations with others, however, the suggestion has been made that the tensions of the cold war may have started at the end of World War I or even in the middle of the 19th century when political differences among the Russian Empire, Western Europe, and the United States were beginning to grow.

The origin of the term “Cold War” is usually credited to George Orwell, who in a 1945 essay contemplated a world living in the shadow of a nuclear war threat. Orwell described it as a “kind of world view, the kind of beliefs and the social structure that would prevail in a state which was once unconquerable and in a permanent state of ‘COLD WAR’ with its neighbors.” Bernard Baruch, an American financier, is usually considered to be the first to specifically use the term in describing the geopolitical tensions among the US, its Western European allies, and Russia, and Walter Lippman certainly popularized the term with his 1947 book entitled *The Cold War*.

The Cold War was reflected in music, movies, plays, books, television, and even in advertising. We may remember the educational film *Duck and Cover* produced in 1951, the popular 1959 movie *On the Beach*, the 1964 movie *Dr Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (and we’ll return to that movie later), the 1983 movie *War Games*, and many others

We also may remember the example of dark humor in President Ronald Reagan’s prelude to a 1984 speech, “My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you today that I’ve signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.” Reagan’s unfortunate joke that was accidentally broadcast was a parody of his opening line in a speech to be given later that day, which was about new legislation that gave student religious-groups the right to meet in public high schools—the speech actually contained nothing about Russia.

Besides writing *The Ugly American*, Eugene Burdick also played a huge role in the culture of the Cold War with his best-selling 1962 novel *Fail-Safe*, co-written with Harvey Wheeler, and the subsequent movie of the same name released in 1964. The term “fail-safe” typically refers to a device that, in the event of failure, responds in a way that will cause no or minimal harm to other devices or danger to personnel.

Fail-safe was serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* in October 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This of course was a period of heightened tensions during the Cold War when conflicts

between Russia and the United States resulted in widespread fears that thermonuclear war was imminent.

Fail-Safe is a great thriller and to me it is as interesting a read now as when I first read it 50 years ago. It tells the story of the failure of systems designed to prevent the accidental beginning of a thermonuclear war. The material covered in *Fail-Safe* was so realistic that Burdick and Wheeler were initially accused by the US military of using classified material in writing *Fail-Safe*, a charge they were later exonerated from when they documented the declassified information that they used.

As with the *Ugly American*, the critics were generally favorable about *Fail-Safe*. Orville Prescott in the New York Times in 1962 wrote that Burdick and Wheeler: “have written a slam-bang that succeeds in terrifying despite its deficiencies as fiction”. But David Dempsey in the New York Times noted that the book “comes across best as journalism of a high and challenging order” rather than as a novel. In contrast, others described the book as “sensational hysteria-mongering science fiction” but Norman Cousins described it as “a glimpse of reality in our time, a precious commodity”.

The book *Fail-Safe* was both a critical and financial success. The movie, however, while gathering excellent reviews, performed poorly at the box office. This resulted from what to me is a fascinating example of Hollywood politics.

Columbia Pictures produced two films on the hazards of nuclear war, in 1964—*Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*. Stanley Kubrick, the director of *Dr. Strangelove*, had a vague idea that he would make a thriller about a nuclear accident. A 1958 novel called *Red Alert* by Peter George was recommended to Kubrick as the basis for a possible plot. The screenplay was prepared by both of them with input from Thomas Schilling, who was a future Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Herman Kahn, a major influence on the idea of proactive nuclear attacks, and the leader behind the development of the modern “think tank”, and satirist Terry Southern.

Kubrick came up with the idea of having a nightmarish comedy about the possibility of mutually assured destruction from a thermonuclear war. However, during the filming of *Dr. Strangelove* (the title character was not in Peter George’s novel and has been assumed to be based on Herman Kahn himself), Kubrick learned that *Fail-Safe* was also in production. Kubrick was afraid that

Dr. Strangelove's box office draw would be lessened by competing with or being released following a *Fail-Safe* movie-adaptation. *Fail-Safe* was likely to be a hit movie, being directed by Sidney Lumet and having Henry Fonda and Walter Matthau in starring roles.

To delay the film, Kubrick and Peter George sued Burdick and Wheeler with the charge that these authors had plagiarized their novel *Fail-Safe* from *Red Alert*, the book that Kubrick had bought for the *Dr. Strangelove* movie. Now, what I haven't mentioned yet, is that both Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler were highly regarded university professors. Burdick was in the Department of Political Sciences at Berkeley, and Wheeler was a political scientist at Washington and Lee University in Virginia.

There is no worse accusation that can be made against an academic, especially ones with reputations like Burdick and Wheeler, than an accusation of plagiarism. However, it is now clear that the real reason that Kubrick had made this claim was to delay production of *Fail-Safe* so that *Dr. Strangelove* would open first. And it did; it opened 8 months earlier than *Fail-Safe*. *Fail-Safe* was universally critically acclaimed. But *Dr. Strangelove* won the box office sweepstakes by a landslide. Perhaps having a satirical comedy appear after a serious drama is released wouldn't hurt either's box office receipts. However, having a satirical comedy appear before a drama may leave an audience uninterested in seeing it.

It should also be noted that the US government was far from helpful in the production of *Fail-Safe*, perhaps still reflecting the idea that somehow Burdick and Wheeler used classified information in writing their novel. For example, they stopped film-rental firms from giving them stock footage of nuclear explosions. Not unexpectedly, during the Cold War both the military and the government tended to be more helpful in projects that cast them in a good light, and obstructionists to those that they perceived as unflattering.

An interesting side aspect to these two movies is that if you look at websites, searching with "term papers for sale", an example of the type of papers they sell to errant students is often "A comparison between the films *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*"!

Eugene Burdick as a Person

Although identified with California through his first book about California politics, *The Ninth Wave*, Burdick was actually born in Iowa in 1918 and moved to Southern California as a young

boy. He went to Stanford, studied writing with Wallace Stegner, and during World War II he was a gunnery officer decorated for bravery in the Battle of Guadalcanal. After World War II, Burdick was a Rhodes Scholar and did a Ph.D. at Oxford, taught at the Naval War College in Rhode Island for two years, and then joined the faculty of Political Science at Berkeley in 1952.

I've been fascinated by Eugene Burdick for a long time and for a variety of reasons. An obvious one is that he also taught at Berkeley. But another is that he spent a lot of time in Mo'orea in the Society Islands in French Polynesia, where I've taught annually for over 20 years and conducted research for almost 30 years. There I have met people who knew him well and described him to me in detail. Actually, my favorite book of his is *The Blue of Capricorn*, which like James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* and especially *Return to Paradise*, is a mixture of fiction and non-fiction accounts of island life. Critics have noted that Burdick's *The Blue of Capricorn* "is perhaps his best written work" and showed his fascination for the emptiness, silence, vastness, and passion of the South Pacific. He once said that he was enamored with the Pacific since he first saw a girl doing a hula at a carnival as a child.

But I think that one of my big interests in Burdick is that while he was a well-known and very respected political scientist, he used that academic knowledge to create powerful novels to popularize his ideas. There are many other examples of professors who have had successful careers as popular writers as well. George R. Stewart, a professor of English at Berkeley, wrote *Earth Abides*, *Storm* (which introduced the concept of naming big weather events like hurricanes), and *Fire*. Carolyn Heilbrun, a professor of English at Columbia University, wrote one of my favorite series of popular mysteries about, not unexpectedly, a professor of English who solves murders, under the pen name of Amanda Cross. Barbara Mertz, an Egyptologist, wrote the popular Amelia Peabody mysteries under the pen name of Elizabeth Peters, about an Egyptologist working in early 20th century Egypt. Her character was based on the famous English archeologist Flinders Petrie.

But perhaps the two most successful academics turned novelists strayed a bit from this stereotype of writing popular novels about characters in their discipline. Erich Segal, a professor of Greek and Latin literature at Harvard, also taught at other Ivies. He wrote his first book on *The Comedy of Plautus* that became the inspiration for the 1962 play and 1966 movie *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. But he was probably best known for his 1970 book and movie *Love Story*, a novel about star-crossed college students that became the best-selling fiction work, and the top-grossing movie, of that year. Likely, we all remember hearing a version of the line "Love means never having to say you're sorry".

But, to me, the quintessential academic turned writer was Robert James Waller. Probably, not many remember him but his book was on the New York Times bestseller list for 164 weeks, and number 1 for a good part of that. He was a professor of management and taught courses in communication at the University of Northern Iowa. He wrote his bestselling book according to the principles of the communication course he taught there. The book was *The Bridges of Madison County*. The San Francisco Chronicle described *The Bridges of Madison County* as “lyrical, sensuous, sensitive, a tale of everlasting love.” Perhaps those of us who were dragged to sit through the movie by our spouses remember it as other critics described it—“sentimental slush”....

But Eugene Burdick’s novels were different. The first novel he wrote did fit his training as a political scientist and parts were certainly at least semiautobiographical, reflecting his undergraduate days at Stanford and his World War II experience. This was *The Ninth Wave*, a 1956 best seller and still a classic examination of California politics. He revisited this topic in a 1959 scholarly anthology entitled *American Voting Behavior*. But it was his later books that brought him real fame.

In the mid-1950s Burdick visited Vietnam with a fascinating character he met at a writing workshop named William Lederer. Lederer had been a career naval officer. He wrote two popular comedies about navy life, the 1950 *All the Ships at Sea* and a 1957 book that created the character of the movie and television show *Ensign O’Toole*. But he had greater influences. In 1940 Lederer had a chance meeting with a Jesuit priest and his Vietnamese assistant while waiting out a Japanese bombing raid in China. The priest asked Lederer to find a copy of the *US Declaration of Independence*. This document eventually reached Tong Van So, who we know later as Ho Chi Minh. We may not remember, given the vilification that Ho Chi Minh received during the American-Vietnam War, but he was a World War II hero to us for saving downed American pilots and was promised by many high-ranking US government officials that he would receive US support for Vietnam independence from the French colonials. At the 1945 Proclamation of the Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh began by quoting from the *US Declaration of Independence*. Ho Chi Minh of course was a central figure in the Cold War, and more of a nationalist than an international communist. He turned from a hero to an enemy from the time that Charles de Gaulle convinced President Harry Truman to oppose Vietnamese independence and to return Vietnam to France as a colony.

Turning novels into movies

Eugene Burdick wrote an article in *Family Weekly Magazine* entitled “Why Can’t the Movie Be More Like the Book?” When the movie rights for *The Ugly American* were being sold, Burdick described the negotiations that he and Lederer held with a “classic idea of a Hollywood movie studio representative. He wore an Italian suit, white-on-white shirt, and had a Dunhill cigar in his mouth. Holding a copy of the book in his hand, the agent said ‘I haven’t read it, someone else does that. But they like it – a little. Now remember lover boys, if we buy it, we have one rule: forget art, we are in the entertainment business.’” Burdick wrote that, although they didn’t think their book was art, he and Lederer had written it with some anger and wanted that feeling evident in the movie.

When they finally sold the book, the producer/director was honest with them “as drama, the book is a mess, too many characters, too many lectures, too many episodes. So do not expect the movie to be like the book.” Burdick wrote that the conversation taught him a great lesson. “In a novel you can write ‘Jamie felt a hot white flash of passion’ but in a movie you have to show it in three dimensions. The novelist can say that something is so and can order the reader to believe it. On the screen, you have to persuade your customer.”

When the movie was finished several fantasies had been added. *The Ugly American* movie still took place in Sarkhan, which of course is a fictional country. They also invented a specific Sarkhan dialect, designed a flag for the country, and even drew a map of Southeast Asia on which they designate a space for the new nation!

Perhaps ironically, Burdick later commented that the movie was better than the book. It was “more integrated, more skillful and more dramatic”. But after the screening, his co-author William Lederer had the best comment to him: “*The Ugly American* was a good flick; where did they get the idea for it from?”

Perhaps one of the most fortuitous aspects of making *The Ugly American* into a movie was the beginning of the friendship between Burdick and Marlon Brando, and the fascination that both developed for Tahiti. You may remember that Brando fell in love with the island and his beautiful Tahitian co-star Tarita Teriipi during the making of the 1962 movie of Nordhoff and Hall’s *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and eventually he bought an island there—Tetioroa.

In preparing for the film *The Ugly American*, Brando invited Burdick to come to Tahiti, presumably to discuss the making of the movie. But as Burdick said, “in two weeks we discussed the book for only five minutes”. Burdick noted that “Brando struck me as a man picking up fragments with the hope of putting them together. Brando slides into one’s mind, pulls out a bit of knowledge, clutches it and runs. He is a man picking up fragments with the hope of putting them into something recognizable. He does it with a gentle skill that must be inherited: no man can live long enough to learn this technique.” I was fortunate enough to have dealt with Marlon Brando during my stays in Tahiti and, frankly, I thought he was a genius.

Brando and Burdick continued their friendship after the making of the movie. Brando starred in a televised Chrysler Theater play Burdick wrote called “*The Candidate*” in 1963, which likely was influenced by Burdick’s novels of California and US politics, *The Ninth Wave* and *The 480*, respectively. Also, he and Brando appeared together on the David Susskind Show, a program that many of us remember well.

Burdick and controversies over the Vietnam War

The Berkeley campus across the Bay was an active place in the 1960s. In May 1965, the Berkeley weekend-long “Teach-in” about American involvement in Southeast Asia was held. In many ways, this event served as the template for countless Vietnam protests to come, not just at Berkeley but all over the US and in many other parts of the world as well. This event has been described in detail by Smith in a 2010 article, and the information in the material below is taking from that article.

The “Teach-in” lasted 33 hours and drew an audience of 10,000 that included politicians, writers, comedians, folk singers, and assorted other Berkeley types. Norman Mailer, Dr. Benjamin Spock, I. F. Stone, and others spoke vehemently against American involvement in Southeast Asia. People in attendance noted that, not surprisingly, “Make Love Not War” t-shirts were in abundance.

There were two main villains at the teach-in. The first was President Lyndon Johnson, whose history has shown was quite effective with domestic policies but whose presidency was eventually brought down by the continuing Vietnam conflict. The second-most derided person

was also not at the event; it was Eugene Burdick. He had been scheduled to speak in defense of US policy in Southeast Asia but withdrew from the “Teach-in” at the last minute.

Burdick’s reasons for not participating were probably justified. He said in an interview on KPFA radio that the teach-in was not going to be educational but was an “ideological circus”, run by people who know nothing about Vietnam. “It is a gathering of people who are already committed to one view or another. This is not a dialogue, it is short of a shrill harangue.”

Others have commented that Burdick’s description was accurate about the teach-in: it was a revival meeting not a seminar. Burdick also said that he objected to discussing serious issues with mob psychology. But, reasons aside, Burdick was vilified at the teach-in as a “tool of the establishment”. One speaker after another denounced him as an imperialist, a stooge, and a warmongering shill.

Burdick’s opinions about Vietnam and a variety of other topics were widely sought and reported. For example, his endorsement of the formation of the Peace Corps by President John F. Kennedy ran as a single article in the New York Times. Likewise his appointment to a national commission supported by the Fund for a New America was mentioned in that newspaper.

So, how would we describe the politics of this Berkeley foreign-policy professor, undoubtedly well informed about and well-traveled in Southeast Asia, a best-selling author? I think from his book *Fail-Safe* he certainly comes across as an advocate of nuclear disarmament. In fact, he wrote that disarmament was the only way to escape from annihilation that a Third World War would bring. In an online comment to the Smith 2010 article, Burdick’s son wrote that “He was definitely liberal minded and always taught us to respect others, even if he grilled others unmercifully for views that he didn’t share!” Another online commentary described a chance encounter with Burdick, with his closing comments being “Always remember to keep asking ‘why’—keep following the question ‘why’ until you get real answers.”

Eugene Burdick died two months after the 1965 teach-in, on a tennis court in San Diego at age 46. He had known all of his adult life that he had a serious heart condition and suffered his first heart attack in his late 30s. He described to a friend of his that I interviewed in Mo’orea that he knew he shouldn’t be playing tennis, but that he loved the game. His family described him

working every night on his novels and according to them he overextended himself because “he knew that he had so much to do in such a short time.”

In many ways Burdick’s life was the epitome of what a professorial career could achieve. Some of his former students have told me that he was both a popular lecturer and a respected political scientist, and a wonderful advisor and mentor to graduate students. But these former students also told me how many of his political science colleagues, especially the theorists in his department, resented his fame, his celebrity friends, and his flashy sports car. They also noted that Burdick may have encouraged these responses by goading these colleagues.

Two of his more notorious irritations to these colleagues are especially noteworthy. First, he appeared in a photo layout in *Life* magazine dancing on a table top at a party in a popular resort—the Bali Hai Club in Mo’orea. Actually, this story in *Life* magazine resulted in a surge of tourist interest in visiting Tahiti, and was a boon to the club’s occupancy rates!

But to some of his colleagues the more irritating action was his appearance in scuba gear in a Ballantine Ale magazine (and later television) advertisement. The quote with the ad was “He’s Eugene Burdick...Pacific explorer...literary man...ale man. After a tingling dive under the Pacific he enjoys nothing more than the unique taste of an ale...totally different, completely rewarding. For ale man Burdick, it’s always a Ballantine Ale.”

In his official Berkeley obituary, three political science department colleagues wrote what I thought was an unfair review of his life and career. They wrote that: Burdick “had a Hemingway physique and posture. His agents, and the agents of his agents, widely projected this image. He was linked with stage and screen celebrities, politicians and journalists, until the scholar in him was virtually submerged....” Not the typical obituary....and not really like the impression of the people I interviewed who knew him.

One writer noted that it’s easy to fault Burdick for the flamboyance in his writing style, in *Fail-Safe* for example, or to damn him with faint praise for being “popular”. But clearly the insight in his novels and the creative imagination in *Fail-Safe* aroused American consciousness to the dangers of thermonuclear war. Moreover, *The Ugly American* enlarged American’s perceptions of how they can be viewed in other parts of the world.

I want to close this essay with a comment by Burdick after he heard that one of his books was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection: "Isn't that wonderful! I now have nearly everything a man can ask for: membership in the University of California, financial success, a beautiful wife, two daughters and a son! Now all I want is to see Adlai Stevenson as President of the United States".

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