

THE QUIET AMERICANS

FOUR CIA SPIES
AT THE DAWN OF THE
COLD WAR — A TRAGEDY
IN THREE ACTS



SCOTT ANDERSON

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of *LAWRENCE IN ARABIA*

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THE
QUIET
AMERICANS

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Cold War—a Tragedy in Three Acts*

Scott Anderson

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To the memory of my sister,

TINA FIRMIGNAC, 1956–2019

And of my brother-in-arms,

CDR. JOHN KRSTAVATS, 1968–2017

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Author's Note

The Soviet Union's principal state security agency underwent nearly a dozen name changes during its seventy-four-year history, but was best known by two successive acronyms, the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and the KGB (Committee for State Security). In the interests of clarity, I have followed the example of most Cold War historians and adopted "KGB" as the primary acronym for most of the period covered in this book.

Somewhat more complicated is the usage of the acronyms OPC (Office of Policy Coordination) and CIA. For the first two years of its existence, from 1948 to 1950, OPC was regarded as quite separate from the CIA, even though it was "housed" within the Agency. This distinction blurred as the two organizations began to be integrated in late 1950, and disappeared altogether with their full merger in 1952. The end result, however, is that the same speakers or writers who might describe the OPC and CIA as two wholly separate (and often adversarial) bodies during the earlier period, will then use the acronyms interchangeably when referring to events in the later integrated period. I have attempted to delineate this changing relationship where necessary within the text, but some confusion might persist—as, indeed, it did for employees of both offices at the time.

Preface

When I was a very young boy, my favorite day of the year was October 10. It was the mid-1960s and my family and I were living in Taiwan, where my father was attached to the American embassy. October 10 was the anniversary of an uprising in 1911 that led to the creation of the Republic of China, and it was celebrated in Taiwan by a massive military parade through the streets of the capital, Taipei. By great good luck, my father's office overlooked one of the main parade routes, as well as the vast square in front of the Presidential Palace that was the marchers' final destination. From his office window, I would watch transfixed as the square below gradually filled with soldiers wearing a riotous array of different-colored uniforms and standing at rigid attention. The highlight was when Chiang Kai-shek emerged onto a balcony of the palace to give a speech. It always ended with the same exhortation: "Back to the Mainland!" At this, artillery would thunder, a hundred thousand soldiers cheered as one, and great billows of propaganda balloons and homing pigeons carrying anti-communist messages rose into the sky, theoretically on their way to the enemy, Red China, just eighty miles away across the Formosa Strait. For a bloody-minded young boy, all of this was terrific stuff, better than Christmas. It took me a long time to realize that my father didn't actually enjoy these annual outings.

Like everyone else of my generation, my view of the world was fundamentally shaped by the Cold War. This shaping may have been more acute in my case due to the places where I grew up: South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia. Korea and Taiwan were both regarded as frontline states in the Cold War, while by the time my family moved

there, Indonesia was just emerging from a Cold War–inspired mass bloodletting that left at least a half-million dead.

One of the things I remember most from my childhood is that the threat of war, of a sudden attack by the communists, was always in the air. In South Korea, the government ruled under martial law, its army forever vigilant against the North Korean communists, massed just thirty-five miles up the road from the capital of Seoul. In Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek went one better than martial law and declared a permanent state of siege. The entranceway to my elementary school was dominated by a large anti-aircraft gun on a swivel platform, two Republic of China soldiers constantly scanning the skies with binoculars for first sign of an incoming Red Chinese squadron. The result in both countries was soldiers everywhere: in the marketplaces, in the parks, passing by in long convoys of transport trucks during school field trips or family drives. Whenever I conjure an image from my childhood, there are usually soldiers somewhere in the frame.

I was alternately thrilled and terrified by all this. Once in Taiwan, when in the grip of the latter state of mind, when I couldn't sleep at night for fear that the communists might come before morning, I sought reassurance from my godfather, a tough-as-nails lieutenant colonel in Air Force Intelligence. When I asked how much advance warning we would have if the Red Chinese did attack, my godfather lit one of the sixty or seventy Camels he would smoke that day and gazed thoughtfully up at its coil of smoke. "About nine minutes," he said finally. "Why do you ask?"

I was too young to appreciate the cynicism of all this, to understand that much of what I was seeing was just so much political theater. The North Koreans weren't going to stream across the DMZ again, and the Red Chinese weren't going to invade Taiwan; by the 1960s, the East Asia front of the Cold War had long since settled into watchful stasis. Instead, what upholding the banner of anti-communism now meant in these places was that their military dictators need brook no opposition, could summarily crush even the slightest sign of domestic dissent. And so they did. In April 1960, my parents watched from a hillside above downtown Seoul as students protesting the dictatorship

were machine-gunned by police. During the time we lived in Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek's prisons were filled to bursting with tens of thousands of political prisoners. In the so-called Indonesian civil war, virtually all the killing had been done by one side, all the dying by the other, and rather than the advertised communist conspirators, the vigilante squads set loose by the military junta often found their victims among Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority, the backbone of the nation's merchant class. In each one of these countries, the dictators' chief benefactor, the United States, could be counted on to steadfastly look the other way.

One reason I didn't grasp much of this at the time was because my parents didn't talk about it. Part of their reticence undoubtedly derived from their not wanting one of their children to blurt out an inconvenient truth at an inconvenient moment, but I'm sure another part stemmed from the fact that my father was part of the apparatus that kept these regimes in place. It must have been a strange and confusing experience for him—a farm boy from Fresno, California; a lifelong “yellow dog Democrat” with a hint of the socialist about him—but this, too, was something we never really discussed.

But perhaps it wasn't strange or confusing for him at all. By the 1960s, my father had been witness to a sweeping Red advance across the globe over the previous two decades. His liberal leanings aside, like virtually all Americans he regarded communism as an enslaving force, a cancer to be resisted. By virtue of his work with the American government—he was an agricultural advisor for the Agency for International Development, or AID—and the “frontline” postings he was given, he had the opportunity to personally engage in that struggle. I'm fairly certain he was not an intelligence officer but, like many American government employees posted abroad in the 1950s and 1960s, he often did double duty. In his soft-power role with AID, he assisted in agrarian reform schemes in a number of countries in Central America and East Asia, and distributed American emergency aid in the wake of natural disasters—noble work that also fit in nicely with the “hearts and minds” efforts to steer the rural poor away from communism. In his more hard-power role, my father also helped

create rural paramilitary and “home guard” formations designed to watch for the unrest of leftist agitators and to monitor the political views of the local population. As often happens with such vigilante networks, most of those fostered by AID in the 1950s and 1960s ultimately proved more effective as vehicles for personal vendettas and score-settling than ideological policing, and certainly the fate of anyone denounced for their purported leftist views in places like South Korea and Taiwan couldn’t have been a pleasant one.

Where it all truly began to turn, both for myself and for my father, was with the Vietnam War. By 1966, and accelerating through 1968, Taiwan became both a back-base and an R&R destination for soldiers serving in Vietnam, the streets of Taipei now filled with even more uniforms. Moving into our small American housing enclave above the city were the families of American officers stationed in Saigon, and the free-ranging game of Cowboys and Indians that we boys in the neighborhood had previously played was renamed Green Berets and Viet Cong. It didn’t actually change the game that much, except that in the past the Indians sometimes won, and in the new version the Viet Cong never did.

This wasn’t the impression my father came away with from his occasional work trips to Vietnam. Instead, the real war there seemed to be growing worse, and more unwinnable, all the time, and he would return from these trips with an uncharacteristic solemnity, a vague sadness that took him several days to shake. When finally we moved to the United States in 1969, my father’s disillusionment was complete. He dragged me and my siblings along to the antiwar demonstrations on the Washington Mall, and vowed that if Vietnam was still going on when my brother and I reached draft age he would take us to Canada. It was a remarkable journey for a man who had been at Pearl Harbor, who had fought in World War II and spent his professional life promoting American influence abroad, but it was Vietnam, the staggering stupidity and directionless brutality with which that war was conducted, that finally caused my father to fully ponder both the waste and the wages of sin that accompanied the American crusade against communism. Rather than stay in Washington or accept

another posting overseas, the day he turned fifty he took an early retirement from the government.

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My passage to the same point took a good deal longer, but it was crystallized by an experience I had in the Central American nation of El Salvador in the spring of 1984.

By then, the Salvadoran civil war between leftist rebels and an American-backed right-wing government was entering its fifth year, and it had already taken the lives of some sixty thousand people. The vast majority of the dead had not perished in battle, but at the hands of death squads allied with—indeed, synonymous with—the government. In getting congressional approval for aid to the regime, the Reagan administration had performed all manner of political contortions to uphold the fiction that the death squads were somehow a separate and uncontrollable entity from the state—and that, anyway, the human rights situation in El Salvador was improving.

By the spring of 1984, the administration was actually correct about this last point. The monthly count of death squad victims had declined dramatically—possibly, as some critics charged, because the murder squads were simply running out of perceived enemies to kill—and the Reagan administration was touting those diminished numbers as proof that their policy was working, that a corner had been turned in El Salvador’s “dirty war.”

As an aspiring journalist, I visited the capital of San Salvador in late May of that year. One afternoon I was walking along the broad street that ran behind the El Camino Real hotel, the city’s journalistic nerve center, when a nondescript van passed me and pulled to the curb perhaps a hundred feet ahead. The vehicle’s sliding door was pulled back, and the body of a woman was thrown out onto the sidewalk. In my mind’s eye, I can still see her: late twenties or early thirties, clad in a weathered floral-pattern red dress, lying with her back on the sidewalk and her bare legs extending into the road, her tied-together hands resting on her chest. I was the only person close by and as the

van pulled away, I approached her with that odd half-hurrying, half-halting gait people seem to assume in such circumstances. I had only walked about halfway to the woman, a matter of maybe ten seconds, when a second van, this one marked as military, pulled up alongside her. Three soldiers scrambled out, and as one raised his machine gun to point at a spot just before my feet—pretty much a universal “don’t approach” gesture—the other two hoisted the dead woman into the vehicle and climbed in after her. The soldier on the sidewalk then dropped his vigil to jump back into the van as it, too, merged into traffic. The entire transaction, from body-drop by “anonymous killers” to body retrieval by authorities probably took less than half a minute, a seamless little sleight-of-hand operation honed by long practice. That night in my hotel room, I watched the White House press spokesman on the evening news once again extol the great human rights progress being made in El Salvador.

For whatever reason, that incident by the El Camino struck me as many others had not, and it summoned to my mind a simple question: How had it come to this? How, in the name of fighting communism—or at least what some claimed was communism—had the American government come to tacitly sanction death squads, to support governments that would so brazenly murder its own people as to toss their bodies out on sidewalks in broad daylight?

I wouldn’t say this question came to me as some kind of revelation. Instead, it was merely the culmination of a long personal journey, one that encompassed my own childhood experiences joined to all I knew about recent American history, about Vietnam and Chile and Guatemala. But something did change in me after El Salvador. From then on, the very phrase “anti-communist” took on a squalid quality when I considered the crimes done in its name, and I tended to consider those who gave themselves that label with much the same derision that I held for other lunatic fringes, the anti-fluoride or flat-earth crowds. This was a comfortable place to be in the mid-1980s, what with the Reagan administration cozying up to most any despot who called himself anti-communist, and I had a lot of company in my disgust.

Yet, even then, I was conscious of an essential contradiction in this outlook, something that didn't fit. Because when you really thought about it, most any right-thinking person *should* be anti-communist. Quite aside from its utopian pretensions in theory, what communism had displayed time and again in practice was a system tailor-made for the most cunning or vicious or depraved to prosper. Amid the blood-drenched history of the twentieth century, just two communist leaders—Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong—had, through a combination of purges and criminally incompetent economic experiments, killed off an estimated sixty million of their own countrymen. If you added in the lesser lights of the communist world, its Pol Pots and Kim Il-sungs and Haile Mengistus, one could easily add another ten or fifteen million to the body count. Given this gruesome track record, shouldn't any right-thinking person be anti-communist in the same way that they should be anti-Nazi or anti-child molester or anti-polio?

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But if anti-communism itself was not the issue, just when did its image become so sullied? While impossible to isolate to any singular event, I believe the answer to that question can be found in a fairly clearly delineated and brief stretch of American history, specifically that twelve-year span from 1944 to 1956 that comprised the first years of the Cold War.

The transformation that occurred in those twelve years of the American Century, both within the United States and in its standing in the world, is nothing short of staggering. In 1944, the United States was seen as a beacon of hope and a source of deliverance throughout the developing world, the emergent superpower that, in the postwar era envisioned by Franklin D. Roosevelt, would nurture democracy across the globe and dismantle the obsolete and despised rule of the European colonial powers. It was to be the end of the age of empire and, if Roosevelt's vision was achieved, possibly the end of war itself, with countries in the future settling their differences around the conference table of a powerful and transnational forum, the United