

July 26, 2009

LETTERS

'The Ugly American'

To the Editor:

Michael Meyer's essay "Still 'Ugly' After All These Years" (July 12) vividly reminded me of reading "The Ugly American" as a 12-year-old in the summer of 1963. My brother had just graduated from [Wesleyan University](#) and left for his orientation, in Washington, to a little-known NGO called International Voluntary Services (I.V.S.), a model for the [Peace Corps](#). He was headed for Vietnam. Many Americans didn't yet know where that was. I read the slim paperback thinking it would tell me what Pete would be doing in Southeast Asia.

I remember in particular a passage about stooped-over villagers whose spines were painfully bent from years of sweeping. The "ugly" American's wife's solution was to produce longer broom handles. I.V.S.-ers introduced better varieties of melons and sweet potatoes, dug wells, poured concrete and, in my brother's case, built irrigation windmills for parched hamlets.

His letters chronicled everyday ups and downs, along with the escalation of a war whose tragic outcome he would not live to see. He deplored the Saigon government's instability and its indifference to the vast rural population. As an eyewitness to the misapplication of American foreign aid, he advocated for a distribution system staffed by Peace Corps volunteers.

If, as Meyer writes, America's values are to be projected by increasing the number of Peace Corps volunteers, I propose that we do more than send them abroad. Let's also listen to what they can tell us.

JILL HUNTING

Sonoma, Calif.

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To the Editor:

Michael Meyer reminds us that the Book Review in 1958 called "The Ugly American," which spent 76 weeks on the best-seller list, a "devastating indictment of American policy." Paperback editions first published by Fawcett Crest/Ballantine in 1960 carried cover blurbs that echoed that assessment: "The famous best seller that unmasked the blundering hypocrisy of some of our top-level diplomats." The cover of the first edition, however, suggests that W. W. Norton had no idea what kind of bombshell it was publishing. Cover blurbs in 1958 promised only "stories of a certain group of Americans in Southeast Asia — their failures and heroism, their humors and passions, their drama in a land of turmoil . . . an entertainment of major topical importance."

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