



The Ugly American

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The Work

The Ugly American is an example of a novel that met with only modest commercial success until an effort was made to ban it. The United States Information Service tried to ban the book's sale overseas—especially in Asia—until adverse publicity forced it to rescind its ban. The book then gained further notoriety when the U.S. Department of State and Senator J. William Fulbright attacked the truthfulness of the authors, hinting they were traitors. Thanks to the ensuing publicity, the book jumped onto the bestseller lists for seventy-eight weeks and sold more than four million copies.

The book also stimulated the American public to question the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policies, and it may have influenced the shaping of foreign policy during the era. Both John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon often cited the book's premise—that communism in Southeast Asia could only be defeated by small-scale actions in the field, not by bungling bureaucrats who preferred the cocktail circuit and schmoozing with political insiders.

When the book was adapted to the screen in 1963, its producers felt pressured by the Agency for International Development to tone down the theme of governmental incompetence.

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