



ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER BING FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Just What the CIA Ordered

DR. AMERICA

The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961

By James T. Fisher

University of Massachusetts Press. 304 pp. \$29.95

By Robert Coles

IN 1954 TOM DOOLEY was a navy doctor who happened to be sent to Vietnam when the United States was taking its first step into that struggle between capitalism and communism. French colonial authority had just come to an end; Vietnam had been divided in two; and America's leaders had decided to assist in the transfer of refugees from the North—a signal of our possible future military involvement in Southeast Asia. With others, Dooley tried to assist thousands of people desperate to escape a newly consolidated totalitarianism.

In a matter of weeks a man who had once hoped to become a society doctor, and who knew nothing, really, about the geography and history of Vietnam, never mind the po-

Robert Coles is a child psychiatrist who teaches at Harvard. His most recent book is "Harvard Diary II: Essays on the Sacred and the Secular."

litical and economic struggle then underway, became an increasingly articulate, energetic combatant in a civil war that, a decade later, would disastrously ensnare America. Dooley was, in fact, as his biographer tells us, "the last American naval officer in Haiphong before it was turned over to the Viet Minh in May 1955." But such an accident of personal fate coincided with a historical moment of enormous significance—the realization of certain American intelligence officers in Vietnam that this evacuation of mostly Christian families needed to be understood back home, and turned into a news story with decisive moral impact.

In Dooley, those agents of the CIA had their man: He was a doctor doing good deeds, attending the vulnerable, the sick, and he was also himself a devout Catholic, many of whose patients were fleeing in anticipation of state persecution for their religious beliefs. He was a dramatic, voluble person, a healer intent on connecting his professional experiences abroad to the military struggle that was, in fact, responsible for them. Energetic, at once introspective and outgoing, fiercely sure of himself, he soon enough learned how to hold audiences in sway and write with such passion that his readers were persuaded to see things his way.

In no time he was being helped to express himself more forcefully, and asked to assist America's intelligence efforts in Southeast Asia, a task he enthu- —Continued on page 9

Continued from page 1

siastically embraced. "Do with me what you like," he told one naval intelligence officer, and then, speaking of himself with a kind of impersonal, even sacrificial distance that must have warmed the heart of that officer, he added this: "I agree with your plans, and if Dooley is the angle that helps sell the world on realization of the importance of the Indo-China sellout [to the communists] . . . then use him to the utmost."

SOON ENOUGH—with the help of several "assets," as our spies are sometimes called—a physician only in his middle twenties would become an internationally known hero. He was brought to the editors of *Reader's Digest*, and through them, to the attention of millions. His book *Deliver Us From Evil* became a huge success, and tons of mail came his way.

Early in 1956 he was sent across America

to peddle that book. He appeared on television, talked on the radio, gave dozens of interviews to reporters; spoke in schools, colleges, churches, hospitals, hotels, military bases, to ordinary working people. He was "co-sponsored by the U.S. Navy and Charles Pfizer and Company," the pharmaceutical giant that had provided drugs for the patients he had treated—the refugees whose lone savior he had become in the public mind (no matter that he was but one of many in a particular military and humanitarian effort).

A few months later, however, the same naval intelligence that had built him up was ready to destroy him: He had become the subject of an "exhaustive investigation" of possible "homosexual tendencies." In March of 1956, this famous doctor, at 29 admired to the point of veneration, resigned from the Navy under pressure, his short-lived celebrity in great jeopardy.

Yet Dooley did not run scared. He was "without question a homosexual as well as the victim of a navy witch hunt," but he was smart enough, sturdy enough psycho-

logically, to avoid becoming a frightened, silenced victim, at the mercy of nameless military bureaucrats. He abruptly returned to Asia, established medical clinics in Laos, where he was known as "Dr. America" (hence this book's title), and became America's "jungle doctor," a revered moral

"The same naval intelligence that had built him was ready to destroy him."

hero. Eventually, he was given an honorary degree by his alma mater, Notre Dame, and continued his activism by raising money for far-off medical missions.

Dooley died young—in 1961 at the age of 34, of malignant melanoma. His public life lasted six short years but has much to

tell us about ourselves, as this wonderfully balanced, knowing book makes clear.

James Fisher, a professor at the Jesuit university in St. Louis whose medical school Dooley attended, knows well the Catholic world to which his biographical subject belonged. He gives us, as his subtle promises, many "lives": a vain, arrogant, self-promoting, ambitious, manipulative storyteller who knew how to exaggerate, tell small fibs and big lies; but also a sensitive, generous, idealistic and compassionate doctor who put himself on the line, under difficult circumstances for the most needy of people.

We also learn much about the America of the 1950s—the way our political and cultural life connected with our foreign policy in Asia. Fisher's subtle, well-told chronicle of a complex mid-century American life turns out to be a compelling work of social history: And Dooley's short life becomes a mirror to a nation's long struggle to figure out what to do with its great power, how to exert it, and where. ■