

***A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of the Military CIA.* By Joshua Kurlantzick. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017. Hardcover: 323pp.**

This aptly, but ironically, titled book tells the story of US involvement in Laos from the early 1950s through the secret war of the 1960s and beyond. Like many journalistic accounts, the book relies substantially on interviews with the American participants and the Hmong military leader Vang Pao, but it is also informed by recent scholarship and some documentary sources. Its focus is on events and actions in Laos, though it does not ignore policy in Washington. Joshua Kurlantzick argues that, despite the enormous damage and huge casualties inflicted in Laos and the ultimate triumph of communist forces, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) counted Laos, the first war that the agency directed, among its great successes. Laos provided the template for the militarization of the CIA and its future wars. The author, however, does not think the results were positive for Laos, the CIA or the United States.

Although the book provides a more or less comprehensive account, throughout there is particular attention on four individuals: Vang Pao; Bill Lair, a CIA operative who was there in the beginning and became close to Vang Pao; Tony Poe, another CIA operative who attempted to raise an indigenous army from people not connected with the Hmong; and Bill Sullivan, the diplomat who ran the secret war in its more expansive phase beginning in 1965. Among these, Lair is clearly Kurlantzick's favourite. A World War II veteran, Lair had spent the 1950s in Southeast Asia, mostly in Thailand and, after the Geneva Conference settlement in 1954, in Laos as well, as a covert CIA agent. He knew the region, its languages, customs and culture, better than most Americans. And in 1961 it was his responsibility to inaugurate Operation Momentum to prevent a victory in Laos by the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies.

Lair's plan was to have a small US footprint in Laos. Working with the talented Vang Pao, he would train Hmong fighters as guerrillas. They, along with some Thai guerrillas that Lair trained, would engage in low level harassing fights with the communists. This would serve Hmong interests, as well as those of the Americans. Lair had no interest in a large American presence in Southeast Asia and thought American objectives could be achieved as long as Asians themselves were engaged in the struggles. The CIA was still small, was not intended to wage wars, and Lair liked it that way.

For the first few years Lair was very happy with the progress. President John F. Kennedy was not interested in committing US troops to Laos. And Vang Pao was an effective recruiter and fighter. Lair considered Operation Momentum a success by 1963. Kennedy had allowed Operation Momentum to expand, but his successor, Lyndon Johnson, expanded it even more, making American involvement in Laos almost unrecognizable from its beginnings. By this time Bill Sullivan was running the war. He had no interest in allowing the US military into Laos, but he wanted the CIA to conduct a major war. The new CIA officers coming to Laos had less understanding of Laos and did not respect the Hmong as much as Lair did. Also, increasingly the CIA relied on private contractors, which Lair considered dangerous. Then came massive American bombings, something that Vang Pao wanted. Lair disagreed, but he was overruled, though even Johnson had doubts about the bombings' effectiveness. A new CIA station chief, Ted Shackley, arrived in 1966 and wanted a wider war, which the CIA approved.

Vang Pao's forces fought hard and achieved some dramatic victories against the North Vietnamese. But the costs were very high, and the bombing, while very useful in specific situations, was indiscriminate over the strategic Plain of Jars, one of the most heavily bombed sites in history. Large numbers of civilians died, and many others became refugees. Disillusioned by what had happened, Lair finally left Laos. He did not become a whistleblower, nor unlike some other CIA veterans did he ever attempt to profit from his experiences in Southeast Asia. His last job was as a long distance truck driver in Texas.

Sullivan does not emerge from this book in a very positive light. He expanded the war in a way that harmed Laos. He then served as Henry Kissinger's agent, telling the Laotians that they were essentially on their own after the Paris Peace Agreement in 1973. In essence, the United States abandoned the Hmong, who had suffered so much, even as Sullivan advanced his own career. As the Pathet Lao was on the brink of total victory in 1975, the US evacuated only Vang Pao and his immediate circle. Without permission, CIA agents and contractors evacuated another 2,500. Many times that number ultimately made it on their own to Thailand, where they lingered in refugee camps. They all wanted to come to the United States, which was not interested in admitting most of them — though today there are over 260,000 Hmong residing in the United States.

Despite the problematic outcome of the war in Laos, the CIA considered it a great success because it tied down thousands of

North Vietnamese troops who otherwise would have been available to fight Americans in Vietnam. The cost to Laos itself was not a concern for the CIA, and future CIA wars would be based on the Laos template.

Aside from his discussion about the impact of the Laos intervention on the future direction of the CIA, the author's comments about the aftermath of the war are mostly limited to what happened to his four antagonists: Lair, Poe, Vang Pao and Sullivan. He notes that a few Hmong fighters remained active into the twenty-first century. There is a brief discussion of the current state of US–Lao relations, which are cordial. That relationship is, indeed, unusual historically, since it is the only bilateral relationship among the Indochinese countries never to have been severed.

One may disagree with some of the book's assertions or conclusions (I thought, for example, that Kurlantzick underestimated the importance and courage of Ambassadors Horace Smith and Winthrop Brown who went to the brink of insubordination to resist Washington's ill-advised policy directives), and there is room for a more detailed investigation of policy decisions. The book also gives little insight into the communists' side in the war. But Kurlantzick provides an informative, well written account of American involvement in Laos with compelling assessments of how the war was conducted and its impact on Laos, as well as on the future of the Central Intelligence Agency.

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