

***A Great Place to Have a War: America in
Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA***

Joshua Kurlantzick
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Reviewer: Greg Raymond

In 2015 I was fortunate enough to accompany the late strategic studies scholar Des Ball on his last trip to Thailand. In the latter part of his career Des had researched and published several books on Thailand's paramilitary units. During the trip, he was keen to pass on his knowledge and contacts. Des talked about Bill Lair, the American who had helped found and train Thailand's crack paratrooper outfit the Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit, usually known by the acronym PARU. His fascination in Lair was apparent. He also talked about Henry Kissinger and here his tone was quite different; a note of distaste and in fact loathing was evident.

Both Lair and Kissinger loom large in Joshua Kurlantzick's compelling account of the United States' secret war in Laos. The conflict from 1961 to 1975 ended with US defeat, and Laos controlled by communist forces. Lair was the progenitor of Operation Momentum, the US name for the secret war. A World War Two veteran who had joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in its early days, Lair had become a Thailand and Laos specialist and had proposed the concept of helping Laos's ethnic Hmong clans fight the communists. But Lair became disillusioned with the upscaling of the war to include a massive air campaign, and was shattered at the final outcome. The Hmong, having lost the war, were given little assistance and many ended up either persecuted at home or in refugee camps in Thailand. Many Hmong believed Lair had promised that the United States would provide sanctuary. Lair, a Texan, finished his days driving long haul trucking routes, which provided the solitude and concentration he needed to deal with his past.

It is unknown whether Kissinger was troubled by what had occurred, but Kurlantzick's reporting of his casual discussion with Nixon suggests not:

"how many did we kill in Laos?" Nixon asked Kissinger in one taped recording of a conversation three years into their bombing campaign. "In the Laotian thing, we killed about ten, fifteen [thousand]", Kissinger replied. The national security advisor did not seem to have a very clear figure and seemed blasé about exactly how many people—civilians, mostly—the bombing had killed to that point. (pp. 153-4).

Apart from Kissinger and Nixon, other memorable characters from the book include Lair's fellow CIA agent Tony Poe, a real life Colonel Kurtz renowned for his bloodlust; Vang Pao, the brilliant and charismatic Hmong general; and Bill Sullivan, the bloodless ambassador who oversaw the escalation of the war. But to nominate the colourful individuals from this work is not to belie Kurlantzick's careful and incisive scholarship. This book draws on a wide range of sources, including interviews with the protagonists and recently declassified CIA archival material, in detailing the origins of the conflict and analysing its strategic backdrop and implications.

Kurlantzick, a former journalist now on the prestigious Council for Foreign Relations, makes clear the rationale for the war and its secrecy. American presidents, first Kennedy, then Johnson and finally Nixon, liked using local forces as proxies, as it meant fewer US casualties. Taking North Vietnamese troops out of the South Vietnam theatre, by presenting them with greater challenges in Laos, was also attractive because it reduced the pressure on US troops in South Vietnam. At the same time they wanted to maintain the fiction of adherence to the 1954 Geneva accords, which prohibited foreign forces in Laos. But above all, especially in the early years, both Kennedy and Johnson bought into the domino theory, that if Laos and Vietnam fell, so would Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Kurlantzick makes a strong argument that the CIA's war in Laos was regarded by the agency as a success and became a model for subsequent operations in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq and today Syria. It seems remarkable that the US military could be excluded from the command of an entire country operation, one that at its peak saw more bombs dropped in Laos in one year than were dropped on Japan during the whole of World War Two. Kurlantzick's startling conclusion is that after Laos, combat operations remain a larger part of the CIA's business than intelligence collection and analysis.

The implications for accountability are significant and damaging. The US Congress and its committees were unable to penetrate the wall of silence and prevarication. Ambassador Bill Sullivan was able to lie and stonewall convincingly to US senators. Lack of accountability assisted the CIA's widespread and indiscriminate bombing campaign, producing horrendous civilian casualties but relatively little impact on the North Vietnamese logistics and resupply chains. Pilots dropped ordnance for the simple reason that they did not wish to return to Thailand still carrying their bombs. By the end of the war some 200,000 Laotians were dead, and one third of the bombs dropped remained undetonated.

Nonetheless, after the fall of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia to communism in 1975, American interest in Laos dropped abruptly. After spending some \$US3.1 billion per year (2016 dollars) on the operation, Presidents Ford and Carter paid no more attention to Laos. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia

remained non-communist. And the focus of the US government moved elsewhere.

Joshua Kurlantzick's book performs a valuable service in vividly documenting this largely unknown and forgotten war. His work captures both the strategic and the human dimensions of the conflict.

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