

**Joshua Kurlantzick.** *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017. 336 pp. 28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4516-6786-8.

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**Published on** H-Diplo (June, 2017)

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Why were American civilian leaders able to hide the increasing US military buildup in Laos during the Vietnam War? What role did the Laos war play in the larger war in Vietnam? What impact did the US secret war in Laos have on those involved then and now? In *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*, journalist Joshua Kurlantzick explores the genesis of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) involvement with Laos, in particular with the Hmong ethnic minority group, and the secret war's lasting effect on US foreign policies. The reason why this "not-so-secret secret" could be hidden for nearly a decade was that Ambassador Bill Sullivan ran the war. As Kurlantzick noted, "Sullivan worked closely with the CIA but not with the American military; he and the CIA station in Vientiane went to extraordinary lengths to keep the US Army out of [Operation] Momentum" (p. 109).

The book provides a chronological progression of American commitment in Laos with sporadic comparisons to more recent US interventions in the Middle East. It is based on archival materials and interviews the author conducted. The author also relies heavily on the handful of books and many articles that have been published regarding the US secret war in Laos. Like other writers, Kurlantzick's narrative revolves around four main characters whose unexpected encoun-

ters would change the course of history beyond Southeast Asia: CIA case officer James William (Bill) Lair, ambassador to Laos William (Bill) Sullivan, Anthony Poshepny (also commonly referred to as Tony Poe), and Royal Lao Army general Vang Pao. Lair was the architect of the Thai special operation Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU), which consisted of parachutists, jungle fighters, and paramilitary instructors.

Given President Dwight Eisenhower's belief that Laos was the key to communist containment in Southeast Asia, President John Kennedy supported Lair's proposal to train and arm Hmong ethnic minorities under then Major Vang Pao. "The plan," as Kurlantzick writes, "noted that the United States could work with the Hmong for a minimal amount of money.... The United States did not have to spend money buying the Hmong rations of beef and eggs and ice cream, as it did for US troops stationed in Southeast Asia ... what's more, Hmong soldiers would get about \$3 per month in pay, compared with as much as \$339 per month for US Army privates serving in Vietnam" (pp. 81-82). Kennedy felt compelled to do something about the situation, but he did not want to send US ground troops into Laos. Operation Momentum seemed to be the perfect solution. Weapons shipments arrived soon after Lair met with Vang Pao in January 1961 and thus began the

recruitment of Hmong men for Operation Momentum. Tony Poe and another CIA operative, Vint Lawrence, trained Hmong recruits. This cheap operation would be guerrilla style where Vang Pao's men ambushed Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces and then retreated into the jungles. As long as the Hmong were carrying out these tactics, they had a higher rate of succeeding. The problem, however, was that throughout much of Vietnamese history, such military strategies had been used to defeat foreign invaders. What Lair and the Americans perceived as advantages for Hmong recruits were indeed methods that the Vietnamese had used for centuries, which negated some of the advantage for the Hmong.

The successes that Hmong had in the first few years of Operation Momentum were short-lived. Heavy casualties required Vang Pao and his officers to continuously recruit new troops. With limited aviation capacity in the early 1960s, the Royal Lao Army relied on American pilots to provide air support for its troops. Since the infiltration routes that became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail began on Lao territory above the demilitarized zone, it explains the impetus for Americans to target Laos, effectively rendering it the most bombed country in the world. The bombing campaign in Laos, Operation Barrel Roll, began on December 14, 1964, which was more than three months before the aerial bombardment campaign against North Vietnam, Operation Rolling Thunder. As US military buildup in South Vietnam intensified in 1965, so did men and supplies flowing from north to south. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese Army sent some of its most elite forces to support the Pathet Lao.

One of the book's strengths is Kurlantzick's illustration of the frustration Lair confronted as he lost control of the operation. He had envisioned using Hmong only for hit-and-run tactics and intelligence gathering. He was opposed to transforming them into a conventional army. Lair viewed the Hmong positively, but he knew they

were no match for the NVA. "The idea of building a wider war was gaining support at the top of the agency," notes Kurlantzick (p. 125). Ambassador Sullivan "backed the agency repeatedly in 1966 as it pushed the White House to let it use Vang Pao's men in bigger battles that included massive air-power" (p. 126). As a result, more and more CIA operatives and contractors arrived to take part in the clandestine war, a situation that Lair could not stand to watch, and thus, he left Operation Momentum in 1968.

The expansion of the war was tragic, but Kurlantzick shows that it also increased Vang Pao's power. The foreign press ran many stories about him that "lionized Vang Pao as a brilliant strategist and served to stroke his ego" (p. 147). He even visited the United States. As long as Sullivan and the CIA could keep the press away from the exact nature of the ground and air war in Laos, Vang Pao seemed invincible. The cautious Lair had left, so little opposition to the efforts to transform Hmong guerrilla fighters into a conventional army existed. Vang Pao and Tony Poe did not always see eye to eye. The agency sent Poe to the northwest region to recruit more troops. The White House, the CIA, and Bill Sullivan approved the resources Vang Pao needed to wage war, but the devastation, in particular the civilian toll, could not be hidden forever. They "worked assiduously in 1969, 1970, and 1971 to defuse public reaction to the Laos operation" (p. 210). Great-power diplomacy would take precedence over the interests of Vang Pao and Lao leaders. Kurlantzick shows that the superpowers were interested in finding a way to end the war. Secret peace talks between US national security adviser Henry Kissinger and Vietnamese diplomat Le Duc Tho resulted in the cease-fire agreement that enabled the United States to disengage from Southeast Asia. The Laos that seemed so important to Eisenhower and Kennedy to serve as a buffer against communist expansion was no longer seen as instrumental in 1973. Its heavy reliance on American aid meant that Lao leaders had no choice but

to agree to a coalition government with the Lao communists. As a result of serving as US foot soldiers for more than a decade, Vang Pao's Hmong forces had to leave Laos beginning in 1975. Kurlantzick expertly explores the contentious exile politics that Vang Pao engaged in until his death in 2011.

As an expert on Southeast Asian politics, Kurlantzick has synthesized a complex history that continues to unfold. For specialists, however, the book provides few new revelations and in numerous parts, the author offers incorrect observations of historical events and places, drawing conclusions for which he does not provide evidence. One of the weakest chapters is "Final Days," where Kurlantzick discusses the events of 1975 and 1976. I discuss here a few examples of the many issues. In one, Kurlantzick writes, "In mid-May, Vang Pao and his closest circle of Hmong fled to Thailand aboard a US helicopter" (p. 232). This description seems to suggest that the evacuation consisted of only this helicopter transport. Vang Pao left on May 14, 1975. Prior to his departure, thousands of civilians and members of the military fought for several days to get into C-130 and C-47 aircraft. Following a description of the situation after Vang Pao left Laos, the author writes, "The once independent people had mostly turned over all their thinking about the future to the general" (p. 233). On the contrary, Hmong left behind made decisions for themselves. Vang Pao discouraged people from leaving, but after he fled, thousands decided to leave, as Kurlantzick shows on the next page where he writes, "a group of between two thousand and three thousand Hmong families clustered at Hin Heup, a bridge near Vientiane over the Mekong to Thailand" (p. 234). The Hin Heup bridge where the infamous massacre took place is not over the Mekong River. Instead, it is over the Nam Lik River. In addition, when Kurlantzick observes that "roads, buildings, runways, and virtually every other type of infrastructure had been ravaged" (p. 240), it is not clear what he is referring to here since Laos had

very little infrastructure to be destroyed. This description would be relevant if it were referring to North Vietnam. Moreover, there are unattributed quotes or references to people interviewed generally instead of names being provided for each interviewee. As this is a historical text, it is important to ensure accuracy.

Similar to other accounts of the US secret war in Laos, Kurlantzick focuses primarily on the CIA and the Hmong in Military Region II under Vang Pao's command. As Thomas Leo Briggs reminded us in *Cash on Delivery: CIA Operations during the Secret War in Laos* (2009), the CIA employed Lao irregular units in the southern part of the country to engage the North Vietnamese Army. In response, the latter had to keep some of its combatants in Laos instead of sending them all to fight US forces in southern Vietnam. The characterization of the Lao as inept and unwilling to fight shaped US foreign policies toward Laos, as Seth Jacobs argued in *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (2012). In the few passages where Kurlantzick refers to Lao leaders, such stereotypes are perpetuated.

Despite these shortcomings, Kurlantzick does convincingly argue that the postwar view of Operation Momentum as a success expanded the CIA's ability to make war without declaration of war. Its involvement in killing missions abroad and the use of local forces has enabled the agency to conduct war in other locations without US forces. Kurlantzick demonstrates that many CIA operatives and key civilian leaders, including Sullivan, were able to advance their careers precisely because the covert operation in Laos was considered an enormous agency success. The operation would be used as a model for other paramilitary operations thereafter.

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**Citation:** Chia Youyee Vang. Review of Kurlantzick, Joshua. *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

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