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

Joshua Kurlantzick (Simon & Schuster, 2017) 336 pp.

Reviewed by Thomas L. Ahern

Joshua Kurlantzick says that over the course of a full decade he talked to numerous participants in the so-called "secret war" in Laos. The book that emerged from those interviews, *A Great Place to Have a War,* rather reads like the result of an attempt to find a new narrative in which to fit the interviews. Following a current fashion in popular history, Kurlantzick treats policy as mostly a byproduct of personalities or bureaucratic competition—and any untoward outcome as the result of someone's incompetence and/or bad faith.

Kurlantzick asserts that in 1961 CIA found in Laos "a unique opportunity to increase the agency's powers." It had "already amassed influence, in the heart of a Cold War battlefield" that the US military was ignoring and could use the little kingdom as the site of an "inexpensive—in American money and lives, at least—proxy war [that] could be a template for fights in other places around the world." No documentation is furnished for any of these claims, which are presented as the CIA's justification for becoming "focused increasingly on killing rather than spying." (14–15)[a]

The result is an intellectually rickety account based on the allegation that the war represented the culmination of a calculated CIA effort to compete with the US armed forces as a military arm of the US Government.

The claim is fantasy. Kurlantzick struggles to make it plausible, but the only documented statement that in any way supports it is attributed to former Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Amory (1953–62), who is quoted as telling an interviewer that "*most of the CIA leadership* was 'all for a war in Laos. . . . They thought that [Laos] was a great place to have a war.'" This can only come from *Spymasters: Ten CIA Officers in Their Own Words*,[b] a compilation of interviews, in one of which Amory says only that "*the activists in the DDP* [Directorate of Plans] *side* were all for a war in Laos" (emphasis added). It is a much more limited claim than the one in Kurlantzick's book, which distorts it by broadening its scope.

It is not Kurlantzick's fault that Amory apparently chose to make such a frivolous remark, but the fact that it gets no support from the people most directly involved in managing the program is telling. In any case, not even the Amory interview suggests that CIA policy called for using Laos to compete for a new role in US military operations.

There was indeed a spike in the investment in covert action (CA) in the early years of the Cold War, much of it involving political CA in the context of national elections in Western Europe. But this growth was intermittent and transitory, on occasion shrinking into insignificance before a new crisis somewhere led to a new and equally temporary response. This is particularly true of the very era on which Kurlantzick builds his thesis. William Colby's memoir notes that, as of the early 1970s—the Vietnam War was still raging—"the covert action culture was rapidly diminishing . . . almost to the vanishing point." Funding for CA programs "had plummeted from more than 50 percent of the overall CIA budget in the 1950s and 1960s to something well under 5 percent."[c]

So Kurlantzick has it exactly backward. A less myopic perspective would have revealed that the effort in Laos, far from heralding the CIA's transformation into a quasi-military organization, represented—along with the counterinsurgency programs in Vietnam—the beginning of the decline of Cold War paramilitary activity. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, brought another, equally transitory, surge in the form of support to the tribal resistance, which ended with the Soviet withdrawal.

At no point during the periodic lulls in paramilitary or other covert action did CIA management perceive itself as

a. Numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers on which Kurlantzick's assertions appear.
b. Edited by Ralph E. Weber (SR Books, 1999), 161.
c. William Colby, *Honorable Men* (Simon and Schuster, 1978), 300–301.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

having ambitions that were being frustrated by the opposition of other agencies. Even at the peak of the commitment in Indochina, viewed by Kurlantzick as the culmination of the effort to convert CIA into a war-fighting instrument, agency management was actually deploring its inability to shed its responsibility for Laos. In the early 1970s, Deputy Director for Operations Tom Karamessines found it "extremely disconcerting" that CIA had managed to cut back its investment in Vietnam but now found itself faced with "very significant escalation" in Laos. The answer, he said, was simply to turn the whole thing over to the Department of Defense and the Thai. Director of Central Intelligence (DCI)Richard Helms echoed this theme during a meeting at the western White House at San Clemente, where he informed the president that the agency "simply could not handle the logistical demands of an ever-growing paramilitary program in Laos."[a]

Far from being cynical manipulators of a helpless client, CIA officers including long-time program manager Bill Lair, Chief of East Asia Division William Nelson, and future DCI William Colby agonized over the cost to the Hmong of the tribe's growing involvement in the war. The 1965 commitment of US combat forces to Vietnam intensified the imperative to resist Hanoi's exploitation of the corridor through Laos. But it is not until page 119 that we get any acknowledgment of the connection between the US deployment of combat forces in Vietnam and the expanded program in Laos. Kurlantzick uses the CIA official history of the war in Laos to introduce a few tactical details but ignores all the expressions of concern registered by CIA managers.[b]

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The interviews at the heart of the book, the accounts of both American and Hmong participants, add colorful if often dubious detail. There's no expression of skepticism about any purported recollection, no matter how improbable or self-aggrandizing, if it supports the author's thesis, or even if it's just entertaining. The only exception is a bit of hedging on the duration of the alleged US commitment to the Hmong resistance during the Vietnam War.

The reliance on interviews is especially problematic in the case of the Hmong. Anyone with experience of tribal cultures understands how the conceptual frameworks that govern their explanations of experience differ from Western thought processes. Estimates of time and of quantities, assignment of motivation, causation, and probabilities—all are different, and the author's failure to exercise any judgment about the stories he is told renders them all suspect. The same applies to his principal secondary sources, almost all of them as emotionally engaged as Jane Hamilton-Merritt, the author of a well-known account of the role of the Hmong in the war in Laos. It's not that there's necessarily an intent to deceive on the part of either interviewer or interview subject, just failures of objectivity and, on the American side, of understanding of different cognitive styles. In addition, on the Hmong side, we have the ever-present risk of the interview subject trying to please the interviewer with whatever he or she seems to want to hear.[c]

There is the appearance of some naïveté even in interviews with US figures, notably those with legendary paramilitary officer Anthony Poshepny, known as Tony Poe. One cannot disprove the wild tales he told Kurlantzick and other interviewers, but the joy he took in playing games with innocent interlocutors was well known at the time to his then-colleagues, of whom the present reviewer was one. The result of all this is that the book is less a history than an attempted exposé, seemingly designed to satisfy the reading public's presumptive appetite for tales of CIA malfeasance. As such, it suffers from the endemic weakness of such efforts, namely, credulous acceptance of even the most fanciful accusations.

The effort to explain the war in Laos in terms of a CIA drive for power employs an auxiliary device in the author's selection of key actors in the shaping of the program. The choices are not always wrong: Bill Lair, the field manager of the program for almost eight years, did a brilliant job of mobilizing Hmong military capabilities with minimum—though in the end serious—Hmong

a. Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Undercover Armies: Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961–1973* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 402 (Redacted version). The author of *Undercover Armies* and this review essay served in Laos during 1961–1962.
b. Ibid., 456–58, 524.

c. The Hmong nearly always counted enemy forces as numbering either "hundreds" or "thousands," and the altitude of an aircraft overhead as "a thousand meters." Any single-engine jet airplane was a "MiG," in fact never seen over Hmong country. I served with Vang Pao at Ban Pa Dong in the spring of 1961 before being sent to Thakhek in the upper Panhandle that summer to create an irregular force of ethnic Lao. There, I encountered some of the same communication problems while debriefing presumably more sophisticated subjects.

casualties and disruption of tribal society. And William Sullivan did essentially the same thing with the US military. He won major support from MACV (Military Assistance Command in Vietnam) in Saigon, especially combat air, while fending off pressures for American military intervention in Laos that would have threatened the already-transparent but indispensable fiction of Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's neutralist stance.

If his critics fault Sullivan for delighting in his role as commander of a (very small) theater of war, the fact remains that he exercised his authority to good effect. But an architect of the program he was not: He arrived in Vientiane in late 1964, when it was already almost four years old. The appearance of outsized influence derives from the coinciding of his tenure with the commitment of US troops to Vietnam and the resulting pressure from successive administrations to expand Laotian operations in support of the main effort. What Kurlantzick tries to turn into a bureaucratic power play actually represented the result of events in South Vietnam and of subsequent policy decisions in Washington.

The choice of Vang Pao is fully justified: He probably was in fact the only Hmong leader with the charisma, military skills, and political acumen needed to mobilize his people. But the notion that his basic strategy was to win "big battles against the North Vietnamese" in order to make the Hmong a political force in Laos is another fantasy, one for which Kurlantzick offers no evidence whatever. (118)

Finally, describing Tony Poe as one of the key figures in the Laos program is no more than a ploy to justify attention to his colorful antics and to his denigration of other players of whom the author also thinks badly. Tony was sent to Nam Yu to separate him from Vang Pao, with whom he had a tense, unproductive relationship. The author quotes Poe to admit that even the Nam Yu mission—to recruit and unite the local tribes—did not succeed. Tony's physical courage and military competence did not confer either knowledge or good judgment about the complexities of the main program, and his comments on it and its managers carry no authority. His influence over that larger program, moreover, was nil. (160)[a]

One might expect that, having failed to make his case for Laos as the paradigm of CIA's new military role, the author would at least cite subsequent programs that could be interpreted as examples of its evolution. But the only one he can come up with is Central America, and the argument here is no more cogent than the one for Laos. The Reagan administration and DCI Bill Casey "heartily supported covert paramilitary action in the Western Hemisphere" in the mid-1980s. But it was Reagan, not CIA, who issued the panicky warning that if the Sandinistas controlled Nicaragua, "they could create a haven for anti-American militants just "two days' driving time . . . from Texas." (249) To the extent that personalities actually matter here, Casey's assignment to lead the CIA into the Central American paramilitary program surely owed more to his personal ties to the White House—he had been Reagan's campaign manager in 1980—than to the workings of a CIA conspiracy allegedly concocted in the early 1960s.

Apparently irrelevant to the author but key to an understanding of the Laos program's successes and limitations is the indispensable role played by the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU), created in 1954 by Bill Lair and then-director general of the Thai National Police, Gen. Phao Sriyanond. Lair had helped train the Thai stay-behind cadres recruited to operate against a feared invasion by the newly triumphant Chinese communists. As that threat faded and demobilization loomed, he wanted to preserve this intelligence and paramilitary capability to serve both Thai and US interests, and with appropriate US okays he persuaded General Phao to convert it into an airborne unit under the Thai Border Police. Lair's twin functions as both CIA staffer and officer in the Thai National Police are what allowed him to propose the deployment of PARU in Laos.

Kurlantzick makes no mention of this unit, which embodied Lair's conviction that Third World allies were perfectly capable of running irregular warfare operations with only minimal US guidance and material support. The availability of PARU in late 1960 is the reason that Lair came to Vientiane from Bangkok. It is hard to imagine how the Hmong program, or the later efforts elsewhere in Laos, could have thrived without the linguistic and professional skills of the PARU troopers and their cultural affinities with the Lao.[b]

a. The extraordinarily open style of station management at that time allowed working-level case officers to stay abreast of both operational developments and management issues. Recollections from this period are the source of comments about matters such as Poshepny's role in the program.

b. Two treatments of the PARU effort can be found in past issues of

Also irrelevant to the author are the contributions of two genuine heroes of the Laos paramilitary program, Ambassador Winthrop Brown and Chief of Station Gordon Jorgensen. As the first supervisors of the program in Vientiane, they set it on the pragmatic course recommended by Lair, one that minimized dependence on US technology, logistics, and direct management and emphasized the development of Hmong leadership with PARU guidance. Brown and Jorgensen consistently fought to preserve this approach, resisting chronic pressures from MACV and Washington for greater US control.

The tone of intellectual and moral superiority that permeates the book undermines whatever authority it might otherwise enjoy. Describing Washington's concern, in 1961, about the importance of Laos to a communist drive to dominate Asia, the author comments that it "did not seem to matter to American leaders that Laos was so small it had only one major city, Vientiane—the capital, which was basically a muddy village—or that most people in Laos live on subsistence farming and had little idea of the differences between communism, democracy, and other political systems." (3–4) Whatever the weaknesses of the domino theory as applied to Laos, they did not include inflated estimates either of the country's size or of its economic strength or political sophistication. Indeed, the country's very weakness, along with its geography—its neighbors included North Vietnam and China—intensified its vulnerability to subversion and military attack.

As he did with Eisenhower, Kurlantzick takes note of President Kennedy's support for a counterinsurgency effort in Laos, the importance of which the president discussed at length—with three maps—in a nationally televised and radio broadcast news conference on 23 March 1961. He said, "Laos is far away from America, but the world is small. Its 2,000,000 people live in a country three times the size of Austria. The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all, in real neutrality observed by all." But Kennedy's role and that of other senior leaders in effecting policy in Laos is lost in Kurlantzick's narrative. Photo © Alamy Stock Photos

There are other pointless comparisons, including one that relates the program's budget to the scale of postwar Laotian foreign trade. Kurlantzick thinks it relevant that, in 1970, the budget was $3.1 billion in current dollars, for an activity in a country that "today has less outward trade with the rest of the world than Luxembourg does." (5) So what? No explicit connection is drawn here, surely because there is none to draw.

We also see here an application of the strategy employed in too many contemporary histories and biographies: Acknowledge the preeminence of other actors and purposes in the making of particular policies and decisions, but attribute the genesis of—and blame for—an unwelcome outcome to the targeted organization or individuals. We get a mention, for example, of the influence of the domino theory on the Eisenhower administration's view of Asian geopolitics, characterized by the president's "obsessions about Laos." (10) But with this hint of even a simplistic geopolitical vision underlying Laos policy, Eisenhower disappears, and we're back to the imagined CIA ambition to use Laos as a stepping-stone to bureaucratic power.

Undocumented claims abound: "Vang Pao himself had repeatedly shot, bombed, and stabbed to death Vietnamese troops in Laos." (6) It's a bit of a stretch: multiple shootings and stabbings by a commander necessarily preoccupied with running a force eventually numbering in the tens of thousands? And "bombing"? A pilot or bombardier

Studies. See, for example, William M. Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955–1974," *Studies in Intelligence* 42, No. 2 (1968) at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html and Richard L. Holm, "Recollections of a Case Officer in Laos, 1962–1964," *Studies in Intelligence* 47, No. 1 (2003) at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol47no1/html/v47i1a01p.htm.

he was not. This kind of sensationalism is a reminder that the integrity—indeed, the plausibility—of a historical account is well served if its author keeps to a minimum the use of unconfirmed, especially when self-serving, first-person claims. (This one gets no citation at all.)

The aversion to governmental secrecy so pervasive in American journalism and popular history since Watergate colors this work, too, but the facts occasionally impede indulging it. We are told that, "while the CIA divulged as little as possible to Congress in the 1940s and 1950s, it had never tried to hide an entire war from Congress." True, it had never concealed a war in either the 1940s or 1950s, but it didn't in Laos, either; Kurlantzick offers no facts that even suggest otherwise. He later admits that the CIA's Laos program was known to "members of presidential staffs and members of Congress . . . the financing for [it] was as aboveboard as any CIA operations could be." The author even acknowledges that, as early as 1964, delegations from both the Senate and the House of Representatives were visiting not just Vientiane but Vang Pao's redoubt in MR II. (104–105)

The effect of this candor is vitiated by the claim that, for these visits, CIA officers created an "entirely fake 'headquarters'" for Vang Pao, in order to give the appearance of a "tiny Hmong-run guerrilla fight that received only food assistance and other humanitarian aid from generous US funds." The reference is presumably to Sam Thong, northwest of Long Tieng, Vang Pao's alternate command post and the center of his Hmong refugee community. The visiting legislators knew all about the military aid program, of course; it was why they were there.

Fairly or not, the author of any revisionist interpretation assumes an extra burden of establishing his or her mastery of the relevant material, especially the most authoritative. A claim to be revealing the origin and purposes of the war in Laos is empty without substantial reliance on State's *Foreign Relations of the United States*, with its exhaustive replication of diplomatic correspondence and policy documents. Kurlantzick, however, just ignores it. One can see why: It would have offered his thesis no help at all, indeed, would have added further evidence of its hollowness.[a]

To cite all the instances of the book's deficiencies would turn this article into a book in its own right, but it does appear that Kurlantzick lacks any background in military affairs or understanding of intelligence process. Regarding the latter, he says that, to keep the program secret, "many station chiefs in Indochina . . . stopped cabling as much as possible and instead relied on oral communications. Station chiefs would then tear up or burn any notes from the conversations." (207) Something resembling a burn-before-reading protocol, apparently, and utterly nonsensical.[b]

He is equally uninformed about military operations. The reader is told that, during the battle for the Hmong's Long Tieng base in early 1971, Vang Pao "personally dragged several artillery pieces up a small peak facing the North Vietnamese," then "firing like mad" into the Vietnamese trapped in the basin below. Firing what? Shells strapped to Vang Pao's back as he dragged the guns up the slope? (The standard artillery piece used in Hmong country was the 105mm howitzer, which weighs almost 5,000 pounds.) The author appears not even to know that howitzers deliver high-angle fire, impossible at the short range he describes. (217–18)

Worse than ignorance is the repeated insinuation that US bombing of Laotian territory took place at CIA behest. There were indeed numerous requests—all from an interagency committee chaired by the ambassador—for the air support needed to repel North Vietnamese forces assaulting Hmong—and other Laotian—positions. But most of the bombs that fell on Laos were directed at strategic targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail or represented ordnance

a. Other, more serious, efforts to chronicle the war in Laos include: Timothy N. Castle, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (Columbia University Press, 1999), and *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam* (Columbia University Press, 1993); Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon* (Steerforth Press, 1996); Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Paladin Press, 1995); Douglas Blaufarb, "Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962–1970," (Advanced Research Projects Agency, Report R-919-ARPA, January 1972). Also: this reviewer's earlier cited *Undercover Armies*. US Department of State documentation is available in: *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*), *1958–1960, Volume XVI, East Asia-Pacific Region: Cambodia; Laos*; *FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XXIV, The Laos Crisis*; *FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume XXVIII, Laos*. All from US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC. All are available digitally from the State Department Historian website: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments.

b. Other reviewers, including CIA veterans of service in Laos, have presented detailed critiques of Kurlantzick's account, some of them questioning the authenticity of certain of his claimed interviews. See customer reviews of the book on Amazon.com.

jettisoned by aircraft returning from unsuccessful missions over North Vietnam.[a]

If the point of writing history is to help learn its lessons, the historian must at least try to address the right questions and identify real causes and effects. This is not to say that there is only one legitimate interpretation of any chronology, certainly not one as complicated as that of the Laos conflict. It is to say, however, that a thesis for which evidence is entirely absent deserves no credence.

Some CIA officers did, at least for a while, come to see the four Laos programs as a model for future such efforts. It would combine reliance on air supremacy with a quasi-unilateral exploitation of ethnic minorities in Third World countries. In this reviewer's judgment, the formula fails because it depends on the simultaneous convergence of too many highly contingent factors, among them a permissive host government, the presence of a cohesive potential surrogate force, the availability of CIA organizational resources capable of directing it, the adversary's strength and purposes, and favorable terrain. But not even this recipe called for the expansion of CIA authorities or capabilities; it merely tried to define a doctrinal approach to an entirely hypothetical requirement.

It might be argued that what the CIA role in Laos really teaches is an extended lesson in managing the sometimes-conflicting cultural values and policy interests of the partners in a joint enterprise. This reviewer sees it in those terms, as an exercise in which CIA took the lead in reconciling divergent interests and policy preferences of the three nations involved—Thailand in addition to Laos and the United States—and of the other departments and branches of the US government involved in the conduct of the war. Kurlantzick's conspiratorial reading prohibits consideration of this or any other fact-based analysis.

If it is true that the pursuit of US foreign policy interests requires a capacity for unacknowledged intervention abroad—covert action—and if preserving that capacity requires, over time, the support of the American voting public, the potential for damage created by a work like *A Great Place to Have a War* becomes obvious. If the author wants to dispute these two premises, let him by all means do so. But he never presents an explicit argument against either the legitimacy or the potential effectiveness of covert paramilitary action. An examination of these questions awaits more serious scholarship.

a. Thanks to former Intelligence Community historian Timothy Castle for clarifying this point.

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