

Cold War Southeast Asia

Malcolm H. Murfett (ed.). (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2012) 376 pp., bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Timothy Castle, PhD

Singapore continues to be a thriving center for academics and other professionals who seek a greater understanding of the region's important past, present, and future place in international affairs. Those in the hunt for the lessons of history will find this collection of 12 wide-ranging Cold War-related essays most rewarding. Editor Malcom Murfett is associate professor in the Department of History of the National University of Singapore. He declares, "Apart from the mountains of literature on the Vietnam War and innumerable references to the 'domino theory' that Eisenhower and others were so concerned about in the 1950s, the role of the Cold War in Southeast Asia has not been subject to much scrutiny."

Murfett's selection of essayists includes scholars from universities and research centers in Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, Malaysia, and the United States. In developing their submissions, the authors consulted archival resources from across the globe, including national repositories in Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Specialty collections, including materials held by the US military, were also consulted.

Far from offering dry recitations of well-established facts, the authors bring forth new information and thoughtfully crafted insights on the Cold War's impact on the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the establishment of Singapore. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) is examined, as is neutralism in Cambodia and Laos. Essays also treat British defense obligations in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as Southeast Asia and the US Army "before the quagmire."

Of particular note to this reviewer, the volume includes an in-depth recounting of the origins of Thai-US involvement in the Laotian "secret war." Written by Sutayut Osornprasop, who holds a PhD from Cambridge University, the essay reveals in detail the full cooperation between the Thai government and the United States in carrying out what became

a key component of the CIA's project there. Osornprasop cast a wide net to gather his material, which includes interviews with key Thai military and CIA participants. Specifically, he details the work of Headquarters 333, the Thai police and military conduit for manpower into Laos. In his earlier dissertation work, Osornprasop established that, while most experts of the period recognize the 1968 deployment of regular Thai military forces to South Vietnam reached 12,000 men, most do not know that by 1972, twice as many Thais were on the ground in Laos. Indeed, some of Osornprasop's most important data comes from Thai veterans who established an advocacy group called the "Unknown Warriors Association (UWA) – 333."

Dedicated to informing the Thai public and others about their efforts, the UWA has an office, holds education events in schools and other forums, and regularly publishes material in English and Thai related to their efforts during the "secret war." Thai participation in the Laos war ranged from the deployment of regular Royal Thai Army artillery batteries and Police Aerial Reinforcement Units (PARU) during the Eisenhower years to the employment of thousands of irregulars drawn from the Thai military through the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Dr. Osornprasop observes that these actions in Laos would, in the early 1970s, "culminate...in the largest expeditionary mission in Thailand's contemporary history." Not surprisingly, stories detailing the efforts of CIA Laos veterans like Bill Lair and Pat Landry—complete with wartime photos—routinely appear in UWA publications. As a demonstration of the open nature of their efforts, UWA members have also traveled to communist Laos to meet and talk about the war with their former enemies.

Cold War Southeast Asia is easily and inexpensively available electronically via Kindle and is highly recommended for intelligence professionals, regional experts, and others looking for new thoughts on the Cold War.



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