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Book Guide

A Great Place to Have a War

In his book *A Great Place to Have a War*, Joshua Kurlantzick tells the story of the CIA's covert war in Laos during the Vietnam War. He examines how the country became, surprisingly, a U.S. policy priority, and analyzes why and how the CIA was able to build the war into one of the biggest covert operations in U.S. history. He further uses the Laos war as a prism to examine the CIA's operations in the global war on terror today.

Summary

Between 1961 and 1973, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) carried out one its biggest covert operations in one of Southeast Asia's smallest states. In *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*, Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow for Southeast Asia Joshua Kurlantzick tells the story of Operation Momentum, the CIA's covert plan, and four individuals who were instrumental in creating an army of ethnic Hmong to fight communist forces in Laos . The battle wound up devastating the country, leaving Laos one of the most bombarded places on earth.

The book also recounts how the war in Laos transformed the CIA from an organization primarily devoted to intelligence gathering to one increasingly focused on paramilitary operations. Kurlantzick notes that Laos was a transformative experience for the agency, “ ... afterward, its leadership would see paramilitary operations as an essential part of the agency's mission, and many other U.S. policymakers would come to accept that the CIA was now as much a part of waging war as the traditional branches of the armed forces.”

After the Vietnam War, the CIA reduced its paramilitary branch, but continued to be involved in paramilitary operations. In the post-9/11 global war on terrorism era, the agency has again become primarily focused on low-intensity conflict rather than spying. *A Great Place to Have a War* poses questions for policymakers today about the proper role of the Central Intelligence Agency in U.S. foreign policy-making. It also touches on other questions such as whether a proxy war fought by local armies working with CIA operatives can be curtailed, and what happens to the entire idea of war when an attack can be launched remotely, with minimal U.S. manpower on the ground at sites of battles.

This book is suitable for undergraduate courses on:

- International Relations
- Southeast Asia Studies
- Intelligence Studies/Intelligence History

Discussion Questions

Courses on International Relations/Southeast Asian Studies

1. How have the events of the Laos war determined the course of Laos's political development up to the current day? Compare and contrast the political development in Laos with the political development in Vietnam over the same period.

2. Are there similarities in how U.S. policymakers viewed Laos in the Vietnam War and how they view small but strategically important states in the global war on terror today?
3. Are there parallels in how the United States currently treats local allies in the global war on terror to the treatment of the Hmong, the key U.S. ally in Laos? What, if any, are the policy similarities?

Courses on Intelligence Studies/Intelligence History:

1. What are the differences between how the United States developed its policies toward Laos in the early- and mid-1960s, and how policy strategies are conceived today for the global war on terror?
2. In light of the U.S. experience in Laos, comment on how much the CIA should be given control of paramilitary operations in conflict zone.
3. If the CIA is given paramilitary powers, what kind of oversight should it have, and who should provide it? What is the ideal relationship between the CIA and U.S. military Special Operations Forces in the current war on terror?
4. What lessons does the Laos war hold for how U.S. policymakers today should handle situations in which Washington enlists local proxy armies, and has to manage expectations of a prolonged U.S. presence in countries where U.S. forces and proxy armies are fighting together?

Essay Questions

Courses on International Relations/Southeast Asian Studies

1. After the end of the Vietnam War, what does the refugee experience of the Hmong coming to the United States tell us about refugee management? Specifically, how could refugee inflows be better managed for those migrating from conflict zones today?
2. Compare and contrast the historical and current U.S. policies toward Laos with U.S. policies toward Vietnam. Why have these two bilateral relationships diverged in recent years, with Vietnam becoming one of the United States' closest strategic partners in Southeast Asia, while relations between the United States and Laos remain limited?

Courses on Intelligence Studies/Intelligence History:

1. How did the Laos battle go from a small-scale operation in the early 1960s, to one of the biggest paramilitary and bombing operations ever? Offer insights as to how policy was made in Laos during this time in history, and weigh the pros and cons of how these policies were developed. What can U.S. policymakers take away from the Laos experience about U.S. operations in the war on terror?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the United States' eventual loss in the Vietnam War, and the failure of U.S. allies in Laos to maintain control of the country militarily and politically? In what ways was the Laos operation an intelligence and/or military failure, and in what ways might it have been considered a political failure?
3. What is the appropriate role of Congress in overseeing U.S. operations in the global war on terror? What tools is Congress utilizing or underutilizing in such monitoring?
4. Is there a policy that the United States could have pursued in Laos during the Vietnam War era that would have allowed U.S. allies to maintain popular support as well as triumph militarily and politically? Compare policies enacted in Laos to

what occurred in the Philippines, with U.S. support, a decade prior.

Supplementary Materials

Courses on International Relations/Southeast Asian Studies:

John Hart Ely, *War and Responsibility: Constitutional Lessons of Vietnam and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Leslie Gelb with Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1978).

Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in an Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

William J. Rust, *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

Courses on Intelligence Studies/Intelligence History:

Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate War in Laos, 1961–1973* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006; partially declassified, February 2009).

Matt Apuzzo and Mark Mazzeti, “Deep Support in Washington for the CIA’s Drone Missions,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2015, A1.

Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018).

Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

Christopher Drew et al., “Seal Team Six: A Secret History of Quiet Killings and Blurred Lines,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2015, A1.

Alex Finley, “How the CIA Forgot the Art of Spying,” *Politico Magazine*, March/April 2017.

Robert M. Hathaway and Russell Jack Smith, *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence, 1966–1973* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993).

Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009).

Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War* (New York: Times Books, 2013).

Arne Kislenko, "A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004): 23.

William M. Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955–1974: Supporting the Secret War," *Studies in Intelligence* (unclassified) (Winter 1999–2000).

Mai Na M. Lee, *Dreams of a Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife, The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

Sutayut Osornprasop, "Thailand and the Secret War in Laos," in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Richard Ruth, *In Buddha's Company: Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

Britt Snider, *The Agency and the Hill: CIA's Relationship with Congress, 1946–2004* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2008).

Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: The Daring Early Years of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 1998).

Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007).

Micah Zenko, "Transferring CIA Drone Strikes to the Pentagon," Council on Foreign Relations Policy Innovation Memorandum, April 16, 2013.

Xiaoming Zhang, "China's Involvement in Laos During the Vietnam War, 1963–1975," *Journal of Military History* 66, no. 4 (October 2002): 1161–62.

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