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Introduction by Kenton Clymer, Northern Illinois University

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Introduction by Kenton Clymer, Northern Illinois University

The War in Vietnam produced an immense literature (about the only positive result of the war). Most of it has of course centered on Vietnam and the American war there; but there are now significant modern treatments of American involvement in most Southeast countries. Laos has not been entirely ignored, as Christopher Gosha points out in his sometimes critical review of *The Universe Unraveling*. But unquestionably Seth Jacobs has produced an exceptionally important, well researched, and compelling account of American involvement in Laos during the Dwight Eisenhower and early John F. Kennedy administrations.

Jacobs sees American perceptions of Lao people and culture as by far the most important determinant in American policy making. His work is along the lines of Andrew Rotter's important study of American-India relations, *Comrades at Odds*, and Mark Bradley's *Imagining Vietnam and America*.¹ Perhaps Jacobs goes even further in his cultural analysis; as David Anderson writes, it "comes close to a cultural-determinist argument." All of the reviewers rightly praise Jacobs for his cultural analysis. Jessica Elkind concludes that Jacobs' book "represents a compelling and important addition to the existing scholarship . . . Perhaps most importantly, by highlighting the role of cultural perceptions in shaping those interactions, Jacobs' book offers a fresh vantage point for understanding U.S. interactions throughout the world." Anderson praises the book as "an excellent example of the 'cultural turn' in the study of the history of U.S. foreign relations" and "a model study of how political choices are a complex product of cognitive beliefs and irrational attitudes." Gosha states that Jacobs "provided what has been missing in the historiography of American diplomatic history toward the Indochina wars – a cultural history of the American perception of 'Laos' and the 'Lao' and how this affected policy making toward this small country." Anne Foster extends Jacobs the highest compliment by noting that we will all have to "re-write our lectures."

All the reviewers are persuaded by Jacobs' very well documented description of American perceptions of the Lao. Long before American intervention in Laos, American observers pictured the people as infantile, lazy, inept, and gutless. This included even those Americans who sympathized with the people and, unlike most Americans, worked among them. "It becomes painful to read," writes Foster. American diplomats accepted these stereotypes. As the reviewers point out, Jacobs is particularly critical of, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos from 1956 to 1958. As Gosha writes, "Jacobs takes us into the downright scary mind of Ambassador Graham Parsons," though it should be mentioned that at least two diplomats, Horace Smith and Winthrop Brown, bravely dissented and indeed went to the brink of insubordination in disagreeing with the American approach to Laos. Brown was rewarded when the new President Kennedy listened to him and exiled Parsons to Sweden.

¹ Andrew C. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina, 2000).

A particularly important stereotype in the Cold War was that the Lao were said to have little interest or skills in fighting (primarily because of their Buddhist beliefs), which made them problematic allies in the Cold War. As Elkind puts it well, this and the other stereotypical portrayals “had the cumulative effect of creating a widely accepted narrative about the futility of supporting the Lao people and of cultivating their leaders as allies in the Cold War.” Jacobs posits that John F. Kennedy accepted without question these portrayals of the Lao, which explains why his administration chose not to engage the communists there but to find a place where a more martial people supposedly lived – in Vietnam.

The reviewers do, however, offer some gentle challenges to this narrative. Anderson believes that Jacobs is wrong to dismiss logistical reasons for choosing not to fight in Laos. Foster accepts Jacobs’ portrayal but asks why the stereotypes were “so strongly expressed regarding Laos and . . . less so for Vietnam and even Cambodia.” Elkind, in contrast, points out that American attitudes toward the Lao were similar to portrayals of many other non-white peoples and that Jacobs may overstate their uniqueness. Goscha very much likes Jacobs’ cultural argument but would like to have seen more attention paid to the “colonial origins of the Orientalist essentialization of the ‘lazy’, ‘indolent’, and ‘carefree’ Lao character.” I was especially taken with the consistent American views that the Lao would not fight. Jacobs attempts to show that this stereotype was incorrect, pointing to significant military feats in the past and some in the present. But might it not be that the Lao simply were not much interested in fighting and killing other Lao at this point in their history? If so, there might have been a grain of truth in the persistent observation that the Lao were not interested in military engagements.

The reviewers all appreciated Jacobs’ inclusion of American aid workers, such as Joel Halpern and his wife Barbara Kerewsky, and non-state actors, particularly Edgar “Pop” Buell, a farmer sent to Laos by International Voluntary Services (a non-governmental forerunner of the Peace Corps). Also important was the apparently omnipresent Dr. Tom Dooley (“he was everywhere it seems,” comments Goscha). The chapters on Dooley and Buell are enormously interesting and evocative and, as Foster points out, make it clear that Americans at the time followed Laos with interest. For a short time, this made Laos “a most consequential place” for ordinary Americans. Elkind thinks that because people like Halpern and Buell were different from other Americans involved in Laos, Jacobs’ claim that “all aid workers behaved in the same, arrogant manner seems a bit oversimplified.” She would also have liked to have seen more contextual materials about them.

All of the reviewers have some reservations about some of Jacobs’ conclusions. But more importantly, all of them regard *The Universe Unraveling* as a very important book. For my part, I found it difficult to put the book down and wished it had continued the story of American involvement beyond the Geneva Conference of 1962.

Participants:

Seth Jacobs is Associate Professor of History at Boston College and the author of *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), and *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations has honored him with two Bernath Prizes: for best article published in the field of U.S. diplomatic history (2002) and best book (2006).

Kenton Clymer is Distinguished Research Professor at Northern Illinois University. His two volume history of U.S. relations with Cambodia (Routledge, 2004) won SHAFR's Robert H. Ferrell Book Prize in 2005. In 2011-2012 he was a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholar in Washington, DC. He is currently writing a history of U.S. relations with Burma.

David L. Anderson is Professor of History at California State University, Monterey Bay, and Senior Lecturer of National Security Affairs at Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA. A past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, his most recent book is *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (2011).

Jessica Elkind received her Ph.D. from UCLA and is an Assistant Professor of History at San Francisco State University. She is currently working on a book on U.S. nation-building projects and the role of American aid workers in South Vietnam from 1955-1965.

Anne L. Foster is Associate Professor of History at Indiana State University. She is author of *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Duke, 2010). She is currently writing a book tentatively titled *The State of Opium*, an exploration of the international and transnational issues surrounding the movement to regulate and eventually prohibit opium in Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Christopher Goscha is Associate Professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). He has recently published *Vietnam. Un État Né de la Guerre 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), the subject of a recent H-Diplo roundtable and *Going Indochinese? Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press/Copenhagen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2012). He is currently working on a socio-cultural history of colonial Saigon and Hanoi at war (1940-56)

Review by David L. Anderson, California State University, Monterey Bay, and Naval Postgraduate School

For Seth Jacobs, U.S. policy in Laos from 1954 to 1962 was based upon “cultural prejudices rather than logistical consideration” (7). This succinct thesis statement clearly situates his well-documented and cogently-argued monograph within the historiography of U.S. Cold War policies in Southeast Asia. Jacobs accurately characterizes most studies of American strategy in that landlocked nation as emphasizing that Laos was not the *place* to draw a line and mount a defense of the wider region against the expansion of global communist tyranny. His new and welcome contribution to the historical conversation is to document that, in American thinking of the time, the Lao were not the *people* on whom to rely to defend the free world against ruthless communist aggressors. In a telling critique of mid-twentieth century American parochialism and cultural (including racial and religious) bias, Jacobs presents a devastating indictment of those Americans who dealt with Laos in the 1950s and early 1960s. U.S. workers in the country lived in a ‘little America’ so isolated from the country it could have been a landing capsule on the moon. Whether it was boorish bureaucrats or patronizing humanitarians, virtually all Americans who encountered the Lao sang from the same hymnal. Jacobs quotes many variations, but the basic refrain was captured in remarks by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that the Lao lacked “will and backbone,” which led to the question of why the United States should “waste money on people who will not help themselves” (69).

Jacobs’ work is an excellent example of the ‘cultural turn’ in the study of the history of U.S. foreign relations. It also represents ‘integrative history’ that marries social science theory and archive-based history.¹ The book is not heavy on theory, but it acknowledges the path-breaking work of historians Andrew Rotter, Mark Philip Bradley, and others who have broadened the political study of the Cold War to include how American policy makers perceived and valued, or did not value, international friends and adversaries. Cultural studies of foreign policy are of various types, including national identity, race, and gender. This book deals primarily with American self-identity and how it prejudiced American concepts of Lao identity. It confirms in American interactions with Laos what Walter Hixon has described as a “cultural hegemony affirming ‘America’ as a manly, racially superior, and providentially destined ‘beacon of liberty.’”² Jacobs’ argument is not explicitly based upon gender or racial analysis. Using official records and family papers of Americans who worked with the Lao, he details how these agents of Western culture infantilized the Lao more than they feminized them. He also notes that, by about 1960 at least, political correctness had developed to a point that prevented U.S. officials and journalists from using the racist ‘white man’s burden’ or ‘little brown brother’ rhetoric of an earlier time. Still, Jacobs paraphrases American comments about Filipinos and the Philippines in 1902

¹ Steven Pincus and William Novak, “Political History after the Cultural Turn,” *Perspectives on History* (May 2011), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1105/1105for3.cfm>.

² Walter L. Hixon, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1-2.

to capture Eisenhower and Kennedy-era notions that U.S. officials “did not want the Lao; they wanted Laos” (272).³

The contrast between people and place provides Jacobs the opportunity to reflect on the issue of why, despite a civil war in Laos that had the United States aiding one side and the Soviet Union the other, the eventually massive U.S. military intervention in the area came in Vietnam and not Laos. He is not the first author to note that officials in Washington were doubtful about the fighting spirit of the Royal Lao Army against communist-led forces, although revealing the depth to which Americans generally viewed virtually all Lao as underachievers is a particular strength of this book. Jacobs argues that strategists in both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations determined that America’s allies in South Vietnam could be better developed as effective fighters than could the Lao. He suggests that this assessment, rather than the geography of Laos, was the deciding factor in where Washington chose to fight in the region. The so-called logistical argument that Laos was not a good place for an American war had merit as well, however. Jacobs cites Bernard Fall’s view that the thousand mile border between Laos and Thailand, a country led by a conservative, pro-American government, provided an excellent support area for U.S. troops to operate in the Plain of Jars, a center of communist strength in Laos.⁴ His point is that logistics were not what gave American planners pause. On the other hand, National Security Council contingency planning documents in 1962 indicate serious concerns about what the planners called “the Military Geography of Laos.” One report concluded that “Laos was inherently vulnerable to infiltration from China and North Vietnam, and the same terrain which made it easy to infiltrate also acted as a natural barrier to large-scale [U.S.] military operations. . . . If the Mekong lowlands of Laos were lost, the general U.S. position in Laos would sharply deteriorate, the threat to Thailand would increase sharply, and infiltration into South Vietnam would be easier.”⁵ The mountainous Thai-Lao border appeared less inviting to U.S. military planners as a staging area than did deep-water ports at Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Vung Tau in South Vietnam.

³ For models of cultural analysis of Cold War policies see Andrew J. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). For recent works of cultural analysis see, for example, Jeffrey A. Keith, “Civilization, Race, and the Japan Expedition’s Cultural Diplomacy, 1854-1845,” *Diplomatic History* 35 (April 2011): 179-202; Katherine A. S. Sibley, et al., “Special Forum: Gender and Sexuality in American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 36 (September 2012): 695-772.

⁴ Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 51.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Vol. 24, *Laos Crisis*, 817n2, http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v24/pg_817. For the relationship between Laos and the American war in Vietnam, see Kenton Clymer, “Cambodia and Laos in the Vietnam War,” in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 360-61.

Topping off Washington's disregard for the Lao as a people and Laos as a place was the fear and loathing of neutralism. To America's leaders of that generation, nonalignment was appeasement, the mortal sin of international politics. As Jacobs deftly describes it, "Americans could not accept that leaders of a small, vulnerable country might be more concerned with their own national survival than with conforming to the geopolitical theories of John Foster Dulles. . . . Laos did not accommodate Washington's cold-war credo and paid the price in ridicule" (18). Indeed, he makes a forceful case that U.S. actions created the tragic civil war in Laos that the majority of Lao were trying so hard to avoid in the intricate complexities of their internal politics. Jacobs is correct to cast Laos as the poster child of U.S. failings in the Third World. It should be noted that this small country was not alone, however. The haughty ignorance of the aspirations of postcolonial nations by officials like Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson was almost legendary among European officials. The British statesman Anthony Eden once blasted Robertson, an extremely anti-communist investment banker, as "impervious to argument and indeed to facts."⁶ The Robertsons in Washington treated the Lao just as they treated Cubans, Egyptians, and a host of other revolutionary nationalists.

Jacobs' book is important and disturbing. His portrait of the virtually unmitigated contempt for the Lao among Americans (with the notable exception of the long-suffering Ambassador Winthrop Brown, who pleaded for more cooperation with Lao leaders) comes close to a cultural-determinist argument. It creates a scenario that a malignant cultural, racial, and religious bigotry among Americans doomed this struggling nation. What mitigates that evil scenario is the integration of Cold War strategic dogma into the cultural abyss separating the Lao and the Americans. Jacobs' monograph is a model study of how political choices are a complex product of cognitive beliefs and irrational attitudes.

⁶ Quoted in Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Foreign Policy toward Communist China, 1949-1969* (New York: Crowell, 1972), 135.

Review by Jessica Elkind, San Francisco State University

As the title of Seth Jacobs' new book suggests, events in the small country of Laos would have major consequences for the rest of the world. *The Universe Unraveling* explores American foreign policy in Laos—an under-populated and understudied part of Southeast Asia—during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Conventional wisdom holds that Cold War geopolitical considerations, American commitments to neighboring states, and logistical concerns about making a stand in the remote jungles and mountains of Laos shaped American policymakers' approach to that nation. However, Jacobs argues that although these factors contributed to United States (U.S.) policies, American assessments of the Lao population were the driving forces behind decision-making on Laos.

American officials, aid workers, and journalists viewed the Lao in a similar, disparaging fashion, as lazy, child-like, and unwilling to fight. Such characterizations appeared in reports and correspondence issued by high-level officials as well as lowbrow media outlets. According to Jacobs, these descriptions had the cumulative effect of creating a widely accepted narrative about the futility of supporting the Lao people and of cultivating their leaders as allies in the Cold War. In an attempt to explain away their ineffectiveness in Laos, American policymakers reduced the diversity of the Lao people, with their varying ethnicities and histories, to a simple and homogeneous culture. They considered any Lao who defied their stereotypes—those Lao who showed resolve and fought for their ideals—to be inauthentic and mere puppets of the North Vietnamese, Chinese, or some other outside group. Jacobs contends that these cultural prejudices significantly influenced American behavior, not only in Laos but also throughout Southeast Asia. As a result of their biases about the nature of Lao people, American policy makers, including two presidents, determined that their anticommunist efforts would meet more success elsewhere in the region, particularly in South Vietnam.

Jacobs skillfully weaves together diplomatic and cultural history, and he relies on various types of sources to make his case. While he makes good use of State Department memoranda, reports, and correspondence as well as other official records, Jacobs also utilizes other types of sources, including newspaper and journal articles, personal letters from aid workers in Laos, and even radio broadcasts. Jacobs draws on the model of Mark Bradley's work on American and Vietnamese perceptions and ideas of each other in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Several sections of *The Universe Unraveling*, notably Jacobs' chapter on Laos in the American popular imagination, are particularly reminiscent of Bradley's study and suggest Bradley's influence on other scholars seeking to understand the cultural underpinnings of American foreign policy. But Jacobs' book also departs from Bradley's work in a critical way. While Bradley shows both sides of the story—American ideas about Vietnam and also Vietnamese perceptions of the United States—Jacobs' study is decidedly more one-sided. He does not fully delve into what the Lao leadership, not to

¹ Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

mention the diverse Lao population, thought of the Americans whom they encountered or how their perceptions of the United States, the American people, or American culture (if such a thing exists) shaped their interactions or decisions.

Jacobs' writing is clear, convincing and accessible, and he provides colorful accounts of some of the most influential Americans working in Laos during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Not only does he discuss high-level diplomats, such as Ambassadors J. Graham Parsons and Winthrop Brown, but Jacobs also considers the role of American aid workers including the anthropologist Joel Halpern, Dr. Tom Dooley, and agricultural advisor and volunteer Edgar Buell. In fact, Jacobs' focus on the human actors, both Lao and American, is one of the most compelling aspects of the book and lends it to a wide audience. *The Universe Unraveling* is organized both chronologically and thematically, with some chapters highlighting American strategy or political developments on the ground in Laos and others exploring cultural perceptions. Throughout the book, Jacobs effectively distills and explains the complicated political landscape in Laos and American responses to developments half a world away from Washington, DC.

In the first three chapters of the book, Jacobs discusses the relationship between the United States and newly-independent Laos in the mid to late 1950s. Jacobs' first chapter focuses on American reporting on Laos during that period, which helped create the perception among U.S. policymakers that the Lao people were unwilling or incapable of fighting. As a counterpoint to such assumptions, Jacobs provides a brief overview of Lao history, including past examples of Lao warfare and the development, albeit relatively late, of a nationalist movement in Laos. Instead of the docile, peace-loving people that mid-century Americans assumed them to be, Lao proved throughout their history their willingness to defend themselves and their interests. In fact, as Jacobs writes, "Laos was born on the battleground. The most revered Lao historical figures were warriors" (35.) However, American officials ignored that history and clung to their beliefs about the Lao.

Jacobs' second chapter details the Eisenhower administration's basic approach to Laos, which focused on maintaining the country as a 'soft buffer' to communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, Ambassador Parsons, a hard-liner and inflexible Cold Warrior, and his colleagues in Vientiane and Washington could not appreciate the skillful diplomacy or genuine desire for non-alignment, national unification, and autonomy of leading Lao politicians such as Premier Souvanna Phouma. As a result, U.S. officials overreacted to political gains made by leftists in the May 1958 elections. American policymakers responded to the election results by adopting a two-pronged strategy that consisted of throwing money at Laos with little regard to the effectiveness of that aid and of supporting extreme right-wing Lao politicians who lacked both popular support and legitimacy in their own country.

The third chapter of *The Universe Unraveling* explores the first part of this strategy—the ill-conceived and poorly implemented American aid programs in Laos. In this section of the book, Jacobs sometimes resorts to generalizations. For example, he writes of American aid workers, "Never did they treat local inhabitants as allies and friends, certainly not as equals, and they made no attempt to foster a sense of camaraderie, of working shoulder to

shoulder in a common cause” (85.) Given his descriptions elsewhere in the book of individuals like Joel Halpern and Edgar Buell, who did seem to defy such stereotypes, Jacobs’ claim that all aid workers behaved in the same, arrogant manner seems a bit oversimplified. However, Jacobs convincingly demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the overall aid program as well as the waste and corruption that American assistance engendered. He argues that the failure of U.S. efforts stemmed primarily from the aid workers’ creation of a ‘Little America’ in Laos, where they could live, work, and socialize in isolation from the Lao population that they were supposed to help. The problems inherent in the U.S. aid program to Laos—in particular, the fact that much of the aid was not applicable to the Lao context and the gulf between Lao needs and interests and U.S. geopolitical objectives—bear striking resemblance to the failures of American technical and economic assistance to South Vietnam during the same time period.

After discussing the general American aid program, Jacobs provides a chapter detailing Lao political events and U.S. responses to them. He then returns to the issue of U.S. assistance to Laos, this time with a more focused discussion of the two most prominent American aid workers in the country, in the book’s fourth chapter, which describes the 1960 Battle for Vientiane and the subsequent multi-dimensional civil war in Laos. As Jacobs shows, Eisenhower’s decision to support the unpopular, autocratic general, Phoumi Nosovan, contributed to polarization within the country and an escalation of the conflict to an international struggle for control in Laos. In the following chapter, which is one of the most engaging of the book, Jacobs again explores the issue of American aid to Laos through an in-depth examination of Dr. Tom Dooley and Edgar Buell, a volunteer with the International Voluntary Services (IVS). Jacobs describes the work these two men performed, and he argues that they, more than any other Americans at the time, “located Laos on the map” and introduced its people to a mass audience back home (193.) Using Dooley and Buell’s own words, Jacobs shows how they depicted the Lao and Hmong, with whom Buell worked especially closely, as dependents in need of basic American assistance but unworthy of American respect. And as Jacobs demonstrates in the subsequent chapter, reporters and commentators picked up where Dooley and Buell left off. Media reports from the late 1950s and early 1960s helped to cement in the American popular imagination a highly derogatory view of the Lao. In an extreme example, one observer referred to the Lao as “retarded children” (216.) Such depictions had serious implications for the confidence (or lack thereof) American officials had in their Lao partners and the policies that the U.S. advanced. Jacobs argues that “the cumulative effect of hundreds of articles and editorials stressing Lao sluggishness, backwardness, and disinclination to fight was to foster a misleading and derogative image of Laos that influenced the attitudes Americans developed about that country” (234.)

The final chapter of *The Universe Unraveling* demonstrates, more clearly than any of the preceding ones, the connections between American views about the Lao people and U.S. policy towards Laos. Here Jacobs focuses on John F. Kennedy’s belief that Laos was an “expendable domino” and the president’s decision to resolve the Lao crisis through a negotiated settlement rather than the use of American troops (240.) Several factors guided Kennedy’s decision, including lack of support from America’s SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) allies, fallout from the Bay of Pigs debacle, and logistical concerns

about waging war in Laos. However, Jacobs claims that cultural biases and the assumption that the Lao would not fight proved to be the key determinant. He writes, “Most important in persuading Kennedy to neutralize Laos, though, was the belief that the Lao were incorrigible pacifists who, in the words of the Laos Task Force, ‘demonstrated little desire, willingness or ability to defend themselves’” (250.)

Kennedy’s position represented a significant shift in U.S. policy towards Laos that had a number of critical implications for the future. First, it signaled that the United States would now accept, at least in certain situations, a coalition government that pledged neutrality rather than to fight to defend a noncommunist regime. More importantly, though, Kennedy’s willingness to compromise on Laos ironically limited his options elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Because the United States had not been able to stem the tide of communist expansion in Laos, Kennedy and his successors doubled down on their efforts to preserve a noncommunist state in South Vietnam. Jacobs contends that they became more invested in the fate of Vietnam because of their shortcomings in Laos. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, Kennedy and other U.S. officials assumed little or no responsibility for those problems and instead blamed the Lao people for flaws in U.S. policy. As a result, Kennedy and his successors committed many of the same mistakes in Vietnam and elsewhere, while failing to heed the lessons their experience in Laos offered.

While *The Universe Unraveling* presents a comprehensive and nuanced account of U.S. policy in Laos, there are, of course, a few issues that Jacobs could have explored in more detail. He might have included more explanation of the work performed by IVS and other aid groups in the chapter on Edgar Buell and Tom Dooley. In his telling, the two men seem to have operated in a vacuum, as Jacobs provides very little information about other aid workers. For example, the reader has no sense of how many other IVS volunteers served in Laos at the time Buell was there, where they lived and worked, how effective their aid projects were, or whether they formed similar opinions of the Lao with whom they interacted. Jacobs also might have examined more fully any differences in American attitudes about the Lao and ethnic minorities, as well as how Lao political leaders viewed and treated minority populations. He discusses the decision of U.S. policy makers to employ the Hmong as the front-line soldiers in the ‘secret war’ against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, but Jacobs otherwise devotes scant attention to how the ethnic diversity of Laos contributed to the political dynamics within the country or to American perceptions of their allies and enemies in the region.

Finally, in the epilogue, Jacobs effectively compares American views of the Lao in the mid-twentieth century with American attitudes about Filipinos at the beginning of that century. However, Jacobs might have pushed such comparisons even further to bolster his thesis about the centrality of cultural considerations for U.S. policy. There are many additional examples of how American stereotypes about other people shaped and often justified official American behavior, for example towards Native Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Japanese during the Second World War. When placed within this context, American attitudes about the Lao do not look as unique as Jacobs seems to suggest they were. Moreover, considered in this light, U.S. policy in Laos appears even less

dependent on Cold War geopolitical concerns and more a continuation of longer-range trends in American history.

Despite these minor shortcomings, *The Universe Unraveling* represents a compelling and important addition to the existing scholarship on U.S. foreign relations in the twentieth century. The book shifts the focus of American policy in Southeast Asia to an understudied but clearly influential part of the region. There exists an impressive and ever-growing body of literature on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia.² *The Universe Unraveling* fills a needed gap in the small number of studies on Laos, even as it contributes to a more sophisticated interpretation of U.S. behavior in those other, more familiar, nations of Southeast Asia. Perhaps most importantly, by highlighting the role of cultural perceptions in shaping those interactions, Jacobs' book offers a fresh vantage point for understanding U.S. interactions throughout the world.

² The literature on U.S. involvement in Vietnam is immense, but some important recent examples include Frederick Logevall's *Embers of War: The Fall of An Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012) and Jessica Chapman's forthcoming *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). For U.S. policy in the Philippines, see Paul Kramer, *Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.) For American policy in Indonesia, see Brad Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.)

The *Universe Unraveling* by Seth Jacobs will prompt us all to re-write our lectures. His book-length exploration of U.S.-Lao relations in the late 1950s and early 1960s complicates the easy anecdote that I, and probably many readers of H-Diplo, made out of President John F. Kennedy's handling of the challenges Laos posed to U.S. Cold War policy in Southeast Asia. Whatever our individual assessments of Kennedy's overall Cold War policy, Laos was a bright spot in many of our lectures. The Kennedy administration's ability to achieve a negotiated compromise for Laos, resulting in a government which included all the political groups, even communists, could be made to have many meanings. It could represent the lost chance for peace in Vietnam, the model which might have been followed. It could show that Kennedy officials really were the brightest, able to negotiate and compromise even at the height of Cold War inflexibility. It could demonstrate that the zero sum game of the Cold War sometimes bowed to unemotional assessments of costs and benefits. After reading Jacobs' entertaining and distressing narrative, those arguments are harder to make.

The subtitle, *American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, signals, as subtitles should, the scope and extent of the analysis. Jacobs explains what the United States did, and what Americans thought, and how they felt, about Laos. It turns out that the United States attempted much more than most Cold War histories report. And, more surprisingly perhaps, Americans avidly followed the adventures of Dr. Tom Dooley¹ and farmer Edgar "Pop" Buell² in Laos in the pages of *Time* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, among other middle-brow mass circulation magazines. Laos, nearly unknown in the United States before it became a critical battleground of the Cold War, and nearly forgotten today, was briefly, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a most consequential place. Jacobs revives that sense of importance, as well as the vast prejudice which accompanied it.

He opens with an extended version of the well-known anecdote about the pre-inaugural briefing of Kennedy by outgoing president Dwight D. Eisenhower, at which Eisenhower famously told Kennedy that Laos was among his most important foreign policy problems. Students today, upon hearing this, usually chuckle to learn that Laos, of which they have barely heard, was thought in early 1961 to be more of a threat to U.S. Cold War success than the situation in Vietnam. Kennedy and his advisors did not chuckle in early 1961. They despaired, because all they were told about Laos by so-called experts led them to

¹ Tom Dooley was a medical doctor who established clinics in South Vietnam and later Laos. An exemplar of the muscular Catholics of the mid-twentieth century, his clinics served humanitarian purposes but U.S. interests as well. He courted public attention to raise money and awareness of those the United States was trying to help, or influence, in South Vietnam.

² Edgar Buell was a retired Indiana farmer who sought adventure after the death of his wife. He volunteered with the International Volunteer Service, which sent him to Laos. He proved to have a skill for connecting with the people of Laos, and was soon enlisted to help get supplies to refugees within Laos. He also was willing to use his connections in the rural areas of Laos to promote U.S. official interests.

believe that there was little likelihood of Lao participation in creating a strong bulwark against the threat of Communist expansion.

The story then backtracks to the 1950s, exploring through several chapters not only the specific policies followed by the Eisenhower administration but also the cultural understandings of Laos by U.S. diplomatic officials, U.S. aid workers (both governmental and non-governmental), and as presented in the U.S. press. While Jacobs clearly and effectively reports what happened in U.S.-Lao relations, his primary interest is in these cultural understandings and the ways they shaped U.S. policy and actions. After reading the book, however, one is tempted to abandon the neutral language of 'cultural understandings' and offer a judgment that there were only cultural misunderstandings. Americans, even those such as Joel Halpern with a Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University, and employed by the U.S. Operations Mission in Laos, seemed to vary only in the degree of their racist assessments of the people of Laos. Halpern and his wife, Barbara Kerewsky, in a very unusual move for U.S. government employees in Laos, lived in the provincial town of Luang Prabang rather than the capital Vientiane, and therefore lived among the Lao rather than in a walled-in all-American compound. Halpern and Kerewsky were excited to be in Laos, another rarity for U.S. officials. But even they, probably the most sensitive and intrinsically interested of the U.S. representatives in the country, resorted to stereotypes and racial judgments. Halpern called the Lao "lazy," "supine," and "placid" in his reports (95) even as those reports noted the inappropriateness of U.S. aid projects and the desirability of tailoring that aid to meet the needs of ordinary farmers rather than the consumption desires of middle class urbanites.

Probably the most common adjective that Jacobs reports Americans using for the Lao, however, was 'indolent.' The phrase the Land of a Million Elephants, as Laos has often been called, began to ring in my ears as the Land of a Million Indolents, so often did I read that word in this book. Other racial judgments were employed, especially regarding the apparent inability or unwillingness of Lao soldiers (in the Royal Lao Army) to fight, but the near constant use of 'indolent' to describe the Lao, by those who liked them but found them frustrating as much as by those who really did not like them at all, was striking. Americans seemed to vie to report the myriad ways in which Lao demonstrated their indolence. Aid workers reported that Lao farmers, when taught how to plant grain with double the yield, responded by planting half the acreage. The supposed reason was that now they didn't have to work as hard for the same gain. U.S. diplomats expressed frustration when leading Lao politicians, supposed to be negotiating a settlement to avert civil war in a time of crisis, took a day off because they did not feel like negotiating. Instead, they were drinking and telling stories. American officials wanted to drag them back to the negotiating table to get some work done at this critical time.

Jacobs rightly assesses that these judgments were racial in motivation, based on American expectations of how to organize social, economic, and political life, not taking into account Lao culture, motivations or needs. When Americans of the 1950s and 1960s attempted to explain why the Lao were so indolent, the dictates of Buddhism topped the list, with its prescriptions against harming other living creatures and what Americans of the time saw as its passive approach to life. Sometimes other explanations were floated: the effects of

disease, the tropical climate, the lack of national unity and of education. Jacobs points out, although briefly and occasionally, that Asia contains many Buddhist nations with very effective armies, and even that the Pathet Lao, the military force that often defeated the U.S.-backed Royal Lao Army, was staffed by the same ethnic and religious stock. Jacobs' observation is intended to demonstrate that the Americans' assessment was prejudicial rather than analytical, the product of cultural misunderstanding, and a source of ineffectual policy by the United States in Laos.

Indeed, a key goal of this book is to demonstrate that U.S. policy for Laos in the late 1950s and early 1960s was "a product of cultural prejudices rather than logistical considerations or other ostensibly more salient imperatives" (7). In this, Jacobs succeeds handily. He does mention the logistical considerations that fighting in Laos presented possibly insurmountable obstacles of geography and (lack of) infrastructure, as well as the utter lack of allied support for military action in Laos. But even these traditional measures of foreign relations were interpreted through the cultural prejudices of Americans, who saw the Lao as weak, placid, unwilling to fight, and, yes, indolent. The United States would be fighting for them, not with them, to save them from themselves. It comes as no surprise that both Eisenhower and Kennedy avoided committing U.S. troops to the cause, and only as a slight surprise that Kennedy decided in the end to get out of Laos to fight elsewhere.

Jacobs establishes quite convincingly that Americans held the people of Laos in extremely low regard. It becomes painful to read, in every chapter, even from those who liked Laos and its people, the contemptuous language used to describe them. But I increasingly asked why these stereotypes and misjudgments were so ubiquitous. Yes, there was racism, cultural prejudice, ethnocentrism. But why were they so strongly expressed regarding Laos and, as Jacobs makes clear, less so for Vietnam and even Cambodia?

One way to answer this question would emphasize Lao history, culture and politics more than Jacobs has. Such an approach would make more of the fact that Laos through history never did have a unified nation with clearly drawn borders, that many people living within Laos may barely have known they were 'Lao' or may have rejected that ethnic label and felt no allegiance to a Lao government. French rule there was indirect, of short duration (imposed during 1893-1907), and resulted in little cultural or social change. The anti-French movement similarly was small and mostly composed of elites. Finally, most Lao Buddhists practiced Theravada Buddhism rather than the Mahayana form practiced in Vietnam. Nation-building Americans assumed the existence of a nation which could be built when they came to Laos, and judged the Lao accordingly. But Laos was more of an administrative entity than a nation-state. Knowing more Lao history and culture does not make the American judgments less racist or ill-informed, but does help us to understand the gulf between Americans and Lao. Americans, who indeed had essentially no knowledge of Laos before 1945 and nearly none until 1954, perhaps expected the people of Laos to be essentially like Vietnamese or Thai. Those comparisons were based on shallow knowledge and geography, however, meaning they were mostly ignorant of Lao culture and history.

Jacobs, a historian of the United States and not of Southeast Asia, occasionally evokes some aspects of Lao history of which U.S. policymakers were ignorant but he is more interested

in what the United States did than in how U.S. observers might better have understood Laos. For his project, a deep explication of Lao history and culture is not necessary. But the question remains: why did Americans seem to react so vehemently to the perceived “indolence” in Laos? Unless the Lao really were more indolent than others, what about Laos or about the United States in Laos prompted this unrelentingly judgment? We have seen in other studies of race and U.S. foreign relations that racial attitudes are highly malleable. The most dramatic examples come from Japan, as so convincingly explored by John Dower and Naoko Shibusawa, but Tim Borstelmann, Mark Bradley, Jason Colby, Carol Anderson, and Paul Kramer, among others, have teased out the ways that race can have different meanings at different times, can be put to different purposes, can evolve.³ Jacobs draws our attention to the ways race and religion are intertwined, and the disdain most Americans had for Buddhism, but does less to explore the broader context of how Americans perceived Buddhism, whether there was specificity or malleability to the racial constructs Americans made for Laos, and in general how race operated to shape U.S. policy in Laos.

We learn how racial judgments informed U.S. policy in Laos, and how easy and apparently universal acceptance in U.S. official circles of those judgments narrowed the options policymakers perceived for Laos. We learn as well how restrictive the Cold War proved to be for the United States: for a statesman, especially perhaps a Lao statesman, to pursue neutralism was sufficient to get labeled weak, naïve, and unreliable by U.S. officials. This stance left little room for creative solutions in places like Laos.

The Universe Unraveling succeeds in explaining how American cultural misunderstandings of Laos doomed U.S. policy efforts there, and how those failures paradoxically prompted U.S. officials to redouble the commitment to South Vietnam. Finally, Jacobs adds to the story of the ubiquity of U.S. power and influence, even when informed by ignorance, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

³ John Dower’s classic *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York:Pantheon, 1987) is the starting point for thinking about this issue. See also Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), Mark P. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Jason Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

In the last decade, a large number of scholars using multi-archival sources have provided top-rate article- and book-length studies of the ‘Lao Crisis’ between 1954 and 1962. The late Arthur Dommen placed this subject at the heart of his magnum opus, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*. Laurent Césari recently published an in-depth study of ‘great power’ diplomacy during the Lao crisis. A renowned group of specialists in international history have recently published seminal accounts of the Lao crisis during this tragic period.¹ Although Seth Jacobs overlooked much of this new scholarship in his book, he has nonetheless provided what has been missing in the historiography of American diplomatic history towards the Indochina Wars – a cultural history of the American perception of “Laos” and the “Lao” and how this affected policy-making towards this small country that bordered on the real problem – Vietnam, both of them.

Jacobs’ book belongs to a genealogy of cultural studies of Western attitudes and policies towards the Indochina War. Decades before the cultural turn occurred in diplomatic history, Paul Mus published two books attempting to explain French and Vietnamese perceptions of each other in cultural terms.² Inspired by Mus, Frances Fitzgerald offered an overarching cultural explanation of how the Vietnamese and Americans failed to understand each other at the height of the Vietnam War. Her highly influential book, *Fire in the Lake*, received the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes.³ More recently, Mark Bradley and Andrew Rotter have relied on the Saidian critique of Orientalism to explore American perceptions and policies towards Vietnam and of India, respectively.⁴ Seth Jacobs’s book

¹ Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and Laurent Césari, *Les grandes puissances et le Laos, 1954-1964*, (Arras: Artois Université Presses, 2007). Qiang Zhai, Matthew Jones, Andrew Preston, Pierre Grosser, Sutayut Osornprasop, Pierre Journoud, Mari Olsen, Vathana Pholsena, Nguyen Vu Tung, Margaret Gnoinska, John Prados, and Jim Hershberg have published pathbreaking essays in *The Failure of Peace in Indochina, 1954-1962*, (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010), which I co-edited in English and French with Karine Laplante.

² Paul Mus, *Viet-Nam: Sociologie d'une guerre*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952) and *Le destin de l'Union française: de l'Afrique à l'Indochine*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1954).

³ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, (Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown, 1972).

⁴ Andrew Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: Culture and Indo-U.S. Relations, 1947-1964*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mark Bradley, ‘Slouching Toward Bethlehem: Culture, Diplomacy and the Origins of the Cold War in Vietnam’, in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*, edited by Christian G. Appy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), pp. 11-34. For those interested in learning more about scholarship incorporating Edward Said’s critique of European Orientalism into the study of American Foreign Relations, there is no better place to start than with Andrew Rotter: ‘Saidism without Said: Orientalism and U.S. Diplomatic History’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 105, no. 4, (October 2000), pp. 1205-1217.

falls squarely into this scholarship on the cultural dimensions of American foreign relations. Indeed, *The Universe Unraveling* appears in Mark Bradley's series with Cornell University Press⁵ and is favorably blurbed on the back cover by Andrew Rotter for its cultural approach.

At the heart of Jacobs' book is the argument that it was the negative, essentialized, and often racist American perception of the Lao, juxtaposed with the more positive image of the warlike and mature Vietnamese, that led President Kennedy to accept the neutralization of Laos in 1962 in order to take a stand against communism in Vietnam. Whether in diplomatic cables or popular culture, Jacobs shows, the Lao appeared in the American mind as "childlike", "effeminate" and "lazy" beings (6, 12-13). Jacobs' selection of Laos as a subject is fully justified. First, no one has attempted a cultural analysis of American policy towards this country. This despite the fact that Washington came extraordinarily close to going to war over it in order to hold off world communism at the Indochinese? pass. Two, the primary source material on Laos is enormous given the importance it acquired under the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Indeed, Jacobs successfully mines the relevant memoirs and a large body of diplomatic correspondence held in the National Archives and Records Administration and presidential archives in the United States. He also makes wonderful use of the press and the private papers of several non-official actors, such as Tom Dooley, Edgar Buell, and Joel Halpern. Third, Jacobs' shift to Laos and his argument contrasting the official American perception of the Lao to that of the Vietnamese builds upon his earlier research and culturally calibrated books on Ngo Dinh Diem and American policy towards the Republic of Vietnam.⁶

Jacobs provides a wonderful cast of characters and analyzes them fairly and effectively to make his point about the importance of culture, race, and ideology in the formulation of American policy towards Laos. Dooley is there; he was everywhere it seems. Jacobs' discussion of this indefatigable man, his contacts and activities, including his radio show beaming straight into Middle America from Laos is engrossing. Less flamboyant though just as important was the grieving Indiana farmer Edgar Buell, who also landed in Laos with the sincere hope of helping the people. He was soon living among villagers, learning the language, and doing everything in his power to get American aid out of urban black-markets and to the farmers in the countryside – and not without success. But he also became deeply involved in local politics and eventually found himself unwittingly helping the CIA. Despite their differences, Dooley, Buell, and even the journalist Stanley Karnow contributed to the essentializing the Lao character (lazy, indolent, and happy-go-lucky) in the American popular imagination.

⁵ "The United States and the World" at http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/collections/?collection_id=186 The other editors of the series are David Engerman and Paul Kramer

⁶ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) and his *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

Back in Vientiane, Jacobs takes us into the downright scary mind of Ambassador Graham Parsons, whose colonial paternalism, aggressive Cold War worldview, and support from the highest reaches of power in Washington contributed to destabilizing Lao politics from 1954, triggering civil war, its internationalization, and thereby ensuring the meltdown of this small country. Dommen also made this point powerfully in his book, but Jacobs adds a much needed cultural take on it. On the other extreme were men such as the American anthropologist, Joel Halpern. Like Buell, Halpern wanted to help get massive American aid and “modernity” to the people in the countryside and did his best to spur American officials into action. Both Halpern and Buell were critical of the American diplomatic community. Trapped in a bubble, few Americans actually knew the Lao or Laos, let alone their needs and hopes. Jacobs provides one of the best accounts available of how “Little Americas” take form abroad in the form of diplomatic missions (chapter 3).

In his 1973 review of Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake*, David Marr pointed out that she had, in reality, written two books, one on the cultural construction of the Vietnamese national character (“little short of disastrous,” he said), the other on American diplomacy towards Ngo Dinh Diem (an analytical success according to Marr).⁷ Like other diplomatic historians looking to make the cultural turn, Jacobs has a hard time reconciling the cultural side of his story with the nuts and bolts of the diplomatic one he also wants to tell or feels compelled to do so. In his earlier research on Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States, Jacobs got around this problem neatly by publishing two books, one on the cultural dimensions of the American interaction with Diem (using race and religion as his analytical categories), the other being a more straightforward diplomatic history of the “origins of America’s war in Vietnam”. In his book on Laos, Jacobs combines both stories into one book with the ultimate goal of showing that the negative American perception of the Lao and the positive one of the Vietnamese was crucial to Kennedy’s decision not to take a stand in Laos but rather in Vietnam.

Unlike Fitzgerald, Jacobs’ best chapters are on the cultural aspects of American policy towards Laos (chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6). Less satisfying is his discussion of the complex Lao crisis and the second Geneva conference that ultimately defused it. Readers unfamiliar with the Laos crisis – its complex local, regional, and international dimensions – will struggle to understand what, exactly, is going on and why and how Laos became such an apparent obsession for two presidents. Jacobs’ discussion of Lao politics could be expanded. Nor does he have much to say on the roles played by the Chinese, the Soviets, the British, the French, or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Qiang Zhai and Mari Olsen show that the Chinese shared the DRV’s desire from 1958 to push the Pathet Lao as hard as the Americans were backing the far right.⁸ Nor did the Sino-Soviet break prevent Moscow and Beijing from collaborating on Laos at Geneva. Jacobs could have better explained how the

⁷ David Marr, Review of *Fire in the Lake*, in *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 32, no 3 (May 1973), pp. 564-565.

⁸ Qiang Zhai, ‘Buying Time for the Pathet Lao : China and the Geneva Conference on Laos, 1961-1962’; Mari Olsen, ‘The Soviet Union and the Fight over Laos, 1961-1962.’

Soviets, for example, fully backed by the Chinese and the DRV, established an airlift into the Plain of Jars.⁹ Not only would this show how Laos suddenly became a major hotspot in the Cold War, but it would have allowed him to link the crisis in Laos to the one in Berlin, where the Americans were operating an airlift at exactly the same time.¹⁰

Jacobs might retort that this wider context is secondary to his argument. To some extent yes, but one cannot have it both ways. Either the author needs to frame his book as the first cultural history of American diplomacy towards Laos, which it most certainly is, or he needs to analyze more effectively the American and international diplomacy of the Lao crisis between the two Genevas if he truly wants to show how the “universe” almost unraveled over the Plain of Jars (and Berlin and Cuba ...). Jacobs successfully shows that the highest reaches of power in the United States held a negative, essentializing view of Laos and the Lao. And I accept that this impacted upon Kennedy’s decision to negotiate a solution to the Lao crisis. However, without exploring other reasons for choosing negotiations, Jacobs attaches too much importance to the cultural factor and its uniquely American dimensions. There were other actors and reasons which much of the new scholarship mentioned above brings to light. For one, Vietnam – both of them – was what it was all about for a long time, not Laos, not Cambodia.¹¹ The Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations knew this perfectly well.¹² Laos only became important to the Americans in terms of how it was related to Vietnam and saving the southern half from world communism. Americans were convinced that the DRV was bent on taking all of Indochina. On that note, Jacobs might have taken a look at the American diplomatic reporting on the spectacular DRV invasion of Laos in 1953. More importantly, Laurent Césari¹³ has shown that John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev were very much aware of the parallel between the American airlift to Berlin and the Soviet one to Laos and each secretly agreed to link the two crises and their diplomatic resolutions at Geneva. Such a linkage mattered.

I also worry that Jacobs is painting a rather too positive American view of the Republican Vietnamese as being more warlike and manly in order to make his cultural case about Washington’s decision to take a stand in Vietnam instead of Laos. That American officials cast Republican Vietnamese, including Diem, in such terms is not in question. They did and

⁹ Laurent Césari, ‘La liaison Europe-Indochine, 1961-1964’, in *The Failure of Peace in Indochina/L’Echec de la paix en Indochine*, op. cit.

¹⁰ Césari shows this masterfully in his book cited in note 1.

¹¹ See Andrew Preston’s essay in *The Failure of Peace in Indochina/L’Echec de la paix en Indochine*, op. cit.

¹² One of the most convincing analyses of the initial American commitment to Vietnam was penned by Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: The Origins of American Commitment to Vietnam*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

¹³ Césari, *Les grandes puissances et le Laos, 1954-1964*, op. cit.

Jacobs details this, especially in arguments designed to justify negotiating on Laos. But that does not necessarily mean that such a representation of the non-communist Vietnamese had always been there or was taken seriously by American officials in other contexts. Much of the French and American diplomatic reporting I have read paints a very unfavorable portrait of the Vietnamese associated with the State of Vietnam/Bao Dai and its avatar, the Republic of Vietnam/Ngo Dinh Diem. Many American diplomatic, military, and newspaper observers would have agreed with French General de Lattre's famous speech to Vietnamese youth in July 1951, imploring them "to be men" – *Soyez des hommes!*¹⁴ I would wager that if one carefully mined French and American reporting on this Vietnamese fighting man, fighting spirit, and essential character, we would find that the image of the "Vietnamese" into the 1960s was not always as positive as the one Jacobs juxtaposes with that of the Lao. It often paralleled the negative American view of the Chinese nationalist fighting man and Chiang Kaishek.

Also missing from Jacob's cultural analysis is a discussion of the colonial origins of the Orientalist essentialization of the 'lazy', 'indolent', and 'carefree' Lao character. One would like to know how the Americans borrowed from and continued a French colonial discourse (or even a pre-existing imperial Vietnamese one). Even if one does not read French, a great deal of exciting and theoretically sophisticated secondary literature exists in English on this vital subject. American Orientalism in diplomatic minds did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Nor did "Laos" exist in its current national form before World War II; it's a colonial creation.¹⁵

But if my comments are long, it is only because Seth Jacobs has written a highly stimulating and important book. Not only is it the first account of the cultural dimension of American foreign policy towards Laos between 1954 and 1962, but it also provides insights into how a cast of little-known individuals such as Tom Dooley, Edgar Buell, and other Americans understood Laos (or didn't) and helped shape an essentialized, misleading perception of the small little landlocked country called Laos. I can only hope now that a new generation of scholars will take up the challenge of exploring the cultural attitudes of other actors, not least of all the Chinese, Thais, Soviets, the Vietnamese (from both sides) and the Lao themselves.

¹⁴ http://www.anai-asso.org/NET/document/le_temps_de_la_guerre/la_guerre_dindochine/appel_a_la_jeunesse_vietnamienne_1_1_juillet_1951/index.htm

¹⁵ Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*, (London: Routledge, 1997); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam*; Christina Klein, ed., *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Soren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space Between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945*, (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008); Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1997); and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1981).

Author's Response by Seth Jacobs, Boston College

This is a welcome turnabout for me. Most SHAFR colleagues who read the 2007 H-Diplo roundtable on my first book still wince at the memory and try to avoid mentioning it in my presence lest they reopen old wounds. On this occasion, though, the praise is more abundant and the criticism gentler. Either I've improved as a historian (doubtful) or I had the good fortune to draw a more lenient panel of reviewers (probable). In any event, I thank David Anderson, Jessica Elkind, Anne Foster, and Christopher Goscha for their thoughtful and constructive analyses.

Let me begin with Goscha, since his comments are lengthiest. At the risk of sounding peevish, I must object to the distinction he makes between *The Universe Unraveling* and my monographs about Washington's 'Diem experiment' in South Vietnam.¹ "Jacobs has a hard time reconciling the cultural side of his story with the nuts and bolts of the diplomatic one," Goscha writes. "In his earlier research on Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States, Jacobs got around this problem neatly by publishing two books, one on the cultural dimensions of the American interaction with Diem, . . . the other being a more straightforward diplomatic history." This time, "Jacobs combines both stories into one book," and the result, in Goscha's opinion, is neither fish nor fowl. If I am reading Goscha's review correctly—and maybe I am not—I have to state that his review presents an inaccurate picture of *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, which had the same scholarly objective as *Universe Unraveling*: to demonstrate how U.S. officials' cultural assumptions led to a particular policy output. In one book, I laid bare the roots of Washington's nine-year commitment to Diem, finding that the 'experiment' was inextricably bound up with midcentury American racism and religiosity; in the other, I interpreted the American decision to accept a nonaligned Laos as a product of intense prejudice against the Lao. Both books also endeavor to debunk a longstanding—but, in my view, insufficient—explanation of why American policymakers acted as they did. According to the accepted narrative, Washington chose Diem as its viceroy because the Eisenhower administration was unaware of any credible rivals for the South Vietnamese premiership—which is untrue, as it turns out. With regard to the neutralization of Laos, two generations of historians maintained that President John F. Kennedy agreed to settle for a draw in this distant kingdom because its landlocked, mountainous, jungled terrain presented insuperable logistical obstacles—likewise untrue, or at least not wholly true. In both *Miracle Man* and *Universe Unraveling* I tried to meet the challenge that all diplomatic historians taking the cultural turn face: namely, it can be difficult to connect attitudes to deeds. The degree to which I succeeded or failed in establishing that connection is for others to judge. But I did *not* write *Cold War Mandarin* to "get around the problem" of relating a "nuts and bolts" diplomatic "story" that I had strategically avoided in *Miracle Man*. Quite the contrary: many of the key diplomatic events in Washington's protracted sponsorship of Diem—such as General J. Lawton Collins's 1954-55 mission to Saigon as presidential envoy and Diem's triumphal 1957 tour of the

¹ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); idem, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

United States—are addressed in detail in both of my Diem books; the principal difference between them is that the later text covers a longer stretch of time and is aimed more explicitly at an undergraduate readership.

That said—and perhaps it shouldn't have been; again, I may have misread Goscha's text—I learned a great deal from his trenchant, wide-ranging review. I take his point about the recent spate of superb articles and books on the 1954-62 Laos crisis, and it is true that my limited language skills prevented me from reading Laurent Césari's work and other cutting-edge texts. Nonetheless, I did draw extensively on Arthur Dommen's *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, a cinderblock-sized monograph that Goscha rightly dubs the veteran journalist's "magnum opus," along with Dommen's *Conflict in Laos and Laos: Keystone of Indochina*.² These are among the most dog-eared, underlined, highlighted, coffee-stained books in my library. Indeed, while rereading *Universe Unraveling* for this roundtable, I caught an oversight that I am pleased to correct here: it was Dommen who directed my attention to the notorious encounter between U.S. Ambassador J. Graham Parsons and Prince Phetsarath, Laos's revered elder statesman, on May 29, 1957—a meeting in which, as I note, "the extent of Parsons's remoteness from popular sentiment in his host country became apparent" (109). Although I deal with this confrontation more extensively than does Dommen, and while I ascribe greater significance to it, his endnotes were what prompted me to examine the relevant memoranda. I gratefully acknowledge his contribution.³

Goscha contends that I depict a "rather too positive American view of the Republican Vietnamese as being more warlike and manly" than the Lao, remarking that many midcentury Americans ascribed traits like cowardice, sloth, and childishness to the Vietnamese as well. Fair enough, but I would argue that the operative word here is "more," and that my claim about American assumptions is comparative. U.S. policymakers and pundits of the Eisenhower era held all inhabitants of the former French Indochina in derision; even Diem came in for his share of ridicule, with CIA operative Edward Lansdale, his friend and booster, at one time describing him as "the eldest of the Seven Dwarfs deciding what to do about Snow White."⁴ On balance, though, the Lao ranked lowest in the estimation of Americans charged either with crafting U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia or interpreting developments there for a stateside audience. An example that comes readily to mind is Virginia Thompson's study *French Indo-China*, which I address in Chapter One and which served as a standard reference book into the 1960s.⁵ Thompson, an Asia

² Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, Revised Edition (New York: Praeger, 1971); Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

³ See Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*, 335, 1055.

⁴ Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 159.

⁵ Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

specialist, had some very unkind things to say about the Vietnamese—or “Annamites,” as she called them; she condemned their “laziness,” observed that they “lacked the driving power given by strong desires,” and found that their “famous tolerance” was actually “dislike of effort.” Yet they were “industrious” and “prolific” compared to the “sluggish,” “insouciant” Lao, whose cultural, and perhaps racial, attributes presented “insuperable obstacles to industrial and commercial progress.”⁶ It was not that Thompson and her contemporaries in journalism and academe regarded the Vietnamese with a great deal of respect or considered them equal in intellect or character to Westerners; they just accorded them *more* respect—and credit for brains and guts—than they gave to the Lao. And that, I submit, made the difference in determining which Southeast Asian country Washington chose to transform into its bulwark against communism.

I’m troubled by the low marks Goscha’s review gives my “discussion of the complex Lao crisis and the second Geneva conference that ultimately defused it.” He predicts that anyone not already acquainted with the affair “will struggle to understand what, exactly, is going on.” That comment stings, because I bent every effort to render this Byzantine imbroglio intelligible and absorbing. Obviously, I hope readers disagree with Goscha’s opinion and endorse Elkind’s verdict that “Jacobs effectively distills and explains the complicated political landscape in Laos and American responses to developments half a world away in Washington DC.” But Goscha is right to underscore the Lao crisis’s tortuousness, the lack of a definitive resolution, and the confusing *dramatis personae* (by 1958, Laos’s three leading rival politicians were named Phoui, Phoumi, and Phouma; deletion of one letter in Eisenhower’s daily intelligence briefing could signal either a coup or a typo). U. Alexis Johnson, who served as Kennedy’s Deputy Undersecretary of State during the crucial period when Kennedy decided to neutralize Laos, remembered this episode as “fiendishly complicated”⁷—doubtless one of the reasons why no monograph-length study of U.S. policy toward Laos under Eisenhower and Kennedy appeared in the almost forty years between the publication of Charles Stevenson’s revised dissertation and the arrival of my book.⁸

Stylistic objections aside, I think Goscha’s review overstates matters in the assertion that I do not “have much to say about the Chinese, the Soviets, the British, the French, or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).” In fact, I devote considerable attention to Soviet maneuvers in Laos, including an extended analysis of the famous Vienna summit between John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, where, nearly lost amid the threats

⁶ Thompson, 375-80.

⁷ U. Alexis Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power: The Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 295.

⁸ Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). By coincidence, William Rust’s treatment of U.S.-Lao relations in the Eisenhower-Kennedy era left the bindery a few months after mine did. His is a much more conventional account, but it is ably researched and repays reading. See William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

and macho posturing, a *modus vivendi* emerged in which both Washington and Moscow could claim a measure of victory. Khrushchev, although seemingly prepared to challenge the West everywhere from Cuba to the Congo, accepted Kennedy's assertion that "Laos is not so important as to get us as involved as we are" and joined the American president in issuing a statement affirming mutual "support of a neutral and independent Laos" (268). I also address Roving Ambassador Averell Harriman's formal and off-the-record negotiations with Georgi Pushkin, head of the Soviet delegation at the Geneva Conference, and the "Pushkin-Harriman understanding" that resulted from those meetings, an arrangement whereby the Soviets would "police" the communist bloc insofar as Laos was concerned and the Americans would keep non-communist nations from violating Lao neutrality (261). My unfamiliarity with Césari's work did cause me to overlook the connection between the Soviet airlift in the Plain of Jars and the simultaneous U.S. airlift in Berlin, and I concede Goscha's point that "[s]uch a linkage mattered," but I do not think it mattered enough to weaken my argument about Kennedy's cultural preconceptions playing the predominant role in his Laos policy.

Note that I wrote "predominant," not "exclusive." *Universe Unraveling* does not advance a single-issue explanation. Rather, it acknowledges that American policymakers in the 1950s and early 1960s were impelled and constrained by a number of factors, including the oft-invoked logistical concerns, but that, in the final analysis, the element that tipped the scales in favor of Lao neutralization was the poisonously negative stereotype of the Lao accepted by virtually every upper and middle echelon official in the White House, State Department, and Pentagon. Absent that longstanding cultural construction, I contend, Washington would have pursued a different policy toward Laos. Kennedy would have rejected communist participation in the Royal Lao Government (RLG), the American military presence in Laos would have swelled as it did in South Vietnam, and Lao strongman Phoumi Nosavan might well have become the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia" instead of Diem.

As for the other diplomatic agendas—French, British, Chinese, and North Vietnamese—that Goscha considers essential to establishing the "wider context" of the Laos crisis: no doubt I could have examined these in greater depth, but I do not ignore them. I explore the gradual, grudging transition from French to American stewardship in Laos as Washington implemented the so-called "Heintges Plan"—named after Brigadier General John Heintges, director of the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO)—near the end of Eisenhower's second term. This was not an amicable handing over of the baton; French officers recoiled at the prospect of being supplanted by a U.S. military mission, but financial pressures forced the government of Charles de Gaulle to phase down French commitments overseas, and the French gave way with bad grace. I moreover address the high-profile meeting between Kennedy and de Gaulle at which the French President flatly declared that "France would not intervene" even if the communist Pathet Lao made a move to seize the entire country (265). My discussion of London's role is admittedly limited to a few passages detailing British support for neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma. I wish *Universe Unraveling* hadn't already been in proofs when Nicholas Tarling's study *Britain and the Neutralization of Laos*

came out⁹, and I *really* wish that fears about exceeding the word limit hadn't prompted me to cut a wonderful anecdote featuring British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan—although, begging everyone's indulgence, I'll relate it in here. Less than a month after conferring with Kennedy at Key West and guaranteeing British support for military maneuvers in Laos if they became necessary, Macmillan joined Kennedy for a cruise down the Potomac and noticed a small flotilla of boats from a local high school being swept helplessly along by the current. "Looks like the Laotian Navy!" Macmillan declared, eliciting a laugh from the president.¹⁰ Clearly, Macmillan shared the low opinion of Lao military prowess expressed by Kennedy's advisers.

Chinese and North Vietnamese involvement in the Lao civil war is, of course, an important topic, and one that I deal with briefly in my introduction by drawing on secondary sources. Since some of the scholars referenced are those Goscha mentions, notably Qiang Zhai, I was surprised to read Goscha's claim that "the Chinese shared the DRV's desire from 1958 to push the Pathet Lao as hard as the Americans were backing the far right." That doesn't square with the timeline as I understand it, but perhaps this is because I relied on an earlier Qiang publication and neglected to consult Mari Olsen's work.¹¹ In any event, neither Hanoi nor Beijing wielded the financial and military clout Washington did, and the precise extent of their support for the Pathet Lao during the late Eisenhower era is, as Goscha observes, "secondary to [my] argument."

I agree with Goscha's opinion that I ought to have probed "the colonial origins of the Orientalist essentialization of the 'lazy,' 'indolent,' and 'carefree' Lao character." This is a fascinating and understudied phenomenon, the degree to which America cold warriors congratulated themselves for being more enlightened than the European overlords they displaced while at the same time retaining—and occasionally amplifying—prejudices held by French, British, Dutch, and other colonialists. One of the most wrenching entries I ran across in Joel Halpern's voluminous field notes involved the complaint by a resident of Vientiane about U.S. aid workers ensconced in their 'Little America.'¹² Americans were so arrogant and inapproachable, this man said, that they made him nostalgic for colonial days, when "the French tried more to mix with the people" (124). Certainly, no French rubber plantation baron ever viewed the Lao with greater disdain than Parsons, and his attitude was doubly galling to his hosts because he kept insisting, as in the above-cited faceoff with Phetsarath, that the Lao should be grateful that Washington was looking out for their

⁹ Nicholas Tarling, *Britain and the Neutralization of Laos* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Cited in Alistair Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, Vol. II: 1957-1986 (New York: Viking, 1989), 294.

¹¹ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mari Olsen, "The Soviet Union and the Fight over Laos, 1961-1962" in *The Failure of Peace in Indochina, 1954-1962*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Karine Laplante (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010).

¹² The Joel Halpern Papers, initially housed at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and then at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, are currently being processed at their new locale, Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., where they should be available shortly to interested researchers.

interests rather than corrupt, decadent Paris. Had Phetsarath been less attentive to protocol, he might have protested that Cold War nation building seemed not so very different from *la mission civilisatrice* to those on the receiving end.

Both Goscha and Elkind point out my intellectual debt to Mark Bradley. I gladly acknowledge it as well. Bradley's *Imagining Vietnam and America* joins Kristin Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood* and Andrew Rotter's *Comrades At Odds* as some of the most mind-expanding books I read in graduate school.¹³ (Yes, there *is* a pattern there; some of us took the cultural turn on a dime.) If *Universe Unraveling* approaches the standard Bradley set with his first monograph, it will have exceeded everyone's expectations, including mine. Elkind also notes that, unlike *Imagining Vietnam and America*, my book presents just one side of the calamitous relationship between the United States and a former French colony in Southeast Asia. All of my primary and secondary sources are in English, the only language I speak or read. It is for other, probably younger diplomatic historians to investigate the Lao perspective and determine, as Elkind puts it, "how their perceptions of the United States, the American people, or American culture . . . shaped their interactions or decisions." To judge by the statements of Lao policymakers that I have been able to read in translation, though, they seem to have had a much firmer grasp on reality (if that is not too loaded a term) than their American counterparts. I'll cite just one example. After the battle for Vientiane, which laid waste to the Lao capital and which I address at length in Chapter Four, Souvanna vented his anguish to a sympathetic reporter. First he slammed Parsons, fuming, "He understood nothing about Asia and nothing about Laos. He is the most reprehensible and nefarious of men. He is the ignominious architect of disastrous American policy toward Laos. He and others like him are directly responsible for the recent spilling of Lao blood." Then Souvanna condemned the entire Eisenhower administration: "What I shall never forgive the United States for is the fact that it betrayed me, that it double-crossed me and my government. It did everything possible to prevent the integration of the Pathet Lao into the government, and when, despite its efforts, I succeeded, the United States continued to sabotage me."¹⁴ Every word of that tirade is true. Indeed, it summarizes most of my book. No American policymaker sized up the situation so accurately at the time—or, to my knowledge, afterwards.

Elkind makes two excellent suggestions for deepening my analysis, and I'm happy to report that I'm already on my way toward fulfilling one of them. There should be "more explanation of the work performed by IVS aid groups in the chapter on Edgar Buell and Tom Dooley," she writes. "In this telling, the two men seem to have operated in a vacuum, as Jacobs provides very little information about other aid workers." True, and it's a shame,

¹³ Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Andrew J. Rotter, *Comrades At Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Cited in "Exiled Laos Chief Lays War to U.S.," *New York Times*, January 20, 1961.

because of all the archives I visited while conducting research for this project, none proved more stimulating than the International Voluntary Services Collection in the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College. The promotional literature, newsletters, annual reports, executive committee meeting minutes, orientation materials, applications for service, and personal correspondence housed in this archive are grist for an article I'm writing at present on the idealistic early years of IVS's efforts in Laos, *before* the organization became so hideously compromised by its collaboration with the CIA and Hmong General Vang Pao's anticommunist guerrilla army. From 1957 to 1960, IVS workers initiated small-scale people-to-people programs in various Lao villages with no interference from U.S. aid officials, and the evidence indicates they accomplished a great deal: teaching health, technical, and agricultural skills; building hospitals and schools; and, overall, living up to the noble vision of IVS's founders. But a few months after Edgar "Pop" Buell arrived in Lhat Houang, most IVSers made what the journalist John Lewallen aptly calls an "agonizing reappraisal" of their objective and abandoned apolitical philanthropy to become "missionaries of development in support of one side in a shooting war."¹⁵ The trigger for this transformation was the battle for Vientiane, when the rightist General Phoumi captured Laos's administrative capital, drove neutralist leader Kong Le into the arms of the Pathet Lao, and plunged the country into civil conflict that rendered many IVS projects impracticable. As I demonstrate, Buell thrived in the new Cold War environment, but IVS suffered a blow to its reputation from which it has yet to recover. Given the reflexive association of the IVS with counterinsurgency, intelligence gathering, and even drug smuggling in much of the literature on America's secret war in Laos, it is a revelatory and heartbreaking experience to read the organization's records from the pre-1960 period, when dozens of young Americans went to Laos with the loftiest of motivations—although, as I intend to show, they often spoke and wrote about the Lao in terms that foreshadowed the hauteur displayed by CIA, PEO, and Embassy officials in later years. I would like to have included more of this material in *Universe Unraveling*, but every scholar publishing today faces the imperative to condense and distill; thus, nearly all of my non-Buell-related IVS passages wound up in a file labeled (I hope misleadingly) "Laos Book Offscourings," awaiting publication in another forum. The same holds true for sections dealing with Dr. Tom Dooley's longest serving assistants in Laos, Dwight Davis and Earl Rhine, whose papers are at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and whose conception of their humanitarian endeavor in Southeast Asian jungles differed markedly from that of their boss. (James Fisher points up this discrepancy in his excellent biography of Dooley.¹⁶) Freed from the necessity of bringing the book in at around 150,000 words, I would have let these two actors take center stage, however briefly.

Elkind also wonders "how the ethnic diversity of Laos contributed . . . to American perceptions of their allies and enemies in the region." She notes that while I devote a great

¹⁵ John Lewallen, "The Reluctant Counterinsurgents: International Voluntary Services in Laos," *Laos: War and Revolution*, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 360.

¹⁶ James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 183.

deal of attention to U.S. efforts to recruit the Hmong as “front-line soldiers,” I don’t say much about Laos’s other ethnic groups, estimated to number as many as 160. Did this remarkable heterogeneity affect Americans’ understanding of the situation? Yes and no. As I observe in chapter three, Parsons and other members of the U.S. mission in Vientiane found themselves frustrated by Laos’s refusal to “hang together as a state” (103). They often grumbled that the people of Laos were as varied as the landscape was anarchic. How could Washington conduct a coherent foreign policy in such chaos? Similarly, when I address portrayals of the Lao in the American media, I cite ethnic plurality as one of the four theories “America’s ministers of information advanced . . . to account for Lao unassertiveness” (230). Yet if Americans were aware of Laos’s variegation, they rarely took the time to distinguish between, for example, lowland Lao, Akha, and Khmu. “Lao” and “Laotian” were interchangeable terms. *All* inhabitants of this peculiar, wedge-shaped country fit the profile: “gentle, peaceful, innocent, charming, feckless, and makes-no-never mind,” in the words of Cooperative for American Relief to Everywhere director Oden Meeker (214). The anthropologist Barbara Kerewsky, who figures so prominently in chapter three, made the point as explicitly as any historian could want, noting that she had been “annoyed, when in Washington, to read generalizations about the Lao character,” but that a few days of fieldwork in Luang Prabang were enough to convince her that “they are true, and that the generalizations indeed hold for almost anyone” (96).

Except the Hmong. Americans’ cultural construction of this group, who made up about 10 percent of Laos’s population at midcentury, was ambiguous, for while aid workers like Buell and CIA operatives like William Lair groped for superlatives in describing the courage and toughness of Vang Pao and his followers, they leavened their praise with a heavy dose of paternalism. To them, the Hmong were “the little guys”; Vang Pao was “the big little guy.”¹⁷ No one questioned their bravery, but in American eyes it was a child’s bravery, born more out of ignorance than fortitude, and often verging on foolhardiness. Roger Warner’s flawed but still invaluable study of the CIA’s clandestine war in Laos vividly evokes the frustration experienced by Vang Pao’s American advisers, who could not dissuade the general from picking fights he was bound to lose, as was the case when he chose to make a stand at Padong in early 1961.¹⁸ CIA officers stationed at this base grew apprehensive when Pathet Lao and neutralist forces massed in the southern Plain of Jars; they told Vang Pao to evacuate, that he would sacrifice his guerrilla army’s mobility if he met heavily armed conventional units head-on, but the ‘big little guy’ was deaf to advice, and he took an unnecessary thrashing.¹⁹ Americans in Laos also often commented on the Hmong’s puerile fascination with machinery, especially airplanes. These were big, shiny toys to Vang Pao and his men; they couldn’t think of them in practical terms, as tools of warfare, but only as delightful playthings and status symbols. Even Buell, who was Vang

¹⁷ Cited in Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 9.

¹⁸ Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America’s Clandestine War in Laos* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1996), 42-51.

¹⁹ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 42-51.

Pao's closest American confidant, basically viewed the U.S.-Hmong relationship as a parent-child one. From his standpoint, the Hmong gained a leg up over other Laotian ethnic groups by being enthusiastic and aggressive children. It took no effort to motivate them, which came as a relief after dealing with the slugabeds in the Royal Lao Army (RLA). But there was still a vast gulf in maturity between "Pop" and his wards.²⁰

Anderson's review is so generous and complimentary that I'm tempted to limit my response to a heartfelt "thank you." Still, he indirectly poses a question that several readers of *Universe Unraveling* have broached outright: Do I, in my zeal to revise the standard interpretation of Washington's Laos policy, downplay the logistical difficulties involved in waging war on the other side of the planet in a craggy, disease-ridden kingdom lacking both infrastructure and coastline? In a word, no. Never in the book do I minimize these challenges; in fact, I devote several pages to identifying and detailing them. Make no mistake: Laos did present what Lawrence Freedman calls "a logistical nightmare" to U.S. policymakers.²¹ Yet so did South Vietnam. Neither country's terrain accommodated modern, mechanized forces. Both had climates that fostered malaria and dysentery. True, the means of naval access to South Vietnam were much more extensive, but Laos shared a thousand-mile border with the U.S. ally Thailand, whose leader, Sarit Thanarat, was General Phoumi's cousin and more than willing to allow Washington to use his nation as a base from which to attack the Pathet Lao. Add to this the fact that, by 1960, most of the fighting between the RLA and the communists took place in the Plain of Jars, an open plateau where U.S. aircraft and heavy weapons could be used to their full advantage, and the old logistical thesis looks even more threadbare. "Logistics be damned!" snapped Senator Richard Russell during Kennedy's pivotal encounter with congressional leaders on April 27, 1961. The important thing, as far as Russell and his fellow legislators were concerned, was that America fought "where we have an ally that will fight for himself," and that was clearly not the case in Laos (237).

Since I've never been one to tackle the most difficult part of an assignment immediately, I've saved Foster's review for last. She makes a fair point. According to *Universe Unraveling*, Americans' conception of the Lao was not only derogative; it was static. The smirking obloquy expressed by Embassy Chargé Robert McClintock in his 1954 position paper "A U.S. Policy for Post-Armistice Indochina," perhaps the earliest in-depth analysis of Laos as a potential cold war battlefield, did not differ appreciably from reports Kennedy received from his Laos Task Force in 1962, after Washington had been trying to stem the communist tide in Laos for nearly a decade. American "stereotypes . . . failed to evolve over time into more sympathetic understanding, despite the . . . opportunities afforded Americans to delve into the motives and objectives of their Lao allies," I observe, and

²⁰ My treatment of this asymmetrical alliance echoes Naoko Shibusawa's pioneering work on postwar U.S.-Japanese relations, the first to deploy *maturity* as a category of analysis. See Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Berlin, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 298.

“greater familiarity only bred greater contempt” (25). Indeed, I end the book by showing how these stereotypes live on in recently published monographs. How can we account for this consistency? Foster notes that “other studies of race and U.S. foreign relations” illustrate that “racial attitudes are highly malleable,” the most famous example being John Dower’s description of how American wartime perceptions of the Japanese as blood-spattered gorillas flipped into the postwar image of an adorable monkey perched on a GI’s shoulder.²² Both portrayals are racist, but they indicate how “race can have different meanings at different times, can be put to different purposes.” No so with American images of the Lao. Tom Dooley’s ‘Kingdom of Kids’—an enchanting country emptied of its adult population and inhabited jolly, idle children—remained Never-Never Land in the American popular imagination long after “Dr. Tom’s” death. “Unless the Lao really were more indolent than others,” Foster asks, “what about Laos or about the United States prompted this unrelenting judgment?”

I hope I managed to demonstrate in *Universe Unraveling* that the Lao were *not* more indolent than others, specifically the Vietnamese and Cambodians. I provide numerous instances of Lao initiative, combativeness, and even cruelty, beginning with Fa Ngum, the brilliant general who conquered a kingdom in the upper Mekong valley in the mid-fourteenth century, all the way through to Vientiane’s attempt to exterminate the Hmong with biological weapons in the 1980s. It will not do to accept the snide American caricature as an accurate reflection of Lao mores. And I think we have to reject Foster’s suggestion that American stereotypes derived from Laos’s lack of cohesion, the absence, throughout most of its history, of “a unified nation with clearly drawn borders.” Balkanization of their homeland did not prevent Kong Le and “Red Prince” Souphanouvong from leading effective armies against the much better equipped forces of General Phoumi. I am likewise unpersuaded that subtilizing between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism gets us any closer to understanding why Washington viewed the Lao with such scorn. After all, the Pathet Lao and neutralist forces had as large a percentage of Theravada Buddhists in their ranks as did the RLA. While I appreciate Foster’s highly-educated suggestions, I stand by the three-part culture-institutions-strategy thesis I advance in my introduction, which attributes American mind-lock to a combination of 1) Lao cultural traits unrelated to battlefield competence; 2) the establishment of a “Little America” in Vientiane that enabled Americans stationed there to avoid interaction with host citizens; and, most important, 3) the fact that Laos’s geostrategic vulnerability necessitated a policy of neutralism. Pressured by Communist China and North Vietnam on one flank and by pro-Western Thailand on the other, Laos could not align itself with either superpower bloc. Had Souvanna or any of his successors adopted an unneutral position, they would have condemned their nation to war. Worse, they would have made Laos a virtual colony of a foreign country. Lao patriotism was no less fervent than American patriotism, but U.S. policymakers could not grasp this and invariably interpreted the American inability to build a rampart of the free world on Laotian territory as a consequence of Lao languor and infantilism. Americans moreover explained away the fighting spirit of the Pathet Lao and

²² John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 374.

neutralists by insisting that the troops following Souphanouvong and Kong Le were really North Vietnamese soldiers in disguise. Never did Washington absorb the lesson, so self-evident to Austro-French journalist Bernard Fall during Kennedy's first year in office, that "the main ingredient in revolutionary war is *revolution*. And 'our' Laotians simply had nothing to be revolutionary about."²³

Fine, I can hear Foster replying, but why were the American stereotypes of the Lao so immutable? Why were there no fluctuations, as with American notions about the Japanese? I'm embarrassed to admit that this question never occurred to me prior to receiving Foster's review, but I'll venture a guess. It was because there was no complex, half-century relationship between Washington and Vientiane to parallel that between Washington and Tokyo. Consequently, the "Lao" of American imagination did not develop and change the way America's "Japanese" did. The United States has been powerfully linked to Japan for many decades, as a military adversary, occupying conqueror, Cold War ally, trade rival, etc. Popular images of the 'Other' transmogrified to fit circumstances, as racial stereotypes are wont to do, from 'buck-toothed sprites' to 'conscienceless apes' to 'star pupils' to 'comrades-in-arms' to 'pinstriped robber barons.' By contrast, Laos was a front-burner issue in Washington for a short time only. After Kennedy decided to cut America's losses in Laos and confront international communism in South Vietnam instead, Laos faded from the headlines and the national discussion. The Pathet Lao victory closed an iron curtain on events, thereby allowing midcentury American stereotypes to remain, in effect, frozen. Thus, when Roger Warner, writing in the late 1990s, reached for an adjective to describe the Lao, he chose the same word used by Reverend Matt Menger in the early 1960s: "retarded" (216, 274).

To wind up a characteristically long-winded response (if it weren't for stern editors, I'd never publish anything), I must say that Anderson's statement that my "portrait of the virtually unmitigated contempt for the Lao among Americans . . . comes close to a cultural-determinist argument" surprised me. I've never thought of myself as that fatalistic. Indeed, one of the cardinal themes of my graduate colloquium on diplomatic history's cultural turn is that beliefs, prejudices, and values—while coercive—are not totalizing; they do not, to use Anderson's term, "doom" policymakers to pursue a counter-productive course. Agency is still possible. Mavericks exist in every society, no matter how conformist, and while they cannot entirely escape the *Weltanschauung*, they can sometime loosen its shackles enough to apprehend truths inaccessible to peers. Witness the heartening examples of Joel Halpern and U.S. Ambassador Winthrop Brown. I can see, though, why Anderson reports that he put down *Universe Unraveling* with a sense of dejection. As Foster notes, much of the book is "painful to read." Almost all of the American policymakers, journalists, and cognoscenti I examine were so persistently close-minded, so blind to the evidence and its implications, and so rigid in their refusal to benefit from experience, that a reader could easily conclude that Washington's ham-fisted management of the Laos crisis was inevitable. That's too pessimistic a note on which to close. In the interest, then, of restoring some optimism about historical actors' capacity to transcend, however fleetingly, the regnant

²³ Bernard B. Fall, *Street without Joy* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1961), 342.

ethos of their day, I'd like to cite an improbable source, published in 1958, and in every respect except for the passage excerpted below a paragon of midcentury American Lao-bashing:

Many say that the Lao are a lazy people. . . . I am of the opinion that this is not true. Let me mention a few things a man must do. He must forge the iron, and make and repair his plow, carving the shaft and yoke himself. He must constantly rebuild a new harrow and blade. He must repair his house, weave new walls, cut thatch for the roof, repair the tools of the kitchen. He must keep his cart, feed his oxen, make rope and fiber. He must make hemp and weave the nets, then fish for his meals. He must build his loom so his wife and daughter can weave. But first he must grow, gin, mill, and dye the cotton. He must care for the sick buffalo, cultivate his fields, practice his religion, and raise chickens, ducks, and grow a garden. This man is not lazy.²⁴

Wise words. The author? Tom Dooley.

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²⁴ Thomas A. Dooley, *The Edge of Tomorrow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1958), 126.