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Introduction by John Prados

**William J. Rust. *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012.** ISBN: 978-0-8131-3578-6 (cloth, \$40.00); 978-0-8131-3579-3 (PDF, \$40.00); 978-0-8131-4068-1 (ePub, \$40.00).

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Introduction by John Prados, National Security Archive

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During the Southeast Asian conflict of the 1960s, and to a considerable degree in its histories as well, there has been a tendency to view the war in Laos as an adjunct or sideshow to the fighting in neighboring Vietnam. William J. Rust sets out to rectify this deficiency—at least in the historiography—with his book *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1945-1961* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012). Rust, whose background lies in journalism (he was a reporter for the *U.S. News and World Report*), has been absent from the discussion for too long. Back in 1985 he contributed the study *Kennedy in Vietnam* which figured among a fresh wave of Vietnam war studies that flowed from the pens of such journalists and scholars as Stanley Karnow, Arnold Isaacs, George Herring, William C. Gibbon and—in his early work in this area, Larry Berman.<sup>1</sup> Now Rust has returned with a prequel, as it were, exploring the lines of United States policy before the Kennedy era.

*Before the Quagmire* is classic diplomatic history. That is, it expostulates on the foreign policy of a nation confronting a particular international issue, in this case the United States facing the situation which existed in Laos as a consequence of the French defeat in the First Indochina War. The author utilizes primarily U.S. sources to lay out the arc of American actions in this arena, focusing on the Eisenhower presidency, and ending with a commentary that sets the stage for the headaches John F. Kennedy would face in office. Rust's key insights are that U.S. policy failures in Laos conditioned the Vietnam conflict importantly, rather than the other way around; and that in Laos, unlike on a variety of other important issues, Dwight D. Eisenhower failed to exercise his presidential leadership role. The result converted a minor irritant into a major Southeast Asian imbroglio.

H-Diplo has assembled an excellent panel of scholars for this roundtable discussion. Ang Cheng Guan specializes in Vietnamese communism and the Chinese role in Southeast Asia. Jessica Chapman is an expert on South Vietnam during the 1950s and has done significant work on the rise of Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem, whose regime would be critically affected by events in Laos. Jeremy Kuzmarov focuses on American foreign policy, covert operations, and criminal justice. In particular, Kuzmarov is expert on United States assistance programs to foreign police services, which in Laos would be used to funnel military aid to the Royal Laotian Government.

All three commentators find *Before the Quagmire* to be important and useful. Ang concludes that the Rust book is an excellent and long-overdue study, “the most detailed account of U.S. policy toward Laos to date” and Chapman terms the history “an especially welcome

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), George C. Herring, *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), William C. Gibbon, *The United States Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, v. I: 1945-1960; v. II: 1961-1964* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983).

addition” which “advances several compelling claims.” Kuzmarov is the least impressed, preferring the analysis in Seth Jacobs’ study of Laos,<sup>2</sup> but he, too, finds strengths in the book. All of the commentators, I believe, essentially agree with Kuzmarov’s proposition that “the Manichean worldview of Eisenhower administration officials can ultimately be seen to have distorted U.S. foreign policy.” Ang puts the point with greater precision by observing that “the goal of creating a stable, anti-communist, and pro-West government was, as Rust reveals, unattainable in the context of Laotian politics.”

Each of the reviewers also observes weaknesses in the Rust study. Kuzmarov’s critique is the most sweeping, arguing that the author should have presented a deeper analysis of United States imperial objectives in Southeast Asia, tied to the drive to preserve free market access and the U.S. project for a Far Eastern network of military bases. Chapman faults *Before the Quagmire* for failing to provide a clear exposition of the Laotian political framework, and agreeing that Rust could have gone further “to question the very applicability of Washington’s black and white Cold-War framework to the Lao case.” She feels the author backed away from the logical conclusion that the ultimate U.S. failure in Laos was due to flawed Cold War policy premises. Ang would have preferred a study that better contextualized U.S. policy in the light of what Washington knew—or did not know—about Chinese/Soviet/North Vietnamese intentions in Indochina.

Some of the commentaries are puzzling, bringing to mind President Kennedy’s famous query to a pair of officials who traveled to South Vietnam in 1963 as to whether they had both visited the same country. To paraphrase Kennedy, did we all read the same book? All three reviewers remark on the nice portraits of American officials that appear in *Before the Quagmire*. Chapman then comments that Rust fails to devote comparable attention to the Lao personalities who populate the narrative. But Ang maintains that Rust is able to guide the reader through “oftentimes convoluted political intrigues” by means of “his excellent sketches of the key protagonists, both Laotian and American.” For his part Jeremy Kuzmarov notes that some important American characters in the story also get no sketches.

Some of the reviewers’ doubts can be traced to their particular interests. Chapman—with whose objection to the thinness of treatments of Laotian personalities I tend to agree—has devoted a significant part of her research into cultural and political aspects of the South Vietnamese leadership during this same period. Ang’s desire for better projection of U.S. policy proclivities in the light of knowledge of the intentions of other third-country actors in Laos is surely related to his interest in Chinese and Vietnamese politics and policy. Kuzmarov’s research has focused on overarching strategic initiatives; his reference to the “1290-d program,” for example, is to a specifically-labeled National Security Council (NSC) Action which flowed from proposals to and discussion within the Eisenhower NSC. In contrast, the author is preoccupied with a micro-level account—that is, an exposition of the day-to-day evolution of U.S. foreign policy tactics in-country.

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<sup>2</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012),

Both professors Kuzmarov and Ang perform the valuable service of calling attention to related works which scholars can profitably consult. Both, in fact, cite Jacobs's *The Universe Unraveling*, which takes a different approach to the same material. Ang also mentions Timothy Castle's work, that of Martin Goldstein, and the wartime tome published by Charles Stevenson.<sup>3</sup> This writer was pleased to see the reference to Stevenson's *The End of Nowhere* and agrees that even with the passage of all this time it remains a useful book.

During the period of Rust's study, Washington's central problem was to craft and implement a policy in Laos within the confines of the Geneva agreements of 1954, which imposed limits on what could be done (for example, military aid was supposed to come only from France); and endowed the Geneva conference co-chairs Great Britain and the Soviet Union with additional roles, plus International Control Commission members India, Poland, and Canada with special responsibilities. Some American maneuvers—like subterfuges for the delivery of military aid—were designed to get around the limits or to court some of the other actors. It is curious that apart from casual mention of the Geneva framework, none of the reviewers engages the question of how well the author dealt with the larger diplomatic environment that applied in Laos. This is especially perplexing in that treatments of the United States' evasion of the Geneva provisions feature so prominently in accounts of the parallel American policies in South Vietnam.

None of this is to fault the reviewers, whose function is simply to draw attention to whatever impresses them about a manuscript, which these reviewers have done very well. Instead the point calls attention to the fact that—like so much else about the Southeast Asian conflict—myriad facets of the history figure in outcomes and thus merit treatment. There is much food for thought in *Before the Quagmire* and in this roundtable discussion.

### Participants:

Born in Washington, D.C., **Bill Rust** is the author of *Kennedy in Vietnam* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) and *Before the Quagmire* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012). He began his editorial career at *U.S. News & World Report*, joining the Book Division as a researcher and subsequently contributing retrospective articles on the Vietnam War to the magazine. He spent much of his professional career as a writer, editor, and communications consultant for foundations and corporations. He has just completed a sequel to *Before the Quagmire*, tentatively titled *A Piece of War: John F. Kennedy and the American Experience in Laos* forthcoming from University Press of Kentucky.

**John Prados** is a senior analyst of the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, and director of its Vietnam Documentation Project. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Martin E. Goldstein, *American Policy toward Laos* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973); Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American policy toward Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

(International Relations) from Columbia University. His most recent book on this subject is *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (University Presses of Kansas). Forthcoming is *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power* (University of Texas Press).

**Ang Cheng Guan** is Associate Professor and Head, Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group of the National Institute of Education at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is the author of *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010), *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013) and *Singapore, ASEAN and the Third Indochina War, 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, forthcoming 2013). His current research/book project is on Southeast Asia and the Cold War, 1945-1991: An International History.

**Jessica M. Chapman**, Assistant Professor of History at Williams College, received her Ph.D. at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 2008. In 2013 she published her first monograph, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* with the Cornell University Press series "The United States in the World." Her current research explores the global commodification of Kenyan distance runners in the postcolonial era.

**Jeremy Kuzmarov** is J.P. Walker assistant professor of history at the University of Tulsa and author of *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) and *Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation Building in the American Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

Review by Jessica M. Chapman, Williams College

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In *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*, William J. Rust advances several compelling claims about American involvement in Laos during the Eisenhower administration and its implications for the quagmire that ensued in neighboring Vietnam. “A case study in transforming a small foreign-policy problem into a large one,” he writes, “the American experience in Laos in the 1950s was a key initial misstep on the road to war in Southeast Asia” (3). Rust traces the Eisenhower administration’s efforts throughout the 1950s to develop a pro-Western, anticommunist Lao government and to oppose a coalition government that included the Pathet Lao, a political-military organization backed by the Vietnamese communists. He claims that the administration failed to recognize that “manipulating the kingdom’s political life had a destabilizing impact on the fragile non-communist base the United States sought to strengthen and unify” (4). Moreover, American efforts to thwart communism in Laos were stymied by disunity among State Department, Pentagon, and CIA officials about how best to achieve that goal, an absence of high-level leadership at key moments, and a lack of unity among Western allies.

Rust’s contribution is an especially welcome addition to the literature on American policy towards Southeast Asia during the Cold War, which tends to focus overwhelmingly on Vietnam. Although he frames the significance of his book in terms of its relevance to Vietnam, he offers a detailed and meticulously assembled discussion of American involvement with Laos between the Geneva Conference of 1954 and the end of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s presidency in 1961, using a wide array of sources from American government archives and oral histories. Rust amply demonstrates that the same Cold-War assumptions that motivated American intervention in Vietnam underlay U.S. policy towards Laos, a country which Eisenhower by the end of his presidency came to regard as the ‘cork in the bottle’ that could prevent communism from overtaking the region. He identifies those core assumptions, shared by all of the Eisenhower administration officials who crafted U.S. policy towards Laos, as follows: “Communist control of Laos would threaten US security interests in Southeast Asia and around the world; a neutral Royal Laotian Government (RLG) would inevitably succumb to communist subversion; and Prince Souvanna Phouma, the kingdom’s leading statesman, was weak, naïve, and dangerous” (3).

American officials, Rust argues, accepted these premises unquestioningly, in large part because of their insufficient understanding of Lao nationalism. He implies that American officials regarded Lao figures with the same dismissive paternalism that they displayed toward the Vietnamese, which helps explain why they failed to respond effectively to the complex political developments that unfolded in Laos during Eisenhower’s tenure and after. Rust paints a picture of American agencies in conflict, failing to agree on how best to promote the goal of anticommunism in Laos. This was, in part, because they had little confidence in the abilities of the native peoples through whom they pursued their objectives, and in part because of fundamental disagreements over whether the problems they faced called for military or political solutions.

Some of the great pleasures to be found in this book are the colorful character sketches scattered throughout its pages of Americans like Ambassadors Charles Yost and Jeff Parsons, Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson, CIA officer Rufus Phillips, and others who found themselves working in Laos during Eisenhower's administration. These brief sketches not only bring these individuals to life, they give to an audience already familiar with the basic contours of U.S. history a sense of where these figures fit into American society and political life. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for the Lao individuals who appear in *Before the Quagmire*. Rust does make an effort to introduce key Lao figures in his story, including Captain Kong Le, Souvanna Phouma, and Defense Minister Phoumi Nosavan. However, despite an intricate account of American interactions with Lao figures, he never really provides a clear, overarching explanation of the complex Lao political context. Rust's insights into Lao politics throughout the book are filtered through the eyes of the American officials who produced the flawed policies he criticizes. By bringing Lao players into the story only when they became relevant to American policymakers—and then discussing them on American terms—it sometimes feels as though he has left them floating around a U.S.-centered narrative that reflects the same fragmentary understanding of Lao nationalism that he is quick to criticize. Moreover, he misses a number of opportunities to dig deeper into the Americans' attitudes towards Lao peoples that may have prevented them from developing a fuller understanding of the country and its political nuances.

Rust, throughout his narrative, quotes a number of statements uttered by American officials that point to a paternalistic view of Lao peoples and their leaders. Yet he does very little to analyze these statements or to comment upon their significance to the policymaking process. For instance, he notes that Yost referred to Prime Minister Katay Don Sasorith as "shifty and lacking in principle" (39). State department officials dismissed Kong Le as an "emotional and truculent paratroop captain" who was "dangerously immature and irrational" (184). And, when frustrated with the chaos of civil war in 1960, Ambassador Winthrop Brown described the situation condescendingly as "very Laotian" (204). Rust records another state department official as complaining that "Phoumi, we always knew, was either stupid, inept, corrupt—he was a bastard, but he was our bastard" (210). Rust misses an opportunity by including these comments in his narrative without venturing any speculation about what they might tell us about American officials' attitudes about Laos and its people, and what the ramifications of those attitudes might have been for the formulation of policy. I would have liked to have read more about Rust's thoughts on how these commentaries connect to his larger arguments about Washington's flawed understandings of Laos.

It seems that disparaging assessments of the Lao figures with whom the United States sought to achieve its goal of a non-communist government in Vientiane must have contributed to Washington's tendency to dismiss Lao autonomy and underestimate the power of nationalism in Southeast Asia more generally. Rust explains that Souvanna attempted to convey to U.S. officials the limits to the United States' abilities to control Laos' political future: "None amongst us nourishes the design of selling his country to foreigners wherever they come from; no one wants to sacrifice our civilization, our religion, our

customs, and institutions on the alters of East or West” (70). However, rather than registering respect for Lao autonomy, Souvanna’s American counterparts responded to this by deeming such sentiments dangerous on the grounds that they could lead to neutralism, a system they feared would facilitate the advance of communism. Rust notes that, despite assurances from Souvanna in early 1958 that “the people of Laos were ‘neither by temperament, civilization, nor social traditions predisposed towards communism,’” (76) top Eisenhower administration officials refused to accept his reasoning, “placing far greater emphasis on the global threat posed by communism than on the national factors that might encourage or discourage subversion.” (76).

Rust is right to point out the flaws in American policy that were generated by insufficient attention to and respect for local conditions in Laos, but I would have liked to have seen him go even further to question the very applicability of Washington’s black and white Cold-War framework to the Lao case. He hints at this with reference to CIA officer Richard Bissell’s post-hoc critique of American foreign policy in Laos. Referring to Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone’s overthrow in 1959, Bissell lamented American officials’ “failure to recognize that General Phoumi’s ‘staunch anti-communism and pro-Western stance’ reflected goals for Laos that were unobtainable in the context of that nation’s politics” (156). Rust seems to agree with Bissell’s assessment that Washington’s poor decision making in Laos could be blamed on senior U.S. officials’ limited understanding of Southeast Asia, and that those limits were a function of Cold-War blinders. He criticizes Eisenhower’s approach to the region, noting that his “perception of communism as a worldwide conspiracy micromanaged from Moscow was a point of view that required little knowledge of the history, people, and politics of the area and great faith in the ‘falling domino principle”” (160). He points out that in the five decades since Eisenhower’s presidency ended, “the falling domino principle, the monolithic communist threat, and other cold war truisms have not aged well.” And, he notes, “Eisenhower’s belief in the mutual exclusivity of nationalism and communism and in the communist monolith were conceptual barriers to developing more effective means of combating insurgency in Southeast Asia” (160). Yet he backs away from pinning the ultimate failure of American policies in Laos on the fundamentally flawed Cold War premises on which they were based, claiming that “contemporary hindsight...runs the risk of underestimating the fear and political orthodoxy inspired by the aggressive tendencies of communist leaders in Moscow and Peking in the immediate post-World War II era” (11). As understandable as American fears may have been, it seems clear that those fears led directly to the development of policies that failed to consider Lao particularities.

Rust’s reluctance to unpack the inherent flaws in the Eisenhower administration’s Cold-War inspired approach to the Third World, Southeast Asia, and particularly Laos, limits his ability to explain in satisfactory terms the gaping chasm that persisted between American understandings of and expectations for Lao political development and the realities on the ground in that country. He claims that “the political and military ‘cures’ prescribed by the US government sometimes worsened the ‘disease’ of communist subversion in Laos” (3). He points to a lack of international support for U.S. policies, inter-agency squabbles, the absence of consistent high-level leadership, a disproportionate emphasis on U.S. military assistance at the expense of effective political programs, and finally the decision to

overthrow Souvanna Phouma in favor of inept military generals as reasons for the Eisenhower administration's failure to prevent the spread of communism in Laos. While these are valid critiques of American policy, it seems necessary to dig deeper to explore the possibility that those issues were merely symptoms of a larger problem of the flawed Cold-War premises that animated American activity in Laos. As with Vietnam, it is well worth asking whether Americans could have achieved the objective of preventing any communists or communist sympathizers from participating in the Lao government, and perhaps more importantly, whether that goal ever served American interests in any meaningful way.

Rust is on solid ground with his conclusion that, despite their very different strategies for Laos, both Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy's policies there paved the way for the massive, and misguided, American military intervention in Vietnam. Both men preferred to manipulate Lao politics through covert measures and diplomatic pressure whenever possible, and without direct U.S. military intervention. Where Eisenhower's administration refused to consider a neutral settlement for Laos and worked to undermine Souvanna, Kennedy—in an effort to avoid a direct superpower conflict over Southeast Asia—pursued neutralization under a coalition government led by Souvanna. However, as that coalition crumbled, Kennedy would come to reject the Geneva Settlement on Laos as a suitable model for solving the deteriorating military and political crisis in Vietnam. As Rust astutely points out, Kennedy saw Laos as a Cold War conflict, and “was prepared to settle for an apparent tie, but not an obvious loss” (267). To avoid such a loss he initiated a gradual increase in military and political pressure in Laos that he assumed would be reversible, an approach that Rusk claims foreshadowed “the flawed thinking behind President Lyndon Johnson's slowly escalating air attacks in the Vietnam War.” Thus, while it remains impossible to know how Kennedy might have responded to the deteriorating situation in Laos and the crisis in Vietnam that led his successor to launch a major war, Rust argues persuasively that JFK's approach to Laos was no more successful than Eisenhower's, and that it generated “a deeper, more dangerous US commitment to the region for his successor” (269).

According to Rust, “One of the more troubling aspects of the American experience in Laos was the inability of the US government to apply the harsh lessons from that country in the 1950s to neighboring South Vietnam in the 1960s” (6). In his view, Americans should have learned from their experience in Laos not to try to solve political problems with military solutions, not to let interagency disagreements confuse friends, embolden opportunists, and undercut American objectives, and, perhaps most importantly, not “to overthrow the sometimes-difficult civilian heads of state—Souvanna Phouma in Laos and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam—in favor of generals who quickly revealed their political ineptitude” (6). These are valuable insights to the last. Again, however, I wish Rust had taken his critique a step further, to question the very foundations of American intervention on Cold War grounds. It is by no means clear the United States would have been able to accomplish its goals in either Laos or Vietnam even had it applied these lessons. Nor is it clear that preserving non-communist regimes in either of these countries served American national security in any real way. A sharper focus on the nuances of Lao politics and a more critical reading of American sources could have enabled Rust to go beyond condemning the

Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations' for what they did wrong in Laos and Vietnam to explain what it was they failed to understand and what they might have done differently to avoid staggering from a "small foreign policy problem" into a military and political quagmire. Even without those elements, Rust's book is an incredibly valuable contribution to our understanding of American involvement in Southeast Asia. Students of American foreign relations and especially the Vietnam War would be wise to consult this important, well-researched work on a woefully understudied topic.

William Rust's excellent study of American intervention and decision-making in Laos led me to recall one of the first things I learned years ago from Professor Ralph Smith when I began serious study of the Vietnam/Indochina War. He wrote that the origins of the Second Vietnam War "arose not from anything the Americans did in South Vietnam... but rather from the consequences of American policy in Laos."<sup>1</sup> According to this argument, if Laos had remained neutral and relatively stable, the land-locked country might have achieved a "modern revival of its traditional pattern of relationships without presenting a threat to any of its neighbours."<sup>2</sup> The United States, however, could not fit such a pattern in its global strategy and demanded that Laos be fully committed to the 'free world'. But its political allies in the country were unable to dominate the political scene. Consequently, "the American presence, without being powerful enough to prevent further Communist intervention in Laotian politics, seemed to threaten both Chinese and North Vietnamese interests" there.<sup>3</sup>

Until the summer of 1962, developments in Laos in fact overshadowed the armed struggle in South Vietnam. It is thus surprising that there has not been much attention given to Laos in the historiography of the Vietnam War, particularly the early years of the conflict. I can only think of three books which preceded Rust's long-overdue study, two of which were published in the early 1970s when the war was still on-going. Both were based mainly on publicly-available sources and are very useful first drafts of history.<sup>4</sup> It was after a hiatus of almost two decades when Timothy Castle published his study of U.S. military aid to Laos between 1955 and 1975.<sup>5</sup> Castle's study, by his own admission, was also limited by the paucity of archival materials which led him to depend principally on oral history to construct his account. Another twenty years has passed and we now have Rust's *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention In Laos 1954-1961*, which is based on a substantial body of primary sources that were not available to the earlier scholars. This is the most detailed account of U.S. policy toward Laos to date, and should be included in any essential reading list on the Vietnam War. This book, read in conjunction with David L. Anderson's study of the Eisenhower Administration's policy in Vietnam,<sup>6</sup> will provide a clear and

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<sup>1</sup> R.B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War, Volume 1: Revolution Versus Containment 1955-1961* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 79

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, 79-80.

<sup>4</sup> Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American policy toward Laos since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) and Martin E. Goldstein, *American Policy toward Laos* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

comprehensive account of the early years of the Indochina War during Dwight D. Eisenhower's tenure.<sup>7</sup>

Rust shows that the U.S. objective was “to hold the line against communist expansion in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos” (15). One of the first priorities was to help the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) recapture the two provinces lost to the Pathet Lao – Sam Neua and Phong Saly. According to the prognosis of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued soon after the conclusion of the 1954 Geneva Conference, while the political situation in Laos was “relatively stable”, the Pathet Lao “could contribute to the overthrow of the RLG ‘through subversions and elections’” (9). The NIE further argued that the prospects for Laos depended on a strong and stable South Vietnam and continued French military assistance for the RLG. The cornerstone of the Eisenhower administration's policy on Laos was simple, clear and consistent - to encourage “the development of a pro-Western, anti-communist Lao government” and oppose any coalition government that included the Pathet Lao (4). The CIA played an instrumental role in executing the policy by supporting or opposing various non-communist Laotian leaders “based almost exclusively on the perceived strength or weakness of their anti-communist convictions” (4). The CIA was also assigned responsibility for Operation Booster Shot, a crash program to provide aid to rural Lao villages to demonstrate the RLG's concern for the rural population and the efficacy of U.S. aid, and which President John F. Kennedy described in 1961 as the “worst mistake” the U.S. had made in Laos (82, 86). In September 1954 the Eisenhower administration also created the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), which could be activated to protect/defend South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos when the need arose, as well as providing direct US military and economic assistance to these countries bypassing the French.

U.S. policy may have been clear, but the goal of creating a stable, anti-communist, and pro-West government in Laos was, as Rust reveals, unattainable in the context of Laotian politics. Differences in approach between the Department of State, Pentagon and the CIA were also not helpful to the cause. A third reason was the lack of unity among the Western allies. All three factors emerge clearly as we read Rust's very engaging account of the developments as they unfolded, beginning with the operationalization of the 1954 Geneva Accords, and of how the United States became more and more entangled in Laos.

The complicated Laotian politics can be difficult to follow for the uninitiated, particularly those aspects relating to “personal, family and regional rivalries” (19). Rust is able to

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<sup>6</sup> David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For U.S. policy toward Cambodia in the same period, see Kenton Clymer, *Troubled Relations: The United States and Cambodia since 1870* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), Chapters 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Another useful book on U.S. policy toward Laos which covers the same period and also published in 2012 is Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012; Singapore: NUS Press, 2013). Jacobs focusses on the cultural dimension - the beliefs, assumptions attitudes that shaped U.S. decision-making in Laos.

skillfully guide t readers through the oftentimes convoluted political intrigues through his excellent sketches of the key protagonists, both Laotian and American, and his clear narrative. The neutralist prince Souvanna Phouma was by far the most indispensable layer on the Laos political scene, although “to his detractors on the right and left, he seemed weak” (17). The United States, like it or not, had to deal with Souvanna who consistently “refused to view Laos in the absolute terms of cold war ideology” (17). He was confident of his ability to balance the different forces in Laos and was willing to compromise with the Pathet Lao in order to reunify the country, to the extent of establishing a coalition government which included the Pathet Lao (which was anathema to the Eisenhower administration) 72).

Ambassador J. Graham Parsons disliked Souvanna Phouma, a feeling that was shared by many U.S. policymakers. The U.S. played an indirect role in the downfall of the Souvanna-led government in May 1957 which forced Souvanna to resign as Prime Minister. As Parsons himself admitted in a telegram to the State Department, “while (the Lao) themselves toppled Souvanna, (the) US had much to do with it as we played upon Lao fears of (the) loss of aid” (69). But the ever-resilient Souvanna became Prime Minister again in August – it was neither the first nor the last time he resigned and returned to office - after prominent Laotian political leaders Katay Sasorith and Phoui Sananikone both failed in their attempts to form new governments despite American backing. Although the latter twowerewell-known for their corruption and for “reaping personal profit from the United States aid program” (70), the U.S. still preferred them to Souvanna, despite the fact that many considered Souvanna to be the most able statesman in Laos. In the words of Seth Jacobs in his recent book on the same topic, he was also America’s *bête noire*.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. played a role in his downfall in 1958 and again in 1960. Washington’s effort to find alternatives to Souvanna Phouma led them initially to support Phoui Sananikone – the “anti-communist and pro-American” who was “neither as ideologically unreliable as Souvanna and nor as duplicitous as Katay” (98). Phoui replaced Souvanna as Prime Minister in 1958. The CIA, for their part, actively promoted Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, an active member of the Committee for the Defence of National Interests (CDNI) which was formed with CIA support and encouragement with the explicit goal of “stamping out communism, corruption and rehabilitating the country”(94). Although he appealed to both the CIA and the Pentagon, which had been long searching for a strong and anti-communist Laotian leader, Phoumi was not popular with Prime Minister Phoui and other politicians who found him to be too ruthless and too ambitious for his own good. Ambassador Horace Smith (who replaced Parsons in 1958) weighed in on the side of Phoui Sananikone. Many in Washington, including Parsons, who had since assumed the position of Deputy Assistant of State for Far Eastern affairs (and later rose to become the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern affairs), disagreed with Smith’s negative description of Phoumi and the CDNI. Phoumi subsequently received support from the Eisenhower administration to seize power on 25 December 1959, which was followed by a blatantly rigged election in April which

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<sup>8</sup> See Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unravelling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 59.

eliminated the leftist opposition entirely. Nevertheless, the U.S. accepted the election result. Rust describes in unprecedented detail the differences of views between the CIA and Pentagon on the one hand, and Ambassador Smith (whose term ended in June 1960) and his successor Winthrop G. Brown on the other.

The Kong Lae coup, so-called because it was led by a Captain Kong Lae of the Second Parachute Battalion of the Royal Laotian Army, in August 1960 provided the opportunity for Souvanna Phouma to become Prime Minister yet again. Washington refused to recognise Souvanna's government. Both the CIA and the Pentagon backed Phoumi whereas Ambassador Brown tried to bridge the differences between Souvanna and Phoumi in the hope that they could work together. Brown's recommendation that the U.S. support Souvanna "wholeheartedly" and provide aid exclusively through his government (rather than back-channelling through Phoumi) faced widespread opposition from U.S. officials (206). Richard Bissell (CIA Deputy Director of Operations, 1959-1962) admitted in his 1996 memoir that Washington policymakers and his agency made a mistake in supporting General Phoumi (156-157).

Dwight D. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State Christian Herter apparently paid little attention to Laos, exhibited no leadership, and had almost no command of the issues pertaining to Laos in the latter part of Eisenhower's presidency (217). As Rust shows throughout the book and particularly in Chapter 10, there was no coherent policy on Laos when John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in 1961, despite the fact that Eisenhower and his Secretaries of Defence and State warned the incoming president that that communist control of Laos would lead to the "loss" of Southeast Asia" (258), which perhaps explains why there were five independent and conflicting accounts of what exactly transpired between Eisenhower and Kennedy during their meeting in the White House on 19 January 1961 (256).

Washington's thinking in early January 1961 remains hazy. According to Charles Stevenson's 1972 account (which in my view is still a useful book despite the passage of time), by 5 January 1961, there were reports that the United States was exploring the idea of an international conference to stabilise the crisis in Laos, form a broad based government and get a guarantee of Laotian neutrality.<sup>9</sup> There were four factors which forced "this retreat to diplomacy": (a) British and French pressure; (b) Reluctance of the army to get involved in a ground war; (c) Lack of commitment of the incoming administration to any specific course of action; and (d) lack of firm evidence of North Vietnamese involvement in the Laotian conflict. Even Thailand was not pushing for direct military intervention at this point.<sup>10</sup> If indeed, there was already re-think in some quarters

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<sup>9</sup> Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*.

<sup>10</sup> For details, see Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, 126-127; Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception" in *The Journal of American History*, Volume 79, Number 2, September 1992, 568-587; see also Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1997), 172, 174-175.

at the very tail-end of Eisenhower's tenure, Kennedy's pledge of U.S. support for a neutral and independent Laos that was made during a 23 March 1961 press conference would not be a complete reversal of the policy of his predecessor. In short, the Eisenhower administration was likely to have done exactly what Kennedy would have done had his presidency been longer – support Phoumi's military offensives against the Pathet Lao in order to strengthen the RLG's negotiating position in any political settlement of the civil war (259).

I do have one small suggestion which I feel would have further strengthened the book. The author could have better contextualised his discussion of Laos in terms of what the U.S. side knew of Chinese/Soviet/North Vietnamese intentions in Indochina during this period. That aside, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and highly recommend it.

Review by Jeremy Kuzmarov, University of Tulsa

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In June 2012, as a result of the new ‘pivot’ strategy to Asia, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton became the first U.S. diplomatic official to visit Laos in over four decades. After being confronted by teenagers who had lost limbs from undetonated ordinance remnant from the U.S.-led ‘secret war’ of the 1960s and 1970s, Clinton was forced to pledge \$9 million for clean-up of the country.<sup>1</sup> William J. Rust’s new book, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*, examines the political history leading up to the destructive secret war. Rust argues that developments in Laos were similar to those in Vietnam and reflected the Eisenhower-administration’s flawed approach towards diplomacy in its bellicose anticommunism and support for right-wing reaction. The U.S. aid mission in Laos was incompetently managed and helped to fuel corruption. Contrary to the model of the hidden-hand presidency, Dwight D. Eisenhower was himself aloof from the situation. The most disastrous decision was the CIA’s backing of a coup in 1960 led by General Phoumi Nosavan, who alienated the population through his violent excesses. This coup was carried out against the wishes of many in the U.S. embassy who supported Phoumi’s rival, Phoui Sannanikone, a staunch anticommunist himself who had been implicated in a financial scandal while director of the Lao-Vieng Bank and was thought to be responsible for the murder of neutralist Defense Minister Kou Vouravong.

The U.S. aid mission to Laos was initiated after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The Geneva agreements gave the pro-communist Pathet Lao control over two northern provinces, with the mandate of setting up free elections in 1958. Unable to establish a formal military mission, the U.S. bolstered the Royal Lao Army (RLA) under the cover of civilian aid programs, underwriting its entire military budget. In 1958, the Pathet Lao won the majority of seats in elections and were subsequently driven underground; Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong managed to escape from prison on the eve of his execution. To justify the expansion of counter-guerrilla operations, the U.S. alleged that the North Vietnamese had invaded the country, though a UN commission found little evidence to support the claim. After Phoumi won blatantly rigged elections in April 1960 following a coup d’état, the country descended into chaos following another attempted coup by General Kong Le in August 1960. The Kennedy administration restored support for the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma, who had been railroaded by Eisenhower, and encouraged his alliance with the right-wing generals. The CIA also began to organize a clandestine army among the indigenous Hmong who were more adept at fighting the Pathet Lao than the RLA.

One of the strengths of Rust’s book is its portrait of 1950s-era U.S. diplomatic officials such as Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and

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<sup>1</sup> On the U.S. bombing of Laos, see Fred Branfman, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War* (New York: Harper, 1972). The best account of the secret war is Alfred W. McCoy, “The Secret War in Laos: 1955-1975,” in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (UK: Blackwell, 2004). For some reason, Rust does not cite McCoy’s important edited volume, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1970).

ambassador J. Graham Parson, a prototypical ‘Ugly American’ who displayed a condescending attitude towards the Lao people and was aloof from popular concerns. Both men worked to block a neutralist coalition led by Prince Souvanna who was considered ‘soft’ on communism. CIA and Pentagon officials favored military leaders who were capable of “ruthlessly” opposing the “Communist threat” (74). The CIA, Rust further illuminates, funneled money to conservative anticommunist candidates and ran civic action programs designed to win ‘hearts and minds’ and enhance surveillance operations. It created commando units behind Pathet Lao lines that engaged in resistance if not outright terrorist activities and became the forerunner of the Hmong army. The commando operations were run under the cover of the American-led International Cooperation Administration’s 1290-d program, which Rust should have discussed. This program trained Lao police in modern records management and counterintelligence techniques that were designed to “facilitate the early detection of communist penetration of the civilian population.”<sup>2</sup>

Rust’s book is solely reliant on U.S. government documents and interviews with ex-government officials and is too top-down in its presentation. The Lao perspective is limited, as the author has not done any research in Laotian or even French sources. His discussion of the Pathet Lao lacks depth and relies on RAND corporation analysts who depict them as proxies of the North Vietnamese. However, the Pathet Lao emerged as the dominant force in the liberationist struggle against the French. Marxist ideals were popular at the time among Third World peoples who equated capitalism with colonial injustice. And the Pathet Lao won pronounced support by promoting land reform and literacy programs modeled after China’s Yennan way, where the establishment of agrarian communes helped build a strong base for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its civil war against the Nationalist Guomindang (GMD). (The strength of these programs led the CIA to try and undercut them through its own civic action programs).<sup>3</sup>

Rust could provide better analysis of U.S. imperial objectives in Southeast Asia after World War II, including the growth of a military base network headquartered in Okinawa, and the desire to open markets partly to help restore Japan’s economic might and ensure its Western alignment.<sup>4</sup> Rust could have compared U.S. policy in Laos with Indonesia and Thailand, where covert manipulation helped to entrench a dictatorial regime led by Phoumi’s cousin, Marshall Sarit Thanarat. He could also better trace the wide scope of

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<sup>2</sup> See Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation Building in the American Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Stuart Fox, *Laos: A History of Laos* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Branfman, *Voices From the Plain of Jars* and Wilfred Burchett, *Laos: The Furtive War* (New York: International Publishers, 1966); Bernard B. Fall, “The Pathet Lao: A ‘Liberation’ Party” in *The Communist Revolution in Asia: Tactics, Goals, and Achievements*, ed. Robert A Scalapino (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), 180–82.

<sup>4</sup> The best analysis in my view can still be found in Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*, rev. ed. (New York: Pantheon, 2003). See also William S. Borden, *The Pacific Alliance: United States Foreign Economic Policy and Japanese Trade Recovery, 1947–1955* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Chalmers Johnson *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004),

governmental corruption in Laos and in the U.S. aid mission and emphasize how, building off the French precedent, counter-insurgency operations were in part funded through opium.<sup>5</sup> In my view, Seth Jacobs' recent book on Laos, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, which covers the same ground as Rust, is superior analytically, as Jacobs better emphasizes the neocolonial nature of America's intervention and the prevalence of deep-rooted racial prejudices and stereotyping that marred U.S. policy.<sup>6</sup> Jacobs also provides colorful portraits of Dr. Tom Dooley and CIA operative Edgar "Pop" Buell, who were key in implementing US policy and are omitted from Rust's book.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its considerable shortcomings, *Before the Quagmire* is still of value in its detailed analysis of the Eisenhower administration's policy and in showing the importance of Laos to the origins of the Vietnam War and the larger containment strategy of the United States in Southeast Asia. The Manichean worldview of Eisenhower administration officials can ultimately be seen to have distorted U.S. foreign policy by fueling support for *coups d'état* and ruthless leaders like Phoumi. They rejected diplomatic overtures which were capable of facilitating a power-sharing arrangement that might have averted the deadly war which engulfed Laos in the 1960s.

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<sup>5</sup> See Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Tom Dooley was a medical missionary crucial to the civic action programs who exaggerated communist atrocities in his books that were serialized for a wide audience in *Readers Digest*. "Pop" Buell was an Indiana corn-farmer who provided logistical aid to the Hmong and spearheaded contact with General Vang Pao, the head of the CIA's clandestine army.

Author's Response by William J. Rust, Independent historian

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Many thanks to Ang Cheng Guan, Jessica Chapman, and Jeremy Kuzmarov for their kind words, thoughtful comments, and constructive criticism of *Before the Quagmire*. It is gratifying that these three scholars concluded that the book is a useful addition to the literature. All three reviewers mentioned omissions in the book, and for most of those I plead guilty.

For a volume emphasizing U.S. policy, diplomacy, intelligence, and military activities in Laos, 1954-1961, Jeremy Kuzmarov is quite correct to note my neglect of the 1290-d police program. I regret that omission. I am less troubled by omitting “Pop” Buell and Dr. Tom Dooley from my book. The former arrived in Laos only months before the end of the period covered by *Before the Quagmire*, and the latter, for all the inherent interest of his story, had negligible impact on the formulation and execution of U.S. policy in Laos, the explicit focus of the book.

Ang Cheng Guan wished the book had a “better contextualized” discussion of “Chinese/Soviet/North Vietnamese intentions in Indochina.” I agree and have tried to provide that discussion in my forthcoming book, provisionally titled: *A Piece of War: John F. Kennedy and the American Experience in Laos*.<sup>1</sup>

Jessica Chapman’s review, in my highly subjective opinion, comes closest to my own appraisal of the strengths and limitations of *Before the Quagmire*. She would have liked me to have pushed harder analytically on a variety of issues influencing U.S. policy—for example, the “applicability of Washington’s black and white Cold-War framework to the Lao case.” Fair enough.

What I tried to do was produce a well-researched, well-written book that provided new insights into an important topic. I prefer narrating a story to making an argument, and I am devoted to the principle of ‘showing rather than telling.’ My approach to writing history includes conclusions and analysis, but often requires readers to apply their own critical thinking to the facts I have presented. A long time ago, a magazine editor growled at me, “I don’t want to have to figure out for myself that two plus two equals four.” Some things never change, including my tendencies as a writer. I will try to be a better analyst—but only within the context of producing a deeply researched, well-written narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> University Press of Kentucky, Spring 2014.