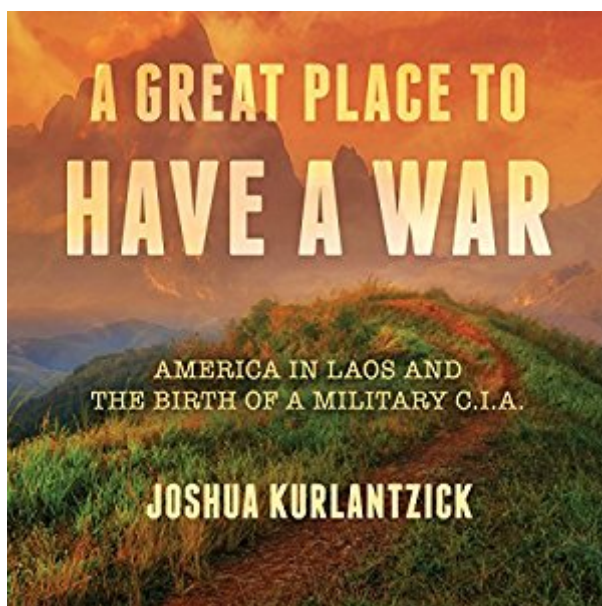


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A Great Place To Have A War: America In Laos And The Birth Of A Military CIA



Synopsis

In 1960 President Eisenhower was focused on Laos, a tiny Southeast Asian nation few Americans had ever heard of. Washington feared the country would fall to Communism, triggering a domino effect in the rest of Southeast Asia. So in January 1961, Eisenhower approved the CIA's Operation Momentum, a plan to create a proxy army of ethnic Hmong to fight Communist forces in Laos. While remaining largely hidden from the American public and most of Congress, Momentum became the largest CIA paramilitary operation in the history of the United States. The brutal war, which continued under Presidents Kennedy and Nixon, lasted nearly two decades, killed one-tenth of Laos' total population, left thousands of unexploded bombs in the ground, and changed the nature of the CIA forever. Joshua Kurlantzick gives us the definitive account of the Laos war and its central characters, including the four key people who led the operation - the CIA operative who came up with the idea, the Hmong general who led the proxy army in the field, the paramilitary specialist who trained the Hmong, and the State Department careerist who took control over the war as it grew.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 9 hours 10 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: January 24, 2017

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01MU8ZZY

Best Sellers Rank: #119 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Asia #284 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > Freedom & Security #306 in Books > History > Asia > Southeast Asia

Customer Reviews

Errors in fact and in conjecture are found in almost every paragraph of this myopic look at the CIA's paramilitary in Laos.- The opening scene of CIA's Bill Lair and Hmong warlord Vang Pao meeting to discuss terms of US cooperation with the Hmong to counter communism in Laos, addressed one of the key post-war questions of what was promised to the Hmong. And what wasn't. Anyone with experience in the

CIA's clandestine service knows that clearly detailed written commitments when cooperation is initiated with any foreign body is a bed-rock, essential part of the business. The author of this book's collection of nonsense sides with Vang Pao's memory. I side with Bill Lair's official account, an opinion he discussed with the author. It is inconceivable that Bill would have made a commitment of that magnitude and have no recollection. This wrong call, to my mind, on page three of this 323 tome, is a harbinger for the ensuing page-after-page of sloppy, poorly constructed analysis.- I served as a CIA paramilitary officer in Laos from November 1971 to the fall of 1973 when I was one of the last four CIA case officers in Long Tieng. Books on my service include Codename Mule (published by the Naval Institute Press to significant acclaim) and The Battle for Skyline Ridge (Kindle version). It is impossible to reconcile my first hand account with Kurlantzick's book. For example his rendering of the fight for Skyline is way off the mark. CIA case officer Eli Chavez - "with bandoliers of ammo laced across his chest" - did not lead 1200 Hmong and Thai soldiers up the ridgeline. He had a 300 man battalion of lowland Lao soldiers and no one I know had any knowledge that he, personally, was directly involved. On the other hand "Hog" and Mike Ingham two other CIA case officers who did play significant personal roles in the battle are only mentioned in passing. And per "RedCoat," the CIA case officer up at LS 32, Bouam Long, who was there on the ground during the 71/72 seize, Kulantzick's coverage is inaccurate on most key aspects. His fantasy account of the battle for Bouam Long, besmirks the heroics of Cher Pao Moua and the Hmong under his command.- This is a small point, but illustrates my larger premise about this book but Kulantzick's assertion that Hog was married is astonishing news to everyone who knew him.- There is almost no mention in the book of the CIA paramilitary's considerable work in other areas of Laos than Long Tieng. Nothing on the CIA base in MR-IA's work against the China road and Savannakhet and Pakse bases work against the Ho Chi Minh trail. No coverage of Air America or the Ravens, both significant players out of Long Tieng.- Anyone generally familiar with the CIA's role in Laos knows that Ambassadors Sullivan, in Vientiane, and Harriman, in WDC, were obstructionists in the US efforts to win a military victory in SEA. This book's mention of Sullivan, and by extension Harriman, ignores CIA Director Colby's comments on the matter.- The extent of the factual errors in this book calls into question the rousing endorsements from the authors and others on this .com page, on the "think tank" Kurlantzick works for and the

Simon & Schuster publishing house especially Simon & Schuster. If they are guilty of such lacks vetting in this book, one has to wonder about its other "non-fiction" products. This book is so flawed as to make the CIA's work in Laos that much more of a secret, because Kurlantzick's garbled facts and failed summations greatly obfuscate the real truths. Of this I am 100 percent sure. P.S. About a year ago Kurlantzick emailed me with a request to use some of the photos from my books in his upcoming look at the CIA in Laos. I suggested he might want to talk with me about some of the background to the photos and he said no that he had all the "background" that he needed, he just wanted my photos to illustrate his points. To put this in context, although more than three million Americans served in Indochina, I was one of only 18 CIA case officers in Long Tieng during the heaviest fighting against the invading North Vietnamese. Of this number only 7 are still alive to give a first hand accounting of CIA paramilitary activities. Kurlantzick did not interview any of us, though with me he certainly had the chance. Not ONE of the contrarians to US military/CIA efforts quoted above in support of this bad book has any sweat equity or credible insights into CIA/Laos. Pls consider those fawning reviews by professional cynics with that in mind. From someone who knows... this book is garbage.

I have only started the book, and so far I am pleased

Having been a pilot who participated in this war.,, I found the author to be on target with his description of the phase of the air war that I flew in. I flew as a FAC along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Jinx

Great book, CIA lessons learned from Iran under Dulles, and how the Agency had free hand in its operations in Laos, with the implications today?

Thank you for a well written book.

As a contemporary Southeast Asia specialist and historian, I can say that the book is engrossing but also stands up next to other books that rely only on interviews and no archival work. The book works hard to assess a major question -- how did a minuscule Asian country become a focus of the geopolitical imagination and anxiety of America? The equivalent would be England pouring billions of dollars into Falklands to fight the Falklands War. But, lo and behold, Laos did, at least for awhile.

Invariably, it became a major U.S. national security priority, with inordinate amount of money and bombing spent on Laos. Laos was the beginning of the American pivot that never left. The book works off of previous books, but it reinterprets the story, which may be why some people don't like it, especially people who it inherently criticizes. It puts the Laos war in the whole narrative of the development of the CIA's paramilitary activities. As things were, Laos became identified by President Eisenhower in the 1950s, as a key "domino" in Southeast Asia. Failure to protect Laos would, the theory affirmed, would lead to the fall of other Asian countries in the region, especially Thailand and Vietnam, leading ultimately to the fall of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. If that specter is scary, imagine a sea of red, representing communism, lapping up on the whole continent, never to recede. That fate is North Korea, Vietnam, China and Laos. Of course, events would later show that this was not the case that this was too narrow a view, and that these dominoes falling probably never would have happened, since communism was broken up into several varieties. The version in Vietnam carried a huge nationalistic over-dose. Dying for the motherland was the supreme duty of the Vietnamese coming from the north. As for the south, its nationalism was pragmatic and prosaic: what ever it takes to get the corrupt local government off the grid. If communism was the panacea, so be it. To the degree Vietnam remained in the ledger of communism, it has of course begun to liberalized economically since 1990. In Thailand, the King was revered. The thought of communism taking hold would have been inconceivable even as early as 1960s. Indeed, Thailand, helped by a revered monarch, held on to be a monarchy that alternates between a military and a democratically elected government, a pattern that continues to hold to this day. Malaysia and Indonesia, two equally crucial domino, went on to become secular countries that, from time to time, have privileged the importance of political Islam over all else. When there was the fear of communism taking roots in Indonesia, it resulted in a massive bloodbath that killed more than 500,000 people in 1965, most of whom were ethnic Chinese who were caught in the wrong side of the ideological divide. These victims professed no communist sympathies, merely for things to be fairer; a natural human instinct. Of course, Singapore remains, to this day, a vibrant city state. Thus, the idea of the domino theory that drove Eisenhower and Kennedy, in the book, to allow the CIA to play such a large role in Laos, really didn't hold up in retrospective. This book is impressive in showing where the gaps and weaknesses were, although it is one also helped by hindsight. But the earlier generations of political leaders did not have the help of such hind-sights. Lee Kuan Yew, being a leader of the smallest Southeast Asian country, exhibited the greatest amount of such "existential anxieties," perhaps to the degree of sheer paranoia. In fact, when asked by historians if he had wrongly

counseled America to stay on to fight the good fight in Vietnam War, Lee answered: "Now who was to say that America's involvement in the Vietnam War, did not buy us time?" Counter-intuitive as it is, Lee may well be right: How do you explain something i.e. the Communist invasion, that never happened ? Even Richard Nixon, a realist, was spellbound by Lee's pragmatic reading of Asia and China. All of them were lulled, perhaps duped, into believing that the threats to Southeast Asia should always be seen as threats to the United States too. This book did not touch on the intricacies of Southeast Asia in that manner, making excuses for hindsight and for how the war in Laos could have been widened, and kept widening. The book went straight for the jugular: that CIA expanded the war in Laos, had the help of no more than five or six bureaucratic types and characters in Washington DC and Laos back in the 1960s, and by so doing, expanded itself in the landscape of American politics. In this sense, this book is an excellent compendium to those who want to understand the expansion of the "administrative state" too sans all the references to Big Brother ala George Orwell. This book is a page turner, and if more archival resources had been used, rather than mere interviews, it would probably formed the must read in the book list of any Southeast Asian history major. Personally, this book is best read, without first going into the reviews of others----including this one !----because the prose is breezy, purposive, historically weighty, but also humanely meaningful. The title, "A Great Place to Start A War," is obviously a jibe on the earlier administrations too. Had it not for the tragedy that is the case with all wars, this book would have been down right witty too !

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