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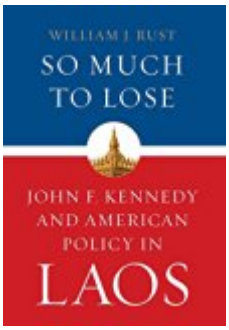
William J. Rust. *So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos.* Studies in Conflict, Diplomacy, and Peace Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. 376 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-4476-4.



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When John F. Kennedy became president in January 1961, he inherited a number of international "crises" in hot spots such as Cuba and Berlin, and he faced the prospect of increased Soviet support for wars of "national liberation." Kennedy also assumed responsibility for U.S. policy in Laos, a small and remote Southeast Asian nation embroiled in civil war. As journalist William J. Rust explains, Laos was one of Kennedy's "earliest and most persistent foreign-policy problems" (p. 1). But for students interested in international relations or American involvement in Laos, there are very few sources that address this important topic. Rust's new book, ***So Much to Lose,*** goes a long way toward bridging the gap in the scholarship and offers a compelling exploration of American policy in Laos during the first years of the 1960s. Having spent much of his career writing about the Vietnam War and Laos, Rust is well qualified to present this history. In fact, this book is a sequel to ***Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961*** (2012), Rust's study of American intervention in Laos during Dwight Eisenhower's presidency. ***So Much to Lose*** provides an intimate and detailed glimpse into high-level policymaking and diplomatic maneuvering, both within Washington DC and internationally. Relying on a vast array of sources, including government documents and reports, White House tapes, oral histories, and memoirs, Rust meticulously reconstructs the process of American decision making on Laos, at times even providing a day-by-day account of conversations, memoranda, and meetings.

Rust argues that U.S. policy in Laos during the Kennedy years was "confused and contradictory" (p. 3). But the stakes were very high—American involvement in the Lao civil war had significant implications both within Southeast Asia and in terms of broader Cold War dynamics. While Kennedy applied gradual pressure in an attempt to accomplish anticommunist goals in Laos, the president did not believe that the United States should take the lead in military escalation in this impoverished and geographically isolated but strategically important country. As a result,

Kennedy "maneuvered tactically to avoid hard choices between intervening overtly with US combat troops and accepting the 'loss' of the country to communism" (p. 4). Rust skillfully demonstrates how inconsistencies in U.S. behavior toward Laos largely derived from American policymakers' inconsistent views about the relative importance of the country. On the one hand, most U.S. officials viewed Laos as peripheral to core U.S. interests in the region. On the other hand, Kennedy and his advisors saw the end of hostilities and the establishment of a neutral, coalition government in Laos as "a symbol of US-Soviet cooperation that 'would have an effect on many other questions of greater importance'" (p. 210).

Since 1954, when France granted independence to Laos and its colonies in Indochina, competing political and military factions had been struggling for control over the small landlocked country. In hopes of weakening both the communist Pathet Lao and neutralists, the Eisenhower administration supported right-wing General Phoumi Nosavan. In August 1960, a coup staged by a young captain in the Force Armee Royale, led to the establishment of an ostensibly neutralist government under the leadership of Souvanna Phoumi in place of Phoumi Nasovan's anticommunist dictatorship. By the time Kennedy was elected Laos had deteriorated into a multifaceted civil war. Phoumi's forces relied on covert assistance from the United States and other anticommunist supporters in their bid to reclaim power and defeat the Pathet Lao and neutralist groups. The Pathet Lao received aid from communist governments in the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), China, and the Soviet Union. Along with the neutralists, they controlled strategic swaths of land throughout the northern provinces, in the densely populated Mekong River valley, and along the border with Vietnam. Kennedy inherited this complex and explosive situation, and, according to Rust's description, from his first days in office the young president took seriously the potential threats posed by continued instability in Laos.

Rust's study of U.S. policy in Laos revolves around the 1962 Geneva accords. Signed by fourteen nations on July 23, 1962, the Geneva declaration established a neutral coalition government in Laos, prohibited interference from foreign states, and provided a framework for maintaining peace and stability within the Southeast Asian kingdom. In the first half of the book, Rust examines with great precision the discussions, debates, and negotiations leading up to the Geneva accords. He devotes the remainder of the book to an analysis of how and why the Geneva framework deteriorated so quickly during the weeks and months following the signing. Rust treats the Geneva agreement as a pivotal point in the story, the axis around which U.S. policy revolved. According to Rust's account, the settlement also marked the pinnacle of international cooperation on Laos. Kennedy pinned his hopes on the success of Geneva accords—he saw the agreement as not only the key to peace and stability in Laos but also as a way to bolster U.S. policy in South Vietnam and as a precursor to improved Soviet-American cooperation in other parts of the world, such as Cuba and Berlin.

Rust deftly places Laos within a broader context by emphasizing the regional dimensions and reverberations of the conflict. He focuses in particular on connections between U.S. policy in Laos and American efforts to maintain a separate, anticommunist state in South Vietnam. Much of Laos's strategic importance derived from the fact that the DRV sent personnel and war material to South Vietnam by way of infiltration routes through Laos. And the Hanoi government supported and encouraged Pathet Lao's attempts to seize power and end Western influence in the country. However, despite these important links, Kennedy displayed a tendency to "compartment the U.S. responses to the twin crises in Southeast Asia." As Rust explains, the Kennedy administration was

willing to accept a Cold War "tie," in a neutralized Laos but insisted on a clear victory for anticommunism in divided Vietnam (p. 8). Rust also demonstrates how U.S. relations with Thailand became intertwined with policy in Laos. In particular, Rust discusses the cooperation and competition between U.S. officials and Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat in advancing their respective agendas in Laos.

While he does a very good job of highlighting connections among Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, Rust might have focused more attention on the neighboring state of Cambodia, including some comparison of the American approaches to Laos and Cambodia. Not only was Cambodia connected historically with those other Southeast Asian nations, but Cambodian leaders, such as Norodom Sihanouk, also sought to assemble a neutral coalition government in order to protect the country's interests and preserve sovereignty. As was the case with Laos, American policy in Vietnam had severe and tragic effects on political developments in Cambodia. And although Rust hints at some of the ways in which tensions between China and the Soviet Union destabilized their clients in Laos and elsewhere, he also might have explored more fully how the competition between those communist powers affected their policies and limited their influence in Laos.

One of Rust's primary strengths is his insistence on highlighting the complexity of this history. Rather than gloss over the Lao aspects of the story, Rust distills and explains the complex political landscape of the country. For example, instead of presenting the fighting in Laos as a simple Cold War clash between communist and anticommunist forces, Rust describes the complicated and multidimensional nature of the conflict. Not only were right-wing, neutralist (including "dissident elements" with that coalition), and leftist factions competing for power, but various ethnic minority groups also contributed to political fragmentation and the fighting. Rust attributes a great deal of agency to Lao actors, especially Phoumi, Souvanna, and Souphanouvong, the spokesman and public face of the Pathet Lao. Rust shows how challenges to neutralism arose not only from external pressure exerted by the superpower patrons but also from internal opposition to Souvanna's government. To illustrate this point, Rust quotes Leonard Unger, the U.S. ambassador to Laos, who described the spring 1963 attacks on Souvanna's government as the culmination of opposition from both Phoumi's conservative forces and the Pathet Lao. As Unger wrote in May 1963, the "communists may now have just about finished [the] job, well started by [the] conservatives on April 19, of destroying [the] neutralists" (p. 246).

In fact, Rust's attention to local agency is both a central feature and a major contribution of his work. Throughout the book, Rust argues that the United States and Soviet Union often lacked control over their clients. Policymakers in Washington DC and Moscow faced resistance from independent-minded Lao leaders as well as their international partners. On a number of occasions, American allies, such as Thailand and France, openly opposed U.S. policy. Similarly, China and North Vietnam frequently undermined Soviet efforts to enforce the Geneva accords and promote neutralism in Laos. As Rust explains, Averill Harriman, the chief American negotiator at Geneva, "was not certain that the Soviet Union had the ability or the will to police compliance by other communist states" (p. 48). By drawing attention to such subtleties, Rust challenges the conventional wisdom that the superpowers enjoyed unrestrained hegemony during the height of the Cold War.

Just as Rust avoids oversimplification in his discussion of military and political jockeying within Laos, he reveals the intricacy of decision making on the American side as well. In particular, Rust highlights the bureaucratic infighting and competition for influence among Kennedy's advisors and within the foreign policy establish-

ment. In many instances, the president received conflicting recommendations from experts in the State Department and from Pentagon officials or the military leadership. But even Kennedy's civilian advisors often disagreed on the specifics of U.S. policy. For example, two of the administration's most influential counterinsurgency experts and architects of policy in Southeast Asia—Roger Hilsman and Walt Rostow—held opposing views on the significance of North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos. As a result of their competing views, Hilsman and Rostow presented divergent prescriptions for the terms of a negotiated settlement on Laos. They also disagreed on the efficacy of bombing North Vietnam to accomplish American goals in South Vietnam. In addition, Rust describes the gulf between policymakers in Washington DC and American personnel stationed in Laos, who, unsurprisingly, often had a more realistic understanding of the situation on the ground and the limitations on Americans' ability to shape the outcome.

Although Kennedy was initially preoccupied with Laos, by the end of his presidency, Vietnam had come to dominate U.S. foreign policy concerns in Southeast Asia. In his description of this shift, Rust explains how American officials basically chose to take a stand against the spread of communism in Vietnam rather than in Laos. This conclusion dovetails with arguments made by Seth Jacobs in his excellent study, ***The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*** (2012). However, while Rust focuses on state-level interactions and argues for the centrality of diplomatic and military considerations to U.S. policymaking, Jacobs presents a less conventional story. He emphasizes the cultural factors that influenced American behavior and explores the role of non-state actors, such as aid workers and journalists, in shaping the United States' approach to Laos. In particular, Jacobs argues that American biases regarding Lao culture and people convinced U.S. policymakers that their anticommunist efforts would meet more success elsewhere. Although Rust's and Jacobs's work differs significantly in terms of style and emphasis, their books complement each other. When read together, these three books (including Rust's ***Before the Quagmire***) offer a more complete assessment of U.S. actions in Laos during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years.

So Much to Lose provides many valuable insights about U.S. policy in Laos, as well as about broader dynamics of the Cold War in Asia. Rust's writing is clear and accessible, and he provides ample evidence to support his claims. If anything, readers might get lost in some of the detail and diplomatic minutiae that Rust includes. However, anyone seriously interested in U.S. foreign relations during the Cold War, and especially American involvement in Southeast Asia and the origins of the Vietnam War, cannot afford to ignore this fascinating book. As Rust skillfully demonstrates, Laos—and American behavior there—was far too important and consequential to remain buried in the footnotes of history.

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