
**BEFORE THE QUAGMIRE: American Intervention
in Laos 1954-1961**

**William J. Rust, University Press of Kentucky,
Lexington, 2012, 323 pages, \$40.00.**

If you want a new idea, read an old book. Similarly, if you seek new ideas on current and future foreign policy issues, take a moment to review a book on a previous foreign policy. Though not the author's stated intent, it's hard not to make parallels between many of today's current foreign policy issues and American policy in Laos in the 1950s. In *Before the Quagmire*, journalist and author William Rust takes a historical look at American involvement in Laos and examines how a small foreign policy issue was transformed into a much larger conflagration. He does so by seeing Laos in the greater context of the Cold War, and examining the internal American and Laotian decisions that ultimately set the U.S. on a course of greater military involvement in both Laos and Vietnam.

Rust focuses this detailed history of American policy in Laos on the years of the Eisenhower administration. He saves Kennedy's role for his upcoming book on the Kennedy administration and Laos. Rust points out that contemporary fear of communism often limited what the key players considered as viable policy alternatives: accept communism or try military intervention. In this case, the Eisenhower administration clearly ruled out any role for the communists in any Lao government. Eisenhower in particular found it difficult to reconcile nationalism with communism, and focused on combating what appeared a monolithic and aggressive communist threat. Rust paints a portrait of an Eisenhower who, despite keeping the U.S. out of the French war in Vietnam, was determined not to let Laos fall to the communists on his watch.

Brothers John Foster Dulles at State Department and Allen Dulles at the newly established CIA were central characters in forming American policy towards Laos. While the principal aim of American policy in Laos was to prevent a communist takeover, the policies pursued by the administration—specifically by the State Department, the CIA, and the Defense Department—were often contradictory and counter-productive. Rust brings the reader inside the American

embassy in Vientiane, where the internal philosophical struggles, as well as friction between ambassadors and increasingly influential CIA stations chiefs, led to coups and conflicting support to competing Laotian politicians and generals. Rust details various local political and military leaders; these Laotians were principally judged and supported based on their commitment to resist communism, rather than their effectiveness in developing a well governed Laos.

Hence, American foreign assistance to Laos became disproportionately represented through military support, with traditional French military advisors soon pushed aside. This military emphasis enabled various political and military Laotian players, but did little to improve the lives of the predominantly rural and poor Laotians. Even the few attempts to support the population where militarized. In the end the U.S. supplanted France as the principal patron of Laos.

The title of Rust's book alludes to Laos as the prequel to a greater and ultimately unsatisfying American involvement in Indochina, particularly in Vietnam. Throughout this richly researched narrative are short, insightful character sketches and assessments of key figures, both American and Laotian, which aptly bring a human element to this tragic foreign policy story. *Before the Quagmire* should interest not only readers of the Cold War and Vietnam War eras, but also provides key insights to students of the development of American foreign policy.

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**BLOWTORCH: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and
American Cold War Strategy**

**Frank Leith Jones, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis,
MD, 2013, 416 pages, \$52.95**

Only rare individuals can effectively balance ends, ways, means, and risk into a coherent design and have the personality and experience to drive its implementation—Robert “Blowtorch” Komer was one such individual. Author Frank Jones provides a discerning and worthwhile biography of Komer. Although a “second echelon” security professional, Komer was a master of strategic art.