

Book Bit for WTBF-AM/FM in Troy, Ala. For November 10, 2016

Series by William J. Rust, published by The University Press of Kentucky—"Eisenhower & Cambodia: Diplomacy, Covert Action, and the Origins of the Second Indochina War", and the previous books "Before The Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos 1954-61" "So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos"

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These books explain so much about the relationship between the USA and southeast Asian nations in the 1950s and early 1960s! Like all true stories, they are filled with startling revelations, disturbing covert activity, larger-than-life personalities, and diplomatic missteps. Having visited Cambodia in October, I was particularly fascinated by the newest book in the series which offers an in-depth look at our spotty relationship with their government in the 1950s. Cambodia's political leader for over a decade was the young Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and his relationship with America was one of miscommunication, mistrust and missed opportunities. (These attitudes were not without some basis.) He was also being smoozed by Red China, invaded by the South Vietnamese and Thai governments (who feared he was getting soft on communism), and fighting internal coups. The French, who were annoyed that we were doing better in Indochina than they had with their "colonies", didn't help us, either. All these issues (and the Vietnam War) led to a communist genocide in Cambodia from 1975-1980.

Meanwhile, the US was helping Laos, the nation where we thought the next proxy war would occur. The Eisenhower administration's Laos policy began in 1954, when the First Indochina War ended by Geneva Accord. The President assumed direct US responsibility for aiding resistance to communism in Laos, South Vietnam and Cambodia. In Laos, a constitutional monarchy, the US financed 100% of its fledgling armed forces, provided covert military trainers through the new organization called the CIA, and established a US civilian aid mission (which was a disaster.) France, former colonizer of Indochina, didn't help the situation. A case-study in turning a "small foreign-policy problem into a large one, the American experience in Laos was a key initial misstep on the road to war in Southeast Asia." We didn't learn anything from Laos that helped us in Vietnam. Our intervention in Lao political life had a destabilizing effect on the country's fragile anticommunist base.

Laos became one of JFK's burdens as well. It was only important because of its geographical proximity to nations struggling with communist guerillas. The North Vietnamese built and improved the so-called "Ho Chi Minh Trail" through Cambodia and Laos leading into South Vietnam. A second Geneva Accord, ratified in July 1962, began to break down almost immediately. The attempt of Laos to be a "neutral" nation as Cambodia was attempting would end badly for both nations as they fell to communism in the mid-1970s. Kennedy was gambling that South Vietnam would defeat the Viet Cong insurgency by 1965. Laos became an active warzone. After JFK's assassination, LBJ inherited the Indochina struggle. Nothing had been learned, and he proved unequal to the task. This series clears so much of the murkiness of that era. They belong in the library of every serious student of 20th century history. (Former journalist and communications consultant William J. Rust is also the author of *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960-1963.*)