



The Association for
Asian Studies

Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam. by Roger Warner

Review by: Arthur J. Dommen

The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 55, No. 2 (May, 1996), pp. 528-530

Published by: [Association for Asian Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2943437>

Accessed: 18/06/2014 05:32

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Asian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Asian Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Readers might have benefitted from an overall discussion of subregional variation and the problems associated with ethnographic regions. For example, central and southern Maluku societies share much with societies to the west, while the northern Maluku societies on and around Halmahera form a set of variations on their own, tied together by a shared political history related to the Sultanates of Tidore and Ternate. One other small quibble: could scholars agree to use Indonesian toponyms—Maluku for the province, Seram (not Ceram) for its central island? These points aside, this well-produced collection, which includes a useful bibliography of recent Maluku research up to 1992 and Masinambow's review of the Project's work, gives the reader a good sense of the central topics animating Maluku studies, and should stimulate further interest in the region.

DAVID BALDWIN
University of Lethbridge, Alberta

Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam. By ROGER WARNER. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. 416 pp. \$25.00.

This is a book about the war in the mountains of Laos between 1961 and 1973. It is not the first, but it is certainly the best. Roger Warner (author of two books on Cambodia) picks up the story in May 1960 with the departure for Laos of Edgar Buell, a farmer from the rolling hills of eastern Indiana and International Voluntary Services recruit, whose mission is to teach modern farming methods. In Xieng Khouang Province, Buell finds himself living in close proximity to the Hmong, a mountain people firmly attached to their land and accustomed to free give and take in council. They welcome "Pop's" presence; his earthy can-do and will-do spirit forges a human bond stronger than any paper treaty.

Of course, this picture of innocence can be overdone, as it was in a hagiographic biography of Buell published a few years before the experience turned bitter. By the time Buell arrived in Laos the policy of neutrality favored by the majority of Lao nationalists had been purposely sabotaged by the United States, using the clout of its large aid program. "We don't talk to neutralists," the American ambassador in Vientiane told the anthropologist Joel Halpern. A "pro-Western" government under Tiao Somsanith was safely in power, or so the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs in the State Department thought.

When Somsanith's government was overthrown in a coup d'état and replaced by a neutralist one headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma, Marshall Sarit Thanarat, the strongman of Thailand, to whom the United States was much beholden, moved rapidly to preempt the threat of a North Vietnamese presence on the Mekong. He had plenty of precedent: in the nineteenth century the left bank had been contested by Hué and Bangkok. Indeed, it is Sarit's invisible presence that one feels behind the five-man Thai paramilitary police teams sent to train the Hmong so as to form a human barrier between the Plain of Jars and the Mekong.

Arms and money for this effort were arranged by a GS-13 in his thirties working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who had spent the previous ten years in Thailand training the police teams. With the agreement of the CIA station chief in Vientiane, he sent a Thai team by helicopter into the mountains ringing the Plain of Jars in the first days of January 1961 to look for the senior Hmong military officer,

Lt. Col. Vang Pao. "He's the one we've been looking for," the Thais radioed when they found him.

Vang Pao explained to the American that with the neutralists and Pathet Lao controlling the Plain, his people had only two choices: to leave or to fight. If they were given guns, they would fight. He could arm 10,000. In that case, they would be loyal to the government and the king and not seek autonomy. When the CIA man proposed accepting Vang Pao's offer to his bosses back in Vientiane, they showed no reaction and he went to sleep that night believing they had decided to reject the offer (p. 47). It was a difficult decision because he had told them if the North Vietnamese were determined to push, the Hmong would be defeated. The only way to run the operation would be to include a contingency for an escape route through Sayaboury to refuge in Thailand. The Hmong still remembered the departure of the French in 1954 with bitterness. But the next day, he learned that his proposal would be accepted. And so, improbable as it seemed, scarcely six months after Buell's arrival, the Hmong stood on the front line of the Cold War, and he and other Americans with them.

Sarit distrusted the American ambassador, Winthrop Brown, who had managed to preserve a working relationship with Souvanna Phouma despite Washington's clumsy efforts to undermine his government, so the CIA agreed to run the operation directly from its headquarters instead of from Vientiane. One hundred Thai paramilitary acted as training cadres with the Hmong. They remained in Laos after the deadline for withdrawal of foreign troops, in violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords. The CIA, more scrupulous, established an operational base at Udorn across the Mekong. Initially, the Hmong partisans gave a good account of themselves, harassing the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao surrogates. But most of Warner's book is devoted to describing how they and the other mountain tribes were sucked into a seesaw war in which they became mincemeat for the vastly better-equipped North Vietnamese, especially after December 1971 when Hanoi's introduction of Soviet-made 130 mm artillery with a range of 28 kilometers largely negated the advantage of American airpower. Even Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng came under attack. Warner gives credence to the estimate that 30,000 Hmong, more than one-tenth of the population (p. 350), had been killed by the time of the February 21, 1973, peace agreement.

When in May 1975 the thin safeguards offered by the peace agreement frayed amid charges and countercharges of ceasefire violations, the Hmong were left perilously exposed to retribution. No evidence has come to light, to my knowledge, that the high official most directly responsible for the 15-year-old Hmong alliance, the then director of the CIA's East Asia Division, Theodore G. Shackley Jr., lifted a finger to protect the Hmong partisans. A motley collection of American and Lao volunteers, flying anything airworthy they could get their hands on, evacuated to safety 2,500 of the more than 50,000 Hmong stuck in Long Tieng, including General Vang Pao and his wives. Warner records that the CIA did not even bother to order the destruction of filing cabinets containing personnel information, which were allowed to fall intact into Pathet Lao hands (p. 349). As for the plan for an exit route through Sayaboury, the Americans had long forgotten about it.

Warner has brought to light much new material. He devotes considerable space, for example, to Fred Branfman, an IVSer turned antiwar activist. Branfman's interpreter and collector of refugee drawings was a Pathet Lao political cadre and Branfman knowingly concealed this fact, according to Warner (p. 303), when he published these materials in a 1972 book that focused exclusively on the human toll

of bombing on the Plain of Jars. For its shock effect on a vast array of actors in the media and on Capitol Hill, in my opinion, the book was worth more to the Pathet Lao than a couple of battalions of troops. On the other hand, Warner has missed the significance of the defection of the neutralist army, disgusted with Hanoi's intervention, from the Pathet Lao in the 1963 fighting on the Plain of Jars.

The basic facts about the "secret war" were known to foreign correspondents at the time. Since then, despite the CIA's refusal to declassify the Udorn base cables and the rest of its 30-year-old-plus records on Laos, many of the details have been filled in by former CIA operatives who have granted interviews to historical researchers, making the CIA's obstruction pointless as well as illegal. Warner uses his interview materials with a mastery that succeeds in avoiding the well-known pitfalls of this method. As he states (p. 398): "The people I talked with belonged to interconnecting networks, and once in a network it was possible to travel along it from one person to the next, tactfully and patiently, in many cases waiting for the right telephone calls to be made between old friends, as they discussed whether it was okay to talk with me or not." Warner also makes judicious use of Buell's letters home. He has a sharp ear for the telling detail, and his writing is lucid and nonpolemical throughout. He owes a debt (which he graciously acknowledges) to Ernest Kuhn and other early reviewers who ensured that numerous errors did not find their way into print. The book shows evidence of careful proofreading.

Warner also portrays the Hmong as human beings, not caricatures. He insists on using the contemporary term Meo instead of Hmong. For Americans in the field, Meo connoted respect, even affection. And, as Warner points out (p. 400), none of the Hmong objected to the usage. Contrast the cold bloodedness of former ambassador William H. Sullivan in the Panglossian views he expresses to Warner (pp. 320–27).

As Sullivan's and Shackley's successors in Foggy Bottom and Langley search for ways of coping with crises from Bosnia to Zaire, they may wish this particular intervention in human affairs had not been so painstakingly pieced together. When Mohamed Farah Aideed can thumb his nose at the United States, secure in the knowledge that no self-respecting rival Somali clansman is going to ally himself with such untrustworthy foreigners, is there much scope for moral suasion, the diplomat's first line of argument? Can a great power that makes a habit of enlisting allies among indigenous peoples, squeezing them dry like lemons, and throwing them away remain a great power for long? Warner's book is priced to be affordable to students and should be on the reading list of university courses in diplomacy for years to come.

ARTHUR J. DOMMEN

The Indochina Institute, George Mason University

Islamic Peasants and the State: The 1908 Anti-Tax Rebellion in West Sumatra. By KEN YOUNG. New Haven: Monograph No. 40, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, Yale University, 1994. xviii, 361 pp. \$22.00.

Violence flared up in several districts of West Sumatra in mid-1908 in protest against the Dutch introduction of personal tax. The unrest was serious enough for reinforcements to be called from Java. By the authorities' own accounts, hundreds of Minangkabau rebels were killed and a larger number injured. White-clad villagers armed only with swords and religious amulets were cut down as they charged against