

Mountain Secrets

*Several new books on
US involvement in
Laos reveal much
about how the war was
fought but little about
why it was lost*

OFFICIALLY, there were no foreign forces in Laos during the Indochina war. The country's neutrality was guaranteed under the Geneva Agreements of 1962. In reality, both North Vietnam and the United States had troops stationed in remote areas of the mountainous country throughout the conflict. The North Vietnamese built their fabled Ho Chi Minh Trail through the jungles of eastern and southeastern Laos, along the slopes of the Annamite Cordillera, and on to guerrilla bases in the south, while American warplanes tried desperately to cut this vital supply line.

The Americans, or more specifically the CIA, also trained and equipped an army of tens of thousands of Hmong hill tribesmen to fight the North Vietnamese in Laos and their indigenous allies, the communist Pathet Lao. Apart from the Hmong, Thai 'volunteers,' guerrillas from Burma's rebellious ethnic minorities, and Nationalist Chinese troops loyal to Taiwan also took part in this war that never was. So secret was the operation that it is only now, more than two decades later, that detailed books can be written about it. But the quality varies, and the results are often substandard—perhaps matching the naiveté of some of the hand-picked young men who fought this war.

For example, James Parker, author of *Codename Mule: Fighting the Secret War in Laos for the CIA* (US Naval Institute Press), was only 23 when he arrived in In-



dochina. On R&R in Australia, he and his family "visited the Opera House, the zoo and went shopping. To our amazement, we discovered that July is not hot in Australia. It was the dead of the winter—in July. 'How crazy,' we said. 'No wonder they talk funny.'"

Mr Parker's account of the war in Laos reflects the same juvenile innocence. The famous CIA operative Anthony "Tony Poe" Poshepny, whose life served as the model for the character Col. Kurtz in the movie *Apocalypse Now*—and who never made it a secret that he paid rewards for severed Pathet Lao ears and collected them in glass jars with formaldehyde, or that he was going to fill a whole pillow with pubic hair from local women he had slept with—was in Mr Parker's eyes no doubt a somewhat troublesome drunkard, but also a case officer who was kept "in a job where he could not hurt anyone and where the Hmong's love for him was a contributing, positive factor."

By sharp contrast, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* by Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison gives an informed, balanced account of all aspects of the CIA's clandestine operations in Laos. The 453-page volume is full of new information, detailed maps of battle sites, and 80 unique photographs of CIA officers in action.

They are all here: Jack Shirley, a young CIA operative who in the 1950s had gone to the Pacific island of Saipan to train Nationalist Chinese frogmen raiding the mainland; William Bird, the owner of a heavy construction firm who at the CIA's behest amassed a diverse fleet of C-46s, Beech Barons and Twin Bonanzas to fly supplies to the Kuomintang in Burma as well as the anti-communist hill tribe forces in Laos; and Robert 'Dutch' Brongersma, one of the pilots who flew the planes for the CIA airline Air America.

The secrets of the 'White Star' teams, which included Thai as well as American personnel are here for the first time in print. The book also details the little-known involvement of a Nationalist Chinese elite unit based at remote outposts near the Yunnan and Vietnamese frontiers: the battle-hardened Bataillon Speciale 111. This was made up partly of former Chinese prisoners from the Korean War who had been evacuated to Taiwan and trained there for special operations against the mainland, including preventing the communist advance into Southeast Asia via Laos.

Despite this effort, the war did not succeed in blocking the communist advance. On October 12, 1973, two Aeroflot An-12 transport planes from Gia Lam Airbase, North Vietnam, landed at Wattay airport outside Vientiane. From them stepped the first group of cadre and soldiers from the Pathet Lao's 206 Public Security Battalion, the communist half of the mixed garrison in the Lao capital which was part of a deal to form a coalition government in Laos. Two years later, the non-communist coalition partner had been outmaneuvered and Kingdom of Laos became the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

One possible criticism of Mr Conboy is that he concentrates too much on the military aspects of the conflict, paying little attention to the perhaps more important diplomatic maneuvers that were happening at the same time. And although the authors did interview some North Vietnamese officers during the course of their research, what is missing is a more complete picture of other side of the story—precisely how much the communist side knew about its adversaries. Even so, *Shadow War* is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the secret aspects of the Indochina war. It also shows how foreign policy sometimes is implemented on the local level even without the knowledge of the policy makers

themselves, let alone the general public.

Roger Warner's *Backfire: CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam* (Simon and Schuster) dwells on the same theme, but in a different way. He argues that the United States initially ran a successful little secret war in Laos, organized and led by a competent and earnest CIA-operative called Bill Lair, until this command was taken away from him and handed over to less sophisticated intelligence types.

Mr Lair watched in near agony how the entire operation in Laos became mismanaged and the hill tribes were set on the road to tragedy. Perhaps not by coincidence, Mr Lair appears to have been one of Mr Warner's main sources for the book; he is the thoughtful, quiet and unassuming hero throughout the narrative.

Back Fire is an extremely well-researched account of the war—and by far the most readable of all these newly published books—but even so, its main argument is not convincing. It was during the supposedly successful years of the secret war that North Vietnam succeeded in building the Ho Chi Minh trail, the US stepped in to prop up Phoumi Nosavan and other inept Lao officials, and the war began to escalate.

Mr Warner argues that things could have turned out differently if the American presence had been limited to a handful of young Americans who understood more about the country than those who came later. But would the outcome have been different? Mr Lair was no doubt a very competent field operative, but the war in Laos had gone wrong well before the arrival of the brash types of Codename Mule.

Mr Warner then adds that the non-communist side "couldn't have won the war, not with the North Vietnamese being as determined as they were; but it would have been possible to manage the war better by keeping it small and better connected to Thailand from the start." There is twisted logic here, which flaws an otherwise excellent account of a war that actually was doomed to fail from the very beginning.

The reasons for that failure have yet to be analyzed. None of these books really addresses the issue, mainly because they fail to take into account the plans and strategies of the other side, which ultimately determined the outcome of the war.

—Bertil Linter

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

THE FIRST PLACE most people meet Korean author Hideo Asano is in a cafe or bookstore, where he hawks his book in order to finance his travels. "In Japan, I can easily get fifteen dollars for the book. In Singapore, ten or twelve. But here in Thailand, I'm lucky if I can get four! People just don't read books. I have to get out of here."

Mr Asano is a short, thin man whose compact frame suggests an internal strength and vitality that is borne out by his sparkling eyes and emphatically punctuated chatter. Just being in his energetic presence can be slightly unnerving, especially if you're standing in the Kinokuniya Bookstore at the World Trade Center in Bangkok, hoping the Japanese shoppers don't overhear his rantings on the flaws in the Japanese character.

"They have no religion and no god! They can't express their feelings! If you go to a man's shop every day for ten years, each day when he sees you, he will say the same thing, 'Hello, how are you today Mr Asano. How may I help you, blah, blah, blah' and you will never become his friend."

In fact, while Mr Asano's parents are Japanese, he was born and raised in Korea and he has spent much of his life traveling. He spent some years in America attending university and freelancing for the *San Francisco Examiner*. There he learned to speak and write in the flawlessly accented idiomatic English which lends his first novel *An American Breakfast* its simple eloquence and 'true grit' gringo feel.

The book, which traces a young Japanese college student's experience living on a Nebraska farm is largely autobiographical, as Mr Asano freely admits: "I get my inspiration from my own

life. What else is there to write about?" Certainly, Mr Asano has dealt with some of the same issues the book's protagonist Kenji must face: interracial relationships, cultural differences, generation gaps and tradition.

The story of working life on a corn and dairy farm harkens back to the very American classics of Vonnegut, Steinbeck and Hemingway, who wrote in the simple spare style of newspaper journalists. It's an engaging tale about folks from different worlds bonding in the face of challenges thrown at them by life, Mother Nature and destiny. Its themes

are universal and its tone places Mr Asano in the class of American literature rather than Korean or Japanese—though the book is a bestseller in Korea.

Mr Asano is happy with the book's American style, and as he gets older he looks to living out the remainder of his life in the US, yet he does not wish to face retirement alone. "I want to find a good woman now and then move to America," he says—but

he is unsure where to find her.

This is where Mr Asano, a world traveler and confirmed misanthrope, has run into some problems. Leaning against the bookstore's rack of travel guides, he gives a quick rundown of the flaws he's discovered in each of the world's major cultures.

Mr Asano worries that the Europeans are emotionally dead and wonders if Russians are honest about their feelings. Finally he decides to head to historic and romantic Prague, where the people are hearty, the beer is good and thousands of young Americans in their 20s fill the cafes at night, full of romance and eager to buy copies of novels by handsome Asian authors.

—Josh O'Connor

