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## Book Review: Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos.*

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reflects the western-centric world view adopted by Canadian and other officials. This perspective, however, can lead to misinterpretations about the historical dynamics at play in the “Far East” in this period, particularly the role of China. After all, the events in North-east Asia for a decade before 1941 and for years afterwards were about a devastating war that produced up to 100 million refugees. Recent studies of the fighting, known in China as the War of Resistance, suggest that 25 million Chinese soldiers and civilians died as a result of the conflict, not Wilford’s figure of 10 million (p. 13), which is the estimated number of soldiers who died. His reference to the war as the “China-Incident” (p. 195) reflects the interpretation of the Japanese imperial government of the time, and he places Manchukuo in Southeast Asia (p. 103), even though it is in North-east Asia. The idea of “crisis” may also have contributed to some odd phrasing, including the notion that “China deserves due consideration as a Pacific power because it tied up so many Japanese forces that might otherwise have been deployed elsewhere across the Far East and the Pacific” (p. 14). Japan’s attacks on Pearl Harbor and Southeast Asia arose out of that country’s invasion of China and cannot be dissociated from that conflict.

These interpretive issues lie somewhat beyond the main focus of the book, which makes an important contribution to our understanding of Canadian diplomacy in 1941 at a crucial juncture of World War II. The author frames the story with much new information, makes fine use of primary research, links domestic policy to international trends, and provides an insightful analysis of Canadian policy toward Japan in the months and weeks leading to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

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STEVEN LEE

*The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos.* By Seth Jacobs. (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2012. xi + 321 pp. \$35)

In the early 1960s, Laos, not Vietnam, generated the most anxiety for U.S. policymakers desperate to halt communism in Southeast Asia. Both Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy followed developments in the small, landlocked country closely, and both considered military intervention. This preoccupation with Laos and the ultimate decision to seek a negotiated rather than a military settlement, argues Seth Jacobs in his latest book, resulted directly

from cultural perceptions, in particular an overriding sense of Laotian indolence.

The story of U.S. resistance and eventual acquiescence to limited Laotian neutrality has been told many times. Jacobs contributes by developing the cultural side of the U.S. story, emphasizing the contradictory impulses, willful ignorance, and stereotyping that dominated the thinking of both American officials and the public at large. The author relentlessly berates U.S. Ambassador J. Graham Parsons, humanitarian Dr. Thomas Dooley (whom Jacobs uncharitably brands “a clean-shaven Joe McCarthy”), and others for essentializing the Lao as lazy and as a pacifistic people incapable of being roused to join the American cause (p. 172). American officials believed that the Pathet Lao, the aggressive Laotian communists, showed a capability on the battlefield because of their contact with the even more aggressive Viet Cong rather than any martial strain in the Laotian character.

While never detailing his methodology, Jacobs serves up so many examples on so many levels that one is willing to concede his point (although I have studied many of the same events and developments and never particularly noticed this discourse). Whether this unfortunate essentializing was applied exclusively to Laotians is another issue. Indeed, U.S. frustration with its allies during the Cold War often resulted in stereotyping of the sort seen in Laos. Jacobs argues that policymakers saw the Vietnamese, compared to the Lao, as a people willing to fight—hence the decision to abandon Laos and fight in Vietnam. Americans, however, frequently bemoaned their Vietnamese allies in similar terms as they lamented the Lao. Indeed, Americans intervened in 1965 largely because the South Vietnamese appeared incapable of mounting an effective defense. Vietnamization, of course, came later. In the first years of the war, Americans eschewed the forces of the Republic of Viet Nam, believing them inferior and ineffective.

If Jacobs’s form of cultural analysis is novel, his ultimate conclusions are not. He echoes the prevailing view of Kennedy as a single-minded cold warrior. Following the orthodox line, he is at pains to explain away Kennedy’s concessions on Laos as anything but evidence of strategic flexibility. A more balanced assessment, however, should incorporate evidence of Kennedy’s skepticism about intervention and his passing interest in expanding neutralization to all of Southeast Asia. What emerges is a more complicated picture than Jacobs or others would allow.

Most welcome, however, would be an initiative to bring the Laotians more sharply into focus. Jacobs consults only U.S. sources—an

anomaly in these days of increasingly internationalized histories. In some cases, the sources are closer than one might imagine. For instance, the Library of Congress, where Jacobs consulted the Averell Harriman papers, has ten volumes of Laotian Prince Souvanna Phouma's diaries (largely written in French) available on microfilm.

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*Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam.* By Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xiv + 444 pp. \$34.95)

This meticulously researched and clearly written study fills a major gap in the literature on the Vietnam War. The coverage in the existing literature on the two sides in the Indochina conflict is imbalanced. We have a clearer picture of American decision-making, but our knowledge about how policy was made in Hanoi is very limited. Most scholars writing on the Vietnam War tend to focus on the question of how the United States lost the war. In contrast, only a few historians have flipped the question by exploring how Hanoi won. For instance, William Duiker in his *Sacred War* (1995) tried to unlock the mystery of policymaking in North Vietnam, but his account was not archive-based, and many of his conclusions were tentative. Lien-Hang Nguyen has tapped into recently opened archival collections in Vietnam to provide a substantial and highly revealing treatment of Hanoi's calculations and maneuvers during the Vietnam War.

One virtue of this volume is its careful dissection of policy debates within the Politburo of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP). Debunking the myth of a unified collective leadership in Hanoi, Nguyen demonstrates that divisions and factions existed at the highest echelon of the VWP. She documents the ascendancy of the hard-line group led by Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, who edged out Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap from nearly all major policymaking junctures, including the decision to focus on cities during the Tet Offensive. The pivotal figure who emerges from Nguyen's account is Le Duan, the longest-serving first secretary of the VWP. Together with his ally, Le Duc Tho, Le Duan established a repressive party apparatus and a police state to consolidate their authority in the North and their control over the war effort in the South. Nguyen concludes that "the Vietnamese communist struggle was anything