

Review of The Ideal Man: The Tragedy of Jim Thompson and the American Way of War

The Ideal Man: The Tragedy of Jim Thompson and the American Way of War by Joshua Kurlantzick (Hardcover edition John Wiley, November 2011). ISBN: 978-0-470-08621-6. US\$25.95. 272 pages.

In Graham Greene's prescient anti-war classic *The Quiet American*, OSS operative Alden Pyle espouses an alternative to communism and colonialism in early 1950s Vietnam. With a little help from the United States, Pyle argues, a stable, democratically elected government should be able to emerge. The title character in Joshua Kurlantzick's latest book, *The Ideal Man: The Tragedy of Jim Thompson and the American Way of War*, would not disagree.

Though Jim Thompson, who is perhaps best known for his Thai silk, his exquisite teak wood Bangkok mansion, and the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death, is hardly the doe-eyed, violent operative that Pyle is, he's cut from the same ideological cloth. But where Greene punished Pyle for his naivete, Kurlantzick is undoubtedly enamored with his central character; Thompson is, indeed, Kurlantzick's ideal man. The Southeast Asia expert at the Council on Foreign Relations has found in Thompson a tragic figure of conviction, principle, and Old World charm. A man who jump-started a flagging traditional industry, who saw what could have happened in Southeast Asia after the Second World War, and whose rise and fall charts the trajectory of America's squandered international good standing.

And whereas Pyle died long before he could see the end result of his government's fool-hardy interventions in a region it

barely understood, Jim Thompson had the misfortune of living to see his adopted home become consumed and remade by a neo-colonialism he had fought so hard to oppose.

Born in 1906 to a blue-blooded Delaware family of considerable social standing, Jim Thompson's early years had all the trappings of a wealthy East Coast Republican upbringing. He went from St. Paul's to Princeton and then, with the help of a family friend, to a swanky New York architectural firm. His time in New York high-society, however, took a toll and after 12 years, he wanted for something more. He began defending Roosevelt's liberalism to his staunchly isolationist parents and in October of 1940, he joined the Delaware National Guard. After three years as a desk jockey, Thompson was accepted by the fledgling, elite boy's club of Ivy Leaguers and adventure-seekers that was the Office of Strategic Services, the United States' wartime intelligence agency.

Following a heroic stint with the OSS in the Mediterranean, Thompson was reassigned to a post in Bangkok just one month after the Japanese surrender. "Jim was an idealist, a romantic, an anti-imperialist and there was no more idealistic time than after the war," a Bangkok colleague of Thompson's remembered, and it was here that Thompson would finally get a chance to put his ideals into action.

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