
**Reviewed by Paul F. Gardner**

Few Americans are aware of their government’s support for a rebellion in Indonesia in the late 1950s. In Indonesia itself, however, this event remains deeply embedded in many people’s consciousness. Whenever unrest emerges in Indonesia’s outer islands, as has been the case since 1999, the routine entry of a U.S. naval vessel into the South China Sea invariably brings Indonesian press speculation about an impending American intervention. It is as if the events of 1957–1958 created lasting antibodies in the Indonesian body politic that multiply exponentially upon any sign of reinfection. A new book describing this costly venture for an American audience is a timely and salutary reminder that we are living with a past that our government long hid from us.

Longer books have been written about the American role in what is known in Indonesia as the PRRI-Permesta rebellion, but no earlier study is based on as many firsthand reports or as little speculation as this slender volume is. The authors clearly gained the confidence of a remarkably large number of officers from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who took part in the covert operation—no mean accomplishment in itself. The experiences of these agents, whose principal task was to buttress the rebellion with American resources and expertise, provide interesting variations on a common theme of frustration. Their tales are supplemented by helpful material unearthed from the relatively scant Indonesian government archives of the period. These documents include histories of the Indonesian armed services and previously unpublished sections of the trial of Indonesia’s sole American prisoner. The Indonesian sources indicate that, although the operation remained unacknowledged by the American government for years, “covert” became a misnomer within days of its launching.

The nature of the rebellion poses serious challenges for any chronicler. The action shifted rapidly from island to island in this large, diverse archipelago. The Philippines and Taiwan were also intimately involved. Virtually every change of scene brought a new cast of characters. Readers who are not well acquainted with the region will find themselves frequently consulting the maps placed somewhat inconveniently at the back of the book. In light of this problem, the narrative could perhaps have done without detours to Albania and Ukraine to trace the origins of a Polish presence among the CIA agents. On the whole, however, the authors have handled scene changes well, employing a brisk writing style reminiscent of a good script for an action movie. For some readers, the intermittent biographies of CIA agents and the history of naval vessels involved in the operation may be an annoying distraction from the complicated story line. This background, however, brings the actors out of the shadows for their brief moments on stage. It also helps explain the “can do” mentality that propelled this ill-judged venture. A good example of their mindset is the entertaining description of an eventually abandoned scheme to rescue the American prisoner by snatching him from his prison yard with a “skyhook” attached to an aircraft.
The authors do not frontally question the operation’s rationale or estimate its ultimate political cost, although there are indications that they believe it was a serious mistake. This detachment cannot in itself be faulted. The book’s heavy reliance on the accounts of CIA agents, who were seldom prone to reason why, may nonetheless lead some readers to conclude that the United States emerged from this venture relatively unscathed, as its architects, the Dulles brothers, later claimed. There is ample evidence, however, that the adverse effects of the operation on the bilateral relationship persist to this day. It would have been helpful in this regard if the authors had allocated more space to Indonesian critics of the intervention. They are not difficult to find. One need go no further, in fact, than the rebel air force commander Petit Muharto Kartodirdjo, who was interviewed for the book. Muharto has elsewhere described his American “advisers” as “thugs” who preempted the role of Indonesians in their domestic conflict. Indonesians on the other side of the battle lines could be expected to have even harsher comments to offer.

Any mention of the book’s omissions should be accompanied by praise for the prodigious research on which it is based. The authors were even resourceful enough to examine the logs of vessels caught up in the action, finding some interesting nuggets there. The data presented are all the more impressive when one considers that the authors did not have access to the CIA archives. Several years ago, the CIA publicly pledged that it would release documents on this operation, but that promise has not yet been fulfilled. Until the CIA upholds its word—and probably far beyond—this book should remain the most authoritative source on the operational aspects of the American intervention in Indonesia’s PRRI-Permesta rebellion.


Reviewed by Kenton J. Clymer, University of Texas at El Paso

Approximately half of this book directly addresses American policy toward Cambodia. Christopher Brady, a lecturer in decision-making theory and systems at City University Business School in London, is more concerned with determining the “simple mythological views” (p. 8) of the presidential administrations of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. Brady writes: “The intention here is to example the realities of the principal actors and groups of actors through an analysis of their public utterances” (p. 10), and he uses Cambodia as a case study. He ironically concludes that Cambodia was a very minor issue in U.S. foreign policy—which, if true, would raise the question of whether the topic deserves book-length treatment. But Brady underestimates the extent to which Cambodia has seared itself into American memory.

Brady devotes a chapter to each presidential administration he considers. In each case, he begins by presenting brief overviews of the major actors (the “principate,” p. 11) and their relative importance, categorizing them according to three levels of