

LAOS: A CONTRAST TO VIETNAM

Laos -- The American Outlook

If I were to compare what Americans were doing in Laos, and how they were doing it, to what they were doing in Vietnam, and how they were doing it there, the first thing that comes to mind is differences rather than similarities. In Laos there were few Americans, and they seemed to have a different attitude or outlook, and there were almost no U. S. military except for those attached to the embassy. Nevertheless, there was a lot of action going on in Laos. I base all these opinions on close observation and participation for a period of about three months I spent in Pakse in 1967, as what AID calls the area coordinator.

Americans in Vietnam worked under considerable pressure, but this wasn't true in Laos, although some Americans there thought it was, because they compared things to the way they were some years back. Many of the senior Americans in USAID Laos served there quite a long time -- some for eight or ten years -- and they held what I would call a sibling rivalry toward the AID people in Vietnam. They were a little resentful about this and often attributed cuts in their proposed programs to the fact that there was only so much to go around and Vietnam got preferential treatment.

My impression is that most of our USAID Americans in Laos either didn't understand what counterinsurgency means or else they purposely disassociated themselves from the political implications of their work and left that aspect to other U. S. agencies. They seemed to feel that good works are an end in themselves -- which in my opinion, is foolhardy. These Americans, in fact, felt that other agencies whose prime concern was the political aspect were interfering with their work and they balked at cooperating with them. USAID mission policy, as explained to me, was solely to increase the country's GNP. This meant stepping up the yield in rice production, and this entailed selling the individual farmer on the so-called miracle seed rice, IR-8, from the Philippines. Also, it meant use of fertilizer, insecticides, and improved methods plus the construction of a heck of a lot of irrigation canals and dams and access roads.

Well, the point is that this average farmer hadn't yet been sold on the program, and the officials of the Royal Lao Government appeared to me to be only lukewarm on the project. By this I mean the local officials. The Lao officials in Vientiane were perhaps sold on the idea, but they hadn't passed any enthusiasm down the line very far. What this policy meant to me in my operation was that anything that contributed to increased rice production was considered good, but anything

that did not was considered an unacceptable expense, and this included feeding refugees and certain paramilitary dependents. I didn't like to see these programs threatened or curtailed because I felt that the political payoff was tremendous in comparison with increased rice production, which in my experience, generally aided the indigenous enemy about as much as it did our side or the "fence-sitters."

Laos -- IVS People

I noticed right off that the IVS people in Laos were a slightly different breed of cat, too, from those serving in Vietnam. From 1963 to March of 1966 I worked with a lot of IVSers in Vietnam, and from the ones I knew, if I were asked to give a composite picture of a typical IVS man, I would describe him as a neat, painfully earnest young country boy with a good feel for getting along with the peasants in their environment. He generally had a good background in some phase of agriculture and enough book learning to be fairly literate but quite inarticulate in discussing anything deeper than sweet potatoes or Guatemala corn.

Now the IVSer in Laos struck me as being more vocal, more politically-oriented, but generally a protester or pacifist, often out of religious convictions. There were quite a few who sported beards and obviously were only casually familiar with soap and water. In Laos IVS works for, rather than with, AID as had been my experience in Vietnam. Many of these men did an outstanding job in Laos, however, and especially in the forward areas program. It was a little hard to get to know them at first. They said they were suspicious of me at first because they knew I was a retired officer and had been in Vietnam for over two years with AID. They didn't trust the military and were strongly opposed to the war in Vietnam. On my side, I made no secret of my aversion to physical dirt and their unkempt appearance, and at the very outset I rather emphatically canceled some of their pet projects such as hand-dug wells and small irrigation dams in areas where there was no political payoff.

Before long, though, and by some compromises on both sides, we established what I would call a good working relationship. They invited me to their house in Pakse several times and on one occasion told me I wasn't the hopeless reactionary they had thought I was. I learned not to expect too much from them. I applied to them a diluted version of the military axiom that I was getting paid to do the thinking but would nevertheless welcome their opinions. Some of their opinions turned out to be not nearly as "goof ball" as I had supposed

they'd be.

Just the same, we lost three or four of them to enemy action -- assassination and ambush. One of these deaths for certain, and perhaps another one, could have been avoided, in my opinion. They were caused by what I would call the ultimate clash in cultural values which meet in opposition. (These deaths, incidentally, did not occur in my region, but they worried me considerably.)

On the one hand is a young American who really hasn't begun to live his life, but who, despite his pacifism, which is presumably based on religious beliefs, finds himself in a political -- not military -- war situation. He lets everybody know that he is there to help and that he does not carry a weapon. He feels he must stick by his ideals even though they may not be understood by his local co-workers. He may even feel -- and this is just my guess -- that his example will make him an exception and the enemy will spare him when the time comes.

On the other hand is the political commissar of an insurgent unit in the neighborhood. He's probably Vietnamese or a Vietnamese-trained local (the Pathet Lao is almost a burlesque of what a liberation front army should be). In any case, he is a pragmatist, a political realist, and the underdog. His aim is to control the population, whether by persuasion, cajolery, intimidation, or terror. He doesn't know this unarmed American youngster personally, but it would probably be inconsequential if he did. This kid is a symbol of the American presence to the local populace and if it suits the convenience of the commissar to have him killed, he'll do it, especially when the risk is minimal because it is known that he is unarmed. The Judeo-Christian ethic appears irrelevant under the circumstances. If this youngster had preserved his ideals but let it be known that he kept a Swedish K-gun or an M-16 under his bed, he would probably still be with us.

Aside from the sense of loss one feels under the circumstances -- the "for whom the bells toll" bit -- I felt somewhat irritated because this sort of meek submission hurts us all. I mean this in the sense that once a lap dog finds how easy it is to kill a sheep, he doesn't sit back and reflect on it philosophically; he kills more sheep. Also, I'm afraid that this type of idealism carried out to its ultimate end is a wasted effort because it is misunderstood and does not convince our pragmatic hosts that they should turn the other cheek. It's somewhat confusing and contradictory with F-105s zooming by overhead.

Parenthetically, I was surprised at how many hippies

or flower children I ran into in Laos. These were usually American young people with very little money, just traveling through as tourists. There were also Europeans, of course, mostly British, West Germans or French. On the average of once or twice a week I would be approached by these people for a meal or a free ride on one of our trucks or aircraft. Most of them came across from Thailand. One hot afternoon in Pakse I was sitting under an awning at a Chinese restaurant sharing a bottle of Shanghai beer with a M. Foret, a Frenchman attached to the local Alliance Francaise. We were approached by three young people who were obviously American and were clean and bright looking. They were a young blond girl and two boys; all were carrying canvas bags, and had just come across the Mekong on the ferry. I told M. Foret, "At last, our national honor has been restored. Three clean American flower children." Unfortunately, they turned out to be Swiss.

Laos -- The Lao Outlook Versus the Vietnamese Outlook

What little I know about Laos was mostly gained by reading about it and hearing other people describe it. My brief tour there helped too. Actually, there are supposed to be about ten million ethnic Lao, but about nine million of them live in Northeast Thailand. Laos has a population of about two and one quarter million and over half of them are not Lao but various mountain tribes. These mountain tribes range from the extremely primitive ones to some rather sophisticated ones. They are like the Montagnards in Central and North Vietnam and they live in about the same latitude in the less desirable and accessible terrain.

The ethnic Lao peasant has the best land along the rivers and valleys and on the plateaus, and he and the local Lao officials treat these people in the same patronizing and disparaging manner as do the Vietnamese toward their Montagnards except that they appear to be kinder and less discriminatory than the Vietnamese. I think this softer attitude by the Lao toward these people is due to three things. The Lao are simply not as intense and contentious as the Vietnamese; Laos is so sparsely populated that competition for land and natural resources is largely absent, and Laos as a country is run in such a jackass, loosely organized fashion that the policy of laissez-faire operates by default.

Laos is not what I would call a sharply defined country, ethnically, physically, or otherwise. Except for the Mekong and some smaller rivers, its borders are indistinct and follow the ridge line of various mountain chains. I often think of Laos as sort of a throwback or a case of a severely handicapped

rather than an underdeveloped nation. I mean by this that if we regard France and Great Britain as being fairly staid, although at times unpredictable old men, the United States could be a 35-year old -- vigorous, wealthy, and sometimes regarded with apprehension by the old-timers. In such an analogy Vietnam is an explosive, presently disorganized, but basically intelligent teenager or "sub-teen", but poor Laos -- she is a little four-year old girl who never had all her marbles to start with. I think most of her elders realize this plainly and plan either to exploit her or protect her when they get the chance.

Outwardly, Laos reminds me of the past. It is the Southeast Asia equivalent of the real or fictional Balkan kingdom of perhaps 1880 or 1905 -- a tropical Transylvania. It has a kindly old ineffectual king, an even kinder and more ineffectual crown prince in his forties (whom I helped entertain in Pakse), a juggling premier who manages to keep three oranges in the air at all times, and a whole host of lesser princes, generals, and cabinet ministers, most of whom couldn't find their way out of the men's room without a guide. Vientiane has some of the characteristics, too, of wartime Lisbon (or Estoril) and Zurich. It's about the only place in this part of the world where we can see and occasionally meet the enemy face to face in a non-shooting situation.

Despite these things, I found the Lao people a pleasure to work with. I found their officials much more gracious and easier to deal with than the Central Vietnamese around Da Nang and Hue. I would say, too, that in comparing government officials, whether they are Lao, Vietnamese, American, or French, their similarities outweigh their differences. The typical official means well, hates to improvise, is inclined to judge progress or effectiveness by manifests that show how much money was spent and how much cement was used, and he has an almost child-like faith in the written word, especially when it comes from his superiors. As to differences, the typical Lao official, while conscious of his prerogatives, assumes an air of diffidence or even what the Germans call gemütlichkeit toward his duties -- "What the hell, tomorrow's another day." I found the typical Vietnamese official to be even more aware of his prerogatives, more dependent on guidance from headquarters, quicker to take offense, but also quicker to exploit his advantage. What also characterized this typical Vietnamese official, in my opinion, was his attitude in adversity. He had what I would call guts, but I doubt that he would call it that because certain alternate choices would just not occur to him. He would accept adversity philosophically and without fanfare or, at the most unpredictable times, to me, at least, he would put everything he had on the line -- his career, money, family, and everything -- and fight an apparently lost cause.

I figure among the Vietnamese it must be a combination of ethics or upbringing and gambler's instinct. It seemed to me that in Vietnam there were a lot of officials who at one time or another were backing the wrong horse right to the bitter end.

In passing, since I mentioned American officials, what makes them different is their unquestioning faith that their way is best and that "all these poor, simple bastards have to do is follow my instructions and there's no problem." When their instructions are obviously not followed, however, most Americans feel horribly inadequate, thrash about in agonizing reappraisals of their methods for putting across the message, or they rationalize. The French, in my opinion, are just like us except for two things. Their cultural heritage is never forgotten, even while inventorying cement sacks, and they never fail to add a varying amount of contempt to the facade they present to all but their superiors.

Laos -- The French Presence

Evidence of French culture, as well as the physical presence of overseas French officials and businessmen, is much more noticeable in Laos than it is in Vietnam. They made their presence felt in many ways in the area where I spent my time, that is, in the Fourth Military Region or southernmost one. I would divide the French in Laos into four general categories. They are the Catholic priests; the official community, including the military and school teachers; business and professional men; and finally what I would call "Kit Carson type of squawmen."

Before saying a little about them, I personally think that we Americans should thoroughly understand the effects and implications of the French presence in Southeast Asia because we'll be there in one capacity or another for a long time. There has always seemed to me to be a feeling of mutual distrust between us and the French there and this certainly isn't lost on the Vietnamese or Lao. Despite the Geneva protocol and dissolution of French Indo-China, there are still many French there, and they perform a useful function because there is no one else to provide these services, unless we do it, and we're neither ready nor qualified. We could learn a lot from them, and if nothing else, we should at least be able to profit from their mistakes. Examples of how we haven't are numerous. Some of our agricultural experts in AID could have learned a lot from the attempts of their French counterparts in their agrovilles. Our civil engineers could profitably imitate the Eiffel Construction Company's bridges instead of some of the monstrosities, including Bailey bridges, we have foisted on the Vietnamese and

Lao. Finally, it always seemed to me tragic that our First Air Cav just got the hell cut out of them initially on the same stretch of Route 19 between An Khe and Pleiku, where the First and Second Korea Battalions of the French Union Forces got zapped 12 or 13 years earlier by the same people using the same tactics. And speaking of tactics, when both the Americans and French finally got around to using unconventional tactics against an unconventional enemy with our special forces and their equivalent of them, their best efforts were sniped at, belittled, and finally sabotaged altogether by the "straight-leg" establishment of both armies.

In the case of the French clergy in Laos, most of these priests are middle-aged or quite old, have been in the country a long time -- some as long as 30 years -- and generally speak the language fluently. Many more were in Laos in the rural areas, than I found in Central Vietnam, and I attribute this to the Vietnamese reaction to the excesses of Diem, who with his brothers personified the worst and most repressive aspects of Catholicism to the Vietnamese.

These priests that I encountered in Laos performed several useful functions. They provided directly, or were instrumental in providing, elementary education for the children. Up on the Bolovens Plateau they were often the first to show villagers how to go in for intensive agriculture and for profit rather than mere subsistence. They did this especially with vegetable crops such as tomatoes and beans and with coffee. They also introduced for good or ill the concept of private property to these people by fencing in their plots to keep out animals, and now the principle that ownership includes the right of exclusion of others from use seems pretty well accepted. Finally, they were a fruitful and dependable source of information because of their familiarity with the terrain and people and knowledge of local dialects. This was not the sort of thing that one could or should press too hard, and I found that incidental intelligence that was divulged on the assumption that I already knew some or all of it was most valuable.

The official French community in my area was headed up by a French marine major (commandante) whose main job was chief of the French Military Mission and he also performed the duties of consul. This mission's function was to train NCOs of the Royal Lao Army or FAR (Force Armee Royale), and it consisted of two officers, a doctor, and a few French NCOs. (FAR, as well as the neutralist army, FAN, is, as a matter of interest, still organized along French rather than American lines, in contrast to ARVN. The "GM" or groupe mobile rather than the regiment is the basic field organizational unit.) They and their dependents are really fine people. I suspect that they

were also in the spook business. They had no travel restrictions imposed upon them and the Cambodian border was just south of us. Then, too, they had a wonderful, made-to-order network in place for gathering information.


The rest of their official community consisted of about 20 school teachers and their dependents. Most of these were also very fine people, and I spent a lot of time with them. Their jobs were not only to teach but to teach the local faculty to teach. One particular friend was a M. Laurent who had spent most of his adult life in Vietnam and Laos. He was quite a traveler and at the time I left, he was making preparations to spend his summer vacation in the Crimea.

The business and professional group consisted of engineers (the French were building a dam just north of Pakse, the Barrage Selabam), sales representatives and managerial people, and small farmers and restaurant owners.

The "squawmen" were an interesting bunch. I borrow this term from our own days in the old west. When a man more or less rejects his own culture and adopts that of his local wife or reasonable facsimile thereof, he is a squawman. Every country has them and I guess there were a hundred or more Frenchmen in this category in and around Pakse. They were mechanics, strawbosses, farmers, small businessmen, and even a few members of the faculty at the Alliance Française. I think they provide a useful service in forming a bridge between the two cultures. Even though they and their local families are regarded with some reserve by the French resident official community, especially the distaff side, I found that there at least their children were not discriminated against and enjoyed the best of two worlds.

My initial contact with this category was generally based on a quid pro quo basis. They sought me out because they wanted to sell us something or they represented someone who did. We negotiated most of the leases for the buildings we occupied in this way, and, incidentally, at a considerable saving. On the other hand, I approached them to intercede in our behalf when one of our drivers almost killed a child because his father-in-law was the local judge and we needed a friend in court.

To summarize, and perhaps generalize, on this subject, I found the French to be very sociable and extremely useful to me in my work. Most Americans are sociable too, but seem to prefer to socialize with each other in an environment like this. We were really fortunate in Pakse because, except for some of the IVS group, the Americans from all the agencies got along well with each other and with the other nationalities there.



The biggest social event in Pakse during my stay was the reception given for the visiting crown prince and his retinue. While this was a pleasant enough evening and interesting to me because I met and talked with many of the country's leaders, it was one of those affairs that never really "got off the ground" because the local Lao officialdom was tense and ill at ease in the august presence of his royal highness. Some, in fact, almost froze into a state of catatonic shock.

This particular event illustrates to me some of the actually strenuous and burdensome chores that are usually disregarded or passed over facetiously when the duties of an American government representative overseas are considered. The affair began with a receiving line at 3:30 in the afternoon and concluded with a dance that ended at 2:00 a.m. the following morning. No one dared leave until the crown prince did -- it would have been a breach of etiquette -- no one, that is, except for Prince Boun Oum who left early since as the local strongman emeritus, he owed bare lip service to the crown prince and only a little more to the king.

Another burdensome chore which fell alike to me, the Vietnamese consul and the French major was that the province chief (the host) asked us nicely enough to dance with the visiting dignitaries' wives, and we spent literally exhausting hours sedately waltzing portly matrons around the floor while their husbands danced with the local belles.

In contrast to this, the most enjoyable affair I attended in Pakse was a jointly sponsored, more or less impromptu event. The annual school play by the Alliance Française could not at the last minute be staged at the school as planned. It was a costume farce by Molière, "The Doctor in Spite of Himself" (?). On short notice, General Phasouk, the area commander, made the FAR Officers' club available, and to make it a real blast (a benefit for the school) everyone was invited. American and French women made a buffet, Americans provided liquid refreshment, and an uproarious, hilarious time was had by all, including the children and the actors. As the evening wore on, everyone relaxed. A few French teachers were heard making disparaging remarks about De Gaulle and some Americans admitted openly to being Republicans.

It was my observation that shared experiences such as this made my work much easier and I recommend conducting business unobtrusively, unofficially, and outside the office as much as possible.