

LAOS AND SOUTH VIETNAM

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IMPRESSIONS, OBSERVATIONS

AND

RECOMMENDATIONS TO I.V.S.

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## INTRODUCTORY

The stated objectives of my visit to Laos and South Vietnam, which was undertaken on behalf of the Board of Directors of the IVS, were multiple: To reassure both the staff and the volunteers in the field of the Board's support, concern and interest; to confer with them whether and how the IVS play any significant roles in the two countries under the present critical circumstances and to ascertain, if at all possible, what some of those roles might be. Shortly before I was to leave New York, I received a communication from some of the volunteers in Laos regarding the IVS-USAID relationships. Together with the crisis of IVS in Vietnam last September, this circular letter from Laos, made me aware of one of the critical issues felt by the IVSers confronting them in both countries, and consequently the stated objectives of my trip included, besides the afore-mentioned two, the third: To look into the way in which IVSers can best carry out their objectives.

Beyond this tri-partite objective I had no hidden agenda. I had no time, either prior to or during my trip, to study the historical background against which, or the socio-cultural context in which the above-stated questions can only be adequately answered. Much less am I equipped to make any critical appraisal of the war situation in the two countries, which, of course, constitutes the most decisive and over-riding factor that makes the social condition extremely precarious for the IVSers to work under. One thing was clear - that there is no point wishing that there was no war. The only thing to do, therefore, is to pursue the questions within the context of the war as a given historical situation. In this conjunction, that Laos is a country at war within itself does not need to be explicitly stated.

## LAOS AND VIETNAM

So far in my life I have never seen two countries at once so alike to each other and so different from each other, being geographically contiguous one to the other and having been under the rule of one and the same colonial power, as Laos and Vietnam. Generally speaking Laos is more India-oriented in culture, its Buddhism is Hinayana, and economically decidedly under-developed, in spite of its civilization of many centuries old. The life of the peasantry is still centered around Wat and the Buddhist priestcraft exerts quite a lot of influence on the villagers. Ethnic Laos are made up of a minority of French-educated aristocracy and intellectual elite and a majority of peasants engaged in subsistence agriculture. Traders, artisans, entrepreneurs of various kinds are seldom found among the ethnic Laos. These positions are occupied by Indians, Chinese, Thais and Vietnam. There is no university in Laos. On the contrary, Vietnam culturally is decidedly China-oriented, its Buddhism is Mahayana, more specifically, predominantly Zen, but has for long been overshadowed by Confucianism and also influenced by Taoism. Economically Vietnam is anything but an underdeveloped country. One gets an impression that the whole nation is made up of born traders and business men though a majority of them are farmers. Vietnam has highly sophisticated urban centers, universities and many secondary schools which have produced a sizable intellectually competent middle class, besides the French-educated elite and traditional aristocracy. Vietnam is a highly secularized society, even though a majority of its people still identify themselves as Buddhists and of late there has been something of a revival of Buddhism as well as the emergence of some eclectic religions (e.g. Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, etc.). Thus the two countries must not be treated as if they were "identical twins," in terms of U.S. policy in the area of economic and technical assistance.

LAOS  
OBSERVATION

1. In this increasingly war-torn country it is utterly inconceivable for the IVS to operate without depending on the resources and facilities provided by the USAID. Short of becoming franciscans, which of course is too much to expect of any American today no matter where. Even just the matter of security alone makes it imperative that the IVS operate within the framework of a contractual relationship with USAID.
2. This does not mean that IVS has to become a part of USAID nor should it become something of a "junior" USAID. On the contrary, unless IVS maintains its organizational integrity and operational independence, not only will IVS not be able to fulfill its unique vocation, but also USAID will lose its most valuable ally. For USAID is both committed to and equipped for a massive economic and technical development of this distinctly pre-modern nation, while IVS is committed more to be the change agent of the pre-industrial mind-set of the people and is attempting to equip its staff and volunteers for this otherwise-bleeding task.
3. This means that if the two organizations knew exactly what their respective objectives are and where the differences between them lie, both in terms of their basic orientations and their modes of operation, they can admirably complement each other. For this reason, the serious effort which both the staff and the volunteers are making to delineate the basic philosophy of IVS so that they may assert their organizational identity is to be highly commended.
4. It cannot be denied that long before my visit tension had developed between USAID and IVS, both between staffs at Vientiane and between IVS'ers and USAID officers in the fields. What had caused such tensions as I found still existing? From what I gathered, the causes may be stated as follows. In view of the undeniable fact that the society of Lao people is one made up of subsistence peasantry of pre-industrial mentality governed by a thoroughly westernized elite, few in number, well-educated and rich, with no economic middle class

between the two (traders and artisans in Laos have until recently been by and large Thais, Vietnamese, Chinese and Indians), USAID appears to have defined its goal to modernize Laos as rapidly as possible by way of economic development and technical aid of gigantic scope, and to achieve this objective before the now smouldering civil war comes to a head.

5. This is to compress the four centuries of Western history from pre-Renaissance to post-Industrial period into less than one man's life time and the average Lao villagers are totally incapable of comprehending what American technicians are doing with American machines to their villages and to their lives.

Seeing this sort of mixture of dismay, resentment and resistance on the part of villagers toward the highly technically-oriented USAID programs, IVSers feel that somehow such programs needed to be preceded or supplemented by a more down-to-earth, unspectacular program of helping the villagers' mind-set to change by way of modern education of youths and by way of gaining confidence of village elders through interpersonal contacts.

6. In this context one finds how important the teaching of English is, for it becomes an instrument to emancipate education per se from the French tradition - i.e. to make a social elite of the educated - and to equip them to live in an industrial society at once as producers and consumers. For nothing conveys the Anglo-Saxon spirit of pragmatism than the English language itself! Suppose USAID should be so preoccupied with its own objective and could not see any sense in the IVS objective, it would be natural for USAID to insist that inasmuch as IVSers have to work within the scope determined by USAID they must be recruited for the specific job slots on the basis of technical competence as determined by USAID. Should this policy be adopted, not only will inevitably lose its genius but USAID itself will waste much of its energy and substance. Furthermore if technical expertise is that USAID is looking for, then USAID should engage experts at commensurate

wages and not look to IVS as a pool of cheap labor. IVS must never be reduced to a junior USAID.

7. By the same token if IVS should become too doctrinaire about its ~~people-to-people~~ emphasis and ignored the real significance of the USAID type of economic and technical development programs, the impact of IVSers' contribution will remain less than infinitesimal. Whether he likes it or not, what one IVSer is doing in a remote village is bound to introduce into that village, the market economy (over against subsistence economy), the machine age, industrial civilization, and all the rest. To live in a technology-governed society means, among other things, to maintain all sorts of machines, besides running them, which require a radically different type of care than keeping animals healthy and the soil fertile. Or, again, raising a cash crop, if not accompanied by adequate marketing processes and opportunities, will not be of any use, nor will the accumulation of cash be of any help unless people learn how to save and invest it. There are these and a hundred and one other related things, many of which appear so trivial to us who have been living in the industrial society for several generations, that need to be inculcated into the thought pattern and daily habit of people who are barely emerging out of the subsistence economy with little preparation for what is dawn-  
ing upon them.
  
8. There is a sense in which people of a now developing country like Laos are required to swim against the stream of history; i.e. whereas in the West the Renaissance preceding rationalism, which in turn preceded scientific revolution, prepared for the industrial revolution of the 18th Century, in the ex-colonies in Asia and Africa people are compelled to accept the industrial revolution as a fait accompli and in order to live with it they are forced to go through in one generation all phases of intellectual

evolution and in reverse order at that, which had taken the West several centuries to undergo. The real meaning of the IVSers unpretentious, earthy kind of personal presence among the villages lies in the plain, simple fact that by the manner in which he lives, handles his machines and takes care of his tools, does things, plans things, thinks, and relates himself to the villagers, government officials, and by the manner in which he is concerned about public affairs, he demonstrates how to live in a modern industrial society as a responsible citizen, at once a producer and a consumer. It cannot be gainsaid that unless somebody does this, all the massive economic development program will end up being a tremendous superstructure built upon a foundation of sand.

9. Seen in such a context as this, programs that appear to be insignificant at first glance such as the handcraft program may take on new meanings. People who are forced to undergo such a radical social change as the people of Laos are, often taken on the characteristics of culturally uprooted people: they find little continuity between their yesterday and their tomorrow, even though they may be living in the same village as their ancestors for several generations back.

In the case of "refugees" and otherwise "displaced people", the problem is even more accentuated. For people in such a situation their traditional forms of handicraft, be it weaving, ceramics, wood-work, or what have you, like their ancestral religion, help them maintain the sense of continuity with their past even when they find themselves in a totally new and unfamiliar situation in the midst of none but strangers. As a money-making proposition, handicraft is less trivial, but as a means by which to help people in transition to maintain their cultural identity, its significance looms large.

LAOS  
RECOMMENDATIONS

These observations lead me to make the following recommendations that:

1. Prior to the contract renewal IVS makes its position fully understood by USAID at the Washington level so that IVS may continue to recruit volunteers not for USAID-determined job-slots on the basis of technical skills required, but on the basis of their capacity and their commitment to carry out IVS objectives in a given country.
2. Field assignment be left to the staff of IVS/Laos, where deemed necessary in consultation with USAID.
3. In recruiting volunteers a more accurate description of the relationship between IVS and USAID in Laos be given than heretofore.
4. At the time of orientation in Washington and Harper's Ferry, the prevailing situation of Laos be more accurately stated than heretofore. positively hinders the volunteers to understand Laos. (more on this later.)
5. The volunteers once assigned to their respective stations be kept under closer "supervision" than heretofore possible of the appropriate Associate Chief of Party in charge of the work they are engaged in - i.e. Agriculture, Community Development, or Education - so that they may be helped to evaluate what they are doing at regular intervals, say every three or four months.
6. In order that Associate Chiefs of Party be collectively as well as individually be more adequately equipped to discharge the responsibility as supervisors of volunteers, either the Chief of Party be given special training in such professional disciplines as personnel management, group dynamics, sensitivity training, and

- intercultural relations, or a trainer type of person be added to develop necessary criteria, process and technique for evaluating on-going programs undertaken by volunteers at their respective stations.
7. IVS/Laos be unified under one COP, with ACOP's in charge of Administration, Education, Agriculture, and Community Development. If desired and deemed feasible another ACOP in charge of "training and in-country orientation" may be added. (It may be more desirable if the COP assumed this dual responsibility).
  8. The Program Committee composed of volunteers elected by them from five regions, one from each except Vientiane region from which two, one Education and the other AD/CD with one chairman being encouraged to carry out its stated objectives.
  9. Ways and means be devised for the IVS/Laos staff to maintain continuity of its corporate competence from year to year. This means two things: on the one hand, the tenure of the COP and ACOPs be so designed as to avoid an abrupt turn-over of a majority let alone the totalit of the staff at any one time, and on the other hand, those who are appointed as COP and ACOPs be given a training period to improve their professional competence. (It is my conviction that administrative and managerial competence of the professional staff is of decisive importance for any large group of volunteers to function effectively. IVS is no exception. Any notion that volunteer means amateur must be dismissed once and for all. In order that IVS may maintain its integrity as a voluntary organization, "professionalization" of its staff is essential).
  10. In screening volunteers, psychiatric examinations be made mandatory. No one who is emotionally unstable, or who is trying to run away

from where one is, should be accepted as an IVSer to work in a country like Laos which is itself "a house divided against itself".

In conclusion, let me emphatically state that the above-listed recommendations do not in any way represent negative reflection of what I saw of IVS/Laos either the volunteers or the staff. On the contrary, I had my initial impression re-confirmed which I gained at Harper's Ferry at my first encounter with a group of IVSers in 1966, namely that they represent the best the American institutions of higher learning can produce. In fact most of these recommendations are based on many suggestions and comments made by them as I sat down with them in a series of informal, unstructured conversations.

SOUTH VIETNAM

OBSERVATION

1. To arrive at Saigon for the first time in one's life and that immediately after ten days in Laos is indeed quite an experience. One cannot help being impressed by the contrast of the two countries. With American military presence so conspicuous and so overwhelming that what can IVS do to be true to its ideal and its operative principle becomes at once the most serious and the most difficult question to grapple with.
2. In this war-torn country, such questions as, "What can IVS do?" "Is there a place in South Vietnam for IVS?" "How can IVS maintain its organizational identity and operate independently of the U.S. government?" and the like, which are on every IVS'er's mind all the time, cannot be adequately answered apart from the more over-arching two-pronged question, "What is the war doing to Vietnam, as a nation, as a society, and as a people?" and as the result, "What are the most outstanding needs of the people of Vietnam?"
3. Far be it from me to give any conclusive answer to these questions! Not knowing the Vietnamese language, having had no chance to study about Vietnam before hand, I could not possibly make any scientific inquiry such a severely limited period of time - eight short days! One thing is clear: Vietnamese society or the people of Vietnam cannot possibly be "studied" by way of Western academic disciplines, the opinion poll technique, and the like.

What I did, then is to listen very carefully to IVS'ers - both the staff and the volunteers - narrate their experience, to watch people everywhere all the time, their behavior, their facial expressions, or the lack thereof, the manners in which they took note of the presence of strangers among them, etc.

With all my discerning faculties working at full speed and overtime I have come up with the following profile of Vietnamese society.

4. It is a society which is run over by the mighty U.S.A. Whether it is actually run by the U.S.A. or not is beside the point; the Republic of Vietnam (or South Vietnam) is literally run over by the U.S.A., not only militarily but in almost every other respect as well. It is a nation in which people who are capable of thinking and of articulating their thoughts have no trust in the government now in power. I have no way to produce any conclusive evidence whether the present government of South Vietnam is really corrupt or not, but when otherwise intelligent and responsible citizens of that country one after another are convinced that it is, then something is clear: people by and large have no faith in "their" government. Whether it is actually corrupt or not is besides the point.
5. South Vietnam is a society in which the adult generation are compelled to expend all their energy simply to survive one day after another. They have no hope for tomorrow. To them Yesterday is nothing but a nightmare which they would sooner forget if at all possible. And everyday that dawns on them brings with it the possibility of a violent death, either by agents of the N.L.F. or more likely by the fire power of their own government force backed up by the American military.
6. It is a society in which family after family has seen one son conscripted into the government armed forces and another son going over to the camp of the N.L.F., and when either one of them leaves their home the parents are resigned not to see him alive ever again.
7. It is a society in which thousands of people - one village after another - are turned into "refugees", or "displaced persons",

uprooted from the soil in which they have been rooted for God knows how many generations. Whatever the reasons that forced them to become uprooted from the land where their ancestors are buried and whose soil has nurtured them from generation to generation, they have lost as refugees and displaced persons the home land of their souls, and consequently have been reduced to something less than free moral agents. In other words, they are no longer able to make moral decisions responsibly.

8. It is a country which is dotted by ever-increasing numbers of refugee centers, refugee camps, and refugee villages, where people are far from being well cared for by their government nor safe under its protection, but are rather being used as pawns of the Viet-Cong's propaganda against the present Government and the U.S.A., - where, many families having their men and boys on both sides of the camp, people are found to be tight-lipped even among friends.
9. Vietnamese society is one in which no one dares to trust anyone else, parents can no longer understand their children and children can no longer respect their parents, friends, and neighbors no longer share their joys and sorrows one with another, and in which the old, traditional values have been completely wiped out but not yet replaced by any new value system. It is a society in which the rich are growing richer thanks to American money and commodities, while the poor are growing poorer thanks to the never ending war in which they are inescapably caught up. As a result, the moral fibre of this society is rapidly disintegrating and its structure being shaken from its foundation up.
10. It is a society in which teen-agers can have no hope for a bright and exciting future for themselves, but face the one inescapable

prospect ; sooner or later to become victims of the shooting war on one side of the cap or the other, and for that reason cannot possibly be interested in anything but having a good time while they can - no incentive to get education, to acquire new knowledge or useful skills. Those who are of more serious bent of mind, being unable to put their trust in their government, being so thoroughly disgusted with what they are convinced to be the neo-colonialism of the U.S.A., are, out of desperation, one by one, throwing their lot in with the N.L.I. despite the fact that they are not communists.

11. It is a people who have collectively been made to feel that they are "un-respected" if not despised by Americans who are presumably their protectors, defenders and benefactors but are virtually their rulers, nothing less. Whether Americans treat them as if they were of an inferior race or not, Vietnamese people seem to sense that Americans look down upon them. They feel they are not trusted, let alone respected, by Americans.
  
12. Finally, South Vietnam is a nation ruled, if it is ruled at all, by a small group of people who cannot do very much without depending on American dollars, American fire power, American commodities, American technicians, American advisors, and everything American. It is a nation which, on one hand, is being destroyed by American fire-power, and on the other hand, being smothered by American aids, material aids, which it has capacity neither to absorb nor to put to creative use.

## SOUTH VIETNAM

### RECOMMENDATIONS

What, if anything, is there for such an organization as IVS to do in such a country as this? This question be adequately answered apart from a prior question: If the profile sketched above is even half-way true to the reality of Vietnam as it has now become, then what is it that the people of Vietnam really need for them to become a self-respecting independent nation with dignity of its own?

Whatever it may be, it is not more American fire-power, nor more American Commodities, nor yet more American technical advisors. A number of IVSers, one after another independently one of another, expressed their opinion something to the effect that what people of Vietnam now need may be the will and the capacity to make the utmost use of what they have in them, the skill to exploit the resources which are latent in them. They also said that what this nation needs is to restore the sense of self-respect even in the midst of poverty, or to solidify a group of people who have a vision of a new nation and are committed to its realization, and yet free from xenophobia.

These may sound too simplistic, in fact they are profound insights which young IVSers, who in Vietnam have no axe of their own to grind, through their intimate relationships with their Vietnamese counterparts and friends, have gained. I cannot agree with them more. And, then, how can the people of Vietnam, after having been torn to pieces by war and even now in the midst of it of which there is no end in sight, be helped to get what they need? Can they do it alone? If not, who can help them?

I believe that this is precisely what the IVS, against all odds, and probably without so intending or being aware of it, has always been doing in Vietnam and elsewhere. IVS has been able to do this, not so much by the professional skills or tech-

nical competence of individual IVSers as by their authenticity as human beings, by their gaining the trust of Vietnamese people with whom they worked, lived, or associated, and through the unpretentious but genuine relationships of mutual trust that has grown between them.

As long as the IVS can do this, to however small an extent, it has a definite place in a definite place in a war-torn Vietnam, and the now war-torn but eventually a post-war Vietnam needs IVS more than anything else. In saying this I am in no manner or means minimizing the risks and dangers IVSers are now and increasingly be exposed to in Vietnam. They will have to be content working within the limits set by USAID and the U.S. military, and to a great extent they will have to depend on these government agencies for their personal security. This, however, does not mean that IVS has to become a part of USAID nor an arm of the U.S. Armed forces, much less does it mean that IVS will have to confine its activities to stated objectives.

It means, though that IVSers who remain in or will be coming to Vietnam cannot be faint-hearted wishy-washy weaklings. They must be ready to risk their lives as much as, if not more than, men in military services. They will have to put up with suspicion, cynicism, ridicule, and many other forms of abuse thrown at them from both sides of the camp; they have to be able not to be disheartened by the lack of any visible result of their effort or tangible sign of achievement of their objective. They must be prepared at times to be betrayed by those whom they have trusted! They must be able to endure all these without grumbling or hating others.

This is a tall order - much too much to expect of young

graduates. Even so, if IVS decides to stay in Vietnam, then what is said in the forgoing paragraph ought to be made crystal orientation. Short of doing this, to send youthful volunteers to Vietnam under present circumstances will be little less than criminal. Without some IVSers, however small in number, who would willingly risk their lives in Vietnam while the war is still raging, neither Vietnam nor the U.S.A will ever be redeemed.

This means that IVSers should be withdrawn from places where their security cannot be assured unless they to live in CORDS compound and be obligated to bear arms. For once in CORDS compound one cannot shirk the responsibility of defending one's neighbors at the time of armed attack. It is, therefore, essential that IVS stations be limited to areas where such extreme measures are not necessary. It must, however, be emphatically stated and re-stated that in today's Vietnam no place is absolutely or always safe for IVSers, or for anybody else for that matter.

I am not recommending fool-hardiness of any sort, but am simply stating that a mission for peace involves as much risk as a military operation and anyone who does not wish to take risk is not fit to be an IVSer especially in Vietnam. After all is said and done, what IVS is about boils down to a venture of faith, for how can one serve others without trusting them? In a suspicion-ridden society like Vietnam, to trust anybody is nothing less than a venture of faith.

As for specific recommendations, those listed for Laos, mutatis mutandis apply to Vietnam. I would simply underscore the importance of supervision of volunteers by professionally competent staff persons especially in Vietnam. One specific matter I would like to add, based on my observation in Vietnam, is the real value of a more thoroughly internationalized IVS

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team in a nation like Vietnam. I would strongly recommend that the IVS Board take definite steps to realize this objective.

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