

HOW LAOS BECAME INVOLVED IN THE COLD WAR, 1954-1962

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There was nothing foreordained about Laos' involvement in the Cold War. In spite of the strategic geographical position it occupied on the Indochinese peninsula, Laos's determination not to see its territory used for aggression was proclaimed by its delegation at the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, which was co-chaired by the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. With much consultation outside the conference chamber, armistice agreements were signed by representatives of the French Union forces and the Viet Minh ending the French Indochina War in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. All the major powers were in favor of a neutral status for Laos, and the royal government enjoyed the goodwill of its neighbors China, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia. In July 1954, as the armistice was signed, the prospect for the Kingdom of Laos was not that dark.

The terms of the armistice agreement for Laos provided for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of French and Viet Minh forces from Laos, a prohibition against introducing foreign military personnel into Laos (except for a French military training mission to be limited to 1,500 men), a prohibition against foreign bases (with the exception of Séno), the regrouping of Pathet Lao "fighting units" in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, and the exchange of all prisoners of war.¹ The agreement was signed on July 20 by General Henri Delteil for the French Union and Vice Defense Minister Ta Quang Buu for the Viet Minh.²

This favorable outcome for Laos was due in no small part to the indefatigable diplomacy of Chou En-lai, both in the conference sessions and outside. Chou privately assured British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France that China was prepared to entertain normal regulations with Laos on the same basis as it did with India, Burma, and Indonesia, namely the five principles of peaceful coexistence, provided Laos harbored no foreign bases. Furthermore, and most importantly, Chou obtained the assent of the Viet Minh to accept the territorial integrity of Laos and to entertain relations of mutual equality with the kingdom. During a trip to Asia in the middle of the Indochina phase of the conference, Chou gave assurances along these lines to Jawaharlal Nehru in New Delhi, whom he sounded out about India's assumption of the chairmanship of an international control commission upon the signing of the armistice, and ensured the cooperation of the Viet Minh during a meeting with Ho Chi Minh near the Sino-Vietnam border.³

¹The text of the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Laos is in Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954, Vol. XVI, The Geneva Conference (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1981), pp. 1521-30. These volumes are hereafter referred to as FRUS.

²General Delteil's name is misspelled in ibid.

³François Joyaux, La Chine et le Règlement du Premier Conflit d'Indochine: Genève 1954 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1979), pp. 243-244; and James Cable, The Geneva Conference of 1954 on Indochina (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 97.

If there was any cloud on the horizon, it was likely to come from North Vietnam, where the Viet Minh had taken over and whose leaders nurtured ambitions of hegemony over Laos (as well as Cambodia) going back to the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. The ICP had adopted a pan-Indochina "liberation" program at its Tan Trao congress in August 1945, where delegates from Laos had been present. The ICP had been "dissolved" in 1951 for reasons of expediency, but the Viet Minh had tried unsuccessfully to seat a delegation from the Viet Minh-sponsored Laotian "resistance government," more commonly known as the Pathet Lao, headed by Nouthak Phoumsavan. At the conference sessions, the head of the royal government delegation, Phoui Sananikone, denounced the Viet Minh for their invasions of his country in 1953 and 1954, and evoked the puppet character of the Pathet Lao, who had played a token part in the invasions and briefly occupied Sam Neua town. The retribution meted out by a "people's tribunal" under Thao Ma, resulting in the summary execution of five Lao civil servants, remained a vivid memory with the non-Communist nationalists for years afterwards.

The chief American policy aim insofar as Laos was concerned had been met by the outcome of the conference. In words penned by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles during the conference, this aim was to see that Laos was "not allowed to go behind the Iron Curtain."⁴ This had been achieved, and the Laotians might have been left to settle their own affairs, except that the administration was under strong Congressional pressure to show a firm anti-Communist stance. The majority leader in the Senate, Senator William Knowland of California, spoke of "a Far Eastern Munich" and was strongly opposed to Dulles's mere presence in Geneva.⁵ It was one of the relatively rare periods in American diplomacy where Congressional leaders were in effect making foreign policy on a major issue. Dulles refused to shake Chou's hand, a snub the Chinese statesman never forgave.⁶

The Armistice Goes Into Effect (August 6, 1954)

The ceasefire went into effect at 8 a.m. on August 6. The three-nation International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICC), consisting of India, Canada and Poland, was formed by August 11. At the same time, a Joint Commission, made up of Franco-Laotian and Viet Minh-Pathet Lao delegations, was set up and functioned until January 1955.

⁴Handwritten note by Dulles to Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Walter S. Robertson, June 18, 1954, in National Archives, Department of State Central Files, Record Group 59, Washington, D.C.

⁵William Conrad Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships. Part 1, 1945-1961 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), pp. 251 and 253.

⁶In the course of a two-hour conversation with an American diplomat two years before his death, Chou brought up the snub no fewer than three times. (Charles W. Yost, History and Memory (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 234.)

Although the ICC noted that neither party gave it "precise information regarding the movement of its troops sufficiently in advance as to make supervision effective," the French substantially completed their withdrawal by November 19 and the Viet Minh three days later. The ICC complained that supervision had been impeded by lack of cooperation, bad weather, inadequate communication and transportation facilities, the difficult terrain of Laos, and the ICC's inability to distinguish Viet Minh and Pathet Lao units, which were both made up largely of minority tribesmen living in the border area.

There were almost immediately problems relating to the regroupment of the Pathet Lao. The Franco-Laotian delegation to the Joint Commission maintained that special commando units controlled the western portions of Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces. The Viet Minh-Pathet Lao delegation argued that their forces controlled the whole of the provinces and that "pirates" had been parachuted into some areas in violation of the ceasefire. The Viet Minh-Pathet Lao also argued that the reference to "provinces" in the armistice agreement meant that the Pathet Lao would station themselves throughout the provinces, not merely in limited areas thereof. The issue was skirted for the time being, however, with the Pathet Lao, at ICC urging, issuing a statement on November 4 that in principle the Pathet Lao administration "is classified under the Supreme Authority of the Royal Government." It was clear, however, that the issue of control in the two provinces remained far from resolved, and the potential existed for incidents and outbreaks of fighting as a result.

The delicate situation was not helped when the royal government's defense minister, Kou Voravong, was assassinated in Vientiane on September 18. The prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, resigned, and one month later Katay Sasorith formed a government that was to last until February 1956.

The Question of the U.S. Military Aid Program

Aid to the Laotian military formed a cornerstone of Dulles's policy for Laos after 1954. Programmatically, the American military aid program in Laos developed out of the so-called pentilateral agreements of 1950 and 1951 among the United States, France, and the Associated States, of which Laos was one. However, the administration confronted a major political obstacle as soon as it explored continuing military aid after the 1954 accords. As early as August 5, 1954, the Office of the Army Chief of Staff warned the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon that a preliminary analysis of the Geneva agreement "indicates major problems in implementing future United States policy in Indochina." MAAG personnel were instructed to exercise caution in discussions with officials of France and the Associated States.⁷

⁷Telegram from Department of the Army/Office of the Army Chief of Staff to Chief MAAG (Indochina) Saigon, August 5, 1954, in National Archives.

The fact that Laos had not up to that point formally requested military aid from the United States was a matter of some relief to the State Department. France could still be relied upon to fill this need. On August 18, Dulles wrote to Defense Secretary Charles E. Wilson that, in considering military aid to the Associated States, "the case of Laos may be set aside," since Laos had to look to France "for aid in training and other purposes."⁸

By October, however, the situation had changed. The royal government had made a direct request for American military aid, bypassing the French. Also, American officials were impressed by repeated warnings from the American minister in Vientiane, Charles W. Yost, that the Pathet Lao, with Viet Minh help, were consolidating their positions in Sam Neua and Phong Saly, into which they had regrouped not only their own meager armed units but also thousands of young recruits taken from villages around the country by the withdrawing Viet Minh and Pathet Lao. By October the Laotian minister in Washington was pressing the State Department's Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs to know what had happened to his government's request for direct American military aid.⁹ Top American officials began to change their earlier negative view of a military aid program in Laos. This change may have been influenced by Pathet Lao actions in Sam Neua during January. Pathet Lao troops occupied two small outposts held by the royal army at Nong Khang and Muong Peun. The royal army, using the same tactics of infiltration and showing superior strength as the Pathet Lao, later reoccupied the latter post without fighting.

Wilson wrote to Dulles on February 16:

The Joint Chiefs of Staff have reviewed Minister Yost's recommendations and consider that, from a military point of view, they cannot recommend the provision of Mutual Defense Assistance Program support of Laotian forces over which the United States, under the terms of the Geneva Accords, would have no control. However, in view of the fact that political considerations may be overriding, the Joint Chiefs of Staff did set forth their views, not to be considered as a recommendation, as to Laotian forces which would be required in order to maintain internal security in that country.¹⁰

Establishment of the Programs Evaluation Office (December 13, 1955)

If American military personnel were not legally allowed to be in Laos, then suitably qualified American civilians would have to do the job of keeping Laotians trained in the use of American military equipment and in accounting for its disposition to the satisfaction of the Defense Department. And the place to find such personnel was among the rosters of retired

⁸Dulles letter to Wilson, August 18, 1954, in National Archives.

⁹Memorandum of conversation by Paul J. Sturm, October 13, 1954, in National Archives.

¹⁰Wilson letter to Dulles, February 16, 1955, in National Archives.

military personnel. This was the origin of the "civilian" military assistance group attached to the country team in Vientiane, to be known as the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO). On October 31, Deputy Under Secretary Robert Murphy was able to write to Gordon Gray, Assistant Secretary of Defense, as follows:

The Department of State is exceedingly pleased that the Department of Defense accepts responsibility for payment of all expenses, including those of administrative support, connected with maintenance of the civilian supervisory group. The remaining obstacle to recruitment and dispatch of personnel urgently required for adequate supervision of large-scale United States military assistance has thus been removed.¹¹

The PEO was activated on December 13, 1955. It was initially staffed by reserve, retired, and former U.S. military personnel who were given State Department Foreign Service Reserve Officer rank. The Embassy on occasion had to remind the military not to address messages to MAAG Laos, a supposedly non-existent unit.¹² Pay of the Lao armed forces soon generated a flood of kip, the Laotian currency, necessitating a program to import goods concurrently to sop up the kip and prevent runaway inflation. This program became a major component of the U.S. economic aid program to Laos, which had begun in January 1955.

The royal government was permitted, under the terms of the Geneva armistice, to request military aid in equipment and personnel "for the purpose of its effective territorial defence and to the extent defined by the agreement on cessation of hostilities" with immediate effect of the coming into force of the ceasefire.¹³ The question was what kind of and how much military equipment and personnel did this mean? The agreement itself was silent on this point. However, as Randle has pointed out, the royal government was completely within its rights to make this determination on its own.¹⁴

The Search for Security

The defense of their country was a subject that preoccupied the members of the royal

¹¹Murphy letter to Gray, October 31, 1955, in National Archives.

¹²Telegram MC-42-56 from U.S. Army attaché to Department of the Army, February 11, 1956, in National Archives. Communications originating in Vientiane will henceforth not be identified by place. Thus, "Embassy to State" means "Vientiane Embassy to State."

¹³FRUS 1952-54, *op. cit.*, p. 1544.

¹⁴Robert F. Randle. Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 505. This is the basic study of the Geneva settlement and the implications it held for subsequent American actions in Indochina.

government in Vientiane, as well as the royal house in Luang Prabang. A royal army numbering 23,650 and adequately equipped and trained would be in a position to contain the Pathet Lao, whose forces were estimated in March 1955 to number 5,000 men organized in 10 infantry battalions and one support battalion. But the threat to Laos's sovereignty posed by the much stronger forces of North Vietnam was beyond the means of the Lao to cope with, as was pointed out in a staff study completed in May 1955.¹⁵ In the event of attack from outside its borders, Laos would not be able to defend itself with its own resources and would have to depend on the concerted action of its friends. Only when there is a clear understanding of what these friends can contribute, the paper concluded, can an effective plan of defense be drawn up.¹⁶

The United Nations, to which Laos was admitted as a member state on December 14, 1955, was one such source of appeal. However, from this time on, the Laotian leaders sought repeatedly to obtain American guarantees of action in the event of invasion, either unilaterally or through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), of which Laos was not a member but whose members had pledged to consult in the event of Communist aggression in Laos.

With the Pathet Lao delaying and obstructing the reintegration of its followers into the national community, the royal government took steps to meet the Pathet Lao threat. A special service for political propaganda was established, separate from military control. This service, operating on a shoestring budget, gathered intelligence on the Pathet Lao, including the Pathet Lao negotiating delegation in Vientiane, and countered the main Pathet Lao propaganda themes, using an assortment of secret agents, newspapers, leaflets, theatrical troupes, medical aid teams, and a radio station broadcasting to Sam Neua, countering Pathet Lao propaganda broadcasts over Radio Hanoi in Lao and other languages prepared by a team led by Sisana Sisane. The royal government protested to Hanoi that these broadcasts, which commonly referred to the royal government as "lackeys of the U.S. imperialists," constituted a flagrant interference in the kingdom's internal affairs.

As a result of the government's counter-propaganda efforts, civil servants and military personnel were less likely to be misled by Pathet Lao promises of a peaceful, democratic, egalitarian, neutral society. The service succeeded in undercutting the Pathet Lao's pretense at a nationalist character by constantly reminding its audience of the Pathet Lao's dependence on Hanoi. The effectiveness of this service is proved by the fact that in a little less than a

¹⁵"Défense du Royaume du Laos," paper prepared by General Sounthone Pathammavong, FAR chief of staff, for Defense Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, May 5, 1955, and enclosed in Foreign Service Despatch No. 98, May 10, 1955, in National Archives.

¹⁶The terms of reference of the PEO contained no mention of defense against any foreign country. See CINCPAC document dated September 13, 1960, in National Archives, Joint Chiefs of Staff Central File 1960, Box 98, Record Group 218.

year it succeeded in provoking the defection of 300 Pathet Lao followers, in fomenting several anti-Pathet Lao demonstrations, and in persuading large numbers of voters in several areas under Pathet Lao influence to defy a Pathet Lao call for a boycott and go to the polls in December 1955 to vote in elections to the National Assembly. Through its infiltrated agents, this service also kept the government informed of the leadership of the Laotian Communist party, the Lao People's Party, which was split off from the Indochinese Communist Party in March 1955 in order to operate in complete secrecy to guide the Pathet Lao with its large non-Communist following. The secretary general of the Lao People's Party was a half-Vietnamese named Kaysone Phomvihane.

On December 3, 1954, Minister Yost delivered the first of what would be many homilies on the subject of the adverse attitude of the U.S. government toward any moves to include the Pathet Lao in a Laotian coalition government. His warning to Foreign Minister Phoui Sananikone coincided with the royal government's opening moves to negotiate a settlement of outstanding issues with the Pathet Lao and end the threat of war. "I also said very earnestly," Yost reported, "I was sure my government would feel obliged to reconsider the entire question of aid to Laos if Communists should participate in Lao Government."¹⁷ The warning was backed up by high officials of the Department's Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs.¹⁸

But hopes of an early and fruitful outcome of negotiations entertained by Prime Minister Katay Sasorith and certain members of his cabinet were soon dashed by Pathet Lao obstinacy. A series of meetings, facilitated by the ICC, saw the Pathet Lao multiply and stiffen their demands. It remained for Prince Souvanna Phouma, who returned to power in March 1956, to carry through the time-consuming task of negotiating the reintegration of the Pathet Lao into the national community. For this task, he believed, he had an advantage in that the nominal Pathet Lao leader, Prince Souphanouvong, was his half-brother. In Laos where family ties count for a great deal, Souvanna Phouma thought it was natural that he and his half-brother, who he did not believe to be a Communist, would arrive at an agreement restoring peace to the kingdom. In his investiture speech to the National Assembly on March 20, 1956, Souvanna Phouma called the settlement of the Pathet Lao problem "preoccupation number one" and "the gravest and most urgent question" before the country.¹⁹

In fact, serious negotiations did not get under way until September, after Souvanna Phouma had been received in Peking and Hanoi amid mutual pledges of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. Meanwhile, the Lao continued to press American diplomats

¹⁷Embassy to State. Telegram No. 158, December 3, 1954, in National Archives.

¹⁸Memorandum of conversation between Robert E. Hoey and Ouyot Souvannavong, Laotian minister to Washington. December 6, 1954, in National Archives.

¹⁹Third Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos, Cmnd. 314 (London: HMSO, 1957), p. 53.

for more concrete assurances as to the character of aid Laos could expect to receive in the event of a Communist invasion. A memorandum on this subject by outgoing Ambassador Yost²⁰ elicited a message from Dulles to Crown Prince Savang Vatthana reassuring the latter that the full weight of U.S. military power stood ready to intervene should the Communists attack Laos.²¹ In his reply, Savang said Laos had confidence "in the immediate intervention of SEATO in the event of foreign aggression."²² At a meeting with Eisenhower in Washington in September 1956, Prince Savang received assurances from President Eisenhower that he was working to strengthen SEATO.²³ Savang, however, worried to Dulles about the rather cumbersome process by which Laos would be expected, in case of need, to appeal to SEATO for help.²⁴

The "Laos-Thailand Alignment"

The question of Laos's security in the event of aggression also was a subject of concern to Laos's neighbor Thailand. As early as September 1955, the commander in chief of the Thai army, Sarit Thanarat, had expressed his belief that because the Mekong did not afford an effective barrier to invasion he favored a "forward strategy" for Thai forces. After reporting this view of Sarit's, the American chargé in Bangkok, Norbert L. Anschuetz, pointed out the political consideration that maintaining the impression in Thai minds that the United States and SEATO would take strong measures in the event of aggression in Laos would dissuade the Thais from giving in to "latent neutralist tendencies." On these grounds, Anschuetz argued, the Thais should "be encouraged unilaterally develop contingent plans provide military support in Laos irrespective receptiveness Laos to Thai suggestions bilateral planning."²⁵

This form of thinking, consisting mainly of a monologue on the part of American

²⁰Memorandum from Yost to Young, May 28, 1956, in National Archives.

²¹Personal message from Dulles to Savang, in telegram from State to embassy, June 8, 1956, in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Vol. XI, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 773-774.

²²Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1635, June 16, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 219-220.

²³Memorandum of conversation, White House, September 24, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 816-818.

²⁴Memorandum of conversation, Department of State, September 24, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 818-823.

²⁵Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 856, September 23, 1955, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 683-685.

diplomats rather than an exchange of views with the Thai and the Lao, thereafter took on added convolutions, usefully summed up in a revealing memorandum prepared for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) by his Staff Group which has found its way into the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States volume for the period.²⁶ The following month the commander in chief Pacific (CINCPAC) endorsed the view expressed by Anschuetz and offered to provide necessary guidance.²⁷ The Joint Chiefs also concurred in principle with the steps outlined by Anschuetz, including making the U.S. military aid mission in Thailand, JUSMAG, responsible for providing guidance. The JCS at the same time approved a State message to the embassies in Bangkok and Vientiane that was dispatched on October 15, 1955 and stated in part "No impression will be given Thais and Laos that U.S. does or does not intend to provide military forces." The message instructed the embassies to forward their plan of action to Washington before making any approaches to the Thai or Lao.²⁸

In June 1956, CINCPAC moved to establish a PEO liaison office in JUSMAG, in effect placing the PEO under the military aid program office in Bangkok. This change, CINCPAC believed, besides being more efficient logistically than having the PEO continue to depend on MAAG Saigon, would also "assist planning for logistic support and Thailand coordination with Laotian forces" and "foster Thailand Lao alignment."²⁹ The Geneva restriction on Laos's joining any foreign alliance was known to CINCPAC, which had a political adviser, a Foreign Service officer, on its staff in Hawaii. Without actually creating an appearance of alliance, the U.S. military by this change in the status of the PEO was aligning its activities in Laos with Thailand, a country that had direct security interests at stake in Laos and whose government was an ally of the United States in SEATO.

For purposes of an understanding of the history of the Cold War, what CINCPAC had done by placing the PEO under JUSMAG in the interest of "fostering Thailand Lao alignment" was in effect to change the terms of reference of the PEO from an organization concerned with training the Laotian armed forces for internal security to one with responsibility for joint action by the Laotian armed forces and those of a foreign country to repel Communist aggression in Laos. The Lao leaders could plead for assurances of American support in the event of aggression against their country, and these pleas could be

²⁶Memorandum from the Chairman's Staff Group to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 23, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 795-800. Hereafter cited as Memorandum to Chairman JCS.

²⁷Telegram from the Commander in Chief, Pacific to the Chief of Naval Operations, October 11, 1955, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 687-688.

²⁸State to Bangkok Embassy, Telegram No. 1248, and to Vientiane Embassy, Telegram No. 283, October 15, 1955, in FRUS 1955-1957, p. 691.

²⁹Navy message 080326Z from CINCPAC to Dulles, June 8, 1956, in National Archives.

answered by polite exchanges of letters at the highest levels. But Sarit, who would soon emerge as the strong man of the Thai regime, had powerful friends in the Department of Defense and was thus another matter altogether. This situation was to have the most serious consequences for the United States in the Laos crisis of August-December 1960.

The first bilateral conference on military planning between Thailand and Laos, which had been envisaged since the previous year, took place at Udorn in July 1956. Preparations were under way for a second meeting when the start of negotiations between the royal government and the Pathet Lao intervened. At this point, Ambassador Max W. Bishop in Bangkok had second thoughts about the advisability of going ahead with bilateral military planning. He stated that "in view changed military and political situation in Laos, believe Department will wish to review U.S. policy toward pressing for joint Thai-Laos military planning for possible military action within Laos."³⁰ CINCPAC thereupon cabled the Chief of Naval Operations that "continued Thai-Laos planning is not contingent upon current Laos-Pathet Lao talks and should be continued for various military, political and psychological reasons." In point of fact, although I have found no evidence for this, it is highly likely that the imminence of the royal government's negotiations with the Pathet Lao led the military to take the view that the "Thai-Lao alignment" was more essential than ever, considering how nervous the military felt about the possible spread of "latent neutralist tendencies" to the Thai leaders.

In a further intervention a few days later, Bishop pointed out to CINCPAC that "we must go slowly in this matter and must have State-JCS views coordinated and agreed before U.S. policy can be decided." The memorandum to the chairman of the JCS, however, saw no valid reason for dissociating the United States from the talks, "or even to withdraw our emphasis thereon," and recommended that "Thai-Lao planning be continued under U.S. monitorship based on guidance now in effect." There was no mention of any coordination of views with State.³¹

There were also problems with the staff talks from the Laotian side, as Souvanna Phouma made clear in a conversation with Admiral Arthur W. Radford, the visiting chairman of the JCS, on July 28. Souvanna Phouma alluded to "a difference of viewpoint between the Lao and the Thai on several important matters during their joint staff talks in Thailand earlier this month."³² Souvanna Phouma was also concerned to avoid creating the appearance of involving Laos in a foreign military alliance. He had intimated to Ambassador J. Graham Parsons that this was his condition for agreeing to the Laotian military's holding

³⁰Bangkok Embassy to State, telegram No. 451, August 15, 1956, cited in Memorandum to Chairman JCS.

³¹Memorandum to Chairman JCS.

³²Memorandum of conversation between Admiral Radford and Prince Souvanna Phouma at luncheon, Vientiane, July 28, 1956, by Seymour M. Finger, in National Archives.

the bilateral talks. The revelation of any Thai-Lao alliance would provide grist for the propaganda mill of the Pathet Lao, Hanoi, and Peking. With his usual precision of language, Souvanna Phouma said that Laos cannot accept Thai-Lao planning if it takes on the aspect of "an alliance." On the other hand, he wished to continue "staff talks on the basis of what it would be necessary to do for defense in case of emergency and Laos had to call upon its friends."³³ Souvanna Phouma's thinking on the practical aspect of the talks was in perfect agreement of what the king was seeking and was consistent with the Laotian staff paper on defense of May 1955. This paper, it will be recalled, dealt with the inability of Laos to defend itself against a concerted aggression from outside the country.

The Negotiations with the Pathet Lao

Parsons arrived in Laos at a critical moment in late July 1956. Souvanna Phouma, as he had promised, had invited the Pathet Lao negotiators to Vientiane. Souphanouvong arrived on July 31. Souvanna Phouma was about to start negotiations to end the state of civil war that prevailed in the two northern provinces. Before doing this, however, he was embarking on a visit to China at Chou En-lai's invitation and a shorter stopover in Hanoi. Parsons told Souvanna Phouma the United States objected to the trip, causing the latter to become "slightly nettled."³⁴ On the day of Souvanna Phouma's departure for Peking, Parsons was conspicuously absent from the wellwishers at the airport. It was an affront that the prime minister took personally, and marked the beginning of a long antagonism between the two men that was to have disastrous consequences for Laos. Matters were not helped when Parsons' presentation of his credentials was delayed until October 12, by which time the negotiations with the Pathet Lao were well under way.

Faced with the imminence, and then the reality, of negotiations between the royal government and the Pathet Lao, Washington reacted sharply, instructing Parsons to renew previous warnings to the Laotian leaders, and undertaking a review of options available to counter what was now described as "the current adverse trend in Laos."³⁵ "Our objective remains to contain, reduce, and eventually eliminate Communist influence," a Department policy memorandum stated. To achieve this objective, the memorandum listed a number of assets to American policy, among which was Laos's "total dependence on outside aid, which at present is principally American, for survival as a politically independent state." Liabilities, on the other hand, included "dim appreciation of Communist objectives and estimation of the Pathet Lao as nationalists," and "Prime Minister Souvanna's vanity, weakness of character, and supreme faith that he can control the Chinese Communists, the

³³Embassy to State, Telegram No. 275. August 18, 1956, cited in Memorandum to Chairman JCS.

³⁴Embassy to State. Telegram No. 168. August 6, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 783-786.

³⁵Memorandum from Young to Robertson and William J. Sebald, September 4, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 805-810.

Viet Minh, and the Pathet Lao." The memorandum stated displeasure that "our expressions of 'serious concern' have too obviously not been taken seriously by the Lao," and suggested the time might come when "we may wish to disengage or threaten to disengage."³⁶ No immediate action was to be taken, however.

In spite of these American admonitions, Souvanna Phouma pursued his negotiations with the Pathet Lao. On October 31, an agreement for cessation of hostilities was signed. On November 2, another agreement for implementation of a policy of peace and neutrality was signed. On December 24, an agreement was signed on measures to guarantee civic rights and non-discrimination to former Pathet Lao members and to integrate Pathet Lao cadres. This was followed on December 28 by issuance of a joint communiqué on matters remaining to be negotiated.

As the agreements reached in the negotiations became known (and the Pathet Lao were assiduous in propagating them to the population), the hardening American opposition had the effect of making the Pathet Lao look more and more like nationalists, while doing everything to weaken Souvanna Phouma's hand. An example of this was the fact that as early as June Washington had intimated to Souvanna Phouma that the United States might be unwilling to underwrite any large-scale integration of Pathet Lao units into the royal army,³⁷ a key element of Souvanna Phouma's negotiating position, on the grounds that such action would amount to giving American aid to Communists. In other words, two "liabilities" were becoming even more damaging to American interests as perceived in Washington, while the "asset" that Laos depended almost entirely on American aid was rapidly being turned into a liability as well.

Parsons' Warning to Souvanna Phouma (November 13, 1956)

A State Department memorandum dated November 7, 1956, titled "Preventive Action in Laos" expressed alarm at the prospect that the royal government would make concessions on the key issues of integration of Pathet Lao soldiers, restoration of the government's rule in the two northern provinces, the holding of general elections with Pathet Lao participation, and Pathet Lao membership in the government. The memorandum stated in part: "Something must be done now to stop, if possible, the unfavorable trend in Laos. CIA agrees with our assessment that the situation is deteriorating and that negotiations with the Pathet Lao are being handled in a naive and slipshod manner."³⁸

The memorandum contained a recommendation that "We make our position known in

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷State to Embassy, Telegram No. 1313, June 23, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 777-778.

³⁸Memorandum from Young to Robertson, November 7, 1956, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 834-835.

advance in terms responsible Lao authorities can understand. We should tell them that we may be obliged to reappraise our policy toward Laos, including the possible suspension of aid, if they take certain steps."³⁹ Instructions to this effect were dispatched to Ambassador Parsons, who delivered the warning in writing to Souvanna Phouma on November 13. Reacting to Souvanna Phouma's plea for American support, the Department expressed its satisfaction that the prime minister "was clearly worried by our letter of November 13."⁴⁰ "On November 22 we instructed the Ambassador to inform Souvanna that the U.S. was unable to respond favorably to the Prime Minister's appeal for support since it considered the entrance of Communists into the Lao Cabinet would threaten Lao independence."⁴¹

Souvanna Phouma's position was based on the premise that national unity was the priority objective. In the first instance, this unity took a territorial form. As he stated in an information note that constitutes the fullest account available of his thinking in early 1957 at the start of another round of negotiations with the Pathet Lao, "It is intolerable to remain any longer in a situation where two provinces of the Kingdom are amputated territorially and demographically."⁴² National unity was also essential politically in the sense that the Pathet Lao should not be allowed to play the game by their own minority rules, but should be made to play by the majority rules. At the urging of the nationalists in the Cabinet, the Pathet Lao had established their own political party in January 1956 so that their candidates in future elections would be able to run other than as individuals, one of the needs shown up by the 1955 election campaign. This party was the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front). Unity also presupposed Pathet Lao acceptance of the monarchy. On November 16, 1956, in Souvanna Phouma's presence, Souphanouvong and other members of the Pathet Lao negotiating delegation took the oath of allegiance to the king.⁴³

Of course, none of this offered a foolproof guarantee that the Pathet Lao would not disregard the niceties of Lao bourgeois political life and take over. Souvanna Phouma himself was astute enough to recognize this ever-present danger. What he could not accept was the fact that American diplomats persisted in seeing the situation as one in which every Pathet Lao member was a Communist first and a Lao nationalist second. Excluded from the national community, the Pathet Lao were tightening their hold, militarily and politically, on

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Memorandum from Sebald to the acting secretary, November 23, 1956, in National Archives.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²"Note d'Information, Présidence du Conseil," undated text in French minuted by Howard P. Jones, February 18, 1957, with the comment that "none of the ideas in it are new," in National Archives. Translated by the author.

⁴³Embassy to State, Telegram No. 788. November 19, 1956, in National Archives.

the two northern provinces, whose reintegration should have been accomplished long before. To break off the negotiations now would mean postponing the achievement of national unity for years, decades, perhaps indefinitely. At the very least, it would mean a resumption of fighting. Accordingly, the royal government would go far in its search for a solution other than by military force. This decision was not subject to criticism or blame from any outsider: the matter concerned a difference among Laotians.⁴⁴

With respect to his efforts to cultivate correct relations with North Vietnam and China, Souvanna Phouma's note said that these were intended frankly to isolate the Communists in the Pathet Lao. He did not rely only on assurances of goodwill from Hanoi and Peking. Correct relations depended on these governments' not supporting the Communists in the Pathet Lao in attempts to subvert the royal government.⁴⁵ Even so, the extent to which Souvanna Phouma was willing to go was limited; he had obtained that the agreement signed between the royal government and the Pathet Lao on November 2, 1956, was modified by secret minutes that precluded the establishment of diplomatic relations with China until the Taiwan question had been settled and with North Vietnam until the outstanding border dispute between the two countries had been settled and the Pathet Lao problem had been settled.⁴⁶

Resumption of the Negotiations (February 4, 1957)

On February 4, 1957 the negotiations resumed with the return of Prince Souphanouvong to the capital. On February 21, an agreement on modalities for holding elections was signed. In a broadcast appeal for national unity on April 8, Souvanna Phouma chided his critics for producing no constructive solution and defended the continuation of the negotiations as the only alternative to civil war or the abandonment of the two provinces.⁴⁷ The crucial test was approaching. Parsons, negative as ever and letting his antipathy to the prime minister show through, sent the following appraisal to Washington:

Souvanna Phouma has been unable to give the dynamic leadership needed because he

⁴⁴"Note d'Information," op. cit.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Embassy to State, Telegram No. 706, November 3, 1956, in National Archives. In thus qualifying his concessions to the Pathet Lao, Souvanna Phouma was taking a leaf from Hanoi's book. The government of North Vietnam had told a visiting Lao delegation that the border dispute could not be resolved until North and South Vietnam were reunified. Work on negotiating conflicting claims, delimiting, mapping, setting boundary markers, and ratifying the border between Laos and Vietnam was not completed until September 19, 1986. The Taiwan problem has not been settled to this day.

⁴⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1741, April 13, 1957, in National Archives.

himself lacks the necessary degree of firmness and convictions to define and defend the Lao position in face of a well defined, aggressive and skillfully presented Pathet Lao program.⁴⁸

In a series of votes in the National Assembly on May 29, a question, "Is the Assembly satisfied with the past agreements signed between the royal government and the Pathet Lao?", was approved by a show of hands without any opposition, while a second question, "Is the Assembly satisfied with the implementation of these agreements already signed?", was disapproved unanimously. A third vote, this one secret, on the question, "Does the Assembly want the government to carry on with the policies outlined by the prime minister?", resulted in 11 votes for the government and 13 votes against.⁴⁹ The government resigned.

In the event, Souvanna Phouma was probably not reluctant to resign. He had brought the negotiations almost to the desired result, and the Assembly showed itself pleased with the course pursued so far. Agreement with the Pathet Lao on the key issues surrounding the setting up of a coalition was still ahead, with the Pathet Lao still maintaining their "temporary" administration of the two provinces. Although the fighting had stopped for the moment, the situation could turn sour very quickly. Moreover, another factor influenced Souvanna Phouma's thinking. By resigning at the end of May he avoided having actual negotiations with Communists injected into the annual Congressional debate in Washington over aid appropriations for Laos.

By now the American aid program had grown to such massive proportions (the program ranked first in the world in per capita terms) that the abuses it generated had begun to attract the attention of a critical Congress, in spite of official attempts to keep news stories of corruption out of the American press. As Parsons pointed out to the Laotians, the Congressional and public economy drive directed at the U.S. budget, and especially the Military Support Program, was a new factor on the U.S. side that rendered the outcome of any necessary reappraisal of U.S. policy in Laos much more doubtful. "Should appropriation hearings coincide with disastrous RLG accommodation to Communists, outcome for Laos aid program predictable."⁵⁰

As a new mood of optimism over the kingdom's prospects blossomed in Vientiane in May 1957, and as many in Vientiane and Washington expressed their doubts about Parsons' pervasive negativism, the usefulness of Parsons' November 13, 1956 letter to Souvanna Phouma began to be doubted in Washington. Parsons saw himself in danger of becoming isolated among his diplomatic colleagues, which moved him to advise the State Department:

⁴⁸Foreign Service Despatch No. 221, May 7, 1957, in National Archives.

⁴⁹Foreign Service Despatch No. 251, Enclosure 1, p. 9, June 4, 1957, in National Archives.

⁵⁰Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 3445, May 20, 1957, in National Archives.

Were I to reiterate flatly at this stage policy set forth November 13 letter ...it would merely lend credence to reports which some of our friends are not above peddling, that United States more interested in keeping couple Pathet Lao (commies) out of government than in helping Laos with settlement of its national problem. I doubt even United-Kingdom Ambassador would find it possible to support us in such attitude. We would thus be alone, with diminished chances of influencing evolution of affairs here.⁵¹

The Department as a result began to backtrack on the link between the November 13 letter and an aid cutoff. As a memorandum of June 28 to Dulles put it:

We may thus soon be faced once again with the necessity to take a position on coalition. We need not now decide publicly on our stand in a completely hypothetical situation, but we should privately be prepared to be flexible if a strong anti-Communist becomes Prime Minister. Ambassador Parsons shares this view. We may wish at some future time tacitly to accept coalition (that is, we would not reduce or withdraw our aid) if (1) the Pathet Lao were integrated into the National Army under an adequate control system, (2) the Government's administration were actually restored in the two provinces, and (3) the Government was in such command of the situation that Pathet Lao entry into the Cabinet did not represent a material increase in Communist subversive potential because their ability to maneuver under the foregoing conditions would be so thoroughly circumscribed. We would not, however, openly shift our policy on coalition, if at all, until the Pathet Lao had fulfilled the foregoing conditions. We have succeeded in preventing disastrous developments under Souvanna by standing firm against coalition and do not wish to lose ground by a premature or unnecessary change.⁵²

The Advent of the Coalition (November 18, 1957)

The cabinet crisis provoked by Souvanna Phouma's resignation in May finally came to an end in August when the king again invited Souvanna Phouma to make a new attempt at forming a government. The vote was favorable. In his investiture speech on August 8, Souvanna Phouma reiterated that the re-establishment of territorial unity through the settlement of the Pathet Lao problem was the top priority.⁵³ Once again, Parsons sought by all means to delay the negotiations, questioning the concessions the royal government was preparing to make and arguing the unenforceability of the commitments made by the Pathet

⁵¹Embassy to State, Telegram No. 2077, June 6, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 931-933.

⁵²Memorandum from Robertson to Dulles, June 26, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 942-945. Italics in original.

⁵³Fourth Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos, Cmnd. 541 (London: HMSO, 1958), pp. 37-51.

Lao. Souvanna Phouma remained unconvinced by Parsons' arguments, saying in effect that achievement of the final goal was worth some risk-taking. Parsons, in turn, was unconvinced by Souvanna Phouma's counter-arguments. Meanwhile, plans for bilateral Thai-Lao staff talks had fallen into abeyance since the single meeting of July 1956, as a JCS memorandum of August 8 noted, recommending that "The United States should continue to actively lay the groundwork for Thai-Lao defense planning so that when the political situation permits, active defense planning between the Thai and Lao can be continued."⁵⁴

Although the United States was on record as being against the entry of the Pathet Lao into the government, either before or after elections, reality intruded to the extent that the Embassy was preparing to predicate an actual continuation of aid on how the Laotian implementation worked out step by step. Parsons spelled out these steps in a telegram to the Department:

Continuance of United States attitude would be reviewed upon completion of each step and would depend on our determination of the following questions:

(Step One) Whether military and administrative control of two provinces has in fact passed into hands of RLG. Our feelings would be based on our own investigation, on the spot.

(Step Two) Whether integration of ex-PL cadres (administrative and military) has been carried out in a manner safeguarding integrity and security of RLG and ANL.

(Step Three) Whether the Neo Lao Hak Sat, or any other successor to PL, was in fact an independent political party, free from foreign domination, and loyal to constitution and crown.

(Step Four) Whether the ex-PL or any other candidates advanced by Neo Lao Hak Sat for ministerial appointments in accordance constitutional procedures are themselves independent and without subversive or disloyal intentions or connections.

(Finally), as our attitude dependent on future circumstances as outlined, no need and in fact undesirable attempt define position more precisely now.⁵⁵

In spite of Foreign Minister Phoui Sananikone's assurances to U.S. officials during a visit to Washington in October that a coalition was still a long way off,⁵⁶ the negotiations in Vientiane began to move rapidly that month. Parsons was later to blame the rapidity with which the final agreements were concluded on the fact that Souvanna Phouma no longer felt

⁵⁴Report by the Joint Strategic Plans Committee to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 8, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 957-960.

⁵⁵Embassy to State. Telegram No. 2077. June 6. 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 931-933.

⁵⁶Memorandum of conversation by Patricia Byrne, October 7, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 980-986.

the restraining hand of Phoui,⁵⁷ but it is far more likely that Souvanna Phouma took advantage of Parsons' absence accompanying Phoui to speed up the negotiations. Whether this behavior was "surreptitious," as Parsons told the Department, or merely a desire to make progress toward a long-established aim, is open to debate.

Also, it should not be assumed that Pathet Lao desire for an agreement was a constant in the equation; some evidence suggests that the Pathet Lao negotiating team under Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit was under orders from the clandestine Laotian Communist party to conclude an agreement rapidly because defections and other manifestations of discontent were appearing in areas under Pathet Lao administration at the time.⁵⁸ Groups of refugees numbering as many as 250 had been fleeing from Sam Neua, having seen through the empty promises of a better life under the "Lao Patriotic Forces" and watching their sons being conscripted for military service and sent to North Vietnam for indoctrination. The royal government made the most of these groups, sending them food and clothing and publicizing their plight. In this the Lao social welfare service acted with commendable speed and initiative.⁵⁹

On October 22 final agreement was reached on re-establishing the royal administration over the two provinces and integration of Pathet Lao cadres. The agreements reaffirmed the full sovereignty of the royal government over the two provinces, provided for a government of national union to be presented to the National Assembly for investiture, and supplementary elections to the National Assembly to be held four months later.⁶⁰ Yet another warning from Washington to the effect that the United States would "closely examine each step in execution in order to ascertain whether RLG remaining in effective control situation and defending position recognized at Geneva"⁶¹ fell on deaf ears. The only concession Souvanna Phouma was willing to make was to hold up public announcement of the agreements until after Parsons' return to Vientiane.

A joint communiqué signed by Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong on November

⁵⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 740, November 6, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 1026-1029.

⁵⁸A visitor to Sam Neua in December 1957 recorded this impression: "No prosperity, no intellectual culture, and perhaps no religion." (Foreign Service Despatch No. 82, December 13, 1957, in National Archives.)

⁵⁹Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1552, June 4, 1956, in National Archives.

⁶⁰Embassy to State, Telegram No. 646, October 23, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 999-1000.

⁶¹State to Embassy, Telegram No. 422, October 23, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 996-998.

2 announced the agreements.⁶² The agreements on modalities of implementing them were signed on November 12.⁶³ As the first concrete step, Souphanouvong in a symbolic ceremony on November 18 formally returned to the royal authority in the person of Crown Prince Savang Vatthana the administration of the two provinces, together with all the troops, civil servants, and war materials belonging to the Pathet Lao. On the afternoon of the same day, the National Assembly approved by unanimous vote the national union government, which included Souphanouvong as minister of plan, reconstruction and urbanism and Phoumi Vongvichit as minister of cults and fine arts.

Ignoring Souvanna Phouma's pleas to give the royal government one or two months in which to demonstrate the workability of the agreements,⁶⁴ Parsons cabled the Department his recommendations for an interim policy pending the re-evaluation in Washington. He urged that in the meantime American military and economic aid not be reduced, while not permitting the royal government to assume that aid would continue regardless.⁶⁵ The Department cabled its concurrence in Parsons' recommendations the next day, noting that the last point would present a major difficulty.⁶⁶ On November 23, Parsons handed Souvanna Phouma the official notification that the re-evaluation of American policy which had been impending since the letter of November 13, 1956 was now at hand.⁶⁷ Fearing an abrupt cutoff of aid in reaction to the coalition, Canada, Australia, France and Britain all urged a continuation of American aid to Laos.⁶⁸

In a letter to the ICC on November 26, Souvanna Phouma stated that the agreements constituted a preliminary political settlement as envisaged in article 14 of the Geneva Agreement and that the activities of the ICC were therefore nearing an end.⁶⁹ Only oversight of the elections remained to complete the mission of the ICC.

⁶²Fourth Interim Report, op. cit., pp. 57-59.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 59-67.

⁶⁴Embassy to State, Telegram No. 714, November 2, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 1017-1018; and Telegram No. 870, November 24, 1957, in National Archives.

⁶⁵Embassy to State, Telegram No. 849, November 20, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 1047-1048.

⁶⁶State to Embassy. Telegram No. 571, November 21, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, p. 1049.

⁶⁷Embassy to State. Telegram No. 871, November 24, 1957. in National Archives.

⁶⁸State to Embassy. Telegram No. 571, November 21, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, p. 1049.

⁶⁹Fourth Interim Report, op. cit., pp. 69-71.

Legalization of the NLHS

The statutes of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS), as amended on September 20, 1957 were accepted as legal by the Ministry of Interior in Vientiane⁷⁰ and the NLHS opened its Vientiane office on November 26. The NLHS would mount a formidable challenge to the established nationalist parties. It had a program. It had a grassroots organization in the countryside. It had dedicated and disciplined cadres. By December the Embassy was describing the NLHS as the "best organized political party in the country."⁷¹

A reading of its statutes reveals the NLHS to have been a party oriented to appealing to as wide a nationalist audience as possible. No mention is made of the secret Laotian Communist Party, or of its links to Hanoi, or of its revolutionary program. The word communism is not mentioned. Nor is Marxism-Leninism. Organizationally, it hardly differed from the other parties, with the exception that its grassroots units were real, not merely on paper. While at the top the NLHS Central Committee was tightly controlled by Communist party members, the grassroots units made the NLHS eminently susceptible to being subverted from within. Grassroots units were democratically elected by majority vote. The operational decision-making body in the NLHS was the congress, and this could be convoked by an initiative from below.

Since membership was open to all, it would have presented little difficulty to infiltrate members of the overwhelmingly non-Communist public into the NLHS and to have them capture leadership positions on the strength of their numbers. Attempts to stop such grassroots initiatives by resort to undemocratic methods on the part of the secret members of the Laotian Communist Party would have exposed the falseness of the NLHS propaganda created a strong popular reaction against it. Yet, apart from the relatively feeble efforts mounted by the government's special service for political propaganda and its successor, the Information, Documentation and Socio-Political Action Service (SIDASP),⁷² both of which operated on shoestring budgets, no one and no agency on the government side attempted to turn the NLHS against its Communist controllers. This would have required a patient, long-term effort, but the rewards would have been commensurate with the effort.

The NLHS banked heavily on the popularity of its leader, Souphanouvong, for getting votes. But more substantive issues like the corruption associated with American aid played into its hands as well. Embassy officers traveling in the provinces reported the concern of local government officials that no serious effort was being made to counter NLHS

⁷⁰Foreign Service Despatch No. 76, December 2, 1957, in National Archives.

⁷¹Embassy to State, Telegram No. 928, December 4, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 1051-1054.

⁷²Foreign Service Despatch No. 83, December 16, 1957, in FRUS 1955-1957, pp. 1054-1060.

propaganda. The feeling that American aid, in spite of its large dollar terms, was hardly visible outside Vientiane was widespread, and even Savang mentioned it in his conversations with the ambassador.⁷³

Voting was set for May 4, 1958. A total of 21 seats were to be contested, bringing the size of the National Assembly to 59 deputies. Since the election law provided for each voter to vote as many votes as there were seats being contested in the voter's province, the nationalist parties had an obvious interest in limiting the number of candidates they presented. Although the Embassy lobbied hard for an election agreement between the major nationalist parties limiting the number of candidates running, no such agreement prevailed in the end.

Laos Reunified

On December 8 in the little town of Sam Neua, composed of about 50 thatched houses and 10 masonry houses, many of them still showing damage from the fighting, and in the presence of ICC observers and of some 50 Pathet Lao soldiers and 200 civilian spectators who provided applause, authority over the province was ceremonially transferred to the royal government. Prince Souphanouvong spoke first, followed by Souvanna Phouma. The next day, in a simple ceremony lasting 15 minutes, the new governor of the province was installed.⁷⁴ Similar ceremonies were held in Phong Saly a few days later.

The Embassy reported that the reoccupation of the two provinces by the army had gone off without incident. The government's writ ran up to the borders of North Vietnam and China. Integration of Pathet Lao troops was begun, with 6,129 men reporting for processing and over 3,500 weapons being turned in by January 31, 1958.⁷⁵ More ominously, certain Pathet Lao units were reported to have crossed over into North Vietnam with their arms. But Laos was at last reunified. It was to be the last time until 1975, when the Communists took over in Vientiane.

In an effort to reassure friendly powers that Laos was not going Communist as a result of these activities, Souvanna Phouma embarked on visits to a number of countries early in 1958. In Washington, American officials were prepared to adopt a correct, but reserved, attitude toward the prime minister, in view of the imminent re-evaluation of American policy. "To avoid having the discussion bog down in fruitless argument on the character of the PL," a briefing paper for Dulles suggested, "it would be better to bypass the point by stating that dissidents, whether Communist or non-Communist, are inimical to Souvanna's aims of fostering nationalism and true unity for the progress and prosperity of

⁷³Embassy to State. Telegram No. 998, December 13, 1957, in National Archives.

⁷⁴Foreign Service Despatch No. 82, December 13, 1957, in National Archives.

⁷⁵Embassy to State. Telegram No. 1270, January 31, 1958, in National Archives.

Laos."⁷⁶ Also it was considered advisable to remind Souvanna Phouma of the historical examples of Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

Under the terms of the November agreement, integration of two battalions of Pathet Lao troops was meant to be completed within 60 days of the formation of the coalition. However, the process hit a snag when the Pathet Lao demanded the acceptance into the royal army of 112 officers, 191 non-commissioned officers, and 95 corporals. The royal government offered to accept the normal complement of officers for two battalions, plus some senior staff, totaling 36 officers, 154 non-commissioned officers, and 208 corporals, later raising this to 43 officers and 171 non-commissioned officers. This dispute was not resolved, and thus integration was effectively stalled.

Meanwhile, for quite other reasons, the United States had held up paying the salaries of the army and police. Seeking to end abuses of the aid program through differences in exchange rates between official bank transactions and the open market rate, the United States demanded a devaluation of the kip and set a deadline of the end of June for the beginning of negotiations on the issue. On March 11 the Embassy reported that, since the United States refused to fund the army and police unless some form of escrow arrangement was in effect for the dollars sold to the National Bank, only army officers and some enlisted men had so far been paid.

Delay in paying ANL [army] and police had created malaise in government circles and members government claim U.S. is playing into hands of dissatisfied elements with leftist opposition reaping benefits. Economic aid program is also being seriously hampered and work on certain projects has been temporarily halted.⁷⁷

It was not until mid-April that the scheduled March and April funds for the army and police were released to the government.⁷⁸ By then the United States was represented in Vientiane by a new ambassador, Horace H. Smith. Parsons, in his new capacity of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, continued to exert a powerful influence on American policy toward Laos.

The May 4, 1958 Elections

The results of the supplementary elections for 21 additional seats in the National

⁷⁶Memorandum from Robertson to Dulles, January 11, 1958, in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960. Vol. XVI. East Asia-Pacific Region: Cambodia; Laos (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 1. Document 5.

⁷⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1521, March 11, 1958, in National Archives.

⁷⁸Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1718, April 12, 1958, in National Archives.

Assembly came as a distinct shock. A combination of skilful propaganda on issues of real substance; discontent among soldiers and civil servants over the pay issue, with many soldiers voting for NLHS candidates; and vote-splitting among the non-NLHS parties; all redounded to the benefit of the NLHS and its electoral allies, who won 13 of the seats. The NLHS and allies had captured one of two seats in Thakhek with barely one-quarter of the total vote, and three of four seats in Luang Prabang with less than one-half the total vote. Immediately after the elections, NLHS propaganda began demanding the holding of general elections. In an election run on strictly local issues, the NLHS and its Communist mentors had won handily. The old-line nationalists had taken a drubbing. And it had nothing to do with voting for the free world as opposed to voting for the Communists, as Washington continued to see the contest in Laos.

Indeed, the State Department's reaction was not to address the issues raised by the election, but to demand the formation of a "broadly-based conservative cabinet excluding NLHS."⁷⁹ Congressional and public reaction, the Department informed the Embassy, made it difficult to justify continued aid to Laos. Citing a telegram from the Embassy in Saigon, the Department said, "We agree with Vietnamese that Souvanna should if possible be eliminated as candidate Prime Minister."⁸⁰

Souvanna Phouma faced difficulties on three fronts in a growing cabinet crisis. Politically, he had to deal now with demands being pressed by a new grouping, made up of middle-level civil servants for the most part, calling itself the Committee for the Defense of National Interests. This grouping, which was formed in June, claimed to stand for sweeping reforms and a strong anti-Communist policy.⁸¹ The encouragement that the CDNI may have received in this their initial foray into Laotian parliamentary politics, and the sources of financial backing they could count on--these were not people who commanded any wealth of their own--are not clear from a reading of the diplomatic correspondence available up to now. Their newspaper, printed on glossy paper unlike anything seen before in Laos, bespoke of their resources. Although the CDNI did not single out Souvanna Phouma personally for attack, the presence of the CDNI forced him to accommodate their political demands as far as he could in view of the fact that they did not hold seats in the National Assembly, and he tailored the draft of his investiture speech to a strongly anti-Communist tone.⁸²

Militarily, while benefiting from the ceasefire he had negotiated with the Pathet Lao, Souvanna Phouma had to bear in mind the continued intransigence of the Pathet Lao on the

⁷⁹State to Embassy, Telegram No. 1420, May 27, 1958, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 448-450.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Foreign Service Despatch No. 178, June 19, 1958, in National Archives.

⁸²Embassy to State, Telegram No. 219, August 1, 1958, in National Archives.

army integration issue. Since his position had been that the May 4 elections had fulfilled the last of the obligations the royal government had incurred at Geneva, the ICC had adjourned sine die. Its disappearance, over the vehement objections of Hanoi, meant there was one possible safeguard less as the workability of the negotiated agreements was tested. Moreover, the United States was now overtly exploring ways to upgrade the effectiveness of its military aid. Ambassador Smith had already approved in May an increase in the number of PEO personnel.⁸³ Thought was also being given to the possibility of transforming the PEO into a MAAG along the lines of the MAAG in Saigon.⁸⁴ Political considerations dictated caution, however, in the State Department's view.

On the economic front, the negotiations over financial reforms had still not resumed, with the result that the U.S. aid appropriation for Laos for fiscal year 1959 was held up. On this issue, Washington had assumed full control, relegating the Embassy to the status of a reporter in transmitting the royal government's position.⁸⁵ This question was to drag on without resolution into October. Smith analyzed the corruption problem, and attributed it to the manner in which U.S. aid was handled.⁸⁶

Smith was sensitive to Lao susceptibilities on all three of these interrelated issues. On August 2, he cabled the Department that he did not consider it wise to try to force Souvanna Phouma "to mold cabinet more closely in accordance with our desires." Smith harbored doubts about the young, untried men of the CDNI, and about the extent of the support they could muster among the civil service and the army if the time came for that. "I continue to consider," he went on, "that any effort at a military coup at this time would almost certainly play into Communist hands and hasten or make truly inevitable the day of Communist control of this country." He added: "The two northern provinces might again split off in open rebellion and in the other ten provinces with aid and 'volunteers' from the Viet Minh, all but the few central points covered by the 300 paratroopers and such additional ANL units as are effectively armed, supplied and trained might be openly taken over by the NLHS. If the ICC returned it might even find evidence after such debacle leading it to conclude that the NLHS has the support of the majority of the population."⁸⁷

⁸³Embassy to State. Telegram No. 2016, May 27, 1958, in National Archives.

⁸⁴Memorandum from Byrne to Maurer, January 29, 1958, in National Archives.

⁸⁵Embassy to State. Telegram No. 2156, June 17, 1958, in National Archives.

⁸⁶Embassy to State. Telegram No. 423, September 4, 1958, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 6. Document 94.

⁸⁷Embassy to State. Telegram No. 229, August 2, 1958, in National Archives.

The Army's Entry into Politics

The next day Smith cabled the Department that Phoui Sananikone blamed the cabinet crisis on the CDNI supporters and their exaggerated demands for a share of power. Phoui also had gained the impression, Smith said, that internal decisions among the CDNI "candidates" for cabinet posts were being dictated not by Souvanna Phouma but by the predicted acceptability of these candidates as negotiators with Washington over pending questions; Phoui had asked Smith to drop a word in the right places if this was not the case. Two days later, with the cabinet crisis still not resolved, Smith asked the Department bluntly:

Under these circumstances it important to know whether it is really U.S. policy to in any way encourage young elements to refuse to participate in this government in belief it is U.S. intention, unless CDNI gets at least one or two more young people into a legally invested government, to support the CDNI and ANL in establishing, by methods of at least doubtful constitutionality but more probably inevitably requiring an outright coup, a government composed entirely or clearly controlled by these young men ...I hope that wording first sentence final paragraph of DEPTTEL 168 does not indicate that we intend to encourage younger elements to attempt coup at this time rather than enter government as suggested by Souvanna.⁸⁸

After several more days of fruitless discussions, Souvanna Phouma realized at last that it was futile to go on trying to meet the CDNI members' insatiable appetite for a share of power, and gave up trying to form a new government. He was named ambassador to France. The new government, when it eventually took office on August 18, was headed by Phoui. It included four CDNI members and Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, a rising young officer and cousin-once-removed of Sarit's⁸⁹ who had been present at the luncheon for Radford in 1956, in a sub-cabinet level position. The army was getting its first taste of politics.

The State Department had immediately cabled Smith assurances that it was not American policy to instigate a coup.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, considering the pressures mounted by the CDNI members, the discussions on upgrading the training of the royal army, and the imminence of important negotiations for resuming normal aid flows on which the government depended, it is difficult to avoid the impression that officials in Washington, having failed in their attempt to prevent a coalition, set about to sabotage the coalition and to bring about the downfall of Souvanna Phouma, even when he adopted a staunchly anti-Communist stance. Given the personal animosity of Parsons to Souvanna Phouma, and his hand in drafting

⁸⁸Embassy to State, Telegram No. 252. August 5, 1958, in National Archives. The reference is to Department Telegram No. 168. August 2, 1958, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 5, Document 79.

⁸⁹FRUS 1958-1960, p. 787. footnote 2.

⁹⁰State to Embassy, Telegram No. 184, August 6, 1958, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 472-473.

policy messages at this point, this effort bears all the markings of his doing.

Washington's policy for Laos now concentrated on finding alternatives to Souvanna Phouma's policy of accommodation with the Pathet Lao, and building up the national army as a counter to the perceived Communist twin threats of subversion and aggression. An agreement worked out with the French reduced the role of the French military mission in Laos and enlarged that of the PEO. The political atmosphere thus changed in the summer of 1958. Phoui, less scrupulous about preserving Laos' neutrality than his predecessor, angered Peking and Hanoi by admitting representatives of Taipei and Saigon, a blatantly provocative action by a country that aspired to neutrality.

The Tchepone Incident

A more ominous immediately development in Laos' foreign relations, however, was the occupation by North Vietnamese security forces in December 1958 of several villages in Tchepone district near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam. The royal government immediately protested the flying of the North Vietnamese flag on Laotian territory. In reply, Hanoi claimed the villages had historically been part of the canton of Huong Lap in Quang Tri province. This claim represented nothing less than a unilateral reinterpretation of the French map used by the Truong Gia Armistice Commission in the summer of 1954 to draw the DMZ, backed by force of arms. Phoui asked the National Assembly for and received extraordinary powers to deal with the crisis. The royal government, well informed and prepared, published an information note giving the history of the demarcation of the border in that area by the French Residents in Laos and Annam, respectively, in March 1914, and proving indisputably that the area occupied was on the Laos side of the line.⁹¹ But the failure to get the lost territory back rankled with the Lao nationalists, not least with Crown Prince Savang.

Savang had approached Smith with a sense of urgency. He wanted to know where the United States, which had often spoken of its support for Laos in the event of aggression, stood. Parsons now considered it was important that the royal government "not appear hasty or nervous in reacting to Vietnamese Communist military and diplomatic pressure."⁹² When the Department finally got around to providing a textual reply, it was so hedged that it could hardly have reassured the government or the head of a friendly state, and certainly not one facing a violation of its border by a hostile neighbor. Its substantive portion read:

Department wishes reassure RLG continued U.S. support heretofore but in view

⁹¹Text in Lao Presse, February 13, 1959, in National Archives. For the text of the Foreign Ministry's note of protest, see Embassy to State. Telegram No. 1242, January 15, 1959, in National Archives.

⁹²State to Embassy, Telegram No. 919, January 30, 1959, in National Archives.

imprecise nature demarcation Lao frontier with North Vietnam and complex history border problems this area considers it impracticable either U.S. or SEATO undertake specific frontier guarantee.⁹³

Here was the United States, whose policies in Laos had maneuvered the king and the royal government into abandoning neutrality and adopting an anti-Communist stance towards its neighbors, not only seeming to take the side of Hanoi in bringing up "complex" historical reasons for the occupation of Laotian territory, but refusing all assurances as to the "specifics" of Laos' borders. Upon receipt of this message, Savang told Smith bluntly he was dissatisfied with the reply, the maps establishing Laos's borders were precise and definite, but he accepted it was the right of the United States to decide whether or not to act.⁹⁴ It is interesting to note that not even the NLHS deputies in the National Assembly accepted Hanoi's claim in public, or even tried to contend that the border was "imprecise." As Souphanouvong told the National Assembly in the debate over Phoui's request for special powers, maps of different dates are not alike and thus produce misunderstandings; he argued, therefore, that the border problem should be settled through negotiations.⁹⁵

The United States, having adopted the position that the Pathet Lao were all Communists, was unable to exploit Hanoi's border violation of the territory of Laos as a means of splitting off the nationalists from the Communists. It therefore swept the whole matter under the rug. Later on, Hanoi was to occupy large sections of Laos permanently for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, justifying this action to the followers of the Pathet Lao as "borrowing" the territory of their country.⁹⁶

The change in the weather resulted in a crisis over the final integration of the foreseen 1,500 Pathet Lao soldiers into the national army, which had been planned for May 1959. One night as a monsoon storm swept over the Plain of Jars, one of the two battalions slipped away. The other battalion near Luang Prabang disappeared likewise. The event signaled a resumption of hostilities. Phoui's government, after indecisive cabinet deliberations, ordered the arrest of the NLHS deputies in Vientiane. Souphanouvong, Nouthak Phoumsavan, Phoumi Vongvichit, Phoun Sipraseuth, Sithon Kommadan, Singkapo, and others. Tiao Souk Vongsak managed to escape.

⁹³State to Embassy. Telegram No. 1030. February 20, 1959, in National Archives. This telegram was cleared by Parsons, among others.

⁹⁴Savang Vatthana, memorandum of conversation by Horace H. Smith, Vientiane, March 24, 1959, in National Archives.

⁹⁵Embassy to State. Telegram No. 1239. January 14, 1959, in National Archives.

⁹⁶The most obvious historical parallel that suggests itself, although fortunately hypothetical, is the Wehrmacht "borrowing" a corridor of Swiss territory to send supplies from Germany to Italy in World War II.

The Crisis of the Summer of 1959

The matter of security guarantees grew more urgent when fighting broke out along the border with North Vietnam further north in Sam Neua in the summer of 1959. Savang's immediate reaction was to instruct the government to mobilize the necessary forces to expel the invaders and to request the United Nations to dispatch an observer to Laos.⁹⁷ The small Laotian garrisons in the border area had given a good account of themselves in the initial fighting, withdrawing from exposed positions along rivers now in spate due to the summer monsoon in accordance with sound military doctrine. They had subsequently managed to reoccupy a number of these positions. But the fighting took a turn for the worse at the end of August, and a number of border posts were lost anew.

The royal government, meeting in Cabinet session, now took the decision to address a formal appeal to United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld for a UN emergency force. Smith, who saw Savang's hand behind this unexpected move, expressed his amazement to Foreign Minister Khamphan Panya that a decision of such importance had been reached without even minimal consultation with Laos's allies, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.⁹⁸ Eventually, a subcommittee of the Security Council visited Laos to look into the charges of aggression, providing some satisfaction to the royal government, but its report was inconclusive. Hammarskjöld himself visited Laos twice in March and November 1959.

The military operations in the border area in the summer of 1959 established a pattern of concealing from view the North Vietnamese presence. Vietnamese forces led the attack on a strong point, then fell back, letting the Pathet Lao remain in place once resistance to the advance had been broken. The fact that North Vietnamese regular army units participated in attacks on July 28-31, 1959 is attested to by eyewitnesses.⁹⁹ Rumors of the North Vietnamese in the vicinity often had a terrifying effect on their own. Among the men who heard them in the mountains of Sam Neua that summer was a young royal army captain named Kong Le. Kong Le had two companies of his Second Paratroop Battalion out on patrol almost on the North Vietnam border. When they returned to Sam Neua without encountering the enemy, the two companies found that the garrison had decamped, leaving the town defenseless. Kong Le also noted the habit of generals like Ouan Ratikoun of making brief flying visits to the front which were not of much use in shoring up the morale of the local population.

⁹⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 301, August 12, 1959, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 10, Document 211.

⁹⁸Embassy to State, Telegram No. 535, September 4, 1959, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 11, Document 243.

⁹⁹Capt. Boun Nam, interview by Joseph J. Zasloff, Vientiane, April 19, 1967.

More extensive direct North Vietnamese involvement in Laos took the form of logistical support for the Pathet Lao forces. As early as two months after the 1954 Geneva Conference, the North Vietnamese established a small support group on the Thanh Hoa-Sam Neua border at Ban Na Meo. This unit, known as Group 100, provided logistical and other support to the Pathet Lao forces. It was headed by Colonel Chu Huy Man, younger brother of General Chu Van Tan. Its political officer was Colonel Dao Viet Huong, who was a member of the Joint Commission to oversee the armistice.¹⁰⁰ In view of the switch back to a fighting strategy, however, the Vietnamese and Lao parties decided to establish an upgraded unit. The new unit, known as Group 959, began operating in September 1959. According to an official history, its personnel had the mission "of serving as specialists for the Military Commission and Supreme Command of the Laotian People's Liberation Army, and organizing the supplying of Vietnamese material to the Laotian revolution and directly commanding the Vietnamese volunteer units operating in Sam Neua, Xieng Khouang, and Vientiane."¹⁰¹ Group 959 was headquartered at Na Kai, just inside the Sam Neua border.

The Army Attempts to Take Over (December 1959)

With the NLHS deputies in a Vientiane prison and renewed fighting in the countryside, the political scene verged ever more on extralegality. Key army officers, having been initiated into politics, were emboldened to take things into their own hands in the capital. In doing so, they showed an increasing tendency to assume the United States would back them. This was the danger that faced Laos as the National Assembly's mandate approached its end in December.

When Savang Vatthana, who had been proclaimed king on November 1 on the death of his father, received Ambassador Smith and Vice Admiral Herbert D. Riley, chief of staff to the commander in chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), Savang had several uncomplimentary things to say about the present Assembly and made it clear he was looking forward to new elections which would bring in young blood. This was music to the ears of Phoumi Nosavan, who indeed had arranged the interview. The king's remark to his visitors that Laos was perfectly capable of choosing the proper time and manner of appealing for foreign assistance, since he knew any advice he got from the United States on such an appeal would be negative, worried Smith.¹⁰² The king had learned the lesson of January well. But suppose Colonel Phoumi and his CDNI supporters provoked an incident with North Vietnam and then appealed for

¹⁰⁰Lt. Col. Phim Somphou, interview by Joseph J. Zasloff, Vientiane, 1967.

¹⁰¹War Experiences Recapitulation Committee of the High-Level Military Institute, "Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc 1954-1975: Nhung Su Kien Quan Su" ("The Anti-U.S. Resistance War for National Salvation 1954-1975: Military Events") (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1980) (in Vietnamese), pp. 54-55.

¹⁰²Embassy to State. Telegram No. 1578, December 8, 1959, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 14, Document 320.

help to SEATO, where the United States would be obligated to respond by making a show of force?

Colonel Phoumi was intriguing with the king to have himself promoted to general, and made sure that in his general staff position he held responsibility for relations with foreign general staffs.¹⁰³ The CDNI supporters were angered by Phoui's dismissal of Khamphan Panya, one of their number, and by the National Assembly's approval of an extension of its mandate to April 1960. Katay's untimely death on December 29 deprived the remaining cabinet at one stroke of its deputy prime minister, minister of interior, minister of cults, and minister of justice. With the king consulting frequently with Phoumi, the crisis reached a climax on January 4 when the army made a show of force in Vientiane and Radio Vientiane broadcast a communiqué stating the supreme command of the armed forces had assumed "handling current affairs."¹⁰⁴ The Western ambassadors in Vientiane, including Smith whose requests for an audience with the king had been ignored, presented a united front to the king on the side of respect for constitutionality.¹⁰⁵ An interim government headed by Kou Abhay, head of the King's Council, took over charged with preparing the elections Phoumi had been wanting so badly. Temporarily rebuffed and nursing his wounds, Phoumi, now general, bided his time as minister of defense in the new government.

Behind the scenes, General Phoumi exercised the considerable pressure he was able to bring to bear due to his position in the government to stage-manage the elections held on April 24, 1960. He had changes made to the electoral law and, arranging financial support from Sarit, now in supreme command in Thailand, bought off strong and inconvenient candidates and enlisted civil servants as his campaign workers. On election day, the balloting itself was fraudulent, the results totally unbelievable, as attested by officials on the Laos desk in Washington to their Western colleagues.¹⁰⁶ A new government was formed on June 3. It was headed by Chao Somsanith, a civil servant untainted by corruption who possessed impeccable nationalist credentials, but was in fact controlled by General Phoumi acting as minister of defense and under the cover of his new political party, Paxa Sangkhom. Souvanna Phouma, elected without fraud, became the president of the National Assembly. The idea of neutrality was not quite dead; the government sounded out Hammarskjöld about

¹⁰³Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1712, December 20, 1959, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 14, Document 323.

¹⁰⁴Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1924, January 4, 1960, in National Archives.

¹⁰⁵Foreign Service Despatch No. 239, January 8, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 15, Document 353.

¹⁰⁶Memorandum of telephone conversation, April 27, 1960, between Barthélémy (French Embassy) and Christian A. Chapman, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 16, Document 377.

sending it an "expert on neutral conduct," preferably a Swiss or a Swede.¹⁰⁷

The NLHS deputies held in prison had not been allowed to run for the Assembly. They got word to their supporters to vote for any NLHS candidates who dared run, or else for their ally, the Santiphab. But they themselves had other ideas. On May 23, under darkness and in accordance with plans prepared well in advance, they slipped out of prison and disappeared into the countryside along a route prepared by the NLHS chief for the province of Vientiane, for which he later was awarded a medal by the NLHS Central Committee. The Pathet Lao insurgency resumed in the countryside.¹⁰⁸

A new American ambassador arrived in Vientiane in the last days of July. A tall, spare New Englander, Winthrop G. Brown, although a Yale classmate, differed completely from Parsons in outlook. He immediately set about making his courtesy calls and presenting his credentials; the king, in view of his experience with Smith with his worries about preserving constitutionality, was probably only too glad to welcome his replacement. Among those on whom Brown called was Souvanna Phouma. As Brown later recalled:

I must say I was very impressed. He took the line that the only proper role for Laos was to be completely neutral. He stressed the fact that he was a sincere and vigorous anti-Communist, but he did not want to be tied up in alliances with the West any more than he wanted to be tied up with alliances with the Communist world. He seemed to be pretty well persuaded that he would be able, if he were in charge, if the country followed a neutral policy, to maintain its independence.

...Now, I took a lot of this with substantial grains of salt, both because of the past history I had been told about in Washington and because of the fact that I didn't think the Communists were quite as gentle and accommodating as he seemed to think that they would be. But nevertheless, the way in which he presented his thesis of trying to unite the different elements in the country into a national and a neutral leadership and to pursue a course of real neutrality for the country seemed to me to be very sincere. The impression I got of the man, as such, was that he had qualities of leadership and that he was likely to appeal to his people.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷Memorandum of conversation between Hammarskjöld and Ambassador-designate Brown, July 5, 1960. in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 412.

¹⁰⁸The Embassy was well informed about the insurgency. The Embassy's archive materials include several detailed reports of the effectiveness of the Pathet Lao organization and proselytizing in the villages. These reports appear to have made little or no impression in Washington.

¹⁰⁹Winthrop G. Brown, recorded interview by Larry J. Hackman, February 1, 1968, p. 3, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, Boston, Massachusetts.

Kong Le's Coup d'Etat (August 9, 1960)

On August 9, Captain Kong Le, a 26-year-old Phou Thai tribesman from Muong Phalane, led his Second Paratroop Battalion in taking over all essential installations in Vientiane. He had unwittingly chosen a moment when the entire cabinet was in Luang Prabang conferring with the king. The Revolutionary Committee informed the outside world by broadcasting their communiqués on Radio Vientiane.¹¹⁰ In a rally held at the city football stadium on August 11, Kong Le declared his goals: an end to the fighting among the Lao, an end to corruption, a policy of peace and neutrality.¹¹¹ These were popular demands by any measure, and elicited widespread evidence of support in Vientiane on the part of students and other groups. The State Department, however, took no account of this aspect of the situation, in spite of the fact the Embassy pointed out the legitimacy of some of the expressed grievances.¹¹² Instead, reacting in Cold War knee-jerk fashion, Parsons cabled the Embassy: "Prospect of neutralist government (under Souvanna Phouma or anyone else) dedicated to another fruitless round of negotiations with Pathet Lao would be one fraught with greatest danger to independence of country and its preservation with free world."¹¹³

On August 13, General Ouan Ratikoun arrived from Luang Prabang and told Kong Le and Souvanna Phouma that the government was prepared to resign, but refused to accept the coup d'état. Once this news spread in the town, demonstrators gathered outside the empty Présidence du Conseil demanding Somsanith's immediate resignation; they then marched on the National Assembly, where Souvanna Phouma met them and, startled by the vehemence of their speakers, attempted to moderate their demands.¹¹⁴ Inside, the 41 deputies present voted unanimously to censure the Somsanith government. On August 14, a delegation of the Assembly carried the news of this vote to Luang Prabang and asked the king to name

¹¹⁰Texts in Embassy to State, Telegrams No. 237 and 244, August 9, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Documents 418 and 425.

¹¹¹Embassy to State. Telegram No. 256, August 11, 1960, in National Archives.

¹¹²Embassy to State. Telegram No. 247, August 10, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 428.

¹¹³State to Embassy. Telegram No. 141, August 9, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 422.

¹¹⁴CIA Information Report IN37507, August 13, 1960, in Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, White House Office Files. Staff Secretary Records, International Series, Laos Situation Reports, Abilene, Kansas.

Souvanna Phouma to form a new government. Somsanith signified his decision to resign,¹¹⁵ and the king accepted this decision.¹¹⁶ The king thereupon named Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna Phouma's government was invested unanimously by 34 deputies on August 17.¹¹⁷ The next day, Kong Le declared that his coup d'état was over and vacated the Présidence du Conseil.

Thai and U.S. Support to General Phoumi

On receiving word of the coup d'état, General Phoumi had flown from Luang Prabang to Ubon, where he told a visitor from the American Embassy in Bangkok of his determination to "straighten things out."¹¹⁸ In a meeting in Bangkok the following evening with Marshal Sarit, American Chargé d'Affaires Leonard Unger, and the chief of JUSMAG in Thailand, General Phoumi outlined plans, "for implementation when supplies, equipment and men all in order," for recapture of the Vientiane airport by parachute drop followed by ferrying in additional forces by air to oust the revolutionary group. He then outlined the assistance he required of the Thais and the Americans: air transport, fuel, pay for his troops, and two radio broadcasting units. Supplies ordinarily destined for Vientiane were to be diverted to Savannakhet, Phoumi's base. A PEO channel was to be opened between Savannakhet and JUSMAG Bangkok, short-circuiting the PEO in Vientiane. The participants decided it would be better to keep their support to General Phoumi secret.¹¹⁹ The next day, the Thais instituted a blockade of Vientiane.

These steps received immediate approval in Washington. A PEO channel was established between General Phoumi's headquarters in Savannakhet and JUSMAG in Bangkok. Aircraft of Civil Air Transport (CAT), a Central Intelligence Agency front, were made available to him. Laotian troops in training at bases in Thailand were to be returned as

¹¹⁵Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 259, August 14, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 18, Document 448.

¹¹⁶Embassy to State, Telegram No. 288, August 15, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 18, Document 451. Also CIA Information Report IN38179, August 15, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹¹⁷CIA Information Report IN40152, August 17, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹¹⁸Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 219, August 10, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 429.

¹¹⁹Embassy Bangkok to State, Telegram No. 221, August 11, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 783-784.

soon as possible to Savannakhet.¹²⁰ Three landing craft were being sent up the Mekong by the PEO for the planned operation.¹²¹ General Phoumi also enlisted the support of the commanders of the four of the country's five military regions outside Vientiane and appealed to all military to rally to him and guaranteed to pay their pay. On August 15, he announced the establishment of a Counter Coup d'Etat Committee, which he said had been authorized by Somsanith. But Somsanith's resignation at approximately the same time left this committee in legal limbo.

In Washington, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who were more concerned with the fate of the royal army than with constitutional procedure, met on August 17 and recommended that a memorandum be sent to the Secretary of State urging support for General Phoumi.¹²² The JCS met again on August 19 and urged immediate and continuing aid to him.¹²³ The hasty acceptance of General Phoumi's "requirements" by the U.S. military without any recorded State Department objection shows to what degree the Pentagon assumed the leading role in American policy-making in Laos in the aftermath of Kong Le's coup d'état.

Civil War

Wanting to avoid civil war, Souvanna Phouma flew to Savannakhet on August 23,¹²⁴ and proposed that General Phoumi and he convoke the entire Assembly in Luang Prabang on August 29. There, the deputies would invest a new government in which Phoumi would have a place. The general accepted. A new government with Souvanna Phouma as prime minister and Phoumi as deputy prime minister and minister of interior was formed on August 30¹²⁵ and sworn in on August 31. General Phoumi announced the dissolution of his Counter Coup d'Etat Committee.¹²⁶ This might have averted civil war

¹²⁰Memorandum for Gates, August 12, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 437.

¹²¹CHPEO Laos to CINCPAC, Message PEO-OPT 2309, August 18, 1960, in National Archives.

¹²²"The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed that the United States should support General Phoumi." Rear Admiral F. J. Blouin, "Note to Control Division," August 17, 1960, in National Archives.

¹²³Rear Admiral F. J. Blouin, "Note to Control Division," August 19, 1960, in National Archives.

¹²⁴CIA Information Report IN42184, August 23, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹²⁵CIA Information Reports IN45326 and IN45399, August 30, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹²⁶Embassy to State, Telegram No. 446, August 31, 1960, in National Archives. Also CHPEO to CINCPAC, PEO-OPT 2425, September 1, 1960, in National Archives.

but for the fact that Kong Le took fright and at noon the same day made a radio broadcast protesting the presence of the general in the cabinet.¹²⁷ Souvanna Phouma convinced him to change his mind, which he did "for the sake of peace and reconciliation" on September 1.¹²⁸ For reasons that have still not been satisfactorily explained, however, the general refused at the last minute to make the journey to Vientiane, and returned to his base at Savannakhet instead. On September 5, he reactivated his Counter Coup d'Etat Committee, and the following week announced the formation of Revolutionary Committee headed by Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, but in fact under General Phoumi's control.

Disregarding the king's action in naming Souvanna Phouma to head a new government and the investiture of the latter by the National Assembly, disregarding the advice of its own ambassador in Laos who warned as early as August 11 of the dangers of U.S. encouragement for overt Thai support for General Phoumi,¹²⁹ the United States was now launched on a course of dealing with a rebel general on a separate but equal footing with the royal government. The United States was thus not only in the position of supplying one section of the royal army against another, but also of fomenting a civil war between two factions of the non-Communists, because General Phoumi's aims did not end with putting down a mutiny by a few hundred men. He hungered for political power. Political power, and the personal pecuniary gain that went with it in the Laos of 1960, were what the general was aiming for. He had been laying the groundwork carefully all these years, cultivating the right contacts, first of all with the Thais, but also importantly in the U.S. military and the CIA.

General Phoumi put his American radio transmitter¹³⁰ to immediate use broadcasting propaganda against Kong Le, whom he called a Communist, a tactic mainly directed to his Thai and American patrons, who justified their largesse on the grounds that General Phoumi was holding the royal army together to fight the Pathet Lao. In fact, General Phoumi did not take a single action against the Pathet Lao between August and December 1960 while he was receiving lavish American aid. He was not interested in chasing Pathet Lao guerrilla squads in the mountains of Sam Neua, and focused all his energy on preparing his campaign to recapture Vientiane. One of his first actions was to capture Paksane on the river road to Vientiane.

¹²⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 439, August 31, 1960, in National Archives. Also CIA Information Report IN45886, August 31, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹²⁸Embassy to State, Telegram No. 462, September 4, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 19, Document 509.

¹²⁹Embassy to State, Telegram No. 254, August 11, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 431.

¹³⁰Joint Chiefs of Staff to State, Telegram No. 1022254Z, August 11, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 17, Document 432.

The Pathet Lao, for their part, were content to watch the situation carefully, looking for the opportunities it offered them to exploit. They did not initiate attacks against the garrisons of the royal army, but kept the latter tightly bottled up. Their propaganda maintained a militant line against Phoumi's rebel group. In a radio statement, Souphanouvong declared his full support for Souvanna Phouma's policies.¹³¹ The prime minister reciprocated, and invited Souphanouvong to come to Vientiane for discussions.¹³²

The confused situation on the non-Communist side did not help. On September 28 when Kong Le dropped a handful of paratroopers near Sam Neua in order to explain the situation to the 1,500-man garrison, which was in principle loyal to Souvanna Phouma, rumors that the garrison's officers, some of whom had been in contact with Savannakhet, might be cashiered created a panic. The garrison abandoned the town, which was immediately occupied by the Pathet Lao, accompanied by their North Vietnamese advisers from Group 959.¹³³ The Pathet Lao administration headed by Thao Ma was re-established. The withdrawing column surrendered its arms to the Pathet Lao near Muang Peun on October 2.

In mid-September, two companies of Kong Le's paratroopers routed the two battalions of General Phoumi's advance guard from their position at Paksane and installed a defensive line on the north bank of the Nam Kading. Souvanna Phouma's government was accepted as the legal government of Laos by the United States, as it was by Britain, France and every other country. Brown joined the other Western ambassadors in the capital to support the prime minister against his enemies, overt and covert. General Phoumi's request to use the Séno air base was rejected by the French ambassador; its commander was ordered to defend the base by force if necessary to deny its use by any forces other than those of the legal government.¹³⁴ General Phoumi rebuffed Brown's overtures to him to give up his plan and return to the government. He replied that he feared for his safety in Vientiane.¹³⁵ Parsons sent Brown a long message intended to dampen what he saw as the ambassador's

¹³¹CIA Information Report IN42738, August 24, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹³²CIA Information Report IN47587, September 3, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹³³Phaibin Phonphachan, interview by Joseph J. Zasloff, Sayaboury, June 8, 1967.

¹³⁴Embassy to State, Telegram No. 298, August 16, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 18, Document 454.

¹³⁵Embassy to State, Telegram No. 502, September 10, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 836-838. Also Foreign Service Despatch 86, September 27, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 20, Document 541.

favoritism toward Souvanna Phouma.¹³⁶ In Luang Prabang, King Savang Vatthana temporized, hoping to bring the military leaders together at least in a united stand against the Communists, leaving a political solution to later; he then retreated into a black mood of disgust with all concerned.¹³⁷

The Parsons Mission (October 1960)

At this juncture, the State Department and Joint Chiefs of Staff, who since August 12 had been meeting repeatedly in Room 2C923 of the Pentagon Building to discuss the ongoing crisis, decided to send a high-level mission to see if differences between their representatives in Vientiane and Savannakhet could not be resolved. The idea of sending the mission may have been precipitated by the announcement in Vientiane of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Laos and the Soviet Union, and attendant rumors of a large Soviet aid grant to Laos. This last, if it materialized, would of course remove an "asset" from American policy-making in that Laos had heretofore been completely dependent on American aid.

The mission was to consist of Parsons, Assistant Secretary of Defense John N. Irwin, and Admiral Riley from CINCPAC. It was put together so hurriedly that Parsons, recalled from leave in Massachusetts, got on the plane for Southeast Asia without even the benefit of catching up on his papers.¹³⁸ In advance of this mission, a joint State-JCS meeting had formulated a set of demands to be made of Souvanna Phouma, including that he desist from negotiations with the Pathet Lao; that he move the seat of government "at least temporarily" from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, where he would be "out of danger of the Kong Le threat" (sic); and take all feasible steps to ensure that Kong Le "desist immediately from any threatening gesture or carrying out of hostilities against Savannakhet" (sic).¹³⁹ Among those who expressed astonishment at this fantastic set of demands were the British and Australian ambassadors in Washington, who pointed out that removing Souvanna Phouma to

¹³⁶State to Embassy, Telegram No. 320, September 18, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 851-853.

¹³⁷Embassy to State, Telegrams No. 593, September 22, 1960, and No. 683, October 6, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 860-861 and 883-886. See also CIA Information Report IN23981, October 7, 1960. in Eisenhower Library.

¹³⁸J. Graham Parsons, recorded interview by Dennis O'Brien, August 22, 1969, p. 14, John F. Kennedy Library, Oral History Program, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹³⁹State to Embassy, Telegram No. 384, October 7, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 886-888. The date of the above telegram is given in the published volume as October 8, but it appears the editor has confused this meeting in Gates' office with one the following day in Dillon's office. The original copy of Telegram No. 384 bears a draft date of October 7. The announcement of establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union was made on October 7.

Luang Prabang would only leave Kong Le more open to Pathet Lao influence, etc., etc.¹⁴⁰ In the event, the prime minister was to accept none of these demands.

The State Department had not bothered to ascertain the prime minister's views on the buildup of General Phoumi that had been going on since August 11. Now, however, in a letter to Ambassador Brown on October 8, Souvanna Phouma requested a clarification of the U.S. position, particularly with respect to the furnishing of military aid. In spite of efforts at secrecy, so much was known about the military aid the Pentagon and the CIA were furnishing that Brown was in a delicate position. Souvanna Phouma pointed out that no legal government could finance a rebellion against it. Furthermore, the imposition of such conditions would mean the alienation of Lao sovereignty.¹⁴¹ Souvanna Phouma opened negotiations with the Pathet Lao on October 11;¹⁴² but he was in an extremely weak position, much weaker than in 1957, in facing the same set of Pathet Lao demands. The coup and General Phoumi's foreign-assisted and illegal rebellion had given the secret Lao People's Party an unprecedented opportunity to burrow deeper than ever behind the nationalist mantle afforded by the NLHS.

On October 12 Souvanna Phouma received the Parsons mission at his office.¹⁴³ He proceeded to give an indictment of the provocative errors committed by his successors after formation of the first coalition, and said the only course for Laos was to implement the 1957 agreements before the Pathet Lao presented even greater demands.¹⁴⁴ The preliminary meeting on October 11 had been to discuss his proposals with respect to a supervised truce and the re-establishment of the royal government's authority in Sam Neua. As for General Phoumi, Souvanna Phouma said there was nothing to discuss, that he had only to acknowledge the authority of the royal government. He did not know what Phoumi wanted. If he were a real nationalist, why did he try to divide the country even further thus serving the interests of the anti-national elements? He suspected General Phoumi might have some secret agreement with Sarit of which both he and the United States remained ignorant. Parsons replied that the United States had stressed to all its friends the importance of the unity of Laos, and thought that Sarit understood this and had acted in a very restrained manner. Parsons said he doubted the existence of a secret agreement between Phoumi and

¹⁴⁰State to Embassy. Telegram No. 389. October 8, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21. Document 558.

¹⁴¹CIA Information Report, IN24832, October 9, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹⁴²CIA Information Report IN25776, October 11, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹⁴³CIA Information Report IN26926, October 13, 1960, in Eisenhower Library.

¹⁴⁴Embassy to State. Telegram No. 729. October 11, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, pp. 895-897.

Sarit.¹⁴⁵

Ambassador Brown was left to patch together an understanding about the military aid to General Phoumi as best he could while the Parsons mission continued its whirlwind tour. In response to the prime minister's observation that if General Phoumi would simply acknowledge the authority of the legal government then he, Souvanna Phouma, would have the assurance that the American arms would not be used against him, Brown said "We would use our influence to fullest and we could, we thought, assure compliance."¹⁴⁶ This was surely to stretch things to the limit. Souvanna Phouma accepted this arrangement on October 19 on the condition, as Brown notified the Department, that the aid should not be used against the royal government.¹⁴⁷

At the State Department it was beginning to dawn on those running Laos policy in Parsons' absence on leave and travel to Southeast Asia that the awkward predicament in which continued aid to General Phoumi had placed the United States might be eased by some action in that quarter. It seemed to the Department's officers that if General Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum could be persuaded to dissolve their Revolutionary Committee, which had no legal standing under the Lao constitution, General Phoumi could be represented as receiving the aid on behalf of the royal army rather than as leader of an overtly rebel group determined to overthrow the constitutional government. This might make a big difference and give some substance to Ambassador Brown's painfully arrived-at understanding with the prime minister. Accordingly, getting General Phoumi and Boun Oum to dissolve their Revolutionary Committee was one of the tasks identified in a memorandum from John M. Steeves, acting in Parsons' absence, to Under Secretary C. Douglas Dillon on October 16.¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, Steeves did not get around to sending out instructions to the field until October 17, Washington time, by which time Phoumi had already been notified of U.S. policy toward him. "As you know, we are urging Phoumi strongly to dissolve the 'Revolutionary Committee.' We believe he will do so," Steeves cabled the Embassy in

¹⁴⁵Embassy to State, Telegram No. 742, October 14, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 568. See also Foreign Service Despatch 101, October 18, 1960, in National Archives.

¹⁴⁶Embassy to State, Telegram No. 765, October 17, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 576.

¹⁴⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 787, October 19, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 22, Document 583.

¹⁴⁸Memorandum from Steeves to Under Secretary Dillon, October 16, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 574.

Vientiane, with an information copy to Bangkok.¹⁴⁹

Phoumi Gets the Green Light (October 17, 1960)

This was not the message General Phoumi received from U.S. officials on October 17. Irwin and Riley met him and Boun Oum and their CIA political liaison officers for almost two hours (Parsons having remained in Bangkok) in Ubon. According to the official report of the conversation, the words "Revolutionary Committee" were not mentioned once.¹⁵⁰ General Phoumi opened the conversation with the usual boilerplate, thanking Irwin and Riley for generous U.S. aid and expressing the hopes of "free Laos" for continuing assistance against communism. Later in the conversation, after outlining his latest plan, General Phoumi made his usual assessment that Pathet Lao attacks threatened every region of the country. His troops were ready for combat. His needs, which he had already given to U.S. representatives, were reasonable and austere.

General Phoumi's speech was persuasive to his visitors. After their formal conversation was finished, Riley took the general aside and told him that the United States had completely lost confidence in Souvanna Phouma and was backing Phoumi to go back and clean up the situation. Irwin similarly told the general that while for the moment the United States was only supporting Phoumi in building up his defenses, in the long run the United States was supporting him all the way.¹⁵¹ The message was not lost. Any thought of returning to Vientiane except by force of arms vanished.

Thus, with the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs in Bangkok, having taken "that particular day to attend to other business,"¹⁵² two military representatives upcountry had made a major and open-ended United States commitment to a rebel general's plans for overthrowing the legal government of a country on the borders of China and North Vietnam by force of arms. I have so far found no evidence of any written authorization of this commitment.

It is possible that in their conversations during the long journey from Washington to

¹⁴⁹State to Embassy, Telegram No. 420, October 17, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 577. What Steeves expected Brown to do with this information remains a mystery. The unreality of American attempts to deal with a skilled manipulator who outwitted his American friends shows through clearly in all the exchanges during this episode.

¹⁵⁰Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 686, October 18, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 578.

¹⁵¹Embassy to State, Telegram No. 883, November 8, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, p. 940.

¹⁵²Parsons oral history, op. cit., p. 16.

Southeast Asia, or perhaps more immediately following their discouraging talk with Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane, Irwin and Riley gained the impression that Parsons was supportive of making such a commitment to General Phoumi, in which case Parsons' absence from the actual meeting in Ubon could be construed as dictated by Parsons' wish to preserve face and have the message delivered by those who had been dealing with General Phoumi on a day-to-day basis. In other words, the commitment was to be made to appear to be no commitment, but instead just another item of routine business among friends. Parsons later passed the whole episode off as a figment of General Phoumi's imagination.¹⁵³ Steeves' tardiness in focusing on the Revolutionary Committee and its dissolution undoubtedly contributed to the turn of events. In any case, the revelation of the commitment, whether real or imagined by General Phoumi, came as a complete surprise to Ambassador Brown.¹⁵⁴

The slant that Parsons put on the Irwin-Riley visit in the cable he addressed to the Department the previous day, however, was quite different. It smacked of a difficult decision to be made, rather than an approval of the course events were inexorably taking under General Phoumi's stubborn direction:

We have agreed they should tell Phoumi that if he should receive proposal from Souvanna for reconciliation, he must respond constructively. Unity in face of enemy is now overriding consideration in Laos and his attitude toward such proposal will show once and for all whether he is willing to put country above self-interest. Should he not take immediate constructive attitude US would at this juncture be forced reconsider its whole attitude toward him.¹⁵⁵

The most charitable explanation that can be put on this is that Irwin and Riley chose simply to ignore Parsons' terms of reference communicated to the Department. Efforts subsequently by a Foreign Service officer to get General Phoumi to dissolve the Revolutionary Committee proved unavailing, not surprisingly. General Phoumi's reaction was "uniformly negative," he reported on October 24.¹⁵⁶ Any proposals from Vientiane

¹⁵³See "Historiographical Note," below.

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

¹⁵⁵Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 676, October 16, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 573. Note that the terms of reference place the onus of taking the initiative for a reconciliation on the prime minister; this is typical of the whole of the U.S. dealings with General Phoumi.

¹⁵⁶Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegrams Nos. 735 and 746, October 25 and 26, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 22, Documents 591 and 598. The Foreign Service officer was Thomas J. Corcoran, who had been the last American consul in Hanoi and had watched the Viet Minh enter the city in October 1954. He cannot have been hoodwinked

would henceforth be dismissed out of hand.

General Phoumi's preparations for seizing Vientiane were known to his PEO advisers and his CIA political liaison officers. Thus, Brown had to choose his words to Souvanna Phouma carefully. "I [Brown] have played fairly and openly with him [Souvanna Phouma] to the utmost that I could."¹⁵⁷ "Situation still complicated by fact that we have given our word that we would do our best insure that no supplies given Phoumi would be used to attack Souvanna [Phouma] and that in reliance on this promise Souvanna [Phouma] has allowed us build up Phoumi's strength. We have loyally lived up to our word thus far."¹⁵⁸ Brown was also determined not to be cowed by other U.S. agencies operating in Laos; when he learned General Phoumi had been given funds by the PEO to pay his troops without his having been consulted,¹⁵⁹ he protested immediately and vigorously.¹⁶⁰

Nevertheless, Washington feared that Souvanna Phouma would bring charges before the United Nations that the United States was aiding a rebel movement in its effort to overthrow a duly constituted member government.¹⁶¹ But Souvanna Phouma proved to be too much of a gentleman for that. American officials were particularly worried about a bill of particulars compiled by Colonel Hugh Toye, the British military attaché and an expert on artillery fire, who detected the hand of General Phoumi's American military advisers in engagements against Kong Le, a violation of the PEO's regulations prohibiting its advisers from taking part in military actions.¹⁶² Parsons appears at this stage to have become

by General Phoumi's professions of anti-Communist action and the wide gap that separated these from any visible moves against the Pathet Lao.

¹⁵⁷Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram 727, October 23, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 22, Document 588.

¹⁵⁸Embassy to State, Telegram No. 932, November 16, 1960, in National Archives.

¹⁵⁹Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 854, November 13, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 23, Document 625.

¹⁶⁰Embassy to State, Telegram No. 917, November 13, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 23, Document 628. See also the memorandum from Steeves to Under Secretary Livingston T. Merchant, October 24, 1960, which expresses fear that the prime minister might discover troop payments about which Brown had not been consulted. (FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 22, Document 590.)

¹⁶¹State to Embassy, Telegram No. 399, October 10, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 21, Document 562.

¹⁶²Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1143, December 13, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 24, Document 672. See also Bangkok Embassy to State,

disabused of his confidence in General Phoumi and busied himself in Washington with trying to manipulate the Lao politicians to form a government that conformed to his conception of a pro-Western neutral Laos.¹⁶³

Stimulated to action at long last, General Phoumi, after forcing the garrison at Luang Prabang with its commander General Ouan Ratikoun to rally to him and capturing another general, Amkha Soukhavong, at Xieng Khouang, launched his campaign on the Nam Kading on November 21. Kong Le's two Neutralist companies pulled back, then sprang a strong counterattack on November 23. General Phoumi's troops fell back with serious losses. Kong Le's troops distinguished themselves bravely, holding ground against a force five times their size, equipped with heavier firepower, enjoying sanctuary in Thailand, and advised by American officers. Many were wounded by artillery fire. They were under constant threat of being cut off from behind by General Phoumi's American landing craft, which, like the CAT aircraft placed at his disposal, enjoyed absolute superiority. They did this without any help from the Pathet Lao, Souvanna Phouma being unwilling to give substance to the propaganda Phoumi's radio was pouring out.

But the general moved up reinforcements and attacked again six days later, this time supported by artillery fire from the Thai side of the river, forcing Kong Le's four companies to retreat. On December 2, 16 weeks after General Phoumi had promised Sarit and Unger to retake Vientiane by a lightning parachute drop, his troops began crossing the Nam Kading, the last natural obstacle on the road to Vientiane.

The Battle of Vientiane (December 13-16, 1960)

The capital was now bracing for General Phoumi's attack. A last-minute and temporary switch of sides by Colonel Kouprasith Abhay, the commander of the Vientiane military region headquartered at Camp Chinaimo on the eastern outskirts, was quickly neutralized by Kong Le, but tension heightened. The Pathet Lao delegation hurriedly left town. More of Souvanna Phouma's ministers disappeared and reappeared. The situation was becoming ungovernable. Seeing the battle as inevitable, Souvanna Phouma, having delegated his powers to the military, accompanied by his ministers Boun Om (Boun Oum's nephew), Tiao Sisoumang Sisaleumsak, and Inpeng Suriyadhay flew to Phnom Penh on the evening of December 9 to seek a neutral ground. The following morning Quinim Pholsena, the minister of information whom Souvanna Phouma had left behind, and Lieutenant Deuane Sunnalath, Kong Le's deputy, flew to Hanoi on a mission to seek Soviet and North Vietnamese military aid. This aid started to arrive the following day in the form of six 105-

Telegram No. 1101. December 23, 1960. in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 25, Document 689.

¹⁶³State to Embassy, Telegram No. 502, November 10, 1960. in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 23, Document 620.

mm howitzers from North Vietnam's stocks of American equipment captured from the French, unloaded at Vientiane's Wattay airport from Soviet Ilyushin-14s flown by Soviet crews.

Thirty-eight deputies of the National Assembly who had sought out the Revolutionary Committee in Savannahket over the preceding weeks voted no confidence in Souvanna Phouma's government on December 11.¹⁶⁴ The king accepted the vote as legal the next day, when royal ordinances dismissing the Souvanna Phouma government and giving powers provisionally to the Revolutionary Committee were signed by the king.¹⁶⁵ A further ordinance nominating a provisional government under Prince Boun Oum, who acted as front man for Phoumi (the king had scruples about naming a general to be prime minister), was signed on December 14.¹⁶⁶ The new regime was recognized without delay by Thailand and the United States.

Not all the allies of the United States were so pleased, however. Lord Selkirk, the British Commissioner General for Southeast Asia, expressed the view to the American ambassador in Bangkok that the government formed by General Phoumi was in reality a military government unrepresentative of popular opinion and in power only because of U.S. arms and support. It had no hope of establishing any degree of order or security within the country. A strong Communist reaction could be expected.¹⁶⁷ Another sign of the frittering away of Western unity was the French decision to disband the French Military Mission, which had been in Laos since 1954.

Kong Le was now defending a capital without a government. General Phoumi began his attack on December 13 at 1:15 p.m. Artillery and tank fire echoed through the deserted streets. From his command post near the airport Kong Le had positioned his men at key points on the outskirts, intending merely to fight a delaying action to allow the safe evacuation to the north of his men and their equipment in the best possible order. The regional command post of the Pathet Lao, situated at Nakhang 60 kilometers north of the capital, disposed of three guerrilla groups but did not take part in the battle. The massive display of firepower by General Phoumi's troops against an adversary that consisted of small mobile groups with light mortars was responsible for killing 400 to 500 civilians in the town, mostly Vietnamese residents, and wounding another 1,000 to 1,500. Kong Le's men lost 17 killed. General Phoumi's armor rolled into town on December 16.

¹⁶⁴Text of motion in Foreign Service Despatch No. 254, April 4, 1961, Enclosure 2, p. 2, in National Archives.

¹⁶⁵State Circular Telegram No. 878, December 19, 1960, in National Archives.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Bangkok Embassy to State. Telegram No. 1079, December 21, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement. Fiche 25, Document 685.

Kong Le retreated slowly northward up the road toward Luang Prabang. General Phoumi did not pursue, in spite of efforts by Sarit, who met him at Nong Khai immediately after the battle, to stiffen his resolve.¹⁶⁸ As Kong Le moved northward, his column received parachute drops from Soviet Ilyushin-14s of badly needed supplies--rice, salt, sugar, blankets, light arms, ammunition, and radios. With new recruits his ranks had swelled to 800 to 1,200 men. On December 23, at Phone Hong about 60 kilometers north of the capital, he received a visit from Kaysone, who had come in a light aircraft to settle the details about distribution of Soviet aid and coordination of Neutralist and Pathet Lao troops in future operations against Phoumi's troops. On January 1, Kong Le's troops took control of the Plain of Jars and Khang Khay after skirmishing with some of the 9,000 Phoumist troops and 9,000 Hmong guerrillas in the vicinity and recovering large quantities of supplies. The following day the Neutralists occupied Xieng Khouang. The PEO advisers with the Phoumist troops were evacuated from the Phong Savan airfield, which became the staging area for Soviet planes flying supplies to the Neutralists and Pathet Lao from Hanoi.

Also on January 1, a CIA agent and Thai paramilitary police advisers made contact in the mountains ringing the Plain with the leader of the Hmong guerrillas, Colonel Vang Pao. Vang Pao requested arms--and quickly. Would the Hmong fight? asked the American, concerned that the arms might fall into the hands of the Communists. Yes, answered Vang Pao, all 7,000 volunteers among them. They needed the arms in three days. After that, the North Vietnamese would attack and they would have to fall back. American airdrops of arms from stocks in Okinawa began in three days, signaling the beginning of a heroic Hmong resistance.¹⁶⁹

Souvanna Phouma, ever the stickler for constitutionality, affirmed in a press interview in Cambodia on December 31 that although he was still the legal prime minister he would resign at once if Boun Oum's government were validated in accordance with the Constitution.¹⁷⁰ When 41 deputies of the National Assembly were convoked by the king and voted confidence in Boun Oum's government on January 4, Souvanna Phouma maintained that the king was not acting on his own free will but simply accepting a fait accompli.¹⁷¹

Quinim and Tiao Sisaleumsak, two ministers who had fled Vientiane, set up a rump

¹⁶⁸Bangkok Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1033, December 17, 1960, in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 25, Document 678. General Phoumi's response to Sarit's exhortation was, as usual, to ask for more equipment, intervention by Thai forces, etc.

¹⁶⁹See "Historiographical Note," below.

¹⁷⁰Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1238, January 2, 1961, quoting Dommen interview, in National Archives.

¹⁷¹Phnom Penh Embassy to State, Telegram No. 814, January 8, 1961, in National Archives.

government at Khang Khay and urged Souvanna Phouma to join them. Souvanna Phouma, however, was in no hurry. In an interview published on January 20, he was bitter about his nemesis, Parsons. "What I shall never forgive the United States for is the fact that it betrayed me, that it double-crossed me and my government," he said. Parsons, he added, "understood nothing about Asia and nothing about Laos. The Assistant Secretary of State is the most nefarious and reprehensible of men. He is the ignominious architect of disastrous American policy toward Laos. He and others like him are responsible for the recent shedding of Lao blood."¹⁷²

General Phoumi's Battlefield Reverses

The early days of January saw the commitment of significant numbers of North Vietnamese troops to the fighting, exactly what Souvanna Phouma had feared. Kong Le had himself requested four battalions of North Vietnamese troops on January 7. Two of these battalions linked up with Kong Le's own forces on Route 7 and down Route 13. The third was engaged in military action at Tha Thom south of the Plain of Jars, while the fourth took up position north of the Plain.¹⁷³ One after another, they picked off outposts in Sam Neua, Xieng Khouang, and northern Vientiane province still in the hands of General Phoumi's troops. The American supply of T-6 trainer planes armed with rockets made only a marginal difference.

There was fresh thought being given, meanwhile, even as the military situation deteriorated from the U.S. point of view, to a neutral solution to the Laos crisis and at last the assumptions on which American policy in Laos had been based for seven years were being re-examined. Ambassador Brown wrote a long and thoughtful cable to Washington on January 18, proposing and discussing the merits and demerits of various schemes for neutralization.¹⁷⁴ The following day in Washington, President Eisenhower, in a meeting at the White House on his last day in office with his successor, discussed Laos at length. This was the second of two meetings between the two men and members of their staffs. At the first, held on December 6, Laos had arisen only briefly. But on January 19, Kennedy came prepared with an aide-mémoire he had dictated himself. He wanted to see Eisenhower, he wrote, to assure a harmonious transition, but also:

Secondly, because I was anxious to get some commitment from the outgoing administration as to how they would deal with Laos which they were handing to us. I thought particularly it would be helpful to have some idea as to how prepared they

¹⁷²The New York Times. January 20, 1961.

¹⁷³Kong Le, personal communication. Paris, March 21, 1974.

¹⁷⁴Embassy to State. Telegram No. 1364, January 18, 1961, in National Archives.

were for military intervention.¹⁷⁵

Eisenhower has been quoted at this meeting as saying that he would favor intervention by U.S. forces in Laos if necessary. However, the outgoing president's position was considerably more nuanced. He would have agreed in all likelihood with his Secretary of State, who opined that the United States would be obligated to use military force in Laos under the SEATO treaty if requested by the royal government. He was not asked this question directly, but he believed strongly in SEATO, having told Savang at their 1956 meeting he was working to strengthen it. But favoring unilateral U.S. action went completely against his philosophy, and would have been contrary to his judgment on previous Indochina crises. In the event, Kennedy's wish for Eisenhower's backing as he prepared to face the Laos crisis may have led him to conclude in his own mind that Eisenhower favored intervention.¹⁷⁶

Parsons and his staff were working on a plan to have the king sponsor a Neutral Nations Commission, to be made up of Burma, Cambodia, and Malaya. It seemed to be a way of getting the king involved in "saving" his country. The king, however, was an unlikely sponsor for the Commission. He had no use at all for the interference of "neutrals" in his kingdom. Nevertheless, he made the speech the Americans wanted him to make. After weeks of meetings in Washington, and an intensive diplomatic lobbying campaign that involved all but the principals, two of the proposed member states, not having been consulted beforehand, and suspicious of American motives, rejected the proposal out of hand. Thus, the American plan for the Neutral Nations Commission came to naught. It must rank as a classic diplomatic fiasco.¹⁷⁷

On February 7, Souvanna Phouma wrote to President John F. Kennedy. The letter, on paper with the letterhead "Kingdom of Laos, Presidency of the Council of Ministers," said:

"It is with deep satisfaction that I took note of your declaration to the press January 25 last, by which you informed the world that the United States under your high Administration desires 'to see Laos live in peace, become an independent country, free of all domination and that it be a non-engaged country.'

¹⁷⁵Dictated to me, Evelyn Lincoln, by President-elect Kennedy, January 19, 1961, "Eisenhower, Dwight D., January 17-December 9, 1961," President's Office Files, Kennedy Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁷⁶See "Historiographical Note," below.

¹⁷⁷The King's speech proposing the plan was written in Washington by Christian A. Chapman, the Department of State's desk officer for Laos. (Brown oral history, *op. cit.*, p. 19.)

"In your Presidential Inaugural Address, you also declared that the new American policy is to defend at all costs liberty and independence of weak countries, and to combat tyranny, poverty, sickness and war.

"These two statements, I can assure you, Mr. President, are approved by my compatriots who have been awaiting them so desperately since the 1954 Geneva Conference."

He went on to say that it was unthinkable that a people as peaceful and as fervently Buddhist as the Lao should wish to become Communist. But it was necessary to help Laos conserve its ancient traditions and the monarchical regime by restoring peace and security. This the "Savannakhet group" was not doing. To wish to suppress rebellion by force of arms was to sow the seed of communism. He urged a return to a political settlement along the lines that had been negotiated in 1957.¹⁷⁸ Later that month he paid a visit to Khang Khay, and then embarked on a tour of world capitals to firm up support for his government among Communist and neutralist countries.

Parsons, intent on his Neutral Nations Commission project, had quietly pigeonholed Souvanna Phouma's letter of February 7 to President Kennedy, which had been dutifully translated by the Embassy in Phnom Penh and forwarded through State Department channels.¹⁷⁹ Consequently, it was not until the end of March that the new Administration at last made contact with this homegrown Lao nationalist. When Souvanna Phouma and Kennedy's roving ambassador, W. Averell Harriman, met for tea at an Indian official's house in New Delhi at the end of March, Souvanna Phouma recorded in his diary "I believe I made a good impression on him."¹⁸⁰

In view of the alternatives among the major actors in Laos in the early days of January 1961, Souvanna Phouma was indeed standing out as General Phoumi's troops suffered one reverse after another and Boun Oum's government proved it exercised little or no authority outside Vientiane and the major towns. Brown was called back to Washington for consultation. On February 3, Kennedy called him into the Oval Office.

Among the first questions he asked me was, "What kind of people are these people: Souvanna and Souphanouvong and Phoumi and the King and Kong Le?" And my heart leapt up when he asked that question, since I had long since come to the

¹⁷⁸Phnom Penh Embassy to State, Telegram No. 1007, February 9, 1961, in Papers of McGeorge Bundy, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁷⁹Parsons memorandum to Walt Rostow, April 27, 1961, in Bundy Papers.

¹⁸⁰Souvanna Phouma diaries, Box 1, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

conclusion that the mistakes in our policy were fundamentally based upon a misjudgment of the characters and abilities and motivations and personalities of this small group of men. It seemed to me the President was going right to the heart of the matter when he said, "What makes them tick?"...

I told him that--I can't remember really in detail, but I told him essentially that I thought that there was only one person in Laos who could be a unifying force in the country and I thought that that was Souvanna; that I thought we had pretty well emasculated him by our policies, that this had been wrong; I thought General Phoumi was greatly overrated, that he'd never been anywhere near a battlefield. He wasn't all that good a general, and he was a poor politician. I thought it was a terrible thing to be in a position where Phoumi was determining our policy and not the United States. I said I thought we'd misjudged Kong Le, that this was a disgruntled soldier, but a patriot, not a communist; that the King was a total zero, who was interested in only one thing, which was keeping on the throne.¹⁸¹

Parsons was finally packed off to be ambassador to Sweden, where he could do no more damage to the interests of the United States in Laos.

The Pathet Lao Lever Their Battlefield Gains into Political Capital

Tha Thom fell on January 18. In central Laos, Laksao, Nhommarath, Mahaxay, vital gateposts on the roads from North Vietnam where the French had skirmished with General Giap's troops eight years previously, and Kam Keut, where U.S. Special Forces advisers with Phoumi's troops, now in uniform, identified the Vietnamese assault troops eye to eye,¹⁸² fell in rapid succession during March to the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese "volunteer troops."¹⁸³ A Pathet Lao soldier at Kam Keut also later provided an account of the North Vietnamese.¹⁸⁴

Phoumi's troops on the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, ill-led by their officers, fell back in confusion. The entire length of the road from the Sala Phou Khoun junction south in the direction of Vientiane as far as Vang Vieng was in North Vietnamese-Pathet Lao hands by mid-March. A Pathet Lao soldier later provided an eyewitness

¹⁸¹Brown oral history, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

¹⁸²Lieutenant General Andrew J. Boyle, recorded interview by Lieutenant Colonel F. G. Walton, March 27, 1971, Section 3, p. 15, Senior Officers Oral History Program, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

¹⁸³War Experiences Recapitulation Committee, op. cit., p. 77.

¹⁸⁴Lt. Kham Tong. interview by Paul F. Langer, Savannakhet, May 1, 1967.

corroboration of the North Vietnamese presence in the attack on Vang Vieng.¹⁸⁵ The Embassy, after long and patient effort, had succeeded in breaking the radio code used by North Vietnamese military units in Laos, and so had good intelligence of their movements.¹⁸⁶ On April 22, an American advisor, Captain Walter Moon, was captured north of Vang Vieng.

On March 23, in the midst of the Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese offensive, a somber President Kennedy addressed the nation on television.

We are faced with a clear and one-sided threat of a change in the internationally agreed position of Laos. This threat runs counter to the will of the Laotian people, who wish only to be independent and neutral. It is posed rather by the military operations of internal dissident elements directed from outside the country. This is what must end if peace is to be achieved in Southeast Asia.¹⁸⁷

The Russians, soon followed by the Chinese and the North Vietnamese, established their embassy at Khang Khay. The Soviets had, by reason of the insistent demand by all the Communist states for a reconvening of the Geneva Conference to deal with the Laos crisis, assumed a position at the center of the diplomatic stage as co-chairmen of the conference. The Soviet and British foreign ministers accordingly issued a statement on April 24 convoking such a conference, accompanied by an appeal for a ceasefire in Laos, which was the main United States concern.

The government in Vientiane lost no time in suing for a truce. On April 28, it broadcast a ceasefire order to its troops and a call for truce talks near Ban Vang Khie, a point between the two forces on the road to Luang Prabang. The Neutralists had established a radio station at Xieng Khouang, which later proved important for distinguishing nuanced differences in their negotiating position from the Pathet Lao. Radio Xieng Khouang now broadcast a call for a meeting in the village of Ban Namone, further north. Like Kaesong in the Korean War, Ban Namone was in Communist-held territory. The radio instructed the Vientiane government to send an emissary to meet a Pathet Lao emissary near Ban Hin Heup south of Ban Namone. At this first meeting under a white flag on May 1, a provisional local ceasefire was put into effect. Two days later, a formal ceasefire order to the Pathet Lao was signed by General Khamtay Siphandon and one to the Neutralists by Kong Le.

¹⁸⁵2nd Lt. Bounlai Xainhachit, interview by Paul F. Langer, Sayaboury, June 16, 1967.

¹⁸⁶Lieutenant General John A. Heintges, recorded interview by Major Jack A. Pellicci, 1974, pp. 592-595, Senior Officers Oral History Program, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

¹⁸⁷Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 214.

With the arrival at the bamboo schoolhouse at Ban Namone of higher-level representatives on each side, the truce talks took on their definitive form. The four groups--the Vientiane government, the Neutralists, the Pathet Lao, and the ICC sat around a square made by four long tables that touched at the corners. The Neutralists, whose delegation head Pheng Phongsavan acted as chairman of the meetings, sat facing the entrance, with the Vientiane delegation headed by General Sing Rattanasamay on their right and the Pathet Lao delegation headed by Nouhak Phoumsavan on their left. The ICC contingent, which arrived on May 11, made up the fourth side of the square. A royal Lao flag hung on the wall behind Pheng's chair. Formal military and political talks began on May 14, with each delegation reaffirming the ceasefire; the Neutralists signed their copy of this document in the name of "the royal government whose Prime Minister is His Royal Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma," the Vientiane delegation in the name of "the royal government whose Prime Minister is His Highness Prince Boun Oum," and the Pathet Lao in the name of "the delegation of the Neo Lao Hak Sat." The Vientiane delegation placed top priority on discussion of making the ceasefire effective, while the other side refused to discuss the ceasefire and insisted on discussing formation of a coalition government immediately.¹⁸⁸

The delegations flew in for the daily meetings by helicopter. The meetings began at 10:30, and lasted usually until mid-afternoon, when the delegations flew home. Newsmen carrying their box lunches from the Hotel Constellation in Vientiane sought the cool shade of nearby trees as refuge from the 100-degree heat. Observers noted how the emissaries exchanged family and other news in a convivial atmosphere. But the bargaining would be tough.

The international conference on Laos was scheduled to open at Geneva on May 12. Disagreement over seating representatives from Laos delayed the opening. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko insisted that since there were three Lao parties discussing the ceasefire at Ban Namone, there should be three Lao parties seated at the conference. This was an issue that had not been agreed to in advance, and, as the new Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, noted in a cable to Washington, was one loaded with political implications. The United States had only accepted an invitation to the conference to meet with 14 nations, of which Laos is one.¹⁸⁹ The problem was, as a cable from the Department pointed out, the Communists had posed the seating issue in such a way as to leave the United States no grounds for making the case that the Communists were not in favor of a neutral Laos.¹⁹⁰

After receiving a somewhat testy message from Kennedy expressing frustration with the British, Canadians and Indians, among others, for leaving the United States isolated in facing Gromyko, Rusk signified agreement to a face-saving formula whereby the issue of

¹⁸⁸Foreign Service Despatch No. 306, June 13, 1961, in National Archives.

¹⁸⁹Geneva to State, Secto 83, May 12, 1961, in National Archives.

¹⁹⁰State to Geneva, Tosec 120, May 15, 1961, in National Archives.

Lao representation would be held in abeyance pending formation of an agreed government delegation, the conference would be allowed to go forward, and each party could go on recognizing the Lao government of its choosing. If the United States decided to withdraw from the conference altogether, in Kennedy's words, it would be "at the appropriate moment and on an appropriate issue."¹⁹¹

In this manner, the Pathet Lao (properly speaking, the "delegation of the NLHS"), who represented no government, were seated on equal footing with the delegations representing Souvanna Phouma and Boun Oum-Phoumi. They had, in effect, been snuck in under Souvanna Phouma's coattails. But Rusk smelled a maneuver in the offing for a tripartite coalition government. Meanwhile, the manner in which the seating issue had been handled gave rise to complaints on the part of friendly governments in Vientiane, Bangkok and Saigon that the United States had been "snookered."¹⁹² The major cause of their unhappiness, however, soon became another issue--the continued violation of the shaky ceasefire and the further gains of territory by the Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese.

Into the "Hot" Cold War

The most flagrant breach of the ceasefire occurred at Padong, where Vang Pao's Meo (Hmong) had dug in since January. The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese continued to shell them after the ceasefire went into effect on May 3 and launched probing attacks. Following an artillery barrage an enemy ground attack succeeded in wresting the position from the defenders, and the Meo retreated to alternative positions. Hanoi and Moscow tried to portray the situation as one where the Meo had moved in after the ceasefire, but this was immediately denied by the United States delegation at Geneva.¹⁹³

The CIA-financed program to arm the Hmong was proving to be a surprisingly effective program. But it also created a commitment, one that was described eloquently by a political officer from the Embassy who visited Padong on May 17 and 18:

It is quite evident from the aid we have contributed to the Meo and the encouragement we have given them that there exists a very definite moral commitment between them and the United States. As members of the Lao Army we have armed them and helped them fight the Communists, which means that in any settlement which would give the Bloc a preponderant voice in Lao affairs, the Meo

¹⁹¹State to Geneva, Tosec 101, May 14, 1961, in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963. Vol. XXIV. Laos Crisis (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994), pp. 195-196.

¹⁹²Saigon harbored particularly grave doubts about the wisdom of U.S. policy in Laos. The South Vietnam National Liberation Front had been formed the previous December.

¹⁹³State to Moscow Embassy, Telegram No. 2148, June 8, 1961, in National Archives.

would be in a very dangerous position. They are aware of this, as the state of their morale testifies, and the continued declarations made to us that they depend entirely on the United States were obviously meant to be taken as requests that we do not leave them in the lurch.

The Meo are still most grateful to us, from what we could tell, and always treated us most hospitably. Vang Pao gave a sumptuous lunch for our party, considering the conditions at Ban Pa Dong, with several courses of rice, noodles, and meat, topped off with Martell and Hennessy cognac. We were seated under a leaky parachute tent in the pouring rain and got thoroughly soaked, but the cognac and ambiance were such that no one seemed to mind. Half-soused in a rain storm at five thousand feet surrounded by heavily armed Meo tribesmen in the midst of an artillery barrage may not sound like the conditions conducive to drawing politically important impressions. Nonetheless, it was evident to me that the Meo depended on the West, thoroughly detested the Communists, and needed our help. Without American support, they would have to flee or come to some sort of accommodation, but the loyal support they have given the West in resisting the advance of Communism in Southeast Asia clearly entitles them to a more favorable fate. Whether that fate can be found in Laos through fighting the Communists to a standstill at Ban Pa Dong, through re-establishing the Meo further from the Plaine des Jarres, or through such a drastic move as a transfer to Thailand, is not yet known.¹⁹⁴

At Ban Namone the deadlock over the agenda was solved by agreeing to consider the formation of a coalition government first, to be followed immediately by an examination of questions connected with the ceasefire, with the proviso that "serious incidents" could be brought up at any time and discussed. On May 26, a military subcommittee was formed to deal with ceasefire matters concurrently with political talks. The Pathet Lao insisted, however, that the military subcommittee could bring reports of ceasefire violations to the attention of the main political committee only by unanimous vote of the subcommittee.¹⁹⁵ They also began a propaganda campaign against aerial resupply of Vientiane outposts in the territory they controlled. They termed these flights violations of the ceasefire, a position on which they received some support from Indian Government legal experts.¹⁹⁶ The Pathet Lao, however, continued to object to the ICC's making any inspection missions and rebuffed an attempt by the ICC delegates to obtain from each side a map showing the positions held at the time of the ceasefire. This attitude stood in sharp contrast with the Pathet Lao's Geneva patrons' insistence on the reconvening of the ICC, again an illustration of differences between strategy and tactics on the Communist side.

¹⁹⁴Foreign Service Despatch No. 295. May 23, 1961, Enclosure 1, p. 7, in National Archives. The author was George B. Roberts.

¹⁹⁵Embassy to State. Telegram No. 2156. May 26, 1961, in National Archives.

¹⁹⁶Foreign Service Despatch No. 318, June 27, 1961, in National Archives.

In spite of the charges and counter-charges at the conferences tables in the schoolhouse, a convivial atmosphere still prevailed, although each side tried to score propaganda points. Thus, for example, the Vientiane government delegates, in response to requests from the Neutralists, carried soap, medicines, batteries, and other personal articles that were in short supply at Khang Khay to Ban Namone. The delegates also exchanged letters, and one day the Vientiane delegation even took along the son of Pheng Phongsavan so he could see his father, but that day the meeting was cancelled. Neutralist delegates confided to newsmen that they hoped for "real neutrality" and intimated that there were "difficulties" with the Pathet Lao at Khang Khay. During a break one day, Nouhak accosted the Vientiane delegates and proceeded to give them a propaganda lecture about the NLHS representing the people, while "the gentlemen of the Phoumi-Boun Oum clique" would one day pay for their crimes against the people; these statements were applauded by a small crowd of onlookers who had been gathered for the purpose by the armed Pathet Lao guards.¹⁹⁷ Such efforts at intimidation were rare, however, and in July a more relaxed atmosphere characterized by an absence of militancy surrounded the talks.¹⁹⁸

In faraway Vienna, President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev had met to discuss Laos, among other subjects, on June 3. The following exchange forms part of the record of their talks.

Referring to the Laotian question, the President said that this was of particular concern to us. While relatively unimportant from the strategic standpoint, this country was included under the protocol to the SEATO agreement in the Treaty Area, and thus we have treaty commitments in that area. The President then said that, speaking frankly, U.S. policy in that region had not always been wise. He stated that he had not been able to make a final judgment as to what the people's desires in that area are. According to our information, there are about nine or ten thousand Pathet Lao but they have two distinct advantages in our view. One is that they are for change. The President remarked that he himself is for change and that he had been elected on the basis of his advocacy of change. He then said that was not to say that if a change were to occur in Laos it would be the one the people wanted. The second advantage Pathet Lao has is the fact that they received support not only in the form of supplies, but also in the form of Viet Minh manpower, which has made them a stronger force. The problem now from a historical standpoint is to find a solution not involving the prestige or the interests of our two countries. The President recalled that last March he had said that the United States wanted a neutral and independent Laos. The USSR had said it wanted the same. The question now is of definition of these two terms, "neutral" and "independent." The President said that he believed Cambodia and Burma were neutral and independent countries and inquired what Mr.

¹⁹⁷Embassy to State, Telegram No. 2325, June 26, 1961, in National Archives.

¹⁹⁸Foreign Service Despatch No. 13, July 25, 1961, in National Archives.

Khrushchev's view on this was.

Mr. Khrushchev said that he held the same view.¹⁹⁹

Later on in their conversation, Khrushchev responded to Kennedy's statement about the involvement in the fighting of the North Vietnamese forces:

Referring to the President's remark that Viet Minh forces were involved in Laos, he said that he had no such information and that this was inaccurate. What is more accurate, and what is an actual fact, is that military action was started from Thailand by the United States.²⁰⁰

The two leaders concluded their discussion of the Laos crisis by agreeing that neither wished to see a direct confrontation between themselves in Laos.

Although it imposed a large burden on the diplomats of the 14 nations represented at Geneva and those posted elsewhere, the Laos crisis slowly worked its way toward resolution within the agreed framework, that is to say, constitution of a coalition government of the Laotian factions and international guarantees of the neutrality of Laos. As all three factions still pledged themselves to respect for the monarchy, this made resolution slightly easier. As early as July, Brown informed the king that U.S. acceptance of a coalition to include the Pathet Lao was "inevitable."²⁰¹

The diplomatic task was complicated by the need for the three Laotian princes to get together periodically to agree on principles of an internal accommodation that were required by the foreign diplomats and beyond the competence of the three Laotian delegations. Choosing meeting places involved endless exchanges and weeks of preparation; yet when these meetings took place, they inevitably were cordial. Some diplomats suspected that Prince Boun Oum was not always aware of the implications of what he had agreed to with Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong. General Phoumi often went along to make sure Boun Oum did not give the whole show away. The National Assembly in Vientiane had been excluded from any role in the settlement in a communiqué issued at the end of a three-princes' meeting in Zurich, for example. While traveling on such missions, the general kept in touch with his staff on the battlefield situation using U.S. diplomatic channels; transcribing map coordinates using the relatively primitive diplomatic communications gear of that time was not always easy, and it seemed an odd way to run a war.

¹⁹⁹Memorandum of conversation, Vienna Meeting Between the President and Chairman Khrushchev, Residence of the American Ambassador, June 3, 1961, by Alexander Akalovsky, in FRUS 1961-1963, pp. 225-230.

²⁰⁰Ibid.

²⁰¹Embassy to State, Telegram No. 5, July 3, 1961, in National Archives.

General Phoumi's penchant for mixing his private financial dealings with official business while Laotian soldiers were dying in isolated pockets resisting the attacks of the Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese added a bizarre and jarring note; he was receiving large sums of cash on his travels abroad arranged through his CIA contact in Vientiane, John F. Hasey.²⁰² Brown reported that the general was still maneuvering to involve U.S. troops in Laos to pull his chestnuts from the fire,²⁰³ in spite of his having received a blunt warning in a visit to Washington that he could not expect the administration to state precisely and in advance under what circumstances it might find it necessary to intervene militarily. Such a statement would amount to delegating to the government in Laos the responsibility for the decisions and the policy of the United States, Secretary Rusk said.²⁰⁴ General Phoumi clearly did not understand the warning. He continued to think in terms of a pro-Western neutrality when Rusk talked of the U.S. objective of achieving a neutral and independent Laos, whereas the meaning of these terms had changed in Washington, where it counted. Perhaps the general cannot be blamed for being confused. What seems to have made the deepest impression on him from this visit was sitting in the Pentagon's War Room for two hours with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and two dozen officers of flag rank. They gave his explanation of the military situation in Laos a sympathetic hearing, asked questions of a military nature, and promised to make every effort to meet his request for speedier delivery of logistical supplies.²⁰⁵

But General Phoumi became less and less of a factor as time went on and the losses of territory of the previous spring were not made up on the battlefield. By August, Harriman was referring to the "Savannakhet group" in his cables to Washington, consciously or unconsciously adopting the terminology of Soviet diplomats with whom he was spending more and more time.²⁰⁶

²⁰²Nice to State, Telegram No. 57, June 11, 1961, in National Archives. This message of General Phoumi's for Hasey refers to reimbursement in Vientiane. The U.S. Consulate in Nice had arranged for the delivery of large amounts of cash to General Phoumi at the Hotel Negresco. Presumably, these came from the CIA's unvouchered funds rather than appropriated funds. (Interview with a Foreign Service officer who was involved.)

²⁰³Embassy to State, Telegram No. 92. July 18, 1961, in National Archives.

²⁰⁴Memorandum of conversation, Secretary Rusk and General Phoumi, June 29, 1961, in FRUS 1961-1963, pp. 276-282.

²⁰⁵Memorandum, Anderson to McConaughy, June 29, 1961, in NSF Country Files, Laos, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

²⁰⁶Geneva to State, Telegram Confe 469, August 1, 1961, in National Archives.

Conclusion

The Cold War spread to Laos as a result of a mistake. I am convinced that the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union in Laos were accurately expressed at Vienna by Kennedy and Khrushchev. Nor would Eisenhower have disagreed. Laos was not worth a war. American policy in Laos, where the United States was deeply involved by the late 1950's, as has been shown, was basically ineffective in that it did nothing to forestall the Pathet Lao from pursuing their strategy of subversion and armed threat. American actions, in fact, often helped the Pathet Lao, as in the 1958 election campaign. So the United States ended up defending the royal government against the threat of takeover by Communists, which it could not very well refuse to do, because there were honorable men on the nationalist side as well as the dishonorable and incompetent.

Thus, Laos was dragged into the Cold War. In the words of Secretary Rusk, a man of eminent common sense and not one to let himself be blinded by ideology: "It is the tragedy of the peaceful Laotian people that they are involved in the confrontation between the great powers, in which they should not be involved at all."²⁰⁷ The Laotians were quite capable of settling their own affairs peacefully, without the involvement of the great powers. First of all, the direction of the Pathet Lao by the secret Laotian Communist Party, itself an agent of the Vietnamese Communist Party and thus, after 1954, of North Vietnam. Then the Laotian military who made themselves the agents of Marshal Sarit, the Pentagon, the CIA, and those in the State Department who saw salvation in a "pro-Western neutrality." The big change in American policy came with the Kennedy administration and the adoption of a new definition for neutrality and independence, words which described U.S. policy goals since 1954. The presumption of Parsons in lecturing Souvanna Phouma about the need for maintaining independence was insulting in the extreme for a Laotian nationalist who had taken part in the independence movement of 1945 when the Laotians had had to steer a course among the French, the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Viet Minh, and did so relatively successfully.

The cause of the Laotian nationalists was done irreparable harm by Parsons, about whom the judgment of Souvanna Phouma stands as a lasting indictment. From his first day in Vientiane, Parsons set about cultivating the opposition to Souvanna Phouma as the latter was setting out to negotiate with the Pathet Lao. He continued at this game, splitting the nationalists, pitting Phoui against Souvanna, the king against Souvanna, and so forth, until long after he had left Laos. The nationalists' failure to agree on a united front in the 1958 elections was partly due to these splitting activities which encouraged many to think of their personal interest and advantage, rather than the good of the country. Parsons made numerous errors of judgment, making the task of the Pathet Lao that much easier. He believed, mistakenly, that Souvanna Phouma lacked leadership abilities. He was led into

²⁰⁷Memorandum of conversation, Secretary Rusk and General Phoumi, June 29, 1961, in FRUS 1961-1963, pp. 276-282.

believing that General Phoumi possessed decisiveness when in fact the opposite was the case; the only cause in which the general was decisive was in spelling out his needs to his foreign friends.

Brown served his President as well as or better than any other ambassador I can think of. He did not mistake General Phoumi's anti-Communist rhetoric for "decisiveness," like Parsons, CINCPAC, and the high-level officials dealing with Laos on a day-to-day basis at the State Department. His position required a great deal of sang-froid. He showed this by keeping a diary during the battle of Vientiane, when the Embassy was damaged.²⁰⁸ Above all, he represented continuity in American relations with Souvanna Phouma and those who really mattered to American interests in Laos. Brown had worked for Harriman in London during World War II, and so the two men formed an effective team when it came to disabusing General Phoumi of the notion that the United States was going to back him all the way, a delicate operation that required cutting off his flow of military aid without at the same time demoralizing the army.

Brown got along well with both Souvanna and Phoumi. He knew better than to make enemies, as Parsons had done. While privately highly critical of the king's leadership qualities, he nevertheless took the king's words seriously and retained his confidence. In his audience in Luang Prabang on July 3, 1961, for example, Brown broke the news that the United States was likely to support a coalition with the Pathet Lao, news that the monarch was certainly not going to like hearing. He did this in the course of a tour d'horizon of the Laos situation in which he got the king to agree that provoking an all-out war in Laos would be no solution. Following the king's observation that including the Pathet Lao would lead to a Communist takeover, Brown skillfully steered the discussion into the reasons why giving the Pathet Lao a few cabinet seats would enable them to take over. The king was brought around to observing that the Pathet Lao had a grassroots organization, while the other parties did not, and thus one of the nationalists' biggest failings was broached. Without evoking the king's responsibility, Brown managed to suggest it.

The U.S. military's ill-considered commitment to General Phoumi to back him "all the way" was broken after the new administration had discovered the worthlessness of General Phoumi's leadership in wartime. The United States had, indeed, backed Phoumi up through his capture of Vientiane, an abandoned capital. But then it turned around and forced him into an ill-fitting accommodation with his nemesis, Souvanna Phouma. One has to feel sorry for General Phoumi and the way things eventually turned out. He was not up to policy matters at all. Fortune smiled on him briefly when he became finance minister and discovered a source of wealth even more lucrative than the CIA's unvouchered funds for his insatiable appetite. By the time he left Laos in disgrace in 1965, after one coup attempt too many, his political epitaph consisted of a huge unfinished casino in Savannakhet, which he

²⁰⁸"Notes on the Battle of Vientiane," in FRUS 1958-1960, Microfiche Supplement, Fiche 24, Document 673.

had no doubt counted on to provide him with a happy retirement untroubled by financial worries. It is little wonder that this ambitious man suffered from "periodic fits of deep depression."²⁰⁹ He had provided the perfect example, if one were needed, of the evils that Kong Le had rebelled against.

The logic of Phoumi's maneuvering was the engagement of U.S. troops in Laos. We came close, but fortunately did not go over the brink. Kennedy had enough common sense to be instinctively against it. He and Khrushchev had talked about the limits of their Cold War commitments in their conversations in Vienna. Moreover, and this may have been the deciding factor, Kennedy had come to distrust his military and intelligence advisers after the Bay of Pigs.

Padong showed that the Hmong (Meo) were being attacked on their own ground. From the start, Hanoi and Moscow attempted to make it appear the Hmong had moved in to Padong after the ceasefire and had attacked the "Patriotic Forces." This canard was immediately denied by the U.S. delegation at Geneva, as pointed out above. In spite of the denial, the propaganda version is often given currency today in that it was the CIA who "recruited" the Hmong to fight against the North Vietnamese. This is demonstrably false. The facts reveal that the Hmong had no quarrel with anyone and were only interested in preserving their way of life on their mountaintops. The CIA program of equipping them with modern arms showed what could be accomplished by lending a helping hand to people able and willing to defend themselves. Quite a different sort of thing than handing bags of money to the Laotian generals.

All this had little enough to do, unfortunately, with the threat posed by the expansionist revolutionary Leninist regime in North Vietnam after 1954, with its techniques of propagandizing, using nationalist fronts, recruiting peasants, indoctrinating them, and sending them into battle against the "lackeys of the imperialists." The purest sort of naiveté as to the nature of this threat seemed to prevail among those who gathered to decide what to do about the latest "crisis." In Washington, Laos was viewed mainly as a crisis, a problem, not as a country inhabited by real people who feared for themselves and their families and struggled to make a living and whose only experience of government may have involved extortion and corruption by those who held power. It is little wonder that no effective counter to the Pathet Lao was ever found by the Americans.

The settlement worked out at the cost of so much labor during 1961 and 1962 remained largely a dead letter. The coalition government was formed. The protocol giving ground to the international guarantees of the neutrality of Laos was duly signed at Geneva. From 1963 on, however, Laos was engulfed in war. The coalition continued to exist in name only. Souvanna Phouma doggedly stuck it out, supported by the Western powers, dealt with by the neutrals and the Communist countries, including North Vietnam, which

²⁰⁹FRUS 1961-1963, p. 173.

continued to maintain an embassy in Vientiane. Kong Le left the Pathet Lao once again, and continued to fight the North Vietnamese. Communist stalling tactics made the ICC completely ineffective. The Pathet Lao never allowed the Neutralists to enter their zone, preferring instead to have a free hand in indoctrinating, recruiting, and generally forming a revolutionary society modeled on Marxist-Leninist models having no relation with Laos and the Laotians. The NLHS denounced the periodic elections held in the royal government zone, while holding none of their own in the "liberated zone." By the time of the ceasefire in 1973, Laos was to hold the record of being the most bombed nation on earth.

It had been known all along by the nationalists that behind the NLHS rhetoric of peace, independence, democracy, neutrality and prosperity was the Laotian Communist Party, a party armed with North Vietnamese weapons and quite capable of seizing power at the right opportunity. The right opportunity came in 1975, after yet another round of negotiations between Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao, this time not even tripartite but one on one, eventuated in a third coalition. Doing away with this coalition and throwing off the mask, the party, appearing publicly for the first time, extolled Marxism-Leninism and enjoined the people to praise the leaders of the revolution who had been all-wise, all-seeing throughout the 30-year struggle to seize power from the "lackeys of the imperialists."

The pretense of respecting the monarchy was dropped. Neutrality was thrown aside; the new Lao People's Democratic Republic was declared to be a proud member of the Socialist camp. The ex-king and his family and the leaders of the overthrown royal government were sent to seminar camps in Sam Neua, from which many (including the royal family) never escaped or returned. Democracy now consisted of the rule of the party, in which decisions were reached by the Leninist doctrine of democratic centralism. Independence came to mean dependence on Vietnam. Vietnamese troops remained stationed in Laos until 1989 to deal with any remaining resistance; an odd kind of independence. Prosperity was the Socialist collectivization of agriculture (finally reversed in 1986), and the lowering of the general living standard to what had prevailed prior to World War II (except for the privileged party leaders, of course, who took long summer vacations in the Soviet Union).

The United States would end up paying for all these mistakes and omissions--in the lives of pilots shot down while bombing North Vietnamese-Pathet Lao targets in Laos, and in casualties in South Vietnam over 11 years as the North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh Trail to send war supplies to their troops in the South.

In view of subsequent events, there are really two questions that are posed by American policy in Laos between 1954 and 1962. They are separate, but interrelated. First, the obvious question that has often been raised above, namely how a policy that was so ineffective at dealing with the Pathet Lao threat to Laos's neutrality and independence could have been continued for so long. And secondly, given this policy, the question that arises of the morality of refusing to give the Laotians, who had the most to lose, credible security guarantees of their borders, and after the borders were violated, of intervention to repel the aggressors. Not having such guarantees, but constantly hoping for them, the Laotians went

to war to defend their country, their loved ones, and their way of life. This last is a question I have not attempted to answer here.

A Historiographical Note

The question of what was said about Laos between Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy in their two meetings on December 6, 1960, and January 19, 1961, poses a particular problem of interpretation for historians. The many memoranda of these conversations, some of them conflicting, have been exhaustively examined by Greenstein and Immerman in a seminal article.²¹⁰

All historians of American involvement in Laos between 1954 and 1962 owe a very large debt to the Office of the Historian, Department of State. The historians of this office have compiled a massive body of documentation on almost every aspect of this involvement. Their published volumes have been cited in footnotes. Much more documentation exists in the declassified State Department files accessible in the reading room of National Archives II in College Park, Maryland, and in other files in the presidential libraries. I wish to acknowledge a special debt of thanks to David A. Haight, archivist at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, who supplied the CIA Situation Reports for the critical days of August-December 1960.

There are one or two criticisms one might make of the State Department's laudable effort, nonetheless. The FRUS 1955-1957 volume omits the CINCPAC telegram of June 8, 1956, placing the PEO under JUSMAG, which, as the above account has made clear, I hope, was a small but crucial step in the progressive abandonment of neutrality. The FRUS 1961-63 volume for some unknown reason lacks any cables from the Embassy in Vientiane prior to April 26, 1961. Even allowing for the fact that the Laos crisis absorbed a great deal of energy in Foggy Bottom in those weeks, it seems odd that the reporting from Vientiane on highly dramatic events is missing for the first 138 pages. Among other things, this omission means that Ambassador Brown's suggestion of neutralization of Laos, in his cable of January 18, 1961, is missing, although Gibbons credits Brown's cable with moving Senator Mike Mansfield, an influential voice in the Congress on Indochina and a close friend of Kennedy's, with sending memos to the President supporting the idea, which became the basis of American policy.²¹¹

²¹⁰Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," The Journal of American History, September 1992, pp. 568-587. My understanding of this encounter has also benefited from a talk with General Andrew J. Goodpaster.

²¹¹William Conrad Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships. Part II, 1961-1964 (Washington, D.C.: Government

The great contrast between the abundance of State Department materials on Laos and the almost total absence of documentation from the CIA is striking. For the CIA's operations with the Hmong, we are fortunate to have extensive interviews, both with the Hmong and with CIA case officers, which have painted in much of the story, both its successes and its failures.²¹² Future generations of Americans owe much to the words of these participants, and hopefully will learn from them, remembering the saying "Those who fail to learn the past are doomed to repeat it."

There are certain questions on which having CIA documentation would be more than helpful, indeed indispensable, to historians. Among them are the circumstances surrounding the formation of the CDIN in the summer of 1958 and the CIA's role in it, if any. Secondly, we do not yet know why General Phoumi reversed himself at last minute at the Luang Prabang airport and did not go to Vientiane on August 31, 1960. One published account says a CIA officer handed him a note. Is that true? If so, what did this note tell the general? Thirdly, CIA documentation could clear up what exactly Irwin and Riley actually said to Phoumi in their famous interview on October 17, 1960. The report we have is indirect and unsourced. If Phoumi had it from Irwin and Riley, he would have told Hasey about it, and Hasey would have made a note of it. If Phoumi made the story up, as Parsons suggests in his oral history,²¹³ Hasey would probably not have reported it.

Then there is the intriguing question of Gordon L. Jorgensen's two memos to Ambassador Brown of May 1, 1961. Jorgensen was the CIA station chief in Vientiane at the time. I quote his memos, which found their way into Harriman's papers and were declassified in 1987, in full for their interest as the only glimpse we have, to my knowledge, into what policy advice the CIA was supplying during the crisis of the spring of 1961.

In reference to your statement this morning that you and Ambassador Harriman desire discuss means strengthening our position, I submit the following:

1. Suggest time has finally come for a real show of force, not only to secure acceptable cease fire before it is too late, but also to establish clearly and unmistakably in the enemy's mind, and before the commencement of any conference or negotiations, the fact that the U.S. means business about its stated policy objectives in Laos. If we fail to do this we can only expect a repetition at the conference table of the past few days' performance on the battle field, namely a rapid erosion of U.S.

Printing Office, 1985), p. 10.

²¹²Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Roger Warner, Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

²¹³Parsons oral history, op. cit., p. 16.

and RLG position. We are almost pathetically anxious to strengthen the RLG's political position prior to the opening of any conference, but we fail to do what is most needed for this purpose, namely, strengthen its military position. To do so, of course, involves either or both SEATO and U.S. forces.

2. Accordingly, propose that U.S., with Thai consent commence immediate repeat immediate movement of U.S. ground and air forces to Thailand for the announced purpose of being ready to move into Laos with speed if enemy continues his "inching forward" tactics. The announcement might also include statement to the effect that staff officers of SEATO and U.S. forces in Thailand would commence discussions with the FAL on how U.S. forces could best be employed to insure that territory under RLG control remains under that control.²¹⁴

The second memo reads:

An additional thought to my memo of this morning: namely, that unless Phoumi fairly soon gets our assurances of military assistance in the form of troops, he is likely to come to the conclusion that he must shortly commence the redeployment of troops in northern and central Laos in order to protect southern Laos at the line [of the] Nam Ca Dinh. Once he is convinced we do not propose to intervene, then I should expect him rather rapidly to commence the above suggested redeployment without much advance warning to us. In fact, we may learn about it so late that even if we are then willing to intervene, we will not be in time to save northern and central Laos.

This alternative is really hardly acceptable for two reasons: (1) I doubt it will last politically; (2) and in that event, it will merely prolong the death agony and our embarrassment and distress.

For your information, I understand lead elements of one Battalion Landing Team can reach Thailand in 12 hours; two other bns can be in Thailand within 24 hours.²¹⁵

The records of the PEO reportedly disappeared from the PEO liaison office in JUSMAG Thailand, where they were housed in a secure area for storage of classified materials (as described in CINCPAC message, June 8, 1956). I have not made a particular study of military records of this period, but I fear that historians have suffered a great loss in

²¹⁴Memorandum for Ambassador Brown from G. L. Jorgensen, May 1, 1961, in Papers of W. Averell Harriman, Box 527, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²¹⁵Memorandum for Ambassador Brown from G. L. Jorgensen, May 1, 1961, in Papers of W. Averell Harriman, Box 527, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

this respect.²¹⁶

Finally, I would like to point out the extent to which not having the relevant documentary evidence can place historians at risk, particularly when they rely on the memory of participants (to a greater or less degree at that) many years after the fact. The statement by Roswell Gilpatric, deputy to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara that "the Pentagon did not even consider itself a primary player on Laos policy until sometime in 1962"²¹⁷ is a statement too ludicrous to be worthy of comment.

Last but by no means least, I wish to acknowledge the help of George W. Dalley, whose tireless pursuit over the last dozen years of archive materials on the period is going to make a major contribution to the work of future students of American involvement in Laos.

²¹⁶Timothy N. Castle. At War in the Shadow of Vietnam; U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955-1975 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xii.

²¹⁷John Prados, The Hidden History of the Vietnam War (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), p. 230.