

grade opium grown in the Long Tieng area. But this opium was not suitable for refining into heroin and was not part of the drug trade. Was the CIA involved in the drug trade? No. Did they know about it? Yes. Did they do anything about it? As former CIA director William Colby has acknowledged, they did little about it during the 1960s but later did take action against the traders as drugs became a problem among the troops in Vietnam. However, the CIA's main focus in Laos was fighting the war, not policing the drug trade.

What was the real Air America like? Where did it fit into the larger context of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia? This is a long story, one that will take me several hundred pages to tell, but let me at least sketch its major outlines.

The real Air America grew out of a decision by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1950 that it required an air transport capability to conduct covert operations in Asia in support of U.S. policy objectives. In August 1950, the CIA secretly purchased the assets of Civil Air Transport, an airline that had been started in China after World War II by General Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer. Civil Air Transport would continue to fly commercial routes throughout Asia, acting in every way as a privately-owned commercial airline. At the same time, under the guise of CAT Incorporated, it provided airplanes and crews for secret intelligence operations.

The CIA's air proprietary was used for a variety of covert missions during the 1950s. During the Korean War, for example, it made over 100 hazardous overflights of mainland China, airdropping agents and supplies. CAT pilots could be found over Dienbienphu in 1954, supporting the doomed French garrison. In 1958, CAT provided the air force for the CIA's unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Sukarno government of Indonesia. Beginning in 1958 and continuing into the early 1960s, CAT Incorporated - or Air America as it became in 1959 - was at the center of a major CIA operation to train and supply anti-communist forces in far-off Tibet. While Air America would continue to support CIA activities throughout Asia (and elsewhere) during the 1960s, the airline's major focus became Southeast Asia, especially the growing war in Laos.

In many ways, the Kingdom of Laos was an unlikely location for American interest. Oden Meeker, a government official who was assigned to the capital of Vientiane in the mid-1950s, found a sleepy country with a tranquility "just this side of Rip Van Winkel". The people, he noted, were unambitious, unmechanical, gentle, courteous, and always smiling. Inefficiency was a way of life that seemed to bother only foreigners. Yet beyond the sleepy surface lay a geopolitical reality. In an age of Cold War, Laos happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. To Assistant Secretary of State Walter B. Robertson, Laos was "a finger thrust right down into the heart of Southeast Asia. And Southeast Asia is one of the prime objectives of international Communists in Asia because it is rich in raw materials and has excess food." Robertson painted a grim scenario for a House subcommittee in 1959. Should the Communists gain control of the resources of Southeast Asia, then combine this prize with the manpower of China and the industrial capacity of Japan, he warned, "We will really have to pull up stakes and come back home, because the battle will be lost."