

Important News

American Diplomacy takes pleasure in making available to its readers a press release, dated April 7, 1998, provided by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

~ Ed.

U.S. Foreign Relations Series Laos Volume (1964-1968) Released by Department of State

The United States increasingly became involved in fighting a war against Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese forces in Laos during the Johnson administration. Laos, a small, poor, sparsely-populated kingdom, became entangled in the Vietnam war because of its geographic position. The Kennedy administration had hoped to neutralize Laos and insulate it from the conflict, but failed because of North Vietnam's insistence on controlling the infiltration routes into South Vietnam. During 1964-1968, Laos became part of the main conflict in Southeast Asia as both the United States and North Vietnam struggled for control of the Ho Chi Minh trail and the northern highlands. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXVIII, Laos, released today by the Department of State, presents a detailed documentary account of U.S. high-level diplomatic, strategic, and military decisions that resulted in expanded involvement and commitments in Laos.

This volume, complementing the Department of State's expanded coverage of the documentary history of the Vietnam war, is based on extensive access to the records of the Executive branch, including the files of the White House and National Security Council, Departments of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Central Intelligence Agency. In addition, this volume makes considerable use of personal papers of several key policymakers, including Averell Harriman and Generals Maxwell Taylor, William Westmoreland, and Creighton Abrams. It was completed before the Office of the Historian had access to Johnson's taped telephone conversations, but there are only a few tapes of conversations exclusively on Laos. Johnson usually discussed Laos in conjunction with Vietnam. Important tapes on the Vietnam war are included in Foreign Relations, 1964-1968, Volume IV, Vietnam, 1966 (released in 1998) and the President's taped conversations on the war including Laos are scheduled for publication in subsequent volumes on Vietnam and in volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia: Regional Affairs.

During the first few months of 1964, the Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese forces again threatened the Plain of Jars, the strategic gateway to the Mekong valley, where most of the Lao population lived. Johnson and his advisers considered sending U.S. troops to Thailand as had been done in 1962, but settled instead on

a series of incremental steps that included sending Air America pilots and propeller driven T-28 planes to reinforce the fledgling Lao Air Force and upgrading the Lao Air Force's bombing capabilities. Differences of opinion in the administration arose over Laos policy. The Department of Defense and General Westmoreland wanted to carry the secret war across the border against the Ho Chi Minh trail.

The Department of State and Ambassador Leonard Unger feared such a plan would shred what remained of the 1962 Geneva Accords and topple neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. The Central Intelligence Agency concentrated on its "quiet war," supporting, supplying, and directing Hmong guerrillas to harass the North Vietnamese in Laos.

In June 1964, two decisions propelled the United States into a more active role in Laos. The first was a retaliatory, armed reconnaissance mission against Pathet Lao anti-aircraft batteries that had downed a U.S. reconnaissance jet. As the President himself feared, this inaugurated an air war in northern Laos. Secondly, the United States supported a Royal Lao Armed Forces' military plan, Operation Triangle, to retake a key crossroad on the Plain of Jars. Air America's transport and fighter propeller planes joined the campaign. In retrospect, these two decisions marked the beginning of a new level of conflict between the United States and North Vietnam.

Despite continued differences of opinion among U.S. policy makers, after 1965 the trend was one of steady escalation of the war in Laos. In the face of Ambassador William Sullivan's opposition, Vietnam Commander William Westmoreland expanded covert cross border operations into Laos by South Vietnamese troops led by U.S. Green Berets. The secret air war against the Ho Chi Minh trail and in the north of Laos expanded exponentially. Other themes covered in the volume include U.S. political support of the Souvanna government against right-wing coups, the expansion of the covert Hmong guerrilla program, Secretary of Defense McNamara's interest in using technology to improve U.S. military capabilities in Laos, and the loss of the secret navigation site at Phou Pha Thi to six battalions of North Vietnamese regulars, resulting in the deaths of eleven Americans.

The Office of the Historian has prepared a summary of the volume. For further information, contact David S. Patterson, General Editor of the Foreign Relations series, at (202) 663-1127 (fax: (202) 663-1289, e-mail: pahistoff@panet.us-state.gov). The texts of the volume, the summary, and this press release are available on the Department's Web site: http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/ibndex.html. Copies of volume XXVIII can be purchased from the Government Printing Office.

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