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THE LAOS CRISIS OF 1959

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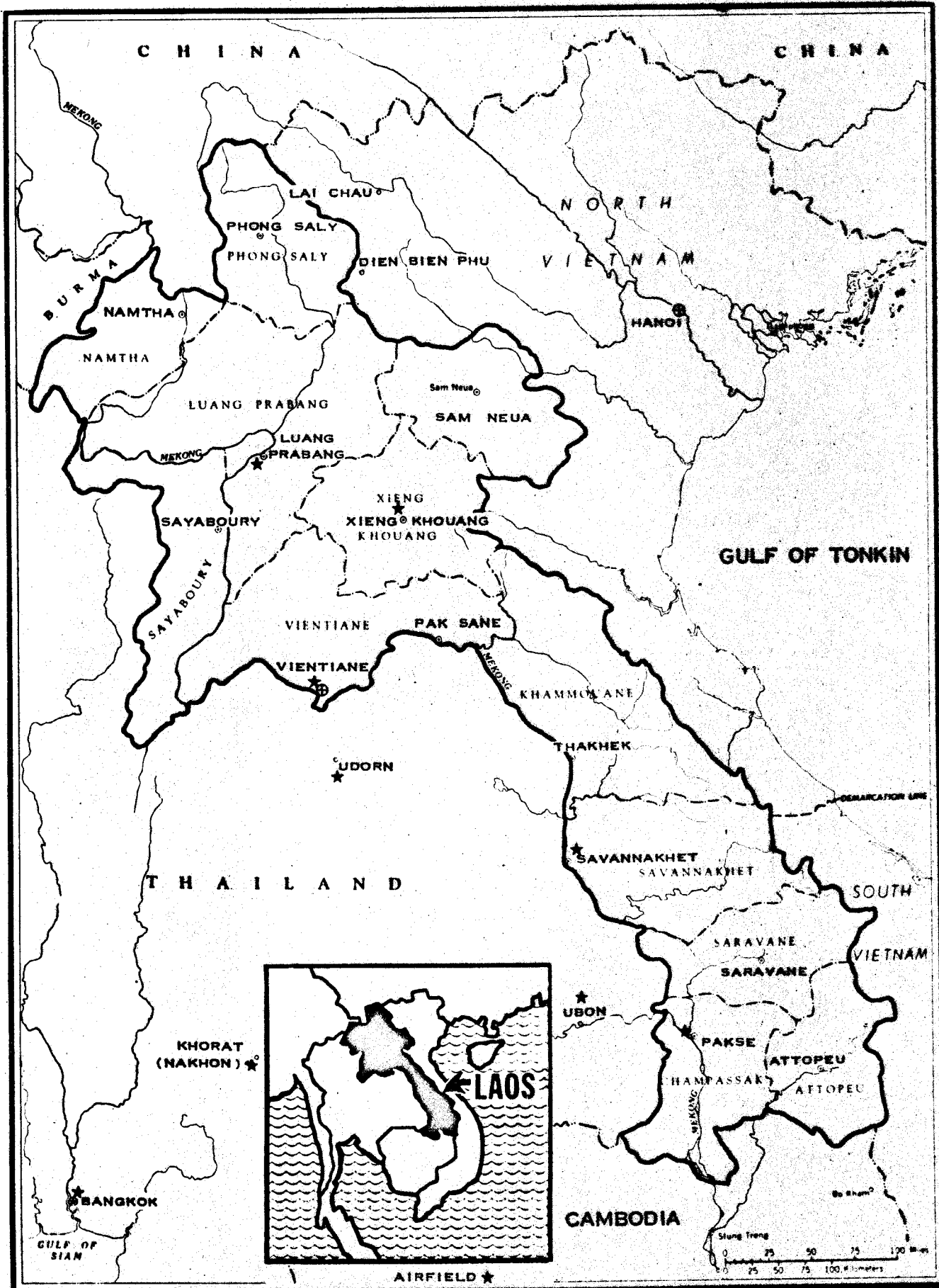
by

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P R E F A C E

The Laos Crisis of 1959 is the sixth in a series of studies on international emergencies involving the use of airpower in some degree. The author of this study is Dr. George F. Lanzer of the USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, which was requested to prepare the series by the Director of Plans, Headquarters USAF.

The present study examines the political and economic situation in Laos before and after the Geneva Agreements of 1954, the rise of the Pathet Lao, and the efforts of the United States to prevent Communist domination of Laos. As the crisis of September 1959 was brewing, U.S. plans for military action began to take shape. The emergency did not begin to subside until a subcommittee of the U.N. Security Council arrived in Laos on 15 September. After the alert in the Pacific was relaxed in October, the United States still faced the difficulty of finding a firm basis in Laos upon which to build a policy. Analysis of the incident pointed up the importance of careful planning, particularly for logistic support, of timely decision-making, and of close cooperation between State and Defense officials.

The study is classified Secret to conform with the classification assigned to some of the sources of information used herein.

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Map of Laos. Frontispiece

I. THE STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL UNION

The Kingdom of Laos is the least developed and most sparsely populated state in Southeast Asia. It emerged as a political and administrative unit after World War II in an area that had been controlled by France since 1893. Before the coming of the French, Laos had consisted of a loosely knit group of petty principalities, sometimes united under one king but more often existing as separate units. The French formed the northern part into the Kingdom of Luang Prabang and the southern part into the principality of Bassac. Both became components of French Indochina, which also included Vietnam (a consolidation of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China) and Cambodia.

During the closing weeks of World War II, the Japanese conquerors of Indochina persuaded nationalist leaders to declare Luang Prabang independent and expand its territory to include Bassac. This was done in September 1945, and Sisavang Vong, who had been the sovereign of Luang Prabang since 1903, was proclaimed King of Laos. Nationalist leaders soon deposed the king, however, accusing him of being pro-French, formed a provisional government, and organized small armed units to resist the returning French. When these "Free Lao" units were overpowered by the French in May 1946, their leaders fled to Thailand and set up a government in exile.

France reestablished its rule, but it recognized the principle of a territorially united Laos under King Sisavang Vong and in August 1946

gave the new state a considerable degree of administrative authority. By May 1947, Laos had obtained a parliamentary system with a popularly elected National Assembly, and by July 1949 the country had become a largely independent state within the French Union. At this time the government in exile in Bangkok dissolved, and most of the Free Lao leaders returned to take part in the Royal government of Laos.

In October 1953, France signed a treaty under which Laos became a "fully independent and sovereign state" with all administrative powers except certain supervisory military and economic rights retained by France until late in 1954. The United Kingdom, France, and the United States had extended diplomatic recognition to Laos in February 1950, and most Free World governments have done so since. Laos joined the United Nations in December 1955.¹

The Land and the People

Laos is a land-locked country of approximately 90,000 square miles in total area, located in the most inaccessible portion of the Indochinese peninsula. It shares a 600-mile border with Red China and North Vietnam, and it also borders on South Vietnam,² Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma. Only about half the total population, estimated at between 1.5 and 2 million people, is made up of ethnic Laotians, a people of Thai

¹The official name for North Vietnam is the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and for South Vietnam it is the Republic of Vietnam. This study, for the sake of clarity, will use the terms North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

stocks. More than a dozen distinct Thai minority groups, frequently called "Tribal Thai" or "Black Thai," live in Laos, along with other minority groups such as the Miao, Phouheng, Yao, and several Tibeto-Burman peoples.* Laotians constitute the dominant group, Lao is the official language, and Buddhism, the religion of the Laotians, is the national religion.

Diversity is so great, nevertheless, that Laos, rather than possessing a widely shared pattern of culture, is an aggregate of societies with differing ethnic origins, languages, and cultures. Only a few hundred French-educated people participate in government and politics, and a sense of nationalism exists only among the few active leaders. Respect for the Crown and the general adherence to Buddhism promote some popular identification with the state. Only about 15 percent of the people are literate, the remainder being generally primitive and politically apathetic.

The rugged, mountainous terrain and the jungle growth over much of the countryside tend to keep the people divided into small, self-contained communities united only by extremely inadequate communication and transportation systems. Laos possesses no railroads, few roads, and only a handful of airfields usable throughout the year. The Mekong River, which forms more than 900 miles of the western boundary, is a major avenue of transportation, but its narrows and rapids, together with seasonal fluctuations in the water level, limit its use to small boats. Few

*Some of the minority groups are hostile to both the Laotians and the Vietnamese, and the Miao have a special hatred for Vietnamese.

their transportation needs most of the people still depend on the human back (T-fresses), ox-carts, elephants, horses, and dugout canoes. Modern communication facilities are extremely few. The principal cities are Vientiane, the administrative capital; Luang Prabang, the Royal capital; Xieng Khouang; and in the south, Savannakhet and Pakse.* 2

The Economy

Removed from the center of Asian affairs as well as from the mainstream of modern civilization during most of its history, Laos has only recently come in contact with modern technology. Its economy is essentially subsistent, with rice the chief product. The predominantly rural population, using primitive methods, normally produces only enough rice to meet its minimum needs. Small quantities of tin, coffee, and tobacco are available for export, but the large timber resources remain largely unexploited. Known mineral resources are small. Per capita income probably does not exceed \$50 per year.

Total government revenues do not cover even the nonmilitary budget of about \$16 million. Annual exports total only \$2 million to \$3 million, while requirements for imported textiles and other finished goods exceed \$10 million. Prior to January 1955 the French provided enough assistance to balance the budget and international payments and equip the army. Since that date the United States has assumed this burden. During the period 1955-59 the annual foreign aid to Laos, mostly furnished by the

*The population of Vientiane is about 16,000 and that of Luang Prabang about 15,000.

United States, averaged approximately \$60 million, more than \$40 million of it for the military budget.

Developments since 1954 have brought some improvements in Laotian trade with other Asian countries. Negotiations with Thailand won an agreement for the free passage of many goods through that country. Completion of Thai railroad facilities to link up with the Mekong River ferry near Vientiane established a route with lower freight costs than the former route through Saigon, in South Vietnam, and reduced dependence on the Mekong River for the transportation of Laotian goods. A triangular Japanese-Thai-U.S. rice deal enabled Laos to obtain rice from Thailand to alleviate a serious shortage resulting from drought and the Viet Minh² invasions of 1953-54.³

Government and Politics

The political quarrels in Laos generally have resulted from personal and family antagonisms among the educated, related, ruling groups, not from basic political differences. Until 1957 or 1958 the two leading political parties consisted of coalitions of non-Communist factions. The principal leaders of the National Progressive Party, the faction with the largest number of seats in the National Assembly, were Katsy Sasorith, Prime Minister in 1954-55, and Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister from 1951 to 1954 and from 1955 to 1958. The chief figure in the Independent Party, the other important non-Communist faction, was Phoui Bounnikone, Foreign Minister in 1954-55 and Prime Minister during 1958-59.

²Pre-Communists rebelling against French control.

Until the important election of December 1955, parties did not play a significant part in the political affairs of Laos, but from that date they became of crucial importance in order to prevent the pro-Communist Pathet Lao members from being elected to the Assembly. Katay and Fheul, with encouragement from the Crown, formed a coalition of their two parties to insure a solid anti-Communist front. The legal non-Communist opposition resided mostly in Song Souvannavong and his Laos National Union Party, but they controlled only a handful of deputies in the National Assembly. Despite his personal prestige as a member of the influential Souvannavong family of southern Laos, Song's party commanded little popular support. The political scene was often agitated by rightist Prince Futsarath, a former Free Lao leader still living in Thailand, but he appeared to have little real support.*

The Crown, with its power to promulgate the laws and designate the Prime Minister and Cabinet, played an important role in governmental affairs. King Sisavang Vong was old and infirm and lived in virtual retirement at the royal capital of Luang Prabang, but Crown Prince Savang Vathana had assumed his powers by about 1950. Both were pro-Western and anti-Communist, and Savang Vathana became a strong force in maintaining cooperation with France and the United States.†

*Futsarath's activities have occasionally produced strained relations between Laos and Thailand, with the former accusing Thailand of meddling in Laotian affairs.

†Sisavang Vong died and Savang Vathana became king on 29 October 1959.

The Pathet Lao

Asian Communists claim that the Pathet Lao movement originated in the Free Lao (Lao Issara) nationalist movement of 1945, but the evidence strongly indicates that it actually began in 1949. At this time a group of the more radical nationalists, led by Prince Souphanouvong, joined the Viet Minh in North Vietnam. The Prince appears to have been motivated both by ambitions for the throne and intense hatred of the French. In November 1950 the North Vietnam radio announced that a national assembly of Pathet Lao had met the previous August, presumably in North Vietnam territory. Subsequent broadcasts reported that the assembly had established a Laotian National United Front, formed a resistance government, elected Souphanouvong Prime Minister, and founded a People's Liberation Army. In 1951 the Viet Minh integrated this resistance group into the North Vietnam united front fighting the French. The executive arm of the organization has since 1950 generally been termed the Pathet Lao, roughly translated as "Land of the Lao."

When Viet Minh regular forces invaded Laos in 1953, and again in 1954, they established the resistance government of Pathet Lao and its fighting units in the two northeastern provinces of Sam Khoua and Phong Saly. Although these invasions attempted to capture the royal capital of Luang Prabang and succeeded in establishing a few isolated guerrilla pockets in the south, they were unable to seize any real control except in northeastern Laos. During the first invasion (April 1953) Souphanouvong and his followers moved into northern Laos, set up a resistance government in the town of Sam Khoua, capital of the province of Sam Khoua bordering on North Vietnam, and declared that this was the only legal representative government

of Laos. The Pathet Lao maintained substantial control over the north-eastern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly from 1953 to 1957.⁵

The Legacy of Geneva, 1954-57

The bitter civil war in Indochina between the French Union and local forces led by Vietnamese Communists (Viet Minh) was ended by the Geneva Conference of April-July 1954. Representatives of the United Kingdom and the U.S.S.R. acted as cochairmen of the conference in which France, Laos, South Vietnam, and Cambodia, as well as Communist China and North Vietnam, participated. Although North Vietnam tried to get representatives of the Pathet Lao invited, such efforts were unsuccessful. One Pathet Lao leader attended as a member of the North Vietnam delegation, and Pathet Lao agents in Geneva distributed pamphlets describing the Pathet Lao's struggle for "Peace, Independence, Unity, and Democracy."⁶

The Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Laos was signed on 20 July 1954 by the French Union and by representatives of North Vietnam, who signed also for the "Commander-in-Chief of the fighting units of the Pathet Lao." The main provisions as they pertained to Laos were as follows: (1) Although some French Union and local insurgent forces could remain in Laos, Viet Minh and most French Union forces would withdraw, and no new military bases could be established. (2) The French were authorized to leave up to 1,500 officers and noncommissioned officers to train the Laotian national army and maintain two "French military establishments," manned by not more than 3,500 men. (3) Except for those who wished to be demobilized, the approximately 3,000 Pathet Lao

resistance troops were to concentrate in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, with special provisions for protecting their interests pending an election scheduled for 1955. (4) An International Commission for Supervision and Control,* composed of representatives of Canada, India, and Poland, with India as chairman, was set up to supervise implementation of the agreements. (5) Fresh troops could not be brought into Laos except for limited rotation and replacement.

Although the United States refused to sign the Geneva Agreements, it did agree to refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb them and declared that it would "view any renewal of aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."⁷

In September 1954 representatives of eight nations--Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippine Republic, France, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States--signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (the Manila Pact), forming the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Immediately after ratification of the SEATO treaty, the foreign ministers of the signatory powers met on 23-25 February 1955 in Bangkok, where they pledged their support for the security and independence of Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam. Thus while Laos was not a member of SEATO, it has been considered to be under that organization's protection.⁴⁸

*Since this commission is usually referred to as the ICC, it will be so designated in this study.

⁴⁸Legally, Laos would have to request assistance before SEATO could send troops to Laotian territory.

Within a few months of the end of the war in Indochina, the Pathet Lao demonstrated that they intended to abide by only those terms of the Geneva Agreements which they thought advantageous to their interests. They entrenched themselves in Sam Neua and Phong Saly and used force to prevent the Royal government from setting up a civil administration in these two provinces. Before the end of 1955 the rebels were demanding control over these provinces and recognition as equals in the national government. This was in open defiance of a treaty between Laos and North Vietnam signed at the Bandung Conference,* as well as of the Geneva Agreements, but since the Pathet Lao support bases were just over the border in North Vietnam, the Royal government could do little but protest to North Vietnam and the ICC.

As the election of 25 December 1955 approached, the Pathet Lao demanded far-reaching changes in the election laws as a price for allowing balloting to take place in their provinces. Failing to obtain the changes, they boycotted the election. The voting returned a solid pro-western majority to the assembly, but the Pathet Lao's boycott left them in a position to challenge the election's validity on the grounds that a large part of the country had not taken part. Despite its neutralist Indian chairman and Communist Polish member, the ICC disapproved these tactics and reiterated the right of the Royal government to establish its administration in the two northern provinces. The commission declared that "this right is undisputed."⁹

*Bandung, Indonesia, 18-24 April 1955.

The years 1956-58 witnessed continuing negotiations between the Royal Laotian government and the Pathet Lao, with some tentative agreements but also repeated obstruction, attempts at subversion, and intermittent armed resistance by the latter. Laos managed to survive as an independent country during this period largely because it received substantial U.S. economic and military aid, Western diplomatic support, and continued help from French advisers in the government and army.

The spring of 1956 saw the return as Prime Minister of Souvanna Phouma, one of the most experienced and influential men in Laos. Souvanna, educated in France and half brother to both the Crown Prince and the Pathet Lao leader,* Souphanouvong, tried desperately to follow a moderate and neutralist policy in his efforts to unify and strengthen Laos. He pressed hard to find a formula that would end the division of the country and bring the "erring brothers" back into the Royal government. Although events moved slowly in Laos, in August 1956, Souvanna and Souphanouvong agreed on a cease-fire and broad principles of a political settlement.¹⁰

With the support of North Vietnam, however, the Pathet Lao repeatedly pushed for new concessions, and by December the Royal government had agreed to integrate Pathet Lao troops into the Royal army, give positions in the civil service to Communist functionaries, accept the Pathet Lao as a legal political party, schedule supplementary elections for an enlarged National Assembly, include the Pathet Lao in a coalition government, and accept economic aid from any country. Souvanna finally balked at demands

*King Boleavong Vong had numerous wives and scores of children.

that the Royal government immediately accept aid from Communist China as proof of Laos' neutrality, and negotiations broke off in mid-April 1957. A cabinet crisis forced Souvanna to resign in May, but he returned to power in August after the Assembly failed to agree on a different successor. By November 19 an agreement was reached whereby the Pathet Lao forces would demobilize and their political leaders would enter the Royal government, substantially on the terms accepted in December 1956.¹¹

In spite of Souvanna's assurances that Laos would remain independent and non-Communist, made to President Eisenhower during a January 1958 visit to the United States, the November 1957 agreements aroused anxiety in the U.S. State Department and some other Free World quarters. They looked too much like previous Communist "Trojan horse" maneuvers to be viewed other than with deep misgivings. Nevertheless, in Laos the desire for national union had achieved an almost mystical quality among politicians and the articulate population. This was reinforced by a common belief that the Pathet Lao could be converted to democratic behavior once the country was united. In addition, India and France exerted pressure for a settlement, largely offsetting advice from the United States to avoid concessions to the Communists.

Up to this point leaders of the Royal army (ARL)¹² had stayed out of politics, but some fear existed in the United States that the military leaders might grow so impatient with inaction and concessions to the rebels that they would seize control of the government and launch an

¹¹Union Nationale Laos.

attack on the Pathet Lao. The most likely leader of such a coup would have been Col. Ouan Rathikhoue,⁸ chief of staff of the AHL, who often boasted to U.S. representatives that he could quickly resolve the problem by decisive military action.¹²

The Election of 1958

The election of 4 May 1958 set in action a chain of events leading almost inevitably to the crisis of the summer and fall of 1959. The November 1957 political settlement between the Laotian government and the Pathet Lao provided for nationwide elections to fill 20 new seats in the National Assembly, raising the membership to 59. In these elections, the Nee Lao Hak Xat (NLHX) Party, representing (in theory replacing) the Pathet Lao, led a leftist political front that also included the "follow-traveling" Santiphab Party. This coalition, campaigning on a nationalist-reformist-neutralist platform and benefiting from disunity among the old-line, conservative parties, won 49 percent of the vote and 13 of the 21⁴ contested seats.

Frightened by this show of strength by the radicals, the two conservative parties, the National Progressives and the Independents, merged into a new party called the Rally of the Lao People or Lao Hui Lao. Souvanna Phouma was elected president and Katsy Sasorith and Phoui Sannakone vice presidents of the new party. About the same time, 15 June 1958, a group of energetic young civil servants, businessmen, and army officers launched

⁸ Sometimes spelled Ratrihoum or Rathikhoue.

⁴ One was to fill a vacancy.

a new political movement known as the Committee for the Defense of the National Interests (CDNI).¹³

After mid-1958 the principal division within the pro-government, pro-Western alliance was between the conservative, old-line politicians of the Lao Kham Lao (LKL), who controlled about 38 of the 59 seats in the National Assembly, and the more dynamic, ambitious young leaders of the CDNI. The conflict between these groups contributed to the failure of the Royal government to establish sufficiently direct and continuous contacts with the general populace, for the most part innocent of political affairs. This hampered the Royal government's efforts to compete with the Communists for the respect and loyalty of the Laotian people.

Although it did not have a wide membership or an effective organization in all provinces, the LKL benefited from the Laotian system of family and regional loyalties and from the political experience of its leaders. Some of the old-guard politicians who had dominated Laos since its independence became discredited because of their ineffectiveness and corruptions. Some LKL leaders appeared to be more concerned with the threat to their personal position posed by the CDNI than with the Communist threat to the nation. Too few LKL leaders demonstrated the inclination or ability to create a vigorous party organization that could compete with the Communists in the villages. Nevertheless, the LKL probably contained most of the country's small number of experienced politicians and competent administrators.

The ambitious young politicians and government officials of the CMI were dissatisfied with the performance of their political elders and recognized that drastic governmental reforms were necessary to defeat the Communist-led NLFK in coming elections. They understood the necessity of developing a national organization and a "grass-root" following in order to gain political strength and undercut the NLFK. By early 1959 the CMI had gained considerable strength and seemed to have won the sympathy of the Crown Prince who, though somewhat lacking in self-confidence and determination, exercised the prerogatives of the King.

The CMI's development as a political party remained in an embryonic stage in mid-1959, but its strength was rising. It received full backing from U.S. representatives, who considered it the most encouraging development in the kingdom. In addition, despite their antagonisms, important leaders of both the LNL and the CMI came to understand that continued disunity would play into the Communists' hands. Accordingly, they used their influence to reconcile the differences. They also recognized their country's dependence on U.S. aid and became increasingly responsive to American appeals for a unified anti-Communist effort.¹⁴

Unfortunately for the Royal government of Laos, the NLFK had wide popular support; unified, zealous, and capable leadership; and an effective organization in the villages of the rural provinces isolated from the chief cities of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Savannakhet. The NLFK also cultivated and won the sympathy of many members of the influential Buddhist priesthood. Partly because of its direct tie with the

Communist party of North Vietnam, the RLK had a large capacity for infiltration, subversion, and sabotage, and it apparently built up a substantial clandestine apparatus. By mid-1959, however, it was probably less capable of military action than it had been before the November 1957 agreements, after which the Pathet Lao surrendered much of their military equipment and dispersed their military organization.

The RLK became apprehensive about the growing strength of the CML, which might presage a concerted anti-Communist effort by a united government, the government's stepped-up measures against RLK agents, and the new rural aid program in areas formerly dominated by Communists. Until May 1959, nevertheless, the RLK avoided action that would endanger its status as a legal political party. It posed as a peaceful, legal, nationalist party, allowing Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow to carry the campaign of threats and intimidation against the Royal Laotian government.¹⁵

Pre-Western Actions

Neither the political settlement of late 1957 nor its success in the election of May 1958 prompted the RLK to abandon its clandestine subversive network or abate its agitation among the ethnic minorities in the countryside where the Pathet Lao had previously been entrenched. In July 1958, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma resigned, declaring that he had lost faith in his former leftist friends and supporters. After several weeks, the anti-Communist leader, Phoui Sananikone, put together a government composed chiefly of LRL and CML members and excluding all leftists. During his investiture speech on 18 August, Prime Minister Phoui declared

that his primary objective was to preserve Laos' newly won independence and unification and that the greatest danger to that objective was Communism. He believed he could preserve the state only if his government succeeded in thwarting subversion and eliminating graft and corruption. Nevertheless, he also pledged to maintain peace by observing a neutral policy "in accordance with the principles of Panch Shila" and the United Nations Charter."¹⁶

The threatening Laotian crisis was doubtless associated with, and heightened by, a number of developments taking place in southern Asia during 1958 and 1959. The Chinese repression of Tibet, the Sino-Indian border dispute, and the intransigence of the rebels in Laos seem to have produced an anti-Communist reaction that had become apparent in 1958 and continued in 1959. There was a tendency to be more critical of the Communists in India, Burma, Indonesia, and even in Ceylon.

The rise of a strong anti-Communist to power in Laos coincided with the demise of the ICC, which adjourned sine die on 19 July 1958. Although the political settlement of November 1957 and the election of May 1958 seemed to have accomplished the job for which the commission had been created, the NLFK opposed adjournment and, with North Vietnamese, Red Chinese, and Soviet backing, began a vigorous campaign for its reestablishment. Prime Minister Phoui opposed reestablishment with equal vigor and with full support of the United States. Armed with special powers from the National Assembly, Phoui declared on 11 February 1959

*The understanding between Laos and North Vietnam signed at the Bandung Conference in April 1955.

that, since the political settlement with the Pathet Lao had fulfilled all provisions of the Geneva Agreements pertaining to Laos, the ICC had no further authority.¹⁷

Even before Phoui's denial of authority to the ICC, his program to clean out corruption in the government, devalue the currency, suppress subversion, and start a rural improvement program--all with the advice and encouragement of the United States--had brought on a greatly intensified campaign of denunciation, protest, and vilification by the NLF. And of course, the latter was strongly supported by North Vietnam and Communist China. This led Phoui on 14 January 1959 to ask for and receive from the National Assembly special authority to rule for one year without normal legislative restrictions.¹⁸

After strengthening his hand by signing new treaties with anti-Communist Thailand and South Vietnam, Phoui launched a bold program to bring all factions and all territory in Laos under control of the Royal government. Pursuant to the agreement of November 1957, two battalions of Pathet Lao troops and considerable military equipment had been integrated into the RL. Integration was only nominal, however, since there had been prolonged negotiations over terms, particularly the number of officer and noncommissioned officer positions to be given ex-Pathet Lao troops.

When the finally agreed upon number of officers assembled on 11 May 1959 to receive their ranks and take their oaths of allegiance to the Royal government, leaders of the two battalions refused, on orders from Prince Souphanouvong, to take part in the ceremony. Three days later,

after alerting his forces, the commander of the AHL ordered troops of the two battalions to submit, resign from the service, or be declared rebels. The first battalion, stationed near Luang Prabang, submitted, but the second battalion, encamped on the Plaines des Jarres near Xieng Khouang, escaped through the lines of regular units seeking to surround it and fled into the hills near the North Vietnam frontier. Back in Vientiane, Prime Minister Phoui immediately arrested Prince Souphanouvong and several of his cohorts and reorganized the cabinet. Most of the NLFK leaders later escaped and fled to the northeast, probably with the connivance of government officials.¹⁹

With their military organization severely impaired and their chief political leader under arrest, the Communists must have believed that events in Laos were running against them. They still controlled large areas of Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, however, and could depend upon support and supplies from North Vietnam. Pressure from this direction was now to be intensified. Immediately after the event on the Plaines des Jarres, propaganda from Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow began to insist that a civil war was taking place in Laos and that border provocations had been fomented against North Vietnam. Radio Peking charged that "the Laotian reactionaries . . . are trying to persecute the democratic forces in Laos in order to assume dictatorial control over the country." The real purpose, according to the NLFK, was to "gradually turn Laos into a colony and military base of the U.S. imperialists."²⁰

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II. U.S. SUPPORT OF LAOS

When Laos assumed responsibility for its own defenses in 1954, its resources were totally inadequate to support even minimum security forces. The Royal government requested financial assistance from the United States to support its national defense and provide some internal financial stability. The United States furnished economic aid pursuant to notes exchanged with the Laotian government on 6 and 8 July 1955. These notes expanded the scope of an economic cooperation agreement with Laos dating back to 9 September 1951. Economic aid for Laos was administered by a U.S. Operations Mission (UEOM), staffed by the International Cooperation Administration (ICA). It operated in the field in the usual manner, under general direction of the U.S. Ambassador.*

The United States furnished military equipment and supplies to both Laos and France during the civil war in Indochina. This aid resulted from the Agreement for Mutual Defense Assistance in Indochina between the United States and France, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam--the Pentilateral Agreement--signed at Saigon on 23 December 1950. The agreement was designed to support "the common interest of the free peoples of the world in the maintenance of the independence, peace, and security of nations devoted to the principles of freedom." The United States

*Ambassadors to Laos during the period covered by this study were Charles W. Yost, July 1955-June 1956; J. Graham Parsons, July 1956-February 1958; and Horace H. Smith, March 1958-June 1960.

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promised Laos political, moral, and material support so long as the Laotian government made a vigorous effort to maintain its independence.¹

Economic and Military Assistance

Since the Geneva Agreements permitted the introduction into Laos of military equipment "necessary for the defense of Laos," the United States continued this aid after the Indochinese war, at the specific request of the Royal Laotian government. Administration of military assistance became the function of a Program Evaluation Office (PEO) established within the USCM at Vientiane. In addition to providing materiel for the Laotian army, the United States furnished technicians to train the army in the use and maintenance of this equipment. These training activities were carried on in cooperation with the French Military Mission (FMM), which had overall responsibility for military training in Laos, including sole authority for the conduct of tactical training.²

It was the policy of the U.S. Government to prevent Laos from passing into the Communist bloc or becoming economically dependent upon the Communists. The United States hoped to assist Laos in the development of a stable, free, representative government with the will and ability to resist Communism from within and without, thereby strengthening the Free World. There was almost unanimous agreement that without substantial economic, political, and military aid from the United States, Laos would soon pass behind the "Bamboo Curtain" and that the rest of Southeast Asia would likely follow. At the same time, American officials recognized that U.S. assistance alone could not make Laos secure, but that Laotian officials

would have to put forth a sustained, coordinated effort to save their country. 3

Politically, the United States hoped to persuade Laotian leaders to resist Communist blandishments and strengthen their nation's political ties with such pro-Western or neutralist countries as Thailand, South Vietnam, the Philippines, Burma, and India. The U.S. economic program, financed and supervised by the ICA, concentrated on improving health, education, public works, and agriculture. Special emphasis was placed on helping improve the well-being of people living in the rural villages. The public works projects included rehabilitating airfields, opening roads, improving ferries and bridges, improving telegraph communications, digging wells, and constructing market halls.

U.S. economic assistance to Laos under the Mutual Security Program totaled approximately \$64.6 million before fiscal year 1957, \$47.1 million during fiscal year 1957, \$35 million for 1958, and an estimated \$22 million for fiscal year 1959. An additional \$4 million designated "technical assistance" was expended prior to fiscal year 1957, \$4.8 million in fiscal year 1957, \$1.2 million during fiscal year 1958, and about \$1.6 million during fiscal year 1959. 4

Obviously, the poorly trained, logistically weak, and indifferently led Laotian armed forces could not suppress a well-organized and strongly supported insurrection without foreign assistance and encouragement. In January 1955, when the United States took over the job of financing and equipping Laotian defense forces, that country possessed an army of

27,000 to 31,000 men, augmented by the French Military Mission of 1,500 officers and NCO's and 3,500 French combat troops. There was also an air force of 500 to 550 men, and a 250-man navy operating 18 small boats on the Mekong River. In addition, Laos had an "auto-defense" corps of about 8,800 men, organized to act as an auxiliary to the AML.

After notification on 12 October 1955 that the FEO would be set up to control U.S. military aid to Laos, the JCS recommended 25,000 as an appropriate size for Laos' armed forces. In establishing this number in February 1956 the JCS accepted the recommendation of U.S. representatives in Laos and the Commander in Chief Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Adm. Felix B. Stump.⁵

By 1957 the Laotian military force consisted of 12 infantry battalions, 1 parachute battalion, 1 artillery-mortar battalion, 3 armored reconnaissance companies, and about 41 commando companies, plus the small naval and air forces already mentioned. The air force, a miscellaneous, composite squadron, could perform rescue, liaison, and light logistic missions. Most of the operating personnel were French, but about 160 Laotians were being trained in France. The French were also training about 350 Laotians locally, and by May 1957, 3 had learned to fly the L-19 and 2 had qualified as C-47 copilots.

Although the United States hoped eventually to build up an air group of 3 squadrons--1 observation (T-6), 1 transport (C-47), and 1 miscellaneous and rescue (helicopters, L-19's, and L-20's)--JCS guidance through 1960 did not go beyond the 1 composite squadron of 25 aircraft. In July

1959 the Laotian air force consisted of a transport flight of 6 C-47's, a liaison and training flight equipped with 6 L-19's, and an observation flight using 2 L-20's. Since this squadron's mission was logistical support, the planes were not armed. The Nationalist Chinese Civil Air Transport (CAT) was under contract to furnish additional logistical support in an emergency. The size of the Laotian armed forces changed little through 1959, but the Department of Defense (DOD) and JCS made a strong effort to improve their quality.

The United States bore the entire cost of this military effort, even including the pay of Laotian troops. Through fiscal year 1956 the cost of military equipment delivered to Laos totaled \$28.4 million; in fiscal year 1957, \$4.3 million; in 1958, \$4.6 million; and for fiscal year 1959, an estimated \$6.4 million. In addition, \$11.6 million worth of supplies from excess stocks of the U.S. armed services or other MAF requirements of fiscal years 1950-59 had been delivered to Laos by June 1959.

In June 1959, the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Monetary Affairs questioned the amount and character of U.S. aid to Laos, especially the large share going for military aid. The JCS replied that the size and composition of the assistance program had been based on a military estimate of the forces required to maintain internal security and a limited defense against external aggression. Although the JCS did not consider itself in a position to assess the relative emphasis that should be placed on military and economic assistance, it expressed strong conviction that Laos could never develop economically or politically without reasonable stability and security.⁶

Despite U.S. assistance, Laotian military strength probably declined between 1954 and 1959, largely because of the decline of French support and the Laotian attitude toward the French. The French gradually withdrew their cadre and technicians from the ANL, leaving it understaffed and deficient in its capacity to plan or execute military operations. By mid-1959 the French force in Laos, originally 5,000 strong, had fallen to less than 500, and Bano, near Savannakhet, was the only French base left in the country. Also, after France relinquished her control, Laotians tended to resent French officers in positions of leadership and ignored their advice.

The FEO, established at Vientiane in November 1955 to control the dissemination of U.S. equipment and train Laotians in its operation, faced an extremely difficult task. The French were jealous of their prerogatives and often uncooperative. Chiefly because of the Geneva Agreements' prohibition against any foreign troops in Laos except French, the FEO staff originally consisted of only about 40 people, most of whom were ex-military officers. Since the job became bigger and more difficult than anticipated, the United States increased the staff and, in January 1959, began to replace key people with active military personnel. Brig. Gen. John Reintges, USA, went to Laos as chief of the FEO. Although this violated the Geneva Agreements, which the United States officially adhered to, the U.S. Government could rationalize its action on the grounds that Laos no longer considered itself bound by the Geneva Agreements.* 7

*Nevertheless, the State Department continued to deny publicly that the United States had sent military personnel to Laos.

Bolstering the ANL

By July 1958, defense officials in Washington had become decidedly uneasy over what they termed the "deteriorating situation in Laos." Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Army Chief of Staff, learned that the USGM and Ambassador Horace H. Smith in Vientiane had made recommendations to the State and Defense Departments asking for a speeding in U.S. assistance programs. The Army feared that State's withholding of money to pay Laotian troops until the Royal government completed its monetary reform⁶ might cause a collapse of morale in the ANL. In addition, Taylor felt that the whole military aid program was too slow and cumbersome to save Laos from chaos and an eventual Communist triumph. By August he had persuaded the JCS to send a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense asking the latter to express grave concern to the Secretary of State concerning the slowness of monetary reform and the dangers in any delay of Laotian aid. Although State withheld dollars until Laos devaluated its currency, it is debatable, since the troops got their pay, whether any great harm resulted. Other aspects of the aid program, however, continued to suffer from delays and inefficiency.⁶

In November and December 1958, just before he became chief of PEO, General Hainiges inspected the Laotian army and made several recommendations to improve its effectiveness. These were incorporated by Adm. Harry D. Felt (CINCPAC) in his general concept for improving the ANL, which he submitted to the JCS on 13 December. Felt's chief proposals were

⁶Prime Minister Phoui's monetary reform of late 1958, previously mentioned, resulted largely from U.S. pressure.

to (1) reorganize the PEO and increase its staff by 32 people, including 20 Laotians; (2) improve logistics by sending a survey team to take an inventory of material on hand and speed up delivery of needed items; (3) assist training of the AML by sending 12 mobile training teams (MIT's), consisting of 24 officers and 72 enlisted men, for a period of six months beginning 1 April 1959; (4) train 20 Laotians for three months at the Infantry School, Ft. Benning, Ga., during the fourth quarter of fiscal year 1959, and 4 in fiscal year 1960; and (5) send Army special forces and psychological warfare teams to work with the PEO. This plan received approval from the PEO, the U.S. Ambassador, Laotian civil and military officials, and both the French Embassy and Military Mission. Admiral Felt believed that unless some such plan were approved immediately, Laos would fall to the Communists. 9

Although DOD accepted the Haintgas-Felt plan on 13 January 1959 and JCS proceeded on the assumption that it would win final approval, considerable time passed while the State Department considered how best to minimize the reactions of North Vietnam, Communist China, and the ICC powers and keep from offending France. In November the French Embassy and Military Mission in Laos had given enthusiastic approval, but in April the French government rejected the plan because it violated restrictions imposed by the Geneva Agreements and because it would increase U.S. influence in Laos at the expense of the French.

Nearly two months dragged by before a plan could be worked out for French-American cooperation. This plan provided that the MIT's would be

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supervised by the FIA, and in each region where they operated a French officer would act as a general supervisor of the training program. He would have an American deputy, and any problems they could not resolve would be referred to the chiefs of the FIA and FEO. American technicians would be responsible for training in communication, motor maintenance, demolition, field engineering, field sanitation and first aid, and the operation and maintenance of U.S. material. The French would continue to be responsible for all tactical training, but they would have only nominal supervision over U.S. training activities. The French-American understanding also provided that the United States would replace 65 French technicians advising the ANL on logistical matters. As a result, on 21 August 1959, OGD and the State Department approved the FEO's plan to add 17 U.S. military and 103 Filipino contract technicians to its staff to supervise operations in the ANL technical services.¹⁰

Difficulties and distressing delays plagued the U.S. assistance program for Laos through most of 1959. Admiral Felt soon learned that he did not have sufficient resources in the Pacific Command to supply the MIT's, which formed the heart of his plan for improving the ANL. He had to go back to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) (ISA) with a request that the Army furnish the teams from its forces in the United States. Felt proposed to deploy the teams to Laos through Thailand in increments of four teams. Although arrangements for the teams could be made in this instance by the time the agreement was reached with the French in June 1959, the delay illustrates the difficulties accompanying much of the Laotian aid program.¹¹

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The Air Force's experience in trying to expedite delivery of two C-47's and three L-20's to Laos became almost ridiculous in its display of delays and frustrations. When Maj. Gen. Donald R. Hutchinson, the Headquarters USAF Assistant for Mutual Security, visited Laos in October 1958, Ambassador Smith convinced him that strengthening the Laotian air force might prove decisive in saving the country from the Communists. The JCS and ISA agreed and authorized the Air Force to find the planes and get them to Laos as soon as practicable. In January 1959, DCS/Operations decided that no C-47's were available in the Air Force inventory. On 4 February, in response to an appeal from CINCPAC, the Air Force asked ISA for funds to procure them from commercial sources. ISA funds did not materialize until 29 May, and MAP approval was delayed until mid-June.

Before starting procurement from a commercial firm, the Director of Material Programs tried once more to find the planes within the Air Force, but failed. Nevertheless, even though the Pathet Lao offensive in Laos had been launched more than two weeks earlier, when the Air Force sent a procurement directive to the Bureau of the Budget for coordination on 7 August, its director objected because he thought the planes should come from the Air Force inventory. "Now," said General Hutchinson, in his letter to Maj. Gen. Jacob E. Smart, Assistant Vice Chief of Staff, "we are back where we were two months ago, [and] . . . as of now there is no decision as to how these requirements will be met, or if they ever will be."¹²

Later in August, no doubt spurred by the growing crisis in Laos, the Air Force took the two C-47's from the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) and obtained the three L-20's from the Army. It dispatched them to Laos, where they were scheduled to arrive on 8 and 10 September 1959. In a letter to Gen. Thomas D. White, Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. John K. Gerhart, DC5/Plans and Programs, complained bitterly about the unwieldy administrative procedures. He believed that the more than six-month delay in getting an emergency decision on the delivery of these planes demonstrated that the decision-making process was not responsive to changing demands.

Keeping the Laotian air force equipped was a much bigger job than the mere size of the force would indicate. Because of the lack of railroads and serviceable roads, the ARL depended to a very large extent upon airlift, often airdrops, to supply its units fighting in the jungle. The ICA was helping Laos repair and rebuild about 40 airfields, but most of these were grass strips usable only during the dry season. Only the fields at Sene base and Vientiane could accommodate heavy transports the year round, and loads had to be reduced at the latter during the wet season. The Air Force believed Luang Prabang, Pakse, and Xieng Khouang could handle C-47's most of the year.¹³

The Department of Defense encountered perplexing problems in financing the Laotian assistance programs after the emergency arose in the summer of 1959. On 9 August, John E. Irwin II, Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) asked for State Department concurrence in assuring Laos that the United States would support immediate measures to augment its military forces,

partly by increasing army strength from 25,000 to 29,000. The best military judgment of DOD, JCS, and American representatives in Laos agreed that this would be necessary to save the Royal government, but since \$8.5 million in additional funds had to be found, Irwin recommended taking money from the President's contingency fund. In September, C. Douglas Dillon, Under Secretary of State, approved taking \$5.5 million from MAP funds, but the remainder of the money would have to come from the ICA. Dillon withheld any decision on using money from the contingency fund, saying this would have to wait until the fiscal year 1960 MAP funds had been appropriated.

Another problem concerned the size of the FEO staff at Vientiane. American representatives in Laos, CINCPAC, and ISA believed that the military personnel of the FEO needed to be increased by about 19 officers and 21 enlisted men in order to compensate for the lack of educated and experienced Laotians to supervise supply and training. The State Department disapproved because of the recent rapid and substantial growth of the official American family in Vientiane--from 249 on 15 July 1959 to 494 on 15 October if the current proposals, including this one, were approved. ^{for Political Affairs} Robert Murphy, Under Secretary of State, pointed out that the United States had to exercise great circumspection in Laos or it would arouse suspicion and opposition on the part of the British, French, and especially the Indians. The Indians had been surprisingly cooperative and had saved the United States embarrassment so far by keeping silent about the training program and the thinly disguised use of military personnel.

Most of the American military officials wanted to openly establish a MAAG in Laos, thus abandoning the pretense, but Murphy and Dillon² believed this might demonstrate to the world that the United States was actually doing things that the Communists were accusing it of doing.

In Vientiane a related difficulty had arisen because of the rapid expansion of the FEO. Most of the latter's administrative support came from the USOM. By 20 September 1959, Ambassador Smith needed more people to do the necessary housekeeping for the FEO, especially in executive and comptroller functions. Smith declared that the only alternative to giving the USOM more people was to convert the FEO into a MAAG with its own administrative staff. In theory, it could remain an operational segment of the USOM and keep the FEO title. Thus Smith was in essential agreement with the military departments. These developments alarmed the State Department and led Murphy to suggest that the United States attempt to cut its staff in Laos rather than increase it. As a result, no significant change occurred in the size of the FEO or USOM staffs during the remainder of 1959.¹⁴

Communist Reactions

By mid-May 1959, civil war in Laos had probably become inevitable, although serious armed conflict did not break out until two months later.¹⁵ In several respects armed rebellion constituted a Communist reaction to

²During much of the fall of 1959, Dillon was Acting Secretary of State, since Secretary Christian Herter was making a tour of South America.

¹⁴There had been a few minor incidents as early as January 1959.

developments in Laos and elsewhere. The general trend in Southeast Asia had been moving against Communist interests for about a year, and in Laos events had challenged several Communist objectives. The Phoui government introduced monetary and other reforms, weakened the NLEX by obtaining defections from its membership and hindering its access to Hanoi, and finally, after obtaining authority from the National Assembly to rule by decree, attempted to put the former Pathet Lao armed forces under complete control of the Royal government. The Phoui cabinet also adopted a definition of neutralism that precluded relations with Communist countries and favored closer ties with the West. No event assumed greater significance in the minds of the Communists, at least in their propaganda, than the Laotian claim that the ICC's duties under the Geneva Agreements had been fulfilled with the nationwide election of May 1958. This was especially serious since the ICC appeared to concur. The Communists believed that their influence on Laotian politics, and thus on foreign policy, had been weakened, that the post-Geneva status quo was being upset, and that they faced the prospect of increasing effectiveness of Western and SEATO activity.

The agreement of November 1957 had not resulted in NLEX control of the Royal government, as the Communists had hoped and fully expected. Integration of the Pathet Lao armed forces into the ANL would have redounded to the benefit of the NLEX only if they had maintained a large measure of political control. Under this situation, integration would have been very dangerous to the Royal government. Now that the anti-Communist Phoui Souvanna seemed to be in control, the pro-Communists could not afford to permit real military integration. By the

summer of 1959 the NLFK was in a very awkward position. It had to disavow the action of its armed units, thereby preserving its fragile legality in the eyes of the Royal government, or challenge the legality of the actions taken by the government since the summer of 1958. In early June 1959 the NLFK expressed willingness to settle for the situation of June 1958 when Souvanna Phouma headed a coalition government. This setting back of the clock 12 months, while superficially a mild request, was actually as intolerable to Phoui's government as the situation of May-June 1959 had become to the NLFK.

Comparatively little action occurred during June and July of 1959, except for the armed attack on Sam Neua and Phong Faly beginning about the middle of the latter month. At first the NLFK assumed the role of primary spokesman for the Asian Communist position on Laos. Then, on 1 June, it issued a statement through Hanoi strongly condemning the Phoui government for provoking civil war in Laos "on orders of the U.S. imperialists." Phoui was also accused of attempting to drag the country into the aggressive SEATO bloc and permit the use of Laos as a base for provocations against her peace-loving neighbors. The government replied by announcing that the recent incident on the Plaines des Jarres was closed and that individual members of the NLFK could go about their normal activities, provided these remained within the scope of constitutional legality. Thus the government considered the issue a wholly domestic one and would look upon any outside intervention as aggression.¹³

Sometime between the middle of May and the middle of July 1959 the directing hand of Communist strategy in Laos seems to have shifted from

the NLFK to Hanoi and Peiping, and possibly even to Moscow. On 15 June, Hanoi outlined its charges against the Royal Laotian government. Heading the list were (1) repudiation of the Geneva Agreements, (2) forcing the IOC to discontinue its activities, (3) carrying out the U.S. policy of aggression, and (4) provocation of neighboring countries. Thus, the emphasis had shifted to those "crimes" which threatened North Vietnam and, possibly, the whole Communist position in Southeast Asia. By July, Communist China was denouncing Britain for refusing to insist upon reconvening the IOC. It appears that Peiping, still smarting from its loss of prestige at Quency and Matsui in 1958, now feared that SEATO was out to strengthen its position and upset the power balance in this area. Before the end of July the United States had become the chief villain and would have to accept the blame for the inevitable conflict. Any possible action in Laos by North Vietnam would be purely defensive.

Before the first serious fighting broke out on 16 July, an impasse had been reached between the Phoui government on the one hand and the NLFK and its friends in Hanoi and Peiping on the other. Phoui had stigmatized the Pathet Lao not only as rebels, but, in view of their strong support from North Vietnam and Communist China, as "foreigners." The latter, in turn, had issued statements embodying a set of demands on the Royal Laotian government, not only totally unacceptable but known and possibly designed to be so. In the United States, the State Department suspected that a general Communist conspiracy had fomented the civil war in Laos. Spokesmen for the department called attention to the visit of

Ho Chi Minh, President of North Vietnam, to Moscow on 2 and 3 July and his conversations with Premier Nikita Khrushchev on the latter date. On his way home he stopped in Communist China, spending several days in Peiping. Two lesser members of the North Vietnam politburo also visited the Soviet Union where they were received by Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan. Washington did not conceal its suspicions that the U.S.S.R. was at the bottom of the trouble, despite Khrushchev's impending visit to the United States.^{*16}

^{*16}In 1958 there had been a meeting in Peiping between Khrushchev and Mao Tse-tung just before the artillery blockade of Quemoy and Matsu.

XII. CRISES OF SEPTEMBER 1959

After 1 July, events in Laos moved slowly but steadily toward a crisis. The first Pathet Lao offensive, beginning about 16 July, consisted of a two-pronged attack; the first aimed at the town of Phong Saly, and the second, with Luang Prabang as the ultimate objective, struck at Sam Neua. Both attacks bogged down into demultory guerrilla fighting. The Pathet Lao troops broke when they met rather mild resistance from the ARL. Some key points were taken but later lost, fresh reserves were fed in by both sides, and for a month it seemed that the Pathet Lao would have to be satisfied with the prolonged struggle it had announced that it would wage.

This action, which took place during the last half of July and early August 1959, opened the Pathet Lao offensive to recapture the territory that had been occupied by the Royal government after the political agreements of 1957. This area of northeastern Laos had to be the first military target because the primary strength of the Pathet Lao, political as well as military, lay in these provinces. Northeastern Laos not only contained most of the national minorities upon which the NLFM depended for its political support but it also provided the approaches to the rebels' sanctuary in North Vietnam. The Pathet Lao training and supply area lay just across the North Vietnam border near Dien Bien Phu. An offensive from this location would naturally cut south into Sam Neua Province and west into Phong Saly. And capture of the town of Sam Neua would recover

the former headquarters of the Pathet Lao organization. To the disappointment and perhaps surprise of the Communists, however, this first Pathet Lao offensive did not produce any decisive results.¹

The early failure of the Pathet Lao appears to have resulted from their underestimation of ARL strength and from poor timing. The rebels had struck during the monsoon because they believed the longer supply lines and lack of roads between Vientiane and the battle area would fatally handicap the ARL. The gamble did not pay off as well as expected, since the ARL had been able to accumulate some reserves of weapons, ammunition, and troops on the spot and could resupply their troops by air. To a degree, the handful of C-47's and L-19's, which resupplied the Royal troops and maintained communications, proved decisive. There also is some indication that the Pathet Lao moved prematurely. Although it is difficult to obtain such solid evidence on details of the fighting, the Pathet Lao probably never had more than 3,000 troops available, and they most likely never exceeded 1,000 in any one action.²

Despite its early successes in thwarting rebel attacks, the ARL could not effectively contain them for long. The military situation grew more serious in August, and by the end of that month the Royal government was in serious trouble. With much of the army tied down in the northeast, the threat to internal security was especially grave. By 30 August, although the towns of Ban Houa and Phong Saly still held out, the Pathet Lao was in striking distance of Luang Prabang, one drive threatened Vientiane, and sporadic guerrilla fighting had broken out north of Savannakhet. Perhaps

more serious was the Communist success among disaffected national minorities in the Boloven highlands of the south. This area became a focus of NLF activity, and its success here would be particularly dangerous, since it would cut off Vientiane's communications with South Vietnam.³

Since early August, Prime Minister Phoui had been considering an appeal to SEATO or the United Nations. Although it seems that North Vietnam fully expected him to ask SEATO for help, he eventually decided on the U.S., of which Laos was a member. On 4 August the Laotian Foreign Minister telegraphed Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold, describing the military situation and asking him to inform the other member states. On 29 August, a special envoy of the Royal government met with Hammarskjold to present a detailed outline of the situation in Laos and invite the Secretary General to suggest measures for achieving a peaceful settlement. Although Hammarskjold seems to have been reluctant to get the Security Council involved in Southeast Asia, Phoui forced his hand. On 4 September, after declaring that a new and more violent rebel attack had been launched on 30 August, the Laotian Foreign Minister charged North Vietnam with "flagrant aggression" and appealed to the United Nations for an emergency force to halt that aggression and prevent it from spreading.⁴

U.S. Plans for Military Action

By early August, U.S. Government agencies directly concerned with defense and foreign relations were viewing development in Southeast Asia with alarm. They not only feared that Laos might soon fall to the rebels but they also believed Communist China might take advantage of the disorder

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to create additional trouble in the area. On 12 August, Allen W. Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), warned the Operations Coordinating Board, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates, Jr., warned the JCS, that the United States should be prepared for trouble from Communist China anywhere in the Far East. Gates asked the JCS to reexamine the contingency plans for the Pacific--Laos and Taiwan in particular--and bring to his attention any deficiencies that required DOD action. Although the Joint Staff did not anticipate full-scale intervention by North Vietnam or Red China, it did believe they were directing the insurgency. Furthermore, the outbreak of violence, by disrupting the U.S.-French training program, would likely keep the Laotian army from attaining the capacity to establish national stability.

General White was especially upset by the apparent inability of the United States to improve the AEL's military posture. He proposed that the United States throw off the restrictions of the Geneva Agreements, notify the French that the United States should take over the military training of the AEL, and establish a full-scale MAAG in Laos. White thought any unfavorable international political repercussions resulting from such action would have to be weighed against the loss of Laos itself. On 4 September the JCS sent a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense embodying substantially the proposals White had made five days earlier. The JCS further recommended that CINCPAC alert his forces at once and that the State Department begin diplomatic action to obtain outside military assistance. SEATO afforded a legal basis for U.S. action, since Laos was

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one of the protocol nations listed in Article IV of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty.⁵

Meanwhile, by the first week in August, the JCS had begun reviewing CIBCPAC's Operations Plan (Oplan) No. 32(L)-59, providing for military support of Laos. This plan, published in June, was designed primarily to hold the main cities and other vital centers in Laos, thus freeing the ARL for stronger operations against the rebels. The United States hoped for the participation of SEATO or other allied nations, but Oplan 32(L)-59 placed chief reliance on a swift U.S. movement to save the situation in an emergency. CIBCPAC would deploy Joint Task Force (JTF) 116, including three battalions of the 31 Marine Expeditionary Force, from Okinawa to Laos, using a combination of air and sea lift. After initial JTF 116 objectives were secured, further operations would depend on the situation in Laos and requests by Laotian authorities. The plan envisaged alerting one USAF tactical fighter squadron for possible movement to Thailand and replacement of the Marine forces in Laos with two Army battle groups airlifted from Hawaii. In addition, Army special forces teams, Navy mobile construction units, and other support units would go in when needed. One attack carrier strike force would operate in the South China Sea, out of sight from land. The forces going to Laos would have to stage through Thailand, mainly at Bangkok. Oplan 32(L)-59 provided for additional Marine and Army forces to be shifted to the western Pacific or placed on alert to counter at least the initial intervention, which would likely come from North Vietnam and, possibly, from Red China.⁶

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Both the Air Force and the Army objected to CINCPAC's plan. The Air Force found it unacceptable because it lacked any firm commitment of USAF units other than for airlift and because of the excessive size of the land forces assigned to JTF 116. The Air Force wanted some of its combat elements included in JTF 116, to arrive in Bangkok simultaneously with the deployment of the first ground forces to Laos. A USAF tactical fighter squadron and a tactical reconnaissance force would be needed to conduct counter-air and reconnaissance operations and demonstrate U.S. intentions to support its Asian allies. USAF officials believed that one Army battle group would be sufficient to save Laos from rebel insurgency and that provision for intervention by North Vietnam or Red China ought to be in a separate plan.

The Army objected to the plan because it believed CINCPAC had not complied with DOD Directive 5100.1, which provided that in such operations Army forces would be used to hold and defend land areas. Also, since Army forces would be used to carry out the main operations after the initial phase, an Army general ought to be in command in Laos from the start.⁷

Army and Air Force objections to Oplan 32(L)-59 persuaded the JCS and CINCPAC to modify it considerably before the end of August. As modified the plan provided that, except in an emergency, an Army general would command JTF 116 and the main combat forces would consist of Army battle groups. In addition, Air Force units would be deployed to Bangkok at the same time ground forces moved into Laos. Nevertheless, Admiral Felt insisted that an alternate plan remain in effect for emergency use. In

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this event the original force would consist of Marine units from Okinawa because they could get to Laos quicker. An Army general would assume command as soon as he could get to Laos with a substantial body of troops.⁸

During the first week of September it seemed to the JCS and IAA that Laos was on the verge of a collapse--intelligence officials feared that Prime Minister Phoui and his cabinet might panic at any moment. By the 4th, JCS, OSD, and the Secretary of State had agreed that CINCPAC ought to be instructed to alert his forces, and the Secretary of State so informed the President. At 0918, 5 September, word reached the State Department that President Eisenhower approved the recommended military preparations.⁹ If military action had to be taken, the President wanted it to be "with great swiftness" once the decision was made. And he believed the decision should be made in time to prevent U.S. forces from having to restore a position already lost. Eisenhower wanted no public announcement without his permission. If questioned, military authorities were to call the preparations a routine military exercise.

By 7 September the JCS had authorized CINCPAC to move his transport aircraft to designated airfields for troop loadings, to load the Marine forces that were to move by sea, and to send the Seventh Fleet into the South China Sea. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, Chairman of the JCS, passed excerpts of President Eisenhower's views to Admiral Felt. CINCPAC informed the commander of TAC that he would most likely ask him for C-130's to augment JTF 116's airlift capacity. He asked the JCS to assign CINCPAC

⁸Admiral Burke received a copy of the message for the JCS at 1125, and JCS sent a copy to IAA.

one C-130 squadron from the United States for deployment to the western Pacific and to make two additional squadrons available on short notice. CIECPAC also advised the Air Force that he would probably have an urgent requirement for four H-19 helicopters in storage at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. The Army proposed immediate deployment of an airborne battle group to Okinawa on six-month rotation, but, although he welcomed the support, CIECPAC insisted that he had far more need for an Army logistic command than for combat units.⁹

Preparations in the Pacific

In May, CIECPAC had alerted the Pacific Air Forces on the imminent publication of Opplan 32(L)-59 and informed it of the part it would play. The first job would be to move the airborne echelon of the Marine expeditionary force, with necessary headquarters and communication and support units, from Okinawa to the airfields of Vientiane and Sano. The plan called for the logistic support of the force by air for 30 days or until resupply could be established overland from Bangkok. The Marine force would seize the airfields, the city of Vientiane, and the Mekong River crossings near Vientiane and Savannakhet. Control of these areas would permit followup forces to move in, seize other vital areas, and render logistic, advisory, and communication support to the ARVN.

PACAF received specific jobs to (1) provide or arrange for the necessary airlift; (2) give the Marines whatever assistance they needed in operating aerial ports; (3) alert one tactical fighter squadron and one tactical reconnaissance force for movement to Thailand to furnish counter-air, air support, and reconnaissance operations; and (4) supply air traffic

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control, communication, and navigational facilities at Udon, Udorn (Udon Thani), Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima), and Don Mueang (Bangkok) airfields in Thailand. The Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces would furnish the fighter and reconnaissance planes and a photo processing center, and possibly some C-119's; the 315th Air Division would conduct the airlift; and the Airways and Air Communications Service (AACS) would provide command control, air traffic control, navigational aids, and aerial port assistance. The tactical fighters and reconnaissance units would move to Bangkok when the first Marine elements went to Laos.¹⁰

Maj. Gen. G. A. Roberts, USMC, Commander JTF 116, activated his headquarters on 7 July. Gen. Emmett O'Donnell, Jr., Commander in Chief PACAF after 1 August, instructed the Thirteenth Air Force to select an air component commander for JTF 116 and the 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo) to advise the commander of the task force on air operational planning. Headquarters PACAF began detailed planning for the sea and air movement of that portion of its forces needed in the operation.

On 20 August, Roberts held a conference at the Iwakuni Marine Air Facility in Japan to which commanders of PACAF, Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces, and the 315th Air Division sent representatives. The conference laid out a detailed plan providing for the participation of the Army as well as the Air Force in the anticipated action. In the first phase, one Marine battalion would seize Vientiane, one would go to Sene, and a third to an as yet undecided location in Laos. The conference also decided that Marine aviation would be preceded by its own communication ground equipment

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at Sene. The 315th Air Division would have 24 (later increased to 50) transport aircraft available to support the JTF. PACAF decided that the Thirteenth Air Force would furnish the tactical fighter squadron and the Fifth would provide the tactical reconnaissance force.¹¹

On 4 September, Admiral Felt warned all major commands in the western Pacific that he might have to put Oplan 32(L)-59 into effect on short notice, and he directed JTF 116 to be ready for operations at once. General Roberts was directed to assemble his staff and component headquarters and load his embarkation groups. CINCPAC regarded this as an alarming directive just short of an "implementation order." Next day Roberts announced that JTF 116 was ready for operation, and Maj. Gen. Thomas S. Moorman, Jr., Commander Thirteenth Air Force, said that the USAF components of the task force had been alerted at Clark Air Base and all assigned personnel were being assembled. AACS mobile units were already standing on alert at Ubon and Udorn to supply tower and homing facilities to guide aircraft into Sene and Vientiane.¹²

Had it become necessary to send JTF 116 to Laos, many serious problems would have arisen, some of which were painfully evident in August and early September. At the Iwakuni conference the 315th Air Division had committed itself to 12 airlift sorties per day from D-day through D/11. Kadena Air Base on Okinawa was to be the primary pickup point, and all airlift enroute to Southeast Asia was to funnel through Clark Air Base. Although PACAF disagreed, the commander of the 315th believed that Kadena, Clark, and Sene airfields would be saturated with planes. The 315th was especially worried

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lest control and handling problems become unmanageable when the increased traffic and stringent timetables associated with Oplan 32(L)-59 were imposed on the control system in Southeast Asia.

Another problem related to the types of transport aircraft to be used. PACAF based its planning on the assumption that it would have C-130's. It also anticipated that the requirement for airlift would likely exceed its capacity. In that event, O'Donnell expected to ask TAC for two additional squadrons of C-130's, one to be based at Kadena and one at Clark. If requirements dictated, he would ask for a third squadron, to be based at Kadena. Headquarters USAF, however, informed PACAF early in September that if it became necessary to augment the transport fleet during the operation, C-124's might be substituted. Although PACAF agreed to accept C-124's if C-130's were not available and the C-124's could be serviced by MATS, O'Donnell's staff was worried. The main concern was whether the airfields of Thailand and Laos would stand up under use by the larger, heavier C-124's.

PACAF's airlift also would have been restricted by lack of facilities at the Bangkok airfield. Early in September the U.S. air attache wired that, although blanket clearance had been granted for aircraft operating through Don Muang airfield at Bangkok, aircraft could be cleared only at the rate of two per day, largely because of the lack of warehousing and the inability of Vientiane to handle large quantities of incoming cargo. This situation was alleviated by improving facilities at Vientiane and contracting with CAF for more airlift at Bangkok, but there remained a

limitation of eight flights per day. In an emergency some flights probably could have been diverted to Chiang Mai, about 350 miles northwest of Bangkok.¹³

Some planners in the western Pacific had long questioned PACAF's assumption that Laotian airfields could accommodate C-130's and C-124's. The 315th decided in June that Seno and Vientiane could handle these planes during dry weather and could support sustained operations if pierced-steel planking were installed and maintained. However, the field probably could not support sustained C-130 or C-124 operations during wet seasons. A survey conducted in August indicated that the airfields at Seno, Vientiane, Pakse, and Luang Prabang were all suitable for the operations planned for them, with Luang Prabang being the least suitable. Pakse and Luang Prabang could handle only lighter planes, C-47's and possibly C-119's. All of the airfields would require continuous surface maintenance.

On 16 September, JTF 116 received a message from Vientiane stating that the airfield there had become unusable as a result of heavy rains. The large airlift scheduled for Vientiane under Oplan 32(L)-59 would have to be diverted, probably to Udorn, 40 miles south of Vientiane, and then shuttled to its destination. This would require the delivery of substantial POL supplies to Udorn, and, more important, the road from Udorn to Vientiane probably would not support sustained truck traffic.¹⁴

Air resupply for the forces initially sent to Laos, plus the Army's reinforced battle group, was expected to require about 12 transport

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sorties per day. This alone would severely tax the capacity of terminal facilities in the western Pacific and Southeast Asia and meant that a surface line of communication had to be established early, especially since there would be other users of the available transport and communication facilities. PACAF assumed that MATS would provide airlift for later phases of the operation if they were carried out. These movements would include (1) an Army logistic command from the United States to Bangkok, estimated to require 166 C-124 loads; (2) a brigade task force from Hawaii to Laos, estimated at 260 C-124 loads; and (3) a reinforced airborne battle group from the United States to Okinawa, estimated to require 163 C-124 loads.

Although CINCPCAC informed the JCS in late August that Oplan 32(L)-59 could be carried out with forces available in the western Pacific at the end of August, PACAF remained skeptical. Additional effort might be needed to accelerate the planned buildup or offset unforeseen delays, provide for possible expansion of the operation, and compensate for delays in establishing an adequate surface line of communication. Subcommands in the western Pacific had to base their plans for the Laos operation on using only those assets made available for that purpose. Aircraft committed to other high-priority missions could not be diverted to Oplan 32(L)-59. New requirements for Laos would have to be obtained from outside; otherwise PACAF could not maintain its overall general war posture while at the same time supporting JTF 116.15

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IV. THE CRISIS SUBSIDIES

Entry of the United Nations

Back in Washington, representatives of the State Department, DOD, CIA, USIA, and JCS, meeting on the afternoon of 4 September, learned that Laos had appealed to the United Nations without informing the United States, France, or the United Kingdom. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld was expected to fly back from Sao Paulo, Brazil, the next day and call an emergency meeting of the Security Council, probably on the 7th. Ambassador Smith had just called for U.S. intervention in Laos, and Adm. Arleigh A. Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, and Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, Army Chief of Staff, agreed that action ought to be taken at once or Laos would fall before the United Nations or SEATO could act. State Department and USIA officials argued, however, that if U.S. forces went into Laos at this time, North Vietnam or Red China, or both, would likely intervene in force.

Herbert Murphy feared that Laos did not have a strong case before the United Nations because there was no proof that North Vietnam had actually intervened with military forces. Some of the conferees favored SEATO action in Laos in order to avoid the Russian veto. Acting Secretary of State Dillon approved of both U.N. and SEATO investigations and thought the United Nations could get around the veto by resorting to Article 29 of its charter. A SEATO ambassador's meeting was scheduled for 6 p.m.

that evening (4 September) to acquaint SEATO with the situation in Laos and try to persuade Thailand to call an emergency meeting for the purpose of setting up a SEATO fact-finding team. Aside from Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, however, the SEATO nations seemed apathetic or preferred U.N. action.

The British thought that the United States ought to talk to the U.S.S.R. about the desirability of U.N. action before the upcoming session of the Security Council. Murphy believed, however, that it would be better for the British to talk to the Russians and let them know that the United States was seriously agitated.

Although Burke warned that CINCPAC might have to move over the weekend to save Laos, the meeting adjourned without any hard decision. State would try to stimulate SEATO action, and, barring a collapse in Laos, the United States would let the United Nations handle the matter for the time being.¹

At 3 p.m. on 7 September, Hammarskjold called the Security Council into emergency session to hear U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge propose the formation of a largely pro-Western² subcommittee of the Council to inquire into the Laotian situation and report back. The Soviet Union strongly objected to this proposal, professing to consider the Laotian war an internal affair of no concern to the United Nations. When a vote was taken on 8 September, 10 of the Security Council's 11 members voted

¹The observer group making up the subcommittee consisted of Shinichi Shibamoto, Japan; Indrojiu Garattieri, Italy; Brig. Gen. Harveto Aheras, Argentina; and Habib Bourguiba, Jr., Tunisia. Norio Aoki, Japan, was alternate.

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"yes," but the U.S.S.R. voted "no." Ordinarily the negative vote would have constituted a veto, but in this case the Council's President, Egidio Ortona of Italy, ruled that establishing a subcommittee of inquiry was a procedural matter not subject to the veto. The Soviet Union challenged the ruling but lacked the votes to invalidate it. The Security Council had been able to act without U.S.S.R. approval, just as Dillon had predicted, but some members feared that it had done so without proper regard for legality.²

Planning for Contingencies

JCS and OSD planning continued in something of a crisis atmosphere for nearly two weeks after the United Nations voted to send its team of investigators to Laos. Many observers questioned whether the United Nations would be able to find a solution, and others thought Laos would disintegrate before the U.N. team reached the Far East. Headquarters USAF doubted whether the current military proposals would solve the Laotian crisis in any case. On 6 September, General White suggested to JCS a new approach in order to deal with future eventualities. Should the Laotian rebellion fail to be contained by currently planned operations, White proposed that the United States employ airpower to insure the independence of its Asian allies. He advocated that the United States (1) deploy an additional squadron of B-47's to Clark; (2) prepare to destroy insurgent forces and their supply sources by striking targets in North Vietnam, using high explosive and, if necessary, nuclear bombs; (3) immediately send 10 to 15 fighter aircraft to Bangkok;

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(4) strengthen forces in the Pacific to insure their readiness to protect Taiwan and Korea, as well as Laos, and be prepared to fight a general war in the Pacific; and (5) at an appropriate time, make a public announcement of U.S. intentions.

White would have preceded any attack on North Vietnam with a warning that the United States intended to move decisively, and he would have attempted to obtain participation of SEATO in his retaliation on the Communists in Southeast Asia. His paper was not regarded with favor in the JCS, however, and the Director of Plans moved to have it withdrawn about seven months later. The Air Force considered the concept still valid, nevertheless, and it reflected a long-standing belief within Headquarters USAF that the Asian Communists would be much less inclined to cause trouble if they understood that U.S. counteraction would not be limited to the territory of Laos.³

After the United Nations became involved in the Laotian crisis, JCS, DOD, and State Department activity shifted toward planning for longer-term eventualities and action by SEATO. The JCS believed that the United States should take advantage of the lull in Laotian fighting, which followed dispatch of the U.N. team, to further strengthen U.S.-French training of the AML. Lemaitzer, in particular, felt that the French were not very effective in Laos, and he wanted the United States to assume more of the burden. Secretary of Defense Neil McElroy thought there had been too much uncertainty about possible U.S. action, and he believed that DOD and the State Department needed to formulate much more precise plans

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for dealing with such situations as the Laotian civil war. The JCS devised a plan whereby SEATO would take the initiative in Laos if the United Nations failed to quiet the disturbance. It was acknowledged that the United States would have to furnish most of the military forces and transport them to Laos, but one of the SEATO countries, preferably Australia or New Zealand, should furnish the military leadership.

The State Department advised extreme caution on the part of the United States now that the United Nations had become involved. Dillon emphasized that this was an exceedingly complex military-political problem. He feared that "exposing ourselves to the U.N." would be very embarrassing, especially in the absence of clear evidence of intervention by North Vietnam. He sought to stimulate SEATO interest and avoid offending the French. Although SEATO had been apathetic at first, since the first of September, it had come to recognize its responsibility and necessity for action, and Dillon insisted that the United States ought to maintain SEATO as a framework within which U.S. actions to save Laos could be undertaken. He also urged Defense officials to bear in mind the interests and sensitiveness of other SEATO countries, especially France, Britain, and Canada.

On 11 September, Dillon met with Australian Ambassador Howard Beale and members of his embassy staff to discuss SEATO affairs. Beale expressed gratification at the U.N. action, but he stated that Australia agreed with the United States that if the Laotian situation worsened, SEATO ought to be prepared to act. Such action might be necessary even if a U.N. force was proposed. Although Beale could not then speak officially for his government, he had no doubt that Australia would want

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to make a substantial military contribution. Deale and Dillon believed that Britain would go along, the Filipinos were moving in that direction, New Zealand and Pakistan probably could be depended upon, and even the French, who had been most reluctant, would probably join force with the others. Deale and Dillon agreed that U.S. Defense officials would discuss military plans with the Australians, probably at Pearl Harbor, before involving all of SEATO.⁴

Relaxation of the Alert

With the arrival of the Security Council's subcommittee in Laos on 15 September 1959, the flames of conflict subsided, and on 6 October, CINCPAC authorized a gradual relaxation of readiness for military action. Material needed for training and maintenance in the western Pacific was unloaded from the ships, and PACAF canceled its air transport alert. On 14 October, JTF 116 began to demobilize. The air components were deactivated, and members of the JTF staff returned to their parent organizations.

The U.S. team spent nearly a month examining evidence collected by the Royal Laotian government and conducting its own investigation in the frontier regions of Laos. Since the subcommittee received no cooperation from across the North Vietnamese border, it could not establish all of the pertinent facts. Consequently, the report it submitted to the Security Council on 6 November offered no definite conclusion on the participation of North Vietnamese regular troops in the fighting. It did indicate that North Vietnam had at least provided equipment, arms, ammunition, and supplies, as well as the help of political cadres.⁵

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Despite the relative tranquility in Laos after mid-September, trouble could recur whenever Communist strategy demanded it, and there remained great doubt as to whether the new "Spirit of Camp David" would find any application in Laos. Immediately following the report of the Security Council's subcommittee, Hammarskjold decided to leave the United Nations in the midst of a General Assembly session to examine on the spot the practicability of establishing in Laos a continuing U.N. "presence" similar to the arrangements he had made in Lebanon and Jordan the year before. Undeterred by a new Soviet remonstrance, Hammarskjold spent a week in Laos, and before returning to New York he arranged for another high U.N. official, S.E. Touomioja of Finland, to remain there for an additional month.⁶

These steps may help to explain the fact that there was no serious disturbance in Laos for the remainder of 1959. Nevertheless, a different kind of trouble continued to plague this beleaguered country. At the year's end a bitter quarrel between the LHL and the CDNI forced Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone and his cabinet to resign. On 31 December another pro-Western leader, Kou Abhay, established a temporary military government to rule pending a new election.⁷ This recurring political incompetence on the part of the anti-Communists pointed prophetically toward future trouble in the Kingdom of Laos.

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V. CONCLUSIONS

The Laotian crisis of 1959 furnished a revealing demonstration of Communist tactics in response to political developments in a small country. By virtue of its membership in SEATO and its position as guardian of the Free World, the United States for the third time in little more than a year⁹ faced critical problems in diplomatic and military policy. Aside from the interests of SEATO and American prestige in the Orient, the United States had such a large stake in Laos that it could hardly afford to let it be lost by default. No less at stake were the prestige and expectations of at least three Communist groups--the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and Chinese. And the U.S. State Department charged that the U.S.S.R. was involved as well.

Contrary to a widely accepted notion, the Communists found themselves on the defensive in Laos during the early phases of the crisis. Four years of negotiations had finally produced a coalition government in 1956, with active Hoo Lao Hak Kat participation. But continued pro-Communist intransigence and U.S. influence soon produced a nationalist reaction that overturned the coalition cabinet and brought to power an anti-Communist government headed by Phoui Sananikone. This development seriously alarmed the Communists because it coincided with a general trend in Southeast Asia that had been moving contrary to their interests

⁹There had been similar crises involving Lebanon and Taiwan in July-September 1958.

for more than a year. In Laos the Phoui government weakened the appeal of the NLEX by instituting domestic economic reforms. It also heightened the tension by hampering NLEX clandestine operations and attempting to bring the Pathet Lao military forces under full control of the Royal government.

Even more distasteful to the Communists, Phoui adopted a neutralism that precluded relations with Communist countries, strengthened Laos' ties with Thailand and South Vietnam, and demanded termination of the ICC. This action reduced Communist influence on Laotian internal politics, threatened the post-Geneva status quo in Indochina, and seemed to extend the influence of SEATO. Phoui's refusal to consider restoration of the ICC and his attempt to bring the Pathet Lao battalions under control of the Royal government produced an impasse. The Communist demand for restoration of a coalition government and the withdrawal of American assistance was unacceptable to both the Phoui government and the United States.

American encouragement of this "pro-Western neutrality" might be regarded as questionable. At least it was so regarded by Cambodia, France, and India, and even the British were doubtful. Although official U.S. policy stated that military and economic assistance would depend only on Laos maintaining its independence, there can be little doubt that U.S. officials openly encouraged Phoui to take a definitely anti-Communist stand. And they just as openly discouraged Souvanna Phouma's attempt to form a coalition government. Events proved that

North Vietnam and Red China would not permit such a development without putting up some kind of a fight.

Perhaps the greatest problem the United States faced during the 1959 crisis was the absence of a firm basis in Laos upon which to build a policy. The primitive nature of the country--its poverty, illiteracy, almost nonexistent transportation and communication facilities--and its geographical exposure to two strong Communist powers posed almost insurmountable difficulties. In addition, it appears that the Communists succeeded better than the Royal government in appealing to the village folk in the mountainous regions. The unreliability and lack of social consciousness of the ruling oligarchy, the lack of a sizable politically conscious population, and the bitter quarrels within the anti-Communist majority all complicated U.S. attempts to save the Royal government. The frequent uncooperativeness of the sensitive French added to the difficulty. Consequently, it might be questioned whether the situation was amenable to a solution favorable to the U.S. position.

Within the U.S. Government, a startling slowness in making decisions as well as differences of opinion between State and Defense officials created unwarranted confusion. Secretary McElroy's complaint in the midst of the September crisis that there had been no clear-cut decision as to what action the United States should take if Laos appeared about to collapse was a revealing admission. It appears that Defense officials were not sufficiently aware of the extremely complex diplomatic problems faced by the State Department, especially after the United Nations became

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involved at the beginning of September. The overriding question as to why there should have been so much delay in reaching an agreed-upon position is puzzling. Trouble had been brewing in Laos for several years, Communist tactics were well known, and most of the developments could have been foreseen. It appears that the decision-making process had not been much improved since the Lebanon and Taiwan crises of 1958.¹

The same degree of confusion and delay seemed to pervade SEATO and U.S.-SEATO planning. As late as 4 September 1959 there was much debate over whether SEATO or the United Nations should assume the chief responsibility in protecting Laos and whether SEATO would act if U.N. efforts failed. SEATO demonstrated a surprising lack of vigor, and it was not until after 10 September that Dillon and Murphy obtained any assurance of action by SEATO to support the Royal Laotian government. The French in particular, and to a lesser extent the British, doubted that Laos was the proper place for a showdown with the Communists. It would appear that the State Department ought to have been more prompt in its attempts to prod SEATO out of its lethargy. The mid-September plan of JCS, whereby SEATO would move into Laos with a predominantly U.S. force under Australian or New Zealand leadership, would likely have resulted in a rather costly military operation.²

The disagreement among the military services over CINCPAC's Opplan 32(L)-59 offers further evidence that too much of the planning for Laos was done in haste. Since CINCPAC, the JCS, and OSD had been seriously concerned about the situation in Laos for about a year, it should not

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have taken until August 1959 to determine what forces would be used if a crisis arose and whether a Marine or Army general would command the task force. The Air Force possibly had a legitimate complaint over the fact that it would have to furnish the air transport but would have few combat units and little authority.

The USAF suggestion of 8 September, involving the possible use of nuclear weapons to destroy the insurgents and their supply sources in North Vietnam as well as in Laos, raised very serious questions. It might be doubted whether there were any suitable targets for nuclear bombs in the jungles of northeastern Laos and northwestern North Vietnam. True, the Pathet Lao obviously received many supplies from caches around Dien Bien Phu. These might have been destroyed if they could have been located, but it is doubtful whether the results would have justified the effort. More important, such an attack would have spread the war to North Vietnam, probably to China, and might eventually have led to a general war in the Pacific. Furthermore, the use of nuclear weapons in Asia would have handed the Communists a tremendous propaganda victory. General White doubtless expected that the mere threat of such action by the United States would make the Communists more tractable, and he realized that without using nuclear bombs the United States would have to fight at a great disadvantage. Nevertheless, it would have been very dangerous to act on the assumption that the Communists would be deterred. USAF officials may have forgotten, or failed to take to heart, the lesson of Taiwan, where U.S. policy denied them the authority to use nuclear weapons.⁵

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Since it did not become necessary to put CINCPAC's operational plan into effect, any analysis of what would have happened in the Pacific must be based mainly on conjecture. Nevertheless, enough uncertainties existed to keep the staffs of PACAF, Thirteenth Air Force, and the 315th Air Division worried. The limitations on airlift at Bangkok, lack of suitable air bases in Laos, and the possibility of a last-minute shift in augmentation aircraft from C-130's to C-124's offered the possibility, even likelihood, of very serious logistic failures. Although logistic problems seemed to be better in hand than they had been during the Taiwan crisis of 1950, PACAF was still struggling feverishly to stock forward bases with the equipment and weapons of conventional warfare, particularly iron bombs and ammunition. Training problems had also been vastly complicated by the 1953 injunction against the use of nuclear weapons.⁴

Just as during the Taiwan crisis of 1950, logistic support and communications were the chief worries of an anticipated Laos operation until CINCPAC relaxed the alert in October. O'Donnell's staff doubted whether the operation could be carried out with the logistic forces made available, and the 315th Air Division feared the communication and control system in Southeast Asia would break down under increased traffic and stringent timetables. This feeling among responsible operations people indicated either that advanced planning had been inadequate or that available resources were stretched too thin to do the job imposed by national strategic policy.

NOTES

(All OCS, JCS, and AF D/Plans documents cited herein were examined in Records Adm, D/Plans, in the following files: OPA(57)20-5, OPA(57)20-9, OPA(58)20-5, OPA(58)20-9, RL(59)244, RL(59)248, RL(59)375.)

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1. Halpern & Fredman, pp 101-9.
2. Ibid., 109-11; Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 68-2-59 (S), 18 Sep 59, pp 4-5.
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5. Memo for Twining et al. from Pitcher, as cited n 3; memo (S) for JCS from Dep ED, subj: Readiness Measures in the Pacific, 13 Aug 59; memo (S) for JCS from C/S USAF, subj: U.S. Action to Meet Urgent Situation in Laos, 31 Aug 59, with note by Secretary to Holders of JCS 1992/731, 8 Sep 59, in JCS 1992/731; memo (S) for ED from JCS, subj: Situation in Laos, 4 Sep 59, in JCS 1992/742.

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14. Ibid., pp 26-27 (TS).
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2. Stebbins, U.S. in World Affairs, 1959, pp 309-11.
3. Memo (TS) for JCS from C/S USAF, subj: Preparation for Decisive Termination of Hostilities in Laos, & two incls, 8 Sep 59, in JCS 1992/741; memo for C/S USAF from D/Plans, same subj, 15 Mar 60; ENIE 68-2-59, 18 Sep 59, pp 5-6.
4. Memo (TS) for C/S USAF from Maj Gen Glen W. Martin, Dep D/Plans, subj: Situation in Laos, 18 Sep 59; memo (TS) for Gen Twining et al. from Capt J.O. Cobb, Dep S/JCS, & incl EM-993-59, 17 Sep 59; EM-961-59, Dept/State Memo of Conversations of 10 Sep 59, incl in memo (S) for Gen Twining et al. from Brig Gen H.L. Hillyard, S/JCS, subj: Situation in Laos, 28 Sep 59; Dept/State Memo of Conversations of 11 Sep 59 (S), Dept/State and Australian Ministers, in JCS 1992/751 (Note by Secretary to Holders, 28 Sep 59).

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7. Ibid.

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1. See Jacob Van Staaveren, Air Operations in the Taiwan Crisis, 1958 (AFCHO, 1960), pp 51-54; Robert D. Little and Wilhelmine Burt, Air Operations in the Lebanon Crisis, 1958 (AFCHO, 1960), pp 70-75.
2. Dept/State Memos of Conversations, 10-11 Sep 59, as cited Chap IV, n 4.
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G L O S S A R Y

AACS	Airways and Air Communications Service
ANL	Armee Nationale Laos
ASD(ISA)	Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs)
CAT	Civil Air Transport
CDNI	Committee for Defense of National Interests
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief Pacific Command
D	Directorate
DAF	Department of the Air Force
DM	Director's Memo
FMG	French Military Mission
ICA	International Cooperation Administration
ICC	International Commission for Supervision and Control
ISA	International Security Affairs
JTF	Joint Task Force
JMAAD	Joint Military Assistance Affairs Directorate
LHL	Lao Hon Lao
MA	Military Assistance
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MAP	Military Assistance Program
MS	Mutual Security
MTT	Mobile Training Team
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NLHX	Neo Lao Hak Kat
OCB	Operations Coordinating Board
PEO	Program Evaluation Officer
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SD	Secretary of Defense
SM	Secretary's Memo
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate
SS	Secretary of State
USA	U.S. Army
USIA	U.S. Information Agency
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission
U-SS	Under Secretary of State

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