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Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970 (U)

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iii

PREFACE

(U) This Report is one of a series that Rand is preparing under the sponsorship of the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Department of Defense. The Overseas Defense Research Office of ARPA specifically asked for analysis to be focused on the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. Government organization and management in the broad field of counterinsurgency and unconventional war.

(U) The present case study deals with the U.S. experience in Laos between 1962 and 1970. Although the United States has been actively involved in Laos since 1955, the Geneva Accords of 1962 opened a significantly new chapter from the point of view of both policy and organization -- a period marked by the effort to avoid the mistakes of 1955-1962. After 1970, the pattern of the war in Laos seemed to change once more, with the large-scale use of Thai troops, an intensified bombing program in North Laos, and employment of irregular forces away from their home areas. These developments, which are difficult to evaluate given the limited information available to us so far, have not been taken into account in the present analysis, whose conclusions apply solely to the years 1962-1970.

(U) The focus of the study is on organization and management; policies are described and analyzed only as they bear on organizational and managerial problems. But in Laos the two have been very closely related, as the 1962 Geneva Accords imposed major political constraints on our subsequent defensive operations and on the organization necessary to carry out such operations.

(U) The unconventional nature of the conflict, the constraints imposed by the Accords, the consequent demands on U.S. agencies for innovative approaches, and the unusual manner in which these demands were met make Laos in 1962-1970 a case study that should be of particular interest to those Department of Defense, JCS, and military service components concerned with unconventional conflict in remote areas. The lessons learned from this and other case studies will be summarized in another Rand report, which will make specific recommendations on organization and management in this field.

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iv

(U) Published Rand studies illuminating other aspects of the war in Laos include RM-5935-ARPA, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao*, and RM-5688-ARPA, *The North Vietnamese Military Adviser in Laos: A First-Hand Account*.

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v

SUMMARY

(U) If one grants that the U.S. purpose in Laos has been to fight a low-cost, low-profile delaying action to preserve the Lao buffer zone against North Vietnamese pressures, then the United States during 1962-1970 largely achieved its aim. It managed the unconventional war in Laos through the unified civilian management of field programs, delegation of responsibility to field operators, and adaptive response to the real-life needs in that remote scene of conflict.

(U) The situation as it was in 1962 placed constraints on U.S. policies and operations. Hardly a country except in the legal sense, Laos lacked the ability to defend its recent independence. Its economy was undeveloped, its administrative capability primitive, its population divided both ethnically and regionally, and its elite disunited, corrupt, and unfit to lead. These failings had led to the collapse of U.S. efforts in the 1950s to help establish an anti-Communist regime in Laos, and convinced Washington that a neutral government would be better suited to Lao conditions.

(C) This solution was thereupon embodied in the Geneva Accords of 1962. A cease-fire halted the fighting between Neutralist and Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) forces on the one hand and the rightist Royal Lao Government (RLG) on the other, and a coalition government of Communist, right-wing, and Neutralist elements was installed, with the Neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. The Accords went formally into effect in October 1962. Only the United States and the USSR, however, complied with them by withdrawing their forces; the North Vietnamese kept a substantial military presence in Laos. Of the three Lao armies that had been contending -- 10,000 Neutralists under Kong Le, about 20,000 Communist forces in the Lao People's Liberation Army (LPLA), and 48,000 in the rightist Forces Armées Royales (FAR) -- the Communists retained a major advantage after the cease-fire by virtue of continuing, covert North Vietnamese support.

(C) For the United States this created the problem of how to sustain a neutral and independent Laos within the constraints imposed by the Geneva Accords that Hanoi was disregarding. The dilemma first

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

vi

arose with respect to the 17,000-man irregular tribal force which the Americans originally had organized to assist the FAR. Washington tentatively decided to continue supporting these units, though at a reduced level and limited to defensive operations, while awaiting the outcome of negotiations to unite and demobilize all the armed forces of Laos.

(C) Prime Minister Souvanna, faced with the need to maintain the strength of the Neutralists and the FAR, next requested assistance for them as well. In response, the United States put together a rather complex organization designed to avoid outright conflict with the Accords while providing aid to the Lao resistance effort. After successive military clashes in the Plain of Jars, in 1963 and 1964, Washington adopted a posture that attempted to reconcile limited military support of the RLG with the terms of the Accords. Departures from these terms were to be strictly limited, carefully controlled, kept inconspicuous, and undertaken only with the approval of the Prime Minister. An added constraint derived from the U.S. view that Laos should remain a secondary theater. Such a policy imposed a reactive pattern on U.S. operations in Laos. Combined with the difficulties of the environment, it forced the U.S. Mission to improvise solutions to its operating problems at the same time that it freed the Mission from undue encumbrance by bureaucratic routines.

(U) In the so-called "quiet war" that followed the breakdown of the cease-fire, a pattern emerged that has persisted with only minor variations. The fighting has been confined to areas that lie between, and adjoin, the main territories of the two sides, and whose significance is largely political. Most of it has been in the Plain of Jars. The difference in the character of the opposing forces has resulted in a seasonal cycle. The LPLA and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces, originally lightly armed guerrillas, had been forced to increase their size and weaponry and as a result had become road-bound. In northeastern Laos, they were now opposed by a popular guerrilla movement composed in large part of Meo tribesmen, who ambushed and harassed the Communists' more conventional LOC and were logistically supported by air. In consequence, the LPLA/NVA was able to take the offensive

CONFIDENTIAL

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vii

only during the dry season (November to May), while the tribal irregulars would try to recoup their dry-season losses when the rains all but immobilized their enemies. Eventually, the Communists constructed all-weather roads that allowed them to extend some of their aggressive activity into the rainy months. From 1968 on they made gains every year, and in both 1970 and 1971 they threatened the heartland of the Meo, including the headquarters at Long Tieng. But the Meo still regained much of the lost ground during the rainy season.

(U) In this cyclical exchange, both sides seemed to be following a tacit policy of mutual abstention, as each avoided attacking objectives critically important to the other. The U.S. purpose was to defend politically important areas without provoking powerful enemy reactions. The Communists, who had satisfied their minimum objectives in Laos by controlling the corridor to South Vietnam and maintaining a secure base for the NLHS, apparently made the additional inputs required to fight the "quiet war" in order to hold on to the politically important terrain on the doorstep of Vientiane and protect a backdoor to North Vietnam.

(C) U.S. programs in this highly unconventional setting focused on essentials for sustaining a Lao government caught up in inconclusive fighting. Small-scale and flexible, so as to fit the needs of a low-profile delaying action, they comprised (1) rural resistance and security activities, (2) supporting programs for such activities, and (3) conventional military programs.

(C) Most important in the first category were the tribal programs conducted by CIA. They were, in fact, resistance movements of the tribal populations against the NLHS, which was resented by the tribes as a harsh ruler dominated by a traditional foreign enemy, the North Vietnamese. The assurance of U.S. support, combined with effective indigenous leadership (particularly by the Meo general Vang Pao), turned these attitudes into strong motivation for a naturally warlike people. The U.S. purpose was to create supplemental armed force with which to help the Lao regulars defend critically important terrain. Gradually, the number of tribal irregulars built up to about 30,000, of whom about half were organized into some 30 full-time battalions.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

viii

At their peak, in 1967, the Meo occupied terrain just outside the NLHS headquarters at Sam Neua. Other tribal groups fought in the northwest and in the south.

(C) This effort was under close policy control from the American Ambassador and the Department of State. CIA personnel were held to a few hundred, many of them stationed in nearby Thailand. By agreement with the Royal Thai Government, they were augmented by Thai specialists, who were invaluable in facilitating communication between Americans and tribesmen. In guiding the effort, the Embassy sought to avoid overextension and overcommitment.

(C) Parallel with the resistance effort went a limited rural security program for the Lao-inhabited lowlands, but it resulted in only one major, multi-agency undertaking, in which villagers northwest of the Bolovens Plateau, in South Laos, were trained and armed and some rural development and training was attempted. After nearly three years, the experiment was curtailed, the Mission having decided that inadequacy of leadership and lack of manpower argued against investing scarce resources in this type of program.

(U) Although managed largely by CIA, the above programs received a major contribution from AID. "Refugee relief," for example, was an AID-sponsored program fully integrated with the tribal effort, which sustained the families of the guerrillas and thereby provided a reassurance essential to morale; AID's medical assistance program was a similar, vital service to the irregular forces. AID also conducted educational and minor development programs that buttressed the appeal of Vang Pao to his people. Their relationship of mutual confidence with tribal leaders helped AID's field representatives meet the special needs of the tribes.

(C) Other U.S. programs focused on the regular forces but had their unconventional aspects. Logistic support for the Lao military was the responsibility of the Requirements Office (RO), a civilian group within USAID that was composed of retired military specialists. An augmented group of army and air attachés concentrated on advising the regular military forces at high levels. The Air Force group not only trained, assisted, and guided the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF),

CONFIDENTIAL

SECRET

ix

but also provided links between the Mission and USAF units in Thailand, thus facilitating the operations of these units in Laos. Through the tribal program, the USAF also gained access to sites from which U.S. helicopters could fly search-and-rescue (SAR) missions into North Vietnam, and where navigational aids for bombing operations against North Vietnam could be installed.

(S) As pressure from Hanoi grew, USAF bombing became a salient feature of the war in North Laos: sorties increased from just a few in 1964 to 42,000 in FY 1970. For the first time, sophisticated high-performance aircraft supported a resistance movement of primitive tribesmen, their choice of targets based in good part on intelligence supplied by the tribal irregulars. Preplanned strikes were limited to targets that required final approval by the Ambassador himself, and, in the early years, avoided the proximity of important centers. (Later, a relaxation in these rules resulted in some bombing of civilians, an unfortunate excess in an otherwise carefully controlled program.)

(C) Another unique feature of the war in Laos was the dependence of the resistance movement on air transport provided by private American contractors. Two firms, flying various large cargo planes, STOL aircraft, and H-34 helicopters, provided a most flexible and critically important logistics capability.

(C) The total cost of these efforts to the United States grew with the intensity of the war, and in FY 1970 was estimated at some \$260 million (not counting the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail).

(C) The organization by which the Mission managed this array of programs was remarkable in that the Ambassador actually directed all U.S. operations, including (because of its political sensitivity) U.S. military activity. One envoy, Ambassador William H. Sullivan, later reported having arrived in Laos with firm instructions to assume authority over military as well as other operations, and having thereafter had no interference from Washington, whose attention was taken up by Vietnam.

(U) The pattern that Ambassador Sullivan set in his four years in Laos was one of unified management, informality, and simplified,

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x

flexible procedures. He kept a close watch on operational detail, and personally chaired the daily meetings of agency principals that he had introduced. The Mission was strongly oriented toward the field, where representatives of the several agencies in turn cooperated closely. Field initiatives received serious consideration from the Mission, and field personnel were supported by Vientiane in their sometimes unusual requests.

(U) The Lao government developed no organizational capability for prosecuting the war. Its approach reflected the fact that the controlling political forces in Laos are regional, and that the central government can take no effective action beyond the capital without the concurrence of local chieftains. In effect, therefore, the United States provided the skeletal structure that linked the various Lao elements and was able to guide their operational activity. Certain critical inputs, however, had to come, and did come, from the Lao themselves: they were the initiative and strong leadership to be found in some regions of Laos. The Americans necessarily concentrated their efforts in these regions, particularly in the Meo tribal areas, and with the enterprising and well-led Lao air force.

(U) The unconventional military effort of the United States in Laos, although inconclusive, thus achieved a significant part of its goals at a relatively low cost. The constraints imposed by the primitive environment, as well as those built into the Geneva Accords, forced the U.S. representatives to improvise, to forgo large staffs, to shun military involvement on the ground, and to rely on a small, well-knit group of Americans to deal directly with one another and with local leaders. Beyond this, they made a conscious decision in favor of unified management of all activities under a civilian chief. The resulting system, despite some weaknesses and failures, was well suited to the particularities of the Lao situation.

SECRET

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- x1

CONTENTS

PREFACE	111
SUMMARY	v
LIST OF UNFAMILIAR ABBREVIATIONS	xiii
MAPS	
I. THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS OF LAOS	xiv
II. MILITARY REGIONS AND PRINCIPAL ROADS OF LAOS	xv
Section	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
U.S. Involvement: 1955-1962	2
Shift in U.S. Policy	4
II. THE SITUATION AT THE TIME OF THE GENEVA ACCORDS	7
The Cease-fire	7
The Coalition Government	8
Neutralization	8
Status of the Various Lao Armed Forces	10
III. THE COMMUNIST SIDE	13
IV. POLICY AND PROGRAM CONSTRAINTS	17
V. BREAKDOWN OF THE ACCORDS AND THE "QUIET WAR"	22
The Pattern of Fighting	24
The Policy of Mutual Abstention	29
VI. U.S.-SUPPORTED PROGRAMS	32
Tribal Resistance	33
Other Resistance Efforts	35
Policy Control of Resistance Activity	37
Rural Security	39
USAID Support of the Resistance	41
Information Support	44
Conventional Military Aid Programs	45
U.S. Military Advisers	46
Air Operations	47
Bombing Program	49
Air Transport	52
Third-Country Presence	53
Over-all Program Costs	54
Program Flexibility	55

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

xii

U.S. MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE AND STYLE	56
The Ambassador as Leader	56
The Military Role of the Ambassador	61
Washington Organization	63
Single Manager	63
The Informal Style	64
The Daily Operations Meeting	66
Limited Demands on the Lao	68
The Field vs. Vientiane	70
Policy Forums	72
Coordination of Sensitive Operations with the RLG ..	73
A Consistent Pattern	74
THE RLG ROLE AND ORGANIZATION	75
The Lao Elite Structure	75
Central vs. Local Initiative	76
The De Facto U.S. Role	77
Lao Inputs	80
THE BALANCE SHEET	83
A Tentative Verdict	83
The Costs Involved	85
Necessity As the Mother of Invention	87
Unified Field Management	90
Key to Adaptive Response -- Generating a Tribal Resistance Movement	91
The Elements of Adaptive Response	93
The Role of Innovation	95
The Role of Leadership	97
Deficiencies in the Lao Program	98
Some Civil-Military Problems	99
Summing Up	101

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

xiii

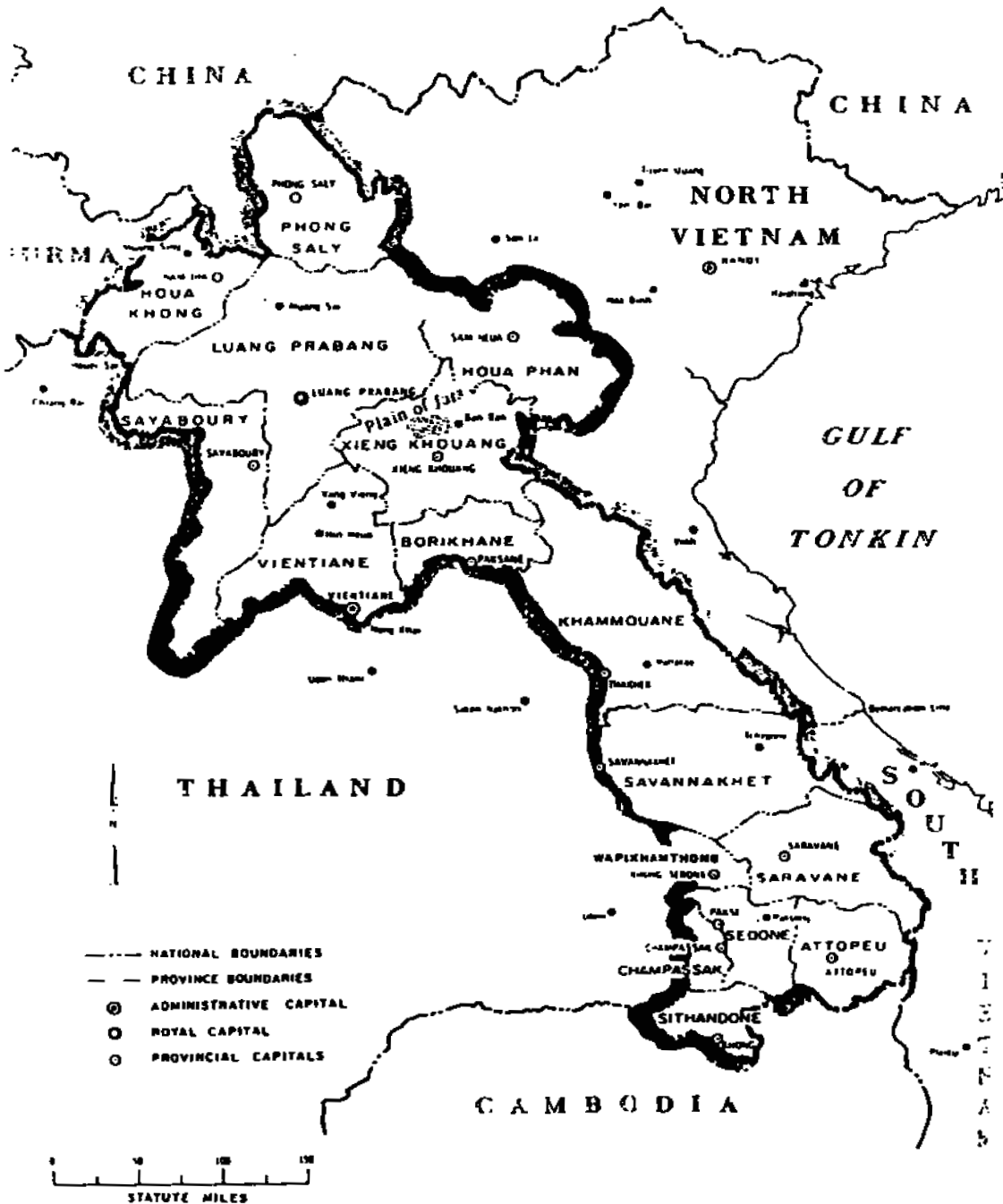
LIST OF UNFAMILIAR ABBREVIATIONS

AIRA - U.S. Air Attaché
ARMA - U.S. Army Attaché
CDNI - Committee for the Defense of National Interests
DEPCHIEF - Deputy Chief, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Thailand
FAN - Forces Armées Neutralistes (Neutralist Armed Forces)
FAR - Forces Armées Royales (Royal Armed Forces)
ICC - International Control Commission
JUSMAG - Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group
LPF - Lao Patriotic Front
LPLA - Lao People's Liberation Army (Kongthap Potpoi Pasason Lao)
MAP - Military Assistance Program
MR - Military Region
NLHS - Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front)
NVA - North Vietnamese Army
PEO - Program Evaluations Office
PDJ - Plain of Jars
PL - Pathet Lao (Land of the Lao)
PPL - Phak Pasason Lao (People's Party of Laos)
RLAF - Royal Lao Air Force
RLG - Royal Lao Government
RO - Requirements Office
RTA - Royal Thai Army
RTG - Royal Thai Government
SEACoord - Southeast Asia Coordinating Committee
SGU - Special Guerrilla Unit

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XIV

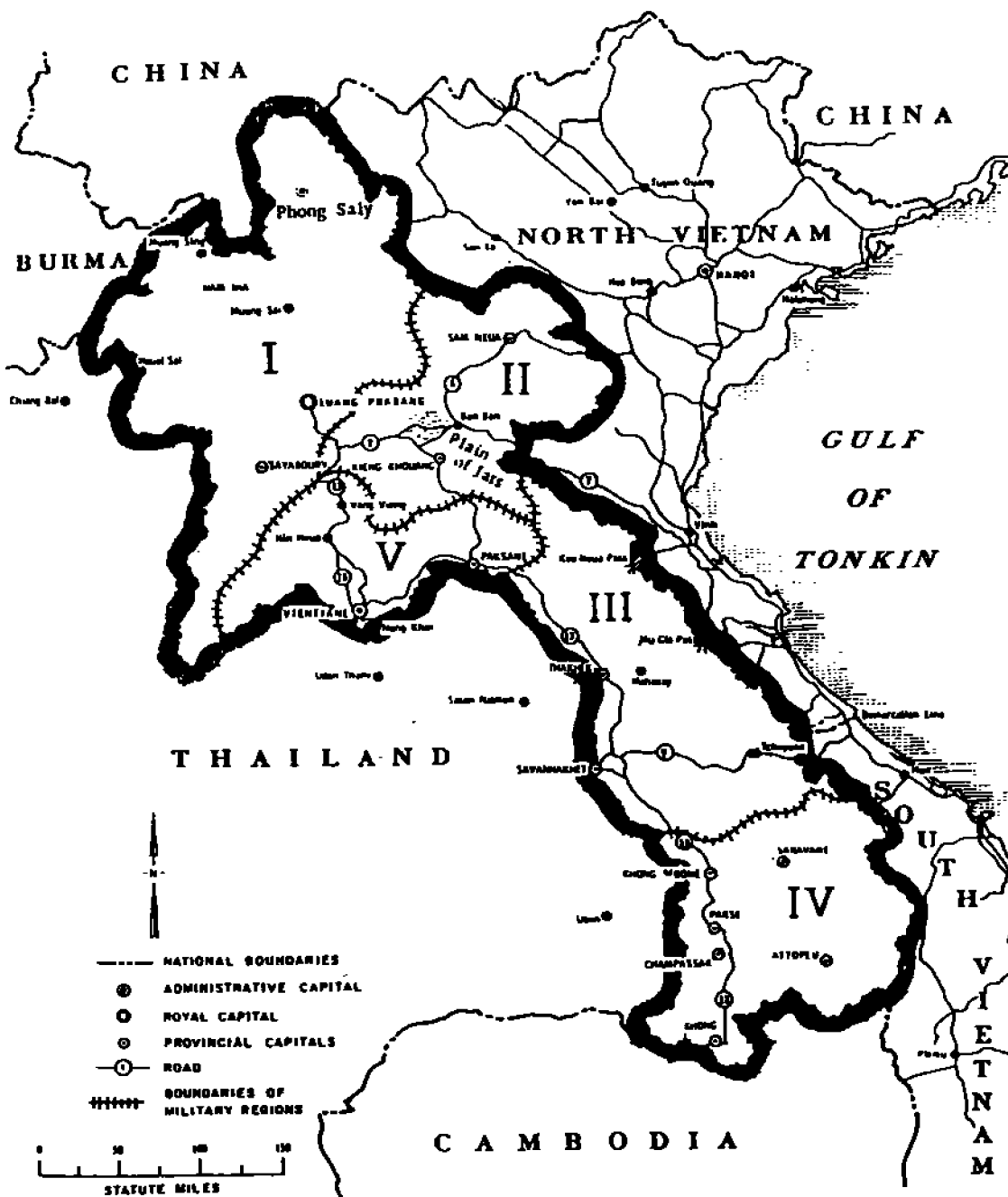


I. THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS OF LAOS

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UNCLASSIFIED

XV



II. MILITARY REGIONS AND PRINCIPAL ROADS OF LAOS

UNCLASSIFIED

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1

I. INTRODUCTION

(U) Since the 1940s, Laos has been caught up in the wars which have succeeded each other in the territory of the former French Indochina. In particular, North Vietnam has massively involved itself in Laos through a client Communist party, the Phak Pasason Lao (People's Party of Laos, or PPL), and the front group that represents Communist interests, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front, or NLHS). This involvement has frequently included a heavy deployment of regular troops of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), amounting on occasion to the equivalent of an army corps, in addition to various NVA service and auxiliary forces.

(U) In the first Indochina war, between the French and the Viet Minh, Laos played only a limited role, although the war eventually spread into its territory, in 1953, when two columns of Viet Minh struck deep into Laos, taking Sam Neua town and threatening Luang Prabang before the arrival of the rainy season forced them to return to Vietnam. The French reaction was to reoccupy the base of Dien Bien Phu in strength to guard the approaches to Laos -- with well-known consequences.

(U) The Laos which emerged from the Geneva Agreements of 1954 immediately became the arena of an intense political conflict between the Communists and the divided non-Communist political groups. The Communist movement in Laos had existed obscurely since the founding of the Communist Party of Indochina in 1930, but moved onto the scene as an important factor in 1950 with the formation of the mass political front initially called Pathet Lao ("Land of the Lao," or PL). In 1954 it was weak in numbers and in troops (estimated at about two thousand), but the Geneva Agreements included one clause which gave it a sizable advantage in the competition that followed. The Agreements had identified Phong Saly and Houa Phan (Sam Neua), two northern provinces bordering on North Vietnam, as regroupment areas for PL forces. After regroupment, all Lao forces were to be unified, elections held, and a united Lao government formed. However, the PL proceeded to establish its own government in the two provinces and

UNCLASSIFIED

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2

refused to participate in the elections, preferring to negotiate for a coalition as a separate force with its own, fully controlled geographic base.

(U) In essence, the next eight years of political conflict revolved around the question of coalition with the Communists. One group of non-Communist politicians, led by Prince Souvanna Phouma (half-brother of PL leader Prince Souphanouvong), held that the leaders of both the Communist and the non-Communist side, if left to work out their problems, could settle their differences and unite the country in a neutral framework. To the right of Souvanna were other factions, which argued -- some with more and some with less fervor -- that Laos must unite in opposition to the Communists.

U.S. INVOLVEMENT: 1955-1962

(U) Beginning in 1955 the United States became deeply involved in this internal conflict. Its goal was to unify all non-Communist political groups and to strengthen them militarily and economically to the point where Laos would become a firm anti-Communist "bastion" on the borders of China and Vietnam.

(U) The policy had one crippling flaw. Its hidden assumption was that Laos was a nation with sufficient national unity, leadership, and political and social infrastructure to use U.S. aid effectively in a policy of firm resistance to its enemies. In fact, however, Laos was and is not such a country. History and terrain have divided the land into separate regions, with little to bind these together. The population is a mixture of races and religions, of primitive hill tribes and lowland paddy-growing Lao peasants, who regard each other with fear and hostility. Although in control of the government and its military forces, the ethnic Lao comprise less than half the population. The elite of this Lao minority is a collection of rival clans, who share little sense of national purpose but regard the government and the public service as an arena where they compete for influence and power to enrich themselves.

(U) The country as a whole is underdeveloped in every way. A limited road network connects the main towns along the Mekong but,

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

3

with few exceptions, avoids the hinterland, a rugged, roadless expanse of jungled hills and limestone ridges. The economy is rudimentary and incapable of supporting even the modest military and civilian services normal to a country of three million, much less armies and civil services greatly swollen as a result of war. The civilian services suffer from crippling deficiencies in training, in pay, and in traditions of service.

(U) In this environment, the United States found that all its efforts to build a solid Lao government trickled off into the sand. An army of 25,000 supported entirely by U.S. funds (against the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) proved gravely inadequate to its tasks.^{*} Generous economic aid was provided, including a large commodity import program, to pay for the cost of the army. But it was mired in corruption and bald thievery. On the political side, the quarreling non-Communist factions refused to unite despite U.S. persuasion and pressure. After a number of permutations, including a short-lived effort at coalition under Souvanna Phouma (opposed by the United States), an attempt was made to create a new political vehicle, the Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDNI), with covert American support.^{**} The CDNI had some initial success but soon became merely another factional grouping no better than the others -- and one that was widely known to have a U.S. subsidy. Two elections took place, in 1958 and 1960, in both of which the United States sought by various means to energize and assist the nationalist candidates, always pressing for unity among them. The second, in May 1960, was so blatantly rigged by the right-wing forces, led by General Phoumi Nosavan, that a reaction set in.^{***} This resulted in a coup d'état, in August 1960, by an

^{*}(U) Because of the restrictions of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Laos was designated the Program Evaluations Office (PEO) and was staffed by military personnel in civilian clothes. In 1961 it was reconstituted as a regular MAAG, in uniform.

^{**}(U) See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, Doubleday, New York, 1967, pp. 114-115.

^{***}(U) See Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, Praeger, New York, 1964, pp. 132-133.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

4

obscure paratroop Captain named Kong Le, whose goal was the neutralization of Laos and an end to the interference of foreigners in Lao affairs.

(U) Kong Le's coup brought Prince Souvanna Phouma back to power. It also led rapidly to a polarization of forces and a military confrontation. With full U.S. support, General Phoumi rallied most of the army to his standard in Savannakhet, principal city in the south, and marched on Vientiane. A battle in Vientiane in December 1960 caused heavy material damage but few casualties. Kong Le and his Neutralist forces retreated northward, while Souvanna Phouma went into exile in Cambodia, bitterly denouncing the United States for its failure to understand Laos. Phoumi took over.

(U) But Kong Le was far from defeated. Beginning in December, when he had formally joined forces with the NLHS* against Phoumi, he had been supplied by a Russian airlift. Provisioned by Russian air-drops, he led his forces in good order to the Plain of Jars, a wide, rolling grassland controlling strategic road junctions in northern Laos. There he drove the Phoumist garrisons from their bases and seized the Xieng Khouangville airfield. With continued Russian assistance, his forces and the PL units allied with them began to grow in strength, easily mastering the forces of the Vientiane faction in several skirmishes. A dangerous crisis loomed, involving not only the various Lao factions but the Soviet Union and the United States as well.

SHIFT IN U.S. POLICY

(U) The new Kennedy Administration opted for a revised double-track strategy: a show of force to assure the adversary that he would have no easy victory, and a quiet effort to arrive at an accommodation. Moscow, no doubt as dismayed as Washington at the prospect of a confrontation between the two countries in remote Laos, reacted

* (U) The Pathet Lao reorganized themselves as the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS, or Lao Patriotic Front) in 1956.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

5

favorably to the American initiative. President Kennedy announced his new approach to Laos on March 23, 1961. Within weeks a cease-fire had been arranged. On May 3 it was officially proclaimed, and an international conference to neutralize Laos was convened in Geneva.

(U) In effect, U.S. policy had taken a sharp turn away from the goal of a strong, anti-Communist Laos toward the concept of a Laos that would be neutralized, policed by international agreement, and governed by a coalition of the right-wing, Neutralist, and Communist factions. Implicit in the change was an acknowledgment that the earlier policy had failed. Observers agreed that the failure stemmed from inadequate appreciation of the constraints imposed by the social and political environment. The material from which to build a firm opposition to communism was not to be found in Laos.

(U) In the course of its effort to make political bricks without straw, the U.S. Mission in Vientiane had been the scene of rather bitter disagreements among various agencies -- disagreements more often about tactics than about policy, and often centering around the pros and cons of U.S. support for specific Lao personalities. Roger Hilsman says ". . . the tragedy was that neither the Lao nor our allies could tell who really spoke for the United States -- whether it was the CIA, the military, the AID officials or the Ambassador. In the end there was open quarrelling among the representatives of the different American agencies, and . . . the United States became the butt of jokes among both friend and foe."^{*}

(U) In sum, the policy, the programs, and the organization of the United States in Laos in the period between the two Geneva conferences had been seriously inadequate. Thereafter, major changes were made in all three categories. In harmony with the shift from the policy of building a bastion -- and in contrast to the earlier willingness to intervene vigorously in Lao politics, to support generously those who assumed an anti-Communist stance, to encourage the import of luxury items at U.S. expense, and to indulge in internecine conflict

^{*} (U) *To Move a Nation*, p. 116.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

6

within the Mission -- the approach became discreet, flexible, and unified, with emphasis upon careful control and limited objectives. An effort was made to apply the lessons of previous failures.

(U) The Geneva Conference of 1962 did not, of course, solve the problems of Laos. The United States again became involved in this uninviting military and political terrain, this time largely in support of the 1962 agreements, against renewed North Vietnam attempts to subvert them. But the new Geneva Accords imposed certain constraints upon U.S. military and paramilitary activity which greatly increased the delicacy of this involvement and complicated the operational problems it entailed. Nevertheless, a rather sizable military response was mustered by various devices and expedients, all subordinate to limited policy objectives.

(U) The 1962-1970 Lao case is significant because of the uniqueness of the situation and of the innovative solutions attempted. It provides experience in the management of a novel group of unconventional programs, some in the field of counterinsurgency, others going beyond the content of that label as commonly understood. It also incorporates new organizational departures. In the process of deploying airpower in support of primitive tribal irregulars, of bringing about mutual support among three separate Lao ground forces and a Lao air force of independent tendencies, and of ensuring cooperation among a half-dozen U.S. civilian and military agencies, the United States Mission evolved empirically an approach to its management tasks that should be of considerable interest to students of unconventional conflict.

UNCLASSIFIED

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7

II. THE SITUATION AT THE TIME OF THE GENEVA ACCORDS

(U) The era of the 1962 Geneva Accords formally began in Laos with entry into force of the restrictions that those Accords imposed on the presence of foreign military forces. In the official view of the fourteen participating powers, the Accords represented a new start for Laos, which for several years had been a cockpit of conflict between foreign and foreign-backed military forces. That chapter of Lao history was now officially closed.

(U) The new chapter, which opened in October 1962, was based on three factors, all the product of lengthy negotiations: a cease-fire, a coalition government, and the neutralization of the territory of Laos. These three instruments were intended to protect the newly pacified and stabilized country.

THE CEASE-FIRE

(U) When the cease-fire was declared on May 3, 1961, as a preliminary to the Geneva Conference, Laos had been the scene of an active shooting war since August 1960. There were numerous violations of the cease-fire during the lengthy negotiations at Geneva, but most fronts had been quiet for several months when the Accords went into full effect. The cease-fire was not accompanied by a delineation of the boundaries of the areas controlled by the two sides.* It was to be policed by an augmented International Control Commission (ICC) composed of contingents provided by Poland, Canada, and India and presided over by an Indian. Increased in size and equipped with some helicopters, the ICC was given the task of watching over the implementation of the Accords throughout the isolated, rugged, and virtually empty back-country of Laos as well as in the areas along the Mekong which were accessible but of limited importance. This was an impossible task without the cooperation of the authorities in the areas concerned. The NLHS very quickly made it clear that the ICC would not be permitted access to territory it controlled except with prior approval and under severe restrictions.

* (U) See p. 13 for a description of the two areas.

UNCLASSIFIED

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8

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

(U) The second factor of importance was the coming into office of the coalition government composed of Neutralist, right-wing, and Communist elements under the premiership of the Neutralist leader, Souvanna Phouma. The coalition purported to be the unified government of Laos, and cabinet posts had been apportioned among the various parties after lengthy negotiations. In appearance it brought together under the leadership of Souvanna both the veteran leader of the Lao Patriotic Front, Prince Souphanouvong (Souvanna's half-brother), and the military leader of the rightists, General Phoumi Nosavan. This appearance of unity was belied, however, by the *de facto* partition of the country into two segments, one of which was governed by the NLHS and the other by the central government of Souvanna Phouma. The NLHS, despite its membership in the coalition, very rapidly took the position that representatives of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) had no right to enter and travel in the portion of the country under NLHS control without NLHS approval. The nominally unitary form of government was thus mere window-dressing for a *de facto* partition along the lines of the cease-fire.

NEUTRALIZATION

(U) A key document of the Geneva Accords was the Protocol setting forth in detail the terms that were to govern the neutrality of Laos and, most particularly, the limitations on any foreign military presence, "regular or irregular." The Protocol prohibited any foreign military activity, except for a French military training mission and the normal contingents of foreign military attachés. Its terms were also to be enforced by the strengthened ICC. In October 1962, when the foreign governments which had previously deployed military elements in Laos announced that they had withdrawn all military personnel not permitted under the Accords, they had actually made the following new dispositions:

(U) The USSR. Soviet military activity had been limited to providing an airlift of weapons and supplies to the NLHS and Neutralist

UNCLASSIFIED

SECRET

9

forces beginning in December 1960. It operated via North Vietnam. Very few Soviet personnel were stationed in Laos in this connection, and little is known about them except that a small advisory mission was stationed on the Plain of Jars and that all were withdrawn before the Accords went into full effect. The airlift was discontinued in December 1962. Training of the NLHS and Neutralists in the use of the Soviet equipment brought in by the airlift had been provided not by Soviet personnel but by North Vietnamese.

(U) North Vietnam. U.S. estimates placed the number of North Vietnamese Army troops in NLHS areas at 6,000 just prior to the Accords. The NVA had complied in a merely token fashion with the requirements of the Geneva Protocol on neutralization, officially putting 40 personnel through the ICC checkpoint on the Plain of Jars and onto aircraft for Hanoi. Most of the rest were presumably disposed somewhere in NLHS territory, although some probably were withdrawn. In view of the ease and rapidity with which NVA forces could be shuttled back and forth between Laos and North Vietnam, it was not necessary to retain a larger number in Laos than were immediately required.

(S) The United States. The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was completely withdrawn.* Also withdrawn were several hundred U.S. Special Forces personnel (designated White Star Teams) who had been organizing tribal irregulars. A total of 666 American military personnel left Laos, as well as 403 Filipinos who had been brought in to supplement the limited Lao capabilities for logistic support and technical maintenance. Most Central Intelligence Agency personnel who had been working along with the Special Forces as advisers to the tribal irregulars were also withdrawn. But a small nucleus in Thailand remained available on a standby basis for reasons explained below.

(S) Thailand. A special Royal Thai Army unit numbering a few hundred had been established to work with CIA in the tribal areas. They were withdrawn, but, as in the case of CIA personnel, some remained available in case of need.

* (U) The MAAG had replaced the civilianized PEO in April 1961.

SECRET

SECRET

(This page is CONFIDENTIAL)

10

(U) There was no significant South Vietnamese, Chinese Communist, or Chinese Nationalist military presence in Laos at this time. On occasion, some elements of the ex-Chinese Nationalist irregulars who had settled down and lived by opium-smuggling in the tri-state border region of Thailand, Burma, and Laos would slip into Laos. Their ties with Taiwan were tenuous, and they had little military or political significance.

STATUS OF THE VARIOUS LAO ARMED FORCES

(U) As for the armed forces of the various Lao groups, each component of the coalition had its military underpinning. The Neutralist forces were the least effective, having been hastily improvised around the figure of Kong Le. They totaled about 10,000 men directly under the former paratroop captain -- now promoted to general -- plus another 2,000 in Phong Saly under a local "war lord" whose loyalty to Kong Le was doubtful. The 48,000-man right-wing FAR (Forces Armées Royales) was the largest component of the armed forces, but its fighting qualities were unimpressive, it having been built up hurriedly with inadequate leadership. Finally, there were the armed forces of the NLHS, which then bore the name Pathet Lao Fighting Forces and were estimated to be in the neighborhood of 20,000. Some of these were formed into companies and battalions; the rest were scattered local forces under the control of Communist provincial authorities. A portion of the NVA forces mentioned above were advisers and specialists assigned to the NLHS military and civilian commands.

(C) In addition to these regular forces, the White Star Teams and CIA had recruited, and in 1960-1962 had hastily armed, some irregular groups in every section of Laos. At the time the program was suspended, these groups numbered 17,000. They were entirely tribal and ethnically non-Lao. The purpose behind their recruitment and organization had been to provide the RLG with auxiliary units that could confront the NLHS forces in mountainous areas, where the FAR functioned poorly if at all and where, consequently, the NLHS held virtually uncontested sway. The most important group among these armed tribesmen, both in terms of quality and in numbers, were the Meo.

SECRET

SECRET

11

Their commander was Colonel (later Major General) Vang Pao, an officer of the FAR who was also a Meo tribal leader and an able guerrilla chieftain. Vang Pao had participated in French-organized guerrilla operations during the first Indochina war and had impressive leadership qualities. Others who participated in irregular activity included groups from the large Mon-Khmer complex of tribes called Lao Theung in the north and Kha (a pejorative Lao designation meaning slave) in the south. The Yao tribe in Northwest Laos was also involved, through its traditional leaders Chao Mai and Chao La.

(S) An apparatus which provided training, guidance, weapons, and ammunition to the tribal groups and included an air delivery system based on private American air companies had been created by the United States. (It will be described in some detail later.) The disposition of this apparatus and the position of the United States vis-à-vis the tribal guerrilla movement had been the subject of intense debate within the U.S. Government during the Geneva negotiations. Even after the cease-fire of May 1961, sporadic and occasionally heavy fighting took place as the tribal forces came under NLRS attack. But the United States halted the program of arming additional tribesmen and limited the effort to self-defense. By October 1962 a lull had fallen over the battlefield in the tribal areas, and the decision was made to leave the tribesmen with a capability to conduct short-term defensive operations only. At the same time, certain standby arrangements were made to facilitate a revival of support activity to tribal groups should they come under Communist attack. Souvanna Phouma was discreetly advised of this decision. He did not demur, although at the time he had no sympathy with the Meo and the other guerrillas, whom he viewed with traditional Lao suspicion aggravated by the fact that the program had been sponsored by his political opponents, the rightists under General Phoumi Nosavan.

(S) At this point, the various programs identified with tribal irregulars were little more than relics inherited from an earlier set of objectives and related policies. Indeed, they were something of an embarrassment since they ran counter to the objectives of current policies. The hope was that they could be wound down and terminated

SECRET

SECRET

12

As the RLG developed its capability to defend its territory, including the tribal areas. As we know, matters took a rather different turn, the principal reason being that the Communist side had distinctly contrasting objectives. We will therefore briefly describe the situation and background of the Communist movement in Laos, to complete this sketch of the setting in 1962.

UNCLASSIFIED

- 13

III. THE COMMUNIST SIDE

(U) By 1960, the Communist movement had reached the point where it disposed of an army of 20,000 and, nominally at least, controlled a population estimated at between 800,000 and 900,000 -- out of an estimated total of 2,750,000. The territory claimed by the NLHS consisted of a wide strip that roughly -- but with some exceptions -- followed the frontier of Laos with Vietnam and China. The depth of the strip averaged 50 to 70 kilometers. In the northernmost province of Phong Saly (a kind of peninsula surrounded on three sides by China and North Vietnam), a nominally Neutralist leader, Khamouane Boupha, was in power. He soon found it opportune to throw in his lot with the pro-Communist faction of Neutralists.

(U) The portion of Laos under Communist control included few population centers, none of them large. It was rugged and isolated, and lightly populated with an extremely varied ethnic mix, in which the Lao were a distinct minority. Indeed, the part of Laos under Communist control was not representative of a typically Lao culture and economy. The Lao are a riverine people, who cultivate "wet" rice and whose historic home has been the Mekong Valley lowlands. In the mountainous area away from the Mekong, the inhabitants are largely non-Lao, tribal, and non-Buddhist. They depend on upland "dry" rice cultivation and slash-and-burn agriculture. As a cash crop, they grow opium, because it is easily transported by man or animal pack and thus can reach the markets in this roadless land. The dependence of the NLHS on foreign support decreed that this movement, which claimed to represent all the Lao, should be concentrated in areas where there were few Lao, and few towns or roads or other development, but which were only a few days' march from North Vietnam and China.

(U) The NLHS government and its chief, Prince Souphanouvong, together with the Lao Communist Party and its chief, Kaysone Phomvihon, had their headquarters in Sam Neua, 30 miles from North Vietnam. After the intensive bombing of Communist-held Laos commenced in 1965, government and Party moved into an extensive network of caves in the limestone karst a few miles west of Sam Neua. From there it now

UNCLASSIFIED

14

controls in some degree more than half the land surface of Laos, in which about 40 percent of the population lives.

(U) It has been established through the questioning of defectors and refugees that the NLHS is supported and sustained at all critical points by the North Vietnamese, including civilian technicians, Communist Party cadres, military advisers, and troops.* North Vietnamese advisers are attached to NLHS governmental and military units throughout the area controlled by the Communist side. In addition to North Vietnamese advisers, tactical units of North Vietnamese troops have spearheaded all important military attacks undertaken by the NLHS. At least three different kinds of North Vietnamese military presence have been distinguished by analysts: First, a network of military advisers assigned to LPLA units down to battalion and to the independent companies in each province; second, a permanent presence of an average of one NVA company per NLHS province; third, the mobile force of North Vietnamese brought into Laos for a particular purpose, and remaining only until that purpose is accomplished.** During the height of the 1970 dry-season campaign it was estimated that some 67,000 NVA troops were operating on Lao soil.*** Of these, large numbers were North Vietnamese laborers organized in construction battalions that worked on the road networks which connect North Vietnam with the battlefields in South Vietnam and also with those in North Laos.

(U) In addition, there have recently been a few thousand Chinese Communist troops, organized in construction battalions, who are building roads linking principal points in Northwest Laos with each other and with China. This Chinese presence appears to be supportive to the North Vietnamese rather than competitive. Its significance as a token of Chinese interest in the area is potential rather than actual.

* (U) P. F. Langer and J. J. Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao*, The Rand Corporation, RM-5935-ARPA, September 1969, pp. 141ff. The author is indebted to this basic study of communism in Laos for much of the information in this section.

** *Ibid.*, pp. 141ff.

*** President Nixon's statement of March 6, 1970.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

15

(U) The North Vietnamese have also assumed the burden of supplying scarce and essential technical skills (especially in the medical field, technical training, and higher education) and a regular flow of essential supplies. The regime which they advise and guide is endeavoring to duplicate on Lao soil a rudimentary version of a Communist regime, but it has neither the administrative capability nor the technical and economic base to permit full-fledged socialist policies. On the political side, however, the attempt results more nearly in a faded carbon copy. The same network of front groups, covering all the main interests of the citizenry, has been set up by the NLHS under the semisecret direction of the Party. Propaganda themes closely follow Radio Hanoi.

(U) The attitude of the people under NLHS control toward that regime is a subject about which little authoritative information is available.* Among the tribal elements who make up a large part of that population, loyalty is generally given to traditional chieftains. The Communists have recognized this factor, and at an early date were able to recruit into their movement several Meo leaders, among them Fay Dang, a chieftain of stature. An even more important catch was Sithon Khomdam, the tribal leader of the Loven people, who live on and north of the Bolovens Plateau.

(U) But other important Meo tribal leaders refused to join the movement ostensibly led by Prince Souphanouvong. These included Touby Lyfong, the paramount chief, and Vang Pao, a member of a high-ranking family, both of whom remained loyal to the French and later to the successor state, the RLG, and to the King of Laos. The Meo were thus divided in loyalty, but the majority ultimately took up arms against the NLHS. The latter retained its hold most firmly in areas where an outstanding leader such as Sithon Khomdam, a legendary hero to his people, was able to sway their loyalties. In other areas large numbers

* (U) Some very useful debriefing material based on questioning of refugees from the Plain of Jars who had lived under NLHS rule for ten years was prepared by Mr. E. McKeithen of AID/Laos. These refugees had lived under close supervision and were not typical of the population in areas away from main centers. They strongly resented the heavy exactions and minute control to which they were subjected.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

16

of tribespeople availed themselves of the opportunity to take up arms against the NLHS. However, such opportunities could only be offered in areas where conditions were favorable.

(U) Communist-controlled Laos may be said to be a territory where the NLHS has tried to duplicate in rudimentary fashion the features typical of Communist government in North Vietnam, but where it succeeds only partially because of the backwardness and also the independent spirit of the people, the lack of development of the country, and the slenderness of NLHS resources. Such success as the movement has derives in large part from the skills and resource inputs of its North Vietnamese sponsors.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

58

their representatives conformed with the letter and spirit of President Kennedy's letter, and there was an equal emphasis to the Ambassador, to my predecessor, and to my successor on keeping the system intact.*

(U) As important as this past history in strengthening the hand of the Ambassador to Laos in recent years was the effect of the policy of support for the Geneva Accords, which has had the unforeseen result of enlarging ambassadorial authority in the one area where the Kennedy letter had restricted it: in situations where U.S. military forces are deployed and an operational command exists. President Kennedy had said: "The line of authority to those forces runs from me to the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, and to the area commander in the field." The Ambassador was to be kept informed by the military commander, with the right of appeal to the President in matters affecting U.S. relations with the local government. Such was the policy. But in Laos this policy came into conflict with the Geneva Accords -- which ruled out a U.S. military command -- and with the desire of the United States to minimize obvious departures from the rules while still supporting a military effort. To quote again from Sullivan's testimony,

. . . There is no organic military command present and functioning, on Lao soil or within the confines of Lao territory; . . . many functions that would ordinarily in a circumstance such as we face in Laos be a direct responsibility of the military chain of command coming up through the Joint Chiefs. By virtue of the 1962 agreements and by virtue of the circumstances prevailing in Laos, these are matters which fall within the province of the Ambassador and of the policy directions.**

(U) Thus, by dint of special circumstances, Laos has become the setting for an organizational arrangement, somewhat unusual in U.S. experience, in which a civilian official wields significant wartime military authority. U.S. history provides more than a few examples of military officers with proconsular powers, particularly in the

* (U) *Ibid.*

** (U) *Ibid.*, pp. 517-518.

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

60

(C) In addition, Sullivan draws attention to several factors stemming from Administration attitudes regarding Laos and from some of the personalities most deeply involved. First, it was a relatively limited operation both in the area and in the size of the forces involved, making it easier for an ambassador to maintain a grip on the situation. He also believes that "the situation in Laos was so confused and confusing, so unattractive that the Joint Chiefs really didn't want to take it on. They were never quite sure that it wouldn't all collapse the day after tomorrow, and they didn't really want to get themselves in the position of being responsible for a fiasco, so I don't think there was any great thrust of urgency to take it over."^{*}

(C) Indeed, according to Sullivan, the Washington tendency was to rely on one man, Averell Harriman, to keep watch over Laos policy for the President. Harriman in turn was a strong proponent of ambassadorial authority. He handpicked senior officers and made it clear to them personally before their departure from Washington that they would be expected to accept and support the authority of the Ambassador. "Although," says Sullivan, "I was looked on as some sort of extension of Harriman, the fact is that, by the time I went to Laos as Ambassador, I had been working here very closely with Mac Bundy, Bob McNamara, Bus Wheeler, and John McCone, and all the other bosses of the individual members of the team out there, all of whom I could get in touch with directly. I think probably everybody on my staff knew that, so that was a factor in giving a certain amount of cohesion to our operation."

(C) One last point in the Ambassador's analysis of the basis upon which he was able to develop a well-integrated operation is also significant: "Finally, by the time I arrived in Laos in late 1964, everyone in Washington who might have concerned himself with sending

^{*}(U) Other discussions of military attitudes toward Laos after the Accords suggest that the Joint Chiefs preferred not to become involved in military responsibility for Laos under the terms of a policy which restricted their freedom of action. See, for example, Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, Part IV.

CONFIDENTIAL

SECRET

96

resistance movement, was a highly unconventional program flexibly handled. Indeed, few U.S.-supported programs in Laos could be called conventional. Even the MAP was less guilty in Laos than it has been elsewhere of the failing which Colonel Amos A. Jordan, Jr. and other commentators have called "mirror-imaging."^{*}

(C) The most innovative aspect of the program was the over-all concept of an unconventional military campaign based on primitive tribal groups, supported by a variety of U.S. agencies, and managed to a large degree by civilians in a civilian chain of command. This was not only without precedent; it was largely unplanned, having developed out of the situation and from the available means as an adaptive response to a highly atypical combination of circumstances. Quite clearly, so flexible yet complex a form of cooperation and harmonization of the very different organizations involved could not have taken place without unified direction at the top.

(S) The development of the tribal forces into an effective fighting unit was CIA's major contribution. Nothing of the sort, depending so completely on aircraft for logistical support, had previously been attempted. CIA pioneered also in the employment of third-country (Thailand) personnel to provide critical skills and to keep the U.S. presence to a minimum. Recognizing that the appeal of the movement to the Meo depended in some part on the eventual realization of an improved standard of life for the tribal villages, it supported a variety of educational and small-scale agricultural efforts. CIA also had the flexibility both to see the possibilities and to improvise the facilities for a radio station that could carry the movement's message throughout the tribal area.

(U) AID's Refugee Relief Program also was unusually flexible, particularly in its attitude toward meeting field requirements, with the accompanying delegation of considerable authority to field personnel. With this kind of authority, field representatives were able

^{*}(U) Cf. *Foreign Aid and the Defense of Southeast Asia*, Praeger, New York, 1962, in which Jordan criticizes the military's tendency to impose U.S. doctrine and matériel on clients, regardless of suitability.

SECRET

CONFIDENTIAL

101

versus the higher performance of propeller-driven aircraft in close support of irregular forces. That no unconventional aircraft were assigned to support of the unconventional war suggests a rigidity which could not be overcome by the limited degree of leverage available to the Ambassador.

(C) Both these examples illustrate the limits to the span of control over the system in Laos and the very evident inability of that system to establish substantial influence over the deployment of major military combat assets or over the tactical concepts employed in such cases.

SUMMING UP

(C) Despite the inadequacies and failures -- some of which persist -- the weight of evidence justifies the conclusion that the *ad hoc* and unprecedented arrangements for managing U.S. inputs in Laos met the challenge. They account in large part for the limited but significant success in that remote conflict during 1962-1970:

1. The character of the war and the constraints of policy and environment placed a premium on adaptive response to the remote and exotic world of the Lao and the tribesmen. This response was made possible by the delegation of responsibility to field representatives, who were able to match needs with capabilities, a process which depended on rapport with local leadership and mutual confidence between U.S. personnel and their clients.

2. The institutional response remained flexible and innovative in part because the organization remained small and lean and in part because leadership oriented itself on the field and on the need to meet field requirements.

3. The leadership also played a critical role in grasping the authority offered to it and in using it to shape an effectively unified organization under genuine single management in the field. Most important in this regard was the subordination of military activity to political control in keeping with nonmilitary requirements and goals.

(U) A wealth of useful lessons is embedded in the Laos experience despite the uniqueness of the circumstances. Of course, no

CONFIDENTIAL

