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UNDERCOVER ARMIES:

CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961–1973

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.

CIA History Staff

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, DC

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ABBREVIATIONS

BG	*Bataillon Guerrilla,* the renamed SGU battalion
CASI	Continental Air Services International
CAT	Civil Air Transport, the Taiwan-based airline that grew out of Gen. Claire Chennault's "Flying Tigers"
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific of US armed forces
CDNI	Committee for the Defense of the National Interest, an informal association of anticommunist Lao political and military leaders
COS	Chief of Station
DDP	Deputy Director for Plans
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAR	*Forces Armées Royales* (Royal [Laotian] Armed Forces)
Helio	Helio-Courier, a single-engine, fixed-wing STOL aircraft
ICC	International Control Commission
KMT	Kuomintang, the political party of Gen. Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NLHS	Neo Lao Hak Sat, the political front of the communist Pathet Lao

NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PEO	Program Evaluation Office of the US Operations Mission in Vientiane
PGNU	Provisional Government of National Union
RLG	Royal Laotian Government
RTA	Royal Thai Army
SEACORD	Southeast Asia Coordination Committee, composed of the MACV commander and the US ambassadors to South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate
SOG	Special Operations Group, a MACV element staffed by the US Army Special Forces
SOT	Special Operations Team
STOL	Short-takeoff-and-landing
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USOM	United States Operations Mission, a field office of the Agency for International Development
WSAG	Washington Special Action Group, the interagency body charged with oversight of covert action

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INTRODUCTION

The Cork in the Bottle

The day before his inauguration as president of the United States, John F. Kennedy met President Dwight D. Eisenhower and several cabinet officers at the White House. Kennedy had solicited the meeting, partly for cosmetic reasons—"reassuring the public as to the harmony of the transition"—but also because he was, in his own words, "anxious to get some commitment from the outgoing administration as to how they would deal with Laos." Receiving Kennedy in the Cabinet Room on 19 January 1961, Eisenhower and his advisers had more to say about the tiny country's strategic importance than about specific means of keeping the "cork in the bottle," as they put it, to prevent communist dominion over most of the Far East.[1]

The Western-oriented Royal Laotian Government (RLG) was threatened both by an army mutiny and by a North Vietnamese–sponsored communist insurgent movement, the Pathet Lao. The mutinous RLG units were the army's best, certainly capable of taking on the best of the dissident forces. But most of the army reflected the lethargy of its officer corps, which was drawn from the colonial elite that had served the French, and now lacked either the energy or the legitimacy for effective leadership.

Well aware of its own military impotence, the RLG feared that asking the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to intercede would only provoke further North Vietnamese incursions. Eisenhower recognized Laotian anxiety, but thought that if the country fell to the communists, "it would bring unbelievable pressure to bear on Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam." He considered Laos so important that, in the words of one Kennedy adviser, "If it reached the stage where we could not persuade others to act with us, then he would be willing, *as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally.*"[2]

It seems that Kennedy had to wait until he took office to learn of the airlift of weapons and equipment already on its way to a tiny village perched on one

[1] Memoranda by participants at the meeting, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XXIV, The Laos Crisis* (hereafter cited as *FRUS 1961–1963*), 19–25

of the mountains covering northern Laos. In fact, the departing administration had already come upon a partial solution to the dilemma posed by its twin objectives, keeping the "cork in the bottle" while avoiding the risks of overt military intervention. Kennedy now accepted the Eisenhower formula: If neither the RLG nor America's SEATO partners wanted joint action, Washington would find surrogates to take up this latest challenge by the Sino-Soviet axis.

Two such surrogates appeared in the conjunction of an Iron Age tribe, then known to outsiders as the Meo, and The Meo, a bitterly anti-Vietnamese mountain people, had migrated from Yunnan Province in southern China. Numbering perhaps 500,000 in Laos, they became the core of an irregular force that fought the North Vietnamese Army until February 1973, when a Laotian cease-fire followed the agreement with Hanoi on terms to end the war in South Vietnam. Under their charismatic, mercurial leader Vang Pao, the Meo—more properly known as the Hmong—evolved from a hit-and-run guerrilla outfit into light infantry operating in regimental strength.[3]

[2] Ibid., 25. Emphasis in original. Secretary of Defense McNamara, in a note to Kennedy on 24 January, recalled Eisenhower as having "advised against unilateral action by the United States in connection with Laos." (See *FRUS 1961–1963*, 41.) More generally, this episode illustrates how complicated and elusive the truth can be even about an apparently straightforward point of fact. Kennedy, too, recalled the president as having favored military intervention, and so did Dean Rusk. Even more indeterminate is what Eisenhower's words, whatever they were, signaled about what he would have done were he not leaving office. Richard Nixon, then his vice president, noted how the president's frequent "enthusias[m] about half-baked ideas in the discussion stage" contrasted with his decisionmaking style, that of the "coldest, most unemotional and analytical man in the world." (Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy About Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 [September 1992].)

[3]

The Agency initially aimed its paramilitary activity in Laos at saving that country from domination by North Vietnam and by Hanoi's own Laotian surrogate, the Pathet Lao. Indeed, the preservation of a noncommunist Laos remained an American objective until the collapse of South Vietnam rendered the question moot in May 1975. But the emphasis changed over time. Until 1964, the main point of contention arose from North Vietnam's failure to withdraw any significant forces from Laos, while US-supported military programs there sought to resist Hanoi's encroachments.

As the United States committed airpower to South Vietnam in 1964, and then ground troops in 1965, American policymakers increasingly saw Laos as a sideshow to the larger struggle between Saigon and Hanoi. In this secondary theater of operations, the antagonists' strategic positions reversed the situation found in Vietnam. In South Vietnam, mobile Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units bedeviled Saigon's road-bound heavy infantry, while in Laos, Hmong irregulars flitted over mountain trails or moved by air to occupy key high ground and to harass Hanoi's tanks and artillery. This reversal of roles also reversed the seasonal alternation of tactical advantage in Laos. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) advanced during the dry season, usually early November to late May, and gave ground to Hmong operations when the rains washed out the primitive road system.[5]

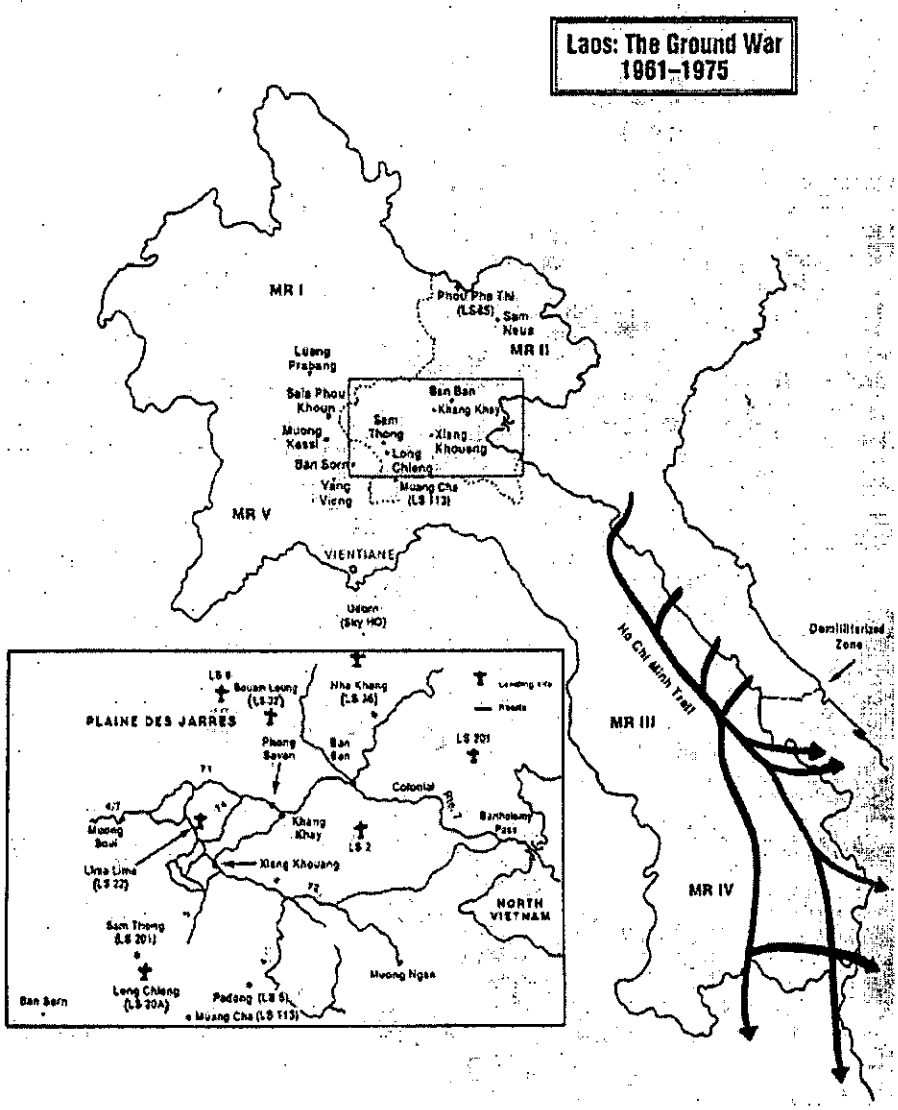
Expanded Hmong forces defended Hmong territory in the mountains of the northeast and diverted substantial North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Meanwhile, with the creation of ethnic Lao guerrilla battalions in the Laotian Panhandle, CIA began in 1968 to contest Hanoi's use of Laotian territory as a supply route to South Vietnam and Cambodia.

The CIA station in Vientiane functioned as the ambassador's executive agent for the conduct of the war. Its role stemmed from reluctance in both

[4] Between 1996 and 2000, Bill Lair provided voluminous information, in the form of interviews and written notes, on his own participation in the war in Laos. Subsequent references to this material cite "Bill Lair."

[5] The official name of Hanoi's army is the People's Army of Vietnam. The term was seldom used by US officials during the war, and this volume follows their practice of referring to it as the NVA.

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Laos ground war, 1961–75.

Washington and Vientiane to end Laotian neutrality. This would have abrogated the 1962 Geneva Agreements, which prohibited all foreign powers but the French from maintaining a military presence in Laos. Overtly committing US combat forces or even military advisers would imperil the basis for a negotiated peace, something the Kennedy administration shrank from doing. The upshot was that, in addition to deploying its own paramilitary resources, CIA often found itself mediating between the Vientiane embassy and MACV in Saigon. In this capacity, it worked to preserve the ambassador's authority

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over covert Laotian operations while also trying to get MACV to support them, especially with combat air.

These efforts were generally successful, though occasionally only with White House intervention. The US Air Force and Navy provided indispensable air support to the irregulars, who bore most of the burden of ground combat in Laos. Together, they compensated for the lassitude and incompetence, born of weak, corrupt leadership, of the government's regular army, the *Forces Armées Royales* (FAR). When large-scale operations ended with the cease-fire of February 1973, the Royal Laotian Government controlled nearly as much of its territory as it had in 1962, at the time of the Geneva Agreements. Irregulars in the north had tied down as many as two divisions of Hanoi's troops while those in the Panhandle had supplemented massive US Air Force bombing with vigorous, if brief, forays into the Ho Chi Minh Trail network.

The 1973 status quo in Laos survived until the fall of Saigon in May 1975, which brought collapse also in Vientiane and in Phnom Penh. But ultimate failure, in Laos at least, is an inadequate criterion by which to judge the quality of the effort devoted to a lost cause. CIA's performance there was certainly not without flaws, but the story of the "secret war" in Laos reveals an admirable record of flexible, economical management and sound tactical judgment. An even more remarkable aspect of that record is the Agency's steady, pragmatic accommodation of cultural sensitivities and of amorphous, competitive command relationships—Laotian, and American. Finally—though doubtless important only to those who were there—the program became for nearly all its CIA participants the adventure of their professional lives.[7]

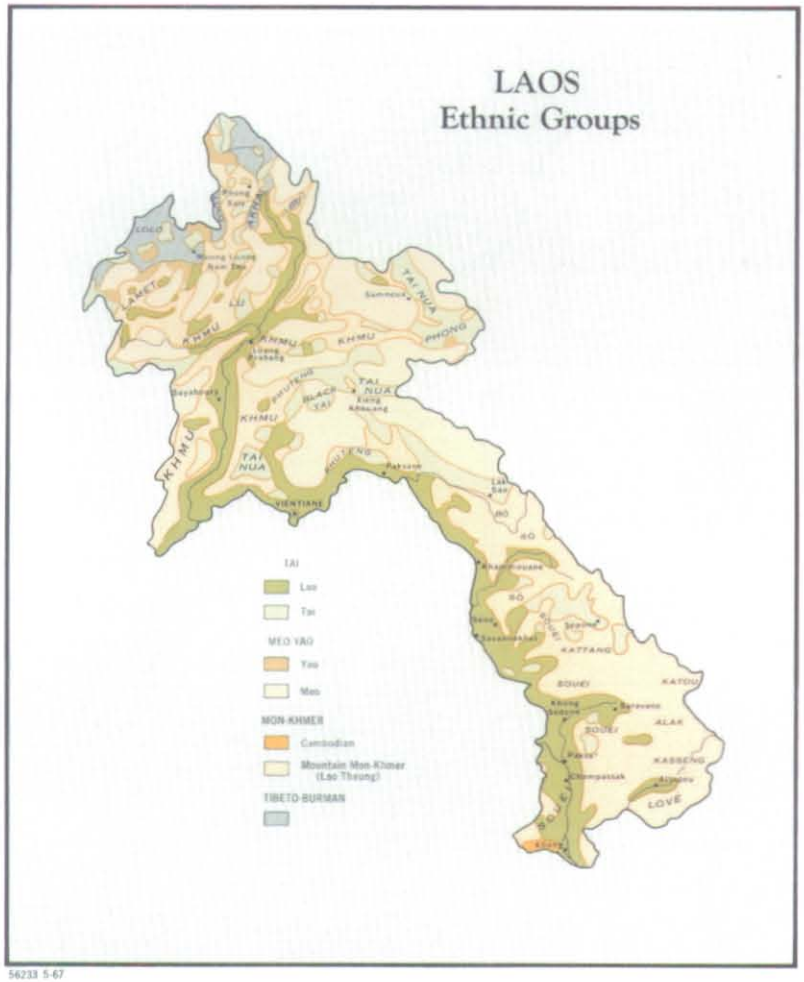
[7] who ran one of the Panhandle programs, expressed the consensus: An entry-level officer found it "pretty heady stuff" to be out at the end of the line in Laos. He was his own boss, with his own airplane, and had cargo aircraft and helicopters on call to support the thousand-odd irregulars who depended on him for everything—pay, food and supplies, training, ordnance, communications, and tactical direction.

SELECTED MAPS

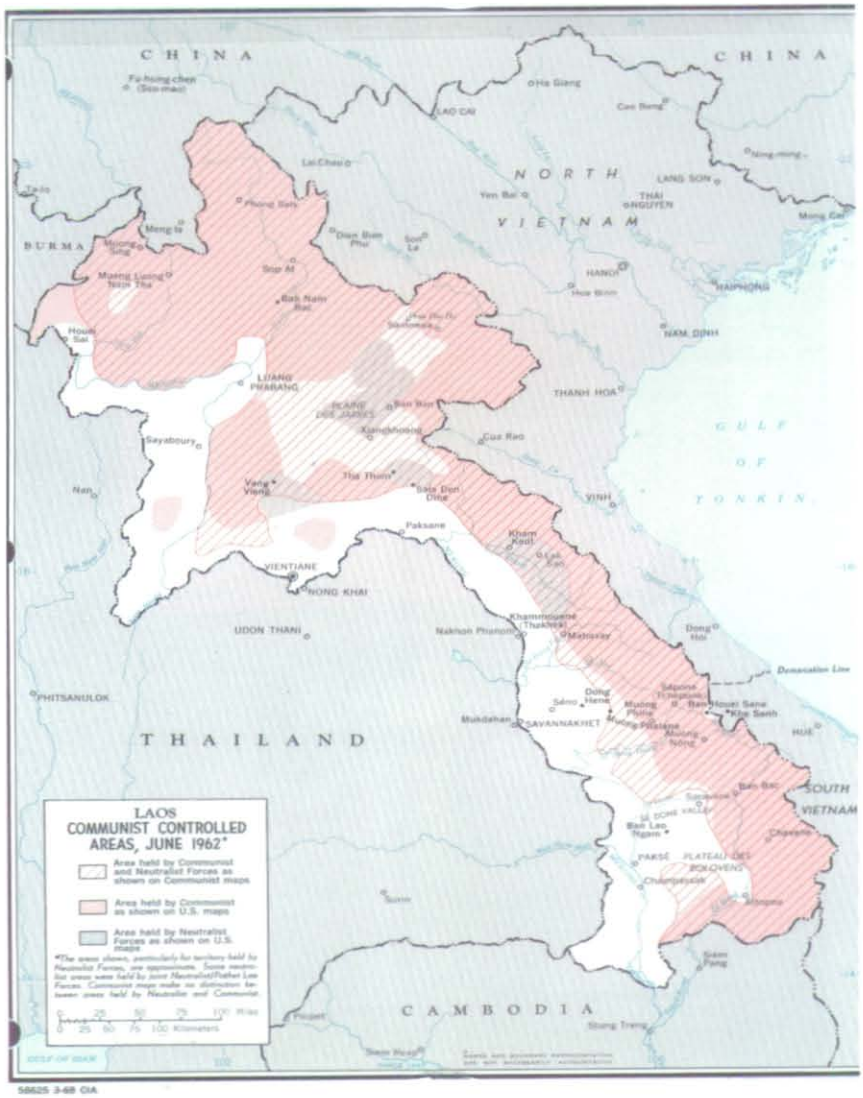


Laos topographical map.

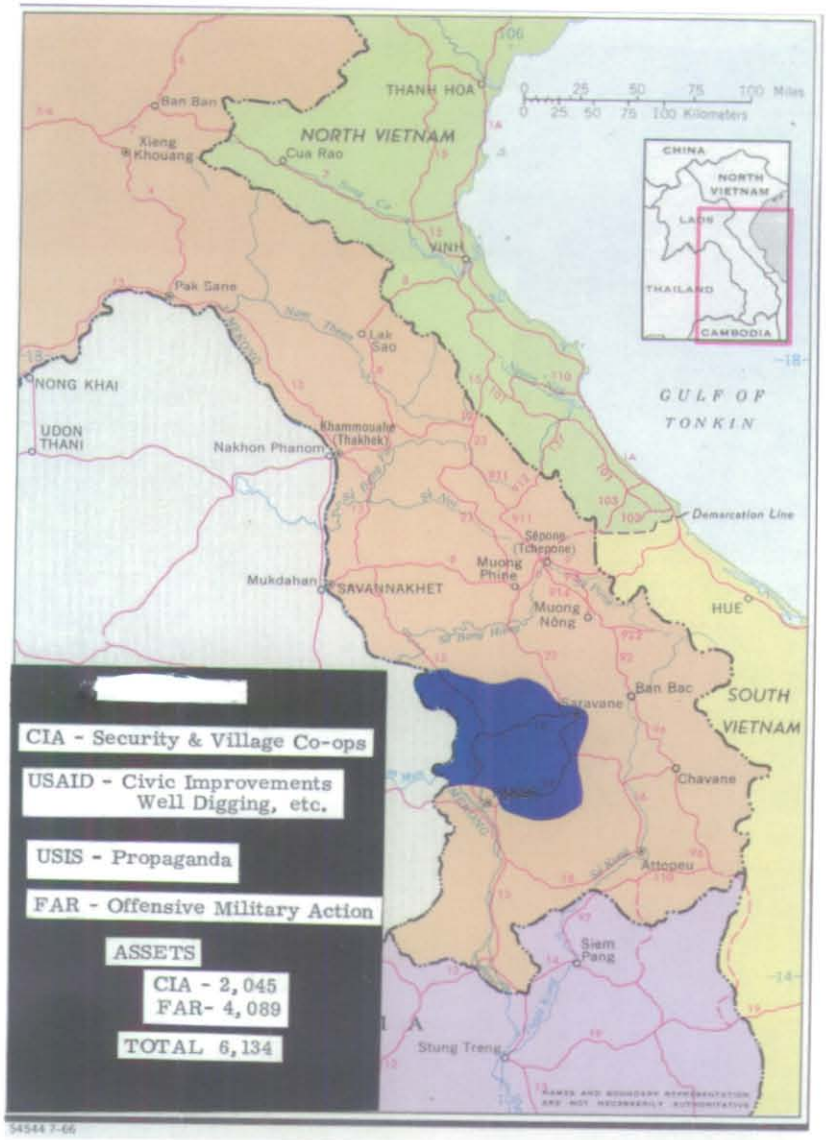
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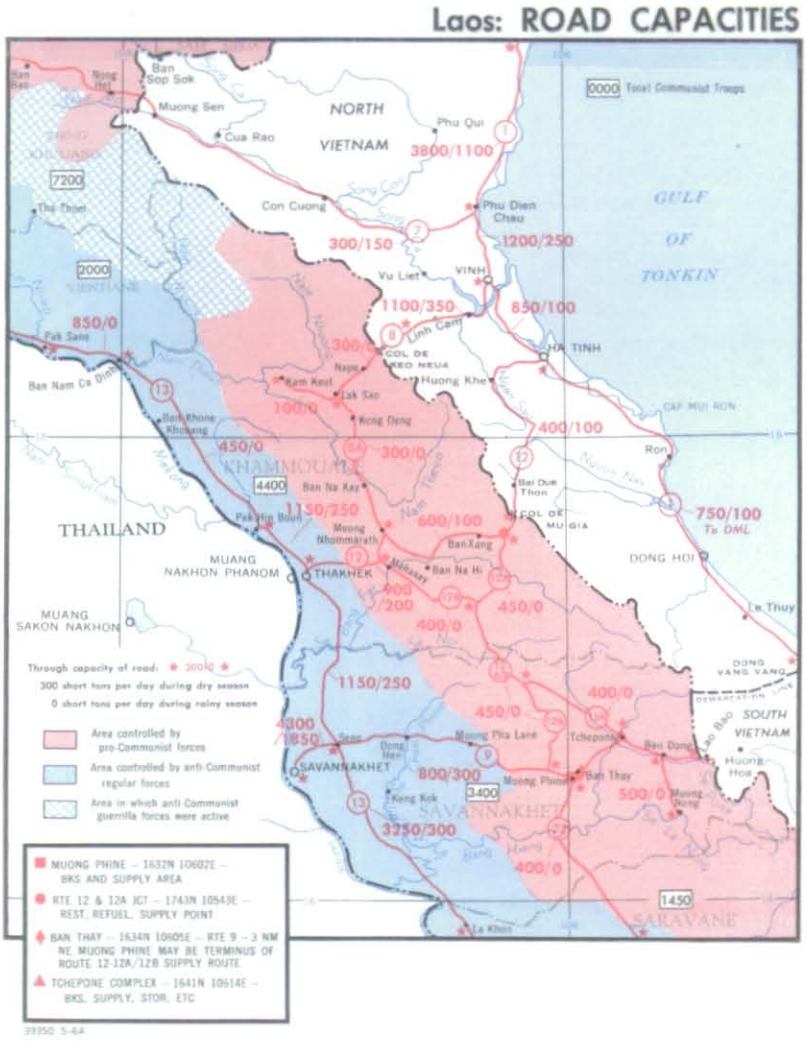
Distribution of ethnic groups in Laos, 1967



Communist-controlled areas in Laos, 1962



Southern Laos village security program, mid-1966

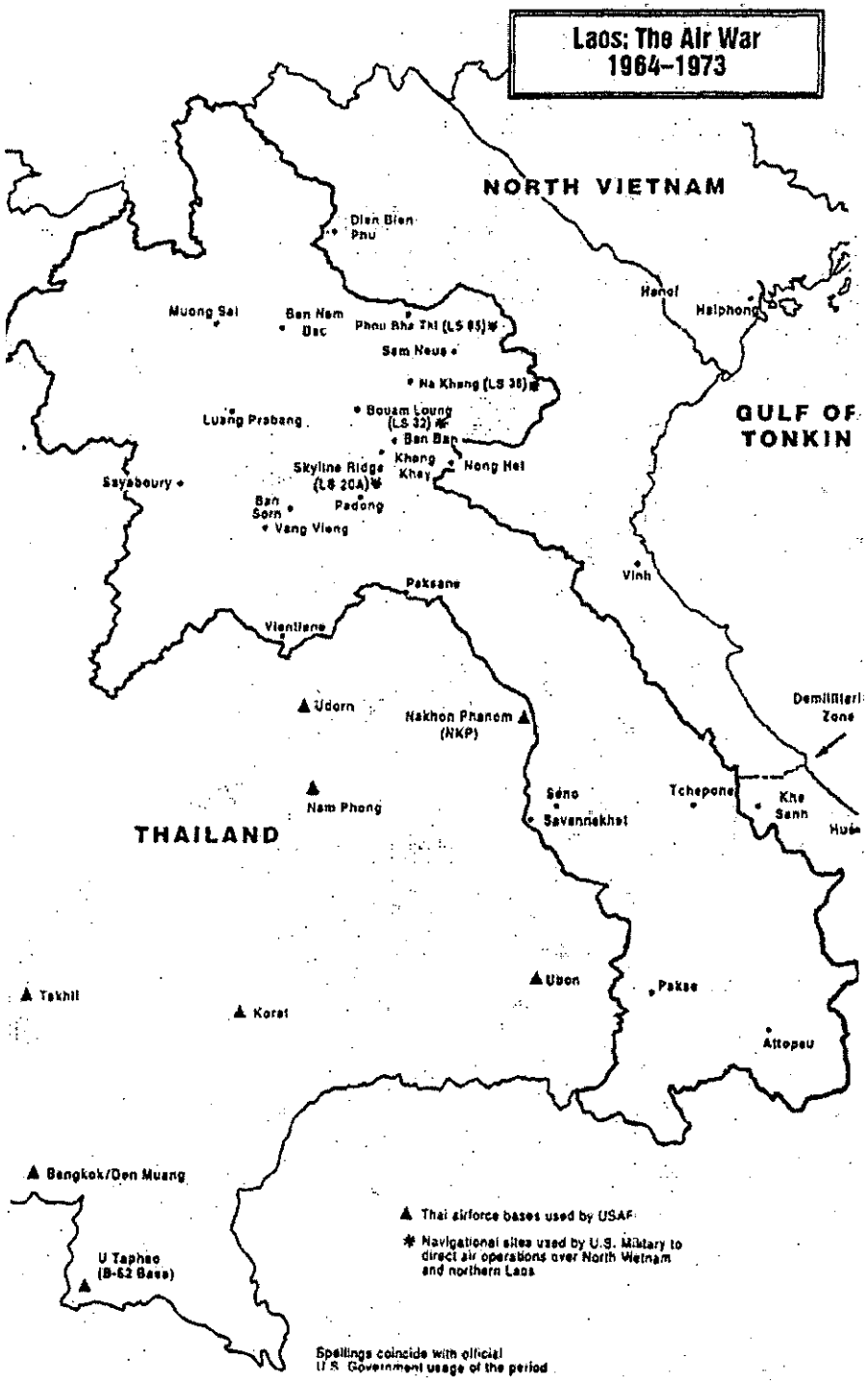


Communist-controlled roads, c. May 1964

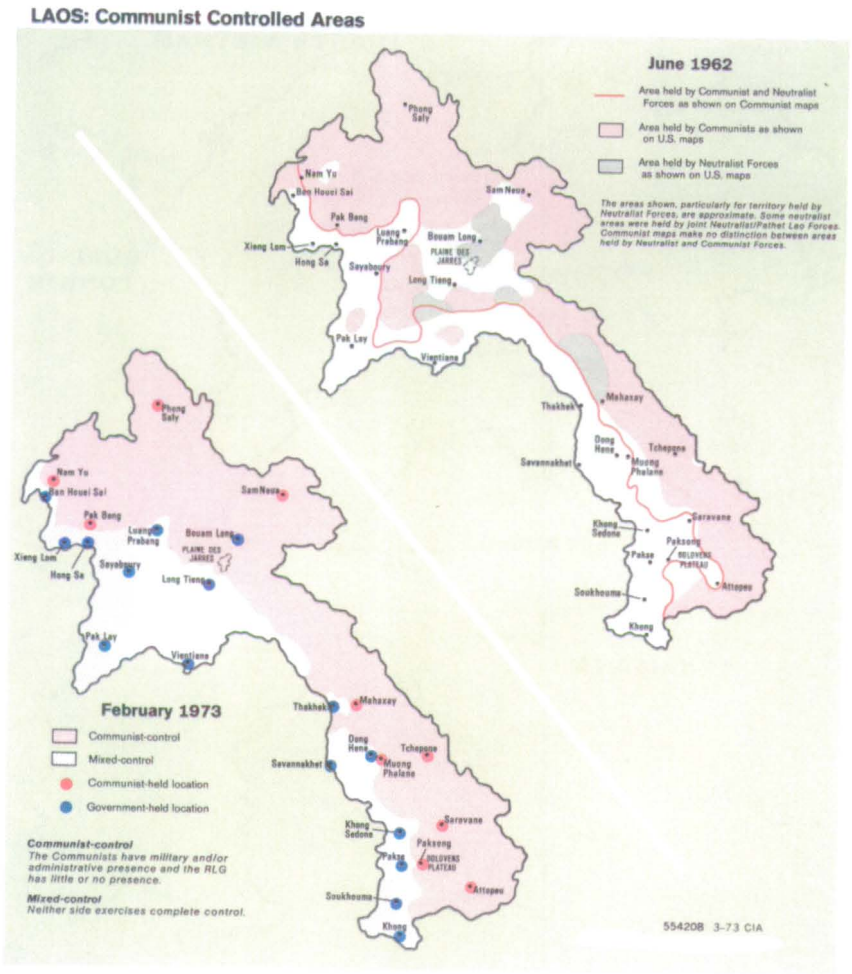
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Principal features of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, early 1972



Support facilities for combat air operations over Laos and North Vietnam



Comparison of controlled areas, 1962 vs. 1973

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PROLOGUE

Despite a chronic, uneasy sense of the fragility of their creation, US policymakers saw the first five years of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime as an unqualified success. North Vietnamese invasion had been deterred, and Diem was consolidating his control of the South Vietnamese countryside. The little kingdom of Laos mattered only as a potential domino, threatening its neighbors only in the event of North Vietnamese or communist Chinese invasion or subversion.

In January 1960, what might be called the first Tet offensive challenged these illusions when coordinated Viet Cong attacks on rural outposts began a process of whittling away at Diem's hold on the countryside. By this time, in Laos, a government far weaker than Diem's was losing ground to the communist Pathet Lao. In August 1960, the army's best combat unit mutinied. The coup created a base of military support for neutralist elements led by Prince Souvanna Phouma and set the stage for the conflict that followed.

From 1955 until the 1960 coup, CIA covert action in Laos had concentrated on the search for enlightened elements within the tradional elite that it could support in a process of political modernization. This effort, like the one in South Vietnam, aimed at developing leadership whose genuine nationalism would not prevent it from accepting Agency guidance as it set out to win the consent of the governed. The 1960 coup nullified these efforts, and CIA, along with the rest of the US foreign policy establishment, now devoted itself to supporting military resistance to the threat of a communist takeover.

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CHAPTER ONE

Everybody's Pawn

Dien Bien Phu, where Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh defeated the French Expeditionary Force in May 1954, lies only a few miles from Vietnam's border with northeastern Laos. Once a substantial power on the Indochinese peninsula, the Kingdom of Laos collapsed in the 18th century, splintering into three petty kingdoms that survived by appeasing their stronger Vietnamese and Thai neighbors. The French reassembled the country when they imposed a protectorate in 1893 and ruled it until 1950, when they gave it independence more nominal than real. At the end of the First Indochina War, four years later, the tiny country had not ruled itself in more than 200 years.[1]

By mid-1954, the Laotian communist front, the Pathet Lao, with help from Hanoi, had taken over de facto control of the two northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua.[2] Backed and essentially controlled by the Viet Minh, the Pathet Lao soon dominated parts of other provinces as well. There were as yet few signs of tension between the Soviets and the Chinese, and international communism still loomed as an alarming ideological specter, monolithic and full of revolutionary fervor. From this perspective, vulnerable Laos represented a potential "domino," which, if toppled by either North Vietnam or the People's Republic of China, could fall on any of its four noncommunist neighbors.[3]

The Geneva Accords of July 1954, which accepted Viet Minh control of North Vietnam, neutralized Laos under a regime to be monitored by an International Control Commission (ICC). The United States refused to sign the accords, which it regarded as unduly accommodating to the communists, but it promised to observe them and to help punish anyone who did not.[4]

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[1] Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, entry on Laos.

[2] Sam Neua was also known as Houa Phan. Contemporary transliterations are Phong Sali and Hua Phan.

[3] Two authorities on Laotian politics in the 1950s and 1960s are Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, and Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos since 1954*.

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Chapter One

An early test of the neutrality formula came when the intransigent Pathet Lao regrouped its forces in the north, adding overt military occupation to its political control of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. The Laotian cabinet, the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma among its members, unanimously requested Western military intervention to recover the two provinces. The French and the British "raised such a howl," as a Senate staff report put it, that the secretary of state John Foster Dulles declined to comply. Nevertheless, although ruling out direct intervention, Washington now decided on a major effort to turn Laos into a buffer, confining the communists to the mountains of the north while a friendly government controlled the Mekong Valley borders with Thailand and Cambodia.[5]

This effort took the form of a military assistance and advisory program that circumvented the provisions of the Geneva Accords prohibiting any foreign military presence other than a residual French mission. Called the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) and nominally a part of the economic aid program, it surreptitiously equipped and trained regular units of the *Forces Armées Royales*. in these early years, operated more in the political arena, concentrating on covert action designed to popularize the Vientiane government. But it kept a weather eye out for opportunities in the paramilitary sphere, and in 1955 had already considered clandestine support to the Hmong, mountain tribesmen previously allied with the French against the Viet Minh.[6]

After some success with harassment operations in Pathet Lao–controlled Phong Saly and Sam Neua Provinces, the program was suspended in November 1957 when new Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma reached a short-lived agreement with the Pathet Lao.[7]

---

[4]

[5]

Regarding pronunciation: the "ph" in a Laotian name or word approximates the hard "p" in English. Thus, Souvanna Phouma's last name is pronounced "Pooma." The "th" sound is also hard; "Thong" is pronounced "Tong."

[6]

For a time, the Laotian military was known as the *Forces Armées Laotiennes* (FAL), but after 1960, it came to be referred to as the *Forces Armées Royales* (FAR). The latter term is used throughout this volume.

[7]

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The deal would have restored the authority of the RLG in the two northern provinces in exchange for the admission of 1,500 Pathet Lao troops into the Royal Lao Army. But the presence of Souvanna's half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, in the Pathet Lao leadership did not suffice to allay mutual suspicion. When the arrangement collapsed, the indefatigable Souvanna tried another tack, proposing to set up diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and to accept Pathet Lao in the Vientiane government. US objections to this faded, in the absence of a workable replacement for Souvanna, who over the next year negotiated an arrangement with the Pathet Lao that called for a coalition government and an expanded National Assembly with 21 new seats.[8]

American acquiescence did not imply approval, but there was no alternative to trying to make the new arrangement work. In early 1958, assistant secretary of state Walter Robertson proposed to exploit CIA's flexibility with a "crash program of village-level political impact projects," designed to display both Vientiane's concern for its people and the "reality of American aid." The Agency responded with two programs, one to ensure an anticommunist parliamentary majority, and the other to resist increasing Pathet Lao military pressure.[9]

These efforts reflected CIA's core beliefs about Cold War strategy not only in Southeast Asia but generally in the postcolonial world. On the political side, the Agency thought it imperative for a threatened anticommunist government, typically dominated by a traditional elite, to establish its benevolent—even paternalistic—concern for the welfare of a predominantly rural population. The military aspect focused on small, mobile units designed to operate in enemy-held territory, challenging communist control and organizing civilian resistance. The two might be combined, using military resources in rural civic action programs designed to popularize the government and its army.[10]

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[8] Both Thai and Lao are customarily addressed by their given names.

[9] Letter from Deputy Under Secretary of State Dillon to the [DCI], 15 February 1958, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*, Volume XVI, East Asia–Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos (hereafter cited as *FRUS 1958–1960*), 429.

[10] CIA never promulgated a formal doctrine for operations in the Third World. The working assumptions that guided such activity in Laos and Vietnam were shaped first by the tradition of OSS support to partisan warfare in World War II and second by the experience of Edward Lansdale, an air force officer detailed to CIA, in the campaign against the Huk rebellion in the Philippines in the early 1950s. Agency practice in Third World conflict often featured a search for a charismatic leader who could mobilize his country's political and military resources to defeat the communists. Ed Lansdale recalled Allen Dulles's admonition, on sending him to Saigon, to "find another [Ramon] Magsaysay," the Filipino leader with whom Lansdale had worked to defeat the Huk insurgents.

The communists' 1958 victory did not, however, reflect popular enthusiasm for the Pathet Lao. The government had undermined its own prospects by allowing several candidates to oppose the single Pathet Lao running in a given district. At the same time, the very connection between the RLG's sudden largesse and the electoral campaign seemed lost on some of its constituents. One defeated candidate berated a group of voters for their ingratitude, only to hear them complain, "You never told us we should vote for you."[12]

Meanwhile, at least initially, the paramilitary effort enjoyed better results. A joint effort with PEO, it began with so-called Scout Ranger teams formed from regular army personnel. While they contested Pathet Lao consolidation of the northern provinces, these evolved into FAR's 1st and 2nd Parachute Battalions. The most effective units in the army, they were as politically volatile as the government they served; one of them would spark the 1960 mutiny that led to the largest, most innovative program of irregular warfare ever conducted by CIA.[13]

A House Divided

Called the Committee for the Defense of the National Interest (CDNI), it purported to represent a new spirit in Laotian politics, immune to corruption and independent of the family-based factions that treated the country as their private preserve. Although Phoui Sananikone, approved by Washington to succeed Souvanna, was himself a prominent member of one of these factions, he claimed to share the CDNI "young Turks'" commitment to transforming Laotian politics. More important to Washington, he and the CDNI supplied the ardent anticommunism that Souvanna seemed to lack.[14]

The new movement, however, did not command enough National Assembly votes to remove Souvanna, and Washington decided to intervene directly.

11

12 Editorial Note, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 437

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under "centralized coordination," and all the witnesses interviewed by the team asserted North Vietnamese support for the campaign.[18]

Whatever Hanoi's role, the level of violence receded in September, giving the RLG and its allies a respite to try to deal with political turmoil in Vientiane. A year of special powers granted to Phoui in early 1959 was coming to an end, along with the term of the National Assembly. The Assembly's conservative majority wanted Phoui's special mandate prolonged, in order to avoid an election and the possible defeat of incumbent deputies. The CDNI, by contrast, wanted to challenge the leftists, and one of its most politically ambitious members, Col. Phoumi Nosavan, told American diplomats in early November that he had offered to run an election for Phoui, promising him, in State's words, a "tame Assembly."[19]

Impatient with the paralyzing factionalism of traditional Laotian politics, Phoumi proposed to follow electoral success with a "directed democracy," one that preserved a constitutional, parliamentary system while compensating for the limitations of "masses too ignorant for normal democracy." State saw the dangers of both the status quo and the authoritarian bent displayed by CDNI's impatient reformers. It accepted the need for a strong executive but worried that the young Turks might "kick over all constitutional traces and establish [a] quasi-dictatorial regime." How the Lao were to go about squaring this circle was left undefined.[20]

One reason for this omission may well have been the disarray among US officials responsible for Laotian matters. The foreign affairs bureaucracy, with each department or agency promoting its own agenda while guarding its jurisdictional turf, paid little more than lip service to coordinating the farrago of political, economic, military, and psychological programs. Worse, the US Mission in Vientiane found itself working at cross-purposes. PEO and CIA supported the CDNI reformers while the ambassador—only nominally in charge of Mission elements from other US agencies—and the economic aid office backed Phoui Sananikone and his conservative allies.[21]

Phoumi Nosavan looked like the potential anticommunist strongman his country needed. In their view—shared by the military in PEO—only a complete RLG shakeup stood a chance of instilling in the RLG enough energy and discipline to compete with the

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[18] Editorial Note. *FRUS 1958–1960*, 649.

[19] Ibid.; Telegram 970 From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 2 November 1959, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 645.

[20] State Telegram 970.

[21] Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1300, 8 November 1959, summarized in *FRUS 1958–1960*, 656–57.

communists. Ambassador Smith, however, maintained that extending Phoui's mandate for a year would give the anticommunist elements time to coalesce into a coherent, progressive front. The Lao contenders saw and exploited this disarray for their respective partisan purposes.

In early November, Ambassador Smith relayed to State a complaint from Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone voicing his fear of a CDNI-army coup supported by CIA. Smith and new economic aid chief John Tobler then collaborated on a telegram that, among other things, judged Agency efforts to be undermining the Phoui government and US prestige in Laos. The situation, they thought, threatened to lead to the "most dangerous and potentially disastrous course of events" for the future of Laos.[22]

The partisan zeal that drove relationships in Vientiane had never been echoed at Foggy Bottom or Langley. Accordingly, State assured Ambassador Smith of his authority over Mission subordinates; Smith was to "confine operational relationships with CDNI to appropriate operational measures fully coordinated by you." At the same time, State wanted Smith to understand Washington's view of the CDNI as a constructive and necessary presence on the Laotian political scene. In this context, State suggested that Smith consider himself a possible target of manipulation by the "astute" prime minister.[23]

The same message adopted a device that became a standard refuge of American officials frustrated by the factionalism of their Indochinese clients. The United States would not take sides, it suggested, nor would it urge on any party a distasteful course of action. Instead, it would try to reduce the friction by encouraging a town meeting atmosphere, in which "all patriotic elements discuss their problems among themselves and work together in [the] greater interest of [their] country." The Lao, "if they are true patriots," would acknowledge their dependence on the United States, the United Nations, and the Geneva signatories.[24]

Ambassador Smith replied with a bitter complaint about CDNI's– –"wrecking policy." He defended Phoui and the "older [and] wiser" conservatives around him, and adopted the prime minister's arguments about the illegality of CDNI's posture as a de facto political party.

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[22] Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State Parsons to the Secretary of State, "Situation in Laos," 16 November 1959, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 667–69;

[23] State Telegram 1095 to Vientiane, 21 November 1959, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 675–77.

[24] Ibid. The empty appeal to Lao patriotism, twice in one paragraph, suggests the depths of Washington's despair

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"Friction between young and old would be much easier to neutralize" if [redacted] activities were "confined to 'appropriate operational measures fully coordinated' by me."[25] [redacted]

In this atmosphere, the mandate of the National Assembly expired on 25 December 1959. The army obtained the blessing of King Savang Vatthana—a constitutional monarch who played his largely ceremonial role at the royal capital at Luang Prabang—for a declaration of military rule until the creation of a new government. [redacted]

New Comity, Old Discord [redacted]

Whatever his sympathy for the CDNI, King Savang named only one member, Brig. Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, to the new provisional government in early 1960, and the embassy still saw a "profound" breach between anticommunist elements in Vientiane. [redacted] and Ambassador Smith proposed to [redacted] a joint effort to reconcile the CDNI and Phoui's Rally for the Lao People. No one, however, saw the provisional government as capable of real leadership, and Washington abandoned its preference for a year's delay in holding a national election.[27] [redacted]

US officials thought the anticommunist slate perfectly capable of winning a fair election. [redacted] rather naively believed that General Phoumi and other CDNI leaders shared that view, but case officer Stuart Methven was disabused of the notion when he visited the RLG's election headquarters during the vote count in late April 1960. There he found a Phoumi aide, Capt. Siho Lanphouthacoul, recording the official count at the chalkboard. The numbers were clearly tainted, for communist candidates were ostensibly running far behind even in the Pathet Lao–dominated province of Phong Saly.[28] [redacted]

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[25] Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1491, 30 November 1959, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 680–83. [redacted]

[26] Editorial Note; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1904, 2 January 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 722–24; [redacted]

[27] Editorial Note; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 2005, 13 January 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 728, 731–32. The Laotian name of Phoui's party was the Lao Hom Lao. [redacted]

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Siho met Methven's reproach for this blatant fraud with a jaunty question, "What is your year of birth?" The startled Methven gave it to him, and Siho erased the number of Pathet Lao votes—a three-digit figure, at most—and replaced it with a more generous 1,927. Methven assumed that Siho's fraudulent count was taking place with Phoumi's acquiescence; at best, the general had clearly done nothing to ensure the integrity of the electoral process.[29]

The Department of State worried that the vote-rigging would invalidate the election in the international arena, but DCI Allen Dulles was inclined to treat it more as a youthful prank. The end result was a new National Assembly entirely without Pathet Lao representation, a desirable outcome certainly, but a better omen had it demonstrably represented voter preferences.[30]

In concert with the British, French, and Australians, the US Mission in Vientiane plunged into maneuvers designed to keep the CDNI from what it saw as a potentially destructive bid by the military to dominate the new government. The noncontroversial Tiao Somsanith became prime minister, Phoumi Nosavan settled for the defense minister's portfolio, and the summer began in relative tranquility.[31]

Ambassador Smith left in May. His replacement, the genteel, judicious Winthrop Brown, Nevertheless, the two quickly disposed of any residue of ill feeling left behind by their predecessors and established a relationship of mutual trust.[32]

Under new management and in a more cooperative atmosphere, began to expand its political organizing efforts to reach ethnic minority groups traditionally despised by the dominant Lao. Stuart Methven later recalled that, although nominally sponsored by the CDNI, the effort was

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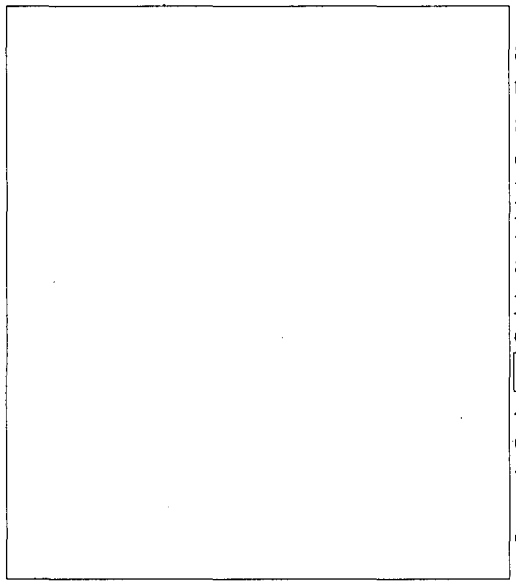
[28] State Telegram 1921 to Vientiane, 26 April 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 751; Stuart Methven, interview by the author, McLean, VA, 26 November 1996 (hereafter cited as Methven interview). Methven was case officer who provided advice and support to CDNI leaders.

[29] Methven interview. Methven recalled that continued to support CDNI organizing efforts during the summer, and progress extended beyond provincial capitals into at least some district towns. This provoked several instances of Pathet Lao harassment, but the fate of the effort may have been presaged by a rally in the late spring at which the crowd was to symbolize its call to "burn out corruption" by burning posters bearing that slogan. A sudden, unseasonably early monsoon shower dampened the crowd and got the posters wet enough to prevent their being set afire.

[30] State Telegram 1921 to Vientiane, 26 April 1960, and Editorial Note, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 51–52.

[31] Vientiane Embassy Telegram 2850, 7 May 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 762–65 and passim.

[32] Author's recollection.



an essentially unilateral CIA move to make Laotian politics more inclusive. It soon led to contact with one of the few Hmong officers in FAR, a French-trained captain named Vang Pao. Methven remembered making a goodwill gesture of US Army surplus sweaters and blankets, 5,000 of each, obtained from [redacted] and dropped by Air America at Vang Pao's sector headquarters at Nong Het, on the border with North Vietnam.[33]

The Kong Le Mutiny

The Vang Pao contact had had no time to mature when a new crisis shattered the government so recently cobbled together. On 9 August 1960, the 26-year-old commander of the elite 2nd Parachute Battalion, Capt. Kong Le, staged a mutiny that quickly grew into a full-fledged coup d'etat. The Lao concealed their planning from [redacted] paramilitary adviser, to whom the rebellion looked like the result of exhaustingly frequent deployment and niggardly material support.[34]

But Kong Le now set out a larger set of grievances. These included not only the familiar theme of corrupt government by a privileged class but also resentment at a heavy American hand in Laos and dismay at the internecine conflict between the RLG and the Pathet Lao.[35]

Kong Le, in uncontested control of Vientiane, demanded the government's resignation, and on 14 August Tiao Somsanith obliged him. Only the defense minister, Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, refused to accept the government's dissolution. He then began lobbying for US aid to help him crush the rebellion; first from Bangkok, where he took refuge after the coup, and then from his base in the Laotian panhandle at Savannakhet.[36]

At this point, Phoumi had no more legitimate claim to power than did Kong Le. Washington shrank from military action against a group of mutineers

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[33] Methven interview.

[34] Ibid. The White House understood Kong Le's complaints to include two months of arrears in the unit's pay. (John S.D. Eisenhower, "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material Reported to the President," 15 August 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 793.)

[35] Methven interview.

[36] State Telegram 172 to Bangkok, 15 August 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 794–95 and passim.

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nist takeover. CIA was to promise Phoumi that he could count on the United States to meet any reasonable request for financial and logistical support.[39]

These assurances stoked the fervent pro-Phoumi bias of the military officers in Savannakhet. had fought with the French Foreign Legion early in World War II and had suffered a throat wound that reduced his voice to a rasping half-whisper. He had come to know Phoumi at a French staff college after the war, and now, had been sent to Savannakhet expressly to capitalize on their friendship. He and the PEO man saw Phoumi as the only Lao capable of saving the country from neutralism and eventual absorption into the communist bloc. But his troops had not been paid for months, and 8 million kip promised by Washington was late. In an apocalyptic cable of 21 August, proclaimed that, "without immediate financial support [Phoumi's] movement will collapse within one week."[40]

Deliveries of money and rice staved off that fate, while the Lao continued their intricate factional maneuvers. In a move that partly compensated for Souvanna's greater popularity in the countryside, Phoumi acquired a major ally from the south. His new partner was Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, heir to the petty kingdom that had ruled the lower Laotian Panhandle. On 10 September, they declared their intention to oppose Souvanna as founders of a Revolutionary Committee.

Having repudiated Souvanna Phouma, General Phoumi replaced Kong Le as mutineer against a legally established government. Despite its distrust of Souvanna and its nominal endorsement of Phoumi, official Washington recoiled from sponsoring an insurgent to lead a sovereign, noncommunist regime. Over the next three weeks, the United States looked for a compro-

[39] Letter from the Chargè in Thailand (Unger) to Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, 24 August 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 823–24.

[41] "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material Reported to the President," 13 September 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 840–41;

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mise formula, perhaps involving a royal convocation of the "principal personages of [the] realm" to form a coalition government that would exclude Kong Le. [42]

Shortly after the Kong Le coup, Phoumi had occupied Paksane, on the Mekong River east of Vientiane. The fragility of his troops' morale was exposed on 21 September, when Kong Le loyalists scattered the numerically superior defenders, driving them back toward Savannakhet. Kong Le and, by some accounts, the Pathet Lao were on the offensive elsewhere as well. Washington now began to fear that its relatively evenhanded approach to the Laotian factions might actually promote the disintegration of the anticommunist side. Accordingly, on 1 October, State instructed Ambassador Brown to implore the king to "take authority into his own hands and appoint [a] caretaker government under royal decree." If this appeal failed, Brown "should know that there is strong and growing sentiment here [in Washington] to give exclusive and all-out support to those able and willing to salvage at least that portion of the country centered in Savannakhet."[43]

The ambassador called on King Savang Vatthana at Luang Prabang, the royal capital, on 6 October. Characteristically hesitant, the king declined to remove Souvanna, and a frustrated Washington mandated one "last desperate ploy" to "work through and with Souvanna Phouma as the legal façade of [the] legitimate government and at the same time supporting Phoumi and other anticommunist forces." Souvanna was to get an ultimatum whose terms included moving the government temporarily to Luang Prabang, doing what he could to restrain Kong Le, and avoiding any negotiations with the Pathet Lao until his position improved. Meanwhile, the United States would unilaterally pay and supply Phoumi's forces in Savannakhet and northern Laos.[44]

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[42] State Telegrams 316 to Vientiane (16 September 1960) and 322 to Vientiane (19 September 1960), *FRUS 1958–1960*, 848–50, 856.

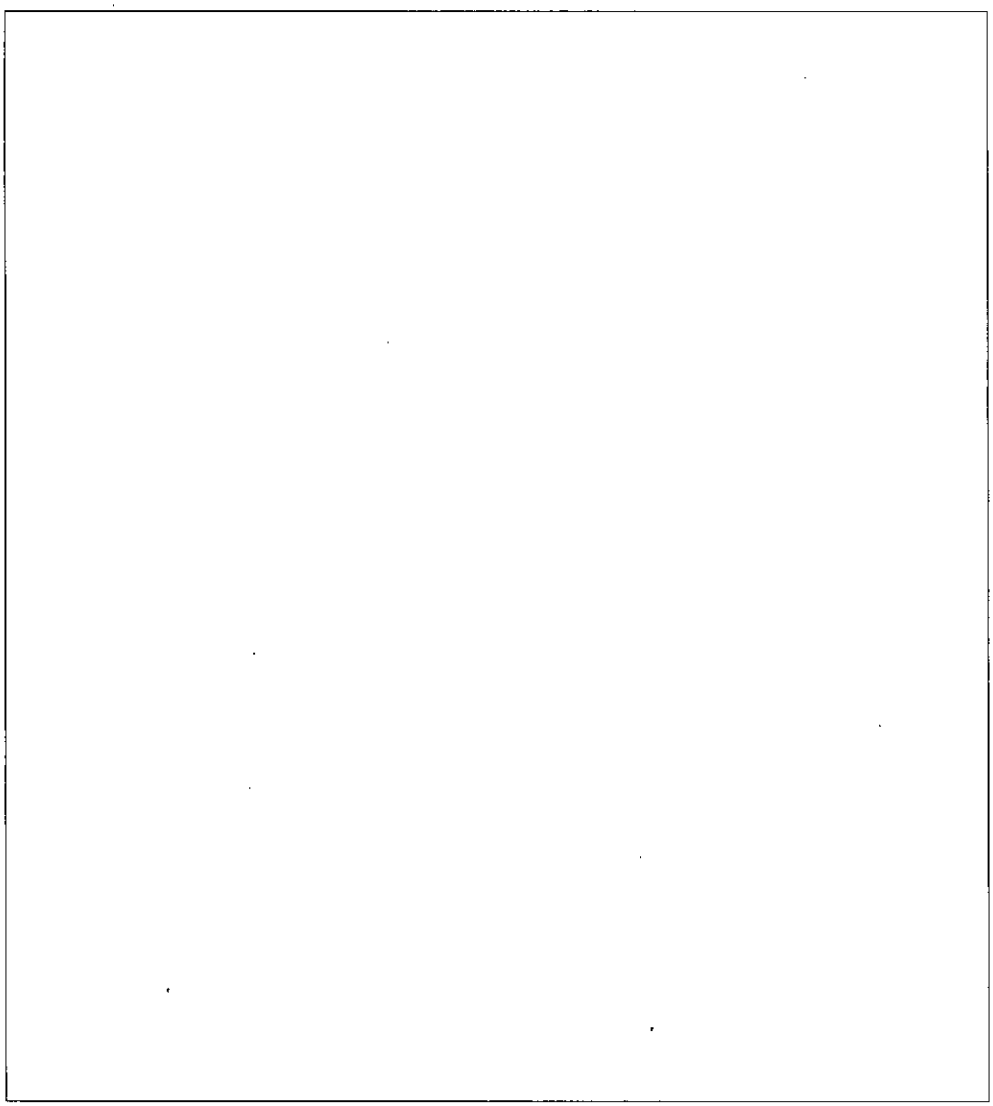
[43] Memorandum of Discussion, 460th Meeting of the National Security Council, 21 September 1960, and State Telegram 365 to Vientiane, "Eyes Only Ambassador," 1 October 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 859–60, 869–71. Under Secretary Dillon said on 29 September that "it had now been admitted that three companies of Pathet Lao" had joined the Kong Le units at Paksane. (Memorandum of Discussion, 461st Meeting of the NSC, 29 September 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 868.)

[44] Vientiane Embassy Telegram 683, 6 October 1960, and State Telegram 384 to Vientiane, 8 October 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 883–88.

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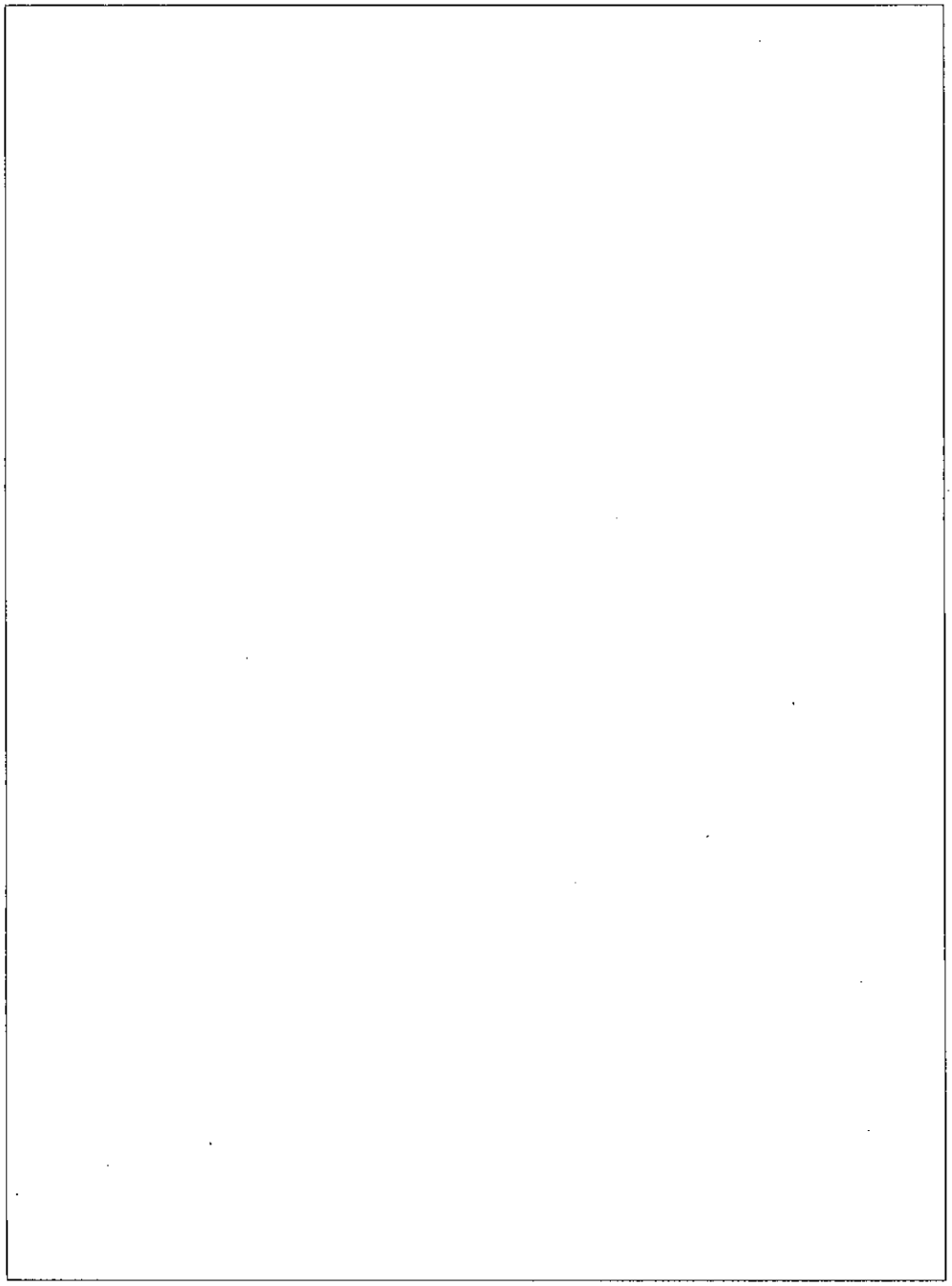
CHAPTER TWO

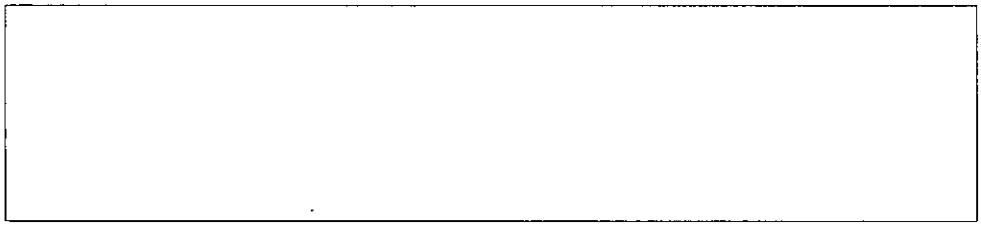
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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA

[redacted] But American hostility to neutrality for Laos was offset, for the moment, by lingering hopes of bringing Souvanna into line. In addition, Winthrop Brown and Gordon Jorgensen questioned Phoumi's ability to hold the nation—or even the south—against Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. Unless the United States was prepared for war in Laos, Brown advised, Washington should now just cut its losses, and "make [the] best of Souvanna" as the only "alternative to chaos or division."[5]

[redacted]

Disagreements and Miscommunication

Meanwhile, pursuing a "last desperate effort" to avoid a military solution, Washington sent the assistant secretary of state J. Graham Parsons and the assistant secretary of defense John Irwin to Vientiane. There, they pressed Souvanna to bring Kong Le to heel and to terminate all overtures to the Soviets. The prime minister was to halt negotiations with the Pathet Lao, resume talks with Phoumi, and move the government to the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Souvanna apparently allowed his visitors to think he would comply, and Irwin proceeded to Ubon, Thailand, where on 17 October he encouraged Phoumi to expect at least secret US support for a march on Vientiane and the seizure of the government.[7]

By the time Parsons and Irwin got back to Washington, it was clear that Souvanna was pursuing his usual ambiguous course. Once again, "for reasons of expediency," as a State telegram put it, the reluctant decision favored con-

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[5] Bill Lair; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 680, 5 October 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 876–78.

[redacted]

[6] [redacted]

[7] State Telegram 384 to Vientiane, 8 October 1960; Memorandum for the Record, 8 October 1960; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 883, 8 November 1960; Editorial Note; all *FRUS 1958–1960*, 886–91, 940, 913.

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tinuing to try to work with Souvanna "as the constitutional and legally installed Prime Minister."[8]

One thing that made it expedient to maintain the status quo in Laos was the confrontation with the Soviets over the civil war in Congo. At the United Nations, President Eisenhower had just slapped Moscow over Soviet support to a Congolese rebel faction, and Assistant Secretary Parsons, usually a hawk on matters Laotian, thought it "would be tragic at this moment to have US actions belie its words." Even so, State wanted Vientiane to know that "this expedient may turn out to be . . . temporary."[9]

As State told Brown, leaving Souvanna in office was intended to "solve our awkward political situation" while preventing him from manipulating Washington against US interests. Accordingly, on 19 October, Washington lifted the ban on aid to Souvanna's government after getting the prime minister to allow direct US support of Phoumi's troops. At the same time, aware of Brown's—[redacted]—uncertain control over the Americans in Savannakhet, the Department sent a foreign service officer to represent the ambassador there.[10]

It took only nine days for Washington to conclude that it had made a bad deal. It now appeared that Souvanna was maneuvering to eliminate Phoumi. Even if he wasn't, State saw US support to Souvanna as destructive of anti-communist morale in the face of a likely Pathet Lao offensive. When Ambassador Brown finally acceded, on 17 November, to Souvanna's removal, [redacted]

On 18 November 1960, Souvanna flew to Sam Neua, where he and Prince Souphanouvong agreed to set up a coalition that included all factions, but denied Phoumi and Boun Oum any access to cabinet positions. On the 20th, the embassy reported Souvanna's departure at the head of troops intending to rendezvous with Pathet Lao forces and capture Luang Prabang. This may well have been a false alarm—the notion of Souvanna at the vanguard of an attacking army challenged the imagination, and no confirmation followed the

[8] State Telegram 425, 18 October 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 915–18. It appears that Vientiane never did explicitly repudiate, to Phoumi, Irwin's intimations of support for a countercoup.

[9] Ibid.; Bangkok Embassy Telegram 668, 15 October 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 904–08.

[10] State Telegram 428 to Vientiane (19 October 1960) and 466 to Vientiane (28 October 1960), *FRUS 1958–1960*, 919, 934–37; [redacted]

[11] State Telegram 466; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 938, 17 November 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 966–69; [redacted]

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reported troop movement—but Washington had had enough. Phoumi's troops once again would get pay and supplies, and all "military restraints" on him were lifted. Brown was instructed to solicit a request from the king that would lead to a "substitute legal government or at least cover of legality" for a regime change.[12]

The State Department officer at Savannakhet briefed Phoumi on Washington's new line, advising him to consult with Phoui Sananikone—prime minister when Kong Le mutinied—about setting up a legal government that the United States could support. Ambassador Brown protested that taking Phoumi's side would simply drive Souvanna—still the most substantial political figure in Laos—into the arms of the Pathet Lao and the Soviets.[13]

This clash of competing goals roiled policy deliberations in Washington. Defense sent instructions to PEO to encourage Phoumi to advance up the Mekong toward Paksane, and Winthrop Brown implicitly threatened to quit if State failed to put a stop to such end runs around the embassy. Foggy Bottom, caught in the middle, fought with Defense about protocol even as it reminded Brown that the military had to be ready for a US role in a possible Laotian civil war.[14]

The quarreling concerned protocol and mechanics, not goals. With Washington now irrevocably committed to Phoumi, Winthrop Brown loyally rejoined the team. He focused on the danger of inconclusive action leaving two competing governments, "with [the] United States supporting one and everybody else the other." Accordingly, he endorsed a JCS directive encouraging Phoumi to combine military pressure on Kong Le with preparations for a coup in Vientiane.[15]

Meanwhile, [redacted] was busy trying to ensure, on behalf of Ambassador Brown, that a successor government would meet American specifications. Stuart Methven, [redacted] main contact with CDNI, was instructed to tell his contacts in Luang Prabang that the United States wanted no Pathet Lao representation in a new cabinet. Souvanna could stay, if there seemed to be no alternative, but not as head of government. And Methven was to get word to assembly deputies still in Vientiane to find their way to Savannakhet, where they could proceed to Luang Prabang by air.[16]

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[12] Editorial Note; Memorandum of Telephone Conversations, 21 November 1960; State Telegram 539, 21 November 1960; all *FRUS 1958–1960*, 972–75.

[13] Editorial Notes, and Vientiane Embassy Telegram 983, 24 November 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 977–80, 982.

[14] Vientiane Embassy Telegrams 1042 and 1043, 2 December 1960; State Telegram 578 to Vientiane, 2 December 1960; all *FRUS 1958–1960*, 986–88.

[15] Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1081, 7 December 1960, *FRUS 1958–1960*, 991–93.

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The maneuvering to force Souvanna's resignation stoked [redacted] partisanship on Phoumi's behalf and led him into what [redacted] regarded as outright insubordination. [redacted] had instructed him to postpone the dispatch to Luang Prabang of the national assemblymen then at Savannakhet. [redacted] sent them anyway, via Air America, earning from Jorgensen a stern though remarkably temperate rebuke.[17] [redacted]

Events now removed the cause of the friction between [redacted] On 8 December, the State Department set in motion the coordinated moves necessary to replace Souvanna with Phoumi Nosavan. It instructed Brown to move the rest of the anti-Souvanna assemblymen from Savannakhet to Luang Prabang. Arms and ammunition to Phoumi-led forces would follow, and another payroll would go to Savannakhet. On 9 December, Souvanna fled to neighboring Cambodia, leaving the government in the hands of Quinim Pholsena, a communist-leaning member of his cabinet.[18] [redacted]

The Soviets moved to exploit their opening, and President Eisenhower was informed that, on 11 December, four howitzers were unloaded from Soviet cargo planes at Wat Tay Airport. But the US Mission in Vientiane had finally delivered a National Assembly quorum to Luang Prabang, where, on the 12th, it passed a no-confidence motion in Souvanna's government and endorsed Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee.[19] [redacted]

Until the king issued a royal ordinance approving the new regime, the country had no functioning government, a situation that the Pathet Lao and its Soviet and Vietnamese patrons would surely try to exploit. But State still had no officer in Luang Prabang, and it fell to [redacted] there to execute Brown's order to get the royal ordinance and get it at once. The well-connected Stu Methven contacted three anticommunist Assembly deputies and impressed them with the matter's urgency. The next day, 12 December, they met him at noon, smiling at his palpable anxiety. "Is this fast enough and legal enough for you?" they inquired, as they flourished a copy of Royal

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16 [redacted] Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front) adopted by the Pathet Lao in 1956. The term *Pathet Lao* remained in common use, a practice followed in this book. [redacted]

17 [redacted]

18 [redacted]

19 [redacted]

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Ordinance 282, transferring governmental power to General Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee.[20]

The Battle for Vientiane (U)

With Thai support, Phoumi had already begun dropping elements of the 1st Parachute Battalion at Chinaimo, a FAR garrison outside Vientiane. Deposed Prime Minister Quinim Pholsena decamped for Hanoi, but Kong Le's forces still held Wat Tay Airport and the city. Phoumi's forces reached the outskirts of the capital on 13 December, and the city came under sporadic artillery and other heavy weapons fire. Embassy families had been evacuated after the August coup, but some staff were caught in housing scattered around Vientiane. Ambassador Brown passed a perilous night as Kong Le and Phoumi infantry twice "see-sawed through my front yard," and had his house commandeered by Kong Le artillerymen who set up their howitzer on his lawn.[21]

Most of the Mission staff finally assembled at the embassy and at the compound belonging to the economic aid mission, USOM. The chancery became more a target than a shelter, because much of Phoumi's fire was directed at the Ministry of Defense, just next door. As Savannakhet forces pushed nearer and .50-caliber bullets scarred the embassy walls, a recoilless rifle round demolished office moments after had left it to see the ambassador. The embassy was hastily evacuated, most of the staff crossing the Mekong for the trip to Bangkok, and no one remained in the embassy when the shelling set it on fire.[22]

On the morning of 16 December, teeming Vientiane had become an eerie ghost town. Kong Le's forces had abandoned the city, retreating to the north, but Phoumi's men were still nowhere to be seen on the streets, and the entire civilian population had either fled or remained in hiding. Even the stray dogs that infested the city had taken refuge. But the embassy was back at work in its shattered building, using the emergency generator for power, and

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[20] Methven had a genius for establishing, on very short acquaintance, relationships of trust with Third World officials.

[21] State Telegram 617 to Vientiane, 10 December 1960, and "Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material," 12 December 1960, both *FRUS 1958–1960*, 1002–04;

[22] at home near Wat Tay when the firing started, spent three days alternately observing enemy activity at the airport and taking cover from incoming "friendly" artillery.

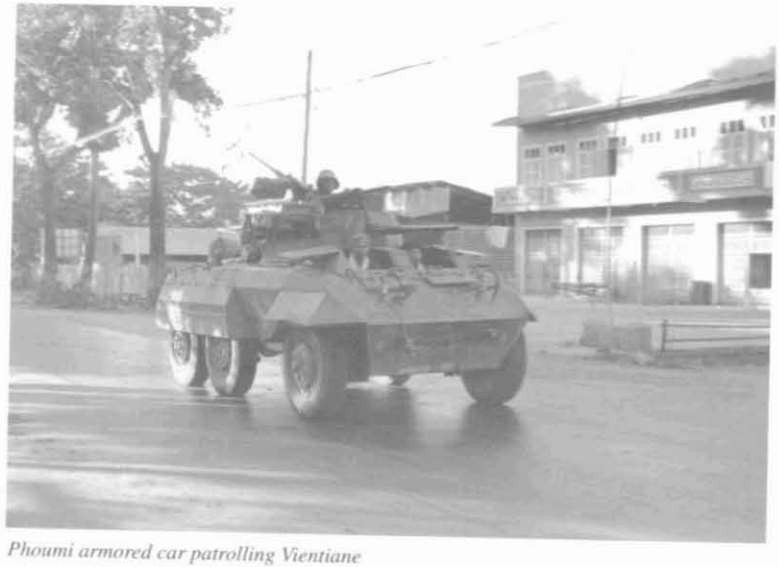
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Chapter Two

Vientiane, Mid-December 1960



Fires in Vientiane as seen from near Wat Tay Airport



Phoumi armored car patrolling Vientiane

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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA

Vientiane, Mid-December 1960



US embassy chancery



COS Jorgensen's office after the battle for Vientiane

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participated in the Mission effort to spark vigorous pursuit of the retreating neutralists.[23]

This effort included acerbic instructions from Brown to the Americans at Savannakhet, where State's man had joined PEO as a Phoumi admirer. They were to treat Phoumi's reporting—veering from the giddily optimistic to the grimly defeatist—with more reserve. Meanwhile, Phoumi should push his lagging field commanders into quick and complete implementation of the tactical plan.[24]

Souvanna had yet to resign, something the Soviets exploited to justify stepped-up aerial resupply of Kong Le's columns. President Eisenhower, declaring that "we should act vigorously, now that we have the cover of legality," favored using US aircraft to supply Phoumi's advance.[26]

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[23] Author's recollection.

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In the week after Vientiane fell to Phoumi's battalions, intelligence reports described continuing Soviet airdrops to Kong Le forces still moving north along Route 13. An Air America twin Beechcraft with and a photographer on board searched the skies over Kong Le's columns, and on 21 December found a twin-engine Soviet supply craft approaching a neutralist drop zone. Photos showing the tail number and the "CCCP" initials of the Soviet Union soon appeared in newspapers around the world. If the publicity did not deter the Soviets, it did help to quiet the British and the French, whose single-minded concern for political accommodation had led them to discount the extent of Moscow's intervention. (Recollection of the author, who was on the Air America C-45.)

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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA

Kong Le, still retreating, reached the junction with Route 7. Instead of proceeding north toward Luang Prabang, or using Soviet materiel deliveries to turn on Phoumi's desultory pursuit, he and allied Pathet Lao forces veered east. On New Year's Day, 1961, they drove the unprepared FAR defenders off the Plain of Jars, the 500-square-mile plateau that comprises the most valuable real estate in northeastern Laos. Soviet supply aircraft began landing there, at the military airfield built by the French, and supply drops continued to dissident forces still bivouacked along the main roads.[27]

By this time, in early January, had accumulated considerable evidence not only of Soviet supply activity but also of North Vietnamese troop incursions. North Vietnamese infantry was reported to have attacked Nong Het, on Route 7 just west of the border. The loss of the Plain of Jars brought the realization that the communist and neutralist forces now threatened to expel the RLG from the entire northeast quadrant of the country.[28]

Kong Le's surprise dash to the Plain of Jars exploited the vulnerability of northeastern Laos—essentially, Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. Except for concentrations of Lao on the Plain of Jars and in valley settlements, this unending succession of vertiginous mountain ranges (the highest peak reached 10,000 feet) was populated by tribes driven up from the lowlands, over the centuries, by more numerous and better organized competitors. The most cohesive of them, the Hmong—still commonly known as Meo—were also the most combatively anti-Vietnamese. They had been chosen by PEO and the Pentagon for a delivery of 2,000 light weapons to protect their villages from Pathet Lao or neutralist pressure after the Kong Le coup of 9 August 1960.[29]

By January 1961, the threat had metastasized, as Kong Le consolidated his hold on the Plain of Jars while isolated FAR units wandered the mountain trails around it. The French, ordinarily blasé about any allegation of communist designs on Laos, told a meeting of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Bangkok that their sources in Hanoi reported 20 Soviet cargo air-

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One later study said that, as of mid-January 1961, the 925th Independent Battalion of the NVA had entered Laos, joining elements of the 325th Division that had chased FAR elements south from the Plain of Jars. (See Kenneth Conboy, with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*, 50.

29

The term *Meo* had no pejorative connotation for the Americans who used it, but they were aware of reported Hmong sensitivity about it. In the spring of 1961, asked by the author about proper usage, Vang Pao dismissed the concern. *Meo* was just fine, he said, and the name remained current for several more years.

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craft shuttling war materiel from China to Laos via Hanoi. The French also offered evidence of a NVA presence in Laos, reporting that, on 5 January, one of these Soviet planes had evacuated a wounded NVA officer from the Plain of Jars to Hanoi. While the French could not document the presence of North Vietnamese troop units, their SEATO representative had no doubt that technicians and advisers now accompanied both neutralist and Pathet Lao units.[30]

The only prospect for effective resistance in the northeast now lay with the Hmong. With Souvanna's departure, the question of a uniformed American presence had lost much of its sensitivity, but the Military Assistance Program, with its long-term planning and rigid schedules, lacked the flexibility to exploit the Hmong potential. The Pentagon had required CIA help to provide even the 2,000 carbines delivered in late 1960. For PEO to launch a larger, continuing program, with a leadtime of only weeks, was out of the question. The US Mission in Vientiane did not even suggest this; instead, on 5 January, it asked the Pentagon simply to provide World War II–vintage B-26 aircraft to fly armed reconnaissance over Laos and perhaps to execute "sneak" photographic missions over North Vietnam.[31]

Defense assented and set up Project MILLPOND, which also offered the potential to bomb enemy concentrations on the Plain of Jars and elsewhere in northern Laos. But Ambassador Brown and his PEO took a sober—even alarmist—view of what overt military intervention might mean. They saw it as leading to a "Korea-type limited war" and perhaps ultimately even to World War III. They recognized that, whatever the scale of combat, not much could be expected from the Lao, who "suffered from disorganization and lack of common purpose within the government, the Army, and the society generally." The Mission admonished Washington to reexamine the situation before entering upon either limited or total war. If the United States were to take that risk, it would have to do so knowing that "half measures will not deter [the] Commies."[32]

The Eisenhower administration, with less than three weeks left in office, was not planning anything so ambitious as even the Korean war, let alone World War III. Nevertheless, it saw the situation as a looming calamity. On 3 January, just two days before the cautionary cable from Vientiane, Eisenhower had said, "If the communists establish a strong position in Laos, the West is finished in the whole southeast Asian area." Meeting with his national security team that day, he also urged a continuing search for peaceful means to keep Laos under Western protection. As we have already seen, however, Eisenhower intimated

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to Kennedy just over two weeks later that unilateral action might be the only, if desperate, hope.[33]

Talking to the Hmong: Enter Vang Pao

Whether Eisenhower would have taken the risk he seemed to recommend to John F. Kennedy is, of course, unknowable. Certainly, both preferred something less fateful than the commitment of US ground troops to Laos. While Washington awaited the arrival of the new administration, engaged in informal discussions with Vang Pao. Then the deputy commander of FAR's Xieng Khouang district, he was about to replace the timorous commander who had presided over the flight from the Plain of Jars.[34]

As a Hmong, Vang Pao was one of the rare ethnic minority members of the FAR officer corps. He had been a member of the French Expeditionary Force that fought the Viet Minh and, now a major, was the highest-ranking Hmong in the army. Also, he had emerged as one of the most influential figures in the loose federation of Hmong clans inhabiting the mountains of northern Laos. These credentials had made him the obvious choice to supervise distribution of the carbines furnished by PEO in late 1960.[35]

Vang Pao was also the obvious candidate to lead any effort—political or military—to keep Xieng Khouang Province under Vientiane's control. Having proved his good will with the gift of sweaters and blankets late the previous summer, Stuart Methven followed up with an offer of a military radio linking Vang Pao with The radio link was never activated, but when began looking for Vang Pao in early January, it had in Methven an emissary in good standing.[36]

From a joint command post with the Royal Thai Army in a house near Wat Tay Airport, they were ready to exploit Methven's opening to this most promising of the Hmong leaders. The debris had not been entirely cleared from demolished office when Lair began importuning for authority to explore with Vang Pao the Hmong tribe's potential for irregular warfare against Kong Le and the Pathet Lao.[37]

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[33] Brig. Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, "Memorandum of Conference With President Eisenhower," 3 January 1961 (drafted 7 January), *FRUS 1961–1963*, 5.

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[36] Methven interview.

[37] Bill Lair

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At this point, Stu Methven encountered Vang Pao at the Luang Prabang airstrip, and Vang Pao asked for a Helio-Courier mission to locate a missing friendly column. With Methven aboard, they flew southeast past the Plain of Jars until they saw a signal panel at Ta Viang, not far from where Soviet aircraft were dropping supplies to Kong Le forces. The pilot found a rice field long enough to land the Helio and, after the little plane bounced to a halt, Vang Pao climbed out to rejoin his men.[38]

Before Methven left, Vang Pao eagerly accepted his offer to introduce a colleague, an expert in matters of irregular warfare. The next day (probably 10 January) Methven brought Bill Lair to the bivouac site. They conducted a bilingual session, Vang Pao using Laotian—comprehensible to a speaker of Thai—with Lair, and French with Methven. Lair had as yet no authority to discuss a program of military support to the Hmong but offered to drop rice to Vang Pao's beleaguered men.[39]

Lair's questions exposed his interest in Hmong resistance potential, and this provoked Vang Pao to confide to Methven—still in French—the Hmong's fear of being abandoned by the Americans as they had been by the French in 1954. Would the United States stay the course, if it began helping the Hmong, or did he risk having aid cut off, at some point, and his people left to the mercy of the North Vietnamese? To Methven, reneging on such a fateful commitment was simply unimaginable, and he assured Vang Pao that any American commitment would be honored as long as it was needed.[40]

On 14 January, Lair finally succeeded in scheduling a mission for one of the newly arrived H-34 helicopters. Its pilot, an Air America pilot, had no knowledge of the terrain, and Lair feigned intimate familiarity with it in order to calm the young man's evident nervousness. At takeoff in midafternoon, Lair were startled by the Sikorsky's shuddering roar; even in level flight, it seemed to be trying to shake itself apart.[41]

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[38] Methven interview. The exact chronology of the first contacts with Vang Pao in January 1961 is uncertain. One cable says that Lair—no mention of Methven—was at Ta Viang on 9 January. Other references give 10 January as the first meeting with Vang Pao in the context of a Hmong resistance. Thirty-five years later, Lair did not remember being introduced to Vang Pao by Methven; he recalled instead flying to Ta Viang in an H-34

[39] Methven interview;

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[41] Bill Lair.

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CHOREOGRAPHY BY CIA

As the H-34 hovered over the Ta Viang landing pad, its main rotor kicked up a choking cloud of dust that almost obscured the setting sun. Lair had strict orders not to stay overnight, and the pilot was threatening to leave without him, so he left to find Vang Pao as he returned to Vientiane.[42]

He and Vang Pao had talked nearly all night, and joined the consensus about Vang Pao: "This is the man we've been looking for." Lair confirmed that now he could discuss the specifics of an armed Hmong resistance and boarded the helicopter for another flight, this time to a new and more secure bivouac at Muong Om.[43]

Vang Pao greeted Lair, who was again struck by the boyishness of the Hmong leader's animated face, with its round shape and narrow, Mongolian eyes. After a characteristically voluble welcome, Vang Pao led the way to the meeting site, on a bank high over the Nam Sane. The meeting exhibited the collective quality of Hmong life. His FAR subordinates, village elders, and ordinary mountain men crowded around Vang Pao as he introduced his visitor. He began the proceedings with a stemwinding oration—in the Hmong language, but with enough Lao vocabulary for Lair to follow its thrust—about the imperative for the Hmong people to preserve their way of life against the predatory Vietnamese.

The oration called up memories of Vietnamese abuses, and Vang Pao told of Hmong old women he had seen forced to drag logs to a sawmill. One listener, overcome with emotion, leaped to his feet, lost his balance, and fell to his death into the torrent below. This seemed only to intensify the emotion generated by Vang Pao's fiery rhetoric, and, when the speech came to an end, Lair already knew the answer to his first question: With the communists and neutralists installed on the Plain of Jars, what exactly did the Hmong people want to do?

Vang Pao made it explicit. The Hmong had just two alternatives, either flee to the west or stay and fight, and he and his people wanted to stay. He had 10,000 men, he said. Adequately armed and trained, they could hold the mountains in most of Xieng Khouang and even Sam Neua Provinces, harassing enemy activity along the roads and in the valleys. He described the distribution of the Hmong population throughout the area, and it appeared to Lair that he might well command the manpower he claimed.

But arms given to fight the communists might be turned against the government, and Lair wanted to know how the United States could be sure that this

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

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did not occur. Vang Pao responded that, despite lingering mutual suspicion, the Lao had not practiced any of the forced assimilation that had driven many Hmong out of China and that now oppressed them in North Vietnam. The National Assembly had a Hmong member, Touby Lyfoung, and Vang Pao's own status demonstrated the possibilities of assimilation for those who wanted it. Far from promoting separatism, said Vang Pao, he wanted his people accepted as part of the Laotian polity.

All of this accorded with Lair's understanding of Hmong aspirations, and Vang Pao's own motivation. But gratification at having these theories confirmed was tempered with some misgivings. On the one hand, Lair saw a Hmong resistance organization on the scale proposed by Vang Pao as a formidable impediment to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese consolidation of the northeast. On the other, he doubted that Agency management would give the idea a serious hearing. he had little reason to anticipate any enthusiasm for an effort to arm, train, and support a force approaching the size of a light infantry division. Concealing his apprehension, he promised Vang Pao to recommend to his superiors that they help the Hmong to stay and fight.[44]

Over dinner, questioned Lair closely about Vang Pao, his manpower base, and the current tactical balance on the Plain of Jars and in Hmong country. Lair thought he had satisfactory answers, but his superiors remained noncommital,

Arming the Hmong

proposal detailed the requirements for a force of 5,000 men, to be armed in increments of 1,000 each if initial results justified expansion.

[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

left open the question of revealing the project to the Vientiane government. It might be as well, thought, first to get started and then explain it to General Phoumi as an extension, justified by military necessity, of the support that Phoumi had promised to deliver through regular channels.[46]

had good reason to hesitate about making a new approach. Earlier, he and PEO chief Gen. John Heintges had encountered only stony resistance to their pleas for direct American support to the Hmong. As of 11 January, not even the Hmong armed in October 1960 were to get any help except through regular FAR channels. The Hmong were "crybabies," Phoumi said, both too primitive to undertake the raid and sabotage missions that the PEO chief had proposed and too treacherous to be indulged in their incessant demands for help. Finally, on the 14th, Phoumi acceded, allowing an airdrop of rice and ammunition to Hmong militia at Ban Khang Kho, south of the Plain of Jars. But still expected him to veto the provision of weapons to tribesmen not already under arms.[47]

Headquarters had just one concern, and it was not that of Vientiane government approval: CIA would be hard-pressed to provide experienced paramilitary advisers for the program, especially if it expanded. backed by Ambassador Brown, replied that supported by Lair and his assistants, could certainly handle the initial endeavor, supervising weapons distribution

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and providing training, communications, and tactical advice. Washington acceded, setting a pattern that endured for almost three years.[50]

Lair flew to Ta Viang to deliver the news in person. Vang Pao's round face lit up in delight, and was equally pleased, but he understood perhaps better than the Hmong leader how small a window of opportunity they had all been given. The Laotian army task force that General Phoumi had ordered to pursue and engage Kong Le had just abandoned the junction of Routes 7 and 13. This left Luang Prabang isolated and the neutralists and their communist allies free to attack any nascent opposition in Xieng Khouang. The outposts around Ta Viang were even then under pressure, and the new program needed a training site secure enough to assemble and train the initial group of volunteers. Should this fail, the enemy would nip the whole thing in the bud and be free to conduct reprisals on the Hmong population at large.[51]

Neither time nor airlift capability permitted exfiltrating volunteers to a training facility in government-held territory. In any case, the Hmong, whose abiding motivation was to protect their families, would not have consented to leave them to the mercies of the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Training would have to take place under the enemy's nose, and Vang Pao proposed bringing the first 300 volunteers to Ban (Village) Pa Dong, a tiny Hmong hamlet about 8 miles south of the Plain of Jars. The rugged terrain would prevent any instantaneous enemy reaction, and he promised at least three days of training before Kong Le or his allies could attack.[52]

Three days was cutting it fine. The Hmong were fine marksmen with their homemade flintlock rifles, and some had been trained as militia by the French, but they would have to master new weapons and at least the basics of guerrilla tactics. But Lair had anticipated just such a contingency in their development of a training syllabus, and they told Vang Pao to assemble his 300 volunteers.

Back in Vientiane, Lair briefed who, although taken aback by the tiny margin for error the training schedule allowed, agreed to take the chance that 300 men would appear where and when Vang Pao said they would. Lair radioed to start off on the two-day march to Pa Dong, then he set to work on a requisition of weapons and equipment

The Hmong could easily outpace an enemy pursuit, but the with Vang Pao would be slowed by the bulky radio and generator—relics of

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[52] Bill Lair. Except as noted, the rest of this account is based on Lair's recollection.

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OSS operations in World War II—and a day later, Lair decided to pick them up in an Air America H-34 and fly them the rest of the way to Pa Dong.

His pilot on this mission was Clarence "Chuck" Abadie, an adventurous ex-marine—later Air America's chief helicopter pilot in Laos—who seemed to thrive on flying into the unknown. This trait made him susceptible to Lair's tactic of feigning greater familiarity with conditions on the ground than, in fact, he had.

Everything worked fine, at first. A white panel in the form of the letter "H" and a smoke signal appeared at the spot on a ridgeline specified in a radio message, and the H-34 lit on a tiny improvised pad in the usual cyclone of dust. The size of the party and Pa Dong's high elevation, which reduced the aircraft's lift, meant that the H-34 would have to make two trips to Pa Dong. Lair took off with leaving Vang Pao and the communicators for the second shuttle.

Higher ridgelines obstructed the way northwest toward Pa Dong, but the H-34 succeeded in cresting all but the last. Abadie realized, too late to turn away, that he was headed for the trees. Bill Lair, in the copilot's seat, could only brace himself as Abadie applied full throttle and yanked back on the stick, struggling to climb. Perhaps caught in one of the fierce downdrafts so common in these mountains, perhaps overloaded, he failed. The helicopter brushed the treetops with its landing gear, then stalled, dropping onto the reverse slope.

Still upright, it careened down the hill, ricocheting off trees until it hit one large enough to flip it on its side and bring it to a halt. The sharp smell of 145-octane aviation fuel signaled the prospect of incineration if a spark should reach the leak. Lair having escaped with cuts and bruises, scrambled to get the semiconscious Abadie out of his harness and up through the window that now faced the sky. But no one was gravely injured; their problem now was communicating their plight to Vientiane.

Serendipity appeared in the person of a Hmong tribesman, who jogged up the slope in the tireless gait of mountain people, running on the leathery feet and splayed toes of a man who had never worn shoes. He turned out to be the chief (*naiban*) of the village just below and, as commander of a Xieng Khouang militia unit under Vang Pao, the possessor of an antique military radio. The operator screamed into a microphone until Vientiane responded, at which point he sent out by key a message describing the accident.

Lair expected the report to be garbled, and it was; an hour later, a radioed reply asked what repair parts he needed. But just before sundown, an Air America C-47 circled overhead, and those on the ground could be sure at least that their location had been accurately conveyed.

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A night as guests in the *naiban's* hut passed uneventfully until about four in the morning, when a blood-curdling scream just outside sent Lair [redacted] frantically scrambling for their weapons. But it was only breakfast; the village women had just slaughtered a pig to be grilled in honor of distinguished company. Another H-34 arrived shortly after sunrise, and the party continued on to Pa Dong. [redacted]

Ban Pa Dong, 4,500 feet above sea level, epitomized the eerie attraction that Laos—especially upcountry Laos—held for nearly all the Americans who worked there. With neighboring peaks hidden behind towers of cumulus clouds, the village stood in crystalline air on a ridgeline that sloped, first gradually and then precipitously, until it disappeared in the stratus clouds that concealed the valley below. The dying swish of the helicopter's main rotor only emphasized the stillness of a perfectly calm day.[53] [redacted]

A Surrogate for a Surrogate [redacted]

The H-34 soon left to pick up Vang Pao and the radiomen. When they returned, Lair proceeded to [redacted] to meet the first increment of weapons and equipment. At this point, both he and [redacted] saw the Hmong resistance as a supplement to FAR in the northeast, not as a substitute for it. They understood that creating a Hmong guerrilla force would not by itself offer the means of expelling neutralist and communist forces from the Plain of Jars, let alone from the rest of northeastern Laos. But it might at least prevent the enemy from consolidating his control while the United States and the RLG struggled to make the regular army a fighting force.[54] [redacted]

Unfortunately for the prospects of this strategy, Phoumi's army—its leader had managed to become a petty warlord without being a real soldier—reverted to its customary lethargy immediately after the capture of Vientiane. [redacted] the US military recognized that only more American support offered the chance of infusing some combat effectiveness. Accordingly, CINCPAC was arranging beefed-up aerial reconnaissance and adding to the 107 Special Forces men already advising FAR down to the battalion level. The Pentagon was making contingency plans for an American combat presence as well: as of 18 January, naval Joint Task Force 116 had been alerted, and some of its ships, carrying helicopters and a marine battalion, were already in position in the South China Sea.[55] [redacted]

On 19 January, the eve of John F. Kennedy's inauguration, the deputy director for plans Richard Bissell made plain his understanding that the "ultimate

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[53] Author's recollection of his first visit to Ban Pa Dong, c. February 1961. [redacted]

[54] Bill Lair. [redacted]

[55] [redacted]

objective" was not military victory. Meeting that day with State and Defense, he joined a consensus on a vague formula that he described to Vientiane as calling for "some stabilization of [the] situation on terms acceptable to [the] United States, presumably as [the] result of political moves." But the prospects for any such stabilization would recede if the military situation continued to decay. Washington therefore thought it an urgent necessity to proceed with the Hmong resistance program while trying to make FAR a more effective instrument of combat.[56]

The Vientiane Mission shared the sense of urgency but once again pointed out the risk of escalation posed by more overt intervention. Accordingly, it emphasized the desirability of using for such jobs as aircraft and radio repair. Implicitly acknowledging the incorrigible weakness of the Laotian officer corps, But the FAR campaign up Route 13 was still stumbling, and on 21 January Headquarters lamented that the morale of Phoumi's forces seemed to be "deteriorating across the board." The new administration was already concentrating on Laos, and several of its "key members" had met with an interagency group to find some way to stiffen the pliant FAR.

In all of this, the Kennedy administration was pursuing the effort of its predecessor to achieve through surrogates what it hesitated to attempt with US combat forces, to ensure a noncommunist government in Laos. Meanwhile, other players—Souvanna, the RLG, the Pathet Lao, the British, and the French—exploited as best they could the available instruments of international diplomacy. In exile at Phnom Penh, Souvanna welcomed a Pathet Lao representative arriving from Hanoi. The British urged the RLG to accept the return of the long-defunct International Control Commission, with Poland, its invariably obstructionist communist bloc member. Meanwhile, the RLG tried to inveigle the United Nations into sending a commission to Laos to investigate the Soviet and North Vietnamese presence. The North Vietnamese, in turn, buttressed the Pathet Lao with advisers and specialists, but undertook no

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offensive operations of their own. Thus, all the combatants, both direct and indirect, chose to limit their investment and their risks. It was in this climate that CIA began arming Vang Pao's Hmong volunteers.[59]

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PART ONE

1961–64

The Eisenhower administration's vision of Laos as the "cork in the bottle" survived into the Kennedy administration and into that of Lyndon B. Johnson. For all of them, the fate of Laos was intimately connected with the survival of an anticommunist government in South Vietnam. But they also saw Laos as, in the more familiar metaphor, a domino in its own right, one whose fall could lead to communist success throughout Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the early programs, both in Hmong country and in the Panhandle, were primarily aimed at helping preserve Laotian territorial integrity within the framework of a cease-fire agreement.

Laotian territorial integrity was still the goal of the Kennedy administration when it signed the Geneva Agreements in July 1962. These called for a cease-fire and the creation of a neutralist coalition government, a formula acceptable to Washington as an alternative to direct military engagement in Laos. The Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam was not yet seen as an imminent threat to the government there, and Washington accepted the risk created by tacitly conceding to Hanoi uncontested control of the infiltration route through Laos that became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or as it was sometimes called, the "Corridor."

Preserving Laotian neutrality in the face of mounting North Vietnamese violations of the agreements remained the driving US purpose in Laos until late 1964. During this period, intelligence collection and tactical response to communist cease-fire violations constituted the principal tasking of CIA irregulars in Laos. Only when the new military regime in Saigon approached collapse did Washington begin to exploit its Laotian irregulars as assets in the larger struggle.

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CHAPTER THREE

Iron Age Guerrillas

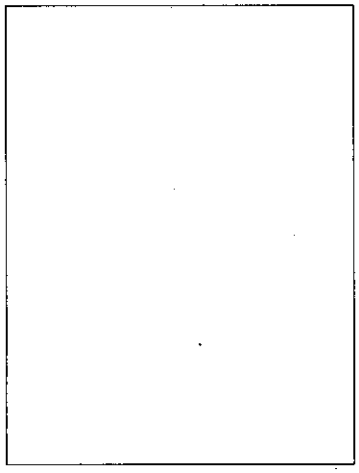
The arming of the first 300 Hmong volunteers began on 24 January 1961 when three C-46 cargo planes crossed the Mekong into Laos carrying weapons and equipment. In the two weeks since Bill Lair's first meeting with Vang Pao, the government's military position had continued to decay. Enemy gains meant that the flight to Pa Dong now covered terrain that might conceal communist or neutralist antiaircraft weapons.[1]

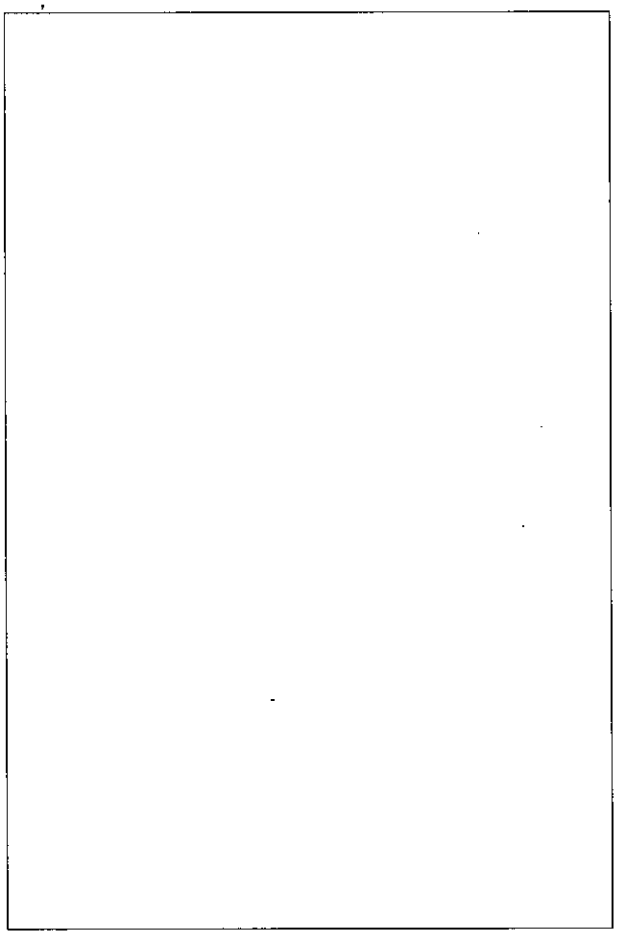
Fearful that early loss of an aircraft would end the project before it started, Bill Lair rode in the cockpit of the lead aircraft, guiding it as best he could between pockets of enemy-held territory. The C-46s drew no fire, and when they reached Pa Dong, the smoke and panel signals displayed by were almost superfluous. The site was crowded not only with the 300 volunteers but also with families, all in holiday finery, from the surrounding hamlets.[2]

The first plane made its pass, and crates of weapons began floating to the ground under their cargo parachutes. Watching them fall, Bill Lair thought with satisfaction that things were proceeding just as he had always envisioned such an operation: there were no Americans on the ground, For the moment, at least, CIA could play a purely supporting role

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[2] Bill Lair.





Together, and Vang Pao dashed from one group to another, were getting through to their trainees. Vang Pao, the most hands-on leader Lair had ever seen, would kneel with the occasional slow student, helping him take apart his weapon, clean it, and reassemble it. But only a few needed help; as a group, these Iron Age tribesmen were the best natural riflemen that Lair had ever seen. Within minutes nearly all of them knew how to clean and maintain their rifles and carbines.[4]

The challenge for was to exert the necessary influence without damaging the integrity of the Hmong leadership structure. Lair had already decided that Hmong leaders must command Hmong fighters; Americans were there, not to motivate the Hmong or to take over the fight, but to enable a people to defend itself as long as it wished to do so. applied this principle from the start, respecting Vang Pao's attention to political equities in selecting unit commanders while ensured due regard to their capacity for military leadership. In this way, consolidated the instant rapport that Lair had observed at their first joint meeting near Ta Viang. Almost from the beginning, became Vang Pao's alter ego, not

[4] Bill Lair;

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just an adviser but a working partner sharing the risks and responsibilities of a growing program.[5]

One small miscalculation had affected the choice of weapons. Lair had assumed that the tiny Hmong soldier would prefer the lightweight carbine, and he had included a few M-1 rifles only for the larger or hardier volunteers. But the trainees, some of whom had never seen anything more advanced than a flintlock musket, instantly recognized the rifle's superior range and accuracy. had to help Vang Pao mediate some squabbling over distribution when the first delivery arrived, and Lair increased the proportion of M-1s in subsequent drops.[6]

Whether firing a carbine or an M-1, nearly every Hmong volunteer needed only a few hours at the improvised firing range before the training team moved on to combat organization and tactics. The Hmong would not be mounting company or even platoon-size operations, at first, and trained them to operate in three-man fire teams. They immediately grasped the principle of fire-and-maneuver, in which one man or element fires from cover while the other advances, in a kind of leapfrog approach toward the enemy's position.[7]

The communists—it appears that Kong Le's neutralists seldom if ever moved against the Hmong—wasted little time reacting to the activity at Pa Dong. A Pathet Lao unit of reported battalion strength moved to within 2 miles of the training base, and the Hmong irregulars went into action within a week of the first weapons drop. The guerrillas ambushed the advancing Pathet Lao, and in the two days of combat that followed killed a reported 17 enemy. Never to be renowned for their fire discipline, the Hmong exhausted their ammunition supply during this action, and Lair flashed a requirement for more.[8]

By 31 January, a Hmong unit had ranged some 18 miles into contested territory, where it encountered an enemy patrol, killing 12 and returning with eight captured weapons. Vang Pao and his advisers expected the communists to return in force, but early successes like these boosted morale and created a respite for the rapid expansion about to take place.[9]

In the next few days, Vang Pao visited outlying villages, where the Hmong leader explained the American offer of support, and promised weapons where local leadership looked committed and strong. Kong Le and

[5] Bill Lair.
[6] Ibid.
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[8]

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his allies—including the Soviets, who were still heavily engaged in airdrops of materiel—were preoccupied for the moment with the key road junction west of the Plain of Jars.

Vang Pao then deployed them in an arc south and west of the Plain of Jars.[10]

Presidential Endorsement and Policy Restraint

These early territorial gains encouraged Washington to raise the ante. On 8 February, President Kennedy authorized CIA to arm as many Hmong irregulars as Vang Pao could recruit, though Headquarters put a cap of 5,000 in its message advising the field. The only sticking point had to do with money. The Agency tried to exploit the leverage of a presidential mandate when it asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to assume the cost of the larger program, as they had done with the first 1,000-man increment. The frosty reply signaled the beginning of a tug of war that endured for the duration of the conflict in Laos: the Hmong resistance was a CIA operation, and if the Agency wanted the "most expeditious processing" of its requests for materiel, it would have to pay. The JCS prevailed, in this instance, and the Agency bore the cost of equipping the next 4,000 Hmong.[11]

The administration did not, in any case, regard military escalation, even by surrogates, as an end in itself.

Both of them knew that Washington still wanted a political settlement; its support of the Hmong program meant that it wanted to help the RLG negotiate from strength, not to seek a decision on the

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[9] Bill Lair;

[10] Bill Lair

[11]

It took another round of correspondence to clarify responsibility for the 2,000 Hmong armed by PEO in late 1960. Headquarters told the field that the Defense Department positively desired to keep these combatants as part of the official RLG defense establishment and that they were not to be included, for accounting purposes, in the 5,000-man force being armed by CIA.

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battlefield. [redacted]

[redacted] Company-level advisers would help achieve this, and so would decentralization, to be achieved by setting up base areas, each with its own tactical commander [redacted] Accordingly, Vang Pao and his two principal advisers, Bill Lair [redacted] set up two new command posts. Overlooking Route 7 on opposite sides of the Plain of Jars, they would harass the enemy's use of this strategic road, which led out of North Vietnam and proceeded through the Plain of Jars to the junction with Route 13.[13]

The imminent creation of a dispersed command structure intensified the need for reliable, secure field communications. Lair and [redacted] had foreseen this and had already developed a training regime for students of minimal education and technological sophistication. Vang Pao chose a dozen literate young Hmong to serve as the first communicators, and Lair flew them to [redacted]

[redacted] In principle, [redacted] needed official sanction for the program, but Bill Lair feared the obstruction of the notoriously sluggish RLG bureaucracy. On the other hand, neither he nor the US Mission wanted to provoke further Laotian suspicion of US partisanship on behalf of the Hmong. Lair, therefore, finessed the issue by suggesting that Vang Pao should take care of it. Vang Pao cheerfully agreed, but never confided just how he had handled the matter, and Lair suspected that he had acted unilaterally.[14]

Even at this early stage, however, both Lair and Vang Pao were determined not only to avoid the appearance of supporting Hmong autonomy but to encourage and promote the tribe's assimilation into the Laotian nation. Language was one key to this, [redacted] devised a numerical code for the Laotian alphabet. As a

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[12] [redacted]

[13] Bill Lair [redacted]

[14] Ibid. [redacted]

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result, the Hmong radio network began using the national language while FAR communications still relied on French.[15]

The tasking of teams to be assigned upcountry reflected Lair's confidence in their competence and their capacity to operate in an alien culture. Only the team leader, two radio operators, and a medic would remain at the command post. The riflemen—privates and corporals—would be assigned one to each of the new volunteer companies.

During this early period, sketchy intelligence suggested both a heavy admixture of North Vietnamese in Pathet Lao military formations and a gritty determination to resist them on the part of Hmong villagers in the northeast. Two French missionaries, escorted by Hmong sympathizers along mountain trails from Sam Neua town to Luang Prabang, reported in convincing detail the Vietnamese presence. Their Hmong protectors, who risked severe reprisals for rescuing them, insisted that Hanoi's troops comprised up to one-half the personnel in some Pathet Lao units.[17]

A Question of Jurisdiction

To the Americans on the scene, information like this illustrated both the threat of North Vietnamese domination, at least in the northeast, and Hmong opposition to it.

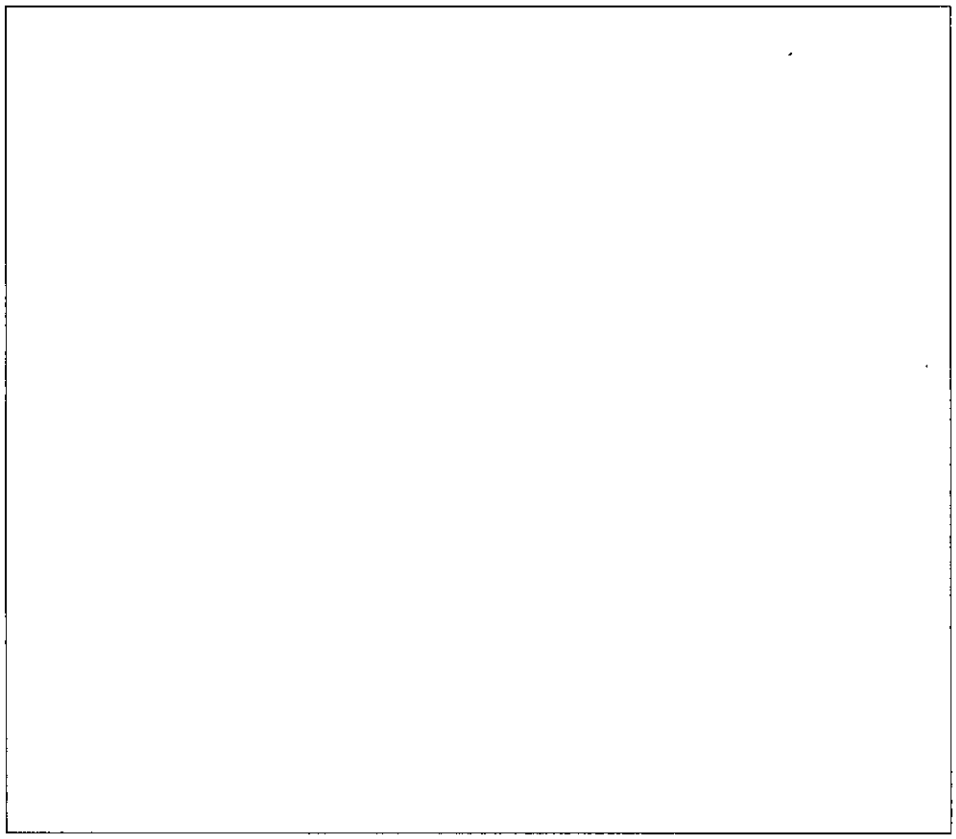
[18]

[15] Ibid.; Lair recalled numerous instances, over the years, in which he pointed this out to FAR officers who disparaged the Hmong for their alleged separatist aims.

[16] Ibid.;

[17]

[18]



responded with a promise to find a role for in "special operations" but insisted that by virtue of "temperament, judgment, language, and existing confidence of [the] Meo," Lair possessed the best qualifications for this tactical liaison. When more aircraft became available, he could spend the requisite time at Ban Pa Dong and still manage the support and coordination in Vientiane.

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[20] Bill Lair.

[21] Bill Lair.

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Target: Kong Le

Doing something about Kong Le had not lost its attraction for Washington, and Headquarters sent a peevish cable reminding of his failure to reply to "repeated queries re possibility of ambushing or capturing Kong Le." Had the ambassador disapproved? If not, why had regular contacts with Vang Pao not produced some planning? Returning to the point three days later, Headquarters complained of being embarrassed in interagency meetings by its inability to promise action to "negate" the rebel leader's position.[23]

reply hinted that he saw this preoccupation as little more than a distraction from the essential task of creating a force capable of holding the surrounding hills while FAR recaptured the Plain of Jars. Kong Le had been "on our list," he said, since the beginning of the Hmong program, but problems remained to be solved. One was that of persuading the Hmong to enter the Plain of Jars, which hosted Kong Le's headquarters, to gather information on his location and movements. "So far, Meos evince much more enthusiasm for shooting up isolated convoys than for entering [the] enemy's main camp." was offering bounties for prisoners, for example, but had as yet no results. And no operation against Kong Le ever did take place. His gradual disenchantment with his communist allies would eventually bring him into de facto alliance with the American-supported RLG.[24]

The Chinese Connection

Agency efforts to help shore up the Laotian government's military position were not restricted to the northeast. In February, authorized Stu Methven, in Luang Prabang, to help FAR challenge the neutralist and communist forces west and north of the royal capital. With the help of he proceeded to organize three irregular units, totaling about 150 members, of several local highland tribes.[25]

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24 The fortunes of war had put the United States, and therefore CIA, in the position of favoring a "bad guy" over a "good guy." Many anticommunist Lao regarded Phoumi as "a crook," though they tended to see this as mitigated by his pro-American stance. Kong Le, in CIA's own judgment, was a "highly competent professional soldier," an essentially apolitical "born leader" whose motivation when he staged the August 1960 coup was hostility toward the admittedly "corrupt bureaucracy" of his own government.

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This initiative led to complications involving remnants of the Kuomintang (KMT) forces expelled from China in 1949. Some of these still roamed northwest Laos, and Nam Tha Province, bordering the People's Republic of China, harbored a sizable number. They led an uneasy existence, stronger than their Lao hosts but always risking overwhelming retaliation if they provoked Beijing with activity aimed at reestablishing themselves in China.

The Lao, faced with a Hanoi-supported insurgency, tended to look on the KMT remnants as a potential ally against the Pathet Lao. Methven's FAR counterpart in Nam Tha advanced an idea—he said it originated with his boss, Military Region 1 commander Gen. Ouane Rathikoun—to recruit a battalion of KMT irregulars to help retake the Plain of Jars. Headquarters' alarmed response to Methven's reporting on this emphasized Washington's determination to avoid provoking the PRC into an intervention like the one in Korea a decade earlier. It ordered Methven to "explain [the] folly" of such ventures whenever the Lao proposed them. Methven assured Headquarters that he would and that his own irregulars would contain only indigenous tribals.[26]

But this did not dispose of the issue. Methven wanted to set up "commando" units in Sayaboury Province, lying west of the Mekong River, and his planning for that locale seems to have been less scrupulous about sealing off his operations from the Chinese. A peremptory cable [redacted] in late February told him that the United States was trying to get the Nationalist government in Taipei to repatriate its troops in northern Laos; accordingly, it instructed him not to use [redacted] with KMT "volunteers." The KMT was not even to know about the [redacted] presence. [redacted] was willing to cancel the Sayaboury program: "If you can't separate [the] Sayaboury commando effort from [the] KMT volunteers, then drop [it]."[27]

Nervousness about Chinese intervention reflected Washington's painful recollection of Chinese armies rolling down into North Korea only a decade earlier. Now, the United States would do what it could to preserve a Laotian buffer state, but it would do so while avoiding even the appearance of an intention to challenge Beijing's territorial integrity. Guided by this imperative, Washington continued trying to find a neutralization formula to supplement military efforts to improve the RLG's bargaining position. Accordingly, the United States announced its support for King Savang Vatthana's 19 February declaration of neutrality. An effort began to wear down Soviet and Chinese resistance to the regional commission proposed by the king to monitor the ter-

26 [redacted]

27 [redacted]

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mination of all foreign military intervention deemed "inconsistent with the country's neutral status."[28]

CIA saw Souvanna Phouma as the key to success in such an effort, and injected itself into the policy arena when it urged the Department of State to keep the communists from using him to sabotage the king's neutralization bid. The Agency saw no prospect of successful neutralization if the communists were to inveigle Souvanna into joining or even visiting the rump government just established in his name by the communist-neutralist alliance at Xieng Khouang. Accordingly, CIA recommended that State undertake to get Souvanna to repudiate the Xieng Khouang regime. CIA also wanted a joint effort with State to intervene in Vientiane politics, this time by brokering the new coalition cabinet it saw as an indispensable adjunct to Souvanna's eventual return to the capital.[29]

A political gambit of this kind needed help on the military front, for the communists would have little incentive to deal with a Vientiane government incapable of holding its own in northern Laos. Washington looked to the Hmong guerrillas for help, but their still-modest numbers and limited combat skills and discipline precluded trying to use them to retake the Plain of Jars or definitively interdict the main roads. Motivated almost exclusively by the urge to protect their families, these irregulars, even with more training than time and resources allowed, would never be regular infantry capable of a frontal assault. had already acknowledged this, in the context of Washington's pressure to neutralize Kong Le. He and Bill Lair now turned to the best available supplement to guerrilla raids and ambushes—harassment by indirect fire using heavy mortars.[30]

Hoping to avoid provoking another bout of General Phoumi's paranoia about Hmong duplicity, wanted to maintain US control of such weaponry. Some of the in Laos were trained in high-angle fire, and he proposed using them to serve the requested mortars. In doing so he accepted, to a point, prescription to allow a direct combat as well as an advisory role.[31]

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[28] Memorandum of Conversation, "Laos," 20 February 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 56–58.

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On 1 March, [redacted] to man 81mm mortars in fire missions against the Plain of Jars. [redacted] had been reluctant to supply 4.2-inch mortars, fearing they were too heavy, but Lair [redacted] insisted that the Hmong could move them. With a range of 8,000 yards, a few of them in the right places could bring the entire plain under fire. Ambassador Brown and Chief PEO supported the idea, and Headquarters acceded.[32] [redacted]

[redacted]

No one expected [redacted] and the Hmong to do more than harass the enemy and force him to divert resources otherwise available to thwart Phoumi's campaign to retake the Plain of Jars. Thus, the burden of dislodging Kong Le and the communists remained a FAR responsibility. But despite accelerated deliveries of materiel under the US Military Assistance Program, the Laotian army continued to distinguish itself primarily by its lassitude and incompetence. On 9 March, having failed with a drive east toward the Plain of Jars, General Phoumi's forces retreated in the face of a counterattack and lost the critical junction of Routes 7 and 13.[34] [redacted]

Leaning Toward Unilateral Military Action [redacted]

Recovering the Plain of Jars had formed the keystone of the US policy aimed at negotiations from strength. Relatively populous and agriculturally productive, it also served as the nexus of the road system in northeastern Laos. Now, as the headquarters of both Kong Le's neutralists and the regional Pathet Lao command, it also represented a challenge to government efforts to reclaim it. The fact remained that, except for Kong Le's own airborne battalion, the

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32 [redacted]

[redacted]

33 [redacted]

34 [redacted]

Also see Memorandum from the President's Military Aide (Clifton) to President Kennedy, 10 March 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 84–85. The then chief of PEO told a White House military aide that "every time a battalion commander becomes too aggressive, Phoumi relieves him of command. He doesn't want any one personality to develop as a [competing] military leader." In a curiously self-contradictory estimate of Phoumi's forces, the PEO chief noted that they had "folded" under random artillery fire at Sala Phou Khoun, even as he assessed their morale as good. [redacted]

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neutralists had displayed little more appetite for combat than had the government's forces. Washington also expected well-supplied FAR units to crush Pathet Lao resistance. The surprise setback at the junction of Routes 7 and 13, guarding the western approach to the plain, had generated near panic among Washington policymakers. In mid-March 1961, they went into a spasm of preparation for unilateral US military intervention. Twin-engine B-26 attack bombers, would serve as the initial tool of this more aggressive stance.[35]

Top PEO officers, then visiting Washington, assured the president's military aide, Gen. C.V. Clifton, that the Pathet Lao would "bug out" when the first bombs fell, and the Plain of Jars would belong to Phoumi. Activation of the plan, called Operation MILLPOND, awaited only the conclusion of an imminent SEATO meeting. Meanwhile, was to accelerate the recruitment of Hmong volunteers, with a goal of 4,000 under arms by 1 April. Air transport resources being assembled for an airborne and air-landed assault—possibly including American troops—would include two H-34 helicopters for use in the Hmong program.[36]

The administration proceeded to send B-26 bombers But it gradually backed away from unilateral intervention, perhaps discouraged by the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimate that this would require 60,000 American troops with tactical air cover and maybe even the use of nuclear weapons. Such considerations outweighed the reservations expressed by whose earlier anxiety about Laos as a tripwire to general war now collided with his belief that a settlement negotiated under existing circumstances would "at best . . . only partially guarantee a divided Laos and, at worst, will certainly facilitate communist takeover." His 20 March cable to Headquarters acknowledged only transitory gains from a settlement: the "temporary avoidance" of a risk of war, the "temporary plaudits of our allies for reasons that have little to do with [the] merits of [the] situation in Laos, . . . and likewise [the] praise of such neutrals as India."[37]

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[35] Clifton memorandum to Kennedy. The 4,000 figure appears in a formal presidential restatement of the authorization given in February. As of 1 April 1961, was authorized to support a guerrilla force of 7,000, including the 2,000 armed by PEO and the initial increment of 1,000 in January. The political counterpart to the military preparations came in messages from Secretary of State Rusk, one to Vientiane instructing the ambassador to assure General Phoumi that the United States did not expect any concessions from him that would endanger Laotian independence; the other, to Phnom Penh, was an appeal to Souvanna to repudiate the rump government in Xieng Khouang that claimed to represent him. (See State Telegrams 951 to Vientiane [11 March 1961] and 805 to Phnom Penh [12 March 1961], *FRUS 1961–1963*, 85, 89–90.)

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[37] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 332–33, quoted in *FRUS 1961–1963*, 94n.

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The local military situation would probably continue to deteriorate, after negotiations from weakness, and [redacted] predicted that the fading credibility of the United States would undermine its allies' willingness to "take positions independent of Russian or Chicom desires." If Washington wanted negotiations to serve a purpose more substantial than mere face-saving, it would first have to restore a favorable military balance. [redacted] went on to list what he thought could be done, without "inviting [the] enemy to retaliate in nuclear fashion," in order to prevent a FAR collapse and lay the basis for a "slow but steady rollback of enemy forces."[38] [redacted]

[redacted] proposals included B-26 bomber raids against enemy installations on the Plain of Jars and supply convoys entering Laos from North Vietnam. He also proposed using helicopters to move heavy weapons and guerrilla teams into enemy rear areas and to hit "PL bands operating in friendly rear areas." In this context, he wanted the Hmong to instigate their compatriots in border areas of North Vietnam to sabotage the communists' interior lines of communication. Meanwhile, the United States should make a conspicuous deployment of troops and aircraft, under SEATO auspices, to South Vietnam and Thailand.[39] [redacted]

[redacted] said that the ambassador had endorsed his proposals, which included numerous measures to expand both the Hmong and the regular Laotian military, and [redacted] expected Brown to repeat them in his own correspondence. No reply to this message has been found, and, in fact, the die was already cast. On 23 March 1961, President Kennedy accepted the risks of negotiating from military weakness when he endorsed the British proposal for a cease-fire and an international conference aimed at reestablishing a neutral Laos. On the subject of military action, Kennedy confined himself to asserting that, if armed attack by "externally supported communists" did not cease, the United States and its SEATO allies would have to "consider their response."[40] [redacted]

Protracted debate ensued, with allies and adversaries alike, over the ground rules for the reactivation of the Geneva Conference. As these discussions wore on, communist forces pressed the attack in Laos. The Hmong continued to acquit themselves well, but [redacted] effort at this time emphasized expanding the guerrilla force and securing mountain terrain and population. Meanwhile, FAR was losing key geography, including Vang Vieng, south of the Sala Phou Khoun intersection that had marked the high-water mark of General Phoumi's advance. Even more dangerous to the Hmong resistance was the passivity of the FAR units covering the southeastern quadrant of the Plain of Jars perimeter. Vang Pao complained to Bill Lair that Col. Kham

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38 [redacted]

39 [redacted]

40 Editorial Note, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 100. [redacted]

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Khong, commanding at Paksane, was allowing Pathet Lao reinforcements to infiltrate into the hills between the Plain of Jars and the Vientiane Plain.[41]

were still attached to FAR regular units in this sector, and one of them, along with a US Special Forces team, paid the price of the characteristic FAR distaste for combat. The incident occurred at Tha Thom, in a narrow valley downstream from the site of Bill Lair's mid-January meeting with Vang Pao. The safety of the regimental headquarters there depended on two infantry battalions to defend the heights flanking the valley in which it lay. One of these got word on 30 March that it would be relieved the next day by a unit from Paksane. Without a word to the command post below, it decamped that night, leaving its position to the enemy. The enemy promptly accepted the gift, and in the morning, the unsuspecting defenders below were swept with artillery, small arms, and recoilless rifle fire.[42]

The Lao broke and fled, leaving behind all their arms and equipment, and their American advisers as well. Trying to extricate themselves under fire, paused to burn their one-time code pads. Fleeing with the Special Forces team, they heard small arms fire and grenades exploding as the enemy wiped out any Lao survivors.[43]

Other FAR units might not be so determined to avoid contact, but, even so, the question arose whether the army might simply abandon the Hmong to the mercies of the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Before the Tha Thom debacle, had been able to assure Washington only that the government had "indicated" it would fight to keep a military presence between the Mekong and the highlands. And that presence did survive after the Tha Thom debacle, if only because the enemy did not press the attack. But Vang Pao's guerrillas, and the scattered regular units under his command, had now emerged as the only active opposition to communist and neutralist control of northeast Laos.[44]

Vang Pao pushed the recruitment of new volunteers, including some 200 from the vulnerable southeastern quadrant, and by early April, CIA had equipped 3,500 of the 4,000 men authorized in February. At the same time, made plans to recruit up to 5,000 additional irregulars—Hmong in Sam Neua Province and a mixture of Hmong and other tribal groups in Luang Prabang Province. Headquarters promptly

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accommodated part of this by authorizing support to another 1,000 guerrillas, and [redacted] responded with a plan to link the Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang irregulars.[45] [redacted]

Military Support to a Civilian Program [redacted]

The rapid evolution of the Hmong as the main barrier to communist encroachment from the northeast reversed the normal relationships between US military and civilian components operating in a war zone. PEO still controlled aid to the 30,000 troops of FAR, but now found itself supporting CIA in directing a Hmong force whose relatively small size belied its growing importance to the survival of a noncommunist Laos. [redacted]

Agency paramilitary activities in these circumstances would normally have been subordinated to a US military command. But this would have conflicted with the administration's commitment to restored neutrality for Laos. Even CINCPAC Adm. Harry D. Felt saw overt military participation in the unacknowledged Hmong project as subversive of the administration's diplomatic strategy. Accordingly, he objected when the Pentagon now proposed to take it over. He lobbied the JCS, the secretary of defense, and the White House against the idea and managed to prevent either the assignment of a military commander or the program's subordination to PEO chief Brig. Gen. Andrew Boyle in Vientiane.[46] [redacted]

Other things being equal, this would have entirely suited the Agency's preferences. But not everything was equal, for Admiral Felt's position left open the question of Agency access to the military helicopters being surreptitiously deployed [redacted] for use in Laos. The admiral wanted no air operations center in PEO, preferring to continue the informal coordination between General Boyle and [redacted] The problem with this, from the CIA perspective, was that it left [redacted] in the position of supplicants, begging helicopter time from General Boyle.[47] [redacted]

Headquarters thought to solve this by telling [redacted] to "take a very hard line in demanding our share" of helicopter time, and [redacted] had to point out that these aircraft, nominally belonging to CIA proprietary Air America, were being paid for by the military, on whose behalf General Boyle was already giving [redacted] a very fair shake. Among other favors, he had allowed the replacement at Defense Department expense of the H-34 in which Bill Lair had crashed trying to reach Ban Pa Dong in January. The problem for

45 [redacted]

46 [redacted]

47 [redacted]

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was resources, not command arrangements, and he saw no alternative to a helicopter capability Meanwhile, he had to rely on his own and Bill Lair's cordial relationships with their military colleagues to meet minimum needs for helicopter support.[48]

The resort to aircraft and crews in the helicopter program reflected the self-imposed obligation to observe the forms of the 1954 Geneva proscription of armed intervention in Laos. That obligation created another problem for US management of the Hmong resistance. If the program were to serve the political purpose of expanding RLG territorial holdings before a cease-fire, the Hmong would require some formal status as part of FAR. Irregulars unilaterally supported by CIA would have no legal standing, yet making them part of the regular military assistance program would subject them to time-consuming programming on the American side and to government obstructionism on the Laotian. With preparations for the Geneva conference still under way, US officials in Vientiane and Washington began looking for a formula that incorporated the guerrillas into FAR—probably as a militia—while leaving support and guidance in CIA hands.[49]

Washington's attempt to strengthen the RLG's bargaining position while preserving a workable atmosphere for negotiations produced a third, entirely intractable, difficulty. Arming and training a guerrilla army, already several thousand strong and still growing, could not be entirely concealed. As early as March 1961, American journalists were digging for the facts of US support of the Hmong,

The solution was threefold: first, to acknowledge some US Mission support of Col. Vang Pao, in his capacity as a FAR commander; secondly, to play down the importance of the Hmong militia as a factor in Xieng Khouang Province; and finally, to avoid confirming an Agency role. It was an uneasy compromise, leading eventually to allegations—sometimes by people who knew better—of a rogue CIA running its own "secret war" in Laos. But it sufficed, in the less volatile atmosphere of early 1961, to minimize publicity about the origin and extent of support to the Hmong.[51]

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Chapter Three

The Right Stuff

By the middle of March 1961, [redacted] had implicitly accepted [redacted] earlier prescription for a resident American presence in Hmong country. Bill Lair was still making almost daily visits to Vang Pao's headquarters at Pa Dong, but the training and communications programs needed full-time supervision. And with plans for more guerrilla camps and a force of 8,000 men, CIA case officers on site would be indispensable if the Agency was to discharge its duty to account for the ordnance being supplied to the Hmong and to control its use. Finally, if negotiations failed and the United States occupied the Plain of Jars, CIA would have to have someone with Vang Pao or risk seeing the US military usurp its liaison with him. Direction by the military, [redacted] Lair believed, would have fatally disruptive effects on the guerrilla program.[52] [redacted]

Under these pressures, [redacted] gave in—though not on the jurisdictional question—and sent [redacted] to Pa Dong while he awaited the arrival of several other veteran paramilitary officers to staff the new sites. [redacted] assignment provided an early example why officers working upcountry needed a balanced set of qualifications, both professional and personal. Far removed from both the constraints and support of work among peers in a familiar setting, these men dealt with the combined burden and challenge of working alone among people of a radically different culture. In some cases, moreover, they had to do this through interpreters of uneven competence.[53] [redacted]

[redacted] had no foreign language, and he brought with him the trilingual interpreter needed for an English-speaker to deal competently with Hmong, Lao, [redacted] at Pa Dong. This was [redacted] son of American Protestant missionaries working among the hill tribes of Burma and northern Thailand. Handsome, personable, and well-spoken, his manner was that of the businesslike young professional. But [redacted] had acquired some of the practices, as well as the languages, of the people among whom his parents worked. These included a certain indifference to punctuality and organizational discipline, and his style soon collided with that of the compulsively organized [redacted]

Despite their disparate styles, [redacted] might have succeeded as a team had not the older man found the Hmong even more antipathetic than he

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[52] Bill Lair. The figure 8,000 includes the 2,000 armed by PEO. [redacted]

[53] Bill Lair; [redacted] interview by the author at Falls Church, VA, 10 May 1999 (hereafter cited as [redacted] interview); [redacted]

[54] Bill Lair. [redacted]

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did his interpreter. Dedicated and intense, saw Vang Pao's one-man-band style of leadership as hopelessly inadequate, involving an impossibly broad span of control. His constant hectoring of Vang Pao to set up a conventional four-part military staff strained the relationship between the two, especially when it took place with Hmong or Lao subordinates present. In fact, Vang Pao lacked people qualified to function like professionals in a Western army. More importantly, the Hmong leader was as much tribal leader as military commander, and his political authority rested on a charisma that needed constant exercise if it were not to decay.[55]

An adviser had to deal not only with Vang Pao and his rudimentary staff but with the volunteer irregulars as well. Nearly all illiterate and with only rudimentary training, they displayed astonishing speed and endurance as they traversed mountain ridges carrying weapons and ammunition. Their cheerful acceptance of extraordinarily harsh conditions and their abiding hatred of the Vietnamese had to compensate for their lack of conventional military discipline and their indifference to any goal broader than securing their families and their way of life.[56]

For a few advisers, cultural disparities like these were to be ignored—eradicated, if possible—as they converted their tribal clients into a smaller version of US Marines. attempt to do this ran up against both the cultural barrier and a charismatic leader's need never to lose face with his inferiors.

The officers who followed, most of them requested by Bill Lair, had a better capacity for cross-cultural empathy and, required only cursory briefing before being dispatched into the mountains. Several had been recruited, like Lair in the early 1950s, out of Texas A&M University, where two or three—including Lloyd "Pat" Landry—had played varsity football. Another, had been a master sergeant in the US Army Special Forces before joining the Agency. Still another, Jack Shirley, was a New England native who, like Lair, had married a Thai girl and made a career of paramilitary work

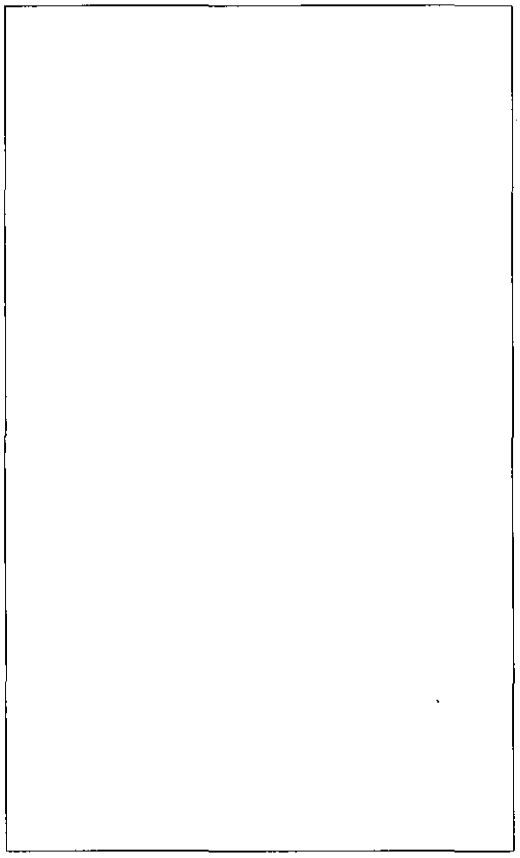
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[55] Ibid.; interview.

[56] Bill Lair,

[57] Ibid; interview; author's recollection. One of the A&M men, played briefly for the NFL's Detroit Lions before joining the Agency. interview.) Both Lair and Shirley married into the families of prominent members of the Free Thai resistance to the Japanese occupation in World War II.

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Clockwise Around the Plain of Jars

With direct US military intervention still an option in Washington, the Agency raced to try to encircle the Plain of Jars with new guerrilla bases. served briefly with Vang Pao at Pa Dong, and expansion began with Pat Landry, who was infiltrated by helicopter into Ban Na, some 10 miles west of the Plain of Jars. Landry shortly fell victim to amoebic dysentery, and replaced him.[58]

Lair and capacity for gentle persuasion had made a success of an informal, command arrangement at Pa Dong. Vang Pao was never seen by his men to be overridden by his advisers, and the advisers never tried to force upon him any operational proposal. He reciprocated by encouraging them often to deal with the Hmong in his name. This formula was replicated at Ban Na—indeed, wherever worked with the Hmong—and and clan leader Tu Nghia together prepared to expand to the north and east. They built an airstrip and began training volunteers to use the weapons dropped to them by Air America C-46s.[59]

With and Tu Nghia, trained several hundred Hmong volunteers at Ban Na and, in the process, learned something of the Hmong approach to security. The scarcity of air transport in those early days often had advisers trekking to outlying sites, and on one occasion accompanied a party of Hmong north across the Nam (River) Ngum. En route, he learned that security, to the Hmong, was a function of elevation. Walking the ridgelines, they set a quick pace and kept up a

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[58] interview.

[59] Ibid. recalled that chose the letter *K* for the team's designation in honor of President Kennedy.

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carefree chatter among themselves. In the valleys, where enemy patrols might lurk, they silently scouted the terrain before the main body crossed on the way to the next slope.[60]

Like their compatriots at other sites, wanted to do more than merely secure Hmong settlements in the mountains; the enemy should know that he could be hurt. Accordingly, they called for one of the 4.2-inch mortars that had authorized two months earlier. The heaviest of its three components weighed about 200 pounds, but the Hmong cheerfully lugged the weapon and a dozen high-explosive shells up and down the intervening mountain slopes until they reached the foot of the last ridgeline before the Plain of Jars.[61]

With the weapon assembled, gunners lobbed shells over the mountain in the direction of an enemy camp. The damage, if any, was doubtless slight, but even so modest an offensive action served notice that the communists did not enjoy uncontested control of the plain. More importantly, it gave both the Hmong and their advisers a sense of taking the fight to the enemy at a time when the military effectiveness of the resistance had yet to be established.

Training had just begun at Ban Na when a Lao Theung chief named Somboon came in from Xieng Dat, west of the Plain of Jars, asking for arms for several hundred villagers. Such overtures from non-Hmong groups—in this case a hill people living at elevations about 1,000 feet lower than the Hmong—had to be carefully scrutinized. No one at Ban Na, even Tu Nghia, knew the man well enough to evaluate his sincerity. Ban Na, therefore, vetted the request with Vang Pao, who rejected it, saying that the anticommunist convictions of the Lao Theung were too weak; under pressure from the Pathet Lao, they would defect to the other side. Tu Nghia accordingly sent Somboon home empty-handed.[62]

The wisdom of this caution became clear some weeks later, after had moved on to set up another guerrilla site. , a US Military Academy graduate and now a CIA contractor, had become the adviser at Ban Na, and he took up Somboon's cause so vigorously that Vang Pao finally gave in. but no Agency adviser, proceeded to Xieng Dat, organized the equipment drop, and began training.

Helio pilot Bill Andresevic spotted the first sign of treachery when he circled the camp one day and saw only one trooper come out to lay the signal panel. Another stood at the entrance to the team's hut in a strange

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.; Bill Lair

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posture, as if he were being held from inside. The scene looked suspicious enough to make Andresevic decide to abort the landing and return to Pa Dong for further instructions. His caution turned out to have been well advised, for three of [redacted] and several Hmong were already dead, murdered in their sleep either by Pathet Lao infiltrators or by turncoat Lao Theung.[63] [redacted]

The Lao Theung decamped for communist-held territory, taking the surviving two [redacted] as prisoners and eventually turning them over for interrogation by North Vietnamese Army officers. By way of reprisal, the embarrassed Vang Pao burned nine Lao Theung villages in the area, scattering their inhabitants. He spared one Lao Theung village, located near Ban Na; its population was Catholic, and even though Vang Pao had been unable to enlist it into the resistance movement, he feared no treachery from it.[64] [redacted]

But the damage was done. The [redacted] prisoners were not seen again until after the Geneva agreement was signed in 1962, when they appeared at Wat Tay Airport in Vientiane as part of the prisoner exchange. Emaciated and weak, with huge welts on their wrists from having been bound with parachute cord throughout their captivity, they got a hero's welcome [redacted] [redacted][65] [redacted]

In the spring of 1961, at about the time of the abortive Xieng Dat experiment with the Lao Theung, some of the volunteers at Ban Na had headed back to their home villages around Phou (Mount) Fa, north of Route 7. Arriving at the Nam Ngum, they found it swollen by early monsoon rains, but they managed to ford it and went on to set up a guerrilla base on the mountain. There they were joined by [redacted] a veteran of an earlier program that had armed [redacted] [redacted] Even then, years before lapsing into a caricature of paramilitary machismo, [redacted] did not have the capacity for empathy with non-Western peoples that characterized officers like Lair and Shirley. But he was competent and courageous and always ready—too ready, his supervisors sometimes thought—to risk death or capture leading his men in combat.[66] [redacted]

Lair knew [redacted] less well than he did the other officers arriving during this period but had heard of his reputation as a hard-bitten practitioner. [redacted]

[redacted]

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[63] [redacted] interview. [redacted]

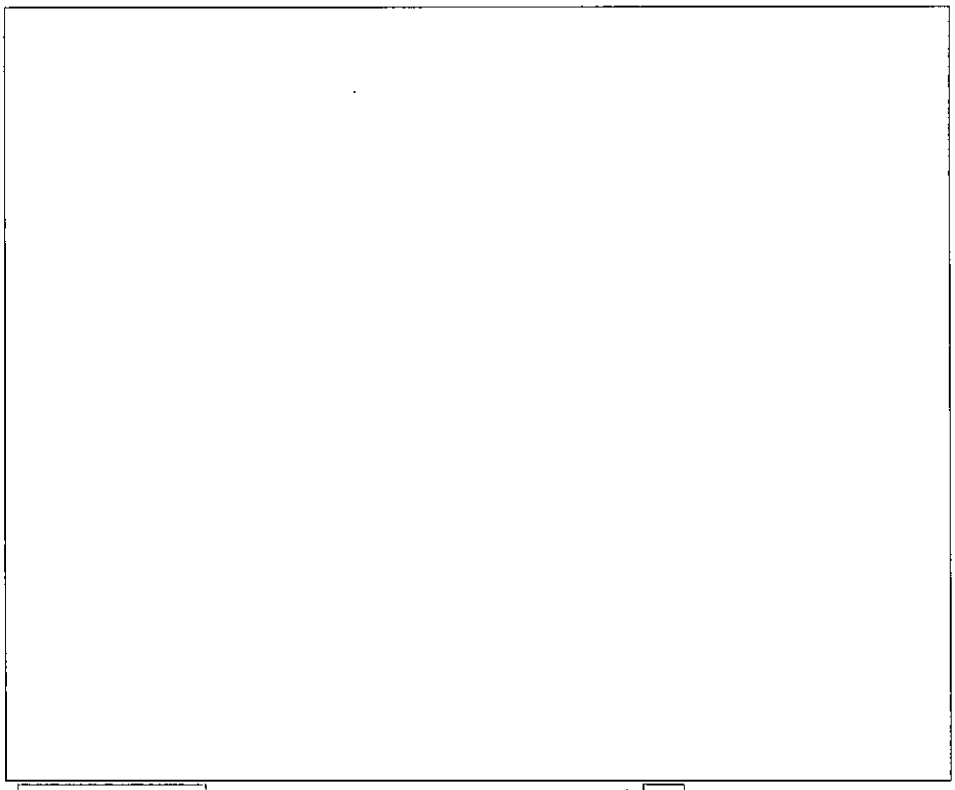
[64] Ibid.; [redacted]

[redacted]

[65] Bill Lair. [redacted]

[66] Ibid.; [redacted] interview. [redacted]

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Vang Pao, Helio pilot Bill Andresevic, c. 1964

Expert at reading people, he knew how to ingratiate himself even with difficult or demanding personalities. In addition, his professional skills commanded respect, and they developed a fully cooperative working relationship before moved to Pa Dong to replace as training officer.[67]

A New Instrument of Guerrilla Warfare

Neither the number nor the performance of Air America's helicopters sufficed to meet air support requirements, and already in the first months of the program Bill Lair impressed on Vang Pao that visits to outlying sites would depend on the availability of landing strips for the nimble Helio-Courier. These strips would facilitate not only Vang Pao's ability to maintain personal contact with his commanders but also the speedy evacuation of wounded.

[67] Bill Lair.

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Accordingly, every Hmong command post boasted a Helio strip. Some of these defied all the safety rules even of military aviation, and Phou Fa provided a dramatic example. The strip there followed a sharply sloping ridgeline near the summit. It also sloped to one side, near the downhill end, where the Hmong reduced the angle by building a log retaining wall and filling earth in behind it. The result was something that resembled a ski jump, and when [redacted] visiting Laos again in mid-1961, insisted on seeing a couple of upcountry sites, Bill Lair decided to acquaint him with the most innovative aspect of the new guerrilla program.[68]

Introduced to it only a few months earlier, when he took the FAR payroll to Savannakhet, Lair had recognized the potential of the new, Agency-developed Helio-Courier STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft. It would extend the reach of Vang Pao's thin leadership cadre—[redacted] and US advisers—to the smallest Hmong operational bases. It would also transport sensitive and valuable cargos (payrolls, medicines, and radio gear, for example) and allow speedy evacuation of the wounded. More of these craft would be needed to supplement the slow—and scarce—H-34 helicopter, and Lair wanted [redacted] support.

He assigned Bill Andresevic, perhaps the most accomplished of Air America's Helio pilots, to make the trip, and Lair sat in the back to let him brief [redacted] on the terrain as they made their way up from Vientiane. Approaching the Phou Fa strip, Andresevic maintained flying speed until the landing gear hit the sloping runway. As the plane slowed under the force of gravity, Andresevic had to apply more power to keep it from rolling backward, and the Helio clawed its way to the level spot at the top.

Over the years, the Hmong—and other irregulars in the Laotian Panhandle—cut dozens of the tiny landing strips that allowed them to exploit this ungainly but superbly adapted machine. None of those who built or used the STOL strips were deterred by the unforgiving terrain, of which Phou Fa represented an extreme example. Many of them followed ridgelines that ended in a precipice at one end and a nearly vertical mountainside at the other. Landings were always made going uphill, and the approach had to be right the first time, for if an unanticipated downdraft or other mischance forced a pilot to break off an approach as he neared touchdown, he might collide with the mountain before he completed his turn.[69]

Flying the Helio, as it was always called, demanded steady nerves, superior coordination, and a certain native optimism. The pilots who stayed came to

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[68] Bill Lair [redacted]

[69] Ibid.; author's recollection; descriptions of other strips by officers including [redacted]

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rely on the capacities of the weird little craft, which took off in the length of a football field and landed at 35 miles an hour. At such slow speeds, nearly every pilot and all the passengers—the plane carried as many as three Americans, but five or six of the much smaller Hmong—survived the numerous crash landings during the years that followed.[70]

In taking to Phou Fa, Lair had more in mind than mere thrills, for it was an article of faith with him that, however much a program of irregular warfare in Laos needed American material aid, it did not require Americans to run it on the ground. Phou Fa, he thought, demonstrated the point.[71]

The point had mainly to do with leadership. No American was stationed at Phou Fa. The operation there was being run by the exceptionally capable and the able and influential leader of the local Catholic Hmong. did the briefing—the Hmong leader, of course, spoke no English—and Lair characteristically stayed in the background, letting get his information and impressions directly from the men on site. When the visitors finally roared down the slope for takeoff, Lair was confident that had absorbed the message.[72]

Completing the Arc

The encirclement of the Plain of Jars continued when a team leapfrogged Phou Fa to set up a base directly north of the plain. then pushed farther to the east. Joined by a team, he set up a command post at a village known as Ban Tha Northeast, about 11 miles north of the key road junction at Ban Ban.[73]

Vang Pao had guaranteed 1,000 volunteers from the area around Ban Tha Northeast, but when arrived, local Hmong leader Nghia Tong had perhaps 30 men waiting to be equipped and trained. Many more were on the way, he kept assuring the advisers, but after three weeks no more than 300 had showed up. There was, fortunately, no immediate enemy reaction, and the standard training regime got under way.[74]

Ban Tha Northeast straddled a ridge on which the volunteers cleared a Helio strip. Even more than most, this one mocked all safety prescriptions. Nearly all guerrilla bases were located on mountain slopes, usually at eleva-

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[70] Despite the theoretical disadvantage of its single engine, the Helio-Courier was involved in no fatal accidents in its first five years of operation in Laos; the only fatalities occurred when one was downed by enemy ground fire.

[71] Bill Lair

[72] Ibid

[73] interview.

[74] Ibid

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tions over 4,000 feet. The strip at Ban Tha Northeast, at 4,600 feet, resembled the ski jump at Ban Na. But it rose even more sharply , and a Helio, landing uphill, required full power to taxi to the end. The dangers of the airstrip and Vang Pao's uncharacteristic mistake about recruiting potential, combined with the proximity of two enemy battlaions at Ban Ban, made Ban Tha Northeast a marginal site, at best. A light machine gun and a 60mm mortar were the biggest weapons in its arsenal, and the Hmong guerrillas could not be expected to defend against an infantry assault, which, if it came, would almost certainly be supported by the North Vietnamese Army.

When asked for a .50-caliber machinegun, it was not the North Vietnamese he had in mind. The Soviet pilots who flew the IL-12 and IL-14 supply flights from Hanoi to the Plain of Jars sometimes dipped incautiously low over Ban Tha as they approached Phongsavan. When one of them dropped down for a closer look at the camp one day, and Hmong leader Nghia Tong had their men ready. As the IL-12 came directly overhead, the .50 caliber and the rest of the garrison opened up. The Soviet banked and fled, and arriving volunteers reported that it had crashed. But Air America reconnaissance and never knew for sure whether he was the one American to shoot down a Soviet cargo plane in Laos.[75]

There was a little less uncertainty about the work of the one-eyed Hmong who with his M-1 rifle—and a very lucky shot—downed another Soviet transport that imprudently followed a ridgeline offering a clear field of fire. Vang Pao claimed to have verified that feat, which earned the marksman a new rifle and 1,000 rounds of ammunition.[76]

Two more sites opened by mid-April 1961. In late March, Jack Shirley, the easy-going paramilitary officer who, was preparing for a weapons drop at San Tiau, 10 miles south of Ban Ban. Shortly thereafter, set up a guerrilla training camp farther east, at an abandoned French outpost just south of Route 7 and only a few thousand yards from the North Vietnamese border.[77]

At this point, guerrilla bases covered all exits from the Plain of Jars except the southeast, where skittish FAR units still provided the main barrier to a possible communist drive to the Mekong. Headquarters estimated that the Hmong were tying down at least six, maybe nine, Pathet Lao battalions, and reporting detailed the skirmishes and ambushes that were keeping the enemy on the defensive. Even the North Vietnamese were, at first,

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[75] Ibid.; Strip elevation from Joint Operations Graphic (Air), NE 48-1, 1983.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.; interview

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intimidated by the ubiquitous threat of raid or ambush. Intercepted messages testified to the anxiety of NVA units about the security of roads they had previously used with impunity, as [redacted] discovered on a visit to Vientiane when [redacted] excitedly instructed him to "read this!"[78]—it was an NVA order to devote more resources to route security. [redacted]

Dozens of guerrilla camps, some more or less permanent and others constructed only to support a particular operation, were to appear in succeeding years. But the structure of the Hmong guerrilla movement was now in place. It matured just as the great powers agreed to an informal cease-fire while they worked on a neutralization formula designed to keep the conflict over Laos from detonating a general war. [redacted]

[78] [redacted]

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CHAPTER FOUR

A Contentious Cease-Fire

CIA was still racing to complete its guerrilla organization in northern Laos when its operation at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba came to a catastrophic end on 19 April 1961. In the wake of this disaster, Washington finally abandoned the direct US military action to retake the Plain of Jars that had been an option four weeks earlier when the United States had endorsed the British proposal for negotiations. Instead, it now pressed for convening the proposed 14-nation conference on the future of Laos.[1]

The change in emphasis in Washington was echoed in Vientiane. There, was preoccupied with completing the command, logistic, and communications arrangements necessary for the Hmong resistance to survive a supervised cease-fire. But immediate tactical issues also demanded attention. The guerrilla camp at San Tiau, was coming under pressure and might have to be evacuated. At the same time, on the other side of the Plain of Jars, saw an opportunity to claim more territory for the Royal Laotian Government by linking Hmong irregulars in Luang Prabang Province with those directed by Vang Pao.[2]

By mid-April the explosive growth of the program had modified view of staffing requirements. Despite the possibility that a Geneva agreement might eliminate American advisers altogether, he now wanted more American military personnel than the Program Evaluation Office and CINCPAC were prepared to give him. At the same time, recognized the validity of Bill Lair's concern about with the Hmong "If US personnel move in on [a] large scale, attempt [to] usurp Meo command and commanders, and appear [to] be relegating to [the] relatively menial role of communicators or interpreters, [the] United States will

[1] Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962–1970*, 7.

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lose both Meo and [redacted]" For that reason, [redacted] wanted to follow a "gradualist approach" that ensured CIA control over the integration of American military personnel and the preservation of [redacted] effectiveness as an autonomous advisory element. But Headquarters could not furnish even the modest numbers [redacted] believed were required, [redacted] went to PEO for help.[3] [redacted]

As it happened, the loss of Tha Thom and other FAR reverses had persuaded PEO chief General Boyle that his Special Forces teams were most urgently required as advisers to the Laotian regulars. There might have been room for compromise, [redacted] but Lt. Col. John Little, working for Boyle as the capable but "dogmatic" chief of the US Special Forces detachment, muddied the waters with a jurisdictional issue. If [redacted] wanted Special Forces involved with the Hmong irregulars, he should give them an area of control—Little proposed Sam Neua Province—with CIA responsible for funding and logistics.[4] [redacted]

Left to his own devices, General Boyle might have been more accommodating, but he did not overrule his Special Forces commander. And [redacted] thought the army ill-prepared to handle the tribesmen's cultural idiosyncrasies and the tension between them and the majority Lao. The result was that, with the exception of Bill Chance's team at the Pa Dong command post, any Special Forces support to CIA irregulars came thereafter on an ad hoc basis, arranged between Little's team leaders in the field and their CIA counterparts.[5] [redacted]

The Territorial Imperative [redacted]

The prospect of a cease-fire impelled both sides to put a high premium on securing as much territory as possible before talks began on the formation of a coalition government. For that reason, [redacted] did not let the impasse with Little prevent some additional expansion. Nevertheless, the shortage of supervisory personnel induced some skepticism about individual proposals that he might otherwise have entertained. [redacted]

In mid-April, Stuart Methven reported from the royal capital at Luang Prabang that numerous mountain tribesmen in his area were volunteering to the local FAR commander, Colonel Siboravong. Some of them were Hmong, already aware of the support to Vang Pao, and Methven wanted to exploit the opportunity both to link up with Vang Pao and to claim additional mountain territory around the royal capital. Other volunteers, including 400 Kha Mou

[redacted]

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from Phong Saly Province in the far north, represented tribes of whose history and political loyalties knew little.[6]

The few Hmong volunteers already armed in Luang Prabang were acquitting themselves well, and had no serious qualms about supporting more. But he worried about control of the Kha Mou, and about the ability of Methven's volunteers to attract others. "Before embarking on this type effort, you must know whether you have a single leader with enough prestige to command [the] loyalty of [the] recruitable Kha Mou in [the] vicinity of any base" that might be established. And the possession of a secure base area was more important to than harassing enemy forces. Methven should concentrate more on developing irregular units behind enemy lines and less on helping FAR build commando units for sporadic forays from friendly territory. Meanwhile, wanted Washington approval to recruit 4,000 more tribal irregulars who could lay claim to additional territory not only in Luang Prabang and Phong Saly but also in Sam Neua Province, in the northeast.[7]

Headquarters thought most of these potential volunteers too scattered to allow effective communications. Any CIA officers deployed with them would run too great a risk of capture, and the assigned to them would have to be withdrawn from support of Vang Pao. Permission was withheld for the moment, though Methven could support the Hmong tribesmen in Luang Prabang Province whose bona fides he had established. Even these, however, would not be included in effort to integrate the Hmong irregulars into FAR in anticipation of a cease-fire inspection regime. Methven could give them "what they need to fight and only as much as necessary to get them to fight."[8]

Three days later, on 21 April, Washington's reservations had increased. A cable to Vientiane repeated earlier concerns about an effective chain of command and about the prospect of successfully imposing CIA conditions on the use of US-supplied ordnance. There was also the potential problem of supplies to the irregulars being cut off after a cease-fire, something that the Hmong might "interpret as failure to fulfill commitments."[9]

More alarming, was the rapid decay of the RLG's military position in the Panhandle, where communist forces now threatened Thakhek, on the Mekong River border with Thailand. Farther south, in

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Savannakhet Province, Pathet Lao advances threatened not only Thailand but also the approaches to South Vietnam. The communists had just taken Muong Phine, on the road between Savannakhet town and the South Vietnamese border, and further advance to the east would expose that border to North Vietnamese infiltration. The Laotian Ministry of Defense renewed its appeal for a cease-fire, but the Pathet Lao made no reply.[10]

The communists may have wanted time to deal with the Hmong expansion that threatened their southern flank in MR 2, for they followed their obdurate stance at the bargaining table with attacks on irregular units south of Route 7. For several weeks, Vang Pao and his advisers had anticipated a concerted reaction to the Hmong guerrillas then spreading east from the Plain of Jars. Headquarters shared this apprehension and, as early as 20 April, had asked about the threat to Vang Pao's headquarters at Ban Pa Dong and about the vulnerability of case officers and US military personnel there and at outposts like Ban Na.[11]

The timing of Washington's query coincided with the first major attack on a Hmong guerrilla base. reported that, as of 21 April, enemy infantry and artillery had Ban San Tiau, east of the Plain of Jars, "under heavy attack." Two case officers—Jack Shirley was the senior of them— were supporting the Hmong volunteers and a FAR territorial unit under Vang Pao's command. said it had instructed Shirley to withdraw, if necessary, to avoid encirclement and had sent two H-34 helicopters to Pa Dong to meet the possible need for evacuation.[12]

Shirley reported next day that the initial attacks had been beaten back—the command post itself was not yet under fire—and that patrols indicated no enemy presence south or east of San Tiau. Concerned about the defenders' morale, he urged against evacuating the advisers by helicopter. But on the 23rd, Hmong scouts around San Tiau reported North Vietnamese infantry moving to cut off all escape routes. It was too late to call for H-34 support, and the advisers joined their troops in a withdrawal over the precipitous ridges to the south.[13]

The CIA advisers carried the rifles who alternated lugging the cumbersome RS-1 radio up and down the tortuous slopes of a Hmong trail to a tiny hamlet about 5 miles from San Tiau. A message to

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12 The author was the second CIA officer at San Tiau.

13 author's recollection.

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triggered an evacuation mission next morning, and the advisers enjoyed several minutes of suspense watching two H-34s droning up the valley toward them. The helicopters were not yet within range of Shirley's tiny emergency transmitter, but their pilots could be heard debating whether they would fly any farther into hostile terrain. About to give up and turn back, they finally heard Shirley's call and proceeded until the panel signaling the landing pad came into view.[14]

The withdrawal from San Tiau with only a few casualties reflected the successful application of live-to-fight-another-day guerrilla doctrine. Advisers and the indigenous commander flew to Pa Dong for consultation with Bill Lair and Vang Pao. Meanwhile, the San Tiau irregulars set up a new base 10 miles to the west.[15]

Divided Counsels

At an administration briefing for congressional leaders on 27 April, Adm. Arleigh Burke, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "strongly and repeatedly" insisted that unless the United States was prepared to intervene militarily in Laos, all of Southeast Asia would be lost. But he acknowledged that such intervention meant a "tough, long, and hard war" that might very well bring in the communist Chinese. The prospect of such a conflict daunted even the legislators who agreed with the domino interpretation. They endorsed the judgment of the acting secretary of state that, "even recognizing [the] possible consequences to our position in [the] remainder [of] Southeast Asia, we should not introduce US forces into Laos."[16]

This reluctance was reinforced by the belief, prevalent on Capitol Hill, that the Lao were unwilling to fight to save themselves. In fact, the kingdom had no martial tradition. Its armed forces were little more than the shell of an institution imposed by the colonial French. With an officer corps inexperienced in combat and devoid of èlan, the army displayed an endemic lassitude that, as we have seen, shaped the US decision to turn to tribal irregulars to restore the balance.[17]

The impression of FAR passivity was intensified by the understanding in Congress that FAR outnumbered enemy forces by more than two to one—the

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[14] Author's recollection.

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[16] Chester Bowles, Telegram to Secretary of State Rusk, 27April 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 146–47.

[17] Memorandum from Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff (Breitweiser) to the President's Military Aide (Clifton), "Comparative Forces in Laos," 1 May 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 157.

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ratio rising to more than three to one when local militias and the Hmong irregulars were included. But the Pathet Lao now benefited from the presence of perhaps as many as 1,500 North Vietnamese advisers and specialists, and its combat effectiveness had grown in proportion. With the enemy active on several fronts, Vientiane had no reserves, and the prospect was one of further reverses.[18]

The unfavorable military balance left Congress and the State Department hunting for a formula that would preserve a noncommunist Laos while leaving the ground combat to indigenous forces. A State telegram of 27 April defined the problem as one of finding a way to stop the communist military advance without destroying the possibility of a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement. The Department doubted that the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese sought to conquer all of Laos, but it emphatically disclaimed any certain knowledge of their intentions. Accordingly, it recommended calling a UN Security Council meeting to mediate between the Laotian factions while SEATO troops—no Americans, presumably, among them—moved into Vientiane and southern Laos.[19]

In another telegram, on 28 April, State continued to wrestle with the issue of ends and means. Part of the dilemma arose from uncertainty about the intentions of the Sino-Soviet Bloc, and Washington's call for more intelligence implied that, whatever the United States might choose to do, it would risk general war over Laos only with great reluctance. Behind this, finally, lay the question of the importance to the United States of a noncommunist Laos. State saw it as contingent in part on the attitudes of Asian governments. "Our national interest is heavy but [only] part of [the] collective interest in security in Southeast Asia." If SEATO allies hesitated to participate in collective action, the United States would have to rethink its responsibilities in the area. For Asian neutrals as well, the time had come to decide whether the umbrella of US power required at least their political support in the conflict over Laos.[20]

The defense establishment took a harder line. Secretary of Defense McNamara thought it essential that Laos not become another in the "present Soviet chain of successes," and that the United States demonstrate its unwillingness "to concede world leadership to the communists." In a memorandum to President Kennedy, he and Deputy Defense Secretary Gilpatric recommended a deadline for the conclusion of a cease-fire. Laos might represent

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[18] Ibid. The JCS figures included, on the government side, a 38,500-man regular army, almost 14,000 militiamen, and 6,000 Hmong guerrillas. The enemy's forces included the 1,500 North Vietnamese, 4,000 Kong Le neutralists, and 11,000 Pathet Lao.

[19] Dean Rusk, Telegram to Department of State, 27 April 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 147n

[20] Telegram from Secretary Rusk to the Department of State, 28 April 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 148–49.

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"one of the least favorable places in the world for direct US military intervention," but American prestige was now engaged. Failing an agreement, American troops should be deployed to Laos both to preserve the kingdom and to meet US obligations to SEATO. Washington would have to accept the possibility of escalation into general war, including an attack on southern China "if Chinese volunteers intervene."[21]

Looking at the problem from a more localized perspective, came to a similar conclusion. Ambassador Brown was looking for ways to strengthen the American bargaining position, and thought it was time to fish or cut bait. The only solution was a "real show of force," not just to get a cease-fire, but to "establish clearly and unmistakably in the enemy's mind . . . the fact that the United States means business about its stated objectives in Laos." Failing this, Washington could expect at the conference table what it was seeing on the battlefield, namely,

> a rapid erosion of [the] US and RLG position. We are almost pathetically anxious to strengthen the RLG's political position prior to the opening of any conference, but we fail to do what is most needed for this purpose, namely, to strengthen its military position to do so.

US and SEATO forces would be needed for this, as well as Marshal Sarit's agreement to move them into staging areas in Thailand. The only alternative was an RLG retreat into the Panhandle, below the Nam Ca Dinh, but doubted that this would provide a durable solution. More likely, it would only "prolong the death agony and therefore US embarrassments and distress."[22]

Even if a cease-fire could be arranged, there remained the question of the subsequent relationship with the Hmong. Headquarters wanted reassurance on several points. Did exercise enough control to ensure their compliance? A corollary to this: Would Vang Pao's authority over them survive the political opposition to be expected from General Phoumi and Hmong clan elder Touby Lyfoung? Finally, did Hmong combat effectiveness justify the political risks of continuing support?[23]

disclaimed any command authority over the irregulars; exercised "influence" on them through Col. Vang Pao, whose approval

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[21] Robert McNamara and Roswell Gilpatric, Memorandum to President Kennedy, "Alternative Courses of Action in Laos," 2 May 1961, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 166–69. Air Force chief of staff Gen. Thomas D. White believed that intervention should be limited to airstrikes; commitment of US ground forces into Laos would be a "maldeployment." But war with China was "inevitable" if the United States took the decisive action necessary to avoid the mistakes of the Korean war. (Editorial Note, *FRUS 1961–1963*, 169–70.)

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had to precede all Hmong guerrilla operations. Conversion to a purely intelligence effort was out of the question, for the entire operation rested on physically securing Hmong settlements in the mountains from the hated Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. But [redacted] expected their regard for the king, and their dependence on the United States for the means to resist, to keep them responsive to tactical guidance. As for combat effectiveness, the COS rated it as better than he had hoped. The Hmong were showing "courage, [a] capacity [to] take losses," the ability to "survive despite hardships and meager rations," and a "considerable instinct and enthusiasm for ambushing and harassing."[24] [redacted]

Addressing the use of US-supplied equipment, [redacted] said he found its effectiveness hard to judge. He noted some excessive ammunition consumption but expected experience and more training to improve fire discipline. At best, the Hmong were "not going to win the war themselves," but they represented the principal RLG asset in Xieng Khouang Province and potentially in Sam Neua and northern Luang Prabang as well. [redacted] advised that, in separate discussions held in late April, the ambassador, the army attaché, and the chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) had all endorsed the program's expansion. Vang Pao had offered another 3,000 volunteers—for a total of 9,000 since the first deliveries at Ban Pa Dong—and [redacted] wanted to arm them before a cease-fire was signed and an inspection regime installed.[25] [redacted]

This preference collided with Headquarters' nervousness about the security of its field officers. Meanwhile, just after the San Tiau evacuation, Headquarters worried that the possibility of an imminent cease-fire might provoke a more concerted communist effort against Vang Pao's other bases. Growing pressure on the Hmong "may signal an all out drive against them within [the] next 48 hours." Accordingly, [redacted] should recall all CIA men assigned to guerrilla sites, and PEO should do likewise with its upcountry people.[26] [redacted]

[redacted] appealed this, asserting that nothing would be better calculated to break the back of the resistance than to abandon the Hmong under fire. Headquarters acceded, for the moment, but told [redacted] it thought the prospects for a long-term upcountry presence were very poor. Its pessimistic forecast saw either a political settlement leading to a "strongly pro-Commie government," or a "Lao military defeat resulting in [the US government] being ousted from Laos."[27] [redacted]

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24 [redacted]

25 [redacted]

26 [redacted]

27 [redacted]

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A Highly Qualified Cease-Fire

On 1 May 1961, Kong Le and the Pathet Lao offered a cease-fire, to go into effect two days later. Why they did so, with FAR on the ropes, remains mysterious, but Washington jumped at the opportunity. There was, for now, no more talk of US military intervention, as Dean Rusk wired Ambassador Brown saying he assumed the ambassador would "counsel [the] RLG to cooperate without raising complicating issues on picayune details."[28]

Among the details Rusk wanted omitted was the formal delineation of territory to be controlled by the contesting parties. This expedient would permit continuing competition for real estate and population everywhere except where major troop concentrations faced each other. Verification of compliance would be complicated, moreover, by the ideological divisions among the members—Canada, India, and Poland—of the International Control Commission, which was to be reactivated for the purpose. And it could be assumed that the Pathet Lao would quickly demonstrate a highly restrictive approach to ICC inspections on its turf. Nevertheless, the agreement met the one irreducible US policy imperative, to prevent the collapse of the armed forces of the RLG without the commitment of American troops.[29]

King Savang Vatthana, General Phoumi, and the civilian elite shared Washington's foreboding about their country's future, and all of them acknowledged FAR's impotence against what they saw as an invasion by the North Vietnamese. Whether or not they agreed with Rusk about territorial boundaries, they had no better chance of influencing Washington than of resisting Hanoi, and an informal and partial cease-fire came into effect on 3 May.[30]

There ensued two weeks of procedural maneuvering by the signatories, during which Headquarters authorized [redacted] to help the Hmong defend themselves. Offensive operations were prohibited, as was "any other provocation which could upset [the] cease-fire." On 9 May, State Department instructions [redacted] authorized ammunition and food supplies to the Hmong [redacted] But new volunteers in scattered enclaves were not to be armed.[31]

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[28] Memorandum from Secretary Rusk to President Kennedy, 1 May 1961; Vientiane Embassy Telegram 1985, "Eyes Only President and Secretary from Harriman," 1 May 1961; State Telegram 1207 to Vientiane, "For Ambassador from Secretary," 3 May 1961; all *FRUS 1961–1963*, 159, 165, 171–72.

[29] Blaufarb, *War in Laos*, 7.

[30] [redacted]

[31] [redacted]

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Rusk's preference to forgo a precise delineation of territorial holdings had the effect of giving the advantage to Hanoi's highly trained and well-disciplined infantry. That advantage multiplied when the NVA exploited tactical surprise, something it had not achieved at San Tiau but which led to a painful defeat shortly after the cease-fire stabilized the points of contact between the communists and FAR.

The attack on San Tiau had come with ample warning. Several days earlier, the CIA advisers, casually inspecting the prehistoric jars in the valley several hundred feet below the command post, had been startled to find themselves under harassing fire from a 105mm howitzer that the enemy had dragged south from Route 7. Hmong patrols had then begun reporting flanking movements by battalion-strength NVA elements, and the emerging picture allowed a prudent reaction. Two weeks later, near the border with North Vietnam, the absence of such warning would exact a very high price.[32]

Whether for lack of manpower or because of Washington's anxiety about CIA officers in the field—risk of capture was always the main issue—there was no CIA officer at Muong Ngat. Some 25 miles east of San Tiau and less than 6 miles from the North Vietnamese border, it had served as a French outpost during the First Indochina War. Now, Muong Ngat harbored friendly forces that included both new Hmong volunteers and a company of territorial forces, mostly ethnic Lao, under Vang Pao's Military Region 2.[33]

Before dawn on 13 May, heavy weapons opened up on Muong Ngat, tearing up the buildings of the old French installation. At 0700 hours, two battalions of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese assaulted the defenders' positions, where the largest bunker was occupied by and the territorials. During the first of at least two hand-to-hand engagements, the radioman was shot through the head and killed. With that attack repelled, gunners launched 4.2-inch mortar shells at the regrouping enemy until their ammunition ran out.[34]

The territorials had a .50-caliber machinegun on an antiaircraft mount. Its crew dead or dispersed, took it over, sweeping the advancing enemy while the remainder of his team rallied the demoralized Hmong defenders. A recoilless rifle round struck the exposed machinegun, disabling it and knocking to the ground. Suffering chest and face wounds, and with the attack-

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[32] Author's recollection.

[33] Bill Lair.

[34]

ers again at the bunker, picked up enemy grenades and hurled them back at the communists.[35]

The North Vietnamese fell back once again. But the defenders were nearly surrounded, and their alternatives were limited: escape or be killed. and the territorials' commander agreed to make a break for it, heading for a wooded area that looked like the only spot on the perimeter not yet occupied by the enemy. They alerted as many of the defenders as they could and dashed out of their bunkers and foxholes.[36]

North Vietnamese fire mowed down dozens of the desperate Hmong and Lao, and An enemy party—unaccountably unarmed—intercepted them before they reached the tree line and seized The men with him fought off the attackers with rifle butts and pointblank fire, and the remaining defenders finally reached the relative safety of the forest. There, the Hmong's endurance and superior knowledge of the terrain allowed them to elude the pursuing enemy. Having been separated during their escape, the surviving and their Hmong guides headed for the rallying point that had designated before the attack.[37]

Two days later, they reached an outpost manned by Hmong irregulars. Meanwhile, Bill Lair alerted by an emergency message from on the morning of the attack, had spent the daylight hours in the air, searching for survivors. They had begun early on 14 May, flying over the eerily calm Muong Ngat, where the dead littering the landscape displayed the ferocity of the previous day's battle. But it was not until 17 May, after a message from the Hmong outpost harboring and his men, that Lair and found and retrieved them.[38]

meanwhile, drew a lesson from the disaster there. Bill Lair concluded that, in his eagerness to expand Vang Pao's forces, he had given too little weight to the skill and determination of the NVA, which he knew had perhaps the finest light infantry in the world. Now, looking at the heavy casualties at Muong Ngat, he resolved never again

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38 Bill Lair;