A Visit to Laos

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I

I arrived in Vientiane in late March, 1970, with two friends, Douglas Dowd and Richard Fernandez, expecting to take the International Control Commission plane to Hanoi the following day. The Indian bureaucrat in charge of the weekly ICC flight immediately informed us, however, that this was not to be. The DRV delegation had returned from Pnompenh to Hanoi on the previous flight after the sacking of the Embassy by Cambodian troops (disguised as civilians), and the flight we intended to take was completely occupied by passengers scheduled for the preceding week. Efforts by the DRV and American embassies were unavailing, and, after exploring various farfetched schemes, we decided, at first without much enthusiasm, to stay in Vientiane and try our luck a week later.

Vientiane is a small town, and within hours we had met quite a few members of the Western community—journalists, former IVS workers in Laos and South Vietnam, and other residents. Through these contacts, we were able to meet urban Laotians of various sympathies and opinions, and with interesting personal histories on both sides of the civil war. We were also able to spend several days in the countryside near Vientiane, visiting a traditional Lao village and, several times, a refugee camp, in the company of a Lao-speaking American who is a leading specialist on contemporary Laos. Officials of the Lao, American, North Vietnamese, and other governments were also helpful with information, and I was fortunate to obtain access to a large collection of documentary material accumulated by residents of Vientiane over the past few years. Many of the correspondents, both French and American, had much to say, not only about Laos but also about their experiences in other parts of Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, most of the people with whom I spoke (most forcefully, the Laotians) do not wish to be identified, and asked me to be especially discreet in citing sources of information.

It doesn't take long to become aware of the presence of the CIA in Laos. The taxi from the airport to our hotel on the Mekong passed by the airfield of Air America, a theoretically private company that has an exclusive contract with the CIA.[1] Many of its pilots, said to be largely former Air Force personnel, were living in our hotel. If you happen to be up at 6 A.M., you can see them setting off for their day's work, presumably, flying supplies to the guerrilla forces of the CIA's army in Laos, the Clandestine Army led by the Meo General Vang Pao. These forces were at one time scattered throughout Northern Laos, but many of their bases are reported to have been overrun. These bases were used not only for guerrilla actions in the Pathet Lao-controlled territory, but also as advanced navigational posts for the bombardment of North Vietnam and for rescue of downed American pilots. There are said to be hundreds of small dirt strips in Northern Laos for Air America and other CIA operations.

After watching Air America parade by on my first morning in Vientiane, I decided to try to find out something about the town. Behind the hotel I came across the ramshackle building that houses the Lao Ministry of Information, where one office was identified as the Bureau of Tourism. No one there spoke English or even French. In another office of the Ministry, however, I did find

[1] For a good account of its operations, see Peter Dale Scott, "Air America: Flying the US into Laos," *Ramparts*, February, 1970.

someone who could understand my bad French. I explained that I wanted a map of Vientiane, but was told that I was in the wrong place—the American Embassy might have such things. I left by way of the reading room of the Ministry, where several people sat in the already intense heat, waving away the flies and looking through the several Lao and French newspapers scattered on the tables.

Across the street stands the modern seven-story building of the French Cultural Center, whose air-conditioned reading room is well stocked with current newspapers and magazines from Paris. French plays and lectures are advertised on posters. On another corner is Vientiane's best bookstore, which sells French books and journals.

The contrast between the Lao Ministry of Information and the French Cultural Center gives a certain insight into the nature of Laotian society. For a European resident or a member of the tiny Lao elite, Vientiane has many attractions: plenty of commodities, a variety of good restaurants, some cultural activities (in our hotel a placard announced a reading of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), the resources of the French Cultural Center. An American can live in the suburbs, complete with well-tended lawns, or in a pleasant villa rented from a rich Laotian, and can commute to the huge USAID compound with its PX and other facilities.

For the Lao, however, there is nothing. Virtually everything is owned by outsiders, by the Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese. Apart from several cigarette factories (Chinese-owned), lumber, and tin mines, one of which is owned by the right-wing Prince Boun Oum, there seems to be little that is productive in the country. After decades of French colonialism and years of extensive American aid, "in 1960 the country had no railways, two doctors, three engineers and 700 telephones."[2] In 1963 the value of the country's imports was forty times that of its exports:

> Economic development has been virtually non-existent and the attempts by the Americans to stabilise a right-wing and pro-Western regime by lavish aid programmes led merely to corruption, inflation and new gradients of wealth within the country and so played into the hands of the extreme left, the Pathet Lao.[3]

In 1968, 93 percent of the exports were tin, wood, and coffee, while 71 percent of the imports (by value) were food, gasoline and vehicles.[4]

The Lao educational system presents a similar picture. It is estimated that only about half of the children ever reach school. Of about 185,000 children in school in 1966–7, 95 percent were in the first six grades, 70 percent in the first three grades. In 1969, only 6,669 students were enrolled in secondary schools. The American aid program has helped, but it too tends to perpetuate the

[2] Keith Buchanan, *The Southeast Asian World*, London, Bell and Sons, 1967, p. 140f. The present USAID administrator reports that as of today, "Laos has virtually no indigenous medical capability and there are only about a dozen foreign trained Lao doctors in-country." (Hearings of the Symington Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, Oct. 20–28, 1969, p. 566, released with many deletions in April, 1970. Government Printing Office.)

[3] Buchanan, *op. cit.*

[4] "*Rapport sur la situation économique et financière, 1968–9*."

distorted pattern of education for the elite. Secondary education has about the same funds as primary education:

> The school is still training a minority of the youth, particularly at secondary levels, to take their place in administration. The biggest and best schools are still located in the cities. The values and attitudes communicated to children are still those of an urban-thinking, technocratic West. The curriculum is still a catch all of often unrelated pieces of information. And the concept of responsibility to the nation is still not being taught forcefully anywhere in Laotian society.[5]

The sensible Education Reform Act of 1962 remains largely a paper program. Branfman concludes that "the school system is training a class of consumers, not producers of wealth," a Western-oriented elite that might, at best, administer Lao society in the interest of the domestic elite and its American backers.

Political life as well is limited to a tiny elite. The State Department *Background Notes*, March, 1969, contends that "only a few thousand individuals, many of them French-educated, participate in government and politics; the bulk of the population is illiterate and politically passive." Surely this is true of the Government-controlled areas. I shall return to the areas under Pathet Lao control later on.

The Lao elite do not seem popular among foreign observers in Vientiane, who comment repeatedly on their venality and corruption. Typical is a report by two French journalists who were at the site of a short but brutal battle near Paksane, southeast of the Plain of Jars. They describe the arrival by helicopter of "the strongman of Vientiane, General Kouprasith,…the most powerful of the Lao generals," well after the battle was over:

> A person with an enormous face and body, wearing heavily camouflaged clothing, he approaches one of the 7 wounded soldiers waiting to be evacuated, taps him on the shoulder, and cries coming toward us: "You don't see any Americans here, nothing but Laos." Behind him, someone brings over a case of pepsi cola and ammunition. The general has himself photographed, arms akimbo, behind a cadaver presumed to be North Vietnamese. It has been searched for an identity card by a soldier, but in vain…. At the Paksane airport, we come across the American pilot who guided the T28 bombing. He is dressed like a sheriff with sunglasses, a cartridge box, and a pistol in his belt. He says to General Kouprasith: "We have done a good job today, General." He adds: "Don't forget to go see the colonel"—and he says an Anglo-Saxon name—"he is waiting for you." Kouprasith makes an impatient gesture.[6]

A well-informed observer describes the Royal Lao Government in the following way:

[5] Fred Branfman, "Education in Laos Today," speech given at IVS annual conference, February 10, 1968. The reference is to the part of Laotian society administered by the RLG. The figure of 6,669 students in secondary schools comes from the AID report in the Symington Subcommittee Hearings, p. 570.

[6] Jacques Doyon and Guy Hannoteaux, "*l'Ambiguïté de l'engagement américain au Laos*," *Figaro*, March 11, 1970, Vientiane.

> Its corruption, lethargy and indifference is as great if not greater than it ever was. Few people living under its rule actively support it. American officials have been unable to push for basic reforms due to the political necessity of getting on with the Lao civilian and military elite so that continued American bombing will be permitted.[7]

I discussed these matters with a middle-aged Lao intellectual, non-Communist and rather left-wing in outlook, a man who has had much experience with the Royal Lao Government and who also lived for some time in a Pathet Lao area. He seemed to feel that the only hope for Laos was a Pathet Lao victory, though he himself, as a Lao bourgeois, did not look forward to this with much enthusiasm. He felt, however, that nationalistic and uncorrupted bourgeois elements would find a place in a society organized by the Pathet Lao.

For the RLG he felt only contempt, and he expressed his belief that even younger men, though less dedicated to total corruption, would be able to do very little. He recalled that while the Government of National Union was functioning, Prince Souphanouvong, the leading figure of the Pathet Lao, was widely regarded as its most capable and efficient member, and one of the few honest men in Laotian public life. He saw no sign that a productive economy could be developed or that control by foreigners could be overcome, in view of the nature of existing programs. He mentioned efforts to develop a "neutralist" organization based on younger, more nationalistic, and less corrupt segments of the elite, but he had little hope of their success.

With some bitterness he gestured to the street outside the room where we were talking, observing that every one of the stores that lined the street was owned by a non-Lao. The Lao elite is busy building bowling alleys, running the prostitution and opium rackets,[8] renting villas to Americans, living at the exorbitant level permitted by the flow of American commodities and the pervasive corruption. He felt that the American aid program was essentially destructive in having perpetuated a consumer-oriented society which benefited, while corrupting, the elite, and in not having even begun to lay the basis for development or modernization that would involve the Lao masses or create a productive society.

Other knowledgeable observers agreed in a general way with this analysis. One of them pointed to a large monument in the center of Vientiane referred to as the "vertical runway" because it was built by dictator Phoumi Nosavan with materials that were meant to be used for improving the Vientiane airport.[9]

A young Lao teacher, openly sympathetic to the Pathet Lao, gave a similar (though more vehement) account. Asked whether the Pathet Lao were attempting to build a clandestine organization within Vientiane to exploit such grievances and plan for an ultimate take-over, he said that to his knowledge they were not, but that there was also no necessity to do so. Many people, he reported, listen regularly to the Pathet Lao radio, and have considerable, though hidden, sympathy

[7] "Laos: the labyrinthine war," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 16, 1970, correspondent.

[8] The CIA is also reported to be involved in the opium traffic. For background and discussion, see the articles by David Feingold and Al McCoy in Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy, eds., *Laos: War and Revolution*, to be published by Harper & Row in November. See also *Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 1970, for a report of direct CIA involvement in opium shipment.

[9] Embassy officials claim that this particular instance of corruption is exaggerated, and that USAID simply diverted other funds to the airport construction.

for the Pathet Lao. He referred to the elections of 1958, the only real elections ever held in Laos, in which the NLHS, the political party of the Pathet Lao, had done very well in Vientiane, and he asserted that these sympathies would once again be revealed if honest elections could be held. He claimed that similar sentiments are widely held among young urban intellectuals, though they are rarely expressed in Vientiane, where the atmosphere is that of a police state—albeit a rather lax and inefficient one.

Vientiane is a place of rumor and suspicion. Direct access to news is limited. Most of what appears in the press is simply based on American Government handouts. Little of the country is firmly under Royal Lao Government control. We were warned not to travel too far from Vientiane, and taxi drivers made much of the dangers of going more than a few miles from the city (partly, no doubt, because they could demand higher fares). In a refugee camp about 35 miles from Vientiane along one of the few roads that can be freely traveled, inhabitants refused to take us out to the forest where, they said, men were working; they claimed that the Pathet Lao were there and the danger was too great. One man finally agreed to take us, but after leading us on a rather aimless path, said that the trip was impossible. Again, there may have been other reasons.

Parts of the nominally Government-controlled areas are actually run by the CIA, and no one seems sure where the CIA ends and the civilian aid program, USAID, begins.[10] The CIA bases of Sam Thong and Long Cheng, north of Vientiane, are in an area that is designated as uninhabited on the detailed map that I bought at the Service Géographique National du Laos, dated 1968 (supplied, I was told, by the US). There are reported to be over 50,000 people in or near the two bases, and perhaps several hundred thousand in the vicinity, almost all of them refugees. According to the spokesman for the Pathet Lao Information Office in Hanoi,[11] since 1964 these areas have been turned into "a second capital of Laos." They serve as the headquarters for Vang Pao's Clandestine Army.

Correspondents and congressmen have been to Sam Thong. Long Cheng is off limits. However, T. D. Allman made his way there on his own several months ago, and last February in a TV interview with Bernard Kalb he reported what he had found before he was picked up and shipped out after a two-hour stay.[12] He describes Long Cheng as an immense intelligence gathering and administrative logistics base, with a 3000-foot runway, many planes, and rescue helicopters (one in the air constantly) to pick up American pilots shot down by Communist anti-aircraft. He estimates that ten to twelve Americans a month are lost in crashes of jets bombing in that area from their Thai bases. The Forward Air Control planes, which mark targets for the American jets, are also based in Long Cheng and flown by American pilots. He reports that there are CIA

[10] That USAID serves as a CIA cover, as has long been reported, has now been officially admitted by Foreign Aid Chief John A. Hannah, AP Boston *Globe*, June 8, 1970.

[11] The Pathet Lao officially favors a return to the general lines of the agreements of 1962 that established a Government of National Union, and therefore has no embassy in Hanoi. There is a RLG Embassy in Hanoi, staffed, I was informed, by Pathet Lao sympathizers. The Pathet Lao Information Office is the highest official Pathet Lao representation in Hanoi. There is also a Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane, accessible, though blockaded by RLG troops, and, he asserts, harassed in many ways by the Government. We were not able to penetrate the bureaucratic maze in the time available, but we did manage to speak to him at the airport, on the way to Hanoi. The interview from which the remark in the text is taken appears in full in N. Adams and A. McCoy, *op. cit.*

[12] See "Laos: the labyrinthine war," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 16, 1970, for some comments on Allman's observations.

houses everywhere, which can be readily identified by their lack of windows and their abundance of antennas and air conditioners.

Sam Thong has been reported captured several times, most recently in mid-May, 1970.[13] It was abandoned by the Vang Pao army in mid-March and occupied about two weeks later.

> Allied sources said looting and vandalism by Laotian troops had reduced the base to "a shambles." The sources said looting had been going on since government forces retook the base earlier this week.[14]

Most observers feel that the Communist forces can take these bases if they are willing to pay the price, and that if they do the Vang Pao army, largely composed of Meo mountaineers, may disintegrate, and may make an accommodation with the Pathet Lao, or may be moved to Thailand. This would be a major blow to the American effort since the Clandestine Army is a more serious fighting force than the Royal Lao Army. While we were in Vientiane there were almost daily rumors of an attack on the bases, and North Vietnamese tanks were reported in the vicinity—surprising, it seemed to me, in view of the intense bombardment of Northern Laos, though it was pointed out that jet bombing is ineffective against military targets in the jungle and mountainous terrain.

II

The recent history of Laos contributes to the atmosphere of suspicion. The first Government of National Union of 1958 was overthrown by American subversion. As Ambassador Graham Parsons candidly remarked in Congressional Hearings of 1959, "I struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition." An American military mission was operating at the time, headed by a US Army general in civilian guise. In the 1958 elections, of twenty-one seats contested for the National Assembly, nine were won by the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) and four by the candidates of the Committee for Peace and Neutrality of Quinim Pholsena, a "left-leaning neutralist" allied with the NLHS. Five right-wing and three non-party delegates were elected. The NLHS had put up only thirteen candidates. Its leader, Souphanouvong, got the largest vote and was elected chairman of the National Assembly. The United States withheld funds, thus impelling the Lao elite to introduce a new government headed by "pro-Western neutralist" Phoui Sananikone. Shortly after, Phoui declared his intention to disband the NLHS as being subversive, thus scrapping the earlier successful agreements that had established the coalition. US aid soon resumed and Phoui pledged "to coexist with the Free World only."

In December, 1959, he was overthrown by the CIA favorite, Phoumi Nosavan, a Lao equivalent to the military dictator of Thailand (his cousin, as it happens), who was also receiving substantial US support. Although the coup government did not last, Phoumi retained his powerful position as Minister of National Defense, thus controlling most of the budget; and the extreme right won

[13] *The New York Times*, May 25. AFP reports that Vang Pao "is trying to retake five small forward posts of his base at Sam Thong.... The base was captured by leftist forces in a surprise assault last week."

[14] UPI, *International Herald Tribune*, April 4–5, 1970. There is some suspicion that the report that Communist troops had occupied Sam Thong was released in an effort to conceal the vandalism of the Clandestine Army.

the ridiculous 1960 elections which were so crudely rigged by the CIA and its favorites that even conservative pro-US observers were appalled.

A coup by paratroop captain Kong Le restored Prince Souvanna Phouma, and civil war broke out, with the Souvanna Phouma government, supported by Russia and China, opposing the American-backed General Phoumi Nosavan and the government of the reactionary prince Boun Oum. Recognizing that its policies were failing disastrously,[15] the American Government agreed to participate in a new Geneva Conference, which took place in 1961–2.

The settlement reached at Geneva, however, did not last long. After a series of assassinations in early 1963, the two most prominent Pathet Lao leaders, Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit, departed from Vientiane. As a RAND Corporation study by P. F. Langer and J. J. Zasloff describes this incident, they left "contending, not entirely without justification, that their security was threatened in the capital."[16] The other two NLHS cabinet members left soon after. The civil war resumed with somewhat different alignments. This time the Americans were supporting Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le, who joined forces with the Lao right (Kong Le presently departed for France, where he now lives in exile), against the Pathet Lao and the "left-leaning neutralists" under Colonel Deuane.

According to the Geneva agreements of 1962, foreign troops were to depart, along with all advisers, instructors, and foreign civilians "connected with the supply…of war materials." The United States claims that North Vietnam never adhered to this agreement, leaving 6,000 soldiers in Laos. The Chinese claimed at the time that hundreds of American soldiers simply changed into civilian clothes, as in the late 1950s. The Pathet Lao maintain that "after the signing of the 1962 Geneva Agreements on Laos, the missions of military 'advisers'—PEO, MAAG, PAG, USOM—put on a common civilian cloak: USAID." They claim that there were 3,500 such military "advisers" in civilian camouflage by 1968 and that "the whole system is directly under the US 'special forces' command, code-named H.Q.333 and based in Oudone (northeast Thailand)."[17] In their RAND study published in September 1969, Langer and Zasloff estimate that there are about 700 North Vietnamese military advisers with the Pathet Lao.

Chinese nationalist troops supported by the United States remained after Geneva, 1962, although some may have been evacuated. They were reported at one time to number in the thousands, and are said to be a fairly effective fighting force—the only Chinese fighting in Laos, incidentally. Vongvichit estimates that there were 600 by 1968, and reports that their activities were confirmed by an ICC investigation in December, 1962.

[15] In the words of the Department of State *Background Notes*, March 1969, "By the spring of 1961 the NLHS appeared to be in a position to take over the entire country."

[16] P. F. Langer and J. J. Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao*, RM-5935, RAND Corporation, September 1969, p. 113; to be published this fall by Harvard University Press as *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos* (175 pp., $5.95).

[17] Phoumi Vongvichit, *Laos and the Victorious Struggle of the Lao People Against U.S. Neo-colonialism*, Neo Lao Haksat Editions, 1969, pp. 77–80. PEO is the Program Evaluation Office of the State Department, claimed by Vongvichit to be "a US military command in Laos." MAAG is the Military Assistance Advisory Group: PAG the Police Advisory Group; and USOM the United States Operations Mission.

American-supported Thai and South Vietnamese troops are also reported to have remained.[18] Vongvichit asserts that "thousands of Thai soldiers and agents, especially those of Lao stock and coming from northeastern Thailand, have wormed their way into the royal army, police and administration, or have mingled with the population in strategic areas and economic centres." Similar reports of Thai soldiers in Laotian uniform are common, and generally believed, in Vientiane. No one has any idea how many CIA operatives remained, or what in detail they were up to, or to what extent they operate under civilian cover.[19]

Obviously USAID tries to implement American Government policy in Laos and to build domestic support for the American-sponsored Royal Lao Government. A more interesting example of the difficulty of determining just how the United States is intervening in the internal affairs of Laos is the case of the International Voluntary Services (IVS). This is a private volunteer group that has attracted many idealistic young people who are eager to help with modernization and development in traditional societies, without mixing in local politics. IVS has operated in Laos for about fifteen years. In 1962, the group was offered a large USAID contract for work in Laos, and its membership grew to about one hundred. The reasons for this sudden American interest seem clear. Before 1962, most American aid had gone to the urban areas. In fact, less than half of 1 percent of the extensive American aid funds[20] were spent on agriculture, the livelihood of over 90 percent of the population.

This was, of course, a factor in the support for the Pathet Lao revealed by the 1958 elections and subsequently. As Dommen points out in his book *Conflict in Laos*, the Pathet Lao needed no propaganda to turn the rural population against the townspeople; indeed the enormous corruption and graft associated with the aid program sickened many city dwellers as well. In 1962 the US therefore decided to channel more funds to the countryside and to do this through an American-controlled apparatus so as to reduce corruption. The plan required the presence of Americans in the villages, and IVS filled the breach. As one volunteer puts it, "IVS became a private agency recruiting young, relatively idealistic Americans to engage in politically motivated counter-insurgency programs in Laos."

Many of the volunteers worked in the Forward Areas Program, which is described as follows in an IVS bulletin:

> Forward Area Team operations…[are] composed of one or two IVS men. They move into areas recently secured from the Pathet Lao with basic tools and housing supplies and proceed with the "impact program." The idea is to help the people in these areas build what they need, whether it be a well, school or dispensary; giving them

[18] See Jonathan Mirsky and Stephen E. Stonefield, "The United States in Laos," in E. Friedman and Mark Selden (eds.), *America's Asia*, Pantheon, 1970.

[19] For background on events prior to the renewal of the civil war in 1963, see Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, New York, 1964; Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground*, Oxford, 1968; Mirsky and Stonefield, *op. cit.*; Langer and Zasloff, *op. cit.*; Vongvichit, *op. cit.* See also Peter Dale Scott, "Laos, Nixon and the CIA," *New York Review*, April 9, 1970.

[20] "From 1946 to 1963 Laos received more American aid per capita than any country in Southeast Asia. By 1958 the Royal Lao Army was the only foreign army in the world *wholly* supported by the taxpayers of the United States." Mirsky and Stonefield, *op. cit.*

> a concrete example of the Royal Lao Government's and USAID's interest in their welfare.
>
> Since there are no USAID personnel in Forward Area field stations, the IVSer, as a representative of USAID, works closely with the Chao Moung [village leader] and the local military commandant.

In later years IVS workers were the only Americans in many rural areas. Some were disturbed at the American Government connection. They felt that they were serving in effect as propaganda agents for the US and the RLG by virtue of their control of USAID commodities, and that they were inadvertently giving military information to the American Government. Even in some urban centers there has been dissatisfaction among volunteers with USAID policy, which is administered in some cases by "retired" military officers.

Since late 1969, IVS workers have been withdrawn to provincial capitals for security reasons (several had been killed), and the scale of the operation was also reduced. Many of the volunteers then joined USAID. In many areas where IVSers formerly worked there is now no American or RLG presence.

It is difficult to avoid concluding that IVS is acting on behalf of the American Government and the RLG in the midst of a civil war. According to an IVS handbook:

> IVS…in Laos…is working by virtue of government contracts and its activities must harmonize with US government policies in the broad sense. There is, therefore, an obligation on the part of IVS team members to endeavor to understand the nature of US policy and to avoid actions or statements to outsiders that might impair US policy objectives.

Whether IVS efforts actually help the RLG is open to question; some feel that IVS activities simply reinforce the RLG's image of incompetence and corruption by showing that the rural assistance program must be implemented by Americans. Nevertheless, the IVS can hardly serve as anything other than an instrument of American foreign policy in Laos.[21]

Pathet Lao spokesmen have no illusions about the role of IVS. Phoumi Vongvichit writes:

> At present Americans of the "Rural Development Service" [of IVS] go to scores of provincial capitals and district centres, towns and villages, in eleven out of a total of sixteen provinces in Laos to supervise the implementation of that program, collect intelligence data and establish political bases in the countryside.[22]

It would appear that these suspicions are justified.

What is true of IVS applies, far more clearly, to the American aid program and, of course, to the direct involvement of the US through the CIA and the military. From the information available,

[21] This information comes from former IVS workers. I was not able to check other sources or the documents themselves, but I believe it to be fully accurate.

[22] Vongvichit, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

one must conclude that there has been vast American intervention in the internal affairs of Laos in an effort to defeat the Pathet Lao insurgents and establish the rule of the RLG. This intervention includes heavy bombardment, support for guerrilla activity in Pathet Lao-controlled areas (by the CIA and its civilian air arm, Air America), the operations of the CIA Clandestine Army, military operations of the US-supported and advised RLG army, direct support to RLG administration and other programs, and aid and development programs administered by the Americans sometimes by way of purportedly neutral organizations. To a significant extent, these activities are in violation of the Geneva agreements of 1962.

The American involvement is enormous. The Gross National Product of Laos is estimated at about $150 million a year. In the fiscal year ending in June, 1969, USAID spent about $52 million. In addition, $92 million was spent on direct military assistance. The former US Ambassador, William Sullivan, said this was "much less" than the cost of the American participation in the air war over the northern part of Laos, which is classified.[23] The costs of the air war in Southern Laos and the funds expended in CIA operations are also unknown. In addition, there is the matter of support for the Thai troops in Laos. On this the Symington Subcommittee Hearings offer the following clarification:

> *Mr. Paul [of the Committee staff]:* There have been reports in the press that have ranged as high as 5000 new Thai troops in Laos. Is this apocryphal?
>
> *Mr. Sullivan:* Apocryphal?
>
> *Mr. Paul:* Are there new Thais?
>
> *Mr. Sullivan:* [Deleted.]
>
> *Mr. Paul:* Do you know of any quid pro quo that was given by the Americans in return for the Thai contribution to the Laotian effort?
>
> *Mr. Sullivan:* Well, I think, as we mentioned earlier, the question of these aircraft that were turned over to the Lao by the Thai, I believe I am correct [deleted] that the United States then replaced those aircraft in the Thai inventory. [Deleted.][24]

There is no available information on the cost of the American intervention since 1962, but the following censored excerpt from the Symington Sub-committee Hearings, p. 553, gives some indication of its scale:

> *Senator Fulbright:* As I understand it, the military assistance to Laos has been [deleted] from 1962 to 1970, according to our figures. Nonmilitary, economic assistance to Laos from 1946 through 1968…was $591 million. This is over a billion dollars.

[23] Interrogation of William Sullivan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and former Ambassador to Laos by Mr. Paul of the Committee Staff, Hearings of the Symington Subcommittee, pp. 532–33.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 516–7.

Note that the reference is to the narrowest category of military assistance, which cost only about $90 million in 1969.

The US has penetrated every phase of the existence (as well as the destruction) of Laos. To cite just one relatively innocuous case, consider the role of the US Information Service, the USIS, in "information dissemination" in Laos.[25] About half of the programming on the Laotian radio is music. Of the other half, USIS, according to Administration testimony, "prepared or participated in the preparation" of about two-thirds. USIS also participates in the publication of a bimonthly magazine with a circulation of 43,000 (the largest Lao newspaper has a circulation of 3,300). In addition there are films and other printed material, pamphlets and posters, wall newspapers, leaflets for air drops. In most of this "there is not US Government attribution"—i.e., the impression is conveyed that these appear as documents or programs sponsored by the RLG. But the Government witness denied that any of this is done "covertly." When asked to explain, he answered as follows:

> We do not hide our participation. It is not done secretly, and I believe that many people, I think that most people, in the Lao Government, for instance, or in the Lao bureaucracy are very aware of American participation in the preparation of these things.

Thus one could not accuse the US Government of any covert attempt to extend RLG influence over the population (or, as the more skeptical would say, to pretend that the RLG exists).

The official justification for US involvement is that it is necessary to defend Laos against North Vietnamese aggression. I will return to the details of the charges and such facts as have been presented to support them. A certain degree of skepticism, however, arises at once, deriving in part from the record prior to 1962. There is no doubt that during this period outside intervention in Laos was overwhelmingly American. All sources agree that the Americans attempted to subvert the accommodation of 1958 (and succeeded, as noted earlier), and that the North Vietnamese played practically no part in Laotian affairs, nor did the Chinese or Russians, prior to the events of 1960 described earlier.

During the 1960s, of course, the Vietnam war complicated matters. The return of South Vietnamese cadres to South Vietnam from the North is said to have begun in 1959, and involved sections of Southern Laos (the so-called "Ho Chi Minh trail"). The American use of Thailand as a base for the bombardment of Northern Laos and later North Vietnam dates from early 1964, according to American Government sources (American troops were sent to Thailand at the time of the Nam Tha incident of 1962[26] and have remained there under the US Military Assistance Command-Thailand, established at the time of the landing).

A second source of skepticism was expressed, in a different connection, by Senator Symington in the sub-committee hearings:

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 585f.

[26] See P.D. Scott, "Laos, Nixon, and the CIA," and Mirsky and Stonefield, *op. cit.*

> We have an over $800 billion gross national product; the Vietnamese [DRV] have practically none. We have 200 million people; the Vietnamese some 17 million. We have been escalating the fighting out there for over 4 years. We have had nearly 300,000 casualties, but are now in the process of acknowledging a stalemate, or a passing over, or some kind of defeat. (p. 591.)

To accept the official American Government position, one must believe that the Vietnamese are supermen, able to overthrow other governments with a flick of the wrist, carrying out aggression throughout Indochina, successfully countering enormous American military and economic power—instead of a small, poor nation that has been subjected to devastating bombardment in which virtually all of its meager industrial resources, not to speak of most of its cities, towns, and communications, have been destroyed.

It is perhaps surprising that these ludicrous charges are so widely believed by Americans. Even self-styled "doves" continually refer to the American war in Indochina as a war against Hanoi. I think it is fair to say that the propaganda achievement of the American Government, in this regard, is probably greater than that of any other use of the Big Lie since the technique was perfected a generation ago.

III

Since the civil war in Laos was resumed in earnest in 1963, American participation has been veiled in secrecy. The veil was lifted slightly by the Symington Subcommittee Hearings, but these still contain many lies that are not challenged in the published record. To select just the ugliest, William Sullivan, who presented the bulk of the Administration's case, stated that"it was the policy not to attack populated areas,"[27] referring to the period 1968–9 (p. 500). He also testified that as ambassador (until 1969) he approved each air strike. Thus he must surely have known that the policy was precisely to attack and destroy populated areas in the territory controlled by the Pathet Lao. The evidence that the bombing has been directed against farms, villages, and towns, most of which have been totally destroyed in these territories, is incontrovertible.

Government deceit has been so great that virtually no Government statement can be, or should be, believed. Consider, for example, President Nixon's speech on Laos on March 6.[28] The key paragraph is this:

> Hanoi's most recent military buildup in Laos has been particularly escalatory. They have poured over 13,000 additional troops into Laos during the past few months, raising their total in Laos to over 67,000. Thirty North Vietnamese battalions from regular division units participated in the current campaign in the Plain of Jars with tanks, armored cars and long-range artillery. The indigenous Laotian communists, the Pathet Lao, are playing an insignificant role.

[27] He continues with this pretense in the Kennedy Subcommittee hearings on refugees, May, 1970: "We established very clear rules putting all villages out of range of American air activity. Before I approved a strike, I insisted on photographic evidence to see the area and the target." He accepted the estimate of 700 sorties a day. See Murray Kempton, "From the City of Lies." *New York Review*, June 4. 1970.

[28] For detailed documentation of other falsehoods in this speech, see Scott, "Laos, Nixon, and the CIA."

These claims are presumably intended to justify the American escalation of the air war, for example, the first B-52 raids in Northern Laos in early 1970.

When I arrived in Vientiane a few weeks after Nixon's speech, I discovered that it was a favorite topic of conversation and ridicule. Every reporter in Vientiane was aware that only a few days before the President's speech, the US military attaché in Vientiane had given the figure of 50,000 North Vietnamese, approximately the same figure that had been reported by the US for the preceding year. This interesting fact was reported by D.S. Greenway, head of the *Time-Life* Bureau in Bangkok, who wrote that "the President's estimate of North Vietnamese troop strength was at least 17,000 higher than the highest reliable estimates of the Americans themselves."[29]

Furthermore, all were aware of how misleading these figures are. The North Vietnamese invasion that Nixon attempted to conjure up was in the Plain of Jars area, recaptured by Communist forces in February in a five-day battle that reconstituted the territorial division that existed between 1964 and August 1969, when the Clandestine Army of the CIA swept through the area. Nixon's figure of 67,000 North Vietnamese does not distinguish between those in Southern Laos—really an extension of the Vietnamese war—and those with the Pathet Lao in Northern Laos where the "invasion" had taken place. It also does not distinguish combat troops from support and communications units, which, according to military observers in Vientiane, comprise about three-fourths of the North Vietnamese forces, hardly a surprise when one realizes that they bring all of their supplies, including food, through a heavily bombed area.

In fact, it is likely that this ratio is now too low. The effect and presumably the purpose of the American bombardment in Northern Laos have been to destroy the civil society administered by the Pathet Lao and to drive as much of the population as possible into Government-controlled areas. As Tammy Arbuckle reports:

> Well-informed sources said the United States is pursuing a "scorched earth" policy to force the people to move into government areas—and thus deprive the Reds of information, recruits and porters.[30]

When the population is forced into Government areas or driven into caves and tunnels, it can no longer provide support for the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops, who are therefore forced to rely increasingly on supplies from North Vietnam. Hence the proportion of combat troops must have decreased. Furthermore, the support and communications "troops" are said to include a large percentage of women and old men.

There have been widespread reports, confirmed by American military sources, that the largest attacks in the recent "invasion"—namely the attack on Moung Soui and the Xieng Khouang airfield—involved about 400 Communist troops, apparently shock troops. As to prisoners, eight North Vietnamese were reported captured in the "invasion" which recaptured the Plain of Jars. In fact, since 1964 about eighty North Vietnamese have been captured, a figure which may be

[29] *Life* Magazine, April 3, 1970. Reprinted in an excellent selection of articles on the current situation in Laos inserted by Senator Kennedy in the *Congressional Record*, April 20, 1970, S5988-92. See also Carl Strock, "Laotian Tragedy," *New Republic*, May 9, 1970.

[30] Washington *Star*, April 19, 1970. Reprinted in the *Congressional Record* collection cited above.

compared to the 200 Americans listed as missing in action or prisoners of war, in addition to "something under 200" listed as killed in military actions in Laos.[31]

All of these statistics must be taken with a grain of salt. According to every observer, the Pathet Lao and particularly the North Vietnamese keep to isolated, heavily forested, and often mountainous areas. Few refugees report contacts with Vietnamese. Despite the vast intelligence gathering effort of the US, it is doubtful that any significant information on the number of NVA troops is available.

Consider Nixon's claim that in the recent offensive the Pathet Lao played only an insignificant role. In support of this claim, American military sources in Vientiane cite only one bit of evidence, namely, captured prisoners. As noted, eight North Vietnamese were reported captured (according to the Lao officers in charge of prisoners). The American military claims that no Pathet Lao prisoners were taken. However, Americans in Sam Thong have spoken to soldiers of the RLG army, who do report that Pathet Lao prisoners were taken. There is also a report, attributed to a source within the US Embassy, that between twenty and thirty Pathet Lao prisoners were taken but were inducted at once into the CIA Clandestine Army. From such statistics (eight, twenty to thirty) one can conclude very little.

Informed observers who have attempted to sift through the available information speculate that at most there may be 5,000 North Vietnamese combat troops involved in the fighting in Laos—a figure which may be compared with the 5,000 Thai combat troops reported, the unknown thousands of Americans involved directly in bombing and ground operations, and the other forces reported to be involved in the American operations.

The Pathet Lao claims that there are 1,200 American Green Berets fighting in Laos. This is denied by the Americans. The Pathet Lao also claims that the CIA Clandestine Army includes tribesmen brought in from Burma and Thailand as well as the Chinese Nationalist troops who remain in Northern Laos.[32] Such reports are taken seriously by informed observers in Laos, some of whom note that the multi-ethnic character of the Vang Pao Clandestine Army must require American coordination and control down to the field level.

American Government sources, though naturally antagonistic, also give some idea of life in Pathet Lao areas, as interpreted by hostile observers. The Embassy in Vientiane supplies two documents by Edwin T. McKeithen, whom they describe as one of their outstanding specialists on the Pathet Lao.[33] He writes that:

[31] See Symington Subcommittee Hearings, p. 380. The report adds that "of those killed in Laos up to October 22, 1969, something around one-quarter were killed with respect to operations in northern Laos." A UPI report from Geneva in the *International Herald Tribune*, April 4–5, 1970, gives the figure of 86 US Air Force Personnel held prisoner by the Pathet Lao in Laos. The figure, given by two clergymen, is claimed to be based on US sources "confirmed by private sources in Geneva." The Pathet Lao claims to have shot down over 1,200 American planes in Laos.

[32] A statement on this matter appears in the interview cited in note 11.

[33] *Life under the P.L. in the Xieng Khouang Ville Area*, undated; *The Role of North Vietnamese Cadres in the Pathet Lao Administration of Xieng Khouang Province*, April 1970. McKeithen is not further identified in these documents. Presumably, he is associated with USAID, the CIA, or both.

> One of the most fundamental alterations [the Pathet Lao] seek in the Lao personality is the addition of persuasion and guilt to traditional authority as means of social control. P.L. cadres are urged to reason, to question and to discuss with villagers until the villagers agree with the P.L. viewpoint. Direct orders are not enough; people must be "taught" until they genuinely believe in what they are doing. At the same time, a villager who cheats or commits crimes against the state must be enlightened until he feels guilty for his actions. This guilt must arise from an internalized higher morality and not from a simple feeling of shame or loss of face among fellows.

These techniques he describes as the introduction of "the rather foreign concepts of persuasion and guilt…as mechanisms of social control." McKeithen does not explain what he would regard as more humane or enlightened methods, nor does he explain wherein he objects to the goals of the Pathet Lao effort to transform Lao society:

> They have pressed for economic equality by introducing progressive taxation and discouraging the conspicuous consumption that establishes a wealthy villager's status. They have almost eliminated the "wasted resources" that are spent on bouns, marriages, funerals, and traditional celebrations.[34] They have taken initial steps toward the communalization of property by establishing "public" padi, by closely controlling livestock sales and slaughter and by introducing public ownership of livestock in the school system…. The status of women has also been altered, as they have been given greater responsibility in administrative affairs and have assumed jobs traditionally restricted to men…. [They have set up] "youth organization[s]" devoted to lofty principles and dedicated to the advancement of long-range goals.

Being fair-minded, McKeithen does not limit himself to these comments, which he apparently regards as negative, to judge by the paragraph that follows:

> Finally, we should note the favorable aspects of P.L. rule as reported by the refugees. They favored the ideas of adult literacy and agricultural development but not the ways that the P.L. had been carrying them out. They also spoke favorably of the virtual elimination of official corruption.

Later on, he describes Pathet Lao measures to improve agriculture (use of fertilizers and irrigation, directed by North Vietnamese technicians); establishment of co-ops and local control of commerce, displacing the former Chinese and Vietnamese merchants; progressive taxation to support teachers and medics and a basic tax (15 percent after exemptions) "to help the state"; educational reforms, including primary schooling in virtually all villages and the introduction of textbooks which "emphasize hygiene and better agricultural practices, as well as self-denial, communal endeavor and solidarity against US imperialism"; adult literacy programs; improved medical services; a ban on polygamy and the practice of bride abduction in Meo areas; and so on.

[34] Here McKeithen is a bit disingenuous. The virtual destruction of civil society by aerial bombardment is obviously a major reason why precious resources must be conserved. One refugee described his own marriage ceremony: few people could attend because of the bombardment and they had to dive into trenches during the ceremony because of a nearby raid.

In his study of the role of North Vietnamese cadres, McKeithen also emphasizes their reliance on "patient counsel rather than direct command," their "softest of soft-sell approaches in dealing with their Lao counterparts," their "deep faith in the efficacy of endless persuasion" and on "the spirit of brotherhood that should bond their relationship." He claims that "virtually all important policy decisions are made by the NVN cadres, but in such a way that the decisions appear to be the work of Lao officials." However, he admits that he has very little evidence since the refugees on whose testimony the report is based had little contact with Vietnamese advisers.

The Vietnamese keep to themselves, even raising their own food. He reports that Vietnamese served as political advisers at higher levels, and that economic and other advisers work also at lower levels in giving technical assistance and as teachers. North Vietnamese products are also available at co-op stores, another way "in which their influence is felt." In listing government officials in Xieng Khouang province he cites three North Vietnamese out of seventeen at the higher (Khoueng Group) level (one a "group representative," one an adviser, and one in charge of irrigation) and none out of fourteen at the lower (Muong) level.[35]

McKeithen claims that one of the goals of the North Vietnamese is "to annex Laos and to till its underpopulated land." Searching diligently through his material, I can find three pieces of "confirmatory evidence" for this judgment. One is a "brief entry" in a diary of a North Vietnamese major found on the Plain of Jars, which states: "[We must] help Laos without restriction, but we have to keep Laos with us to realize permanent duty of [our] volunteer troops, [to] provide land, [to] marry natives, and to be settled in Laos." Second, "the North Vietnamese have requested permission from the NLHS to move in 20,000 families—dependents of the NVA troops in Laos." The request was turned down by the NLHS, and the plan, apparently, was not implemented.

Finally, the North Vietnamese advisers were instrumental in instituting a second rice harvest and extensive irrigation projects, and McKeithen "cannot help but feel" that this is in anticipation of North Vietnamese migration, since there is so much unused land. Since McKeithen's papers are obviously propaganda documents of the American Government, I assume that he made as strong a case as he could for his conclusion, which, clearly, must be regarded as lacking serious support.

The extensive RAND Corporation study by Langer and Zasloff also attempts to demonstrate North Vietnamese domination of the Pathet Lao.[36] According to the authors, the Vietnamese advisers

> …provide experienced, disciplined personnel who add competence to the operations of their Lao associates. We have found that these Vietnamese advisers are widely respected by the Lao for their dedication to duty. By their example, by on-the-job training, and by guidance, generally tactful, they goad the less vigorous Lao into better performance. [p. 146.]

[35] *Life under the P.L.* He also notes that "the Khoueng offices were located in a small cave" outside the city, but fails to mention the reason.

[36] Langer and Zasloff, *op. cit.*

They also provide medical and technical aid, and have trained native Lao, making "a beginning…in developing indigenous technical skills." Their "doctrine places great emphasis on winning over the population…one would expect considerable tension between the Lao and their Vietnamese mentors…but we were struck by how successful the Vietnamese were in keeping such resentment at a minimum."

When I discussed the social and economic programs of the Pathet Lao with American Embassy officials they gave me the impression that they would be favorably impressed with what the Pathet Lao had done and might achieve were it not for the "North Vietnamese aggression," which, they argue, is the cause of the problems of Laos. One official agreed that the Pathet Lao educational reforms were particularly good, but said that the RLG was now imitating these programs, specifically the adult literacy program. I tried to check this information with reporters and with Lao residents of Vientiane who were familiar with government activities. Their response ranged between skepticism and ridicule. I met no one outside the Embassy who believed that the RLG was capable of implementing such a program. Since I did not have the time to inquire further, I must leave it at that.

The American Embassy was also helpful in providing me with data supporting their claim that North Vietnamese aggression is the fundamental problem of Laos. They directed me to reports of the RAND Corporation and the ICC, in addition to the documents cited above. Particularly conclusive, they argued, was an ICC investigation of a complaint from the RLG on October 2, 1964, reporting the capture of three North Vietnamese prisoners,[37] which was confirmed. The ICC report concluded that these prisoners had entered Laos as members of complete North Vietnamese army units from February to September, 1964, in groups ranging from fifty to 650 soldiers. The report also stated:

> The Commission notes with interest that this was the first time, since the Commission's reconvening in 1961, that it had been brought to the attention of the Commission that prisoners, alleged to have been North Vietnamese, had been captured by the armed forces of the Royal Laotian Government and were available for interrogation.

The report opens with the letter of October 2 from the RLG containing the complaints which it later investigated, as well as a letter of September 28 from Phoumi Vongvichit, Secretary of the NLHS at Vientiane, alleging that American aircraft based in South Vietnam had attacked Laotian territory and parachuted South Vietnamese military personnel into Laos, three of whom were captured (two are identified by name). The latter charge is discussed in "a separate message," presumably *Message No. 36*. On returning to the United States I tried to obtain *Message No. 36*, but without success. I have been informed that it has not been declassified (by the British Government, which is co-chairman of the Control Commission). Though this fact naturally arouses suspicions, nevertheless it is likely that the Message is perfunctory.

A second ICC document reports the investigation of a complaint that the Officers School of the Royal Army at Dong Hene in Southern Laos was attacked on March 8–9, 1965, by a combined

[37] *Message No. 35*, 16 September 1965. International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos, to the Cochairman of the Geneva Conference.

Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese force. The investigation confirmed the allegation. Most of the captured prisoners testified that they were on their way to South Vietnam.[38]

The final supporting document is a report of interviews with a North Vietnamese adviser to a Pathet Lao battalion, Mai Dai Hap, who defected in December, 1966.[39] The informant was a captain in the NVA and a member of the Lao Dong (Workers) Party of North Vietnam. He claims to have been one of thirty North Vietnamese assigned to Laos in February, 1964, to serve as advisers. He trained the personnel of a Lao battalion and directed its operations. He served in the vicinity of Nam Tha near the Chinese and Burmese borders. In February, 1966, his unit was sent to Muong Long in the area of the Co, a highland tribal minority, near Burma, in Northwest Laos, to defend a Pathet Lao base that was under attack by RLG forces.

This was, according to Langer and Zasloff, a region in which "the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao had built resistance bases against the French, so that the Co people welcomed them heartily, especially after seeing the Vietnamese with the unit." Discouraged by the hardships of combat, the feeling that he had failed in his leadership, and concern that the enemy, now supplied with artillery and bombers, was growing in strength and receiving support from the lowlanders, as well as by a number of personal problems including his remarriage, he defected in December, 1966.

Captain Hap reports that in addition to military tasks he had a political program containing the following topics:

> 1. Objectives and tasks of the Laotian revolution
>
> 2. The land of Laos is beautiful and rich, the population of Laos is industrious; why are the Laotian people suffering?
>
> 3. Who is the enemy of the Laotian people?
>
> 4. The tasks and nature of the Laotian Liberation Army

One comment of Hap's that is frequently quoted by American sources is this:

> Generally speaking, everything is initiated by the North Vietnamese advisers, be it important or unimportant. If the North Vietnamese advisory machinery were to get stuck, the Pathet Lao machinery would be paralyzed.

This exhausts the documentary evidence of North Vietnamese control over the Pathet Lao that I was able to obtain. In reading these materials, one is struck by the low-keyed and generally constructive approach of the North Vietnamese, the limited evidence for actual North Vietnamese

[38] *Report of an Investigation by the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos of an attack on Dong Hene by North Vietnamese Troops*; this document, undated and unidentified, is a reproduction of parts of the original ICC document submitted on June 14, 1966.

[39] Paul Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *The North Vietnamese Military Adviser in Laos*, RAND Corporation, RM-5688, July, 1968.

control over the Pathet Lao, and the gulf between the evidence and the claims which it is meant to support.

It is, after all, hardly surprising that there were North Vietnamese troops in Southern Laos a month after the regular bombing of North Vietnam was initiated (the Dong Hene incident). Nor is it surprising that North Vietnamese advisers should have arrived in Northern Laos in early 1964 (note that the first complaint to the ICC was in October, 1964), in view of the events outlined above. Recall that regular bombardment of Northern Laos from Thai sanctuaries began in May, 1964. Recall as well that the CIA established bases along the North Vietnamese frontier for sabotage and guerrilla action, as well as to guide the all-weather bombardment of North Vietnam.[40] It is interesting to compare the North Vietnamese involvement with the American program, aspects of which were discussed earlier. Also remarkable is the barely suppressed outrage over the North Vietnamese activities. How dare they assist on their border friendly forces which the United States is determined to destroy!

Suppose that the Pathet Lao were to take over Laos completely. What would be the North Vietnamese role? When asked this question, a Lao defector said that he expects them to leave when they finish their mission of helping the Pathet Lao:

> It is just like when the Chinese went to help the Koreans. After they had won the war, they left.

The urban intellectual whose remarks I have reported earlier was less sure. He thought that Laotian independence would always be threatened by North Vietnam, Thailand, and China, though he felt that there was a fair chance that all might agree that Laos should be left as a neutral buffer. Prince Souvanna Phouma, in an interview with us, had no doubts about the North Vietnamese intention to conquer Laos. He explained:

> North Vietnam wants to colonize Laos with Vietnamese because their country is too overpopulated. It's obvious. Look at their flag with its five-pointed star. One is for Tonkin, one for Annam, one for Cochin China,[41] one for Laos, and one for Cambodia.[42]

(If we were to apply this reasoning to the American flag....) He offered no other argument, apparently regarding this as conclusive.

A North Vietnamese spokesman described the interest of his country in Laos as purely strategic:

[40] The details are difficult to document, of course, since the RAND Corporation does not obligingly supply selected information to indicate the scope and timing of these activities. Some details appear in the Symington Subcommittee Hearings. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that except for the ICC reports, documents of the sort reviewed here are of dubious value. The source material is not available, and there is no way of checking distortions, excisions, or omissions.

[41] The three regions of Vietnam, in Western terminology. In Vietnamese: Bac-Bô, Trung-Bô, Nam-Bô.

[42] I did not take notes during the interview with Prince Souvanna Phouma. These remarks and those quoted below were reconstructed immediately after the interview and checked with other participants.

> It is on our Western border. For our own security, we cannot allow Laos to turn into a base for the Americans to threaten us. You know that the Americans have been using Laos as a forward base both for themselves and the Thais, and have guided their planes for bombing us from Laos…. Laos has been a historic invasion route into North Vietnam. The French took Laos first, originally, before setting out to colonize us. At the end of World War II they went back in and took Laos first, then used route 9 to transport men and materials to take Hue, and also route 7. Our only concern for Laos is that it remain strictly neutral. We cannot allow Laos to be a base for the Americans, with their planes, their soldiers, their special forces, their CIA, their Thais and other mercenaries.

Naturally, North Vietnam regards "the Lao territory bordering on North Vietnam, particularly in the provinces of Phong Saly, Luang Prabang, Sam Neua, and Xieng Khouang, as essential to its security and will strive to ensure that these areas are not controlled by hostile forces."[43] China also has an obvious security interest in these areas. So long as these areas are under attack by American forces or by forces which North Vietnam and China can regard, with justification, as American puppet forces, one can expect a continuing North Vietnamese involvement. It is difficult to see why North Vietnam should attempt to conquer Laos, thus being forced to control a hostile population and coming face to face with the Thai. Nor can I find any serious evidence for such an intent.

According to American Embassy sources, over a million people in this nation of some three million remain in Pathet Lao-controlled areas. Harrison Salisbury, in his report from North Vietnam[44] quoted a foreign Communist visitor to these areas:

> You cannot imagine what it is like in the headquarters of these people. Never is there any halt in the bombing. Not at night. Not by day. One day we were in the cave. The bombing went on and on. The toilet was in another cave only 20 yards away. We could not leave. We could not even run the 20 yards. It was too dangerous.

According to this visitor, the Pathet Lao had set up a hospital, a printing press, a small textile mill, a bakery, and a shop for making arms and ammunition in the caves. The bombardment was said to include guided missiles that can dive into a cave, as well as high explosives and anti-personnel weapons. The people come out only at dusk and dawn to try to farm, but the planes attack any visible target, even trails and cultivated fields. These reports attracted little attention, presumably because the source was not believed. In June, 1968, Jacques Decornoy of *Le Monde* traveled to Sam Neua province and confirmed these reports.[45] His harrowing account of life under perhaps the most intensive bombardment in history received little attention in the United States.

[43] Langer and Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos*, p. 212.

[44] *Behind the Lines—Hanoi*, Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 35–6. Salisbury assumed that he was referring to Southern Laos, but the description is remarkably similar to what has since been reported from the North. In view of what we now know, the description is probably of Sam Neua province.

[45] Decornoy's reports are given in full, in translation, in Adams and McCoy, *op. cit.* Also in the *Bulletin* of the Concerned Asian Scholars, April-July 1970.

According to Souvanna Phouma and the American Embassy, some 700,000 refugees are said to have fled to Government-controlled areas. The most recent arrivals are from the Plain of Jars area. As noted earlier, this area was under Pathet Lao control from 1964 until 1969. During the offensive in the fall of 1969, the CIA Clandestine Army conquered the plain after heavy bombardment—the first large shift in territorial boundaries since the outbreak of the civil war. When Communist forces were about to retake the Plain of Jars in February, 1970, the population was evacuated and the area turned into a zone of devastation. It is estimated that about 15,000 refugees were taken, mostly by air, to Vientiane, where they are now scattered in refugee camps.

Just prior to the Communist recapture of the Plain of Jars in February, 1970, Henry Kamm reported that the Lao peasants were not informed that they were to be evacuated, though those who wished to stay (in what would become a free fire zone, in fact) would be permitted to do so.[46] Reports in Vientiane indicate that a large part of the population went over to the Pathet Lao despite the abysmal conditions.

IV

I spent several days visiting a refugee camp near Vientiane. The camp consists of five long sheds with an aisle between two raised floors. Each family has about fifteen square feet of space, without partitions and marked off only by posts. There are perhaps 100 people housed in each shed—many children, old men and women, a few young mothers, some young men who were wounded in the fighting, and a few other young adults. Many observers believe, and have reported, that most of the young people joined the Pathet Lao before the evacuation. These refugees had been in the village for about two months.

The refugees give the impression of being severely demoralized. Only rarely do any of them work. There has apparently been little attempt to clear land for cultivation, though it is likely that they will stay in this area. They themselves do not know what will happen to them. The government provides them with a rice ration, but little further care and no information. Promises to reimburse them for lost property or to change their Pathet Lao money for RLG currency have not been fulfilled. The refugees asked me—some begged me—to help them to have their money exchanged. Some said that they would starve otherwise, and this is possible, since apparently they have no food except for the rice ration and what they can find in the forest.

But these people are not mendicants. They were, in fact, probably the most well-to-do of the Lao peasantry. Some had careful records of their possessions. One sixty-year-old man who had owned forty cows and nine buffaloes estimated that the value of his belongings was about $3,600. Another showed us detailed records written up for the RLG but never honored which calculated his possessions as worth $5,000 before the bombing. Such reports were not unique, though some of the refugees had been very poor. Some had brought with them good clothes, occasionally a sewing machine or other possessions. All spoke with great longing of their wish to return to their homes in the Plain of Jars, with its fertile and abundant land, its cool climate, distant hills, rivers, and streams.

The refugees were acquainted with our interpreter from previous visits, and were superficially friendly, though wary. They naturally assumed that we were connected with the American Gov-

[46] *The New York Times*, February 5, 1970.

ernment, and they obviously were not going to tell us anything that might lead to some new catastrophe. Conducting extensive interviews makes one feel uncomfortable. The refugees have good reason to dissimulate, and at the same time they do not wish to be uncooperative. With repeated questioning, it is easy to discover inconsistencies and even absurdities in their answers, but it is not pleasant to take on the role of a police agent. Apart from this, it is heart-rending to see their demoralization and despair, to watch an old woman crouching down in unaccustomed supplication, or to see the children sitting quietly hour after hour in the oppressive heat and dust of the camp.

The first story told by virtually every refugee is straightforward. They came to the Government side because they hated the Pathet Lao, who were oppressive. Why did the Pathet Lao oppress the people? "I don't know; I guess they are just crazy," one man told us.

Another man who had been a rather poor farmer in his former village spoke quite openly and favorably about the Pathet Lao. As he went on, a small group collected and listened quietly. An alert young man began to interrupt, correcting our informant and giving the negative, stereotyped answers to which we had already become accustomed. Within moments, our informant's answers also shifted. When the same sequence was repeated in other interviews, we realized that so long as this man was present, there was no point in continuing the discussion. Who he was, of course, I have no idea—perhaps a Pathet Lao cadre. Certainly the reasonable approach, from their point of view, was to appear to be pro-Government and antagonistic to the Pathet Lao.

We spoke to one young woman who had fled to the Government side some years earlier, with several other young people. When asked why, she said that it was because of porterage which they were forced to do for the Pathet Lao. We asked whether she fled after her village was destroyed by bombing. "No, before," she answered. An older man interrupted, saying: "No, after, you know, there were many people killed in the bombing." She then said: "Yes, we escaped after the bombing." "Were you afraid of the bombing or the porterage?" "Both," she answered.

Every refugee with whom I spoke said that everything that he knew of—his own village, and all dwellings within several days journey—had been destroyed by bombardment before they were evacuated. Prior to 1968 the bombing of the Plain of Jars was sporadic. In April of 1968 it became more intense, and the villagers soon had to leave their villages and dig trenches and tunnels in the surrounding forest. At first they were able to farm sometimes, mainly at night, but this became impossible as the bombing increased in intensity. One man told us that the people of his village had been forced to move eight or nine times, deeper and deeper into the forest into new systems of trenches as the bombing extended its scope. He reported that by April, 1969, his village was destroyed by bombs and napalm. The Pathet Lao showed them how to dig trenches and tunnels, and identified the types of planes.

Another reported that in February, 1969, the bombing destroyed everything in the village. The first bombing, of a village nearby, was in June, 1967. Later, the bombing was constant, and the people lived in tunnels in the hills, coming out only on days when the bombing stopped. Our interpreter, who had interviewed about 300 refugees, informed us that these stories were typical.

Every refugee to whom he had spoken reported that everything he knew of personally or had heard about was destroyed by bombardment before the evacuation.

In September, 1969, the Vang Pao army conquered the Plain. The Meo soldiers were undisciplined and killed many of the cows and buffaloes. Many of the young men joined the Pathet Lao: others were taken into the Vang Pao army. We asked why the Meo soldiers killed the cattle. One man said the soldiers told the villagers that they didn't want cattle left to nourish the Pathet Lao. The refugees were concentrated in new villages—strategic hamlets, apparently—when the Vang Pao army came. Then, when it was clear that the Plain could not be held, they were evacuated.

The primary complaint against the Pathet Lao had to do with the compulsory porterage. Prior to the bombing, there was very little porterage, but when the bombing began, the Pathet Lao soldiers moved to remote areas and could no longer use trucks, as before. "The planes made the soldiers disperse and they forced us to do porterage," one refugee said. One claimed that the porterage had begun as early as 1964. Others gave later dates. All, when pressed, said that the porterage began when the soldiers were forced by the bombing to move to inaccessible places.

Few of the refugees had ever seen any Vietnamese, though one informant, when interrupted by the young man whom I mentioned earlier, agreed with this man that the Pathet Lao were really Vietnamese who spoke Lao. A moment before, in answer to the question, "What kind of people are they?" he had said: "Oh, they are our own Lao people." He was unwilling to talk any longer at that point.

There were also other complaints about the Pathet Lao. One relatively rich farmer said he could not live comfortably with the Pathet Lao even if the bombing were to end, so that no more porterage would be necessary:

> They would take us to study all the time. There was no money, no commerce. They only respect you if you have torn clothing so we have to wear torn clothing all the time.

The poor farmer I mentioned earlier gave a more sympathetic account. He described a mild land reform in 1965:

> They told the people who had a lot of land to give some to the people who had only a little. I didn't get any, and none was taken away. I had enough. They only took land to give to the really poor. The people from whom they took the land away sometimes were angry. In this case, the Pathet Lao would say: "Look, you have a lot of land and he doesn't have any. Do you want him to die?" They always explained. They rarely put anyone in jail. Only if they explained for a long time and they still didn't give any land.
>
> The people who were taken away were not put in prison. They were taken to Phonesavan to study and work. If a person caused trouble they also took him to study. Also lazy people. They would teach them not to steal or your friends will kill you. Being lazy or not giving up your land is stealing from your friends. The Pathet Lao never yelled. They really did well. They really acted nicely. They never stole. Never took anyone or beat anyone.

This informant had never been to school and was pleased with the Pathet Lao educational reforms. He said that the teachers were taken to Phonesavan to be taught and then returned to the village. Other boys joined the Pathet Lao to be soldiers, and some went to the towns for medical training or to join the civil administration. No Pathet Lao lived permanently in the village, he reported.

He was not sure what the Pathet Lao taught the teachers, but when they returned they taught only in Lao, no longer in French. Everyone was taught to read, particularly the women.

> The only people who didn't study were those who were blind. I knew how to read. I studied arithmetic. Before I didn't know anything. Before, the teacher didn't work as much. Now he worked much more. The teacher wasn't happy because he was working all the time. [General laughter.]

We interviewed two of the village teachers. They said that when the Pathet Lao came in 1964, after driving the Kong Le forces off of the Plain, they took the teachers for ten days to Phonesavan. They instructed them in teaching methods, and told them they must teach in Lao, not French. "They explained that Lao is our own language and Laos is our country and we don't need foreign languages." They also gave them political education.

> They taught us that under the French a French-style education was taught because they wanted people to love France. But now they taught us that our country was liberated and we have a liberated style of education and education would teach people to love their country. Education was now for everyone, not just for the rich. In the old days education was mainly in the towns and cities. Many villages had no schools. When the Pathet Lao came in they trained many teachers and many more people were educated, though schooling was still not universal.

Language teaching and mathematics were made more demanding than before and four grades were to be instituted for everyone. The teacher was required to run an adult literacy program on Saturdays and Sundays. Villagers who knew how to read also became literacy instructors. They described the literacy campaign as very good, and virtually universal. Before there had been just mechanical teaching of reading, with no content. Under the Pathet Lao, the texts dealt with agriculture and livestock and love of country. The political content was something like this: "Before, under the French, we had to pay taxes and money was sent to France. Now we're building our own country and are not working for foreign people." The intention was to extend education to grades five to seven, but this program could not be carried out, because of the war.

An older man, formerly quite well off, added that the Pathet Lao made them study before work, and took some men from the village to study.

> They taught us mainly agriculture. One must produce more. Build the economy. One man should do the work of ten. If you produce more you can exchange it for clothes and money. Then we can exchange the produce with other countries.

In theory, he said, it was a good idea, but he wasn't happy about it, particularly because of the taxation. The Pathet Lao took 15 percent of everything above subsistence. This was for the soldiers, teachers, and medical personnel whom they trained and returned to the village.

Another refugee who had lived in Phonesavan gave us additional information. The activists, in the early period, were intellectuals from Vientiane and Sam Neua who had studied in France. The Pathet Lao tended more to live among the people and recruited peasants from the area, while the intellectuals were, for the most part, with Kong Le and the neutralists. At first the Pathet Lao kept their identity secret. Later they began speaking more openly to people whom they felt they could trust. They always spoke nicely (this he reiterated over and over), and gave long explanations before suggesting any action. They lived like the poor peasants, for example refusing to ride in trucks as the Kong Le soldiers did. They were very prudent.

The Pathet Lao cadres encouraged the people not to be afraid of important men or to use honorific forms of address.

> The Pathet Lao changed many things. They helped the villagers farm rice and build houses, and gave rice to people who didn't have enough. They changed the status of women. Women became equal to men. They became nurses and soldiers. Wives were not afraid of husbands any more.

At first some husbands got angry, but they were told that there was to be no more oppression: "Look, she's human, you don't have special rights."

Before, everything was for hire. After the Pathet Lao came, money wasn't necessary. They tried to induce cooperation among the villagers and to bring families to cooperate in agricultural work. They used no force, but tried to shame people into helping if they refused, to encourage them to see that all would benefit from cooperation.

They formed "Awakening groups" of cadres from the village that were responsible for encouraging cooperation and collectivization. By 1967, virtually everyone was involved in collective farming, though they also kept private plots. The cadres never insulted anyone. They tried to make you like them. They would never take out guns and money to impress people. In 1967 they suddenly replaced all outsiders with local cadres drawn from the Awakening groups, many of whom had been taken away for training for a month or so.

Each village had a complicated system of organization: political, administrative, defense (police), young boys, young girls, women, cleanliness, education, cooperation, etc. Everyone belonged. They elected their own leaders. There were also technical organizations concerned with irrigation, livestock, agriculture, adult literacy, forestry. Representatives of these groups would deal with experts from the outside in matters such as irrigation.

The first bombing began in May, 1964. Phonesavan itself was bombed in 1965. Between November, 1968, and January, 1969, the town was completely evacuated and destroyed. The Vang Pao army came through in September, 1969.

During 1964 and 1965 only very few North Vietnamese soldiers were in the vicinity. By 1969 there were many North Vietnamese. The soldiers maintained a very strict discipline and kept away from the villagers. People felt sorry for them because of their enforced isolation. The Pathet Lao taught them that the North Vietnamese were their friends who had come to give them technical assistance and help them to survive. They had enormous respect for the North Vietnamese. To illustrate, he told a story of a North Vietnamese irrigation adviser who was condemned to

death by the Pathet Lao after he had killed a water buffalo. The people objected and protested to the General, who affirmed the sentence. The man then killed himself. In general, they regarded the North Vietnamese with awe.

The Pathet Lao also taught them not to hate the American pilots, some of whom were captured and led through the town, but "only their leaders."[47]

I asked one man about fifty years old, who looked strong and healthy, why neither he nor anyone else seemed to be working, why they were just sitting in the sheds when surely they should be preparing to farm. He said:

> Let the war end and we can return to our village. I don't know how to farm here. No one comes to explain or help or tell us how to do it. We don't have the strength to cut down the trees. The Government says nothing. They don't tell us whether we can ever go home. We don't know. All the land has trees or bushes. We are too tired to cut the bushes and the trees. There are no hills or mountains here. It is all flat. When we do Hai (upland farming) where we come from, the trees all fall in one direction and it was easy to burn them. Here they just fall in all directions. We do not know how to farm here.

In fact, these people know well how to farm in this area, and the work would not be beyond their strength, at least if they had enough to eat. But as the above account indicates, they are demoralized and without hope. The only time that I saw work being done in the village or its surroundings was during one visit, when I watched some men and women constructing private huts with wood that they had cut in the forest. Some women were sewing, and others were cooking or collecting food. The rest sat quietly, their interest somewhat aroused by our presence, but apparently with no plan or hope for the future.

V

A correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* has summarized the situation which produced the refugees as follows:

> …The area is a carpet of forest dotted by villages and a few towns. Refugees report that the bombing was primarily directed against their villages. Operating from Thai bases and from aircraft carriers, American jets have destroyed the great majority of villages and towns in the northeast. Severe casualties have been inflicted upon the inhabitants of the region, rice fields have been burned, and roads torn up. Refugees from the Plain of Jars report they were bombed almost daily by American jets last year. They say they spent most of the past two years living in caves or holes.[48]

[47] This is a constant refrain among the Communists of Indochina.

[48] April 16, 1970. See note 7.

It is doubtful that any military purpose, in the narrow sense, is served by the destructive bombing. The civilian economy may have been destroyed and thousands of refugees generated, but the Pathet Lao appear to be stronger than ever. If anything, the bombing appears to have improved Pathet Lao morale and increased support among the peasants, who no longer have to be encouraged to hate the Americans. The situation is exactly like that in Vietnam, where, in the first year of the intensive American bombardment in the South (1965), local recruitment for the Viet Cong tripled to about 150,000, according to American sources. And, as in Vietnam, the indigenous guerrilla forces are now more dependent on outside assistance as a result of the destruction of the civilian society in which they had their roots. The correspondent quoted above comments:

> By depriving communist forces of indigenous food stores, the bombing has caused them to rely on more dependable supplies from North Vietnam. For all that it has undoubtedly demoralized civilians, refugees report that the bombing has raised the morale of Pathet Lao fighting forces. Unlike most other soldiers in Laos, they finally have a clear idea of what they are fighting for. Refugees also say that volunteers for the Pathet Lao army have doubled…in the last few years. Before, many village youths were reluctant to leave their villages. Now the attitude has become, "better to die as a soldier than to die hiding from the bombing in holes in the ground.[49]

As in Vietnam, there is a military purpose to these tactics in a broader sense. Here again we see the tactic of "forced-draft urbanization" at work. To fight against a people's war, it is necessary, here as in South Vietnam, to eliminate the people, either by killing them, destroying their society and forcing them into caves, or "urbanizing" them by driving them into refugee camps or urban centers. Who can tell whether this tactic may not succeed?

We discussed the bombardment with Prince Souvanna Phouma. He denied that any destruction is taking place:

> There is no destruction. We only bomb the North Vietnamese. We have "teams" scattered throughout the country. When they see the North Vietnamese convoys they call for bombing. Laos is not like the United States. It is not densely populated, with many big cities. No cities or villages are destroyed. 700,000 refugees have come to our side. There are no people on the other side. Maybe a few huts destroyed, but no settled areas. People flee when they hear that the North Vietnamese are coming.[50]

We mentioned specifically that refugees have told us that their villages were destroyed long before they left them. He replied:

> No, no. Sometimes North Vietnamese mix in with the population and we have to make a sacrifice of them and bomb the village, that's true. For example, recently in Paksane some North Vietnamese held a village and it took us three days to dislodge them. In that case unfortunately the villagers got bombed also.

[49] This paragraph is taken from the original text, parts of which appear in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 16, 1970.

[50] See note 42.

He then showed us a large relief map of Indochina on the wall, and repeated: "You see those mountainous areas controlled by the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Nobody lives there."

According to American figures, over a million people live there, well over a third of the population.

Part of the population of Laos lives in urban centers, Vientiane being the largest. Others live in the Pathet Lao-controlled areas under the conditions I have described. Still others remain in refugee camps. In addition, there are the Meo tribesmen who have been organized by the CIA, and that part of traditional Lao peasant society that is still untouched by the war.

Reports from the Vang Pao army of Meo indicate that they may be nearing the end of their ability to continue fighting. Several years ago, Robert Shaplen quoted Edgar "Pop" Buell, the American who is primarily responsible for the Meo operations:

> A few days ago I was with Vang Pao's officers when they rounded up 300 fresh Meo recruits. Thirty percent of the kids were 14 years old or less and about a dozen were only about 10 years old. Another 30 percent were 15 or 16. The rest were 35 or over. Where were the ones in between? I will tell you, they are all dead. Here were these little kids in their camouflage uniforms that were much too big for them, but they looked real neat, and when the King of Laos talked to them they were proud and cocky as could be…. They are too young and are not trained. In a few weeks 90 percent of them will be killed.[51]

Since then, the Vang Pao forces have suffered serious losses, and all credible reports indicate that their situation is far worse. By inciting large numbers of Meo to fight against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, the United States may have brought about their destruction as an organized group.

"Pop" Buell recently reported that "all his friends from his early days in Laos have died in combat."[52] He added:

> The best are being killed off in this country and America will never be able to repay them for what they're doing.

The American policy of sacrificing the Meo to America's anti-Communist crusade must be regarded, in my opinion, as one of the most profoundly cynical aspects of the American war in Indochina.

To try to get a sense of traditional Laos, we visited a village just a few miles from Vientiane which—incredibly—seems virtually untouched by the war, indeed by the modern age. We visited the home of an old peasant couple where our guide had lived for several years as an IVS volunteer. When we arrived, the old man was sitting on the large open porch outside the sleeping quarters, carving Buddhist verses on long strips of bamboo. He was so engrossed that he was unaware

[51] *New Yorker*, May, 1968, quoted in Symington Subcommittee Hearings, p. 552.

[52] Henry Kamm, *The New York Times*, February 5, 1970.

of our presence until our guide tapped him on the shoulder in greeting. The man and his wife seated themselves before us and wound knotted strings around our wrists, wishing us health and good fortune. The old woman explained that she had just received these particular strings from a Buddhist monk at a shrine where she had spent several days.

Water buffaloes, gentle beasts, trudged slowly along the dirt paths, past knots of people talking and laughing in the quiet of the early evening. The villagers greeted our guide warmly, joking and chatting with him as we walked through the village. Several were at least half-stoned, contributing to the atmosphere of tranquility and abandon. We had brought some meat for dinner, which the peasant woman cooked. After a leisurely meal with the old couple, we returned, late that evening, to Vientiane.

Superficially, such a village seems a haven of peace in the turmoil and misery of Laos, but there is more to the story. Our guide, who had studied the village with great care, estimated that infant mortality may be as high as 50 percent. Dysentery is endemic, and much of the population is always ill. In fact, as we strolled through the village we saw ceremonies on several porches for those who were ill. There is no sanitary water supply, and very little medical care.

The life of the village is less than delightful in many other ways. The old man we visited told us that he walks a long distance to fetch water. This seemed surprising, since there was a large pond nearby. When we walked to the pond, we discovered that it was fenced off, as was a large area surrounding it. Our guide explained that some years back a man had come to the village and simply taken the pond and the surrounding land for himself. When the villagers went to the village chief, they were told that that is the way it was to be.

The older inhabitants now speak sadly of the days when they could sit beneath the tall trees near the pond and they complain of the difficulty and inconvenience and the loss of good land, but there is nothing that they can do. When he arrived in the village and learned of the situation, the IVS worker tried to convince them to go to the city, barely five miles away, and begin a law suit. The man was quickly told that this was impossible. The village chief had agreed, indicating that higher officials were involved in blocking the pond. Complaints would not be heeded and might even bring soldiers to the village. It is such abuses as these, typical of a traditional society and, if anything, given added harshness by colonialism, that the Pathet Lao seek to end.

Loring Waggoner, a community development area adviser who has worked in Laos for a number of years in the USAID program, touched upon such matters in his testimony before the Symington Subcommittee Hearings (pp. 574f.). He described the peasants as "village oriented," and not concerned with Laos as a nation. With regard to the RLG:

> The villager looks at the Government officials in Vientiane as people who have attained a position where they can ask and take things without consultation with the villagers, with the local population. They rarely make protests about this type of corruption or skimming off the top unless, of course, it begins to pinch them fairly badly.

He went on to describe the corruption of the elite in their dealings with the villagers, and observed that the villagers describe the Pathet Lao as "honest with them" though "much more

authoritarian than the Lao Government seems to be." The villagers tend to view the Pathet Lao as traditionalists who emphasize "the old way of life, making it all Lao."

When I arrived in Laos and found young Americans living there, out of free choice, I was surprised. After only a week I began to have a sense of the appeal of the country and its people—along with despair about its future.

Notes

> McKeithen's anti-Pathet Lao bias is so extreme that he cannot even manage to be consistent. Thus he writes that Pathet Lao "minor officials are chosen on the basis of their contributions to the state and their reliability (strong back / weak mind)" (*Life under the P.L.*). A few pages earlier we read that "Government officials [under the Pathet Lao] are chosen almost entirely on the basis of merit, although there seems to be a general preference for the economically deprived villager as opposed to his wealthier counterpart."
>
> The five points of the star do have a symbolic significance: they stand for intellectuals, workers, peasants, tradesmen, and soldiers working together to defend and build the country.

Noam Chomsky
A Visit to Laos
July 23, 1970

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