

**The United States in Laos, 1953-64**

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States were left as the two dominant global powers, with increasingly divergent political ideologies that brought them to the brink of war. Under contemporary constructivist understandings of the Cold War, the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union germinated in the U.S. based upon well-founded fears that their communist ideological rival would make great strides globally and increase its sphere of influence throughout the world - posing an existential threat to the democratic ideology of the West and the international status quo. Throughout the 1950s and 60s there were several instances in which the communist ideology expanded to developing nations newly burgeoning into the international community, starting with the successful communist revolution of China led by Mao Zedong in 1949.<sup>1</sup> Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, from 1953-1961, the United States initiated its Cold War foreign policy, which sought to prevent the global spread and expansion of communism founded upon the theories of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.<sup>2</sup> Dulles shaped American foreign policy as an interventionist, premised on his own conception of the world being split between two divergent and hostile blocks, in which the danger posed by communism was universal to all nations and the obligation to protest its threat boundless and absolute.<sup>3</sup> President Eisenhower crystalized this understanding of the global Cold War threat, and furthered the United States' justification for an interventionist foreign policy, through what he coined as the "Domino Theory". Eisenhower defined this theory of international

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<sup>1</sup> Current U.S. Policy in the Far East. United States National Security Council. Top Secret, National Security Council Report. November 19, 1954: 22 pp. DNSA collection: Presidential Directives. ProQuest. pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Eliades II, "United States Decision-Making in Laos, 1942-62" pp. 6-7. (hereafter referred to as "Eliades II, Decision-Making".)

<sup>3</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur M. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965. Print. pp. 536. (Hereafter: Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*.)

relations and the spread of communism as a row of dominoes set up across the globe representing each nation, in which the fall of one domino leads to the fall of others, until “what will happen to the last one is that it will go over very quickly,” creating a situation of accelerating disintegration with profound influences for the global status quo and ideology of nations.<sup>4</sup> To meet this existential threat to American interests and Western democracy generally, throughout the 1950’s the United States increasingly escalated its policy of intervention and confrontation with Communist nations across the globe.

For the duration of the 1950’s, global tensions grew as the international community became further divided between the democratic West and the communist East. The prospect of the struggle escalating into a new global war appeared increasingly likely. A series of major confrontations between the Soviet Union and the United States in this global struggle emerged, such as: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s threat to close access to Berlin in 1958; the communist forces of Ho Chi Minh conducting guerilla warfare against the U.S. supported regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam in the late 1950s, and; the rise of Fidel Castro and his communist regime in Cuba, just 100 miles from the coast of the United States by the end of 1959.<sup>5</sup> One fundamentally striking aspect of the U.S. policy and leadership that marked this Cold War period: the fact that these momentous crises, such as the Vietnam War, were actually of subsidiary importance to successive administrations during the 1950’s and 60’s, when compared to the political plight of Laos, which discreetly topped the agenda.

While the Vietnam War became the pinnacle war of the Cold War era, and eventually came to define an entire generation of Americans, in the 1950’s the deteriorating situation in

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<sup>4</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 536.

<sup>5</sup> Eliades II, *Decision-Making*. pp. 6-8.

Vietnam took a backseat to the situation in Laos in the formulation of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. During this period, the potential impact of events in Laos were viewed by United States policymakers as “far more threatening than what was happening in Vietnam.”<sup>6</sup> According to President John F. Kennedy, the Eisenhower administration placed the utmost importance on the Laotian situation in American foreign policy, as Eisenhower himself “talked at length about Laos, but never uttered the word Vietnam.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, at a crucial moment in the Cold War, when the Eisenhower Administration was preparing for transition to the Kennedy Administration - in the midst of the upheaval in communist Cuba, an expanding war effort in Vietnam, and heightened conflicts with the Soviet Union - Kennedy and Eisenhower spent the majority of their conferences dedicated to Laos.<sup>8</sup> Laos was considered the most pressing issue during the 1961 transition, relegating all other issues facing the new administration, to secondary status.

According to Eisenhower, Laos was the “key to all Southeast Asia” that could never be allowed to fall into the hands of the Communists by the global community, and that if the United States were confronted with such a situation, he would “as a last desperate hope” choose to intervene unilaterally on behalf of the free world.<sup>9</sup> Secretary of Defense under JFK, Robert McNamara, advanced this understanding of the Laos situation, noting that after being briefed on Laos by Eisenhower, all policymakers of the Kennedy administration took President Eisenhower’s opinions as gospel, reiterating his words that “if Laos were lost,” it would result in the fall of all

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<sup>6</sup> Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism*. pp. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Rostow, W. Walt. *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History*. pp. 264. Kennedy cited throughout.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, Seth. *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*. Cornell University Press, 2012. pp. 3. (Hereafter: Jacobs, Seth. *The Universe Unraveling*.)

<sup>9</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 163.

of Southeast Asia.<sup>10</sup> The views of the Eisenhower Administration greatly influenced incoming President John F. Kennedy to consider Laos of primary in significance, and to keep Laos as the focal point of the United States policy in halting the expansion of communism in Asia. As a result, Kennedy dedicated “more time on Laos than on anything else,” in the first months of his administration.<sup>11</sup>

What becomes increasingly interesting about United States decision-making in Laos was the determination of policy makers to keep U.S. involvement and influence in the country a secret. While American involvement in Vietnam came to dominate the evening news for over a decade, and had a profound effect on American music, culture, and politics - extinguishing 55,000 American lives in the process - U.S. involvement in Laos, was kept, for the most part, a secret from the international community and more significantly, the citizens of the United States.

<sup>12</sup> Even though Laos was considered more pivotal than Vietnam for achieving American interests in Southeast Asia by both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations from 1953 through 1963, it was, nonetheless, in Vietnam, and not Laos, that the United States decided to unilaterally enter war on behalf of the free world and South Vietnam in 1965. While the U.S. engagement in Vietnam grew and dominated international politics more generally, the U.S.’ simultaneous involvement in a parallel war in the neighboring nation of Laos, went unreported and remained largely unknown. The obscurity of the American intervention in Laos was by design; U.S. political and military leadership went to great lengths to keep U.S. activities in Laos secret,

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<sup>10</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961-1963, John F. Kennedy, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis (1994) 41, January - March 1961: Transition from the Eisenhower to the Kennedy administration. (Kennedy in FRUS hereafter referred to as FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Subject.)

<sup>11</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 329.

<sup>12</sup> Niksch, Larry. *The United States and Laos*. Congressional Research Service, Foreign Affairs Division. June 1, 1970. pp. 14-15. (Hereafter: Niksch, Larry. *The U.S. and Laos.*); Spector, H. Ronald. Vietnam War. *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.* 15, Feb. 2019. Web.

relying upon clandestine operations by paramilitary groups and forbidding deployment of U.S. ground troops in what was to become - America's Secret War in Laos.<sup>13</sup>

The U.S. involvement in Laos was, from its inception, kept almost entirely clandestine, covert, and secretive. When Laos gained its independence from France in 1950, becoming an autonomous state within the French Union, Prince Souphanouvong created the Laotian communist movement, known as the "Pathet Lao" (Land of the Lao).<sup>14</sup> From the outset, the Pathet Lao was allied closely with the Viet Minh in Northern Vietnam, while simultaneously taking a confrontational posture towards the newly established Laotian government and its Royal Laotian Army, headed by his half-brother, Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, who aligned the government as a protectorate of France.<sup>15</sup> 1950 saw the United States initiate its involvement in Laos through bankrolling the French's military action and aid for the Laotian government in its struggle with the Communist insurgency, dedicating a significant percentage of its Southeast Asia military budget to Laos as a means to prevent the Communist tide's takeover of Indochina.<sup>16</sup> The 1954 Geneva Accords disallowed the United States and all foreign powers other than France to be involved in the independent affairs of Laos or to introduce

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<sup>13</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, Jane. *Tragic Mountains: the Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*. Indiana University Press, 1993. Print. pp. 144-146. (Hereafter: Hamilton-Merritt. *Tragic Mountains*. pp.)

<sup>14</sup> *Background on Laos, 1961*. United States Department of State. Secret, April 13, 1961: 7 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. ProQuest. pp. 1-7. (Hereafter: *Background on Laos, 1961*. pp.)

<sup>15</sup> FRUS, 1952-1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Vol. XII, Indochina (1982) 2298. *Policy of the United States in the Aftermath of the Geneva Conference, July - December 1954: The Increased Role of the United States in South Vietnam; Measures Taken in Support of the Diem Government; the Beginnings of American Aid Programs in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia*. (Eisenhower in FRUS hereafter referred to as: FRUS, year, Eisenhower, Vol. XII, Laos. Subject.); Robert, T. *Area handbook for Laos*. June 1967. pp. 2 (Hereafter: Robert, T. *Area Handbook for Laos*. pp.)

<sup>16</sup> Castle, Timothy. *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975*. Columbia University Press, 1993. pp. 11. (Hereafter: Castle, Timothy. *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*.); U.S. Department of State, *Fact Sheet: Laos*. 1963. pp. 11.

military personnel from outside Laotian territory.<sup>17</sup> However, the Eisenhower Administration was not pleased with the entirety of the Accords, partially in light of the inability of the French to eliminate the spreading Communist threat of the Pathet Lao. The Eisenhower Administration began a military buildup of its own in Southeast Asia, in the interest of preventing Communist subversion in all of Indochina, and in particular, to protect the U.S. chief ally in the region, Thailand, from Communist infiltration.<sup>18</sup> In 1954 the United States created an embassy in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, headed by Charles W. Yost.<sup>19</sup> This event served as the onset of the United States' direct involvement in Laotian affairs. From 1954 through 1964 the United States foreign policy was focused on curtailing the expansion of Communism in Laos, including: directly influencing the leaders and policies of the Laotian government; military training and financial aid to the Royal Laotian Army;<sup>20</sup> creation of a clandestine paramilitary army of the Hmong ethnic group controlled by secret organizations in the fledgling CIA; the placement of hundreds of CIA and ex-military personnel in Laos for open military assistance by 1961;<sup>21</sup> and,

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<sup>17</sup> Dommen, A. *Conflict in Laos: The politics of neutralization*. 1964. pp. 53-54. (Hereafter: Dommen, Conflict.); *The Situation in Laos*. U.S. Department of State. September, 1959. pp. 4. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. Proquest. pp. 1-4. (Hereafter: *The Situation in Laos*. U.S. Department of State. 1959. DNSA.)

<sup>18</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Department of State (DOS) to the Embassy in Vientiane, Washington, Jan 3, 1957.; *United States-Vietnam relations, 1945-1967: Study prepared by the Department of Defense in 1971*. United States Department of Defense. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off. pp. 10:738. (Hereafter: *U.S.-Vietnam relations*. Department of Defense).

<sup>19</sup> Stevenson, Charles. *The End of Nowhere; American policy toward Laos since 1954*. Print. 1972. pp. 27-29. (Hereafter: Stevenson, Charles. *End of Nowhere*.)

<sup>20</sup> Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism*. pp. 86. "since 1955, and in violation of the Geneva Accords, the U.S. had been paying the salaries of the entire Laotian Army, training its officers, and supplying it with uniforms and arms; the U.S. had spent \$325 million, all but 20 percent of it on the military."; Robert, T. *Area handbook for Laos*. June 1967. "Between July 1954 and June 1963, United States aid to Laos totaled \$328 million. Until 1955 assistance had been channeled through France and was paid in French currency, but since that year it has been paid directly to the country in American currency. Until 1962 much of this aid was military assistance."

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. *United States security agreements and commitments abroad: Kingdom of Laos*. Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations. 91st Cong., 1st Seas., October 1969, pp. 420. (Hereafter: *Hearings*, 1969.)



culminating with conducting a CIA controlled proxy war in Laos including the eventual formation and use of the Air America T-28 Strike Force,<sup>22</sup> which allowed for the reconnaissance and combat flights of U.S. civilian pilots in the war effort and the start of the daily American bombing crusades in Laos.<sup>23</sup> The results of the United States involvement in the Laotian fight against Communism are startling: hundreds of millions spent in U.S. military aid and financial support from 1950-1975, totaling more than any other American aid program per capita in Asia; the then most extensive “paramilitary action and political manipulation” in a sovereign country in U.S. history; the deaths of tens of thousands of Laotians on both sides, and perhaps most tragically, the death of more than 50,000 ethnic Hmong, ultimately culminating in the wholesale displacement of the entire Hmong culture, which became subject to genocide and ethnic cleansing by the Communists after the withdrawal of American involvement.<sup>24</sup> Probably the most shocking fact about the U.S. involvement in Laos - which is largely unknown to the public due to its not being taught in American schools - is that Laos, a country most Americans cannot identify on the world map, became the most heavily bombed country per capita in history with over two million tons of bombs dropped by the United States from 1964 through 1973, equal to that of a planeload of bombs dropped every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years, straight.<sup>25</sup> The amount of bombs dropped on Laos is truly unsettling, as nearly one ton of cluster bombs were dropped for every man, woman, and child residing in Laos at the time, culminating in over

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<sup>22</sup> Castle, Timothy. *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*. pp. 69-70.

<sup>23</sup> Castle, Timothy. *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*. pp. 69-70.; Declassified Document Reference Service, 1990. Document 3312 (hereafter: DDRS, year. Document); DDRS, 1989. Document 686.

<sup>24</sup> Warren, William. *Laos is at war but vientiane yawns*. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Jan 04. 1970. (for total aid program estimates); Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy: the Secret Wars of the CIA*. Ivan R. Dee, 2006. Print. pp. 344. (Hereafter: Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*.) (For paramilitary action and political manipulation facts); Hamilton-Merritt. *Tragic Mountains*. (For ethnic cleansing and total Hmong deaths see: preface pp. xx-xxiii & pp. 527.)

<sup>25</sup> Suthinithet, Santi. *Land of a Million Bombs: Laotian refugees reach out to aid their war-torn country*. *Legacies of War*, Issue 21, 2010. Web.

50,000 people being injured or killed from the start of the bombings in 1964 and over 20,000 people in the post-war and post-bombing period alone, starting after 1974.<sup>26</sup>

The puzzle is how the situation in Laos could have been so crucial to U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, yet receive so little coverage by the media or open discussion with the American public by the political administrations behind the decision-making in Laos at the time. If Laos was so much more significant and decisive than Vietnam to the United States' Cold War interests in the region, why was the U.S.'s involvement in Laos kept secret, while Vietnam became the centerpiece or "poster-child" of the Nation's Cold War involvement in Southeast Asia? The question that this paper is seeking to answer is why did successive American administrations make the decision to keep the United States' involvement and eventual wartime intervention in Laos, a secret hidden from the world, and more importantly, from the American public who were funding it? More concretely, what was it about Laos' political situation that influenced U.S. policy-makers into conducting America's first Secret War? Why did this underdeveloped nation, with no official census, and smaller in size than the state of Idaho, become the area in which the U.S. waged a Secret War to combat the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia?<sup>27</sup> Why Laos?

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<sup>26</sup> Lloyd-George, William. The CIA's 'Secret War'. *The Diplomat*. 25, Feb. 2011; Lloyd, Alan Peter. Remnants of the Secret War in Laos. *The Diplomat*. 27, Jan. 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Goldstein, Martin E. *American Policy Toward Laos*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973. pp. 23. (Hereafter: Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*.)

## **I: Alternative Understandings**

Before embarking upon the constructivist perspective and argument of this paper, which deals almost entirely with the ideas and beliefs held by the United States policy-makers and citizens in regards to the character of the Laotian leadership, military and people in regards to their ability and willingness to confront the incursion of communism into their country, there are several other analytical perspectives that provide crucial context to the Secret War in Laos and that are pivotal to a full understanding of the U.S.'s foreign policy decisions in Laos during the Cold War. These arguments vary: from a focus on domestic factors regarding the Laotian public and United States citizens, to systemic levels of analysis which place significance on the international status quo, balance of power, and international accords. However, all of these arguments and considerations are relevant as pieces of a whole, individual factors that contribute to the entire context that informed and influenced United States' decision-making in Laos during this Cold War period of 1953-1964. None of these perspectives should or can adequately stand alone as the sole or complete understanding of why the United States kept its involvement in the Laotian War a secret.

Analyzing the domestic level of international relations, focusing on the United States citizenry during the Cold War, and specifically during the Vietnam War era, it becomes quite obvious why policy-makers would decide to keep the war in Laos a secret. The U.S. had already found itself in a hotly contested war, in which the U.S. couldn't leave its South Vietnamese ally to be taken over by North Vietnam and its Viet Minh soldiers, regardless of the widespread public sentiment against the war in the United States. Vietnam had caused a massive divide amongst the U.S. citizenry, in which over 50 percent of the population disapproved of America's

involvement and handling of the war in public polls.<sup>28</sup> The antiwar sentiment amongst the public progressively grew throughout the 1960s, resulting in large-scale protests against the U.S. Government. Protests of the Vietnam War eventually reached a national-scale, in which tens of thousands of students, liberals, and even veterans of the war were taking to the streets and government offices to hotly contest further U.S. involvement.<sup>29</sup> These protests culminated in the tragic Kent State protests of 1970, in which several students were shot and killed by the National Guard.<sup>30</sup> No U.S. administration wanted the kind of scrutiny, or blame, as was resulting from escalating conflict in Vietnam; keeping the Laotian War secret enabled successive administrations to act without the magnifying glass of the press and public opinion. Essentially, no U.S. President wanted the responsibility for creating what would be seen as a second Vietnam War. Each U.S. administration believed that there would be little public support for intervening in the tiny and unknown Laos, as the people of the United States were already “fed up with adventures” in Southeast Asia and certainly wouldn’t stand for another war.<sup>31</sup> Both the Kennedy and Eisenhower Administrations have admitted that they wanted to keep a “very serious cloud over the entire scene,” as to avoid causing any public alarm.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Congressional research on foreign policy in 1970 later revealed that part of the reason that the war in Laos was kept secret under Eisenhower, Kennedy and up through to Nixon in 1970, was specifically due to the lessons learned from full-scale involvement in Vietnam. Policymakers wanted to avoid the

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<sup>28</sup> History.com Editors, Vietnam War Protests. *A&E Television Networks*. 22, Feb. 2010. Web.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Discussion at Dinner at the White House on Sunday Night, 24 May, 1964. United States Central Intelligence Agency. Secret, Memorandum for Record. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. pp. 1-3. (Hereafter: Discussion at dinner at the White House, 1964. DNSA. pp.)

<sup>32</sup> FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in the United Kingdom. Washington, April 15, 1961. pp. 132-134.

situation that developed in Vietnam from 1961 through 1964, as the United States' open and expanded military involvement in Vietnam led to a "deep psychological feeling of commitment to South Vietnam within and outside of the Administration" shared by much of the American public (at least in the early years), which ultimately made full-scale combat involvement unavoidable and withdrawal impossible.<sup>33</sup> Thus, by maintaining secrecy in Laos the United States could avoid this dilemma of full commitment and binding obligations in Laos in the event that U.S. goals and objectives came to appear untenable, allowing the U.S. to "terminate its activities [in Laos] at any time".<sup>34</sup>

At the systemic level of analysis in international relations there are many readily available theories as to why the United States attempted to keep the war in Laos a secret from both the domestic and international community. Viewed through the neo-realist lens of John Mearsheimer, and specifically through his work, *Conventional Deterrence*, one can infer that the U.S. decision to avoid direct conflict and involvement in Laos was made based on its projected outcome of the war and its engagement.<sup>35</sup> Under this theoretical perspective, one could argue that the U.S. was deterred from direct military engagement due to its belief that victory in Laos would be unlikely and costly. This theory does apply to U.S. policy in Laos to a certain extent, as U.S. decision-makers repeatedly considered the large costs of entering the Laotian conflict, and many decreed such an action as foolhardy based on these profound deterrents.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Niksch, Larry. *The United States and Laos*. pp.17-18.

<sup>34</sup> Hearings, 1969. P. 543.

<sup>35</sup> Mearsheimer, John. *Conventional Deterrence*. Cornell University Press, 1983.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense McNamara. White House Meeting on Laos, January 23, 1961; Includes Report]., 1961. United States Department of Defense. Top Secret, Memorandum. January 23, 1961: 15 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. ProQuest. (Hereafter: Memorandum from Nitze, White House Meeting on Laos, 1961. DNSA. pp.)

Many factors contribute to making the Laotian situation costly and unfavorable in the eyes of American policy-makers. The first and most obvious deterrent to U.S. intervention in Laos, which strengthens Mearsheimer's Conventional Deterrence theory in regards to Laos, was the country's geography. This factor played a large role in the United States' decision-making in Laos. Military officials considered Laos to be "inhospitable" for any military campaign due to its tough, mountainous and jungle-infested terrain, and other "built-in liabilities" such as its geography, topography and climate which would make all military intervention and putting actual troops on the ground in Laos a difficult feat in the case of actual war.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Laos was landlocked and insignificant in the international arena, further weakening the choice to militarily intervene in the Laotian civil war as a impetuous decision with no great prospects for victory. According to General MacArthur, an experienced general in Southeast Asia from the Korean War, "anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined."<sup>38</sup> This observation seemed to many decision-makers particularly applicable to the isolated and tough terrain of Laos. Thus, a widely accepted perception was held among U.S. policy-makers that open military intervention in Laos would be an imprudent decision, in which the United States would set out on a contested and unilateral military mission with no great advantages or prospects for victory.<sup>39</sup>

An even greater factor which supports Mearsheimer's Conventional Deterrence theory in regards to Laos, was the widespread belief amongst U.S. policy-makers, that open U.S. military

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<sup>37</sup> Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, Together with Discussion for and Against such Action. Fourth Revised Draft; Includes Annexes]., 1961. United States Department of Defense. Top Secret, Memorandum. May 30, 1961: 15 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. ProQuest. (Hereafter: Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, 1961. DNSA.)

<sup>38</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. A Thousand Days. pp. 338-339.

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum from Nitze, White House Meeting on Laos, 1961. DNSA.

intervention in Laos would have caused retaliation from the regional Communist powers of Asia. If the U.S. were to have militarily entered Laos, as Eisenhower and Kennedy both considered doing, then Hanoi, Moscow, and Beijing may well have concluded the United States' involvement and actions posed a serious threat to their security, and would therefore respond in kind with justified military counteraction.<sup>40</sup> This well-founded concern over provoking direct Chinese involvement can be seen in National Security Council meetings, even in the beginning of the Laotian conflict, where high-level officials in the Eisenhower administration, such as Allen Dulles and Dean Rusk, argued that Laos is not the "place to start" the Western war against Communism due to the fact that it would almost certainly result in "full-scale war with the Chinese" shortly after U.S. intervention.<sup>41</sup> The US decision-making in Laos was thus kept secret and covert in order to avoid the outside involvement and escalation of the war by China and North Vietnam.

Contemporary conclusions of liberal international relations theory provide other factors at the systemic level of analysis that could also have compelled U.S. foreign policy towards a clandestine involvement in the Laotian War. Under the liberal perspective of international relations theory, forwarded by Immanuel Kant and his work, *Perpetual Peace*, there is a profound significance placed on the influences of international agreements and accords.<sup>42</sup> Kant originally proposed that lasting peace and an end to great power conflict could be established

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<sup>40</sup> Notes on the 481st National Security Council Meeting (NSCM), 1961. United States Department of Defense. Top Secret, Notes. May 1, 1961: 3 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. ProQuest. (Hereafter: Notes on 481st NSCM, 1961. pp.); Hearings, 1969. pp. 399 & 419.; The United States Senate, Report of Proceedings, Hearing held before Committee on Foreign Relations. Briefing by Secretary of State Dean Rusk on Situation in Southeast Asia. Vol. 1. Washington, D.C. 15, June. 1964. pp. 17. (Hereafter: "Rusk before Senate 64").

<sup>41</sup> Notes on 481st NSCM., 1961.

<sup>42</sup> Kant, Immanuel, et al. *Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Essay*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915.

throughout the world by the spread of universal democracy and international cooperation. Liberal international relations theory has built upon Kant's propositions of democratic peace, and now regards international agreements, accords, and cooperation as significant factors which inhibit the likelihood of war.<sup>43</sup> In regards to Laos, this perspective maintains that the international agreements of the Cold War are a foundational factor in the shaping of U.S. foreign policy. More concretely, the United States kept its war tactics secretive and covert, along with all interaction in and with the government of Laos, due to the Geneva Accords: an international agreement signed by the French and its former colonized nations of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which disallowed all foreign intervention and involvement in the independent and neutral nation of Laos.<sup>44</sup> The Geneva Accords limited the U.S. and its capabilities, compelling its involvement and engagement in the Laotian War to be kept secretive and clandestine, in order to preserve the accords as the basis of a future settlement and avoid compromising vital elements of the accords which contain outside involvement on behalf of the other communist powers of the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> Thus, contemporary liberal international relations theorists would point to the significance of the Geneva Accords in preventing U.S. military engagement in Laos, as the democratic nation of the United States sought to maintain the legitimacy and cooperation of the international agreement.

While I maintain that the U.S.'s popular opinion, fear of Chinese and other communist nations' intentions, the Geneva Accords and Laos' difficult geography are imperative to a full understanding of the entire context of United States decision-making in Laos during the Cold

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<sup>43</sup> Doyle, Michael W. "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1983, pp. 205–235.

<sup>44</sup> Niksch, Larry. *The United States and Laos*. pp. 15-16.; *The Situation in Laos*. U.S. Department of State. 1959. pp. 4.; *Hearings*, 1969. pp. 413-415.

<sup>45</sup> Niksch, Larry. *The United States and Laos*. p.16.



War, this work will contend that the constructivist perspective, with its significance placed on the role of ideas, beliefs, and perceptions in shaping U.S. foreign policy, should be considered a fundamental component in the impetus for and formation of U.S. decisions in Cold War Laos, and ultimately warrants greater acknowledgement.

## **II: Constructivism**

In answering the question of why U.S. involvement in the Laotian war was kept a secret, my argument is based on constructivist understandings of international relations set forth by Alexander Wendt, in his work, *Anarchy is What States Make of it*.<sup>46</sup> Wendt, and other constructivist theorists such as Ted Hopf, place the role of beliefs, ideas, and perceptions of policy-makers as vital aspects underlying a nation's decision-making in foreign policy.<sup>47</sup> Seth Jacobs, in his book, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, utilizes this constructivist understanding and places a powerful significance upon the role of ideas, beliefs, and perceptions in shaping American policy in Cold War Laos.<sup>48</sup> Employing this theoretical approach to international relations, and following the argument laid forth by Seth Jacobs, this work attempts to prove that the Secret War in Laos was kept hidden by U.S. Government officials and military leaders, largely due to their perceptions of the Laotian public, leadership, military, and government.

Through an examination of the selected years prior to the initiation of wide-scale bombing by the U.S. in Laos, from 1953-1964, the extent to which perceptions and opinions of the Laotian people and government among American policy-makers and actors provided the

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<sup>46</sup> Wendt, Alexander. *Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power-Politics*. International Organization, Vol. 46, no. 2, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Hopf, Ted. "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory." *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 171–200.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs, Seth. *The Universe Unraveling*. Cornell University Press, 2012.

foundation for U.S. decision-making provided is striking. This set of beliefs regarding the Laotians was directly informed by reports of U.S. citizens and leaders residing in or working with Laos and the Laotians. These reports came from all sorts of United States citizens with diverging roles and interactions with Laotians, ranging from U.S. aid and developmental workers, through the ambassadors to Laos, and all the way up to the Secretary for Far East Asian Affairs. While these individuals who interacted with the Laotians and Laos itself came and worked for different reasons and goals, they all contributed to the formation of the U.S. perception of Laos - which regarded the Laotian government, leaders, military, and even civilian populations as weak, lazy, and incompetent.<sup>49</sup> These prejudiced, intolerant, and misinformed opinions of U.S. citizens and officials, painted a picture of the Laotian nation and people as helpless, inept, and fundamentally unable to defend their nation against Communism.<sup>50</sup>

When compared to the notably divergent beliefs, perceptions, and ideas of U.S. decision-makers about Laos' neighboring country, Vietnam, it becomes quite apparent why the U.S. ultimately chose to go to war in Vietnam and simultaneously avoid direct military engagement in Laos. While U.S. officials regarded the Laotians as not worthy of U.S. military support, due to the perceived "impotence" and poor cooperation of the Laotians to fight for their own country, the situation in Vietnam was viewed in a completely different light.<sup>51</sup> U.S. officials viewed the South Vietnamese as being the appropriate allies to fight alongside, as instead of fleeing in terror from battle like Laotians, the Vietnamese had "considerably better" cooperation, were "better led," and had the crucial difference of actually fighting with a "greater will" to do

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<sup>49</sup> Jacobs, Seth. *The Universe Unraveling*. Cornell University Press, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Southeast Asia Fact Sheet. United States Department of State. pp. 6.

<sup>51</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Message [text not declassified] to Director of Central Intelligence McCone. Vientiane, May 13, 1962. pp. 762-764.

so.<sup>52</sup> The U.S. believed that the South Vietnamese combat elements were “highly effective” with “overwhelming military strength,” as opposed to the “wholly ineffective” Laotian forces.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the Vietnamese were believed to be “superior Asian troops... with great skill,” which would actually fight alongside U.S. ground troops for their freedom.<sup>54</sup> U.S. policy-makers continually viewed the Laotians “in contrast” to their superior Vietnamese neighbors, which ultimately made it difficult to justify any support for the “vacillating people” who were perceived as not having the same determination to fight for themselves as did the Vietnamese.<sup>55</sup> The culmination of these beliefs was the U.S. decision to intervene on behalf of the South Vietnamese, who it believed would actually fight alongside of the U.S. for their freedom, and followed different policy in Laos which was avoiding of actual ground intervention and combat.

U.S. officials also held diverging beliefs and views on the Communist Laotians, or the Pathet Lao, which offer further insight into the United States’ condescending and patronizing beliefs of the non-Communist Laotians and their Royal Government. While U.S. officials could only recognize the RLG’s apathetic attitude regarding their country’s future, they repeatedly considered the Pathet Lao to be the “only” population of Laotians that actually had a “real determination” to fight for their country.<sup>56</sup> The Communist Pathet Lao were considered the only Laotians to actually have fighting capabilities, but even this was viewed in a condescending

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<sup>52</sup> FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum of Conversation, 1962. pp. 867- 871.; FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Meeting with Congressional leaders, 1962. pp. 770-774.

<sup>53</sup> SEATO forces in Thailand. United States. Military Aide to the Vice President. Secret, Memorandum. June 5, 1962: 1 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Hereafter: SEATO in Thailand. 1962. DNSA.); FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Acting Director of Central Intelligence (Cabell) to the Secretary of State. pp. 823-825.

<sup>54</sup> FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Message to Director of Central Intelligence McCone. 1962. pp. 762-764.

<sup>55</sup> Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, 1961. DNSA.

<sup>56</sup> FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense McNamara. 1961. pp. 26-40.

light, as Eisenhower attributed their greater capabilities to the inspiration of the Communist philosophy, but not inherent in their nature as gentle Laotians.<sup>57</sup> Due to this assessment of the Pathet Lao, no U.S. official ever seriously doubted the Communist capability to completely take over Laos at will, which directly influenced ensuing U.S. policy in the nation.<sup>58</sup>

This judgement concerning the character of the Laotian people, especially when contrasted to the divergent assumptions with regard to the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao, served as the impetus for America's Cold War policy in Laos. U.S. perceptions and beliefs of the Laotian people as essentially naive and passive, that they did not understand the threat posed by the Communists nor possess the will or ability to effectively confront that threat, ultimately led to the decision to keep America's involvement hidden and covert. Above all, these perceptions led to the determination to avoid, at all costs, the placement of U.S. ground troops in the Laotian civil war.

### **III: The Following Discussion**

This paper will analyze the evolution of U.S. foreign policy with regards to Laos, beginning with the Eisenhower Administration's initial steps towards intervention in 1953, through the decision of President Lyndon B. Johnson to begin the formal U.S. bombing campaign in Laos in 1964. Specifically, the following research will attempt to prove that the foreign policy decisions of the United States in the buildup period from 1953-1964 to maintain all involvement in Laos secretive and clandestine were intrinsically influenced by the United States' perceptions and beliefs about the Laotian nation and its people. The research and cited

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<sup>57</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 163.

<sup>58</sup> *The Situation in Laos*. United States Department of State, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. Secret, Background Paper. May 8, 1961: 3 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Hereafter: *The Situation in Laos*. U.S. Department of State. 1961. DNSA.)

works come from: the primary sources of the Foreign Relations of the United States archive, the Digital National Security Archive, and archived State Department papers; a plethora of second hand sources ranging from books on the Secret War to news articles published by the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine*; and oral histories and interviews recorded by the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program and the Congressional Research Service.

Starting in the onset of American involvement in Laos under President Dwight Eisenhower, the first chapter of this work will exemplify how the original perceptions, beliefs, and ideas of the U.S. regarding Laos came to influence the Administration's policy within the nation. With an ardent and unwavering anti-Communist stance, created by the prevalent Cold War ideology of the United States under Eisenhower, the newly established embassy in Laos followed the Administration's policy to defeat Communist influence in all of Southeast Asia. Although the Administration originally stuck to a policy of limited involvement, the U.S. under Eisenhower believed that the Laotians didn't understand the true intentions of their Communist subverters, and were too inept to do so. U.S. officials' beliefs regarding the Laotian nation, its citizenry, Royal Government, and military, painted a picture of Laos as primitive and unable to defend itself against the subversion tactics of Communism on its own. With such a depiction of Laos and its lacking ability to prevent Communism in mind, the Eisenhower Administration began its ever increasing political involvement in Laos in order to maintain the country as a bastion of freedom for the West in Southeast Asia. The Administration and its U.S. officials in Laos did everything within their power to exert strong influence in Laotian politics, which ultimately brought about heightened conflict between the Communist and non-Communist

elements within the country, greater instability of the Royal Laotian Government, and an increase in U.S. personnel and aid to Laos.

The second chapter reveals how the perceptions and beliefs of U.S. officials in Laos, and the Eisenhower Administration more broadly, continued to increase and intensify after the successful negotiations between the Communist and anti-Communist elements of Laos in 1957. The section will demonstrate how the strengthened negative perceptions of the Laotians degraded U.S. hopes for the country to be a bastion of freedom to instead be more of a soft buffer, which is all the Administration decided it could reasonably expect. This change in hopes for the country, based on intensified negative beliefs regarding the Lao, resulted in the greater reshaping of American policy and involvement in Laos. Rather than working with the RLG, which U.S. officials held in contempt and viewed as weak and ineffective, the Administration entered its second phase of policy toward Laos, in which it became increasingly involved in the making and unmaking of governments and political powers within the nation. Due to the Administration's negative beliefs of the Laotians and their new coalition government, which actually unified and brought peace to Laos, the U.S. began its covert CIA involvement in Laos, which acted unilaterally on behalf of the United States to breakdown the coalition government and replace it with the western leaning political leadership of Phoui Sananikone.

Chapter 3 illustrates how even the leadership of Phoui, who was subservient to U.S. interests in Laos and openly anti-communist, wasn't exempt from the onslaught of negative and patronizing perceptions, beliefs, and ideas of the United States under President Eisenhower. The section demonstrates how the Administration's condescending views resulted in its policy decision to abandon Phoui, which ultimately brought about further CIA covert involvement and

influence in Laos, along with a heightened conflict in the unstable country. The result would be two successive and successful coup d'etat's, multiple regimes exerting control over the government, a three sided civil war between the Communists, the neutralists, and the rightists, and the eventual U.S. and CIA policy to support, arm, and provide military assistance to the illegitimate revolutionary committee of General Phoumi and his control over the RLG. The section exemplifies how the Eisenhower Administration's perceptions and beliefs of each successive political power and government during the heightened conflict helped shape its ensuing policy decisions within Laos. By the end of Chapter 3, it becomes glaringly evident how the Eisenhower Administration's perceptions and beliefs of the Laotian nation, citizenry, and political situation overall, shaped its policy decisions within the country to ultimately act unilaterally and covertly through the CIA. Eisenhower's decision to act covertly and through the CIA's secretive influence, rather than openly intervening, is shown to be a direct result of his Administration's paternalistic view of the Laotians.

Chapter four exemplifies how the patronizing and condescending views of the United States continued to intensify after the handover of power from Eisenhower to President John F. Kennedy, resulting in the maintained policy decision to avoid open U.S. military engagement in Laos. The section demonstrates how the Kennedy Administration viewed the Laotians as too weak and primitive to permit the use of actual U.S. military units and citizens to fight alongside such a people who wouldn't even fight for their own country and freedom themselves. Kennedy's renewed condescending views of the Laotian situation and people are shown to influence his own policy decisions within Laos, as he avoided U.S. military intervention and instead attempted at a second Geneva agreement, which ultimately failed. The chapter

conclusively presents how the Kennedy Administration's continuance of the patronizing views of the Laotian situation resulted in a further heightening of the conflict and civil strife in Laos, coupled with intense increases in U.S. covert involvement in the country, and the ultimate creation of what is now considered the CIA's Secret War in Laos.

Chapter 5 reveals how the policy decisions of the previous Administrations to avoid direct U.S. engagement in the country, influenced by their perceptions and beliefs of the Laotians as conclusively not deserving of such support, have culminated in the profoundly heightened civil strife and military conflict in the country. The section demonstrates how President Johnson came into office with limited policy options in Laos other than a further escalation of the war effort in order to advance U.S. interests in the country. Johnson regarded his policy decisions as limited due to the continued U.S. belief that the capabilities of the Laotians in defending their freedom were limited, which was subsequently discouraging of any U.S. direct support. Chapter 5 illustrates how President Johnson's ultimate decision to begin the immense U.S. bombing crusade in Laos, which came to define U.S. covert military intervention and the Secret War in Laos overall, was fundamentally based on yet another patronizing perception of the U.S. in regards to the Laotians and their capabilities.

By the conclusion of this thesis, the significant role of the perceptions and beliefs of decision-makers will become apparent. American perceptions and beliefs regarding the character of the Lao and the Royal Lao Government will be understood as critical factors in the formulation of U.S. policy in the nation for over two decades. This discussion and weight placed on the constructivist perspective in regards to the Secret War in Laos, is significant because it exemplifies just how powerful the role of ideas, beliefs, and perceptions can be in the shaping of



foreign policy. By analyzing the Secret War in Laos under this perspective, it becomes increasingly obvious that the U.S. decision to ultimately avoid direct military engagement in Laos was fundamentally based on the perspectives and beliefs regarding the Laotian nation and its people as being not worthy of such U.S. action and support. This becomes all the more apparent when compared to Vietnam, in which the U.S. decided to conversely intervene militarily in the country, primarily due to diverging and more positive views of the Vietnamese people and leadership. While Laos was never regarded as worthy of U.S. troop engagement and the possible loss of American lives, as was Vietnam, the country was eventually decided to be worthy of a bombing crusade which would affect the Laotian population for decades to come. This conclusion is significant and warranting of greater discussion because it proves how devastatingly powerful the role of condescending and arrogant U.S. beliefs and perceptions can be for people across the globe. The U.S.'s decisions to avoid direct engagement, while escalating the conflict within Laos and conducting a rigorous bombing campaign, ultimately resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 Laotians, over a tenth of its population, and the continued deaths of civilian Laotians from unexploded ordinances even after the war period's end.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Kurlantzick, Joshua. *A Great Place to Have a War : America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*. First Simon & Schuster hardcover ed., Simon & Schuster, 2017.

## **Chapter One**

## **Eisenhower and the First Geneva Accords 1954 - 1958**

This chapter sets out to analyze and discuss the foreign policy decisions of the United States in Laos during President Eisenhower's first term in office. By the end of this section, the significant role of U.S. decision-makers' perceptions, beliefs, and ideas regarding the Laotians will be apparent. The indisputable influence of these perceptions and beliefs on U.S. policy decisions, in its first days of involvement in Laos, will become glaringly discernable - as the evolution of U.S. policy in Laos will illustrate how it changed alongside the intensifying U.S. beliefs regarding the Laotians and their inherent character.

Under the Eisenhower Administration, American perceptions and beliefs regarding the Lao people and state had a direct influence on the U.S. foreign policy decisions toward Laos, ultimately resulting in an escalation of civil strife and an undercutting of "the delicate political balance in the country".<sup>60</sup> During the first period of United States involvement in Laos under the Eisenhower Administration, U.S. policy "may be characterized as one of limited involvement," in which the United States simply reacted to events in Laos, "rather than shaping them."<sup>61</sup> By 1955, Laos became the first formerly colonized French nation to hold elections after the Geneva Conference, in which a non-Communist and pro-Western regime was voted into power; Prince Souvanna Phouma became the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Laos.<sup>62</sup> The Eisenhower Administration sought to keep the anti-Communist regime of Laos in power, as a bastion of democracy in Indochina for the free world, and as a buffer of protection to Thailand

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<sup>60</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 347.

<sup>61</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 122.

<sup>62</sup> Eliades II, *Decision-Making*. pp. 7.

and India from the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia.<sup>63</sup> Signifying the new position of importance Laos occupied vis-a-vis American interests, the Eisenhower Administration appointed Charles W. Yost as the first ever U.S. Ambassador to Laos in September of 1954.<sup>64</sup> Laos entered the ambit of Eisenhower's National Security Council policy, which proclaimed that the United States would make every conceivable effort "to defeat Communist subversion and influence and to maintain and support friendly non-Communist governments" in the Indochinese region.<sup>65</sup> Thus, 1954-1955 saw the start of an ever increasing American political involvement in Laos, initiated and directed by President Eisenhower, his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and their ambassadors in Laos, Yost from 1954 through 1956, followed by J. Graham Parsons who presided until 1958.

In the period immediately following the 1954 Geneva Accords, and the first elections of Laos in 1955, the "sleepy, remote Laos," did not receive the "end to the fighting" and ceasefire agreed upon in the Accords that the three new Indochinese nations, including Cambodia and Vietnam, were promised. Instead the Pathet Lao Communist aggressors laid claim to the northern provinces, installing "PhongSaly in the north," and "Sam Neua in the northeast".<sup>66</sup> The Eisenhower Administration perceived the Pathet Lao's boycott of the elections in 1955, and its subsequent occupation of the two northern provinces, as a threat towards the fledgling Laotian government, Eisenhower's bulwark of freedom in Southeast Asia. According to Ambassador Yost in 1955, the United States not only maintained contempt for the Geneva Agreements due to

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<sup>63</sup> U.S.-Vietnam relations. Department of Defense, 1971. pp. 10:738.

<sup>64</sup> Stevenson, Charles. End of Nowhere. pp. 27-29.

<sup>65</sup> Spector, R., & Center of Military History, 1983. Advice and support: The early years, 1941-1960 United States Army in Vietnam. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History. pp. 228. (Hereafter: Spector, R., & Center of Military History, 1983. United States Army in Vietnam. pp.)

<sup>66</sup> *Trouble in the Hills*. Time. 25, July. 1955. Vol. 66 Issue 4, p27.

its lack of effectiveness to curb the role of Communism in Laos, but also disregarded the French Military Mission in Laos for its inadequacy. Likewise, Yost expressed the Administration's perception of the Lao military force as "far from satisfactory" in their abilities as well.<sup>67</sup> The National Intelligence Estimate of 1954 warned that although the Laotian armed forces had a much larger military force and "strength of 27,000," with leadership from the French military, the Pathet Lao Army which "numbers about 6,000 men" and was backed by volunteer Viet Minh forces "will probably continue to exercise considerable control" over their taken provinces and even have "the capability by political and subversive means to heighten their influence in Laos and to weaken the anti-Communist government."<sup>68</sup> The Eisenhower Administration concluded that the Royal Laotian Government and its Army, was unable to hinder the growth and advance of Communism, regardless of its "efforts to demobilize the Pathet Lao troops", due to its worsening "effectiveness" and the lack of "effective political leadership," caused by the nation's "incompetent defense minister".<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, American observations of the Lao concluded that the "Laotian army has not displayed a real will to fight in past operations," in addition to considering the population of Laos to be "in large measure politically apathetic" to their Communist neighbors.<sup>70</sup>

Since the first days of U.S. involvement, these perceptions of the Lao military, leadership and government were reinforced as the Eisenhower Administration increased its intervention in Laos. The United States Operations Mission was launched, which funded nonmilitary projects in

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<sup>67</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. 29, Jan. 1955. pp. 595-597.

<sup>68</sup> FRUS, 1952-1954, Eisenhower, Vol. XIII, Indochina. pp. 2298.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Laos but had a principal focus of defense related spending.<sup>71</sup> The U.S. Operations Mission included a disguised military aid organization called the Programs Evaluations Office (PEO), providing retired American military personnel to impart American military assistance to Laos.<sup>72</sup> The Operations Mission also increased economic aid substantially, with \$48.7 million and \$44.5 million in 1956 and 1957 alone.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, the U.S. mission in Laos expanded from a “dozen or so at the end of 1954 to forty-five in the autumn of 1955... to over one hundred in December 1957.”<sup>74</sup> The objective of this secretive build-up of U.S. involvement in Laos, was primarily two-fold: an attempt to preserve the Geneva Accords, and to prop-up Laos as a rampart of Western power and democracy to stem the tide of falling Communist dominoes in Southeast Asia.<sup>75</sup>

In 1966, the divergent opinions of the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the Eisenhower Administration, regarding the seriousness of the threat posed by the Pathet Lao mobilization, as well as their overall future goals for the Laotian nation, resulted in further solidification of American perceptions of the limitation of Lao will and abilities. While Washington correctly recognized the looming menace of the Pathet Lao, the Laotians and specifically Prince Souvanna Phouma considered the Pathet Lao as “not really communists but only wayward brothers,” who will return to normal and “patriotically to fold once reasonable give-and-take” is presented by the government.<sup>76</sup> Souvanna was even cited to say that his

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<sup>71</sup> Baldwin, B., & Research Analysis Corporation, Operational Logistics Division. 1964. *Case study of US counterinsurgency operations in Laos, 1955-1962(U)* (Technical memorandum / Operational Logistics Division; RAC-T-435). McLean, Va.: Research Analysis. E4. (Hereafter: Baldwin, Case Study 55-62.)

<sup>72</sup> Baldwin, Case Study 55-62. pp. A10.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Aid Operations in Laos. House, Committee on Government Operations. pp. 6-9.

<sup>74</sup> Stevenson, Charles. End of Nowhere. pp. 29.

<sup>75</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Parsons, 23, Aug. 1956. pp. 802.

<sup>76</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Legation in Laos to the DOS. 3, May. 1955. pp. 641-643.

half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, the leader of the Pathet Lao was and “has never been a Communist,” but only “a misled patriot.”<sup>77</sup> The neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma didn’t regard the Pathet Lao as did the United States: “a threat to Laotian independence,” nor, perhaps more importantly, as an “agent of foreign power,” the Viet Minh.<sup>78</sup> Rather, Prince Phouma argued that the organization merely sought help from North Vietnam and was never consumed by the Viet Minh nor its communist ideology.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the “population for the most part appears not so much worked up re[sic] Communism itself,” and holds an attitude of apathy towards the political situation as a whole.<sup>80</sup> Due to the fact that so few Laotians actually thought that Souphanouvong was Communist, there were more people who believed that the Prince could be weaned over, which resulted in Souphanouvong being treated as a member of the princely family and Lao in good standing, rather than as a Communist subverter.<sup>81</sup> With views of Prince Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao as such, Prince Souvanna Phouma stuck to his goals of creating “a neutral Laos armed against subversion and infiltration,” under a political coalition agreement with the Pathet Lao, which he believed to be the only way to finally and peacefully bring the Nation together as one.<sup>82</sup> In pursuit of this goal, Souvanna went against the interests of the United States and specific recommendations of Ambassador Parsons, and walked arm in arm around Vientiane, the capital of Laos, with his Paris-educated half-brother Souphanouvong, as a

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<sup>77</sup> Conquest By Negotiation. TIME. 21, Jan. 1957, Vol. 69 Issue 3, pp. 29.

<sup>78</sup> Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 119.

<sup>79</sup> MacGregor, Greg. Laos Aide Denies Reds Led Rebels. Special to The New York Times. *New York Times (1923-Current File)* 25, Feb. 1958.

<sup>80</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Legation in Laos to the DOS. 3, May. 1955. Yost, pp. 640-643.

<sup>81</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 24, Nov. 1956. pp. 846.

<sup>82</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to DOS. 23, Aug. 1956. Parsons, pp. 801-802.; Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 123.

symbolic gesture signifying their mutual interest in a coalition government with the inclusion of the Pathet Lao, which they both considered a “family affair”.<sup>83</sup>

The Eisenhower Administration, the Department of State, and Ambassador Parsons were “disturbed” by the coalition goal of Souvanna and responded with a “concrete display [of] U.S. displeasure” and “expressions [of] serious concern” which had reportedly “little effect on Souvanna.”<sup>84</sup> The stance the U.S. put forth in response to these moves by Souvanna were almost entirely based on the U.S.’ beliefs and perceptions of the Pathet Lao, both the neutral Prince Souvanna Phouma and his half-brother and communist Prince Souphanouvong, along with the Lao government and people more generally. To start, the U.S. never questioned whether or not the Pathet Lao were Communist, primarily due to the perceived facts that the Pathet Lao forces quadrupled in strength after the Geneva Accords, along with their continued harassments and waging of haphazard war against the Royal Government, which supported neutralism and the Pathet Lao’s introduction into Laos’ politics.<sup>85</sup> The Americans concluded that the Pathet Lao was most certainly Communist due to its leader Prince Souphanouvong who had “a son studying in Moscow and a Vietnamese wife who was formerly Communist Ho Chi Minh’s secretary,” making him quite literally in bed with the Communists and under their direct influence.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the United States declared that it had “no doubt” that the Royal Laotian Government

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<sup>83</sup> Conquest By Negotiation. TIME. 21, Jan. 1957, Vol. 69 Issue 3, p29.

<sup>84</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from DOS to the Embassy in Laos. 29, Aug. 1956. pp. 803-805.

<sup>85</sup> “The Turnip Watchers.” TIME. 25, Mar. 1957, Vol. 69 Issue 12, pp. 35.; “Trouble in the Hills.” TIME. 25, July. 1955, Vol. 66 Issue 4, pp. 27.

<sup>86</sup> “Trouble in the Hills.” TIME. 25, July. 1955, Vol. 66 Issue 4, pp. 27.



and its leaders have been a “serious disappointment” for desiring to reach such agreements and a coalition with the communists which they considered were inevitably “bound to fail.”<sup>87</sup>

The embassy in Laos, specifically Ambassadors Parsons and Yost, attempted guiding Prince Souvanna and the newly independent Laotian Government away from a coalition resolution, asserting that “wishful hopes for elimination of Communist threat through peaceful negotiation,” are misplaced, and more specifically, “dangerously naive.”<sup>88</sup> The Eisenhower Administration considered the reasoning of the Lao in this regard as childish, and that ill-conceived resolution for a coalition government was the result of the “generally lackadaisical Lao outlook,” which perceived the Pathet Lao as a non-Communist group of lost brothers who need to be brought back to peacefully unite the Nation again.<sup>89</sup> This judgement of the Lao character as naive was furthered through the conclusions of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, which informed the Secretary of State and White House that Laos was vulnerable to such Communist enticements and ‘soft’ tactics due to a simple shift in the Communist’s attitude from a “scowl to the smile” which the Lao immaturely succumbed to.<sup>90</sup>

The decision to negotiate with the Pathet Lao was regarded as ignorant and misunderstood, as U.S. officials believed that “Laos [was] too soft” to effectively prevent Communist subversion and control once the Pathet Lao were permitted to enter the Government and integrate into the Royal Laotian Forces.<sup>91</sup> Any agreement with the Pathet Lao involving a

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<sup>87</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Legation in Laos to the DOS. 13, Feb. 1955. pp. 602-604.

<sup>88</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Legation in Laos to the DOS. 3, May. 1955. Yost, pp. 640-643.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

coalition government, according to the United States Embassy, wouldn't settle the country's political problem and struggle with Communism, but would instead further weaken and divide Laos.<sup>92</sup> The United States was highly critical of the "mistaken belief that 'neutrality' will earn [Laos] Communist goodwill" based on the U.S. view and judgement that the "universal Lao desire to please everyone," manifested as misled hopes for an agreement and coalition as a way to please both sides of the conflict.<sup>93</sup> Lastly, the Eisenhower Administration held strong reservations concerning the supposedly neutral Prince Souvanna Phouma himself, who the U.S. decreed had a strong case of "vanity," and an obvious "weakness of character" which led him to such an ill-advised and erroneous solution to the PL problem.<sup>94</sup>

The Eisenhower Administration, viewed the concept of a coalition government with aversion, "in accordance with the containment psychology" formulated during the Cold War era, and decreed that "any concessions to the Pathet Lao" would advance "the objective of international Communism," which Washington believed, "was to remake the world in its own image."<sup>95</sup> This conclusion, widely-accepted in Washington, was shaped by U.S. experience with neutralism elsewhere in the world, such as Czechoslovakia's 1948 struggle with the Communists, in which its solution to incorporate Communists in the government ultimately resulted in a Communist coup and complete takeover of the government from within. The Eisenhower administration used the example of Czechoslovakia to support American containment policies in the Cold War, and specifically to ensure that no Communists were ever

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<sup>92</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 29, May. 1957. pp. 921-924.

<sup>93</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 115.

allowed into the government of Laos, because their attempt to take over the government from within was considered inevitable.<sup>96</sup> President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, both unilaterally abhorred and openly rejected the concept of neutralism during the Cold War as “immoral”.<sup>97</sup> The Administration perceived the international arena as a global divide in ideologies, a zero-sum struggle between the Free World and Communism, which made any government that didn’t stand with the West become effectively against the Free World, even if they remained neutral.<sup>98</sup> Thus, while other great powers, such as London, Hanoi, Moscow, and Beijing, “wished to see the Pathet Lao incorporated into the Laotian Government,” the United States under Eisenhower “considered such an expansion” as the very regrettable “first stage in the loss of Laotian independence” to the “external conspiracy” of Communism and expended considerable resources and pressure to prevent such a resolution taking place.<sup>99</sup>

In line with American perceptions of the Lao, their leadership, their aggressors in the Pathet Lao, and the overall global Cold War situation, the United States spent the next year, from 1956 through 1957, attempting to convince the Laotians not to resolve their national struggle with an agreement and supporting a coalition with the Communists. Concurrently, the U.S. increased its involvement in Lao’s internal affairs under secrecy. Led by Ambassador J. Graham Parsons’ strong-willed anti-Communist campaign, the Administration labored for sixteen months to bar a coalition.<sup>100</sup> The U.S. Government did everything in its power to exert a strong influence through its “hold on purse strings” and the low caliber instruments which it was given, while

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<sup>96</sup> Eliades II, *Decision-Making in Laos*. pp. 7-8.

<sup>97</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 124.; Department of State Bulletin, “Neutralism.” Secretary Dulles, 23, July. 1956. pp 147.

<sup>98</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 536.

<sup>99</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 119.

<sup>100</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 325.

officials continually complained that they had “no better ones” to work with.<sup>101</sup> The United States attempted to educate the Lao elite of the dangers of being neutralized by the Pathet Lao, through repeated discussions of the Communists’ true desires under a neutral coalition, which were deemed to be “paralysis and vassalage” and the creation of an opportunity to expand their control and subversion.<sup>102</sup> The Eisenhower Administration also sought to make its “aid program more effective” since its previous financing of the total cost of Lao military’s wages had “almost no meaning for the Lao peasant” who could still be persuaded by the Communist propaganda.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the legation in Laos attempted to bring behind-the-scenes support to other influential leaders in the RLG who were mostly “skeptical and uneasy” about Souvanna Phouma and his “hazardous course” of negotiations with the Pathet Lao.<sup>104</sup>

The last, and probably most influential attempt of the U.S. to prevent a coalition government, was the threat of Ambassador Parsons of “total disengagement” and the “withdrawal of American economic aid” from Laos entirely.<sup>105</sup> The Administration touted the growing appearance that the U.S. “can no longer rely on only friendly advice and warnings,” about the Communists since this method had previously “not been taken seriously by the Lao.”<sup>106</sup> The threat of taking away financial aid made clear that U.S. financial support was not open-ended and without strings attached. The Office of Southeast Asian Affairs considered Souvanna’s sustained flirtations with the neutralist posture to be tantamount to political suicide,

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<sup>101</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Legation in Laos to the DOS. 29, Jan. 1955. pp. 595-96.

<sup>102</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

and the Eisenhower Administration began behind-the-scenes consultations with, and support of alternate leadership candidates within the Royal Laotian Government. Ambassador Parsons maintained that his work to personally acquaint himself with various leaders behind the back of Souvanna, was quite efficient in steering the Lao away from a coalition.<sup>107</sup> The threat of reappraisal of its financial aid to Souvanna's government, and a drastic change in U.S. policy toward Laos, was perhaps the Administration's most effective tool of influence.<sup>108</sup>

American efforts originally influenced the cabinet of Souvanna to unanimously reject his negotiated plans with Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao.<sup>109</sup> Souvanna found himself directly "between two fires" of his brother Souphanouvong's never ceasing pressures for a coalition, and his Cabinet which sided with the U.S. against such an action.<sup>110</sup> While Souvanna said he could receive written commitment from the Pathet Lao on key concerns regarding the coalition agreement, Parsons had "no faith" he could actually produce such agreements with the Pathet Lao, due to his evaluation of Souvanna as a weak and disappointing leader.<sup>111</sup> Souvanna responded by threatening resignation, depressed after his helpless efforts and "failure to face up to crux of PL problem," along with his growing divergence of opinion on the Pathet Lao issue with the ministers in his cabinet.<sup>112</sup> The U.S. was thus faced with the "problem" of finding a new leader who could check Souvanna's coalition course since "Souvanna has made little if any

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<sup>107</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 3, June. 1957. pp. 926-27.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 21, Nov. 1956. pp. 842-44.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.; FRUS, 1955-1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

<sup>112</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 21, Nov. 1956. pp. 842-44.

headway to date” on the Laotian struggle with the PL.<sup>113</sup> In attempting to solve this problem, the U.S. was given a “choice between two unsatisfactory alternatives,” of either continuing to work with Souvanna - since there was no “satisfactory alternative to Souvanna,” as neither the Crown Prince nor anyone else could come up with a decent replacement, - or allowing Souvanna to resign, which the Crown Prince pleaded against, due to the commonly held belief that his resignation would result in the end of Laos.<sup>114</sup> The Eisenhower Administration’s judgement that alternative Laotian leaders were “unsatisfactory” serves as an explicit example of how the U.S. appraisal of Laos and the Lao people, shaped American policy decisions, ultimately resulting in the U.S. allowing the return of Souvanna to power and the resumption of negotiations with the Pathet Lao.

The U.S. efforts to prevent a coalition with the Pathet Lao ultimately resulted in failure. Despite successfully inspiring the Assembly to deny Souvanna’s coalition agreements and negotiations with the Pathet Lao, this only temporarily ended the Souvanna-led government. Further attempts by the U.S. and Lao conservatives to form a new government under Katay Sasorith, the pro-American and anti-Communist, ultimately failed in June of 1957.<sup>115</sup> Although the U.S. Embassy claimed to have successfully influenced a majority of the Lao elite to be “profoundly suspicious of PL,” the United States couldn’t prevent the Lao from again switching

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<sup>113</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. 28, May. 1957. pp. 919-920.

<sup>114</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 21, Nov. 1956. pp. 842-44.

<sup>115</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 28, June. 1957. pp. 942-945.; FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Secretary of State’s Special Assistant for Intelligence (Cumming) to the Secretary of State (Herter). Washington, 21, June. 1957. pp. 936-937.

preferences and ultimately accepting the settlement.<sup>116</sup> U.S. officials attributed this failure to the “appeal of national unity” created by Souvanna and the Pathet Lao, which was interpreted as being increasingly “irresistible” for all of the Lao.<sup>117</sup> Thus, Laos returned to Souvanna, the man who made “dangerous concessions” to the Pathet Lao, and the U.S had to shift back to working with his leadership, no matter how “unsatisfactory” the U.S. viewed Souvanna and his goals to be.<sup>118</sup>

By November 1957 the Vientiane Agreements were finalized, and a neutral Laos under a coalition government was finally established.<sup>119</sup> A new government headed by Souvanna was put into place on November 18 and consequently set May 4 of 1958 as the date for supplementary elections.<sup>120</sup> On this determined date, the PL were to symbolically return the two northern provinces to the RLG, the Pathet Lao were granted the right to participate in the upcoming elections under their new NLH party, an enlarged cabinet was to be presented to the assembly which would include the Pathet Lao, and the Pathet Lao troops were to be integrated into the Royal Laotian Army.<sup>121</sup> The U.S. was shocked by Souvanna’s dismissal of American advice, and openly stated its “regrets” that the Pathet Lao Forces were able to achieve such a beneficial situation.<sup>122</sup> The Pathet Lao ultimately benefited from its two-year effort to undermine the

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<sup>116</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 15, Nov. 1957. pp. 1035-1038.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 28, June. 1957. pp. 942-945.; FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 15, Nov. 1957. pp. 1035-1038.

<sup>119</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 325.

<sup>120</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 117.; FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 18, Nov. 1957. pp. 1042-1044.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, FRUS, pp. 1042-1044.

<sup>122</sup> Department of State Bulletin, Testimony before Senate committee on Foreign Relations. 28, April. 1958. pp. 701.

government, as Souvanna agreed to concessions which allowed the PL to integrate into the royal government, army, and national union.<sup>123</sup> The United States and its Office for Far Eastern Affairs considered this settlement as “the dangerous type” which it had been long trying to avoid, since it would consequently allow the Communists to immediately gain seats in the cabinet and allow for increased subversion and “penetration opportunities” for the global tide of Communism.<sup>124</sup>

The conclusion of Souvanna’s negotiations with the Pathet Lao intensified U.S. perceptions on the non-Communist Laotians, as unsophisticated, inept and lacking the political will to make the difficult decisions required to effectively govern in the face of a committed and cunning adversary. The U.S. National Intelligence estimates initially believed that the agreements never had the possibility of being settled, but once the agreements were reached, the U.S. National Intelligence community and U.S. officials universally condemned the result. U.S. officials were of the strong belief that Souvanna Phouma and his RLG cabinet clearly “misjudged the implications of the agreement” and the Pathet Lao entirely.<sup>125</sup> Ambassador Parsons reached a point in his frequent meetings with Souvanna where his beliefs and perceptions of the leader and his “inadequacy” brought the discussions to a stand-still, as both could not, despite repeated efforts and intelligence documents they both had, “persuade” the other of the nature of the Pathet Lao.<sup>126</sup> Their interactions intensified to confrontational levels of disagreement, in which Parsons thought that Souvanna regarded his words as “irrelevant”, and

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<sup>123</sup> Conquest By Negotiation. TIME. 21, Jan. 1957, Vol. 69 Issue 3, pp. 29.

<sup>124</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 18, Nov. 1957. pp. 1042-1044.

<sup>125</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. National Intelligence Estimate: Probable Developments in Laos over the next few months. Washington, 20, Aug. 1957. pp. 968-73.

<sup>126</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 24, Oct. 1957. pp. 1000-1003.



Souvanna believed that Parsons concluded the pledges from the Pathet Lao “were worthless”.<sup>127</sup> Ambassador Parsons felt as if he “could do nothing more” in his talks with Souvanna and proclaimed that no matter what the two presented and argued, it inevitably led them back to their fundamental divergence on the nature of the Pathet Lao.<sup>128</sup> The Eisenhower Administration was confounded that the Royal Government of Laos could be so incompetent as to be the only government left in the world which not only wasn’t fearful of its Communist subverters, but also hadn’t heard of the classic Communist maneuver of conquest by truce negotiation.<sup>129</sup> The Administration was “shocked at the irresponsibility” of the RLG for believing in such agreements, and even outright criticized the RLG for what it claimed was blatant “stupidity”.<sup>130</sup> The U.S. came to agree with the Laotian’s appraisal of themselves: concluding that the “newly independent Laos” was a “child, especially in relation to the United States.”<sup>131</sup> The United States maintained that Souvanna Phouma’s decision to compromise with the PL couldn’t be taken lightly and criticized him for being preoccupied “with wooing PL to detriment all else.”<sup>132</sup> The Administration derided “Laos’ softness and extreme vulnerability to Communist envelopment” as Souvanna opened the RLG to PL influence and subversion.<sup>133</sup> U.S. officials referred to the coalition government agreement as a result of Souvanna’s “persistent blind faith” in the PL being

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Conquest By Negotiation. TIME. 21, Jan. 1957, Vol. 69 Issue 3, pp. 29.

<sup>130</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 26, Oct. 1957. pp. 1009-1010.

<sup>131</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. pp. 412-419

<sup>132</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 3, June 1957. pp. 926-27.

<sup>133</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

“nationalist and not communist.”<sup>134</sup> Eric Kocher, the Acting Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs in Washington, declared Souvanna as being “proven so unreliable and unsatisfactory” as the Prime Minister of Laos that even his resignation wouldn’t be against U.S. interests.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, U.S. Government officials attacked the RLG as an “inexperienced parliamentary government” which rendered it “unstable and ineffective.” American sentiment in this regard extended to the Laotian population, considering them to be “primitive”, as exemplified by their naivety in being duped by the disingenuous promises of their duplicitous Communist subverters.<sup>136</sup>

After Souvanna’s decision to form a coalition with Communists, U.S. officials concluded that it was “hopeless to expect that... Laos can in any way actively contribute to the defense of the Free World,” nor “to expect that in the present circumstances... Laos will stand militantly anti-communist with the West.”<sup>137</sup> After failing to stop the coalition agreement, Ambassador Parsons downgraded his hopes for Laos’ future to “at least develop a country which while it desires neutrality will be as strong as possible and lean to us rather than to our enemies.”<sup>138</sup> Eisenhower’s desire for Laos to become a bastion of freedom for the West and the democratic ideology degraded into tepid hopes for a “sort of buffer” which was “about all [the United States] can reasonably expect,” from a nation such as Laos, which in its naivety failed to recognize the

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<sup>134</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 21, Oct. 1957. pp. 995-997.

<sup>135</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Acting Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Kocher) to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Sebald). Washington, 26, Nov. 1956. pp. 847-848.

<sup>136</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. National Intelligence Estimate: Probable Developments in Laos over the next few months. Washington, 20, Aug. 1957. pp. 968-73.

<sup>137</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

<sup>138</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to DOS. 23, Aug. 1956. Parsons, pp. 801-802.

duplicitous posture of Communists, and largely ignored the advice and interests of the United States.<sup>139</sup> U.S. decision-makers began questioning all U.S. involvement in the “little country” of Laos; why should the United States “spend money in economic development,” which was “clearly disproportionate to the population size of the country,” for “such an unreliable people” which never followed U.S. interests.<sup>140</sup> Ambassador Parson’s provided a window to the Eisenhower Administration’s dismissive and contemptful perception of the Laotian leadership and its people generally by asking “what more would we really want of country like this?”<sup>141</sup>

The Eisenhower Administration approached the looming 1958 elections with the idea that preventive action may be necessary in Laos, due to U.S. officials’ perceptions of Laos and its believed “exceptional vulnerability” to Communism, in which the U.S. concluded that the non-Communist Laotians’ ability to control the Pathet Lao under a coalition government would be painstakingly “doubtful.”<sup>142</sup> In accordance with U.S. assessments regarding the Czechoslovakian coup, Lieutenant General of the USAF Charles Cabell summarized American sentiments heading into the 1958 elections as one of little hope. The U.S. stood back and approached the coalition government’s elections it so vigorously attempted to prevent, in recognition that the U.S. couldn’t do anything quickly enough to change the “primitive, underdeveloped, [and] underpopulated” nation of Laos, which didn’t fully comprehend the subversion possibilities presented in front of them.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Letter From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Ambassador in Laos (Parsons). Washington, June 4, 1957. pp. 928-930.

<sup>141</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to DOS. 23, Aug. 1956. Parsons, pp. 801-802.

<sup>142</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 3, June. 1957. pp. 926-27.

<sup>143</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Acting Director of Central Intelligence (Cabell) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 27, Sept. 1956. pp. 823-825.

In conclusion of the U.S.'s first years of involvement in Laos from 1954-1958, it can be noted that the Eisenhower Administration's increasing engrossment in Laos and change in policy away from its original stance of limited involvement was a direct result of the U.S.'s perceptions and beliefs of the Laotians and their RLG. The Eisenhower Administration believed that the Laotians were too naive to recognize the true intentions of their Communist Pathet Lao subverters, and viewed all the Laotian leaders and their RLG as a serious disappointment characterized by their innate weakness of character as Laotians.<sup>144</sup> As a result, the Administration began its ever increasing involvement in the Laotian political problem, which started the country's disproportionate aid program and expansion of covert U.S. personnel in Laos. By the end of 1957 and the successful negotiations between the non-Communist RLG and Communist Pathet Lao, the negative and condescending views of the U.S. officials under Eisenhower intensified, culminating in America's loss of hope for Laos, and the ultimate change of the U.S.'s stance and policy in Laos heading into Eisenhower's second term as President and the coalition government's doomed elections.

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<sup>144</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). 4, Sep. 1956. pp. 805-810.

## **Chapter Two**

## **Eisenhower's Breakdown of a Coalition's Chance and Formation of a Military CIA 1958-1959**

This second chapter will analyze and discuss how the U.S.'s increased involvement in Laos and further foreign policy decisions under President Eisenhower were influenced and partly caused by the U.S.'s intensified patronizing beliefs and perceptions of the Laotians and their leadership. By the end of this section, it will be very apparent how the Eisenhower Administration's policy decisions resulted in a furthering and escalation of the political conflict and civil strife in Laos, hardly conducive to the democratic goals of the U.S. for the country. Moreover, it will become increasingly evident how the negative U.S. perception of the RLG and non-Communist Laotians influenced and shaped Eisenhower's foreign policy in Laos, and more specifically, the U.S. decision to become more progressively involved in the making and unmaking of governments and political powers within the divided country.

By Eisenhower's second term as President, the "backwardness and isolation" of Laos was accepted as fact by policy-makers, and the belief that "Laos can serve as no more than a buffer" for the West became the prevailing view in the United States.<sup>145</sup> Souvanna successfully concluded negotiations with the Pathet Lao, and his half brother Souphanouvong, despite the repeated pleas from Ambassador Parsons. Heading into the elections of 1958, U.S. agencies were intentionally "dragging their feet in Laos" to slow the election process and inevitable failure of the RLG.<sup>146</sup> The Department of State informed U.S. officials in Laos to "be silent" in the election period, due to the fact that it viewed all discussions and interactions with the RLG

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<sup>145</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Despatch From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Prospects for Laos, Vientiane, 6, Apr. 1956. pp. 750-755.; FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 16, Oct. 1956. pp. 826-828.

<sup>146</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Letter From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the Ambassador in Laos (Parsons). Washington, June 4, 1957. pp. 928-930.

representatives, which ignored U.S. advice, as a “waste of time”.<sup>147</sup> Operating under the belief that the RLG was “not conducting a vigorous, well planned campaign,” in comparison to their Communist opponents, the Eisenhower Administration looked for alternative avenues to further U.S. interests.<sup>148</sup> The U.S. increased its direct intervention in Laos, which was already over 130 million dollars and actively sought out other groups in Laos with the will to defend their liberty by whatever means necessary.<sup>149</sup> The Eisenhower Administration shifted in policy away from Souvanna and his looming coalition government, believing it was no longer wise to adhere to a policy of wait and see but rather to initiate “immediate and bold action” became paramount.<sup>150</sup> One result of this shift in Administration policy was the approval of “Operation Booster Shot,” a “high-impact Village aid program” intended to increase awareness of the Nationalist Front of Western leaning leaders in regions where the “Royal Lao Government’s political influence and popularity were considered weak.”<sup>151</sup> The Eisenhower Administration decided that the conservative leaders of the RLG should be given “maximum credit” for the Booster Shot program, in order to keep U.S. involvement in Laos secretive and “played down as much as possible”.<sup>152</sup>

The Administration’s negative predictions regarding the elections proved accurate and an entirely new political situation arose in Laos for the start of Eisenhower’s second term in office.

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<sup>147</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 13, Nov. 1957. pp. 1030-1031.

<sup>148</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Stump) to the Chief, Program Evaluation Office, Laos (Brown). Honolulu, 13, Feb. 1958. pp. 426-428.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note, Deputy Under Secretary of State Dillon report on meeting with Souvanna Phouma in Lao Embassy. 14, Jan. 1958. pp. 419-420.

<sup>150</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Stump) to the Chief, Program Evaluation Office, Laos (Brown). Honolulu, 13, Feb. 1958. pp. 426-428.

<sup>151</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 169. pp. 435.

<sup>152</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 171. pp. 437.

<sup>153</sup> The Department of State projected that the Communists and their political party, the “Neo Lao Hak Xat,” could only win from 4 to 6 seats, in the May 4 supplementary elections.<sup>154</sup> This prediction proved overly optimistic: out of the 21 seats at issue, the Communists won nine seats, and the neutralists won only four. The Eisenhower Administration perceived the results of this supplemental election as a victory for the Communists, which could control about one-third of the seats in the newly enlarged assembly (21 out of 59 seats), under a “leftist coalition” and alliance with the neutralists who had become greatly resistant to U.S. influence <sup>155</sup>

After the election, Souvanna continued to repeat his opinion that “the Pathet Lao were not Communist,” claiming that if they were truly Communists “they would have remained in control of the two northern provinces and certainly would never have submitted to the Government’s authority, nor “taken an oath to King, Constitution, and Buddha in pagoda.”<sup>156</sup> Souvanna asserted that the “Pathet Lao were 100 percent Lao before they were other things” and urged the nation to welcome its representatives as liberators, since the RLG couldn’t “sacrifice the rest of the 500,000 people in the two provinces” in order to exclude the PL from the government.<sup>157</sup> Souvanna firmly believed that Laos was the only country in Asia which was not providing of fertile land for Communism. He contended that Laos was underpopulated and traditional, its Buddhism was strong, and the Communists only made up a small minority of the population. Souvanna believed that these factors worked together to make Laos one of the only

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<sup>153</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 17, May. 1958. pp. 441-442.

<sup>154</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum from the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Kocher) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson). Washington, 5, May. 1958. pp. 438.

<sup>155</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 17, May. 1958. pp. 441-442.

<sup>156</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Prime Minister Souvanna meeting with Secretary of State in U.S., pp. 412-419.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.



countries in Southeast Asia which was completely impermeable to subversion and Communist takeover.<sup>158</sup> Souvanna prevailed upon “the United States to have confidence, and to allow three-to-four months’ period to see whether he had been wrong in his judgement.”<sup>159</sup>

While many Lao were convinced by Souvanna that the election results didn’t illustrate a choice of Communism by the Lao electorate, nor an advance of the Communist interests in Laotian politics, the U.S. believed the election results were indicative of the beginnings of Laos’ “submergence within the Communist bloc”.<sup>160</sup> The Eisenhower Administration viewed the Communist threat as noxious and pervasive, contending that the Communists “now controlled nearly one-third of the people of earth and 18 formerly independent nations.” In accordance with this perspective, U.S. officials judged the election to signify yet another country duped by the Communist’s perfidious scheming, the “subtlety of its means and the disguising of its purposes until [it is] too late.”<sup>161</sup> The Administration concluded that Souphanouvong and the NLHX were instruments of world Communism,<sup>162</sup> whose ultimate goal and “aim is to establish Communist control in Laos,” whether by parliamentary means or by force.<sup>163</sup> Ambassador Parsons relentlessly educated Souvanna of the American view that his coalition government wasn’t safe “from the Communist cancer” and that the government posts that the PL were going to undertake were not “minor” or “non-key” as he described, but the strategic positions which would enable

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 17, May. 1958. pp. 441-442.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 15, May. 1958. pp. 439-441.

<sup>161</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Prime Minister Souvanna meeting with Secretary of State in U.S., pp. 412-419.

<sup>162</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 15, May. 1958. pp. 439-441.

<sup>163</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 17, May. 1958. pp. 441-442.

the Communists “to penetrate Lao society through courts, Pagoda schools, and nationwide propaganda.”<sup>164</sup> The Eisenhower Administration felt defeated in its plans for Laos but still persisted in their efforts to “educate” Lao leadership, as a means of maintaining a “political climate” against Communism.<sup>165</sup> However, rather than hearing Souvanna out and listening to his requests, the Eisenhower Administration publicly criticized and attacked Souvanna, calling him a coward for not having the “courage to admit” that the U.S. warnings concerning the Communist threat were correct.<sup>166</sup>

The Eisenhower Administration faulted the conservative Lao leaders for losing the election, “simply because the conservative parties could not reconcile their differences.”<sup>167</sup> The Administration also blamed the electoral losses on the conservative leaders refusal to follow American guidance to put up only one candidate per voting district. Rather, the Lao conservatives nominated 85 candidates for the 21 available seats, which scattered their strength and greatly reduced any possibilities of winning.<sup>168</sup> U.S. officials across the Eisenhower Administration viewed the conservative Laotian leaders with contempt. Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, summarized the views of U.S. officials in his own statements and beliefs that it was unfortunately childish that the conservative Laotians’ “first reaction” after the elections was “simply to blame each other,” like youthful and inexperienced children, “for the mistake that they all made in failing to produce a workable

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<sup>164</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 21, Oct. 1957. pp. 995-997.

<sup>165</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 30, July. 1957. pp. 954-956.

<sup>166</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 29, Oct. 1957. pp. 1010-1011.

<sup>167</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 178. pp. 450-451.

<sup>168</sup> Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 118

united front with a minimum list of conservative candidates.”<sup>169</sup> The State Department viewed the conservative leaders in Laos as a group containing “little organization and discipline,” along with a complete absence of “reasonably effective leadership.”<sup>170</sup> Both Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his successor, Christian Herter, blamed Souvanna for failing to unite the conservative party, and came to view the Lao leader as “suspect,” “discredited,” a “political liability since mid-1956,” and no longer meriting of confidence from the “non-Communist elements at home [in Laos] or abroad.”<sup>171</sup> Eric Kocher, the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, declared that the U.S. should not trust Souvanna, as his “actions thus far” indicate that he might actually be working towards Communism in general, and that this “dangerous concession to the Pathet Lao would not be his last.”<sup>172</sup>

The U.S. embassy in Laos viewed the conservatives in the RLG as “simply not organized” enough to win an election nor to effectively combat the “efficient NLHX party”.<sup>173</sup> Ambassador Parsons believed the “conservative leadership” in the nation to be “tainted” and specifically offering of “small hope for” any possibility of a dynamic government which would side with the West and stay united against Communism.<sup>174</sup> After the failed election, this Embassy relayed its beliefs to the Department of State that the “Lao conservative leaders” are too “indecisive” and “less enthusiastic” than their Communist opposition, as they are immaturely

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<sup>169</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 17, May. 1958. pp. 441-442.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 27, May. 1958. pp. 448-450.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 15, May. 1958. pp. 439-441.

<sup>172</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Acting Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Kocher) to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Sebald). Washington, 26, Nov. 1956. pp. 847-848.

<sup>173</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 19, May. 1958. pp. 443-446.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

“still more concerned about blaming each other for defeat at polls than about future developments” in the country.<sup>175</sup> In summary, the U.S. congressional reaction to the election results and the Lao in general, was that of deeming the whole of Laos as a “waisted aid program” with “discredited” leadership and government.<sup>176</sup>

As a result, the Eisenhower Administration sought to change its policy in Laos in order to “accomplish US objectives of keeping Laos from Communist domination,” and to attain a better result in the “must win” general elections of 1959, in which Allen Dulles decreed that the U.S. had “a good deal to fear.”<sup>177</sup> The overwhelming opinion in Washington was that the U.S. policy in Laos was creating an “unacceptable situation,” and that the recent elections of May 4, in which the communists “scored gains of such an impressive nature,” created a situation in which the U.S. believed to “indicate a real and imminent peril” that would ultimately move Laos “within the Communist orbit within another year.”<sup>178</sup> This greater fear over failure in the elections of 1959 inspired yet another increase in the Eisenhower Administration’s secret involvement in the internal affairs of Laos, and started the “second phase” of American policy toward Laos, in which “Washington became involved in making and unmaking governments and in fighting the Cold War on the battlefields of Laos.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 22, May. 1958. pp. 446-448.

<sup>176</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 27, May. 1958. pp. 448-450.

<sup>177</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 19, May. 1958. pp. 443-446.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 178. pp. 450-451.

<sup>178</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Letter From the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Sprague) to the Deputy under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Dillon). Washington, 22, July. 1958. pp. 466-468.

<sup>179</sup> Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 122.

The conservative front in Laos, following the U.S. embassy's advice, "dissolved their existing political organizations" in order to join together under a new united party called "Rally of the Lao People (RLP)," or as it was also known, "Lao Hom Lao" (LHL).<sup>180</sup> The new Ambassador to Laos who replaced Ambassador Parsons, Horace Smith, "favored Souvanna's neutralist solution," and supported the elections of 1958 to reunify the country regardless of the Pathet Lao's gains, showing a new side and perspective of the U.S. foreign policy in Laos.<sup>181</sup> Washington under Eisenhower, on the other hand, was persuaded that "Souvanna was leading Laos into the Communist camp," regarding the elections of 1958 and his choosing to bring the Pathet Lao into the RLG as the final actions in which "Souvanna destroyed the last vestige of support he had from Washington."<sup>182</sup> Thus, while Ambassador Smith claimed to the RLG that "Washington supported Vientiane," the Eisenhower Administration began its own game in Laos with the CIA at the wheel, which would characterize the latter half of President Eisenhower's foreign policy in Cold War Laos.<sup>183</sup>

The first step of Eisenhower's new policy following the failed elections was to eliminate Souvanna as candidate for Prime Minister, who was considered the sole leader who "presided over severe conservative defeat" in the polls.<sup>184</sup> The U.S. stood alone in this objective, as all of the world's great powers, including France and England, as well as all members of the Communist bloc, supported Souvanna Phouma and his neutralist coalition ideals.<sup>185</sup> The U.S.

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<sup>180</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note, pp. 183.

<sup>181</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 345.

<sup>182</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 119.

<sup>183</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346.

<sup>184</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 27, May. 1958. pp. 448-450.

<sup>185</sup> Winthrop G. Brown, recorded interview by Larry J. Hackman, February 1, 1968, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. pp. 23-24. (Hereafter: Winthrop G. Brown, Interview. pp.); Ambassador Brown's Thoughts on Laos. United States Embassy, Laos. Secret Cable. March 8, 1961. 3 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Ambassador Brown's Thoughts on Laos. 1961. DNSA.)

decided to act unilaterally to have Souvanna removed, by increasing its pressure on the RLG and Souvanna after the elections, which, coupled with the Pathet Lao's continued refusal to merge its fighting forces into the Royal Army, resulted in Souvanna's resignation due to a lack of trust in the NLHX and his feelings of having failed in his attempt at reunification.<sup>186</sup> Rather than letting the neutralization and peaceful coalition strategy of Souvanna play out, the U.S. and its secretive CIA involvement in Laos effectively "undercut the delicate political balance in the country" put in place by Souvanna.<sup>187</sup> The King of Laos then asked Phoui Sananikone, the Western-leaning and anti-Communist leader of the LHL, to form a new government in Laos. On August 18 of 1958, Phoui was approved to form a new cabinet by the National Assembly, which he composed of almost entirely his LHL conservative comrades, and absolutely no members of the NLHX.<sup>188</sup>

Initially, the U.S. was happy with the new LHL regime in Laos and its leader Phoui, who it viewed as the best possible of the leaders in Laos, as no other Lao in recent years had better understood nor faithfully supported U.S. views on the situation in Laos.<sup>189</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. regarded Phoui as the Laotian Prime Minister to be the "best of the Western-oriented politicians" at the time who could individually bring a fresh look at the situation in Laos at the "most opportune time" in 1958, when the U.S. was running out of policy decisions and hope for Laos under Souvanna's leadership.<sup>190</sup> The Eisenhower Administration strongly supported the Phoui regime for the rest of 1958 into 1959, which, as will become apparent in the discussion below,

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<sup>186</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 143.

<sup>187</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 347.

<sup>188</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 144.

<sup>189</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 30, July. 1958. pp. 470-471.

<sup>190</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 20, Jan. 1959. pp. 499-501.

directly resulted in the increasing civil strife and the continuing advance of the Communist efforts in Laos.

Phoui began his rule as Prime Minister with “political courage” and “tactical ability in pushing through unpopular measures” that the U.S. desired, such as the outlawing of the NLHX party and Communism in Laos entirely, while also imprisoning the leaders of the NLHX, including Prince Souphanouvong.<sup>191</sup> Despite such actions against the NLHX and Communists, Phoui still tried to force the Pathet Lao military units to integrate into the RLG as per the agreements of Souvanna Phouma. However, the Pathet-Lao brigade refused to be integrated with the Royal Laotian Army under Phoui. The Pathet Lao viewed the actions of Phoui against the NLHX as an attack against their position, backing them into a corner with little alternatives other than resorting back to conflict.<sup>192</sup> The result of Phoui’s actions - which were supported and influenced by both the U.S. embassy and the newly administered CIA personnel in Laos, who were covertly positioned under the Programs Evaluation Office as civilians working to train the Royal Lao Armed Forces - was a return to conflict in the northern provinces of Laos. The Communists initiated a series of conflicts and territorial occupation in northern Laos, starting with the border incidents of December 1958, in which North Vietnam’s military forces were seen re-entering the conflict on behalf of the newly outlawed Pathet Lao.<sup>193</sup>

The U.S. viewed the renewed conflict in the northern provinces as a condition justifying further clandestine involvement of U.S. forces in Laos and an expansion of the CIA’s role in the political balance of the country, which the U.S. claimed was more “urgent” than the current

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<sup>191</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, October 26, 1958. pp. 486-488.; Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 152.

<sup>192</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 3, June. 1959.

<sup>193</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum. 29, Dec. 1958. pp. 491-496.

program in Vietnam.<sup>194</sup> By direct pressure from the U.S. officials in Laos, Prime Minister Phoui responded to the renewal of military conflict in the northern provinces with a statement before his own special session of the Lao National Assembly and LHL Cabinet. He argued that the fighting had placed the RLG and his ANL military forces in a state of heightened danger, which resulted in the approval of his request for “special powers to implement” an action plan that would deal with the renewed Communist threats and gain greater help from Laos’ friends in the West during the global divide of the present world.<sup>195</sup> The U.S. Embassy in Laos further urged Phoui to use his newly granted special powers to renounce the Geneva Agreements and allow the US to increase its covert military and CIA involvement in Laos under the Heintges Plan.<sup>196</sup> The U.S. was, in effect, secretly using the pro-U.S. Phoui to achieve its own interests. Under the Heintges Plan, the U.S. was permitted to conduct the Programs Evaluation Office’s “new plan for supporting the Lao National Army” (ANL), which was approved by Ambassador Smith and the French Ambassador in Vientiane.<sup>197</sup> The Plan involved reorganizing the PEO as well as increasing its total strength with the assignment of a total of 96 American military personnel which was a net increase of over ten fold (1000 per cent) and resulted in a total of some 139 active duty American military personnel in Laos.<sup>198</sup>

Even though Phoui was openly anti-Communist and subservient to U.S. interests and demands, the administration began to foster negative perceptions of the new leader and his cabinet.<sup>199</sup> Allen Dulles contended that the new regime would likely be unable to “prevent the

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<sup>194</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum. 29, Dec. 1958. pp. 491-496.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 20, Jan. 1959. pp. 499-501.

<sup>197</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum. 29, Dec. 1958. pp. 491-496.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 192. pp. 474.



further growth of pro-Communist influence in Laos.”<sup>200</sup> The Eisenhower Administration blamed Phoui for the intensifying conflict in the northern provinces, citing Phoui’s operations against the Pathet Lao intended to destroy the group entirely, as the primary cause of the revamped Communist aggression in the north.<sup>201</sup> Soon, the U.S. determined that it could not rely upon Phoui, and that his aggressive anti-Communist policies resulted in reinvigorating the conflict in the northern provinces, and ushering back in the “bleak picture” that the U.S. had always held in Laos.<sup>202</sup>

In addition to blaming the Phoui government for the new conflict with the Pathet Lao, the U.S. also believed that “the danger of a Communist take-over in Laos” under the Phoui regime was “growing daily”.<sup>203</sup> To start, Eisenhower and his Laotian Embassy considered the current military situation in the Northern Provinces and the “military posture” of the RLG and ANL under Phoui more generally, as being “untenable” due to the belief that there was a lack of “efficiency” in the army of the ANL, which was decidedly receiving of poor training from the French.<sup>204</sup> Washington concluded that the failure of Phoui to integrate the Pathet Lao brigade resulted in the “glaring exposure of ANL weaknesses” and “loss of public confidence” in the RLG more broadly, which made the “immediate threat to internal security of Laos” by the PL all the more threatening and concerning.<sup>205</sup> The Embassy in Laos perceived the ANL of Phoui as

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<sup>200</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum. 29, Dec. 1958. pp. 491-496.

<sup>201</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 3, June. 1959. pp. 537-538.

<sup>202</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum. 29, Dec. 1958. pp. 491-496.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 30, July. 1958. pp. 470-471.

<sup>203</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 20, Jan. 1959. pp. 499-501.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 3, June. 1959. pp. 537.

something lesser than an “effective security force,” composed of its “glaring weaknesses,” strong “disorganization,” and “low effectiveness”.<sup>206</sup> These perceptions resulted in the general conclusion of Washington, that the PL was “beyond the present ability of ANL to quell,” and that “because of weather, terrain, and appallingly low effectiveness of [the] ANL” its chances of successfully combating Communist aggression were “almost nil”.<sup>207</sup>

Lastly, the Eisenhower Administration viewed the new LHL control over the RLG with fear and aversion, as it perceived this new government as “weak and ineffective, similar to governments Laos had in [the] past,” primarily due to the fact that it was composed of “the same personalities which had dominated Lao politics in the past.”<sup>208</sup> Part of what contributed to the United States’ fear over the new LHL government was that its leaders had not yet reacted to May 4 defeat in elections, which was primarily their own fault. This led Eisenhower and certain military leaders in Laos, such as General Southone of the ANL, to believe that the older conservative leaders and Phoui’s control over the RLG would lead to the “inevitable” legal or illegal take-over of the RLG by the NLHX or Pathet Lao, either in the next elections of 1959, or before they even begin.<sup>209</sup> Thus, the situation in Laos under the LHL and general control of the RLG by Phoui, still remained as an overall “bleak picture” in the view of the U.S. foreign policy decision-makers at the time.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. 1958. pp. 461-466.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 183. pp. 456.

<sup>209</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 17, July. 1958. pp. 460-461.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 20, July. 1958. pp. 461-466.

<sup>210</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 30, July. 1958. pp. 470-471.

These views of U.S. officials regarding the Phoui regime and the return to conflict with the Pathet Lao in the northern provinces of Laos permitted the U.S. to reverse the negative trend in Laos with strong measures, such as the Embassy's decision to approve the new PEO plan of General John A. Heintges. The Heintges plan would effectively commit additional U.S. military personnel in Laos as members of the Civilian Supervisory Group (PEO), which Phoui had originally favored and authorized.<sup>211</sup> This first step of the Eisenhower Administration was made in order to help fix the effectiveness of the ANL and RLG with intensified training efforts aimed at making the ANL an actual and "effective security force".<sup>212</sup> However, this same group of secretive CIA operatives in Laos and within the PEO, eventually brought about Phoui's downfall.

In conclusion of this 1957-1959 period of U.S. policy in Laos under President Eisenhower, one can begin to discern how U.S. beliefs and perceptions of the Laotians and their political situation influenced Eisenhower's policy decisions within the embattled country. Rather than letting the neutralist coalition play out, which would have continued the peace in Laos and solved the divided country's problems, the Administration viewed the coalition with disdain, considering it an unacceptable situation and a consequence of the stupidity of the Laotian actors with which it had to work with. Under such a perspective and belief of the Laotian leadership and coalition government, the U.S. decided to covertly further its involvement in the political situation of Laos and breakdown the coalition government's chance through an undercutting of its power and replacing it with its own Western-leaning government led by Phoui Sananikone.

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<sup>211</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum. 29, Dec. 1958. pp. 491-496.

<sup>212</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 3, June. 1959. pp. 537.

## **Chapter Three**

## **The CIA's Abandonment of Phoui 1959-1961**

This third chapter demonstrates how even the Western-leaning leadership of Phoui Sananikone, who was almost entirely subservient to U.S. interests in Laos, was also subject to the negative and patronizing perceptions, beliefs, and ideas of the United States under President Eisenhower. The chapter proves how these beliefs shaped U.S. policy decisions to abandon Phoui and increase CIA covert involvement in Laos, which ultimately intensified the political strife, division, and war efforts in the embattled country. Through analyzing the Eisenhower Administration's perceptions and beliefs of each successive political power and government regime during this heightened period of conflict and civil war, it becomes glaringly evident how such negative and condescending views of the Laotians influenced the U.S.'s ensuing policy decisions within Laos.

Instead of sticking with Phoui, who the CIA believed to be weak and responsible for the situation in Laos teetering "on the brink of disaster," the U.S. desired new faces and decided to "seek to have younger, more energetic new men included" in the cabinet and in control of the RLG.<sup>213</sup> This began with Washington's decision to install a reliably pro-western regime, which allowed the CIA to put in their first significant and concrete appearance in the internal politics of Laos.<sup>214</sup> The CIA effectively brought together what Washington referred to as the "Young Ones," or Les Jeunes. These were students and young Laotians, such as Phoumi Nosavan, whom the CIA brought back from France, who attributed internal discord in Laos to the "ineptness,

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<sup>213</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Letter From the Ambassador in Laos (Smith). Vientiane, 15, Dec. 1959. pp. 690.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 19, May. 1958. pp. 443-446.

<sup>214</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 183. pp. 456.

corruption and self-seeking” of the older generation of politicians in Laos.<sup>215</sup> At the first meeting of this group on June 17, 1958, the Young Ones formed a political party known as the committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI).<sup>216</sup> According to Ambassador Horace Smith in Laos, the CDNI was composed of over a hundred self-proclaimed young Lao individuals who stood together as a blatantly anti-corruption and anti-communist group.<sup>217</sup> In contrast to the LHL, the U.S. was encouraged by this new formulation of conservatives, believing the CDNI to be better for U.S. interests and causing of a more “hopeful” situation in Laos overall.<sup>218</sup>

Thus, while the Embassy in Laos was working with Phoui and the LHL, the CIA effectively took the reigns of the Eisenhower Administration’s goals in Laos and undermined the State Department’s actions in the country through working with the CDNI. With help of the CIA’s pressure on Phoui, the CDNI saw its inclusion in the Phoui Cabinet, securing four of the eleven Cabinet positions.<sup>219</sup> Having obtained governing influence, the CDNI followed the plans of its secretive CIA advisers, by preventing the LHL from strengthening its control of the RLG.<sup>220</sup> As developments in the military situation continued to prove Phoui was too weak to defend Laos from the Communists, the CIA progressively increased its support of the CDNI and forcefully encouraged it to “stand as a unit against all other conservative groups” in Laos.<sup>221</sup> This forcefully intensified the political rivalries amongst conservatives and caused a deeper split in

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<sup>215</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 143.; Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 325.

<sup>216</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 144.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Editorial Note 183. pp. 456.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 17, July. 1958. pp. 460-461.

<sup>219</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 152.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, October 26, 1958. pp. 486-488.

<sup>220</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Letter From the Ambassador in Laos (Smith) Vientiane, 15, Dec. 1959. pp. 690.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

the unity of anti-Communist elements in Laos overall. The Embassy in Laos became aware of the CIA's secretive involvement in Laos on behalf of the CDNI, and eventually recognized that the CDNI was seeking to replace the LHL leaders with candidates of their own choosing, but the CIA's position of influence and beliefs regarding the Phoui regime were too intransigent to revise.<sup>222</sup>

By the middle of 1959, Phoui Sananikone responded to the actions of the CDNI and began to denounce Phoumi and the CDNI group of young politicians for undermining of his current RLG regime of the LHL.<sup>223</sup> Due to the Eisenhower Administration's perceptions of Phoui and his ANL's lack of effectiveness, by the time of Phoui's open critique of the CDNI, Eisenhower had already added over a hundred Special Forces men to the clandestine military advisory group euphemistically called the Program Evaluation Office or the PEO, under the code name "White Star."<sup>224</sup> The White Star group of covert CIA operatives secretly worked with the Royal Lao Armed Forces (RLAF), whose strongman, General Phoumi Nosavan, a well-known leader of the CDNI and one of the Jeunes, sought dramatic change in Laos.<sup>225</sup> Rather than allowing open U.S. military involvement in Laos on behalf of Phoui and the Western-leaning, anti-Communist regime of the RLG, the Eisenhower Administration viewed this regime with derision, and decided against providing additional assistance.<sup>226</sup> Rather, the CIA and its White Star covert Special Forces group, moved in to preserve Eisenhower's investment in the CDNI,

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

<sup>224</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 30, July. 1958. pp. 470-471.

resulting in supporting the coup ousting Phoui in favor of Phoumi, who assumed control of the RLG and the U.S.'s mission in Laos.<sup>227</sup>

Towards the end of 1959, Phoumi dominated non-Communist Laos. However, Prince Souphanouvong of the NLHX and Pathet Lao escaped from the prison and fled to the North. Souphanouvong had developed a strong dislike of the new anti-Communist Phoumi Government, which he believed to be an even further controlled puppet of the United States.<sup>228</sup> Upon his return to the hills in the northern provinces of Laos, Prince Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao resumed the civil war with new attacks against the RLG and Phoumi's RLAF, along with the NLHX issuing what amounted to be a declaration of war.<sup>229</sup> The White House responded similarly, using the renewed Communist threat in Laos and the increasing assistance to the Pathet Lao from China and North Vietnam, as justification for the Washington White Paper and major statement in September of 1959.<sup>230</sup> The White House Paper set forth further legal justification for American intervention in Laos, Declaring Laos an "embattled country."<sup>231</sup>

The Phoumi Government didn't last long in Laos, despite direct support from the CIA. In 1960, and in direct contravention of repeated U.S. advice to the contrary, Phoumi rigged the new general elections in order to ensure an anti-Communist dominance in the RLG.<sup>232</sup> By the time the new Ambassador to Laos, Winthrop G. Brown, arrived, this rigging of the elections resulted in yet another coup d'etat over the Royal Lao Government and the ousting "pro-U.S. government"

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<sup>227</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

<sup>228</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 325.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*; Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 152.

<sup>230</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 171.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 15, Sept. 1960. pp. 841-845.



of Phoumi by the paratroops of Captain Kong Le.<sup>233</sup> Kong Le was generally understood to be a young paratroop captain and “simple man,” who desired the end of foreign intervention in Laos and ultimately to “bring peace to his people.”<sup>234</sup> On August 9, 1960, as a response to the rigged elections under General Phoumi, Kong Le and his 600 men of the Second Paratroop Battalion of the Royal Armed Forces, successfully took over Vientiane and announced to the world Kong Le’s control over the country.<sup>235</sup> Captain Kong Le then asked Prince Souvanna to form a new government in Laos which would end the political strife in the country and bring peace through unification.<sup>236</sup>

The new Souvanna cabinet, with Captain Kong Le exercising control over the RLG, enjoyed widespread global support as the best alternative to quell the continuing “chaos and division” in Laos.<sup>237</sup> The Eisenhower Administration, however, formed its own divergent opinion concerning the Souvanna Government and Captain Kong Le, which resulted in the U.S. following unilateral policies in Laos once again. This Eisenhower Administration decision was analogous to past U.S. decisions in Laos, such as the determination to defeat the settlement of November 1957, as it similarly deviated from the rest of the world’s desires for the country to be neutral.<sup>238</sup> The U.S.’ unshared views and subsequent unilateral policies can be attributed to the fact that there were still many opponents of neutralism in the Eisenhower Administration, who were heavily concentrated in the Pentagon, State Department, and especially in the Bureau of Far

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.; Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346.

<sup>234</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

<sup>235</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 204

<sup>236</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346.; Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

<sup>237</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 5, Oct. 1960. pp. 877-880.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum of Discussion at the 456th Meeting of the National Security Council. Washington, August 18, 1960. pp. 808-811. (hereafter: Memorandum of 456th NSCM, pp.)

<sup>238</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 210.

Eastern Affairs, where former Ambassador J. Graham Parsons now served as Department Head.

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The re-introduction of Souvanna Phouma into the RLG and his attempt to form a new coalition with the Conservative (non-Communists) and the Pathet Lao to establish a neutralist regime - brought about a renewed profusion of ideas, perceptions, and beliefs amongst Eisenhower Administration policy-makers, building upon past negative conclusions regarding Laos under Souvanna's prior leadership.<sup>240</sup> To start, the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs in Washington considered Kong Le "a probable Communist" and summarized the view of the entire Eisenhower Administration when it claimed to look "with great dubiety on the neutralist solution" provided by Souvanna Phouma.<sup>241</sup> Likewise, the prevailing view in the Department of State was that the Souvanna Cabinet was "one of serious weakness and inexperience."<sup>242</sup> Under Secretary of State, Clarence Douglas Dillon, furthered this belief in claiming that the new cabinet would once again foolishly focus its energies on negotiating a settlement with the PL, and by doing so, allow the Pathet Lao to continue subversion attacks on the RLG, and an improvement of its position unopposed in the countryside.<sup>243</sup> The Department of State perceived Kong Le as "dangerously immature and irrational."<sup>244</sup> Allen Dulles, the Director of the CIA, opined his own "personal view that this was the first step of a possible Communist take-over of Laos," due to the fact that Souvanna "was not a strong political leader" and might actually be used by the Pathet

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<sup>239</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 210.

<sup>240</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

<sup>241</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 327.

<sup>242</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 17, Aug. 1960. pp. 806-808.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

Lao for Communist gains in the political situation of the country.<sup>245</sup> The Eisenhower Administration also put forth its condescending views on the King of Laos, whom it regarded with disdain for lacking the will to take any meaningful action on behalf of the freedom of his country, due to the fact that he had a strong “distaste of... becoming involved in [the] political arena.”<sup>246</sup> Even Ambassador Brown, who supported the Souvanna coalition solution in Laos, offered patronizing views of Souvanna himself, claiming that he is “not a clear thinker,” nor a “particularly good organizer,” and actually “overestimates his own powers” in his decision to negotiate with the Pathet Lao, as he “negotiate[s] from [a point of considerable] weakness.”<sup>247</sup> Ambassador Brown’s tepid support for Souvanna appeared to be based on his contemptuous belief that there wasn’t “any respected figure on the horizon” in Laos who would have had the “leadership qualities or authority necessary” to be the new leader in replacement of Souvanna.<sup>248</sup> Ultimately, U.S. decision-makers concluded that the Souvanna-Kong Le coalition government was in “complete disorder,” due to lacking the “qualifications that are required to hold Laos against PL military and subversive tactics,” and believed that the outcome of such disorder would be the fall of Laos to the Communist Pathet Lao.<sup>249</sup>

Shortly after the formation of the Souvanna and Kong Le controlled RLG regime, a three sided civil war broke out, partly due to the U.S. unilateral and secretive policies in the country. The Pathet Lao continued fighting in the northern provinces. A new conflict between the

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<sup>245</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum of 456th NSCM. pp. 808-811.

<sup>246</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 17, Aug. 1960. pp. 806-808.

<sup>247</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 15, Sept. 1960. pp. 841-845.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 16, Sept. 1960. pp. 848-850.

Neutralists of Kong Le and the anti-Communist rightists of Phoumi, commenced with an attack by Kong Le against Phoumi troops in 1960.<sup>250</sup> Ambassador Brown concluded that the situation had reached a critical point, where there was “now little to no chance” of salvaging the country and in which the U.S. needed to make a decision to “cut its losses” and avoid the risk of actual war in Laos.<sup>251</sup> Ambassador Brown maintained that Souvanna was the only alternative which offered “hope of salvaging anything we care about from the present wreck.”<sup>252</sup> Administration officials came to view Kong Le as “a very bad actor” and “Castro Communist-type individual,” that needed to be removed from power.<sup>253</sup> Eisenhower was fearful that Souvanna Phouma was either an “accomplice or a captive” of Captain Kong Le, and viewed them both as conspirators of the Pathet Lao which should be removed from the RLG.<sup>254</sup> Lastly, and probably most significantly, Eisenhower’s underlying belief was that Souvanna was still working to handover Laos to Communism with his negotiations with the Pathet Lao.<sup>255</sup> These views informed and motivated the U.S. decision to move away from Souvanna and Kong Le, in stark contrast to the rest of the world which perceived Souvanna and Kong Le as nationalists desiring a peaceful end to the political strife in Laos, of which they both repeatedly claimed to be their only intention.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Durdin, Peggy. “Gentle Laos Is Caught in the Cold War.” *New York Times*, 23, Apr. 1961. pp. 226.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt). Washington, 3, Oct. 1960. pp. 876.

<sup>251</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 5, Oct. 1960. pp. 877-880.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum of 456th NSCM, pp. 808-811.

<sup>254</sup> Bowie, Robert R., and Immerman, Richard H. *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy*. Oxford University Press, 1998. pp. 608. (Hereafter: Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*. pp.)

<sup>255</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS, Vientiane, 5, Oct. 1960. pp. 877-880.

<sup>256</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

These negative perceptions of Souvanna and Kong Le, are crucial to a full understanding of the overall context which shaped the U.S. policy decisions in Laos under the Eisenhower Administration. While the entirety of the United States Operations Mission in Laos desired to support Souvanna and a neutralist agreement, the Eisenhower Administration viewed the Souvanna coalition with aversion and ultimately ignored the USOM and Ambassador Brown's desires to unite Souvanna, Phoumi and all non-Communist actors in Laos against the Pathet Lao.<sup>257</sup> Thus, the U.S. decided for the second time in 1960 to avoid the solution of Souvanna, and his neutral coalition government, following the same path it took earlier in 1957 when the U.S. undermined the Vientiane Agreements and supported Phoumi instead.<sup>258</sup>

The U.S. and its secretive CIA militants in Laos began supporting the revolutionary committee Phoumi had set up in Savannakhet with Prince Boun Oum, primarily by channeling aid to Phoumi while bypassing the Vientiane Government of Souvanna.<sup>259</sup> After the Kong Le forces of the RLG under Souvanna began their attack on Phoumi's troops in Savannakhet, the Joint Chiefs of staff and covert CIA militants in Laos decided to prevent any further destruction to the anti-Communist position, which it thought was losing its capacity to effectively contain Communist insurgency.<sup>260</sup> Thus, the Joint Chiefs advised for an aggressive support of General Phoumi, starting with the immediate authorization for the U.S. to provide Phoumi's forces with any supplies necessary to maintain their position against Captain Kong Le.<sup>261</sup> The Joint Chiefs

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<sup>257</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 326.

<sup>258</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 327.

<sup>259</sup> Instances of Phoumi Nosavan's Disregard of U.S. Advice., 1962. Department of State. Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. Secret, Analysis. February 15, 1962. 2 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Hereafter: Instances of Phoumi Nosavan's Disregard of U.S. Advice., 1962. DNSA.); Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346.

<sup>260</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt). Washington, 3, Oct. 1960. pp. 876.

<sup>261</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt). Washington, 3, Oct. 1960. pp. 876.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower,

approved supplying FAL units under Phoumi using PEO facilities with substantial deliveries to the base in Savannakhet by Air America planes, and specifically called for the encouragement of Phoumi to promptly “liquidate Kong Le coup group even at cost of some bloodshed.”<sup>262</sup>

With plans drawn up by his American Advisers in the PEO, Phoumi won what JFK considered “the only military victory of his life” around the end of 1960.<sup>263</sup> While the plans were U.S. designed, the PEO kept with its covert tactics in presenting the plan to Phoumi’s subordinates as Phoumi’s plan.<sup>264</sup> Phoumi was able to successfully launch a coup that toppled Souvanna and liberated Vientiane from the previous government, in part due to the additional secretive military aid from the PEO.<sup>265</sup> Phoumi took control over the RLG and made Prince Boun Oum the Prime Minister over his new Cabinet, thereby strengthening the legitimacy his rule, due to the fact that the Prince was the head of an old family which had formerly ruled Southern Laos with a good reputation and high standing throughout the country.<sup>266</sup> As a result of the coup, Souvanna and Kong Le fled Vientiane in American trucks loaded with American supplies, allowing them to come to terms with Souphanouvong and join forces with the Communist Pathet Lao.<sup>267</sup> In conclusion, Winthrop Brown’s hope for uniting the country under Souvanna had been

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Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Secretary of Defense (Gates). Washington, 16, Sept. 1960. pp. 846-848.

<sup>262</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Secretary of Defense (Gates). Washington, 16, Sept. 1960. pp. 846-848.; Bowers, Ray L. *Tactical Airlift*. Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force: For Sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1983. (Hereafter: Bowers, Ray. *Tactical Airlift*.)

<sup>263</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 328.

<sup>264</sup> Wing, Case Study. C16.

<sup>265</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346.; Conference at the Pentagon with General Phoumi., 1961. United States Department of State, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. Secret, Memorandum. June 29, 1961: 5 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. ProQuest. (Hereafter: Conference with General Phoumi., 1961. DNSA.)

<sup>266</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum of 459th NSCM, Washington, September 15, 1960. pp. 845.; FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 15, Sept. 1960. pp. 841-845.

<sup>267</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 328.

thwarted. Instead, the Eisenhower Administration had driven the neutralists of Kong Le and Souvanna into a reluctant alliance with the Communists and provoked an even further escalation of the war effort, shown by the newfound open Soviet aid to the Pathet Lao.<sup>268</sup>

Heading into 1961 and the transfer of power from the Eisenhower Administration to the Kennedy Administration, the perceptions and beliefs among Eisenhower Administration officials regarding the situation in Laos had concentrated and intensified. As he prepared to leave office, Eisenhower drastically increased U.S. involvement, in both the political situation and in the fighting itself. Eisenhower had come to believe, very strongly, that the situation in Laos was the most critical factor to the future of Southeast Asia. Eisenhower made it a priority to convey his ardent conclusion to the incoming Administration of John F. Kennedy.<sup>269</sup>

The three-sided civil war in Laos, which led to the U.S. decision to back Phoumi in his military coup of the Souvanna and Kong Le government, had been viewed by the Eisenhower Administration as a situation in which the U.S. had to decide between regrettable alternatives of leadership to fix the “present wreck” of a situation in Laos.<sup>270</sup> The first alternative was believed to be “unacceptable,” in supporting Phoumi and Boun Oum who had abrogated the legal government and were led by the “bull-headed Phoumi,” who the U.S. viewed as being overwhelmingly consumed by his own personal ambition.<sup>271</sup> The second alternative, openly supporting Souvanna, was considered “uncertain,” “risky,” and “most unwise” due to the U.S. opinion of Souvanna as a poor leader and lacking of the will power needed to defeat the Pathet

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<sup>268</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 328.

<sup>269</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 163.; FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. pp. 41.

<sup>270</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS, Vientiane, 5, Oct. 1960. pp. 877-880.

<sup>271</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. Vientiane, 15, Sept. 1960. pp. 841-845.

Lao.<sup>272</sup> Ultimately, foreign policy decisions of the Eisenhower Administration during this civil war period were made based on their perceptions of the leaders in question, in which the U.S. chose Phoumi as the alternative and leader with fewer personal issues and “blind spots” in leadership, and as the leader with the better capacity to effectively contain communist insurgency, since Souvanna was viewed as succumbing to the will of the Pathet Lao.<sup>273</sup> The Eisenhower Administration ultimately chose Phoumi, regardless of his limited popular support and international sympathy, based upon the belief that the neutralist government of Souvanna would conclusively make greater concessions to Communists than would the Phoumi government.<sup>274</sup> The U.S. made its decision to support Phoumi secretly through the PEO and behind the back of Vientiane, based on its assumptions and beliefs regarding the Souvanna coalition, and because the U.S. had no better alternatives, “unless [the] King [could] pull some Lao rabbit out of his hat.”<sup>275</sup>

Even after Phoumi’s successful coup ousting Souvanna, the Eisenhower Administration continued to grapple with its lack of confidence in the abilities of Phoumi as a leader, and in the capability of the Phoumi military to quell the Pathet Lao’s advances against the RLG. The Embassy in Laos believed that Phoumi was a decreasing force that could only reunite the country by “some miracle”, and viewed his armed forces as being entirely characteristic of the Lao’s “inherent reluctance to fight”.<sup>276</sup> Furthermore, Ambassador Brown believed that Phoumi’s forces were best characterized by the military and psychological defeats they endured during the civil

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 16, Sept. 1960. pp. 848-850.

<sup>275</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS, Vientiane, 5, Oct. 1960. pp. 877-880.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.



war period fighting Kong Le's neutralist forces, which resulted in a lost confidence in themselves and in their leader.<sup>277</sup> The U.S. believed that the Phoumi regime's ability to thwart the Pathet Lao and militarily combat Communism in Laos was almost nil, due to the perceived fact that the military forces are strongly tempted by the appeal of neutrality and negotiations as opposed to fighting the Pathet Lao.<sup>278</sup> The Eisenhower Administration believed that Phoumi would never curb the spread of the Pathet Lao in the northern provinces on its own, due to the fact that Phoumi's Royal Laotian Army let two weeks go by before taking out after the fleeing troops of Kong Le, and instead allowed them to join the Pathet Lao in the North.<sup>279</sup> Ambassador Brown offered his own patronizing views of Phoumi as a leader and critiqued the U.S.' decision to back Phoumi in Laos as the best defendant of the country's freedom, claiming that Phoumi never truly listened to the Embassy's advice, and cited the General elections of December 1959 as an example. In these elections, Brown argued, the U.S. repeatedly advised Phoumi not to rig the elections or use blatant intimidation tactics, but Phoumi and his cohorts entirely disregarded such advice and instead used the FAR for intimidation purposes, along with rigging the elections in such "a crude nature that it was obvious to the most naive."<sup>280</sup> The most naive, were believed by almost all U.S. officials, to be the Lao population, which was considered as being ideal for Communist subversion tactics due to its "primitive" characteristics, such as its lack of education of even its governmental leaders, and the assumed fact that less than 15 percent of the population is literate.<sup>281</sup> Ultimately, the Eisenhower Administration concluded that, due to the Lao's

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Goldstein, Martin. *American Policy Toward Laos*. pp. 329.

<sup>280</sup> *Instances of Phoumi Nosavan's Disregard of U.S. Advice.*, 1962. DNSA.

<sup>281</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum From the Acting Director of Central Intelligence (Cabell) to the Secretary of State. Washington, 27, Sept. 1956. pp. 823-825.; FRUS,

ignorance and Naivete, Washington was in a better position “to know what was going on in Laos than the Laotians were themselves.”<sup>282</sup>

The American impression of Lao governing and fighting capabilities was not limited to the Phoui regime, but characterized the U.S.’s views on virtually all of the Laotians during this civil war period, with the possible exception of the Communists. The Pathet Lao were viewed as capable fighters, Eisenhower believed, as the result of inspiration derived in the Communist philosophy.<sup>283</sup> The Eisenhower Administration believed the “civil war had succumbed to the national indolence,” and basically regarded the conflict in Laos to be similar to the U.S.’s beliefs about the Laotian character overall, being lazy and avoiding of work and conflict.<sup>284</sup> This belief regarding “the pacifist inclinations of the Royal Laotian Army,” was supported through Eisenhower’s description of the troops’ actions prior to Kennedy’s Inauguration, which was said to have only managed to cover sixty five miles in twenty-nine days in its effort to stop the Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces and only having one casualty: “a lieutenant who accidentally shot himself in the foot.”<sup>285</sup> The U.S. presumed that the Lao troop’s lack of aggressiveness and combat proficiency was due to the army’s educational level being too low, its lack of competent or charismatic leaders, and the general lackadaisical nature of the Lao character, along with the facts that the military units had insufficient rations, difficult field conditions, and poor pay, resulting in a low morale amongst all.<sup>286</sup>

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1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 30, July. 1957. pp. 954-956.; United States, Department of State. Southeast Asia: Laos Fact Sheet. pp. 2.

<sup>282</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in Laos. Washington, 17, Aug. 1960. pp. 806-808.

<sup>283</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. A Thousand Days. pp. 163.

<sup>284</sup> Goldstein, Martin. American Policy Toward Laos. pp. 329.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Hearings, October 1969, pp. 371.

Furthermore, The State Department under Dulles believed that the Lao were weak and not “much given to fighting,” due to their perceived “long tradition of not liking bloodshed.”<sup>287</sup> The U.S. generally assumed that the “Lao favored contemplation and disliked killing,” and were decidedly weak and lousy in fighting for the defense of their country’s freedom versus the Pathet Lao due to their “ambition... to be let alone to enjoy themselves” as a part of their characteristics as Buddhists.<sup>288</sup> U.S. officials under Eisenhower attributed the “military shortcoming of Laos” in its ability to thwart Communism was its country’s leadership, which were reported to have “limited military training or experience,” “fear of North Vietnamese prowess,” and lacking of both competence and charisma as leaders of an army fighting for freedom.<sup>289</sup>

The U.S. perceptions of the Lao and its Government were further represented and supported by U.S. news publications at the time, such as the *New York Times*, which described the Lao as “unlettered and uninformed,” who were “among the most pacific people” in the world.<sup>290</sup> These news articles depicted the Lao as “small, graceful, brown-skinned” people and “simple peasants” who lacked the knowledge of main world currents to such an extreme extent that they were stuck in the misinformed past, as they “still” thought the “earth is flat” and had trouble identifying their own Prime Minister in their “life of bucolic simplicity.”<sup>291</sup> These impressions were furthered in the critique of the Laotian Army, by *Time Magazine*, which supported the Eisenhower Administration’s beliefs in claiming that it was “an unimpressive fighting force,” which was not likely to “make a free-world bastion” out of the “isolated jungle

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<sup>287</sup> FRUS, 1958-1960, Eisenhower, Vol. XVI, Laos. Memorandum of 456th NSCM, pp. 809.

<sup>288</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 324.

<sup>289</sup> Hearings, October 1969, pp. 371.

<sup>290</sup> Durdin, Peggy. “Gentle Laos Is Caught in the Cold War.” *New York Times*, 23, Apr. 1961. pp 226.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid*.

nation” of Laos.<sup>292</sup> Time later offered even greater patronizing views of the Lao and its Army fighting for freedom, claiming that the “troops had disastrously flunked” their military tests by fleeing from battle the second they encountered the enemy, leaving behind even more weapons, ammunition and trucks to their enemies of the Pathet Lao.<sup>293</sup>

These beliefs of the Eisenhower Administration and the U.S. more generally, painted a picture of the Lao as “a relaxed and lackadaisical people,” which ultimately “lacked the nationalist frenzy” required for defending their freedom against Communism on their own.<sup>294</sup> The Congressional Subcommittee for Foreign Operations, asserted that “by nature the Lao seem to be a peaceable people” with a natural aversion for conflict and crime.<sup>295</sup> In effect, Laos became a nation within the State Department’s beliefs regarding all of the Southeast Asian countries, which it decreed were not “strong enough to withstand armed Communist aggression without help.”<sup>296</sup> The Laotian nation became understood as the country which is “less fitted to serve as a pivotal point in the struggle against Communism” than “scarcely any [other] country on earth,” due to its “affably unambitious people” with an “innate gentleness.”<sup>297</sup> Ultimately, the Eisenhower Administration looked down on the nation of Laos and its people, and continued to claim that due to Laos’ “pathetic history,” the U.S. would never intervene militarily for the “vacillating people who seemingly will not fight for themselves”.<sup>298</sup> Eisenhower emphasized that the United States held very great responsibilities for “preserving the independence and liberty of

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<sup>292</sup> The Price of Peace. *TIME*. 18, Jan. 1960, Vol. 75 Issue 3, pp. 33.

<sup>293</sup> Time to Reconcile. *TIME*. 10, Nov. 1960. Vol. 76 Issue 15, pp. 40.

<sup>294</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 323-324.

<sup>295</sup> U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th Report. U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Government Operations; Foreign Operations and Monetary Affairs Subcommittee, Seventh Report. 10, June. 1959. California State University, Sacramento. pp. 4. (Hereafter: U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th Report, 1959. pp.)

<sup>296</sup> Southeast Asia Fact Sheet. United States Department of State. pp. 6.

<sup>297</sup> Laos: The Unloaded Pistol. *TIME*. 21, Sept. 1959. Vol. 74 Issue 12, pp. 35-36.

<sup>298</sup> Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, 1961. DNSA.

many countries all over the world, including some such as Laos which are far distant and of which they know little,” but the government couldn’t stand and help those, such as the citizenry of Laos, who didn’t have “an equal determination to defend their independence against internal or external attack” from Communist subverters.<sup>299</sup>

These perceptions and beliefs in the civil war period of Laos, in which the Eisenhower Administration regarded the capabilities of the Lao citizenry, RLG and military forces to be lacking of the qualities needed to prevent the spread of Communism, participated in creating the U.S. policy to pursue an even greater involvement in the country’s politics and civil war, while being careful to avoid direct U.S. force and military action. The U.S. undertook the covert policy of “paramilitary action and political manipulation in Laos” which reached “heights never before achieved” and effectually created nations within the landlocked nation of Laos.<sup>300</sup> Headed by the covert CIA operatives in Laos, the agency started with the recruitment of the Hmong tribe in the Annamite Mountains, also known as the Meo, under what would eventually be called Project Momentum, which became the bedrock of the CIA’s secret war in Laos.<sup>301</sup> During the three-way civil war period in Laos, on the surface Washington supported Vientiane and the RLG, but it secretly recruited the Hmong ethnic group to form what it considered to be a “secret army” or “armee clandestine” and began its covert alliance with the small population of mountain dwellers through inducing Phoumi to pass along supplies and aid to the Hmong, who in return swore allegiance to the General.<sup>302</sup> In contrast to the perceived inferior capabilities of the RLG and its military forces to quell Communist insurgency, the CIA “appreciated the Hmong fighting

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<sup>299</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Eisenhower, Vol. XXI, Laos. Memorandum of a Conversation, 27, Feb. 1955. pp. 612-618.

<sup>300</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 344-350.

<sup>301</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 346-348.

<sup>302</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 348.

abilities,” and placed great trust and aid in the ethnic group which reportedly had no national allegiance to Laos.<sup>303</sup> The relative success of this clandestine paramilitary group was believed to be a reflection of Vientiane’s army being “too weak” to exert similar authority and its perceived qualities of being too fearful of combat and actual work.<sup>304</sup> Thus, while the U.S. alleged to support whichever leader held control over the RLG, the CIA was waging secret warfare against the Pathet Lao with its Armee Clandestine of the Hmong, led by Vang Pao. Vang Pao and his covert military was furnished with U.S. military equipment and airlifts that provided by Air America under contract to USAID.<sup>305</sup> The Eisenhower Administration chose to follow such a secretive policy in Project Momentum because the U.S. could create an entire army out of people already in Laos for a fraction of the cost of the placement and use of actual U.S. troops, which would ultimately have to fight alongside the perceived weak army of Lao.<sup>306</sup> The project and undisclosed paramilitary alliance remained secretive by virtue of its success as a project controlled by the CIA, which was already waging counterinsurgency operations elsewhere in the world. This effectively allowed the CIA to move freely in Laos, permitting the disguise of its monetary and military supply aid for the Hmong in aid to Thailand, military assistance, USAID, and CIA budgets.<sup>307</sup> As a result, before Kennedy took office there were already 2,500 Hmong in the secret army serving as America’s paramilitary organization and alternative to direct military action with U.S. forces in the Laotian Civil War.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 349.

<sup>304</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 350.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>306</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 352.

<sup>307</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 351-353.

<sup>308</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 348.

The paramilitary and covert involvement in Laos was coupled with massive monetary and military aid to the RLG, reaching over \$300 million by 1960, which amounted to over \$50 for every inhabitant of the country and more aid per capita than any other country in the world.<sup>309</sup> Throughout the U.S.' involvement in the Laotian civil war, American aid administered through the USOM practically supported the entire economy of Laos.<sup>310</sup> Over eighty-five percent of the aid was used to support the 25,000-man army with a military budget that averaged about \$31 million a year.<sup>311</sup> The U.S. continued to increase the amount of aid provided to Laos as the threat of Communist insurgency was perceived to grow, as the amount of support was established on a basis of military judgement and a political determination made by the Department of State, which viewed the 25,000-man army as not being able to thwart Communism on its own.<sup>312</sup> The Secretary of Defense under Eisenhower concurred in the views of the State Department and Joint Chiefs, including their perceptions of the force levels in Laos, which determined the financial aid based on political reasons and judgements.<sup>313</sup> Due to this, Laos became the only country in the world where the United States supported 100 percent of the country's military budget.<sup>314</sup> Despite this devastatingly large aid program, the living standards of the public were not lifted, and U.S. officials believed that the aid failed in producing a productive military force. Instead, the monetary affairs committee of the U.S. Congress argued that the aid actually widened the gap between the RLG and its citizenry while strengthening the appeals of the Communist Pathet Lao, which ultimately damaged U.S. goals for the country to prevent Communist takeover and

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<sup>309</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 325.

<sup>310</sup> U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th Report, 1959. pp. 1-3.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th report. pp. 7-8.

<sup>313</sup> U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th report. pp. 7-8.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

increased the civil strife in Laos more generally.<sup>315</sup> As a result, by the end of the Eisenhower Administration and the beginning of John F. Kennedy's succession, the aid program had reached such shockingly high numbers and fruitlessness, that any attempt at fixing the program proved "an almost impossible task."<sup>316</sup>

In effect, critics of U.S. government policy such as John Prados and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Paul Nitze, have contended that U.S. actions under the Eisenhower Administration staunchly undercut "the delicate political balance in the country, hardly conducive to democracy," and left the Kennedy Administration with an adverse military situation and civil war which was "deteriorating progressively," with little hope of the U.S. actually achieving its objectives for Laos to become a bastion of freedom.<sup>317</sup> The war tragically developed into a conflict between competing external forces, in which the different sides of the civil strife became the pawns of the international struggle between the East and West. Eisenhower dismissed and "emasculated" Souvanna, the one person in Laos who could have been a unifying force, due to the Administration's complaints that he was "too weak," and unable to control the Pathet Lao situation.<sup>318</sup> Instead, Kennedy entered office with the U.S. fully supporting the regime of General Phoumi, which many important free world countries considered to be illegitimate and showed an overt "unwillingness" to work with.<sup>319</sup> Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown, who served in Laos under the Kennedy Administration, later testified that

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<sup>315</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 325.; U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th report. pp. 1-3.

<sup>316</sup> U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th report. pp. 11

<sup>317</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 347.; FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense McNamara. [Attached] Report Prepared by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Laos. January 23, 1961. pp. 28-40. (Hereafter: Memorandum to McNamara. pp.)

<sup>318</sup> Winthrop G. Brown, Interview. pp. 11-14.

<sup>319</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum to McNamara. pp. 28-40.



rather than believing in Souvanna, as had the rest of the world, the previous Administration denied Souvanna the resources and political support necessary for completion of his goals, and instead followed a policy that pushed Souvanna into the arms of the Pathet Lao and Laos' Communist neighbors.<sup>320</sup> Ambassador Brown alleged that these policy decisions of the Eisenhower Administration were entirely "wrong" and fundamentally based upon a "misjudgement" of Souvanna and his abilities and motivations as a leader in Laos.<sup>321</sup> The result of Eisenhower's policies was an increased war effort in Laos, by the U.S. and the Soviets; the Soviets began airlifting equipment and aid to the Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces against Phoumi, the North Vietnamese increased their involvement with an addition of an estimated 9,000 military units in Laotian territory, and the U.S. began its own expanded involvement with a set of fifteen Air America planes flying one thousand tons of supplies each month into Laos and a naval task force with Marines standing in a high state of alert, ready for intervention across the border in Thailand.<sup>322</sup> Kennedy inherited a built-up military situation in Laos, in which the U.S. had unilaterally supported the undesirable General Phoumi and his Boun Oum government, which now stood in a "condition of near collapse" due to its efforts to impede the Pathet Lao.<sup>323</sup> The U.S. was stuck in its unilateral policy, and the war situation in Laos had reached the brink of escalation to another dangerous Southeast Asian conflict between great world powers.

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<sup>320</sup> Winthrop G. Brown, Interview pp. 11-14.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Memorandum of Conference with the President, March 9, 1961--3:30 p.m., 1961. United States Military Aide to the President. Top Secret, Minutes. March 29, 1961: 9 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. ProQuest. (Hereafter: Conference with the President, 1961. DNSA.); Capabilities of the Royal Laotian Government Armed Forces., 1962. United States Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Memorandum. February 21, 1962: 2 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. ProQuest. (Hereafter: Capabilities of the Royal Laotian Government Armed Forces, 1962. DNSA.); Department of the Air Force. Oral History Interview. Lieutenant Colonel Butler B. Toland, Jr., pp. 17-22. (Hereafter: Air Force Oral History Interview, Colonel Toland. pp.)

<sup>323</sup> Capabilities of the Royal Laotian Government Armed Forces., 1962. DNSA.

In conclusion of Eisenhower's second term as President of the United States, it is clear how the negative perceptions and beliefs of the Eisenhower Administration regarding the Laotians, their leadership, and their Royal Government, concretely influenced and shaped U.S. policy in the country. Due to the Administration's widespread negative and condescending beliefs of the non-Communist Laotians, their leadership, and their capabilities overall, Eisenhower concluded that the nation was undeserving of direct U.S. military support and ground troop engagement. Eisenhower believed that the Laotians weren't capable of defending their nation against Communism on their own, but would never support sending American troops and risking American lives to fight alongside such "vacillating people" with a "pathetic history" and who seemingly "will not fight for themselves."<sup>324</sup> Thus, with such patronizing views in mind, the U.S. decided to avoid direct U.S. force and military engagement, and instead pursue an even greater involvement in Laos' politics and civil war through covert CIA action and the creation of the CIA's clandestine paramilitary war. The end result of Eisenhower was a conclusively heightened conflict in Laos, increased U.S. covert involvement, and intensified widespread negative beliefs and perceptions of the Laotian nation amongst U.S. officials.

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<sup>324</sup> Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, 1961. DNSA.

## **Chapter Four**

## **Handover to JFK 1961-63**

The Fourth Chapter of this paper serves to exemplify how the negative perceptions and beliefs of the United States regarding Laos continued to intensify and grow under President John F. Kennedy. This section convincingly demonstrates how Kennedy's continuance of the patronizing views of the Laotian situation influenced his own policy decisions in Laos, which ultimately resulted in a further heightening of the conflict and civil strife in Laos, coupled with intense increases in U.S. covert involvement in the country, and the creation of what is now considered the CIA's Secret War in Laos.

The overwhelming impression Kennedy maintained from the Eisenhower Administration on the Laotian question, was that the U.S. could not intervene militarily in Laos on behalf of the West, as it would be difficult to justify strong support for such an apathetic people, "who seemingly will not fight for themselves," and "evidently could not care less" about their freedom, nor the political situation taking place around the world.<sup>325</sup> This determination was derived from the beliefs and perceptions set forth by the Eisenhower Administration, and only became more entrenched under Kennedy. The new President did, however, stray from Eisenhower's view in at least one respect: while Eisenhower felt that Laos was a critical domino in the Southeast Asian geopolitical struggle, Kennedy thought that the nation wasn't "worthy" of engaging the great powers, and that the previous Administration's effort to transform the country into a pro-Western buffer was ridiculous, as neutralization was the clear and correct policy.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, 1961. DNSA.; Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 332.

<sup>326</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 329.

The Kennedy Administration viewed the current situation as being caused by the “weakness” of the RLG and the general “apathetic” attitude of the Lao populace toward the civil strife in Laos, which were seemingly unaffected by the U.S. aid, military training, and development programs throughout Laos in the previous years.<sup>327</sup> Covert CIA officials viewed the FAL with contempt, claiming that the army continued to exemplify their lack of will to resist and to actually fight the Pathet Lao, along with not even knowing what they were fighting for. The Kennedy Administration and its CIA officials in Laos perceived the command and military establishment of General Phoumi as “confused, inefficient and... ineffective” in its capabilities.<sup>328</sup> Ambassador Brown, the new Ambassador to Laos in 1961 under JFK, concluded that the military units of Phoumi were “less effective... than usual” in the heightened conflict.<sup>329</sup> CIA operatives in Laos agreed, arguing that the military’s “impotence” was revealed by 1961 with the involvement of North Vietnamese troops, which struck terror in the FAR and FAL forces and caused them to retreat, even though they were greater than twice the size of the enemy forces entering battle.<sup>330</sup> Kennedy’s national security advisors believed that the RLG forces had “no stomach and no real capability” for engagement with the Viet Minh who successfully defeated the French, and argued that the forces practically “already put on track shoes” and stood ready to “run at first indication” of the North Vietnamese presence with the Pathet Lao.<sup>331</sup> General

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<sup>327</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense McNamara. Washington, January 23, 1961. pp. 26-40.

<sup>328</sup> *Synopsis of intelligence material reported to the president*. United States. White House, Staff Secretary. Top Secret, Intelligence Brief. January 4, 1961: pp. 1-2. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954, 1954-1968. Proquest. (Hereafter: *Synopsis of intelligence reported to the President, 1961*. DNSA.); *The Situation in Laos*. U.S. Department of State. 1961. DNSA.; *Conference with the President, 1961*. DNSA.

<sup>329</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in the United Kingdom. Washington, April 15, 1961. pp. 132-134.

<sup>330</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Message [text not declassified] to Director of Central Intelligence McCone. Vientiane, May 13, 1962. pp. 762-764.

<sup>331</sup> *Capabilities of the Royal Laotian Government Armed Forces, 1962*. DNSA.

Rueben Tucker of the U.S. military advising team in Laos, reported to U.S. officials that the leadership of the RLG forces in battle were the first to leave in retreat, and directly caused the poor combat effectiveness of the military units, which he perceived to be approximately nil.<sup>332</sup> General William H. Craig, another covert U.S. action officer in Laos, furthered this negative perception of the Royal Armed Forces, claiming that the “lack of leadership” was a “major deficiency” of the FAL and that there was a plethora of “incompetent officers” placed in command of the forces by the “ineffective” leadership of General Phoumi.<sup>333</sup>

U.S. news publications in 1961 painted a similar picture of the RLG and its Armed Forces, and for the most part described the Laotian situation as being due to the result of the weaknesses of the Laotian character inherent in the RLG’s militants. *Time Magazine* depicted the Laotian soldiers as Buddhists which never fired their weapons at the enemy, but instead found ways to retreat their entire 29,000-man army, even in the face of only 300 paratroopers of the enemy.<sup>334</sup> Articles described the Royal Laotian Army and its soldiers as “small, laughing men” which “swam in mountain streams, stole pigs, got drunk on rice whisky,” and anything else other than the occasional firing of their U.S. supplied guns in the “general direction of the enemy” with no intention of actually killing another human being.<sup>335</sup> The overall image created by news publications and U.S. officials in Laos in 1961, was that the entire Kingdom of Laos was “lackadaisical,” and “primitive,” and that any U.S. goals in the country to thwart Communism

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<sup>332</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Meeting with Congressional Leaders. Washington, May 15, 1962. pp. 770-774.

<sup>333</sup> *Summary of Briefing by Brigadier General William H. Craig, Joint Staff, On His Trip to Southeast Asia.* Memorandum For The President. 26, Sept. 1961. United States. Special Military Representative of the President. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Hereafter: Summary of Briefing by Brigadier General William H. Craig. 1961. DNSA.)

<sup>334</sup> Unattractive Choice. *Time*. 27, Jan. 1961. Vol. 77 Issue 5, pp. 25.

<sup>335</sup> The White Elephant. *Time*. 17, March. 1961. Vol. 77 Issue 12, pp. 22-30.

wouldn't be successfully carried out by the RLAF, which was considered apart of the 90% of the population which still believed the world was flat and inhabited by mostly Laotians.<sup>336</sup>

The escalation of the Laotian civil war and the U.S.' involvement under Eisenhower ultimately didn't improve U.S. views on the abilities of the Royal Lao Army (FAL) to impede the Pathet Lao. Instead the Kennedy Administration understood the heightened conflict as one in which the enemy maintained the capability to easily defeat the FAL and Lao Armed Forces (FAR) of Phoumi, resulting in their immediate takeover of all of Laos.<sup>337</sup> Ambassador Brown later testified that JFK's national security advisers repeatedly advised that General Phoumi was "incapable" of coping with the armed resistance of the Pathet Lao, and reinforced this with his own opinion that Phoumi's Armed Forces were "indolent, enchanting people," but not "vigorous" or "organized" enough to effectively thwart the Pathet Lao, which resulted in the overarching conclusion Laos was decidedly "hopeless."<sup>338</sup> Phoumi was further viewed as "unreliable," and an "inheritance of the mistakes of the previous Administration" which didn't deserve any further support in the Laotian Crisis.<sup>339</sup> The Kennedy Administration viewed the military situation as "intolerable," with the increasing Soviet Airlift of over 2400 tons of equipment, North Vietnam's continued alliance of the Pathet Lao in the battlefield, and the Communist offensives progressively pushing back the RLG's forces, all combining to expand the probability of an imminent overnight collapse of the Western leaning RLG.<sup>340</sup> Ambassador

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<sup>336</sup> The White Elephant. Time. 17, March. 1961. Vol. 77 Issue 12, pp. 22-30.

<sup>337</sup> Memorandum for Mr. McGeorge Bundy. Nov, 27, 1961. *Lao army capabilities attachment not included*. United States Department of State, Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. (Hereafter: Memorandum for Mr. McGeorge Bundy. 1961. DNSA.)

<sup>338</sup> Winthrop G. Brown, Interview. pp. 23-24.

<sup>339</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Telegram From the Delegation to the Conference on Laos to the DOS. Geneva, November 21, 1961. pp. 522-523.

<sup>340</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Bowles to President Kennedy. Washington, April 26, 1961. pp. 140-144.; Conference with the President, 1961. DNSA.

Brown informed Kennedy that this escalation of the crisis was directly caused by Eisenhower's decision to support the illegitimate Phoumi Government, which forced the coup'd Prime Minister Souvanna to form a rival government with vigorous military and political support from the forces of Kong Le, the Pathet Lao, the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam, all of which openly challenge the credentials and legitimacy of the RLG under Phoumi.<sup>341</sup>

Under these assumptions, the Kennedy Administration revised U.S. policy in Laos, as seemingly no one in the international community supported the U.S.'s unilaterally imposed leadership, and instead sought to eliminate the rival Souvanna government through its inclusion in the RLG under a neutral government.<sup>342</sup> President Kennedy made apparent that the United States was now willing to accept any truly neutral government in Laos and allowed the reemergence of the Geneva convention and International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question by May 16, 1961.<sup>343</sup> JFK thought that the international agreements in Geneva were the only way to prevent Communist takeover of Laos as things stood in 1961, as the direct use and intervention of U.S. military troops was considered incomprehensible, due to the fact that the U.S. couldn't prop up a country such as Laos, that would not fight for themselves in their own battle against Communist insurrection.<sup>344</sup> Due to the President's reinforced beliefs of Phoumi's ineffectiveness, Kennedy concluded that American troops must not go to die in Laos for the weak and ultimately doomed Western-leaning leader.<sup>345</sup> Instead, Kennedy reshaped U.S.

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<sup>341</sup> Ambassador Brown's Thoughts on Laos. 1961. DNSA.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum to McNamara. pp. 26-40.; Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos and Protocol Signed at Geneva. Department of State Bulletin. LBJ Library. August 13, 1962. pp. 258-263. (Hereafter: Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, 1962. Department of State Bulletin. pp.)

<sup>344</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Kennedy and Acting Secretary of State Ball. Washington, May 11, 1962. pp. 740-741.

<sup>345</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. A Thousand Days. pp. 516.



policy in Laos to seek a coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma, in which he placed roving Ambassador Averell Harriman in charge of the 14 nation conference of negotiations and called for an immediate cease-fire in Laos.<sup>346</sup> In April of 1961, President Kennedy declared that the U.S. unreservedly supported the goal of a neutral and independent Laos and rejoined the desires of almost every nation in the world which stood in favor of a neutral Laos. Kennedy viewed neutrality in Laos differently than Eisenhower, asserting that it “is not simply a negative concept,” but a part of the rights of Laos to choose its own way of life.<sup>347</sup>

The fundamental errors in U.S. policy in Laos, based on misjudgements and false assumptions of the Lao leaders and specifically Souvanna Phouma, had finally come to an end under the Kennedy Administration. The U.S. belatedly trusted Souvanna, and by July of 1962, the participating governments of the International Conference in Geneva signed, for the second time, a Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos.<sup>348</sup> The Settlement once again called for the removal of all foreign troops and military personnel from Laos, and for a truly neutral Coalition Government under Souvanna Phouma.

Unfortunately, the settlement was doomed from its inception and was never actually put into effect, even though it was signed by all members of the International Conference and despite considerable attempts by the U.S. to make the reconciliation possible. The Coalition might have had a chance during the Vientiane Agreements of 1957, but the Eisenhower Administration had shot that idea down then, and again in 1960, and now the coalition goal appeared impossible, due

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<sup>346</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Meeting with Congressional Leaders. May 15, 1962. pp. 770-774.

<sup>347</sup> United States Outlines Program to Insure Genuine Neutrality for Laos. Secretary Rusk. Department of State. 15, Aug 1961. pp. 4-6. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. (Hereafter: United States Outlines Program to Insure Genuine Neutrality for Laos. Secretary Rusk. pp.)

<sup>348</sup> Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, 1962. Department of State Bulletin. pp. 258-263.

to the heightened conflict and significant disadvantages which did not exist during the previous attempts to form a coalition.<sup>349</sup> The Pathet Lao had no reason to forgo their advantages, as they now had great support from North Vietnam, China, and the USSR, increased from 1800 men to over 38,000 trained and equipped soldiers, and were internationally recognized as having the capability to overthrow the RLG by military force.<sup>350</sup> As a result, the Pathet Lao continued, and even intensified, their aggression against the Royal Laotian Armed Forces during the Coalition negotiations, and sought to advance their control over Laos at the expense of neutrality. The Viet Minh never truly withdrew from Laos, as over 2,000 still presided in the country, there was never any successful integration of armed or civilian forces. There was never any successful integration of armed or civilian Communist forces. Ultimately, the Communists continued to violate the cease-fire through unprovoked attacks on the Royal Army units, neutralists, and everyone else.<sup>351</sup>

The Kennedy Administration's decision to support a Coalition Government and the reconvening of the Geneva Convention as an alternative to United States direct military intervention ultimately failed. As a result, the civil strife in Laos continued to escalate, but now the alliance between the neutralists and the Pathet Lao had ceased, as Souvanna and Kong Le rejoined the rightist wing of Phoumi as defenders of Laotian independence against Communism.<sup>352</sup> By the end of 1962, entering into 1963, sharp fighting between the Pathet Lao and the Souvanna-Kong Le-Phoumi alliance had restarted, initiated by the Pathet Lao's shooting down

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<sup>349</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 517.

<sup>350</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Meeting with Congressional Leaders. Washington, May 15, 1962. pp. 770-774.

<sup>351</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in the Soviet Union. Washington, Feb. 14, 1963. pp. 933-934.

<sup>352</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. *A Thousand Days*. pp. 517.

of an Air America plane in the Plaines Des Jarres area that was cleared by Souvanna and international authorities to bring food and comfort items to the neutralist forces, along with the assassination of one of Kong Le's top commanders and strong supporters.<sup>353</sup> The true breakdown of the Geneva Accords was exemplified in the continued attacks of the Pathet Lao, such as its takeover of Nam Tha, which eliminated any doubt of the Pathet Lao's intention to conquer Laos by armed force and resulted in further U.S. opinions and beliefs regarding the RLG's Armed Forces and its overarching capabilities to prevent the Pathet Lao.<sup>354</sup> The U.S. viewed the last advances of the Pathet Lao forces in central Laos to have gone "well beyond the level of activity that had been tacitly accepted as permissible under the umbrella of the Geneva Accords," and decided that the U.S. needed to react, otherwise the RLG's forces under U.S. support would incur increased aggressiveness and moves from the Pathet Lao that would damage the U.S. position in the country.<sup>355</sup>

The new alliance of neutral and Western-leaning forces was viewed by U.S. officials to have the "same weaknesses" as the previous forces of Phoumi, demonstrated by a "strong tendency to retreat or abandon position in the face of relatively light pressure" of the enemy, which increased ten-fold if the North Vietnamese were suspected to be with the Pathet Lao.<sup>356</sup> The Kennedy Administration perceived Kong Le as displaying of his own "definite weaknesses

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<sup>353</sup> FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Memorandum From the President's Military Representative's Naval Aide (Bagley) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor). Washington, Nov. 28, 1962. pp. 921-923.; FRUS, 1961-1963, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Telegram From the DOS to the Embassy in the Soviet Union. Washington, Feb. 14, 1963. pp. 933-934.

<sup>354</sup> Plan for possible intervention in Laos; includes attachments. United States. National Security Council. Top Secret, Cover Memorandum. June 1, 1962:16 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. C. Proquest. (Hereafter: Plan for possible intervention in Laos. NSC, 1962. DNSA.)

<sup>355</sup> FRUS, 1963-1968, Lyndon B. Johnson, Vol. XXVIII, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman) to Secretary of State Rusk. Feb. 15, 1964. pp. 7-8. (hereafter: FRUS, LBJ, Subject, Date, pp.)

<sup>356</sup> FRUS, JFK, Vol. XXIV, Laos Crisis. Telegram to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. April 20, 1963. pp. 980-985.

as a military tactician,” and concluded that his abilities in preventing the Pathet Lao were just as “hopeless” as Phoumi.<sup>357</sup> All of the Coalition Government’s armed forces under Souvanna, Phoumi, and Kong Le exemplified the same “Intense... fear” of North Vietnamese regulars, and covert CIA operatives within the PEO regarded this defining quality of weakness as the main cause of the Pathet Lao’s decision to undermine the Geneva Agreements, as they have gained more and more territory from the RLG by direct influence of the North Vietnamese forces, which the U.S. now believes to be at estimates as high as 10,000 in Laos.<sup>358</sup> The Kennedy Administration viewed the FAR military units with even more contempt, claiming that the militants would throw away their guns and flee for safety when faced with orders to counterattack the enemy.<sup>359</sup> CIA officials viewed the combat effectiveness of the RLG’s Forces as being practically absent, and believed that the “Laotian Army [was] not capable of resisting a determined enemy attack anywhere in the country.”<sup>360</sup> Secretive Operatives in the country under the PEO further believed the Lao forces to be “wholly ineffective” due to their continued losses and fear of the Pathet Lao and enemy forces, which have made them “demoralized, disorganized, and seemingly unwilling to fight.”<sup>361</sup>

Faced with these perceptions of U.S. officials regarding the continued “disquieting implications of the weakness of the FAR” and the RLG’s forces, the U.S. increased its intervention and covert actions in Laos once more, in direct, but secretive, defiance of the

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Laos Military Situation. United States, Pacific Command. Commander-in-Chief. Secret Cable. January 27, 1962: 5 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War. (Hereafter: Laos Military Situation, 1962. DNSA.)

<sup>359</sup> Dommen, Conflict, pp. 187.

<sup>360</sup> The current military situation and outlook in Laos. United States. Central Intelligence Agency. Secret, Special National Intelligence Estimate. May 14, 1962: 10 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Hereafter: The current military situation in Laos. CIA, 1962. DNSA.)

<sup>361</sup> SEATO forces in Thailand. United States. Military Aide to the Vice President. Secret, Memorandum. June 5, 1962: 1 pp. DNSA collection: Vietnam War, 1954-1968. (Hereafter: SEATO forces in Thailand. 1962. DNSA.)

Geneva Accords it implemented itself. Originally, the Kennedy Administration decided to increase its support and the size of the Hmong Guerilla group under Project Momentum, which was perceived to be the “most effective element in fighting the Communists” in all of Laos.<sup>362</sup><sup>363</sup> The program was given an increase in its aid, with \$11,625,000 for fiscal year of 1963 and \$14,008,000 for the following fiscal year of 1964, along with the approval of the PEO for the expansion of the covert paramilitary group to over 23,000 armed Meo guerrillas.<sup>364</sup> The CIA had additionally developed paramilitary and intelligence assets among the Yao ethnic group in Northwest Laos and the Kha in the South, with an additional 1,000 and 2,000 authorized for action against the Communists and receiving of covert U.S. support through the CIA.<sup>365</sup> By 1963, the Armee Clandestine under Project Momentum had grown to over thirty thousand troops following covert CIA operative orders in the PEO.<sup>366</sup> When Souvanna Phouma secretly asked for U.S. help in his efforts to prevent the Pathet Lao’s takeover, President Kennedy quickly agreed, and designated the CIA as the “executive agent” for the Laotian paramilitary effort in the country’s civil war.<sup>367</sup>

The Kennedy Administration further permitted the expanded air support operations conducted by Air America under USAID for these paramilitary groups, along with the FAR and neutralist military organizations, which it kept covert through the CIA’s cover and funding

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<sup>362</sup> The current military situation in Laos. CIA, 1962. DNSA.

<sup>363</sup> Memorandum to the President. Laos Task Force Meeting, February 28, 1961. Laos: General, Laos: General, 2/20/61-2/28/61. John F. Kennedy Library. National Security Files. (JFKNSF-130-006). (Hereafter: Memorandum to the President. Laos Task Force Meeting, 1961. JFK.)

<sup>364</sup> FRUS, LBJ, Vol. XXVIII, Laos. Memorandum From the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Scott) to the Special Group. Washington, January 17, 1964. pp. 1-5.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 348.

<sup>367</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 348.

mechanisms.<sup>368</sup> Additionally, the Administration authorized the deployment of six U.S. T-28s to the Souvanna government in Laos, along with the remainder of the F-100 squadron to Thailand, which was approximately 12 additional F-100s to the presiding detachment of 6 already in Thailand, for the purpose of conducting of high level aerial photo reconnaissance in Laos.<sup>369</sup> Along with this, the U.S. provided the RLG with a U.S. Air Force Mobile Training Team (MMT), for the initial teaching and maintenance of Vientiane's Wattay airfield and Air Force sectors.<sup>370</sup> This policy eventually created the tactical arm of the Royal Lao Air Force, which became the most effective indigenous combat unit in Southeast Asia, with skillful pilots averaging five sorties in flight per day.<sup>371</sup> Kennedy further authorized the PEO to operate openly as a uniformed Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).<sup>372</sup>

In conclusion of Kennedy's short time as President of the United States, one can clearly recognize how Kennedy's foreign policy decisions in Laos were primarily based upon and influenced by his own Administration's continued and intensifying perceptions and beliefs regarding the Laotian situation. The Kennedy Administration's renewed condescending views of the Laotians as too weak, primitive, and apathetic to warrant strong U.S. support, conclusively resulted in the maintained policy decision to avoid open U.S. military engagement in the country. President Kennedy himself, believed that the U.S. couldn't justify strong support and engagement for a country and people which seemingly wouldn't fight for themselves. Thus,

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<sup>368</sup> FRUS, LBJ, Vol. XXVIII, Laos. Memorandum From the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Scott) to the Special Group. Washington, January 17, 1964. pp. 1-5.

<sup>369</sup> FRUS, LBJ, Vol. XXVIII, Laos. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman) to Secretary of State Rusk. 25, Feb. 1964. pp. 13-17.

<sup>370</sup> Stevenson, Charles. End of Nowhere. pp. 199-201/193.

<sup>371</sup> Hearings, pp. 371.

<sup>372</sup> Hilsman, Roger. To Move a Nation: the Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy. 1st edition, Doubleday, 1967. pp.134. (Hereafter: Hilsman, Roger. To Move a Nation. pp.)

Kennedy continued the trend set by President Eisenhower and brought about his own expansion of the U.S. effort and involvement in Laos, resulting in yet another increase in the political strife and war efforts in the country.

## **Chapter 5**



## **President Johnson and the U.S. Bombing Campaign 1964**

The final chapter of this thesis discusses how the various policy decisions of the previous Administrations of the United States government generated the profoundly heightened military conflict in Laos and left President Johnson with limited policy options in order to achieve U.S. interests in the embattled country. The section demonstrates how the continued negative and patronizing perceptions of the Laotians and their lacking capabilities in defending their country influenced President Johnson's policy decisions in 1964.

By the time President Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon B. Johnson succeeded him as President of the United States, the war effort in Laos and the United States' involvement was completely controlled by the CIA. The PEO and CIA successfully met the requirements of the Geneva Accords for withdrawal of all foreign troops by pulling most of its operatives back to Thailand, which allowed them to simply fly to their jobs in Laos each morning with Air America shuttles that were already making around twelve flights per day to deliver weapons euphemized as dirty rice.<sup>373</sup> U.S. officials and CIA operatives had become tired of the "inescapable fact" that when adopting stronger military actions in Laos, they were hindered by the woeful limitations in capabilities of the friendly armed forces in the country, which ultimately discourage any further U.S. support.<sup>374</sup> Thus, the Johnson Administration sought to advance U.S. interests in Laos through an increase in its interventionist, but covert, policies. This started with a further mass expansion of the Hmong Secret Army after 1964, and a great escalation of the entirety of the CIA's secret war in Laos under Ambassador Leonard Unger.<sup>375</sup> By this time the CIA and its

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<sup>373</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 349.

<sup>374</sup> FRUS, LBJ, Vol. XXVIII, Laos. Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the DOS. March 1, 1964. pp. 24-27.

<sup>375</sup> Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy*. pp. 351.

operations in Laos had reached its final form, with over 250 Americans either in Laos or commuting to their daily jobs, and a budget that increased to over \$300 million a year.<sup>376</sup>

Most significantly, 1964 saw the start of what became the single most defining element of U.S. and its CIA's covert military intervention policies in Laos, the U.S. Air Force's bombing crusade in Laos. This policy started with President Johnson's authorization of project "Waterpump," which deployed thirty-eight U.S. Air Force officers to Thailand for the training of Thai and Lao pilots, which were already well-qualified flyers due to the MMT, but needed to become masterful in American bombing tactics in order to follow the T-28s and their pilots from South Vietnam, which had more than a dozen graduates flying daily bombing and reconnaissance missions over Laos, with permission from Souvanna, Ambassador Unger of the U.S., and the cognizant approval of President Johnson.<sup>377</sup> Immediately after the formation and acceptance of Project Waterpump, Washington sought an increase in effectiveness through the use of U.S. pilots on reconnaissance flights, even though the Thai and Lao pilots were perceived as competent, and convinced Souvanna to accept such U.S. increased involvement on the basis that it was necessary to retain photos of the Pathet Lao violating the Geneva Accords.<sup>378</sup>

Reconnaissance was not enough for U.S. officials and CIA operatives under the Johnson Administration, as Souvanna and Ambassador Unger were eventually and successfully urged to authorize the use of U.S. civilians in Air America's T-28 Strike Force made up of primarily Thai and Lao pilots. By May 20, the U.S. civilians were approved to enter the Strike Force, and on the same day five new T-28s and five RT-28s were given to the Waterpump unit and were painted

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid, pp. 353.

<sup>377</sup> U.S. Army, Talking Paper for Chief of Staff, "Guidance for T-28 Aircraft operations," March 9, 1964. (Hereafter: U.S. Army T-28 Aircraft Operations. 1964.)

<sup>378</sup> Hearings, pp. 370-371.

immediately with RLAF markings.<sup>379</sup> Only a few days after the State Department and Johnson's approval of such a program, on May 25, the Air America Strike Force with U.S. civilian pilots who were formerly U.S. military pilots began conducting their own bombing campaign of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Plain of Jars, and the rest of the northern provinces of Laos controlled by the Pathet Lao.<sup>380</sup> The CIA began its aerial intervention in the Laotian Civil War under president Johnson and Ambassador Unger, with American flyers being designated the "A Team," and being followed by the "B Team" of Thai Pilots and the "C Team" of the decidedly lesser Laotian Pilots, of which came to define the rest of the U.S.'s covert intervention and involvement in the Laotian Civil War through to its conclusion in 1975.<sup>381</sup>

Thus, the single most defining factor of the U.S. intervention in Laos and the CIA's Secret War, was the direct result of yet another condescending and patronizing perception and belief of U.S. officials regarding Laos, and specifically its trained pilot force. The pilots were regarded as competent in their abilities, but were perceived as instrumentally less effective than the use of U.S. civilian pilots. Due to such beliefs, American civilians began participating in the daily bombing campaigns over Laos and were even designated the A team, or the best of the piloting teams. To further the patronizing perceptions of the Laotians and specifically their trained piloting teams, the Lao piloting team was ranked at the bottom of the piloting groups in regards to their effectiveness at bombing and defending their own nation, even placing them behind the Thai group who received the same amount of training.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Declassified Document Reference Service (DDRS), 1989, Document 856-857. (Hereafter: DDRS, year, Document).; DDRS, 1990, Document 3044.

<sup>380</sup> DDRS, 1976, Document 226A.; Hearings, pp. 370,476,481,483.

<sup>381</sup> U.S. Army T-28 Aircraft Operations. 1964.; DDRS, 1989, Document 3404.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

In conclusion of 1964 and President Johnson's defining policy decisions in Laos, it is overtly obvious that such escalation of the war effort and U.S. involvement in Laos was fundamentally based on yet another patronizing perception of the U.S. in regards to the Laotians. The single most defining element of the U.S.' military intervention policies and Secret War in Laos, the Air Force's devastating bombing crusade which started in 1964 and lasted for over a decade in the embattled country, was ultimately created out of the same negative and condescending beliefs the U.S. had held since the beginning of its involvement in Laos. Considering that U.S. officials under President Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson all believed that the Laotians were too weak to defend their nation from communism on their own, Johnson decided to ultimately begin the bombing crusade of Laos in 1964 based on this negative assumption of the Laotians. Furthermore, U.S. civilians eventually took over the flight program based on this same negative perception of the Laotian pilot team's effectiveness, which was considered competent, but not as effective as the use of covert American civilian pilots.

## Conclusion

The result of American Policy in Laos from 1954-1964 under the United States Government Administrations of President Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, was an expansion of the civil strife in Laos to that of a game between the great powers and the global divide between the East and West. The U.S. effectively viewed Laos in accordance with its beliefs of all the Southeast Asian nations, as not being able to thwart Communism on its own.<sup>383</sup> Despite Laos's inability to prevent its Communist Pathet Lao subverters on its own, the U.S.'s dissenting beliefs and perceptions regarding the Royal Lao Government, its armed forces, and the Lao populace more generally, served as a factor contributing to the overall result in the U.S.' repeated policy decision to not intervene with U.S. forces on behalf of a country which wouldn't fight for itself and for a military which didn't "believe in getting killed like the civilized races" of the World.<sup>384</sup> The U.S. perceived the Lao as weak, lazy people, who were defended by an army of childish weaklings which ran away from real conflict, and governed by leaders who, out of utter stupidity and blindness, misunderstood the true dangers of the subversion tactics of Communists. Thus, even though the U.S. was pushed to the brink of escalating the war effort and U.S. intervention in Laos from the beginnings of the civil war period in 1955, the U.S. maintained its decision to not intervene on behalf of such an undeserving and apathetic people, keeping all of its involvement in Laos covert and clandestine.

While there are many factors that contributed to the United States' foreign policy decision to remain in Cold War Laos covertly rather than employing direct military engagement - such as the limitations of international agreements like the Geneva Accords, fears of escalation

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<sup>383</sup> U.S. AID Operations in Laos; 7th report, 1959. pp. 7-8.

<sup>384</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur. A Thousand Days. pp. 333, 337.

and outside intervention from the Chinese, which would undoubtedly make the prospects for winning such a war less likely, and the limiting factor of a lack of popular sentiment and public support for such action - these factors all overlook the significance of the constructivist perspective in analyzing U.S. foreign policy. The constructivist approach, takes into account the relevance of the negative perceptions, beliefs, and ideas held amongst U.S. officials in regards to Laos, which were certainly of critical influence to U.S. policy decisions in the country and the ultimate determination that the Lao were not worthy of direct U.S. military support and possible loss of American lives.

This piece of U.S. Cold War foreign policy and history is important and worthy of greater discussion today for many reasons. Under the constructivist perspective, the Secret War in Laos exemplifies just how powerful the role of beliefs, ideas, and perceptions can be in the shaping of foreign policy. The U.S. decision to ultimately avoid direct military engagement in Laos was, at the very least, very influential and partly based upon the negative perceptions and beliefs regarding the Laotians, which were judged to be undeserving of such U.S. action. These negative assessments and beliefs of the Laotians, allowed for the eventual U.S. bombing crusade which made Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history, culminating in over 50,000 people being injured or killed from the start of the campaign in 1964 and an additional 20,000 losing their lives in the postwar period after 1974.<sup>385</sup> The United States made the decision that Laos was unworthy of direct American intervention and military aid with ground forces, but the same perceptions and judgements of Laos which paved the way for such a policy, gave U.S. decision-makers the belief that the Laotians were conversely deserving of one of the biggest

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<sup>385</sup> Lloyd-George, William. The CIA's 'Secret War'. The Diplomat. 25, Feb. 2011; Lloyd, Alan Peter. Remnants of the Secret War in Laos. The Diplomat. 27, Jan. 2014.

bombing campaigns in history. Thus, the U.S.'s condescending perceptions of this far away nation and people of Laos, of which it knew very little, greatly influenced America's devastating impact on the country and ultimately the loss of thousands of lives.

The United States is a great and robust international power; but its power to alleviate, heal, and rehabilitate the unfortunate and defenseless victims of conflict, as well as its responsibility to minimize its contribution to the inevitable human costs of war, have never been utilized to the same extent as its uses of power in South Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees Escapees. Refugee and Civilian War Casualty Problems in Indochina : a Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, September 28, 1970. U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1970.

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