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# Fragile New Truce

## Laotian Agreement Offers

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WASHINGTON — The new cease-fire agreement in Laos is a vital part of President Nixon's peace program for Indochina — without which there could be no real peace.

But it is clearly a messy, ambiguous and fragile agreement — almost as messy, almost as ambiguous and possibly even more fragile than the three-week-old Vietnam cease-fire.

If the Laotian deal works, however, it will accomplish two vitally important objectives:

- It will at least partially close down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, the longtime supply route for the war in South Vietnam.

- It will bring immense pressure on recalcitrant Cambodia to find a way to peace. Cambodia is still at war — still unable to sort itself out and arrange a peace agreement.

But perhaps even more significantly to Americans, the Laotian ceasefire should get the United States out of one of the longest, the most frustrating and most secret wars in its history.

That is what the war in Laos has been.

Most Americans couldn't tell you what the United States has been up to in Laos for the past decade, and why — and for good reason. It has been the classic "secret war" of our time, shrouded in classified documents since 1964, or even before.

Astonishing as it may seem, American warplanes began to bomb in Laos as early as 1964 from aircraft carriers off the South Vietnamese coast.

Nine years ago American air bases in Thailand sported signs that read: "Lead Alley, 300 miles north."

That bombing in support of a shaky Laotian government has been going on just about ever since.

The Pentagon says it will stop now, with the signing of the agreement. In recent days,

## U.S. An Exit From Secret War

according to the Communists, the United States has been flying 400 or 500 sorties a day over Laos — some with B52 bombers.

The United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency, for years has been supporting, training, supplying and paying a guerrilla army in Laos under the command of Gen. Vang Pao.

At one time, in 1969, that army numbered 39,000, according to a Senate Foreign Relations committee study but it is now down to about 25,000.

And the United States has been supplying the Royal Lao army, as well, and furnishing training.

It also has picked up the check for a secret army of Thai "volunteers" in Laos — some 5,000 strong.

A CIA-related airline, Air America, has supplied air support for Vang Pao and for the Laotian army and performed all manner of tasks necessary for keeping the country going.

At this point, there is no way of knowing for sure exactly what the United States intends to do in the future in Laos as far as any, or all, of these secret activities are concerned.

The United States itself did not negotiate the Laotian agreement — it was negotiated by the Royal Lao government, which the United States has supported, and the Communist Pathet Lao.

The Pathet Lao are indigenous Laotian Communists — the equivalent in Laos of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

But Secretary of State William Rogers said Wednesday the United States will live up to the terms of the agreement to the letter. And one of the major terms is a requirement that all "foreign troops" withdraw.

The question is how you define "foreign troops."

American officials say the major force of "foreign troops" in Laos is some 40,000 to 60,000 North Vietnamese who have been operating the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the dense jungles of eastern Laos for years.

If words in the agreement mean what they seem to, North Vietnam must withdraw these troops — and the Ho Chi Minh Trail will be out of business.

High State Department officials say this is the intention.

But when asked if they actually expect the Communists to dismantle the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they say,

"We'll have to wait and see."

As far as American operations in Laos are concerned, Rogers declined to give straight answers Wednesday to pointed questions.

Sen. Charles Percy, R-Ill., asked him at a Senate hearing if the United States planned to "end its paramilitary role" in Laos — which meant: Will the CIA close up shop?

Rogers replied: "We will comply with the terms of the agreement."

The problem in interpreta-

tion here is that the United States always has insisted publicly that it has complied with the terms of the 1962 Laotian agreements — and, in fact, it has been operating a secret war in violation of those agreements. The Communists have violated the agreements, too.

But although the future American role in Laos is still obscure, the new cease-fire agreement, overall, has to be considered a major and important step along the road in the attempt to find peace in Indochina.

The machinery appears to be just about as cumbersome, and perhaps as unworkable, as some of the machinery in the Vietnam agreement.

The parties that have made

the agreement don't seem to be any more devoted to the idea of peace than the parties in Vietnam.

But the current war in Laos has been going on 11 years and has led to a stalemate.

The Communists haven't won, although they have come out of the agreement in a somewhat stronger political position than they had 11 years ago.

Certainly, the Royal Laotian government hasn't won.

The United States has prevented a Communist victory, but that's all.

It is certain that there could be no real peace in Indochina without a Laotian cease-fire. The question now is whether there will be peace with one.

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