

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 October 1969

Subject; Some Historical Notes on Laos

1. By almost any measure, Laos should not exist as an independent country. Historically, for the past 700 years Laos has been an area populated by people who are Thai, and except for brief early periods of independent kingdoms, and the short 75-year span of French control, it has been under Thai influence -- which was sporadically and bitterly disputed in the eastern part of the area by the Vietnamese. Ethnically, most of the population is Lao, a branch of the Thai race, living in the valleys, particularly along the Mekong river. The remainder are a variety of tribal peoples living in the mountains, overlapping the Annamite ridge line in the east into Vietnam, and in the north overlapping into Tunnan province in China. Geographically, Laos is one-half of a valley, the other and more populous half being in Thailand. In a contorted application of Gallic logic, the French mapmakers, in creating Laos, split the Lao off from their Thai brethren

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on the one hand, and split the mountain minority peoples in half on the other. Within this freakish boundary, they tried to glue the patchwork of family baronies together, declare the leader of one of them king, and call this contraption a country.

2. When the French finally reluctantly granted independence to their creation on 22 October 1953 after some seven years of relinquishing various degrees of control, Laos as the French defined it was accepted as a country because its independent status seemed to offer advantages to all. The Lao obviously preferred independence to subordination either to the Vietnamese or the Thai. To the French, this solution was certainly easier than working out some division of the territory, or promoting its unification with Thailand. And the idea of a buffer state between the Vietnamese and Thai appealed to the French, the US, and other geopolitically minded countries. The Thai in 1954 were not really capable of reasserting their ancient influence and saw in France and the US proxies who would do it for them, or at least hold the fort for them more effectively, until they got around to it themselves. And the Vietnamese Communists, in their imperialist view that all of Indochina was to be their domain, saw the French version of Laos as more desirable than any division of it along geographic or ethnic lines, since they were probably confident

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they would obtain it all in the long run and the French version of Laos would net them more territory. This view was probably generally shared or supported by China and the USSR. And so the fate of remote, weak, exotic Laos as a cold war battleground was foreordained.

3. Since World War II, there have been a series of clearly distinguishable watersheds in Communist strategy in Laos: 1954, 1959, 1962. Beginning in 1946 the Vietnamese Communists sponsored a separate Communist movement in Laos. Prior to that time Laotians who later became Lao Communists were either members of the Lao Independence movement, the Lao Issara, which came to terms with the French in 1949, or were members of the Vietnamese "Indochina Communist Party" which was dissolved in early 1951. Until 1954 the Viet Minh nourished their Lao underling with the object of expanding its strength, giving it a territorial base, and using it in the fight for independence from France. In the Geneva Conference of 1954 the Communists were successful in achieving a certain amount of legitimacy and the important territorial base of Phong Saly and Sam Neua (now Houa Phan) provinces.

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4. 1959. 1959 was a turning point in Indochina. From 1954 until then the object of the Hanoi-dominated Pathet Lao was merely to strengthen their forces and consolidate and expand their territorial base with an eye towards eventual control over all Laos. But in 1959 the Third Party Congress of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi resulted in a decision to step up the insurgency in South Vietnam, and with this decision Communist strategy in Laos changed. It became critically important to gain control over the territory in the Laotian panhandle through which men and material enroute to South Vietnam would have to pass.

5. At the same time the year of 1959 brought other important internal changes in Laos. In May 1958 the Communists had made a surprisingly strong showing in the elections and an anti-Communist reaction led to the installation of a strongly right-wing government in August 1958. By early 1959 the new anti-Communist climate had ended previously serious efforts to unite the Communists and the Royal Lao Government and the resultant confrontation together with the changed Vietnamese Communist strategy made increased violence inevitable.

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6. For the next two years there was chaos in Laos, and when President Kennedy took office in January 1961 he was confronted with a serious situation. The Communist military offensive was making steady headway and Soviet support of the Communists in Laos had become of such nature and proportions that it appeared the USSR and the US were on a collision course. In April 1961 the two super-powers agreed to defuse the situation. A cease-fire was to be arranged and an initial conference called to find a way to take Laos out of the East-West conflict. After some 14 months of negotiating and fighting the Geneva Conference held its last session on July 23, 1962.

7. Toting up the gains. In the eight years since 1954 the position of the Lao Communists had improved greatly. Militarily their forces, together with the NVA, Kong Le's neutralists, and Soviet support had expanded their area of control from something less than two provinces to approximately half the country and about 1/4 the population. Politically they had achieved full legitimacy and a 1/3 position in a coalition government where the neutralist 1/3 was not entirely unfriendly. In fact at that time the Communists probably felt they could exert strong influence over them. The Pathet Lao Army had grown from 1,500-3,000 to about 20,000 troops. (NVA troops in Laos numbered about 9,000 in July 1962). And from

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Hanoi's point of view they had the vital portions of the Lao pan-handle corridor in their hands and^a much better buffer providing security for their borders with northern Laos. In short, Hanoi had achieved her objectives in Laos. Until South Vietnam was won, there was no strong incentive to do more in Laos, and good cause for restraint.

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S-E-C-R-E-T

8. At the date of this writing, some 12,000 NVA troops, including possibly the entire 312th NVA Division, are estimated to be strung out along route 7 in North Vietnam and Laos enroute to the Plaine des Jarres area. This is the latest increment in a substantial buildup of North Vietnamese forces in Laos over the past two or three years. In the spring of 1968 we estimated total North Vietnamese combat and support personnel in Laos at about 35,000, a total of some 10-14 battalions over the previous year. A year ago NVA forces had grown to 47,000. The location of these reinforcements had been a good indicator of the forthcoming areas of military action. In 1967-1968 the reinforcements were concentrated around the Bolovens Plateau area in the south and around Phou Pha Thi in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province in the North. In 1968-1969 they were concentrated mainly in the north where they took Na Khang (Site 36) and Muong Soui, but there were some in the south where they took Thateng. In the north, NVA units have usually been from the 316th NVA Division headquartered in Moc Chau, North Vietnam just over the border from Houa Phan Province and they usually returned to North Vietnam after the dry season campaign was finished. Last year for the first time they remained in north Laos.

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S-E-C-R-E-T

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9. The present movement is unprecedented in several respects. (Continue with para 8 then add last sentence: Obviously their military campaign in North Laos will be vigorous this year and will probably be centered around the Plaine des Jarres and targets to the south and west of it.

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9a. The evidence on Communist intentions is substantial.

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, says that the main objective of the coming dry season was the liberation of Vang Pao's bases of Sam Thong and Long Tieng, and then a move down route 13 to the Nam Lik River at Ban Hin Heup. He said the mission of his company was to reconnoiter the Sam Thong area.

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and agent reports. Lao Communist radio broadcasts confirm these general intentions in their continual references to the infamously of the present Vang Pao Plaine des Jarres campaign which they claim was launched from "the bases of Sam Thong, Long Tieng and Vang Vient." Moreover, the statements of the NLHS representative in Vientiane, Sot Pethrasi, also bear these intentions out.

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16a. Hanoi must also consider possible Thai reactions to a more aggressive move in Laos. From our point of view, the Thai appear woefully unprepared to defend their traditional and vital security interests on the eastern side of the Mekong. Despite Thailand's possession of all the ingredients to make it the peninsula's strongest power, it does not have at this moment, and probably will not in the foreseeable future, the military wherewithal to operate effectively in Laos. This is partly perhaps because they have concentrated on economic development rather than military expenditures. While this may make them better off than Hanoi in the long run, in the short run they are very dependent on the US. And it is probably because they have counted on the US to use its own military power in Laos in case of need that the Thai have done so little in support of their interests there. Even if Hanoi views Thailand's readiness in this way, however, we would doubt that it dismisses Thailand's potential completely when considering its policy in Laos. North Vietnam is still a small country and common sense would suggest not becoming too provocative in too many directions at the same time.

Additional Paragraph
Memo for Director on Laos
3 October 1969

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