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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

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March 16, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Lindsay Grant

SUBJECT: Laos - Your Tuesday Meeting with Congressional Leaders

You are scheduled to meet with Congressional leaders friendly to our role in Southeast Asia at 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, to discuss Laos.

I enclose the following materials:

Tab A -- The U.S. Role in Laos -- History and Reasons

Tab B -- Military Operations and Statistics

Tab C -- The Symington Sub-committee -- Administration
Disclosure Policy

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

There are also attached:

Enclosure I -- Your briefing book for the March 6 Backgrounder

Enclosure II -- Packets for Congressional Leaders (Consisting of The President's March 6 Statement; Kissinger March 6 Backgrounder; Q & A; The U.S. Role in Laos)

The Congressional packets are of course intended to provide guidance for them to use in preparing statements and rebuttals on Laos policy. You will note that Tab A ("The U.S. Role in Laos") is included in the Congressional packets. This is done to give the leaders a checklist of your talking points which they can take with them.

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I recommend that you lead off with the following --

GENERAL TALKING POINTS:

1. You wish to go over the argumentation in support of the President's policy in Laos. You will cover three areas which appear to be of particular interest on the Hill: the rationale for our role; the statistics on U.S. personnel, fatalities, and operations; and the reasons for our disclosure policy concerning the Symington Sub-committee transcript on Laos.
2. On the first point -- the rationale for our role -- you are going to provide them with the basic texts, some Q & As which you found useful, and a brief summary of our arguments.
3. In summarizing our arguments in an unclassified document, you have dealt with the justification for our role, but not really with the reasons why we should play this role. The answer to the latter question is straightforward:
 - Laos provides access from Communist areas to South Vietnam and Thailand, and to a neutral -- Cambodia -- which is finding itself increasingly threatened by a semi-permanent Vietnamese Communist occupation of its border areas, and by support which those Communists are giving to Cambodian dissidents.
 - Laos needs some help, and no other signatory of the 1962 Geneva accords has the will and the resources to help it.
 - If our failure to help the legitimate Government should result in its collapse and replacement by a tool of the Communists, the logistic routes would be cleared for support to dissidence in Thailand and Cambodia.
 - Similarly, a pro-Communist government in Laos would make every effort to mobilize world opinion against our interdiction efforts against the Ho Chi-minh trail.
4. Perhaps because of the Vietnam experience, there is a tendency to look at all our policies in East Asia in all-or-nothing terms. We have said that we don't plan to put ground combat troops into Laos. At the same time, we think that Laos is worth the support we are giving it -- economic and military assistance, plus tactical air support to Souvanna's troops, plus advice and assistance in maintaining his armed forces. We think that Congressional and other opinion makers should begin to look at Laos in terms of whether it

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is worth the present effort, rather than whether it is worth a total commitment.

5. (Go to Tab A.)

Attachments

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THE U. S. ROLE IN LAOS

HISTORY AND REASONS

1. We all agreed to the 1962 Geneva accords--ourselves, the Soviets, the North Vietnamese--fourteen countries. These accords called for us all to respect the neutrality and integrity of Laos, to honor its wish to stay out of the Vietnam fighting, to make sure that its territory was not used for attacks on neighboring countries, and that neighbors did not attack it.
2. The U. S. honored the commitment and took out the military advisers who had been assisting the Laotian Government. We checked our advisers out through the International Control Commission, as the accords required, and we left. The North Vietnamese sent some 40 men through the Control Commission checkpoints, and left some 6000 troops in the country. They never did leave. Their numbers have grown as they have increased the pressure on the Royal Government of Laos. They are concentrated along the Ho Chi-minh Trail to South Vietnam--using Laotian territory to wage war on South Vietnam in violation of the Geneva accords--and they are in North Laos attacking the troops of the legal Government of Laos--which they themselves agreed to--some 75 miles inside Laos from the nearest part of North Vietnam.
3. By their own lights, the North Vietnamese are acting rationally. They needed to insure a route into South Vietnam. They had trouble infiltrating troops through the demilitarized zone in Vietnam, which was inspected by international inspectors. The unpopulated hills of Laos, to the West, made a good alternative route. They wanted to guarantee that route, and they still want to guarantee it. That is their major and immediate interest in Laos: to make sure that nobody interferes with their use of Laotian territory in their war on South Vietnam. My point is that they were willing to make an agreement which they knew they were going to violate, in order to insure that a hostile Government in Laos did not cooperate with us to cut the use of the Ho Chi-minh Trail. More Americans should perhaps investigate that type of dishonesty, while they are trying to smoke out "credibility gaps" on the part of the United States Government.

4. There are presently some 67,000 North Vietnamese combat troops in Laos. They have for all practical purposes taken over the conduct of the war in Laos from their Laotian clients. When they wanted to announce a new Communist political program for Laos this month, the announcement was made from Hanoi over the Hanoi news service. Even the Pathet Lao radio station is located in North Vietnam, not far from Hanoi. Critics of American involvement should consider those facts when they complain of our involvement--we have 1,040 people there, including diplomats, USIS people, mail clerks, an AID mission, government contractors, and all the usual personnel of a U. S. overseas mission.

5. The Prime Minister of Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma is a neutralist. The U. S. Government did not want him in 1962. We were backing another man, but the Communists accepted him and were willing to work out a deal for a government under him, so we accepted him. The Communist-dominated Pathet Lao withdrew from his government when they found that they could not dominate him. He was under increasing military pressure. He turned first to the Soviets for assistance. They provided some--a few airplanes, but they would not do much because they did not want to offend Hanoi. He turned to us and we helped him. We still think that the idea of the 1962 Geneva accords was a good one--to allow Laos to pursue its own neutral course and stay clear of the Vietnam war.

6. Most of the hand wringing concerning our involvement in Laos goes on furthest from the action. One does not hear many people, aligned or unaligned, Socialist or non-Socialist, in East Asia complain about what we are doing out there, nor do they want us to leave. You would look hard to find a statement in the past year from any non-Communist national leader in East Asia asking us to abandon what we are doing out there. We all know that our Asian allies--the Thais, Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Australians, and New Zealanders--support our position, but what about the so-called uncommitted leaders? Here are representative comments by some of them:

Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore--he is a Socialist and nobody has ever called him a puppet of Western imperialism--but here is what he said in January: "What Southeast Asia needs is a climate of confidence which only a continuing U. S. commitment can create."

Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia--another Asian leader who has often been exceedingly critical of the U. S. over the years--here is what he now says: "In all honesty and objectivity, the U. S. presence permits us to be respected, if not courted, by the European and even Asian Socialist camps." He goes on to say that "the prospect of an early retreat of the Americans (he is speaking here of South Vietnam) would cause fear among our friends and would raise the danger that Cambodia would fall before Communism." (Sangkum, December 1969)

Malaysian and Indonesian leaders--and neither country is in SEATO--have made it clear that they want us to see Vietnam through to a successful conclusion, because they are close enough to the situation to know a Communist victory would affect them directly and decisively.

7. In short:

-- We are helping a small neutral country stay neutral after it was sold out by the North Vietnamese in pursuit of their own interests in South Vietnam.

-- We helped that country to protect itself from an outright invasion when it could not get help elsewhere among the others who agreed to the 1962 Geneva accords.

-- We have no other commitments to that small country, and we are not engaged in ground combat operations in its behalf. Nor do we have plans to become engaged in such operations.

-- We support the Royal Government of Laos, a government we originally accepted at the behest of the same Communists who are now trying to destroy it.

-- We think that the 1962 accords should be respected, and we would like to see all foreign troops and military forces out of Laos, as those accords envisaged.

THE U. S. ROLE IN LAOS

MILITARY OPERATIONS AND STATISTICS

1. The U. S. Presence. The 1040 figure given by the President is solid for March 2,

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[redacted] This figure has not changed during this Administration. The Senators would be safe in saying that it has changed less than 2 per cent. You do not plan to release the figure, because we do not have one for Inauguration Day 1969 and because we don't want to get enmeshed deeper in the number game, but the comparable figure for January 1, 1969 was 1023. Of the total, 228 are military personnel; plus sixteen men assigned to Embassy duty (15 Marine Guards; 1 officer on loan to USIS). This is all there are, except for incidental intrusions into the Laos/Vietnam border area during clashes in efforts to interdict the Ho Chi-minh trail.

2. U. S. Fatalities. You found a considerable morass in trying to sort out the air fatalities, since the practice had been to lump Laos together with Vietnam and the Pentagon's reporting system made it very difficult to sort out the figures in retrospect. The figures you gave on background March 6 are still as good as anything we have. (About 400 killed, captured or missing, including 193 captured or missing; including also "less than 50" military personnel and civilians stationed in Laos killed by hostile action--you described these as civilians, but Ziegler subsequently has correctly indicated that both civilian and military fatalities have been less than 50 since 1962.) The Administration stands with more confidence behind its figures since the beginning of last year: six civilians and one military officer (killed in a surprise raid.) The Administration has taken steps to report casualties as they occur, so that this issue of credibility will not rise again.

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3. "Combat Operations." This term has given rise to much confusion and accusations of bad faith. In reporting casualties, the Defense Department uses "combat operations" to describe operations the purpose of which is to engage the enemy in combat. We have no ground troops in Laos, and the assertion still stands up that none of our personnel working with the Lao forces has been killed in such operations. This

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is distinguished from hostile action such as anti-aircraft fire (which has brought down several civilians employed by Air America and other air transport contractors.) At Phou Pha Thi, some technicians who were released to Lockheed by the Air Force to man a radar station were wiped out by a North Vietnamese attack, but they were not engaged in ground combat operations except insofar as they may have tried to defend themselves.

4. Air Sortie Rates. There has been some loose talk about our sortie rates over Laos. Sorties have increased, as the Vietnamese presence has increased and created more targets. The end of bombing in Vietnam also freed some resources. The rate has more than doubled in the past two years, but we still plan on a rate of 140 sorties per day (highly classified information) in all of Laos including the Trail. On days when targets are maximum, we occasionally exceed 200. We do not operate 400-500 per day, as Senator Symington has suggested. The present level is sufficient to handle the targets which develop, on a continuing basis, and we are not under pressure to increase the level.

5. Expenditures in Laos. Our economic aid program is budgeted this year at \$48 million (on an expenditure basis, it will be about \$50 million;) (UNCLASSIFIED figure). Our military assistance to Laos will run this FY at just under \$130 million (Classified). These items cover our direct expenditure, except for our own relatively modest costs in maintaining our own mission in Vientiane. Our air support activities are budgeted as part of our Vietnam operations, and you do not have a breakout which you consider reliable, but a figure of \$300 million has been cited and is probably in the ballpark (most of this goes to interdiction of the Ho Chi-minh trail, however, and so is really a Vietnam expenditure).

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