I. INTRODUCTION

We incur hundreds of thousands of U.S. casualties [in Indochina] because we are opposed to a closed society. We say we are an open society, and the enemy is a closed society.

Accepting that premise, it would appear logical for them not to tell their people; but it is sort of a twist on our basic philosophy about the importance of containing Communism. Here we are telling Americans they must fight and die to maintain an open society, but not telling our people what we are doing. That would seem the characteristic of a closed society. We are fighting a big war in Laos, even if we do not have ground troops there. Testimony for 3 days has been to that effect, yet we are still trying to hide it not only from the people but also from the Congress.

—Senator Stuart Symington

Many times in years past, the war in Laos has been called the "forgotten war." Forgotten because the U.S. government has not been, as Senator Symington puts it, "telling our people what we are doing." Indeed, because of U.S. government secrecy, the war in Laos has been so completely forgotten that William Fulbright, the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, could testify in October 1969 that he "had no idea we had a full-scale war going on" in Laos. Now, after publication of the Pentagon Papers in three different versions, we have further evidence of how much Laos has been forgotten, not only by the public but by U.S. policymakers as well. For most of the last twenty years, excepting the crises of 1960 through 1963, Laos has been for the United States little more than a sideshow to the conflict in Vietnam.

Though the United States has spent billions of dollars in the Kingdom of Laos, top U.S. officials in Washington have only rarely given their attention to this small country and then only in times of military crises, or in terms of how events in Laos affect U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As one American official in Vientiane put it in 1960, "This is the end of nowhere. We can do anything we want here because Washington doesn't seem to know it exists." 3

Because the documents in the Pentagon Papers reflect largely the views of Washington, and because they focus on Vietnam, they provide insight into only a small portion of U.S. involvement in Laos. It is the fuller account of U.S. involvement in Laos' forgotten war, both that revealed in the Pentagon Papers and that omitted from them, which we will treat in this essay.

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French officers and men to train the Laotian army. It was this last stipulation which was to prove most troublesome for the U.S. involvement in Laos.

III. NOTHING THAT WE DID: 1954–1958

Our fear of communism has been so great as to be irrational. We have virtually imbued it with superhuman powers. Its very nature, in our thinking, assures its success. We fail to see that, like other political ideologies, it can only take root among a receptive population. . . . We do not consider the possibility that our antagonists in fact may be in better tune with the grievances of the people whose loyalty we seek to win, and thus have been able to promise remedies which to the latter appear realistic and just.

—Roger M. Smith

On October 20, 1954, barely three months after Geneva, Prince Souvanna Phouma resigned as Prime Minister of Laos. He had only just begun the difficult task of reaching a political settlement with the Pathet Lao, and the circumstances surrounding his resignation have yet to be explained completely. Most accounts link the fall of Souvanna Phouma in October 1954 to the assassination of his Minister of Defense, Kou Voravong, in September. However, years later, in 1961, Souvanna Phouma attributed his fall in 1954 to foreign interference. After the Prince's resignation, a new government was formed under Katay Don Sasorith, who favored closer relations with Thailand and evidently harbored reservations on the sagacity of coalition with the Pathet Lao. At any rate, talks with the Pathet Lao founder and were broken off in April 1955. Twice more, once in the summer and once in the fall, talks between Katay and the Pathet Lao were resumed only to be broken off. During all this time the Pathet Lao resisted Royal Lao government attempts at reimplementation of control over Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces. As former British military attache to Laos Hugh Toye recounts it, "The Pathet Lao argued against the obvious intention of the Geneva Agreement, that the provinces were theirs until a full political settlement was reached." 4

General elections were held in December 1955 without Pathet Lao participation, but when the new assembly convened Katay found himself lacking enough support to continue as Prime Minister. Souvanna Phouma gathered support and formed a new government in March 1956, on a pledge of reconciliation with the Pathet Lao. He resumed talks with them and from August 1956 through September 1957, signed the first seven of ten agreements between the Royal Government and the Pathet Lao which came to be known as the Vientiane Agreements. Souvanna Phouma's efforts at reconciliation with the Pathet Lao were interrupted in May 1957 when upon receiving only a qualified vote of confidence in the National Assembly, he resigned. However, after an extended period of confusion, when no other leaders were able to muster enough support to form a government, Souvanna Phouma returned as Prime Minister in August. He again resumed talks with the Pathet Lao and reached final agreement for the inclusion of two Pathet Lao representatives as Ministers in a new coalition cabinet.

During all of this period, the United States was by no means inactive in Laos. The chief characteristic marking all of U.S. policy in Laos throughout the 1950s was quite simply anticommunism. An NSC memorandum (5612/1, 5 September 1956) clearly reveals this attitude. Among the stated elements of U.S. policy toward Laos were the following:

1. In keeping the Communists from taking over Laos.
2. In strengthening their association with the free world; and
3. In developing and maintaining a stable and independent government willing and able to resist Communist aggression or subversion. 7

For Assistant Secretary Robertson there was no question as to Laos' strategic significance:

... when you look at the map you will see that Laos is a finger thrust right down into the heart of Southeast Asia. And Southeast Asia is one of the prime objectives of the international Communists in Asia because it is rich in raw materials and has excess food. We are not in Laos to be a fairy godfather to Laos, we are in there for one sole reason, and that is to try to keep this little country from being taken over by the Communists. ... It is part of the effort we are making for the collective security of the free world. Every time you lose a country, every time you give up to them, they become correspondingly stronger and the free world becomes weaker.

This isn't happening only in this little country of Laos, it is happening all over the world, everywhere. We are engaged in a struggle for the survival of what we call a free civilization. 8

The only difficulty with the implementation of this policy was that under the Geneva Agreements the United States was prohibited from establishing a military mission in Laos. An alternative possibility would have been to work through the French military mission in Laos, but such an alternative was clearly less than wholly satisfactory. As stated in a NSC memorandum (NSC 5429/2, 20 August 1954) on Indochina policy, the United States should work "through the French only insofar as necessary. ..." 9 This obstacle was overcome in January 1956 when the United States established a military mission, but called it by a different name—the Program Evaluation Office (PEO) attached to the U.S. aid mission. There is little doubt that the PEO violated the spirit if not the

*Throughout this paper explanatory comments added to quotations will be placed within brackets.
letter of the Geneva Agreements. PEO clearly served as the functional equivalent of a military advisory group. For example, the chief of PEO from February 1957 to February 1959 was Brigadier General Ruthwell H. Brown, U.S. Army (retired). Before coming to Laos, Brown had served as chief of the Army Mission in the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Pakistan, as deputy chief of MAAG South Vietnam, and as chief of MAAG Pakistan. After retiring from the last position in 1956, he was “asked by Admiral Radford and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in November 1956” to go to Laos on an inspection tour and shortly thereafter he was appointed as chief of PEO Laos.10 Indeed, the PEO ploy was so obvious that even the U.S. State Department on one occasion in 1957 forgot the pretense and listed Laos as one of the “countries where MAAG personnel are stationed.”11

In addition to the military mission, U.S. involvement was growing in other realms. A United States Operations Mission (USOM) had been established in Vientiane in January 1955 and in July of that year an agreement was reached with the Katay government on new economic aid and an increase in military assistance. The aid, however, was not directed to the Lao as much as anything prompted the aid cutoff. Indeed, if corruption had been the real reason for “disciplining the Laotian Government,” many American officials might become election issues for the Communists.16

The real battle, though, was not against corrupt officials. The main task was preventing a “Communist takeover.” Such an aim had intrinsic value for U.S. policymakers but also was geared toward preventing the spread of insurgency into neighboring Thailand. An Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) Report on Southeast Asia, 28 May 1958, recounted the setbacks for the United States in this struggle:

The formation in November, 1957 of a coalition cabinet with Communist Pathet Lao participation, additional communist gains of places in army and civil service, and permission for the Pathet to operate as a legal political party throughout the country, were generally considered as a setback for U.S. objectives.17

With the scheduling of special elections for May 1958 to include Pathet Lao participation, U.S. officials were fearful. A Congressional report summed up the situation:

In the fall of 1957, with an awareness of the forthcoming elections, Ambassador Parsons contemplated the cumulative results of the U.S. aid program to date. He was concerned with the possibility that its shortcomings might become election issues for the Communists.

He was apparently impressed by the aid program’s obvious neglect of the needs of the typical Lao, the rural villager or farmer. In an effort to remedy this shortcoming, the Ambassador conceived Operation Booster Shot.18

Operation Booster Shot was an emergency attempt to extend the impact of the U.S. aid program into rural Laos. Clearly inspired by the upcoming elections, it was an early version of “winning hearts and minds.” The Operation included well-digging, irrigation projects, repair of schools, temples and roads; altogether more than ninety work projects. Incredibly, the program also included the air dropping of “some 1,300 tons of food, medical and construction supplies and other useful supplies”19 into areas inaccessible by road. One Congressman rather undiplomatically referred to the latter aspect of the program as “drop[ping] a flock of supplies in the jungle.” 20 The Congressman cited “one airplane pilot who participated in the airdrop who thought what he was supposed to do was haphazard.”21 But as Assistant Secretary Robertson put it,

This was a crash program. Such a program, we felt, would do much to counter the anticipated vigorous Communist campaign in the villages and the growing criticism that American aid benefits the few in the cities and fails to reach the rural population.22

Yet despite the crash nature of the Booster Shot program and the expense which “may have exceeded $3 million,”23 the operation failed to succeed. In
the May elections, nine out of thirteen Pathet Lao candidates won seats in the National Assembly. Additionally, four candidates of the neutralist Santiphap (Peace) party, or as they were called by U.S. Ambassador to Laos Graham Parsons, "the fellow travelers," won election.24 Thus "Communists or fellow travelers" had won thirteen out of twenty-one seats contested. Also, Prince Souphanouvong, leader of the Pathet Lao, standing for election in the capital province of Vientiane, won more votes than any other candidate in the elections. A few days after the May 4 elections, when the new National Assembly convened, Souphanouvong was elected Chairman.25 Interpretations concerning the reasons behind the Pathet Lao electoral successes varied widely. The OCB Report maintained that the "Communists' show of strength . . . resulted largely from the conservatives failure to agree on a minimum consolidated list of candidates." 26 The conservatives had run a total of eighty-five candidates for the twenty-one contested positions. A Laotian official, Sisouk Na Chanpassak, who is the current Laotian Minister of Finance gave a different reason:

Black market deals in American aid dollars reached such proportions that the Pathet Lao needed no propaganda to turn the rural people against the townspeople.27

Yet whatever the vote was against, it also was a vote for the Pathet Lao. They had organized well for the election. Former Pathet Lao soldiers and cadres acted as grass-roots campaigners and, in contrast to the Laotian government officials, they were honest. As Hugh Toye, former British military attaché to Laos, described them, "they behaved with propriety, with respect for tradition, and with utmost friendliness as far as the people were concerned. Their soldiers were well-disciplined and orderly like [their mentors] the Viet Minh. . . ." 28 The electoral victories clearly gave the Pathet Lao added authority in the coalition government. United States reaction was quick to follow. First, the CIA helped to organize a group of young conservatives, the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI), in opposition to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.29 Second, on June 30, the United States again shut off aid to Laos. As Roger Hilsman, who served as Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and later as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs in the Kennedy Administration, later wrote,

... by merely withholding the monthly payment to the troops, the United States could create the conditions for toppling any Lao government whose policies it opposed.30

Surely enough on July 23, in a National Assembly vote, Souvanna Phouma's government was toppled. One observer charged that the United States paid huge sums for votes against Souvanna,31 and another maintains that the CIA was "stage-managing the whole affair."32 Whatever the exact circumstances, the United States was clearly and deeply implicated in the fall of Souvanna Phouma in 1958 as again it would be in 1960.

Yet in a height of pretense bordering on the absurd, Assistant Secretary Robertson, when asked in Congressional hearings whether the United States had done anything to cause the "coalition of the non-Communist elements in the Government which was successful in getting rid of the Communist ministers," answered, "Nothing that we did, no."33 Such innocence is all the more remarkable in light of Robertson's testimony on the formation of coalition government. Former Ambassador Parsons had testified "I struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition government." Robertson elaborated,

... there is no difference whatsoever in our evaluation of the threat to Laos which was posed by this coalition. That is the reason we did everything we could to keep it from happening.34

The U.S. did "everything we could" to prevent the coalition government, but when it fell, "Nothing that we did, no."

IV. ANTI-COMMUNIST, PRO-FREE WORLD NEUTRALITY

After Souvanna Phouma lost the July 23 vote of confidence in the National Assembly, he still tried to form a new government, but CIA agents "had persuaded the CDNI to oppose Souvanna"35 and his attempt failed. On August 18, Phoui Sananikone gathered enough support to form a government. His cabinet excluded the two Pathet Lao ministers who had been in Souvanna's government, but did include four CDNI members who were not members of the National Assembly.36 The coalition government was broken.

Phoui soon demonstrated his own brand of neutrality. He established relations with Nationalist China and upgraded the Lao mission in Saigon to embassy status. After agreements on reforms in the aid program and devaluation of the Laotian currency in October, the United States resumed aid to Laos. Then in January 1959, U.S. aid to Laos was increased.

In December, Phouei seized upon the occurrence of a skirmish between Laotian and DRV soldiers in the region near the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam to charge North Vietnam with initiating a campaign against Laos "by acts of intimidation of all sorts, including the violation and occupation of its territory."37 The validity of the charges was questionable, but Phouei nevertheless used the incident as a pretext to request emergency powers from the National Assembly.4 On January 15, he was granted emergency powers for one year. On the same day, he reshuffled his cabinet to include for the first time three army officers who were also CDNI members. On February 11, Phouei declared that Laos was no longer bound by the Geneva Conventions or the limitations on acceptance of foreign military aid.5 As the government became more conservative, now including seven CDNI members, purges were initiated against Pathet Lao officials and sympathizers.6 In the meantime, two Pathet Lao battalions awaited integration into the Royal Lao Army, as called for in the agreements reached earlier between Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao. In early May details of the integration were agreed upon, but at the last minute on May 11 the two battalions, fearing a trick by the increasingly anti-Communist Phouei government, refused to comply with the plan.7 Thereupon, Phouei ordered Prince Souphanouvong and the other Pathet Lao leaders in Vientiane arrested, and commanded the Royal Army to encircle the two recalcitrant PL battalions. He then issued an ultimatum to the PL troops; either they be integrated into the Royal Army immediately or be disbanded. The First Battalion complied, the Second did not. Toye relates their escape:

On the night of 18 May, the whole seven hundred men, complete with their families, their chickens, pigs, household possessions and arms slipped
An OCB Report on Southeast Asia, 12 August 1959, commented:

the Lao Army displayed a disappointing lack of capacity to control a small scale internal security problem when it permitted the battalion to escape.  

The Royal Lao government, incensed, declared the Pathet Lao troops would be considered deserters. The coalition government, if only broken earlier, was clearly shattered now.

In July the Royal Lao government (RLG) reported Communist guerrilla attacks in the north.  

The onus of blame for the resumption of hostilities clearly lay with the Phoumi Sananikone government, and indirectly with the United States.

Throughout the year the tension and particularly the rhetoric of crisis heightened. One particularly notable, though perhaps not atypical example of the exaggerated air of crisis is recounted by Bernard Fall. On August 24, 1959, the New York Times titled a story on Laos with the alarming report “Laos Insurgents Take Army Post Close to Capital.” As Fall points out, the headline should have read “Rain Cuts Laos Vegetable Supply,” for there had in fact been no attack. The whole story had mushroomed out of a washed-out bridge which had caused a cutoff in traffic to Vientiane and thus prevented the daily vegetable supply from coming through. The story of the attack on the outpost had been built from speculation as to the cause of the cutoff in traffic!  

Although the U.S. did expand the PEO group in July and in August increased aid to Laos, direct military intervention was avoided. In September, the RLG reported Communist attacks on Sam Neua and again charged North Vietnam with aggression, but this time the charges were presented before the United Nations. The secret U.S. government SNIE of September 18, 1959, acknowledged, however, that there was “no conclusive evidence of participation by North Vietnamese.” And a UN team of observers reached very much the same conclusion later in September. After these setbacks in gaining additional international support in his battle against the Communists, Phoumi considered

regarding his resignation and sent troops to surround his house. On December 30, Phoumi resigned.

Our problem in the last few months has not been “to strengthen the determination of the RLG to resist subversion” or “to prevent Laotian neutrality from veering toward pro-communism.” Without minimizing the importance of these objectives, our immediate operational problem has been to persuade the Laotian leadership from taking too drastic actions which might provoke a reaction on the part of the North Vietnamese and which might alienate free-world sympathy for Laos—as for instance, outlawing and eliminating by force the NLHX or taking a hard anti-communist position in international affairs.

In January 1960 an American newspaper reported, “If free elections were held today in Laos, every qualified observer including the American Embassy, concedes this hermit kingdom would go Communist in a landslide.” Yet in the April 1960 election the Pathet Lao were soundly defeated. The explanation, of course, was that the elections were completely rigged. Not only were the electoral rules rigged against PL candidates, and village headmen bribed, but also Prince Souphanouvong, the PL leader and top vote-getter in the 1958 elections, was still held under arrest and not allowed to run. The manipulation of the election and the increased power of the conservative elements in the Vi"etnamese government, no doubt made Souphanouvong fear for his safety. He and his Pathet Lao colleagues who had been languishing in jail in Vientiane for over
a year decided to wait no longer. On the night of May 24, they escaped. Evidently the Pathet Lao leaders had convinced the soldiers guarding them of the validity of the PL cause, for the "guards" accompanied the PL leaders in their escape.24

Events moved peacefully for the next few months and the United States was evidently pleased with the new conservative government. In language reminiscent of George Orwell's "doublethink," a NSC memorandum in July noted among U.S. policy objectives in Laos, that of "helping maintain the confidence of the Royal Lao Government in its anti-Communist, pro-Free World 'neutralism.'" 25 Events in August, unique even to the remarkable world of Lao politics, were to prove, however, that not everyone was happy with the new policy of "anti-Communist, pro-Free World neutralism."

V. YEARS OF CRISIS: 1960-1962

So it was that by the start of 1964, after a decade of humiliating reverses and the expenditure of close to half a billion dollars, United States policy had come full circle: during the 1950s Souvanna Phouma and his plan for a neutral Laos had been opposed with all the power of the Invisible Government [the CIA]; now the United States was ready to settle for even less than it could have had five years earlier at a fraction of the cost.1

The events of August 1960 and the tragically needless fighting over the next two years were to bring Laos to the forefront of American attention. In all of the almost two decades of the second Indochina war this was the only time during which Laos was for the United States much more than a mere sideshow to the conflict in Vietnam. As the Pentagon Papers point out,

For although it is hard to recall that context today, Vietnam in 1961 was a peripheral crisis. Even within Southeast Asia it received far less of the Administration's and the world's attention than did Laos. The New York Times Index for 1961 has eight columns on Laos, twenty-six on Laos (Gravel ed., II:18).

The individual who precipitated the 1960 crisis was a diminutive, dedicated, Army Captain named Kong-le. Ethnically a member of a minority group from the southern Laos, Kong-le was the commander of the best unit in the Royal Lao Army, the Second Para Troop Battalion. He was, as Bernard Fall put it, a "soldier's soldier," and "much too unsophisticated for playing the favorite Laotian game of political musical chairs." 2

In the early morning hours of August 9 with General Phoumi and the entire cabinet in Luang Prabang conferring with the King, Kong-le and his paratroopers, politically unsophisticated though they may have been, shocked the world and no doubt their French and American military advisers. They executed a coup d'etat and occupied all of Vientiane. A few days later Kong-le explained his motives for overthrowing the government:

What leads us to carry out this revolution is our desire to stop the bloody civil war; eliminate grasping public servants [and] military commanders ... whose property amounts to much more than their monthly salaries can afford; and chase away foreign armed forces as soon as possible. ... It is the Americans who have bought government officials and army commanders, and caused war and division in our country. ... We must help each other, drive these sellers of the fatherland out of the country as soon as possible. Only then can our country live in peace.3

Kong-le quickly formed a provisional committee and called on Souvanna Phouma to head a new, truly neutral government. After a vote of the National Assembly and with the King's approval, Prince Souvanna organized a new cabinet. In the meantime Phoumi Nosavan flew to his stronghold in Savannakhet. Souvanna, working once again to build a government of national union, flew to Savannakhet for talks with Phoumi, who finally agreed to join the government. In late August the Assembly, meeting in Luang Prabang, approved the new cabinet including Phoumi Nosavan as Vice-Premier and Minister of Interior. The settlement was backed by the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane and by the newly arrived U.S. Ambassador, Winthrop Brown, who was convinced of Souvanna's neutrality. However, other more conservative forces were at work in the U.S. government, and in September, Brown was instructed to find a substitute for Souvanna Phouma who was pro-Western.4 While the Embassy delayed and evidently fought for the support of Souvanna, the CIA and the U.S. military advisers of PEO turned once again to their protégé—Phoumi Nosavan.

After the agreement with Souvanna in Luang Prabang, Phoumi had returned not to Vientiane but once again to his headquarters at Savannakhet. On September 10, despite his agreement with Souvanna, Phoumi announced the establishment of a countercoup committee against Souvanna's government and of which he was nominally a member. A week later with at least the tacit support of the United States, Thailand instituted a blockade on Vientiane. Nevertheless, a flood of supplies including those intended for Vientiane continued to pour in to Phoumi's forces at Savannakhet.5 Additionally, despite a promise to Souvanna to the contrary, two hundred Laotian paratroopers who had been training in Thailand under U.S. sponsorship were turned over to General Phoumi.6 Souvanna Phouma pleaded with U.S. officials to discontinue the blockade, but no help was forthcoming. Finally he turned to the Soviet Union for help. On October 1 Souvanna announced his approval for the establishment of a Soviet Embassy in Vientiane. His announcement only confirmed U.S. suspicions of his pro-Communist tendencies. Indeed, this assessment had proved in effect to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Calling him pro-Communist, the United States refused him help. In desperation, he turned to the Soviet Union for aid, thus "proving" the original assessment of his pro-Communist tendencies. Nevertheless, a U.S. delegation was dispatched to Vientiane in October to talk with Souvanna. In effect the delegation, including former Ambassador Parsons, demanded that the Prince abandon his policy of neutrality.7 Souvanna refused. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. decided that "Souvanna must go." 8 As it was to happen again in Vietnam just three years later, the United States decided that a legally constituted government "must go."

In the meantime U.S. aid had continued to pour into Savannakhet for Phoumi's forces. In mid-December, "with plans drawn up by his American advisers," General Phoumi marched on Vientiane. A tragically bloody battle followed which inflicted as many as 500 civilian casualties.9 Greatly outnumbered, Kong-le's forces withdrew to the north. With Vientiane and Luang Prabang controlled by Phoumi forces, the King on December 13 named Prince Boun Oum to form a new government. The United States quickly recognized the Boun Oum govern-
The Peninsula Papers and U.S. Involvement in Laos

The new Administration, however, delayed action on Laos. In late January, Kennedy set up a Task Force to review American policy in Laos. In the meantime the Kong-le/Pathet Lao forces had consolidated their position on the Plaine des Jarres and in early March attacked the Sala Phou Khoun junction on the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Again the Phoumists troops, despite their American advisers, panicked and fled. To the United States the crisis appeared to be nearing explosive proportions. In Washington, according to one participant, the meetings on the Laotian crisis were “long and agonizing.” Various proposals for intervention were discussed. One called for American paratroops to seize and occupy the Plaine des Jarres. Another called for the occupation of the panhandle in southern Laos and the Vientiane Plain by 60,000 troops. The Laos task force also developed a contingency plan containing seventeen steps of escalation. Nevertheless, the new President still temporized. Without actually ordering any U.S. troops to Laos, he put U.S. Marines in Okinawa on alert for possible intervention and dispatched helicopters and supplies to Thai bases near Laos. By March 24, Kennedy seemed to have decided to pursue a diplomatic rather than military solution to the crisis. On that day Kennedy appeared on nationwide television and declared:

I want to make it clear to the American people and to all of the world that all we want in Laos is peace and not war, a truly neutral government and not a cold war pawn, a settlement concluded at the conference table and not on the battlefield (Gravel ed., II:800).

In the same month progress did develop on the diplomatic front. The United Kingdom called for a new Geneva Convention on Laos. And on April 24, Russia joined Britain in calling for an armistice in Laos and a reconvention of the Geneva Conference. In the same week opinion in the U.S. government became much more amenable to a diplomatic settlement, for it was during the week of April twentieth that the blunder of the Bay of Pigs invasion became known. A Kennedy aide later quoted the President as having said “Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did. Otherwise we’d be in Laos by now—and that would be a hundred times worse.” Nevertheless, with Pathet Lao/Neutralist forces gaining ground throughout Laos—as Toyey says “gain[ing] as much cheap territory as they could”—some people within the U.S. government still spoke of U.S. intervention. On April 29, Secretary of Defense McNamara talked of landing U.S. forces in Vientiane and declared that “we would have to attack the DRV if we gave up Laos.” The possibility of overt U.S. intervention in Laos was not yet dead. The Pentagon Papers reveal that in a May 1 meeting on Laos, Kennedy “deferred any decision on putting troops into Laos,” but instead approved “a cable alerting CINC PAC to be ready to move 5000-men task forces to Udorn, Thailand, and to Tournai (Da Nang), South Vietnam. The alert was intended as a threat to intervene in Laos if the communists failed to go through with the cease fire which was to precede the Geneva Conference” (Gravel ed., II:41-42). This meeting seems to have been the last time, at least for this crisis, at which overt intervention was considered. The United States had backed into the decision to seek a political settlement on grounds which were completely functional;

1. The Phoumists forces, the only alternative to negotiated settlement or U.S. military intervention had repeatedly demonstrated their abysmal fighting capabilities.
As Dommen put it, "the 'decision' to accept a coalition in Laos was virtually thrust upon the Kennedy Administration." 29

Although Kennedy had thus "rejected" overt military intervention he did not shy away from covert operations. In a NSC meeting on April 29, only two weeks before the opening of the second Geneva Conference he approved plans to "dispatch agents to North Vietnam" for sabotage and harassment and to infiltrate commando teams into Southeast Laos (Gravel ed., II:640-641).30 A July report by counterinsurgency expert Brigadier General Edward G. Lansdale told of other covert operations in Laos:

About 9,000 Meo tribesmen have been equipped for guerrilla operations, which they are now conducting with considerable effectiveness in Communist-dominated territory in Laos. . . . Command control of Meo operations is exercised by the Chief CIA Vientiane with the advice of Chief MAAG Laos. The same CIA paramilitary and U.S. military teamwork is in existence for advisory activities (9 CIA operations officers, 9 LTAG/Army Special Forces personnel in addition to the 99 Thai PARU [Police Aerial Resupply Unit] under CIA control) and aerial resupply (Gravel ed., II:646).

In an aura of Orwellian doublethink Lansdale continues:

There is also a local veteran's organization and a grass-roots political organization in Laos, both of which are subject to CIA direction and control and are capable of carrying out propaganda, sabotage and harassment operations (Gravel ed., II:647).

Did the renowned counterinsurgency expert really believe that a grass-roots political organization could be "subject to CIA direction and control"? This doublethink reflects the dilemma of much of the U.S. involvement in Indochina. U.S. leaders knew theoretically that to be effective, an organization had to be subject to CIA direction and control and are capable of carrying out propaganda, sabotage and harassment operations (Gravel ed., II:647).

This continuing covert military support undoubtedly contributed to what became the biggest stumbling block in the path toward a negotiated settlement of the crisis: the insinuation of the Laotian rightist faction led by Prince Boun Oum and Phoumi Nosavan. After meetings of the princely leaders of the three Laotian factions in Ban Hin Heup in October, Boun Oum rejected the division of portfolios in a proposed coalition cabinet. Then for two months he refused to meet with Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong to help work out a compromise.37 In December Phoumi launched new military actions in central Laos east of Thakhek and in northern Laos near Muong Sai. Hugh Toye, British military attaché to Laos at that time describes Phoumi's actions. "Both were areas where his opponents could be expected to be sensitive and where probes would provoke military reactions which could then be used as excuses for delay on the political front." 38 With the rightists' insinuation becoming more apparent, Harriman persuaded his superiors that more effective persuasion was neces-
In January 1962, the U.S. withheld economic aid. On January 10, Prince Boun Oum then in Vientiane relented and announced his intention of returning to Geneva to resume negotiations. Two days later the United States responded with an announcement of its intention to resume aid. Phoumi Nosavan, however, proved more intransigent. In late January, the Pathet Lao mortared the town of Nam Tha in northern Laos. Their actions were a clear breach of the ceasefire, but Souphanouvong defended them by claiming that Nam Tha had been the base for probes by Phoumi’s forces into Pathet Lao territory. Also the Prince complained of continuing air attacks on Pathet Lao villages. Contrary to official American advice, Phoumi responded by building up his troops at Nam Tha to 5,000 by the end of January. It was again Averell Harriman, chief U.S. negotiator at Geneva, who pushed for U.S. sanctions against the buildup by Phoumi. In addition, Harriman sought and obtained the removal of the CIA station chief whom he suspected of unofficially backing Phoumi in his venture. In March, Harriman himself even met with Phoumi. He told the General flatly, that “the Phoumi forces were finished in Laos if they did not agree to coalition.” But the situation had already reached the threshold of crisis. In February the nervous Thais had moved troops to the Thai-Lao border. And on May 6, the crisis reached its denouement. Accounts differ as to whether there actually was a battle at Nam Tha. Apparently there was not, only the “possibility of one.” Whatever the case, Phoumi’s troops fled in panic toward the Mekong River town of Ban Houei Sai and crossed into Thailand. Once again Phoumi cried “Wolf!” and this time not just “North Vietnamese!” but “Chinese wolf!” Amid the panic and confusion, had it that an attack on Ban Houei Sai was imminent. So Phoumi’s troops fled right on across the Mekong into Thailand. An American patrol, displaying rather more courage, probed back toward Nam Tha. They encountered only scattered Pathet Lao patrols, no Vietnamese or Chinese. One American officer, displaying a sense of humor, undoubtedly necessary for his work as military adviser to Phoumi’s troops, reported to his superiors:

The morale of my battalion is substantially better than in our last engagement. The last time they dropped their weapons and ran. This time they took their weapons with them.

General Phoumi’s ploy had failed. Backed by CIA agents he had hoped to provoke a crisis which would force the United States to intervene militarily and destroy the forthcoming coalition. The U.S. reaction was more restrained than Phoumi had hoped. On June 15, in a show of force President Kennedy announced the deployment of 3,000 U.S. troops to Thailand. While contingency plans were drawn up for the “investing and holding by Thai forces with U.S. backup of Sayaboury Province (in Laos)” and for the “holding and recapture of the panhandle of Laos . . . with Thai, Vietnamese or U.S. forces” (Gravel ed., II:672–673), neither plan was implemented. Again, covert intervention was avoided while the focus for action remained with covert operations. A NSAM No. 162, June 19, 1962) recommended the increased use of third-country personnel with particular attention to

The whole range of this concept from the current limited use of Thai and Filipino technicians in Laos to the creation of simply equipped regional forces for use in remote jungle, hill, and desert country. Such forces would

After the Nam Tha fiasco and despite continuing covert operations, progress toward coalition came quickly. In June, the three princes reached agreement on the composition of a coalition cabinet. Seven positions were allotted to Souvanna Phouma’s neutralist faction, four each to the Pathet Lao and to the rightists of Boun Oum and Phoumi. The remaining four cabinet positions went to a fourth group, the Vientiane neutralists. On July 23 the fourteen member nations of the Geneva Conference gave official sanction to the new Government of National Union. Regrettably, it was to prove shortlived.

VI. THE SIDESHOW WAR, 1963–1968

Despite the withdrawal of U.S. military advisers from Laos following the second Geneva conference, U.S. involvement in Laos continued to grow. The United States maintained its support of Souvanna Phouma and the guise of a coalition government, not for its own sake so much as to allow the United States to continue actions in Laos aimed at furthering American objectives in Vietnam. After 1962 a general attitude of anticommunism and a desire to prevent revolutionary hegemony in territory adjacent to Thailand continued to motivate U.S. policymakers. Yet after this time Laos, itself, was for the United States little more than a sideshow to the growing conflict in Vietnam.

The 1962 Geneva Agreements on Laos gave only short and imperfect peace to the small kingdom. Different observers have laid the blame for the breakdown of the agreements variously to each of the participants in the Laotian conflict; to the United States, to the North Vietnamese, to the rightist faction in Laos and to the Pathet Lao. There was, however, no corner on the market. The blame was ample, to be shared by all.

As required by the Geneva Accords, the U.S. withdrew its military advisers, totaling 666 men, from Laos by the October 7 withdrawal deadline. Roger Hilsman, a member of the Kennedy Administration involved in planning U.S. policy on Laos, later wrote,

Harriman, especially, felt strongly that the United States could comply with both the letter and the spirit of the agreements in every detail, that its record should be absolutely clear.

Hilsman, quoting Harriman, goes on to explain what prompted the adoption of this policy, “If Souvanna’s government of national union breaks up, we must
be sure the break comes between the Communists and the neutralists, rather than having them teamed up as they were before." ⁵ While the United States may have obeyed the letter of the Geneva Agreements, adherence to their spirit was questionable. The aspect of U.S. involvement after Geneva to which the Pathet Lao objected most vehemently was the continuing provision of ammunition and supplies to the CIA-organized Meo tribesmen, some of whom still lived in enclaves behind the ceasefire line in Pathet Lao–controlled territory. The United States maintained that such supplies, airdropped to the Meo, were warranted under a clause in the Agreements allowing for the introduction of war materials which "the Royal Government of Laos may consider necessary for the national defense of Laos." ⁶ The Pathet Lao objected to the supply flights to the Meo forces on the grounds that such flights could be legally approved only through the agreement of all three factions in the tripartite government.⁷ The PL chagrin over the continuing supply of the Meo forces is understandable in light of the fact that even after Geneva the Meo forces were by no means quiescent. As Roger Hilsman wrote,

The Meo were undoubtedly troublesome to the Communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese cadres. And it should also be said that there were occasions of tension in 1962 and 1963 when it was useful to have the Meo blow up a bridge or occupy a mountaintop in the deadly game of "signaling" that the United States had to play to deter the Communists from adventuring with the Geneva accords.⁸

But while the United States clearly can be held partially to blame for the failure of the 1962 Agreements, neither were the North Vietnamese guiltless. Only forty North Vietnamese advisers to the Pathet Lao were officially withdrawn after Geneva.⁹ Even though their presence in Laos had never been acknowledged officially by the DRV, very probably a much larger number were involved. While some of them may have been withdrawn unofficially, it also seems likely that a substantial number remained behind after the withdrawal deadline.¹⁰

In light of the only partial adherence to the Geneva Agreements on the part of outside powers, it is not surprising that the three Lao factions met with little success in their attempt to form a coalition government. After the signing of the Soviet airlift to the Plaine des Jarres in November, the neutralist troops of Kong-ke were left with no independent source of supply. As a result they had to depend on supplies coming from North Vietnam, as did the Pathet Lao. Whether as a result of disagreement over the allocation of the supplies from North Vietnam or for some other reason, fighting broke out between the Pathet Lao and Kong-ke's troops.¹¹ One group of neutralist troops led by Colonel Deuan Sunnalath sided with the Pathet Lao. In February 1963, neutralist Ketsana Vongsavong was assassinated in his home on the Plaine, and on April 1 the neutralist Foreign Minister in Souvanna's government, Quinim Pholsena, was assassinated in Vientiane. Shortly thereafter Prince Souphanouvong, fearing for his safety and no doubt recalling his arrest in 1959, left Vientiane for Khang Khai on the Plaine des Jarres. The prospects for a coalition were waning. Also in April the United States began supplying Kong-ke's neutralist forces and renewed fighting broke out between the neutralist factions on the Plaine.

There is little evidence that the United States contributed directly to the renewal of fighting, though its initiation of supply flights to Kong-ke's forces was, no doubt, viewed with alarm by the leftist forces. Nevertheless, it is clear that the United States did not persevere in its fulfillment of the Geneva Agreements

with much compunction. In October 1962, the same month as the announced withdrawal of all U.S. military advisers from Laos, the American mission to Laos established a successor to the PEO, a military mission, now called the Requirements Office.¹² Like the old Peo, the Requirements Office was nominally a part of the U.S. aid mission. As Stevenson points out, U.S. "Covert operations continued despite the ostensible withdrawal of all 'foreign military personnel' as provided in the Geneva agreements." ¹³ In June 1963, President Kennedy decided to supply the RLG with more modern T-28 aircraft and initiated a training program for Laotian pilots in Thailand early in 1964.¹⁴ In March General Phoumi reached a secret agreement with Premier Khan of South Vietnam to allow South Vietnamese soldiers to enter Laos in chase of enemy troops.¹⁵ Also during this time evidence accumulated on growing DRV involvement in southern Laos in opening up the fledgling Ho Chi Minh trail.¹⁶

In mid-April 1964, Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Phoumi Nosavan met on the Plaine des Jarres for talks aimed at reaching agreement on the coalition government. The primary issue discussed was the neutralization of Luang Prabang.¹⁷ It had been proposed that the government move to that more neutral city since Vientiane was clearly in the firm control of the rightist forces. The talks soured—largely because of Phoumi Nosavan's refusal to make significant concessions. He evidently felt that any concessions to the leftist and neutralist factions would weaken his position as leader of the rightists and feared a challenge to his role as spokesman for the group. If such were Phoumi's fears, they quickly proved well-founded.

After the breakup of the talks on the Plaine, a disheartened Souvanna returned to Vientiane on April 18. The same day he announced his resignation as Prime Minister. The following day two rightist generals, Kouprasith Abhay and Siho Lamphouthacoul, acted to usurp power. They executed a coup d'etat and arrested Souvanna Phouma.¹⁸ The United States reacted quickly to the grab for power by the right-wing generals. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos, Leonard Unger, had been in Vietnam for meetings with U.S. officials there. Upon hearing of the coup he immediately flew back to Vientiane and informed Kouprasith that the United States still supported Souvanna Phouma. Threatened with a cutoff in U.S. aid, the generals, on April 23, released Souvanna and called on him to return as leader of the rightist-neutralist united General Staff.²¹ In the United Nations, the United States charged the Pathet Lao with "an outright attempt to destroy by violence what the old coalition, the substance was clearly not the same. On May 2, Souvanna announced the merger of the rightist and neutralist factions. The partnership was lopsided at best. With the rightists in effective control Souvanna "became daily more of a figurehead in a situation over which he had little control." ²²

On May 17, the Pathet Lao began an offensive on the Plaine des Jarres against Kong-ke's forces, which were by then formally under the command of the new rightist-neutralist unified General Staff.²³ In the United Nations, the United States charged the Pathet Lao with "an outright attempt to destroy by violence what the whole structure of the Geneva Accords was intended to preserve." ²⁴ Yet from the Pathet Lao point of view, the Accords had already been shattered; by the rightist coup on April 19, by the rightist-neutralist agreements and by the continuing guerrilla actions of the Meo forces in northern Laos. The Pathet Lao subsequently charged that it was the United States who "staged" the April 19 coup.²⁵ Given the U.S. involvement in the toppling of Souvanna's governments in 1958 and 1960, the charge clearly had precedent. Yet as previously noted it was the intervention of U.S. Ambassador Unger and the threat of an aid cutoff which prompted the generals to return Souvanna to his position of Prime Minister. The PL charge of U.S. perfidy was, for once, groundless.
On May 21, the United States obtained Souvanna’s permission to conduct reconnaissance flights over PL-held territory (Gravel ed., III:524). Armed escort planes were soon added to the reconnaissance missions which were code-named YANKEE TEAM. On June 6, the Pathet Lao shot down one U.S. plane and the next day downed a second U.S. jet. In retaliation, a squadron of U.S. jets attacked Pathet Lao positions on the Plaine. Apparently alarmed by Communist denouncements of the raids, Souvanna declared that he would resign unless the United States stopped the attacks. The flights were discontinued, but two days later, after meeting with Ambassador Unger, Souvanna announced the resumption of the escorted reconnaissance flights. The attack sorties by U.S. jets over northern Laos had not been announced by the U.S. government. They were first revealed by the New China News Agency. On June 17, the Washington Post editorialized,

The country has come to a sad pass when it must turn to Communist China’s New China News Agency for reports on covert military operations being conducted by the United States. . . . In Laos, Communist China claimed that American planes had flown attack missions against installations on the Plain of Jars. First the State Department refused comment, but soon the story leaked out in quite the form that the Communists had charged. . . . What in heaven’s name does the United States think it is doing by trying to keep these air strikes secret? Does the Government really have the naivete to believe that its hand in these operations can be concealed? If it is to conduct or sponsor such raids, then let the matter be decided openly in terms of whether American interests require it. . . .

Despite complaints such as the above, U.S. air operations in Laos were to continue with neither open discussions nor public knowledge of them. From June 1964 to March 1970, the U.S. government never acknowledged conducting anything more than “armed reconnaissance” flights in northern Laos. Yet during this time the fighter-bomber sortie rate of U.S. planes over northern Laos reached a peak of 300 per day.

Among the reasons later given for the official U.S. secrecy over its involvement in Laos was that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma wanted it so. In testimony before the Symington Subcommittee in October 1969, William Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Laos from 1964 to 1969, addressed the issue. In explaining “why it is that the United States is reluctant to place on the public record through the statements of officials precise definition of what the U.S. involvement or operations in Laos have entailed,” Sullivan cited an “understanding between my predecessor [Leonard Unger] and the Prime Minister of Laos . . . premised upon statements being limited, [and] admissions publicly stated being very carefully structured.”

Such an explanation of course implies that the Laotian Prime Minister was kept informed of U.S. operations in Laos. The Pentagon Papers make clear, however, that U.S. officials considered it desirable, but by no means essential, to keep Souvanna informed on U.S. actions. A cable from Dean Rusk to the U.S. Embassies in Saigon, Vientiane and Bangkok dated August 9, 1964, reported “Meeting today approved in principle early initiation air and limited ground operations in Laos. . . .” Rusk suggested a meeting between the respective Ambassadors to “clarify scope and timing [of] possible operations.” As one of the crucial issues to be discussed at the meeting he questioned “whether we should inform Souvanna before undertaking or go ahead without him” (Gravel ed., III:524).
The operation in northern Laos, code-named Operation Triangle (also called Operation Three Arrows or Samsone) proved more successful. The operation, mounted during July of 1964, was aimed at clearing the Vientiane–Luang Prabang road. A number of U.S. Army personnel were brought into Laos to help coordinate the operation. Thai artillerymen were brought in to support the offensive. By this time Thai pilots were also operating in Laos in Laotian-marked T-28 aircraft. An August 17 cable from CINCPAC to the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that "Progress in Laos is due almost entirely to T-28 operations and Thai artillery" (Gravel ed., III:543).

Despite the success of Operation Triangle and the deepening U.S. military involvement in the Kingdom, it is evident that by the summer of 1964, Laos was subordinated to U.S. interests in Vietnam to such an extent that U.S. policymakers little more than a sideshow to the conflict in Vietnam. In August, Unger cabled Washington:

resolution Laos problem depends fundamentally on resolution Vietnam and therefore our policy here (leaving aside corridor question) is necessarily an interim one of holding the line but trying avoid escalation of military conflict (Gravel ed., III:542).

Laos was subordinated to U.S. interests in Vietnam to such an extent that U.S. officials opposed moves toward a resumption of an international conference to bring peace to Laos, because a ceasefire in Laos would have hindered U.S. actions related to the conflict in Vietnam. In a cable from Saigon Ambassador Taylor revealed the U.S. attitude:

Intensified pressures for Geneva-type conference cited in Reftel would appear to U.S. to be coming almost entirely from those who are opposed to U.S. policy objectives in SEA (except possible UK which seems prepared jump on bandwagon). Under circumstances, we see very little hope that results of such conference would be advantageous to U.S. (Gravel ed., III:523).

In a memorandum dated August 11, William Bundy stated the U.S. position even more bluntly,

1. We would wish to slow down any progress toward a conference and to hold Souvanna to the firmest possible position. . . .
2. If, despite our best efforts, Souvanna on his own, or in response to third-country pressures, started to move rapidly toward a conference, we would have a very difficult problem (Gravel ed., III:528-529).

The American opposition to the peace moves on Laos reflected not any desire for open war in that country but rather a wish to maintain the status quo, to prevent losses and to keep options open. A memorandum by Defense Department official John McNaughton on October 13 noted two aims for U.S. policy in Laos: "a) To preserve Souvanna's position (no coup). b) To prevent significant PL land grabs" (Gravel ed., III:581).38

And, as Bundy noted in August, "We particularly need to keep our hands free for at least limited measures against the Laos infiltration areas" (Gravel ed., III:526).

A "very difficult problem" for the United States was avoided, however, and the status quo maintained, when preliminary talks between Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong fell through. The Laotian rightists refused to agree to a plan for the return of the Plaine des Jarres to centrist control,38 and the talks ended.

After the breakup of the preliminary peace talks in September, the forgotten war in Laos continued with increasing intensity. In October President Johnson gave his authorization for Unger to "urge the RLG to begin air attacks against Viet Cong infiltration routes and facilities in Laos Panhandle by RAF T-28 aircraft as soon as possible" (Gravel ed., III:576-577). By that time South Vietnamese T-28 aircraft were also "bombing the Laotian corridor" (Gravel ed., II:344; III:160). These early strikes against the fledging Ho Chi Minh trail were of militarily questionable significance both because of the limited effectiveness of the RVNAF and the RLAF37 and because of the fledgling character of the trail itself. In December 1963, Ambassador Unger had reported that "the recent use of the Laotian corridor was not extensive enough to have influenced significantly the then intensive VC efforts in South Vietnam" (Gravel ed., III:160). A November 1964 summary of MACV and CIA cables on infiltration concluded that on the basis of the presently available information, it considers 19,000 infiltrators from 1959 to the present as a firm (confirmed) minimum and 34,000 as a maximum number during the same time period. The summary concluded further that "the significance of the infiltration to the insurgency cannot be defined with precision" (Gravel ed., III:673-674).

Although the early strikes on the trail area of southeastern Laos may not have been terribly important strategically they did afford a psychological boost to the regime in Saigon.38 While Ambassador Unger was authorized in October "to inform Lao that YANKEE TEAM suppressive fire strikes against certain difficult targets in Panhandle . . . are part of the over-all concept and are to be anticipated later . . ." (Gravel ed., III:577), no strikes by U.S. aircraft were carried out in southern Laos until after the November elections in the United States. The U.S. air strikes both in Laos and in the DRV were reportedly contingent on reform in the Saigon government. In December 1964, Ambassador Taylor, just back from Washington, presented the Saigon government with a statement that if the GVN would demonstrate a "far greater national unity against the Communist enemy at this critical time than exists at present," then the U.S. would add its air power "as needed to restrict the use of Laotian territory as a route of infiltration into South Vietnam." After the new unity and effectiveness of the GVN became visible, promised Taylor, "the USG would begin bombing North Vietnam" (Gravel ed., II:344).

Also in early December, the JCS developed an air strike program to complement the YANKEE TEAM reconnaissance missions in northern and central Laos. Their proposals were presented to a meeting of the National Security Council on December 12. The JCS plans were approved with only one amendment. The use of napalm by U.S. planes in Laos was excluded. In an unusual act of deference the NSC decided that for the first use of napalm in Laos, "the RLAF would be the only appropriate user." It was also agreed at the December 12 meeting that there would be no public statements about armed reconnaissance operations in Laos "unless a plane were lost." If a plane were to be downed, the
U.S. government would “continue to insist that we were merely escorting reconnaissance flights as requested by the Laotian government” (Gravel ed., III:253–254). The bombing program in northern Laos code-named BARREL ROLL got under way on December 14. The program of twice weekly missions by four aircraft each was carried on into January when after the loss of two U.S. planes over Laos “the whole lid blew on the entire YANKIE TEAM operation in Laos since May of 1964” (Gravel ed., III:264). The bombing in Laos was soon overshadowed, however, by Operation ROLLING THUNDER, the bombing of North Vietnam, which began in February 1965.

The man in charge of the U.S. military air war in Laos was William Healy Sullivan, the new U.S. Ambassador. Sullivan assumed his post as U.S. envoy to Laos in November 1964, but was by no means a newcomer to Laotian affairs. Despite the objections of more senior Foreign Service Officers, Sullivan had been hand-picked by Averell Harriman in 1961 to serve as second in command of the U.S. delegation to the second Geneva Conference. In March 1962, Harriman sent Sullivan to the Plain of Jars to confer with Souvanna and Souphanouvong in an attempt to break the stalemate on the coalition talks. Evidently Sullivan had won the confidence of Souvanna in those early contacts because after meeting with the Prime Minister on December 10, only two weeks after assuming his new post, Sullivan cabled Washington that Souvanna “Fully supports the U.S. press program and is prepared to cooperate in full” (Gravel ed., III:253). Since the establishment of a U.S. military mission in Laos was proscribed by the Geneva Agreements of 1962, Sullivan as Ambassador was nominally in charge of all U.S. military actions in Laos. As a result, the new Ambassador came to be called “General Sullivan” or the “Field Marshal.” By all reports, Sullivan kept a tight rein on U.S. military activities in Laos. According to William Bundy, “There wasn’t a bag of rice dropped in Laos that he didn’t know about.” He was a pragmatist when it came to the U.S. role in Indochina. A memorandum written at that time

American personnel, who have hitherto served only as advisors, should be integrated into the Vietnamese chain of command, both military and civil. They should become direct operational components of the Vietnamese Governmental structure. For cosmetic purposes American personnel would not assume titles which would show command functions but would rather be listed as “assistants” to the Vietnamese principals at the various levels of government. . . .

Americans should be integrated to all levels of Vietnamese Government . . . (Gravel ed., II:319; Sullivan’s italics).

In Laos, Sullivan instituted no similar plans calling for Americans to become “direct operational components” of the Laotian government. Rather he relied on the USAID mission which operated for the most part quite independently of the RLG. With the exception of a few key departments (for example the Public Safety Advisory group and a handful of advisers to the Finance Minister who worked daily with their counterparts in the RLG) the USAID advisers in Vientiane usually remained ensconced in their air-conditioned offices in the USAID compound. The aid mission remained separated from the RLG to such an extent that it came to be called the “parallel government” and the USAID director was referred to as the “second Prime Minister.” “General” Sullivan remained in command, however, and the focus of U.S. involvement in Laos remained in the realm of the military.

In early January 1965, after a trip to Southeast Asia, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Harold K. Johnson, recommended that Operation BARREL ROLL be reoriented “to allow air strikes on infiltration routes in the Lao Panhandle to be conducted . . . a separate program from those directed against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese units” in northern Laos. His recommendation was subsequently implemented. The code name for the program of U.S. airstrikes against the infiltration routes in southern Laos was STEEL TIGER (Gravel ed., III:338, 341).

Thus, as one observer has pointed out, the “secret war [in Laos] was really four wars . . .” Two of the “wars” were fought by American warplanes, STEEL TIGER in southern Laos, and BARREL ROLL in northern Laos. A third and less secret “war” was conducted by the Laotian Forces Armees Royales (FAR). This has been, no doubt, the least efficient aspect of the conflict at least from the American point of view. The five regional military commanders of the FAR have often been likened to warlords and seemed always to be more intent on making money than on making war against the Communists. The fourth war was that conducted by the irregular forces known variously as the Secret Army, the CIA Army, the Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) or the Battalions Guerriers (BGs). These irregular forces were an outgrowth of the CIA directed Meo Army of the early 1960s. By the late 1960s the war had taken such a heavy toll of the Meo that the irregular forces then contained soldiers from other Lao ethnic groups as well as Thai “volunteers.” The SGUs were, however, still controlled largely by the CIA. Although nominally under the command of Royal Lao Army General Vang Pao, the irregular forces were beyond the control of the RLG to such an extent that when once Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma asked for irregular units to defend the Royal Capital of Luang Prabang, his request was reportedly refused. 49

The Pentagon Papers reveal very little about U.S. involvement in Laos after 1964. All of the post-1964 references to Laos come only in a context of how events in Laos relate directly to the war in Vietnam. The single item of recurring mention is the problem of North Vietnamese infiltration of men and supplies through the Laotian Panhandle into South Vietnam. The resolution of this problem had been the object of the initiation of the STEEL TIGER operation in early 1965. In September 1966, General Westmoreland confronted with a Communist buildup in northern SVN, put forward a new plan for action against the infiltration. His idea which he termed “SLAM” (for seek, locate, annihilate and monitor) called for both B-52 and tactical air strikes along the trail through Laos (Gravel ed., IV:337). During the summer of 1966, a Defense Department-sponsored thing-tank group was formed to study the Vietnam war and particularly the infiltration problem. The group, formed under the auspices of the JASON divi-
sion of the Institute for Defense Analyses, concluded that the bombing of North Vietnam "does not limit the present logistic flow into SVN ..." (Gravel ed., IV:354). As an alternative the JASON group proposed an anti-infiltration barrier across Laos. The group's findings clearly influenced Secretary of Defense McNamara who in October proposed limiting the bombing of the North and suggested the building of a barrier "across the trails of Laos" (Gravel ed., IV:356). His proposals were opposed by the JCS, who disagreed on the assessment of the effectiveness of the bombing, and by Sullivan, who feared undermining Souvanna.

After the temporary coup of 1964, the U.S. had continued to support Souvanna's government. As a result of this continuing American favor, the Prince remained in office despite a coup attempt by army officers in 1965. The firm U.S. backing of the Prince was crucial in preventing further coup attempts, although such were often rumored. In October 1966, the Royal Lao government requested additional U.S. assistance and the U.S. mission decided that what the RLG needed was American Forward Air Controllers (FACs). Also in October 1966 came the curious incident of Royal Lao Air Force General Ma. General Ma was the commander of the RLAF and was highly rated by American Air Attachés. As a result of the RLAF bombing over the Ho Chi Minh trail, General Ma had achieved increased status within the RLG military hierarchy. He soon became involved in conflict, however, with Laotian army generals. Ma objected to the generals' use of RLAF planes for personal errands—reportedly including the smuggling of opium. General Ma's conflict with the army generals reached such proportions that, despite the intervention of Ambassador Sullivan, Ma led a bombing raid on the army headquarters in Vientiane. The raid failed to put out of commission any of Ma's antagonists and the general was forced to flee into exile in Thailand.

The United States was little concerned with such internecine struggles, except insofar as they might inhibit U.S. operations in Laos aimed at interdicting the Ho Chi Minh trail. In April 1967, General Westmoreland's attentions again turned to Laos and a new plan for operations into the Laotian Panhandle. The operation, code-named HIGH PORT, called for the invasion of southern Laos by an elite South Vietnamese division. Westmoreland envisioned "the eventual development of Laos as a major battlefield, a development which would take some of the military pressure off the south" (Gravel ed., IV:443). Civilian officials again held sway, however, with their arguments against such a move, on the grounds that it would probably be ineffective and it might lead to Souvanna's downfall and the escalation of the war in Laos (Gravel ed., IV:444).

Despite the decisions not to intervene openly in Laos, the covert intervention was continued unabated. In 1966, the United States initiated Project 404. Under this program more than 100 U.S. military personnel were brought in from Thailand to advise the Laotian army and air force. Also in 1966, several navigational stations were established in Laos to guide U.S. planes bombing the DRV. Since these stations were clearly in violation of the Geneva Accords, which prohibited the use of "Laotian territory for military purposes or for the purposes of interference in the internal affairs of other countries," their existence was a closely guarded secret. The Communist forces in Laos, however, knew of these navigational sites. One site at Muong Phalane in central Laos, was overrun on December 25, 1967, killing two Americans. Another site at Phou Pha Thi, in northern Laos, only seventeen miles from the North Vietnamese border, was overrun by Communist forces in March 1968. Twelve U.S. Air Force men were killed at Phou Pha Thi, while a thirteenth escaped.

We made a big thing in the Johnson administration about stopping the North Vietnamese air strikes. But at the same time we were increasing in secret the air strikes against Laos. In fact, as the general just said, which I knew, orders were that if you do not need the planes against Vietnam, use said planes against Laos.

—Senator Stuart Symington
(Symington Hearings, p. 713)

Johnson's claim of a "substantial reduction" in the level of hostilities was completely disingenuous. The planes which were no longer bombing north of the twentieth parallel were diverted to Laos. The same pattern of deception was repeated in November 1968, after the complete bombing halt over North Vietnam. On the night of October 31, in announcing the total bombing halt over North Vietnam, President Johnson proclaimed, "The overriding consideration that governs us at this hour is the chance and the opportunity that we might have to save human lives on both sides of the conflict." 1

If such was the "overriding" concern of Johnson, clearly it did not extend to Laos. The Cornell University Air War Study Group noted, "The next day, President Johnson announced the partial bombing halt as "the first step to de-escalate the conflict." He added, "We are reducing—substantially reducing—the present level of hostilities" (Gravel ed., IV:597).

VII. POST-PENTAGON PAPERS

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Three weeks after the loss of the navigational outpost on Phou Pha Thi, on March 31, 1968, President Johnson announced a partial bombing halt over North Vietnam. The day before the announcement the State Department sent out a cable to the U.S. Ambassadors in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea and Laos. The cable revealed that

In view of weather limitations, bombing north of the 20th parallel will in any event be limited at least for the next four weeks or so—which we tentatively envisage as a maximum testing period in any event. Hence, we are not giving up anything really serious in this time frame. Moreover, air power now used north of the 20th can probably be used in Laos (where no policy change is planned) and in SVN (Gravel ed., IV:595; italics added).

As one U.S. official put it, "We just couldn't let the planes rust." With the vastly increased sortie rate in Laos and the departure of Sullivan as Ambassador in March 1969, the controls on U.S. air attacks designed to avoid the bombing of civilian targets were substantially relaxed. In April 1969 the town of Xieng Khouang on the Plaine des Jarres was completely leveled. Shortly thereafter, the Communists launched a drive westward from the area of the Plaine toward the town of Muong Soui. Despite vastly increasing fighter-bomber sortie rates, Muong Soui fell to the Communists on June 27. In an attempt to recoup some
of their losses the Royalist forces launched a counteroffensive. Supported by massive U.S. airpower (at rates approaching 300 sorties daily in northern Laos alone) the offensive met with very little resistance. The CIA-backed SGUs of Meo General Vang Pao quickly captured all of the Plaine. The SGU forces occupied the Plaine for nearly six months. In January and February 1970, faced with an imminent attack on the Plaine by PL/NVN forces, the RLG evacuated all of the civilians from the area—totaling roughly 20,000 persons. Despite saturation-bombing by B-52s, the Communists forces regained control of the Plaine in March 1970.

The evacuation of the refugees from the area of the Plaine provided the first opportunity for Western observers to learn of what life was like under the Pathet Lao. Numerous accounts of life under the PL soon began appearing in newspapers and magazines. Many of the accounts from the refugees dealt with various aspects of the regimentation of life under the PL. Yet the common denominator to all accounts, what the refugees almost invariably talked about, was the bombing. Perhaps the most concise account of the bombing was given by a United Nations advisor in Laos, George Chapelier. After interviewing dozens of refugees, Chapelier wrote,

By 1968 the intensity of the bombings was such that no organized life was possible in the villages. The villages moved to the outskirts and then deeper and deeper into the forest as the bombing reached its peak in 1969 when jet planes came daily and destroyed all stationary structures. Nothing was left standing. The villagers lived in trenches and holes or in caves. They only farmed at night. All of the informants, without any exception, had his village completely destroyed. In the last phase, bombings were aimed at the systematic destruction of the materials [sic] basis of the civilian society.10

Even an official U.S. government survey made similar findings. The survey, conducted by the United States Information Service (USIS) in Laos and revealed publicly thanks to the efforts of U.S. Congressman Paul McCloskey, reported that

97% of the people [that is, of the more than 200 refugees from 96 different villages and 17 different sub-districts interviewed] said they had seen a bombing attack. About one third had seen bombing as early as 1964, and a great majority had seen attacks frequently or many times. . . . 96% of the 169 persons who responded to the question said their villages had been bombed; 75% said their homes had been damaged by bombing. . . . 11

The testimony of the refugees revealed once again the continuing deception by U.S. officials over American involvement in Laos. These officials had maintained that U.S. aircraft operating over Laos were bound by strict Rules of Engagement specifically designed to prevent bombardment of civilian targets.12 In Congressional hearings, the U.S. Air Attaché to Laos had even testified that “villages, even in a freerdrop zone, would be restricted from bombing.”13 How then did it happen that 95 percent of 169 villagers from dozens of different villages reported that their villages had been bombed?

One U.S. Foreign Service Officer who served in the U.S. Embassy in Laos gave me the following explanation.

The Rules of Engagement are good and probably as thorough as they could be. The trouble is though that given the sociology of the Air Force, they cannot be enforced effectively. Pilots are rated not on how many civilians they avoid bombing. They’re rated on bomb damage assessment, on the number of structures destroyed. They have no incentive to go out of their way to avoid bombing civilians.14

A less specific but perhaps more revealing explanation comes from an examination of how money is spent in Laos. The total Royal Lao government budget for fiscal year (FY) 1971 was $36.6 million. Roughly half of this amount came from RLG revenues and half from foreign aid. In contrast, U.S. economic aid to Laos in FY 1971 totaled $52 million. In the same year U.S. military assistance to Laos was valued at $162.2 million, and the FY 1971 CIA budget at roughly $70 million. The estimated annual cost of U.S. bombing over Laos in 1971 was $1.4 billion.15 In other words, the United States spent the FY 1971 roughly twenty-eight times more to bomb Laos than on economic aid to the country.

The cost of the bombing can be compared also with the estimated $66 per capita income of Laos’ citizens. Using 2.5 million persons as an estimate of Laos’ population, we find that the per capita cost of U.S. bombing in Laos is $560 or more than eight times Laos’ estimated per capita income. When queried as to how the United States can spend such a vast amount on destruction in Laos, how the United States can spend so much more on destruction than on construction, a State Department official replied, “our air operations [in Laos] are directed primarily at interdicting the flow of weapons and other military supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail which would be used against our forces in South Vietnam.”16 The same official also insisted that “The rules [Rules of Engagement for U.S. aircraft over Laos] do not permit attacks on nonmilitary targets and place out of bounds all inhabited villages.”17

Yet as the U.S. Senate Refugee Subcommittee put it in 1970, “the sheer volume and constancy of bombing activity [in Laos] since 1968 makes effective control of these strikes almost impossible.”18 Senator Edward Kennedy, Chairman of the Senate Refugee Subcommittee, in fact, estimated that the “bombing in Laos contributed to at least 75 percent of the refugees” in that country.19

On March 6, 1970, in response to “intense public speculation” over U.S. involvement in Laos, President Nixon gave an address on U.S. policy and activities in Laos.20 For the first time Nixon admitted that the United States was flying “combat support missions for Laotian forces when requested to do so by the Royal Laotian Government.” Yet despite this one refreshingly candid admission, Nixon continued to perpetuate most of the deception over U.S. involvement. For example, Nixon stated, “No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations.” On March 9 the Los Angeles Times revealed, however, the story of how an American army adviser to the Royal Laotian Army, Captain Joseph Bush, had been killed in northern Laos on February 10, 1969.21 The White House belatedly admitted the captain’s death, but maintained that Bush had died not in combat, but as a result of “hostile action.”22 This sort of deceptive semantic distinction provided the rationale for Nixon’s omission of the fact that in reality hundreds of Americans had died in the war in Laos.23 The President had carefully limited his assertion to Americans “stationed in Laos” and who were killed in “ground combat.” The phrases were crucial to Nixon’s assertion because many American servicemen in Laos are technically not stationed there. They are in Laos only on “temporary duty.”24 Also the
majority of Americans involved in the war in Laos never set foot on Lao soil. They fight the war from airplanes flying out of Thailand or South Vietnam or from aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Nixon also asserted that “The level of our air operations has been increased only as the number of North Vietnamese in Laos and the level of their aggression has increased.” Yet, as already noted, U.S. air operations in Laos were increased dramatically in 1968 simply because aircraft were available after the bombing halted over North Vietnam. In attempting to justify the increased American involvement in Laos, Nixon also asserted that the North Vietnamese troop level in Laos had increased to “over 67,000.” The contention was more than slightly questionable because Nixon’s figure was more than 17,000 greater than that given out at the very same time by U.S. officials in Vientiane. Additionally, Nixon was clearly guilty of misrepresentation by omission. His “precise description of our current activities in Laos” failed to mention the extensive CIA operations in Laos, the recent use of B-52s in northern Laos, or the full extent of American military advisory operations to the Lao army and air force.

In light of such deception at the very beginning of Operation Booster Shot, it is hardly surprising that the pattern was continued at the lower echelons. A particularly blatant example came to light in April 1971. In that month, the U.S. Embassy published a small book entitled Facts on Foreign Aid. In a section of the book headed “Causes and Motives in Refugee Movements” the Embassy stated,

The motives that prompt a people to choose between two kinds of rule are not always clear, but three conditions of life under the Pathet Lao appear to have prompted the choice of evacuation: the rice tax, portage, and the draft. The people grew more rice than they had ever grown before, but they had less for themselves. They paid it out in the form of taxes—rice to help the state, trading rice, and rice from the heart. The Pathet Lao devised an elaborate labor system of convoys and work crews. They drafted all the young men for the army. The refugees from the Plain of Jars say that primarily for these reasons they chose to leave their homes.

Contrast this with the USIS report on refugees from the Plain of Jars, which in a section titled “Reasons for moving to the LGZ Zone” related that,

49% of the 226 [refugees] who were asked the question said that fear of bombing was the reason they had sought refuge by moving away from home; 20% gave dislike of the Pathet Lao as the reason for leaving their home areas.

The USIS report concluded that “The bombing is clearly the most compelling reason for moving.”

The USIS survey was conducted in June and July of 1970. Facts on Foreign Aid was published more than eight months later, in April 1971. It is difficult to imagine that the authors of Facts on Foreign Aid were unaware of the findings of the USIS report. How then can the gross distortion of the only empirical data available be accounted for? How is it that the Embassy document did not even mention bombing as an ancillary cause of refugee movement? Again, what comes to one’s mind is a form of Orwellian “doublethink” and “newspeak.” Policy says that the United States does not bomb civilians. Policy is true. Therefore refugees could not have moved on account of the bombing. Because they were not bombed. Because policy says they were not bombed.

And so the pattern of secrecy and deception concerning U.S. involvement in Laos evidenced in the Pentagon Papers continues. Perhaps the only difference is that as the war in Laos continues in time and in escalation, the sea of destruction enveloping the lives and homes of more Laotians sweeps wider and wider.

VIII. CONCLUSION

United States policy toward Laos can be viewed as having three phases. During the first phase, from 1950 until approximately 1960, U.S. policy in Laos was dominated by a concern for the prevention of a Communist takeover. While after the Geneva Agreements of 1954, the United States paid lip-service to the concept of Laotian neutrality, covert U.S. involvement was aimed at bringing to power the most conservative anti-Communist elements of Laotian society. After the Agreements and despite growing U.S. involvement, Prince Souvanna Phouma achieved real success in his efforts to establish a coalition government. As a result, the Pathet Lao participated in the 1958 supplementary elections as a legal political party. After the Pathet Lao successes in those elections, conservative elements in Laos led by Phoumi Nosavan and Phouei Sananikone, and backed by the United States, coalesced to oust the Pathet Lao from the government.

The second phase, from 1960 through 1962, was a transitional period during which U.S. policy shifted from opposition to Souvanna Phouma toward an at least nominal support of the Prince’s neutral Government of National Union. The United States supported Souvanna not so much out of any real U.S. commitment to a truly neutral Laos, but because he was the only leader of sufficient stature to maintain a relatively stable government supported at least nominally by both Communist and non-Communist nations.

The third phase of U.S. diplomacy in Laos, from roughly 1963 to the present, has been dominated by considerations for American interests in Vietnam. While continuing to support Souvanna, the United States has incessantly carried on covert military operations against the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in Laos. While focused primarily on the interdiction of the Communist supply lines through southern Laos into South Vietnam, this policy has also entailed a continuing buildup of CIA-directed irregular forces, first in northern Laos and gradually spreading throughout the country. Additionally, this phase has also seen the devastatingly heavy U.S. bombing attacks in northern Laos, most notably in 1968 and 1969.

Yet while these three phases are valid and useful in understanding U.S. diplomacy toward Laos, there remain certain elements of American involvement which are disconcertingly common to all three phases; namely the covert and deceptive nature of U.S. involvement and the recurring subversion of Laotian interests in favor of those of which American policymakers arrogantly thought best. In 1958, the United States attempted to influence the Laotian elections via Operation Booster Shot. After those elections the U.S. actions of shutting off aid to Laos and covertly supporting rightist forces led to the downfall of Souvanna’s neutralist government. Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson flatly denied any U.S. involvement in the Prince’s downfall. In 1960, the United States again played a crucial role in the overthrow of Souvanna’s neutral government which was ostensibly supported by the United States. The United States claimed that the responsibility for the “fratricidal war” of that year rested “solely on the Soviet Government and its partners.” In 1964 the United States opposed a peace conference on Laos because such a conference would have limited
America's "free hand" in its interdiction of the Communist infiltration routes through southern Laos. After 1966, the United States secretly used bases in Laos to direct U.S. aircraft bombing the DRV. In 1968 and 1969 American bombing over Laos was dramatically escalated simply because U.S. warplanes were available for use after the bombing halts over North Vietnam. Even at the height of U.S. bombing over northern Laos in the summer of 1969, the United States acknowledged conducting nothing more than "armed reconnaissance." The United States continues to claim, despite substantial evidence to the contrary, that strict Rules of Engagement for U.S. aircraft operating over Laos prevent the bombing of civilian targets. In short, the pattern of covert U.S. involvement in Laos and deceptive public statements regarding that involvement continues right up to the present day.

The U.S. government has often cited Communist activities in Laos and particularly North Vietnamese intervention as the raison d'être for U.S. actions in Laos. In this essay I have touched only occasionally on North Vietnamese activities in Laos. I have done so primarily because this paper has focused on U.S. involvement in Laos. Nevertheless, only the most myopic of observers could fail to recognize that the DRV, like the United States, has used Laotian territory in pursuance of its own ends.1 Most notably this has been so in southern Laos, where the DRV has even subordinated the interests of its allies in Laos, the Pathet Lao, to its own ends. While some observers may argue that North Vietnamese intervention in Laos is legitimized by reason of historical circumstance or by reason of geographic propinquity,2 we shall approach this issue from the opposite direction. That is, can U.S. actions in Laos be justified in terms of reaction to North Vietnamese intervention in Laos?

U.S. involvement in Laos can, of course, be judged in either of two ways; firstly in terms of the standards by which one hopes the world's most powerful democracy might be (and indeed usually claims to be) governed or secondly, as suggested above, relative to the actions of those to whom the United States is opposed. By the first standard, the conduct of the U.S. government or more precisely the conduct of the Executive Branch of the U.S. government in Laos is clearly a travesty. Twice the U.S. government has subverted legally constituted governments of Laos. Repeatedly it has violated both the letter and the spirit of international agreements on Laos. More recently the U.S. Executive has rained down literally billions of dollars' worth of bombs on a country with whom the United States is not at war and without Congressional or international sanctions or even public knowledge of its actions.

Yet, international conflict and diplomacy are realms which seldom conform to any absolute standards of right and wrong. Therefore, we might better examine U.S. involvement in Laos according to the second standard; namely in comparison to the actions of North Vietnam. First, it is relevant to point out that the DRV, like the United States, has incessantly violated Article 4 of the 1962 Geneva Agreements, which proscribes the introduction into Laos of foreign military and paramilitary personnel. Also, the DRV has probably matched, or even surpassed the U.S. record of deception concerning its involvement in Laos. However, in terms of sheer destruction of Laotian lives and homes and country-side, the U.S. involvement in Laos has been far more disastrous than anything the DRV has done. According to the Cornell Air War Study, from 1965 through 1971 the United States dropped more than 1.6 million tons of bombs over Laos.3 In a country of 91,000 square miles this amounts to more than seventeen tons for every square mile of the kingdom. On a per capita basis this amounts to roughly six-tenths of a ton of bombs for every man, woman and child in the country. The bombing has not, of course, been spread evenly across the whole country. It has been concentrated on the panhandle region of southern Laos and the Pathet Lao-controlled areas of northern Laos. The bombing has resulted in the destruction of all urban centers under Pathet Lao control and, in at least some areas, the destruction of virtually every village.4 Such vast destruction wrought so casually on one of the least-developed countries of the world surely cannot be justified on the basis of any comparable destruction wrought by Communist action in Laos.5

Much of the deception and the casually arrogant nature of the U.S. intervention in Laos has been documented in detail in the Pentagon Papers. Yet after reading through the myriad details of those documents, after reading the memos and cables of U.S. policymakers speaking of "scenario development" and "gradual, orchestrated acceleration of tempo...of the reprisal strikes," and of John McNaughton's view of U.S. aims in South Vietnam, to which U.S. policy in Laos was subordinated, that is,

70%—To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor)
20%—To keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.
10%—To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.
ALSO—To emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used, and after reading the Assistant Secretary of Defense's opinion on the essential aspect of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia,

It is essential—however badly SEA may go over the next 2–4 years—that the U.S. emerge as a "good doctor." We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly,6 after reading these things, one is left with a single overwhelming impression: that to U.S. policymakers, the people of Laos, the people of Indochina never mattered. Even Robert McNamara's often-quoted memorandum on the bombing of North Vietnam, relating that

The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1000 non-combatants a week while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one (Gravel ed., IV:172).7 comes not in the context of whether such bombing is morally defensible or out of any evident concern for those civilians who were killed and injured. Rather it comes in the context of concern for the "world image of the United States."

Reading these things my mind goes back to some of the people I met in Laos. I recall the refugee named Xieng Som Di, who returned to his village one day in the summer of 1967. He returned from working in his rice fields only to find that his village had been bombed. His house and all his possessions were destroyed, and his mother, father, wife and all three of his children had died in the bombing raid. And I remember the refugee woman named Sao La who told me of how her two sons, aged four and eight, were killed in two separate bombing attacks by jets. She related that in both incidents the boys had been playing near the rice field. When the jets came over, they had not run for shelter fast enough. They were killed by antipersonnel bombs, or what Sao La called "bomb." And too, there were victims who were not injured by any weapons. One refugee
woman, Sao Siphan, related to me how her children died. After the CIA-backed irregular forces captured the Plaine des Jarres in the summer of 1969, all of the civilians of the area were gathered into refugee camps. Sao Siphan and her family were moved into a camp at a place called Nalouang. There, within a period of two months, all of Sao Siphan's children, ranging in age from one to sixteen years, died in an epidemic which swept the refugee camp. She told me, “All of my children, all seven, died.”

And the victims are not just the civilians, for even the soldiers fighting in Laos are in many ways themselves victims. One soldier with whom I talked in the spring of 1971 illustrates this fact. His name was Bounthong. He was twenty-five and had been a soldier for seven years. His father had been killed in fighting with the Communists in 1970. In early 1971 his mother was badly wounded during the Communist shelling of Long Cheng, the headquarters of the CIA irregular forces. Bounthong came to Vientiane with his younger brothers and sisters to bring his wounded mother to the hospital. He wanted to sell me his army jacket in order to buy medicine which doctors told him was needed to help his mother. He got the medicine but his mother died anyway. A few days later, with newspaper stuffed into his shoes, whose bottoms had worn through, and leaving his younger brothers and sisters in a Buddhist temple because he had no relatives in Vientiane, Bounthong flew back to Long Cheng to resume his soldiering.

Perhaps these people and their relatives cannot matter in the formulation of United States policy, or in the fighting of a war, yet still one cannot help but wonder. If U.S. policymakers had not been so concerned with being tough and hurting the enemy very badly, if the United States had not opposed the peace initiatives in 1964 in order to preserve America’s “free hand” in Laos, one cannot help but ask whether these people would have suffered so tragically.

One wonders whether U.S. policymakers are pleased with the results of our involvement in Laos. Clearly we have “been tough” in Laos and have “gotten bloodied.” But the blood is not our own.

NOTES

I.
1. U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments, Abrasions Hearings, October 20, 21, 22 and 28, 1969 (hereafter referred to as the Symington Hearings), p. 543.
2. Symington Hearings, p. 673.

II.
3. Prince Souphanouvong was officially ousted from his positions in the Lao Issara government in exile in 1949 before its official dissolution. Souphanouvong now leads the Pathet Lao in opposition to U.S. presence in Laos.
5. Ibid., p. 37.
7. For a more complete account of the major provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords, see Gravel ed., I:270-282.

III.
3. Accounts differ as to Katay’s attitude toward coalition with the Pathet Lao. For instance, Dommen, op. cit., p. 83 relates that he “spoke hopefully of prevailing upon Souphanouvong’s nationalism and bringing the Pathet Lao back into the national community.” Other accounts, however, give evidence of his anti-Pathet Lao attitude. For example, Katay authored a tract entitled Laos—Reviewed Cornerstone in the Anti-Communist Struggle in Southeast Asia (Stevenson, op. cit., p. 31. See also Toye, op. cit., pp. 107-108).
5. There is some discrepancy in the usage of the term Vientiane Agreements. Toye, for instance, uses the term narrowly only to refer to agreements signed in November 1956. Marek Thee (in Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy, Laos: War and Revolution, New York: Harper and Row, 1970, pp. 131-138), however, uses it to refer to all ten agreements signed from August 1956 to November 1957. We shall use the term in the latter sense.
7. U.S. House, Committee on Government Operations, United States Aid Operations in Laos, Hearings, before a subcommittee of the committee on Government Operations, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, p. 180 (hereafter these hearings will be called the Porter Hardy Hearings, after the subcommittee chairman).
8. Porter Hardy Hearings, pp. 184-185. Next to Robertson even John Foster Dulles appeared somewhat soft on the Communist threat to Laos. In a news conference on May 11, 1954, following the fall of Dien Bien Phu, he remarked that Laos and Cambodia were “important but by no means essential” because they were poor countries with meager populations. The lapse was only momentary, however, for the remarks were subsequently deleted from the official transcript. Gravel ed., I:36.
10. Porter Hardy Hearings, pp. 709-710. See also Dommen, op. cit., p. 102, on how Brown’s successor “vanished into thin air” into Laos as PEO chief.
13. Ibid., p. 8.
in the p. 118. The only exception to this view, except of course for U.S. government officials. See Dommen, Operation government. See Dommen, The Pentagon Papers suggests that the earlier interpretations were correct. In the OCB Report, 28 May 1958, the ominous sentence "We are now considering various possibilities relating to a reappraisal of our effort in Laos," comes at the end of a section discussing the election results. The report's discussion of monetary reform comes afterward and includes the statement that "scandalous import licensing was stopped less than two months after the May elections." At any rate, the United States could not have been unaware that the aid cutoff for whatever reasons, coming less than two months after the May elections, would put great pressure on Souvanna's government.

33. Ibid., p. 195-196.

IV.
1. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 66.
2. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 118. Stevenson suggests that Sananikone's inclusion of the CDNI members was done "under pressure from the Crown Prince as well as some Americans" op. cit., p. 66.
3. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 120; Dommen, op. cit., p. 118.
4. Dommen, op. cit., p. 115, indicates that the DRV was at fault in the incident but Toye, op. cit., p. 121, counters that the clash was precipitated, perhaps deliberately, by a Laotian army patrol. Toye also suggests that Phoui, in maneuvering for emergency powers, may have been emulating Marshal Sarit of Thailand.

8. Toye, op. cit., p. 125.
10. See Dommen, op. cit., p. 120, for a description of these attacks.
12. As two RAND analysts put it, "In retrospect it is apparent that the Sananikone government precipitated the final crisis that led to war in Laos"; in A. M. Halpern and H. B. Fredman, Communist Strategy in Laos (Santa Monica: RAND Corp., June 14, 1960).
14. Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 80-81 suggests that the reserved U.S. reaction to the "crisis" in Laos might have been due to the new Secretary of State, Christian Herter, who was much less interested in Asia than his predecessor, John Foster Dulles.
16. Fall, op. cit., pp. 154-155; Stevenson, op. cit., p. 79.
18. Ibid., p. 85. As Stevenson points out, the CIA's sponsorship of Phoumi was opposed by the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane.
23. Dommen, op. cit., pp. 129, 133. He reports that "CIA agents participated in the election rigging. . . ."
24. Dommen, op. cit., p. 138, suggests that the escape of the Pathet Lao leaders was actually a blessing in disguise for the rightists. They had previously announced that they would try the PL leaders for "offenses against the security of the state." It had become apparent, however, that a trial of Souphanouvong and his comrades would have been "exceedingly embarrassing to the Vientiane government." Thus the escape of the PL leaders obviated the potentially embarrassing trial.

V.
2. Bernard B. Fall, Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961 (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 185. Fall gives a fascinating account of Kong-le's earlier career that Kong-le received instructions from his French and American military advisors on the tactical problem of occupying and holding a major city only the day before the coup! See also Dommen, op. cit., p. 143.
5. Ibid., pp. 105-106.
7. See Stevenson, op. cit., p. 110, for a full description of the delegation's demands. Souvanna later described Parsons as "the most reprehensible and nefarious of men," who was the "ignominious architect of the disastrous American policy toward Laos." The Prince continued, "What I shall never forgive the United States for, however, is the fact that it betrayed me and my government." Souvanna Phouma's remarks come from an oft-quoted interview in the New York Times, January 20, 1961.
of the Prince was reached in "late October." Stevenson, op. cit., p. 114, says the decision was not reached until November 10.

10. Fall, op. cit., p. 196. Curiously enough, Fall had related in an earlier book, Street Without Joy (1964), p. 337, that about 1,000 civilians were killed in the "Battle of Vientiane." It is not explained why this earlier figure, supposedly based on an "on-the-spot investigation" by Fall himself, is reduced so drastically in the 1969 book.

14. Fall, Street Without Joy, p. 338, estimates that the available Phoumiist forces outnumbered the Kong-le/Pathet Lao troops roughly 4 to 1.
15. Writing in 1964, Bernard Fall gave a succinct answer to questions such as those posed by Eisenhower. He wrote "... it had been forgotten that the main ingredient in revolutionary war is revolution. And 'our' Laotians simply had nothing to be revolutionary about" (Street Without Joy, op. cit., p. 342).

19. Ibid., p. 128.
23. Fall, op. cit., p. 338; Stevenson, op. cit., p. 137.
24. Hilsman, op. cit., p. 133.
25. Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 286–287. An additional factor in this respect was that a massive U.S. intervention in far-off Laos would present tremendously difficult logistic problems in contrast to the relatively very short supply lines of the Communists. See Dommen, op. cit., p. 188.
27. Fall, Anatomy of a Crisis, pp. 212–213.
28. See note 3. As pointed out by Fall and Stevenson, the absence of North Vietnamese troops did not mean that there was no North Vietnamese involvement at all. The DRV had been supplying both advisers and material to the Pathet Lao, but not regular troops. Toye, op. cit., p. 163, does suggest, however, that in addition to advisers, the DRV aided the Pathet Lao with mortar detachments.
30. These plans were approved April 29 not May 11 as Stevenson, op. cit., p. 153, has written. On the latter date NSAM 52 announced the President's decisions (Gravel ed., II:641).
33. Toye, op. cit., p. 177–178; Stevenson, op. cit., p. 162; Dommen, op. cit., p. 207–208; Fall, op. cit., p. 226.
35. Ibid., pp. 247–248. Both Toye, op. cit., p. 179, and Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 160, 344, indicate that the Meo guerrilla force levels were raised to 18,000 in the summer of 1961. In light of the Pentagon Papers their figure appears to be exaggerated. Also, Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 160–161, suggests that the covert actions of that summer may have come without Kennedy's full knowledge. Again, the Pentagon Papers make it clear; this was not the case.
36. USG ed., 11:328. The aerial resupply missions referred to here are those by Soviet aircraft which were flown into that town after the PL/Kong-le territorial gains prior to Geneva.
37. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 167; Toye, op. cit., p. 179.

38. Toye, op. cit., p. 179. See also Stevenson, op. cit., p. 167, who quotes an observer as saying, "There was considerable evidence that the Pathet Lao were not abiding by the ceasefire. . . ."
39. Toye, op. cit., p. 180. Dommen, op. cit., pp. 216–219, gives an account of Nam Tha strikingly different from any other observers. He depicts it throughout as carried out on the Communist side almost entirely by the North Vietnamese and suggests that for the Pathet Lao it was only "excellent field training." The only evidence he cites to substantiate North Vietnamese dominance in the operation is the diary of a North Vietnamese soldier purportedly picked up by Phoumi's troops. The accounts of Toye and Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 173–174, suggest little if any North Vietnamese participation.
40. Harriman's suspicions appear to have been correct. See Stevenson, op. cit., p. 170.
41. Dommen, op. cit., p. 216.
44. Ibid., As Stevenson points out the account may have been apocryphal but could well have been true.
46. For the text of the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, and the Protocol to that Declaration, see Symington Hearings, pp. 413–418.

VI.
41. Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 223–260, tends to lay the blame much more with North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao. A more balanced account is given by Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 180–199. As he puts it (p. 183), "Blame for breaking the Geneva Accords cannot be placed on only one group. There was no one point in time when the agreed provisions were in effect, and after which there were violations."
5. Ibid., p. 153.
7. Porter in Adams and McCoy, op. cit., p. 186. See also Symington Hearings, p. 473.
9. Dommen, op. cit., p. 239.
10. Ibid., p. 240. The DRV, like the United States, had tried to conceal its involvement in Laos. As a result, the number of North Vietnamese remaining in Laos after the withdrawal deadline is a point of controversy and vague speculation. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 183, recounts that the DRV withdrew "only about half of their forces in Laos." Dommen, op. cit., p. 240, cites the State Department's estimate that "several thousand' Vietnamese troops had left Laos by the deadline, but this left several other thousands still within the country."
16. See Aggression from the North. The Record of North Viet-Nam's Campaign to Conquer South Viet-Nam (Department of State Publication 7839, Washington, D.C.; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965). This document indicates that in the early 1960s most of the personnel infiltrating through Laos into South Vietnam were native Southerners who had gone north after the 1954 Geneva Agreements. In 1964, however, an increasingly larger proportion of the infiltrators were native northerners. Message
Thai pilot flying the plane. Although the information the North Vietnamese have used in connection with this case appears to be accurate, it is not clear if the pilot is alive and can be presented to the ICC. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, nor that other Thai pilots might be captured by the PL.” Gravel ed., III:609. See also Gravel ed., III:592-593 for cable evidently to the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, in which Rusk grants “discretionary authority to use AA (Air America) pilots in T-28s for SAR [search and rescue] operations when you consider this indisputable rapt. indispensable to success of operation. . . .”

34. It was during the summer of 1964 that U.S. pilots over Laos were allowed “to fire on targets on the ground even if they were not fired upon.” Symington Hearings, p. 276.

35. It was in this memorandum that McNaughton gave his view on the essential aspect of U.S. policy in SEA. “It is essential—however badly SEA may go over the next 4-5 years—that U.S. emerge as a ‘good doctor.’ We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly” (Gravel ed., III:582).

36. Dommen, op. cit., p. 278.

37. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 207.

38. Ibid., p. 208.


40. Symington Hearings, p. 421.

41. Symington Hearings, pp. 486, 517-518. See also p. 485 for a description of “Ambassador Sullivan’s Air Force.”


43. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 209.

44. Ibid., p. 209. Symington Hearings, p. 490.


46. See Fred Branfman, “Presidential War in Laos, 1964-1970,” in Adams and McCoy, op. cit., pp. 257-264, for a description of the parallel government. Perhaps something about the priorities of the U.S. effort in Laos is reflected in these informal subtitles. The U.S. Ambassador was called “the General” or “the Field Marshal” whereas his subordinate, the USAID director, was called “the second Prime Minister.” For another description on the “parallel government” see Stevenson, op. cit., p. 220. The extent of the “parallel government” was indicated by a USAID worker when he testified that the aid program in Laos “is probably the only mission that we have that is—that more or less sits on a bag of cement until it gets into a school” (Symington Hearings, p. 581).


50. Exactly how Westmoreland planned to monitor anything after annihilating it is not clear. But, of course, “SLMA” wouldn’t have made near so nice an acronym. Whether Westmoreland’s plan was implemented or not is not clear from the Pentagon staff. Evidently it was not.


54. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 217, quotes one U.S. official as saying, “the biggest job Bill Sullivan had was to keep Westmoreland’s paws off Laos.”

U.S. bombing over Laos has never been officially revealed. The figure cited of Laos.

punishment given to pilots for violation of the Rules of Engagement was "transfer out pp. 9-12, and Stevenson, Hearings, April 21 and 22, 1971. Hereafter, this document is referred to as the Judiciary, Want a Sanctuary," Cross Fire," Pendulum of War Swings Wider in Laos," the PL and American bombing of the PL zone had been made previous to this time, Monde, VI. 7. Littauer and Uphoff, Air War Study Group (101,000, Littauer and Uphoff, et al., op. cit., p. 545) and the total sorties over Laos in 1970 as given by the Cornell Air War Study Group (101,000, Littauer and Uphoff, op. cit., p. 275).


VIII. 1. One prime example of this myopia is D. Gareth Porter's "Subverting Laotian Neutrality" in Adams and McCoy, op. cit. While cataloging the machinations of the United States and its "military clients" in Laos after the 1962 Geneva Agreements, Porter omits any discussion of the issue of North Vietnamese violations of the Agreement. He does not say whether he believes there were no DRV violations or whether he feels that DRV intervention was somehow warranted. Rather, he ignores the whole issue completely. A reverse myopia is exhibited by Langer and Zasloff, op. cit., who focus on North Vietnamese intervention and completely ignore that of the United States. Langer and Zasloff do, however, document DRV intervention and deception over its role in Laos. See Langer and Zasloff, op. cit., pp. 164–180.
2. See, for example, Noam Chomsky, *At War with Asia* (New York: Vintage Books of Random House, 1970), pp. 213–234, who argues that DRV involvement in Laos has come largely after and in response to U.S. intervention in Laos. The evidence now available from the Pentagon Papers certainly does nothing to detract from such a thesis. It is also relevant to point out that official U.S. government sources recently acknowledged that "about 80 percent of all North Vietnamese [in Laos] are in southern Laos . . ." (Moose-Lownstein Report, p. 6). These forces are presumably engaged chiefly in activities connected with the Ho Chi Minh trail. Thus it would be impossible to judge this aspect of North Vietnamese involvement in Laos without also judging the whole history of the Vietnam conflict and U.S. intervention in it.

3. The Cornell Air War Study Group estimates that during this time period, the United States dropped 1,150,000 tons of bombs on the trail area of southern Laos and 494,000 tons on northern Laos, Littaur and Uphoff, op. cit., p. 287. For a description of what the bombing has done to the once verdant Plain of Jars see T. D. Allman, "Landscape Without Figures" in the *Manchester Guardian* (weekly), January 1, 1972. Allman writes, "All vegetation has been destroyed and the craters, literally, are countless."

4. In addition to the reports of Chapelier, Decornoy, USIS, and others already cited, an Associated Press dispatch in October 1970 relates how villages in northern Laos were bombed:

*Vientiane (AP)*

Reliable sources confirmed yesterday a report that U.S. pilots flying bombing missions over northern Laos frequently save a final bomb or rocket for hitting unauthorized civilian targets. . . .

The sources said unauthorized bombing by individual pilots has largely destroyed the Pathet Lao capital of Sam Neua and many other Laotian towns, although population centers are technically off limits for U.S. fliers. Competition among pilots often begins with the pilots trying to see who can get the closest to a town without actually hitting it and quickly degenerates into wiping out the town, the sources said (Bangkok *World*, October 7, 1970).

A recent column by Jack Anderson (Washington *Post*, February 19, 1972) gives further evidence of the incredibly grotesque nature of U.S. bombing over northern Laos. Anderson quotes a former U.S. Air Force sergeant:

In one case there was a guy in the Plain of Jars area who was crawling away after they'd hit a village with 500 pounders. So they dropped a 250 pounder on him. That blew off one leg.

He was still moving so two planes went in and dropped anti-personnel bombs and they got that one guy crawling away.

The same ex-Air Force man also recounted the bombing of a Pathet Lao hospital.

5. Indeed the Laotian Communists seem to have exercised more restraint than have their comrades elsewhere in Indochina. For example, they have never subjected Vientiane to any rocket attacks similar to those launched against Phnom Penh and Saigon. The Pathet Lao have, however, occasionally launched a few rockets against the airfields in Luang Prabang and Pakse. And regardless of what the Pathet Lao have done in Laos, their actions, whatever they could conceivably have done, could not possibly justify the unilateral U.S. intervention in Laos.


7. In justice to McNamara, one should point out that next to some of his colleagues, the Secretary of Defense, at least after his "disenchantment," comes across as a moderate. For example in March 1965 Maxwell Taylor cabled Washington, ""Current feverish diplomatic activity particularly by French and British was interfering with the ability of the United States to "progressively turn the screws on D.R.V."" (Sheehan et al., op. cit., p. 394). Even as late as May 1967 Walt Rostow could write, "We have held that the degree of military and civilian cost felt in the North and the diversion of resources to deal with our bombing could contribute marginally—and perhaps significantly—to the timing of a decision to end the war" (ibid., p. 574). By the time Rostow wrote this memo, the term "civilian cost" was no longer a vague supposition.