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Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

Laos and the New Left

VIENTIANE, Laos—Very shortly after the signature of the Geneva Accord on Laos in 1962, it became glaringly clear that the Hanoi war planners had no intention of keeping their promise to withdraw their invasion force from this small country.



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Measures were therefore taken to aid the Lao people to maintain their independence.

The first requirement was to insure enough air transport capability to supply the Zan-Communist forces in this country where forces in almost no internal transport.

Today, two private companies, employing pilots willing to undertake near-combat duty for liberal pay, are operating here in Laos. Air America and Continental airlines now supply the Nationalist and Neutralist forces wherever they are engaged with the enemy; they are the sole lifeline of the more advanced and exposed posts, and they keep alive the strong guerrilla movement behind the enemy lines.

This guerrilla movement, too, had existed pre-Geneva. Transfer of the guerrillas from their mountain fastnesses in the northern provinces was at first planned; but once again, expansion and reinforcement of the guerrilla effort was begun as soon as it was plain the North Vietnamese promises were worthless.

THE GUERRILLAS are mainly Meo tribespeople, brave hillmen expert in am-

bush. In the north, especially in Sam Neua Province, they are now everywhere. Their attacks on the Communist supply lines constitute a heavy handicap to the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops.

Finally, the pattern's missing piece was overtly supplied in 1964. In that year, under pressure of a sharp enemy offensive, the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma requested that American Air Force planes fly "aerial reconnaissance" in Laos — which really meant close air support.

This air effort is now strongly supplemented, it must be added, by the pilots of the Royal Lao Air Force who use T-28 trainers as mini-bombers. In these ways, the independence of the Lao people has thus far been assured.

All this is well known in every foreign office in the world, if not among the general public in America. There is no news, in truth, in the facts summarized above. They are worth setting forth at this time only for a special reason having nothing to do with Laos.

In brief, the air transport and guerrilla-support efforts, so vital to the future of Laos, are CIA enterprises carried on by the request of the Lao government. And there are reasons to believe that the CIA role in Laos is due to become the subject of another "New Left" expose, like the one which has just caused such a meaningless row.

PERHAPS the expose will arouse the emotions of Senator Robert Kennedy's virtuous young people "who do not remember the second World War or Korea"—the young people whom the Senator seems to think should become, in some de-

gree, the arbiters of American policy.

But it must be noted, in the first place, that President Kennedy, who very clearly remembered the second World War and Korea, knew all about these measures and fully authorized every one of them. And it must be noted in the second place that these measures have produced the precise results that President Kennedy hoped for.

To be sure, they have neither won the war in Laos, nor have they carried the main burden of the war. The real burden of the war has been carried by the Lao people. And the Lao people have made enormous progress in these last few years, under Prince Souvanna Phouma's leadership.

Even in 1962, the Laotians were still, in some sense, refugees from history, half-unwilling to face up to history's grim intrusion in their midst in the form of North Vietnamese invaders. Now, however, the Lao armed forces are regularly giving a very good account of themselves against the North Vietnamese units, which do almost all the fighting for the other side. More important still, these last years have given birth to a growing sense of nationhood. As the Pathet Lao have been first repulsed, and then rolled back a bit, hope for the future has grown here. In Laos today, indeed, you can all but see a small nation coming into being—for Laos as the French left it was not a true nation.

Without the measures summarized above, none of this could have happened. But no doubt, this will be another cause for indignation among all those young people who "do not remember the second World War or Korea."