

# Tragedy of Vietnamization *Part 1 of 17*

## Destroying Laos to "Save" It

By Charles W. Yost

"VIETNAMIZATION" of the Indochina war seems more and more to mean that it is now mainly waged on the ground in Laos and Cambodia and in the air over North Vietnam. This is no doubt a relief to the South Vietnamese and to the United States ground forces, but it spreads rather than ends the war.

As first United States resident ambassador in Laos, I have followed the tragedy of that small country with a special sympathy

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and anguish. No more kindly, humane and inoffensive community of human beings can be imagined.

Yet for 20 years, through no fault of their own, entirely as a side-effect of the ambitions of their neighbors and the rivalries of the great powers, they have been repeatedly invaded, their villages destroyed, their people killed or made homeless.

Undoubtedly the chief blame for this outrage lies with the North Vietnamese, who since 1954 have kept an artificial civil war alive in Laos and who, since 1960, have—in gross violation of the Geneva accords—used Laotian territory as their main supply route to the south.

However, more than 10 years ago President Kennedy decided that Laos was too remote and inaccessible to be saved by United States military intervention and that its only salvation lay in a negotiated settlement.

CAMBODIA, while also shamelessly used by the North Vietnamese as a supply route to their forces in the south, escaped direct involvement until the overthrow of Sihanouk in March, 1970.

Since then, however, it has been invaded repeatedly by both North and South Vietnamese, invaded and bombed by the United States, and ravaged and devastated almost as much as Laos.

I have long hoped that an eventual settlement in Vietnam, however it might come about, would more or less restore the *status quo ante* in Laos and Cambodia—a coalition government with the non-Communists preponderant in Laos, a neutralist government of one sort or another in Cambodia.

In view of the increasing entanglement of the two countries in the war during the past two years, and Communist gains in both of them, I am now considerably less hopeful.

On one point, however, I am certain—that if the United States, after seven years of massive involvement in Vietnam, has been unable to assure a favorable outcome there,

we shall not be able to assure a favorable outcome in Laos and Cambodia by prolonging our military aid and escalating our bombing.

All we could achieve by these devices would be to add to the destruction and to prolong two civil wars which (since we cannot intervene decisively at this stage) will have to end eventually in some sort of accommodation between the two sides.

The Nixon administration has resumed bombing of North Vietnam on the alleged grounds that it is essential to protect our residual forces in South Vietnam. This can hardly be the real reason if there is any basis at all to the administration's claim that the situation in South Vietnam is now so secure that we can safely withdraw almost all our forces. If the South Vietnamese cannot by 1972 hold their own without United States airpower, "Vietnamization" has not succeeded but failed.

I suspect that the real reason for renewal of the bombing is that the President and his advisers are alarmed by Communist successes in Cambodia and Laos. They fear that these successes may, by a reverse domino effect, undermine morale in South Vietnam and thus frustrate the administration's game plan of preserving a shiny facade in Indochina until November, no matter how shaky what lies beyond the facade may be. Having at this late date



Up the Down Staircase

weapon than airpower, the administration turns to it again, even though seven years of experience in Indochina have proved that it is ineffective, that in this sort of war it destroys friend and foe alike, and that it not only forecloses early release of our prison-

ers in Hanoi but adds to their number.

THERE IS only one practical means of ending rapidly both the sufferings of the people of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and United States military involvement there. That is the one which a majority of members of the Congress has been demanding for months—that the administration do immediately an early date for the total withdrawal of all United States forces from all three countries, conditional only on the release of our prisoners, and that thereafter it leave to the governments of the three countries, with such modest aid as they may desire from us, the responsibility for negotiating with the other side such settlements as may prove feasible.

The use of our troops in Indochina is no longer capable of affecting the ultimate outcome of the war or of restoring our diminishing bargaining power in a negotiated settlement. All it can do is give a false and temporary sense of security and "strength" while further weakening us as we come to leave.

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