

Post 8/5/71

Laos: A Country and a Policy Disintegrate

The following is the conclusion of a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report, "Laos: April 1971," prepared by James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose.

No one we met in Laos, American or Lao, seems to have a prescription for the future other than to continue to do what is being done now. Some observers pointed out to us that, in the long run, the odds are heavily against defending Laos, given the advantages the North Vietnamese enjoy. These are a 1,300-mile front along which they can attack; short, well-developed and increasingly heavily defended supply lines; a sanctuary largely safe from direct attack; a population 10 times that of Laos; and a larger, more experienced and better motivated army. In their more optimistic moments Lao and Americans, as well as most Western observers, expressed a guarded belief that the Lao will be able to cling to what remains of their territory until the war ends in Vietnam, believing that the war in Vietnam will end in an agreed settlement in which the great powers will participate and that this settlement will lead to a similar resolution of the situation in Laos.

There is a sporadic dialogue between the Pathet Lao and Lao governments, and a Pathet Lao representative has arrived in Vientiane within the past week to present new proposals. But these new proposals are apparently harder than previous proposals and include a demand for a bombing cessation throughout Laos—not just in parts of Laos, as in previous demands—before talks can begin.

Thus, the prospect of negotiations seems slim indeed. In the first place, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese are in the strongest military position they have ever enjoyed, and it is difficult to imagine what, from their point of view, they might gain by a compromise which did not bring an end to U.S. bombing of the Trail. In the second place, as long as we continue to provide the Lao with the means of continuing the war, even though at a high cost to us in money and an exorbitant cost to them in lives, and as long as the leaders of Laos see no crucial

need to negotiate the initiative for a political settlement will not come from the Lao. The latest series of attacks all along the line in Laos may, however, force Lao leaders to alter their attitude toward negotiation, particularly if additional American or Thai help is not forthcoming. Finally, as far as U.S. policy is concerned, it is quite apparent that many American officials regard the continued prosecution of the war in Laos as an essential adjunct of our current military strategy in Vietnam because, in their view, it ties down two or more North Vietnamese divisions and permits us to exploit Lao territory to interdict the Trail, thereby buying time for Vietnamization. In this sense, we are indeed using the Lao for our own purposes at an increasingly heavy cost to them in lives and territory. At the same time, U.S. officials also believe that if U.S. air activities in Laos were stopped, the military situation would be even more serious in Military Regions II, III, and IV and that all of Military Region II, including the vital base at Long Tieng, could be lost.

The Thai irregulars constitute a new complicating factor, one not yet fully acknowledged by some accustomed to dealing with Laos within the context of an Indochina war. Some observers pointed out to us, however, that it would seem to follow from the presence of these Thai in a key strategic location in Laos that the Thai will inevitably be parties to any negotiation with the North Vietnamese, the issue for them being the line demarcating areas of influence in Laos. And in connection with areas of influence, it was pointed out to us that the practical effect of the Chinese road is that the Chinese border has already been shifted southward to encompass a substantial portion of northern Laos.

Both the Royal Lao government and the United States government seem to consider themselves tied inextricably to the concept of the 1962 Geneva Agreements. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma indicated in his conversation with us that he regards these agreements as a commitment on the part of the great powers in general, and the United States in particular, to provide military assistance and financial support. He also

seems to view the agreements as a pattern for the future. It is difficult for some observers to see how agreements violated so blatantly, by both parties, can be regarded as a realistic basis for a future settlement when they have not accomplished this end so far. Yet the statement is persistently heard in Vientiane—from both Lao and United States officials—that the Geneva Agreements of 1962 can be implemented after the war in Vietnam is settled or in conjunction with a settlement. And no one seems willing to admit the possibility that there may be no final settlement but merely a continuation of the war in Vietnam, though perhaps at a somewhat reduced level.

If there is no settlement in Vietnam and the war also continues in Laos, Laos will remain a hostage available to the North Vietnamese should they wish to draw American airpower away from Cambodia and South Vietnam, embarrass the United States, threaten Thailand or bring the Chinese into closer involvement. Perhaps the only real protection the Lao have is whatever limits the North Vietnamese wish to place on themselves. Some U.S. officials believe that, these limits include not taking over the whole country but continuing to use Lao territory as a supply route while assisting the Pathet Lao as a political—as well as military—force with the final objective of a partitioned Laos in which the eastern portion will be governed by the Pathet Lao and the western portion by a regime not unsympathetic to North Vietnam. Meanwhile, the area under government control shrinks steadily, the cost to the United States rises, the Pathet Lao consolidate their hold on territories no longer under government control and the Lao government's professed policy of neutralism continues to hang by the single human thread of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. He, in turn, seems to be increasingly isolated from other powerful political figures in his country who wish to involve the United States, or the Thai, even further in the defense of what remains of their country, knowing that they cannot possibly defend it themselves.