

employed," and asked for a memorandum describing how many forces we could put in Laos within thirty days, and how quickly the Viet Minh—the North Vietnamese army—might respond. Not satisfied with JCS Chairman General Lyman Lemnitzer's reply that the United States could interdict enemy supply lines, Kennedy on February 6 repeated his request, and Lemnitzer finally submitted a memo on February 16 reporting that the North Vietnamese could introduce 110,000 men and the Chinese about 50,000 within thirty days.<sup>4</sup> And on the same day, in his very first press conference, Kennedy stated in response to an apparently inspired question that the United States wanted to establish in Laos "a peaceful country—an independent country not dominated by either side but concerned with the life of the people within the country."<sup>5</sup>

A week later, Kennedy listened carefully to a lengthy first-hand report on the situation from Ambassador Winthrop Brown, who had returned from Laos for consultation. Kennedy, who always wanted to hear about crises from the men on the spot, began their hour-long conversation by asking Brown about the morale of the Laotian army. Brown replied rather pessimistically that the army was plagued by factionalism and a shortage of first-class officers, and that he did not think the United States could find a satisfactory solution to the problem with purely military means. Asked what should be done, Brown endorsed State Department plans for a commission of neutrals that would arrange a cease-fire and certify Laotian neutrality—an idea, he said, which might end the split between the United States on the one hand and the British and French on the other. He explained that the British and the French regarded the neutralist Souvanna Phouma as the only hope for unifying the country, and that the British would not object to Pathet Lao participation in the government. Kennedy, in reply, expressed concern over our differences with London and Paris, and repeated his reservations regarding the military situation. Endorsing the idea of a neutral commission and a possible political settlement, he asked whether the Communists would be likely to agree. Brown replied that the SEATO military measures now under consideration—including the dispatch of an American unit to Thailand—might have a bad effect upon Communist, allied, and neutral opinion.

Kennedy concluded by asking for Brown's opinion of Souvanna Phoumi, and Boun Oum. Brown described Souvanna as a sincere and

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patriotic anti-Communist, but suggested that he might view Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao too naively. He described Phoumi as "ambitious, unscrupulous, hard-driving, egotistical, moody, proud, a fast-talker but a slow thinker who was nonetheless intelligent," and Boun Oum as a "Lao Falstaff" and a "figurehead" in the government—characterizations most unlikely to inspire confidence.<sup>6</sup>

Kennedy, the British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin remarked several years later, "listened with extreme intentness . . . I've never known a man who listened to every single word that one uttered more attentively. And he replied always very relevantly. He didn't obviously have ideas in his own mind which he wanted to expound, or for which he simply used one's own talk as an occasion, as a sort of launching pad. He really listened to what one said and answered *that*." Kennedy obviously drank in Brown's report, and it helped move him toward a middle position of trying to strengthen Phoumi's bargaining position while making overtures for a peaceful settlement. On February 8, in another meeting of senior officials at the White House, the President expressed opposition to moving any troops into Thailand, but approved an airlift of military supplies and a mission of seventy-two American military trainers to counter the Soviet airlift and support Phoumi's new offensive into the Plain of Jars. But the offensive was designed to strengthen the government's bargaining position, and Washington also decided to approach Moscow and ask for help in arranging a peaceful settlement and in persuading Souvanna to join the Boun Oum government.<sup>8</sup>

These steps, however, did nothing to reverse the situation. Rusk gave Soviet Ambassador Menshikov the American proposal for a commission of neutral nations on February 20, and eight days later Menshikov simply restated the Soviet position that Souvanna was the legitimate head of the Laotian government, and called once again for a fourteen-nation conference in Geneva.<sup>9</sup> On the same day Walt Rostow reported to Kennedy that Phoumi's offensive had stalled, although Rostow remained hopeful about the future.<sup>10</sup> And the next day Rusk reported to Kennedy that only Malaya among the three chosen nations had accepted the Laotian King's invitation to serve on the commission.<sup>11</sup> On March 1 Admiral Felt cabled from CINCPAC, "It needs to be repeated again and again that the only way to save Laos now is by successful military action."<sup>12</sup>

rigged. Phoumi referred to his cousin Sarit by the courtesy title "Uncle," which many Americans erroneously interpreted literally.

41. *Ibid.*, 354, 355.
42. *Ibid.*, 373, 375, and m.s., pt. 2, 476.
43. See *ibid.*, 367, 377, 379, 384, 391, and m.s., pt. 2, 438, 505.
44. *Ibid.*, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400.
45. *Ibid.*, 415, 416, 418.
46. *Ibid.*, 421, 426, 429, 430, 431, 432, 434, 444.
47. *Ibid.*, 438, 349, 440, 446, 447, 448, 450.
48. *Ibid.*, 462, 463, 464.
49. *Ibid.*, 467, 469, 472, 473, 474, 476.
50. *Ibid.*, 486, and m.s., pt. 2, 675.
51. *Ibid.*, 487.
52. *Ibid.*, 485, 490.
53. *Ibid.*, 492.
54. *Ibid.*, 493, 495.
55. *Ibid.*, 497.
56. *Ibid.*, m.s., pt. 2, 690.
57. A deletion occurs at this point in the record.
58. *Ibid.*, 498 (emphasis added).
59. *FRUS*, 1961-63, XXIV, 1, 2.
60. *Ibid.*, 3.
61. Accounts of the meeting by Kennedy himself, Gen. Wilton Persons, and Herrer are *ibid.*, 7, 8, 9. See also Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History*, Sept. 1992, pp. 568-587, which includes notes by Clark Clifford and Robert McNamara.
62. See Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, pp. 247-260.
63. See the recent book by Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 146-200.
64. See Eisenhower's memo to Dulles, Sept. 8, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, II, pt. 1, pp. 460-463, and many comments by Eisenhower during NSC meetings reported in the same volume.
65. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1950-1963* (Boston, 1972), pp. 185-187.

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1. Strauss and Howe, in *Generations*, pp. 261-278, date the birth years of this generation as 1901-1924, but in my opinion many Americans born in the 1901-1904 period are more typical of the previous Lost generation.
2. The accusation that Democrats actually stole the election—now a tenet

of Republican dogma—has little evidentiary basis. A detailed study of the voting in Illinois in 1960 concluded that Kennedy won that fairly, and even a shift of Illinois to the Republican column would have changed the result. See Edmund F. Kallina Jr., *Courthouse White House: Chicago and the Presidential Election of 1960* (Orlando, 1988).

3. The author of the most recent sensational best-seller devoted to Kennedy made a calculated and avowed decision to ignore that documented with results of predictably dubious validity: Seymour Hersh, *The 13 Side of Camelot* (Boston, 1997); see also Hersh, "May-Zelkoff Confidential," *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1998), pp. 654-661 which Hersh explicitly discounts archival sources.
4. *FRUS*, 1961-63, XXIV, 10, 12; VIII, 11; and see CM-85-61, JFK, Countries, Laos: General, 2/16/61-2/19/61.
5. Harold W. Chase and Allen H. Lerman, eds., *Kennedy and the 13: The News Conferences* (New York, 1965), p. 25.
6. *FRUS*, 1961-63, XXIV, 13. Kennedy apparently kept no record of talk in the White House. The farcical aspects of Laotian politics and peaceful character of the people immediately struck most observers in Laos, and also emerged in various press reports, even those of *Time* magazine, despite its generally tough line against Asian Communism. See e.g., *Time*, Feb. 3, 1961.
7. Isaiah Berlin oral history, JFK.
8. *FRUS*, 1960-63, XXIV, 14, 15. Deptel 840 to Vientiane, *ibid.*, Charles "Chip" Bohlen, the former ambassador to Moscow who had become a special assistant to Rusk, proposed the approach to Moscow. *Ibid.*, 17, 20.
9. *Ibid.*, 19.
10. *Ibid.*, 19.
11. Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia had refused even a personal appeal from Kennedy, leading the *New York Times* of Feb. 26 (sec. 1, p. 16) to brand the President's "first serious venture into personal diplomacy" a failure.
12. Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, II (Washington, 1986), p. 60.
13. The March 9 meeting is *FRUS*, 1960-63, XXIV, 25; see also a March meeting and its results, *ibid.*, 22. The agreed military measures included an airlift of 14 Marine helicopters, their crews, and maintenance personnel to Udorn, Thailand, on the Laotian border. See Marolda and Fitzgerald, *The Navy and Vietnam*, II, pp. 60-61.
14. *FRUS*, 1960-63, XXIV, 31.
15. No contemporary minutes of this meeting have come to light, but see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston, 1965), pp. 332-333 and Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy: His Own Words* (New York, 1988), pp. 246-248.
16. On Rostow's role see Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph

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