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Matter of Fact

President Kennedy's Gamble

By Joseph Alsop

VIENTIANE, Laos—A bit more than five years ago, President Kennedy took a major gamble, not without some reluctance. His first instinct, by some now forgotten, had been to meet with force the forceful North Vietnamese invasion of sleepy little Laos.



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Instead, for many practical and political reasons, the President decided to seek a settlement. Averell Harriman was deputed to undertake the task. Since the Soviets also wanted a seeming settlement, the Geneva Agreement of 1962 was the result.

The long dishonored terms of this Geneva Agreement can be briefly summarized. Laos was to have a three-cornered government with each corner hopelessly irreconcilable with the two others (composed of neutralists, nationalists and Communists), and the North Vietnamese invaders were to withdraw from Laos entirely, and were never to use Laos as a corridor to supply or reinforce the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

ON PAPER, these were good terms, testifying amply to Averell Harriman's williness and stonewalling powers as negotiator. They were in fact crammed down the reluctant throat of the North

Vietnamese by Soviet urging. But no one, least of all President Kennedy, and, one presumes, Ambassador Harriman, really expected the terms of this agreement to be observed by the North Vietnamese signatories.

The virtual certainty that the agreement would be honored only in the breach was pointed out to President Kennedy not long after it was triumphantly signed. He remarked, with a wry smile, that one could never be sure about such matters, but that there were certainly ample foundations for such a forecast.

To this he added, speaking much more seriously, that if you were going to make a stand in Southeast Asia, the right place to do so was in the main theater of action, especially if the main theater was much more militarily advantageous than a subordinate but more early threatened theater.

"The key is South Vietnam," he said, "and although the other side may think differently, we are not going to be beaten in South Vietnam."

Although the worst fears about the unreliability of the accord reached in 1962 were fully justified from the very outset, the President's gamble has also been justified—at least tentatively. To begin with the first point, no breach of any solemn international agreement has ever been more flagrant or more prompt than the breach of the last Geneva Agreement by the Hanoi war planners.

AT THIS WRITING, the war planners in Hanoi have assigned to duty on the Ho Chi Minh trail through southern Laos—which they gravely promised never to use again—a combined total of nearly 35,000 men.

Of this total, about 20,000 are coolies and farmers.

These are people who have been sent in to maintain the trail's network of main and subsidiary roads and also to plant rice in the fields abandoned by the wretched Laotians whom the North Vietnamese have forced to take refuge on our side of the line.

A North Vietnamese division, to provide flank guard for the trail, and engineer battalions, to maintain it, comprise the balance of the men on the trail. It can be seen, then, how perfectly this part of the accord is being honored.

As for the other part of the accord, which was sup-

posed to give this small and pleasant country the right to settle its own affairs in its own way, the story is exactly the same. In North Laos, where the Laotian civil war centers, there are still about 13,000 North Vietnamese troops.

They are either operating in independent battalions or are brigaded in one way or another with the pro-Communist Pathet Lao forces. And if these foreign troops were not here, the Laotians would indeed have settled their own affairs among themselves.

Outwardly, therefore, President Kennedy's gamble has been a dead bust. A second report will show why this has nonetheless been a good gamble—provided the recent prescriptions of the President's brother are not adopted.

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