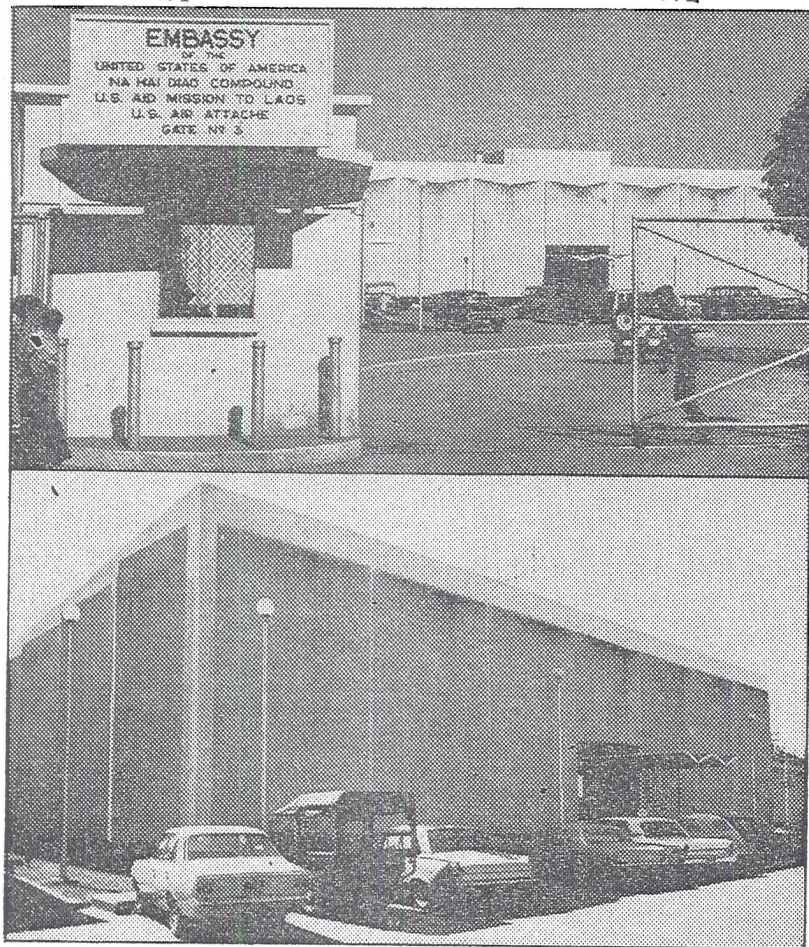


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In Laos, A.I.D. Marches On

By T. D. ALLMAN

VIENTIANE, Laos—Some time ago, I had my introduction to the self-perpetuating interregnum of suspended time, space and perception occupied by the United States Agency for International Development, and its sister agencies, Clandestine Client State Division, when I paid my first call on the genial, perennial A.I.D. director in Laos, Charles Mann.

His office then was located in a small, misleadingly ramshackle building in the Na Hai Diao Compound in suburban Vientiane. The compound is a self-contained cantonment which shelters, besides A.I.D. headquarters, the centers of the C.I.A. bombing and military advisory efforts in Laos, a swimming pool, supermarket, American bar and restaurant, movie theater, popcorn machine and microwave tower, all encased in a six-foot chain link fence and patrolled by units of the U.S. Embassy's 500-man strong, blue-uniformed private army.

The most noticeable thing, upon first visit, about the compound was that in a country where every house is open to catch the faintest breeze, each American building was sealed off, windowless. When the buildings did have windows, they were painted over in white, locked, barred and curtained from the inside.

In Mr. Mann's office, there were no windows at all, just a series of maps, displaying neat arrows, insignae, code keys and statistics showing the visitor exactly what was happening in Laos from the vantage point of A.I.D. activities to command.

"A.I.D. has learned that empire has its financial limitations."

local contractors put the building's cost at millions. The air-conditioning runs off A.I.D.'s private generators; the U.S. Mission consumes more electricity than the rest of the country combined. The A.I.D. telephone directory contains more entries than the Laotian Post and Telegraph telephone book, but the A.I.D. switchboard, preoccupied with internal communications, still cannot be reached from an outside line for most hours of the day.

The new windowless building is off-white, eyeless, bomb-proof, impregnable to climate and contains its own furnace for destroying secret documents. Hundreds of bureaucrats, their maps and coffee-makers, presumably could subsist within it, never leaving, for years.

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Mann, whose ability to attune A.I.D. activities to the requirements of U.S. intervention had made him A.I.D. director in South Vietnam, Cambodia and the Congo, did not discuss his organization's activities as a front for the C.I.A. I had been told in advance.

However, his conversation — his talk, an explanation of how the U.S. supported the kip, the Laotian national currency, at a steady rate of 500 to the dollar was interesting enough. I was able to discern that the kip operation essentially consisted of exchanging annually \$20 to \$30-million for valueless kip, and burning the collected kip. The program acted as a straight-forward giveaway. It moved the Laotian economy no closer to self-sufficiency, indeed perpetuated dependence on the United States.

As a result, the country was flooded with imported consumer goods; "re-exportation" of some of them on the black market kept the business community content; there was little inflation. Laos, Mann seemed to be saying, for obvious reasons preferred living at a standard it could never by itself afford to the evils of Communist aggression.

I asked if the kip would have any value if the program ran out of money. Yes, he conceded, if the dollars were cut off the kip would not be worth the paper on which it was printed.

Now, three and a half years later, things are a little changed in the Na Hai Diao Compound. A.I.D. headquarters has vacated the ramshackle building and settled a few yards away in Vientiane's most unusual indestructible building.

With the devaluation of the dollar and the anti-A.I.D. vote in the Senate, A.I.D. has learned that empire has its financial limitations.

Following the Senate vote, the U.S. Embassy devalued the kip by 20 per cent. Unless Congress has a change of heart, or the rich Japanese and Europeans pay more to keep it up, the kip will be devalued again, or be left to find its own value, and A.I.D.'s most cherished program will be gone.

The new A.I.D. headquarters gives the impression of eternity, if not grace. It has no windows at all, not even a painted-over one, throughout its three stories.

Locals call the new building "the white cube," "the cinder block," but most often "the windowless building." Its number on the embassy roster is 500—will they change the number with the devaluation to 600, I could not avoid wondering, and then perhaps to 1,000, to keep up with the kip? The building, A.I.D. officials say, cost only \$394,000, and, one said, "will pay for itself in reduced air-conditioning charges." Unofficial estimates by