

Why U.S. Stays in Laos

Remembering Peking, Diplomats Say
A Listening Post Can Have Value

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VIENTIANE, Laos, June 6—

Late last week a senior American diplomat told Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian Premier, that for the United States and Laos to continue

to have diplomatic relations there had to be orderliness.

News

Analysis

The Price termed the remark a threat and, though

the American protested that it was only "a statement of fact," rose and strode from the room.

Three days later, with smiles and handshakes, the Prince received Assistant Secretary of State Philip C. Habib, and each expressed his warm opinion of the other's country and the wish to continue relations.

The contrast is typical of those that mark the wane of the American presence in Laos and elsewhere in Indochina—a presence that at one time was punctuated by B-52 bomber raids across the Laotian plains and by the arrival of hundreds—even thousands—of American aid officials who handed out largess over and under the table.

U.S. Won't Let Go

By the end of this month only 50 of the Americans will be left in Laos—the last American presence in Indochina—and the fact that they will be here at all is a sign to many here that America still does not want to let go in this part of the world.

A senior diplomat said, summing up official American thinking: "It is better to have a small listening post here than to break off entirely as we did in Peking and have a total break in communications—a total incomprehension on both sides."

"This is the heart of Southeast Asia here," he added, "and we are not prepared to write it off."

Nevertheless, by all accounts a very different relationship is evolving from the one existing five years ago at the height of American involvement or even five months

ago before the street demonstrations, the seizure of Americans and of American facilities and the demands by the Government that the Americans withdraw their aid personnel and turn their programs over to Laos.

"The sooner we can clean up the mission and have a straight, small United States Embassy here, the sooner we can have better, cleaner relations between the two countries," the senior American official said, speaking at a briefing for reporters.

Some Want to Leave

Although this viewpoint is being presented as that of the Ford Administration and of the American Embassy, discussion continues among officials here about whether this is the right course—whether the United States, unwanted and repeatedly the target of insults, and threats, should not, in the words of another official, "pick up all our marbles, including some \$30-million a year in aid, and go home."

This attitude is largely founded on the relationship between the two countries—a relationship that not only the Pathet Lao but many of the most devout Laotian rightist remember vividly and in most cases bitterly.

"There has always been a very paternalistic attitude you people have had toward us," said a right-wing Government official. "Like the attitude of a rather overbearing father to a somewhat naive and even retarded child, you have thought you could do almost anything to us provided you gave us some sweets in the end and a pat on the head."

Many Laotians remember well the days of G. McMurtrie Godley, Ambassador in the early nineteen-seventies, who ran the mission "like the war room at the Pentagon," ordering down B-52 air assaults on the Plain of Jars and moving around the red-headed pins on the map that covered his office wall.

They remember even further back, when the Program Evaluation Office became the Military Assistance Advisory Group and its mobile training teams fanned out across the Plain of Jars, organizing Gen. Vang

Pao's Meo tribesmen into guerrilla fighting forces.

And they remember too, that after the 1962 Geneva accords banned the introduction of arms and foreign military personnel into Laos, the United States Agency for International Development's "requirements office" brought military matériel into the country and suggested to the Laotians how it might be used.

These same A.I.D. workers branched out into other projects—in agriculture, forestry, hydroelectric power, fisheries production, education, medical training. Many of the projects were of great help to the country, but the legacy was there, and in some 22 scattered cities and towns the workers were acting as listening posts for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Many of these circumstances, of course, no longer pertain. The number of A.I.D. locations has shrunk sharply over the last two years, but the feelings toward them continue unchanged.

"We are and have been simply the most visible foreign force in Laos" another senior American diplomat said, "and as No. 1 we were the logical targets all along."

The demonstrations came as little surprise to those who had followed the Laotian political scene and noted the growing power and stridency of the Communist-led Pathet Lao.

Students led by a few firebrands such as Khamsay Sourihone, president of The National Federation of Students, demanded actions that the Pathet Lao had long urged—the withdrawal of aid personnel from the provinces, a general reduction in the foreign presence and the end of American paternalism.

Many of these students had been sharpening their attitude for years in meetings at the select Institute Royal du Droit et Administration. In Vientiane only a small push was needed last month to send them into the streets here and in such provincial capitals as Savannakhet, Luang Prabang and Pakse.

The students, in the view of most foreign observers, were not likely to have acted on their own, but no one questions that they were expressing a fundamental feeling of most Laotians, particularly those of the left, who are increasingly running this country.

The reaction of the United States was the only one feasible. It agreed to pull out all Agency for International Development workers and to turn over all agency property and

programs to Laos. Beyond that, it has begun to scale down the embassy staff, reducing it from more than 800 several months ago to what is likely to be 50 or fewer by the end of this month.

Why, after all of this, does the United States stay?

There is, of course, the obvious explanation — that the United States, having poured billions into this small kingdom, is determined to retain whatever influence it can, much as, a diplomat observed, the British hung on as long as possible to the vestiges of empire.

But there is more. A struggle seems to be brewing between the Soviet Union, China and North Vietnam for the favors of the Laotian Government and people.

Already scores of Aeroflot workers have arrived, and a large Soviet diplomatic and cultural mission has grown up. The Chinese too have begun talking of an air route through Vientiane, and Chinese cargo planes have begun landing at Vientiane.

Meanwhile, the influence of North Vietnam, particularly

with the Pathet Lao, is growing, and this bothers both China and the Soviet Union.

The result is that these countries apparently would like to see the United States stay as a counterweight in the area and have begun to hint as much to members of the American mission.

"And there are some Laotians too who would like to see us around as a form of security blanket just in case," an American commented. "This struggle of the big Eastern powers gets to be too much."

From the American viewpoint, then, Laos provides a ringside position for the developing tussle between the major powers in Asia. Beyond that there is the matter raised by another American that no one quarrels with. "Look," he said, "we have embassies everywhere from Togo to Turkey, from Poland to Peking. Why not Laos?"