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Laos Rightists Plot Cambodian-Type Coup



WASHINGTON — The ouster of Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk has stirred up plots in Laos to dump Prince Souvanna Phouma and set up a Cambodian-style military government. This could repeat the Cambodian crisis all over again in Laos, with dangerous consequences for the U.S. Intelligence reports warn that rightist Laotian leaders have been encouraged by the Cambodian experience to attempt a similar takeover in their country. They are weary of the aging Souvanna Phouma who, like Sihanouk, has put on a show of outward neutrality. But just as Sihanouk permitted secret incursions by the North Vietnamese, Souvanna Phouma allowed the Americans to operate in Laos.

The Kremlin had promised both leaders that the North Vietnamese would leave their countries after the Vietnam War was settled. But as the encroachments increased, the two princes lost faith in the Soviet promise and concluded that the North Vietnamese would never clear out voluntarily.

Souvanna Phouma turned increasingly to the U.S. to save Laos from the Communist crunch. But Sihanouk flew to Moscow and Peking to enlist support in getting the North Vietnamese out of Cambodia. While he was on this mission, he was deposed by the generals he left behind. Now he has joined the same forces, ironically, that he had tried to remove.

Secret Understanding

Washington and Moscow reached a secret understanding, meanwhile, to keep still about the U.S. intervention in Laos. As long as the U.S. didn't officially acknowledge its clandestine operations, the Kremlin agreed to ignore them.

The Russians, as they had promised Sihanouk and Souvanna Phouma, also guaranteed there would be no North Vietnamese takeover of Laos and Cambodia. Both the Soviets and Americans agreed to endeavor, at least, to confine the war to South Vietnam.

At no time did the U.S. wish to expand the Vietnam conflict into a fullscale Indochina war. Restricting the battlefield to South Vietnam, however, also had advantages for the Communists. It meant that the U.S. could never really win the war. For it is impossible to defeat an enemy who can escape across the border into sanctuaries. In 1964, the North Vietnamese began enlarging their sanctuary privileges in Laos by attacking the Plain of Jars and increasing the infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh spiderweb of trails.



Prince Phouma

The U.S. countered by stepping up its clandestine activities and bombing the infiltration routes. After the bombing of North Vietnam was halted in 1968, the U.S. simply moved the sorties across the border and concentrated the full fury upon Red targets in Laos.

CIA's Secret Army

The Central Intelligence Agency, mean-

while, has subsidized a secret army in Laos under Gen. Vang Pao, a vulgar ex-French Army sergeant, whose 14,000 fighting men have been recruited largely from the minority Meo tribes.

The secret army is headquartered at the multi-million-dollar CIA base of Long Cheng. A steady stream of Air America and Continental Air Services planes, under CIA and AID contracts, haul food, munitions and the monthly payroll for Vang Pao's troops.

Stories have now leaked out about this clandestine army, describing it accurately as the only effective fighting force in Laos on the American side. Yet my reporter in Indochina, Les Whitten, reports from Vientiane:

"The sad fact is that all the millions expended upon Vang Pao's mercenaries have not convinced one responsible U.S. official in Saigon or Vientiane that this land of 2.8 million people can be defended for more than a few weeks by the secret army against a determined Communist attack.

"The Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese control half of Laos and clearly could take over the other half almost at will."

Whitten adds that "the fabled CIA forces, which liberal senators regard as some kind of powerful presence in Laos, are made up, in fact, of time servers, a few brilliant intelligence men and a larger number of ex-servicemen who are as harassed as any Washington bureaucrats simply trying to carry out routine duties.

CIA Routine

"Much of their time is spent going to Lao units like traveling salesmen taking orders for ammunition and guns. At other times, they are paymasters, making sure that Vang Pao's officers don't pocket the pay that is supposed to go to the soldiers.

"The CIA agents also wearily stress to the Laotians on the U.S. payroll: 'No boom boom, no rice.' If they refuse to fight, in other words, they will get no food or pay.

"While the secret army is at least classifiable as a military force, some of the other Laotian army units are hardly more than poorly trained and homesick militia. Their pay is as low as \$6 per month, compared to about \$25 for Vang Pao's riflemen.

"The Lao generals, meanwhile, are up to their brass buttons in scandals. Some front for such enterprises as bowling alleys and nightclubs, often owned by Chinese. The name of a general protects the owner from confiscation or excessive taxation by corrupt officials.

"One general reportedly has been selling the Lao national forest to the Thais for American-financed construction projects. A U.S. effort to license and certify the health of Laos' prostitutes was thwarted by another general who didn't want to call attention to his source of income."

Whitten declares that Souvanna Phouma, whom the right-wing generals would like to depose, remains in Laos only by Communist sufferance. The Communists, reports Whitten, "may fear intervention from Thailand with its pudgy but large army and population 11 times that of Laos, or from U.S. ground forces in the Cambodian pattern.