

By W. W. ROSTOW

AUSTIN, Tex.—As the critical battle shapes up for control over the infiltration routes through Laos during the current dry season, it may be useful to recall the history of that critical piece of the world's real estate.

The Hanoi delegation returned from the post-Sputnik conference in Moscow in November, 1957, content that the policies agreed to there permitted the reopening of attack on South Vietnam. Speaking to a group of North Vietnamese officials on Dec. 7, 1957, Le Duan said: "The Moscow documents have not only confirmed the line and created favorable conditions for North Vietnam to advance toward Socialism but have also shown the path of struggle for national liberation and have created favorable conditions for the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam."

By the second half of 1958 violence in South Vietnam began to increase. South Vietnamese political and military cadres, brought north in 1954, were infiltrated through the Laos corridor, joining the expanded Vietcong effort in the south. By December, 1958, there were clashes between regular North Vietnamese and Lao forces near Tchepone. This was part of the background to the grant of emergency powers to the Government of Laos in January 1959 and the coming into the Government of several army officers. But the Government in Vientiane lacked the power to assert sovereignty over its territory in the face of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese opposition. By Jan. 20, 1967, Laos was in almost total political and military disarray.

President Kennedy convinced the Communists in his first three months that a take-over of Laos would be resisted by the United States. As a result, the Geneva Conference on Laos opened in May, 1961, against the background of a precarious cease-fire. The United States was prepared to accept a neutral Laos, headed by Souvanna Phouma; but it negotiated

## *Use of the Corridor Violates the Laotian Accords of 1962*

hard to make that neutrality real. The Laos Accords were signed on July 23, 1962. The signatories agreed that they would not introduce into Laos military personnel in any form and that they would not use the territory of Laos for interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

In addition, Harriman negotiated an understanding with Pushkin, the Soviet delegate, that Moscow would assume responsibility for assuring that the provisions of the Laos Accords would be honored by Hanoi, including explicitly an end to the transit of Laos against South Vietnam. This was not a casual understanding. It was an agreement negotiated over many months without ambiguity in either Government.

The Laos Accords went into effect in the first week of October, 1962. It was clear immediately that Hanoi did not intend to honor the agreement: infiltration continued. Moscow was apparently not prepared to accept the costs of forcing Hanoi's compliance. And the United States failed to act decisively, which might have strengthened Moscow's hand in Hanoi.

(I have said on another occasion—The New York Times, Jan. 5, 1969—that I regard the failure of the Kennedy Administration to insist promptly on the honoring of the Laos Accords of 1962 as the greatest single error in policy of the 1960's; although it is not difficult to understand why President Kennedy, in the wake of the Cuba missile crisis and with things then going relatively well in South Vietnam, would have chosen not to initiate a major crisis at that time.)

Given the arithmetic of guerrilla warfare, the infiltration of, say, 500 Communist cadres a month from the

North was a most serious matter in 1961-63. Normally one guerrilla ties down 10 or 15 on the defending side.

In 1964 the meaning of infiltration changed. In the wake of the 1963 political crisis in South Vietnam, Hanoi made the momentous decision to introduce its regular forces into the battle. They came through Laos.

For a time supplies came in directly by coastal shipping until choked off by the American and South Vietnamese navies. And Hanoi made arrangements with Sihanouk for supply through Cambodia on a scale greater, even, than was understood at the time. Nevertheless, the war which Southeast Asia and all of us have suffered since 1964 could never have been mounted without the illegal use of the Laos trails.

With the closing off of the Cambodian supply route in 1970, the Laos corridor became the sole major route into South Vietnam.

Men have differed in the past and they may differ now over the meaning of this tale and the lessons to be drawn from it. For example, Roger Hilsman and I debated temperately the military significance of infiltration in 1962. But I agree with this passage from his "To Move a Nation" (p. 155): "The lessons of the Laos crises are many — that agreements with the Communists can be kept by and large intact, for example, but only if one is willing to keep up the same level of commitment to keep the agreement as one was willing to use to obtain it in the first place."

What the South Vietnamese are now trying to do is to enforce an agreement which Hanoi and Peking freely signed in July 1962; which Moscow undertook to guarantee; and for which the United States continues to bear an inescapable responsibility.

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