

# The Downfall of General Ma

Right-wingers, especially right-wing generals, and particularly right-wing Laotian generals, are in disrepute these days with those who make and carry out American foreign policy. So few, if any tears are being shed in Washington over the news that General Ma, exiled to Thailand since 1966, and former commander-in-chief of the Royal Lao Air Force, was shot down and killed during a coup attempt Monday in the Lao capital of Vientiane.

In the case of Ma (news reports have called him General Thao Ma, but "Thao" means "Mr." in Lao), it was a case of two coups and you're out. He had tried once before—in the summer of 1966—and failed. He never was much of a planner.

Right-wing Lao generals have, for decades, been rather an unsavory lot.

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All except Ma, that is. Ma was a peasant. He had no large and influential family that needed enrichment and protection. He was born in 1929 in Saravane in southern Laos, and it was rumored that he had Vietnamese blood in him. This fact, Laotians concluded, explained his courage in the face of enemy fire.

Like many other Lao, Ma fought with the French army against the North Vietnamese after the end of World War II. Sergeant Ma was caught by the Vietnamese at Dienbienphu in 1954, refused to surrender, and led a contingent of Lao troops out of the encircled valley to safety in Laos.

I knew Ma when he was a general and at 35 years old, the commander-in-chief of the Royal Lao Air Force, headquartered in Savannakhet in central Laos. In American eyes, he could then do no wrong. Almost single-handedly, he broke up one attempted right-wing coup led by General Phoumi against Government forces in Thakhek in 1965. He was brave, and daily led his ancient T-28 fighter bombers against North Vietnamese troops and supplies coming

down the Ho Chi Minh trail on their way into South Vietnam.

Those were the "glorious" days of our Vietnam involvement, days when only a handful of people in this country were speaking out against the war. Ma didn't care about politics; he just hated the North Vietnamese, and the Americans supplied him with everything he needed.

Though he was "our" general, he really wasn't. "I would tell the Americans to get out of Laos tomorrow," he told me, "if the North Vietnamese would get out too." Ma felt no hatred toward the Pathet Lao, for he considered them—by themselves—no threat to his country. And Ma was, *mirabile dictu*, incorruptible; he actually lived on his salary of \$20 a month. But sad to say, his incorruptibility led to his downfall.

General Ouane Rattikone was, in 1966, chief of staff of the Lao Armed Forces. General Ouane was also the chief heroin producer in the country. He needed planes to transport his goods, and he wanted Ma's cargo planes to do the job. Ma refused.

The general staff then pressured the government of Souvanna Phouma to transfer the Air Force headquarters to Vientiane and away from Savannakhet, where right-wing and separatist feelings have always run high. Ma refused to go. Shortly afterward, he was betrayed for the first time, when a trusted subordinate planted gold bars on a Lao Air Force cargo plane that was being flown from Saigon to Laos. The police waited for the plane to land, found the gold, and Ma was accused of smuggling. The pressures for him to move his headquarters were intensified. Ma remained adamantly opposed.

Because of this adamancy, however, the Lao boat began to rock, and if there was one thing the Americans and the Russians agreed upon in Laos, it was that there should be no boat rocking. American support for Ma evaporated.

Ma then plotted his first coup attempt. His principal co-conspirator was Colonel (now General) Noupheet Daoheung. Noupheet was Ma's most trusted companion, and was the commander of Groupe Mobile 18, consisting of three

crack battalions. While Ma sent his planes to bomb army headquarters in Vientiane, Noupheet was to parachute his troops into the city. The plot was found out. Noupheet had enormous gambling debts and sold out, so when Ma was bombing the army base, Noupheet stayed home. The planes may have gotten off the ground, but the coup didn't, and Ma fled to Thailand.

The coup never would have succeeded, of course. The U.S. had, for years, made it clear that it was tired of Lao coups. We were committed to Souvanna. We wanted Ma to bomb Vietnamese, not Lao. But the Americans still liked him. In exile in Bangkok, he was offered a job flying Air America cargo planes in South Vietnam. Ma declined the offer because it was not extended equally to his fellow exiled pilots. He was paid a subvention in laundered money—money which came from Armees Clandestines leader General Vang Pao who, of course, was financed by the CIA.

So for one brief and final day, seven years after his first coup attempt, General Ma tried again. This time he was reacting, sadly enough, not against corruption and venality (in which case his attempt would have been labeled "quixotic"), but against the peace accords of February 22, which he no doubt regarded as a sellout to North Vietnam. So, at the age of 44, Thao Ma is dead, carrying to his death, in addition to the shot-down remnants of his T-28, the final epithet of "right-winger."

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