

A QUIET MIRACLE is being worked in Laos, the only part of Indochina yet to begin tasting any of the real benefits of peace. Not only has there been no fighting for most of the year since the Laotians signed their own cease-fire in February 1973, but the American-backed Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the Hanoi-supported Pathet Lao leader, his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, have been moving in a characteristically indirect manner towards the rudiments of a political settlement. They have not yet formed a coalition government and some observers wonder when or if they will. But an internal balance of sorts seems to have been attained, and that may be a serviceable substitute.

Two international developments help explain how Laos could escape from a murderous war in which perhaps a ton of American bombs and chemicals was dropped for each person in the country — a war which may have turned more than half the population into refugees. First, President Nixon stopped bombing, a step which forced the families which make up Souvanna's government to accept the political compromises which the bombing alone had enabled them to avert. For a while after the 1973 cease-fire, there was some question whether Souvanna's more rightwing supporters would accept a compromise. They essayed a coup last summer. It was quickly repudiated by Washington, and it failed. Since then, by agreement, some 3,000 Pathet Lao troops have entered the two government capitals in order, in effect, to keep Souvanna on the path of compromise. Compromise means that perhaps four-fifths of the territory of Laos, and currently upwards of a third of the people, are under Pathet Lao control. Those are the facts of life in Laos.

The second key international event was that Hanoi, having gained legal access to South Vietnam in the Paris accords, no longer needed in the same degree the Ho Chi Minh supply trails running through Laos. North Vietnamese activity in Laos has, accordingly, tapered off.

With this reduction in American and North Vietnamese intervention, the civil war in Laos could reach its own level—a very low level which only makes more plain and painful the extent to which foreigners were responsible for the war.

The real miracle of Laos, however, is what the Laotians themselves have wrought. Through all their travail, they never lost formal touch with each other; they preserved the formal structure of Laotian unity set up in the Geneva accords which were meant to neutralize the country in 1962. As T. D. Allman writes in the *Manchester Guardian*, Souvanna—unlike Lon Nol and President Thieu—never outlawed his opponents; rather, he left the way open for eventual reconciliation. Similarly, Souphanouvong — unlike Sihanouk and the Vietcong — never declared his own group's independence. Thus, when the foreigners finally relented and the time came for strictly Laotian business, the Laotians were ready to make their own peace. This process is now going forward.

A case can be made that no one country has ever created so much physical and human havoc in another country as the United States created in Laos. What for this country was a "limited war," one that sometimes was even thought of as a joke, was for Laos a total war. Virtually the whole life and culture of the Plain of Jars was destroyed, for instance, as that strategically situated area became the scene of annual battles. Whether the bombing was justified by the United States' political goals is a question we will not address here. There cannot be a sliver of doubt, however, that by the bombing the United States incurred an immense obligation to help heal the wounds of war. If the issue of reconstruction aid for Hanoi remains unresolved, there is no reason for the United States not to offer massive aid to Laos—to the parts controlled by Souvanna and the parts controlled by Souphanouvong, as well. Mean political considerations should not be allowed to obscure Laos' human tragedy. The administration should put forth a reconstruction plan and the Congress should follow through.