

Diplomat With Aggressive Style

George McMurtrie Godley

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Thursday, July 12—G. McMurtrie Godley, whose nomination as an Assistant Secretary of State has been rejected by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is variously regarded by those who knew him in Laos either as a paternalistic bull in a china

shop or as an old-fashioned and effective, bulwark against Communism. Ambassador Godley, who ended his four-year tour in Laos in April, is remembered by Government officials, fellow ambassadors and newsmen as a diplomat whose style at times seemed more in keeping with the belligerent tone of the Theodore Roosevelt Administration than with the modern era of cramped caution imposed by confrontation between nuclear superpowers.

The 55-year-old career diplomat's admirers consider him to be the one American more than any other responsible for having prevented the fall of Laos to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. They also point to the fact that he successfully helped shield the neutralist but pro-American Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, from right-wing generals dissatisfied with Laotian Government policy.

As over-all administrator of the more or less clandestine American war effort in Laos, Ambassador Godley was responsible for coordinating air strikes in Laos as well as sustaining the fragile Laotian economy. He also had a key role in directing the activities of a mercenary army of Laotian tribesmen and Thai troops sponsored by

the American Central Intelligence Agency.

American operations, conducted by a staff of more than a thousand in a country of three million or so, are widely credited with the continued survival of the Government in the face of what otherwise would have been overwhelming North Vietnamese pressure.

The Atmosphere Was Heated

While Mr. Godley incurred the hatred of North Vietnamese, Pathet Lao and other Communist diplomats posted to Vientiane, he alienated many Western and non-Communist Asian ambassadors too.

He is particularly remembered for a diplomatic reception at which he grabbed the lapels of the envoy of a large country whose relations with the United States were particularly delicate and loudly demanded that he stop divulging so many diplomatic secrets to the press.

A number of guests were embarrassed, and the offended diplomat told Mr. Godley: "Take your hand off me, Mr. Ambassador. I am the representative, like yourself, of a sovereign nation."

Mr. Godley has made no secret of his distaste for the press, particularly the American press, and for the United States Congress.

Chatting with fellow envoys he referred to a scheduled meeting with newsmen and reportedly remarked: "Tomorrow I'll have to see those little bastards of the press. They're as bad as those bastards on the Hill."

Western and other diplomats have sometimes found it risky to communicate their feelings about Mr. Godley. A senior Western diplomat privately confided some of his impressions to a newsmen, who took notes. The notes fell into the hands of an American intelligence agent, according to the diplomat in question, and within a few days were on the desk of Mr. Godley, who angrily confronted the diplomat with them.

Mr. Godley, who has impressed people on the whole as bluff but friendly, has never seemed to mind the sharp criticism that such incidents engendered even when it found its way into print. A powerfully built six-footer who likes to be called Mac, he has never conveyed an impression of timidity or embarrassment.

In an interview, he once said with a laugh: "The press seems to regard me as some kind of ogre. Well, that's part of the business I'm in."

He rarely disclosed information of importance to newsmen although he saw them fairly often.

After the Laotian cease-fire he told reporters that the procedure in case of serious Communist violations was that the Laotian Government would request American air strikes and that the United States would decide whether to carry them out. Pressed as to the American criteria for responding to such requests, he characteristically snapped, "That's my business!"

The Ambassador was on particularly close terms with Prince Souvanna Phouma and appeared to be liked by the Laotian chief of state, King Savang Vatthana. (All three are partial to cigars.)

The power that Mr. Godley exercised in Laos until his departure April 23 was not new to him. In previous posting as Ambassador, he served from 1964 to 1966 in the Congo (now Zaire), during a period in which the American role was crucial. In 1964 he coordinated American military air transport with Belgian-paid mercenaries in suppressing a Chinese-backed rebellion against President Moïse Tshombe.

In an earlier exercise of American power Mr. Godley was a State Department staff coordinator who helped plan the American landing on the beaches of Beirut during a threatened Lebanese civil war in 1958.

No stranger to clandestine operations, he began his Foreign Service career in 1941 as vice consul in Marseilles, moving a year later to Switzerland, the wartime headquarters of Allen W. Dulles, then with the Office of Strategic Services and later head of the C.I.A.

In Laos, Mr. Godley, something of a study in contrasts,



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worked long hours but was frequently seen in tennis whites and enjoyed sumptuous dinner parties and good wine. He equally enjoyed his frequent airplane and helicopter trips to combat zones.

He and his second wife, the former Elizabeth McCray, lived with their two adopted children in a riverfront villa here. One of the finest in Vientiane, it was only a few hundred yards from that of Prince Souvanna Phouma, but, unlike the Prince's, was equipped with a large swimming pool.

George McMurtrie Godley, born in New York on Aug. 23, 1917, was educated at Hotchkiss, Yale and the University of Chicago. After the war years in Switzerland he was in other European stations, in Washington on four assignments and, in 1951-57, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

One of Mr. Godley's favorite themes is that he would like to see the gap between the State and Defense Departments narrowed to eliminate misunderstandings between military men and civilians. He saw his role both here and in the Congo as primarily military.

Just before leaving Vientiane he was asked what he considered his major accomplishment in the country. "If the cease-fire holds up, that will be it," he replied.