

Step by Step

Story of U.S. Role in Laos

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On July 23, 1962, the communist and noncommunist powers in Asia — including the United States — signed the Geneva Accords to create a neutral Laos. The foreigners agreed to withdraw their military forces from the little country and promised never to send any more troops — not even military advisers.

The Russians pulled out their 500 troops. The Americans pulled out the 750 they had, including 450 Green Berets who had been operating in the boon-docks as White Star Teams. The North Vietnamese, who were always known as the bad guys, pulled out 16 men and left 6000 others behind in their lair in the northern provinces.

The agreement was hailed as a triumph of reason over passion and as a great diplomatic coup for President Kennedy.

INTRIGUE

We are now learning from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that there was less to that agreement than met the eye, and that within 60 days after it was signed the United States was embarked upon a series of secret activities designed to violate every promise this country had made.

It is a delicious story of intrigue, black tricks, cover operations, secret agents, phony agencies and code names like Golden Eagle, Operation Triangle, Seacord, DepChief and Project 404.

The first fact that emerges from the committee's hearings is that the Americans never left Laos as they had



SOUVANNA PHOUMA
He started it

promised to do. CIA operatives remained in the hills to provide "sustenance" to their allies among the Meo tribesmen led by General Vang Pao, whose virtue always has been that he likes to fight.

ARMS

The rest of the American government started getting involved in September 1963, when the new premier, Souvanna Phouma, asked both the Russians and the Americans for military equipment.

The Russians turned him down. The Americans didn't and agreed to put into the country 1100 tons of military equipment each month. That violation of the Geneva accords, but it set in motion other activities that were a clear violation of our promises.

Somebody had to find out what kind of equipment the Laotians really needed. So the U.S. recruited retired military men, put them in ci-

vilian clothes and sent them into Laos as employees of a new branch of our aid mission — the Requirements Office.

DEPCHIEF

Somebody had to stockpile, maintain, process and transport this equipment. So the U.S. created another new agency. It was called Deputy Chief, U.S. Military Assistance Group, Thailand, or DepChief as it was known in the trade. Its mission was classified, and its headquarters were across the border in Thailand.

Somebody had to check on the Laotians to see that they were using their new weapons properly and to give them advice. So the U.S. set up another cover operation — Project 404. This was the code name for the Army and Air Force advisers sent into the country to "supplement" the attaché staff at the American Embassy in Vientiane.

It was soon obvious that tactical training. DepChief took on part of that job, to supplement what the CIA already was doing with Vang Pao's troopers. 3

AIR STRIKES

The next development should have been predictable. Laos needed more direct forms of American help — active combat support. So in 1964, months before ground troops were sent to Vietnam, the Air Force began providing air reconnaissance, then air cover, then air strikes, then close support. To get this job done, it was necessary to send in American ground controllers and airborne spotters to manage the strikes.

By 1966 the special forces wanted a piece of the action and proposed a Golden Eagle operation that involved, presumably, the insertion of Green Beret teams into the countryside. That was turned down.

But the air support, the CIA operations with the Meos, the use of Army and Air Force "coordinators", the various missions of DepChief and other American activities have mushroomed into a "---Billion" dollar annual enterprise. The figure is classified.

All the while and right up to today, Article 4 of the Geneva accords remains in effect:

"The introduction of foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign paramilitary formations and foreign military personnel into Laos is prohibited."