

Laos War Comes Out of Hiding

by Donald M. Rothberg

AP -
 day and leak by leak, the secret war in Laos is becoming more and more difficult to hide.

Successive administrations, Democratic and Republican, have refused to discuss the extent of U.S. involvement in Laos, a small, land locked and officially neutral country whose borders touch China, North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma.

The question is not whether the United States provides military and economic aid to the neutralist government of Laos, but whether Americans are actually engaged in fighting between forces supporting that government and Communist insurgents.

The official response, as enunciated by President Nixon when asked during a Sept. 26, 1969, news conference about American involvement in the war, is: "There is no

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American combat forces in Laos."

Civilian Clothes

Pressed by a Senate subcommittee on the same question, William H. Sullivan, a deputy assistant secretary of state and a former U.S. ambassador to Laos, replied the next month:

"Are there any people with military training in civilian clothes? There are people who have had military training and people who have had paramilitary training who are in civilian clothes. My definition of troops were people who are members of the armed forces of the United States of America. I assume that is what the senator had in mind.

A year later, an Associated Press dispatch from Saigon quoted a military source as saying casualties for U.S. were 1 or 2 killed and 3 to 10 wounded each month.

Asked about the figures, a U.S. command spokesman in Saigon said, "There are no U.S. combat troops in Laos."

Slowly, over a long series of hearings, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee



A SUSPECT IS GAGGED

A Khmer Rouge (Cambodian equivalent of Viet Cong) suspect taken by South Vietnamese troops

—AP Photo

the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, say the United States adhered meticulously to the requirement for total withdrawal.

CIA Removed

Sen. Mike Mansfield of Montana, Democratic leader and a recognized authority on Southeast Asia, said in an interview: "The CIA was in Laos before the Geneva accords and they stayed after 1962."

When the North Vietnamese resumed their offensive a year later, Souvanna Phouma, now Laos' prime minister, asked the United States for supplies and ammunition to help his forces counter the Communists. He also asked the United States to say as little as possible about the assistance for fear it would jeopardize his neutralist position.

United States aid flowed into Laos, but the focus was changing. South Vietnam had become the Southeast Asian crisis point, and American policy makers began to view Laos in relation to the Vietnam war. According to a State Department source: "North Vietnamese utilization of the trail area overwhelmed other concerns."

has disclosed some of the U.S. involvement in Laos. Other information has come from such sources as the Pentagon papers, present and former government officials, and field dispatches.

Disclosures

Among the disclosures:

- There are 4800 Thai troops led by a Thai general and supported entirely by U.S. funds fighting in Laos despite an act of Congress prohibiting support of mercenaries in Laos.

- Cambodian troops, trained by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency have been fighting in Laos. Forty Cambodians were killed and an undisclosed number wounded in recent heavy fighting for the Bolovens Plateau.

- Current budget figures show the United States spending \$90 million for military and \$52 million for economic aid to Laos. The correct figure, congressional sources claim, is nearly \$500 million most of which is channeled through the CIA.

- Congressional source estimates \$2 billion is being spent each year bombing that part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, principal Communist supply route from North to South Vietnam, that runs through Laos.

- Since 1964, the United States also has conducted bombing raids in support of the Royal Laotian Army. While the number of sorties is classified, Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) has said "a handful" in 1964 increased a hundredfold in 1965, then nearly doubled again in 1966.

- As of Jan. 27, 1971, according to the State Department, there were 1034 Americans in Laos, including 395 employes of the Agency for International Development, 244 with the military attache's office, and 300 employed by Air America and Continental Air Services International, two air lines supported by the CIA.

Ike Moved

Since 1961, the CIA has had an undisclosed number of agents working principally

with Meo tribesmen in northern Laos and more recently with the Thai force.

When John F. Kennedy became President in 1961, Laos was the United States' most pressing problem in Southeast Asia.

In President Eisenhower's view "the fall of Laos to Communism could mean the subsequent fall — like a tumbling row of dominoes — of its still-free neighbors, Cambodia, and South Vietnam and, in all probability, Thailand and Burma. Such a chain of events would open the way to Communist seizure of all of Southeast Asia."

Eisenhower supported the pro-Western government of Premier Boun Oum. With Boun Oum's army taking a beating from the pro-Communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies, American advisers were sent into Laos to try to shore up the faltering Laotian Army.

Kennedy sought instead to defuse the situation through formation of a Laotian coalition government led by neutralist Souvanna Phouma.

Negotiations began in Geneva in May 1961 with W. Averell Harriman heading the U.S. delegation. The so-called Geneva accords were signed in July, 1962. They declared Laos a neutral country and called for withdrawal of all foreign troops through designated checkpoints.

In an interview, Harriman said the North Vietnamese who had about 10,000 troops in Laos "did not keep the Laos agreement for a single day." Intelligence sources believe the North Vietnamese eventually reduced their forces to about 5000 troops without bothering with checkpoints.

The United States withdrew about 750 Americans. Whether any Americans stayed behind in Laos is uncertain.

Harriman and Roger Hillsman, a State Department specialist in the area during