THE UNIVERSE UNRAVELING

American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos

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Chapter 1

“A Long Country Inhabited by Lotus Eaters”

Washington Encounters Laos

The three states of French Indochina—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—stood on the threshold of a seemingly golden era as 1954 drew to a close. French defeat in the battle of Dien Bien Phu had ended the war between France and the Viet Minh and sounded the death knell of France’s Southeast Asian empire. A multinational conference of communist and noncommunist powers in Geneva had worked out the details of a region-wide settlement: recognition of Laos and Cambodia as independent nations, withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lao and Cambodian territory, and partition of Vietnam until elections could be held to unify the country in 1956. The conferees had also established an international-control commission to oversee implementation of what came to be known as the Geneva Accords. While leaders of the various Indochinese liberation movements recognized that the accords were ambiguous in crucial respects, and while the refusal of the U.S. delegation at Geneva to endorse the settlement led some observers to predict that Western intervention in Southeast Asian affairs was far from over, millions of former colonial subjects celebrated their independence and looked with confidence to the future. “We were so optimistic,” Lao politician Panh Ngaosyvathn recalled decades later. “Everything was in
Chapter 2

“A Soft Buffer”

Laos in the Eisenhower Administration’s Grand Strategy

In March 1958, Nationalist Chinese President Chiang Kai-shek hosted a meeting of U.S. ambassadors to Asian countries. The diplomats gathered in Taipei to evaluate America’s Far Eastern policy, which had enjoyed smooth sailing since the death of Philippine leader Ramón Magsaysay the previous year. There had been no defeats or crises; indeed, events in Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia indicated an upswing in the free world’s fortunes, while Ngo Dinh Diem had pulled off what American journalists were calling a “miracle” by making South Vietnam a going concern. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who presided over the Taipei gathering, could survey the cold war’s Asian front with optimism.

There was a soft spot, however, and it was contiguous to every country in Southeast Asia except Malaya. When the ministers at Taipei read their briefing books, they must have been appalled by the gloominess of the “Laos” chapter, as well as by the scornful tone author Patricia Byrne adopted. Byrne, the State Department’s officer in charge of Lao affairs, began by noting that Laos appeared “more a liability than an asset to the free world.” It was “the weakest and least stable of all of the states of Southeast Asia,” it suffered from “the greatest economic handicaps,” and its “minuscule elite” had not proven “equal to the task of...assuming the international
Chapter 3

“Help the Seemingly Unhelpable”

“Little America” and the U.S. Aid Program in Laos

The August 1958 newsletter for the American Women’s Club of Vientiane spotlighted several recent events, most prominently a community theater production of You Can’t Take It with You performed at the mess hall of the United States Operations Mission (USOM) compound. “Bouquets should be tossed” to an “excellent cast,” wrote the newsletter’s anonymous drama critic. “The Mekong Players came into their own” with this, their second show, a “comedy in the old tradition of Joseph Jefferson.” Singled out for “[s]omething special in the way of bouquets” was Alice Drew, a secretary in the USOM’s procurement division, who, readers learned, “went through one rehearsal [sic] voiceless due to laryngitis.” Drew’s “stellar performance” helped make the play a hit, but other cast members received plaudits, too: “[T]here couldn’t have been a better Donald than Charlie Searles (loved that Phi Beta Kappa key bit), nor a more likable curmudgeon of a Grandpa than Charlie Anderson.” The actors’ work was “pointed up by masterful direction” and “abetted by a set that smacked of Raoul Pene du Bois.” While the reviewer acknowledged that “most of the audience had a nodding acquaintance with the piece that had been a highly successful Broadway show,” this did not prevent them from enjoying “three evenings of fine entertainment—a very salable commodity in this community.”
Vientiane would fall. Of that there was no doubt. General Phoumi Nosavan’s men had American-supplied armored cars and tanks, gunboats and landing craft, artillery, mortars, rifles, and machine guns. U.S. helicopters flew above the advancing “Phoumists” army to direct its artillery fire. The soldiers defending Vientiane were outnumbered, according to a British diplomat, thirty to one. Worse, they had no armor. Phoumi hoped to take over the administrative capital without a fight.

Quinim Pholsena, acting premier of the Royal Lao Government (RLG), refused to accommodate him. “Once fighting starts, it will go on until we are all dead,” he told a reporter for the New York Times. “We will fight to the last drop of blood.” Kong Le, the paratroop captain who would lead the defenders in battle, went on the radio to challenge Phoumi to a duel—just the two of them, man to man, to determine “who should be in control of Vientiane.” He informed a Thai correspondent that his troops would “fight to the last” and would “save the last bullet for themselves.” Phoumi’s men were just as pugnacious. On the eve of hostilities, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative recorded one of them as boasting “in all seriousness” that he and his comrades possessed “a superhuman power which makes them immune to human destruction.” They were “protected by special
Chapter 5

"Doctor Tom" and "Mister Pop"

American Icons in Laos

Thomas Anthony Dooley III and Edgar Monroe Buell never met, which was just as well. They would have found little to talk about. The St. Louis physician and the Indiana farmer moved in separate circles, even when they were both fighting to save Laos from communism. Dooley may not have been aware of Buell's existence, and Buell mentioned Dooley only three times in letters home, twice parenthetically and once with the earthiness that made him such good copy. "God[,] you will never know how glad I am I worked hard on this language," he noted after delivering supplies to a Hmong village. "Mr. Dooley wrote about the many dialects [sic], it was imposable [sic] to learn them. Hell[,] I have been everywhere he was and more to [sic] and can get by."!

The pugnacity of that remark, and the substitution of "Mr." for "Dr.,” reflected Buell’s awareness of the social gulf between himself and Dooley. Whereas the doctor had enjoyed a privileged upbringing and had attended Notre Dame and St. Louis University School of Medicine, Buell’s formal education had ended with high school. The demands of keeping his family in food and shelter made further academic pursuits impracticable, and Buell often grumbled about "educated fools” whose “book learning” hid their lack of common sense. In an unguarded moment, he confessed to
Chapter 6

"Retarded Children"
Laos in the American Popular Imagination

"The typical Laotian, and most of the two million Laotians are typical, is probably the world's last un-angry man," editorialized Warren Rogers of the New York Herald Tribune in May 1962. "He is Puck and Huckleberry Finn, but without the guile those two were capable of. He loves gentle music and gentle games and is ever ready for a party. He hates to fight and will almost always refuse, and he loathes the thought of harming another living thing." Thus far, John Q. Laos seemed a capital fellow. Yet he had a flaw. "Such a man," Rogers wrote, "is hardly soldierly material."

This was a problem, because the cold war compelled Washington to try to make soldiers out of about seventy thousand Lao—forty thousand in the Royal Lao Army (RLA) and thirty thousand in the Lao National Guard. "It has been a harrowing experience," reported Rogers. "The Americans have been frustrated beyond words at the typical Laotian recruit's good-natured, happy-go-lucky incompetence in the simplest military arts." Even when the Lao "appeared to have grasped enough to face a test in battle," they kept "shooting at an angle of 30 degrees over the heads of the enemy." A glance at Lao history indicated that this dovishness was no recent development; the Lao had always preferred "partying to fighting" and had
Chapter 7

"No Place to Fight a War"

Washington Backs Away from Laos

John F. Kennedy may have decided against U.S. military intervention in Laos before his April 27, 1961, meeting with congressional leaders, but that encounter set the new policy in stone. Like many landmark exchanges of the Kennedy administration, it was impromptu. Kennedy hated former president Dwight Eisenhower's regimented way of arriving at decisions, preferring a more freewheeling approach that, he felt, saved time and encouraged innovation. Thus, when the National Security Council (NSC) presented its report on Laos on the morning of the twenty-seventh, Kennedy impulsively asked that prominent legislators be summoned to receive the same intelligence. Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson, who was present, recalled, "A very considerable number of congressmen from both Houses, representing most of the committees and most of the shades of opinion, were ushered into the room." Although Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh Burke, an Eisenhower-administration holdover, found Kennedy's inattention to procedure irksome, the president wanted to know how much congressional support he could count on if he put American troops into Laos. "I would say that the NSC meeting terminated in the formal sense," Johnson noted, "but [the congressmen] blended right into it." In fact, they did more than that, haranguing Kennedy and his military