

# LAOS

Buffer State or Battleground

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predecessor's policy with regard to Laos, and patient negotiations between Britain and Russia, had made the eventual recall of the Geneva Conference a probability. There had been indications of a change of heart at the very end of the Eisenhower administration in January. Kennedy, not yet president, had reserved his position as he had done on other issues. Eisenhower had called Laos the most immediately dangerous of the problems he was passing on: 'You might have to go in there and fight it out,' he said.<sup>70</sup> But the new president had his own views on Indo-China. He had been critical of American policy there as far back as 1951, and in the great debate on United States intervention in 1954 had been 'frankly of the belief that no amount of American assistance in Indo-China can conquer . . . an "enemy of the people", which has the sympathy and covert support of the people'.<sup>71</sup>

So now, Kennedy did not need Lord Harlech to tell him that United States policy in Laos had been unwise and that 'the impression of Washington always rushing about to prop up corrupt dictators in Asia could not have happy consequences'.<sup>72</sup> He realized that the effort to turn Laos into a pro-Western bastion had been ridiculous and that neutralization was the correct policy.<sup>73</sup> American prestige was now so heavily involved, however, that disengagement must be cautious. 'We cannot and will not', he said, 'accept any visible humiliation over Laos.'<sup>74</sup> The Laotian military disasters in March, unforeseen by his military advisers who were predicting a Phoumi victory,<sup>75</sup> compelled him to consider whether to commit American troops, although he already knew that:

if he sent 10,000 men to southeast Asia, he would deplete the strategic reserve and have virtually nothing left for emergencies elsewhere. . . . Equipment was so low that, when Kennedy inspected the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg in October, the division had to borrow men and material to bring itself up to complement. The Army could hardly fight longer than a few weeks before running short on ammunition, nor was new production set to remedy the deficiencies. The supply of armoured personnel carriers, self-propelled howitzers and recoilless rifles fell far below the required number. . . . The airlift capacity consisted largely of obsolescent aircraft designed for civilian transportation; it would have

<sup>70</sup> Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (London, 1965); p. 640.

<sup>71</sup> Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

taken nearly two months to carry an infantry division and its equipment to southeast Asia. And, if such a division had found itself in the jungles of Laos or Vietnam, it would have been like Braddock's army at the Battle of the Wilderness, since counter-insurgency forces hardly existed.<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, the president's advisers were divided both on what military action should be taken and on the likely consequences of such action. The logistics problem would be complex. 'In the event of large-scale movement of North Vietnamese troops into Laos in response to the commitment of American troops there the enemy supply line would be short, the American line long.'<sup>77</sup>

Military precautions were nevertheless taken, if only to meet the mounting anxiety in Siam,<sup>78</sup> and the clearest warnings conveyed to Moscow and Peking that the United States would intervene to prevent a Communist takeover. The Seventh Fleet was moved to the South China Sea, combat troops were alerted in Okinawa, and five hundred marines with helicopters were moved to Udorn airfield in Siam, thirty-five miles south of Vientiane. But at the same time the new president accepted on 23 March the idea of a cease-fire in Laos followed by an international conference.

The prospect of a new Geneva Conference in 1961 had something of the effect upon the Pathet Lao that it had had on the Viet Minh in 1954. Pathet Lao forces, now operating by companies and sometimes by battalions, set out to gain as much cheap territory as they could, and in particular to occupy the areas of eastern Laos in which the Viet Minh were interested. As a cease-fire became imminent in mid-April, Prince Souphanouvong's men achieved quick and sweeping gains in three areas, government troops making no serious effort to oppose them. North of Luang Prabang they took the important opium trading centre of Muong Sai and approached Nam Tha. East and north-east of Thakhek they took Kamkeut, Nhommarath, and Mahaxay.<sup>79</sup> Further south

<sup>76</sup> Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-7.

<sup>77</sup> Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>78</sup> Nuechterlein, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-202.

<sup>79</sup> Dommen's accounts of attacks on Kamkeut by Viet Minh assault troops (*op. cit.*, p. 188), and of a conventional attack on Muong Sai accompanied by 'rolling barrages' of shell-fire (*op. cit.*, pp. 196-7), reproduce government propaganda, some of which was afterwards denied. They also show this author falling into the error of describing Laotian war in Western terms for which he criticizes others (*op. cit.*, p. 123).

they occupied Tchepone and took into their control the eastern half of the road linking Savannakhet with the frontier of South Vietnam. These latter moves extended the rebels' control from their old fiefs in the north to the unsubdued Kha tribal areas in the south where their influence was already paramount. There was also a sharp attack on the strong government force under Colonel Kouprasith north of Vang Vieng. Vang Vieng returned to Neutralist control.

Western observers who had visited the operational areas were not surprised at Phoumi's continual military disasters, which were partly due to the lack of experienced and worthy leaders. In August 1960 the Laotian Army had still not recovered from the shortage of officers caused by its rapid expansion since 1954. Some battalions were still twenty per cent. below strength in officers. Since the further expansion under Phoumi's aegis, which had raised the strength of the army to some 45,000 men, there were officers trying to command two separated companies in the field at the same time, and battalions with no more than four officers.

Laotian soldiers are tough and devoted when they have leaders who are worthy of them, as many a French officer discovered in the Indo-China War. The defence of Muong Khoua by a Laotian battalion against the Viet Minh in April-May 1953 provided a classic example of fortitude. Ordered to delay the Viet Minh 316th Division for fourteen days, the battalion had held out for five weeks; only four survivors are known.<sup>80</sup> But in the present state of leadership, difficulties were inevitable. Observers saw troops advancing with the greatest reluctance even when unopposed, sentries firing at random on the smallest noise, positions ill-chosen, field works so constructed as to be useless, soldiers sleeping in dug-outs intended for the ammunition they had stacked outside. Phoumi himself was never seen at an active front. Against the dedication of Kong Lae's parachutists, the hard discipline of the Pathet Lao hill-men under their energetic prince, against the Vietnamese cadres and the Viet Minh myth, the soldiers of Phoumi had no chance.

As his military situation deteriorated Phoumi alleged that sixty thousand Viet Minh were operating against him and asked the United States for increased aid. On 19 April the four hundred

<sup>80</sup> B. B. Fall, *The Two Vietnams* (London, 1963), p. 121.

American military advisers in Laos,<sup>81</sup> who had hitherto appeared in civilian clothes, put on their uniforms and assumed a tactical advisory role. But this was also the day of final disaster in the Bay of Pigs, a disaster which subdued the voices urging American intervention in Laos and strengthened President Kennedy in his resistance to them.<sup>82</sup> 'Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did', he said later, 'otherwise we'd be in Laos by now—and that would be a hundred times worse.'<sup>83</sup>

On 24 April 1961, Britain and Russia called for an armistice in Laos which would be followed by the convening of a conference at Geneva. For the moment, the kingdom of Laos had other things to do. The day chosen as auspicious for the cremation of His late Majesty King Sisavang Vong had arrived. The government and diplomatic corps were in Luang Prabang for the magnificent state funeral. Amid the noise of supply aircraft coming and going from the airfield to isolated military posts in the mountains, and the salutes fired with live ammunition by artillery withdrawn from the nearest front, the traditional ceremonies unrolled for three long days. Only when the king's ashes had been deposited with due pomp in the royal pagoda, did attention return to the war.

A cease-fire was eventually proclaimed by the three parties to the conflict between 28 April and 3 May, by which time the Pathet Lao had occupied most of the territory they required. It was confirmed by the newly summoned International Control Commission as being generally effective on 11 May.<sup>84</sup> The Geneva Conference accordingly reassembled; it did so in circumstances which looked disastrous for Western interests.

Only a year had passed since General Phoumi's elections might have been thought to have confirmed the kingdom of Laos on its pro-Western course; the Pathet Lao leaders were in prison and the minor insecurity that existed in the country could have been ascribed to bucolic quarrels about rice, salt, women, and opium—village fights of the sort that recurred year by year. The Phoumist government had at least nominally controlled the whole country;

<sup>81</sup> The original three hundred infantrymen of the 'Programs Evaluation Office' had already been replaced by about four hundred Special Forces personnel from the U.S. guerrilla training schools; Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>82</sup> Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 307-8.

<sup>83</sup> Sorensen, *op. cit.*, p. 644.

<sup>84</sup> The Commission met in Delhi on 28 April and the first party reached Vientiane on 8 May 1961.