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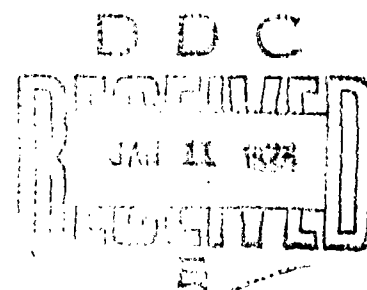
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Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970 (U)

Douglas S. Blaufarb



A Report prepared for
ADVANCED RESEARCH PROJECTS AGENCY

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PREFACE

(U) This Report is one of a series that Rand is preparing under the sponsorship of the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Department of Defense. The Overseas Defense Research Office of ARPA specifically asked for analysis to be focused on the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. Government organization and management in the broad field of counterinsurgency and unconventional war.

(U) The present case study deals with the U.S. experience in Laos between 1962 and 1970. Although the United States has been actively involved in Laos since 1955, the Geneva Accords of 1962 opened a significantly new chapter from the point of view of both policy and organization -- a period marked by the effort to avoid the mistakes of 1955-1962. After 1970, the pattern of the war in Laos seemed to change once more, with the large-scale use of Thai troops, an intensified bombing program in North Laos, and employment of irregular forces away from their home areas. These developments, which are difficult to evaluate given the limited information available to us so far, have not been taken into account in the present analysis, whose conclusions apply solely to the years 1962-1970.

(U) The focus of the study is on organization and management; policies are described and analyzed only as they bear on organizational and managerial problems. But in Laos the two have been very closely related, as the 1962 Geneva Accords imposed major political constraints on our subsequent defensive operations and on the organization necessary to carry out such operations.

(U) The unconventional nature of the conflict, the constraints imposed by the Accords, the consequent demands on U.S. agencies for innovative approaches, and the unusual manner in which these demands were met make Laos in 1962-1970 a case study that should be of particular interest to those Department of Defense, JCS, and military service components concerned with unconventional conflict in remote areas. The lessons learned from this and other case studies will be summarized in another Rand report, which will make specific recommendations on organization and management in this field.

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(U) Published Rand studies illuminating other aspects of the war in Laos include RM-5935-ARPA, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao*, and RM-5688-ARPA, *The North Vietnamese Military Adviser in Laos: A First-Hand Account*.

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SUMMARY

(U) If one grants that the U.S. purpose in Laos has been to fight a low-cost, low-profile delaying action to preserve the Lao buffer zone against North Vietnamese pressures, then the United States during 1962-1970 largely achieved its aim. It managed the unconventional war in Laos through the unified civilian management of field programs, delegation of responsibility to field operators, and adaptive response to the real-life needs in that remote scene of conflict.

(U) The situation as it was in 1962 placed constraints on U.S. policies and operations. Hardly a country except in the legal sense, Laos lacked the ability to defend its recent independence. Its economy was undeveloped, its administrative capability primitive, its population divided both ethnically and regionally, and its elite disunited, corrupt, and unfit to lead. These failings had led to the collapse of U.S. efforts in the 1950s to help establish an anti-Communist regime in Laos, and convinced Washington that a neutral government would be better suited to Lao conditions.

(C) This solution was thereupon embodied in the Geneva Accords of 1962. A cease-fire halted the fighting between Neutralist and Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) forces on the one hand and the rightist Royal Lao Government (RLG) on the other, and a coalition government of Communist, right-wing, and Neutralist elements was installed, with the Neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. The Accords went formally into effect in October 1962. Only the United States and the USSR, however, complied with them by withdrawing their forces; the North Vietnamese kept a substantial military presence in Laos. Of the three Lao armies that had been contending -- 10,000 Neutralists under Kong Le, about 20,000 Communist forces in the Lao People's Liberation Army (LPLA), and 48,000 in the rightist Forces Armées Royales (FAR) -- the Communists retained a major advantage after the cease-fire by virtue of continuing, covert North Vietnamese support.

(C) For the United States this created the problem of how to sustain a neutral and independent Laos within the constraints imposed by the Geneva Accords that Hanoi was disregarding. The dilemma first

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arose with respect to the 17,000-man irregular tribal force which the Americans originally had organized to assist the FAR. Washington tentatively decided to continue supporting these units, though at a reduced level and limited to defensive operations, while awaiting the outcome of negotiations to unite and demobilize all the armed forces of Laos.

(C) Prime Minister Souvanna, faced with the need to maintain the strength of the Neutralists and the FAR, next requested assistance for them as well. In response, the United States put together a rather complex organization designed to avoid outright conflict with the Accords while providing aid to the Lao resistance effort. After successive military clashes in the Plain of Jars, in 1963 and 1964, Washington adopted a posture that attempted to reconcile limited military support of the RLG with the terms of the Accords. Departures from these terms were to be strictly limited, carefully controlled, kept inconspicuous, and undertaken only with the approval of the Prime Minister. An added constraint derived from the U.S. view that Laos should remain a secondary theater. Such a policy imposed a reactive pattern on U.S. operations in Laos. Combined with the difficulties of the environment, it forced the U.S. Mission to improvise solutions to its operating problems at the same time that it freed the Mission from undue encumbrance by bureaucratic routines.

(U) In the so-called "quiet war" that followed the breakdown of the cease-fire, a pattern emerged that has persisted with only minor variations. The fighting has been confined to areas that lie between, and adjoin, the main territories of the two sides, and whose significance is largely political. Most of it has been in the Plain of Jars. The difference in the character of the opposing forces has resulted in a seasonal cycle. The LPLA and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces, originally lightly armed guerrillas, had been forced to increase their size and weaponry and as a result had become road-bound. In north-eastern Laos, they were now opposed by a popular guerrilla movement composed in large part of Meo tribesmen, who ambushed and harassed the Communists' more conventional LOC and were logistically supported by air. In consequence, the LPLA/NVA was able to take the offensive

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only during the dry season (November to May), while the tribal irregulars would try to recoup their dry-season losses when the rains all but immobilized their enemies. Eventually, the Communists constructed all-weather roads that allowed them to extend some of their aggressive activity into the rainy months. From 1968 on they made gains every year, and in both 1970 and 1971 they threatened the heartland of the Meo, including the headquarters at Long Tieng. But the Meo still regained much of the lost ground during the rainy season.

(U) In this cyclical exchange, both sides seemed to be following a tacit policy of mutual abstention, as each avoided attacking objectives critically important to the other. The U.S. purpose was to defend politically important areas without provoking powerful enemy reactions. The Communists, who had satisfied their minimum objectives in Laos by controlling the corridor to South Vietnam and maintaining a secure base for the NLHS, apparently made the additional inputs required to fight the "quiet war" in order to hold on to the politically important terrain on the doorstep of Vientiane and protect a backdoor to North Vietnam.

(C) U.S. programs in this highly unconventional setting focused on essentials for sustaining a Lao government caught up in inconclusive fighting. Small-scale and flexible, so as to fit the needs of a low-profile delaying action, they comprised (1) rural resistance and security activities, (2) supporting programs for such activities, and (3) conventional military programs.

(C) Most important in the first category were the tribal programs conducted by CIA. They were, in fact, resistance movements of the tribal populations against the NLHS, which was resented by the tribes as a harsh ruler dominated by a traditional foreign enemy, the North Vietnamese. The assurance of U.S. support, combined with effective indigenous leadership (particularly by the Meo general Vang Pao), turned these attitudes into strong motivation for a naturally warlike people. The U.S. purpose was to create supplemental armed force with which to help the Lao regulars defend critically important terrain. Gradually, the number of tribal irregulars built up to about 30,000, of whom about half were organized into some 30 full-time battalions.

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At their peak, in 1967, the Meo occupied terrain just outside the NLHS headquarters at Sam Neua. Other tribal groups fought in the northwest and in the south.

(C) This effort was under close policy control from the American Ambassador and the Department of State. CIA personnel were held to a few hundred, many of them stationed in nearby Thailand. By agreement with the Royal Thai Government, they were augmented by Thai specialists, who were invaluable in facilitating communication between Americans and tribesmen. In guiding the effort, the Embassy sought to avoid overextension and overcommitment.

(C) Parallel with the resistance effort went a limited rural security program for the Lao-inhabited lowlands, but it resulted in only one major, multi-agency undertaking, in which villagers northwest of the Bolovens Plateau, in South Laos, were trained and armed and some rural development and training was attempted. After nearly three years, the experiment was curtailed, the Mission having decided that inadequacy of leadership and lack of manpower argued against investing scarce resources in this type of program.

(U) Although managed largely by CIA, the above programs received a major contribution from AID. "Refugee relief," for example, was an AID-sponsored program fully integrated with the tribal effort, which sustained the families of the guerrillas and thereby provided a reassurance essential to morale; AID's medical assistance program was a similar, vital service to the irregular forces. AID also conducted educational and minor development programs that buttressed the appeal of Vang Pao to his people. Their relationship of mutual confidence with tribal leaders helped AID's field representatives meet the special needs of the tribes.

(C) Other U.S. programs focused on the regular forces but had their unconventional aspects. Logistic support for the Lao military was the responsibility of the Requirements Office (RO), a civilian group within USAID that was composed of retired military specialists. An augmented group of army and air attachés concentrated on advising the regular military forces at high levels. The Air Force group not only trained, assisted, and guided the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF),

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but also provided links between the Mission and USAF units in Thailand, thus facilitating the operations of these units in Laos. Through the tribal program, the USAF also gained access to sites from which U.S. helicopters could fly search-and-rescue (SAR) missions into North Vietnam, and where navigational aids for bombing operations against North Vietnam could be installed.

(S) As pressure from Hanoi grew, USAF bombing became a salient feature of the war in North Laos: sorties increased from just a few in 1964 to 42,000 in FY 1970. For the first time, sophisticated high-performance aircraft supported a resistance movement of primitive tribesmen, their choice of targets based in good part on intelligence supplied by the tribal irregulars. Preplanned strikes were limited to targets that required final approval by the Ambassador himself, and, in the early years, avoided the proximity of important centers. (Later, a relaxation in these rules resulted in some bombing of civilians, an unfortunate excess in an otherwise carefully controlled program.)

(C) Another unique feature of the war in Laos was the dependence of the resistance movement on air transport provided by private American contractors. Two firms, flying various large cargo planes, STOL aircraft, and H-34 helicopters, provided a most flexible and critically important logistics capability.

(C) The total cost of these efforts to the United States grew with the intensity of the war, and in FY 1970 was estimated at some \$260 million (not counting the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail).

(C) The organization by which the Mission managed this array of programs was remarkable in that the Ambassador actually directed all U.S. operations, including (because of its political sensitivity) U.S. military activity. One envoy, Ambassador William H. Sullivan, later reported having arrived in Laos with firm instructions to assume authority over military as well as other operations, and having thereafter had no interference from Washington, whose attention was taken up by Vietnam.

(U) The pattern that Ambassador Sullivan set in his four years in Laos was one of unified management, informality, and simplified,

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flexible procedures. He kept a close watch on operational detail, and personally chaired the daily meetings of agency principals that he had introduced. The Mission was strongly oriented toward the field, where representatives of the several agencies in turn cooperated closely. Field initiatives received serious consideration from the Mission, and field personnel were supported by Vientiane in their sometimes unusual requests.

(U) The Lao government developed no organizational capability for prosecuting the war. Its approach reflected the fact that the controlling political forces in Laos are regional, and that the central government can take no effective action beyond the capital without the concurrence of local chieftains. In effect, therefore, the United States provided the skeletal structure that linked the various Lao elements and was able to guide their operational activity. Certain critical inputs, however, had to come, and did come, from the Lao themselves: they were the initiative and strong leadership to be found in some regions of Laos. The Americans necessarily concentrated their efforts in these regions, particularly in the Meo tribal areas, and with the enterprising and well-led Lao air force.

(U) The unconventional military effort of the United States in Laos, although inconclusive, thus achieved a significant part of its goals at a relatively low cost. The constraints imposed by the primitive environment, as well as those built into the Geneva Accords, forced the U.S. representatives to improvise, to forgo large staffs, to shun military involvement on the ground, and to rely on a small, well-knit group of Americans to deal directly with one another and with local leaders. Beyond this, they made a conscious decision in favor of unified management of all activities under a civilian chief. The resulting system, despite some weaknesses and failures, was well suited to the particularities of the Lao situation.

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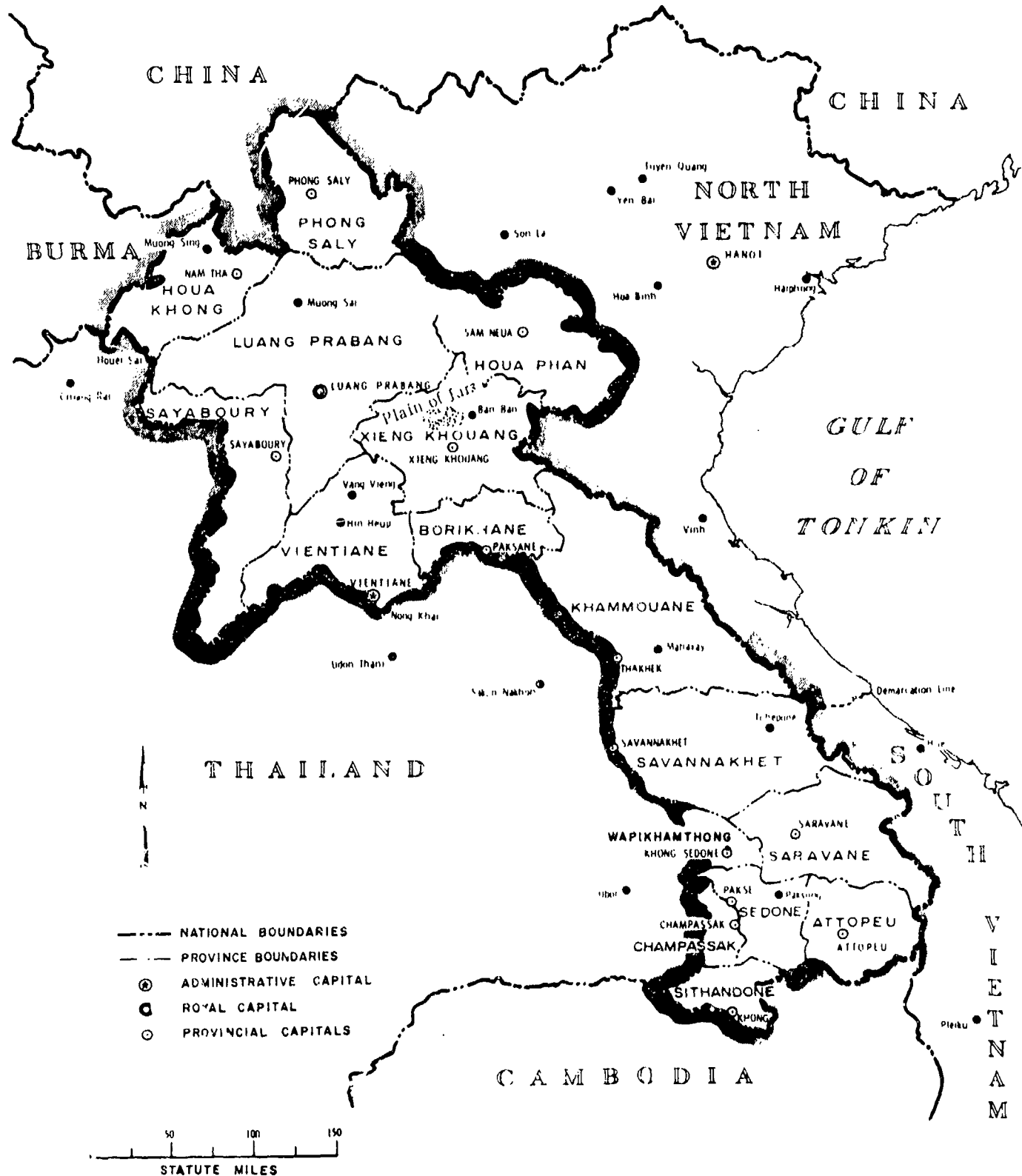
LIST OF UNFAMILIAR ABBREVIATIONS

AIRA - U.S. Air Attaché
ARMA - U.S. Army Attaché
CDNI - Committee for the Defense of National Interests
DEPCHIEF - Deputy Chief, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Thailand
FAN - Forces Armées Neutralistes (Neutralist Armed Forces)
FAR - Forces Armées Royales (Royal Armed Forces)
ICC - International Control Commission
JUSMAG - Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group
LPF - Lao Patriotic Front
LPLA - Lao People's Liberation Army (Kongthap Potpoi Pasason Lao)
MAP - Military Assistance Program
MR - Military Region
NLHS - Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front)
NVA - North Vietnamese Army
PEO - Program Evaluations Office
PDJ - Plain of Jars
PL - Pathet Lao (Land of the Lao)
PPL - Phak Pasason Lao (People's Party of Laos)
RLAF - Royal Lao Air Force
RLG - Royal Lao Government
RO - Requirements Office
RTA - Royal Thai Army
RTG - Royal Thai Government
SEACoord - Southeast Asia Coordinating Committee
SGU - Special Guerrilla Unit

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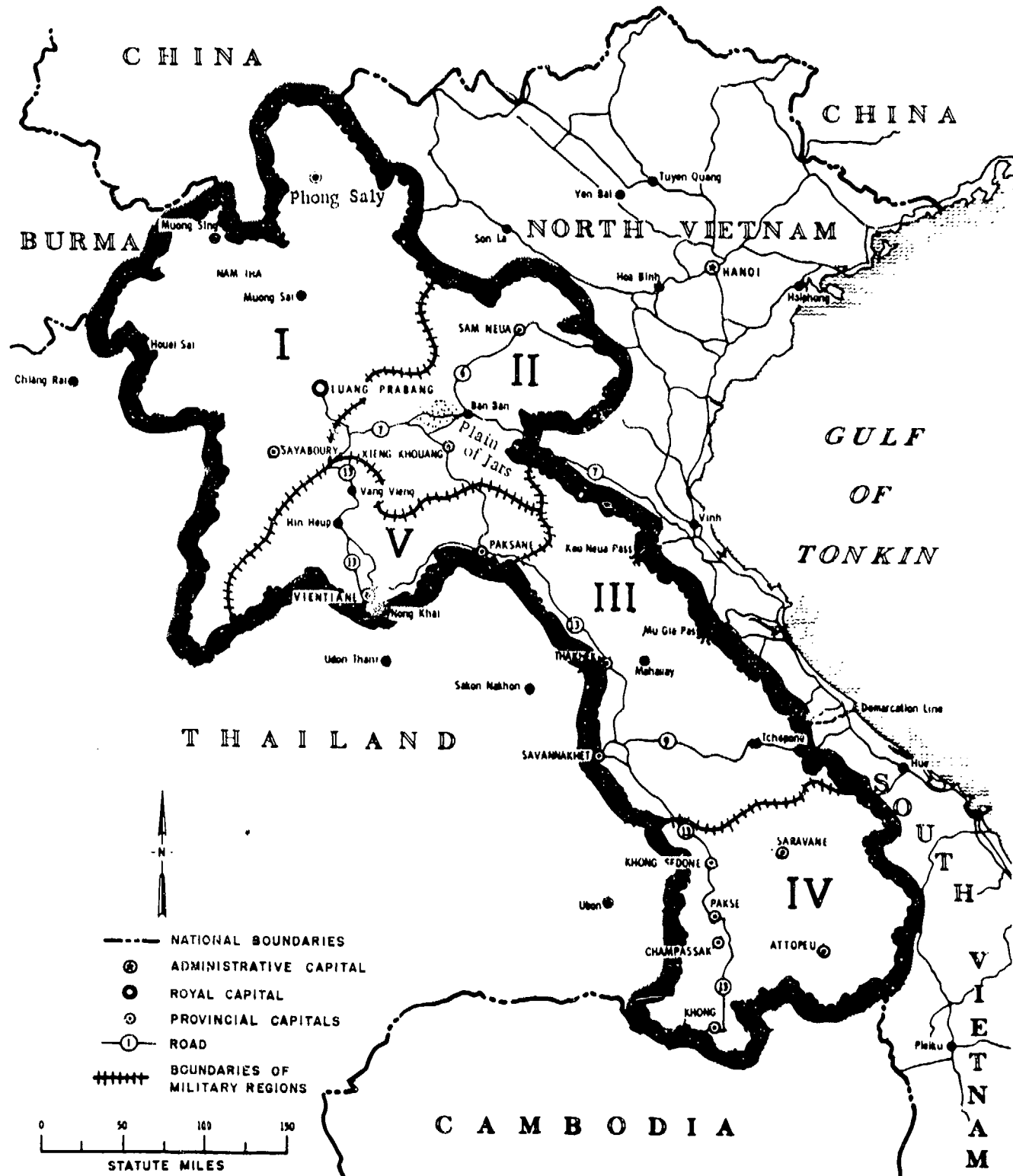


I. THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS OF LAOS

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II. MILITARY REGIONS AND PRINCIPAL ROADS OF LAOS

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I. INTRODUCTION

(U) Since the 1940s, Laos has been caught up in the wars which have succeeded each other in the territory of the former French Indochina. In particular, North Vietnam has massively involved itself in Laos through a client Communist party, the Phak Pasason Lao (People's Party of Laos, or PPL), and the front group that represents Communist interests, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front, or NLHS). This involvement has frequently included a heavy deployment of regular troops of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), amounting on occasion to the equivalent of an army corps, in addition to various NVA service and auxiliary forces.

(U) In the first Indochina war, between the French and the Viet Minh, Laos played only a limited role, although the war eventually spread into its territory, in 1953, when two columns of Viet Minh struck deep into Laos, taking Sam Neua town and threatening Luang Prabang before the arrival of the rainy season forced them to return to Vietnam. The French reaction was to reoccupy the base of Dien Bien Phu in strength to guard the approaches to Laos -- with well-known consequences.

(U) The Laos which emerged from the Geneva Agreements of 1954 immediately became the arena of an intense political conflict between the Communists and the divided non-Communist political groups. The Communist movement in Laos had existed obscurely since the founding of the Communist Party of Indochina in 1930, but moved onto the scene as an important factor in 1950 with the formation of the mass political front initially called Pathet Lao ("Land of the Lao," or PL). In 1954 it was weak in numbers and in troops (estimated at about two thousand), but the Geneva Agreements included one clause which gave it a sizable advantage in the competition that followed. The Agreements had identified Phong Saly and Houa Phan (Sam Neua), two northern provinces bordering on North Vietnam, as regroupment areas for PL forces. After regroupment, all Lao forces were to be unified, elections held, and a united Lao government formed. However, the PL proceeded to establish its own government in the two provinces and

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refused to participate in the elections, preferring to negotiate for a coalition as a separate force with its own, fully controlled geographic base.

(U) In essence, the next eight years of political conflict revolved around the question of coalition with the Communists. One group of non-Communist politicians, led by Prince Souvanna Phouma (half-brother of PL leader Prince Souphanouvong), held that the leaders of both the Communist and the non-Communist side, if left to work out their problems, could settle their differences and unite the country in a neutral framework. To the right of Souvanna were other factions, which argued -- some with more and some with less fervor -- that Laos must unite in opposition to the Communists.

U.S. INVOLVEMENT: 1955-1962

(U) Beginning in 1955 the United States became deeply involved in this internal conflict. Its goal was to unify all non-Communist political groups and to strengthen them militarily and economically to the point where Laos would become a firm anti-Communist "bastion" on the borders of China and Vietnam.

(U) The policy had one crippling flaw. Its hidden assumption was that Laos was a nation with sufficient national unity, leadership, and political and social infrastructure to use U.S. aid effectively in a policy of firm resistance to its enemies. In fact, however, Laos was and is not such a country. History and terrain have divided the land into separate regions, with little to bind these together. The population is a mixture of races and religions, of primitive hill tribes and lowland paddy-growing Lao peasants, who regard each other with fear and hostility. Although in control of the government and its military forces, the ethnic Lao comprise less than half the population. The elite of this Lao minority is a collection of rival clans, who share little sense of national purpose but regard the government and the public service as an arena where they compete for influence and power to enrich themselves.

(U) The country as a whole is underdeveloped in every way. A limited road network connects the main towns along the Mekong but,

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with few exceptions, avoids the hinterland, a rugged, roadless expanse of jungled hills and limestone ridges. The economy is rudimentary and incapable of supporting even the modest military and civilian services normal to a country of three million, much less armies and civil services greatly swollen as a result of war. The civilian services suffer from crippling deficiencies in training, in pay, and in traditions of service.

(U) In this environment, the United States found that all its efforts to build a solid Lao government trickled off into the sand. An army of 25,000 supported entirely by U.S. funds (against the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) proved gravely inadequate to its tasks.* Generous economic aid was provided, including a large commodity import program, to pay for the cost of the army. But it was mired in corruption and bald thievery. On the political side, the quarreling non-Communist factions refused to unite despite U.S. persuasion and pressure. After a number of permutations, including a short-lived effort at coalition under Souvanna Phouma (opposed by the United States), an attempt was made to create a new political vehicle, the Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDNI), with covert American support.** The CDNI had some initial success but soon became merely another factional grouping no better than the others -- and one that was widely known to have a U.S. subsidy. Two elections took place, in 1958 and 1960, in both of which the United States sought by various means to energize and assist the nationalist candidates, always pressing for unity among them. The second, in May 1960, was so blatantly rigged by the right-wing forces, led by General Phoumi Nosavan, that a reaction set in.*** This resulted in a coup d'état, in August 1960, by an

* (U) Because of the restrictions of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Laos was designated the Program Evaluations Office (PEO) and was staffed by military personnel in civilian clothes. In 1961 it was reconstituted as a regular MAAG, in uniform.

** (U) See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, Doubleday, New York, 1967, pp. 114-115.

*** (U) See Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, Praeger, New York 1964, pp. 132-133.

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obscure paratroop Captain named Kong Le, whose goal was the neutralization of Laos and an end to the interference of foreigners in Lao affairs.

(U) Kong Le's coup brought Prince Souvanna Phouma back to power. It also led rapidly to a polarization of forces and a military confrontation. With full U.S. support, General Phoumi rallied most of the army to his standard in Savannakhet, principal city in the south, and marched on Vientiane. A battle in Vientiane in December 1960 caused heavy material damage but few casualties. Kong Le and his Neutralist forces retreated northward, while Souvanna Phouma went into exile in Cambodia, bitterly denouncing the United States for its failure to understand Laos. Phoumi took over.

(U) But Kong Le was far from defeated. Beginning in December, when he had formally joined forces with the NLHS* against Phoumi, he had been supplied by a Russian airlift. Provisioned by Russian air-drops, he led his forces in good order to the Plain of Jars, a wide, rolling grassland controlling strategic road junctions in northern Laos. There he drove the Phoumist garrisons from their bases and seized the Xieng Khouangville airfield. With continued Russian assistance, his forces and the PL units allied with them began to grow in strength, easily mastering the forces of the Vientiane faction in several skirmishes. A dangerous crisis loomed, involving not only the various Lao factions but the Soviet Union and the United States as well.

SHIFT IN U.S. POLICY

(U) The new Kennedy Administration opted for a revised double-track strategy: a show of force to assure the adversary that he would have no easy victory, and a quiet effort to arrive at an accommodation. Moscow, no doubt as dismayed as Washington at the prospect of a confrontation between the two countries in remote Laos, reacted

* (U) The Pathet Lao reorganized themselves as the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS, or Lao Patriotic Front) in 1956.

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favorably to the American initiative. President Kennedy announced his new approach to Laos on March 23, 1961. Within weeks a cease-fire had been arranged. On May 3 it was officially proclaimed, and an international conference to neutralize Laos was convened in Geneva.

(U) In effect, U.S. policy had taken a sharp turn away from the goal of a strong, anti-Communist Laos toward the concept of a Laos that would be neutralized, policed by international agreement, and governed by a coalition of the right-wing, Neutralist, and Communist factions. Implicit in the change was an acknowledgment that the earlier policy had failed. Observers agreed that the failure stemmed from inadequate appreciation of the constraints imposed by the social and political environment. The material from which to build a firm opposition to communism was not to be found in Laos.

(U) In the course of its effort to make political bricks without straw, the U.S. Mission in Vientiane had been the scene of rather bitter disagreements among various agencies -- disagreements more often about tactics than about policy, and often centering around the pros and cons of U.S. support for specific Lao personalities. Roger Hilsman says ". . . the tragedy was that neither the Lao nor our allies could tell who really spoke for the United States -- whether it was the CIA, the military, the AID officials or the Ambassador. In the end there was open quarrelling among the representatives of the different American agencies, and . . . the United States became the butt of jokes among both friend and foe."*

(U) In sum, the policy, the programs, and the organization of the United States in Laos in the period between the two Geneva conferences had been seriously inadequate. Thereafter, major changes were made in all three categories. In harmony with the shift from the policy of building a bastion -- and in contrast to the earlier willingness to intervene vigorously in Lao politics, to support generously those who assumed an anti-Communist stance, to encourage the import of luxury items at U.S. expense, and to indulge in internecine conflict

* (U) *To Move a Nation*, p. 116.

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within the Mission -- the approach became discreet, flexible, and unified, with emphasis upon careful control and limited objectives. An effort was made to apply the lessons of previous failures.

(U) The Geneva Conference of 1962 did not, of course, solve the problems of Laos. The United States again became involved in this uninviting military and political terrain, this time largely in support of the 1962 agreements, against renewed North Vietnam attempts to subvert them. But the new Geneva Accords imposed certain constraints upon U.S. military and paramilitary activity which greatly increased the delicacy of this involvement and complicated the operational problems it entailed. Nevertheless, a rather sizable military response was mustered by various devices and expedients, all subordinate to limited policy objectives.

(U) The 1962-1970 Lao case is significant because of the uniqueness of the situation and of the innovative solutions attempted. It provides experience in the management of a novel group of unconventional programs, some in the field of counterinsurgency, others going beyond the content of that label as commonly understood. It also incorporates new organizational departures. In the process of deploying airpower in support of primitive tribal irregulars, of bringing about mutual support among three separate Lao ground forces and a Lao air force of independent tendencies, and of ensuring cooperation among a half-dozen U.S. civilian and military agencies, the United States Mission evolved empirically an approach to its management tasks that should be of considerable interest to students of unconventional conflict.

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II. THE SITUATION AT THE TIME OF THE GENEVA ACCORDS

(U) The era of the 1962 Geneva Accords formally began in Laos with entry into force of the restrictions that those Accords imposed on the presence of foreign military forces. In the official view of the fourteen participating powers, the Accords represented a new start for Laos, which for several years had been a cockpit of conflict between foreign and foreign-backed military forces. That chapter of Lao history was now officially closed.

(U) The new chapter, which opened in October 1962, was based on three factors, all the product of lengthy negotiations: a cease-fire, a coalition government, and the neutralization of the territory of Laos. These three instruments were intended to protect the newly pacified and stabilized country.

THE CEASE-FIRE

(U) When the cease-fire was declared on May 3, 1961, as a preliminary to the Geneva Conference, Laos had been the scene of an active shooting war since August 1960. There were numerous violations of the cease-fire during the lengthy negotiations at Geneva, but most fronts had been quiet for several months when the Accords went into full effect. The cease-fire was not accompanied by a delineation of the boundaries of the areas controlled by the two sides.* It was to be policed by an augmented International Control Commission (ICC) composed of contingents provided by Poland, Canada, and India and presided over by an Indian. Increased in size and equipped with some helicopters, the ICC was given the task of watching over the implementation of the Accords throughout the isolated, rugged, and virtually empty back-country of Laos as well as in the areas along the Mekong which were accessible but of limited importance. This was an impossible task without the cooperation of the authorities in the areas concerned. The NLHS very quickly made it clear that the ICC would not be permitted access to territory it controlled except with prior approval and under severe restrictions.

* (U) See p. 13 for a description of the two areas.

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THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

(U) The second factor of importance was the coming into office of the coalition government composed of Neutralist, right-wing, and Communist elements under the premiership of the Neutralist leader, Souvanna Phouma. The coalition purported to be the unified government of Laos, and cabinet posts had been apportioned among the various parties after lengthy negotiations. In appearance it brought together under the leadership of Souvanna both the veteran leader of the Lao Patriotic Front, Prince Souphanouvong (Souvanna's half-brother), and the military leader of the rightists, General Phoumi Nosavan. This appearance of unity was belied, however, by the *de facto* partition of the country into two segments, one of which was governed by the NLHS and the other by the central government of Souvanna Phouma. The NLHS, despite its membership in the coalition, very rapidly took the position that representatives of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) had no right to enter and travel in the portion of the country under NLHS control without NLHS approval. The nominally unitary form of government was thus mere window-dressing for a *de facto* partition along the lines of the cease-fire.

NEUTRALIZATION

(U) A key document of the Geneva Accords was the Protocol setting forth in detail the terms that were to govern the neutrality of Laos and, most particularly, the limitations on any foreign military presence, "regular or irregular." The Protocol prohibited any foreign military activity, except for a French military training mission and the normal contingents of foreign military attachés. Its terms were also to be enforced by the strengthened ICC. In October 1962, when the foreign governments which had previously deployed military elements in Laos announced that they had withdrawn all military personnel not permitted under the Accords, they had actually made the following new dispositions:

(U) The USSR. Soviet military activity had been limited to providing an airlift of weapons and supplies to the NLHS and Neutralist

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forces beginning in December 1960. It operated via North Vietnam. Very few Soviet personnel were stationed in Laos in this connection, and little is known about them except that a small advisory mission was stationed on the Plain of Jars and that all were withdrawn before the Accords went into full effect. The airlift was discontinued in December 1962. Training of the NLHS and Neutralists in the use of the Soviet equipment brought in by the airlift had been provided not by Soviet personnel but by North Vietnamese.

(U) North Vietnam. U.S. estimates placed the number of North Vietnamese Army troops in NLHS areas at 6,000 just prior to the Accords. The NVA had complied in a merely token fashion with the requirements of the Geneva Protocol on neutralization, officially putting 40 personnel through the ICC checkpoint on the Plain of Jars and onto aircraft for Hanoi. Most of the rest were presumably disposed somewhere in NLHS territory, although some probably were withdrawn. In view of the ease and rapidity with which NVA forces could be shuttled back and forth between Laos and North Vietnam, it was not necessary to retain a larger number in Laos than were immediately required.

(S) The United States. The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was completely withdrawn.* Also withdrawn were several hundred U.S. Special Forces personnel (designated White Star Teams) who had been organizing tribal irregulars. A total of 666 American military personnel left Laos, as well as 403 Filipinos who had been brought in to supplement the limited Lao capabilities for logistic support and technical maintenance. Most Central Intelligence Agency personnel who had been working along with the Special Forces as advisers to the tribal irregulars were also withdrawn. But a small nucleus in Thailand remained available on a standby basis for reasons explained below.

(S) Thailand. A special Royal Thai Army unit numbering a few hundred had been established to work with CIA in the tribal areas. They were withdrawn, but, as in the case of CIA personnel, some remained available in case of need.

* (U) The MAAG had replaced the civilianized PEO in April 1961.

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(U) There was no significant South Vietnamese, Chinese Communist, or Chinese Nationalist military presence in Laos at this time. On occasion, some elements of the ex-Chinese Nationalist irregulars who had settled down and lived by opium-smuggling in the tri-state border region of Thailand, Burma, and Laos would slip into Laos. Their ties with Taiwan were tenuous, and they had little military or political significance.

STATUS OF THE VARIOUS LAO ARMED FORCES

(U) As for the armed forces of the various Lao groups, each component of the coalition had its military underpinning. The Neutralist forces were the least effective, having been hastily improvised around the figure of Kong Le. They totaled about 10,000 men directly under the former paratroop captain -- now promoted to general -- plus another 2,000 in Phong Saly under a local "war lord" whose loyalty to Kong Le was doubtful. The 48,000-man right-wing FAR (Forces Armées Royales) was the largest component of the armed forces, but its fighting qualities were unimpressive, it having been built up hurriedly with inadequate leadership. Finally, there were the armed forces of the NLHS, which then bore the name Pathet Lao Fighting Forces and were estimated to be in the neighborhood of 20,000. Some of these were formed into companies and battalions; the rest were scattered local forces under the control of Communist provincial authorities. A portion of the NVA forces mentioned above were advisers and specialists assigned to the NLHS military and civilian commands.

(C) In addition to these regular forces, the White Star Teams and CIA had recruited, and in 1960-1962 had hastily armed, some irregular groups in every section of Laos. At the time the program was suspended, these groups numbered 17,000. They were entirely tribal and ethnically non-Lao. The purpose behind their recruitment and organization had been to provide the RLG with auxiliary units that could confront the NLHS forces in mountainous areas, where the FAR functioned poorly if at all and where, consequently, the NLHS held virtually uncontested sway. The most important group among these armed tribesmen, both in terms of quality and in numbers, were the Meo.

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Their commander was Colonel (later Major General) Vang Pao, an officer of the FAR who was also a Meo tribal leader and an able guerrilla chieftain. Vang Pao had participated in French-organized guerrilla operations during the first Indochina war and had impressive leadership qualities. Others who participated in irregular activity included groups from the large Mon-Khmer complex of tribes called Lao Theung in the north and Kha (a pejorative Lao designation meaning slave) in the south. The Yao tribe in Northwest Laos was also involved, through its traditional leaders Chao Mai and Chao La.

(S) An apparatus which provided training, guidance, weapons, and ammunition to the tribal groups and included an air delivery system based on private American air companies had been created by the United States. (It will be described in some detail later.) The disposition of this apparatus and the position of the United States vis-à-vis the tribal guerrilla movement had been the subject of intense debate within the U.S. Government during the Geneva negotiations. Even after the cease-fire of May 1961, sporadic and occasionally heavy fighting took place as the tribal forces came under NLHS attack. But the United States halted the program of arming additional tribesmen and limited the effort to self-defense. By October 1962 a lull had fallen over the battlefield in the tribal areas, and the decision was made to leave the tribesmen with a capability to conduct short-term defensive operations only. At the same time, certain standby arrangements were made to facilitate a revival of support activity to tribal groups should they come under Communist attack. Souvanna Phouma was discreetly advised of this decision. He did not demur, although at the time he had no sympathy with the Meo and the other guerrillas, whom he viewed with traditional Lao suspicion aggravated by the fact that the program had been sponsored by his political opponents, the rightists under General Phoumi Nosavan.

(S) At this point, the various programs identified with tribal irregulars were little more than relics inherited from an earlier set of objectives and related policies. Indeed, they were something of an embarrassment since they ran counter to the objectives of current policies. The hope was that they could be wound down and terminated

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as the RLG developed its capability to defend its territory, including the tribal areas. As we know, matters took a rather different turn, the principal reason being that the Communist side had distinctly contrasting objectives. We will therefore briefly describe the situation and background of the Communist movement in Laos, to complete this sketch of the setting in 1962.

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III. THE COMMUNIST SIDE

(U) By 1960, the Communist movement had reached the point where it disposed of an army of 20,000 and, nominally at least, controlled a population estimated at between 800,000 and 900,000 -- out of an estimated total of 2,750,000. The territory claimed by the NLHS consisted of a wide strip that roughly -- but with some exceptions -- followed the frontier of Laos with Vietnam and China. The depth of the strip averaged 60 to 70 kilometers. In the northernmost province of Phong Saly (a kind of peninsula surrounded on three sides by China and North Vietnam), a nominally Neutralist leader, Khamouane Boupha, was in power. He soon found it opportune to throw in his lot with the pro-Communist faction of Neutralists.

(U) The portion of Laos under Communist control included few population centers, none of them large. It was rugged and isolated, and lightly populated with an extremely varied ethnic mix, in which the Lao were a distinct minority. Indeed, the part of Laos under Communist control was not representative of a typically Lao culture and economy. The Lao are a riverine people, who cultivate "wet" rice and whose historic home has been the Mekong Valley lowlands. In the mountainous area away from the Mekong, the inhabitants are largely non-Lao, tribal, and non-Buddhist. They depend on upland "dry" rice cultivation and slash-and-burn agriculture. As a cash crop, they grow opium, because it is easily transported by man or animal pack and thus can reach the markets in this roadless land. The dependence of the NLHS on foreign support decreed that this movement, which claimed to represent all the Lao, should be concentrated in areas where there were few Lao, and few towns or roads or other development, but which were only a few days' march from North Vietnam and China.

(U) The NLHS government and its chief, Prince Souphanouvong, together with the Lao Communist Party and its chief, Kaysone Phomvihan, had their headquarters in Sam Neua, 30 miles from North Vietnam. After the intensive bombing of Communist-held Laos commenced in 1965, government and Party moved into an extensive network of caves in the limestone karst a few miles west of Sam Neua. From there it now

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controls in some degree more than half the land surface of Laos, in which about 40 percent of the population lives.

(U) It has been established through the questioning of defectors and refugees that the NLHS is supported and sustained at all critical points by the North Vietnamese, including civilian technicians, Communist Party cadres, military advisers, and troops.* North Vietnamese advisers are attached to NLHS governmental and military units throughout the area controlled by the Communist side. In addition to North Vietnamese advisers, tactical units of North Vietnamese troops have spearheaded all important military attacks undertaken by the NLHS. At least three different kinds of North Vietnamese military presence have been distinguished by analysts: First, a network of military advisers assigned to LPLA units down to battalion and to the independent companies in each province; second, a permanent presence of an average of one NVA company per NLHS province; third, the mobile force of North Vietnamese brought into Laos for a particular purpose, and remaining only until that purpose is accomplished.** During the height of the 1970 dry-season campaign it was estimated that some 67,000 NVA troops were operating on Lao soil.*** Of these, large numbers were North Vietnamese laborers organized in construction battalions that worked on the road networks which connect North Vietnam with the battlefields in South Vietnam and also with those in North Laos.

(U) In addition, there have recently been a few thousand Chinese Communist troops, organized in construction battalions, who are building roads linking principal points in Northwest Laos with each other and with China. This Chinese presence appears to be supportive to the North Vietnamese rather than competitive. Its significance as a token of Chinese interest in the area is potential rather than actual.

* (U) P. F. Langer and J. J. Zasloff, *Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao*, The Rand Corporation, RM-5935-ARPA, September 1969, pp. 141ff. The author is indebted to this basic study of communism in Laos for much of the information in this section.

** *Ibid.*, pp. 141ff.

*** President Nixon's statement of March 6, 1970.

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(U) The North Vietnamese have also assumed the burden of supplying scarce and essential technical skills (especially in the medical field, technical training, and higher education) and a regular flow of essential supplies. The regime which they advise and guide is endeavoring to duplicate on Lao soil a rudimentary version of a Communist regime, but it has neither the administrative capability nor the technical and economic base to permit full-fledged socialist policies. On the political side, however, the attempt results more nearly in a faded carbon copy. The same network of front groups, covering all the main interests of the citizenry, has been set up by the NLHS under the semisecret direction of the Party. Propaganda themes closely follow Radio Hanoi.

(U) The attitude of the people under NLHS control toward that regime is a subject about which little authoritative information is available.* Among the tribal elements who make up a large part of that population, loyalty is generally given to traditional chieftains. The Communists have recognized this factor, and at an early date were able to recruit into their movement several Meo leaders, among them Fay Dang, a chieftain of stature. An even more important catch was Sithon Khommadam, the tribal leader of the Loven people, who live on and north of the Bolovens Plateau.

(U) But other important Meo tribal leaders refused to join the movement ostensibly led by Prince Souphanouvong. These included Toub Lyfong, the paramount chief, and Vang Pao, a member of a high-ranking family, both of whom remained loyal to the French and later to the successor state, the RLG, and to the King of Laos. The Meo were thus divided in loyalty, but the majority ultimately took up arms against the NLHS. The latter retained its hold most firmly in areas where an outstanding leader such as Sithon Khommadam, a legendary hero to his people, was able to sway their loyalties. In other areas large numbers

* (U) Some very useful debriefing material based on questioning of refugees from the Plain of Jars who had lived under NLHS rule for ten years was prepared by Mr. E. McKeithen of AID/Laos. These refugees had lived under close supervision and were not typical of the population in areas away from main centers. They strongly resented the heavy exactions and minute control to which they were subjected.

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of tribespeople availed themselves of the opportunity to take up arms against the NLHS. However, such opportunities could only be offered in areas where conditions were favorable.

(U) Communist-controlled Laos may be said to be a territory where the NLHS has tried to duplicate in rudimentary fashion the features typical of Communist government in North Vietnam, but where it succeeds only partially because of the backwardness and also the independent spirit of the people, the lack of development of the country, and the slenderness of NLHS resources. Such success as the movement has derives in large part from the skills and resource inputs of its North Vietnamese sponsors.

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IV. POLICY AND PROGRAM CONSTRAINTS

(U) Before describing the events which led to the breakdown of the 1962 Accords and the resumption of fighting, it is essential to develop more fully the unique context which accounts for the special nature of the U.S. involvement in Laos. It derives from an array of environmental and political constraints within which U.S. policies had to be shaped. The environmental constraints were the familiar ones already described, which had brought the earlier policies to an impasse and which were fully taken into account in the devising of new policies. However, compounding the problems of implementing the new policies were the political constraints of the Geneva Accords. As the new phase began, in October 1962, the American posture was determined by the fact that, although the United States had been a reluctant convert to the policy of neutralization, it had opted firmly for this position in early 1961 and had then become a prime mover in the effort to neutralize the country. From the President down, officials reiterated frequently that the objective of the United States was to assure Laos' independence and neutrality.* The government of Souvanna Phouma was seen as the only viable vehicle through which this objective could be accomplished. It therefore was to be supported materially and morally by the United States and like-minded countries.

(U) But the United States experienced some difficulty in the practical implementation of these general objectives. Survival of the RLG required that it fulfill in some degree the minimum functions of government, and this it could only do with foreign assistance. The United States therefore found itself involved in educational and agricultural development programs, as well as in public works, finance and budgeting, public health, and the like. Between the

* (U) For a recent reiteration, see *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad: Kingdom of Laos*, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-first Congress, First Session, 1969 (hereafter referred to as *SPRC Hearings*), p. 392.

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extremes of token assistance and a long-range basic reform-and-development program by which to enable Laos to manage its own affairs, the United States opted for an intermediate point which seemed "reasonable" according to some undefined, common-sense standard. Affecting this decision were such factors as the difficulty of persuading Congress to support aid to Laos in amounts which, per capita, exceeded those accorded to far larger and more important countries, and the extremely limited capacity of the RLG to absorb aid unless it included not only material resources but foreign advisers and experts assigned to the Lao ministries and departments and working side-by-side with Lao functionaries. Also of importance in determining the scope of the effort was the necessity to keep the size of the American community in Laos to a minimum. Indeed, this consideration was a major constraint that influenced the style as well as the substance of the program in many large and some trivial ways.

(U) If the purpose of the policy was to avoid the appearance of the American giant dominating and controlling events in neutralized Laos, a major complication in its implementation was the primitiveness of facilities in Vientiane, which required the Embassy to provide all essential services for its personnel. To avoid the proliferation of such services as medical care, power, housing and furnishings, physical security, transportation, food and other daily supplies, entertainment, and recreation, a tight ceiling was placed on civilian personnel. The size of the AID program was thus determined by practical calculations, rather than by a clearly defined set of development objectives and a strategy to fit.

(U) Politically, the guiding principle was again support for Souvanna Phouma as prime minister and for the RLG as constituted by the 1962 Accords. This support required that the United States be prepared to use its influence with the right-wing element of the coalition -- the military and political leaders grouped around Deputy Prime Minister Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum, the traditional chieftain of southern Laos -- to maintain their cooperation. Such cooperation was never to be other than grudging, having been obtained from Phoumi only after a long period of pressure and suasion. However, the

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United States had little leverage which it could use vis-à-vis the left wing of the coalition should that faction attempt to exploit its improved legal and strategic position. At the same time, the history of the 1954 Geneva Agreements and of various earlier efforts at coalition with the Communists did not inspire unreserved confidence in the commitment of the NLHS to the tripartite policy. The United States therefore relied upon the desire of the Soviet Union to see the coalition solution succeed, and on its ability to influence the left wing of the coalition.

(U) Against the possibility that the USSR would prove unwilling or unable to intervene if the coalition were endangered, the United States deemed it important to see to the development of an adequate and competent RLG military force. The existing armed forces were neither adequate nor competent and required foreign assistance to achieve the desired level. After receiving a request from Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to provide the government's armed forces with essential equipment and supply, the United States put together a rather complex organization designed to avoid outright conflict with the terms of the Accords governing the presence of foreign military personnel (see p. 45).

(C) Thus, as NLHS/NVA pressures mounted, the U.S. position with respect to the Accords was that, in order to preserve the essence of an independent and neutral Laos, certain limited and carefully controlled departures from the implementing protocols had to be undertaken. These would be discussed with Souvanna Phouma in advance, and his views would be respected, since he was regarded as the keystone for the highly unstable RLG structure. This approach governed policies relating to military activities from the entry into force of the Accords onward.

(C) A major concern was to keep departures from the terms of the Accords to a minimum and as inconspicuous as possible.* Thus,

* (C) As to the reasons for this necessity and for maintaining secrecy and discretion, this paper will assume familiarity with the U.S. Government's rationale and will not discuss the matter other than to state that it is based on assumptions concerning (a) the

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while U.S. military and paramilitary activities were to be undertaken, an obvious and undeniable U.S. military presence would clearly be an embarrassment and would be avoided. In effect, all the functions of a Military Assistance Advisory Group, some of the functions of a U.S. military command, and numerous unconventional activities in support of irregular troops, including a requirement for airborne logistics adapted to an area without airfields or navigational aids, would have to be effectively performed in circumstances which prohibited an avowed military presence of the type normally considered essential.

(C) A further constraint was the relegation of Laos to the status of a secondary theater where no final decision would be sought; its fate was to be determined by the outcome in Vietnam. In addition to the objectives related directly to Laos, post-Geneva developments in Vietnam brought into existence objectives related to the Vietnam war. The existence of supply lines through remote areas of Laos which were vital to the enemy in Vietnam demanded, in the view of the United States, adjustments in Lao policy that would permit air attacks against those lines. The objective became to interdict the use of the corridor by the NVA while avoiding irreparable damage to the Geneva political arrangements.

(C) These policy constraints were determined at the highest levels in Washington and were part of the "givens" with which the U.S. Mission in Vientiane had to deal. They led to further program limitations and constraints. Most important, the policy of support for both the RLG and the Geneva Accords imposed an exclusively reactive pattern on the RLG/U.S. side: Departures from existing restrictions could not be expected to get Washington approval, except as a response to an immediate Communist threat to the RLG position in North Laos.

(U) Although burdensome, the range of constraints just noted also had positive aspects. They, in effect, forced the U.S. Mission

value, particularly vis-à-vis the USSR, of preserving a façade of adherence to the Accords; (b) the justifiability of departing from the terms in reaction to massive violations of the Accords, particularly so when such interventions are requested and authorized by the RLG, which also makes secrecy a condition of that authorization. Cf. *SFRC Hearings*, p. 399.

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to look in new directions for solutions. As will be seen, they had further beneficial consequences in shielding the Mission from the standard institutional constraints which often tend to stifle innovation and put a check on adaptive response. The Mission in Laos was impelled to pioneer and experiment in fields where precedent offered no guide. As the result of the political and environmental peculiarities of its job, some constructive approaches and achievements emerged along with much frustration and some failure.

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V. BREAKDOWN OF THE ACCORDS AND THE "QUIET WAR"

(U) At this point in time we can reconstruct speculatively the Communists' strategy in attempting to take advantage of their gains under the 1962 Accords. When the coalition was formed, they controlled only one of the three groups that comprised it, but they had reason to expect that the Neutralist component could be brought substantially under their control, with or without the cooperation of Souvanna Phouma. They had penetrated both Kong Le's forces and Souvanna Phouma's immediate political circle in the person of Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena, a Communist instrument or ally.* The NLHS also controlled all ammunition and resupply for Kong Le's forces, which were armed with Russian weapons. Its leaders thus had substantial reason for believing that in short order they would be able to bring a significant portion of Neutralist assets under their control. This in turn would make it possible for them, under the guise of legitimacy, to move toward control of the entire government.

(U) The next eighteen months saw them attempt numerous stratagems aimed at bringing the Neutralists under their domination. They failed, because Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le remained committed to Neutralist independence and were able to obtain essential material assistance from several foreign sources, notably from the United States. There is no need to review the history of the developing split between the Neutralists and the NLHS, aside from several key events which had much to do with the eventual shape of the U.S. program.

(U) The first clear and unmistakable violation of the cease-fire on a large scale took place in 1963. Within the Neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars, a pro-NLHS "dissident" element had earlier formed under a certain Colonel Deuane, who had become disaffected from Kong Le. In late March of 1963, intermittent violence broke out between this faction and the majority of Neutralist troops loyal to Kong Le. The dissidents, backed by NLHS units, attacked Kong Le's positions in

* Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, p. 153.

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the towns ringing the Plain of Jars and drove them westward across the Plain.

(S) When reports of this attack reached Vientiane, the U.S. Mission took several actions to support Kong Le's units. One was to activate the Meo forces of Colonel Vang Pao. Although the Plain itself is not Meo-inhabited, a concentration of Meo villages exists in the hills around it, and Vang Pao's headquarters were only about 50 air miles from the eastern edge of the Plain. The Mission decided, with the Prime Minister's knowledge, to deploy the Meo irregulars in support of Kong Le. The sudden appearance of the tribesmen on hillsides overlooking some of their major positions forced the "dissident Neutralist" and the NLHS forces threatening Kong Le to take defensive measures. It is believed that the presence of the Meo irregulars on the high ground was a major factor permitting Kong Le to extricate himself with the bulk of his forces intact. At the end of this episode, the Neutralists kept control of the western third of the Plain and of most of the Neutralist troops. Colonel Deuane stayed with the NLHS, and his troop remnant was maintained by the Communists as an ostensibly separate element of "true Neutralists."

(S) From this point onward, the situation moved steadily toward open hostilities. On the political front in Vientiane, the arrangements which had been laboriously put together at Geneva and elsewhere began to disintegrate. A series of political assassinations occurred, culminating in the shooting of Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena by a member of his guard. The NLHS members of the coalition fled the city. The coalition became an artificial legal construct, in recognition of which the Prime Minister retained the names of the absent NLHS ministers on his cabinet roster but either replaced them with appointees in an "acting" capacity or "temporarily" assumed their functions himself. He repeatedly assured the NLHS leaders that they were welcome to return to Vientiane and assume the posts assigned to their party.

(S) The final crisis, effectively ending any fading hopes of coalition, occurred once again on the Plain of Jars (PDJ), in 1964. An element of Kong Le's forces defected to the Deuanist "true neutralists," an event which appears to have been staged by the

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Communists and was exploited by them to support the claim that Kong Le's forces had deserted him. Under cover of this ruse, the Communists pressed an attack which drove Kong Le entirely off the Plain, except for a small foothold around Muong Soui. Again considerable American matériel support was provided Kong Le, and diversions were staged by the Meo tribesmen. Probably more important, however, was the use of U.S. airpower for the first time in Laos. Jet strikes were staged in the Plain of Jars area and along Route 7, the supply line leading most directly from the Plain eastward to North Vietnam.* Although the air attacks were limited in number and character, they were probably interpreted by the Communists as an indication that further movement westward involved increased risks of U.S. intervention.

(U) The military situation on the Plain now became stabilized, and remained so for five years. Since the Neutralists themselves were not a formidable force, being torn with dissension and suffering from gravely inadequate leadership, considerations other than Neutralist strength doubtless played a major part in persuading the Communists to stay their hand. Chief among them probably was concern about provoking an even stronger American reaction than had already occurred. Another motive may have been unwillingness to penetrate the Meo-controlled terrain west of the Plain until the Meo were reduced to harmlessness.

(U) These events, in May-June 1964, brought a critical change in the Lao conflict. They appear to have persuaded both the United States and Souvanna Phouma that a policy of strict adherence to the Geneva Accords was no longer viable. Since the Communists had apparently made the same decision at some earlier point, both sides now settled down to a policy of political maneuver and limited military engagement while maintaining a public posture of continued support for the Accords.

THE PATTERN OF FIGHTING

(U) Since the rainy season of 1964 the shooting war in Laos has followed a relatively stable pattern and a definite annual rhythm. It

* (U) *SFRC Hearings*, p. 476.

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has been confined to an area between and marginal to the main territories of the opposing sides -- an area significant largely for political reasons. Neither side has wished to risk the political or military consequences of striking into the enemy's heartland.

(U) The NLHS forces (which recently have titled themselves the Lao People's Liberation Army, or LPLA) are essentially conventional troops, having evolved from the Pathet Lao guerrilla bands of the 1950s into a road-bound army which requires secure LOCs and truck transport to support its operations. The same is true of the NVA elements which move into Laos during the dry season, and which are dependent on long LOCs reaching back into North Vietnam. Behind this change of tactics and style are the increased toughness of the forces arrayed against them, of which the Meo irregulars are the nucleus, and the threat of Lao and U.S. airpower. These factors have required the Communists to deploy in larger units, to augment their firepower with artillery and antiaircraft weapons, and to dig in to hold ground. Finally, they are unable to count upon the local population to provide rice and bearers, and so must bring their food supplies with them in trucks.

(U) This last factor results from the success of the U.S.-supported Meo forces in gaining the support of the tribal population of Xieng Khouang and western Houa Phan (Sam Neua) provinces. In effect, the Communists in that corner of Laos have had the tables turned on them. In the once fashionable Maoist metaphor, the sea they swam in has become hostile, the fish who are swimming in it comfortably are anti-Communist, and the Communist fish need oxygen tanks to stay alive. The loyalist Meo are the guerrillas drawn from the people and supported by them.

(C) But they are guerrillas with a difference. Although they fight unconventionally in the classic guerrilla pattern (i.e., infiltrate, ambush, and harass), they do not always melt away when they come up against a strong force. Because they are able to call upon copious air support and have airlift to extricate them if encircled, they stand and fight to defend particular terrain.

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(C) This ability is important to the Meo for psychological as well as logistic reasons. Certain locations have importance beyond military considerations, an importance deriving from the spirit world and from the mystic ties that bind particular communities to specific landmarks. In addition, the logistic system of the Meo is dependent upon airstrips, which they must defend if they propose to stay in a particular area. The most important of these airfields is the one at General Vang Pao's military headquarters at Long Tieng, the busiest airfield in Laos.

(U) It follows from the differences in their structure and requirements that each of the contending forces performs best at a different season: the road-bound LPLA/NVA reaches its peak in the dry season, when the roads and jeep tracks are passable; the tribal forces reach theirs in the rainy season, when their air logistic support comes into its own, in contrast to their enemy's virtual loss of his LOCs. There is thus an annual cycle, by which the LPLA/NVA forces fall back to their base areas during the rainy season (the NVA to rest and regroup in Vietnam) and regain the lost ground during the dry season.

(U) From 1964 through 1967, the forces loyal to the RLG retained the initiative and gained terrain annually in the exchange. But up to the present only one RLG military initiative has had permanent results: "Operation Triangle," which was mounted in the rainy season (July and August) of 1964. It combined forces of the FAR, the Forces Armées Neutralistes (FAN), and the Meo irregulars to clear the LPLA/NVA out of an area due north of Vientiane that dominates the crossroads of Routes 7 and 13. This area is critical to regular road communication between the capitals of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The 1964 offensive met little serious resistance, and the area remains under government control today; the likely explanation is that the LPLA/NVA had poor land communication into this area, with no continuous, reliable road or river links to its base areas, only unimproved trails that are not passable by vehicle.

(U) In 1966 the FAR attempted to duplicate the success of "Operation Triangle" when it sought to improve the defenses of Luang Prabang by pushing the enemy's line about thirty miles further north

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and away from that city. It took its objective, the town of Nam Bac and the area immediately around it. By the end of the succeeding dry season, however, the LPLA/NVA had carried out a counterattack which ended in the rout of the heavily reinforced FAR units defending the area. These troops panicked before the expected enemy attack had actually begun and scattered into the hills. Two thousand FAR soldiers disappeared permanently from the rolls, their fate still uncertain.

(U) Beginning in 1968 the initiative shifted, and the LPLA/NVA have gradually forced the RLG forces back, particularly around the Plain of Jars. There has been an escalation of firepower on both sides, the increments being provided by NVA troops on the Communist side and by U.S. airpower on the other.

(U) A critical factor enabling the Communists to reverse the trends of 1964-1967 was their program of road construction. The North Vietnamese built a limited network of all-weather roads which, although heavily bombed, made it possible for them to hold during the 1967 and 1968 rainy seasons much of the ground gained during the dry season and to start their next annual campaign from a point farther west. They also steadily increased their input of NVA troops, until in 1969 and 1970 they had two divisions deployed. Indeed, in 1969 the Communists kept up the momentum of their offensive through the first half of the rainy season. But they then lost the entire Plain of Jars to a Meo counterattack, which came at a time when all the NVA troops in the area had pulled back for rest and regrouping. The Communist side lost 7,000 tons of supplies, including sixteen tanks. However, they retained control in other important, recently occupied areas, particularly in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) province, from which all non-Communist forces had been expelled.

(U) During the 1970 dry season they regained all the ground lost in the Plain of Jars area, and moved further into RLG-controlled mountain areas due south of the Plain of Jars than at any time since 1962. This is the Meo heartland and the site of the headquarters at Long Tieng, and the Communist advance thus represented a serious threat to the guerrilla program. By the summer of 1970, the Meo situation was precarious. The civil headquarters at Sam Thong had been lost,

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and enemy mortar shells were exploding on the airfield at Long Tieng.

(C) But the realities of weather and logistics reasserted themselves and helped avert complete disaster. Having moved up into the hills south of the Plain of Jars to attack the Meo heartland, the LPLA/NVA had left their roadhead far behind and were thus unable to mount a concentrated attack against a dug-in defense. When the rains came, they were forced to halt their offensive and move closer to their supply points. In this situation, the United States and the RLG asked for and obtained Thai reinforcements: Ground troops of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) in battalion formation were flown in to help secure Long Tieng.

(U) By September 1970 Vang Pao had mounted a counteroffensive, retaking Sam Thong and several key points on the approaches to his main base areas. Thus, although modified significantly, the basic patterns of the war in the North had not been repealed. An annual cycle is still discernible, and in the spring of 1971 another Communist dry-season offensive was mounted, from jumping-off points much closer to the Meo redoubt area than ever before. The situation, while partially restored, remains full of risk for the Meo and the RLG.

(U) Although the war has been most intense in the predominantly Meo areas north of Vientiane, a similar cyclical pattern dominated by the seasons has been evident elsewhere. The Yao and Lao Theung tribes in Houa Khong (Nam Tha) province at one time threatened the base areas of the LPLA around Nam Tha Town and Muong Sing. But this threat has been contained in recent years by the LPLA/NVA. In the mid-south (Savannakhet province), the FAR has occasionally advanced eastward along Route 9 as far as the town of Muong Phine, on the western edge of the supply corridor for NVA forces in South Vietnam. It has never succeeded in reaching the corridor itself.

(U) Similar minor changes have taken place seasonally in the far south, on and around the Bolovens Plateau, a terrain feature of strategic significance. There was no permanent improvement in the FAR's position in the area, the same seasonal rhythm being evident here as elsewhere, until in 1970 (probably in response to the VC/NVA's loss

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of their principal supply route in Cambodia) Saravane and Attapeu were taken and held by Communist forces and heavy pressure was brought against bases on the eastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau.

THE POLICY OF MUTUAL ABSTENTION

(C) This brief outline of military events during 1964-1970 suggests that the fighting was not only inconclusive but deliberately so. Neither the United States nor North Vietnam was seriously seeking a final solution for Laos' problems in Laos. It was accepted that the fate of Laos would be decided elsewhere -- to wit in Vietnam -- and that in the meantime it would be inadvisable to sponsor actions which threatened the façade of the Geneva Accords. There thus appears to have evolved an unwritten mutual prohibition against attacks on targets judged to be of critical value to either side. The FAR was discouraged by the U.S. Mission from launching itself against Communist-held positions which might appear vulnerable but where an attack would provoke a strong riposte. Our justification was that such mutual abstention from attacking critical targets would benefit both the RLG -- whose political and military underpinnings were less sturdy than those of the Communists -- and the United States, which would not have to face the need to intervene as a result of ill-considered FAR aggressiveness. In effect, the United States favored a defensive policy in Laos, reflecting the fact that (except for the Ho Chi Minh Trail) Laos was regarded as secondary to Vietnam.

(C) The U.S. Mission sought to channel RLG military initiatives in the direction of upgrading defensive positions and of strengthening the government's position in areas of political importance, such as the "Operation Triangle" area and Nam Bac. By coincidence, some of the most critical terrain surrounding the Plain of Jars and overlooking the routes giving access to it from the east was also the homeland of the Meo tribe, more aggressive than the Lao and with no liking for the North Vietnamese. Within limits (see pp. 37-39), the Meo could be encouraged to take offensive action, since they were competent to deal with enemy counteractions. By expanding east of the Plain and up toward Sam Neua, they were in fact distracting the LPLA/NVA and

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making it more difficult for them to bring pressure against Vientiane itself. Then, as the military investment increased on each side, some political restraints were set aside. The Meo conquest of the Plain of Jars in 1969, which began as a limited attack on the town of Xieng Khouangville, was one example. The geographical boundaries of the zone of abstention thus gradually narrowed, but the defensive policy remained in force on the U.S. side. Overambitious schemes to drive the enemy out of areas known to be critical to him were discouraged.

(U) By and large, the Communist side has observed a similar restraint, which it also loosened recently. With the exception of Vientiane, all the principal towns of RLG-controlled Laos are within two days' march or less of Communist advance positions and would be relatively easy objectives for the LPLA/NVA to take. At various times, all these towns, except Vientiane, have been harassed and threatened. But the attacks were not pressed home until the fall of Saravane and Attopeu in 1970. No doubt this self-limitation reflects a Communist order of priority which, in most instances, has placed exploitation of existing advantages in Laos ahead of adventurist probing of U.S. tolerance thresholds and which does not include destruction of the remnants of the 1962 settlement.

(U) It would appear that for the present Hanoi sees its minimum objectives as having been met in Laos. These surely include control of the routes for matériel and personnel movements to South Vietnam -- the Ho Chi Minh Trail -- which were protected from serious ground attack by, among other things, the terms of the Accords and the unwillingness of the United States to allow these to be ignored completely.* Given the effort and resources expended by Hanoi in shoring up the LPLA and NLHS with Vietnamese troops and equipment, a second minimum objective must be to control a territorial and population base adequate to nourish the growth of the Lao Communist movement.

* (U) The South Vietnamese attack on the corridor in the Spring of 1971, supported by the U.S. indicates some further change in the American view of the balance of factors governing military operations in the area. Nevertheless, after it ended it appears to have left the situation much as it had been before.

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Eventually, when present political restraints are removed, the Communists are doubtless expected to move out from that base to contest for control of the entire country. We can further assume that the annual dry-season return of the LPLA/NVA to the offensive in North Laos, and particularly to the area around the Plain of Jars, to recoup the losses of the rainy season was a tribute paid by the Vietnamese to the political importance of that area -- a traditional key to North Laos, whose control would open the way to Vientiane for the NLHS and be a major psychological blow to the RLG. In addition, we cannot overlook the fact that the Plain lies across one access route to North Vietnam and that the barring of a back door to the NVA's homeland must have importance for Hanoi. In the final analysis, however, the state of our knowledge does not permit confident assumptions either about the price paid or about the NVA's true reason for accepting the necessity of paying it.

(U) In sum, the "quiet war" has been a repetitive series of maneuvers, in which each side sought to gain ascendancy in marginal areas where minor military gains could eventually be translated into significant political and military benefits. As yet, neither side has achieved a major permanent success or suffered a crushing defeat.

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VI. U.S.-SUPPORTED PROGRAMS

(C) After 1962, its policy of sustaining Souvanna Phouma's government against renewed Communist efforts to bring it under NLHS control led the United States into a gradual expansion of its Lao programs -- but always within the constraints previously discussed. The result was a flexible range of small-scale programs, designed to meet the needs of low-profile delaying action in a remote area. Some activities originally scheduled to be reduced and eventually eliminated were intensified instead. New activities were undertaken which had not been contemplated at all in October 1962. Programs directed against the Communists eventually ran the gamut from small-scale intelligence collection to sizable paramilitary activity and large-scale USAF bombing campaigns.

(C) But this effort as a whole is difficult to categorize within any existing typology of military operations. The unique political constraints already noted have limited its scale and nature. Some activities correspond to standard concepts of counterinsurgency against rural-based insurgencies, but the whole has been broader and more complex. In Laos, the insurgency has evolved into a civil-war-cum-foreign-invasion, in which regular and irregular Lao forces and North Vietnamese and some Thai regulars are engaged, and airpower is heavily committed on the RLG side.

(C) Perhaps we should style it simply an unconventional war, a term which calls attention to its outstanding characteristic. For analytic purposes we will separate the component programs into: (1) rural security and resistance activities; (2) supporting programs for security and resistance activities; and (3) conventional military programs. The larger part of the U.S. effort will fit tidily into these categories, although the rest presents problems. Some U.S. technical aid programs, e.g., public works and public health, made inputs into activities unrelated to the war which are not easily separated from those involved in the present analysis.* This section

* (U) Other AID programs not directly involved in the war included Agricultural Development, Roads, Public Health (e.g., maternal and

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describes the scope and nature of the programs, leaving their organization and management for later discussion.

TRIBAL RESISTANCE

(U) The activity of greatest importance under the heading of rural security and resistance was the tribal program, which cannot be equated with a standard counterinsurgency effort aimed at rebuilding security and effective government in the countryside. The NLHS, in its own name and that of the dissident Neutralists, claimed control of most of the territory in which the tribesmen lived. Some of it they had in fact controlled and governed since the early 1950s, particularly in Sam Neua Province. The Meo and other tribal movements were in large part popular resistance *against* a government perceived as oppressive, rather than an effort to secure the countryside for a threatened government.

(U) As noted, the dividing line between NLHS territory and that controlled by the other two factions was never officially traced and agreed to. Its location was clear enough where conventional military forces were deployed and where administrative centers and a permanent government presence existed. However, in the roadless expanses of the hinterland, control shifted from one side to another with the passage of armed units. The resources of both sides were spread so thin that often no permanent control resulted. It was in such areas that the first changes took place in the territorial division that had emerged from Geneva. The basis for these changes was the rallying of local tribal populations, many of them Meo, who opted to align themselves against the NLHS.

(C) Among the important motivations of the tribesmen was resistance -- traditional with the Meo -- to any external effort to control and manage their affairs. NLHS demands for rice and for men were irksome. A second reason was an identification of the NLHS with the North

child care), Education, Public Safety, and Public Administration. In addition, the United States has contributed heavily to the international stabilization fund, which has maintained the value of the kip.

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whom the irregular forces under Vang Pao numbered 22,000. (As chief of FAR Military Region II, comprising Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces, he also commanded regular Lao forces averaging 7,000 men.) Although driven from the bases in eastern Xieng Khouang Province from which they had harassed Route 7, the Meo expanded elsewhere, particularly northwest of the Plain into Houa Phan (Sam Neua). At their peak, in early 1967, they occupied locations within a few miles of Sam Neua Town. The resources put into Meo irregular military development have seen a steady upgrading of Meo forces to the present level of thirty full-time battalions, or nearly half the force. Despite very heavy casualties this force remains in being, always in a position to threaten LPLA/NVA supply lines leading to or from the Plain of Jars, and usually able to perform reliably even against North Vietnamese.

(S) A by-product of the Meo resistance was control of some terrain of value to the United States for support of the bombing of North Vietnam. In 1966 the Mission concurred in a USAF proposal to place a Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) aid on a Meo site atop Phou (Mount) Pha Thi, a small, flat-topped mesa approximately 5,000 feet high with sheer sides all around. The aim was to provide navigational assistance to U.S. aircraft on missions against North Vietnam. In 1968 a counterattack by the LPLA brought about the loss of this facility and also of the fourteen USAF personnel assigned to it.

OTHER RESISTANCE EFFORTS

(S) This discussion of the tribal resistance programs has focused on the Meo effort, much the largest of its type. Other, smaller-scale efforts flourished further west, around Luang Prabang. The tribals numbered approximately 3,500, of whom about 2,000 belonged to the so-called "armée clandestine," a collection of resistance groups of the Khmu tribes first organized by General Ouan Rathikoun, then commander-in-chief of the FAR and subsequently supported by the United States. Others were recruited in a fashion similar to the Meo under Vang Pao.

(S) Still further west, in the province of Houa Khong (Nam Tha), the Yao tribe formed a nucleus under two brothers (Chao Mai and Chao La) for a tribal movement totaling approximately 5,000 irregulars.

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(Included in it were not only Yao but elements of Lao Theung and others.) In the early years of their activity, these groups pushed to the outskirts of Muong Sing and Nam Tha, but they were eventually forced back from these sensitive locations.

(S) In North and Northwest Laos there were areas to which access was readily available but which nevertheless remained outside the resistance movement. In fact, two wedges of terrain to the northeast and the northwest of Luang Prabang remained under Communist control even at the height of the movement. The same is true of three or four enclaves in northern Sayaboury Province on or close to the Laos-Thailand border. These were of importance to the NLHS and the Chinese Communists because they afforded the means of direct contact with and support for the Meo insurgents in northern Thailand. The state of our information about the tribespeople involved does not permit a confident explanation of the reasons for their being on the Communist side. Some evidence suggests that local tribal leadership had been recruited into the NLHS at an early date and that the people remained loyal to their leaders.

(S) Resistance movements were attempted elsewhere in Laos, but with limited success. For example, with the agreement of the Military Region IV commander, General Phasouk Somly, recruiting was done among the Bolovens tribes -- including the Loven, the Lave, and the Nha Heun. Little that was permanent resulted from these efforts, except for the Nha Heun, who remained loyal to Phasouk and retained control of the eastern Bolovens for the government. Among the reasons for failure were a traditional ethnic hostility toward the Lao, intertribal rivalries, and the strong hold on tribal loyalties of the NLHS leader Sithon Khommadam (see p. 15). About 3,000 men were eventually armed and trained and employed in MR IV in various intelligence, security, and harassment tasks along the edge of the Ho Chi Minh corridor. Some were refugees from Communist rule in the corridor. In performing these functions, most of them were filling the role of strike forces rather than members of a resistance movement.

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POLICY CONTROL OF RESISTANCE ACTIVITY

(S) Because of the Geneva Accords, the resistance movement was made the responsibility of the CIA. However, every aspect was reviewed and approved in detail by the Ambassador in Vientiane and by the Department of State in Washington, within guidelines laid down at the highest interagency level and approved by the White House. The critical decisions which constituted policy control points were two: the arming of additional men, and the stationing of additional U.S. personnel in Laos. For many years, the import of any lethal weapon into Laos by CIA was subject to personal review and approval by the Ambassador. The same scrutiny was applied to the movements of CIA personnel. A similar process was followed routinely in Washington.

(S) On several occasions, proposals for expansion by Vang Pao were disapproved by Ambassador William H. Sullivan on the grounds that they would imply excessive and unwise commitments. One such case, late in 1965, involved the defense of terrain south of Sam Neua Town where some tribesmen had rallied to Vang Pao and were awaiting arms. But the terrain was too exposed to be held for long, and the Ambassador considered the commitment to support the villagers involved as an excessive burden. Periodically, Vang Pao also made proposals to retake the Plain of Jars, which were regularly disapproved.

(S) To define the limits on paramilitary and military operations, the Embassy in 1967 developed a position paper entitled *U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos*. After analyzing the salient factors in the determination of policy, the paper concluded that a carefully measured and limited expansion served U.S. and Lao purposes, but generally not north of a line connecting Muong Sing, Muong Sai, Nam Bac, and Phou Pha Thi. "From the U.S. standpoint, expansion should only be undertaken when it can clearly be shown that: a) our war effort in Vietnam would be substantially helped; b) the security of Thailand and of presently held territory in North Laos would be significantly enhanced, or c) our relations with the RLG would be significantly enhanced, or that our failure to support expansion in North Laos would result in substantial deterioration in our relations."

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(S) The paper then listed courses of action, of which the most important were: "Continue to take areas in North Laos which will increase our ability to damage NVN vehicular and personnel traffic. Enhance the protection of Thailand and of friendly-held territory in North Laos by . . . [closing] existing gaps between friendly positions in east and west Luang Prabang province. Continue to engage in small-scale harassment operations to keep the enemy off balance. . . . Refrain from actions which could provoke serious enemy retaliation." It also called for strong defense of bases where USAF operations were supported and from which certain intelligence operations were mounted.

(S) The purpose of the paper was to provide clear guidelines and objectives and particularly to impress upon all concerned the limitations on the activity after a long period of expansion. During 1967 and 1968 it accomplished this purpose, and governed expansion policy. By 1969, however, expansion was no longer an issue. The forces of General Vang Pao were hard put to defend their heartland, and mutual escalations had brought changes in the restrictions previously accepted. The restrictions in the policy paper were overtaken by events and became irrelevant.

(S) The resistance program was a rather sizable activity to be conducted covertly. It was possible only because of the remoteness of the area and because the only access was by aircraft, which were under U.S. Government contract (see p. 52). The availability of Thai bases made it possible to remove the operational headquarters to the vicinity of the Royal Thai Air Force base at Udorn, thereby rendering the activity less visible. Policy and management control remained in Vientiane.* In addition, subbases were established in each region, where U.S. and Thai personnel worked closely with tribal leadership.

(S) The total number of CIA personnel involved in these programs never was more than a few hundred, counting those in Thailand as well as in Laos -- a small number in view of the size of an activity which

* (S) In time, the security of the program eroded, a victim of its size and of its duration. However, the U.S. Government prefers not to acknowledge certain aspects explicitly for reasons having to do with its position vis-à-vis other powers and the RLG itself.

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comprised approximately 30,000 resistance forces. This low ratio of U.S. personnel to effective resistance forces was made possible by the availability of qualified Thai to work with the tribal programs. The effectiveness of the handful of Americans was multiplied by the use of a fleet of small aircraft, which transported personnel as well as matériel and equipment. The Americans also had the advantage of a modern communications network.*

RURAL SECURITY

(S) Less important in impact and size -- and less successful as well -- was the attempt to introduce into Laos the kind of village security program which had been found useful elsewhere, for example, in Malaya and Vietnam. Its purpose was to establish permanent security in certain threatened points in the lowland areas. This limited program was seen as a pilot effort through which to evolve a model rural security program that would fit the peculiarities of Laos.

(S) Originally, a USAID project called the "village cluster" program was developed in 1963 to concentrate rural development efforts for greater impact. At first it was proposed that, with the consent of the regional commander, some villagers in these "clusters" would be armed and trained to provide local security. However, in most cases local FAR commanders were hesitant about or uninterested in distributing weapons to villagers. Indeed, the original village clusters were, with a few exceptions, not in threatened areas. For the most part, their security was provided by the regular FAR unit in the neighborhood.

(S) An exception among FAR leaders was General Phasouk Somly, the commander of Military Region (MR) IV. With his full cooperation, a combined development and security program was put into operation in 1964, in the small province of Wapikhamtong, north of Pakse. In essence, the plan was to train and arm villagers while assisting the village in a development program involving wells, schools, irrigation works, roads, and the like. At the same time, regular FAR units assigned to the area were brought up to standard in equipment and

* (U) Other aspects of the organization are discussed in Section VI.

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provided with a supplementary allowance to improve their rations. New barracks were built for the troops. Village militia, some full-time irregulars, and FAR units were then to be welded into a unified defense element, with the regular units on alert to come to the assistance of the village in the event of an attack larger than could be handled by the local defenders. After an initial trial in Wapikhamtong, the program was expanded to cover the Sedone Valley between Saravane and Pakse, which comprised the Lao Ngam rice bowl -- long dominated by the NLHS.

(S) The program was supported jointly by CIA and AID and by the Requirements Office and Deputy Chief JUSMAG in Thailand. AID furnished the resources and advisers for rural development, while CIA provided training and guidance for the militia as well as the supplement to FAR rations and funds for the barracks. Another innovation was the establishment of a school for village chiefs, who were brought to Pakse and indoctrinated in their duties. They were personally greeted and addressed by Prince Boun Oum and by General Phasouk.

(S) For some thirty months the Sedone Valley project appeared to progress. Local militia units were trained, plus some platoons of full-time irregulars; roads and wells were completed, vegetable gardens planted, irrigation tanks dug, and the like. Minor Communist harassment took place but work continued. In 1967, however, two events compromised the future of the project: CIA withdrew its support on the grounds that the higher priority of its Ho Chi Minh corridor programs required it to redirect its resources,* and the full-time irregulars (Special Guerrilla Units, or SGU) were transferred to other duties. Shortly thereafter, several battalions of LPLA/NVA attacked Lao Ngam and drove the FAR out of the area. Villages in the area which had cooperated with the government suffered at the hands of the LPLA/NVA. In subsequent years, a security program was continued in a smaller area on a much-reduced scale, but no new experiments of this

* (U) See pp. 98-99 for further discussion of the impact of this decision.

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type were undertaken. Instead, rural security in lowland Laos was left to the police (who operate only in the cities and towns) and the regular army.

(S) In effect, a decision was made not to put further resources into so dubious and marginal a program. There were not likely to be other regional commanders as concerned as General Phasouk. Nor, once CIA withdrew, would it have been possible to finance the special benefits required to raise the performance and the conduct of the FAR troops to the higher levels necessary. In view of the lack of interest of the Lao and the obvious determination of the LPLA/NVA not to yield areas of importance to them, little could have been gained by attempting to repeat the Sedone Valley effort -- whether the attempt was to "liberate" lowland areas under LPLA/NVA control or to stiffen the defenses of RLG-controlled areas. In the uplands, where the resistance program started and flourished, the FAR was not a factor and local leaders were prepared to make a commitment to resist if the United States would support them. But in lowland Laos, where FAR was in charge of security, it discharged its responsibility poorly. Moreover, local leadership showed little initiative and little perception of threat. In sum, the necessary preconditions for a rural security program did not exist outside of MR IV, and even there the forces available to the RLG fell short of what was required.

(S) The procedures followed by the United States in the limited lowland security programs were similar to those followed in the resistance programs. The Sedone Valley effort was vetted by the Mission in Vientiane at joint meetings in which all participants were represented. It was also regularly discussed and considered in Pakse by the CIA and AID representatives. It was in fact a thoroughly combined operation.

USAID SUPPORT OF THE RESISTANCE

(S) Closely associated with resistance activity was the overt USAID Refugee Relief Program. Enlistment of guerrilla fighters was not an individual matter in Laos. It involved, rather, a decision by an entire village to go over to Vang Pao or some other leader, and a

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commitment thereupon by the United States to support the village if it were forced by enemy action to evacuate its home area. This support would take the form of emergency action in event of need to evacuate the villagers by aircraft to a suitable location well out of the combat zone, where they would be maintained as refugees until they had been able to produce two successive rice crops.

(C) The knowledge that their families would be cared for in such emergencies was a factor in persuading the tribesmen to join the irregulars, for in those hills the only protection for a village rests with the men of that village. (Thus a tribesman was unlikely to accept a commitment to serve as a full-time soldier away from his home unless he was assured that his family would be cared for in his absence. *) Often, all the able-bodied men would join the movement, thereby creating additional requirements for relief supplies, as the village would be unable to raise sufficient food to meet its own needs in their absence. If so, the village was placed on a list of locations to which rice and other food were regularly dropped.

(S) USAID refugee relief has been much more than the name suggests. It is a fully-integrated and quite essential element of the tribal program. Particularly in the Meo region it has strong field representation, centered at Sam Thong, the civil headquarters of the Meo. ** And it participates closely with Vang Pao and CIA in Meo operations. It has access to the same aircraft used by CIA for air transport. Through a small group of AID personnel and a larger number of Lao employees, the field manager (the unique Mr. Edgar Buell, who has performed this function from the beginning) maintains an up-to-date status report on the refugee population, location, and needs, and

* (S) The commitment of the men of the village had negative military effects at times. When a village population was threatened by enemy movements, the families would abandon the location, and the defenders, if they came from the village, would go with them regardless of orders to the contrary. To avoid such flights, Vang Pao later arranged to evacuate villagers to a safe location as soon as the threat was perceived.

** (U) Since Sam Thong came under Communist pressure in 1969, the civil affairs center has been moved to Ban Son, a few miles closer to Vientiane.

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prepares a daily schedule of supply deliveries. This staff and the tribespeople have developed a mutual trust which is of great importance to General Vang Pao in maintaining morale in spite of a regular diet of setbacks and retreats. Other, similar refugee relief centers are located at several critical points, but that at Sam Thong is the largest.

(U) The USAID Public Health Division, closely connected with the refugee relief effort, has had as one of its principal objectives the furnishing of medical support to the tribal program. One category of that effort has been the training of medical "corpsmen" and practical nurses to work in tribal villages, especially among refugees. Numerous primitive dispensaries have been built and were operating in 125 localities as of May 1970.* About 415 Lao and tribal paramedical personnel were working in the field, and a total of some 1,350 have been trained.

(U) Of equal importance has been the system for the evacuation and treatment of war casualties. Until recently, evacuation was by helicopter or small aircraft to the two-hundred-bed hospital at Sam Thong. Early in 1970, this hospital was evacuated because of enemy pressure and a temporary field hospital was set up at the nearby village of Ban Son.

(U) Both the local dispensaries and the field hospitals have played a significant role in the resistance program, since they provide reassurance to villagers that battle casualties will receive some care. From small beginnings the AID Public Health Division built up over a period of years a network of primitive dispensaries and indigenous paramedical personnel that was able to offer a minimum treatment to 75 percent of all war casualties, a notable achievement when weighed against the fact that Laos boasts only about a dozen qualified doctors and that the RLG Ministry of Health is feeble indeed.

* (U) *Refugee and Civilian War Casualty Problems in Laos and Cambodia*, Hearings Before the Subcommittee To Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-first Congress, Second Session, 1970 (hereafter referred to as *SJC Hearing*), p. 45 (testimony of Dr. Patricia A. McCreedy).

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(U) Other USAID programs have helped reinforce the position of the tribal guerrilla leaders and increased the appeal of their movement. Among them was the establishment of a number of informal schools, with Lao language textbooks provided by AID. At one time the textbooks were purchased through voluntary contributions, including money collected from Air America pilots and others associated with the resistance program. The school buildings were made of thatch and flattened fuel-drums and the teachers were volunteers. Later a tribal education program was formalized and a "groupe scolaire" (an elementary and an intermediate school) was constructed at Sam Thong by the Ministry of Education with USAID funds.

(U) Some agricultural development (improved strains of hogs, corn, and the like) and some public works were also undertaken in tribal areas, notably the enlargement of the airstrips at Sam Thong and Long Tieng and the construction of a road connecting the two centers.

(U) In sum, many USAID projects not only provide support to the resistance but account for some of its appeal to the tribal population. Vang Pao and the other leaders have been able to point to such material benefits as the "groupe scolaire" and the road as a token of the benefits to the Meo under his leadership.

INFORMATION SUPPORT

(S) U.S. information programs have played only a very limited role in support of the resistance. The covert nature of the activity posed problems for USIA, which prepared and printed leaflets for airdrop in support of resistance movements but was not able to do much more.

(S) On the other hand, CIA supported the establishment of a short-wave broadcasting station in Long Tieng. It was of relatively low power but could be heard well enough throughout the tribal areas of North Laos. Although studio and transmitter were primitive, they were adequate to the purpose. Using the name "Union of Lao Races Radio," the transmitter broadcast news, native music, and some hortatory material in Lao, Meo, and several other tribal languages. It

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was well received by its audience, to whom transistor radios had been distributed to enable them to listen. The programs were the work of native musicians and announcers, with Thai assistance. Installation and maintenance were performed by the same CIA technicians who maintained the operational radio circuits.

(S) CIA and USIA also collaborated in the production of leaflets dropped over enemy-held areas. Occasionally, enemy defectors would bring in such leaflets, but for the most part it was not possible to check the results of leaflet programs. The generally low level of literacy undoubtedly reduced their impact.

CONVENTIONAL MILITARY AID PROGRAMS

(U) The United States also conducted certain more or less "conventional" aid programs in Laos, whose primary importance lay in keeping the FAR and FAN in being as a military force. While only a portion of this military activity was directly concerned with the programs already described, it formed an important part of the U.S. organization. Because of the problems posed by the Geneva Accords, it was carried out by several ad hoc arrangements under close coordination.

(U) With Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's agreement, as already noted, a logistics unit had been established in USAID Vientiane to determine FAR and FAN needs, to requisition material to meet those needs, and to arrange for its distribution upon arrival. This Requirements Office of USAID consists of approximately thirty persons, retired U.S. officers and NCOs. They are supplemented by some third-country technicians who assist the FAR logistics organization with maintenance requiring skills not available to the FAR. The RO staff directs and advises FAR and FAN logistics personnel on logistics procedure, and, through them, attempts to keep track of FAR and FAN needs. Because of low standards, poor leadership, lack of skills, and corruption, both armed forces are logistically in straitened circumstances most of the time. The RO staff, however, has been able by various expedients to ward off logistical collapse.

(C) RO serves as the in-country representation of the Military Aid Program (MAP). The rest of what would under more typical

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circumstances be a MAAG has been located in Thailand under the rubric of Deputy Chief, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group Thailand (DEPCHIEF JUSMAG THAI, usually shortened to DEPCHIEF). It performs the normal MAP functions of developing annual programs, receiving and stockpiling equipment in Thailand for eventual forwarding to Laos, arranging for the training of FAR and FAN personnel (often done in Thailand by RTA trainers), and the like. It is the contracting authority for some of the contracts with Air America. Personnel from DEPCHIEF (totaling 39 officers, 78 enlisted men, and 4 civilians) are concentrated in Bangkok, with a few stationed in depot areas closer to Laos. With rare exceptions, they never visit Laos since they constitute a U.S. military organization of the type explicitly forbidden in the Accords.

(S) The logistics support provided by RO and DEPCHIEF has been limited to meeting the needs of the regular Lao armed forces. The irregulars are supplied by a separate CIA logistical capability, which depends entirely on aircraft to move material from Udorn, Thailand, to various locations in Laos.

U.S. MILITARY ADVISERS

(U) A second function normally performed by a MAAG is advisory. In Laos, because of restrictions stemming from the Accords, this function is performed by the air and army attachés and their assistant attachés, augmented in number and assigned to various regional commands and headquarters. However, these officers are not attached to Lao combat units and are not authorized to take part in combat. At the end of September 1969, 218 military personnel were on duty in Laos, performing both advisory and normal attaché functions. (This figure did not include a separate category of Air Force personnel, numbering 91, whose duties will be described.) All these officers supported resistance activities only peripherally, e.g., when joint operations involving both regulars and irregulars were undertaken. An exception was the work of the air attachés with the Royal Lao Air Force, which often operated in direct support of the irregular units (see below). The attachés not only were advisers to the Lao but reported military developments and synthesized the many separate elements of the military

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picture in Laos. They were thus able to maintain a continuing evaluation for the Ambassador and for out-of-country military commands. As the Ambassador's principal military advisers, they also recommended military policies.

(C) Over the years, substantial resources have been invested in the regular forces, much of them earmarked for ammunition and equipment, particularly aircraft and ordnance for the Lao air force. Nevertheless, a considerable effort has focused on training and advice to upgrade the FAR's performance. Although the quality of the regulars improved somewhat over the period 1962-1970, the FAR still performs indifferently in most battlefield encounters with the NVA. Among the many reasons one must include inadequate leadership, poor discipline, lack of professional training, corruption -- in fact, an absence, at all levels, of commitment to or even understanding of accepted military behavior and values. The consensus of those who have worked with them is that the Lao make poor soldiers and that the Lao elite as a class provides indifferent and in some cases disastrous leadership. Against such obstacles, the U.S. effort has been able to make only limited headway.

AIR OPERATIONS

(U) The U.S. Air Force has been responsible for a variety of air-related activities, a portion of them concerned directly with the resistance. The Air Attaché's Office had the task of advising the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) in its combat operations, including combat air support for the irregular forces. RLAF T-28s stationed in Vientiane on occasion have made two or three sorties each per day to the scene of battles in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces. Eventually, some Meo pilots were trained to fly such missions, and they do so now as fully-integrated members of the RLAF.

(S) In addition to the Meo, a group of Thai pilots fly T-28s bearing RLAF markings. They also operate in support of the irregular forces. Their aircraft are based in Udorn, Thailand, where they return at night. USAF is responsible for supporting this program as well, training and briefing the Thai pilots, and maintaining and arming the

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Thai aircraft. This is done in Udorn by men of an Air Commando wing stationed in northern Thailand.

(U) Further USAF contributions to the support of resistance have taken several forms, of which the critical categories are forward air control for close support missions, collecting and preparing target information, and actual bombing by USAF aircraft of targets related to the war in North Laos.

(S) USAF O-1s and other spotter aircraft have been involved in *forward air control* (FAC) for air strikes in North Laos. At first, the FAC aircraft flew from Thailand. Later, a few were based in Laos and flew out of Long Tieng. At various times, the FACs used different methods to communicate with the irregular units on the ground. The problem of compatible radio equipment was quickly solved, but language difficulties remained. On occasion, a bilingual Thai flew in the back seat of the FAC. At other times, the Thai interpreter was located at the ground command post. In either case, the novel arrangements led to effective close air support for the ground forces.

(S) Beginning in 1964, the number of USAF sorties of all types in Laos (including the Ho Chi Minh Trail) grew, until in 1970 they reached an annual total of about 170,000. The availability of sorties in that magnitude produced an equivalent increase in demand for *target information*. The best source of such information in North Laos was Vang Pao's headquarters, where a constant flow of combat intelligence was available, and where requirements for additional information could be levied, returning commanders and soldiers debriefed, prisoners interrogated, and the like. Eventually, a USAF contingent was covertly assigned to Long Tieng to take advantage of such opportunities. Its members worked together at the base with CIA, Thai, Meo, and Lao personnel, and the evidence indicates that despite the potential for misunderstanding, friction was kept to a minimum. Some of their reasons will be discussed later. Also at Long Tieng, and when possible at other bases in North Laos, were stationed large helicopters (CH-3C -- called familiarly the "Jolly Green Giant") for *search and rescue* (SAR). During the period when North Vietnam was under regular air attack, SAR missions were flown regularly from Meo-held sites in North Laos to pick up downed pilots in North Vietnam.

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BOMBING PROGRAM

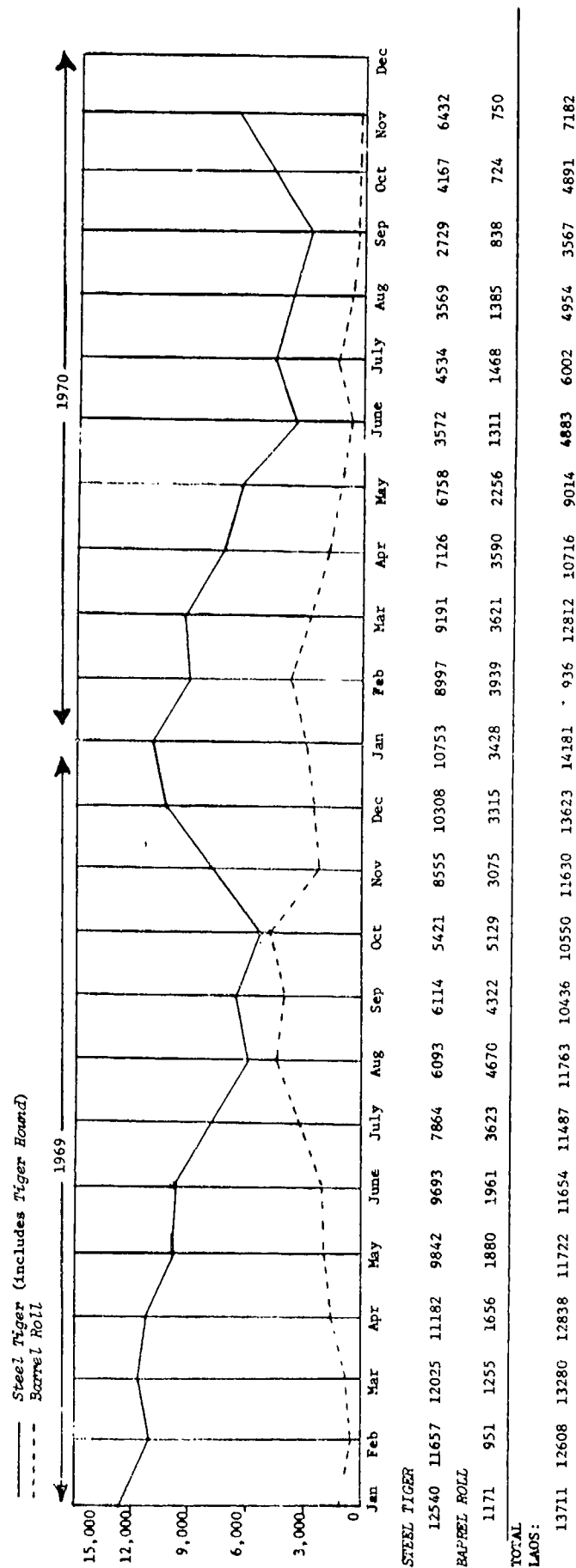
(S) The USAF air campaign in Laos still is divided into two separate parts with separate objectives. The southeastern corridor along the Vietnamese frontier is the scene of the bombing program directed at the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It is divided into two segments, designated *Steel Tiger* and *Tiger Hound*, and has separate rules of engagement and control procedure from those of USAF combat activity in the North, which was designated *Barrel Roll*. The principal difference between the two parts of the USAF air campaign is in command and control. In the case of *Steel Tiger* and *Tiger Hound*, this comes from Saigon. Its purpose is interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh corridor, and in effect it has little direct connection with the resistance and related activities in Laos, which are the subject of this study. However, all such operations in Laos, including B-52 raids, were discussed in advance with Embassy Vientiane. Where continuing programs of interdiction were involved, rules of engagement were agreed upon; where preplanned targeting was involved, targets were approved in advance by the Embassy in accordance with a procedure permitting all elements with information or assets in the area to concur or withhold concurrence. Finally, a system of FAC-controlled strikes was developed, permitting FACs to call in strikes which could be cleared on the spot by an airborne control aircraft in contact with Lao authorities on the ground.

(S) Of chief interest for this study is *Barrel Roll*, the program in the North, which provided air support to the resistance beginning in 1964. It became more intense after the cessation of bombing in North Vietnam. Attack sorties in the *Barrel Roll* area totaled 15,144 in FY 1969, and soared to 42,279 in FY 1970. (The sortie totals for calendar years 1969 and 1970 are shown in Fig. 1.) The targets included interdiction of road traffic, depots, and other military installations, and combat air support for the irregulars on the ground. The sheer volume of sorties made for control problems. These are discussed below.

(U) Targeting for preplanned *Barrel Roll* strikes is derived most often from information supplied by the irregulars who ran combat

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LAOS - ATTACK SORTIES 1969-1970 (S)
(Excludes B-52s)



* Based on U.S. Air Force: Trends and Indicators for the period in question.

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patrols, debriefed prisoners, etc. Projected targets are reviewed by each agency concerned and are submitted to the RLG Ministry of Defense. They are then forwarded to Udorn and Saigon to be placed on lists of targets to be struck by the 7th and the 7/13th Air Forces. The Ambassador reviews each of the proposed targets personally (in both areas), and did so even after sortie rates soared (see p. 100).

(S) Close support for ground troops is handled in a fashion similar to the support provided by the Lao and Thai T-28s. Contact was maintained through a FAC aircraft to a ground-controller, and strikes were called in on enemy positions. Although not uncritical, in most cases the irregulars have been well satisfied with the support. A resistance movement of primitive tribesmen supported by supersonic aircraft is a novelty in the history of warfare, and it was a successful innovation on the combat front in Laos. The bombing of civilians which took place, especially as sorties grew in number, was an unfortunate excess in an originally sound and closely-controlled program. Most of it occurred as political constraints became fewer in response to substantial increases in the number of NVA troops on Lao soil. The bombing of military installations in or close to important centers came to be judged acceptable by the Mission in view of increased NVA pressure, at the same time that many more aircraft sorties became available. It has been assumed in the Mission that the attacks were not only necessary but effective in that the North Vietnamese were not successful in gaining all their objectives. That assumption is difficult to confirm, but one certain result was the obliteration of such towns as Xieng Khouangville, Phongsavan, Khang Khay, and Ban Ban -- all on the Plain of Jars -- as well as, among others, Mahaxay and Tchepone. Of course, such destruction did not stem from a deliberate decision but was a consequence of relaxed ground rules, permitting heavy attacks on military targets in or near these towns, and of a huge increase of available sorties. A question which may not be answerable is whether the same military effects could not have been obtained with fewer sorties more precisely carried out.

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AIR TRANSPORT

(U) Another unique feature of unconventional war in Laos is the way the resistance program (indeed most U.S. programs in Laos) are completely dependent on air transport provided under contract by two American civilian air transport firms. The larger of the two is Air America, a company with years of experience flying in remote areas in the Far East under hazardous conditions.* The smaller was initially called Bird and Sons, the subsidiary of an American construction firm which came to Laos originally to build the new Vientiane airfield under USAID contract. In 1965, Bird and Sons sold its assets in Laos to Continental Air Services, a subsidiary of Continental Air Lines, which took over the Bird and Sons contracts.

(S) The air fleets operated by these two firms consist entirely of propeller-driven aircraft. The larger planes are World War II vintage C-47s and C-46s, together with some C-123s lent by the USAF. They are used for the dropping of cargo and for flights between conventional airfields at principal Mekong Valley towns. In-country flying when cargo and passengers have to be landed are performed by helicopter and by a fleet of short take-off and landing (STOL) aircraft, of which the mainstays have been first the Heliocourier, and later a larger, more powerful Swiss civilian aircraft, the Pilatus Porter. Some U.S. Army CV-2 STOL cargo planes (De Havilland Caribou) have also been given the Air America fleet for up-country use. Finally, a helicopter fleet composed of H-34s is employed in direct support of the resistance forces, flying ammunition and supplies to forward command posts and supply points and evacuating wounded.** The H-34s are also essential in the movement of troops, of refugees, of command personnel, and of Americans in various capacities.

(U) Air America has second-echelon maintenance capability in Vientiane; in Udorn, it has up to fourth-echelon capability for all

* (C) Air America has ties to the U.S. Government which, however, are not relevant here and need not be considered in detail.

** (C) These and other military aircraft, including the CV-2, C-130, and C-123, were leased to Air America by the Army and Air Force under a contract arrangement known as "bailment."

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aircraft under contract. It is regulated by the Federal Aviation Agency and follows standard FAA requirements in pilot qualifications, pilot flight time, engine flight time, and the like.

(S) During the early post-Geneva period, Air America was a political issue, having been labeled a paramilitary instrument of the U.S. Government as a result of its close association with the irregulars. Souvanna Phouma actually requested that it leave Laos as soon as an alternative could be found. In the meantime, almost all of Air America's flying was for nonmilitary USAID projects. While the United States was attempting to identify another air transport firm with equivalent capabilities, Souvanna Phouma became disabused of his earlier expectations of cooperation from the NLHS and dropped his objections to Air America.

THIRD-COUNTRY PRESENCE

(U) One device for reducing the U.S. presence and costs was to introduce third-country nationals to perform various technical functions. Moreover, the Thai contributed an indispensable language capability, without which the growth of the resistance program would have been limited to the rate at which linguists could be trained and deployed. Other nationalities involved in various aspects of the unconventional war were Filipinos and Chinese from Taiwan. Members of both of these nationalities were brought in to work for Air America. Filipinos were brought in also by a Filipino firm, Eastern Construction Co., and by the Filipino organization "Operation Brotherhood," which staffed three hospitals supported by USAID. The Lao government had little choice but to accommodate itself to the presence and functions of third-country nationals. Lao nationals, however, did not like the practice. While there was little loss of face in accepting advice from Americans, there was considerable loss in accepting it from fellow Asians, and especially from such neighbors and historic enemies as the Thai. The practice was accepted as a temporary evil. It appears to have had no long-term impact.

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OVER-ALL PROGRAM COSTS

(C) It has proved quite impossible to reconstruct meaningful costs for the programs described. The unconventional war in Laos has such a variety of inputs from different agencies with different practices that no common basis exists for an over-all accounting. This is particularly true when one attempts to identify the costs of the air war.* Moreover, CIA's policies do not permit it to make information on its own costs available for outside research. Since the USAF- and CIA-supported programs account for most of the money spent, we are left with very little.

(U) An additional problem is evident in analyzing AID costs. The program and project breakdowns do not distinguish between activities concerned with aspects of the unconventional war (resistance, rural security, and the like) and other activities. The same is true of MAP costs, which are broken down in terms of material, investment costs, training, and the like, none of which categories is applicable.

(C) Nevertheless, in order to give the reader some feel for the U.S. resource inputs in the unconventional war in Laos, we will reproduce the available figures for one fiscal year, FY 1970, together with one additional, informed estimate. In this example, the military aid figure includes air, ground, and naval assistance, and is programmed under Military Assistance Service Funded (MASF) rather than MAP.

(C) FY 1970 PROGRAM (in thousands)

DOD MASF	146,400**
AID (Resistance-associated)	
Refugee Relief	2,410
Air Costs	4,273
Village Health	2,446
Military Technical Support	1,894
Total AID	11,023***
Grand Total	157,423

* (C) There is no agreement among specialists as to the basis for estimating incremental air-war costs, and no generally acceptable figure is derivable. Since the air assets used in Laos were deployed originally for use in Vietnam (including corridor operations), and were used in Laos only as they could be spared, it is impossible to reach agreement on the appropriate share allocable to *Barrel Roll* operations.

** (U) Source: Statement in the U.S. Senate by Senator Stuart Symington, October 4, 1971.

*** (U) This figure does not attempt to include certain technical programs such as public works, which had some small inputs into the

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(S) We can estimate that CIA costs were less than one hundred million dollars, and place the outside total -- *excluding USAF bombing* -- at no more than \$260 million. This FY 1970 figure was the largest annual total expenditure since the war in Laos began, but it will probably have been exceeded by that for FY 1971. Although some costs (such as USAID air costs) had been higher, in some of the previous years, the large MASF and CIA items had increased so much by 1970 that they dwarfed the reductions in other categories. By way of comment we may note that a figure of \$260 million is large for a country the size of Laos, but is minor compared with Vietnam costs running into the tens of billions.

PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY

(U) This description of the U.S.-supported programs suggests that they constituted a highly flexible and adaptive response to a set of novel problems. As challenges became apparent -- and few of them were or could be entirely anticipated -- solutions were improvised and developed in the field by field personnel. The Mission proceeded "as ways opened" to deal with each crisis as it revealed itself. Very rarely, if ever, did an annual budget or program allotment actually correspond at the year's end to the projections with which the year had started. Although private predictions of enemy offensives could be made with confidence, the constraint which obliged the Lao and the U.S. governments to await enemy attacks before reacting was one of several factors preventing realistic programming.

(S) In terms of resource inputs, conventional DOD-funded military aid programs were considerably larger than the unconventional programs of the civilian agencies. However, a balance was maintained which restrained any one program from preempting the others, a potential danger whenever both political and military goals are sought simultaneously. How this was done -- how a number of distinctly separate and sometimes competing agencies were brought to work together constructively in the unconventional and somewhat improvised program matrix -- now will be described.

war-related programs. The total of all AID programs in FY 1970, including the stabilization fund which supports the kip, was \$51,800,000.

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VII. U.S. MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE AND STYLE

(U) In strong contrast to Vietnam, the unifying factor which related the various program improvisations just described to one another and made them consistent with U.S. policy aims in Laos was the Ambassador himself. In addition to his other functions as Chief of Mission, the U.S. Ambassador in Laos is in effect the director of operations for all U.S. Government programs in that country.

THE AMBASSADOR AS LEADER

(U) There are several reasons for this role, some general and some related particularly to circumstances in Laos. The policy of placing operational authority for overseas activities in the hands of the ambassadors was promulgated by presidential decision: In May 1961, in a letter to all U.S. Chiefs of Mission, John F. Kennedy said: "You are in charge of the United States Diplomatic Mission and I shall expect you to supervise all of its operations." In a follow-up letter, in July 1961, Under Secretary Bowles added emphasis:

The Ambassador is the leader, the coordinator, and the supervisor of all official United States representatives in the country to which he is accredited. As such, he bears the responsibility for success or failure in achieving foreign policy objectives.

(U) The admonitory tone of the last sentence -- as well as its exaggerated sweep -- suggests some of the urgency behind the policy. This, it may be recalled, was a time when the new President exhibited some impatience with what he saw as the State Department's reluctance to "take charge" of foreign affairs.* Ambassadors were under pressure to demonstrate that they were strong managers and could make effective use of the powers conferred upon them. New ambassadors selected by the Kennedy Administration, particularly for trouble-spots such as

* (U) All memoirs and histories of the period confirm this attitude, as, for example, Hilsman's *To Move a Nation* and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *A Thousand Days*.

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Laos, were chosen with a view to their suitability for a managerial role and were personally urged by their seniors to demonstrate their abilities.

(U) The circumstances of Laos reinforced the pressures emanating from the White House. It had been one of the countries where the President was disappointed to find division and indecisiveness in the U.S. Mission. This aspect was explained by William H. Sullivan, who had been U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane from 1964 to 1969, in testimony before the Symington Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

. . . It is no secret [said Mr. Sullivan] that one of the great problems in the late fifties in not only Laos but in several other countries was that we had . . . an arrangement under which a representative of each agency or department had the ability to receive instructions from and communications directly with his own parent agency in Washington with a minimum of direction and control by the Ambassador.

The net result of this was that there were several instances in which different agencies took different attitudes, and sometimes different actions which did not leave the United States functioning and acting with a single voice in these countries.

Laos was a rather conspicuous example of this in the period 1959-1960 and I suppose it contributed as much as anywhere else to the inspiration for the presidential letter by President Kennedy in May of 1961. . . . *

(U) Moreover, Sullivan made it clear that this policy was not merely an understanding between the Ambassador and his superiors. The whole foreign affairs community was involved and was fully advised -- both of the general instruction and of its particular importance in Laos. Here again is Sullivan's account:

. . . Because of the history of Laos and its particular place in having precipitated this sort of direction . . . the agencies here in Washington were more than ever acutely sensitive to seeing to it that their representatives in Laos did not repeat earlier performances and, therefore, there was a very sincere effort by the agency head, by the department head, by the Cabinet officers here in Washington to be sure that

* (U) *SFRC Hearings*, p. 517.

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their representatives conformed with the letter and spirit of President Kennedy's letter, and there was an equal emphasis to the Ambassador, to my predecessor, and to my successor on keeping the system intact.*

(U) As important as this past history in strengthening the hand of the Ambassador to Laos in recent years was the effect of the policy of support for the Geneva Accords, which has had the unforeseen result of enlarging ambassadorial authority in the one area where the Kennedy letter had restricted it: in situations where U.S. military forces are deployed and an operational command exists. President Kennedy had said: "The line of authority to those forces runs from me to the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, and to the area commander in the field." The Ambassador was to be kept informed by the military commander, with the right of appeal to the President in matters affecting U.S. relations with the local government. Such was the policy. But in Laos this policy came into conflict with the Geneva Accords -- which ruled out a U.S. military command -- and with the desire of the United States to minimize obvious departures from the rules while still supporting a military effort. To quote again from Sullivan's testimony,

. . . There is no organic military command present and functioning, on Lao soil or within the confines of Lao territory; . . . many functions that would ordinarily in a circumstance such as we face in Laos be a direct responsibility of the military chain of command coming up through the Joint Chiefs. By virtue of the 1962 agreements and by virtue of the circumstances prevailing in Laos, these are matters which fall within the province of the Ambassador and of the policy directions.**

(U) Thus, by dint of special circumstances, Laos has become the setting for an organizational arrangement, somewhat unusual in U.S. experience, in which a civilian official wields significant wartime military authority. U.S. history provides more than a few examples of military officers with proconsular powers, particularly in the

* (U) *Ibid.*

** (U) *Ibid.*, pp. 517-518.

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immediate postwar period in Europe and the Far East. The typical pattern in American experience has been one in which a military commander, usually as a result of wartime disruption, has assumed civilian responsibilities as a temporary expedient until more normal conditions have been restored. In Laos, on the contrary, considerable military decisionmaking is in the hands of a civilian official, devoid of military status or rank or any position in the chain of military command, who, by virtue of his *civilian* position and the energetic use by him of his powers as Chief of Mission, has become the U.S. proconsul in most important respects.

(C) Such an end result of policies established with other purposes in view came as something of a surprise to many. Indeed, a literal description of the handling of military affairs in the U.S. Mission in Laos might make it appear merely like the "normal" exercise of an ambassador's responsibility for policy control over U.S. activities. But in practice, as we shall see, it comes to much more. An excerpt from Senator Symington's cross-examination of the Ambassador illuminates this question with respect to USAF operations:

Senator Symington: Whether it is good, bad or indifferent, it is a fact you were running a great part of the decisionmaking incident to this large war in Laos as far as American activities were concerned. There is nothing wrong with that, based on your instructions.

Mr. Sullivan: No, that was my function and that is what I hope I did.*

Ambassador Sullivan has cited several other reasons for the Chief of Mission's authority over military activities in Laos: "The nature of the operation in Laos was by its very structure clearly so much more than a military operation, and so much of the military operation was itself under the control of the Agency [CIA] rather than the control of the Pentagon, that it became a simpler proposition for the Ambassador to keep a grasp on it. The Agency having a much more supple chain of command from its headquarters to the field. . . ."**

* (U) *Ibid.*, p. 488.

** (C) This statement was made in a personal interview with the author. All quotations from Ambassador Sullivan in the following pages not otherwise documented are from this interview.

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(C) In addition, Sullivan draws attention to several factors stemming from Administration attitudes regarding Laos and from some of the personalities most deeply involved. First, it was a relatively limited operation both in the area and in the size of the forces involved, making it easier for an ambassador to maintain a grip on the situation. He also believes that "the situation in Laos was so confused and confusing, so unattractive that the Joint Chiefs really didn't want to take it on. They were never quite sure that it wouldn't all collapse the day after tomorrow, and they didn't really want to get themselves in the position of being responsible for a fiasco, so I don't think there was any great thrust of urgency to take it over."*

(C) Indeed, according to Sullivan, the Washington tendency was to rely on one man, Averell Harriman, to keep watch over Laos policy for the President. Harriman in turn was a strong proponent of ambassadorial authority. He handpicked senior officers and made it clear to them personally before their departure from Washington that they would be expected to accept and support the authority of the Ambassador. "Although," says Sullivan, "I was looked on as some sort of extension of Harriman, the fact is that, by the time I went to Laos as Ambassador, I had been working here very closely with Mac Bundy, Bob McNamara, Bus Wheeler, and John McCone, and all the other bosses of the individual members of the team out there, all of whom I could get in touch with directly. I think probably everybody on my staff knew that, so that was a factor in giving a certain amount of cohesion to our operation."

(C) One last point in the Ambassador's analysis of the basis upon which he was able to develop a well-integrated operation is also significant: "Finally, by the time I arrived in Laos in late 1964, everyone in Washington who might have concerned himself with sending

* (U) Other discussions of military attitudes toward Laos after the Accords suggest that the Joint Chiefs preferred not to become involved in military responsibility for Laos under the terms of a policy which restricted their freedom of action. See, for example, Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, Part IV.

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instructions or otherwise dabbling in the affairs of Laos was so pre-occupied with South Vietnam that, as you well know, we got practically no instructions whatsoever from Washington. I can't say that in the course of the four-and-a-half years I received more than about three instructions. Because nobody had time to bother about Laos, they were perfectly willing to leave it in the hands of the people who were sitting out there."

(C) Thus, owing to a variety of circumstances, the Chief of Mission in Laos was in a position to take full advantage of his responsibility for policy implementation and the management of U.S. programs in that country. The critical factor was his authority to insist that the military chain of command consult with him and submit its proposals to him for approval. A corollary was the necessity for the same chain of command to respond to military initiatives that either originated with the Ambassador or bore his endorsement as a result of desires expressed by the King, the Prime Minister, or Lao military leaders. The same applied to initiatives raised by all U.S. agencies concerned with military activity, including CIA.

THE MILITARY ROLE OF THE AMBASSADOR

(U) Although, strictly speaking, the Ambassador did not "exercise military command" in Laos, those who did were unable to take military actions affecting Laos without first convincing the Ambassador that the proposed actions were desirable or, at a minimum, that they would not *harm* U.S. objectives. More often than not, they found themselves having to consider whether to approve military proposals made by the Ambassador whose purpose was to *advance* U.S. objectives in Laos.

(S) It may be useful to itemize the military and paramilitary areas in which the Ambassador's approval was necessary before actions could be taken by the U.S. military:

(C) I - U.S. Activity Originating in Laos

- a. Permanent and temporary assignment in Laos of all personnel concerned with military activity. Implicitly, this involved ambassadorial approval also for the purpose of the proposed mission.

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- b. Budget requests for MAP.
- c. Ground rules governing movements of U.S. advisory personnel within Laos, participation in combat (prohibited), level of Lao system at which advisers should be assigned, etc.
- d. Requests for augmentation of improvement -- or any change -- in existing military equipment for regular Lao units.
- e. Construction of U.S. military facilities.

(C) II - RLG Military Activities

- a. Sizable movements of Lao military personnel requiring lift by U.S.-controlled aircraft.
- b. Offensive operations by Lao forces requiring close air support or preliminary air attack or any special logistical support.
- c. Lao force levels, including regular and irregular forces, and any changes in them.
- d. Off-shore training for Lao personnel. Ceremonial and other types of visits to the U.S. by Lao military personnel.
- e. Construction of FAR or RLAF facilities.

(S) III - U.S. Military Activities Originating Outside Laos

- a. Advance approval of preplanned air attacks against targets inside Laos.
- b. Approval of rules of engagement and ground rules for other types of air activity (armed route reconnaissance, close air support, photographic reconnaissance, ground patrols from Vietnam, etc.).

(S) The Ambassador's powers were thus virtually complete, with the important exception of the commitment of U.S. combat and combat support resources, which in Laos was entirely limited to aerial activity. In this field the Ambassador could *request* activity against various targets, and he could withhold or grant approval for activity proposed by external military commands. But he could not

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determine such activity, and he had to be content with the decisions of 7/13th Air Force and COMUSMACV with respect to the commitment of resources. Of course, such decisions were made on the basis of overall requirements for the war in Vietnam.

WASHINGTON ORGANIZATION

(U) These unusual authorities in the hands of the Ambassador did not stem from explicit administrative decisions in Washington but flowed rather from high policy decisions. As it turned out, very little of the Mission's management activities stemmed from Washington initiatives. The division of labor between the Mission and Washington was straightforward. Broad policy lines were established in Washington. The requirements for implementation and any modifications of policies which seemed necessary to the field were developed in the Mission and submitted to Washington for approval. Once approvals and resources had been obtained, the Mission carried out the programs with little interference from Washington. In military matters, additional approvals were required from field commands -- which might include MACV and always included CINCPAC.

(U) A Laos Working Group was established in Washington in 1962 to provide interagency coordination, but it was allowed to lapse in 1963. New structures, such as the State Department Operations Center for crisis management and the network of permanent committees called Interagency Regional Groups, took up some of the coordinating function. For the rest, *ad hoc* meetings and the usual informal personal contacts provided all the coordination thought to be necessary. In sum, the Washington community saw Laos as essentially a field problem and allowed the initiative to remain there.

SINGLE MANAGER

(U) A point of critical importance is that the direction of the unconventional war in Laos was effectively in the hands of a single manager, the Ambassador. This applied not only to in-country decision-making but also to negotiation on matters of policy in port with

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military commands outside the country, an aspect illustrated in Fig. 2, which displays U.S. organizational relationships both inside and outside Laos. All continuous black lines in the diagram indicate direction and control, and can be seen to go through the Ambassador. Control of agencies in Laos from higher echelons outside Laos is shown as subject to ambassadorial concurrence. The fact that the attachés and RO were part of the Ambassador's staff meant that no external military authorities could issue a direct order to any one of those military functionaries. The direction and control managed in this fashion was detailed, continuous, and firm, an arrangement unique in U.S. organizational practice overseas. Most of the positive qualities of the Mission management structure were attributable to the concentration of operational authority in one person.

THE INFORMAL STYLE

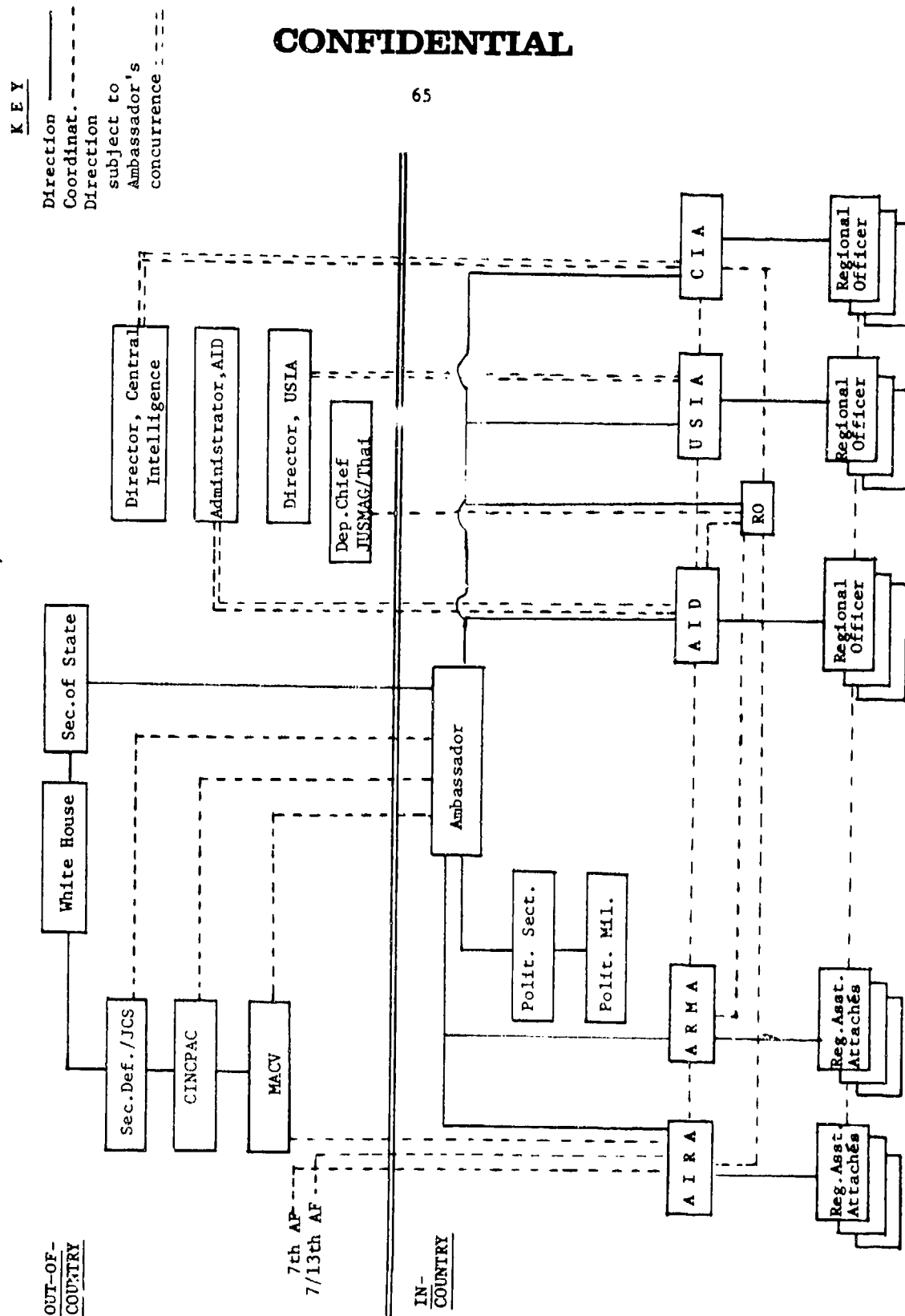
(U) Having described the origin of this unique managerial authority, we will now inquire into how the Ambassador used that authority, and how the Mission managed the programs for which it was responsible in accordance with his operating approach. Here an important element was the Ambassador's own managerial style. In Sullivan's case, it was one of informality and administrative simplicity, combined with strong emphasis on personal contact both within the Mission and between Americans and Lao.

(U) Although not free from the burden of paper work which afflicts all U.S. Government offices, senior Mission personnel tried where possible to deal face-to-face, at meetings or otherwise, and resort to written memorandums only after agreement had been reached. Bureaucratic inertia and the normal hesitations of officials with a variety of factors to weigh in their decisions occurred to a lesser degree than might have been expected at two important levels, those of agency head and of field representative outside of Vientiane. No doubt this was due as much to the unremitting pressure of crisis as to the personalities involved. In encouraging such attitudes, the Ambassador felt free to take definite positions, to move on his own initiative, and to press the agency heads under him to move rapidly

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(C) Figure 2

ORGANIZATION OF THE U.S. MISSION - VIETNAM/LAOS (U)



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in the desired direction. The style of the Mission was thus rapid, uncluttered, and direct.

THE DAILY OPERATIONS MEETING

(U) One quality of U.S. conflict management in Laos was the notable absence of formal arrangements or of an elaborate structure. Each agency, of course, had its own divisions and sections, its staff and support activities. The mechanism which fitted them together was an institution known as *the daily operations meeting*, an innovation of the Vientiane Embassy.

(U) The daily meeting became a fixture during the summer of 1964, when "Operation Triangle," the first large combined offensive to be mounted, called for combining FAR, FAN, and irregular ground forces in troop and logistic movements on the ground and in the air, according to a firm timetable (see p. 27). Daily meetings of the principals, with the Deputy Chief of Mission presiding, were instituted by Ambassador Unger in an effort to ensure smooth execution of the plan. Triangle accomplished its objectives in the most trouble-free operation conducted by the RLG forces up to that date. The pattern had thus been set for a daily meeting during a critical operational phase. Ambassador Sullivan, when he arrived later in 1964 to replace Ambassador Unger, made the meeting a daily one, which has continued to the present. In addition, he made it a practice -- unprecedented in the Foreign Service -- to attend the meeting himself. With considerable impact it made the point that the Ambassador considered himself not only the Chief of the Mission but also the operations manager, a point routinely reemphasized as Ambassador Sullivan did not hesitate to intervene in detailed operational matters.

(U) In composition, the daily meeting was broader than the country team; it included representatives of all sections concerned with operations.* It was largely a forum in which to review the progress of current operations and discuss future ones. Before it

* (U) Under Sullivan the meeting was a regular feature of every working day except Thursday, when it was replaced by the standard country team meeting, attended by many of the same members. It normally began at 9 a.m. and lasted between one and two hours.

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ended, each participant had been invited to raise questions of concern to him or impart information of general interest. Most meetings resulted in several operational decisions by the Ambassador and his issuing instructions to various participants.

(U) The meeting was not a decisionmaking mechanism in itself but an aid to smooth and informed decisionmaking and to the full flow of relevant information. Ambassador Sullivan has put it in these words:

I [took] steps as Ambassador there to have a daily meeting with all the chiefs of various elements of the mission, all of the representatives of the other agencies, to make sure not only that I was informed of all their problems and interests and intentions, but that there was cross-fertilization so that the AID man knew what the USIS man was doing, the Army Attaché knew what the political officer was doing and vice versa, and so that I knew what all of them were doing, and they knew what I was doing, and in this way there was no excuse for anyone being out of step through ignorance of the facts.

This also, in my judgment, introduced a unity of purpose so that if there were any differences they were met immediately at the inception and resolved rather than permitted to diverge and result in fixed positions that would end up in conflicts.*

(U) The daily meeting was the basic device whereby the operating style of the Mission was established. It reiterated daily that the war in Laos was a joint effort, that the Ambassador had wide authority over all agencies participating, and that he expected all participants to be open and accommodating toward their colleagues and to place common purposes ahead of individual service interests.

(U) It did not, of course, take care of all coordination problems, particularly those involving sensitive matters, which required frequent bilateral consultation and coordination between principals. Nor did this -- or any other approach -- achieve complete harmony and cooperation on all issues. There were many problems, not all of

* (U) *SFRC Hearings*, p. 518.

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which were resolved smoothly. We shall discuss them later in evaluating the Mission organization.

LIMITED DEMANDS ON THE LAO

(U) A highly informal style also characterized the U.S. approach to the Lao. Most Americans did not use a great deal of subtlety or indirection in dealing with their Lao counterparts and contacts. The tendency was to limit the frame of reference to a few simple and explicit areas of common interest and to attempt to push forward in those areas. There normally was little difficulty in obtaining nominal agreement from Lao contacts. On the other hand, very often the nominal agreement was meaningless because the Lao in question had no intention or perhaps no way of carrying out the desired policies, particularly if they affected the basic political realities of their family-centered regionally-based power structure.

(U) In effect the U.S. Mission's dealings with the Lao elite were made easier by the limited nature of U.S. objectives. They reflected a "common sense" appreciation of what was possible. The Lao elite were not asked to consider any uncomfortable or far-reaching changes in their system of government or in the arrangements whereby they distributed rewards. In matters of critical importance to the United States, however, the Mission did use pressure to bring about Lao compliance with U.S. views. One example occurred after the briefly successful *coup d'état* by General Kouprasith Abhay, deputy commander-in-chief of the FAR and commander of Military Region V (Vientiane). In April 1964, Kouprasith and the police chief, General Sihō, had taken control of Vientiane and placed Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma under house arrest. Among the measures taken by the Mission to force the rebel generals to back down was cutting off POL imports into Laos. Within a few days the situation had been righted, and Vientiane was restored to normal. No sanctions were imposed on those responsible for the coup.

(C) In carrying out essential programs, the United States displayed the same tendency to substitute American for native energy and skill as has been noted in Vietnam. But it is unlikely that the Lao

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government could have performed even the minimum essential functions without such help. In the planning of military operations, and particularly in such fields as logistics that call for great precision, U.S. intervention was common. Control of airlift and of the sources of supply permitted Americans to dominate this field completely. In activity other than military, USAID has performed an analogous function. As noted by Heymann and Donnell, "what has happened in Laos is that an American assistance establishment has been created which acts as the indispensable operations management and supply organ enabling the RLG to continue to function as a government. Through a combination of that and steadfast support, USAID has created a set of instrumentalities and a web of relationships that serve not merely to 'counterpart' but to furnish the fiber and sinew of the Lao government."* There was, however, a built-in limitation on U.S. intervention in the scarcity of U.S. personnel and the determination at policy level not to increase the size of the Mission. The modesty of U.S. objectives was both a cause and an effect of this policy.

(C) The tact displayed by U.S. officials in their handling of the Lao, to which Heymann and Donnell allude, was not always present in dealings with the Vientiane elite, where the Americans sometimes tended to be direct and blunt. The result was often an uneasy alliance held together more by mutual need than by trust and understanding. In the field, however, relationships were apt to be different. In some regions and in many villages and local command posts where Americans were active, close relationships based on mutual respect did flourish. To a considerable extent, this reflected the success of a unique group of officers in USAID and in CIA who voluntarily remained in-country for many years, who were able to communicate in Lao, and who developed productive working relationships with the local leadership. Again to quote Heymann and Donnell, "The authors were deeply impressed with the experience, dedication, competence and ingenuity of the [USAID] field personnel they encountered in their travels.

* (U) Hans Heymann, Jr. and John C. Donnell, *Rural Programs in Laos: A Mid-1969 Reassessment* (U), The Rand Corporation, RM-6120-AID, February 1970, p. 33, Confidential.

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The level of competence in the host-country language is truly remarkable. . . ."^{*} In the case of CIA personnel there was less linguistic capability, but in 1960-1966 CIA also was able to develop a cadre of officers who established relationships with tribal leaders that proved of great value. Later on, USAID and CIA lost many of their veterans; particularly in CIA, the dilution of staff capability diminished the value of what had been a unique asset. As has been the case elsewhere, most Army or Air Force personnel, because of the shortness of military tours, found it difficult to develop the knowledgeability and the close local relationships of the civilian officers.

THE FIELD VS. VIENTIANE

(S) The style of the Mission pragmatically stressed those approaches which achieved results in the Lao context, where so many factors conspired against success. For example, the Mission quite naturally became field-oriented, because the war was not being fought in Vientiane and because the Lao ministries and cabinet-level officials there were not able to affect outcomes in the remote hinterland. The extent to which AID had adjusted its operational style to this condition caught the attention of a team of Rand researchers in Laos in 1965: "One of the notable achievements of USAID in Laos is the degree to which the program has moved into the field. Sizeable field operations extend the influence of U.S. personnel and provide indispensable information . . . USAID people have learned that facts as they appear in Vientiane may bear little relation to the facts as actually found in the field."^{**}

(C) Most agencies had senior representatives in the regional centers of Pakse, Savannakhet, and Luang Prabang who were selected with care and in whose judgment considerable reliance was placed. But the largest of these regional activities was not in any of these established towns. It was in two Meo villages, Sam Thong and Long

^{*}(U) *Ibid.*, p. 15.

^{**}(U) C. Cooper, Paul Langer, Richard Moorsteen, and C. Zwick, *Security and Assistance in Laos* (U), The Rand Corporation, RM-4743-AID/ISA, September 1965, p. 67, Secret.

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Tieng. There, a USAID refugee relief program under Edgar ("Pop") Buell functioned symbiotically with the CIA's resistance program. Later a substantial Air Force activity also came to be based in Long Tieng. However, the critical fit has been between the CIA and AID groups, both working directly with General Vang Pao and his principal lieutenants and each separately responsible to its headquarters in Vientiane.

(U) In essential matters, the Americans of different agencies assigned to the tribal resistance program worked smoothly together, with only occasional exceptions stemming from personal differences. This was partly due to the dedication of the personnel. But more important was the fact that the officers assigned saw each other (regardless of agency affiliation) as belonging to one group, sharing common problems and values and hardships, and separated by their unique situations from the outside world, which included the Embassy and the country team in Vientiane. Sometimes, officers from different agencies would find themselves in situations where their lives depended on each other. Such experiences tended to bind them together. To a degree, similar attitudes prevailed in other outposts, but nowhere was there quite the sense of common involvement in the same program that existed in the tribal resistance activity.

(U) Not surprisingly, many regulations and restrictions governing personnel and operations were simply impractical or inconvenient in the field and were not rigidly enforced. Most important among them were those governing personnel exposure to hostile action, which, if followed literally, would have required advisers to leave the scene as soon as the enemy approached, thus limiting their ability to influence the tribesmen. The matter often had to be left to the judgment of the individual, and in most cases this judgment proved sound. At any rate, the issue was handled quietly within the Mission.

(U) Resolution of problems of this nature was important for the personnel directly concerned, who took assurance from the knowledge that for the most part their seniors were not inclined to be overly legalistic. As shifts of personnel brought changes to the roster of senior officers, this assurance was weakened or strengthened, depending

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on the attitudes of the newcomers. The point remains, however, that a buffer between field personnel and the home organization is needed if the former are to have freedom to innovate, and that a single manager of high rank provides the most effective buffer. Under such protection, a burden of bureaucratic conformity and of irrelevant routine is lifted from the operators, who are encouraged to use their imagination and to deal pragmatically with their unique real-world problems. Creativity flourishes (inevitably accompanied by some eccentricity), to the benefit of the policy objective.

POLICY FORUMS

(C) In 1964, a new forum for regional policy discussions was established. Called SEACORD (Southeast Asia Coordinating Committee), it consisted of the Chiefs of Mission and the senior U.S. military commanders in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, together with either CINCPAC himself or a senior representative. Selected staff officers from each Mission also attended. SEACORD met on an *ad hoc* basis, but no more than twice a year. It had no permanent staff.

(S) SEACORD was a reflection of the intensification of the war in Vietnam and the increasing importance of Laos and Thailand in the eyes of U.S. commanders. It was one of several forums where agreement (subject to Washington concurrence) was negotiated on departures from existing policies. Another was a series of limited meetings between Vientiane and Saigon Mission representatives. At such sessions the policy of supporting the neutrality of Laos was intensively reviewed, and certain modifications were elaborated and agreed upon. Many of the meetings witnessed concerted efforts by military spokesmen, most often by COMUSMACV, to achieve an easing of restrictions on the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, on penetration of U.S. Special Forces teams into the same area, on location of navigation aids in Northeast Laos, and the like. It often fell to the U.S. Ambassador in Laos to take a firmly negative position that placed him in direct opposition, on military matters, to senior military officers. After such meetings it was his practice to monitor the adherence of the military commands to any such decisions and any agreements that had been worked out and

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to insist upon detailed compliance. This practice -- a necessity as he saw it -- made the U.S. Ambassador to Laos a controversial figure in senior military circles. However, the policy of supporting the neutral government of Laos would have quickly eroded under the pressure of military urgencies, had not the Ambassador maintained such an aggressive defense.

(S) Some concessions to military demands were inevitable in view of the military importance of the corridor, and a clearly demarcated portion of Laos (the *Steel Tiger* area) came to be treated in significant ways as part of the Vietnam war theater. However, activities there remained subject to scrutiny and veto by the U.S. Ambassador to Laos, and any projected departures from agreed practice were generally submitted to Souvanna beforehand.

COORDINATION OF SENSITIVE OPERATIONS WITH THE RLG

(S) A separate category of policy issues arose in relation to the escalating North Vietnamese threat in northern Laos. Plans for meeting that threat, usually in the form of increased bombing, and specially of air support for offensive and defensive operations of Vang Pao, were usually thrashed out first among Vientiane, Washington, and the military commands, and the proposals would then be submitted to Souvanna Phouma. Among matters dealt with in this way was the escalation of the bombing in support of the resistance movement, particularly when it involved targets close to important NLHS centers. Other details concerning U.S. support to the resistance, however, were not discussed ahead of time. Although at various times the Commander-in-Chief of the FAR, General Ouan, and his deputy, General Kouprasith, asked to be informed on the subject, the information given them was offered after the fact and in a generalized form.* Souvanna Phouma

* (U) CIA held strongly to the view that a major reason for the relative military effectiveness of the resistance program was that support to the tribal groups was not delivered through the FAR. Bids by Generals Ouan and Kouprasith to learn more about U.S. support were viewed as a first step by the general staff in an effort to establish control. In view of the corruption and inefficiency which greatly reduced the effectiveness of FAR operations, the effort was resisted. The following section discusses this dilemma.

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did not make such demands. His attitude toward the resistance operations was cool and noncommittal at first, for reasons already touched on (see p. 11). Later, he came to view the Meo resistance with respect and favor. In both periods, however, he apparently preferred to be kept in ignorance of details.

A CONSISTENT PATTERN

(U) In sum, the management of U.S. activity in Laos was characterized by unified management, informal style, and simplified, flexible procedures. It remained so in the face of some unprecedented tasks. The orientation was toward the extremities of the system, the Americans and Lao attempting to survive "in the bush." Their perceptions of the needs of the program were accorded weight, and bureaucratic norms were more often than not pushed aside to permit rapid and flexible response to the field's requirements.

(U) This outline of the style and procedures of the Laos Mission has referred most often to experience under Ambassador Sullivan, who headed it for four-and-a-half out of the nine years since 1962. However, there has in fact been a substantial consistency: from Ambassador Unger, through Ambassador Sullivan, to the incumbent, Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley. This is true in part because all three men were selected for their ability to manage complex operations. Additionally, they were confronted with identical urgencies, which shaped their approaches in a similar pattern.

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VIII. THE RLG ROLE AND ORGANIZATION

(U) A brief word is needed here about how the Royal Laotian Government was organized to carry its share of the wartime burden, because its capabilities -- or rather lack of them -- did much to dictate the nature of the U.S. supporting role. The first thing to be said is that the RLG cannot, unaided, perform even the minimum tasks essential for survival against its enemies. It still lacks the qualities and skills necessary to even minimally competent administrative performance: trained cadres, reliable communications, adequate equipment and funds, and a tradition of service to a national purpose. Throughout its modern history, it has been dependent on foreign assistance and guidance to be able to perform administrative tasks at any level. Indeed, ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai still handle most of the skilled and semiskilled trades and commerce of Laos.

THE LAO ELITE STRUCTURE

(U) Lao society comprises both a peasant and an elite class. The elite is grouped in families and clans with a regional basis, and these groups constitute the primary loyalty system of the individual. The Lao elite controls the RLG military and civilian services and uses its positions in the manner traditional to countries where ancient family and clan loyalties are strong and concepts of nationalism, professionalism, and institutional loyalty are weak. They engage in wholesale corruption, nepotism, and favoritism, exploiting their status to advance personal and family welfare. Adding further obstacles to effective government is the ethnic and geographic diversity of the country, and its separation into three separate kingdoms within recent enough history to have left its mark on contemporary attitudes.

(U) The result is a central government whose ability to affect events outside the capital depends on the concurrence of the chieftains of local power centers. At the center, power is carefully balanced among representatives of the various local groupings. It is

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virtually impossible for the central government to enforce its writ in a region against the will of the local chieftain, since behind a thin façade of centralization the government is but a loose association of regional clans.

(U) In each region, a commanding general acts as the representative of both the RLG and the local clique or family. Such generals frequently have ties by blood or marriage which legitimize their authority vis-à-vis the local elites and populace with greater effect than does their status in the national army. Thus, General Phasouk in MR IV is married to a niece of Prince Boun Oum Champassak, Viceroy of South Laos and head of the Champassak clan. General Kouprasith Abhay, Commander of MR V (Vientiane), is married to the daughter of Ngon Sananikone, a leader of the large Sananikone clan which dominates the politics of Vientiane Province and city.

(U) Among the consequences of this situation is a great reluctance to transfer troops from one region of Laos to another. The local commander looks upon his troops as permanent local assets, not as components of a national army. Although occasionally a *groupe mobile* (a unit approximating a lightly armed regiment, the largest tactical unit in the FAR), or even two, may be temporarily moved to reinforce a specific operation -- this is done only as a result of U.S. pressure.

CENTRAL VS. LOCAL INITIATIVE

(U) The FAR General Staff is the indigenous organization with which military operations are formally discussed and through which agreement is reached on MAP, on training matters, on operations, and the like. It is conventional in conception as well as organization, although naturally quite small. The Royal Lao Air Force is part of FAR and under the General Staff. The General Staff or key members of it are in daily (where necessary, hourly) touch with the U.S. attachés. However, no special organizational arrangements for liaison have developed from this regular contact. It is all quite informal. No Lao civilians are involved other than the Prime Minister and a few personal aides. The RLG cabinet has no significant role in military affairs.

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(C) The energizing factor within the Lao system is neither the General Staff nor any other element in Vientiane, but is provided, in several areas, by local leaders who (for reasons having less to do with national than with local purposes) are inclined to resist LPLA/NVA incursions. It is through such leaders that the United States has had to develop plans for program activity or military operations. Normally, plans are initiated in response to interest already expressed in Vientiane or to known policy objectives. The next step is to submit a tentative proposal through U.S. channels to Vientiane, after which several procedures (moving upward through the Lao hierarchy, direct referral from the Embassy, or both) may be followed to obtain approval from the General Staff and Prime Minister.

THE DE FACTO U.S. ROLE

(C) In effect, the United States in Laos provides the skeletal structure which links the various Lao elements and, in the implementation stage, monitors and guides the Lao performance. In most military operations, U.S. personnel stand at the elbow of their Lao counterparts, providing active operational support, prodding commanders, and advising them on operational decisions. The Americans themselves attempt to remain in the background and to concentrate for the most part on technical and support activities, especially on supply movement. They are not authorized to participate in combat or to command local units. From time to time instances of such activity do occur, but they result from accidents of war and the personalities of individual advisers; they are not common.

(C) Over time, the United States aims through the MAP program to bring the Lao to the point of assuming full responsibility for their own defense. But the Mission recognizes that survival of a non-Communist RLG is the necessary prior objective. Where it is possible to do so without jeopardizing survival, initiative is turned over to the Lao, but Americans remain at their side. They will in all likelihood have to be there as long as the main threat is from North Vietnam. If they were not, Lao resistance would collapse.

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(C) There is in fact a third option: to increase substantially the resources invested in training the Lao at all echelons, including U.S. advisers working side by side with Lao in RLG ministries.* The purpose would be rapidly to improve the Lao's capabilities for handling their own affairs. However, the Mission view has been that the doubtful benefits (doubtful in view of the formidable obstacles to be overcome in the Lao system) argue against our assuming the political costs (both in the United States and internationally) of greatly increasing the U.S. presence.

(S) Because of deficiencies in the Lao government and of the animosities between tribal and Lao groups, the United States has not permitted the RLG to assume a direct role in the Meo and other tribal resistance movements. In several instances, as already noted, the General Staff attempted to inject itself into the arrangements whereby the United States was funneling assistance to the Meo. But, except for a few minor concessions, this pressure was resisted in all matters of substance on the grounds that the General Staff was not capable of distributing such assistance either honestly or in a timely fashion.

(C) It is also quite clear that Meo morale would be seriously affected if the tribesmen were forced to give up their direct relationship with the United States and revert to a status subordinate to the Lao General Staff. Vang Pao and his associates would view such a step as placing them once again at the mercy of an ancient enemy whose objective would be to control and exploit the Meo. Indeed, the Meo probably look on their special relationship with the United States as a guarantee that they will not be returned to the position of inferiority they endured for generations.

(C) The deep ethnic hostility between Lao and Meo at one time reached as high as the Prime Minister, who at first viewed the Meo as aggressive and untrustworthy savages. In part, this attitude stemmed from Souvanna's experience as a young administrator involved in an operation to suppress a Meo rebellion against the French. When advised of U.S. plans for the Meo in 1962, he indicated acceptance but

* (C) This was one of the recommendations of the Rand study team that published RM-4743-AID/ISA (see above, p. 70, fn.).

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no enthusiasm. As time went on, however, the fighting qualities of the Meo against the North Vietnamese impressed him favorably. He also came to realize that the United States and Vang Pao were not supporting a movement for Meo independence. When it became clear that the Meo were engaging the LPLA/NVA in the name of the RLG, and that the themes of loyalty to the King and of Lao national survival against the Vietnamese threat, rather than Meo independence, were being advanced to spur Meo resistance, the Prime Minister became a firm supporter of the Meo.

(S) This political approach, which had early been agreed upon between CIA and Vang Pao, owed much to the latter's understanding of the limitations that geography placed upon the Meo. Also, CIA had made clear that it did not intend to sponsor a movement to divide and weaken Laos, and its advisers urged Vang Pao to reject Meo autonomy both symbolically and in his policies and programs. The language of instruction in the elementary schools which sprang up under the protection of Vang Pao was Lao; the Lao flag flew at his installations; the King's and Souvanna's pictures were very much in evidence; his radio called itself the Voice of the Union of Lao Races. All these were manifestations of U.S. policies to which Vang Pao agreed because he saw their necessity.

(S) On the other hand, Vang Pao thus far is not inclined to accept Lao domination of the Meo people after the United States withdraws. What political form the future Meo/Lao relationship will take remains to be worked out. There is no doubt, however, that for the Lao government to be without substantial influence over a program of the scope of the resistance movement detracts from its authority in its own territory and thus in a sense undermines the objectives of Lao independence. This dilemma has not been resolved; the effort has been to soften its edges and, by a policy of loyal gesture, of symbol, and of cultural assimilation, pave the way for an amicable resolution at a later date. It is difficult to discern any other approach that would have worked as well in preserving both the resistance movement and a semblance of Lao control over affairs in Laos.

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LAO INPUTS

(C) Lest it appear that most critical resistance inputs were of U.S. origin, it should be emphasized that certain indispensable contributions could come only from the Lao. Among them were initiative and leadership. As already mentioned, however, these qualities were not much in evidence in the General Staff in Vientiane; where they did appear was in the regions. In Pakse, Savannakhet, and Long Tieng one found not only initiative but also the leadership necessary to swing the support of the local communities, and the requisite knowledge of the details of the scene on which to base an effective plan.

(C) An inevitable result of these constraints on working with the Lao was that some areas received a larger share of U.S. attention and interest than others. The favored areas were those which (1) were judged to possess energetic and relatively capable leaders; (2) were important strategically; and (3) had a sufficient number of qualified and well-motivated officers and men to ensure some success in the proposed enterprise. If a prospective operation or program was consistent with U.S. objectives and promised both reasonable rewards and a reasonable chance of success, it was likely to obtain U.S. support. Preeminently, it was General Vang Pao and his irregulars who met these criteria and consequently enjoyed a degree of support generally surpassing that granted other regional leaders.

(C) In the earlier years of the post-Geneva period, the flow of support to the Meo was more than matched by the assistance channeled to Kong Le and the FAN, then under heavy pressure at the edge of the PDJ. As time went on, however, Kong Le showed less and less ability to manage the warring factions and restless officers of his forces, while his demands became excessive. Finally, discouraged by his failure, he gave up and left the country. The subsequent flow of U.S. assistance to the FAN has been at a level adequate to maintain the limited existing capability, but no more than that.

(C) Others who received a large share of U.S. attention and assistance included MR IV commander General Phasouk Somly, about whose qualities of decisiveness and leadership there is considerable

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controversy. Despite these doubts, Phasouk has always impressed his U.S. advisers by his strong desire to improve the security of his area, and by his personal reliability in the disposition of money and resources, statements which cannot be made about most Lao regional commanders.

(C) The Royal Lao Air Force is a somewhat special case of a regular Lao national organization which has been equally active in all regions, although this impartiality is in part the result of U.S. pressure. The former commander of the Lao Air Force, the energetic if erratic General Thao Ma, impressed the Mission with his élan as a pilot and a leader, and he was encouraged to carry out the first air attacks against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. However, General Ma was also an emotional partisan in military politics, whose political passions affected his judgment. In 1966, he staged a rather irrational air attack on the headquarters of General Kouprasith outside Vientiane, and he is now in exile in Thailand. His replacement, General Souritdon Sasorith, has proved adequate -- although far from outstanding -- and support has continued.

(C) Whether because of General Ma's influence or for some other reason, the Royal Lao Air Force has developed a combat record which is outstanding according to USAF analysts. The RLAF has one of the highest known sortie rates, and some Lao pilots have flown the unprecedented total of one thousand missions.* Performance of this quality has contributed to the high level of U.S. support.

(C) On occasion, support for specific operations has also been provided to MR III in Savannakhet, to MR I at Luang Prabang, and to a minor degree to MR V at Vientiane. Because of the strategy of strictly limited objectives, however, these areas received less attention than the other Military Regions.

(U) The RLG civilian ministries and civil service have had only a slight impact on the unconventional war. The Ministry of Social Welfare under rightist Minister Keo Viphakone had responsibility for

* (U) See *The Journal of Military Assistance* (U), No. 112, p. 125, Confidential.

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refugees. Minister Keo also was one of the few senior Lao with managerial talent and energy. His service, like all the others, was woefully short of qualified personnel and other resources, but it usually could be counted upon to make a respectable effort. The few other able ministers were not involved directly in war-related activities and so had little impact on the programs we have described. By and large, the unconventional war proceeded in areas out of the reach of RLG agencies, whose few strengths and many deficiencies thus had little bearing on events.

(C) In sum, except for the air force, Lao institutions were notably ineffective on the national level, even if the system did function with considerable élan and sense of purpose in a few key regions. Though U.S. involvement was thus essential to the government's survival, the United States has never satisfactorily resolved the dilemma posed by the contradictory needs for its intervention and its encouragement of self-reliance in the Lao that will enable them eventually to cope with their problems on their own. As long as North Vietnam threatens Laos, the challenge will doubtless remain beyond the capability of Lao institutions to handle unaided.

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IX. THE BALANCE SHEET

(U) It may be premature to essay more than a tentative assessment of the current phase of U.S. involvement in Laos. Indeed, as this is being written, a new act is unfolding. However, neither the framework of the U.S. holding action in Laos nor the U.S. role in it are likely soon to change significantly, permitting at least an interim evaluation of its organizational and managerial aspects.

(U) Any such evaluation must be framed in the context of the constraints imposed by U.S. policy and by the unique nature of Laos itself. In broad terms, the U.S. aim was to help uphold Souvanna Phouma's government against an essentially North Vietnamese attempt to undermine it. But this effort had to be carried out in ways as consistent as possible with the Geneva Accords, which after all were designed to serve the same purpose. The United States and the RLG were also sharply constrained by the sheer difficulty of mounting any sustained defense campaign in a country notably lacking in both national cohesion and even marginally effective administration. Thus the challenge was to identify what few assets were available and to mobilize an anti-North Vietnamese resistance effort in the manner least damaging to the fabric of the Geneva Accords and under highly adverse environmental circumstances.

A TENTATIVE VERDICT

(U) Given these difficulties, the U.S.-backed resistance effort from 1962-1970 seems to have been at least a qualified success. As of end-1970, it had achieved its overriding aim of preserving the RLG, and leaving the government in control of most of the populated Mekong lowlands. Of course, this was partly due to Hanoi's apparent disinclination -- for various reasons (see p. 30) -- to mount an all-out takeover effort. But the U.S. involvement did raise North Vietnam's costs to a significant degree. This has been aptly described by Ambassador Sullivan: "I think the limitations on ultimate North Vietnamese success in taking over Laos . . . came far more from constraints that operated on Hanoi external to the immediate Lao

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situation than from our counterinsurgency efforts. I think our efforts made it infinitely more difficult for them and much more costly, and therefore brought them up against constraints perhaps at a lower threshold than they would have otherwise."

(U) Looking at Indochina as a whole, which is even more important today than in the past, this is saying rather more than is at first apparent. It implies that the North Vietnamese have been forced to settle for a good deal less in Laos than they would have obtained without the U.S. involvement there, and have paid a considerable price for rather little in the way of progress toward their ultimate objective.

(U) A second achievement is that, with many compromises and at considerable cost, the fabric of the Geneva Accords has been precariously preserved. A neutral Laos continues to be the avowed objective of the Geneva powers, and they have tacitly agreed not to consider the deviations that have taken place sufficient cause to abrogate the agreement and cast aside its remaining elements. The RLG has retained the recognition of the principal powers (China and North Vietnam excepted) as the government of Laos.

(U) There have been other payoffs, beyond mere survival, which have served the over-all U.S. objective in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia. The toll of North Vietnamese men and resources, taken both in the corridor area and in the fighting in the North, has been a drain on the enemy. We can conclude from the pattern of North Vietnamese behavior, their return year after year with fresh forces to retake the same hills they had taken and then lost so often before, that they have suffered from constraints on their resources which imposed a ceiling on their potential and which probably make it a painful obligation to try to fill the gaps in their ranks caused by the Lao resistance.

(C) The effort in Laos has also been a matter of high importance to Thailand, one of whose perennial objectives has been to maintain a cushion of territory between itself and a powerful hostile force. The present government holds to this purpose, to judge not only from its public stance but from its willingness quietly to contribute Thai military resources to the defense of Laos. The protective cushion of

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territory on Thailand's northern and eastern borders, although wearing thin in some areas, is still considered by the Thai to be of value. Its continued existence is a result of the unconventional war in Laos.

(U) These achievements have been a near thing. On several occasions, the Geneva-created RLG seemed on the point of collapse. Moreover, at the end of 1970 it controlled less territory than at any time since 1962, with the 1971 dry season at hand and no certainty that the United States and the RLG could hold against the next, expected LPLA/NVA attack. The future viability of the non-Communist political groupings of Laos will depend largely upon the ability of Souvanna Phouma and his supporters to continue to withstand such military pressures. Unless there is a settlement involving partition of the country or a restored coalition government or a combination of these, the chances of survival of the non-Communist forces, and for evolution toward strengthened independence and neutrality, depend upon effective resistance. Whether this can be maintained indefinitely is far from certain; however, it has been achieved up to now under conditions of great stress and uncertainty. This suggests that the future is not foreclosed for the non-Communist elements in Laos.

(C) Ambassador Sullivan has summed up the gains as follows:

Now, what did we accomplish? Well, I think we bought a considerable degree of space during most of the time we were there. The Meo area was at least as large and in many ways larger than it had been in 1962. I think we bought a considerable amount of time, permitting the lowland Lao structure to survive until the rest of the situation in Indochina developed to a point where, as I hope it is currently reaching, this whole war may be settled in one composite effort. . . .

In view of the other benefits accruing from the Lao effort, Sullivan's comment is perhaps overly restrained.

THE COSTS INVOLVED

(C) Also notable from the U.S. viewpoint is that, however limited and transitory these accomplishments, they have been achieved at comparatively modest cost. To date, the United States has met its

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minimum goals with resource inputs that make the 1962-1970 unconventional war in Laos perhaps the most cost-effective of all such U.S. ventures in Southeast Asia. Comparison with the Vietnam conflict is particularly striking. The number of U.S. advisory personnel has been quite small at all times, the only U.S. combat forces committed being those involved in an air support effort from bases outside Laos. Although it is difficult to estimate dollar costs, and particularly the cost of bombing, the non-USAF costs in the period 1962-1970 were certainly never more than \$260 million a year and usually less. In terms of cost effectiveness, the casualties and other losses inflicted upon the North Vietnamese would show a favorable balance for the U.S. effort in Laos as compared with Vietnam.

(U) But the costs to the Lao have been far greater, both in human suffering and in the destruction of towns and villages caused by bombing. The latter is limited almost entirely to the area occupied by the NLHS (the exceptions being the result of pilot error). But the tribal war against the LPLA/NVA has been brought home to the tribal populations with harsh impact. Estimates place the refugee population as of April 1970 at 246,000. But over the years many more -- possibly as many as 700,000 people out of the roughly 1,900,000 under RLG control -- have left their homes to resettle permanently or temporarily in safer areas. Many have been forced out of their homes two, three, or even more times. Finally, the casualty toll of fighting men and civilians has been high for a small nation. For the Meo, it has been particularly painful; various estimates place it somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 (or from 9 to 22 percent of the approximately 450,000 Meos in the country).^{*} These grim statistics raise the question of whether the tribesmen would have chosen the same course had they foreseen the consequences to themselves and their communities. But the final balance cannot be struck while the conflict still goes on, the outcome as uncertain as ever.

^{*}(U) These figures are taken from the testimony submitted by various government and nongovernment witnesses before the Senate Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees, chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy, on May 7, 1970. See *SJC Hearing*, pp. 42 and 63.

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NECESSITY AS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

(C) How was all this accomplished? What were the key determinants of such success as was achieved? Among them were: that Laos in 1962-1970 was conceived of as a limited objective operation from the outset; that the Geneva Accords sharply constrained what could be done, particularly in overtly military terms; and that the overriding priority of Vietnam relegated Laos to a minimum-investment "sideshow." Perhaps paradoxically, the constraints imposed by these factors made for flexibility and innovativeness in the U.S. effort in Laos. Moreover, those that derived from the unique nature of the Laos situation tended to offset the kinds of institutional constraints that have often imposed rigid pre-formed patterns on U.S. responses in other remote-area conflicts, such as in Vietnam.

(U) The weakness of the Lao government and the often total absence of its presence had the positive effect of eliminating an intervening layer of bureaucracy. Little was lost and something was gained. The RLG was not capable of making a positive contribution, but it was prone to corruption and inefficiencies that would have taken their toll (as they did in other programs) had the opportunity offered. At the same time, the simple standards and roving way of life of the tribes -- people not encumbered with possessions nor used to solidly constructed habitations -- reduced the requirements and expectations of the tribal refugees to a regular supply of rice and a few other essentials. Again, the absence of roads forced the United States to resort to aircraft for the movement of goods and people, and airlift was costly. But it increased the flexibility of the program by shortening lead-time between request and response, especially in periods of crisis. Finally, the autonomous character of the resistance movement strengthened the appeal of the movement to the tribespeople; it was clearly their own movement, with but a limited Lao presence.

(C) The principal political constraint was, of course, the necessity of respecting the Accords. Where deviation from them was deemed essential, this policy imposed a need for constant monitoring to ensure compliance with the ground rules. This, among other things, led to continued control over a large-scale paramilitary program by a

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civilian covert agency, despite the firm policy of the White House (stemming from the Bay of Pigs failure) to place such programs under military control. Such constraints produced occasional embarrassments, as, for example, when the United States was forced by its own policies to remain silent about USAF bombing in Laos long after this fact became widely known. On the other hand, a positive result was freedom from many other, largely institutional constraints, which normally follow upon large-scale U.S. military deployments overseas. The American commitment to the Geneva Accords, and support for the policy at high levels, enabled the Ambassador in Vientiane to oblige the U.S. military to follow the ground rules that this policy demanded. The military tendency to build large staffs was suppressed, and the military presence was kept small, thus obviating most of the distorting impact that a large American presence might have had on the Lao community or economy. The small size of the military contingents made for greater efficiency, reducing the time lost in coordinating -- a common failing of large headquarters.

(C) Most important, military decisions were subject to review by civilian management. Political control thwarted the institutional inertia which leads the U.S. military to regularize the irregular and conventionalize the unconventional. A factor of critical importance was the prohibition of U.S. ground-force involvement. There was thus no basis for the military leadership to allege that civilian interference jeopardized the lives of American soldiers, an argument which elsewhere has been used to justify maximization of firepower at the expense of other considerations. Civilian bureaucratic constraints were similarly deflected and turned into strengths. The fixed objective of keeping the size of the U.S. Mission as small as possible forced the civilian agencies, too, to forgo many support and staff functions.

(U) One of the results of having to operate in this manner was the pattern of delegating responsibility to the field. Another was to reduce reporting requirements at every level. Planning was simplified, but enough flexibility existed both in Vietnam and in Washington to deal with the unexpected. There is no doubt, however,

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that certain sacrifices had to be made. After nine years of operation under crisis conditions, with minimal staff and paperwork, USAID/Laos began to be criticized in some quarters in Washington for deficiencies in reporting and its refusal to increase its staff to meet requirements for budgeting, programming, and planning.

(U) One such criticism was voiced by Senator Edward Kennedy on February 6, 1971, after the General Accounting Office (GAO) reported the results of a study of USAID/Laos conducted at Senator Kennedy's request. The report focused on the improvised nature of the effort, the shortage of U.S. personnel, and the inadequacy of statistics and of reporting. Since we do not have the full text, we cannot say whether it made any effort to balance these criticisms with references to the reasons for some of the deficiencies, not to mention the considerable accomplishments of the program.

(U) Yet the above deficiencies seem moderate, even trivial, compared with the flexibility and efficiency of a program carried on by a small, well-knit, knowledgeable group of men who dealt with one another and with the local leadership face-to-face, rather than in the conventional pattern of management by staffs which deal with reality at a distance. USAID/Laos was not unique in its methods, but the GAO report is a reminder of the extent to which this pattern deviated from management norms. The deviations stemmed from political constraints, and it is to be hoped that the criticism directed at them does not obscure the beneficial lessons to be drawn from the experience.

(U) But the numerous constraints within which the United States was forced to operate in Laos from 1962 to 1970 do not by themselves create, though they did facilitate, the unusually flexible and adaptive nature of the U.S. response. One added factor was the pragmatic way in which U.S. conflict managers took into account all the realities of the environment and of local resources, which sharply limited what could and could not be accomplished in such a primitive locale. In this respect, they greatly benefited from the hard lessons learned in the abortive U.S. effort in Laos during 1955-1962.

(U) But still more than this was involved. To exploit the available asset with such comparative success required positive steps.

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Hence there had to be, in addition, a series of managerial and organizational factors: unified conflict management, flexible and innovative program concept and execution, good leadership, and the like. These important features are summarized below.

UNIFIED FIELD MANAGEMENT

(U) However one approaches the organization of the unconventional war in Laos, one comes back to the importance of unified field management as the key to the matter. We noted briefly in Section I the negative effects of disunity within the U.S. Mission in earlier years. Against this background, U.S. ambassadors in the years 1962-1970 -- supported by the State Department and the White House -- took steps to ensure unity. They did this by precept and practice. Personnel were carefully briefed on the importance of a team approach, and those who did not comply were transferred out of Laos. At the daily meeting all concerned sections of the Mission were advised of important plans and kept up to date on events affecting them.

(C) This approach not only avoided the negative costs of disunity and assured coordinated operations, but also provided a buffer and a shield behind which field operators could deal with the peculiarities of their situation. In an institutional environment governed by routine norms, the qualities of flexibility and innovativeness, which make for adaptive responses, cannot flourish unless protected by higher authority. Without such protection, the peculiar needs of the field's real world will be brushed aside. (The same is true of the need for close cooperation within a multifaceted program.) There must be recognition of these qualities at a level which can offer protection for the innovators. In Laos, each agency's senior representative could provide some protection, but the Ambassador's authority often was critical in swinging the balance. An example of this role was the protection afforded the army and air attachés when their procedures and activities violated military norms, as they often did. These officers were able to withstand pressures from higher military levels only because the Chief of Mission took upon himself the brunt of insisting on the primacy of political considerations. In doing so, he acquired a certain

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notoriety in officers' messes throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific as a civilian who fancied himself a military strategist and meddled in military affairs. Nevertheless, he could not be ignored.

(C) Similarly, high-level protection made it possible for the field representatives of different agencies to merge their resources, and then draw from the common store as required, without a detailed accounting. Civilian airlift, communications, bags of rice, and tenting -- and many more items -- were shared as needed in the up-country bases. Most of this sharing never showed up on the record, but Vientiane was aware of it and defended it when bureaucratic challenges were raised.

KEY TO ADAPTIVE RESPONSE -- GENERATING A TRIBAL RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

(C) The key element in the adaptive U.S. program in Laos was the generation of effective resistance to the threat posed by the North Vietnamese and their NLHS clients -- the threat of a camouflaged invasion which exploited the superior military skills and resources of the Communist side to expand the area controlled by their political organizations. Earlier experience taught that this threat could hardly be countered by the RLG conventional forces, given their extremely limited military skills and their traditional fear and sense of inferiority in the face of the North Vietnamese. Moreover, the RLG side had only nominal control over the minority populations living in and around the contested zones, especially away from the few towns and roads. If no other resources could be found, it looked at first like an unequal contest indeed.

(C) In search for additional forces, efforts were made to build up lowland Lao groups and leaders, using the name and presence of Kong Le and the dynamic (for Laos) form of neutralism he espoused. However, not only did his leadership prove ineffectual, but the effort as such was ethnically unappealing to the tribal populations. Far more promising was the existing Meo nucleus under the then Colonel Vang Pao, who felt that the large Meo communities in the upland valleys throughout the contested areas could be organized into a popular resistance movement. The requirements, well understood by parts of

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the Mission from earlier experience, might have been summed up as follows:

1. An appeal to resistance could only succeed if it responded to the strong ethnic identity of the tribesmen and issued from leaders who came from among them. It had to hold out the promise of a future improvement in status and living standards. On the other hand, it need not be *anti-Lao*; it only had to be opposed to a tribal status of inferiority. Hostility feelings could be focused on the NLHS, whose exactions were already resented, and on the Vietnamese, the traditional enemy of the northern tribes.
2. To counter village caution and skepticism, the tribal leaders needed to be able to claim powerful foreign support and to demonstrate that it responded to tribal needs. Such support was required both to provide the necessary weapons and logistic back-up and to demonstrate the reality behind the promise of a better life. Support was particularly necessary to provide food in villages where the working population had left home to fight, and to care for refugees forced out of their homes by the tides of war.
3. An adequate means of transport to provide such support was essential. In a roadless land it could only be provided by aircraft. Nor were conventional aircraft adequate. Helicopters and STOL aircraft and the large, slow transports of World War II vintage were to be preferred. Along with the aircraft had to come an entire support and delivery system, comprising (a) a network of airstrips; (b) parachute riggers and cargo handlers; (c) a system for marking drop zones; (d) base services, including maintenance, repairs, fuel storage, flight communications; (e) a system for certifying changing village requirements; and (f) crews familiar with bush-flying and with the unique terrain and flying conditions of the area.
4. A network of advisory and of technical personnel was needed to train the tribal forces: to advise them on plans and operations, to interpret and translate, to maintain and operate radio communications, and to report enemy and friendly dispositions and developments to higher authority.
5. Finally, the nature of the activity and of U.S. policy vis-à-vis the RLG required at least tacit concurrence, if not strong endorsement, by the policy level of the RLG.

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(C) These requirements were successfully met by the programs and organizational arrangements carried out in part by CIA (assisted by Thai army and police specialists) and in part by AID. As a result, a large proportion of the tribal population of North Laos rallied to the standard of Vang Pao and other leaders. This was done with great rapidity, the largest expansion taking place between mid-1964 and mid-1966. Since then, the effort has focused on improving the quality of the tribal forces (many of whom at the beginning were merely local part-time militia) and on finding and training replacements.

(C) While these tribal irregulars have had many vicissitudes and suffered severe losses, the force has retained its structure and integrity, despite desertions by some groups which found the cost of resistance too high and slipped back to their former homes to make their accommodations with the NLHS. Today, the military importance of the tribal irregulars is as great as ever, if not greater. With this force lying across their access to the Vientiane plain, the LPLA/NVA have been unable either to reclaim their former vantage point just above Vientiane or to reduce the Neutralist forces which occupy that area.

THE ELEMENTS OF ADAPTIVE RESPONSE

(C) Probing further into the reasons for the speed with which the resistance was expanded and the durability of the tribal commitment, we must grant first place to General Vang Pao's grasp of tribal aspirations, to his imaginative leadership, and to his indefatigability. These essential qualities could not be supplied by outsiders. But also essential were certain qualities of style and approach common to the AID and CIA officers involved in the project. Their focus, of necessity, was on adaptive response to the needs of the tribals as *the latter saw them*, with minimal interference with tribal customs -- including some that to the Western mind can only appear as the grossest superstition. The aim was to encourage the tribal clients to think of the effort as their own cause, assisted but not controlled by a powerful foreign ally.

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(C) Innumerable incidents and examples could be cited, from selecting the right kind of rice (it was available only in Thailand) to allowing leave for ceremonies to propitiate the spirits before launching a campaign. There were also examples of mistakes and failures which resulted from lack of understanding of tribal beliefs, particularly of the importance of the spirit world. A classic case often cited in the indoctrination of new personnel was the fate of the hospital built by U.S. Special Forces at Sam Thong before the Geneva Accords (the Special Forces having shared responsibility for the early buildup of the Meo resistance movement in 1961 and early 1962). The hospital site had been selected for technical reasons having to do with water supply. But the village elders objected, explaining that the spot was the haunt of powerful spirits who would be offended if disturbed. Nevertheless, the hospital was built on the disputed site. Soon afterward the Special Forces withdrew in response to the Geneva Accords. The villagers lost no time in wiping out the affront to the spirits. They burned the hospital down.

(C) Such episodes suggest more than the importance of respect for the picturesque oddities of the tribesmen. The real world of the irregulars was unimaginably different from, and at many levels in conflict with, that of the organization helping them, but the two had to be effectively reconciled. That was the responsibility of the U.S. advisers. Even at the Vientiane level, the U.S. advisory organization was obliged to place at the top of its values that of *serving the real world of the field*.

(S) For many reasons, the operating arm of CIA has developed under the necessity to accord priority to that principle. To explore the reasons why would take us far beyond the scope of this study. But results achieved in sensitive field operations quickly evaporate if demands generated in the real world of the field are forced to yield to the standard bureaucratic procedures and organizational conventions that constitute much of the real world of the rest of the organization.

(S) CIA also benefited in Laos from the high value that the organization attached to flexibility in meeting and dealing with

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unexpected events, to reacting effectively to crisis demands. In part, it planned for the unexpected by allowing generous resource margins; in part, it dealt with it by quickly discarding normal procedures when the field situation required. In the field, AID representatives working with the tribesmen were able to draw on this capability by informal agreement. They borrowed equipment, were advanced supplies "on loan," and the like on an informal basis.

(C) AID as an organization tends to be far more subject than CIA to internal bureaucratic and procedural constraints, which are heightened by pressures stemming from outside forces, such as the Congress and the press. The unusual responsiveness and flexibility nevertheless shown by the AID organization in Laos were due to the exceptional quality of the personnel in the field and to the support they received from their director and from the Chief of Mission.

(C) As the unconventional war intensified, it made similar demands on the U.S. military for adaptive response and flexible procedure. These qualities became of signal importance as the NVA escalated its involvement and the need for additional military support became apparent. Several organizational departures from the norm were undertaken to sustain the regular military activity of the FAR and the FAN. The regular forces played a secondary role in the war in the North, however, until the Royal Lao Air Force, employing the highly serviceable T-28, became involved. At that juncture, assistant air attachés were deployed at key points, and U.S. ground crews were brought in from Thailand as required to keep the T-28s in operation. Later, USAF targeting personnel were assigned to Vientiane and forward bases as well, where they were obliged to adapt themselves to the unusual living conditions and peculiarities of the tribal communities. The difficulties were softened by the fact that theirs was essentially a technical task that involved only their carrying out the specialist duties for which they were trained.

THE ROLE OF INNOVATION

(C) In a real sense, the entire U.S. involvement in the war in Laos was an innovative enterprise. Its centerpiece, the tribal

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resistance movement, was a highly unconventional program flexibly handled. Indeed, few U.S.-supported programs in Laos could be called conventional. Even the MAP was less guilty in Laos than it has been elsewhere of the failing which Colonel Amos A. Jordan, Jr. and other commentators have called "mirror-imaging."*

(C) The most innovative aspect of the program was the over-all concept of an unconventional military campaign based on primitive tribal groups, supported by a variety of U.S. agencies, and managed to a large degree by civilians in a civilian chain of command. This was not only without precedent; it was largely unplanned, having developed out of the situation and from the available means as an adaptive response to a highly atypical combination of circumstances. Quite clearly, so flexible yet complex a form of cooperation and harmonization of the very different organizations involved could not have taken place without unified direction at the top.

(S) The development of the tribal forces into an effective fighting unit was CIA's major contribution. Nothing of the sort, depending so completely on aircraft for logistical support, had previously been attempted. CIA pioneered also in the employment of third-country (Thailand) personnel to provide critical skills and to keep the U.S. presence to a minimum. Recognizing that the appeal of the movement to the Meo depended in some part on the eventual realization of an improved standard of life for the tribal villages, it supported a variety of educational and small-scale agricultural efforts. CIA also had the flexibility both to see the possibilities and to improvise the facilities for a radio station that could carry the movement's message throughout the tribal area.

(U) AID's Refugee Relief Program also was unusually flexible, particularly in its attitude toward meeting field requirements, with the accompanying delegation of considerable authority to field personnel. With this kind of authority, field representatives were able

* (U) Cf. *Foreign Aid and the Defense of Southeast Asia*, Praeger, New York, 1962, in which Jordan criticizes the military's tendency to impose U.S. doctrine and matériel on clients, regardless of suitability.

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to get close to the local leadership and to make the delicate adjustments between the peculiarities of the clients' needs and the capabilities and resources of the organization. Another essential innovation was the informal system developed for maintaining contact with, and keeping track of conditions in, the many widely spread-out locations being served. Also, the network of primitive dispensaries and indigenous paramedical personnel built up by AID had no precedent; it called for a continual process of adaptation to a series of crises.

(C) Several aspects of Air Force operations in Laos were quite novel, particularly the linking together of primitive ground forces with sophisticated high-speed aircraft providing close support. There were many minor, technical innovations in weaponry, communications, and the like.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

(U) In seeking reasons for U.S. accomplishments in Laos we should not overlook the personal contributions of some key figures. The opportunity to work in the unusual organizational environment in Laos doubtless attracted individuals with talents and tastes for that kind of milieu. Also, the pattern of single management placed a premium on the choice of ambassadors. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations were seeking ambassadors who could take command and direct a complicated operation. The men they chose for Laos were deliberately selected for that role and knew it. Of the three men -- Leonard Unger, William H. Sullivan, and G. McMurtrie Godley -- Sullivan was in place the longest and played the largest role in shaping the organization and unifying it. In doing so, he lived up to the expectations of the Administration in ways that may not have been quite expected. His term was distinguished by his courage in dealing with the criticism from various out-of-country military commands and by decisiveness in managing his complex task. But without a strong performance by all three ambassadors the unusual grant of authority and the unified concept of the Lao Mission structure would have failed to meet the challenge.

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DEFICIENCIES IN THE LAO PROGRAM

(U) Not surprisingly, the program had its inadequacies and failures. Some were the defects of its strengths, some reflected the intractability of institutional constraints on innovation, and others simply resulted from the shifts of senior personnel over the years.

(C) In Laos, no common plan or commitment formally associated the various agencies in a program to wage unconventional war; the role and program of each agency was subject to that agency's interpretation. Basing such a complex undertaking on a series of essentially oral understandings and assumptions has major disadvantages. While it affords a relative freedom from bureaucratic constraints, the absence of precise definition has negative results as the years go by and circumstances (and the principal actors) change.

(S) Examples of such undesirable consequences are the reduction of AID support for the tribal program in 1966-1969 and CIA's withdrawal from the Sedone Valley development program in 1967. The first resulted from a change in the AID/Vientiane leadership: The incoming director viewed the Refugee Relief Program as a diversion from the authentic AID mission and acted vigorously upon this view to change priorities and the distribution of AID resources. He did so largely from a conception of himself as the representative of an independent agency rather than as a member of a unified field organization. The Ambassador, having no explicit policy authorization to refer to as a basis for overruling these decisions, was obliged to deal with the issues raised through a bargaining and negotiating process, often choosing to reduce the area of contention by merely ignoring departures from previous AID policies. The impact on the up-country AID organization of the withdrawal of support was noticeable and harassing to the personnel concerned. The size of the program was reduced, with results that were short of critical, but which slowed down program activities until crisis situations brought on by NVA action had the effect of restoring momentum.

(S) The withdrawal of CIA support for the Sedone Valley project (see p. 40) was based on the view of the Agency's chief in Vientiane, supported by his headquarters, that the increased importance of the Lao corridor required a shift of priorities and a redirection of

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resources. The Ambassador concurred. To the AID personnel involved, the result appeared as a unilateral withdrawal from a long-term commitment. Participants have cited several reasons for the failure of the ambitious Sedone Valley effort, and it is doubtful that CIA's withdrawal was responsible. However, its impact could have been softened by careful planning and gradual implementation. The responsibility is not easily fixed, but a more formal assignment of roles within this subprogram as well as within the over-all program would have made for a more orderly change.

SOME CIVIL-MILITARY PROBLEMS

(C) Despite the successful incorporation of a limited range of military activities in the civilian-managed organization in Laos, there were quite evident limits to the allocation of military resources, particularly of the kind needed in Vietnam. Except for the corridor, which was directly related to the war in Vietnam, Laos was viewed by MACV and CINCPAC as a secondary theater. Thus the tendency was to be sparing of assets assigned to support of the unconventional war in North Laos and to seek *quid pro quos*. The establishment of the TACAN site on the mesa at Phou Pha Thi (see p. 35) can be viewed in this light. The Ambassador in Vientiane was not able to obtain the air support he believed necessary for the unconventional war until after the bombing of North Vietnam had stopped.

(U) Thereafter, an embarrassment of riches brought its own problems. A very large increase took place in jet aircraft sorties (see Fig. 1), and the application of existing control procedures to this massive augmentation of airpower proved to be a burden, as an exchange between Senator Kennedy and Ambassador Sullivan illustrates:

Senator Kennedy: You have outlined in some detail, Mr. Sullivan, your review of bombing targets. Of course, since you left the bombing has increased dramatically, has it not?

Ambassador Sullivan: Yes.

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Senator Kennedy: So now we apparently have up to 700 bombing sorties a day over Laos, and this seems to me to be a pretty full-time job for any American Ambassador to review in detail all the sorties that take place. . . .

Ambassador Sullivan: It took all my time.*

(U) Although the Ambassador does not actually attempt to review sorties but merely reviews targets, and although many of the sorties are in the category of route reconnaissance with attacks on moving targets authorized in advance, precise control of this volume of air activity would appear to be virtually impossible. Following the heavy bombing of the Plain of Jars as a prelude to the Meo counterattack that captured the entire Plain in September 1969, the refugee movements that were caused in part by the application of airpower in North Laos have raised doubts about the degree of control the Chief of Mission is able to exercise. Thus, although the attacks in the Plain of Jars area were supposed to have been limited to specific installations such as truck parks, depots, munition dumps, and the like, the friendly forces found the towns of Xieng Khouangville, Khang Khay, Ban Ban, etc. virtually destroyed and the inhabitants gone.

(C) Another example of the problem was the use made of the wing of propeller-driven aircraft which was based in Nakorn Phanom, Thailand, beginning in 1967. The Ambassador had taken the initiative in securing their assignment to the area because of what he considered to be their superior qualities in support of primitive ground forces (such as survivability in a small-arms environment, long loiter-time to find and fix targets, slow cruising speeds for the same purpose). Yet these A-1s and A-26s were made available only sparingly for use in North Laos but were utilized in the attack upon the corridor. The matter remains controversial to this day, involving as it does a complex trade-off between the higher priority of the corridor operations

* (U) *SJC Hearing*, p. 62.

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versus the higher performance of propeller-driven aircraft in close support of irregular forces. That no unconventional aircraft were assigned to support of the unconventional war suggests a rigidity which could not be overcome by the limited degree of leverage available to the Ambassador.

(C) Both these examples illustrate the limits to the span of control over the system in Laos and the very evident inability of that system to establish substantial influence over the deployment of major military combat assets or over the tactical concepts employed in such cases.

SUMMING UP

(C) Despite the inadequacies and failures -- some of which persist -- the weight of evidence justifies the conclusion that the *ad hoc* and unprecedented arrangements for managing U.S. inputs in Laos met the challenge. They account in large part for the limited but significant success in that remote conflict during 1962-1970:

1. The character of the war and the constraints of policy and environment placed a premium on adaptive response to the remote and exotic world of the Lao and the tribesmen. This response was made possible by the delegation of responsibility to field representatives, who were able to match needs with capabilities, a process which depended on rapport with local leadership and mutual confidence between U.S. personnel and their clients.

2. The institutional response remained flexible and innovative in part because the organization remained small and lean and in part because leadership oriented itself on the field and on the need to meet field requirements.

3. The leadership also played a critical role in grasping the authority offered to it and in using it to shape an effectively unified organization under genuine single management in the field. Most important in this regard was the subordination of military activity to political control in keeping with nonmilitary requirements and goals.

(U) A wealth of useful lessons is embedded in the Laos experience despite the uniqueness of the circumstances. Of course, no

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future involvement will ever duplicate the terms and conditions of the Laos effort. But we may well be confronted at some time with rural-based Communist insurgency in another primitive country, in a remote and unfamiliar setting, where, if the United States chooses to support local counterinsurgency efforts, it will have to find ways of unifying and harmonizing the inputs of several of its agencies while using flexibility and innovativeness to adapt itself to the peculiarities of the local scene.

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