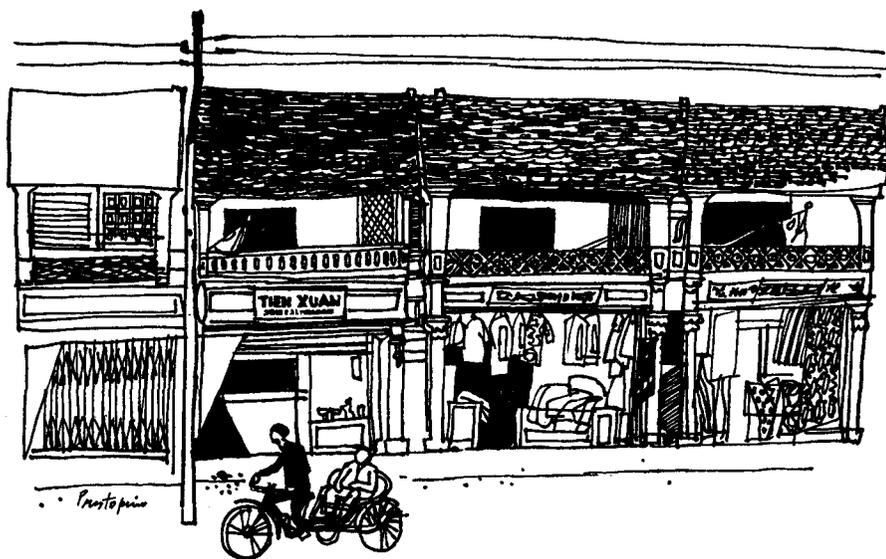


AT HOME & ABROAD



Our Secret War in Laos

DENIS WARNER

UNTIL RECENTLY Prince Souvanna Phouma's stay in power as the premier of Laos was open to serious doubts. Yet today, he has emerged as a leader with unsuspected strength and authority. The dove has become a hawk, applauding the United States for bombing North Vietnam and urging it to greater efforts against Vinh, the town that is the Vietminh's main source of supply into Laos, and even against Hanoi.

Many things have changed in Laos in the past twelve months, including Souvanna, and almost all the changes have been for the better. A year ago the Communist Pathet Lao was doing very nicely. It had severed the road and river communications between the administrative and royal capitals of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, seized the foothills overlooking the Mekong River at Thakhek, and was about to drive the neutralist forces, under the command of General Kong Lae, from the Plain of Jars north of Vientiane.

The political scene was no less dismal. Souvanna seemed torn between what he regarded as a betrayal by his half-brother, Prince

Souphanouvong, and his Vietminh backers on the one hand, and a desire on the other to maintain the government of national union set up by the 1962 Geneva accords. Time and again Souvanna threatened to pack up and end his days in comfort in France. No one would have been surprised to see him go.

The Right offered no alternative to Souvanna: its chronic corruption had become even more flagrant. To compensate for reduced allocations of American aid after the Geneva Agreements, the rightist General Phoumi Nosavan, then the deputy premier, sought funds to maintain his army and his patronage by opening a chain of casinos and what may well have been the world's biggest opium parlor, and by the manipulation of monopolies in gold, perfumes, and liquor.

In brief, the Royal Lao government, as represented by its neutralist and right wings, was rapidly falling apart, while the dissident Pathet Lao faction, with the power of the Vietminh behind it, was behaving precisely the way all but the most optimistic and gullible western signatories to the Geneva Agreements had expected. Laos in-

deed seemed lost, and, thanks to the security it afforded to the long section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail within its boundaries, South Vietnam was being lost along with it.

Changing Fortunes

What has happened since is largely the result of two coups separated in time by almost a year, the first in April, 1964, and the second just two months ago, in February. Firmly entrenched at last, the new Souvanna Phouma is for the moment confident and prepared to battle with the Vietminh; the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang has been cleared of the Pathet Lao; its pirates no longer infest the Mekong; and last month sixty officer trainees and a small garrison of government troops at the Royal Lao Army school at Dong Hene in central Laos first withstood and then destroyed a Vietminh attack of battalion size in the most successful single operation of the war.

It would be unwise to exaggerate the importance of the gains or their durability. By the same token it can not be forgotten that the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which the Vietminh have now extended for motorized use well below the 17th parallel, is still a Communist sanctuary. Injections of foreign aid, mostly from the United States, alone keep the government solvent. Moreover, Prince Souphanouvong claims that any time the Pathet Lao wants to take Vientiane, or any other Mekong River town, it can do so—a boast that, with sufficient Vietminh aid from Hanoi, he could certainly make good.

Yet within these limits, much has been achieved. Souvanna commands more respect from the Right than ever seemed likely or even possible. Phoumi Nosavan has fled into exile, his place as finance minister taken by the reportedly incorruptible Sisouk Na Champassak, who once swore that he would never serve under Souvanna and is now a valued lieutenant of unquestioned loyalty. Tribal refugees in increasing numbers have left the Pathet Lao areas to seek the protection of the Royal Lao Army forces, and, in small but not insignificant matters, such as vegetable production, education, and village welfare, there

are encouraging signs of progress.

Behind these changes is an intricate story of coup and countercoup, of plot and counterplot. The result has not led to disastrous divisions between the rightists and the neutralists but, through the elimination of the two most ambitious and dangerous men on the anti-Communist side—Phoumi Nosavan and General Siho Lamphouthacoul, the former chief of the national police force—to a degree of unity in Vientiane that holds out a reasonable prospect of stability. This has been accompanied by a dramatic and largely secret change in the tactics and policies of the neutralist and rightist forces and those who support them.

The April, 1964, coup which brought about these extraordinary changes reflected the rightists' bitterness and frustration at the Pathet Lao's exploitation of the Geneva Agreements in its attempt to take over all of Laos. The leaders of the coup, General Siho and General Kouprasith Abhay, the Vientiane commander, were bent on getting rid of Souvanna Phouma, whom they regarded as a weak and inept leader; as a secondary target, they had their sights on General Phoumi Nosavan. The generals succeeded in overthrowing Souvanna and were apparently about to assassinate him when the U.S. embassy, with strong support from the British and Australians, and more importantly from King Savang Vatthana, insisted on his reinstallation.

THOROUGHLY DISILLUSIONED now with the Pathet Lao, which by then had driven the neutralists out of the Plain of Jars and established political as well as military control over the area, Souvanna was fully receptive to the changes which the generals demanded, which the United States approved, and which Pathet Lao intransigence called for. At long last, the Pathet Lao and its Vietminh allies were about to get a taste of their own medicine.

Though Phoumi Nosavan was downgraded from deputy premier to finance minister and stripped of the monopolies and the fund-raising casinos from which his patronage and power flowed, he had not lost his ambition or his capacity for in-

trigue. Three times during the latter part of 1964—on July 22, August 4, and during Christmas week—government troops were out in the streets in Vientiane in anticipation of a coup by Phoumi.

Early this January an astrologer told Phoumi's wife that his forty-sixth year would be the best in her husband's life if it began with the good wishes of the community. For his birthday celebration, therefore, Phoumi sent out two thousand invitation cards for a party that was to begin at six in the morning and to continue for twenty-four hours. Until noon, the party was mainly a family affair; but from lunchtime onwards, cabinet ministers, generals, diplomats, and thousands of others poured into Phoumi's home bearing gifts. At nine o'clock in the evening he told an Australian diplomat that he was on his 160th glass of champagne; at six o'clock the next morning Phoumi was still on his feet and the champagne was still flowing. Surviving guests who hazarded a guess at the cost put it at \$10,000, a tidy sum for a cabinet minister whose official income was only \$80 a month.

Lost in the Stars

The year seemed to have begun in a manner to have delighted the stars, but exactly a week later Phoumi's house was in ruins and he had fled in exile to Thailand with General Siho. When Phoumi was dispossessed of his lucrative monopolies and opium and casino interests after April, 1964, he had found an ally in Siho, who had formerly been his protégé and more recently his enemy. With Phoumi's power curtailed, Siho had been able to use his new authority and his paramilitary police apparatus to create his own empire. Some of its smaller pillars were modest opium dens and gambling houses and the sale of Lao identity papers and passports to Chinese Communists anxious to go about their business in Thailand. Siho was rich, powerful, feared—and at thirty, intensely ambitious.

The series of events which led to their downfall began on January 31 when, at 8:35 P.M., troops under the command of Colonel Bounleut Saycocie took over Vientiane's radio station, stadium, and Ministry of

Youth, Sports and Fine Arts. A few minutes later the colonel broadcast a message to the people explaining that he wanted to "rescue" the high command "in order to make the army a more effective fighting force and to save the country." What Bounleut had in mind is far from clear even now. In part, his minor coup seems to have been a protest against very low army pay; in part, it may have been what he says it was, an attempt to provoke Phoumi and Siho into an "ambush."

If this was his purpose he was wholly successful, for Phoumi and Siho proceeded to make their bid for power, ostensibly with the pretext of crushing Colonel Bounleut. This time Souvanna, again in his new firm role, gave the orders and General Kouprasith carried them out. The Phoumi-Siho countercoup ended with their ignominious flight to Bangkok, where Phoumi is reported to have a million dollars tucked away. But Vientiane will bear the scars of the brief but bitter struggle for a long time to come; some sixty people were killed, and Siho's parting shot was to blow up the city's radio transmitters and to destroy the intelligence files.

The abortive countercoup not only strengthened Souvanna's position at the head of the rightist-neutralist coalition but also restored full military control to a loyal high command. Souvanna himself now has the purpose and bearing of a courageous leader of a country involved in a fight for its life. He also reflects the confidence of a man getting the support he needs not only at home but also from the outside—namely from Washington. Just how this came about is something of a success story for U.S. policy, which for understandable reasons Washington has chosen to conceal rather than to publicize.

THE NEW American role in Laos dates back to the coup of April, 1964. Until that time the United States had watched protestingly but passively while Vietminh units from the north flagrantly ignored the Geneva Agreements, reinforcing the Pathet Lao on the Plain of Jars and elsewhere, and consolidating, extending, and improving the Ho Chi Minh supply route to South Viet-

nam. To "honor" the agreements, which called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops, Hanoi ordered home forty Vietminh soldiers, who passed through the International Control Commission's checkpoints; some eight to twelve thousand remained. Meanwhile the 666 members of the American Military Assistance Advisory Group had departed in their entirety. Tragically late, Washington began to recognize that the war in Laos and South Vietnam was indivisible, and that the Geneva Agreements, far from being the great victory for peace that some of their western architects had proclaimed, were a trap designed to remove the pressures and strains on the supply route to the Vietcong.

The United States had two choices: it could denounce the Geneva Agreements, openly intervene in the war once again, and perhaps lose the support of Souvanna and King Savang Vatthana; or it could follow the Pathet Lao ground rules. It chose the latter, and now from its own privileged sanctuaries in northeastern and northern Thailand, as well as from South Vietnam and the Seventh Fleet, it is working with the full approval of the Royal Lao government in an attempt to restore the balance destroyed by North Vietnam's disregard of the Geneva Agreements.

The change in American policy became apparent when Washington ordered reconnaissance flights along the main lines of communication between the Pathet Lao areas and North Vietnam. These flights not only revealed constant Vietminh reinforcement and resupply but also showed the presence of anti-aircraft guns that fired on the American planes. The reconnaissance missions soon became retaliatory and finally offensive.

Impressed with the effectiveness of air power against Route 7—a road with many bridges that winds from North Vietnam to Luang Prabang through the narrow defiles of north-central Laos—the United States equipped the Royal Lao Air Force with additional T-28s. While Lao pilots were being trained at Udorn in northeastern Thailand, Thai mercenaries flew the planes. According to reliable sources, twenty-five Lao-speaking Thai pilots were originally

employed and supplied with Lao papers and identity cards. A senior Lao official says that only a few of the Thai pilots remain; most, he says, are now Lao. This applies only to the air force, however, and not to the CIA operations through Air America, a fifty-plane transport group operating with American and multinational crews from Laos and Thailand and probably South Vietnam as well.

Grenades in the Rice Sacks

Air America has been spectacularly successful. Its role following the Geneva Agreements was to supply tribal groups loyal to the neutralists and rightists with foodstuffs, medicines, and other goods. It also supplied, at the request of the Royal



Lao government, the needs of two Royal Lao battalions isolated, harried, and more or less cut off in the region of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

By the middle of last year, increasing quantities of guns, grenades, and other weapons went along with the sacks of rice to the loyal mountain tribesmen who have become the guerrilla striking forces of the Royal Lao Army, operating in much the same fashion as the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam. According to the Vietcong, captured Thai and Chinese Nationalist crewmen (whose photographs have been published along with those of Americans taken at the same time) have confessed that Air America is a paramilitary force. It would not be easy to dispute the description.

American fighter-bombers destroyed an important bridge at Ban Ban on Route 7 and have kept it out of commission, which promises many problems for the Pathet Lao when

the wet season sets in next month. Well aware of this, the Pathet Lao tried to open a shorter alternative supply route to the Plain of Jars through Sam Neua. Immediately, they ran into guerrilla attacks. Air America had been on the job.

Around Muong Sai and Nam Tha in northwestern Laos, the guerrillas have become so confident that they have been pressing for permission to attack the towns held by the Pathet Lao. Here and elsewhere, the range and scope of their activities may be gauged from the fact that Air America and two subsidiaries now have access to more than two hundred airfields and airstrips, many of them far behind Pathet Lao lines. In the past few months, twenty new airstrips have been opened.

Two aspects of Air America's operations are of special significance. The Black Thai tribesmen from whom the guerrillas are recruited in northern Laos spill over into the Thai country of North Vietnam and could conceivably be used for the creation of an even more important insurgency situation; also, the U.S. special forces' emphasis on the "struggle for the hearts and minds of the people" is reflected in the huge number of refugees who have elected to move with the guerrillas out of Pathet Lao territory. More than a hundred thousand are now dependent on airlift and airdrop for their supplies. "I'd like to see how they sort out the bookkeeping in Washington," said one American. "I wonder how you figure out the bill on a flight that carries both guns and rice."

In one vital area, however, and among one vital group of tribesmen, there has been a conspicuous lack of success. The Khas of eastern and southeastern Laos in the general region of the Ho Chi Minh Trail remain firmly committed to the Pathet Lao. Apart from the less than successful efforts to interdict the trail by bombing, the United States appears to have fallen back on Vietnamese commandos—with what success no one will say. In a white paper published in January, the central committee of the Neo Lao Hak Xat Party, the political wing of the Pathet Lao, reported that four groups of commandos had been parachuted around Tchepone and Mu-

ong Ngon, about twenty miles south of the main staging base at the point where the trail dissolves into tracks passable only by man or pony.

Presumably on the basis of this experience, U.S. officers do not believe that the southern part of the trail can be cut off either by bombing or even by the large-scale use of commando and ranger groups. A highly skilled force of several divisions would be needed for the job.

All of this adds up to something far short of victory—which was, in any event, hardly to be expected. Pushed too far, the new initiatives in Laos might have provoked repercussions that would have proved embarrassing to the United States with its heavy commitments in Vietnam. “In my view,” said one reliable informant, “the bombing and supply from Udorn are very effectively done. No one is trying to go too far or too fast, but the use of air and the supply to guerrillas are important factors in this situation, both militarily and politically.”

“I opposed the use of the T-28s,” said another source. “I thought they would aggravate rather than help. I was wrong. Especially in the region of Route 7 leading to the Plain of Jars they have thrown complete confusion into the ranks of the Pathet Lao and the Vietminh. Consumer supplies have become seriously short there and no peasant is willing to risk his buffalo on the road any longer.”

THERE ARE CRITICS, of course, among some U.S. friends and allies. As for the International Control Commission, it accepts phlegmatically the current and continuous violations of the Geneva Agreements by both sides. “We have made repeated applications to the Royal Lao government to investigate the activities of Air America,” said one member. “We have never had a reply.” Since the commission has never been allowed to investigate Pathet Lao areas, it is hardly surprised.

In military quarters the general feeling is that the Pathet Lao will make one of its usual offensives late in the dry season, this month or in May, to inflict what limited damage it can on the Royal Lao Army in the few weeks remaining before the monsoons blanket the mountains.

But there are no signs of anything more serious—no thrust of the Pathet Lao and the Vietminh through to the Mekong, no march south by the Chinese. It is conceivable that the neutralist leader Kong Lae, who has bitterly resisted the assimilation of his eight thousand troops into the Royal Laotian Army, might still defect. What really matters, however, is that American intervention has provided a climate of confidence in which the government may even begin to govern.

Constitutional problems, the diffi-

culty of holding elections, and the certainty that the Pathet Lao will not accept seats as nominated members in a new national assembly raise the possibility that the government of national union will cease to exist in name as well as in principle. The divisions between the rightists-neutralists and the Pathet Lao now appear unbridgeable. That this happened before all Laos fell into Communist hands is a stroke of good fortune that the anti-Communist leaders who brought about the Geneva Agreements scarcely deserve.

Senator Dirksen's Unexpected Allies

JULIUS DUSCHA

WHEN the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its controversial one man, one vote reapportionment decision ten months ago, both the opponents and proponents of the ruling predicted that within a year it would lead to a political revolution giving complete control of state legislatures to senators and representatives from cities and suburbs. By January, half of the legislatures were under Federal court orders to redistrict during 1965, and about a dozen had already completed reapportioning. But the revolution may not occur. Not only have the farmers, who have the most to lose politically, organized themselves to fight the court's decisions, but so have state legislators and businessmen who are accustomed to dealing with state governments as they are.

Moreover, the opponents of the reapportionment ruling have received unexpected support from such urban-oriented and liberal political figures as Republican Senator Jacob K. Javits of New York, and California's Democratic Governor Edmund G. Brown and Republican Senator Thomas H. Kuchel. Not a single governor of a major state has spoken out in support of the Supreme Court decision.

As such proponents of the ruling as Democratic Senator Paul H. Douglas of Illinois have discovered, there

is a widespread feeling throughout the country that the Supreme Court seriously damaged a desirable part of the checks-and-balances system of American government. It is a feeling compounded of concern for minorities, of a rural nostalgia that still pervades the thinking of many city people, and of a genuine fear of all-powerful majority government. To all these arguments, Douglas and other supporters of the decision have replied that the majority should rule, and that the rural and small-town minorities should not have a veto in state legislatures over the desires and needs of the seven out of ten Americans who live in our cities and suburbs.

Riding the Tide

The debate between the opponents and proponents of the reapportionment decision is now focused on a Constitutional amendment sponsored by Senate Republican Leader Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois and thirty-seven other senators on both sides of the aisle. Their amendment would allow one house of a legislature to be apportioned “upon the basis of factors other than population.” Supporters of the amendment generally interpret “factors” to mean geography, but the opponents of the Dirksen proposal as it is now written have argued that it could