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American Policy in Laos

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Paper No. 6: American Policy in Laos
AMERICAN POLICY IN LAOS

During the past year the newspapers have carried continuous dispatches concerning the future of the kingdom of Laos and attempts by the American government to prevent that small Southeast Asian country from becoming a Communist state.

Most Americans who think beyond the headlines are hindered by conflicting stereotypes which have received wide currency in recent years. On one hand, many politicians are fond of referring to how we "lost" China or allowed North Vietnam to "slip behind the Bamboo Curtain;" on the other hand, are reporters' pictures of the incompetent and high-living American diplomat and technician. Both these egocentric images implicitly assume our ability to dominate or at least manipulate other countries. Seldom do we ask ourselves if they were ever ours to lose.

In Laos, where our extensive military aid has received much publicity, little is known about the effects of American programs and policies on established Lao values. It is possible to learn from failures as well as successes, and in this respect the past history of American aid and information programs in Laos can be very revealing.

Buddhism in Laos might at first be considered marginal to American interests and more particularly to planning in the diplomatic and economic aid fields. This point of view could be accepted if our interests in Southeast Asia were narrowly defined. On the contrary, very broad aims have been expressed in public policy declarations in which the United States committed herself to maintaining Laos' independence and freedom from Communist control. Many of our difficulties have come about because the implementation of these goals has been too narrowly interpreted. In order to implement broad aims which encompass the whole of the society and culture, interest has often been shown only in terms of formal diplomatic procedures, military aid, information activities and certain fields of economic and technical assistance. Their effect on the total way of life in Laos has not been considered. Our government's activities have touched all aspects of Lao culture, including religion.

Hinayana Buddhism has had a history of approximately 1000 years in Laos. Since Christianity has made relatively few inroads the Buddhism of the valley Lao is without question the dominant religion of the kingdom. The Lao constitution specifies that the King must be a dedicated Buddhist. Monks participate in almost all official ceremonies and government officials pay homage to them on state occasions and in many private ways as well. In most villages the Abbot of the wat (pagoda) is the most respected figure in the community.

The relationships between Buddhism and American programs and policy in Laos can be most clearly seen if we look at the ways in which American agencies have come into direct contact with the monks, have incorporated references to Buddhism into their programs or have indirectly affected the priesthood. (An interesting side effect has been caused in large measure by the United States military aid program and to a lesser extent by the economic aid mission's police program. Formerly, most Lao young men became novices or monks for periods ranging from several months to several years and in many cases completed their education in the pagoda. Becoming a monk was a way of paying a spiritual debt to one's parents and achieving status within the community; this applied to both villagers and townsfolk. Within the last few years many jobs have opened up in both the Army and the police. To the average Lao they pay extremely well, the uniforms and work are glamorous and in addition the jobs provide extra sources of income either through obtaining supplies or straight graft (although the latter opportunities are certainly not universal). As one village Abbot expressed it, "Our young men would rather become policemen than monks and now value money more than honor." This may be something of an exaggeration. It is not only the monks who are affected. A school administrator remarked, "When it comes time to look for a job, the most
intelligent young men first go to the army, then to the police, and only after they had been refused work in government offices do they come to us as a last resort." Military aid seems to have weakened the traditional moral system without offering a positive alternative.)

The American programs more directly involved with the priesthood are the Information Service and the Community Development Division of the aid mission. USIS, recognizing the fact that the monks constitute a significant and respected element in the community and that the average citizen has great respect for them and for Buddhism, has approached this problem in two ways. Perhaps the least important of these is the use of what might be called Buddhist type propaganda on a large scale. This includes printed materials, exhibits and films, many of which appeared in honor of the 2500th Anniversary of Buddhism. One exhibit dealt with Buddhist art in the United States, and a special issue of the USIS magazine "Free World," issued in the Lao language, portrayed some of the holy shrines of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and concluded with a description of Buddhists in the United States. Lao newsreels produced under the auspices of USIS have dealt with various religious ceremonies. Since few surveys have been made it is difficult to judge the impact of this propaganda.

On the basis of a number of casual conversations with villagers, monks and townspeople, it is possible to infer that the materials and films were favorably received, although they were not necessarily associated with United States objectives. An Abbot at one wat handed some USIS Buddhist booklets to a visitor at the same time telling him in very strong terms how the Americans were ruining his country by corrupting the people.

More direct in their impact have been English language teaching programs among the monks. Several have been sent to America for advanced study. USIS has also assisted the priesthood in producing newspapers and other publications. The Asia Foundation, a private agency, has subsidized the publication of books (USIS cannot directly aid in the production of religious materials) and employing technicians to assist in the reconstruction of pagodas. It is natural to assume that a monk who wants to learn English and particularly one who asks Americans to give him lessons is favorably inclined toward the United States on a personal level even if he might not be in agreement with all our government policies.

A saffron-robed, shorn monk will approach an American visitor to a pagoda and smilingly ask him in English, "How do you like our country?" After indulging in the usual courtesies and recovering from his surprise, the visitor may ask, "Where did you learn your English?" When told that a particular person associated with USIS had been teaching him, the visitor might tend to go away thinking that the monks were if not pro-American certainly not anti-American. This feeling would be reinforced on observing USIS posters tacked on the walls of their living quarters and seeing them enjoy USIS films at festivals given in honor of the pagoda.

However, a few days later the American visitor might be more than a little surprised to see the same monk warily receiving a Communist Pathet Lao leader and listening to him relate his heroic adventures in the jungle. The Communist presents his life as one of sacrifice and self-denial for a noble end, arousing sympathy in his priestly audience who link his efforts to the ascetic tradition of Buddhism. The Pathet Lao representative contrasts himself, a poor man, with the rich officials who are linked to the American Imperialists. Among monks and townspeople as well as villagers the Pathet Lao are often known as the People of the Forest.

Language can be used as a technique only; the culture associated with it ignored or even reviled. Thus the North Vietnamese government publishes more English language propaganda materials than does South Vietnam. According to recent visitors to Red China English is still used as the language of instruction in certain schools such as that of medicine in Peking, because of established tradition and the difficulties inherent in switching over to Russian.
When asked by a non-Westerner why he is studying English, a Buddhist monk replied, "To get a good government job after I leave the priesthood." This seems far removed from the concept of monastic life in our own culture. Buddhist monks, however, remain in the priesthood only as long as they wish to, and the pagoda training is used by some as a kind of inexpensive boarding school. Some are even rather aggressive in requesting special instruction in English language training.

How has this desire for a government job been reconciled with a pro-Vatthu Lao attitude and one which is hostile to the nominally pro-Western government? Those Lao who have thought about this question said, "I will work with this government until its leadership changes," or "[with increased education I may obtain a more favored position with a new (pro-Communist) government." This position has been particularly prevalent among the younger monks in the larger centers such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

On the subject of village aid, which might be interpreted as meaning the focusing of certain government services on the village -- agricultural extension, public health, rural education, and the provision of appropriate equipment and experts when needed -- even in a country with as rudimentary a government structure as Laos there are established Ministries of Agriculture, Health and Education. However, on the provincial, district and village levels there has arisen a real problem of coordination, especially since there is an acute scarcity of trained personnel. This problem is widespread in newly independent countries which are suddenly confronted with the political and economic implications of rural isolation and poverty. Partly with the advice of American experts in rural extension services, the government of India set up a Ministry of Community Development to direct a nationwide program of coordinated village aid. India's pattern has been widely copied. Several years ago American aid officials began to send Lao personnel to India to observe these programs. In 1958 a Bureau for Village Development was set up in the Lao Ministry of Social Affairs and in 1959 was allocated a modest budget to aid village development by participating in the financing of projects such as road building, well digging and construction of other village facilities. These funds were to be dispensed by regional committees composed of the heads of all the provincial departments, with the Governor acting as chairman.

Prior to the establishment of this organization the government had concentrated much of its efforts on Civic Action, a crash-type program modeled on a similar organization in Vietnam which was active in resettling refugees from the North when the Republic of South Vietnam was created at the end of the Indochina War. Led by a Lao army colonel and financially supported by United States military and economic aid agencies, groups of young men, mostly soldiers, were selected for six week courses designed to make them "experts" in education, agriculture, health and propaganda. Then they were sent out into the field to work in the villages giving advice and instruction, distributing medicine and agricultural equipment and showing films. This program was subsequently abandoned.

In 1959 the Army, with backing from the American military liaison group, prepared another rural development program to be administered by "Teams of Six." The ultimate objective was to have a team operating in every one of the 600 districts in the Kingdom. These teams were similar in composition to those of the Civic Action program and were under the command of a colonel in the psychological warfare branch of the Lao Army. The training of personnel was variable, ranging from a few weeks to several months. These teams were to have resided permanently in the particular district to which they were assigned.

At the same time the different technical ministries of the Lao government had their own programs for village development and so have not been enthusiastic supporters of this Army program. This is particularly true since the latter were relatively well supplied with funds while the
ministries had to constantly scale down their own projects. The technical ministries were also severely limited by lack of personnel available for rural projects. In the Health Ministry they were occupied with running the hospitals in the provincial capitals. The Agriculture Ministry had only a few people with any degree of technical training above high school level. The Education Ministry had the largest number of trained personnel in direct contact with villages.

In 1956-57 there was a program under which a number of village teachers paid with American aid funds were instructed to devote half the day to teaching and the other half to showing the children carpentry techniques and gardening methods and instructing them in health practices. This program was eventually dropped.

In 1959 a Belgian UNESCO expert associated with the Ministry of Education established a center staffed with Lao personnel trained at the UNESCO Fundamental Education Center in Thailand. Other village aid programs included the work of Operation Brotherhood, a Philippine medical group which attempted some public health work. The American International Volunteer Services team in Keng Niovanglah a public health nurse and also did work in agricultural education. Not all these small programs were in direct competition, of course, since they tend to operate in different parts of the country. The work of the military, however, posed a problem for the civilian agencies engaged in similar activities. There were also conflicts among American personnel and officers corresponding to frictions within the Lao government, since the expert usually tends to associate himself with the agency with which he has direct contact. Like most activities of the Lao government the above programs were financed largely or exclusively with American funds.

Civic Action was intended to make an immediate impact on the villagers, showing the people that their government held a real interest in their welfare and in bettering their living conditions in a dramatic way. In one case, a Civic Action team went to a village and put up a row of houses -- after their departure the villagers were asked their reaction. They replied that the work of the government officials had nothing to do with them, for they were not told about the team's activity. When asked if they would use the houses they said they already had good houses of their own and even in case of need they would prefer to build their own homes since those put up by Civic Action were poorly constructed.

A visit to a Civic Action model village about twenty miles from Vientiane was revealing. On the main road a brightly lettered sign points to the village, and after turning off to the village trail the traveler was inspired by further signs every few kilometers. Arriving in the village he found that an attempt had been made to pave the lanes. There were also street signs, but during the rainy season these efforts had been largely obliterated. The model section consisted of a neatly fenced compound at the edge of the village. Inside the enclosure was a new concrete well, a school, a hall and first-aid station plus a school and living quarters for the Civic Action personnel. A flower and vegetable garden was included in the compound. On the day of the writer's visit, the Civic Action personnel were all away but several of the village elders were happy to chat about the project. They said they were not consulted about the location of the new facilities nor did they request them. The man who owns the land on which the new buildings were erected was informed that if the project proved a success he would be paid in a few years; otherwise the land would be returned to him. The villagers do use the new concrete well, but there exists the sentiment that the original well on the property had been taken away from its owner and that the new well does not belong to anyone. The village children use the school but the people are talking about erecting their own nearer the pagoda. All the buildings in the compound were constructed by hired labor imported for the occasion from Vientiane. The villagers expressed interest in having a permanent nurse assigned to them. When asked what kind of project they would
consider most important to them, the villagers replied that a good road linking their community with the main road was something they all desired.

Other Civic Action activities included courses of approximately one month duration to all county (muong) chiefs and then allowing them to spend brief periods in other parts of the country to gain some perspective on their own local problems. There have also been conferences of the provincial governors. Less intensive courses have been given to district and village chiefs (tassense and noi beng) in certain provincial centers. The tassense are locally elected while the county administrator (choo muong) are appointed by the central government and are part of the Lao civil service. In any case, because of the change of programs these courses were not continued.

Continuity is extremely important from the point of view of the villagers and the Lao officials, but was lacking in all these programs. When the author traveled upstream on the Mekong River as the representative of the American aid mission in northern Laos he was asked at many villages why the school teachers had not received vegetable seeds as they had the previous year. It was hard to explain to them that had been a "one-shot affair" and that if the seed project were reinstated it would be under the agricultural division of USIA, not the education division which made the original distribution. In all fairness to the American aid personnel and to the Lao government, consistent planning is difficult since it varied from year to year depending on fluctuating Congressional appropriations. This system is also rather wasteful.

Programs such as Civic Action, the Teams of Six and others where the free distribution of commodities plays a large role have put many well meaning Lao government and American aid officials in the position of traveling around the countryside and asking the villagers what kind of assistance they would like to have. Since this commodity assistance was paid for almost entirely by American aid funds, it set up high expectations on the part of villagers which their government could not readily fulfill and put the villagers in the position of receiving charity.

Although it was not our aid mission's announced intention, a significant result has been to make Vientiane a much more attractive place to live from the point of view of the average government official. At the same time conditions in the villages have remained basically unchanged. Since the beginning of the American aid program Vientiane has blossomed forth with air-conditioned movie with cinemascope screens, pastry shops, night clubs with taxi dancers imported from Hong Kong and Saigon, many new restaurants, a startling increase in the number of automobiles - to say nothing of improved educational and hospital facilities. Many of these innovations might appear rather primitive or even pathetic to the sophisticated westerner, but to a Lao official with six years of education who at most may have had a trip to Bangkok or Saigon these developments have great appeal. Certainly they are much more enticing than what provincial towns have to offer and infinitely more so than an average village of Laos, which most likely is reached by trail and has neither electricity nor radio.

Such a situation is by no means unique to Laos. But the problem is acute in Laos, where in many areas contacts with the central government exist in name only. For example, in the setting up of the Fundamental Education Center the teachers who were trained in Thailand showed a positive distaste for living in villages on a permanent basis. As a result, their center was established on the edge of Vientiane rather than in a village area removed from the capital as was desired by USIA, GEDCO expert. In the course of their travels several of the students had managed to acquire automobiles which operate quite well on the streets of Vientiane but which would do poorly on muddy village roads.
Some American officials have cited the increasing prevalence of cars and bicycles as a sign of economic advancement. Compared to other countries of Asia and even certain countries in Europe, automobiles are much more common among Laos officials of the higher and middle ranks. Thus almost every Minister and department head has a Mercedes Benz and some have several. It is quite true that no American agency has officially furnished expensive civilian automobiles to Laos government officials, but almost all have come in as by-products of our subsidization of the Army and the general economy of Laos. All the gasoline necessary to run them is imported.

A great deal of construction of homes, office buildings, hotels and stores has occurred in Vientiane from 1955 to 1960. To service these new buildings the American aid mission has installed a diesel-operated power plant which replaced an earlier charcoal-operated one. Undoubtedly a certain growth of Vientiane was inevitable in the development of Laos as a national state, but to a large extent the boom was artificial, based as it has been almost entirely on outside aid.

Resentment has been strong among the rural population, and the writer has been asked any number of times, "Why is it that you Americans give all your money to the rich people who live in town and never think of us?" This issue has been exploited by the Pathet Lao in election campaigns and is perhaps one of the reasons why so many of their candidates won large majorities in the 1958 election.

Perhaps the most crucial factor has been that the living standards of the officials, particularly those in the upper echelons, have greatly increased while the living standards in the countryside have remained just as low, thus increasing the gap between the elite and their fellow countrymen (even though the living standards of the former are still quite simple by European and particularly American standards). The political implications of this widening gap have been readily apparent during the past year.
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