



John F. Kennedy, the development of counterinsurgency doctrine and American intervention in Laos, 1961-1963

Item Type	Thesis (Open Access)
Authors	Koprowski, Daniel C.
DOI	10.7275/6871225
Download date	2025-05-18 21:07:42
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/45176

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JOHN F. KENNEDY,
THE DEVELOPMENT OF COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE
AND AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN LAOS, 1961-1963

A Thesis Presented

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2000

History

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CHAPTER 1

KENNEDY AND THE NEED FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE

Introduction

In January 1961, when John F. Kennedy raised his right hand and swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, he had in his mind a very different conception of some of those enemies than many of his contemporaries. Like many politicians of his day, he believed strongly in the American doctrine of containment articulated by George F. Kennan, a strategy designed to arrest the advance of communism around the world by political, economic, diplomatic and, when required, military means. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kennedy did not believe that America's reliance on its vast nuclear arsenal was equal to the task. He believed, rather, that the foremost threat facing the Western world was communist insurgency, not overwhelming conventional or nuclear force. Therefore, he reasoned, America required a strategy that could meet a broad range of challenges throughout the spectrum of conflict.¹

John F. Kennedy's belief in the need for a flexible response was the product of several influences. The first was the Korean War. Kennedy believed that America's inability to win a decisive victory in Korea, coupled with a general feeling among the American people that the war was an unnecessary sacrifice, had doomed Truman politically. He had been in Congress during the McCarthy

¹ Christopher M. Lehman, "Protracted Insurgent Warfare: The Development of an Appropriate U.S. Doctrine," in *Guerrilla Warfare and Counterinsurgency: U.S.-Soviet Policy in the Third World*, ed. Richard H. Schultz, et al. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1989), 121-123.

era and had seen first-hand the perils for a politician who allowed himself to be perceived as soft on communism. Part of Kennedy's belief, then, arose from political pragmatism.

More important, however, were his experiences and those of his closest advisors. In 1951, during his years in the Senate, Kennedy visited Vietnam. He returned with a new conception of how best to execute a global containment strategy. What he had witnessed in Southeast Asia was the failure of French military strategy that relied on conventional weapons and tactics against a dedicated communist insurgency. From that point forward, Kennedy's rhetoric consistently stressed the need for a new level of capability, a strategy that would allow for a flexible response to communist expansion without resorting to nuclear war. "In practice", Kennedy argued in 1959, "our nuclear retaliatory power is not enough. It cannot deter Communist aggression which is too limited to justify atomic war. It cannot protect uncommitted nations against a Communist takeover using local or guerrilla forces. It cannot be used in so-called brush-fire wars...In short, it cannot prevent the Communists from nibbling away at the fringe of the free world's territory or strength."² Kennedy was arguing for the development of a counterinsurgency (hereafter abbreviated CI) capability to fight communism in the Third World.

Kennedy would often find himself fighting an uphill battle in his quest to create a viable CI capability. Most of his inner circle shared his views, as did

² John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *A Compilation of Statements and Speeches Made During His Service in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives*, (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964): 288, quoted in Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 53.

several prominent officers in the U.S. Army. But, as a review of his early policies by his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff points out, he had to develop this capability in the face of fifteen years of momentum in the defense establishment, momentum aimed at creating an “unchallengeable, absolute capability” in nuclear weapons.³ He would have to change the mindset of much of his Defense Department, as well as reorganizing and retraining its units for CI.

Kennedy’s conviction that such a capability was imperative was bolstered by events of the late 1950s that served to heighten an already acute public fear that Communism was on the march. In 1956 the Soviet Union had supported a victorious Nasser regime in Egypt against the combined power of Britain, France and Israel. In 1957 the Soviets had beaten America into space by launching Sputnik. In 1960 the Soviets shot down an American U-2 spy plane over Soviet territory, capturing its pilot and embarrassing the United States.⁴ In the same period, America had witnessed communist insurgencies in Laos, Vietnam, Cuba and Malaya. While the outcome of the uprisings in Southeast Asia was still in doubt and the insurgency in Malaya had been defeated, the sheer quantity of communist guerrilla activity was cause for concern. The startling success of guerrilla actions in Cuba added a sense of urgency and credibility to Kennedy’s calls to develop counterinsurgency capability as a weapon in the arsenal of containment.

³ General L.L. Lemnitzer, “Summary of Military CI Accomplishments Since January, 1961”, 21 July 62, NSF, M&M, Box 319, JFKL.

⁴ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958-1964, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 77-78.

Taken together, the events of the 1950s fanned the flames of domestic anticomunism and created a political climate that made dedication to the strategy of containment an imperative for those seeking office. Such an environment provided fertile ground for Kennedy's appeals for a new level of capability, and he capitalized on the fact during his presidential campaign. His attacks on the Eisenhower administration's focus on nuclear weapons, at the expense of conventional forces, had been steady and severe throughout his campaign.⁵ Kennedy's claim that America needed new tactics to stem the tide of global communism was well received by most Americans. He used the doctrine of flexible response as an example of such a tactic. The ability to both describe the problem and provide a solution carried great weight in the election of 1960.

The suspicions of the American public and the young President-elect deepened when, on January 6, 1961, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his so called sacred wars speech in which he intoned that "The Communists support just wars...and they march in the van of the peoples fighting for liberation."⁶ Kennedy ordered his top foreign policy advisors to "Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Soviet Premier's words. It was clear that from the beginning that Kennedy intended to make containment a priority, and on his terms. He answered Khrushchev's rhetoric in his inaugural address with his famous promise that the U.S. would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any

⁵ Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 526.

⁶ Fursenko and Naftali, 78.

friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.”⁷ With those words, Kennedy ushered in not only a “New Frontier” for America, but also a new phase of the Cold War, one that promised to be characterized by resistance to communism on many new fronts.

From his earliest days in office, Kennedy demonstrated that he intended to back up his rhetoric with action, and he immediately began making waves in the defense establishment. Among his first directives to his national security staff was to “examine means for placing more emphasis on the development of counter-guerrilla forces.”⁸

James Reston of *The New York Times* noted the stir caused by Kennedy’s innovations on March 1, 1961, writing “There was a big flap in Washington today over reports that the Kennedy Administration was changing its military strategy.”⁹ Reston apparently found the “flap” unnecessary, arguing that every new administration reviews its military strategy. He went on, however, to colorfully note Kennedy’s emphasis on flexibility, saying that “Neither the President nor the Secretary of State wants to use a sledge hammer to kill a fly,”¹⁰ and he paraphrased from Kennedy’s early speeches regarding the need for a limited-warfare capability. Reston described Kennedy’s belief that America could not

⁷ Ibid.; Blaufarb, 53.

⁸ McGeorge Bundy, “National Security Action Memorandum Number 2”, 3 February 61, NSF, JFKL; Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967): 413.

⁹ James Reston, “Another Big Controversy Over Very Little”, *The New York Times*, 1 March 61.

¹⁰ Ibid.

rely on its nuclear arsenal to prevent communist encroachment in the Third World (Reston tellingly used Indochina as an example). The author then went on to say that “accordingly, the President has already ordered more strenuous training for anti-guerrilla warfare and no doubt more scientific brains will be diverted to improving the capacity of the armed services to fight this kind of war more effectively.”¹¹ Despite the latter realization, Reston apparently failed to see the full significance of Kennedy’s new policy.

What Kennedy did in his early days was nothing less than add a new dimension to U.S. military strategy. The implications of that new dimension would become clear to all in the ensuing years, as America became deeply entangled in brushfire wars in many corners of the globe. For John F. Kennedy, the first of these entanglements came in Laos, where communist insurgents, supported by North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union, vied for supremacy with neutralists and the Royal Government (supported by the United States).

What follows then is really three stories. The first is the development of post-war counterinsurgency as a tool of containment and the lessons derived from Truman and Eisenhower’s forays into CI operations. The second is the post-war history of political turmoil in Laos and American intervention efforts, especially between 1955 and 1960. The third is a case study of the Kennedy administration’s counterinsurgency efforts in Laos and how they reflected Kennedy’s strategy of containment from 1961-1963.

I will attempt to explain the political, diplomatic and operational considerations that drove Kennedy’s decision making, with emphasis on the

¹¹ Ibid.

following questions: What was the state of American CI doctrine when Kennedy took over in 1961? How had that doctrine been developed? What did Kennedy know about CI and how did his knowledge affect American doctrine? Did Kennedy understand the situation in Laos? Did he know what kind of enemy he was fighting? Given the answers to all of those questions, how did his theories about CI play out in Laos, and how did Laos affect the development of CI doctrine? In other words, did Kennedy's CI program in Laos meet his goal "killing a fly" without "using a sledgehammer?" The answer to that question is important to CI operations and foreign interventions in the post-Kennedy Cold War.

In Laos, as in much of Southeast Asia, Kennedy learned quickly that domestic and international politics formed a house of cards, where action in one place might have profound effects in another. The insurgency in Laos, Kennedy's successors would find, was a small part of a larger regional communist movement. Operations by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and military special operations forces in Laos, therefore, can be seen as something of a primer for later interventions in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Central America. Both Kennedy and his successors drew a myriad of lessons from earlier CI operations. Laos, for example, certainly influenced the political and military leaders who executed American policy in Vietnam. Not all of the diplomatic, political and military lessons learned were necessarily good ones. I will, therefore, conclude with a brief discussion of how America's foray into Laos may have set the nation up for failure in neighboring Vietnam.

The historiography of post-war counterinsurgency and American operations in Laos has come in three discernible waves. The first of these arrived in the late 1960s and 70s, and focused its attention on American operations in Laos. The first group to emerge from the first wave of scholarship on the subject is characterized by books like Bernard Fall's *Anatomy of a Crisis* and Arthur Dommen's *Conflict in Laos*, sought to explain the Laotian political background that brought about American intervention. A second group seems to have been motivated by the ongoing war in neighboring Vietnam, as many authors sought lessons from the earlier crisis to illuminate the current one. Charles A. Stevenson's *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954* and Martin E. Goldstein's *American Policy Toward Laos* are good examples of this. In his introduction, Stevenson promises to put Laos in its proper perspective. His analysis of American policy is damning, arguing that it "seems a series of mistakes," but he makes an effort to cast policy makers as men with difficult decisions to make, often between several undesirable choices. He also tells the reader that the mistakes of Laos may hold important lessons. Goldstein, a political scientist, wishes to examine not *what* happened in Laos, but *why*. Particularly he wants to uncover America's stake in Laos, and how all parties to the conflict were able to reach the bargaining table in Geneva in 1962.¹²

¹² Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1964); Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-61*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1969); Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972); Goldstein, *passim*.

These works are characteristic of the period in that they criticize policy and, in Stevenson's case especially, point out its human cost among Laotians and its financial costs to Americans, while stopping short of similarly criticizing Kennedy. Such gentle treatment of Kennedy may be a product of his continuing heroic status among many of the authors. Another explanation, and one that forces a researcher to read his sources very carefully, is the fact that many of these early examinations were written by members of Kennedy's own staff who, following his assassination, were anxious to protect, or even build, the late President's reputation. Roger Hilsman's *The Politics and Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* and Arthur M. Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days* are good examples of this approach.¹³ The authors of this first wave tend not to directly address Kennedy's theories about CI, at least not with a critical eye. Many of these authors, particularly those who served in the Kennedy administration, end up sounding like apologists for any failures the President may have suffered. With respect to the implementation of CI and foreign intervention, for example, these authors tend to promote the notion that Kennedy had the right idea about CI and how it could be used as a tool of containment. Any failures of the President's CI doctrine are generally seen as the byproduct of resistance to the change by a stubborn, conventionally minded defense bureaucracy.

Still another group of books that falls roughly into the first wave of scholarship on Southeast Asia were the Vietnam province studies. Like Jeffrey

¹³ Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1967); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1965).

Race's *War Comes to Long An*, these books examine the effect of the war on specific provinces and regions in Vietnam.¹⁴ Their focus is usually in the Johnson and Nixon years, but their background chapters frequently review Kennedy's policies in Vietnam. As such, they frequently pass judgment on his CI programs. Race, for example, argues that Kennedy and his successors simply failed to grasp the power behind the communist movement in Southeast Asia. America misunderstood the enemy, in his view, and therefore responded with the wrong tactics. While books like Race's study the provinces in Vietnam, their indictments of American policies to combat communist insurgency in Southeast Asia are relevant to the struggle in Laos.

Following the end of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, another wave of books arrived that attempted to illuminate the development of CI doctrine, sometimes to demonstrate why or how it failed in the recent conflict, but more often to draw lessons from past operations, sometimes using Laos and Vietnam as examples. Douglas Blaufarb's *The Counterinsurgency Era* and Larry Cable's *Conflict of Myths: The Development of Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam* are the best examples. Blaufarb provides copious detail on the background of both insurgency and counterinsurgency, analyzes the lessons of operations in the Philippines and Malaya and looks hard at how well Americans have translated CI lessons into doctrine and practice. Cable follows a similar path, with more attention paid to lessons learned and unlearned from CI operations in Greece, South Korea, the Philippines, Malaya and, interestingly,

¹⁴ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

“the Banana Wars” in Central America. A growing subset of this genre examines CI efforts in Vietnam specifically, usually focusing on the failure of the defense establishment to properly balance conventional and unconventional approaches to the insurgency. Andrew Krepinevich’s *The Army and Vietnam* is an excellent analysis that falls into this category. Krepinevich suggests that, despite painful experiences in Southeast Asia and the Army’s pledge of “no more Vietnam’s”, the defense establishment has remained resistant to change and has, after all, learned few of the lessons of its past.¹⁵ While these historians focus on CI doctrine, they tend to touch only briefly on Kennedy in the telling of a larger story. When they do focus on Kennedy’s decisions on CI, it is usually with an eye toward how they affected Vietnam, rather than Laos.

The third wave of writing on Laos and CI came in the 1990s. As many of the operatives who executed American CI programs in Southeast Asia retired, they began to write books about their experiences. Most of these are characterized by a limited view of operations. While many of the earlier works tackle policy and doctrine, these later works examine execution on the ground, and illustrate how high-level decisions affected low-level operations. Many of these books are harshly critical of the Kennedy administration and, while they are usually excellent books, some seem motivated by bitterness over the fate of the indigenous personnel the authors had a hand in training. Perhaps the best pair

¹⁵ Blaufarb, *passim*; Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*, (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

to come out of this genre are Robert Conboy's amazingly detailed account *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* and Roger Warner's *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos*. Again, one must read this set of books carefully because, while they are great for providing perspective as to how American intervention played out on the ground, they are sometimes colored by personal dissatisfaction with the outcome of operations, as is the case with James E. Parker's *Codename Mule: Fighting the Secret War in Laos for the CIA*.¹⁶ This latest group of historians comes closest to the theme of this essay by covering both the background to the crises in Laos and the actions on the ground meant to deal with those crises. Their scope is very broad; most books of this sort cover U.S. intervention from its beginnings in 1955 until its end in 1973. Many go beyond that to tell what happened after the U.S. left Laos. Even these detailed accounts, however, tend to offer only limited analysis of Kennedy's CI theory and doctrine. The analyses they offer on the subject, moreover, are often culled from the secondary sources of their predecessors, most notably Blaufarb.

In attacking my subject, I will draw from many of these sources as well as numerous primary sources to arrive at some conclusions of my own about CI lessons learned and unlearned and describe how CI doctrine was developed and how it played out in Laos. In that respect, this essay is something of a synthesis

¹⁶ James Conboy, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*, (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995); Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos*, (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1996); James E. Parker, *Codename Mule: Fighting the Secret War in Laos for the CIA*. Another, smaller body of literature that coincided with the final wave reflected, somewhat, the trend towards social history in that its subject was not CI or lessons learned from operations in Laos, but rather, the exploitation and abandonment of the Hmong by American politicians and advisers. For a good example of this, see Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

of the three waves of scholarship as they relate to the Kennedy years, 1961-1963. I will break new trail, I believe, by focusing on Kennedy's thinking about CI and how it affected operations. Kennedy left few personal documents that tell us what he thought or knew about many of the subjects that occupied his presidency, including the crisis in Laos. There are documents, however, that can tell us what Kennedy was being told by his advisors. From these documents we can derive what Kennedy knew. We can then look at what he did to draw some conclusions about what he thought. Using some newly declassified documents, I will argue that Kennedy's thinking on CI had much to do with the outcome of American intervention in Laos and, ultimately, Vietnam.

Post War Lessons

Counterinsurgency operations were not new when Laos and Kennedy together arrived on center stage in 1961. They were not Kennedy's invention, despite his reputation as their leading benefactor. Modern American counterinsurgency operatives can trace their lineage to intelligence agents and special operations forces that have engaged in covert, counter-guerrilla missions from the French and Indian War through today. Their legacy includes the famous exploits of Rogers' Rangers in colonial America, Francis Marion during the American Revolution, Mosby's Raiders during the Civil War, and Merrill's Marauders and the OSS during World War II.¹⁷

¹⁷ Brigadier General William P. Yarborough, "Special Warriors of the U.S. Army," *Airman: The Official Journal of the Air Force* 5 (November 1961), 42-44.

¹⁸ Mao Tse-tung, *Six Essays on Military Affairs*, (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1972), 232-253.

During the Cold War, insurgencies have generally been armed, revolutionary struggles against a government or political ideology. They typically developed as efforts by communist-trained insurgents in the third world to redistribute land and wealth to the peasantry, and use the support this garnered to combat a non-communist or pro-west government. Most communist-led insurgencies followed the doctrine of protracted war articulated by Mao Tse-tung, the main principle of which is to fight a long series of guerrilla engagements to exhaust and demoralize the enemy.¹⁸ The most striking example of a true, comprehensive insurgency might be Ho Chi Minh's so-called people's war in Vietnam. By appealing to the impoverished majority of Vietnamese peasants with promises of land and economic reform, Ho was able to muster an amazingly dedicated and resilient following that ultimately wore down a numerically and technologically superior foe. In so doing, he demonstrated the difficulty of fighting a true insurgency with conventional weapons and tactics. Because of the social revolutionary nature of people's war, effective CI engages the political, economic and social realms, as well as the military.¹⁹ CI has as its object the destruction of an entire insurgent movement, rather than a single enemy unit or objective. Direct action, therefore, is merely part of the equation.²⁰

In the two decades following the Second World War, however, America had no coherent CI doctrine. With the exception of the CIA, few agencies

¹⁹ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Writings, 1920-1969*, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1973), *passim*, but especially 94-95, 195-208; FM100-20, chp 2. 2.

²⁰ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM 100-5, Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1990), chp. 2.

outside the Department of Defense played, or cared to play, much of a role in CI. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower presided over CI operations in Greece, Italy and the Philippines. The British, meanwhile, engaged in counterinsurgencies in Malaya and Singapore. The success of these early post-war CI operations promised a bright future for the containment of communism. For America, which had no doctrine for CI, these early operations taught some early lessons about the type of small wars the U.S. would encounter throughout the Cold War as it sought to contain communism and the insurgencies it inspired. Some of those lessons misled American leaders about the nature of insurgency and the real costs of CI.²¹

The Greek Civil War, from 1947-1949, provided the U.S. with its first post-war CI testing ground. Based on the definition provided above, it was a CI operation only insofar as it was an effort to support the Greek government against a communist insurgent. American intervention was extremely limited and involved primarily logistical support to conventional operations by Greek forces. Little effort was made, at least on the part of the Americans, to win the support of the people or answer any of the indictments of the insurgents with preemptive social or political programs of their own. More importantly, the Greeks themselves carried out most of the difficult work and all of the combat, under the

²¹ For concise discussions of the significance of post-war CI operations, see Theodore Shackley, *The Third Option: An American View of Counterinsurgency Operations*, (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1965): 8-9, and John Prados, *President's Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations From World War II Through the Persian Gulf*, (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996): 220. Two articles published in the *Marine Corps Gazette* in 1954 provide detailed contemporary assessments of two of the operations examined. They have been anthologized in Thomas N. Greene, ed., *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him*, (New York: Praeger Publishers,

inspirational leadership of a Greek hero, Field Marshal Alexander Papagos. U.S. involvement was hardly decisive.

The Greek government defeated the communist insurgents, in large measure, because the insurgents, "in search of a quick victory...conventionalized their forces...and sought to defeat the regular Greek Army in head-on war...ignoring the concept of protracted war."²² By doing so, the insurgents squandered any advantage they may have held because of the psychological value of guerrilla operations. By standing and fighting a conventional war, they virtually guaranteed their own defeat.²³

The Greek operation, therefore, provided few valuable lessons as to the intensity and difficulty of counterinsurgency operations. The lessons it did teach may have done more harm than good. In a report to McGeorge Bundy in November 1961, Chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council George C. McGhee draws lessons from past CI operations for use in Vietnam. Entitled "Counter-Guerrilla Campaigns in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines", the report cites the leadership of U.S. General Van Fleet and the practice of letting U.S. advisors go forward with combat units as decisive factors in the victory. He scarcely mentions the Greeks at all, except to laud "the increased efficiency of the GNA as a result of informed Greek leadership and of U.S. advice

1962). On Malaya, see Lieutenant Colonel Rowland S.N. Mans, "Victory In Malaya"; On Greece, see Colonel J.C. Murray, "The Anti-Bandit War".

²² Blaufarb, 23.

²³ Ibid. Mao articulated his theory of protracted struggle in 1938, so presumably it was available to the Greek insurgents.

and training.”²⁴ Flush with an easy victory, the Truman Administration did little to bolster its ability to conduct CI operations and the lessons it saved for its successors may have led them down the wrong path. The U.S. failed to develop its CI doctrine and capability, even as communist guerrillas in Southeast Asia appeared to be learning from their mistakes extending their resistance to the French and what Ho called “U.S. imperialism”.²⁵

The Huk rebellion in the Philippines provided another challenge and another easy victory for American CI. In 1946 the Huks, a native resistance group that fought the Japanese throughout WWII, reacted violently when they began to lose power to the new government following post-war elections. Essentially, they felt betrayed by the new government whom they had helped bring to power. Armed with a resistance network leftover from the Japanese occupation, they seized control over the central Luzon region and ruled it as if it were a separate state, running schools and providing other forms of governmental services.

Early efforts by the Philippine government to counter the Huks were entirely military and bore little fruit until they modified their tactics and strategy. Through trial and error, the Philippinos “[discovered] the superior effectiveness of light infantry units, the use of specialized scout squads to reach into and strike at enemy base areas, [and] the reliance on armed civilians under military

²⁴ George C. McGhee, “Counter-guerrilla Campaigns in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines”, 21 November 61, POF, Subjects, CI, JFKL.

²⁵ Ho, 95-95.

supervision to defend their own homes.”²⁶ Military operations did not defeat the Huks, however.

In 1950, with the insurrection in full bloom, Philippine President Quirino named Ramon Magsaysay Secretary of National Defense. Magsaysay had commanded 10,000 Philippino resistance fighters during the War and was sharply critical of the government’s efforts to defeat the Huks. He embarked on an ambitious and decidedly unconventional approach, both within the military and without.

Among his reforms, he demanded that the Philippine army treat civilians in their areas of operations with respect, declaring that “every soldier had two duties: first, to act as an ambassador of good will from the government to the people; second to kill or capture the Huk.”²⁷ Magsaysay’s insistence on his military’s sensitivity to civilians was, perhaps, the first demonstration of the effectiveness of what would come to be known as “civil military operations”. Magsaysay’s American advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, writes in his memoirs that he encouraged the Philippine leader to expand on this theme, suggesting the use of the military to assist civilians whenever and however they could. By doing so he would eliminate many of the problems that the Huks exploited to gain local support.²⁸ Magsaysay agreed, and embarked on a civic-

²⁶ Blaufarb, 28.

²⁷ Ibid., 30.

²⁸ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 70.

works program that should have stood as an example for the nation building that would characterize later efforts to combat people's war.

Most importantly, Magsaysay instituted a small but fundamental program of land reform. Under the auspices of the Economic Development Corps, Magsaysay instituted rent controls and provided the landless with a means to redress legal complaints against their landlords through the military's Judge Advocate General's Corps. He also promised land on the island of Mindanao to any of the Huks who were willing to lay down their arms. Once settled, he promised government assistance until these families got their farms up and running. While only 250 Huk families accepted Magsaysay's offer, the program succeeded in its effort to alleviate the chief complaint of the insurgents: inequitable distribution of land and the economic hardship it created.²⁹

In the Philippines, as in Greece, American intervention was limited. The U.S. provided advice and economic aid, both of which made a difference, but the decisive action was taken by the Philippine government, Magsaysay in particular, to earn and keep the support of its people. While the happy coincidence of Lansdale's ideas and Magsaysay's leadership proved an effective combination, the victory was primarily a Philippino effort. As D. Michael Shafer points out in *Deadly Paradigms*, prior to Magsaysay's arrival on the scene, American policies had little effect on the Huk insurgency.³⁰ The operation was, nevertheless, perhaps the first successful CI operation of the Cold War. It encompassed a total

²⁹ D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 231-239.

³⁰ Ibid., 205.

effort on the part of the government to dismantle not just the forces of the insurgent enemy, but also his base of popular support. It engaged in civic works projects and land redistribution, using military resources to assist the populace, and actively pursued positive civil-military relations. It should have provided a bevy of lessons for the developers of American CI doctrine. But despite Lansdale's input, the Philippine victory came almost as easily for the Americans as had the earlier Greek one. Americans misinterpreted the reasons for the victory, and therefore reinforced the wrong lessons.

The American military and intelligence communities came away with the impression that CI was cheap and effective. It may have been the latter, but it would often prove not to be the former. "The element of good luck finding a Magsaysay", Douglas Blaufarb argues, "was not always understood as what it was---sheer good luck."³¹ McGhee's 1961 report to Bundy affirms the notion that the US was still not drawing appropriate lessons from its operations. McGhee stresses the importance of the U.S. advisory role, then the leadership of Magsaysay, followed by building civilian support for the government as important factors leading to success.³² The U.S. moved on, satisfied with its undeveloped, but apparently successful, CI program and unwilling or unable to grasp the true catalysts behind the success of operations in Greece and the Philippines.

In 1948, the British began to have insurgency problems of their own in Malaya. As in Greece and the Philippines, the insurgents in the British colony were motivated by communist ideology. Also like those operations, the British

³¹ Blaufarb, 40.

met with great success. The British experience in Malaya is important for two reasons. First, it revealed the importance of a comprehensive, systematic approach to insurgency. Second, it illustrated how important local conditions were to a CI operation. As seems to have often been the case, U.S. officials took the lessons they liked from the Malaya experience and discarded those they disliked.

The situation the British faced in Malaya was unlike most that the United States had, or would encounter in its battles against communist insurgency. The first, and most important factor was the fact that the British were in charge in Malaya. They ran the local government and the military, and therefore had no need to route orders or policies through local authorities for approval. What local authorities were involved worked for the British, rather than with the support of the British, an important distinction. That sort of simplicity in command was invaluable, especially when one considers the difficulty U.S. officials had working with their counterparts in such places as Laos. Direct authority over many of the elements involved in the British CI effort played a decisive role in their success.

Second, the backbone of the Malaysian Communist Party and its guerrilla war against the British was the country's Chinese minority. This population formed only about a third of the whole, and commanded little allegiance among the general population. Furthermore, they were a readily identifiable minority, concentrated along the island's west coast and separated from the rest of the island by a chain of mountains. This geographic and social isolation allowed the British to focus their efforts in one place and against one ethnic group. Third, the

³² McGhee, "Counter-guerrilla Campaigns in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines".

British had controlled Malaya long enough that there was an extensive cadre of British civilians on the island with detailed local knowledge. These people provided critical intelligence and early warning.

Fourth, the British placed responsibility for suppressing the insurgency in the hands of a war committee composed of both civil and military authorities. This organization allowed for a rapid response to insurgent activity, while maintaining sensitivity to the needs of the local population. The British have a long-standing tradition of civil-military cooperation and it proved crucial to their success in Malaya. The cooperation of civil and military authorities allowed the British the luxury of separating insurgents from civilians, one of the basic principles of CI operations. Finally, the Malaysian Communist Party, importantly, received little external support in their efforts to overthrow the British.³³ McGhee seems to have garnered the right lessons from Malaya. He stresses the centrality of the British political effort to the overall CI campaign and the good use of intelligence to isolate the insurgents, thereby removing them from their base of power, the populace. Despite these revelations, however, he still fails to recognize the crucial importance of the insurgents' inherent weaknesses and the coordination of civil and military operations in the British victory.³⁴

While the lessons of the British experience in Malaya seem clear in retrospect, American observers apparently recognized some but not others. For

³³ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM 90-8, Counterguerrilla Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (hereafter USGPO), 1986); Sam C. Sarkesian, *Unconventional Conflicts in a New Security Era: Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 55-75; Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 71-95.

³⁴ McGhee, "Counter-guerrilla Operations In Greece, Malaya and the Philippines", JFKL.

example, the Army's initial doctrinal manual for CI-style operations, *FM 31-21 Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations*, published in 1958, reflected the experience of the Army Special Forces in Korea, where they were created to organize partisan resistance to the communists, rather than to operate as part of a unified CI campaign. "Using [this] model," argues Richard Downie, "the Special Forces concentrated on the mission of organizing friendly guerrilla forces behind enemy lines and coordinating the efforts of these guerrillas with U.S. conventional force operations."³⁵ Based on the Army's published doctrine, the lessons of civil-military cooperation had not been integrated as late as 1958 into a service-wide CI doctrine, nor had the defense establishment seen fit to tailor a force specifically organized and trained to execute CI operations. While the McGhee report acknowledges the importance of "the inter-relationship of military tactics and socio-economic reform" and that "there is no substitute for strong leadership, integrated both politically and militarily", the evidence suggests that American CI doctrine was slow to institutionalize these important lessons, while misinterpreting the importance of some of his earlier ones.³⁶

With confidence born of easy victory in Greece and the Philippines, the American military marched on through the 1950s and into the Kennedy years without a coherent counterinsurgency doctrine. Throughout the post war years, particularly under President Eisenhower, the country and its armed services

³⁵ Richard D. Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador and the Drug War*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 53.

³⁶ McGhee, "Counter-guerrilla Operations in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines"; Department of the Army, *FM 31-21, Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1958); Department of the Army, *FM 31-16, Counterguerrilla Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1962); Downie, 52-63.

remained caught up in the idea that the threat of massive nuclear retaliation was enough to deter communist aggression. When forced into operations requiring covert, or CI-style capabilities, the CIA was often the weapon of choice, rather than the military. CI doctrine continued to stress conventional forces and tactics, and paid little heed to the lessons of successful civil-military operations. The key pieces that seem to have been overlooked in most lessons taken regarding CI were the importance of ideology and its link to the support of the local population. In April, 1961, a *London Times* correspondent wrote a piece on Kennedy's shift towards increased capability in limited war. "The CIA man in the Brooks Brothers suit is being replaced by a soldier with a switch knife." he wrote, "The new hero is...a soldier expected to join in, and win, the military-political battles...Notably absent in...official appreciations of...contest[s] like Cuba, Laos and South Vietnam, is any reference to the ideological nature of the contest. There would appear to be a national inability to comprehend that sincere men can believe in communism, or that a people will not necessarily rise up against a dictator such as Dr. Castro, who has at least instituted some basic reforms."³⁷.

There certainly seems to have been a kind of blindness to ideology in some of the lessons learned about CI. That blindness does seem to be, as the preceding article implies, somewhat ethnocentric. Nevertheless, by April, when the article appeared, Kennedy appeared to be a firm believer in the use of CI to contain communism and was making aggressive moves to inculcate his philosophy throughout his administration. Fortunately, there were several

³⁷ London Times Correspondent, "James Bond Qualities for the U.S. Guerrilla Fighter", *The London Times*, 27 April 61.

important proponents of CI capability around the President, who was himself a strong believer.

Counterinsurgency doctrine in 1959 and 1960 looked very similar to how it had looked at the end of World War II. That is to say, there was very little published doctrine and what there was had yet to show much positive influence from post war lessons learned in the Philippines and Malaya. America still viewed CI as a military mission that could be carried out by conventional military forces. In special cases, like the communist insurgencies in Greece and the Philippines, the doctrine said, conventional units could be reorganized into smaller, lighter units to address a guerrilla enemy. In some cases the Special Forces could be used to raise local resistance to conventional forces. American soldiers and money remained at the center of its CI thinking. As yet, American CI doctrine neglected non-military approaches and failed to recognize the importance of addressing the roots of insurgency. No mention was made in the 1958 CI manual of fundamental economic or political reform as a key ingredient in a unified CI effort. Proceeding from this baseline, Kennedy's rhetoric promoting a doctrine of flexible response promised to revolutionize CI doctrine. The fact that Kennedy took over with major insurgencies burning in Cuba, Laos and Vietnam would test just how well Kennedy understood CI himself.

Kennedy's Increased Emphasis on Limited War

The documents of the early Kennedy administration make it clear that by "limited war", Kennedy meant "insurgency" and almost always communist

insurgency at that. The documents also suggest that Kennedy received plenty of advice as to what constituted insurgency and how best to fight it.

In February 1961, Robert H. Johnson, a member of the NSC's policy planning staff, issued his first report on Key National Security Problems. As if to reinforce the President's position, he highlighted the "grossly inadequate conceptual basis for our various programs relating to the developing areas..."³⁸ The implication is that holdovers from the Eisenhower administration in the Pentagon still favored a strategy predicated on massive retaliation, rather than flexible response.

At one of his first NSC meetings Kennedy served notice of his priorities when he asked his staff, "what are we doing about guerrilla warfare?"³⁹ He followed up that meeting with National Security Action Memorandum #2, dated February 3, 1961. Its content was straightforward; he ordered the Department of Defense and "other interested agencies" to "examine means for placing greater emphasis on the development of counter-guerrilla forces."⁴⁰ This memorandum marked the beginning of an emphasis on CI that would endure for most of the Kennedy administration.

To steer the administration in the right direction, Kennedy appointed a Military Representative to the President, choosing for the job General Maxwell D. Taylor, something of a legend in military circles. He had been one of the

³⁸ Robert H. Johnson, "Key National Security Problems", 10 February 61, NSF, M&M, Staff Memoranda, JFKL.

³⁹ Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 413; also quoted in Blaufarb, 53.

⁴⁰ McGeorge Bundy, "National Security Action Memorandum Number 2", 3 February 61, NSF, M&M, JFKL.

pioneers of airborne operations in the Army and had fought with the 82nd Airborne Division and commanded the 101st Airborne Division in World War II. He had later commanded the 8th Army in Korea and been Chief of Staff of the Army. He was the consummate paratrooper in an era when paratroopers were considered cutting-edge, the vanguard of the new military. He had opposed Eisenhower's strategy of reliance on a massive nuclear strike capability to the point of resigning his commission to protest conventional force cuts. He was also among the first to embrace the theory of "flexible response." Best of all, from the perspective of many in Kennedy's inner circle, he combined all of his military expertise with cultured intelligence. He was a published author, an academician (he spoke Japanese, had taught Spanish and French at West Point, and later became the Academy's superintendent) and director of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. General Taylor was emblematic of everything Kennedy wished his military to be---smart, flexible and unquestionably competent.⁴¹

Kennedy's administration echoed his belief that a flexible response capability was critical in its first National Intelligence Estimate, dated January 17, 1961. It stated, "It is now widely held that, in order to prevent such a paralyzing choice [nuclear war for a limited cause] it is necessary to have limited war capabilities, so that comparatively minor threats can be countered with appropriate means. But in recent years limited war capabilities in the West have been declining rather than rising...There has been a trend toward the reduction

⁴¹ Prados, 219-222; Weigley, 526.

of budgetary allocations for the modernization and mobility of limited-war-capable forces.”⁴²

The revelation that Western defense budgets had neglected limited warfare was followed by an admission that there was much about limited war that remained to be developed. What, for example, constituted grounds for intervention? How did one prevent a limited war from becoming a general war? And, tellingly for the climate of the times, how could the U.S. prevent the Soviets from introducing nuclear weapons into a limited war theater? Kennedy and his Departments of State and Defense set to work on those questions immediately, but they had been left precious little information from the Eisenhower administration, and much of it reflected older thinking and the former President’s lack of emphasis on CI. On January 24, 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara sent Kennedy a memo with his recollections of the last meeting between Eisenhower and the President-elect. On the subject of limited war, McNamara recalled, one of Eisenhower’s advisors (Secretary Gates) had argued that “The United States [could] handle any number of limited war situations at one time.”⁴³ Clearly, if the defense establishment believed that, Kennedy had his work cut out for him. Gates’ thinking reflected the doctrine of the time, implying as the manuals did that conventional forces could carry out limited war missions. In so arguing, both Gates and the contemporary doctrine failed to see limited war as Kennedy did, heavily influenced by political considerations.

⁴² *Foreign Relations of the United States*, (Hereafter *FRUS*), 1961-1963, Volume VIII, Laos Crisis, (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1994), 7.

Kennedy's emphasis did not mean instantaneous transformation, however. On February 14, 1961, National Security Staff member Robert W. Komer sent a memorandum to W.W. Rostow complaining that, despite the top "limwar" threats coming from Laos, Vietnam, Congo and Lebanon, "most Pentagon planning and certainly most of our military aid programs are still based on the concept of meeting major overt local aggression on a multi-division scale....DOD people tend to concentrate on anti-guerrilla problems, rather than on preventive medicine..."⁴⁴ More evidence followed in April when James Cross of the Institute for Defense Analysis published a study that found the Army continued to stress military action and organization in CI operations, rather than its non-military aspects. Cross tells the study's recipient, W.W. Rostow, that Philippino President Magsaysay had explained to him "his paradoxical double problem of getting the Philippino army into shape to fight effectively and then in restricting its full use in combat to permit his achieving a politically stable victory." He goes on to bluntly warn Rostow that the lesson of past CI operations is that "an ex-insurgent, disillusioned, reformed, and rehabilitated can be a valuable citizen, while a dead insurgent usually leaves behind him some friend and relatives and a long, lingering bitterness...few things are more politically dangerous for a government that depends in any way on the consent of the governed than to suppress irregulars and rebels by military action alone."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 24 Jan 61, p.10.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Komer, "Limited War Threats", 14 February 61, NSF, M&M, Staff Memoranda, JFKL.

⁴⁵ James Cross, 19 April 61, NSF, M&M, Staff Memoranda, JFKL.

Cross's findings, and his warnings to Rostow, came at a time of policy review for the Kennedy administration, and told them what they believed to be true already, that there needed to be a significant shift in both thought and action.

In May 1961, Robert F. Kennedy sent his brother a copy of a 1960 Army report entitled "Counter Insurgency Operations: A Handbook for the Suppression of Communist Guerrilla/Terrorist Operations". It is a detailed analysis of communist command and control of insurgent operations in the third world and how to fight them. It argued that, "the basic causes of revolutionary warfare are seated in the politico-psychological and socio-economic instability of the country...the guerrilla/terrorist movement is the result, not the cause of the problem...the anti-guerrilla/terrorist operations must aim at severing the enemy from their base within the people, and must, therefore, emphasize political, psychological and economic actions...the guerrilla must be opposed by his own actions...a military operation alone has never been shown to extinguish guerrilla operations of a significant nature."⁴⁶ The report runs for over 80 pages and, in addition to the assertions above, provides a thorough description of communist theory and an assessment of the COMINTERN's role in fomenting and directing insurgencies around the world. Its most important chapters, however, appear as appendices that provide examples of tactics to be used against insurgent forces.

One of these appendices includes the development of a village-based protection system and resistance movement that strikingly resembles the strategic hamlet program later attempted in Vietnam. It stresses the importance

⁴⁶ Robert F. Kennedy, Letter to the President, 22 May 61, POF, Countries, Cuba, JFKL.

of the physical separation of the local population from the insurgents to prevent the subversion of the former and to remove the base of support from the latter. It also calls for the government, usually the target of an insurgency, to provide services for its citizens, especially those that the insurgents claim are missing or inadequate. It clearly argues that, without popular support, a government cannot defeat an insurgency. Essentially, the report describes a strategy by which a government counters insurgency by winning the hearts and minds of the local population. Without the fertile soil provided by dissatisfaction among the people, insurgency cannot take root.

Here at last was the basis for a comprehensive CI doctrine. Whether the authors of the report truly understood how to win hearts and minds is not clear, but the steps they describe are those of almost every successful post war CI operation. Most importantly, the report emphasizes the importance of fundamental reform to address the grievances of the insurgents. This crucial aspect of CI was, as I've argued, missing from American doctrine. Why then, one wonders, did this report arrive on the President's desk by such unusual channels, almost a year after its appearance? The fact that the report remained unpublished as a manual suggests that Pentagon leaders did not yet believe it significant enough to institutionalize its findings. Its title and content suggest that it was authored by members of the special operations community, a group roundly disdained by the conventional military at the time. Both factors may help explain its obscurity.

Assuming Kennedy read the report, one would expect someone with his belief in flexible response to quickly transform its contents into doctrine. Given the appearance of new CI manuals for both the Marine Corps and the Army in 1962, which included some of these lessons, one gathers that Kennedy embraced this study and its recommendations. My analysis of the execution of CI programs in Laos will demonstrate whether Kennedy understood the idea of a holistic approach to communist insurgency and how well he digested the contents of the Army report.

Events of early 1961 must have galvanized Kennedy's belief in the threat posed by a relentless, global advance of communism. In March and April of 1961 the Soviets and their allies scored what could only have been perceived as a series of Cold War triumphs over the Americans. On March 24th, for example, the administration issued a press release claiming that "an unarmed C-47, assigned to the United States Embassies at Vientiane and Saigon, was shot down on March 23 over Xieng Khouang province at an altitude of more than 6000 feet...the plane was shot down by anti-aircraft artillery, not small arms fire."⁴⁷ Washington rightly viewed this development as critical to the ongoing CI effort in Laos. At 6000 feet, the American plane almost certainly had to have been shot down by a Soviet Surface to Air Missile, indicating that, if the Soviets weren't directly involved, they were providing the Pathet Lao insurgents with relatively hi-tech weapons, and training them in their use. Two weeks later, on April 12th, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin made the world's first successful manned flight into space. This accomplishment amazed and frightened America,

because it indicated that the communists were pulling decisively ahead in the space race. Who knew what advantages such technology would give them?

Then, on April 17th, America and the Kennedy administration were badly shaken by news of the disastrous events at the Bay of Pigs. The President had staked much in terms of personal reputation and national prestige on the success of the invasion. Its failure damaged the credibility of the new administration and complicated political and diplomatic decision making, as well as making the accomplishments and advances of global communism seem all the more relentless. Presidential advisor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., sent Kennedy a memo upon returning from a trip to Europe, during which he had tried to gauge response to the Cuban catastrophe. The overriding sentiment among European leaders was "shock and disillusion". Europeans, Schlesinger explained to the President, had placed great faith in the new American administration, and was deeply disappointed that it had blundered so badly, so early in its tenure. Moreover, he wrote, European leaders were alarmed that "the Kennedy who launched the invasion was the real Kennedy---that talk about 'new methods' of warfare and countering guerrillas represents his real approach to the problems of the cold war..."⁴⁸ What the Europeans did not know was just how right they were. Kennedy did intend to approach the problems of the cold war with new methods and by countering guerrillas. He had made some naïve decisions, and his military planning had been woefully inept, but his administration was learning, and the President was determined to proceed.

⁴⁷ Press Release, 24 March 61, NSF, CS:Laos, JFKL.

In the realm of CI, the failure at the Bay of Pigs meant that covert CI operations, such as those ongoing in Laos and Vietnam, ran the risk of further embarrassing the United States, should they fail or be badly compromised. Kennedy, therefore, saw it as critically important to rebuild his administration's credibility with its allies, and so put other initiatives on the back burner temporarily. Among the initiatives that he quashed was direct military intervention in Laos.⁴⁹ The Kremlin must have sensed the opportunity presented by an apprehensive or off-balance Washington. After April they accelerated a series of airlifts to the Pathet Lao and committed to vast new military intervention in Cuba, including the fateful decision to place nuclear missiles on the island.⁵⁰

With events seemingly turning against the U.S., W.W. Rostow advised Kennedy that "...the greatest problem we face is not to have the whole of our foreign policy thrown off by what we say and what we do about Cuba itself...I believe we must resume with intensified vigor and perhaps more boldness than we have heretofore envisaged, the lines of action already under way." Among those lines, he counseled, was to prove that the U.S. was not "a paper tiger." In short, what Rostow proposed, and what Kennedy seems to have taken to heart, was greater care and planning to shore up the administration's reputation, and intensified diplomacy and non-military intervention techniques. To "redress and restore" the U.S. position in the international order, Rostow proposed that the

⁴⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Reactions to Cuba in Western Europe", 3 May 61, POF, Cuba, Security, JFKL. Emphasis is Shlesinger's.

⁴⁹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 339.

⁵⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, 102-103.

U.S. should publicize the expansionist, absorptive nature of communism, advertise their willingness to resort to nuclear blackmail, and offer an American program of "independence, assistance and partnership" as a contrast. All of this, he argued, would show the communists, America's allies and the Third World that the Cuban mishap was an aberration.⁵¹

Kennedy appears to have done just what Rostow advised. With his administration back on its feet, Kennedy returned his attention to the creation and training of limited-war-capable units. He immediately ordered increased training for counterinsurgency at the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, and he expanded the number of Special Forces Groups, adding two overseas in Okinawa and Germany. His emphasis is reflected in his changes to the fiscal year 1962 Defense Budget. In the area of limited war, the Eisenhower administration had earmarked no money at all for "readiness, training and exercises" of limited war units. Kennedy's new budget allocated \$149 million. In virtually every sub-category of Limited War, Kennedy's budget called for vast increases. In sealift capability the increase was \$40 million, in ammunition, equipment and stock, \$204 million and in research and development, Limited War saw a jump from nothing to \$70 million. Overall, Kennedy proposed \$582.3 million in increases to the limited warfare budget. Small wonder he created the stir that Reston so glibly pooh-poohed. Reinforcing the perception that his emphasis was on flexibility, the same budget saw a \$211.5 million decrease in allocations for Strategic and Continental Air Defense and a \$199.3 million

⁵¹ W.W. Rostow, "The Problem We Face", 21 April 61, NSF, M&M, Policy Planning, JFKL.

increase in overall Research and Development funds. The New Frontier for the CI meant newer tactics, better equipment and training and more flexible responses to communist insurgency.⁵²

The Special Group For Counterinsurgency

After a year in office, with many of his CI initiatives underway, Kennedy took the unprecedented step of institutionalizing counterinsurgency as a tool of containment in his administration. On January 18, 1962, Kennedy issued National Security Action Memorandum #124. Its subject was "Establishment of the Special Group (Counter-Insurgency)." In an administration known for its think-tank, inner-circle style of decision making, such a group meant that no one in Kennedy's government could look past CI any longer. The Special Group (CI) was chaired Kennedy's Military Representative, General Taylor, and included Robert F. Kennedy and McGeorge Bundy, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Deputy Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Director of the CIA and the Chief Administrator of the Agency for International Development. The Memorandum that established the Group outlined its primary missions including, "insur[ing] proper recognition throughout the U.S. government that subversive insurgency...is a major form of politico-military conflict *equal in importance* to conventional warfare."⁵³ This first mission suggests that Kennedy perceived resistance to his ideas among some in his administration and wished to re-emphasize his priorities. The Group's other

⁵² FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume VIII, p.56-65.

⁵³ John F. Kennedy, "Establishment of Special Group (Counterinsurgency)", 18 January 62, NSF, M&M, SGCI, JFKL. Emphasis mine.

responsibilities included assessing CI doctrine and resources and making recommendations for their modification, development of CI programs "in countries and regions specifically assigned to the Special Group (CI) by the President", and insuring that the emphasis on CI was reflected in the organization, training, equipment and doctrine of the forces and agencies charged with carrying out those CI programs.⁵⁴ Attached to the memorandum was a list of the Group's three initial areas of responsibility, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. It was sent to the head of each agency involved and was signed "Jack Kennedy."⁵⁵ The establishment of the Special Group (CI) was an important step by Kennedy because it turned his theories and rhetoric about CI into published policy. It forced recognition of CI's role in national strategy upon the reluctant and provided an interdepartmental body to synchronize and over watch the execution of the government's CI policies.

The Special Group (CI) was, for obvious reasons, perceived as quite important within the Kennedy administration, and indeed it was. Here was a personal directive from the President to some of his senior staff members to ensure unity of effort and maximum efficiency and effectiveness in dealing with counterinsurgency. Here also was institutionalization of the idea that CI had to involve both civil and military spheres, that it had to address political and economic issues, as well as diplomatic and military ones. The doctrine that was being taught at Fort Bragg now had an infrastructure supporting it in Washington.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

The lessons of the past decade and half were finally being translated into workable doctrine and policy.

Scarcely two months after its inception, the Special Group had already developed quite a track record. In a classified memo dated March 22, 1962, General Taylor reviewed the group's activities for the President. Among the things he chose to list were the establishment of a military command in South Vietnam, the expansion of the Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, the elevation of the latter school's commander to Brigadier General level (making it a prestigious job), inclusion of CI training and qualification among the requirements for flag-rank promotion across the armed services, codification of training objectives and programs for the Military Advisory Assistance Group and the appointment of a flag officer from each service to serve as a CI representative on the Joint Staff. All of these actions had the approval of the President.⁵⁶

In June, with the group's purview expanded to include new hot spots in Cambodia, Congo, Iran, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Venezuela, the President asked Taylor to have the Special Group draw up a list of the greatest insurgency threats facing to United States interests. Out of this grew the group's first list of hot spots. There were 13 countries listed in two groups, critical and non-critical. Tellingly, only Laos and Vietnam made the critical list.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Author and Subject Sanitized, 22 March 62, NSF, M&M, SGCI, JFKL. The nature of the memo and the style of writing suggest that its author was probably General Taylor.

⁵⁷ General Maxwell D. Taylor, 1 June 62, NSF, M&M, SGCI, JFKL.

The Special Group (CI)'s most important efforts, it seems, came in trying to change the mindset of the military. To be sure, there were still many officers and entire units that neither cared for nor ever expected to engage in CI operations. But the tide was now against them. By January 1962, Lemnitzer was able to report to the members of the Group that "the military are taking full advantage of the laboratory-type approach afforded by the current situation in Southeast Asia and other areas of the world."⁵⁸ Among the advances he cited in military training for CI, were modifications to the curriculum at virtually every level of military education, from the service academies to the staff and senior service colleges. All now included instruction in the principles of CI operations. There was also now specialized CI training for MAAG personnel, as well as increased emphasis on language expertise.⁵⁹ It is difficult to tell whether many of these efforts reflected a thorough understanding of people's war and how to fight it, or if they were just lip service. The curriculum at the service academies and staff college, in particular, stands out as a place where lip service and little else might have been paid to the ideas of CI. Even if the lessons being taught to young officers amounted little more than admonitions to build schools for the locals and avoid killing their livestock, such instruction represented a drastic change from pre-Kennedy days.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ General L.L. Lemnitzer, "Military Training Related to CI Matters", 30 January 62, NSF, M&M, JFKL.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Current CI instruction remains rudimentary at the junior-officer level, stressing the minimization of collateral damage and the development of civic works projects. Discussion of fundamental political and economic change remains un-addressed, as does Maoist theory. There

In July, Lemnitzer issued another report entitled "Summary of Military CI Accomplishments Since January 1961." This document boasts that the services had developed "a strategy of both therapy and prophylaxis". Among the other accomplishments on the CI front were the training of more than 14000 foreign officers from 65 countries and the reorganization of the military to include CI capability in each service. Most importantly, however, he argued that the greatest gains had been realized "in a peaceful area---helping allied military forces strengthen the social and economic base of their countries and, in so doing, to create a better image of themselves."⁶¹

If Lemnitzer's assertions are true, then here, at last, are the lessons of the Philippines and Malaya properly applied. They would not penetrate into doctrinal manuals immediately. What appears clear from a review of Kennedy's emphasis on CI is that the right ideas were there, in the minds of a few key advisors, from the beginning. The evidence also suggests that Kennedy was privy to their thinking and that he wished his government to espouse a doctrine that included it. It took a year for him to reverse the momentum of fifteen years of emphasis on nuclear strategy. By 1962, however, it seems that Kennedy's priorities were finally being institutionalized throughout his administration. The activities of his CI operators at Fort Bragg and throughout the Third World were not yet fully integrated into doctrine, but a lag between training, execution and publication in doctrinal manuals is not unusual. There is usually a period during which field

seems no reason to assume and I have no evidence to suggest that the situation was any different in 1962.

operators experiment with techniques and procedures that are incorporated into doctrine only after a review has proven them effective, as seems to have been the case with Kennedy's CI programs. Reviews of previous CI operations as well as, one assumes, reports from his own operators and trainers, led him to push his program in the direction he did, a direction that led to the publication or modification of three new doctrinal manuals for CI in 1963, and 7 more before the end of the decade. The lag does not negate the fact that what Lemnitzer reported in July 62 denotes significant progress in the development of CI doctrine from the top down. It remains to be seen how well this doctrine and Kennedy's emphasis on CI fared in the "laboratory-type" arena of Laos.⁶²

⁶¹ General L.L. Lemnitzer, "Summary of Military CI Accomplishments Since January 1961," 21 July 62, NSF, M&M, JFKL.

⁶² Downie, 53 shows that FM 31-16, *Counterguerrilla Operations*, FM 31-21, *Guerrilla Warfare and Special Operations Forces*, and FM 31-22, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces* were all released (or re-released) in 1962 as implementing doctrine for CI operations. FM 31-16 still suggested that conventional units could be used effectively in a CI role, but all of the manuals discussed the need for civil-military cooperation and the importance of political action in CI.

CHAPTER 2

THE POST-WAR QUAGMIRE IN LAOS

Introduction

One cannot hope to understand the Kennedy administration's CI efforts in Laos without some background into the quagmire of Laotian politics and the history of American intervention in the kingdom. When President Kennedy assumed office, Southeast Asia was a region in turmoil. Communist guerrillas backed, America suspected, by the Soviets and Chinese, clashed with government forces in both Laos and South Vietnam. Laos was considered critical because if communists succeeded in conquering it the only thing standing between them and West-friendly Thailand would be the Mekong River. Between 1955 and 1959, Eisenhower had committed hundreds of military advisors and over \$205 million to ensuring that Laos was not the first domino to fall. The outgoing President and his staff focused on the situation in Laos during the last transition meeting held with the incoming Kennedy administration. He warned the young President-elect that it was the key to the region. "It [is] the cork in the bottle", Eisenhower's Secretary of State added, telling Kennedy, "If Laos [falls], then Thailand, the Philippines and of course Chiang Kai-shek [will] go."⁶³ Eisenhower and his advisors spoke from five years of often-difficult experience in the country. This chapter will examine the development of American intervention

⁶³ Evelyn Lincoln, "Notes of Conversation Between President-Elect Kennedy and President Eisenhower", 19 January 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 24:19. While several versions of what was said in this meeting exist, Kennedy personally dictated this one to his assistant, Evelyn Lincoln; Goldstein, *American Policy in Laos*, 138. Goldstein places the actual figure for total aid to Laos from 1955-59 at \$205.4 million, Prados at "over \$250 million".

in Laos to help set the stage upon which Kennedy's CI operations played out. To do so, I must first explain the nature of the conflict in Laos, as well as the makeup and motivations of the various factions.

In 1955, Eisenhower began his third year in office with events in Laos moving quickly and unpredictably. The President maintained that there was a world communist conspiracy, orchestrated by the Soviet Union, and his thinking made the danger of Laos falling under communist domination in 1955 seem very real. The Geneva Accords of July 1954 had ended a bloody period of civil war in the little kingdom between the Royal Government, supported by the French, and the communist Pathet Lao, who sought to oust the French from the Kingdom once and for all. When negotiations for a cease-fire began, a tiny force of Pathet Lao, about 1500 combat troops, controlled 80% of the country, while the Royal Army of 20,000 controlled only the Mekong River Valley.⁶⁴ Goldstein suggests that the ability of such a small force to control such a vast area is evidence of the Viet Minh's influence. The aid of the powerful Viet Minh, who were backed by the North Vietnamese Army and the Soviet Union, would certainly explain the ability of so few soldiers to hold so much territory. In any case, the Pathet Lao were not permitted to send a delegate to the negotiations that were to decide, among other things, the fate of their country. Nevertheless, the Accords included the Pathet Lao in their decrees.

The Geneva Accords set forth a cease-fire date of August 6th, 1954. Within 120 days after that date, all foreign troops, but specifically, the Viet Minh

⁶⁴ Goldstein, 73.

and the French, were to be out of the country. The tenets of the Accords allowed a small cadre of French military personnel to remain in the country to train the Royal Lao Army, but military assistance by any other external nation or group was specifically prohibited.⁶⁵ Perhaps most fatefully, the Accords provided for a coalition government that would include both the existing Royal Government and the communist Pathet Lao. The latter were to consolidate in two northern provinces of Laos, Phong Saly and Sam Neua, to prepare for the national elections anticipated sometime in 1955.⁶⁶

Despite the tenets of the Geneva Accords specifically including the Pathet Lao in the coalition government, Eisenhower was determined that Laos must be anti-communist. He was convinced that the Geneva Accords, having partitioned Vietnam and recognized a communist north, left the door open to the possibility of communism spreading into Laos. He was, however, hampered in his desire to intervene because of the prohibition against foreign military personnel in the country. But with elections approaching and the Pathet Lao demonstrating alarming popularity, which might translate into strength at the polls, Eisenhower felt forced to do something to ensure their defeat. Laos's importance to America's vital national interests may have been negligible, but the symbolic importance of holding the line against communism was considerable and made intervention almost inevitable.

⁶⁵ Between 1955 and 1963 the military forces in Laos that remained loyal to the King and his government, that is to say, the national army, changed its name several times. For simplicity's sake, and to differentiate it from the other factions that did not remain loyal to the King and government, I will refer to the Laotian army as the Royal Lao Army throughout the narrative.

⁶⁶ *FRUS, 1955-1957, Volume XXI, East Asian Security, Cambodia, Laos, 577-578; Foreign Relations, 1952-54, Volume XVI, 1521, 1540-1543; Goldstein, 66-101.*

From French Colony To Independent Nation

The story of American intervention in Laos begins, as it does in Vietnam, with the French empire in Indochina. Like Vietnam, Laos suffered the ministrations of French colonial rule through most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1940, as war raged in Europe and Paris fell to the Nazis, the latter's Axis ally, Japan, began a campaign to seize European colonies in Southeast Asia. Within a year they controlled most of France's former empire in Indochina, including Laos. Japanese rule, while harsh, was a critical turning point for Laos in throwing off the French yoke. Japanese governors, in an effort to purge European influence, encouraged the growth of nationalism in the region. In Laos, they went so far as to kidnap the son of Laotian King Sissavong Vong in a successful attempt to coerce him into declaring an end to French rule.⁶⁷

Among those who grasped this thread of independence were three brothers, all intellectuals from the Laotian elite. Princes Phetsarath, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong initiated and led a Free Lao movement, called Lao Issara, which declared independence at the end of World War II. This decision put the Lao Issara at loggerheads with the French, who had launched a post-war effort to retake their colonies in Indochina and the Royal Government, which issued a counter-declaration of allegiance to France.⁶⁸ The ethnic makeup of the Lao Issara is unclear, but their leadership came from the ethnic majority lowland Lao, who also composed most of the Royal Government. The Lao Issara were

⁶⁷ Conboy, *Shadow War*, 31-35.

an example of a united front insurgent movement, whose object was national independence. The appeals of the Lao Issara and the autonomy granted under Japanese occupation made reestablishment of a colonial relationship difficult for the French. French efforts to gain control of the countryside from Lao Issara guerrillas met with frustration for nearly a year. In 1946 the French sent paratroopers to finally establish order in Laos, prompting the three princes and the Lao Issara to flee to Bangkok.⁶⁹

France's chance to celebrate the defeat of the Lao Issara movement was short, however. In Vietnam, communist Viet Minh guerrillas were gaining ground and momentum. In an effort to free assets to fight the Viet Minh, the French granted Laos ever-increasing degrees of autonomy. In 1947 they established a constitutional monarchy. In 1949, they allowed the Royal Lao Government to raise an army. With independence seemingly on the way, Prince Souvanna Phouma and his faction of the Lao Issara returned, with amnesty, to Laos. The Lao Issara had split during their time in exile over strategy. Souvanna Phouma favored gradual evolution to independence, believing the French were destined to eventually abandon Laos. Souphanouvong, the commander of the Lao Issara's military forces, favored an alliance with the powerful Viet Minh and the military overthrow of the French. Phetsarath remained in exile, disagreeing with

⁶⁸ Arthur J. Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 39-40.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

⁷⁰ Goldstein, 67-70.

the introduction of the Viet Minh into the nationalist Laotian movement.⁷⁰ Souphanouvong mounted an attack against the French in 1947 and was once again routed. His tactics further split the Lao Issara, who ejected him from the movement in 1949 and declared allegiance to the royal government. Shortly thereafter, the Lao Issara dissolved.⁷¹

Souphanouvong and his followers made their way to North Vietnam, where they finally allied with Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. In August 1950 Souphanouvong established the Pathet Lao, a movement dedicated to the overthrow of the French and the unification of Laos. Later that year, he established a political wing of the Pathet Lao, dubbed the First Resistance Congress of Laos. The latter organization declared a resistance government, the Neo Lao Issara, the forerunner of the Laotian Communist Party. While Souvanna Phouma led a nationalist political movement in Vientiane that was loyal to the royal government, the burgeoning Pathet Lao began receiving arms and training from the Viet Minh. In 1953 the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh launched the first of three joint invasions of northern Laos. By the end of 1953 the invaders had gained control of Sam Neua and Phong Saly, two of the provinces in northern Laos.⁷² As Goldstein points out, the Pathet Lao maintained an amazingly effective veil of secrecy around their organization. There is evidence to show that the Viet Minh heavily influenced the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao carried arms and wore uniforms provided by the Viet Minh. There

⁷¹ Ibid.

were Vietnamese advisors with their units in the field. Most tellingly, the two forces repeatedly joined forces to attack the French and the Royal Lao Army.

Aside from this cooperation, very little is known about the Pathet Lao and many questions remain. Goldstein asks, for example, how dedicated they really were to communist ideology. Were they true communists, or only insofar as it earned them the support of the Vietnamese? The Pathet Lao were present at a conference sponsored by Vietnam in 1951 at which communist front movements in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos (represented by the Pathet Lao) agreed to an alliance. But this does not prove that they were dedicated communists. It was at the same meeting that the Viet Minh agreed to aid the Pathet Lao, so the latter group could have been paying lip service to communist ideology in an effort to gain much needed support.⁷³ The Pathet Lao were very dependent on the Viet Minh for aid, but I do not believe they shared the latter group's ideological purity. The Pathet Lao's tactics were a mix of people's war and united front. They used propaganda and selective terror, including assassination, to coerce the reluctant into cooperation. They also set up schools and provided basic government

⁷² Joseph J. Zasloff, *The Pathet Lao: Organization and Leadership*, (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1973.), 45; Goldstein, 67-70, 98-99.

⁷³ Goldstein, 68; Dommen, *Keystone of Indochina*, 40.

⁷⁴ Conboy, 13; Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 71.

⁷⁵ Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 20-22, 30-31.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 20-22.

services in some areas to gain support.⁷⁴ Such an unusual mix of tactics is inconsistent with pure Marxism or people's war.

Paul Langer and Joseph Zasloff have argued that, while Souphanouvong did study in France during the height of the popular front movement there, he was not an ideologically zealous communist. His rhetoric did not reflect Marxist theory, nor did any of the Pathet Lao's propaganda. These two historians also note that, upon his return from France, despite his excellent professional and academic qualifications, the French assigned him to an unimportant post, heightening his resentment of French rule.⁷⁵

It seems likely, therefore, given Souphanouvong's background and his unfavorable experiences with the colonial government, that the Pathet Lao were less ideologically motivated than they were bent on the eradication of French colonialism. The economic, social and political natures of the country support the latter assertion. As Langer and Zasloff make clear, Laos is not a land of haves and have-nots in the same way that many Third World countries are. It is a country of small villages, largely isolated from one another and the world at large. The government, any government, wields little influence over the routine events of a villager's life and the villager, in return, seems to seek little from the government. More importantly, the average Laotian shows little interest in national, let alone global politics. Because so few Laotians are politically active, either by geography or apathy, the influence of a few elite families tends to be

exaggerated. Souphanouvong came from one of these families.⁷⁶ If economic inequity was not an issue in Laos, and there was no evidence of Marxism in the Pathet Lao's platform, while there was anti-French and, later, anti-U.S. rhetoric, one must conclude that the Pathet Lao were a united front independence movement.

Having identified the Pathet Lao as a united front, one is able to more clearly define the nature of their insurgency. They were not fighting a true people's war as Mao defined it. Neither economic reform, nor land redistribution seems to have been their object so much as national independence and an end to colonialism. But if Langer and Zasloff are correct, that most Laotians sought little from and cared little about the government, how did a Pathet Lao independence movement gain support? Their support was based largely on the combination of greater independence granted by Japan and then France, followed by the shock of return to French rule. The beginnings of the Lao Issara movement are first discernible in the period of French reintroduction into Laos, which makes the latter argument plausible. Langer and Zasloff argue that the same period saw a rise in the influence of the Vietnamese in Laos. There is an ancient animosity between ethnic Laos and the Vietnamese, and this animosity helped foment a movement aimed at placing the fate of Laos in the hands of Laotians. The latter movement eventually became the Lao Issara, which later

split into two camps, one that favored the Vietnamese (Souphanouvong's Pathet Lao) and one that did not.⁷⁷

It is difficult to conclude confidently that the Pathet Lao succeeded in stirring nationalist sentiment in notoriously apathetic Laos. One must remember, however, that the Pathet Lao were a relatively small movement, albeit with a big influence. Because they were small, they did not need a massive support structure, although they had one in the Viet Minh. It seems likely that the Pathet Lao were able to gain power based on appeals to what nationalists there were among the politicized elements in the country, and maintain it with a combination of propaganda, assistance to the populace, selective terror and copious aid from the Vietnamese.

The Royal Lao Government's loyalty to its French patrons was hinged on the latter's ability to protect the Kingdom from the communist insurgents, a task which was becoming increasingly difficult. Viet Minh incursions into Laos were becoming larger and harder to defeat. The Pathet Lao, who followed on the heels of invading Viet Minh forces, gained popular support as the French proved less and less able to protect their provincial subjects. In a final effort to prevent the Viet Minh from overwhelming northeastern Laos, the French prepared their final stand at a strongpoint constructed at Dien Bien Phu, just across the border in North Vietnam. The intent of this large, well-armed base was to deter the Viet Minh from crossing the frontier into Laos, as they had done twice before, and threatening the old royal capital of Luang Prabang.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23-29.

Dien Bien Phu's fatal flaw, however, was its location in the center of a valley. The French had calculated, incorrectly, that the enemy would be unable to get artillery into the mountains surrounding the base. This miscalculation cost them dearly. The Viet Minh laid siege to the French strongpoint, while marching other forces around it to threaten Luang Prabang. After nearly four months, Dien Bien Phu fell to the communists on May 7, 1954. The French could not last long after losing their largest base, and they soon negotiated an end to their reign in Indochina, at Geneva in July 1954. But the end of French rule was not such an unqualified boon for Laos.

As I have implied, Laos was a nation mostly in name. It was made up of several different ethnic groups, separated generally into mountain tribes and lowland Lao. Many of the former lived in small, scattered villages along the rugged spine of the country and recognized no national boundaries or allegiance to any government save their own local elders. The lowland Lao, or Lao Loum, were by far the largest ethnic group in Laos, at 1.7 million. They outnumbered the combined highland tribes, which included the aboriginal Lao Theung, and the more recently arrived Lao T'ai, Hmong and Yao about two to one. There were also significant Chinese and Vietnamese minorities in southern Laos. This mix defied easy governance and virtually ensured that the minority highlanders, who were by no means unified in beliefs or allegiances, were underrepresented in the government. To make matters worse, the politicized segments of Laotian society, primarily lowlanders, were often split over the question of the Pathet Lao's legitimacy and the role of the French in the royal government. The political

disarray contributed to the conditions that allowed a communist, united front insurgency to blossom in Laos.⁷⁸

Despite the mandate in the Geneva Accords that foreign troops evacuate Laos, by the August 5th cease-fire date, 4,000 Viet Minh guerrillas remained in Laos. They occupied positions throughout the country, save the Mekong River valley. The Pathet Lao, whom the Geneva Accords had instructed to move to the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, were doing something more than consolidating and regrouping. They effectively seized control of both provinces and began governing them, almost as a separate nation, even providing some basic governmental services to the populace.⁷⁹ The Royal Lao Army was in disarray after nearly five years of struggle against the guerrilla tactics of the communist forces, and with the departure of most of their French allies, they were rendered incapable of coercing compliance with the Geneva agreements from either the Viet Minh or the Pathet Lao.⁸⁰

Two months after Geneva, with many French bureaucrats still holding cabinet posts in the Royal Lao Government, and the Lao National Army suffering losses to the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao in the field despite the presence of 1500 French advisors, Laotian King Sissavong Vong solicited direct American

⁷⁸ Dommen, *Keystone of Indochina*, 1-7. The population figures are Dommen's estimates; there was no census in Laos until 1985.

⁷⁹ Conboy, 13; Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, 31.

⁸⁰ Goldstein, 122-141. Goldstein argues that, short of granting Laos total independence, thereby removing the Pathet Lao's *raison d'être*, there was little either the French or the U.S. could have done to arrest the influence of the communists in Laos from 1949-1954.

assistance. The old King claimed that without it, his national army would be financially bankrupt and incapable of further operations after January 1955.⁸¹

The growth of the communist Pathet Lao as a threat to the royal government and the continued influence of the Viet Minh forced the United States to sit up and take notice of Laos. The U.S. position on Indochina had, until this point, been primarily one of sideline support for their French ally. The Eisenhower administration needed French agreement on several issues in Europe aimed at preventing the spread of communism there. As a consequence, the Americans were unwilling to alienate the French by implying that the French could not handle the situation in Indochina by themselves. Embroiled in a climate of post-war anti-communism, and firmly believing himself to be facing a relentless communist drive for world domination, Eisenhower saw French defeat at Dien Bien Phu as a sign that the communist insurgency in Laos also posed a major regional threat. By the eve of the Geneva conference, he began to consider an aid program to bolster the Royal Lao Government.

Early United States Intervention

In response to the Royal Lao Government's pleas for help, the Eisenhower administration established a diplomatic mission in Vientiane, and sent Charles W. Yost to be the first American ambassador to the Kingdom. Yost was to preside over several programs designed to bolster the Royal Lao Government by promoting economic, public health and educational improvements, as well as indirect military aid, routed through a loophole in the

Accords. To assist the Mission with the military aspects of aid to Laos, on December 13, 1954, the U.S. established the Programs Evaluation Office in the Mission at Vientiane.⁸²

Prevented by the Geneva agreements from engaging in direct military intervention in Laos, Eisenhower's Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed to use "U.S. civilians with military experience". Consequently, the Programs Evaluations Office was staffed by a group of unusually fit, well-groomed men. Not coincidentally, many of these men had been discharged from military service, often in Special Operations, only days before their assignment to the PEO.⁸³

The PEO was the consummate diplomatic exploitation of a gap in treaty language. Based on a 1950 agreement, the U.S. was allowed to supply their French ally with arms and equipment for their war in Indochina. They reasoned, therefore, that they had a demonstrable need to "receive and oversee the equipment and make sure it was properly used." The U.S. could not train the Royal Lao Army, but the French could, and the Americans could ensure the French did it correctly. The PEO was, therefore, really a conduit for funds and equipment to the Royal Lao Army. The U.S. Mission quickly found itself funding virtually the entire operating budget of the Lao National Army and providing

⁸¹ Charles W. Yost, Telegram to State Department, date unknown, NSF, Countries, Laos, JFKL.

⁸² Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 14-17.

⁸³ *FRUS*, 1955-1957, Volume XXI, *East Asian Security, Cambodia, Laos*, 585; Stevenson, 39.

significant quantities of military hardware besides. The non-military aspects of the Mission continued, but were vastly overshadowed by the military spending.⁸⁴

Among the non-military programs the U.S. Mission initiated were: a highway building program to improve road access to the interior, a ferry program for the Mekong River to provide a vital trading link with neighboring Thailand, and a rural health care program dubbed Booster Shot.⁸⁵ These operations, particularly Booster Shot, were designed in part to aid the Royal Government in the elections of 1958 by showing that they could care for their citizens. They were, in short, attempts to eliminate the problems that the communist Pathet Lao insurgents exploited to gain local support. Eisenhower may not have understood the nuances of CI, but there were those in his administration, especially in the CIA, who did.

Together the non-military programs totaled roughly \$5 million and did not prevent the communists from carrying the elections. The aid programs were rife with corruption and much of the money and equipment sent for construction and rural improvement programs found their way into the pockets of Laotian officials in charge of their management.

In contrast, American military aid to Laos from 1955-59 amounted to roughly \$40 million per year, plus nearly \$4 million between 1958-59 for a military pay raise for the Royal Lao Army. The \$40 million was intended to stimulate the Laotian economy, but apparently far exceeded the economy's ability to absorb

⁸⁴ Castle, 14-17; Goldstein, 166.

⁸⁵ Goldstein, *ibid.*

capital. Goldstein argues that this fact is affirmed by the accumulation of a \$40 million surplus by the Royal Government in these years, the equivalent of an entire year's aid.⁸⁶

With an army bolstered by U.S. aid providing a degree of stability, and the integration of Pathet Lao forces seemingly underway, the Royal Lao Government held the Geneva-mandated free elections in May 1958. They were surprised when the Pathet Lao legally won nine of the ten seats it contested in the election. Among those elected was Souphanouvong, the once-exiled Prince and leader of the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao-allied Santiphab party carried four more, giving the communists control over 13 of 21 available seats and drastically altering the balance of power in Vientiane.⁸⁷ This turn of events perplexed and alarmed the Eisenhower administration, but apparently not many of the Laotians. In the opinion of Ambassador Yost, the Laotian government did not consider the Pathet Lao true communists, but rather "wayward brothers who will return patriotically to fold once reasonable give and take [is] presented," and so negotiations to integrate the newly elected communists with the existing royalists continued.⁸⁸

There is little evidence to explain the Pathet Lao's electoral victory in 1958. Their military power derived from Viet Minh support, but the source of their political power is harder to pinpoint. It seems likely, however, that their popular support derived from the strength of their united front tactics against the French.

⁸⁶ Goldstein, 179-203.

⁸⁷ Zasloff, 46.

⁸⁸ *FRUS, 1955-1957, East Asian Security*, 640-641.

Simply stated, their electoral victories suggest that politically aware Laotians supported their drive to oust the French and unify the country. Many of these Laotians must have agreed with Souphanouvong's assessment of the royal government as a puppet of the French. This assessment appears accurate, based on Souvanna Phouma's appointment as Prime Minister in November 1951. Souvanna's appointment must have struck some Laotians as both suspicious and galling, given his easy acquiescence to the reintroduction of French authority and the dissolution of the Lao Issara without independence having been achieved.

In reaction to the newly legitimized communist influence in the Royal Lao Government, a group of right wing politicians formed the Committee for the Defense of National Interests. As the radical anti-communist voice in Laos, this party won U.S. support, prompting neutralist Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone, appointed after Geneva, to embrace a "more pro-Western brand of neutrality."⁸⁹

Part of the 1954 agreement that had formed the coalition government was the provision that the 1st and 2nd Pathet Lao Battalions would be integrated into the Royal Lao Army and stationed in their home territory on the Plain of Jars, where they had already established strong defenses and a base of support. As it became clear in the Spring and Summer of 1959 that the right wing of the Phoui's government was pursuing a firmly anti-communist policy and would not

⁸⁹ Conboy, 18-19.

allow the Pathet Lao to assume their duly-elected place in the coalition

government, these two battalions balked at integration.⁹⁰

The downward spiral of events accelerated when the Royal Lao Government, angered by this perceived waffling on the part of the Pathet Lao, had the Royal Army surround the soldiers on the Plain and issue an ultimatum to the recalcitrant communists. At this point, the Royal Army posed a moderate threat to the Pathet Lao under the best of circumstances, but they had a superior position and had caught the Pathet Lao somewhat by surprise. Facing long odds and a tough fight, the 1st Battalion capitulated. The 2nd Battalion seized the opportunity provided by a rainy night and fled the Plain for North Vietnam on May 18th. After a brief pursuit and skirmish, the communists escaped across the border. Upon hearing the news, Phoui had Souphanouvong and his communist cohorts placed under house arrest.⁹¹

The escape of an entire battalion of communist fighters into North Vietnam, as well as the subsequent desertion of hundreds more who had already integrated into the Royal Lao Army, prompted the Eisenhower administration to escalate its involvement in Laotian affairs. Until this point, it appears that the PEO had restricted its role to training and advising. There were only six field officers staffing the PEO until January 1959, when newly-appointed Programs

⁹⁰ Major General Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 49-50. This document was written by a Laotian general who was Deputy Defense Minister under Phoumi, among other posts. He attended U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and was therefore in a unique position to deal with the American military advisors and diplomats who administered U.S. aid programs in Laos.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Evaluations Office director John Heintges, a rising Army Brigadier General discharged from service to take the post in Laos, requested a drastic increase in manpower. The organization in Laos grew to include 65 administrators, (all World War II veterans of Heintges' unit in the 3rd Infantry Division, which had fought across France and Germany), and 12 teams of eight special operations soldiers each, deployed to Laos on six month tours. These special operations forces, nominally under the command and control of the PEO, were part of an operation called Hotfoot. Collectively dubbed the Lao Training Advisory Group (LTAG), the soldiers of Hotfoot were led by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simons, a veteran of Ranger and OSS units in World War II and one of the pioneers of American Special Operations.⁹² The LTAGs set up shop at four French training sites throughout the country and, alongside their French counterparts, began training Royal Lao Army units in the use and care of all manner of weapons, from small arms to rocket launchers and mortars.⁹³

Hotfoot sputtered to a halt as quickly as it started when the Royal Lao Army lost four outposts in the province of Sam Neua. The Royal Army reacted by mounting an aggressive campaign against the 2nd Pathet Lao Battalion (the one that had escaped the Plain of Jars the previous May), but without much success. U.S. intervention in the Sam Neua incident was limited to airlift of supplies, although the Eisenhower administration did move Joint Task Force 116,

⁹² According to Hamilton-Merritt, Colonel Simons would lead the U.S. raid on the Son Tay prison in North Vietnam in 1970.

composed of Marines, airpower and special operations forces into a staging position in the South China Sea, should the communists make a determined push into Laos. As quickly as the fighting had flared, however, it died down, and Hotfoot found new life.⁹⁴

By the end of 1959, the Programs Evaluations Office had grown to over 175 civilians and 107 Special Forces trainers and constituted the largest U.S. military assistance program in Southeast Asia.⁹⁵ Despite this, in December, the Royal Government in Vientiane began to come apart at the seams, although this time, it was not the communists doing the tearing.

Royalist Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone, long at odds with the right wing Committee for the Defense of National Interests, extended the term of the National Assembly, his last bastion of power, through the scheduled elections of April 1960. This action, he hoped, would prevent the elections and his inevitable defeat at the polls.⁹⁶ With the time thus bought, he hoped to strike a decisive blow against the communists and thereby regain some of his constituents' support. Luck was not with him, however.

In response to Phoui's action, the Committee, led by Colonel Phoumi Nosovan, the Deputy Minister of National Security and Army Chief of Staff,

⁹³ Conboy, 20-21; Stevenson, 29; Richard H. Schultz, Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 266.

⁹⁴ Conboy, 21-25.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

staged a coup, with the backing of the CIA in Vientiane.⁹⁷ Military forces loyal to Phoumi surrounded the Prime Minister's residence and demanded his resignation. A rising young star in the Royal Lao Army, Captain Kong Le, deployed his paratroopers to maintain order throughout Vientiane. The next morning, the coup ended successfully, and bloodlessly, when the King received Phoui's resignation.

The Eisenhower administration split over whom to support in the power struggle between semi-neutralist Phoui Sananikone and rightist Phoumi Nosavan. Many in the State Department worried that Phoumi's militant image would taint the government and drive people to the Pathet Lao camp. The anti-Phoumists were supported by the assessment of the U.S. Ambassador to Laos, who did not consider Phoumi a particularly skilled politician. Phoui eventually won America's support, albeit hardly enthusiastic, with the help of pressure from Britain, France and Australia, all of whom favored Phoui Sananikone.⁹⁸ The confusion over who to support suggests that events in Laos were not clear to Washington in 1959 and that Eisenhower was unsure of who provided the best chance to keep the communists out of the government. In any case, Phoui was ousted and Phoumi came to dominate the government set up after the coup.

Following the coup, the King installed an interim Prime Minister, Kou Abhay, and promoted Phoumi to Minister of Defense. The CDNI was in power, and the CIA had helped put them there. But with four months until the next

⁹⁷ Sananikone, 47-49; Stevenson, 88.

⁹⁸ Stevenson, 87-89.

elections, Heintges and the Eisenhower administration were eager to ensure that he stayed there. The PEO and U.S. Embassy staff set to work at a fever pitch, setting up medical clinics in the backcountry and air dropping supplies to isolated hamlets throughout Laos in the hope of galvanizing support for the new, pro-western government.⁹⁹

The elections held on April 24, 1960 were a sham. Ballot box stuffing and fraudulent counting, also apparently orchestrated by the CIA, ensured a victory for the right wing Committee for the Defense of National Interests, which was also a victory for the U.S.¹⁰⁰ The Pathet Lao was out of government and the newly elected Royal Lao Government was (again) pro-west. The Royal Lao Army was making strides toward becoming a viable fighting force and beginning to see the fruits of its counterinsurgency efforts. Then, on the morning of May 24th, Souphanouvong and the rest of the Pathet Lao leadership, still imprisoned at Camp Phonekheng, were allowed to escape by complicit prison guards.¹⁰¹ The stage was thus set for a communist resurgence and the onset of a crisis in Laos.

Kong Le's Coup

The next crisis in Vientiane would come from within. Following the Committee for the Defense of National Interest's successful coup, paratrooper commander Kong Le found himself and his men constantly deployed on one wild

⁹⁹ Sananikone, 52-60.

¹⁰⁰ Sananikone, 58; Stevenson, 88.

goose chase after another. When they weren't deployed, the elite unit was quartered in ramshackle huts on the mud flats outside of Vientiane. Kong Le protested both the misuse and mistreatment of his soldiers, but he found the Royal Lao Army general staff unsympathetic to his soldier's needs and almost hopelessly corrupt.¹⁰²

The son of aboriginal Lao Theung peasants, Kong Le had enlisted in the Royal Lao Army at the age of 17. He had exhibited enough skill to be granted an appointment to the French-run officer candidate school, from which he graduated without much distinction. He remained in the Army after it was reduced in size following the Geneva Accords and in 1958, he volunteered and was accepted for the Army's paratroop unit as its executive officer. His first action with the paratroopers was during the Sam Neua fracas, when they were deployed to fight the Pathet Lao, a mission he considered unwarranted based on the insurgents' habit of going to ground in the face of superior forces. He had acquitted himself well as acting commander of the paratroopers during the CDNI's coup, and enjoyed the loyalty of the toughest, most elite soldiers in his nation's army.¹⁰³

After the coup, Kong Le came to believe that the Royal Lao Army generals were stealing American aid meant to arm and train Laotian forces, including his paratroopers. Exasperated by this corruption, he came to see a neutralist, coalition government that would include the Pathet Lao and be unfettered by the

¹⁰¹ Sananikone, 60. General Sananikone believes it was Phoumi himself who allowed Souphanouvong to escape. In a twist indicative of the bizarre state of Laotian politics, the two were brothers as well as rivals, and Phoumi, he claims, was "erratic and impulsive."

¹⁰² Ibid., 61.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 31-46.

corrupting influences of either Soviet or American aid, as the only viable alternative and he began developing a plan to make his idea a reality. After months of incessant operations in which his soldiers were routinely misused, including one mistaken incursion into Cambodia during which the unit's calls for help were ignored, Kong Le assembled his men and outlined his plans to seize the government. He found nearly unanimous support among his men for his plan.¹⁰⁴

At 0300 on August 9th, Kong Le's battalion initiated its coup. They seized the Royal Lao Army's headquarters in Vientiane, blocked the main road through the city, secured the central bank, radio station and telephone exchange and arrested the commander of the Royal Lao Army in his bedroom.¹⁰⁵ Kong Le's forces achieved control of the city in less than four hours with only six casualties. But the difficulties were just beginning for him, his country and the United States.

Kong Le installed Prince Souvanna Phouma, a left-leaning neutralist, as Prime Minister and initiated cooperation with the Pathet Lao. Both moves alarmed American policy makers and pro-west Laotian leaders alike. In response, General Phoumi Nosovan, late of the Royal Lao Army, began a counter-coup against Kong Le and Souvanna Phouma that resulted in a series of bloody skirmishes and ended with the Battle of Vientiane in December 1960. Phoumi prevailed in his counter-coup, and forced Kong Le and the Pathet Lao to

¹⁰⁴ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 29. Four of Kong Le's officers chose not to participate in the Coup, but apparently maintained enough personal loyalty to keep it a secret.

¹⁰⁵ Chalermnit Press Correspondent, *The Battle of Vientiane 1960*, (Bangkok, Thailand: Chalermnit Press, 1961.), 42-56.

flee north, while Souvanna Phouma and most of his government abandoned their posts, and their country, for safe haven in Cambodia.¹⁰⁶

Shortly after they fled the city, Kong Le's forces and the Pathet Lao asked for and received the first of a series of airlifts of military equipment from the Soviets, by way of Hanoi. Meanwhile, the King dismissed the absent government of Souvanna Phouma and, on December 14th 1960, installed Prince Buon Oum as Prime Minister and Phoumi Nosovan as his Deputy. This provisional government consisted primarily of lowland Lao, and Boun Oum liberally distributed cabinet posts among his family and loyal supporters.¹⁰⁷

The Situation as Kennedy Found It

Kennedy was sworn in shortly after his counterpart, Boun Oum, in Laos. He inherited a messy situation that defied easy answers but demanded his attention. In Laos, Boun Oum and the Royal Lao Government were upright, but wobbly, with Souvanna's government in exile refuting their claims to legitimacy. Most of the military was loyal to Deputy Prime Minister Phoumi, and therefore to the royal government. The same was not necessarily true of the Laotian peasantry. The Royal Government was largely nepotistic and represented few of the nation's ethnic groups save lowland Lao. Adding to the mix, Souvanna Phouma still claimed to be the rightful Prime Minister of Laos, despite having been dismissed by the King. Meanwhile, on the Plain of Jars, Souvanna Phouma's former Information Minister claimed that he was the only legitimate

¹⁰⁶ Dean Rusk, "Information Paper: Laos", 27 March 61, NSF, Countries, Laos, JFKL.

¹⁰⁷ Sananikone, 71-74.

representative of the neutralist government, having remained with Kong Le during the Battle of Vientiane, and following the latter's evacuation of the capital.

Internally, Buon Oum's government was unpopular and suffered regular harassment from Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. Outside of Vientiane the Boun Oum government was hard pressed to wield much real power at all. The PEO continued its operation, although the fighting in Vientiane interrupted their program. The infrastructure built up since 1955 and emanating from the U.S. Mission at Vientiane remained mostly intact.

Externally, the Royal Lao Government enjoyed little support from anyone besides the United States, which was primarily interested in them as an alternative to the communists. In contrast, Kong Le and the Pathet Lao were backed strongly by the North Vietnamese, and the communist world almost unanimously supported Souvanna Phouma's claim to the Prime Ministership.

Kennedy did not have a particularly reliable ally in Vientiane. His staff assessed the Boun Oum government as unpredictable and unreliable, saying, "The Boun Oum government is not particularly amenable to United States advice and tends to act without consultation."¹⁰⁸ He would find out in February 1961, that their assessment was all too accurate.

Boun Oum was in a difficult position. The insurgent Pathet Lao held the Plain of Jars and the vital road networks that criss-crossed it. They also had the militarily and politically powerful Viet Minh supporting them. They continued to receive supplies from the Soviet Union as well, vastly strengthening their hold on

¹⁰⁸ Rusk, "Information Paper: Laos", JFKL.

northern Laos. The Royal Government, for its part, had few allies and the only external aid it received came from the U.S., in quantities that did not compensate for its other liabilities. Thus stuck, Buon Oum and the King issued a declaration of Laotian neutrality on February 19, 1961 and began seeking a negotiated peace with Souvanna Phouma and his supporters. The declaration was not what the U.S. hoped for in Laos, but the Kennedy administration publicly supported it.

The problem for the Royal Lao Government in trying to reach a settlement was that they were negotiating from a position of weakness. The problem for Kennedy was that Laotian neutrality, while it offered a non-communist alternative, meant that the U.S. would be forced to stand on the sidelines in Laos. Kennedy apparently felt that such a predicament left him open to Republican attacks. He needed to appear tough on communism, especially early in his tenure, and accepting neutrality might be perceived as allowing a loophole that the communists could slip through. Kennedy's margin notes on the above information paper indicate the sensitivity of the matter politically. In an apparent effort to express support for Laos without alienating Republicans in Congress, who opposed neutrality as the first step towards communism, he substituted the phrase "The U.S. favors a neutral Laos, independent and not aligned with either political bloc" to the earlier "The U.S. does not oppose a neutral policy for Laos, so long as the Lao government desires it and it can in fact be maintained."¹⁰⁹ In the climate of the Cold War, Kennedy couched his language on Laos carefully, so that it would be difficult for his opponents to find fodder to use against Democrats in the mid-term elections and again in 1964.

American money and personnel had been tied up in Laos since the inception of the PEO program in 1955. Support had waned in 1959, with the rise of the neutralists, then waxed again as with the Pathet Lao attacks in Sam Neua. By 1960, with Kong Le's neutralist coup demonstrating the continued instability of the country, the PEO and the CIA were waging what was, for all intents and purposes, a covert war in Laos. National prestige was, as always, closely linked to its apparent success or failure in foreign policy.¹¹⁰

Laos presented Kennedy with potential political embarrassment on two fronts, international and domestic. There was no guarantee that the communist insurgents would negotiate with the Royal Government and many of Kennedy's advisors believed that the military situation in the country was virtually untenable.¹¹¹ All of the American aid and training of the previous six years would therefore amount to nothing if the Soviets were allowed to continue openly supplying pro-communist forces in northern Laos. The perception on the part of the international community, in that case, would have been one of victory for the communists. U.S. prestige would have suffered. In the months after the Bay of Pigs, especially, this possibility would weigh heavily on Kennedy.

More importantly, previous aid aside, if Laos were allowed to fall, Kennedy was told, the entire region might too. In the climate of the Cold War, that could not be allowed to happen. Kennedy had run on a platform critical of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Prados, 262-263.

¹¹¹ A telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the State Department, 18 January 61 assesses the situation as follows: "military prospect is as best protracted struggle...", NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

Eisenhower's containment strategy. He had been elected with a minority of the popular vote and knew that, unless he appeared to maintain a hard line against communism, he would open himself up to Republican attack. Moreover, he believed the American people would not tolerate another war on the scale of Korea. Their stomach for casualties in a war with which they had trouble identifying had, he believed, doomed Truman, and he would not tempt the same fate.

With covert operations still underway in Laos, Kennedy had three choices: escalation to conventional war, escalation of counterinsurgency operations and a covert war, or an abandonment of military operations and an increased diplomatic effort. The new President chose the middle path, and the U.S., already ankle deep in the murky waters of Laos, sank in to its knees.¹¹²

The overriding consideration of the Eisenhower administration's policies in Laos had been hard-line containment of communism. The Kennedy administration, led by a pragmatic young politician with an affinity for covert operations and counterinsurgency promised to offer something different. Apparent acceptance of neutrality had to be followed by tangible, demonstrable action to ensure the American people believed that the President had not surrendered Laos to the communists. Failure to do that, he knew, would spell political disaster.

¹¹² Lawrence J. Bassett and Stephen E. Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War", in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, Thomas G. Paterson, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.), 229.

For the Pathet Lao, the transition from French colonial rule to American aid must have seemed quick and complete. Indeed, the communists appear to have shifted easily from resisting one to resisting the other. The installation of what seemed to the nationalist Pathet Lao to be an American puppet government to replace the departed French puppet government ensured that their insurgency would continue.

CHAPTER 3

KENNEDY'S COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN LAOS

Introduction

John F. Kennedy was getting advice on the situation in Laos even before he took office. His incoming administration, particularly his inner circle, knew of his predilection for covert operations and his belief in CI as a tool of containment. Moreover, the outgoing Eisenhower administration had stressed the importance of Laos and the tenuous nature of its government's hold on political power. A telegram from the American Embassy in Vientiane to the Department of State outlined the situation succinctly for Kennedy, saying: "military prospect is at best protracted struggle which holds out little hope for security and integrity of country in near future...this effort requires material help on political, economic and psychological side in terms of countering the [Pathet Lao] anti-[government] effort...I believe it is an illusion to hope that the US alone supporting the Lao armed forces...can establish security in Laos...a political solution is essential."¹¹³

Coming as it did at the very beginning of Kennedy's presidency, and from the country that presented him with his first diplomatic crisis, this assessment must have confirmed two things in the President's mind. First was the need a flexible response capability generally, second was the need for a CI campaign in Laos specifically. Before he could act decisively in Laos, however, Kennedy needed to be brought up to speed on the situation in the country and the nature and status of ongoing US intervention. His first month in office was, therefore,

¹¹³ American Embassy in Vientiane to the Secretary of State, Telegram 1364, 18 January 1961, NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

characterized by a thorough policy review. While he had the luxury of a relative lull in the cycle of coup and counter-coup in Laos between the end of December 1960 and February 1961, getting a clear picture of what was going on was no easy task. Intelligence gathering was made even more complicated by the fact that, even as he was trying to discern the situation and formulate a workable response, there were ongoing US operations in Laos that often impacted the ever-changing political picture.

Kennedy's Beliefs Confirmed

With two Prime Ministers claiming legitimacy, Kong Le cooperating with the Pathet Lao and the Soviets supplying the communist insurgents, the situation Kennedy faced in Laos was anything but clear. What was clear in the early weeks of his presidency was that Laos was quickly turning into the scene of a potential superpower showdown. The President believed that he needed to convince the Soviets that he was willing to fight over Laos, while pursuing a political solution to the dilemma. The solution he sought appears to have included the possibility of a truly neutral government in Vientiane, rather than the staunchly anticommunist government insisted on by Eisenhower. Such a policy was a major shift for US diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

To ensure the establishment of a neutral government, Kennedy would have to mount a detailed, effective CI program that would eliminate the fuel used by the Pathet Lao to build popular support. With American CI doctrine still strongly reflecting the experiences of Korea and the opinions of a conventionally minded Pentagon, the President faced an uphill battle. He had to impose his

limited war program on the military before it could be put into action in Laos. Fortunately for the President, the CIA and military personnel operating in Laos tended to be experienced special operators, who thought about CI in terms of light forces and small units. While many of their strategies and tactics remained a far cry from the holistic approach favored by Kennedy, they were closer than their counterparts in the Pentagon. Laos, therefore, promised to test the existing CI doctrine, even as it served as a laboratory in which to develop the new.

Kennedy would soon find that domestic political pressure was also part of the decision making mix. On January 21, 1961, Kennedy received a lengthy memorandum from Senator Mike Mansfield regarding the "Laotian Situation". The Senator had been contacted directly by Souvanna Phouma, who complained bitterly about the course of events in Laos and the status of U.S. intervention. Phouma's chief complaints, which Mansfield apparently agreed with, were the tendency of the U.S. to back prominent Laotians while ignoring the less prominent, the exaggeration of the threat of communism in the country (Phouma insisted that there were "less than 100" Laotian communists), and what he perceived as the blocking of neutrality. The Senator added to this list his own indictment that aid to Laos would have a "corrupting and disrupting effect...on an unsophisticated nation such as Laos." Mansfield followed up his complaint with a list of recommendations aimed at creating a neutral Laos. The way to do that, he argued, was to create a neutralization commission composed of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The key to it all, however, was a cutback in U.S. military

intervention, either by reintroducing the French as trainers, or by introducing a new, Asian-based training team created for the purpose.

In a follow up memo, Mansfield expressed his belief that such a course of action would accomplish a number of important diplomatic goals. First, a neutralization commission would put Asians in charge of what Mansfield judged was "essentially an Asian problem." Second, it would make the U.S. immune from charges of "imperial meddling" in Laotian affairs, and would force the Soviets and Chinese to abstain from intervention as well, or face such charges. Finally, it would allow the U.S. to extricate itself "from an untenable over-commitment..."¹¹⁴

It is a small wonder, given the assessment of the embassy in Vientiane and pressure from within his own government, that Kennedy decided against escalation to conventional military force in Laos. He must have been more convinced than ever that a dedicated, broad-spectrum CI campaign was required to address the thorny problems of Laos.

Ongoing Operations in Laos

There were at least three operations underway in Laos when Kennedy took over. The first, and perhaps best known, was an Air America operation that provided airlift of supplies and personnel to the Royal Army. Throughout the PEO's tenure, the CIA's de facto aviation wing had conducted airlifts to Royal Army units in Laos, usually from bases in Thailand. During Phoumi's counter-

¹¹⁴ Senator Mike Mansfield, "The Laotian Situation", 21 January 1961, POF, Subjects, Laos, JFKL.

coup in December 1960, these airlifts had proven critical to the Army's ability to successfully drive Kong Le's forces from Vientiane.

The second operation that Kennedy inherited was the Royal Army training conducted by the U.S. Army Special Forces and supervised by the PEO. While still nominally a civilian operation, the PEO had taken an increasing role in training the Royal Army since the rightist coup that had brought Phoui Sananikone to power in early 1959. First dubbed Hotfoot, this mission would change names and expand under Kennedy's watch.

The third ongoing operation was, as far as can be determined, a CIA mission based in Thailand and focused on training small units of special police to patrol the border and defend against Chinese insurgent activity. These special Thai units were called Police Aerial Reinforcement Units (PARU), and their training included a graduation exercise that parachuted them into insurgent-contested areas.¹¹⁵ Since 1957, small groups of Lao soldiers, mostly from the paratroop battalions, had also trained with these units in Thailand. Following Kong Le's coup in 1960, PARU units had accompanied Phoumi's forces when they recaptured the city.

None of these were CI operations in the mold of the British operation in Malaya. To wit, none addressed the basic problems exploited by the Pathet Lao. None stressed civil-military cooperation. All were expressly intended, as befitted Eisenhower's beliefs on limited warfare, with fighting the enemy, rather than addressing the political, economic or social questions plaguing the country.

¹¹⁵ Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 38.

Given Kennedy's beliefs about CI, one would expect subsequent operations to reflect a more flexible approach. It remains to be seen how well his beliefs were translated into action.

Evolving Intervention

In the waning days of his presidency, Eisenhower had approved a program to arm and train the Hmong, a mountain tribe of northern Laos. That program, initially called Operation Momentum, was in its opening stages in January 1961, but quickly became one of the centerpieces of American intervention. With the Royal Government controlling little of the territory north of Vientiane and the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces still a threat, Kennedy expanded the operation.

CIA operative Bill Lair, a longtime veteran of Southeast Asia, and the father of the PARU program in Thailand, moved into Laos in January and met with Vang Po, a prominent Hmong leader. Vang Po had fought the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao for years and was anxious to obtain the new arms and training offered by Lair.¹¹⁶

The Hmong, also commonly known as the Meo, were an ancient tribe that had practiced subsistence farming in the Laotian highlands for generations. They roamed freely across national borders and recognized no particular national allegiance. From the earliest days of French colonization, the Hmong had grown opium poppies, which both the French and the resistance had used to fund operations in the region. In the 1950s the Hmong, under Touby Lyfoung, the first

¹¹⁶ Parker, *Codename Mule*, xi-xii.

of their tribe to graduate from a university, had sided primarily with the French. Under Touby's leadership, in fact, the Hmong had attempted an overland relief of the beleaguered French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. As French influence waned and another turn of side taking loomed, Touby relinquished his role as the Hmong's military leader to Vang Po, a long-term veteran of the Royal Lao Army.

Vang Po's military career had begun near the end of World War II, when he was a messenger for the French army. He had engaged in guerrilla warfare as a member of a partisan Hmong force assembled by Touby. Following the war he attended the national police academy, the only Hmong to do so to that point. The lowland Lao who filled out his class and ran the academy ostracized him. Despite the racism, he finished at the head of his class. In 1950 he was assigned to hunt down a communist guerrilla force that had expanded Ho Chi Minh's war into Laos. He found and killed every man in the unit, earning him high praise from the local French commanders, and an appointment to officer candidate school. Like everything else he tried, he succeeded in this course and was commissioned in the Royal Lao Army. After the 1954 Geneva agreement, Vang Po remained in the Royal Army, rising to command a battalion composed of his tribesmen.¹¹⁷

Vang Po spent the time between 1954 and 1960 either running from Viet Minh invasions or conducting counter-guerrilla operations along the border with Vietnam. During these years of running and hiding, coming out to fight and harass the enemy, Vang Po became an expert at field craft, forged his Hmong

¹¹⁷ Warner, *Shooting at the Moon*, 26-31; Prados, *President's Secret Wars*, 268-274.

into a tenacious, tightly knit guerrilla force and, perhaps most importantly, observed the destruction of Vietnamese units by French air power. These experiences convinced Vang Po of several things. First, he wanted to command a large conventional force. He was an expert guerrilla fighter, but he had seen what big guns and big units could accomplish in the open, and he was hooked. The American aid promised to provide him an opportunity to test his skills with new and better weapons. Second, he came to believe that the communists were ultimately bad for his people. When Kong Le staged his coup in 1960 Vang Po agreed with the former's assessment that the leadership of the Royal Army was corrupt and insensitive. He knew and liked Kong Le, but he disagreed with his contemporary on the value of a neutral coalition government, believing that the influence of the Pathet Lao was destined to subvert the new regime. Having fought the Pathet Lao's sponsors, the Viet Minh, for most of two decades, Vang Po decided to throw his lot and that of his people in with the Royal Government.¹¹⁸

Vang Po's alliance with the Americans was not easily arrived at. The Hmong were not Lao nationalists any more than they were communists. In the past they had worked as porters and guides for the Viet Minh. The Americans earned their allegiance by convincing Vang Po that the communists were intent on taking over Laos and divesting the Hmong of their land. Such assertions confirmed Vang Po's own suspicions. Once arrived at, the Hmong-American arrangement was good for both parties. American weapons and training made Vang Po's fighters far more effective than they had ever been on the battlefield.

¹¹⁸ Warner, 30.

Better performance on the battlefield meant higher morale among the Hmong fighters, and this translated into intense loyalty to their leader, Vang Po. In turn, such loyalty earned Vang Po greater control and prestige as a regional leader of the Hmong. War, and the foreign aid that came with it, had brought Vang Po to prominence and, he believed, allowed him to fight the most dangerous enemy of his people. He therefore remained loyal to the King and his American backers. At the same time, the loyalty and lethality of Vang Po's forces were important to the Americans, because the Hmong lived and operated in the strategically vital northern provinces. Vang Po's own home was just east of the Plain of Jars, and his tribesman knew the terrain as well as anyone in the world.

The PARU teams executed the initial training of the Hmong. Using the Thai soldiers allowed Lair to keep the American operation low profile and alleviated potential cultural and language barriers between the trainers and their Hmong students. The Thais were not Hmong, but they were a lot closer than the Americans, and had the added advantage of being difficult to distinguish from the Hmong, except up close. Under Lair's leadership, the PARU quickly set up and conducted a series of three-day camps for 1,000 of Vang Po's Hmong. The success of the early training brought more American CIA operatives and a vast expansion of Operation Momentum. By May the PARU and their American counterparts had trained nearly 5,000 Hmong, with more waiting in the wings. The operation would eventually equip and train more than 20,000 Hmong, often without the knowledge or approval of the Royal Lao Army leadership, or the

American Ambassador.¹¹⁹ But there was more going on in Laos that would arguably render Momentum's early success moot.

In the early months of 1961 the PEO continued to coordinate the Special Forces training of the Royal Lao Army under various operational names. What had begun as Hotfoot soon became Operation White Star, with advisors assigned to several levels of the Royal Army. (White Star advisors would also later be used to augment Operation Momentum.)¹²⁰ On February 6th, General Lemnitzer informed the President that Heintges' replacement as Chief of the PEO, Andrew Boyle, had requested nine additional training teams.

The next day, Undersecretary of Defense Kenneth Landon offered the President his assessment of the situation, arguing that American military aid was misdirected. He believed that the Royal Army was being made dependent upon American advice and equipment for survival, and could not be made self-sufficient. The remedy, he proposed, was to direct military assistance toward the development of forces that could "operate as guerrillas at the village level and can live off the countryside. This is the kind of war the communists conduct in Southeast Asia," he told the President, "and this is the kind of war we should

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 31-34, 35-42; Sananikone, 77-79; Conboy, *Shadow War*, 57-66; Parker xi; Castle, 38-43; figures vary, these represent the rough median among several estimates.

¹²⁰ There are differing accounts of the origins of Operation White Star. Stevenson contends that it began as the Hmong training operation in 1960, under Eisenhower. Conboy and Castle, however, say that White Star began as part of the PEO's Royal Army training mission and was later used to augment the Hmong training mission. The point of the matter is that the Hmong under Vang Po were part of the Royal Army. Therefore Momentum and White Star probably shared personnel and resources liberally.

conduct."¹²¹ A week later Landon reiterated his point even more directly in a memo to W.W. Rostow. He said bluntly, "The war in Laos and elsewhere in Southeast Asia will be won or lost in the villages."¹²² Again he stressed the need to redirect American assistance toward a force that could bolster village level support for the Royal Government.

Landon's arguments demonstrate that at least some of the people in Washington understood the essential elements of people's war, and how to fight it. Moreover, here is evidence that they were telling the President what they knew. What Landon told Kennedy essentially confirmed the assessment of the embassy in Vientiane that military assistance alone could not produce security in Laos. Moreover, Landon had pinpointed the reason that it could not, namely that Eisenhower's Army-centered military assistance program was misdirected and would not produce long term results favorable to United States interests. He was promoting a program that would do what the current PEO organization had not, develop local support for the Royal Government, which was neither widely representative nor popular.¹²³ Broadening its support among the people was the only sure way to weaken the appeal and the power of the Pathet Lao.

Shortly thereafter, despite Landon's arguments, Kennedy approved the deployment of nine new Special Forces teams to augment Operation White Star. By early March the first three teams were arriving in Laos. The President also

¹²¹ Kenneth P. Landon, "Laos and the Indian Ocean Area", 7 February 61, NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

¹²² Kenneth P. Landon, "Community Action Teams", 13 February 61, NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

¹²³ Dean Rusk, "Ambassador Brown's Call", 2 February 61, POF, Countries, Laos, JFKL. Rusk reiterated Ambassador Brown's assessment of the Royal Government's standing.

approved the increase of the Royal Army to a total of 32,322 men, many of whom had already been mustered into service by Phoumi, without an okay from Washington.¹²⁴

Kennedy's decision to expand Operation White Star at this point illustrates a consistent trend in his decision making on Laos. When reports indicated that things were going poorly, Kennedy reacted by increasing the level of military aid. Even when advised to do otherwise, Kennedy consistently chose a military option, suggesting that perhaps he misunderstood the notion of counterinsurgency presented by the likes of Landon and Rostow. Another possibility, and one that seems more likely, is that Kennedy's views have been misunderstood, that his idea of flexible response focused on the military, and that he had less confidence in the non-military aspects of CI.

From January through early March, Operation Momentum met with great success. The Hmong were eager trainees, fierce fighters and loyal to Vang Po, who was in turn loyal to the King. Military confrontations between the Pathet Lao and the Hmong had been sporadic, with the smaller Hmong guerrilla forces generally shooting and moving, rarely squaring off in a decisive engagement. Operation White Star likewise continued apace, although assessments of the Royal Lao Army by their American trainers were not always complementary. All told, the early spring of 1961 showed promise, with more equipment and advisors flowing into Laos and a tenacious new guerrilla force being developed to fight the

¹²⁴ Warner, 50-51.

Pathet Lao on their own terms. Kennedy was well on his way to demonstrating his intention to keep Laos from falling to the communists.

In late February, he also took his first steps toward a diplomatic solution, appealing to Burma, Malaya and Cambodia to form a neutral commission to mediate in Laos. This proposal, originally requested by Laotian King Vatthana, was rejected by both Cambodia and Burma, who felt it would be unproductive. Malaya abstained from offering a decision either way. Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk applauded Kennedy's good intentions, but proposed a fourteen-member conference to formulate a peace agreement, an idea favored by the Soviets, Chinese, and the Pathet Lao.¹²⁵ Kennedy had little time to mull over the disappointment he must have felt at the failure of his first effort in personal diplomacy. Military developments in Laos were about to take a decisive turn for the worse.

In March the weaknesses of America's military aid programs in Laos became apparent. The Pathet Lao, strengthened by an infusion of Soviet aid, mounted a major offensive and routed the Royal Army. On March 7th, W.W. Rostow summarized the situation for Kennedy, saying, "[the] Communists launched a probing offensive against Phoumi's men. Without much fight, our boys fell back, apparently past the crucial crossroads. It is not yet clear whether Phoumi's forces have the capacity to rally..."¹²⁶ On March 9th the Pathet Lao

¹²⁵ William J. Jorden, "Cambodia Spurns Kennedy Appeal", *The New York Times*, 26 February 61.

¹²⁶ W.W. Rostow, "Situation in Laos as of Task Force Meeting, March 7, 1961", 7 March 61, NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

captured the “crucial crossroads”, a strategically important junction that controlled road access between the Plain of Jars and Vientiane.

Rostow’s description of the fighting is interesting on two counts. First, his use of the words “our boys” is illustrative. The tone of his memo is clearly disappointed. Since it is likely that American Special Forces accompanied Phoumi’s troops into combat, this choice of words could indicate that he saw their presence as key to the Royal Army’s success, or in this case, failure. Second, the rout of the Royal Army by a “probing offensive”, and the apparent concern over whether they could rebound from it, suggests that the operation to train and equip the Royal Army wasn’t bearing much fruit, further strengthening Landon’s arguments to the President that a new approach was required.

Events continued their downward spiral through March, with the Pathet Lao advancing and the American armed and trained Royal Army falling back. In the face of a growing debacle, the State Department began developing a plan to move a multi-national force from member nations of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization into Laos. The plan called for a unilateral conventional force deployment by the United States if SEATO failed to act. Rostow conveyed the urgency of the situation for the President when he told him that its rapid deterioration, and the failure of negotiations between Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi Nosavan meant that “if Lao resistance crumbles and major centers come under attack or fall, we may have to move very swiftly indeed...”¹²⁷ Two days later, alarmed by the communist advances, Kennedy placed Marine Corps and

¹²⁷ W.W. Rostow, “Joint Chiefs of Staff-Department of State Meeting of March 17th, 1961”, NSF, Subjects, Policy Planning, JFKL; Parker, xi.

Navy units stationed at Okinawa on high alert, and sent 14 new helicopters to Laos to augment the Air America fleet.¹²⁸

On March 27th, Rostow returned from a visit to the Special Forces School at Fort Bragg with a report from three soldiers who had just returned from their six-month deployment to Laos. His news was all bad, but helped explain the failure of American aid to prop up the Royal Army. The three operatives told Rostow that "Phoumi's problems have been worse than we thought...his control over his commanders is extremely dilute...our supplies have not been moving forward from government dumps to the field units...the communications net to and from the field units has been feeble and has made air drops extremely uncertain."¹²⁹ This evidence, provided by advisors who had been in the field with the Royal Army, suggests that the corruption that so incensed Kong Le was still present and had a severely detrimental effect on the performance of the Army. Moreover, it suggests that assessments which argued for a redirection of military aid programs were correct.

In the midst of the March crisis, Rostow offered the President his own opinion as to the efficacy of the administration's efforts in Laos thus far. He believed that he had detected a dangerous tendency in U.S. policy toward the separation of diplomacy and military action. He noted that this was the opposite of the communist practice of carefully orchestrating the two. Separating the two, he felt, watered down the diplomatic efforts and forced eventual military

¹²⁸ Conboy, 51; Castle, 29-30.

¹²⁹ W.W. Rostow, "Visit to Fort Bragg", 27 March 61, NSF, M&M, JFKL.

intervention to be larger than otherwise would have been required. Finally, he argued that when diplomatic efforts were abandoned to the military, the eventual political solution was abandoned along with them. Soldiers aren't politicians, he told Kennedy, and while they may win the battle that's put in front of them, they could not and should not develop the long-term political solutions required in almost every case. "I think we should put our minds steadily to work..." he said, "on how to orchestrate diplomacy and force better...In the case of Laos, we must have a sharper notion as to what our political objective is..."¹³⁰ One might expect Rostow's suggestion, coupled with the negative report from the field, to have spurred Kennedy to overhaul the CI programs in Laos. What it appears to have done, however, was drive him to deepen current commitments.

Perhaps anticipating a Republican attack on his increased involvement in Laos, Kennedy took his case to the American people. On March 23, 1961, with the Pathet Lao gaining ground daily on the Royal Army and increasing numbers of American advisors being shipped to the training camps, Kennedy repeatedly hammered the point that Laos was critical to the entire region. "Laos is far away from America, but the world is small," he said, adding, "The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all--in neutrality observed by us all. I want to make it clear to the American people and to the world that all we want in Laos

¹³⁰ W.W. Rostow, 10 March 61, NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

is peace, not war; a truly neutral government, not a cold war pawn; a settlement concluded at the conference table, not on the battlefield.”¹³¹

Having thus publicly committed the United States to supporting a free and neutral Laos, Kennedy continued military aid to the Royal Government and the Hmong. He also stepped up his diplomatic efforts. On March 26th and 27th, he held separate talks with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. The talks succeeded in reactivating the International Control Commission, an international monitoring group originally set up at Geneva in 1954 to ensure a peaceful transition to neutrality. They also managed to establish a cease-fire date of May 11, although two of the three factions fighting over Laos had yet to agree to it.¹³²

In April 1961 the failed invasion of Cuba splashed across world headlines, and operations in Laos were forced into the background temporarily. Along with word of the disaster at the Bay of Pigs came the news that the President of the United States had decided against using American troops to ensure the success of the operation. Kennedy, fearing such news might further damage his credibility by making him seem indecisive, took a small but important step to discourage any such thoughts on the part of the communists. He ordered the PEO in Laos to have its personnel shuck their civilian attire in favor of military uniforms, effectively transforming the PEO into an overt Military Assistance

¹³¹ Warner, 48.

¹³² *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, 138-139; Castle, 40.

Advisory Group, a position it had held, covertly, since 1959.¹³³ Such an order was tantamount to authorizing direct, overt ground combat.

Kennedy's order to the PEO seems, on the surface, to have been motivated by concern over national and personal prestige. A month earlier, however, the Chief of the PEO had complained to Joint Chiefs Chairman General L.L. Lemnitzer, that the Pathet Lao had Vietnamese advisors down to company level. He had asked that his Special Forces training teams be allowed to go overt, by wearing their uniforms, and be assigned down as far as battalion level.¹³⁴ In this case, there seems to have been a coincidence between political and military necessity. Whatever the reasons behind the decision to go public in Laos, it was a small but important shift in policy. One of its effects was to force a reckoning between the United States and the Soviet Union over what was now overt aid by the former to a country in which the latter had a stake. It also led, almost inevitably, to the first American casualties in Laos.

In early April, the Pathet Lao launched yet another offensive against the Royal Army in the vicinity of the Plain of Jars. One battalion of Royal forces, advised by "Team Moon", a Special Forces advisory team led by a U.S. Army captain of the same name, had been fighting for over a month to regain the road junction captured by the Pathet Lao in their March offensive. On 22 April the communist forces prepped Team Moon's positions with heavy artillery, then launched an assault that overran the Royal Army battalion and its Special Forces advisors. Two of the team's four members were killed during the assault. Two

¹³³ Goldstein, *American Policy in Laos*, 239; Sananikone, 77.

were captured, including Captain Moon, who was later killed by his captors after his second escape attempt. The fourth member of the team was released after sixteen months in captivity.¹³⁵

Having been badly routed on the Plain of Jars, Phoumi ordered his forces into last-ditch blocking positions to protect Vientiane and Luang Prabang from the Pathet Lao, who now held most of the critical routes to and from the heart of Laos and seemed capable of going as far as they wished. On April 26th, Acting Secretary of State Chester Bowles, reiterating the assessment of his Ambassador to Laos, Winthrop Brown, painted a troubling picture for Kennedy. "The military situation in Laos is becoming intolerable," he reported, "with...Communist offensives continuing against key areas. They could result in the capture of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Paksane, effective bisection of the country and control of the Mekong basin areas."¹³⁶ If the Pathet Lao were allowed to get that far, Bowles argued, they could threaten Thailand and Vietnam. He then warned the President that Souvanna Phouma's efforts to establish a fourteen-nation conference on Laos would turn into "a communist victory party" if the Pathet Lao were allowed to continue their operations unchecked. His recommendations to Kennedy included consideration of direct and massive military intervention.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ General Andrew J. Boyle, "Message 1134", 22 March 61, NSF, CS: Laos, JFKL.

¹³⁵ Castle, 31; Conboy, 53-54; Warner 56-57. Accounts of the demise of Team Moon vary, but this one seems to be the consensus.

¹³⁶ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, 140-141.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Records from a series of meetings held between April 27 and April 29, 1961 make it clear that Kennedy did not wish to risk a major conventional intervention in Laos, or the confrontation with China and the Soviet Union that such an action might provoke. On April 27th, Acting Secretary Bowles reported to Dean Rusk on the consensus of a meeting of the administration on Laos. He told the Secretary of State that, while all present at the meeting accepted the notion that without direct U.S. intervention all of Southeast Asia might be endangered, the unanimous view was against introducing US forces into Laos.¹³⁸ Rusk responded by asking what SEATO was doing in response to the crisis. The answer to that question was, simply, not much. The members of SEATO were split over what to do about Laos, with the majority apparently holding their breath and hoping the cease-fire would take place as scheduled.

The recent and painful memory of the Bay of Pigs almost certainly weighed heavily on Kennedy's mind during these tense days of debate over what to do about Laos. There seems little doubt that his administration considered the possibility of full-scale war with the Soviets or Chinese over Laos very real. Still, if there was to be a superpower showdown over Southeast Asia, the documents suggest, Kennedy preferred it to be over Thailand or Vietnam, not Laos.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, Kennedy and his advisors continued to feel strongly that the U.S. had to prevent a communist takeover of Laos. They were in a difficult

¹³⁸ Ibid., 144-156.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 146-147; Castle, 41.

¹⁴⁰ Author and date sanitized, "Defense Assessment of Merits of Intervention in Laos", POF, Countries, Laos, JFKL.

position, stuck between two distasteful choices, with apparently little allied assistance they could count on. The situation was, perhaps, clarified a bit by Kennedy's military advisors, who told him that "[the communists] have breached the Annamite chain, which forms a natural barrier between Vietnam and Laos. The next barrier is the Mekong. After the Mekong, the way is open to the entire area..."¹⁴⁰ The same advisors cautioned Kennedy that the effects of non-intervention included confirmation, for potential insurgents, that global communism was ascendant; that the West was effectively losing the Cold War. Such a belief, they contended, would encourage a rash of violent communist insurgencies. Acting on such advice, but obviously uneasy about his position, Kennedy ordered the Joint Task Force from Okinawa into position in the South China Sea, an indication that he was prepared to at least tempt the Soviets by rattling his saber. This may have been an effort to convince the Pathet Lao and the Soviets of his resolve, especially in the wake of the Bay of Pigs.

The world did not get to find out if Kennedy was playing a diplomatic bluffing game, or if he was truly prepared to risk war to keep the communists from capturing all of Laos. On May 1st the Pathet Lao accepted the terms of the cease-fire hammered out by the British and the Soviets. Two days later Phoumi's men were also ordered to stand down.¹⁴¹ The confrontation over Laos was averted, for the moment, by diplomacy. Subsequently, America suspended military aid to Laos and the cease-fire went into effect as scheduled on May 11th.

¹⁴¹ Conboy, 54.

Five days later, on May 16th, the Second Geneva Conference was convened to settle the three-sided dispute over the country.

On June 3rd and 4th, Kennedy met with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna. In a contentious meeting over a range of issues from Berlin to nuclear disarmament, the one thing the two leaders agreed on was that Laos was not worth a superpower confrontation. They issued a joint statement following the meeting, part of which "...reaffirmed their support of a neutral and independent Laos...and of international agreements for insuring that neutrality and independence..."¹⁴² With that, Kennedy's intervention in Laos entered a new stage. He handed the reigns of American involvement in Laos to Averill Harriman, the American delegate to the Geneva Conference. Overtly, America was now involved only diplomatically in the Kingdom. The Momentum, PARU and White Star teams remained in the country, however, and the secret war continued unabated until May 1962, when the Geneva Conference ended.¹⁴³

The implication of the Pathet Lao onslaught of March and April 1961 is that Kennedy's program in Laos had failed. The developments that led to the second Geneva Conference, moreover, confirm several things about Kennedy's early intervention in Laos. First, most of his programs were holdovers, extensions, or expansions of those initiated by the Eisenhower administration. Second, all of the programs were militarily oriented. The time, money and blood spent training the Hmong and the Royal Army did nothing to make the Royal Government more responsive to or representative of a significant number of its

¹⁴² Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, 154; Castle, 42.

people. Third, the failure of the Kennedy administration to recognize these shortcomings and institute a comprehensive CI plan, of the sort that the President's advisors (including his own brother) were promoting, led inevitably to the failure of military intervention. Kennedy believed in a strategy of flexible response. His brother, Robert F. Kennedy had provided him with an Army report that laid out the fundamentals of a holistic CI doctrine, designed for the type of enemy he faced in Laos. Rostow, Landon and his embassy staff in Laos had all counseled him to attack the disease, not the symptom, by addressing the basic social and political problems of Laos, rather than fighting the Pathet Lao exclusively. The path was there; Kennedy just failed to take it, resorting to the old, partisan style CI of the Korea days.

With the onset of negotiations, American policy in Laos was bound to change. While the Kennedy administration still maintained its covert aid programs, they tried to avoid obvious violation of the cease-fire. Much of the Hmong training conducted by the Momentum and White Star teams continued, as did the airlift of supplies. The organization and activity of the PEO and its operators apparently differed little from the military aid program of the pre-cease-fire days. The Hmong and the Pathet Lao continued to skirmish in the mountains around the Plain of Jars. In short, as the peace talks dragged out among the three factions vying for control of Laos, Kennedy's misdirected CI program dragged along with it. Despite a brief but intense flare-up in May 1962, during which Kennedy deployed 3,000 Marines to Thailand in preparation for a move

¹⁴³ Ibid.

into Laos, the Geneva Conference offered a year during which Laos was, for the most part, out of the spotlight.¹⁴⁴

Geneva Changes the Rules in Laos

The outcome of the Geneva Conference promised to change the nature of foreign intervention in Laos. The agreement announced in July 1962 called for "the maintenance of neutrality by a regime presided over by Prince Souvanna Phouma's neutralists, but strongly influenced by both the Pathet Lao and the Vientiane group."¹⁴⁵ There was to be a coalition government, with Phouma's neutralists holding seven seats in the national assembly, and the Pathet Lao and Phoumi's nationalists getting four each. In this and other respects, the 1962 agreement resembled the failed 1954 agreement. The 1962 agreement, too, called for the demobilization of most of the armed forces of all sides, and the creation of a smaller, integrated national army. There was to be an International Control Commission, composed of fourteen nations, which would monitor compliance with the terms of the agreement. Most importantly for the American aid programs, the agreement called for an end to all foreign military intervention and the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel. The International Control Commission would be especially interested in the latter. Article 1 of the Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos clearly defined "foreign military personnel" as "members of foreign military missions...advisers, experts, instructors, consultants, technicians, observers...and foreign civilians connected

¹⁴⁴ Parker, xiii.

with the supply, maintenance, storing and utilization of war materials."¹⁴⁶ It is interesting that the delegates included the final passage regarding foreign civilians. Such a broad and clear definition signaled the end of the PEO, Operation White Star and the CIA's training of the Hmong.

The deadline for troop withdrawal was set for October 7, 1962. The International Control Commission set up checkpoints to count foreign soldiers as they exited the country. The checkpoints accounted for 666 American advisors on their way out between August and September. The CIA maintained a two-person station within the US Mission at Vientiane, ostensibly to monitor communist compliance with the Geneva agreement.¹⁴⁷ With only weeks to go before the deadline, however, the Commission reported that only 40 of an estimated 7,000 Vietnamese advisors and soldiers had evacuated Laos. This inaction by North Vietnam was a clear violation of the Geneva agreements and initiated another round of discussions in Washington. Averill Harriman appealed to Kennedy to adhere strictly to the Geneva agreement. Such discipline on the part of the United States, he argued, might convince the neutralists that the North Vietnamese could not be trusted, and might thereby push Phouma farther from the communist camp. US intelligence estimates told the President (incorrectly) that the North Vietnamese appeared interested in maintaining their access to South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, but were not interested in

¹⁴⁵ George Modelska, *Working Paper No. 2, International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question, 1961-2*, (Canberra, Australia: Department of International Relations, The Australian National University, 1962), 37.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 147-148.

¹⁴⁷ Parker, xiii.

further encroachment into the country. Kennedy, therefore, protested the violations but took no further action.¹⁴⁸ Kennedy's military advisors in Laos slowly but surely closed up shop and left the kingdom to its uneasy neutrality.

CI Efforts in a Neutral Laos

There were non-military operations active in Laos. A non-governmental organization called International Voluntary Services (which Warner describes as a private forerunner to the Peace Corps) had a representative, Edgar Buell, in the Laotian highlands as early as May 1960. His was there to teach modern farming techniques, but just as often ended up providing intelligence to the CIA and liaison between the other Americans and the locals, whom he had come to know quite well.¹⁴⁹ With the advent of neutrality, missions such as Buell's began to look ever more important, as the Special Group (CI) began to look for ways to influence events in Laos without violating the Geneva agreements.

On July 3, 1962, General Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent a memo to the other members of the Special Group (CI) detailing a proposal for counterinsurgencies in Southeast Asia. He began the memo by offering the opinion that the expected formation of a coalition government in Laos limited American opportunities to exert anticommunist influence. They needed to look more deeply for ways to influence events. "One fruitful area", he told them, "relates to public health." He proposed to train a cadre of young Laotians from

¹⁴⁸ *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, 889-907; Stevenson, 178-179; Warner, 74-75. As always, there are several estimates of Vietnamese troops in Laos, ranging from 5,000 to 10,000. 7,000 is Parker's figure and represents the median estimate.

¹⁴⁹ Warner, 1-9.

the "hinterlands" to provide medical aid to the chronically under-treated peasants. Furthermore, "It would develop a body of active young men who are favorably oriented toward the United States and who, at the same time, enjoy influential stature among their countrymen. Finally, it would provide, through the overt relationship between the United States agencies and these young medical men, a continuing opportunity both to infuse our ideas into the Laotian people and to procure local information of continuing value."¹⁵⁰ The Special Group, with the Department of State, USAID, the Department of Defense and USIA leading the way, set to work designing a program to engage in this and other non-combat aspects of CI.

The medical program established by the Special Group was administered by USAID. They recruited Doctor Charles Weldon and his wife, Doctor Patricia McCreedy to run the operation in Laos. The husband and wife team had developed a stellar reputation as public health doctors in American Samoa, where they had solved the island's chronic problems with tuberculosis, elephantiasis and high infant mortality. Once in Laos, McCreedy found herself without a job. Weldon found himself in the grip of a crippling USAID bureaucracy. But with the help of Edgar Buell, now the USAID's Refugee Coordinator among the Hmong, he set about establishing an inoculation program, basic medical training and a system of rural health clinics. What the doctor didn't know, according to Warner, was how well his public health plan

¹⁵⁰ Lemnitzer, "Memo For The Members of The SGCI", 3 July 62, JFKL.

dovetailed with the USAID's overall development effort, and "with the CIAs re-expanding efforts to organize the Laotians of the countryside."¹⁵¹

Doctor Weldon's medical program was part of a large effort, spearheaded by the Department of States' Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. The main focus of the program was an overhaul of American financial aid to Laos, which had been characterized by direct budgetary support, which had proven ineffective and allowed corruption to flourish in Vientiane. The new financial package called for an elimination of cash grants in favor of "reimbursable financing" and expanded imports to Laos, both of which were to be tightly controlled by U.S. and Lao customs.

The overhauled fiscal year 1963 aid package for Laos also included the Project Program, a \$13 million initiative for rural development, teacher training and medical assistance, including Weldon's operation. The Project Program also included proposals for the establishment of Lao National Radio, a telephone plant for Vientiane, and refugee resettlement and relief for the Hmong.¹⁵²

The Project Program seems finally to have incorporated the principle of political and social reform into America's CI efforts in Laos. Improved farming, education and public health would almost certainly produce a Laotian population who were, as Lemnitzer hoped, "favorably oriented towards the United States."¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Warner, 104.

¹⁵² *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIV, 909-910.

¹⁵³ Lemnitzer "Memo For The Members of the SGCI", 3 July 62, JFKL.

In reality, however, many of the Project Program's goals were designed to address problems created or exacerbated among the Hmong by the earlier military aid programs. Following the Geneva agreements and the evacuation of American military advisors, the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao had launched major offensives against the Hmong. The Hmong, who had fought so effectively under the American aid program, soon found themselves running low on all manner of supplies, including food and ammunition. Harriman had authorized a small number of "mercy mission" supply drops to Vang Po's forces, but they were insufficient to stave off the vastly larger communist forces.¹⁵⁴ In late August 1962, a communist attack on the village of Ban Ban forced some 6,000 people, mostly Hmong, to flee south. After running for most of the day, the refugees camped in a high valley, where the communists surprised and massacred them. According to one account, "Children were snatched from their mothers' arms and hurled with head-crushing force against rocks. Old men and women were shot in the legs and left to die alone, abandoned both by their young and by their executioners. Women were raped, then disemboweled."¹⁵⁵ According to Jane Hamilton-Merritt, the attack killed 1,300 refugees, again most of them Hmong. Those that survived fled in a panic.

As word spread of the massacre, villages among the hills emptied before the onrushing Viet Minh and Pathet Lao. Shortly thereafter, with some 20,000 refugees crowding the village of Muong Meo, Edgar Buell enlisted the aid of Air

¹⁵⁴ Castle, 51.

¹⁵⁵ Don A. Schanche, *Mister Pop*, (New York: David McKay Company, 1970), 199, quoted in Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 121.

America (still operating in neighboring Thailand) to disperse them before they could be cornered and attacked. Meanwhile, Doctor Weldon and his half-trained Hmong medics tended the sick and wounded.

The communist attacks continued, with Vang Po's dwindling forces trying desperately to defend their tribesmen, but being pushed from one mountaintop to another. In September, after nearly 200,000 Hmong were forced to flee another series of attacks, Souvanna Phouma requested that the US resume aid to the Hmong, a request echoed by the CIA agents still present in Laos, and the American ambassador.¹⁵⁶ This request brought a resurgence of military aid to accompany the Program Project among the Hmong. Supply flights to Vang Po resumed, and the CIA once again began to fight its guerrilla war in Laos, this time from its base across the Mekong in Thailand.

In April 1963, the Pathet Lao attacked Kong Le's neutralist army, their erstwhile ally. In May, the State Department authorized supply drops to Kong Le. In a twist of irony that seems entirely predictable given the situation in Laos, the U.S. was now supplying both Vang Po and Kong Le, who frequently fought each other. Communist violations of the Geneva agreements continued, with no reaction from the international committee designed to deal with such infractions.¹⁵⁷ In November, following Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination and the subsequent turmoil in South Vietnam, the administration's attention was once again diverted away from Laos. Kennedy's assassination a few days later further

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 122-123; Parker, xiii.

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton-Merritt, 123-126.

diverted national and global attention. The North Vietnamese seized the opportunity to increase the flow of soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam and Laos, ensuring the extension of the bloody struggle in the Laotian highlands.

Conclusion

The return to military aid in the face of communist violations of the Geneva agreements signals the failure of counterinsurgency in Laos. If one accepts the notion that an insurgency must enjoy popular support to be successful, then the recurrence of insurgency in Laos indicates that America's CI programs were never successful in winning such support away from the Pathet Lao.

I contend that the failure of Kennedy's CI programs in Laos was the result of an antiquated approach to counterinsurgency, a fundamental misunderstanding of the type of enemy he faced and an impatience born of bad timing and political circumstance. As I have shown, Kennedy had a workable framework available to develop a comprehensive CI strategy. Robert F. Kennedy had presented him with a document that described in detail the parameters of effective counterinsurgency, and even provided suggestions as to tactics. Rostow, Hilsman, Landon and others of his advisors had counseled him to shift his focus from bolstering the military to building support for the Royal Government. Moreover, Kennedy had an affinity for covert operations and believed in flexible response. Ignorance cannot be Kennedy's defense. As I've argued, Kennedy was shown the path; he just failed to take it.

The record shows that when faced with deteriorating events in Laos, Kennedy's response was to repeatedly boost support for projects like White Star

and Momentum; to train and assist more forces to fight the communists, or to provide those forces with more weapons and supplies. When such measures appeared insufficient, his next step was consistently to elevate the alert levels of his conventional forces in the region, three times even moving task forces to within striking distance of Laotian soil.

Two factors, I believe, explain his actions. First, Kennedy's record indicates that, while he may have believed in flexible response, and may have known about the non-military aspects of CI, the two did not necessarily coincide in his mind. A look at Kennedy's creation of the Special Forces school demonstrates that, while the ideal was the soldier-diplomat, the reality was the trainer and fighter. His highest visibility project in the realm of limited war, therefore, was not designed to provide anything more than what it did, a flexible military response.

Second, the crisis in Laos erupted early in Kennedy's term, when he was still trying to formulate policy and establish himself both domestically and internationally. He had criticized Eisenhower's execution of containment, and had to demonstrate that his theories would work better. To complicate matters further, Kennedy had to make many critical decisions in the wake of the Bay of Pigs disaster. The advice given by Schlesinger and Rostow, and the President's subsequent actions, indicate that he was heavily influenced by the need to appear decisive and committed in this period. This often meant he had to take action that would demonstrate relatively quick results. True counterinsurgency is a long-term proposition. While the military aspects of it, like sending new

weapons or more advisors, might bear immediate fruit, it takes much longer to change minds and win popular support. In his defense, Kennedy might well have instituted a holistic CI campaign, had he not felt pressured to produce tangible results quickly.

When Kennedy finally did introduce a relatively unified CI effort in Laos, it was more as a response than as a prophylactic, and it was incomplete and misdirected at that. Most of the rural development, health care and educational programs executed by USAID after 1962 targeted the hill tribes of northern Laos, most notably the Hmong. The same is true of the refugee resettlement programs. The fact of the matter is that the military aid programs of 1961 created the Hmong refugee problem, by convincing the Hmong to fight the communists, and making them dependent on American aid to do so. When American aid dried up, the Hmong were easy pickings for the better-armed communist forces. Moreover, the hill tribes were already loyal to the royal government, making CI efforts among them redundant. A higher payoff target in Laos would have been the lowland Lao who supported the neutralists. The programs of USAID might have borne more fruit there, by gaining more support for the royal government, rather than bolstering existing support. To do so, however, would have required time and patience that Kennedy apparently did not possess.

Such arguments beg the question: if Kennedy had engaged in a more comprehensive CI program in Laos, would it have changed the outcome? Without engaging in counter-factual history or extending the story beyond Kennedy's assassination, I argue no. American CI doctrine in January 1961 had

changed little since the first manual was published in 1958. The doctrine still called for the reorganization of conventional units to fight insurgents. It was not until the new version of the Army's overarching operational manual, *FM 100-5, Operations* was published in 1962 that the roots of counterinsurgency were addressed. The implementing doctrinal manuals, *FMs 31-22, U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces, 31-21, Guerrilla Warfare and Special Operations Forces*, and *31-16, Counterguerrilla Operations*, were not published until 1963. Such doctrine included the valuable lessons from Malaya, and incorporated the views of men like Hilsman and Rostow, but arrived far too late to save Kennedy's programs in Laos.

More importantly, the type of insurgents Kennedy faced in the Pathet Lao were not likely to be defeated by anything short of granting Laos complete autonomy. If one accepts the notion that the Vietnamese had designs on all of Southeast Asia, the picture becomes even more muddled. The Pathet Lao wanted the Americans out of Laos; the Vietnamese wanted the Pathet Lao to secure Laos for communism. Even if Kennedy had introduced land reform, as Magsaysay did in the Philippines, it would not have weakened the Pathet Lao, because the populace did not rally around them for economic reasons, but rather for as nationalists and liberators. The Pathet Lao also had the capacity to keep fighting as long as the aid of the Viet Minh continued. Unfortunately for Laos, that aid appears to have been limitless.

Even the non-military CI programs that Kennedy did institute in Laos failed to address the fundamental appeal of the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao were

fighting for independence. They had begun by resisting the French, but the American takeover had been so complete that the Pathet Lao had naturally transitioned to resisting the U.S. Like the French, the U.S. had few options, short of abandoning operations in Laos altogether, that would have diminished the role or power of the Pathet Lao. Neither the USAID, nor the CIA ever addressed the appeal of the Pathet Lao, probably because they misinterpreted it. They appear, at least in 1962 and 1963, to have been attempting to win the hearts and minds of Laotians, but their efforts were misdirected. The Special Group (CI) was a great way to synchronize the administration's CI efforts, but its documents also indicate a fundamental misunderstanding of the enemy they were faced with in Laos. Health clinics, schools and improved farming techniques may have kept the support of those already sympathetic to the Royal Government, but they did little to address the fundamental political circumstances of the country, or the basic appeal of the Pathet Lao.

Even the best American CI efforts in Laos, then, were doomed to failure. The non-military programs were too little, too late. They were aimed at the wrong group of people, and in any case failed to attempt, let alone produce, any fundamental change. They certainly were not intended to leave Laos to the Laotians. The military efforts were no better, and from some perspectives, far worse. Aid to the Royal Lao Army added a third faction in the Laotian political quagmire, when Kong Le grew fed up with the corruption it bred in the Army's General Staff. The same aid proved incapable, moreover, of making the Royal Army a potent force on the battlefield. Aid to the Hmong was an unmitigated

disaster. America armed, trained and supplied a tribe that grew dependent on the aid, and was hard pressed to stave off their own destruction without it. The fate of the Hmong demonstrates the overall weakness of Kennedy's CI efforts in Laos: they were all temporary measures at best, destined to dry up when the Americans who ran the operations left.

CHAPTER 4

EPILOGUE

Laos After Kennedy

Obviously, US intervention in Laos did not end with Kennedy's assassination in November 1963. The situation would get much bleaker in the years to come, especially for the Hmong. By the end of 1963, the Hmong had 20,000 American trained and equipped fighters resisting the communists, but the Pathet Lao's Vietnamese benefactors continued to add new units to the fray. The Hmong fought as guerrillas, harassing, ambushing and launching hit and run raids against Viet Minh, Pathet Lao, and, after 1968, North Vietnamese Army targets.¹⁵⁸ The communists, in contrast, fought in larger formations, with conventional weapons and, often, conventional tactics. The contrast of styles dragged the fight out for two more decades.

In the intervening years between 1963 and the fall of Laos to the communists in 1975, the U.S. presence in Laos grew and changed. The CIA station grew to 225 men, with 50 advisors among the Hmong. Lyndon Johnson drastically increased the power and scope of the air operation, sending F-111 fighter-bombers and World War II era B-26s to the Air America base at Udorn, Thailand. From there they ran ten to twenty sorties per day against the combined communist forces. In 1968 the North Vietnamese sent four battalions of their regular army to hound the Hmong, whose casualties had mounted and who were no longer able to readily replenish their numbers. In the face of this

¹⁵⁸ Parker, *Codename Mule*, xv; Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 121-126.

development, the U.S. began to run as many as 300 bombing missions per day, to hammer the communist formations as they maneuvered across the Plain of Jars. But the end was near for Laos and the Hmong. Lyndon Johnson had escalated the war in Vietnam along with the covert commitment to Laos, but gone was any hope for a successful counterinsurgency.

One reason, obviously, was that the Hmong were effectively now the insurgents. They had always been a guerrilla force, but now the Pathet Lao held the majority of power and were backed by a large conventional force. Another reason was that the American intervention had reverted to its military roots. With the number of Hmong dwindling even as American air power in the region increased, the US was hard pressed to find enough able-bodied young Hmong men to field an army. They were certainly in no position to lobby for popular support.

The war would drag on until another cease-fire was declared in January 1973. The last American aircraft passed out of Laos on 22 February of that year, leaving the country, and the Hmong, to the communists.¹⁵⁹ The horrors of war were just beginning for the Hmong and others who had opposed the Pathet Lao. After years of fighting and hiding in the jungles, Vang Po and his family escaped across the Mekong into Thailand in 1976. They and a few other Hmong families found their way to the United States, where they were settled in Montana, safely tucked away from the genocide that was ravaging their people. Vang Po became an American citizen.

¹⁵⁹ Parker, 170.

Back in Laos, the remaining Hmong were subjected to constant hounding by the Pathet Lao. Between 1973 and 1991, they were attacked with artillery, troops on the ground and, increasingly, from the air. Prisoners captured by the Pathet Lao were tortured and maimed. Women were publicly raped and children crippled as warnings to those who resisted the Pathet Lao. Perhaps most horribly, the communists launched a chemical and biological warfare campaign to kill those Hmong who escaped into the jungles. Reports of chemical weapons use surfaced repeatedly between 1978 and 1991, indicating that the Pathet Lao and their sponsors remained bent on destroying the tenacious hill tribes that had resisted them for so long. The U.S. did not intervene.¹⁶⁰

Laos' Connection to Vietnam

Events in Laos during the Kennedy administration bore little on the growing war in Vietnam. It was only after the war, with the benefit of hindsight, that one can begin to find connections. One important line that connects Laos and Vietnam is the development and use of CI doctrine. Laos was, I've argued, a CI failure for Kennedy, partially because there was no doctrine for such operations. The doctrine that appeared in 1963 was not significantly tested in Laos. The new doctrine derived more from lessons learned from errors of omission than it did from experience in the field. The greatest legacy in the new doctrine traced its lineage, most likely, to the British experience in Malaya. However it was derived, the new doctrine would be played out in Vietnam. In a 1961 meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Kennedy had told the

¹⁶⁰ Hamilton-Merritt, 355-460, 493-494.

assembled officers that he “[wished] to have the maximum number of men trained for counterguerrilla operations and put into areas of immediate concern...”¹⁶¹ Most of those men, one assumes, were military. Since the President also instituted CI training as a requirement for promotion to general officer, and incorporated CI doctrine into the officer training schools, it seems reasonable to conclude that the officers who executed the war in Vietnam were trained using Kennedy’s doctrine, probably by men whose experience came in Laos. Therein lies the connection.

Laos becomes important, therefore, because many of the same people who had learned hard lessons in Laos simply applied them next door to Vietnam. This is certainly true of men in the administration, like W.W. Rostow and McGeorge Bundy, both of whom played key roles in both Laos and Vietnam. At ground level, those who went back to the United States were often trainers for the next generation of advisors. The CIA and Special Forces soldiers who transited the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, as it was soon named, must have been taught by Laos veterans. Who else would have had the experience and still been in service? The doctrine these men taught was very different from the operations they had executed. How well the veterans of Momentum and White Star were able to reconcile that dichotomy is an important question that bears directly on the success of American CI operations in Vietnam. But how well the Americans passed on the hard lessons of Laos to

¹⁶¹ Memorandum for Record, “Essential Points Arising From the JCS Meeting With the President”, 23 February 1961, NSF, M&M, CS: Laos, JFKL.

those who would attempt to win hearts and minds in Vietnam is a subject for another inquiry.

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