

Eisenhower and Southeast Asia, Part II: Failure by Choice

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A Shift to the Offensive

In mid-March, 1960, President Eisenhower decided upon a major foreign policy shift to the offensive based on another change in the strategic weapons balance favoring the United States. After several years of fits and starts, the U.S. ballistic missile program had begun to show results. On September 1, 1959, Washington had declared the Atlas D ICBM operational at Vandenberg Air Force Base. In mid-September, the Polaris SLBM had successfully test-fired its first missile at full range. In early November, Washington announced plans to deploy one squadron of Jupiter intermediate-range missiles to Turkey and two squadrons to Italy. And in December, Washington had deployed the Thor IRBM to the United Kingdom.

At the same time, it became clear to U.S. intelligence that the Soviet missile program was still mired in difficulties with no hope of early ICBM deployment. The conclusion was that the United States would be deploying a broad range of land-based, sea-based, and intermediate-range missiles before the Soviet Union could; and this would give the United States a growing strategic weapons advantage. Ironically, the public perception was precisely the opposite, as the erroneous idea of a missile gap favoring the Soviet Union gained currency during the 1960 presidential election campaign.

Based on the emerging actual strategic weapons advantage, Eisenhower decided to adopt a more assertive

foreign policy to recoup lost gains. Europe was at the top of the list, with Cuba and Southeast Asia not far below. The United States would strengthen the containment structure and abandon the effort to reach a détente with the Soviet Union. Key to this strategic adjustment was the president's highly secret and plausibly deniable plan to abort the May 1960 Paris summit, and defeat French President Charles de Gaulle's scheme to cripple the U.S. position in Western Europe.



Atlas D ICBM, 1959—USAF photo via *siloworld.net*

Eisenhower relates that on March 17 he authorized the CIA to begin training Cuban exiles for the “day when they might return to their homeland.” Related measures concerning Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo seem also to have been taken

at this time.¹ On the same day, at an NSC meeting, CIA Director Allen Dulles cited “widespread reports” of increased Communist actions in South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The situation in Laos was of particular concern. “Security enforced by the central government exists fully only in the cities, to a lesser extent in the towns, and not at all in the countryside.”² It was not clear, he said, what would be the tactics of the Communists (represented by the Pathet Lao political wing, *Neo Lao Hak Xat*, or NLHX) in the coming election, scheduled for the end of April, but their growing strength was troubling. In the event, as will be discussed below, Communist electoral tactics would pale compared to the differences among Laotian leaders themselves, and the growing strength of the Pathet Lao.

The Problem of de Gaulle

Indeed, U.S. problems in Laos could be traced back not only to the Moscow-Hanoi decision to escalate the war, but also to the deterioration in U.S. relations with France. The latter began when the United States forced France out of Indochina in 1954. The French sought a neutral Laos—not a bulwark against Communism—as part of a larger strategy of Vietnamese unification. Differences with the United States over Southeast Asia could not be papered over by superficial attempts at cooperation and it is a wonder that the Eisenhower Administration failed to comprehend them.³

The downward spiral in Franco-American relations intensified with Charles de Gaulle’s rise to power in 1958. From the outset he demanded French inclusion in a U.S.-U.K.-France nuclear triumvirate to control nuclear weapons, a proposal that

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: The White House Years, A Personal Account 1956-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 533-535.

² “Memorandum of Discussion at the 437th Meeting of the National Security Council,” March 17, 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 333.

³ See the insightful book by Marianna Sullivan, *France’s Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978) especially Chapters 2 and 3.

fell on deaf ears, but which he broadened into a demand for a tripartite world strategy. He sought U.S. nuclear technology and material, which was also denied, prompting a decision to acquire an independent nuclear capability.

Indeed, De Gaulle was determined to pursue an independent policy, withdrawing the French Mediterranean Fleet from NATO, and seeking to develop a continental European bloc based on Franco-German cooperation. De Gaulle's plan, as the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research put it, was to raise France to a leading role in global affairs and to the position of "mediator and link between the United States and the Soviet Union."⁴ If anything, this analysis *underestimated* de Gaulle's ambitious plans to counter what came to be termed by journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber "*le défi américain*."

Except for acquisition of an independent nuclear capability—France had successfully detonated two atomic devices in February and March of 1960—de Gaulle's foreign policy had disappointing results primarily because France did not possess the national power to pursue an openly independent policy. Adopting the strategy of the weak power, de Gaulle began to pursue what was essentially a spoiling strategy of denial against the United States and *détente* with the Soviet Union, as he sought to build a continental European bloc between the two superpowers. De Gaulle's strategy would have taken a giant stride forward had the Paris Summit, with its promise of U.S.-Soviet *détente*, taken place.

However, as Eisenhower recounts, the proposed meeting was "the summit that never was," disrupted by the downing of a U-2 reconnaissance plane over Sverdlovsk, in the

⁴ "Intelligence Report Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research," December 6, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Western Europe, Volume VII, Part 2, eds. Ronald D. Landa et al. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1993), Document 201.

USSR.⁵ The juxtaposition of the U-2 Incident and the Paris Summit has raised questions about the relationship of one with the other. Despite U.S. Government protestations to the contrary, a view has evolved that it was deliberately contrived to prevent the meeting from taking place.⁶

The main point, however, is whether contrived or not, the effect of the U-2 Incident was not only to disrupt the developing “thaw” in U.S.-Soviet relations, but also to bring crashing down de Gaulle’s scheme for an independent continental Europe. Indeed, de Gaulle recognized instantly that his scheme had failed when, after Khrushchev had stormed out of the summit meeting, he said to the president: “Whatever happens, *we are with you.*”

Eisenhower thought that the “brightest spot in the whole affair” had been de Gaulle’s “loyalty,” surely one of the most ironic tongue-in-cheek reflections of one adversary about another in modern history.⁷ Without the loss of a single casualty, the United States had restored the integrity of NATO and the American leadership role in it. But, if Eisenhower thought that de Gaulle would meekly fall in line behind American leadership, he would be greatly mistaken. De Gaulle’s first response would be to disrupt U.S. policy in Laos.

Quagmire in Laos

In Laos, the nation-wide legislative elections of April 24, 1960 had resulted in a resounding victory for the non-Communists over the Communists. Of the fifty-nine seats contested, the conservative Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI) won thirty-two, the neutralist *Rassemblement du Peuple Laotien* (RPL) twenty-seven, and the Communists zero. The

⁵ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 543.

⁶ See James Nathan, “A Fragile Détente: The U-2 Incident Re-examined,” *Military Affairs* (October 1975), 97-104. For an analysis of the mission, see Chris Pocock, “From Peshawar to Bodo—Mission Impossible?” in Sven Lundestad, ed., *U-2 Flights and the Cold War in the High North* (Bodo: Bodo College Press, 1996) 2-23.

⁷ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 556. (emphasis in original)

elections were universally recognized as having been rigged, as electoral districts were redrawn to favor non-Communist candidates. The Laotian armed forces, *Forces Armées Laotiennes* (FAL) not only provided security for the people against the Communists, who won no seats even in precincts they controlled, but they also campaigned against the RPL in favor of the CDNI. CIA agents reportedly also were heavily involved in distributing kip (Laotian currency) to buy votes.⁸

In a little noted development, former Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had quietly returned from his stint as ambassador to France to rejoin the RPL. He won an assembly seat representing Luang Prabang and was appointed president of the National Assembly. From that position, within four months, he would move to the center of the political-military vortex that would soon engulf Laotian politics.

On the basis of the election results, Phoumi Nosavan sought to claim appointment as prime minister, but once again Washington stepped in to thwart him. Over the course of the following month, Ambassador Horace Smith made repeated demarches to King Savang to deny Phoumi the appointment on the grounds that “he was unduly antagonistic to Communism and that his appointment might result in stirring up the local hostilities in Laos.”⁹ To reiterate, U.S. strategy was to support a civilian-led government backed by a strong military, but the inherent problem in that conception was how to prevent the military leader from parleying military strength into political power.

Indeed, Phoumi had made known his intention to bring the imprisoned Souphanouvong and his associates to trial on the charge of treason. But the “Red Prince,” as he was known, had prepared carefully for this eventuality during his ten-month

⁸ Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid To the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia, 1993), 19.

⁹ “Editorial Note,” *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 351.

incarceration. In the early morning of May 24, 1960, during a tropical rainstorm, Souphanouvong and seven fellow prisoners, joined by nine of their guards, escaped from the police camp where they were being held. Fleeing into the jungle, he went underground.¹⁰ By the time he resurfaced four months later, the situation in Laos would have changed dramatically. More immediately, however, Souphanouvong's escape made Phoumi Nosavan's rise to power more likely and galvanized Smith into action once again.

Meeting with the king later the very day of Souphanouvong's escape, Smith strongly urged him not to appoint Phoumi as prime minister. As their discussion progressed the new king complained about Washington's heavy-handed tactics. "The Crown's deep desire was for U.S. to treat Lao as adults, capable of judging international and national events in full responsible manner and possessing due awareness of gravity their particular situation." To Smith's avowal that the "U.S. approach [was] not intended as interference," the king replied that he regarded the ambassador's advice as "friendly"; "otherwise [it] would be impossible [to] explain [these] demarches."¹¹

The king took the position that "no matter what U.S. desires might be, Laos would continue [to] pursue anti-Communist course," but, averred paradoxically that "Laos had never sought [to] wage war against anyone" and that its neutrality had just been "reaffirmed" in the elections. Smith supported Laos' anti-Communist stand, but advised that "moderation in pursuing this policy seemed likely [to] prove more successful...than more violent measures likely [to] be adopted by less moderate govt." Reporting to Washington on the meeting, Smith thought that the king had "probably already privately

¹⁰ "Editorial Note," *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 348.

¹¹ "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Smith] to the Department of State," May 24, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 347.

worked out” a “new formula” for the next government.¹² He was right, and it was with Phoumi Nosavan, prompting Smith to deal directly with Phoumi in an attempt to head him off again.

In a meeting with Phoumi on May 29, Smith reported, the general said that he did not feel that he had “gone beyond” U.S. desires and that, “if he were Prime Minister he would bring about national unity through establishment [of a] coalition Cabinet,” of primarily “civilian character.” Policy would remain the same and “conform to U.S. wishes.” Moreover, “everyone” wanted him to assume the premiership, but that he would “cede place to someone else of his own choice if U.S. objections to him...were insurmountable.”

It became clear to Phoumi during their discussion that Smith was adamantly opposed to him becoming prime minister, but he refused to back down. At length, he offered a Hobson’s choice of either a government “headed by himself,” or one headed by Tiao Somsanith, who was Souvanna Phouma’s nephew. Phoumi seemed to be offering a sop to both the United States and to Souvanna Phouma with the nomination. But, it was obvious that the unseasoned, forty-seven year-old prince would simply be a front man for the CDNI-dominated regime. In either case, Phoumi said, he would assume the portfolio of defense minister in the cabinet.¹³

On June 3 the National Assembly approved the new government headed by Tiao Somsanith, which was widely assumed to be effectively under the control of Phoumi Nosavan. Welcoming the decision, the embassy offered a wry, pessimistic, but prescient assessment: “We believe it safe [to] expect that proposed cabinet will be prone [to] seek less our...counsel, will

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Smith] to the Department of State,” May 29, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 350.

welcome it less when volunteered, and will be less responsive to such guidance after it is received.”¹⁴



President Charles de Gaulle was prepared to deal with the Communists in Laos, in return for maintaining French influence in Indochina. *Photo source: German Federal Archive, via Wikimedia Commons.*

On the surface, by mid-1960, the United States seemed to have achieved its objective of a pro-American, civilian-led, neutral government. In fact, however, relations with the Lao had deteriorated badly. In an attempt to allay the king's objections to the U.S. ambassador's strong-arm methods Washington replaced Smith with Winthrop Brown, a personally more engaging representative, but changing ambassadors did little to repair the deeper fissures in the relationship. American policy

¹⁴ "Editorial Note," *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 351.

had severely alienated certain segments of the military and political elite. According to Anthony and Sexton, there were some officers who

resented the 'meddling' of U.S. instructors in their units and preferred French methods.... These officers were backed by a group of politicians who believed the U.S. presence...violated the Geneva accords, was an unnecessary provocation to their communist neighbors, and should be terminated. Souvanna Phouma supported this position.¹⁵

There was, in short, a growing polarization within the Lao leadership as some supported the United States and some France. Indeed, it was in Laos that de Gaulle implemented his spoiler strategy, with particularly unfortunate consequences for both countries. The specific issue he employed was the joint training program for the Lao Army.

At the end of June, French Ambassador Hervé Alphand met with U.S. Secretary of State Christian Herter. He claimed that the joint training agreement was due to expire on September 1 and that from that date France was ready to assume sole control over the program. Incredulous, Herter inquired: were the French "asking...that we should withdraw all of our officers engaged in training the army by September 1? Alphand replied in the affirmative."¹⁶

Three weeks later, when Winthrop Brown, the newly appointed American Ambassador to Laos, passed through Paris on his way to Vientiane, he was told that de Gaulle was very

¹⁵ Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos: 1954-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 28.

¹⁶ "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, June 30, 1960," *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 352.

interested in taking “sole responsibility” for training in Laos. Although U.S. officials believed that the “Laos want the French out and the U.S. in,” events would shortly refute this sanguine view.¹⁷

The Eisenhower Administration had no intention of meekly withdrawing from Laos. Indeed, it was just then in the process of increasing involvement. To avert an impasse with the French, the Americans sought assistance from Thailand. The truth was that American training cadre were having a difficult time developing capable Laotian officers and soldiers, who seemed resentful of American methods. Nor were the French, who interpreted for the Americans, helpful, exacerbating difficulties. In order to get around the obstructive French presence, the United States arranged to bring the Thai government into the training program for the FAL.¹⁸

The Royal Thai government, headed by Marshall Sarit Thanarat, was concerned about the growing conflict in neighboring Laos and was more than willing to assist in training FAL forces, not least because Phoumi Nosavan was his cousin once-removed. This proposed solution had the benefit of bypassing the French with Thai instructors, whose linguistic compatibility with the Lao obviated the language barrier. It also minimized resentment against the United States, and virtually eliminated the cultural impediments experienced by American instructors, as some training would take place in Thailand.¹⁹

Phoumi, in fact, had begun to act on this plan, demanding the withdrawal of all French instructors on August 6. The French, however, were forewarned. A few days earlier, French intelligence had intercepted a message from Sarit to Phoumi urging him to take control.²⁰ In this context, the stunning

¹⁷ “Memorandum of Discussion at the 452nd Meeting of the National Security Council, July 21, 1960,” *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 64.

¹⁸ Anthony and Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos*, 27-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

²⁰ *Laos: A Self Study Guide* (Washington: Department of State, 2004), 18. (Online at <http://www.governmentattic.org/3docs/Laos%20SSG.pdf>.)

events that commenced on August 9 take on the aspect of a French-directed pre-emptive strike against a U.S. attempt to exclude them from Laos, a step that also fit de Gaulle's spoiler strategy.

Kong le's Coup—de Gaulle's Plot

At three o'clock in the morning of August 9, twenty-six year old Laotian Captain Kong Le deployed his 900-man 2nd Paratroop battalion and several tanks around the capital, Vientiane. Confining the head of the U.S. mission to "something like house arrest," his troops took control of key points, including the radio station, airport (and five C-47 transport aircraft), and government buildings, including the national assembly.²¹ Then, he announced that, as *Chef du Coup d'Etat*, he had taken control of the Royal Laotian Government.²² The young captain had chosen his moment well, moving when the entire government cabinet was away in Luang Prabang, discussing with King Savang the burial arrangements for deceased King Sisavang Vong.

Broadcasting from Radio Vientiane, on August 10, Kong Le announced the formation of a forty-man Provisional Revolutionary Committee, which included Souvanna Phouma, the leftist Quinim Pholsena, two generals, and several "disgruntled" politicians, including Bong Souvannavong, a neutralist who had "long served as an apologist for the Pathet Lao." CIA reports suggested "two of Bong's extreme leftist sons appear to have played an important role in the coup."²³ Local reports also said "the French were suspected of aiding Kong Le

²¹ "Memorandum of Discussion at the 455th Meeting of the National Security Council," August 12, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 359.

²² Bernard Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 187.

²³ Central Intelligence Agency, *Current Intelligence Weekly Summary*, 11 August, 1960, Part I, 3-4.

in the hopes of reinserting Souvanna Phouma into the government.”²⁴

At a rally in the capital’s soccer stadium on August 11, Kong Le declared that his purpose was to end the fighting, establish a truly neutral government, and bring about an end to foreign and *especially* American intervention in Laotian affairs. (This last point stunned the Americans, who had believed that Kong Le was solidly pro-U.S.)

Kong Le declared, “It is the Americans who have bought government officials and army commanders, and caused war and dissension in our country.... We must help each other drive these sellers of the Fatherland out of the country as soon as possible.”²⁵ He demanded that Souvanna Phouma, “the only man who could reconcile the country’s different factions,” be appointed prime minister.²⁶

The Tiao Somsanith cabinet refused to resign or to return to Vientiane, as demanded. On August 13, Kong Le responded by parading a group of noisy “demonstrators” including many of his armed troops to the National Assembly, which they surrounded, demanding passage of a “no confidence” vote against Somsanith. Among the banners carried by the crowd were signs printed in Lao, French, and English saying, “PEO we don’t need you.”²⁷

Souvanna Phouma emerged from the assembly to speak briefly with the crowd, and then went back inside to convene a session to consider their demands. The forty-one delegates present had “lived for some days” in the National Assembly where Kong Le had penned them up and, according to

²⁴ Paul Hillmer, *A People’s History of the Hmong* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society, 2009), 75.

²⁵ Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 187-88.

²⁶ Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 29.

²⁷ “Paper Prepared by the Assistant White House Staff Secretary (John Eisenhower),” August 16, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 369.

Dulles “would have done almost anything to go out.”²⁸ Accordingly, under duress, the delegates voted unanimously in support of a “no confidence” resolution against the government and urged the king to name none other than Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister.

The next day the king complied with this dubious legal procedure, accepting the resignation of Tiao Somsanith and his cabinet and agreeing to appoint Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister. On August 16, thirty-four deputies of the National Assembly (seven had refused to attend) vested Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister. Kong Le declared that his coup had ended, but his troops remained ensconced in Vientiane.²⁹ Souvanna Phouma, announcing that he would keep for himself the portfolios of foreign affairs and defense, pledged to unite the country, seek genuine neutrality, respect all treaties, and accept aid from any country.³⁰

This sequence of events strongly indicated that Kong Le’s coup had not been the independent act of a single, disillusioned, idealistic officer, as invariably described, but the first step in a coordinated scheme to replace the neutralist, pro-American government led by Phoumi Nosavan with the neutralist, pro French government led by Souvanna Phouma. Nor was Kong Le a political novice. Although lacking formal education, he was a well-trained officer with political connections, married to the niece of General Ouan Ratikon, commandant of the armed forces.³¹ Connections aside, Kong Le

²⁸ “Memorandum of Discussion at the 456th Meeting of the National Security Council,” August 18, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 373.

²⁹ *Laos, 1960—January—1963*, Department of State Central Files (Washington: Congressional Information Service, 2003), xiii.

³⁰ Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 29.

³¹ Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 143.

was clearly influenced by the left-wing views of Bong Souvannavong and his two sons.³²

Taken completely by surprise, U.S. officials hinted cautiously that the coup was more than the act of a single officer and that the French were behind it. In a meeting of the NSC, on August 12, Dulles said, “Souvanna Phouma had been in Vientiane and may have been in touch with Captain Kong Le.” He “might form a government of a neutralist type” and that “the French would tend to look upon this favorably.” Reports from Vientiane noted, “both the British and the French had professed ignorance and surprise at the coup, [but] that both reflected a disturbing complacency.”³³

Souvanna Phouma, the “neutralist,” was strongly pro-French and had a French wife. His just completed two-and-a-half-year stint as ambassador strengthened that interpretation and his entourage of French advisers in Vientiane made plain his political orientation. As head of the National Assembly he had argued for the termination of the American aid program in Laos and its replacement by the French, exactly the demands of Kong Le—and de Gaulle. Kong Le, in short, had been the catalyst, perhaps an unwitting catalyst, in a larger scheme.

The king cautiously withheld royal sanction from the new government, pending the outcome of negotiations with Phoumi Nosavan. Phoumi, however, had other plans. Upon learning of the coup, he went first to Bangkok where he held a meeting with

³² Disinformation and rumor abounded in Laos. On the coup, Dommen, *Ibid*, relates Kong Le’s story that he had begun planning the coup with co-conspirators during a U.S. sponsored training course in the Philippines, October 1957-January 1958. The story lacks credibility because during the time mentioned Souvanna Phouma was Prime Minister of Laos. The French, on the other hand, immediately put out the false story that the coup had originally been Phoumi’s idea, which had gone awry. Of course, it made no sense for Phoumi to carry out a coup against himself. For this story, see Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 390-391.

³³ “Memorandum of Discussion at the 455th Meeting of the National Security Council,” August 12, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 359.

Sarit as well as U.S. charge d'affairs Leonard Unger, the chief military advisor, and CIA station chief. Asking for full U.S. support, Phoumi planned a counter coup involving a rapid military response to retake Vientiane and "straighten things out," as he said to U.S. officials.³⁴

The Phoumi-Sarit plan was for Sarit to begin an immediate blockade of Vientiane, while Phoumi carried out a parachute drop into the capitol to drive out Kong Le's forces. The key to his plan was Washington's provision of transport aircraft, as Kong Le had captured almost the entire air force of five C-47 transport planes. Establishing his headquarters in Savannakhet in the Laotian panhandle, Phoumi asked for U.S. air support, communications gear, and money for troop salaries, fuel, ammunition, and medical supplies. While Washington considered the path forward, the situation quickly evolved into a four-cornered standoff.

Souvanna Phouma, supported by Kong Le, was ensconced in Vientiane; the king remained in the royal residence in Luang Prabang, hoping for a peaceful outcome; and Phoumi Nosavan was in Savannakhet, poised to attack with a force of five thousand men. The Pathet Lao, for the time being, were content to sit on the sidelines and await the outcome, which at the moment was trending in their favor.

Although the U.S. government was divided, both in Washington and Vientiane, President Eisenhower decided to continue with the two-horse strategy adopted the previous October. The United States would support a civilian-led, neutral government, while continuing to strengthen Phoumi and the army. The difference was that the horse in Vientiane had changed from the pro-U.S. Tiao Somsanith/Phoumi government to the pro-French Souvanna Phouma/Kong Le government. This change, in turn, generated two problems for the Administration.

³⁴ *Laos, 1960—January—1963* Department of State Central Files (Washington: Congressional Information Service, 2003), xiii.

The first was how to prevent Souvanna from careering too far to the left and the second was how to prevent a military takeover from the right.

On August 17, State gave Ambassador Brown three instructions in an effort to bring about a unified, neutral, but anti-Communist government. Drafted by Assistant Secretary of State Graham Parsons, he was to “eliminate Kong Le...and neutralize his influence”; support the “army as main bulwark against Communist takeover”; but keep “Phoumi and [the] Army outside Vientiane...together as counterpoise to situation in Vientiane.” The theory was that once Kong Le was neutralized and the Souvanna Phouma cabinet “has shown itself free to act,” Phoumi “might” be persuaded to join it. Thus, for the moment, Phoumi was to be held back because “if Phoumi attempted countercoup and failed, he might be eliminated as [a] force in Laos and [the] Army seriously divided.”³⁵ The assumption that Kong Le controlled Souvanna Phouma and once the captain was “neutralized” the prime minister would cooperate with Washington would not be borne out by events.

The problem with these instructions was that not only were they unrealistic, but also that Brown was opposed to them entirely. Washington seemed to believe that it could still pursue the two horses strategy, even under a pro-French government. But the fact was Souvanna Phouma had outmaneuvered Phoumi and had no intention of readmitting him into his government, except in a powerless, subordinate position.

Moreover, Brown, too, had misread the situation. He did not believe the coup had been “politically inspired,” but had grown out of “a hope for a peaceful reconciliation of a long fratricidal struggle,” an extraordinary view perhaps reflecting his short time in country of less than two weeks.³⁶ Believing

³⁵ “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos,” August 17, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 372.

³⁶ Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 158.

Souvanna to be “in a mood to negotiate,” Brown did not realize that Souvanna Phouma fully intended to reprise his previous time as prime minister in 1957 and deal once again with the Pathet Lao in hopes of achieving his (and de Gaulle’s) version of neutrality through a coalition with the communists.

Furthermore, Brown had no way of neutralizing Kong Le, recognizing that he had broad appeal among the populace. And he would find it difficult to restrain Phoumi, who was unwilling to make concessions because American supplies were now flowing to his forces in Savannakhet. Brown’s main leverage was the power to withhold air transport, which put him at odds with the PEO and CIA chiefs who supported Phoumi’s plan to retake Vientiane as soon as possible.³⁷

The French attempted to support Souvanna Phouma in a variety of ways. First, they denied Phoumi the use of the French-controlled airfield at Seno east of Savannakhet, which Phoumi sought to employ for his airborne assault.³⁸

Next, French Ambassador Pierre-Louis Falaize “suggested” to Brown that the way to resolve the impasse was for the U.S., British, French, and UN Ambassadors to “go to Luang Prabang...to ask the king whom they should deal with.” Ambassador Falaize fed Brown the line that “Souvanna appears to be nearing an agreement with Phoumi, and if we would support him now, we could influence him better later.” Although Brown was eager to take up this idea, the state department “instructed” him not to go along. “We do not like such a

³⁷ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State,” August 22, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 377.

³⁸ William Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012), 183.

concerted demarche and believe the king would like to avoid being confronted with decision.”³⁹

Nevertheless, reluctantly following instructions, Brown expressed his determination to “concentrate our efforts primarily on forcing an agreed solution” between Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi. But, whereas his instructions clearly commanded him to weaken Souvanna and strengthen Phoumi, he did the opposite, acting along the lines of Falaize’s advice to deter the latter from advancing on Vientiane, while he arranged meetings between the two men.

After several days of meetings, and “apparently” having reached agreement, on August 29 the two men and the National Assembly delegates met in Luang Prabang. To Phoumi’s dismay, however, the king asked Souvanna Phouma to form a new government, instead of himself. Phoumi was given the post of Interior Minister, which he tentatively accepted, but then declined because it would have deprived him of any control of the military.⁴⁰ Souvanna Phouma kept the top posts of prime minister, foreign minister, and defense minister for himself, effectively controlling the government and its military forces. Even though several posts were allocated to CDNI members, they exercised little influence. The pro-French, Souvanna Phouma was, for the moment, in control.

In a larger sense, de Gaulle had succeeded in defeating American policy, yet it was not at all clear that he was in fact prepared to supplant the United States in Laos. France was too weak for that. Rather, it seems that de Gaulle was content to spoil the American approach, without replacing the United States. The result was the worst of both worlds, as Souvanna

³⁹ “Paper Prepared by the Assistant White House Staff Secretary (John Eisenhower),” August 19, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 376.

⁴⁰ Phoumi later said “the only reason that I agreed to go to Luang Prabang and enter into discussions with Souvanna Phouma was that I counted on the king to charge me with the responsibility for re-establishing order and security in Laos.” Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 196.

Phouma moved onto an anti-American course and the French stood idly by.

From One Government into Three

Faced with a fait accompli, the Eisenhower Administration initially sought to uphold the Souvanna Phouma government to provide a fig leaf of legality for its support of Phoumi. However, insistence upon government legal cover for other activity was something of a red herring. At this very moment, in the Congo the United States was supporting the military leader, Sese Soko Mobuto against the legal government's head Patrice Lumumba and earlier had supported King Hussein of Jordan against his own government.⁴¹ Moreover, support for the Laotian constitution was ephemeral, at best, honored more in the breach than in the observance, except, perhaps, by U.S. officials.

Over the next week and a half, until September 10, Washington declined to support a Phoumi attack on Vientiane and attempted to persuade him to return to the capital and join the government. At the same time, they sought to weaken Souvanna Phouma by asking him to send Kong Le out of Vientiane. Both ploys were transparent and both failed. Phoumi would not return because of genuine fears for his safety and Kong Le would not leave Vientiane; indeed, he declared his opposition to the inclusion of Phoumi in the cabinet.⁴²

There also developed a major division within the U.S. government over the correct policy to pursue. Assistant

⁴¹ See Stephen Weisman, "What Really Happened in Congo," *Foreign Affairs*, (July-August, 2014). Weisman cites a Dulles cable to the CIA station chief in August 1960: "We conclude that [Lumumba's] removal must be an urgent and prime objective and that under existing conditions this should be a high priority of our covert action."

⁴² "Telegrams From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos," August 31 and September 5, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Documents 386 and 387.

Secretary of State Parsons and his man Ambassador Brown argued in favor of providing full support to Souvanna Phouma and sharply curtailing support to Phoumi. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA, and the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Command (CINCPAC) argued in favor of full support for Phoumi. Defense officials were particularly concerned about the larger picture, the upsurge in Communist military operations throughout the region, and how events in Laos related to South Vietnam, while Brown, especially, focused narrowly on political events in Vientiane.

Furthermore, even though all acknowledged the “strong” rumors in Vientiane that “the French were behind this coup,” there is no discussion in the record about what it meant for U.S. policy, or how to respond to it.⁴³ The president was curiously uninvolved in the dispute, offering little strategic guidance to his officials at NSC meetings and Vice-President Nixon, a statutory member, was hardly visible. High-level officials like Secretary of State Herter and Under Secretary of State Douglas Dillon vacillated. Brown later described his “instructions from Washington [as]...masterpieces of double-talk.”⁴⁴

While U.S. government officials dithered among themselves about the course to pursue, the delay gave Souvanna Phouma, Kong Le, the Pathet Lao, the North Vietnamese, the Russians, and the Chinese opportunity to prepare next steps. Upon news of the coup, Ho Chi Minh immediately went secretly to Yalta where he met with Khrushchev on August 15 and received instructions to support Souvanna Phouma.⁴⁵

⁴³ “Paper Prepared by the Assistant White House Staff Secretary (John Eisenhower),” August 30, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 384. Even less is there discussion in the scholarship of the French role.

⁴⁴ *Winthrop G. Brown, Oral History Interview—2/1/1968* (John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program), 9.

⁴⁵ Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (North Carolina: McFarland, 1997), 158-59.



Adding to U.S. troubles, Moscow established diplomatic relations with the Souvanna Phouma government in October 1960.



**Laotian Prime Minister
Souvanna Phouma**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Presented with a golden opportunity, Moscow decided to establish diplomatic relations with Laos, the better to influence events. Ho had hoped to heal the open breach between Moscow and Beijing, but Khrushchev would have none of it, as the Sino-Soviet dispute was now a highly publicized issue. Indeed, the Russians had just recalled all of their advisors from China, shut down their entire aid program, and were attempting to mobilize the entire Communist bloc against the Chinese.

British intelligence remarked about the “astonishing forbearance” of the Pathet Lao, which, they believed could have made a grab for power, but that was a misreading of their plans. With Souvanna Phouma in control their interests were best served by inaction—at least for the time being. Besides, Hanoi was extremely reluctant to proceed with the war in the face of Sino-Soviet hostility and so advised their Laotian allies to hold back.

Thus, the Pathet Lao focused on the negotiations track. Souphanouvong quickly got in touch with his half-brother Souvanna Phouma on August 23, and publicly expressed his readiness to resume negotiations based on the 1957 agreement. In return Souvanna dropped all charges against him and other NLHX leaders for “lack of evidence,” clearing the way for negotiations.⁴⁶

Beijing’s leaders continued to keep their distance, stating China’s “need for a peaceful international environment for a long time to come.” From early August, Zhou Enlai had begun to float the idea of an Asian mutual nonaggression pact that would include the United States, but received no reply from Washington. After the coup, in an interview with journalist Edgar Snow on August 30, Zhou reiterated this idea, pending settlement of the Taiwan issue, a perennial roadblock to improvement in relations. Nevertheless, Zhou wanted to “settle disputes through peaceful negotiations,” which, for the moment, made it difficult to distinguish Beijing’s approach from that being taken by Moscow, Hanoi, and the Pathet Lao. Coming as Sino-Soviet relations were reaching rock bottom, it was no wonder that American officials were confused by events in Southeast Asia.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, there were no grounds for assuming a *coordinated* policy approach by Moscow and Beijing toward the region, yet that was the official assumption. Their open conflict virtually mandated an approach to China, but that was the furthest thought from administration officials, who continued to insist upon the existence and danger of a coordinated, global Communist threat.

On September 5, Hanoi convened its Third Party Conference during which Prime Minister Pham Van Dong offered to establish diplomatic relations with Laos, if Souvanna Phouma would reaffirm the 1954 Geneva Accords and the 1957 Vientiane

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 159.

agreements.⁴⁸ Within two days, U.S. intelligence learned, Souvanna Phouma “was engaged in negotiations with the Pathet Lao,” Hanoi’s surrogates, a development Dulles thought to be “somewhat ominous.”⁴⁹ Indeed, it appeared that Souvanna was bent on bringing the Communists back into the government.

On September 10, Phoumi Nosavan preempted both Souvanna’s move to the left and the U.S. effort to put together a coalition government by establishing his own government in Savannakhet. His ally, Boun Oum, a former prince and leader in southern Laos, proclaimed the formation of the Revolutionary Committee Against the Coup d’Etat. He demanded the abolition of the Souvanna government and constitution, loyalty to the king, and establishment of martial law throughout the land. Phoumi informed U.S. officials that he would place Vientiane under siege, but not immediately attack it.⁵⁰

The emergence of two governments, (Souvanna of course disregarded Boun Oum’s dissolution proclamation, while declaring a national emergency) now intensified the division within the U.S. government, as Parsons and Brown argued for full support of Souvanna Phouma, a position increasingly difficult to reconcile with his shift to the left, while the JCS, CIA, CINCPAC, and Defense pushed for support for Phoumi and for the liquidation of Kong Le.⁵¹

The Administration sought to resolve the dilemma with a plan to have the king effect a “royal reconciliation,” by establishing yet a *third* government under a respected political

⁴⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁹ “Editorial Note,” *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 388.

⁵⁰ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State,” September 10, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 391.

⁵¹ For the dispute, see “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State,” September 15, 1960; and “Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Gates),” September 16, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Documents 395 and 397.

figure, which both Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi Nosavan could support.⁵² This idea depended entirely upon the existence of a “respected figure” and the willingness of the king to take the initiative, which he had not heretofore shown an inclination to do.

Indecision, Procrastination and Escalation of Conflict

Before U.S. officials could take any action, Souphanouvong declared in a radio broadcast on September 16 that the NLHX would support the Souvanna Phouma government and that the Pathet Lao would fight against Phoumi. In the same speech, he called upon Souvanna to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, and China.⁵³ His call was in fact a cover for Moscow, as the Russians rushed to establish relations with Laos in less than three weeks, on October 7. (China would not do so until seven months later, in April 1961, and North Vietnam not until mid-1962.)

The Soviet Union suddenly expressed a public interest in Laos for the first time. Heretofore, the Soviets had made only passing references to the country. On September 21, Radio Moscow issued a government statement charging the United States with interfering in the domestic affairs of Laos. The next day came another statement attacking Thailand for supporting Phoumi Nosavan. On September 27, Pathet Lao Radio hailed Moscow’s statement of the 22nd and called upon Souvanna Phouma to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union “as soon as possible.”⁵⁴

While Souvanna was working out the details of establishing diplomatic relations with Moscow, Ambassador Brown was defiantly rejecting the State Department’s proposal to work toward setting up a new Laotian government. Wanting to

⁵² “Telegram From the Department of State [Dillon] to the Embassy in Laos,” September 16, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 398.

⁵³ Ang, *Vietnamese Communists’ Relations With China*, 164.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 164-65.

“be sure that Washington fully understands immediate obstacles and risks,” he pointed out that the king was unwilling to take “decisive action,” Phoumi’s “obstinacy” remained, and he saw no “respected figure” on the horizon that could be chosen.

The “only man” who stood a chance of restraining Kong Le was Souvanna Phouma. If he fell, Brown warned, resorting to a sky-is-falling alarum, not only would the United States be accused of orchestrating his downfall, but also Kong Le would immediately reoccupy Vientiane and the Pathet Lao “will start nationwide insurrection aided by increased covert assistance [of the] DRV.”⁵⁵ The truth was that all of these were already happening.

Summing up, Brown advised “waiting [a] day or two” before taking action, especially in view of what he said was the “stabilization [of the] situation Sam Neua.” The State Department immediately replied authorizing him to “hold up the action...pending further consideration in Washington.”⁵⁶ Brown’s information about Sam Neua, however, was incorrect and procrastination proved costly, but his prediction about the sky falling was already coming true.

The situation around Sam Neua was not stabilizing, but deteriorating. The Pathet Lao had emerged from their period of military quiescence since the coup to mount major attacks. Souvannavong’s radio broadcast of the 16th had been a call to action. Professing support for Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le, the Pathet Lao moved to take control of the key border province of Sam Neua (Houaphan) that stood astride the Ho Chi Minh trail, attacking the RLG garrison there. (Phong Saly to the north was already theirs.)

⁵⁵ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State,” September 18, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 399.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, note 4.



Laos: Key or Cork? Map: U.S. Department of State, via Google Images

At the same time, Pathet Lao troops assisted Kong Le whose forces were engaging Phoumi's forces at Paksane, some ninety miles east of Vientiane, driving them back across the Nam Ca Ding River. Ambassador Brown had denied Phoumi the use of air transport for his planned attack on Vientiane, so his troops had been forced to move overland where they had encountered Kong Le and the Pathet Lao at Paksane.

The growing military crisis in the field raised the policy divisions within the U.S. government to the breaking point. Attempting to discipline an obstreperous ambassador increasingly out of control, Assistant Secretary Parsons gently chided his protégé, suggesting that there was more at stake than a dispute over whom to support, and hinting about larger U.S. strategy. Saying that he was "a little disturbed by lack of understanding which appears to be developing between us," he

tried to back him off his full-throated support for Souvanna Phouma:

While Souvanna is legally constituted authority, we must not forget that direction his policies is inimical to US interests.... Although return to stability is primary present objective, we should have no illusions re problems we shall be facing if and when Souvanna gets firmly in saddle. In first place this will be considered US defeat.⁵⁷

Though agreeing with Brown's assessment of Phoumi as "bull headed" and "vaultingly ambitious," he was nevertheless anti-Communist and pro-US. "His 'revolution' not just of single general against legal government, but encompasses great majority southern leadership and evidently has sympathy of King." Thus, as the FAL is the "key source of power in Laos," Phoumi cannot be excluded from playing an important role.⁵⁸

Undersecretary Dillon lent authoritative reinforcement to Parsons' message the next day, insisting that Brown urge the king to act. "We are ... convinced that Souvanna government cannot reunite country or FAL, and that a new government must reestablish situation." Contrary to Souvanna's assurances, Vientiane was under the control of Kong Le and the Pathet Lao, with whom he was "apparently working." The only way to "give substance" to Souvanna's "claim of authority in Vientiane" would be if he could assign [Kong Le] "elsewhere in country." Failing that, the only ways to resolve the "Kong Le problem," were by reconciliation with Phoumi, which was highly unlikely, or his military defeat at Vientiane. Dillon underscored the larger context:

⁵⁷ "Telegram From the Department of State [Parsons] to the Embassy in Laos," September 18, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 400.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

If RLG cannot even assert its authority in Vientiane, it is difficult to see how it could extend it to country. Also deeply concerned that country is divided and believe problem more complex than simple question of Phoumi's individual recalcitrance.⁵⁹

The de-facto Kong Le/Pathet Lao control of Vientiane forced the United States to change the way it was delivering supplies in country. Accordingly, Dillon instructed Brown to inform Souvanna Phouma that supplies would henceforth be redirected to Savannakhet, instead of to Vientiane, an arrangement to which Souvanna acquiesced, as long as Phoumi did not use the arms against him.

On September 22, Brown, as instructed, met with King Savang and found him in a "more decisive [and] confident mood." The king had a plan. Perceiving the need to unify his army as Pathet Lao attacks continued, his plan was to invite all military commanders to Luang Prabang, a "purely military meeting without politicians present." He sought to obtain a "consensus among officers [for] anti-Communist policy and strong defense against [Pathet Lao]."⁶⁰

If this were accomplished, he said, then he would convene his national defense committee and seek a political solution there. He would "really like [to] keep Souvanna, [so he could] prove man of good will but he must change policies." He would install Phoumi as Commander-in-Chief and "remove all extreme leftist members." It was "all right [to] be neutral but must be anti-Communist." Concerned that an outright dismissal of Souvanna would precipitate another coup, the king said that only after a solution was reached would he announce the resignation

⁵⁹ "Telegram From the Department of State [Dillon] to the Embassy in Laos," September 19, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 401.

⁶⁰ "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State," September 22, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 404.

and reorganization of the present Souvanna government. The king declared that he was willing to move to Vientiane with the new government to provide stability.⁶¹

Phoumi Nosavan, upon hearing of the king's plan, expressed strong reservations to it. In his view the army was not divided, a statement he surely knew to be false. While expressing his full loyalty to the king, he believed the FAL was united; the only division he acknowledged was the political one between the non-Communists and the Communists. He claimed that Vientiane was already under Communist control "up to the neck."⁶²

There were five Pathet Lao battalions deployed around the capital with two others at Paksane, he said. Souphanouvong's home in Vientiane was Communist headquarters and Quinim Pholsena was "now [the] real power [in] Vientiane." Phoumi's advice was for the king to take control, "assume head [of] government himself," and appoint a strong leader as prime minister.

But time was running out. By the third week of September, it had become clear that the Pathet Lao, supported by North Vietnamese "volunteers," would defeat the RLG's garrison of fifteen hundred men at Sam Neua. Worse, Souvanna had openly supported the Pathet Lao there. As Brown tersely reported "Souvanna consciously tried persuade defenders Sam Neua come over to him, which certainly, whether intended or not, disrupted effectiveness defense city."⁶³

Brown had hurriedly authorized Air America, (formerly Civil Air Transport) to resupply the garrison, but it was too little,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State," September 23, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 405.

⁶³ "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State," October 2, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 414.

too late. On September 28, after the Pathet Lao had overrun the airstrip at Sam Neua, “Brown halted all Air America flights into combat areas.”⁶⁴ The airstrip had been the sole forward location for supplying RLG forces in northern Laos and its loss crippled the FAL’s capability for combat operations there. On the other hand, according to the Vietnamese history of the war, Pathet Lao control of the entire province of Sam Neua, “placed Hanoi in an advantageous position to organize and coordinate the revolution in Laos until complete victory in 1975.”⁶⁵

The defeat at Sam Neua prompted Phoumi to set aside his reservations and join the other military commanders in Luang Prabang for a meeting with the king on September 28. Under the king’s prodding Generals Ouane and Phoumi buried their personal differences and agreed to a ceasefire. They also agreed to convene a political conference within a week to effect a governmental reorganization that would remove Souvanna Phouma as prime minister, although most likely, retain him in a new cabinet.⁶⁶ The king had successfully completed the first step in his plan to change the government. Kong Le, however, had not attended the meeting and continued to fight against Phoumi’s forces at Nam Ca Dinh.

A Fateful Policy Dispute

Washington sought to encourage the king to complete the second part of his plan, which paralleled the advice from Phoumi. Offering both carrot and stick, Secretary Herter instructed Brown to see the king,

pointing out to him that political and military leadership now in such stage of disintegration that the only solution for salvaging his country is

⁶⁴ Anthony and Sexton, *War In Northern Laos*, 30.

⁶⁵ Ang, *Vietnamese Communists’ Relations With China*, 165.

⁶⁶ “Memorandum of Discussion at the 461st Meeting of the National Security Council,” September 29, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 410.

for King to take authority into his own hands and appoint what would be equivalent of caretaker government under royal decree. He would himself assume leadership of government or at least name a Prime Minister other than Souvanna Phouma who from all indications is either unable, unwilling or (more seriously) actively conniving with the Communists to gradually hand over Laos. Secondly, the King would name a Commander-in-Chief of his forces in whom he has the most confidence and whom he feels best able to rally remnants of FAL now bitterly divided between several loyalties.⁶⁷

Herter authorized Brown to assure the king that the United States was “willing to give him all feasible support in order to reestablish [the] integrity of his realm.” We would support the king’s move to Vientiane as a “good symbolic move and make a more efficient administration possible.” Then, perhaps mindful of the king’s penchant to vacillate, the secretary gave Brown a stick with which to encourage the king to complete the second part of his plan. Brown was authorized to inform him “no further payment of troops or other forms of aid are to be forthcoming until this political step has been taken.”⁶⁸

Brown’s instructions clearly reflected a growing sense of anxiety in the upper reaches of the administration. Herter stated bluntly that “US cannot be party to take-over of Laos by Communists and we cannot support or condone any government of Laos which is instrumental in such process.” Unless the proposed political reorganization of the government takes place as scheduled in the next few days the “US will have to review its position and determine some new approach to problem of helping preserve Lao independence.” Herter closed by saying

⁶⁷ “Telegram From the Department of State [Herter] to the Ambassador in Laos,” October 1, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 412.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

“believe you should know that there is strong and growing sentiment here to give exclusive and all-out support to those able and willing to salvage at least that portion of the country centered in Savannakhet if the King unwilling or unable to take such leadership suggested above.”⁶⁹

In short, Herter revealed to Brown that the United States was on the cusp of a major decision to abandon the two-horse, civil-military concept. Washington wished to see emerge a government no longer under control of Souvanna Phouma but, if that were not possible, was prepared to support Phoumi in order to “salvage at least that portion of the country centered in Savannakhet.” In other words, the United States was prepared to support a pro-U.S. government in southern Laos against a leftist government in Vientiane. The purpose was clear, but unstated. It was to maintain some position from which to deny North Vietnam access to South Vietnam through the Ho Chi Minh trail.



American Ambassador Winthrop Brown's bias in favor of Souvanna Phouma complicated U.S. policy in Laos. *Image source: trumanlibrary.org via Wikimedia Commons*

From the available data, however, that larger, strategic rationale seems never to have been communicated to Brown. At least, he never referred to it. Furthermore, Herter appears to have made a serious mistake here, which Brown compounded. Protocol required going through the Prime Minister when requesting an audience with the king. Herter authorized Brown to reveal “appropriate portions of your instructions to Souvanna

⁶⁹ Ibid.

when requesting immediate audience [with the king].” Herter wanted him to emphasize the continuing “disintegration [of] non-communist elements” and the growing strength of the Pathet Lao “as each day passes,” but Brown appears to have revealed much more.

Brown was strongly committed to support of Souvanna Phouma as the political solution in Laos and equally strongly opposed to Phoumi. Thus, Herter’s instructions created a dilemma for him. To escape it, Brown went immediately to Souvanna to plead with him to shift course to comply with Washington’s demands. In deciding what was “appropriate” he revealed to Souvanna that unless he changed policy the United States would withdraw its support from him and shift to complete support of Phoumi.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, rather than persuade Souvanna to comply, it galvanized him into moving faster to the left. He continued negotiations with the Pathet Lao and the NLHX, finalized details for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Moscow, and demanded that the king dismiss Phoumi and some two dozen of his fellow officers.

In the meantime, Brown replied to Herter the next day, offering his appraisal of the current situation “as of October 2.” His report was either the reflection of a serious lack of information, or a deliberate obfuscation, because it dramatically under-played the severity of the crisis. It was in all probability an attempt to buy time for Souvanna to change his mind. In what was even more abbreviated language than in most cables, Brown sought to paint Souvanna in a positive light. After acknowledging that Souvanna had undermined the defense of Sam Neua (noted above), Brown said:

⁷⁰ In a later cable Brown acknowledged “I had told Souvanna about suspension aid and he had said govt would pay from own resources.” See Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State,” October 6, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 420.

cease-fire orders by PL in regions loyal Souvanna...have undoubtedly helped him by lending credence claims his policies will restore peace in country. Results have made Souvanna less inclined compromise, especially when added his general self-confidence and sense he supported by legal and constitutional propriety.⁷¹

Brown recommended strengthening the government and reunifying the FAL "in every possible way." If a new government was to be formed "it would be preferable for Souvanna be retained in new government because he represents wide elements which cannot be ignored and which no one else can equally effectively represent."⁷² Who these "wide elements" were he did not identify. The Pathet Lao, he noted, had made territorial gains in Sam Neua and were

able gain stature by support legal government whose policies they exploiting. They have played a clever game of not appreciably intervening in Vientiane-Savannakhet conflict but remaining in wings, apparently with Vientiane approval, as menacing presence giving psychological and potential physical support anti-Phoumi forces.

This was an extraordinary assessment of the battlefield situation. While it was true that the Pathet Lao were "exploiting" Souvanna's policies, to say that they were "not appreciably intervening...but remaining in wings," was not remotely close to the truth. In fact, the Pathet Lao, "accompanied by their North Vietnamese advisers from Group 959," had just overrun and

⁷¹ "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State," October 2, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 414.

⁷² *Ibid.*

taken control of Sam Neua and its forces were supporting Kong Le in battle at the Nam Ca Dinh.⁷³

Brown had gone too far. Officials at the Pentagon began calling for his recall.⁷⁴ However, recall of an ambassador after less than two months at his post was unthinkable. It would have been an admission of failure, both for him and perhaps for the policy he was attempting to execute. But American policy was changing and the ambassador was dead set against it.

The next day, October 3, the Joint Chiefs authorized Admiral Harry D. Felt, CINCPAC, *immediately* to “provide necessary arms and supplies” to Phoumi, move the First Paratroop Battalion, in Lobpuri, Thailand “where you think best,” and “air-lift other Phoumi Forces as you consider desirable.”⁷⁵ The weapons shipped over the next ten days included four thousand rifles, one thousand sub-machine guns, three hundred grenade launchers, twenty-five light mortars, thirteen recoilless rifles, and ten heavy mortars. Also furnished was \$300,000 for “rice and related supplies.”⁷⁶

When apprised of this decision, Brown’s reaction was to send an alarmist “eyes only” message to Assistant Secretary Parsons and Under Secretary Livy Merchant doubling down on Souvanna. He declared “there is little or no chance salvage country, or even south alone, through Phoumi.” In his view

we have now to cut our losses, which are already serious. Alternative to chaos or division is to make best of Souvanna, who is himself worried about rapidly increasing strength PL,

⁷³ *Laos, 1960-January-1963*, Department of State Control Files, Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs (Washington: Congressional Information Service, 2003), xv. Group 959 was Hanoi’s command unit in Laos assigned to supply, train, and direct Pathet Lao forces.

⁷⁴ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 211.

⁷⁵ “Telegram From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt),” October 3, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 415.

⁷⁶ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 213.

and wants all support he can get to strengthen his hand against them. We should gain Phoumi cooperation if possible, but if this fails, and unless King pulls some Lao rabbit out of his hat...Souvanna is only rallying point left in country.⁷⁷

If the Joint Chiefs' approach were pursued in full, he said, it would "be regarded as clear declaration support for Phoumi against lawful govt (constitutional point is important), confirming suspicions long harbored that U.S. has been secretly supporting him." Furthermore, he said "it will be considered intervention internal affairs another country... risks precipitating civil war and intervention from north with consequences risk international war." In short, support of Phoumi would mean that the U.S. was backing a "decreasing force with declining will to fight which... cannot succeed reunite country, or even south."

In sum, he thought there was "still a chance that a Souvanna govt, given our support and guidance, can avoid Communist control of Laos. I do not believe that Souvanna is working to hand over Laos to Communism." Brown would be seeing the king the next day. Unless he creates a new government, or brings about Souvanna-Phoumi cooperation "there will be no other alternative to Souvanna which offers hope of salvaging anything we care about from the present wreck."⁷⁸

Brown's message had no discernible impact on the NSC meeting the next day. Indeed, Merchant disregarded his plea and supported the very approach he had counseled against—to Phoumi. Dulles summarized the current situation, saying that the Pathet Lao were gaining strength and "Souvanna has indicated a willingness to negotiate with them." The allegiance of FAL forces in "outlying districts" was uncertain. Dulles did not know what had happened at Sam Neua. "One report was that Phoumi

⁷⁷ "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State," October 5, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 416.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

forces...had gone over to the Pathet Lao; other reports indicated these forces were defeated in action." The question was what to do?⁷⁹

Merchant said that he had not yet received a report from Brown about his meeting with the king then in progress (there was a twelve-hour time difference with Laos ahead). He thought the situation in Laos "difficult and complicated." It appears, he said, "more and more that Souvanna Phouma is either a willing accomplice or a captive of Kong Le." Brown was

seeing the King now in a last effort to persuade him to use his royal prerogatives to form a coalition government and halt deterioration of the political situation, under threat of withdrawing U.S. aid. The results of the interview may be the basis for hard decisions. We may have to abandon our effort at unity and as an alternative give all-out support to the Phoumi element still willing to fight.⁸⁰

Dulles concluded the discussion by observing that Souvanna would be establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. He thought it possible that "a neutralist government leaning toward Communism would be the outcome in Vientiane soon unless we can recoup the situation through Phoumi, who does inexplicable things but still fights."⁸¹

Brown's report on his meeting with the king was disheartening. The king said that any hope of a "reconciliation between Vientiane and Savannakhet had been destroyed by action Vientiane by attacking at Nam Ca Dinh morning after ceasefire had been agreed under Royal aegis." The reference

⁷⁹ "Memorandum of Discussion at the 462nd Meeting of the National Security Council," October 6, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 418.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

was to Souvanna Phouma's authorization (action Vientiane) of Kong Le's attacks against Phoumi's forces.⁸²

Furthermore, Souvanna had also just seen the king and asked him to order the dissolution of Phoumi's revolutionary committee and demand that he swear allegiance to Vientiane. The king said, "he could not do this." The king told Souvanna that "they could seek reconciliation or they could seek capture Savannakhet and subdue [revolutionary] committee by force. This was up to them. If they could not put themselves in command [of] whole situation then they should resign." The king "criticized Souvanna severely not only for breach cease-fire but for letting Pathet Lao get in such position [of] strength and for his activities Sam Neua."

Brown urged the king to act, that "if no action taken, all might be lost." The king, on the verge of tears, replied, "perhaps all was already lost." He said he could act only in accordance with the constitution. He could appoint a new government only if Souvanna resigned, or if the Assembly passed a vote of no confidence. The king lamented the fact that "Laos was suffering from democracy imposed upon a politically immature and apathetic people, saddling them with responsibilities of self-government for which they were not ready."

The king blamed everyone but himself for the current predicament. He blamed the West for the imposition of a democratic system, which made it impossible for him to act. He blamed his own people for being apathetic and politically immature. And he blamed Souvanna for the Pathet Lao's growing strength.⁸³

⁸² "Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State," October 6, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 420.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Washington Pirouettes

The king's unwillingness to assume responsibility forced a superficially consistent, but no longer practical choice in Washington. In a meeting attended by CIA Director Dulles, Under secretary of State Dillon, Secretary of Defense Gates, Chief of Staff Lemnitzer, Under Secretary Merchant, and their staffs (but not the president, vice-president, or Secretary Herter), U.S. leaders formulated a policy decision which amounted to an ultimatum.

The instructions to Brown, cabled on October 8, directed him "to make a last desperate effort to work through and with Souvanna Phouma as the legal façade of legitimate government and at same time support Phoumi and other anti-Communist forces." Making plain that the time for debating the issue was over, "for your information and guidance, you should understand that should this last desperate ploy not be effective difficult alternative must face us of supporting exclusively the anti-Communist elements without reference to Souvanna Phouma's position."⁸⁴

To earn U.S. support, Souvanna would have to move his government from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, transfer all cash on hand there, ensure that Kong Le not fight against any FAL units, and break off all negotiations with the Pathet Lao. As far as support for the FAL, henceforth, CINCPAC would directly supply anti-Communist forces, bypassing Kong Le. The shipment of supplies to Phoumi's forces should "move with as little ostentation as possible in order not to arouse undue suspicion that center of military operations being centered [sic] in Savannakhet."

Regarding diplomatic action, Brown was to request French, British and Australian assistance in persuading

⁸⁴ "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos," October 8, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 421.

Souvanna to cooperate. "Inasmuch as they have been insistent on our support of him we should get their immediate assistance in gaining his cooperation." Finally, in order to clarify "the thinking and details of this concept," Brown was informed "a special mission of Mr. Parsons, Mr. Irwin of Defense and Admiral Riley of CINCPAC will be arriving soon as possible."⁸⁵

Concerned that "the alternatives that are before us...are not very pleasant," Dillon scheduled a meeting with the president for a briefing on October 11. Those present, in addition to the president, were Dillon, Defense Secretary Gates, CIA Director Dulles, JCS Chief Lemnitzer, Under Secretary Merchant, his assistant Steeves, and General Goodpaster, the president's assistant. Neither Vice-President Nixon, nor Secretary of State Herter was present.

General Lemnitzer laid out the disposition of Pathet Lao, Kong Le, and non-Communist forces, concluding that the "military situation is not at all satisfactory." Dulles reported that the Soviet ambassador would be arriving in Vientiane the next day and that Souvanna, who was "dealing with the Pathet Lao...may be waiting for this in order to play the United States and the Soviets against each other." Dillon reviewed the "very difficult problem" that had developed since the Kong Le coup wherein the United States was supporting General Phoumi against the legal government headed by Souvanna Phouma.⁸⁶

Dillon also noted the "differences of view...between our people in Vientiane...and the people concerned with Laos in our departments here." A mission consisting of Assistant Secretaries Parsons and Irwin together with Admiral Riley had been sent to "resolve these differences of view and try to determine what further actions we should be prepared to take if the situation does not develop favorably."

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ "Memorandum of a Conference With the President," October 11, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 424.

Defense Secretary Gates declared that he was “very pessimistic as to the possibility of keeping the country for the free world, even if Souvanna Phouma does not make some kind of deal with the Communists.” Lemnitzer said that the U.S. had moved two additional FAL paratroop companies from Thailand to Savannakhet, which should “strengthen the Phoumi forces materially. Merchant reported that the governments of Thailand and South Vietnam were “deeply disturbed” by the Laotian situation. Dillon observed that the British, French, and Australian governments were “holding back” their support.

The memorandum of the conference was revealing, for it indicated that the president had not been kept informed of events, as they had been developing for some months. In a response that startled the group, he said: the “only suggestion [he] could give...would be to try to win Souvanna Phouma to our side, such as placing funds in escrow for him in Bangkok, and try to get him to request our help in dealing with the situation.”⁸⁷ In short, Eisenhower’s guidance was to pull back from the ultimatum, reaffirm the two-horse strategy of supporting the civilian government and retain legal status by attempting to bribe Souvanna into cooperating with the United States, even while continuing to strengthen Phoumi.

Over the next several days, State, Defense, and CIA officials scrambled to reformulate policy to reflect Eisenhower’s guidance.⁸⁸ In the meantime, the results of the Parsons mission had come in, which made it doubly difficult to return to the two-horse strategy. Parsons had attempted to obtain Souvanna’s commitment to cooperate with the United States and halt cooperation with the Communists, specifically to discontinue negotiations with the Pathet Lao and draw back from any

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Cf. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 217-18, who says of this briefing that “the president understood neither the issues nor the personalities involved” and made no decision at this time.

relationship with the Russians. He failed on all counts.⁸⁹ He also began to realize that the “French could even be conniving with [Souvanna] against us and are no doubt balancing their loyalty to us against their desire again to play major role in Laos.”⁹⁰

Souvanna moved to establish relations with the Soviet Union to counterbalance the increasing pressure coming from Washington. Brown thought that the United States was pushing Souvanna into the arms of the Soviet Union, which was a gross misreading of his politics.⁹¹ True, Souvanna had told Brown that he turned to Moscow because the United States refused to supply fuel and rice, but that was a convenient excuse and only partially true. While Vientiane was experiencing sporadic fuel shortages, which mainly affected U.S. needs for air conditioning and gasoline, foodstuffs were readily available on the Thai black market. According to Dommen, who was living in Vientiane, “no serious shortages ever developed.”⁹²

Souvanna was bent on taking Laos toward a neutralism that included the Communists, as the French urged, not one that excluded them, as Washington demanded. But openly dealing with the Communists was alienating his own supporters in the National Assembly and in the FAL. Seeking to demonstrate evenhandedness to stave off the Americans he made anti-Communist statements and gestures, but took no concrete measures against them.

For example, when Soviet Ambassador Aleksandr Abramov arrived in Vientiane on October 13, Kong Le’s forces made a great show of welcoming his arrival. Souvanna ostentatiously slapped a two-week detention penalty on him for his insubordination, but it was all show. The fact was Kong Le

⁸⁹ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Parsons] to the Department of State,” October 11, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 425.

⁹⁰ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Parsons] to the Department of State,” October 16, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 430.

⁹¹ Brown, Oral History, 12.

⁹² Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 155.

was increasingly dependent on the Pathet Lao and both paid only lip service to Souvanna, who had become their front man for fending off the United States.

Despite the obvious, the Administration placed itself in what may be described as a self-induced paralysis, encouraged by Brown. State Department officials began to think in terms of the probability that Souvanna would demand that the United States withdraw from the country, or have its UN representatives charge the United States with interference in the domestic affairs of Laos—with the same result. The fact that such action would have exposed Souvanna as a Communist pawn dispelling all pretense of neutrality seems not to have occurred to Washington.

Fear of being “brought to the UN to give account,” Herter said, in the “policy decision” communicated to Brown on October 18, has persuaded us that for “reasons of expediency...we accept the inevitable of working with Souvanna Phouma as the constitutional and legally installed Prime Minister. This is necessary to maintain the façade of legality,” that will enable us to continue to operate in the country. This façade is “expensive cover,” but the “cost is considered acceptable in order to buy time and continue to have the opportunity to build up anti-communist strength...”⁹³

To make “rigid demands and to pull out if they are not met would at this juncture abdicate the field to the Russians.” Staying in the game, he went on, “has the additional merit of consistency and continuity in the eyes of our allies [even though] the break in the ranks as exhibited by the French in their recent advice to Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane is unfortunate.” We wish to maintain the “the highest degree of solidarity possible.”

⁹³ “Telegram From the Department of State [Herter] to the Embassy in Laos,” October 18, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 432.

Then, toward the end of the message, Herter sought to inject a sense of realism to Brown that fears of being booted out of Laos were groundless. We assume, he said, that “with the semblance of normalcy restored in our relations with the Prime Minister, he will then be no more decisive in the action available to him against us than he is against the Pathet Lao....For his own purposes (and by character) Souvanna Phouma is not likely to abrogate our agreement with the RLG unilaterally or to take us to the United Nations even though he is aware of considerable irregularity and outflanking.”

Brown was instructed to inform Souvanna that the United States would continue to support him, but, at the same time, he was to take “whatever feasible steps present themselves to encourage his replacement.” The United States was lifting the embargo and would pay salaries for all troops, including those of Kong Le, even while pressing Souvanna to “extricate himself from [his] influence.” Brown was to advise Phoumi to “dissolve” his revolutionary committee to erase the “great disadvantage” of his formally illegal “rebel” status.⁹⁴

The “policy decision,” it seems, was itself an expensive cover. The Administration had decided to use Brown’s strongly pro-Souvanna sympathies to disarm the prime minister and throw him off guard, while moving to strengthen Phoumi’s forces for the showdown that was fast approaching.

The Attempt to Topple Souvanna Phouma

The policy of “expediency” decided on October 18 rapidly ran its course. Ten days later, Herter sent new instructions to Brown. “Events of the past few days,” he said, “indicate that Souvanna’s usefulness in achieving essential US objectives is about at an end.”⁹⁵ U.S. intelligence had learned

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “Telegram From the Department of State [Herter] to the Embassy in Laos,” October 28, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 440.

that Souvanna was about to form a Committee for Neutrality and National Unity, (it would be announced on October 31) whose membership would include Souvanna's supporters and Souphanouvong's NLHX, following "the classic pattern of Communist-front organizations." There was also a "reported agreement" to "divide Vientiane Province between the Pathet Lao and the government. Such action could legitimize the Pathet Lao enclaves within the province."⁹⁶

As a result, Herter said, Souvanna had "lost [the] sympathy of all important non-Communist leadership elements in Laos." The king was now "opposed to Souvanna and apparently desires to have [generals] Ouane and Houmphane declare against [him] preliminary to establishment by King of paramilitary government in Luang Prabang." We were now entering, he said, "into [a] new phase and plan of action."⁹⁷

To facilitate this plan, Brown was to exfiltrate as many National Assembly delegates as possible from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, to have the minimum number of thirty required for a quorum. He was also to meet with Souvanna in a last-ditch attempt to persuade him against dealing with the Communists. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson in Bangkok was to arrange for former Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone, Washington's choice to replace Souvanna, to go to Luang Prabang to be in place when the king would nominate him.

The trigger for action would be one or a combination of three events: 1) a coup in Vientiane, 2) a vote of no confidence by the delegates, or 3) a revolt in Luang Prabang against the government. If any one of these occurred, Souvanna would be called to Luang Prabang to consult with the king, who would direct him to form a new government.

⁹⁶ "Editorial Note," *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 443.

⁹⁷ "Telegram From the Department of State [Herter] to the Embassy in Laos," October 28, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 440.

In this way, Washington sought a change of government within the bounds of Laotian constitutional processes. The goal was to ease Souvanna out, perhaps retain him in a new government, but bring Phoumi in, along with other military commanders. Such a government, Herter assured Brown, would include strong representation of all elements and “be fully acceptable to all non-Communists in Laos as well as commend itself to British, French and Australians. Would [also] probably be acceptable to Thais; and Vietnamese have already expressed themselves as favoring Phoui government.” Herter allowed as how “Souvanna could accept such an arrangement because he has worked with Phoui before.”⁹⁸

Herter’s remarks, clearly based on his assessment of Souvanna’s character as indecisive and weak, would be invalidated within hours. The idea that the French would support this plan would likewise be proven false, but would take a little longer. Brown immediately reported back from his conversation with the prime minister, who “informed him that Phoumi had to be removed from Laos.” He also “told Brown that if the United States ceased to support Phoumi, he [Souvanna] would ‘disappear.’”⁹⁹

In the meantime, Souvanna would not cave in to U.S. pressure, but fight back. From his perspective it was Washington that was being isolated. Souvanna had at least the superficial support of the British and Australians. The Russians and the French were quietly advising him not to cooperate, and the North Vietnamese were openly backing him. It was, perhaps, this support that misled Souvanna to underestimate Washington’s response.

Against the protestations of Brown, who objected to every facet of this plan, even while reluctantly carrying out his duties, action began on November 10 with a coup in Luang Prabang. Executed by General Ouane Rattikone’s subordinate,

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., fn. 3.

Major Bounthieng Insisiengmay, commander of the FAL Third Infantry Battalion, it was a bloodless affair proclaimed to be against the “communist-controlled government” of Souvanna Phouma.¹⁰⁰ Declaring support for the King, he requested assistance from Phoumi, who sent a planeload of paratroopers to Luang Prabang the next day.

(Ironically, the next day, November 11, a cabal of disgruntled paratroopers attempted and failed to carry out a coup against President Diem in Saigon. Diem believed that the U.S. was aware of and did nothing to stop the attempt, which soured relations. Moreover, a similar civil-military split in U.S. ranks existed in Vietnam as existed in Laos, but in reverse, with the ambassador Ellsworth Durbow disapproving of Diem’s performance, and the Defense Department fully supportive of him.)

Theoretically, the Laotian coup put Souvanna in Vientiane in a vise between pro-Phoumi forces in Luang Prabang and Savannakhet. In a slow-moving contest of maneuver over the next three weeks, each side attempted to outflank and overpower the other. Claiming the king was a prisoner acting “under duress,” Souvanna refused his summons, but nevertheless declared his intent to retake Luang Prabang and free the king.¹⁰¹

Souvanna knew that without substantial reinforcement from the Pathet Lao, an attempt to take Luang Prabang would only weaken his hold on Vientiane. So, on November 18, he traveled to Sam Neua for two days of talks with Souphanouvong, who agreed to help with 500 troops. They also agreed to turn the

¹⁰⁰ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 231-32.

¹⁰¹ “Telegram From the Embassy in Thailand [Corcoran] to the Department of State,” November 15, 1960 *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 456. Phoumi thought both the Pathet Lao and the French would prevent Souvanna from going to Luang Prabang. He said, “French circles would probably arrange Souvanna’s liquidation by PL rather than permit him go to Luang Prabang, resign and tell all about alleged French complicity Kong Le coup.”

Committee for Neutrality and National Unity into a coalition government. In a derisory gesture, Souvanna offered minor posts to Phoumi and Boun Oum, but said they would be banned from cabinet positions.¹⁰² The “offer” was rejected.

On November 20, Souvanna sent three companies of his troops bolstered by the five hundred Pathet Lao toward Luang Prabang. To keep him in a whipsaw, Eisenhower decided to “take the wraps off Phoumi right away,” authorizing the use of Air America transports so Phoumi could send reinforcements to protect Luang Prabang. To strengthen the pincer, on November 28, Phoumi sent his Savannakhet forces to the Nam Ca Dinh River beyond which lay the key junction town of Paksane.¹⁰³

Souvanna responded by deploying Kong Le’s forces to engage Phoumi’s at the river. Admiral Felt believed that if Phoumi could seize Paksane “Vientiane might crack apart.”¹⁰⁴ Moreover, for the first time, Phoumi’s troops were fighting well, bolstered by U.S. Special Forces advisers directing artillery fire and CIA-trained Thai paramilitary teams assisting in jungle fighting tactics.¹⁰⁵

As the conflict escalated, the Defense Department increasingly controlled the action through Admiral Felt, CINCPAC. Brown, sensing that the possibility of a political solution was rapidly vanishing, sought to regain control of events, hysterically demanding that he be given the authority to make battlefield decisions. He demanded to know whether Admiral Felt was “permitted to give instructions about operations in Laos without going through the Ambassador?”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² “Editorial Note,” November 21, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 462.

¹⁰³ “Memorandum of Telephone Conversations,” November 21, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 463.

¹⁰⁴ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 238.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 239-40.

¹⁰⁶ “Telegram From the Embassy in Laos [Brown] to the Department of State,” December 2, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 472. In a follow-up cable minutes later (Document

Parsons sought to mollify Brown with the argument that as the conflict escalated the military would increasingly call the shots, but reassured him of his support:

Difficult or perhaps undesirable as it may seem to you in peculiar fragmented Lao circumstances, we do have to live with need to reconcile civil and military sides of our Government. Should, despite all our efforts, there be civil war, CINCPAC and JCS will bear brunt of whatever follows and we cannot afford [to] ignore their views on matters on which they are best qualified.¹⁰⁷

The jurisdictional flare-up tended to distract attention from a far more serious development: the direct entry of the Soviet Union and North Vietnam into the fray. From December 3 (and continuing for the next eighteen months), the Soviets began a military airlift from Hanoi to Kong Le's forces. Hanoi commenced trucking weapons and supplies into Northern Laos, as well. Proxy war now unfolded in Laos between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Soviet Intervention

The Soviet intervention soon would change the battlefield balance against Phoumi's forces, but for the moment he still held the advantage. Thus, on December 8, Phoumi put his plan to capture Vientiane into action. It began with a coup against Souvanna executed by Kouprasith Abhay, a secret ally. The same day Phoumi airlifted 200 troops to Vientiane to secure

473), he said, "I would like to know where I stand. At present I have responsibility but not authority, because someone else is giving orders of crucial importance...through separate channels, without necessity my concurrence or even opportunity [to] comment..."

¹⁰⁷ "Telegram From the Department of State [Parsons] to the Embassy in Laos," December 2, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 474.

his hold on the capital.¹⁰⁸ Kong Le, whose main force was engaged in battle with Phoumi's at the Nam Ca Dinh River, began immediately to redeploy them back to the capital. The result was that a standoff evolved over the next several days as Kong Le's men established positions at the National Assembly, the radio station, and the airport, while Kouprasith's forces returned to the Camp Chinaimo barracks outside the city.¹⁰⁹

The coup surprised and dismayed Souvanna, who, realizing that his position had become precarious, the next day declared Vientiane an open city, turned over the reins of government to a local military commander, and fled to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In Phnom Penh, he met with Russian Ambassador Abramov, who informed him that the Soviet Union would continue to support him as head of the legal government of Laos. Persuaded, he thereafter maintained that despite fleeing the country, he had not resigned.



The Soviets used Ilyushin Il-14 aircraft to ferry materiel to Kong Le's forces in Laos.

Image by VargaA via Wikimedia Commons.

Meanwhile, on December 10, the undercover Communist member of Souvanna's cabinet, Quinim Pholsema, announced his assumption of the premiership.¹¹⁰ He and Kong Le, accompanied by representatives of the Pathet Lao, immediately flew to Hanoi to be briefed on Soviet plans. The Russians agreed to supply arms, if Kong Le and the Pathet Lao formed an alliance. The next day, December 11, Soviet planes began flying in arms and North Vietnamese artillery specialists and Kong Le's forces

¹⁰⁸ Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 33.

¹⁰⁹ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 241 and Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London: Oxford, 1968), 158.

¹¹⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian Crisis, First Installment, 9 August 1960 to 31 January 1961* (Washington: Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, 1961) 52. (Online at <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/250/2500113001B.pdf>. Accessed October 22, 2017.)

began moving toward Vientiane.

In Savannakhet, also on December 11, a quorum of forty National Assembly members passed a vote of “no confidence” in Souvanna and endorsed the Boun Oum-Phoumi Nosavan Revolutionary Committee. The king approved of these steps the next day, signing Royal Ordinance 282 dismissing Souvanna Phouma, and Royal Ordinance 283 naming Boun Oum Acting Prime Minister and Phoumi Defense Minister.¹¹¹

On December 13, in Moscow, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vasili Kuznetsov delivered a letter to Washington via U.S. Ambassador Llewellyn E. Thompson, charging the United States with interference “against the legal Laotian government of Souvanna Phoumi (sic).”¹¹² The letter formalized the proxy nature of the conflict, as now the United States and the Soviet Union were supporting different governments, each with a claim to legitimacy.

Seeking support from allies, Washington canvassed SEATO members. The United Kingdom and Australia reluctantly supported Washington, but France initially “equivocated,” and eventually declined, a development the State Department found “extremely disturbing.”¹¹³ The French reaction should not have come as a surprise. In truth, the United States, at least for the moment, had defeated the French scheme to install their man, Souvanna Phouma as a neutralist, French client.

There followed, December 13-16, the “battle for Vientiane,” which was largely a series of artillery exchanges

¹¹¹ *Laos, 1960-January-1963*, Department of State Central Files, Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs (Washington: Congressional Information Service, 2003), xvi and “Paper Prepared by the Assistant White House Staff Secretary [John Eisenhower],” December 12, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 484.

¹¹² “Soviet Note on Laos,” *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. XLIV, January 2, 1961, 16-17. (Online at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015077199258;view=1up;seq=2>. Accessed October 22, 2017.)

¹¹³ Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 248.

directed by North Vietnamese and American artillery and mortar specialists, respectively. The relatively massive display of firepower, accompanied by heavy machine gun bursts, devastated the capital, which was constructed largely of wooden structures.

Phoumi's men concentrated on "especially targeting the headquarters of the French military mission [while] Kong Le opened counterbattery fire using artillery pieces flown in to Wattay [airfield] by Soviet Ilyushin-14's from Hanoi."¹¹⁴ The outcome was a decisive, if temporary, victory for Phoumi, whose forces secured control of Vientiane and forced Kong Le to retreat northward. Soviet planes dropped supplies and arms to his forces as they retreated, preparing his men for a return to the battle.

The question was: why had the Soviet Union injected itself openly into Laos? Their eleventh-hour entry had saved Souvanna from defeat, but the Pathet Lao's nearly complete domination of the countryside meant inevitable victory in Laos under the most pro-American of regimes. Moreover, Hanoi now had unobstructed logistical access to South Vietnam, which, in turn, presaged eventual victory there, too.

The Soviet move must be understood on two separate levels. In terms of Laos itself, upholding Souvanna as the legitimate power holder gave Moscow an entry into Laos and arms support for Kong Le saved him from defeat. It also provided cover for a significant North Vietnamese entry into Laos, changing the battlefield balance and making it extremely unlikely that Phoumi could succeed in maintaining his position of power. Soviet entry put great pressure on the United States to intervene directly with its armed forces. Such a move would have served the longer-term interests of promoting a U.S-China conflict, part of the strategy of Soviet support for North Vietnam against the South.

¹¹⁴ Department of State, *Laos: A Self Study Guide*, 19.

But there was also a larger issue in play and that was Cuba. Soviet leaders recognized that the strategic weapons balance had shifted to their great disadvantage, which made overextended positions vulnerable to American counterattack. Cuba was the most important of these. Indeed, it was a fact that Eisenhower had decided to recover Cuba and preparations had begun. Thus, the strong, overt Soviet move into Laos was also designed to divert the United States from Cuba.¹¹⁵

Questions of Strategy

The most important strategic issue to arise during the Eisenhower administration was the emergence of the ICBM, not simply as a new weapon, but also as a new factor in international politics. In particular, perceptions of advantage, especially which power was closer to deployment of a first-generation missile, increasingly came to dominate the foreign policy behavior of both the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Eisenhower Administration closely monitored the evolution of the Soviet missile program, recognizing its brief ascendancy over the initially lagging American program in 1957. The Soviets employed their putative advantage in the Syrian crisis of that year, deterring the United States from taking action to prevent Syria's shift into the Soviet camp. To one degree or another Syria has remained there ever since.

Eisenhower also registered the setback to the Soviet missile program in 1958 and reacted with a forceful series of foreign policy moves through the year, especially in the Lebanon-Iraq crisis of July and the Taiwan Straits crisis of August, which were both resolved satisfactorily. In both cases,

¹¹⁵ One could make the same argument for the Soviet intervention in the Congo a few weeks earlier. Both were designed to divert the United States from Cuba and other overextended Soviet positions. In the Congo, the United States had responded by arranging for a UN peacekeeping force to enter the country. As soon as that occurred, the Soviets ended their airlift and sent the same planes to Laos.

perception of strategic weapons advantage permitted the administration to proceed confidently.

But, late in the year, as Eisenhower also sought to manage a transition in Cuba from dictatorship to democratic rule, Khrushchev combined a contrived crisis over Berlin with a reassertion of strategic weapons superiority, based on a presumed, imminent deployment of a first generation missile, to deter the United States from carrying through on its policy for Cuba. The result of Khrushchev's bluff was the rise of Castro to power, one of the worst defeats in American foreign policy history, which rankles to the present day.

It would be a year before American confidence would be restored, when the United States began to deploy intercontinental, intermediate, and sea-based missiles. From early in 1960, the administration once again began to chart a more forceful foreign policy course designed to recover lost positions. Meanwhile, an equally pro-active, if desperate, Soviet Union pursued policies bent on preserving accumulated gains—even though, or perhaps because, its missile program was still mired in difficulty.

Geopolitically, the Administration failed completely to comprehend the implications of the Sino-Soviet split on the strategy of Containment, or on American policy, especially policy toward Southeast Asia. Conversely, it failed utterly to realize the implications of the split on Soviet strategy and foreign policy. Eisenhower's one saving grace was his absolute refusal to commit American ground forces to Southeast Asia, especially to Laos, against the almost unanimous recommendations of his advisers. The president would not entertain any possibility of war with China.

American policymakers never came to the realization that one of the main objectives of Soviet policy in Southeast Asia was to entangle the United States and China in conflict. Throughout, policymakers assumed Sino-Soviet *cooperation* in Southeast Asia, despite voluminous evidence to the contrary,

and therefore sought no opportunity to utilize the split to advantage.

On the ground in Southeast Asia, the Eisenhower Administration never came to grips with the insurgency war that North Vietnam was waging in South Vietnam and Laos until it was too late, seeking to support those nations through conventional military means. The result was that by the time Eisenhower had concluded his term, the prospects for maintaining South Vietnam and Laos free of Communist domination had nearly been extinguished.

The Eisenhower Administration, at least as far as extant documentation shows, was very slow in realizing the split in the Western Alliance, as France under Charles de Gaulle decided to pursue an independent strategy that was increasingly antagonistic to the United States. Still less did the administration understand the implications of the French split on U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia. Indeed, much of the difficulty the United States experienced in Laos occurred as a result of French instigation, the Kong Le coup being the most serious.

With one exception, the final year of the Eisenhower Administration would be marked by frustration and failure and, paradoxically, the single exception would be publicly portrayed as a failure, even though it was a great success. The plan to topple Castro would be deferred and policy toward Southeast Asia had failed. The only major success—the collapse of the Paris Summit in May 1960, precipitated by the U-2 incident—restored U. S. preeminence within the alliance and defeated separate French and Soviet attempts to bring about a neutral Western Europe. And, it was accomplished without firing a shot.

Eisenhower's foreign policy in Southeast Asia was as close to a catastrophic failure as it was possible to be, but it was a failure by choice. The Soviet-North Vietnamese strategy of insurgency war in Southeast Asia, especially in Laos, left the Administration with only two choices: failure or war. Rather than

risk war with China—as a deployment of ground forces to Laos would insure—Eisenhower chose failure.

Ironically, the only momentary exception to the strategy of declining to risk war over Laos came at the very end of the Eisenhower presidency. As the conflict in Laos raged in December 1960, the president authorized seven U-2 flights to scan the North Vietnamese-Laotian border to determine whether the Royal Lao Government's claims that Beijing was entering the fray were true. They were not. U-2 "photography did not substantiate the Laotian claims," forcing Vientiane to retract its charge.¹¹⁶ It was this intelligence finding that may have emboldened Eisenhower to urge incoming President John F. Kennedy to deploy U.S. combat forces to Laos, the only time any president would consider such action.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ See Gregory Pedlow and Donald Welzenbach, *The CIA and the U-2 Program* (Central Intelligence Agency, 1998), 221.

¹¹⁷ "Memorandum of a Conference With the President," December 31, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 498; and "Memorandum on Conference between President Eisenhower and President-elect Kennedy and their Chief Advisers on January 19, 1961, recorded by Clark Clifford, *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, Volume 2, 635-637. (Online at <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon2/doc97.htm>)