SECOND INDOCHINA WAR

Cambodia and Laos Today

WILFRED BURCHETT

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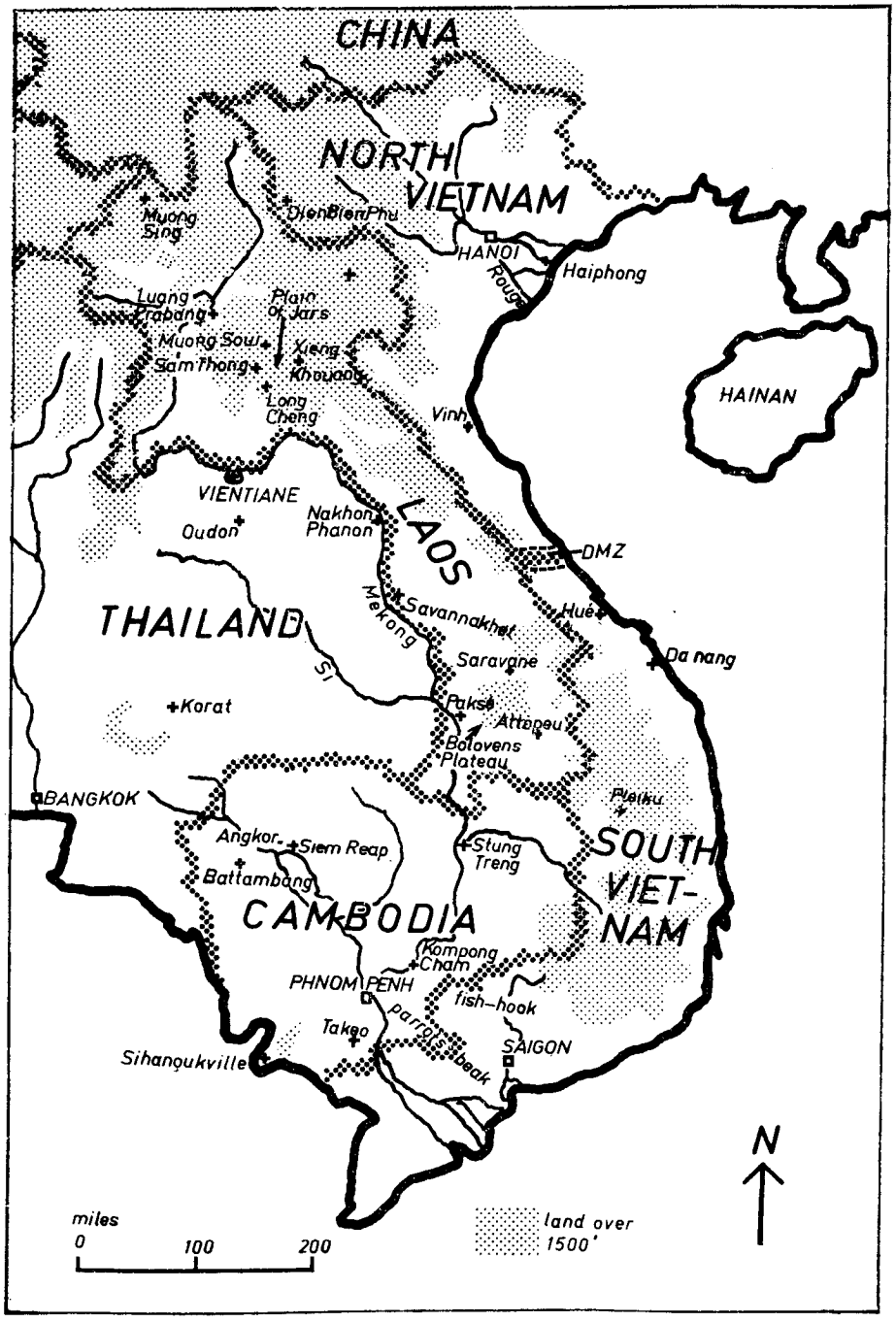

When, on April 30, 1970, U.S. troops and tanks rumbled across the South Vietnamese frontier into neutral Cambodia, the second Indochina war started. There was no longer a separate ground war in South Vietnam, an air war in North Vietnam, a 'secret war' in Laos — they had been fused into a single front as had existed sixteen and more years previously before the 1954 Geneva Agreements put an end to France's Indochina war. Despite all that has been said about 'limited objectives' and deadlines for U.S. troop withdrawals, future historians will fix April 30, 1970, as the date on which the second war of Indochina started. From then on, just as there would be one single war, so there could be only one single peace, an Indochinese peace — that is if the conflict could be limited to the states by then involved.

A week before the invasion was launched, U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers had assured a Congressional Appropriations Committee that no American troops would be sent to Cambodia. A few days after it started, President Nixon and Secretary for Defence Stephen Laird gave assurances that the invasion was limited in time and space — two months and a depth of nineteen miles inside Cambodia. Within a couple of weeks a flotilla of gunboats, with an umbrella of U.S. planes and helicopters, moved up the Mekong River a hundred or so miles into Cambodia, and the Saigon leaders — with U.S. blessing — were stating that their troops had gone to Cambodia to stay. Gunboats on the Mekong — it smelt strongly of the most rapacious phase of nineteenth-century colonialism.

'Is anybody sure what that flotilla of South Vietnamese gunboats is doing on the Mekong River . . . ?' the *Washington Post* asked editorially on May 13. After examining the dubious official pretexts proffered, the paper asked: 'Where there are gunboats, can some kind of gunboat diplomacy be far behind?'

To be sure they were only South Vietnamese gunboats. It was only some of the officers on board — like the pilots giving air cover — who were Americans.

The expedition up the Mekong was in fact only a logical, if startling, extension of a brand-new U.S. military-political invention — 'special war' — which had its first try-out in South Vietnam from the end of 1961 onwards. It is a classic example of the application of that rather awkward and hitherto much misunderstood term, 'neo-colonialism'.[1] 'Special war' in the Nixon era of 'Asiatization' of

teleguided U.S. colonialism in Asia equals the practical content of the old John Foster Dulles concept: ' Let Asians fight Asians ', where that furthers U.S. interests.

' Special war ' was one of the three types of war which the late President Kennedy's military advisers, including President Nixon's adviser on national security affairs, Henry Kissinger, persuaded him the United States must prepare to fight. The great thing about ' special war ' was that others did the fighting while the U.S.A. put up the dollars and arms, provided strategic and tactical direction through a corps of U.S. ' military advisers ', provided support facilities such as air power and air transport — everything in fact except the cannon fodder. Among the advantages of ' special war ' was that it was cheap to run. As one enthusiastic advocate said to a session of the Congressional Armed Services Committee, after explaining the fractional cost of maintaining a local soldier as compared to an American one: ' And when they die — you don't have to ship them home. You bury them right there on the spot.' An equivalent of U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker's remark in favour of the Nixon policy of ' Vietnamization ': ' It's a question of changing the colour of the corpses.'

' Special war ' failed in Vietnam and had to be moved up to the next stage of ' local ' or ' limited ' war, one in which American combat troops are involved but which is limited in scope and stops far short of the third and last ' global, nuclear ' war. ' Special war ' has been waged by the U.S.A. in Laos from late 1960 onwards, as explained in the second half of this book. From April 1970 it has been waged in Cambodia.

The ' gunboats up the Mekong ' took the concept a stage further. Instead of U.S.-backed local forces being employed to maintain a pro-U.S. régime in power in their own country, they were now sent in to invade a neighbouring country for the same purpose. An obvious advantage was that the action could be shrugged off as ' South Vietnamese ' — not bound by any of the rules Washington pretended it was imposing on its own military commanders.

The purpose of this book is to show that what is happening in Cambodia and Laos today has nothing to do with ' Sihanouk Trails ' or ' Ho Chi Minh Trails ', ' Vietcong sanctuaries ' or ' bases ', but represents a logical extension of policies followed by the U.S.A. in the area from 1954 onwards — policies deliberately planned in the name of ' filling the power vacuum ' created by the collapse of French colonialism in Indochina. It is as simple as that — all the rest is decoration and juggling with semantics.

The U.S.A. deliberately set out to wreck the 1954 Geneva Agreements, which it refused to sign but undertook to respect. In refusing

to accept the elections to unify Vietnam — to have been held in July 1956 according to the Geneva Agreements — in refusing to respect the neutrality of Laos and Cambodia and consistently working to overthrow truly neutralist régimes in those countries, United States policy-makers created brick by brick the grave situation which exists in the former states of Indochina today. The concept of Laos and Cambodia as neutral buffer states was the basis for the meeting of East–West minds at the 1954 Geneva Conference; specifically it was a meeting between Anthony Eden and Pierre Mendès-France on the one side and Chou En Lai and Vyacheslav Molotov on the other, which was agreed to by the states immediately concerned. But John Foster Dulles stalked out of the Geneva Conference and later denounced neutrality as ' dangerous and immoral '.

The end-result is gunboats up the Mekong and a second Indochina war. It is typical of the development of neo-colonialism that they are puppet gunboats. It is also typical that Thailand and South Vietnamese Asiatics are co-operating with Cambodian sub-puppets to tear Cambodia to bits and transform it into a sub-colony, or at least trying to do this.

When the CIA brought about the downfall of Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia and his neutralist concepts, they started a chain reaction of events, the ultimate consequences of which are unpredictable. Not only did they bring the Vietnam war onto Cambodian soil within a matter of days and create a single war-front in all Indochina. In blowing up the restraining dam of Cambodian neutrality U.S. policy-makers have started a ' no-frontiers ' war which might well blaze its way across all of southern Asia to the gates of India and beyond.

Washington has made much of ' Communist sanctuaries ' in Cambodia. There are far more important American ' sanctuaries ' in Thailand — and there are also important guerilla bases in Thailand stretching across to the frontiers with Malaysia. And despite the claims made describing Sir Robert Thompson as the ' victor of counter-insurgency ' in Malaya, there is still an incipient, unfinished guerilla war there. The hard core and leadership of the Malayan guerillas, whom Sir Robert Thompson never defeated militarily, remain intact and active in the Thailand–Malaysia frontier area. By June 1970 the extension of ' special war ' in Laos had brought about a link-up in north-western Laos and north-eastern Thailand between Pathet Lao guerillas and those of the Thailand Patriotic Front, who in that area are mainly of Laotian ethnic origin.

Had the Vietnam war been confined within the frontiers of Vietnam, had it been settled along the lines that started to be defined

at the Paris talks, other problems would have remained isolated and been solved at a tempo corresponding to the economic and social-political levels of development of the countries concerned. President Nixon decided on 'Vietnamizing' the war instead of ending it; on expanding it instead of limiting it. American intervention, and in some cases — as with Thailand and the Philippines — merely American presence, acts as a powerful fertilizer on the seeds of national liberation movements. This is a hard fact of the 1970s which President Nixon and his successors will have to reckon with.

The author has been an on-the-spot eyewitness to the unfolding drama of Indochina from the beginnings of the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference in 1954 to the formation of a Royal Cambodian Government of National Union in Peking on May 5, 1970.

W. G. Burchett
Paris, June 1, 1970

[1] Very approximately one could define this new type of colonialism as one suitable to be imposed on newly developing countries in which the expensive presence of the colonial power is reduced to the minimum. It is a system devised by the U.S.A. to move into countries which have thrown off the classic type of colonialism. Instead of a colonial administration and occupation troops, there are heavily subsidized client régimes and local puppet troops applying U.S. policies. 'Special war' instead of the dispatch of an old-type Expeditionary Force is the military expression of neo-colonialism. 'Special war' failed in South Vietnam and the Americans were obliged to send their own troops after all, thus reverting to old-type colonialism.

1. Cambodia and its place in Indochina

Fate has allotted to the states of Indochina a tragically unenviable role in the geo-political order of things. A transit route and staging ground for invaders of other parts of Asia; a cross-roads of rival imperialisms; a battleground for would-be conquerors of Indochina for its own attractions; a source of endless wars between the component states themselves trying to assert dominance over each other; and a focal point for clashing cultures and religions — it has been only too often a veritable maelstrom of strife on the Asian mainland. Whether it was the armies of successive dynasties of feudal China or the Mongol hordes moving south; Western colonialists moving east; Japanese expansionists moving west in World War II; or the U.S.A. aiming north at People's China — it was through Indochina that they passed and pitched their tents for centuries, decades and years respectively. The incredible thing is that the peoples of Indochina have always resisted — often enough with arms in hand.

Why the name Indochina? Because the cultures and influences of India and China met on the peninsula in which today's Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are situated. In its wider context the term Indochina includes all those states in the peninsula which starts on the eastern borders of today's East Pakistan. It includes Burma, Malaya, Thailand and the three states of former French Indochina, all of which were subject in a greater or lesser degree to the influences of India and China. For the purposes of the present book the term Indochina is used in its narrower context as the area formed by Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Vietnam, separated by the Annamite chain of mountains from Laos and Cambodia, was more strongly influenced by Chinese culture, partly because of centuries of Chinese occupation. Cambodia and Laos were at one time strongly influenced by Indian culture. The magnificent temples of Angkor in Cambodia bear witness to the conflict and sometimes the peaceful co-existence of the Hindu and Buddhist religions. The Vietnamese also adopted Buddhism, but a different variety from that of the two neighbour states — and at times tinged with Taoism.

Each of the three states has retained its distinctive culture, its language, way of dress and eating. The Vietnamese have adopted a Latin script for their written language; those of Cambodia and Laos are based on Sanskrit. Vietnamese, like Chinese and Koreans, eat with

chopsticks, Cambodians with spoons, and Laotians — like Indians — with their hands. The types of food they eat are different. Vietnamese food is similar to, but not identical with, Chinese. The Cambodians favour Indian-type curry and meat and fish cooked on a skewer. Laotian food is somewhere in between, but the diet also includes raw meat. They are all rice-eaters, the Laotians tending to favour glutinous rice. The mountain-dwellers in all three countries favour maize and also glutinous rice as the staple diet. Each has retained its customs despite centuries of foreign occupation, having resisted absorption by the occupiers.

Nature and climate have left a strong imprint on the character of the component states of Indochina. The level of political, social and economic development in each is quite different. To a certain extent this difference also applies to both North and South Vietnam, although — apart from slight differences of accent — language and customs are the same throughout the length and breadth of the country, for the Vietnamese proper. In the North the climate is relatively harsh, and there is great pressure of population on the cultivable land. Before the land reform which followed the French withdrawal after the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the land was in the hands of landlords who lived in the same village as the peasants and disputed every kilogram of rice wrested in the form of rent from the tenant farmers. In the South nature was more generous, there was less pressure of population on the land. Landlords tended to live in the cities and dabble in trade, leaving it to agents to collect the rents. Many adopted French nationality; they sent their sons to study in France and behaved rather like European-type absentee landlords. In Cambodia there was, and still is, practically no pressure of population on the land, and there is no traditional landlord system — only small farmers who own the land they till (although they often do not really own the crops they grow, having mortgaged them in advance to moneylenders or merchants who buy their crops cheap and sell them commodities dear). There were no landlords in Laos either, but in many parts of the country a sort of feudal system under which the ' tasseng ' or appointed head of a group of villages could call on the peasants to provide unpaid labour for tilling the local notables' land or other such tasks — sometimes up to six or eight months a year — and to surrender the choicest portions of the proceeds of fishing and hunting.

Within a country like Laos — and to a certain extent in the mountainous areas of Vietnam — man's evolution from slave society, through serfdom and feudalism, to primitive forms of capitalism could be traced merely by studying the socio-economic habits of the different racial groupings. In general, the more backward were those who

pursued a semi-nomadic form of agriculture — the ' slash and burn ' system under which a patch of forest was hacked out of a mountain slope and burned, and hillside rice or maize planted in holes poked into the ash-covered earth with a stick, the tribal groupings moving on from mountain slope to mountain slope and returning to original patches only when the forest had covered them again. The most advanced racial grouping, the Lao Lum, of Thai racial origin and considered as the ' real ' Laotian people, live in the plains and valleys. The Lao Xung, comprising the Meo, Lolo and Yao tribes of Chinese origin, occupy the mountain tops. The women cultivate maize and opium and breed cattle, the men are redoubtable hunters with crossbows and home-made rifles. On the slopes are the Lao Theung, of Indonesian origin, comprising a large number of tribal groupings.

If one takes Indochina after the 1954 Geneva Agreements temporarily cut Vietnam in two at the 17th Parallel, Laos is the biggest single unit in terms of area, with 236,800 sq. km. (88,780 sq. miles). Cambodia comes next with 181,000 (71,000 sq. miles), then South Vietnam with 171,665 (66,263 sq. miles) and North Vietnam with 161,103 (63,344 sq. miles). In terms of population, however, Laos is by far the smallest with a total of about three million, Cambodia next with about six million; both taken together are overshadowed population-wise by North Vietnam with seventeen million and South Vietnam with fifteen million. On the map, Indochina sticks out like a southern appendage of mainland China, just as does Korea far away in the north-east.

In contrast to the easy-going Cambodians and Laotians, the Vietnamese are energetic, with great capacities for organization, discipline and hard work. The French used Vietnamese to staff their administrative machinery throughout Indochina, a fact which caused many hard feelings against them. Vietnamese also established themselves as craftsmen and technicians in Cambodia and Laos, and shared with the Chinese the functions of merchants in the towns. (Money in the sense of currency was introduced in Laos and Cambodia much later than in Vietnam, and barter instead of money exchanges is still very common in rural areas in both countries.) The Vietnamese also settled in as rice-growers and fishermen.

The Cambodian and Laotian people — until recent industrial development in Cambodia — lived mainly on the direct fruits of their labour: the rice they grew, the fish they caught, the game they hunted, the tools and weapons they forged, the cloth they wove. Theirs was a subsistence and not a commodity economy. One of the most interesting events of the year in Cambodia is after the rice harvest, when the convoys of peasant ox-carts rumble along the roads

to the banks of the Tonle-Sap river, near Phnom Penh, where they barter their rice for a special type of fish, transformed on the spot into ' prahoc ', a highly salted fish paste which provides a vitamin-rich element in the Cambodian diet. The lack of a commodity economy did not prevent the Cambodians from creating a highly developed civilization, as the ruins of the Angkor temples testify.

Indeed, to study Cambodia's past one must visit Angkor. There is little to prepare one for the first impact of the ancient capital and its ruins. One has read about them, seen photos and heard tales of their wonders. But nothing prepares the emotions for that first glimpse of the towers of Angkor Wat, rising like lotus buds above the jungle tops and mirrored in the waters of the surrounding moat. They are but a prelude to the gradual unfolding of the treasures of this, the most famous of the Angkor group of monuments. Angkor Wat itself is but one of at least a dozen other monuments of supreme historic and cultural importance in that great complex of buildings known as Angkor. Scores of additional fragments of lesser interest — except to the specialists — cover hundreds of acres.

Cambodia itself is a museum of ancient ruins, with over 1,000 officially classified. But it is at Angkor, for half a millennium the capital of the Khmer kings, that the greatest concentration is found. If it is only the ruins of temples that today testify to the greatness of the ancient Cambodian architects and builders, this is because only the deities were considered worthy of buildings of stone. Mere mortals — even kings — were housed in wood at best, more often in bamboo and thatch. Because of this, the houses and palaces of the Golden Age of Cambodia have disappeared without a trace — except as portrayed in the sculptured friezes of the Angkor monuments.

The first capital of what roughly corresponds to present-day Cambodia was established at Angkor — a few miles from the present-day town of Siem Reap — at the beginnings of the ninth century. The pre-Angkorian history of Cambodia is not very exactly known. The best sources are Sanskrit inscriptions found at Angkor and first translated by Indian scholars, the Chinese Annals, and accounts by Chinese travellers who visited the country from time to time. But historians are generally agreed that between the first and sixth centuries of our era there was a Hindu kingdom in what is now southern Cambodia. It was known to the Chinese as Fou-Nan. In the northern part lived a race known as the Kambujas, who were apparently vassals of the Kingdom of Fou-Nan. In the middle of the sixth century, the governor of the Kambujas declared himself independent of Fou-Nan and with the help of his brother set up a rival dynasty. Within a century, the successors of the two brothers annexed the south and replaced the

Kingdom of Fou-Nan by that of the Kambujas. For a period there were civil wars and the country was divided, part of it falling under the sovereignty of Java. Towards the end of the eighth century, a prince of the former ruling dynasty, who had been taken as a prisoner to Java, returned and re-established the Kingdom of Kambuja with himself on the throne as King Jayavarman II. He declared independence from Java and established the first capital of a unified Cambodia near Angkor in what is today the province of Siem Reap.[1]

Successive kings maintained their capitals in the same region until the mid-fifteenth century, when the western provinces were threatened by Siam. The ruins which today attract visitors from all over the world date from the beginning of the ninth to the end of the thirteenth centuries. Angkor Wat itself was built during the reign of King Suryavarman II (1112–82).

Jayavarman had brought with him from Java the theory of a god-king, or Devaraja — one which had its counterpart in the ' divine right ' so beloved of European monarchs in more recent times. He was, he claimed, an incarnation of Vishnu, Hindu Lord of the Universe, descended to Earth. When he died, he would return to Mount Meru in his original form of Vishnu. The central tower of Angkor Wat represented Mount Meru and sheltered a ' linnga ' phallic symbol representing the god-king. The successors of Jayavarman II perpetuated this belief and each was obliged to construct a ' mountain temple ' as a residence for the royal ' linnga '.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk is a spiritual descendant of the Angkor kings and the god-king theory is widely accepted by today's Cambodian peasantry. This reverence for the monarch has also a very earthly reason. The Angkor kings were first-class engineers, and when one died it was the best among the royal engineers who was elected to succeed him. Cambodian prosperity depended on water conservation. Unlike Vietnam, whose agriculture depended on the controlled flooding of the fields in the vast deltas of the Red River and the Mekong, Cambodian agriculture depended on man-made reservoirs and irrigation channels, around which the population tended to concentrate. Some modern Cambodian scholars, supported by French researchers, believe that the magnificence of Angkor is explicable because of the huge concentration of population around the excellent reservoirs and irrigation systems built by the Angkor kings — some of which still exist today. Angkor Thom, the main capital, is claimed to have been the biggest city in the world at the time of its greatest glory, with over a million inhabitants.

Gradually, it is believed, the reservoirs became silted up, and centres of agriculture became dispersed nearer to the Mekong and Bassac

rivers. The theory has been advanced that the network of roads built by the last of the Angkor kings, Jayavarman VII, with inns spaced every eight to ten miles — an easy day's march — and well-equipped hospitals at regular intervals, were necessary for the transport of rice from various parts of the country to feed Angkor at a time when silted-up irrigation systems had greatly reduced rice production in that area. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the prosperity of the people depended on the skill, energy and organizational capacity of their engineer-kings — not to mention their military capacities.

One of the most important national holidays in present-day Cambodia is that associated with the Ploughing of the First Furrow, performed until his overthrow by Prince Sihanouk, with Brahman priests in attendance as relics of the old days when Hinduism was the official religion. (If Sihanouk is not on hand to perform this official opening of the 1970 agricultural season, the peasantry will be convinced that disaster lies ahead.)

Favourite themes in the sculptured galleries at Angkor Wat are from the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharatta. One can spend weeks examining these legends in stone, carved with zest and humour, with the humanism and realism of the sculptors expressed in every chisel-cut. But the artists' mood changes when they portray battle scenes between Cambodians and Chams.[2]

Such scenes are not shown in a glamorized, heroic form, but realistically, with all the horror and suffering that war brings. There is no glorification even of military successes. Cambodian troops are shown marching over a battlefield thick with their own dead. In the naval battles which took place on the Great Lake between multi-oared galleys laden with opposing troops — the Chams always recognizable by their lotus-shaped head-dresses — one sees the wounded toppling overboard to be seized by crocodiles. The lake bottom is piled high with bodies, Cambodian and Cham, intertwined in death, a prey for giant turtles, crocodiles and huge fish. The land battles are directed by generals on elephants, armed with javelins, while the infantry fight with pikes and crossbows. Grim scenes show the fate of Cambodians taken prisoner — hung by the wrists in racks while spikes are driven into their bodies, then thrown into the flames with their bodies still bristling with spikes.

Together with frescoes of war scenes are others — especially at the Bayon temple — portraying people building houses, bargaining at the market, hunting in the jungle with crossbows, fishing with nets, attending feasts, tilling the soil, attending cock fights and combats between wild boars — scores of scenes giving intimate glimpses of the life of the people as it was then and still is in many parts of the country today.

After Jayavarman VII, there was no further building of importance. Successive armies of Chams and Siamese swept back and forth, looting and burning. In 1297, almost a century after the end of Jayavarman VII, the Chinese traveller Chou Ta-kuan found court life in Angkor still sumptuous, but the country devastated and impoverished by wars with the Siamese. In 1432, Angkor was definitely abandoned as capital of the kingdom. The Siamese occupied it for a short time, but finally they also withdrew from what had become a pile of ruins. Most of the peasantry moved out of the Angkor region after the invaders destroyed a complicated irrigation system built at the same time as Angkor Wat. The jungle reclaimed the area; it became the home of herds of elephants, tigers and panthers. A splendid civilization fell into decay. Later generations of Khmers gazed in awe at the massive ruins and invented legends as to their origin.

In the early seventeenth century a Spanish missionary stumbled across the strange ruins — and concluded they had been built by the Romans or Alexander the Great!

It was not until the French seizure of Cambodia in 1862 that any serious study was made of them and the history of the 500 years of the Angkorian period was gradually pieced together.

The modern history of Cambodia starts with French colonization. This itself was presaged with the arrival of French warships in Vietnam in 1858 — ostensibly to ' protect ' French missionaries in Tourane (Danang) and Saigon. After Vietnam, Cambodia was next on the list as France pieced together her Indochina colony. It is not the purpose of this book to deal with the details of French rule or the resistance of the Cambodian people, but certain elements of the resistance struggle and the role of Sihanouk in recovering the country's independence are essential to understand what is happening in Cambodia after the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak coup.

When the Japanese took over Indochina in December 1941, they were content in Cambodia, as elsewhere, to let the Vichy France administration continue to run civilian affairs. But on March 9, 1945, by which time the Vichy régime no longer existed, the Japanese staged a coup and took over completely. As in Vietnam and Laos, in August 1945 there was a popular uprising against the Japanese and State power was seized by patriotic resistance forces. But not for long. Supported by British warships and British troops under Brigadier-General Gracey, French troops landed in Saigon on September 23, 1945, and after the resistance forces in Saigon were forced out of the capital, the French used it as a base to move into Cambodia. On October 5, General Leclerc parachuted troops into Phnom Penh, thus officially opening the second French invasion of Cambodia and a new

phase in the resistance struggle of the Cambodian people.

It is important to note that the French fought the war in Indochina as a whole. In their original conquest they had used a foothold in South Vietnam to take Cambodia. From bases in Cambodia they had occupied the rest of South Vietnam. They used bases in Cambodia and Vietnam to seize Laos. In their reconquest they used Saigon to move back into Cambodia, and Cambodia to outflank the Vietnamese resistance forces in west and south-west Vietnam. For the outflanking movement designed to wipe out the Vietminh in northern Vietnam, the French used Laos as their base. Fronts and battle areas overlapped from Vietnam to Laos, from Laos to Cambodia and from there back to Vietnam.

Because of the stiff resistance from the Vietminh in the South and the necessity to play for time to build up strength for the invasion of the North, promises were made to Cambodia in a *modus vivendi* signed on January 7, 1946, providing for full independence 'in principle' for Cambodia. It was to be followed by treaties which would abolish the protectorate and cancel out the odious conventions extracted at pistol- and bayonet-point at the end of the nineteenth century. But discussion on the treaties was always postponed, while troops continued to arrive and the French hold on the country tightened rather than loosened. The machine for recapturing Indochina was perfected and in December 1946 an all-out war was launched against the people of Vietnam with the shelling of Haiphong and the invasion of the Red River delta. With each French advance in Vietnam, prospects for the implementation of the *modus vivendi* in Cambodia receded.

A reference to this situation and to the strength of the Khmer Issarak resistance movement was contained in a statement made by Sam Sary,[3] at that time Minister for Conferences charged with negotiations with the French Government. The statement complained about the delays in granting full independence, nearly eight years after the *modus vivendi* had been signed, and pointed out: 'This hesitant policy of France and the strengthening of Communism in Indochina is leading to disaffection by the Cambodian citizens. An increasing part of the population is crossing over to the dissidents and the threat of a civil war similar to that raging in Vietnam is a real one. . . .'

The 'dissidents' were, of course, members of the Nekhum Issarak Khmer (Khmer Freedom Front), which had been founded to carry on the anti-colonial struggle. After the French come-back in October 1945, the Front immediately gained the support of civil servants, workers and students in Phnom Penh — first of all in political actions,

strikes and demonstrations, and later in a more militant form when an appeal was made for volunteers to leave the city and join the Khmer Issarak armed forces.

In August 1946 the Khmer Freedom Front struck its first real blow by wiping out the French garrison at Siem Reap and capturing the entire stock of arms. The Front gradually began to set up guerilla bases, extending over large areas in north-west, south-west and south-east Cambodia — the same regions that the National United Front, formed after Sihanouk's overthrow, seized within a matter of weeks. At first the only arms the Khmer Issarak armed forces had were those they seized from the enemy. Later they built jungle arsenals for the manufacture of small arms, hand grenades, mines, light bazookas and other weapons suitable for partisan warfare. Between 1946 and 1949, Peoples' Committees were formed at district and village levels in many provinces, with self-defence units to protect the villages. As the organization developed, resistance groups in isolated areas were linked up; finally there was a large, united military-political front.[4]

In April 1950 there was an important political development when a Conference of Peoples' Representatives was held, attended by 200 delegates representing all sections of the population. It is typical of the situation in Cambodia that just over half, 105 to be exact, were Buddhist bonzes. The Conference decided to set up a Central Committee for Liberation, later transformed into a provisional government and subsequently into a Government of National Resistance, to administer the areas already under Khmer Issarak control. In the tradition of Cambodian Buddhism, the bonzes have played a consistently patriotic role and this has proved a major setback for the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak régime to which the Buddhist hierarchy and rank-and-file bonzes were hostile from the first; this hostility has increased in proportion to the savagery of the repression to which they have been subjected.

On March 3, 1951, there was a conference of the Nekhum Issarak Khmer and parallel organizations in Vietnam and Laos. At this conference, the Vietnam–Khmer–Lao alliance was formed to co-ordinate the struggle in the three countries. It was on the basis of decisions taken on this conference that Vietnamese volunteers later entered Cambodia and Laos to fight side by side with the Khmer Issarak forces — by then the Khmer National Liberation Army — and the Pathet Lao. From then on, the resistance forces went from strength to strength. France's most illustrious soldier, General de Lattre de Tassigny, was sent to Indochina when other lesser military stars had failed. He too tried, failed and was withdrawn after having lost virtually the whole of northern Laos. He was replaced in March 1953

by General Henri Navarre, whose famous plan was to 'end the war in eighteen months'. Another 20,000 troops were sent from France for Navarre's 'win the war' plan, and by this time there were 291 French battalions in Indochina. Of the eighty combat or mobile battalions, seventy-one were concentrated in Vietnam. Navarre withdrew all combat battalions from Cambodia but had to leave nine in Laos because of the intensified activities of the Pathet Lao and Vietminh forces. The strength of the static 'pacification' forces remained at thirty battalions in Cambodia and Laos, with 181 stationed in Vietnam. But the forces in Cambodia were reduced to only two French battalions of 'pacification troops' and five battalions of the Royal Khmer Army under French command.

Sihanouk used this situation, and the mounting activities of the Khmer Issarak movement, to put pressure on the French for more and more concessions.

By this time (March 1953), the essential bone of contention between the French government then in power and Sihanouk was the question of Cambodia's adherence to the French Union and the French demand to continue using Cambodia as a base for operations both in Vietnam and in Laos. In order to frighten Sihanouk, the French even created a false Issarak movement which committed terrorist acts aimed particularly at the monarchy.[5] The argument was then used that only the presence of French arms under a French command could save Cambodia and the monarchy from destruction.

Sihanouk met this challenge head on, in a manner which was later characteristic of him. He secretly passed arms, and permitted some officers and men to desert to the real Khmer Issarak forces. In a note to the French President on March 5, 1953, Sihanouk showed that he was aware of French policy to reconquer the former Indochinese colonies one at a time. He stressed the strength of the Khmer Issarak movement, the popular basis of its support and his refusal to permit Cambodia to become involved in France's fight with the Vietminh.

'The present policy of France in Indochina,' he wrote, 'is based on the idea that the principal aim at the moment is success in the fight against the Vietminh. . . .' He pointed out that such a policy did not suit Cambodia, where the people 'above all desire peace and are sincerely attached to the ideas of liberty and independence.' He then continued: 'The real situation from a military and political viewpoint is the following: three-fifths of our territory are occupied by the Vietminh . . .' which was the term Sihanouk used loosely to describe the Cambodian and Vietnamese resistance forces. The only solution, he pointed out, was complete independence to deprive the Vietminh and Khmer Issarak of their popular support. He also pointed out that the

Khmer Issarak had deep roots among the people:

'Native sons, peasants and even townspeople . . . their patriotic proclamations find a favourable response among the people and also among the [Buddhist] clergy whose influence is enormous throughout the kingdom. They are assured of faithful followers among the masses as well as amongst the nation's élite. . . . The Issarak danger is real in itself. These rebels frequently mount ambushes against our patrols of provincial guards, police and troops and recently — alone or together with the Vietminh — have obtained results which have greatly affected public opinion by the assassination of a governor, a chief of province and district chiefs. . . .' (Among those killed was the French High Commissioner for Cambodia, de Raymond, assassinated in Phnom Penh by a Khmer Issarak guerilla in November 1951.)

Sihanouk referred to the fake French-created Issarak, which included a member of the royal family, 'and who even receive supplies and arms from the French Command, while the leader of this band (a Prince Chantarainsey) is in constant contact with senior French officers, with whom he dines on occasion.'

The main reason why the Khmer Issarak found such support among the population, Sihanouk pointed out in his note, was that Cambodia was not really independent. 'What can I reply,' he asked, 'when the Issarak propaganda proves to the people and the clergy that Cambodia is not really independent? . . .' He made very detailed suggestions for the 'transfer of prerogatives till now withheld by France and which in consequence would make it incumbent on the king and the royal government to find themselves the means necessary to exercise their powers and responsibilities. . . .' Only by such a step, he said, could French policy 'be understood and accepted by our people who, I must stress, have developed considerably and demand more than ever the real attributes of independence. . . .' Attached to the note were two appendices, one outlining Sihanouk's ideas for more independence in military, judicial, financial and economic affairs, the other regarding the 'tacit agreement' between the French High Command and the spurious Issarak movement.[6]

At this time, Sihanouk was just thirty, but displaying a considerable talent for statesmanship which must have appalled French policy-makers. In 1941, when Sihanouk's grandfather, Sisowath Monivong, died, the French, acting as king-makers, had selected the nineteen-year-old Norodom Sihanouk to succeed him instead of his uncle, the older and tougher Prince Sisowath Monireth. It is ironic that twenty-nine years later the Americans, fancying themselves as the new king-makers, chose Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, nephew of Monireth, as their 'strong man' in Phnom Penh. At one of the informal receptions

that Sihanouk delighted in arranging for diplomats and journalists, he once commented, regarding his accession to the throne: 'The French chose me because they thought I was a little lamb. Later they were surprised to discover that I was a tiger. In fact I was always a tiger — but at that time a little one.'

When he got no reply to the March 5 note, nor any reaction to the complaint about the Chantarainsey band of fake 'Khmer Issarak', Sihanouk sent a second note on March 18, 1953, which he described as a 'cry of alarm', citing the 'desertion' to the Khmer Issarak of a lieutenant of the royal army with forty soldiers and their equipment. He warned that if France did not immediately revise its policy, the whole of Cambodia would rally to the 'rebels'. The 'desertion' was Sihanouk's way of hitting back at the French High Command for forming the spurious 'Khmer Issarak' forces. It was also a clear warning that if independence were not granted immediately the whole of the royal army might go over to the real Khmer Issarak to get independence by force of arms.

The French reply came within twenty-four hours — an invitation from President Auriol for Sihanouk to lunch with him at Versailles on March 25. At the luncheon, Sihanouk's demands for speedy negotiations to give substance to Cambodia's independence were rejected and he was told bluntly to clear out of France and go home as quickly as possible. The communiqué issued by the President was full of the usual platitudes about the great friendship which animated the discussions, but it ended with a curious admonition that Sihanouk 'should return to Phnom Penh within a few days'. This was the last thing that Sihanouk intended to do. The minimum he wanted was agreement in principle on the new basis for Cambodian–French relations. The Minister for Associated States also told Sihanouk to go home; his continued presence in France was not desired and would be interpreted as 'pressure on the French Government'. Sihanouk did not go home, but to the United States, where his demands for U.S. support for Cambodian independence were received coldly and unsympathetically by John Foster Dulles. The latter also told him, in effect, to go home and help General Navarre win the war against the 'communists'.[7]

In an interview with the *New York Times*, after he arrived in Washington, Sihanouk repeated that only full independence would satisfy the Cambodian people. Asked whether he was not aware of the communist menace, he replied: 'Among intellectual circles of the Cambodian people there has been created a growing conviction that the Vietminh Communists fight for the independence of their country.' He added that such elements 'did not want to die for the French and

help them to remain in Cambodia . . .'. Again, he made a passionate plea for total independence.

This revealed a line of thought which Sihanouk has consistently followed until today. A man's attitude towards his country and people is the important thing, not his ideology. National interests come before class interests. Sihanouk recognized that the Vietminh then, as the 'Vietcong' today, were patriots, fighting for the true independence of their country. Even when Cambodia's independence was at stake, he refused to make any concessions which would help France then, or the U.S.A. today, to crush that armed struggle.

Sihanouk returned from the U.S.A. disgusted and disillusioned not only at the official derision with which his requests for support were received, but also by the evidence of racial discrimination which he personally experienced. The *New York Times* interview caused much 'pain' in Paris, but as it coincided with severe military reverses in Vietnam the French Government made a show of starting talks on the points raised by Sihanouk. It was soon clear that no serious negotiations were really intended and the talks were quickly bogged down in interminable delays as every question was referred to Paris. On June 14, 1953, Sihanouk abruptly left Phnom Penh for Bangkok to alert world opinion and, as he expressed it, 'to give a final warning to the French'. In a note distributed to foreign embassies in Bangkok (there were, of course, none at that time in Phnom Penh), Sihanouk made the point that the people as a whole, from the peasants to the intellectual élite, including the army and the Buddhist clergy, were all for complete independence 'even if this means a general revolt to throw off the yoke of the French occupiers'.

In a forceful expression of patriotism and a rare example of a monarch indulging in self-criticism, King Sihanouk, as he then was, admitted that he had been wrong to sign a convention in 1949 which included clauses limiting Cambodian sovereignty and placing the country within the French Union. 'I am grateful,' he stated, 'that the people have not punished me for acting against their will in placing our country in the French Union and for having violated the sovereignty of our country by accepting the treaty of 1949. In this decisive turning point in the history of our country and our relations with France, I must choose between France and my compatriots. Obviously, I choose my compatriots. . . .'

There is an obvious parallel between the Bangkok statement in June 1953 and the various messages — some of them extremely self-critical — to the Cambodian people from Peking in March–April 1970. Underlying them is the passionate devotion to his country and people which has always dominated Sihanouk's actions — even when

he has made mistakes.

After several long discussions with the Cambodian leader in the first years after independence, I made the following statement in *Mekong Upstream*, written in 1956, at a time when there was considerable suspicion in progressive circles and in the socialist camp about Sihanouk and the genuineness of his neutrality:

'He is a vigorous and intelligent personality who thinks for himself and says what he thinks with frankness and courage. He shows considerable ability in adapting himself to changing situations and tends to view problems with an open mind and to learn as he goes along. He shows an independence of judgement which has appalled certain diplomats at the moment when they were certain they had gained their point. He is not afraid to admit mistakes nor to take quick measures to correct them. His enemies say he is self-willed and will not tolerate opposition; those who know him best say his character has mellowed considerably since he travelled abroad and gained experience in statesmanship. No one questions that Sihanouk is a true patriot and that his self-will and obstinacy are largely expressed by his uncompromising stand for full independence and nothing less.

'I have had the pleasure of several conversations with Sihanouk and the outstanding impressions are his frankness, his ability to express himself with clarity and eloquence and his grasp of an idea or trend of thought before one has half finished expressing it. He speaks excellent French and English and is not averse to using apt quotes from the French classics to illustrate a point. . . .'

After getting to know him considerably better during the fourteen years that have elapsed since, I have little to add as to the main traits of his character.

Parallel to the diplomatic struggle that Sihanouk was waging at this period was that being waged on the military-political front by the Khmer Issarak and their Vietminh allies. Among the most effective recruits for the Khmer Issarak armed forces were the rubber plantation workers. Of a total labour force of about 12,000 on the plantations — herded behind barbed wire and escorted to work by armed guards — some 1,500 had escaped to join the resistance. In the forests neighbouring the plantations in the Chup area near the Vietnamese frontier, the Khmer Issarak had set up arsenals for making grenades and other arms, staffed almost entirely by the plantation workers. Guerilla units were formed from former plantation workers in villages surrounding the region and regular liaison was maintained with a Khmer Issarak headquarters established inside the biggest of the three Chup plantations, under the very eyes and noses of the French.

It is not surprising that after Sihanouk was overthrown the plantation workers from the same region were among the first to set up armed units, and that large areas were liberated within a few days. In view of the current American and Lon Nol–Sirik Matak line that the trouble in Cambodia is due to 'aggression' from North Vietnam, it is worth repeating the account given by a veteran Khmer Issarak cadre which I published in *Mekong Upstream*. Summing up the role of the rubber plantation workers at the time of the resistance struggle against the French, he said:

'They represent the largest single mass of proletariat that we have in Cambodia. You know that we have no real industry and so no industrial workers. At first some of us tended to overlook this potential because the regular plantation workers are mostly Vietnamese. Cambodians work there mainly between the agricultural seasons to supplement their incomes. Some of us thought it would be difficult to create a single effective organization. The French had long tried to divide Cambodians and Vietnamese by offering big rewards if the Cambodians would denounce Vietnamese fleeing from the plantations. Their propaganda was that the Vietminh wanted to conquer Cambodia. . . . In the beginning there were difficulties. It took a lot of patient and dangerous work to establish the first contacts and explain the situation. But the results were magnificent and above all complete solidarity between Cambodian and Vietnamese workers was achieved. The French propaganda failed because the Cambodians saw, in day-to-day activities, the self-sacrificing way in which Vietnamese workers defended the common interests. They fought shoulder to shoulder against the real enemy.

'During the last years of the war, plantation workers provided two thirds of the staff for all of our secret production bases, for almost all our transport corps, for liaison work not only throughout all east Cambodia but also with the fronts in South Vietnam. . . .'

The Cambodian working class has developed considerably since those days and so has the solidarity between Cambodia and Vietnamese workers, not only on the plantations. It was no coincidence, however, that the first large-scale massacre of Cambodians by Lon Nol's troops in March 1970 was in Kompong Cham province, where the rubber plantations are situated.

What with the deteriorating military situation in Vietnam and the increasing activities of the Khmer Issarak inside Cambodia, the Laniel–Bidault government started negotiations again. Some progress was made towards giving Cambodia independence but there were provisos that would have given the French High Command the right to use Cambodia as an operational base against the Vietminh. The formula was the reservation of 'temporary facilities for the necessary means of

assuring operational command of units stationed east of the Mekong.'

'East of the Mekong' covered the whole of Vietnam, almost all of Laos and about a third of Cambodia. Sihanouk fought tooth and nail against such conditions and bluntly refused to accept independence until they were dropped. As the French High Command was anxious for a settlement with Cambodia so that troops there could be transferred to other fronts, the provisos were eventually dropped. While negotiations were still proceeding, Sihanouk's senior adviser and then prime minister, Penn Nouth (now with Sihanouk in exile), made an appeal in the King's name which resulted for the first time in the label of 'neutralist' being pinned on the Cambodian leader. The appeal was made on July 31, 1953, for fighting to cease on Cambodian soil:

'Although we are not communists, we do not oppose communism as long as the latter is not to be imposed on our people by force from outside. . . . What happens in Vietnam is none of our business.'

In other words Sihanouk made it clear that, even at the price of an indefinite postponement of independence, he had no intention of taking part in an anti-Communist or anti-Vietminh crusade, or of permitting Cambodian territory to be used in such a crusade. *Le Monde* commented with prophetic insight:

'Washington does not hide the fact that its whole policy in South-east Asia is in danger from a wave of neutralism which the example of Cambodia has just launched. . . .'

Washington has never renounced that 'fear' of the spread of neutralism in South-east Asia, denounced by the late John Foster Dulles as 'immoral and dangerous'.

Another of Sihanouk's qualities which Washington will have to grapple with, now that his neutral concepts have been swept aside, is one that I also noted in *Mekong Upstream*, the first book I wrote about Cambodian problems:

'There are abundant signs that Sihanouk realizes that while nothing can be done without the people, everything can be done with the people. . . . In every crisis Sihanouk has appealed to the people and the people have responded. Each time Sihanouk moves closer to the people, the people move closer to Sihanouk. . . .'

All the signs are that Sihanok has realized this more completely than ever after the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak coup.

American intervention in Cambodian affairs started immediately after the shocking discovery of Sihanouk's neutralism in mid-1953. The ultra-reactionary head of the China Lobby, Senator Knowland, and the U.S. ambassador to Saigon, Donald Heath, were dispatched to reason with Prime Minister Penn Nouth and convince him of the necessity of joining in the anti-communist crusade. Penn Nouth re-

peated Sihanouk's views that Cambodia 'had nothing against communist régimes as long as they do not interfere with Cambodia'. Knowland's arguments that this was a dangerous policy, that one should not await the danger but go out to meet it by attacking 'communists and Vietminh', made no impression. Heath added that the urgency of the fight against communism demanded that Cambodia agree to France having the sole military command for Cambodia, as well as Laos and Vietnam. Penn Nouth, with Sihanouk's backing, refused. The Knowland–Heath visit marked the beginning of prolonged and intensive U.S. interference in Cambodia's internal affairs, soon to take the form of attempts to get rid of Sihanouk and his brand of neutrality.

By November of 1953, Sihanouk had warned that Cambodia would withdraw from the French Union unless all powers, including full military authority and responsibility for internal and external security, were transferred to Cambodia. On November 9, agreement was reached on essential powers being transferred; the French retained some temporary transit rights for their troops but were forced to abandon their demand for bases for their operational commands 'east of the Mekong'.

On November 20, General Navarre started dropping parachute troops under Colonel Christian de Castries into the valley of Dien Bien Phu, as the key move in a vast operation aimed at reoccupying northern Laos and all of northern Vietnam and thus winning the war. The Dien Bien Phu operation, which was intended as the decisive element of the 'Navarre Plan', ended in the historic victory for the Vietnamese People's Army on May 7, 1954, the very day ceasefire discussions opened at Geneva — a fine example of Ho Chi Minh's military-political planning.

At the Geneva Conference, France's ill-fated foreign minister, Georges Bidault, blandly tried to prove that there was no such thing as a war in Indochina. France had been merely engaged in putting down 'communist subversion' there and in helping the 'independent' states of Cambodia and Laos defend themselves against 'Vietminh aggression'! This was not really very different from Washington's official apologia for waging war against the peoples of Indochina sixteen years later.

The foreign minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, showed that his government had no designs on Cambodia and Laos by offering to withdraw all Vietminh forces immediately upon the conclusion of a ceasefire, provided the governments of Cambodia and Laos agreed to ban the establishment of foreign military bases on their soil. It was not difficult for Pham Van Dong to justify

this demand in view of the fact that the French and the Japanese had consistently used one of the three states of Indochina as a base for the invasion of the others. This was accepted. At Geneva, recognition of the real independence and sovereignty of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos was written into international documents for the first time.

The Geneva Conference marked the end of a whole historic phase for Cambodia, and for Indochina as a whole. A new one was to be ushered in as the United States tried to fulfil the self-appointed task of ' filling the power vacuum ' caused by the French collapse.

[1] The above account is summarized from various works by one of the best-known French authorities on early Cambodian history, G. Goedes, including *Les Capitales de Jayavarman II, La Tradition Généalogique des Premiers Rois d'Angkor* and *Pour Mieux Comprendre Angkor.*

[2] The empire of Champha was centred in what is now South Vietnam. Cambodia was repeatedly subject to Cham invasions, mostly by fleets sailing up the Lower Mekong and attacking Angkor via the Great Lake, which covers about 9,000 sq. km. at the height of the rainy season. Later the Champha empire was destroyed by the Annamites and only a few thousand Chams now survive, minority peoples scattered in isolated villages in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

[3] Sam Sary later joined the ' Khmer Serei ' traitor group.

[4] These developments and many of the activities of the Khmer Issarak movement, as well as many other matters concerning Cambodia and Laos, I have described in detail in my book *Mekong Upstream,* first published by the Fleuve Rouge Publishing Co. in Hanoi in 1957, and to which I have referred numerous times in the present book.

[5] In 1968–69 General Lon Nol fabricated similar provocations and ' evidence ' that the ' Khmer Rouges ' threatened Sihanouk.

[6] This movement was the forerunner of the ' Khmer Serei ' movement, run by the CIA. At that time, the false ' Issarak ' also had close ties with the ' Black Dragon Society ', a sort of Japanese super-CIA.

[7] Details of this whole revealing episode in Sihanouk's diplomatic struggle for real independence were given to the author on Sihanouk's personal instructions for the book *Mekong Upstream.*

2. Background to the March 18 coup

Apart from Sihanouk's own experiences in the U.S.A. and the Knowland–Heath pressures, the first collision with the U.S.A. came soon after the 1954 Geneva Agreements put an end to the war in Indochina.

At the end of the war, Cambodia needed economic and financial assistance. The government, which had never been able to get its fingers on the country's assets, was left with a bankrupt economy and empty coffers. There was no money to pay the army or administration. Washington offered dollar aid which Sihanouk agreed to accept as long as it was without conditions. He was insistent on this point. The American negotiators more or less winked at each other and said: ' We'll give the aid now and send in the bill later.' The bill proved to be Cambodia's membership of SEATO.[1] Sihanouk refused to pay it and thereupon started his real difficulties with the U.S.A.

For what purposes did Cambodia need aid? Opinions vary among Cambodian progressives about the extent to which aid was needed and the way in which it should have been spent. The main expense was the army. Until independence, military expenses were theoretically paid by the French; in fact the money came from funds poured into France by the U.S.A. to keep the war going. With the end of the war, the payments were made direct to Cambodia from Washington. U.S. pressures were first exerted in the form of warnings that the ' Viet-minh ' or Chinese ' Reds ' were about to attack Cambodia, so the army must be expanded — especially as French troops were no longer around. The U.S. government would be only too happy to foot the bill. So the army was expanded and modernized and fitted out with mainly U.S. equipment.

Communications were in a bad state. Cambodia's only outlet to the sea was along the Mekong River through South Vietnam. Although she had 400 kilometres of coastline along the Gulf of Siam, there were no deep-water ports, and no roads or railways linking the coast with the interior (apart from one which led from Phnom Penh 170 km. south to the seaside resort of Kep). The Americans financed railway construction in both Thailand and Cambodia to provide a rail link between Phnom Penh and Bangkok. But Cambodia, with historically bad experiences at the hands of her two neighbours, did not wish to be dependent on South Vietnam and Thailand for her communications with the outside world. She wanted her own port. The idea

suited the French also, as American pressures started to squeeze French interests out of Saigon and threatened French trade with Cambodia via the Mekong.

France agreed with Sihanouk's request to build a port at the tiny fishing village of Kompong Som in the Gulf of Siam, where the water was deep enough for ocean-going vessels. Sihanouk wanted to use some of the U.S. aid to build a railway from the future port to the interior. U.S. aid experts vetoed the proposal on the ground that ' strategically ' it would be dangerous to have a railway leading in from the sea. ' Red ' China might invade that way! The Americans were not averse to building railways from Thailand or improving communications with South Vietnam, from where the only invasions had come in the past. After much discussion the Americans agreed to construct a road if the French built the port. Port and road were the main features of the economic side of the foreign aid programme. That Sihanouk should have fought so hard for this is consistent with his single-minded attitude in fighting for the country's real independence, a goal he never abandoned.

U.S. dollars were also provided to finance Cambodian imports. Cambodian importers paid into a special ' counter-fund ' the equivalent in local currency for the dollars they drew on to pay for imports. The ' counter-fund ' was entirely controlled by U.S. aid officials, to be used as they liked: ' The greatest invention since the wheel ' was how one U.S. aid enthusiast once described it. The U.S.A. had its own very important budget to dispose of as it liked inside the country. The ' counter-fund ' was used to pay the Cambodian Army; for U.S. aid projects such as the road, the salaries, rents, etc., of the Americans who began to swarm into Phnom Penh, and also — as was discovered later — to finance extensive CIA activities inside the country. The first U.S. ambassador to Cambodia after 1954, Robert McClintock, was a top CIA agent, as was also his chief aide at the Phnom Penh embassy, Martin F. Herz. It was these two, in effect, who controlled the ' counter-fund ' budget.

On March 3, 1955, Sihanouk abdicated as King, in favour of his father, Norodom Suramarit. He did so in a typical surprise move by sending an envelope to the Phnom Penh radio station, asking the programme director to play the tape enclosed in place of the customary midday newscast. He had recorded his speech of abdication. Even to those in circles closest to him, this came as a complete surprise. I saw him shortly afterwards and asked why he had taken this step. His reply revealed much of his inner thinking and explained many of his statements after the March 18 coup.

' I wanted to offer proof to our young people, especially our young

students,' he said, ' that my efforts for the country and nation had nothing to do with the wish to be his Majesty the King, or to my attachment to the throne. . . .'

There is no question that, in fact, he chose this course to end the monarchy in a gradual and dignified way, in order to play a more direct role in the country's affairs. He believed this was the only way of ensuring the country's independence after the war in view of American attempts — which became quickly apparent — to replace France in Indochina. As his father had no other heirs, and Sihanouk gave a pledge that he would not accept the throne again after his father's death, the monarchy as an institution would end with the death of Sihanouk's parents. To all practical purposes, except for important formal traditions, of value as a unifying factor, the monarchy ended with Sihanouk's abdication. (At the Peking Press conference on May 5, 1970, at which Sihanouk announced the formation of a Royal Government of National Union, he said: ' In form we are a monarchy, but the content is republican.')

In the same abdication broadcast, Sihanouk announced the formation of the Sangkum (Popular Socialist Community) formed by the fusion of existing political parties into what was to become virtually the only legal political movement in the country. Through the Sangkum, Sihanouk reaffirmed that Cambodian foreign policy would be based on strict neutrality.

Broadcasting to the nation two weeks after his abdication, Sihanouk also revealed his patriotism, his realism and his desire and capacity to adjust himself to new situations.

' When I assigned myself the task to struggle against foreign domination,' he said, ' confronted as I was with the great powers, my royal authority was necessary to facilitate my task and to wage a successful struggle for the fatherland. . . . If I had not spoken as King of Cambodia, they could always have replied that I did not represent Cambodia, but only a clique or a part of national opinion. . . .' He explained that the situation had since changed and the main problems to be solved were those concerning Cambodia's internal developments:

' If I remained on the throne,' he continued, ' locked up in my palace, no matter how great my affection for the people or my desire to help them — I would never really know their true situation or the abuses of which they may be victims. I would be unable to distinguish the true from the false, black from white, justice from injustice, truth from slander. A sovereign has far too high a position for the people to be able to see him often. Even if the people succeeded in being received by the King, they would not expose the real source of their

griefs because they are always accompanied by officials and so they fear reprisals. How can the monarch know what happens to the people after they leave the palace?

'Also the palace is stuffed full of a whole hierarchy of court mandarins, amongst whom slide the intriguers — like blood-sucking leeches that fasten themselves to the feet of elephants. Such conditions make it quite impossible for the monarch to render justice to the people. For one thing, the latter dare not open their hearts; for another, certain highly placed persons are always on hand awaiting the propitious moment to give the King advice which is not necessarily in the interests of the people. . . .'

In this very detailed exposé of the reasons for his abdication, Sihanouk also explained that he had tried to have contact with the people; that he was deeply interested in their problems but 'by the very fact that I was King, every time I wanted to travel I had to notify the adminstrative authorities so that they could take what they considered necessary measures in advance. They organized official convoys, they mobilized troops and police; they cleaned up the "khets" and "khands" [provinces and districts] according to the exact itinerary of my visit. . . . After a speech, it is practically impossible for the sovereign to contact the people and get any information because the officials are sure to have taken the necessary precautions to make everything seem right and proper. . . .'

This was not demagogy on Sihanouk's part. He has always sought the closest contact with the people. After he had rid himself of the trappings of a monarch, he took great pleasure in dropping in unannounced — quite literally, by a tiny helicopter — on places he considered of interest at the moment. He visited every corner of the country, literally every district, and many of them repeatedly, and right up to the time of his overthrow maintained intimate contacts with the people of a quality that very few leaders could claim. When I visited him in Peking, shortly after the March 18 coup, Sihanouk said that it was the contact with the people that he missed most in his temporary exile. He recalled that he was in the habit of spending two to three days every week in the provinces.

It is in the light of the 1955 abdication speech that his announcement from Peking, fifteen years later, that he would not seek office as Chief of State again must be seen. He realized that a whole era had come to an end and that a new one was starting in which neither the type of régime he had headed in the past, nor that which had usurped its powers, would have a place. The future belonged to the people, but first there must be a struggle for real national liberation, in which Sihanouk pledged to take part on the side of the people. There is no

doubt that he has long been an admirer of Prince Souphanouvong in Laos for having led such a long and arduous resistance struggle with all the hardships and sacrifices that this entailed.

By the end of 1955, pressure on Cambodia to join SEATO began to reach outrageous proportions. There was direct pressure on Sihanouk himself from John Foster Dulles, and when this did not work, brother Allen, then head of the CIA, came to Phnom Penh with 'proofs' of impending 'communist aggression', the only protection against which would be membership of SEATO. Sihanouk's reply was that the 1954 Geneva Agreements provided for Cambodian neutrality. Dulles knew very well that without Cambodian agreement and U.S. military power solidly implanted in that country up to the borders of South Vietnam, SEATO would be ineffective as an instrument of U.S. domination of the area. Cambodia represented a 'missing link" in the chain of anti-communist 'bastions' Dulles was forging across southern Asia from the Philippines to Thailand.

I arrived in Phnom Penh in March 1956, when pressures were building up to their climax. Sihanouk had outraged the State Department when — despite an arrogant warning by Ambassador McClintock — he paid an official visit to Peking. Work on the famous road from Sihanoukville — already taking shape as a port — had still not started and the U.S. was threatening to cut off economic aid altogether. To stress how dependent Cambodia was on the goodwill of the U.S.A. and its allies, South Vietnam and Thailand had closed their frontiers with Cambodia and started an economic blockade. U.S. planes, officially taking part in SEATO manoeuvres in Thailand, were daily violating Cambodian air space. 'Khmer Serei' irregulars, another of the CIA's private armies, were making raids into Cambodia from bases in Thailand and infiltrating agents and saboteurs from South Vietnam. A newly-arrived U.S. ambassador to Bangkok was the same Peurifoy who had engineered the overthrow of the independent-minded government of Guatemala (after it had expropriated 234,000 acres of land held by the United Fruit Company).

I wrote a series of articles describing the situation in Cambodia as ominously reminiscent of that on the eve of the CIA-sponsored action in Guatemala. Some were picked up and extracts were rebroadcast over Peking and Hanoi radio. John Foster Dulles took it upon himself to deny one of these in a letter to the Cambodian foreign ministry on April 15, 1956, in which he expressed 'alarm that statements from various sources are giving increasing publicity to allegations according to which the U.S.A. tried to force Cambodia into joining the SEATO pact by threatening to withdraw U.S. economic aid, and that the U.S.A. had obliged independent and friendly nations such as Vietnam

and Thailand to impose measures of economic warfare against Cambodia . . .'. Dulles denounced such allegations as ' completely false ' and warned that they ' could damage the friendly relations existing between our two States . . .'. He pointed out that the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia had brought to the knowledge of the King and Queen, some days earlier, that ' the U.S.A. has never publicly made any official observations concerning Cambodian neutrality . . .'.

That was one of the moments when a journalist has a sinking feeling in his stomach, starts checking again the facts on which his articles have been based and reassesses the reliability of his sources. How many Heads of State will stand up against a *démarche* from a U.S. Secretary of State? But Sihanouk immediately published a declaration making as his first point that it was curious for Dulles to reply to newspaper articles by a letter to the Cambodian foreign ministry. He then dealt with the matter of ' no public or official ' U.S. observations on Cambodian neutrality.

' It is difficult to be more prudent,' Sihanouk observed. ' It is a fact that " officially " and " publicly " the U.S.A. has never made any observations about Cambodian neutrality. However, private American " advice " and unofficial " criticisms " have not been lacking. . . . It so happens that I have in my hands overwhelming proof of a plot in Manila against Cambodian neutrality. . . .'

He went on to reveal an extraordinary incident during his official visit to the Philippines a few months earlier when ' an unknown person not of Philippines nationality . . .' had presented Sihanouk with an amended version of his own speech, rewritten on U.S. embassy notepaper, and which he was scheduled to deliver the following day at the Camp Murphy headquarters of the Philippines Army. The amended version of the speech was full of phrases about the necessity for ' cooperating with other free countries against communist aggression or subversion . . .' etc. The Manila Press had been running banner headlines to the effect that Sihanouk had come to the Philippines to announce Cambodia's entry into SEATO — but this was the limit. Sihanouk refused the draft, reverting to his own original text, the essence of which was that Cambodia could not ' take part in any military blocs because of the agreements freely signed at Geneva . . .' and that Cambodia ' despite ideological differences, would maintain correct relations with all other powers on the basis of non-interference in each other's affairs, the only solid basis for lasting peace . . .'. He was warned that to make such a speech ' would offend his hosts '. But he insisted. He was prevented from delivering the speech; the ceremony at Camp Murphy was cancelled and he was subjected to humiliating insults for the rest of his stay for refusing to please his

hosts — and the U.S. backers of his hosts — by announcing Cambodia's entry into SEATO.

All this was spelt out at great length and in detail for the benefit of the late John Foster Dulles and, as a sort of footnote to the whole affair, Sihanouk gave me an exclusive interview in which he categorically rejected SEATO ' protection ' of Cambodia or any relationship whatsoever with SEATO. It was the most definite and all-embracing rejection of SEATO he had ever made. He coupled that statement with another, in the same interview, to the effect that he would welcome entering into diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and other countries of the socialist world. (At that time only SEATO powers were represented in Phnom Penh, with the exception of India, which was very strongly neutral at that time and angry with the U.S.A. for its flirtation with Pakistan.) U.S.-inspired pressures were stepped up again from this time on and took on more specific forms.

In 1956, the site of a famous Angkorian-period temple at Preah-Vihear on Cambodia's northern frontier with Thailand was seized by Thailand, and Sihanouk was only restrained by American pressures from sending his army to expel the Thai occupying forces. Two years later, South Vietnamese troops of Ngo Dinh Diem invaded Cambodia's northernmost province of Stung Treng, penetrating to a depth of four kilometres and showing every intention of staying. Sihanouk ordered his troops into action to repel them, but was informed by the head of the U.S. military aid mission that American arms, even in Cambodian hands, could not be used against America's allies — Thailand or South Vietnam. American military trucks could not be used to transport Cambodian troops for such operations.

Sihanouk discovered to his horror that not only could arms and transport supplied under the U.S. military ' aid ' programme not be used to defend Cambodia against the only imaginable sources of danger to the country but that this ' aid ' would be cut off completely if Cambodia accepted any military aid from China or other Socialist if Cambodia accepted any military aid from China or other socialist countries. He defied the Americans on this occasion, exerting enough military pressure to force the invaders out.

The following year a major CIA plot to overthrow Sihanouk was discovered and put down thanks to good intelligence work backed by warnings from Chinese and French intelligence services and the loyalty of the people's militia in Siem Reap province — where the Angkor ruins are located. The plotters included a Cambodian general, Dap Chhuon; Ngo Dinh Diem's brother-in-law who was South Vietnam's consul in Phnom Penh; the head of the ' Khmer Serei ' traitor group, Son Ngoc Thanh — an old agent of the Japanese and U.S.

intelligence services — and his close associate Sam Sary, former Cambodian ambassador in London. The plot was master-minded by an American CIA agent at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Victor Masao Matsui.

The rebel headquarters was raided in time. Large stocks of arms, a quantity of small gold ingots for buying collaborators, and incriminating documents were found. Dap Chhuon was wounded by one of his own men in the surprise attack and, according to later accounts, he asked for a high-ranking officer to be brought to him to whom he wanted to make a statement on the background of the plot which would have incriminated Lon Nol. The latter, then head of the Cambodian army, sent someone to finish off Dap Chhuon with a bullet in the head. Matsui was expelled — just as seven years later he was expelled from Karachi — for espionage. The essence of the plot was to seize, for a start, the northernmost provinces of Cambodia, declare an alliance with the southern provinces of Laos under a faithful U.S. ally, Prince Boun Oum of Champassak, and declare an independent secessionist state which the U.S.A. would have immediately recognized. This was at a time when some of the U.S. policy-planners were working on the idea of a ' corridor ' through southern Laos which would have linked South Vietnam with Thailand, as a second-best alternative to bringing Cambodia into SEATO.[2]

Later in the same year, a ' present ' in the form of a charming lacquered box arrived for the Queen — marked to be opened by her personally. Whoever sent it knew her habit of opening her own mail, usually in the presence of her husband and Sihanouk. On this occasion, because Prime Minister Son Sann had arrived unexpectedly to bid farewell before a trip abroad, the mail was opened in an ante-room. A few seconds before Sihanouk arrived to join his parents in the throne room, there was a tremendous explosion; the King's secretary was blown to bits as he opened the lacquered box-bomb and another attendant killed underneath the throne room by the force of the explosion. From what was left of the wrappings, it was learned that the bomb had been mailed from a U.S. military post-office in Saigon.

Sihanouk was beginning to learn the quality of U.S. ' aid '. As a first step he closed down the U.S. military mission. This was after another incident in which a number of wooden cases addressed to the U.S. Embassy, normally not inspected because of diplomatic immunity, were found to be full of arms. They were destined for ' Khmer Serei ' groups being infiltrated into Cambodia from South Vietnam at that time.

In 1963, Sihanouk obtained unanimous approval from the National Assembly to renounce all U.S. economic and military ' aid '. It had

become all too clear that this was being used to strangle the country's economic development, especially as it could not be used to finance the State enterprises which the government of those days favoured. It was being used to develop a class of comprador capitalists with a vested interest in U.S. aid at any price and thus actively or potentially hostile to Sihanouk's nationalist policies. It was known by this time that the counterpart funds were being used to finance CIA operations throughout the country in which many of the 300 American members of the various ' aid ' missions were involved.

The following year there was a major scandal when the manager of the Phnom Penh bank, Song Sak, later identified as the top CIA agent inside the country, was discovered to be up to his neck in economic and financial sabotage. Avoiding arrest, he escaped to Saigon where he immediately joined Son Ngoc Thanh[3] and Sam Sary as Number Three man in the ' Khmer Serei ' leadership. Song Sak was closely associated with Sirik Matak and Yem Sambour, both of whom were known for their pro-American leanings and who became first and second deputy-premiers respectively in the Lon Nol cabinet after the March 18 coup.

Throughout this period, the U.S.A. had refused to recognize Cambodian neutrality or the country's territorial integrity within its present frontiers. Washington implicitly supported the Saigon régime's territorial claims against Cambodia, including claims on a few small islands a few miles off the coast at the Kep seaside resort.

In February 1965 the Americans started the systematic bombing of North Vietnam; a month later the first U.S. Marine detachments disembarked at Danang in South Vietnam. Direct U.S. intervention in South Vietnam and the air war against the North had started. Air and artillery strikes against Cambodian border villages were stepped up. Sihanouk threatened several times to sever diplomatic relations unless they were halted. They continued — and in May 1965, following the sacking of the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Sihanouk broke off diplomatic relations with the U.S.A.

A U.S. plane, helicopter and tank, symbols of those shot down or destroyed on Cambodian territory, were put on public display in Phnom Penh as a reminder of what Cambodia had suffered from the United States only because she insisted on preserving her independence and neutrality and on living in peace within her own well-defined frontiers.

With the closing of the doors of the U.S. Embassy a whole phase of Khmer–American relations ended — a bitterly disillusioning one as far as Cambodia was concerned. The only ones in Phnom Penh who really regretted the American departure were those in American

pay and the profiteers and speculators who had invested ill-begotten fortunes in building houses to let at huge rents to American diplomats and staff members of the various U.S. missions.

[1] South-East Asia Treaty Organization. Finally set up in Manila in September 1954 by the U.S.A., Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan.

[2] According to one version, which I heard in Cambodia at the time, Lon Nol was involved, and once the secessionist state was consolidated and recognized he intended to carry out a coup and attach the rest of Cambodia to the secessionist state. Sihanouk seems not to accept this version. At his Peking Press conference on May 6, 1970, he referred to the Dap Chhuon plot to wage a war of secession but said that Lon Nol had helped him ' to crush this rebellion '. That an officer of Lon Nol's staff inexplicably silenced the wounded Dap Chhuon is well known in Cambodian army circles.

[3] Son Ngoc Thanh had been puppet prime minister of Cambodia under the Japanese. Later he tried to capture the leadership of the Khmer Issarak movement. When that failed he joined the false ' Khmer Issarak ' set up by the French. Later he fled to Thailand and from then on offered his services to the U.S.A. He founded and headed the ' Khmer Serei ' (Free Cambodia) traitor group subsidized and armed by the CIA. First based in Saigon, he later transferred to Thailand from where he directed armed sabotage against Cambodia. After the March 18 coup, he returned to Phnom Penh with units of the ' Khmer Serei ' armed forces as the backbone of Lon Nol's shock troops. It was rumoured that part of the ' price ' demanded by the Saigon régime for military support for Phnom Penh was that Son Ngoc Thanh should replace Lon Nol as prime minister.

3. Explanations

At an historic Press conference in Peking on May 5, 1970, Prince Sihanouk announced the formation of a Government of National Union to lead a resistance struggle against those who had seized power in Phnom Penh and the forces they had called in to maintain them in power. He also reviewed some of the events which, in his view, had led to the March 18 coup. After describing the situation prior to the coup in which ' even if we were poor, our Cambodian people lived in peace and independence and in harmonious relations with other foreign residents ', he contrasted this with the racist, genocidal policies of the new Phnom Penh régime, with the horrors of war that had been brought to Cambodia and the fact that within six weeks the country had been transformed into a U.S. colony — even a sub-colony of South Vietnam. Referring to the leaders of the new régime, General Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak, Sihanouk said :

' You may well ask : but from where do they come? Were they not your closest collaborators? Yes, it is true they were. Lon Nol was my right arm. We followed the same road from the time of our youth, from the time of the French Protectorate. With our esteemed elder brother, Penn Nouth [seated alongside Sihanouk at the Press conference as prime minister of the newly formed resistance government], Lon Nol and I worked for our country's independence. We succeeded in forcing France to transfer her remaining colonial prerogatives to us in November 1953, eight months before the Geneva Conference on Indochina. It was Penn Nouth who signed the agreement on the transfer of France's remaining powers and the complete withdrawal of French forces from Cambodia in November 1953.

' Of course, it was not only Penn Nouth, Lon Nol and Sihanouk. We were three patriots among many others who fought and worked for the same aims. Our Cambodian people also made great sacrifices and worked very hard. We also render homage to the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people, under the leadership of President Ho Chi Minh, who greatly weakened French colonialism and thus facilitated the success of my own activities in obtaining full independence for our country. Our Cambodian people have always loved and admired my elder brother, Penn Nouth — because he is a true patriot, an upright, honourable man who has never wavered on the question of independence and devotion to the people. That is why the elected representatives of the people, our members of parliament, have always

voted for Penn Nouth as prime minister.

'As for Lon Nol, I had entrusted him with the post of Commander-in-Chief of our armed forces. Premier Penn Nouth also had confidence in him. As Minister of National Defence, Lon Nol was responsible for national security. He was responsible for the armed forces and the state police. Lon Nol's recent plot, however, was not the first organized by the CIA against me. There was a whole series of plots because I was a neutralist who refused to give way to the Americans and who thus represented a danger to U.S. imperialism in South-east Asia. . . . With Lon Nol faithful to me, the army faithful to Lon Nol and the people behind us, we were able to thwart all their plots. . . . But this time they succeeded because they bought Lon Nol, my right arm. My right arm struck out at me before I could defend myself. . . .'

The reason for Lon Nol acting as he did is more complex than his having suddenly been bought up by the CIA. One could go back to 1952, when a moderately left-wing Democratic Party held such legislative powers as were available in those days of the French protectorate. On June 12 of that year the prime minister, Huy Kanthoul, announced the discovery of a plot to overthrow the government and of a cache of arms intended for the use of the plotters, who were headed by Lon Nol and Yem Sambour — the latter Lon Nol's foreign minister after the 1970 coup. Both were arrested but released by an intimidated Huy Kanthoul a few days later. That was the first indication of the sort of role Lon Nol hoped to play in an independent Cambodia. But he had to wait another eighteen years.

After the Geneva Agreements wrote into international law the attributes of independence which Sihanouk had wrung out of the French eight months earlier, new forces and trends appeared on the Cambodian horizon. Until 1954 there was practically no Cambodian working class — except for rubber plantation workers. There was also no indigenous capitalist class. Both classes started to emerge once independence had opened the way for economic development. There were two trends. That favoured by Sihanouk was the development of state enterprises. That favoured by Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, Yem Sambour and others was for private, capitalist enterprise. Sihanouk was for state enterprises because he correctly foresaw that private enterprise at that stage of Cambodia's development would have to depend on injections of foreign capital. It would mean that colonialism, thrown out by the front door, would return through the back entrance. With help from the socialist countries, a number of state enterprises were built — textile plants, a cement plant, paper mills, rubber processing industries and others.

Although the nationalized enterprises were nominally run for the

profit of the state, in fact they were run for the profit of elements of the Cambodian upper and privileged classes who competed for managerial jobs and the lucrative rake-offs of corruption which went with the jobs. State enterprises, even normally profitable ones like textile mills, always ended up with deficits, because what should have been profits went into the pockets of the managerial staff. It was something like bureaucratic capitalism in Kuomintang China. The people paid taxes to finance nominally state enterprises, the profits went into the pockets of bureaucrats who controlled and managed them. Production for the tax-paying consumers was the least of the worries of the privileged managerial staff. A bureaucratic capitalist class took its place as a new element in Cambodian society. But at least it was a national element and, objectively speaking, Sihanouk in defending the country's real independence, defended at the same time the interests of that class.

Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, Yem Sambour and the banker Song Sak, referred to in the previous chapter, favoured a comprador-type capitalism dependent on foreign capitalism. Their natural ally and purveyor of capital was the U.S.A. and thus they were headed on a collision course with Sihanouk's nationalist concepts. In all fairness it must be stated that Sihanouk's motive in opting for state enterprises as the main line of economic development was not to create lucrative jobs for corrupt officials. It was to push on with the economic development of the country in such a way as to avoid risks that the country's hard-won independence would be whittled away by foreign economic penetration. His policies brought benefits to the people and, in his way, he was fulfilling the tasks of the national, democratic revolution which orthodox, left-wing forces accepted as appropriate to that stage of Cambodia's social-economic development. There was a steady increase in living standards; there were irrigation projects for the peasants, and vastly improved public health and educational facilities at the disposal of their children.

Left-wing forces were in something of a dilemma, especially the Pracheachon (People's Party) — the Cambodian Communist Party which was formed after the Indochinese Communist Party was dissolved in 1951 and separate parties were set up in each of the three Indochinese states. They supported Sihanouk's policy of independence and neutrality and priority for state enterprises. But they also had their historic tasks of defending the interests of Cambodian workers. This brought them face to face with the problem of how far they should concede on questions of class interests in favour of national interests. The dilemma became the more acute as Sihanouk unquestionably waged a stubborn struggle against U.S. imperialism, and his

neutralism — after the war started in South Vietnam — represented a precious form of support for the struggle of the Vietnamese people.

Three sorts of antagonisms could be defined. (1) The people as a whole against the United States and its activities in the area. Progressive forces, including the Pracheachon, considered that the anti-U.S. struggle and the defence of Sihanouk's policy of neutrality and independence was the most important thing. (2) The working people against their employers — in state as well as in private enterprise. The Pracheachon was bound to defend working-class interests but not to the extent where this would weaken the main struggle to defend national independence. (3) Antagonisms within the ruling class, between the protagonists of national, bureaucratic capitalism and those supporting foreign-dominated, comprador capitalism. This latter antagonism, symbolized by Sihanouk on the one hand and Lon Nol and Sirik Matak on the other, was certainly not seen very clearly by Sihanouk at first. This was at least partly due to the feudal trappings of the past which, despite the fact that Sihanouk stepped down from the throne within a year of independence, had produced something approaching servility in relations between the Chief of State and his Cabinet. Lon Nol was one of those who scrupulously observed the outer form of such relationships, and used these, in fact, to mask his real feelings. Sihanouk revealed at his Peking Press conference that the National Assembly, presided over by Lon Nol, unanimously offered prayers for Sihanouk's health three days before it deposed him!

For progressives, the antagonisms within the ruling class were expressed in the fact that although they staunchly supported Sihanouk's policies of neutrality and independence and of developing the state sector of the economy — and Sihanouk welcomed this support — they were persecuted by Lon Nol, who was head of the armed forces and state police. Lon Nol was also particularly zealous in digging up evidence of 'subversive activities' by progressive intellectuals and deliberately creating a rift between them and Sihanouk. On one occasion, 'proof' of a left-wing plot against Sihanouk was supplied to Lon Nol via the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh to divert attention from a real CIA-hatched plot earlier the same year.

The policy of the Pracheachon Party, the leadership of which virtually went 'underground' after the formation of the Sangkum, was to support Sihanouk's policies but also to prepare for the possibility of his downfall. In discussions with some of their leading cadres in 1956, I learned that it was their belief that in the long run either Sihanouk would be forced to align himself with the Lon Nol policy or be eliminated. From that time on the Pracheachon and allied groups began to prepare for the latter eventuality.

As the country and its economy developed, so the antagonisms within the ruling class deepened, especially during those early years when the U.S.A. consciously fostered the growth of a pro-U.S. comprador capitalist class, by refusing aid for anything other than private enterprise. Antagonisms between the developing working class and their employers also deepened. By 1963 this had led to police repression against progressives whose activities had been too marked. Lon Nol had been very impressed by the military coup in Burma in 1962 in which his opposite number, General Ne Win, had seized power. Rumours were very strong in Phnom Penh in the months that followed that Lon Nol was contemplating the same sort of coup. Sihanouk got wind of this and produced a play in which Lon Nol played the role of a plotter against the monarchy. It was a device he was to employ several times when antagonisms within the ruling class showed signs of getting out of hand.

It was in 1963 that some progressive intellectuals started to disappear. Among the first were Son Sen, one of the principals of the Phnom Penh Teachers' Training College, and two professors, Ieng Sary and Salot Sar. They had all been marked down for special attention by Lon Nol's police. A year later their three wives disappeared. Ieng Sary's wife had been head-teacher at a Phnom Penh secondary school and was Cambodia's first graduate in English literature. The rumours in Phnom Penh were that first the husbands, then the wives had been arrested. In fact they were among the first to start organizing resistance bases in case they would later be necessary. By this time, apart from the threats of internal repression, there were external threats from the U.S.A., waging 'special war' in South Vietnam which threatened to spill across Cambodia's frontiers, and specific military threats against Cambodia from the Saigon and Bangkok régimes. The CIA-organized 'Khmer Serei' forces, based at that time mainly in South Vietnam, were actively and openly working for the overthrow of Sihanouk.

This was a period when Sihanouk displayed great skill in what was often referred to as his diplomatic 'balancing act', aimed at preserving Cambodian neutrality at all costs and keeping the country as an 'oasis of peace' in a war-torn South-east Asia. He strengthened Cambodia's relations with the socialist world, including the establishment of friendly relations with Hanoi. To offset this 'opening to the Left' he also strengthened relations with capitalist France, which shared Sihanouk's interest in curbing U.S. incursions into what France considered her own share of interests in Indochina. By 1965, when the U.S.A. committed its combat troops to South Vietnam and started the bombing of the North, Sihanouk had taken a clear position in condemning U.S.

aggression in Vietnam, and had established unofficial relations with the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. Sihanouk knew enough about his country's history to understand that friendly relations with Vietnam were essential for Cambodia's survival and he quickly recognized that there were two kinds of Vietnam. There was an aggressive, expansionist Vietnam based in Saigon which would pursue a traditional policy of hostility towards Cambodia, and a progressive, friendly Vietnam based in Hanoi and at the NFL headquarters in the South, with which Cambodia could live in mutually friendly relations.

By May 1965 diplomatic relations with the U.S.A. had been severed and relations with the NFL became closer than ever. Sihanouk's great worry was to keep the war from overflowing into Cambodian territory. Cambodia, the NFL and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam all had an interest in preventing this. Cambodian neutrality — if only the denial of the country to the Americans for military bases — was precious enough support for the NFL in its titanic confrontation with the U.S.A. Progressive forces inside the country gave all-out support to Sihanouk at this time. It coincided with important decrees nationalizing the banks and the import–export trade to weaken the basis of America's natural allies among the comprador-type capitalists. This provoked the start of serious plotting by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. If Lon Nol had been impressed by General Ne Win's 1962 coup in Burma, he was doubly and trebly impressed by General Suharto's October 1965 coup in Indonesia.

When banker Song Sak fled from Phnom Penh with 400 million riels (the equivalent of over ten million dollars at official exchange rates), the U.S.A. lost the head of its CIA organization in Cambodia. Part of his activities, discovered immediately after his flight, was the organization of a network of local CIA agents, lavishly paid from a fund especially established by the CIA in his bank. His anti-state financial manipulations and sabotage of the state-controlled enterprises were discovered by Son Sann, then manager of Cambodia's National Bank. He informed Sihanouk who immediately ordered Song Sak's arrest. But through connivance with his closest associate, Sirik Matak, the banker made good his escape and went off to become openly what he had been all the time — one of the top three leaders of the ' Khmer Serei '.

' Song Sak tried to buy up those who behaved honestly in the administration,' Sihanouk said at his Peking Press conference. ' He tried to open the gates for U.S. imperialism. He had inexhaustible funds and at the time we could not understand from where they came. Later we had indisputable proof that they came from the CIA.'

Not long after Song Sak's flight, Sirik Matak, then ambassador to Peking, asked Sihanouk to transfer him somewhere else — he was ' bored to death ' in Peking. He asked specifically to be posted to Japan. Sihanouk agreed, and after a period in Phnom Penh he went to Tokyo as ambassador, resumed his ties with Song Sak and re-established links with the CIA which had been interrupted by Song Sak's abrupt flight. In referring to the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak plot, Sihanouk said :

' The Americans succeeded because they bought up Lon Nol. This was possible because his *eminence grise*, Sirik Matak, had long flirted with the U.S.A., starting from the time [1966] when he became ambassador to Japan. He prepared the plot from that time, working out the details with the CIA in Tokyo and later when he was posted as our ambassador to Manila. I do not say the Japanese and the Philippine governments were involved. It was the U.S.A., SEATO and the CIA. . . .' Sihanouk went on to explain that as Sirik Matak considered himself a claimant to the throne, he had always been hostile : ' He could never tolerate me, but he was a childhood friend of Lon Nol. He never co-operated with the Government or any National Assembly, except the last one. Later he simply became a U.S. agent.'

It seems clear that by the carefully prepared plot to overthrow Sihanouk and all he stood for, the CIA wanted to avoid the cruder sort of Latin-American-type coups they had fomented in Laos — and had at first experimented with in Cambodia. Some more ' constitutional ' methods had to be found. Cambodia was too much in the public eye, Sihanouk's neutralism had won too much international acceptance and was too firmly supported inside the country for a straight-out military coup.

On September 11, 1966, there were general elections for the sixth Legislature since independence. The results of these elections provided the ' constitutional ' framework within which the coup could be organized. Sihanouk explained at his Peking Press conference that as the Sangkum was a fusion of political parties of all tendencies, he, as Sangkum president, in consultation with other leaders chose candidates to maintain a careful balance within the National Assembly between left, right and centre tendencies. ' In this way we could preserve a balance between the various tendencies and maintain stability. But for the last elections I fell into a CIA trap. The latter financed a monstrous press campaign against my so-called " dictatorship ", denouncing the " single-party system ", accusing me of having " massacred democracy in Cambodia ". We decided not to propose candidates from the top for the 1966 elections, but to permit a " free

for all ". The result was confusion. There were sometimes twenty or thirty candidates for each seat. People had no idea whom to choose. The richest of the bourgeoisie, the natural allies of the U.S.A., spent money like water in financing electoral campaigns by ultra-rightist, reactionary candidates. Voters received textiles, medicines, free cinema tickets, toys and sweets for their children from these ultra-rightists. Lon Nol used the army and police to intimidate the voters. The people had no way of distinguishing between real and spurious patriots. The result was that only three authentic patriots were elected for the ninety-two seats contested. But a campaign was organized even against these three, and not long afterwards they left for resistance bases in the countryside. . . .'

Lon Nol was appointed prime minister of the government which emerged from this ultra-right-wing Assembly. Within six months there were serious incidents involving armed suppression of peasants in Battambang province and Lon Nol had ' discovered ' a left-wing plot to overthrow the government. In fact what happened was a deliberate provocation organized by Lon Nol to provide the background for a Suharto-type coup. Over the years, hundreds of families in Battambang province had carved farms out of virgin land, gradually transforming what had been dense jungle into flourishing fields. Traditionally, in Cambodia, those who clear and cultivate common lands are automatically the owners. In early 1967 Lon Nol's troops arrived and started evicting the peasants, producing papers to show that the land belonged to high-ranking government officials. In fact Lon Nol's aim was to rent the farms out to former ' Khmer Serei ' troops who were supposed to have ' rallied ' to the government. It was a strategic area close to the Thai frontier, over the other side of which were the main body of the ' Khmer Serei ' and their CIA-run operational bases.

To protest against the evictions there were mass demonstrations in Battambang city in which Vietnamese and Chinese residents took part, thus giving Lon Nol the pretext to claim that ' Vietminh ' and ' Maoist ' Chinese were responsible. At the beginning of all this Sihanouk was in France for medical attention and Lon Nol sent alarmist reports of a country about to explode in violent revolution. His troops continued evicting the peasants, confiscating the arms normally possessed by peasants in that region as protection against wild animals in the jungle.

Sihanouk returned from France to face, for the first time in his career, a hostile demonstration demanding the resignation of the government, dissolution of the right-wing Assembly and new elections. The press campaign against the three left-wing deputies was stepped up. They were accused of being ' Vietcong ' and ' Maoist ' agents.

It is difficult to know how things would have developed if Lon Nol had not had a most providential accident at that time. A jeep driven by Lon Nol's long-time rival at the Defence Ministry and chief of the armed forces, General Nhiek Tioulong, overturned on a steep embankment, pinning Lon Nol underneath. The driver escaped injury but Lon Nol was sufficiently incapacitated to take him out of circulation for many weeks. But the process he had set in motion in Battambang continued to develop. In April 1967 some peasants attacked a military post to recover arms that had been seized from them — then disappeared into the forest. A regular military campaign was launched against them, including the use of planes to bomb their jungle hideouts.

Lon Nol resigned at the end of April, ostensibly because of his injuries but more likely because Sihanouk was alarmed by the situation that had developed during the six months in which Lon Nol had been at the helm. Sihanouk appointed a government of ' technicians ' chosen outside the National Assembly, including a few progressives. It caused a sensation in Phnom Penh when it became known that at first two of the left-wing deputies, and then the third, had disappeared. These were the economists Khieu Samphan and Hou Youn and the lawyer Hu Nim, all three of them outstanding intellectuals, each holding a doctorate in his respective speciality. The rumour in Phnom Penh at the time was that they had been arrested, probably killed. In fact, as with the three teachers four years earlier, they had withdrawn into the protection of resistance bases, already well prepared to receive them. This started a movement of literally thousands of young people, many of them students, into the resistance bases in the Elephant mountains in the south, the Cardamomes in the west and the areas around the frontier with South Vietnam in the north-east. From that time on — in late 1967 — there were almost daily communiqués about clashes between the ' Khmers Rouges ' and the forces of ' law and order ' in widely separated parts of the country. The ' Khmers Rouges ' did not launch offensive actions, but they defended themselves and consolidated their bases.

Throughout 1968, things moved along uneasily with Sihanouk gradually withdrawing from effective control of State affairs. In the U.S.A., Nixon replaced President Johnson at the White House in January 1969, and soon produced his own version of ' disengagement ' with the magic formula of the ' Vietnamization ' of the war. The Lon Nol–Sirik Matak group was delighted with this turn of events because it meant in effect that the U.S.A. would not be pulling out of Vietnam after all. Nixon was refusing to concede defeat. Prospects of a nationalist and neutralist coalition government in Saigon,

which had loomed up over the horizon at the Paris peace talks, had now receded. The Lon Nol–Sirik Matak group began to recover from their shocked surprise at the weakness the U.S.–Saigon forces had displayed during the NFL's 1968 Têt offensive. With Nixon, 'Vietnamization', an indefinite continuation of the war and the maintenance of the Thieu–Ky régime in Saigon, they could push their own pro-American, anti-neutralist policies more openly.

Nixon's advisers had persuaded him that the full success of 'Vietnamization' hinged on weakening the NFL sufficiently by striking at their frontier bases to ensure there would be no 'come-back' during the American limited withdrawal. Stable pro-Western régimes, which would not be shaken by the reduced U.S. military presence in South Vietnam, must be installed in the 'perimeter countries', Laos and Cambodia. Such régimes would certainly co-operate with the U.S.–Saigon Command in sealing off the Cambodian and Laotian frontiers with South Vietnam. The massive use of U.S. air- and fire-power could take care of the thirty-mile gateway from North Vietnam along the Demilitarized Zone. With South Vietnam hermetically sealed off from all supply routes, the Thieu–Ky troops, with U.S. air and artillery support, could easily mop up the rest of the NFL forces inside the country.

The attempt to seal off the frontier with Laos was made in September 1969 by a surprise attack against the Plain of Jars — described in detail in another chapter. Getting rid of Sihanouk was the essential precondition to sealing off the Cambodian frontiers.

In August 1969 the ailing, sixty-four-year-old Penn Nouth, who had been in charge of a caretaker government, had to resign for reasons of serious ill-health. Sihanouk named Lon Nol to replace him and the latter chose Sirik Matak as his deputy premier and also entrusted him with the Ministries of the Interior, Security, National Education and Religious Affairs — the latter very important because of the vital role the Buddhist hierarchy plays in Cambodian public life. The following month Lon Nol left for France for 'health reasons', leaving the field clear for Sirik Matak as acting prime minister. In the meantime, in June that year, diplomatic relations had been resumed with the U.S.A. The stage was now set and the principal actors on the spot for the last act, the overthrow of Sihanouk and his brand of neutralism, a major aim of U.S. policy towards Cambodia for the previous fifteen years.

At the end of the year, the National Assembly, at Sirik Matak's initiative, annulled various measures of State control over banking and foreign trade, in favour of a 'liberalization' of the economy to make the country more 'attractive' to foreign investors. Sihanouk vigorously opposed these measures but failed to get National Assembly support.

Four ministers, loyal to him, resigned. According to Cambodian parliamentary practice, this should have been enough to bring down the government. Sirik Matak showed no intention of standing down, and his position was reinforced because Lon Nol was out of the country. Sihanouk then urged that the resignation of the four ministers be held in abeyance until Lon Nol's return. But within a few hours Sirik Matak announced in a press communiqué that he had accepted the resignations. This was the first official action of defiance against the Chief of State. It was in fact a carefully staged mini-coup by the comprador capitalists.

Sihanouk's riposte was to call a National Congress of Sangkum, a device he often employed when he wanted to speak directly to the people and to obtain popular support for his policies. Delegates to the National Congress from all over the country approved his position. Satisfied with this moral victory, Sihanouk, together with his wife, elder statesman Penn Nouth and a few other close collaborators, left for medical treatment in France, arriving there on January 10, 1970. It seems that his intention was to let Sirik Matak 'stew in his own juice' for a while, then to make a leisurely return journey via Paris, Moscow and Peking, returning home with offers of political and economic support from Cambodia's traditional friends, France, the U.S.S.R. and People's China. Lon Nol came to Rome, where Sihanouk had made a brief stop-over, to pay his respects and renew assurances of his eternal fidelity.

I visited Phnom Penh during the first half of February 1970, by which time the anti-Vietnamese attacks in certain of the newspapers — said to be receiving generous U.S. subsidies — had reached explosive proportions. They were in sharp contradiction to the officially proclaimed policy of friendship to North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, both of which by then had embassies in Phnom Penh. The press attacks were paralleled by a whispering campaign launched by some pro-U.S. embassies, recalling historic quarrels between Cambodia and Vietnam and the imperative necessity for Vietnam to push outwards into under-populated countries like Cambodia, etc. The whispering campaign had in fact started in June 1969, just prior to the official visit of Huynh Tan Phat, the prime minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and had intensified month by month since then.

Another significant aspect was that attacks by the U.S.–Saigon armed forces against Cambodian frontier villages had been very much increased since the Nixon administration had taken over. Among the more serious violations were chemical warfare attacks against Cambodian rubber plantations — one-third of which were affected by a

systematic attack spread over several days in April 1969. Another was the shelling of Dak Dam village on November 16–17, 1969, in which twenty-five Cambodians were killed and ten wounded, one of the most serious incidents that had ever taken place. (The U.S. government later offered 400 dollars compensation to the next-of-kin of those killed!)

One high-ranking Cambodian official whom I met in February 1970 said: 'Some people think all this is part of a stick-and-carrot treatment. In fact all we are getting so far is the big stick.' But he went on to say that a 'carrot' was being promised only when Cambodia had given proof by deeds and not words that there was a real change of heart towards the U.S.A. World Bank officials arrived during my February visit and I talked with some of them. But they showed an elaborate lack of interest in any immediate aid projects. My impression was that they were there to reinforce the U.S. Embassy attitude that concrete evidence of a 'change of heart' was needed before World Bank money would be available.

It is in this context that the 'spontaneous' demonstrations and sacking of the DRV and PRG embassies on March 11 have to be seen. It was significant, too, that the slogans were posted up in English; that Western correspondents — normally banned from Cambodia — were on hand and the embassy sackings were so beautifully filmed that 'it looked more like a movie than a documentary', as one top English TV executive remarked to me later. The sacking of the embassies has to be seen also as an organic part of the plot to depose Prince Sihanouk. It was all written into the one scenario, with timing that does credit to the stage managers. The sackings took place just twenty-four hours after Sihanouk's announcement that Premier Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam would pay a state visit to Cambodia and a few hours before the Head of State was to fly off to Moscow. His actual overthrow took place a few hours before he was due to leave Moscow for Peking as the last stop on the way home.

The noise about 'North Vietnamese and Vietcong' troops was an important element in the scenario which Sihanouk denounced as a diversionary manoeuvre to cover up the real intentions of the plotters. Sihanouk knew, the Cambodian people knew and, above all, General Lon Nol as former Defence Minister knew, that any NFL troops which overflowed into the frontier areas from time to time came not with any hostile intent towards Cambodia, but in the course of their fight against U.S. aggression. Their target was Saigon, not Phnom Penh.

During the 1969–70 session of the U.N. General Assembly, Cambodia's delegate, Huot Sambath — who later declared himself for

Sihanouk — presented a list of 7,000 violations committed by U.S.–Saigon forces between 1962 and the end of 1969, resulting in more than 300 Cambodians killed and 700-odd wounded. There had never been any casualties due to the actions or presence of Vietnamese resistance forces in the frontier areas.

There had been many scores of International Control Commission investigations into U.S.–Saigon frontier violations, especially in the so-called 'Parrot's Beak' area, but despite the most assiduous efforts of the Canadian member no evidence was ever found of any NFL presence to 'justify' such violations and massacres of Cambodian villagers in the frontier areas. It was always exclusively Cambodians and not Vietnamese who were the victims. The synthetic indignation worked up over 'North Vietnamese' and NFL presence on Cambodian soil was essential both as an ingredient of the pretext to overthrow Sihanouk and for the new Lon Nol–Sirik Matak régime to 'prove by deeds a change of heart'.

Sihanouk and Lon Nol, as Defence Minister, both understood at the time that, when Cambodia was seriously threatened by simultaneous invasions from South Vietnam and Thailand, with 'Khmer Serei' units ready to follow on the heels of the invaders, it was the fact that the NFL controlled the main part of South Vietnam's frontiers with Cambodia that enabled Lon Nol to concentrate his troops on the Thai frontier and counter the invasion threat. For a long period it was the NFL that protected Cambodia's eastern frontiers. It was the NFL also who made things so hot for the 'Khmer Serei' in South Vietnam that they had to abandon their bases there and move into Thailand. (In early 1964, I personally handed Prince Sihanouk, as a gift from Nguyen Huu Tho, president of the NFL, a collection of training manuals and operational plans of the 'Khmer Serei' after the NFL had overrun their main base in South Vietnam during my visit to the NFL areas.)

There was certainly nothing in Cambodia even remotely resembling the situation in Morocco and Tunisia during the Algerian resistance war, when the Algerian FLN openly had operational bases, training grounds, supply depots and routes through to Algeria and a large part of their regular army stationed in the two neighbouring countries. When the French bombed the Tunisian village of Sakkiet Sidi Youssef, because of FLN presence there, there was a tremendous international outcry. The U.S. solemnly sent its Under-Secretary of State, Robert Murphy, to investigate and contribute to the outburst of official international indignation. But 7,000 U.S. violations of Cambodian villages and a monthly tonnage of U.S. bombs on Laos exceeding the monthly average dropped on Europe during World

War II, because of suspected trails that might transit up to twelve tons of supplies daily, passed almost uncommented on in the world Press. There seems to be ' one law for the rich and one for the poor ' even amongst the colonialist powers.

The principal pretext advanced by Lon Nol at the fateful session of the National Assembly on March 18, 1970, for the removal of the Chief of State from his post was that he had tolerated the presence of ' North Vietnamese and Vietcong ' troops on Cambodian territory. National Assembly members had little choice as to how to vote. Each was handed three ballot papers — blue for a ' yes ' vote, white for ' no ' and a criss-crossed one for ' no opinion '. Deputies were warned that they must sign the ballots, otherwise they would be invalid! The vote was unanimous. As a replacement, the president of the National Assembly, Cheng Heng, appointed at Lon Nol's insistence some months previously, became Chief of State. At his Peking Press conference, Sihanouk described him as a ' poor devil ' whose main public function had been as the director of Phnom Penh's central prison.

With the destitution of Sihanouk as Head of State, a whole era in Cambodia had come to an end. The question in everyone's mind was — what next? Apparently the Americans and some U.S. allies were quite convinced that Sihanouk would accept the blow philosophically and retire, like Bao Dai,[1] to a villa in the South of France — which the French government quickly assured him would be available. The Cambodian people would accept the new régime at its face value and any unrest would quickly be diverted into racial outbursts against the Vietnamese and indignation against Sihanouk and the royal family, based on a high-pressure slander campaign. (Within the next few days, psychological warfare ' experts ' had arrived from Indonesia to advise on how to whip up anti-Vietnamese, anti-Communist, anti-Sihanouk campaigns.)

There was a fascinating paragraph in the ' Periscope ' column of the May 27, 1970, issue of *Newsweek*: ' A team of Cambodian officers secretly visited Indonesia last November and again in January to study in depth how the Indonesian Army managed to overthrow President Sukarno. This, some Indonesians say, gave Djakarta advance knowledge of Cambodian General Lon Nol's coup against Prince Norodom Sihanouk last March. It also helps explain Indonesia's prompt offer to send arms to Lon Nol.'

Those, however, who calculated that Norodom Sihanouk would passively accept the *fait accompli* of his overthrow woefully underestimated the character of Sihanouk and the qualities of the Cambodian people.

[1] The ex-Monarch of Vietnam under the Japanese and French who retired to the French Riviera in 1955, after being deposed by the pro-U.S. dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem, of South Vietnam.

4. Sihanouk fights back

In a car on the way to Moscow airport for a plane that was to take him to Peking, Sihanouk learned from Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin that he had been deposed. Members of his entourage knew of it some hours earlier but could not decide how to break the news. It came as a complete shock. There had been no warning at all. But Sihanouk's reaction was immediate — and predictable to those who really knew him. He would fight back. On the plane to Peking he was already planning the counter-attack. On arrival, he was immediately assured of Chinese support by his old friend Chou En Lai who met him at the airport. A few days later he received the same assurances from Premier Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam, who made a special and at that time secret visit to Peking for the purpose. By March 23, Sihanouk had formulated a five-point proclamation which will remain an historic landmark in Sihanouk's own evolution and the opening of a new chapter of Cambodian history. In his capacity as Head of State, Sihanouk:

> Accused the Lon Nol régime of high treason and decreed its dissolution.
>
> Announced that a Government of National Union would be formed.
>
> Called for the setting up of a consultative assembly formed from the broadest sections of the community, englobing 'all patriotic progressive and anti-imperialist tendencies'.
>
> Called for the creation of a National Liberation Army to fight against U.S. imperialism and its agents inside the country.
>
> Called for the creation of a National United Front for the liberation of the country and to handle the tasks of reconstruction after victory was won.

He appealed to his compatriots to make their choice and to rise up and overthrow the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak régime.

Things began to move rapidly after that — more rapidly than Sihanouk could have imagined at the time of the coup. The vitally important factor was that progressive intellectuals immediately responded to his appeal. It had been broadcast over Peking and Hanoi radio, monitored and recorded on tape inside Cambodia and rebroadcast from thousands of loudspeakers all over the country. The effect of Sihanouk's voice — and on such a subject — was electric. Lon Nol had nothing with which to counter. He had prepared the military side of his coup, and the political intrigue which accompanied it, most carefully. But he had done nothing to prepare public opinion. His slander campaign against Sihanouk's private life could not have moved people less. They were interested in basic questions of peace and war, independence or foreign invasions.

Within twenty-four hours, there was a joint declaration of support from the three missing left-wing deputies, Hou Youn, Hu Nim and Khieu Samphan — the first news of them for almost three years. The fact that these outstanding intellectuals, pioneers of the resistance struggle within the country with high prices on their heads, offered all-out support to Sihanouk had a galvanizing effect on progressives inside and outside the country. The three of them had suffered greatly during the previous four years. But they showed their maturity in deciding that it was policies and not personalities that counted. Sihanouk had laid down a correct line — they were prepared to forget the past, accept that line for the present and fight for the future. In their analysis of the situation, contained in their statement of support, they made it clear that Sihanouk's appeal corresponded precisely to the new phase of the national democratic revolution. It was one which even the most orthodox of left-wing progressives could support — as they did.

'We unreservedly support the March 23 declaration made in Peking by the Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk,' the deputies' declaration states. 'We appeal to all our compatriots in the towns as in the countryside not to enrol as cannon fodder in the army or police of the American imperialists and those national traitors, Lon Nol and Sirik Matak; not to pay them any taxes or respect their barbarous laws; to unite sincerely and closely in the Cambodian National United Front; to organize guerilla units and armed forces to fight against and overthrow their régime and set up honest administration at hamlet, village, district and provincial level. . . .' The deputies appealed to soldiers and civil servants to support the people in their struggle and to join the ranks of the resistance forces. They referred to the broad international support the resistance movement was bound to receive 'especially from the Vietnamese and Laotian people' in their struggle for national liberation.

When did any resistance movement get off to a more auspicious start? There was unity over a broad spectrum from peasants and workers to the monarchy. Resistance bases were already formed — six main ones dominating all key areas of the country. The embryo of a

liberation army already existed and leaders tempered by three years of underground struggle — plus veterans of the anti-Japanese and anti-French resistance. Arms in abundance were available immediately after Sihanouk's appeal.

Before then, the NFL of South Vietnam had not supplied arms to the 'Khmers Rouges' resistance fighters — although they had abundant stocks in the frontier areas. They did not want to do anything which could endanger Sihanouk's neutrality. They loyally respected agreements on non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Once the 'Khmers Rouges' had gone over to armed resistance in 1967 they were in fact something of an embarrassment to the NFL. The latter could not appeal to them to call off their own struggle in the higher interest of aiding the NFL to defeat U.S. imperialism. But it was so easy for Lon Nol to persuade Sihanouk — as he did at one period — that it was the 'Vietcong' who were behind the 'Khmers Rouges', that it became a very delicate problem to handle. Fortunately the main bases and main scene of armed clashes were remote from the border areas of South Vietnam. To the best of my knowledge the only help given the Cambodian resistance fighters was occasionally when a group was hard-pressed by Lon Nol's troops in the frontier areas and they would be allowed to slip through NFL positions to be passed back onto Cambodian territory as soon as possible — perhaps in some other sector.

With Sihanouk's appeal the situation was transformed. He called for a 'struggle waged in common with other anti-imperialist, peoples' forces of fraternal countries . . .'. If the Americans were somewhat disappointed that many of the arms caches uncovered during their invasion of Cambodian territory were empty, they should have looked for the missing ones in the hands of tens of thousands of Cambodian resistance fighters, to whom they had been distributed in the very first days following Sihanouk's appeal for armed struggle.

There were large-scale spontaneous uprisings immediately after Sihanouk's appeal. Although Lon Nol tried to pretend these were launched by the 'Vietnamese' and instigated a series of savage massacres against the Vietnamese community which shocked the whole world, journalists on the spot confirmed that it was Cambodians and not Vietnamese who turned out in massive demonstrations against the régime; that it was Cambodians and not Vietnamese whose corpses choked the roads and whose wounded filled the provincial hospitals. Hundreds of people were killed between March 26 and 28 along the road leading from Cambodia's third largest town of Kompong Cham to the capital, many of them shot down in the outskirts of Phnom Penh itself. Referring to the Kompong Cham incidents, the *Le Monde*

correspondent J. C. Pomonti wrote:

'The demonstrators (about three thousand according to an eyewitness) were spread all over town and along the road, stopping vehicles and painting "Long Live Sihanouk" on the doors and distributing the Prince's portrait to the drivers. After that, and in circumstances not precisely known, a convoy of about fifty trucks and cars, overflowing with demonstrators, including a lot of students and high school pupils, formed up and set out for Phnom Penh, about sixty miles to the south. At Koki, about twelve miles to the west of the capital, incidents had taken place on the Thursday night and early Friday morning. According to a Cambodian parachute officer, a lot of Vietnamese "disguised as peasants with a few arms" had infiltrated villages of the area. . . .' The report refers to 'peasants armed with knives' who attacked a government office in Takeo province, burning all the files they could lay their hands on, and Pomonti quotes a local official as saying that he was having great difficulty in 'explaining things to the peasants . . .'. He referred to armed clashes at the approach of a bridge less than a mile from the centre of Phnom Penh and at road junctions on the outskirts of the city. All these demonstrations were by Cambodians, not Vietnamese. Pomonti quotes the Takeo official as saying: 'In my district there are very few Vietnamese and they are very careful not to budge. . . .'[1]

'This is Sihanouk country, its people fanatically loyal to the prince who was deposed as chief of state ten days ago,' reported Jack Foisie of the *Los Angeles Times*[2] from Kompong Cham on March 30. 'Mobs beat and stomped to death two representatives of the National Assembly who returned here to explain to their constituents why they had voted to oust Norodom Sihanouk. In retaliation, army troops rode into town and shot into a crowd Friday morning, killing twenty-six persons — by the provincial governor's count — and wounding sixty-two. . . . The province . . . appeared to be in turmoil.

'Villagers stuck pictures of Sihanouk in our face and asked in guttural French if we were for him. They backed up their fury with machetes, sharp farm tools and clubs. A few were armed with French and Czech rifles. We nodded our assent and they pounded our backs and whooped us on our way.

'The provincial governor, Tian Kien Chieng, put the number of "misguided" Cambodians in his area at between 20,000 and 40,000, mostly peasants who he said had come under the influence of North Vietnamese or Cambodian Communist agents. . . .' Foisie quoted the governor as saying that the demonstrators 'wanted the dissolution of the National Assembly and the restoration of Prince Sihanouk . . .'. Previously, resistance leader Hu Nim had been the deputy for

Kompong Cham province, re-elected in 1966 despite the right-wing pressures and corruption of voters.

These were genuine, spontaneous uprisings of the Cambodian people. Journalists on the spot tended to report only those that took place in the provinces adjacent to Phnom Penh, especially in the sensitive areas between the capital and the South Vietnamese frontier. But in fact they took place all over the country. After several hundred peasants had been slaughtered in Kompong Cham, Takeo, Svay Rieng, Kandal and other provinces in the great wave of spontaneous demonstrations at the end of March, Sihanouk advised against such unarmed actions in favour of organized armed resistance. Thousands of villagers who had fled into the jungle looking for resistance leaders were contacted, given arms and advised to return to their villages and set up resistance organizations, including elected committees and self-defence guerilla units.

Thousands of Lon Nol's troops either joined the resistance forces or handed over their arms to the resistance and returned to their native villages. In numerous cases they simply piled up their arms in their barracks and sent word to local resistance leaders to come and collect. In the Battambang area in the west, an old resistance cadre heard Sihanouk's appeal and, without awaiting further instructions, he went to talk things over with a company of Lon Nol's troops in his area. The upshot was they followed him into the jungle, where they set up an important resistance base, reinforced a few days later by groups of students from Battambang University. At Siem Reap, near the famous Angkor ruins, students also left *en masse* for the nearest resistance base. Lon Nol's army and administration showed signs of collapsing everywhere, except in the capital itself where the régime could concentrate sufficient armed strength to stabilize the situation temporarily. But the army had no stomach for a fight.

At the Neak Luong ferry crossing on the Mekong — sixty miles east of Phnom Penh — the resistance fired a few shots and the defending battalion fled to a Buddhist pagoda, with the resistance forces in pursuit. Bonzes in the pagoda persuaded the troops to lay down their arms and leave — which they did. This was how the ferry crossing was captured. (It was recaptured later by Saigon naval-borne troops with U.S. air support.) Of Lon Nol's original fifty battalions, ten had simply dispersed during the first month of action, ten more had been wiped out, had surrendered or had crossed over voluntarily to the resistance forces, another nine were tied down on fixed guard duty. Another thirty-five battalions of green recruits were formed from bewildered students and others and acted mainly as arms suppliers to the resistance forces. By the end of the first six weeks, the original

six resistance bases had linked up and a regular Liberation Army had been organized at battalion strength with better arms, weapon for weapon, than those of Lon Nol's troops. They were supplemented by regional troops at company level and self-defence guerillas in more than a hundred villages, both of which were armed as well as Lon Nol's troops — and indeed with the latter's weapons. It was the troops of the Cambodian Liberation Army — not 'Vietcong' and 'North Vietnamese' — that had liberated most of Cambodia by the time Nixon decided to strike across the frontiers with U.S. troops and send Saigon forces on an operation of the most flagrant aggression to try to wrest back control of Cambodian towns and villages from Cambodian patriots.

The shock troops used by Lon Nol in the very first days after the takeover, and for the massacres of Cambodian peasants and unarmed Vietnamese prisoners, were from the CIA private army of 'Khmer Serei'. During 1969, there were mysterious large-scale defections of whole companies and even battalions of Thailand-based 'Khmer Serei' mercenaries to the Cambodian government. In one day, 700 crossed the border from Thailand and gave themselves up. Credit for these 'defections' was given to Lon Nol. The 'deserters' were given cash rewards and settled on the land in strategic frontier areas. Phnom Penh sources maintain that they were re-formed into units, armed and secretly brought to the capital on the eve of the coup. Their numbers were swelled by hundreds of others, detained in prison and released by Lon Nol within a few days of the coup. Trained killers, with no ties at all with the country or people to restrain them, they had been recruited from among the Khmer minority in South Vietnam. Rapists and looters, they sowed terror wherever they appeared. The Lon Nol–Sirik Matak coup was the day for which they had been trained, and they performed the same role for the CIA as the Vang Pao mercenaries had in Laos.

On April 24 and 25, 1970, a 'Summit Conference of the Indochinese Peoples' was held 'in a locality of the Laos–Vietnam–China border area . . .'. The Cambodian delegation was headed by Prince Sihanouk; the Laotian delegation by Prince Souphanouvong, president of the Lao Patriotic Front; the South Vietnamese delegation by Nguyen Huu Tho, president of the NFL of South Vietnam; and the North Vietnamese delegation by Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. The essence of the agreement reached dealt with the current tasks of uniting to fight an expanded war in Indochina; it defined the principles of applying this unity and the basis of future relations between the various components. It is a wise and moderate document which affirms that the fundamental positions of the three peoples have not

been modified because of the extension of the war. Thus:

'The Cambodian, Lao and South Vietnamese parties affirm that their combat objectives are independence, peace, neutrality, the prohibition of the presence of all foreign troops or military bases on their soil, non-participation in any military alliance, prohibition of the use of their territories by any foreign country for the purposes of aggression against other countries. . . . The people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam fully respect these legitimate aspirations and unreservedly support the struggle for these lofty objectives. . . .'

In other words, despite the greatly changed situation, neutrality remains the goal, with all the implications for an autonomous South Vietnam as a partner in a neutral zone together with Laos and Cambodia.

The principle of the autonomy of each of the components — even while co-operating in military affairs — is clearly stressed in a passage which states: 'Proceeding from the principle that the liberation and the defence of each country are the business of each people, the various parties pledge to do all they can to give one another reciprocal support according to the desire of the party concerned and on the basis of mutual respect. . . .' There is a further reference to 'mutual support in the struggle against the common enemy and to lasting future co-operation in the building of each country according to its own way . . .'. And: 'The parties affirm that all problems arising in the relations between the three countries can be solved through negotiations in a spirit of mutual respect, mutual understanding and mutual assistance. . . .'

There is no mention of setting up a joint military command, which might have been expected, but there is provision for future meetings at summit level when the occasion requires. It is also noted that the situation for a common struggle is 'more favourable than ever' and that the Indochinese people 'have forged an indestructible solidarity; moreover, as never before they possess considerable forces . . .'.

Chou En Lai, who presumably acted as 'host' to the conference, gave a banquet after the closing session at which he said, among other things: 'The international situation is excellent. Under the heavy blows of the three Indochinese peoples and the people of the rest of the world, U.S. imperialism is beset with difficulties both at home and abroad. Driven into an impasse they find the going tougher and tougher. . . .' Paraphrasing a quotation from Mao Tse Tung at the beginning of the war in Vietnam, Premier Chou said: 'The seven hundred million Chinese people will provide powerful backing for the three Indochinese peoples and the vast expanse of China's territory is their reliable rear area. The three fraternal Indochinese peoples may

rest assured that in the common struggle against U.S. imperialism, the Chinese people will always stand at their side. Together we unite, together we fight and together we will win.'

Rarely in recent years has any Chinese leader made such a specific statement on such an issue. It was a forerunner to one made by Chairman Mao Tse Tung on May 20, 1970, in which he warmly supported:

> '. . . the militant spirit of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodian Head of State, against U.S. imperialism and its lackeys . . .
>
> '. . . the joint declaration of the "summit" conference of the Peoples of Indochina . . .
>
> '. . . the establishment of the Royal Government of National Union . . .'

and promised:

> '. . . that the Chinese people would firmly support the three peoples of Indochina and other peoples of the world in their revolutionary struggles against American imperialism and its lackeys . . .'

It was only the seventh declaration on international affairs by Chairman Mao Tse Tung in seven years — a sufficient comment on the importance China attaches to the rape of Cambodia and the war in Indochina.

(On May 4, underlining a similar concern on the part of the Soviet Union, Premier Alexei Kosygin had held his first Press conference in six years as prime minister, in which he warned the U.S.A. of the consequences of its aggression against Cambodia and launched an urgent appeal for the 'unity of all peace-loving forces' to halt the aggression. In the harshest language ever used from Moscow against a president of the United States since World War II, the Soviet government declaration read by Premier Kosygin warned Nixon that the Soviet government would 'draw the appropriate conclusions' in its own future policy towards the United States. In the light of the aggression against Cambodia and the 'flagrant divorce between the declarations and assurances of President Nixon and his deeds in the field of foreign policy', Kosygin asked: 'What is the value of international agreements to which the United States is, or intends to be, a party if it so unceremoniously violates its obligations?' In replying to questions Kosygin estimated that the Summit Conference of the Peoples of Indochina represented a 'factor of unity' in the fight

against U.S. aggression.)

The summit conference, and the clearly defined future roles of the participants, cleared the way for a National Congress of the Cambodian people held at the beginning of May in Peking. Delegates were those appointed by the leadership of the resistance in Cambodia in consultation with patriotic Cambodians abroad, including of course Sihanouk in Peking. It was this Congress which drew up the Political Programme of the Cambodian National United Front, confirmed Sihanouk as president, chose an eleven-member Political Bureau for the NUF and appointed a Royal Government of National Union, with Penn Nouth as prime minister.

There was considerable applause at the press conference when Sihanouk announced that the three deputies in the resistance had been given three key ministries in the resistance government. Khieu Samphan, forty years old, was named Minister of Defence; Hou Youn, forty-two, Minister of the Interior, Rural Reforms and Co-operatives; Hu Nim, forty-one, Minister of Information and Propaganda. Chosen as Foreign Minister was forty-eight-year-old Sarin Chhak, former Cambodian ambassador to Cairo; as Minister of Public Works, Telecommunications and Reconstruction, forty-two-year-old Huot Sambath, former head of Cambodia's delegation to the U.N. The youngest member of the cabinet is thirty-six-year-old Chan Youran, former ambassador to Senegal; the oldest is Prime Minister Penn Nouth, at sixty-four. The average age of the twelve-member cabinet is forty-eight — which happens also to be the age of Sihanouk. It is a young government but a distinguished one, with a high proportion of known patriots and progressives. After Sihanouk no one has more prestige inside the country than Penn Nouth, whose whole life has been devoted to obtaining and defending Cambodian independence. All twelve members have been ministers or state secretaries in previous governments, two of them ministers of defence — Major-General Duong Sam Ol, who was defence minister in the last government before that of Lon Nol, and Lieutenant-General Ngo Hou, who had also been Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and Head of the Air Force. The list also included two former foreign ministers. Minister of Economy and Finance, forty-four-year-old Thiounn Mumm, D.Sc., is a well-known progressive and had been in self-imposed exile in France; forty-year-old Chea San, at present ambassador in Moscow, is Minister of Justice and Legal Reforms; and Chau Seng, forty-two, former vice-president of the National Assembly and at one time Sihanouk's dynamic and highly efficient personal secretary, was appointed Minister in charge of Special Missions.

There are no members of comparable qualities in Lon Nol's

government.

The political programme provides for Buddhism remaining as the state religion, but freedom for other religions is guaranteed; also the protection of ' legitimate rights and interests of foreign nationals who respect our laws and customs . . .'. Among the social reforms promised are some that will be welcomed with enthusiasm by the peasants, including: ' Guaranteeing the peasants the right of ownership of the land they cultivate . . . helping the peasants resolve the agrarian problem through a fair solution of unreasonable debts. . . .' Other measures deal with revising the system of land rents and interest on loans, which is exorbitant in some parts of the countryside. These latter measures do not have to await victory in the liberation struggle. They are being applied immediately in scores of liberated villages all over the country.

Polygamy is to be abolished and ' effective equality for both sexes ' to be introduced. The type of balance which already existed between the state and private sectors of industry and commerce is to be maintained, also the nationalization of banks and foreign trade, but with measures aimed at eliminating the type of corruption that crippled state enterprises in the past.

The policy of neutrality is reaffirmed in the section dealing with foreign policy, and ' Cambodia is ready to make concerted efforts with Laos and Vietnam to make Indochina genuinely a zone of independence, peace and neutrality wherein each nation preserves its integral sovereignty . . .'. In general there is little in the programme to cause any anxiety to any country except those who have aggressive intentions against Cambodia. It is a programme capable of rallying the widest support within the country and is in accordance with the strictest principles of peaceful co-existence.

In presenting the programme, Sihanouk said it had been drawn up, and the government chosen, without his participation. ' I merely helped correct the French draft of the various documents and a few typing errors,' he said, but added that he wholeheartedly approved the decisions. ' Our armed forces exist already,' he said. ' The enemy says it is the " Vietcong " or " Vietminh " that is liberating our territory. It is not true; it is our own Liberation Army. We lacked a government — now we have a government. We have an administration on the spot. Every time we liberate a village or locality we install the legitimate administration with the difference that now the new political programme is being applied — to the great advantage of the people. . . .' [8]

In an interview which Sihanouk accorded me on May 6, the day after the formation of the government, and which was filmed and

recorded in the garden of the spacious modern villa the Chinese government had put at his disposal as his residence and secretariat, I asked whether the fact that he was in exile in Peking and the government had been formed abroad did not cut him off from the resistance inside the country. Sihanouk, whom I found ' fighting fit ', very confident, very militant and vital, replied in English :

' No. We formed the government in response to a request from inside the country, mainly from those in the resistance movement. Leading members of the government, as you know, are actually directing that resistance movement. We can say that our government is not rooted here but is rooted in the soil of Cambodia. I am most anxious to return but the maquisards at the resistance bases have told me that I have to fulfil some duties abroad in the international diplomatic field, helpful to the cause of our people in Cambodia.' He explained that only the ministers directing the struggle on the spot had powers to decide such questions as which minister should return and when. The rest of the government were bound by their decisions in such matters.

At the time of the interview, People's China, North Korea and Cuba had already recognized the government and Sihanouk had assurances of recognition from about twenty countries in all, not including the Soviet Union or any East European countries apart from Albania, Rumania and Yugoslavia. But Sihanouk was confident the Soviet Union would also recognize them and after that the rest of the European socialist states.

As to his reaction to the invasion by U.S.–Saigon troops, Sihanouk said : ' It does not surprise me, because the aim of the March 18 coup was to open the doors of independent and neutral Cambodia to American invasion and occupation. Because of their " falling domino " theory, they wanted to occupy Cambodia to strengthen other dominoes and prevent them from falling.'

On the previous day President Nixon had given as one of the reasons for the invasion that the U.S. was ' defending Cambodian neutrality ', so I asked Sihanouk what he thought about this.

' Since President Nixon decided to defend our neutrality,' he replied, ' Cambodian neutrality no longer exists and our independence has been wiped out. But without the armed intervention of the U.S.A. and their satellite invaders, we should already be in Phnom Penh and not in Peking. Lon Nol in fact invited them in, not to protect the neutrality of Cambodia, but to defend his shaky régime.'

I asked for his comment on the reasons given by the Americans for invading Cambodia and also for the *coup d'état*, namely the presence of Vietnamese resistance forces on Cambodian soil.

' Before, we were independent,' he replied. ' We had our neutrality.

Now we are a colony of the Americans and we are occupied by 65,000 South Vietnamese troops — mercenaries of the Americans. I was deposed on March 18 because it was said that I allowed the " Vietcong " and " Vietminh " to occupy Cambodia. They sometimes came to Cambodia because of some necessities, some strategic or technical necessities. But within the framework of their fight against the U.S.A., to liberate their homeland. Even if they were in Cambodia, they looked towards Saigon. All their efforts were directed towards Saigon and South Vietnam. They wanted to liberate South Vietnam. They never looked in our direction. They recognized *de jure* our frontiers. Even in the future, after their victory, they cannot change the frontiers of Cambodia.

' They are not a threat to Cambodia. But, on the contrary, the Saigon government is a threat to Cambodia since they refuse to recognize our frontiers — because they want to take some provinces away from us. Svay Rieng, for instance, which they are now occupying under the forces of General Do Cao Tri. They also want to take some of the off-shore islands away from us.'

Sihanouk also gave his evaluation of the Indochinese Peoples' Summit Conference :

' Before the arrival of the French colonialists, the so-called Indochina did not exist. There was Annam, Tonking, Cochin China — the three States of Vietnam — Laos and Cambodia. It was France that created Indochina and united us inside a Federation. But our three peoples wanted to win back from the French national independence for our homelands. They had to be in solidarity with each other in order to develop their growing struggle and claims for independence.

' When the Japanese militarists and fascists came into Cambodia during World War II, our three peoples also had to resist this Japanese invasion. So this created, right at the beginning, right at the starting point — many years ago — a solidarity of the peoples of Indochina. That solidarity was certainly greatly strengthened by the American invasion of Indochina, of South Vietnam in particular. But now, U.S. aggression is not only against South Vietnam, but against North Vietnam, against Cambodia and Laos. We have to fight — we have to liberate our countries.

' Conscious of our weaknesses, small peoples who have to fight against a giant, a very big power, very powerful with enormous military strength, it is vital for us to unite our efforts, to co-operate closely with each other in order to win. If we want victory, this is what we have to do. It may take a long time. But we are optimistic as far as the victory of our people is concerned.'

At his press conference the previous day Sihanouk had also referred

to the question of co-operation between the peoples of Indochina. ' It is our sacred right to unite with the fraternal Laotian and Vietnamese peoples,' he said, and went on to speak about Arabs of widely differing social régimes who were united against Israel. ' Because we unite in this struggle, this does not mean we have to become communist satellites or accept foreign invasions. During World War II, Britain went into and through France to fight the common enemy. No one accused Britain of " invading France ". We are at home in Indochina. The only foreign invaders are the Americans and their satellites. They should withdraw. They must withdraw, otherwise we will wipe them out. . . . The summit conference has formally declared that Cambodia is to be free of foreign troops. . . . Neither the U.S.A., Australia, South Korea, Thailand or anyone else has the right to come into our Indochina and make war.'

Although no formal joint military staff had been set up, it appeared that co-ordinated activity between the Cambodian, Laotian and South Vietnamese resistance forces developed even before the summit conference. A large liberated area had already been carved out by mid-May in what is known as the ' three frontiers area ' where Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam meet. Pathet Lao victories in the Attopeu–Saravane area of the strategic Bolovens Plateau coincided with Cambodian Liberation Army advances in the adjoining northernmost province of Stung Treng, culminating in the capture of the provincial capital of the same name. On the South Vietnamese side, NFL control of the Central Highlands extends to the outskirts of Pleiku, with solidly liberated areas to the north and south of that city. Whatever the ebb and flow of battle produces, the peoples of Indochina now have a vast, contiguous and relatively secure base area linked, by areas long since liberated by the Pathet Lao and NFL, with North Vietnam and thus with China. In case Thailand intervenes too flagrantly in the affairs of Laos and Cambodia, it is predictable that the Pathet Lao — with or without North Vietnamese support — will extend the areas under their control to include most of the areas bordering on Thailand. This they can do without much difficulty, as their operations during the 1970 dry season have shown.

While the U.S.–Saigon Command was piling up ' Vietcong body count ' figures from Cambodian civilians, massacred by murderous air assaults in the ' Parrot's Beak ' and ' Fish-hook ' areas of Cambodia; while their ground forces were rushing around to find a ' Vietcong Pentagon ' to give Nixon some desperately needed justification for his catastrophic military-political blunder, the general staffs of the resistance forces of the three peoples of Indochina were quietly establishing and consolidating common bases for what they all realize will

be another protracted phase in their long struggle for independence. What Nixon had counted on as a surprise attack to snatch a quick military victory out of the quagmire in South Vietnam has in fact created the conditions for a complete victory of all the peoples of Indochina. At least that is how their leaders see it and they have very sober, logical arguments, based on the recent history of their respective countries, to justify their predictions.

No responsible Cambodian, Laotian or Vietnamese leader with whom I have spoken has ever suggested submitting the Cambodian people to the sufferings and sacrifices entailed by a prolonged armed struggle against the most powerful and ruthless armed forces history has known. It was not the Cambodian, Laotian or Vietnamese resistance leaders who tore down the barriers that brought the war cascading over onto Cambodian soil. Once it was done, the Cambodian people had no other choice than to take up arms, as they have done throughout their history, against the foreign invaders.

The U.S. method of waging war — to destroy what cannot be occupied — makes it certain that other Cambodian towns will suffer the fate of those like Snuol, Memot, Krek and others in the border areas — blasted out of existence. Thousands of Cambodian women, old people and children are going to be slaughtered to make up ' Vietcong ' and eventually ' Khmercong ' body-count figures. But the resistance will go on as long as a single invader remains on Cambodian soil, on Laotian soil or on Vietnamese soil. And the destruction of material values in Indochina is matched by the destruction of moral values within the United States. For this there will eventually be an awful day of reckoning for President Nixon or whoever succeeds him in the White House. The rape of Cambodia was just too much for the human conscience. The military and political miscalculations of the U.S. war-makers reflect the total contempt they have for human beings and human values, total contempt for the Cambodian people as for their own people. Despite the computerized soundings of public opinion, nothing seems to have prepared Nixon for the shock waves of revulsion that swept the whole world, including and especially the United States, at the horror that the Cambodian invasion represented and the daily presidential lies of attempted justification.

In a warning to the Lon Nol régime on May 25, the Soviet government, in what many believed to be the first step towards recognizing Sihanouk's Government of National Union, issued a statement condemning the invasion of Cambodia by U.S.–Saigon troops as a ' gross violation of the 1954 agreements on Indochina and of the generally recognized norms of international law. . . . The flame of war has swept Cambodia, leaving ruins and ashes where towns and villages

had stood and taking toll of the lives of thousands of innocent victims', the statement continued and went on to warn of the possibility of a long civil war, stating that 'those who connive with the U.S. and Saigon intervention will bear the responsibility for this . . .'. The Soviet Union would 'draw appropriate conclusions' from the choice that the Lon Nol régime would make — 'a return to the road of peace and neutrality, or unity with the forces of aggression and war . . .'.[4]

If he still had any capacity for being moved by international reactions, President Nixon should have been particularly hurt when the congress of the West German ruling Social Democrat Party approved a resolution on May 12 condemning the American invasion.

It is not, however, the reactions of a Nixon or a Lon Nol to international opinion which will be decisive in Indochina or Cambodia. It is the struggle of the peoples of Indochina — the people of Cambodia, of Vietnam and of Laos.

[1] *Le Monde*, March 31, 1970.

[2] *International Herald Tribune*, March 31, 1970.

[3] As to why the title '*Royal* Government of National Union' is used, Sihanouk explained that it was a question of defending the legitimacy of the régime which he headed and which was established under a Constitution drawn up in 1947, with the participation of all political parties, including the Communist Party, existing at that time. Sihanouk quoted extensively from that Constitution to prove without any shadow of doubt that the *coup d'état* of March 18, 1970, was a violation of the Constitution and the plotters were guilty of high treason. He also explained, correctly, that although the form of the régime was monarchic, the content was republican from the time he abdicated from the throne. But he and the leaders of the National United Front attached great importance to defending the constitutional legitimacy of their government and thus underlining the 'illegitimacy' of that headed by Lon Nol, Cheng Heng and Sirik Matak.

[4] It had been thought by many that the 'appropriate conclusions' would include recognition of the National United Front government and Prince Sihanouk as Head of State. The fact that this did not take place in the months following the establishment of the N.U.F. government led Sihanouk to express his disapproval publicly. The diplomatic situation between the Soviet Union, the Phnom Penh régime and Sihanouk was original to say the least. The Soviet Union maintained its embassy in Phnom Penh but refused to accredit an ambassador from the Phnom Penh régime to Moscow. The former ambassador to Moscow, Chea San, who rallied to Sihanouk, continued to have diplomatic recognition in Moscow as the representative of the N.U.F. but not of the government under its aegis .A functionary of the former embassy set up his headquarters in a Moscow hotel and maintained relations with other embassies — but not the Soviet Government — in the name of the Lon Nol régime. It was difficult to envisage this situation lasting indefinitely.

5. Introduction to Laos and its problems

Long before the advent of French colonialism brought the Cambodian and Laotian people together with the Vietnamese in the French colony of Indochina, they were linked by history and their Buddhism. A century before the abandonment of the Angkor capital, a young Laotian prince had taken refuge there. His name was Fa Ngoun,[1] a convert to Buddhism at a time when the latter was still competing with Hinduism for acceptance as the main religion in that corner of Asia. In the mid-fourteenth century, Fa Ngoun left Angkor with a 500-year-old golden statue — or Prabang — of Buddha, reputedly from Ceylon, the very cradle of the Buddhist faith, as his most precious possession. He established himself hundreds of miles to the north, on the Mekong river, at a place then known as Muong Swa, later renamed Luang (Town) Prabang (of the Golden Buddha). Deeply influenced by his sojourn at Angkor, Prince Fa Ngoun gradually transformed Luang Prabang into a Buddhist centre, the precious relic a pole of attraction for bonzes and scholars, the town itself attracting craftsmen and merchants and other elements similar to those that had contributed to the rich life of Angkor.

Once having consolidated his situation at Luang Prabang, Fa Ngoun turned his attentions to the neighbouring principalities of Houa Phan, Muong Phouan (today's Xieng Khouang), Vientiane and Champassak, often at war with each other and their neighbours. When he had subdued them by force of arms or threat of such force, Fa Ngoun, in 1353, founded the Kingdom of Lan Xang (Kingdom of the Million Elephants) with the royal capital at Luang Prabang and Buddhism as the official religion, the whole forming the Kingdom of Laos much as it exists today. Fa Ngoun was succeeded twenty years later by his son, who took the name of Sam Sen Thai (Three Hundred Thousand Thai) because a population census conducted by him had yielded 300,000 young men of military age.

The American journalist Arthur Dommen, who has done considerable research into the Laotian history of that period, writes that: 'The two successive kings, father and son, ruled over a group of vassal princes and exacted recognition from neighboring emperors and potentates. Their source of power was a centralized standing army of 150,000 men, divided into infantry, cavalry and elephant corps, supported by a supply corps of 20,000 coolies. In practice, each of the local governors exerted considerable control over the soldiers

recruited from his district, who also served as the local police force. With this machinery of state, the two kings preserved the independence of Lan Xang from enemies without and dissolution within. . . .' [2]

Despite waves of internal dissensions and foreign invasions, the Siamese and Burmese from the west, the Annamites from the east, the kingdom founded by Fa Ngoun lasted some 350 years and in a modest way corresponded to the 'Golden Age' of Cambodia's Angkorian period. If no great temples were built, the country was liberally covered with Buddhist pagodas and enjoyed peace and relatively stable government. In the sixteenth century, the reigning King Sathatharit transferred the royal capital downstream to Vientiane, the present administrative capital of Laos, apparently because of the danger to Luang Prabang from Burmese invaders whom Sathatharit had twice defeated.

The first Westerners — Jesuit missionaries and a group of Dutch traders, headed by Gerrit van Wuystoff — arrived in the mid-seventeenth century, during the reign of King Souligna Vongsa (1637–94) and seem to have found the Laotians much as they are today (when they are not being bombed or shot at): gentle, peaceful, easy-going people, generous and hospitable, with few material needs — altogether a discouraging prospect for merchants or missionaries in those days.

After the long, relatively peaceful and prosperous reign of Souligna Vongsa, Laos fell on evil days. With no son to succeed him — the stern king had put his only son to death for having seduced the wife of a high court official — power was briefly wielded by the highest-ranking mandarin, Tien Thala, who was in turn overthrown by a provincial governor. Family dissensions among Souligna Vongsa's descendants eventually led — in 1707 — to one of his nephews, Sai Ong Hué, setting himself up as a prince in Vientiane and a grandson, Kitsarat, in Luang Prabang, which he declared an independent kingdom. This was the beginning of the break-up of the state as founded by Fa Ngoun and the opening up of Laos to partition by foreign invaders. Six years later there was further dissension resulting in another kingdom being set up at Champassak in the south, where a number of provinces seceded from Sai Ong Hué's Vientiane kingdom. By 1713, there were thus three kingdoms, Luang Prabang in the north, Vientiane in the centre and Champassak in the south. There was not even unity or cohesion inside the three kingdoms themselves; local feudal rulers declared themselves independent of the royal capitals and another kingdom was set up in Xieng Khouang. Bitter wars between the kingdoms laid the country open again to invasions from traditional enemies in Siam, Burma and Annam.

By 1778, the Vientiane kingdom had become a tributary state of

Siam. After an unsuccessful uprising by the vassalized Chao (Prince) Anou in 1825, the Kingdom of Vientiane was simply annexed by Siam. (One of the results of Prince Anou's defeat was to have long-term consequences in Thailand, which were certainly the opposite to what was intended. Tens of thousands of Laotians were forcibly deported from the Laotian side of the Mekong to the Korat Plateau area on the Siamese side of the river. Their descendants today, strongly influenced by the Pathet Lao, are a major source of worry for the Thai government, forming as they do a majority of the population in Thailand's troubled north-eastern provinces. There are in fact more Laotians in Thailand today than in Laos.)

In 1832, a few years after Siam annexed Vientiane, Annam took over the neighbouring kingdom of Xieng Khouang. By this time Siam had also annexed the Champassak kingdom, and all that was left of the Laos of the Fa Ngoun–Sam Sen Thai dynasty was Luang Prabang, which Annam claimed as a tributary state but which in fact was paying tribute to Siam.

This was still the situation when French colonialism appeared in Indochina in 1862, occupying for a start the western provinces of Cochin China, the southernmost part of Vietnam. The following year the French pushed on to Cambodia from their Cochin China bases and then steadily extended their occupation to central (Annam) and North (Tonking) Vietnam, leaving Laos until Vietnam and Cambodia had been digested.

The first showdown with Siam over Laos did not take place until 1885 when Siam, impressed by the setting up of French military outposts along the Annamite Chain overlooking Laos, launched an expedition to seize the Plain of Jars (even in those days considered a highly strategic area) and dispatched officials to Luang Prabang to tighten Siam's control over that tributary state. French reaction was to warn Bangkok that the kingdoms of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang were both under the sovereignty of the Court of Hué, capital of the Annam Empire, now under French 'protection'. The upshot was that the following year France was able to appoint Auguste Pavie, who proved to be one of the shrewdest empire-builders France has produced, as vice-consul to Luang Prabang. Pavie thus started the long process of intrigue and demonstrations of force by which France gradually positioned herself for the complete takeover of Laos.

By using the 'Treaty of Protectorate' under which the Empire of Annam had been absorbed, Pavie managed to extend French influence to any regions which — even in the flimsiest fashion — had been considered tributaries to the Annam Empire. The final showdown came in the classic manner with the dispatch of a French naval contingent

to Bangkok, and a shotgun treaty was imposed on Siam on October 1893, under which Siam ceded all of Laos east of the Mekong to France, that on the west bank remaining with Siam, then strongly under British influence. In subsequent conventions, certain regions on the west bank were also transferred to France, which established the administrative capital of her latest colony in Vientiane. A royal capital was maintained in Luang Prabang, with King Sisavang Vong on the throne, nominated for the post by the French Senior Resident.

Although with warships in Bangkok harbour the French were able to arrange things fairly smoothly with the rulers of Siam, it was a different matter with the Laotian people, especially when the French-appointed tax-collectors and their agents set to work.

The first large-scale insurrection broke out in 1901, just eight years after the Treaty of Bangkok had been signed. It was confined to the Savannakhet and Champassak areas in the south and was led by Phocodouot, a district chief of the plains-dwelling Lao Lum. It was put down after two years, as conditions in the plains did not favour partisan-type warfare. Far more serious was an uprising of the Lao Theung, which comprise some forty tribal groupings including the Kha (slaves), the poorest and most oppressed of all the Lao peoples. The Lao Theung are specially strong in the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos. The first leader of the revolt was Ong Keo, chief of the Lavel, the largest single tribal grouping among the Lao Theung. After Ong Keo was killed by treachery — a local French Resident having arranged a private meeting under the pretext of peace negotiations, in which he shot the Lavel chief with his pistol — leadership passed to one of the great Laotians of his day, Komadome, also from the Lao Theung.

Despite tremendous difficulties of communication, Komadome wove together a resistance movement covering many provinces, with a political programme which paved the way for alliances with other tribal groupings and even the Lao Lum in some areas. He developed a written language for the Lao Theung people and came closer to being a genuine national leader than anyone since Fa Ngoun, the difference being that his strength was based on popular support and not on subjugating rival princes.

At one time the French mobilized the major part of their forces in Indochina against Komadome, using everything from elephants to fighter planes to crush the movement. Starting in 1910, it lasted until 1937, before being finally crushed after a two-year blockade of Komadome's main base area at Phu Luong, near the Vietnamese frontier. One of the resistance leader's sons, Khamphan, later told me how the end came :

' In the final phase, the French bombed us from the air and moved up with three battalions of troops, two hundred elephants, troops on horseback, and Alsatian dogs to track us down. My father and my elder brother Si Thone laid an ambush for their advance party, but the French were shown another track by a traitor and surprised our headquarters from behind. We rushed out at the noise of dogs but my father had forgotten his pistol. As he ran to get it, he was shot in the back. The elephants were used to trample down our houses and those inside them. My eldest brother Si Thone was wounded and taken prisoner with another brother. Three younger brothers were thrown into a ravine and three still smaller ones were shot or died later of starvation. The elephants were used to charge into the villages and any of our people who survived were shot or bayoneted. . . .' Khamphan managed to escape capture for another eight months but was finally caught and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment, his elder brother Si Thone to life imprisonment. Released by the Pathet Lao uprising in August 1945, Khamphan and Si Thone immediately joined the resistance movement and are today high-ranking leaders of the Pathet Lao forces in southern Laos. Komadome remains a legendary figure whose exploits have entered into the country's folklore.

There were numerous other uprisings during that first phase of French occupation, but nothing compared to Komadome's twenty-seven years' war. Resistance against the French only really ended with World War II and the temporary occupation of Laos by the Japanese, but the various movements were unco-ordinated and organized on local or regional scales so that the French could concentrate their forces to crush them. The main point, however, is that from the earliest days of occupation the Laotian people were always fighting back in one place or another. When Vichy France capitulated to the Japanese invaders of Indochina in December 1941, a new stage of the Laotian independence struggle was ushered in.

For the first time resistance was to be organized on a national basis, uniting all tribes and races, the mountain people and the plains-dwellers, eventually englobing the urban population as well as those in the countryside. Later still, unity was to be forged with the other peoples of Indochina in a common struggle. Some elements and aspects of this are described in the chapters that follow, also how the struggle developed once the U.S.A. decided to try to fill what their leaders considered to be a ' power vacuum ' in Laos caused by the departure of the French.

There is a sharp contrast in outlook between the U.S.A. and the peoples of Indochina as to the nature of this struggle. Washington

tends to see it through the narrow optic of 'anti-communism'; the peoples of Indochina see it through the optic of their centuries-long struggle for complete independence and the end of foreign domination. It is above all this difference in outlook that makes settlement difficult. Whether it was the arrival of proselytizing missionaries from the West, or the various U.S. economic 'aid' missions, the peoples of Indochina are used to the most varied and innocent pretexts for the imposition of foreign rule. History gives them good grounds for their deep-rooted suspicions of foreign implantations under any pretext. This holds good for all former Western colonies in South-east Asia, and also for a country like Thailand which was never openly colonized but which in recent years has become aware of foreign occupation through the 'back door'.

This short historical sketch and attempt to situate Laos within the general development of the states of Indochina and their struggle to maintain national identity, along with the Laotian resistance to French attempts to restore colonial rule after World War II, provides the background to understanding the fierce resistance the Laotian people put up against U.S. attempts to replace the French with their own brand of domination over Laos. Even though this appeared in a teleguided form at first, through the manipulation of local placemen — there is a long list of Laotian equivalents of Ngo Dinh Diem and the other 'strong men' who temporarily served U.S. interests in Saigon, some of them also dead or in exile — the Laotian people and their progressive leaders saw things for what they were. The struggle against French colonialism had aroused the political consciousness of the Laotian people to a point at which they could recognize the signs — perhaps even before Washington itself had a clear idea of its long-term aims in Laos. Apologists for colonialism always explain how the implantation of the flag really all happened by accident, imperial power blundering along in the footsteps of adventurers and others making policies on the spot.

The Lao Lum peasants, the Lao Theung and Lao Xung tribespeople, however, did not need computers to sense the results of U.S. intervention in Laos any more than does a hare when he hears the barking of hounds on his tracks. And they were able to distinguish between leaders ready to sell out their national interests and those ready to accept any sacrifices to defend them.

A tragic aspect of U.S. policy in South-east Asia has been to ignore completely, or woefully underestimate, the fierce attachment to nationalism and the determination to gain total independence that motivates the struggles of the Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese people — and others in Asia. They are not just red or blue flags in

the Pentagon map room, nor ciphers to be fed into a computer. They are peoples with their own traditions, cultures and histories, peoples who live within well-defined boundaries behind which they have fought for centuries for the right to live their own lives. Successive U.S. administrations have preferred to see things through ideological blinkers and in terms of an East–West power struggle.

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[1] Sometimes spelt Fa Ngum or Fa Ngun according to the transcription from Sanskrit.

[2] *Conflict in Laos — The Politics of Neutralisation* by Arthur J. Dommen, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1964.

6. Laos in the Seventies

Just as the war in South Vietnam and the role of the U.S.A. therein only gradually impinged upon public awareness, so a hidden war in Laos and the United States' role therein only gradually started emerging from the shadows of official secrecy towards the end of 1969. U.S. mythologists, smoked out into the open by facts and incidents too blatant to escape public notice, pretend that U.S. involvement is something new, made necessary by a 'Ho Chi Minh trail' to South Vietnam or by North Vietnamese 'aggression' against Laos.

In fact, as with 'Vietcong sanctuaries' in Cambodia, the presence or otherwise of 'Ho Chi Minh trails' or North Vietnamese troops are of incidental importance only. They have nothing to do with the origins, aims and extent of U.S. intervention. This latter has long ago been escalated into 'special war' in Laos on a scale proportionately greater than in South Vietnam when 'special war' was escalated into 'limited war' in March, 1965, with the commitment of U.S. combat divisions.

What is happening in Laos today is a logical step-by-step projection of processes set in motion nearly twenty years ago as part of U.S. global crusading policies of the time. If the situation has not yet escalated into 'limited war' in Laos — and if the latter is in fact averted — this will not be due to some ideological change of heart in Washington but due to some belated awareness in responsible circles that policies should not overstep the means of enforcing them.

By the end of 1969, China, emerging from the self-imposed isolation of the 'Cultural Revolution' began showing an interest again in what was happening in the perimeter areas. On November 3, the Soviet Union delivered a sharp protest at U.S. intervention in Laos in the form of a note sent by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to participants in the 1962 Geneva Conference on Laos. 'Serious concern' was expressed at the 'alarming situation that has been created in Laos as a result of the further widening scale of U.S. interference in the internal affairs of that country, specifically the participation of its armed forces in military actions in Laotian territory. . . .' The declaration went on to warn that the Soviet Government 'condemns U.S. actions in Laos and stresses that all responsibility for the dangerous situation taking shape there rests with those forces which are moving actually to open a new front in the war of aggression against the peoples of South-east Asia. . . .'

But apart from the diplomatic frowns from the socialist, and important sections of the neutralist world, there were also the deterrents of the bitter lessons inflicted on U.S. strategists by the armed forces of the Vietnamese and Laotian liberation movements. The military establishment of which President Nixon seemed to be a willing prisoner, however, is notoriously slow to learn from such lessons.

As the 1970s loomed over the horizon, Laos, in the eyes of President Nixon's South-east Asian experts, seemed to be shaping up satisfactorily for almost the first time since the U.S.A. started meddling in that corner of Asia. Unlimited dollars and weight of bombs, napalm and chemicals, thousands of U.S. military 'advisers', treachery in Vientiane and 'Special Forces' in the field, had produced results. The Pentagon maps showed a large part of the rural population where the CIA wanted them — behind barbed wire. Between the highly concentrated 'population clusters', the maps showed 'white areas' where no one lived, nothing grew — emptied, if not of the Pathet Lao fish, at least of the sea in which they swam. Above all, the highly strategic Plain of Jars[1] was finally in the hands of the 'free world'. A round-the-clock shuttle service of CIA planes was flying in men and materials to transform it into that network of bases that for so long had been the dream of the Pentagon hawks.

Throughout 1969, the monthly tonnage of bombs dropped on Pathet-Lao-controlled villages exceeded the highest monthly level dropped on North Vietnam. If more dollars per head were lavished on training, equipping and paying Laotian soldiers than on any others in Asia, this was more than matched by the record cost per head of killing Laotian peasants from the air. The only way to escape the bombs, as millions of air-dropped leaflets pointed out, was to accept the concentration-camp life behind barbed wire, living off U.S. hand-outs. In many cases there was no choice. After the bombs and napalm, helicopters swooped down, 'Special Forces' commandos landed, their M-16s blazing at anyone who ran. Survivors were flung aboard and flown off to be dumped in a barbed-wire enclosure called a 'refugee camp'. Any dazed victims of military age would soon find themselves in uniform, a gun in their hands, in due course herding other villagers into similar camps.

As the victims increased in numbers, 'camps' were upgraded into 'centres', the latter expanded into 'unity villages' which, as they multiplied, were linked together to form 'restoration zones' of which twenty-two had been formed by the end of 1969 over the length — if not the breadth — of the land.[2] Officially Vientiane claimed a total population of 500,000 in the 'restoration zones' by 1970, a staggering figure considering the total population of the Vientiane-controlled

areas was at most 1,500,000. ' Unity villages ' and ' restoration zones ' were obviously the Laotian equivalent of the notorious ' strategic hamlets ' and ' prosperity zones ' — the U.S.–Ngo Dinh Diem solution for emptying the seas in which the ' Vietcong fish ' swam in South Vietnam.

The same methods of ' accelerated pacification ' which horrified the world at South Vietnam's ' Pinkville ' were used against other ' Oriental Human Beings ' in countless Laotian villages. As in South Vietnam also, the ' unity villages ' were set up on the perimeters of towns and bases along the main highways as ' protective belts ' to take the first shock of attacks by the Pathet Lao against the bases. The destruction of entire hamlets of recalcitrants to ' encourage ' their neighbours to move ' voluntarily ' was commonplace. Defoliant attacks against crops and orchards speeded departures or stressed the hopelessness of return.

' Get out of your villages or else . . .' was the theme hammered away in the leaflets air-dropped sometimes before the bombs and napalm rained down, more often later, to warn villagers not to try to set up house elsewhere. In their air-conditioned villas, the American experts could rationalize that it was cheaper to dump surplus U.S. rice and a few cases of condensed milk and soap into the concentration camp villages than to continue the extermination bombing — and more humane! In practice they did both, and U.S. military spending grew by the year. Cultivation of rice and other food crops was discouraged — or strictly controlled — in the Vientiane-held areas, because of the official fear that a proportion might be reaching the Pathet Lao. Obviously, crops in the Pathet Lao areas were primary targets for toxic defoliants, supplemented by napalm in the harvest season.

It was all done under the charitable title of the ' Rural Development Program ' — needless to say 100 per cent U.S.-financed — as benevolent a project as herding the survivors from extermination wars against the Red Indians into ' reservations '. And just as such reservations in the U.S.A. are now highlight attractions for tourists, so the plan includes a ' model ' restoration zone covering the whole of Vientiane province, to persuade high-level tourists such as visiting congressmen and journalists like Joe Alsop that all is well in the CIA-run Land of the Laos. A hint of what is shaping up can be discerned in the following passage from an account by *New York Times* correspondent Henry Kamm. After describing General Vang Pao's hush-hush base at Long Cheng,[3] ' accessible only to authorized Laotians and Americans ', Kamm continues:

' Six miles to the North is Sam Thong, the town that serves as his

headquarters as commander of the Second Military Region. . . . The visitor is shown a bustling refugee centre sustained by U.S. aid, where Meos wearing their traditional black costumes, brightened by multi-coloured sashes, scarves and headgear, await resettlement. Some are indeed refugees, displaced by enemy action or by American bombing. Others are soldiers who are being moved from one hilltop to another . . . moving a combat unit usually means resettling their families.' [4]

Aid to the Meos and other unfortunate inmates of the concentration camp villages comes from AID (Agency for International Development), a typically innocuous title for the nefarious nature of its CIA-sponsored activities, at least as far as Laos is concerned. By what means, other than bombs and napalm, whole Meo clans could have been induced to move off their mountain tops and come down to refugee centres in the stuffy plains, is not yet entirely clear. Destruction of their cattle, maize and opium crops must have played a considerable role. It is not an accident that the most intensive use of defoliants has been against villages on the summits and slopes of the areas bordering Vientiane and Xieng Khouan provinces where the highest concentration of Meos live. It is not in character with the Meos to come down into the plains where they can hardly breathe the stuffy, humid air. It is not explicable either by even the most lavish bribes that AID could offer.

In some cases that I heard of it was done by trickery. A whole village would be evacuated on the pretext that it was to be settled on another safer, more fertile mountain top: the women, children and old folk were dumped ' temporarily ' in a refugee centre on the plains while the younger men were taken to ' inspect the new site '. In fact they soon found themselves in a military training centre in Thailand and their families were lucky if they ever saw them again.

In South Vietnam, young men of the Khmer minority were simply rounded up in the fields, bundled into trucks or helicopters without even a chance to inform their families, to be conscripted into the traitor ' Khmer Serei ' commandos, and whipped off to training camps in Thailand. I interviewed dozens of them over the years, among the many hundreds who deserted the first time they were sent on raids into Cambodian territory.[5] In their case it was easy to throw a cordon around their villages in the Mekong delta; the Meo villages, however, are virtually inaccessible except by helicopter, so the Meos had to be brought down to the plains by terror or trickery. Traditionally the men rarely leave the pure, clear air of the mountain tops, leaving it to their women to descend to the markets in the plains once or twice a month in order to exchange opium for their simple needs in consumer goods.

In the meantime, U.S. involvement had quietly but dramatically increased. In 1959, Pathet Lao sources put at 300 the number of U.S. military advisers and other personnel in Laos. At the time of the 1962 Geneva Agreements, Hilsman[6] writes there were 666 — which is probably less than the real number, but the figure given for the purposes of 'evacuation' of foreign military personnel according to the Agreements. A substantial proportion put on civilian clothes and returned as AID or embassy personnel.

By early 1966, again according to Pathet Lao sources — and they had every opportunity to be well informed — there were over 5,000 Americans in Laos, of whom 3,500 were military 'advisers' and instructors. After an on-the-spot check, the French journalist Bernard Couret — then writing for *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Paris) — informed the Bertrand Russell International War Crimes Tribunal[7] that there were 12,000 Americans (not counting their families) in Laos. They included instructors and advisers, air crews and ground staff, an army of technicians for road and bridge maintenance — and for servicing the incredible total of 100 air strips in Laos, thirty of which were behind the Pathet Lao lines. He included a figure of 500 air crews for the CIA-run Air American and Continental Service airlines.

In a special communiqué on July 20, 1969, to mark the seventh anniversary of the 1969 Geneva Agreements, the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat also gave the figure of 12,000 Americans in Laos, the overwhelming majority of them military 'advisers' and 'instructors'. If one adds to these another 1,000 at the 'Green Beret' Headquarters 333 at Oudon and a few hundred more at the Lopbury commando training centre (both in Thailand), one has some idea of the extent to which the Pentagon was involved in its secret war in Laos by 1969.

Souvanna Phouma pretended to know nothing about it. It was only in 1968 that he had admitted that U.S. planes were in fact bombing Laos.[8] Until then he had contributed to the official myth that they were only on 'reconnaissance missions' although he knew perfectly well that the bombings had been going on for four years — since May 1964, to be exact. In October 1969, Souvanna Phouma blandly informed the UN that there were neither U.S. nor Thai troops in Laos, only North Vietnamese. A few weeks later, a U.S. Senate enquiry summoned CIA director Richard Helms and three military attachés of the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, to explain just what the U.S.A. and CIA were up to in Laos.

'It is likely,' reported the *New York Times* Washington correspondent, Bernard Lossiter, 'that Mr. Helms will be asked about a reported 300 CIA agents said to be operating in the Laotian war. Many are

reported to be former Green Berets, recruited to lead Laotian units on reconnaissance missions and terrorist raids. Soldiers and supplies for the war are carried in Air America and Continental Air Service. The two airlines are said to be CIA-operated. The three attachés recalled from Vientiane to testify before the Senate are expected to describe the tactical bombing and ground operations that the American military in Laos reportedly directs for the royal government. There have been reports that every operation now mounted by the royal Lao forces is directed and controlled by the American military establishment there. The U.S. Air Force reportedly flies up to 300 sorties a day against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. On the ground American captains and majors are said to draw up battle plans in the field and even accompany Laotian units into action. . . .'[9]

When the time came for the U.S. ambassador to Thailand, Mr. Leonard Unger, to give evidence before this same enquiry, the *New York Times* reported that 'he refused to testify on what were described as "six or eight" questions concerning U.S. intelligence commitments in Thailand. One of these concerned the amount of money the United States was paying the Thais for their operations in neutral Laos. . . .'[10]

For Souvanna Phouma to deny U.S. and Thai intervention was on precisely the same level as Nguyen Van Thieu's denial that any massacre took place at 'Pinkville' at a time when G.I.s were falling over each other to give the details and the U.S. Army had already placed one of the officers responsible under arrest. Phouma was never very fortunate with his cover-up denials, being continually let down by those he wished to protect. On November 20, 1969, the U.S. Defence Department disclosed that 160 Americans were 'missing and two are presumed captured' in Laos, which is another indication of the scale of their activities.

Despite the enormous investment in dollars and military equipment; despite having expanded the Royal Laotian Army from 17,000 at the time the French left to over 70,000; despite a certain success in 'emptying the sea'; despite the commitment of thousands of U.S. 'advisers' who in fact assumed the direction of military operations, the Pentagon could not record any progress on the battle-front during the last months of 1968 and the first half of 1969. Not only had repeated attacks into the Pathet Lao areas been repulsed with heavy losses, but three important strategic bases deep behind the Pathet Lao lines had been lost, airfields and all. They included the big mountain-top base of Pha Thi, a similar one at Nakhang and the 'Special Forces' and Thai artillery base at Muong Soui, a big complex entirely under U.S. and Thai command. The latter was an especially embarrassing defeat — the Americans managing to evacuate U.S. and Thai

personnel in time to avoid an international scandal, but at the cost of large quantities of artillery and other equipment which had to be abandoned. The Muong Soui airfield, also abandoned, was a key centre for supplying Meo-manned 'Special Forces' outposts. Other bases of lesser importance were also knocked out in the first half of 1969, together with scores of smaller air-supplied outposts. By July there were only two U.S.–Vientiane bases of any size left behind the Pathet Lao lines, the most important of which is the Long Cheng-Sam Thong complex south of the Plain of Jars.

The NLH High Command claimed that 500 planes and helicopters were knocked out or destroyed on the ground in these actions and that their forces took a heavy toll of parachutist, commando and other so-called élite units of the Royal Laotian Army, and also the main 'Special Forces' units operating behind their lines. Four regimental commanders were among the slain. It is worth noting that all the fighting at Pathet Lao initiative took place well on the Pathet Lao side of the *de facto* line of partition which Hilsman recognizes the Pathet Lao respected.[11]

Early in the second half of 1969 the secret army of General Vang Pao — quietly built up in Thailand and equipped with M-16s, with U.S. advisers down to battalion level, and in special units like parachutists and heliborne troops down to company level — was ready to make its début. It had been built up to about 17,000 regulars in battalion-sized units, supplemented by about another 30,000 irregular semi-commando, semi-bandit units. Some of the latter were kept at Long Cheng for hit-and-run operations, others lived permanently behind the Pathet Lao lines, supplied by air drops of opium and munitions. The regular units were essentially shock troops, to be used like the U.S. Marines to spearhead attacks, seize positions and hold them long enough for the regular Laotian Army troops to take over. They were encouraged to commit atrocities against the Lao Lum and others to give them a guilt-fear complex as to the results if they were ever defeated themselves — or captured. They were indoctrinated that they had to kill or be killed.

In July 1969, U.S. planes intensified their attacks against the towns and villages in and around the Plain of Jars, reducing every building, down to the humblest bamboo hut, to ashes. The code name in Laotian for this air offensive was 'Ke Kheu' (Revenge). In attacks of unprecedented violence, operating out of bases in Thailand, the planes attacked everything that lived, moved, grew or had been made by the hands of man. Schools, hospitals, pagodas, houses, crops ready for harvesting, peasants in the fields, fishermen on the rivers — all were prime targets for 'Operation Revenge'.

In mid-August, a major offensive was launched against the Plain of Jars — and a new element was introduced into the Laotian war by the use of paratroopers and scores of helicopters to land Vang Pao's 'Special Forces' battalions right into the Plain. Of the twenty-three battalions taking part, sixteen were Vang Pao troops under direct U.S. command, acting as the vanguard shock troops in the 'kill all, burn all, destroy all' type of operations that have become standard in the 'search and destroy' tactics used in South Vietnam. The code name for this action was 'Kou Kiet' (Save Honour).

As it was the height of the rainy season, the Plain of Jars was only thinly defended, the Pathet Lao troops usually taking advantage of the seasonal operational lull to withdraw to their jungle bases for study courses. Stunned by the violence of the bombing which preceded the offensive, the massive use of paratroopers and heliborne troops and the huge scale — by Laotian standards — of the operation, the local self-defence forces were no match for the well-trained Vang Pao mercenaries and their M-16s. Normally the Pathet Lao Command was well-informed of preparations for an offensive, but this time the enemy's operational headquarters was at Oudon in Thailand, with Long Cheng as the advance base once the offensive got under way. By the time the intensified air shuttle service between Oudon and Long Cheng had signalled what was in the wind, it was too late to move regular troops in the required number back into the Plain.

Behind Vang Pao's mercenaries, Vientiane and Thai troops moved in to do the 'mopping up' and herd the traumatized survivors of the extermination battalions into concentration camp compounds to be exhibited to journalists as 'refugees from Pathet Lao terror'.

For the first time in eight years, the Plain of Jars was in the hands of the U.S.-backed Rightist forces, which had won their first notable victory. Because it was a victory, President Nixon could not resist referring to the U.S. role in the affair — something that premier Souvanna Phouma was quick to deny.[12] Despite this denial, however, the Nixon claim to a share in the victory did not pass unnoticed in the U.S.A. itself. Newspapers began to show an interest in the extent of U.S. involvement, prodding Congress to show an interest also. Hence the Senate enquiry referred to earlier, preceded by an on-the-spot investigation by *New York Times* correspondent Henry Kamm. The preliminary results produced scandalized astonishment at what had been going on over the years behind the backs of the American public.

'What strikes me most,' said Senator Fulbright,[13] 'is that an operation of this size could be carried out without members of the Senate knowing it — and without the public knowing!' (He was referring

to the whole aspect of U.S. involvement, not just operation 'Kou Kiet'.) 'U.S. involvement in the war on such a large scope,' the Senator continued, 'presents a dilemma of major proportions. I knew we were doing a little of this and a little of that in Laos, but I had no idea it was a major operation of this kind. . . .' Senator Stuart Symington, on the eve of the sub-committee hearings, charged the administration with deliberately keeping secret from the public the fact that Americans were involved in a war in Laos. 'He called the situation a "travesty" and charged that "high" government officials have wrapped activities there in a cloak of "secrecy".' [14] Some of them continued to do so by refusing to testify before Symington's sub-committee. And President Nixon himself carried the policy of secrecy still further by refusing to permit the full publication of the evidence the sub-committee was able to obtain. Only a heavily censored transcript was made available to the public.

Eventually, after strong congressional and public pressure and six months after the sub-committee had completed its work, 237 pages of the censored part of the transcript were released 'after more than 100 meetings with State Department and other officials . . .' [15] The revelations contained therein made it clear why Nixon was so coy about disclosing what he and his predecessors had been up to in Laos and why another ten per cent of the transcript was still under censorship wraps. The report confirmed that the U.S.A. had indeed been engaged in air operations in Laos, since 1964 at a cost of '"billions of dollars" and over 200 American lives . . .'. The censored part of the transcript revealed that the U.S. ambassador to Laos between 1964 and 1969, William H. Sullivan, was in fact the commander-in-chief of extensive military operations inside the country.

'The new record shows that the war in Laos involved far more than the "1,040 Americans . . . stationed in Laos" that the President's guarded statement listed. That is only the tip of the iceberg. The hearings disclosed, as sub-committee sources put it, that "tens of thousands" of Americans are engaged in the Laotian war. . . .'

Murray Marder's report goes on to say that 'Censorship took out of the transcript all summary figures on costs; every reference to the Central Intelligence Agency's operations, which include training, equipping, supplying and directing the "clandestine" army of up to 36,000 Meo tribesmen in Laos commanded by Gen. Vang Pao; all references to the use of Thailand's forces in Laos; details of U.S. air operations from Laos; figures showing the escalation of American air strikes in Laos during bombing "pauses" or in the halt in the air war against North Vietnam and other critical facts. . . .'

One of the pretexts given to the sub-committee for suppressing the

extent of U.S. military intervention in Laos was that premier Souvanna Phouma 'made it clear that he wanted us to say as little as possible', according to ex-ambassador Sullivan — by that time Under-Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

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[1] The Plain gets its name from lines of huge grey jars, three to eight feet in height, ranged in strips up to a mile long and several jars wide. Their origin is still a mystery and they have now been bombed to bits as a U.S. Air Force contribution to the creation of archaeological ruins.

[2] From 1961 onwards, the Pathet Lao and progressive neutralist forces controlled two-thirds of the territory and half the population of Laos, the rightists controlling the towns and the villages along the Mekong river.

[3] Referred to in Chapter 13.

[4] As published in the *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), October 27, 1969. I do not, incidentally, put Henry Kamm in the same category as Joe Alsop. Kamm was one of those who uncovered the 'Pinkville' story and also details of America's secret war in Laos.

[5] These desertions later took on a sinister aspect in late 1969 and early 1970 when whole companies and even battalions deserted. In fact they turned out to be the shock troops for the coup d'état.

[6] Roger Hilsman, former U.S. Under-Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, in his book *To Move A Nation* (Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1968), deals extensively with Laos and I have referred to this book frequently.

[7] At Roskilde (Denmark) between November 20 and December 1, 1967.

[8] President Nixon first admitted the bombings at a TV Press Conference on December 9, 1969.

[9] As reported in the *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), October 20, 1969.

[10] *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), November 27, 1969.

[11] *To Move A Nation*, page 527.

[12] It is just conceivable that, as 'Kou Kiet' was an all-American operation with the Vang Pao troops under direct U.S. command with U.S. officers down to company level, and that as the strategic headquarters was in Thailand and the tactical headquarters at the hush-hush Long Cheng base in which Souvanna Phouma had probably never set foot, the prime minister did not even know the details and extent of U.S. participation. But that he knew U.S. troops were operating in Laos is certain.

[13] In an interview with Murray Marder, published in the *Washington Post*, October 30, 1969, after preliminary hearings at a Senate Foreign Relations sub-committee under Senator Stuart Symington.

[14] As reported by UPI, October 19, 1969.

[15] This and following quotes are from Murray Marder, *Washington Post*, April 20, 1970.

7. Background to a hidden war

What aroused the ire of Senator Fulbright[1] was not only the fact that the U.S.A. was involved in a secret war[2] in Laos behind the backs of the U.S. Congress and public, but that at least 150 million dollars a year were being spent ' to supply, arm, train and transport a clandestine army of 36,000 men. . . .' [3] The senator from Arkansas was referring to only one facet of the secret, teleguided war which the CIA and the Pentagon were running in Laos — the operations from the hush-hush Headquarters 333 in Oudon, across the borders of Laos in Thailand. The 36,000 men were tribal mercenaries, nominally under the command of General Vang Pao, of Meo tribal nationality, who had risen to the rank of lieutenant under the French and was thus an obvious candidate for highly paid employment with the CIA. HQ 333 is run by American ' Green Berets ' and Vang Pao's men are their Laotian equivalent. They are ' Special Forces ' units shuttled back and forth from Thailand into Laos as operational plans require. They are an all-American outfit, armed, paid, trained and transported by the U.S.A., operating directly under U.S. strategic and tactical command without even nominal reference to the Defence Ministry of Prince Souvanna Phouma's Vientiane régime.

After some journalists had done the spadework, Senator Fulbright unearthed the fact that: ' This force which we supply and train . . . is backed up by an enormous air force. I don't mean just helicopters; I mean the U.S. Air Force operating out of Thailand. . . .' And as further evidence of the extent to which the Senate — and his own Foreign Relations Committee — had been hoodwinked, he disclosed:

' This is not in my view an undertaking by the CIA as such. The CIA is operating under orders of the National Security Council, and a committee which is appointed by the Council — which is directly responsible to the President. . . .' He added that not only the Nixon administration but those under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson had been just as involved. Where did it all start?

1949 was the year in which the Chinese Red Army was cutting to pieces what was left of Chiang Kai Shek's U.S.-backed Kuomintang forces, pushing them back in great encircling actions south of the Yangtse river, grinding them to pieces and sweeping what was left of them off the Chinese mainland to Hainan island (from where those who survived another shattering defeat were later removed by U.S. planes and warships to the comparative safety of Taiwan). It was

the year in which the Chinese People's Republic was proclaimed in Peking. It was also the year in which General ' Wild Bill ' Donovan, who had headed America's war-time OSS[4] and later fathered the CIA which succeeded it, sent one of his right-hand men, Major James Thompson, into Laos to set up an espionage network there, linked with another being set up across the border in north-east Thailand. (Donovan, an enthusiastic specialist in espionage in South-east Asia, was later appointed U.S. ambassador to Thailand to run things on the spot.)

Even a cursory glance at the map of Laos explains its fascination for the ' hawks ' of those days, whose major preoccupation was how to put Chiang Kai Shek back onto the Chinese mainland. How best support the remaining Kuomintang troops still being mopped up in south-west China? How best use the considerable KMT force under General Li Mi which had escaped into Burma to be immediately taken over by Donovan and his staff? Later, after Vo Nguyen Giap's troops had won a decisive victory over French forces along Vietnam's northern frontiers and opened up communications between the Viet-minh-controlled areas and People's China, the question of halting the onward march of the Vietnam revolution was also on the agenda. That is where geography comes in. Laos has frontiers with Thailand, Burma, China, Cambodia and Vietnam — and once the latter had been divided at the 17th Parallel by the 1954 Geneva Agreements, this meant Laos had frontiers with both North and South Vietnam. (Subsequently this meant common boundaries with two Asian socialist states, People's China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with the neutral states of Cambodia and Burma and the two U.S. client states of Thailand and South Vietnam.) It also contained the tempting strategic Plain of Jars, where enough air power could be based to dominate the whole of southern China and the mainland countries of South-east Asia. With the development of rocketry, the two serried ranges of Laotian mountains running north-east to south-east along the frontier with Vietnam provided an irresistible appeal for the Pentagon's rocketeers.

On a map of Asia, Laos makes a poor showing as far as geographical size is concerned — like Britain on a map of Europe as far as the Urals. In fact, Laos is almost exactly the same size as Britain, a difference of only twenty-eight square miles in favour of Laos. But whereas Britain is very densely populated — England and Wales are second only to Holland for population density in Europe — Laos is one of the most sparsely populated countries in Asia, with about three inhabitants per square mile. It is sometimes described as a large country with few people and especially few Laotians, because the ethnic minorities of

the highlands are generally thought to outnumber those who are considered the real Laotians, the plains-dwelling Lao Lum. Ethnic groupings, customs, types of agricultural pursuits and methods of cultivation vary according to the geographical location of the villages. Those situated on the crests and summits of the mountains and on the plateaus which dominate the least populated areas of the country concentrate on cattle breeding and opium production; those on the slopes and foothills grow maize and hill paddy in rotated 'slash and burn' cultivation patches. In the more densely populated fertile plain through which runs the Mekong river, or in the plentiful valleys which shelter its tributaries, the Lao Lum are essentially rice-growers, dependent on seasonal rainfalls.

The population of Laos is generally estimated at between two and a half and three million. An exact figure is hard to establish. An iniquitous head-tax system introduced by the French, and which included such refinements as a breast-tax on pregnant women, encouraged the Laotians to conceal the exact number of family adherents and to discourage census-taking. Pregnant women tended to stay away from the markets and other public places. This was especially true among the ethnic minorities whose forests, mountains and difficult access routes facilitated concealment of family details from the tax assessors. Until very recently — in certain regions even still today — tribal and clan concepts existed, with elements of slavery and serfdom, of pre-feudal forms of society together with their appropriate forms of family and social organizations including polyandry.

Among more than thirty different nationalities, the greatest single racial grouping is the Lao Lum, who probably total about one million. The largest single minority grouping are the Lao Thenh tribes of Indonesian origin and after them the Lao Xung, of Chinese origin, among whom the Meo tribes are predominant. In the towns and villages of the plains and main communication routes there are also many Vietnamese of more recent origin, including artisans and family adherents of officials brought in by the French to serve in the colonial administration. Of the three main national groupings of Indochina, the French preferred Vietnamese to Cambodians and Laotians because of their superior intellectual and physical dynamism. They live more or less integrated with the Lao Lum as artisans, shopkeepers, rice farmers or fishermen. At one period when part of Laos was a vassal of Annam (now Central Vietnam) and another part a vassal of Siam, the rulers agreed to divide the country for political, fiscal and conscription purposes in a way that is probably unique in history. Plains-dwellers whose houses were on piles would be considered Laotians, with taxation and conscription loyalties to the local rulers; those with

houses on ordinary ground foundations were Vietnamese, with the same obligations to Annam.

There was another more classic division of the country when rival Western powers appeared on the scene at the end of the nineteenth century. The British, based in India, were expanding east into Burma and Siam; their main goal was southern China. The French, based on Cochin China (the southern part of Vietnam which includes the Mekong delta) and having swallowed up Annam and Tonking, the central and northern part of Vietnam, and Cambodia, also had an eye on southern China. Laos was a secondary prize on which neither side wanted to waste powder and shot. Agreement was reached in the Anglo-French Treaty of Bangkok (1893) whereby the British recognized French domination over all of Laos up to the left bank of the Mekong, while Laotian territory on the right bank reverted to Siam, then a British semi-colony. Laos was thus neatly carved up between the British and French spheres of influence, France accepting that Siam was a British-dominated buffer state between the main bases of French and British imperialism on the Asian mainland.

In terms of population, economic and social development or natural resources, mid-twentieth-century Laos hardly seemed qualified for a leading role on the stage of history. Unfortunately for the leisurely, gentle Laotian people, steeped in Buddhist tolerance and pacifism, their country was forced into playing just such an unrewarding role. Through no fault or desire of its own, Laos became a domino of the Pentagon and the CIA; its toppling could be presented as a major defeat and disaster for the 'free world' and thus a *casus belli.*

My own first contact with the Laotian problem was in early March 1954. The Geneva Conference had already been scheduled. Apart from discussing a peaceful settlement in Korea — my main interest in those days — the Conference was also to discuss a ceasefire in Indochina. I decided to visit the Vietminh headquarters in the North Vietnamese jungle and find out what I could about the Indochina war. There, in addition to meeting President Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and other Vietnamese leaders for the first time, I also met the head of the Pathet Lao, Prince Souphanouvong. It was my first-ever meeting with a prince and also my first realization that Indochina was not just a single state, as most non-specialists regarded it in those days, but made up of the three separate entities of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, each with its distinctive language, customs and cultures, each in different stages of social and economic development.

Souphanouvong was at Ho Chi Minh's headquarters to co-ordinate policies for the forthcoming Geneva Conference, where Laos was bound to be discussed. Also, the battle of Dien Bien Phu was just

shaping up and the Pathet Lao forces were blocking French attempts to open up a land route from their Laos bases through to the valley of Dien Bien Phu. Souphanouvong is a compact, short but powerfully-built man. His face, walnut brown after years of living in the open, with its high cheekbones and broad forehead, reinforces the impression of strength, intelligence and vitality. Like most of his race, he has jet-black hair and eyes. He expresses himself with vigour and in the clear, direct terms of a technician, sure of his subject, with no time lost in the superficial courtesies so often encountered in Asia, even among progressives if they have feudal backgrounds. Despite his court upbringing, Souphanouvong, as I later discovered during visits to the Pathet Lao areas, had completely identified himself with his people.

Speaking an impeccable French — with clarifying remarks in very good English — Souphanouvong at our first meeting gave me a concentrated briefing on the history of the Pathet Lao and the ups and downs of the Laotian resistance struggle up to the military-political situation at that moment.

Briefly it was as follows. From the time the French occupied Laos, resistance in some form or place, mainly by the ethnic minorities, never ceased. But the various uprisings were invariably crushed. As national cohesion was non-existent, the French could exploit differences between the Lao Lum and the ethnic minorities, fomenting and exploiting inter-tribal quarrels. They could concentrate their forces to suppress the unco-ordinated uprisings one at a time. The development of the resistance forces in Vietnam against the French and Japanese in the early 1940s stimulated ideas of a similar united struggle in Laos. A successful uprising had been staged in August 1945, as in Vietnam. Also as in Vietnam, the French returned in force a few months later to try to restore their colonial rule. A resistance struggle had been waged ever since in close co-ordination with that of the Vietminh. As for Prince Souphanouvong's own role, part of it emerged at our first meeting, but most of it was pieced together later.

Souphanouvong was the youngest of twenty sons of Prince Boun Khong, who headed one of Laos's three reigning families, each with its separate capital — at Luang Prabang where Souphanouvong grew up, at Vientiane, and at Paksé in the south. Boun Khong's eldest son, Prince Phetsarat, had been the last viceroy of Laos under the French. In between the youngest and eldest sons and born of a different mother was Prince Souvanna Phouma. It was Phetsarat who brought up the two half-brothers when their father died and it was he — a progressive individual for his day — who later sent them abroad with instructions to study subjects which would be of practical use in developing their backward country. Phetsarat had set the example by graduating in

mechanical engineering in Paris, with printing machinery as his speciality. The half-brothers also studied in Paris, Souvanna Phouma taking a triple degree in marine, electrical and civil engineering, and Souphanouvong graduating as a road and bridge-building engineer at France's famous *Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées*. Both were brilliant students and at the time they graduated, and for many years to come, the three princes were the only engineers in Laos.

In 1937, at the time of the Popular Front government in France, Souphanouvong was doing postgraduate work on the docks at Bordeaux and Le Havre. Like Ho Chi Minh, he soon appreciated that the average Frenchman in France was very different from the colonialist specimens who lorded it over his compatriots in his own country. His contacts were with progressive intellectuals and the French working class. He was deeply impressed by French revolutionary and humanist culture and the contrast this offered with everything he had experienced of French colonialism. He was stimulated by the contagious, progressive spirit of the great days of Popular Front rule with its overtones of anti-colonialism.

There were no roads or bridges to be built under the French administration in Laos, so Souphanouvong started his engineering career over the border in Vietnam. He was appalled by the living and working conditions of workers on the rubber plantations through which he built roads, and in the labour camps alongside railway construction sites on which he worked. His contempt for French colonialism reached flashpoint when Indochina was ceded to the Japanese without the French 'protectors' firing a shot in defence of the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian peoples.

After his contacts with militant progressives in France, it was natural that he contacted progressives in Vietnam — many of them organized in the Indochinese Communist Party. There came a fateful meeting with Ho Chi Minh. After a long exchange of opinions about colonialism in their two countries, Souphanouvong put the blunt question as to what he should do for his own people. He got an equally blunt reply: 'Seize power from the colonialists!' And Ho Chi Minh went on to explain how he was preparing to do this in Vietnam. Souphanouvong set about doing the same thing, first by contacting young Laotian patriots in Vietnam, then returning to form resistance groups on Laotian soil on the pattern of those being formed by Uncle Ho for a seizure of power in Vietnam.

A successful uprising was staged in August 1945, mainly by groups of intellectuals in the cities and patriotic elements within the French-formed army, whom the very persuasive Souphanouvong had won over to his side. The weakness of the resistance forces was that they

had no roots in the countryside. Souphanouvong tried to mobilize his brothers, a number of whom were leading cadres in the army. Phetsarat gave the movement his blessing from above; Souvanna Phouma agreed to accept a post in the new government formed after the king abdicated and independence was declared.

Then the French returned. As in their original occupation of Indochina, they left the reoccupation of Laos until — thanks to British troops ostensibly sent to Vietnam to disarm and repatriate the Japanese — they had consolidated their positions in southern and central Vietnam and Cambodia and had secured their lines of communication in those areas. When they were ready, they made a three-pronged invasion of Laos, up from Cambodia, across from central Vietnam, down from Kuomintang China. The Pathet Lao forces fought bravely but were defeated in a decisive battle on March 21, 1946, at Thakhek on the Mekong, a strategic junction where the main road leading west from Vietnam meets the main road leading north from Cambodia. The French made full use of their monopoly of air power and artillery. Souphanouvong personally commanded the Pathet Lao forces and was seriously wounded; he was carried by the remnants of his forces over the frontier into Thailand. It took another five months for the French to consolidate their positions in the main towns and the roads leading to them.

A Laotian government-in-exile was set up in Bangkok, the government of Thailand at that time favouring the independence movements in Vietnam and Laos. Prince Phetsarat was Head of State and other key members included Princes Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma and a certain Katay Don Sasorith of part Vietnamese origin who had joined the former resistance government in August 1945 once power had been seized.

After recovering from his wounds, Souphanouvong began to analyse the reasons for the military defeat and concluded that the main mistake had been in basing the resistance exclusively on the towns and in trying to fight the French on their terms. He and a handful of supporters started to study the revolutionary experiences of the ethnic minorities and the Lao Lum peasants, and concluded that the peasantry and tribespeople, the mountains and jungle provided precious reserves for a long resistance struggle. The latter must be based not only on the urban intelligentsia but above all on the peasantry and ethnic minorities. A sense of unity and nationhood must be forged. He tried to persuade other members of the government-in-exile to support him in a new start, based on mobilizing the whole Laotian people in armed struggle. But when it came to the point of leaving the comfortable life of exiles in Bangkok, the others decided to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Souphanouvong returned alone in 1947 to organize a resistance movement. He found that the remnants of his original and widely separated armed forces had been continuing as well as they could on their own. Loosely co-ordinated commands had been set up in the mountains along the frontiers with Vietnam. Some of the tribespeople had started their own resistance movements. It was a situation in search of a leader. Souphanouvong accepted the role.

The French in the meantime had restored the king to nominal power — which did not in fact extend beyond the palace grounds — and had experimented with a number of short-lived puppet governments. But no one with any prestige was prepared to serve. Eventually the French turned to the government-in-exile in Thailand. The first to desert, slinking away without even a word to his colleagues, was Katay. (He was later to catch the eye of John Foster Dulles with a book: *Laos — Ideal Cornerstone in the Anti-Communist Struggle in South-east Asia* — a sure bait for Dulles's talent scouts!) Souvanna Phouma was the next to desert and was used by the French to persuade the others. Only Phetsarat, too old to join Souphanouvong in the jungle, refused to return to serve the French. He remained in exile when Souvanna Phouma, in 1949, led the rest of the former provisional government back to serve in a puppet administration in Vientiane.

Starting from 1950, the U.S.A. directly subsidized French efforts to wipe out the resistance forces, to the extent of 25 million dollars a year, but the Pathet Lao units continued to grow in strength and influence.

The culminating point in the war itself, and in co-operation between the Vietminh and Pathet Lao forces, was just shaping up at the time of my first meeting with Souphanouvong; the cream of the French Expeditionary Corps was bottled up and encircled by Giap's forces at Dien Bien Phu, just across the border from Laos in north-west Vietnam, and all routes of access and exit were solidly blocked by Pathet Lao veterans.

By that time, the U.S.A. was footing eighty per cent of the costs of France's 'dirty war' in Indochina and plans were being made to intervene directly with U.S. combat troops — not to mention U.S. air power.

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[1] On December 15, 1969, Fulbright demanded an end to the secrecy in Laos.

[2] In *The Furtive War* (International Publishers, New York, 1963) the author drew attention to the extent of America's secret war in South Vietnam and the beginning of a similar one in Laos.

[3] *Washington Post*, October 29, 1969.

[4] Office of Strategic Services.

When it became obvious that neither U.S. dollars nor U.S. tanks, planes and artillery pieces (the remnants of which still litter the valley of Dien Bien Phu) could save the French from military defeat, the Pentagon proposed direct U.S. military intervention, although agreement had already been reached among the big powers to discuss a ceasefire at Geneva. The former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Roger Hilsman, described the plan as follows:[1]

'By mid-March [1954], the French defenders at Dienbienphu were in trouble, and Washington was worried. Admiral Radford, Chairman of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed to the French high command that sixty American bombers from Clark Field in the Philippines escorted by 150 Navy fighters from the Seventh Fleet should conduct a raid on the forces ringing Dienbienphu in an attempt to "eliminate" Viet Minh artillery installations and communications — "Operation Vulture" it was named. . . .'

Congressional leaders were briefed. After the Korean experience, where 'Operation Strangler' had failed against the Korean–Chinese transport system, they were sceptical of Radford's promise that 'one strike would do the job, but that if not, surely a second would . . .'. According to Hilsman, they laid down three conditions that would have to be met before they sanctioned the plan. These represent a striking illustration of the congessional leaders' devotion to the independence and self-determination of nations:

'1. . . . that support to the French be multilateral. 2. . . . that the French should speed up the process of granting Indochina its independence, and 3. . . . that the French should agree not to withdraw their military forces from Indochina. . . .' How the third condition could be reconciled with the second, Hilsman does not explain. Dulles promptly set to work on Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, to try to provide the first offer of 'multilateral support'. Eden describes in his book *The Full Circle* his own and Churchill's indignation when they saw that Dulles was trying to push them into the position of not only getting involved in, but also seeming to be the instigators of 'multilateral support' — that is, a Korean war-type international intervention.

While Dulles was doing his best, the Pentagon went ahead with even more ambitious planning. General Matthew B. Ridgway, then Army Chief of Staff and, after his experiences as UN Commander

in Korea, a disbeliever in the decisive role of air power, sent a team of specialists to estimate how many U.S. combat troops would be necessary to make intervention effective. They reported back, still according to Hilsman who had access to all the documents, 'that at least five divisions would be needed at the outset, rising to ten or more as the fighting progressed . . .'. Ridgway was against the project and in his book *The Soldier* he later commented that his specialists' report 'played a considerable, perhaps decisive part in persuading our Government not to embark on that tragic adventure'.

Although Radford's plan was specifically aimed at rescuing the French at Dien Bien Phu, it would certainly have involved Laos as well as Vietnam, as Pentagon thinking was in terms of the war in Indochina and not in its component parts. In the French winter-spring offensive of 1953–54, Thailand-based planes flown by U.S. pilots had caused heavy human and material losses in raids on the Pathet Lao controlled areas of northern Laos, according to official Pathet Lao documents.

Dulles turned up for the early stages of the Geneva Conference and tried desperately to persuade those countries that had taken part in the Korean war — and whose foreign ministers were in Geneva for the Korean part of the Conference — to join in a new war of intervention in Indochina. But the only ones to offer any troops at all were South Korea and Australia, with Thailand and the Philippines making half-hearted offers 'in principle'. When Churchill finally and emphatically killed the plan by refusing British support and Canada's Lester Pearson did the same, Dulles left Geneva in a rage. Those of us who were there will never forget his expression as he stalked out of the former League of Nations building, obviously boiling with fury after receiving the decisive telegram on Churchill's refusal. He left Geneva within hours but continued from Washington to do everything possible to avert a ceasefire, even offering French Foreign Minister Bidault a couple of A-bombs if that would keep France in the war. But the Laniel–Bidault government fell, to be replaced by one under Pierre Mendès-France who set himself the deadline of July 20 by which to get a ceasefire or resign.

Dulles still had a few more tricks to play. In a dramatic and little-publicized meeting with Eden and Mendès-France in Paris on July 13, just one week before the latter had pledged to have a 'ceasefire or bust', Dulles laid his plan for SEATO on the table, demanding that it be set up immediately as the instrument for emergency intervention in Indochina. After a stormy session during which both Dulles and Mendès-France pounded the table with their fists, the French premier, staunchly supported by Eden, rejected the 'emergency intervention'

but accepted the SEATO concept, on condition that it be set up only after all possibilities of arranging a ceasefire had been exhausted. Dulles stormed away from that meeting in as black a rage as at the time of his earlier setback in Geneva. But there were still one or two cards to play. In her efforts to break the fighting solidarity of the Indochinese peoples, and according to how hard-pressed she was on the battlefield or by her allies, France handed out bits and pieces of independence to Cambodia and Laos, but in such a way that whatever was given could easily have been taken back if she could establish the upper hand. By the time the Geneva Conference of Indochina got under way, Souvanna Phouma was nominally prime minister of an 'independent' Laos, represented at Geneva by Defence Minister Kou Voravong and Foreign Minister Phoui Sananikone, a member of an old feudal family who had long co-operated with the French. The trappings of 'independence' had been hastily fashioned to keep Souphanouvong's resistance government away from the conference table.

As the clocks ticked away towards midnight on the fateful night of July 20, agreement on ceasefire procedures having been reached between the French and Vietminh delegations, it became known that insuperable difficulties had arisen within the Laotian delegation. Sananikone refused to sign on the pretext that it implied recognition of the Pathet Lao, because of the provisions for regrouping their forces in the two northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. (The final agreements were not signed until dawn on July 21 because the Cambodian delegation refused to agree to a similar regrouping procedure for the Khmer Issarak forces which were proportionately much smaller than those of the Pathet Lao.) During that night of July 20, the 'hawks' among the American journalists were confidently predicting that the deadline would never be met, that Mendès-France would have to resign and that the Geneva Conference would collapse.[2] They were counting above all on the Laotian delegation. But in the end Kou Voravong signed for Laos and the Geneva Conference came to a successful end as far as negotiating a ceasefire was concerned.

Back in Vientiane, Kou Voravong revealed in the National Assembly that an agent of the U.S.A. had paid one million dollars into a Swiss bank account for Phoui Sananikone in return for his pledge that the Laotian delegation would not sign the Geneva Agreements. A few days later, Kou Voravong was assassinated as he sat — a dinner guest — with his back to the window in the home of Phoui Sananikone. The assassin who fired through the window stepped into a waiting boat and crossed the Mekong river into Thailand. In addition to his 'crimes' of having signed the Geneva Agreements — on instructions

from Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma — and of having revealed Phoui Sananikone's role at Geneva, nine days earlier Kou Voravong had arranged and participated in the first meeting between Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong. This represented a start to the political negotiations provided for under the Geneva Agreements to bring about national reconciliation between the royal government and the Pathet Lao. To cap everything, Kou Voravong had also revealed and denounced in the National Assembly plans to stage a treacherous attack on the Pathet Lao forces as they withdrew from their bases and regrouped in accordance with the Geneva Agreements. A friend of the assassinated minister later told me that Kou Voravong had accepted an invitation from Phoui Sananikone to 'talk things over' but that he had gone to the dinner determined not to yield an inch. The assassin's bullet in his back was the result.

At Geneva, Bidault, who had once referred to Ho Chi Minh during a United Nations debate as a 'non-existent phantom', had tried to pretend that Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao were also 'non-existent phantoms' and that the only question to be discussed was the withdrawal of 'Vietminh aggressors' from Laos. However, when it came to discussing ceasefire details over maps, the French had to recognize officially what their field commanders knew very well, namely that the Pathet Lao forces held important bases and areas throughout the whole of Laos. It was the French who insisted that in order to make a ceasefire and separation of combatant forces effective, the Pathet Lao forces were to withdraw from the ten central and southern provinces and regroup in Phong Saly and Sam Neua, the two north-eastern provinces having common frontiers with Vietnam and China respectively.[3] It was a blow to have to abandon their old bases, especially solid resistance areas in Attopeu and Saravane provinces and the Bolovens Plateau. But as the counterpart to the regrouping was to be nation-wide elections which the Pathet Lao were sure to win, it seemed only a temporary sacrifice. Sam Neua and Phong Saly were, however, provinces in which the Pathet Lao were relatively weak at the time of regrouping.

The political upheaval which followed the assassination of Kou Voravong and its implications ended in Souvanna Phouma resigning as prime minister, to be replaced by Katay. The latter, who had faithfully served the French in the office of the Senior Resident, had jumped on the bandwagon of the first resistance government, deserted to the French again in Bangkok and had emerged as Washington's No. 1 choice as a Laotian Ngo Dinh Diem. Katay's wife by second marriage was the sister of Prince Boun Oum of Champassak whom Katay, with U.S. support, was grooming to replace the ailing King Sissavang Vong

on the throne at Luang Prabang. With Katay in power in Vientiane and unlimited dollars at his disposal, Dulles was ready to move into a more active phase of upsetting the Geneva Agreements and for the U.S.A. to move into the ' power vacuum ' which would be caused in Laos by the French departure.

A fascinating account of the real plot hatched between Dulles, the CIA and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, is revealed by Brigadier-General James M. Gavin who, at the period of which he was writing, was Ridgway's deputy Chief of Army Staff, in charge of Plans.[4] As the French had ' unwisely folded ' and were ' acting in their own self-interest rather than in the interests of the free world as a whole ' it was up to the U.S.A. ' to assume the full burden of combat against Communism in that area . . .'. Immediately after the Geneva Conference, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ' began with the highest priority to study a proposal to send combat troops into the Red River delta of North Vietnam . . .'. Ridgway, as during the Dien Bien Phu crisis, was wary. He sent Gavin to South Vietnam to size up what sort of forces would be needed. Gavin and his experts agreed such an operation would probably mean war with China, as the U.S. Navy wanted to occupy Hainan island, being ' unwilling to risk their ships in the Haiphong area without first invading and capturing the island . . .'. As the Chinese might react by reopening the Korean front, the Joint Chiefs must make ' the agonizing decision as to whether we should wait to be attacked in Korea, or whether we should take the initiative in reopening that front . . .'.

To occupy the Red River delta and capture Haiphong and Hanoi, Gavin estimated it would take ' eight combat divisions supported by thirty-five engineer battalions and all the artillery and logistical support such mammoth undertakings require . . .'.

Admiral Radford was enthusiastic about this plan; so were Dulles and the CIA. Radford was ' fully supported by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Chief of Naval Operations . . .'. Gavin was against it because of the Army horror of getting bogged down in a land war in Asia and tangling with the Chinese again. Ridgway agreed with Gavin and went over Radford's head to persuade Eisenhower to veto the scheme. Instead it was decided to build up Ngo Dinh Diem's army in the south to do the job in a famous ' March To The North '. The Radford–Dulles–CIA plan called for an invasion well before July 1956 and the promised elections to unify Vietnam.

As for Laos. . . . In February 1955, after a SEATO meeting in Bangkok, Dulles dropped in to Vientiane for a chat with Katay. The political talks arranged by Kou Voravong had finally started on December 30, 1954, and while Katay played for time over procedural

matters, U.S. transport planes dropped commando units into Sam Neua and Phong Saly in an attempt to wipe out the Pathet Lao bases and headquarters there. When the talks did get started, Katay's delegate produced a plan to set up a ' Surrender Committee ' to arrange for the disarming and surrender of the Pathet Lao forces. Obviously the Pathet Lao refused and proposed the setting up of a political committee to arrange the implementation of the Geneva Agreements, nation-wide elections, unification of the country, integration of the Pathet Lao into the national community and other points included in the ceasefire agreements.

The talks quickly got bogged down, as Katay intended. It was obvious that he was playing for time and awaiting instructions, which were brought personally by Dulles. A couple of weeks after the latter's visit, Katay's troops launched a major attack into Sam Neua, the beginning of a long and unsuccessful campaign to occupy the two provinces, wipe out the Pathet Lao and present the U.S.A. with an aggressor's dream in the shape of the vast plateaus and plains of Laos from which U.S. air power could dominate the entire region. ' If Laos was not precisely a dagger pointed at the heart of Kansas, it was very plainly a gateway to South-east Asia . . .,' writes Arthur Schlesinger.[5] The U.S.A. was in. Arms, dollars and transport planes arrived for a start; then military ' instructors ', followed by ' advisers ' who gradually assumed tactical command of military operations.

Schlesinger has some pungent comments on the early years of the Dulles plan to transform Laos into a ' bulwark against Communism ' and a ' bastion of freedom ' — policies continued by Dean Rusk and the Nixon administration:

' In pursuit of this dream, the United States flooded the wild and primitive land with nearly 300 million dollars by the end of 1960. This amounted to 150 dollars for every inhabitant — more aid per capita than any other country and almost double the previous per capita income of the Laotians. Eighty-five per cent of this went to pay the total bill for the Royal Laotian Army, which by 1959 was outfitted in American style with jeeps, trucks and a Transportation Corps (all despite the fact that Laos had no all-weather roads) as well as an Ordnance Corps, a Quartermaster Corps and Military Police. When trained at all, and effective training did not begin till 1959, the Laotian troops learned, not counter-guerilla warfare, but conventional manoeuvres. Of the 300 million only seven million went for technical co-operation and economic development. . . .'

My own first visit to Vientiane was in May 1956. Instead of the ten days' visa I had requested, the hospitable airport officials insisted on giving me one for twenty-one days. A few hours after my arrival,

a policeman called at my hotel saying he needed my travel document for a small change in the wording of the visa. When he returned it, one word had been added: Cancelled. An embarrassed police officer said I must leave immediately. Three diplomatic missions, in separate *démarches*, had demanded my expulsion. The U.S. Embassy had applied direct pressure through American 'advisers' at police headquarters and the Laotian police had acted without reference to their own government. I was to be the victim of a particularly nasty short-circuit of administrative procedures.

Why all this bother? The Americans and their closest allies knew that a few months previously I had seen Souphanouvong. The disastrous failure of Katay's military campaigns against the Pathet Lao had caused his temporary downfall and Souvanna Phouma was in power again as prime minister. I had just come from Cambodia where the Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, had told me in no uncertain terms that Cambodia absolutely rejected being placed within a SEATO 'zone of protection'.[6] Perhaps I would seek from Souvanna Phouma a similar statement of rejection of SEATO 'protection'. Perhaps I had brought a message to facilitate contacts between the two half-brothers and get talks started again — the very thought of which sent temperatures mounting in the SEATO embassies. The atmosphere in the U.S. Embassy was panicky enough at the best of times in those days, I was informed by a friendly colleague.

The previous ambassador, Charles W. Yost, had been whipped off to another post a few weeks earlier, because an FBI investigating team checking on the reasons for U.S. diplomatic defeats in South-east Asia discovered that Yost's wife, of Polish origin, had been seen on several occasions speaking *in Polish* to members of the Polish delegation of the International Control Commission. At a diplomatic reception on the Saturday night of my arrival the U.S. chargé d'affaires had approached Katay, then vice-premier, and enlisted his support for my expulsion. Fate took a hand next morning when Katay was offered a ride on a pony belonging to the wife of the head of the Canadian delegation to the ICC. Reluctant to admit that he was not a good rider, Katay climbed aboard and was promptly thrown, the pony galloping off and dragging him behind with a foot caught in the stirrup. With body and pride badly wounded, Katay retired to his home-town of Paksé in the south. At the Laotian Foreign Office on the Monday morning — there had been no planes to take me away in between — the cancellation of my visa was said to have been a misunderstanding. The American chargé d'affaires was snubbed when he also called — while I was at the Foreign Ministry — to officially demand my expulsion. A scribbled note from an official and the police,

smiles all over their faces, restored my visa. I *did* see Souvanna Phouma. He *did* reject Laos being placed under SEATO protection; he *did* enquire as to Souphanouvong's health and expressed the hope that negotiations would soon get under way again.

Katay's accident removed him from the scene for a critical two weeks, during which arrangements were finalized for the meeting between the two half-brothers to end the civil war. The first such meeting was in July 1956, following the arrival of Souphanouvong at Vientiane. Battlefield activity ceased completely and, by the end of 1956, agreement had been reached on all points under discussion. The Neo Lao Haksat would start functioning as a normal political party; its representatives would be included in a new coalition government of national union, pending nation-wide elections; Laos would adopt a policy of neutrality based on the five principles of peaceful co-existence and 'would not adhere to any military alliance and not permit any country to set up their military bases on Laotian territory apart from those envisaged in the Geneva Agreement'. (This proviso related to some small French training installations.)

This agreement marked a severe setback to the first U.S. attempt to install and consolidate a pro-U.S. puppet régime in Laos. J. Graham Parsons, who succeeded Yost as U.S. ambassador to Laos, was later to testify before a U.S. congressional committee: 'I struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition.'[7] He failed, temporarily at least, but continued the battle as Under-Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

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[1] *To Move A Nation*, page 100.

[2] To re-read Joe Alsop's reports of the final stages of the Geneva Conference is to get an idea of the inspired pessimism which reigned at the time.

[3] As an example of how those in high places are ill-informed, one could cite ex-President Kennedy's special adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in *A Thousand Days* (André Deutsch, London, 1965). He writes: 'In 1953 the Pathet Lao, with Viet Minh support, occupied two provinces in northeastern Laos . . .' (page 273). In fact it was in late 1954, without Vietminh support, and under the specific provisions of the Geneva Agreements.

[4] *Crisis Now* by James M. Gavin in collaboration with Arthur T. Hadley, Random House, New York, 1968, pages 45–49.

[5] *A Thousand Days*, quoted earlier, pages 273–274.

[6] At one of its first sessions, the SEATO powers had included South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in a SEATO 'zone of protection' without consulting the governments or peoples of those countries.

[7] Mentioned by Hilsman in *To Move A Nation*, page 118.

9. The second round

An agreement was one thing, but getting it implemented was quite another. Good agreements have never been lacking throughout the whole history of the Laotian problem, but any that implied real national reconciliation and real independence were sabotaged right, left and centre by the U.S.A. The Souvanna Phouma–Souphanouvong agreements had to be ratified by the National Assembly and the U.S. Embassy launched a vigorous campaign to prevent this. Every member of the National Assembly was visited by U.S. Embassy personnel armed with fat wallets. Where bribes failed, blackmail and threats were used. While this campaign was in full swing, I made a second visit to Vientiane — in mid-January 1957. Souphanouvong, whom I had hoped to see, had returned to his Sam Neua headquarters to arrange Pathet Lao participation in the new government. The American and British embassies took advantage of his absence to step up their pressure on Souvanna Phouma to repudiate the agreements. I arrived — this time with my wife — with visas valid for a week. They were again cancelled within a few hours with requests to leave the country within twenty-four hours.

An American colleague from the Scripps-Howard newspapers who had fixed a luncheon appointment turned up late, red of face and apologetic. 'I can't be seen even talking to you,' he explained without sitting down. 'I wish I could stir up the sort of sensation in our embassies that you do by just being around. . . .' I asked what it was all about. 'The Embassy says you are mainly responsible for bringing the two princes together again. . . .' And he took off — a frightened little man. Back at the hotel the police were waiting to ask when I was leaving. They spoke of a motor-cycle escort to the airport.

A visit to the Foreign Ministry produced no results this time. 'There are forces stronger than us' was the apologetic reply. Souvanna Phouma sent me a message by the Indian Chairman of the International Control Commission: 'This time I cannot help you. You are welcome to return after the coalition government is formed' — an inglorious illustration of his lack of backbone. The British ambassador protested to the ICC Chairman that it was 'scandalous' that such correspondents could travel on the ICC courier plane — the only method of transport, then as now, between Hanoi, Vientiane and Phnom Penh. As an extra, revealing rebuke, the British ambassador added: 'The job of the ICC should have been to keep those two

princes apart instead of trying to bring them together. . . .' (This was because ICC transport had been used to shuttle Souphanouvong back and forth between his Sam Neua base and Vientiane during the negotiations. All this was most strictly connected with the implementation of the Geneva Agreements, which the ICC was there to supervise and the British ambassador, representing one of the co-chairmen, should have been doing everything to encourage.)

The expulsion order was modified to enable me to leave on the next ICC flight to Hanoi, giving me time for a meeting with National Assembly deputies who told of the huge bribes being offered for a 'No' vote on the agreements. U.S. financial 'aid' had been halted to back up the U.S. ambassador's threats that Congress would never grant funds to governments with 'communists' in them. It took the personal intervention of Nehru (representing the Chairman of the ICC) with Eisenhower to get the dollars flowing again.

Before I left, there was a curious and revealing incident. My wife and I were having an apéritif in a small bar on the afternoon prior to our departure for Hanoi. The bar was deserted except for one other client. Although there were at least a dozen free tables, he staggered over to ours and asked, in an unmistakeably American voice, if he could join us. I replied: 'Frankly — no! We're here for a quiet chat and there are plenty more tables.' He staggered off, belching, to another table. A few minutes later he zig-zagged out and appeared to collapse into a cycle-rickshaw parked outside the bar, starting to snore. When we called the French barman for the bill, he leaned over to wipe the table and whispered:

'He's not drunk. He's CIA. I know because I'm *Deuxième Bureau*.[1] Don't be fooled by him. Watch his jeep — he's got a special gadget in it.' By this time the American had rolled out of the cycle-rickshaw into the driving seat of the jeep and seemed to be fumbling with the gears. As we stepped out onto the footpath the jeep leaped at us like a rocket. Had I not jumped and swung my arm to knock my wife back, we would both have been crushed against a stone wall adjoining the bar. As it was, the jeep made a crazy, screaming turn, lurched back onto the street and went roaring on its way. Had there been an 'accident' the pretext would have been 'drunken driver' — with diplomatic immunity he could have been flown out of the country without even perfunctory court proceedings.

Next morning, before the plane left, we dropped into the bar again to thank the barman. 'I've never seen you before and I don't know what you're talking about,' he snapped.

Whether he was really *Deuxième Bureau* or not, I shall never know, nor why he would have taken the unusual step of revealing it, even if

he was, unless it was to add urgency to his warning. At that time and ever since, the French were very hostile to American attempts to take over the country and as the chief American accusation against me was that I was responsible for 'bringing the princes together' and supporting the 'neutralists', the French possibly had an interest in seeing that I was not bumped off by the CIA. The latter presumably knew we would be in the bar at that time, as we had fixed an appointment with another American journalist who did not turn up. As a similar jeep 'accident' had occurred a few weeks earlier in Athens, in which the well-known left-wing Greek leader, Lambrakis, had been run down and killed by a CIA agent, we considered ourselves fortunate to escape. Had we not been warned, and had we stepped straight out to the street which was the normal exit from the bar, we would have been crushed against a huge truck, parked a few yards ahead of the jeep. As it was, we left for our Hanoi base without further incident.

In March 1957, Prince Phetsarat returned after eleven years of exile and was immediately courted by the U.S. and British embassies. They had great hopes that after so many years in Bangkok he would take a pro-SEATO line. A month after his return, although he had expressed the desire to live as a 'simple citizen', the King restored his old title of Viceroy. This now had little meaning but it gave him the prestige of an 'elder statesman', a status which the pro-SEATO embassies were certain they could turn to their advantage. His first public statement horrified them. Phetsarat wholeheartedly approved the setting up of a coalition government and called for 'absolute neutrality, clear and without hypocrisy', and as concrete expression of this he proposed the immediate establishment of diplomatic relations with Hanoi and Peking. A fascinating sidelight on his return and on his character was that he brought with him some modern printing machinery on which he hoped Vientiane's first daily newspaper would be produced.

By one means and another the actual formation of the coalition government was delayed until August 1957, although neither bribes nor threats were able to block ratification by the National Assembly. Souvanna Phouma remained premier and took over the Ministry of Defence. Souphanouvong became Minister of Economic Affairs and Planning, Katay Minister of the Interior, and Sananikone Minister of Foreign Affairs. By November 1957, the Pathet Lao loyally wound up their administration in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, handing them over to the royal government. The Pathet Lao armed forces were demobilized, and the soldiers returned to their villages except for two battalions that were to be integrated into the Vientiane army as intact units.

'Complementary' elections were to be held in May 1958 to fill

about one-third of the National Assembly seats. With Katay as Minister of the Interior and any real electioneering banned as 'subversive propaganda', the results seemed a foregone conclusion. For the twenty-one seats at stake, the Neo Lao Haksat, facing its first electoral test, presented only ten candidates. Nine were elected. Katay and his allies presented twenty-six candidates, of whom four were elected. Sananikone's supporters did not win a single seat. But the Peace and Neutrality Party, headed by Quinim Pholsena and allied to the Neo Lao Haksat, won four out of five seats contested, in addition to four seats it already held in the National Assembly. Out of sixteen candidates presented for twenty-one seats, the Neo Lao Haksat and its ally won thirteen — and Souphanouvong won his seat in Vientiane with a far greater margin than any other candidate. As an expression of public opinion, nothing could have been clearer.

General elections for all fifty-nine seats in the National Assembly were to be held the following year and it was clear to Washington that under the most scrupulous Western concept of 'clean elections' and even with Katay's dollar-greased electoral machinery, Souphanouvong and his allies would have a landslide victory. It was also clear that Katay's usefulness was coming to an end. Within a few weeks of his humiliating defeat at the 'complementary elections', a new gimmick with a new personality appeared on the scene. This was the 'Committee for the Defence of National Interests', CDNI for short, formed by a group of fascist-minded officers, chief amongst them General Phoumi Nosavan.

Roger Hilsman's version of the situation written from the 'inside' some years later does not differ too much from mine written from the 'outside' at the time. Referring specifically to the elections, he comments:[2]

'There was much ineptness on the government side — they had run eighty-five candidates for the twenty-one seats at stake — but the significance of the election was clear. . . .

'Members of the CDNI, "the Committee for the Defence of the National Interests", which everyone knew that CIA had sponsored, were particularly active.

'The United States Government was also concerned. J. Graham Parsons, the ambassador who had fought for "sixteen months to prevent a coalition," was now in Washington as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and there were apparently many there who agreed with him. In any event, the United States Government reached a decision to hold up its monthly payment to the Lao Government — on the pretext that there was corruption in the commodity import program and a need for monetary reform.[3] The

CDNI and others made the most of the opportunity: a parliamentary crisis quickly flared up and on July 23, they succeeded in swinging enough votes to cause Souvanna to lose a vote of confidence in the National Assembly and resign.

'Souvanna was sent off to be ambassador to Paris, and Phoui Sananikone formed a government that excluded the two Communist ministers[4] but did include four members of the CDNI who were not members of the National Assembly. He then embarked on the policy of "pro-Western" neutrality and backed it up by putting an end to most of the abuses in the commodity import program, abolishing the license system, providing for American customs inspectors, and instituting an effective monetary reform. . . .'[5]

Schlesinger's account is even more forthright: 'In 1958 Washington decided to instal a reliably pro-Western regime. CIA spooks put in their appearance, set up a Committee for the Defence of National Interests (CDNI) and brought back from France as its chief an energetic, ambitious and devious officer named Phoumi Nosavan. Prince Souvanna, who had shown himself an honest and respected if impulsive leader, was forced out of office; a veteran politician named Phoui Sananikoune took his place. In 1959 the State Department backed Phoui, but the CIA preferred Phoumi. . . .'[6]

It was an open secret in Vientiane that the U.S. Embassy had paid 100,000 dollars a vote to bring down the coalition government, but it was typical of the weak, vacillating stand that has marked the political career of Souvanna Phouma that he accepted defeat so easily and went off into exile as ambassador to Paris. In the new government, Katay was given another chance to 'redeem' himself. With the Ministries of Defence and the Interior in his hands, with the Pathet Lao forces disbanded except for the two battalions, with key cadres exposed and defenceless as integrated members of the administration, Katay was all set to prove his worth. Troops were sent to seal off the frontiers between Sam Neua and North Vietnam, and the killing started. In some provinces — Phong Saly for example — not a single Pathet Lao cadre escaped. In the old resistance bases at Attopeu and Saravane, to which cadres had returned after the 1957 agreements, the heads of those murdered were publicly exposed to show the Pathet Lao had physically ceased to exist. Katay did not, however, have enough troops and police to concentrate them everywhere at the same time for the arrests and killings — and in some areas small groups of armed resistance started up again.

Throughout the latter half of 1958 and the beginning of 1959, the killings went on; Katay was taking revenge for his defeats in 1955 by using his army and police against unarmed patriots who had devoted

years to the independence struggle. On February 11, 1959, Sananikone denounced the Geneva Agreements and declared that as far as his government was concerned the ICC had ceased to exist. Demands by the Soviet Union as Co-Chairman of the 1954 Geneva Conference to Britain, as the other Co-Chairman, for the reconvening of the ICC, backed by Nehru, went unanswered. Washington officially approved Sananikone's repudiation of the Geneva Agreements (as it had done when Ngo Dinh Diem did the same thing in South Vietnam). Katay and Sananikone went ahead with plans for the final coup — the liquidation of the two Pathet Lao battalions.

On May 9, 1959, the battalions, which by that time had been separated, one stationed near Luang Prabang and the other in the Plain of Jars, were ordered to line up for the ceremony of 'integration' into the Royal Army, without arms or uniforms — in fact in their underwear — as they were to be provided with new equipment, including uniforms. At the same time units of the Royal Army with U.S. tanks and artillery moved in to surround them. The battalion leaders demanded time to get instructions from their leaders in Vientiane, but by this time Prince Souphanouvong, Phoumi Vongvichit and other Neo Lao Haksat leaders had been placed under house arrest. On May 18, the two battalions were each issued with an order to surrender or be wiped out and tank-supported troops moved up for the kill. About one-third of No. 1 battalion escaped that night despite the 'eyeball to eyeball' encirclement. The following morning, General Rattikone, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Army, came in person to receive the surrender of No. 2 battalion — and found an empty barracks. No. 2 battalion had escaped intact. Despite a frantic pursuit during which paratroop battalions were dropped ahead of their escape route — and soundly thrashed — No. 2 battalion and eventually almost half of No. 1 battalion managed to march and fight their way back to their old resistance bases, or hide away in the jungle to await instructions. As revenge for this, Souphanouvong and other leaders were removed from house arrest and flung into gaol.

In Hilsman's version No. 2 battalion, 'taking the government forces completely by surprise — decamped to North Vietnam with all its equipment and dependents in a forced march from where it had been stationed on the Plain of Jars. . . . The Pathet Lao, with Vietnamese help, then set about to drive out the government forces and officials from the two provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua and to consolidate their control . . .'.[7] For what possible reason the Pathet Lao forces should first go to Vietnam, Hilsman does not explain. In fact, No. 2 battalion made an epic fighting march for almost one month from the Plain of Jars straight back to their former base in Sam Neua

province, where they were received with open arms by the population. There they split up into small groups and engaged the Royal Army garrison troops in guerilla warfare. A part of No. 1 battalion managed to straggle back to Phong Saly to do the same thing; another part was dispersed in Luang Prabang and neighbouring provinces where it started guerilla activities again in order to survive. Having dealt with the government troops, thrashing five battalions, two of them crack paratroop battalions air-dropped in their pursuit, and having fought their way out of several 'steel ring encirclements', No. 2 battalion had no difficulty in dealing with the demoralized troops in what had become their home province of Sam Neua.

The escape of the battalion was a horrifying blow to Sananikone–Katay and their CIA–State Department backers. They had no illusions as to the fighting quality of the Pathet Lao forces, nor as to the popular support they enjoyed throughout the country.

'Phoui, in turn,' Hilsman continued, 'asked for more American military aid and more American military technicians and advisers, and the United States agreed, announcing that it would send military technicians, who would wear civilian clothes in token deference to the Geneva accords, to help in expanding the Royal Lao Army from 25,000 to 29,000 men. . . .'[8]

Previous to this, Hilsman had provided an example of the duplicity and hypocrisy with which Washington violated key paragraphs of the Geneva Agreements in starting to build up the army to 25,000:

'To accommodate to the Pentagon's insistence on having a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in spite of the provisions of the Geneva Agreements, the State Department agreed to let one be set up in disguise. The PEO, for Programs Evaluations Office, wore civilian clothes — to no avail, since the deception eventually became known and hit the newspapers.'[9]

Guerilla warfare started up again in many parts of the country and mutual recriminations between Sananikone and the new rising star of the CIA, Nosavan, came to a climax at the end of 1959[10] when Sananikone kicked Nosavan and the other CDNI ministers out of his government. Within twenty-four hours — on New Year's Eve — Nosavan carried out a military coup and swept Sananikone out of office. This was the real start of the Nosavan era. The CIA had found another 'strong man'!

'During early 1960,' writes Schlesinger, 'Phoumi [Nosavan] dominated non-communist Laos. Recognizing that Defence and CIA were committed to him, he felt free to ignore their advice, rigging the spring elections so blatantly, for example, that the results lacked any color of legitimacy. . . .'[11] The Pathet Lao, which had dominated the

'complementary' elections a year earlier, were wiped off the slate. Hilsman points out that in Sam Neua province, the home base of the Pathet Lao and 'virtually inaccessible' to the Vientiane government, 'the Pathet Lao candidate was supposed to have received thirteen votes out of over 6,000 cast . . .'. Nosavan and Sananikone (the latter had not gained a single seat in the previous elections) won every single seat!

Meanwhile, in his solitary prison cell on the outskirts of Vientiane, Souphanouvong had been working on the prison guards, awakening their patriotism, appealing to their conscience, gradually establishing human contact — a very difficult task at first because the guards had strict orders not to exchange a word with their captives and to cover their ears if addressed. In March 1960 Prince Phetsarat died, but Souphanouvong was not permitted to attend his brother's funeral. Souvanna Phouma returned for the occasion but was not permitted to see his gaoled half-brother. At preliminary hearings, the judges could find no pretext to condemn Souphanouvong and the others. (One judge was so impressed by Souphanouvong's bearing and arguments that he later joined the Pathet Lao.) Early in May 1960, the prisoners were tipped off that there would be no trial. They were to be 'shot while attempting to escape' during a pretended transfer to another prison. Shortly after this news, at dead of night, Souphanouvong led all sixteen out of prison with the nine prison guards on duty that night, all twenty-five of them armed and in M.P. uniforms. Eight of the guards had been won over by Souphanouvong's persistent explanations, the ninth — in charge of the arsenal — decided to 'go along' with the others. This, on top of the escape of the two battalions, was too much for 'strong man' Nosavan, who raved and ranted and pledged to deliver the escapees alive or dead — and his choice would certainly have been the latter. Virtually the entire Laotian army and police, together with U.S. advisers, were mobilized in pursuit.

Souphanouvong and his comrades were terribly weakened from their year in prison. It was the start of the rainy season. Their route lay over a series of jungle-covered mountains, hundreds of kilometres back to Sam Neua. To avoid reprisals on villages by the pursuing troops, they slept in the open, soaked to the skin, plagued by leeches and mosquitoes. But they evaded their pursuers, passed on from unit to unit by guerillas who at that time were already organized in the areas adjoining Vientiane province.

The whole story of the escape and the ideological preparatory work done by Souphanouvong in the seemingly impossible conditions of his imprisonment is an epic of human determination and courage. Once again it testified to the extraordinary qualities of this prince turned

revolutionary. It also testified to the real sentiments of the Laotian people, including those in the most hardened units of the American-formed army.[12] One morning, some three months after the escape, while they were still far from their Sam Neua base (two months in time as it turned out later), Souphanouvong switched on his transistor radio to hear the electrifying news of a military coup in Vientiane, pulled off by an unknown paratroop captain, Kong Le — unknown, that is, to the outside world and even to most Laotians.

Souphanouvong knew who he was and so did his right-hand man, Singkapo,[13] who was listening to the radio at his side. Kong Le came from the same village as Singkapo and had studied under the latter at the village school. Later, when Singkapo had established his reputation as one of the most brilliant of the Pathet Lao commanders, the CIA chose Kong Le — by then an American-trained paratroop officer — to approach his former teacher and try to win him over and if necessary to buy him. In a series of discussions that lasted over three months, it was Singkapo who persuaded Kong Le of his real duties as a patriot. At their last meeting, Kong Le had said: 'When the right time comes you may find support from unexpected quarters. Many of us are sick of this business of killing our brother Laotians on American orders. . . .'

Later, at the time of the escape of the two Pathet Lao battalions, after the crack 1st Paratroop battalion sent in pursuit had been badly defeated, Kong Le's second battalion was ordered into action. He managed to smuggle in a message to Singkapo in prison, asking for advice. Singkapo said he had no alternative but to go, but advised him 'not to expose yourself or your battalion too much'. Kong Le, slightly wounded at the first contact, demanded hospitalization. Without him to lead, the battalion fled at the first fire-fight and was withdrawn for garrison duty as punishment.

In their jungle hide-out, Souphanouvong and the others discussed the situation. Once the details became clear, it was decided that Singkapo should return with utmost speed and join forces with Kong Le. He covered the distance that had taken three months during the escape in seven days, to a point close enough to Vientiane for Kong Le to send a helicopter to pick him up.

The coup took place on August 10, 1960, and at a public meeting two days later, Kong Le declared: 'Many past governments promised to follow a neutral course, but they never kept their promises. My group and I are ready to sacrifice everything, including our lives, in order to bring peace and neutrality to our nation. . . .'

The King invited Souvanna Phouma — home on leave from Paris — to form a government, which he did; but with his usual genius for

vacillation and dangerous compromise, he brought in Nosavan as deputy premier and, of all posts, Minister of the Interior. This government was immediately recognized amongst the great powers by the U.S.A.

The second round had come to a close, with Kong Le's coup as the climax to a whole series of shattering defeats for U.S. policies in Laos and for the CIA-selected local stooges who applied them.

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[1] Roughly, the French equivalent of the CIA.

[2] *To Move A Nation*, page 117.

[3] There was corruption deliberately encouraged by the CIA to build up a new comprador class, headed by Katay, which fattened off U.S. dollar aid.

[4] Apart from Souphanouvong, Phoumi Vongvichit, Minister of Education.

[5] *To Move A Nation*, page 118. Katay ran a whole string of banks and import-export companies through which all U.S. aid was financed. Under the new system, a high proportion of the dollars passed through the hands of Sananikone rather than Katay.

[6] *A Thousand Days*, page 275.

[7] *To Move A Nation*, page 120.

[8] *To Move A Nation*, page 120.

[9] *To Move A Nation*, page 112.

[10] Katay suddenly took ill and died at the end of December 1959.

[11] *A Thousand Days*, page 275.

[12] I have described the escape in more detail in *The Furtive War*, Chapter 10.

[13] Colonel Singkapo Chunmali Sikhot, member of the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat, head of the Pathet Lao armed forces.

10. Out into the open

If Souvanna Phouma had displayed anything like the backbone of Kong Le at that time, he would have arrested Nosavan instead of accepting him into the government. With the joint strength of the Pathet Lao forces and units loyal to Kong Le, he could easily have done so. That the people would have supported such a move was certain. But, comments Hilsman, 'Phoumi [Nosavan] did not really intend to live up to the agreement, apparently having made it only to gain time. He went almost immediately to Savannakhet, his old home base, and began to seek support for a counter-coup from his relative, Marshal Sarit [Thanarat] of Thailand, and from among Americans who represented agencies likely to be sympathetic. . . .'[1] An airlift of American arms was started to Savannakhet while Thai units massed on the Thailand side of the Mekong, opposite Vientiane.

The Kong Le coup really caught the U.S. Embassy where it hurt most, knocking the wind right out of the policy experts. The effect was even worse because it came just one week after a new ambassador, Winthrop G. Brown, had arrived in Vientiane. After this climax to a succession of defeats, some U.S. agencies were beginning to wonder which horse to back. Despite the fact that the new government headed by Souvanna Phouma was given official recognition by Washington, it was soon apparent that this was only to gain a breathing space and that real U.S. policy was to work for its overthrow.

On September 10, 1960, Nosavan set up a 'Revolutionary Committee' headed by such a well-known 'revolutionary' as Prince Boun Oum of Champassak! The latter thus made his grand début on the world diplomatic scene, as a leading protégé of the U.S. subversive affairs department. While arms poured into Savannakhet from Thailand, a blockade on all supplies was imposed by Thailand against Vientiane.

Faced with Nosavan's hardly concealed plans for a march on Vientiane, Souvanna Phouma turned again towards the Pathet Lao with an offer of participation in a new government of national union. In October, former Ambassador Parsons — by then Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs — was dispatched to Laos to cope with the new and horrifying turn of events. Kong Le had been an all-American manufacture. To Parsons' primitive political mind he had now turned 'communist' and Souvanna Phouma was about to turn the same way! To mark the point, Parsons' arrival coincided

with the cancellation of the U.S. monthly pay cheque to the Laotian army. According to both Hilsman's and Schlesinger's versions, Parsons demanded that Phouma break off negotiations with the Pathet Lao, form an alliance with Nosavan and move the capital from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. This would pave the way for a Nosavan–Thai assault against what could be categorized as a 'red bastion' once Souvanna Phouma had abandoned it. Souvanna Phouma refused. Parsons left, determined that Phouma had to be destroyed together with the capital. According to the Hilsman version, Ambassador Brown, a bit more sophisticated than Parsons, accompanied the latter to Bangkok pleading for a slightly more subtle play.

'When he returned to Vientiane, Brown pointed out to Souvanna that while the non-Communist forces quarrelled among themselves, Laos might well be lost to the Pathet Lao, who had followed their usual course of guerilla nibbling while the negotiations were going on. The United States, Brown went on, would be willing to resume its financial payments to Souvanna if he in turn would not object to a resumption of U.S. deliveries of military equipment to Phoumi. The United States, Brown was able to say, had Phoumi's promise not to use the aid against Kong Le and the neutralist forces in an attempt to bring down Souvanna's government, but only against the Pathet Lao. . . .'[2]

Both Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi Nosavan behaved predictably. Perhaps nothing is more illustrative of the real role of Souvanna Phouma in his gradual shift from pro-French liberal-nationalism to pro-U.S. anti-nationalism.

'Souvanna quickly agreed,' continues Hilsman, '— hoping, for one thing, finally to convince the United States Government that he was not so naïve about the Communists as they believed. . . .'[3]

I do not believe that the Pathet Lao leaders or Kong Le knew at that time that Souvanna Phouma had moved so far to the right, that objectively he was already playing the U.S. game and was ready to betray his closest allies.

As for Phoumi Nosavan, he acted with his usual treachery and contempt for those stupid enough to believe his promises:

'But Phoumi violated the agreement. Over the next weeks, as his military strength built up, it became increasingly clear that Phoumi was moving his forces into position for an attack on Vientiane. . . .'[4]

Part of Nosavan's forces moved up from Savannakhet in U.S. trucks, others were moved through Thailand to attack Vientiane from across the Mekong. 'Phoumi marched on Vientiane and with plans drawn up by his American advisers won the only military coup of his life . . .' is Schlesinger's terse account of what happened.[5] (In two

previous battles, Kong Le had inflicted heavy defeats on Nosavan's troops at Paksane and a still heavier one was inflicted by the Pathet Lao No. 2 battalion in Sam Neua.)

Kong Le's troops and the Vientiane population, to whom arms had been distributed, fought very well. It took Nosavan's forces eighteen days to occupy the city, a decisive element in his favour being artillery fire from the Thai side of the Mekong, directed by U.S. helicopters hovering over the city. Characteristically, Souvanna Phouma flew off to Cambodia as soon as the fighting started. When it was all over Boun Oum moved into Vientiane and renamed his 'Revolutionary Committee' a government which the U.S.A. promptly recognized as the authentic government of Laos.

In Phnom Penh, Souvanna Phouma lamented that he had been cruelly cheated by that 'most nefarious and reprehensible of men', former Ambassador J. Graham Parsons. Of course he did not reveal details of the cheating — that arms which he had thought would be used *only* against the Pathet Lao had been turned against him. There had been a good deal of 'cruel cheating' all round — Brown and Parsons' cheating of Souvanna Phouma; Nosavan's CIA-sponsored cheating of everybody; and Phouma's own implicit cheating of the Pathet Lao and Kong Le, whose armed forces together with the people of Vientiane had to suffer the consequences. Above all it was the Laotian people who were being most 'cruelly cheated' by Washington policy-makers in a most ruthless display of power politics to bring a small Asian nation to its knees.

Kong Le's troops withdrew in good order and, linking up with Singkapo's Pathet Lao forces, together carried out a beautifully co-ordinated action to seize the Plain of Jars on New Year's Day 1961, causing more howls of pain from Vientiane and Washington. This was another body-blow. The Pentagon would infinitely have preferred to lose Vientiane than the Plain of Jars. Adding insult to injury was the fact that Kong Le's troops were transported to the Plain of Jars in U.S. armoured cars and trucks. To explain away this defeat, Nosavan invented the myth of 'seven North Vietnamese battalions' in a note to the UN. But rumours of 'Vietminh battalions' had such a demoralizing effect on his own troops that at a Vientiane Press conference a few days later, with Boun Oum and the diplomatic corps present, Nosavan had to admit that there was no evidence of 'North Vietnamese battalions'.

In reply to Nosavan's calls for help — in the form of either SEATO intervention, which France was blocking, or direct U.S. intervention — Eisenhower sent half a dozen AT-28 planes, described as for 'training only' and what were known as 'white star' military adviser teams.

One of these was attached to each of Nosavan's battalions, in flagrant violation of the Geneva Agreements. They were ineffective. Having no moral incentive themselves, they were unable to inject any morale into the Nosavan troops. They could not explain convincingly why Laotians should kill Laotians.

John Kennedy took over from Eisenhower at the White House, but that did not change anything in Laos. By the end of January 1961, Nosavan had concentrated twenty battalions, about half his armed forces at that time, in a major offensive to retake the Plain of Jars. But even the 'white star' teams — the start of the application of American 'special warfare' in Laos — were unable to speed up the snail's pace at which the reluctant attackers advanced. Schlesinger says they covered sixty-five miles in twenty-nine days. They showed speed only in retreat, fleeing when the Pathet Lao–Kong Le troops counter-attacked.

The Pathet Lao guerillas took advantage of Nosavan's troop withdrawal from other areas to concentrate for the Plain of Jars offensive to liberate most of Lower Laos, including the area along strategic Highway No. 9 linking Savannakhet with the South Vietnamese port of Dong Ha. About this time the British, foreseeing disaster ahead for Nosavan, began to show interest in the proposal they had scorned almost two years previously, that of reviving the ICC, although they had tacitly approved Sananikone's denunciation of the Geneva Agreements in February 1959.

Hilsman describes 'long and agonizing' meetings which he attended at this time with Rusk, McNamara, the CIA chiefs and others to decide what was to be done. Among the proposals was one to parachute a division of U.S. Marines onto the Plain of Jars. 'We can get them in all right,' General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is recorded as saying. 'It's getting them out that worries me.' Various other proposals were considered for Americans killing Laotians as the latter were refusing to do it themselves.

At a dramatic televised Press conference on March 23, against a background of military maps of Laos, which presented Nosavan's defeats as proof of the 'progress of communist encroachments', Kennedy blandly asserted that if the 'attacks' did not stop, 'those who support a genuinely neutral Laos will have to consider their response . . .'.[6] As every top-ranking U.S. official who had anything to do with Laos from 1954 onwards had subscribed to the Dulles concept of neutrality and neutralism as 'dangerous and immoral', the Kennedy statement caused the raising of diplomatic eyebrows everywhere, not least in the SEATO capitals and Vientiane itself. The President then flew off to a meeting with British Prime Minister Macmillan where

the two agreed that only massive intervention or a speedy ceasefire could save Nosavan from complete collapse. Rusk sounded out the possibilities of intervention at a Bangkok SEATO meeting, but was turned down again by the French.

Prince Sihanouk had long before proposed a reconvening of the Geneva Conference to discuss Laos and had been repeatedly snubbed by the U.S.A. and Britain for his pains. Now the British began to show interest in this idea coupled with a ceasefire. The U.S. ambassador to Moscow reported back that Khrushchev was more interested in Berlin than Laos and would not risk a fight there. By this time diplomatic relations had been established between Laos and the Soviet Union, which still recognized the Souvanna Phouma government. Kennedy decided on a show of force to back up the various diplomatic moves he was then toying with. The Seventh Fleet was dispatched at full speed to the Gulf of Siam; helicopter units were shifted into north-east Thailand; a detachment of Marines was readied for action in Japan; and all the indications were that the U.S.A. was going to move into Laos in a big way. Kennedy spoke more and more of a 'truly neutral' Laos in keeping with the old diplomatic axiom: 'If you can't beat them, join them.'

Doubtless under the influence of the Winthrop Brown–Souvanna Phouma conversation of the previous October, some of Kennedy's more sophisticated advisers were already working on the long-term idea of weaning the Souvanna Phouma neutralists away from the alliance with the Pathet Lao into which U.S. policy had pushed them — reluctantly as far as Souvanna Phouma was personally concerned.

By mid-April 1961 the net result of the series of events sparked off by the attempt to wipe out the two Pathet Lao battalions nearly a year previously was that seventy per cent of the territory and about half the population of Laos was under the control of the Pathet Lao or the neutralists allied to them. All this was a predictable consequence of Washington's determination to stamp out not only 'communism' but anything else in Laos which represented an obstacle to U.S. policies in the area. Official policy was to create an anti-communist, client state of the U.S.A. which by definition would be anti-national and thus repugnant to the Laotian people.

Militarily, the Pathet Lao–Kong Le forces could have pressed their advantage and driven the remnants of Nosavan's forces right back over the frontier to the training camps in Thailand from where many of them had come. On April 24, the U.S.S.R. and Britain, as Co-Chairmen of the 1954 Geneva Conference, issued an appeal for a ceasefire which, for political reasons, the Pathet Lao accepted. It went into effect ten days later and the way was cleared for a new Geneva

Conference. Had the boot been on the other foot and had Nosavan been about to deal a *coup de grâce* to the Pathet Lao–Kong Le forces, the U.S.A. would certainly never have agreed to such a ceasefire and conference. The Pathet Lao had to take into consideration the position of the socialist camp and the general line of peaceful co-existence.

In the meantime there had been the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba and Schlesinger reports that on April 20, in order that U.S. 'restraint' in Cuba should not be interpreted as 'irresolution everywhere', President Kennedy 'transformed the corps of American military advisers in Laos, who up to this point had wandered about in civilian clothes, into a Military Assistance and Advisory Group, authorizing them to put on uniforms and accompany the Laotian troops. Later that day,' continues Schlesinger in an interesting sidelight on Nixon's natural reactions in such situations, 'when Nixon saw the President and urged an invasion of Cuba, he also urged "a commitment of American air power" to Laos. . . .'[7]

At the very outset of what was to be the long-drawn-out Geneva Conference, it was clear that the U.S. and Boun Oum–Nosavan delegations were going to repeat the performance of Katay in 1955. They were going to use the conference table to play for time while their armed forces were built up and prepared for another round on the battlefield. Due to open on May 12, the first session was delayed for four days because the U.S. delegates refused to sit down with those from the Souvanna Phouma–Pathet Lao delegation. It was delayed another six weeks, and for the same reason, by the Boun Oum–Nosavan and Thai delegations refusing to sit down with the Pathet Lao. This was all part of the crude tactics of trying to win the 'respectable' Souvanna Phouma away from his 'red' allies. Heading the Boun Oum–Nosavan team was Phoui Sananikone, whose performance at the 1954 Geneva Conference has already been mentioned.

In the meantime U.S. military aid poured into Savannakhet and a feverish effort was made to re-form, re-equip and reinforce Nosavan's shattered units. Despite the ceasefire, nibbling attacks were made during the latter half of 1960 to try to retake some of the strategic points lost during the February–March fighting, with uniformed U.S. 'advisers' ostentatiously taking part. With many stops and starts — stops while Nosavan's forces launched attacks, starts when the attacks were blocked and more time was needed for build-ups — the Geneva talks slowly ground forward, at least as far as paper agreements were concerned. The declared aim of the participants was to end the civil war, establish national harmony and the unity of the country by setting up a new coalition government representative of all trends. Agreement was reached on setting up a coalition government which

would adopt a policy of neutrality. But because Nosavan, thoroughly discredited as he was by his treachery and military *débâcles*, wanted to dominate the scene and continue to play the 'strong man' in Laos, no progress could be made on the actual composition of a coalition government. He either wanted no coalition at all, or one under his leadership. And despite the official U.S. position of seeking a 'truly neutral' Laos, Nosavan was backed to the hilt by the CIA and State Department.

Hilsman, maintaining the official pretence that Kennedy was having real difficulties in controlling such a puppet, confirms at least that the difficulties at Geneva were caused by Nosavan, not the Souvanna Phouma–Pathet Lao delegation.[8]

'The Americans' troubles were with Phoumi, and they were very public indeed. As most of the great powers in history have discovered, a small and supposedly weak ally can be powerful in stubbornness. . . . General Phoumi Nosavan was as clever in these matters as the others [Chiang Kai Shek, Syngman Rhee, Ngo Dinh Diem] had been. . . . If the United States took too strong a stand against the Communists, and Phoumi decided there was no risk at all that the United States would abandon Laos, his course of action was obvious. He would adamantly refuse to negotiate with Souvanna for a coalition government and wait for an opportunity to provoke a Communist attack and so trigger an American intervention. . . .' (Which is precisely what Nosavan did in early 1962, with U.S. 'advisers' in command.) Hilsman then talks about deliberately 'ambiguous' U.S. statements formulated so Nosavan could not be certain of the extent of U.S. support.

'But Phoumi was undeterred and promptly set about to resist all pressures to participate in a coalition government. For he had already had the experience in 1960 of forcing the United States to back down and bend to his will when he had marched on Souvanna's government after the Kong Le coup. And he undoubtedly also believed that this time, as in 1960, there would be a policy struggle in Washington in which he could count on the support of both the Pentagon and the CIA. . . .'[9]

At the end of February 1962, I flew into the Plain of Jars, where the Souvanna Phouma–Pathet Lao coalition government had set up its capital at Khang Khay. It was one of those many periods in which the Geneva Conference was in recess. An hour before my plane touched down, Souvanna Phouma had flown in from Vientiane, from a meeting which the British and American ambassadors had arranged with Nosavan. 'If you come to Vientiane and talk things over with Nosavan, all will be well,' he had been assured. He was in a bad

mood when he returned, frustrated and humiliated. No one had met him at Vientiane airport. He had to look for an hotel room like any ordinary tourist. Nosavan kept him waiting for several days while the U.S. ambassador subjected him to a war of nerves by threatening SEATO intervention unless Phouma agreed to give Nosavan 'at least' the Ministries of Defence and Interior in any coalition. Nosavan asked for just this when they finally met.[10]

Washington was making a big pretence at pressures on Nosavan at this time and big publicity was given to the fact that the monthly cheque of five million dollars for the Boun Oum régime was being withheld because of Nosavan's intransigence. I found no one in Khang Khay who believed this. I asked Souvanna Phouma's acting premier and finance minister, Khamsouk Keola, what he thought about this. He laughed: 'It's just a ruse. The Americans give extra money to Nosavan's uncle Marshal Sarit Thonarat in Thailand, and he just passes it on. If the Americans want to put real pressure on, why don't they cut the arms supplies?' Jacques Nevard, the *New York Times* Vientiane correspondent, made the same point in a dispatch to his paper. After mentioning the reported halt in financial aid, he continued: 'However, the United States has continued its military aid to General Phoumi Nosavan's forces. Weapons, ammunition and fuel have not been cut off. An airlift chartered from the Chinese Nationalists still functions. Uniformed teams of United States military advisers continue to serve with most of General Phoumi Nosavan's battalions in the field. . . . The general has placed more obstacles in the way of a coalition régime than any other leaders in the country. . . .'[11]

When I discussed this with Prince Souphanouvong, he pointed out that U.S. military aid to Thailand had doubled since the ceasefire agreements were signed. 'Why?' he asked. 'Is Thailand at war? Deliveries include jet planes. Why? Either to help carry on an existing war or to start a new one. I have signed three agreements since the start of the Geneva talks. All I ask is that the other side honour their signatures. Now the Americans say they are ready to support a neutral government. We see no neutral attitude from them — only their policy of aggression. . . .' He listed the three agreements as one signed at Zurich on June 22, 1961, between himself and the Princes Souvanna Phouma and Boun Oum over the setting up of a provisional coalition government of national union. The second was signed at Hin Heup, in Laos, on October 8, between the same three princes agreeing that Souvanna Phouma would be prime minister and that the government would include eight neutralists, four Pathet Lao and four Boun Oum nominees. The third was signed at Geneva on January 19, 1962, on the specific personalities to form the cabinet; this was repudiated

within forty-eight hours by Nosavan. All three agreements were within the framework of the Geneva Conference.

As for the 'stopped pay cheque', the London *Times* reported much later that the CIA provided the funds for Nosavan from 'its own capacious budget. The belief is that the agency transferred the money from its operations in Siam . . .'.[12]

By this time, the United States had moved into 'special war' in South Vietnam. Helicopter and air crews had started arriving in November–December 1961, and a U.S. command had been set up under General Paul Harkins in Saigon in February 1962. The fact of U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam could not but have its effect on the conference on Laos and the validity of any agreements reached. Such a monumental violation of the 1954 Geneva Agreements boded ill for whatever new agreements were reached at the 1961–62 Geneva Conference on Laos. A pet U.S. project was already being discussed in the press — to open up Road No. 9 in the south and drive a corridor through to link the northern part of South Vietnam to Thailand through Lower Laos, through which troops and supplies could be shuttled back and forth as the military situation required. What was being presented to the outside world as a Nosavan–CIA rebellion against U.S. official policy was merely an attempt to implement Pentagon planning with the knowledge and approval of the President of the United States. Official support for a 'neutral' Laos, like the pressures on Nosavan, were so much shadow play for public diversion. The pretended flirtation with neutrality was at a time when the U.S.A. was publicly condemning ideas of neutrality in South Vietnam — where advocating neutrality was a 'crime' punishable by death — and was publicly rejecting Prince Sihanouk's requests for recognition of Cambodia's neutrality. Real U.S. policy was the one that Laos got from Nosavan, his generals and CIA advisers, not the prattle about a 'truly neutral' Laos.

I asked Kong Le and Singkapo, both of them then generals heading the Joint Supreme Military Command, about the military situation. They explained, over maps, that in the three previous months Nosavan's forces had launched three major offensives, retaking some 1,800 square miles of territory. Singkapo said that Nosavan had 'simply walked out of the Na Mone [near the Plain of Jars] conference which was to pinpoint the ceasefire line, and never came back'.

According to the situation on the Singkapo–Nosavan military maps, it was clear that Nosavan was heading for a disaster. Since early January 1962, a striking force of twenty battalions had pushed some seventy miles behind the ceasefire lines in the northern sector to capture the small towns of Nam Ho, Nam Seo and Muong Houn. The

Pathet Lao–Kong Le forces counter-attacked, recaptured the towns, hurling the attackers back in disorder. Nosavan had ordered them to regroup in a valley about ten miles east of the town of Nam Tha, the latter in Nosavan's hands and on the edge of what should have been the ceasefire line. I described the situation at that time as follows:[13]

'A glance at the military map showed all the best of Nosavan's forces bottled up in a Dien Bien Phu situation and almost all of the U.S. supply resources tied up feeding them . . . 7,000 of Nosavan's élite troops were surrounded in a valley on Souvanna Phouma's side of the ceasefire line, an important proportion of his total fighting strength. After all, it was the loss of only 16,000 élite French troops at Dien Bien Phu that caused the collapse of their whole military effort in Indochina. . . .'

Singkapo and Kong Le decided to leave them there for the time being to 'wither on the vine', hoping this might change Nosavan's arrogant obstruction to the formation of the coalition government. Cold, hunger and sickness had their effects as weeks dragged on into months and the besieged troops were not relieved. They were being supplied from a forward airfield at Muong Sin, about sixty miles from Nam Tha valley. This was the situation at the time I left Khang Khay in early March.

Souphanouvong later told me the sequence of events which led to another great crisis and display of Kennedy brinkmanship. Early in May, the half-starved garrison at the Muong Sin airfield revolted. Troops were flown in to quell the revolt, but the first plane that landed was immediately surrounded by the mutineers. There was a brief skirmish. Part of the reinforcements joined the revolt, others resisted and were killed, the plane was destroyed. No other planes dared to land. When news of this reached the encircled troops at Nam Tha, they realized that their last hope of relief was gone and that their meagre air-dropped supplies would be still further reduced or stopped altogether. They made a desperate attempt to break out to the west. Nosavan sent a relief force but it was ambushed before it could effect a junction. Those who managed to escape the encirclement fled in disorder towards the Mekong, joined by the panic-stricken garrison of Nam Tha which had never been threatened during the four months' siege of the troops in the valley. The fleeing troops, officers and all, crossed the Mekong into Thailand, abandoning a lot of equipment including much of Nosavan's artillery. It was Nosavan's greatest military *débâcle*.

News of the four months' siege of Nam Tha had been ignored by the outside world and the *débâcle* was presented as some sudden Pathet Lao–Kong Le violation of the ceasefire agreements. The

Seventh Fleet and Marine units were again rushed to Thailand and all-out U.S. intervention was threatened.

Schlesinger and Hilsman give contradictory accounts of how the crisis developed, a fact which, if they are based on CIA reports, makes it clear that the White House was being just as badly informed by the CIA on Laos as it was on Cuba at the time of the Bay of Pigs shambles.

'No sooner had Phoumi declared a readiness to negotiate than the Pathet Lao broke the ceasefire in a major way.' Schlesinger reported.[14] 'On May 6, with North Vietnamese support, they seized the town of Nam Tha, where Phoumi had imprudently deployed a substantial force. The engagement was, as usual, almost bloodless. The Royal Laotian Army fled, and the communists appeared to be starting a drive towards the Thai border. This flagrant violation of the ceasefire brought a prompt reaction in Washington. . . .'

Hilsman writes: '. . . in late January 1962, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops closed around the capital of the province, the town of Nam Tha itself, digging in on the surrounding heights. . . . Over the next few weeks, against American advice, Phoumi flew in more and more of his troops to reinforce the Nam Tha garrison. By the end of January five thousand of Phoumi's army, which by then totaled fifty thousand were at Nam Tha, including important elements of his available artillery. . . .'

Why 'against American advice'? In fact there were U.S. advisers with the Nam Tha troops which were flown in by CIA planes! Why did the troops have to be flown in if this was Nosavan-held territory? Hilsman does not explain. The explanation that the troops were bottled up in a valley ten miles east of Nam Tha town, well behind Pathet Lao lines, is the logical reply. 'Still another attempt was made to persuade Phoumi to withdraw from the trap, but without success. . . .'[15] What trap could there have been unless Nosavan was operating in hostile territory? Hilsman does not explain. All he does is to try and disassociate the U.S.A. from the defeat.

'On May 2, 1962,' the Hilsman account continues, 'just 364 days after the ceasefire had been declared, one sector of the defense perimeter at Nam Tha received fire from the surrounding Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces. The next day, twenty-five miles to the west, Communist forces attacked and captured the last remaining airfield in northern Laos, at Muong Sing. On May 4, they captured an outpost a mile and a half east of Nam Tha. . . .' This is a very different version from that of a mutiny of Nosavan's forces on the airfield, which would have been a logical consequence of the tactics that Singkapo and Kong Le described to me — to let Nosavan's forces 'wither on

the vine'. Hilsman's account also differs from the 'almost bloodless' action reported by Schlesinger, which tallies more closely with Souphanouvong's version. Hilsman continues: '. . . Then at 3 a.m. on May 6, four Vietnamese battalions launched an assault on the northwest segment of the defense perimeter, and shortly thereafter other battalions attacked from the east, the northeast, and the southeast. The twelve Americans on the White Star team with the defenders reported that first one sector, then another had been overrun. At 7.30 a.m. the team itself was evacuated by helicopter. By nine that morning, Nam Tha had fallen, and the survivors among the Royal Lao Army defenders were fleeing in disorganized panic down the road toward the Mekong and Thailand.

'Over the next three days the intelligence reports showed no further troop movement. The attack had been a large-scale probe, a major although still-limited violation of the ceasefire. . . .'[16]

The whole action fits perfectly into Hilsman's prediction that, if Nosavan was sure of U.S. support, he would 'provoke a Communist attack and so trigger an American intervention. . . .'[17]

Apart from repulsing Nosavan's January offensive and blocking the 'relief column', there had been no Pathet Lao initiative at all, nor did the Pathet Lao pursue the fleeing Nosavan troops — although the temptation to deal a *coup de grâce* must have been strong. Neither Schlesinger nor Hilsman, incidentally, refer to the ambush of Nosavan's 'relief force', either because the CIA did not report it, or because such a report would have too obviously revealed that it was Nosavan who had violated the ceasefire agreements by another attack into Pathet Lao-held territory. The allegation of 'Vietnamese' troops was a throw-away line that neither author tries to substantiate. What was true at that time was that there were some 2,000 U.S. military 'advisers' planning and supervising operations, including that at Nam Tha. The fact that Hilsman admits there was a 'white star' team there is evidence enough of American involvement in the operation. There were also Thai and Kuomintang troops operating under the Nosavan-CIA command.

The boomerang effect of the Nam Tha *débâcle* and U.S. involvement in it prompted the London *Times* despatch referred to earlier. This put the blame onto the CIA — as if it really did operate independently of the White House. Had the operation succeeded, like that against the Plain of Jars seven years later, there would have been no talk of 'against American advice', nor of blaming the CIA.

Under the headline 'CIA Is Blamed For Laos Crisis', the Washington correspondent of *The Times* reported that: 'The Administration is now convinced that the Central Intelligence Agency has been up

to its old devices again and must share a large responsibility for the situation in Laos. . . . Apparently the evidence shows that the swarm of CIA agents in Laos deliberately opposed the official American objective of trying to establish a neutral government. They are believed to have encouraged General Phoumi Nosavan in the concentration of troops that brought about the swift and disastrous response from the Pathet Lao. . . .'[18] The well-informed *Times* correspondent thus demolishes the myth that Nam Tha was 'against American advice'.

President Kennedy banged hard on the war drums and, in an exercise of brinksmanship which outdid Dulles at his worst, used Nosavan's defeat to step up the military occupation of Thailand (the Pentagon wanted support bases there for South Vietnam anyway). The most important result, however, was that after a Kennedy–Khrushchev meeting in Vienna in the first week of June, another ceasefire was agreed, thus saving the rest of Nosavan's forces from complete destruction had the Pathet Lao decided to exploit the military situation. On June 12, agreement was reached on the composition of a coalition government. This paved the way for a reconvening of the Geneva Conference and the adoption of the documents now referred to as the 1962 Geneva Agreements on Laos. As for the government, I described it at the time as 'a government of national coalition in which key posts are in the hands of Souvanna Phouma neutrals, some minor ones for the Vientiane neutrals whose 'neutrality' is of dubious hue, according to my informants, and the rest divided equally between the Neo Lao Haksat and Nosavan. The Neo Lao Haksat, in view of the major role they had played in defeating Nosavan and their long record of sacrifice and struggle for the real independence of their country, were extremely modest in accepting parity with Nosavan. . . .'[19]

The only reason that a ceasefire and coalition government were acceptable to Kennedy was that this was the only alternative to the complete destruction of Nosavan's forces.

Souvanna Phouma became Premier and Defence Minister, Souphanouvong Deputy-Premier and Minister of Economic Affairs and Planning, Nosavan also Deputy-Premier and Minister of Finance. Quinim Pholsena, a staunch pro-Pathet Lao neutralist, became Minister of Foreign Affairs. Such a coalition government could have been formed at any time during the previous eight years but for U.S. intervention. The presence of Nosavan in the cabinet justified suspicions of more storms ahead.

Another phase of the Laotian drama had come to an end. It was one in which the role of the U.S. in waging 'special war' against the Laotian people had been smoked out into the open. Foreign

military personnel were to be withdrawn after the signing of the Geneva Agreements, which meant that the 'white star' teams flew out to Thailand, got back into civilian clothes and flew back into Vientiane as embassy and AID personnel.

On paper the agreements looked good — it remained to see how they would work out. Hilsman ominously quotes Averell Harriman, who headed the U.S. delegation at Geneva, as stating around this time: 'We must be sure the break comes between the Communists and the neutralists, rather than having the two of them teamed up as they were before. . . .'[20] To bring this about now became the major aim of the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA.

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[1] *To Move A Nation*, page 123.
[2] *To Move A Nation*, page 125.
[3] *To Move A Nation*, page 125.
[4] *To Move A Nation*, page 125.
[5] *A Thousand Days*, page 277.
[6] *A Thousand Days*, page 281.
[7] *A Thousand Days*, page 284.
[8] The situation was strikingly similar to that in Paris at the end of 1968, when the Saigon régime, with obviously strong backing from influential circles in Washington, were able to block the start of the quadripartite talks on Vietnam and when they finally did start, were able to block any progress because Washington wanted it that way.
[9] *To Move A Nation*, pages 136–137.
[10] I reported this at the time, also in *The Furtive War*.
[11] *New York Times*, February 22, 1962.
[12] *The Times*, London, May 24, 1962.
[13] In newspaper articles and in my book *The Furtive War* from which the following passage is taken, page 204.
[14] *A Thousand Days*, page 415.
[15] *To Move A Nation*, pages 140–141.
[16] *To Move A Nation*, page 141.
[17] *To Move A Nation*, page 137.
[18] *The Times*, London, May 24, 1962.
[19] *The Furtive War*, pages 206–207.
[20] *To Move A Nation*, page 153.

11. Split and kill tactics

The most significant thing about the new coalition government on which the Laotian people and their well-wishers abroad had set their hopes, was that it never worked and never even started working. From the very first day it was a prisoner of Nosavan's troops and police who controlled Vientiane, where the former neutralist administration had transferred to from Khang Khay for integration with the administration there. But it was Nosavan's placemen who staffed all the ministries and departments of the central government. Demands by Souphanouvong and the neutralists that the security and policing of the capital should be on the same tri-partite basis as the coalition government itself were sneered at. Had Souvanna Phouma been prepared to take a strong line on this, it could have been done. But his class interests came to the fore again and he seems to have been only too pleased to see the progressive forces frustrated and placed again at the mercy of U.S.-backed reaction. To have broken Nosavan's grip on Vientiane at this time, without the authority of the prime minister, would have meant re-starting the civil war.

The new U.S. policy of weaning the neutralists away from the Pathet Lao, as a prelude to a renewed attempt to destroy first the latter and then the neutralists themselves, made itself felt from the very first days. Nothing worked. The coalition government was paralysed. Economic plans, developed by Souphanouvong and approved by the National Assembly, were blocked by Nosavan as finance minister. Decisions taken by ministers were killed by vice-ministers or department chiefs on the CIA payroll.[1]

In late March 1963 I paid another visit to the area. Souphanouvong, in describing the situation, spoke about mysterious 'desertions' from Nosavan's troops to those of Kong Le. Not just a trickle of twos and threes but whole units at platoon and even company strength. Desertions in fact were at such a rate that the 'desertees' were beginning to outnumber Kong Le's effectives in key areas. Repeated warnings to Kong Le himself had no effect — he seemed only too pleased to see his units strengthened in relation to those of the Pathet Lao.

Through bribery and flattery and by playing on his known weaknesses, Kong Le — now that he was back in Vientiane — was being 'neutralized' in a special sense. He began to lose interest in his role and functions, and during one critical period he had faded out of the

picture altogether, either a moral or physical prisoner of Nosavan's men, who had even infiltrated his headquarters. Strange orders were issued in his name. Suspicions among some of his subordinates hardened when some units were ordered in his name to evacuate key positions in the Plain of Jars, to be replaced by others who were in fact Nosavan's men in Kong Le uniforms. This seemed suspiciously like the trick with which Katay, in his time, had tried to disarm the two Pathet Lao battalions.

Kong Le's second-in-command, Colonel Deuane, commander of the Plain of Jars–Xieng Khouang region, realized what was happening and refused to budge. Souvanna Phouma, warned of the impending attempt at a takeover from within, brushed the warning aside as the product of Souphanouvong's 'over-suspicious mind'. This was the situation at the end of March 1963, with strong rumours of a coup at any moment in which the Pathet Lao leaders and those of the left-wing neutralists were to be assassinated. Vientiane itself swarmed with CIA agents at their usual work of trying to buy up those they considered useful or eliminate those they considered dangerous.

On the night of April 1, Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena, head of the 'Peace and Neutrality Party' and one of the outstanding personalities in Laotian political life, was shot and killed by a burst of machine-gun fire as he walked up the steps of his Vientiane home with his wife, who was also gravely wounded. They were returning from a reception at the royal palace. Within hours, the streets were filled with troops and tanks. Nosavan's forces tightened their encirclement of the city and one of the Kong Le units infiltrated by Nosavan 'desertees' raced off to arrest Colonel Deuane, as a prelude to taking over the Plain of Jars. Deuane's guards beat off the attack. A second assault next day, supported by seven tanks, fared no better, part of the attacking troops either refusing to advance or switching sides. Colonel Deuane was one of the most popular and efficient officers among the neutralist armed forces and the Kong Le elements among the attackers had no stomach for their task.

I met Madame Pholsena a few days after her husband's assassination. She had been left to bleed to death on the steps alongside her husband's body, and was refused any medical attention until Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi Vongvichit, the Pathet Lao Minister of Information, forced their way past Nosavan guards and insisted on her removal to hospital. Her legs swathed in plaster from the hips down, she told me there was no doubt but that Nosavan and the CIA had arranged the assassination. She reminded me of what her husband had told me some months previously — that on a visit to the U.S.A. with Souvanna Phouma, highly placed agents had made vigorous attempts to buy

him over and had made all sorts of veiled threats when he scornfully rejected their offers.

The fact was that Pholsena had insisted on being present, in his capacity as foreign minister, at all discussions which Souvanna Phouma had in Washington — including the key meeting with President Kennedy. Souvanna Phouma had flown off to Washington a month after the coalition government was formed. He assured Kennedy that most Laotians preferred the U.S.A. to the Pathet Lao and agreed to Kennedy's demand that at all costs no U.S. military or economic aid should pass into Pathet Lao hands. A tacit agreement was reached that Phouma would do everything possible to limit, weaken and eventually eliminate Pathet Lao influence. It was highly embarrassing that a man of Quinim Pholsena's known integrity and friendship with the Pathet Lao should be privy to such matters. Hence the all-out attempt to buy him over, about which Pholsena had told me on his way back from Washington. He represented a very obstinate and capable stumbling block to U.S. determination to win the neutrals away from the Pathet Lao, so bullets were used where bribes failed.

The actual killing was organized by General Sino, who headed Nosavan's military police and had set up, under the guise of a 'National Security Co-ordinating Office', what was really an assassination committee to eliminate Pathet Lao and progressive neutralist higher cadres. Another of the early victims of Sino's assassination teams was Khan Thi Siphanthong, a colonel in charge of the neutralist forces' own security services, who was well aware of the details of Sino's organization.

When the first attempt to seize or kill Colonel Deuane failed and Kong Le's own troops refused to make more attacks, an appeal was issued in Kong Le's name for help from Nosavan units. In the meantime, Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit — with their experiences of May 1959 still fresh in their minds — had slipped out through Nosavan's encirclement, the former returning to Khong Khay, the latter to Sam Neua. Nosavan battalions moved up into the Plain of Jars, the gates opened in certain places by the Kong Le units which had been most heavily infiltrated by the 'deserters'. But by mid-April, when the Nosavan battalions launched their attack, the Pathet Lao forces had also moved up to support Deuane's outnumbered units. Nosavan's forces were easily beaten back, except at one western outpost at Tha Thom which they were able to overrun.

It is ironic to read Hilsman's account of this period. He is obviously torn between shouting with glee at the success of the new policy and concealing the truth as to how it was implemented. After describing President Kennedy's acceptance at a National Security Council meeting of Harriman's formula that 'we must be sure the break comes between the Communists and the neutralists. . . .' Hilsman then pretends that the Pathet Lao were responsible for the break.

'The Pathet Lao made their first move by attempting to take over Kong Le's neutralist forces. . . .' (In fact it was just this very close alliance that had most alarmed Washington.) 'When he insisted on independence, they cut off the Soviet supplies coming to him overland from Hanoi. At Souvanna's request the United States stepped into the breach with a new flow of supplies through Vientiane. . . .' (This was simply a new version of the deal Souvanna Phouma had agreed to with Ambassador Brown behind the back of the Pathet Lao and Kong Le in October 1960, but this time directed exclusively against the Pathet Lao.

'The Pathet Lao,' continues Hilsman, 'then began a more subtle but also more vicious campaign, in which Quinim Pholsena, nominally a neutralist, was the central figure. Quinim directed a network of secret agents in an attempt to subvert the more susceptible officers under Kong Le and to assassinate those who were loyal. The Communists had some success in their attempts at subversion, but when they assassinated Colonel Ketsana, Kong Le's courageous chief of staff, and an old friend, the neutralists closed ranks. And they retaliated by assassinating Quinim himself. The Communists then tried an out-and-out military offensive against the neutralists. They attacked Kong Le's position on the Plain of Jars, driving him back into the western half of the plain. . . .' (It was common knowledge in Vientiane that Ketsana had been assassinated by Nosavan's men after other efforts to turn Kong Le against the Pathet Lao had failed.)

'Thus by the summer of 1963, the split was complete. . . .' Hilsman notes with satisfaction '. . . It was the Communists now who were isolated, and the non-Communist neutral and conservative factions who were joined in opposing them. . . .'[2] Indeed, superficially it looked as if the Harriman formula and the tactics used to implement it had worked to perfection. But what the split and kill experts had overlooked was that the neutralists themselves were split, a very important part, those with real backbone, remaining true to the alliance with the Pathet Lao. Harriman and Hilsman were thinking exclusively in terms of the Vientiane political scene. If the Pathet Lao were 'isolated', they were isolated with the people — the most decisive form of 'isolation' in the long run. Progressive and able neutralist leaders such as Colonel Deuane on the military side and Khamsouk Keola (Minister of Health in the coalition government) on the political side remained firm. Their bases in the countryside were still solid. They had the support of the people everywhere, including in Vientiane

and other cities.

As for Kong Le, he later disappeared into exile and oblivion. He had played his role in history in staging the 1960 *coup d'état*. He could have continued to play a role just as long as he remained true to his Pathet Lao allies, but not otherwise. In the end he realized the extent to which he had been tricked, used and then flung aside, once the CIA had squeezed him to the last drop of usefulness. The Pathet Lao knew how to utilise and develop all that was good in Kong Le, his patriotism and courage, and teach him the elements of people's war. The CIA knew how to utilise and develop all that was bad in him, especially his moral and ideological weaknesses.

Of the situation in April 1963 I wrote at the time that ' the military plot failed due to the loyalty of Colonel Deuane and the main part of the neutralist forces in the Plain of Jars; to the reluctance of the Kong Le troops to attack their colleagues; to the vigilance of the Pathet Lao and to the low morale of Nosavan's forces. But it was a close call. Had " Operation Trojan Horse " succeded, the trap would have been sprung in Vientiane and all the Pathet Lao and progressive neutralist forces in the capital would have been caught in it. . . . '[3]

With the departure of Souphanouvong and Vongvichit from the capital, the coalition government existed on paper only — to the jubilation of Washington. It was abundantly clear that U.S. policy, despite the lip service to ' neutrality ', had never changed an iota. It was still dominated by the obsession of exterminating the Pathet Lao, the chief obstacle to their plans for making Laos a satellite. The process had started towards a polarisation of two forces in the country instead of three: the rightists to which so-called ' neutralists ' like Souvanna Phouma had rallied; the leftists, comprising the Pathet Lao, to which the progressive neutralists had now rallied.

[1] It was subsequently revealed that Nosavan had issued secret instructions that civil servants were to obey only orders from his old administration, on pain of severe punishment if they disobeyed.

[2] *To Move A Nation*, page 153.

[3] *The Furtive War*, pages 213–214.

12. Exit Nosavan

By his failure to take the Plain of Jars, even with the advantage that treachery and surprise afforded, Nosavan had once again proved his incompetence and his inability to inject any fighting spirit into the forces he had created. His star, like that of Prince Boun Oum — who had never played his role with much conviction or enthusiasm — was on the wane. Washington had somebody much more politically glamorous — Souvanna Phouma. Militarily, there was also something new in the air. The Royal Laotian Army, made up almost exclusively of the Lao Lum plains-people, Buddhists who abhorred violence and whose hierarchy had a tradition of patriotism and thus supported the Pathet Lao, had proved in a dozen engagements that they had no stomach for killing fellow-Laotians in the interests of a foreign power.

The conviction grew amongst U.S. military experts on the spot that it could never be converted into an efficient and reliable instrument of U.S. policy despite the huge sums of money lavished on it. Something else had to be found.

Schlesinger reports that, after Nosavan's 1961 fiascos, President Kennedy began casting around for new ways of fighting guerilla wars and decided on a vast expansion of ' Special Forces ' cadres and units as the best way to fight ' special wars '. Something really new had to be created ' . . . in order to confront the existing challenge of guerilla warfare in the jungles and hills of underdeveloped countries. Over the opposition of the army bureaucracy, which abhorred separate élite commands on principle, he reinstated the SF green beret as the symbol of the new force. . . . '[1] Both Schlesinger and Hilsman make it clear that this decision was specifically related to the defeats of Nosavan's U.S.-trained forces in Laos. It was normal, therefore, that Laos should be one of the first experimental fields for the application of this new weapon, which was to become an important auxiliary in carrying out the United States' self-appointed duties as the world's super-gendarme. ' Special Forces ' are based on the use of local mercenaries under U.S. officers, trained and paid by the CIA, loyal to the U.S.A. But how were they to get Laotians to perform any better under U.S. officers than they did under puppet Laotian officers? No progress was made until the Meo tribespeople came into the picture.

Because of their experienced exploitation of ancient tribal feuds and traditional hostility between the tribespeople and the Lao Lum,

the French had been able to build up a Meo commando force which totalled 3,000 by end of the Indochina war. They were headed by two opium-dealing tribal chiefs, To Bi and To Jeu. But the majority of the Meo fought on the side of the Pathet Lao under the famous Meo chieftain, Faydang, today a member of the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat. They still remain loyal to the Pathet Lao. But talent scouts of the CIA spotted the commandos left by the French and also one of their Meo officers, lieutenant Vang Pao. The CIA decided to take them over and use them as the nucleus for the Laotian ' Special Forces '. Racially conditioned against the Lao Lum, they could be inspired with contempt equally against Souphanouvong and against the neutralists, including Souvanna Phouma if necessary. The Meo tribes lived on the summits of the mountains, very strategically placed for just the sort of nefarious activities that the ' Special Forces ' are trained to undertake. '. . . there were occasions of tension in 1962 and 1963 when it was useful to have the Meo blow up a bridge or occupy a mountaintop as a move in the deadly game of " signalling " that the United States had to play to deter the Communists from adventuring with the Geneva accords. But arming the tribesmen engendered an obligation not only to feed them when they were driven from their traditional homelands but also to protect them from vengeance. . . . '[2]

By 1964, after Nosavan had suffered a further series of defeats in renewed attempts to take the Plain of Jars and to open up Route No. 9 in the South, the Americans were busy building up the original force of 3,000 Meos to 15,000, organised in five zones and forty-eight sectors in Upper and Lower Laos. At Long Cheng, southwest of Xieng Khouang, a big ' hush-hush ' base was developed, complete with aerodrome, officers' training school, supply depots and training centres for espionage, sabotage, signalling and all the cloak and dagger techniques in the ' Special Forces ' arsenal. The three zones in Upper Laos were under the nominal command of ' General ' Vang Pao, the two in Lower Laos under another tribal chieftain, Boun Pone. The real headquarters for planning, supplies, training and as a rear operations base was at Oudon in Thailand, known as HQ333, and run directly by U.S. ' Special Forces '. Another centre for higher ' studies ' in sabotage was set up at Lopbury, also in Thailand, while the most promising trainees were selected for finishing courses in Japan and the U.S.A. itself. From scores of disillusioned Meos who were captured or simply deserted when they found out what they were being used for, the Pathet Lao leaders soon built up a detailed picture of how the Meo ' Green Berets ' were trained and organized.

Although the majority were Meos, the CIA recruited among Thais

who had served in South Vietnam, and among Kuomintang remnants from Burma and Thailand and from northern Laos also — a choice selection of killers and bandits.

Armed, equipped, trained, fed and paid out of the special CIA budget, they got more and better of everything — including pay — than the Royal Army troops. Anything that could be done to increase hostility between the Lao Lum and the tribes, the Royal Army and the ' Special Forces ', was all to the good as far as U.S. policy was concerned. What was being built up was a purely mercenary army which belonged entirely to the U.S.A. and the operational plans of which never even had to be shown to the Vientiane government or its staff headquarters. More and more the ' Special Forces ' were built up, not only as the main U.S. military instrument in Laos but the main military force in general. Money — as Senator Fulbright complained — was no object. Anything needed to corrupt — booze, girls, opium — was available as a reward for the most odious crimes. Traditionally the Meos, like the other tribespeople, were exceptionally honest and straightforward, the most loyal of allies. Everything that U.S. power and wealth could furnish to break down their moral qualities was used to transform them into bandits who despised not only the Lao Lum and other tribespeople, but also those of their own race who were not swaggering around in ' Special Forces ' uniforms.

Under the feudal relations which were still maintained among the tribes in the non-liberated areas, it was only necessary to corrupt the heads of the various clans and tribes and the young men were automatically obliged to follow their leaders. Without a sense of nationhood, many were thus dragooned into the ' Special Forces ' and in training camps in Thailand were taught new ways of killing their compatriots, without knowing where they were or who was the enemy they were supposed to exterminate.

While this build-up of the ' Special Forces ' continued, Souphanouvong made many attempts to get the coalition government functioning again. He proposed, among other things, to transfer the administration to Luang Prabang and to create a neutral zone around the royal capital, both zone and city to be policed by a tripartite security force. This was turned down, as were many other proposals, some of which had the support of the ICC, designed to create conditions of security in Vientiane itself and make the normal functioning of the coalition government possible. Until a minimum of security was guaranteed in Vientiane, Souphanouvong would not return to put himself and other Pathet Lao leaders in a trap which the rightists could spring at any moment they desired.

In April 1964, in response to an initiative of Souphanouvong,

Souvanna Phouma and Nosavan came to the Plain of Jars to talk things over in a tripartite meeting. Nothing emerged from it, but the very fact that it took place shook the CIA. On April 19, just after the two returned to Vientiane from what was in reality a fruitless meeting, there was a military coup, carried out by General Kouprasith Abhay, a relative of Phoui Sananikone, and as willing and right-wing a puppet as Nosavan. Souvanna Phouma was placed under house arrest, Nosavan was relieved of part of his command, and Kouprasith put himself at the head of a ' Revolutionary Committee ', acting as the new government.

Obviously the coup caused a commotion abroad, the ripples of indignation reaching up to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference who expressed their disapproval, forcing the U.S. State Department also to make noises of dissent. President Johnson's special envoy, William Bundy, turned up in Vientiane on April 21. Doubtless after having received assurances that nothing had been agreed at the Plain of Jars conference with Souphanouvong, Bundy set about restoring order in such a way that the coup-makers and the CIA would be satisfied, but under a cloak of respectability that would look good to the Co-Chairmen and the outside world. There followed a whole series of manoeuvres, in which the coup-makers agreed to accept Souvanna Phouma again as long as he ' broadened ' his cabinet; Nosavan was restored to his post as vice-premier; Souvanna Phouma and Nosavan negotiated an agreement to fuse the neutralist and right-wing parties. The ' broadening ' of the cabinet meant the exclusion of the Neo Lao Haksat members and the appointment of a right-winger to replace the murdered Quinim Pholsena at the foreign ministry.

From May 7, 1964, the date on which Souvanna Phouma announced the shotgun formation of a new government, the tripartite coalition government ceased to exist and the 1962 Geneva Agreements were in effect null and void, the legal basis of the agreements shattered by Souvanna Phouma's abdication of his responsibilities. More than ever Phouma was in debt to Washington who had ' rescued ' him from political, if not physical, liquidation, and the Pentagon was not tardy in exacting repayment. Within ten days of the all right-wing government being formed, American jets started bombing the main Pathet Lao bases in the Plain of Jars, Sam Neua and Lower Laos, while Nosavan's force started new operations on several fronts, supported by U.S. tactical aviation.[3]

Ostensibly these raids were directed at the so-called 'Ho Chi Minh trail ', along which North Vietnam was supposed to be infiltrating men and supplies to the South. In fact they were aimed at giving tactical

support to Nosavan's ground operations and at wiping out the main Pathet Lao bases. In relation to the start of these air operations, Hilsman reveals that shortly after President Johnson took over at the White House after the assassination of President Kennedy, and some time before Hilsman himself resigned in March 1964, Walt Rostow for the State Department proposed ' gradual escalation ' of the war in North Vietnam and shortly afterwards the Pentagon and CIA put forward a programme of ' low-level reconnaissance ' in Laos. This was supposedly because of increased use of the ' infiltration routes '. Hilsman shows that at the time the total supplies required by the NFL from outside South Vietnam was six tons per day and that even two years later, by which time their armed forces had trebled, the Pentagon estimate of their needs from outside the South was twelve tons per day. Hilsman also points out that the ' infiltration ' rate was lower in 1964 than the previous year and that it was lower in 1963 than in 1962.

The new president had perhaps been stimulated by General (' Killer ' as he was known to World War II correspondents) Lemay's dictum: ' We're swotting flies. . . . Let's go after the manure pile.'

' . . . The proposal for low-level reconnaissance over Laos — with the implication that bombing would follow if targets were spotted — [or if the low-level reconnaissance planes were fired on as was inevitable. W.B.] had been made before. But Harriman, Forrestal and I had fought it steadily. In the first place, we were worried about the effect on Laos itself. The Geneva Agreements of 1962 had achieved a precarious neutrality for Laos that so far both sides had respected in its broad outlines. There was a *de facto* partition rather than an effective government of national union, but by and large the Communists had stayed on their side of the line of partition. . . . But we were also worried about the effects of an escalation on the struggle in Vietnam as well. . . . '[4] Hilsman then accuses the North Vietnamese of using Laos as an infiltration route to the South and says that the bombings could have been justified on these grounds. ' At least 5,000 men a month could be infiltrated over the Ho Chi Minh trails — over 60,000 a year. Yet from 1960 on, the monthly average had been only 650 and the yearly average only 7,850. *More important, the personnel coming over the routes were not North Vietnamese, but still only the pro-Communist southerners who had gone north in 1954 and were returning to serve in the Viet Cong as cadres. . . .*'[5]

Hilsman and Harriman were against the bombings because, as Hilsman writes: ' If we openly violated the Geneva Agreements, it would be politically easier for the Communists to violate them even more openly, actually increasing their infiltration through Laos. To

Harriman, Forrestal, and me the conclusion seemed obvious. If we raised the ante by bombing, the North Vietnamese would respond by increasing the use of the infiltration routes to include northerners. . . .'[6] But the 'ante was raised' and, under the pretext of bombing infiltration routes, all Pathet Lao bases in the liberated areas were attacked from mid-1964 onwards.[7]

Rivalries and mutual recriminations between the Sananikone and Nosavan factions continued to develop, and the prestige of Nosavan continued to decline because of the incapacity of his forces to win a single victory on the battlefield. Although he was no longer in charge of military affairs, part of the shame of the defeats rubbed off on him, as the armed forces were very much his creation. Souvanna Phouma kept reshuffling his cabinet, moving it further and further to the extreme right. In March 1965, the Nosavan–Sananikone quarrel developed into armed clashes: Nosavan lost as usual and fled the country to seek refuge with his cousin, Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the dictator of Thailand.

As the war in South Vietnam escalated in February 1965, with the start of the systematic bombing of the North and a month later by the landing of the first U.S. combat units in the South, the Meo tribespeople found many of their mountain-top villages being converted into U.S. bases, helicopter fields and radar-relay centres for guiding planes based in Thailand and on the Seventh Fleet to and from their bombing missions.[8] A great effort was made by the CIA to establish a network of such mountain-top bases in the Pathet Lao areas, supplied by two airlines operated by the CIA out of Vientiane and Thai airfields.[9] Obviously once such bases were established behind their lines, the Pathet Lao did their best to eliminate them. This is one of the explanations for Hilsman's reference, quoted earlier, to the 'obligation not only to feed them [the Meos] when they were driven from their traditional homelands but also to protect them from vengeance. . . .' Protecting them from vengeance as we shall see later meant (1) dropping American 'Green Berets' to help defend the bases, and (2) when that failed, forcibly evacuating the tribespeople into concentration camp-type reservations in the Vientiane-controlled areas.

Although the policy of 'split and kill' yielded certain fruitful results for U.S. policy-makers during the first couple of years after the formation of the coalition government, it also resulted in splitting the right-wing forces — illustrated by the Sananikone–Nosavan clash and the flight abroad of Kong Le when his forces were integrated against his will into the rightist army. On the other hand, there was a consolidation of the Pathet Lao and its allies — helped in mid-May, 1964,

by an uprising of leftist elements within the Kong Le neutralist armed forces, the insurgents immediately establishing contact with the Pathet Lao. The new reinforcements, added to those already rallied around Colonel Deuane and Khamsouk Keola, facilitated the formation of an 'Alliance Committee of Patriotic Neutralist Forces' which replaced the vacillating neutralists of the Souvanna Phouma school to become reliable allies of the Pathet Lao. The Alliance quickly turned into a vital new political force in the country, attracting to it important elements among the urban middle class and intellectuals.

The use of the Vang Pao mercenaries, so clearly in U.S. pay; the ruthless destruction of villages by U.S. bombs and napalm from U.S.-piloted planes; the shift by Souvanna Phouma away from his former neutralist and nationalist position; all these factors heightened political consciousness to a degree never before known in Laos.[10]

By mid-1965, with the build-up of U.S. combat forces in South Vietnam, the merciless bombing raids on the North and open intervention in Laos, the United States had become recognised as an all-out enemy of the people of Indochina. It was widely felt also, not only inside Laos and not only in the socialist capitals but in France as well, that Souvanna Phouma had by this time transferred his allegiance from Paris to Washington.

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[1] *A Thousand Days*, page 285.

[2] Hilsman's version of 'Special Forces' exploitation of the Meo tribespeople, *To Move A Nation*, page 115.

[3] These first raids started two months before the 'Gulf of Tonking' incident used as the pretext for the first attacks against North Vietnam.

[4] *To Move A Nation*, page 527.

[5] *To Move a Nation*, page 527. The italics are mine. Hilsman was referring to the 140,000 'Vietminh' troops, cadres and a few of their families who had temporarily withdrawn to the North after the 1954 Geneva Agreements, and who were to return to the South after the 1956 general elections which were never held owing to U.S.–Diem repudiation of the Geneva Agreements.

[6] *To Move A Nation*, page 528.

[7] Roger Hilsman resigned in March 1964 because of disagreement with Johnson's insistence on 'military solutions' in Laos and Vietnam.

[8] Seventh Fleet planes bombing deep inside North Vietnam flew on to bases inside Thailand, refuelling and restocking to bomb again and return to the carriers.

[9] AP reported on June 20, 1965, that a thirty-five-plane squadron with U.S. pilots carried out the supply work at a cost of $10,000,000 a year. The funds came from the CIA.

[10] Following more coups and counter-coups between supporters of Nosavan and Sananikone–Kouprasith in early 1965, and further shuffles to the right by Souvanna Phouma, there remained only six of the nineteen members of the original Tripartite Coalition Government, which hardly gave Souvanna Phouma the right to claim that he still headed the government based on the 1962 Geneva Agreements.

13. Back to the Plain of Jars

If there is one aspect that has emerged from the U.S. Senate probes and hearings and the facts dug out by a handful of suspicious journalists, it is the secrecy, skulduggery and outright lying that had gone on at the highest levels in Washington right from the beginnings of U.S. intervention in Laos. One of the pretexts given by the Nixon administration for not releasing the full transcript of the Symington hearings was that it would be ' too embarrassing for previous administrations '. It is obviously a phoney reason, for Nixon is not the man to be coy about destroying the image of his predecessors. But, because of the pressures and probes, the public at large has finally caught a glimpse, still far from complete, of the really dirty work that goes on in areas remote from the spotlight of public attention. I have been a witness on the receiving end ' from the other side ' to part of what has been happening, on and off for the past fifteen years. Professionally, I am pleased that other western journalists, especially American journalists, by late 1969 were finally on the scent of what has been going on. However I think it is fair comment to say that had there not been the national crisis over the failures in Vietnam and fears that more Vietnams were being developed under the surface, the spotlight would not have been switched onto Laos.

What happened in the first few months of 1970 was entirely predictable. The Pathet Lao decided to retake the Plain of Jars — and did. For good measure they decided also to restore the ceasefire line, approximately as it was at the time of the 1962 Geneva Conference, which would justify wiping out the U.S. ' secret bases ' at Sam Thong and Long Cheng, established by the CIA after 1962, and which served as the advance bases for the stupid CIA-directed operation against the Plain of Jars in September 1969. In talks with leading Pathet Lao officials in the North Vietnam-Laotian border areas less than a month after Vang Pao's troops had seized the Plain, I was told that the Pathet Lao forces could and would retake it when the dry season arrived. And in Vientiane a few days later, I was informed that even in Prince Souvanna Phouma's entourage there was considerable nervousness about the repercussions of the CIA-Vang Pao ' notable victory '.

The dry season starts at about the end of November. By mid-January, 1970, two things were happening. Pathet Lao preparations for a counter-offensive could be noted. Vang Pao's Meo mercenaries

were showing no stomach for their role in holding the Plain. They could be used effectively as shock troops in short, sharp, ' kill all, burn all, loot or destroy all ' operations. But then they had to get back to their mountains. They were no good as garrison troops in the plains. They began to fall sick and there were many desertions. The regular Vientiane troops were showing no great speed in taking over that very dangerous bit of real estate that the Plain was sure to become. By the end of January, the writing was on the wall. On February 3, premier Souvanna Phouma proposed the ' neutralization ' of the Plain of Jars. It was strange that he had not thought of that when he was in a victorious position over four months earlier. The Pathet Lao rejected this, doubtless recalling how ' neutralization ' in Vientiane had ended up with the Pathet Lao and left-wing neutralist ministers as prisoners of Nosavan, to be assassinated at the latter's will.

On February 5 the CIA started flying out, in C130 planes, some 23,000 unfortunate civilians from the concentration camp villages they had set up in the Sam Thong–Long Cheng area. Synthetically created flotsam, they had to be removed so that the Pathet Lao ' fish ' would find no ' sea ' to move around in. Also it would ease the U.S. conscience to know that the only ones who would now be bombed were the ' naughty ones ' who had avoided concentration or had escaped from the camps.

As the Pathet Lao — by then described as ' North Vietnamese ' troops — predictably closed in, the Vientiane troops predictably moved out. This is no reflection on their courage or fighting capacity, but on their realism and in many cases their patriotism. That they rarely stand and fight the Pathet Lao is their affirmation of refusing to kill and be killed to implement what are so obviously U.S. policies against their own national interests. If this had not been clear enough before, it certainly had been during the previous twelve months as they had seen U.S. air power blasting their whole country to pieces. On February 13, after having claimed another ' victory ' the previous day, Vientiane announced the loss of twelve hill positions, vital approaches guarding the Plain. Vientiane losses were given as nineteen killed and fifty wounded, which does not suggest that there was any very enthusiastic resistance. The following day it was announced that heavy artillery was being flown out of the Plain and that the latter was being prepared ' as a trap to lure the North Vietnamese and crush them by air power. . . .' [1] (In his final days in the Berlin bunker, Hitler comforted the German people as Soviet armies swept towards the capital that they were being ' lured ' into positions on which the great counter-offensive would be launched!) By February 16 it was announced from Saigon that 400 fighter-bombers were attacking

' North Vietnamese troops, trucks and supply lines in Laos ' and the following day B52 operations in South Vietnam were switched to Laos. The newspaper headlines made it appear as if this deployment of U.S. strategic and tactical air power in Laos was something new. In fact it had been going on for years and B52s had been regularly used in Laos for at least a year.

Tucked away in a UPI story from Saigon on February 16 was the confirmation that: 'B52s and a fleet of 400 fighter-bombers have been flying daily missions into Laos for months. But the new emergency strikes, requiring all the planes available, underscored the urgency of the situation in Laos. . . .' What it underscored in fact was the impotence of air power as a substitute for ground troops, or as the remedy for a complete lack of political stability. Air power, employed at its ruthless worst, was incapable of reversing the incredible Dien Bien Phu-like blunder of dropping troops into the midst of solidly Pathet Lao territory where man, climate and nature were on the side of the Pathet Lao forces — and their allies, if in fact there were any North Vietnamese troops there.

At 3 a.m. on the morning of February 21, despite the B52s and the 400 fighter-bombers, Pathet Lao forces launched their final assault and the Plain of Jars was firmly in their hands within a matter of hours.

In an ironic commentary on February 23, on the recapture of the Plain, *Le Figaro* (Paris's leading daily paper and far removed from any suspicion of left-wing sympathies) wrote: ' How many men were thrown into the decisive offensive on Saturday morning? In Vientiane sometimes they speak of 6,000 troops, sometimes 400. It is said that the battle was a tough one . . . also that there was practically no fight at all. Among the considered opinions offered, one hears that government troops suffered heavy losses — also that losses were very light. We heard of a rout, the desperate flight of the 1,400 defenders of Xieng Khouang, described as lost in the hills or hiding out in the beds of rivers which criss-cross the Plain. Now it is said that the evacuation, prepared in advance, took place as scheduled. . . .'

To bolster the old U.S. charge that all that was happening in Laos was North Vietnamese ' aggression ' the cry went up again that all this was done by North Vietnamese troops. At the time of writing I have no information one way or the other. But I do recall that during two other major crises over Laos when the same charge was made, it proved to be false. One is the seizure of the Plain of Jars on January 1, 1961,[2] by Kong Le and Pathet Lao troops. Nosavan's charge about ' seven North Vietnamese battalions ' was later withdrawn by Nosavan himself. In fact the Plain of Jars was captured by Kong Le's three

parachute companies with support from Pathet Lao guerillas in the area. In his book *Laos, Buffer State or Battleground*,[3] Hugh Toye describes Kong Le's advance on the Plain of Jars on December 31, 1960. ' He had abandoned his two guns en route and his striking force consisted only of three parachute companies and some heavy mortars. Phoumi (Nosavan) however, announced that seven Viet Minh battalions had crossed the frontier and that two of them were approaching the plain. It was thus hardly surprising that the main garrison there bolted almost as soon as Kong Le was within mortar range. . . . Up to this point Kong Le had received little or no help from the Pathet Lao. . . .' Toye then makes the point that North Vietnamese support only came much later.

My own information is that although the Pathet Lao at that time were not materially equipped for the conventional sort of warfare that Kong Le then wanted and for which his forces were equipped, and although they would never abandon their own partisan tactics, they did lend all the support within their power to help in the seizure of the Plain of Jars. But there were absolutely no North Vietnamese forces in the area at all.

The other major crisis was at Nam Tha in May 1962, which I have also dealt with in a previous chapter. Here the accusation that the attackers were North Vietnamese and even Chinese troops was almost used as a pretext for World War III, and provoked the Kennedy–Khrushchev meeting in Vienna. My own information, based on seeing the military maps with the positions of the opposing forces just prior to the battle and the designations of the units deployed by both sides, was that it was only Pathet Lao forces which chased the rightist forces out of Nam Tha. Hugh Toye, with access to information from the ' other ' side, writes as follows:

' The allegation that the Pathet Lao had been supported by Chinese troops was dismissed by the American advisers in the area. It was generally believed that there was at least a battalion of Viet Minh in Muong Sai, but many observers were satisfied that the Pathet Lao no longer needed even Viet Minh advice in order to deal effectively with their opponents. Government forces retreated without resistance down the valleys to Ban Houei Sai on the Mekong and on 11 May crossed the river into Siam. By 15 May about three thousand men, including General Bou Leut himself [Commander-in-Chief of Nosavan's Vientiane army, W.B.] were being air-lifted back to Vientiane, and two thousand more had surrendered to the Pathet Lao. Fresh troops reoccupied Ban Houei Sai a few days after it was abandoned and found no enemy near it. An American patrol " back up the trail to Nam Tha found only scattered bands of Pathet Lao guerillas and no

North Vietnamese." [4] . . . As before, the Pathet Lao made no attempt to move up to the Mekong area and no further incidents were reported from the area. . . .'

Whether there was 'at least a battalion of Viet Minh at Muong Sai,' I do not know. In any case it would not have figured on the operational maps I saw, but it seems clear from the Toye and Dommen accounts that the Nam Tha action was exclusively a Pathet Lao one and the only outsiders involved were Americans. Therefore reports that North Vietnamese troops were involved in the Plain of Jars and related actions should be treated with the greatest reserve, although a perfectly good case could be made for their involvement. In any case the Pathet Lao forces, veterans of nearly twenty-five years of jungle warfare and continuous growth and development in every respect, are absolutely capable of waging such actions without, as Toye points out, 'even Viet Minh advice'. In nearly all actions against the Vientiane troops, including those in which there was not the faintest possibility of North Vietnamese support, they have come off the victors, even under what appeared objectively to be impossible conditions.

As the Pathet Lao forces continued to advance, President Nixon acted as predictably as did the Vientiane troops. First of all he continued to deny that any U.S. forces were involved, then to send letters to premiers Harold Wilson and Alexei Kosygin — on March 5 — asking them to use their influence to move the situation from the battlefield to the conference table. Just as, in the weeks preceding the Nam Tha battle, President Kennedy was quite happy with the situation as long as it was Nosavan's forces that were advancing, but demanded a conference as soon as the tables were turned on Nosavan's forces, so President Nixon had also been very happy with the CIA operation when Vang Pao's forces took the Plain of Jars. For the first time, an American president officially claimed some credit for the success. There was no appeal then to Wilson and Kosygin to arrange a conference to restore the situation. It was not surprising that Kosygin coldly rebuffed the demand and advised Nixon to stop the bombings and get out of Laos.

It was about this time that the situation in Laos began to blow up inside the United States. Not because there was much editorial indignation about the morality of U.S. presence there — but because things had gone wrong. Official Washington lies about Laos started flying home to roost. 'No Americans stationed in Laos have ever been killed in ground action. . . .' President Nixon said on March 5, in the same 3,000 word statement in which he had appealed to premiers Wilson and Kosygin as co-presidents of the 1962 Geneva Conference on Laos. But Nixon continued to refuse publication of the transcript of a

Senate's sub-committee enquiry into official evidence of U.S. involvement there. Next day came the news that a Captain Joseph Bush had been killed on February 10, 1969, helping protect a 'secret' U.S. base at Muong Soui, twenty-odd miles west of the Plain of Jars. His wife supplied the evidence. The White House then announced that six civilians, apart from Captain Bush, had also been killed. Within a few days the figure had reached twenty-seven, then something 'under fifty'. On March 10, the father of Captain Bush revealed an interesting detail by stating that 'a government-supplied tombstone had an inscription saying that his son had died in Vietnam'. This raised the tantalizing question as to how many other Americans officially 'killed in action in South Vietnam' had in fact died in America's secret war in Laos.

On March 10 also it was revealed that for more than four years American military personnel serving in Laos had been receiving extra 'hostile fire pay' of sixty-five dollars a month and pilots flying across Laos to bomb North or South Vietnam from bases in Thailand also received extra bonuses. Almost the same day, Senator Stuart Symington, who had chaired the Senate Sub-Committee whose transcript of evidence was being suppressed, asserted that casualties of American airmen 'far exceeded the twenty-seven Americans that the administration acknowledged have been killed or were missing in ground operations in Laos. . . .' Figures of up to 400 airmen missing in action were cited. The *Washington Post* correspondent, T. D. Allman, revealed on March 17 that 'more than a dozen Americans were killed in Laos two years ago in defence of a secret American installation which assisted U.S. bombings of North Vietnam. The incident, until now kept secret, was not included in President Nixon's [March 6] speech and it has had an important effect on North Vietnamese strategy in northeast Laos. . . .' Senator Symington weighed in with the charge that testimony regarding this incident had been censored out of his sub-committee's report. The base referred to was at Pha Thi[5] which was eliminated by the Pathet Lao in 1968. Allman correctly describes it as 'an American radar reconnaissance and rescue base in extreme northeastern Laos which guided U.S. aircraft to their targets and electronically released their bomb loads by radio impulse.'

As an installation on Laotian territory directing bombing attacks on targets in North Vietnam, the North Vietnamese had every right under international rules of war to go in and try to knock it out. Furthermore as eighty per cent of the bombing attacks against the North were flown across Laotian air space from Thailand, North Vietnam had every right to traverse Laotian ground space to get at those bases in Thailand and try to destroy them. Pha Thi was the

most important of such radar bases but only one of many; the operation of these bases amounted to acts of war against North Vietnam on the part of the Vientiane government.

All these revelations began to put Nixon in the same position as the late President Eisenhower when he denied there had been any U2 flights over the Soviet Union at a moment when U2 pilot, Gary Powers, was in Soviet hands.

Then there was the question of U.S. personnel in Laos. After persistent probing and denials that there were any 'ground combat personnel', the State Department admitted on September 24, 1969, that there were 'about 500 U.S. government personnel in Laos, plus 330 AID contract personnel. . . .' On March 6, 1970, President Nixon upped this figure to 1,040, of whom 616 were 'government personnel — engaged either in military, advisory or training capacities. . . .' This figure came close to the 666 given by the U.S.A. at the time of the 1962 Geneva Conference and which were all supposed to have been withdrawn. It of course excluded an unknown number of thousands who could be switched from South Vietnam and Thailand on tactical operations as the occasion demanded.

As to the AID[6] personnel, there were some interesting revelations. 'The U.S. civilian AID mission in Laos is being used as a cover for CIA agents in clandestine operations against the Communist enemy. . .' writes correspondent Jack Foisie, in the March 11 issue of *The Los Angeles Times*. 'Agents posing as members of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) mission's Rural Development Division are recruiting and training pro-government guerillas to fight Communists, detect enemy movements deep in their own territory and act as ground controllers for aircraft. . . . Conversations with people throughout Laos in the past several weeks indicate that the number of agents posing as civilian AID workers totals several hundred. . . .'

Foisie goes on to describe other disguises adopted by the CIA for its various innocent-sounding agencies. 'The Rural Development Annex,' he continues, 'appears to be the successor to "White Star", the code name under which CIA activity in Laos was originally conducted. Although nominally under control of the AID mission director, Charles Mann, annex people answer only to the CIA chief in Laos. There is another secret organisation hidden within the AID mission compound. It is called the Special Requirements Office, and its personnel provide supplies for the clandestine units. . . . Many members of the annex are former American servicemen who fought in Vietnam. Often they come from the Special Forces and their job in Laos is about the same — without the green beret. . . .'

How right the Laotian people were to mistrust such foreign missions, which history has taught them to distrust no matter how innocent and high-sounding their names. Conspiracy is hardly a misnomer for such double-dealing towards both the Laotian and American people. One of the most alarming aspects is that none of all this skulduggery would have come out in the American press had it not been for the crisis over the Plain of Jars.

Three journalists, two Americans from the *New York Times* and *Life Magazine* and one Frenchman from *Agence France Presse,* managed to get inside the 'secret' CIA base at Long Cheng. They were able to slip in unnoticed but were later arrested by a Laotian colonel, interrogated by an American 'in civilian clothes — presumably CIA — and hustled out at U.S. Embassy direction on a plane bound for the capital of Vientiane. . . .' — according to a *Washington Post* report of February 26. U.S. Ambassador Godley was quoted as saying that he 'had lost all interest in the press' after the incident. (If Establishment journalists could be treated like that in Laos, then readers will appreciate that I got off lightly with my own brushes with the CIA in Vientiane described in a previous chapter.) T. D. Allman, quoted earlier, was one of three journalists who penetrated Long Cheng. He described it[7] as 'the centre of operations of the U.S. military and the Central Intelligence Agency in Northeastern Laos'. He refers to U.S. military men clad in civilian clothes 'riding in open Jeeps and carrying M16 rifles and hand guns. These young Americans,' explains Allman, 'are mostly ex-Green Berets, hired on CIA contract to advise and train Laotian troops. The fact that they are temporarily CIA personnel and no longer connected with their Army units allows the U.S. Government to say that it has no soldiers fighting in Laos. . . .

'Nearly every male between the ages of twelve and fifty is in the army organised by the CIA and headed by Maj. Gen. Vang Pao. The others — women, old men and children — have been resettled in formerly unpopulated hills south and west of Long Cheng. They are almost totally dependent on U.S. gifts of rice, medicine and clothing. Gen. Vang Pao's army, despite heavy U.S. support, has not fared well. His guerilla forces, which once numbered about 18,000 men, now total about 6,000. But they have been augmented by reinforcements from the regular Laotian Army units so that he has a total of about 12,000 men under his command. . . .' Allman estimated that planes landed at the Long Cheng airport at the rate of about one per minute.

At Vientiane airport in October, 1969, I estimated that the CIA-run Air America and Continental Air Services planes interspersed with T-28 fighter-bombers were also taking off at the rate of about one every two minutes on supply and bombing operations.

Henry Kamm of the *New York Times,* now something of an expert on recent developments in Laos, writing in the *International Herald Tribune* of March 23, referred to the further weakening of the Vientiane government's positions because of 'mounting indications that its best fighting force, the clandestine American-backed army of Gen. Vang Pao, is at a low ebb. Sam Thong, one of the government's two principle bases in northern Laos, had to be rapidly evacuated. The second base, Long Cheng was endangered. The low morale of the general and his man-and-boy soldiers were plainly in evidence. . . .'

One more American 'strong man' in South-east Asia was on his way out, after one more CIA 'Bay of Pigs' type disaster, leaving thousands of Laotians killed and wounded, tens of thousands more made homeless as a result of U.S. policies which are a total negation of the principle of self-determination for the Laotian people. The ultimate expression of this was Secretary of Defence Laird's statement that even if the Pathet Lao won out completely in Laos, set up their own government in Laos and demanded the U.S. government to halt the bombings of Laotian territory, the bombings would continue.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the most recent crisis in Laos was why the CIA launched the September 1969 action against the Plain of Jars. A tempting hypothesis is that it was not really intended as a military success at all. It was a CIA action to create a certain situation rather than a long-term military success. It occurred at a time when pressure was building up in the press and Congress to curtail U.S. engagements in Laos. The Pentagon and the CIA must have known, should have known at least, that the Plain would be retaken and the atmosphere of crisis built up, just as in fact did happen. Was it Nixon's way of forcing the hand of Congress, or the CIA and the Pentagon's way of forcing the hand of Nixon himself to halt disengagement in South-east Asia by proving the necessity for continuing U.S. military presence in the foreseeable future. If the commitment was to be reduced in one area it must be increased in another. Dominos that had refused to show any signs of falling were to be shaken hard by U.S. policies until they really did start to totter. What happened over the borders in Cambodia at the height of the Laotian crisis provides food for thought along these lines.

A more dismal explanation, which would show that the CIA is even more out of touch with realities in Laos than it was in South Vietnam on the eve of the Tet offensive, has been advanced by some normally well-informed contacts in Washington. Nixon, they say, had been persuaded that things are really going well in South Vietnam. 'Vietnamization' is going to work, the NLF is once again 'at the end of its tether'. Withdrawals can go ahead in a leisurely fashion without

disturbing the relation of forces. The Thieu-Ky régime can be maintained. The only thing is to make sure that the perimeter countries, Laos and Cambodia, are not endangered by the gradual reduction of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Nixon, according to this hypothesis, was persuaded that the September operation was 'sound' militarily and that American implantation in the Plain of Jars would put an end to further left-wing trouble in Laos and 'Communist penetration' from the North, just as the toppling of Sihanouk would end the risks of any further co-operation between Cambodia, North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government in the South. Once the situations in Laos and Cambodia had been cleared up withdrawals could go ahead even faster and Nixon could go on to win the mid-term elections on the strength of 'Pax Americana' in South-east Asia as a going concern.

Not only that but it appears that Nixon was so convinced by his Pentagon advisers that the adventures in Laos and Cambodia would bring military victory within his grasp, that he was also convinced the DRV–PRG negotiators at Paris would be so shattered and demoralized that they would accept the 'generous' surrender terms that he was prepared to send along to Paris together with a new chief of the U.S. delegation. To reinforce the delusion that at last he was in a position of strength, he sent over a hundred bombers on successive days, to bomb deep inside North Vietnamese territory in the most flagrant violation of the agreements reached in Paris.

All these illusions were certain, like 'Vietnamization', to blow up in President Nixon's face long before the mid-term elections in November 1970. This was proven by the reverses in Laos from September 1969 onwards and even more by the catastrophic consequences of the invasion of Cambodia.

There were all sorts of dire predictions that after the Plain of Jars victory the Pathet Lao forces would sweep on to take the royal capital of Luang Prabang — as it was generally conceded they easily could have done, and Vientiane also as far as that goes. But the Pathet Lao have always shown themselves modest at the moment of victory. A notable case in point was the their victory at Nam Tha in 1962 when all observers agreed they could have swept on to occupy the left bank of the Mekong and exterminated the fleeing rightist troops. They made no attempt to do either. Instead they agreed to sit in on the Geneva Conference, in which the U.S.A. suddenly discovered great interest after the Nam Tha *débâcle*. One could imagine what the U.S. position would have been had this been a notable victory for the rightist forces. Similarly, after retaking the Plain of Jars, the Pathet Lao leadership, on March 6, 1970, proposed a five-point peace plan

based on the essence of the 1962 Geneva Agreements:

1. The United States must withdraw completely from Laos and cease its military activities in the country.
2. In accordance with the 1962 Agreements, Laos must refrain from any military alliances with other countries.
3. An election should be held to a new National Assembly to form a democratic government.
4. During an interim period, the Laotian political parties should set up a consultative conference and a coalition government. The parties should agree to establish a security zone to ensure the unhindered functioning of the participants in the conference and coalition government.
5. The Laotian problem must be settled by the parties concerned.

It was made clear that this was no 'take it or leave it' proposal but one which should be the basis for discussions — which could start, however, only after U.S. bombings were halted. It was a constructive plan, especially Point 4 which dealt with the root cause of the non-implementation of the 1962 agreements — namely that the neutral coalition government at that time was a prisoner of the right-wing forces which completely controlled the capital and had all the administrative and security services in their hands. It was a plan that could have provided the basis for restoring national unity in Laos and a political solution which could in turn have pointed the way towards a political settlement in Vietnam.

Souvanna Phouma's first response to the peace plan was considerably warmer than that of Washington, but the latter's sour reaction was a sure pointer to the line Souvanna Phouma would eventually follow. Probably for internal reasons, he had at any rate to make a show of interest in preliminary talks, and a special Pathet Lao envoy came to Vientiane to present the plan officially. The military situation was very bleak indeed and Souvanna Phouma may well have intended to play for time at least by starting talks again. But in the meantime Washington thought it had countered the defeat in Laos by a 'victory' in Cambodia with the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk. The American press noted editorially that the coup in Phnom Penh had acted as a 'morale stiffener' for Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane. The 11th hour chance, and perhaps the last one for a negotiated settlement, was rejected on April 1 on the grounds that the Pathet Lao demand for the halting of U.S. bombings as a pre-condition for talks was 'unacceptable'.

With the rejection of the peace plan and the new situation in Cambodia, the Pathet Lao forces went into action again in April 1970, this time in the Bolovens Plateau area of the 'three frontiers

region' where South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos meet. The province of Attopeu, including the provincial capital of the same name, was quickly liberated. Attopeu was an important base for the rightist forces and was the main entry point for the clandestine 'Special Forces' operations which the Americans were running in Laos from South Vietnam. Its loss was a severe blow against all American operations in that part of southern Laos and there was more to come as the Pathet Lao forces went on to encircle Saravane, some sixty miles to the north of Attopeu, taking a number of U.S.-supplied hill-top bases as they went. In the north, Pathet Lao troops pushed forward to the Thai frontier in several places and beat back counter-offensive operations in the northern and southern sectors, at the same time tightening their encirclement of the only two important U.S. bases behind their lines — at Sam Thong and Long Cheng. Several times, Pathet Lao commandos penetrated the perimeter of these bases to shell Vang Pao's headquarters. In one such operation it was reported that Vang Pao was wounded and flown out to Oudon in Thailand for hospitalization.

By the end of April, hundreds of the Vang Pao mercenaries had deserted and were passed back through Pathet Lao territory to their native villages. In the three months that followed the Pathet Lao offensive to retake the Plain of Jars, at least half of Vang Pao's forces were wiped out, according to Pathet Lao estimates at the beginning of May 1970. Some American estimates — as noted earlier — put the number even higher. To fill the gap, the Americans started bringing in 'Special Forces' troops from South Vietnam — a fact which was 'leaked' by the Saigon Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam at the Djakarta conference on Cambodia on May 17 and was reluctantly confirmed by U.S. Defence Secretary Laird the following day. This was just one more secret Nixon had concealed from the U.S. public. According to Pathet Lao sources, 2,000 more such 'Special Forces' units were being given a crash training course in Thailand, to be rushed to the rescue of the badly shattered, badly demoralized Vang Pao remnants.

By the end of May 1970 there were at least 5,000 Thai troops fighting in Laos and more were being sent in every week to be 'integrated' with regular Vientiane army units. The intensified use of 'Special Forces' units; the increased use of Thai troops; improved weapons and increased air activity — these were the main measures by which the U.S. Command in Laos was trying to avoid a complete military collapse.

As for the Laotian resistance forces, their leadership was obviously thinking in terms of the new military perspectives opened up by the

fact that the war in Laos had become an integral part of the Second Indochina War. This was clear from the reply of Prince Souphanouvong, to my question as to his evaluation of the Summit Conference of the Peoples of Indochina in which he had participated as head of the Neo Lao Haksat.

'While the United States intensified and expanded their war of aggression in Indochina,' he replied, 'the Summit Conference was a scathing reply by the peoples of Indochina to these adventurous activities by the United States. It was a severe blow to Nixon's thesis "Asians Fight Asians" and "Indochinese Fight Indochinese". The success of the conference highlighted new progress in the anti-U.S. struggle for the national salvation of the three countries of Indochina and marked an important contribution to the struggle for national independence and peace in South-east Asia and the world in general. That is why it was widely acclaimed and warmly supported by broad sections of international public opinion. The joint declaration of the Conference is one of unity and struggle against the common enemy and will serve to reinforce and extend the relations of support, mutual aid and long term cooperation between the peoples of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

'The program will still further intensify the coordination and unity of efforts deployed by the three countries in their fight against U.S. aggression. It will lead the struggle of the Lao, Khmer and Vietnamese people to new heights and will lead to complete victory over U.S. interference and aggression, transforming Indochina into an authentic area of independence and peace.

'In Cambodia for instance, after the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, things have not at all turned out as the Americans expected. Responding to the five-point appeal of Prince Sihanouk, the political programme of the Cambodian United Front and the manifesto of the Royal Government of National Union, the Cambodian people's struggle has developed very rapidly on a national level, taking over vast areas in the countryside including many towns and dealing heavy blows at the U.S.–Saigon forces, shaking to its very foundations the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak regime.

'As for the Laotian patriotic forces they have retained and constantly developed their position of active initiative. After having kicked the enemy out of the Plain of Jars and completely recaptured the whole area, the patriotic forces directed their attack against the hideout of the "special forces" at Sam Thong–Long Cheng. They liberated Attopeu, Saravane and other places in the Bolovens Plateau area. That is to say they have punished the enemy in the jumping-off points and bases for their criminal attacks.

'In extending the war to the whole of Indochina, the Americans have got further bogged down and are in a critical impasse. . . . In the light of the joint declaration of the Summit Conference, the 40 million Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese peoples, fortified by the powerful support of people throughout the world, will further consolidate the active and victorious position already acquired and will step up their struggle to win final and complete victory.

'The aims of the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian peoples are to build up peaceful, independent and prosperous countries. . . . Each of our countries has its own position based on the realities of each country. We respect each other's position. The Summit Conference absorbed these viewpoints, the synthesis of which are reflected in the communiqué.'

The real synthesis obviously will be expressed in the concrete military-political developments of the Second Indochina War and the form of the future relations between the countries of Indochina after their final victory.

One thing seems certain — just as there is now a single Indochina war, there can only be a single Indochina peace.

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[1] As quoted in a Vientiane communiqué on February 14, published in *Le Figaro* (Paris) on February 23, 1970.

[2] Referred to in Chapter 10.

[3] Published by Oxford University Press, London, 1968.

[4] Hugh Toye was quoting here from Arthur Dommen's book *Conflict in Laos* (Praeger, New York, 1964).

[5] See reference in Chapter 6.

[6] The role of AID in the recruiting of Meo mercenaries is referred to in Chapter 6.

[7] In the *New York Times*, March 6, 1970.

Washington's official pretext for the gradual escalation from interference to intervention, then downright aggression against the Laotian people — and later against the Cambodian people — has always been related to North Vietnamese 'intervention' or 'aggression'. In fact Hanoi's policy has been strictly to let the Laotians and Cambodians settle their own affairs. Without U.S. interference, the Laotians and Cambodians would have settled their affairs in a manner satisfactory to themselves and the North Vietnamese. The Vietnam of Ho Chi Minh had no intention of, and little interest in trying to impose communist or pro-communist régimes in the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia, even if it had the means of so doing. As far as the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos and Cambodia were concerned, Hanoi's leaders were satisfied with the letter and spirit of those agreements, the essence of which was that the two kingdoms would become neutral buffer states between Vietnam and other states of mainland South-east Asia. This, as observed earlier, was the essential element in the meeting of East–West minds at Geneva.

For the British and French, the buffer state concept quietened their anxieties regarding an expansion, or at least a too rapid expansion, of 'Communist ideas' with which they identified the 'Vietminh' beyond the confines of Vietnam. The Cambodian–Laos *cordon sanitaire* would protext their spheres of interest in Thailand, Malaya etc. from the 'red virus'. Vietnam could not be saved — the Vietminh had won — but it could be amputated ideologically from the rest of South-east Asia. Even if it buttoned itself on to China — already 'lost' — this was an inevitable and thus acceptable price for its isolation elsewhere. Meanwhile SEATO would provide a 'protective shield' for states on the other side of the buffer.

For Hanoi, with prospects of the zone to the south of the 17th parallel being reunified with the North in two years and with the sea to the east and south as the natural frontiers; with neutral buffer states in the west and fraternal, socialist People's China to the north, the Vietnamese people could go ahead immediately in peace and independence to build up a viable socialist state which would prove a still more irresistible attraction to their compatriots in the South when the time for elections arrived. It was in this spirit that agreement could be reached at Geneva on the future status of Laos and Cambodia.

Laos was in a very different state of social-political evolution to Vietnam. Its revolution would find its own tempo. If there were Vietminh troops there during the anti-French war, this was on a friendly, mutual-help basis, forged by the resistance forces of Indochina to co-ordinate their common efforts to defeat French colonialism and bring peace and independence to each of the component parts. They resisted French efforts to buy off each one of them individually in order to crush them separately once the colonialist forces were strong enough.

The Vietminh forces in Laos withdrew after the 1954 Geneva Agreements, to the unanimous satisfaction of the International Control Commission which supervised their departure. They had no thoughts of ever returning. There would be no problems for Laotian political leaders in agreeing on common programmes with their comrades-in-arms, the Pathet Lao, who had broad popular support, including that of the powerful Buddhist clergy on the one hand and the nationalist-neutralist forces on the other, representing between them all that there was of organised public opinion in the country. There would be no problems in effecting national reconciliation. There was no risk of a government resulting from this national reconciliation adopting policies that would represent any threat or danger to an independent Vietnam.

Busy as they were healing the ravages of war, bringing about unity within in the North and preparing for the nation-wide elections, the last thing the Hanoi leaders wanted was a Laotian problem on their hands. The Geneva Agreements seemed the surest guarantee that this would not happen.

But the United States of Eisenhower and Dulles, before the Geneva Agreements were ever signed, had decided to move into Laos, indirectly if possible through stooges such as Katay and Sananikone, directly if that did not work. This policy was continued by the administrations of Kennedy and Johnson, and is continued today by that of Nixon. Whatever help North Vietnam at any particular stage gave the patriotic forces in Laos was a reaction to United States intervention. North Vietnam alone or together with People's China, supported from time to time by the Soviet Union (as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference) took innumerable initiatives to bring the Laotian question back onto the rails of the Geneva Agreements and to reinforce the supervisory role of the ICC. They denounced Sananikone's closing down of the ICC and his repudiation of the Geneva Agreements. They demanded ICC investigation of wholesale breaches of the agreements and had nothing to fear from investigations of charges of Vietnamese intervention. For two years, during which U.S. inter-

vention increased every year, the British Government turned a deaf ear to North Vietnamese requests, relayed by the Soviet Government, to revive the ICC. The British acted only when they could serve the interests of the U.S.A. and its stooges in Laos. When North Vietnam did start sending substantial aid to Laos, this was at the specific request of the legal government of Souvanna Phouma, at a time when he needed the support of the Pathet Lao for his own political and physical survival.

Hanoi maintained a similar, consistent attitude towards South Vietnam. As long as the U.S.A. kept out of the South physically — and in fact long after there was physical U.S. intervention — Hanoi let the South Vietnamese people try and settle their own affairs, despite the perfidious tearing up of the Geneva Agreements, the repudiation of the Geneva pledge of general elections in July 1956 to unify the country, and the savage repression, amounting to attempted extermination, of those who had taken part in the armed struggle for independence. Hilsman recognizes that it was only long after U.S. intervention started in the South that the North really started to help the resistance movement there.[1]

What was certain was that Hanoi, as far as neighboring Laos was concerned, was not going to sit idly by and see its former comrades-in-arms across the frontier exterminated so that the United States could take over from France as the new colonial power in Laos. If at some stage, even before the 1970 Summit Conference of the Peoples of Indo-China, the North Vietnamese helped Laotian patriotic forces repel the forces of U.S. intervention, most fair-minded persons with a minimum knowledge of the background would applaud. In so doing the North Vietnamese would be defending the Laotian people's interests and those of peace in South-east Asia. They would be acting in the spirit of the 1951 alliance between the resistance forces of the three states of Indochina[2] and that of the Phnom Penh Conference of the Peoples of Indochina in May, 1965, pledging common action against U.S. aggression if further encroachments were made against the participating countries.

History would in fact have judged the North Vietnamese harshly had they turned their backs on their former Laotian allies and their compatriots in the South in their hour of direst need. The North Vietnamese leaders had to make their decisions in the light of national interests — certainly threatened if U.S. military presence was installed along her frontiers — and the international situation, particularly North Vietnam's position as a member of the socialist camp. Participants in the 1960 conference of world communist parties in Moscow had agreed that while they were against the export of revolution, they

were also against the export of counter-revolution. They had pledged to mobilize their resources, including the military resources of countries where communist parties held state power, to help people and countries which had risen up in revolution and were victims of international support of counter-revolution.

Thus, in relation to her position within the international communist movement and the socialist camp, the DRV would be fulfilling her international obligations in helping the Pathet Lao defeat U.S.-sponsored counter-revolution in Laos.

There were other factors. By 1965, the United States had created one single military front against the peoples of Indochina. It took the form of U.S. combat troops in South Vietnam, the air war against North Vietnam, ' special war ' in Laos, and threats to invade Cambodia coupled with bombing and shelling of the latter's frontier villages. These were all part of a single, co-ordinated front. But while the U.S.A. reserved for itself the privilege of waging one single war as the French had in their time, the victims, boxed up in their respective pens, were supposed to wait to be butchered one by one. Can anyone blame them if they broke out to unite and help each other?

There was also the fact that eighty per cent of air attacks against North Vietnam were being flown from bases in Thailand across Laotian air space, guided to their targets by American-manned radar bases in Laos, the bombs actually dropped by electronic signals from these bases. If the U.S.A. had the right to use Laotian air space to attack North Vietnam, did not the North Vietnamese have the right to cross Laotian ground space to hit back at the bases in Thailand, not to mention the right of entering Laotian territory to wipe out the radar bases? Had Prince Souvanna Phouma cared a fig about preserving Laotian neutrality he would have denied the use of Laotian air space to attack a neighbouring country — as it was he never even raised his voice against it.

Another facet of the double standards Washington uses in its self-imposed role of international gendarme is that the United States reserves the monopoly of using foreign troops in its pay against the Laotian and South Vietnamese people. They use Thai, South Vietnamese, Kuomintang Chinese, Philippine and other mercenaries in Laos, and South Korean, Australian, New Zealand, Thai and Philippine troops in South Vietnam. But for the North Vietnamese to help their closest neighbours and compatriots was a ' crime ' to be punished by extermination — ' Let's bomb 'em back to the Stone Age ' as General Lemay demanded.

Had the socialist camp reacted similarly, Soviet planes would have been bombing American cities and Soviet and Chinese submarines

sinking U.S. supply convoys in the Pacific (carrying not six or a dozen but thousands of tons of supplies daily); while Chinese, North Korean, Cuban and Hungarian troops, etc., would have been fighting in South Vietnam and Laos.

At the beginning of 1961, for instance, after Kong Le and Singkapo had seized the Plain of Jars, Thai troops under U.S. command were parachuted into the area on three successive days: January 1, 2 and 4. This was at a time when not even the most suspicious imagination could conceive of Vietnamese presence, scores of miles as it is, over trackless, jungle-covered mountains, from the Vietnamese frontier. Nor could the North Vietnamese be associated with any of the major crises which sparked off the Washington exercises in brinkmanship — the defeat of Katay's military campaigns. the affair of the two Pathet Lao battalions; the escape of Souphanouvong; the Kong Le coup; the seizure of the Plain of Jars. The 'Ho Chi Minh' trail pretext had not even been invented at that time. But direct U.S. intervention and that of the troops in U.S. pay was already apparent for all to see.

Another example of Washington's double standards is that the U.S.A. reserves for itself the monopoly of using a country like Thailand for training and operational bases and 'attack-free sanctuaries', for transporting war supplies for use against neighbouring countries and for deploying troops in U.S. pay and under U.S. command in order to outflank and attack its victims from the rear (as in Nosavan's attack on Vientiane for example). What an outcry there would have been if China had used northern Laos to send military supplies to North Vietnam, or had invaded Laos and Thailand under the U.S.-invented pretext of 'hot pursuit' to destroy the Kuomintang remnants harrassing her frontier areas from bases in Laos and Thailand!

From the beginning of its intervention in Laos and elsewhere in Indochina, the United States has applied the jungle law of 'might is right'. Had Vietnam and the Pathet Lao, and countries friendly to them, employed the same official pretexts used by Washington to justify its intervention, U.S. 'sanctuaries' in Thailand, Guam, Okinawa and the Philippines would have been bombed for a start. Thailand would have been invaded for committing 'acts of war' as defined under international conventions against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Laos. In applying its double standards, Washington has pushed things already to the very verge of a widened war in South-east Asia which only a miracle can avert.

As a result of the public alarm as to where things were heading in Laos and the Senate hearings as to just what was going on, the U.S. Senate, on December 15, 1969, adopted an amendment to the Defence Appropriations Bill which was presented to the public as

ending the danger of U.S. armed involvement in Laos and Thailand. But after the usual editorial commendations praising the wisdom of this step, it became clear with the publication of the text that the resolution provided for the Nixon administration to continue — even to intensify if necessary — just that sort of 'special war' against the Laotian people described in the preceding chapters.

Small wonder that President Nixon could tell Senate leaders that the amendment — on which such hopes had been nourished — was 'definitely in line with administration policy' and that White House press secretary Ron Ziegler could comment that the resolution was an 'endorsement' rather than a 'curbing' of that policy. Then it turned out that, in a most unusual procedure for a measure supposed to have been aimed at blocking all possibilities of U.S. intervention in Laos and limiting the President's powers in this sense, the amendment had been sent to President Nixon for approval before being adopted. The wording had been adopted at a 'secret session when reporters were excluded from the galleries. . . .'

The key phrase in the defence appropriations bill states: 'none of the funds appropriated by this act shall be used to finance the introduction of American ground troops into Laos or Thailand.'[3] The U.S. Air Force, the helicopter units, the 'Green Berets', the artillery, communications and other 'support' facilities, all the paraphernalia of 'special war' is excluded from the ban. Not a dollar would be cut from the budget which finances 'special war' activities. At most, the amendment halts any immediate escalation of 'special war' to 'limited war', but it completely fits in with the Nixon version of the 'Asians fight Asians' doctrine.[4]

Twenty years previously, Senator Richard Nixon earned the title 'Tricky Dickie'. His much publicised 'secret peace plan' for ending the war in Vietnam showed that he was living up to his title, as did his glib acceptance of the Senate amendment on limiting the form of U.S. intervention in Laos and Thailand. The 'peace plan' turned out to be one of continuing the war in Vietnam by other means — by 'Vietnamizing' it, with assurances that the U.S.A. would not leave until 'Vietnamization' was working the way Nixon wanted. At his Pakistan halt on the world tour, Nixon, when asked whether he was having difficulty in assuring Asian leaders that his plan for withdrawing U.S. forces from Vietnam posed no threat to the security of other Asian states, replied that the U.S.A. was committed to a policy in the Pacific — a policy not of intervention but one that certainly ruled out withdrawal. . . . Eight months later came the U.S. invasion of Cambodia!

The end result of the Senate hearings on Laos — while, as revealed

in an earlier chapter, even those sections which escaped Nixon's censorship confirmed much of the skulduggery documented in this book — has been to authorise the Nixon administration to continue the work started by his predecessors. The most sinister aspect, as far as the Laotian people and their immediate neighbours are concerned, and confirmed in the most brutal fashion by the invasion of Cambodia, is that United States intentions to dominate South-east Asia do not seem to have changed one whit. The Laotian people, like their Vietnamese, Cambodian and Thai neighbours, have no alternative but to continue to develop their struggles, arms in hand when and where necessary, to defeat this policy and force the abandonment of U.S. aims.

It is true that U.S. administration policies in South-east Asia are running into ever-tougher opposition within the U.S.A. itself, including inside the U.S. Congress where many liberal law-makers are clearly horrified at the whittling away of their prerogatives, especially in the matter of making war. This explains the head-on collision between Nixon and the Senate over the Cambodian invasion, and the attempt by a group of senators to pass a measure, much stricter than the amendment on Laos, to curb U.S. intervention in Cambodia. The Cooper–Church measure, named after the Republican and Democrat senators who drafted it, was a rider to foreign military sales legislation, aimed at cutting off funds for any U.S. military activities in Cambodia after June 30, 1970, the date by which Nixon had promised to pull out all U.S. combat troops. In its original form the measure would also have cut off funds and supplies for Saigon troops operating in Cambodia. But it would have controlled U.S. air activities at the same time and it was gradually whittled down on the grounds that it 'infringed on the responsibilities of the President — as Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces — to protect American troops in the field. . . .'

As with the Laos amendment, the legal experts went to work to produce something that would look good for public opinion but which would permit the President to get what he wanted in one form or another. Long before the June 30 deadline approached, in addition to Saigon troops on the rampage in Thailand, there were Thai troops and 'Special Forces' commandos — formed by the CIA from South Vietnamese of Cambodian origin — entrusted with the 'defence' of Phnom Penh against Cambodian resistance forces; there were prospects of South Korean, Indonesian and Taiwan forces in an international army of counter-revolution, armed and financed by the U.S.A., despite the Cooper–Church amendment. The cynicism with which this spectacle of Cambodia being torn to pieces by its worst enemies under American patronage was presented as 'saving the

country' from the 'Vietcong and North Vietnamese' needs no comment.

'The cynicism of the United States executive reached its peak,' said Sihanouk in his opening speech to the Summit Conference of the Peoples of Indochina, on April 24, 1970, 'when he demanded that the resistance forces of our three peoples, of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, evacuate their own countries in response to the withdrawal of a part of the United States forces, and especially when our resistance had become "foreign intervention" on our own soil. Where then should our liberation armies go? To the United States? Have the U.S. aggressors through some operation of the Holy Ghost become pure-blooded Indochinese?'

The United States, it is sometimes explained by earnest apologists, are entitled to employ double standards, because they are 'goodies' and the national liberation forces are the 'baddies'. Their use of sanctuaries in Thailand, Okinawa and Guam is justified because it is for a 'good' cause whereas Cambodia can be blasted to bits by B52 bombers and carved up between her neighbours because 'Vietcong sanctuaries' were employed for a 'bad cause'.

Such arguments are not likely to impress the peoples of Indochina and their struggle against such double standards will be the major factor in South-east Asia in the 1970s.

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[1] Referring to the State Department's White Paper on 'Aggression from the North . . .' used to justify the start of the American bombing of the North, Hilsman comments (*To Move A Nation*, page 531): 'No captured documents, equipment, or materials are presented that indicate either the presence of North Vietnamese regular units or of individual North Vietnamese in significant numbers. The white paper was able to present the case studies of only four captured infiltrators who were ethnic North Vietnamese. No evidence was presented of the presence of regular North Vietnamese units except the allegations of two of these and two other captured Viet Cong of southern origin. . . .' Hilsman, who knew very well the methods used to extract such allegations, does not set much store by them.

[2] Referred to in Chapter 1.

[3] *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), December 18, 1969.

[4] Nixon began to spell out his version of this doctrine in a series of 'background' briefings to journalists at Guam, on July 25, 1969, on the Asian leg of his round-the-world tour. The essence was that the U.S.A. was essentially a 'Pacific power' but would 'continue to play a role in Asia to the extent that Asian nations bilaterally and collectively desired it to play a role'. Developed in many variants since, it is the 'do-it-yourself-for-us and-with-our-help' version of 'Asians Fight Asians'.

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'Is anybody sure what that flotilla of South Vietnamese gunboats is doing up the Mekong River in Cambodia?' the *Washington Post* asked editorially on May 13th 1970. After examining the official pretexts offered, the paper added: 'Where there are gunboats, can some kind of gunboat diplomacy be far behind?'

The purpose of this book is to show that what is happening in Cambodia and Laos today has nothing to do with 'Sihanouk Trails' or 'Ho Chi Minh Trails', but represents a logical extension of policies followed by the U.S.A. in the area from 1954 onwards — policies deliberately planned in the name of 'filling the power vacuum' created by the collapse of French colonialism in Indochina.

Wilfred Burchett's lucid account of the current situation and its historical background is solidly based on first hand experience of the area over the past fifteen years. Frankly hostile to official U.S. policy, it provides a refreshingly humanitarian approach to a subject which has become almost totally obscured by ideological interests.

Distinguished writer-journalist Wilfred Burchett was born in Australia in 1911. His career as a journalist and as an authority on South-east Asian affairs began during the Second World War and, since that time, he has acted as foreign correspondent for a wide range of newspapers, including *The Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Express*, *Ce Soir* and *L'Humanité*. Wilfred Burchett is also the author of more than twenty books, many of them concerning the countries of South-east Asia; his works have been translated into twenty-five languages and published in twenty-eight countries. Famous for his work reporting the Korean peace talks at Panmunjom, Wilfred Burchett has lived in Cambodia and has been to Vietnam over twenty times.

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