

## “Every War Must End” or Ending a Quagmire *for* the United States: Laos, Vietnam and...

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### Introduction

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, controversies arose over whether Iraq would be another Vietnam for the United States. The quagmire in Vietnam was an agonizing experience for many Americans and much more so for the people who experienced a number of bombings and attacks on the ground. What few people remember, though, is that there was another quagmire preceding and paralleling the one in Vietnam in the same region. In the conflict in Laos, few Americans died, but a number of Laotians died in the battles supported by foreign advisors and foreign arms. Even more died from the U.S. bombings of Laos in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

This paper tries to place the often-forgotten U.S. involvement in Laos in the larger framework of U.S. involvement leading to Vietnam. It pays particular attention to how the war “ended” for the United States rather than examining how it involved itself in Laos in the first place. Most people, including myself, often take the latter approach, but the examination of how a war ended and how people remember it is also important. This is because they are likely to influence the framework of people’s thinking when they face a choice of another war or involvement.<sup>1</sup>

This paper also tries tentatively to compare U.S. disengagement from Laos to U.S. disengagement from Vietnam. There has been a widespread perception regarding Laos that the United States had successfully achieved its neutralization in 1962 and stopped on the brink of intervention. Some people may even ask why the United States failed in Vietnam while it succeeded in Laos. While this kind of interpretation or question is not totally wrong, this paper argues, the U.S. involvement itself and the path to the neutralization in Laos also represented serious failures in U.S. policy. They are more akin to those failures in the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the path to the “peace” agreement achieved in Paris in 1973.

## **I. Diplomacy or Military Intervention in Laos**

### **A. Laos after 1954**

On March 23, 1961, President John F. Kennedy spoke to the American people on TV and appealed to the nation about the impending crisis in Laos. In a highly staged performance typical of the new television age, the president talked with a very large map of Laos at his side. This small nation must have loomed large in the minds of Americans on that day. That image quickly faded away as events in Cuba, Berlin and Vietnam later overshadowed the situation in Laos. The Geneva Conference on Laos agreed on the neutralization of Laos in July 1962. It seemed to be a good compromise that could be achieved short of U.S. military intervention.<sup>2</sup>

The Geneva Conference began in May 1961 and continued on and off through the summer of 1962. Conservative, neutralist and communist forces in Laos agreed on the cessation of hostilities, the formation of a tripartite coalition government and the neutrality of Laos. Advisors and troops from foreign countries were to withdraw from Laos. Fourteen nations, including the United States and North Vietnam, participated in the conference with Great Britain and the Soviet Union as joint chair.<sup>3</sup> Kennedy appointed H. Averell Harriman as ambassador-at-large to deal with the Laotian problem. Under Harriman's leadership, the Kennedy administration played a major part in the Geneva talks and acted as a mediator among the different groups in Laos.

After the Geneva Agreement on Indochina in 1954, Laos experienced more political crises and more turbulent armed conflicts than Vietnam. The pro-western Royal Lao Government (RLG) conducted general elections in 1955 as was stipulated in the Geneva Agreement. However, the Pathet Lao (PL), the leftist group supported by North Vietnam, boycotted the elections. The elections did not occur in the two northern provinces that the PL controlled. In 1957, the RLG and the PL reached an agreement on a coalition government and the supplementary elections to be held in these two provinces. A coalition government was formed with the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. However, the election results in May 1958 were a blow to the Americans and the pro-western, conservative leaders in Laos. The PL and other leftists won more than half the seats contested in the elections.<sup>4</sup>

The election outcome and what happened later in 1958 proved to be a turning point in Laos. The RLG and the PL had at least held talks intermittently for political settlement until 1958. This had occurred despite the fact that the United States provided a large amount of military aid to the RLG to strengthen its military and internal security capabilities and often expressed strong misgivings about the RLG's negotiations with the communists.<sup>5</sup> However, the dialogue between the RLG and the PL became difficult after the elections. In June, young anti-communist leaders in the Lao army and the RLG formed a group called the

Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI) with encouragement and support from the Eisenhower administration. The CDNI and its *de facto* leader, Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, came to exercise a strong influence in Laos. Souvanna Phouma was forced to step down as prime minister. A pro-western conservative, Phoui Sananikone, formed a new cabinet with CDNI members in August 1958. They began to curtail the PL influence and exclude PL leaders from the government. Military skirmishes between the Lao army and the PL force increased. By the end of 1959, even the conservative Phoui government lost favor with the rightists. Phoumi and the army staged a coup against Phoui in December 1959. The U.S. government, knowing that the coup would happen, decided to “step aside and permit Lao to work out [a] new relationship among themselves,” as it would do in South Vietnam in 1963. Fortunately, Phoui was not treated like Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother.<sup>6</sup>

The dominance of Phoumi and the army in Laotian politics was short-lived. In August 1960, a young leader of the elite paratrooper unit, Kong Le, and his supporters in the army staged an unexpected coup against the Phoumi-backed government. They attacked U.S. meddling in Laotian politics and advocated neutralism. Souvanna was called in to become prime minister with the support of Kong Le. PL members also participated in the Souvanna cabinet and the National Assembly endorsed the Souvanna government.

In September 1960, a counteroffensive by Phoumi’s force began against the neutralist government. Phoumi proclaimed the formation of a new government with Prince Boun Oum as prime minister. An all-out civil war started between the rightists on one hand and the neutralist Kong Le group and the PL on the other. By December 1960, the Phoumi force took over Vientiane, but battles continued. Eisenhower did not recognize the Souvanna government and continued to provide military aid to the Lao army, i.e., the Phoumi force. Not only the major communist states but also the U.S. allies, Great Britain and France, supported the Souvanna government against the Phoumi-Boun Oum group.

Since 1954, the Soviet Union had refrained from direct involvement in Laos. However, in December 1960, it started airlifting arms and equipment to the PL and the neutralist forces. The Soviet airlift was apparently a response to Phoumi’s offensive and the U.S. support. But American officials became quite alarmed by the “evidence” of Soviet intervention. The small elephant kingdom suddenly came onto the center stage of the worldwide “cold war” struggle.

## **B. Diplomacy and Planning for Military Intervention**

In a meeting in January 1961, Eisenhower warned Kennedy about this grave situation in Laos and even hinted at the need for U.S. military intervention in Laos. As soon as he became president, Kennedy organized a special Task Force on Laos to re-examine U.S. policy. Kennedy’s TV appearance in March was the culmination of a two-month-long re-examination of U.S. policy by the new administration.

Some studies on the Vietnam War simply state that Kennedy proposed neutralization for Laos in his March speech and achieved it in 1962. However, this is only half true. While Kennedy said that the United States would support “a neutral and independent Laos” and earnestly work for a negotiated settlement in Laos, he also mentioned SEATO’s “special treaty responsibilities toward an aggression against Laos” and said, “No one should doubt our own resolution on this point.”<sup>7</sup>

Within the administration, Kennedy and his advisors discussed possible military measures as much as they did a negotiated settlement in Laos. What they had in mind was a two-track policy—while seeking a negotiated settlement, they prepared for military intervention in Laos in case political negotiations failed. Two weeks before Kennedy’s Laos speech, the administration had decided on increased military measures for Laos to strengthen the Phoumi force. Kennedy stepped up the provision of military supplies to Phoumi, increased the number of U.S. military advisors and strengthened the Hmong force.<sup>8</sup> The Hmong tribesmen had been receiving covert U.S. military aid and fighting against the PL force.

The administration also went into a discussion with the British government for a joint SEATO military intervention in Laos. Soon after the Laos speech, Kennedy met British premier Harold Macmillan at Key West, Florida. Both agreed to give priority to political negotiations, but Kennedy secured Macmillan’s commitment to a possible joint military intervention in Laos in case of a breakdown of political talks.<sup>9</sup> Military leaders from both countries worked on elaborating a military contingency plan for Laos and agreed on what was called SEATO Plan 5 by May. It envisaged committing U.S. and U.K. forces into the panhandle or the southern part of Laos.<sup>10</sup>

The British commitment to joint military intervention is noteworthy. The British supported Souvanna and had serious doubts about a military solution for Laos. Nonetheless, they decided to support the U.S. military action in Laos if it should occur. After the Key West meeting, the British Foreign Minister recorded: “If America after weighing everything decides to go in, I fear we must support them but the prospect is horrible.” The Minister of Defence shared the same sentiment: “Military intervention in Laos has always been a nonsense, but if Americans are determined on a limited intervention, we can play our part.”<sup>11</sup> The British liked the new president and accepted the idea of joint military intervention if it would be limited in nature and British participation would have a restraining influence over U.S. policy.<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately, new situations in Laos and other areas of the world narrowly saved the U.S. and the British leaders from making the egregious choice of sending their troops inside Laos. On May 2, the Defense Department recommended to Kennedy that the United States intervene in Laos if there should be no satisfactory cease-fire.<sup>13</sup> While U.S. officials were holding discussions in Washington, the opponents in Laos just reached a temporary cease-fire effective May 3. Kennedy’s failure at the Bay of Pigs in April probably contributed to the

loss of appetite for military measures. Kennedy also had to give a higher priority to Berlin and U.S.-Soviet relations.<sup>14</sup>

### **C. Geneva and Re-examination of U.S. Policy**

Talks at the Geneva Conference on Laos reached a deadlock as soon as they started in mid-May. The Phoumi group refused to send its representatives to Geneva. There were disagreements on how various Lao groups should be represented in the conference and on the actual implementation of a cease-fire.

In fact, many of the negotiations leading to the Geneva Accord in 1962 occurred outside Geneva. In early June, Kennedy had a meeting with the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev. They agreed on the establishment of “an independent and neutral Laos.” Khrushchev said that they “should use their influence so as to bring about agreement among the forces participating in the Laotian struggle.” In late June, the three Lao princes—Souvanna, the PL leader Souphanouvong and Boun Oum—met in Zurich and agreed on the formation of a provisional government. The appointment of a prime minister and the composition of the government were left to further negotiations.<sup>15</sup>

U.S. policy toward Laos began to shift gradually around this period. In the NSC meeting of June 29, Harriman expressed his belief that Souvanna would probably become the next prime minister. Kennedy agreed.<sup>16</sup> On the same day, Phoumi visited Washington and met Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. He had a meeting with the president the next day. Phoumi told Rusk that the Geneva Conference was convened “against the wishes of the Royal Laotian Government.” He told Kennedy that “a government of national union was only one more possibility for Communist penetration of Laos” and that “Souvanna is not the true leader of neutralism.” It was clear that Phoumi was not willing to endorse the agreement at Zurich nor a government presided over by Souvanna. Kennedy emphasized U.S. support for “an independent and neutral Laos” and told Phoumi that “we do not want to resolve the situation by purely military means.”<sup>17</sup>

Phoumi’s visit to Washington revealed a wide gap between his position and the position of the Kennedy administration on the resolution of the crisis in Laos. A report from Winthrop Brown, U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane, on Phoumi’s statement after his return sent a further alarm to Washington. According to Brown, Phoumi returned from Washington “vastly encouraged” and believed that the United States was “now prepared to back him militarily.” Phoumi had his own military plans and Brown worried that Phoumi “may decide to force our hands....”<sup>18</sup>

By the end of July, the Kennedy administration concluded that the Souvanna government would be the only option available in Laos. Realism prevailed over ideological antipathy toward neutralism. At a White House meeting on July 28, while discussing plans for military intervention, Kennedy worried that Phoumi’s “real wish may be to have the conference break up and then get us into military

action in Laos.” He also expressed his feeling that “we should have to take a Souvanna government, sooner or later.” Despite his advisors’ recommendation, Kennedy made no decision on military intervention and “made it very plain that he himself is at present very reluctant to make a decision to go into Laos.”<sup>19</sup> However, Kennedy always kept his options open, or, to put it more critically, was indecisive. Military contingency planning continued through 1962. Kennedy encouraged it and never committed himself to any meaningful reduction of U.S. aid to the Phoumi and the Hmong forces.

The U.S. acceptance of Souvanna brought about an agreement with Britain and France on August 7. At the foreign ministers’ meeting in Paris to discuss the Berlin question, the three countries also discussed Laos. They agreed to support Souvanna as the prime minister of a provisional government and seek an understanding with Souvanna on such issues as the composition of the government and the integration of the military forces.<sup>20</sup>

At a meeting at the end of August, the White House adopted a new direction for U.S. policy. Kennedy and his advisors decided to get Harriman to have “direct conversations” with Souvanna and intensify the diplomatic effort. At the same time, they still pursued the other part of their two-track policy. The meeting also proposed to seek conversations with SEATO allies to further develop PLAN 5, increase U.S. and Thai military advisors in Laos and increase the number of the Hmong forces by 2,000 to the total strength of 11,000.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the acceptance of the Souvanna solution did not totally dispel the ambiguities and divisions over the Laotian question. Some officials even believed that a divided Laos was better than a unified Laos with communist influence. The policy of giving priority to diplomacy also invited some protest from U.S. ambassadors in Vientiane, Saigon and Bangkok. They felt that, rather than rushing toward the establishment of a Souvanna government, the United States might “bide [its] time” and see how things would develop while completing a military intervention plan in case of resumption of hostilities.<sup>22</sup>

Despite some grumbling from the ambassadors on the spot, Kennedy’s special representative, Harriman, was most energetic and willing to go forward with the Souvanna solution. From Geneva, he reported in mid-September that the Soviet representative repeatedly assured him that North Vietnam would be “ready to live up to [the] agreement” if it was reached. The Pathet Lao would be ready, too. Harriman felt there was a “real change” in Soviet policy. He then visited Vientiane and held talks with Souvanna. Harriman felt that, although Souvanna’s position on the selection of cabinet members was not acceptable yet, Souvanna took “a realistic position on several subjects.” He thought that Souvanna considered the Pathet Lao his opponents. Souvanna also “unqualifiedly accepted [the] responsibility to close Laos as [a] corridor for [the] Viet Cong.”<sup>23</sup>

Harriman also had talks with Phoumi. Phoumi expressed his reservation about Souvanna as prime minister. Harriman flatly told Phoumi that there were “really only two alternatives in Laos—a peaceful negotiated solution or

resumption of hostilities.” He also told Phoumi that Kennedy had asked him to make it clear that the United States “was not prepared to support RLG in any military initiative on its part to move north to recapture [the] lost areas....” He came out of the meeting with a “strong impression that he [Phoumi] has no real intention of pursuing serious negotiations.” Harriman also told Washington: “The more I see of Phoumi, the less I trust him as [the] US chosen instrument to carry out faithfully our agreed policies and objectives now or later.”<sup>24</sup>

In early October, the three princes met again in Laos and finally agreed on Souvanna as the prime minister of a coalition government. A new cabinet was to include 16 ministers and its dominant members should be from a “truly neutral” group. From Geneva, Harriman reported on his talks with the Soviets. He said that “we may be on [the] verge of [a] significant break-through..., depending, of course, on [the] outcome of negotiations [among the] three Princes in Laos.”<sup>25</sup>

Kennedy gave wide discretion to Harriman in his negotiations on Laos. However, some officials in Washington did not share Harriman’s view. In response to Harriman’s recommendation for more pressure on Phoumi, the State Department advised restraint and told him that Phoumi still followed the “general line” of policy that the U.S. desired. On November 1, Harriman’s recall for consultation in Washington was proposed in the State Department. One official wrote in his proposal that the United States had made so many concessions and felt that they should coordinate the overall policy with Harriman.<sup>26</sup> Harriman became very emotional about this issue. Kennedy had to intervene and had two telephone conversations with Harriman on November 1 and 2. Harriman won the president over to his side. Harriman sent an “eyes only” telegram to Kennedy and Rusk, stating: “It is fantastic that General Phoumi, who is entirely [a] US creation, should be permitted to continue to dictate American policy. Time is running out fast.” Rusk and other officials went along with Harriman.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of November, Harriman’s dominance of the Laotian issue in Washington became quite clear. In what was called the “Thanksgiving massacre,” Kennedy named Harriman as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. Harriman replaced the official who remained in the department from the previous administration and had differences with him. Kennedy appointed as Under Secretary of State George Ball, a dove, who shared Harriman’s view on Laos.<sup>28</sup> With his stature and reputation, Harriman even came to overshadow Rusk on the Laotian question.

## II. The “Neutralization” of Laos

### A. The Limits of U.S. Influence

After Harriman’s return to Washington, the U.S. attitude toward Phoumi became noticeably tougher. A State Department telegram to Brown in early December stated that Brown would be “authorized to inform Phoumi that we [would be] no longer able [to] work with him” if he refused to negotiate further

with Souvanna. In another telegram, Harriman stated that, if full-scale hostilities should break out in Laos, the United States would be required to put its force into Laos or Laos would be overrun. He emphasized to Brown that “[o]ur policy then must be to avoid facing the President with either of these extreme alternatives.” For this purpose, Harriman said that the United States must be prepared to consider “drastic steps such as bringing about Phoumi’s departure” from the government.<sup>29</sup> Yet, no “drastic” measures were carried out.

In Geneva, the major powers came to an agreement on the principal points for the neutralization of Laos by the end of December. Yet, negotiations on the composition of the new cabinet dragged on mostly due to Phoumi’s intransigence. Phoumi complained to his CIA liaison officer that he was “too deeply shocked by [the] defeatist policy” of the United States and that it was treating the RLG “like a small child.” On January 3, 1962, Brown recommended the suspension of military aid for the Phoumi force. He informed Washington that he had “no pressures left to use on Phoumi and Boun Oum” and “had made all the threats that words alone can convey.”<sup>30</sup> He could not win Washington’s approval of the suspension of military aid. There were still disagreements in the administration on how much tougher Washington should be on Phoumi. At the meeting on January 6, Kennedy reaffirmed his support of the Souvanna government despite some protests from his advisors and authorized “a high-level ‘dicker’ with Phoumi.” On the day before the meeting, the “Special Group (Counter-Insurgency)” recommended that the United States “offer him substantial funds in retirement” if Phoumi showed “any signs of being willing to resign his present position” while “consideration of a coup d’etat against General Phoumi be discarded for the time being...”<sup>31</sup> Phoumi did not resign from his position.

Despite Harriman’s ascendancy over U.S. policy toward Laos, there was an important limitation to the American influence over Phoumi. Kennedy never suspended the military aid to the Phoumi force although he showed token pressure by temporarily suspending cash grants to the RLG in January. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) was totally against the suspension of the military aid. The JCS memo on January 5 said: “The military position of the RLG is not such that we must seek a peaceful settlement at all cost” and “To cut off US aid to anti-communists elements at this juncture would be self-defeating.”<sup>32</sup> At the end of January, the Kennedy administration pressured Phoumi to give up the posts of Defense and Interior ministers to the neutralists, but he did not listen. Despite the stepped-up carrot-and-stick approach, U.S. policy toward Laos arrived at a deadlock again.

### **B. The Fall of Nam Tha and Its Meaning**

On February 1, 1962, a report of a military clash between Phoumi and PL forces in Nam Tha in northern Laos came in. U.S. sources determined that the Phoumi force started the attacks. This incident prompted Washington to reappraise its policy toward Laos. At a meeting of State, Defense and CIA

representatives, Harriman proposed that the United States, Great Britain and France negotiate directly with Souvanna on the composition of a new cabinet and switch U.S. recognition to Souvanna’s government when they reached an agreement. This meant bypassing Phoumi. The officials from the Defense Department and the CIA agreed to Harriman’s proposal.<sup>33</sup> The ambassadors of the three countries held talks with Souvanna in Vientiane and temporarily agreed on a list of new cabinet ministers. However, Phoumi refused to accept the fait accompli. A subsequent approach to Phoumi in early March by the U.S. Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), as well as State Department and CIA officials, did not bear fruit even though their message was quite clear—Phoumi would lose U.S. military aid unless he gave up the Defense and Interior posts and agreed to the proposed list. In Washington, Kennedy met with Congressional leaders to discuss Laos in late February. The leaders were quite unwilling to endorse U.S. military intervention in Laos.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Harriman himself went to Laos to persuade Phoumi in March. Harriman first visited Bangkok and convinced the Thai premier Marshall Sarit, a strong supporter of Phoumi, to come with him to persuade Phoumi. They met in Nong Khai on the bank of the Mekong River across from Thailand. William H. Sullivan, Harriman’s right-hand man, remembered that Harriman was very harsh with Phoumi at the meeting. Michael Forrestal, Harriman’s French interpreter, remembered him telling Phoumi that, if the fighting continued, “You bastards will have to swim that river out there, and not all of you are going to make it.”<sup>35</sup> Harriman was not yet authorized to tell Phoumi that the United States would suspend its military aid in the event that he would not listen. Kennedy was still indecisive and hesitant to execute military sanctions against Phoumi. He was afraid of weakening the anti-communist base in Laos.

Still, after the Nong Khai meeting, there occurred a gradual shift both in U.S. policy and Phoumi’s attitude. The Kennedy administration finally began to give serious consideration to “mild” military sanctions against Phoumi and Phoumi showed signs of being more accommodating to U.S. persuasion.<sup>36</sup>

However, the most decisive moment came before these changes were put into action. It came on May 6 when the PL force started an all-out attack on the Phoumi force at Nam Tha. Most Phoumi soldiers gave up fighting and many of them literally had to “swim” over the Mekong to escape to Thailand. Harriman’s words turned out to be true. As soon as the communist attack started in Nam Tha, *The New York Times* characterized it as a possible Dien Bien Phu.<sup>37</sup> The battle was far from comparable to Dien Bien Phu. But in a sense it was a Dien Bien Phu for Phoumi and the United States because the decisive defeat of the Phoumi force finally changed the whole situation. There was no longer any need for U.S. military sanctions against Phoumi.

It has generally been believed that the strong pressure from the United States brought about a change in Phoumi’s stubborn attitude against the neutralization of Laos. When we reexamine the process leading to the fall of Nam Tha, we know

that the Kennedy administration meandered even after its confidence in the Phoumi group came to be seriously questioned in early 1961. Lacking any substantial military sanctions, U.S. pressure had little influence over Phoumi's attitude. What really had an impact was the fall of Nam Tha. Although the Kennedy administration sent the 7th Fleet to the Gulf of Siam after the fall of Nam Tha and discussed possible military intervention plans for Laos, the enthusiasm for intervention lost much of its fervor by this time.

The neutralization of Laos did not mean that the United States gave up Laos to the communists. Its importance lay in providing a framework for the withdrawal of foreign troops and military personnel from Laos. This meant that the North Vietnamese military as well as the U.S. military had to withdraw its personnel from Laos. The United States continued its covert aid to the Hmong forces after 1962 while the communist side used the corridor in Laos for transporting arms and supplies to their comrades in South Vietnam.

Despite this kind of deception on both sides and the resumption of fighting in Laos and the eventual U.S. bombing of the Laotian corridor, the neutralization was significant for the United States because it provided an important framework for the "Laotization" of the conflict. It enabled the United States to seal off the choice of committing its own ground troops in Laos.<sup>38</sup>

The neutralization was also significant for the defense of South Vietnam. Laos had long been considered a buffer against the communist "encroachment." As U. Alexis Johnson, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, wrote in early 1961, the importance of Laos "lay not so much in itself as in [its] effects on Thailand and South Vietnam." According to Forrestal's memo to the president before the fall of Nam Tha, Harriman felt that "the more flexible policy in Laos is best understood in terms of our stronger strategic position in Vietnam."<sup>39</sup> Kennedy had greatly increased the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam by the end of 1961. After Nam Tha, he immediately deployed U.S. troops in Thailand to prevent further deterioration of the situation. For the United States, the neutralization of Laos was an important part of the policy of making a stand or drawing the line in Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

### **III. "Extrication" from Vietnam**

#### **A. Fighting and Ending the War under the Illusion of "Peace with Honor"**

In March 1965, less than three years after sealing off the choice of committing U.S. ground troops to Laos, the United States chose to send them to South Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> This came soon after it initiated bombing attacks against North Vietnam. The United States widened the scope of air attacks against North Vietnam and also within South Vietnam. By the end of 1967, the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam rose to more than 450,000. Although there were some peace initiatives during this period, it was not until the Tet offensive started at the end of January, 1968, that many people in the United States realized that there

was something wrong with this war.

In retrospect, one may wonder why U.S. officials thought that the United States could win the struggle for nation building in Vietnam while it failed in a similar endeavor in a much smaller country next door. An illusion of power that most Americans naturally had in their own country’s superb air- and fire-power might explain part of this puzzle. Moreover, most Americans except for those who witnessed events first-hand did not realize how strenuous the determination of the indigenous people could be to defend their own country from “foreign aggression” and to choose their own form of government.

It is well known that the Tet offensive was not a total military defeat for the U.S. military force in South Vietnam. But the shock it gave to the officials of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, the mass media and the public in the United States probably made it an easy candidate for another Dien Bien Phu in many people’s minds. It gradually became clear that a military victory was not within reach without further military commitment and sacrifices by the United States. Even with such an escalation, there was no guarantee that the United States could win or that the American public could tolerate further casualties and atrocities until the war ended.

As in the case of Laos, the change of administration helped in promoting a new direction in Vietnam. This does not mean that Richard M. Nixon was much different from his predecessors in his attitude toward the problem in Vietnam. But the year 1968 was different. The Tet offensive epitomized a series of failures in the U.S. effort in Vietnam. With the number of American casualties constantly rising and with no light at the end of the tunnel, the public mood had changed a great deal from the 1950s and the early 1960s. The former vice president also benefited from his hawkish record and his absence from Washington during the previous Democratic administrations. He could criticize the Democrats’ policy although the U.S. commitment in Vietnam was rooted in the Eisenhower-Nixon period.

During the presidential campaign in 1968, Nixon was vague about what kind of policy he would pursue as president. He told the American people that he would seek “peace” and bring “an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.”<sup>42</sup> Nixon later used the famous phrase “peace with honor.” However, the huge costs that the Nixon administration inflicted on the Vietnamese, the Cambodians, the Laotians and the Americans even while pursuing a negotiated settlement did much damage to both “peace” and “honor.”<sup>43</sup>

How the Nixon administration developed its war and exit strategy has been much examined. There is still much debate on what the real intentions of Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor, were in the negotiations leading to Paris, but one thing might at least be said: As shrewd politicians and realists, Nixon and Kissinger were fully aware of the limits of human sacrifice that the American people could tolerate. Their foremost objective was to get the U.S. troops out of Vietnam. Even though they may not have intended to throw

away the anti-communist government in South Vietnam in the gutter, they felt that the Vietnamization of the conflict was inevitable for the United States. This was a shock to the government of South Vietnam, which had been living with the Americanized war for several years. Nixon and Kissinger, however, did not pay much attention to this. They pursued a framework that should make the withdrawal of U.S. troops possible. And that settlement should come not as a result of weakness. As Kissinger wrote in his memorandum to Nixon in 1971, "For the future of our own people as well as [for] international reasons, it is essential that we leave Vietnam as an act of government policy and with dignity, not as a response to pressures and in the form of a collapse."<sup>44</sup> Probably without much realizing it, they followed the path that Kennedy and Harriman had followed in Laos.

### **B. Laos and Vietnam**

In 2003, Kissinger published his memoirs on the Vietnam negotiations entitled *Ending the Vietnam War*. The subtitle of the book is *A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*. Although the magnitude of U.S. military involvement was incomparable, we see many similarities between America's quagmire in and disengagement from Laos on one hand and America's quagmire in and "extrication" from Vietnam on the other.

In both countries, the United States sent its military advisors at the earliest stage of its commitment and poured in a great amount of military aid for several years in order to strengthen the military, para-military and internal security capabilities of the indigenous government against the communist influence. Despite the initial prospect for success, the control of the government in both countries was liquidated by competing nationalist forces, and internal military clashes increased. We might see the root of such chaos in an inevitable internal struggle among different nationalist forces that could have happened in any country after decolonization. In view of the U.S. effort to prop up one nationalist group or "client" government against another, the United States clearly failed in its effort both in Laos and Vietnam. The United States was unable to reform and strengthen the local government that it supported. Even though the local government and the groups that received U.S. support were not effective, the United States continued and increased its military support to them in the face of mounting military pressures by the enemy.

In both cases, when the crisis reached its peak, new leaders appeared in the United States. Kennedy and Nixon had to learn from the failures of the previous administrations. They realized that there was not much sense, either military or political, in the presence of the U.S. troops in a country once the war became difficult to win. They both groped for the key to the withdrawal of the U.S. military personnel. The process was not easy. Kennedy was often indecisive in deed although not necessarily in words. He came close to executing an intervention plan in Laos. But he was lucky. Nixon and Kissinger were more

determined. But, one might say, they were more savage and did not mind expanding the war and bombarding the enemy while negotiating with them.

In both Laos and Vietnam, the U.S. government gave up on ineffective civilian leaders and acquiesced in or even encouraged the military’s rise to power. This greatly increased the military tension in both countries. However, the more militarized the conflict became, the more difficult it became to support the military effort of the group that the United States supported. It also became clear how futile it was to keep fighting someone else’s war in a remote country.

Eventually, in Laos, Phoumi and his force suffered a clear-cut defeat at Nam Tha. In Vietnam, the U.S. military and the army of South Vietnam were unable to turn the tide and eventually suffered a largely psychological, but decisive, “defeat” in the Tet offensive.

After Nam Tha and Tet, the road to Laotization and Vietnamization was prepared. In Laos, it took the form of neutralization with the United States giving up the objective of establishing an anti-communist government there. In Vietnam, it eventually took the form of what they called a “peace agreement” with very little guarantee that any “peace” would prevail or the U.S.-supported government could survive. In either case, the U.S. officials could not afford to listen to the demands of their old allies. Nor did the U.S. officials try to keep them much informed about the details of negotiations leading to the final settlement with the communist side.

In both Laos and Vietnam, what was most important was to secure the disengagement of the U.S. military personnel from the soil of these countries. The self-centered motive for the U.S. disengagement, however, did not guarantee a peace nor an end of the conflict for those people whom the United States professed to be saving from communist rule. Geneva and Paris only meant an end of a quagmire for the United States.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has aimed to provide a more detailed analysis of the American side of the story leading to the Geneva Accord on Laos than had been remembered in the past. It has also tried to correct some misperceptions about the neutralization process of Laos. The analysis shows how futile the U.S. policy was in propping up the U.S.-supported government and how ineffective the U.S. pressure was in the process leading to neutralization. But the American experience in Laos was soon forgotten in the midst of the mounting crisis in Vietnam. U.S. policymakers, even those who were in a position to witness the failure in Laos, did not remember it or chose to believe that Vietnam was quite different from Laos and, consciously or unconsciously, followed the same path in Vietnam.

Not only contemporary policymakers but also historians and the public forgot the American experience in Laos. Many studies on the Vietnam War do not give much attention to what happened in Laos as well as other countries of Southeast

Asia in the 1950s and the 1960s. Except for some new studies, they scarcely mention Laos.<sup>45</sup> Is this because of historians' negligence or because of the neglect of historical memories on the part of policymakers on which historians inevitably have to depend? In either case, the public has almost no way of remembering what happened and what the United States did in such faraway countries in Southeast Asia.

The loss of collective memories can have a serious impact on what the following generations will experience. A couple of comments are in order concerning the memories of Laos and Vietnam. First, the lack of the sense of failure on the part of the United States under the guise of "neutralization" and "peace agreement" eventually would likely have weakened the lessons that some people thought that they had learned. Particularly, people might easily have forgotten the fact that the United States involved itself in nation building in other countries and did not have the power to change the situation, thus letting people in a later period be carried away with another case of a "we-can-do-it" mentality. Second, what seems more horrible is that, with a facade of neutralization or peace, many people scarcely realize the disproportionate human costs that the United States inflicted directly or indirectly on the other side. People may remember Vietnam as an "American tragedy," but the sense of moral responsibility for others escapes many people's minds. They do not seriously come to question the validity of the use of America's formidable military force against others even if others were just fighting with stones and sticks.

This kind of tendency may not be particular to the United States. Any great power can cause great casualties in the process of involving itself and failing in an internal conflict in other countries. And when a great power disengages itself from such failure, it does so mostly for its own sake and not for a real settlement of the problem. Every war must end for ourselves, but not necessarily for others.

As an epilogue, something may be said about religion and foreign policy or international politics. A certain religious belief or self-righteousness, often mixed with racial or ethnic prejudice, may constitute an important part in the thinking of some policymakers. These factors may influence a country's foreign policy on certain issues at a certain period of history. But we have to be careful when we examine such factors influencing a certain policy. Not all leaders uniformly share the same thinking even if they share the same religious belief. The American people had Eisenhower as well as John Foster Dulles, George F. Kennan as well as Reinhold Niebuhr. People with the same religious belief can easily make different recommendations for foreign policy. Some people may have "missionary zeal," lean toward intervention or become "crusaders" while others may become isolationist or strongly protest against intervention and the atrocities that come with it because of their strong religious belief. In the case of Laos, one can see much self-righteousness and prejudice in statements made by U.S. policymakers, but most of these statements are not necessarily related to religion.

Whether or not some religious belief contributes to the formulation of an

interventionist policy, the intervention may not succeed. Laos, Vietnam and most other cases of post-World-War-II U.S. intervention show that an intervention can easily fail once one is in a remote country where there is always a great limit to whatever political control or influence any foreign power can exercise. In Vietnam, some Americans welcomed the fact that Ngo Dinh Diem was a Christian and found him worthy of U.S. support. However, when the Kennedy administration abandoned him, Diem’s Christianity was no longer important for most people. This does not mean that Diem’s Christianity or the internal religious conflict was unimportant in the struggle among Vietnamese nationalists. It only means that Diem’s religion probably lost its importance for U.S. policy in the subsequent development of events in Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> In any case, the U.S. effort to end a quagmire in Laos and Vietnam might show that, in international politics, self-interest easily overtakes self-righteousness or religious or moral consistency.

## Notes

1. The title of this paper is inspired by Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971; and David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: An Uncomplimentary Account of Our Precarious Commitment in South Vietnam*, New York: Random House, 1965.
2. On U.S. involvement in Laos, see Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground*, London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968; Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969; Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, rev. ed., New York: Praeger, 1971; Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos since 1954*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972; Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993.
3. See George Modelski, *International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question 1961-2*, Canberra: The Australian National University, 1962.
4. Koji Terachi, “Democracy, Elections and Internal Security: U.S. Policy toward Laos in the Late 1950s,” *JCAS Occasional Paper*, No. 11 (January, 2001), pp. 35-59.
5. The U.S. provided almost all the military budget for the Lao army and helped to create the para-military “auto-defense” force. The U.S. military commitment in Laos was much larger than that in South Vietnam considering the size and the population of the country (ibid.).
6. The Department of State [DOS] to Vientiane, Dec. 19, 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS], 1958-60, XVI, pp. 701-702; DOS to Vientiane, Dec. 22, ibid., pp. 707-708.
7. Kennedy’s news conference, Mar. 23, 1962, [http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Press+Conferences/\[2007/05/30\]](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Press+Conferences/[2007/05/30]) See Koji Terachi, “The Crisis in Laos and U.S.-U.K. SEATO Military Intervention Planning,” *Kokusaiseiji [International Relations]*, no. 130 (May 2002), 33-47 [In Japanese].
8. “N.S. Action No. 29, sanitized copy” [NSAM No. 29], Mar. 9, 1961, Regional Security Files, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library [JFKL], Boston, Massachusetts, Box 231.

9. Conversation between President Kennedy and the Prime Minister at Key West, Florida, Mar. 26, 1961, Prime Minister's Record, PREM 11/3280, Public Record Office [PRO], London; Note by Prime Minister (Copy handed to the President), no date, *ibid.* No record of this talk seems to be available in U.S. archives.
10. "Terms of Reference for Military Discussions between CINCPAC and Admiral Luce (UK)" (Memo from Anderson to Johnson, June 14, 1961), Documents concerning Laos 1960, General Records of the Department of States [RG 59], National Archives [NA], College Park, Maryland, Box 1763A.
11. From Bangkok (Home) to FO, Mar. 28, 1961, PREM 11/3280, PRO; From Minister of Defense to Prime Minister, Mar. 29, 1961, DEFE 13/422, PRO.
12. See, for example, From West Indies (Macmillan) to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Tracks no. 4 & no. 6, Mar. 26, 1961, PREM 11/3280, PRO.
13. Memo from McNamara and Gilpatric to President Kennedy, May 2, 1961, FRUS, 1961-63, XXIV, pp. 166-169.
14. See Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, pp. 642-646.
15. Memo of Conversation, Vienna, June 3, 1961, FRUS, 1961-63, XXIV, p. 230; Memo from Peterson to U. A. Johnson, June 23, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 256-257.
16. Editorial Note [The 486th Meeting of the NSC], *ibid.*, pp. 274-275.
17. Memo of Conversation, June 29, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 283-286.
18. From Vientiane to DOS, July 18, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 297-302.
19. Memo of Conversation, July 28, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 322-326.
20. Rusk to DOS, August 7, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 351-353.
21. NSAM No. 80, Aug. 29, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 399.
22. Bangkok to DOS, Sept. 7, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 403-406.
23. Vientiane to DOS, Sept. 18, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 419-421.
24. Vientiane to DOS, Sept. 20, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 421-425; Geneva to DOS, Sept. 26, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 431-433.
25. Memo from Battle to Bundy, Oct. 11, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 463-464; Geneva to DOS, Oct. 15, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 470-472. Harriman's memo somewhat reminds us of Kissinger's famous "peace is at hand" speech on Vietnam in October 1972.
26. DOS to Geneva, Oct. 27, 1960, *ibid.*, pp. 483-484; Memo from Steeves to Bowles, Nov. 1, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 485-488.
27. Geneva to DOS, Nov. 6, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 500-501f; DOS to Geneva, Nov. 7, 1961, W. Averell Harriman Papers, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 529.
28. See Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891-1986*, New York: William Morrow and Co., 1992, pp. 587-589; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, pp. 410-412. See also Memo from R. H. Johnson to Rostow, Nov. 28, 1961, FRUS, 1961-63, XXIV, pp. 528-530; Editorial Note, *ibid.*, I, pp. 670-671.
29. DOS to Vientiane, Dec. 4, 1961, *ibid.*, pp. 531-533; DOS to Vientiane, Dec. 9, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 535.
30. Vientiane to DOS, Jan. 3, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 551-552; Vientiane to DOS, Jan. 4, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 554-555.
31. Memo for the Record, Jan. 6, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 571-573; Memo for the Special Group, "Proposal for General Phoumi Nosavan," Jan. 5, 1961, Meetings & Memoranda Series, National Security Files, 1961-1963, JFKL, Box 319.
32. Memo from the JCS to McNamara, Jan. 5, 1962, FRUS, 1961-63, XXIV, pp. 580-583.

33. Memo for the Record, Feb. 6, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 613–615.
34. Vientiane to Washington, Mar. 6, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 644–648; Bangkok to DOS, Mar. 7, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 648–650; Memo of Conference with Kennedy, Feb. 21, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 625–633.
35. Oral History Interview with William H. Sullivan, June 16, 1970, JFKL, pp. 18–19; Abramson’s Interview with Forrestal, in Abramson, *Spanning the Century*, p. 590.
36. NSAM No. 149, April 19, 1962, FRUS, 1961–63, XXIV, pp. 695–696; Bangkok to DOS, May 1, 1962, *ibid.*, pp. 708–710.
37. Memo of Telephone Conversation, May 6, 1962, *ibid.*, p. 721.
38. For the events after 1962, see Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, pp. 180–239.
39. Bangkok to DOS, Jan. 11, 1961, Documents concerning Laos 1960, RG 59, NA, Box 1758; Memo from Forrestal to Kennedy, April 17, 1962, FRUS, 1961–63, XXIV, pp. 694–95. See also William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part II: 1961–1964, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986, pp. 23–25.
40. Memo from Forrestal to Kennedy, FRUS, 1961–63, XXIV, pp. 767–769. See also Matsuoka Hiroshi, *1961 Kennedy no Senso [1961: Kennedy’s War]*, Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1999.
41. For an overview of U.S. commitment in Vietnam, see George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996; Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*, New York: Harper, 1991; David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
42. Nixon’s presidential nomination acceptance speech, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/shownomination.php?convid=17> [2006/05/30]
43. On negotiations for the Paris Agreement of 1973, see Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975; Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement*, Chapel Hill, NC: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*, New York: Free Press, 2002; Lloyd C. Gardner & Ted Gittinger, eds., *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964–1968*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2004.
44. Quoted in Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, p. 14. See also Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, pp. 56–57.
45. Recent studies include, for example, Matsuoka, *1961 Kennedy no Senso*; Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003; Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?: Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003. There are some important differences in these studies regarding Laos and Kennedy’s legacy, etc. For a good overview of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, see Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999.
46. On Diem and the United States, see Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957*, Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004.