

What Laos and Vietnam Are Still Telling Us

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I. Repeated Commitments to Unknown Lands

Let me start my comments on Prof. Terachi's excellent presentation by calling the country of today's subject "Lay-us," instead of "La-os," because that is the way President John F. Kennedy called it in his first State of the Union Message in January 1961—almost immediately after his first encounter with the Laotian problem—although he soon corrected it and started to talk about his policy toward "La-os," not "Lay-us." The fact that he could not pronounce the name of this country accurately clearly shows how limited the knowledge of the policymakers in Washington, including the president himself, was with regard to the place where they were almost dispatching American ground troops.

Laos was not an exception. It was among the many spots in the world that could be regarded as "*terra incognita*," a land completely unknown to the Americans—an expression by Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, to describe the Vietnam experience. As a nation pledged to maintain the world order, the United States has made commitments all around the globe, even in such distant countries as Laos or Vietnam, despite its unfamiliarity with their histories, cultures, social and political backgrounds, even the roots of the conflicts.

Such remoteness both in terms of geography and psychology, or intimacy, could easily become a serious obstacle for American diplomacy to be successful. If diplomatic or military blunders in those unfamiliar places cannot be avoided, what the Americans can and should do is to keep in mind what they did and why they did it, and try to avoid the repetition of the same mistakes in the future.

However, unfortunately, they overlooked the lessons that they had learned in Korea before plunging themselves into another quagmire in Vietnam. As Prof. Terachi shows us today, they could not remember what had happened in Laos. Even the tremendous fear of "another Vietnam" was at least temporarily cast aside after September 11, 2001, resulting in the deadlocked war in Iraq. It will not be long before warning against "another Iraq" or cry of "no more Iraqs" will be added to the vocabulary of American diplomatic history, which is already full of forgotten wars, quagmires and disasters. That is why we are here, discussing America's past experience, and why I find Prof. Terachi's talks very significant to

us all.

II. Was Neutral Laos Really a Failure?

Prof. Terachi insists that America's escape from Laos by negotiated settlement in 1962 was a failure. Indeed, the Geneva solution was full of ironies and tragedies. First, the price of temporary peace proved to be very high, causing numerous deaths and destructions.

Second, agreement in Laos became an introduction to another, more agonizing war in Vietnam. President Kennedy was severely criticized for his apparent weakness in Laos, which fortified his belief that the United States should hold the line in Vietnam at any cost.

Third, the Geneva negotiation and the development after the agreement was signed, especially North Vietnam's violation of the accords, increased American distrust toward further talks with the Communists. The U.S. Government, for example, refused to give any serious consideration to proposals of neutralization of Vietnam or Southeast Asia made by French President Charles de Gaulle or Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Yet, the Geneva Accords in 1962 could still be regarded as a success for American diplomacy. First, it was the best kind of solution that the United States could have expected, with the position of the right-wing faction in Laos wholly collapsing even with American strong backing. The Americans hated to be involved in an all-out civil war. They also wanted to avoid a humiliating diplomatic defeat. Other options left for them were probably either partition of the country, which would possibly begin a prolonged warfare as had been witnessed in Vietnam after 1954, or complete Communist triumph.

Second, as Prof. Terachi points out, neutral Laos with a coalition government was merely a face-saving solution, and nothing more than that. But to save its own face was sometimes very crucial for a great power like the United States. It was also important for President Kennedy himself as a politician. It would have been so for any other president.

Third, President Kennedy's position before the Cuban Missile Crisis in that October was so weak that it was very difficult for him to resist strong pressure for military action in Laos. Under such circumstances, he did his best by utilizing what Prof. Terachi calls "two track policy" of negotiation and show of strength. In sum, President Kennedy can be defended by asking, "What else could he do?" While my evaluation might be too favorable to him, I wish to have Prof. Terachi's further comments on this so that we can have a better understanding on this matter.

III. Diplomatic Battles against America's Allies

Let me turn to another subject: the relations between the United States on the

one hand, and Laos and South Vietnam on the other. In each country, the Americans were faced with serious conflicts with intransigent allies within the anti-Communist bloc—such local leaders as Phoumi Nosavan in Laos and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. So embarrassing were these diplomatic battles against America’s “enemy within”—a phrase that Robert F. Kennedy, the president’s brother and Attorney General, used to describe his struggle against Mafia, a formidable enemy within the United States. Tough pressure tactics, including threat of terminating aid, as well as mild persuasion, worked neither with Phoumi nor with Diem. America’s influence over its own “creation” or “instrument,” as described by W. Averill Harriman of the State Department, was wholly limited.

Phoumi and Diem were too weak to stand on their own feet. The United States knew that withdrawal of its support to them might lead to victories of the Communists, the Pathet Lao or the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong)—a possibility that the United States least wanted. It is true that the Kennedy Administration actually stopped its aid to South Vietnam in the fall of 1963 as one last effort to have Diem accept American demands. But even then, aid cut was only selective lest it should hamper the entire war efforts and was made into effect in a muted way to save Diem’s face. Here is an irony: the weaker a client government is within its own territory, the stronger it can be in its negotiating position with its patron, the United States.

America’s leverage was also limited by its long-held Cold War perception. Anti-Communist South Vietnam was vital to the security of Southeast Asia and the Pacific as a whole, and thus indispensable to the United States. It was essential for the defense of South Vietnam to hold Laos, and especially its southern half—“Laos Panhandle” as was then called—which contained the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Hanoi’s infiltration routes into South Vietnam.

The United States could not let Laos as well as South Vietnam go. President Kennedy once described America’s preferences of local leaders in Latin America: first, a decent and democratic regime; second, an undemocratic but anti-Communist regime; third, a Communist regime. The United States, in many cases including conflicts in Southeast Asia, hoping for the days of the first to come, had to be satisfied with the second, because the third might come up at any moment.

IV. Continuous Search for Alternate Leadership

Both Phoumi and Diem resisted American pressures. Just as Phoumi protested the United States for its treatment of Laos as “a small child,” as shown by Prof. Terachi, a South Vietnamese Foreign Minister condemned the CIA because they were making his country that of “boys.” In essence, the Laotians were the Laotians, and the Vietnamese were the Vietnamese, no matter how dependent they were upon American aid and support.

Realizing that Phoumi and Diem were not only ineffective but also uncooperative, the Americans had to find an alternate indigenous leadership. They were fortunate in Laos because they had Souvanna Phouma. He was not an anti-Communist leader, but he was not a Communist, either, and was permissible. His government was considered to have a better chance of survival against the threat posed by the Communists.

In Vietnam, the Americans were not so lucky. The Kennedy Administration was embarrassed to find virtually no alternative to Diem's rule. In a real sense of the word, his only alternative was Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi—collapse of the anti-Communist government in Saigon. While the Americans could not abandon Diem, the military and political situations in that country worsened day by day. Finally, in early November 1963, the Americans had South Vietnamese military leaders overthrow the Diem regime and form a new government. But that proved to be an illusionary solution. Diem's dictatorship ended, only to be replaced by political chaos and vacuum, the period of "revolving door," according to McNamara's recollection, in which one leader after another appeared.

History of America's commitment in Vietnam was that of consecutive "solutions" and "experiments." At the beginning, President Harry S. Truman supported French selection of Bao Dai, former Vietnamese emperor, as a head of the state that the French had created. When France was defeated and Vietnam was divided in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower picked up Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1963, President Kennedy helped establish General Duong Van Minh's military government. Then came Nguen Khanh, Nguen Van Thieu, Nguyen Cao Ky, and so on. It was always easy for the Americans to blame such indigenous leadership for what had gone wrong with their commitment without any serious reconsideration or reappraisal of American policy itself.

V. A Living Myth of Conflict-Localization

There were indeed some moments of rethinking. In Laos during 1961-62 as well as in Vietnam after 1968 were such occasions. The United States in both cases pursued a two-way policy: to disengage itself from a seemingly endless civil war and, simultaneously, to prevent that country from slipping away from American hands. Their method was to localize the conflict by building a strong army and a stable government so that victory could still be achieved without massive American commitment. But there are several problems in this approach.

First, in Vietnam, the United States wanted "Vietnamization" of the conflict from the very beginning, since it was essential, as President Kennedy once described, that the conflict should remain "their war." But the Vietnamese Army never became reliable. Nor its government was able to maintain order. Thus the war had to be Americanized in the mid-1960s, essentially because the United States had failed to Vietnamize it before then.

Second, the United States had provided the anti-Communist Vietnamese army

with arms, equipments, training, military doctrine, and tactical advice, because of their belief that troops manufactured after an American model could defeat their enemy with ease, since the U.S. armed forces were the strongest in the world. Continuous efforts to consolidate the South Vietnamese government derived from their conviction that American-style democracy could be introduced across the Pacific and would be effective, because it was the best way of government ever in history. Ironically, their quest for localization of the conflict was based upon successful Americanization of that country, or creation of “little America.”

Finally, it seems that the American people still cannot dispense with an illusion, or a myth, of conflict-localization magic: the war can be won in a cheaper way by letting the people living there fight on behalf of the United States; the Americans can make a trustworthy government and a reliable army, because they know very well how to do the jobs; they can solve any problem arising between the U.S. Government and the indigenous leaders; they can move any country to the direction that they want. These are the features that we witnessed both in Laos and in Vietnam several decades ago. Those experiences, I believe, are still giving us some important lessons, and one of Prof. Terachi’s aims today is to remind us of them.