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Laos at War

IAN G. BAIRD

It is hard to know where to start when writing about "Laos at War," as the conflict there was complicated and persistent over decades, although with varying circumstances in different parts of the country. Still, it is generally recognized that the war in Laos occurred between around 1959 and 1973. It can be considered to be part of the Second Indochina War, or the Vietnam War, as Americans know it.

This chapter is particularly focused on what is now often referred to as the "Secret War in Laos," which began after the Second Geneva Accords of 1962 were signed, and ended with the signing of the Vientiane Agreement in 1973, which was designed to lay the groundwork for national reconciliation through establishing a coalition government. However, it instead eventually led to the Pathet Lao takeover of the country, and from then little-known but persistent armed conflict between communist forces and anticommunist insurgents continued.

Some background is required regarding the period prior to 1959 and 1962, at least starting from the end of World War II in 1945, when the Lao Issara (Free Lao) nationalist organization was formed to resist the return of the French colonial government. Later, one faction of that group of nationalists, led by Souphanouvong, the so-called "Red Prince," became allied with Hồ Chí Minh and other communists in North Vietnam. Similarly, "after" the war (though fighting actually continued), it is important to at least briefly examine the fall of Laos to communism in 1975. Even though the Americans largely withdrew from Laos in 1975, royalists, democrats, nationalists, and neutralists continued to politically oppose and wage guerrilla war against the new government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), even if the nature of the conflict changed dramatically. The anti–Lao PDR insurgency emerged beginning in 1975 and continued into the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond, albeit weakening considerably in recent years. This conflict is what I call *the Really Secret War in Laos*.

This chapter is intended to provide readers with a summary review of the conflict in Laos. The overall goal is to briefly summarize the important circumstances associated with the war in Laos, something that has apparently not been done before.

Between World War II and Điện Biên Phủ

During World War II, the Japanese inspired anti-French colonial ideas in Laos; thus, upon their defeat in August 1945, Lao nationalists, with the urging of the departing Japanese, formed the Lao Issara. They were not, however, militarily developed enough to resist the return of the French, who sent aircraft to bomb the central Lao town of Thakhek, killing a large number of ethnic Vietnamese and Lao civilians and forcing Prince Souphanouvong to flee across the Mekong River by boat, after he was shot by a French airplane, and take refuge with Tieng Sirikhan, a key Seri Thai (Free Thai) leader from northeastern Thailand.[1] Lao Issara in other parts of the country also fled across the Mekong River to Thailand, including the leader, Prince Phetxarath, Souphanouvong's half-brother. The Thai government, led by Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong, was sympathetic, as the northeastern faction of Pridi's Seri Thai had cooperated with the Lao Issara during World War II.[2] However, in 1947, Field Marshall Phibun Songkhram led a coup d'état against Pridi, forcing him into exile in China. The new Phibun regime was less willing to support the Lao Issara, and pressured them to resolve their dispute with the French. The French also took the opportunity to institute some reforms in Laos, including granting partial independence to the country, although without giving up control over key institutions, including the security services. But the push-and-pull factors were enough to lead many Lao Issara to reconciliation in 1949, when most returned to Laos. However, Prince Souphanouvong refused to reconcile with the French. He joined the Việt Minh and, over time, the Lao Issara became the communist Pathet Lao. They were strongly under the influence of North Vietnamese communists, who sent advisors to Laos to help recruit Lao people to the Pathet Lao, and also provide them with political and military training.[3] The Việt Minh initially had little recruiting success in Laos, but after they changed their strategy and "went native" – meaning

1 Chansamone Voravong, personal communication, Paris, France, June 26, 2009.
2 Sriphanom Wichitwalasan, personal communication, Phanom Phrai, Roi Et, August 8, 2015.
3 Christopher E. Goscha, "Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisors in Laos (1948–1962)," *South East Asian Research* 12 (2) (2005), 141–85.

that they made serious efforts to learn local languages, adopt local cultural practices, and generally integrate themselves with the local population – they gained more allies, especially in remote areas where they were able to gain the trust of many ethnic minorities, although less so in major population centers.[4] Fighting occurred, but it was not nearly as intense as it would become in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The French were defeated by the Việt Minh in 1954 during the decisive battle at Điện Biên Phủ and were thus forced to negotiate their departure from French Indochina, which included Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The French Indochina War had come to an end. During the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into communist North and noncommunist South Vietnam, while Houaphanh and Phongsaly provinces in northern Laos were categorized as Pathet Lao regroupment zones, and Laos was recognized as a neutral state. There were, however, hopes that the divisions in Laos would be temporary, and that future negotiations would allow for the integration of the communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao government (RLG) into a single governing administration. However, the Geneva Accords left the procedure for reintegrating the two provinces into the national system contingent on future negotiations between the RLG and the Pathet Lao.

The outcome of the Geneva Conference constituted a clear political gain for the Pathet Lao. By being allotted regroupment areas, it won an internationally recognized base area from which to wage political struggle, and within which to gain valuable administrative experience.

Failed Reconciliation

Negotiations occurred in 1956, and on November 12, 1957 a joint communiqué announced that an agreement had been reached. Soon after, a coalition government was formed, with two Pathet Lao ministers joining the government in Vientiane. The Pathet Lao also continued to administrate Phongsaly and Houaphanh provinces in northern Laos.[5]

In May 1958, elections were held; despite allegations that the US CIA-backed rightists rigged some of the elections, and that the Americans dropped food in a number of places in advance of elections in order to try to influence

4 Ian G. Baird, "Various Forms of Colonialism: The Social and Spatial Reorganization of the Brao in Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia," Ph.D. thesis (University of British Columbia, 2008).

5 Kenneth Conboy (with James Morrison), *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, 1995).

the results, the Neo Lao Hak Xat Party won thirteen of twenty-one seats. However, the official election results in Attapeu province, in the deep south, gave the rightwing Front Uni Party candidate 20,692 votes, as compared with Kaysone Phomvihane, who represented the communist Neo Lao Hak Xat, who officially received just 1,968 votes.[6] Arthur Dommen reported the results of this election uncritically, stating that "he [Kaysone Phomvihane] was defeated in the National Assembly elections" in Attapeu.[7] However, official Lao PDR historiography claims that boxes of votes for Kaysone were thrown into the Xekong River, which seems plausible, since Kaysone was thought to have some support in the outer-lying areas of the province. Some have even gone as far as to claim that Kaysone obtained 100 percent of the vote, although this is almost certainly inaccurate. The alleged rigging of voting forced the Pathet Lao, including Kaysone Phomvihane, to return to the forests to fight against the RLG. Thus, the war in Laos was not simply an extension of what was happening in neighboring Vietnam, but also had its own particular political trajectory. General Phoumi Nosavan became the dominant rightwing influence in the military and government.

In May 1959, the second of the Pathet Lao's two battalions – one of whose leaders was the Hmong Thao Tou Yang and had been based on the Plain of Jars – refused to integrate into the Armée Nationale Laotienne, after the RLG refused to allow as many Pathet Lao officers into the Forces Armées du Royaume (FAR) as requested by the communists. This was regarded as a rebellion by the leadership of the RLG in Vientiane. On May 14, 1959, the RLG issued an ultimatum that the renegade Pathet Lao battalion integrate. In May 1960, after the Pathet Lao leadership was initially put under house detention, the rightist prime minister, Phoui Sananikone, ordered the arrest of the Lao Patriotic Front leadership. However, they were famously able to escape from Phonkheng jail, outside of Vientiane, ten months later, before regrouping in Houaphanh province.

Before the Second Geneva Accords

On January 22, 1959, the US military launched the Hotfoot Project, which would eventually transform into being the White Star Program on April 19, 1961. Hotfoot sent US regular military to Laos to arm and train anticommunist militias. They went to various parts of the country, including the north, and

6 Document from actual vote-counting in Attapeu province, handwritten in French, 1958.
7 Arthur J. Dommen, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina* (Boulder and London, 1986), 108.

central and southern Laos. The White Star Program expanded the number of people in Laos, from 154 in spring 1961 to 402 by October 1961, but was ended once the Second Geneva Accords on Laos of 1962 were signed. The 433 US military personnel were withdrawn from Laos.[8]

On August 9, 1960, Captain Kong Le, who was just 26 years old, led the 2nd Paratrooper Battalion to conduct a coup d'état in favor of neutralism and against foreign interference in Lao affairs. Although it is widely rumored that the French secret service, particularly the French policeman Jean Deuve,[9] helped Kong Le plan for the coup, Kong Le denied any involvement of any French agents in the coup planning, including when I interviewed him in 2009 in Paris.[10] In any case, Kong Le brought Souvanna Phouma back from exile in Cambodia to become the neutralist prime minister of Laos.

Later in the year, however, the Thai and US governments supported Phoumi Nosavan's forces, who had regrouped in Savannakhet in southern Laos, where they established a parallel government with Prince Boun Oum, the prince of Champasak, as its leader. Phoumi's forces were able to retake the capital of Vientiane from the south during the battle of Vientiane, which continued from December 13 to December 16, 1960, with artillery support from the Thai Army. The Soviets dropped air supplies to Kong Le's Forces Armées Neutralistes in Vientiane, but they were still forced to retreat to the north, first to Vang Vieng and then to the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang province. The neutralists soon split into two factions, one loyal to Kong Le eventually rejoining the FAR. Another faction, the Patriotic Neutralists, became aligned with the Pathet Lao communists and stayed in Pathet Lao–controlled areas for years. In July 1959, the Armée Nationale Laotienne, the Lao Navy, and Laotian Aviation had been put together by the RLG to create the Forces Armées Laotiènnes (which would be renamed the [abovementioned] Forces Armées du Royaume or FAR in September 1961).

During the time Kong Le was in power, the CIA sent Bill Lair, an American agent who had already been working for the CIA in Thailand, and five teams from the Police Aerial Resupply Unit (PARU) operating from Thailand to work with General Phoumi Nosavan to launch a countercoup against Kong Le. Their support was crucial, and thus Bill Lair and his Thai PARU colleagues were asked to stay in Laos after Vientiane was retaken. Bill Lair ended up

8 Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochina Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2001), 439.
9 Francois Thanome, personal communication, Paris, France, June 26, 2009.
10 General Kong Le Sibounheuang, personal communication, Paris, France, June 25, 2009.

flying to Tha Vieng in northeastern Laos, on the advice of Phoumi's government, in order to meet the Hmong military leader, Lieutenant Colonel Vang Pao, in early January 1961, thus beginning what would become a legendary collaboration between the two men, since Bill Lair, representing the CIA, started to provide military and training support to Vang Pao's anticommunist soldiers, a force that gradually gained strength. Operation Momentum helped Vang Pao establish a number of bases surrounding the Plain of Jars. The government of Thailand also established Operation 333 in 1961, in order to provide military assistance to the RLG against the communist Pathet Lao.

On April 24, 1961, a ceasefire between the FAR and the communist Pathet Lao was agreed upon, but on June 6, 1961 the communists violated the ceasefire by attacking and overrunning Vang Pao's base at Pha Dong, leading to a retreat to Pha Khao. It also led to the first large number of Hmong refugees to flee to Vientiane before being eventually airlifted to a resettlement site at Nam Hia in Xayaboury province in northwestern Laos.[11] By May 1961, it had become clear that the ethnic Hmong Highlanders led by Vang Pao were the principal military instrument of RLG presence in northeastern Laos, as large numbers were recruited to former CIA-supported paramilitary units. In 1962, (by then) Major General Vang Pao moved out of Pha Khao and set up headquarters in Long Tieng, where he would be based until the fall of the RLG in 1975.

Between January and May 1962 fierce fighting occurred in the northern Lao province of Luang Namtha. Known as the battle of Luang Namtha, the conflict between the FAR and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) from North Vietnam and Pathet Lao communists ended with the noncommunist forces retreating 90 miles (150 kilometers) southwest across the Mekong River into Thailand via Houay Sai. Phoumi's disastrous military defeats in Luang Namtha reduced American confidence in him. Washington exerted pressure to form a coalition government. The hope then was that the neutralist party of Prince Souvanna Phouma would moderate and unite the two extremes.

The Secret War in Laos: The Early Years

The Secret War in Laos can be said to have begun on July 23, 1962, the day that the Second Geneva Accords confirmed Laos as a neutral country. The US Programs Evaluation Office (POE) funded the FAR, but the Secret War in Laos gained its name because the CIA funded the Special Guerrilla Units

11 Frederic Benson, personal communication, Greensboro, NC, November 18, 2017.

(SGUs), since the United States did not want to acknowledge that it was no longer following the Second Geneva Accords, which guaranteed Laos' neutrality.

It appears that initially, following the Geneva Accords of 1962, the US government intended to withdraw all regular military personnel from the country, including those who had been working with White Star. The US ambassador to Laos, Leonard Unger, who took on his position in Laos on July 25, 1962, just two days after the accords had been signed, claimed that his assignment was "to do whatever was feasible to carry out the provisions of the 1962 Geneva Accords and to avoid a renewal of warfare in Laos."[12] However, the job soon came to be how to appear to be following the accords, when actually not doing so. Indeed, the US government realized that thousands of North Vietnamese troops were not leaving the country. Thus, the United States started looking for options to defend the RLG, but without openly defying the Second Geneva Accords. This all led the CIA to become tasked with supporting military operations in Laos – with the permission and cooperation of the RLG, but secret from the rest of the world.

In April 1963, the Patriotic Neutralists attacked Kong Le's neutralists, probably with North Vietnamese support, although North Vietnam denied their involvement at the time. The attacks caused Kong Le's forces to give up their positions on the Plain of Jars, although they were able to reorganize themselves at Muang Soui and to the south at Vang Vieng. The dire overall circumstances in Laos at the time led Arthur Dommen to describe the Second Geneva Accords of 1962 as "worthless."[13]

During the first half of the 1960s, Bill Lair was in charge of the CIA's paramilitary strategy with regard to Military Region (MR) II[14] in central and northern Laos, where he worked closely with Vang Pao, who eventually became a general and the military commander of MR II. Lair hardly did any work regarding the road-watching and other operations directed against the Hồ Chí Minh Trail in southern Laos, but he is well-known for his work setting up and supporting the Hmong anticommunist forces.

12 Leonard Unger, "The United States and Laos, 1962–5," in Joseph J. Zasloff and Leonard Unger (eds.), *Laos: Beyond the Revolution* (New York, 1991), 275–84, at 279.

13 Dommen, *Indochina Experience of the French and the Americans*, 495.

14 There were five Military Regions (MR) in Laos at the time. MR I included northern Laos; MR II covered central and northeastern Laos; MR III encompassed south–central Laos; MR IV included the southernmost part of Laos; and MR V encompassed the capital city of Vientiane and surrounding areas.

Figure 12.1 Hmong militia during the American Secret War in Laos (1962). Source: Pictures from History / Contributor / Universal Images Group / Getty Images.

The Secret War Escalates

The Secret War in Laos involved two major arenas of conflict. The first was in northeastern Laos, especially the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang province, but also other areas, and was between the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese communists, on the one side, and the FAR, with support from the CIA and (later) Thai "volunteer" forces, on the other. The second was the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, which was first established by the North Vietnamese military in 1959 and went from Khammouane province south to the border between Laos and Cambodia and into Cambodia itself. Essentially, the North Vietnamese were using territory in Laos to send North Vietnamese troops, equipment, and other supplies to the south, so as to bypass the demilitarized zone (DMZ), which divided North from South Vietnam, but without receiving permission from the RLG.

On May 21, 1964, Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister of Laos, first authorized US bombing in the country. From then until 1973, Souvanna Phouma played an important role in approving bombing missions in Laos. Indeed, he was at times hawkish on bombing, which was also broadly supported by some Lao elites, including King Sisavang Vatthana, as the RLG believed that

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such bombing was justified by the fact that the North Vietnamese had violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country by sending large numbers of troops into Laos.[15] According to Ryan Wolfson-Ford, on July 31, 1964, Souvanna Phouma approved, in principle, the use of US aircraft for stopping the North Vietnamese from using the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.[16] Then, on September 30, 1964, Leonard Unger, the US ambassador to Laos, reported for the first time, in a memo, that Souvanna Phouma "concurred in principle to corridor [Hồ Chí Minh Trail] air strikes."[17] However, Unger also reported that "in various ways – some known to me and some not – Souvanna sought to block this traffic [along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail], but in such a way that Laos would not find itself sucked into the Vietnam maelstrom, and that its hard-fought-for neutrality would not, in the larger context, be abandoned or jeopardized."[18] It has also been suggested that the United States' first priority was to bomb the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, but that they needed to provide bombing support for the war in northern Laos as well, since that was the priority for the RLG, even though this quid pro quo was later denied by Unger's successor as US ambassador to Laos, William Sullivan, during testimony he made to the US Congress on October 21, 1969.[19]

The aerial bombardment of Laos by US aircraft mainly based in Thailand, but also in Vietnam and Guam, gradually escalated. On March 30, 1965, Souvanna Phouma reportedly agreed to plans to intensify air operations in southern Laos, although he insisted that he be briefed regularly on bombing results, and also that the US Air Force liaise closely with the Royal Lao Air Force. Souvanna also insisted that civilian casualties be avoided. In fact, Souvanna Phouma was very concerned that villages in Laos not be bombed, and this eventually led Sullivan to put specific restrictions on bombing operations. This, in turn, sometimes put Sullivan at odds with the senior leadership of the US military in Vietnam, including General Westmoreland and others. The US Air Force used various means to increase the accuracy of bombing, including employing Forward Air Control Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) systems at various locations in Laos, Ravens, Thai Forward Air Guides, and

15 US Senate, *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad: Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress*, Committee on Foreign Relations, vol. I, parts 1–4 (Washington, DC, 1971), 371.

16 Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Ideology in the Royal Lao Government-Era (1945–1975): A Thematic Approach," Ph.D. thesis (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018).

17 Quoted in ibid., 268.

18 Unger, "United States and Laos," 278–9.

19 US Senate, *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad*, 482.

Lao and Hmong Forward Air Guides. In addition, Souvanna Phouma was insistent that everything remain top secret. This was partially because the RLG was also receiving some support from the Soviet Union. He did not want to jeopardize his neutralist role, as the Soviets were in a position to encourage Hanoi to send more troops into Laos, or to restrain them. US Ambassador Sullivan agreed with these arguments, as did Washington-based officials.

Over nine years, between 1964 and 1973, the United States would fly 580,000 bombing missions over Laos.[20] There were also large quantities of chemicals, including at least over half a million gallons of Agent Orange and other related chemicals sprayed in Laos, primarily on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. The bombing was intensive and led to severe misery and suffering for the people living in communist-controlled areas. Beginning in October 1965, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observation Groups (MACV SOGs), special military units based in Vietnam, also launched small team operations into Laos from Vietnam in order to disrupt enemy movements along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Attapeu was of strategic importance to the United States, as it was an ideal location for observing activities along the Trail.[21]

Between 1964 and 1967, Thailand's support for the RLG, via Operation 333, allowed for 125 Thai personnel to be based in Laos. Most trained Vang Pao's SGU forces in MR II. In 1969–70 the scale of fighting increased, and Thailand started sending thousands of "volunteer" forces into Laos to assist the SGU. During the battle of Skyline Ridge in 1971–2, when Long Tieng, Vang Pao's base, was threatened, there were about 1,000 mainly Hmong fighters there, along with 5,000 Thai "Tiger Scouts" from Operation 333 and just a few American CIA advisors. Large numbers of Thais also fought in other parts of the country, including on the Bolaven Plateau in 1971–2. There were up to 20,000 Thai Operation 333 people based in Laos between 1970 and 1974, mainly based at Long Tieng, Xieng Lom, and Pakse.[22]

Attempted Coups

There were a number of failed coups d'état in the mid-1960s. On April 19, 1964, Siho Lamphouthacoul, the former national military police chief, attempted a coup with General Kouprasit Aphay, a key military figure in Vientiane. The

20 http://legaciesofwar.org/about-laos/secret-war-laos/.
21 Ian G. Baird, "The US Central Intelligence Agency and the Brao: The Story of Kong My, a Non-Communist Space in Attapeu Province, Southern Laos," *Aséanie* 25 (2010), 23–51.
22 MacAlan Thompson, personal communication, November 24, 2017.

coup was seemingly initially successful, but then failed when the US ambassador, Leonard Unger,[23] informed the coup-makers that Washington supported Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Then, on August 4, 1964, General Phoumi Nosavan attempted a coup, using a training battalion in the capital that he controlled, but the coup-makers were soon crushed by forces loyal to General Kouprasit Aphay, the deputy leader of the FAR, and Phoumi was stripped of his troop command. On January 31, 1965, Colonel Bounleut Saycocie attempted a coup using the battalion that he commanded in Vientiane. It failed, but, crucially, Phoumi Nosavan was accused of orchestrating a simultaneous coup attempt, even though his son, Phoumano Nosavan, who was a lieutenant in the Royal Lao Air Force at the time, and commanded a company, claimed that his father was not involved in the plot. Instead, he claimed that Kouprasit Aphay, with the apparent approval of the CIA, took the opportunity to accuse Phoumi of involvement and force him to flee to Thailand. Once in Thailand, the Thais did not allow him to travel south to try to regroup in Savannakhet, as he had done in 1960. Phoumano reported that Phoumi had recently traveled to China and North Vietnam to try to negotiate peace for Laos, something that the Americans apparently did not agree with. He believes that the Americans asked the Thais to make sure Phoumi went to Bangkok, not to Savannakhet.[24] William Sullivan, the US ambassador,[25] also admitted later that he did not believe that Phoumi Nosavan was actually involved in the attempted coup.[26] General Thao Ma Manosith, the head of the Royal Lao Air Force, launched still another failed coup d'état on October 22, 1966, a week after Kong Le had been "forcibly invited" to leave Laos and take refuge in Indonesia. The FAR wanted to integrate Kong Le's 12,000 neutralist forces into themselves, which they did.

In July 1966, Ted Shackley became the head of the CIA's Vientiane office, based at the US Embassy in Vientiane, replacing Douglas Blaufarb, who had worked closely with Bill Lair and the PARU from Thailand. Before Shackley went to Laos, he received specific orders from the CIA's director, Richard Helms, that the war in Vietnam was the priority. Shackley's arrival marked a major shift, as he was more interested in full-on military engagement with the enemy, even if that led to major casualties. Major General Vang Pao was apparently a willing partner in this strategic shift from guerrilla to more

23 He served as US ambassador to Laos from 1962 to 1964.
24 Phoumano Nosavan, personal communication, Bangkok, November 2016.
25 He served as US ambassador to Laos from 1964 to 1969.
26 William H. Sullivan, *Obbligato 1930–1979: Notes on a Foreign Service Career* (New York, 1984).

conventional warfare. Illustrative of the shift, Shackley locked horns with Major General Phasouk S. Rajaphakd, the leader of southern Laos' MR IV, when Shackley canceled a program in Wapi Khamthong province designed to win the hearts and minds of communists in the area. Shackley remained in his position for more than two years, until he became chief of the CIA station in Saigon in October 1968, replacing William Colby.

Crucially, Shackley was focused on military action, as opposed to intelligence-gathering operations, and, unlike Bill Lair, who favored bringing young college graduates in to work with him, Shackley brought in former marines and other military men.[27] Dissatisfied with the idea of using Vang Pao's forces in MR II for conventional warfare,[28] Bill Lair decided to leave Laos. Shackley knew little about Laos or her people and was focused on furthering American interests, seemingly regardless of the impacts on Laos. He was a numbers man and was concerned much more about what people in the United States thought than people in Laos.

Initially, Vang Pao's forces in MR II realized substantial gains far beyond those of any previous year. In Sam Neua district, Houaphanh province, for example, Vang Pao's units took control of most areas, except for the capital city of the province, which remained under Pathet Lao control. Over time, the strength of the SGUs grew, and in a report issued on October 31, 1968 it was estimated that there were 39,000 paramilitary guerrilla forces loyal to the RLG, of which 22,000 were in MR II. The majority of those were Hmong. There were also 7,000 in northwestern Laos, mainly ethnic Khmu, Iu-Mien, and Lahu, 2,000 in northcentral Laos, 4,000 in central Laos, mainly ethnic Lao, and 4,000 in southern Laos, mainly ethnic Nya Heun, Brao, and Lao. This compared with 46,000 regular FAR troops, 8,500 neutralist soldiers, 5,000 members of regional defense forces, 1,500 in the Royal Lao Air Force, and 500 in the Royal Lao Navy. SGUs were based in various parts of the country, but the largest number were in the Long Tieng area in MR II. Others were based in Nam Nyou and Xieng Lom areas in MR I, as well as in MR III and IV in southern Laos.

Pakse Site-38 Airfield became the largest SGU base on the Bolaven Plateau and in southern Laos. It was located in an ethnic Nya Heun area on the eastern part of the plateau, and there were more than 1,000 paramilitary soldiers based there. Another paramilitary group established on the plateau was the 1st SGU. This 550-man unit was based on the eastern part of the Bolaven

27 See Baird, "US Central Intelligence Agency and the Brao," 23–51.
28 Ja Blong Thao, personal communication, Green Bay, Wisconsin, March 14, 2015.

Plateau at Pakse Site-22. There were also other SGU sites on the Bolaven Plateau. In southern Laos, the main US and Lao government effort was to disrupt the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Missions to the Hồ Chí Minh Trail occurred to gather intelligence and sabotage movement, and efforts were even made to capture Vietnamese officers in order to extract intelligence information from them, with those citizens of Laos who were successful in capturing live Vietnamese officers receiving significant cash bonuses. Highlander road-watch teams were typically airlifted in by helicopter, where they would continue their missions on foot. The SGUs operated from 1967 to 1970, after which time they joined the rest of the ranks of the FAR and fought as line infantry. However, American CIA case officers continued to pay the paramilitaries who worked on American projects, and Americans continued to advise and direct operations involving ethnic minorities. Less well known or documented than the SGU forces on the Bolaven Plateau were the ethnic Brao units based at Kong My, a CIA-supported base in southeastern Attapeu province, located a distance away but still within range of the tri-border area with Vietnam and Cambodia.[29]

The Secret War escalated, along with the aerial bombardment, in the mid- and late 1960s, and General Vang Pao gradually developed the largest paramilitary force in the country in MR II, with CIA support. Stationed at the mountainous base of Long Tieng, Vang Pao's forces battled against the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies, especially in Xieng Khouang and Houaphanh provinces. It was later widely rumored by Hmong veterans in the United States that their support for the CIA would be reciprocated by the US government later, in case they lost the war. As one Hmong man told me at a Veterans Day event organized in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, on November 11, 2012, "Bill Lair said that the US would help the Hmong if they won, and if they lost, they would find a place for the Hmong to take refuge."[30] Bill Lair, however, denied that any such promise was ever made, although it is certainly true that the Hmong were fully funded and advised by the CIA. In any case, many Hmong believe that there was such a promise.

The Nam Bac Valley, in northern Luang Prabang province in northern Laos, was the site of major military engagements during the second half of the 1960s. In August 1966, the FAR moved into the valley to take control from the

29 Baird, "US Central Intelligence Agency and the Brao," 23–51.
30 Hmong man, personal communication, Veterans Day Event, Bouasavanh Restaurant, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, November 11, 2012.

Pathet Lao, who had previously infiltrated the area. The hope was to block a potential attack on the royal capital of Luang Prabang, and to eventually retake Luang Namtha. One year later, in August 1967, the North Vietnamese besieged the base, leading both sides to reinforce their troops, and then, on January 11, 1968 – almost three weeks in advance of the beginning of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam – the communists launched a major multidivisional attack on FAR positions in Nam Bac. Part of the FAR's problem was apparently poorly coordinated air support. In any case, the fight was furious, and the FAR generally performed poorly and suffered serious losses. Of the 3,278 royalist soldiers at Nam Bac, only about one-third were able to withdraw and eventually regroup. Casualties were not only from MR I, but also from southern Laos as well. FAR material losses were also heavy, and 600 FAR POWs even switched sides to join the Pathet Lao.

Although Vang Pao's troops made significant advances in Houaphanh province in 1967, in early 1968 there were serious setbacks, including the fall of Phou Pha Thi, or Lima Site-85 airfield, on March 11, 1968. It was an important TACAN station, and the TSQ-81 bomber guidance system was also located there. Phou Pha Thi was crucial for directing US aircraft engaged in bombing missions in the Hanoi area. Many of its defenders, whether Hmong, Lao, Thai, or American, did not survive the assault. On March 23, 1969, Vang Pao's SGUs in MR II launched a large-scale attack on the Plain of Jars and in other parts of Xieng Khouang province, supported by the Royal Lao Air Force and the US Air Force; the North Vietnamese counterattacked in June, but by August 1969 the royalists were able to gain back what had been lost. North Vietnam's 174th Regiment had to withdraw in early September. However, the Vietnamese counterattacked in mid-September, and were again able to retake control of the Plain of Jars.

The Deterioration of the Military Situation in Laos

In 1970, fresh North Vietnamese troops moved into northern Laos, and the Skyline Ridge area was bombed by B-52s while North Vietnam was besieging Long Tieng. B-52 bombers were operating in southern Laos before then, but this was the first time they were deployed in the north. Vang Pao's SGU reinforcements halted the North Vietnamese advance, and the fighting went back and forth for the rest of the year.

Also in 1970, the military situation greatly intensified in southern Laos, and the situation for the FAR and the SGUs deteriorated. Attapeu and Salavan provinces in southeastern Laos easily fell to the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao

in 1970. As the Pathet Lao leader, Kaysone Phomvihane, later wrote, "Thus the efforts to put the Nixon Doctrine into effect in Laos were frustrated … [w]e inflicted a blow on the enemy in the south, in the provinces of Saravane – Attapeu, both of which were almost completely liberated."[31] The Nixon Doctrine encouraged US allies to take responsibility for their own security, although with support from the United States when needed. From there, fighting gradually moved west to the Bolaven Plateau in Champasak province in 1971 and 1972, where heavy fighting soon occurred. Some of Lon Nol's Khmer soldiers from Cambodia assisted the Lao military on the Bolaven Plateau, but did not perform particularly well.

In 1971, Saigon's Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) attempted to infiltrate into Laos to attack the North Vietnamese and cut off the Hồ Chí Minh Trail in eastern Savannakhet province, in what became known as Operation Lam Sơn 719. The mission began on February 8 and continued until March 25. It was the most intense armed conflict to reach MR III. After some initial successes, the South Vietnamese tried to withdraw to Vietnam beginning on March 9. However, the retreat did not go as planned and soon turned into a rout. Finally, the operation failed. During an April 7 televised speech, US President Richard Nixon claimed that "Tonight I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded."[32] In fact, the situation was much more problematic.

To the north, Vang Pao's forces continued to battle the Vietnamese, with both sides experiencing heavy losses; territory was lost and gained. The United States had become continually weary of the war and in 1973 strongly encouraged the Lao government to follow on the heels of South Vietnam and sign a peace treaty with their communist adversaries. The Lao neutralists and right-wing factions were initially resistant to the idea, but Henry Kissinger, the US secretary of state at the time, made a secret and unofficial trip to Laos in early February 1973. He met Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and another senior Lao statesman privately. He convinced them to change their position, but not simply through intellectual persuasion. Essentially, the United States was funding the Lao government and military, and Kissinger threatened to withdraw funding if Souvanna Phouma did not agree to sign a peace agreement. The latter realized that he had no option but to comply.[33] Thus, on February 21,

31 Kaysone Phomvihane, *Revolution in Laos* (Moscow, 1981), 34.
32 Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 630.
33 Dr. Yang Dao, personal communication, Brooklyn Park, MN, February 12, 2011; Phagna Houmphanh Saignasith, personal communication, Paris, June 26, 2009.

1973, the Vientiane Agreement was signed, which led to the establishment of a coalition government soon after, and a short period of relative peace. This coalition government would, however, last less than three years, and would begin deteriorating about two years after the agreement was signed.

Beginning in 1973, the Pathet Lao gradually worked to take full control. Some wanted the rightists and neutralists to take a stronger line against the Pathet Lao, and this eventually led to Thao Ma Manosith's second failed coup attempt, which occurred on August 20, 1973, when he commandeered a T-28 plane and subsequently executed airstrikes on Kouprasit Aphay's house and office, before finally being shot down, dragged from the airplane badly injured, and shot dead, apparently on the orders of Kouprasit Aphay.

In May 1974, Prince Souphanouvong, representing the Pathet Lao, put forward an eighteen-point plan for "National Reconstruction," which was unanimously adopted. Externally, reconciliation appeared to be moving forward well, but there was actually much more at play.

The Fall of the RLG

In early May 1975, following a series of Pathet Lao–orchestrated student protests, a number of rightwing government ministers accused of corruption fled the country. Then, on May 14, Vang Pao and about 2,500 other MR II leaders and their families were airlifted out of Long Tieng to Thailand. Soon after, the government was gradually taken over by the communist Pathet Lao, as infighting between the noncommunist elite in Laos made it easier for the Pathet Lao to take control.[34] In June and July, former government officials and military personnel began being sent away for various forms of political reeducation in different remote parts of the country. The harshest of these camps were located in Viangxay district, Houaphanh province, in the far northeast of Laos, but others were organized in Attapeu, Xepon, and elsewhere. Conditions were poor, and many succumbed during imprisonment. Others escaped; some were killed trying to. In August 1975, the king of Laos, Sisavang Vatthana, was pressured by the communists to resign from the throne, and on December 2, 1975 the Lao PDR was established, following the Vietnamese and Soviet political models. In 1977, the king and most of the rest of the royal family in Luang Prabang were arrested and sent to reeducation camps, where they all died owing to malnutrition and illness.

34 Ian G. Baird, "Elite Family Politics in Laos before 1975," *Critical Asian Studies* 53 (1) (2021), 22–44.

As the major political transformation occurred, large numbers of people began fleeing across the Mekong River to Thailand. Refugee camps were established there, and some refugees started being resettled in third countries, including the United States and France. Others, especially those previously in the FAR, started militarily resisting the Laos PDR government, some organizing military operations from the borderlands in Thailand. Others were based inside Laos. The Thai government particularly supported the Lao resistance against the Lao PDR government and their Vietnamese supporters, as the Thai government was fearful of a possible communist invasion.[35] The Chinese also provided military training and material support to some anti–Lao government resistance groups, especially after 1979, when the relationship between China and Vietnam deteriorated, with Laos supporting Vietnam. Some senior Lao PDR political figures, including Dr. Khamsengkeo Sengsathit and others, also decided to defect to China, where they advocated for political and military resistance against the Lao PDR government.

Initially, military resistance to the Lao PDR government was scattered and poorly organized. Over time, however, resistance increased. Various armed resistance groups emerged, including the neutralists politically led by General Kong Le, and the Hmong messianic group led by Zong Zoua Her and Pa Kao Her, officially named the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL) but commonly known as the Chao Fa.[36]

By the mid-1980s, however, the Lao National Liberation Front (LNLF) (known as the Neo Hom in Lao) became the most powerful resistance group, led by Vang Pao and General Thonglith Chokbengboun, and allied with Prince Sanprasith Na Champasak's resistance organization, which was based in Ubon Ratchathani province, in northeastern Thailand, and operated in the southern-most part of Laos, in the area that was part of Laos' MR IV. Around that same time, the Chinese stopped supporting the insurgency, including the ELOL and the neutralists, and in 1989 Chatchai Choonhavan, the new prime minister of Thailand, came to power. Unlike his predecessors, he promoted peace with Laos and Cambodia, and promoted the new "Battlefields

35 General Saiyud Kerdphol, personal communication, Bangkok, July 31, 2013.

36 Ian G. Baird, "Chao Fa Movies: The Transnational Production of Hmong American History and Identity," *Hmong Studies Journal* 15 (1) (2014), 1–24; Ian G. Baird, "The Monks and the Hmong: The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand," in Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (eds.), *Violent Buddhism – Buddhism and Militarism in Asia in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), 120–51.

to Market Places" policy. In the early 1990s this led to the gradual end of support from the Thais for the insurgency.

In the early 1990s, the last official refugee camps in Thailand were gradually closed, thus depriving the insurgency of the refugee population, a crucial source of support for its political and military activities. In the early 2000s, the only significant armed insurgency in Laos were Hmong groups in the mountains of the north. However, this resistance has heavily declined, especially since Vang Pao died in the United States in 2011. However, a few small groups of Hmong are still living in the mountainous forests of north–central Laos, where they continue to resist the Lao PDR government, with political support from the Congress of World Hmong Peoples, a US-based pro–Hmong State group based in Minnesota. However, the Hmong in the forests spend most of their time foraging for food and hiding from the Lao PDR military, as they have been greatly weakened compared to the past.

Conclusion

The conflict in Laos – and what preceded it and followed it – represents a tragedy for Laos and its people, regardless of what side of the political divide one was on. Those from all sides shed blood, and large numbers were displaced owing to military conflict or bombing. Large numbers of people were imprisoned or felt that they had no choice but to flee the country to Thailand after the Lao PDR was established in 1975, later settling in Western countries. The Secret War in Laos stretched for eleven years, between 1962 and 1973, but, as should be clear from this chapter, conflict actually raged, on and off, and to varying degrees in different parts of the country, for over fifty years, beginning in 1945.

For a short period, soon after John F. Kennedy became president of the United States, Laos attracted the interest of the mainstream US media, but since then it has never garnered the attention that the war in Vietnam did. However, there is no doubt that the war in Laos was a crucially important part of the broader conflict that engulfed mainland Southeast Asia, but one that has not received sufficient attention.