

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Joel M. Halpern

Spring 1964

Laos and America: A Retrospective View

Joel Halpern, *university of massachusetts, Amherst*

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By

BARBARA AND JOEL HALPERN



Reprinted from *The South Atlantic Quarterly*
Vol. LXIII, No. 2, Spring, 1964

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Barbara and Joel Halpern

The farmers in a certain section of the U.S. seemed implicitly to divide human beings into three categories: scenery, machinery, and people. In the first category they grouped Indians on the nearby reservation, who could be seen on a Sunday drive and from whom souvenirs could be bought. In the second category were migrant farm laborers who had to be maintained—fed, housed, and supervised. In the people category they placed neighbors, relatives, and friends with whom they socialized and went to church, and with whose children theirs went to school.

The peoples of Laos have been viewed by the Western world mostly as enchanting scenery and, more recently, as rather poor machinery. The French were early smitten with the human scenery, and in a travel account published in 1868 Henri Mouhot depicted the Lao as quiet, submissive, patient, temperate, trusting, credulous, superstitious, faithful, simple, and naïve. Needless to say, he declared the women beautiful. Auguste Pavie, the man most responsible for French colonization of Laos, found the capital of the Kingdom of Luang Prabang a delightful place in which to make his home for several years. Until the end of the French colonial period Laos continued to be regarded as a kind of Shangri-la remote from the problems of the world. In recent years journalists covering political crises have succumbed perhaps less to the charm than to the stereotype and have described the Lao as irresponsible and carefree. Human beings as ill-functioning machinery began to enter the picture during the 1960-1961 civil war. This was particularly true when the poor showing of the Royal Lao Army was attributed to their Buddhist faith or inclination to be carefree.

MRS. HALPERN, a lecturer, and MR. HALPERN, associate professor of anthropology at Brandeis University, were field representatives for the foreign aid program in northern Laos in 1957. The latter revisited Laos in 1959 as consultant to the RAND Corporation.

When Americans have thought about Laos it has been in terms of scenery or possibly machinery but not in terms of people, a classification which seems to require a fairly long period of reciprocal contact. The reifying of the social scientist is similar to the machine category, while photographs emphasize the scenery aspect. To know a particular person as an individual inhibits the scenery concept and makes more difficult the use of mechanical categories of classification. Around Luang Prabang, Meo tribesmen, with their red pompom-trimmed caps, heavy silver neck-rings, short indigo jackets, and bare torsos above flaring britches are superb subjects for photography, but after they began to visit our home and we learned to know them as individuals concerned with the education of their children and the marketing of their crops, they became individuals rather than curiosities. Witnessing a Lao administrator's grief at the death of his first child made it impossible to view him simply as a member of the rising elite who combined the desire to modernize his country with a continuing belief in the power of animistic spirits.

Scenery, both physical and human, abounds in Laos. Most captivating is that of the royal capital, which appears to incarnate much of traditional Lao society that has largely vanished in Vientiane and elsewhere. Approaching Luang Prabang from afar, by plane, road, or river, the most striking sight is the flashing gold spire of the Phou Si, a Buddhist shrine on top of the conical peak rising from the center of the peninsula that forms the town. One glimpses the Royal Palace through a screen of frangipani and flame-tree blossoms. The airborne visitor gains a full view of the royal city nestled on a finger of land at the confluence of the broad Mekong and the clearer waters of the Nam Khan, the embankments fringed with feathery bamboo groves and the valley rimmed by undulating blue-green mountains. Scarcely minutes away by air are scattered tribal villages on the mountain tops and slopes, amid scars of burned-over forest patches, and following the rivers, more Lao villages and rice fields tucked into pocket valleys. This is Laos in miniature, the town strings out along the river, with its sovereign, temples, and trade, the mountains and valleys beyond sheltering the peasants and tribesmen who form the majority of her people.

Luang Prabang can overwhelm the senses. There are the peri-

odic boom and tinkle of temple drums; the scent of joss sticks, jasmine, and open sewage; the sight of pagodas, each with its own community of monks. Some of the graceful temples are shabby, and their frescoes of Lord Buddha's incarnations are not among Asia's finest. Still, the eye is dazzled by sweeping roofs surmounted by Nagas, by the red and gold façades set with chips of blue glass mosaic, by the saffron robes of the bonzes spread to dry on blooming rose bushes in the temple courtyard, guarded by grimacing plaster lions and lichen-covered stone pillars.

At the time of the Lao New Year the pageantry is magnificent, the more so for being on so small a scale. There are parades of the half-dozen royal elephants, processions of monks led by the abbots borne on gilded palaquins, and the appearance of the king, in his cream-colored silk *sampot*, under the white parasol, symbol of the kingdom, followed by high officials in jewel-hued garments and accompanied by retainers waving ceremonial fans and by sword-bearers and drum-beaters in scarlet uniforms. All this harks to a fast-disappearing past. The Western-style royal band in its natty, oversize uniforms, with kepi military hats slipping low over Lao ears, bespeaks an ill-fitting present.

Remains of serrated potsherds and implements in the river bank near the Palace testify to thousands of years of history. The royal family's finely incised gold betel services recall a regal world of half a millennium ago. Today's kerosene tins for hauling water from the river and dugout canoes powered by outboard motors are not new as change, but they are new as universals. Rice cultivation, Buddhism, and the divine right of kings as cultural elements and complexes spread over large portions of the globe, but they never attained the universality of the internal combustion engine or paper currency.

A new Laotian synthesis is evolving on the old one of Indian, Chinese, and aboriginal influences. It is not a question of mechanical intermixing of parliamentary forms, communist ideology, constitutional monarchy, Buddhism, animism, irrigated rice culture, barter trade, handicrafts, and international politics, but of reshaping, redefining and shifting emphases. In a still fluid social and political situation, predictions for the future are risky, but a number of assumptions seem fairly safe. The United States' effort in Laos has been a failure. The question remains whether the failure is absolute

or partial. Unlike in many other countries such as Nationalist China, to cite the classic case, there has never been any real effort to create a positive public image either of Laos or the American program there. The sole efforts in this direction have been press releases of the State Department and the foreign aid program, the chief function of which appears to have been their use as straw men for journalists and Congressional critics of the aid program. The stories of corruption of the elite and basic failure of rural development programs, as well as the inability and lack of aggressiveness of the Royal Army, are familiar. But there are a number of matters relating to our failure in Laos as well as to possible lessons to be learned from this experience which have scarcely been mentioned in print.

The American role in Laos has been a very brief one, having begun after the Geneva Conference in 1954. American cultural impact on Laos has been superficial in the cultural sense but very great in the economic sense. In all phases of life, the American presence in the form of diplomatic functions, economic and military aid programs, and information activities has collided head-on with strongly entrenched French influence in these fields, in the cultural characteristics of the Lao elite themselves, all of whom received a French-sponsored education, and in the continuing physical presence of French advisors in almost all important government ministries, particularly during the late 1950's.

Up to 1959, official American foreign policy entertained some hope of building up Laos as an anti-Communist buffer under the protective umbrella of SEATO, although no one ever seriously considered it a defense bastion. But by the time of the Geneva Peace Conference in May, 1961, the United States, faced with a *de facto* Pathet Lao victory in much of the country, was advocating a neutral Laos.

Certain features have consistently characterized American policy in Laos, particularly as it pertained to economic assistance. Despite much talk about technical aid and a large number of projects in this field, the program had been primarily military until the failure of the Royal Lao troops in the field. Secondary emphasis was placed on the police and third on transportation projects. By comparison, the sums spent on education, health, agriculture, and community development were small. Even when significant rural aid projects have been undertaken, these have been directed by the

army. The main part of these efforts has consistently reflected the machinery aspects of human relations, and the spectacular failure of this program is too well known to need documentation here. More significant in retrospect is to understand why they were undertaken in the first place. Basically, they seem to represent a mechanical approach to complex social phenomena or, in times of crises, to rely on some of the tactics that were successful in winning World War II. Certainly the military aid program to Laos bears resemblance to its general ideological if not lineal ancestor, the lend-lease program of World War II. Also important were the assumed virtues of a consumer economy. However, when these concepts are removed from our own history and culture and applied not to a war in Europe, or to a highly industrialized economy which also places great value on work and achievement, but transferred to a predominantly subsistence and barter trade economy with Buddhist and animist religious systems, quite different results are achieved.

The use of Mercedes Benz automobiles by almost all high-ranking officials can be cited as an example of the corruption of the elite. This takes on special meaning for Laos if the Mercedes is contrasted with an elephant, the former having become the prerogative of the contemporary elite and the latter being the traditional one. A royal prince or high official riding on an elephant does not arouse envy or scorn. The elephant is the beloved symbol of the kingdom, integrated ritually into the life of the country. A parade of painted and garlanded elephants is a source of pleasure to all, while a Mercedes Benz can be a pleasure only to an individual and his family. Elephants move with dignity and, say the Lao, with grace. To tell a Lao young woman she walks like an elephant is a compliment, but "classy chassis" or its equivalent has no meaning in Lao culture. Riding slowly by atop an elephant, the individual has a chance to see and to be seen by the populace; driving past in a car he kicks up dust in people's faces. Elephants are secured through the hunt, and protection of the spirits is sought. Mercedes have been obtained through currency manipulations, or at best account juggling, and are the indirect largess of a foreign power. But what member of the present-day elite would prefer an elephant to an automobile? Cars were first introduced into Laos by the French and were the privilege of the highest colonial officials and

of the king. Therefore, although far from sacred, luxury automobiles have become a new status symbol, one that connotes not power but wealth and, more importantly, unearned and unsanctified wealth.

American policy in Laos may be characterized as simultaneously anticolonialist and anti-Communist in ideology, mechanical in planning, expedient in implementation and at the same time colonialist in method. Our own revolutionary tradition undoubtedly influenced the American government to take an idealized view of the Laotian state just emerging from colonialism. How else to explain America's initial distrust of and disgust with the French? Had the American diplomats and economic assistance personnel been willing to humble themselves, ask French advice, and consider continuing certain French policies, it is possible that the pride of our Gallic friends might not have been so greatly wounded and that, if not actively helping the American effort, they at least would not have tried to undermine it. But evidently the State Department representatives saw only a discredited colonial power. While there were undoubtedly some Lao elite who had grudges against the French, many of them, who considered themselves "children of the French peace (unlike the Vietnamese, who, if one follows out the analogy, considered themselves bastards of French colonialism)," might have willingly co-operated with such a policy. Instead, unlike the more realistic North Vietnamese who molded the Pathet Lao to their own ends, and the French who were now bereft of their power and so, also, of many of their illusions, the Americans engendered French hostility and then permitted many of the astute Lao elite to play them off against the French and also the Pathet Lao as an implied threat. Unfortunately too many of the elite were clever only from the point of view of amassing their own fortunes and not for building up their government. The American government permitted itself to be blackmailed by a series of Lao governments which were completely dependent on our aid program.

The Americans desired above all a viable Lao army, so the Lao politicians were able to dangle the loyalty of this army and its concept of anti-Communism over the heads of the Americans whenever the latter suggested currency reforms or other innovations. It might be thought that in a theoretical sense two anti-types of ideologies might coalesce into a single positive program, but as it worked

out they tended to nullify each other. When the anticolonialist ideology suggested reform, more often than not the anti-Communist ideology triumphed, the implication ironically being that reforms might lead to instability, possibly anarchy, and conceivably a Communist alternative, while stability—that is, support of the *status quo*—implied superficial anti-Communism, e.g., good traditional Buddhists cannot become Communists.

Simultaneously, a mechanically planned aid program of salaries in *kip* with dollar-financed imports to absorb the *kip* generated by salary payments resulted in undermining not only Buddhism but what was left of the traditional elite power structure as well. It is painfully evident that the institution of an expanding military and economic aid program progressively decreased whatever felt independence of action the elite may have had. In fact they became vassals of the Americans, but in public theory at least the Americans believed in anticolonialism, and hence the myth of Lao independence. Certain segments of the Lao elite, with a potential anarchy transmutable to Communism conceivably at hand, were able effectively to manipulate the Americans' fears. Both parties became involved in progressive self and mutual deception, albeit of different kinds. The Americans, while often covertly dissatisfied with the composition of various Lao governments, felt that there was little they could do within the ideological limits they had set themselves.

Part of the mechanical planning rested on this anticolonialist myth of Lao independence; thus the whole of the aid mission was there at the request, and the programs being undertaken on the initiative, of the Lao government. Not too much attention was paid, however, to the conflicting anticolonialist and anti-Communist ideologies in program implementation. These were the underlying implicit assumptions which were not often questioned, least of all by the people on the scene, especially those in the military and aid programs. Transferring implicit concepts from American domestic life and from the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe strained most energies in Washington and Laos. Things were brought in a pipeline to Laos in great numbers: army uniforms, rifles, small arms, trucks, jeeps, bulldozers, a power plant, tugs, galvanized roofing, and some medicines, among many other items. To keep things moving in a pipeline takes much effort. Papers must be

filled out and transmitted, and taxpayers' dollars must be justified to a reluctant Congress, which in past years has always been more amenable to military aid on a short basis than economic and technical aid over a longer period. In times of stress the capacity of the pipeline was increased: in 1959 and 1960 the American public was told that the crises in Laos were being met by stepping up arms shipments. These shipments had been sufficient in the past, during the Indochina War, to supply not only the French forces but, through capture, the Vietminh as well, so that in a number of actions in Laos both sides were reported to be using American equipment. This is not to say that equipment and salaries are not important to an army in waging war, but that more vital is a will to fight. To conceal this failure in approach it has been necessary to invent another myth about passive, Buddhist Lao who are not interested in fighting. This is a proposition that bears no relationship to the turbulent history of the area. At the same time, concepts of people as scenery have made self-deception easier.

This kind of planning has been evident in technical assistance programs as well, where funds must be committed for the present year and programmed for the next. The culmination of this process is the ritual exchange of smiles and handshakes for goods, ephemerally memorialized in news photographs and propaganda posters. Should the Communists consolidate their victories and American influence be eliminated from Laos, there will have been endless official smiles to cover the grave of lost American hopes. The most "materialistic" people on earth will have traded a small portion of our treasures for an evanescent anti-Communist *status quo* maintained through a few brief years. When Americans feel threatened they emphasize action and speed. Crash programs were set up, with hurried plans and symbolic results. In Laos the peasant was rediscovered, and rural development, "Civic Action," on a crash basis was rewarded by houses built but not lived in, movies shown but not understood, propaganda publications distributed to cover cracks on bamboo walls, prize chickens eaten but not bred, roads built but not maintained. Again the "materialists" were temporarily satisfied with fleeting symbolic acts.

This type of planning and action requires no knowledge beyond an implicit faith in one's own culture and its stereotyped view of another. For the believer in the ever constant jeep and airplane and

in the imperative to adopt variable nature to their needs, surveys of roads and airfield sites are necessary. Passive Buddhism and colorful, traditional, hungry, sick, illiterate rural people can be assumed to be forever constant if an idealistic view of the world is to be perpetuated. But jeeps do change social structures, education experts do affect religious value systems, and exchange rates do affect concepts of the future. In some cases even hindsight may be covered up with another myth to replace the one destroyed: flatter the Communists by attributing to their influence all unexpected changes.

It is possible to be colonialist in methodology and anticolonialist in ideology. Recognition of the concept of a free and independent Laos with a vision of its economic progress and institutional stability does not define how one shall live and work to bring this about. If speed, action, and recruitment are important, then colonialist methodology becomes imperative. If salary and living conditions are assumed to be major motivations, the recruitment to Little America becomes axiomatic. Little America provided housing segregated from that of the host country, frozen foods in a commissary, and exclusive community facilities. Action required those who, unlike almost all Lao of the mid-fifties, were familiar with the English language and American techniques. Just as the French used Vietnamese in Laos, so the Americans have had Chinese from Hong Kong as servants and engineers, Filipinos as architects and accountants, Thai from Bangkok as interpreters and warehousemen.

Have we learned in this small and in many ways marginal country anything which might be applicable elsewhere? Given the geographic relation of Laos to neighboring China and North Vietnam, was it possible for Laos to remain independent even with an enlightened American program if the steadfast intention of China and Vietnam was to subvert her? While definitive answers to these questions are not possible, we can envisage courses of action alternative to those that have been pursued. Possibly these might be helpful in planning programs in those countries which, in terms of ethnic diversity, economic underdevelopment, reliance on traditional power structures and on external assistance, share many features that have characterized Laos. A primary need is to conceptualize the future clearly. What type of government and social system do the local elite foresee a year, five years, or a decade or more hence?

To what extent do these aspirations accord with American aims and objectives? Is it possible to harmonize the two? A major problem obstructing the solution of issues of this nature was that faced by the American government in Laos, namely a traditional and basically conservative elite who opposed an active Communist organization. Should the United States support reform groups, as was covertly attempted in the case of a young elite reform group in Laos? It is possible that one of the factors contributing to failure was the lack of consistent and co-ordinated programs, particularly with regard to rural areas and minority problems. There was at least a fair chance that if long-range planning in these fields had begun in 1955 and 1956 some basis for resisting Pathet Lao infiltration in the countryside might have been established. Much of the talk in the United States has revolved around the amount of foreign aid, and there is ample indication that in the Laos case, especially in the military field, too much money was spent too heedlessly.

Part of the difficulty in an entrenched elite and the lack of alternatives is related to the matter of trained personnel. Sporadic attempts were made to train a few Lao in various fields in the United States and also to send others to Thailand and the Philippines for special study. The major fault with these programs was that too few were chosen and that they were sent for too short a time. Further, most of them were the sons or relatives of the elite. Had 1,000 students selected from the elite and at least an equal number from villages and tribal areas been sent for one, two, three, and four year courses of study, by 1960 there could have been a few hundred college graduates in engineering, education, agriculture, and medicine. The cost would have been at most a few million dollars a year, a fraction of the cost of military supplies (many of which decayed or rusted and were never used). Flexibility and knowledge are closely linked to long-range planning. One of the best ways of embarking on a long-range development program is to profit from the knowledge and institutions created by the former colonial power. (There is a danger in associating policy too closely with that of a former colonial power, but there is also the opposite hazard which occurred, at least initially, in Laos.)

Although various topographic surveys were undertaken in Laos, American officials consistently lacked any basic knowledge of rural

economies, tribal organizations, or even urban development. It is true that in theory it might be nice to depend on the local government for this information, but with Laos's lack of trained personnel much of this information was often unavailable to local authorities. Banking, tax, transportation, and geological consultants were employed by American agencies, but aside from a few superficial surveys at no time were any anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, human geographers, agricultural economists, or political scientists employed, much less consulted. American officials during their tenure in Laos in the 1950's were never precisely aware of the cultures of the tribal peoples, the languages they spoke, the role of the Buddhist pagoda in Lao village life or, for that matter, the traditional value system of the Lao. Nor were the responsible American officials during this critical period particularly interested in seeking any of this kind of information.

Knowledge alone will not insure success, no more than an understanding of Mao Tse Tung's tactics of guerrilla warfare based in rural areas prevented a repetition of the same developments in Vietnam and Laos. Intelligently trained diplomatic personnel with knowledge of the local language (Lao, not French) and a background in the history, customs, and traditions of the area are essential and will also help not only in securing information but in insuring its best utilization. This situation is changing, but even good, dedicated personnel are no substitute for leadership and a clearly conceived future program of action.

With regard to positive external policies, regional federations of local nations can also be very important, as can concerted programs of economic and technical assistance through the United Nations. As far as Laos is concerned, one of the most hopeful developments, although perhaps too late, has been the Mekong Development Plan, undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations, in which Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam share in a common program of development based on the Mekong basin. Furthering bonds with Thailand was a positive and significant policy of the American government in Laos, but, unfortunately, this policy never had time to bear fruit.

Without doubt many of these points are not practical in the sense that they actually could have been accomplished in Laos or can be easily accomplished in other areas. But failure is also im-

practical, in an even broader sense. It does not require great clairvoyance to predict that what happened in Laos will also occur, with local variations, in other countries unless the future is clearly conceived by American policy-makers and attempts are made to implement these conceptions either with existing governments or the emerging governments. Positive and dynamic ideologies must be evolved from living syntheses of local traditions and democratic Western political inheritances. Communist programs for development as evolved in North Vietnam and elsewhere are not inevitable since they depend on coercion, but an imaginatively conceived future is an indispensable prerequisite for effective counterpolicy. The Americans and their Lao associates succeeded in destroying the traditional bases for effective rule without any positive replacement. As long as such policies are continued the triumph of Communist-sponsored movements is indeed inevitable.

It is considered unfashionable to mourn the passing of the noble savage or the romantic past, a past which was pleasanter than the future in prospect. In Laos one can say that the greatest causes for change have been external. While military intrusions are not new in Lao history, French colonialism, followed by American presence in the economic and political senses, are characteristic developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as are, obviously, the motivating Communist philosophies of Laos' two northern neighbors. Neither the Lao nor the tribal peoples were much bothered by problems of land reform or famine, and although there have been social frictions these have been basically resolvable since Laos is an underpopulated country; so pressures for rapid social change cannot be considered internal. But even the external pressures are symptoms rather than basic causes: it is really the social imperatives arising from the worldwide diffusion of an industrial civilization that are causing vast changes in Laotian cultural patterns. Regardless of the outcome of the present politico-military struggle, many of the unique features of Lao civilization will disappear because they are no longer functional. We have museums for artifacts but none for traditions and value systems. Change is not new, but the progressive disappearance of unique ways of life is. While worldwide cultural uniformity does not appear imminent, the progressive elimination of small civilizations even though temporarily conceived of as modern independent national entities appears a

growing trend. Lao music, crafts, religious holidays, life crises rites, folk tales, and even behavior patterns and value systems will all be partially or completely obliterated in the not too distant future, and there is surely some cause for regret, aside from the purely sentimental.

It is conceivable that greater understanding of cultural processes in the future may enable us to plan how minor as well as major civilizations may be modified and certain desirable elements preserved by means of social engineering, hopefully democratic in nature. We are not inevitable absolute slaves of the culture process, in Laos or elsewhere—the Pathet Lao and their backers have done well in Laos not because of the inevitability of the acceptance of their ideology but because their concept of the future has not been effectively and comprehensively challenged. If we have learned anything of the cultural process or the evolution of civilizations it is that they change as wholes, not as parts. It is not possible to try to hold the religious and social sectors constant and innovate sporadically in the economic and military. Herein lies the basic cause of the failure of the West in Laos. The continued use of conventional diplomacy and economics will, of necessity, result in future failures for the West. Time is on the side of those who broadly conceptualize change. In Laos the Pathet Lao and their backers have pre-empted the field by default.