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From the Selected Works of Joel M. Halpern

Spring May 20, 1961

American Policy in Laos

Joel Halpern, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



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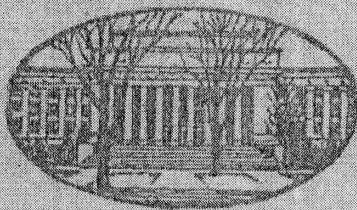
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OF THE

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FRANK E. ROBBINS, *Editor*

RUTH W. GJELSNESS, *Assistant Editor*

Spring • 1961

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AMERICAN POLICY IN LAOS

BY JOEL M. HALPERN

DURING the past year the newspapers have carried continuous dispatches concerning the future of the kingdom of Laos and attempts by the American government to prevent the small Southeast Asian country from becoming a Communist state.

Most Americans who think beyond the headlines are hindered by conflicting stereotypes which have received wide currency in recent years. On the one hand, many politicians are fond of referring to the way we "lost" China or allowed North Vietnam to "slip behind the Bamboo Curtain"; on the other we have reporters' pictures of the incompetent and high-living American diplomat and technician. Both these ethnocentric images implicitly assume our ability to dominate or at least manipulate other countries. Seldom do we ask ourselves if they were ever ours to lose.

In Laos, where our extensive military aid has received much publicity, little is known about the effects of American programs and policies on established Lao values. It is possible to learn from failures as well as successes, and in this respect the past history of American aid and information programs in Laos can be very revealing.

In our Autumn, 1960, issue, JOEL M. HALPERN, A.B. '50, discussed the various and sometimes conflicting elements of the population of Laos, a country which he has twice visited on governmental missions. His second article on Laotian affairs deals with our own programs of assistance to that small southeast Asian country. Dr. Halpern's degree of Ph.D. (in anthropology) was attained, in 1956, after graduate study at Columbia University, and he is now Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles.

BUDDHISM in Laos might at first be considered marginal to American interests, and more particularly to planning in the diplomatic and economic-aid fields. This point of view could be accepted if our interests in Southeast Asia were narrowly defined. On the contrary, very broad aims have been expressed in public-policy declarations in which the United States committed itself to maintaining Laos' independence and freedom from Communist control. Many of our difficulties have come about because the implementation of these goals has been too narrowly interpreted. In order to accomplish broad aims which encompass the whole of the society and culture, interest has often been shown only in terms of formal diplomatic procedures, military aid, information activities, and certain fields of economic and technical assistance. Their effect on the total way of life in Laos has not been considered. Our government's activities have touched all aspects of Lao culture, including religion.

Hinayana Buddhism has had a history of approximately one thousand years in Laos. Since Christianity has made relatively few inroads, the Buddhism of the valley Lao is without question the dominant religion of the kingdom. The Lao constitution specifies that the King must be a dedicated Buddhist. Monks participate in almost all official ceremonies, and government officials pay homage to them on state occasions and in many private ways as well. In most villages the abbot of the *wat* (pagoda) is the most respected figure in the community.

The relationship between Buddhism and

American programs and policy in Laos can be most clearly seen if we look at the ways in which American agencies have come into direct contact with the monks, have incorporated references to Buddhism in their programs, or have indirectly affected the priesthood. An interesting side effect has been caused in large measure by the United States military-aid program and to a lesser extent by the economic-aid mission's police program. Formerly, most Lao young men became novices or monks for periods ranging from several months to several years, and in many cases completed their education in the pagoda. Becoming a monk was a way of paying a spiritual debt to one's parents and achieving status within the community; this applied both to villagers and to townsmen. Within the last few years many jobs have opened up in both the Army and the police department. They pay the average Lao extremely well; the uniforms and work are glamorous, and in addition the jobs provide extra sources of income, either through obtaining supplies or by straight graft (although the latter opportunities are certainly not universal). As one village abbot expressed it, "Our young men would rather become policemen than monks and now value money more than honor." This may be something of an exaggeration. It is not only the monks who are affected. A school administrator remarked, "When it comes time to look for a job, the most intelligent young men first go to the Army, then to the police, and only after they have been refused work in government offices do they come to us as a last resort." Military aid seems to have weakened the traditional moral system without offering a positive alternative.

TWO AMERICAN programs more directly involved with the priesthood are the Information Service and the Community Development Division of the aid mission. The United States Information Service (U.S.I.S.), recognizing the fact

that the monks constitute a significant and respected element in the community and that the average citizen has great respect for them and for Buddhism, has approached this problem in two ways. Of these, the use of what might be called Buddhist type propaganda on a large scale is less important. This includes printed materials, exhibits and films, many of which appeared in honor of the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of Buddhism. One exhibit dealt with Buddhist art in the United States, and a special issue of the U.S.I.S. magazine, *Free World*, issued in the Lao language, portrayed some of the holy shrines of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and concluded with a description of Buddhists in the United States. Lao newsreels produced under the auspices of U.S.I.S. have dealt with various religious ceremonies.

Since few surveys have been made, it is difficult to judge the impact of this propaganda. On the basis of a number of casual conversations with villagers, monks, and townspeople, it is possible to infer that the materials and films were favorably received, although they were not necessarily associated with United States objectives. An abbot at one *vat* handed some U.S.I.S. Buddhist booklets to a visitor, at the same time telling him in very strong terms how the Americans were ruining his country by corrupting the people.

More direct in their impact have been English-language teaching programs among the monks. Several have been sent to the United States for advanced study. The U.S.I.S. has also assisted the priesthood in producing newspapers and other publications. The Asia Foundation, a private agency, has subsidized the publication of books (the U.S.I.S. cannot directly aid in the production of religious materials) and employed technicians to assist in the reconstruction of pagodas. It is natural to assume that a monk who wants to learn English, and particularly one who asks Americans to give him lessons, is favor-

ably inclined toward the United States on a personal level, although he might not be in agreement with all our government policies.

A SAFFRON-ROBED, shorn monk will approach an American visitor to a pagoda and smilingly ask him in English, "How do you like our country?" After indulging in the usual courtesies and recovering from his surprise, the visitor may ask, "Where did you learn your English?" When told that a particular person associated with U.S.I.S. had been teaching him, the visitor might tend to go away thinking that the monks were, if not pro-American, certainly not anti-American. This feeling would be reinforced on observing U.S.I.S. posters tacked on the walls of their living quarters and seeing them enjoy U.S.I.S. films at festivals given in honor of the pagoda.

However, a few days later the American visitor might be more than a little surprised to see the same monk warmly receiving a Communist Pathet Lao leader and listening to him relate his heroic adventures in the jungle. The Communist presents his life as one of sacrifice and self-denial for a noble end, arousing sympathy in his priestly audience, who links his efforts to the ascetic tradition of Buddhism. The Pathet Lao representative contrasts himself, a poor man, with the rich officials who are linked to the American imperialists. Among monks and townspeople, as well as villagers, the Pathet Lao are often known as the People of the Forest.

Language can be used as a technique only, the culture associated with it ignored or even reviled. The North Vietnamese government publishes more English-language propaganda materials than does South Vietnam. According to recent visitors to Red China, English is still used as the language of instruction in certain schools, such as that of medicine in Peking, because of established tradition and the difficulties

inherent in switching over to Russian.

When asked by a non-Westerner why he was studying English, a Buddhist monk replied, "To get a good government job after I leave the priesthood." This seems far removed from the concept of monastic life in our own culture. Buddhist monks, however, remain in the priesthood only as long as they wish to, and the pagoda training is used by some as a kind of inexpensive boarding school. Some are even rather aggressive in requesting special instruction in English-language training.

How has this desire for a government job been reconciled with a pro-Pathet Lao attitude and one which is hostile to the nominally pro-Western government? Those Lao who have thought about this question said, "I will work with this government until its leadership changes," or "With increased education I may obtain a more favored position with a new (pro-Communist) government." This position has been particularly prevalent among the younger monks in the larger centers such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

ON THE SUBJECT of village aid, which might be interpreted as meaning the focusing of certain government services on the village—agricultural extension, public health, rural education, and the provision of appropriate equipment and experts when called for—even in a country with as rudimentary a government structure as Laos there are established Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Education. However, on the provincial, district, and village levels there has arisen a real problem of coordination, especially since there is an acute scarcity of trained personnel. The problem is widespread in newly independent countries which are suddenly confronted with the political and economic implications of rural isolation and poverty. Partly with the advice of American experts in rural extension services, the government

of India set up a Ministry of Community Development to direct a nationwide program of coordinated village aid. India's pattern has been widely copied. Several years ago, American aid officials began to send Lao personnel to India to observe these programs. In 1958 a Bureau for Village Development was set up in the Lao Ministry of Social Affairs, and in 1959 was allocated a modest budget to aid village development by participating in the financing of projects such as road building, well digging, and the construction of other village facilities. These funds were to be dispensed by regional committees composed of the heads of all the provincial departments, with the Governor as chairman.

Prior to the establishment of this organization, the government had concentrated much of its effort on Civic Action, a crash-type program modeled on a similar organization in Vietnam, which was active in resettling refugees from the North when the Republic of South Vietnam was created at the end of the Indochina War. Led by a Lao army colonel and financially supported by United States military and economic aid agencies, groups of young men, mostly soldiers, were selected for six-week courses designed to make them "experts" in education, agriculture, health, and propaganda. Then they were sent out into the field to work in the villages, giving advice and instruction, distributing medicine and agricultural equipment, and showing films. This program was subsequently abandoned.

In 1959 the Army, with backing from the American military liaison group, prepared another rural development program to be administered by "Teams of Six." The ultimate objective was to have a team operating in every one of the six hundred districts in the kingdom. These teams were similar in composition to those of the Civic Action program, and were under the command of a colonel in the psychological warfare branch of the Lao Army. The training of personnel was variable, rang-

ing from a few weeks to several months. The teams were to reside permanently in the particular district to which they were assigned.

AT THE same time the different technical ministries of the Lao government had their own programs for village development and so have not been enthusiastic supporters of this Army program. This is particularly true since the latter were relatively well supplied with funds, while the ministries had constantly to scale down their own projects. The technical ministries were also severely limited by lack of personnel available for rural projects. In the Health Ministry, they were occupied with running the hospitals in the provincial capitals. The Agriculture Ministry had only a few people with any degree of technical training above high-school level. The Education Ministry had the largest number of trained personnel in direct contact with the villages.

In 1956-57 there was a program under which a number of village teachers, paid with American aid funds, were directed to devote half the day to teaching and the other half to instructing the children in carpentry techniques, gardening methods, and health practices. This program was eventually dropped.

In 1959 a Belgian UNESCO expert, associated with the Ministry of Education, established a center staffed with Lao personnel trained at the UNESCO Fundamental Education Center in Thailand. Other village-aid programs included the work of Operation Brotherhood, a Philippine medical group which attempted some public health work. The American International Voluntary Services team, in Xieng Khouang, had a public health nurse and also did work in agricultural education. Not all these small programs were in direct competition, of course, since they tended to operate in different parts of the country. The work of the military, however, posed a problem for

~~The American personnel were all away, but several~~
activities. There were also conflicts among American personnel and offices, corresponding to frictions within the Lao government, since the expert understandably tends to associate himself with the agency with which he has direct contact. Like most activities of the Lao government, the above programs were financed largely or exclusively with American funds.

CIVIC ACTION was intended to make an immediate impact on the villagers, showing the people in a dramatic way that their government had a real interest in their welfare and in bettering their living conditions. In one case, a Civic Action team went to a village and put up a row of houses; after their departure the villagers were asked their reaction. They replied that the work of the government officials had nothing to do with them, for they were not told about the team's mission. When asked if they would use the houses, they said they already had good homes of their own, and even in case of need they would prefer to build their own homes, since those put up by Civic Action were poorly constructed.

A visit to a Civic Action model village about twenty miles from Vientiane was revealing. On the main road a brightly lettered sign pointed to the village, and after turning off to the village trail the traveler was inspired every few kilometers by further signs. Arriving in the village, he found that an attempt had been made to pave the lanes. There were also street signs, but during the rainy season these efforts had been largely obliterated. The model section consisted of a neatly fenced compound at the edge of the village. Inside the enclosure were a new concrete well, a school, a hall, and first-aid station, plus living quarters for the Civic Action personnel. A flower and vegetable garden was included in the compound.

On the day of my visit, the Civic Ac-

of the village elders were happy to chat about the project. They said they were not consulted about the location of the new facilities nor did they request them. The man who owns the land on which the new buildings were erected was informed that if the project proved a success he would be paid in a few years; otherwise, the land would be returned to him. The villagers do use the new concrete well, but there exists the sentiment that the original well on the property had been taken away from its owner and that the new well does not belong to anyone. The village children use the school, but the people are talking about erecting their "own" nearer the pagoda. All the buildings in the compound were constructed by hired labor imported for the occasion from Vientiane. The villagers expressed interest in having a permanent nurse assigned to them. When asked what kind of project they would consider most important to them, they replied that a good road linking their community with the main road was something they all desired.

Other Civic Action activities included courses of approximately one month's duration for all county (*muong*) chiefs, after which they were allowed to spend brief periods in other parts of the country in order to gain some perspective on their own local problem. There have also been conferences of the provincial governors. Less intensive courses have been given to district and village chiefs (*tassongs* and *nai bans*) in certain provincial centers. The *tassongs* are locally elected while the county administrators (*chao muongs*) are appointed by the central government and are part of the Lao civil service. In any case, because of the change of programs, these courses were not continued.

CONTINUITY, which is extremely important from the point of view of the villagers and the Lao officials, was lacking in all these programs. When I traveled up-

stream on the Mekong River as the representative of the American aid mission in northern Laos, I was asked at many villages why the school teachers had not received vegetable seeds as they had the previous year. It was hard to explain to them that that had been a "one-shot affair," and that if the seed project were reinstated it would be under the agricultural division of U.S.O.M., not the education division, which made the original distribution. In all fairness to the American aid personnel and to the Lao government, consistent planning is difficult, since it varies from year to year depending on fluctuating Congressional appropriations. This system is also rather wasteful.

Programs such as Civic Action, the Teams of Six, and others, where the free distribution of commodities plays a large role, have put many well-meaning Lao government and American aid officials in the position of traveling around the countryside and asking the villagers what kind of assistance they would like to have. Since this commodity assistance was paid for almost entirely by American aid funds, it aroused in the villagers high expectations which their government could not readily fulfill and put the villagers in the position of receiving charity.

ALTHOUGH it was not our aid mission's announced intention, a significant result has been to make Vientiane a much more attractive place in which to live, from the point of view of the average government official. At the same time, conditions in the villages have remained basically unchanged. Since the beginning of the American aid program, Vientiane has blossomed forth with air-conditioned movies with cinemascope screens, pastry shops, night clubs with taxi dancers imported from Hong Kong and Saigon, many new restaurants, a startling increase in the number of automobiles, to say nothing of improved educational and hospital facilities. Many

of these innovations might appear rather primitive or even pathetic to the sophisticated westerner, but to a Lao official with six years of education, who at most may have had a trip to Bangkok or Saigon, these developments have great appeal. Certainly they are much more enticing than anything the provincial towns have to offer, and infinitely more than can be found in an average village of Laos, which most likely is reached by trail and has neither electricity nor radio.

Such a situation is by no means unique to Laos. But the problem is acute there, where in many areas contact with the central government exists in name only. For example, in the setting up of the Fundamental Education Center, the teachers who were trained in Thailand showed a positive distaste for living in villages on a permanent basis. As a result, their center was established on the edge of Vientiane rather than in a village area removed from the capital, as was desired by the UNESCO expert. In the course of their travels, several of the students had managed to acquire automobiles, which operate quite well on the streets of Vientiane but which would do poorly on muddy village roads.

SOME American officials have cited the increasing prevalence of cars and bicycles as a sign of economic advancement. Compared to other countries of Asia, and even certain countries in Europe, automobiles are much more common among Lao officials of the higher and middle ranks. Thus, almost every Minister and department head has a Mercedes Benz and some have several. It is quite true that no American agency has officially furnished expensive civilian automobiles to Lao government officials, but almost all have come in as by-products of our subsidization of the Army and the general economy of Laos. All the gasoline necessary to run them is imported.

A great deal of construction of homes,

office buildings, hotels, and stores has occurred in Vientiane from 1956 to 1960. To service these new buildings the American aid mission has installed a diesel-operated power plant which replaced an earlier charcoal-operated one. Undoubtedly, a certain growth of Vientiane was inevitable in the development of Laos as a national state, but to a large extent the boom was artificial, based as it has been almost entirely on outside aid.

Resentment has been strong among the rural population, and I was asked any number of times, "Why is it that you Americans give all your money to the rich people who live in town and never think of us?" This issue has been exploited by

the Pathet Lao in election campaigns, and is perhaps one of the reasons why so many of their candidates won large majorities in the 1958 election.

Perhaps the most crucial factor has been that the living standards of the officials, particularly those in the upper echelons, have greatly increased while the living standards in the countryside have remained just as low, thus increasing the gap between the elite and their fellow countrymen, although the living standards of the former are still quite simple by European, and particularly American, standards. The political implications of this widening gap have been readily apparent during the past year.

ROBERT FROST AT CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND

There was a certain twinkling in your eyes
Which presaged merriment or some surprise
For us, who'd thought a poet on a page
Could these days never prove to be a sage.
But then beneath the irony and mirth
Was something that was deep, that probed the birth
Of things you looked upon, a lofty star
Or woodland drowned in snow. Some things there are
That speak to you, ordinary things that we
Would never notice quite enough to see
Through them to the heart. You that have this sight,
(For you have been acquainted with the night),
You show us where the secrets sit complete.
You dance upon the swords beneath your feet.

JOHN DIXON HUNT