Summer July, 1959

Economic Development and American Aid in Laos

Joel Halpern

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Economic Development and American Aid in Laos

Reprinted from Practical Anthropology
Vol. 6, No. 4, July-August 1959
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Economic Development and American Aid in Laos

Joel Martin Halpern

American economic aid to other countries would not, at first glance, seem to fit within the purposes and scope of PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. A reading of the following article, however, may help the American who is concerned primarily about his Christian witness among peoples of other cultures to see himself more clearly. Certainly the major characteristics of "Little America" described here have their counterparts in Christian mission programs, though most observers would feel that Christian missions, for all of their serious cultural oversights, have not been quite so superficial as the U.S. economic aid program. Although the following discussion is written from the viewpoint of a cultural anthropologist utilizing the traditional participant-observer technique, the motivation in preparing it is less anthropological than it is to present the ideas of an interested citizen.

Much that has been written about the foreign aid program can be classified as destructive, since few positive suggestions have been offered. The author firmly believes that some type of aid program is essential but that certain changes in current policies are indicated. The intention here is to offer constructive criticism. Many of the points raised have doubtless previously been made for other areas, here the objective is to provide documentary material based on the situation in Laos. 1

The Kingdom of Laos 2 shares with a few other newly independent countries an almost complete reliance on foreign aid. Natural resources do exist, but they are largely unsurveyed and undeveloped. Because of a rugged terrain and poor transportation facilities, Laos is unable to support her growing urban population without imports. For the present and an indefinite future she will remain dependent on some form of outside aid. Currently this aid comes from the West, chiefly from the United States. This situation is far from stable, for in recent elections Communist-dominated parties have made considerable progress. An offer of Communist Chinese financial assistance has also been made. It would not seem too unlikely that Laos may one day

1 This article is a cultural anthropologist's personal viewpoint. The author would appreciate comments from the reader.

2 Laos is a landlocked country of Southeast Asia bounded by China, Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Its recent independence from French control puts it in a very critical transition period economically and in other aspects of its culture. See William A. Smalley, "The Gospel and the Cultures of Laos," PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 3, No. 3 (May-June 1956), pp. 47-57.
day come to terms with her giant neighbor to the north.

Viewed in this context, an analysis of the American aid program takes on increased importance. It is not the intention here to discuss the United States Operations Mission to Laos in relation to Laos' political situation. Although political and economic factors can be as significant as cultural ones, this paper focuses on the latter, which have been largely ignored. Such matters as details of politics, urban economic development, and military assistance are clearly outside the scope of this paper, which has its central focus on the Laotian villager.

Although the country is governed almost exclusively by a French-educated aristocratic intelligentsia, the ninety percent or more of the rural population cannot be ignored, and the primary purpose of this article is to discuss the aid program as it has affected or failed to affect the villager.

Because of the extreme conditions in Laos, many of the general problems confronting American aid programs are exaggerated here, making them stand out in sharper perspective. Perhaps some of the following comments may apply, however, with modifications, to other parts of the world.

The Americans and the Aid Mission

Many reports have been written on the American aid program in Laos. Most of these have gone into great detail in describing the organization and administration of special projects, particularly the one relating to the import program and currency reform. These matters are doubtless of great importance, but we will be concerned with their actual operation only indirectly; our main interest here is a problem that to date has been pretty well ignored—the interaction of American and Laotian life and culture in the rural environment. Since Laos is an independent country, the aid must go through the government before it can reach the rural population. Further, since the aid originates with the American government and is implemented only through individual Americans, their ideas and preconceptions are obviously of great importance.

Before the Vietminh War few Americans had visited the country and almost none had lived there aside from a few resident missionaries. Yet in 1957 there were approximately 200 American officials and their families residing in Vientiane and a few in the provinces. Some of these were career diplomats with long overseas service records; the majority, however, were associated with the Aid Mission, and for most of them it was the first time they had been outside North America. Some may wonder if these individuals received any preparation to face a culture and way of life so radically different from their own. The answer is that aside from a brochure which specified that the climate was tropical and suggested proper clothing, there was virtually none. Most of the aid personnel were put through an orientation course in Washington, but this was limited almost entirely to personnel procedures, health matters, and the proper ways in which to fill out forms.

A few attempts were made to indicate that the country to which the person was going was unlike his own, but the tone for the orientation meetings was set in a planning session at which technicians were asked to devise a program in their fields for "Country X." Facts on physical geography and general economy were provided, yet nothing was said about the country's history, traditions, ethnic problems, or values—in short what the anthropologist calls culture. The basic assumptions appear to have been that it is only the economic facts which need be considered in the planning of an aid program.

It is impossible to control the geographic climate of the country to which the new personnel is being sent; the cultural climate can be controlled, however, at least in part. Thus, although it is necessary to bring tropical clothing and to take certain health precautions, it is evidently not felt necessary to bring new ideas or to be aware of a different way of life. A key factor in creating a controlled cultural climate is to assemble the accoutrements which comprise a basic part of American material culture. It is, of course, possible to restrict one's own mental climate without any material possessions to reinforce it. Many foreigners have "never left home" mentally, even though they may have adopted some of the day-to-day living habits of the country of residence. The process of nonadaptation is obviously much easier.

Little America

These material accessories and accompanying attitudes present in American culture, when transplanted, form the framework for a Little America overseas. Although Little America basically reflects a state of mind, some of its material manifestations are most easily defined under some basic categories such as clothing, shelter, food, earning a living, and recreation. Then, too, how do Americans compare to other resident Europeans such as the French? How do they relate to the Laotian environment?

4 As used in this discussion, Little America may be defined as the intellectual culture of official American government personnel residing in Vientiane, Laos, in 1957. It also includes the various American material imports which have made possible to a significant extent a way of life fundamentally similar to that of a middle-class government worker in Washington, D.C.
Clothing, as might be expected, originates in America. In the matter of wearing apparel the Americans are not too different from the French and the urban Lao male officials who commonly dress in Western clothing. This is true to a certain extent in rural areas as well. Of course, the cut and styling of American clothing is always readily distinguishable.

Housing is another story. One could not expect to see Westerners living in Lao-style bamboo and thatch dwellings, especially since most ranking Lao officials in Vientiane reside in Western-style French villas. The French have similar housing, varying with their status. They have one or two compounds providing housing for military advisory personnel, and the other French, both official and unofficial, are scattered throughout the town. American housing is characterized by barbed wire compounds. Although a few Americans do live in different parts of Vientiane, the overwhelming majority reside within three compounds. They are segregated according to agency: one houses American Embassy and Information Service personnel, and the other two are for Aid Mission employees. These three compounds differ in type of housing. The former is composed of prefabricated aluminum units with air-conditioning. The main Aid Mission compound consists of modified Lao-style bungalows on concrete piles, plus one motel-type structure. In this compound are also located the barracks which serve as office building. The newest and most highly desired housing consists of American ranch-style homes modified for tropical conditions, complete with adjoining breezeway, driveways, and lawns. This community is located several miles outside of town, necessitating special taxi service. In all compounds furniture is of western style made in Bangkok or occasionally shipped from America.

To a limited extent some Americans (usually their servants) buy certain food in the local market. The greater part of the food they consume, however, originates in the American commissary situated within the main compound. Almost all its stocks, including canned and frozen food, come from the United States. Special American-type perishable foods such as baked goods are imported from Bangkok. In addition, a restaurant serving only American food functions within this compound.

As to earning a living, almost all Americans with the aid program work within the confines of their main compound. The Mission, headed by a director and a deputy director, is divided into several sections. One includes specialized technicians in the fields of education, health, agriculture, public works and community development. The second, dealing with program planning, designs the overall aid plan and negotiates agreements with the government of Laos. The third section is largely devoted to maintaining the other Americans in their offices and supplying them with food and housing; employees in this section include among others a personnel officer, controller, and warehouse supervisor. The Americans have also imported so-called third country nationals to assist them in various phases of their work, since almost all Lao outside of the government ministries lack the necessary technical and educational qualifications. For example, there are Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, and Filipinos who function as bookkeepers, mechanics, and interpreters. Laotians are employed only as chauffeurs, cooks, and cleaning women.

Little America is of sufficient proportions that it is occupied largely in maintaining itself. That is, most day-to-day contacts are among Americans and third-country nationals. Actual degree of contact with Lao officials varies from almost none in the executive division of the Aid Mission to occasional daily or weekly contacts in the technical divisions. The most meaningful contacts, in terms of importance to the American personnel, are those within the Mission and not with officials of the host country, to say nothing of those with Lao villagers. Perhaps a significant reason for this is the large amount of correspondence with Washington necessary on all matters ranging from the trivial to the policy-making level. A good deal of this business is caused by the fact that a new program must be planned every year, in accordance with varying Congressional appropriations. There is also considerable correspondence on organizational and other matters within the Mission itself. The foci of Mission paperwork is illustrated by the constant stream of mimeographed notices issued for the information of all personnel. These refer to such matters as personnel policies, commissary hours, recreational activities for Americans, requisitioning of supplies, and administrative procedures. During 1957 there was not one notice which dealt directly with the Lao or with our objectives in that country.

Government offices in Laos operate from approximately seven o'clock in the morning until two in the afternoon six days a week, while the Americans follow the standard five-day, forty-hour week, with all statewide holidays. In accordance with diplomatic custom, major Lao holidays are also observed.

Outside Contacts

Where contact is necessary with Lao officials, it is made difficult by the linguistic barrier. Of all the Americans stationed in Laos in 1957 a very few spoke French fluently and only a few had sufficient knowledge of the language to conduct even a limited conversation in it. Within the Aid Mission, among the various technical divisions there was but one American who spoke fluent French. To help the aid personnel a number of other Americans were employed as “interpreters,” their qualification being a knowledge of French—none of them spoke Lao. Among all Aid Mission, Embassy, and other American personnel one was moderately fluent in Lao and three others had some knowledge of it.

Religious and recreation patterns are almost exclusively American in content and take place within the American community. Those who attend church do so at the Protestant or Catholic churches maintained by local American and French missionaries. As for entertaining, those
few Americans who invite Lao to their homes are the exception. Most visiting is done among the American community. Additional diversions are provided by weekly imported American movies shown in a recreation hall located in the Aid Mission compound, a bingo night, and Sunday evening buffet dinners at the restaurant. A special recreation committee was in 1957 considering the building of tennis courts and a swimming pool exclusively for the use of American personnel. That same year a small lending library was in operation, and an American Women's Club of Vientiane ran a thrift shop to help local charities. The club also heard speakers on such topics as local history and Lao village life.

The basic concern of the Aid Mission was with goods and materials rather than ideas, with equipment rather than training. Countless jeeps, elaborate road-grading equipment, trucks, fire engines, sprayers, electric generators, and outboard motors were among the materials presented to the government at specially organized ceremonies. A few scattered attempts were made to train Laotians in the use of this equipment, with varying degrees of success. Most of these efforts were limited to one- or two-week courses.

Information Service Activities

Although the program of the United States Information Service cannot be classified as technical assistance, its basic objectives are the same as those of the Aid Mission, and one of its chief purposes is to give publicity to the latter's accomplishments. Because of the lack of development of government facilities in Laos, USIS also assists the Lao Information Service in informing the people of Laos about their country and government. Dealing as it does with both urban and rural peoples, the activities of the American Information Service will be briefly discussed here.

In the absence of radios in Lao villages, the Information Service pursued its 1957 program by two principal means—publications and films. The printed materials, issued in large quantities, were relatively efficiently distributed to Lao villages throughout the country. A much smaller amount found its way to tribal villages. A colored lithograph of the King is felt by some Lao to be endowed with magical qualities and is highly valued. Greatly appreciated by teachers and school children is a large colored map of Laos in the Lao language. Some villagers, however, had difficulty in understanding the concept of a map, but once it was explained to them their interest was aroused. This was particularly true of the Meo. When given these maps along with an explanation locating the principal towns, the Mekong and the area of their own village, even the majority who were illiterate in Lao were fascinated by them. An elementary Lao primer issued by the Information Service is used in all schools as well as in many wats (Buddhist pagoda compounds) where Lao was taught. Copies of a magazine on Buddhism in Southeast Asia, which contains photographs of American Buddhists and Buddhist art in the United States, are warmly received by Buddhist priests and laity. These varied publications on Laos in Lao are


50% of the French countryside, captioned in French, distributed by that country's Information service and found in many rural schoolrooms.

The mere use of the local language in publications does not, however, ensure understanding. Maps of the United States, booklets on the life of Benjamin Franklin, a poster of the flags of the United Nations, a chart of the organization of SEATO, or a photo-sheet of a Lao Embassy reception in Washington, although seen frequently on the bamboo walls of village dwellings, do not have too much meaning to people whose schooling is limited to religious education at the wat or a few years under a teacher who himself may have only six years of education. Newspapers do not exist outside the towns, and radios are infrequent even in urban areas. Photographs of Admiral Radford visiting Vientiane, the administrative capital, cannot signify much to people who think that American is the personal name of a missionary family.

It does not take any intellectual sophistication to enjoy a movie, any movie. Lao villagers give the same rapt attention to Information Service films that many Americans accord their television screens. A Lao movie audience squats in a circle around the semi-transparent picture screen, viewing it from both sides. Thus many rural Lao see for the first time in their lives the elaborate ceremonies and festivals which take place in their royal capital. They see their King and Crown Prince, the Lao army on parade, and neighbors in Thailand raising prize farm animals at agricultural demonstration centers. These films are accompanied by a Lao sound-track.

Drama is provided in a film called "The People Win Through," written by Burma's Prime Minister U Nu and dealing with a fight against local Communists. At some of these film showings interest is stimulated by the singing introduction in Lao rendered by an Information Service projectionist.

Films of any type are welcomed in villages which have few means of recreation outside of the annual cycle of holidays and crisis rites. Sometimes Information Service films are requested by village headmen to help create a carnival atmosphere at traditional festivals called bouns. They are shown next to the outdoor platform on which Lao couples are dancing the lam vong8 with the loud-speakers blaring forth modern Thai music.

A Look at the Aid Program

The most important aid program activity, in terms of effect on the rural population, is the one under which various types of consumer goods are imported into the country. This activity is described in a Mission publication summarizing the operation of the aid program:

The Lao Government does not earn enough money to pay the salaries of the soldiers, policemen, teachers, and civil servants it needs.

8 These bouns occur in villages near the larger towns and would not be seen in more remote areas. The lam vong is a dance imported from Thailand, in which men and women move slowly in concentric circles with out touching. The dancers move their arms gracefully in motion reminiscent of some of the movements in classical Thai dancing.

The United States has decided to help, not by paying these people dollars, but by providing dollar aid in the form of military assistance, which the Lao Government provides kip at the rate of 35 to one. This kip is then used to pay the salaries of soldiers and policemen and others. The salaries are spent, the kip thus made available to business men can be deposited with the Lao National Bank and dollar credits made available for purchase of the needed imports.

And so, U.S. aid is put to a double purpose—first it is used to defray expenses of Lao Government soldiers, policemen, and other civil servants; then the same money is used again to bring to Laos all those goods which are increasing the economic capacity of the country and making life more worth living for all the people.

These immediate objectives agree with the broader, long-range view stated by President Eisenhower in a speech early in 1957 and quoted in the same publication:

> With other free nations, we should vigorously prosecute measures that will promote mutual strength, prosperity, and welfare within the free world. Strength is essentially a product of economic health and social well being. Consequently, even though we continue our programs of military assistance, we must emphasize aid to our friends in building more productive economies and in better satisfying the natural demands of their people for progress. Thereby we shall move a long way toward a peaceful world.

This and numerous other pronouncements have indicated that our basic objective is an economically stable, independent, and democratic Laos. Therefore, American aid programs should be judged on how successful they are in helping to realize these objectives. Some people might question the whole idea of an aid program to a country such as Laos and say that in the relatively stable, traditional society existing in Laos it might be just as well to leave things as they are, most of the population being content with the status quo. All this has an element of truth, in that the average Laotian villager is not acutely dissatisfied with his lot. Nevertheless, even people in remote parts of Laos are gradually becoming aware that conditions formerly accepted as inevitable need not necessarily be that way. Although the problems of the Laotian villager in terms of his economic survival are not as acute as those confronting, say, the Indian villager, where great population pressures make imperative some sort of economic and cultural change, still there are in Laos a number of felt needs. In any case, since the Indochina war radical changes have become inevitable. The only question that remains is under whose auspices they will be carried out.

Some of these needs have been discussed in a monograph on Village Life. These include schooling, adequate salaries for village officials, a reciprocal relationship between government and villager. How far does the American aid program outlined above go toward meeting these needs? What are the positive and negative effects? Even the bitterest critics of the aid program cannot deny some of its positive implications. As a direct result of the aid program there are now more rural school teachers, even though the number is still far from adequate. There are more consumer goods available, which are accepted and desired by village people. These are especially clothing, iron bars, flashlights, soap, kerosene, and a few foods such as canned milk and tinned fish which provide a needed variety in the diet. Capital goods such as jeeps and outboard motors have made trading in locally produced and imported goods easier. The complete abolition of such a program would undoubtedly impose hardships and represent a step backward.

Aid Program Abuses

On the other hand, there have been a great many abuses and adverse effects. Some of the more obvious ones have been noted in the American press. It is worth quoting here the observations of a conservative economic newspaper. After noting that about $100,000,000 have been spent in Laos since the aid program began there, the reporter goes on to state:

> The principal effect of the U.S. largesse has been a wild and rather weird boom, based on nothing more solid than cash on hand and an unquestioned assumption that there is more to come.

Sleek Cadillacs, Buicks, and Fords have been imported by the dozen, as have the May-Floral teeth braziers, 73 tons of sporting goods, fishing tackle, and thermos jugs, 180 tons of automobile covers, $23,400 worth of festival decorations, $1,500 worth of musical instruments, and thousands of dollars worth of costume jewelry.

Retail shops are stocked to their bamboo ceilings with items that the Laotians have hardly ever seen before—American toothpaste, badminton rackets, roller skates, Japanese dolls, in the Laos Naka.

A lot of the U.S. money went to buy products from Red China—cherries in syrup from Shantung and Five Goats Beer from Canton. Much of this stuff is unsalable, but it doesn't matter; the importers have already made their profits from foreign exchange manipulations.

To understand this, one must acquaint himself with the magic kip, the highly overvalued Laotian currency unit. The official exchange rate, set by the Laos Government, is 35 kip to the American dollar. But in the hardheaded money markets of Hongkong, Bangkok, or even Vientiane, a Laos trader can buy 100 kip for a dollar. This sets the stage for fantastic profits.

A Laotian trader can buy 100,000 kip in the free money market for $1,000. He then applies for a license, he still stands to profit $65,000 before he has even moved the goods. Then he can simply sell his import license for more cash, if he wants.

If an importer decides to use his license, he still stands to profit heavily. Suppose he imports expensive men's shirts at $1.00 each. Buying his dollars from the Laotian Government at the official rate, each shirt costs him 35 kip. But then the
free market money values come into play. When the shirt goes on the market in Laos, it is priced at about 100 kip. So the importer has nearly tripled his money. Repeating this process under Laos' free and easy import rules, a businessman quickly can amass a considerable fortune....

Many shipments, it is said, are diverted in Thailand (93 percent of Laos’ imports pass through Bangkok and then are transported to Laos overland), where there is a lively demand for a wide range of goods. Other items arrive in Vientiane only to be shipped out again for greater profits. Thus, industryless Laos has become an exporter of automobiles and outboard motors.

Effects on Lao Values

Other consequences are not so easily visible. One is the effect this program has had on traditional Lao values. For example, many young men are now attracted to the police and military, and fewer are entering the priesthood. The high salaries given them contrast with the minimal wages paid to school teachers. A few years ago there were many more applicants for teaching jobs than there were vacancies; now it is increasingly difficult to recruit teachers with even minimum qualifications.

Money accumulated by Lao officials and merchants via the aid program has also tended to accentuate social and class differences. Although class and caste (ethnic) differences are of long standing in Laos, there have never been really great differences in material wealth. Even the King lived in a wood and bamboo house until the French built him his modest palace in Luang Prabang. Ministers who now have European-style villas with one, two, or even more foreign cars parked in their garages formerly rode bicycles and lived in bamboo houses. One student of Lao affairs has pointed out that it is easier to approach a man on a bicycle than one in a chauffeured Mercedes-Benz. The denunciation of such luxuries by the Pathet Lao Communists and their refusal to date to accept any of these luxuries for themselves has been one of their chief sources of strength among the rural people and among many town dwellers as well.

One high-ranking Lao official, who is not among those who have enriched themselves, recently remarked, "Young people now value money more than honor." When asked if he thought termination of American aid would solve the problem, he replied that there was a lot more involved and that there was no simple solution. All these developments cannot be blamed entirely on the mishandling of aid funds, however, because the introduction of an increasing amount of cash into a society which has traditionally handled relatively little has many undesirable side effects and dislocations. This is true even when not accompanied by widespread corruption.

What are some of the basic assumptions underlying this type of aid program? The pros and cons of military aid for Laos cannot be discussed in detail in this report. Still, it is possible to question the utility in Laos of a 25,000-man army, particularly when the Pathet Lao forces whom they have been fighting have now been incorporated into the government and Royal Lao Army. A police force is without question necessary to maintain internal security. At the same time, whether high salaries make for high morale and maximum efficiency has never been clearly proved.

Then there is the matter of how newly introduced consumer goods have affected the way of life of the Lao and tribal peoples. After rice, the chief indispensable trade commodity is salt, and both of these are produced locally. If Lao village culture is not to regress, iron bars for tools are also necessary. Manufactured clothing is generally desired, but acceptable substitutes can be made from locally grown cotton and silk. Yet a good many of the new items in the shops must certainly be considered amenities or luxuries and not necessities. The border line between these categories is not always clear and may vary among ethnic groups. Soap is an example. Lao villagers would consider it essential, but a prosperous Khmu would rather buy a cigarette lighter than a year's supply of soap. Although imported cigarettes are preferred for prestige reasons, the roll-your-own varieties can be made from local tobacco. These illustrations can easily be multiplied.

In this context the last paragraph of the statement quoted above describing the import program is worth repeating. It contains a value judgment derived from American culture but by no means shared by all Laotians!

And so, U.S. aid is put to a double purpose—first it is used to defray expenses of Lao Government soldiers, policemen, and other civil servants; then the same money is used again to bring to Laos all those goods which are increasing the economic capacity of the country and make life more worth living for all the people.

Much of stateide advertising contains the theme that a new toothpaste, soap, or cigarette will "make life more worth living," and to a certain extent these declarations are believed by many Americans. Although the Lao villagers may accept some of these goods eagerly, their value in his overall way of life may be questioned. Certainly prosperous Lao officials and merchants have shown an eagerness to accumulate such goods, but it would be mistaken to say that they view them the same way an American views similar items. There is a strong recreational aspect to Lao culture, that is, it is considered important to "do things in a pleasant way." This goes for driving a car, drinking refrigerated beer, or dancing a lam song to over-amplified music. But the beer and music end quickly and the car eventually breaks down due to lack of repairs. The American will go to great lengths to repair his car; the Lao may also make some efforts in that direction, but there is no compelling force. ("It doesn't matter; it can't be helped") is a favorite Lao expression and an indispensable idiom.

Lao Religion and Material Goods

The importance of the Buddhist religion in Lao life cannot be overestimated, despite the fact that many young men appear to be attracted to the police or army. The ultimate reality to most Lao is not in their material possessions or expendable goods, but in the cycle of rebirths in which they are involved and in acquiring merit for a better rebirth. Merit is not obtained by accumulating goods; on the contrary, generosity with one's material possessions is a virtue. After the age of fifty or fifty-five, most Lao men and women desire to retire from active life and spend time in meditation. Even for young people life in the wat (temple compound) is of
great importance, and becoming a bonze (a Buddhist priest) is a common experience. Relatively enormous sums, often equivalent to lifetime savings, are spent on personal religious festivals.

Becoming a bonze does not represent complete renunciation of worldly possessions, and certain of the Buddhist rules governing these matters are not strictly observed. For example, a Lao bonze can earn money from his religious services which he can use after he leaves the priesthood, and various material gifts are customarily presented to bonzes. Yet even by Lao standards their life is simple and their possessions relatively few. Although a bonze might welcome renovations to the pagoda or an additional statue of Buddha to adorn the altar, he would not regard these items as essential, nor would he or the average layman feel that consumer goods make life more worth living.

But Buddhism is only part of the story. What about the spirits, the phi? So far as is known, they have not developed a taste for toothpaste. We are dealing here with a culture where destroying consumable goods and income-producing property in livestock for religious sacrifice make life more worth living. This is not so in Little America, for the commissary, with its stock of goods, does make life more worth living for the local Americans. It would be unfair to claim that these consumer goods form the most vital aspect of their lives abroad, for American missionaries have for years subsisted on a good deal less. There is no doubt, however, that such goods are of much greater importance in American cultures than they are in Laotian culture.

Road Construction

What, then are some of the accomplishments and problems in the fields of transportation, agriculture, and education? Road construction has been one of the biggest projects of the Aid Mission, and the significance in Lao trade of the road between Vientiane and the royal capital at Luang Prabang has been brought out earlier. The following is the official description of this project:

The reopening and maintenance of the national roads of Laos and the allied program of training Lao personnel are among the most important projects being aided by the United States Operations Mission. Distribution of goods is one of the most expensive and difficult problems faced by the Royal Lao Government, because transportation on many of the roads is possible only by jeep or oxcart, air-freighting of goods is prohibitively costly, and the Mekong River—the main artery of the country—is unnavigable by large craft during much of the dry season.

Almost $1,500,000 worth of road-building equipment has been brought in, serving the dual purpose of rebuilding the roads and training Lao personnel in the care and operation of equipment, so that maintenance may be carried on and new roads built by Laotians themselves in the future. Although rehabilitation work on the Luang Prabang-Vientiane road had been in progress less than three months, in April it was unofficially opened when a diplomatic convoy which included the American Ambassador made the trip by car to the Royal Capital for the New Year's celebration. In addition, many Lao officials also made the journey by auto. They reported that excellent progress had been accomplished; that the road was easily passable for its entire length. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Public Works were so impressed that they publicly expressed their enthusiasm at the near-miracle results.

This program was a success in that during 1957 a road was temporarily opened for traffic. This success lasted only a short time, since the monsoon rains soon washed away stretches of improperly constructed roadbed and caused landslides which will have to be cleared anew each year.

Additional difficulties in the public works program are indicated in the newspaper article cited earlier:

Transport improvement is the largest single current aid project, with $5.6 million provided by the United States. Beside the new ferry, there is a $3.7 million plan to rehabilitate roads. Most of this has been spent for heavy earth-moving equipment: tractors, bulldozers, and shovels. Maintenance cost of this machinery is about seven million kip monthly, or more than double the Laotian government's normal total revenue—which gives some idea of the problems ahead if the U.S. aid funds are permanently terminated.

Actual road work is largely in the hands of the Universal Construction Company, an American firm which operates on a direct contract with the Lao government and has a large force of Okinawans on the job. The principal project is maintaining the dirt road between Vientiane and the summer [royal] capital of Luang Prabang, 150 miles to the north. No new roads are contemplated.

Even more important than the cost of maintenance is the training of Lao personnel for this work. From this point of view the project has been an almost complete failure. By way of illustration, the operation of the project in Luang Prabang town was carried out by a crew of Okinawans who were assigned to work on the road and also to bulldoze certain streets in the royal capital. In a sense this work proceeded under the general direction of the local Department of Public Works and although a few Lao worked with the Okinawans little real training was accomplished. During 1957 two American construction workers were assigned to Luang Prabang to install a rock-crusher. They worked almost exclusively with the Okinawans who, after the Americans' departure, were responsible for the maintenance of the new installation. In view of similarities between Okinawans and Japanese, it is not surprising that local Lao townfolk and villagers thought the road was being built by the Japanese who had occupied the area during the war.

When asked about the lack of a training program, American responsible for the road project replied that their primary job was to build roads and not act as instructors. Similar responses were given by other Americans who were theoretically in Laos to train people in import and export procedures but who expended their energies just trying to set up a workable system, with no time left for training.

12 The Buddhist Lao, like the non-Buddhist mountain tribes, believe in and conduct religious and magical rites for spirits of various kinds. See "Aspects of Village Life and Culture Change in Laos," op. cit.


It is natural that there never was a question of priorities between construction and training, although the two objectives need not necessarily be incompatible. This easily relates to the Little America state of mind which finds it more expedient to deal with things rather than ideas, with machinery and construction rather than teaching and training. It should be emphasized that this is an implicit "official policy" attitude and not one felt by individual American technicians. Once removed from Little America, the two construction men briefly assigned to Luang Prabang survived on local housing and food, and despite linguistic barriers made friends with local officials, went hunting with them, and in general got on very well. But they could not initiate a training program by themselves and so were recalled to headquarters in Vientiane after the completion of their technical work.

**Agriculture and Irrigation**

In the field of agriculture a vital felt need of the villagers is for irrigation works. Part of any irrigation system is some sort of dam, and projects for construction of dams have figured prominently in the program of their technical work. As far as they were concerned the project was then financed by the villagers.

In any democratically administered aid program the foreign technician must work through the officials of the host government. To by-pass these channels and deal directly and only with the villagers would be a violation of the political independence of that country. At the same time, it is this author's repeated contention that an aid program consists of ideas as well as techniques and machinery. In the basically conservative, status-conscious society of Laos, the technician should not try to transplant his own social and political system. Such attempts would be justifiably resented, but if American aid is to make any sense at all, surely the technician should be interested in the effect of his project on the people whom it is designed to benefit. He should also be interested in the extent to which his technical knowledge is transferable and transferred.

Again this brings us to the problem of communication between the foreign technicians and the host officials. The course in irrigation techniques referred to in the official statement above was given through a French-English interpreter. As is common in most societies where class and age are important social distinctions, the Lao officials attending the course had a strong sense of etiquette. Even had the American technicians been able to speak French with them directly, it would be likely that if their comments were not understood they would not be unduly questioned, especially since in most cases the Lao officials were younger than the Americans. The informal give and take of similar courses in American society is not part of Lao culture. In addition, it is customary for most Lao officials to use the interpreter not as a tool but as a third party in the conversation. If the interpreter happens to be Vietnamese or Thai, he too has a personal sense of etiquette, and will phrase his translation accordingly. It is not unusual, then, that in most cases contact between American technicians and their Lao counterparts cannot be anything but formal and does not lend itself easily to an interchange of ideas. Sincere friendliness, good will, and polite and tactful English speech do not always succeed in overcoming these barriers.

Now what about the Lao villagers? Although the dam will benefit them, they do not feel that it was built for them. A significant portion of the land watered by the dam is owned by the royal family, with many villagers working as tenants. It was therefore assumed by them that the dam was constructed for the royal family. The villagers did not contribute their labor for this project but were paid for their efforts, so that they felt it was strictly a government enterprise. As far as the American technicians and materials were concerned, the villagers assumed that the Americans at the dedication ceremony were simply some foreign visitors and did not associate them with the dam at all.

Permanent dams have been built by landlords in other areas near Luang Prabang. When repairs were necessary, villagers did not undertake them on their own initiative, but instead waited for the owners to act. Even in areas where villagers work only on their own land, if a dam is to be properly maintained it is necessary to explain its operation to the villagers in an attempt to ensure their interest and cooperation. In that way the dam may be a more lasting improvement.

**Education and Tools**

There are also those instances where the technician does not come from Little America but works for an international agency and lives in and off the local economy. Of course, this does not automatically ensure the success of his work. An isolated training course, no matter how well presented, which is not followed up by other activities almost inevitably fails of its objective. This is illustrated in the experience of a French-speaking UNESCO technical education specialist who in 1956 conducted week-long courses at several of the provincial capitals in the use of the tool kits donated by the American Aid Mission for the rural schools. This course as it took place in Luang Prabang is described in romanticized but sincere terms by the technician's wife.\(^5\)

American Aid has donated a tool box for each rural school in Laos and has asked the UNESCO expert for technical education (who is my husband) to conduct these courses. Two have already been completed with good success, one in Savannakhet, Central Laos, and one in Pakse, South Laos.

After the official opening we go to a large classroom with white tiled floor. The tool boxes are neatly arranged there, quite an impressive block. With the help of an interpreter who speaks both Lao and French, the expert gives the name of each tool and explains briefly its usage and advantages.

A beautiful level is the first item on the list. It is passed round and well admired. An ax with a long

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15 Quoted in Ras Oliver Johnson, A Study of Education in Laos (mimeographed), pp. 49-56.
handle is not known to them. They laugh as my husband shows them how to hold and swing it. Brace and universal square, hand drilling machine and pipe vise, and many more unknown tools have to be explained, and the boys follow the lecture very attentively.

One boy had asked: "And when do we learn to make nice furniture?"
The expert explains how they can use the little knowledge they could acquire during these five days to make doors, window frames, and simple furniture as well. He gives on the blackboard the drawings for a plain working bench and a table to be built as the next exercise upon return to their village.

Judging by this abridged account both students and teacher enjoyed the course, and some pleasant contacts were established. However, no concrete action resulted. The presentation was planned on a national level, and although the provincial education officials were pleased to be hosts to the sessions they never received official instructions from the national Ministry of Education about the action to be taken following the completion of the course. Thus, the tool kits were not distributed to the teachers but were stored in the education office's supply room. Had the government had previous experience with technical education, no doubt they would have continued on their own. Since there was no local person equipped to continue the work of the UNESCO expert, the tools remained idle. The fault lies in a lack of planning and lack of continuity. A one-week course such as this could hardly be expected to have a lasting effect.

Need for Continuity
This lack is illustrated in still other aid projects. One was the distribution of vegetable seeds to village schools which was carried out one year with good results. The seeds were well received by the teachers and villagers and produced some useful garden crops. That is as far as the project went. Unfortunately one year was not a sufficient time for villagers to get their own seeds from the new plants. More seeds were eagerly awaited the following year, not only by the villages which received them the first time but by other villages which had heard about the project. The next year, however, the Aid Mission did not have a seed program.

Much the same situation prevailed with village medical kits. These, too, were distributed to the rural school teachers, some of whom received a month's training in their use. Again, supplies to refurbish these kits were not forthcoming the following year so that in both instances expectations were built up which were never fulfilled.

It is small wonder that the Lao officials concerned with these projects became confused as to the methods used in planning American aid programs. Perhaps a better impression would have been left with both officials and villagers if the projects had never been undertaken. One Lao remarked, "It is better not to give at all than to give and stop when the greatest need is felt."

A final American aid project to illustrate the lack of contact between Little America and the Laotian economic and cultural situation is the case of the distribution of several truckloads of American-made agricultural implements such as hoes, axes, and shovels. The lack of familiarity of the Lao with certain American-designed tools has been indicated. One day a large shipment of implements arrived in Luang Prabang by plane, with instructions from the Ministry of Agriculture that they be distributed. The provincial agriculture official followed his superior's instructions, and they were distributed a day or two later. Most of them were given as handouts to local townpeople on a first-come, first-served basis. Some of these town dwellers cultivated gardens on the river bank. Part of the implements went to the Thai Dam refugee village, where gardening is an important source of cash income, and a few neighboring Lao villages also received some. None were given to Meo or Khmu because, according to the distributing official, "No Meo or Khmu were around when I was giving them out."

There are blacksmith villages in the environment of Luang Prabang, where the chief source of income is in the production of locally used agricultural tools such as digging sticks, Lao-style hoes, and machetes. It would have seemed a more fruitful approach for an aid project to have worked toward improving traditional equipment and production processes in the villages rather than to have handed out unfamiliar implements in an unorganized manner.

Suggestions and Conclusions
It is easy to criticize a program which has had as many difficulties as the one in Laos. Some of the main objectives of the Laos program, such as political and economic stability, have so far not been realized, and the mistakes in the administration of the aid program have undoubtedly made it easier for local Communists to increase their political influence.

The aim in this paper is to criticize constructively and suggest possible solutions. Even under ideal conditions the transfer of techniques from one culture to another is a difficult process. It is not only a matter of transferal of a technique; one must also consider its side effects on the surrounding social and cultural matrix.

Basic to the administration of the aid program in Laos is the material organization and frame of mind implicit in Little America. It is both inconceivable and undesirable that Americans working overseas should seek to adopt the culture of the host country, for they would then lose their ability to function independently and objectively. On the other hand, it is not profitable to ignore the local culture. Knowledge of the local way of life will not in itself solve political problems, but it may aid in their resolution, and it is a necessary prerequisite to an effective aid program.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union share fundamentally the same technical culture, that is, both countries produce fairly similar jet planes, hydrogen bombs, trucks, medicines. These vary in details of design rather than in essential principles of operation. The important difference is one of values, not of equipment. What American aid should represent, therefore, is primarily ideas and methods of procedure rather than functioning as a distributing agent for supplies. Little America makes possible the transfer of supplies but places obstacles in the way of transferal of ideas or
even of the establishment of relationships of understanding and trust, which are an obvious requirement for their successful transfer.

The following suggestions are intended specifically for the situation which exists in Laos, but in some cases may apply to other areas in which American aid programs operate.

1. Learning a Language

There may be reasons why adult Americans do not know French, but there is no reason why they cannot learn. It would be impractical to spend years teaching American technicians on two-year contracts to speak flawless, grammatical French. But if it is considered important for American personnel to have first-hand contact with Lao officials, some minimum training in French should be provided. Highly technical negotiations of bilateral agreements require interpreters, but certainly no interpreter should be necessary for a discussion of rice cultivation, school curriculum, or malaria spraying. A technician working without an interpreter will make more mistakes at first, but even the imperfect exchange of ideas done directly is far more meaningful and rewarding than translations which, although mechanically perfect, do violence to ideas and concepts. It is the job of the foreign technician to use the language established in his host country. A knowledge of the technician's own language should not be forced upon his counterpart. Learning English should be encouraged, of course, but Lao officials should not be rated on their ability to speak English.

A knowledge of Lao is not very useful outside of Laos. At the same time, the small effort spent in acquiring a vocabulary of a few hundred words is amply rewarded by the closer personal relationships it fosters. Even a slight knowledge of the language of one's host country shows that the foreign technician values and respects her culture. If the technician can greet a villager and ask him a few simple questions and reply in turn to the villager's questions, a small bond of understanding has already been established. Even minor linguistic achievements will make the technician's job easier and possibly more fruitful, and may also provide him with indications that he is running into difficulties which might not come through in a formal exchange via an interpreter.17

2. Modifying Little America

Realistically speaking, it probably would not be possible to completely abolish Little America even though it might be desirable. Americans technicians often come overseas at what they consider to be great personal sacrifice. It would not be reasonable to expect them to live like Lao villagers. If families accompany aid personnel, some local medical facilities must be available and ready access to more extensive facilities must be maintained at all times. One cannot expect to recruit exclusively dedicated idealists, but, if sufficiently high salaries are paid, competent personnel can be attracted. An American commissary is not essential, nor is an American restaurant, although both are probably justifiable.18 Nevertheless, Americans who cannot survive without canned fruit juices and minute rice are perhaps better off remaining at home.

While bamboo houses are not adequate for Westerners, at the same time air-conditioned barbed-wire compounds are not vital to maintain health. The American housing compounds in Vientiane were developed because of the lack of local housing facilities for the large numbers of Americans sent over. This raises the question as to whether it was absolutely essential to bring in so many Americans. As indicated earlier, Little America, once established, is self-perpetuating: the larger the community, the easier it is for it to have an existence completely independent of the local culture, and consequently the larger the number of Americans needed to maintain other Americans and keep Little America functioning. Perhaps decentralized housing would help this situation. Air conditioners help make life easier in the tropics, but their acquisition and maintenance should not cause one to lose sight of our main objective.

The number of technicians should be kept to a minimum rather than increased. Supporting executive office personnel should be limited and reliance placed on local facilities. Local personnel should be used wherever possible within the Mission. If competent local personnel are not immediately available, they should be trained. Certain operations may be more inefficient as a result, but local barriers will be fewer.

17 In 1957 Congress appropriated $8,000,000 to help improve the caliber of the ICA personnel overseas. Language training is now (November 1958) a prerequisite for many jobs.

18 Such facilities are essential, however, in cases where it is regarded as desirable to separate foreign troops from the local civilian population, as in the case of American forces stationed in Europe or Japan.
ment, this may make the work of the Communists more difficult and perhaps impossible. Large sums of money heedlessly spent by American personnel help unscrupulous officials to get rich quick. It cannot bring about positive economic development. This can be done by successive steps only, and large amounts of new consumer goods are not necessary to implement it. Americans have concepts worth presenting: labor outside of office work is not something to be restricted to the lower classes, and trained officials can profitably get their hands dirty; the programs which succeed best are those which have the understanding and cooperation of the people they are designed to benefit, since “improvements” imposed from above do not make for true progress; an individual should be judged according to his ability and not his birth. Any American working abroad can easily name or redefine these concepts and probably add half a dozen more.

5. Appreciation of Local Culture Values

During the course of its operation the American Aid Mission has spent countless thousands of dollars on surveys for rivers, road, and airports. No comparable survey was ever undertaken concerning the Laotian’s ideas with regard to specific development programs or even to the idea of development in general. It was merely assumed that American concepts apply. Political and economic matters are analyzed in detail, but no one has bothered to systematically compare Laotian and American values to see where they agree and differ. It would be considered sheer folly to build a road without first surveying the proposed route, but it is normal operating procedure, apparently, to plan an aid program with little if any foresight as to how it might affect the local population.

6. Importance of Rural Programs

The population of Laos is overwhelmingly rural, and approximately half of these people are non-Lao. No aid program can be effective which does not deal with the majority of the people. To date, much of the American aid has been concentrated, partly by plan and partly by indirection, in the towns, particularly in the administrative capital of Vientiane. New stores, offices, a bank, a hotel, have been built while villages are unable to obtain teachers or basic medical supplies. A power plant dependent upon imported fuel oil has been set up in Vientiane. A ferry service requiring heavy subsidies has been instituted to aid in the importation of consumer goods from Thailand, while local village crafts are ignored. The differences between town and village have been increased and so have the mutual suspicions.

7. Reaching Different Ethnic Groups

Of the small amount of aid that does reach rural areas, very little indeed has found its way to the non-Lao ethnic groups. Thus existing tensions have been multiplied. The Communist Pathet Lao have made good use of the dissatisfaction of the minority groups as well as of the Lao villagers. Some of the best Pathet Lao soldiers have been Khmu. Clearly Laos does not need new banks and trading companies as much as she needs schools, a rural medical program, and some kind of agricultural extension service. Although prejudice does exist,