

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of Joel M. Halpern**

---

1961

## Some Reflections on the War in Laos, Anthropological and otherwise

Joel Halpern



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC BY-NC International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/joel\\_halpern/294/](https://works.bepress.com/joel_halpern/294/)

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR IN LAOS,  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND OTHERWISE

*Prof. JOEL MARTIN HALPERN*

CENTRE D'ETUDE DU SUD-EST ASIATIQUE ET DE L'EXTREME-ORIENT.  
Institut de Sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Rédaction et Administration  
avenue Jeanne, 44  
1050 - Bruxelles  
tél. 48.81.58 (poste 3452)

Publication mensuelle  
Verschijnt maandelijks  
4e année - 4e jaar  
n° 44 31.12.1970

Abonnement - Subscription

annuel  
jaarlijks - 215 FB  
annual - 250 FB or US \$ 5

Compte n° 29.484 PUBLICATIONS SUD-EST ASIATIQUE  
ET EXTREME-ORIENT  
chez Société Générale de Banque, Agence Louise  
avenue Louise 61, 1050 Bruxelles (CCP 2.61).

LEERSTOEL CHINESE EN JAPANSE TAAL- EN LETTERKUNDE.  
Rijksuniversiteit te Gent.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR IN LAOS,  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND OTHERWISE.

---

Professor Joel Martin HALPERN  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, Massachusetts 01002

The Ambassador of the People's Republic of China stepped from his limousine, and the Chief of Protocol ushered him to his place. His face wore a hint of a scowl, for he was the first high-ranking guest to arrive but was seated in the second row. In due time the other ambassadors and the Crown Prince arrived at the reviewing stand set up on bamboo poles on the bank of the Mekong, just a few blocks from the air-conditioned Lang Xan Hotel. The Crown Prince puffed on a cigar and the other dignitaries made themselves comfortable as they watched the preliminaries of the secular part of the annual boat race celebration marking the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the rice harvest. While the teams made ready a small pirogue paddled by containing a group of men dressed as women and singing a ditty about the relative merits of different ladies of pleasure well known about Vientiane. There followed, on the deck of a barge, a graphic parody of fornication, this fertility rite featuring a short man with a four foot long banana-stem penis strapped into his small frame. His target was a large heart-shaped painted wooden vagina worn by his partner. The visiting anthropologist, torn between observing the reactions of the diplomatic

corps and the drama on the passing barge, was unable to determine whether the cheers and laughter of the crowd meant that the banana-stem had hit its target or that the little man had again tripped on his appendage.

Journalists delight in writing of the Lao love of festivals and of the inability of the "gentle Lao" to take life seriously. However, this humorous festivity (even the racing crews are dumped in the water after the races) can be seen as a symbolic affirmation of an essential aspect of the human condition, procreation and fertility, while enjoying its ludicrous aspects which link us to the lower primates.

Such a view of life can be seen as essential to Lao psychological survival rather than as a mere "love of festivals". These links with their traditions are an assertion by the Lao of their individuality in the context of the larger nations which surround them and seek to dominate them.

Driving up to Vientiane via Thailand's Friendship Highway, one passes the U.S. Army Communication bases, and the ammunition storage depots, and the air base at Udon with its miles of chainlink fence hung with signs in Thai and English warning of the armed patrols and the watch dogs.

O Say can you see, by the dawn's early light.  
 What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming  
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight  
 O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming  
 And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,  
 Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,  
 O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave (1)

"Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, Interviewed by Newsman Following Appearance Before House Appropriations Committee, February 26, 1970 :

Question : Mr. Secretary, some Senators say that ex-Green Berets working for the CIA are engaged in the fighting. To use their words, "U.S. military men in uniform, the advisors, are swarming over the country and that our B-52s bombed the Plain of Jars in support of the Royal troops". Is this correct ?

Secretary Laird : I've made my position very clear. We have used air power. The President announced that in his press conference in January to support the war in Vietnam. We have no military forces engaged in ground combat in Laos. The situation as far as our advisors and other activities in Laos is the same situation that has existed for three or four years".

These are the cultural and psychological motivations behind the bombing employed by the American military in Laos - massive technology, based on faith in the rightness<sup>of</sup> one's cause, and founded on one kind of historical glorification of violence.

The sky is blue, the top of the mountains are clear, on the summits and sides of the hills there is fresh green grass. Two little boys named Tong and Bee are playing tops. Their laughing and shouting are very lively. Suddenly Tong stops playing and listens carefully. Then he hears a hum. He raises his eyes to the sky and sees planes. American bandit planes are flying straight at him, like black eagles. Suddenly he sees flames pouring from under the planes. The blaze gets very red and black smoke twirls up to the sky. Tong feels giddy. He wants to call Bee so that they both can run home. But his arms can't move any more. His legs feel very heavy and he can no longer move on. Forest, bush, reeds, grass all twirl around him. He falls down on the ground calling to his mother to curse the wickedest American bandit. The wicked American thief who is more wicked than the wild beast (2).

Massive technology, by its nature, is not easily controlled, and while a "bomb bursting in air" falling on a Fort McHenry in a 19th century war against a colonial power can be seen as testing the defenders of the "land of the free and the home of the brave", a century and a half later the same war mobilization psychology can be effectively employed by the receivers of bursting bombs to create civilian martyrs and pro-

vide increased motivation for another civilization defending its own ramparts.

### A Brief Personal History.

In late 1956 I first arrived in Laos, a community development officer with the American aid program, the sole man posted to Luang Prabang and fresh from a stint in Washington, working on a Laos handbook with the then incipient and subsequently tragic luminary - Bernard Fall (3).

Time spent plowing through French ethnographies in the Library of Congress did not adequately prepare me for the challenges of the new position. Among my more notable failures was the inability to meet a request for a pool table on the part of the Lao officials who belonged to the Cercle Privé. In the absence of a program, the potential for idleness was offset by a young Ph.D.'s proclivity for ethnographic research and publication. No such aimless wandering is possible today for the several dozen aid assistance people and military "attachés" who currently make up the American "team" in Luang Prabang and are the "proud" possessors of their own organization chart. However, the Pathet Lao, by restricting movement, have effectively reduced certain of the prerogatives formerly enjoyed by "proper colonialists" such as a dip in an upland waterfall pool.

A 1959 revisit was made possible by a Rand Corporation grant for the study of Lao elites. After two volumes documented with detail I concluded in 1964 :

Americans, Chinese, French, Japanese, Thai and Vietnamese have all participated in trying to control and change the lives of the peoples of Laos and, in this endeavor, have received help or "supervision" from Canadians, English, Indians, Poles and Russians. It would seem that seldom in world history has such a large and varied company meddled in the lives of so few (4).



For several years past I have participated in the work of the Mekong Seminar of the Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group, considering the implications of dam building on the Mekong River. In connection with AID supported research feasibility studies I visited Laos in late 1969. An avid reader of the Student Mobilizer <sup>(5)</sup> of the New Mobe, sympathetic to innuendo and slander will have no trouble equating such activities with the Academic Advisory Committees for Thailand <sup>(6)</sup>, also supported by the U.S. Government and therefore "identified with counter-insurgency". Building the billion dollar Pa Mong Dam, some thirty miles north of Vientiane, may if thoughtlessly carried out, be an ecological disaster, an incitement to social revolution and provide business and profits to engineering firms, but one needs Alice's looking glass to be able to call it counter-insurgency's finest hour. It is also possible to see a failure to construct the dam as an attempt to prevent Laos and Thailand from realizing their own potentials for development.

Prior to my recent trip to Laos, I hardly considered the war, the bombings and the deaths a joke or at least something approachable in a humorous or cynical way. But that was before I met a group of Lao journalists. One evening over beers, in a discussion of the war, I mentioned American concern for, among other things, the loss of 40,000 of our men. This they interpreted humorously. Laughing is clearly a way to cover up embarrassment in both Occident and Orient. To them it seemed too obvious, to fight a war is to involve oneself with death. Perhaps part of the joke may ultimately be on the pro-government newspapermen who felt that American involvement in the war and in death was a planned long-term policy and that the United States would therefore not easily abandon her position of support for the present policies of the Lao government and opposition to the Pathet Lao.

Some bargain-rate philosophers have conceived of life as



a bad joke improperly told. Perhaps this is one way to make sense out of the cultural background of our involvement in Laos and Vietnam. During the late 50's I spent several weeks with the late Dr. Tom Dooley, the dedicated self-image builder, anti-communist and sometime doctor to the tribal folks of northern Laos. When Doctor Tom could get away from the TV cameras, his teen-age fan mail and making like Dr. Schweitzer at the piano, he went about his job of tending the sick with an enthusiasm and personal intensity not easy to forget. However, his medicines "generously" donated by the large pharmaceutical firms were in large part dated and not legally permitted for use in the U.S. They were, however, very effective on the patients in Laos.

Recently attending an anti-war rally at my university, I watched students waving the Viet Cong flag as they listened to a street theater play by the Women's Liberation, in which a "kangaroo court" sentenced a coed to a lifetime of washing dishes and having babies. This crop of middle-class revolutionaries obviously have got their struggle second-hand, which seems fair recompense for the second-hand goods, second-hand experts (retired and retread technicians) and second-hand ideas (e.g. Community Development from India) that the Americans exported to Laos before bringing in a first-hand war.

#### American Technology and Revolutionary Creativity.

Within the United States much of the criticism of the war has centered on the bombing and especially on the civilian casualties it causes. In Vietnam, with its denser population centers, the impact clearly has been very heavy. In Laos, however, with the Pathet Lao-controlled areas located in the mountains, none of the population centers are very large. Perhaps Xieng Khouang, which in 1958 had a population of 3,500 has been the largest town held by the Pathet Lao. This is not to say that people cannot be killed in small settlements -

they obviously can be and have been - but rather that it takes more bombs to have the same effect when the population is spread out. If the Pathet Lao had the air power and were able to use it on the Mekong River towns controlled by the Royal Lao such as the some 200,000 of greater Vientiane then, of course, the effect might be more substantial.

Similarly, the mountainous terrain makes it difficult for large groups of armed men to maneuver and engage one another, especially if neither side is spoiling for a fight to the finish. In fact, it has seemed (to me at least) that land warfare in Laos displays some of the fastidiousness of primitive combat. That is, the struggle is somewhat symbolic. When two groups clash and there are several casualties then the fight is broken off while both sides regroup. This, of course, presupposes that there are two sides remaining to carry on the struggle. If one side, such as the Royal Lao, leaves the scene, it is hard to make contact unless there is direct and vigorous pursuit.

It should not be inferred that the Royal Lao troops have been totally ineffective. This is not quite true as the past actions of the so-called Meo "Clandestine Army" under General Vang Pao have<sup>ve</sup> proven in their small scale guerrilla actions often far behind the Pathet Lao lines. These actions have been facilitated in large part by the air drops to remote outposts undertaken by the now famous (or infamous) Air America<sup>(?)</sup>.

But the military movements back and forth, by their supposedly newsworthy nature, do tend to obscure some of the basic social and political dynamics of the evolving situation in Laos. The American military, with blind reliance on technology, has retained a simple-minded faith in air power. This exists despite the lessons of its limited effectiveness in the mass raids on European cities in World War II. They have also ignored the meaning for the Pathet Lao of the "bombs bursting in air", of their own Star Spangled Banner.

By this pressure supplied from the air they have enabled a psychological mobilization to take place - the ramparts to be watched - among the three groups opposing the Americans and their allies : the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. As the propaganda photographs of the latter show, they are forced to live and work in caves along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but they continue to function. The Americans on their side have claimed that the bombing makes it more difficult and expensive for the North Vietnamese to move men and supplies into South Vietnam.

These claims may be true, but the necessarily random destruction of enormous monsters like the B-52 has helped the North Vietnamese working in Laos to overcome the traditional fear and distrust felt toward them by the Lao and the mountain peoples. This makes the Americans and their bombers the ultimate enemy. Although the tempo of the bombing has clearly been stepped up recently, beginning in the late 50's and certainly by the early 60's the Americans had replaced the French as precisely defined objects of hatred. During the first Indochina war American missionaries who were captured reported that they were treated better than French prisoners. It is, however, difficult for the Pathet Lao to tell one European from another, and mistakes often occurred, for example, in 1959 a French UNESCO officer was killed when the Pathet Lao overran a Meo mountain village which, because of its altitude, functioned as an excursion spot for Vientiane. The Frenchman was executed. When the mistake was discovered, an apology was made to his wife.

Grant Wolfkill, in his account as a prisoner of the Pathet Lao from May 1961 to August 1962, refers to how he and his companions were sometimes gratuitously kicked when their convoy encountered other troops. By contrast, he also refers to the friendly and deferential treatment he at times received from older villagers who regarded the French as protectors

and patrons (8). This ambivalent attitude toward white foreigners was observable even in the 50's when an American aid official would be confronted with older villagers squatting down before him as an act of obeisance while requesting medicines and other aids. At the same time young men might spit as he passed or turn their backs.

#### The Pathet Lao and Psychological Mobilization.

The constant pressure of the bombing has enabled the Pathet Lao to picture themselves as the victims of terror and the fighters in a just struggle, aided by "the fraternal parties and peoples of North Vietnam and China" as well as "the world liberation movement". By contrast the Royal Lao are viewed as the lackeys of the Americans, aided by Thai mercenaries. The Pathet Lao program as set forth places stress on uniting the various peoples of Laos, including the diverse tribal groups, who compose the majority of the population in the areas which they control. The unity is specified as being for the purpose of expelling American military intervention so that subsequently all the peoples of Laos can live together in peace in the postwar period. At the same time, they point with pride to advances in education, health, agriculture, trade organizations and road building. They also clearly specify the need for political organization, down to and including the village level. This latter point was strongly stressed by Fall in the early 1960's (9).

Building a modern bureaucratic entity clearly requires a major change in values and a realignment in political leadership. In the case of the diverse peoples under Pathet Lao control it means creating new patterns of leadership and forms of organization which have never existed before. This is not to say that modernization is best accomplished under conditions of saturation bombing, but although the American military intervention does cause casualties it is clearly

neither destroying Pathet Lao society nor its will to fight. Quite the opposite is true : the leadership that does exist has been severely tested by the bombing and those people who remain in the Pathet Lao area are being subjected to or participating in (depending on one's point of view) "a radical transformation of Lao society", in the words of an American AID official in Laos. This official's report based on interviews with refugees from the Xieng Khouang area in 1969 observed :

The NLHS (Neo Lao Hak Sat, political arm of the Pathet Lao) seeks nothing less than a radical transformation of Lao society from a loosely structured hierarchical system to a tightly organized conformist society where the rather foreign concepts of persuasion and guilt are introduced as mechanisms of social control. They have pressed for economic equality by introducing progressive taxation and discouraging the conspicuous consumption that establishes a wealthy villager's status. They have almost eliminated the 'wasted resources' that are spent on bouns, marriages, funerals and traditional celebrations. They have taken initial steps toward the communalization of property by establishing 'public' padi (rice) and by closely controlling livestock sales ...

Statements emanating from the Pathet Lao stress resistance to the enemy, organization of military forces, development of local level civilian party structures, economic and educational development, and doing all of this within a broad base of unity founded on the participation of all ethnic groups. Thus the immediate tasks of the Laos Communist Party in 1968 were given as :

Ideologically educate the people in Liberated areas.

Strengthen administrative organizations, self-defense militia and guerrillas, which are real forces of the people's democratic government.

Carry out national unity.

Concentrate efforts on the development of agriculture.

Transportation of goods from one place to another (pro-



bably referring to moving supplies into South Vietnam).

Improve communication routes.

Pay attention to trade and financial activities.

Strengthen and develop cadre.

Prepare and be ready for negotiation.

A recent Rand Corporation report focussing on the role of the North Vietnamese in Laos <sup>(10)</sup>, based in part on interviews with defectors, asserts (p. 203) :

Our investigation shows that in virtually every important field of Laos Communist development the North Vietnamese have played a critical role. They are largely responsible for selecting the Lao Communist leadership which has shown remarkable stability and cohesion ... North Vietnamese advisers have helped these cadres construct an army, a bureaucracy, a Marxist-Leninist party, and political and mass organizations all based upon the DRV model.

#### Historical Precedent.

This same report points out (p. 208) an historical precedent for such activity, deriving from the colonial era when Vietnamese occupied the most vital posts in the civil administration of the Laotian protectorate except the top ones held by the French. Further, both Xieng Khouang (until 1942) and Sam Neua (for a longer period) were directly administered from Hanoi. Despite the dissatisfaction that is noted in this monograph on the part of the North Vietnamese with what they regard to be the "poorly organized, indolent, and lacking in ideological zeal", tendencies on the part of their Lao comrades, the authors do nevertheless point out that although some of the Lao they interviewed were somewhat resentful of their Vietnamese advisors, still "the evidence on the whole suggests that the Vietnamese Communists have been successful in maintaining a good working relationship with their Lao associates"(p. viii). The authors conclude by asserting that whatever the outcome in South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese government will continue to consider the Lao provinces near its

boundaries as essential to its safety and will do its best to see that they are not controlled by hostile or potentially hostile forces.

In his book Laos, Buffer State or Battleground <sup>(11)</sup>, Hugh Toye makes the point of the role of Laos as a buffer zone between Thailand and Vietnam and points out how this has historical precedent in the period prior to French rule. In speaking of the mid-nineteenth century he remarks (p. 22) :

In Xieng Khouang also the traditional dual relationship was eventually restored. At first Siam had acquiesced in the annexation of the mountain state by Vietnam. The removal of Vietnamese influence from the Mekong valley, however, had restored the significance of the mountain barrier. Siam was now the Mekong valley power and it was not long before she had adopted the traditional Laotian interest in the hills. At length a rebellion took place with her encouragement in Xieng Khouang, and in 1855 the Vietnamese found it prudent to reinstate a member of the old ruling family. The new ruler paid tribute to his neighbors on both sides of the mountains as his forebears had done.

#### The Royal Lao Government and the Americans.

Clearly the Pathet Lao are a protégé of North Vietnam and also of China in somewhat the same way that the Royal Lao Government is dependent on the United States for material and technical assistance <sup>(12)</sup> and increasingly on the Thai for direct military help with ground forces to supplement U.S. airpower. The Royal Lao are more reluctant to acknowledge publicly Thai assistance of any kind than are the Pathet Lao with respect to North Vietnamese sponsorship. Both are silent with respect to the military assistance<sup>s</sup> they receive while loudly denouncing the other as subservient to foreigners.

Prince Souvanna Phouma has now come full circle from his alliance with the Pathet Lao in the early 1960's as exemplified by his 1969 statement before the National Press



Club :

North Vietnam is not using Laos just to wage war in South Vietnam. At the same time it sends more than 40,000 troops for the purpose of fighting against the legal government, on the side of a Rebel Communist Party, the Neo (Lao) Hak Xat ... the case of the Lao Kingdom is clear and cannot be misunderstood. A totally independent state, its borders well known, a legal government recognized everywhere even by those who are against it, the Kingdom is truly invaded by foreign troops responding to the call of a small group of revolutionaries, insignificant in itself, which owes its survival to North Vietnamese battalions.

The mixed ethnic character of the mountains provinces bordering on North Vietnam is also recognized, as is the fact that the ethnic valley Lao, the ruling group within the Kingdom, are a small minority in these regions. The lack of independent economic viability of the Royal Lao-controlled areas along the Mekong river is also well known, as is the Royal Lao government's consequent heavy dependence on American foreign aid. The North Vietnamese are as much "foreigners" in the areas of the Pathet Lao as are the Thai in the Royal Lao areas and perhaps more so.

The situation of the Americans who have in effect replaced the French is another matter. Their role in Laos is, of course, intimately tied to the war in South Vietnam and Cambodia. It is not possible now to talk of the American role in Laos without taking into account the enormous disaster that our military involvement in Indochina has become <sup>(13)</sup>. But even if one were sympathetic to current American political objectives as put forth in President Nixon's statement of March 6, 1970 ("efforts to de-escalate the conflict and reach political understanding" and "helping prevent the recognized Laotian government from being overwhelmed by larger Communist forces dominated by the North Vietnamese"), it is not difficult to see that many American policies are contradictory and counterproductive even to the ends sought. First there is the

domino type theory and supplementing this the "prop-up" posture. According to the domino idea if one state goes communist then others will inevitably follow. According to the prop-up corollary, to prevent the dominoes from falling one must prop them up with military aid, economic aid and technical and military assistance. Perhaps the most characteristically American bit is the mechanical analogy, equating peoples and nation-states with things, and attempting to solve political, economic and social problems with goods and people who are expert in their use. This is to be done supposedly while keeping institutions and values constant, or so it is implied. Our policy-makers are often not prepared to deal with the many ways things affect people (a not surprising situation considering the current domestic American scene).

The United States foreign aid program began in Laos in the fifties by "pumping in" (the phrase itself is important) goods and financial support through a traditional hierarchy containing a minimum of trained personnel due in part to the French use of Vietnamese in the Laotian colonial administration. The temptations were too much. When the late Prime Minister Katay (the name appropriately means rabbit in Lao) in a lighter moment bragged to reporters of having pocketed a few million of the pumped in dollars, the American administrators responded in what to them seemed a logical way, by becoming colonial in methodology while outwardly remaining anti-colonial in ideology <sup>(14)</sup>. That is, they proceeded to set up a parallel government (the term is widely used by Lao officials) at all critical levels of the administration. This was seen as getting aid "direct to the people". But it, of course, did not exactly serve as a goad to active and responsible administration neither on a local nor national level.

The social implications were succinctly pointed out by Bernard Fall who linked it to the symbolic act of taking an official off a traditionally used elephant and putting him

into a Mercedes, with all that it implied in foreign exchange costs, loss of mobility, and valued symbolic status. The great availability of foreign aid has brought about a proliferation of cars and

enabled high-ranking officials to greatly increase their standard of living by building and renting homes to foreigners as well as increasingly entering into business partnership with local Chinese merchants. At the same time there has been progressive failure to develop a competent bureaucracy. Today, in imitation of contemporary American priorities, Vientiane has an air-conditioned bowling alley but no sewage system. It has extensive colonies of private housing for U.S. and other foreign experts, diplomats and military advisors but no public housing or effective building codes. The massive (for Laos) American presence has also resulted in the beginning of an organized Laotian work force. A little over a year ago the employees of the American aid mission, the single largest employer in the country outside of the Lao government, struck for higher pay in what appears to be the first such action in the history of Laos. The leader was reportedly a Lao who had had some college training in the United States.

The domino (the Royal Lao government) can, of course, be subverted from within, buried under a flood of cars, bowling alleys, superfluous advisors and unneeded projects externally supplied. The Pathet Lao are also externally supplied, but their sponsors have more limited resources and place stress on local organization and motivation. They also came from a neighbouring state and have faced similar problems in their own country.

Economic differentiation proceeds apace in the Royal Lao areas, especially in the towns and the surrounding villages where potentially antagonistic economic interest groups are coming into being. The American aid program's rural development division has had a corps of vigorous young employees who are fluent in Lao and have long experience in the country. This in itself is a dramatic change from earlier

years <sup>(15)</sup>. A few young American technicians now have Lao wives. They have lived in the provinces and have direct contact with the population <sup>(16)</sup>. This contrasts with the former cultural isolation. But however well intentioned and well prepared people may be they cannot overcome bad policy. Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, rural development and much of refugee resettlement projects have been American and not Laotian programs <sup>(17)</sup>. Liberally funded (for Laotian conditions) using externally supplied equipment and with direct American supervision, their long-term institutional impact as a counter to the Pathet Lao in terms of local level organization seems of limited effectiveness. Refugee programs, despite their outwardly appealing aspects which are anti-colonialist and humanitarian in ideology remain colonialist in methodology (local level American aid expert teams, USAID warehouses, with Laotian employees). The North Vietnamese have advisors down to the district level among the Pathet Lao but the role of the former is closer to that of, for example, dedicated white American technicians working on Indian reservations in the United States - difficult to do, but successful joint political and socio-economic action is possible.

There are many positive features of Royal Lao government and American activities. Some government organizations such as the Ministry of the Plan, with young, dedicated college graduate personnel, try to seek an orderly development stressing a maximum of self-reliance. Much has been accomplished by the American aid program in working with the Ministry of Education in establishing, for example, the first secondary school where courses are taught by Lao in the Lao <sup>language</sup>. Education on all levels has also improved. A number of irrigation projects have been undertaken. Provincial hospitals have been established. The Nam Ngum hydro-electric project is under construction under the auspices of the United Nation's Mekong Committee. New roads have been built. As has been

pointed out, these programs do, of course, have counterparts on the Pathet Lao side.

However, if there were not a war, it is possible to seriously question how interested the United States would be in many of these programs to which, compared to other world areas, relatively lavish assistance is now being provided. Further, many programs such as refugee relief and resettlement projects are directly related to the war and the bombing. "Taking care of those who flee 'friendly action'" is how one American aid official expressed it. More importantly, there are no attempts to mobilize the population to accommodate to the drastic changes taking place such as in the great growth of Vientiane town, due not only to the influx of foreigners but also to refugees from the countryside seeking a safe haven. Bamboo shanties around the army bases typify the indifference of at least certain key government ministries to the direct implications of their policies.

Although the Meo more or less run the civil administration in the area of Xieng Khouang where General Vang Pao's army operates, and there are some Meo deputies in the Assembly, some civil servants and some limited broadcasts in Meo, still attempts of specific government departments to deal with the non-Lao mountain peoples exist only as plans <sup>(18)</sup>. The King remains as a symbol, not yet explicitly rejected by the Pathet Lao, who also picture the Vientiane Buddhist shrine of the Tat Luang in their textbooks and on their currency as do the Royal Lao.

The basic ineffectuality of aspects of the American aid policy and its Lao counterpart is exemplified by the American government's paying per diem directly to Lao officials so that they will be more willing to go out in the countryside to perform their duties.

American military aid combined with massive economic



and technical assistance may temporarily sustain the Royal government in its current position, but it cannot build the political infrastructure for the Lao. In this connection, it is worth noting that the withdrawal of American military forces from mainland Southeast Asia may not result in a totally peaceful situation between countries such as Thailand and Vietnam who have historically articulated their strong competitive status on what is now the territory of Laos.

#### The Mekong Project.

Many who are repelled and disgusted by the ongoing war would claim that America has no conceivable future role to play in Laos or elsewhere in Southeast Asia and that the only policy to be followed is one of total withdrawal. This <sup>neither</sup> seems necessary nor desirable. For total isolationism is no more realistic than military interventionism. It may be that programs such as that connected with Mekong River development, undertaken as a regional project under international auspices, may provide the most favorable setting for future American participation.

A good example of specific values shared by both sides to the present conflict is reflected in the Nam Ngum dam being constructed under the auspices of the Mekong Committee. During the period of the Troika government in 1962-63 when the Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong was Minister of Public Works, he signed a contract with a Japanese firm for a feasibility study. The project was found non-viable by both the World Bank and the American Aid Mission. Then after the Johns Hopkins speech of President Johnson in which an offer of aid was extended to North Vietnam in the postwar period, a group of American electric power experts took another look at Nam Ngum. The experts concluded that "if Thailand would buy power the project was viable". Construction money was raised by a group of nations, including the United States.

The project was turned over to the World Bank. Informally the United Nations Mekong Committee contacted the Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane and the unofficial reply was that the Pathet Lao still viewed the Nam Ngum as the highest priority project. Unfortunately, the resettlement scheme was bungled and the Pathet Lao began to broadcast claiming that the project was solely for the benefit of wealthy Lao and the Thai-American defense line. Some of the displaced villagers joined the Pathet Lao and there were attacks on the Lao army camp and the American Aid personnel housing at the dam site. However, the main construction site was unharmed. The Lao government and the United Nations, through the Secretary-General, appealed to the Pathet Lao to neutralize the site. Officially the Pathet Lao declined but a net effect was that both sides withdrew their troops. Unofficial approaches have been made by the Royal Lao government to the Pathet Lao to try to interest them in using the power to be generated with perhaps the Russians participating in underwriting construction of a power line northward. Dam construction proceeds and is scheduled for completion at the end of 1971. Lao are being trained to run the dam and plans are being made for irrigation projects on the Vientiane Plain with water to be pumped by Nam Ngum power. None of this may come to pass but at least such projects indicate a possible way in which Laos may begin to emerge from her present dependent position.

Some may object that the Mekong Project will merely provide a cover for the entry of large business consortia, most probably from Japan, and attempts to dominate the Southeast Asian market. These are, of course, dangers. However, the necessary technical and economic input for the desired modernization must come from outside. The problem would seem to lie not so much in its source (East or West), but in the means exercised for its local control. This control can only be exercised by self-reliant national governments and hopefully functioning regional organizations including all the



countries in the area (19).

### Concluding Thoughts.

But such developments cannot easily take place under the shadow of a large American military presence, which only inhibits the political accommodations which must occur peacefully or otherwise between the existing states in the area. This specifically includes the nature of the future Laotian policy, possibly as some sort of truly neutralized buffer state (or states) between Thailand and Vietnam. From the American point of view this does mean allowing the Southeast Asian states to seek their own accommodations in either a communist or non-communist form with or without revolution. A glance at Southeast Europe, where there are some intriguing political and social analogies, or back into pre-European conquest history in Southeast Asia itself, would both seem to indicate that a neat and tidy solution is most unlikely. But then, the risks of living with diversity are much less than those of continuing the war. We have long since come to accept the communist states of Eastern Europe and officially enjoy cordial relations with some such as Yugoslavia. They are no longer regarded as simple Soviet satellites. There is no reason to expect less of Southeast Asia.

From the long range point of view, it is possible to see parallel effects deriving both from Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao activities. In both cases modernization is occurring, although in the former it is largely unplanned and many of the side effects are unanticipated. The Royal Lao government tends to rely more on past symbols and traditional social structures with a lack of clearly anticipated future alternatives. They do, however, permit a greater degree of intellectual and social diversity. But the diverse cultures and societies which have existed in Laos are becoming increasingly assimilated into a centralized national system whether

it is of the Royal Lao or Pathet Lao variety. These separate non-Lao cultures may not become extinct but they unfortunately seem destined to lose much of whatever distinctiveness and autonomy they may have possessed in the past. In this respect, the impacts of both governments are similar.

Social change is a reciprocal process, and the continued prolongation of the war in Laos and Vietnam not only delays the working out of new and badly needed innovations within Southeast Asia but also in American society. The continuing war also progressively undermines the legitimacy of the American democratic tradition for which so much has been claimed.

All rights reserved by the author.  
Not for quotation.

#### Footnotes.

1. The Star Spangled Banner, the national anthem of the United States of America based on a battle with the English in the war of 1812.
2. Extracted from a Meo language reader (in Lao script) used in Pathet Lao areas.
3. For those with an historical turn of mind the results in revised form appeared in Le Bar F. and A. Suddard, ed., Laos, HRAF Press, New Haven, 1960.
4. Economy and Society of Laos, Monograph n° 5, Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1964, p. 135.

5. A newspaper published by an anti-war student group in the United States. Reference is made to a spring 1969 issue.
6. A conference group of American scholars concerned with research in Thailand.
7. Although many Lao have died on both sides in the intermittent war not a few "offensives" and "battles" have been created by both sides for foreign consumption.
8. Grant Wolfkill, Reported to be Alive, London, W.H. Allen, 1966.
9. "The Pathet Lao : A Liberation Party" in R.A. Scalapino ed., The Communist Revolution in Asia, Englewood-Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1965, pp. 173-197.
10. P.F. Langer and J.J. Zasloff, Revolution in Laos : The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao, Santa Monica, The Rand Corporation, September, 1969, RM-5935-ARPA, (Advanced Research Projects Agency, Department of Defense).
11. London, Oxford University Press, 1968.
12. More than 90% of the development funds of the Royal Lao government come from foreign aid. No comparable figures are available for the Pathet Lao administration, but it may be equally high as far as industrial equipment is concerned.
13. Perhaps every large-scale war is a disaster to the peoples involved. This war has been a disaster to many civilians in Indochina and psychologically to American civilization as well as to the military killed on both sides.
14. This point was dealt with at length in B. and J. Halpern, "Laos and America - A Retrospective View", South Atlantic Quarterly, Spring 1964.

15. See the author's "Economic Development and American Aid in Laos", Practical Anthropology, Vol. 6, n° 4, 1959, pp. 151-171.
16. Many Americans were withdrawn from provincial towns and villages in 1969-1970 due to a worsening security situation as well as for political reasons.
17. With United Nations assistance the Lao government is continuing its efforts in this field despite reduced American involvement in this program.
18. In the 1950's and 1960's tribal peoples have been involved from time to time in programs of rural development but not on a systematic large-scale basis. There have however been schools in minority areas. Recently relatively large-scale irrigation projects in areas such as Sayaboury, have involved Meo resettled from Xieng Khouang. Everything considered the Meo have been the most important group in this respect. At present, a number of Meo are studying in France and some have received higher education and training in the United States. They are also important in the local administration in Xieng Khouang where General Vang Pao's army operates. The Americans in common with the pattern established by the French have stressed the minority areas in their programs.
19. In the European context a Danubian Commission combines Communist and non-Communist states in that river basin area.

