

The Unraveling of the 1962 Geneva Accords: Laos 1962-1964

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This paper is a chronological summary of research undertaken mainly by historians focusing on events that transpired in Laos during the post-Geneva Accords period from mid-1962 through 1964 which set the pattern of the escalating multifaceted war in Laos that not only reignited the internal turmoil that prevailed since 1954 but which also significantly impacted North Vietnam's involvement in the South Vietnamese insurgency.

Immediately following the Geneva Agreements of 1954, Laos became engaged in internal political conflict between the Communists and divided non-Communist political groups. From the outset, the United States gradually became actively involved in Laos—essentially a buffer zone that borders on China, North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma—as part of an effort to hinder the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

Arthur Dommen summed up the hostile relationships between the two main protagonists in the emerging Second Indochina War, Washington and Hanoi:

“It would be hard to find two nations that trusted each other less than North Vietnam and the United States after 1954. The two came face to face in Laos long before they did in Vietnam. Hanoi, with its principal interest in the struggle for unification with South Vietnam, had to keep its lines open to the south through Laos. Thus, while both sides in the conflict were talking in terms of Laos, they actually meant South Vietnam. Laos was caught in the middle... (Unger 1991: 276)

Amid an escalating pattern of mistaken policies and actions after the U.S. became engaged in Laos in 1955, the Americans began to realize the complex realities that prevailed in Laos. As succinctly summarized by Douglas Blaufarb, Laos was:

hardly a country except in the legal sense. Laos lacked the ability to defend its recent independence. Its population divided both ethnically and regionally, and its elite disunited, corrupt, and unfit to lead. These failings had led to the collapse of U.S. efforts in the 1950s to help establish an anti-Communist regime in Laos,

and convinced Washington that a neutral government would be better suited to Laos conditions (Blaufarb 1972: v).

It became clear that without strong international intervention to guarantee stability in the area Laos would soon once again become a battlefield. Averell Harriman, who served as Ambassador-at-Large under President Kennedy and his chief negotiator during the Geneva conference, saw “Laos, as well as Cambodia, as buffer states providing a ‘cordon sanitaire’ between Thailand and Vietnam, and he sought to achieve their internationally recognized neutrality through the negotiation of a new set of Geneva Accords” (Unger 1991: 277).

A new chapter in the history of Laos began in May 1961 when a second Geneva Conference, co-chaired by Great Britain and the Soviet Union, convened and fourteen countries—including the three member countries of the International Control Commission (ICC)¹ assigned to monitor the implementation of the Accords: India, Canada, and Poland—met in an effort to call for the international neutralization of Laos.

Shortly thereafter, the three princes of Laos—Boun Oum Na Champassak (Rightist), Souvanna Phouma (Neutralist), and Souphanouvong (Pathet Lao) met in Zurich where they agreed in principle to establish a provisional government with representatives from each faction. The princes signed a communiqué on 22 June that included the domestic policy goal of unifying the three armed forces into a single national army, the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Laos, the acceptance of unconditional civilian aid from any country, and a prohibition against the Kingdom of Laos joining or accepting the protection of a military alliance. (Rust 2014: 28)

In September 1961, Harriman told Prince Souvanna that “a major U.S. interest was to get [the] Lao government’s cooperation in closing [the] Ho Chi Minh Trail and [the] border with South Vietnam.” Souvanna replied that once a new government and Laotian neutrality were established, “No one will cross Laos from north to south. We will not allow any country to violate our territories.” Admitting that the Pathet Lao exhibited “a certain good will toward Viet Cong passage through Laos,” Souvanna did not say how he would shut down the infiltration trails into South Vietnam. (Rust 2014: 43)

¹ The predecessor of the 1962 Accords ICC was the largely ineffective 1954 Geneva ICC which was in service in Laos from 1954 to 1958.

In actual fact, U.S. Ambassador Leonard Unger (who assumed his position in Vientiane on 25 July 1962) stated that as time passed and “in various ways—some known to me and some not—Souvanna sought to block this traffic, but in such a way that Laos would not find itself sucked into the Vietnam maelstrom, and that its hard-fought-for neutrality would not, in the larger context, be abandoned or jeopardized” (Unger 1991: 278-279).

On 21 February 1962, during a meeting with President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk “defined the U.S. objective as establishing a Lao government ‘that had a reasonable chance of remaining neutral and independent.’ If ‘the big power blocs’ could agree on the neutralization of Laos and on effective enforcement ‘machinery,’ then the kingdom could be kept from becoming a base for communist ‘action’ against other Southeast Asian countries” (Rust 2014: 82)

Fourteen months after the conference was convened, on 23 July 1962, the Geneva participants signed the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos and Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos.² The new government was officially known as the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU)³.

The Accords, which formally went into effect in October 1962, fundamentally called for a cease-fire; a coalition government comprised of Communist Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS)⁴, right-wing, and Neutralist elements; and the neutralization of the country of Laos. Neutralist leader Prince Souvanna Phouma was appointed prime minister. He sought to pursue a policy of “peace, neutrality, unity, and independence within the framework of the Geneva Agreement” (Dommen 2001: 486).

² For texts of both the Declaration and Protocol see Appendixes 1 and 2 in Rust 2014: 259-266.

³ In this paper the PGNU will be cited as the Royal Lao Government (RLG), the name given to successive governments appointed by the king during the existence of the Kingdom of Laos from 1947-1975 (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman: 1992: 122)

⁴ The Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) was an organization formed in 1956 to act as the broad political front of the Pathet Lao, the term commonly used for the pro-communist, anti-government insurgency and to the Lao Communist movement in general. Pathet Lao will be used in this paper to describe both the Communist political organization and the Lao People’s Army. (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman: 1992: 74-75, 103)

Ambassador Leonard Unger pointed out that “the new Geneva Accords of 1962 were intended to usher in a new era in which Laos would be lifted out of the East-West test and be enabled to function on the world scene as a truly neutral nation. The Geneva Accords were the principal internationally-endorsed instruments to make this status explicit and to sketch out a regime which would reinforce the neutral status. Prince Souvanna Phouma was the embodiment of this governmental neutrality” (Unger 1991: 281).

Shortly after the Geneva Accords were signed, Prime Minister Souvanna traveled to Washington where he met President Kennedy on 27 July. The visit “marked in the Prince’s mind the American acceptance of him as Prime Minister at long last. Kennedy’s Laos policy, indeed, hinged on strong support for the Prince by all agencies of the American Government and in conjunction with the Soviet Union” (Dommen 1971: 262).

Against this backdrop, Ambassador Unger viewed his assignment as being “to do whatever was feasible to carry out the provisions of the 1962 Geneva Accords and to avoid a renewal of warfare in Laos” (Unger 1991: 279), and he considered his central task as being to support “in every way possible the tripartite government and its leader” (Unger 1991: 280).

Washington’s initial estimate was that while the Communists would pursue their goal to gain control of Laos, for the time being they would seek to achieve this objective through political means. It was also expected that the North Vietnamese would seek to maintain some military presence for the purpose of supporting the Pathet Lao and for the purpose of maintaining, in an “inconspicuous” manner, infiltration routes into South Vietnam as long as the threat of American determination to prevent their takeover of Laos was present. (Hilsman 1967: 151-152)

Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman stated that U.S. policy to meet this situation was that the:

United States should comply with both the letter and the spirit of the [Geneva] agreements in every detail, that its record should be absolutely clean... If the Geneva agreements and the political solution failed in Laos, [Harriman] wanted it to be the Communist side that had to pay the political cost, including the cost in terms of damaging their goals elsewhere in Asia and Africa, and not the United States... If the Communists broke the agreements and the United States had to intervene with force, he wanted to make

sure we had all the international political support we could get” (Hilsman 1967: 152).

Hilsman went on to say that Harriman said more than once:

‘We must be sure the break comes between the Communists and the Neutralists, rather than having the two of them teamed up as they were before.’ The point was that in our judgment it was by no means certain that it would be the Communists who won the political battle for control of a government of national union, especially if the non-Communists—the Neutralists and the conservatives—worked together (Hilsman 1967: 153).

With bickering inside the newly-formed cabinet almost from the beginning, “it was questionable whether the precarious balancing act attempted by Souvanna could reunify the country and ‘return to conditions of peaceful political competition’” (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 85) in an environment that:

lacked a working unified government, a unified administration, a unified army or police force, an elected assembly respected by all factions, a program for or international verification of demilitarization and observance for foreign powers of the prohibition against introducing into it foreign military personnel. Its only unifying factor was the king, to whom the three factions paid homage. The threat of escalation of fighting among the three factions and outside intervention hung over the kingdom like a dagger (Dommen 2001: 575).

One of the key restrictions imposed by the Accords was the “withdrawal from Laos of all foreign troops and military personnel...” (Rust 2014: 254). However, only the United States and the USSR complied with these terms by withdrawing their forces⁵; the North Vietnamese retained a substantial military presence in Laos. Premier Souvanna did not press the issue. (Dommen 2001: 483) For the United States “this created a problem of how to sustain a neutral and independent Laos within the constraints imposed by the Geneva Accords that Hanoi was

⁵ Soviet military activity had been limited to providing an airlift, via North Vietnam, of weapons and supplies to the Pathet Lao and Neutralist forces beginning in December 1960. Their small mission on the Plain was withdrawn and the airlift discontinued by December 1962. Thereafter, North Vietnamese were trained to fly the planes and deliver food and ammunition to the Pathet Lao.

disregarding” (Blaufarb 1972: vii). This became a challenge for the U.S. with respect to the irregular tribal paramilitary forces which the Americans organized to assist the Lao military before the Geneva took effect. The decision was to continue supporting these units (with assistance from Thai PARU advisors⁶) at a reduced level and limit their activity to defensive operations.

Leading up to the Geneva conference, a cease-fire was declared in Laos on 3 May 1961 which, until then, had been the scene of conflict since the Kong Le⁷ coup on 9 August 1960 (after which he retreated to the Plain of Jars in December and aligned with the Pathet Lao). Nevertheless, violations were not uncommon during the course of the Geneva negotiations, although they tapered off after the Accords went into effect. Tranquility was short-lived, however, and trouble between the Pathet Lao and its Neutralist allies developed almost immediately after the official cessation of the fighting in 1962. In view of the Pathet Lao’s goal to control all of Laos, it came as no surprise that friction ultimately developed between the two factions (which had previously been allies) that transitioned into open military conflict.

Not only was the withdrawal of foreign troops important to the success of neutralization, the control of the delivery of military supplies allowed under Article 6 of the Geneva Protocol as “necessary for the national defense of Laos,” and how they were to be delivered was the subject, and topic of dispute, during a 1 September 1962 meeting between Souvanna and his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong⁸, who was the coalition’s Pathet Lao-appointed deputy prime minister (Dommen 2001: 484).

⁶ Since early 1961, the Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) served as guerrilla operations advisors to CIA-organized paramilitary forces in Laos. (Conboy 1995: 59) Thailand had been motivated since the nineteenth century to prevent Vietnamese control of the left bank of the Mekong. Thai nationals were actively engaged in fighting in Laos on the side of the government since at least the summer of 1964. (Dommen 1971: 283)

⁷ For more information about Kong Le see Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 67-68. “It was the military support of Kong Le which was an important factor in Souvanna Phouma’s taking on or holding his leadership of the government of Laos at one or two critical junctures” (Unger 1991: 284).

⁸ Prince Souphanouvong’s short biography can be found in Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 142-143. Souvanna Phouma long believed that Souphanouvong was a nationalist and not a Communist.

On 2 September, Prime Minister Souvanna wrote a letter to U.S. Ambassador Leonard S. Unger requesting the continuation of aid at peacetime levels under the Military Assistance Program (MAP) to the Rightist faction⁹ pending the integration of the coalition's three armed forces.¹⁰ On about 27 September, Unger flew to the Plain and met with Kong Le, who dropped his earlier anti-American rhetoric and instead petitioned Unger for U.S. for humanitarian aid. (Conboy 1995: 97) Subsequently, on 20 November 1962 Souvanna sent a similar request to Unger regarding aid to the Neutralist army. To fulfill these requirements the U.S. Mission to Laos¹¹ established the Requirements Office (R.O.) as a means of assisting in the maintenance of stability of the Royal Lao Government (RLG). (Dommen 2001: 484)

On 1 October, the Prime Minister requested the U.S. to continue its refugee relief program, much of the aid having been airlifted to some 140,000 refugees—mostly ethnic minorities—in remote areas of northern Laos by Air America. A formal agreement was signed on 7 October with the understanding that the U.S. would continue its humanitarian assistance for as long as there was a need. (Benson 2014)

The headquarters of both the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao were situated adjacent to each other near Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars¹², where they also shared the airfield. Both parties had heretofore been reliant upon Soviet supplies which were airlifted to the Plain by Soviet transport planes until its termination was announced in December 1962 when the planes were furnished by the USSR to each of the three factions.

Over time the Pathet Lao had been pinching off supplies to the Neutralists forcing them to seek essentials from the Americans. (Dommen 2001: 488) On 27 November in 1962, a U.S. chartered Air America C-123 aircraft delivering supplies to the Neutralists on the Plain of Jars was

⁹ It is questionable whether Souphanouvong endorsed this request. (Dommen 1971: 264)

¹⁰ For a breakdown of the size of each faction's military force as of 1962 see Dommen 1972: 243, 245.

¹¹ The U.S. Mission to Laos consisted of the U.S. Embassy, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), United States Information Service (USIS), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army Attaches. The Requirements Office (R.O.), staffed largely by retired U.S. military personnel, was a division of USAID.

¹² The Plain of Jars, located in Xieng Khouang Province, is a plateau situated in north-central Laos surrounded by mountains.

shot down, most likely by a Neutralist renegade, Colonel Deuan Sounnalath,¹³ who fell out with Kong Le and sided with the Pathet Lao in their bid to split the Neutralists and create a Patriotic Neutralist faction. “Pathet Lao leaders continued to charge that such flights were for the purpose of dropping men and munitions behind their ‘lines’ and repeatedly threatened to attack ‘intruding’ aircraft” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, January 7, 1963).¹⁴ Wishing to exert control over Kong Le’s forces, the Communists sought to make them dependent upon the Pathet Lao for their supplies, including ammunition. Another U.S. chartered aircraft was shot down in northwestern Laos on 5 January 1963 while dropping rice to a Forces Armées Royales (FAR) village in the Muong Sing area.

In a letter dated 15 January 1963, Souphanouvong “protested to Souvanna Phouma...[that the delivery of supplies by U.S.-chartered aircraft to outlying anti-Communist elements did not have coalition sanction, and] reportedly requested that the government ask the International Control Commission (ICC) to supervise such flights or, if necessary, have the aircraft withdrawn from Laos as being in violation of the Geneva Accords” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, January 18, 1963).

As noted above, the duty of the ICC was to monitor the implementation of the Accords throughout the country, an impossible task without the cooperation of the coalition members. The Pathet Lao made it clear from the beginning that ICC would not be granted access to territory it controlled except with prior approval and severe restrictions. Their role was complicated by the fact that the 1961 cease-fire agreement did not delineate the boundaries of the territory controlled by the two sides. Consequently, the ICC did not significantly influence the course of events as they unfolded in Laos. This was due in no small part to stonewalling by the ICC’s Polish delegate, who blocked the placement of ICC inspection teams on a permanent basis in disputed locations such as the Plain and other sensitive points where Neutralist, Pathet Lao, and Phoumist garrisons were in proximity, and Attopeu in the south. (Blau-farb 1972: 7; Stevenson 1972: 190; Dommen 1971: 252-253)

¹³ For a biographical sketch of Deuan Sounnalath, refer to Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 32-33.

¹⁴ For a detailed overview of the political complexities associated with U.S.-chartered Air America’s delivery of supplies for provisioning troops (including paramilitary units) and providing food and basic essentials to refugees in outlying areas see Dommen 2001: 484-487.



Political Map of Laos in 1964 reprinted from *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* by Douglas S Blaufarb, A Report prepared for the Advanced Research Projects Agency by RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA (R-919 ARPA, 1972), approved for public release per ARPA letter dated 5 August 1997.

Kong Le demanded via a radio broadcast on 22 January “that the Pathet Lao stop interfering in the internal affairs of Premier Souvanna’s Neutralist party. As a precautionary move against a Pathet Lao attack, Kong Le recently redeployed his forces in the Plain of Jars.” At the same time, Kong Le was “also considering joint defensive actions with Deputy Prime Minister General Phoumi [Nosavan’s]¹⁵ forces” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, January 24, 1963).

Increasingly, it became clear the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese mentors “viewed neutralization of Laos as merely a tactical uncontested step on its way to achievement of its real goal, elimination of the nationalists and Communist control of Laos and Vietnam... Maintaining Pathet Lao control over eastern Laos had become essential” (Dommen 2001: 488).

Ambassador Unger pointed out that:

while it had been hoped that the neutralisation of Laos would terminate the possibility of its territory being used as a route of passage from North to South Vietnam, as time went on this became in fact the central problem, as Hanoi did not respect Laos’ neutrality and did make maximum use of Lao territory for the passage of men and material into South Vietnam to pursue its aggression there (Unger 1991: 278).

During the next eighteen months, the Communists took various actions designed to bring the Neutralists under their control. Ultimately, they failed “because Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le remained committed to Neutralist independence and were able to obtain essential material assistance from several foreign sources, including the United States” (Blaufarb 1972: 22).

William Rust observed that “stepped-up planning for overt U.S. military action against North Vietnam...began in 1963 during that year’s Laotian crisis, by now a hardy perennial that bloomed every spring. The coalition government had failed to integrate the country’s three factions, and a split among the Neutralists triggered a wave of assassinations and renewed fighting on the Plain of Jars” (Rust 1985: 87).

Clashes between the Pathet Lao and Kong Le’s Neutralist Armed Forces had become almost a daily affair by early 1963. It is probable that

¹⁵ A biographical sketch of Rightist General Phoumi Nosavan can be found in Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 110-111.

dissident Neutralist Deuan was also responsible for the 12 February 1963 assassination of Kong Le's right-hand man, Colonel Kettsana Vangsouvan, who was increasingly critical of the Pathet Lao. Shortly thereafter, on 1 April, the coalition's foreign minister, pro-Pathet Lao Quinim Pholsena¹⁶, was assassinated by his Neutralist bodyguard, most likely in revenge for the murder of Kettsana. Two days later, one of Kong Le's intelligence officers was found dead. (Conboy 1995: 97-98)

Citing poor security, these events prompted the Pathet Lao cabinet members to leave Vientiane, essentially signaling the breakup of the coalition government. Accordingly, "the coalition became an artificial legal construct, in recognition of which the Prime Minister retained the names of the absent [Pathet Lao] ministers on his cabinet roster but either replaced them with appointees in an 'acting' capacity or 'temporarily' assumed their functions himself. He repeatedly assured the [Pathet Lao] leaders that they were welcome to return to Vientiane and assume the posts assigned to their party" (Blaufarb 1971: 23).

From this point onward, the situation moved steadily toward open hostilities with the ICC fulfilling neither its role of reporting violations or threats of violations nor that of supervising and controlling the cease-fire called for under the Protocols. On the political front in Vientiane, the arrangements which had been laboriously put together at Geneva and elsewhere began to disintegrate. (Dommen 2001: 490; Blaufarb 1971: 23)

The first clear and unmistakable violation of the cease-fire on a large scale took place in April 1963. Amazingly, the cease-fire committee had held 58 official meetings and fourteen informal meetings between July 1962 and April 1963 (Dommen 2001: 497). In late March, intermittent violence broke out between the dissident Deuan faction, known as Patriotic Neutralists, and the majority of Neutralist troops loyal to Kong Le. Beginning 6 April, the pseudo-Neutralists, backed by Pathet Lao units, attacked Kong Le's positions along the eastern perimeter of the Plain of Jars forcing them to abandon positions in Xieng Khouang Province—Khang Khay, Phongsavanh, the Ban Ban valley, and the province's capital, Xieng Khouangville—and drove them westward across the Plain to Muong Phanh, their new headquarters. It was reported that North Vietnamese troops were involved. (Dommen 2001: 491-492) However, the Pathet Lao claimed that the incident involved only the Patriotic Neutralists and Kong Le. In response, Kong Le's Neutralist forces managed to consolidate their hold over Vang Vieng, forcing the

¹⁶ For more information about Quinim Pholsena refer to Dommen 2001: 491.

Pathet Lao portion of the garrison north toward Muong Kassy, both of which are situated on Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. (Conboy 1995: 98; Dommen: 2001: 492; Blaufarb 1971: 22-23)

As noted by Arthur Dommen, “the experience of the [Neutralists] during their alliance with the Pathet Lao between December, 1960 [when Kong Le retreated to the Plain following the Battle of Vientiane], and the final break in April 1963—when the extent of North Vietnamese direction was revealed for the first time—had been one of shock and disillusionment” (Dommen 1971: 256).

With Kong Le in retreat, on 10 April the Kennedy White House authorized covert deliveries of military supplies to both the Neutralists—to ensure that Neutralist forces on the Plain were maintained and not weakened—and Hmong paramilitary. Attributing Pathet Lao aggressiveness and effectiveness to Hanoi, and concluding that failure to respond vigorously would be interpreted as a U.S. decision to abandon Laos, ten days later the president ordered a naval carrier task force to the South China Sea. (Conboy 1995: 99)

The Hmong paramilitary units, under the command of Colonel Vang Pao, were mobilized with support from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in January 1960. Under the coordination of Bill Lair and his Thai PARU counterpart, the paramilitary’s headquarters were set up in Long Tieng—located in a mountain valley south of the Plain—during the third quarter of 1962. Although the Plain itself was not inhabited by the Hmong, their villages were situated in the surrounding hills outside the clutches of the Pathet Lao. CIA support was briefly suspended in late 1962 following the outcome of Geneva.

With the Prime Minister’s knowledge, high-level decisions made in Washington permitted limited expansion of the Hmong guerrillas in support of Kong Le¹⁷ beginning in March 1963 following the Pathet Lao attack against Kong Le. The sudden appearance of the tribesmen on hillsides overlooking some of their major positions forced the Patriotic Neutralists and Pathet Lao forces threatening Kong Le to take defensive measures. There is little doubt that the presence of the Hmong irregulars on the high ground was a major factor permitting Kong Le to extricate himself with the bulk of his forces intact. As a result, the Neutralists maintained control of the western third of the Plain and of most of the

¹⁷ For a biographical sketch of Vang Pao see Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1972: 161.

Neutralist troops from Muong Phanh. (Blaufarb 1972: 23, 34; Conboy 1995: 98)

On 14 April, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma met with the leaders of the opposing factions in Khang Khay, the seat of Souvanna's Neutralist government, located on the Plain of Jars (Pathet Lao headquarters¹⁸ were located in Vieng Say near the capital of Houaphan Province, Sam Neua town, in northeastern Laos near the border with North Vietnam) and:

obtained their agreement on a temporary cease-fire pending efforts to arrange a negotiated settlement. Souvanna was accompanied on his one-day visit by Deputy Premier Souphanouvong, the three ICC commissioners, and the British and Soviet ambassadors as representatives of the Geneva co-chairmen, Britain and the USSR. Preceding his visit, Souvanna had sent letters to Kong Le and Colonel Deuan urging reconciliation in line with the Premier's efforts to overcome the disunity in Neutralist ranks which the Pathet Lao had been exploiting. However, restoration of a command relationship between Kong Le and Deuan, whom Kong Le despised as a traitor, was expected to be difficult. At the time, it was believed that Kong Le probably would elect to resume fighting—perhaps with Rightist military support—unless provision was made for the return of his forces to positions lost in the recent series of clashes. Pathet Lao truculence and suspicions were mirrored in a communiqué issued by General Singkapo, the Pathet Lao military commander, on 14 April denouncing penetration by “imperialist forces in liberated territory” in the Plain of Jars region and north of Vientiane, and demanding their immediate withdrawal (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 15, 1963).

Shortly thereafter:

on 16 April, Beijing raised the possibility of a renewed civil war if the U.S. “intervention” continued—a warning Hanoi presented on the previous day. The Chinese called for immediate action by the Geneva Conference co-chairmen to check U.S. “aggression.” Beijing declared that if the situation in Laos continues to “dete-

¹⁸ In addition to Souphanouvong, Pathet Lao top-level political leadership included Kaysone Phomvihane, Nhouak Phoumsavan, and Phoumi Vongvichit.

riorate,” a new meeting of the Geneva powers should be considered (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 17, 1963).

Arthur Dommen concluded that “the crisis on the Plain of Jars in April 1963 showed the worthlessness, within less than a year of the signing of the Geneva Agreement on Laos...” of the understanding the Americans had regarding the intention of the Soviets in supporting the effort to achieve the neutralization of Laos (Dommen 2001: 495). On 26 April, Khrushchev met Ambassador-At-Large Harriman in Moscow and told him bluntly “that the Soviet Union could do nothing to influence, much less enforce, any sort of behavior on the Communist signatories... From 26 April 1963 on the [Geneva] co-chairmen [USSR and Great Britain] ceased to play any effective role in deciding the outcome of the war in Laos” (Dommen 2001: 496), thereby abdicating its Article 8 responsibility for supervising implementation of the Accords (Dommen 2001: 575).

It had previously been observed that “Harriman was severely criticized by some of his State Department colleagues for relying too much on occasional appearances of Soviet cooperation” and that “Harriman and other U.S. officials failed to understand that [North Vietnamese] leaders...’were never puppets’ of the Soviet Union or the [People’s Republic of China], ‘and their ability to make autonomous decisions was never seriously compromised’” (Rust 2014: 56, 58).

Indeed, “Ambassador Unger had told [President] Kennedy that the Soviets enjoyed very little influence in Laos, which must have come as a surprise to the president, who had listened for years to Harriman’s assurances that the Soviets could be counted on to defuse the crisis in Laos” (Dommen 2001: 576).

While restarting military aid to Hmong paramilitary units was relatively easy for the CIA, Kong Le’s Neutralists were reluctant. In an effort to convince the Neutralist general of America’s good faith, Washington summoned from assignment in Africa Jack Mathews, the CIA officer whose previous posting in Laos enabled him to form a close relationship with Kong Le prior to the August 1960 coup. Dispatched to the Plain of Jars, Mathews assured Kong Le that assistance would be forthcoming provided Neutralists cooperated with the U.S., and ammunition and equipment began flowing to the Neutralists during the latter part of April 1963. (Conboy 1995: 99)

Once logistical support recommenced, by 20 April Hmong paramilitary forces, acting under direction from their CIA advisors in Long Tieng,

hauled a 75mm pack howitzer and 57mm recoilless rifle within range of Pathet Lao-held Khang Khay and Ban Liang, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) compound four kilometers to the east. Although under orders not to fire, their deployment successfully diverted Communist attention from Kong Le's men. At the same time, ammunition drops were made to paramilitary units converging north and south of Xieng Khouangville. Other Hmong elements reinforced Neutralist units at the Plain of Jars village of Lat Houang, while still other Hmong pre-positioned themselves to cut Route 7 east of Nong Pet. "If all restrictions on the [Hmong] were removed," said a 20 April CIA report, "Kong Le could retake lost ground. For now, current [Hmong] assistance lets them hold, short of a major North Vietnamese-assisted offensive" (Conboy 1995: 99).

Meanwhile, in an effort to gain the confidence of the Neutralists, Rightist General Phoumi Nosavan invited them to march alongside FAR soldiers in March during the annual Army Day parade in Vientiane, and by deploying two Thakhek infantry battalions to the Plain of Jars to reinforce Neutralist units in the Phou Theung area, a prominent hill situated on the southeastern Plain. (Conboy 1995: 99)

Nevertheless, the Pathet Lao showed no signs of easing up. After confronting the FAR units on the Plain, they repulsed a counterattack by Hmong paramilitary units against Xieng Khouangville and the central Plain of Jars. It was also revealed that three new North Vietnamese battalions had been dispatched to join the one Vietnamese battalion already positioned in Xieng Khouang Province. (Conboy 1995: 99)

The Pathet Lao attacked two ICC helicopters on 3 May 1963 as they landed on the Plain. This incident threw a pall over the talks that were underway at Khang Khay. It was not certain whether the attack was based on a decision to exclude the ICC from the Plain or an isolated incident provoked by undisciplined soldiers. The Pathet Lao placed the blame on Neutralists.

However, as the negotiations continued it became clear that "the Pathet Lao strategy was to negotiate over and over agreements on the same issues in dispute, each time leveraging a bit more advantage out of them" (Dommen 2001: 498).

Nevertheless, the ever-optimistic Souvanna Phouma was persistent. In spite of objections from the Pathet Lao, Souvanna Phouma sought to convene a Council of Ministers'¹⁹ meeting in Luang Prabang:

In a communiqué issued on 10 May, Souvanna pointed out that as premier he had the authority to request such a meeting and King Savang Vatthana had agreed to convene one. He emphasized that such a meeting would enable the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao to settle their differences and avoid war. The day before, Hanoi broadcasted a letter written by Souphanouvong on 5 May requesting the Geneva co-chairmen to convene another 14-nation conference on Laos if Pathet Lao proposals for a local solution were not carried out (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 11, 1963).

In the meantime, with the support of Hmong leader Vang Pao and a Lao army representative, it was reported that Kong Le devised plans to “retake lost Neutralist positions [previously shared with the Pathet Lao], including Xieng Khouangville, Lat Houang, Nong Pet as primary targets, with Khang Khay and Ban Ban as secondary targets.” Souvanna Phouma objected to such a course of action owing to his desire to continue to pursue diplomatic and political solutions. On 9 May, he told Kong Le that he still had “a couple of cards to play,” one of which was to seek to maintain an ICC team in the Plain of Jars on a “temporary but continuing” basis in spite of opposition from the Polish ICC representative²⁰ (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 14, 1963).

As time passed, it became increasingly clear that the Pathet Lao strategy was to recover territory occupied by the Neutralists in the 1961-1962 fighting, whether it was on the Plain, in Phong Saly Province, at Vang Vieng, or on the Mahaxay Plateau in southern Laos (Dommen 2001: 499). By mid-May 1963, the North Vietnamese had deployed about five thousand troops to protect north-south cross-border trails and to support the Pathet Lao. (Castle 1993: 62)

By the first half of May, the North Vietnamese had positioned battalions near Nong Het in Xieng Khouang Province, Khammouane Province in central Laos near the passes over the Annamite Mountains, Savannak-

¹⁹ The Royal Lao government was comprised of appointed ministers and deputy ministers presided over by a Prime Minister designated by the king to form a government. (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman:1992: 30)

²⁰ The Polish ICC delegate obstructed everything in Vientiane that did not suit Hanoi and did little that favored the reconciliation of the three Lao factions. (Dommen 2001: 482)

het Province north and south of Route 9, and Attopeu Province east of the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos. Their positions along the north-south Lao border with Laos indicated that their mission was to guard the whole border and keep the cross-border trails open. In the North Vietnamese view, these troops were under a chain of command separate from that of the troops who had been integrated into Pathet Lao battalions. (Dommen 1971: 257)

In response to the strategic moves into Laos undertaken by the North Vietnamese, Souvanna Phouma continued to:

increase pressure on the Pathet Lao to cease their military action in order to create a favorable atmosphere for negotiations among the Laotian factions. On 1 June, Souvanna publicly charged that “foreign troops”—the North Vietnamese—were spearheading the current attacks, and the next day he called on the Pathet Lao to halt their shelling of the Neutralist positions in the Plain of Jars. [Although they continued to pressure the Neutralists,] the Pathet Lao have not advanced their forward positions on the Plain of Jars (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 3, 1963).

Shortly thereafter, on 6 June, Souvanna publicly accused the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese of colluding, and two weeks later put a hold on government funding of the Pathet Lao faction. Until then Souvanna had honored an agreement with North Vietnam not to acknowledge the presence of their forces in Laos in exchange for their withdrawal after the Geneva accord. (Castle 1993: 63)

In an attack against the role of the Soviet Union as co-chairman of Geneva, in the 16 June editorial of *People's Daily*:

the Chinese sought to demonstrate the contrast between Chinese support for militancy and Soviet caution. They criticized the Russians implicitly for failing to use their ICC position to denounce the U.S. [Beijing charged that the U.S. and the West were] violating the Geneva agreements while Moscow looked on in silence [and implied that] Moscow is secretly in league with Washington. [The editorial indicated that while China] will not “look on idly while others violated the Geneva agreements...and threaten China’s security,” [they] carefully avoided a commitment to action (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 18, 1963).

Earlier, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow suggested that the Russians sought to avoid complicating their problems in dealing with the Chinese Communists at this juncture in the Sino-Soviet conflict. He felt that:

Moscow has been embarrassed by Pathet Lao aggressiveness and has been forced into a position of covering up for Pathet Lao policy which it did not fully approve. [The ambassador] doubts that the USSR could exert sufficient pressure on the Pathet Lao to permit a return to the status quo ante and the stabilization on the situation in the Plain of Jars. [It was believed] unlikely that the Soviet leaders had decided to reverse their policy in Laos and seek to destroy Souvanna's coalition government. [Rather, it was likely that they] see considerable advantages in maintaining the Geneva façade and prefer tactics of gradual erosion of Neutralist strength which avoids the risks of escalation of the fighting and a great power confrontation in Laos (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 26, 1963).

It had become apparent that Beijing did, in fact, have interests in Laos. Earlier in the year, the Chinese Communists had become increasingly active in northern Laos and had supplied arms to the Pathet Lao and that some Chinese military elements may have been operating in Houa Khong Province in northwestern Laos. Furthermore, there were reports that the Chinese were expanding their road-building activity in that area:

An all-weather road between Mengla in southern China and Phong Saly [town, the capital of Phong Saly Province,] is almost complete. Lao army officers have stated that a road net—authorized by Souvanna Phouma and to be built by the Chinese—will eventually connect Phong Saly with Muong Sing, Nam Tha, and perhaps even Ban Houei Sai [in Houa Khong Province] via Mengla. Such a net would tie northern Laos—now almost inaccessible by road from central Laos—to China's Yunnan Province. Souvanna claims that the road-construction projects are General Phoumi's business... Phoumi seems to believe that road construction will continue regardless of any objection he might make...(Central Intelligence Bulletin, February 1, 1963).

By mid-June President Kennedy concluded that Hanoi and the Pathet Lao had gone too far, and in an 18 June meeting with his national security advisors he vowed to "meet new Pathet Lao attacks with prompt counterpunches" (Conboy 1995: 99), and reviewed a three-phase action

program. The first two phases were designed to get Geneva back on track and reactivate a viable coalition. Of these, the first called for modest increases in FAR, Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF), Neutralist, and Hmong guerrilla forces. The second, slightly exceeding Geneva's limits, called for a removal of restrictions on FAR/Neutralist offensives. Furthermore, it called for United States Air Force (USAF) armed aerial reconnaissance, an increased U.S. military presence on mainland Southeast Asia, and the introduction of combat aircraft in Laos flown by third-country nationals. If these options were to fail, the third phase would involve the introduction of U.S. combat forces to Laos. (Conboy 1995: 99-100)

With this menu of options on the table, on 19 June Kennedy approved the first phase. Accordingly, over the next two months equipment was supplied for two Neutralist battalions, and six T-28B fighter-bombers were sent to replace the RLAF's aging T-6 fleet. Selecting from a revised second phase, the president also approved increased paramilitary operations, more guerrilla formations, increased use of Thai PARU advisory teams, South Vietnamese special forces operations in the Lao panhandle, and offensive operations by FAR, Neutralists, and RLAF. (Conboy 1995: 100)

With their new T-28s, the RLAF underwent an upgrade that commenced in August 1963 with assistance from a USAF Mobile Training Team (MTT) that provided initial instruction and maintenance services at Vientiane's Wattay airfield. The intended use of, and U.S. control over these airplanes was outlined in a 26 October 1963 message from the State Department to Ambassador Unger: "We are not rpt [repeat] not yet prepared to authorize use of T-28s...except in response to certain clearly aggressive Pathet Lao actions. Reaffirm, however, previous authorization for T-28s to attempt intercept and down any North Vietnam illegal supply flights. Do not rpt not approve use of bombs for cratering Route 7. Washington approval should be requested for types of other possible uses you would recommend for bombs" (Castle 1993: 65).

Pathet Lao activity accelerated in the panhandle during the first week of June that led to the withdrawal of Neutralists from Mahaxay and Muong Phine in Savannakhet Province, the latter town being the site to which Neutralists had retreated following the fall of Tchepone in April. (Conboy 1995: 99)

Shortly thereafter, evidence suggested that:

substantial numbers of political agents have been infiltrated into South Vietnam from North Vietnam since the fall of 1962. [Fur-

thermore, there had been reports of the] infiltration of groups ranging from small units up to two regiments in size. [Aware of these movements, South Vietnam's] President Diem had expressed concern over Communist activity in southern Laos which he fears might lead to greater North Vietnamese support for the Viet Cong (Central Intelligence Bulletin, July 2, 1963).

During mid-1963, CIA road-watching programs got underway along the so-called Ho Chi Minh trails which first emerged in 1959 on the Lao side of the Vietnamese border in central Laos areas east of Thakhek and Savannakhet, and in southern Laos east of the Bolovens Plateau. Known as Operation Hardnose in southern Laos, ethnic Lao Theung were recruited and trained by the CIA in leadership and road-watching techniques. Positioned near the Bolovens Plateau village of Houei Sai—which guarded the northern approaches to the plateau—the road-watchers were joined by a six-man Thai PARU detachment. (Conboy 1995: 115, 119)

With Thai support, Hardnose road watchers and instructors shifted from Houei Sai on the Bolovens to Saravane for deployment along the trails. Operating in their home districts, these tribal detachments appeared to be meeting with considerable initial success. By December 1963, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara praised the “remarkably effective” operation and suggested it be expanded (Conboy 1995: 119).

Meanwhile, in northwestern Laos along the Lao border with Thailand, Burma, and China's Yunnan Province, the CIA stepped forward in an attempt to fill a largely ineffective FAR military presence with paramilitary forces. By developing working relationships with Houa Khong Province's tribal leaders, recruitment from the multiple ethnic groups initially commenced in the spring of 1962. Before significant progress could be made the CIA's area case officer had to withdraw from Laos pending the outcome of Geneva. However, by the summer of 1963, President Kennedy's decision to increase pressure against the Pathet Lao prompted the CIA to renew its Houa Khong Province operations from Chiang Khong, Thailand, located across the Mekong from Ban Houei Sai in Laos. (Conboy 1995: 135)

Discord re-emerged on the Plain of Jars in July:

The heaviest and most concentrated barrage in the past two months against Neutralist positions on the Plain of Jars took place on the night of 17-18 July... Although no ground was lost by the Neutralists, [the FAR] and Neutralist commanders expect

further attacks. General Phoumi is making contingency plans to launch a “large-scale operation” involving the use of T-28 aircraft to attack the Pathet Lao’s forward positions on the Plain as well as enemy concentrations at Xieng Khouangville and Khang Khay (Central Intelligence Bulletin, July 19, 1963).

Given the green light for expanded paramilitary activity, the CIA devoted most of its attention to northeastern Laos. By the late summer of 1963, heavy Air America traffic utilized airstrips at sites like Long Tieng, Sam Thong, Muong Cha, and Houei Sa An to rebuild depleted weapons stores. (Conboy 1995: 100) In August, the Hmong staged a major operation to disrupt Route 7, the key access route from North Vietnam to the Plain, which was described as “classic guerrilla warfare, the harassing tactics of a lightly-armed native force against a road-bound conventional army” (Blaufarb 1972: 34).

For his part, Vang Pao sought to reinvigorate the paramilitary net that had been spread across Sam Neua Province during the months leading up to the implementation of the Geneva Accords. Earlier in 1963 the U.S. Embassy considered halting humanitarian food drops and abandoning the province. However, this did not happen and five paramilitary teams and one Thai PARU team were able to maintain a foothold in Sam Neua from which the CIA could build and expand. (Conboy 1995: 100)

In coordination with the paramilitary, FAR also began to assume a greater interest in Sam Neua and made some modest offensive advances. Other offensive movements were not so successful. A Neutralist plan in mid-August to create a commando battalion for the purpose of recapturing lost Neutralist positions on the Plain of Jars was cancelled. In September a joint FAR and Neutralist plan to retake Tchepone in the panhandle’s Savannakhet Province did not materialize. (Conboy 1995: 100-101)

Although there were forces at work to create a formal alliance between the Neutralist and FAR military leaders, Neutralists became:

increasingly disenchanted over their association with General Phoumi and were pressing to achieve a more independent position. General Amkha Soukhavong, newly appointed director of Souvanna’s Neutralist staff in Vientiane, recently said that “the only possible way for Laos to endure” was for the U.S. to furnish aid directly to the Neutralists rather than through supply channels controlled by Phoumi. He claims that at present Phoumi exercises an inordinate degree of control over the Neutralists’ mili-

tary posture. [During the last week of July, Kong Le] also expressed concern that the Neutralists could be “absorbed” by Phoumi. He, too, called for the establishment of separate supply channels in order to allow the Neutralists to remain independent of the right-wing forces (Central Intelligence Bulletin, August 3, 1963).

Souvanna once again pressed for a settlement:

Premier Souvanna is again trying to smooth the way for the Pathet Lao to resume an active role in the government. Souvanna apparently hopes to restore a semblance of stability to the coalition before he departs on 9 September for an extended trip abroad. Phoumi Vongvichit²¹, the Pathet Lao Minister of Information, arrived in Vientiane last week [of August] with the terms on which Prince Souphanouvong...says he would return himself. Following meetings with Vongvichit, Souvanna has told Ambassador Unger that he believes the Pathet Lao are “coming around” and will be prepared to cooperate much more than in the past. Souvanna therefore has agreed to the formation of a tripartite police force in Vientiane, one of the conditions Souphanouvong had set for his return. Souvanna hopes that General Phoumi, the Rightist leader, will show “good faith” and support the creation of the new police force. Phoumi may agree to some token arrangement to satisfy Souphanouvong’s conditions, but he is not likely to allow any such arrangement to undermine his control over the capital (Central Intelligence Bulletin, September 3, 1963).

There was concern, however, that the:

September attack on a U.S.-chartered C-46 resupply plane may impede Premier Souvanna’s efforts to establish a semblance of unity within his coalition government. Souvanna has been attempting to achieve such unity before he leaves next week for an extended trip. The aircraft was hit by enemy fire [near Tchepone—a key Communist logistical center for operations in southern Laos—] while on a rice-drop mission... This would be the first U.S.-chartered plane lost to enemy fire since last Janu-

²¹ For biography of Phoumi Vongvichit see Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 111-112. More can be read about his Vientiane visit in Dommen 2001: 499-500.

ary. [The crew was captured and held hostage by the Pathet Lao.] Since then, however, there have been many reports of ground fire against aircraft flying over Pathet Lao-held territory. The Pathet Lao repeatedly protested these flights. They claim that such flights do not have the approval of the tripartite government and that they constitute intervention in Laotian internal affairs. Souphanouvong has threatened in the past that any U.S. aircraft that overflew "his" territory would be shot down (Central Intelligence Bulletin, September 6, 1963).

Following his two-month trip abroad, Premier Souvanna returned to Vientiane on 8 November 1963:

apparently determined to attempt again a reconciliation with the Pathet Lao. Souvanna recently has expressed optimism that he can bring the Pathet Lao back into full participation in the coalition government. He apparently intends to renew his earlier proposal that the administrative capital be transferred, at least temporarily, to Luang Prabang, which would be demilitarized. The two Pathet Lao ministers in the coalition, Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit, have justified their self-exile in Khang Khay on the ground that their security cannot be assured in Vientiane as long as the city is under Rightist control. Although Souphanouvong last August rejected the proposal to neutralize Luang Prabang and move the coalition government there, Souvanna is optimistic that he may now agree. Souvanna claims to have received Soviet assurances of support for his plans during his recent visit to Moscow (Central Intelligence Bulletin, November 8, 1963).

On 16 November, talks convened on the Plain of Jars during which:

Kong Le and Pathet Lao General Sinkapo agreed on measures to "create a favorable atmosphere" for a new meeting between Premier Souvanna Phouma and Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong. A cease-fire is to be declared between Neutralist and Pathet Lao forces on the Plain, and further preparatory talks have been scheduled (Central Intelligence Bulletin, November 18, 1963).

Later in the month of November fighting continued, and:

right-wing and Neutralist forces continue to make gains against Communist military positions. Neutralist forces, which recently

captured Vang Vieng, north of Vientiane, have advanced 16 miles farther north and gained control [of] strategic Route 13 from the capital to this point. In central Laos, Lao army troops have [moved across the Na Khay Plateau and] captured Kam Keut, a Pathet Lao strongpoint at the western end of Route 8. Right-wing forces, reinforced by an air-borne battalion from Savannakhet, advanced toward Lak Sao, a depot on the Communists' supply route to the Nhommarath region [located only 21 kilometers from the Vietnamese border]. The Pathet Lao had not attempted major counteraction. [It should be noted that the FAR units had a weak hand because some of their Thakhek units had been deployed to the Plain of Jars in April, and the Neutralists had been evicted from Mahaxay earlier in the year.] On 30 November, the Pathet Lao military leader General Singkapo charged that the U.S. and the Rightists were attempting to sabotage current Neutralist-Pathet Lao negotiations and held the Rightists "fully responsible for the consequences" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 4, 1963).

As of 20 December:

Communists appear to be moving to counter some of the recent Rightist advances [across the Na Khay Plateau] in central Laos. On 16 December, a force reportedly consisting of one battalion of North Vietnamese troops recaptured the key road junction at Lak Sao, a position which right-wing forces had taken early this month. The Communists, however, still do not appear to want to press a counteroffensive to the point of jeopardizing chances for the talks that Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong recently indicated he wants with Premier Souvanna (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 20, 1963).

However, by January 1964 the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had proceeded to recapture the Na Khay plateau marking a significant victory over the FAR and Neutralist troops (the latter were evacuated by air to the Plain thereby ending their presence in central Laos) who sought to reduce the threat against Thakhek and to block North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam. For the second time in two years (the Nam Tha fiasco in February 1962 being the first), General Phoumi's Na Khay performance demonstrated FAR's limitations on the battlefield. (Conboy 1995: 101-102). On 31 January 1964, the director of the U.S. Joint Staff described the situation in Laos as "clearly deteriorating" (Rust 2014: 239-240).

Arthur Dommen asserted that the objective of the North Vietnamese in the Na Khay operation was to step up military pressure on the South Vietnam battlefield and that their objective was to clear the vicinity of Route 8 in Khoummouane Province in order to free it for movement of men and supplies to South Vietnam. Furthermore, they believed General Phoumi's decision to launch this operation as an escalatory move would expose the association between the U.S. and the Rightists, thereby compelling Souvanna to criticize it. (Dommen 2001: 577)

Earlier in December, on the 5th, Neutralist Lieutenant Colonel Leuang Kongvongsa was assassinated, an event that would likely:

aggravate factional differences among the Neutralist forces in Laos. Leuang, intelligence chief in the Special Military Cabinet headed by General Amkha, had been the leader of a group of Neutralist officers opposing the developing alliance between the forces of Kong Le and General Phoumi. He and his supporters maintained that the Neutralists should adhere to a strict middle-of-the-road position, dependent on neither the right- nor the left-wing factions. Many Neutralist and Rightist officers were bitterly opposed to Leuang's views, fearing that his concept of strict neutrality would only play into the hands of the Pathet Lao (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 5, 1963)²².

Nevertheless:

Neutralist and Pathet Lao representatives are continuing their efforts to negotiate an easing of tensions between the two factions. At a 20 December meeting on the Plain of Jars, both sides called for an "early" meeting between Premier Souvanna and Souphanouvong. They also agreed in principle that elements of the coalition government should be transferred from Vientiane to the royal capital at Luang Prabang, which would be neutralized and placed under tripartite control. Additionally, both factions reiterated their support for the formation of a mixed police force in a neutralized Vientiane. General Phoumi's right-wing faction, which was not represented at the meeting, is yet to be heard from. Phoumi might agree to some scheme for the neutralization of Luang Prabang. However, he has indicated that neutralization of Vientiane is contingent upon the willingness of the Pathet Lao

²² For more information about the Leuang episode see Dommen 2001: 576. His arrest by DNC on 5 November 1962 is described in Dommen 2001: 497.

to allow free movement in areas of Laos now under their control (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 23, 1963).

The meeting between Prince Souvanna and Prince Souphanouvong—their first since the ICC helicopter incident and their failed negotiations eight months earlier—took place in Sam Neua town in January 1964. Upon returning to Vientiane, Souvanna emphasized to Unger that a real effort had to be made to achieve national reconciliation. Unger felt that Souvanna was hoping for his support in the forthcoming negotiations, particularly to put pressure on the Rightists. (Dommen 2001: 578-579)

At the end of the day, the Luang Prabang plan failed to materialize, and (as noted above) in late January 1964 the Pathet Lao launched a military campaign in central Laos. Fighting also erupted between Rightist/Neutralist forces and Communist positions on the Plain of Jars. It was obvious that the three Lao factions were resigned to using military means to solve a manifestly political problem (Castle 1993: 63).

The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese were also advancing in central Laos and moving west in the direction of the Mekong valley:

Communist military pressures are causing considerable concern in Vientiane. Premier Souvanna is seeking to have the [ICC] send a team to central Laos, where Communist forces still seemed to be creeping south toward the Mekong valley. He is also looking for ways to arrange a cease-fire and a pull-back to previous positions to permit resumption of preparations for tripartite talks. General Phoumi strenuously opposed sitting down with the Pathet Lao under the present adverse circumstances. To bolster his case and to cover the recent ignominious rout of his forces [from the Na Khay Plateau] east of Thakhek, Phoumi is exaggerating the extent of North Vietnamese military intervention. He has also been hinting at possible “spontaneous” popular demonstrations in Vientiane against the North Vietnamese Embassy and Pathet Lao mission. Some conservative elements remain dissatisfied with the leadership of both Souvanna and Phoumi. Souvanna also said recently that, for the first time, he feared for his personal safety in Vientiane (Central Intelligence Bulletin, February 13, 1964).

In Vientiane there was concern that:

new frictions among Neutralist leaders may block more effective anti-Communist efforts in the Plain of Jars area. [On 17 Febru-

ary,] General Amkha, chief of Souvanna's Neutralist military cabinet in Vientiane...revealed to the U.S. ambassador a plan to establish a unified headquarters to coordinate Rightist, Hmong, and Neutralist forces in the Plain. Premier Souvanna has expressed support for Amkha's plan, observing that Neutralist commander Kong Le was not competent to handle large-scale organizational matters. Kong Le recognizes the need for a coordinated operational command, but fears Amkha's plan is part of a move to oust him from leadership of the Neutralist forces... Kong Le plans to set up a joint logistical base west of the Plain of Jars with Hmong commander Vang Pao (Central Intelligence Bulletin, February 22, 1964).

Shortly thereafter, Communist advances were directed at the positions of Hmong paramilitary forces:

New Communist military advances in the Plain of Jars area threaten to disrupt preparations for talks between the three factions. On 25 February [1964], Communist forces drove Hmong guerrillas from positions on Phou Khe, a height guarding the southeast approach to the Plain of Jars. This action occurred a day after representatives of the Rightist, Neutralist, and Pathet Lao factions met in Vientiane to plan for a Plain of Jars "summit" meeting. Ultimate Communist military intentions in this area are unclear, but one immediate objective apparently was to gain full control over the supply route to Xieng Khouang town [referred to in this paper as Xieng Khouangville] via Route 4, which was within range of Hmong mortars on Phou Khe. Control of Phou Khe would also facilitate a move against Kong Le's headquarters at Muong Phanh should the Communists wish to undertake such a major action (Central Intelligence Bulletin, February 28, 1964).

During March, even more North Vietnamese soldiers moved into Southern Laos:

the Communists appear to have deployed a sizable concentration of troops into southern Laos... [Redacted] have reported the movement of an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 men—many identified as North Vietnamese—from the region east of Thakhek southeast to the Muong Phine area. This area serves as a base for Communist operations in the southern Laos-South Vietnam border region (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 8, 1964).

Towards the end of March 1964, it became known that General Phoumi Nosavan:

is planning to intensify clearing operations against Communist units [in this area] which have been active in the lowlands east of Savannakhet in central Laos. A mop-up drive launched earlier this month [March] bogged down in the face of stiff resistance just south of [Muong Phalane] on Route 9. Phoumi now plans to renew these attacks, using bombs as well as airborne rockets, in support of his ground troops (Central Intelligence Bulletin, March 21, 1964).

With the Soviets now largely out of the picture, Souvanna concluded that the time had come for him to try to convince China and North Vietnam to rein in the Pathet Lao. (Dommen 2001: 580) In an effort to generate goodwill, Souvanna paid official visits to Beijing and Hanoi in early April. The Chinese, who had supported Souvanna's Neutralist position, "received the prime minister with suspicion and cool formality. During an official banquet Premier Chou En-Lai accused American 'imperialists'—and, by association, Souvanna—with violating the Geneva agreements. A subsequent joint Chinese-Lao communiqué was less strident, with Chou calling for an internal Lao political settlement among the Pathet Lao, the Neutralists, and the right wing" (Castle 1993: 63).

Having said that, it was reported Chou En-Lai suggested that Souvanna dissociate the Laos problem from the Vietnam problem based on his perception that Hanoi was pushing Souvanna into the arms of the Americans. It seemed that Chou's remarks might have been geared to alarm Hanoi into forcing the restoration of the coalition government, thereby facing Hanoi with the possibility of losing control over the revolution in Laos. On his return to Vientiane Souvanna "pressed on Unger the consideration that it would be particularly helpful in the new context if the U.S. would publicly take note of Chou's suggestion of dissociating Laos from Vietnam and indicate that this also accorded with American policy" (Dommen 2001: 584). Unger proposed this, but it seemed that American policymakers misread Chou's intent. Instead of engaging China to assist in confronting Hanoi on the question of war or peace in Laos, the U.S. adopted a confrontational attitude toward both Hanoi and Beijing. (Dommen 2001: 581-584)

The prime minister's call on the Hanoi leadership was even less hospitable. General Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese army, tersely

told the prince that the Vietnamese “could not tolerate the presence of troops on the Plain of Jars other than those of the Pathet Lao” (Castle 1993: 63). The North Vietnamese were seemingly not prepared to sit down and negotiate. Furthermore, Hanoi probably also stressed the need to support South Vietnam’s Viet Cong in view of the increased intervention by the U.S., thereby implying their need to use the trails that pass through Laos. (Dommen 2001: 581) Arthur Dommen observed that “it was in the course of this visit that Souvanna Phouma became fully aware for the first time of the serious intent of the leaders in Hanoi to acquire the hegemony over Indochina that the French had possessed, regardless of the cost to themselves and to the native peoples” (Dommen 1971: 259).

Upon returning from his trip to Beijing and Hanoi:

Premier Souvanna [nevertheless] appears primed for a new effort to reunify Laos. Tripartite talks between his Neutralist faction, General Phoumi’s Rightists, and the Pathet Lao headed by Prince Souphanouvong are scheduled to begin [on 17 April 1964] on the Plain of Jars. To facilitate the early return of Pathet Lao ministers to the coalition cabinet, Souvanna favors at least a temporary shift of the seat of government to apolitical Luang Prabang. He also indicates he will push for longer range implementation of the agreements of 27 November 1962, which called for an integrated national army and a tripartite police force in Vientiane. Souvanna seems to be banking heavily on renewed Communist assurances of respect for Laos’ neutrality which he received during his visits to Hanoi and Beijing earlier [in April]. These talks appear to have reinforced his opposition to any cooperation between General Phoumi’s forces and the South Vietnamese Army. He fears this would result in strong Communist reaction (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 14, 1964).

Following the assassination of South Vietnamese President Diem in Saigon on 2 November 1963, the ensuing military-led governments in Saigon presented North Vietnam with ample opportunity to expand the pace and scope of the Viet Cong insurgency. This necessitated greater use of the trails, which, in turn, led RLG and South Vietnamese military leaders to consider cooperative ventures to curtail North Vietnamese use of the panhandle. (Conboy 1995: 119)

By March 1964, the new South Vietnamese ruling junta leader, General Khanh Nguyen, hoped:

to extend limited military operations into southern Laos. He envisaged progressively more ambitious actions, starting with reconnaissance patrols... Tribal groups living on both sides of the border would be recruited for these operations... Khanh also says he intends to have South Vietnamese forces engage in hot pursuit of the Viet Cong up to a distance of ten kilometers inside Laos. He notes that an agreement for this was made several years earlier [1959] with Lao army commander General Phoumi. Khanh plans to meet with General Phoumi in Dalat, northeast of Saigon, [on 14 March]. He claims Lao Premier Souvanna agreed to the meeting, but Khanh was not sure of Souvanna's position on South Vietnamese operations in southern Laos (Central Intelligence Bulletin, March 14, 1964).

In reality, Phoumi's initiatives placed Souvanna Phouma in an awkward position given his efforts to restore the coalition government to functioning status while his deputy prime minister was agreeing to foreign intervention in complete violation of the Geneva Agreement. (Dommen 2001: 579)

By the third week of April 1964 there had been three Phoumi-Khanh meetings to work out a collaborative program. However, before the Dalat and Saigon meetings could be transformed into reality, Rightist General Siho Lamphouthacoul's 19 April coup (see below) diverted FAR's attention to Vientiane's political turmoil. Subsequently, on 5 May Washington instructed Vietnam's Military Assistance Command (MACV) to begin planning for unilateral South Vietnamese cross-border operations into the panhandle. Named Leaping Lena, the teams were recruited from Vietnam's Special Forces. (Conboy 1995: 120)

On 17 April, Souvanna Phouma traveled with Phoumi to the Plain for the tripartite meeting aimed at cooling tempers. After one day, however, little had been resolved as the Pathet Lao confronted Souvanna with inflated demands. Since the talks were collapsing, Souvanna returned to the capital on the evening of 18 April. Dejected, he confided to the U.S. deputy chief of mission later that night his intent to resign effective 20 April. (Conboy 1995: 106)

Before the talks it may have been speculated by the Pathet Lao that if Souphanouvong were to sabotage the summit and Souvanna resigned the Communists could argue that the Patriotic Neutralists constituted the core of a still-legal successor government. Alternatively, Souvanna's intention to resign could precipitate a right-wing move to overthrow the coalition.

If Souvanna then elected to stay, the Pathet Lao could then argue that he was taken over by the Rightists and no longer represented the Neutralists. (Dommen 2001: 585)

With Souvanna Phouma about to quit and the Pathet Lao taking diplomatic heat for its obstinacy, events had suddenly shifted in favor of the FAR generals. It was at this inopportune juncture that the Rightists staged a coup d'état. The coup was orchestrated by a single politically unsophisticated officer: General Siho Lamphouthacoul²³, who, under guidance from Phoumi in 1960 following the Kong Le coup, created a paramilitary police force known as the National Directorate for Coordination (DNC)²⁴ to (ironically) discourage future coup attempts. According to CIA analysts, General Phoumi reportedly planned to take over the government once Souvanna resigned, but Siho beat him to it. (Rust 2014: 243) Brought in at the 11th hour as his chief accomplice was General Kouprasith Abhay, commander of Vientiane-based Military Region 5. At about 4:00 a.m. on 19 April, intermittent gunfire broke out throughout Vientiane and, during the course of the day, Souvanna and other Neutralists were (temporarily) arrested. (Conboy 1995: 106-107, Rust 2014: 243).

Ambassador Unger, who had been attending a diplomatic conference in South Vietnam, rushed back to Laos and quickly communicated America's displeasure to the offending generals who were seeking to replace the tripartite government and who formed a revolutionary committee. Until then, the U.S. had been hard at work training and supplying the right-wing and, to a certain extent, the Neutralist military elements of the RLG. With the right wing seizing power Washington had no choice but to rebuke the Rightists or face a total breakdown of the coalition. (Castle 1993: 64)

As described by Charles A. Stevenson, the United States linked its policy to Souvanna Phouma primarily "because of his seemingly indispensable qualities. Although he had a withering power base in the Neutralist army, he was everyone's second choice as leader. He was the only prominent Laotian politician who had not totally alienated one of the major factions. He alone was held in high esteem by the French, Russians, and British—as well as by the Americans" (Stevenson 1972: 196).

²³ A biographical sketch of General Siho can be found in Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 131.

²⁴ DNC acted as a law unto itself in Vientiane, arresting and humiliating its enemies, including Neutralists. (Dommen 2001: 497)

An early resolution was unlikely in view of the fact that Souvanna and most of his cabinet members had made the decision to resign:

Souvanna, accompanied by members of his cabinet and a representative of the Rightist coup group, flew to Luang Prabang [on 21 April] to submit his resignation to King Savang. Prior to his departure from Vientiane, Souvanna informed Ambassador Unger that a majority of the cabinet earlier in the day had voted for the dissolution of the present coalition government. He anticipated that the King would accept his resignation and assume “full powers” pending the designation of someone—possibly Souvanna himself—to form a new government. Souvanna was doubtful that a balanced government could be formed under the present circumstances. He indicated that the coup group was determined to deny the Pathet Lao any cabinet posts, and noted that General Phoumi also favored their exclusion. Souvanna, observing that formation of a government without the Pathet Lao might entail serious consequences, maintained that he had argued “until he was exhausted” with the coup leaders, whom he characterized as “those young brats who know absolutely nothing” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 22, 1964).

The coup leaders, increasingly concerned over their failure to win widespread support, appear to be taking steps to ensure their control over Vientiane. General Siho, a key member of the group, reportedly has alerted nearby units under his command for a possible move into the city should trouble break out. These precautions may have been prompted by indications that General Kouprasith, 5th Military Region commander and nominal leader of the revolutionary committee, was allying himself with General Phoumi in joint efforts to curb Siho’s power. Phoumi may be readying forces for a move against the capital (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 22, 1964).

As Lao military and political leaders continued to seek ways resolve the current crisis, Vientiane remained outwardly calm:

On 22 April, King Savang affirmed to Western diplomats [including Ambassador Unger] his continued recognition of Souvanna’s coalition government and characterized [the] coup as “stupid” and “destructive.” The King said he had dissuaded Souvanna, who returned to Vientiane late [on the 22nd], to stick it out as premier. Savang also intimated that he had charged Phoumi to

clean up the situation in Vientiane by force if necessary. Meanwhile, coup leaders expressed strong opposition to any return to the status quo ante. General Siho, in a press interview [on the 22nd], expressed hope that agreement could be reached “without unnecessary bloodshed,” but warned that if the coalition did not resign it would “suffer the consequences.” The coup group has had little success in its efforts to win support from key military leaders outside the capital. The majority of the Lao generals probably were waiting for a cue from General Phoumi who is now in Vientiane and in contact with the revolutionary committee. Several of the generals were slated to meet [on 22 April] in Savannakhet, possibly to plan a countercoup to be implemented if Phoumi failed to resolve the crisis through negotiation (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 23, 1964).

The Lyndon Johnson administration²⁵, like its predecessor, had its Laos policy firmly grounded in maintaining the façade of the Geneva status quo; for this, Souvanna Phouma was indispensable. Faced with stiff U.S.-led Western resolve to back the prime minister and the probable termination of military and economic assistance, on 23 April the generals quietly agreed that Souvanna Phouma could continue to lead a coalition government, although a committee of national defense would preside. (Conboy 1995: 107; Dommen 1971: 267)

Nevertheless, the political situation remained unresolved:

Leaders of the 19 April coup are continuing to press for cabinet changes. Coup leaders are slated to meet with Premier Souvanna [on 27 April] to discuss reorganization plans. At a meeting of Rightist military leaders held on 26 April, General Kouprasith announced that Souvanna would recall all absent cabinet members to Vientiane. It is not known, however, whether Souvanna has agreed to this plan of action. This stratagem is apparently designed to force the hand of absentee Pathet Lao and left-wing Neutralists. Kouprasith said if the members do not return, their seats would be declared vacant and new individuals named. The coup leaders probably have been braced in their position by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat’s statement on 23 April expressing sup-

²⁵ Vice President Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency following the assassination of President Kennedy on 22 November 1963.

port for the coup and charging Western intervention.²⁶ General Phoumi, speaking with the U.S. Ambassador [on 26 April], indicated he would make efforts to curb any rash action by the coup leaders which might jeopardize the Geneva Agreements. Phoumi's ability to exert pressure, however, appears limited; while he still controls the national purse strings as Minister of Finance, he commands little military support in the Vientiane area. Nevertheless, General Siho is likely to come under increasing pressure—from Rightist elements as well as Western powers—to reach a solution which would keep the agreements intact. Siho might take precipitate and possibly violent action should he feel himself being driven into a corner and in danger of “losing face” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, April 27, 1964).

In the wake of the coup, infighting among the FAR leadership increased. Emerging strong was General Kouprasith, who, quietly reversing himself and throwing support behind Souvanna Phouma, had by late spring earned the reputation as the army's key moderating force and the added title of FAR deputy commander-in-chief. Strengthened, too, were Kouprasith's two main allies: Major General Ouane Rathikoun, awarded with the title of FAR commander-in-chief, and Lieutenant Colonel Thonglith Chokbenboun, General Kouprasith's staunchly anti-Communist chief of staff. (Conboy 1995: 123)

Outmaneuvered by Kouprasith in the immediate wake of the coup, Siho became a magnet for international criticism leveled against excesses by Lao military and retreated to his Phou Khao Khouai mountain redoubt northeast of Vientiane where he assumed a low profile for the rest of the year. (Conboy 1995: 123)

Oddly enough, while the right wing was now in the ascendancy, and although he had been a loyal supporter of Souvanna Phouma since Geneva (Dommen 2001: 587-588), General Phoumi emerged from the coup a loser. Two weeks after the coup, Ambassador Unger reported that “it is now quite apparent that Phoumi's position, perhaps even life, has been precarious” (Rust 2014: 245). Both Siho and Kouprasith regarded Phoumi's power as excessive and wanted a share of the general's lucrative opium, gold, and gambling interests. On 2 May, acquiescing to

²⁶ It may have been unlikely that the generals would have acted without some encouragement from South Vietnam and Thailand, both of which had doubts about the 1962 Geneva Accords and shared the Rightists' concerns about the viability of the coalition. (Dommen 1971: 266)

Kouprasith and Siho, Souvanna personally replaced Phoumi as Minister of Defense (he continued as deputy premier), established a military committee to reorganize FAR command and control, and announced plans to merge the Rightist and Neutralist military factions. (Castle 1993: 64; Rust 2014: 244-245) Ambassador Unger observed that Souvanna was “perhaps deceiving himself as to how completely he is in control” (Rust 2014: 245).

Following the turmoil in Vientiane precipitated by the coup, Laos seemed to return, in Unger’s words, “to its more accustomed range of insoluble problems” (Dommen 2001: 588). As President Lyndon Johnson described it: “It’s just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw” (Dommen 2001: 600).

During the last week of April 1964, U.S. intelligence concluded that the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao had been “working steadily to improve their capabilities for expanded and sustained military operations” (Rust 2014: 245-246). On 27 April, while Vientiane was immersed in political turmoil, the Pathet Lao launched a heavy attack against Kong Le’s forces. The assault was reportedly carried out in response to Souvanna’s violation of the Geneva accords, and launched after a series of FAR and Hmong operations against Communist positions along the border and on the southern edge of the Plain. (Castle 1993: 67) The Pathet Lao easily laid claim to Phou San, a strategic location overlooking Kong Le’s Muong Phan command post with Neutralist units positioned to the north at Muong Kheung. (Conboy 1995: 107)

Six days later, Pathet Lao and PAVN units swept east of the Plain and overran Phou Nong situated south of Ban Ban. Within the mixed garrison, Neutralist elements, totaling 152 soldiers and 737 dependents, fled northwest; the FAR contingent—slowed by paramilitary militia and thousands of Hmong dependents and refugees—escaped toward the southeast with Communists in pursuit. (Conboy 1995: 107)

As the Neutralists retreated, Ambassador Unger reported that “[the] Communists may now have just about finished [the] job, well started by [the] conservatives on April 19, of destroying [the] Neutralists” (Rust 2014: 246).

Regarding the role of the conservatives, Souvanna Phouma reportedly told Unger that on at least two occasions right-wing Colonel Thonglith, Kouprasith’s chief of staff, had been in regular touch with the Pathet Lao. However, according to Thonglith years later, it was actually Siho who had been in contact with Pathet Lao agents. In any event, “it

would seem that the [Pathet Lao]...found willing accomplices in Vientiane for the overthrow of Souvanna Phouma, who was the biggest obstacle to the success of its strategic plans” (Dommen 2001: 585-586).

Furthermore, there was speculation that Souvanna’s April meeting with Chou En Lai may have alarmed Hanoi into thinking that Beijing favored a solution wherein Souvanna would reinstate the coalition government thereby extending Souvanna’s control over the entire country (after all, he was the head of government) and precipitating Hanoi’s loss of control over the “revolution” in Laos. (Dommen 2001: 582) As Dommen points out, “the idea of dissociating the Laos question from the Vietnam question was something that went against Indochinese Communist strategy, which, since 1954, had always been to intermingle the two, diplomatically as well as on the battlefield. Chou, like Khrushchev before him, was threatening to let the Indochinese Communists down...” (Dommen 2001: 583).

Ultimately, it could be argued that Souvanna brought the crisis on himself and his government. Ambassador Unger summed it up:

Souvanna has through his own actions and also under pressures of others been maneuvered into a position in contradiction to much of what he has stood for and worked for over recent years. Because he had announced his intention to resign...and then compounded the problem by insisting (stupidly I believe) on taking the position that the Government of National Union had fallen as a result of the coup, he put himself into the hands of those who want to bring down the Government of National Union (Dommen 2001: 587).

With an accelerating conflict underway, Souvanna told western diplomats that North Vietnam, China, the Soviet Union, and ICC’s Polish member would do nothing to stop the fighting, and according to Unger, during a conversation with Souvanna Phouma on 19 May he “made it clear [that] he believed there [was] little to be gained by cranking up [the] Geneva machinery” (Rust 2014: 246). It seemed that none of the countries involved in Laos possessed the capability or desire to collaborate in a way that would put a halt to a situation that was on the verge of spiraling out of control.

On the same day in Washington, the French ambassador informed Secretary of State Rusk that France intended to ask the co-chairs of the Geneva conference to convene a meeting of the agreement’s fourteen signatories. On the following day, 20 May, French President de Gaulle

announced a French appeal to the co-chairs for an international conference to restore peace and neutrality in Laos. The U.S. resisted mainly because such a conference would lead to the introduction of an unwelcome topic, the neutralization of Vietnam. (Rust 2014: 247) Furthermore, Unger observed that any new agreement “‘could only be worse than [the] last,’ with the United States likely ‘obliged to beat an even more recalcitrant right wing (and perhaps Souvanna too) into negotiations and concessions to [the] Pathet Lao[,] which we full well know could only benefit [the] latter’” (Rust 2014: 247).

In the meantime, Washington’s response to the heavy April attack against Kong Le and paramilitary forces was to follow the Kennedy strategy: President Johnson ordered a troop alert on Okinawa and directed the Seventh Fleet, already in the South China Sea, to prepare for military action. Of more immediate importance, the Waterpump-supported Thai and Lao pilots (see below) were ordered to begin a stepped-up bombing and reconnaissance campaign against Communist positions on the Plain. While this aerial assault averted what might have been Kong Le’s complete destruction, by 16 May the Neutralists had been removed from the Plain and thousands of refugees were fleeing south. (Castle 193: 67)

Pursuant to President Kennedy’s decision in mid-1963 to ramp up America’s level of engagement in Laos, on 6 December 1963, it was recommended that a T-28 Air Commando detachment from the USAF Special Warfare Center at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, be deployed to Udorn, Thailand, to “provide realistic operational experience to RLAFF aircrews and to provide a ready operational force to augment the RLAFF as required” (Castle 1993: 66). As noted above, the T-28s were delivered to Laos beginning in August 1963.

Approval for this program was forthcoming in February 1964, and in mid-March 1964 thirty-eight U.S. Air Force officers and enlisted men of Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing—codenamed “Waterpump”—arrived in Saigon and subsequently relocated to Udorn by mid-May. Shortly thereafter, Waterpump had more than a dozen Laotian graduates, known as Team C, flying daily bombing and reconnaissance missions over Laos. To coordinate this activity the State Department established a primary Air Operations Center (AOC) at Wattay airport in Vientiane and a secondary AOC at Lao Air Force headquarters in Savannakhet” (Castle 1993: 66, Conboy 1995: 108).

During a U.S. National Security Council meeting on April 29, 1964, security aides showed President Johnson U-2 reconnaissance photographs

that “revealed major improvements in road networks [in Laos], the effect of which is to improve Hanoi’s ability to back up forces in Laos or in South Vietnam” (Castle 1993: 67). The North Vietnamese construction spread from Route 12, located east of Thakhek, down to Tchepone, a Laotian town situated directly west of the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam. Therefore, while the fighting on the Plain of Jars represented a serious escalation of Lao hostilities, it was also a useful catalyst for increased U.S. military reconnaissance of communist infiltration along the Laotian-South Vietnamese border.

In the spring of 1964, Unger authorized the placement of two CIA operatives in Savannakhet, where they were joined by their Thai road-watching advisors, labeled Team W, all of whom were previously based in Nakhorn Phanom, Thailand. During the months leading up to the November presidential elections, the Johnson administration was cautious about the steps it took in Laos; nevertheless, such a limited number of U.S. and Thai paramilitary advisors was permissible. However, a more overt U.S. paramilitary presence in Savannakhet was still forbidden. This decision affected chartered airline services, which since 1963 had been forced to stage most of their central Laos resupply drops for paramilitary and road-watch teams from Nakhorn Phanom rather than Savannakhet or Thakhek. (Conboy 1995: 120-121)

Although the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane was sensitive to aerial resupply activity in the panhandle following the downing of an Air America C-46 on an airdrop mission in September 1963, in mid-1964 the CIA took steps to create a new air transport company, Boun Oum Air (bearing the name of Rightist southern Laos leader and former prime minister Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak), using Air America aircraft with Asian crews that would serve as a cover and reduce the exposure of Americans. The Lao-based airline was short-lived, however. (Conboy 1995: 121)

In early May 1964 the State Department queried the American embassy in Vientiane on the merits of reintroducing a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)²⁷ into Laos “as a means of demonstrating U.S. intent” (Castle 1993: 73). Ambassador Unger’s opening response reflected the thin façade of U.S. activity in Laos, and he continued with a frank and somber assessment of the Royal Lao armed forces. The Ambassador ended his assessment by stating: “I recommend U.S. not

²⁷ A designation for American Military advisors sent to other countries to assist in the training of conventional armed forces and facilitate military aid.

unnecessarily involve itself in open violation Geneva Accords and the U.S. prestige not repeat not be publicly linked with such an inept and uninspired army as are the FAR/Neutralists today” (Castle 1993: 73).

Following Plain of Jars setbacks at the end of April, the Johnson administration moved to boost the RLG’s hand. “It was widely believed that the Communists would launch an attack on Kong Le’s troops on the Plain, again using the pretext that the Patriotic Neutralists were rightfully taking over the positions that had been held by Kong Le in 1962 before he sold himself to the Rightists” (Dommen 2001: 590). With the MAAG option off the table, in support of the Neutralists the U.S. embassy during the first week of May proceeded to deliver a two-month supply of ammunition and gasoline to the Plain. In addition, weapons were flown directly from Thailand to Kong Le’s men on the Plain of Jars, while most of the 1,000 Neutralist support and combat troops garrisoned around Vientiane prior to the 19 April coup were airlifted to the Plain. Finally an additional boost was provided in the form of CIA’s Jack Mathews, Kong Le’s former acquaintance, who was flown back to Laos to confer with the Neutralist leader. Mathews proceeded to persuade Kong Le to travel to Sam Thong to meet with Vang Pao. An agreement was reached between the two generals whereby Kong Le promised to continue fighting even if pushed from the Plain while Vang Pao promised that his Hmong guerrillas would offer the Neutralists sanctuary in the hills should they be run off the Plain. (Conboy 1995: 107-108)

Meanwhile, Rightist elements pressured the reorganization of the government in the face of Pathet Lao opposition:

General Phoumi on 5 May announced that Premier Souvanna had agreed to changes in the cabinet designed to “improve” its efficiency. These changes involve replacing two left-leaning Neutralists now out of the country, and naming a successor to the Foreign Ministry post held by the late Quinim Pholsena [assassinated in 1963]. Phoumi also indicated that the two Pathet Lao ministers, Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit, would be “temporarily” replaced pending their return to Vientiane. The declaration, although ostensibly having Souvanna’s approval, apparently was instigated by the leaders of the coup group. General Siho reportedly had dictated the changes to Phoumi, threatening to take unilateral action if Phoumi could not work out an arrangement with Souvanna. The Pathet Lao continued to oppose any change in the cabinet lineup. On 6 May, they charged that Phoumi’s announcement was “dangerous” and that

recent actions of the coup group were designed to destroy the coalition government. The Pathet Lao reiterated their demands for a dissolution of the coup committee and again called for a renewal of tripartite talks. Souvanna apparently is hopeful that, given enough time, he will be able to work out a solution to the crisis. He is worried, however, that the strongly rightist National Assembly, slated to convene on 11 May, will take action which could lead to a formal break with the Pathet Lao. Should his maneuverability be further limited, Souvanna might resign and leave the country (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 7, 1964).

It appeared, though, that the Pathet Lao may have been preparing to set up a separatist government outside Vientiane:

There have been recurrent reports over the past several months that the Pathet Lao had formed a shadow government as a contingency measure. Several Pathet Lao and left-wing Neutralist members of the present coalition were slated to serve as the nucleus of this government. Recent Communist propaganda suggests that the 19 April coup has lent impetus to preparations for such a move. Pathet Lao spokesmen increasingly have drawn a distinction between the "coalition government"—which they say will "exist no matter how the situation in the country develops"—and an "illegal new government" which might be imposed by the coup group. Meanwhile, the Pathet Lao have adopted a tougher line in their protests against rightist actions in Vientiane. A spokesman warned on 7 May that the Pathet Lao would fight—"maybe militarily, maybe politically"—any moves to change the cabinet without tripartite approval. He added that if the Pathet Lao were "forced out" of Vientiane there would be "partition and civil war" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 8, 1964).

Nevertheless, it was expected that Premier Souvanna was poised to name replacements to three Neutralist cabinet posts during the second week of May:

Premier Souvanna is expected to name replacements to three Neutralist cabinet posts this week. Souvanna recently indicated he would replace two Neutralist cabinet members who refused to return from abroad. He also said he would appoint a successor to Quinim Pholsena, the Neutralist foreign minister assassinated in 1963. The formal announcement is expected later this week in

the National Assembly, which convenes [on the 11th] in the capital. It will probably draw a strong protest from the Pathet Lao, who have insisted that any cabinet changes have tripartite approval. However, the Neutralist premier appears to have succeeded in postponing any sweeping reshuffle of the government dictated by the rightists. Souvanna has indicated that he will move cautiously, making additional changes only after negotiations among all factions. He plans to visit Khang Khay in the near future for more talks with Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 11, 1964).

Before General Thao Ma, the RLA commander, could send the first group of T-28 trainees to Udorn for Waterpump training, Laos plunged into full-scale war. Beginning 13 May 1964, the Pathet Lao moved into the lowland between Phou San and nearby Phou Keng, thereby fully cutting off the ground link between the Neutralist outposts at Muong Phan and Muong Kheung. The same day, Neutralist officers Sourideth and Chieng led an open revolt against Kong Le, demanding that all right-leaning Neutralist officers vacate the Plain; in a show of force, Sourideth deployed a dozen tanks around the general's Muong Phan command post. (Conboy 1995: 108)

The following day, a Pathet Lao battalion, backed by North Vietnamese and one company of Patriotic Neutralists, attacked and seized Tha Thom on 14 May, pushing FAR troops south toward Paksane. That same evening, Neutralist Lieutenant Colonel Chieng took his soldiers from its garrison on the southern Plain and declared loyalty to dissident Deuan's faction. (Conboy 1995: 108)

As the U.S. Embassy continued to downplay the Pathet Lao's moves, Communist troops on the morning of 16 May seized Phou Theung, the mountain with a commanding view of the southern Plain. Coordinating efforts with the Phou San front, the Communists then launched a double-pronged envelopment of Kong Le's Muong Phan headquarters. (Conboy 1995: 108)

Having misread the intentions of the Pathet Lao, the U.S. Embassy groped for means to counter the Communist offensive. This sparked a flurry of telegrams between Vientiane and Foggy Bottom as Ambassador Unger and Washington's policy-making establishment wrestled with the pace and scope of the U.S.'s escalating involvement in Laos. (Conboy 1995: 109)

The least controversial of the options forwarded by Ambassador Unger was a call for expanded RLAF T-28 strike operations. On 17 May, Unger granted long-awaited approval for the embassy's stockpile of bombs to be turned over to RLAF control. Later that morning, the RLAF launched its first T-28 bombing missions over the Plain, hitting Phou Keng and the former Neutralist command post at Muong Phanh and saved the day for the Neutralists. On the same day, the ambassador urged that additional T-28s be provided to Thao Ma's air force, and Washington agreed. (Conboy 1995: 109; Dommen 2001 591-592)

Another proposal presented by Unger was the use of U.S. civilian T-28 pilots, who in theory would be more skilled and aggressive than Thao Ma's aviators. With Souvanna Phouma's approval granted on the afternoon of 17 May, Ambassador Unger cabled Washington on the 18th urging the use of U.S. pilots on the basis that they would be most effective in cratering Route 7 east of Ban Ban. The ambassador pointed out that Hmong guerrillas were already cratering the road, but emphasized that T-28 ordnance would be even more damaging. Washington hemmed and hawed for two days, but on 20 May Secretary of State Dean Rusk approved Unger's request. (Conboy 1995: 109) Accordingly, CIA and Air America officials in Vientiane proceeded to recruit American civilian pilots to fly the T-28 combat missions. (Castle 1993: 69) The CIA reported that Souvanna said that he wished to make "maximum use" of T-28 aircraft to "really punish" the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 12, 1964).

On 25 and 26 May, the first U.S. T-28 group, known as the A-Team²⁸, flew their first mission and attacked targets on the Plain of Jars, including Route 7's Ban Ken Bridge which spanned the Nam Mat situated to the east of Ban Ban. (Conboy 1995: 109)

Shortly before A-Team's first mission, it was decided to form a B-Team of Thai T-28 pilots named Fireflies. To support the newly formed Fireflies, Udorn-based Waterpump commandos used the Air Operations Center (AOC) recently set up at Wattay airport in Vientiane. B-Team's targeting instructions—which were directed to conduct some sensitive strike missions originally intended for A-Team—were provided by Colonel Robert Tyrrell, the USAF air attaché who, in turn, coordinated strikes directly with Ambassador Unger. (Conboy 1995: 109)

²⁸ For identification, and as a measure of competence, the American flyers were called the "A Team," while the Thai pilots were designated the "B Team," and the Lao were the "C Team."

By 17 May, Kong Le had shifted his Neutralist headquarters ten kilometers southwest of Muong Phanh to Ban Khong on the western extreme of the Plain, and Vang Pao had begun redistributing his paramilitary forces around Khang Kho, situated in the hills off the southern Plain of Jars, in an effort to divert attention from the deteriorating Neutralists' defenses. (Conboy 1995: 108)

With only a toehold at Ban Khong, Kong Le's grasp on the Plain was rapidly weakening. By the afternoon of 18 May, nearly all Neutralist positions on the Plain had been abandoned, forcing the general to relocate his command post to Ban Na, an old Vang Pao outpost west of the Plain. Lieutenant Colonel Sourideth, who had apparently reconciled with Kong Le, led an attempted breakout from Muong Phanh up Route 4-7 in an attempt to join Neutralist units regrouping at Muong Soui. However, the Communists intercepted and destroyed most of the tank column and killed Sourideth. (Conboy 1995: 108)

Secure for the time being at Ban Na, there was a silver lining to Kong Le's losses. As was the case in April 1963 when Neutralists retreated from the eastern Plain, their withdrawal this time was also made in good order with relatively small losses of heavy weapons and small arms which the U.S. Embassy promised to replace by 26 May. Equally comforting was the fact that a large number of Neutralists from the unit of mutinous Lieutenant Colonel Chieng's unit had defected and made their way to Ban Na by 21 May. (Conboy 1995: 108)

On the other hand, Neutralist tanks and armored vehicles positioned at Muong Kheung exhausted their ammunition supply. With their escape route to Muong Soui blocked by the Communists, in early June the Neutralists torched their equipment and scattered, with some reaching Muong Soui and others heading northeast to a remaining Neutralist outpost at Muong Hiem. (Conboy 1995: 108)

By the end of May 1964, Kong Le had been driven completely from the Plain following a Communist offensive in which the Vietnamese played a decisive role. (Dommen 2001: 590) Earlier on, Souvanna had telegraphed Souphanouvong requesting the Pathet Lao not to attack the Neutralists. His response was that "the fighting was provoked by 'reactionaries' within the Neutralist ranks who attempted to place the Neutralists under the command of the Rightist faction" (Dommen 2001: 592).

The Communists were negatively impacted by their offensive in several ways. Not only did it galvanize the nationalists, it also caused refugees to flee from their villages and seek safe haven in the greater Sam

Thong – Long Tieng area operations centers for USAID and the CIA, respectively, positioned in the mountains south-southwest of the Plain.²⁹ Furthermore, it prompted the direct involvement of American T-28 aircraft in combat over Laos for the first time. (Dommen 2001: 594)

The turmoil that wracked northern Laos and intensified Communist logistical activity in both eastern Xieng Khouang and the panhandle as revealed by U-2 reconnaissance flights prompted reconsideration of the need for low-level jet reconnaissance flights over Laos. This need was considered as early as June 1963, and again more recently in March 1964, but was scrapped due to concern that it might spark Chinese intervention. The U-2 reconnaissance photographs reviewed during a 29 April U.S. National Security Council meeting were discussed in greater detail on 18 May in an urgent telephone conference involving senior White House, State, Department of Defense, and CIA officials in Washington, and Ambassador Unger in Vientiane. Unger had reported via cable to the State Department that Souvanna had rejected an American request for low-level jet reconnaissance flights over Laos. According to Unger's message, Souvanna requested the flights not take place at this time, "believing such action would be exploited by [the] communists (and perhaps others) as direct military intervention" (Castle 1993: 68). Unger agreed with the prime minister that the overflights were not a good idea. (Conboy 1995: 110)

Nevertheless, hoping for Unger and Souvanna to reconsider their position, during their phone conversation the Washington group outlined to Unger the advantages of reconnaissance activity over Laos, and ultimately told him: "We do not have in mind authorizing this [i.e., overflights] at once if Souvanna opposed, but are considering groundwork from which we might proceed in a day or two even without his consent...Would Souvanna be really upset if we did?" (Castle 1993: 68). The Joint Chiefs of Staff also believed that low-level reconnaissance could act not only as a display of resolve by the U.S., but also as a morale booster for Kong Le's troops. (Conboy 1995: 110)

Available records do not indicate when or how Unger conveyed Washington's wishes to Souvanna, but U.S. Air Force jet reconnaissance flights, code-named Yankee Team, first flew four U.S. Air Force RF-101s based in South Vietnam over southern Laos on 19 May and, two

²⁹ For more information about refugee movements during the course of the war see <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/SEAiT/USAIDLaos>, and Benson 2015.

days later, on 21 May, began flights over the Plain of Jars by carrier-based RF-8As. (Conboy 1995: 110; Dommen 2001: 394-395) According to a State Department account submitted to a U.S. congressional committee in 1969, Souvanna approved the flights on 18 May and issued a communiqué on 28 May endorsing the flights as “necessary to observe Communist violations of the accords” (Castle 1993: 68). Arthur Dommen reported that in a message to Souphanouvong on the same day, Souvanna Phouma revealed that he requested the U.S. “to help carry out reconnaissance flights intended to watch the comings and goings of all forces of invasion and aggression now operating in Laos” (Dommen 2001: 594).

The CIA reported that following talks with King Savang Vatthana on 10 June Souvanna told Ambassador Unger that he would approve U.S. reconnaissance flights, and that “he would not object if the U.S. felt it necessary to provided armed escorts on these missions” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 12, 1964). However, Timothy Castle has asserted that “Ambassador Unger recalls showing Souvanna the first photographs taken by the Yankee Team. In Unger’s words, ‘Souvanna was very stressed and upset, *but still did not want to give his approval for the flights* [Castle’s italics]. He condoned it [by not objecting]...but never really supported the flights. He never said you must not do this.’ Souvanna’s great fear, according to Unger, was that Laos would again be dragged into the greater battle for Indochina” (Castle 1993: 68-69).

Souvanna was adamant that the U.S. not state publicly that American aircraft were being sent over Laos to make air strikes. (Dommen 2001: 595) However, the State Department let the word out that President Johnson had personally authorized the use of armed escorts, and on 9 June Souvanna summoned Unger to his office and expressed his displeasure. He told Unger that “we have to act and let people say what they will. The Viet Minh do not proclaim that they have sent their troops into Laos. We should imitate them = act in silence and deny the facts. Unger agrees” (Dommen 2001: 596). By 16 June the issue was resolved and escorted reconnaissance flights continued. (Dommen 2001: 596-597)

In his dealings with Souvanna Phouma, Unger stated that “I believe we must be clear with Souvanna all actions which are likely to come to his attention,” and added that “I believe this includes virtually everything proposed except perhaps some actions in most remote southeastern areas of country within perhaps twenty-five kilometers of South Vietnamese frontier” (Dommen 2001: 600). Dommen observed that:

In dealing with Souvanna Phouma, Unger followed the rule that as long as the prime minister was not put in a position of requesting actions by the United States that violated the Geneva Agreement, he could accept them, without at the same time accepting responsibility for them, which was the important point. This position of Souvanna Phouma's argued for the minimum of public disclosure (Dommen 2001: 600).

In the meantime, it appeared as though the Russians and the Polish ICC delegate were no longer cooperative in restraining the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces:

Moscow seems to have decided there is no longer any chance of restoring the Souvanna coalition government and further efforts to this end would only antagonize the North Vietnamese and drive them closer to [Beijing]... The shift in the Soviet attitude has come on the heels of sharp denunciations by Hanoi and [Beijing] of the "merger" between Souvanna's Neutralists and right-wing Laotian forces as "illegal" and absolutely intolerable." In the face of aggressive Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese tactics since mid-May, Soviet leaders apparently found it increasingly difficult to support Souvanna's efforts to restore the situation... [On 19 May the Soviets told the British ambassador] that the USSR favors a new conference which could forestall Western military intervention in Laos and at the same time restrain the North Vietnamese and block an expansion of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. The U.S. Embassy in Paris believes the French may propose broadening the mandate of the conference to include all of Indochina (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 21, 1964).

Signs of increased dissatisfaction with Souvanna Phouma by the Rightists and the Pathet Lao became apparent at the end of May:

In Vientiane there are signs of increased Rightist dissatisfaction with Souvanna's coalition... [Rightist leaders called] for the withdrawal from Laos of the "useless" [ICC and for] military action against the Communists. Other Rightist leaders recently have criticized Souvanna for failing to provide decisive leadership. Meanwhile, the Pathet Lao line appears to be hardening toward Souvanna. In a statement broadcast [on 25 May,] Souphanouvong asserted that Souvanna had "destroyed" the coalition government and could no longer be considered part of the

coalition. Souphanouvong's charge probably reflects an increasingly tough attitude on the part of Hanoi and [Beijing]. Neither capital has backed the recent French proposal for an international conference, nor have they followed Moscow's lead in publicly declaring continued support for Souvanna's coalition (Central Intelligence Bulletin, May 26, 1964).

At the end of May, it was reported that Communist forces:

are advancing against Muong Soui, the Neutralist blocking position on Route 7 west of the Plain of Jars... Before withdrawing [on 27 May] from Muong Kheung, where they had staged a brief comeback, the Neutralists destroyed the bulk of their heavy equipment. [Also on 27 May,] a Lao army garrison at Ban Ta Viang was forced out by the Communists. In the hills west of Ban Ta Viang, the loss of another [Hmong] position points up the expanding Communist campaign to eliminate these [Hmong] guerrilla forces. The [Hmong], who have developed a significant interdiction and harassing capability, have already been driven from the majority of their positions east of the Plain (Central Intelligence Bulletin, 28 May, 1964).

During the last week of May, Kong Le reassessed the position of his troops, which held pockets from Muong Hiem (northeast of the Plain) to Vang Vieng on Route 13, and was urged by the U.S. to relocate his headquarters from Ban Na to a more-logistically accessible Muong Soui (located near Route 7), which already garrisoned Neutralist units, and he agreed to make the move during the last week of May. (Conboy 1995: 110)

Once again, the Pathet Lao proposed a new round of tripartite talks in Khang Khay:

On 31 May, Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong sent a message to Premier Souvanna and General Phoumi urging renewal of the Plain of Jars talks, which had been broken off just prior to the 19 April coup. Asserting that the situation was becoming "extremely dangerous," Souphanouvong called for "immediate" talks so as to "create conditions necessary for the government to renew its functions." The military situation remains relatively quiet in the Plain of Jars area, with little ground action reported. In other areas, Rightist forces have made limited gains against Pathet Lao position in the region southwest of Vang Vieng and have also recorded some advances near Ban Ta Viang, southeast

of the Plain. Pathet Lao forces are pressing clearing operations against right-wing units north of Muong Moc near the North Vietnamese border. The small Laotian air force is continuing active. On 1 June, air support was provided to the Rightist units near Vang Vieng and eight sorties were launched against Pathet Lao targets in the Plain of Jars area (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 2, 1964).

Concurrently, “north of Paksane, right-wing forces are moving slowly toward Tha Thom, and as of 1 June were reported within 10 miles of that village” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 3, 1964).

Meanwhile, there were further indications that the Communists were preparing to activate a separatist government:

Souvanna, apparently convinced that further dealings with the Pathet Lao would be fruitless unless preceded by “big power” agreement, has indicated he would not oppose the pull-out of the remaining Pathet Lao cabinet members from Vientiane. He also is willing to meet with Pathet Lao chief Souphanouvong, but believes that little could be accomplished by such talks at the present time (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 3, 1964).

In letters to the Geneva co-chairmen dated 3 June, Souphanouvong stated that he “no longer recognized Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister of the tripartite coalition government,” a position that was supported by the Polish ICC. (Dommen 1971: 273)

Several days earlier, on 26 May, China’s Foreign Minister Chen Yi declared that “if [Souvanna] becomes the leader of the Rightist Phoumist group, which is alleged to have incorporated both the Neutralist and Rightist groups, he will completely forfeit his political standing” (Dommen 1971: 275):

The events between May and June 1964 “brought a critical change in the Lao conflict. They appear to have persuaded both the United States and Souvanna Phouma that a policy of strict adherence to the Geneva Accords was no longer viable. Since the Communists had apparently made the same decision at some earlier point, both sides now settled down to a policy of political maneuver and limited military engagement while maintaining a public posture of continued support for the Accords” (Blaufarb 1972: 24).

The first Yankee Team reconnaissance jet shot down over Laos was on a mission over the northeastern corner of the Plain of Jars on 6 June

when it was brought down by Communist gunfire south of Ban Ban. The pilot, Lieutenant Charles F. Klussman, was flying a Navy RF-8A, and was subsequently rescued. The following day, another Navy jet flying in the same area was downed about 20 miles southwest of Ban Ta Viang and the pilot was rescued on 8 June by an Air America H-34 helicopter. (Castle Shadow 70) In both instances, Air America strike force T-28s, “officially” flying in support of the search for the downed jet flyers, were directed by CIA case officers, who took the opportunity to destroy previous identified targets. On 9 June, eight USAF F-100s demonstrated U.S. resolve by attacking a Communist antiaircraft position at Xieng Khouangville. Earlier, “on 2 June, Pathet Lao chief Souphanouvong in a message to the Geneva co-chairmen had protested U.S. jet flights as a ‘crude intervention in Laotian internal affairs’” Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 8, 1964). (Castle Shadow 70-71)

Two days after the F-100 strikes, B-Team Thai-piloted Firefly T-28s attacked the Pathet Lao headquarters at Khang Khay killing a civilian, apparently in error and without U.S. approval. Killed was a civilian in the Chinese Economic Mission building. Earlier, on 9 June, the *People’s Daily* had declared “The Geneva Agreements are in danger of being completely wrecked” (Castle 1993: 71). Shortly thereafter, the Chinese began to attack Souvanna personally, marking a turning point in Peoples Republic of China (PRC)-Royal Lao Government (RLG) relations. Henceforth, the PRC refused to recognize Souvanna’s administration as the legitimate government of Laos. (Castle 1993: 71-72)

The bombing incident drew attention to what the Chinese mission and the RLG agreed to in 1962 based on the understanding that it would mark China’s “economic and cultural presence” (Castle 1993: 72). About the same time, the RLG had agreed to Chinese assistance in building a “goodwill” road linking Mengla to Phong Saly town, the capital of Phong Saly Province. However, it became increasingly apparent that the Chinese planned to extend other new roads being built in northern Laos toward Thailand, a legitimate concern for the Vientiane government. (Castle 1993: 72)

Muong Soui, Kong Le’s new headquarters, while easier to supply since it was situated astride Route 7, was far more vulnerable to Communist attacks from either direction along Route 7. Accordingly, Kong Le began to lobby for defense assistance, and subsequently, on 26 June, the U.S. Army Attaché (ARMA), Ambassador Unger, Thai authorities, and a reluctant Souvanna Phouma agreed to the placement of a Royal Thai Army artillery unit at Muong Soui. (Conboy 1995: 110)

Also with Muong Soui in mind, the FAR General Staff met with Neutralist General Amkha and a member of the ARMA staff on 9 June to propose a sweep from the Neutralist pocket at Vang Vieng up Route 13 to Sala Phou Khoun, situated at the junction of Route 13 and Route 7, thereby enabling direct overland support to Kong Le's headquarters and forestall movement against the Neutralist stronghold at Muong Soui by Communist forces reportedly moving westward along Route 7. Souvanna Phouma offered immediate support to the concept during a meeting with U.S. officials on 23 June, and by the third week of June the operation had grown in scope from a single-pronged Route 13 sweep into three task forces—one each from Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Muong Soui—converging on Sala Phou Khoun. The joint force undertaking the operation was to be comprised of FAR, Neutralist, and Hmong guerrilla battalions. Accordingly, the operation was named Triangle. Unlike the FAR's last major operation on the Na Khay plateau, it was believed that Triangle had a reasonable chance for success. (Conboy 1995: 110-111; Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 25, 1964)

On 24 June, China's Foreign Minister Chen Yi issued:

the harshest [statement] yet made in [Beijing's] campaign to develop international pressure for negotiations on Indochina. Chen's remarks...[hinted] at the possibility of Chinese reaction in the event that the war escalates in Laos or spreads outside of South Vietnam, [but] they remained deliberately vague concerning specific actions [the Chinese would take]. Chen warned that the Chinese would "absolutely not sit idly by while the Geneva agreements are completely torn up and the flames of war spread to their side." Calling once again for negotiations, Chen declared that no one should mistake [Beijing's] desire for a peaceful settlement as a "sign of weakness and think they do whatever they please in Indochina" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, June 25, 1964).

On 27 June, five Vietnam Special Forces Leaping Lena teams were parachuted into the hills around Tchepone but met strong resistance by the North Vietnamese who left only four survivors to escape back to South Vietnam. (Conboy 1995: 120)

The CIA paramilitary program in northwestern Laos—which bordered on Thailand, Burma, and China—gained momentum as the CIA case officers in mid-1964 began relocating back to Laos from Chiang Khong in Thailand. As noted earlier, they had left Laos in 1962 in

accordance with Geneva. Nam Yu, situated in central Houa Khong Province, served as their new base, where they were joined by Thai instructors. Recruitment of local minorities began immediately, the Mien, Khmu, Lu, and Hmong being the most active of the Province's diverse ethnic groups. (Conboy 1995: 136)

By 19 July Operation Triangle, was ready to start in the Vang Vieng/Muong Kassy area. Air America transports airlifted troops and supplies, U.S. jets and Thai-piloted T-28s flew reconnaissance and strike missions, and U.S. Forward Air Controllers (FACs) were brought into Laos to direct air attacks. Air America T-28 pilots were excluded from the operation. Triangle continued for more than ten weeks and met with considerable success. (Castle 1993: 73-74)

The rival Laotian factions remained unable to agree on arrangements for tripartite talks. Souvanna Phouma had earlier proposed New Delhi as a meeting site, but on 20 July Souphannouvong rejected that option. Furthermore, on 16 July dissident Neutralist chief Colonel Deuan asserted that his "Neutralist" faction—not that of Kong Le and Souvanna—must represent Neutralist interests at the tripartite meeting and, subsequently, at any international conference. (Central Intelligence Bulletin, July 23, 1964)

During talks in Moscow between the British Foreign Secretary and the Soviets which commenced on 28 July, it was predicted that:

the Soviet leaders probably will reiterate charges in their 26 July notes to the Geneva powers that U.S. actions made it impossible for the co-chairmen to fulfill their functions. The notes warned that if the Soviet proposal for a 14-nation conference in August is rejected, the USSR will be compelled to re-examine its co-chairman role, which had become "fictitious." Since last spring, Soviet behavior has reflected a desire to disengage as much as possible from a deteriorating situation in which the USSR has had little influence. The co-chairman functions at times have complicated Moscow's relations with the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and Chinese, and have resulted in embarrassing displays of Soviet impotence (Central Intelligence Bulletin, July 28, 1964).

The three Laotian factions have agreed on Paris as a site for new talks among themselves preparatory to a reconvened Geneva conference on Laos. Premier Souvanna is suggesting that the talks begin on 24 August. Souvanna may be unwilling to press his conditions for an international

conference, including prior withdrawal of the Pathet Lao from the Plain of Jars (Central Intelligence Bulletin, August 10, 1964).

During the course of the summer—in actions separate from Operation Triangle—Neutralist forces at Muong Soui began a seesaw campaign to retake Phou Kout, the strategic ridgeline overlooking the western Plain of Jars, largely without success. One of the victims of the battle was the loss of a Firefly B-Team pilot shot down on 14 August while flying near the ridge. A second Firefly pilot, together with the Thai commander, were subsequently shot down in the vicinity of Xieng Kouangville on 18 August, and the Air America H-34 helicopter that attempted to rescue them was also shot down. After being informed of these losses, Ambassador Unger immediately authorized two Air America-piloted T-28s, armed for the first time with napalm, to cover a second Air America rescue attempt which successfully recovered the surviving chopper crew. The two Thai were not found, but it was later learned that they both died in captivity. (Conboy 1995: 113)

Because of his decision to authorize the use of ordnance as controversial as napalm, the Ambassador's action produced a major storm in Washington. Ultimately, though, the State Department relented and granted him permission to sanction the use of napalm in future emergency situations. (Conboy 1995: 113)

Otherwise, the military situation in Laos following Operation Triangle had been relatively quiet. "Government forces are now engaged in a clearing operation to remove Communist troops from the area southwest of Muong Kassy who were dislodged from positions along Route 13 during Triangle" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, August 17, 1964).

"On 15 August, Pathet Lao chief Souphanouvong agreed to Premier Souvanna's suggestion of 24 August as the date for beginning talks preparatory to a reconvened Geneva conference on Laos. [However,] Souvanna, in a conversation with the U.S. ambassador on 16 August, was pessimistic concerning the results of the meeting" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, August 17, 1964).

Meanwhile, pursuant to the failure of Leaping Lena in the panhandle, officers from FAR and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) met again in early August in southern Laos to discuss cooperation. However, with their expectations being too high, Saigon, with Washington's support, once again reviewed the possibility of unilateral action in the panhandle. Cross-border teams, to be accompanied by U.S. military advisors, were tentatively scheduled to begin operations into Laos by 1

November. However, due to various events, including a revolt by Rhade hill tribe units along the Vietnamese border, cross-border missions were rescheduled for 1965. (Conboy 1995: 120)

As noted earlier, the Yankee Team reconnaissance missions, which commenced in May 1964, were primarily a reaction to the North Vietnamese penetration of South Vietnam by moving soldiers and supplies via the corridor on the Lao side of the border. As Timothy Castle pointed out:

Washington's interest in Laos was now, therefore, merely an adjunct to the expanding war in South Vietnam. From this point forward, the U.S. would become involved in two distinct, yet interrelated wars in Laos. First, the aerial bombardment of supplies and men traversing Laos destined for South Vietnam. Second... a continuing American effort conducted mostly beyond the confines of the Geneva Accords to protect the RLG against the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao. America's war in Vietnam would now move into the shadow of the much larger struggle for South Vietnam (Castle 1993: 76).

Unger was advised about a message drafted and approved Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy dated 9 September that "early initiation [of] air and limited ground operations in [the] Laos corridor as soon as politically and militarily feasible" had been approved in Washington (Dommen 2001 601). It was decided at a meeting in Saigon on 11 September that "an ambitious program for air and ground operations in southern Laos was 'to be initiated as rapidly as operationally feasible'" (Dommen 2001: 601). Unger objected to the use of American and South Vietnamese forces, but agreed to pursue RLAFF T-28 strikes in central and southern Laos. On 29 September, Unger discussed the matter with Souvanna Phouma who reluctantly agreed provided that the civilian population would not be affected. Furthermore, Souvanna pressed for concentrating the T-28s against Route 7 in northern Laos because he feared a new Communist offensive in the Plain of Jars. (Dommen 2001: 601-602)

While the Paris talks began on schedule (24 August), it soon became evident that discussions between the Laotian leaders were making little progress:

Premier Souvanna indicated that he would not insist that the Pathet Lao withdraw completely from the positions they seized last spring in the Plain of Jars. He proposed instead that the rival

forces exercise joint control of the Plain under the supervision of the ICC. The Pathet Lao did not reject this proposal out of hand, but they would be unlikely to agree unless they could extract substantial concessions in other areas. Souvanna's room to maneuver is narrowly circumscribed, however, by the opposition of strong Rightist elements to any accommodation with the Pathet Lao. If Souvanna were to make major concessions, the Rightists might unite to overthrow his coalition government. According to the press, more formal discussions are to open today [1 September] (Central Intelligence Bulletin, September 1, 1964).

The talks between the leaders of the three factions finally broke up on 21 September, and "second echelon representatives have been designated to continue negotiations in Paris on terms for reconvening a 14-nation conference... Little progress can be expected unless there is a substantial shift in the political or military balance in Laos. The leaders were unable to agree on terms for Neutralist control of the Plain of Jars" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, September 23, 1964).

As time passed, the likelihood of successful negotiations diminished even further and, for all intents and purposes, the failure of the Paris negotiations marked the end of the second coalition government:

Premier Souvanna has told the U.S. ambassador that he is convinced that the Pathet Lao plan to launch a "major offensive" this month [in October]. Souvanna repeatedly emphasized the necessity of doing "everything possible" to interdict Communist supply routes into Laos from North Vietnam. [On 30 September,] he announced that he is withdrawing the Laotian ambassador from Hanoi. The Pathet Lao also appear to be losing hope of gaining anything through negotiations. [During the last week of September,] Prince Souphanouvong, protesting continuing Rightist military attacks..., warned that his forces intended to retake lost territory by force if necessary (Central Intelligence Bulletin, October 1, 1964).

Government forces are nevertheless still pressing the Communists in northern Laos. Southeast of the Plain of Jars, Rightist forces are consolidating their hold over recently captured villages of Tha Thom and Ban Ta Viang. In the hills to the east of the Plain, [Hmong] guerrillas are moving against a number of Communist strongpoints lost to the Pathet Lao earlier this [1964] year. To the west, the Rightist and Neutralists forces are continuing to mop up operations against Pathet Lao forces in the Vang

Vieng-Muong Kassy region (Central Intelligence Bulletin, October 1, 1964).

However, in line with Souvanna's prediction it appeared as though the Communists were building up their forces in the Plain of Jars area as the rainy season came to an end. Truck traffic along Route 7 increased, and there were indications that North Vietnamese reinforcements were moving into the Phou Kout area northwest of the Plain and the Muong Phanh area to the southeast of Phou Kout. (Central Intelligence Bulletin, October 7, 1964).

By the end of October, the North Vietnamese were continuing to reinforce their military capability in the Plain. During the last week of October, "over 200 trucks moved west along Route 7 toward the Plain, with one convoy containing 90 trucks. Although there has been no firm indication of an imminent enemy attack...the Pathet Lao, supported by the North Vietnamese, are reinforcing their front-line positions on the fringes of the Plain as well as buttressing strong-points in the hills near Xieng Khouang town to the southeast" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, October 30, 1964).

By early November, the CIA's Hardnose venture in southern Laos, which got underway a year earlier, was meeting considerable success. By early May 1964, twenty radio-equipped ethnic Lao Theung teams concentrated in the Saravane area and extended south to the Cambodian border. Six months later, Hardnose activities were expanded and greater Thai participation grew with the new Team T which was deployed at Houei Kong on the Bolovens Plateau and Ban Nong Boua, thirteen kilometers southeast of Saravane. These two detachments provided further on-site training for Hardnose road-watch teams (Conboy 1995: 120).

During the first week of November, the Pathet Lao initiated counter-moves against the Rightist military's recent clearing operation and the situation remained fluid. "South of Xieng Khouang town, reinforced Communist forces have stalled a government advance northward from positions at Tha Thom [which guards the approaches to the Mekong lowlands north of Paksane] and Ban Ta Viang. Farther south, right-wing forces east of Savannakhet have been turned back in their efforts to clear the Pathet Lao from the Ban Nong Boua Lao area" (Central Intelligence Bulletin, November 6, 1964).

One of the options being considered in Washington in the wake of the November election and limited retaliatory U.S. airstrikes underway in

northern Laos since early June, was an offensive air campaign against the trails. This course of action was first considered in late August following the 2 August Gulf of Tonkin event involving the USS *Maddox*, but U.S. presidential election considerations led to the mobilization of the RLAF, and both Thao Ma, the RLAF commander and Souvanna Phouma offered quick consent. The air war against the trails began on 14 October when three flights of Lao T-28s were dispatched from Savannakhet to hit targets around Mu Gia, one the major passes (the other being Nape) in the Annamite Mountains through which the Ho Chi Minh trail entered Laos. (Conboy 1995: 121) Between 1 October and 30 December, the RLAF flew 724 sorties. (Dommen 2001: 602)

To monitor the RLAF campaign, U.S. reconnaissance jets conducted post-strike analyses in the face of an increasing number of anti-aircraft guns positioned along the trails. By 22 November, two jets were shot down, and in response the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff approved retaliatory anti-aircraft fire suppression strikes along the Lao corridor. President Johnson agreed to pursue this course of action on 2 December, and after RLG approval Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara gave the go-ahead for two missions per week against the trails under the name Barrel Roll³⁰. (Conboy 1995: 121) The first 15-ship USAF armada departed from Da Nang, South Vietnam, on 14 December and the first Barrel Roll mission swept over northern Laos, thereby directly injecting U.S. airpower into the trails war not covered by the armed escorts policy of the previous June. (Conboy 1995: 121-122; Dommen 2001: 603)

“Communist forces appear to be stepping up their pressure in central Laos. On 2 December...enemy forces had moved onto Route 13—the principal north-south route in Laos—at a point about 45 miles northwest [of Thakhek]. Government forces [several days earlier] had abandoned several positions in that region in the face of increased Pathet Lao activity” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 2, 1964).

By the end of December, the Communists continued to strengthen their forces in several areas, and as many as several battalions of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao reinforcements:

³⁰ U.S. Air Force aerial combat activity in northern Laos was designated as Barrel Roll and targeted road traffic, depots and other military installations, and provided combat air support for the paramilitary forces on the ground. In southern Laos, aerial bombing was divided into two segments, Steel Tiger and Tiger Hound, both of which were directed at the Ho Chi Minh trails. (Blaufarb 1972: 49)

have moved south along panhandle Route 23 toward the Muong Phine area. Although their ultimate destination is unknown, they may be slated for deployment along Route 9 to the Ban Nong Boua Lao area where Rightist forces last week stepped up their military pressure. At least 500 North Vietnamese troops had been reported moving along Route 12 toward Mahaxay. [In northern Laos,] numerous vehicles continue to move into Laos [from North Vietnam] along Route 7...through Nong Het...and Ban Ban, a supply depot east of the Plain of Jars at Ban Ban (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 30, 1964).

“Meanwhile, tensions rose in Vientiane where rival Rightist factions continue to maneuver for power. There are no firm indications that either group is planning an imminent takeover, but such a move could be easily triggered” (Central Intelligence Bulletin, December 30, 1964).

Several significant changes took place in December on the American side. Ambassador Leonard S. Unger completed his two-year tour in Laos in November. He left Laos on 1 December, and was replaced on 9 December by William H. Sullivan, who had been Ambassador-At-Large W. Averell Harriman’s principal deputy in Geneva.

In summarizing Ambassador Unger’s tour of duty in Laos, Arthur Dommen observed the following:

On December 1, the day he left Laos, Unger could truthfully claim that he had succeeded in avoiding infringement on Lao sovereignty in furtherance of the American war in South Vietnam and that he had kept his word to the prime minister. His efforts on behalf of the independence of Laos were graciously acknowledged by the king. However, the situation was to change abruptly after Unger’s departure (Dommen 2001: 602).

The second turning point that affected the future U.S. course of action in Laos was November’s U.S. presidential election in the U.S., which provided President Johnson with four more years in office. Accordingly, “the White House immediately began to plot a more assertive, more aggressive course of military and paramilitary involvement in the Kingdom of Laos” (Conboy 1995: 113).

Thirdly, Douglas S. Blaufarb noted that “since the rainy season of 1964, the shooting war in Laos has followed a relatively stable pattern and a definite annual rhythm. It has been confined to an area between and

marginal to the main territories of the opposing sides—an area significant largely for political reasons. Neither side has wished to risk the political or military consequences of striking into the enemy’s heartland” (Blau-farb 1972: 24-25). Accordingly, and as anticipated, in mid-January 1965 the Communists launched their dry season push in northern Laos. (Conboy 1995: 126)

Sullivan’s tour of duty in Laos lasted nearly five years (from December 1964 to March 1969), and the conflict in Laos became known by some as “William Sullivan’s war” (Stevenson 208-209). As Timothy Castle stated, Sullivan succeeded in managing “the conflict in such a way as to preserve the façade of American adherence to the Geneva agreements.” He went on to say that Sullivan “ensured the concealment of military aid to Laos and, thereby, provided Souvanna Phouma and the Soviet Union with the political ‘cover’ necessary to ignore U.S. violations of the Geneva agreements” (Castle 1993: 77).

As the war intensified during the following years, it evolved into four intensive wars defined by Charles Stevenson as administratively distinct and only partially coordinated: the conflict fought by the Royal Army (FAR), which was generally limited to the areas surrounding the principal towns in the Mekong valley; the vigorous, deadly war fought by paramilitary units comprised of Hmong and other ethnic minorities in mountainous borderland terrain to block Communist advances toward the Mekong valley under the supervision and support of the CIA; the air war in northern Laos code named Barrel Roll at first shared by the RLAf but increasingly dominated by the Americans; and the air wars in the southern panhandle of Laos known as Steel Tiger and Tiger Hound that targeted the Ho Chi Minh trails that led to South Vietnam and which was a direct adjunct to the Vietnam war. (Stevenson 1972: 210)

Norman Hannah argued that as the Second Indochina War unwound “the United States ‘opted’ to describe South Vietnam as vital but not to block its invasion through Laos, thereby ‘keeping its options open.’ But it was impossible to defeat North Vietnam decisively in South Vietnam without stopping the invasion. As a result, U.S. determination eroded as the casualties mounted and the prospect of success receded” (Hannah 1987: xxv).

Roger Hilsman concluded that “if the guerrilla struggle in Vietnam went against the Communists, Laos would quickly become the model for a truly neutral country in which the Communists participated in a coalition government without attempting to subvert it—at least for a

while. But if the Communists won in Vietnam...then they would regard Laos as part of the prize” (Hilsman 1967: 154).

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"Anyone who thinks he understands the situation here simply does not know the facts."

Attributed to an early Ambassador to Laos, source unknown

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Frederic Benson earned his BA in History and Asian Studies at St. Olaf College (that included a semester at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand), MBA at Thunderbird School of Global Management, and MLIS at University of North Carolina/Greensboro. He worked in Laos from 1968 to 1974, two years with International Voluntary Services, Inc. (IVS) and four years with United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Most of his time in Laos was with USAID's Office of Refugee Affairs as Operations Officer, and he worked in various field locations throughout northern Laos. After leaving Laos he pursued a career in international business, which involved postings in Southeast Asia and extensive travel worldwide. Recently, Fred Benson compiled an extensive collection of mainly primary source material entitled *Indochina War Refugees in Laos, 1954-1975: Documents and Reports*, which can be viewed in digital format at the University of Wisconsin's Southeast Asian Images and Texts (SEAiT) website (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/SEAiT.USAIDLaos>). A paper on the same subject will soon be published in the *Journal of Lao Studies* (<http://www.laostudies.org/>).

