Chapter II

THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION AND LAOS

Laos, which emerged as a sovereign and independent state as a result of the settlement arrived at the Geneva Conference in 1954, was militarily and economically a weak country. It lacked political cohesion and strength to meet internal and external pressures. For this reason, the prospects of its survival as an independent state did not appear to be very bright. Dynastic, regional and political conflicts intensified by the presence of geographical, ethnic and political factors threatened the unity and integrity of the country. Since its independence there were three dominant groups in Laotian politics— the neutralists led by Prince Souvanna Phouma, the pro-Communist Pathet Lao led by Prince Souphannouvong, half brother of Souvanna Phouma, and the right wing which included among others high ranking military officers. To make matters worse, these groups had close links with powerful groups in neighbouring countries. The Pathet Lao enjoyed the support of the North Vietnamese Communists, the Viet Minh, and the right wing had close links with the leadership in Thailand. And even though Souvanna was a staunch neutralist, he was reputed to be "pro-West." The struggle between the Communist
Pathet Lao and the non-Communist factions which had begun as early as 1953 did not end with the Geneva Settlement.

The Laotian political factions did not refrain from seeking help from neighbouring countries—most notably North Vietnam and Thailand—to strengthen their own position vis-a-vis their rivals. It was quite natural, therefore, for these neighbouring states to acquire interests in Laos and play influential roles in its politics. Thailand and North Vietnam, in turn, were aligned with big powers who were engaged in a bitter Cold War.¹

The stakes of the big powers were high. However, they approached Laos from different angles. China was interested in Laos because Laos was situated on its southern borders and because North Vietnam had developed considerable interest there. But China mainly concerned itself with diplomacy and propaganda. United States policy towards Laos was conceived within the broader framework of its policy in the region. For the United States the commitment to defend Thailand and South Vietnam was an important consideration in its policy towards Laos.² Thus because of its geographical location between the Communist powers on the one hand and non-Communist countries on the other, a weak Laos became a pawn in Cold War politics.


²Ibid.
The moderate leaders, particularly Souvanna Phouma, who was premier for most of the time after Laos gained independence, generally preferred a policy of neutrality in foreign affairs. But in the Cold War environment that prevailed in the region after 1954, Laos found it extremely difficult to adhere to this course. Souvanna Phouma felt that Laos was not able to solve its problems because of constant foreign interference. The United States was interested in having a pro-Western government in Laos and its efforts were directed to this end. On the other hand, China and North Vietnam viewed the United States as their principal antagonist and its presence on their borders as a serious threat to their security. They wanted Laos to be out of the sphere of influence of a hostile power.

Laos was in no position to meet its economic and defence needs. Before 1954, it was heavily dependent on French technical and military assistance and American aid. Senator Mike Mansfield (Dem., Montana), who made a study tour of the country in 1954, observed in his report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Laos could not stand "without strong foreign ties." If the French withdrew it was inevitable that "Laos would move or be moved into the orbit of one or more of

3Ibid., p. 27.

its stronger neighbours," he said.⁵ And France was in no position to continue its financial and military support to Laos.

The Geneva Agreements permitted France to retain its military bases (at Seno and Vientiane) with a maximum total of 3,500 men and a training mission of 1,500 men.⁶ But due to the pressure of the Algerian war France could not fulfill these responsibilities. It gradually reduced the size of its forces, it was not able to effectively maintain its bases and its training mission never reached even a third of the authorized strength.⁷

The United States faced a difficult decision in 1954. Laos lacked strength and stability to preserve its independence and neutral status. It did not have adequate resources to meet its economic and military requirements. The country had very few natural resources and a small population for its size. The revenue of the government was barely enough to meet the civil expenses. The government of Laos was in no position to undertake the task of economic development


or support its military. The United States concluded that Laos faced Communist threat both internally as well as externally, and that its loss could have disastrous consequences for the West. If the United States desired to ensure the survival of Laos as an independent country, it was evident that it would have to assume the entire responsibility for its economy and defence. After the Communist intervention in Korea and Indochina, the United States was determined to prevent further expansion of Communism in the region. The Eisenhower Administration was developing a policy of firmness toward the whole region of the Far East. It was in this context that the U. S. government along with France decided to support "the complete independence of Laos" and assist it in its effort to safeguard its independence. The agreement to this effect was reached between the United States and France.

American policy in Laos was aimed at preventing a Communist takeover of the country. The United States did not consider a neutral Laos as an adequate protection for this purpose. In 1959, during the hearings before the House Subcommittee on Government Operations under the Chairmanship


of Congressman Porter Hardy (Rep., Va.), United States officials underlined the strategic importance of Laos and stressed the need to keep it non-Communist and with the "Free World." Walter Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and a key policy maker, pointed to the strategic significance of Laos and observed:

Laos is a finger thrust right down into the heart of Southeast Asia. And Southeast Asia is one of the prime objectives of the international Communists in Asia because it is rich in raw materials. . . . If they can add Southeast Asia . . . we will really have to pull up stakes and come home, because the battle will be lost.\footnote{11US Congress 86, session 1, House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Monetary Affairs of the Committee on Government Operations, Hearings, United States Aid Operations in Laos (Washington, D. C., 1959), pp. 184-85.}

He went on to emphasize that the United States was in Laos for "one sole reason," to try to keep this small country from being taken over by the Communists. It was part of the effort the United States was making for the collective security of the "Free World." The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Charles Shuff argued that Laos could be easily used as a "corridor of aggression" in Southeast Asia; particularly it could provide access to Vietnam where the United States had made "important gains" in attaining political stability and economic progress.\footnote{12Ibid., p. 46.} He asserted:

We have made substantial progress in convincing the Lao that their best interests lie in cooperating with the West and we are working hard to assist them to establish and maintain a stable,
free and representative government with the will, determination and capability of resisting the communist threat both from within and without. It is emphatically in our national interest to insure that this unstable and weak country which is of strategic and psychological importance to the free world position in Southeast Asia remain non-Communist. A non-Communist Laos serves as a buffer between the Communists and the free countries of Southeast Asia. The loss of faith in the United States on the part of the uncommitted nations of the world as well as on the part of our allies should Laos fall would be a serious American defeat in the cold war.  

Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, Douglas Dillon added that Laos had long frontiers with Thailand and South Vietnam and gave them protection from the Communists. He stressed that the United States was interested in "a Laos that will become soundly wedded to the free world and strong enough to stay there."  

As Washington was convinced that Laos was vital for the defence of entire Southeast Asia, it took the decision to assume responsibility for its defence and economic development. The decision was made in September 1954 and its implementation began in January, 1955. The United States announced in September 1955 that it would provide aid directly to the Royal Lao Government (RLG) for strengthening its defence against the threat of Communist subversion and aggression. Since 1954 the United States had sought to increase its

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13. Ibid., p. 49.
influence in Laos and to keep it a strong, non-Communist country. Eisenhower and Dulles thought that Laos was an important domino whose loss could lead to disastrous consequences.

The effort of the United States to establish a pro-Western Laos was not in conformity with the Geneva Agreements which provided for a neutral Laos. It eventually led to deeper American involvement in the political and military affairs of the country. From 1954 to 1960 American intervention in the political, economic and military affairs of Laos steadily increased. This escalation was in direct response to what the Americans viewed as a rise in the Communist threat and the deterioration in the strength of the Royal Lao Government.

American Objectives Defined

The course of action with respect to Laos as adopted by the National Security Council and approved by the President was spelled out in the NSC document No. 5612/1 dated 5 September 1956 as follows:16

43. Seek to strengthen the determination of the Royal Government to resist subversion and to maintain independence.

44. In order to prevent Laos neutrality from veering toward pro-Communism, encourage

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individuals and groups in Laos who oppose dealing with the communist bloc.

45. Develop an attitude of confidence on the part of the leaders that the UN Charter, SEATO, and US support provide a favourable basis for Lao resistance to Communist pressure and inducements.

46. Encourage and support close bonds between Laos and Thailand; including such political associations, economic co-operation, and joint military planning as feasible.

47. Support the expansion and reorganization of police, propaganda, and army intelligence services, provided anti-communist elements maintain effective control of these services.

48. Continue support of the Royal Lao Army to assure internal security and provide limited initial resistance to an attack by the Viet Minh.

49. Terminate economic and military aid if the Lao Government ceases to demonstrate a will to resist internal communist subversion and to carry out a policy of maintaining its independence.

The American objectives regarding Laos were reiterated two years later in another National Security document of 2 April 1958, which reflected some changes in the policy. The document stressed the importance of providing military assistance to the Royal Lao Government. It also placed emphasis on promoting anti-Communist and pro-Western attitude in the RLG. The document of April 1958 declared:

47. Provide military assistance for the development of Lao armed forces capable of maintaining internal security (against Communist subversion) and providing limited initial resistance to external aggression by the Viet Minh and

Hereafter this source will be cited as DOD Documents.
(Communist China). Encourage Lao to formulate and implement a broadly conceived security plan including both internal and external security which encompasses the services of all branches of the Royal Government, civil and military. . . .

49B. Encourage and support cooperation between Laos and other Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand, Viet-Nam, the Philippines, Malaya and Burma, including such joint effort in the anti-subversion, economic, communications, and military fields as is feasible.

49C. Develop greater mutual understanding and cooperation with the French in the furtherance of common Free World objectives.

49D. Strongly support an expanded UN presence and technical assistance in Laos, and make a special, intensified effort to encourage other friendly powers to provide assistance.17

During the period from January 1955 to May 1958, the United States was primarily interested in strengthening the administrative structure and economy of Laos. But after the election of May 1958, the United States attempted to steer Laos away from the position of neutrality to a course more suited to its own objectives.

The first Laotian Premier, Souvanna Phouma, was a firm believer in neutrality. However, his neutrality leaned towards the West. The popular American weekly Time felt that his government was "basically pro-Western" and the New York Times on a few occasions referred to him as a pro-Western neutralist leader.18 Under his leadership the country

17Note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on the United States Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia, NSC 5612/1, 2 April 1958, Ibid., pp. 1129-30.

18Time (Chicago, Ill.), 4 November 1957, p. 31; and New
embarked on a policy of national reconciliation and neutrality in foreign affairs. He began negotiations with the Pathet Lao in September 1954 to put into effect the Geneva Agreements. But his government fell shortly afterwards and the negotiations were broken off.

**Beginning of American Involvement**

United States Secretary of State, John F. Dulles, however, had no sympathy with Souvanna Phouma's policy of neutrality. After the Geneva Agreement the United States was beginning to replace France as chief supporter of Laos. Consequently, the views and opinion of Secretary of State Dulles became an important element of United States policy in Laos. He was deeply distrustful of Souvanna Phouma and desired to have a government in Laos which would be more sympathetic to United States objectives.\(^\text{19}\)

In February 1955, Dulles visited Laos and offered it economic and military aid. Prime Minister Katay Sasorith, who succeeded Souvanna Phouma came from southern Laos, was a moderate right wing politician and welcomed formal American assurances of support for the defence of the principles of security and mutual aid in the region. In concrete terms, the United States promised aid to Laos if it was attacked by the Communists. In return, Crown Prince Savang Vatthana

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assured Dulles that the Laotian government would resist subversion. Dulles also promised American support in military actions to subdue the Pathet Lao.\textsuperscript{20} In July 1955, an agreement was signed between the two countries under which the United States aid programme in Laos was expanded.

During his visit the American Secretary of State noted that although the Katay government was willing to take a strong line towards the Pathet Lao, a certain degree of hesitancy marked its attitude. Its attitude towards SEATO was also equally ambivalent. From this Dulles concluded that the Katay government feared that if it acted firmly against the Communists within Laos, it might "be struck by the Communists from without."\textsuperscript{21}

The Laotian leaders were not very enthusiastic about SEATO protection. "If SEATO came in there would be international war and this country would be the battleground," said one of them giving expression to the sentiment shared by others.\textsuperscript{22} During his visit in February 1955, Dulles had expressed the hope that the fear of the Royal Lao Government would be allayed by better understanding of the protective

\textsuperscript{20}New York Times, 28 February 1955.


nature of SEATO. As a result of the visit of Dulles, Laos was drawn closer to the West in general and to the United States in particular. The Katay government also established closer links with Thailand. A plan to send Laotian officers to Thailand was agreed upon. These actions which bound Laos and Thailand were in keeping with new American policy of making Thailand its close ally.

The problem of Laos was very much on the mind of Dulles. He referred to it several times during his tour of Southeast Asia. For instance, on 5 March 1955, in the Philippines, he referred to Laos as, "the little kingdom in difficult economic straits and with a common border with Communist China and North Vietnam." The United States, he said, was aware "that if Laos should fall then Thailand would find itself sharing a border with a Communist country with only a river between the two countries."  

The Asian-African Conference at Bandung (Indonesia), held from 18 to 24 April 1955, provided the Laotian leaders an opportunity for direct diplomatic talks with the Chinese and the North Vietnamese. A series of meetings took place between the Laotian, Chinese and North Vietnamese representatives. Katay in his meeting with the North Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong emphasized that external threats posed

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23 Ibid., 9 March 1955.
24 Ibid., 2 March 1955.
25 Ibid., 6 March 1955.
a danger to Laos. Both prime ministers agreed that the Pathet Lao question was of an "internal order." They signed a treaty on 23 April 1955 in which the two countries pledged adherence to the principles of peaceful co-existence. Pham Van Dong gave an assurance that North Vietnam had no designs on the Laotian provinces controlled by the Pathet Lao. Chou En-lai also expressed support for the neutrality of Laos and gave assurances that China had no intention of interfering or intervening in the affairs of Laos.26

Integration of Pathet Lao

The most difficult problem which the Royal Lao Government (RLG) faced was the problem of integrating the Pathet Lao into the national community. The Pathet Lao had established their firm control in the two northeastern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua before the Geneva Settlement was concluded. The Geneva Accords allowed them to regroup their forces in the two provinces, but these were to be returned to the control of the Royal Government. The Pathet Lao, however, retained their control and resisted the attempts of the Royal Government to establish its authorities in these two provinces with military force. The result was a de facto partition of the country. Since these areas lay along the border on North Vietnam, it was relatively easy for the North Vietnamese

and the Chinese Communists to provide them with aid. This assistance by the North Vietnamese violated the treaty between Laos and North Vietnam that the two parties had signed at the Bandung Conference. By early June 1955, the Pathet Lao were strong enough to demand complete political and military control over both provinces.  

Senator Mike Mansfield, after his return from the study mission to the countries of Indochina in October 1954, reported that the Pathet Lao were interpreting the Geneva Agreements to mean that:

they may exercise full powers in the two provinces, at least pending the holding of a general election. Compulsory political indoctrination was being enforced in the villages which they controlled. Young men from all over Laos were being brought to the provinces for training and some were being sent to North Vietnam for that purpose.  

Senator Mansfield pointed out that the terms of the Agreements were not being carried out. The withdrawal of the Viet Minh from Laos was not proceeding smoothly. As a result, severe tensions had been developing.  

A year later, after he had visited Laos for the second time in 1955, Senator Mike Mansfield in his report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported further gains made by the Pathet Lao. They had assumed "full rights of  

29 Ibid.
control" over the two provinces and established a military base there. Their forces had increased considerably and there was evidence to suggest that the Viet Minh officers and cadres held key positions in these forces. The presence of the Pathet Lao in the northern provinces posed a serious threat to the rest of Laos as they could initiate guerrilla warfare and political subversion in any area. They had already launched a number of attacks against the Royal Army. Consequently, a tense situation prevailed in the country and was likely to continue, Mansfield's report added.\(^{30}\)

The RLG was quite concerned over the occupation of the two provinces by the Pathet Lao. When he was still the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma had initiated negotiations in September 1954 with the Pathet Lao for a political settlement. But his government fell shortly afterwards. Katay Sasorith, who succeeded him, had the backing of the Americans. The negotiations were carried on by the new government but, probably because of American influence, no serious effort was made for a settlement. The chief issue was the right of the government to take the two provinces before the general elections. Katay was determined that the Royal Government's authority should extend over the whole country before the general elections which were scheduled to take place in August.

In spite of its efforts, the RLG did not succeed in extending its authority over the two provinces. Katay was reluctant to accept the military challenge of the Pathet Lao because he feared he might antagonize their supporter, the North Vietnamese Communists. In June 1955, however, the Katay government decided to use force to defend its rights, a move strongly supported by the United States.\textsuperscript{31} The State Department feared that the North Vietnamese support to the Pathet Lao would lead to a permanent division of the country.\textsuperscript{32} The International Control Commission (ICC) eventually succeeded in bringing both the parties together in Rangoon in October 1955.\textsuperscript{33} An agreement was reached on a military ceasefire in the two disputed provinces. Subsequently, negotiations were held in Vientiane. No settlement could be reached over the issue of participation of the Pathet Lao in the national elections. They demanded far-reaching changes in the electoral laws and a mixed supervisory commission to control elections. Katay insisted that the two provinces be returned to the Royal administration before other aspects of the settlement could be considered. The talks broke down.\textsuperscript{34} On 6 November a spokesman of the RLG

\textsuperscript{31}New York Times, 23 June 1955.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{34}New York Times, 11 November 1955; and Brian Crozier,
told the ICC that it had been unable to reach agreement with
the Pathet Lao and would hold national elections without
them. 35 The Pathet Lao boycotted the elections which were
held on 25 December without the participation of the two
provinces under their control. Katay's National Progressive
Party won twenty-one of the thirty-nine seats in the
National Assembly. 36 Although the election signified a pro-
Western majority, the fact that large portions of the
country had not participated in it provided grounds for
contesting the outcome. 37

In the meantime, Royal Government troops and the Pathet
Lao forces repeatedly clashed and fighting broke out in the
contested provinces in July 1955. There were numerous
incidents during the subsequent years but none was so
significant as to cause concern to the government in Laos
until December 1958. Nor did the Royal Lao army throw its
weight in Laotian politics until the end of 1958. The
Pathet Lao continued their efforts to consolidate their hold
in the two northeastern provinces. Although a de facto
division was materializing, the RLG did not acknowledge this

"The International Situation in Indochina," Pacific Affairs
(Richmond, Va.), vol. 29, pp. 316-17.

36 Ibid., 9 January 1956.
37 Barber, n. 27, p. 116.
Activities of the Laotian Communists and the gains made by them caused concern among the United States diplomats. Aided by the two Communist neighbouring countries, the Laotian Communists were seeking to increase their influence. The Americans considered a Communist foothold in Laos a "potential Communist beachhead." 39

In the extension of his remarks to the Senate in June 1955, Senator Mike Mansfield pointed to the danger inherent in the Laotian situation: "The refusal of the Pathet Lao dissidents to permit the government authorities to reoccupy the northern provinces had the effect of dividing the country into two parts." 40 Senator William F. Knowland (Rep., Cal.), a staunch anti-Communist, expressed concern over the situation in Laos. He demanded that the matter be brought before the United Nations General Assembly if the Laotian Communists did not comply with the provisions of the Geneva Agreement. 41

Determined to prevent a Communist takeover of Laos, the United States sought to strengthen the RLG by a large-scale programme of military and economic assistance. The aid programme began early in 1955. Congressmen in general were

39 Ibid., 5 July 1955.
41 Ibid., p. 9217.
in favor of assisting Southeast Asian countries which they thought were trying to maintain their independence against the Communists. Senator Mansfield in his remarks in the Senate in 1956, stressed the need for continued assistance in Southeast Asia and especially in Laos. In support of his argument he inserted in the Congressional Record an article by Alan S. Emory, entitled "Continued Aid Need for Southeast Asia." The article was published in Watertown Daily Times, a daily from Watertown (N. Y.) and was the result of a conversation Emory had with Charles W. Yost, who was the United States Ambassador in Laos in 1956.42

During the fall of 1954 and throughout the following year, the International Control Commission tried to reconcile the differences between the two parties but was not able to accomplish much. The ICC only succeeded in provoking the Laotian government which complained in June that when the rebels violated the Geneva Agreement, the ICC intervened ineffectively.43 In November it complained again that the ICC was not supervising the Indochinese truce adequately.44

Members of the Commission admitted that they were confronted by insurmountable difficulties that prevented them from policing the Laotian armistice adequately. Most of the population lived in the valleys of otherwise rugged

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42 Congressional Record, vol. 102, p. 11077.
44 Ibid.
country. The members of the Commission also noted that the communications were bad, that it was often hard to distinguish between Laotians and Laotian speaking Vietnamese, and that it was also difficult to say whether a man tilling fields by day was a guerrilla at night. Although the Commission's Indian representative proved to be a stabilizing factor, the Polish and Canadian members could not agree on basic matters. 45

In January 1956 the ICC pushed for an early political settlement according to the terms of the Geneva Agreement and urged that the two disputed provinces be returned to the jurisdiction of the Royal Government. After the Pathet Lao rejected the ICC resolution, the ICC issued a scathing report to the co-chairmen of the Commission, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. On 7 January the Commission passed a strongly worded resolution calling for the integration of the Pathet Lao into the national community as envisaged in the Geneva Settlement. 46 In response, the Pathet Lao issued a letter dated 25 January 1956 containing counter allegations against the Royal Government for violating the Geneva Settlement. As a result, the Commission informed the Pathet Lao that it could only assume from this reaction that this

45 The Times (London), 21 March 1956.

meant rejection of the resolution.47

The National Coalition: The U. S. Response

The political scene in Laos changed with the change in ministry. Souvanna again became Prime Minister in 1956. Souvanna and his new cabinet regarded the settlement with the Pathet Lao as essential to stability in Laos and began negotiations with them. These negotiations resulted in provisional agreements in early August 1956 between Souvanna Phouma and Souphannouvong for the cessation of all hostile acts by each side toward the other. Souvanna Phouma agreed that his government would pursue a neutral policy in foreign affairs, the Pathet Lao would be permitted to exist as a political party, supplementary elections would be held in which the new Lao Hak Sat (NLHS), the political front of the Pathet Lao, would be allowed to participate and a government of national union would be set up. The Pathet Lao agreed to transfer the two northeastern provinces to the Royal Government and to place its troops under the royal control. In the communique issued by them, the two leaders agreed that the Laotian government would be guided in its various policies by the five principles of peaceful coexistence.48 The agreements were confirmed in December


1956. On 28 December, the government of Premier Souvanna Phouma announced the signing of an agreement for the integration of the Pathet Lao with the rest of the country.49

Shortly after the agreements were reached in August, Souvanna Phouma led a delegation of the Laotian government to Peking and Hanoi. For this, however, he was promptly dubbed as a "left-winger" by Washington, Bangkok and Saigon. Souvanna Phouma's real purpose in undertaking the journey was to demonstrate his neutrality and desire for agreement with the Pathet Lao. The Laotians were successful in getting China to reaffirm its promise of non-intervention made at the Bandung Conference. In a joint communique signed with Premier Chou En-lai, Souvanna stressed that Laos would pursue a policy of peaceful neutrality and would not join any military alliance if Laos' security were not threatened.50

In turn, the Laotians insisted that China and North Vietnam honour their pledge given at Bandung. Chinese demands required that Laos prohibit the building of American bases and the introduction of American advisors in Laotian territory. They also wanted Laos to agree to the establishment of a Chinese Consulate General in Vientiane. Peking, however,

in Laos, n. 46, p. 9; and The Times, 9 August 1956.


maintained that it would not object to the construction in Laos of "any base permitted under the Geneva Agreements." This was obviously a reference to the French bases. What China had very much on its mind was American bases in the proximity of its own border. American commentators have pointed out that before the crisis of 1959, China had attached priority to East Asia in comparison with Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia its objective at this stage was mainly confined to preventing open hostilities. The Laotians were willing to agree to the first two demands but were firm in rejecting the demand for the opening of the Red Chinese Consulate General. Souvanna Phouma explained that this would be a violation of the policy of neutrality. In Peking, Souvanna insisted that he opposed further Laotian involvement with SEATO. As he explained, the Laos protocol had been formulated without consulting Laotians; furthermore, acceptance of SEATO "umbrella" was synonymous with violation of the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Souvanna reaffirmed this position during his visit to Saigon, on 9 September 1956. However, Katay Sasorith, when he was Prime Minister, had

51Ibid.


stated in March 1956:

Laos has common borders with Red China and North Vietnam and, therefore, is much exposed to Communist menaces. . . . Though Laos is not a signatory of the Manila Pact, it lies within the protective orbit of the Treaty. It is satisfying to receive the promises of the United States (with regard) to their will to defend the principles of security and mutual aid in this part of the world. . . .

Thus Souvanna took an altogether different posture from his predecessor, especially with regard to SEATO.

In Hanoi Souvanna Phouma could again get a declaration in support of the Laotian independence and integrity without acceding to the North Vietnamese demand for diplomatic recognition. The visits to Peking and Hanoi had one objective, namely, to bring about a favourable atmosphere for negotiations with the Pathet Lao. And Souvanna Phouma was able to achieve this, though the statements made by the Chinese and the North Vietnamese were no more than signs of goodwill.

Following the confirmation of the Vientiane Agreement, there was extreme tension in Laotian politics. The Vientiane Agreement brought about a reversal of roles in Laotian politics. Prior to it, the Pathet Lao had opposed integration and the right wing had demanded it. Now the right wing anti-Communists began to oppose the integration of the

55Ibid.

56Ibid., 30 August 1956; and Sisouk Na Champassak, Storm Over Laos: A Contemporary History (New York, 1961), p. 49; Fall, n. 9, p. 74.
Pathet Lao. Katay, who had returned from the United States, a short while before, initiated an intense campaign against the immoderate demands of the Pathet Lao and Communism. He attacked Souvanna Phouma's policies and warned him of a Communist takeover. In this course of action, according to some British scholars, he was encouraged by Ambassador J. Graham Parsons, who followed the policy of encouraging anti-coalition forces. 57

Souvanna Phouma's policy of neutrality caused concern in the West, which regarded any coalition with the Communists as dangerous. The United States Embassy in Laos expressed its serious concern when Souphannouvong was named as Minister for Planning in the new government, particularly because this gave him control over the distribution of American aid. 58 As early as January 1957, American opinion began to speak of 'conquest by negotiation.' 59 Even Sisouk Na Champassak, regarded as pro-American by many of his countrymen, acknowledged that the United States threatened to cut off assistance. He also implied that the Americans


strongly supported Katay's anti-Communist posture. To defend Souphannouvong, Souvanna Phouma made statements saying that he did not believe that Souphannouvong was a Communist. He said, "My brother has never been a Communist, only a misled patriot." But the Pathet Lao wanted Laos to have closer relations with the Communist countries. In effect, they made it a condition for peaceful integration. They also demanded that the Royal Lao Government must accept Chinese aid to demonstrate its neutrality in the Cold War. Thus, the two sides had diametrically opposite attitude towards the question of the relation of Laos to other countries.

Katay did not succeed in forcing Souvanna Phouma out of office but he was able to mobilize more rightists against a coalition. The pressure of the Pathet Lao proved to be counterproductive as it resulted in a change in the stance of Souvanna Phouma, who later shifted his position by demanding that the Pathet Lao troops integrate before the formation of a coalition government. In March 1957, the Souvanna government began to suspect the motives of the Pathet Lao. Consequently, negotiations concerning implementation of the agreement were suspended.

The State Department had considered the entire situation

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60 Champassak, n. 56, pp. 52-55.
61 Time, 21 January 1957, p. 27.
63 Fall, n. 9, pp. 75-78; and Champassak, n. 56, p. 54.
as unacceptable. As a result, United States diplomats unofficially informed the Royal Government of Laos that if the Pathet Lao were included in the national government, the Laotians could no longer expect assistance from the United States. Laos was largely dependent on American aid, which amounted to about 40 million dollars a year. The Souvanna Phouma government had to give serious consideration to the American threat.\(^6\) The American officials had implied that the Agreement of 28 December with the Pathet Lao should be discarded and that the government should end all further negotiations with them. American authorities viewed the situation as an opportunity to create a stronger pro-American regime in Laos.\(^6\)\(^5\) The State Department and the Pentagon viewed Souvanna as leaning too far toward the Communists. Their own preference was for Katay Sasorith, the pro-American politician who had openly opposed neutralism of Souvanna Phouma which advocated peaceful co-existence with North Vietnam and China.

Souvanna requested public acknowledgement of support for his policy from France, Britain, and the United States. On 24 April, all three governments responded with a note declaring their intention of supporting Souvanna Phouma's

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\(^6\) The Nation (New York), editorial, 30 March 1957, pp. 266-67.

\(^6\)\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\)\(^6\) Ibid.
government and his policies. Though the United States joined Britain and France in affirming support for Souvanna Phouma's government, it wanted him to firmly resist the ulterior conditions of the Pathet Lao. These included the formation of a coalition government with the Pathet Lao and acceptance of aid from the Communist countries. The Pathet Lao also demanded a neutralist stance that would allow the establishment of diplomatic missions of Communist countries in Laos. The New York Times reported American officials as saying that the acceptance of "these conditions would have given the communists their most significant gains in Southeast Asia since the partition of Indochina."69

The issue of the integration of the Pathet Lao into the Laotian community was complex and Laotians were not sure as to what they wanted. When the National Assembly reopened on 11 May 1957 there was no clear majority either for the adoption or rejection of the proposals for integration. The vote of the Assembly was ambiguous and its uneasiness was evident. The Assembly on the one hand approved August 1956 Agreement and on the other expressed its dissatisfaction with Souvanna Phouma's approach to the negotiations. It gave him, stated a competent commentator, a vote of confidence

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67 The Times (London), 25 April 1957.


with reservation, by saying that "it approved of the results so far achieved, but expressed its dissatisfaction with the protracted negotiations and the closeness with which Souvanna Phouma and Souphannouvong were associating themselves."70 The plans for a coalition so alarmed the National Assembly that it voted against Souvanna Phouma's continuing negotiations with Souphannouvong. Souvanna took it as a rejection of his policy and resigned on 30 May 1957.71

When Souvanna's government fell, it was known that the United States, France, Britain, and South Vietnam looked forward to a new leadership that would not work for a coalition including the Pathet Lao.72 The United States opposed Souvanna's attempt at a coalition with the pro-Communists. During the 1959 Hearings, a State Department official, Eric Kocher, Director, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, claimed that "we opposed anything, which was not in accordance with the Geneva Accords, and a coalition giving cabinet positions to the Pathet Lao without elections was certainly outside the Geneva Accords."73 At the same

70Smith, n. 58, p. 543.
71New York Times, 31 May 1957; Lao-Presse, 29 May 1957, as quoted in Fall, n. 9, pp. 76-77; and Current Notes on International Affairs, vol. 29, p. 788.
73Hearings, United States Aid Operations in Laos, n. 11, p. 40.
hearings, Ambassador Parsons claimed that he had "struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition." The feeling of the American government was summed up by the New York Times thus: "The United States view is that the Pathet Lao members should be granted amnesty and allowed to re-enter politics, not as party but as individuals."

The government which succeeded Souvanna was headed by Katay Sasorith, a favourite of the United States. But Katay failed to obtain the approval of the Assembly and Souvanna Phouma was reinstated as Prime Minister again in August. The new government that he formed included pro-Western Laotians like Katay and Phoui Sananikone, but no Pathet Lao members. Even then the New York Times expressed the view that this new government was a "setback for the West." The United States would not have been satisfied with less than a pro-Western and anti-Communist government in Laos. Souvanna Phouma's proposals for the integration were approved by the Assembly this time. On 2 November, Souvanna Phouma and Souphannouvong signed a joint communique which reiterated the agreements reached in August 1956. The military agreements were signed on 2 November, and the political accords were signed on 12 November. These

74 Ibid., p. 195.
76 Ibid., 10 August 1957.
77 Ibid., 8 November 1957.
agreements came to be known as the Vientiane Agreement. By this agreement the Pathet Lao obtained many of the concessions they had demanded. The most important of these was the right to form a legal political party, Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS), and the agreement in principle that they should participate in a government of national union. The government agreed to follow a policy of neutrality in foreign affairs and declared its support for the principle of peaceful coexistence. As a quid pro quo the Pathet Lao promised to hand over the two northern provinces over which they had control. The Vientiane Agreement provided for the integration of two Pathet Lao fighting units (1,500 men) as part of the Royal Lao Army (while the remaining 4,500-6,500 were to be demobilized). The Agreement also integrated the Pathet Lao civil service with the Royal Lao Government. Supplementary elections were to be held in May 1958.78

The Agreement brought about the establishment of a government of national union in which Souphannouvong became a Minister of Planning, Reconstruction and Urbanization; another top-ranking Pathet Lao leader, Phoumi Vongvichit, held the Ministry of Religion and Fine Arts.79 The State Department expressed its serious concern at the formation of


a coalition government in Laos in which Communist leaders were included. The State Department's concern, as an editorial in the New York Times pointed out, arose from the belief that Communist coalitions, especially in underdeveloped nations were dangerous and that coalition was one of the major techniques of gaining Communist control.\textsuperscript{80} The elections were to be held the following May for 21 seats which were to be added to the National Assembly. The NLHS was permitted to operate as a political party. On 18 November, Souphanouvong formally returned to the Royal authority the two provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly and also the Pathet Lao personnel under his command. The National Assembly unanimously approved the new coalition government.\textsuperscript{81}

The first experiment in neutrality in Laos had begun well. At least for the time being things went on smoothly. In early 1958, it appeared that for the first time since the Second World War, Laos was finally experiencing peace. Despite their disapproval of the Vientiane Agreements, the United States continued its military and economic aid to Laos. As Minister of Planning, Souphanouvong showed himself to be trustworthy and efficient. He declared that he would cooperate with the United States since he realized that Laos required aid over a long period of time.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80}Ibid., 21 November 1957.
\textsuperscript{81}Ibid., 20 November 1957.
\textsuperscript{82}Oden Meeker, The Little World of Laos (New York,
It seems that opposition to the coalition both from inside and outside the country had some effect on the provisions of the final agreement. It did not fully meet the demands of the Pathet Lao and restrained their attempt to gain control over the new government. Only two Pathet Lao members were taken into the cabinet. In his policy statement in August 1957, Souvanna assured the people that he would strive to improve relations with neighbouring countries, including those that were Communists, and also accept any assistance that would not compromise the Laotian sovereignty. But he did not accept the Pathet Lao demand that Laos accept aid from China.\(^{83}\)

The new Agreement received approval in Paris and London, Moscow and Peking.\(^ {84}\) The United States stood alone in voicing its opposition. The State Department officials were reportedly of the view that the Agreement was a blow to the objectives of the United States.\(^ {85}\) Thais also disapproved of the coalition because they desired to have a Laos that was not only a buffer but an ally. A neutral Laos was likely to be less friendly and less subject to Thai influence than was the Katay regime.

This pessimistic view of the situation was not shared by

\(^{1959\text{, p. 209.}}\)

\(^{83}\) *Time*, 2 December 1957, p. 29.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.

\(^{85}\) *New York Times*, 21 November 1957.
everyone in the United States. A veteran American diplomat said, "Don't write Laos off to the Communists yet. . . . After all, this is not the first time in history that a country had admitted communists to its government and yet survived."86 The Pentagon's assessment was that, generally speaking, the situation was not unfavorable to the West. The integration of the two northeastern provinces with the rest of the country under royal authority had been achieved. This was quite significant since it was one of the few occasions when territory under the Communist control had been acquired peacefully. Secretary Dulles too took an optimistic view when he remarked, "Let us watch it. It might work."87 In 1959, Assistant Secretary Robertson reflected the common attitude among U. S. policy makers when he declared that: "We very much feared when they took the Communists in the government that the same thing would happen to Laos as happened to Czechoslovakia.---We very much feared that the Communist coalition would bring the Communists dangerously into the country."88 Many concluded that as the coalition had been formed, it would result in the withdrawal of the United States from Laos. The State Department did re-evaluate its Laotian policy in the light of the developments that had taken place in Laos. The formation of a coalition

86 Time, 2 December 1957, p. 29.
88 United States Aid Operations in Laos, n. 11, p. 191.
government including the Pathet Lao, Communist gains in Civil Service and army positions, as well as official sanction for the operation of the Pathet Lao political party, were regarded as setbacks for the American objectives by the National Security Council. On the other hand, the integration of the Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces were viewed as a positive development.89

In the meanwhile, Congress and the American public had come to know of the abuses of the foreign aid program.90 The Pathet Lao were levelling serious charges against the administration of the American assistance. The Eisenhower Administration was convinced that cessation of aid would mean abandoning Laos to Communism. Therefore, it was sympathetic to the request of Souvanna's government for assistance to help it win the extremely critical May elections. To buttress its own position it recalled the statement of the Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma in January 1958 that the Royal Lao Government would oppose any effort at subversion. The United States agreed to continue such aid contingent upon future Laotian actions. This shift in United States policy reflected a positive move. Whereas in the past the U. S. Administration had openly opposed concessions to the Communist Pathet Lao, it now attempted to help the Royal

90 The U. S. aid program will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
Lao Government implement terms of the settlement. However, it felt that by its action it was in no way adversely affecting the position of the "Free World." 91

The United States had decided to continue aid to Souvanna's government but this did not mean that it had given up its support of the right wing faction. Certain American Embassy officials in Vientiane, particularly Ambassador Parsons, developed a plan titled "Operation Booster Shot" to aid anti-Communist forces in the May 1958 election. Included in the proposal was an effort to disburse American aid to the outlying villages. Ultimately they hoped that an anti-Communist victory would result in the exclusion of the Pathet Lao from the new Premier's cabinet. 92

The United States' aid programme and the entreaties of its Embassy made little headway. It therefore decided to intervene more directly but covertly in Laotian politics. Ambassador Parsons, however, maintained that the United States restricted its intervention to persuasion. However, on the basis of his interviews with important government officials Charles A. Stevenson, a careful researcher into United States policy in Laos, has stated that the American activities were wide ranging. According to him, "the CIA was the arm of policy implementation under Parsons." By


92 Hearings, United States Aid Operations in Laos, n. 11, pp. 221, 229.
1957, the CIA staff in Laos had been enlarged and its intelligence network was fairly well entrenched. Consequently, the CIA had become an important source of leverage and information in Laotian politics. What was significant was the fact that the CIA was the most vigorous opponent of Souvanna Phouma whom it thought to be under French influence.  

After the November 1957 Agreements had been concluded, Souvanna Phouma declared that the supplementary elections to be held in May 1958 would consummate the last facet of the Geneva Agreements. Subsequently, he asked that the International Commission for Supervision and Control be withdrawn by 4 May 1958.  

The 1958 Elections  
The elections had been necessitated by the electoral law amendments which had been approved by the Assembly in March 1957. These amendments provided for the extension of the franchise to women, and a new method of calculating the number of deputies for each province on the basis of one for each 50,000 inhabitants instead of one for each 4,000 registered voters.  

Considerable publicity was given to these elections, as they were the first to be held since the country had been  

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reunited by the Vientiane Agreement of November 1957 and
the first with NLHS participation. The NLHS launched an
energetic campaign denouncing the government during the
pre-election months. Their slogans advocated peace and
prosperity and preached anti-Americanism. In the villages,
they capitalized on people's grievances against the Royal
Lao Government, charging it with corruption and maladmini-
stration of American aid.95

Those siding with the non-Communists included Katay
Sasorith's Nationalists, Phoui Sananikone's Independence
Party and Souvanna Phouma's Progressive Party. Each of
these parties was further split by personal rivalries. These
parties were slow to start their campaign and were severely
handicapped by their inability to agree upon a joint list
of candidates. As a result, they split their vote by
putting up several candidates in each electoral district
whereas the NLHS not only put its single candidates in
selected electoral districts but also had agreements with
other anti-Government parties.96

The U. S. Embassy in Vientiane and the Laotian government
were aware of the strategy of the parties on the left. To
counter that, in the autumn of 1957, Ambassador Parsons
initiated "Operation Booster Shot." However, the programme

proved ineffective as it came too late.97

Twenty-one seats were contended in the 1958 elections. Of these, the NLHS won nine and its ally the Santiphab (Peace) Party won four. The right wing parties in contrast were able to win eight seats. The left wing as a whole won thirteen seats, though they secured only thirty-two percent of the total votes. Souphannouvong got the largest number of votes and was surprised by the amount of support given to the NLHS.98

Right wing Laotians were alarmed by the unforeseen Communist victories which made the necessity of cohesiveness and reunification of their organization all too apparent to them.99 American confidence was also shaken. The size of the victory of the left wing parties was a personal embarrassment to Ambassador Parsons who had confidently predicted a victory for the pro-Western forces. Appearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, just after the elections, Parsons had declared that the defeat of the Pathet Lao in the elections would indicate the 'value for our aid money.'100


98Simmonds, n. 59, p. 181; Current Notes on International Affairs, n. 78, p. 792; and New York Times, 18 May 1958, and Fall, n. 9, pp. 86-87.

99Current Notes on International Affairs, n. 78, p. 792.

10085th Congress, sess. 1, House Subcommittee on the Far
But once the election results were known, it seemed that after all American aid money had been of small value. The United States now faced the imminent and dangerous prospect of the NLHS winning a majority in the coming election. 101

The election results had a profound impact on Laotian politics. In the face of clear evidence of the Communist strength, the non-Communist decided to unite and reorganize. As a result, two new political organizations soon appeared on the scene. In June 1958 the Nationalist and Independent groups in the Assembly united to form the Rally of the Lao People's Party (RLP) under the leadership of Katay Sasorith and Phoui Sananikone. The voting strength of the new party in the Assembly was thirty-six. Most of the moderate nationalist leaders were concentrated in this new party. 102

The formation of the RLP was followed by another right wing move, the formation of a body called Committee for the Defence of National Interests (CDNI). The CDNI was formed by pro-Western army officers and civil servants, and it immediately became an influential group. 103 Its avowed aim was to

East and Pacific of the Committee in Foreign Affairs, Hearings, Mutual Security Program in Laos (Washington, D. C., 1958), p. 34.

102 Simmonds, n. 59, p. 181; and Champassak, n. 56, pp. 62-64.
counteract Communist influence. The PEO (Program Evaluation Office), a group of U.S. military personnel in the Aid Mission, and officially described as a civilian group, working closely with the CIA, played a significant part in the organization of the CDNI. The CDNI besides being strongly anti-Communist was also reformist. It emphasized the honest and effective administration to overcome the lure of communism. Consequently, it declared war on Communist subversion and corruption. With the rise of the CDNI, polarization again became a distinct and dangerous possibility. Extremism from the left was faced with extremism from the right rather than moderation, vigilance or social and economic improvements.

The conflict in Laos which until then was basically a civil strife began to develop into a Cold War. And the United States began to intervene in Laotian politics through the PEO, by stealthily backing the CDNI. Roger Smith, Arthur Dommen, Hugh Toye, Arthur Schlesinger and Roger Hilsman all have explicitly stated that the CIA encouraged the right wing Laotians to form the CDNI and played a significant role in supporting it.

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104 Smith, n. 58, p. 545.
105 Champassak, n. 56, p. 64.
106 Simmonds, n. 59, p. 182.
107 Roger M. Smith, "Laos in Perspective," Asian Survey (Berkeley, Calif.), vol. 3, p. 63; Dommen, n. 47, pp. 127-28; Toye, n. 57, pp. 118-19; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A
Souvanna Phouma found himself under considerable pressure from both the right and the left. Following the elections, he faced an extremely difficult situation in the National Assembly. With the conclusion of the Vientiane Agreement a new phase in the Pathet Lao activity had begun. The NLHS was pressing the government for closer relations with countries of the Communist bloc and carrying on intense propaganda against government misrule. Souvanna had been unable to form a strong political group to implement his moderate reformist policies. Older groups of politicians were discredited by the accusations of corruption and profiteering. The American aid programme provided large cash sums to support the military and thus contributed to inflation. The CDNI was in direct opposition to Phouma's policy. It advocated monetary reform and a tougher position in negotiating with the Pathet Lao. Communist propaganda berated them for being lackeys of the Americans. These CDNI demands further complicated Souvanna's problems.

Since the time Souvanna Phouma began negotiating with the Pathet Lao for the formation of a national coalition, the


108 Simmonds, n. 59, p. 182; and Meeker, n. 82, p. 211.

109 Simmonds, n. 59, pp. 182-83.

110 Dommen, n. 47, p. 111.
United States had been exerting pressure on his government. But the defeat of the pro-American candidates in the May election changed the situation for the United States. After the electoral victory of the NLHS, the United States suspended the monthly aid deposit from 30 June 1958, citing corruption and the need for monetary reform as the grounds for its action.\textsuperscript{111} Presumably, this was intended to further increase pressure on the Laotian Prime Minister.

Election results were confirmed on 22 July, and on the same day, Souvanna Phouma submitted the resignation of his cabinet in keeping with the constitutional formality.\textsuperscript{112} In the next two weeks he tried to forge a majority from amongst the RLP, the CDNI and the National Union Party. In order to meet the pressure from the CDNI and the Americans, he tried to form a cabinet that did not include any Pathet Lao members, an action which was not in keeping with the spirit of the agreement with the Pathet Lao. He failed to form the government due to the unreasonable attitude of the CDNI which demanded eight out of fourteen portfolios in the cabinet, even though it had not participated as a party in the recent elections. The CDNI also refused to accept certain former ministers whom it accused of corruption.\textsuperscript{113} In the

\textsuperscript{111}Simmonds, n. 59, p. 183; Dommen, n. 47, p. 110; and Toye, n. 108, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{112}Fell, n. 9, p. 88; and New York Times, 23 July 1958.

\textsuperscript{113}Smith, n. 58, p. 546; and New York Times, 5 August 1958.
manoeuverings that took place after the inauguration of the new Assembly, a number of deputies were encouraged to block the reappointment of Souvanna. It was alleged that the PEO and the CIA lavishly disbursed money to achieve this.\footnote{Smith, n. 107, p. 63; Toye, n. 57, p. 119.} The CIA thus worked to oppose Souvanna and promote the CDNI. However, this was no local operation but was supported by Washington since J. Graham Parsons, now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, as well as other members of the Far Eastern Bureau, did not like Souvanna. Washington officials blamed Souvanna for the decisive victory of the left in the election and supported the CDNI campaign for cabinet positions.\footnote{Stevenson, n. 93, p. 65.}

On 6 August 1958, Souvanna publicly proclaimed his failure to form a government. For the time being, at least, the United States had succeeded in frustrating the Laotian leader. Souvanna attributed his failure to the irreconcilability of conflicting political interests within the RLP. He was not able to distribute the portfolios in a manner satisfactory to all the groups. This was a major factor in his fall from power. Of equal significance was the "single-minded anti-Communism of the CDNI" which opposed his moderate proposals.\footnote{Smith, n. 58, p. 546.} Souvanna Phouma was convinced that a large part of his difficulties were the result of the
actions of Graham Parsons who had been secretly working for his removal from the office. Souvanna himself said in his speech at the Geneva Conference in 1961 that the pressures from the United States had brought about his resignation.

The American aid had allegedly been suspended by the U. S. government because of increasing Congressional complaints concerning the poorly administered aid programme. Allegations were made regarding corruption in the import program, and the failure of Laotian government to implement monetary reforms and take measures necessary for the proper use of the aid funds. However, it would appear that the real reason for the suspension of aid was to bring pressure on Souvanna Phouma to resign.

Most of the writers including, for instance, Toye and Dommen, accept the validity of Souvanna's charge. However, Stevenson has taken the opposite view. According to him the American assistance would have been suspended regardless of who the premier was. Scandals about the abuses in the aid programme provided an impetus to take action. It has been argued that the success of the Communist candidates brought home to the CIA the increased urgency for doing something.

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118 Ibid., 15 June 1961.
119 Dommen, n. 47, p. 110; and Toye, n. 57, p. 118.
120 Stevenson, n. 93, pp. 59-60.
decisively and quickly to show that necessary steps were being taken to remedy the abuses in the aid programme. Washington announced that the aid would remain suspended till the kip was devalued. Following the American decision on 30 June 1958, the Souvanna government fell in July. A new government headed by Phoumi Sananikone was formed in August and within two months American aid was resumed. The resumption was made, however, only after the necessary monetary reforms had been announced by the new government. The strong possibility of linkage between Souvanna's removal and resumption of aid remains and cannot be ruled out.

As a result of the conjunction of internal and external forces, the first neutralist experiment in Laos failed. Souvanna Phouma believed that it failed primarily because of overt and covert manipulations of the American government. It cannot be denied that the Americans tried to intervene actively in the indigenous political process of a small Asian country. In the new government of Phoumi Sananikone, who succeeded Souvanna Phouma as the Prime Minister, the United States had a government which was more sympathetic to American policy objectives in Laos.