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# “A Good, Bad Deal”: John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961–1962

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Historians have devoted considerable attention to John F. Kennedy's Southeast Asian diplomacy. Yet the vast majority of these studies have focused narrowly on Vietnam when, in fact, it was Laos to which the president devoted the bulk of his attention during his first two years in office.<sup>1</sup> In Laos, Kennedy faced a precarious situation, strikingly similar to the crisis soon to arise in Vietnam. Defying many of his advisers and risking political peril, Kennedy decided to pursue the formation of a neutral

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1. On Kennedy's priorities in office, see *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of U.S. Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (4 vols., Boston, 1972), 2: 161. Although the vast majority of historians dealing with Southeast Asia in the 1960s have focused on Vietnam, during the late 1960s and 1970s several scholars began to piece together the story surrounding Kennedy's Laotian policy. These works included Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960–1961* (Garden City, N.Y., 1968); Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (New York, 1968); Usha Mahajani, "President Kennedy and U.S. Policy in Laos, 1961–1963," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2 (1971), 87–99; Charles Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy toward Laos Since 1954* (Boston, 1972); Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos* (New York, 1964); and David K. Hall, "The Laos Crisis," in Alexander L. George, David K. Hall, and William E. Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Laos, Cuba, Vietnam* (Boston, 1971). More recent efforts include Arthur Dommen's general study, *Laos: Keystone of Indochina* (Boulder, Colo., 1985); Terrence Ferner, "W. Averell Harriman and the Geneva Conference on Laos, 1961–1962" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1984); and Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of Averell Harriman, 1891–1986* (New York, 1992), 582–591.

government in Laos that would include both pro-American elements and representatives from the communist Pathet Lao. The president's efforts faced stiff opposition, sometimes from within his own administration. Yet Kennedy continued to resist escalation and successfully obtained a negotiated settlement, even after a powerful communist offensive in May 1962. Although far from perfect, Kennedy's chosen course thwarted a communist takeover of Laos and provided relative stability for a troubled nation during dangerous times.

In examining Kennedy's foreign policy, scholars generally have treated the young president as a hard-line Cold Warrior, wedded to anticommunism and confrontation.<sup>2</sup> Those studying his Southeast Asian policies have echoed this assessment. Most historians have minimized his diplomatic accomplishments in Laos and insisted that the president simply intended to neutralize the situation there so that he could concentrate on aggressively thwarting communism in South Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> However,

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2. For an historiographical discussion of Kennedy's foreign policy, see Burton I. Kaufman, "John F. Kennedy as World Leader: A Perspective on the Literature," *Diplomatic History*, 17 (1993), 447-469. Kaufman characterizes the majority of scholars examining Kennedy as "still highly critical of the president." Among the general works disparaging Kennedy's foreign policies is Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York, 1989). Robert Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, 22 (1998), 29-62, recently has driven the criticism of Kennedy in a new direction by offering a gender-focused study of Kennedy's diplomacy, which Dean argues was shaped by "cultural narratives of imperial manhood." Dean offers, however, little in the way of primary research.

3. Among the more prominent studies arguing that Kennedy's accommodation in Laos paradoxically dictated a harder line in Vietnam are George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 128-129; Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy, Profile of Power* (New York, 1993), 116; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, 1995), 46; R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War* (2 vols., New York, 1983), 1: 260; Roger Warner, *Backfire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and its Link to the War in Vietnam* (New York, 1995), 84; and Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War," in Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 229-230. Other works, including John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992), 9, 269-274, Stephen E. Pelz, "When Do I Have Time to Think? John F. Kennedy, and the Laotian Crisis of 1962," *Diplomatic History*, 3 (1979), 215-229, and Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, Md., 1986), 91, see few benefits that accrued from Kennedy's neutralization plan and argue that neu-

while certainly a Cold Warrior, Kennedy exhibited his own brand of flexible, personal diplomacy in pursuit of his larger agenda. After an early attempt to address the Laotian crisis through counterinsurgency, he turned to diplomacy in April 1961. He assigned to W. Averell Harriman the delicate job of forming a reliable neutral government through an international conference at Geneva, Switzerland, but he continued to oversee the negotiations closely. Harriman's creative and often forceful diplomacy was the key to the successes achieved in Laos. Nevertheless, Kennedy remained in command; on at least two occasions, he overruled the calls of Harriman and other advisers to utilize American military forces in Laos to shore up diplomatic efforts.

Operating against heavy odds, Harriman worked a series of near-miracles at Geneva. These included maintaining a cease-fire, eliciting Soviet support for Laotian neutrality, and persuading the American-supported, anticommunist royal government of Laos to cooperate. Under Harriman's guidance, and with Soviet support (apparently inspired by fears of Chinese competition in Southeast Asia), Laos by mid-1962 had a functioning, neutral government, giving rise to hopes of expanding the Laotian blueprint for neutrality to all of Southeast Asia. Members of Kennedy's own administration strongly advocated such a policy, and the president was sympathetic.

Yet, in the long run, the intricacies of the Southeast Asian political situation proved overwhelming, and the moment slipped away. The Laotian model was too complex and politically risky. Neither the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China (PRC), nor the United States fully controlled its allies in the region, yet each insisted on retaining a façade of control. As a result, despite the positive spirit engendered at Geneva and the successful effort to neutralize Laos, Southeast Asia, by the end of the decade, had become the center of Cold War tensions. Nevertheless, Kennedy's venture into the politics of ac-

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trality allowed for further infiltration by the Viet Cong through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, Calif., 1994), 305, however, credits Kennedy with achieving, in the words of Averell Harriman, "a good, bad deal in Laos." Further, Duiker sees Kennedy as "tortured by doubts about the wisdom of involvement" in Vietnam.

commodation was serious and, at least momentarily, successful.<sup>4</sup>

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In the decade before Kennedy's presidency, Laos was a pawn in the Cold War. The French agreed to end their colonial claim to Laos at the 1954 Geneva Conference; almost immediately, an intense struggle broke out between the Pathet Lao and the American-supported royal government. By the late 1950s, the Soviets had become involved, supporting the Pathet Lao. In an attempt to bring peace to his native land, Laotian Prince Souvanna Phouma created a neutral government in 1957 with the aid of his half-brother, the "red" Prince Souphanouvong, leader of the Pathet Lao. But the United States under Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles regarded neutrality as nothing less than an accommodation with evil and rejected the coalition arrangement.<sup>5</sup> This encouraged General Phoumi Nosavan, the right-wing leader of the royal army, to stage a coup, forcing the Pathet Lao and Souvanna into the hills, where they continued their guerrilla war with North Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet sponsorship. Souvanna made a brief return to head up another neutral government in 1960, but, again, General Phoumi, with American support, overthrew him. Souvanna retreated northward to ally once more with the Pathet Lao.<sup>6</sup>

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4. The State Department's publication of relevant papers on the Laotian crisis and the opening of material in the Averell Harriman Papers in 1987, as well as of related materials at the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Libraries, allows for a closer look at Kennedy's Laotian policy.

5. Most historians depict Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles as rigid opponents of neutralism. Both Stanley Wolpert, *Roots of Confrontation in South Asia: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the Superpowers* (New York, 1982), and Len E. Ackland, "No Place for Neutralism: The Eisenhower Administration and Laos," in Nina S. Adams and Alfred McCoy, eds., *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York, 1970), 139–154, emphasize the Eisenhower administration's opposition to neutralism in Asia. H. W. Brands, *The Specter of Neutralism: The United States and the Emergence of the Third World, 1947–1960* (New York, 1989), argues that Eisenhower and Dulles, while publicly denouncing neutralism, acted more pragmatically in practice. In the case of Laos, however, Eisenhower always ardently opposed neutralism, in sharp contrast to Kennedy's policies.

6. Harriman and others suspected that John N. Irwin, Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs at the Pentagon under Eisenhower, organized Phoumi's overthrow of Souvanna Phouma. W. Averell Harriman, oral history interview by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston, 1964), 49, John F. Kennedy Library, Columbia Point, Mass.; J. Graham Parsons, oral history interview by Dennis O'Brien (Boston, 1968), 13, *ibid.*

By 1961, three main players, covering a broad political spectrum, had emerged on the Laotian scene: Phoumi on the far-right; Souvanna, the neutralist, slightly to the left of center; and, on the far left, Souphanouvong, the leader of the Pathet Lao.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there were four outside players: the United States, the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China. Buoyed by an immense Soviet airlift of supplies to northern Laos, the Pathet Lao were on the march early in 1961, winning a series of encounters that brought them to the verge of taking all of Laos. As President Eisenhower prepared to step down from office, he grimly informed Kennedy that he must be prepared to intervene militarily in Laos. Eisenhower added that defeat in Laos would mean losing the "cork in the bottle." As such, the effect would be the "beginning of the loss of most of East Asia."<sup>8</sup>

Kennedy had been elected on the basis of his promise to get the United States moving again, both domestically and internationally. Campaigning in 1960, he had attacked the Eisenhower administration's failure to challenge explicitly com-

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7. The issue of Laotian "nationhood" deserves much deeper treatment than can be provided here. A landlocked country of roughly three million in the early 1960s, with an impoverished, agrarian economy, Laos was a maze of religious, ethnic, political, regional, and family divisions. The Lao people make up roughly one half of the population, while several other ethnic groups, including the Hmong, constitute the rest of the population. Given the complex of vying interests in Laos and its colonial background, little in the way of any real "nationalist" sentiment existed. Thus, it is all the more remarkable that Souvanna Phouma managed to bridge some of the gulfs in Laotian society and establish a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of his countrymen. In regard to the Pathet Lao, see MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985* (Stanford, Calif., 1986), 70-86, for a general treatment of the Pathet Lao during the neutralization process. Brown and Zasloff depict the Pathet Lao as a "joint enterprise" with the North Vietnamese.

8. "Memorandum for the Record," Jan. 19, 1961, in U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963* (24 vols., Washington, D.C., 1988-1996), 24: 21; Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History*, 79 (1992), 568-587. Some debate exists in regard to exactly what Eisenhower told Kennedy at their meeting. Cabinet Minute, 128/35 1(2), Jan. 17, 1961, Cabinet Records, Public Record Office, Kew, England (hereafter cited as CAB, PRO). Assessing the situation in Laos, Lord Home, the British Foreign Secretary, saw little hope of halting the Pathet Lao, short of "tactical nuclear weapons," nor did the British see much hope of cooperation from the Soviets, especially in light of their "recent successes."

munist advances in the Third World.<sup>9</sup> Key to the new president's plan was the adoption of counterinsurgency to halt communist advances.<sup>10</sup> The new administration directed most of its counterinsurgency plans toward Vietnam, where military prospects looked brighter than in Laos. But the Inter-Agency Task Force on Laos, created by Kennedy in the opening days of his administration to deal with the Laotian crisis, clearly viewed military operations, including possible American intervention, as necessary in order to achieve U.S. goals in Laos.<sup>11</sup> Kennedy's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Walt Rostow, strongly advocated a Laotian policy that would "orchestrate force and diplomacy intimately at every stage" and warned the president that "when we are being nice diplomats we tend to lose ground."<sup>12</sup>

Yet on the diplomatic front, Kennedy saw positive signals emerging out of Laos in the early days of his presidency. Prince Souvanna wrote to Kennedy, suggesting some sort of compromise. In spite of his alliance with the Pathet Lao, Souvanna was apparently not eager for a communist victory. Souvanna had an ally in Winthrop Brown, the American ambassador to Laos, who had long believed that only Souvanna could offer an alternative to communist control. He seconded Souvanna's plea

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9. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days, John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 72; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know* (Oxford, Eng., 1997), 183–184; Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1983), 8–9.

10. Thomas G. Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat: From Truman to Reagan* (New York, 1986), 207. My definition of counterinsurgency borrows from Paterson's discussion in which counterinsurgency is a general strategy, which "took several forms," all aimed at applying aggressive force to counter communism in the Third World. William Bundy to the Secretary of Defense, Nov. 1961, box 1, Vietnam Documents, Joint Chiefs of Staff Central File, 1963, Records of the JFK Collection, Record Group 218, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as RG 218, NA). In a recently declassified memorandum, Bundy outlined the administration's counterinsurgency program for Vietnam. Also see Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 249–308; Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 231–232; Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries*, 81. After 1960, the CIA sponsored a buildup of guerrilla troops in eastern Laos. Kennedy continued the effort as part of his general counterinsurgency strategy.

11. "Report Prepared by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Laos," n.d., *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 62–71.

12. "Memorandum From the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Kennedy," March 10, 1961, *ibid.*, 24: 83.



with a long telegram, urging that Kennedy seek a negotiated settlement involving Souvanna.<sup>13</sup> On February 3, 1961, Kennedy consulted Ambassador Brown personally at the White House. Brown recalled the meeting as “a very, very moving experience.” Kennedy pressed the ambassador for his personal impressions of events—particularly whether Souvanna could be trusted. In response to one question, Brown began to explain official policy. Kennedy stopped him, saying “That’s not what I asked you. I said, ‘What do you think,’ you, the Ambassador?” Brown opened up, treating the occasion like a “confessional.” He criticized past American policy, finally telling the president that Phoumi was overrated and that only Souvanna could unite Laos.<sup>14</sup> A few days later, the United States made the first tentative moves toward investigating a diplomatic solution by circulating an initial proposal for Laotian neutrality to interested nations.<sup>15</sup>

Kennedy, however, still appeared intent upon combining military methods with diplomatic efforts. In early March, with American encouragement, General Phoumi launched a last-ditch effort to regain ground. Washington, according to Rostow, apparently saw the attack as a means to maximize “our bargaining position.”<sup>16</sup> The plan failed when the Pathet Lao soundly defeated Phoumi. The shock of the rout, combined with the disaster of the Bay of Pigs and the knowledge that he would soon have to face Nikita Khrushchev over the Berlin issue, left Kennedy shaken and open to less confrontational approaches.<sup>17</sup> The president moved sharply away from his initial reliance on military strategies toward a policy that emphasized diplomacy. Although many of his key advisers continued to advocate more

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13. Winthrop Brown telegram, Jan. 18, 1961, box 130, National Security Files, JFK Library.

14. Winthrop Brown, oral history interview by Larry J. Hackman (Boston, 1968), 14–15, JFK Library.

15. “Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs to President Kennedy,” Feb. 14, 1961, *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 55.

16. Walter Rostow, “Memoranda for the President: Evolution of Our Policy Toward Laos,” March 9, 1961, box 130, National Security Files, JFK Library.

17. Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (New York, 1991), 132–134, 143–147; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 316; Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965), 630; Parmet, *JFK*, 176.

coercive efforts in Laos, the president adamantly avoided further overt military actions. Clearly, the events of early 1961 had an impact on the young president. In April, he told former vice president Richard Nixon, "I don't see how we can make any move in Laos which is 5000 miles away if we don't make a move in Cuba which is 90 miles away."<sup>18</sup> While never fully abandoning his interest in counterinsurgency, especially along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Kennedy clearly had lost faith in the abilities of either the Laotian or American military forces to shape events in Laos.

The failure of military efforts in Laos was not the only factor leading Kennedy toward negotiation. Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia conveniently suggested reconvening the 1954 Geneva conference to deal with the Laotian crisis. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan pressed Kennedy to pursue neutralization when the two met in late March.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, in spite of the vast Soviet investment in airlifting supplies to Laos, Khrushchev hinted to the American ambassador in Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, that he would not oppose a neutral Laos.<sup>20</sup>

On March 22, 1961, Harriman, who served the president as something of a roving ambassador, met with Souvanna in New Delhi. Over tea, Souvanna assured Harriman that neither he nor the majority of Laotians were communists. He proposed again to establish Laos as a neutral country with a coalition government, but this time with American support. Souvanna stressed that there was little time for such an arrangement and that the communist Pathet Lao would have to be represented in a coalition government.<sup>21</sup>

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18. As quoted in David Hall, "The Laos Crisis," 70.

19. Christian Chapman, oral history interview by C. S. Kennedy (Washington, D.C., 1990), 29, Georgetown University Foreign Affairs Oral History Program; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 506–507. While the Eisenhower administration had regarded American sponsorship of neutrality as paramount to sin, Kennedy was open to the concept as a means of easing crisis points in the Cold War. In March the topic of Souvanna and a neutral Laos was discussed at a Key West meeting between Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Both came to the conclusion that a political solution was worth trying. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 184. Charles DeGaulle's declaration that France would refuse to support any western intervention in Laos could have encouraged Kennedy to pursue negotiations.

20. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics and Foreign Policy of the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1967), 130.

21. Harriman to Dean Rusk, March 23, 1961, box 256, Averell Harriman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Circumstances thus clearly favored negotiation rather than a military solution in Laos. Although he still had the alternative of committing U.S. troops to Laos—an option favored by many of his advisers—Kennedy now was reluctant to pursue a military course. Politically, negotiations held some promise. Kennedy had inherited a deteriorating situation from Eisenhower. The previous administration, he could argue, had let the opportunity to challenge the Pathet Lao slip away. Through careful diplomacy, Kennedy could lure the significant neutral forces loyal to Souvanna away from their alliance with the Pathet Lao and continue to pursue covert operations along the eastern border of Laos. This would represent an improvement over the conditions in Laos at the time of Kennedy's inauguration. A cease-fire leading to an international conference would also buy time. Should the Pathet Lao violate the cease-fire, Kennedy would then have international support for U.S. intervention. Neutralizing Laos would allow Kennedy to concentrate on Western Europe and Berlin—his real priorities.

Yet Kennedy's strategy brought with it political risk. At home, key congressional leaders of both parties warned the president against any capitulation to the communists.<sup>22</sup> Although he urged the president to pursue negotiations, Prime Minister Macmillan recognized that Kennedy faced a difficult dilemma. In April he reported to a British cabinet meeting that Kennedy would be called "an appeaser" if Laos fell to the communists, but if war resulted, Kennedy, like President Harry Truman in Korea, would be a "warmonger."<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, Kennedy pushed on with negotiations. He assigned Harriman to lead the American delegation to Geneva. The two men remained in close contact, with Kennedy often

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22. *AFL-CIO News*, Feb. 11, 1961. A radio show sponsored by the AFL-CIO in February 1961 underscored the risk that Kennedy was taking in opting for neutrality in Laos. On the show, Democratic Representative Clement J. Zablocki, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Far East, and his Republican counterpart on the committee, Representative Walter H. Judd, both urged Kennedy to stand up to the communists in Laos. Zablocki insisted that: "If we show one iota of weakness there [Laos] we are inviting trouble not only in Laos but the whole world." *Washington Post*, April 7, 1961. Congressional Republican leaders Senator Everett Dirksen and Representative Charles A. Halleck also warned Kennedy that a coalition government in Laos would inevitably result in a communist takeover.

23. Cabinet Minute, 128/35 20(2), April 13, 1961, CAB, PRO

phoning Harriman during the conference to reiterate his preference for a negotiated settlement. Kennedy also relied heavily on other ambassadors for firsthand observations and views on Laos not necessarily available from the centralized State Department. Harriman later recalled that Kennedy essentially served as his own secretary of state. Winthrop Brown remembered Kennedy as “in personal command of the situation” in Laos, reading, approving, and often writing many of the instructions sent to Harriman and others. Kennedy’s unorthodox, informal style, often bypassing formal structure, amounted to a sort of personal diplomacy.<sup>24</sup>

In order to begin the conference, a cease-fire was necessary. Both Harriman and General Lyman Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, urged Kennedy to use a small contingent of American troops in Laos to enforce the cease-fire. Consistent with his policy throughout, however, Kennedy firmly resisted the introduction of American troops to shore up the truce.<sup>25</sup> The opening of the conference had to be postponed several days, but a provisional cease-fire allowed it to begin on May 17, 1961.

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24. W. Averell Harriman, oral history interview by Larry Hackman (Boston, 1970), 34–35, JFK Library; Harriman interview by Schlesinger, 73, 84. After initial reservations about the new president, Harriman became increasingly impressed by Kennedy’s “ability to penetrate to the heart of every problem and to sift through conflicting advice.” Brown oral history interview, 16; Parsons oral history interview, 31. Parsons also later remarked on Kennedy’s unique style of diplomacy, referring to the “president’s personal involvement, even to the point of picking up the telephone and calling officers of no great prominence for something that he wanted to know and know then.” Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Hearings on Covert Action*, 94 Cong., 1 sess. (1975), 7: 137–138. Kennedy also sought to empower the local diplomats and ambassadors upon whom he relied for information and advice. The president issued a circular letter that put all American officials operating in foreign countries, including CIA agents, under strict control of local ambassadors. Most Kennedy intimates such as Roger Hilsman, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Theodore Sorensen, concur with this view of Kennedy as an independent, resourceful, and pragmatic president charting his own course. However, the majority of historians have ignored evidence of Kennedy’s bureaucratic independence and have instead depicted Kennedy as a conventional Cold Warrior. In this regard, see Louise Fitzsimmons, *The Kennedy Doctrine* (New York, 1972); Richard Walton, *Cold War and Counter Revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1972); and Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*.

25. Harriman oral history interview by Schlesinger, 45–47. David Hall credits Kennedy’s diplomatic skills with bringing about the cease-fire in Laos. Hall, “The Laos Crisis.”

The conference opened amid low expectations. In a memorandum to President Kennedy, Harriman expressed little hope for the talks; he suggested that a walkout might be necessary if things went poorly. An American contingency plan, involving a “de facto division” of Laos, was prepared in case the conference failed. The plan proposed to leave the north to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, while the south would remain a haven for the American-supported rightists. At the same time, Harriman made clear to Kennedy that such an arrangement would require Americans to make “the ultimate decision”: to use American troops to defend the south. Harriman was so pessimistic that he recommended that Laotian royal troops continue to train during the cease-fire “to support this eventuality.”<sup>26</sup>

As the conference opened, Harriman and Kennedy’s primary concern was to gain concrete assurances of Soviet cooperation. Without a firm Soviet commitment to stop supplying the guerrillas and to persuade the North Vietnamese to halt their efforts, nothing could be accomplished. In spite of positive signals from the Kremlin, Soviet representatives at Geneva apparently had no official authorization to support neutralization.<sup>27</sup> In early June Kennedy and Khrushchev were to meet in Vienna. The meeting, Kennedy decided, would be the perfect occasion to press the Soviets for a definite commitment on the question of Laos.

The Vienna summit proved to be an extraordinarily tense meeting. When Kennedy first brought up the topic of Laos, Khrushchev rebuffed him, saying that he was well aware of the part played by the United States in overthrowing Souvanna. In response, Kennedy admitted that American actions had not always been “wise,” but then, sensing inflexibility, he shifted to other subjects. The next morning Kennedy again steered the conversation toward Laos and this time found Khrushchev in a more conciliatory mood. The Soviet chairman agreed to work

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26. “Memorandum for the President,” May 1961, box 527, Harriman Papers; Cabinet Minute, 128/36 (4), June 29, 1961, CAB, PRO. According to the British, the United States was stationing heavy equipment in Thailand for use in Laos.

27. Dommen, *Laos*, 194; Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 55, 84, 86–87. The Soviets had already sent some positive signals indicating a willingness to cooperate on neutrality. Yet, at Geneva, Soviet delegates avoided any commitment until after Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev’s meeting at Vienna.

in good faith for the Geneva goals and observed that interested parties “should be locked in a room and told to find a solution.” The agreement on Laos was, in fact, the only positive note of the Vienna summit.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, even as the Cold War appeared to intensify, the two superpowers were working together to resolve conflict in Laos. But why would the Soviets, after their massive airlift to support the Pathet Lao, agree to such cooperation? American and western delegates could only speculate on the matter. Some, such as Under-Secretary of State Chester Bowles, suspected that it was an early sign of a Sino-Soviet break, evidence that the Soviets feared a Southeast Asia controlled by China.<sup>29</sup> Their expensive airlift to the Pathet Lao was perhaps an effort to supplant Chinese influence. To the Soviets, the option of a strong neutral government in Laos, and perhaps a series of other neutral governments across Southeast Asia, might be a welcome alternative to an enlarged Chinese sphere of influence. In retrospect, this analysis rings true, but it was hardly clear at the time. With the Chinese still very hostile—in fact, not speaking to the Americans—there was little hope that the United States could take advantage of a split even if one became more evident.<sup>30</sup> A month after the Vienna conference, Harriman wrote to the American ambassador to Thailand, warning that Sino-Soviet tensions might actually make Khrushchev “more aggressive” toward the United States rather than open up new diplomatic opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

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28. “Memorandum of Conversation,” June 3, 1961, “Memorandum of Conversation,” June 4, 1961, *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 225–236. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 211–212.

29. Chester Bowles to Rusk, Oct. 5, 1961, box 526, Harriman Papers.

30. Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, 1972), 227–228.

31. Harriman to Kenneth Young, July 8, 1961, box 528, Harriman Papers. Also see Department of State to Harriman, Oct. 3, 1961, box 526, *ibid.*, for an extensive analysis of Soviet intentions toward Laos prepared by the British Foreign Service. The British study played down Chinese and Soviet differences, suggesting that some sort of a deal regarding Laos might have been struck between Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow. The British were mystified as to whether China or the Soviets controlled the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. Finally, they speculated that Khrushchev was attempting to display his willingness to compromise in light of his hard stances on nuclear weapons and Berlin. The British judged neutrality as preferable in Khrushchev’s mind to a partitioned Laos with the Americans firmly

The actual motives of the Soviet Union remained a puzzle, and the mystery grew deeper at Geneva. Soon after the Vienna summit, Russian delegate G. M. Pushkin went a step beyond Khrushchev's Vienna commitment to Kennedy. He pledged to be responsible for North Vietnamese and Chinese cooperation in maintaining Laotian neutrality. In return, he suggested that Great Britain should monitor American compliance with the agreements. In proposing this unusual arrangement, Pushkin apparently hinted at Soviet interest in easing tensions between North and South Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Pushkin's proposal, with the attendant possibility of a Southeast Asian détente, excited some American officials, but Harriman was puzzled by the Soviet pledge: "It's very difficult for me to see what they would gain by taking a commitment which made them responsible for an act by their allies. It would seem to be more sensible to sit back and let the other fellow break the agreement and then pretend that they had nothing to do with it."<sup>33</sup>

Whatever the Russian motives may have been, the American-Soviet exchanges at Vienna and Geneva significantly raised hopes for a successful negotiated settlement. A few days after the Vienna summit closed, Souvanna, his communist half-brother Souphanouvong, and Prince Bon Oum, the head of the royal government, held a preliminary meeting in Geneva. This was a step forward, but the Americans continued to want a better sense of Souvanna, a figure still allied with the Laotian communists.

Before the three princes met, Harriman arranged to have a comprehensive conference with Souvanna. The ambassador used the meeting to pepper the prince with questions. Pointing to his royal background and close ties to France, including his French wife, Souvanna assured Harriman that he was no communist. The prince declared that he was ready to take the leadership of Laos and asked for American assistance. Harriman hedged, saying that Souvanna was asking him "to believe too

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supporting the south with ground troops. For similar conclusions, see Earl H. Tilford, Jr., "Two Scorpions in a Cup: America and the Soviet Airlift to Laos," *Aerospace History*, 27 (1980), 151-162.

32. Harriman oral history interview by Schlesinger, 58; Frederick Nolting to Rusk, Sept. 20, 1961, box 528, Harriman Papers.

33. Harriman oral interview by Schlesinger, 76.

much in one afternoon.” In his report to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Harriman conceded that Souvanna had responded properly to all his inquiries but added, “I left knowing little more about him than when I went in.”<sup>34</sup> At the three princes’ meeting, Souvanna continued to act like a potential leader, rallying the other princes to sign a general statement supporting the principle of neutralization.

By mid-summer, Harriman had cautiously moved to the view that Washington could trust Souvanna and work with the Russians on the issue. Several weeks after his meeting with Souvanna, Harriman cabled Rusk and announced, without enthusiasm, “that we are probably faced with necessity accepting Souvanna as Prime Minister [*sic*].” The alternative, Harriman explained, would be a return to hostilities, as well as the possibility of American military intervention.<sup>35</sup>

Even as the negotiations went forward, a group within the administration, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Lemnitzer, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Rostow, and Rostow’s assistant Robert H. Johnson, were drawing up just the sort of plans for military involvement that Harriman feared. These included unilateral American intervention.<sup>36</sup> Although Kennedy clearly opposed any sort of American military involvement and some in the military also warned against engagement in landlocked Laos, other prominent administration officials remained committed to a military solution.

If Phoumi learned of such plans, Harriman feared, he would have little incentive to participate in the negotiations. The ambassador therefore urged that the planning be discontinued.<sup>37</sup> These caveats did not dissuade other advisers. At a meeting on July 28, 1961, Robert Johnson pressed Kennedy on contingency plans for Laos, suggesting that “it would be helpful in planning” for the president to approve of an intervention ahead of time, should one later become necessary. Kennedy shot back, complaining of previous overly optimistic military

34. Harriman to Dean Rusk, June 11, 1961, *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 243–244.

35. Harriman to Rusk, July 31, 1961, box 538, Harriman Papers.

36. See “Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara,” July 12, 1961, *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 292–294, for some of the details of the contingency plans.

37. Robert H. Johnson to W. W. Rostow, n.d., *ibid.*, 24: 413–414.



appraisals and making "it very plain that he himself [was] at the present very reluctant to make a decision to go into Laos." Kennedy urged that the Geneva negotiations be carried forth in good faith, adding that "nothing would be worse than an unsuccessful intervention in this area."<sup>38</sup>

In early September, a disturbing telegram from Brown suddenly diverted Harriman from the tasks at hand. The ambassador had asked General Phoumi, the military leader of the royal forces, about rumors of Nationalist Chinese (Taiwanese) military units fighting the Pathet Lao in northern Laos. To Brown's shock, Phoumi confirmed that three companies of Nationalist troops were indeed in Laos. The communist Chinese had long complained that Thai and Taiwanese troops were aiding the royal government. The United States had always vigorously denied the charges. Should the revelations about the troops from Taiwan become public, Harriman's accusations about North Vietnamese interference in Laos would appear hypocritical. In addition, the Nationalist Chinese might draw the People's Republic of China directly into the Laotian conflict. Harriman fired off an immediate response: "Urge in strongest terms that these units be disbanded and officers returned, if possible, to Taiwan." Within two days the royal government agreed to withdraw the "irregulars," defusing the potentially explosive situation.<sup>39</sup>

Harriman's next move came at a mid-September meeting with Souvanna in Rangoon, Burma, where he sought to spell out exactly what he expected of Souvanna. Over several meetings, Souvanna reiterated his distrust of the communists and even went so far as to concede that it might be necessary to fight the Pathet Lao. Yet Souvanna remained too confident for Harriman's taste about the prospects for a neutral government. At the end of the meeting, despite his sense that the prince was "overly-optimistic" and "unrealistic" on several issues, Harriman

38. "Memorandum of Conversation," July 28, 1961, *ibid.*, 24: 322-326.

39. Harriman to Rusk, Sept. 8, 1961, Department of State to Geneva, Sept. 11, 1961, Brown to Rusk, Sept. 8, 1961, all in box 528, Harriman Papers; "Memorandum of Discussion on Laos," Feb. 8, 1961, box 130, National Security Files, JFK Library. While Harriman was shocked at the presence of the Kuomintang troops, Kennedy, Rusk, Rostow, and Alan Dulles had all been well aware of the Taiwanese troops since at least early February 1961. Chiang Kai-shek was apparently opposed to the removal of the troops

was sufficiently satisfied to extend formal support to Souvanna as the leader of the coalition government.<sup>40</sup> From there, Harriman moved to shore up international backing for Souvanna, lobbying Thai leader Marshall Sarit Thanarat and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India for support. A strong relationship with India was of particular importance because India headed up the three-nation control commission overseeing the Laotian cease-fire.<sup>41</sup>

However, one important American ally, South Vietnam, went on record as opposed to Souvanna. On September 18, Ambassador Frederick Nolting sent an urgent telegram from Saigon to Harriman and Rusk, detailing President Ngo Dinh Diem's fears of a neutral government in neighboring Laos. Neither Diem nor Nolting trusted Souvanna. They maintained that a neutral government would be too weak to shut off North Vietnamese access to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through Laos and supplied insurgent communists in South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> Instead, Diem advocated partitioning Laos. Nolting actually suggested that, with Pushkin's cooperation, the Soviets might be willing to support a divided Laos, with the United States and the Soviet Union guaranteeing peace. But the unlikelihood of Soviet cooperation in such a scheme and Kennedy's continuing insistence that American troops not be used in Laos kept Harriman's negotiations on track.<sup>43</sup>

While Kennedy backed Harriman's efforts, Nolting's approach had supporters in Washington. Harriman complained later that elements within the State Department refused to accept Souvanna and continued to believe that prowestern military forces in Laos could be revived. At the beginning of October, Harriman cabled Rusk to say that, for the first time, he was feeling confident about his assignment. Still, he emphasized that success could be achieved only "if all agencies of the government will continue to work for that goal."<sup>44</sup> Harriman actually suspected that Kennedy's frequent phone calls, reiterating the

40. Harriman to Rusk, Sept. 15, 16, 1961, box 528, Harriman Papers.

41. "Memo for Alexis Johnson," June 19, 1962, box 527, *ibid.*

42. Nolting to Rusk, Sept. 18, 1961, box 528, *ibid.*

43. Adlai Stevenson to U.S. Delegation in Geneva, Sept. 22, 1961, Nolting to Rusk, Sept. 20, 1961, box 528, *ibid.*

44. Harriman to Rusk, Oct. 1, 1961, box 528, *ibid.*

president's support for neutralization, were designed to "make sure I wasn't paying attention to the other opinions in the State Department."<sup>45</sup> Harriman's frustrations festered until he openly complained to a British delegate that high officials in the State Department were clinging to the policies of Dulles and refusing to recognize the "radical changes in policy which the new administration had introduced." Rusk, Harriman lamented to the British, was blissfully unaware of the dissension, thus making work at Geneva all the more challenging.<sup>46</sup>

Harriman never identified the source of resistance at the State Department. But Robert Amory, deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) under Kennedy, later pointed to the International Security Affairs office of the State Department and to Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, Joint Chiefs of Staff aide Victor Krulak, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy. At the CIA, according to Amory, resistance centered around operations chief Richard Bissell and Director John McCone.<sup>47</sup>

Many of those in the State and Defense departments who so troubled Harriman were close contacts of General Phoumi, the pro-American leader of the royal Laotian army. This complicated Harriman's next challenge, that of getting Phoumi to

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45. Harriman oral history interview by Schlesinger, 57.

46. [?] Carter to Foreign Office, 371/159948 (DF 2231/403), Sept. 9, 1961, Foreign Office Correspondence, Public Record Office, Kew, England (hereafter cited as FOC, PRO).

47. Robert Amory, oral history interview by Joseph E. O'Connor (Boston, 1966), 38-40, 108-109, JFK Library. According to Amory, Kennedy's military advisers were also pressing "for more aggressive action" in Laos. Yet, while Washington-stationed members of the CIA and Defense Department resisted Kennedy's efforts, CIA and military personnel in Laos were well under the control of pro-Souvanna U.S. Ambassador Brown. William H. Sullivan oral history interview by Dennis O'Brien (Boston, 1970), 13. William Sullivan, Harriman's assistant at Geneva, commented that CIA Official Desmond Fitzgerald also showed great interest in the Laos issue but did not fully trust Phoumi and therefore did not obstruct Kennedy's efforts. Also see Brown oral history interview, 6, and Parsons oral history interview, 17. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, 234. Chester Cooper, an aide to Harriman at Geneva, has made similar allegations about resistance at the State and Defense departments to Harriman's mission. Some believed that opposition to the neutralization effort existed even within Harriman's own delegation at Geneva. The British Foreign Office suspected that the American delegate John Steeves was using his return to Washington during the conference's August recess to undercut the neutrality initiative. Edward Peck to Malcolm MacDonald, 371/159947 (DF 2231/381), Aug. 10, 1961, FOC, PRO.

participate in the neutral government. In September 1961 both Brown and John Kenneth Galbraith, ambassador to India, reported that Phoumi had expressed discomfort with the idea of a government headed up by Souvanna. Galbraith worried that Phoumi would purposely break the cease-fire and retreat to the south, expecting American support.<sup>48</sup>

In November 1961 fighting broke out near Xieng Khay, the Laotian communist stronghold. American officials feared that Galbraith's scenario was unfolding. Responsibility for breaking the cease-fire could not be pinned on either party; nevertheless, a cloud of suspicion hung over Phoumi and the United States. Harriman reported to the State Department that opinion at the conference had turned against the United States as a result of the violation of the cease-fire. The fighting at Xieng Khay stopped after a few days, but Harriman's suspicion of Phoumi's intentions remained.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, Harriman was well aware of Phoumi's ability to subvert the Geneva negotiations. The general had a reputation as an ineffective military officer and a corrupt administrator of American aid. But Phoumi had supporters within both the American government and public. Columnist Joseph Alsop, for instance, considered the general a friend and a dependable ally for the United States. Alsop publicly praised Phoumi and derided the Geneva conference as an "exercise in international hypocrisy."<sup>50</sup> Harriman, however, saw Phoumi as an obstacle requiring immediate and forceful attention.<sup>51</sup>

In late January 1962 the key parties to the Laotian agreement again prepared to meet in Geneva to arrange concrete plans for the composition of the coalition cabinet. Harriman feared that Phoumi would hold up the meeting by demanding the ministry of defense for himself, knowing full well that this would compromise the neutralization plan.

To force Phoumi's cooperation, Harriman made an extraordinary move. He decided to threaten Phoumi with a cutoff

48. Brown to Rusk, Sept. 8, 1961, John Kenneth Galbraith to Rusk, Sept. 22, 1961, box 528, Harriman Papers.

49. Harriman to Rusk, Nov. 21, 1961, box 529, *ibid.*

50. *Washington Post*, May 22, 1961.

51. "Memoranda of Conversation, Harriman and Joseph Alsop," Feb. 15, 1962, box 529, Harriman Papers.

of American aid and to ask the Soviets not to take advantage of the temporary weakness of the royal Laotian forces. On January 15, 1962, Harriman met with Pushkin and told his counterpart that, if necessary, the Americans would "expect his assistance" in obtaining Pathet Lao assurances not to take advantage of the situation. Pushkin agreed. Harriman's admission of the complications of handling supposed allies was an unprecedented event in the Cold War, where façades of control often shrouded the struggles of both superpowers to keep recalcitrant allies under some degree of command.<sup>52</sup>

Even with the threat of no U.S. aid, Phoumi stood fast. The princes lingered in Geneva several days waiting for Phoumi to signal his willingness to resume negotiations. In a further effort to press Phoumi, an American, British, Canadian, and French task force met to consider "ostentatiously cultivating" a right-wing political rival of Phoumi in order to scare the general into compliance.<sup>53</sup> The three princes finally met on January 19, 1962, but their conference went "nowhere." In a "black mood," Pushkin predicted the breakup of the entire conference and the renewal of hostilities.<sup>54</sup> The following day, however, the princes, under pressure from all sides, surprised everyone and worked out a provisional accord. They endorsed all of the international agreements made at Geneva and decided to put off the final decision of who would serve as defense minister. Significantly, Phoumi did indicate a willingness to take another ministry post in place of defense.<sup>55</sup>

Superpower cooperation occurred infrequently in the Cold War, and both Pushkin and Harriman seemed to recognize its rarity. After the breakthrough meeting among the princes, Harriman privately told Pushkin that he had grown to appreciate "the frankness with which we had come to speak

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52. Harriman to Rusk, Jan. 15, 1962, *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, 24: 583-584. Also see Cabinet Minute, 128/36, 25(3), March 30, 1962, CAB, PRO. The British Foreign Service feared that cutting off Phoumi would mean the collapse of the royal army and possibly lead to a Pathet Lao victory.

53. United States Delegation to Rusk, Jan. 18, 1962, box 529, Harriman Papers.

54. United States Delegation to Rusk, Jan. 19, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

55. "Joint Communique of Princes Souvanna, Souphanouvong, and Bon Oum on the formation of the Lao Government of National Union," Jan. 20, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

with each other” and added that this “was more than with any other Soviet in my experience.” Pushkin returned the compliment, saying that their cooperation was “an example of how the USSR and the US could work out immediate problems and conflicts in mutual interest.”<sup>56</sup>

In spite of their optimism, it soon became clear that General Phoumi was still not cooperating. Returning to Laos from Geneva, he let it be known that he intended to remain head of the military. Growing increasingly concerned, Harriman decided to apply direct pressure. He arranged to suspend the \$3 million per month American grant to Phoumi and to have Laos-based CIA agent John Hasey sent home. Hasey was a close friend of Phoumi, and Harriman suspected that he was subverting the peace efforts. Ambassador Brown, insisting that Hasey was loyal, disagreed with Harriman, but he supported Hasey’s removal as another effort to pressure Phoumi.<sup>57</sup> Kennedy then sent Phoumi a personal message urging him to cooperate and making it clear that Harriman’s words—and not those of anyone else—represented the president’s views.<sup>58</sup>

Harriman also decided to go to Laos for a direct confrontation with Phoumi. To pressure the general, Harriman brought with him Phoumi’s cousin, Marshal Sarit Thanarat, Thailand’s dictator. Kennedy tapped Admiral Harry D. Felt, commander-in-chief of armed forces in the Pacific, to secure Sarit’s help. In return for his support, Felt apparently promised Sarit some form of U.S. protection in the future. By the time that Harriman arrived in Southeast Asia in late March, the Thais had joined the Americans in issuing a joint communiqué in favor of Laotian neutrality.<sup>59</sup>

Upon arrival, Harriman ventured just over the Laotian border to the Thai town of Nong Khai. There Harriman met with Sarit, Phoumi, and Kenneth Young, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand. Phoumi began by insisting that Souvanna could not be trusted and repeating his reluctance to give up the de-

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56. “Memorandum of Conversation between Harriman and Pushkin,” Jan. 20, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

57. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 515; Brown oral history interview, 10–11, 26–27.

58. Department of State to Embassy in Laos, Jan. 27, 1962, *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 596.

59. “Secret Draft Message for Admiral Felt,” n.d., box 529, Harriman Papers.

fense and interior cabinet positions. The group began pressuring Phoumi. Harriman explained that the cabinet positions were not negotiable. He accused Phoumi of being a "dictator to the rest of the world." Sarit assured his cousin that, if the coalition fell apart, there would still be time for the United States to intervene.<sup>60</sup>

The next day, at a meeting with Phoumi and his deputies at Phoumi's Vientiane office, Harriman insisted that the Soviets would see to a North Vietnamese withdrawal. The Laotians were skeptical. One of Phoumi's supporters explained to Harriman, "You have taken away the means of continuing our struggle. We have difficulty in following your somersaults in the cold war. We have great reservations regarding the Soviets. You have played your game. For us it is a matter of life and death[,] even existence." Disregarding the emotional plea, Harriman continued to view the royal forces led by Phoumi as "a defeated army."<sup>61</sup>

By April it appeared that Harriman's coercive tactics had persuaded Phoumi to cooperate in the formation of a new government. But the American sanctions had allowed the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao to regroup and plan an attack on the weakened Laotian army. During March and April communist guerrillas surrounded a royal army stronghold in the province of Nam Tha. On May 2, they attacked. Phoumi's troops reportedly ran from the oncoming communists. A captured diary from a North Vietnamese soldier fighting at Nam Tha revealed that the attack had been planned by the North Vietnamese leadership as a sort of Dienbienphu in Laos. In the space of several days, the communists almost drove Phoumi's troops out of Nam Tha.<sup>62</sup>

The Nam Tha attack raised questions not only about the intentions of Laotian and North Vietnamese communists but also those of the Soviets, who had promised to control the Pathet Lao. The White House and State Department were frantic with fear that the attack might undermine a year of diplomatic work. In early May Harriman returned to Washington, where he and Under-Secretary of State George Ball received Soviet

60. "Memoranda of Conversation," March 24, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

61. "Record of Meeting," March 25, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

62. Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 140; Dommen, *Laos*, 73.

Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Harriman and Ball reminded Dobrynin of the high-level American-Soviet cooperation on Laos, beginning with Khrushchev's personal word on the matter.<sup>63</sup> Dobrynin blamed Phoumi's "clique" for the attack but reiterated Soviet support for Laotian neutrality.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, debate raged at the White House as to how to deal with the outbreak. Rostow wanted to bomb North Vietnam immediately. Others pressed for American military intervention on the ground, in effect bringing about the contingency plan to divide Laos.<sup>65</sup> President Kennedy told Ball in strict confidence that former President Eisenhower was threatening to make a public statement in favor of intervention.<sup>66</sup> As he had at the beginning of the Geneva conference, Harriman advocated sending American ground troops into Laos. After several days, Kennedy settled the debate. Again he decided not to intervene directly in Laos. Instead, Kennedy sent the Seventh Fleet to Thai waters and dispatched 5,000 American troops to the Thailand-Laos border. Additional military support came from U.S. allies New Zealand and Australia.<sup>67</sup>

Most American officials blamed the Soviets for the Nam Tha attack.<sup>68</sup> While the State Department and the White House vented their anger, Llewellyn Thompson, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, offered a sobering view in a cable to the secretary of state. Thompson reminded the State Department of its own problems reining in belligerent allies like Phoumi. The Soviets'

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63. "Paper prepared for 2:45 call by USSR Ambassador Dobrynin on the Acting Secretary Mr. Ball," May 9, 1962, box 529, Harriman Papers.

64. Anatoly Dobrynin to Harriman, May 15, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

65. Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 146; "Memoranda From Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary McNamara," May 11, 1961, *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, 24: 742-744.

66. "Memoranda of Telephone Conversation Between President Kennedy and Acting Secretary Ball," May 11, 1962, *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, 24: 741. Also see "Memoranda of Discussion with former President Eisenhower," May 13, 1962, *ibid.*, 24: 760-761. Fearing a public statement from Eisenhower urging American intervention over the Nam Tha incident, Kennedy dispatched Secretary Robert McNamara, CIA Director John McCone, and General Lyman Lemnitzer to speak with the former president. They were successful in persuading Eisenhower to hold off.

67. "Memorandum of Conversation," May 15, 1962, *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, 24: 770-774; Harriman oral history interview by Schlesinger, 77.

68. "Meeting of Secretary of State with British and French Ambassadors and Governor Harriman," May 14, 1962, box 529, Harriman Papers.



hold over their Laotian allies, the ambassador explained, was even more tenuous, with the communist Chinese standing by as an alternate means of support. Compared to the United States and its relationship with Phoumi, the Soviet Union had much less leverage. In the end, Thompson suspected, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had acted on their own.<sup>69</sup>

The presence of American troops in Thailand and the continuing support for a neutral Laos by all principal parties brought a return to cease-fire conditions by the end of May. On June 11, 1962, Souvanna announced the final arrangements for the coalition government—with Souvanna as prime minister and Phoumi and Souphanouvong as vice premiers. With Laotian neutrality on the verge of reality, the Geneva conference assembled for its final sessions at the beginning of July. The opening day mood was one of elation, almost a “class reunion” atmosphere. The delegates addressed the final details, and, on July 23, fourteen nations signed the final accords, requiring the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Laos within seventy-five days.<sup>70</sup>

Optimism spread across Southeast Asia and Washington as the conference wrapped up successfully.<sup>71</sup> In the aftermath of Geneva, encouraged by the ability of the United States to work with the Soviets in promoting neutrality for Laos, a group within the Kennedy administration began to press for an extension of the neutrality model to other Southeast Asian countries. Early on, Kennedy’s interest in Laotian neutrality and the apparent Soviet cooperation in this venture encouraged a rethinking of American policy. In May 1961 Kenneth Young, U.S. ambassador to Thailand, wrote a memorandum suggesting that Laos might serve as “a catalyst changing the composition of our

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69. Llewellyn Thompson to Rusk, May 15, 1962, box 529, *ibid.*

70. “U.S. Delegation in Geneva to Rusk,” July 2, 1962, box 529, *ibid.* Along with requiring the withdrawal of all foreign troops, the Geneva accords contained a declaration of neutrality in which all signatories agreed to respect Laotian neutrality fully. The signed agreement also carried provisions against military alliances with Laos or the presence of any foreign military troops on Laotian soil.

71. According to a Department of Defense history, the signing of the Geneva accords created a “euphoria and optimism” that led McNamara to set in motion a planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. *Pentagon Papers*, 2: 160–162.

policy.”<sup>72</sup> Christian Chapman, a desk officer at the American embassy in Vientiane, launched a proposal to create a neutral barrier of countries to the south of communist China.<sup>73</sup>

Higher officials at the State Department shared Chapman’s views. In the fall of 1961, after Harriman had procured preliminary understandings with both Souvanna and the Soviets, Under-Secretary of State Bowles, prophetically warning that American military involvement in the area could result in a “humiliating defeat,” issued a sweeping proposal. He called for the formation of an “independent belt” in Southeast Asia that would include Cambodia, South Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Malaya.<sup>74</sup> Encouraged by the successful completion of the Geneva conference, Bowles pressed his plan. He proposed releasing a grand presidential “Peace Charter for Southeast Asia” that he personally would carry to Southeast Asia and launch. The Bowles proposal had supporters within the State Department, including Roger Hilsman, director of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, and his deputy Thomas Hughes. Hilsman later called the Bowles proposal “imaginative” and claimed that President Kennedy was sympathetic: “my sense of his attitude is that he accepted the concept as a farsseeing expression of the ultimate goal for Southeast Asia.”<sup>75</sup>

During the final days of the Geneva conference, Kennedy, through Harriman, appeared to be exploring the possibility of expanding the Geneva accords. On the day before the conference ended, Harriman and his aide, William H. Sullivan, met directly with Ung Van Kiem, the North Vietnamese foreign minister. In the official record of the meeting, Harriman noted an “improvement in candor” on the part of the North Vietnamese, which included an admission of sorts that their troops

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72. Kenneth Young, “Our Framework for the Fourteen Nation Conference,” n.d., box 527, Harriman Papers.

73. Chapman oral history interview, 31.

74. Bowles to Rusk, Oct. 5, 1961, box 526, Harriman Papers.

75. Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 43; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 287. Sorensen notes that Kennedy “liked Bowles, liked most of his ideas.” Sullivan oral history interview, 34. Sullivan believed that “at heart he [Kennedy] was constantly looking for opportunities to see if we could expand from the Laos agreement, but at the same time feeling more confident about his military posture in Vietnam once Laos had been tied up.” Parmet, *JFK*, 203–204. But Kennedy did demote Bowles in the “Thanksgiving Day massacre” in the fall of 1961, and the president obviously saw limits to Bowles’s world view.

were operating in Laos. Political scientist Allan E. Goodman has suggested that Harriman also proposed the idea of neutralizing Vietnam along the lines of the just-completed Laotian model. The North Vietnamese, however, quickly insisted that, as a precondition for any negotiations, the United States must immediately withdraw all support personnel from South Vietnam. This was unacceptable to the Americans, and the meeting ended with no progress.<sup>76</sup>

The following day, Harriman scheduled a formal talk with Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Li, in spite of some resistance from the State Department. At the meeting, Harriman hinted to Chen Li that the United States might be interested in easing tensions between the two nations, but the Chinese insisted that no movement could take place until the United States turned Taiwan over to the People's Republic of China. There the conversation ended.<sup>77</sup>

The North Vietnamese and Chinese reactions, it would appear, thwarted any further thoughts of neutralizing all of Southeast Asia. Upon Harriman's return to the United States, Secretary of State Rusk asked him to review Bowles's proposal. According to Bowles, Harriman had been an enthusiastic sup-

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76. "Memorandum of Conversation," July 22, 1962, *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, 24: 867-870. According to Allan Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, Calif., 1978), 13-14, Kennedy authorized the top secret, July 22 meeting between Harriman and Foreign Minister Ung Van Kiem to explore the possibility that negotiations could be put in place to neutralize Vietnam along the Laotian model. William H. Sullivan, *Obbligato, 1939-1979: Notes on a Foreign Service Career* (New York, 1984), 176-178. Sullivan also presents the meeting as designed to open an avenue to negotiations with the North Vietnamese. Sullivan to author, Feb. 29, 1996. Sullivan remembered "considerable sensitivity about these talks" and deemed it "quite likely" that more was discussed at the meeting than is reflected in his official memoranda, although he did not recall the specific issues discussed. Sullivan often prepared separate memoranda of meetings for the president only. Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz have suggested—without evidence—that, after initial discussions regarding neutralization, the North Vietnamese at some point dropped their demand for full withdrawal of American personnel. They insist, however, that Kennedy, after briefly flirting with negotiations, chose to turn instead to a more aggressive approach. Bassett and Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory," 240.

77. Harriman to John Czyzak, July 23, 1962, "Memorandum for Files: Personal and Secret," July 21, 1962, box 530, Harriman Papers; Harriman oral history interview by Schlesinger, 67-68; Abramson, *Spanning the Century*, 585. From his arrival in Geneva, Harriman had pressed the State Department to authorize him to conduct talks with Chen Li.

porter of his neutralization plan.<sup>78</sup> But in his response to Rusk, Harriman assailed the plan as unworkable and “impractical.” The logistics of organizing conferences and procuring international and regional support would be nearly impossible. More importantly, Harriman argued, the communists simply could not be trusted.<sup>79</sup>

The possibility of furthering the working relationship between the United States and Soviet Union established at Geneva also evaporated quickly. Pushkin died within a year of the Geneva agreement. When Harriman went to the Kremlin in 1963 to press Khrushchev to keep his side of the bargain on Laos, the Soviet premier virtually refused to talk about the issue, perhaps out of embarrassment that the Soviet Union could not control the Pathet Lao.<sup>80</sup>

Prospects for a Southeast Asian détente were thus short-lived. The Soviet pretense of controlling the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese quickly crumbled.<sup>81</sup> In spite of Soviet guarantees and the Geneva agreement, North Vietnam continued to make free use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Aided by the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao resumed their guerrilla war after the Geneva agreements. The U.S. military continued to formulate contingency plans involving American troops in case the coalition government failed.

The agreements at Geneva should not be seen, however, as

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78. Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941–1969* (New York, 1971), 409; George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York, 1985), 82. Herring links the Bowles proposals with Harriman’s concerns about corruption in the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and the risks of military involvement. But after his experiences at Geneva, Harriman held little faith in the Bowles plan.

79. Harriman to Rusk, July 30, 1962, box 565, Harriman Papers.

80. Harriman oral history interview by Schlesinger, 59; “Memorandum of Conversation,” April 26, 1963, *Foreign Relations, 1961–1963*, 24: 1000–1005.

81. Sullivan oral history interview, 16. The Geneva conference dented many long-held assumptions about the communist world. Sullivan later explained that the Americans began the negotiations believing that the Soviet Union dictated policy to both China and North Vietnam. “It wasn’t until the end of the conference,” Sullivan explained, “that we realized that the Soviets didn’t have full control over the people on their side.”

a failure. While Souvanna increasingly relied upon the United States, he still retained a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the Laotian populace.<sup>82</sup> The addition of Souvanna and the substantial neutralist forces to the remnants of the royal army was enough to hold off the communists in key regions of Laos.<sup>83</sup> This provided the United States with a staging ground for its “secret war” against the North Vietnamese (clandestine campaigns that were in clear violation of the Geneva agreements). Serving as ambassador to Laos beginning in 1964, Sullivan recalled the CIA-trained Hmong warriors as having significant success as part of the “secret war” fighting the North Vietnamese in northern regions of Laos.<sup>84</sup> Two years after the formation of the coalition government in Laos, Harriman wrote with some satisfaction that the U.S. position in Laos “is substantially better than it was two years ago. We have lost practically no territory. . . . We are now supporting the neutralists and the conservatives whereas before we were in the intolerable position of supporting only the right wing.” Harriman also credited neutralization with having “held the Mekong Valley from Viet-Cong control, and to a considerable extent protected Thailand from the subversive incursion that we were gravely concerned would make Thailand another guerrilla battlefield.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, while hardly an unqualified success, Kennedy’s pursuit of neutrality left the United States with a measure of influence in Laos and was certainly preferable to

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82. Memorandum, June 12, 1962, box 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, JFK Library; “Short Term Outlook for the Laotian Coalition Government,” Sept. 26, 1962, *ibid.*

83. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 9, 269–274; Pelz, “When Do I Have Time to Think?” 215–229; Hannah, *The Key to Failure*, 91. Hannah, Newman, and Pelz have argued that Laotian neutralization allowed for even greater infiltration of South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. While infiltration did pick up after the Geneva agreement, the prospect of a Laos controlled by the Pathet Lao would have set the stage, no doubt, for even greater infiltration.

84. Sullivan, *Obbligato*, 210–213. See John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago, 1995), 228–232, for general details of the Hmong “secret war” in Laos.

85. Harriman to Bundy, July 11, 1964, declassified box 14cl, Harriman Papers.

either direct American intervention or a full Pathet Lao victory in Laos.

By the end of his life, Kennedy was moving away from any idea of expanding neutrality to all of Southeast Asia.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, his dogged pursuit of a coalition government in Laos provides valuable insights into the nature of Kennedy's diplomatic style, especially in relation to the question of Vietnam.

Some have suggested that Kennedy was interested in pacifying Laos mainly so that he could focus all his attention on waging an active war against communism in Vietnam.<sup>87</sup> Kennedy's experience in Laos, however, taught him the value of risk and compromise. Kennedy initiated negotiations, pressed Khrushchev for support at Vienna, and stuck to negotiations, over even Harriman's reservations. Kennedy refused to use American troops in Laos and in doing so defied virtually all of his advisers. In his support for Souvanna, Kennedy showed an understanding of the importance of finding leaders with popular legitimacy. Kennedy also showed a willingness to seek information and conduct policy in an unorthodox manner by contacting and dealing directly with ambassadors such as Harriman and Brown, and by circumventing the State Department, where entrenched interests, such as those at the International Security Affairs office, threatened to thwart his intentions. Finally, Kennedy was prepared to use neutrality as a diplomatic and political tool to the end of providing delays, realignments, face-saving devices, and façades for other efforts. At the very least, Kennedy learned that he could ease political pressure through creative diplomacy. Whatever path Kennedy would have chosen for Southeast Asian policy after 1963 will forever remain a mystery. One can only surmise that future decisions would have been shaped by the in-

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86. "Memorandum of Conversation," Sept. 23, 1963, *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, 24: 1053. In a meeting with Souvanna in the fall of 1963, Kennedy told the Laotian prime minister that, while he was open to neutralizing Vietnam, the "necessary ingredients seemed to be lacking," such as a figure like Souvanna who could unite the country.

87. Sullivan oral history interview, 34.

tensely independent and personal style of diplomacy that Kennedy had practiced throughout the Laotian crisis.<sup>88</sup>

88. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 82–101. Roger Hilsman and Kennedy aide Kenneth O'Donnell both claimed that Kennedy told them that he had no intention of using American forces in Vietnam. Harriman oral history interview by Hackman, 35–37. Harriman commented that, before Kennedy died, he “was already concerned that we were becoming too deeply involved in Vietnam.” Harriman further asserted that those in the administration who shared Kennedy's concerns about Vietnam, were “pushed aside” by the Lyndon Johnson administration. “Memorandum for the President, Subject: Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to SVN,” Feb. 10, 1963, Vietnam Documents, Joint Chiefs of Staff Central File, 1963, RG 218, NA; “Summary Report on Eighth Secretary of Defense Conference, Honolulu, May 7, 1963,” box 1, *ibid.* Materials declassified by the Assassination Records Review Board in the fall of 1997 confirm that the Kennedy administration was seriously considering a withdrawal of roughly 1,000 advisers from Vietnam in 1963. In spite of the finesse and skill with which Kennedy handled the Laotian crisis, most historians have continued to consider him a conventional Cold Warrior, especially in regard to Vietnam. Scholars Gardner, Smith, and Kahin have all argued for an essential consistency between the Kennedy and Johnson policies on Vietnam. With little historical evidence to support his contentions, Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and the U.S. Political Culture* (Boston, 1993), has insisted that Kennedy was rabidly eager to go to war in Vietnam. As new sources become available, new research, unencumbered by preconceived notions, is needed to portray the nature of Kennedy's diplomacy more fully.