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SUMMARY OF
OBSERVATIONS ON THE U.S. COMMAND EXPERIENCE
IN LAOS, AUGUST 1960-MAY 1961

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE U.S. COMMAND EXPERIENCE
IN LAOS, AUGUST 1960-MAY 1961

INTRODUCTION

1. This is a short summary of a two-volume study of the experience of the U.S. Command System and the U.S. decision-making machinery in dealing with the Laotian crisis during the 9 months from August 1960 to May 1961. The purpose of providing this summary is to make the main results of the study available to officers and officials who have a need to know but do not have time to read the detailed study.

2. The study of Laos is one of a series of historical analyses, undertaken by WSEG at the request of the JCS, to provide empirical data concerning the problems encountered by the national command structure in real situations. The other situations studied are different in character and suggest the elements of both variety and repetitiveness to be found in recent command and control experience. It is, of course, not expected that either the Laos experience, or any other, will be exactly duplicated in the future. For this reason we must suppose that command and control problems of the future will not be exactly what we found them to be in the past -- for instance, in Laos.

3. But in devising a command organization, in providing it with equipment, with information flow, with operating instructions and procedures, we have to assume what the problems will be at each echelon, what decisions will be made at what echelons, what authority will be delegated, and what authority reserved, etc. The presumption of these studies of experience is not that any previous experience will be exactly duplicated in the future, but rather that previous experience, systematically recorded and analyzed, provides the only empirical evidence available concerning command problems. As such, it forms the most trustworthy available guide to our rational processes in determining the difficulties to expect, and hence to prepare for, in future command systems.

4. In what follows, there is first a "Summary of Main Highlights of the Laos Incident" and then a "Summary Characterization of the Laos Incident." These are intended to provide a perspective to the several groups of "Observations," which constitute the main substance of this report.

SUMMARY OF MAIN HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LAOS INCIDENT

5. On 9 August 1960 Kong Le, a young Lao paratroop captain, staged a military coup in which he seized Vientiane, the administrative capital of Laos, while most of the high officials of the pro-Western Royal Laotian Government were in Luang Prabang, the royal and ceremonial capital of the little kingdom. Kong Le vaguely proclaimed himself a neutralist, but his objectives, possible backing, and co-conspirators, if any, were not clear.

6. Defense Minister Phoumi, the strongest personality in the government, who was in control of most of the Laotian military units outside of the city of Vientiane, flew to the southern Laotian city of Savannakhet on the first day of the coup to confirm his control of the troops stationed in that area and to organize a resistance to Kong Le.

7. Within a few days Kong Le was joined by the veteran neutralist politician Souvanna Phouma, and maneuvering began to get National Assembly approval of Kong Le's overturn of the government by military coup. General Phoumi, in Savannakhet, set up a High Revolutionary Committee dedicated to the overthrow of the Kong Le/Souvanna government.

8. The situation immediately following the coup was very confused, and because it was not clear just what was going on, the U.S. took no strong steps. Our objective in Laos had been to make it independent, pro-Western, and strongly anti-Communist. To that end, the government of Laos was largely supported by the U.S. The troops of both Kong Le and of General Phoumi were equipped, fed, and paid by the United States in hopes that they would defend Laos from the Communist-infiltrated Pathet Lao and from possible incursions by Viet Minh from North Vietnam. We reaffirmed recognition of the pre-Kong Le coup government, but remained in touch with both sides, hoping for an accommodation between them. [

]

9. Suddenly and unexpectedly the hitherto fluid situation was solidified in a shape that made the U.S. political problem much more difficult. Partially persuaded by a demonstration held in its chambers, the National Assembly declared the previous government dissolved and voted to invest Souvanna Phouma as Prime

Minister. This act of the National Assembly, although apparently accomplished under some duress, gave the Souvanna government the presumption of legality needing only the final confirmation of a royal rescript to make it constitutionally binding. This presumption of legality was given political support by the fact that Souvanna was favored by France, by the United Kingdom, and by most Asian neutrals.

10. However, the Souvanna/Kong Le combination controlled little of the country side, little of the Laotian army that we had build as a bulwark against Communism, and seemed much too ready to make concessions to Pathet Lao and other left-wing demands. It was Phoumi who controlled more of the U.S.-supported military forces and who generally followed the straight anti-Communist line that was favored by the United States at that time.

11. The U.S. then sought to resolve the dilemma in Laos by seeking to force an accommodation upon the two contending factions before the Souvanna government was confirmed by royal edict. Political pressures, and manipulation of the flow of U.S. aid, upon which both factions were dependent for continued existence and strength, were employed in an effort to effect the compromise. When finally this policy was recognized to have failed, the U.S. gave [] support to Phoumi's attempt to overthrow the Kong Le/Souvanna government by force. It was about this time, in November, that a Laos Battle Staff was activated in the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

12. After initial failures, General Phoumi finally succeeded in mid-December in retaking Vientiane. []

Souvanna Phouma fled abroad and Kong Le retreated north.]

13. At the beginning of December, a fortnight before the final fall of his government, Souvanna Phouma abandoned hope of getting the U.S. to end support of his enemies, and in desperation accepted the Russian offer of aid. Immediately a Russian airlift from North Vietnam began to bring supplies into Vientiane, for the Souvanna government and for Kong Le's troops. After the fall of Vientiane, the U.S. was faced with the problem of what to do, militarily, with the Kong Le

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forces which had escaped and continued to receive Russian airlift assistance, and what to do, politically, with Souvanna Phouma's claims of still being the legitimate head of the government of Laos.

14. In the period after the fall of Vientiane, the most important immediate fact was the Russian airlift to Kong Le, which had begun early in December as an overt measure of aid by the Russian government to the legally constituted government of Laos. If General Phoumi had achieved some momentum by the capture of Vientiane, it was soon lost. If Kong Le lost momentum in being driven from Vientiane, he soon began to regain it with the aid of the Russian airlift and of other forms of assistance provided by the Viet Minh. Kong Le moved from the area north of Vientiane eastward into the strategic Plaine Des Jarres area, and there he consolidated his position, joined by elements of the Pathet Lao.

15. From mid-December to mid-January, U.S. reaction to events in Laos may have been slowed, and rendered more cautious, by the fact that these were the last weeks of the departing administration. With the advent of the new administration, an attempt was made to reappraise the situation and fix upon a course of action. Out of the interagency group that did the staff work for one reappraisal, a Laos Task Force was established, the Chairman being the chief State Department representative. A political goal of a neutral Laos was accepted as the somewhat altered U.S. objective in Laos, but in the face of the deteriorating situation in Laos, it was judged necessary to develop a stronger bargaining position before this could be accomplished. The stronger bargaining position required that General Phoumi and his forces be placed in a position where they could more effectively resist further aggressions by Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. [

[

16. This policy and program were followed until early March. But Phoumi's forces, after some initial success in moving into areas previously vacated by Kong Le, soon suffered major

setbacks. The Russian airlift and Viet Minh aid continued to build up the Kong Le forces, and it became evident that the situation was getting worse, not better, in terms of the comparative strength of Phoumi and Kong Le. [

]

17. Souvanna Phouma was circulating, meanwhile, in Communist Bloc capitals; and at the same time the foreign offices of the U.S., U.K., France, and the USSR were in communication on terms of a possible settlement. In these matters the U.K. and the USSR acted ostensibly in their role as co-chairman of the Geneva Conference of 1954.

18. In the period from mid-March to mid-April 1961, [

] Phoumi's forces continued to give up one place after another, and the military superiority of the Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces became constantly more evident and more decisive. There was little real combat, but it became increasingly evident that the Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces could occupy almost any area that they set out to take. All of the great powers, including the USSR, expressed themselves in favor of a cease fire and of a negotiated peace which would result in a neutral Laos. The desirability of such undeniably good things was not arguable. The practical and immediate issue was soon recognized to be, however, whether or not the Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces would, in fact, honor a cease fire while the final settlement was being negotiated.

19. Although everyone agreed in principle with cease fire and negotiated peace, the Kong Le/Pathet Lao kept up the same pressure, and the Phoumi forces gradually withdrew first from one place and then another. By mid-April it seemed that soon all of Laos, including the two capitals and all other points of consequence in the Mekong Valley, would be in Pathet Lao or Kong Le hands. Faced with this imminent prospect of complete loss of Laos to the Communists, the U.S. at high levels considered intervention, but repeatedly deferred making a binding decision upon this. [

] a gesture intended to impress both friend and foe as a symbol of

U.S. aid and resolution to defend Laos against a complete Communist takeover -- while holding open the possibility of intervention a little later. Preliminary preparations were made for deploying PACOM units into the area, and the pace of negotiations with Russia, with the U.K. acting as the broker, was speeded up.

20. Through the last half of April, the conditions in Laos continued to worsen. At the same time, the U.S. was humiliated by the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba. As developments in Laos appeared headed toward a climax at the end of April, PACOM elements moved into forward positions, anticipating possible intervention orders. Official publicity was given to some of these moves. [

]

21. Near the end of April the U.K. and the USSR agreed upon a negotiating formula. That formula did not meet all of the U.S. requirements, but the U.S. gradually came to believe that it offered the only alternative to the risks of seeking to attain U.S. goals in Laos by intervention. And intervention would probably have had to be unilateral, and, by our own calculations, stood little chance to succeed against determined Chinese and Viet Minh opposition unless we were prepared to accept the risks of expanding the war [

]

22. Thus, at the beginning of May, although the question of intervention itself was left pending, a decision was taken to send a U.S. delegation to the Geneva Conference that had been arranged by the USSR and the U.K. A little while later, an uneasy cease-fire agreement was reached between the Phoumi and the Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces. The Laos incident was by no means closed at this point, but it had definitely moved, for the time being at least, out of the crisis stage.

SUMMARY CHARACTERIZATION OF THE LAOS INCIDENT

23. The U.S. involvement in Laos was a continuing low-key crisis, dominated by political considerations. [

] There was serious consideration of intervention, and in anticipation of that possibility advance deployments were made. At the climax it appeared we might be in direct confrontation with major powers of the Communist Bloc. The tension eased off, rather than ended.

24. Laos had been a subject of nagging national concern ever since the end of the Indochina war in 1954. The Laos problem had reached the minor crisis stage at least once before, in 1959. During the nine months covered by this study, Laos was continuously a major preoccupation of CINCPAC. It was a perpetual agenda item at NSC meetings; in 29 meetings of the NSC from 12 August 1960 to 1 May 1961, it was on the agenda 24 times. At the national level, however, although Laos was always an inescapable as well as worrisome burden, it was always overshadowed by other issues. Never, for more than a moment, was Laos accorded full-time, first priority attention by the highest echelons of national decision making.

25. Although the national level did not accord sufficient priority to Laos -- except possibly very briefly, for a couple of days, in the last week of April 1961 -- to give prompt or full attention to issues arising in Laos, not enough authority was delegated to any lower echelon to insure effective resolution of issues on which there were significant differences of opinion below the national level. Referral of policy differences from subordinate echelons to the Presidential level was apparently accomplished only twice or three times within the period August 1960 to mid-January 1961. With the new administration such referral to the President was much more frequent, but issues on Laos were always over-shadowed at that level by other issues and problems, and consequently received comparatively little attention

26. The U.S. operations that were operations, as distinct from deployment for possible intervention, were quasi-military rather than military. Twice during this period PACOM units were placed on DEFCON-II, and overt military intervention was considered with apparent seriousness at the national level

for about six weeks in the spring of 1961. Many deployments were made, including some forward positioning to facilitate and expedite intervention if a decision to intervene were made. [

27. []

28. Because the Kong Le coup was originally appraised as a political event calling for a political reaction, the initial response of the Joint Staff did not deviate from established routines. These involved mainly the SEA Branch of the Pacific Division of J-3 and the Subsidiary Activities Division of J-5, acting without formalized special arrangements to assure coordination. The first organizational recognition of a contingency was the formation, on 11 October 1960, of a part-time Working Group on Laos, consisting of 3 colonels from J-3 and one from each of the other J's. In mid-November, a Battle Staff headed by a Deputy Director of J-3 was activated, and the Battle Staff continued as the central focus of Joint Staff activities on Laos from then to the end of the period studied.

29. In general, the JCS (and the Laos Battle Staff acting in their behalf) served to advise policy-making echelons on military aspects and "political-military" aspects of the Laos problem. In doing so, the JCS functioned much of the time as a Washington representative of CINCPAC. The JCS regularly depended upon CINCPAC for specific knowledge of the situation in his area, including matters of political-military policy, and for ideas

concerning courses of action to be recommended at high levels in Washington. The JCS rarely failed to concur in CINCPAC's appraisals or proposals; more than once, however, military suggestions originating in the Joint Staff were found politically not feasible by CINCPAC, and were withdrawn.

30. The circumstances surrounding this study, and the nature of the events themselves, have facilitated development of an overall description of strategic decision making, from the field to the national level, in a continuing low-key crisis in which operations consisted more often of intrigue and quasi-military adventuring than of overt military combat. In an affair of this kind, the role of the JCS and of the Defense Establishment as a whole, within the national command structure, emerges reasonably clear. But data were not available, nor was the affair sufficiently current, for a close study of the internal procedures of the Joint Staff. [

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31. Formal lines of administrative subordination remained the same throughout the period of this Study. (See Figure 1.) There were some changes, however, after the new administration came in, in formal assignment of responsibilities to agencies, and there were shifts in the individuals most trusted by those in positions of power.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHARACTER AND ENVIRONMENT OF
THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS 1/

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

32. The decision-making process was extremely complex and was conducted in an environment of ambiguity. This was true throughout the period of this study.

33. Decisions of consequence on operational matters were seldom rendered solely or even largely on the basis of operational

1/ At intervals throughout the concluding observations there are parenthetical references to paragraphs in the main parts of the study that illustrate, support, or are otherwise pertinent to the points that have been made.

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considerations. They were seldom rendered on the basis of Laotian considerations alone. Political considerations were always present, and generally they were the determining factor. These political considerations were numerous, changing, and concerned a diversity of factors in Laos, Thailand, Southeast Asia generally, the Asian neutrals, France, the U.K., and other SEATO allies. They related to possible U.N. actions, to U.K.-USSR negotiations, to cease-fire negotiations between Phoumi and the Pathet Lao, and to possible escalation of minor actions into major conflict. Almost always the determining factors related to concerns in other areas, and to other considerations foreign to the assigned responsibilities of the Laos Battle Staff or the Laos Task Force. (With decisions based on these other factors and rendered by officials whose attentions were concentrated largely on other matters, factors important to local considerations and to operations were sometimes needlessly or unwittingly disregarded.)

34. The extent and diversity of extraneous considerations entering into decisions concerning Laos involved use of information on a correspondingly wider variety of subjects, from a correspondingly greater range of places, and channeled through a correspondingly greater number of organizations.

35. In the area of concerns above the purely routine matters that were unquestioned SOP, and for that reason handled without challenge at lower field echelons, there was scarcely an issue that was purely military. Every military action had political implications, either in terms of its possible side effects, or in terms of the judgments that it involved concerning the feasibility of particular goals, or in terms of a judgment of the political character and reliability of some Lao individual or faction. Above all, there was a judgment concerning the likely reaction of the enemy or of neutrals to moves that we might take. (See Part I, paragraphs 97, 99, 116, 126, 127, 139, 143, 194-197, 200, 245, 257, 261, 262, 267, 268, 270; and Part II, paragraphs 17, 20, 21, 36, 40-43, 49, 56, 77, 78, 84, 93, 109, 111, 114, 115, 127, 133, 136, 150, 162, 179, 180, 182, 200, 227, 245, 257, 261, 262, 267, 268, 270, 272-276, 278-280, 284-287, 299, 310, 312, 314-316, 349, 350, 351, 360, 361, 363, 375, 376, 378, 380, 383, 391, 393, 395, 396, 402, 403, 406, 410-412, 416, 417, 421-424, 428, 429, 432, 437-445, 452, 453, 460, 467, 469, 474, 475, 477.)

36. Operations actually engaged in were always at a very low point on the scale of the violence that could have been brought to bear. Because of this, determination of what to do and how to do it was always circumscribed by a judgment of what we could get away with. This became, without explicit recognition, the determining factor in most cases. Such a judgment, if conducted rationally, involved appraisal of the governing intangibles which would permit us to get away with one thing, but not with another. This was not a technical judgment of the physical magnitude of the task and of the physical characteristics of what would be required to do the job. It was essentially an appraisal of psychological, social, and political factors. The basic circumstances of a war of such limited proportions, therefore, undermined the classic basis for judgment of effectiveness of weapons and of tactics, and involved that judgment in an appraisal of intangibles. Such appraisal of intangibles was indeed inescapable. But concern for this dimension appears to have obscured the fact that technical evaluation of the operational effectiveness of a given system against known enemy systems and readily available responses was still an interesting and important consideration. (See Part II, paragraphs 31, 52-56, 60, 63-68, 105-125, 126, 127, 134-141, 144, 151-153, 239, 241, 284, 290, 320-327, 337-346, 357-361, 372, 378, 380, 408, 409, 413, 414, 434, 438-440, 446, 448, 449.)

37. [

] Coordination of their actions was, of course, supposed to be effected by the Country Team under the leadership of the Ambassador. [

] Special problems developed because efficiency of operations sometimes suggested the joint use of facilities, but differential security levels made this difficult or impossible. [

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38. Finally, the problem was rendered more complex by the fact of differential delegation of responsibility to field representatives by different agencies. In matters of mutual concern, Defense, [

] generally delegated much more authority to the field than State did. As a result, where Defense [] had full authority to act on a matter, that action might be held up by the State representative who lacked comparable authority. (See Part I, paragraphs 56, 64, 75, 93-94, 180-185, 203, 204; and Part II, paragraphs 155, 177, 251-257, 441.)

39. When the crisis moved into the phase at which overt military intervention was seriously considered, the phasing of military moves to accord with political moves assumed high importance. Preliminary deployments, staging plans, and scheduling of arrival into the intervention area were changed from previous plans in order to accommodate political requirements for rapid action, to synchronize with diplomatic negotiations with friend or foe or both, to avoid unwanted appearances, and to reduce the possibility of embarrassing political actions in the U.N. or elsewhere. (See Part II, paragraphs 273, 278, 280, 281, 299, 304, 306-308, 411, 412.)

PERSISTENT AMBIGUITY OF THE DECISION-MAKING ENVIRONMENT

40. Whether or not the Laos incident deserved to be called a war, the fog of war prevailed. Intelligence was generally incomplete, often conflicting or in serious error, and commonly dependent upon sources with an ax to grind. Many decisions that we had to make were made on the basis of judgment of the personal characteristics of Lao individuals, or of the political inclination, or power, of a group or faction. This involved indirectly a social or political appraisal of the forces at work within the land -- a subject upon which there were evident and probably inescapable differences between honest and ordinarily competent U.S. officials.

41. In addition to the inherent slipperiness of the subject matter, lack of solid information created a situation in which proprietary or emotional interests, either of those providing intelligence or of those acting upon it, often made it quite impossible to escape the influence of the wish upon the thought. The circumstances in which events were interpreted and decisions

made were generally so ambiguous that reactions to intelligence and to events were more predictable on the basis of established viewpoints as much as upon the basis of the event itself.

42. Critical factors upon which judgment had to be based were appraisals of intentions, of personal capabilities, and of possible future response to still hypothetical events; judgment of these intangibles was generally the linchpin upon which decision depended. (Part I, paragraphs 35, 37-42, 44-51, 136-138, 144-157, 204-242, 252-256; and Part II, paragraphs 46, 47, 66-68, 73-75, 78-85, 110, 117, 120, 136, 214, 215, 219, 243, 245, 246, 251-253, 258, 260, 261, 264, 266-269, 369, 411, 412, 451, 476.)

OBSERVATIONS ON CENTRAL PROBLEMS OF POLICY THAT AFFECTED
COMMAND AND CONTROL DECISION MAKING

CHANGE IN ADMINISTRATIVE STYLE DID NOT ELIMINATE
AMBIGUITIES IN POLICY

43. In the period from August 1960 to January 1961, the problem overwhelming all others was lack of clearly defined, clearly felt national policy and purpose. We were unable, as a nation, to pursue with consistency and firmness any single policy leading clearly and resolutely in one unequivocal direction. This was a problem beyond the power of the JCS to resolve, and was resolvable only at a national level, if resolvable at all. Each agency involved had by its charter a legitimate interest in Laos. Without clear-cut resolution of national policy, each agency was predisposed to favor policies based on its own accepted mode of operations and to maintain a proprietary interest in them, even when they were in conflict with policies being attempted by other and competing U.S. agencies. So long as higher authority did not assert itself decisively to develop a unified U.S. policy, it was possible for peer agencies to appeal decisions and to delay actions or programs lacking unequivocal support of higher authority. No policy ever had the best possible chance to work because no one policy was ever followed to the exclusion of others that lessened its chances of success. (See Part I, paragraphs 34, 35, 55, 65, 85, 100, 128, 180-185, 200-202, 205, 218-219.)

44. In the period January to May 1961, there was a new administration with a different administrative style. The President took a more active and more frequent role in resolving

issues of policy and program, the State Department was given a greater role in the formulation of policy recommendations for Presidential consideration, the Ambassador was accorded greater authority in the exercise of the authority that was delegated to the field, [

] But issues of policy affecting operations were not always promptly resolved by these changes, nor was the tendency to ambivalence in American policy eliminated.

45. White House assumption of responsibility for the resolution of operational issues did not assure that there would always be prompt and clear-cut resolution of them. Prompt resolution at the national level required that those at echelons just below the White House level perceivethe issues, and judge them important enough to place before the President for resolution.

46. There were cases when this was not done, and no decisions were made, and operations stalled. If officials at echelons directly serving the Commander-in-Chief did not see fit to refer issues upward, resolution was deferred, and it was these officials who were, in effect, rendering a decision not to decide the issue. If they formulated the problem, the alternatives might be, for better or for worse, different from the alternatives another echelon would have presented, and the final decision influenced, if not determined, by the shape given to the problem by those who presented it. (See Part II, paragraphs 150-151, 155, 197-206, 251-257, 264-266, 350-351, 361, 380, 421.)

POLICY AMBIVALENCE REFLECTED BASIC DIFFICULTIES

47. The continuing ambivalence probably reflected the inherent difficulty of the situation. These difficulties, which were extremely complex and many-sided, may be usefully considered in terms of difficulties that were primarily political, and difficulties that were primarily military.

48. Politically, we were involved in a situation not to our liking, and it was far from clear that we could induce or compel the Laotians, and other interested parties, to adopt a political solution to our liking, whatever we did. We had committed ourselves, over the years, often with no real choice in the matter, and principally by a long series of expedients, each of which was intended to meet an immediate problem only.

Our major European Allies with experience in the area made it unmistakably clear that they considered we pursued unrealizable goals. Such support as they gave us they gave only as an indulgence, and not because they favored our policies. There was far from agreement on Laos among informed Americans; honest and uninhibited discussion of Laos was bound to produce widely divergent views of what could and should be done. In the policies we acted upon, we continued to compromise at the national level between opposed extremes, not so much because the compromise promised success as because there were always arguments, very difficult to answer, to be made against either extreme. (See Part I, paragraphs 28, 34, 35, 65, 81, 85, 88, 94, 95, 100, 108, 126, 127, 128, 133, 157, 160-163, 169, 180, 198, Appendix A, pages 205, 206; and Part II, paragraphs 46, 47, 49, 136, 145, 155, 214, 215, 219, 245, 246, 253, 261, 369.)

49. Another very important aspect of political difficulty was that in Laos the U.S. was attempting to conduct a counter-insurgency operation largely by proxy. Our proxies in this case were men of different race, language, and culture, whose customs, systems of value, and social and political outlook were radically different from our own. Repeatedly we developed plans and appraisals, and repeatedly we found that our Lao proxies behaved in a way that made our appraisals look wrong, and defeated the plans we had drawn for them. One reason for this seems to be that much of the time in our appraisals and plans we unwittingly extrapolated into the Laotian scene our own values and judgment of issues and ways of doing things only to find, later, that when it came time for them to perform, the Lao judged and acted as Lao, not as Americans. And another reason -- or another way of saying much the same thing -- seems to be that we emphasized provision of means to our proxies, hoping against hope that they have the motivation to use the means in the manner we intended, only to find later that that motivation was lacking. Since successful use of the means we provided depended upon Laotian will and capacity to use them, an understanding of their values and motivation was a prerequisite, which we never filled, both for fixing our goals in Laos and for formulating realistic plans. Instead of making such an appraisal the basis for our policies and plans, we continued to develop and to embark on plans that ignored the cultural constraints of Laotian life. (See Part I, paragraphs 31, 33, 35, 37-42, 49-59,

88, 105, 122, 125, 126, 136-138, 144-157, 172, 177, 188, 228, 237, 240-242, 252-256; and Part II, paragraphs 46, 47, 78, 79, 110, 117, 118, 120, 136, 144, 145, 214, 215, 219, 243-248, 259-261, 270-271, 364, 369.)

50. On the military side, the main cause of ambivalence in American policy resided in a combination of our weakness in conventional land forces [] and failure to adjust political commitments to the military capabilities we possessed and were ready to use. Lacking military means of dealing effectively, on a localized basis, with possible enemy responses to actions we might initiate, we made a partial but significant commitment of U.S. prestige to Southeast Asia before facing up fully to the issue of what we would do if North Vietnam and Communist China countered a localized U.S. interventionary move by their own localized means. This issue had for several years been in the background of every consideration of possible conflict with Communist China, but it had never been brought up for forthright decision. The immediate possibilities of the situation, as it developed in April 1961, made the prospect [] sufficiently immediate and concrete to elicit a decision for that particular situation, if not for more lasting or more general policy. Faced by a choice between a political solution that entailed minor defeat and a military solution that would force us to choose between accepting local military defeat or extending the war [] to China and Vietnam, if North Vietnam and Communist China opposed it, high political authority rejected the military solution and accepted the diplomatic setback. This was presumably because an attempted military solution might have increased immediate political problems, and military hazards as well, out of all proportion to the U.S. stake in Laos. (See Part II, paragraphs 127, 165-166, 171, 174, 175, 297, 430, 457-458, 461, 478-496.)

NATIONAL AMBIVALENCE AND AGENCY PARTISANSHIP

51. The basic differences in understanding of the problem and in approaches to it that resulted from its inherent difficulty tended to become institutionalized in the different U.S. agencies having responsibilities in Laos. Consideration of specific measures was frequently conducted not as a dispassionate appraisal of the comparative effectiveness or probability of

success of these measures, but rather as an argument for or against the proposed measure because it seemed representative of the type of approach that was favored or opposed. Thus, State characteristically favored purely political solutions and generally opposed application of military pressures. This attitude was even carried to the extreme that the classic use of military pressure to extract political concessions was forgotten, and State Department counsel was characterized generally by fear of the rare possibility that military pressure would intensify resistance rather than accomplish the more common result of inducing compliance; or it would be argued, from the same point of view, that pressure would hamper or interrupt negotiations, rather than strengthen our bargaining position.

52. [

] Defense, on the other hand, seemed often to favor any activist proposal simply because it was activist, without carefully weighing its chances of success. Even when the military merits of a proposal were dubious at best, and when all that could be claimed for the measure was that it might boost morale, it would often be advocated ardently, apparently because it seemed a step in the right direction. There is remarkably little evidence of systematic effort to answer the questions "Will it succeed?" or "What countermeasures does the enemy have available and how might we counter those countermeasures?" In addition, some proposals for military actions originating in the Joint Staff were judged politically unrealistic or premature, by either CINCPAC or ISA, or both, without reference to State. (See Part I, paragraphs 43, 54, 55, 100, 168, 179, 201, 202; and Part II, paragraphs 48, 53, 66, 109, 114-116, 119, 126, 127, 129, 130, 132, 133, 144, 145, 151, 153, 155, 162, 177, 217, 264-266, 284, 361, 413, 452, 453.)

53. [

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54. In this atmosphere, interagency communication was difficult and interagency consultation lost much of its potential value. It was commonly assumed, in Defense, that State would oppose almost any forceful measure, regardless of merit, and would interpret events and intelligence, regardless of content, to support its standing views. Evidently State commonly attributed comparable intransigence to Defense. Just as Defense had no confidence in the political proposals advanced by State, State had no confidence in the military proposals and judgments of Defense. Defense officials thought some State policies and officials defeatist; and State seemed at times to suspect that proposals for military actions were advanced, by Defense, not on their own merits, but for the purpose of indirectly involving the U.S. in a more active military policy than we would knowingly choose.

55. There were both exceptions to and complications in this unhappy atmosphere. There were a few individuals in State friendly to at least some individuals in Defense. The Laos desk of OASD/ISA cooperated with and assisted, both formally and informally, the Laos Battle Staff and the other parts of the Joint Staff that were at times involved. But some stations of ISA were regarded by many in the JCS with as much suspicion as the State Department itself. There was also a characteristic difference between Washington and the field. The field was always more aware of local complications than Washington, and sometimes differences between Washington and the field were more marked than differences between agencies. With only a few known exceptions, differences between agency representatives in the field were less bitter than in Washington; confronting the reality, there was generally a more tolerant understanding of the other's point of view. (See Part II, paragraphs 162, 264-266, 411-414, 438-441.)

OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING PROBLEMS OF PROCEDURES AND ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE, AND COMMUNICATIONS PROBLEMS

PROBLEMS OF PROCEDURES AND ADMINISTRATION PRACTICE

56. Whenever the attention of the highest echelon of national authority was directed to the problem of Laos it retained control of the smallest details of operations that were judged to effect those responsibilities. This included extremely small tactical details most of the time. Comparatively low

level tactical or technical matters, such as making direct USAF logistic flights into Vientiane, or using 100-lb. HE bombs on planes already carrying rockets or machine guns, could not be firmly or dependably resolved below the national level. Presumably this was because these matters seemed to affect broad national interests that were the responsibility of the national political level.

57. The assumption of tactical control by the national level carried the danger that ignorance of technical, logistic, and operational problems could result in infeasible or otherwise mistaken decisions concerning tactical matters. Whereas in other incidents, problems were created by bypassing intermediate echelons between the national level and the tactical level in the issuance of orders, in Laos, problems were created because intermediate sources of realistic military information were bypassed. (See Part II, paragraphs 144, 164, 165, 166, 171, 173-175, 178, 297, 351, 407, 418, 419, 420, 426, 430, 439, 457, 458, 461, 464, 469-471, 478-497.)

58. Throughout the period of our study, CINCPAC was empowered by JCS and DOD to make all decisions which they had the power to make without interagency consultation or reference to higher authority. There was a manifest lack of comparable delegation of responsibility to the Ambassador. In the case of the Ambassador, this was true in the period from August to January, when the Ambassador appeared in effect to take his orders from the State Department, and in the period from January to May during which period the Ambassador appears to have taken his orders primarily from the White House. In the period from January to May, the Ambassador's position as Chief of the Country Team was much more strongly backed by Washington than previously. Nevertheless, the failure to delegate authority to the Ambassador comparable to that delegated to the military officials and agencies in Laos tended to impair or destroy the power to expedite action that was the intent of the delegation of power on the part of those agencies that did so delegate. Delegation of power to the field was a matter upon which there was continuing difference between State and Defense. State, the policy agency, consistently refrained from much delegation, while Defense, the action agency, consistently favored broad delegation of power.

59. Referral of local operational issues to Washington for resolution often created problems. The situation in the field frequently changed so fast that the bureaucratic procedures in use in Washington did not keep pace, and decisions were sometimes made in response to conditions no longer in effect by the time the decisions could be implemented. This was not a result of inadequate communications in a message transmission sense, but rather was a result of the inherent time-consuming characteristics of interagency consultation and coordination. Without exception the operational issues referred to Washington from the field required interagency coordination at least, or otherwise the attention of the White House. To arrange interagency meetings to the convenience of officials, at echelons high enough to have authority, generally involved time; it likewise involved time to secure Presidential or other White House attention.

60. The twelve-hour time differential between Laos and Washington was also a complicating factor at times. It would have been less of a complicating factor had there been an around-the-clock watch by officials at levels high enough to make the decisions required. (See Part I, paragraphs 56, 61, 64, 75, 86, 93, 94, 110, 159-163, 180-185, 227, 245; and Part II, paragraphs 227, 228, 250-257, 404, 407, 419, 420, 426, 444, 464, 469-471.)

61. Formal meetings and procedures often constituted mere formalization of decisions already largely worked out, often on the basis of unrecorded contacts and communications. The informal was frequently more important than the formal. These informal exchanges included telephone and telecon conversations between points in Washington, Hawaii, Thailand, and Laos, personal and out-of-channel contacts in all places and between all stations. Individuals in all positions of authority tended to depend upon personalities whom they knew, bypassing intervening official stations in the process. The direction of inquiries and the assignment of responsibilities were often decided on the basis of individual personalities rather than formal station in the established chain of command. This reflected a universal preference for dealing with known individual capabilities, rather than relying upon official stations and formal procedures not personally known to the official exercising the choice. In a controversial situation such as

Laos, wherein the prejudices of most officials were well established and known, the temptation to go out of channels to get a fresh viewpoint was perhaps even greater than it would have been if the element of controversy and of institutionalized views had not been as great. (See Part I, paragraphs 81, 82, 180-185, 225-227, 245, 249; and Part II, paragraphs 154, 291, 297, 354, 433, 435, 437, 454, 457, 468, 472.)

62. Authorizations to employ particular tactics, weapons, or other measures tended to lapse quickly if not used. Either passage of time, or change in key personnel, or presence of new political factors was generally sufficient to convince high political authority, in the circumstance of nonuse, that the altered circumstances required reexamination in order to ascertain the current appropriateness of that tactic or weapon or measure. (See Part II, paragraphs 33, 95, 99, 116, 192, 194, 199, 225, 325, 350, 351.)

63. There was a striking lack of continuity of experience and specialized competence in the roster of persons participating in the groups officially considering, or making policy recommendations or rendering decisions upon, major issues of U.S. policy in Laos. There was bureaucratic dispersal of responsibility; policy recommendations on the same subject originated in quite different groups, and proceeded through quite different channels, to the point of ultimate decision. Individuals who participated in the discussion of policy or assisted in the determination of that policy were different upon different occasions.

64. In monitoring Laotian matters at the working level and in interagency contacts, State maintained a reasonable degree of continuity of special competence. There were some changes in responsible personnel, but generally those working with detail were brought in to meetings and coordinated messages. ISA retained the same Laos desk officer throughout, and the specialized competence of this individual was at times very helpful to the JCS, where continuity of experience was not the rule. When the Battle Staff was activated with a general officer as its chief, that general officer was apparently made privy to most -- perhaps all -- of the information concerning Laos available to the JCS. He was a participant in most, but not quite all, of the major discussions and meetings concerning Laos. This was an exception to the more generally prevailing situation in the JCS, however.

65. Generally, in the JCS especially, but to a lesser extent elsewhere as well, officers with specialized, continuing and detailed knowledge of Laos and of arrangements there were sloughed off from the consultative process as the importance of an issue raised it to higher echelons. By the time it reached the national level, at which authoritative decisions were made, these persons were completely out of the picture. In the JCS, moreover, the practice of rotation made it extremely difficult to match the continuity of specialized area competence that other agencies were able to place in their representation. If the issues had been purely military, rotation would have been less a handicap. But when determination of issues depended crucially upon other considerations, specialist knowledge of the Laos problem in general was prerequisite to effective performance. (See Part II, paragraphs 143, 146-150, 154, 177, 202, 203, 205, 206, 227, 277, 292, 354, 361, 380, 421, 472, and Appendix A.)

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

66. The major problems of communication consisted of inadequacies in mutual understanding, as distinct from inadequacies in message transmission or in mechanisms for storage or processing of data. The inadequacies occurred mainly between echelons or agencies in Washington, and between Washington and the field. The common causes of these misunderstandings were the different attitudes and perspectives characteristic of these different agencies, echelons, or stations, rather than mechanical difficulties or inadequacies. There is always some chance for misunderstanding between those with different perspectives and interests, but the prospect of misunderstanding was in this case greatly enlarged by the policy differences that existed between the agencies.

67. Instructions to the field intended to convey discretionary or contingent authority were on some occasions given different interpretations according to the policy predilections of those receiving them. Another source of confusion was the simplistic view of operational matters sometimes held by those whose thoughts concentrated on high policy. Instructions that seemed clear to policy officials in Washington were frequently not clear in the field, because operational complexities upon which the field focused its attention were not explicitly dealt

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with in the message. They were not dealt with explicitly in the message, evidently, because their very existence was ignored. Another recurring source of confusion in fast-moving situations was the inevitable question concerning applicability of an earlier directive to a recently changed situation. (It may be supposed that voice communications would in some cases have eliminated or at least reduced problems that existed when the messages were transmitted in a written form.) Another source of confusion was the contingent directive; more than once it turned up that the contingency upon which the directive was dependent was not clearly definable and hence subject to question or dispute, or else the effect of that contingency had not been correctly appraised when the directive was issued. (See Part I, paragraphs 74, 103, 111, 114, 159-163, 227, 232-235, 238-241; and Part II, paragraphs 57, 104, 109, 116, 162, 164, 173, 175, 192, 225, 361, 402, 411, 412, 418, 439, 441, 448, 449, 452, 464, 469-471.)

OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING PROBLEMS
OF DOCTRINE AND PLANS

68. The issues of escalation were associated by political authorities with consideration of almost every proposed military measure, even very limited measures for very limited objectives. When the tension was not high, and consideration was at comparatively low echelons, possibilities of escalation were viewed principally in terms of escalation of tactical measures, at the local level. But when the consideration attained such importance it attracted national attention, even very minor operational proposals suggested possibilities of escalation to serious and high levels of violence, including enlargement of the conflict to general war. Such considerations evidently affected the nature of decisions rendered. The [] were effective at lower levels of threat, so far as we were concerned, and at earlier stages in the escalation process, than most []

69. Political authority characteristically sought to localize as well as to limit the levels of violence. Military plans and proposals that involved either geographical extension, or intensification of the degree of violence, greatly strengthened the reluctance of political authority to employ military or

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other activist means to resolve the issue. However, throughout the entire period covered by this study, the one thing that was clear was that if we were to win this struggle, we had to employ greater means, of some kind, than we had been employing up to the date of that consideration.

70. The kind of military capability that high political authority seemed to want was a force that could be committed on a localized basis, with high probability of victory in a very short time against any imaginable localized response by the enemy. The enemy, in order to defeat that force, would be required to take steps which constituted overt and drastic escalation [

] and from which the enemy would evidently and surely be deterred. This was scarcely realistic. Escalation possibilities existed from the very bottom of the scale of violence until they ran out the top in nuclear warfare. The limits that were imposed, or that might be imposed at any point along the line, were imposed solely by the answer, at that point, to the question of what we could get away with. There was no sure answer to what we could get away with without knowing what the enemy's judgment was of what he could get away with against us.

71. At the time that intervention was considered, the characteristic military view was that Communist China, and North Vietnam as well, would be deterred by the threat of U.S. nuclear retaliation from intervening in sufficient strength to be successful. In contrast to this, the characteristic political view seems to have been that Communist China, perhaps following the example of the Korean War, might insinuate enough conventional forces into the theater to bog us down in an attritional jungle war, leaving us with the choice of accepting local defeat on this basis or attacking China outright. There is no present way of telling which view was right and there was no way at that time.

72. The potentially remediable difficulty was that the U.S. strategic dilemma [had not been faced up to plainly on a national policy and military planning basis. Probably it is because the subject is so difficult, so controversial, and ultimately so hypothetical that it has been avoided. It is as if there were a conspiracy of silence. []

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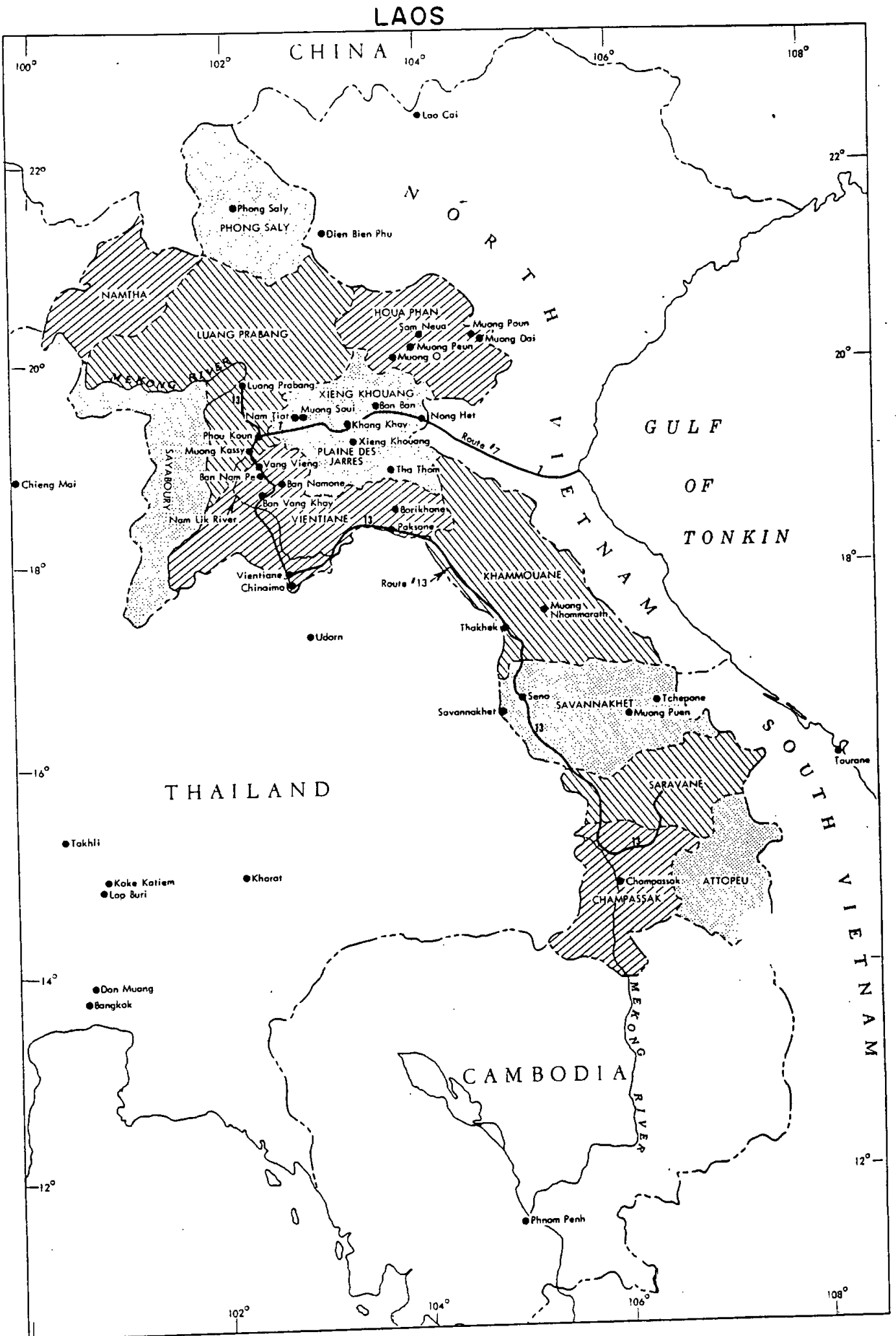
73. The military plans that were in existence oversimplified the political factors affecting operations. This became evident when intervention was seriously considered and the specifics of military deployments and other measures and of political steps or negotiations had to be jointly considered. On the other hand, political authorities tended vastly to oversimplify the complexities of military operations. The realistic problems of military operations, especially those of a logistic nature, were apparently not understood nor foreseen in the requirements that political authority sought to place upon the military at the time that operations were seriously considered.

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FIGURE 1



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