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2 March 1970

SUBJECT : Background on Laos for Points Paper

Cliff

I PRE-1962

1. Modern Political History:

Before the French arrived in Laos, a group of clans with separate kingdoms had occupied the land for several hundred years. The political boundaries of Laos, however, were ill-defined and came into frequent conflict with territorial claims by neighboring states until France made Laos a protectorate in 1893. Laos, as a name of a state, dates from 1899 when the French began to administer the region as a single unit with a chief resident at Vientiane. Under the French the three kingdoms of Laos -- Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak -- were unified in 1946 under the dynasty of Luang Prabang. The country gained independence within the French Union in 1949. In a series of successive steps subsequent to World War II, France gradually accorded Laos its independence and in October 1953 recognized the kingdom as a fully sovereign state. The kingdom of Laos, however, reaffirmed its adherence to the French Union. This relationship was dissolved upon the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements in 1954 which terminated the Indo-China War.

Political forces set in motion from World War II worked against a return to the status quo ante. On 12 October 1945 the Lao Issara (Free Laos) was formed. The Lao Issara, led by Prince Phetsarath, included virtually all of the Lao western educated elite as well as Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong. Their political goal was to preserve the Japanese-instigated declaration of independence from France. The speedy French reoccupation of Laos prevented the Lao Issara, who were receiving aid from Ho Chi Minh in the form of Communist Vietminh troops, from achieving their goal. The Lao Issara dissolved itself in 1949 with most of the members returning to government service. Prince Souphanouvong, however,

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who advocated collaboration with the Vietnamese Communist Vietminh, was expelled from the Lao Issara and led several dozen dissatisfied followers from Laos into Vietnam. There they received support and training from the Vietminh and in 1950 Vietminh propaganda broadcasts made their first reference to a "Pathet Lao" resistance movement dedicated to the fight against "French imperialism". Pathet Lao forces fought against the French presence in Laos in isolated actions along the Vietnamese border but controlled only small fractions of Laos until 1953. In April 1953 the Vietminh/Pathet Lao forces launched their first thrust into Laos, occupying Houa Phan Province (Sam Neua) and advanced to within a few miles of the royal capital of Luang Prabang. In this action Vietminh forces were twice as numerous as those of the Pathet Lao and even the Pathet Lao ranks were filled preponderantly with Vietnamese. Despite French-backed resistance, the invaders were able to retain control of much of Houa Phan Province. Prince Souphanouvong immediately announced the establishment of a "resistance government" in the town of Sam Neua, declaring it to be the only legal representative government in Laos, moving his headquarters there from Vietnam. Again in late 1953, Vietminh forces crossed from Vietnam into the panhandle of Laos to take the town of Thakhek. This force was also dispersed by the French and went into the surrounding hills, where they began propaganda and subversive activities among the mountain tribes. Pockets of control were thus established by the Pathet Lao. By 1953, the Pathet Lao and Vietminh claimed to control all of Houa Phan Province, a large part of Xieng Khouang Province and parts of Luang Prabang and Phong Saly Provinces. This success, coupled with skillful propaganda, ensured this movement recognition by the Geneva Accords of July 1954.

2. 1954 Geneva Accords to 1962:

The Geneva Accords of July 1954 called for a single, independent government for Laos. All "Vietnamese People's Volunteers" were to be out of Laos within 120 days. Pathet Lao forces were to be regrouped in the two northern provinces of Houa Phan and Phong Saly and were to

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be integrated into a national army within 120 days. It became apparent soon after the signing of the Geneva Agreement, however, that the political differences between the opposing factions in Laos would prevent a rapid integration of the Pathet Lao forces into a national army. Furthermore, Pathet Lao military harassment of government-controlled areas continued. Eventually a nominal integration of 1500 Pathet Lao troops into the Royal Army took place in February 1958 but the two Pathet Lao battalions involved retained their own identities. The Royal Government in May 1959 decided to force integration. Faced with this ultimatum, one Pathet Lao battalion complied but the second escaped across the border to North Vietnam.

The Pathet Lao forces soon returned and between July and September 1959 North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao forces made strong attacks on government positions in both Houa Phan and Phong Saly. Although the arrival of a UN fact-finding commission in late 1959 caused the enemy to cease large-scale operations, by October 1959 the Pathet Lao had reverted to guerrilla attacks on Royal Army outposts and villages.

In late 1959 and early 1960 the Royal Lao Government, always fragile and unstable, underwent several changes of leadership. In May 1960 Prince Souphanouvong and other communist leaders who had been placed under arrest the previous year escaped from prison and fled to communist-controlled areas within Laos. Shortly thereafter in August 1960, Captain Kong Le, the commander of an elite government parachute battalion, staged a successful coup d'etat in Vientiane. This act thrust an important third force, Kong Le's neutralist army, on the Lao political and military stage. The Pathet Lao saw Kong Le as a potential ally and an additional disruptive force to plague the Royal Government. In an attempt to avert civil war among the non-communist elements, Prince Souvanna Phouma, a former prime minister, was again called upon to form a government. General Phoumi Nosavan, a leader of the rightist anti-communist faction, joined forces with Prince Boun Oum in south Laos and mounted a campaign to retake Vientiane.

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By mid-December Phoumi had rallied, retaking Vientiane in spite of extensive Soviet airlifts of supplies to Kong Le. Prince Boun Oum, together with General Phoumi, then established a new government in Vientiane.

At this point North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops again invaded Houa Phan and pushed westward across the Plain of Jars. The enemy further consolidated his position in the north by the capture of Muong Sai, an important town and military post that controlled access to both Phong Saly and Houa Khong Provinces. To improve their position in central and southern Laos, the Pathet Lao spearheaded by North Vietnamese units launched three main drives in March and April 1961. The first thrust was aimed along Route 8 in central Laos; the second about 50 miles to the south along Route 12; and the third still further south captured the key city of Tchepone and its airfield.

Negotiations for a cease fire line began in early 1961 but were repeatedly stalled by the Pathet Lao who sought to improve their strategic position. The cease fire went into effect on 3 May 1961 and by the spring of 1962 the North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao forces began a drive against Nam Tha, first capturing Muong Sing near the border of China. This defeat eliminated the authority of the Royal Lao Government in northwestern Laos and opened western Luang Prabang and all of Houa Khong Province to communist domination. With a tenuous cease fire agreed to by the three Lao factions -- rightist, neutralist and Pathet Lao -- two efforts were undertaken to provide a political solution. A 14-nation conference was convened at Geneva in May 1962 and, on the internal level, a summit meeting at Zurich was held among Princes Souvanna, Boun Oum and Souphanouvong in an effort to reach agreement on the formation of a coalition government which would include all three factions. On 12 June 1962 a Tri-Partite Provisional Government of National Union was formed under Souvanna Phouma. On 23 July a Declaration and Protocol on the Neutrality of Laos was signed at Geneva by all 14 participating nations.

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Of immediate importance under the 1962 Geneva Agreement was the requirement that all foreign military personnel leave the country within 75 days of the signing under the supervision of the International Control Commission (ICC) which had been reconvened in April 1961 in New Delhi. All U.S. military advisory personnel departed Laos before the 7 October 1962 deadline. However, only 40 North Vietnamese troops were withdrawn through ICC check points leaving behind an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 combat support troops.

II. POST-GENEVA ACCORDS (1963 to 1968)

Within a few months of the signing of the 1962 Geneva Agreements the Pathet Lao, supported by the North Vietnamese, began maneuvering to subvert or eliminate Kong Le's neutralist military forces which constituted Souvanna Phouma's principal military strength. Minor skirmishing broke into open hostilities by April 1963 when the Pathet Lao attacked Kong Le's troops in positions they had held jointly with the Pathet Lao. These aggressive tactics by the Pathet Lao resulted in much closer cooperation than before between the neutralists and rightists in the political as well as the military field.

With the outbreak of fighting in April 1963, the two Pathet Lao ministers within the Government of National Union withdrew from Vientiane leaving Pathet Lao representation in the government in the hands of two Pathet Lao secretaries of state of Cabinet rank. By late 1964, however, the Pathet Lao secretaries of state also had withdrawn to communist-held Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars.

Also in the spring of 1963 the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces increased their military operations in south and central Laos. These actions were designed to consolidate the communist hold on lines of communication vital to their operations in South Vietnam. By early June the communists had secured what is now known as Route 23. The importance of the panhandle to the communists was clearly illustrated

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by their reaction to a Royal Lao Government offensive in 1963. By 8 December Royal Lao Government forces had moved to within 15 miles of the North Vietnamese border on Route 8, but were heavily assaulted by enemy forces augmented by North Vietnamese battalions. Other enemy forces moved north and by the end of January 1964 had captured the territory within 16 miles of Thakhek. In the process, the communist forces strengthened their control of the important mountain passes along the border, gained control of most of Route 8, and in general occupied in strength an area which looked south down the panhandle and west towards Route 13. Between 1964 and 1968 the fortunes of battle seesawed back and forth in favor of the Royal Lao Government forces in the rainy season and the communist forces in the dry season.

On the political side, throughout this same period numerous attempts were made to restore peace. In May 1964 the British, at the request of the Prime Minister, invited the signatories of the Geneva Accords to begin consultations in Vientiane. The United States and several other signatories accepted the invitation which the communist states spurned. At the close of consultations in June, the representatives concluded that the Pathet Lao with North Vietnamese support had initiated the attacks against the neutralists and that the deteriorating military situation in Laos presented a grave threat to the peace of Southeast Asia. Several attempts have been made since to convene a new Geneva-type meeting of the 14 nations that took part in the 1962 conference. These have been unsuccessful. Efforts on the part of the three Lao factions to resolve their difficulties in meetings in Paris during August and September 1964 likewise produced no basic concessions except a general agreement to continue talking. Talks have continued sporadically since then. A Lao communist representative has resided in Vientiane. In addition, there is a North Vietnamese Embassy. Prime Minister Souvanna has attempted on numerous occasions to utilize these channels to propose initiatives to re-establish the Tri-Partite Government and to restore peace. The North Vietnamese violations of the international accords have been publicly denounced during the annual sessions on Laos of the General Assembly of the United Nations, through

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the publication of White Books by the Government of National Union in 1966, 1968 and 1969, and through numerous press conferences and public statements by the Prime Minister or other ministers of the Lao Government.

III TURNING POINT (1969 to 1970)

1. North Vietnamese Escalation in 1969 and 1970:

Communist military activity intensified in 1968 and even more in 1969. Whereas the communists had habitually advanced during the dry season (November to May) and the government forces normally retook lost ground during the wet season (June to October), the vigorous enemy offensive campaigns in the dry seasons of both 1968 and 1969 departed from this traditional interchange. In the spring of 1969 the North Vietnamese carried their offensive considerably deeper into areas held by Royal Lao Government forces for several years. The Royal Lao Government, in an effort to blunt further advances, launched limited operations designed to cut the enemy's supply lines. This met with unexpected success resulting in withdrawal of most of the North Vietnamese forces in the Plain of Jars. But the enemy's determination to move back into the area became clearer in September 1969 when advance elements of the North Vietnamese 312th Combat Infantry Division began moving into north Laos to bolster the North Vietnamese Army 316th Division which has been fighting in north Laos for several years. In addition, they have introduced at least two tank companies, long-range artillery and numerous sapper and other units. With the three remaining months of good weather, it seems probable that the large North Vietnamese combat force now assembled in north Laos would be able to exceed any military gains it has made in previous years. The communist forces will almost certainly push well beyond the Plain of Jars, gain control of the strategic road junction at Sala Phou Koun and possibly threaten the royal capital of Luang Prabang and the administrative capital of Vientiane. There is also cause for concern that the present level of North Vietnamese military activity in Laos is no longer simply a response

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to the situation within Laos but may also begin to reflect Hanoi's frustration in South Vietnam. We have long estimated that the North Vietnamese could readily seize the entire panhandle of Laos and establish themselves on the Mekong. We believe that ultimately North Vietnam wants a communist-controlled Laos. This objective, however, is still subordinated to their primary goals in South Vietnam. Frustrated by the interdiction of their personnel and military supply system through the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it may well be that the North Vietnamese have decided that they need to increase the pressure on the Royal Lao Government in the north permitting a greater degree of acquiescence on the part of the Royal Lao Government to let them use the Ho Chi Minh Trail uninhibited by government harassment or American bombing.

2. Role of the U.S. in Laos:

In mid-May 1964 the Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese took advantage of dissidence within the neutralist ranks and attacked Prince Souvanna Phouma's neutralist military forces on the Plain of Jars. This deliberate and open onslaught prompted the Prime Minister to seek additional military assistance. The U.S., responding within the framework of the Geneva Agreements, supplied military equipment and supplies for the Lao armed forces. This was within the provisions of Article 6 of the Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos signed in Geneva in 1962 which provided "the introduction into Laos of armaments, munitions and war material generally, except such quantities of conventional armaments as the Royal Government of Laos may consider necessary for the national defense of Laos, is prohibited".

Because of the consistent refusal by the communists to allow the ICC teams to enter their territory to inspect alleged violations of the Geneva Agreement, the first American reconnaissance flight was flown over the southern part of Laos on 19 May 1964 after consultations with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma the previous day. These reconnaissance flights were extended on 21 May to cover the Plain of Jars and neighboring

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areas. On 28 May 1964 Souvanna Phouma publicly endorsed these reconnaissance missions over Laos stating that they were necessary to observe communist violations of the Accords. These flights initiated in accordance with the appeal of the Prime Minister, were continued and later, with the Prime Minister's approval, armed escorts were added. On 12 June after an armed escort plane was shot down, Souvanna Phouma stated publicly that the flights would go on. In a letter to the ICC co-chairmen on 19 June, Souvanna stated that the flights were legal and that the "bombing of positions of the Pathet Lao and Vietminh aggressors by governmental decision needs no other justification".

In a special message to Congress on the state of the nation's defenses on 18 January 1965, President Johnson said "The problem of Laos is the refusal of the communist forces to honor the Geneva Accords into which they entered in 1962. We shall continue to support the legitimate government of that country. The Geneva Accords established the right of Laos to be left alone in peace."

In the ensuing years in the face of continued violations of Lao neutrality and territorial integrity by the North Vietnamese, the Royal Lao Government has continued to request further U.S. assistance. It was in response to these requests that the U.S. commenced its air operations over Laos and increased its training and logistics support to the Royal Lao Government. These actions did not include the furnishing of U.S. combat troops and there are no U.S. combat troops stationed in Laos today.

3. Current Political Initiatives:

On 3 February 1970 Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, through his Special Assistant for Foreign Affairs, convoked the North Vietnamese Charge d'Affaires and proposed his formula for the neutralization of the Plain of Jars. This initiative, designed to stop the combat in the Plain of Jars and create a situation conducive to talks

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between the Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao, was rejected out of hand by the North Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 February.

Souvanna Phouma is currently making still another bid to the co-chairmen of the 1962 Geneva Accords to reconvene a Geneva-type conference. There is little likelihood the Soviet Union will agree to meet.

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