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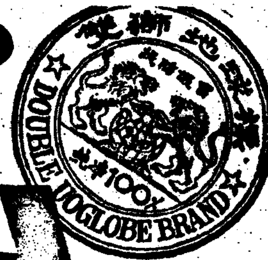

THE C.I.A. AND THE HEROIN TRADE

By ALFRED W. McCOY
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"LADIES and gentlemen," announced the genteel British diplomat, raising his glass to offer a toast, "I give you Prince Sopsaisana, the uplifter of Laotian youth."

The toast brought an appreciative smile from the guest of honor, cheers and applause from the luminaries of Vientiane's diplomatic corps assembled at the farewell banquet for the Laotian ambassador-designate to France, Prince Sopsaisana. A member of the royal house of Xieng Khouang, the Plain of Jars region, the prince was vice-president of the National Assembly, chairman of the Lao Bar Association, president of the Lao Press Association, president of the *Alliance Francaise*, and a member in good standing of the Asian People's Anti-Communist League. After receiving his credentials from the king in a private audience at the Luang Prabang Royal Palace on April 8, 1971, he was treated to an unprecedented round of cocktail parties, dinners, and banquets. For Sopsai, as his friends call him, was not just any ambassador: the Americans considered him an outstanding example of a new generation of honest, dynamic leaders.

The final send-off party at Vientiane's Wattay Airport on April 23 was one of the gayest affairs of the season. Everybody was there; the champagne bubbled, the canapes were flawlessly French, and Ivan Bastouil, charge d'affaires at the French embassy, gave the nicest speech. Only after the plane had soared off into the clouds did anybody notice that Sopsai had forgotten to pay for his share of the reception.

His arrival at Paris's Orly Airport on the morning of April 25 was the occasion for another reception. The French ambassador to Laos, home for a brief visit, and the entire staff of the Laotian embassy had turned out to welcome the new ambassador. There were warm embraces, kissing on both cheeks, and more effusive speeches. Curiously, the prince insisted on waiting for his luggage like any ordinary tourist, and when his many suitcases finally appeared after an unexplained delay, he immediately noticed that a particular one was missing. Sopsai angrily insisted that his suitcase be delivered at once, and French authorities promised, most apologetically, that it would be sent to the Laotian embassy as soon as it was found. Sopsai departed reluctantly for yet another reception at the embassy, and while he drank the ceremonial champagne with his newfound retinue of admirers, French customs officials were examining one of the biggest heroin seizures in French history.

The ambassador's suitcase contained 60 kilos of high-grade Laotian heroin — worth $13.5 million on the streets of New York, its probable destination. A week later, a smiling French official presented himself at the embassy with the suitcase in hand. Although Sopsaisana had been bombarding the airport with outraged telephone calls for several days, he suddenly realised that accepting the suitcase was tantamount to an admission of guilt and so, contrary to his righteous indignation, he flatly denied that it was his. Ignoring his declaration of innocence, the French government refused to accept his diplomatic credentials, and Sopsai remained in Paris for no more than two months before he was recalled.

DESPITE its resemblance to comic opera, the Prince Sopsaisana affair offered a rare glimpse into the workings of the Laotian drug trade. That trade is the principal business of Laos, and to a certain extent it depends on the support (money, guns, aircraft etc) of the CIA. Unfortunately, the questions raised by the prince's disgrace were never asked, much less answered. The French government overlooked the embarrassment for diplomatic reasons, the international press ignored the story, and the United States embassy demonstrated a remarkable disinterest in the entire subject.

Over the past 50 years, Laos has become something of a free port for opium. The delicate opium poppy grows abundantly at high elevations in the northern mountains, and under a sequence of different regimes (French, American, Laotian), the hill tribesmen have been encouraged to cultivate the poppy as the principal cash crop. Opium dens can be found in every quarter of Vientiane, and the whereabouts of the opium refineries are a matter of common knowledge.

The Laotian indifference to Prince Sopsaisana's misfortune therefore becomes easily understandable. The reticence of the American embassy, however, requires a few words of explanation. Sopsai had allegedly received his 60 kilos of heroin through the kind offices of a particularly aggressive Laotian general named Vang Pao. Vang Pao also happens to be the commander of the CIA secret army in

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northeastern Laos. He has commanded that army since 1961, and during the past 11 years he has become an increasingly notorious entrepreneur in the Laotian drug trade.

But the American embassy remains curiously unaware of his involvement in the narcotics traffic. Nobody has any information on the operation of the Laotian drug business, and embassy officials appear to have adopted an attitude of benign neglect. That attitude was characteristically expressed in a letter written in December 1970 by Ambassador G. McMurtie Godley to a journalist inquiring about the opium traffic. Godley wrote:

"The purchase of opium in Southeast Asia is certainly less difficult than in other parts of the world, but I believe the Royal Laotian Government takes its responsibility seriously to prohibit international opium traffic . . . However, latest information available to me indicated that all of Southeast Asia produces only five percent of narcotics which are, unfortunately, illegally imported to Great Britain and the U.S. As you undoubtedly are already aware, our government is making every effort to contain this traffic and I believe the narcotics bureau in Washington DC can give you additional information if you have some other inquiries."

Ambassador Godley did not deem it worthy of mention that the latest information available to him should have indicated that the great majority of heroin being used by American GIs in Vietnam was coming from Laotian laboratories. Nor did he deem it necessary to mention two other facts:

- In 1967 the United Nations reported that poppy farmers in northeastern Burma, northern Thailand, and northern Laos – a region known as "the Golden Triangle" – were producing 1000 tons of raw opium annually, which was then about 70 percent of the world's supply. The available evidence indicates that the exports have increased, and that heroin from the Golden Triangle is now being shipped into the United States through Europe and South America.
- During the last months of 1970 more American soldiers were evacuated as casualties from South Vietnam for drug-related reasons than for reasons having to do with war wounds.

It may seem controversial, even shocking, that any U.S. government agency would ignore the international drug traffic. But when considered in the perspective of historical precedent, and conceding the demands of mountain warfare in northern Laos, the U.S. embassy's tolerant attitude seems almost inevitable.

Rather than sending U.S. combat troops into Laos, four successive American presidents and their foreign policy advisers worked through the CIA to build the Meo guerillas of northern Laos into the only effective army in Laos. The fundamental reason for American involvement in any aspect of the Laotian opium traffic lies in these policy decisions, and they can be understood only in the context of the secret war in Laos, a war in which Vang Pao emerged as one of the principal figures.

CIA operations with Meo guerillas began in 1959 as part of a regional intelligence-gathering program. Noting with alarm renewed guerilla activity in South Vietnam and Laos in the late 1950s, American intelligence analysts interpreted these reports as the first signs of communist plans for the "subversion and conquest" of Southeast Asia. General Edward G. Lansdale, who directed much of the U.S. defence department's strategic planning on Indochina during the early years of the Kennedy administration, recalls that these hill-tribe operations were set up to monitor communist infiltration.

The French, before 1954, were involved in the opium trade in Indochina. Colonel Roger Trinquier, who organised hill-tribe commandos, ensured the loyalty of his Meo mercenaries by letting the French air force fly their opium to Saigon for sale

Air America helicopter lands in northern Laos. It is reported that opium has been shipped out of the area on Air America helicopters since 1970

While the U.S. military sent half a million troops to fight in South Vietnam, the mountain war has required only a handful of U.S. personnel. "I always felt," General Lansdale told me, "that a small group of Americans organising the local population was the way to counter communist wars of national liberation." In South Vietnam, computerised command decisions and automated firepower dehumanised the fighting, while the rapid rotation of U.S. personnel made military commanders seem like replaceable parts in a giant machine. However, American paramilitary personnel serving in Laos have tended to serve long tours of duty, some a decade or more, and have been given an enormous amount of personal power.

Since there were too few U.S. operatives to assume complete responsibility for daily operations in the hills of Laos, the CIA usually selected one leader from every hill tribe as its surrogate commander. The CIA's chosen ally recruited his fellow tribesmen as mercenaries, paid their salaries with CIA money, and led them in battle. Because the CIA had only as much influence with each tribe as its surrogate commander, it was in the agency's interest to make these men local despots by concentrating military and economic power in their hands.

IN THE Meo region of northern Laos, the CIA had the good fortune to find, in Vang Pao, a man with unlimited ambitions and a willingness to take battlefield casualties. For Vang Pao, peace is a distant, childhood memory. He saw battle for the first time in 1945 at the age of thirteen, while working as an interpreter for French commandos who had parachuted onto the Plain of Jars to organise anti-Japanese resistance. In April 1954 he led 850 hill-tribe commandos through the rugged mountains of Sam Neua Province in a vain attempt to relieve the doomed French garrison at Dienbienphu.

When the first Indochina war ended that same year, Vang Pao returned to regular duty in the Laotian army. He advanced quickly to the rank of major and was appointed commander of the Tenth Infantry Battalion, which was assigned to the mountains east of the Plain of Jars. While he had a good record as a wartime commando leader, it was in his new command that Vang Pao first displayed the personal corruption that would later make him such a despotic warlord.

In addition to his regular battalion, Vang Pao was also commander of Meo self-defence forces in the Plain of Jars

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