

Time has come to tune in on Laos again

Liberation News Service

Most of us learned about Laos before we had ever heard of Vietnam. In 1962, there was John F. Kennedy looming in the TV screen, solemn, harried but steadfast, and behind him an immense map of Indochina with a thin dark blob right in the middle: Laos. And we were told of the dire situation there. We were told that freedom and justice were under attack, that a crisis for democracy and world order was at hand, and that we were strong, we were resolute, we would not falter.

For a few months Laos was in the headlines, with a footnote in the first paragraph clueing people in that "Laos rhymes with mouse" so they could talk about it at cocktail parties or at school. And then an agreement was reached in Geneva, with a truce and a neutralist government set up. And we began to forget about Laos. Especially because another country emerged from the formless mass of Indochina, and began to occupy our attention: Viet Nam.

Laos pretty much disappeared for seven years; seven years during which the 1962 agreement was destroyed. U.S.-backed Laotian government troops and U.S. bombers made constant attacks on territory held by the Lao Patriotic Front (like the NFL, an anti-imperialist coalition which includes both Communists and nationalists) and conditions within government-controlled territory deteriorated drastically. (Before 1954, Laos exported rice, now they have to import over 60,000 tons a year.)

But now Laos is reappearing. Suddenly, the New York Times is

full of stories. Suddenly Time and Newsweek are running little maps of Laos with about 7/8th of the territory shaded in red to show that it is controlled by the liberation forces. Any day now, you may turn on your tube looking for a good monster flick and find that JFK's old bosom enemy, Richard Nixon, is clogging all the channels, morose, deeply concerned but calm, and behind him an immense map of Southeast Asia.

Because once again the U.S. presence there is threatened. Because the Laotians seem as stubborn as the Vietnamese in refusing to give up the fight and be "pacified."

But it won't do just to pass off the Laotians and the Vietnamese as strong foreign people, with an incomprehensible determination to fight. People fight for things that are important to them. That is certainly true of the Americans who are directing their presence in Laos and in Vietnam. The economy of Laos is almost totally absorbed into U.S. big business, which controls over 80 per cent of nearly 100 leading local businesses and manages to sell \$20-million a year worth of U.S. goods in Laos while buying only \$1.6-million. This doesn't help the people of Laos very much, but it warms the hearts of the men in Wall Street. And they're the ones who really count when it comes to U.S. foreign policy.

So when Laotians begin to move on things that are important to them — like land and food and independence, they have to fight for them. Over the last year, they have won several important victories, pushing the "neutralists" and their U.S. advisers further and further back. And the U.S. Air Force has been unable to stop

them, even with over 250 B-52 raids a day, even with napalm and phosphorus bombs and defoliation attacks.

The time has come when the New York Times is forced to admit that victory for the Laotian people "seems closer to realization now than ever before." So now they begin to talk about Laos again. Now they begin to explain how the Laotians are a peaceful gentle people who cannot stand up against their enemies (who are also Laotians but for some reason are not peaceful and gentle) without help from the good old U.S.A.

Pretty soon they will probably begin talking about dominoes and carrots and sticks and winning the hearts and minds of the people. They won't make a big deal about the \$2.5-billion that U.S. businessmen have invested in Southeast Asia or about their plans to "substantially increase" that figure as announced in the Far Eastern Economic Review.

Because it's hard to convince people that they should risk their lives or the lives of their sons and friends for so many dollars worth of investment. So they'll tell us about the plight of democracy and they'll point at the map and show how "our" side is here and the "enemy" is there and we've got to hold that line, no matter what the cost. And that's when we'll have to prove that you can't just take people with the same trick over and over.

We've learned a lot since 1962 — a lot more than they have if they still think that they can win a war where even the Times admits most of the people either support the other side or aren't interested in fighting, and where the people who make their allies are big landowners who have traditionally been the oppressors of the common people.



A Pathet Lao (Laotian freedom fighter) guerrilla printer. LNS photo



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