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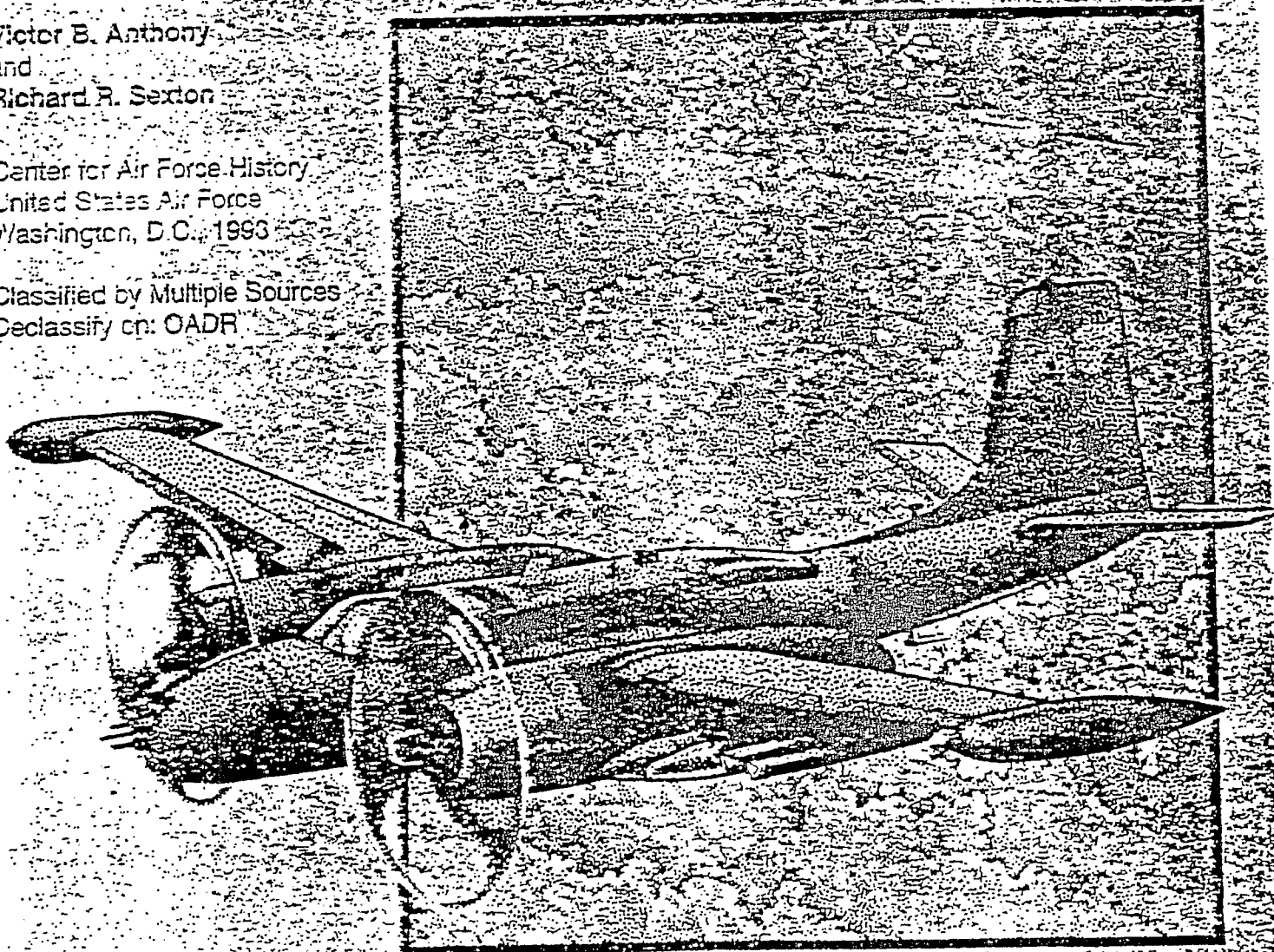
The United States Air Force
in Southeast Asia

The War in
Northern Laos
1954 - 1973

Victor B. Anthony
and
Richard R. Sexton

Center for Air Force History
United States Air Force
Washington, D.C., 1993

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Foreword

(U) *The War in Northern Laos, 1954–1973*, is one of three volumes concerned with the war in Laos that will be published in the Center for Air Force History's *United States Air Force in Southeast Asia* series. Two volumes, *Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1960–1968*, by Jacob Van Staaveren, and *Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1968–1972*, by Bernard C. Nalty, describe Air Force activities in southern Laos; this volume covers the north over the total period. The two areas of Laos, north and south, had vastly different types of conflicts. Interdiction of supplies and personnel flowing down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to South Vietnam took precedence in the south, while the Air Force, in the north, directly aided the government of Laos with training and military assistance, as well as with missions supporting ground forces engaged in conflict.

(U) The war in northern Laos was complex and confusing, with three separate factions contending for power and territory. The 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos recognized Laos as a neutral state but prohibited it from forming military alliances with other governments. The Royal Laotian Army in 1955 numbered around ten thousand, but the French, who trained the army before 1955, had not allowed Laotian officers in positions of authority. The Laotian Army Air Force, an air force in name only, was a small section of two hundred. As the United States struggled to overcome these deficiencies, because the Geneva accords prevented establishment of bases or even advisory groups, subterfuge and deception became common, and the irregular forces often were the most effective and determined. Finally, because of the Geneva restrictions, the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane evolved as the final authority on any overt Air Force action, an inefficient and difficult situation that persisted throughout the entire period of U.S. assistance to Laos. This book describes the triumphs, frustrations, and failures of the Air Force in northern Laos between January 1955, when the United States Operations Mission began to coordinate military aid, and April 1973, when B-52s and F-111s flew the last bombing sorties over northern Laos.

(U) Two officers assigned to the Office of Air Force History wrote *The War in Northern Laos*. Maj. Victor B. Anthony, author of the Introduction and first eight chapters, is a graduate of the Citadel and has an MA in history from Duke University. Major Anthony also wrote the study "Tactics and Techniques of Night Operations in Southeast Asia" during his assignment to the Office of Air Force History. Lt. Col. Richard R. Sexton, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, authored the final eight chapters and the Epilogue. He has an MA in history from the University of California, Davis, and an MA in International Relations from the University of Southern California. Both authors are Master Navigators and both were instructors in the History Department at the Air Force Academy. Following Colonel Sexton's departure in 1979, Col. John Schlight, then Chief of the Special Histories Branch, Office of Air Force History, combined the two manuscripts and organized the book into its present form.

RICHARD P. HALLION
Air Force Historian

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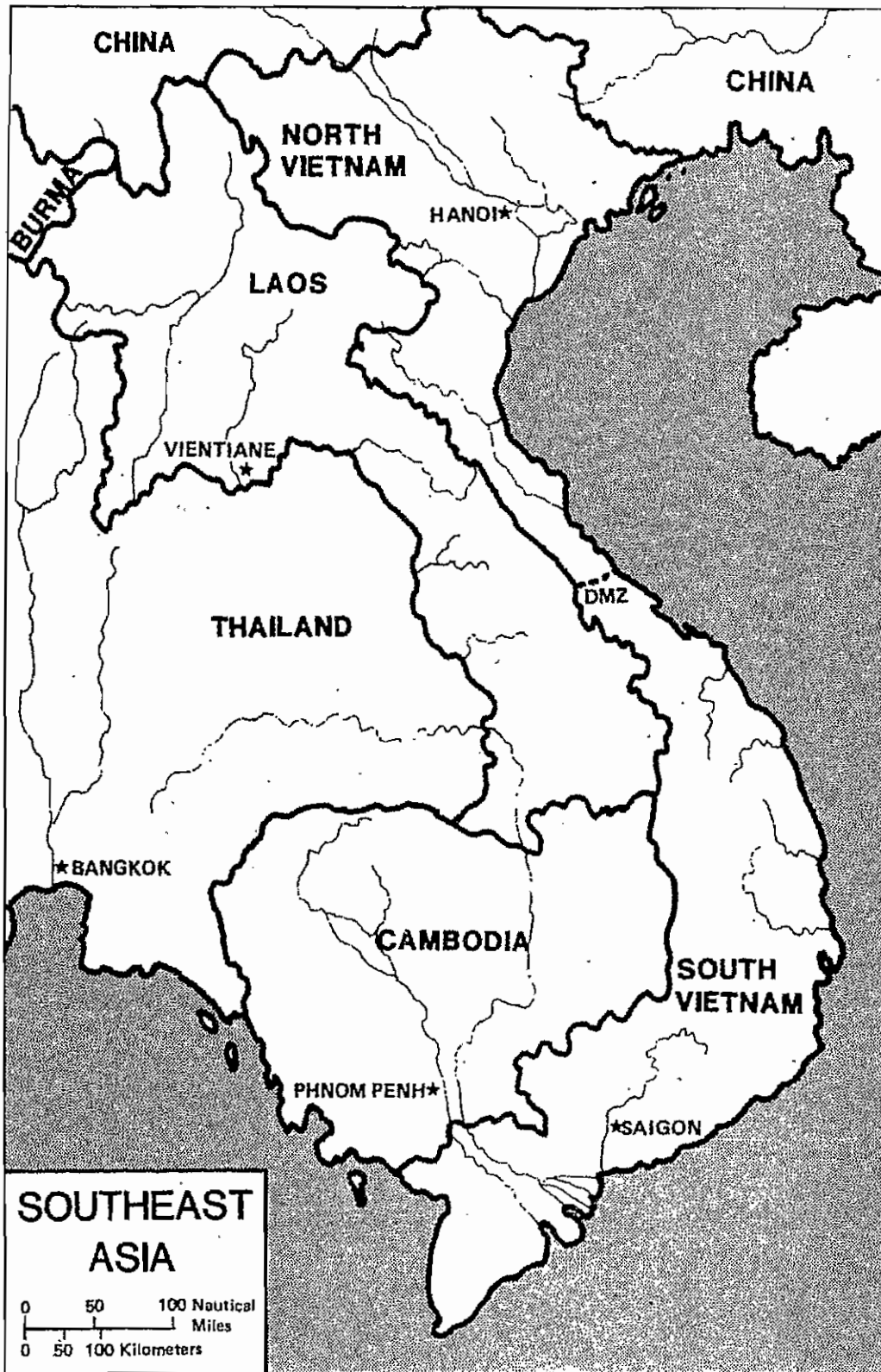
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Introduction

Prelude to U.S. Involvement (U)

● Laos—known as the Land of the Million Elephants and White Parasol by its pleasant and easy-going people—is a primitive, thinly populated, land-locked country lying in the north-central portion of Indochina. With roughly the same area as Oregon, approximately ninety-one thousand square miles, and a population of just under three million people, Laos is the most sparsely settled country in Southeast Asia. Resembling a pork chop in shape, its mountainous northern border is shared with Burma and China. The Annamite Mountains separate Laos from Vietnam on the east, and Cambodia and Thailand bound the country on the south and west, respectively. About two-thirds of the land consists of rugged, jungle-covered mountains, limestone karsts, and broad plateaus, an area very suitable for guerrilla operations. Few roads penetrate this remote area, and a modern army is faced with severe logistic problems.

● Most of the people live in the remainder of the country, the fertile valley of the Mekong River, Asia's fourth largest river, which flows through the northwestern part of the country and forms a part of its western boundary. The Mekong serves as the major artery for commerce between Laos and the outside world, and the country's major populated areas nestle along its banks.

● Everyday life in Laos is chiefly regulated by the monsoon seasons. The rains of the southwest monsoon arrive in May and stay until mid-October. During these five months, the roads puddle, pothole, and rut, becoming largely unusable. Streams swell and overflow their banks, inundating large areas and sweeping away rickety wooden bridges. The highest water level is reached in early November after the rains have ceased. Lush jungle growth appears, and the multicanopied trees shut off any view from the air over wide areas. Insects swarm in clouds, while armies of leeches wait on shrubs to be brushed onto unwary victims. In short, the June to December period is characterized by quagmires of ooze, flooded roads, and dense foliage.¹

● The dry season, during the northeast monsoon, lasts from November to February and brings clear skies, little rain, and cool nights. As the soil dries and cracks, the smaller streams turn to trickles. These streams no longer obstruct traffic, having dried to a series of moss-covered puddles; and traffic picks up along the roadways, tracks, and trails.

● A two-month hot season follows the northeast monsoon, with temperatures rising well above one hundred degrees. With the high humidity, the heat is stifling. The bamboo jungles turn yellow and drop their foliage, covering the ground with a carpet of crackling leaves. This is the time when the mountain tribes slash and burn new farming plots, and the fires often reach for miles, spreading an extensive belt of smoky haze that may rise as high as ten thousand feet.

● Historically, Laos has often been portrayed as a remote fantasy land that, until the 1960s, slept like Rip Van Winkle. On the contrary, because of its geographic location and sparse population, throughout most of its history Laos has been battered between the rival empires of Vietnam and Thailand, serving as a buffer or a battleground for its stronger and more populous neighbors. In fact, an early U.S. analysis described Laos as a "pawn of destiny."² These powerful

1. ● MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61; Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London, 1968), p 44.

2. ● Douglas S. Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional Warfare in Laos, 1962-1970* (R-919-ARPA,

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neighbors not only invaded the country, but often divided it among themselves. The only time the Laotians maintained any degree of autonomy was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, in the early eighteenth century, the heirs to the throne quarreled and the region was split into three separate states—the Kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. The royal bickering continued, and it was not long before Thai and Vietnamese overlords resumed their domination of Laos.

● In 1826, the Thai occupied Vientiane and annexed Champassak outright. Two years later they deposed the ruler of Vientiane, leveled the town, and deported one third of the population to Thailand. (Among the spoils of war was the priceless Emerald Buddha that was carried back to Bangkok.) The Vietnamese emperor, fearful of Thai expansion, countered these moves by annexing Xieng Khouang and sending an army to occupy the Plain of Jars.³ Only Luang Prabang, Bangkok's ally in the recent war, retained its nominal independence. During the next few years, the Thai and Vietnamese skirmished frequently, but all-out war was averted. By the 1850s, however, the Vietnamese, more concerned with the arrival of the French in Southeast Asia, withdrew their soldiers from Laos to meet this new threat. As Vietnamese influence waned in northern Laos, the Thai gradually strengthened their hold on the Laotian states.⁴

● During the first half of the twentieth century, Laos was diverse ethnically and culturally. The population was a mixture of races, religions, tribes, and clans who frequently regarded each other with suspicion and hostility. Nearly 55 percent of the people were ethnic Lao, a race closely related to the Thai. The Lao were predominately Buddhist and lived in the river valleys where they practiced wet-field, or paddy, farming. Rice was the principal crop, although some fruit and vegetables were produced. The main source of protein was fish, supplemented by beef, pork, and poultry. In basic attitudes, the Lao were peaceful, easy going, and not aggressive. The traditional social structure consisted of peasant and elite classes. The elite class was made up of family and clan groupings with a regional basis. These various groups, rather than the nation, commanded the loyalty of the individual peasant. At the center, power was carefully balanced among the elite, who saw government service primarily as an arena to compete for influence and a means to advance clan or family interests. As a result, the government's ability to influence events outside its capital depended on the concurrence of local political chieftains.

● Primitive mountain tribes and a small foreign community composed the non-Lao population. Most of the tribesmen practiced slash-and-burn dry rice farming and were animists, or spirit worshipers. Hunting, fishing, and some vegetable gardening supplemented the basic rice diet. The largest group was the Kha, a Mon-Khmer people of many small tribes dispersed throughout central and southern Laos. Little ethnic or social awareness existed among these tribes, personal loyalty rarely extending beyond the village elders. The Yao and Meo, relative latecomers to Laos, had migrated from China in about 1850. More ethnically conscious than the Kha, they had a loose political organization based on subtribes and clans. The Yao became vassals of the royal house of Luang Prabang in the northwest, while the Meo became aligned with the nobles of Xieng Khouang in the northeast. The Ho and Kho, Tibetan-Burmese tribes,

Santa Monica, 1972), pp X, 2-3, 75-76; EOTR, Col Robert S. Ferrari, USA, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, May 27, 1968, pp 24-34.

3. ● The Plain of Jars, technically the Tranninh Plateau, is located in the center of northern Laos. It is a high, rolling plain about thirty-six hundred feet above sea level and is surrounded by even higher mountains. The popular name, often shortened to PDJ from the French *Plaine des Jarres*, is derived from the one hundred or so stone jars strewn about a meadow near the center of the plain. The jars are large enough to hold a small man in a squatting position and are thought to be funeral urns. Tests have placed their age at two thousand years and their origin as Chinese.

4. ● Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 456-59; Maj Louis Seig, USAF, *Impact of Geography on Air Operations in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1970); Lt Col Philip R. Harrison, USAF, *Impact of Darkness and Weather on Air Operations in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969).

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occupied the extreme northwest. Like the Yao and Meo, their political structure was loose. The tribal Thao, scattered over northern Laos, were the most socially and culturally advanced of the hill people. Although ethnically related to the Lao and Siamese Thai, they maintained their own distinct tribal composition. The small foreign community, mostly businessmen and tradesmen, lived chiefly in the urban areas. The Lao generally accepted foreigners, but regarded the hill tribes as racially inferior and viewed them with hostility and suspicion. This was especially true of the warlike Meo. ("Meo," for example, means "savage" in Lao, while "Kha" denotes a slave.)⁵

④ The French interest in Southeast Asia had been generated by a desire to find a back door to China that would avoid the British-dominated ports of Hong Kong and Shanghai. Vietnam appeared to offer such a route; and by 1883, the French had established a protectorate over that empire. Alarmed at this turn of events and fearful that France would reassert Vietnamese claims to Laos, the Thai launched a large-scale expedition into northern Laos in 1885. They occupied the Plain of Jars, Xieng Khouang, Samneua, and parts of present-day Vietnam. Negotiations with the French followed and the Thai agreed to accept a French vice consul at Luang Prabang. Since consulates functioned solely in foreign cities, this seemed to signify French recognition of Thai claims to northern Laos. Still, the Thai soon had cause to regret their action as the French appointed the energetic explorer/diplomat, Auguste J. M. Pavie, as their consul.⁶

④ Today, Pavie is called the Father of Modern Laos, a title well deserved. Four months after his arrival in Luang Prabang, the rainy season began and the Thai troops guarding the province withdrew to the south. undefended, the kingdom was attacked by Chinese bandits⁷ who burned and looted the royal capital. Pavie managed to spirit away the aged king and the grateful monarch was persuaded to place himself under French protection, thus beginning French colonial rule in Laos. Two years later, Pavie convinced several other chieftains to accept French protection. The French then revived the old Vietnamese claims to the area. Grudgingly, the Thai gave in, and Pavie personally received Thailand's renunciation of the northern provinces at Dien Bien Phu.

④ Even so, France's imperialistic appetite had not been satisfied—only whetted. By 1890, the French were claiming territory west of the Mekong. The Thai resisted and border clashes ensued. Finally, in 1893, three French gunboats blockaded Bangkok. This move alarmed the British, who wanted to maintain Thailand as a buffer between their own possessions in Burma and India and the French colonial empire in Vietnam. Tension increased, but war was averted when the British urged Thailand to accept French terms. Squeezed between the two European powers, the Thai had no choice. A new treaty severed the west bank of the Mekong from Thailand and joined it to Laos. In return, the French guaranteed Thai independence; but subsequent conventions in 1902, 1904, and 1907 added more territory to French Indochina.

④ In part, French ambitions in Laos were simply an attempt to acquire as much territory as possible before the British could get it; the country, of itself, offered no economic or military benefits. At the same time, the French wished to restrain Thai influence along the Mekong, an influence the French felt would jeopardize their more valuable possessions in Vietnam. Thus, French rule in Laos was directed primarily toward using the area as a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam.⁸

5. ④ Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961* (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), pp 25-27; Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York, 1964), pp 1-10; Frank M. LeBar and Adrienne Suddard, eds, *Laos: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven, 1960), pp 14-16; John K. Whitmore, "The Thai-Vietnamese Struggle for Laos in the Nineteenth Century," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, eds: Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York, 1970), pp 56-65; Toye, pp 32-34.

6. ④ Alfred W. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 68-70; Toye, pp 27-35; Dommen, p 10.

7. ④ Actually soldiers who had fled China when the T'ai'ping rebellion was crushed in 1864. They settled in northern Laos and Vietnam and turned to banditry.

8. ④ Dommen, pp 9-15; Toye, pp 39-41.

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④ The boundary between French Laos and Vietnam was based on the Mekong watershed. Such boundaries served the needs of cartographers and politicians, but meant little to the inhabitants. While the Lao accounted for 55 percent of the total population in Laos, six to seven times more Lao lived in Thailand; and as many Meo were dwelling in northern Vietnam as in Laos. (Still other Meo were in Burma and Thailand or had remained in southern China.) The French boundaries also ignored traditional political alignments. For example, Phong Saly and Samneua, which had never been under Lao rule, became part of Laos, as did Sayaboury, which had always been governed from Bangkok. What the French hoped would be a clearly defined political unit became one of the most fragmented and ethnically complex in Southeast Asia. As long as the French ruled Indochina this was of little consequence; but when the French left in 1954, these boundaries—and the people's view of them—took on new significance.⁹

⑤ Administratively, the French divided the country into fourteen provinces under a governor at Vientiane, who reported to the governor general in Hanoi. Because Laos was considered the backward part of Indochina, its colonial staff was kept to a bare minimum. In 1902, it numbered just seventy-two officials—the smallest in the French empire. With such a limited bureaucracy, the French found it convenient to preserve the existing structure of local government and avoided upsetting custom and tradition wherever possible. For example, the monarch at Luang Prabang was permitted to keep his throne as Pavie had promised. He retained all the outward trappings of government, but in reality, the French ruled the province. The French also appointed district officers, but lower officials were selected by the villagers based on traditional clan loyalties.¹⁰

⑥ In contrast to Vietnam, the French did very little in the way of educating the average Lao, a people they considered childlike, happy-go-lucky, even indolent. In 1907, they decided that two to three years of religious and educational training by a Buddhist priest in the local temple would suffice. In the larger towns and villages, secular schools were built, although staffed almost entirely by Vietnamese teachers. Soon, the latter's dependents in these schools outnumbered the Laotians two to one. Thus, education reached only the very few; in 1940, there were only seven thousand primary school students in a population of one million.

⑦ The elite of Laos fared much better. Many studied at the Lycee Pavie in Vientiane under French teachers, with the most promising graduates being sent to Hanoi and then to Paris for further education. However, when these better-educated Laotians returned to their native land, they often had to take menial jobs, with Vietnamese immigrants filling the positions they sought because the French actively encouraged Vietnamese immigration into Laos. At the turn of the century, the Red River delta had a population density of fifteen hundred people per square kilometer (0.4 square mile); in Laos, the average density was only four. At the end of World War II, an estimated fifty thousand Vietnamese lived in Laos. There were two results of this French policy: first, Vietnamese colonies sprang up throughout Laos and the traditional Lao distrust for the "people from the other side of the mountains" was intensified. Second, too few native administrators were trained to hold positions of responsibility. This deficiency was to make itself felt after full independence was reached and for years afterward.¹¹

⑧ Although the French dominated the lowland Lao, they could never control the fiercely independent Meo. These warrior-farmers had appropriated the mountains of northeastern Laos, where the opium poppy was their main agricultural product. As long as they were not abused or mistreated, the Meo were willing to pay taxes to the French on the opium derived from these

9. ④ Toye, pp 47-48; McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 75-77.

10. ⑤ McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 78-79.

11. ⑦ *Ibid*, pp 82-83; LeBar and Suddard, *Laos*, p 17; Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos: A Contemporary History* (New York, 1961), pp 4-7, 14-15, 24-25; Toye, p 45.

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poppies.¹² The French, however, often used Lao administrators who regarded the Meo as savages and racially inferior. Lao demands grew excessive; and in 1919, the tribes revolted and proclaimed an independent Meo kingdom in Xieng Khouang Province. When Lao militia failed to quell the rebellion, regular French troops were called in. By 1921, the secession movement had been crushed, but the simmering resentment of the mountain people was later exploited by the Viet Minh following World War II.¹³

● Economically, the French did little for Laos. There were some improvements in poppy growing; but self-supporting village agriculture, in which 90 percent of the population engaged, was virtually untouched. Few attempts were made to improve the production of rice and maize, the country's main food crops. Even though the French experimented with coffee and rubber plantations on the Bolovens Plateau, these ventures were usually underfinanced or lacked the skilled labor to harvest the product. The six thousand workers of the one tin mine were Vietnamese and French, and the lode eventually petered out.¹⁴

● One of the more grandiose schemes to stimulate trade during the colonial period was construction of a road network in Laos linking it with Vietnam. For centuries, the natural route for Laotian commerce (what there was of it) had been on footpaths between villages or down the Mekong and across northeast Thailand to Bangkok. Such traffic, beneficial to Thailand (and the British), could not be tolerated by the French. Using corvee labor drawn from the populace, French engineers and Vietnamese technicians built three major "highways." Route 13 was the chief north-south connection between the major towns along the Mekong. Route 7 was the main east-west road in the north, cutting across the Plain of Jars and entering Vietnam via the Barthelemy Pass. In the panhandle, Route 9 originated at the Mekong town of Savannakhet, ran eastward through Tchepone and Khe Sanh, and ended on the coast of South Vietnam. None of the roads were passable during the rainy season and, until the 1960s, carried little traffic. Plans for a railway between the seacoast and the Mekong valley never materialized.¹⁵

● In summary, Laos was much the same on the eve of World War II as when Auguste Pavie first set foot on its soil over fifty years earlier. The country was still a backward, inaccessible, and undeveloped hinterland compared to bustling Vietnam, which boasted a costly rail network, an elaborate highway system, schools, universities, and impressive colonial administrative centers. Laos had none of these and remained Indochina's stepchild.

● The outbreak of World War II signaled the beginning of the end of France's Southeast Asia empire. A few days after her defeat by Germany, France gave Japan rights to use airfields and to station troops in Indochina. The French civil service and army that were loyal to Marshal Philippe Petain's Vichy government were allowed to remain and function, provided they did not interfere with the Japanese. The Thai subsequently signed a treaty of friendship with Tokyo and immediately occupied portions of Luang Prabang province and the lands west of the Mekong.¹⁶

● Realizing it might be just a matter of time before they lost all of Laos to Thailand, the French belatedly moved to develop nationalism. They reorganized the colonial administration, appointing Laotians to better positions with higher pay. The Kingdom of Luang Prabang was enlarged to encompass all of northern Laos. Two Lao infantry companies (*chasseurs*) were raised and made part of the colonial army. More schools and hospitals were opened in the

12. ● The opium trade was so lucrative that it became a monopoly of the Indochina government, generating one-seventh of its income. However, the long, difficult borders of Laos also made it ideal for smuggling nonregulated opium out of the country—a practice continued right through the American involvement in Southeast Asia.

13. ● Dommen, pp 5, 16-17; McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 79-80, 91-92.

14. ● McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," p 84.

15. ● *Ibid*, p 83; Dommen, p 14.

16. ● Toye, pp 55-57.

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lowlands; but little was done for the mountain tribes, the Lao being extremely reluctant to share their newfound political and social status with people they deemed inferior.¹⁷

For three years the Japanese and Vichy French jointly administered Indochina in a sort of live-and-let-live agreement. When American forces invaded the Philippines in October 1944, Japan sent reinforcements to Vietnam as a precaution against an invasion there. The French realized their position was becoming more precarious each day. Many subordinate military officers had previously contacted the Free French mission in Kunming, China. It was agreed that if the Japanese began to remove the French, the garrisons would retreat into the mountains and become partisans. The Free French mission further contacted some Meo hill tribes, the only people considered effective mountain guerrillas. French commandos parachuted in from China, bringing modern weapons and supplies, and began organizing the tribes.¹⁸

In early March 1945, the Japanese decided to end French rule. They quickly arrested members of the civil government throughout Vietnam, replacing them with Japanese or loyal Vietnamese. Military garrisons were attacked and while some troops escaped into China, most were captured and imprisoned. Only a few reached the mountains where they joined the Meo and the commandos. The Japanese then informed the rulers of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that they were now independent nations within Japan's new order. The Laotians, however, proclaimed their loyalty to the French. Such brashness did not sit well with the Japanese. They sent troops on a sixteen-day forced march from Vinh to Luang Prabang and compelled King Sisavang Vong to backtrack and declare Laos independent. To ensure the monarch's continued compliance, Crown Prince Savang Vatthana was sent back to Saigon as a hostage. Prince Boun Oum, hereditary heir of the house of Champassak (and later prime minister of Laos) elected to continue the fight. With French military help, he set up a guerrilla base in southern Laos and spent the last few months of the war harassing Japanese lines of communication. Prince Phetsarath,¹⁹ viceroy and prime minister since 1941, was careful not to antagonize the Japanese further. Convinced the Laotians would give them no more trouble, the Japanese merely appointed "advisors" to his administration. The prince, however, saw a golden opportunity to prepare Laos for independence. One of his first acts under the Japanese was to remove many Vietnamese from the civil service and replace them with Laotian.²⁰

Meanwhile, the remainder of the French colonial force scattered into the mountains where they organized small guerrilla bands. Their function was not to harass or attack the Japanese, but to gather intelligence and serve as a reminder to the Laotian people that France had not abandoned them. More important, they were to be the nucleus for reestablishing French rule following Japan's defeat.²¹

Prince Phetsarath had other ideas. When the war ended and the French commissioner tried to return in late August 1945, he was told that he no longer had any authority in Laos and

17. *Ibid.*, pp 58, 61-63; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: The Reorganization of the Lao Armed Forces, Apr 1, 1968.

18. Toye, pp 63-64; McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 96-97.

19. Prince Phetsarath was a member of the cadet or junior branch of the royal family. Although its members were rich and well educated, their wealth did not approach that of the great families of Vientiane or Champassak. For nearly 150 years, the cadet branch furnished the Viceroy or "second king" at Luang Prabang. As spiritual leader, the king reigned, but the Viceroy ruled the country. Phetsarath was educated in Saigon and Hanoi and, at fifteen, was sent to the Colonial College for French Administrators in Paris. He spent a year at Oxford University in England before returning to Luang Prabang in 1918. His younger brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, became Prime Minister of Laos; and his younger half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, became leader of the Pathet Lao. [Dommen, pp 19-20.]

20. Toye, pp 64-66.

21. Nina S. Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence, 1945-1954," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 104-05.

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Prelude to U.S. Involvement

that the declaration of independence from the previous April was still valid. Two weeks later (September 15, 1945), Phetsarath, backed by a coalition of independence groups, unilaterally declared the Kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Champassak united. He did not receive the support of the king or crown prince, however, nor of Prince Boun Oum. In fact, Phetsarath soon received a telegram from the king stripping him of his powers. On October 12, 1945, Phetsarath's group reaffirmed independence, adopted a provisional constitution, and nominated a government known as Lao Issara (Free Laos). A second petition for recognition failed, and on October 20, the assembly took the drastic step of voting to depose King Sisavang.²²

④ In the interim, Prince Souphanouvong, Phetsarath's younger half-brother, moved north with troops to support the provisional government. After his return from France in 1937, the prince had married a Vietnamese woman. He spent the war in Vietnam, where he made contact with the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh. When the Lao Issara declared independence, Souphanouvong approached Ho for aid, and the latter directed his followers in central Vietnam to render the prince all possible assistance. At Hue he was given an armed escort of fifty soldiers—the first instance of Viet Minh support for the Laotian national movement. These troops arrived in Vientiane around November 1, augmented by some mountain tribes and immigrant Vietnamese recruited at Savannakhet and Thakhek, towns on the Mekong River that were heavily populated with Vietnamese. Although suspicious of Souphanouvong and his Vietnamese "army," the Lao Issara decided to broaden its political base. Souphanouvong was made minister of national defense and chief of the armed forces. Since the new government's strength did not exceed more than a few hundred men, such titles were titular niceties.²³

④ The French, however, were already tightening the noose on the embryonic national movement. The colonial troops that fled to China the previous year were rearmed, and Sayaboury Province was retaken in February 1946. French forces from Saigon pushed over the mountains and easily occupied Champassak. At Thakhek, Souphanouvong's men made their stand and, after a bitter fight, were defeated. The prince was wounded and fled across the Mekong to Thailand. The French then advanced north, occupying Vientiane on April 24 and Luang Prabang on May 13, temporarily ending the independence movement. Phetsarath and his younger brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, along with some two thousand of their followers, joined Souphanouvong and the remnants of his small army in exile.²⁴

④ In Bangkok, the Lao Issara suffered a split following Souphanouvong's return from Hanoi after a mid-1946 meeting with Ho Chi Minh. The prince advocated renewing the war with the French and merging the Lao Issara and Viet Minh efforts. His colleagues balked. Like most Laotians, they harbored a historical distrust and fear of the Vietnamese. Furthermore, being in exile gave the group a chance to reflect on their positions. Phetsarath now favored an independent Laos under French protection while Souvanna still wanted full independence. At one time, Phetsarath protested that he was not anti-French and that he was too old to learn Chinese or English. All he desired was for France to realize times had changed. Neither brother could reconcile himself to the virulent anti-French position of Souphanouvong. When the gulf widened, they removed him as minister of defense of what was left of the rebel forces. Now estranged from his brothers, Souphanouvong followed the lead of Ho Chi Minh and retreated into the mountains of eastern Laos with a small group of followers. (Ho, unprepared for war, had fled into the mountains in 1946 after hostilities broke out between France and the Viet Minh). Aided by the Viet Minh with rice, money, and arms, Souphanouvong set about organizing a new power base.²⁵

22. *Ibid.*, pp 107-08; Dommen, pp 12-23.

23. Dommen, pp 23-24; Tran Van Dinh, "The Birth of the Pathet Lao Army," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, p 425.

24. Dommen, pp 25, 27; Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," p 109.

25. Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," pp 104-114; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 42; Sisouk, pp 16-17.

The War in Northern Laos

In June 1946, the French established a joint Franco-Laotian commission to discuss further relations between the two countries. Eventually a constitutional convention convened and on May 11, 1946, King Sisavang produced a new constitution. Laos was declared a constitutional monarchy under the ruling house of Luang Prabang with political, economic, and military matters remaining with the French. However, very few of the Lao Issara exiles were sufficiently impressed with constitutional developments to return home. To them, the new constitution was nothing more than a facade for the French to continue colonialism. In 1949, another convention granted the Laotians more independence. The king then sent a message to the exiles granting amnesty. They accepted, then voted to dissolve the Lao Issara and go back to Laos. Phetsarath could not return because his attempted coup against the royal family had made his position untenable. He withdrew completely from political life and lived as a recluse in Bangkok, Thailand, until the king granted him a pardon in 1957, allowing him to return home.²⁶

In the meantime, the French sought to regain control of Vietnam. Laos was scarcely affected by this struggle until March 1953, when the Viet Minh forces crossed into Laos and occupied Samneua. Souphanouvong came with them, heading an independence movement known as the Pathet Lao (Lao Country). Using the classic peasant revolution of Mao Tse-tung, coupled with his own dynamic personality, Souphanouvong gained power in eastern Laos. Soon, the greater part of Phong Saly and Samneua Provinces, plus a wide belt of mountain territory, was in his hands. The royal government retained its hold on the lowlands; but with so many Vietnamese immigrants living in these areas, its grip was tenuous at best.

Taking advantage of the situation, the communists moved south to the Plain of Jars where the reinforced French and Lao were waiting. Now in the open, the Viet Minh were thrown back by artillery and air strikes. From the valley of Dien Bien Phu, a second enemy column spearheaded to within seven miles of Luang Prabang, only to be ambushed and repulsed.²⁷ Two days later, heavy monsoon rains made large scale military operations in the mountains impossible. Nevertheless, the weather was clear on the Mekong River, and on Christmas Day 1953, the Viet Minh took Thakhek, cutting Laos in half. The seesaw battle that ensued lasted until February 1954 before the communists were finally pushed back into the jungle. The French reacted by seizing the base at Dien Bien Phu to protect the approaches to Laos and to draw the Viet Minh into another set piece battle and destroy them. After an epic fifty-six-day siege, the garrison of the base surrendered on May 7, 1954, effectively ending French rule in all of Indochina.²⁸ During the colonial period of France (1885-1954) that ended, for all practical purposes, at Dien Bien Phu, the French had superimposed their own bureaucratic system on Laos, but they had done little to change the underlying social fabric. This absence of national cohesion made Laos a ready target for communist subversion and would prove to be a major obstacle to American efforts to build a viable noncommunist government.

26. Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," pp 115-16.

27. Gen. Raul Salan, commander of French forces in Indochina, was forced to defend Luang Prabang because the aged king refused to leave. "The Vietnamese did not succeed in taking Luang Prabang when they attacked us in 1479," the king told Salan. "Neither will they succeed this time." Accordingly, the French and Laotians prepared to defend the city, hastily erecting bunkers and stringing miles of barbed wire. Then, suddenly, the Laotians quit working and a holiday atmosphere pervaded the city. When the French commander asked the governor for an explanation, he was told that a venerable Buddhist priest had predicted the Vietnamese would not capture the city. Hence, the people saw little sense in completing the defenses. The fact that the Vietnamese were turned back gave more credence to the priest's magical powers. [Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 53-54.]

28. Dommen, pp 39-43; Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp 456-59.