SUBJECT: Support for Possible Military Operations Within Laos

On June 23 the Government of Laos asked for extensive US support for a military operation in the area north of Vientiane and west of the Plain of Jars. In subsequent exchanges with Ambassador Unger, it is clear that our response to this request involves serious issues affecting our relationship to Souvanna Phouma, possible Communist reactions to the proposed operation, and indeed the whole trend of our military actions in Laos.

I. Situation and Nature of Proposed Operation

A. Proposed Operation.

The operation would be a three-pronged attack designed to secure control of Route 13, which runs between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and of that part of Route 7 which runs from Route 13 east to the present position of the Neutralist forces at Muong Soui. The initial troop movement would be made about July 1 with the operation itself to commence about July 7-8. Ten government battalions would be involved, including one substantial force to be airlifted from its present position in southern Laos. The opposition in the area is currently estimated at three Pathet Lao battalions.
The operation as proposed by the Lao called for US participation in the following respects:

a. Some prior US reconnaissance activity in the area.

b. Extensive Air America airlift support using US civilian pilots and aircraft currently within Laos, supplemented by three additional C-123's and three Caribou which could be supplied with Air America markings.

c. US civilian pilots in Lao T-28's in combat operations.

In examining the proposal, we have already concluded that the use of US civilian pilots in T-28's (c. above) is not necessary provided that[136] However, we must recognize that use of US pilots in airlift support of combat operations (b. above), even though they would be civilians flying unarmed aircraft, represents a degree of open US involvement going beyond anything we have hitherto done and laying the US open to charges of direct violation of Article 4 of the Geneva Accords in the sense that the pilots would in effect be performing military operations. This new US involvement differs only in degree from what we have done to date but does have this additional element. The Lao would of course also use their own fairly extensive airlift capability.
A military analysis of the operation has been prepared by the DOD and is separately submitted at Tab A. The JCS favor the operation. Ambassador Unger, with the advice of his highly competent attache staff, believes that the operation has a reasonable chance to succeed.

B. Threat to Neutralist Forces in Muong Soui.

This is the major element in the current military situation, and the operation is designed to relieve pressure on Muong Soui and to provide a consolidated government-held area into which the forces in Muong Soui could retreat if defeated. The current judgment in Vientiane is that the Communist forces are massing for a possible early attack on Muong Soui, and the RLG has been dramatizing the threat. A Washington intelligence judgment by CIA is at Tab B; it concludes that an attack on Muong Soui is a little better than 50/50 today, and will become probable, as a normal response, if Souvanna's operation is carried out.

The Neutralist forces in Muong Soui number approximately 3300 and, although apparently in a reasonably good state of organization and morale, have several deficiencies, notably in respect to artillery crews. The current judgment is that, if the Communists attack in full force using tanks and artillery, Muong Soui could not be held for more than 3-4 days, even if the present Lao T-28's were augmented by additional
American-piloted T-29's as well as extensive US reconnaissance/strike operations.

Defeat of the Neutralist forces at Muong Soui would have extremely serious consequences in military and above all in political terms. The Neutralist forces would probably be dispersed, and a great many would find their way down toward Vientiane and link up with other government forces. The Meo would also be exposed. Above all, the cumulative effect of this defeat, coming on top of the May defeats, could well discourage Souvanna completely and possibly result in drastic and unwise action by Neutralist and Rightist generals either in the form of military action for its own sake or in the form of some political upheaval in Vientiane that could damage or even destroy Souvanna's position.

Although we have not hitherto regarded a Communist attack on Muong Soui as in the same category as Communist offensives against the Mekong areas or Luang Prabang, Ambassador Unger has now stressed that it has assumed a much greater psychological importance than we had hitherto realized.

In relation to the threat to Muong Soui, the proposed operation can be argued both ways. On the one hand, it might trigger a Communist attack that would not otherwise have taken place. On the other hand, particularly if there were some identifiable Communist action against Muong Soui, the US would be in a very serious position if it had refused.
to support an operation designed to relieve Muong Soui. Even if the operation did not achieve its objectives and if Muong Soui fell, it would be far better for the US-Lao relationship to have made the effort and to have failed than to have held the Lao back from what they regarded as a promising attempt to help.

C. Domestic Political Factors in Laos.

Souvanna Phouma has joined with both Neutralist and FAR generals in planning the proposed operation and has indeed prodded them into the present plan. Both he and they believe that the May defeats were about all they could take and must be countered by some offensive action on the Government's side. In addition, Souvanna and his generals, Ambassador Unger reports, have noted the various statements and evidences of our own determinations to hold in Southeast Asia (attaching special weight to the Taylor appointment as an indicator of possible stronger action) and have come to believe that the US is prepared to go far in breaching the Geneva Accords in support of government military operations. It is Unger's judgment that failure on our part to support the proposed operation would make it very difficult to maintain the confidence of Souvanna and the generals in our ultimate willingness to take strong action to defend Laos and with it Southeast Asia. (Souvanna is also urging maintenance of a major reconnaissance program within Laos and the use of
reconnaissance flights for strike operations to cut Route 7 east of the Plain of Jars.)

D. International Factors

The future diplomatic track concerning Laos is still uncertain. The Poles have discussed a modified proposal with the British, involving initial meetings of the three Lao factions, with the participation (apparently on something of a sideline basis) of the co-chairmen (the British and the Soviets) and the ICC members (Canada, India, Poland) with the co-chairmen then to determine whether conditions warrant a full-scale Geneva Conference. This is an entirely acceptable variant from the original Polish proposal, and we have told the British we would endorse their accepting it. However, they and the Poles have not yet agreed on a form of invitation, and it is possible that the Poles and the Soviets are weighing their actions very carefully. There is also a serious question whether the Pathet Lao would accept even this modification, and the Poles are apparently dealing directly with them to work this out. In sum, there is a good chance that the proposal will surface in the next few days, and it remains by far the best bet we have to keep negotiations on Laos moving without weakening on our insistence on withdrawal. (During the week we have examined alternatives if the Polish proposal does not get off the ground, and none of these alternatives, including resort to the UN, seems to have real promise.
of buying time and making some progress on issues other than withdrawal.)

If renewed hostilities in Laos appeared to be initiated by the Government, with US support, and not in response to Communist action, this could have a serious disruptive effect on our negotiating track. Even though we might reduce direct US involvement, almost all the countries concerned with the diplomatic negotiations would probably assume that the operation had US blessing and was part of a broad US plan to maintain and increase pressure in Laos. The French would naturally resume their pressure for an immediate Geneva Conference, but, most important, the Indians and Soviets might well believe that the US was moving drastically further and that the only way out was to get an immediate Geneva Conference. Even the British and Canadians might well weaken under these circumstances, and the total result would be serious danger to the possibility of the Polish proposals doing what we hope they can do.

Our second international problem would be the reaction of the ICC. Unless the Communists had started to move against Muong Soui, the Indians and Poles would probably regard the operation as a breach of the cease-fire and would be particularly sensitive to the degree of direct US involvement in violation of the Geneva Accords. Although Souvarna and we could argue that the action was entirely justified in response to far more serious Communist aggressions of May -- which it certainly is --
it would be difficult to head off ICC investigation, and the Indians in particular might be very difficult indeed. In relation to the negotiating track, offensive action by the government would tend to obscure the blame that now rests on the Communists for their May actions and would tend to support a "plague on both your houses" position by key nations, that would greatly weaken our pressure to bring about Communist withdrawal.

Obviously, these adverse international reactions would be sharply changed to the degree that the operation could be represented as being a relief of Muong Soui. Vientiane's present estimate that attack on Muong Soui may be imminent, coupled with the timetable proposed for the operation, may make it possible to justify the operation completely on this basis. But we cannot now be sure of this.

Similarly, adverse international reaction would be reduced to the extent the US was not directly involved. In a broad sense, the operation does not represent a major change from what we have been doing in our reconnaissance operations. However, we have had a strong justification for the latter, and have hitherto refrained from direct military involvement in combat operations within Laos.

E. Possible Communist Reactions

The Communists almost certainly already know of the proposed operation, since it has been prepared by a wide circle of military planners in Vientiane. They thus have ample time both to prepare their
defenses and to consider action in other parts of Laos in response.

Within the area actually affected by the operations, the Communists would have difficulty in any major reinforcement. The nearest Viet Minh units are believed to be several days' march away, on the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars, and would have to come through rough country to reach the area. We would probably get some information on any such movement.

On the other hand, the Communists could easily react by an extensive attack on Muong Soui, and it is far from clear the proposed operation would put the government forces in a stronger position to resist such an attack in the short term. On the contrary, the extensive effort involved would probably weaken the government's capacity to help the forces in Muong Soui.

Moreover, the Communists have the option of attacking in other parts of Laos. Unger thinks this is unlikely, on the ground that they already have this option and have not exercised it, and that they must know that action in other areas would be in effect a move toward the Mekong. Washington intelligence judgment shares this view, although there is some concern that the Communists might move in the Attapeu area of southern Laos, from which the additional forces required for the operation would be drawn. Even though some compensating reinforcement of Attapeu is planned, the town is now dangerously encircled by
by Pathet Lao forces. The same is true of many other points along the boundary between the government forces and the Pathet Lao, and it remains true (and Unger agrees) that the Communists have the capability of taking government positions just about any place they choose.

In terms of its signal effect on Hanoi and Peking, US involvement in the operation would have some initial effect, but the real impact would probably depend on what we did if the Communists reacted by attacking Muong Soui or elsewhere. If we failed to react very strongly to such action, the Communists might well conclude that we were trying to do things in Laos on the cheap.

II. POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

In the light of all these factors, the Secretaries of State and Defense yesterday agreed to a tentative position set forth in the outgoing State/Defense message, 1267 to Vientiane, attached hereto. The reply from Vientiane (Vientiane 1726) concurs generally in the proposed position and is also attached. No reply has been received from Bangkok, but Ambassador Martin had previously urged that we approve and support the operation.

With respect to the diplomatic repercussions, we queried London, Paris, Moscow, New Delhi, and Ottawa last night (State 8632 to London attached). The replies received to date are as follows:
a. Moscow 3934, attached, feels that the Soviets would react very adversely, back off the Polish proposal, and shift to all-out support for an immediate Geneva Conference.  

b. London 6481, attached, indicates that the British would be troubled but would try to support us. It urges that the British be fully cut in, and mentions that they would expect our support if they had to take a somewhat parallel action in the Indonesian situation in the near future.  

c. Ottawa 1748, attached, indicates the Canadians would be lukewarm unless the operation clearly appeared a response to direct and imminent threat against Muong Son. It stresses that the Canadians should be fully consulted in any event before we take action.  

The Soviet reaction may be a serious factor requiring further consideration. The British and Canadian reactions make it clear that we should consult with them and this we should certainly plan to do if we adhere to the tentative position stated in last night's outgoing message.  

W. P. Bundy  
June 28, 1964