MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

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 very 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 planned calls for US participation in the following respects:

a. Extensive prior US reconnaissance activity in the area.

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


With respect to B and C, the operation would be open US involvement 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 in both cases would be performing military operations. Air America in the past has supplied only food to Lao combat forces, although on a covert basis it has engaged in lifting arms to the Meo and in emergency situations to RLG forces.

Because of the importance of this added US element to our judgment, we are asking Vientiane [ ] to consider whether the necessary airlift would be supplied from the existing Lao airlift capability alone [ ] Air America and additional [ ]
Military analysis of the operation has been prepared by DoD and JCS and is attached as TAB A. Unger believes that it has a reasonable chance to succeed. The JCS have made no judgment on this point.

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 from the west 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. Our Washington judgment has been that, despite the Communist preparations, an early attack is not necessarily likely on general grounds.

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-28'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 flight 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 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 Souvanna 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 Soul. Vientiane's present estimate that attack on Muong Soul 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
(f) If we are prepared to face a showdown, this would naturally involve a diplomatic context, accompanied by military pressure. The military pressure, however, should be tailored to the specific diplomatic actions which we contemplate or confront. For example, the unacknowledged attack upon the Zieng Khouang battery doubtless conveyed a useful signal to North Viet Nam, and it may be significant that the propaganda reaction has come from Peiking rather than Hanoi.

It would be helpful, in the general context of our dealings with Hanoi, if a second unacknowledged attack could be mounted, for example on Ban Ban, about June 14.

Similarly, a third unacknowledged action, for example against Nong Het could be mounted on about June 21 or 22.

All of these military action would be in the context of Laos exclusively, because it would be our purpose to attempt to confine the Polish conference to successful action with respect to Laos. It should be noted that the six members of the Polish conference have competence only in Laos and only in connection with the Geneva machinery affecting Laos.
(g) Since such an open break between the Soviets and the Chinese is quite unlikely, we should anticipate that the Polish conference will fail to produce a satisfactory situation with respect to Laos. At this stage there would be a considerable international impulse toward a larger conference dealing with the majority larger problem of Southeast Asia as a whole. If we chose to face the diplomatic showdown on this issue, we should then similarly tailor our military background to that larger framework. For example, we should begin a series of unacknowledged attacks against installations in the panhandle such as Moung Nong, Moung Phine, and eventually Mu Gia, at the North Vietnamese-Lao border. We can certainly drag out the preliminaries for such a Southeast Asian conference while these actions are in train. Once we agree to the conference itself, we could then slide our attacks across into the truck marshalling yards in North Viet Nam, the assembly points at Nong Hoi and similar logistic targets which are directly associated with the North Vietnamese infiltrations and the into Laos and South Viet Nam. While it will be/difficult thing for us to do, we should be prepared to sit at the conference table with these military actions going on, making clear that we regard them as equivalent to Viet Cong actions in South Viet Nam and the Pathet Lao actions in Laos. Our bargaining position should clearly be that these actions will be suspended once the Viet Cong terror and the Pathet Lao territorial attacks are not only suspended but once the North Vietnamese en cademment both in South Viet Nam and Laos is withdrawn.
We should accustom ourselves to the notion that this negotiation process and its accompanying military tattoo will be a fairly lengthy process, extending over several months, and beginning during the highly political atmosphere which accompanies the Presidential campaign season.

In its most classic sense what we would contemplate would be a "talk fight" operation similar to those conducted by the Chinese Communists themselves. We would have to carry this on in relative isolation assured only of British, Thai, Vietnamese and probably Canadian vocal support. On the other hand, we could anticipate that Souvanna, the Indians, and in some silent measure, the Soviets and the Poles, would be in our corner. On the whole the prospects for the successful accomplishment of this scenario are rather favorable, given steady nerves and a refusal to give way to Goldwater-type emotions.
defenses and to consider action in other parts of Laos in response.

Within the area actually affected by the operation, 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 that 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. We are asking for an intelligence judgment on this, but our initial estimate is that Unger may well be too sanguine. We are particularly concerned that the Communists might move in the Attopeu area of southern Laos, from which the additional forces required for the operation would be drawn. Even though some compensating reinforcement of Attopeu is planned, the town is now dangerously encircled 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
Soul or elsewhere. If we failed to react very strongly to such action, the
Communists might well conclude that we were trying to things in Laos on
the cheap.

II. Possible Courses of Action

A. Actions to Strengthen the Forces at Muong Soul and Deter Action

We should do all we can for these purposes in any event.

Specifically:

1. We can conduct fairly intensive reconnaissance operations east
of Muong Soul. These would have some deterrent effect and would also
give us better information on the extent of the build-up. One such operation
was conducted on June 28 at 20,000 feet with results not yet determined.
It may well be that only low-level operations would have the full desired
effect, but if we conduct these we must reckon that the anti-aircraft defenses are strong and that we would probably wish, for military reasons, to conduct them on a suppressive basis. This would strengthen the local effect, but also carry a strong general signal to the Communist side, perhaps somewhat stronger than we would have thought desirable at this time on more general grounds. Finally, there is a significant risk of losing one or more aircraft and of a repetition or even strengthening of the various reactions that surrounded the June 9 operation.

3. We do not believe that authorizing American pilots in T-28's would add sufficiently to the T-28 capability to be worth doing prior to an actual Communist attack. 

This should result in an early significant increase in the Lao XXXXXX T-28 capability, which could then be used extensively against the Communist forces east of Muong Soul.

B. Measures to Reassure Souvanna More Generally

1. Souvanna is critically interested in what we would do if Muong Soul were attacked. He has already asked us to authorize the use of napalm in this event, and we have responded affirmatively to Unger and authorized him to move the 2-days worth of existing stocks in Udorn
forward to Vientiane. We could go further and assure Souvanna that we would permit the use of American civilian pilots in the event of attack, and there is the further possibility that we could indicate we would be prepared to send in really extensive "reconnaissance" strike missions in the event of attack. We must recognize that these actions would probably not contain an attack if the Communist side really meant business, although they might permit the neutralist forces to stay in being as they withdrew. Apart from the effect of the actions themselves, an immediate assurance to Souvanna that we would take them would have some effect if we decide to discourage the operation he now proposes.

2. Souvanna is requesting reconnaissance/strike missions to interdict Route 7 east of the Plain of Jars. This too involves a repetition and perhaps heightening of the effect obtained by the June 9 operation, and we would have to weigh this against the reassuring general effect on Souvanna. The problem of loss is again present. The JCS are opposed to this action, while Unger does not think it would have significant reassuring effect with Souvanna. Thus, our conclusion is negative at this time.

3. We had been considering air strikes in the Panhandle infiltration areas, and the RLAF could participate in these. Unger believes Souvanna would favor this, but also that it would not have too much reassuring
effect with him.

C. The Issue of Supporting the Present Operation

1. Outright support as the Lao have requested would have serious international disadvantages. On the other hand, if it turns out that US airlift is vital to a reasonable chance of success, our refusal to supply this would have extremely serious effects on our relationship with Souvanna and his generals, and possibly on our over-all posture of firmness in the area. This is the dilemma we face, and we should try to avoid a flat yes or no.

2. Specifically, we should try to relate any operation undertaken as specifically as possible to the threat to Muong Soui, and to reduce the direct US role just as far as we can and still retain both a reasonable military operation and the confidence of the Lao. We could take the position that the defense of Muong Soui is the major job, and that we believe this requires such effort that only a more limited offensive operation should be undertaken, presumably from Vang Vieng northward along Route 13. Such an operation would not require extensive airlift or American-piloted T-28's, although undoubtedly some reconnaissance would be useful.

Although less deflating than outright discouragement, this alternative will seem to the Lao so meager that we must consider whether we would not have to maintain their confidence by taking nearly the full
range of actions stated under A and B above in order to maintain our relationship.

3. We could seek to stall the Lao completely for the present and get them to concentrate wholly on Muong Soui, arguing that they need an additional build-up before they can undertake any sort of offensive operation. While a shade less drastic in effect on their confidence, this position would be difficult to sustain for long in view of our already deep involvement in their planning.

4. Timing of Decision

The Lao are already putting great pressure on us for preliminary reconnaissance to be completed by June 30. In addition, the proposed airlift from Attopeu would require the movement of US aircraft to that area on June 30. Unger has indicated that the present week timetable could be put off as much as a week or ten days without serious consequences, but the Lao want to act before the rainy season reaches its full pitch, so that we cannot well stall beyond that limit.

D. Action if Muong Soui is Attacked

We must face up to this question now both because the possibility and the importance of this attack appear greater than we had previously estimated, and because our contingency plans could make a vital difference in our capacity to assure Souvanna.
American civilian pilots in T-28's and conducting extensive recon-strike missions, Unger recommends additional force movements within Laos (which could be within present guidelines) and the introduction of air/ground control and land-mining operations. It is not clear whether Unger thinks these would in fact beef up the Neutralist forces to the point where they could contain an attack, but we presume that all these measures would still leave the Neutralists likely to be defeated even if slowly.
this unless they had at least a general indication that we were prepared
to act with such forces. In relation to an attack on Muong Soul, we must
consider whether we should plan actually to use outright US bombing
missions and abandon the recon cover. But we would probably not
contemplate introducing US if the Communists went no further than Muong Soul. However, the deployment alone would
help to deter any Communist action elsewhere, and the general tension
within Laos would be such that it might be an important additional element
in our signal to Hanoi and Peking at that point.