

The secret war, the executive war, the automated war, the sad war in Laos

The Dying Frangipani

Tran Van Dinh

A Reuters dispatch datelined Hong Kong, May 24, 1972, relayed the following communiqué from the Pathet Lao News Agency:

The bomb tonnage released on the liberated zone in Laos in the first three years under the Nixon Administration is equal in energy to 150 Hiroshima type atomic bombs. On a per capita basis the bomb tonnage dumped on the liberated zone in Nixon's time is the highest in history and Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world.

One can dispute the exact bomb tonnage in the same way one can argue about whether the United States can destroy the Soviet Union ten times or nine times over, or vice versa. But no one, from officials at the Pentagon to researchers of the 1972 Cornell University "Air War Study," denies the claim made by the Pathet Lao (the Lao revolutionary movement) that Laos has long ago earned the sad reputation of being "the most heavily bombed country in the world." Yet, during my frequent lectures at universities and colleges and civic organizations in this country, I have had the distinct impression that not many Americans are aware of the war in Laos, a war called by columnists and writers the "secret war," the "executive war," the "automated war," the "total war."

They are at best indifferent, at most ignorant of the impersonal killing from the air of thousands of people in a land of 91,425 square miles with a population estimated at between 2½ to 3 million by an

armada of jet planes from a country 10,000 miles away with a population 70 times as big and a GNP 6,000 times as great. Very few Americans, even at this very late hour, after more than 8 years and over 350,000 bombing sorties, realize that their country's bombs are destroying a people who are "faceless," who are not their enemies and whose innocence, charm and elegance are symbolized by the fragile and smiling Dok Champa, the frangipani flower.

For centuries the Dok Champa has been a witness to all moments in the life of the Lao people: in Buddhist ceremonies, popular festivals, courtships, marriages, in moments of joy and hours of sorrow. The story behind the frangipani tells much about the history of Laos itself. According to the legend of "Champa Si Ton" (The Four Frangipanis), once upon a time there lived in the kingdom of Muong Pen Chan (or Pancala) a king named Kulani who shared his palace with two women of equal beauty: Nang Kham Kong, the First Queen, and Nang An Gi, the Second Queen. One day a frontier messenger reported to King Kulani that a wild elephant herd was terrorizing the population. He set out immediately on a long expedition to hunt them down.

During his absence, the First Queen gave birth to four sons. The childless and jealous Second Queen, who helped her deliver the babies, substituted for them four young dogs and put the babies on a raft which she hurled into a nearby river. Upon his return from the hunt, the King was furious to learn that his First Queen had brought forth four dogs as offspring. He chased her from the palace and exiled her to a distant imperial farm as a pig keeper. The Second Queen was not happy either: The raft on which the four young princes were tied, instead of floating downstream to the high seas, was miraculously pushed upstream and the four babies rescued by a peasant couple at a neighboring village. When the Queen was informed of this by one of her secret agents, she herself went to the village and, while the

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peasant couple was working in the fields, she fed the babies poisonous cakes and killed them. The grieved peasant couple buried them in their garden, and the next morning from the graves grew four frangipanis.

This transformation frightened the Queen, who sent her guards to cut them down. But the slender trees resisted all sharp knives. She finally summoned the peasant couple and threatened them with death if they let the trees grow. The peasant couple prayed at the frangipanis, which were then easily felled. The Queen's soldiers attached to each frangipani a heavy stone and drowned them in the river. But the river's Nagas untied the frangipanis, which now floated serenely and bloomed. A young disciple of the famed hermit Aggicakkhu saw the flowers, picked some of them and offered them to the master. The hermit immediately recognized the flowers as coming from the four holy frangipanis, the reincarnations of the four Bodhisattvas. He asked his disciple to bring the four trees to his retreat and there, with the intense light from his eyes, burned them down into ashes. The immortality water he poured on the ashes resuscitated the four princes.

To each of the royal infants he gave a name according to the color of the flowers each frangipani was bearing: Prince Seta Kuman (White Prince), Prince Pita Kuman (Light Yellow Prince), Prince Souvanna Kuman (Golden Prince). On the youngest he bestowed the name Vajira Nanda Kuman (the Nice Diamond Prince), for this prince had lost one finger

which the hermit replaced with a long and pointed diamond; directed at a person, it could either take his life or restore it. The hermit educated the princes, taught them supernatural powers, especially the ability to fly, and equipped them with miraculous weapons when they reached adulthood. Then they bade farewell to the hermit, flew to the Kingdom of Yak, conquered it, and from this "liberated zone" proceeded to Pancala, their father's realm.

One night the Nice Diamond Prince penetrated into his father's room and inscribed on the forehead of Queen An Gi obscene drawings and on his father's forehead the following sentence: "Kulani, unjust King, you treat Diamond like rock and rock like Diamond. Bring us back Queen Kham Kong or your kingdom will be destroyed." When the King awoke and saw himself in the mirror and looked at the ugly face of his Queen, he was caught by fear and immediately sent his aides to invite Queen Kham Kong back to the palace. She refused, but when the four princes revealed to her their origin she agreed to become again the First and Only Queen. Nang An Gi, the former Second Queen, was banished, relegated to pig keeper.

The postwar domestic conflicts in Laos were in essence the story of the Four Frangipanis, a story of a family torn by rivalries and intrigues. The two major opponents in these conflicts—which the U.S. Air Force open intervention from the air and the U.S.-CIA clandestine operations on the ground transformed into a



bloodbath of unprecedented proportions—are half-brothers: Prince Souphanouvong (born July 12, 1912), leader of the Pathet Lao, now living somewhere in his liberated area in North Laos, and Prince Souvanna Phouma (born in October, 1901), now Prime Minister of the Royal Lao Government in Vientiane. They came from the same father, Prince Boun Khoung, but were of different mothers. They were both educated at prestigious engineering schools in France. Prince Souphanouvong married a Vietnamese, Prince Souvanna Phouma a *métisse* (half French, half Lao).

The population of Laos is itself divided. The Lao ethnic group represents only about half of the entire population, the rest being divided among several minorities, the most important of which are the Khas in the south and the Meos in the north. Unlike the Lao who build their houses on stilts and in the lowlands, the Meo (numbered between 300,000 to half a million) build theirs on the ground on the highest crests and ridges where they grow their opium poppies. It is from this Meo community that the CIA developed a clandestine army supplied by a civilian, CIA-financed airline, Air America. It is from the area controlled by this army that opium began its passage through the hands of Lao, South Vietnamese, and Thai generals, to be finally transformed into heroin, mainly in Southern France, and shipped to the U.S.

The Meo "Armée Clandestine," which is no longer clandestine and to which have been added about 10,000 Thai mercenaries (paid by the U.S. at a cost of \$100 million a year), is commanded by the Meo General Vang Pao, a former non-commissioned officer in the French colonial army. His military advisors are Americans in civilian attire. The best known among them is Edgar "Pop" Buell, an Indiana corn farmer who had been in Laos over a decade and started his official career in an apparently harmless organization, the International Voluntary Services, a private volunteer group under contract to the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). Despite massive U.S. aid, the Meo Armée Clandestine was not doing very well. In an interview with Robert Shaplen, Far Eastern correspondent for the *New Yorker*, "Pop" Buell confessed:

"Vang Pao has lost at least a thousand men since January [the interview was held in early 1968] killed alone and I don't know how many more wounded. He's lost all but one of his commanders. . . . A short time ago, we rounded up three hundred fresh recruits. Thirty per cent were 14 years old or less and ten of them were only 10 years old. Another thirty per cent were 15 or 16. The remaining forty per cent were 35 or over. 'Where were the ones in between?' I will tell you—they're all dead and in a few weeks 90 per cent [of the new recruits] will be dead. . . ."

The situation is no better today, four years later.

But not all the Meos are fighting for General Vang Pao. Meo loyalty was divided: the Pathet Lao Vice Chairman for the northern Hill people is the Meo leader Faydang.

Unified territorially as a country in the fourteenth century, Laos is bordered by six states: North Vietnam and South Vietnam in the east, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, Burma to the northwest and China to the north. The common border between Laos and Vietnam totals 1,324 miles in length through a very complex landscape. The Ho Chi Minh Trail passes through Laos, and a look at a good map will indicate more readily than words the multiple problems faced by this landlocked country since its birth. Laos, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., put it in his *A Thousand Days*, was a "state by diplomatic courtesy." Ever since its birth, its stability has been constantly threatened by a combination of domestic divisions and foreign interventions and dominations.

In 1707 the Kingdom was split into three separate feifs: Luang Prabang (home of King Savang Vatthana, the 64-year-old present monarch); Vientiane, the present administrative capital; and Champassak in the south, still virtually ruled by Prince Boun Oum of the Champassak family. Seven years earlier, in 1700, Sai Ong Hue, a Lao prince who had lived in exile in Vietnam, marched on Vientiane at the head of a Vietnamese army. He took the city and proclaimed himself king. Two hundred and forty-five years later, in 1945, another Lao prince, Prince Souphanouvong, was escorted back to his country by a contingent of Vietnamese military officers and soldiers to build what is now the Pathet Lao. I was one of those officers.

The August, 1945, Vietminh Revolution impressed Prince Souphanouvong, who was then stationed in Vinh (now in North Vietnam) as an engineer in the French Public Works. Through Vietnamese friends—most of them classmates of his, first at Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi and later in France—who are now members of the Ho Chi Minh government in Hanoi, Souphanouvong got an audience with President Ho Chi Minh and was encouraged to return to Laos to create an independence movement. I met Prince Souphanouvong for the first time in Hue (the former imperial capital of Vietnam and my hometown) the night of September 30, 1945, when the Vietminh committee had information that



Japanese troops, still in Hue awaiting the arrival of Allied troops to whom they were to surrender, might seize the city. I was there as deputy director for special operations of the General Staff of the Vietnamese Liberation Army in Central Vietnam. The very next day, October 1, I and five other officers of the General Staff received orders to escort, with a handful of soldiers, the "Lao prince back to his homeland."

On the way to Vientiane we stopped to recruit Lao soldiers and partisans. When we passed through Khe Sanh (the scene in 1967-68 of heavy fighting between U.S. Marines and North Vietnamese soldiers, near to the DMZ) we took off our Vietnamese insignia and put on the three-headed elephant, emblem of the Lao Liberation Army. It was in Vientiane in November, 1945, after discussions with another of his half-brothers, Prince Phetsarath, and members of the Lao Issara (Free Lao) government that Prince Souphanouvong became Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the Lao Liberation. I became his advisor on military intelligence and security. Prince Souvanna Phouma took the insignificant job of Minister of Public Works. The military situation was becoming critical.

In most of the military engagements against the French, who began to return to Laos and occupied areas in the countryside, Souphanouvong personally led his troops. He enjoyed the dangerous life of a guerrilla commander. He had a great faith in the future of his country and in his people. Even at that time, when his future was at best uncertain, he was already preparing a plan for the economic development of the Mekong Valley. His stubborn independence irritated some of his Vietnamese advisors but commanded my deep respect. All decisions were his, though he admired President Ho Chi Minh and entertained deep affection for the Vietnamese people. He was and is no puppet of any foreign power. On March 21, 1946, after a bloody battle during which the French used planes, bombs and tanks against Lao and Vietnamese armed with old rifles, grenades, knives and bamboo sticks, the city of Thakhet in Central Laos where Souphanouvong made his headquarters was occupied. Souphanouvong fled across the Mekong to Thailand. In the boat he was wounded by a bullet from a strafing British Spitfire. One of his Vietnamese advisors was killed, thousands of civilians died or were wounded.

At the end of 1946 the French forces reoccupied

all the cities in Laos. Prince Souphanouvong thereupon organized his guerrilla units and often crossed the Mekong to harass the French. On October 24, 1949, the Lao Issara government-in-exile in Bangkok, Thailand, announced its dissolution, and the following month a French air transport plane brought Souvanna Phouma and twenty-five others back to Vientiane to cooperate with the French, who had granted Laos semi-independence. Souphanouvong was not satisfied with the arrangement and the plane left without him. A few weeks later, he set out on foot to Ho Chi Minh's headquarters in the jungles of North Vietnam, reaching it after several unsuccessful attempts to enlist U.S. help for his independence movement through the U.S. Embassy in Thailand and especially through the American military attaché, Lt. Colonel William Law.

With some arms, some money from the Vietminh, Souphanouvong formed the Lao Liberation Committee. On August 13, 1950, the first "Lao Resistance Congress" convened in the jungles of northern Laos. The Congress elected a "national resistance" government headed by Souphanouvong and adopted a twelve-point manifesto at the bottom of which appeared the words "Pathet Lao" (Lao Fatherland).

With the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Agreements of 1954, the temporary partition (until 1956) of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, Laos was recognized as a unitary, independent, neutral state with a single government in Vientiane. The Pathet Lao forces, which, under Souphanouvong, had grown into an experienced guerrilla army, were to be concentrated in the northeastern provinces of Phong Saly and Samneua pending their reintegration into the Kingdom of Laos after elections to be held in 1955.

Although the U.S., which did not sign the Geneva Agreements, promised not to use force to disturb them, it did consider the Agreements as a victory for the Communist side. Thereupon, in Laos as in Vietnam, the U.S. poured in aid to support the anti-Communist factions, especially the corrupted Lao generals, among them General Phoumi Nosavan. Civil war broke out and the anti-Communist government in Vientiane was near collapse when, in March, 1961, President Kennedy sent Marines to Udorn, the Thai town at the border of Laos, thus re-establishing the historical process of Thailand's intervention in the affairs of Laos. South Vietnam was involved, and so was North Vietnam.

Ever since 1958 there existed a close military cooperation between Vientiane and Saigon. The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam) high-ranking officer who was in charge of that cooperation was none other than Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu, now General, since 1967 President of South Vietnam. By 1959, and with the anti-Communists fully in control of the Vientiane government, the



South Vietnam and U.S. Special Forces were given carte blanche for penetrations and operations in Laos. There was a ceasefire on May 3, 1961, and the ensuing Geneva Conference of 1962 ended with an agreement which created, under Prince Souvanna Phouma, a troika-type of government with Cabinet members from three factions: anti-Communist, neutralist, Pathet Lao. Prince Souphanouvong became Deputy Prime Minister for Planning.

The uneasy arrangement did not last very long: the pro-Pathet Lao Foreign Minister was murdered, fighting started again, and in April, 1963, Prince Souphanouvong escaped from Vientiane with his principal lieutenants, leaving only a minor representative behind. In 1963, after the overthrow and murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem and the quick deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam, the U.S. decided to use its armed forces to rescue the Saigon regime. The escalation of the war in Vietnam created additional tensions in Laos. Rhetoric and affirmations of respect of Lao neutrality notwithstanding, all interested parties in the Vietnam war regarded Laos as a rear and a proxy battleground. The American public, except for those who had lost a son or a brother in the "non-war" in Laos, was still in the dark.

In 1964 the U.S. began air raids against the Pathet Lao in the Plaine des Jarres in northern Laos. After the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam by the Johnson Administration in 1968, all the planes were diverted to Laos. The intense bombing not only killed people and cratered the earth but also, as in Vietnam, "generated" refugees (over 100,000 from the Pathet Lao area alone). At the beginning of March, 1971, when the ARVN, supported by U.S. logistics and advisors, began the invasion (officially, an "incursion") of Laos, the country was literally pilloried by American bombs.

The tragi-comedy of the Laos invasion was obvious not only because of the very poor performance of the ARVN but because it was carried on without the knowledge of the Lao Government. The day after the South Vietnamese and Americans massed forces at the Lao border, Premier Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane was asked by a French reporter, "What is going on in southern Laos?" "I don't know." "Why don't you call the Americans to find out?" suggested the reporter.

When Prince Souvanna Phouma called, U.S. Ambassador G. McMurtie Godley said that he didn't know either but would find out and let the Prince know. This story (reported in the *Washington Post* of March 9, 1971) tells a great deal about the "independence" and "neutrality" of Laos. By 1971 the secret war in Laos was no longer secret, thanks largely to the efforts of one young American, Fred Branfman, who has spent four years in Laos, from March, 1967, until February, 1971, the first two as an educational advisor with the International Voluntary Services (IVS) and the last two years as a free-lance



researcher, writer, interpreter and journalist. He is now director of Project Air War in Washington, D. C.

In a series of articles Branfman wrote for Dispatch News Service International and reprinted in the *Boston Globe* of December 6-8, 1971, he described the situation in Laos:

November, 1968, marked a basic turning point. Planes that had been bombing North Vietnam were diverted into Laos after the bombing halt of November. As the war scaled down in South Vietnam, planes were brought from there as well. The dimensions of the air war quickly skyrocketed. Average daily sorties soon shot up to six or seven hundred, but sometimes going as high as 1,500 during peak periods. Reliable sources estimate the cost of the air war in 1969 was \$1.7 billion. Well over 200,000 sorties were flown, delivering over half a million tons of ordnance. Bombing has continued at roughly the same level throughout 1970. The burgeoning air war involved more than 50,000 American airmen located at bases in Thailand, South Vietnam, Guam and Okinawa and carriers of the Seventh Fleet. The air space about Pathet Lao zones was soon filled with well over 1,000 aircraft daily: light spotter planes at 2,000 feet; A1E, A-26, and T-28 prop bombers, AC-47 and AC-130 gunships, flare ships and rescue gunship helicopters at 5,000; F-4, F-105 and B-57 jet fighters and jet reconnaissance aircraft at 10,000; KG-135 super-tankers at 20,000; C-130's filled with electronic gear designated to coordinate the bombing of specific sectors at 25,000; B-52 bombers at 30,000 and C-130's of Hillsboro Control which coordinate all the bombing in Laos at 35,000. . . .

One must add here the latest invention in the U.S. arsenal: the smart bombs (the TV-guided bombs and the laser-guided bombs) which are now extensively used in both Vietnam and Laos. On April 29, 1971, nearly two months after his return from Laos, Fred Branfman testified before the Ad Hoc Congressional Hearing chaired by Congressman Ronald Dellums:

Most of the bombing has occurred in the two-thirds of Laos controlled by the Pathet Lao. This

is a mountainous, forested region of some 50,000 square miles. It is inhabited, according to an estimate of an American Embassy official in March, 1970, by over 900,000 people grouped in some 3,500 villages. This area is quite possibly the most heavily bombed region in the history of warfare, a zone described by one refugee who left it as "a lake of blood and destruction." It is a region that has had, by conservative estimate, more than 2 million tons of bombs dropped on it. It is thus a region the size of New York State that has undergone as much American bombing as Europe and the entire Pacific theater during World War II [2,057,244 tons].

Branfman, who had interviewed thousands of refugees, brought back with him their testimonies and drawings. One Lao singer, now languishing in a refugee camp, lamented:

Over there we left our home, over there we left our rice. Neither our goods nor our beasts could be brought with us—what will we be without them? Farewell our buffalo, our pigs, our fowl. We hope you will be smart enough to hide yourselves. If not, you will all get shot and eaten by the soldiers. How sorry we were not to take you with us. Farewell rice fields, orchards, bamboo gardens and lakes filled with fish. It is not our will to leave you, but the war obliges us. It is not our weakness to go away, but the barbarity of some stronger people with their machines. Farewell everything that makes that place our home. Farewell. . . .

This simple "farewell address" is not only a condemnation of the U.S. policy in Laos. It also reveals the soul of the Lao people, a people who, through sufferings, have blended in their life the best of the Buddha's compassion and the purest of Lao Tse's naturalness. They are the American Indians of the 1960's.

But it is wrong for us to say that the U.S. Air War in Laos was an accident or even a military necessity. It was the cold application of the principles of the "automated battlefield" proudly described by General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, former U.S. Commander in Vietnam. Said he on October 14, 1969, at a meeting of the Association of the U.S. Army:

On the battlefield of the future, enemy forces will be located, tracked and targeted almost instantaneously through the use of data links, computer assisted intelligence evaluation and automated fire control. With first round kill probabilities approaching certainty and with surveillance devices that can continually track the enemy, the need for large forces to fix the opposition physically will be less important. . . . I see battlefields on which we can destroy anything we locate through instant communication and almost instantaneous applica-

tion of highly lethal firepower. . . . Today, machines and technology are permitting economy of manpower on the battlefield as indeed they are in the factory. But the future offers even more possibilities for economy. . . .

General Westmoreland's vision matches that of George Orwell's for 1984:

War is no longer the desperate annihilating struggle that it was. . . . It is a warfare of limited aims. This is not to say that . . . the conduct of war . . . has become less bloodthirsty or more chivalrous. On the contrary. . . . But in a physical sense, war involves very small numbers of people, mostly highly trained specialists. The fighting . . . takes place on the vague frontiers whose whereabouts the average man can only guess at. . . .

General Westmoreland's battlefields of the future are now in northern and southern Laos, in Vietnam, in Cambodia. George Orwell's 1984 war is now being waged in Indochina, and the average American "can only guess" at its consequences. The "enemy" who is "targeted" are the peoples of Indochina, regardless of age, sex and domicile.

On May 28, 1972, while U.S. bombs fell on the cities and jungles of Indochina, President Nixon in Moscow was on the air addressing the Soviet people:

Yesterday, I laid a wreath at the cemetery which commemorates the brave people who died during the siege of Leningrad in World War II. At the cemetery, I saw the picture of a 12-year-old girl. She was a beautiful child. Her name was Tanya. The pages of her diary tell the terrible story of the war. In the simple words of a child, she wrote of the deaths of the members of her family: Shanya in December, Granic in January. Then Leka. Then Uncle Vasya. Then Uncle Lyosha. Then Mama. Then the Savichevs. And then, finally, these words, the last words in her diary: All are dead. Only Tanya is left.

If he was sensitive enough, President Nixon should have known that there were and there are and there will be—unless he recalls his bombers to the U.S.—thousands of Lao Tanyas, Cambodian Tanyas and Vietnamese Tanyas. The difference is that in Laos, even Tanya will not be left. She will die.

I pray that from the grave of a Lao Tanya will grow a slender and beautiful frangipani which someday, when peace returns, will be transplanted in front of the Pentagon to remind the heartless Westmorelands of their "first round kill probabilities." Laos now is a dying frangipani, but it will be resuscitated by the Aggicakkhu of the twentieth century, Prince Souphanouvong and his partisans who are resisting the U.S. intervention in the deep caves of northern Laos. He and his followers in the Pathet Lao will make the frangipanis bloom all over again in a peaceful, independent and truly neutral Laos.