

No Room for Peace: Possible Futures for Indochina

David K. Shipler

In the perspective of a few thousand years of Indochinese history the decade of direct American military intervention that so wrenched our own country is little more than a minor subtitle in a rather brief chapter. Contrary to the declarations of those who opposed policy and those who made it, the United States neither started nor ended the warfare in Indochina. Although the U.S. inflicted great agony and destruction on some small countries, the suffering yielded no conclusion. Even after their withdrawal, Americans could find no satisfaction in a neat end to a bloody game.

The Cambodian government stumbled along in the general direction of defeat, as it had while the B-52s and F-111s were reducing the countryside to rubble. The Laotians, enjoying a more benign American attitude, crept slowly toward coalition with the Communists. And in South Vietnam the political intransigence and military might of both sides produced a continuing, violent stalemate.

What the new American absence holds for the future of these three countries remains a wild guess at best. Simply in terms of human suffering, any equation that contains less napalm and fewer helicopter gunships comes out a plus. But on questions of military victory, governmental form, big-power influence and economic structure, the mathematics become tricky and full of traps. One unknown factor is the evolution of United States policy. American troops and planes are gone, but American weapons, ammunition and economic sustenance still pour in, leaving the powerful men in Washington as critical manipulators of events in the Central Highlands and Kompong Cham and the Plain of Jars. Furthermore, the U.S. is still a great power, and Indochina still a stage on which the great powers can wage their deadly contest for preeminence.

From Saigon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane, American policy toward Indochina appears afflicted with ambivalence: drifting in Laos toward conciliation, in South Vietnam toward confrontation and in Cambodia wallowing helplessly in a firestorm of aimless fighting. The current stance of each country's current government seems to enjoy enthusiastic, unquestioning American support, with the result that the goals of the American policy and of the local government mirror each other perfectly. If one wanted to ignore the complex relationships between the United States and these small lands, or to forget the gulfs of distrust and frustration, he might be tempted to use that polemical word "puppet." But then he would have to identify the puppeteer, and that is difficult. Sometimes it seems to be nothing more than the inertia of old policies, oiled by the vague, residual sense of anti-Communist comradeship. On other occasions the strings appear to be securely in the hands of Nguyen Van Thieu, Lon Nol and Souvanna Phouma.

Ironically, the tragedy of the American role in Indochina is underscored most dramatically in Laos, the only country of the three where a real cease-fire has taken hold and the only country on the verge of translating war into peaceful, political settlement. Here the United States has apparently withdrawn not only its jet fighters from the skies, but also its bellicose attitude from the diplomacy. Openly and vigorously opposing continued warfare, and lobbying for the formation of a coalition government with the Communist-led Pathet Lao, the U.S. mission in Vientiane has proceeded in a spirit of détente, seeking to calm rather than inflame. This is such a new role and so atypical of the United States in this part of the world that an American tempted to feel pride ought instead to weep. There is something very sad in seeing the hopes of a small nation rest largely on the prospect that the United States will simply leave it alone.

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Laos is unlike Cambodia, which is unlike South Vietnam. Attempts to analyze one by means of the other are specious. Laos's principal distinguishing characteristic is its great political balance wheel—Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister, whose immense stature as a nonideological conciliator has played a large part in keeping the warring sides talking to each other, recognizing the same king and honoring the same flag. Souvanna stands where nobody with any power stands in either South Vietnam or Cambodia—on middle ground. And yet Souvanna's middle ground is more than merely a mediator's position. It is high ground also, from which the Prince, by sheer force of personality and royal heritage, dominates the emerging political direction of the country at a crucial stage.

For nearly two decades Souvanna's solution for Laos has been coalition with the Pathet Lao. His first two attempts, in 1957 and 1962, succumbed to the anti-Communist reflexes of the United States and the divisiveness of the cold war. After the new government was formed in 1957, the American ambassador to Laos, J. Graham Parsons, proudly told a Congressional committee: "I struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition." His goal was ultimately realized, for when elections were held in 1958 and the Pathet Lao and their supporters won thirteen of the twenty-one seats being filled in the National Assembly, the United States withheld a vital, regularly scheduled payment of dollars to the government's account, thus precipitating a monetary crisis and a vote of no-confidence in Souvanna. He resigned as Prime Minister and was replaced by rightist Phoui Sananikone. The Pathet Lao were excluded from the National Assembly. The coalition was ended.

The American sabotage in 1962 was more subtle, but equally effective. It was also perhaps inadvertent, for it turned up on a spreading war that was nourished in part by American arms and logistic support. Ostensibly, Washington approved of the coalition. But the United States had also financed and equipped a large army to fight the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, who were using the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the mountains of eastern Laos to send men and supplies into South Vietnam. Air America, the private airline under contract to the Defense Department, State Department and CIA, was the key to troop transport and supply for government military forces throughout the country. As the U.S. flew reconnaissance missions over Laos, it became inextricably enmeshed in the military confrontation. When American reconnaissance planes were shot down, American air strikes were launched against Pathet Lao positions. Laos, fighting its own civil war, became also a battleground of the cold war, and the coalition disintegrated.

Vientiane is probably like no other capital in the world. Laos has diplomatic relations with everyone, it seems. The North Vietnamese, the South Vietnam-

ese, the Communist Chinese, the Russians, the Americans—all have embassies there, and all mix freely on a nonstop cocktail circuit that also includes the Pathet Lao representatives, the right-wing generals and Prince Souvanna. It takes only a few days in this fairy-tale atmosphere to become intoxicated with the notion that the world is really quite a friendly place after all.

On the other hand, the presence of such a diversity of interests also makes Vientiane's diplomatic atmosphere a good litmus for the spirit of détente, at least as it applies to Laos. In that context there might be some basis for the universally hopeful feelings. The United States has concretely demonstrated its commitment to Souvanna's concept of a coalition, even going so far as to openly threaten Vientiane's right-wing generals with a cutoff of fuel and arms when they vacillated about defending the Prince last August during an attempted coup by a former general who had been exiled in Thailand. This was the work of John Gunther Dean, the American chargé d'affaires, who raced about Vientiane that morning seeing every concerned party. He also arranged to hide Souvanna in the American ambassador's villa, which was then empty.

The coup attempt was an effort to rally anti-government support among generals who opposed the coalition, and it came at a critical time in negotiations between the government and the Pathet Lao. Mr. Dean's efforts were publicly acknowledged by Souvanna as a key reason for the army's ultimate support of the Prince and put-down of the rebel attack. The episode, as it turned out, also strengthened the Prince's hand in pushing his dissenting right wing into reluctant acceptance of the coalition concept. The Russians and the Chinese, while less vigorous in their efforts to bring the coalition about, have nevertheless clearly supported it. Great-power unanimity obviously raises the prospect of success.

As prescribed by the peace agreement of February, 1973, and the Protocol of September, 1973, the coalition consists of a cabinet split between the two sides, with Souvanna remaining as Prime Minister and his half-brother, Souphanouvong, the nominal head of the Pathet Lao, installed as Deputy Prime Minister. After a certain period general elections are to be held, and the coalition is to be replaced by a new, elected government. Whether any of this works depends largely on Souvanna. He is seventy-two, and he is tired. This is his final effort. He wants very much to see success, and if he remains on the scene with the precision of his political calculations undimmed, he might just bring it about.

Beyond the immediate future, the durability of the peace that has taken hold in Laos will depend more on decisions made outside the country than within. The Laotian civil war, which often took on the overtones of a family squabble (Laos is still in part a collection of family fiefdoms and commercial em-

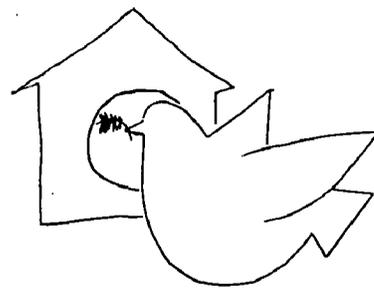
pires), came to be called "the annex war" because in the final analysis it had more to do with Vietnam than with Laos. The important thing, of course, was the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail by North Vietnamese. While some elements of the Washington policy were aimed at preventing the "loss" of Laos to the Communists, the centerpiece of the conflict was Vietnam.

This leaves Laos with the question of what the North Vietnamese do now, and what the American response will be. If Hanoi honors the terms of the Laos Peace Agreement and withdraws all its troops within sixty days after the formation of the coalition government, then it will have to use its new network of roads within South Vietnam for its military logistic support. But if, as is more likely, North Vietnam withdraws only the troops that it had committed to the genuine Laotian civil war—those units stationed far west of the trail and used to support Pathet Lao units in combat against the government—then Souvanna and the new coalition (and the United States) might choose simply to ignore the remaining North Vietnamese presence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Such benign neglect, so to speak, would be the most hopeful policy, for the view is popular among American diplomats in Indochina these days that North Vietnam has a singular purpose—to control South Vietnam—and that Laos and Cambodia are quite literally paths to that end, nothing more. In short, while Hanoi would naturally like to see friendly governments in those two countries, its main concern is that whatever governments are in power leave the logistic routes alone.

If this analysis is correct, and if the Soviet Union, China and the United States keep hands off, then Laos enters a fascinating period of political conflict in which both the rightists, who have been fed guns and bullets by the United States all these years, and the Pathet Lao, who have been similarly fed by North Vietnam and its allies, must learn a new game. Either side could win, or the match could remain a standoff for some time. There may come a moment when one side or the other decides to stop playing by the rules, but its ability to pick up arms again will depend largely on the attitudes of its powerful benefactor.

When the last American bomb fell on Cambodia August 15, the entire press corps and diplomatic corps in Phnom Penh held its breath waiting for the city to be overrun and the Lon Nol government to collapse. Embassies made their evacuation plans; journalists calculated how much of the capture of Phnom Penh they could cover before they had to flee. The *Far Eastern Economic Review*, in an issue that should have been entitled "Things I Wish I Never Said," put a big picture of the Cambodian president on its cover with the banner, "Bye Bye Lon Nol."



When nothing happened as it was supposed to, when the insurgents failed to take the capital, failed to capture the besieged city of Kompong Cham, failed to dislodge the ailing Lon Nol, the Americans of course took credit for having used the bombing effectively to weaken—in the argot of U.S. diplomats in this part of the world—"the enemy," or "the bad guys." Another interpretation is that the massive carpet-bombing served no military purpose at all in this sort of war, so that even when it was suddenly stopped, the military situation remained essentially unchanged. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two extremes, thereby satisfying neither prejudice. But an essential fact emerges from the debate: we know very little about "the enemy" in Cambodia.

Any newspaper reader can see immediately that journalists are fumbling for a nice, quick word to label the force that is fighting the Cambodian government. In South Vietnam there is "Viet Cong," even though the term is regarded by the National Liberation Front as pejorative. In Laos there is "Pathet Lao," even though few people on either side there call it that anymore, having shifted to the more precise term, "Neo Lao Hak Sat," which means "Lao Patriotic Front." But there is no ready name in Cambodia. Some say "Khmer Rouge," but that probably represents no more than one faction of a force that has come, for most journalists, to be called "the insurgents."

American intelligence analysts who interrogate prisoners, monitor radio broadcasts and read captured documents contend that the Cambodian insurgent force is controlled by a Cambodian Communist Party, which is directly allied with the Lao Dong Party, a successor to the Indochinese Communist Party based in North Vietnam. Given the ancient hatred of the Cambodians for the Vietnamese, and given the recent acknowledgment by American officials in Phnom Penh that North Vietnamese troops are no longer fighting with, but sometimes against, the Cambodian insurgents, the American contention that Hanoi controls the insurgents has come under strong challenge. North Vietnam probably provides logistic support for the insurgents, and perhaps advisors as well, but that Hanoi has the power to tell the insurgents when, where and how to strike is open to serious question. In any case, the Americans admit that they do not even know the names of all the top people on the Central Committee of the Cambodian Communist Party, and they know almost nothing about the few names they have.

In recent months the intelligence analysts have become convinced, through interrogating prisoners and defectors from various levels within the party hierarchy, that the ousted chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, has little influence among the high ranks of the insurgents. His name is used to attract new recruits, but once they climb into the party structure they discover the Prince has lost his glamor, and his name is seldom heard. If this is true, it complicates the problem of finding a political solution to the chaotic war that now engulfs this country. It is difficult enough to negotiate when you know whom you are dealing with, and virtually impossible when you don't. If Lon Nol is ousted by his own followers—not an impossibility—or if the capital of Phnom Penh just cannot take any more shelling or siege, the insurgent leaders might step forward in an effort to obtain a political victory through negotiation. This assumes no military victory, which for months now has eluded both sides.

Again, the ultimate course of events in Cambodia is largely a function of events in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, whose trail network through Cambodia is now spared American bombs, may not really need an insurgent victory in Cambodia. Lon Nol's ragtag army and meager air force can hardly threaten the trail in the east. Consequently, Hanoi may be less anxious to provide the insurgents from its own limited reservoir of arms, less convinced that it must give the insurgents what they need to take the country. It is even plausible that North Vietnam likes Cambodia just as it is—hopelessly shackled to a confused struggle that produces enough instability to allow the North Vietnamese to use part of its territory with impunity. Sihanouk certainly would not please Hanoi as a chief of state, for example. He is too independent, and his installation in Phnom Penh would require North Vietnam to deal with him as it does not have to deal with the Cambodian government now.

As in Laos, this line of reasoning follows from the proposition that North Vietnam is interested only in dominating South Vietnam, not the rest of Indochina. This could be wrong, but it appears to be a safe assumption that at least in the immediate future South Vietnam will remain the focus of Indochina's post-American period and the most volatile battleground of all.

By the end of its first year the Paris Peace Agreement of 1973 had begun to look like one of the most pathetic documents ever produced by international diplomacy. Its real accomplishment was to get the American troops and planes out, but its remaining military and political provisions went largely ignored by all sides, including the Americans. The document's vision of political reconciliation, laughable when it was signed, acquired a bitter tone after a year of intransigence.

Nguyen Van Thieu, after all, is essentially a general

commanding an army. Without war or the imminent threat of war Thieu cannot govern, for with American help the South Vietnamese have created a government whose backbone is military and whose spine is the chain of military command. Having failed to nurture the evolution of a set of orderly democratic institutions, Thieu is now trapped. Unless he stands consistently to the right of his own army, his support will begin to erode and his commanders will turn against him. There is evidence that Thieu wants to be politically conciliatory toward the Viet Cong, of course, but quite apart from what he wants, he might not have that option. Unlike Cambodia, where the war is so recent that it has not engaged the whole population in its conflicting causes, the Vietnamese war has had years to touch everyone, to take someone from virtually every family, to work its way into every crack and crevice of society, infecting the country with all the complex currents of zeal and hatred and fear that are the curses of civil war. Assuming that Thieu wants to stay in power, he probably has less room for political maneuvering than most Americans would imagine.

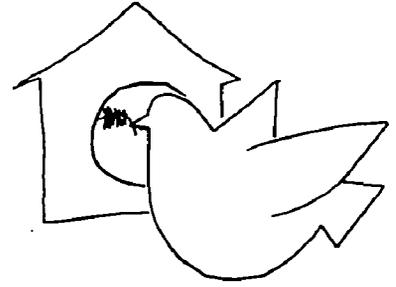
Perhaps this is why the Nixon Administration has failed to use its vast military and economic leverage to push Thieu into an observance of the Paris Agreement's political provisions. There is also a less charitable explanation: The United States is still fighting the war, even if by proxy, and Thieu is doing exactly what the Americans want him to do. In signing the Paris Agreement neither the United States nor North Vietnam abandoned the desire to exert controlling influence over whatever government sits in Saigon. The North Vietnamese intentions could undoubtedly be expressed in stronger terms than the American, but there is enough symmetry of interests to guarantee a continuing struggle for a long time.

Among the Hanoi-watchers and the Viet Cong-watchers there is a strong feeling that the Communists expected the Paris Agreement to yield them greater political progress than it has. The agreement, however sketchy, does envision Communist participation in the political life of South Vietnam through general elections and a chance to take from Thieu, peacefully, the mantle of authority. But Thieu, while offering to set a date for such elections, also denies the Communists freedom to move, to organize, to rally support, to express their views freely in the press. It is as if the Republican Party told the Democrats that they could run candidates for Congress, but that solidly Democratic parts of the country would not be allowed to participate in the election, that no Democrat could be quoted by a newspaper or interviewed on television, that Democratic rallies would be stopped by the police and the participants jailed and that the Republicans would supervise all polling places, would count the votes and would announce the results. In the face of such handicaps, it would be no surprise if the Democrats chose not to

participate in the "election." Yet Thieu and the American diplomats here blithely say that the Communists refuse to participate because they know they would lose, adding that if Thieu let them do what they wanted, they would engage in "subversion."

The National Liberation Front has long envisioned a very different kind of political success, a blending of the armed revolution with the popular uprising to create a tidal wave of victory that would engulf the entire country. For a number of reasons—the viciousness of the war, the weariness of the peasantry, the effective and pervasive police control exerted by the Saigon government and the deep currents of anti-communism among many South Vietnamese—this has not happened. But there is no reason to think the Vietnamese Communists have given up the dream in which war is not merely a military affair but essentially a way of changing men's minds. That is why, after years of bitter struggle against the Americans, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese officials can be so cordial to American newsmen when they appear at Camp Davis on the edge of Saigon for the Provisional Revolutionary Government's weekly press conference. It is a truly amiable, relaxed morning, with handshakes and smiles and tea and North Vietnamese liqueurs and Russian chocolates. It is another battle in the long war, and everyone knows it.

It is not possible to separate military from political issues in Vietnam. The behavior of both sides since the Paris Agreement seems to guarantee that military methods will continue to serve in advancing political ends. Without the prospect of some role in the government the Viet Cong are forced either into a continued stalemate or into an all-out military effort. Some of the Hanoi-watchers believe they can discern a debate now taking place between factions in North Vietnam, and also between the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. Put crudely, they think that the men in the field—plus General Vo Nguyen Giap, the mastermind of North Vietnamese military strategy—have argued for a massive offensive. Others have counseled patience, they believe, arguing (with some merit) that Thieu's 1.1 million man army will gradually grow flabby, less alert, more demoralized, and that his ailing economy will nurture discontent, perhaps even rebellion. Mixed into this calculation are perhaps the limits placed by the Russians and Chi-



nese on the supply of arms for further warfare. Even though North Vietnam has allegedly infiltrated large numbers of troops, tanks and artillery pieces into the South since the cease-fire, they might not be used immediately for an offensive. There is a good chance that the Viet Cong have decided to concentrate for a while on fashioning their territory into a third Vietnam—building roads, consolidating control, enhancing self-sufficiency.

All of this leaves us with several scenarios over the next few years. First, there is the possibility of continued stalemate with a relatively high level of fighting. Second, a Communist offensive at some point, perhaps a year or two from now. The offensive could take the form of an all-out attempt to take Saigon and conquer the country, or a try for two or three province capitals to strengthen the Viet Cong claim to participation in the government or a limited fight over hamlets and villages that the Communists feel they lost after the cease-fire.

A third scenario is the rarely mentioned possibility of a government offensive, probably aimed at stopping the Communist road construction and clearing Communist troops away from their striking positions on Saigon and some province capitals. Finally, as American aid dwindles and the country's economic problems multiply, a political upheaval on the Saigon side—possibly a coup d'état or something less dramatic—might produce a more conciliatory government, or even a more conciliatory Nguyen Van Thieu. Lurking behind these options is the dreaded possibility of a new American intervention at some point, especially if a Communist offensive is launched—and if Richard Nixon weathers impeachment proceedings. In the long sweep of history the agony of Vietnam will no doubt produce some surprises to confound the prognosticators. But one thing seems virtually certain: among all the scenarios there is no room for peace.